

Research Article

Decoding the "Divine Consciousness" of the Temple of Heaven: The "Mandala" Writing of Daoist Alchemy

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Abstract

This paper deciphers the "divine consciousness" embedded in the Beijing Temple of Heaven—a Ming-Qing imperial sacrificial site for heaven worship—through the lens of Daoist alchemical "mandala" (坛城 Tancheng). As a physical manifestation of ancient Chinese cosmology and spiritual pursuit, the Temple is interpreted as a three-dimensional mandala encoding the stages of Daoist Internal Alchemy (内丹学 Neidan Xue): refining essence into vital breath (炼精化炁 Lianjing Huaqi), transforming breath into spirit (炼炁化神 Lianqi Huashen), and sublimating spirit to merge with the divine (炼神还虚 Lianshen Huanxu). Key architectural elements—such as the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests (祈年殿 Qinian Dian) with its triple eaves (corresponding to the Lower, Middle, and Upper Elixir Fields 下/中/上丹田 Xia/Zhong/Shang Dantian), celestial blue tiles (symbolizing divine purity), and numerical symbolism (12 pillars for earthly cycles, 4 pillars for cosmic order)—are analyzed as symbolic vessels for consciousness ascension. The Temple's layout (Circular Mound Altar, Imperial Vault of Heaven, Danbi Bridge) forms a nested cosmological model mirroring the human body as a microcosm, facilitating the integration of mortal and divine. Ultimately, the Temple of Heaven is revealed as a monumental "mandala writing" (坛城书写 Tancheng Shuxie), where architecture serves as both a ritual space and a catalyst for achieving the Daoist goal of "Heaven-Human Unity" (天人合一 Tianren Heyi).

Keywords

Beijing Temple of Heaven, Daoist Internal Alchemy (Neidan Xue), Mandala (Tancheng), Divine Consciousness, Tan T'ien

1. Introduction

(1) Research Background and Theoretical Foundation

The Temple of Heaven (simplified Chinese: 天坛; traditional Chinese: 天壇; pinyin: Tiāntán) is a complex of imperial religious buildings situated in the southeastern part of central Beijing. The complex was visited by the Emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties for annual ceremonies of prayer to Heaven for a good harvest (It was the site where emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties worshipped Heaven, prayed

for good harvests, and sought rain). The Temple of Heaven occupies approximately 2.73 million square meters, four times the area of the Forbidden City, making it the largest and highest-ranked surviving ancient Chinese sacrificial architectural complex in terms of ethical hierarchy. In 1961, the Temple of Heaven was announced by the State Council as one of the first batch of National Key Cultural Relics Protection Units. [1] In 1998, "The Temple of Heaven: an Impe-

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rial Sacrificial Altar in Beijing" was inscribed as a World Heritage site. The Temple of Heaven was inscribed as a World Heritage site in 1998 and was described as "a masterpiece of architecture and landscape design which simply and graphically illustrates a cosmogony of great importance for the evolution of one of the world's great civilizations..." as the "symbolic layout and design of the Temple of Heaven had a profound influence on architecture and planning in the Far East over many centuries." [2] The layout of the Temple of Heaven is rigorous, its architectural structure is unique, and its decorations are magnificent.

Thus, the Temple of Heaven is the highest-ranking classical Chinese sacrificial architectural complex in terms of ethical hierarchy. Ancient Chinese ritual architecture, as a physical carrier of cosmology and life philosophy, has long been a focus of scholarly attention for its profound implications. Qian Mu (1948) pointed out in *Introduction to Chinese Cultural History*: "Ancient Chinese architecture, especially ritual architecture, is actually a three-dimensional representation of cosmology" [3]. This assertion reveals the intrinsic connection between architecture and philosophical thought, providing a macro theoretical framework for the study of the Temple of Heaven. Furthermore, Ge Hong of Daoism stated in *Baopuzi Inner Chapters* (Chapter 10, *Clarifying the Fundamentals*): "The 'Dao' internally governs the body, externally governs the state, enabling the harmonious operation of the seven celestial bodies (qi zheng)." This is an exposition of Daoist thought and Neidan (Internal Alchemy) cultivation methods. The Daoist concept of "homology of body and state" (身国同构, shen guo tonggou) is inseparable from Neidan cultivation; for a state to be well-governed, the ruler must achieve it through layers of sacred cultivation. Further elaborated, it emphasizes that Neidan cultivation hinges on this homology of body and state, where the human microcosm resonates with the macrocosm of Heaven and Earth. Its core idea is the isomorphism between the rhythms of human life and the order of the cosmos. Therefore, the Daoist political thought of "homology of body and state" lays a crucial theoretical foundation for this study's construction of an "architecture-body-consciousness" interaction model, revealing the relationship between politics, mind-nature (xinxing), and cultivation. Simultaneously, Daoist Neidan studies (Neidan Xue), as the core system of traditional Chinese life philosophy, provides a novel perspective for interpreting sacred space through its "Threefold Alchemy Method" (San Yuan Danfa: refining form into Qi (炼形化气, lian xing hua qi) – refining Qi into Spirit (炼气化神, lian qi hua shen) – refining Spirit to return to Void (炼神还虚, lian shen huan xu)) and the "Three Dantian" [4].

(2) Existing Research Paradigms on the Temple of Heaven consist of three main academic lineages: institutional history, architectural form and structure, and cosmological symbolic principles encompassing mathematics, mechanics, acoustics, and geometry

Institutional History Lineage: Previous research has uti-

lized canonical texts documenting the Temple of Heaven's institutional evolution, sacrificial rituals, and administrative functions to verify the sacrificial systems of the Ming and Qing dynasties, revealing its political symbolism within the imperial ritual framework. For example, historical analysis of sacrifices at the Temple of Heaven [5] meticulously presents the institutional context of the architecture, focusing on the "historical-functional" dimension.

