

A Preliminary Study on the Cultural Value and Protection of Ancient Town Architecture in Fencheng, Shanxi

Yihua Xu ^{1,2,*}, Junjie Niu ^{1,2}

¹ School of Geographical Sciences, Taiyuan Normal University, Jinzhong 030619, China

² Fenhe River Basin Scientific Development Research Center, Jinzhong 030619, China

*Corresponding Author

Yihua Xu

1379733194@qq.com

Received: 25 April 2026 / Accepted: 5 May 2026 / Published online: 6 May 2026

Abstract

This paper examines Fencheng Ancient Town, an ancient architectural complex located in Shanxi Province, China, through an analysis of its architectural characteristics, cultural significance, and conservation strategies. The town is distinguished by its long history, favorable natural environment, and rich cultural traditions. Its spatial layout is organized around the Drum Tower as the central core, forming a well-structured urban pattern. The principal architectural forms exhibit distinctive features, including the decorated front wall and the stage of the City God Temple, the screen wall and lattice doors of the Confucian Temple, as well as structures such as examination halls and pre-school towers, all of which embody profound cultural meanings. Both the overall layout and the individual architectural elements reflect the integration of local agrarian traditions and Confucian culture. In response to current challenges, such as the decline of traditional customs and inadequate building conservation, this study proposes a series of targeted strategies aimed at promoting the sustainable preservation and development of Fencheng Ancient Town.

Keywords: Fencheng Ancient Town; Architectural Form; Cultural Value; Conservation Recommendations

1. Introduction

With the designation of numerous of ancient building complexes as heritage sites, increasing attention has been given to their role in strengthening cultural identity, preserving architectural heritage, and promoting traditional art. The report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasized the need to promote the creative transformation and innovative development of excellent traditional Chinese culture. Before transformation and development, we must do relevant preparatory work, namely, understanding the development

history of a certain culture and clarifying its development background, which will help promote the completion of the historical task of "dual innovation". Faced with this situation, the current qualitative description of ancient building complexes mainly focuses on well-known building complexes such as the Forbidden City and its central axis in Beijing (Que, 2022), and the Confucius Temple in Qufu (Wu & Wu, 2019). Research on building complexes in Shanxi Province is also more focused on various courtyards related to Shanxi merchants (Hu & Xie, 2020) and the changes in the Huangcheng Xiangfu and its surrounding environment (Huang, 2021), which have profound historical value at a specific historical moment. The main content of the research is the analysis of the characteristics of the buildings themselves and the development and protection of the buildings (Shi, 2024; Collection of Chinese Local Chronicles, 2006). This paper analyzes the cultural background of the existing buildings in Fencheng Ancient Town and the cultural customs of the area from the perspective of architecture, explaining the relationship between these contents and the geographical environment.

2. Overview of the Ancient City

2.1. Historical Evolution

Fencheng Ancient Town is located in Fencheng Town, Xiangfen County, Shanxi Province today, on the eastern foot of Gushe Mountain in the Lüliang Mountains. According to the Guangxu edition of Taiping County Annals, its original site was located in Jincheng Village, at the southern end of Xiangfen County and the border of Xinjiang County, Yuncheng City (Xue, 2014). Fencheng's history can be traced back to the Tang and Yu periods. The Yongzheng edition of the "Taiping County Annals" records: "Taiping was the capital of the ancient Emperor Yao. Since the Yu, Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties, it has belonged to Jizhou. During the Spring and Autumn period..., it belonged to Wei. From the Qin and Han dynasties onwards, through the Wei and Jin dynasties, the Later Wei dynasty, the Sui dynasty, the Tang dynasty, the Song dynasty and the Yuan dynasty, for several decades and hundreds of years, it belonged to Hedong, Jiangjun, or Pingyang, and its affiliation changed many times (Bao & Feng, 2011)." Until January 1914, during the comprehensive adjustment of the administrative divisions and place names in Shanxi Province, since there were already three county towns in the country named "Taiping", the ancient place name "Fencheng" was reused. Thus, the ancient Taiping County became today's "Fencheng Town". Fencheng Ancient Town was formerly known as "Taiping County". In 633, the 7th year of the Zhenguan era of the Tang dynasty, the county seat of Taiping County was moved here. After that, Fencheng Ancient Town was able to develop and has a long history, lasting for 1321 years. The construction time of the buildings that can be seen now is mainly concentrated in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

2.2. Natural Environment

Fencheng Town is located in the southwest of present-day Xiangfen County, 18 kilometers from the county seat. It borders Xiangning County to the west, Xijia Township of Xiangfen County to the east, Jingmao Township of Xiangfen County to the north, and Xinjiang County and Zhaokang Town of Xiangfen County to the south. The town covers a total area of 127 square

kilometers. The town proper, also known as Taiping Ancient Town, is located at 110°16.315'E, 35°48.883'N, measuring 332 meters wide from east to west and 655 meters long from north to south, covering an area of 22 hectares.

