

Architecture, Environment and the Creation of a Sacred Space: Nanyan Palace in Wudang Mountain as an Example

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Abstract:

Wudang Mountain has the attributes of both a Taoist ashram and a royal family temple of the Ming Dynasty. Based on the research on the holy mountain, this article focuses on how architectures communicate with the environment to create a sacred space under the influence of religious and political needs. Designers need to find a balance between the form specifications of high-grade buildings as well as the natural environment. This article takes Nanyan Palace as an example and combines three types of historical images with on-site research to study its spatial layout. Research finds that Nanyan Palace is divided into the guided transition space and the central deity space in accordance with the terrain. The former follows the winding mountain while the latter maintains an axisymmetric layout. The node space between the two is also significant in the transition from secular to sacred. Architectures organize surroundings and guide pilgrims from pilgrimage roads to the blessed spot, so as to help humans establish a connection with heaven ultimately. At the same time, the imperial power completes the discipline of the people.

Keywords: Wudang mountain; Taoist architectural complex; sacred space; historical image; architecture and environment.

1. Introduction

Taoism is a local belief and ritual system in China and the holy mountain holds an important position. In Taoism, mountains are the dwellings of gods as well as the space for humans to pursue divinity [1]. The sanctity of a holy mountain comes from nature and the landscape itself, as well as rituals surrounding this location [2]. Among them, architecture plays

a crucial role. It carries people's understanding and expectations of sacredness.

Based on the research of the holy mountain, this study focuses on architecture. This article takes the systematic renovation of Wudang Mountain in the Ming Dynasty as the historical background and takes Nanyan Palace as an example to study how architectures communicate with the environment to create a sacred space under the influence of religious and

political needs. In terms of methodology, this article compares three types of historical images drawn in the Ming Dynasty and combines on-site records for research. With the creation of the sacredness of Wudang Mountain as the center, this study conducts dialectical thinking on a series of relationships between politics and religion, architecture and nature, belief and ritual. This research is meaningful for the study of Taoist sacred sites.

2. Background

2.1 History of the Construction of Wudang Mountain

Wudang Mountain is the ashram of Taoist Emperor Zhenwu. Zhenwu, also known as Xuanwu, was originally a mythical animal guarding the north. Afterward, it was

revered as a northern god by Taoism and was granted the imperial decree by human emperors. Taoist activities in Wudang Mountain date back to the Han Dynasty and the cult of Zhenwu in Wudang Mountain was formed in the Song Dynasty at the latest. In the Yuan Dynasty, the worship of gods in Wudang Mountain underwent an essential transformation: it is both religious and political.

What's more, in the Ming Dynasty, the imperial family adopted Zhenwu as their patron saint [3]. During the Yongle period, to preach the idea that "the emperor's power was granted by god", emperor Zhu Di issued an edict to systematically build Wudang. Since then, Wudang Mountain has become both a Taoist ashram and a royal temple. Portraits of Zhenwu and emperor Zhu Di can be seen in figure 1. They share a high degree of similarity in the expression of the image in their paintings. This also reflects the significant influence of politics on religion.



Taoist Emperor Zhenwu



Emperor Zhu Di

Fig. 1 Taoist Emperor Zhenwu and Emperor Zhu Di

2.2 Positioning of the Nanyan Palace

There are many palace complexes on the mountain and sacred roads linking them. Nanyan Palace is located at the intersection of the east and west pilgrimage roads [4]. Wudang Mountain is regarded as a sacred space of initiation and the pilgrimage is a transitional ritual for humans to connect with the deity [5]. The layout of Wudang

Mountain adopts narrative techniques to fully reproduce the process of Zhenwu's cultivation. As depicted in figure 2, from the foot of the mountain to the top, it can be divided into the three realms of man, earth, and heaven [6]. Nanyan Palace is the key point of transformation from earth to heaven.