Architectural Form and Structure Research Tradition: Liang Sicheng's pioneering construction analysis in *Structural Regulations of Qing Dynasty Architecture* meticulously documented the circular hall layout and technical features of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests (Qinian Dian) at the Temple of Heaven [6]. Lü Houjun studied the acoustic phenomena of the Temple of Heaven's architecture from a scientific and technological perspective [7]. Research exploring the experience of conservation and restoration projects at the Temple of Heaven [8], Jiang Bo's research on the Temple of Heaven's architectural domain [9], Round Altar and Bright Hall: Ceremonial Building Sites of the Tang Empire. *Historical Studies of Ancient and Medieval China*, Vol. 29, 2013.2, 163 - 187), and Hou Xiaoxuan's research [10] represent this tradition. These studies conducted a dual "form-structure" analysis, deepening the understanding of architectural technology.

Cosmological Symbolism Path: Joseph Needham's (1956) theory of "cosmological symbolism," proposed in *Science and Civilisation in China*, inspired scholars to focus on the mathematical and symbolic aspects of the Temple of Heaven [11], such as the layout of the Circular Mound Altar (Yu-anqiu Tan) based on "heavenly numbers" (tianshu).

Previous research on the Temple of Heaven has predominantly concentrated on its history, architectural techniques, features, or its role within the imperial cosmology-levels of static symbolic analysis-while neglecting its deep function as a catalyst for sacred consciousness. However, the Temple of Heaven is a three-dimensional mandala (Tancheng) encoding the stages of spiritual alchemy (Lian Dan Jici). Its dynamic functional mechanism as a "catalyst for sacred consciousness" remains unrevealed. The Temple of Heaven functions as a "dynamic mediator of consciousness" (Mediator), an "interactive" intermediary mechanism connecting physical space and subjective consciousness. Ancient Chinese people used the spatial design of architecture to facilitate the dynamic transformation of consciousness from the mundane to the sacred. Therefore, this deep functionality is an exceedingly important dimension. Research on Ming and Qing ritual architecture urgently needs to break through the dualistic "form-function" analytical model. This article aims to reveal the advanced convergence between the three fields of sacred architecture, Daoist Neidan studies, and consciousness research. Through the logic of "three-stage transformation" (San Jie Zhuanghua), it will present the complete chain of integration, transformation, and construction across the three distinct pathways of "space, body, and consciousness."

(3) The Theoretical Value and Practical Significance of this Study

Daoist thought, as the foundation of Chinese culture, gradually formed the Southern and Northern Schools following the rise of Neidan studies in the Tang Dynasty and its development by the Zhong-Lü lineage in the Song Dynasty. The Southern School, influenced more deeply by Buddhism, emphasizes "Mind" (Xin, nature); the Northern School (Zhong-Lü lineage) emphasizes "Qi" and "Essence" (Jing) (Journal of Chinese Religions, 2010). This cultivation system, centered on "Jing (精, Essence), Qi (炁, Vital Energy), Shen (神, Spirit)," is essentially a form of spiritual alchemy – achieving the leap from the mundane to the divine through the regulation of body-mind energy. The "Mandala" (Tancheng, also known as Mandala), as a symbolic vehicle for this process, is both a field where energy converges and a map for the ascension of consciousness. The Temple of Heaven in Beijing is precisely such a "Mandala" erected upon the physical earth. Using architecture as its brush and Heaven and Earth as its canvas, it inscribes the ultimate code of Daoist spiritual alchemy. The term Mandala literally denotes "divine city" (Sacred Ritual Platform), where "city" symbolizes an urban form extended into a celestial palace-representing the Buddhist archetype of perfected enlightenment, the pinnacle of spiritual perfection. By examining the architectural configuration of the Temple of Heaven complex, centered on the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests, through the prism of Daoist alchemical practice, the sanctuary ultimately embodies the supreme energetic field of consciousness cultivation: the perfected realm of Tancheng (坛城, Mandala).

This study precisely adopts the perspective of Daoist Neidan studies (Neidan Xue) to interpret the core architecture of the Temple of Heaven, the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests (Qinian Dian). It investigates how architectural elements such as its triple eaves (sanchong yan), 28 pillars, and azure glazed tiles correlate with concepts of "Jing" (精, Essence), "Qi" (炁, Vital Energy), and "Shen" (神, Spirit) found in texts like the Taiyi Jinhua Zongzhi (Secret of the Golden Flower) and the Huangting Jing (Yellow Court Classic), constituting a "living Mandala" (Huo de Tancheng), thereby revealing the spatial correspondences of its transformative process. The triple design of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests – corresponding to the Three Dantian (San Dantian) – proposes a schema that transcends the dualistic opposition of "sacred" and "secular." Furthermore, the study explores the deep mechanism by which the entire Temple of Heaven complex, including the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests, the Imperial Vault of Heaven (Huangqiong Yu), the Circular Mound Altar (Yuanqiu Tan), and the Danbi Bridge (Stairway Bridge/Vermilion Steps Bridge), collectively functions as a "ritual machine" (Yishi Jiqi) for elevating consciousness.

