A Study on the Classification and Value of Ming Dynasty Paifang in China: A Case Study of Paifang in Jinxi County

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Abstract

Paifang, a form of ancient Chinese vernacular architecture integrated with engraving and calligraphy, serves both as monuments and landmarks, features a variety of social functions and expresses rich cultural connotations, and is thus hailed as historical records made of stone. As the stone paifang in Jinxi are numerous and well-preserved, this paper, based on fieldwork, takes eight typical examples of paifang built in the Ming Dynasty as its subjects of study and conducts an analysis on them from the perspectives of geographical and historical distribution as well as classification, and then based on this assesses the cultural heritage value of paifang from three aspects, namely, historical value, artistic value and scientific value. The findings are as follows: First, the building forms of paifang enjoy suitability and versatility for their functions. Second, the function types of paifang reflect the ideology and values of the feudal ruling class. And last, paifang displays the epochal character of architectural and artistic features and the social and economic backgrounds of that era.

Keywords: stone paifang; Ming Dynasty; classification; cultural heritage value; vernacular architecture

1. Introduction

Paifang, an archway-style monumental structure, is a form of ancient Chinese construction, mostly built in temples, tombs, ancestral halls, government offices or street intersections, to preach ethics and flaunt merit (Fang, 2011). As a product of the ancient Lifang system, combined with the Jingbiao system, paifang perform the functions of identity, commemoration, decoration, commendation and spatial boundaries within traditional culture, and bear profound historical connotations (Liu, 2012).

Studies on vernacular architecture have become popular worldwide in the research on the history of architecture since 1999, when the "Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage" was adopted by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). Jinxi County is located in eastern Fuzhou City, Jiangxi Province, China. The county is home to a large number of vernacular buildings and structures such as ancestral halls, academies, folk dwellings and paifang. As built vernacular heritage is defined in the "Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage" as a practical structure with appeal and aesthetical value, and a focus of contemporary life and record of social history, the paifang in the county, which are great in number, vary in form and are fine in quality, and enjoy great research value. The characteristics of paifang differ throughout different eras. The Ming Dynasty represents the peak of paifang’s development, with distinctive features of the times. The number of surviving Ming Dynasty paifang in Jinxi could be as high as 16, including eight with definitive chronological and historical evidence. This paper selects eight paifang with definite chronological records as research subjects to discuss the distribution, classification and cultural heritage value of Paifang. These are "Ming-Jian-Tian-Chao" (名薦天朝), "Nan-Zhou-Gao-Di" (南州高第), "Zhong-Yi-Shi-Jia" (忠義世家), "Sheng-Yi" (聖裔), "Ru-Men-Jia-Di" (儒門甲第), "Da-Fu-Fang" (大夫坊), "Zong-Xian-Di" (宗憲第) and "Hou-Che-Shi-Jia" (后車世家).

2. Distribution

2.1 Geographical Distribution

These eight paifang are mainly spread out in the northern part of Jinxi County. There are three in Liuli Township, two in Heshi Town, and one in Heyuan Town, Huangtong Township and Zuojiang Town. The three paifang in Liuli Township are Putang Village's "Ming-Jian-Tian-Chao", Xiaogeng Village's "Nan-Zhou-Gao-Di" and Aotang Village's "Da-Fu-Fang".

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The two in Heshi Town are: Xiaogongmao Village's "Ru-Men-Jia-Di" and Youdian Village's "Zong-Xian-Di". "Sheng-Yi" is located in Kongjia Village, Heyuan Town. "Zhong-Yi-Shi-Jia" is in Dengjia Village, Huangtong Township. "Hou-Che-Shi-Jia" is situated in Houche Village, Zuofang Town (Fig.1.).

2.2 Time Distribution

The construction time of the eight paifang runs throughout the Ming Dynasty, from the early to late Ming period, displaying continuity in time and the development of the Ming Dynasty's construction techniques, as well as the prevailing social and economic conditions. There are seven paifang with clear records of construction time in the inscriptions on the inscribed boards. "Hou-Che-Shi-Jia" has no definite record, but the name in the inscription on the boards and other related information suggests that the paifang was constructed between 1622 and 1636. These paifang are sorted by construction time, one was built in the early Ming Dynasty, two were built in the mid-Ming Dynasty, three were built in the late Ming Dynasty and two were built at the end of the Ming Dynasty. Among them the earliest is the "Ming-Jian-Tian-Chao" built in 1425 and the latest is "Ru-Men-Jia-Di" built in 1637. This time span covers up to 200 years.

