

Confucian Figure Patterns in China's Traditional Residences

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Confucianism is the core value of Chinese culture, and its ideas—such as "family and country first," loyalty to China, filial piety to parents, and kindness to others—have been deeply rooted in the hearts of the Chinese people for thousands of years. For the ancient Chinese people, patterns reflecting Confucian thoughts were their favorite decorations for traditional residences. These patterns show the core Confucian virtues: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, trustworthiness, filial piety, fraternity, loyalty, integrity, shame, diligence, courage, respect, forgiveness, prudence, frugality, forbearance, friendship, kindness, and harmony. Many stories about Confucian sages, virtuous people, and their teachings in China's history have become the best materials for these residence decorations.

For example, there are patterns about Confucius (551 BCE – 479 BCE) and his disciple Yan Hui (521 BCE – 481 BCE) cooking porridge together, Gao Chai (521 BCE – ?) respecting the elderly and caring for his family, Confucius asking farmers for directions, and the "Six Arts" explained in *The Analects·Shu Er* (a classic Confucian book). The "Six Arts" refer to six basic skills that Confucian scholars in ancient China needed to master: etiquette (including philosophy, politics, and moral education), music (music, dance, calligraphy, and painting), archery (military skills), charioteering (driving skills), calligraphy (literature and history), and mathematics (science and business). Other famous stories, such as Yang Shi (1053 CE – 1135 CE) standing in the snow to wait for his teacher, Li Dong (1093 CE – 1163 CE) fighting against the Jin Dynasty to defend China, and quotes from Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism, are also common themes in residence decorations.

1. The "Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues" Patterns

The "Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues" are important moral standards in Chinese Confucianism. Confucius (551 BCE – 479 BCE), Mencius (372 BCE – 289 BCE), and Xunzi (313 BCE – 238 BCE)

all discussed the "Three Cardinal Guides," which refer to the relationships: the ruler guides his ministers, the father guides his sons, and the husband guides his wife. The "Five Constant Virtues" are benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness—five unchanging moral principles advocated by Confucianism.

These patterns are often expressed in interesting and easy-to-understand ways, using homophones (similar-sounding words) in Chinese:

- There are 3 large vats (the Chinese word for "vat" sounds the same as "guide") arranged horizontally or vertically, and 5 virtuous people or 5 cute children tasting wine (the Chinese word for "taste" sounds the same as "constant"). Sometimes, 5 scholars gather around one large vat to chat and taste wine.
- In some interesting designs, 3 vats are placed crookedly in a row. Zhong Kui (a mythical figure in Chinese culture who catches ghosts) and 4 ghosts are either tasting wine with bamboo ladles, hiding in the overturned vats, or drunk beside the vats—Zhong Kui laughs happily. This design uses homophones to imply the "Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues."
- Other patterns show imperial crowns (symbolizing the ruler), official hats and uniforms, or a prime minister holding a memorial tablet. Some show a minister kneeling before the emperor (reflecting "the ruler guides his ministers"), a son kneeling to listen to his father (reflecting "the father guides his sons"), or a husband reading/writing while his wife grinds ink or serves tea (reflecting "the husband guides his wife").
- Some patterns combine the Five Constant Virtues with a scholar feeding goldfish by a fish tank, or 5 literati with wine pots and cups, with a plaque carved with "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, trustworthiness" behind them. There are also figures representing each virtue: a Confucius-like scholar bowing (benevolence), a Guan Gong-like general on horseback (righteousness), a Dharma-like monk bowing respectfully (propriety), a Zhuge Liang-like scholar shaking a fan (wisdom), and an emperor giving instructions (trustworthiness).



Fig.1 Qing Dynasty (1636 CE – 1912 CE) · Wood Carving: Five adults and children surrounding large vats, implying the "Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues."

2. The "Standing in the Snow at Chengmen" Pattern

This pattern comes from *History of the Song Dynasty-Biography of Yang Shi*. Yang Shi (1053 CE – 1135 CE) was a scholar from Jiangle, Fujian Province, China. He loved studying and traveled around to find good teachers. In spreading Cheng-style Neo-Confucianism, he gradually formed his own school of thought, known as "Guishan Neo-Confucianism."