In the long river of ancient Chinese civilization, architecture was never merely physical space for shelter; it was also the concrete manifestation of cosmology, life philosophy,

and divine consciousness. The Temple of Heaven in Beijing, as the sacred site for imperial worship of Heaven during the Ming and Qing dynasties, embodies the ancients' reverence for "Heaven" (Tian) and their ultimate pursuit of "the unity of Heaven and humanity" (Tian Ren Heyi) in every brick, tile, and structural detail. This article, for the first time from an interdisciplinary perspective, opens up an extremely important yet nearly unexplored field of divine consciousness research within Chinese imperial sacrificial architecture-using the "Mandala" (Tancheng) concept of Daoist alchemy (Dandao Xue) as the key to reveal the isomorphism between the architectural symbols of the Temple of Heaven's Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests (Qinian Dian) and divine consciousness within cosmology. It deciphers the tri-level progression (San Ceng Jidi) of this isomorphism in the awakening of divine consciousness within the lower, middle, and upper Dantian, the sublimation of divine consciousness, the advancement of the Primordial Spirit (Yuanshen), and other stages of innate primordial spirit cultivation (Xiulian Jici), ultimately achieving the highest-level fusion of divine consciousness (Shenxing Ronghe).

From a theoretical perspective, this study applies the hermeneutics of "language-image-meaning" (Yan-Xiang-Yi) to architectural interpretation, developing a "Form (Architecture)-Qi (Energy)-Spirit (Consciousness)" (Xing-Qi-Shen) decoding method. It systematically demonstrates, for the first time, the correspondence between the Temple of Heaven complex and Daoist alchemical classics such as the Taiyi Jinhua Zongzhi, revealing its essential characteristic as a "three-dimensional alchemical furnace" (San Wei Lianding Lu). Secondly, this article also reinterprets the modern value of traditional cosmology through Daoist alchemy, providing inspiration for constructing a system of philosophy of mind with distinctive characteristics of Chinese civilization. Future research could further utilize virtual reality technology to empirically test the Temple of Heaven space's regulatory effects on states of consciousness, thereby promoting the transformation of theoretical research into practical applications. In summary, this article utilizes the theoretical system of the "Threefold Alchemy Method" (San Yuan Danfa) from Daoist Neidan studies to construct a three-dimensional "architecture-body-consciousness" (Jianzhu-Shenti-Yishi) mutual interpretation framework. This perception of "architecture as the alchemical cauldron" (Jianzhu Ji Ding) provides a new paradigm for understanding the consciousness-transforming function of sacred space.

2. Historical Evolution and Cosmological Construction of the Temple of Heaven

(I) From "Altar of Heaven and Earth" to "Temple of Heaven": Focusing the Divine in Ritual Reform

The history of the Beijing Temple of Heaven chronicles the gradual crystallization of divine consciousness. In the

18th year of the Yongle reign (1420 AD), after relocating the capital to Beijing, Emperor Zhu Di commissioned the construction of a site for Heaven and Earth worship east of Zhengyangmen Gate, modeled after the Great Sacrificial Hall in Nanjing. Initially named the "Altar of Heaven and Earth" (天地坛 Tiandi Tan), its rituals centered on the "Joint Worship of Heaven and Earth" (合祀天地 Hesi Tiandi), alongside ceremonies for imperial enthronements, royal births, empress investitures, imperial funerals, as well as supplications during natural disasters or foreign invasions—all events intrinsically linked to the dynasty's survival, implicitly expressing prayers for "life" and reverence for "death."

In the 9th year of the Jiajing reign (1530 AD), Emperor Zhu Houcong implemented the "Separate Sacrifices at the Four Suburban Altars" (四郊分祀 Sijiao Fensi) system, leading to the altar's reconstruction: the southern suburban altar (the former Tiandi Tan) was dedicated solely to Heaven worship, while new altars were built in the east (Sun), west (Moon), and north (Earth). In the 13th year of Jiajing (1534 AD), upon the Ministry of Rites' petition, the names were formalized: "The southern altar east [of the city] is named the Temple of Heaven (Tiantan), the northern altar the Temple of Earth (Ditan), the eastern altar the Altar of the Sun (Chaori Tan), the western altar the Altar of the Moon (Xiyue Tan)" (Ming Huidian). Henceforth, the name "Temple of Heaven" was established, its divine function shifting from "Heaven-Earth Unity" to "Heaven Worship" (祀天 Si Tian). Rituals were further refined, incorporating prayers for a bountiful harvest in early spring (孟春祈谷 Mengchun Qigu), the winter solstice sacrifice to Heaven (冬至祭天 Dongzhi Jitian), and thanksgiving for rain and snow (祀谢雨雪 Si Xie Yuxue), extending reverence for "Heaven" to every node of the natural rhythm.

During the Qianlong era (1735-1799 AD), the Temple underwent multiple renovations. In the 16th year of Qianlong (1751 AD), the glazed tile colors of the Great Hall of Offering (大享殿 Daxiang Dian, later renamed Qinian Dian) were unified from the original scheme symbolizing Heaven (blue upper), Earth (yellow middle), and the Myriad Things (green lower) to a pure cyan-blue (青色 qingse), accentuating the purity of "Heaven." In the 15th year of Guangxu (1889 AD), the Hall of Prayer was destroyed by lightning and rebuilt identically years later, ensuring the continuity of this divine symbol. After Yuan Shikai's attempted sacrifice in 1916, Heaven worship ceased. In 1918, the Temple opened as a public park. Yet, the divine consciousness it embodies did not vanish with the rituals; it persists within the architectural fabric, awaiting reinterpretation.

(II) Architectural Layout: A Miniaturized Model of Cosmic Order

The main structures of the Temple of Heaven—the Hall of Prayer complex, the Imperial Vault of Heaven (皇穹宇 Huangqiong Yu), the Circular Mound Altar (圜丘坛 Yuanqiu Tan), and the Danbi Bridge (丹陛桥 Danbi Qi-

ao)—form a nested cosmic model centered on a north-south axis, serving as its "spine." The altar area is circular in the north and square in the south, embodying the traditional Chinese concept of "tian yuan di fang" (heaven is round, earth is square). Surrounded by two layers of altar walls, the complex is divided into an inner altar and an outer altar, covering a total area of 273 hectares. Most of the main buildings are concentrated in the inner altar [12].