3. Classification

A great variety of paifang thrived in ancient China. In this paper, the eight Ming Dynasty paifang in Jinxi County are discussed primarily on their functional properties and forms to explore the rich diversity of paifang.

3.1 Classified According to Functions and Properties

In general, the function of paifang can be divided into practical functions and moral functions. Before the Song Dynasty (960–1276), paifang were mainly capable of being opened and closed, and letting people pass in and out, namely, they performed the practical function of a door. With the disintegration of the Lifang system during the Song Dynasty, paifang evolved to adopt a mainly iconic function. They were placed at the intersections of streets to divide the space, and later on were also built in front of government offices and temples as landmarks. During the Ming and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties, the material functions of paifang weakened and they evolved to have more commemorative functions. Paifang were the product of the feudal ethical code and their rich connotation and symbolic significance are far more important than the architectural structures themselves (Qiao and Luo, 2003), which have been called "a tridimensional history book". According to the contents they express, paifang, as a carrier of culture, can be classified into three types: the first displays the traditional Chinese ethical contents of royalty, filial piety, moral integrity and righteousness; the second cites scholarly honor and official rank; the third celebrates family renown.
"Sheng-Yi", "Ming-Jian-Tian-Chao" and "Zhong-Yi-Shi-Jia" fall into the first category. "Sheng-Yi" was built to commemorate the merits rendered by the Ming officials Kong Junqing and Kong Zonglu with the permission of the emperor in the 37th year of the Wanli (万历) era of Ming, 1609. On the inscribed board of "Ming-Jian-Tian-Chao" it is explicitly recorded that the paifang was built to recognize Xu Jishan, a xiucai (a scholar who passed the imperial examination at the county level in the Ming and Qing dynasties) in Putang Village during the early Ming, and to eulogize his chivalrous deed of donating 4,500 dan (roughly, 270,000 kilograms) of grain to help the victims of natural disasters. "Zhong-Yi-Shi-Jia" was built after Deng Chang and Deng Cheng, two descendants of Deng Fang, who passed the imperial examination at the court level in the same year and became officials. They obtained permission to build a paifang to celebrate how their ancestor Deng Fang led his army to resist the Jin invaders and safeguard their homeland (Ding, 2011).

"Ru-Men-Jia-Di", "Da-Fu-Fang" and "Zong-Xian-Di" fall into the second category. "Kedi" (科第) refers to a practice adopted in the imperial examinations in ancient China. According to this practice, candidates were sorted into different categories and ranked according to their performance in each category. Kedi paifang were built to exhibit the excellent performance of the owner in the imperial examination. On the inscribed board of "Ru-Men-Jia-Di" is a record of the villager Fu Zhengduo's success in achieving the title "jinshi" (进士), a successful candidate in the highest imperial examination. "Da-Fu-Fang" was built to celebrate the villager Zhou Hu's success in the imperial examination at the provincial level and his qualification for official election. "Zong-Xian-Di" is a "guandi" paifang that is situated at the front of the house Hu Guifang, a jinshi in Youdian Village during the Ming Dynasty, built for his father to celebrate becoming "Zongxian". "Zongxian" was an official position during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

"Nan-Zhou-Gao-Di" and "Hou-Che-Shi-Jia" fall into the third category. In the center of the horizontal board is inscribed the four characters "nan" (南), "zhou" (州), "gao" (高) and "di" (第), which flaunts its family renown. "Nanzhou" (南州) means "southern Xuzhou" (南徐州), one of the first destinations of the Xu clan. "Hou-Che-Shi-Jia", located at the entrance of the village's ancestral hall, was likewise built to honor the He clan in Houche Village.