The Fencheng County Gazetteer states: "Gushe Mountain stands to the west, Chongshan Mountain forms a screen to the east, and the Fen River flows through the middle, making the terrain rugged and secure." Specifically, this refers to the area west of Fencheng Town being the Gushe Mountain range, the main ridge of the Lüliang Mountains, and to the east being the Chongshan Mountain range, a branch of the Taiyue Mountains. The Fen River flows through this region, its banks being flat and forming part of the Linfen Basin. Huoshan Mountain is adjacent to the north, and the Hui River to the south forms a protective barrier around Fencheng Town. Such town layout is in line with the traditional Chinese architecture of relying on mountains and water, and its site selection is completely in line with the typical Chinese architectural tradition.

Fencheng Ancient Town is located in a climate zone that belongs to the semi-arid and semi-humid monsoon climate zone and the temperate continental climate zone. Its typical characteristics are that spring is sunny and warm, summer is hot and rainy, and winter is cold and dry. The four seasons are distinct, spring and autumn are relatively short, and rain and heat occur at the same time. There are many sunny days and few rainy days throughout the year, and the sunshine time is sufficient. The lowest temperature is usually in January, which is the time of the lowest temperature of the year; the temperature is highest in July and August, and the frost period is relatively long.

The annual and seasonal variations in precipitation are very large. There are many rainstorms in July, August and September every year, and floods are likely to occur. The northwest wind is strong in spring and winter, and the southeast wind is relatively mild in summer and autumn. Many features of Fencheng Ancient Town's architecture are fully adapted to the above-mentioned climate characteristics.

2.3. Human Environment

2.3.1. Running Drum Cart

Shanxi is one of the birthplaces of Chinese drum art, and it is also one of the regions in China with a wide variety of drum music and a high level of artistic development (Li, 2012). In Xiangfen, where Fencheng is located, a very important folk activity is called "Running the Drum Cart." Legend has it that it originated in the Spring and Autumn Period. To escape attacks from political enemies, the Marquis of E of Jin built a fortified village (formerly known as "Egongbao") in what is now Weicun, where he stationed his troops for rest and recuperation. Therefore, the "drum" and "cart" in "Running the Drum Cart" refer to the war drum and war chariot of that time. Later, during the Tang Dynasty, Yuchi Gong was enfeoffed there, where he trained soldiers and cultivated land, adopting a policy of combining military and agricultural labor, which further developed "Running the Drum Cart." Today, Running the Drum Cart no longer has a war-related attribute and has gradually been passed down through generations as a folk custom. The "Running the Drum Cart" in Weicun has been preserved to this day, continuously developing and evolving. However, the basic structure of the drum cart has not changed significantly, basically maintaining

its original appearance from thousands of years ago. But due to the loss of its war-related attributes and the increasing emphasis on daily entertainment, the rules surrounding Running the Drum Cart have become increasingly refined and strict. For example, “There are five drum carts in Weicun, located in five different directions within the village. People from different directions can only pull the drum cart belonging to their assigned direction and cannot pull the same cart in different directions (Kang & Zhang, 2020).” Each drum cart has a different pattern, and during the competition, villagers pulling drum carts from different directions wear different colored clothing.

The “drum cart running” tradition itself has a long history and profound meaning. It has been inherited and developed over thousands of years and will continue to be passed down through generations. On the one hand, this custom has been successfully declared a national intangible cultural heritage and is protected by policy. More importantly, it needs to be continuously developed and passed down by the people who play the drums. Local activities include the “Drum Cart Culture Festival.” Furthermore, it is imperative to deepen the understanding and appreciation of this activity among local young people.

2.3.2. Xiangfen Taige (a type of traditional folk performance)

Since the mid-Qing Dynasty, the term "Taige" has been used in various regions including Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Jiangxi, Beijing, Shanghai, Fujian, Hunan, Hubei, Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, as well as parts of Hebei, Shanxi, and Henan (Lu, 2012). Because the specific causes and performance styles differ from place to place, each has its own unique characteristics. The Taige performance in Xizhonghuang Village, Fencheng Town, is particularly distinctive.

Taige is less a performance and more a complete ritual, integrating martial arts, acrobatics, drama, and dance, possessing a unique and surprising performance style. Furthermore, the music, costumes, and props used in the performance are subject to strict formal constraints.

There are different accounts of the origin of the Taige performance in Xizhonghuang Village. Among the widely circulated accounts, the main origin times and events include the "Hundred Families Opera" of the Han Dynasty and the "Peacock God" sacrifice of the Ming Dynasty. Regardless of its origin, what we know now is that the current Fencheng Taige performance already had its prototype in the Han and Tang dynasties, and its function changed from welcoming gods and ancestors to the current entertainment activities (Cui & Zhao, 2024). From the perspective of welcoming gods and ancestors, Taige performance shows the Chinese nation's awe of nature and its national imprint of not forgetting its roots.

Nowadays, as an entertainment activity, it has gradually shown a departure from its original sacred and inviolable function, and has truly entered the bloodline of every local person's life in a more vivid form. As a result, the educational and social normative significance derived from Taige activities has become more significant.