Circular Mound Altar (Yuanqiu Tan): A three-tiered open-air circular platform built of carved bluish stone (艾叶青石 Aiye Qingshi). Its "altar without a hall" design eliminates physical barriers, enabling direct dialogue between "Heaven" and "Man." The circular stone platform symbolizes the "Round Heaven" (天圆 Tianyuan), while its three tiers subtly correspond to the "Three Powers" (三才 Sancai) of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity.

Imperial Vault of Heaven (Huangqiong Yu): A single-eave circular hall with blue tiles, housing the spirit tablets used on the Circular Mound. Its circular form and domed caisson ceiling (藻井 zaojing) create a microcosmic mirror of "Heaven." The circular white marble pedestal inside enshrines the "Supreme Emperor of Heaven" (皇天上帝 Huangtian Shangdi) tablet—here, "Heaven" is not a Western monotheistic deity but a unity of the natural and the divine, embodying "Heaven-Human Resonance" (天人感应 Tianren Ganying).

Danbi Bridge: The north-south axis connecting the Circular Mound and the Hall of Prayer, divided into three paths: the Sacred Way (神道 Shendao), the Imperial Way (御道 Yudao), and the Princely Way (王道 Wangdao). The Sacred Way represents the "Path of Ascension," symbolizing the channel for consciousness to leap from the mundane to the divine.

Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests (Qinian Dian): The heart of the Temple, a triple-eaved circular building with a gilded pinnacle and a triple-tiered conical roof that tapers upwards. Its interior 28 pillars (4 Dragon Well Pillars symbolizing seasons, 12 inner Golden Pillars symbolizing months, 12 outer Eaves Pillars symbolizing two-hour periods, totaling 28 corresponding to the lunar mansions), the central marble slab with natural dragon-phoenix veining, and the coiled dragon caisson ceiling collectively form a concentrated cosmic energy field.

This "Round North, Square South" (北圆南方 Bei Yuan Nan Fang) enclosure system and the triple concentric circle structure formed by the Hall of Prayer – Imperial Vault – Circular Mound concretize the ancient Chinese cosmological view of "Heaven-Human Unity": all things are harmoniously oscillating energy waves, forming a complete cosmos within a spiritually resonant field. The human body, as a "microcosm," possesses such a harmoniously oscillating energy field—the "mandala." The Temple of Heaven is precisely the architectural manifestation of this resonance between the "microcosm" and the "macrocosm."

3. Daoist Alchemy and the Mandala: The Theoretical Foundation of Spiritual Ascent

I The Core of Internal Alchemy: The Transformation of Essence, Vital Breath, and Spirit

Daoist alchemy (Internal Alchemy) is not metallurgy on a material level but a spiritual cultivation using the human body as the "cauldron and furnace" (鼎炉 *dinglu*), achieving dimensional ascension of consciousness through the regulation of "Essence, Vital Breath, and Spirit" (精、气、神 *Jing, Qi, Shen*). The Secret of the Golden Flower (*太乙金华宗旨 *Taiyi Jin Hua Zongzhi*, attributed to Lü Dongbin but likely compiled in the Ming-Qing period) is a seminal Internal Alchemy text. Its core method, "Turning the Light Around and Guarding the Center" (回光守中 *Huiguang Shouzhong*), focuses on the "Celestial Heart" (天心 *Tianxin*, between the eyebrows) to refine the "Light of Nature" (性光 *Xingguang*, the Golden Flower). It emphasizes achieving divine awakening through the condensation of "light." Translated by Richard Wilhelm in 1929 as *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, with psychological commentary by Carl Jung, this Eastern wisdom gained significant Western attention.

The key to Internal Alchemy cultivation lies in the energy circulation of the "Microcosmic Orbit" (小周天 *Xiao Zhoutian*) and the "Macrocosmic Orbit" (大周天 *Da Zhoutian*). As stated in *Taoist Yoga: Alchemy and Immortality*: "Taoist Yoga embraces spiritual alchemy, its goal being the complete conquest of death. It teaches how to practice spiritual alchemy from the elementary stage to the stage of proficiency in order to leap from the mortal to the immortal divine state." [13](p.xi).

Specifically, the practitioner uses breath regulation to ignite the "Inner Fire" (内火 *neihuo*), reversing the "generative force" (精 *Jing*, often dissipated through sexual desire), driving it to circulate within the Microcosmic Orbit: "As soon as this force tends to follow its usual course (outward), it is turned back and, driven by the inner fire kindled by regulated breathing, it is sublimated in the microcosmic orbit (小周天 *hsiao chou t'ien*) which rises from the base of the spine up the backbone to the kidneys, the back of the head and the brain, and then descends by the face, chest and abdomen to return to its starting point to complete one revolution." [13](p.xii).

Through repeated ascent and descent, the "generative force" is purified and stored in the "Lower Elixir Field" (下丹田 *Xia Dantian*) below the navel, transforming into "vital force" (气 *Qi*). The four crucial points of the Microcosmic Orbit are: "the genital region where the generative force gathers, the top of the head, the middle of the spine and two points in front of the body-where the generative force is purified." [13](p.xiii) When the "vital force" becomes abundant, the practitioner enters the "Macrocosmic Orbit" (大周天 *Da*

Zhoutian): "By practising immortal breathing through the heel and trunk channels (rising from the lower abdomen to the brain via the heel channel and descending via the trunk channel) the 'wheel of dharma turns of itself' (法轮自转 *Fa Lun Zi Zhuan*)-a free circulation of the life force ascending by the former and descending by the latter, restoring deep prenatal breathing, wiping out all postnatal conditions so that prenatal vitality is transformed into a 'bright pearl' which lights up the brain." [13] (p.xvi)

II The Mandala: A Symbolic Field of Energy and Consciousness

The "Mandala" (坛城 *Tancheng*) is the core symbol of Daoist spiritual alchemy-it is both a geometric model for energy convergence and a map for consciousness ascension. At the microcosmic level, the mandala corresponds to the body's energy centers (the Three Elixir Fields, 三丹田 *San Dantian*); at the macrocosmic level, it corresponds to the ordered structure of the cosmos. The mandala's "circle" symbolizes eternity and perfection; its "layers" symbolize the stages of consciousness advancement; its "center" symbolizes the divine origin (Primordial Spirit, 元神 *Yuanshen*).

