Home, Courtyard, and Gardening: A Historical Tracing and Modern Reflection [1]

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Abstract

Home, courtyard, and gardening constitute the core of China's agricultural civilization. The three form a mutually nurturing structure of "spiritual core — spatial carrier — practical action," together composing a "space–time symphony" that spans thousands of years. This paper traces the historical evolution of these three elements from the pre–Qin period to the Ming and Qing dynasties, examining their morphological development and cultural accumulation. During this long arc, the home evolved from a survival unit into a dual sanctuary of ethical order and spiritual belonging; the courtyard expanded from physical space into a realm of dialogue between nature and the human spirit; and gardening transformed the courtyard from a "static space" into a "dynamic field of life." By analyzing how modern transformation has deconstructed this traditional structure, the paper reveals contemporary dilemmas such as spatial alienation, ruptured connections, and the dissolution of values. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach that combines historical inquiry, cultural interpretation, and philosophical reflection, the paper seeks to provide a frame of reference of both scholarly value and practical significance for contemporary readers. Its intellectual innovation lies in breaking out of the conventional framework of "philosophy of home"—which has often focused on ethical order, emotional belonging, and kinship extension—and instead adopting the unique perspective of the

mutual nurturing of "home, courtyard, and gardening" to illuminate their influence on nature, life, production, living, ecology, and human nature. In doing so, it offers an interdisciplinary theoretical and practical path for deconstructing the alienation of production, life, and human existence under modernity, and for reconstructing the authentic relationship between humanity and nature, humanity and life.

Key Words: Home, courtyard and gardening; historical tracing; agricultural civilization; reflection on modernity; philosophy of life

Introduction

Looking back over the 5,000-year history of agricultural civilization, home, courtyard, and gardening have always been the main thread running through Chinese life—a "a memory that transcends time and space" etched into the cultural gene. The home provides a place for the spirit to settle, the courtyard extends and expands space, and gardening connects life with nature. The three are interdependent and mutually nourishing, forming a life paradigm of "farming and reading to pass on the family legacy, poetry and books to sustain the generations." They embody the Chinese worldview of "unity of heaven and humanity," the ethical concept of "family and state as one," and the life outlook of "personal practice through tilling the soil."

From the oracle bone script character for "home" depicting a pig inside a house ——the earliest form of home——to Tao Yuanming's lyrical appreciation of "plucking chrysanthemums by the eastern hedge, gazing leisurely at the southern mountain," [1] to the wisdom of "sowing in spring

[1] Tao Yuanming (c. 365—427), also known as Tao Qian, and art name Wuliu Xiansheng, was a scholar of the Eastern Jin Dynasty. He is the founding father of China's pastoral poetry and honored as the "Ancestor of Recluse Poets." *Drinking Wine, No. 5* is the most famous piece from his collection Twenty Poems on Drinking Wine, written after he retired to live a pastoral life.

and harvesting in autumn," the interplay of these three not only shaped the daily fabric of traditional life but also distilled cultural codes for coping with existential challenges and cultivating character.

However, the waves of industrialization, urbanization, and technological advance brought by modernity have shattered this traditional structure: the home has been reduced to a functional living space, the courtyard squeezed out by high-rise buildings, and gardening has become detached from daily life. This has led to a host of modern predicaments: the estrangement between human and nature, the weakening of emotional bonds, and the confusion of spiritual disorientation.

In an era of climate change, the post-pandemic period, and rising uncertainties, retracing the historical trajectory of home, courtyard, and gardening to unearth their deep cultural values and practical wisdom is not an act of nostalgic retreat. Rather, it seeks to find keys for contemporary people to unlock the dilemmas of modernity. By tracing the historical evolution of these three elements and analyzing their mutual-nurturing tensions, and then considering the real challenges in the modern context, this paper explores pathways for transforming traditional wisdom into modern practice, with the hope of providing reference for rebuilding a warm, meaningful, and spiritually grounded modern life.

I. Historical Tracing of Home, Courtyard, and Gardening

The relationship among home, courtyard, and gardening has never been static。 over the course of history their connotations and forms have continued to enrich, forming a cultural system that is both stable and adaptive. From their emergence and shaping in the pre-Qin period to their codification and consolidation in the Ming and Qing dynasties, the three have consistently revolved around the core value of "human survival

and development," building a living space of functional complementarity and spiritual symbiosis.