A typical problem at present is that Taige, as a national intangible cultural heritage activity, cannot always organize a complete team for performance. Large-scale performances can only be held during the "Thirty-Sixth Day of the Lunar New Year" and the New Year. This problem is enough to show that the inheritance of Taige performance faces a rather arduous challenge. "No

successors" is a predicament faced by the inheritance of many traditional activities in my country.

3. Architectural Features of the Site

According to historical records, the old town site of Fencheng Ancient Town was 655 meters long from north to south and 332 meters wide from east to west, covering an area of 22 hectares. The overall structure was centered on the Drum Tower, with buildings radiating outwards in four directions. To the west were the Confucian Temple, the Imperial Academy, the Examination Hall, and the School Pagoda; to the northwest were the City God Temple, the Wei Hou Temple, the Nuwa Temple, the Guanyin Hall, and granaries; to the east were the county government office, various government offices, the Guan Yu Temple, and the prison. In total, there were as many as 17 streets and alleys (see Figure 1).

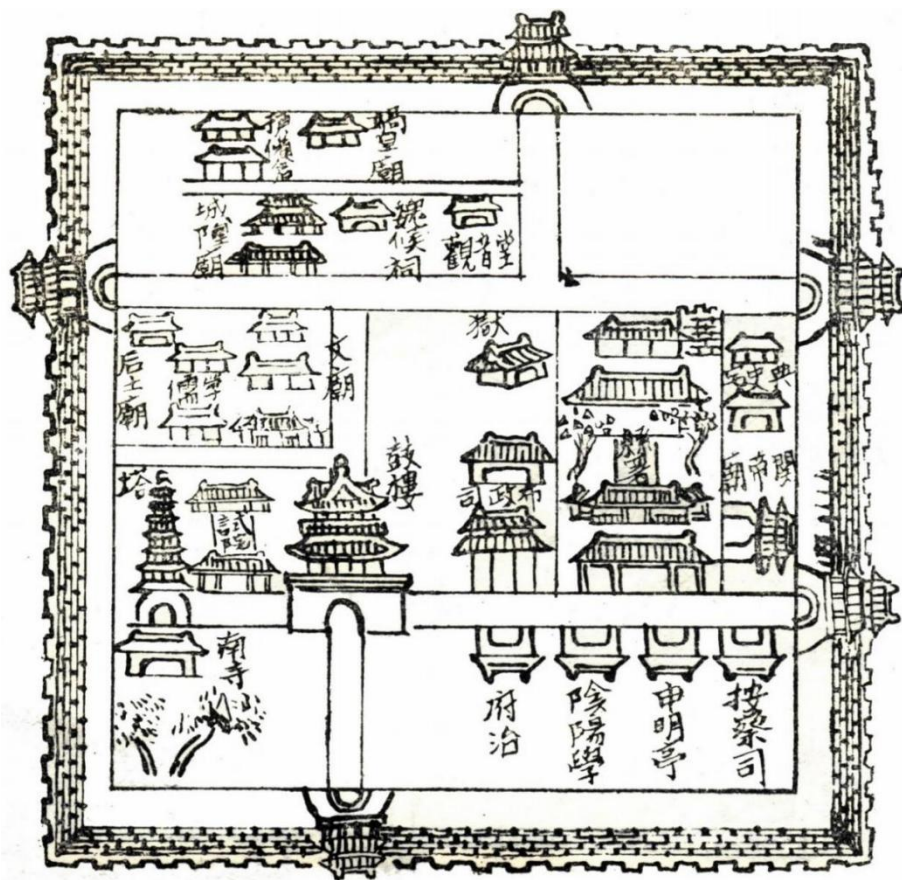


Figure 1. Layout map of the ancient city of Taiping County (from the Qing Dynasty Guangxu edition of the Taiping County Gazetteer)

Fencheng Town has a long history, with more than ten temples built during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. The distribution of residences and temples is interwoven, and the town's layout has been well preserved to this day. The specific street layout and building distribution mainly retain the pattern from the late Ming dynasty. It shows traces of the ancient Chinese urban ward system and the layout of shops along the streets after the Song dynasty, truly a unique example of surviving county-level architecture in my country. Because Fencheng Town is located

in the Fen River Valley, its wide and flat terrain has resulted in a well-organized and orderly layout. The basic components of an ancient Chinese city include city walls for defense, temples for education, government offices for administration, shops for commerce, and residences. Fencheng Town encompasses all these elements and is further divided into several unevenly spaced small blocks by Gulou Street, making its land use extremely compact.

4. Main architectural forms and characteristics of the site

Now, when you go to Fencheng Ancient Town, you can see that the two largest groups of buildings preserved in the town are the Confucian Temple and the City God Temple. These two groups of buildings are located on the north and south sides of an alley. The author will mainly introduce these two groups of buildings, as well as some local buildings such as the Xueqian Pagoda and the Examination Hall, and explain their historical background and cultural value. The spatial layout of Fencheng Ancient Town is not a random accumulation of buildings, but a structured system shaped by social hierarchy, ritual practices, and everyday life. Centered on the Drum Tower, the overall spatial organization reflects a form of central-place structure that integrates administrative, religious, and residential functions. This spatial pattern demonstrates how traditional settlements in northern China were organized to balance governance, ritual activities, and local livelihood.

