

# Moon Gate as an Evolutionary Interior Archetype

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**Abstract**—The Moon Gate is an archetype in Chinese interior design. This paper introduces the history of Moon Gate in Chinese history and its development in foreign Chinese gardens. Then the paper studies the Moon Gate used in Chinese interior design in the chronological sequence. Finally, the paper concludes the law of development of Moon Gate as an interior archetype.

**Keywords**—moon gate; interior design; archetype

## I. INTRODUCTION

Moon Gate describes a circular opening in a wall or screen that identifies an entrance and enables movement between two spaces. Moon Gate commonly appears in Chinese gardens as well as traditional interior spaces.

Moon Gate originated in the Chinese Garden. In 1631, the book Yuanye illustrated it and described that Moon Gate originally evolved from brick-made circular openings in precedent Chinese gardens [1]. According to the handbook, Old Summer Palace Interior Decoration Regulation, when Moon Gate was used in an interior setting, it was called “Yuanguang Men”. During the Qing Dynasty, “Yuanguang Zhao” became a popular title to refer to the indoor Moon Gate.

Due to its circular form, Moon Gate is in contrast with the post-and-lintel framing of Chinese timber buildings. Its use in the interior impacts the visual, functional and symbolic spatial qualities. As a passageway it signifies transition from one place to another and in doing so, it serves as a means of enhancing an ensuing view. Moon Gate creates an illusion of expanded space and is reminiscent of the Intype (Interior Archetype) Borrowed View [2].

In the Illustrated Dictionary of Taiwan Ancient Architecture, Moon Gate is identified as a symbol of perfection [3]. In Chinese traditional culture, it is believed that the sky is a circle while the ground is a square. The circle represents the positive and proactive attributes such as the heaven, daytime, male, and movement. Therefore, the circle of Moon Gate reflects the pursuit of perfection and a series of movements. Because the indoor Moon Gates indicate an important space, they are exquisitely decorated, engraved in wood with themed auspicious animals, plants and geometrical patterns such as cracked ice. Moon Gates highly decorated with themed carvings add value to its function in the interior space.

Moon Gate is an indispensable feature in some foreign Chinese gardens. Other cultures have appropriated Moon Gate into their gardens and landscapes. In New York City, the Metropolitan Museum of Art features Moon Gate as an entrance. In the Chinese Garden of Friendship in Sydney, Australia, Moon Gate provides a framed view into the pond. In other countries, Moon Gate may convey ideas contradictory to that of China. For example, in Bermuda, Moon Gates are a common garden feature and are regarded as a symbol of love. Bermudians believe people who walk through a Moon Gate are blessed with good luck. But in the Smithsonian Moon Gate Garden in Washington D.C., the shape of the circle and square illustrates the Chinese viewpoint of heaven and earth. Building techniques and construction materials for Moon Gate may be traditional or innovative. For example, in Europe a Moon Gate wall was created by British stone mason and artist, Johnny Clasper. It was constructed from traditional milestones without cement or any form of bonding material which makes the technique a unique example of Moon Gate [4]. Several Moon Gates have been created by photographer Andy Goldsworthy mixing traditional and non-traditional materials such as the temporary sculpture he made of woven twigs [5].

## II. CHRONOLOGICAL SEQUENCE

In the 1770s, the Lodge of Retirement (Zhai Juanqin) ("Fig. 1") was built in the Forbidden City, Beijing, intended to be the studio and recreational house for Emperor Qianlong. The lodge consisted of nine bays on the facade, among which five bays formed a reception studio and living space with a symmetrical plan. The four bays in the west functioned as an interior theater with a pavilion stage and wall murals to simulate exterior landscapes in the spacious palace courtyard gardens. A Moon Gate was strategically placed along the south wall, to allow access from the lobby into the interior theater. Moreover, an identical image of Moon Gate and balustrade was depicted on the opposite north side wall covered with trompe l'oil paintings [6]. Paintings on the wall echoed the Moon Gate partition and were used to draw a connection between the indoor and outdoor. Viewed from the passage way beyond the Moon Gate, the mural implied a distant garden reminiscent of the Intype Borrowed View.

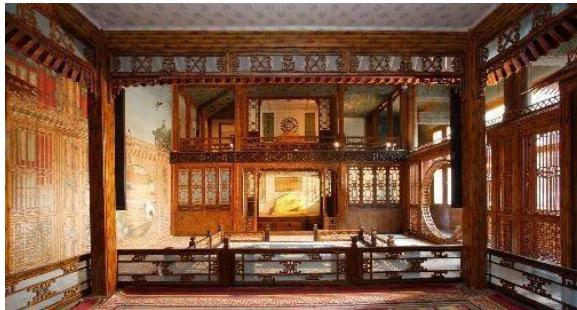


Fig. 1. The Lodge of Retirement, Beijing 1770.