(I) Pre-Qin Period: Origins and Intellectual Foundations

The pre-Qin period marks the emergence of the relationship among home, courtyard, and gardening, laying the conceptual and institutional groundwork for their mutual nurturing.

The concept of "home" evolved from a survival unit to an ethical carrier. In oracle bone script, the character "家"- jia (home) is pictographic: "a pig inside a house," symbolizing food reserves and the foundation of a settled life, highlighting the significance of farming and animal husbandry for family subsistence. [2]The Zhou dynasty, through the "Rites of Zhou", established a system of rituals and ethics for the home. The office of " chief household ritual officer
"presided over sacrifices and family rites, integrating lineage transmission and ethical cultivation into daily life. The "Spring Offices" chapter of the Rites of Zhou records the position of "chief household ritual officer"who was responsible for invocations, sacrifices, family rites, and regulations regarding clothing, food, housing, and hierarchical prohibitions. The "capping ceremony" for noble males (*Rites of Zhou — Ceremonies for the Gentry*) [3]symbolized adulthood and signified their assumption of responsibility for family continuity. King Wen of Zhou's "保训-Baoxun" (Precepts) initiated the tradition of family instructions, making the home a vehicle for transmitting values. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, various schools of thought enriched

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[2] Li Xueqin, edited. *Compilation of Oracle Bone Script*, Zhonghua Book Company, 2011

[3] The Rites of Zhou, together with Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial and Book of Rites, is known as the *Three Ritual Classics*. It is a core classic of ancient China's political system, ritual—musical civilization, and
state governance, exerting a profound influence on later ritual systems and official institutions.

the "philosophy of home": Confucianism proposed "cultivate oneself, harmonize the family, govern the state, and bring peace to the world" (*Great Learning*)[4], viewing the family as the foundation for cultivating virtue. Mencius's assertion that "the foundation of the world lies in the state, and the foundation of the state lies in the family" (*Mencius — Li Lou I*) [5]established the interconnected relationship of "self–family–state." Daoism endowed the home with the natural quality of "returning to authenticity." Laozi's vision of "sweet food, beautiful clothing, peaceful dwellings, and joyful customs" (Laozi, in Chapter 80 of *The Classic of the Way and Virtue*) [6]sketched a simple and tranquil ideal of home. Zhuangzi's idea of "taking heaven and earth as home" transcended the physical limitations of the blood–related family; his concept of "wandering in infinite space" (*Zhuangzi — Free and Easy Wandering*)[7] illustrated a freedom that depends on nothing external.

The courtyard began to take shape as a spatial extension of the home. At this stage, the courtyard was primarily functional: the enclosed space ensured residential security while providing ground for planting and animal husbandry, forming the prototype of "a house with a yard, a yard with fields." The *Book of Songs*[8] describes scenes where the courtyard served both productive and domestic functions. Zeng Xi[9], a disciple of

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[4] *The Great Learning,* one of the Four Books of Confucianism, is a core classic that expounds the Confucian ideal of self–cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and world peace.

[5] Mencius (c. 372—289 BCE), a key Confucian philosopher, advocated the inherent goodness of human nature and emphasized benevolent governance; his teachings are recorded in *The Book of Mencius*.

[6] Laozi, a prominent ancient Chinese philosopher, founded Daoism; his thought is recorded in *Tao Te Ching*, advocating wu wei–无为 (non–action) and harmony with nature.

[7] Zhuangzi, a leading Daoist philosopher, emphasized spiritual freedom, equality of all things, and harmony with the Tao, with his teachings collected in *Zhuangzi.*

[8] *The Book of Songs* is China's earliest poetry collection, recording early social life, rituals, and sentiments.

[9] Zeng Xi (c. 542—475 BCE), was an early disciple of Confucius and father of Zeng Shen (Zengzi). Famous for his "Yi River" ideal in *The Analects*, he represented a free–spirited, aesthetic strand

Confucius, expressed the aspiration to "bathe in the Yi River, enjoy the breeze at the Rain Altar, and return home singing" (*The Analects, Book XI, Xian Jin*), already hinting at an aesthetic expansion of family leisure into natural space. When Confucius was at home at ease, he was described as "affable and thoroughly composed" ("*The Analects*, Book VII, *Shu Er* "), fully displaying the relaxation and peace of family space.

