

ARCHITECTURAL SYMBOLS OF CHINESE THREE-TIERED STAGE PLEASANT SOUND PAVILION

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Abstract

The “three-tiered stage” or *chóngtái sāncéng* 崇臺三層 was an innovation of Chinese theatrical architecture during the Qianlong 乾隆 reign (1736–1796), a heyday of court theater in the Qing dynasty. The Qianlong emperor commissioned the construction of four such gigantic theaters, of which three are no longer extant. The only one still in existence is the three-tiered stage Pleasant Sound Pavilion (*Chàngyīn Gé* 暢音閣) in the Forbidden City. This three-tiered stage reflects an ingenuity of the Qing court theater. By focusing on this three-tiered stage, this study aims to use the only extant three-tiered stage Pleasant Sound Pavilion as a way to understand traditional Chinese architectural symbols embedded in its exterior structure and interior design.

From the beginning of civilization, man has continually sought to reform and improve his environment according to the needs of basic physical existence. As culture was raised to higher levels, man was no longer satisfied with simple physical existence. Hence symbols, as

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employed in language, art and music, were used to express the deeper meanings of daily life. With the Chinese, art is a kind of symbolism. Architecture's specific symbolic language was developed to represent the character, spirit, feelings and ideas of both the builder and beholder.

Architectural symbolism creates a dialogue between man and architecture. Through this dialogue man experiences, understands and uses architecture. Symbolism is an intrinsic part of ancient Chinese culture. Through the perception of symbolic meanings in architecture, man began to understand and participate in deeper cultural activities. Traditional Chinese architecture in essence symbolizes many levels of meaning: axial symmetrical planning expressed ethics and ritual; orientation and geomancy or *fēngshuǐ* 風水 depicted deeper religious meaning; the form of an individual structure characterized the Chinese spirit. In short, the Chinese worldview has been embodied in the symbolism of both architecture and site planning.

The art of *fēngshuǐ* has been deeply rooted in Chinese culture. It also involves the understanding of the meaning of *yīn* 陰 and *yáng* 陽 (the theory of negative and positive forces), the Five Elements (*wǔxíng* 五行), the application of Chinese symbolism on buildings, the knowledge of the theory of magnetism and the understanding of the workings of ecology, as well as the understanding of the technical skill required to treat the interior and exterior of a building (Huang and Yang, 1996: 12; Wang, 2001: 138). Yang Rubin and Huang Junjie have argued that in the interpretation of traditional Chinese architecture, this

concept of *yín* and *yáng* is expressed as dualism in architecture. Masculine qualities are *yáng* and feminine qualities are *yín*; accordingly, built-up areas, sun-lit roofs, protruding structures and front elevations are *yáng*, while void areas, shadowed eaves, set-back structures and rear elevations are *yín*. But when there is too much of *yáng* in anything it will turn into *yín* and vice versa. For example, when a built-up area is too large it will be *yín* and when a roof eave tilts up too high it will transform into *yáng*. Anything that is too *yín* or too *yáng* is imbalanced and, therefore, is undesirable² (Huang and Yang, 1996: 13-14; Wang, 2001: 138-139).

In addition to the principles of *yín* and *yáng*, ancient Chinese architecture also followed the theories of the Five Elements. According to Wang Zhenfu, the phrase *wǔxíng* appeared as early as in the *Shàng Shū* 尚書 or the *Book of Shang*. The *Zhōu Shū* 周書 or the *Book of Zhou*, covering the years 557-581 B.C., explained the nature of the Five Elements and listed them in order—water, fire, wood, metal/gold, and earth. The Five Elements represent the five different kinds of matter with which people constantly come in contact. However, it is the essence of the elements, rather than the elements themselves which, in

² They have also explained that when there is balance in an environment there is *qì* 氣 or rejuvenating energy. Thus, it is of vital importance that buildings should be correctly sited, appropriately related to surrounding buildings and balanced in construction materials and design elements. This is the reason for the symmetrical layout of buildings in classical architecture (Huang and Yang, 1996: 13-14; Wang Zhenfu, 2001: 138-139).

combination, cause each other, as well as all other things to occur; in the wrong combination they can be mutually destructive. Combinations of the elements can cause great happiness or distress to human life. For example, north, south, east, west and center; green, yellow, red white, and black; and the five stages of human's life as shown in Table 1 (Wang, 2001:139-140).