During 1875-1908, the reign of Emperor Guangxu in Qing Dynasty, Linquan Qishuo House ("Fig. 2") was built in the Garden Liu in Suzhou. The architecture was a typical garden structure, which combined two halls together, one which faced the north and the other toward the south, with an independent roof system under one expansive covering. Two halls were alternatively used for seasonal changes. It was said that these two halls had different functions: the north accommodated host receptions while the other served the hostess. Therefore, the hall was divided by a solid wood screen in the center and two Moon Gate partitions on either side. The screens were made of padauk wood and the openwork carving of vine plants filled the wood frames. Moon Gate not only divided the space but also produced multiple spatial layers in the expansive hall.



Fig. 2. Linquan QishuoHouse, Suzhou 1875-1908.

In the 1980s, with the advent of new reform policies in China, commercial and residential construction expanded exponentially creating new urban centers. Chinese architecture witnessed a mixture of Chinese and western styles. During this period, interior design predominately followed western practice but contained some recognition of Chinese traditions.

The Fragrant Hill Hotel (1982) ("Fig. 3") by Chinese-American architect I.M.Pei was an outstanding example of combining traditional architectural details within a contemporary building. Pei departed most from tradition in his design of the central lobby or atrium, which was dominated by some 8,000 square feet of skylights [7]. A Moon Gate was instrumental in defining a transition from the entrance gate into the spacious atrium beyond. This Moon Gate was derived from a screen wall (Ying Bi) inside an entrance gate in a Quadrangle Courtyard in China, which was used to protect privacy for the dwellers inside and to

keep evil spirits away from the house. Decoration of the Moon Gate partition symbolized an exterior landscape on the interior. Pei chose simple, elegant white stucco reminiscent of old Chinese houses and gray tiles to decorate the Moon Gate and surrounding windows.



Fig. 3. Fragrant Hill Hotel, Beijing 1982.

In the 1990s, Moon Gate appeared frequently in Chinese restaurants and hotels. The Beiyuan Restaurant ("Fig. 4") was one of three large Lingnan-Garden style restaurants in Guangzhou with dense local decoration. Mr.Bozhi Mo, an architectural master of the Lingnan School, led the expansion and set the tone for its interior design. In the entrance lobby was a Moon Gate which ushered guests into the dining area. Looking through the Moon Gate was a hexagonal Manchuria window embedded within the marble wall. Although the Manchuria window had no access to the view, it arouses imagination of the distant natural scene and obscured the spatial depth.



Fig. 4. Beiyuan Restaurant, Guangzhou 1957.

In 2008, DuGe ("Fig. 5") was renovated from a private home into a boutique hotel. Once as a residence in Hutong to a noble Beijing family, this 200-year old house was renovated by Belgium designer Jehanne de Biolley. The update capitalized on the courtyard environment to provide privacy from the city to hotel guests. De Biolley reallocated ten guest rooms and named them with unique themes reflecting Chinese culture, one of which was the Bamboo House. In this structure, Moon Gate was used to separate the living room from the bed room. Bamboo themes were presented on the screen in the form of openwork wood

carving. In antiquity, auspicious vegetation usually covered the partition. Here, Moon Gate matched the theme of the room, both functionally and poetically.



Fig. 5. Duge, Beijing 2008.

The 2010 decade featured diversity of Moon Gate in interior settings. Heyi Ting (2011) ("Fig. 6"), Chengdu, is a house of Chinese Traditional Medical Science designed by Lin Yu. The over-scaled Moon Gate was two stories high and dominated the public space. It was reflected in the pool like a moon in the water thereby creating a tranquil atmosphere. In Chinese culture, the moon is a symbol of peace and seclusion. The architect sought to highlight the lunar image of the garden setting, which resulted in a highly emotive visual experience and enhanced the function of the space. This Moon Gate was a thin partition with copious light transmission rather than a more opaque screen to block visual panorama. Its scale fit the volume of the building and successfully merged the interior and the exterior landscape together.



Fig. 6. HeyiTing, Chengdu 2011.

Moon Gate was popular in residences since many dwellers showed a reverence for nostalgia. This residence in the Oriental Cultural Garden ("Fig. 7"), Hangzhou, finished in 2014, featured a pair of Moon Gates in the multipurpose area to separate the study space from the living space. These Moon Gates were constructed to minimize the decorations and reinforce the spiritual requirement of Zen Soul. Two arcs shaped like frames respond to each other, as bookends defining the inner space. Their void allows a borrowed view

of the space beyond which lends itself to the poetic imagery of Zen Soul.



Fig. 7. Oriental Cultural Garden, Qijing Jiayuan Building 15, Hangzhou 2014.

A restaurant named Xiaoda Dong(2014) ("Fig. 8") was also in pursuit of Zen Soul and utilized Moon Gates as a primary decorative element in the interior. Unique to these Moon Gates was their integration with the dining furniture in the restaurant. Patrons were unable to walk through the Moon Gates as they became structural supports for the elongated dining table. In this case, the function of Moon Gate changed and the scale was adjusted to match the intricacy of the furniture.