The manifestation of the "Golden Flower" (金华 *Jinhua*) in *The Secret of the Golden Flower* is precisely the result of mandala energy condensation: "When the practiser succeeds in concentrating his attention on the centre between the two eyes, a light appears in his head-this is the 'light of nature' (*hsing kuang*), which is also the manifestation of the mandala's center." The formation of the "immortal embryo" (仙胎 *Xiantai*) described in *Taoist Yoga* corresponds to the completion of the mandala's energy circuit: "The union of generative force, vital force and spirit (神 *Shen*) causes a golden light to appear in the white light between the eyebrows-this is the embryo of the 'seed of immortality', like the union of the male and female organs of a flower producing fruit." [13] (p.xvii)

The ultimate meaning of the mandala is to realize the "Heaven-Human Unity" state of consciousness: "When the 'seed of immortality' returns to its source in the lower abdomen, concentrated contemplation causes a golden light to appear in the white light between the eyebrows-this is the manifestation of the union of generative force, vital force and spirit. The two lights (white and golden) unite like male and female to produce the 'whole' (全 *ch'ian*), the seed of immortality." [13] (p.xvi-xvii) is precisely the core of divine consciousness that the Temple of Heaven's architecture strives to reach.

III. Isomorphism Between Temple Architecture and Internal Alchemy Cultivation: The Concretization of the Mandala

Every architectural detail of the Temple of Heaven forms a precise correspondence with the stages of Daoist Internal Alchemy cultivation, constituting a three-dimensional "mandala." From the triple eaves of the Hall of Prayer to the three tiers of the Circular Mound, from the dragon motifs as energy channels to the color coding of consciousness, each

element narrates the secret of "Essence, Vital Breath, and Spirit" transformation.

(I) Hall of Prayer: Architectural Manifestation of the Three Elixir Fields and Primordial Spirit Advancement

As the core of the Temple, the Hall of Prayer's structure is a perfect mirror of the three stages of Internal Alchemy cultivation. This triple-tiered circular building, with its gilded pinnacle and triple eaves tapering upwards, corresponds both physically and symbolically to the path of Primordial Spirit advancement: "Refining Essence into Vital Breath" (炼精化炁 Lianjing Huaqi), "Refining Vital Breath into Spirit" (炼炁化神 Lianqi Huashen), and "Refining Spirit to Return to Emptiness/Void" (炼神还虚 Lianshen Huanxu) [14].

Lower Elixir Field (下丹田 Xia Dantian): The "Cauldron and Furnace" for Refining Essence into Vital Breath

The lowest eave and the three-tiered white marble Sumeru pedestal correspond to the "Lower Elixir Field" (below the navel). The pedestal, built of Fangshan white marble over 95% pure, symbolizes the purity required in the "Refining Essence into Vital Breath" stage-"pure thoughts, single-minded concentration." The 12 outer Eaves Pillars symbolize the "twelve two-hour periods," subtly resonating with the daily rhythm of "generative force" flow-just as the Microcosmic Orbit requires "regulating the inner fire with breath to circulate generative force along the orbit." The pillars' arrangement creates an energy circuit, constraining "Essence" (Jing) within the "cauldron and furnace" (the pedestal).

The central marble slab with natural dragon-phoenix veining is a symbol of "yin-yang energy resonance." The dragon (阳 Yang) and phoenix (阴 Yin) intertwined represent the "union of generative force (yang) and vital force (yin)," precisely as Taoist Yoga states: "When the heart (fire) is linked with the lower abdomen (water), the spirit is wrapped in vital force until the two unite to form the 'immortal embryo in perfect serenity'." [13] (p.xvi).

Middle Elixir Field (中丹田 Zhong Dantian): The "Transformation Field" for Refining Vital Breath into Spirit

The middle eave and the 12 inner Golden Pillars correspond to the "Middle Elixir Field" (heart region/solar plexus). The Golden Pillars symbolize the "twelve months," totaling 24 pillars with the outer layer, corresponding to the "twenty-four solar terms"-the rhythm of "vital force" (Qi) transformation with the seasons. The solar plexus, as the "largest nerve plexus in the abdomen," is the core of energy transformation. The "inward taper" of the middle eave symbolizes "vital force ascending from the Lower Field to the Middle Field, becoming more refined after purification."

The Qianlong-era change unifying the eaves' tiles to cyan-blue holds profound meaning: cyan-blue belongs to Wood (木 Mu), symbolizing "growth," corresponding to the process of "vital force transforming into spirit." The Secret of the Golden Flower emphasizes "Turning the Light Around and Guarding the Center." The converging form of the middle eave is like "gathering vital force into the Middle Field to

fuse it with the heart-mind (fire)"-"When the vital force is full and descends to unite with 'long life', the golden light (red-yellow) appears, its perfection occupying the other half of the 'whole'." [13] (p.xvii).

