

Original research article

The connotations of the Sukhavati (Pure Land) culture contained in the architecture of Xiaoxitian (Thousand Buddhas Monastery) at Xixian County

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Abstract: This article analyzes and interprets the Sukhavati Culture contained in the site selection as well as the architectural and spatial layout of Xiaoxitian (or the Thousand Buddhas Monastery, a Buddhist complex at Xixian County), and the Great Buddhas Hall inside it by means of field inspection to the buildings at Xiaoxitian, and by combining with relevant literature and records so as to assist people to have a better understanding of the Sukhavati Culture and highlight the architectural concepts of applying the Sukhavati belief into the practical life of ancient Chinese people.

Keywords: Xiaoxitian; site selection; architectural layout; the Great Buddha Hall

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Temple architecture is a kind of material achievement which has been made by designers and artisans based on their own cultural quality and creativity as well as the combination of natural environment with material conditions. As a constituent part of environment, temple architecture is also regarded as a kind of religious concept, emotion or feeling expressed in the material form; meanwhile, it has become a supporting environment in which Buddhist believers take part in Buddhist activities; in such way has it influenced and changed the psychology and behaviors of Buddhist believers. Sukhavati temples always intend to create a pure land of Buddhism, in which all those with worldly troubles will be able to feel the clean nature of their selves in an elegant and clean environment; and through the wordless cultivation among such environment and surroundings, people will be provided with a path of becoming a Buddhist, namely, they will be able to return to their original nature and temperament^[1]. There was a saying in ancient times that “Buddhists accounted for a majority of residents in well-known mountain across the country,” implying that they liked to reside in the natural and beautiful landscape, where they could admire frosts and dews in the morning while listening to winds and rains at night. On the one hand, they could enjoy the peacefulness and harmony of the nature; on the other hand, they may achieve the peace of mind and get rid of any dusts in their souls^[2].

Based on the Sukhavati Culture contained in the architecture of Xiaoxitian, this article made an in-depth analysis on how changes were made in the site selection for Xiaoxitian, its architectural layout and the Great Buddha Hall to agree with the Sukhavati belief. By excavating the cultural characteristics behind the forms, it assists us to truly understand the Sukhavati Culture contained in Xiaoxitian, and grasp its main value.

1. Connotations of the Sukhavati culture in the selection of the site for the complex

The sites for different types of temples are based on their own characteristics, and Sukhavati buildings are closely related to the Sukhavati belief^[3]. The natural and social environments which Xiaoxitian is in had produced some impact on the selection of its site; just as what Master Hong Yi explained the venue for the cultivation of Sukhavati, “In case that a person cultivates Zen Medication, Stopping and Contemplation, or Mantra, he must keep his hands off any earthly affairs and retreat to a mountain for quiet practice; however, it’s another case for the Sukhavati school. In the cultivation of Sukhavati, all people and places may be an object for learning; and scholars, farmers, artisans and merchants, while engaging in their respective daily businesses, can cultivate Sukhavati at any time and places as they like; moreover, as for good deeds or undertakings, anything about the welfare of the public, we should do our utmost to accomplish them so as to accumulate virtues and merits for our perfection of the Sukhavati belief. So, how on earth should we abandon it?”^[4].

1.1. Natural environment

In the Sukhavati belief, nature is regarded as a manifestation of Buddhahood, holding that all things on earth, even a piece of grass or a tree, are not without feeling; instead, all of them are in the possession of Buddhahood, or their own value of existence. It advocates the harmonious existence with the natural environment, worships the nature, treasures all things on earth and gives correct responses to the call of the nature so as to achieve the realm of unity of man and nature^[5].

