Article

Study on the Religious and Philosophical Thoughts of Xizi Pagodas in Hunan Province of China

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Abstract: The Xizi Pagoda (惜字塔) is a form of traditional religious building used for burning “Paper with Characters (字纸)”, worshipping the gods, praying for blessings, revitalizing culture, and it is also an important material embodiment in the process of the development and evolution of religion in China, carrying China’s unique “Scholarly Culture (书香文化)”

1. Introduction

The Xizi Pagoda is a form of religious building where the ritual of “Cherishing Papers with Characters (敬惜字纸)” is practiced. The belief in “Cherishing Papers with Characters” is to worship the divinity of the characters and the regulation of disrespectful behavior towards the characters, as a mean of avoiding desecration of the characters. This also shows the great value that Chinese people attach onto reading, literacy and education, and it carries the connotation of China’s unique “Scholarly Culture (书香文化)”

Since ancient times, China has worshiped characters, and this worship originated from the legend of “Cangjie Creating Characters (仓颉造字)” in ancient times, in which the process of creating characters was sacred, and therefore the ancient Chinese believed that the characters had the divine power to communicate with gods and ghosts and to change the world. As a carrier of characters, paper was more precious in ancient China due to
productivity constraints, hence people treasured it. Existing documentations indicate that the “Xizi-belief” emerged in China during the Northern Qi Dynasty (6th century AD), and that “Xizi-activities” and the associated sacred spaces, such as religious acts of worship to Wenchang Di (文昌帝君), became popular during the Song Dynasty (10th–13th centuries AD). With the prevalence of the Imperial Examination System (科举制度), “Cherishing Papers with Characters” gradually became a common folk belief in Chinese society during the Ming (14th–17th centuries AD) and Qing Dynasties (17th–20th centuries AD). Since then, Confucian literati, Buddhist monks and Taoist followers have set up various organizations called “Xizi Hui (惜字会)” to promote the thought of “Cherishing Papers with Characters”. Meanwhile, a wide range of Xizi Pagodas were built. Taoist deity Wenchang Di, Ming Dynasty Buddhist monk Master Lianchi (莲池大师) and Confucian sages, etc., played a major role in promoting the culture of “Cherishing Papers with Characters”. In fact, the religious classics related to them also reflect the thought of “Cherishing Papers with Characters”, such as “Wenchang Di Advises People to Cherish Papers with Characters (文昌帝君劝敬字纸文), “Zi Zhi Lu (自知录), “Zeng Zi Advises People to Cherish Papers with Characters (曾子劝敬惜字纸)”, etc. These classics all have in common that they mention that Papers with Characters should not be thrown away nor trampled on, but disposed properly.

At present, most of the existing Xizi Pagodas are concentrated in the villages of Sichuan, Hunan and Guizhou. This study takes Xizi Pagodas in Hunan as the object of research, and conducts a comprehensive study of Xizi Pagodas, “Xizi” Culture and its religious thoughts from the interdisciplinary perspectives of religion, art philosophy, design and architecture.

2. Literature Review

At present, there are very few studies on Xizi Pagodas in the Chinese academic community. In the fields of literature and sociology, the architectural landscape of Xizi Pagodas is seldom mentioned. Mr. Lu Xun (鲁迅), a famous Chinese writer, thinker and revolutionist, once referred to the Chinese custom of “Cherishing Papers with Characters” in his book “Origins of Characters and Literature (门外文谈)”, saying: “Because writing is the property of the privileged, it has a dignified and mysterious characters. In fact, Chinese characters are still dignified to this day, and we often see baskets hung on walls that say 'Cherishing Papers with Characters’” (Lu 2016). In his collection of reminiscent essays “Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk (朝花夕拾)”, the article “Minor Records (琐记)” described the Xizi Pagoda next to the temple: “Next to the temple is a brick furnace for incinerating Paper with Characters, with four big characters written horizontally above the furnace’s opening: 敬惜字纸” (Lu 1973). Sociologist Fei Xiaotong (费孝通) once recalled reflecting on the relationship between academic value and social impact: “In my childhood, I saw my grandmother pick up every piece of Paper with Characters on it, gather it in the brick furnace and burn it, and educate us that we should ‘Cherish Papers with Characters’. Once I grew a bit older I laughed at my grandmother for being such a superstitious person. It was only when I reached my grandmother’s age that I understood the cultural significance of ‘Cherishing Papers with Characters’. When characters are written on paper, it becomes something that can bring good and bad fortune to all people and should, therefore, not be taken lightly” (Fei 1997). The modern writer Yu Qiuyu (余秋雨) once mentioned in his cultural essay “The Chinese Literary Vein (中国文脉)” the stone furnace next to the temple and the cultural practice of “Cherishing Papers with Characters”, “Next to the door of the temple, there is a stone furnace engraved with four characters: 敬惜字纸. There are still embers in the stone furnace, put the Paper with Characters in it, sometimes there is a small fire, sometimes there is no fire, only to see the paper slowly become charred and eventually turn into ashes”. “The illiterate respect the writing, just as we worship a god we have never met, as a rite of the world and a tribute to heaven and earth” (Yu 2012).

The research on Xizi Pagodas in the academic community can be divided into three stages:
1. The conscious exploration and initial construction based on the custom and belief of “Cherishing Papers with Characters” has pioneered the study of Xizi Pagodas in modern China. The custom of Cherishing Papers with Characters can be understood as a kind of “information worship”, a characteristic of traditional Chinese culture, in which people view information as a sacred symbol, and when this worship is put into action, the “Xizi” Rituals of burning Papers with Characters and returning them to nature are formed. Also, there are corresponding Xizi Furnaces (惜字炉), Xizi Pagodas and other materialized landscapes (Sang 1996). The earliest research on Xizi Pagodas in China was conducted in 2008 in “the Xizi Pagoda in the Ming and Qing Dynasties—Architectural Relics of “Xizi” Culture (明清惜字塔——惜字文化的建筑遗存)”, which first mentioned Xizi Pagodas and the “Xizi” Culture during this period. The study took Sichuan Xizi Pagodas as the research object and believed that the basic function of Xizi Pagodas is to incinerate Papers with Characters (Song 2008). Xizi Pagodas are commonly found by the water’s edge as the collected ash will later be poured into the sea. In addition, they are also commonly found in academies, ancestral halls, temples and other places where a large amount of Papers with Characters is produced. Sometimes, they were also built as a symbol of prosperity of local cultural beliefs at the entrance of villages (Tan and Luo 2018).

