

Cross-Cultural Differences in Tourists' Cultural Perceptions of Chinese Architectural Heritage: A Semiotic Perspective

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Full Text

Preamble

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Keywords: Cross-cultural; Architectural Heritage; Architectural Symbols; Tourist Perception

Introduction

Since China joined the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1985, it has, as of May 2025, inscribed 59 sites on the World Heritage List. Among them, 25 are cultural heritage sites centered on architecture. As one of the three major types of world cultural heritage, architectural heritage embodies not only historical memory and artistic expression but also the underlying social structures and value systems of a given society. Chinese architectural heritage, characterized by distinctive structural logic, decorative symbols, and spatial semantics, serves as a vital medium for global visitors to understand Chinese civilization. With the steady growth of international tourism, tourists from diverse cultural backgrounds demonstrate marked differences in their perceptions and emotional responses to architectural heritage. For example, interpretations of “imperial hierarchy,” understandings of fengshui symbolism, and aesthetic preferences for vernacular dwellings vary significantly, often revealing divergence or even conflict across cultural perspectives.

Most existing studies focus on macro-level dimensions such as architectural aesthetics, historical value, and tourist preferences. However, micro-level mechanisms—how tourists identify and interpret architectural symbols within specific cultural contexts—remain underexplored. While semiotic theory has gradually entered the discourse of heritage tourism research, a systematic investigation into how architectural heritage, as a symbolic cultural system, functions within cross-cultural perceptual processes is still lacking. Against the backdrop of tensions between global cultural dissemination and local cultural particularity, exploring how international tourists decode the cultural meanings of Chinese

architectural heritage across cultures holds both theoretical significance and practical value.

In response to this gap, this study adopts cultural semiotics as its methodological foundation and draws on insights from cultural psychology and cross-cultural behavioral theory. It aims to: (1) construct a symbolic and semantic classification system for Chinese architectural heritage; (2) analyze the differences in perceptual features, emotional responses, and underlying mechanisms among three types of tourists; and (3) propose experience optimization strategies tailored to the cultural characteristics of each group (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]).

This study takes eleven representative architectural heritage sites in China as case samples. Through a dual-source data strategy—integrating in-depth interviews and online review analysis—it ensures the stability and academic rigor of the extracted perceptual themes. Notably, this research is among the first to link the symbolic structure of architecture with the cultural-psychological mechanisms of tourists. It establishes an analytical pathway of “architectural symbols → perceptual themes → emotional responses → perception mechanisms,” thereby addressing the current gap in micro-level research on heritage tourism perception. In addition, by categorizing tourists’ emotional structures through cultural orientations, the study deepens the cross-cultural interpretation of affective responses. These findings offer practical implications for developing interpretive systems, content design, and cultural communication strategies in multicultural heritage tourism contexts.

The paper is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research background and poses the core questions. Chapter 2 provides a literature review on architectural heritage studies from a semiotic perspective, as well as on cross-cultural research within the field of cultural heritage. Chapter 3 outlines the data collection procedures and analytical methods. Chapter 4 systematically constructs a symbolic system of Chinese architecture. Chapter 5 presents empirical analyses of the perceptual content and mechanisms among three cultural tourist groups. Chapter 6 concludes the study with a summary of theoretical contributions, practical recommendations, and directions for future research.

Literature Review

As a key form of tangible cultural heritage, architectural heritage not only holds historical and artistic value but also embodies a rich system of cultural symbols. With the development of international tourism, increasing scholarly attention has been paid to the perceptual and experiential differences among tourists from diverse cultural backgrounds. Targeted research is urgently needed to support the development of interpretive systems, content strategies, and cultural communication in multicultural contexts.

2.1 Architectural Heritage from a Semiotic Perspective

Semiotics emphasizes the processes of encoding and decoding cultural meaning, viewing architecture as a symbolic system with social and cultural representational functions [?]. Architecture is not merely a composition of form and space, but a material expression of social institutions, religious beliefs, and aesthetic conventions. Its form, materials, proportions, and decorative elements can all be interpreted as “cultural symbols” [?]. Jencks (2005) argues that architecture functions as a “polysemic medium,” wherein different audiences generate divergent interpretations depending on their cultural contexts [?]. Architectural heritage, as a sedimented form of historical culture, represents a crystallization of “spatial memory.” Through symbolic mechanisms, it enables visitors to perceive, imagine, and emotionally connect with specific cultural environments [?].

In the field of tourism studies, semiotic theory has been gradually introduced into cultural heritage experience research. Peirce’s triadic model of signs provides a logical framework for understanding how architecture is “viewed” and “interpreted” [?]. Based on this model, some scholars have examined visual communication strategies, spatial narrative structures, and meaning-making processes at heritage sites [?]. In China, researchers have also applied semiotic analysis to traditional vernacular dwellings and religious architecture to explore ritual structures, ethical systems, and aesthetic symbolism, thereby revealing the cultural logic and value systems embedded within [?, ?].

However, three major limitations persist in the current body of research. First, most studies focus on the analysis of single symbolic systems, lacking systematic and generalizable classification frameworks for architectural symbols. Second, empirical research on how tourists recognize and interpret architectural symbols in cross-cultural contexts remains scarce, hindering a deeper understanding of perceptual pathways and emotional response mechanisms. Third, there is insufficient integration of semiotic theory with fields such as cultural psychology and visitor experience studies, leaving the interdisciplinary framework underdeveloped. Consequently, building a comprehensive analytical framework for architectural cultural symbols—while integrating cross-cultural perceptual behaviors and mechanisms—has become a critical direction in contemporary heritage tourism research.

2.2 Cross-Cultural Research in Cultural Heritage

Cross-cultural research represents a vital subfield within cultural heritage tourism, focusing on understanding how tourists from different cultural backgrounds differ in their perceptions, emotional responses, and behavioral reactions [?]. As high-density carriers of cultural meaning, architectural heritage sites possess spatial structures, decorative symbols, and symbolic connotations that are often interpreted differently across cultural contexts, thus influencing the depth of perception and the quality of visitor experience.

Existing studies have mainly developed along three lines. The first approach draws on cultural dimension theories, such as Hofstede's model, to examine how cultural values shape tourist behavior. For instance, Hao and Cho (2016) found discrepancies in the perceived authenticity of experiences among Chinese tourists in Korea under cross-cultural conditions [?]. The second approach adopts a perspective of identity and cultural recognition, exploring how tourists construct boundaries of "self" and "other" through heritage interpretation [?]. The third line investigates mechanisms of cultural mediation, analyzing how multilingual interpretation systems and narrative strategies facilitate tourists' understanding of foreign heritage [?].

In the specific domain of architectural heritage perception, several studies suggest that tourists' interpretation of architectural symbols is shaped by their cultural presuppositions [?]. For example, Western tourists often feel unfamiliar with the axial symmetry and hierarchical spatial logic emphasized in traditional Chinese architecture, whereas East Asian tourists may exhibit a stronger sense of cultural resonance. Conversely, when Chinese tourists visit Muslim heritage destinations, their perceptions tend to remain at a superficial level, lacking a deeper understanding of the underlying Islamic values [?].

Despite the valuable perspectives offered by the above studies, several limitations remain. First, the excessive reliance on cultural dimension models often fails to illuminate the micro-level interactions between tourists and architectural symbols. Second, the dominance of quantitative survey methods limits the potential to trace detailed perceptual pathways through multimodal analysis. Third, the geographical scope of research remains concentrated, with the cross-cultural perception of non-Western architectural heritage still marginalized. Future research should therefore integrate cultural psychology and spatial cognition theories to develop more nuanced comparative frameworks and examine how tourists from diverse cultures "read" and interpret architectural symbols.

2.3 Review

In summary, architectural heritage, as a highly symbolic cultural medium, carries significant meaning and emotional identity in cross-cultural tourism. Existing research has made notable contributions to the construction of architectural symbol systems, tourist perception pathways, and experience enhancement strategies, demonstrating the unique value of semiotic perspectives in revealing the mechanisms of cultural transmission. However, three primary shortcomings still exist:

First, there is a lack of a systematic classification and analytical framework for architectural symbols. Although some studies have attempted to analyze architectural elements from a semiotic perspective, most have focused on specific types or regional architectures, without providing a generalized and systematic classification of architectural symbols [?, ?]. This limits a comprehensive understanding of architectural heritage symbol systems and the feasibility of

cross-cultural comparisons.

Second, empirical studies on tourists' cross-cultural perceptual pathways are still insufficient, particularly regarding the micro-level exploration of perception, emotions, and memory mechanisms. Existing research predominantly relies on quantitative survey methods, and there is a lack of multimodal approaches to reveal detailed perceptual pathways, making it difficult to deeply understand how tourists recognize and interpret architectural symbols in different cultural contexts [?, ?].

Third, although several experiential optimization strategies have been implemented in practice, evaluation systems remain inadequate, making it difficult to measure the depth of cultural understanding. Current interpretive systems and narrative strategies mainly focus on information transmission, lacking systematic analysis of tourists' cultural understanding and emotional resonance. This limits the effectiveness of heritage communication and the quality of visitor experiences [?].

