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How Do Murals Organize Viewing? Spatial Integration and Ritual Experience Mechanisms in the Sanqing Hall of Yongle Palace

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Abstract

Existing studies on the murals of Yongle Palace have generally treated them as two-dimensional images for formal analysis, while neglecting the symbiotic relationship between mural painting and architectural space. Taking Chaoyuan Tu in the Sanqing Hall of Yongle Palace as the central case, this paper analyzes how murals transform architectural space into religious space from three perspectives: spatial semiotics, directional coding, and viewing paths. The study finds that the architectural space, pictorial space, and material space of the Sanqing Hall together constitute a spatial semiotic system, transforming the hall from a physical site into a sacred field. The directional distribution of the eight principal deities forms a structural correspondence with the Five Elements directional system, so that spatial arrangement itself becomes a form of religious cosmological coding. The viewer's transition upon entering the hall, ritualized movement, and perceptual rhythm between distant and close viewing together reveal how mural space is activated through bodily movement. These three levels all point to one central proposition: the murals of Yongle Palace are not flat images attached to walls, but an integrated "spatial device" composed of the hall, directional order, and viewing path.

Keywords

Yongle Palace Murals; Spatial Integration; Ritual Experience; Directional Coding; Viewing Path

1. Introduction

The murals of Yongle Palace represent one of the highest achievements of Chinese temple and monastery mural art. Among them, Chaoyuan Tu in the Sanqing Hall, with its vast scale of 429.56 square meters, magnificent group portrait of 286 deities, and refined line drawing with heavy colors, has become a classic case that cannot be bypassed in the study of Chinese religious mural painting. However, a review of existing scholarship reveals a clear shared tendency: whether formal studies

analyze composition, modeling, line, and color in parallel [1][2], specialized studies focus on the classification of heavy-color techniques [3], or practical studies discuss technical inheritance from the perspective of copying and reproduction [4], most research treats the Yongle Palace murals as two-dimensional images that can be extracted from the wall surface and examined independently.

This tendency toward "de-spatialization" leads to three levels of interpretive deficiency. First, the compositional logic of the murals is reduced to pictorial arrangement, while the structural homology between the centripetal composition and the axial order of the hall is overlooked. The spatial organization of the Yongle Palace murals is essentially a spatial projection of religious order, rather than merely an arrangement for visual balance. Second, the directional arrangement of the murals is treated simply as positional layout, while the correspondence between the eight principal deities and the Five Elements directional system is ignored. Direction is not a neutral spatial coordinate, but a symbolic dimension carrying religious meaning. Third, the viewing experience of the murals is equated with visual analysis of the image, while the viewer's bodily movement and perceptual shifts within the hall are neglected. The meaning of the murals is generated not only by "being seen," but also by "being walked through," "being encircled," and "being immersed in." It should be noted that although Zong Honggang's research discusses how painters such as Ren Bonian and Wang Zheng drew upon the composition of the Yongle Palace murals, his focus remains on the transmission of compositional modes within the image and does not further examine the symbiotic logic between mural composition and architectural space [2]. Hu Xin'an's analysis of raised-powder gilding, heavy-color outlining and filling, and other techniques is detailed, yet it remains limited to the description of visual effects within the image and does not extend the symbolic function of materiality to the spatial level [3]. These studies have made contributions within their respective dimensions, but together they form a "de-spatialized" interpretive framework: the mural is separated from architecture and becomes an image that can be independently examined on paper.

Spatial semiotics and theories of religious space provide new perspectives for reconsidering this problem. A. J. Greimas's theory of field reveals that space is not a neutral container, but a semiotic system in which meaning is generated [5]. Mircea Eliade's theory of "sacred space" points out that the essence of religious space lies in hierophany, or the manifestation of the sacred [6]. Juhani Pallasmaa's architectural phenomenology further emphasizes that bodily perception in space precedes visual cognition [7]. Based on these perspectives, this paper unfolds its analysis from three levels: "the semiotic homology between architecture and image," "directional coding and cosmic order," and "viewing paths and ritual experience." It seeks to answer the following question: How do the murals of Yongle Palace transform architectural space into religious space through spatial integration?