2. Research on Xizi Pagodas has gradually developed with a focus on the artistic form of Xizi Pagodas and the spiritual belief behind them. The artistic form of Xizi Pagodas include geometric relationships, primary and subordinate, contrasts and differences, rhythm and rhyme, proportion and scale, balance and stability and other formal beauty principles (Zhou and Zhang 2011). Xizi Pagodas are embodiments of characters and culture. People hold the “Xizi” Ritual under Xizi Pagodas, praying for good luck in the Imperial Examination, which has gradually made Xizi Pagodas the material embodiments of prayer for blessings (H. Zhu 2013). Under the combined influence of various factors such as Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, the thought of “Cherishing Papers with Characters” gradually matured, ultimately leading to the emergence of Xizi Pagodas. The folk belief that characters have spirituality is a key factor in promoting the development of Xizi Pagodas (Chen and Liu 2014). Due to the functional requirement of burning Papers with Characters, the interior of Xizi Pagodas are designed as a cylindrical space. Scholars have conducted a certain amount of analysis and excavations of the unique functions and morphological features of Xizi Pagodas in various regions of China, with most of the research areas focusing on the Sichuan and Chongqing regions, and some of the studies also involve Xizi Pagodas in Hunan, Hubei, Guangdong, Taiwan, and other places. Since Xizi Pagodas in one region tend to have similar structural features, Xizi Pagodas in other regions may have significant differences. For example, the 70 existing Xizi Pagodas in the Chongqing area are mostly stone pagodas with hollow interiors, and their basic structures and external decorations are no different from those of other pagoda-type buildings, and most of the decorations are engraved with couplets of characters and auspicious motifs (Shu and Luo 2023). In Yanting County, Sichuan Province, there are a large number of stone masonry Xizi Pagodas, which have a Baogu Stone (抱鼓石) on each floor, known as the “Yanting Classic Xizi Pagoda”, which are extremely rare in other areas (Li et al. 2022). The discovery of a number of Xizi Furnaces and Xizi Pagodas in Lianzhou City, Qingyuan, Guangdong Province, reflects the importance that Lianzhou City has historically attached to culture and education (M. Huang 2011). Shunsheng Shi (施順生) excavated more than 110 Xizi Pagodas in the Taiwan area, with a total of 33 different titles, and analyzed the morphological characteristics of the five remains of Xizi Pagodas: pavilions, furnaces, buildings, pagodas and stands (S. Shi 2007). In Xintian County, Hunan Province, the decorative pattern of the Xizi Pagodas unites the specialized auspicious forms of cultural and educational architecture (Tan et al. 2023). At the same time, their aesthetic appearance is also influenced by the spirit of Hunan Culture, such as cherishing literature and ceremonies, and hav-
ing candor and optimism. It has become a unique ethnic art form in Chinese culture with a unique role in enlightenment and education (He et al. 2023).

3. China is now paying increasing attention to the protection of ancient buildings, with the promulgation of a series of laws such as the “Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics (中华人民共和国文物保护法)” and the “Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on the Protection of Cultural Relics (文物保护法实施条例)”. Using the Third Cultural Heritage Census (第三次文物普查) carried out from 2007 to 2011, many Xizi Pagodas were discovered. At this time, people began to attach importance to the material cultural heritage of Xizi Pagodas. In the restoration of the Xizi Pagoda in Chating Town, Wangcheng County, Hunan Province, Professor Liu Su (柳肃) combined the expertise of experts from many disciplines, including botany, materials science, chemistry and chemical engineering, to preserve the unique landscape of the combination of the Xizi Pagoda and trees (Liu 2008). Some scholars gradually began to photograph Xizi Pagodas in the field, measure the data on the spot, build 3D digital models, and carry out digital art restoration based on the proportionality of the pagodas (W. Huang 2022). Other scholars used finite element numerical simulation analysis and concluded that Xizi Pagodas have good stability, and the reason is related to the plan form of Xizi Pagodas and their architectural components (He et al. 2023).

The “Xizi” Ritual has also been studied by people from other countries. Ino Kanori (伊能嘉矩) began his field research in the Taiwan area in 1897, and in 1906, he began to write his book, “Taiwan Culture (台灣文化志)”. The book records the custom of “Cherishing Papers with Characters” in Taiwan, which leads to his observation of the Ryukyu region’s ritual of “Cherishing Papers with Characters”: the custom of “Cherishing Papers with Characters” has long been popular in the Ryukyus. In the “Story of the Yaeyama Islands (八重諸島物語)”, it is said that “in the past, in the village of Ishigaki-jima (石垣島), there was a three-foot-high Xizi Pagoda, with a U-shaped gate in the upper center and a hollow inside. Here was once influenced by Confucianism, the popular of ‘Cherishing Papers with Characters’, scattered in the streets of papers, will be picked up and stored in Xizi Pagoda, and the ashes would be thrown into the sea after being burned. This Xizi Pagoda was built on 16th October, 18th year of the Daoguang period (1838). At that time, when a royal envoy surnamed Lin sailed to Ryukyu to inspect the public sentiment, he saw that there were papers with characters everywhere on the road, so he put forward a call to advise everyone to Cherish Papers with Characters. (Ino 1991) Michiko Kawasaki (川崎ミチコ) published ‘About Cherishing Papers with Characters—Cherishing Papers with Characters by nakara morishima and bakin takizawa 敬惜字紙について—森島中良・瀧澤馬琴の敬惜字紙’ in ‘Eastern Philosophy and Culture 東洋思想文化’, 2015. The article provides an introduction to the Chinese “Xizi” Custom, “Xizi” Culture and Xizi Pagodas. It is mentioned that between the mid-18th and mid-19th centuries, two volumes of “惜字帖” by Morishima Nakara (森島中良) (1754 or 1756–1810) were published in the Bunka Gengen (first year of the Bunka era). Takizawa Makoto (瀧澤馬琴) created “敬惜字紙小成” “惜字雜箋” “玉照堂遺愛字紙”, all of which are related to “Xizi” Culture (Kawasaki 2015). In 1882, a Korean named Lee Kyung-jae published a Korean version of the “Respect for Paper with characters Texts (敬惜字紙文)” (백두현 1998). In 2011, Singaporean history scholar Chong Chin Yong (庄钦永) in the “Singapore Chong Wen Ge (崇文閣) non-school examination” article proposed that “Chong Wen (崇文)”, meaning “reverence for paper with characters”, that Chong Wen Ge is the reverence for paper with characters and the beliefs in the dissemination of the place (Y. Li 2013).