Amidst the unique natural environment, Xiaoxitian represents a vivid reflection of the Pure Land. Unlike other ancient Buddhist temples constructed in remote high mountains, it perks on the west bank of the Zhichuan River, facing the county seat of the millennium-old Xixian County across the river. According to *The Tablet Inscriptions about the Thousand Buddhas Monastery* written by Yang Jichun, a local official of the county in the Ming Dynasty, “Buddhist Master Dong Ming arrived at Xixian at sunset, finding a hill at the northwest corner of the county seat, which looks like a phoenix, the middle part of the hill serving as the body of the sacred bird, with the rocks in the south and north like wings spreading at the front; and under its two armpits are little streams running endlessly. In the east of the county seat stands the protruding Canglong Hill, with the Wen Chang Tower on top of its peak, forming an arch-shaped protection with the Ci Mountain. The little rivers run from the north and empty themselves into the Yellow River, while some streams snake westwards to the Buddhist complex. The rivers and streams meet and then move southwards, with the town guiding its mouth, thus forming a magnificent scenic area. That is also why the Thousand Buddhas Temple was erected there”^[6]. The complex of Xiaoxitian is surrounded by mountains on three sides, with cliffs rising steeply on two sides; at the front of the temple is a river, with ancient trees and clean streams around the temple; hence, a natural scenic spot has been formed, featuring town walls at the front, rolling hills at the rear, and broad and flat rivers, accompanied by little brooks. According to the description in *The Bussetsu Amidakyo*, a classic Buddhist sutra, “It’s also regarded as Sariputra, the Pure Land of Bliss, with the Seven-treasures Pool full of Eight-virtues-and-merits Water”^[7]. It depicts the Pure Land where treasure pools are found everywhere, the water in which just taste sweet and cool, thus attracting the people who long for cultivation of Buddhism in a place of purity. Meanwhile, it coincides with the customs of ancient Chinese people in the selection of sites for temples amidst landscape, which features “Existence among Yin and Yang,” “with river in the front while hills at the rear” and “containing auspicious wind and Qi.” It is also interpreted in the poetic lines written by Li Maomei, a scholar in the Ming Dynasty, in his article *A Tour of the Thousand Buddhas Monastery*, “For many times I’ve come here to eliminate my desires for earthly

pleasures. Now I'm willing to throw my books and swords away and devote myself to achieving the perfection of Buddhism"^[6] (p. 152).

1.2. Social environment

Xiaoxitian, despite of its beautiful landscape and abundant historic relics, has little been known by outsiders due to its remote location in the west of the Shanxi province, according to some scholars; however, such opinions are lack of sufficient evidences. In terms of locality, Xiaoxitian is situated in the area dominated by gullies on the Loess Plateau, thus lacking good geographical conditions, or even reduced to primitiveness; if looked from its entirety, things are different; that is, it is not inaccessible; instead, it has a long history of economic prosperity and busy transportation activities, and is a place full of activities in association with the culture of Pure Land.

Xixian County has been regarded as a stronghold since ancient times. At the center of the crossroads in the county town stands the Grand View Tower constructed in the Ming Dynasty, on the four tablets on each wall of which are engraved with such four-Chinese-character phrases as “*Dong ping gu she*,” “*Xi dai huang he*,” “*Nan lin gu ci*” and “*Bei gong jin yang*,” which respectively means “The Shielding of the Guye Mountains at the East,” “Proximity to the Yellow River at the West,” “Near the Guci at the South,” and “An Arc-sharped Defensive Line for Jinyang(one of the well-known metropolises in Ancient China) literally, indicating the geographical location of Ancient Xizhou. Moreover, on the four tablets hanged high under the eaves of the third storey of the tower can we find another four four-Chinese-character phrases of “*san jin xiong bang*,” “*he dong zhong zhen*,” “*long quan gu jun*” and “*chang shou yi feng*,” which mean respectively “Three Powerful States of Zhao, Wei and Han in the Warring States Period,” “A Strategically-important Town in the East of the Yellow River,” “Ancient Prefecture of Longquan, ” and “A Place of Legacy Known for Longevity” literally, implying the historical status of Ancient Xizhou. According to *The Records of Construction of Xizhou Town* written by Qian Yikai, an official in the Qing Dynasty, “Most of its territory sitting on plateaus; however, Xi had earned its name for its town being lower than the plateaus and with a wet climate. Surrounded by high mountains and peaks, Xi has a clear river running through its heart. It controlled the right of the Yellow River, and connected Fenbei (in today's north of Xiangning, Shanxi province), thus acquiring a strategic position. For such, the town had to be renovated and strengthened from time to time”^[6] (p. 98). From the overall geographical situation of the Fen River Valley and the Southwestern Shanxi Province, Xiaoxitian, one kilometer west of the county seat, is far from remote; instead, it has been regarded as the center of the Xixian area which had undergone rapid development in politics, economy, culture and transportation in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. In the aspect of the Sukhavati school of Buddhism, Qian Yikai wrote in his *Records of the Newly-built Tea House* that “I believe that if one harbors a good intention of benefiting people or even things, he will surely rise as a capable and contributive people. Sincerity is always translated into assistance for other people; so, the more capable and sincere one is, the bigger contributions he will make.” Since the Sukhavati Culture was introduced into Xixian County, local people became Samaritans: they built temples, and positively preached the Sukhavati Culture, just as what W. Ross Ashby said, “For an organism, its environment has been defined as the surrounding variable factors. The change of such factors has not only influenced this organism, but also has been changed by its behaviors”^[8].