Therefore, future research should focus on three aspects: first, developing a systematic classification and analytical framework for architectural symbols, encompassing various types and regional architectural heritages to enhance cross-cultural comparability; second, adopting multimodal research methods, combining both quantitative and qualitative data to explore tourists' emotional responses and perception mechanisms in different cultural contexts; third, establishing a scientific evaluation system to measure the depth of tourists' cultural understanding and emotional resonance, providing theoretical support for the development of interpretive systems, content strategies, and cultural communication.

Methodology

3.1.1 Overview of Chinese Architectural Heritage

As of May 2025, China has a total of 59 World Heritage Sites, among which 25 are cultural heritage sites centered on architecture [?]. These architectural heritage sites can be classified into eight major types (see Table 1): ancient cities, ancient towns, official architecture, religious architecture, mausoleum architecture, ancient villages and folk houses, military and cultural facilities, and gardens. These heritage sites exhibit significant diversity in both geographic distribution and architectural style. Official and religious buildings are more concentrated in northern China, while vernacular dwellings and classical gardens are more common in the south. The earliest surviving architectural heritage dates back to the Tang dynasty, with the best-preserved examples primarily from the Ming and Qing periods.

3.1.2 Case Selection

This study selects 11 representative architectural heritage sites covering all eight categories as research samples, including the Forbidden City in Beijing, the Ancient City of Xi'an, the Summer Palace, the Great Wall, and the Classical Gardens of Suzhou. The selection criteria include: (1) internationally recognized tourist attractions; (2) clear architectural typology and symbolic features; (3) over 5,000 reviews in both Chinese and English; and (4) relatively balanced geographic distribution. These sites not only serve as cultural icons but also function as intersections where local tourism experiences and architectural symbol transmission converge.

Table 1. Types of Architectural Heritage and Representative Heritage Sites

Type of Architectural Heritage	Official English Name
Ancient Cities and Historic Districts	Ancient City of Xi'an*
Ancient Towns	Wuzhen Ancient Town
Official Architecture	The Palace Museum* / Temple of Confucius
Religious Architecture	Ancient Building Complex in the Wudang Mountains
Mausoleum Architecture	Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor and Terracotta Army*
Ancient Villages and Local Residences	Ancient Villages in Southern Anhui -Xidi and Hongcun
Cultural and Military Architectural Structures	The Great Wall* / The Temple of Heaven*
Gardens	The Summer Palace* / The Humble Administrator's Garden*

*Note: A total of 11 heritage sites are listed; * denotes the core site. Table compiled by the author.**

3.1.3 Tourist Group Classification

Based on the degree of cultural difference from Chinese traditions, tourists are categorized into three groups: (1) Group C, Chinese tourists, including those from mainland China (C1) and Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan (C2); (2) Group A, Asian tourists, including those from Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asia; and (3) Group UA, tourists from Europe and North America. This classification is informed by the relative proximity or divergence between each group's mainstream cultural background and traditional Chinese culture, providing a gradient framework for comparing perceptual differences. As the study aims to

analyze the overall perceptual characteristics of each cultural group, it does not engage in demographic profiling of individual respondents.

3.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

The interviews were conducted between May 2023 and April 2025 across the 11 selected heritage sites. Tourists from the three cultural groups were invited to participate in face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. The interviews focused on three core areas: perceptual content, emotional response, and understanding of architectural culture. Special attention was given to tourists' interpretations of different architectural types (e.g., religious, vernacular, and official architecture), and their perceptions of social institutions, locality, and ethnicity embedded within them.

Participants were recruited in collaboration with travel agencies using a phased rolling sampling strategy. In the first phase, seven major sites were covered to preliminarily assess data saturation. The second phase extended to the remaining sites to complete the sample. A total of 264 valid interviews were collected, with a distribution ratio of Group C: A: UA = 4:3:3. Each interview lasted between 3 to 10 minutes. Audio recordings were transcribed and manually coded, with all transcripts reviewed and cross-verified by two researchers.

3.2.2 Online Data Collection

Online user reviews served as comparative material, sourced from TripAdvisor (representing international tourists) and Ctrip (for mainland Chinese tourists). The data collection focused on “architecture” -related sections of each site, ensuring a minimum of 200 reviews per site. Collected data included user identity, comment content, and ratings. The time frame of data collection matched that of the interviews, resulting in a total of 13,021 user reviews.

3.2.3 Data Preprocessing

The research team manually reviewed all 264 interview transcripts and selected 235 high-quality textual samples, comprising 94 from Group C, 70 from Group A, and 71 from Group UA. Online reviews were annotated with AI-assisted tagging, and 1,500 thematically relevant sentences focusing on architectural culture were selected and grouped by tourist origin.

The data preprocessing workflow involved the following steps: (1) extracting sentence segments related to perceptual themes and emotional responses; (2) bilingual translation between Chinese and English; (3) cleaning invalid characters and removing duplicates; (4) word segmentation and stopword removal; (5) stemming and lemmatization. A standardized corpus was thereby constructed to support the subsequent analysis.

3.3.1 Content Analysis

By analyzing literature related to architectural history and architectural semiotics, this study identified typical symbolic elements of traditional Chinese architecture. Drawing on structuralist theory, symbols were categorized and hierarchically organized based on architectural function, form, and ornamentation. A symbolic-semantic mapping was constructed to provide theoretical support for subsequent textual analysis (see Table 3).

3.3.2 Text Analysis

Text analysis not only allows for the objective quantification of qualitative textual data but also reveals the structural features of architectural cultural perception. To ensure accuracy and capture the interaction and structure among variables, the study applied the following procedures:

(1) High-Frequency Word Extraction: Using NVivo 12, high-frequency terms were extracted from the cleaned interview transcripts. Based on the number of participants and interview questions, and in alignment with the research objectives of thematic recognition and deep mechanism exploration, the top 20% of thematic keywords were retained for each tourist group at each heritage site.

(2) Hierarchical Coding Process: - a. Preliminary Thematic List: A draft list of themes was generated based on high-frequency words to guide the subsequent sentence-level coding. - b. Sentence-Level Hierarchical Coding: Each thematic sentence was independently coded using open coding → axial coding → selective coding to distill core themes and establish connections between nodes. - c. Code Validation: The list of high-frequency terms was compared with the final coding framework to ensure comprehensive coverage of architectural symbols. - d. Cross-Group Thematic Validation: NVivo's matrix coding feature was used to identify common themes across the three cultural groups. - e. Theoretical Saturation Check: The framework was evaluated to identify any potential themes not captured through group-based coding. - f. Coding Reliability Test: Kappa coefficient analysis was applied to assess intercoder consistency in the interview coding.

This approach enabled the identification of both explicit cultural expressions of architectural symbols and cross-cultural differences in perception. Ultimately, the analysis yielded structured themes and emotional patterns in tourists' offline perceptions of architectural culture.

(3) Control Group Analysis (Online Reviews): Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling was applied to online user reviews to extract major perceptual themes. These themes served as a comparative basis for validating the results derived from the interview data.

(4) Theme Validation: Themes derived from online review analysis were compared against the interview-based themes to identify any additional perceptual content not captured in the interview coding. Interview themes were revised

accordingly to ensure comprehensiveness and reliability. Finally, the Jaccard similarity coefficient was calculated to evaluate the conceptual construct validity of the interview-based thematic framework.

It is important to note that due to the significant volume difference between online and offline textual data, direct integration of the two may cause structural imbalances. Therefore, online data was used strictly as a supplementary reference for validation rather than for integrated theme coding.

Symbolic Features of Chinese Architecture

This study adopts a structuralist linguistic approach to analyze the symbolic system of traditional Chinese architecture. Structuralism posits that cultural meaning does not reside inherently in individual elements, but rather emerges through the relational structures among signs. As a form of cultural practice, architectural meaning is not explicitly embedded within individual components, but is instead constructed through the interactive structure between the composition of elements, functional logic, and historical context [?]. Building upon this theoretical foundation, the study establishes an analytical framework that evolves through five layers: from “basic elements → symbolic system → functional roles → cultural interaction → multi-level structure.” This pathway aims to uncover the deep cultural codes embedded in classical Chinese architecture.

Methodologically, the research systematically reviews and analyzes authoritative architectural history texts, including *A History of Ancient Chinese Architecture* (Liu Dunzhen, 1984), *The Five-Volume History of Ancient Chinese Architecture* (Liu Xujie et al., 2003), and *The Symbols of Chinese Traditional Architecture* (Wang Qijun, 2007), to construct a preliminary symbolic system [?, ?, ?]. The resulting framework was reviewed and refined by two professors of traditional Chinese architecture and one folklorist to ensure historical accuracy and cultural interpretability.