The “Xizi” Custom has reached a wide range of countries. On the walls of the San Francisco Cultural Centre, a frame with the inscription “Respect the Paper with Characters, the gods will be pleased (敬惜字紙, 神明咸悦)” hangs to remind people to respect the book and the characters. Many gray cloth bags with the logo “Wenhua Society Character and Paper Ash (文華社字紙灰)” were placed next to it for the collection of ash, and a “holy
furnace (圣炉)” for incinerating paper with characters was built in a secluded area, which was equivalent to the Xizi Pagoda in China (Wang 2001). The Chinese “Xizi” Custom was introduced to Japan during the Edo period in the 17th and 18th centuries, and Xizi Pagodas were built in the cities of Nagasaki and Osaka in Japan (Kawasaki 2015). In Malaysia, there is still a tablet of the year of Guangxu Yiyou (1885) in the Fungshan Temple in Minzhong, Malaysia, which is a “tablet of respect for paper with characters (敬惜字纸碑)” (Memory of China Project Centre 2014).

Due to the small number of existing Xizi Pagodas and the fact that most of them are scattered in the countryside, the public generally pays less attention to and knows less about Xizi Pagodas. There is still a large gap in the existing research on the architectural features and cultural values of Xizi Pagodas. Existing studies have focused on the origin and development of Xizi Pagodas, the architectural and artistic characteristics of Xizi Pagodas in various regions, “Xizi” customs and practices and the cultural heritage value of Xizi Pagodas. Therefore, this study aims to combine the objective visible factors, such as the spatial structure and decorative aesthetics of the Xizi Pagoda, with the implicit cultural connotations, such as religious culture, ritualistic ideas, and philosophical concepts inherent in the Xizi Pagoda, in order to synthesize and research the Xizi Pagoda and its related religious culture.

3. Materials and Methods

The authors conducted field research and surveyed a total of 62 Xizi Pagodas in Hunan Province from 2019 to 2024, and selected 30 of them with good conservation status as typical cases for analysis. The reasons for choosing Xizi Pagodas in Hunan Province for this study are as follows:

1. Hunan Province has had a flourishing literary style since ancient times. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, there were 429 palace graduates (进士) from Hunan Province, accounting for 56.2 percent of the total number of palace graduates (进士) in the country (Nie and Wan 2005). Under the influence of Zhou Dunyi (周敦颐) (1017–1073), the pioneer of Sung Ming Neo-Confucianism, until the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Hunan became the flourishing place of Confucianism and has developed academic thought with local characteristics. There were many famous Confucian scholars, such as Hu Anguo (胡安国) (1074–1138), Hu Hong (胡宏) (circa 1105–circa 1155), Zhu Xi (朱熹) (1130–1200) and Zhang Shi (张栻) (1133–1180), who taught Confucian classics in Hunan. Against this background, the “Xizi” Culture was widely spread in Hunan, and a large number of Xizi Pagodas were built and relatively well preserved.

2. By searching “China National Knowledge Infrastructure” and “Web of Science” literature platform, we can find 28 studies on Xizi Pagodas, but only 4 studies on Xizi Pagodas in Hunan Province. Thus, more studies need to be conducted.

3. The research team of authors belongs to the key universities of Hunan Province, China, and has long been carrying out research on Hunan vernacular landscape, with a rich research foundation, close contact with the local government and relevant social groups. Also, conducting the study in Hunan Province is also more convenient considering geographical factors.

Based on the three reasons mentioned above, Xizi Pagodas in Hunan were selected as the main research object for this study.

The methodology of this paper is based on field study and documentation methods. Our team used camera photography, drone mapping and laser ranging to document the Xizi Pagodas. However, due to the large size of some of the Xizi Pagodas, the size of the details may be slightly deviated. In addition, we conducted interviews with local communities, which were recorded in detail and converted into electronic texts. Finally, all the images, data information, interview recordings, search notes and other primary sources were collated and summarized. This article also collected 28 relevant works from 2008 to 2023 on “China National Knowledge Infrastructure” and “Web of Science” through a lit-
The establishment of Xizi Pagodas are intricately intertwined with the evolution and propagation of Confucianism. According to one hypothesis, Xizi Pagodas were believed to have originated during the Song Dynasty (Geng 2018). After the Tang (7th–10th centuries AD) and Song (10th–13th centuries AD) Dynasties, with the establishment of the Imperial Examination System, scholars were gradually driven by fame, political power and wealth, and the “Xizi” Culture has gradually become attached to meanings such as promoting success in the Imperial Examinations (Zhou 2011). Xizi Pagodas in Chenxi Village (陈溪村) and Shijia Village (石家村) in Chenzhou City, Hunan Province, and Hebian Village (河边村) in Shaoyang City, Hunan Province, were carved with the image of “Fish Leaping the Dragon Gate (鱼跃龙门)” which implied the wish for success in the Imperial Examinations (Figure 1). As a result, followers of Confucianism constructed Xizi Pagodas throughout China, primarily for the purpose of burning Papers with Characters as a means of wishing for good fortune. An alternative perspective suggests that Xizi Pagodas first emerged during the Ming Dynasty. The behavior of “Cherishing Papers with Characters” is clearly recorded in the Ming Dynasty writer and novelist Ling Mengchu’s (凌濛初) (1580–1644) book “Some More Amazing Stories (二刻拍案惊奇)”, “When Wang Zeng’s father saw Papers with Characters abandoned, he had to pick it up and wash it with warm water mixed with spices, and then burn the Papers (王曾之父生平见字纸遗弃, 必拾而以香汤洗之, 然后焚化)” and “The genealogy of the Kong Clan in Pinglin Village, Nanxiong City, Guangdong...
Province, records that the Pinglin Xizi Pagoda was built in 1404, and that it was constructed by Kong Bodao (孔伯道), a descendant of Confucius at the end of the Ming Dynasty, and that the pagoda was inscribed with a text entitled “Kong Bodao Ancestral Tablet (孔伯道公祠碑)” (H. Zheng 2024). It is the earliest Xizi Pagoda found in China so far (Xiao and Deng 2016). With the development of the Imperial Examination System, the “Xizi” Culture flourished during the Qing Dynasty. Professor Liang Qizi (梁其姿) of the University of Hong Kong pointed out that the act of “Cherishing Papers With Characters” gradually evolved into a collective religious ritual for the entire class during the Qing Dynasty (M. Shi 2021; Liang 2001).