Table 1: The interrelationships of the Five Elements, directions, stage in human's life, color scheme and the *yín-yáng* application

<u>Elements</u>	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal/gold	Water
<u>Direction</u>	East	South	Center	West	North
<u>Stage in life</u>	Birth	Growth	Synthesis	Gathering	Hiding
<u>Color</u>	Green	Red	Yellow	White	Black
<u>Nature</u>	<i>Yin</i>	<i>Yang</i>	<i>Yang</i>	<i>Yang</i>	<i>Yin</i>

Source: Evelyn Lip, *Feng Shui: Environments of Power: A Study of Chinese Architecture*, p. 35.

Like any other building in the Forbidden City, the three-tiered stage Pleasant Sound Pavilion was constructed based on the precepts of *fēngshuǐ*, the art of placement with reference to a sense of balance, the theory of *yín* and *yáng*, and the Five Elements (Fig. 1). All of the structural elements of the Pleasant Sound Pavilion that I have analyzed elsewhere clearly reflect these theories that underlie the roots of

Chinese planning and architecture.³ Perhaps one of the architectural elements of the Pleasant Sound Pavilion that clearly evinces these theories is its color scheme.



Fig. 1. The three-tiered stage Pleasant Sound Pavilion. Photo from Láng Xiùhuá 郎秀華, *Zhōngguó Gǔdài Dìwáng Yǔ Líyuán Shìhuà* 中國古代帝王與梨園史話, cover page.

As Sun Dazhang and Wang Zhenfu have noted, traditional Chinese buildings were not designed with the sole consideration of building form, but also were based on the symbolism of colors. The application of paint on timber serves the purpose of protecting the

³ See my discussion of this theater in Sasiporn Petcharapiruch, "Marvel of Three-Tiered Stage Pleasant Sound Pavilion" in *Chinese Studies Journal*, Faculty of Humanities, Kasetsart University, No.1, April 2006, pp. 185-218 and "Architectural Structure of Chinese Three-Tiered Stage Pleasant Sound Pavilion" in *Journal of Sinology*, Sirindhorn Chinese Language and Culture Center, Mae Fah Luang University, Vol. 1, August 2007, pp. 165-195.

timber and gives symbolic significance to the building elements. The use of colors in Chinese building is a unique art and the significance of these colors must be understood in this cultural framework (Sun, 2002: 64; Wang, 2000: 88).

The five main colors normally applied to traditional Chinese architecture are red, yellow, green, white and black. Each color relates to one of the Five Elements and has its own significance and symbolizes value for the Chinese as shown Table 1. Red, a bright, auspicious color associated with warmth and the Fire Elements, represents good fortune and happiness. Yellow occupies the center position in the Five Elements, the same as the position of the earth. It signifies the royal color used by the emperors and symbolizes power and authority. It also has an association with the Earth Element which symbolizes growth. Green, related to the Wood Element, symbolizes growth and is used to represent longevity and, because of its soothing effect, also to represent harmony. White is for mourning and love. It is associated with the Gold Element, while Black, linked to the Water Element, denotes darkness. In addition, color schemes of Chinese architecture are based on traditional values of Chinese colors and the interplay of *yín* (cool) and *yáng* (warm) colors (Sun, 2002: 65-66; Wang, 2000: 90-91).

