

Research on the Cultural Value of Liaocheng Shan-Shan Guildhall under the Influence of Canal Culture

Zhao Xinru¹

¹Xizang Minzu University, Xianyang, Shaanxi, 710127, China

Keywords: Shan-Shan Guildhall, Canal, Cultural Value

Abstract: During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal, as an important waterway connecting the north and south, drove the development of economic and cultural exchanges on both sides. Located in the western part of Shandong, Liaocheng was the only prefectural political center city along the Shandong section of the canal during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Taking advantage of the canal transportation, the economy of Dongchangfu District prospered rapidly, and local merchants established more than a dozen regional guild halls, with the most complete one being the Shan-Shan Guildhall. The Shan-Shan Guildhall symbolizes the prosperous commercial development of Dongchangfu District in history. Based on the previous research and combining the local characteristics of Liaocheng, this paper aims to study and discuss the historical and cultural value of the Shan-Shan Guildhall.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Grand Canal, flowing through the Dongchangfu District in the western part of Shandong, became an important channel for north-south transportation, attracting famous merchant groups such as Shanxi merchants and Shaanxi merchants to establish the Shan-Shan Guildhall. Based on field surveys and traditional documents such as local gazetteers and literature, this paper aims to analyze the historical and cultural value of the Shan-Shan Guildhall from different perspectives through on-site research and analysis of the research problem.

1. Background Introduction

1.1 Basic Overview of Shan-Shan Guildhalls in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

Guild halls emerged in the early Ming dynasty, mainly divided into three categories: official guild halls, industrial and commercial guild halls, and immigrant guild halls, among which industrial and commercial guild halls were the main body.^[1] During the Ming and Qing dynasties, due to the rapid development of commodity economy and continuous progress in transportation and science and technology, large-scale commercial groups emerged. These commercial groups were mostly established based on family background, blood ties, and hometown relations, aiming to strengthen commercial capital and increase competitiveness. To further consolidate these cooperative relationships, some merchants began to organize and build industrial and commercial guild halls, and the essence of the Shan-Shan Guildhall is a commercial guild hall.

1.2 Liaocheng Shan-Shan Guildhall

Liaocheng Shan-Shan Guildhall is located in the southern part of the main urban area of Liaocheng City, Shandong Province, on the west bank of the Grand Canal. It is known as the first of the “Eight Great Guild Halls” of Liaocheng and the only one that has been preserved. In 1977, the People’s Government of Shandong Province listed it as a key cultural relic protection unit at the provincial level. In 1988, the State Council listed it as one of the third batch of key cultural relic protection units nationwide.^[2]

Shan-Shan Guildhall follows the basic layout of traditional Chinese palace-style architecture, emphasizing balanced symmetry on both sides of the central axis. The main and secondary levels are distinguished through the form of the roof and the complexity of carvings. From the outer to the inner, the three courtyards inside gradually increase in height, creating a harmonious and orderly arrangement. The stone carvings, wood carvings, and painting techniques inside the guild hall are exquisite examples of Chinese architectural art. They depict various traditional stories from ancient China, such as “Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea” and “Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars,” providing valuable information for the study of ancient Chinese architectural history, commercial history, theatrical history, as well as calligraphy, painting, and carving arts.

2. Research Content

Shan-Shan Guildhall regards “strengthening hometown ties and expressing hometown sentiments” as its primary function, connecting interpersonal resources with business opportunities. This reflects the changing mindset of merchants during the Ming and Qing dynasties as the market economy era approached. The Shan-Shan Guildhall combines the excellent business concepts and innovative management methods of Shanxi and Shaanxi merchants, linking hometown networking activities with the development of interpersonal resources and promoting industrial and commercial activities. This has achieved progress in its own historical and cultural value. With the changing times, the Shan-Shan Guildhall has presented and carried different value functions, making it of great research significance.

2.1 Cultural Value

The value functions carried by the Shan-Shan Guildhall reflect the changes in ideological thoughts under the social transformation in China. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the religious beliefs of deity worship awakened the self-esteem and professional consciousness of merchants, leading to the ethical development of commerce. In the case of the Shan-Shan Guildhall, a worship system was formed with the worship of Guan Yu as the main focus, supplemented by Taoist and Buddhist worship. The spirit of “loyalty, righteousness, benevolence, and bravery” guided the spiritual world of Shanxi and Shaanxi merchants, constructing their own ethical system of business operations and regulating their own business activities.^[3] Today, the statue of Guan Yu is still worshipped in the Shan-Shan Guildhall, and many Shaanxi and Shanxi merchants who engage in business activities in the Liaocheng area come to worship with their families and friends.

As wealthy and influential merchant groups, Shanxi and Shaanxi merchants also have a strong interest in drama. Almost every industrial and commercial guild hall has a theater building. The theater building of Liaocheng Shan-Shan Guildhall is particularly magnificent, with exquisite paintings and carvings. Merchants expressed their aspirations for a better life through theatrical performances, portraying their desires for prosperous business and a fulfilling life.^[4] The cultural value of the Shan-Shan Guildhall is not only reflected in the inheritance and promotion of traditional culture and spirituality but also vividly displayed through painting, carving, and

architectural structures. Its historical heritage and cultural value deserve further exploration.

