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Gendered Space and Patriarchal Order: A Study of Spatial Segregation in the Chang Family Manor

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Abstract. In traditional Chinese society, architectural space was not merely a physical carrier, but a material manifestation of patriarchal order and gender power relations. The grand scale and strict etiquette of Shanxi merchant residences during the Qing Dynasty, with their spatial layout embodying Confucian ethical norms of "distinction between inside and outside, and between men and women," provide a typical example for studying the relationship between gender and space. This study uses the Chang Family Manor in Taigu, Shanxi, as a case study, focusing on the intrinsic connection between the spatial structure of traditional residences and gender inequality. Employing qualitative research and case analysis methods, combined with gender space theory, literature review, and architectural layout interpretation, the study systematically examines the manor's courtyard sequence, functional zoning, circulation organization, and symbolic meaning, exploring how patriarchy, through spatial division, disciplined women's daily activities and social roles. The study finds that the Chang Family Manor adopts axial symmetry and a clear public–private, inner–outer spatial order, locating male and public spaces in the front and core areas while assigning women's living quarters to enclosed back and side courtyards. Through courtyard depth, gate barriers, and path restrictions, this layout implicitly limits women's mobility and social visibility, stabilizing and naturalizing gender hierarchy in daily life.

Keywords: Gendered space, patriarchal architecture, Chang Family Manor, Confucian hierarchy, Qing dynasty

1. Introduction

Architectural space has long been viewed as a physical structure defined by function and aesthetics. However, feminist spatial scholarship argues that space is not a neutral container but a socially constructed product that shapes social relations and power distribution. Massey states that space is embedded in social structures and intertwined with gender differences, and spatial organization reflects power relations [1]. Spain adds that gendered spatial segregation causes unequal access to resources and decision-making, which reproduces patriarchal systems [2]. For late imperial China, Ko points out that women's daily life and moral cultivation mainly occurred in inner chambers, and gender order was internalized through daily spatial practice [3].Although existing studies confirm the relationship between space and gender order, most remain theoretical or macro-historical, with few concrete architectural cases explaining how spatial layouts restricted women's mobility and

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visibility. This study takes Chang Family Manor as a case to explore the relationship between spatial organization and gender inequality, raising two research questions: how the manor's layout reflects patriarchal hierarchy and which architectural designs constrained women's activities. The study adopts a qualitative case-study method by analyzing architectural plans, spatial zoning, and circulation paths, supported by visual materials and related theories. It contributes to the cross-cultural application of gendered space theory and provides a new perspective for understanding gender inequality in traditional Chinese architecture.

2. Architecture, family governance, and patriarchal spatial order

2.1. Patriarchal residence and family governance

In traditional Chinese society, particularly during the Ming and Qing periods characterized by patriarchal and ritual-based systems, the family was not merely a private unit of daily life, but a key structure carrying social status, ethical order, and symbolic authority. For large patriarchal families with stable intergenerational continuity, the scale, form, and spatial order of residential architecture were directly related to maintaining family dignity and social position [4]. Large family compounds were therefore not constructed solely to meet residential needs, but served as material representations of family power, economic strength, and cultural legitimacy, organizing daily life, regulating behavioral boundaries, and consolidating patriarchal order.

The Chang Family Manor developed and expanded within this historical context. As a representative Jin merchant family of the Qing dynasty, the Chang family accumulated wealth while simultaneously facing sustained pressure to demonstrate ethical legitimacy and social propriety within a society dominated by scholar-official cultural norms. Manor-style residences not only displayed economic power, but also embodied adherence to Confucian patriarchal ethics through their scale, enclosure, and internal order. As family size increased and multi-generational co-residence continued, the Chang Family Manor evolved into a spatial system accommodating multiple generations and branches. Its architectural form served collective family governance rather than the private needs of individual households. In this sense, the Chang Family Manor should be understood as a patriarchal residence designed to maintain family order and implement internal governance [4], with its spatial structure actively participating in the construction of family power and hierarchical relations.

2.2. Architecture as a spatialized instrument of patriarchal order

In patriarchal societies, family order is not sustained solely through household rules or ethical doctrines, but is continuously enacted and reinforced through the organization of everyday life. Architectural space plays a critical role in this process. Through spatial division, sequencing, and hierarchical arrangements, residential architecture transforms abstract ritual principles into concrete behavioral norms. Space functions not merely as a container for family activities, but as a mechanism that guides, restricts, and regulates family members' movements and social relations without relying on explicit commands.

