Elementary Form: Indigenous Shui Cultural Center, West-Line Studio[1]

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How can contemporary architecture mediate and transcend the opposing binaries of its inside (autonomy) and outside (engagement) in peripheral contexts? The paper analyzes the architecture of the Indigenous Shui Cultural Center by West-Line Studio and argues that an elementary form of architecture can be the critical agency in providing an ethnic group – the Indigenous Shui in the peripheral southwest of China – with citizenship and identity.

keywords:

elementary form, Indigenous Shui, Indigenous Shui Cultural Center, West-Line Studio, thick interpretation

Introduction

Architecture needs to clarify its core translational knowledge and to continue its incomplete disciplinary project in the age of social, cultural, and environmental crises. To fulfill these tasks, the profession needs a critical resolution of the long-standing yet increasing tension between architecture's inside and architecture's outside—that is, "autonomy" and "engagement." The tension and disjunction between autonomous production and wider types of engagement are inherent to both the discipline and the profession. Recognizing this disjunction, any critical articulation that seeks to bridge the increasing gap between the thinly scattered architectural theory and criticism on the one hand and contemporary design practice on the other should be valued. That is because theoretical research and extended criticism on exemplar buildings and contemporary designs can not only reestablish their relevance to the society they serve but also reclaim the fundamental agency of design and production to advance the incomplete project of modern architecture.

Positioned in this theoretical context, this paper conceptualizes the elementary form of contemporary architecture to constitute the primary element of internal "autonomy" and to be the agent for external "engagement." The term *elementary form* is borrowed from Émile Durkheim's 1912 work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Transposing it to architecture, any elementary form may be said to be the most elemental if it fulfills two conditions: firstly, that it is found in a society whose organization is surpassed by no others in simplicity; secondly, that it is possible to explain it without making use of any element borrowed from a previous example.[2] Following this definition, the architecture of elementary form should be unprecedented and deeply rooted in preexisting localities. In this context, Indigenous people and their place of abode provide a critical source not only because of their repression in the modernist architectural project, enmeshed as it is in global colonialism and imperialism,[3] but also because the topic is rarely discussed in the global architectural historiographic discourse.

In his book *Autonomy, Ethnicity, and Poverty in Southwestern China* (2007), political scientist Chih-yu Shih addresses how the individual communities of multiethnic Southwestern China can position themselves inside the state's policy agendas on autonomy and ethnic citizenship.[4] Citing the diasporic Shui people in the book's section "Out of Place," Shih discusses the general "ethnicity lost in regional autonomy," noting the specific "lost agency for change."[5] In conclusion, Shih wonders whether and how ethnic minorities are able to develop their subjectivity by positioning themselves in, rather than finding a life outside, the state, and whether this allows their autonomy to gain substance.[6]

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[2] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 2nd ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976); the first edition was published in 1912.

[3] Jyoti Hosagrahar, *Indigenous Modernities: Negotiating Architecture and Urbanism* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005).

[4] Chih-yu Shih, *Autonomy, Ethnicity, and Poverty in Southwestern China: The State Turned Upside Down* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[5] Shih, *Autonomy, Ethnicity, and Poverty*, 131–60.

The Indigenous Shui Cultural Center ***(fig. 1)*** was designed by West-Line Studio and built in 2017 on the edge of Sandu Shui Autonomous County, a remote Indigenous region belonging to the Qiannan Buyei and Miao Ethnic Autonomous Prefecture in the Guizhou province of Southwestern China. It serves as a case study not only for its unique design proposition and mature modus operandi in navigating complex internal and external conditions but also because of its physical presence and symbolic representation using an elementary form to reconcile and transcend the opposing binaries of "autonomy" and "engagement."