Fig. 8. XiaodaDong Restaurant, Beijing 2014.

An interesting interior example expressing Zen Soul with Moon Gate was the Nianhua Wan Sales Center (2014) ("Fig. 9") at Mt. Lingshan, Wuxi. Mt. Lingshan Scenic Area is a Buddhist utopia in the Taihu Lake National Tourist Resort, Wuxi. Many buildings at Mt. Lingshan highlight the Zen Soul design and the sales center is no exception. An expansive Chinese landscape painting mounted on the curved lobby wall serves as an artistic representation of Borrowed View seen through Moon Gate. This Moon Gate is unique in its appearance and construction method, made of an array of bamboo rods held together by indiscernible fishing wires fashions the form of a Moon Gate. Symbolic of bamboo trees, this Moon Gate appeared to sway in the mountain scene beyond. Here, the shape of Moon Gate was also interpreted as Round Sky and Square Earth, which was an ancient Chinese perception of the world.



Fig. 9. Nianhua Wan Sales Center, Wuxi 2014.

In 2015, Hirsch Bedner Associates (HBA) created a signature design for NUO's first hotel ("Fig. 10"). The overall design was inspired by traditional Chinese culture, blending elements from the Ming dynasty with a western modern aesthetic. In this case, Moon Gate was presented as a progressive Marching Order (an Intype) instead of a single planar element. Use of unexpected materials gave this Moon Gate an entirely new appearance. The arches were made of stainless steel and the partition wall was finished with a dark mirrored glass. An axial order was established to guide visitors through the passageway and attract attention. Due to the reflective glass, artificial light delicately balanced drama with visibility. Additional sequences of Moon Gate occurred on the way to NUO's spa area. Arches of white marble contrasted with visually weighted tori formed from refined dark marble. Looking through this contemporary Moon Gate, one can perceive a landscaped Borrowed View [9]. Both sequences of Moon Gate were intensified via the use of Intype Marching Order and by paying homage to Chinese traditional decoration yet catering to a modern western design aesthetic.



Fig. 10. NUO hotel, Beijing 2015.

### III. CONCLUSION

Moon Gate is an Intype (Interior Archetype). At its origin, Moon Gate belonged to the outdoor garden in China or in other countries around the world. But the inventive Chinese carpenter imitated the outdoor Moon Gate and laid the foundation for interior adaption. Early examples of the indoor Moon Gate continued the principle of traditional function and visual effects of the outdoors. Within the last ten years, designs for indoor Moon Gates stressed diversification and individuality in terms of scale, form, material and function. More and more modern design practice considerations are brought into concern. Moon Gates are abstracted as icons to indicate Chinese traditional culture rather than used as the screens.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Evidence for the use and the chronological sequence of Moon Gate as an archetype was developed from the following sources: The Lodge of Retirement [1770] Forbidden City, Beijing China in "the Lodge of Retirement, the last dream of Qianlong," [http://www.jhnews.com.cn/jhwb/2008-12/04/content\\_350084.htm](http://www.jhnews.com.cn/jhwb/2008-12/04/content_350084.htm); PhotoCrd: Anonymous/Linquan QishuoHouse [1875-1908] Linger Garden, Suzhou, China, [n/jhwb/2008-12/04/content\\_350084.htm](http://n/jhwb/2008-12/04/content_350084.htm); PhotoCrd: Sammu / Guangzhou North Garden Restaurant, [1957] Mo Bozhi; Guangzhou China in Pangli, "Qing Style Screen and Guangzhou Restaurant," Interior Design, No.1. (Jan 1998); PhotoCrd: Pangli / Fragrant Hill Hotel[1982] I.M.Pei; Beijing China in "I.M.Pei Centennial birthday and his works," <http://travel.sohu.com/20170426/n490967587.shtml>; PhotoCrd: Anonymous/ Duge Courtyard Bountique Hotel, [2008] Jehanne de Biolley; Beijing China in Zu Yunyu, "The Montage in the Courtyard — Duge Courtyard Bountique Hotel," Interior Design+Construction, No.180 (Aug. 2009):48; PhotoCrd: Shengqiang, Zhou zhizhi / Heyi Ting [2011] Yulin, Chengdu, China in Yulin, "Arc, Associated with Details of Chinese Style," Interior Design+Construction, No.201(May. 2011):72 / Oriental Cultural Garden, Qijing Jiayuan Building 15 [2014] Guangjie; Hangzhou, China in Guangjie, "Oriental Cultural Garden, Qijing Jiayuan Building 15," China Interior, No. 871(July, 2015):100 / Xiaoda Dong Restaurant [2014] Liu Daohua; Beijing, China in Liu Daohua, "Tribe — Beijing Qiaofu"

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