Unlike highly formalized imperial architectural complexes, the layout of Fencheng Ancient Town exhibits a certain degree of flexibility. However, the prominence of key structures, such as the City God Temple and the Confucian Temple, indicates their dominant role in organizing social and cultural space. These buildings function not only as physical landmarks but also as symbolic centers that structure collective memory and social order.

4.1. City God Temple

On the east and west sides of the alley, there is a wooden archway, which is inscribed with "Jiancha Archway (see Figure 2)" and "Yizhen Archway" respectively. Such decorative signs as archways often have the function of strengthening and defining the entrance space (Zhang, 2020). In addition, the meaning of the two archways is closely related to the City God Temple. The City God has always occupied an important position in the folk culture of my country. He is regarded as the spiritual core of a city and maintains the safety of the city and the stability of the residents' lives (Fang et al., 2008). As a strategic location fought over by military strategists since ancient times, the city god in the town could serve as a "protector" during wartime and as a "supervisory god" in peacetime, and was worshipped by the people of the town. In the second year of Hongwu (1369), Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang bestowed titles upon the city god (Li & Wang, 2018) and ordered officials at all levels to take an oath at the city god temple in their place of office after taking office, and to make a pledge to ensure that they were honest and upright and loved the people like their own children.



Figure 2. Jiancha Fang

4.1.1. The Painted Screen

In front of the gate In front of the main gate of the City God Temple, there is a painted screen (see Figure 3). In the middle of the screen is a round Qilin. The "Qilin screen" or "Greedy screen" was built in the early Ming Dynasty during the Hongwu period. The screen is located in front of the City God Temple, which once again highlights the simple legal system of the City God Temple (Hu, 2012). On both sides are inscribed a couplet with the philosophical meaning of life and death: "Man transforms into things and things transform into man, the changes are endless. He is born and dies, and he is born and dies without end." A pair of stone flagpoles are erected on both sides of the screen, on which are inscribed "On behalf of Heaven, we proclaim the transformation of the country and protect the people. The Emperor inherits the power to show good and punish evil." Before even stepping into the temple gate, one is deeply impressed by the solemnity of the gate.



Figure 3. Screen wall at the main gate of the City God Temple

4.1.2. Passing-Through Stage

Inside the gate of the City God Temple, about one meter away, there is a "passing-through stage" facing north (see Figure 4). The foundation of the stage is made of stone. The wooden structure supports the main framework. Because it is a "passing-through stage", it is only set up when a theatrical performance is needed. Otherwise, it serves as a passageway. According to existing data, this type of stage construction began to appear in the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty. By continuously moving the relative position of the stage southward, it eventually formed a close connection with the building, making the temple more secular (Zhang & Liu, 2001).

4.1.3. Offering Hall

From the passageway inwards, one is greeted by a square, cross-shaped, hipped-roof building with a depth of one bay—the Offering Hall of this City God Temple. The Offering Hall was where sacrifices were offered to the City God, and its glazed tile roof, ridge, eaves, and gable ridges are all well-preserved.

4.1.4. Main Hall

Adjoining the Offering Hall and being the highest building in the temple grounds is the south-facing Main Hall. The Main Hall is a seven-bay, corridor-less hall, five bays wide, with a glazed tile roof that has been preserved to this day, showcasing the superb glazing techniques of ancient craftsmen. The bell and drum towers of the City God Temple are located on the east and west sides of the Main Hall. The bell is rung at sunrise, and the drum is sounded at sunset. The double-eaved hipped roofs of the bell and drum towers are beautifully designed and are treasures of northern Chinese wooden architecture.



Figure 4. Pass-through stage

4.2. Confucian Temple

Separated by an alley from the City God Temple and located southeast of it, lies another well-preserved and grand building—the Confucian Temple. Its first courtyard is shaded by towering cypress trees, hence the local name "Cypress Courtyard." Legend has it that this complex was first built in the Tang Dynasty. The Confucian Temple complex perfectly embodies the symmetrical distribution along a central axis. Facing south, the complex consists of a screen wall, the Lingxing Gate, the Pan Pool, the Ji Gate, and the Dacheng Hall, arranged from south to north.

4.2.1. Screen Wall

Directly opposite the main gate of the Confucian Temple stands a straight screen wall made of blue bricks. A couplet is inlaid on both sides of the screen wall: the first line reads, "The Way is uniquely illustrious, its virtues are universally appreciated," and the second line reads, "There is no second place to honor, the poems of the sage are revered throughout history." Following the typical structure of a complete screen wall, the screen wall in front of the Confucian Temple is composed of three parts: the base, the body, and the top. The base is a meticulously crafted "Sumeru pedestal," highlighting the temple's importance in the area. The body is empty, but other screen walls in the ancient town of Fencheng often feature auspicious motifs like the Qilin (a mythical creature), suggesting that this screen wall originally had some designs, which were likely destroyed later. The top is a double-sloped roof with tiled ridges and animal figures.

