

Sounds and Positions: Visual Interpretation of Ming Forbidden City in Court Ritual Practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an interdisciplinary study of Ming dynasty court rituals, historical architecture, and the visualization of space-time relationships within ritual contexts. While scholars have long recognized that Chinese architecture was shaped by *li zhi* (the traditional system of rites and institutions) and have shown growing interest in the space-time dynamics generated by the performance of rituals, few have analyzed these dynamics within a specific ritual, leaving the nuanced and complex nature of imperial ritual space insufficiently explored. Focusing on the court ritual in the Ming Forbidden City, the study examines how sound—such as drums, bells, and whips—structured a non-ordinary temporal framework. Building on this space-time foundation, it employs visual reconstructions and diagrams to map the interplay between specific spatial positions and temporal stages within the ritual process. This approach reveals how time, space and participants were distributed, nested, and correlated in layered and interconnected ways. The analysis further demonstrates that the center of the imperial city was not absolute or permanently fixed; rather, different halls and gates could temporarily function as spatial centers depending on the specific ritual stages. On this basis, a deeper analytical model is proposed to uncover the transformation, reconfiguration and diversity of Ming Forbidden City, explaining how ritual constituted spatial realities by reconfiguring architectural space.

Keywords: drums; gates; process; reconfiguration; space-time