2. The connotations of the Sukhavati culture contained in the architectural and spatial layout

Since the entry of the Buddhist Culture into China, the architectural layout of Buddhist temples had

been influenced by the Chinese traditional architecture, and gradually aligned with the courtyard-style architectural system exclusive in China, constructed in the classical triplicate or quadrangle courtyard complex on an axle, on which are arranged with the main hall and the side halls. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, under the influence of the Sukhavati belief, the architectural quality and artistic level of temples had been generally enhanced; specifically, although still square or neat, the temples had been given multiple kinds of mature architectural layouts and styles as to the grouped sequence. Xiaoxitian, known for its smallness, sophistication, exquisiteness and uniqueness, has its architectural and spatial layout to go beyond the extent of purely architectural structure, while reflecting the significance and functions of Sukhavati in respect of architectural space.

2.1. Layout and form

Temples are for enshrining and worshipping all kinds of Buddhist figures; hence, the layout and form of temple architecture have acquired special significance and requirements in association with the Sukhavati belief, and the architectural layout reasonably and skillfully designed would produce an important influence on its believers' psychology and behaviors. In the design of Sukhavati temples, from entrance to gate and then to main building, a process of soul conversion from the mortal life to the Pure Land is required.

The overall floorage of Xiaoxitian is approx. 1100 square meters, with its peak of 100 m long, and 10 to 40 m wide, plus an apex. It has an altitude of 1025.5 m, with a slope each on the southern and northern sides, the gradient of the northern one being 1:0.6, while that of the southern one 1:1; and under the slopes are valleys. The vertical height on the northern side is 40 meters, while that on the southern side 25 m. Although within the rough terrain, Xiaoxitian leads the limited space to the unlimited time-space; meanwhile, the limited external form of Xiaoxitian created a drastic change in distortion and expansion due to the deepening of its contents. According to the records in Yang Jichun's *The Tablet Inscriptions about the Thousand Buddhas Monastery*, "In the construction of the temple, the artisans removed the dangerous parts and created a safe site, and cut grass and bushes; they created a foundation for the complex following the natural landform, measured the size of the site and set benchmarks for it; they worked as per required sizes and rules. After arduous work, the temple came into being, standing high and magnificently, and squarely rooted in the rocks. It looks as grand as an imperial palace in the heaven, with colorful flags and canopies flying beautifully." Considering the restrictions by the landform, Dong Ming, designer of the temple, took the Sukhavati belief as the foundation and adopted the traditional Chinese architectural concepts; specifically, the hollowing techniques were employed. Just as what Chen Yinke, Great Master of History, said, "That's why Buddhist doctrines can produce a great and far-reaching impact on the history of Chinese thoughts---it has been absorbed and reformed here in China"^[9].

Xiaoxitian, facing the east, was built with the Great Buddha Hall as the center and its parts arranged symmetrically along an axle, conveying the meaning of the Western Paradise. In terms of the plane layout, the designer basically followed the Buddhist architectural rules for Buddhist activities, which consist of gate, the Caturapramāṇāḥ Hall, bell tower, drum tower, the Samantabhadra Hall, the Manjuist Hall, and the Great Buddha Hall. There is a famous saying in *Bussetsu Amidakyo*, "The good roots of happiness and virtues shall not be neglected, for by which we will be allowed to enter the Western Paradise"^[7] (p. 41). This had served as the basis for designing the temple with the modern architectural characteristics; namely, it consists of a reception room, a library for Buddhist sutras, dormitories for monks, as well as the Skanda Hall, the Cloud Pavilion, and the Ksitigarbha Hall. Each single building is in the appearance of an extremely simple rectangular box, but all of them are grouped together. Among the grouped buildings, just from the height and size of individual buildings, we can judge the priority in them. Just as what are recorded in the *Three*