Gardening became the core practice of home and courtyard. During this period, gardening mainly focused on grain crops, fulfilling both subsistence functions and the survival wisdom of "following seasonal rhythms and adapting to local conditions." The "*Book of Songs*" and Mencius's injunction "not to miss the farming seasons" (*Mencius — King Hui of Liang I*) reflect the alignment of gardening with natural cycles. Mohist thought extended to gardening practice, advocating an ethic of production that benefits people and connects family gardening to human welfare. The three elements thus formed a basic structure of "home as core, courtyard as space, gardening as action," highlighting the survival logic of agricultural civilization rooted in agriculture.

(II) Qin–Han to Tang–Song: Development and Cultural Maturation

From the Qin–Han to the Tang–Song period, social stability and economic prosperity brought the relationship among home, courtyard, and gardening to maturity, with their cultural connotations and functional forms becoming increasingly rich.

The ethical and spiritual dimensions of "home" were further strengthened. After the Han dynasty's "sole respect for Confucianism," Confucian ethics became the basic principles of family life. Systems of family learning, family instructions, and family regulations gradually improved, with

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in Confucianism.

diligence and frugality becoming core values of family heritage. During the Wei–Jin and Southern–Northern Dynasties, Daoism and Neo–Daoism flourished, and the scholar–official class pursued a lifestyle of "returning to the garden and fields.Tao Yuanming's reflections—such as "a homestead of ten–odd mu, eight or nine thatched cottages and plucking chrysanthemums by the eastern hedge, gazing leisurely at the southern mountain"—elevated gardening practice into spiritual aesthetics, endowing the triad with cultural value beyond utility (*Five Poems on Returning to the Garden*). The Tang dynasty's imperial examination system popularized the ideal of "farming and reading as a family legacy," making the home an important site of education. The courtyard became both a place for cultivation and a space for study and intellectual pursuit, forming a life paradigm of "farming to nourish the body, reading to illuminate the Way." In the Song dynasty, Cheng–Zhu Neo–Confucianism[10] further strengthened family ethics. Sima Guang's “Model for the Family” and Zhu Xi's Family Instructions systematized the concepts of "diligence and frugality in managing the household" and "farming and reading in tandem." Gardening was no longer just a means of livelihood but also a form of spiritual cultivation fostering the character of "one reaps what one sows." Zhu Xi's line, "Half an acre of square pond laid open like a mirror" (*Reflections on Reading*), [11]captures the unity of nature, body, and spiritual insight.

The courtyard diversified in spatial form and function. In the Qin–Han period, courtyards became a common residential form for both nobles and commoners. Palatial "parks and gardens" and folk "courtyards"

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[10] Cheng–Zhu Neo–Confucianism, founded by the Cheng brothers and systematized by Zhu Xi in the Song Dynasty, regards Principle（Li,理） as the ultimate origin of the universe, advocating self–cultivation and ethical discipline, and profoundly shaped traditional Chinese social ethics and family norms.

[11] Zhu Xi was a great Neo–Confucian scholar of the Southern Song Dynasty, the synthesizer of Cheng–Zhu Neo–Confucianism. He standardized the Four Books and deeply shaped traditional Chinese education, ethics and family culture.

differed in scale but both retained planting functions. In the Tang dynasty, courtyard design became more refined, incorporating pavilions, terraces, exotic flowers, and rare plants. Gardening expanded from grain crops to ornamental plants, and plant culture gradually developed symbolic meanings: "peonies for wealth and honor," "bamboo for moral integrity." Song dynasty courtyard culture reached its peak; literati regarded the courtyard as a spiritual realm for expressing emotions and aspirations. Su Shi's[12] exclamation, "One can go without meat, but not without bamboo by the dwelling" (*To the Monk Lüyun Xuan*), highlights the symbolic significance of planting. Li Qingzhao's line, "Who planted that banana tree before the window?" demonstrates the connection between courtyard planting and emotional expression. The compound word "courtyard" (“庭院–tingyuan”) appeared in the “History of the Southern Dynasties”: "He especially loved the sound of wind in pines; the courtyard was full of them, and whenever he heard the rustling, he rejoiced" (“*History of the Southern Dynasties — Biographies of Recluses*”). During this period, the courtyard assumed multiple functions: production (growing vegetables and fruits), domestic life (family gatherings), aesthetics (enjoying flowers and trees), and spiritual practice (reading and gardening). It became a space for dialogue between humans and nature.