2. The Semiotic Homology Between Architecture and Image: From Physical Site to Sacred Field

2.1. Architectural Space as Sign

The architectural space of the Sanqing Hall is not merely a functional sheltering structure. Its south-facing orientation, axial direction, and entrance position themselves carry the symbolic meaning of the distinction between "sacred" and "secular." The south is associated with yang, dignity, and brightness, while the north is associated with yin, concealment, and stillness. When viewers enter the hall through the southern doorway, they move from "yang" into "yin," from "brightness" into "dimness." This spatial transition itself carries a ritualized symbolic meaning. Natural lighting inside the hall is limited, creating a light gradient that gradually weakens from the entrance toward the interior. This symbolically reinforces the spatial experience of moving "from brightness into darkness" and "from the ordinary into the sacred."

The central node of the interior space is the images of the Three Pure Ones carried by the partition wall. Located slightly north of the center of the hall, they form the endpoint of the architectural axis and the anchor point of the ritual space. The processions of the eight principal deities and hundreds of subordinate deities are all oriented toward the Three Pure Ones as the center of worship. Here, the axial order of architectural space and the directional order of pictorial space completely coincide, turning the hall into a ritual field in which physical space and symbolic space are homologous.

2.2. Pictorial Space as Sign

The centripetal composition of the mural is not a purely formal choice, but a spatial sign of the order of "all gods paying homage to the origin." The eight principal deities are symmetrically distributed within the hall, while hundreds of subordinate deities form multiple levels through overlapping and occlusion. The bodily orientations and lines of sight of all figures point consistently toward the center. The structure of pictorial space gives visible spatial form to the religious concept of "Chaoyuan," or paying homage to the Primordial. The centripetal composition does not merely "represent" Chaoyuan; it "is" Chaoyuan. At the semiotic level, the structure of pictorial space and the structure of religious ritual become identical.

Overlapping and occlusion also carry symbolic functions. Figures in the front layer are complete in form and clear in detail, while figures in the rear layers are partially hidden. At the symbolic level, this treatment of spatial depth suggests that the closer a figure is to the front, the more "substantial" it appears; the deeper a figure is placed, the denser and more concealed it becomes, as though the sacred core cannot be fully penetrated by sight. Spatial depth is not a representation of physical depth, but a symbolic indication of who is closer to the ritual center.

Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of Spatial Integration and Viewing Paths in the Yongle Palace

Murals



The symbolic function of cloud forms is especially crucial. As the only spatial element in the mural that belongs neither to "figures" nor to "objects," clouds define the boundary between the mundane realm and the sacred realm, indicate the dynamic process of divine descent, and function as a "medium" among different groups of deities. Their presence transforms pictorial space from "the arrangement of figure processions" into "the unfolding of cosmic order." The areas filled with clouds are no longer empty background, but the religious space of "vital transformation" itself.

2.3. The Spatial Semiotic Function of Color and Materiality

The blue-green color system is not only a symbolic "basis of order," but also a spatial "organizer of depth." Through variations in brightness and saturation within the blue-green range, the mural establishes a hierarchical progression from periphery to core and from secondary status to honored position. This color-layered hierarchy does not create realistic space through perspective; rather, it organizes the depth of order through differences among color layers. The spatial function of color is not to "represent" physical distance, but to "mark" religious hierarchy.

The spatial semiotic function of gold and raised-powder gilding is even more direct. Gold ornamentation is attached in relief-like form above existing color layers and is arranged along the contours of crowns, the edges of ritual implements, and key turning points in garment patterns. This continually draws visual attention toward "sites of authority." Under the weak lighting conditions inside the hall, the reflective quality of gold causes momentary optical flashes as the viewer moves. This "effect of manifestation" makes specific spatial nodes continually "appear" in the viewer's perception, transforming religious hierarchy into a perceptible spatial experience.

These symbolic functions are built upon concrete material carriers. The murals of Yongle Palace adopt a ground structure consisting of a rough mud layer, a fine mud

layer, and a white powder layer, completing the material transformation from "architectural wall" to "pictorial support." Without this transformation, lines could not remain continuous, color layers could not sustain stable superimposition, and gold ornamentation could not produce a raised effect. The durability of mineral pigments allows the relationships among color layers to remain stable over time, while gilding techniques extend spatial signs from the visual level to the tactile level. Viewers can not only "see" hierarchical differences, but also "perceive" them. Spatial signs are therefore materially reinforced.