2.2 Historical Value

In the early stages, the primary function of the Shan-Shan Guildhall was as a commercial “office” for “strengthening hometown ties and expressing hometown sentiments.” It gradually evolved to include functions for residence and entertainment. Over time, it has carried different functions as the era changed.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Dongchangfu District in Liaocheng served as a vital transportation hub connecting southwestern and eastern Shandong, with the Yellow River and the Grand Canal as the main transportation routes. It held a significant geographical position, leading to the settlement of the main merchant groups engaged in east-west trade, which facilitated the thriving development of the Shan-Shan Guildhall. However, after the Opium War, the canal transport system declined, leading to a deterioration of the economic conditions in the various regions and counties along the canal. Consequently, the merchant groups based on the canal gradually dispersed from their stationed areas, and the Shan-Shan Guildhall, under these historical conditions, lost its original function as a commercial guild and became occupied by various factions.^[5] During the period of the Republic of China, amidst the struggle for power among different factions, the Shan-Shan Guildhall served as a command post and a storage place for goods. It later went through several turnovers and turned into a front-line base for patriotic movements and activities for young university students. It is through this long-term process of use and construction that the historical buildings and written records of the Shan-Shan Guildhall have been completely preserved.

3. Shortcomings and Suggestions

The Shan-Shan Guildhall is a witness to the prosperous commercial development and economic prosperity of Liaocheng in history, and even today, one can sense the historical weight of the Shan-Shan Guildhall from its brick carvings and corridors, having weathered a century of storms. However, during the research period and in light of the current state of conservation and development of the Shan-Shan Guildhall, several issues have been identified:

Firstly, it has not formed a distinctive cultural center, and the development potential has not been adequately explored. Currently, “rebuilding old cities” is a hot topic in urban construction, and it is urgent to address how urban development can promote the coordination between historical architecture and the surrounding environment. Secondly, the publicity efforts are relatively minimal, hindering the organization of relevant cultural activities. The primary audience for the Shan-Shan Guildhall is often businessmen from Shanxi and Shaanxi, while local visitors tend to overlook it, with little knowledge of the historical and cultural significance of the Shan-Shan Guildhall. Thirdly, there is a lack of awareness in terms of architectural preservation, and a shortage in the consciousness of protecting cultural heritage. While the Shan-Shan Guildhall was listed as one of the third batch of key cultural relic protection units nationwide in 1988 and has undergone multiple renovations, there are visible signs of dust and corrosion within the buildings, indicating a lack of systematic preservation efforts.

Through the review of architectural literature and field research on the Shan-Shan Guildhall in Liaocheng city, new approaches and methods for addressing the insufficient historical and cultural exploration, limited publicity efforts, and weak architectural preservation awareness have been provided.

Firstly, it is essential to vigorously promote the cultural and historical value of the Shan-Shan Guildhall. The Shan-Shan Guildhall during the Ming and Qing dynasties serves as crucial evidence

for the historical, social, economic, and cultural development of the Dongchangfu District area. It also serves as strong evidence of the blending of the cultures of Shanxi, Shaanxi, and the history of Liaocheng. The promotion of the historical value of the Shan-Shan Guildhall and the in-depth exploration of its historical records hold significant importance.

Secondly, there is a need to strengthen promotional efforts and carry out distinctive activities. As a cultural architectural center representing the characteristics of Liaocheng, the Shan-Shan Guildhall should utilize its geographical location and historical value to plan corresponding cultural activities. Furthermore, it can host Shanxi and Shaanxi cultural themes on a regular basis, connecting tourism, exhibitions, leisure, and the unique cultural heritage of the old city, producing a distinctive cultural tourism industry.

Urban development and the rise and fall of the canal are intertwined, with canal culture becoming an indispensable part of city culture. The unique historical treasure of the Shan-Shan Guildhall, as an embodiment of art and a testament to Liaocheng's history as a commercial center along the canal, displays the culture of Shanxi and Shaanxi, as well as Shandong, serving as an invaluable historical artifact. Taking the Shan-Shan Guildhall in Liaocheng as a typical case, this paper presents a preliminary analysis of the distribution and cultural connotations of merchant guild halls in the Shandong canal region during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Describing the historical and cultural value of the Shan-Shan Guildhall, promoting its historical significance, and advocating canal culture holds an important meaning.

References

- [1] Gao Jing. *Exploring the Rise and Fall of the Dongchang Canal Economic State from the Perspective of Shan-Shan Guildhall* [J]. *Huaxia Culture*, 2012.
- [2] Zhao Jinpeng. *Commercial Activities in the Transportation of the Ming Dynasty*. Shilin, 1996(1).
- [3] Li Wenye, Jiang Taixin. *Transportation in the Qing Dynasty* (Chapter 14). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1995.
- [4] Fei Zhengqing. *Cambridge History of Late Qing China (1800-1911) Volume 1*. Translated by the Historical Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.
- [5] Li Wei. *Research on the Worship System and Ethical Implications of Shan-Shan Guildhall in the Ming and Qing Dynasties*. [D]. Nanjing University, 2020.