

Reshaping Cultural Memory: The Chinese Calligraphy Stone Gallery as a Model for Cultural Regeneration in Memorial Spaces

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Abstract

This paper examined how the Chinese Calligraphy Stone Gallery (CCS Gallery) functioned as a model for cultural regeneration in memorial spaces. Based on theoretical perspectives on cultural memory and collective identity, the research studied how space design was merged with the elite culture of literati calligraphy to rethink cultural stories and strengthens Chinese cultural confidence. Through embedding Confucian values intermingled with Taoist values within its architectural as well as landscape planning, the CCS Gallery not only conserved diachronic masterpiece calligraphies but reconstructed a lively collective memory among Malaysian Chinese too. A qualitative case study methodology including spatial analysis, content analysis of stone inscriptions, as well as interviews with key players uncovered that the gallery's re-imagined memorial space constructs a Confucian merchant identity. The findings represented a template for heritage conservation as well as the rejuvenation of culture memory within multicultural urban setting.

Keywords: *Cultural Regeneration, Cultural Memory, Confucian Merchant, Literati Calligraphy, Spatial Design.*

Introduction

Memorial spaces contain latent potential as dynamic hubs for cultural expression. Through the interaction of atmosphere and natural elements, memorial spaces can form dynamic networks of memory [1]. In this research, the Chinese Calligraphy Stone Gallery (CCS Gallery), a project by Nirvana Group Malaysia was carefully examined. Rooted in the Group's long-standing commitment to cultural renewal and the pursuit of a value-driven enterprise model—one that emphasizes "respecting tradition while innovating tradition"—the Gallery embodies a vision of cultural revitalization through architectural expression [2]. The idea for the Gallery emerged in 2008, following advice from cultural consultants, as part of a broader effort to enrich the company's cultural identity and contribute to national self-strengthening through heritage innovation. While the Gallery draws inspiration from the centuries-long history of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, this history includes migration and postcolonial assimilation policies that fragmented cultural memory [3], which moves beyond commemoration by reimagining memorial park as a living cultural space. In bringing together features such as Jiangnan courtyard, Anhui MaTou Qiang (horse-head walls), and literati calligraphy from various dynastic traditions, the CCS Gallery synthesized these broken stories through a single collective identity for the Malaysian Chinese. This coming together is not about looks but about beliefs because it made a shared identity for a "Confucian merchant" that goes beyond place and is based on the life of people living away from their homeland.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural Memory

Cultural memory, emerges through shared symbols, narratives, and practices that bind groups to their past. In diasporic communities like Malaysia's Chinese—descendants of migrants from Fujian,

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Guangdong, Hainan, and other provinces—cultural memory is inherently fragmented, reflecting the diverse regional origins and interrupted histories of its people. The CCS Gallery intervenes by spatially reassembling these fragments: Jiangnan’s scholar-garden aesthetics, Anhui’s merchant-class architecture (MaTou Qiang), and northern China’s calligraphic traditions are curated into a cohesive whole. This process is reflective of Halbwachs’ theory that collective memory is 'spatialized' by material spaces to allow for groups to rebuild identity in spite of historical disjunction [4].

Moreover, cultural memory is not simply about the conservation of remains but is an active process whereby it is interpreted and recontextualized. In the CCS Gallery, the selected inscriptions and calligraphic works function as material media through which historical narratives are conveyed across generations. By arranging these works within a carefully designed spatial context, the gallery transforms itself into a "textual chronoscope". In this way, cultural memory is repeatedly transmitted and rejuvenated, and thus the heritage of the diasporic community remains accessible and dynamic in response to historical interruptions and everyday challenges.

Literati Calligraphy as a Cultural Symbol

Literati calligraphy has long symbolized Chinese culture, blending aesthetic beauty with deep philosophy. According to Gao, more than just art, Literati calligraphy conveyed scholars’ values—morality, intellect, and self-cultivation—while reflecting Confucian, Taoist thought through brushwork [5]. Literati calligraphy represents the convergence of culture, philosophy, and art—timeless, adaptable, and continuously inspiring across generations.