Amongst the forms of paifang in ancient China, apart from those mentioned above relating to loyalty and righteousness, the "Kedi" paifang and family paifang, another important form is the "jiexiao" (chastity and filial piety paifang). It is noteworthy that no content concerning "jiexiao" can be found in the eight paifang, which is by no means coincidental. In Jixi County a significant proportion of Qing Dynasty paifang that celebrate "jiexiao" can be found, that profoundly reflect the political background and social customs of the era. Paifang were given meanings and values according to ethical and moral principles and patriarchal clan rules in Chinese feudal society. As a materialized expression of ideology, they were dominated by the ideology of the ruling class. The paifang authorized to be built by the government in the Ming Dynasty primarily belong to the forms of loyalty and righteousness paifang and "kedi" paifang, which were meant for praising persons of virtue and righteous men, meritorious statesmen excellent generals, and people who succeeded in the "keju" exams. At that time the institution of building "jiexiao" paifang appeared, but it was not mature, and thus the number of "jiexiao" paifang is limited. However, in the Qing Dynasty the subject matter for paifang changed from those successful in the "keju" exams or official careers to chaste and filial women; thus, a large number of "jiexiao" paifang emerged in the Qing Dynasty.

### 3.2 Classification According to Building Forms

Paifang are classified into paifang and pailou according to their building forms. Those with roof structures on the columns and the horizontal boards are called pailou, whereas those without roof structures are called paifang. According to their shapes and scales, paifang fall into different categories: one bay, three bay, five bay, etc. Similarly, pailou are categorized into the following: one-bay one-tier roof, three-bay two-tier roof, three-bay three-tier roof, five-bay three-tier roof, five-bay four-tier roof, etc. The most common types are three-bay two-tier roofs and three-bay three-tier roofs (Liang, 2007). There is one style of paifang called the paifang door or pailou door. They are commonly seen on the front of main gates of ancestral halls, temples, houses and archways, with paifang shapes clearly projected onto the walls. They are parts of the building without independent structure and mainly act as symbolic features and ornaments, which are more common south of the Yangtze River in China (Li, 2007). Among the eight paifang in Jixi County, only "Da-Fu-Fang" stands at the entrance of the alley as an independent archway, serving as a landmark. The seven others are architectural components attached to the front of the gate, the ancestral hall or the house and act as ornaments and monuments.

"Da-Fu-Fang" is an independent paifang with a three-bay two-tier roof, with the plane form 杵 yuán. It features a three-bay two-tier roof on the front, with the back of its two central columns perpendicular to the secondary roof on the facade connecting the two wings. "Ming-Jian-Tian-Chao" is a fore eave wall on a gatehouse, with a roof structure and belongs to the pailou door category. Its style is a three-bay three-tier roof. In the same form as "Ming-Jian-Tian-Chao" are "Nan-Zhou-Gao-Di", "Zhong-Yi-Shi-Jia" and "Sheng-Yi", which all act as the façade of doorways in the village and they are all pailou doors. Their forms are three-bay two-tier roof, three-bay three-tier roof and three-bay four-tier roof.
three-bay three-tier roof respectively. "Zong-Xian-Di" is on the front facade of a folk house, which is merged with the main gate, and it is a pailou door with a three-bay two-tier roof. "Hou-Che-Shi-Jia" is on the building facade of the entrance lobby of an ancestral hall. It is a pailou door with a three-bay three-tier roof. "Ru-Men-Jia-Di" is on the facade of the doorway, with no roof and is a paifang door with three bays.

In terms of building construction, the building forms of these eight paifang imitate the form of traditional Chinese wooden structures. The forms include the most distinctive components in traditional Chinese architecture — a roof, beam, column and fang, etc. As shown in Table 1. and Fig.2., paifang of the same function and properties, although slightly different in building form, take the form of a three bay in width and wood-imitation structures, which comply with paifang's function of commending and honoring.