Buddhist Authoritative Laws, Volume II of *Records of the Ocean-embracing Temple at Yushan*, “The temple also serves as a shield of protecting Buddhist doctrines, so it’s especially justifiable to plant some bamboo and trees and erect high walls around it. Above all, in all temples the main hall should be taken as the center, which should be high, with other buildings on its four sides lower. If the rear hall is higher than the main hall, the design would be regarded as improper...In the hall, the Buddhist statue should be taken as the main decoration so that it should be large and tall, while the statue of the Dhammapala Bodhisattva should be small. If the Buddhist looks small, it will be also regarded as improper either”^[10]. In the layout of Xiaoxitian, the Great Buddha Hall was built on the obviously high ground by following the natural landform so as to highlight the dominating power of the Sukhavati thought within the hall. With the main hall as the center, the Buddha statue looks large and tall, thus manifesting the order of priority among Buddha, Dhammapala, Bodhisattva and Arhat.

2.2. Function and type

In addition to serving as the residence for monks, temple buildings represent folks’ expectation for their belief^[11]. Obtainment of rebirth in the Pure Land and seeking for liberation was earnestly pursued by Dong Ming, founder of Xiaoxitian, in the heydays of the Sukhavati Culture. Xiaoxitian has met the demand of the Sukhavati Culture in respect of architectural function; specifically, in dealing with the Sukhavati belief, it gives a concept of symbolism and adopts the design system in the early Western architecture of “Inside equals outside;” namely, both the appearance and interior layout of the temple manifest the Sukhavati Culture^[10] (p. 37). Xiaoxitian perches on a mound amidst the numerous gullies and valleys on the Phoenix Mountain. According to the classification of geomorphic types, the mountain belongs to a hilly and gully region. Its surroundings consist of stripe-shaped loess hills, with farmlands on the upper parts, while luxuriant forests extending from the slopes to the gully bottoms, dotted with green lakes, thus acclaimed as the Pure Land. Regarding the route guidance, a tourist can walk through the Heaven Bridge on the Heaven Lake, and climb to the gate by going through three paths dug in the rock cliffs, enabling people to pursue the Land of Purity. It is very far from the Buddhist Hall, but the farther you walk, the thicker the religious atmosphere; and your sincerity will not be exposed until you come to the front of the Butsudan. Meanwhile, the two horizontal tablets with the Chinese characters of “Xiaoxitian” and “Path to the Western Paradise” also serve as a starting point. This simple combination of the curve method and the positive and negative spaces give rise to an interesting feeling of space, and require flexible application of techniques. Facing the east, Xiaoxitian’s front gate is located at the southern side. According to *THE Book of Changes*, south is a Li hexagram, regarded as the moment with the most vigorous Yang Qi in a day and a year; in the meantime, the southern side of Xiaoxitian are expansive valleys, and faces the mouth of winds, indicating that it is easy to breath in fresh air, and gets a wider vision.

Regarding spatial function, courtyards are the sum of their practical function and the spiritual function as well as the constituent unit with the most fundamental function of temple buildings. Based on the landform, Xiaoxitian is divided into three courtyards of the lower, the upper and the front courts. At the right west of the lower courtyard is the Caturapramāṇāḥ Hall where monks gave speeches about Buddhist doctrines, and the Dhammasala Hall where they had assemblies for conversion and abstention; at the south is the reception room for believers and visitors; at the north is the office for storing Buddhist sutras, where monks read classical Buddhist books for research; and at the rear of the Skanda Hall on the east is the dormitories for monks. As for the upper courtyard, the Great Buddha Hall in it is taken as the main building; thanks to a large platform within it, the courtyard was mainly used for holding Buddhist activities and conducting service for monks. In the front courtyard the Cloud Pavilion is taken as the core, set with the bell

tower, the drum tower and the Ksitigarbha Hall, giving a feeling of highness, where the monks could enjoy the scenes in the distance, or write inscriptions for the temple.

