

Inheritance and Innovation at Ziyang Academy in Hankou, Hubei

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Abstract— This paper aims to analyze the distinctive features of the Ziyang Academy in Hankou from the perspectives of inheritance and innovation. The academy shares profound ties with familial traditions, having been established by Huizhou merchants based on native-place solidarity. It traces its intellectual lineage to Zhu, Xi while inheriting the legacy of Confucius, serving as a practical embodiment of Confucian values in cultivating civic virtues. Simultaneously, the academy functioned with guild hall characteristics, blending commercial acumen with a commitment to local development and social welfare initiatives. It evolved into an urban landmark, where its founding, architectural design, and associated cultural landscapes became defining features of the era. The academy's adherence to Zhu, Xi's philosophy not only promoted his teachings but also honored Confucian ideals. From Confucius to Zhu, Xi, the Ziyang Academy's social engagement and practices offer valuable insights for fostering a sense of familial and national responsibility—"cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world"—in the new era. Its dual approach of "narrating tradition" (inheritance) and "pioneering innovation" provides a referential framework for integrating humanistic spirit into higher education and societal development.

Keywords— Zhu, Xi Studies; Hankou Ziyang Academy; Guild Hall; Urban Memory; Cultural Landscape

I. INTRODUCTION

In the history of Chinese education, the establishment of academies is not of ancient origin but rather a later development. A common view holds that academies emerged from the dual influence of private and official initiatives. Following the widespread circulation of books,

scholars engaged in activities such as collecting, printing, teaching, writing, and compiling texts, leading to the accumulation and dissemination of knowledge in specific spaces or localities (Deng, 2006).

Since the Ming and Qing dynasties, administrative divisions have undergone numerous changes, and the

Wuhan area gradually came to encompass the three cities of Wuchang, Hanyang, and Hankou. Over time, many renowned academies emerged in the region, among which the Ziyang Academy (located in present-day Xin'an Street, Qiaokou District, and Wuhan) stands out as particularly distinctive and well-known. Academies bearing the name "Ziyang Academy" existed in Anhui, Suzhou, Hangzhou, and other places. However, the Hankou Ziyang Academy, also known as the Xin'an Academy, uniquely combined the functions of an academy and a guild hall. It was founded during the Kangxi reign of the Qing Dynasty by Huizhou merchants who pooled resources to establish it after settling in Hankou for trade. Over years of expansion, it grew into a significant urban landmark.

Notably, the academy also served roles in charity relief, free schooling, ancestral worship, and infant care. Coupled with its grand architecture and extensive facilities, the Ziyang Academy became an important urban symbol for locals and outsiders, natives and sojourners alike. It fostered a shared sense of identity and collective memory, while also embodying the social solidarity and mutual aid of its time.

II. THE ZIYANG ACADEMY AND ITS TIES WITH CLANS

"Ziyang" was the alternative name of Zhu, Xi. After the Southern Song Dynasty, the influence of Zhu, Xi's philosophy grew significantly and spread throughout East Asia. The establishment of the Hankou Ziyang Academy originated from the joint proposal of Huizhou gentry and merchants who had migrated to Hankou for business or settlement. Huizhou was formerly known as Xin'an Prefecture, and Zhu, Xi himself was a native of Wuyuan in Huizhou. Thus, these scholar-merchants, inheriting both academic traditions and cultural legacies, often founded Ziyang Academies in multiple locations. The motivation behind the creation of the Hankou Ziyang Academy was no exception (Dong, 2019).