Gardening became richer in cultural connotation and practical forms. In addition to traditional grain farming, cash crops and ornamental plants became increasingly common. Tea and mulberry cultivation in the Tang dynasty spurred courtyard economies; flower cultivation in the Song dynasty scaled up into an industry. The practical wisdom embedded in gardening was continuously distilled. Works like Lu Yu's *Classic of Tea*

[12] Su Shi (1037—1101), art name Dongpo, was a towering literary and artistic figure of the Northern Song Dynasty. A master of poetry, ci, prose, calligraphy and painting, he founded the bold and unrestrained school of ci and embodied a resilient, eclectic Confucian–Taoist–Buddhist spirit.

[13]and Chen Yong's *Book of Agriculture* [14]systematically summarized the relationship between gardening and natural rhythms and ecological balance. The work rhythms of "sowing in spring, tending in summer, harvesting in autumn, storing in winter" became important vehicles for the Chinese people to understand the cycle of life. Poems such as Lei Zhen's "The buffalo boy rides home on the ox's back, playing a random tune on his short flute" (*Evening in the Village*) [15]and Lu You's "Don't laugh at the muddy wine brewed in farmhouses; in a bumper year they keep plenty of chicken and pork for guests" (*A Visit to the Village West of the Mountain*) [16]record life scenes and emotional bonds linked to gardening and animal husbandry. Gardening not only nourished the body but also cultivated the mind. The practice of "working with one's own hands and cherishing the fruits" strengthened reverence for nature and respect for labor, forming the cultural genes of "diligence and frugality in household management" and "following nature's way."

(III) Ming–Qing: Codification and Consolidation

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[13] Lu Yu (733—804), courtesy name Hongjian, was a Tang-dynasty tea scholar and cultural pioneer, honored as the Sage of Tea. His The Classic of Tea, the world's first systematic monograph on tea, laid the foundation of Chinese tea culture and shaped East Asian tea ceremony for millennia.

[14] Chen Fu (1076—c.1189) in 1149, Chen Fu's Agricultural Treatise is the first surviving comprehensive monograph on rice farming in southern China. It systematically summarized paddy field cultivation, cattle rearing and sericulture, advocating intensive farming, soil fertility maintenance and harmony with nature, profoundly shaping southern Chinese agriculture for centuries.

[15] Lei Zhen was a poet of the Southern Song Dynasty. His birth and death years are unknown, and few historical records survive about his life. He excelled at writing pastoral poems in a fresh, serene and understated style. *Evening in the Village* is his most famous and enduring work.

[16] Lu You was a distinguished master of pastoral poetry. *A Visit to the Village West of the Mountain* is his representative pastoral work. The line "Amid fold on fold of hills and winding streams, the way seems lost; Where willows shade and flowers bloom, another village is crossed" has been widely recited through the ages.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the traditional structure of home, courtyard, and gardening became increasingly fixed. Related cultural norms and practical models reached maturity, bequeathing a significant legacy to agricultural civilization.

The ethical norms and functional systems of the “home” were finalized. Family instruction culture flourished as never before. Zhu Bailu's *The Family Instructions of Master Zhu* famously taught: "For every bowl of rice and every spoonful of soup, think of the toil from which it comes; for every half yard of thread and every half strand of silk, consider the labor that produced it." [17]This bound gardening practice tightly to family ethics. Zeng Guofan's *Family Letters* [18]emphasized "farming and reading as a family legacy" and argued that "the only way for a household to endure is to value frugality," regarding gardening labor as an important means of cultivating family values. During this period, families were mainly core or joint families, and the courtyard became a space for emotional bonding across generations. Gardening activities were an important scene of cooperation and interaction among family members, reinforcing the family ideal of "harmony brings prosperity." At the same time, the link between family and state grew closer. The "self-sufficient" economic model of courtyard gardening became a micro-foundation for state stability, supporting the development of handicrafts and commerce during the

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[17] Zhu Bailu was a Neo-Confucian scholar of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. His Maxims for Family Governance, also called *Family Instructions of Master Zhu,* is a classic Chinese family precept. Written in simple and refined language, it advocates diligence and frugality, self-cultivation, neighborhood harmony, and the tradition of farming and reading. It has long served as a key moral textbook for family education and profoundly shaped traditional Chinese family ethics and daily life norms.