The overall layout of the Chang Family Manor exemplifies this logic of spatialized order. The serial arrangement of multiple courtyards produces a progressive spatial sequence from exterior to interior and from front to rear, while functional zones are distributed with clear hierarchical distinctions. Through courtyard depth, threshold control, and spatial zoning, the manor naturally differentiates varying degrees of openness and privacy. This structure was not randomly generated,

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but served the long-term needs of patriarchal households to maintain order, hierarchy, and behavioral boundaries. In this sense, architectural layout itself constituted a form of "ritualized space" that could be enacted through daily practice, allowing family members to internalize their prescribed social positions and roles through routine movement.

3. Gendered inner–outer division and women's spatial practice

3.1. The inner domain as an institutionalized female space

Within interdisciplinary perspectives on gender and space, space is understood not as a neutral physical container, but as a product of social institutions, power relations, and normative expectations. As emphasized in Space, Place and Gender, space is embedded within social relations and actively shapes gender differentiation and social order through everyday practices [1]. Consequently, discussions of women's status must attend to spatial location and accessibility, as space itself functions as a medium through which social norms are materialized.

In Qing patriarchal society, the spatial arrangement of women's living areas was not a matter of personal preference or household convenience, but an institutionalized outcome embedded within ritual and ethical systems. Traditional emphasis on the distinction between "inner" and "outer" domains referred not merely to physical interiors, but to a gendered spatial order imbued with moral significance. Women were expected to reside within inner residences or inner chambers, a spatial arrangement closely tied to prescribed roles, behavioral boundaries, and social visibility. As demonstrated in Teachers of the Inner Chambers, the inner domain constituted the primary setting for women's daily life, education, and moral cultivation, functioning as a comprehensive system of living and regulation rather than a simple residential area [3].

It is important to note that the inner domain was not an isolated room or architectural unit, but a spatial structure organizing women's everyday life. Women's residential, domestic labor, caregiving, and moral training activities were systematically arranged within this relatively enclosed spatial system. Through repeated practice, women's activity range and social roles were continuously reinforced and naturalized. Thus, the moral injunction against "appearing in public" was not merely an abstract ethical ideal, but was enacted and internalized through spatial division and restricted movement in everyday life.

From the perspective of spatial power, gendered spatial segregation entails more than positional separation; it directly affects access to social resources, public affairs, and visibility. As argued in Gendered Spaces, spatial arrangements structured by gender produce unequal access to knowledge, decision-making, and social participation [2], thereby reproducing power differentials without reliance on explicit prohibitions. Women's placement within the inner domain thus entailed not only physical distance from public spaces, but a structural marginalization of social presence.

In sum, women's space in Qing patriarchal society constituted an institutionalized and repeatedly enacted spatial order. Women's prescribed location was not the result of individual choice, but a normative arrangement shaped jointly by ritual, ethics, and spatial structure. This concept of the inner domain provides a necessary theoretical and historical foundation for interpreting women's spatial distribution within specific family residences.

3.2. The inner domain and the spatial organization of women's everyday life

While the inner domain defined women's prescribed spatial position at the institutional level, this norm was realized in everyday life through functional spaces and repetitive practices. The inner

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domain was not a symbolic abstraction, but a spatial system composed of everyday functions closely associated with women's roles. In Qing patriarchal households, women's residence, labor, and caregiving responsibilities were centered on the domestic interior, with daily activities stably organized around household and inner-domain functions.

Women's everyday life involved cooking, textile production, needlework, and family care—activities that were not incidental but fundamental to moral evaluation and gender identity. Historical studies indicate that women's diligence and virtue were assessed through sustained engagement in domestic labor, a system that relied on repeated use of specific spaces. As discussed in Teachers of the Inner Chambers, women's education and moral cultivation occurred not in public instructional spaces, but through everyday domestic practice [3], binding women's identity formation to the spatial logic of the inner domain.

From a spatial power perspective, this organization of daily life was not a neutral division of labor, but a spatial structure that stabilized women within low-mobility and low-visibility trajectories. The repetitive and enclosed nature of women's spatial use reinforced specific life patterns, rendering them natural and unquestioned. As noted in Gendered Spaces, when groups are consistently confined to particular functional spaces, their social roles and power positions become structurally fixed [2]. The inner domain thus functioned as a mechanism binding women to domestic labor through spatial stability.