One winter, Yang Shi and his friend You Zuo went to Songyang Academy at the foot of Junji Peak in Dengfeng City, China, to visit their teacher Cheng Yi (1033 CE – 1107 CE). It happened that Cheng Yi was resting, so the two men waited outside the door. The weather was extremely cold, and snow covered everything, but Yang Shi stopped You Zuo from waking their teacher several times. When Cheng Yi woke up, he found two "snowmen" outside the door. He was deeply moved and taught Yang Shi wholeheartedly, passing on all his knowledge to him.

The patterns usually show: Yang Shi and You Zuo standing in front of a thatched cottage covered with heavy snow and ice; or the two men standing quietly outside the door while Cheng Yi naps on a bed by a warm brazier inside; sometimes they stand at the gate pavilion or the open space in front of the main door. Some patterns even show them standing outside a screen, while Cheng Yi dozes at his desk.

This pattern teaches people that to gain true knowledge and make progress, besides studying hard on their own, they must respect their teachers and be pious in learning. Yang Shi became a model of respecting teachers and academic knowledge in China, and this story has become a traditional virtue of the Chinese nation. It also tells people that only by being polite and modest can we keep improving and achieve success.



Fig.2 Ming Dynasty (1368 CE – 1644 CE) · Colored Painting: Yang Shi and You Zuo standing under the eaves in the snow.

3. The Zhu Xi Patterns

Zhu Xi (1130 CE – 1200 CE) was a famous Neo-Confucianist, thinker, philosopher, educator, and poet in China's Song Dynasty (960 CE – 1279 CE). He is known as the "great master of Confucian Neo-Confucianism" and the "synthesizer of Neo-Confucianism." His ancestral home was Wuyuan County, Huizhou Prefecture (now Wuyuan County, Jiangxi Province, China), and he was born in Youxi, NanJian Zhou (now Youxi County, Fujian Province, China).

He is the only person who was not a direct disciple of Confucius but was enshrined in the Confucius Temple, ranking among the Twelve Philosophers in the Dacheng Hall (the main hall of the Confucius Temple). His Neo-Confucianist thoughts had a profound influence on China, becoming the official philosophy of the Yuan (1271 CE – 1368 CE), Ming (1368 CE – 1644 CE), and Qing (1636 CE – 1912 CE) dynasties. His book *Annotations on the Four Books* became the official textbook and the standard for the imperial examination (the ancient Chinese examination system for selecting officials).

The patterns often show scenes such as Zhu Xi questioning heaven, the poem "All flowers are blooming in spring," a half-acre square pond with flowing water (a metaphor for knowledge), the "Ehu Debate" (a famous academic debate he participated in), reading in four seasons, Zhu Xi in an academy, and his self-portrait. Auxiliary patterns include his works such as *Annotations on the Four Books*, *Explanation of the Taiji Diagram*, and *Explanation of the Tongshu*, which are placed on desks or antique shelves. His courtesy names (used in ancient China) such as Zhonghui, Huian, and Huiweng are often signed in the patterns.



Fig.3 Qing Dynasty (1636 CE – 1912 CE) · Wood Carving: Zhu Xi compiling the Four Books and Five Classics in his study.

4. The Zhu Bolu Patterns

Zhu Bolu (1617 CE – 1688 CE), also known as Master Zhu's Family Motto, was a famous Neo-Confucianist and educator in the late Ming Dynasty (1368 CE – 1644 CE) and early Qing Dynasty (1636 CE – 1912 CE) in China. Based on Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, he advocated combining knowledge with practice and wrote dozens of textbooks for teaching. His most famous work, *Master Zhu's Family Motto*, clearly explains the ways of self-cultivation and family management, advising young people to be diligent and thrifty in managing their families and to be content with their lot.

The patterns often show the full text of the family motto, or popular excerpts such as "Rise at dawn... Every bowl of porridge and every meal should remind you of the hard work behind them; every thread and every strand should make you cherish the resources." These words are written in different calligraphy styles and decorated with auxiliary patterns on the main wall of the living room, the core position of the study, or made into large screens or shrines in traditional Chinese residences.

The purpose of these patterns is to teach students that "self-cultivation," "family management," and "learning lies in moral character, and career lies in loyalty and filial piety" are the lifelong goals of life.



Fig.4-1 Qing Dynasty (1636 CE – 1912 CE) · Colored Painting: Zhu Bolu teaching his family motto to students.