4.2.2. Lingxing Gate

The Lingxing Gate (see Figure 5) of the Confucian Temple, according to records, was built during the Zhengde period of the Ming Dynasty.



Figure 5. Lingxing Gate



Figure 6. Dismounting Stele

It is a three-bay, four-pillar, three-story stone archway with a hipped roof imitating a wooden structure. Both the inner and outer sides of the gate are supported by four stone pillars, each with a reclining lion encircling its base. The inner side of the Lingxing Gate is inscribed with "Golden Sound and Jade Vibration". The first documented record of it is in Mencius, which interprets it as "sage" (Li, 2010), which is also to praise the contributions of the sage Confucius. There is a stone tablet in front of the Lingxing Gate, which is inscribed with "Civil and military officials, soldiers and civilians, etc., dismount here" (see Figure 6). This also reflects the respect for Confucius and the symbolic role of etiquette. In addition, it can also serve the practical value of tethering horses.

4.2.3. Pan Pond

The Pan Pond (see Figure 7) can be regarded as a representative of local official schools. It originated in the State of Lu during the pre-Qin period (Deng, 2017). During the Northern Song Dynasty, a large number of Pan Ponds were built. At that time, the shape of the Pan Pond was mostly square. Although most of them were located in front of the Minglun Hall, there was no written rule on the location of the Pan Pond. Even in the Yuan Dynasty, the regulations were not unified and the rectangular shape was still the main one. Until the middle and late Ming Dynasty, there were clear regulations on the location of the Pan Pond, namely, the Pan Pond was built inside and outside the Lingxing Gate. In addition, the shape of the Pan Pond was changed from the original rectangular shape to a semi-circle or a near semi-circle shape.

The Pan Pond in the Confucian Temple in Fencheng Ancient Town is located inside the Lingxing Gate. When people of all kinds enter the Lingxing Gate and see the Pan Pond, they will

feel infinite respect and admiration in their hearts, thus laying a solemn and dignified spiritual foundation for entering the Dacheng Gate for worship (Xiao & Cao, 2012). Its shape is semi-circular, and the crescent shape also represents the idea that learning has no end (Li & Wang, 2024). The main building material is brick, and the banks are surrounded by stone railings. There are ten balusters on each side of the railings, and stone lions are carved on the top of the balusters, each with its own shape. On the railings, there are plant patterns with auspicious meanings such as peonies and lotuses. In addition, there is a "Pan Bridge" above the Pan Pond, also known as the "Zhuangyuan Bridge".



Figure 7. Pan Pond and Zhuangyuan Bridge

4.2.4. Dacheng Gate

Passing through the Lingxing Gate and the Zhuangyuan Bridge over the Pan Pond, the Dacheng Gate comes into view (see Figure 8). Dacheng Gate is also called "Ji Gate," meaning a gate with halberds erected. In ancient times, emperors would use halberds as gates when they traveled. Unlike military halberds, gate halberds were a type of ceremonial weapon, and their number was directly proportional to the official rank (Cui, 2014). The Dacheng Gate of Fencheng Ancient Town was first built in the Ming Dynasty. It is a gable-roofed building with glazed tiles on the top, three bays wide and four rafters deep. There is a side gate on each side of the Ji Gate, for pedestrians to use outside of special times. The main gate is only opened during occasions such as grand ceremonies and sacrifices.

On the east and west sides of Dacheng Gate, there are two shrines: the Shrine of Famous Officials and the Shrine of Local Worthies. The Shrine of Famous Officials is used to enshrine honest and upright officials who served in Taiping County, while the Shrine of Local Worthies enshrines people from Taiping who served elsewhere and local gentry.



Figure 8. Dachengmen

4.2.5. Dacheng Hall

After entering Dacheng Gate, you can see the main building of the Confucian Temple - Dacheng Hall (see Figure 9). At the same time, this hall is also the most magnificent building in the entire Fencheng Ancient Town architectural complex. It is said that it was first built in the Tang Dynasty, and the existing buildings are from the Ming Dynasty. The hall is five bays wide, and the top is a double-eaved hip roof covered with glazed barrel tiles. The ridge is also decorated with glazed tiles and carved with strange flowers and beasts. There is a platform in front of Dacheng Hall, and a porch on the platform. The porch is a double-eaved hip roof. According to records, there were originally statues of Confucius and his four sages in the hall. After the "Supreme Sage Teacher" was honored during the Jiajing period of the Ming Dynasty, the statues were changed to memorial tablets (Li, 2010). There are nine rooms on each side of Dacheng Hall, which are also places to worship the sages and scholars.