These five colors have a bearing on the color scheme used in the Pleasant Sound Pavilion. Balustrades on all three platforms, partial sections of beams and eaves, all staircases (Fig. 2) and screen doors

(Fig. 3), as well as handspike windlasses on the Prosperity Stage and the Fortune Stage⁴ are all bright red (Fig. 4). This red color signifies the good fortune, prosperity and vitality of the grand theater. Since red is associated with the fire element, it also reinforces the precise location of the Pleasant Sound Pavilion, on the south side of the Loge of Inspecting the Truth (*Yuèshì Lóu* 閱是樓) (Fig. 5).⁵ Yellow is applied to glazed tiles that cover the roof of the grand theater, to the gilt decorations on beams, eaves, brackets, and ceilings, as well as gold characters inscribed on the front two pillars of the Longevity Stage⁶ and on the three horizontal wooden boards mounted on frontal eaves on each platform (Fig. 5). This symbolizes wealth and the honor of the emperor. It also represents that the grand theater was exclusively for imperial use.

⁴ The Prosperity Stage or *Lù tái* 祿臺 and the Fortune Stage or *Fú tái* 福臺 are the second and top floors of Chinese three-tiered stage consecutively.

⁵ The audience hall named the Loge of Inspecting Truth is situated in the south side (the opposite side) of the theater. Equivalent to the “royal box,” this building was also constructed during the Qianlong period. It faces south and stands opposite the Pleasant Sound Pavilion. The Loge is two stories high, five *bays* wide, and three *bays* deep. This hall was the audience hall for the emperors, empresses, and court officials to watch opera performances. The Loge is flanked by 13-*bay* corridors on both eastern and western sides. This was the area from which ministers and high officials watched plays. These corridors form viewing galleries which connect it to the rear area of the theatrical pavilion, which were used as a dressing room for the actors of the Pleasant Sound Pavilion, in total forming a courtyard-like architectural setting.

⁶ The Longevity Stage or *Shòu tái* 壽臺 is the first floor of Chinese three-tiered stage.



Fig. 2. Two *chàduǒ* 槓垛 or staircases and an entrance door (*shàngchǎngmén* 上場門) located on the left side of the Longevity Stage. Photo taken inside the Longevity Stage of the Pleasant Sound Pavilion by Sasiporn Petcharapiruch on November 11, 2004.

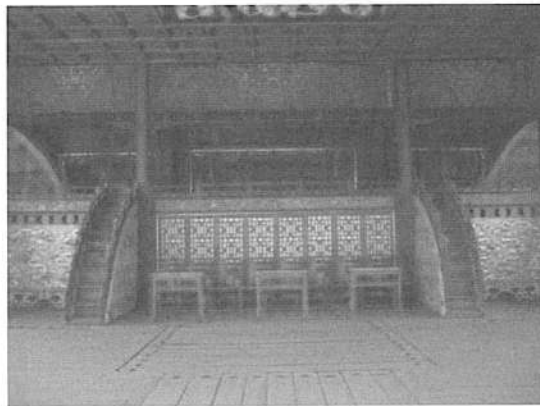


Fig. 3. Screen doors (*gézimén* 格子門) between the front stage and the backstage of the Longevity Stage, connected to the Immortal Tower.

Photo taken inside the Longevity Stage of the Pleasant Sound Pavilion by Sasiporn Petcharapiruch on November 11, 2004.



Fig. 4. Five handspike windlasses for the lifting apparatus located in the backstage of the Fortune Stage of the Pleasant Sound Pavilion. Photo from Yú Zhuōyún 于倬云, *Zìjìn Chéng Gōngdiàn* 紫禁城宫殿, p. 166, plate 184.



Fig. 5. Front view of the Loge of Inspecting Truth. Photo from Láng Xiùhuá, *Zhōngguó Gǔdài Dìwáng Yǔ Líyuán Shǐhuà*, cover page.