### Table 1. Classifications and Distribution of the Eight Paifang

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Function and property</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Gregorian calendar year (Recorded year)</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ethical achievement</td>
<td>&quot;Sheng-Yi&quot;</td>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>3 bay 3 tier roof</td>
<td>1609 (万历已酉年)</td>
<td>Kongjia Village, Heyuan Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ethical achievement</td>
<td>&quot;Ming-Jian-Tian-Chao&quot;</td>
<td>Righteousness</td>
<td>3 bay 3 tier roof</td>
<td>1425 (洪熙元年)</td>
<td>Putang Village, Luli Township</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ethical achievement</td>
<td>&quot;Zhong-Yi-Shi-Jia&quot;</td>
<td>Loyalty and righteousness</td>
<td>3 bay 3 tier roof</td>
<td>1567 (隆庆元年)</td>
<td>Dengjia Village, Huangtong Township</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Scholarly achievement</td>
<td>&quot;Ru-Men-Jia-Di&quot;</td>
<td>Kedi</td>
<td>3 bay 2 tier roof</td>
<td>1637 (崇祯丁丑年)</td>
<td>Xiaogongniao Village, Heshi Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Scholarly achievement</td>
<td>&quot;Da-Fu-Fang&quot;</td>
<td>Kedi</td>
<td>3 bay 2 tier roof</td>
<td>1542 (万历三十六年)</td>
<td>Xiangong Village, Luli Township</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Scholarly achievement</td>
<td>&quot;Zong-Xian-Di&quot;</td>
<td>Guandi</td>
<td>3 bay 2 tier roof</td>
<td>1602 (万历三十六年)</td>
<td>Youdian Village, Heshi Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Family achievement</td>
<td>&quot;Nan-Zhou-Gao-Di&quot;</td>
<td>Family renown</td>
<td>3 bay 2 tier roof</td>
<td>1595 (万历乙未年)</td>
<td>Xiaogong Village, Luli Township</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Family achievement</td>
<td>&quot;Hou-Che-Shi-Jia&quot;</td>
<td>Family renown</td>
<td>3 bay 3 tier roof</td>
<td>1622-1636</td>
<td>Houche Village, Zuofang Town</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Cultural Heritage Value

The UN "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage" points out that cultural heritage (tangible cultural heritage) includes monuments, groups of historical buildings and sites of outstanding universal value in terms of history, art or science. The evaluation of cultural heritage mainly encompasses historical, artistic and scientific value.

#### 4.1 Historical value

The eight Ming paifang embody rich ideological and cultural connotations and showcase the social and cultural background of their respective eras. To a great extent, the cultural connotations within paifang are expressed via the inscriptions and carvings. The content of text carved in the inscriptions includes "ti" (题) and "zhu" (注). "ti" refers to the large characters carved on the inscribed board in the paifang's main arch. A
paifang is usually named after the inscription on its main arch. "Zhu" refers to the small characters carved on the left and right sides of the inscribed board on the central arch, explaining the paifang's background and the owner's stories, usually written in narrative tones. From the perspective of the parsing of the text, there are three ranks of paifang, the "Yu ci" (御赐), "En rong" (恩荣) and "Sheng zhi" (圣旨) (Yang, 2013). It was a supreme honor for a person, a family and even a town to receive the emperor's permission to build a paifang (Jin, 2003). Thus in the inscriptions on some paifang, "En rong" or "Sheng zhi" was specially carved to indicate that the paifang were built with imperial permission from the emperor and to display glory.

The four vigorous characters "Ming" (名), "Jian" (軒), "Tian" (天) and "Chao" (朝) are inscribed in the center of the horizontal board of the "Ming-Jian-Tian-Chao". The "zhu" on both sides records when the paifang was built and the author of the inscription. There are two reasons why "Ming-Jian-Tian-Chao" has relatively high historical value. First, it is rare to see the full text of an imperial decree issued by the emperor on a paifang. There are only a few such cases in the whole country and there is only this one case in the Fuzhou region in Jiangxi Province. The imperial decree gives a detailed account of the time the paifang was built (in 1425, i.e., the first year of the Hongxi (洪熙) era of the Ming) and the purpose of its construction — to eulogize the villager Xu Jishan's chivalrous deed of donating 4,500 dan (roughly, 270,000 kilograms) of grain to relieve the victims of natural disaster, which is of significant value as a historical document. Second, due to the fact that the emperor Hongxi reigned for less than one year, "Ming-Jian-Tian-Chao" is one of the few existing material objects produced in the Hongxi era (Wu, 2012).

