

# Sacred Landscapes in China's Multimedia Space: A Hermeneutic Investigation on Architectural Manifestations of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism in Modern Chinese Society

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## Introduction

Echoing ASCF's philosophical quest for a built landscape that could better house "the spiritual development of humanity in service of addressing the world's most pressing issues," this paper highlights the imaginary spatial-topical system and semiotics that exemplify a collective sense of off-modern nostalgia in contemporary China. Interweaving the four themes of this conference through three different case studies, this paper highlights the re-imagined landscapes in China's multimedia space that are inspired by the "Three Teachings," namely, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Extending the poetic concept of "dwelling" and human cultural geography to the three examples under study,<sup>1</sup> I argue that a hermeneutic investigation on architectural manifestations of the "Three Teachings" in contemporary Chinese society offers cultural and historically informed ways of understanding how architectural designs today can be rich with human meaning, as a response to the experience of discontinuity and a search for connection, while continuing to strive for spiritual transcendence.<sup>2</sup>

## Dwelling Nostalgically: Confucius Literati Gardens in *Jiangnan Landscape*

The first example introduces the architectural and spatial arrangement of classical Chinese gardens featured in *Jiangnan Landscape*, a popular simulation mobile game set during China's Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Reflecting the Confucius ideals transpired during the Ming dynasty, this example shows the featured urban garden architecture and other traditional art forms for the spatiotemporal associations and socioeconomic contributions they make to home building as an extended cognitive mechanism for aestheticization. (Fig. 1).

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<sup>1</sup> For Heidegger, the problem of our situatedness in the world is inextricably bound up with the question of dwelling. Architecture not only allows for the possibility of dwelling, but it is also precisely part of that dwelling itself. See Heidegger (1953; 2006) and Tuan (2017; 2020).

<sup>2</sup> According to Tannock, nostalgia refers to "the sense that agency or identity is somehow blocked or threatened, and that this is so because of a separation from an imaginatively remembered past, homeland, family or community" (1995: 456).



Figure 1: Screenshots of Jiangnan Landscape, which show a scene designed and modeled after Literary Gathering by Zhou Wenju (917 - 975) to reintroduces the historic figurers in the original painting as NPCs in the game. (Image in the public domain)

*Jiangnan Landscape* went viral in China in July 2020, when complex and elusive sentiments—the experience of discontinuity, the crisis of identity, and the anxiety of existence shared by displaced individuals—were being intensified by calamitous circumstances like the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdowns implemented around the globe. Created and published by the Shanghai-based indie game studio Coconut Island, *Jiangnan Landscape* was downloaded more than 2.1 million times within a month of its release.

*Jiangnan Landscape* invites players to enter virtually the gaming space in the person of Wen Zhengming (1470–1559), a Ming dynasty literatus. Wen was born in Suzhou, a canal town in China's Jiangnan region, to a prominent scholar-gentry family, and he became known especially for landscape paintings. In the game, Wen, who in real life designed the famous *Zhuozheng yuan* (Humble Administrator's Garden), is trapped inside a fire-damaged scroll of landscape painting of his own making. Coincidentally, in addition to a playful style, which combines elegant ink-painting strokes and traditional garden designs in colorful comic panels, the game's overcoming-a-catastrophe-by-creating-an-urban-garden-home storyline is highly relatable psychologically to the displaced players forced to adapt to circumstances beyond their control during the COVID-19 outbreak. "If the aesthetics of illusion in gardens potentially invited the charge of self-indulgence, it also overlapped with dreams, memories, or fantasies wherein a lost world could be reclaimed."<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 2).

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<sup>3</sup> Li 2012, pp. 334.