Current academic research on the Ziyang Academy particularly emphasizes the aspect of mutual assistance among fellow Huizhou merchants. Scholars argue that, in addition to its roles in lecturing and worship, the academy also functioned as a guild hall. Zhou, Chunjian and Zou, Huaqing contend that since Huizhou merchants were active nationwide, especially in Hankou, it was both necessary and urgent to rely on the academy to connect with fellow townspeople. As Dong, Guifu stated, "I consider the establishment of the academy as achieving three benefits in one move: honoring past sages to illuminate the Dao, founding lecture halls to encourage learning, and gathering fellow townspeople to foster camaraderie" (Dong, 2019). From the perspective of "hometown ties," where kinship may fade but land remains familiar, this was the most fundamental original intent behind the creation of the Ziyang Academy. Zhao, Yu, in the preface to A Brief Record of the Ziyang Academy, particularly emphasized that while guild halls were widespread across multiple provinces, the Ziyang Academy, though named as an academy, was in fact also a guild hall.

As is well known, guild halls were initially established to accommodate scholars traveling to the capital for imperial examinations, hence also called "examination halls." Over time, their scope expanded, becoming gathering places for fellow townspeople or urban sojourners to socialize. As Wang, Rigen noted, guild halls were the result of continuous adjustments and refinements between centralized authority and grassroots self-governance. However, the sense of mission encapsulated in "cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world" persisted among both organizers and participants. Thus, within guild halls, efforts were made to strengthen emotional bonds, facilitate information exchange, and provide practical and effective assistance to maintain the stability of grassroots society (Wang, 1996).

Of course, the reverse could also be argued: guild halls incorporated the distinctive features of academies, thereby enhancing their unique value. The Ziyang Guild Hall (Academy) clearly exemplified this. However, if discussing it solely from the perspective of guild halls or Huizhou merchant mutual aid risks lacking historical depth, overemphasizing the merchants themselves while neglecting the traditions and influence of academic education.

In fact, the connection between academies and families, clans, and local communities was a crucial link in the Confucian scholars' practical efforts since the Song Dynasty to transform society and cultivate moral customs. As the Cheng brothers (Cheng, Hao and Cheng, Yi) stated, "To govern the hearts of the people, consolidate clans, enrich customs, and ensure people do not forget their roots, it is necessary to clarify genealogical records and establish the system of clan leadership." (Cheng & Cheng, 2004) Zhu, Xi, in a letter to Lü, Zuqian, also wrote, "I intend to revise the Lü Family Community Compact and its rituals, as well as establish norms for capping, marriage, funeral, and ancestral rites." (Zhu, 2010) The deeper meaning behind this is tied to the traditional Confucian ideal of "cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world." Post-Song and Confucian intellectuals emphasized social order, beginning with self-cultivation and gradually expanding outward—from family and clan to community, society, nation, and the world. The idealistic purpose of establishing academies lay precisely in this progression.

Zhu, Xi and other Confucian scholars were not solely focused on inner spiritual refinement. They advocated self-cultivation, discussed the nature of the mind, compiled Family Rituals, and then extended these principles to family governance. From individual moral development, they expanded into daily life rituals—covering weddings, funerals, ancestral worship, and other rites—and further into clan and lineage structures. This included compiling

genealogies, establishing family and clan rules, and promoting community compacts. Importantly, academies also served as spaces for scholarly discourse, intellectual exchange, and friendship through literature, making them key sites for disseminating knowledge, ideas, and values.

Thus, the integration of academies and guild halls was not solely due to the geographical ties of Huizhou merchants but also stemmed from the educational philosophy that had developed since the Song Dynasty, which found full expression in the Ziyang Academy. This was a tradition inherited by scholar-gentry and merchants from Zhu, Xi when they established academies. As Dong, Guifu noted, "For five hundred years, scholars across the land have revered Zhu, Xi as the great master of learning. The people of Xin'an, dwelling near the sacred legacy, have preserved his teachings, passing them down through generations (Dong, 2019). Discoveries in classical scholarship have flourished in succession, and even those who enter village schools or travel afar to study invariably adhere faithfully to his enduring instructions without deviation." This demonstrates how his intellectual legacy endured, resonating through the ages.