Importantly, this spatial organization did not depend on explicit prohibitions or coercive enforcement. Women were not constantly instructed where they could not go; rather, everyday arrangements guided expectations and behaviors toward "appropriate" locations. Through repetition, the inner domain became a naturalized spatial order, reproduced through daily life itself.

Through this analysis, women's space emerges not as an isolated architectural feature, but as a structural system integrating gender roles, moral expectations, and spatial practice. At this level, the inner domain provides a crucial interpretive framework for understanding the distribution and function of women's spaces within specific patriarchal residences.

3.3. The inner domain in the Chang Family Manor: spatial distribution and gender order

Having established the institutional logic of the inner domain and its everyday functional system, this section turns to the architectural case of the Chang Family Manor to examine how these norms were materially realized within a patriarchal residence. An analysis of the overall site layout and courtyard sequencing shows that the manor exhibits a progressive spatial structure extending from exterior to interior and from front to rear, with multiple courtyards connected through thresholds and enclosures that establish clear hierarchical differentiation [5]. This spatial organization provided stable relative positions for different activities and functions, facilitating the implementation of gendered spatial norms.

In terms of relative functional distribution, spaces associated with external reception, family ritual, and activities with stronger public character are located toward the front sections and along the main axis, while spaces related to residence, daily life, and internal household operations are situated within deeper and more enclosed courtyard systems. Although official guide materials do not explicitly designate users for each space, analysis of courtyard depth, circulation nodes, and enclosure levels indicates a layout highly consistent with Qing patriarchal norms of inner–outer distinction [5]. Functions associated with the inner domain were systematically positioned in areas requiring traversal of multiple courtyards and thresholds.

This spatial positioning directly affected everyday movement. Greater depth increased travel distance and access cost, while multiple thresholds reduced visibility and circulation. For women

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whose activities were primarily organized within the inner domain, daily life was spatially oriented toward residential and domestic functions, maintaining consistent distance from front public areas. Women were thus not excluded from public space through explicit prohibition, but were guided toward "appropriate" locations by the logic of spatial organization.

It is important to emphasize that this spatial distribution did not imply women's complete absence from family operations. Rather, hierarchical spatial organization regulated degrees of visibility and mobility. The Chang Family Manor did not rely on explicit gender labeling of spaces; instead, through front–rear zoning, courtyard depth, and circulation order, inner-domain norms were naturalized through everyday practice. In this way, institutional expectations regarding women's space were translated into stable, repeatable spatial order within the residence.

Through this analysis, the Chang Family Manor is shown not to have created women's inner-domain norms in isolation, but to have materialized and routinized pre-existing gendered spatial conventions of Qing patriarchal society through its large-scale and hierarchical architectural structure. Architecture thus functioned as a mediating mechanism between institutional norms and everyday practices, enabling gender order to operate continuously within seemingly neutral spatial arrangements.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined the Chang Family Manor as a representative Qing-dynasty Jin merchant residence, integrating gendered space theory and women's history to analyze how patriarchal systems were materially enacted through architectural space in everyday life. By conceptualizing patriarchal residences as instruments of family governance, the study demonstrates that the spatial structure of the manor was not a neutral living arrangement, but an integrated system that supports family order and ritual practices. Within this system, spatial division, courtyard depth, and circulation hierarchy jointly regulated family members' behavior and social positioning.

Building on this foundation, the study introduces the concept of the inner domain to clarify the normative logic governing women's space in Qing society. Women were systematically situated within spatial systems associated with residence, domestic labor, and household management, which reflects widely shared expectations regarding gender roles, morality, and social visibility. Through repetitive practice and enclosed spatial organization, these roles were stabilized in everyday life.

By relating this institutional framework to the specific spatial distribution of the Chang Family Manor, the analysis demonstrates that the manor's layout closely aligns with gendered norms of inner–outer distinction. Spaces associated with women's daily activities were positioned deeper and more enclosed, regulating mobility and visibility through spatial structure rather than explicit exclusion. This process enabled gender norms to be naturalized and reproduced through routine architectural use.

It should be emphasized that this analysis does not seek to impose moral judgment on historical cases, but rather to examine the structural relationship between institutions, space, and everyday practice. Through an analysis of the Chang Family Manor as a typical patriarchal residence, the study highlights how traditional family architecture functioned as a material medium through which gender order was sustained within ostensibly neutral spatial arrangements. This spatial perspective contributes to a deeper understanding of family power structures and women's lived experience in late imperial China, while offering new points of dialogue between gender studies and the architectural history of China.

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