[18] *Zeng Guofan’s Family Letters* is a timeless classic by Zeng Guofan, a distinguished statesman and scholar of the late Qing Dynasty. It gathers his earnest teachings to his family concerning self-cultivation, diligent learning, household management and personal integrity. Advocating diligence, frugality, modesty and the farming-and-reading tradition, it embodies profound Confucian wisdom. As a treasure of Chinese family education, it has deeply shaped later generations’ moral cultivation and family ethics.

Ming and Qing and providing material support for the continuation of the Silk Road.

The spatial patterns and regional characteristics of the “courtyard” became more distinct. Courtyards in the Ming and Qing exhibited clear regional styles: the symmetrical quadrangles of the northern area, the compact sky wells of the southern area. Despite differences in form, both retained planting functions. Aristocratic gardens (such as Suzhou's classical gardens) brought together planting and landscape art, with "plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum" as standard features symbolizing the lofty character of literati. Folk courtyards were predominantly practical, with designs like "flowers in the front yard, vegetables in the back yard" that met daily needs while creating a pleasant domestic atmosphere. Yuan Mei's *Sui Garden* [19] in the Qing dynasty embodied the idea of "letting cranes go to seek birds among the mountains, and letting visitors come to see the flowers in all four seasons." He transformed wasteland into a courtyard that combined planting and aesthetics, becoming a model of "farming and reading as a family legacy" (Suiyuan Ji (also known as *Record of the Garden of Contentment*). Even the humble courtyards of ordinary people, with their scenes of "melon trellises, bean racks, and the sounds of fowl and dogs," embodied the life ideal of "small contentment and modest prosperity," reflecting the simple aspirations of agricultural civilization.

Gardening saw technological maturity and cultural consolidation. During the Ming and Qing, gardening techniques reached the peak of traditional

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[19] Suiyuan Garden, located at Xiaocang Mountain in Nanjing, was rebuilt and renamed by Yuan Mei, a renowned Qing-dynasty writer. Meaning "following nature and fate", it was designed to conform to natural terrain with plain and elegant scenery. Living here in seclusion after official retirement, Yuan Mei devoted himself to writing and literary gatherings. A famous Jiangnan private garden, it nurtured his spiritual poetry theory and lifestyle aesthetics, where he completed masterpieces such as *Poetry Talks of Suiyuan* and *Suiyuan Food List*.

agriculture. Xu Guangqi's “*Complete Treatise on Agricultural Administration*” systematically summarized experiences in crop cultivation. Courtyard gardening achieved the practical goals of "abundant harvests of five grains and thriving domestic animals." The symbolic meanings of gardening were further accentuated: auspicious associations such as "surplus year after year (represented by fish)" and "steady rise in status (represented by sesame)" became linked to gardening practices, giving rise to a folk culture rich in agricultural characteristics. Fan Chengda's poem (*Impromptu Verses on the Four Seasons: No. 44*) depicts the hardship of farming gardening and the bond between humans and domestic animals. Gardening was not only a guarantee of family livelihood but also a bond of nostalgia. Whether for officials and merchants returning to their hometowns in retirement or for ordinary people seeking a place to settle, courtyard gardening was an important marker of returning to an authentic life. The folk saying "two acres of land, an ox, a wife, children, and a warm bed” aptly captures the deep connection between gardening and family happiness.

2. The Deconstruction of Traditional Life Structure by Modernity and Real-World Dilemmas

Modernity, with its core logics of "rationalization," "technologization," and "disenchantment," has driven the transition from agricultural civilization to industrial civilization and increased productivity and the pace of social development. Yet it has also fundamentally deconstructed the traditional mutual-nurturing structure of home, courtyard, and gardening, giving rise to a series of real-world dilemmas.