In terms of symbolic classification, this study draws on Saussure’s distinction between the “signifier” and the “signified.” Architectural components, materials, and spatial layouts—i.e., visually perceptible objects—are regarded as signifiers, while the embedded meanings related to political systems, religion, and cosmology constitute the signified [?]. Following the principle of symbolic hierarchy, the symbolic system of Chinese traditional architecture is categorized into three levels: four primary symbolic categories (lexicon, syntax, grammar, and style), 24 secondary categories, and 65 tertiary categories. This framework presents a comprehensive symbolic logic that extends from material elements and spatial organization to cultural symbolism.

In sum, the symbolic system of Chinese architecture can be understood as a coherent “architectural language,” governed by unified cultural thought, yet incorporating regional variations and structural regularities. Composed of lexicon, grammar, syntax, and style, it constitutes a semiotic system with distinct cultural encoding capabilities [?].

Table 2 . Typology of Chinese Architectural Symbols

Primary Symbol (4)	Secondary Symbol	Tertiary Symbol (65)
Lexicon	Material	Timber, earth, brick/stone, tile, paint, paper (6)
	Structural Elements and Decoration	Beams and columns, dougong brackets, doors and windows, ceilings, carvings/sculptures, decorative painting/murals, plaques/couplets, paving (8)
Syntax	Main Structure	Form, color, ridge (3)
	Pedestal	Wall, door, window, corridor column (4)
Grammar	Rhetoric	Steps, railings (2)
	Discourse	Analogy, resonance, composition, association, annotation (5)
Style	Facilities	Axis, fractals, time, geomancy (4)
	Garden	Layout, pavilion/kiosk/corridor/bridge, rockery/water system/vegetation (3)
	Courtyard	Geomancy, cluster layout, communal activities, defense, clan-based settlement (5)
	Village	Transport, trade, planning, religion and social interaction (4)
	City	Round heaven and square earth, grid layout, hierarchy, zoning, defense (5)

Note: This table is based on the classification and analysis found in references [?, ?, ?] by the author. For details and interpretations of architectural symbols, see Appendix 1.

(1) Primary Symbolic Category: Lexicon

The “lexicon” represents the most fundamental unit in the architectural symbolic system, encompassing two secondary categories: materials and components. The material subcategory includes eight types of physical media, such as timber, earth, brick, stone, tile, paint, and paper. The component and decorative subcategory comprises beams and columns, dougong brackets, doors and windows, ceilings, carvings, decorative paintings, couplets and plaques, and paving. Although these elements may have limited functions in isolation, they serve as the “minimum culturally recognizable units” within the architectural whole. When components such as bricks, tiles, window panels, and inscribed plaques are assembled in specific configurations, they become signifiers imbued with cultural and institutional meanings. Their high degree of recognizability allows observers to immediately associate them with the cultural identity and traditional imagery of Chinese architecture [?].

(2) Primary Symbolic Category: Syntax

“Syntax” corresponds to the compositional rules governing component assemblage and spatial organization. It functions as an intermediary layer between basic lexicon and complete architectural structures. This category includes four secondary symbolic types: roofs, building bodies, rooms, and platforms. Within the roof subcategory, three tertiary classifications—form, color, and ridge design—highlight the ethnic decorative features and regional adaptability of architectural components. Structural logic determines how elements such as columns, beams, tiles, and wadang (decorative tile-ends) assemble into roof systems. Doors and windows, together with walls, form independent enclosures; rooms are structured through the combination of partitions and timber paneling to create relatively open spatial units; and platforms reflect both moisture prevention functions and ceremonial hierarchical order. These syntactic structures are governed by ethnic construction logic and material constraints, embodying the symbolic encoding of the modular composition system distinctive to traditional Chinese architecture [?].

(3) Primary Symbolic Category: Grammar

“Grammar” refers to the structural rules that govern syntactic combinations; it represents the deep generative mechanism by which architectural symbols move from composition to cultural production. This category includes two secondary symbolic types: rhetorical devices and discursive structures. The rhetorical subcategory consists of five tertiary symbolic forms—analogy, resonance, association, annotation, and composition—which enable indirect expression of values, emotions, and belief systems through spatial symbols. The discursive subcategory includes axis, fractal patterns, and temporality as tertiary elements, reflecting the spatial logic and narrative rhythm embedded in architectural layouts. For example, axial layouts—commonly seen in palaces and ancestral halls—emphasize spatial hierarchy and ritual order; fractal structures exhibit isomorphic patterns across courtyard, settlement, and urban scales; temporality pertains to how visitors experience spatial rhythm and pauses. As a grammatical mechanism, this layer serves both as a carrier of cultural encoding and as a structuring force

behind the narrative character of traditional Chinese architecture [?].

(4) Primary Symbolic Category: Style

“Style” refers to the expressive form through which architectural symbols convey functional roles, spatial ambience, and cultural aesthetics. It constitutes the representational mode at the compositional level, serving as an integrated manifestation of spatial intention and symbolic meaning. This category comprises six secondary types—cultural facilities, gardens, courtyards/atria, villages, market towns, and cities—and further involves elements such as layout, rockeries, water systems, spatial layering, and geomantic or religious orientations to compose distinctive “architectural texts.” For instance, the garden style emphasizes landscape aesthetics and meandering pathways; the courtyard style reflects ethical hierarchies within the family unit; market towns and villages integrate daily life with defense, transportation, and communal activities. Much like literary genres—such as poetry, prose, or fiction—architectural styles express cultural narratives within a shared grammatical system, offering diverse paths of symbolic articulation [?].

Taken together, the symbolic system of traditional Chinese architecture can be understood as a multi-layered structure composed of four primary symbolic categories: lexicon, syntax, grammar, and style. Each layer functions as a translational interface from material forms to cultural symbols, and from spatial configurations to social meanings. From a structuralist perspective, this system not only reveals the organizational rules through which architecture operates as a signifying medium, but also highlights its capacity for symbolic reproduction across time, space, and sociocultural contexts. Characterized by rigorous structural logic and rich symbolic depth, traditional Chinese architecture embodies a distinctive cultural semiotic system that balances unified expression with regional and ethnic diversity.

Empirical Analysis of Perceptual Content and Mechanisms Among Three Cultural Tourist Groups

5.1.1 High-Frequency Word Extraction and Classification

Following the previously outlined methodology, this study utilized NVivo 12 to clean and extract semantic content from 235 valid interview transcripts, resulting in 1,450 thematic sentences related to architectural culture. A total of 3,103 high-frequency words were initially extracted. After removing duplicates and applying sample-weight control across the three tourist groups at each heritage site, 607 core high-frequency words were retained. These words cover all 11 architectural heritage sites, with the distribution as follows: 243 for Group C, 182 for Group A, and 182 for Group UA. For example, in the sample of the Ancient City of Xi'an, the number of high-frequency words for each group was 22 (C), 16 (A), and 16 (UA), respectively. These high-frequency terms include concrete nouns (e.g., architectural components, forms), abstract nouns

(e.g., culture, institution), adjectives (e.g., exquisite, grand), and emotion-laden words (e.g., awe-inspiring, tranquil, mysterious). The lexical structure exhibits clear cultural orientation and high emotional density, making these terms effective input variables for subsequent semantic network construction and thematic coding analysis.

5.1.2 Construction of Perceptual Semantic Networks

Based on the high-frequency words extracted above, Gephi 0.10 was used to construct the perceptual semantic networks for the three cultural groups. The 11 architectural heritage sites were used as grouping units, and separate symbolic perception networks were created for Group C, Group A, and Group UA (Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]). The analysis revealed the following:

The network structure of Group C is tightly connected, with abundant links between nodes, and the cultural themes expressed are broad. From the semantic network, a yellow word network centered around “Forbidden City” (palace) emerged, revolving around keywords such as “power,” “imperial power,” “culture,” and “faith,” reflecting a strong identification with the nation’s history and an embedded high level of cultural awareness. Terms like “ancestors,” “bloodline,” and “heritage” frequently appeared, with spaces such as villages (e.g., Huizhou) and ancestral halls carrying connotations of cultural belonging and strong cultural identity. Words like “awe,” “reverence,” “spirit,” and “faith” emerged, demonstrating a profound sense of cultural respect, national pride, and emotional depth. The network spans from urban axial lines to villages and palaces, displaying a comprehensive understanding of heritage culture [?].

The network of Group A, in contrast, exhibits a fusion of cultures and a comparative structure. Japanese and Korean tourists primarily focused on elements like “capital city” and “dougong wooden structure,” often comparing them with their own architectural traditions. Southeast Asian tourists connected with multi-cultural imagery through terms such as “Buddhism” and “religious integration.” This structure aligns with the shared religious and aesthetic foundations of the East Asian cultural sphere [?]. Elements such as “gardens,” “small bridges,” “flowing water,” and “courtyards” formed an organic narrative, emphasizing the “flexible structure” and poetic expression of spatial layouts. This reflects a delicate perception of the cultural atmosphere behind the architecture. Words like “prayer,” “peace,” and “mystical” indicate a cultural resonance with Chinese Daoist and Buddhist spaces, though not as strongly emphasizing “orthodoxy” or “political symbolism” as in Group C. Adjectives such as “beautiful,” “elegant,” “exquisite,” “dreamlike,” and “tranquil” are frequently used, highlighting the common aesthetic experience within the East Asian cultural sphere.