Methodology

Data Collection

This research employs a qualitative case study approach, drawing on multiple sources to offer a comprehensive analysis of the CCS Gallery:

Spatial Analysis. Detailed examination of the gallery’s architectural layout and landscape design, with an emphasis on how traditional elements (e.g., Jiang Nan courtyard configurations) are reinterpreted in a modern setting. Its courtyard layout comprises approximately 18 interconnected structures, categorized into five key elements: ancestral temples, pavilions (ting), memorial arches (PaiLou), stone bridges, and colonnades.

Content Analysis. Systematic evaluation of stone inscriptions and calligraphic works to identify recurring themes, stylistic elements (see table 1), and the evolution of calligraphic forms from ancient to contemporary contexts (see table 2).

Table 1. Content Category of the Ancient Tablet Inscriptions

NO.	Content Category	Classification Basis	Example and Total Inscriptions
1	Cultural Memory and Identity Formation	Records of political events, local governance, social order, and public affairs	C09, C12 — Total: 26 pieces
2	Confucianism and Religious Syncretism	Focus on the implementation of Confucian rituals and integration with other religions	C14 — Total: 13 pieces
3	Literati Culture and Calligraphy Aesthetics	Expression of literati spirit, poetry and calligraphy arts, and calligraphic theory	C21 — Total: 27 pieces
4	Ethnic/Cultural Interaction and Transformation	Emphasis on cross-regional and cross-ethnic influences, frontier expansion, and cultural exchange	C25 — Total: 17pieces
5	Modern Transformation and Innovation	Modern transformation, innovation, and interdisciplinary practices of traditional carving	C79 — Total: 15 pieces

Table 2. Ancient tablet inscriptions reflected the Calligraphically Evolution

Historical Period	Calligraphically Evolution	Elected calligraphy works

Shang (ca.1600– 1066 BC) and Western Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1066 – 771 BC)	Oracle Bone Inscription	Total 6 (C1-C6)
Qin Dynasty (221 –207 BC)	Lesser Seal Script and official script	Total 4(C7-C10)
Han Dynasty(206 BC – AD 220)	Clerical script became the official writing script in the Han dynasty.	Total 8(C11-C18)
Wei , Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties (220 – 589)	The Development of Regular Script, Running Script and Cursive Script	Total10(C19-C28)
Sui, (581 – 618) Tang,(618 – 907) and Five Dynasties (907 – 960)	The Cradle of Regular Script and Cursive Script	C79 — Total: 15 pieces
Song Dynasty (960 – 1279)	Emergence of Personal Creative Styles	Total12(C44-C55)
Yuan(1271 – 1368)and Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644)	Revival of Ancient Styles	Total 7(C56-C62)
Modern times	Assimilation of the Past for a New Rendition	Total21(C78-C98)

Expert Interviews. Through interviews, we were able to have a good understanding of the concept and cultural imperatives behind the CCS Gallery. While our committee of professionals made several study trips to the Stele Forest at Xi’an and the Han Garden Stele Gallery at Kaifeng to ensure that stele selection, carving methods, and spatial configurations were faithful to the originals. Two concurrent work streams drove the project: on the one hand, the construction crew broke ground at the Feng Shui preferred location at Taoyuan Ancient Town, incorporating mountain peaks into the garden, redirecting streams, and closely working with Chinese craftsmen on stone materials and inscription processes; on the other, the advisory committee painstakingly screened 138 steles—managing content authentication, copyright negotiations, and line-by-line textual authentication, all in a quest for perfection. According to Tan, two fundamental ideals kept cropping up repeatedly: man harmonizing with nature [6]. The former is seen in the Jiangnan courtyard style, horse-head walls, and serpentine waterways to generate a harmonious, nature conformist environment with brick, wood, and stone. The second is seen in curatorial practices that merge Confucian ethics.

Scope and Limitations

This study examined the development of the CCS Gallery and its influence on cultural memory during the first decade of the 21st century. While it provides valuable insights into the gallery’s spatial and symbolic strategies, the research is constrained by the evolving nature of cultural identity among Malaysian Chinese, as well as the inherent challenges in translating nuanced Chinese cultural concepts into English.

Findings and Discussion

Spatial Storytelling and Architectural Design

The imaginary Jiangnan water town recreated in the CCS Gallery embodies the theme of “harmony between humanity and nature” through its traditional riverside architectural forms. The table 3 shows that the Architectural Structures has symbolic meaning.