Figure 9. Dacheng Hall

4.3. Examination Hall and Xueqian Tower

Walking forward from the Lingxing Gate of the Confucian Temple, you will see the Examination Hall of Taiping County, the place where scholars of all dynasties took the imperial examinations. Built in August of the seventeenth year of the Daoguang Emperor's reign, it had a main hall at the rear and a platform at the front, with 15 examination rooms. Bricks were used as tables and benches in the rooms, accommodating a total of 900 examinees. After the examination hall was built, a wall was constructed, enclosing the original Wenfeng Tower, thus transforming it into the Xueqian Tower. This tall building, visible from the Lingxing Gate of the Confucian Temple (see Figure 10), was located within the examination hall's wall and in front of the Confucian Temple, hence the name "Xueqian Tower" (meaning "Pagoda Before the Scholars").

The Wenfeng Pagoda itself is a byproduct of my country's imperial examination system. When Buddhism and Confucianism met in East Asia, Chinese culture embraced and integrated all reasonable foreign elements. As a pagoda, the Wenfeng Pagoda was originally a product of Buddhism. In Shandong, the birthplace of Confucianism, it was compatible with Confucianism. Combined with the most traditional Chinese feng shui, it eventually formed the Wenfeng Pagoda with Confucian connotations (Zhu & Yang, 2026).

The Wenfeng Pagoda in Fencheng Ancient Town is a nine-story pagoda, 23 meters high, standing majestically on the south side of the Confucian Temple. The pagoda is a hollow structure, with the entire space from the first to the ninth floor being interconnected, without any stairs for climbing.



Figure 10. Xueqian Tower

5. Status, Characteristics and Value of the Site

5.1. Cultural Significance of Fencheng Ancient Town

Fencheng Ancient Town is actually a collection of buildings from the Jin, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. The history of the town can even be traced back to the Warring States period. Its long history and well-preserved state are unparalleled.

5.1.1. Agricultural Culture/Central Plains Culture

Fencheng Ancient Town is located in the lower reaches of the Fen River, the second largest tributary of the Yellow River. It shares the same land with the ancient Dingcun Site. As an important site of human distribution in ancient my country, the Dingcun Site is where China's agricultural civilization originated. The earliest wisdom of the Chinese people, the earliest agricultural development, the earliest record of time, and even the observation of the nascent Twenty-Four Solar Terms (Kanjumba, 2026) are all here. The solar terms still play a guiding role in agricultural production in this land. Generation after generation has lived and thrived here. Although the time of the existing buildings can only be traced back to the Yuan and Qing Dynasties, in the uninterrupted bloodline inheritance, time has become a simple symbol, and customs are the memories that we can see with our own eyes.

5.1.2. Confucian Culture

The Confucian Temple buildings in the two major building complexes of Fencheng Ancient Town embody the profound influence of Confucian culture on the Chinese land in every brick and tile.

Confucianism, as the creator of the ideology that maintained social stability in traditional Chinese society (Ge & Li, 2026), embodies loyalty, filial piety, benevolence, and righteousness as the backbone of every Chinese soul. This has been the source of the Chinese nation's enduring strength throughout history, even under foreign rule. This influence manifests itself in behavioral habits, written symbols, and, of course, architecture.

There are over two thousand Confucian temples of varying sizes throughout China and even the world. While the thoughts of Confucius endure, the widespread promotion of Confucian temples is not only due to the immense influence of Confucian thought itself, but also largely attributable to the "respect for Confucius and Confucianism" by successive Chinese emperors. Furthermore, the consistency in the scale and architectural style of these scattered temples demonstrates that the cultivation of moral character, such as propriety, righteousness, integrity, and a sense of shame, was not merely empty rhetoric in traditional Chinese feudal society.

5.2. Architectural Significance of Fencheng Ancient Town

5.2.1. Overall Architectural Layout Perspective

Fencheng Ancient Town itself is not a complex of buildings that served a specific social function. The existing buildings within it are simply those necessary for the daily lives and production of the local residents, including some residences. During the author's research, these residences were not open to the public; only general observations were made from the outside. It is evident that these residences were built around the same time as the Confucian Temple and City God Temple, which were highlighted earlier. This demonstrates that the architectural complex was closely aligned with the actual lives of the local people.

Therefore, the overall structure and layout of the complex are not as strict and orderly as those of the Confucian Temple. However, it is clear that the buildings related to the guardian deities and Confucius are the largest in the entire complex. Through the study and analysis of the overall architectural layout, we can understand the daily life and festive atmosphere of ordinary Chinese people hundreds of years ago.

5.2.2. Detailed Architectural Design

Architecture is inherently designed to meet people's daily needs, so the most important design principle must be prioritizing human needs. For example, in Fencheng Ancient Town, located in a typical monsoon climate, flat roofs are not typically built. Furthermore, Xiangfen, "backed by mountains to the east and bordered by Gushe to the west," enjoys a guaranteed timber supply due to its climate and topography. This ensures that wood remains the primary building material in Fencheng Ancient Town. While overall rainfall is not insignificant, it is concentrated, preventing even wooden buildings from succumbing to excessive moisture and allowing them to retain their former glory and splendor even centuries later.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the life cycle theory of tourist destinations, Fencheng Ancient Town is currently in the exploratory stage and, overall, has not yet been commercialized. One major reason is that the location of Fencheng Ancient Town is closely intertwined with the lives of the local people; it is not an independent place completely detached from their daily lives. Therefore, further commercial development of the ancient town is needed. However, precisely because it has not been commercially developed, Fencheng Ancient Town is well-preserved, with no obvious signs of human damage. Some buildings, however, did not survive artillery fire. So, overall, the problem with Fencheng Ancient Town lies in the fact that the damage to some buildings was not repaired in a short period, making subsequent restoration more difficult. Overall, the preservation of the ancient buildings is relatively complete.