3. Directional Coding and Cosmic Order: The Spatial Configuration of the Eight Principal Deities

3.1. The Directional Distribution of the Eight Principal Deities

The directional distribution of the eight principal deities in the Sanqing Hall forms a structural correspondence with the Five Elements directional system. On the east wall are Jinmu Yuanjun and Donghua Dijun. The east belongs to wood and governs growth and generation. Jinmu governs female immortals, while Donghua governs male immortals. Yin and yang are separated yet coexist on the same wall, implicitly corresponding to the cosmological logic that "the east governs generation." On the west wall are Houtu Huangdiqi and the Haotian Jade Emperor. The west belongs to metal and governs contraction. Houtu is the honored deity of the earth, while the Jade Emperor occupies the position of heavenly ruler. The juxtaposition of heaven and earth corresponds to the directional attribute of "the west governing contraction." On the north wall are the Great Emperor Ziwei of the Central Heaven and North Pole and the Great Emperor Tianhuang of the Gouchen Upper Palace. The north belongs to water and is associated with imperial position. Ziwei is the pivot of the stars, and the two deities share the north wall, corresponding to the traditional symbolism of "the north as the imperial seat." On the east and west sides of the partition wall are the Great Emperor of Longevity of the South Pole and the Heavenly Worthy Taiyi Savior from Suffering of the Eastern Pole Qinghua, who respectively govern longevity and salvation from suffering. Their directional significance lies in their "proximity to the center": to approach the Three Pure Ones is to approach the body of the Dao, while longevity and salvation are the functions of the Dao arising from its essence. The deities are not simply "placed" somewhere; they "belong" somewhere. An intrinsic symbolic relationship is formed between directional attributes and divine functions. Direction is therefore not a neutral spatial coordinate, but a symbolic dimension carrying religious meaning.

3.2. Directional Symmetry and Yin-Yang Structure

The distribution of the eight principal deities presents a rigorous symmetrical structure: east and west, south and north, yin and yang. This symmetry is not merely geometrical, but cosmological. The east and west walls form a yin-yang pair: Jinmu,

associated with yin, and Donghua, associated with yang, are located in the east; Houtu, associated with yin, and the Jade Emperor, associated with yang, are located in the west. Each wall contains both yin and yang, yet the east wall occupies a yang position and the west wall occupies a yin position. This creates a nested structure in which "the yang position contains yin and yang, and the yin position contains yin and yang." Each wall is internally balanced in yin and yang, and the two walls together form a higher-level correspondence between yin and yang. This nested structure closely accords with the Daoist cosmological idea that "one yin and one yang constitute the Dao." The special status of the two principal deities on the north wall lies in the fact that the north wall faces the entrance and occupies the primary position on both the visual and architectural axes. In the Chinese cosmological tradition, the north symbolizes "imperial position."

Figure 2. Schematic Diagram of the Deity Layout in the Hall of Three Purities, Yongle Palace



The North Star is surrounded by all other stars, and the Ziwei enclosure is the dwelling place of the heavenly ruler. As stated in the "Treatise on the Celestial Offices" in the Records of the Grand Historian, "In the central palace is the celestial pole star; the bright one among them is where Taiyi constantly resides." Placing Ziwei and Gouchen on the north wall causes the directional symbolism of "emperor" and the divine identity of "emperor" to fully coincide. This coincidence is not accidental, but a structural connection between the Daoist pantheon and the cosmic directional system in space.

3.3. The Partition Wall and the Center-Periphery Structure

The partition wall divides the interior of the hall into two areas. The southern side of the wall, where the images of the Three Pure Ones are located, forms the "core sacred domain," while the northern side, where the murals unfold, forms the

"encircling ritual field." After entering the hall, the viewer first stands within this "ritual field." The eight principal deities and hundreds of subordinate deities surround the viewer from all directions, forming an enclosed spatial field. Behind the partition wall, the images of the Three Pure Ones represent a deeper "core sacred domain." They are the absolute center of the entire ritual space, yet are partially obscured in physical position by the partition wall and can only be directly confronted when the viewer moves around or goes deeper into the space. This spatial relationship of "visible yet not directly accessible" symbolically expresses the Daoist idea that "the Dao is within the heart, yet can only be reached through cultivation and realization."