Upper Elixir Field (上丹田 Shang Dantian): The "Divine Manifestation" of Refining Spirit to Return to Void

The top eave and the 4 Dragon Well Pillars correspond to the "Upper Elixir Field" (brain, the "Mansion of the Primordial Spirit" 元神之府 Yuanshen Zhi Fu). The Dragon Pillars symbolize the "four seasons," representing the timeless eternity of "Spirit" (Shen). The 4 Dragon Pillars, plus the 12 Golden Pillars and 12 Eaves Pillars, total 28, corresponding to the "Twenty-Eight Lunar Mansions"-a symbol of "Spirit" resonating with the cosmos, like the Macrocosmic Orbit enabling "the prenatal vital force and spirit to gather in the brain, finally producing 'sweet dew' (甘露 Ganlu)." [13] (p.xvi).

The gilded pinnacle atop the hall is the architectural "apex of divinity," symbolizing the "Unity of the Imperial One" (帝-混成 Di Yi Huncheng, Yellow Court Canon 黄庭经 Huangting Jing)-the highest level of divine fusion. This aligns with Taoist Yoga's description of the "final breakthrough": "When the positive light (union of the two lights) appears, the practiser should gather the life force of the heart, stomach, liver, lungs and lower abdomen to form the 'macrocosmic agent' (宏观炼金剂 Hongguan Lianjin Ji) and achieve the leap from the mortal to the divine." [13] (p.xvii). The "gilding" of the pinnacle corresponds to the "explosive appearance of golden light," symbolizing the maturity of the "immortal embryo" and the liberation of the Primordial Spirit.

The coiled dragon caisson ceiling is a direct visualization of the "mandala's top view." Its concentrically receding structure is completely isomorphic to the mandala's circular energy field. The dragon coiling upwards symbolizes the "Spirit" in the brain "breaking through the Celestial Gate (crown of the head) to manifest countless transformations". [13] (p.xvii). This "planar projection of high-dimensional energy" makes the Hall of Prayer a channel for consciousness ascension "from three dimensions to higher dimensions."

(II) Imperial Vault of Heaven: The Mandala's Core and Divine Storage

As the repository for the Circular Mound spirit tablets, the Imperial Vault's structure symbolizes the "core of the mandala." The cylindrical form of the single-eave blue-tiled circular hall corresponds to the "mandala's vertical energy pillar"; its three-tiered caisson ceiling "receding concentrically" presents a microcosmic view of the "mandala's cross-section"-akin to the description of the "Primordial Spirit Cavity" (大脑 Danao, brain) in Taoist Yoga: "When the practiser succeeds in concentrating his attention on the centre between the two eyes, a light appears in his head-this is the light at the centre of the mandala." [13] (p.xiii).

The arrangement of the "Supreme Emperor of Heaven"

tablet flanked by ancestral tablets subtly encodes the "unity of divinity and humanity." "Supreme Emperor of Heaven" is not a Western monotheistic god but the unity of "Heaven as Nature" and "Heaven as Divinity," corresponding to the Primordial Spirit (Yuanshen) in Internal Alchemy. The ancestral tablets symbolize "acquired consciousness" (Shishen). Their coexistence in the hall symbolizes the "fusion of innate Primordial Spirit and acquired conscious spirit," much like the "energy interaction between center and periphery" in a mandala.

The deities enshrined in the East Annex Hall-"God of the Great Light (Sun), God of the Seven Stars of the Northern Dipper, Gods of the Five Elements (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water)"-and the West Annex Hall-"God of the Night Light (Moon), God of Clouds, God of Rain"-are symbols of "cosmic elemental energy." These nature deities correspond to I Ching trigrams (e.g., "Water" to Kan ䷜, "Fire" to Li ䷔), symbolizing the "mandala's peripheral energy field"-just as the Microcosmic Orbit requires "utilizing heaven and earth's energy to assist the internal circulation," these tablets serve as mediators for resonance between the "human microcosm" and the "cosmic macrocosm."

(III) Circular Mound Altar and Danbi Bridge: Energy Channels for Heaven-Human Communication

The Circular Mound's three-tiered open-air circular platform embodies a field for "direct Heaven-Human dialogue." Its "altar" form corresponds to the "mandala's outer circle"; its lack of a roof symbolizes "breaking physical barriers for divine energy to pour directly." The circular bluish stone platform features railings and steps in multiples of "nine" (e.g., 9 posts top tier, 18 middle, 27 bottom)-"nine" being the ultimate Yang number, corresponding to the pure Yang energy of "Heaven." Just as Internal Alchemy requires "using Yang fire to refine Yin essence," the "nines" of the Circular Mound are symbols for "amplifying Yang energy."

The Danbi Bridge, as the "Path of Ascension" connecting the Circular Mound and the Hall of Prayer, with its three parallel paths (Sacred, Imperial, Princely Ways), corresponds to "different paths of consciousness ascension." The Sacred Way is the "Path of the Spirits," symbolizing "the Primordial Spirit's direct flight"; the Imperial Way is the "Path of the Emperor," symbolizing "the channel of the emperor as Heaven-Human intermediary"; the Princely Way is the "Path of Officials," symbolizing "the sublimation of mundane consciousness." The three paths ascending in parallel are completely isomorphic to the Microcosmic Orbit's path "ascending from the Lower Field to the brain," concretizing "energy converging from the mandala's periphery to its core."

The acoustic phenomena of the Circular Mound-like the "Triple-Sound Stone" (三音石 Sanyin Shi) and "Dialogue Stone" (对话石 Duihua Shi)-are physical proof of "energy resonance." A sound made standing on the center stone produces multiple echoes, symbolizing the "self-reverberation of divine consciousness." The propagation and reflection of

sound are analogous to the "circulation of Qi in the Cosmic Orbits" in Internal Alchemy-sound is formless yet traceable, just as "Qi is invisible but its flow can be felt in the body."