III. THE OPERATION OF ZIYANG ACADEMY AND GUILD HALL

Since the academy and guild hall were integrated and mutually reinforcing, the management of Ziyang Academy inevitably incorporated commercial thinking and practices. Dong, Guifu noted that since its establishment, the academy had incurred significant expenses, initially running a deficit of 4,000 taels of silver. After subsequent expansions and renovations, the deficit had ballooned to 15,000 taels by his time. He observed: "The academy's annual rental income totals just over 4,300 taels, while expenditures for the biannual sacrifices and other expenses amount to no less than 2,000 taels, leaving a surplus of only 2,300 taels. This barely covers the interest on the

15,000-tael deficit, leaving the principal permanently uncovered" (Dong, 2019).

The academy's rental properties—such as ten shops at Xinnmatou, eighteen on the east side of Xin'an Street, and buildings along Shuixiang Lane on Taiping Street—generated an annual rent of 4,404 taels, closely matching Dong's figure. Fundraising through collective contributions or donations from benefactors over the years was another key revenue stream. The Hankou Ziyang Academy Records (Vol. 8) lists numerous donors, affirming that "the academy's completion relied on collective effort, and their names shall endure alongside the institution" (Dong, 2019).

According to Chen, Yue's research, such financing models had a 10-year return cycle with a 60% investment yield. Most donors were Huizhou natives, reflecting the interconnectedness of the academy, clans, and fellow provincials. The "operational process" involved investing in academy-related construction projects—whether renovations or new builds—and initiating collective fundraising campaigns as critical steps. Rental income from commercial properties often exceeded the academy's budgetary expenses, allowing investors to recoup partial principal plus interest annually, ultimately turning a profit after a decade.

Additionally, Chen, Yue analyzed land and rental contracts documented in the Hankou Ziyang Academy Records, identifying five characteristics of land rights: "the voluntary nature of contractual terms, the separable attributes of land and building rights, the stronger enforceability of land rights over building rights, the non-natural legal personality of property owners, and the close ties between urban landowners and local authorities" (Chen, 2021). This reveals that, compared to traditional land rights in feudal society, the academy's real estate holdings enjoyed relative autonomy. Property management thus emerged as the pivotal strategy for reversing the academy's financial losses. The subsequent growth of

sacrificial assets demonstrates that Ziyang Academy's approach to managing land and buildings—distinct from traditional academies reliant on farmland endowments and tuition—embodied innovative commercial principles.

However, during its construction and expansion, Ziyang Academy indeed encountered numerous land ownership disputes. First, in the 37th year of the Kangxi reign (1698), residents who had initially agreed to relocate and signed contracts later reneged on their promises. Then, in the 6th year of the Yongzheng reign (1728), the academy's managers planned to widen Xin'an Lane and construct a new dock, only to find the property rights maliciously seized and delayed in restitution. Both cases escalated into legal battles, requiring significant effort from the academy to resolve.

In the 53rd year of the Qianlong reign (1788), Bi, Yuan, whose ancestral roots were also in Anhui, was reappointed as the Governor-General of Huguang. Leveraging his connections, he strongly supported Ziyang Academy and even composed (or commissioned) An Appeal for the Renovation of the New Anhui Academy in Hankou. He further issued a public notice declaring the renovation a noble endeavor to honor Confucian values. Given Hankou's diverse and often unruly population, the notice warned against any intentional provocation, theft, or disruption of the academy's operations, stating, "All local militia, soldiers, and civilians are hereby notified: Should anyone dare to steal timber, bricks, or stones during construction or exploit this occasion to stir trouble, the merchants are permitted to report the offenders to the authorities for severe punishment without leniency. Let all heed this warning and comply." (Dong, 2019) Disputes over the academy's land rights—whether with residents or malicious actors—were frequent. Yet, operating with a merchant-guild mindset, the academy remained committed to social welfare, aiding fellow provincials and benefiting the broader community.

For instance, in August of the 49th year of Kangxi (1711), catastrophic fires broke out simultaneously in Wuchang and Hankou, with the latter suffering the worst damage—over 10,000 homes burned and countless casualties. Many survivors sought refuge in the academy, which managed to shelter and save thousands. Similarly, in June of the 5th year of Yongzheng (1727), a devastating flood breached the riverbanks, causing immense losses. The academy, built on higher ground, escaped severe flooding and housed displaced residents for months, even constructing temporary shelters.

