

A Treatise as Refined as the Spring Winds and as Pure as Autumn Water

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The pinnacle of Chinese culture is elegance and refinement, the essence of five millennia of civilization and Chinese spirit, an art form imbued with beauty, yet cultured in its romanticism. Chinese refinement is grand and profound, and has continued to reinvent itself throughout the ages. Its everlasting qualities reveals how it has blended the new and old throughout the ages, surviving wars and turmoil, and witnessing the rises and falls, all without yielding. Moreover, the ability of Chinese culture to continue along the path of refinement and elegance is not limited to its language, but instead extends to encompass all forms of creation. Therefore, although architecture is thought to be but a lesser art, there exists within it wondrous grace and refinement. That is the reason why true architects strive industriously to create works that would rise above mere craftsmanship, while inheriting the legacy of the refined. They are charged with the responsibility of carrying on this precious cultural heritage.

As the standard-bearer of his generation, Kris Yao has deeply influenced Taiwan's contemporary cultural landscape over the past thirty years, and his impact has since spread far and wide across the Taiwan Strait. Yao's architecture has become important benchmarks in both modern Chinese architecture and in the continued formation of modern Chinese culture. Therefore, to understand Kris Yao, it would be unwise to limit oneself to the confines of Taiwanese architecture; one should examine his work within the modern transformation of Chinese civilization in order to fully demonstrate the underlying historical value of his works.

Beginning in the late Qing Dynasty, facing the turmoil of the invasion of western civilization, Chinese civilization was forced to initiate a difficult transformation to modernity. A century of change brought vicissitudes and hardship. The political divide of 1949 splintered Chinese civilization as the two sides of the Taiwan Strait went their separate ways in regards to modernization. Those who crossed over to Taiwan were able to preserve the hierarchy of traditional Chinese culture. This enabled traditional

“refined culture”, which is an amalgamation of “elite values”, to flourish in the Taiwanese society.

The orientation of the grassroots and the elite exacerbated the underlying differences in cultural perspectives between Mainland China and Taiwan over the past six decades. Taiwanese society held on to the core values of refinement and kept its cultural values from collapsing under the attack of the foreign, using refinement to adapt to the times, linking the new with the old while maintaining elegance.

The modern refinement of the traditional Chinese culture bred in Taiwanese society is reflected by the literature of Pai Hsien-yung and Chiang Hsun, the films of Hou Hsiao-hsien and Ang Lee, the dances of Lin Hwai-min, the plays of Stan Lai, and the architecture of Kris Yao. They have demonstrated alternative visions and possible paths for the thoughtful modernization of Chinese civilization. For their peers in mainland China, these works, though not necessarily grand, can be viewed as alternatives for the modern transition of Chinese culture.

Yao’s contributions to cultural refinement is epitomized by the taming of the “red-haired wild horse” from the West – in this case, modern Western architecture. Architectural forms and vocabulary are transformed in accordance to the core values of traditional Chinese culture and re-organized into Yao’s unique refined and cultured spaces. Under Yao, the refinement of Chinese culture is rendered by employing the concepts of “harmony” from Confucianism, “transcendence” from Taoism, and “stillness” from Buddhism. Through this, Yao is able to absorb and utilize modern Western architectural forms while lessening the bluntness of their brute force.

Confucian harmony influences the foundation of Yao’s spatial designs. Harmony eliminates contradictions, avoiding the forced regimentation of hyper-efficient, complex spaces and unified logical forms that modern architecture tends to impose on the user. Under his precise and rational orders, Yao is able to moderate redundancy to create free, comfortable spaces. His balanced approach is free of the extremism in Western architecture, exuding instead a relaxed, human warmth. Arrogance is not present in Yao’s buildings, nor are there complicated or enigmatic concepts too difficult for the layperson to understand.

Taoist transcendence is expressed as freedom in Yao's designs. This type of freedom is different from the aggressive freedom in contemporary Western architecture, which asserts individuality and destroys in order to create. Yao's freedom is passive, just "a dip in a pool of clear green water" without ripples. Traces of his restrained freedom is evident in the subtle variant-script bay window in the Lanyang Museum, the almost indiscernible shifts between symmetry and asymmetry of the overhanging wall on the west side of the Water Moon Monastery, and the ever-changing patterns in the wooden lattice windows in the Wuzhen Theatre. Even in his bolder works, such as the free flowing Palace Museum Southern Branch in Chiayi and the New Taipei Art Museum, Yao still maintains a certain delicate balance between freedom and order. Transcendence is like flowing water, blissful, but not abusive; free, but not indulgent. Kris Yao's architecture transcends craftsmanship into the realm of art, from art to Tao, balancing yin and yang creating lively, exuberant refinement and grace at the behest of rational order.

Buddhist stillness as a temperament is unconsciously revealed in Yao's designs due to his personal adherence to Buddhist philosophy. Not to mention the Buddhist temples such as Luminary Buddhist Center and the Water Moon Monastery, even in bustling creations such as the Hsinchu High Speed Rail Station and the Wuzhen Theatre, Yao exhibits a high degree of restraint in his expression of substance. His intentions are presented subtly, filled with compassion for the illusions of a fleeting life, paired with a hint of reluctant to build for what is merely ephemeral. Kris Yao's realm of refinement is in between the Risshu and the Zen schools of Buddhism, or rather, a taste of Zen in Risshu. A fleeting moment of youth and beauty creates eternity within the transient, just like the lone image of the Kelti Center in the Xinyi District; it may appears very close, but is actually far away; it seems to move but is still and quiet; it looks real but is illusory. A fashionable veil cannot hide the original face of the immovable; even though many turns of tides have come and go, a gap as thin as the cicada's wings is still hard to cross.

Qing Dynasty poet Deng Shiru once wrote: "like the spring wind, a gracious person can hold many things / like the clear water in autumn, a piece of writing won't be contaminated by dust"; and as mentioned in the Doctrine of the Mean, "all living creatures can grow together without causing each other harm, and paths can run

parallel without interfering”. The spring wind encompasses all living creatures and all parallel paths in harmony and with great tolerance. Kris Yao’s architecture integrates modern Eastern and Western architecture and fuses Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism; he has abandoned the complicated for the simple and omitted the contrived for candor.