(I) Spatial Functional Alienation: From "Life Community" to "Functional Sign"

The logic of "consumption of signs" characteristic of modernity has divorced home, courtyard, and gardening from their original vital connections, reducing them to functional or consumptive symbols. Baudrillard pointed out that in consumer society, the utilitarian function of objects gives way to symbolic meaning; the mode of existence of things undergoes a fundamental change, no longer manifested through practical use but through their idiosyncratic relationship with the subject and their "mixage" with other objects. [20]The home is no longer a spiritual habitat but a "symbol of status." Floor area and decoration quality have become the core criteria for evaluating a family. The courtyard has been compressed into a "decorative balcony," and gardening reduced to "Instagramable-worthy" ornamentation, losing its productive and emotional functions. In the process of urbanization, high-rise buildings have replaced traditional courtyards; "atomized dwellings" have become mainstream. Family size continues to shrink, and the proportion of single-person households and DINK(Double Income, No Kids) households is rising. The functions of "caring for the elderly and raising children" and "emotional mutual aid" have weakened, with the home reduced to a mere "sleeping space." Gardening has drifted away from the routines of daily living. Industrialized agriculture has achieved "maximum efficiency" but has also severed people's direct connection with the soil and crops. Understanding of food is confined to the level of "commodity," and the life process of "spring sowing and autumn harvest" has been forgotten.

(II) Rupture of Interconnections: From "Mutual Nurturing and Symbiosis" to "Isolation and Fragmentation"

Giddens's concepts of "time-space distanciation" and "disembedding mechanisms" have severed the internal connections among home,

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[20] Jean Baudrillard, The System of Objects, trans. Lin Zhiming, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2001

courtyard, and gardening. [21]Urbanization has concentrated populations in cities; the spatial separation of work and daily life has become the norm for most people. The need to work in a location different from one's home encroaches on the time that families can spend together and devotion to their courtyards. Meanwhile, industrialized farming models have detached gardening from the domestic sphere, transforming it into a professionalized, scaled-up enterprise. With the family no longer functioning as a production unit, the symbiotic interdependence of the three has collapsed. The development of digital technology has further intensified the rupture. The phenomenon of "presence through absence" is widespread: family members immerse themselves in electronic devices while physically together, bringing physical distance closer but psychological distance farther. The "digital nature" of the virtual world (pastoral scenes in games and short videos) replaces real gardening practice. People's understanding of nature remains at the level of "scenic appreciation" rather than "immersive experience," leading to what Richard Louv called "nature-deficit disorder" (Richard Louv, "*Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*", trans. Hao Bing, Wang Ximin, et al., Hunan Science and Technology Press, 2013) spreading from children to adults.

(III) Dissolution of Value and Meaning: From "Spiritual Nourishment" to "Utilitarian Supremacy"

Weber's "instrumental rationality hegemony" has trapped modern society in an "iron cage"[22]. The "non-utilitarian values" carried by home, courtyard, and gardening has been continually eroded. Under instrumental rationality, efficiency and self-interest have become the core pursuits.

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[21] Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity,* trans. Tian He, proofread by Huang Ping, Yilin Press, 2011.

[22] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* trans. Li Xiujian et al., Wanjuan Publishing Company, 2021

Family life is engulfed by "performance anxiety." Individuals invest increasing energy in workplace competition, turning the home into a "bedroom for restoring energy" rather than a "harbor of life." Courtyard gardening, seen as "time-consuming and labor-intensive" and offering "limited output," is dismissed as "inefficient behavior" and marginalized by the fast pace of modern life. The social evaluation system tilts toward "wealth accumulation and social status." The traditional ideal of "farming and reading as a family legacy" is labeled "backward." The spiritual need for tranquility and nature is suppressed by the pursuit of material goods. Postman's warning of "amusing ourselves to death" (Neil Postman, "*Amusing Ourselves to Death*", trans. Zhang Yan, Guangxi Normal University Press, 2004) has left people physically and mentally exhausted in virtual clamor. Gardening and courtyard maintenance—practices requiring patience and focus—have been replaced by fragmented entertainment, making it difficult to achieve deep spiritual satisfaction.