According to the architectural climatology, the design of “low at the front while high in the rear” and the regular “arrangement of high and low elevations” render it convenient for ventilation. The Cloud Pavilion at the front courtyard is the highest point of the whole complex, serving as an excellent shield to prevent dusts from the due east, and the both sides of the building lead to the lower courtyard through the two narrow cave-shaped passages of “Suspicious of No Road Ahead” and “A New Domain.” The lower courtyard is square. Inside it, the Caturapramāṇāḥ Hall which faces the east, the Skanda Hall and the Abbot’s quarters in the east opposite the Caturapramāṇāḥ Hall, the Essence Storage Chamber in the north, and the reception room in the south form a closed courtyard; while the right side of the Caturapramāṇāḥ Hall leads to the front courtyard through a narrow cave-shaped voucher gate, but the exit of this passage does not directly lead to the inside of the front courtyard; instead, it leads to the Manjuist Hall; visitors have to go through the Manjuist Hall before entering the front courtyard. This design undoubtedly blocks the dusts at the lower courtyard from floating into the front courtyard. Similar to the lower courtyard, the front courtyard is square, with the difference being that it has only three sides: the Great Buddha Hall at the west, the Manjuist Hall at the north and the Samantabhadra Hall at the south, which form a comparatively closed environment. *Part I of No.4 Section of Records of Speeches of Bodhisattvas in Compassionate Flower Sutra* records the fourth wish made by Manjuist before Buddha of Treasures, “Combine the force of Caturapramāṇāḥ buddhas from ten directions to build this Buddhist temple, with red and green soils as its foundation, without dusts, soils, sands, stones, as well as any other dirty and evil things and thistles and thorns^[7] (p. 28). Manjusri Bodhisattva’s original wish was to build a land of purity, so that Xiaoxitian’s dust-prevention function is just in accordance with Manjusri Bodhisattva’s best wish for the Pure Land.”

2.3. Organizational method

Based on the profound Sukhavati Culture, Sukhavati temple buildings can realize the desired functions, while maintaining the continuity of the ecological and cultural environment. They must complement with the surroundings in terms of organizational forms while not creating any unharmonious factors to the cluster of buildings^[12].

While inheriting the excellent Buddhist architectural culture, Xiaoxitian dare to innovate and introduce the architectural organizational forms. In the aspect of architectural organizational concepts, it excels in adjusting measures to local conditions and using simple and clean formal languages; namely, it has not only expressed the Sukhavati Culture, but provided inspirations and references to the design and research on the temple architecture in China. In terms of the architectural organizational forms, it arranges the temple as per the specific landform with free and skillful techniques, while following the method of arranging landscape with artificial scenes as the core, which is popular in garden-like temples^[13].

The Phoenix Mountain on which Xiaoxitian stands is just one of the numerous mountains and hills in the region, thus naturally restricted by the terrain. In the ancient architectural organizational concepts, it is better to boast sheer boundary contours on the ground that there will be more space for the creativity of a designer. This is completely different from the classical Western architectural organizational concepts. Dong Ming, founder of Xiaoxitian, based on the local landform and surroundings, made its blueprint featuring the hollowing out method^[10] (p. 106). According to *The Tablet Inscriptions about the Thousand Buddhas Monastery*, “A path was dug in the rock cliffs to create a secluded and fascinating atmosphere. Climbing up the path, you will reach a flat and open clearing. This arrangement may be called ‘Path Out of Rocks.’” Regarding symmetry and balance, Xiaoxitian is home to 20 buildings, large or small, high or low, but

arranged symmetrically from north to south within a limited space. Furthermore, the caves are used as gates to divide or connect the building clusters in the upper courtyard, the lower courtyard and the front courtyard. As for the central space, the designer made use of the terrain to place the Great Buddha Hall at the location with the obvious altitude difference so as to reach the goal that the Great Buddha Hall—the sacred hall of the Pure Land—possesses the dominant position. This design also coincides with the introversive language logic model in the Chinese architectural spatial standards: “As for things within the universe, the Saint would leave it undiscussed.” In the aspects of comparison and details, single buildings, as the nodes in the sequence-space organization, often lack an independent and complete symbolic meaning. So, Xiaoxitian uses the combinations of buildings to express the symbolic significance behind the buildings; for example, the Skanda Hall is arranged in front of the dormitories of monks; this is not because of sizes or requirements for layout and artistic effect, but with the implication that Skanda will protect the Pure Land where monks cultivate themselves^[14].