![Figure 1. (a) Image of “Fish Leaping the Dragon Gate (鱼跃龙门)” on Xizi Pagoda in Chenxi Village, Guiyang County, Chenzhou City, Hunan Province; (b) image of “Fish Leaping the Dragon Gate” on Xizi Pagoda in Hebian Village, Linwu County, Chenzhou City, Hunan Province; (c) image of “Fish Leaping the Dragon Gate” on Xizi Pagoda in Shijia Village, Linwu County, Chenzhou City, Hunan Province.](image)

The couplets on Xizi Pagodas also contain Confucian cultural connotations, mainly advocating the behavior of “Cherishing Papers with Characters”, fostering local culture, and aspiring to achieve academic success. The purpose of the couplets is to emphasize Confucian ethics and morals such as “Self-cultivation (修身)”, “self-control (克己)”, and “goodness of human nature (性善)” through the culture of etiquette and to infiltrate their ideological indoctrination in the whole process of burning Papers with Characters, as well as to cultivate the Confucian ethical spirit of “love and benevolence (仁爱)”, “respecting teachers (尊师)”, “valuing education (重教)”, and “learning with enjoyment (乐学)”. The Xizi Pagoda in Shuangjiang Village (双江村), Hunan Province, is inscribed with a couplet that reads “The six-pointed golden furnace is used to burn Papers with Characters, and the five-story pagoda is capable of sensing the star of wisdom (六角金炉焚字纸，五层鹰塔摘文星)”, which intends to educate future generations to respect characters, paper, and knowledge, as well as to pray for good academic achievements in the future. The Xizi Pagoda in Xinhu Village (新华村), Hunan Province, is inscribed with the process of the “Xizi” Ritual and exhorts people to Cherish Papers with Characters: “The Xizi Pagoda was built to burn Papers with Characters, and today we have gathered all of you here… to turn the tattered papers into ashes, so that they can be saved from the shame of being trampled on, and the characters are the most precious treasures that were created by our ancestor Cangjie, and we should cherish them (建字炉以资焚化集同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…残笺转为灰烬当同人于此日…” The Xizi Pagoda in Maofu Village (毛甫村), Hunan Province, also depicts the scenario of the “Xizi” Ritual, with the phrase “The
shape of the pagoda allows books to be placed inside, and the smoke after burning float in
the air (形能藏简册，气自绕云烟)” (Figure 2).

Figure 2. (a) Image of couplets on Xizi Pagoda in Shuangjiang Village, Guiyang County, Chenzhou City, Hunan Province; (b) image of characters on Xizi Pagoda in Xinhua Village, Changsha City, Hunan Province; (c) image of couplets on Xizi Pagoda in Maofu Village, Guiyang County, Chenzhou City, Hunan Province.

4.2. Xizi Pagodas Incorporate Buddhist Thoughts and Inherit the Form of Buddhist Pagodas

The thought of “Cherishing Papers with Characters” is consistent with the Buddhist thought of honoring the classics. In Buddhism, one believes that the recitation of Buddhist scriptures can turn bad luck into good fortune and bring good fortune in times of trouble. In the Sui Dynasty (6th century AD), Tang Dynasty (7th–10th centuries AD) and the Five Dynasties (10th century AD) (隋唐五代), the thought of “Cherishing Papers with Characters” with the dissemination of Buddhism was further propagated (Chen and Liu 2014). The explanations and initiatives of some Buddhist masters strongly promoted the popularity of the “Xizi” Culture, giving theoretical support from the perspective of Buddhism and giving the “Xizi” Culture a good doctrinal basis. For example, Master Ouyi (蕅益大师) (1599–1655) and Master Lianchi (莲池大师) (1535–1675) of the Ming Dynasty, and Master Yinguang (印光大师) (1862–1940) of the modern era have relevant initiatives on “Cherishing Papers with Characters” and honoring the scriptures (G. Huang 2021). The famous monk Lianchi said in his book “Zi Zhi Lu (自知录)”: “Picking up the Papers with Characters on the road and burning it, up to 100 characters, is considered a good deed; discarding the Papers with Characters and neglecting it, up to ten characters, is a fault (拾路遗字纸火化，百字为一善；遗弃字纸不顾者，十字为一过！) (Z. Shen 1942)”. The Buddhist monk Yinguang once wrote “General Advice to Respect Papers with Characters and Scriptures (普劝敬惜字纸及尊敬经书说)”, saying, “The benevolence of the characters cannot be exhausted. The blessing of Cherishing Papers with Characters is great (字之恩德，说不能尽。敬惜书字，福报甚大)” (Yinguang 1940).

The shape of Xizi Pagodas is derived from the architectural form of Buddhist Pagodas. After the introduction of Buddhism to China, the Indian “stūpa” was combined with Chinese pavilion architecture and became Pavilion-style Pagodas (楼阁式塔) (Luo 1983). Thus, the Chinese Buddhist Pagoda was constructed extensively in China, with the Indian “stūpa” form as the Pagoda’s brake and the Chinese Multi-storied Tower (中土重楼) as the pagoda’s body, a sacred space with sublime imagery. Subsequently, Chinese Pagodas underwent a process of secularization, and their use gradually expanded into the folk realm,
giving rise to several types of Pagodas with varying functions such as ornamental purposes, demon suppression, “Feng Shui (风水)” supplementation and the burning of Papers with Characters. Although the Chinese Pagodas mentioned above have been separated from the Buddhist architectural system (Y. Shen 2015), the design is still similar or the same as Chinese Buddhist Pagodas. These types of Chinese Pagodas still inherit the religious functions of enshrining and worshiping gods, and Buddhist thoughts are still embedded in the architecture. The Xizi Pagoda is not an exception. Since Buddhism reveres classics significantly, and Buddhist Pagodas represent spiritual images such as divine power, holiness, hope and merit, which are consistent with the purport of the thought of “Cherishing Papers with Characters” (Chen and Liu 2014), and the artistic modeling and construction norms of Xizi Pagodas have strong Buddhist characteristics.