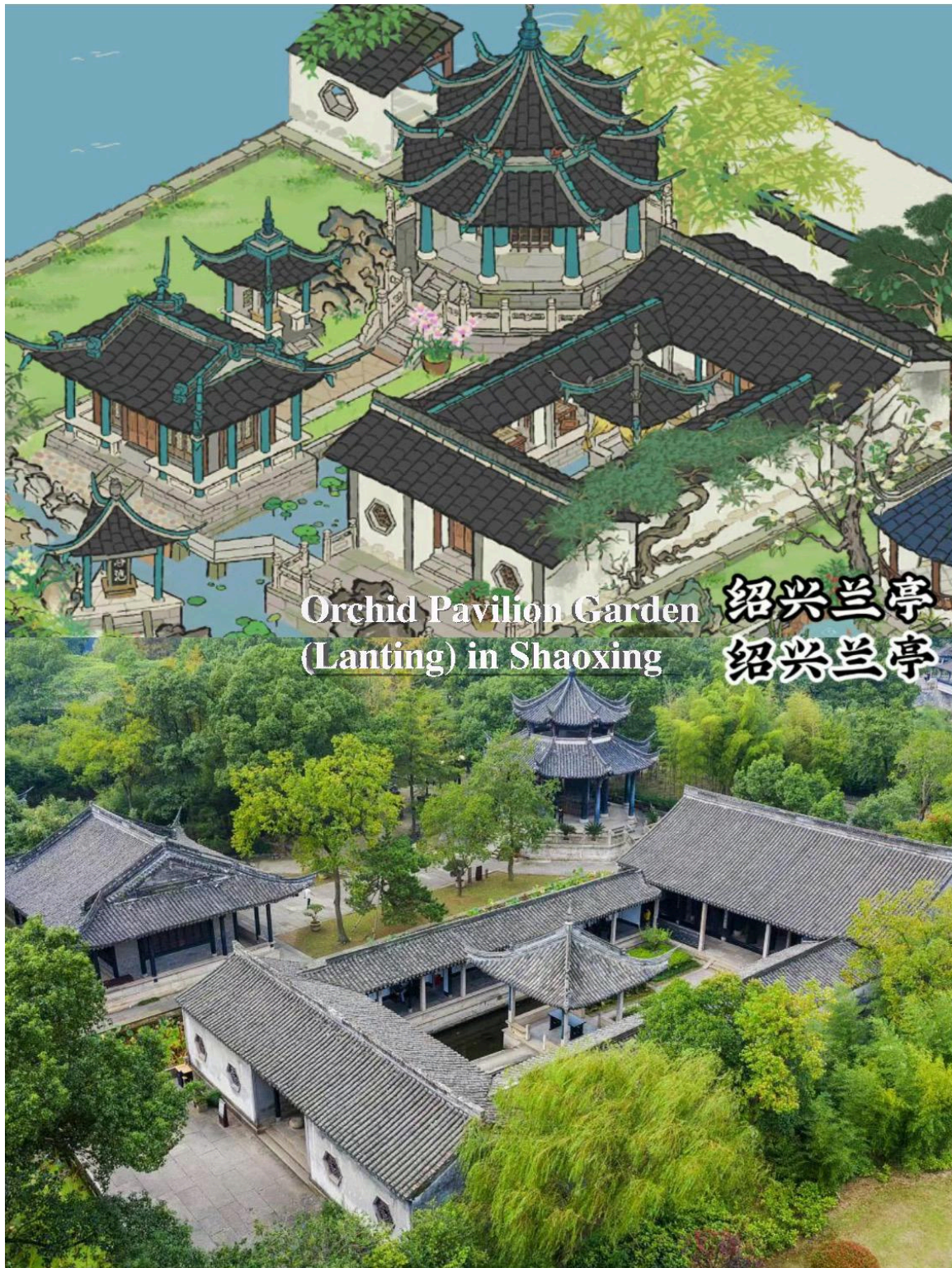


Figure 2: A screenshot of the Orchid Pavilion Garden in Jiangnan Landscape and a photo of the present-day Lanting Garden in Shaoxing, China. (Image in the public domain)

To restore this fire-damaged scroll, or rather, to recreate the fire-torn canal towns that were once Wen's home, players are placed unexpectedly in an impoverished situation and must complete a list of challenges, including constructing new urban garden architectures, attracting new residents, and hosting a marketplace, to rebuild the area and revive the economy. Home, in this sense, reconnects players to a community and an urban setting, rebuilt through gardens.

The design and graphic narrative of *Jiangnan Landscape* are inspired by and developed based on the late Ming–Qing dynasty trend of creating gardens as both a mental and spiritual refuge from the turmoil and devastation of the Ming–Qing transition. The Ming dynasty, known for its cultural and economic prosperity after it had driven out the Mongols, was a unique transitional period, founded between two alien rulers: the Yuan dynasty of the Mongols (1271–1368) and the Qing dynasty of the Manchus (1644–1911). The Ming cultural landscape was marked at its peak by nostalgia among displaced Ming loyalists during its decline and eventual fall under foreign conquerors. Many Han Chinese intellectuals chose a reclusive lifestyle toward the end of the Ming dynasty and turned instead to commercial endeavors or careers as professional painters and garden designers.<sup>4</sup> The concept of home, a space sacred to an individual, is in this instance challenged and redefined by a sense of homelessness similar to the crisis of identity and the anxiety of existence experienced by the Ming intellectuals during the Ming–Qing transitional period. *Jiangnan Landscape* offers carefully woven narratives from Ming historical figures; gamers contribute to a series of brief and incomplete graphics and textual narratives that are lodged in the minutiae of everyday life, connecting the past to the present. Manifested as private gardens in *Jiangnan Landscape*, architectural designs function as the search for continuity, which is, in the Heideggerian sense, unconcealed to be the core of a collective sense of off-modern nostalgia.