Indigenous Shui

The Shui are one of the Indigenous ethnic groups living in the remote and peripheral mountains of southern Guizhou province, China. They have a remarkably long history of recognition as an independent ethnic people—since the seventh century, during the Tang dynasty. Ancestor worship is core to Shui identity and everyday life. To be identified as Shui, one needs to exclusively practice ancestor worship.[7] The archetype of Indigenous Shui architecture is the interlocking wooden house type with three to seven rooms on two to four floors, often with human occupation on the upper floors above the animals at ground level.[8] The central hall is the spiritual heart of every Shui building, containing the ancestral shrine with tablets and sacrifices, and it is the space in which the birth, marriage, and death rituals take place. The stairs symbolize key transitional elements in the ancient Shui house.[9] Bronze drums and masked performances are part of Shui ancestor worship outdoor rituals on ancestral lands or around ancestral trees.[10] Thus, architecture and ritual are intertwined in Shui home- and place-making ***(fig. 2)***. Archetypal Shui architecture is therefore not about style, aesthetics, or utility but about something more implicit; it is about how architecture shapes and reflects the users.[11]

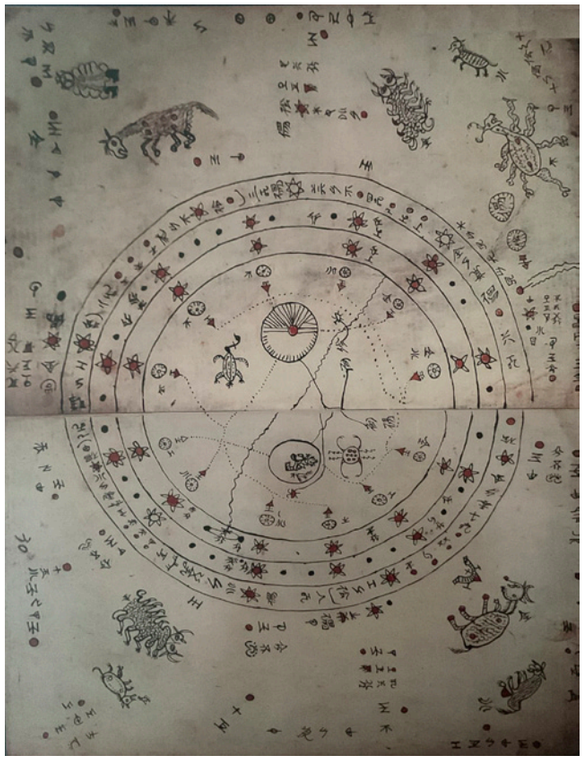
Compared to their long-standing ethnic neighbors such as the Miao, Dong, and Buyei peoples, the Shui have developed and kept their own written language

fig. 1
The building, the mountain, and the Shui territory. Photo and source: West-Line Studio, China, 2017.

fig. 2
Shui ritual practices in the field, enclosed by mountains. Photo: Xiang Ren. Source: Qiannan Buyei and Miao Ethnic Autonomous Prefecture Archive, China, 2024.

fig. 3
A narrative page of the ancient Shui script. Photo: Xiang Ren. Source: Qiannan Buyei and Miao Ethnic Autonomous Prefecture Archive, China, 2024.

6 Shih, *Autonomy, Ethnicity, and Poverty*, 233–37.
7 Shih, *Autonomy, Ethnicity, and Poverty*, 150.
8 Yizhi Zhou and Miao Wei, "Sinicisation and Ethnicity: Spatial Characteristics of Shui Vernacular Architecture in Guizhou, Southwest China," *Built Heritage* 5, no. 2 (2021).
9 Chaolin Pan and Zonglin Wei, eds., *Cultural Studies of Shui, China/ Zhong Guo Shui Zu Wen Hua Yan Jiu* (Guizhou Renming Press, 2004), 612.
10 Pan and Wei, *Cultural Studies of Shui*, 508–10.
11 Peter Blundell Jones, *Architecture and Ritual* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).



