

Connecting Architecture and Transcendence: the work of Nelson Wu

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How should one characterize the differences (and possibly the similarities) between traditional China and India, and because my field of interest is architectural and urban history, how can a characterization of these two cultures be carried into the description of the built environment?

The late Nelson Ikon Wu posed a China/India dichotomy in 1963 his essay length book, *Chinese and Indian Architecture*, which was published as a part of *The Great Ages of World Architecture* series. The series attempted a fresh look at various aspects of world architecture by American scholars. Wu's position has remained a major lens for understanding the difference between these two great poles of Asian architecture. This paper will examine his view of the subject, and reflect upon it.

Wu was a charismatic figure and a professor at Washington University in St. Louis, where he was the Edward Mallinckrodt Distinguished University Professor of the History of Art and Chinese Culture in Arts & Sciences and a founding member of the St. Louis Asian Art Society.

He was born in Beijing in 1919 during the tumultuous years after the fall of the Qing Dynasty. Because of the war with Japan, he graduated with a bachelor's degree from the National Southwest Associated University in

Kunming before traveling to the United States in 1945. He studied at the New School for Social Research in New York before going to Yale University to earn a master's (1949) and Ph. D. (1954) in art history, and taught at Yale, San Francisco State College (now University), and Kyoto University in Japan before going to Washington University.

In his book Wu started off by suggesting a commonality. “Both traditions exhibit a strong desire to relate a cosmic ideal with man’s own image and role within it.” The desire to relate the human condition to the perceived cosmic order is indeed at so primordial a level that almost any culture would share this interest with others.

He quickly shifted to differences “with a Chinese world of walled cities...shaped by... [an] ideal of regulated harmony in society, and rooted in the human intellect. In contrast there was “an Indian world of holy places...[and a] concern for eternity,” based upon the search for the meaning of life. To illustrate this dichotomy, Wu used a Western Han tile design of the “Four Deities” dated about 200 BCE, and a medallion from the Amaravati Stupa of about 150 CE. Each was a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional reality.

The Han tile was a square that stood for a cube representing the Han world of man. As Wu explains: “the Chinese universe is actually a cube. The design here is merely a plan of it. The central shaft is memory, that tenacious tie of ancestral worship, and is also time. In Huai-nan Tzu, a Han dynasty book almost contemporary with the making of this type of tile, the reality of the universe is understood as the combination of “a six-sided world” (top,

bottom and four sides) plus “past, present, and future..” As this cube of a universe spins down the central axis of time, Chinese history unreels, the four seasons revolving with the Chinese cyclical calendar. There are good years and bad years, but the nation is forever the Central Kingdom.”

(Wu,13)

East – Blue Dragon, blue-green vegetation, wood and the up-reaching tree.

South – Red Phoenix of Summer and fire at the zenith.

West – White Tiger of metallic autumn symbolic of weapons, war, executions and harvest; of fruitful conclusion, the calmness of twilight, of memory and regret, and unalterable past mistakes.

North – Winter, cold region, black, the element water; “Hsuan-wu a snake coiling around a turtle, two hibernating reptiles forming a picture behind man’s back of life preserved underground.” (Wu, 12)

The fifth element not represented by a picture but by writing is man in the middle with the scattered words “One thousand autumns and ten thousand years, enduring happiness, never to end.” For Wu this and the many other similar Han brick and tile designs were “self-portraits of the houses or cities of which the tiles were a part.”

The rectilinear tile “is a rigid, finite, and unnatural design [by which I take him to mean intellectually abstract].” (Wu, 29) “Always keeping man in its center, it is an image of man’s society, organizing its enclosed space around him. The Chinese designer is continually challenged and inspired by the specific requirements of each social program and by the human relationships in the society which his building serves and portrays.” (Wu.

30) The courtyard dwelling, and the walled city represent this conception at radically different scales.

In Spiro Kostof's terms the Chinese are creating an architecture emphasizing circumscription and shelter. (Kostof, 21) Circumscription refers to the act of establishing a boundary that defines what is inside the boundary from the setting around it. This act also begins the process of giving shape and dimension. Shelter is Kostof's way of referring to the enclosure of space. The act of marking off an area to create a space for the rituals of daily life, and further defining portions with shelters that create fully defined volumes in contrast to the exterior spaces in Kostof's terms is what Wu is describing.

In contrast to the Chinese square Wu juxtaposes the Indian circle, in this case the Amaravati medallion representing the numerous depictions of ritual events, "the translation of Buddha's Alms Bowl to the Tushita Heaven." The bowl is the central image "traveling up and down the eternal shaft of time" with the numerous surrounding figures subsidiary, and helping to maintain the focus on the central image. Wu continues: "The "center" of the medallion is somewhere about halfway between the middle and the top. It is where one would expect to find the North Pole on the picture of an axially tilted globe, and the rings of dancers are analogous to its latitudinal lines. It suggests the all-inclusive shape of a sphere but with the invisible half concealed from man's knowledge. Foreground figures are seen in full, while only the heads of those in the distance are visible. Running through the center is the path of the alms bowl through the layers of heavens. The infinite universe of India revolves around that cosmic axis." (Wu, 13)

Chinese culture has had a long interest in divination, longevity, and immortality suggesting a culture fixated upon life its improvement and preservation. Divination is a strategy to gain advantage in life by knowing the immediate future. This tendency goes back at least to the Shang Dynasty as represented by the archives of oracle bones that have been unearthed by archaeologists. It was such an important activity that it helps to give birth to writing and all that entails in Chinese culture and civilization. With the rise and development of Daoism one sees a significant segment of the Chinese intelligentsia and occasionally an emperor fixated upon techniques and herbal remedies to prolong and possibly attain immortality. All of this speaks to a culture and civilization directed towards life rather than death.