Beyond the architecture itself, the charm of Fencheng Ancient Town lies in its unbroken customs and traditions passed down through history. However, with economic development and social progress, these customs and traditions face enormous challenges. People's aesthetic demands for literature and art are increasing, but old traditions cannot keep pace with the times. The issue of their inheritance is urgent. While updating performance styles and engaging the younger generation are possible, their implementation faces many difficulties. Besides local artisans taking responsibility for our cultural heritage, the local government needs effective policies and measures to leverage the power of the public and society to revitalize and ensure the enduring transmission of traditional culture. I will offer some suggestions on the protection and tourism development of certain buildings:

6.1. Research Findings

This study has systematically examined the architectural characteristics and cultural significance of Fencheng Ancient Town through the analytical lenses of spatial organization, ritual function, and cultural symbolism.

The results demonstrate that the spatial structure of the ancient town is organized around the Drum Tower, forming a central-place pattern that integrates administrative authority, religious activities, and residential life. This spatial configuration reflects a localized governance model in which political, cultural, and everyday functions are closely intertwined.

At the level of individual architectural complexes, the Confucian Temple represents a highly structured ritual space defined by axial alignment and hierarchical progression. The sequential arrangement of architectural elements—such as the Lingxing Gate, Pan Pond, Dacheng Gate, and Dacheng Hall—constructs a ceremonial pathway that regulates both physical movement and symbolic meaning. This spatial logic embodies Confucian principles of order, hierarchy, and moral cultivation, demonstrating how architecture serves as a medium for ideological expression.

In contrast, the City God Temple illustrates a more flexible spatial system characterized by the integration of sacred and secular functions. The coexistence of ritual space and performance space within the same complex reflects the dual role of the temple as both a site of religious belief and a center of communal interaction. This highlights the importance of architecture in mediating between collective belief systems and everyday social practices.

Furthermore, the Examination Hall and Xueqian Tower embody the institutional and symbolic significance of the imperial examination system. Their spatial presence reflects not only functional requirements but also the cultural value placed on education, meritocracy, and social mobility. The incorporation of elements such as the Wenfeng Pagoda also indicates the interaction between Confucian ideology, folk beliefs, and geomantic principles, revealing the hybrid nature of the cultural landscape.

Overall, the study reveals that Fencheng Ancient Town constitutes an integrated cultural landscape in which architectural space operates simultaneously as a physical environment, a ritual framework, and a carrier of cultural meaning. The relationship between spatial form and social structure is therefore central to understanding the historical and cultural value of the site.

6.2. Policy Recommendations

Based on the above findings, this study proposes the following recommendations for the conservation and sustainable development of Fencheng Ancient Town.

First, conservation strategies should prioritize the integrity of spatial organization rather than focusing solely on individual buildings. As demonstrated in this study, the cultural significance of the site lies in the relational structure between architectural elements, particularly the axial system and ritual sequences of the Confucian Temple. Therefore, preservation efforts should aim to maintain the overall spatial logic and not merely restore isolated structures.

Second, heritage conservation should emphasize the preservation of ritual function and cultural symbolism. Architectural elements such as gates, stages, and ceremonial spaces derive their significance from their use within cultural practices. Without the continuation of these practices, the meaning of the architecture risks being reduced to purely visual or aesthetic value.

Third, the City God Temple should be managed as a dynamic cultural space that balances preservation and social vitality. Given its role in integrating religious belief with community activities, moderate cultural activation—such as the revival of traditional performances and temple fairs—can enhance its relevance while maintaining its historical authenticity.

Fourth, heritage management should integrate both tangible and intangible cultural resources. The findings indicate that the value of Fencheng Ancient Town extends beyond its physical structures to include local customs, festivals, and performance traditions. Effective conservation therefore requires coordinated efforts involving local communities, cultural practitioners, and policy institutions.

Fifth, tourism development, if pursued, should be carefully aligned with the spatial structure and cultural logic identified in this study. Rather than introducing externally driven commercial models, development strategies should reinforce the existing cultural identity of the site. Excessive commercialization or spatial alteration may disrupt the historical continuity and undermine the authenticity of the cultural landscape.

Finally, environmental management should be incorporated into conservation planning. As observed during field investigation, external environmental pressures, such as traffic-related pollution, pose potential threats to the long-term preservation of the site. Coordinated planning

measures are therefore necessary to ensure both cultural and ecological sustainability.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study is primarily based on qualitative analysis, including field investigation and architectural interpretation. While this approach provides in-depth insights into spatial and cultural relationships, it may benefit from further methodological expansion. Future research could incorporate quantitative spatial analysis, GIS-based modeling, or comparative studies with other traditional settlements to deepen the understanding of regional architectural patterns and cultural landscapes.