Table 3. Architectural Structures and Cultural Significance

Architectural Element	Symbolic Meaning
Ancestral Temples	Symbolize familial ethics and Confucian rituals, emphasizing reverence for ancestry and lineage.

Pavilions	Serve as spaces for rest and contemplation, reflecting the Taoist philosophy of “following natural rhythms.”
Memorial Arches	Highlight social morality and historical memory, underscoring Confucian emphasis on hierarchical order.
Stone Bridges	Connect humans with aquatic landscapes, metaphorically representing the Taoist balance of yin and yang.
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Unity of Heaven and Humanity in Feng Shui Design

The core concept of “unity of heaven and humanity” (Tian Ren He Yi) is central to the gallery’s design, we will analyze from different aspect to show that the spatial layout follows the rhythms of nature, allowing architecture and landscape to coexist in harmonious dialogue.

Materials and Construction. Brick, wood, and stone are used as primary materials, with timber frameworks dominating the structures, blending natural and humanistic elements.

Orientation and Layout. Buildings adopt a south-facing orientation with ample spacing to maximize sunlight and scenic views. The arrangement of “backed by mountains and facing water” aligns with Feng Shui principles for optimal energy flow (qi) and auspicious symbolism.

Ecological Aesthetics. The interplay between architecture and natural landscapes conveys the ecological wisdom of “harmonious coexistence among heaven, earth, and humanity.” The Gallery serves as a living memory place where cultural legacy is preserved.

Design Details and Symbolism. The gallery’s meticulous attention to spatial balance reflects the core philosophies of both Confucianism and Taoism. South-facing layouts, traditionally associated with “receiving heavenly blessings,” symbolize prosperity and good fortune. The integration of mountains and water embodies the Taoist principle of Dao Fa Zi Ran— “following the way of nature.” Meanwhile, the use of symmetry and contrast echoes Confucian ideals of order, harmony, and equilibrium.

Reconstructing Cultural Memory Through Literati Calligraphy Tradition

All cultures have traces of memory [7]. Elite culture of calligraphy is just a kind of cultural memory, a kind of knowledge, a kind of wisdom, a kind of spirit of philosophy, a technique system. The curated collection of stone inscriptions plays a pivotal role in bridging past and present. I would suggest that the selected masterpieces have constructed the cultural memory from the key observations include:

Diachronic Presentation

By displaying calligraphic works that span from ancient oracle inscriptions to modern interpretations, the gallery constructs a layered narrative that highlights the evolution of Chinese characters and calligraphic styles. This diachronic approach reinforces continuity and reaffirms the enduring value of traditional culture.

98Ancient tablet inscriptions reflected the Calligraphically Evolution. The inscriptions on ancient tablets echoed the evolution of Chinese calligraphy. In the Qin era, unification of the script led to the development of the standardized Small Seal Script. The shift from Small Seal Script to Clerical Script represents not only a technological advancement in calligraphy, but also the start of a new era shaped by centralized political control. This transformation left a lasting mark of a 'unified culture' and became a core part of Chinese identity. The progression from Clerical Script to Regular Script shows how writing evolved from a practical tool into a form of artistic expression—an important step in the development of calligraphy that also fueled the Chinese pursuit of a refined, scholarly spirit. Later, the move from Regular Script to Running Script reflects the traditional Chinese belief that ‘writing carries the way’, capturing the personal emotions and style of the calligrapher. The freedom and expressiveness of Running Script continue to inspire cultural creativity while deepening a sense of pride and connection to Chinese heritage.

The continuation of literati tradition in Malaysia. Local inscriptions on tablets documented pieces by 37 scholars who were born and active in Nanyang from 1874 to 1940. The pieces represent the ongoing literati tradition in Malaysia. At this time, there was also a group of artists and scholars migrating to Nanyang, and there is even a selection by Xu Beihong, whose influence toward calligraphy

development in Penang was immense. Even though artists such as Li Jian, He Xiangnin, and Gao Jianfu organized art exhibitions in Malaysia, they later returned to China. Subsequently, numerous scholars and calligraphers decided to remain in Malaysia and acted as teachers, contributing significantly toward calligraphy development and Chinese education. Among them are Lin Xueda, Shi Xiangtuo, Luo Qingquan, Guan Zhenming, Zhou Mansha, Kong Xiangtai, Cui Dadi, Chen Leishi, Huang Yao, and others.