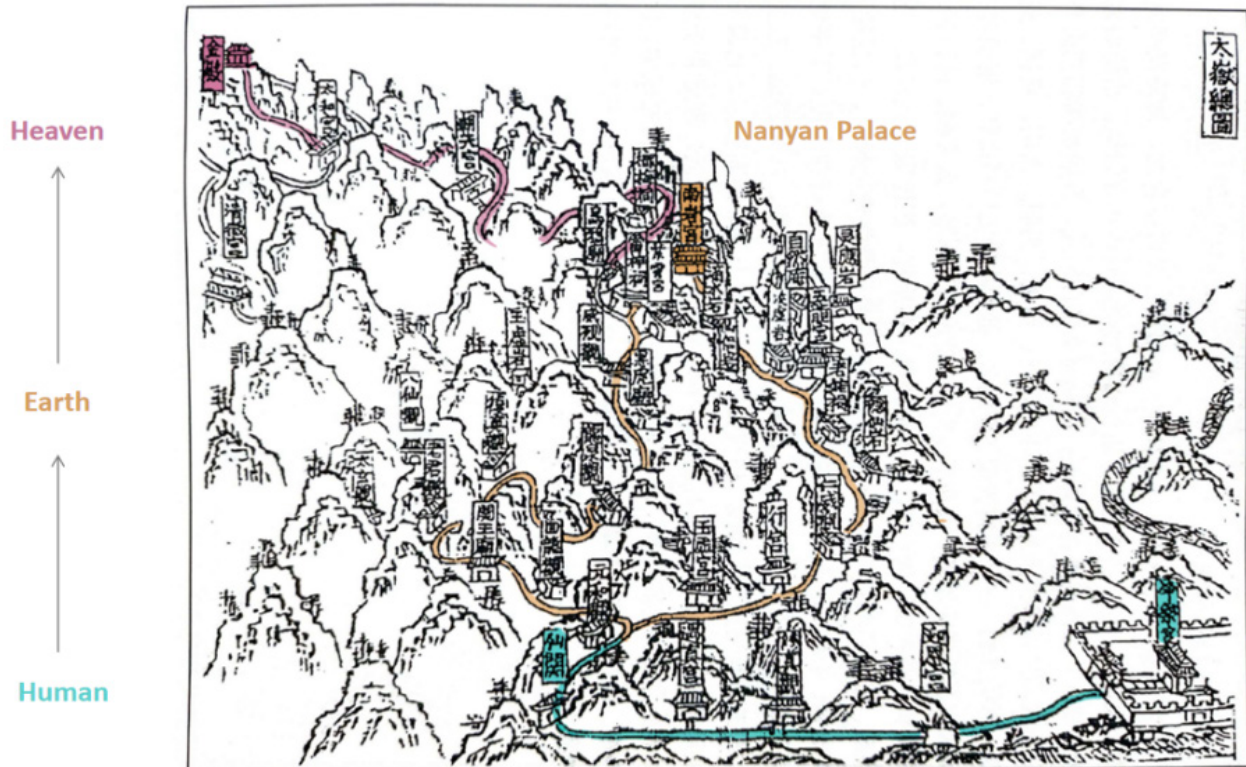


Fig. 2 The three realms from foothill to peak: Man - Earth - Heaven. Adapted from General Map of Wudang Mountain, Taiyue Mountain Annal, Jiajing Period of the Ming Dynasty.

2.3 Constraints to Construction

On the one hand, Wudang Mountain had a strong political significance in the Ming Dynasty. The complex there is built concerning the Forbidden City, which is strictly governed by etiquette. On the other hand, in line with the Tao-

ist view of nature, Zhu Di forbade the destruction of the original landscape and the felling of trees. Thus, as shown in figure 3, designers need to find a balance between form specifications of high-grade buildings as well as the natural environment. It is a challenge to arrange the elements of a royal palace while following nature in Wudang [7].



The Forbidden City of the Ming Dynasty



Wudang Mountain

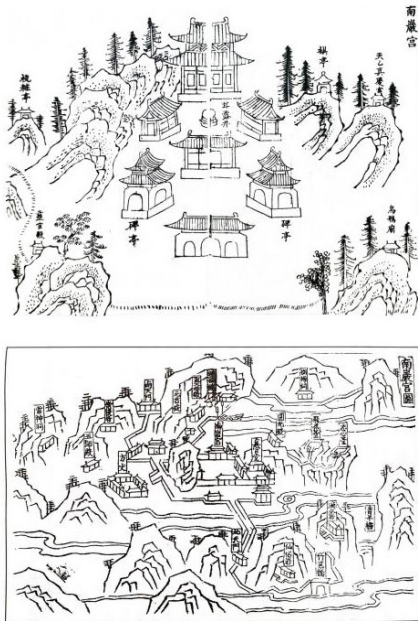
Fig. 3 Designers need to find a balance between the two.