3.4. Directional Relationships Among the Three Halls

The spatial layout of the three halls of Yongle Palace itself constitutes a directional narrative system. The Sanqing Hall is located at the central axis, while the Chunyang Hall and Chongyang Hall are arranged before and behind it, corresponding to the hierarchy of Quanzhen Daoist belief. The Sanqing Hall represents "the body of the Dao," the Chunyang Hall represents "ancestral transmission," and the Chongyang Hall represents "cultivation practice." The spatial progression from south to north corresponds to the elevation of belief from "human" to "Dao." The viewer's movement through the temple complex is itself a spatial pilgrimage.

4. Viewing Paths and Ritual Experience: Space Activated Through Movement

4.1. From Physical Space to Ritual Space: The Viewer's Transition Upon Entering the Hall

When viewers enter the Sanqing Hall through the southern doorway, their spatial experience immediately undergoes three transformations. The first is a shift from "openness" to "enclosure." The open space outside the hall suddenly contracts into the enclosed field of the interior. The divine processions on the east, west, and north walls, as well as on the partition wall, enter the viewer's field of vision from different directions at once, creating an unavoidable sense of being surrounded. The second transformation is from "everyday light" to "ritual light." Dim lighting suppresses the ability to distinguish details in ordinary vision, while making gold, white, and other high-brightness nodes in the mural more conspicuous, producing an "effect of manifestation." The viewer's visual attention is automatically guided toward the "sacred bright points" within the image. The third transformation is from "spectatorship" to "participation." Because the bodily orientations and gazes of the mural figures all point toward the central deities, viewers entering the hall naturally find themselves in a position of "being looked at." It is not only the viewer who looks at the mural; the deities in the mural also seem to "look" at the viewer. The viewer is transformed from an external spectator into a participant in the ritual of Chaoyuan.

4.2. The Visual Rhythm of Ritualized Movement

The viewer's movement within the hall is a ritualized movement guided by the spatial organization of the mural. Its basic rhythm may be simulated in four stages. In the entrance stage, the viewer's gaze is first captured by the principal deity images on the north wall. The visual center is concentrated directly ahead, while the figure groups on the side walls remain in the blurred zones of peripheral vision. In the encircling stage, the figure groups on the east and west walls gradually enter the main field of vision. Because the mural continuously unfolds along the architectural walls, the viewer's gaze naturally forms a "handscroll-like viewing" experience while walking. With each step, new groups of figures enter the visual field, creating a visual cycle of "appearance—focus—withdrawal—new appearance." In the stopping-node stage, visual nodes such as the "golden lotus" before Houtu Niangniang and the "three-luminary" ritual vessel beside the Great Emperor Ziwei serve as points of pause within the dense group imagery. The viewing process therefore takes on a rhythm of "pause—advance—pause again." These nodes are often located in the areas of the principal deities, where the viewer pauses, looks upward, and worships. In the stage of approaching the center, the viewer's gaze and body gradually move closer to the partition wall and the area of the Three Pure Ones. The experience shifts from "being surrounded by the divine assembly" to "directly facing the Three Pure Ones." The "core-periphery" spatial structure analyzed above is completed at the end of the movement, and the ritual experience is elevated from "encircling worship" to "direct confrontation with the body of the Dao."

4.3. The Perceptual Rhythm of Distant and Close Viewing

In distant viewing, the viewer gains an overall impression of the mural: the solemn tonal foundation of the blue-green system, the rhythmic nodes of warm colors and gold, and the ordered framework of the centripetal composition. From a distance, the gold ornamentation appears as scattered points of light, enveloping the entire hall in a "slightly moving spiritual radiance." This is precisely the perceptual presentation of the "effect of manifestation."