Since there was no creator god in Han thinking (Loewe, 1982, 63-4), the world was constantly in flux and in the process of becoming. As Loewe notes about China during the Han Dynasty: “These derived in part from a search for permanence in a highly volatile world. There was a deep concern to maintain the perpetual operation of those natural cycles whereby the world had created and was continuing to exist, and a desire to regulate thought and behavior so as to conform with those cycles. There was a common acceptance that unseen powers may affect human fortunes, and that communication is possible with such powers, either to attract blessings or to preclude disaster. Above all, the universe was regarded as being unitary; there was no essential division between sacred and profane, and the creatures of heaven, earth and man were seen as members of a single world. Similarly there was no rigid separation

between religious and intellectual categories, in the way that has become accepted in the west.” (Loewe: 1982, 7)

The lack of a clear position on what happened after death further explains the desire to focus and do well in life. Han thought focused on continual change in the shifting balance between yin and yang rather than some saga or central myth about the nature of the afterlife.

“There is no complete statement of the beliefs that Chinese entertained regarding a life hereafter. Allusions and fables abound in mythology, but there is no solemn drama or saga of sacred literature which corresponds with the conquest of death that is enshrined in the Christian tradition. Nor is there a logical presentation of the arguments for a future life or a visionary description such as may be found in the *Phaedo*.”

“First, there was a wish to prolong the life of the flesh on earth as long as possible. Secondly, there was a desire to effect the entry of one element of a diseased person’s soul into another world or paradise;” (Loewe: 1982, 25.)

In another passage Loewe notes that, “...there was no insistence on the thanks or services due to an identified being, in return for the gift or life or natural wealth. No linear concept of time develops from the need to identify or (Loewe, 1982, 64) establish a single beginning from which all other processes followed. “In neither mythology nor philosophy can there be found the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*: creation is a process of transforming one substance into another but not one of manufacture.” (Loewe: 1982, pp. 63-4)

“The emergence of a world which possesses finite shape from a state of primeval chaos, in which heaven and earth were still formed as one substance, is mentioned in a number of myths, whose origin can hardly be traced with certainty.” (Loewe: 1982, p. 64)

Wu understands the Indian conception of architectural space to begin with the void and the solid. The yoni is the sculptural version of the void, the boundary around a dark emptiness at its core, and the solid, which focuses the act of worship around it, as with the linga, the altar, the column, and the stupa. So of the three primordial ways of beginning the creation of architecture, Wu understood the Indians to have emphasized the erect solid, that focused the space around it as the main consideration. From this emphasis naturally follows ritual circumambulation. This architectural strategy is well suited to holy places and ritual dance, festivals, and pilgrimages. From here Indian religious architecture unfolds.

There is a sense in which Indian [that is South Asian] architecture seems less concerned with space, and more focused upon solid and surface and the sacred dark void at the core, which contains the sacred solid, or monument as Kostof would put it. The vertical monument focuses the otherwise undifferentiated space around it. (Kostof, 21) Wu's interpretation can be easily extended to include this observation.

Hinduism poses the good life as:

1. Dharma – fulfilling one's purpose
2. Artha – prosperity
3. Kama – desire, sexuality, and enjoyment
4. Moksha – enlightenment

The Hindu temple with its origins in the village altar and sanctuary, and later in the grabha-griha (womb chamber) generates an architecture of monuments visually understood from the outside, and an inner sanctum that

was a dark womb. The Shivite sacred image of the linga rising up out of the yoni expresses the solid in the void as the sacred center, the monument cradled within the darkness.

Buddhism poses an increased level of asceticism in comparison to Hinduism. The Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path, and Three Refuges of Buddhism were by definition an argument for an ascetic life. Here the fundamental insights into the nature of being, the correct path based on an accurate understanding, and the construction of a community of support defined an ordered life. The stupa, with its roots in the funerary mound begins a religious architectural tradition directed to the monument as experienced from the outside. It is a solid by its very definition that can only be viewed from the outside, and it is meant to be experienced in ritual circumambulation.

Finally, the third great religion originating in South Asia poses the most demanding level of asceticism of the three religions. The highest stage of Jainism is jiva (the liberation of the soul) and moksa (the release from the cycle of death and rebirth), which extinguishes being from the condition of continual reincarnation. This goal is achieved through a five part process of radical asceticism including ahimsa (non-injury), satya (speaking the truth), asteya (not taking anything not given), brahma charya (chastity), and aparigraha (detachment from place, persons, and things).

Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism ultimately entertain ever stricter forms of asceticism (the practice of self-denial as a means of religious

attainment through discipline) in order to achieve, what an outsider viewing this religio-philosophical models, might refer to as a “good death.”

My tendency is to say that whereas Chinese culture focused on the living of a good and successful life, South Asian culture focused more on the good death, a death that brought with it a better reincarnation, or ultimately an oneness with the godhead. If this is the case then it made sense that these differing attitudes would be reflected in the two architectural traditions.

I started out skeptical of Wu’s formulation but found myself seduced by its descriptive power, elegance and ability to differentiate the Chinese from the Indian tradition. Seeing Wu’s formulation in terms of Kostof’s three fundamental modes of architectural expression (circumscription, shelter, and monument) helps one to understand the architectural differences, giving design significance to the square and the circle. Adding the notion of China as a culture directed towards life, and India as a culture directed towards death further clarifies the idea of the Chinese square as the enclosing courtyard giving spatial order to daily life, and the Indian circle as the monument at the core of religious ritual. Whereas one architectural tradition focuses on the dwelling as the model for other building types, the other concentrates its architectural tradition on the special nature of the religious experience.

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