Beyond disaster relief, with Bi, Yuan's approval, Wang, Hengshi integrated the academy's "water dragon (fire hydrant)" firefighting equipment into the official fire response system. He also hired 22 trained laborers—regularly paid despite their other occupations—to form a rapid-response firefighting team. These men underwent routine drills to ensure swift mobilization during emergencies, with clear reward and penalty regulations. This system became a model of efficiency, often being the first to deploy in crises, further solidifying the academy's role in social rescue and recovery efforts.

IV. ZIYANG ACADEMY AND URBAN MEMORY

The Ziyang Guild Hall (Academy), located on New Street, boasted an architectural layout rich in cultural symbolism. Its main structures included:

(1) Ancestral halls: The Hall of Reverence for the Way, living quarters, a spirit wall, a halberd gate, and the Pool of Striving.

(2) Pavilions and towers: The Imperial Library, Library Pavilion, Pavilion of Literary Glory, and Pavilion of the Star of Scholars.

(3) Halls and study spaces: The Banquet and Archery Pavilion, Dwelling Near the Sages, Qixiu Study,

Six Waters Lecture Hall, Hall of Solemn Respect, Pavilion of Aspiring to Learn, and the Studio of Singular Focus

Over time, the academy commissioned numerous literary works—inscriptions, odes, prefaces, and records—to commemorate its spaces. These included:

- Inscription for the Imperial Library
- Ode to the Imperial Library
- Preface to the Hall of Reverence for the Way
- Record of the Half-Acre Pond
- Account of the West Hall
- Preface to the Academy's Library Pavilion
- Record of the Banquet and Archery Pavilion
- Account of Qixiu Study
- Preface to the Hall of Solemn Respect
- Preface to the Pavilion of Aspiring to Learn
- Essay on the Studio of Singular Focus
- Record of the Merit-Praising Shrine
- Account of the Pavilion of the Star of Scholars

These texts, brimming with literary elegance, reflected the academy's cultural grandeur.

Following subsequent renovations and expansions, the complex grew to include donated structures—shopfronts, covered corridors, side chambers, seated towers, perimeter buildings, and enclosing walls. In the Daoguang era, Ye Tiaoyuan's Bamboo Branch Songs of Hankou captured the vibrancy of New Street: "Jing, Su, foreign, and Canton styles artfully arranged; Gilded and colorful, each more exquisite than the last; High eaves line the road, facing one another; for orderly splendor, none surpass New Street." The annotation clarifies: "Among commercial streets, this reigns supreme—the thoroughfare of the Huizhou Guild Hall." (Xu, 1999)

The Huizhou Guild Hall was none other than Ziyang Academy, and exiting its gates led directly to New Street. Lined with bustling shops and thronged by crowds of affluent customers, the street epitomized commercial prosperity. Ye, Tiaoyuan even employed hyperbolic flair to depict Hankou's mercantile frenzy—where "wheels

clashed and shoulders rubbed" in pursuit of profit—claiming: "This place never had true natives; nine parts merchants, one part common folk." His note adds that the so-called "one part common folk" were "merely registered migrants from elsewhere" (Xu, 1999). While factually exaggerated, this portrayal vividly conjures the era's commercial dynamism and omnipresent opportunities.

The architecture of the Guild Hall (academy), with its vermilion roof tiles and emerald-green glazed tiles, intricately painted beams, and carved pillars—whether in its grand halls, enclosing walls, soaring eaves, or majestic structures—often became a dazzling representative landmark of the city. When managed effectively and combined with social care and practical functions, these spaces could serve both utilitarian and touristic purposes, gradually evolving into iconic symbols of urban memory. Descriptions of such urban memories often highlight sensory richness: amidst teeming crowds and the ceaseless flow of carriages, one would visually encounter scenes of prosperity—ornate buildings and lavish attire; auditorily, the lively sounds of music, song, and merchant calls; while diverse culinary offerings provided gustatory and olfactory stimulation or delight. Sight, sound, smell, and taste—all were abundantly present.