In terms of the number of layers and sides, Xizi Pagodas inherit the plan and facade characteristics of Chinese Buddhist Pagodas. Xizi Pagodas in Hunan have an even number of sides on the plane and an odd number of floors on the facade (Figure 3) (Table 1). Because Buddhism in China is dependent of the development of Chinese native philosophy, it is influenced by the cosmological view of “Round Heaven and Square Earth (天圆地方)”, the philosophical thought of “Unity of Yin and Yang (阴阳一体)” and the design concept of “Modeling Heaven and Earth (象天法地)”. “Heaven” corresponds to the height of the facade of Pagodas, and “Earth” corresponds to the number of sides, so that the number of floors in almost all pagodas is only taken as the “Yang Number (odd number)”, and the number of sides is taken as the “Yin Number (even number)” (L. Zheng 1991). The number of layers of Chinese Pagodas is based on the number of layers of the Buddhist “Phase Wheel (相轮)” (H. Zhang 2008). Because Xizi Pagodas inherited the shape of Buddhist Pagoda features, the regulation of Xizi Pagodas’ layers is also similar to the Buddhist Pagoda, which mostly number five to seven. The even number of sides of Xizi Pagodas correspond to “the Four Noble Truths (四圣谛)”10, “the Six Paths of Reincarnation (六道轮回)”11, “the Eightfold Path (八正道)”12, etc. Therefore, the number of sides of the Xizi Pagoda is generally hexagonal, quadrilateral and octagonal, respectively.

Figure 3. The number of common layers and sides of Xizi Pagodas in Hunan.
Table 1. Basic information of some Xizi Pagodas in Hunan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Time of Construction</th>
<th>Shape of Plane</th>
<th>Number of Floors</th>
<th>Overall Height (m)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jiahe County, Chengzhou</td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Chujiang Village</td>
<td>(1814) Emperor Jiaqing’s reign</td>
<td>Quadrilateral 4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Qingshan Village</td>
<td>(1816) Emperor Jiaqing’s reign</td>
<td>Hexagonal 6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiyang County, Chengzhou</td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Shanglongquan Village</td>
<td>(1821) Emperor Daoguang’s reign</td>
<td>Quadrilateral 4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.62 (Remaining height)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Chenxi Village</td>
<td>(1862) Emperor Tongzhi’s reign</td>
<td>Hexagonal 6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Shuangjiang Village</td>
<td>(1875) Emperor Guangxu’s reign</td>
<td>Hexagonal 6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Maofu Village</td>
<td>(1850) Emperor Daoguang’s reign</td>
<td>Hexagonal 6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Zhongliu Village</td>
<td>(1875) Emperor Guangxu’s reign</td>
<td>Hexagonal 6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linwu County, Chengzhou</td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Shihuiyao Village</td>
<td>(1839) Emperor Daoguang’s reign</td>
<td>Quadrilateral 4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Shijia Village</td>
<td>Emperor Qianlong’s reign</td>
<td>Hexagonal 6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jianghua County, Yongzhou</td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Daxu Town</td>
<td>Early Qing Dynasty</td>
<td>Hexagonal 6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Xiulingshui Village</td>
<td>Qing Dynasty</td>
<td>Hexagonal 6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Changfu Village</td>
<td>(1882) Emperor Guangxu’s reign</td>
<td>Hexagonal 6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Pengziceng Village</td>
<td>Qing Dynasty</td>
<td>Hexagonal 6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Time of Construction</td>
<td>Shape of Plane</td>
<td>Number of Floors</td>
<td>Overall Height (m)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ningyuan County, Yongzhou, 永州市宁远县</td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Xiwan Village 西湾村惜字塔</td>
<td>(1852) 永咸丰二年</td>
<td>6 Hexagonal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Pipagang Village 萍岐岗村惜字塔</td>
<td>Qing Dynasty 清代</td>
<td>6 Hexagonal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Tangtouling Village 塘头岭村惜字塔</td>
<td>Qing Dynasty 清代</td>
<td>6 Hexagonal</td>
<td>(Original 5)</td>
<td>7.8 (Remaining height)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Laobaijia Village 老柏家村惜字塔</td>
<td>(1860) 永咸丰十年</td>
<td>6 Hexagonal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lengshuitan District, Yongzhou 永州市冷水滩区</td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Xiangjiang West Road 湘江西路惜字塔</td>
<td>Qing Dynasty 清代</td>
<td>6 Hexagonal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiangyong County, Yongzhou 永州市江永县</td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Shangqiantang Village 上甘棠村惜字塔</td>
<td>Qing Dynasty 清代</td>
<td>8 Octagonal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changsha County, Changsha 长沙市长沙县</td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Xinzhong Village 新中村惜字塔</td>
<td>(1830) 永道光十年</td>
<td>6 Hexagonal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wangcheng District, Changsha 长沙市望城区</td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Chating Town 茶亭惜字塔</td>
<td>(1838) 永道光十八年</td>
<td>6 Hexagonal</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Shanmuqiao Town 杉木桥惜字塔</td>
<td>(1887) 永光绪十三年</td>
<td>6 Hexagonal</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Xinhua Village 新华村惜字塔</td>
<td>(1843) 永道光廿三年</td>
<td>6 Hexagonal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liuyang County, Changsha 长沙市浏阳市</td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Chudong Village 楚东村惜字塔</td>
<td>(1907) 永光绪三十三年</td>
<td>6 Hexagonal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longhui County, Shaoyang 邵阳市隆回县</td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Hebian Village 河边村惜字塔</td>
<td>(1851) 永咸丰元年</td>
<td>4+8+6 Quadrilateral+ Octagonal+ Hexagonal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaoyang County, Shaoyang 邵阳市邵阳县</td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Shutang Village 树珊村惜字塔</td>
<td>(1851) 永咸丰元年</td>
<td>8 Octagonal</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. Cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Time of Construction</th>
<th>Shape of Plane</th>
<th>Number of Floors</th>
<th>Overall Height (m)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shuangqing</td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Dongta temple</td>
<td>Qing Dynasty</td>
<td>4+6 Quadrilateral+Hexagonal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District, Shaoyang</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>邵阳市双清区</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liling County,</td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Weishan Village</td>
<td>Qing Dynasty</td>
<td>6 Hexagonal</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhuzhou</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>株洲市醴陵市</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hengnan County,</td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Zhanhe Village</td>
<td>(1886) Emperor Guangxu’s reign</td>
<td>6 Hexagonal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hengyang</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>衡阳市衡南县</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hengnan County,</td>
<td>Xizi Pagoda in Chizu Village</td>
<td>(1876) Emperor Guangxu’s reign</td>
<td>6 Hexagonal</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hengyang</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>衡阳市衡南县</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Part of the data in the table comes from the author’s previous research article, “Study on the Protection of the Spatial Structure and Artistic Value of the Architectural Heritage Xizi Pagoda in Hunan Province of China”. The rest of the data are the results of the team’s recent study; “X+X+X” represents the number of sides for the different levels of the Pagoda.