Fig.4-2 Qing Dynasty (1636 CE – 1912 CE) · Wood Carving: A father teaching his son to get up at dawn to clean the courtyard.

5. Patterns of the Integration of Three Religions

Folk tradition features a popular residential decorative pattern embodying the confluence of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Originating in the Northern and Southern Dynasties, this pattern took initial shape in the Tang and Song dynasties, and evolved into a mainstream social ideology during the Ming and Qing dynasties. It constitutes a vital part of ancient Chinese philosophical history and traditional culture.

The three religions complement and interact with one another, integrating their doctrines while reaching the same destination via different paths. Confucianism long held a dominant ideological role, governing the ethical and moral norms of the Chinese people. Ancient people revered the sages of these three faiths, and decorated residential spaces with composite patterns combining Confucian saints, Buddhist Bodhisattvas, and Taoist immortals.

Water Outlet Settlement Patterns of the Three Religions

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, such patterns prevailed in cultural settlement zones, water outlet spaces, residential dwellings, academies and shrines across Fujian, Guangdong, Jiangxi and other regions. In the ancestors' perception, Confucianism represented essential life philosophy, Taoism embodied the essence of health preservation and spiritual cultivation, and Buddhism fulfilled the mortal longing for liberation from suffering and attainment of bliss.

In these patterns, Confucian elements occupy the primary position, supplemented by Buddhist and Taoist motifs. The composition depicts a landscape basin imbued with Confucian culture, dotted with architectural complexes of the three religions: the Jixia Academy, Pavilion of Guanyin, Kuixing Tower, covered corridors and folk residences are arranged in a well-proportioned integrated space. The design aims to create an ideal living realm of the integrated three religions, praying for divine blessing for human prosperity, freedom from illness and disaster, longevity, good fortune, and harmonious well-being.

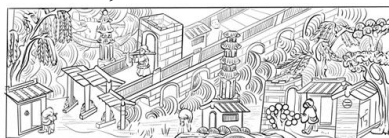


Fig.5-1 Wood Carving of the Qing Dynasty: Integrated Architecture of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism

6. Figural Patterns of the Integrated Three Religions

The Buddhist precept of no killing, Confucian emphasis on filial piety and human ethics, and Taoist tenets of *Tao follows nature* and *unity of humanity and heaven* are perfectly fused in these patterns. Combined motifs embody Confucian core values: reverence for heaven, ritual propriety, inherent goodness, perseverance, emulation of virtuous role models, ancestor worship, filial piety to kin, loyalty, trustworthiness, benevolence and righteousness. Adorning folk residences with such integrated patterns stood as a remarkable innovation of ancient people.

Harmonious Unity Pattern (All-Embracing Harmony)

The pattern portrays Laozi, Confucius and Sakyamuni sitting on natural mountain rocks and wooden platforms amid mountains and forests, engaging in philosophical discussion. It also draws on *Records of the Origin of Yiluo School* by Zhu Xi of the Song Dynasty: 'Master Mingdao sat all day like a clay sculpture, yet treated all people with complete amiability and harmony.'

The most representative version was created by a Ming-dynasty painter, who ingeniously combined a Confucian scholar, a Buddhist monk and a Taoist priest to form the *Harmonious Unity* pattern. It symbolizes that all schools derive from one origin, all doctrines belong to one school, the three religions merge into one, and all hundred schools share the same rationale, reflecting the ideological pursuit of cultural integration and harmonious coexistence.

Visually, the pattern resembles a cross-legged Maitreya Buddha with a beaming, carefree countenance, hands folded in salute. On the left, a Taoist priest leans close to Maitreya's cheek, holding sutra scrolls with a rounded back and hair bound by a spherical ornament; on the right, a Confucian scholar in traditional square headwear holds Confucian classics. The three figures blend seamlessly into an interdependent, harmonious whole. Viewed from left, center and right respectively, the images of Confucius, Sakyamuni and Laozi can be seen, embodying the *Unity of Three Sages*. Inscriptions on the stele praise: 'Buddhism for spiritual enlightenment, Taoism for physical preservation, Confucianism for ethical clarification' and 'Three religions as one, nine schools from a single source'.