Explicit Cultural Messaging. The CCS Gallery offers a groundbreaking model of cultural revitalization by blending classical calligraphy with thoughtful spatial design. This integration breathes new life into shared cultural memory among Malaysian Chinese communities. The following analysis explores five key areas in which these inscriptions contribute to constructing cultural memory, promoting ideological fusion, honoring literati traditions, encouraging cross-cultural exchange, and fostering contemporary innovation.

Cultural Memory and Identity Formation. This section connects historical inscriptions and everyday archival documents to the ongoing construction of cultural identity and collective memory, especially within Malaysia's diverse society. Monumental pieces like the "Mount Langya Stele" (C09) reflected early efforts at script standardization and administrative unity, symbolizing the roots of governance and cultural continuity. These artifacts help the Chinese diaspora maintain a spiritual and historical bond with ancestral knowledge, creating a timeless and borderless sense of identity. Meanwhile, documents such as the "Juyan Bamboo Slips" (C12) offer a ground-level view of history—capturing not just politics and economics but also daily life, including names, traditions, and family structures. These intimate records strengthen identity by allowing communities to reconnect with the personal experiences of their forebears through authentic cultural memory.

Confucianism and Religious Syncretism. Such as "The Draft of a Requiem to My Nephew" (C37), composed by Yan Zhenqing during the An Lushan Rebellion, exemplifies the blending of Confucian ethics, Taoist concept. The unrefined, emotionally expressive strokes transformed personal grief into a collective moral reflection, turning calligraphy into not only an art form but also a part of a traditional commemorative act. For Malaysian Chinese, this piece symbolizes a revival of traditional values and helps to create an "imagined community" that bridges time and geography. Together 13 pieces in this category demonstrate how physical artifacts can anchor group memory, echoing theories by Halbwachs, Assmann [8].

Literati Culture and Calligraphy Aesthetics. Like "The Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion" (C21) captures the fusion of poetry and calligraphy that defines literati culture. The elegance and expressive strokes not only set artistic standards but also convey Confucian values and intellectual ideals. Together 27 works reflected a blend of aesthetic grace, ethical contemplation, and communal spirit—connecting historical Chinese identity with the lived experience of the global Chinese diaspora.

Ethnic and Cultural Exchange. The Yuan Zhen Epitaph (C25) illustrates the richness of cultural dialogue, preserving stories of ethnic interaction and the process of sinicization. The inscriptions in this category serve as a record of both individual and collective experiences, reinforcing identity for Chinese communities abroad. They emphasize that cultural evolution and preservation coexist symbiotically.

Modern Innovation and Transformation. We take "Huang Binhong's Seal Script Couplet" (C79) to explain this category. (C79) reflects how traditional calligraphy continues to evolve in modern contexts. This piece merges the elegance of ancient forms with the creativity of the present, affirming the role of innovation in cultural preservation. Total 15 pieces inscriptions that displayed at the CCS Gallery, they offer a model for how historical art forms can inspire future generations and sustain cultural vitality among Chinese communities worldwide [9].

Overall, the findings reveal that the CCS Gallery through its innovative spatial design and carefully curated calligraphic works, the gallery creates imaged an ancient past that bridges historical narratives with contemporary cultural identity. This reimagining of commemorative space is unlike the Chinese classical garden of a particular period. I argue that the space is a textual chronoscope that transferred imaginations of Chinese literati garden as well as the Confucian with merchant identity [10]. The creation of CCS gallery availed a space for imagination of China for its viewers. Particular overseas Chinese Scholarly merchant identities in Nanyang were cultivated through the establishment of CCS gallery in the future.

Conclusion

Through the overall analysis of the spatial design of the CCS Gallery, as well as the in-depth study of the carefully selected inscriptions, calligraphic styles and formal characteristics, we found that the gallery serves as a powerful vessel for constructing a beautiful imagined Chinese cultural memory. The integration of natural landscape, architectural harmony, and literati calligraphy transforms the site into a living archive of collective identity. Not only a commemoration of history, the gallery has also actively promoted the continuation of culture and actively fosters cultural continuity and self-confidence among the Chinese diaspora. Research shows that the combination of spatial design, art curation and cultural symbols can effectively reshape the memory space into a dynamic field for cultural regeneration.

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