IV. Semiotic Interpretation of Divine Consciousness: Dragons, Colors, and Numbers

(I) Dragons: Totems of Energy Channels and Multi-Dimensional Fusion

The ubiquitous dragon motifs (on pillars, caissons, paintings) within the Temple's architecture are activated symbols of "divine consciousness." From a Daoist perspective, the dragon is a "unified entity of multi-dimensional energy": its serpentine body (Yin), antler-like horns (Yang), and eagle-like claws (strength) symbolize the "fusion of Yin-Yang and strength-softness," akin to the "harmonious coexistence of diverse energies" within a mandala.

The dragon is also the "resonance code between Earth's energy grid and human energy." Ancient Chinese "dragon veins" (龙脉 Longmai) refer to Earth's energy networks; within the body, the "spine is the dragon bone, the meridians are the dragon body." Awakening "dragon energy" (龙气 Longqi) means activating the "Microcosmic Orbit circulation." The "coiling form" of the Hall of Prayer's Dragon Pillars symbolizes "Qi ascending along the spine"; the "soaring posture" of the coiled dragon caisson symbolizes the "Primordial Spirit breaking through the Celestial Gate at the crown." As Taoist Yoga states: "The spirit leaves the body and manifests countless transformations in space." [13] (p.xvii).

The difference between Eastern and Western dragons further highlights the Chinese dragon's essence as "consciousness": the Western dragon represents "external fear," while the Eastern dragon signifies "mastery of internal power." The dragon motifs of the Temple of Heaven are a declaration: "Humans, through cultivation, master internal energy and resonate with Heaven and Earth."

(II) Colors: Visual Coding of States of Consciousness

The evolution of the Hall of Prayer's glazed tile colors reflects a process of "consciousness focusing." From the Yongle to Jiajing periods, the three colors-blue upper (Heaven), yellow middle (Earth), green lower (Myriad Things)-symbolized the undifferentiated state of "Heaven-Earth-Humanity Unity." The Qianlong-era change to all cyan-blue tiles, cyan-blue belonging to "Heaven," symbolizes "consciousness shifting focus from 'joint Heaven-Earth worship' to 'Heaven worship alone'," paralleling the Internal Alchemy requirement to "gather scattered awareness into the Primordial Spirit."

The blue tiles of the Imperial Vault and the bluish stone of the Circular Mound form a unified "color system of Heaven." Blue symbolizes the "depth of the sky," corresponding to the "clarity of the Upper Field"; cyan-blue symbolizes "vitality of life," corresponding to the "transformation in the Middle Field." This chromatic unity makes the Temple a "high-purity field of divine energy," guiding the visitor's consciousness from "mundane sensory desire" to "sacred

awareness."

(III) Numbers: The Quantitative Manifestation of Cosmic Rhythms

The numerical system of the Temple of Heaven encodes cosmic rhythms. The twenty-eight pillars of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests correspond to the Twenty-Eight Lunar Mansions, symbolizing the synchronization between the microcosm of the human body and the macrocosm of the celestial sphere. The Ninefold System of the Circular Mound Altar corresponds to the hierarchical levels of celestial Yang energy (with nine representing the ultimate Yang number in numerology). The 360-meter length of the Danbi Bridge (approximately equivalent to the number of days in a year) signifies the cyclical sublimation of consciousness through time.

These numerical configurations are not arbitrary but embody the Daoist concept of Shushu (numerology/calculation arts) – wherein numbers serve as the quantitative expression of cosmic energy. Just as the I Ching (Book of Changes) condenses the principles of transformation into sixty-four logical codes, the numbers at the Temple of Heaven function as an operational manual for the energetic potency of the ritual space (mandala). The twenty-eight pillars, representing the Lunar Mansions, ensure the resonance between human vital energy and stellar trajectories. The multiples of the Ninefold System amplify the refining potency of Yang fire, thereby optimizing the alchemical transformation of Essence (Jing), Vital Energy (Qi), and Spirit (Shen).

V. Divine Revelation in the AI Era: The Temple of Heaven's Significance for the Leap in Collective Consciousness

Following the termination of the Heaven Worship Ceremony in 1916, the Temple of Heaven transitioned from an "imperial sacrificial ground" to a "public cultural space", yet the numinous consciousness it embodies remains undiminished. In the AI-dominated modern era, humanity confronts a schism between "instrumental rationality" and "divine awareness" – precisely here, the mandala paradigm of the Temple of Heaven offers a therapeutic framework for this rupture.

The "holographic manifestation design" of the Temple of Heaven-encompassing form, color, numbers, sound, and structural mechanics-can awaken latent divine memory without linguistic mediation. Its "form" (a circular shape symbolizing heaven) evokes a yearning for "wholeness"; its "color" (cyan-blue) activates the clarity of the "upper dantian" (a key energy center in Taoist physiology); its "numbers" (nine and twenty-eight) resonate with cosmic rhythms; its "sound" (echo) induces self-reflection in consciousness; and its "structural mechanics" (e.g., beamless halls, suspended columns) exemplifies the natural balance of energy. This design transcends linear thinking and acts directly on the subconscious, akin to the Taoist concept of wuwei (non-coercive action)-"infinite creativity arising from stillness."

In the AI era, the Temple of Heaven reminds us that true

"intelligence" is not the precision of algorithms, but the holographic awareness of the "unity of heaven and humanity" (天人合). Its tripartite structure corresponds to the "frequencies of conscious evolution": The foundational layer (Lower Dantian) embodies "survival consciousness"; The intermediate layer (Middle Dantian) represents "emotional consciousness"; The apex layer (Upper Dantian) signifies "divine consciousness".

