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The Chinese Courtyard: An Encomium

[Gregory Bracken](#)

Xing Ruan's *Confucius' Courtyard: Architecture, Philosophy and the Good Life in China* is authoritative, erudite, and enjoyable. And it is about so much more than architecture, encompassing as it does culture, gardens, literature, and calligraphy in its exploration of this most significant of Chinese spaces: the courtyard. Divided into three sections, with evocatively titled chapters, the book is richly illustrated by the author's own beautiful pencil drawings which gives it a stylistic cohesion by uniting well-known images with his own sketches. These go beyond mere illustrations; they help to interrogate what is under discussion more deeply, all informed by an architect's feeling for, and understanding of, space.

The book's primary aim is to explore how the courtyard represented the Chinese 'view of the world, and of themselves' (xxvi), how it 'helped facilitate the often languid cultural and spiritual life of the Chinese' (xxvi). The Chinese, unlike the Indo-Europeans, 'have not radically changed their worldview, [nor] the ideal of the good life, ever since their intellectual foundations were entrenched in the Golden Age' (xli). So, Ruan tells us, 'understanding of the Chinese courtyard (both the form and the idea) may afford one an effective tool to unlock the "Chinese state of mind"' (xliv).

The longevity of the courtyard in China is 'nothing short of astonishing' (xxviii). Ruan asks, 'Why did humans build courtyards in the first instance?' (xxvii). Well, a courtyard lets in light and air, but this was not its sole *raison d'être*, something 'we moderns like to believe' (xxvii). '[S]parsely furnished, poorly heated and, too often, [missing] sanitary plumbing and the supply of running water until the middle of the twentieth century. The lack of corporeal comfort, nevertheless, did not in any way tarnish their art of living' (xxvii) which Ruan sees as finely tuned to the Confucian doctrine of the middle: the good life. This doctrine is based on the understanding that 'saints and the innate moral defects in humans are rare, [so] the middle, in the Chinese mind, is virtuous, for it represents not a compromise, but a propriety that is humanly achievable' (xxv). It is this marrying of the spatial and the social in the Chinese courtyard that underscores the book's importance. Far from being a nostalgic encomium, it is actually a 'call for returning to a *courtyard* understanding of the Chinese way of living. (xxxvii-xxxviii – italics in original).

Architecture and society

Ruan sees the courtyard (and indeed Chinese architecture) as engaging in 'an important sleight of hand with a seductive conjuring power. For it is both physical and elusive at the same time' (xxxiii). Physical, because 'the tangible configuration of a courtyard is necessary to be effective; [and] elusive because the efficacy of a courtyard is not dependant on the countless shapes and dimensions that it can take' (xxxiii). 'It is however the void in the middle that speaks to the core idea of the form, as well as a way of living that carries' (xxxiii). The void is not a thing in itself but a space that comes into being through use (Ruan quotes Laozi's analogy of how a wheel depends not only on its spokes but the empty space between them (60)). And because Confucianism demanded participation in rites, it was these that filled the void of the courtyard – it was also filled with 'life's miscellany' (264).

Ruan argues that the courtyard is a remarkably sustainable construction (xxx), because over an unbroken history of 'more than three millennia, the Chinese had endlessly reworked, rather than continuously reinvented, their way of living' (xxx). Ancient Mediterranean cultures also created courtyard living which, he says, 'makes its fall from grace in Europe curious' (xxix). The Chinese also 'saw no need to develop a particular building type to correspond to a special use, which the English took to an unparalleled level of specificity in the nineteenth century when work and living were

separated, and assorted institutions emerged' (xxx). Ruan sees the Chinese courtyard as the basis of his 'overtly promised profit of this book at the outset – that is, a penetrating access to things Chinese that an architectural understanding may provide' (xxxiii).

Some of the other important points this book makes are the fact that the Chinese word for 'house', *jia*, can also be translated as 'home' and 'family', ideas that are inextricably linked in the Chinese mind, unlike the West (19). Ruan also comments on the 'curious lack of interest in an immortal built world' in China (44). He explains this by what he calls the 'Chinese fixation on the visceral pleasure that has led to their disdain for aesthetic properties by cultures that privilege vision and its associated visuals' (44). This is puzzling to the European mind; the idea 'that the enduring fame of a building could be derived from its history of numerous uses and associations with the people who occupied it, rather than the physical features of the building itself' (47). The Chinese house 'has been represented in the literary world, including poetry, painting and all sorts of forms of artefacts. What these representations tell us about are the lives that lived in these houses, which cannot be readily deciphered from a skeletal surviving house' (46). And 'it was the remarkably static courtyard, as both a place and a way of living, that provided the long-lasting continuum of the pre-modern Chinese culture' (95).

End of a way of life

The beginning of the end for the courtyard and its way of life was nineteenth-century Shanghai. 'This was the first time in Chinese history that the notion of profit-driven property development was explicitly displayed before the Chinese' (229). This radically changed the view of the home from a family heirloom into a 'commodity produced by profit-driven business and according to the modern doctrine of land economy' (240). This was Shanghai modernity, the moment when China began to take a new path.

Xing Ruan's book makes prescient use of interesting and varied sources, effectively combining them to establish, and richly evoke, the Chinese courtyard through literary descriptions, which is sometimes all that's left of them. And while the puzzling longevity and elegant simplicity of the courtyard alone would make them worth studying, Ruan says the 'real spur for writing this book is the hope for, in the not-too-distant future, a response to, and better still a readjustment of, the inescapable distraction of the modern world and the consequential loss of one's inner life' (xxxiv).

Whether built with 'refinement, ostentation or shoddily, the aim was to make the building more adaptive to human needs now and in this life' (xxxv). This book shows why the courtyard's appeal lasted so long, and how it helped structure the Chinese world. What is happening to them now is the subject of the final chapter, Chapter 10, The Assault of Modernity, where Ruan points to the 'growing trend of remodelling pre-modern courtyards into sleek modern homes, boutique hotels and elegant restaurants [which] is no indication of a conscious recognition of the meaning of the Chinese microcosm condensed in the courtyard' (262). He laments that this 'trend rather reflects the continuing influence of a modern misconception of the courtyard and the meaning of voids' (263).

The courtyard's elegance and usefulness may well be coming to an end. This is not due to any inherent flaw in either its conception or its construction, it simply means that Chinese society has moved beyond the point where it sees the courtyard as having a meaningful role to play any more, outside the rarefied, and ultimately sterile, confines of reconstituted museum pieces.