Xizi Pagodas also inherited some of the decorative elements of the “stūpa”. “The Foundation Bed (塔基)” of Xizi Pagodas are often the “Sumeru Pedestal (须弥座)” in Buddhist architecture. The traditional Sumeru Pedestal consists of “Guijiao (圭角)”, “Xiafang (下坊)”, “Xiaxiao (下枭)”, “Shuyao (束腰)”, “Shangxiao (上枭)”, “Shangfang (上坊)” (Zhang 2000). Most Xizi Pagodas have a simplified and modified version of the traditional Sumeru pedestal, with some retaining the “Shangfang” and “Xiafang”, with an indented form of “Shuyao” in the center, while some others retain only the “Guijiao” feature (Figure 4). The composition of most Xizi Pagodas’ “Vertical Shafts (塔刹)” are derived from Buddhist Pagodas, which generally have three parts: the Pedestal, Body, and Top. There are also some Xizi Pagodas in Hunan that simplify the Vertical Shafts, showing shapes similar to pen points, vases, gourds, and multi-section gourds (Figure 5).

To sum up, Xizi Pagodas inherited the construction method, the flat and facade form and decorative features from Buddhist Pagodas, implying the connotation of Buddhist thought. Xizi Pagodas are mostly distributed among the folk, with strong secular characteristics. Therefore, Xizi Pagodas are different from Buddhist pagodas in terms of architectural form, architectural decoration and other aspects of strict standardization. In other words, their representations are more flexible and diverse.

![Figure 4](image-url)
Figure 5. The form of Xizi Pagodas’ Vertical Shafts.

4.3. The “Xizi” Ritual and Images of Deities on Xizi Pagodas Associated with Taoism

Believers in the “Xizi” Culture believe that characters are a divine symbol capable of communicating between heaven and earth, gods and ghosts. Shi Zhenlin (史震林) (1692–1778), a literati of the Qing Dynasty, wrote in “Xiqing Sanji (西青散记)” that “characters have ‘Hun and Po (魂魄)” and when burning Papers with Characters, the rising smoke carries the Hun of the characters and is thereby able to send them to the gods in heaven. Meanwhile, the remaining ashes are the Po of the characters, which can be sensed by the deities underground. Only by pouring the ashes into the rivers and seas and burying them in the soil could the traces of the characters be completely eliminated (字有魂魄，焚时烟上腾为魂，天神验之；灰下遂为魄，地祇察之。惟沉诸水及瘗于土，则灰灭而字无迹矣).” (Z. Shi 1907). The “Xizi” Ritual has a strong Chinese Taoist character. Taoist rituals, such as sacrifices and prayers require the burning of texts, and the act of burning Papers with Characters is known as “进表” or “表奏”. Taoist believers believe that the act of burning Papers with Characters can send their prayers to the Heaven (天庭) (Deng and Yang 2024). In Taoist thought, burning Papers with Characters can also cure diseases and reincarnate the dead. Wang Xianqian (王先谦) (1842–1917), a scholar at the end of the Qing Dynasty, recorded in his book “Commentary on Hou Han Shu (后汉书集解)” the “Sanguan’s Handwriting (三官手书)” for praying for the welfare of the sick was performed by “writing the patient’s name on the paper and stating that the patient had confessed his guilt. Three copies were made in which one was sent to the mountains, one was buried in the ground and one was sunk in the water (书病人姓字, 说服罪之意。作三通, 其一上之山, 著山上, 其一埋之地, 其一沉之水) (X. Wang 1930)”.

Ning Quanzhen (宁全真) (1101–1181), the founder of the Song Dynasty’s Donghua Sect of Taoism, recorded in his book “The Rituals of the Shangqing Lingbao Sect – Expiate the sins of the dead with water and fire (上清灵宝大法·水火炼度品)” that the specific practice of transcending the dead souls is “to put the burning talisman into the water which will turn it into talismanic water…… The living can take it to strengthen their souls, and the ghosts can be transcended through the rite (炼度之仪……生人服之, 可以炼神。而鬼神得之; 亦可度化)” (Y. Zhang 1445).

The “Xizi” Ritual absorbed the burning rituals of Taoist and included steps such as rinsing the dirt from the Papers with Characters, building a furnace to incinerate it, and pouring the ashes into the water or burying them. The ritual is clearly documented in many Taoist classics, such as the “Book of Advice from Wenchang Di (文昌帝君阴骘文)”, which has been circulated among the folk since the Yuan Dynasty (14th–17th centuries AD). It mentions that people should do more good deeds in order to receive blessings and protection from the gods, and that “Cherishing Papers with Characters” is one of the most important good deeds (X. Zhu 1942). In the book “Wenchang Di’s Character Laws (文昌帝君律功过格)”, which was popular in the Qing Dynasty and used to advise people to be good, there were 24 Merit Laws and 29 Offense Laws (过格) on “Cherishing Papers with Characters”. In the Merit Laws, there are many words describing rituals such as “Bathing (沐浴)”, “Burning (焚烧)” and “Burying (埋葬)”, etc. (X. Zhu 1942). “Bathing” is the first step of the ritual, which refers to washing the Paper with Characters in warm water containing spices, an act that is similar to Christian baptism. This will not only cleanse the Paper with Char-
acters, but it also purifies the mind of the worshiper. After purification, it is necessary to perform the “Burning” ceremony, in which the flame burns the “washed” paper, turning it into smoke that can communicate with the gods. Finally, the act of “Burying” is to dispose of the ashes, which represent the residual spirituality of the characters, in order to prevent it from being desecrated (N. Li 2011). In summary, ritual acts such as the “Bathing”, “Burning” and “Burying” can strengthen the sacred attributes of the “Xizi” Ritual. Meanwhile, in the course of the continuous development and improvement of this ritual, a fixed place, Xizi Pagoda, was created to perform the ritual of burning Paper with Characters. There are holes with different functions on the body of Xizi Pagodas. On the ground floor, there is usually a South-Facing Paper Entrance (进纸口) and a North-Facing Ash Exit (出灰口) for burning papers and clearing ashes, while the openings on the first floor and above are used for ventilating and dispersing smoke (Figure 6).