#### **Dwelling poetically: The Daoist Sacred Site “Peach Blossom Spring”<sup>5</sup>**

To dwell authentically is to dwell poetically, since poetry is a manifestation of truth restored to its artistic dimension. Architecture, therefore, becomes a means of making the "world" visible. The second example introduces webcomics inspired by poetry and prose that reimaged the Daoism-inspired, utopian landscape of Tao Qian's "Peach Blossom Spring" and offers insight into Chinese architecture and urban debates through the eyes of contemporary Chinese intellectuals and graphic/comic artists. Specifically, it introduces the works of the modern Chinese architect and artist Yushan, whose works embody some of the ideals of Chinese Daoism, such as unrestrained individualism or the aesthetic idea of *xingling* and argues that these creations emerged as a poetic reaction to China's urbanization and environmental changes.

Daoism, an indigenous Chinese philosophical tradition, derives its name from the word "dao," meaning "way" or "path." It encompasses teachings and practices aimed at enabling individuals

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, Wen Zhenheng, a great-grandson of Wen Zhengming, compiled *Zhangwuzhi (Treatise on Superfluous Things)*, a collection of philosophy on gardens before he committed suicide as a rebellious act against the queue and other Manchu policies. The requirement that Han Chinese men and others under Manchu rule give up their traditional hairstyles and wear the queue was met with great resistance.

<sup>5</sup> For reference, I am providing a translation of the “Peach Blossom Spring” story: A fisherman of Wuling once rowed upstream, unmindful of the distance he had gone, when he suddenly came upon a grove of peach trees in bloom. . . . The wild flowers growing under them were fresh and lovely, and fallen petals covered the ground. . . . It [the grove] came to an end at the foot of a mountain . . . There was a small opening, and it seemed as though light was coming through it. The fisherman left his boat and entered the cave, which at first was extremely narrow, barely admitting his body; after a few dozen steps it suddenly opened out onto a broad and level plain where well-built houses were surrounded by rich fields and pretty ponds. Mulberry, bamboos, and other trees and plants grew there, and crisscrossed paths skirted the fields. The sounds of cocks crowing and dogs barking could be heard. (Hightower 2000).

to attain the state of a fully realized being with a profound metaphysical understanding of the ever-changing universe. Daoist sacred sites known as "grotto-heavens" emerged in the 4th century and refer to a utopia constituted by a nexus of interconnected caves hidden in divine mountains and served as soteriological sanctuaries. Regarded as the most influential piece of utopian writing in Chinese history, Tao Qian's tale about the sacred site the "Peach Blossom Spring" not only celebrates the egalitarian worldview, but it has been approached as an influential site of cultural inspiration throughout its recorded history.

Following the Daoist tradition and literary metaphors, in his landscape and architectural designs, instead of forcing the audience to question the presence and effects of modernity on the environment by incorporating images of electric poles and rubbish into images of traditional landscapes, Yushan playfully restores the relationship between Chinese words and images to create a reimagined "Peach Blossom Spring" by capturing the essence of contemporary urban lifestyles based on communal autonomy and individual enlightenment unaided by religious rituals or textual knowledge (Fig. 3).





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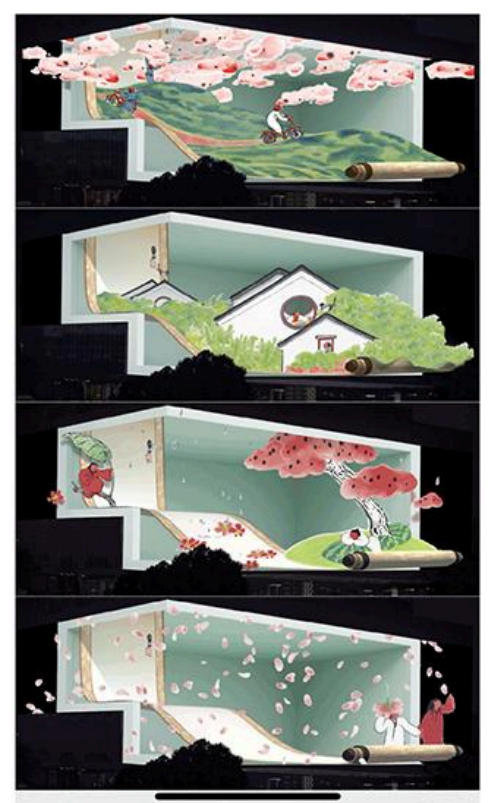


Figure 3: A event flyer for Yushan's talk on traditional Chinese landscape painting and a screenshot of Yushan's landscapes and architectural design showcased in Chongqing. (Image in the public domain)

Interestingly, Daoist terms were frequently employed to translate Buddhist concepts. Some scholars have suggested that the growing interest in depicting Daoist divinities, which emerged in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, was spurred, in turn, by the introduction of Buddhist artistic traditions during that era.