In the construction of garden-style scenes, the designer created the artificial scenes in accordance with his judgements, conscious or unconscious. According to the records in *The Reconstruction of the Bridge Approaching Virtues*, which was written by Hui Kang in the Qing Dynasty, “There were heavy and continuous rains in the summer of 1770 A.D. during the Reign of Qianlong in the Qing Dynasty, and the Bridge Approaching Virtues collapsed. In face of such an ominous event, could local people give a blind eye to it? Instantly donations were made and artisans were hired to rebuild the bridge. The project was completed soon, and I was asked to write an article for commemorating the magnanimous act.” The Bridge Accessing Heaven was constructed to replace the original small bridge at Xiaoxitian, which had been stormed away by floods. Jin Fuhai in the Republic of China recorded in his article *Tablet Inscriptions for Prohibiting Gathering Firewood at Xiaoxitian*, “The learned monk came here 20 years ago, and initiatively took the task of managing the temple, planting trees around. Now the temple presents a new face, with luxuriant forests; hence, it has been acclaimed as the best scene in this county. County Chief Yang prohibited local people from gathering firewood within the area of the temple, which conveys a profound significance.” Considering the lack of property management and the desolate surroundings of Xiaoxitian, some learned monks planted lots of pine trees and bushes around the temple, combining the ancient temple with gardens. Guo Fengcun in the period of the Republic of China wrote in his *Tablet Inscriptions for the Reconstruction of Xiaoxitian Buddhist Temple*, “Inside the temple there are a Guper and some peonies, which look black and let off unique aroma, sufficient to add glamour to the scenic spot... Seeing the flooding of streams at the foot of the mountains, and that the roads were so muddy and rough, the monks promptly erected a stone bridge, providing convenience to travelers and local people; and, seeing that the caves and narrow slopes were too close to precipitous cliffs, they built railings with bricks so that climbers would no longer feel dizzy and shake there.” In terms of organizational form, the designer of Xiaoxitian, consciously or unconsciously, constantly, positively and symbolically recreated the Land of Purity, just like what the Sukhavati sutra *Bussetsu Amidakyo* describes the Western Paradise (the Pure Land)^[15], “Sariputra! Listen! The Pure Land, seven-layer abstention, seven-layer composure and seven-layer wisdom are all surrounded by four treasures: gold, silver, colored glaze and glass, respectively corresponding to regularity, happiness, self and cleanness; hence, the land has been called ‘the Western Paradise.’”

3. The connotations of the Sukhavati culture contained in the Great Buddha Hall

As the core of the ancient Sukhavati temple of Xiaoxitian, the Great Buddha Hall recreates the Western Paradise in terms of overall structure, a solemn Pure Land composed of a couple of miraculous achievements

of merits and virtues. It has not followed the conventional model of enshrinement and worship as adopted by temples from ancient times; on the contrary, it initiated new shape and structure, and broke new ground in terms of contents. Compared with the frescoes and statues seen in other temples created in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, it demonstrates a purer and orthodox ideal of Sukhavati^[16]. According to *The Tablet Inscriptions about the Thousand Buddhas Monastery*, “and order all statues of Buddhas to be transported to this mountain, and make sure that colorful flags are hanged and brilliant canopies are used, just like two trees rising high above a forest; the horses and wheels are colorfully decorated, and the convoys are just like celestial beings sitting under such canopies. Finally, the temple has got good results in both the world and heaven, and looks as magnificent as beautiful dragons and elephants. In the Seventh Year of the Reign of Shunzhi in the Qing Dynasty, the Buddha statue was placed inside the hall; and this grand Buddhist event had last for half a year”^[6] (p. 96).