3. Historical Image Research

images used for analysis, all of which were drawn in the Ming Dynasty.

3.1 Overview of Three Types of Images

As compared in figure 4, there are three types of historical



Landscape Map



Court Painting



Literati Landscape Painting

Fig. 4 Three types of historical images about Nanyan Palace

The first type of images are landscape maps in the mountain annals in Jiaping period. These diagrams are similar to a guidebook. They abstract topography and simplify architectures. However, the orientation and layout of the palace and landscape are more accurately recorded [8]. The second type is court painting (Wudang Auspicious Painting) in Yongle period. It is a 12-meter-long, half-meter-high scroll with 15 drawings. It records paranormal matters occurring over several palaces on Wudang Moun-

tain. It is more carefully drawn for buildings and natural landscapes. The third type is the literati landscape painting (Wudang Snowy Scene of Nanyan Palace) in Jiaping period. It is a large painting, nearly three meters high and one meter wide. It was painted by Xie Shichen, a Ming Dynasty artist. He drew it from memories of a personal excursion when he was young. This image is a more realistic representation while adding a more personal interpretation.

3.2 Analysis of Landscape Maps



Fig. 5 The ideal layout of Nanyan Palace. Adapted from Nanyan Palace Map, Taiyue Wudang Mountain Annal, Kangxi Period of the Qing Dynasty

The Taoist complex of Wudang Mountain has a high degree of unity in form with the palace buildings. Figure 5 is the ideal layout of Nanyan Palace if it's not constrained by natural environment. There is a central axis and the court-

yards are arranged along it. Emphasizing this “axis of royal power” is a common feature of the palace complexes on Wudang Mountain [9].

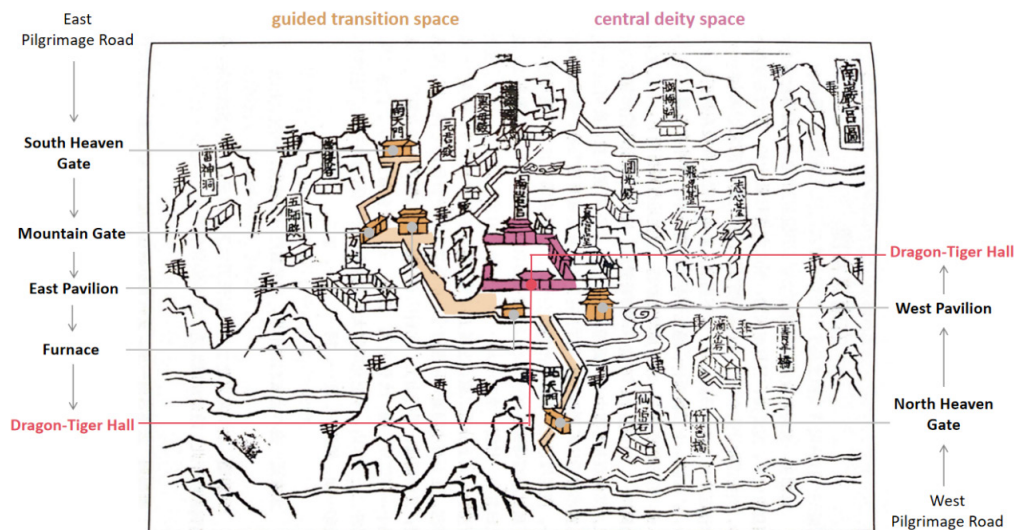


Fig. 6 The actual layout of Nanyan Palace. Adapted from Nanyan Palace Map, Dayue Taihe Mountain Annal, Jiajing Period of the Ming Dynasty