**Dwelling religiously: Staging the UNESCO Dunhuang Mogao Caves**

Turkey is considered a traditional channel of the Silk Road, with Istanbul being the end point; there are many ancient Silk Road remnants in the territory of Turkey. The final and third example connects Istanbul and China through the ancient Silk Road by looking at the digital replica of the UNESCO world heritage site, the Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes, for the purposes of both heritage conservation and theatrical performances. The ancient Silk Road formed an intercontinental

network connecting Europe and Asia, facilitating a vibrant exchange of goods, ideas, and cultural traditions across the Eurasian region. During the Middle Ages, the Silk Road extended along multiple routes from Asia to Anatolia and from Thrace to Europe. Prior to the 11th century, the Seljuk Empire provided security for travelers by constructing caravanserais (inns) along these roads to sustain commercial activities in Anatolia. A significant impact of the movement of peoples and ideas along the Silk Roads was the transfer of architectural and artistic styles, often resulting in complex adaptations; for example, the spread of early Buddhist stone-carving practices throughout Asia. This gave rise to the distinctive development of Buddhist art and architecture, but there were also significant amalgamations with local styles. The interplay of architectural styles is also evident in the Islamic empires, where architectural forms incorporated many design elements from neighboring areas, such as Hindu naturalistic plant motifs.

One of the most renowned UNESCO heritage sites situated along this fabled trade route is the city of Dunhuang in northwest China. Historically a frontier metropolis, Dunhuang was a locus for religious, cultural, and intellectual influences since the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.). The Dunhuang Grottoes, a vast network of Buddhist cave sanctuaries carved into the cliffs of northwestern China, stand as a testament to the profound connection between physical space and spiritual practice in ancient Buddhist traditions. These extraordinary cave temples envelop visitors in an imaginary landscape of Buddhist legends and paradises. Built over centuries by devout followers and patrons and covered in murals and sculptures, these cave shrines served not only as artistic marvels but also as sacred sites for meditation and spiritual cultivation. (Fig. 4).



Figure 4: A dancing scene from Dunhuang Mogao Cave No. 55, east wall mural. (Kuang 2024)

The Dunhuang Academy was founded in 1943 to protect and study the relics and is now responsible for preservation of the site. International institutions also collaborated with the academy for related projects, such as a 3D, panoramic replica of Cave 45 housed at the Getty since 2016 and the Cave Dance immersive exhibition held at Harvard FAS CAMLab since 2022. Most recently, the Academy also posted panoramas of their preservation work. (Fig. 5).





Figure 5: Screenshot of Dunhuang Academy's Digital Dunhuang website and a flyer for Dunhuang, a theatrical dance drama that re-created the Mogao Grottoes on stage for performances. (Image in the public domain)

Standing out from the rich visual culture of the Dunhuang caves are scenes depicting celestial dance performances in Buddhist paradises, widely acclaimed as the most representative artistic achievements at Dunhuang's sacred landscape. Within Dunhuang's grand repository of ancient documents lie textual records containing annotated movements for dance. A stage for performing dances inspired by the murals from Dunhuang, though not a consecrated ritual space, can be reimagined and recreated to become a place for spiritual engagement akin to a religious sanctuary, reflecting the profound connection between physical spaces, visual representations, and the meditative practices that lie at the heart of Buddhist traditions. Theatrical dance performances inspired by Dunhuang's sacred landscape not only immerse audiences in the dynamic world of Buddhist art from the region but also lead them into the deeper cultural dimension of Buddhist dance—where audiences are invited to contemplate themes of body, life, and spiritual transcendence embodied by the celestial dances depicted in the caves.

## Conclusion

Architecture can be conceived of as a process of innovation that creates designs for living together and maintaining life.<sup>6</sup> Hence, fostering connections between hermeneutics and architecture allows the process of transformation, guided by spirituality, to emerge. The interplay of China's "Three Teachings" - Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism - presented in the three examples, highlights the intricate cultural exchanges and cross-pollination of ideas that shaped the spiritual and philosophical landscapes of China.

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<sup>6</sup> See Shaun Gallagher's discussion in Keane and Selinger (2008).