Group UA’s semantic network, by contrast, is star-shaped and diffuse, with loose connections between nodes. The perception words in this group focus on highly sensory terms such as “glazed tiles,” “stone carvings,” and follows “mys-

ticism,” with emotional “architecture-function-historical events,” emphasizing the “defensive, grand, and symbolic” aspects of architecture, with terms such as “Great Wall,” “mausoleum,” “defense,” and “empire” emerging, reflecting a structured cognitive approach. Terms like “sculpture,” “exhibition,” and “museum” often appear from a perspective of “artifacts” or “historical evidence,” demonstrating a disconnection between material descriptions and the cultural perspective of the viewer. Words like “mysterious,” “spectacular,” and “breathtaking” are used, but the emotional evaluations are highly variable and often presented from a third-person detached perspective, rather than from an embedded cultural experience [?]. Most of the tourist interest is centered around the “grand narrative” and “spectacle experience,” with terms such as “magnificent,” “majestic,” “empire,” and “shocking,” reflecting the tendencies of “spectacle tourism.” Group C focuses on reconstructing national and historical connections through architecture; Group A seeks cultural resonance in spatial atmospheres; Group UA, in contrast, behaves more like “knowledge-driven travelers,” observing and analyzing the allure of foreign civilizations. These differences reflect the perceptual characteristics of heritage cognition across different cultural contexts [?].

Figure 2. Semantic Networks of Architectural Symbol Perception Among Three Cultural Groups in China

(a: Semantic network of Group C; b: Semantic network of Group A; c: Semantic network of Group UA) Created by the author.

5.1.3 Thematic Coding of Perception

Following the construction of the semantic networks, the study proceeded to systematically code the interview transcripts using the classical three-stage coding method of grounded theory [?], supported by NVivo 12 to ensure conceptual depth and logical rigor in the extraction of perception categories.

In the first stage, open coding was conducted. The research team analyzed each of the 1,450 thematic sentences, extracting 82 initial concepts, including architectural components (e.g., dougong, overhanging eaves), visual impressions (e.g., solemn, colorful), institutional markers (e.g., imperial power, ritual order), and spatial symbols (e.g., central axis, symmetry). To ensure semantic coverage and conceptual saturation, each cultural group was independently coded by different researchers, followed by cross-validation.

The second stage involved axial coding. The initial concepts were aggregated, compared, and categorized into 19 axial categories, such as cultural aesthetics, religious symbolism, social hierarchy, ethnic identity, and local memory. This process was supported by NVivo’s node-subnode system, which facilitated semantic normalization and the clarification of category structures.

In the third stage, selective coding was applied. Centering on the core question of “how tourists perceive and interpret architectural culture,” the 19 axial categories were theoretically integrated and consolidated into six overarching

ing thematic categories: Aesthetic Perception, Scientific/Productive Perception, Institutional/Ritual Perception, Power/Hierarchical Perception, Ethnic/Local Perception, and Religious/Ethical Perception.

To ensure the data reached sufficient conceptual density and theoretical support, a stepwise saturation method was employed. By the sixth round of interview samples (i.e., samples 51–60), no new concepts or themes emerged in two consecutive rounds, indicating that theoretical saturation had been achieved. Additionally, 30 interview transcripts were randomly selected for Kappa coefficient analysis, yielding a result of $k = 0.78$, which meets the standard for good intercoder reliability.

To enhance consistency across data sources, the study incorporated LDA topic modeling on online review data. Results showed that online thematic content tended to be more fragmented and semantically shallow, with topics such as: architecture and night performances, ancient architecture and history, regional architecture, cultural heritage and sacrificial practices, imperial gardens, and vernacular dwellings. Based on this, the thematic framework was primarily built on interview-based coding, with online data serving as a supplementary reference.

The six initial perception categories were thus refined and consolidated into five stable first-level thematic categories: Aesthetic Perception, Scientific/Productive Perception, Institutional/Political Perception, Ethnic/Local Perception, and Religious/Ethical Perception. To further assess consistency between the two data sources, the Jaccard similarity coefficient was calculated across the five combined perception themes, yielding a value of 0.68. This result indicates a high degree of consistency between the interview and online data, supporting the construct validity of the thematic framework derived from the interviews.

Table 3. Final Coding Examples of Perceived Themes Across Three Cultural Groups

Perception (Main Category)	Conceptual Category	Examples	Example Sentences	Coding Frequency / Highlighted Sites
Aesthetic Perception	Exquisite Deco- ra- tion, Strict Form, Bal- anced Open- ing/Closing	Aesthetic Model, Harmonious and Beautiful	(Temple of Heaven) The Hall of Prayer for Good Harvest is really beautiful, and whenever Chinese heritage tourism is introduced, it represents the aesthetic model of Chinese ancient ar- chitecture (C1-12). (Summer Palace) It almost contains all the classic elements of Chinese gardens, arranged harmo- niously and beautifully, both spacious and tranquil (C1-25).	C(170), A(130), UA(123)

Perception (Main Category)	Conceptual Category	Examples	Example Sentences	Coding Frequency / Highlighted Sites
	Grand and Ma- jestic, Well- Proportioned and Bal- anced, Ele- gant and Exquisite	Rich in Landscapes, Full of Delight and Surprise	(The Palace Museum) This place is bigger than The Grand Palace, and the buildings are much taller, but it' s not as delicate or ornate as The Grand Palace (A-17). (The Summer Palace) It' s huge, but truly beautiful. Some areas are so quiet and refined. It reminds me of Katsura Imperial Villa in Kyoto, but it' s still quite different (A-21).	

Perception (Main Category)	Conceptual Category	Examples	Example Sentences	Coding Frequency / Highlighted Sites
	Ingenious Crafts- man- ship	Massive in Scale, Over- whelming Proportion	(The Humble Adminis- trator' s Garden) Sometimes it feels like standing on the edge of a cliff, other times like walking through a sea of flowers. This place is just fascinating —so beautiful. People who lived here must' ve been incredibly romantic (UA-39).	

Perception (Main Category)	Conceptual Category	Examples	Example Sentences	Coding Frequency / Highlighted Sites
Scientific/Productive Perception	Intensive Tall, Labor- Intensive and Time-Consuming	Single Spatial Sequence, Spatial Ap- propriation of Power	(Palace Museum) The wood and stone are so massive, how did they make it feel so soft? It doesn' t even seem like wood and stone (C1-17). (Great Wall) The Great Wall is so towering and long; how much manpower did it take, and how long did it take to build? It' s truly remarkable (C2-27).	C(136), A(105), UA(98)

Perception (Main Category)	Conceptual Category	Examples	Example Sentences	Coding Frequency / Highlighted Sites
Institutional/Political Perception	Ritual System, Symbol of Social or Political Status	Imperial Authority	The sheer scale of Xi' an' s ancient city and the Palace Museum is truly over- whelming— there' s nothing like this kind of urban form in Southeast Asian countries (A-33). He unified all of China and built himself this massive tomb—with an enormous under- ground palace. That' s just unbe- lievable (A-49).	C(76), A(57), UA(49)

Perception (Main Category)	Conceptual Category	Examples	Example Sentences	Coding Frequency / Highlighted Sites
	Clan- Based Liv- ing, Cul- tural Ambi- ence, Liveli- hood Shaped by Local Geog- raphy	Site-Specific Adaptation, Developed Waterway Transporta- tion, Thriving Local Commerce	(Xi' an) This is the largest ancient city I' ve ever seen— the city walls and towers are so tall, and the royal palace ruins are just huge (UA-48). (The Great Wall) It' s such an incredible feat of en- gineering. After all this time, it' s still standing— just amazing (UA-26).	