The three characters "Da" (大), "Fu" (夫) and "Fang" (坊) are inscribed in the center of the front side of the horizontal board of "Da-Fu-Fang". In the center of the back of the horizontal board are inscribed the characters "Wen" (文) and "Guang" (光). The "zhu" on both sides records a clear account of when the paifang was built and the official who inscribed it at the time. From the writing, the purpose of the construction of the paifang can be inferred. The characters "Nan" (南), "Zhou" (州), "Gao" (高) and "Di" (第) are inscribed in the center of the horizontal board of "Nan-Zhou-Gao-Di". The large characters on the horizontal board commend family renown and the small characters on both sides indicate when the paifang was built and who the author of the inscription was.

Inscribed vertically on the board between the short columns of the main arch of "Zhong-Yi-Shi-Jia" are the characters "en" (恩) and "rong" (荣); inscribed horizontally on the board between the architraves are the four large characters "Zhong" (忠), "Yi" (義), "Shi" (世) and "Jia" (家), celebrating the deeds of the ancestors while defending the motherland. The small characters on both sides of the board inform the viewer when the paifang was built and renovated.

The characters "Sheng" (聖) and "Yi" (義) are inscribed vertically on the board between the short columns under the main arch of "Sheng-Yi". The text on the board states that the paifang was constructed to commend the two officials Kong Junqing and Kong Zonglu. It also indicates when the paifang was built.

Inscribed vertically on the board between the short columns under the main arch of "Hou-Che-Shi-Jia" are the characters "en" (恩) and "rong" (荣). Its title "Hou-Che-Shi-Jia" (后車世家) is inscribed horizontally on the board between the architraves in graceful script. The inscription on the horizontal board commends the clan. The time around which the paifang was built can be inferred from the name of the author of the inscription.

The three characters "Zong" (緯), "Xian" (憲) and "Di" (第) are engraved in the center of the board of the "Zong-Xian-Di" paifang. From the "zhu", it can be concluded that the paifang was built in the 30th year of the Wanli era by Hu Guifang, who served as Judicial Commissioner of the Guangdong Judicial Commission at the time.

The four characters "Ru" (儒), "Men" (門), "Jia" (家) and "Di" (第) are inscribed horizontally on the board of the central arch of "Ru-Jia-Men-Di". From the "zhu", one can learn that the paifang was built by the Minister of Rites Kong Zhenyun in celebration of Fu Zhenduo's success in passing the highest level of the imperial examination.

The content of the characters sheds light on the circumstances of the construction of the paifang and provides evidence for the assessment of their historical value.

Amongst the eight paifang, "Zhong-Yi-Shi-Jia" and "Hou-Che-Shi-Jia" bear the two Chinese characters "en" (恩) and "rong" (荣) vertically on the boards, which indicates that they are of higher rank and were built with local government's contribution of capital and were authorized by the empire, while other paifang were contributed to by individuals or clans. In terms of building scales, these eight paifang are between 5.20-7.78 meters in width and 5.15-7.80 meters in height. "Zhong-Yi-Shi-Jia" is the largest paifang in scale, followed by "Hou-Che-Shi-Jia", which states clearly that the building scale of the paifang was influenced by construction rankings. "Zhong-Yi-Shi-Jia" was built in the middle of the Ming Dynasty, while "Hou-Che-Shi-Jia" was built in the later Ming Dynasty. The empire was richer during the middle period and the local government's economic power was stronger, whereas the economy suffered a depression in the later Ming. Therefore, it can be seen from the architectural style that "Zhong-Yi-Shi-Jia" is more profound and magnificent while "Hou-Che-Shi-Jia" is more simple and frugal.
4.2 Artistic Value

Architecture is a silent art. Apart from being monuments of feudal ethics and marks of spatial boundaries, ancient Chinese stone paifang also serve as art treasures. They are the crystallization of calligraphy, stone engraving and the fine art of building with unique artistic appeal.