In close viewing, the viewer's field of vision narrows to individual figures or local areas. The material thickness of color-layer superimposition becomes perceptible, and the technical details of raised-powder gilding become clearly visible. The linear relief of gold ornamentation is arranged along the contours of crowns, the edges of ritual implements, and the key turns of garment patterns. Its technical precision is invisible from a distance but highly clear at close range. Subtle differences in facial colors and local coloring also emerge in close viewing: the faces of principal deities tend toward ochre to convey authority and gravity, while the skin of female deities is pinkish-white to suggest luminosity and liveliness. This "only visible at close range" visual information constitutes a "reward mechanism" within the spatial experience. The closer the viewer approaches and the longer the viewer remains,

the more visual information and perceptual layers are obtained, thereby guiding the viewer toward a ritualized behavioral pattern of "approaching—pausing—approaching further."

The shift between distant and close viewing is not a one-time choice, but a perceptual rhythm that continuously occurs during movement within the hall. When the viewer approaches a wall, close viewing begins; when the viewer moves away, distant viewing resumes. When pausing before a principal deity, the viewer closely observes its gilded details; after stepping back a few paces, the viewer again sees its hierarchical position within the divine assembly. Distant viewing constructs the overall sense of enclosure within the religious field, while close viewing provides the material credibility of sacred order. The two constantly alternate and overlap through movement, ultimately transforming the mural space from "an object to be viewed" into "a field to be immersed in."

4.4. Differences in Viewing Modes Among Different Halls

The viewing of Chaoyuan Tu in the Sanqing Hall is characterized by a "synchronic" ritual experience. Once viewers enter the hall, they are immediately surrounded by encircling group images, forming a synchronic religious experience of "all gods being present at once." The murals in the Chunyang Hall are characterized by a "diachronic" narrative experience, in which viewers must walk along the walls to gradually read the narrative sequence. The narrative structure of the Chongyang Hall is more complex, and the viewer's walking rhythm is more compact. The differences among these three modes of viewing reveal the adaptability of artistic language under different pictorial functions within the same temple system: the Sanqing Hall presents "synchronic worship-oriented viewing," the Chunyang Hall presents "diachronic narrative viewing," and the Chongyang Hall presents "compact narrative viewing." Each viewing mode forms an organic correspondence with the religious function and spatial structure of its hall.

It must be emphasized that the ritual route simulation described above is not a complete reconstruction of the experience of Yuan-dynasty viewers. Yuan-dynasty believers possessed religious knowledge and ritual training far beyond that of contemporary researchers, and their viewing experience must have been more self-conscious. What this paper offers is a cautious analysis of possible viewing modes and visual perception based on the existing architectural space and pictorial conditions.

5. Conclusion: The Mural as "Spatial Device"

This paper has systematically analyzed the spatial integration mechanisms of the murals in the Sanqing Hall of Yongle Palace from three levels: spatial semiotics, directional coding, and viewing paths. These three levels all point to one central proposition: the murals of Yongle Palace are not flat images attached to walls, but an

integrated "spatial device" composed of the hall, directional order, and viewing path. At the level of spatial semiotics, the architectural axis, pictorial order, color coding, and the "effect of manifestation" produced by gold ornamentation operate together in space, forming an overall experience in which "entering the hall is entering the sacred." At the level of directional coding, the directional distribution of the eight principal deities forms a structural correspondence with the Five Elements directional system. Direction is not a neutral coordinate, but a symbolic dimension of religious meaning. The directional logic in which the east wall governs "generation," the west wall governs "contraction," the north wall governs "imperial authority," and the partition wall governs "proximity to the Dao" gives visible spatial form to the order of the pantheon. At the level of viewing paths, the viewer's entrance transition, ritualized movement, and perceptual rhythm between distant and close viewing reveal how mural space is activated through bodily movement and perceptual shifts. The meaning of the mural is generated not only by "being seen," but also by "being walked through," "being encircled," and "being immersed in."

Thus, the concept of "spatial device" is not only a description of the mode of existence of the Yongle Palace murals, but also a methodological reminder. The study of Chinese temple and monastery murals should not stop at formal analysis of two-dimensional images, but should restore murals to their integrated relationships with architectural space, directional order, and viewing practice. As Eliade argues, sacred space is not merely "discovered," but "manifested." The murals of Yongle Palace transform the everyday physical hall into a sacred field that can be experienced by the body through spatial semiotic coding, directional ordering, and the guidance of viewing paths. Only by re-understanding the mural as a religious spatial medium that "organizes viewing, shapes cognition, and guides experience" can we truly grasp its distinctive position in the history of Chinese religious art.

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