As Hu, Xiaozhen observed, "Compared to rural areas, cities are marked by dense populations, crowded dwellings, vibrant economic activity, rampant consumerism, and a compressed sense of daily time—these surface-level urban-rural contrasts remain constant across eras... Ultimately, all sensory experiences shape the psychological traits of urban residents and their ways of perceiving the world. Naturally, the 'urban psyche' also reciprocally influences the city's character." (Hu, 2019) Ziyang Academy, as an urban landmark, fostered unique sensory experiences through its shops, storefronts, culinary delights, and bustling traffic—all of which coalesced into

an essential component of the city's collective consciousness.

From its initial proposal and construction to subsequent renovations, Huizhou merchants paid meticulous attention to the architectural details of Ziyang Academy. Specifications governed even the weight of city bricks and their laying technique (with particular emphasis on "mián qì" — solid masonry where each brick was laid flat). After years of careful stewardship, Ziyang Academy had become a defining landmark of Hankou, naturally attracting literati to compose poetry in its praise. As Tan, Zhaogui and Wang, Yao's research explicitly notes, such grand architectural complexes as Ziyang Academy—with their majestic scale, imposing presence, and opulent ornamentation—represented how "...the imprint of commercial economy became deeply engraved upon the architectural structures, streets, markets, and skylines of cities along the Han River, transforming into distinctive urban symbols. As natural representatives of commercial development in Han River cities, guild halls substantially reshaped both the physical and social spaces of these urban centers" (Tan & Wang, 2022). The flourishing commercial economy thus manifested itself in the architecture of guild halls and academies, molding urban spaces while simultaneously influencing collective urban memory. Through various written accounts and other recorded narratives, these memories have conversely acquired the power to reconstruct and redefine the very landscapes they describe.

Yet we must not overlook the profound emotional connection between people and the land within China's traditional academy system—a bond deeply intertwined with clan solidarity and social welfare. As reflected in urban memory, these academies often became sanctuaries during disasters, embodying their role as socially inclusive spaces that shared both fortune and misfortune, as exemplified by the previously mentioned cases of fire and flood relief. Beyond the visual spectacle of gilded splendor,

another "distinctive landscape" emerged from clan ethics, carrying even greater social welfare significance: the charitable cemetery. Established during the Qianlong era by Huizhou merchants to bury fellow provincials who died locally, these cemeteries were deliberately sited on prime land christened "Xin'an Righteous Burial Grounds". Contemporary records describe this "landscape narrative": "Stretching west to east in tiered rows and north to south in numbered burial sequences, each plot followed strict dimensions—five chi wide, eight chi long, and four chi deep. Two ledgers were maintained: one kept at Xin'an Academy, another at Yuhuang Temple in Shilipu."

Both Ziyang Academy (Xin'an Academy) and Yuhuang Temple maintained registries of the deceased, cataloged by burial numbers. By 1767 (the 32th year of Qianlong), over a thousand graves filled the grounds; by 1804 (the 9th year of Jiaqing), the overcrowded mounds necessitated expansion. This prompted fundraising to purchase land at Xujiawan, extending this tradition of social care—honoring the dead through dignified burials.

The academy's physical complex and its ancillary facilities collectively formed a cultural "landscape." Such landscapes served not only as landmarks but also as embodiments of ethical imperatives regarding life and death. Beyond cemeteries, other initiatives like the 1800 (the 5th year of Jiaqing) Water Dragon Decree—which positioned new firefighting equipment ("water dragons") at the centrally located academy while maintaining five existing units—demonstrated institutionalized compassion. Derived from the academy's ethos, facilities like orphanages, free lodges, and public docks all manifested its social welfare philosophy. Thus, when examining Ziyang Academy's landscape memory, we must foreground its "social care and praxis" dimension. Only through this lens can we fully appreciate the multilayered social significance embedded in this remarkable institution.