![Figure 6. The holes in the body of Xizi Pagoda.](image)

Xizi Pagodas are usually carved with images of Kuixing (魁星) and other deities from the Taoist mythology. Kuixing, the Taoist deity in charge of scholars’ fate, is the most common deity in Xizi Pagodas, which is represented by the image of creature with “a ghost-like face, a foot cocked back, a foot on a fish head, a dipper in one hand, and a pen in the other”, implying that Kuixing can circle the names of the candidates through the pen in his hand and make them the top of the list. Other common images of deities include “Tianguan (天官)” and “Fu Lu Shou (福禄寿)”. Tianguan is the Taoist deity that is responsible for bestowing blessings, depicted as “wearing official robes and an official hat and holding a scroll entitled “Tianguan Provide Blessings (天官赐福)”. Fu Lu Shou, which are three Taoist deities that represent good fortune, wealth and longevity, respectively, are represented as follows: the God of Fu “wearing an official’s hat and holding a book”, signifying good fortune and wealth; the God of Lu “wearing a scholar’s hat and holding a Jade Ruyi (玉如意)”, signifying high official and generous salary; and the God of Shou “is a white-bearded old man holding a walking stick”, signifying longevity. It is believed that these statues can represent Taoist deities, and that performing the “Xizi” Ritual under the watchful eyes of these deities can eliminate disasters and obtain blessings (N. Li 2011). Many Xizi Pagodas are also carved with the magic weapons of “Eight Immortals (八仙)”,
such as Han Zhongli’s palm leaf fan has the power to bring the dead back to life, signifying longevity and survival in desperate situations (Figure 7).

Figure 7. (a) Kuixing (魁星); (b) Tianguan (天官); (c) Fu Lu Shou (福禄寿); (d) Palm leaf fan (芭蕉扇).

5. The “Xizi” Cultural Inheritance and Xizi Pagodas Protection

The worship of characters is an important feature of traditional Chinese culture. Ancient Chinese people inscribed characters onto tortoise shells and animal bones, burning and baking them, in order to discern the future by interpreting the formed cracks. This practice marked the birth of character worship with religious connotations. In the case of poetry, scripture, couplets and other various written carriers that inherently preserve historical information, the ancients recognized that characters were inherited and held them as sacred symbols. Throughout the course of Chinese history, Buddhist monks have diligently collected and revered paper manuscripts adorned with intricate characters. In Dun-huang, a dedicated cave was constructed to house these sacred scriptures and perform other “Xizi” behaviors. Ancient people treated Papers with Characters that needed to be disposed in a similar way as how people were treated after they died, with burning and cremation, deep burials or sealing in caves and grottoes. The texts “the acts of Li Ruyi engaging in book burning incense worship (李如一得书焚香肃拜) (Y. Wang 1932)" and “the Fan family devoted all their efforts to building the Tianyi pavilion library for collecting books (范氏家族倾举族之力建造天一阁藏书楼) (jiang et al. 2017)" are prominent examples that highlight the ancient Chinese reverence and appreciation for characters, knowledge, and cultural classics. It is this profound respect for Papers with Characters that has enabled the enduring legacy of Chinese civilization to be passed down from generation to generation. As a material embodiment carrying the “Xizi” Culture, the Xizi Pagodas are more direct embodiments of the Chinese sentiment of reverence for characters, culture, and knowledge in comparison with other religious buildings.

As a result of scientific and technological progresses, social development and ideological changes, the “Xizi” Culture, which has lasted for thousands of years, has gradually died out and even been forgotten. Due to abolition of the Imperial Examination System, the introduction of science and technology, and further developments of the commodity economy in China, people no longer cherished Papers with Characters in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (the PRC), the state called on the people to eliminate feudal superstitions, and the sacredness of characters was gradually dissolved, and the “Xizi” Culture lost its basis for survival. With the prevalence of fragmented reading and the increasing diversity of text carriers, the traditional paper reading mode has been further impacted, and the overall charm and coherence of traditional culture has thus been unconsciously cut.

The Xizi Pagoda is a special type of architecture and a relatively widely distributed religious landscape, which has been distributed in some villages and streets in China since the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and it is now seldom recognized by the world with the change of time. The dwindling number of Xizi Pagodas, the serious dilapidation and dis-
repair of their remains and the lack of informative and comprehensive archival records make preservation an urgent necessity. According to our team’s site visit, many local people do not recognize the Xizi Pagoda, and the “Xizi” Culture is gradually being forgotten and fading away.

At present, with the Chinese government’s policy of “vigorously promoting the protection of tangible cultural heritage, strengthening the protection and inheritance of history and culture in urban and rural construction, and comprehensively promoting the revitalisation of the countryside” (Xinhuanet 2021), the endangered architectural heritage represented by Xizi Pagodas has begun to receive gradual attention, and local governments are actively registering and cataloging this type of tangible cultural heritage and carrying out the work of discovery, protection and utilization. Currently, Venerable Master Miaozu (妙祖法师), the presiding priest of Futian Temple (福田寺) in Shanxi Province, still advocates that “Characters are the most precious thing in the world, enabling the mortal to be holy, the fool to be wise, the poor to be rich, and the sick to be well (字为世间至宝，能使凡者圣，愚者智，贫贱者富贵，疾病者康宁) (Guang 1932)”. Whenever there is a midterm or college entrance examination, the incense at the Xizi Pagoda of the Yunxian Temple (云仙寺) in Sichuan becomes very strong, where worshippers pray for passing the examination and achieving good grades. The Xizi Pagoda in Zhiji Village, Hunan Province, is still being worshiped (Figure 8). “The ‘Xizi’ Culture” and “Xizi Pagodas” together regulated people’s behavior in handling “Papers with Characters” in history, and shaped the cultural personality and humanistic spirit of “Cherish Culture and Advocate Etiquette” in the Chinese Literary Vein (中国文脉). The protection of Xizi Pagodas and the inheritance of the “Xizi” Culture will help to regain the reverence for characters and help the current social problem of the increasing fragmentation of information, which is a great impetus for the continuation of Chinese writing, cultural inheritance and civilization.