The leap of human collective consciousness necessitates an ascent from "existential anxiety" to "divine awakening"-a transformative process mirrored in the gilded pinnacle of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests (祈年殿), which, after undergoing triple refinement, emanates a "golden radiance".

4. Conclusion: Reciprocal Nourishment from Ancient Wisdom Paradigms: The Eternal Radiance of the Sacred Mandala

The Temple of Heaven in Beijing is not a lifeless monument of the past, but a living mandala-an architectural embodiment of Daoist alchemy, encoding the ascent of consciousness from the profane to the divine. The Temple of Heaven incorporates corporeal bodies, surrounding cosmos, and cultural heritage into a dynamic system for consciousness generation. Every element-from the Three Dantian symbolism of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests to the cosmic core of the Imperial Vault of Heaven, from the heaven-earth communion at the Circular Mound Altar to the dragon motifs, chromatic harmonies, and sacred numerology-whispers the same truth: "Man is a microcosm of the universe, and divinity is the highest fulfillment of humanity."

In an age where cosmic truths are buried beneath power and ritual, the Temple of Heaven stands as a mirror, revealing humanity's forgotten inner sanctity. It reminds us: AI may map the stars, but it cannot replicate the lived experience of cosmic unity. Technology may push the limits of existence, but it cannot surpass the alchemy of essence, energy, and spirit. Amidst the dialectical tensions between sacred and profane, tradition and modernity, the Temple of Heaven unveils a more integral landscape for humanity to comprehend consciousness and attain spiritual transcendence-ultimately revealing a core truth: consciousness is both a constructed product and a transformable agent, wherein the synergy of space, body, and cognition constitutes the master key to unlocking the mysteries of awareness.

The Temple's divine consciousness is, ultimately, human consciousness-a silent message from China's ancient sages, written in stone and space: Only by returning to the mandala's sacred resonance, aligning the inner and outer cycles of existence, can humanity realize the stillness of "I am the cosmos; the cosmos is emptiness"-and in the age of AI, re-

kindle the light of transcendence.

At the southern apex of Beijing's axis, this mandala still waits-for those who will pause, listen to the breath of the skies, and awaken the dragon within.



Figure 1. The Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests.



Figure 2. Temple of Heaven.



Figure 3. The Circular Mound Altar.



Figure 4. The Imperial Vault of Heaven.

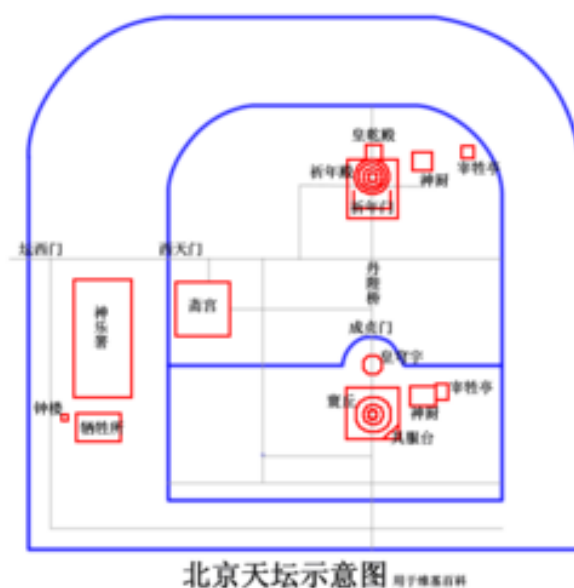


Figure 5. Image Caption (Left to Right): The Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests, the Imperial Vault of Heaven, the Circular Mound Altar, and Schematic Diagram of the Beijing Temple of Heaven.

Author Contributions

Pang Yanning is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix

Illustrations

The main structures of the Temple of Heaven consist of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests, the Imperial Vault of Heaven, the Circular Mound Altar, and the Vermilion Steps Bridge (Danbi Bridge). Among these, the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests is the architectural and spiritual centerpiece.

The Imperial Vault of Heaven is a single-eaved circular

hall with blue-glazed tiles, housing the divine tablets used in ceremonies at the Circular Mound Altar.

The Circular Mound Altar is a three-tiered open-air marble platform ("yuanqiu"), crafted from Aiye Qing bluestone. Its design follows the principle of "an altar without a roof," emphasizing direct communion with the heavens.

The Vermilion Steps Bridge (Danbi Bridge), also called the Sacred Way, forms the north-south axis connecting the Circular Mound Altar to the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests. Symbolizing the "Path to Ascension," it is divided into three parallel walkways: the central Imperial Way (reserved for deities), flanked by the Royal Way (east, for emperors) and the Divine Way (west, for ritual attendants).

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Biography

Pang Yanning, Ph.D. in Literature, Associate Professor, and Master's Supervisor. Dr. Pang Yanning is a member of the Shandong Writers Association and the Shandong Dashun Culture Research Association, and a former visiting scholar at the Faculty of English, University of Oxford. She currently serves in the English Department of the School of Foreign Languages, Shandong University of Science and Technology, where she teaches undergraduate courses such as British and American Literature and An Introduction to Chinese Culture, as well as postgraduate courses including Sino-British Comparative Literature, Foreign Literary Theory, and Western Literary Criticism. Her research interests encompass Western literature and culture, classical Chinese and Western literature and culture, literary theory, and comparative literature, with a core focus on the cross-temporal and cross-cultural comparative study of Western classical studies and contemporary British literature. Dr. Pang has been awarded the Qingdao Social Science Outstanding Achievement Award and honored as one of the "Outstanding Young Talents" in the third batch of recipients from the West Coast New Area. Over the past six years, she has presided over multiple research projects funded by the National Social Science Fund of China, the Shandong Provincial Social Science Fund, and the Qingdao Municipal Social Science Fund.