However, due to the influence of topography, the axis of Nanyan Palace will be somewhat unique. Figure 6 shows the actual layout. North of the Nanyan Palace is a valley,

and in front of it is a broken cliff. The space between the valley and the cliff is not enough to accommodate all the buildings. Thus, Nanyan Palace is divided into two main

areas: the guided transition space and the central deity space. The former follows the winding mountain while the latter maintains an axisymmetric layout. These two areas are divided by the Dragon-Tiger Hall and its front square. The guided transition space consists of two pilgrimage roads. The South Heaven Gate on the east pilgrimage road stands at a commanding high point. Then there is a winding road down the mountain. On the way, pilgrims pass the little Mountain Gate and then the East Pavilion. And finally, on the east side in front of the Dragon-Tiger Hall, there is a furnace. Contrasting with the east pilgrimage road, the west one, which passes North Heaven Gate, is

a continuous uphill path. On the west side in front of the Dragon-Tiger Hall is the West Pavilion, opposite the furnace on the east side.

In conclusion, the east and west pilgrimage roads have similar architectural elements, but they are not identical. This is greatly affected by the terrain. Two pilgrimage roads eventually intersect on the space between the valley and the cliff — this is the central deity area where the idols are worshipped.

3.3 Analysis on Court Painting



Fig. 7 Adapted from Wudang Auspicious Painting, Yongle Period of the Ming Dynasty

Wudang Auspicious Painting was presented to the emperor. It has a more concrete depiction of central deity space. This is a symmetrical enclosed courtyard. The main hall is backed by a valley and faces south. The side halls are on the east and west. An obvious axis connecting the complex, the valley and heaven can be seen in figure 7. This is an important expression of royalty and sanctity.

The bottom of the central axis is Dragon-Tiger Hall, which is dedicated to Wang Lingguan, the guardian deity of Taoism. So this hall is an important transformation site that means people entering the space of God. Through the hall, people will see a wide square and a large-scale

palace on a high platform. The great hall is dedicated to Emperor Zhen Wu. Concentric rings of coloured light rise from the valley behind the Great Hall. It is like the blessed spot where the Taoist deities live. Pilgrims are able to communicate with heaven here.

It is also worth mentioning that the hierarchical layout, the raised platforms as well as the gable and hip roof with double eaves of the Great Hall are all reminiscent of the Forbidden City, which was built at almost the same time. This shows the influence of political consciousness on the construction of Taoist sacred sites.

3.4 Analysis on Literati Landscape Painting



Fig. 8 The white space on the diagonal corresponds to the valley space. It is a sacred space. Adapted from Xie Shichen, *Wudang Snowy Scene of Nanyan Palace*, Jiajing Period of the Ming Dynasty.

Wudang Snowy Scene of Nanyan Palace is a literati landscape painting depicting the snowy scenery of Nanyan. This painting has a diagonal composition. As indicated in figure 8, it can be supposed that its viewpoint is from the valley behind the great hall looking towards the palace. These large landscape paintings are often hung on the wall or screen at home so that people can dream of traveling while in bed. In this regard, the large white space on the diagonal is important. It helps the painter to create an illusory and sacred realm [8]. This space corresponds to the valley behind the Great Hall. It can also be connected to the sacred axis on *Wudang Auspicious Painting*. What's more, blurred strokes in the white space add to the wonderland atmosphere. Thus, we can surmise that this space is left to the viewers' imagination to communicate with the deity.

4. Discussion

Nanyan Palace can be divided into two main areas: the guided transition space and the central deity space. Each area has its own character, and the transformation nodes between them are also important.

4.1 Guided Transition Space: Control and Guidance

The guided transition space is designed to regulate one's emotions before entering the deity area. One of the essential points is the sight control along the road. Figure 9 shows a few pictures drawn on the road from the East Pavilion to the Dragon-Tiger Hall — the trees, rocks and buildings form several sets of binary structures that guide the pilgrims towards the central deity space.