The structure of the Pleasant Sound Pavilion differs from its counterparts in the Forbidden City in that its peripheral columns are painted green (while columns in other palatial halls are painted red). Green is also a color of glazed tiles of the top hipped roof of this grand theater, and is also applied to partial sections of polychrome paintings on beams, eaves, brackets, and ceilings in the theater (Figs. 6-7). Since green is the color of sprouting leaves, it symbolizes the tenderness of spring, growth and liveliness of drama performances in the theater. Green also corresponds to the east, which signifies the direction of the Pleasant Sound Pavilion in the northeastern section of the Forbidden City. Besides these three colors, black is also applied on the two frontal columns of the Longevity Stage and on three horizontal wooden boards mounted on frontal eaves on each platform (Fig. 8). White is painted on

the cloud patterns decorated on the ceilings of the Longevity Stage and on those corner girders and beams of the inner eaves of this platform, as well as on an entrance door and an exit door (Fig. 9).

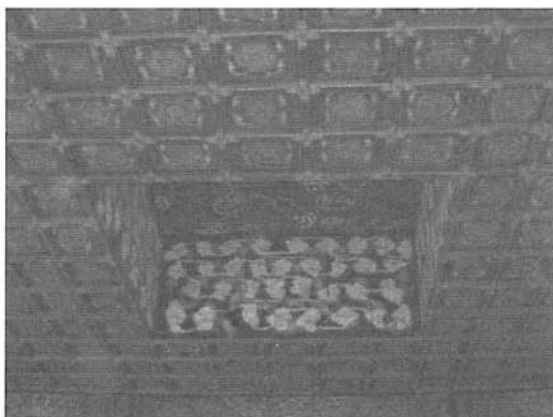


Fig. 6. The ceiling of the Longevity Stage. Photo taken inside the Longevity Stage of the Pleasant Sound Pavilion by Sasiporn Petcharapiruch on November 11, 2004.



Fig. 7. The performing area of the second floor, called the Prosperity Stage, of the Pleasant Sound Pavilion. Photo from Yú Zhuōyún, *Zhìjìn Chéng Gōngdiàn*, p. 166, plate 185.



Fig. 8. Wooden boards with gold characters inscribed. Photo taken outside the Longevity Stage of the Pleasant Sound Pavilion by Sasiporn Petcharapiruch on November 11, 2004.



Fig. 9. The polychrome painting in the theater. Photo taken inside the Longevity Stage of the Pleasant Sound Pavilion by Sasiporn Petcharapiruch on November 11, 2004.

The theory of *yín* and *yáng* applied in the Pleasant Sound Pavilion can also be seen in Chinese numerology. According to Huang Junjie and Yang Rubin, the ancient Chinese philosophical approach to numerology is found in the *Yì Jīng* 易經. The word *yì* 易 represents the changeability of the state of all things and the interaction and relation of the negative and positive qualities of things in nature (1996: 137-138). Confucius used the ancient numerals (Eight Trigrams) of negative (*yín*) and positive (*yáng*) signs to form the sixty-four hexagrams for making reference to the Chinese system of cosmology. By squaring the number eight, the Sixty-Four Hexagrams were formed. The number with one dot was considered an odd and *yáng* number, while the number with two dots was an even and *yín* number. Thus 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9 are *yáng* and 2, 4, 6, and 8 are *yín* numbers. The number 9 is the supreme *yáng*,

and accordingly associated with the supreme ruler, the emperor (Huang and Yang, 1996: 139). This numerology was applied on all buildings in the Forbidden City, including the Pleasant Sound Pavilion as shown Tables 2 and 3 below.

Table 2: Architectural Elements in the Pleasant Sound Pavilion that Correspond to *Yáng* Numbers

<i>Yáng</i> numbers	Elements in the Pleasant Sound Pavilion
1	One <i>tiānjǐng</i> 天井 on the Fortune Stage, one big well in the underground
3	Three hipped roofs, three main platforms (excluding the Immortal Tower), units of three bays in width and three bays in depth of the Longevity Stage,
5	Five <i>tiānjǐng</i> on the Prosperity Stage, five <i>dìjǐng</i> 地井 in the Longevity Stage, five floors (including the Immortal Tower and the underground), number of figurine decorations on the roof ridge of the Longevity Stage
7	Number of figurine decorations on the roof ridge of the Prosperity Stage
9	Number of figurine decorations on the roof ridge of the Fortune Stage, units of nine bays of the theater, number of steps of wooden staircases linked the Longevity Stage and the Immortal Tower

Here the numerical 9 signifies the highest order of the *yáng* quality. Thus it was associated with the emperor and was applied to units of construction and to the bays of this grand theater.