(IV) The Essence of Real-World Dilemmas: Conflict Between Modernity and Human Needs

The essence of these real-world dilemmas is the conflict between modernity's logic of "efficiency first," "technological supremacy," and "individualism," on the one hand, and the essential human needs for "emotional connection," "symbiosis with nature," and "life experience," on the other. Horkheimer and Adorno pointed out that rationalization gave rise to instrumental rationality hegemony; the logic of technology and efficiency penetrated all areas of life, ultimately leading to human alienation.[23] The human being is both a "rational performance subject" and a "social animal in need of emotional belonging"; both a "user of technology" and a "biological being dependent on nature." Although the

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[23] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, , trans. Cao Weidong and Qu Jingdong, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2020

traditional structure of home, courtyard, and gardening no longer fits contemporary modes of production and life, the core values it carried—emotional mutual aid, natural connection, experiential learning through labor, and sense of responsibility—are precisely what contemporary people lack. Modern "urban diseases" (obesity, hypertension, hyperlipidemia, hyperglycemia, cervical spine problems), psychological anxiety, and social dysfunction all stem fundamentally from the rupture with traditional life wisdom, highlighting the necessity of reclaiming these core values.

3. Modern Inspirations and Pathways for Transforming Historical Wisdom

From this historical tracing of home, courtyard, and gardening, it is not difficult to see that these three elements are not merely deposits of cultural heritage; they contain survival wisdom for addressing the dilemmas of modernity. Their modern inspiration does not lie in returning to traditional forms, but in extracting core values and giving them contemporary expressions, achieving a dynamic symbiosis of "taking modernity's efficiency while preserving tradition's values."

(I) Spatial Dimension: Creating Fusion Spaces of "Traditional Elements + Modern Functions"

In response to the spatial constraints of urban living, traditional lifeway can be embedded to enable the connection among home, courtyard, and gardening to take root in modern spaces.

For urban spaces, the concept of "micro-courtyards" should be promoted, supporting residents in converting balconies and windowsills into "gardening corners." Community planning should encourage "shared vegetable gardens" and "rooftop farms," giving urban residents

(especially children) authentic gardening experiences and alleviating "nature-deficit disorder." In urban renewal, the fabric of old neighborhoods and courtyards should be preserved, with supporting public spaces such as community farms and shared courtyards to avoid the "physical isolation" of high-rise buildings. Residential design should emphasize connection with nature, promoting "housing with courtyards/balconies" so that the home becomes "the smallest unit of dialogue between humans and nature."

For rural spaces, "over-urbanization" should be avoided. In rural revitalization, the integrity of courtyards and cultivated land should be preserved, and traditional "courtyard economies" should be organically integrated with modern agriculture and rural cultural tourism. Modern amenities such as digital technology and convenient transportation should be improved to solve the "inconvenience" of traditional villages, encouraging young people to return to the countryside and resume the traditional model of "gardening + living," thus achieving complementary advantages between urban and rural spaces.

(II) Conceptual Dimension: Reshaping the Life Philosophy of "Emotional Connection + Natural Symbiosis"

Drawing on the spiritual nutrients of historical wisdom, individuals should be guided to rebuild connections with self, family, and nature in modern life.

Emphasis should be placed on the value of "emotional connection" within the family. Drawing on traditional "family rituals" (regular family meals, holiday gatherings, collaborative care of planting spaces) can counteract the family estrangement brought about by the digital age. Passing on the traditions of "parental love and sibling affection" can make the home a

carrier of emotional comfort and a sense of responsibility, alleviating the loneliness of individuals facing the risks of modernity. Byung-Chul Han argues that in the "achievement society," individuals are enslaved by performance standards and lose emotional connection and nature experience. [24]Family emotional connection can help resolve this dilemma.

The ecological concept of "natural symbiosis" should be reshaped. The traditional wisdom of "following nature's way" in gardening can be translated into modern "low-carbon living" practices. Family-scale gardening (balcony vegetables, potted fruit) can embody the concept of green development. The "spiritual value" of gardening should be promoted as a way to relieve anxiety and settle the mind through "immersive leisure," replacing fragmented entertainment and recovering the "capacity for slowness." This aligns with the Daoist orientation of "following the Way as it is by nature" and "avoiding extremes, extravagance, and overconfidence" (*Laozi's Daodejing "The Classic of the Way and Virtue"*Chapter 29).