3.1. The space of Sukhavati

The ancient books and records of the Pure Land Sect believed that so long as a Buddhist believer believes Amitabha, and murmurs his name, he will be able to enter the Pure Land prepared by Amitabha. The arrangement of the Great Buddha Hall at Xiaoxitian is just like a full miniature of Tripitaka of Sukhavati: the frescoes and groups of statues imply that the dharma-mukha of Sukhavati is suitable for the masses to enter the realm of Buddhism and that so long as a believer believes in the Sukhavati belief, he will be able to break away from the earthly things and enter the Western Paradise where there is no suffering and hardship. In addition to the five statues of the main Buddhas of Sukhavati in the Oriental and Western Lands, the audiences who attended the Dharma assembly of Amitabha as per *Bussetsu Amidakyo*, the classical scripture of Sukhavati, created the statues of the Ten Great Disciples of Buddha, Six Small Monks, as well as the Paradise of Colored Glaze, the Heaven of Six Desires, the Ten Great Vidharajas and the music performers at the Heavenly Palace^[7] (pp. 25–26). According to the perception of the Pure Land Sect, there is no number in the Pure Land, thus there is a saying of “Unnumbered Buddha,” implying that, in the professional terminology of Buddhism, “in the Pure Land Sect, there are three levels of wisdom to meet the needs of the masses”^[17].

The statues in the Great Buddha Hall at Xiaoxitian are all arranged on top of the butsudana, in front of which there are five independent but connected Buddhist niches containing five main Sukhavati buddhas, which are taken as the center; at the side of each main buddha two attending Bodhisattvas were created, forming five Western Paradises (the Pure Lands); and with which as the center, they spread in all directions. At the southern and northern sides stand the standing statues of the Ten Great Disciples of Buddha; then on the decorative wooden doorsills in the rear of the statues of the Ten Great Disciples of Buddha were molded six lively small monks: some of them hold up buns or fruits, forming another layer of contrast. On the top of the northern gable at the right side of the main hall present the grand scenes of frescoes and hanging molded figures which combine to demonstrate the theme of “the Heaven of Six Desires,” a miniature of the world for all things; on the top of the southern gable at the left side are the frescoes and hanging molded figures which combine to present the Western Paradise with the theme of “Paradise of Colored Glaze.” These two groups of frescoes and molded figures form a sharp contrast.

At both sides of the baldachins on the top of the niches of the five main buddhas, on the second-floor platform, and in the Paradise of Colored Glaze are arranged with several groups of dancing scenes with the Flying Apsaras Musicians and Dancers, as well as the Music Performers at the Heavenly Palace. On the square pylons are also created with some dispersed sculptures of worldly disciple music performers. The images of a number of music performers are dotted in all scenes, forming a unified atmosphere of the Pure

Land. According to the doctrines in *The Worldly Domain in Amitayurdhyana Sutra*, “Buddha explains to A[^]nanda and Vaidehi: in the Land of Treasures, there are a myriad of treasure houses, in the pavilions of which reside numerous gods who play heavenly music; the musical instruments are hanged in the void, just like the heavenly Ratna-ketu; they would produce wonderful melodies without being played. Among a number of musical melodies, you will discern Buddhas, Buddhist doctrines and monks.” According to the records in *Bussetsu Amidakyo* about how to enlighten the masses by interpreting two factors: one’s own body and his external environment, “Sariputra! Listen! In the Western Paradise of Buddhism, when a breeze comes, the treasured trees and a whole network of treasures produce wonderful melodies, just like a grand symphony. So long as a people hear them, he will be greatly inspired by the joys of Buddhas, Buddhist doctrines and monks”^[7] (pp. 32–99). Indeed! In the Western Paradise (the Pure Land), each part has a treasure house with a myriad of treasures; in these treasure houses, numerous heavenly female musical performers play heavenly music; and then there are musical instruments being hanged in the void, just like the heavenly Ratna-ketu; they would produce wonderful melodies without being played. Among a number of musical melodies, you will discern the praises for Buddhas, Buddhist doctrines and monks. Since the Pure Land was created, it has been tightly bound to the sophisticated and wonderful heavenly music; however, the original intention is not the music itself, but how assist the masses to cultivate and improve themselves before entering the Pure Land; also, in such way will the masses of different personalities and levels of intelligence to co-exist in and build the Pure Land.