V. LESSONS FROM ZIYANG ACADEMY FOR CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITIES

Examining the present through the lens of history, the development and distinctive features of Ziyang Academy offer valuable insights for our modern era. As noted at the outset of this article, academies have a long evolutionary history, with their nature gradually adapting through different historical periods. It is well known that since the late Qing dynasty, China faced unprecedented crises from both foreign threats and domestic turmoil—what scholars call "the great transformation unseen in three millennia." Reformists proposed various solutions: some advocated adopting Western learning while maintaining Chinese foundations; others insisted on seeking answers exclusively from ancient wisdom. The debates raged over what should change, how to implement reforms (gradually or radically), and whether the priority should be national survival or intellectual enlightenment. Should modernization focus on naval power, political systems, Buddhist revival, or Confucian critique? Opinions diverged widely, but consensus emerged that China desperately needed transformation.

A prevailing agreement held that social change must begin with educational reform. This led to new academic systems like the year 1902's Renyin System (unimplemented) and the year 1904's Guimao System (considered the foundation of modern Chinese education). The transition from academies to modern schools and then to universities maintained knowledge transmission within institutional walls. Late Qing reforms aimed to popularize "education"—enlightening the masses, expanding schooling, and saving the nation" through universal literacy. Yet reality proved different. The new system, intended to make scholars of all citizens, remained limited in practice. Many who acquired basic literacy through schooling still lacked exposure to new ideas. Compulsory education standards struggled to achieve consistency and sustainability. As a result, numerous citizens outside

academia saw no connection between learning and livelihood—why pursue enlightenment when survival demanded all attention? Even graduates, as Cai, Yuanpei observed in his inaugural speech as Peking University president, often focused solely on textbooks, grades, and credits; mastering examination techniques to obtain degrees for employment, rather than pursuing genuine intellectual growth.

Thus, traditional academies were never entirely abandoned, as many contemporaries believed universities and academies could complement each other's strengths while extending education's reach into society to cultivate moral customs. A prime example is Tang, Wenzhi's establishment of an "academy-style school"—initially named Wuxi Academy of Chinese Classics in 1920, renamed Wuxi College of Chinese Studies in 1927 after official accreditation, and finally approved by the Ministry of Education in 1930 as the Private Wuxi Academy of Chinese Studies, dedicated to teaching and researching traditional Chinese learning. Alumni later recalled four distinctive features of the institution: moral cultivation, specialized text instruction, resonant recitation practices, and essay competitions (Chen, 2016). This legacy continues today as numerous universities establish collegiate systems—some drawing on historical models while adapting to modern academic structures, others preserving the essence while adjusting scale. As previously discussed, if universities can embody urban memory and cultural landscapes, academies certainly can too. While "historic" academies naturally fulfill this role, universities with historical roots can similarly establish collegiate institutions. Even ordinary educational institutions, without the prestige of elite universities, may create academies based on regional characteristics, cultural traditions, or connections to historical figures. As Dong, Guifu articulated in his "Stele Inscription on the Renovation of Hankou's Xin'an Academy": "I maintain that academies achieve three virtues through a single

institution: honoring predecessors to illuminate the Way, establishing lecture halls to encourage learning, and gathering compatriots to strengthen fellowship" (Dong, 2019).

From Ziyang Academy's model in Hankou to the broader history of Chinese academies, we can reconsider contemporary university-college relationships—whether using collegiate systems to supplement teaching and research or as platforms for academic exchange. By studying other universities' models through thorough investigation and aligning with institutional characteristics, today's universities might find inspiration—much as the Tang dynasty poet wrote, "Drawing from the lingering waves of poetry and ritual, we find joy in mutual refinement." This poetic vision of collaborative cultivation remains profoundly relevant for modern higher education.

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