According to The Aesthetics of Architecture by British scholar Roger Scruton, what people see is not just interesting space, but a harmonious combination of interrelated aspects. It is thanks to the exquisitely wrought details that the harmony attracts our attention (Scruton, 2003). The engravings on the eight paifang feature a wide range of themes and patterns, including geometric patterns, floral patterns, animal patterns, vessel patterns as well as characters and stories (Li, 2009). These ornamental subjects are adopted for their beautiful form and more importantly, for the fact that they reflect people's ideological concepts and their aspiration for a better life. Techniques employed in the engraving of the paifang are diverse, mainly including line carving, relief, circular carving, hollowed-out carving and so on. A variety of carving techniques are explored in the aesthetic representation of lines and forms and the combination of actual and illusory space, so as to endow the subjects of the engraving with strong artistic appeal, such as a three-dimensional and dynamic feel, the play of light and shadow, and rich layers. This section is devoted to a presentation of the patterns of the engravings on the paifang according to various subjects as well as the carving techniques involved (Fig.3).

(1) Geometric patterns: Geometric patterns are the simplest and most basic decorative content most often seen on the columns and horizontal square-columns. Common geometric patterns include the wan-zi (万字) pattern, gui-jin (turtleback) pattern, ru-yi-yun (ruyi cloud) pattern and the juan-cao (curled grass) pattern, to name but a few. Line carving was used in most of these.

(2) Vessel patterns: Common vessel patterns include vases, copper coins, ru-yi (a curved decorative object that serves as a ceremonial scepter or a talisman symbolizing power and good fortune in Chinese folklore), etc. The ancient copper coin pattern, a symbol of wealth, was used on the lower architrave of the central arch of "Hou-Che-Shi-Jia". Ru-yi in bas-relief is observed in the V-shaped space on the lower architrave of the main arch of "Nan-Zhou-Gao-Di", the relief of a fish leaping out of the water seen in the middle of the upper architrave of "Nan-Zhou-Gao-Di", carp leaping into the Dragon's Gate), which is associated with rapid advances in one's study, official position, or other aspects. The patterns of magpies, horses, plum blossoms and the like engraved on the left side were used to form the homophonic Chinese expression "ma shang you xi" (the instant arrival of a joyous occasion). The lifelike engraving of magpies, monkeys, deer and bees on the right side were used to refer to the homophonic Chinese expression "jue lu feng hou" (be conferred a rank of nobility with high salary). These patterns represent people's aspirations for a better life.

(3) Floral patterns: Common floral patterns are of the peony, lotus, plum blossoms, pine, bamboo and so on. Floral patterns render the paifang both charming and auspicious.

(4) Animal patterns: In ancient Chinese mythology, these animals including dragons, phoenixes lions, deer, red-crowned crane, bats and fish were widely used as decorative patterns in architecture to express sacred and auspicious connotations. The relief of a fish leaping out of the water seen in the middle of the upper architrave of the main arch of "Nan-Zhou-Gao-Di" is a representation of the ancient Chinese myth "li yu tiao long men" (carp leaping into the Dragon's Gate), which is associated with rapid advances in one's study, official position, or other aspects. The patterns of magpies, horses, plum blossoms and the like engraved on the left side were used to refer to the homophonic Chinese expression "ma shang you xi" (the instant arrival of a joyous occasion). The lifelike engraving of magpies, monkeys, deer and bees on the right side were used to refer to the homophonic Chinese expression "jue lu feng hou" (be conferred a rank of nobility with high salary). These patterns represent people's aspirations for a better life.

(5) Character patterns: Characters and stories mainly derive from ancient novels, operas and life...
situations, which are full of life and are of symbolic and educational significance. On the two short columns under the main arch of "Sheng-Yi" and "Zhong-Yi-Shi-Jia" are engraved two figures in high relief, the left being a civil official and the right being a military officer; on the upper architrave of the main arch of "Sheng-Yi" is carved a picture portraying a character story. Portrayed in the picture are 27 lifelike characters with distinctive features, which is a typical example of figure carving.