Between the southern and northern sides of the main hall are arranged with the Ten Great Vidyarajas who take the mission of subduing evils and assisting the masses to ridding themselves of worries and troubles. This layout is made in the order of priority and features mutual responses, thus fully and systematically embodying the doctrines of Sukdavati, Buddha’s wisdom, wishes and merits & virtues, the ideal realm of the Western Paradise, and the worries and troubles of the masses in a vivid and popularly manner; moreover, they depict the cultivation of ordinary monks and the Ten Great Disciples of Buddha, as well as the arduousness and complexity in the process of eliminating evils and the troubles of the masses^[6] (pp. 56–73).

3.2. Molding techniques

The dull appearance of the Great Buddha Hall at Xiaoxitian is the result from the restrictions by the surrounding terrain. To demonstrate the vast and borderless Pure Land, the artisans created most of the scenes by means of hanging molded and miniaturized landscape, and used a large volume of techniques for embossed paintings and gilding; finally they had successfully manifested the magnificence and brilliance of the Western Paradise. In the aspect of molding techniques, Pan Jiezi, famous contemporary traditional Chinese realistic painter, wrote in his poem *Xiaoxitian*, “What marvelous techniques and hard work in the creation of such a large number of statues! The colorful and sophisticated decorations justify the high craftsmanship. Although as old as the Ming Dynasty, all these wonderful artworks are rare and treasurable.” It is a brief summary of the super techniques and well preservation of the colored statues in the Great Buddha Hall, which is supported by walls, girders and columns inside and decorated with colored sculptures made of wood and clay by a strict process; furthermore, according to the requirements of the Pure Land that “Dusts, earth, stones, sands, dirty things and even thorns must be avoided,” artisans shall consider how to prevent worms and dusts in the preservation of the hanged sculptures. According to some scholars, the ancient artisans had skillfully added some special materials for making the coatings for the colored sculptures, so that over the past three centuries there have occurred no worms, spider webs or dusts inside the hall. In addition, the molding techniques in the making of the hanged colored sculptures inside the hall had played a

big role in the prevention of dusts. The hanged colored sculptures or articles inside the hall, to align with the scenes and movements, gradually enlarge from bottom to top, and incline forwards, with an average declining rate of 3 to 8 degrees. The statues at the high places were built into the form of looking down, thus forming an angle with the vertical direction of falling dusts and avoid directly falling dusts. The Great Buddha Hall itself is always closed, with only one entrance open, thus only a very few of dusts are allowed into the hall; the winds inside are small, plus a dry climate, it is easier to add colors to the clay sculptures, and it's not easy for them to fall off, thus very few dusts adhering to the surfaces of the sculptures. Some local parts of colored sculptures are connected with horse tail hair to give a marvelous hanging and swinging effect to such decorations on the curtains and draperies as pearls and flowers, and demonstrate the high skills of the ancient artisans in the expression of their profound inspirations and arts in association with the Pure Land.

Awed by Xiaoxitian's profound culture of sculpture, Mr. Zhao Puchu, former Chairman of the China Buddhism Association, wrote the inscriptions for the Great Buddha Hall, "No dusts blur the border between the Oriental World and the Western Paradise; all things in both man's world and the heaven are abundant and pure," poetically summarizing the culture of sculpture which is manifested in the colored sculptures inside the Great Buddha Hall. At Xiaoxitian, numerous figures, stories and scenes representing different times and spaces had been created on three walls and most of the spaces inside the hall from multiple angles and layers to present the scenes of the Western Paradise (the Pure Land). This has easily made local worshippers and outside visitors to acquire a feeling as if staying in the visionary Pure Land; in such way will they get some inspirations from the Sukhavati belief and immerge themselves in the Pure Land wholeheartedly and happily; also, by means of a strong appeal, the hall can lead the worshippers and visitors to enhance themselves from an anesthetic feeling to the perception of the Sukhavati belief^[6] (p. 84).

Temple architecture constitutes an important part of the Chinese ancient architectural culture. How to get a deep insight into it? We must learn some other cultural knowledge related to architecture, which determines the in-depth meaning of the temple architecture. This article, based on the Sukhavati Culture, deeply analyzes the connotations of the thoughts and culture contained in the architecture at Xiaoxitian. Meanwhile, while inheriting the culture and tradition of Sukhavati temples, it has innovated the design in practice, which provides some inspirations and references to the design and research on the contemporary Chinese temple architecture.

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Conflict of interest

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