(III) Institutional Dimension: Establishing a Support System of "Enabling Policies + Multi-dimensional Evaluation"

Through institutional design, the conflict between modernity and traditional values can be mitigated, providing enabling conditions for the modern transformation of historical wisdom.

First, work systems should rebuild the boundary between work and life. Labor regulations should be used to curb "996" (working from 9am to 9pm, 6 days a week)work culture and "involution." Flexible and remote work arrangements should be promoted to ensure individuals have time for family and necessary gardening activities. The social evaluation

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[24] Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Wang Yili, CITIC Press, 2019

system should break away from "performance-only" metrics, incorporating "family responsibility," "community contribution," and "physical and mental health" as recognized dimensions, thereby reducing the pressure of a single success standard. Habermas argued that modernity is an "unfinished project," and that the root of its crisis lies in the imbalance between social modernization and cultural modernity.[25] Institutional adaptation is precisely an important path to rebalancing them.

Second, family policies should lower the cost of fulfilling traditional functions. Enhancing affordable childcare services, parental subsidies, and pension protection will reduce the pressures of child-rearing and eldercare on families, paving the way for family togetherness and the practice of gardening. Cultural policies should strengthen the transmission of traditional life wisdom. School curricula should include "nature education" and "traditional crafts." Social communication—through documentaries and community activities—should showcase lifestyles and values in the "traditional plus modern" mode, guiding public awareness of the contemporary significance of "hands-on practice."

(IV) Individual Dimension: Incorporating lightweight traditional practices into modern life

Individuals should actively break away from "technology dependence" and integrate traditional wisdom into daily life to achieve body-mind balance. Reject digital addiction by reducing meaningless screen time. Through "lightweight practices" such as "weekend gardening," "balcony vegetable growing," and "community planting," individuals can rebuild a direct connection with nature, experience the life rhythms of "spring sowing and autumn harvest," and gain the sense of achievement that "effort yields

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[25] Jürgen Habermas, *Modernity: An Unfinished Project*, 1997

reward." Participating in family and community gardening collaborations can rebuild meaningful social connections through shared labor, cultivate "community consciousness of mutual aid and sharing," and alleviate the loneliness of modern life.

Cultivate pluralistic values, free oneself from the grip of the "development myth," and accept the value of "slow living" and "ordinary life." While pursuing career development, also value family, health, and spiritual nourishment. Integrate the ideals of "poetry and books to sustain the generations," "diligence and frugality in household management," and "following nature's way" into modern life. Maintain rationality in an age of rampant consumerism. Through gardening practice, appreciate the truth that "material things are hard to come by," and form a simple and moderate lifestyle. This resonates with the Confucian virtue of being "content with coarse rice and water" (*The Analects — Yong Ye*).

Conclusion

From this historical tracing, we see clearly that home, courtyard, and gardening have always been the "spacetime symphony" of China's agricultural civilization. The mutual-nurturing structure of "spiritual core — spatial carrier — mode of action" that they constructed has spanned five millennia, consistently aligning with the essential needs of human nature, and building a life field of emotional mutual aid, natural symbiosis, and experiential learning through labor. As the French sinologist Jacques Gernet observed, "This space carries multiple civilizational connotations—literature, art, cosmology, intellectual pursuits—and is a living microcosm of the Chinese spiritual world".[26]

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[26] Jacques Gernet, *Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion, 1250–1276*, trans. Liu Dong, Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 1995

Modernity has certainly deconstructed their traditional forms of expression, but it has never dissolved their core values. On the contrary, the very predicaments of alienation, anxiety, estrangement, and nature-deficit disorder in which we are mired today highlight the irreplaceability of those traditional values. By integrating space to break down the urban-rural divide and physical isolation, the core lies in allowing the "home" to return to its essence as an emotional community, the "courtyard" to become a bridge for dialogue between humans and nature, and gardening to serve as a bond for experiencing the rhythms of life.

Advocating for the contemporary reshaping of the mutual-nurturing structure of "home, courtyard, and gardening" is centrally aimed at pointing directly toward the authentic connections of the human self with nature and with society, thereby offering an important theoretical perspective and practical pathway for deconstructing the alienations of production, life, and human existence.

Reference (in-text citations)

See also Sun Hongwu and Ma Huidi, eds., "*Leisure Agriculture: A Wild Flower from Ancient Times*", China Agriculture Press, 2023.

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