Perception (Main Category)	Conceptual Category	Examples	Example Sentences	Coding Frequency / Highlighted Sites
Ethnic/Local Perception	Tranquil Har- mo- nious, Ori- ental Scroll Im- agery, Eth- nic Diver- sity	Quest for Outstand- ing Craftsman- ship, Skilled Tools, National Power	(Confucius Temple) From the main gate, you pass through several arches and gates. It' s a long way to the main hall, which stands so tall—it really shows how highly people regard Confucius (C1-40). (The Palace Museum) Basically the emperor' s mansion— the biggest one in China. Back then, the emperors made common people build palaces for them (C2-13).	C(112), A(84), UA(77)

Perception (Main Category)	Conceptual Category	Examples	Example Sentences	Coding Frequency / Highlighted Sites
Religious/Ethical Perception	Education, geo- mancy, Con- cepts, Na- ture Wor- ship	Immortality, Ancestor Worship, Confine- ment Education	(Confucius Temple) Walking through this kind of space feels really solemn. Why does this temple in Qufu feel similar to the Palace in Beijing? Isn' t the dragon symbol only for emperors? So is Confucius treated like an emperor? (A-42) (The Palace Museum) The emperor sat so high up—those dragons on the throne look fierce. He must' ve been a pretty in- timidating guy (UA-29).	C(86), A(60), UA(43)

Perception (Main Category)	Conceptual Category	Examples	Example Sentences	Coding Frequency / Highlighted Sites
	Moral Edu- ca- tion, Reli- gious Gar- dens, geo- mancy Con- cepts	Moral Benchmark, Nature Worship, Longevity and Health	(Hongcun) Most villagers here are related— close family members live in the same house, with rooms arranged by age and seniority (C1-52). (The Humble Adminis- trator' s Garden) I studied classical Chinese poems about gardens in school. Being here brings those lines to life—our ancestors had such refined taste (C2-76). (Wuzhen) These small bridges, flowing water, houses,	
			and the river markets— all this shaped the gentle, poetic character	Machine Translation

Perception (Main Category)	Conceptual Category	Example Sentences	Coding Frequency / Highlighted Sites
		(Hongcun) These houses look like little fortresses. Were they for war? Or to keep out thieves? (A-57). (Wuzhen) Boats carry goods in and out of town—that' s how it got so prosperous. It reminds me of Damnoen Saduak in Bangkok (A-31).	

Perception (Main Category)	Conceptual Category	Example Sentences	Coding Frequency / Highlighted Sites
		(Hongcun) The alleys are like a maze, and there' s a stream running beside them—the sound of water is really soothing (UA-48). (Wuzhen) People here live by the water, travel by boat, and trade along the river. It' s like something out of a medieval movie scene (UA-46). (Xi' an) There' s this Muslim street—it' s got amazing street food and a strong Middle Eastern vibe	
		(UA-38).	Machine Translation

Perception (Main Category)	Conceptual CategoryExamples	Example Sentences	Coding Frequency / Highlighted Sites
		(Mount Wudang) Came here to seek guidance from the Wudang master and enjoy the beautiful scenery. The Golden Hall is so high—it' s a real test to climb up here (C1-87). (Hongcun) Coming back home for the New Year, we go to the ancestral hall with my family to pay respects and pray for our ancestors' blessings (C1-76). (Hongcun) All the buildings are multi-story, and unmarried women live	
	chinarxiv.org/items/chinaxiv-202506.00299	upstairs without leaving the house. I wonder how they develop mentally in this	Machine Translation

Perception (Main Category)	Conceptual Category	Example Sentences	Coding Frequency / Highlighted Sites
		(Tangyue Village) Japan also has birdhouses (Torii) similar to memorial archways, but they don' t have as much variety or content (A-41). (The Summer Palace) People in Singapore follow Taoism and Buddhism too, but there aren' t any gardens directly related to religion like this one. It' s really interesting (A-38). (Hongcun) Does geomancy help protect us? Is it the same as the Bod-	
		hisattva in Buddhist temples? (A-61)	Machine Translation

Perception (Main Category)	Conceptual CategoryExamples	Example Sentences	Coding Frequency / Highlighted Sites
		(Tangyue Village) At first, I thought the memorial archways were to honor warriors or generals, but the truth was very different from what I imagined (UA-58). (Temple of Heaven) The 'Heaven' that Chinese people worship—is it an invisible, omnipotent god like God, or a visible god (UA-28)? (Mount Wudang) Many people in Europe know about Chinese Taoism, especially	
	chinarxiv.org/items/chinaxiv-202506.00299	the Taoist priests who practice martial arts and magic—it's very	Machine Translation

Note: Table compiled by the author.

5.2 Analysis of Perceptual Theme Differences

In the previous section, through hierarchical thematic coding of offline interview texts and LDA analysis of online review texts, five core perception themes were validated and finalized through cross-source comparison: Aesthetic Perception, Scientific/Productive Perception, Institutional/Political Perception, Ethnic/Local Perception, and Religious/Ethical Perception (Table 3).

(1) Aesthetic Perception: Cultural Differences in Interpreting Architectural Imagery

All three cultural groups demonstrated high sensitivity toward aesthetic perception, with primary points of focus including building materials, components, colors, decorative elements, and garden landscapes. However, notable cultural preferences emerged in the way architectural beauty was interpreted.

Group C exhibited a strong sense of cultural familiarity and aesthetic intimacy. Participants were able to recognize specific architectural elements (e.g., dougong, wadang tile-ends, mythical beasts, and inscribed plaques) and imbue them with cultural meaning. Architectural forms were often described using terms such as “solemn,” “exquisite,” and “splendid.” For instance: “The Summer Palace almost contains all the classic elements of Chinese gardens—both expansive and serene.” (C1-25) This aesthetic preference reflects the traditional Chinese concept of *xing-shen jianbei* (integration of form and spirit), deeply rooted in Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist cultural contexts. It emphasizes the symbolic significance behind formal expression.

Group A placed greater emphasis on the harmony between spatial layout and nature. Their descriptions favored terms such as “tranquil,” “spacious,” and “layered.” Participants often related the architectural aesthetics to lived cultural experiences, drawing analogies with Japanese courtyards or Thai palaces. For example: “This place is much bigger and taller than The Grand Palace, but not as delicate.” (A-17) This perspective reflects the lasting influence of the *Tian-Ren He-Yi* (unity of heaven and humanity) philosophy on architectural imagery within the East Asian cultural sphere.

Group UA, by contrast, tended to use visually affective descriptors such as “magnificent,” “colorful,” and “mysterious” to describe architectural appearances and atmospheres. However, their understanding lacked depth regarding structural details and symbolic connotations. Chinese traditional architecture was often perceived as an “exotic spectacle,” evoking both visual stimulation and cultural imagination. One participant noted: “Wow! It’s like wandering through a maze—so much fun.” (UA-39) This perspective aligns with the concept of the Oriental gaze, shaped by Western romanticism and exoticism, and reflects a gaze characterized by visual fascination rather than symbolic interpretation.

(2) Scientific/Productive Perception: Multiple Interpretive Paths to Construction Logic

Scientific and productive perception refers to the way tourists, through observing and experiencing structural systems, material choices, construction techniques, and spatial layouts of traditional Chinese architecture, come to appreciate the technological ingenuity and organizational capability embedded in historical Chinese building practices. While all three cultural groups expressed high regard for this dimension, their perceptual emphases and interpretive frameworks differed significantly across cultural contexts.

Group C exhibited a strong sense of historical awareness and cultural pride. Their attention extended beyond the scale of the buildings and the use of materials to emphasize the “craftsmanship, institutional coordination, and historical continuity” underlying these elements. As one visitor from mainland China remarked during a visit to the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor: “How many people must have been mobilized, and how long must it have taken to complete this? Truly remarkable.” (C2-27) Such comments reflect not only admiration for architectural technique but also appreciation for the state’s capacity to mobilize large-scale engineering efforts. This perceptual mode is closely tied to the Chinese cultural tradition of *Tiangong Kaiwu* (Heavenly Craftsmanship, 1637 Ming Dynasty encyclopedia) and a shared collective memory of historical state-led construction [?].

Group A participants tended to interpret Chinese architectural science by drawing analogies with traditional construction techniques from their own countries. For example, Japanese and Southeast Asian visitors often expressed awe at the scale, structural logic, and modular assembly of Chinese heritage sites such as the Forbidden City or the Great Wall, frequently noting the absence of similar large-scale historical constructions in their own cultural contexts. “This is much larger than the palaces in Kyoto, and the spatial organization is quite complex.” (A-33) Such comparative perspectives reveal both similarities and differences among technological systems across East Asian cultures [?].

Group UA, in contrast, tended to adopt an exploratory and analytical lens, focusing on questions like “how it was built” or “how many workers were involved.” They showed strong interest in the construction scale, material transportation, and structural design processes. As one British tourist commented on the Great Wall: “After all this time, it’s still standing—what an achievement.” (UA-26) This approach reflects a modern engineering perspective, typical of low-context Western cultures [?], in which attention is given to the mechanisms and procedural logic of architectural production [?].

(3) Institutional/Political Perception: Cultural Cognition of Hierarchical Space

Institutional and political perception focuses on how tourists interpret social hierarchy and cultural order through architectural forms, spatial layouts, and symbolic decorations. In traditional Chinese architecture, elements such as

axial symmetry, platform elevation, and gate-pavilion arrangements function as spatial symbols of institutional authority. These features often evoke complex responses among tourists regarding political history and cultural identity.

Group C exhibited pronounced cultural familiarity and historical emotionality. They were able to discern institutional meanings such as “imperial power,” “hierarchy,” and “ritual order” from architectural forms, frequently using evaluative terms like “majestic,” “solemn,” and “imposing.” For instance, after visiting the Confucian Temple, one mainland Chinese tourist remarked: “The main hall is so tall and ornate—it shows how deeply Confucius was respected at the time.” (C1-44) This reflects a sense of cultural reverence among Chinese tourists toward symbolic architectures of power, often accompanied by reflexive thinking on historical periods. Such perception is rooted in China’s Confucian tradition of *li zhi* (ritual governance) and its high power distance cultural orientation [?].