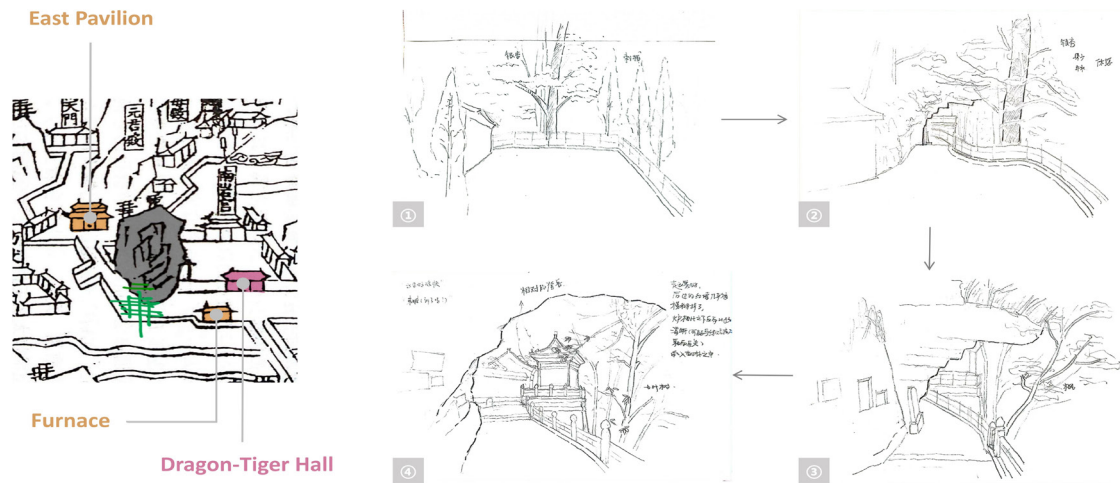


Fig. 9 Sight Control from the East Pavilion to the Furnace. On-site recordings

Facing the East Pavilion is a platform where people can rest, and a large ginkgo tree is planted on the hillside behind the platform. Turning a corner on the platform, a large protruding rock blocked the view. Walking under the rock, the furnace made of green glazed tiles suddenly appeared. Go a few steps further and people will reach the Dragon-Tiger Hall.

Through this series of control and guidance, pilgrims will have the feeling that the palace is hidden in a cave when they finally see the hall. This enhances the sense of mystery and is in line with “the Cave of Heaven” mentioned later.

4.2 Transformation Nodes: From Earth to Heaven

Dragon-Tiger Hall and the furnace are the transition points for pilgrims entering and exiting the residence of deities. The node space here has the symbolic significance of transitioning from secular to sacred [10].

Dragon-Tiger Hall enshrines the guardian deities of Taoism. The furnace is on the east side of the plaza outside the hall. After the pilgrims have completed a series of rituals, they walk out of the Dragon-Tiger Hall and throw the offerings into the furnace. The smoke drifts into the air, implying pilgrims’ complete communication with the deity.

4.3 Central Deity Space: The Cave of Heaven

For one thing, the central deity space reflects the concept of etiquette of royal high-grade buildings. For another, it creates the imagery of “the Cave of Heaven”, which is regarded as the abode of the Taoist deities. In terms of Taoist cosmology, “cave” has the meaning of emptiness

and chaos [5]. Although Nanyan Palace is not located in a cave, the designers used the shelter of rocks on the east pilgrimage road to create a “cave-like” experience. Then, the enclosed layout of the central deity space somehow suggests the cosmic core. Apart from this, the valley and mountain fog behind the main hall also provides a field of emptiness and chaos that attracts contemplation. Pilgrims come to establish a connection with heaven here.

5. Conclusion

Wudang Mountain was inscribed on the *World Heritage List* in 1994. An expert from UNESCO said that Wudang Mountain combines ancient wisdom, historic architecture, and natural beauty. It is exactly a reflection of Taoist thought—heaven, earth, and man are combined in one. This can also be applied to understand the creation of sacred space at Nanyan Palace.

Nanyan Palace is divided into the guided transition space and the central deity space by the terrain. Architectures organize surroundings and guide pilgrims from pilgrimage roads to the blessed spot. These help humans establish a connection with heaven ultimately. What’s more, heaven symbolizes imperial power to a certain extent. When people develop reverence for heaven during pilgrimage experiences, the imperial power also completes the discipline of the people.

This article provides a reference for the historical study of the Taoist architectural complex in Wudang Mountain. Further study intends to pay more attention to people’s behaviors and rituals and to analyze the creation of sacred space in conjunction with the Taoist thought of the body and the universe. Research could return to Taoism’s own sacred narrative of natural landscapes.

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