Figure 8. Scenes from the worship ritual at Xizi Pagoda in Zhiji Village.

6. Conclusions

To conclude, Xizi Pagodas and its culture are characterized by “Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism”. This paper carries out an in-depth study of the religious culture of Xizi Pagodas, analyzes the relationship between the religious thought of “Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism” and Xizi Pagodas and its culture, and expands on the current heritage of the “Xizi” Culture and the protection of Xizi Pagodas. The conclusions of this study are as follows:

1. The emergence of Xizi Pagodas is connected to the development of Confucianism. The “Xizi” thought had already appeared in the Northern Qi Dynasty; under the influence of the political system of the literati as officials, the “Xizi” trend began to prevail in the Song Dynasty. The improvement of the Imperial Examination System in the Ming and Qing Dynasties brought the “Xizi-belief” to a peak. The Xizi Pagoda’s
image, such as “Fish Leaping the Dragon Gate”, and its couplets contain Confucian cultural connotations, all of which are intended to emphasize Confucian ethics and morals and to spread Confucian thought through the “Xizi” Ritual.

2. Xizi Pagodas incorporate Buddhist thoughts and inherit the form of Buddhist Pagodas. The thought of “Cherishing Papers with Characters” was in line with the Buddhist thought of cherishing the classics and was further developed as the religion grew and spread. The modeling of Xizi Pagodas originates from Buddhist Pagodas, inheriting the construction method, flat and facade form and decorative features of Buddhist Pagodas, and at the same time, it innovates the entrance and exit form with the function of smoke evacuation.

3. The “Xizi” Ritual and images of deities on Xizi Pagodas are associated with Taoism. The “Xizi” Ritual has absorbed the burning rituals of Taoist sacrifices and has strong Chinese Taoist characteristics. The continuous development and refinement of the ritual gave rise to the Xizi Pagoda. Most Xizi Pagodas are usually carved with images of Kuixing, Fu Lu Shou and other deities from Taoist mythology. It is believed that performing the “Xizi” Ritual under the watchful eyes of these deities will eliminate disasters and bring blessings.

At present, the number of Xizi Pagodas is decreasing, the remains are in a serious state of disrepair, and the “Xizi” Culture is gradually being forgotten. This paper enriches the research on the Xizi Pagodas and “Xizi” Culture, however, this study also has some limitations due to the lack of time and knowledge reserves. For example, this paper lacks a more complete and comprehensive analysis and research on Xizi Pagodas in Hunan; the modern protection and cultural inheritance path based on the current situation of Xizi Pagodas needs to be further improved. The authors expect that the research results of this study will provide a scientific rationale and a theoretical basis for the protection and inheritance of Chinese traditional architecture and outstanding national culture.

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Notes
1 “Jing Xi Zi Zhi (敬惜字纸)” means Cherishing Papers with Characters, which is often abbreviated to “Xi Zi (惜字)” and carved on Xizi Pagodas. The word “Xi (惜)” means to treasure and cherish, while “Zi (字)” means Chinese characters, and “Xizi (惜字)” represents “Cherishing Characters”.

2 In China, the concept of “Scholarly Culture (书香文化)” first came from a plant called “Ruta graveolens L. (芸草)”, whose scent was said to repel insects. Readers used to put the plant in their books and called the aroma of the plants “the aroma of the book(书香)”. Later, “Scholarly Culture(书香文化)” came to refer to the culture of reading.
“Cangjie Creating Characters (仓颉造字)” is one of the myths and legends of ancient China. Cangjie (仓颉) had collected, organized, standardized and used the characters that had been passed down among the ancestors and played an important role in the creation of Chinese characters, and was honored by later generations as the “Sage of Character Creation”. Cangjie’s action moved the gods of heaven, when the grain fell from the sky like rain, frightening the ghosts and monsters so much that they cried at night.

Wenchang Di (文昌帝君) is a deity revered by Chinese folklore and Taoism as being in charge of the achievements and positions of scholars.

Sung Ming neo-Confucianism is a generic term for the Confucian thought and doctrine of the Song, Yuan, and Ming periods, a neo-Confucianism centered on traditional Confucianism and compatible with the philosophical theories of Buddhism and Taoism.

The “Fish Leaping the Dragon Gate (鱼跃龙门)” is an ancient Chinese folklore. In ancient times, people imagined that after jumping over the Dragon Gate, these carp would change into dragons and ascend to heaven, which was a metaphor for a successful career or a high position.

Stūpa is a form of pagoda originating from India, which is mainly used to enshrine and house the bones (relics), scriptures and dharma objects of the Buddha and holy monks.

Feng Shui (风水) is a theoretical system based on Chinese philosophy of “Qi (气),” which is used to explain the ideal living environment model of Chinese people, specifically referring to the location of residential bases, graveyards, etc. Chinese people believe that the quality of “Feng Shui” can affect the fortunes of their families.

Phase Wheel (相轮) is the metal ring in the middle part of the pagoda’s Vertical Shaft, which serves as an indication of the pagoda and plays a role in honoring the Buddha. The more layers of the phase wheel, the higher the virtue.

Four Noble Truths (四圣谛): The Four Noble Truths (Sanskrit: Catusatya), is one of the basic teachings of Buddhism. It refers to the Four Noble Truths of suffering, collection, annihilation and the Way.

Reincarnation (六道轮回): The Six Paths of Reincarnation are the paths that naturally lead to different paths according to the karmic consequences of one’s life. The six paths are divided into three good paths and three evil paths.

Eightfold Path (八正道): The Eight Paths of Reincarnation are the paths that naturally lead to different paths according to the karmic consequences of one’s life. The six paths are divided into three good paths and three evil paths.

According to Chinese Taoism, the soul is divided into Hun (魂) and Po (魄), with the Hun being the “Yang Qi (阳气)” that makes up a person’s mind and intellect. Po is the coarse, heavy and turbid “Yin Qi (阴气),” which constitutes the human sensory form. When a person dies, the Hun returns to heaven, and the Po returns to the earth.

Fan Qin, the Minister of War in the Ming Dynasty, initiated the construction of a library known as “Tianyi Pavilion” in the eastern part of his residence, which housed an impressive collection of over 70,000 volumes at that time. Tianyi Pavilion, established more than four centuries ago, stands as a pioneering example of Chinese private book collections.

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