Group A, though less familiar with the underlying logic of Chinese institutional systems, generally expressed awe toward the perceived “sense of hierarchy” and “ritual atmosphere” manifested in architectural spaces. They formed impressions largely through intuitive responses to building scale and spatial sequencing. As one Southeast Asian tourist commented: “These buildings are very grand and refined, but I can’t really say what they represent.” (A-38) For this group, such architecture was perceived more as a solemn ceremonial space than as an embodiment of institutional function.

Group UA tended to view symbolic structures such as palaces and city walls as “materialized representations of historical power.” Their responses often carried a tone of distance and analytical observation. For example, an American tourist remarked: “The buildings in the Forbidden City are so tall—you’d normally only see something like this in a movie.” (UA-29) This mode of cultural viewing reflects a detached stance shaped by low power distance and highly individualistic cultural backgrounds, which tend to perceive power spaces as “cultural others” [?].

(4) Ethnic/Local Perception: Divergent Understandings of Indigenous Culture

Ethnic and local perception refers to how tourists interpret cultural diversity and regional traditions through their experience of architectural features that reflect ethnic identity and geographic specificity. Traditional Chinese architecture—through village patterns, waterway systems, environmental adaptability, and decorative symbols—presents vivid markers of ethnic and regional cultures, eliciting varied associations and emotional responses among tourists from different cultural backgrounds.

Group C demonstrated a high degree of emotional identification with vernacular architecture. Visitors often linked spatial forms such as ancestral halls, *siheyuan* (courtyard houses), and Jiangnan water towns to meanings of “hometown,” “ancestry,” and “tradition,” generating a strong sense of cultural belonging. As one tourist from Jilin, China, noted during a visit to Hongcun: “Most villagers

here are related. Families with closer blood ties tend to live near each other.” (C1-52) This type of interpretation stems from familiarity with the spatial logic of lineage-based communities and ethical hierarchies—an example of culturally embedded perception [?].

Group A visitors expressed curiosity toward Chinese local cultures, often seeking analogical understanding through cultural similarities. For instance, a tourist from the Philippines remarked: “These houses look like fortresses—very different from the *siheyuan* I saw in Beijing a few days ago, but also somehow similar.” (A-57) Such comments reveal that when encountering unfamiliar ethnic or local symbols, visitors attempt to bridge comprehension gaps by referencing comparable experiences from their own cultural backgrounds [?].

Group UA tended to perceive locality through the lens of a “cultural landscape.” Their responses frequently emphasized the connection between architecture, natural environment, and everyday life, using descriptors such as “rustic,” “tranquil,” or “cinematic.” One British tourist described Wuzhen as: “The scenery here is beautiful...like a medieval movie scene.” (UA-46) At Hongcun, many UA visitors expressed surprise at the presence of same-surname clans and spatial lineage clustering, reflecting both a perceptual gap regarding Chinese kinship-based spatial organization and a tendency toward romanticized imagination in cross-cultural observation [?].

(5) Religious/Ethical Perception: Cross-Cultural Interpretations of Faith and Moral Order

Religious and ethical perception centers on how tourists understand the embedded systems of religious belief and cultural norms through architectural symbols such as sacrificial altars, religious temples, and ancestral halls. This dimension reveals how architectural space functions as a carrier of religious institutions and ethical ideologies, perceived differently across cultural contexts.

Group C generally displayed a deep understanding of Chinese religious architecture. They were able to distinguish spatial features associated with Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, and relate these features to their own ethical experiences. For example, a tourist from Beijing remarked after visiting an ancestral hall in Hongcun: “Ancestral halls are not just buildings—they are places for honoring ancestors and passing down family traditions.” (C1-76) This type of perception reflects the spatial articulation of Confucian filial piety and family ethics, and illustrates Chinese tourists’ cultural familiarity with the architectural embodiment of the patriarchal-ritual order (*zongfa zhixu*) [?].

Group A visitors, many of whom come from cultures with Confucian-Buddhist-Daoist backgrounds, typically expressed reverence and cultural affinity toward religious spaces, though their understanding of the underlying ethical systems was often limited. A Japanese tourist, for instance, remarked after viewing a memorial archway in Huizhou: “Chinese *paifang* are much more complex than Japanese *torii*. In Japan, we don’t have so many types or symbolic layers.” (A-41) Such comparative expressions reflect an analogical mode of perception

based on cultural proximity—one that identifies difference within similarity and builds understanding through contrast.

Group UA, by contrast, tended to interpret religious symbols in Chinese architecture from the perspective of a “religious other.” Their comments often included terms such as “mysterious,” “symbolic,” or “ritual space” to express fascination with the spiritual dimensions of these sites. For example, a French visitor commented at Wudang Mountain: “Many people in Europe have heard about Chinese Daoism—especially that Daoist priests can do kung fu and magic. It’s mysterious. Some say they live longer. I heard some people still practice it.” (UA-63) This mode of perception reflects an aesthetic-emotional orientation framed by religious anthropology and mysticism, wherein spiritual space is viewed through a lens of exotic fascination [?].

In summary, the analysis of the five perception themes—Aesthetic Perception, Scientific/Productive Perception, Institutional/Political Perception, Ethnic/Local Perception, and Religious/Ethical Perception—reveals both convergence and divergence in the way the three cultural groups (C, A, and UA) perceive architectural heritage. These differences are not only reflected in symbolic recognition and emotional responses, but more profoundly manifest in the underlying value systems, perceptual modes, and interpretive frameworks shaped by their respective cultural backgrounds.

Group C, as culturally embedded participants, demonstrated a high level of cultural familiarity and symbolic literacy. They were able not only to identify architectural elements but also to contextualize them within specific historical narratives and ethical systems. Their perceptions reflected strong national identity, a sense of historical continuity, and the capacity to sustain collective memory. This mode of perception is deeply influenced by China’s Confucian ritual governance structure and collectivist cultural traditions.

Group A, as cultural affiliates, expressed both recognition and respect toward Chinese architectural symbols. They engaged in cultural comparison to construct understanding, often employing analogical strategies to interpret spatial order, aesthetic forms, and ethical symbols. Their perception path was characterized by “finding difference within resonance and building dialogue through contrast.” This approach benefits from the institutional and aesthetic affinities shared across the East Asian cultural sphere.

Group UA, as cultural outsiders, perceived Chinese architecture primarily through visual observation, exploratory engagement, and symbolic interpretation. Their responses emphasized sensory experience and cultural imagination, often viewing architecture as a representation of “exotic culture.” Interpretive perspectives tended to be romanticized, mystified, or historicized.

Overall, the three cultural groups construct distinct perceptual pathways toward architectural heritage: internalized, comparative, and observational. This also confirms the shaping effect of cultural value dimensions—such as Power Distance Index (PDI), Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV), and Long-Term Orientation

(LTO)—on heritage perception mechanisms. In the future, cross-cultural communication and presentation of architectural heritage should fully consider such perceptual heterogeneity. Strategies such as multi-contextual interpretation, emotionally resonant symbolic narration, and immersive scene-based interaction can enhance visitors' cultural understanding and foster experiential inclusivity on a global scale.

5.3.1 Extraction and Categorization of Emotion Words

(1) Emotion Word Extraction: Based on the previously identified high-frequency words related to architectural perception, this study employed NVivo 12 software to extract emotion-related words from the interview transcripts of the three cultural groups. A total of 121 high-frequency emotional terms were identified. The research team then manually reviewed these terms, assessing their contextual meanings and relevance to architectural symbols. Words with weak relevance to architectural culture, semantic redundancy, or unclear representation were excluded. Ultimately, 110 emotion words were retained, distributed across the cultural groups as follows: 45 for Group C, 30 for Group A, and 35 for Group UA (see Appendix 2). Some overlap of emotion terms across different groups is considered normal and expected.

(2) Emotion Word Categorization and Visualization: Using NVivo 12's semantic classification function, the emotional vocabulary of each group was categorized. This process was theoretically grounded in Russell's Circumplex Model of Affect [?] and Tsai's Affect Valuation Index (AVI) [?, ?]. By referencing the NRC Emotion Lexicon and its Chinese extension, the study performed cultural clustering of the 110 high-frequency emotional terms in relation to the cross-cultural characteristics of architectural perception.

As a result, fifteen distinct emotional categories were identified: awe, pride, curious, surprise, appreciate, respect, belong, identity, resonance, nostalgia, familiarity, pleasure, detached, confused, and reflect. These categories range from positive aesthetic responses to feelings of disconnection or confusion, capturing the culturally symbolic orientation of architectural perception.

These emotions are distributed across three quadrants of the affective space. High-arousal, positive-valence emotions typically reflect strong affective evaluations of architecture, such as admiration for aesthetic, cultural, or functional aspects. Low-arousal, positive-valence emotions tend to indicate rational and objective appreciation without fluctuation. Low-arousal, negative-valence emotions often signal difficulty in interpreting architectural symbols or induce self-reflective responses rooted in one's own cultural framework. No emotion types were observed in the high-arousal, negative-valence quadrant (Quadrant II), which is consistent with the general motivational pattern of tourism—that is, visitors typically do not seek out experiences associated with pain or anxiety (Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]).