In addition, further interdisciplinary research integrating architectural history, cultural geography, and heritage studies would contribute to a more comprehensive framework for analyzing and preserving similar historical settlements.

Author Contributions:

Conceptualization, Y. X and J. N.; methodology, Y. X and J. N.; investigation, Y. X and J. N.; resources, Y. X and J. N.; data curation, Y. X and J. N.; writing—original draft preparation, Y. X and J. N.; writing—review and editing, Y. X and J. N.; visualization, Y. X and J. N.; supervision, Y. X and J. N. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding:

This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement:

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement:

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement:

The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author(s).

Conflict of Interest:

The author declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Bao, L., & Feng, Q. (2011). Folk customs in southern Shanxi: Cultural inheritance and sustainable development of the running drum cart. *Sports Research and Education*, 26(5), 84–86.
- Collection of Chinese Local Chronicles. (2006). Taiping County Chronicle (Originally published 1882).

- Cui, A., & Zhao, H. (2024). Architectural art of Pingyao City God Temple. *Shanxi Architecture*, 50(19), 10–15.
- Cui, S. (2014). Feng Shui architecture of Wenfeng Pagoda. *Talent and Wisdom*, (11), 246–249.
- Deng, L. (2017). Space and education: Spatial formation and educational implications in Confucius Temples. *Journal of Henan University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 57(5), 132–139.
- Fang, Z., Wu, C., & Zhao, J. (2008). Dialectics of “Eight Treasures Qilin”. *Journal of Fujian Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, (6), 105–108.
- Ge, M., & Li, Y. (2026). Research on the sustainable development of traditional village residential dwellings in Northern Shaanxi, China. *Buildings*, 16(2), 380.
- Hu, J. (2012). A cultural interpretation of the sound of metal and jade. *National Arts*, (4), 75–82.
- Hu, W., & Xie, Y. (2020). The spatial evolution mechanism of rural residential scenic environments in Shanxi Province. *Arid Zone Geography*, 43(6), 1603–1611.
- Huang, Z. (2021). Spatial layout design of architectural art in characteristic ancient villages in Guangxi. *Architectural Economics*, 42(5), 157–158.
- Kang, B., & Zhang, Z. (2020). Taige and related folk performance forms. *Drama Art*, (1), 39–48.
- Kanjumba, W. C. (2026). Designing a resilient space ecosystem: Advanced technologies, sustainability metrics, and human-centric operations. In *AIAA SCITECH 2026 Forum*. American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics.
- Li, B. (2012). The running drum cart in Weicun Village, Xiangfen, Shanxi. *Journal of Shanxi Normal University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 39(S2), 40–42.
- Li, H. (2010). Cultural implications of the Pan Pond in Confucius Temples. *Academic Exploration*, (2), 116–121.
- Li, H., & Wang, J. (2018). Spatial characteristics of traditional Shanxi theater architecture. *Sichuan Drama*, (7), 32–35.
- Li, Y. (2010). Taosi Observatory: The earliest astronomical observatory in the world. *Studies in the History of Natural Sciences*, 29(3), 259–270.
- Li, Z., & Wang, M. (2024). Spatial characteristics and elements of ancestral temples in Fencheng Ancient Town. *Architecture and Culture*, (8), 94–95.
- Lu, C. (2012). Decorative themes and cultural significance of ancient Chinese architecture. *Journal of Tongji University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 23(1), 27–36.
- Que, W. (2022). Two descriptions of the layout of the Forbidden City complex in Beijing. *Studies on Ancient Capitals of China*, (1), 93–97.
- Shi, M. (2024). Protection and cultural tourism development of ancient rural buildings. *Seismic Engineering and Reinforcement*, 46(5), 203.
- Wu, P., & Wu, W. (2019). Architecture, book collection, and other aspects of the Kuiwen Pavilion of the Confucius Temple in Qufu, Shandong. *Journal of the National Museum of China*, (5), 114–124.
- Xiao, J., & Cao, K. (2012). Architectural layout and ritual space in local Confucian temples during the Ming and Qing dynasties. *Architectural Journal*, (S2), 119–125.
- Xue, L. (2014). *Fencheng Ancient Town*. China Architecture & Building Press.
- Zhang, C. (2020). The hierarchy and expression of City Gods in the Ming and Qing dynasties. *Journal of Nankai University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, (3), 157–172.

Zhang, Y., & Liu, L. (2001). A study on the Pan Pond. *Ancient Architecture and Garden Technology*, (1), 36–39.

Zhu, K., & Yang, R. (2026). The syncretism of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism and its impacts on Chinese educational traditions: Evidence from Zhu Xi. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Advance online publication, 1–13.

License: Copyright (c) 2026 Author.

All articles published in this journal are licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). This license permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are properly credited. Authors retain copyright of their work, and readers are free to copy, share, adapt, and build upon the material for any purpose, including commercial use, as long as appropriate attribution is given.