Another common motif depicts Confucius, Sakyamuni and Laozi sitting together to discuss scriptures amid wilderness gardens, sturdy pine trees or under the Bodhi tree. It conveys the lesson that people should learn spiritual cultivation from Buddhism, physical refinement from Taoism, and worldly wisdom from Confucianism.



Fig.6-1 The prototype of this line drawing derives from *Harmonious Unity*, painted by Emperor Xianzong of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Jianshen (reigned 1465–1487 AD). Though appearing as a single figure in the painting, it actually depicts the representative figures of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism embracing one another. With a rounded and integrated composition, it symbolizes the confluence of the three religions and harmonious coexistence.



Fig.6-2 Colored Painting of the Qing Dynasty: Sages of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism Discussing Doctrines Together

7.Wang Yangming Themed Patterns

Wang Yangming (1472, Chenghua 8th year of the Ming Dynasty) was born in Yuyao, Zhejiang Province. A rare statesman, strategist and thinker proficient in both literary and military arts in Chinese history, he achieved illustrious feats and established a distinctive philosophical system.

As a great master of the School of Mind, Wang Yangming advocated *the unity of knowledge and action*, holding that establishing doctrines, accomplishing meritorious deeds and cultivating moral integrity are all forms of spiritual practice. He was the ultimate synthesizer of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Leading a life of hardships and tribulations, he upheld virtue and righteousness, possessing both literary grace and military strategy with extraordinary achievements. His School of Mind exerted far-reaching influence, earning him the accolades 'Equal to Confucius, Mencius and Zhu Xi' and 'Master of a Hundred

Generations'. He is acclaimed for attaining the pinnacle in cultivating virtue, accomplishing merits, and establishing teachings. The core tenets of his philosophy — *Mind is Principle*, *Extending Innate Knowledge*, and *Unity of Knowledge and Action* — are renowned nationwide.

Wang Yangming themed patterns are widely applied in folk residences: full texts of the *Heart Sutra* or inscriptions of his core philosophies adorn central screen walls, studies and halls, as well as large folding screens and shrines. Other depictions show him cultivating himself amid mountains, forests, bamboo, streams and peaks, wearing a square pacification headscarf and a wide-sleeved jade-patterned robe; sitting cross-legged in plain robes with the *Heart Sutra* resting on his lap; enlightening himself in a cave inscribed with 'Unity of Knowledge and Action' on the wall; sitting alone by mountain streams as depicted in *Moon Meditation Painting*; drafting *Instructions for Practical Living* in formal Confucian court attire; dressed as a Ming court official with red outer robes and a ceremonial tablet in hand; or commanding warships to suppress bandits and secure national stability.

These patterns deliver profound lessons: a narrow mind is the root of misfortune, while an open heart is the gateway to blessing; unhappiness stems from neglecting one's inner self. They encourage people to open their hearts, uphold the values of mutual assistance, love, respect, harmony and unity, adhere to the core principle of *the unity of knowledge and action*, and pursue self-perfection.

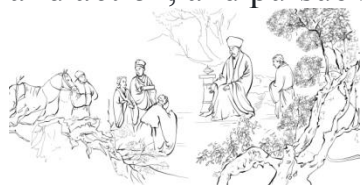


Fig.7-1 Colored Painting of the Qing Dynasty: Wang Yangming Lecturing in the Mountains

Combined Patterns of Eight Buddhist Treasures and Eight Taoist Treasures

Also known as *Eight Treasures Celebrating Eternal Spring*. The pattern features an alternating arrangement of the Eight Buddhist Symbols — the Dharma Wheel, Conch, Precious Umbrella, Canopy, Lotus, Treasure Vase, Golden Fish and Endless Knot — and the Eight Taoist Treasures: Fisherman's Drum, Sword, Ruyi Scepter, Coin Pattern Bamboo Basket, Gourd, Double Happiness Ornament, Yin-Yang Plaque and Flute.

Centered on either Buddhist or Taoist Eight Treasures, the composition is surrounded by seasonal flowers. The pattern implies an eternal spring for both Buddhism and Taoism throughout the year, symbolizing vitality,

perpetual hope, continuous auspiciousness, freedom from illness and disaster, blessings for the whole family, and universal prosperity.



Fig.7-2 Qing Dynasty Pattern: Combined Ritual Implements of Buddhism and Taoism

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