Table 3: Architectural Elements in the Pleasant Sound Pavilion that Correspond to *Yín* Numbers

<i>Yín</i> numbers	Elements in the Pleasant Sound Pavilion
2	Number of entrance door and exit door on each platform, two wooden staircases linked the Prosperity Stage and the Fortune Stage
4	Four wooden staircases between the Longevity Stage and the Immortal Tower, four platforms (including the Immortal Tower)
6	Number of lion heads mounted on pillars on three sides of the theater, number of six entrance doors and exit doors in total, six lattice-work screen doors on the Longevity Stage
8	Eight lattice-work screen doors on the front stage of the Fortune Stage
10	Ten lattice-work screen doors on the front stage of the Fortune Stage
12	Twelve pillars in the Longevity Stage which signify twelve lunar months, twelve lattice-work screen doors on the Prosperity Stage

As Wang Zhenfu has noted, every element in traditional Chinese architecture needs to be balanced with reference to its nature (*yín* and *yáng*) (2001: 142). Therefore, each structural element in the Pleasant Sound Pavilion is classified either as *yín* or *yáng* according to the classical Chinese palatial building framework. And since this three-tiered stage was built as an imperial private or residential quarter, it was regarded *yín*. Its front façade is *yáng* while the rear *yín*. The roof top is *yáng* and the roof waves *yín*. The sunlit court is *yáng* and the shaded corridors *yín*. The red columns are *yáng* and the green ceilings *yín*. Structural elements with odd numbers are *yáng* and those with even numbers *yín*. Within the grand theater compound the side facing the sun (*yáng*) is finished with *yáng* colored materials and the side facing the north (*yín*) is paved with *yín* colored materials. The main roof tiles of the Pleasant Sound Pavilion are green (*yín*) and those of the Loge of Inspecting Truth on the opposite side are yellow (*yáng*).

The three-tiered stage Pleasant Sound Pavilion also embraces the notion of Chinese cosmology. Like any buildings of Chinese palace complex, the three-tiered stage is composed of three major parts: a platform (in this case three main platforms), the roof, and the pillars that supported it. The structure has been traditionally thought to symbolize the now-familiar triad of *tiān* 天 or Heaven (roof), *dì* 地 or Earth (platform), and *rén* 人 or Humanity

(pillar). Its system of framing separates the elements of support and enclosure (Zito, 1997: 140-141).

The roofs are duplex, that is, they are arranged in three stages. They show some differences in their proportions as well as in the treatment of the gables. They are curving saddle roofs with high ridges and far projecting eaves. As for the twelve pillars on the Longevity Stage, they are made of single enormous tree trunks. Symbolically, they represent twelve lunar months (Wang, 2001: 144). These pillars support the roof with a cluster of cantilevered brackets that radiate, in principle, in the four cardinal directions. When viewed from a distance, this three-tiered stage seems to be all high building and a marvelously carved sloping roof, two structural immensities held apart, and thus together, by the dwarfed pillars between, as though the burden of connecting Heaven and Earth were almost too much to bear.

Thus it is evident that the symbol used, the spatial effects created and the architectural theme as well as the structural composition of the Pleasant Sound Pavilion was intentionally designed, especially since the building was built as an emperor's recreational hall. Insofar as the emperor was seen as the Son of the Heaven and possessing divine power, his place of entertainment must be of the grandest scale and finished with the most ornate of decorations. The subtle balance and interdependence between the constituent parts of a composition are the defining characteristics of traditional Chinese architecture, clearly exemplified by the three-tiered stage Pleasant Sound Pavilion.

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