Figure 3. Distribution of 15 Emotional Categories Across Quadrants

(by the author)

Based on the clustering results presented above and the empirical context of this study, the fifteen identified emotional categories were further operationalized and mapped into an emotional typology matrix of Chinese architectural symbols for the three cultural groups (see Table 4). In this matrix, red, brown, and blue color blocks respectively represent the C group, A group, and UA group. It is important to note that, according to Tsai's (2007) model of ideal affect, the C and A groups exhibit a stronger preference for low-arousal affiliative emotions (e.g., identity, nostalgia), whereas the UA group tends to favor high-arousal exploratory emotions (e.g., awe, excitement). As shown in Table 4, even when facing their own cultural heritage, the C group does not display a significantly higher presence of high-arousal positive (HP) emotions compared to the UA group.

Table 4. Emotional Typology Matrix of Chinese Architectural Symbols for Three Groups

Quadrant	Emotion Categories	Group C	Group A	Group UA
High-Arousal Positive (HP)	awe, pride, surprise, curious			
Low-Arousal Positive (LP)	appreciate, respect, belong, identity, resonance, nostalgia, familiarity, pleasure			
Low-Arousal Negative (LN)	reflect, detached, confused			

Note: Table compiled by the author.

5.3.2 Emotional Differences Among the Three Cultural Groups

(1) Emotional Characteristics of Group C: Resonance and Reflection

The emotional responses of Group C to Chinese architectural heritage are primarily characterized by high-arousal positive (HP) and low-arousal positive (LP) emotions. Both the density and diversity of emotional word frequencies are significantly higher than those of the other two groups, indicating a deeply culturally embedded perceptual pathway. HP emotions such as awe, pride, and reverence are frequently associated with spaces symbolic of political authority—such as roofs, facilities, and cities—reflecting strong identification with the nation's history and an embedded high level of cultural awareness. LP emotions

such as belonging, identity, and familiarity are predominantly linked to villages, courtyards, and other vernacular spaces, reinforcing everyday emotional connections to ancestry and local culture [?]. Although relatively infrequent, Group C also exhibits some low-arousal negative (LN) emotions, such as reflection, particularly when encountering institutional architectural spaces like palaces. Overall, their emotional structure is dominated by HP + LP emotions, with minimal LN presence, and exhibits the widest range of emotional categories—characteristic of a highly engaged cultural participant.

(2) Emotional Characteristics of Group A: Empathy and Analogy

Group A demonstrates the traits of an empathic cultural participant, with a balanced distribution of HP and LP emotions. Their emotional responses toward architectural spaces tend to follow a pathway of analogy, interpretation, and moderate resonance. HP emotions such as awe, curiosity, and surprise are commonly triggered by architectural symbols like roofs, elements, and platforms, especially in the presence of grand or ornate structures, which elicit strong spatial impact. LP emotions such as appreciation, identity, and peacefulness are concentrated in gardens, courtyards, and villages, and are emotionally analogous to the Confucian-symbolic systems of “ritual-nature-family” shared across East Asian cultural contexts. Additionally, Group A shows a moderate presence of LN emotions, such as reflection and detachment, often linked to institutional architecture or culturally opaque symbols. This tendency reflects a cautious and respectful attitude when facing perceptual barriers, consistent with low-context communication cultures [?]. For example, an Indonesian tourist questioned in front of the Confucian Temple in Qufu: “Is Confucius considered equivalent to an emperor?” (A-42)—indicating uncertainty about institutional logic and a heightened sensitivity to cultural differences within this group.

(3) Emotional Characteristics of the UA Group: Surprise and Distance

The UA group demonstrates an emotionally structured profile of a “peripheral observer,” dominated by high-arousal, positive (HP) emotions in their experiences of Chinese architectural heritage. Their overall perception pathway can be summarized as a three-stage process: sensory dominance → symbolic interpretation → cultural distance. HP emotions such as surprise, awe, and curiosity frequently appear in response to large-scale or culturally unfamiliar architectural symbols such as roofs, platforms, facilities, and cities. These emotional responses reflect a typical sensory shock and exploratory inclination when confronted with “monumental structures in an alien culture” [?]. Low-arousal, positive (LP) emotions—such as pleasure and appreciation—appear less frequently, mainly in spaces characterized by harmonious environment and organic spatial composition, such as gardens, courtyards, and towns. This pattern illustrates the influence of the picturesque gaze, rooted in the Western romanticist tradition of heritage appreciation [?]. Compared to the other two groups, the UA group exhibits significantly more low-arousal, negative (LN) emotions, such as confusion, detachment, and strangeness, particularly when encountering archi-

tectural elements, symbols, or textual references rich in cultural coding but lacking interpretive clarity. These emotional reactions are often linked to a lack of relevant cultural background knowledge. For instance, one French tourist misinterpreted the function of a *paifang* (memorial archway), illustrating the difficulty of perceptual conversion [?].

Summary of Emotional Differences and Cultural Mechanisms

The emotional responses of the three cultural groups—C, A, and UA—toward Chinese architectural heritage reveal that cultural familiarity, perceptual structure, and value orientation are key mechanisms shaping the distribution of emotional categories.

Group C, as culturally embedded participants, exhibits a dominant HP + LP emotional structure with minimal LN emotions. This pattern is closely associated with their extensive cultural capital, strong national identity, and historical familiarity, in which architecture serves as a trigger for collective memory and cultural belonging.

Group A, as cultural affiliates, shows high emotional sensitivity across both HP and LP dimensions, along with moderate LN emotions related to reflection and detachment. This dual mechanism of identification and distancing enables emotional grounding for intercultural analogy and understanding, arising from both shared cultural heritage and perceptual gaps in institutional or ritual interpretation.

Group UA presents a structure marked by salient HP, pronounced LN, and sparse LP emotions. Their affective responses are primarily driven by visual stimulus and spatial magnitude, often resulting in powerful emotional reactions. However, due to cultural distance and the lack of deep semantic access, emotional disconnection and cognitive confusion frequently occur.

As shown in Table 4, the emotional structures of the three groups align with three distinct cross-cultural affective pathways: immersive (C), analogical (A), and observational (UA). These findings suggest that in the future, cultural heritage presentation and interpretation should adopt differentiated strategies such as group-specific guided tours, emotionally resonant symbolic interpretation, and visual-affective resonance design—in order to enhance intercultural understanding and emotional co-construction in heritage experiences.

5.4.1 A Five-Stage Model of Perceptual Pathways

Drawing on Peirce's Triadic Theory of Signs and Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism, this study proposes a five-stage model for tourists' architectural perceptual pathways:

1. **Symbol Discovery:** Tourists first identify the built environment through sensory input—such as spatial organization, color, and form—activating attentional mechanisms within the travel setting.

2. **Primary Perception:** Initial aesthetic responses and affective arousal arise based on the building's form, materials, and spatial structure.
3. **Meaning Interpretation:** Tourists classify, interpret, and assign cultural affiliation to architectural symbols based on their own knowledge base, cultural schemata, and prior experience.
4. **Interactive Feedback:** Experiences are externalized through photography, social media sharing, verbal evaluations, and other forms of expression.
5. **Cultural Internalization:** Architectural experiences are transformed into long-term memory and cultural perception, forming value judgments or affective affiliations.

This model integrates theoretical frameworks from visual culture [?], perceptual psychology [?], and tourism narrative studies [?], offering both strong explanatory power and practical applicability.

5.4.2 Differences in Perceptual Mechanisms Among Cultural Groups

Based on the five-stage model, the study further conducts a cross-group summary of the perceptual characteristics exhibited by the three cultural groups (see Table 5). The analysis reveals significant differences in how tourists from distinct cultural backgrounds navigate symbol recognition and emotional internalization:

Table 5. Differences in Architectural Perception Mechanisms Among Tourists from Three Groups

Stage	Group C (Culturally Embedded Type)	Group A (Culturally Affiliated Type)	Group UA (Cultural Otherness Type)
Symbol Identification	Identification of Traditional Architectural Elements	Attention to Culturally Familiar Components	Visual Spectacle Identification
Primary Perception	Triggering of Cultural Emotions	Comparative Interpretation / Sensory Resonance	Spectacular Contemplation / Affective Awe
Meaning Interpretation	Analysis of Ritual Logic / Mobilization of Historical Memory	Cultural Analogy / Recognition of Differences	Labeling Understanding / Construction of Exoticism
Interactive Response	Active Contemplation / Internalized Expression	Rational Inquiry / Dialogic Feedback	Selfie-Sharing / Cross-Cultural Narrativization

Stage	Group C (Culturally Embedded Type)	Group A (Culturally Affiliated Type)	Group UA (Cultural Otherness Type)
Cultural Sense of Belonging / In-Formation of Cultural Identity		Cross-Cultural Comparison / Mnemonic Construction	Fragmented Experience / Visual-Dominant Memory

Note: Table compiled by the author.