The engravings on the eight paifang include static objects like flowers and dynamic images such as "carp leaping out of the water". The combination of the static with the dynamic renders the breadth of the whole paifang both serene and vigorous. These eight stone Ming Dynasty paifang have dignified and magnanimous forms, and graceful and idyllic engravings, showing typical Ming Dynasty artistic characteristics. "Ming-Jian-Tian-Chao", built in the early stage of the Ming Dynasty, has the most exquisite pattern engravings with mighty and profound styles and scenes. Following that is "Zhong-Yi-Shi-Jia" and "Nan-Zhou-Gao-Di", built in the middle and later periods of the Ming Dynasty, while "Hou-Che-Shi-Jia", built at the end of the Ming Dynasty, has relatively less engravings and simpler patterns. The eight paifang represent the gradual and slight evolution in artistic styles from the early to later periods of the Ming Dynasty and, to some extent, reflect the social and economic background of a strong empire from the early to mid-later phase, and a gradual decline of power in the later phase.

4.3 Scientific Value

The eight stone paifang feature precise structures, appropriate scales, well-made components, scientific design of tenon-mortise joints and stable bases, showcasing the wisdom of the craftsmen and the construction technology and capabilities of that era, which provide detailed and accurate material for the study of the construction technology and engraving levels in the Ming Dynasty. The structural stability of the eight paifang is proven by the fact that they remain intact despite the wear and tear of five or six hundred years.

All of the eight paifang studied in this paper are built of stone. In terms of stone texture, they are made of Yinshan white stone, Jinxia pea-green stone and red sandstone. Jinxia County is home to Yinshan white stone and Jinxia pea-green stone, whereas red sandstone comes from neighboring Dongxiang County or Nanfeng County. Among the eight paifang, "Da-Fu-Fang", "Ming-Jian-Tian-Chao" and "Nan-Zhou-Gao-Di" were built with Yinshan white stone. "Sheng-Yi" was mostly built with Yinshan white stone, but the upper and lower architraves of the main arch and the side arches were built with Jinxia pea-green stone. The base of "Zhong-Yi-Shi-Jia" was partly built with red sandstone, with the main structure of the paifang mostly built with Yinshan white stone and the upper and lower architraves of the main arch and the side arches built with Jinxi Pea-green stone. Since architraves are the key parts to engrave and the upper and lower architraves of both paifang adopted the form of high relief, it is logical for us to infer that Jinxia pea-green stone is softer than Yinshan white stone and thus easier to carve. Top-quality Yinshan stone was used in the construction of "Ming-Jian-Tian-Chao" and "Nan-Zhou-Gao-Di". The stone is fine-textured, weather-proof and flexible. It has helped the two structures to withstand wind and rain for 600 and 500 years respectively, and to stand lofty and intact, without clear evidence of weathering. "Zong-Xian-Di", "Hou-Che-Shi-Jia" and "Ru-Men-Jia-Di" were all built in red sandstone. This material was of lower quality and cheaper price, which leads to the fact that "Hou-Che-Shi-Jia" and "Ru-Men-Jia-Di" already show signs of erosion. These two paifang were built in the later phase of the Ming Dynasty and the choice of building material quality corresponds with the social and economic strength of the time. In general, the eight paifang demonstrate the relatively advanced building skills of the era in terms of architectural structure and materials, and therefore, are of certain scientific value.

In terms of social and cultural value, the Ming Dynasty paifang, compared to the Yuan (former dynasty) and Qing Dynasty (later dynasty) paifang, reflect the specific social and cultural background of the time. In the Yuan Dynasty, due to the unstable social structure, the unsound concepts of etiquette and regime, and insufficient civilian economic accumulation, relatively fewer paifang were built. The small amount of remaining paifang from the Yuan Dynasty are simple in shape and less decorative. In the Ming Dynasty, society and the economy were stable and rules of etiquette were emphasized, especially for the imperial examinations and the praise of "loyalty and justice". The advocacy of integrity and filial piety were still in a preliminary stage, so the overall number of paifang constructed was large, but "Jiekiao" paifang constitute just a small number. In the Qing Dynasty, politics, society and the economy were relatively stable, the ruling class was strongly pushing rules of etiquette, which reached their peak, and the number of paifang constructed was large, among which "Jiekiao" paifang represents a great proportion. Compared with the Ming Dynasty paifang, the Qing Dynasty paifang have slender proportions, with bluestone as the most common building material, and the decorations are overelaborate, although their carvings are less vivid and rich than Ming Dynasty paifang.