Group C: Tends to recognize ritual-symbolic elements (e.g., central axes, dougong brackets) and activates historical memory and ethnic sentiment during meaning interpretation. Their interactive expressions are typically low-key and immersive, ultimately leading to a strong sense of cultural identity [?].

Group A: Shows preference for architectural elements similar to their own cultural traditions, such as Buddhist symbols and timber construction techniques. Through cultural analogy and comparison, they construct understanding of Chinese architecture. Their interactions are characterized by questioning and dialogue, reflecting high cultural engagement [?].

Group UA: Approaches heritage sites through a “visual spectacle” mode, focusing on color, proportion, and structural features. They frequently engage in selfies, hashtags, and social media posting to construct a sense of the exotic. Their perception is often marked by surprise, exoticization, and symbolic consumption.

Based on the above analysis of the three cultural groups, this study summarizes three distinct perception mechanism pathways:

- **Culturally Embedded Type:** Represented by Group C, this pathway emphasizes historical consensus, institutional familiarity, and familial-national affective bonds (*jia-guo qinggan*).
- **Culturally Affiliated Type:** Represented by Group A, this mode focuses on religious commonality and interpretive analogy between cultures.
- **Cultural Otherness Type:** Represented by Group UA, this pattern is characterized by visual defamiliarization and emotion-driven experiential consumption.

These differences are reflected across emotional responses, meaning construction, and modes of feedback expression. They are not only shaped by cultural background, but are also closely related to social identity, educational structure, and travel motivation [?].

The current model does not yet incorporate contextual variables such as interpretation modes, site layout, or language mediation. Future research could integrate technological interventions (e.g., AR, multilingual audio guides) and

social constructionist perspectives to explore the dynamic modulation mechanisms of perception pathways, thereby advancing a more adaptive model for multicultural communication in architectural heritage interpretation [?].

Conclusion

6.1 Research Findings

Grounded in cultural semiotics and informed by cultural psychology and cross-cultural behavioral theories, this study systematically investigates the perceptual differences among three cultural groups—visitors from mainland China and Hong Kong/Macau/Taiwan (Group C), East and Southeast Asia (Group A), and Western countries (Group UA)—in their experiences of Chinese architectural heritage sites. Drawing on bilingual textual analysis of 235 in-depth interviews and 1,500 online reviews, the study identifies five core perception themes and fifteen culturally coded emotional types. The main conclusions are as follows:

(1) Cultural memory influences the interpretive pathways of architectural symbols

Cultural background profoundly shapes the mechanism through which visitors understand architectural symbols. Group C generally perceives traditional architecture as a material carrier of collective memory, emphasizing patriotic sentiments and historical continuity, and exhibiting a strong sense of emotional belonging. Group A tends to adopt a strategy of analogical perception, seeking cultural resonance through similarities in spatial configuration, formal aesthetics, and ethical connotations between Chinese and their native architectures. Group UA primarily engages with heritage through a spectatorial-experiential approach, focusing on the exotic and deconstructive qualities of architecture in terms of visual aesthetics and symbolic schema. These findings align closely with Chronis' s (2012) argument that visitors construct storied meaning in cultural spaces [?].

(2) Emotional structures exhibit significant cross-cultural psychological differences

Applying Russell' s (1980) Circumplex Model of Affect [?] and Tsai' s (2007) theory of ideal affect [?], the study reveals clear cross-cultural variation in emotional expression patterns. Group C demonstrates high emotional density, with a nested emotional structure combining high-arousal, positive (e.g., pride, reverence) and low-arousal, positive emotions (e.g., identity, nostalgia). Group A displays predominantly neutral-affective tones, including appreciation and resonance, often accompanied by moderate cultural reflection. Group UA exhibits a dual-structure composed of high-arousal, positive emotions (e.g., awe, curiosity) and low-arousal, negative emotions (e.g., detachment, confusion), highlighting the psychological tension produced by cultural distance. These findings resonate with Tsai' s insights on how ideal affect is differentially expressed across cultures.

(3) Cultural values shape the depth and preference of architectural perception

Incorporating Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions framework [?], the study further explores how cultural value orientations influence the selectivity and interpretation of architectural experience. Group C, shaped by high collectivism and high power distance, tends to prefer architecture featuring ritual significance, ancestral reverence, and national symbolism, such as ancestral temples and imperial palaces. Group A exhibits a strong capacity to perceive historical continuity and institutional similarity, showing appreciation for the synchronicity of ethics and spatial structure. Group UA, influenced by low-context cultural preferences, is more inclined toward visual symbols that are image-based and abstract, but shows limited resonance with deeper metaphorical or religious meanings encoded in architecture. These findings are consistent with previous research on cultural perception differences informed by Hofstede's cross-cultural value framework.

6.2.1 Advancing Cross-Cultural Tourism Theories

(1) Integrating Cultural Psychology to Refine Perception Mechanism Models

Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on cultural dimensions or perceptual differences [?, ?], this study incorporates Tsai's Ideal Affect theory, moving beyond simplistic cultural value analyses. By linking tourists' emotional responses to architecture with their culturally shaped ideal emotional states, the study emphasizes the cultural plasticity of affective reactions. This approach offers a novel explanatory mechanism for why tourists exhibit divergent emotional responses to similar architectural elements.

(2) Constructing a Micro-Level Model of "Architectural Perception"

By aligning the classification of architectural symbols with tourists' emotional reactions, and drawing on Hall's (1980) theory of cultural encoding/decoding [?], we developed a five-stage perception model—symbol discovery → primary perception → meaning interpretation → interactive feedback → cultural internalization. This model not only responds to semiotic concerns about meaning construction, but also aligns with the growing scholarly emphasis on micro-process mechanisms in cultural interaction [?].

(3) Establishing an Analytical Framework for Cultural-Affective Mapping

Through the integration of emotional clustering and cultural group types, the study constructs a reusable cross-cultural affective distribution map. This framework provides a generalizable analytical template for future research on architectural heritage and emotional dynamics in tourism.

6.2.2 Experience Enhancement Strategies for Diverse Cultural Groups

To translate these findings into actionable strategies for heritage tourism, we propose the following differentiated approaches:

- **For Group C**, we recommend strengthening narratives of collective memory and integrating nation-family storytelling into guided interpretation to enhance cultural identity and emotional resonance.
- **For Group A**, we encourage the use of cultural analogy, emphasizing comparative display of Chinese and foreign architectural structures and facilitating cross-cultural resonance through interpretive design.
- **For Group UA**, we suggest simplifying interpretive contexts, incorporating multilingual and immersive technologies such as AR reconstruction and narrative-based audio guides, in order to lower the cognitive threshold for symbolic decoding and enhance symbolic-affective experience.

In sum, experience strategies should be developed through a three-pronged framework: cultural adaptation, emotional guidance, and media alignment, as follows:

1. **Culturally Adaptive Curatorial Strategies:** Heritage curators and interpreters should account for emotional distance between cultures. For Group UA in particular, we recommend avoiding culturally exclusive political or ritual terminology, and instead employing visually intuitive, symbolically rich design approaches.
2. **Emotion-Oriented and Immersive Communication Strategies:** By leveraging digital humanities tools and VR/AR technologies, practitioners can link emotional categories to architectural symbols, thereby realizing affect-enhanced navigation. This technique encourages tourists to move beyond surface-level viewing and engage in deeper cultural understanding and emotional resonance.
3. **Development of Culturally Adaptive Multilingual Guide Systems:** It is essential to develop guide systems that are emotionally and culturally adaptive for different visitor groups. For Group C, content should emphasize collective memory and national narratives; for Group A, highlight analogies in spatial and institutional structures; and for Group UA, prioritize visually and sensorily oriented content design.

6.3 Limitations and Future Directions

(1) Further Refinement of Cultural Group Categorization

This study primarily categorized cultural groups based on cultural distance. Future research could enrich this framework by incorporating intra-group cultural variability, travel motivation, and emotional regulation capacity. Doing so would enhance the psychological depth of cross-cultural perception research.

(2) Limited Multimodality in Data Collection

The current research relies predominantly on textual analysis. Future studies should integrate multimodal data sources such as eye-tracking, facial expression recognition, and behavioral observation, to enable a more comprehensive analysis of the perception-emotion-behavior linkage [?].

(3) Underdeveloped Modeling of Tourist Behavioral Transformation

While this study proposes that emotional structures influence cultural understanding, it does not construct a systematic model of how tourists' affective responses transform into perception and behavior. Future research could employ structural equation modeling (SEM) to test causal pathways between emotional dimensions, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty.

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Note: The terminology related to traditional Chinese architecture, gardens, and other relevant concepts in this paper follows the 1996 official glossary issued by the National Committee for Terms in Sciences and Technologies (China). For terms not included in that glossary, the translation adopts expressions commonly used by Chinese government sources, international organizations, and mainstream academic publications in the global scholarly community.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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