5. Conclusion

Paifang, as an important component of traditional Chinese architecture and building-related plastic arts vividly exemplifies Chinese culture and displays profound artistic, cultural and social significance. This paper has conducted a comprehensive analysis of the eight paifang from three perspectives: their distribution, classification and cultural heritage value.
With reference to distribution, the eight paifang are spread out primarily in northern Jinxī County. They were constructed during a span of 200 years from the early to late Ming. Research on their classification indicates that paifang can be classified into three types: the first displays the traditional Chinese ethical content of royalty, filial piety, moral integrity and righteousness; the second cites scholarly honor and official rank and the last expresses family renown. Based on building forms, paifang are classified into these types: three-bay two-tier roof, three-bay three-tier roof and three-bay (no roof). Moreover, the cultural heritage value of these eight paifang is derived from three aspects: historical value, artistic value and scientific value. By investigating the content of the texts, the subject of the carvings, the techniques and the architectural structure, shows that the content of the inscribed texts includes "ri" and "zhu", which, on the one hand, present the nature of the paifang and the background of its construction, and on the other, display their historical value; engravings cover a number of subjects, ranging from geometric patterns, vessels, plants, animals to figures; a variety of carving techniques were employed, including line carving, bas-relief, high relief and hallowed-out carving, which demonstrate artistic value. The various forms, firm structure and fine material of the paifang demonstrate the relatively advanced building skills of the era. The findings are as follows.

1) The building forms of paifang have suitability and versatility for their functions. The eight paifang's building form are all three bay, of a wood-imitation structure and the materials are all stone. Their construction times span over 200 years. Their content in praising and honoring differ while their forms and materials are alike. This reflects how paifang's form underwent appropriate changes of attributes under the premise of having suitability and versatility for their functions.

2) The forms of paifang's function reflect the ideology and values of the feudal ruling class. The paifang built under the authorization of the Ming-Dynasty government were mostly meant to praise persons of virtue and righteous men, meritorious statesmen and excellent generals, and persons who succeeded in the "kejiu" exams, thus the types of paifang are primarily loyalty and righteousness paifang, "kedin" paifang, etc. At that time the institution of building "jiexiao" paifang appeared, but it was not mature, and thus the number of "jiexiao" paifang was limited. However, in the Qing Dynasty, paifang's subject of honor changed from those successful in the "kejiu" exams or official careers to chaste and filial women; thus, a large number of "jiexiao" paifang emerged in the Qing Dynasty.

3) Analysis on the time distribution and the cultural heritage value demonstrates that paifang display the epochal characteristics of architectural and artistic features and the social and economic backgrounds of the era. The Ming Dynasty stone paifang have dignified and magnanimous forms, graceful and idyllic carvings, showing typical artistic Ming Dynasty characteristics, and represent the gradual and slight evolution in artistic styles and the change of social and economic background from the early to late Ming Dynasty periods. The construction scale is related to the building's rank—the higher the rank, the bigger the construction scale. Within a certain rank, the building quality of paifang was closely related to the social and economic status of the era.

Notes

1) The Lifang system was a major system of urban planning and construction in ancient times, and more importantly, an effective management system the rulers adopted to maintain their imperial authority.

2) The Jingbiao system was a social system adopted in ancient times to praise virtue and punish vice. It was used by the ruling class to eulogize those with outstanding performance in terms of society's ethical and moral standards as a means to establish sound social morals, stabilize social order and assert its dominance.

3) The Ming Dynasty was the ruling dynasty of China for 276 years (1368–1644).

4) All paifang are named after the inscription on the horizontal inscribed board.

5) A chronology used in ancient China. When each emperor ascended the throne, the name of the reign would change, with the emperor's formal name taken as the name of his reign.

6) There are three ranks of ancient paifang: "Yu ci" (御赐), "En rong" (恩荣) and "Sheng zhi" (圣旨). "Yu ci" indicates that the construction of the paifang was funded by the national treasury under the orders of the emperor. "En rong" suggests that the construction was funded by the local treasury under the orders of the emperor. "Sheng zhi" implies that the construction was funded by the clan concerned with the assent of the emperor.

7) Etiquette system — in ancient China, general social order was maintained by the patriarchal clan system and feudal ethical codes, rather than by law.

References