and textual documentation to a far greater extent. The Shui script is a source in constructing and preserving their cultural autonomy in which ancient Shui ideas on cosmology, Indigenous geography, religion, ethics, and philosophy were recorded in half-written, half-drawn form ***(fig. 3)***. So far, 486 characters have been identified from the approximately 3,000 preserved characters of this ancient script.[12] It is the task of the sacred group of Shui script masters to interpret and disseminate the tacit knowledge.[13] Anthropological evidence shows that Shui script still functions in contemporary Shui life, such as when choosing the date for a marriage ceremony or the construction of a building.[14]

The historic buildings of the Shui were less distinctive and had fewer features than those of their neighboring ethnic groups such as the Dong.[15] In recent times, Shui vernacular architecture and settlements have experienced the same fate of being homogenized in the process of rural urbanization and tourist development as those of similar minority cultures have in other parts of China.[16] The development of the Shui economy, predominantly relying on tourism, is not without rationales, considering the disadvantaged location of the underprivileged communities. However, such tourist development has had irreversible collateral side effects. In this process, Indigenous kinship societies and belief systems are highly vulnerable to dominant external forces and forms. Therefore, the long-term problem that the Shui face is the preservation of their sense of self as well as their sacred belief and knowledge systems.

12 From the official record in the Qiannan Buyei and Miao Ethnic Autonomous Prefecture Archive, 2025.
13 Xueyan Song, Weimin Zhang, Xiangqing Zhang, Yaoyuan Meng, and Jia Liu, "Construction of a Knowledge-Based Database for the Intangible Cultural Heritage Shui Script: A Perspective from Oral Histories with Shui Script Masters," *Library Trends* 71, no. 3 (2023): 436–60.
14 Pan and Wei, *Cultural Studies of Shui*, 539–44.
15 Derong Kong and Xiang Ren, "The Drum Tower," *AA Files*, no. 78 (2021): 53–60.
16 Evelyne Gauché, "Tourismification of a Shui Village in the Mountainous Province of Guizhou (South China): Imaginaries and the Use of Landscape for Political Ends," *Journal of Alpine Research/Revue de géographie alpine* 105, no. 3 (November 2017).

fig. 4
The site in the mountainous territories and its strategic location at the arrival zone of the Sandu Shui Autonomous County. Map: Google Earth. Source: West-Line Studio, China, 2017.

Leading a marginal existence to date, the Shui comprise a total population of less than 500,000, which in comparison to other Chinese minorities makes them a minority among minorities. More than half of the Shui population lives in Sandu Shui Autonomous County, which was established in 1957 and is where the Indigenous Shui Cultural Center project is located.

The Design Position

The site ***(fig. 4)*** provided for the Indigenous Shui Cultural Center was strategically chosen as a triangular space on the edge of the Shui territories, according to the newly prepared Sandu Shui Autonomous County masterplan (2016–30), sandwiched by mountains and divided by a new rapid transport infrastructure.

Based in Guizhou, the province in which Sandu Shui Autonomous County is located, West-Line Studio has been quietly and consistently practicing in the most marginal geographies of this peripheral administrative region for more than twenty years. The practice's evolving modus operandi has been informed by multicultural communes, the Karst topography, Indigenous craftsmanship, and ethnic rituals.[17] Commissioned by the local authority following an open competition, the Indigenous

[17] Xiang Ren, "Thin Mask, Thick Mnemonic: The Idea of the Wall and Genius Loci in Two Contemporary Buildings," *Architectural Research Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2020): 37–48.

fig. 5
The building upon completion, and its immediate surroundings. Photo and source: West-Line Studio, China, 2017.

Shui Cultural Center was West-Line Studio's first project in the Shui region. It can also be seen as the primary modern public building for the Shui. West-Line Studio's design was intended to be a bearer of the Shui's memories and to reflect their internal world.[18] The design was to achieve a fragile balance between realizing a sense of internal autonomy for the Shui and reflecting their external engagement with the world beyond through this new building type.

Two dominant design tendencies were avoided by West-Line Studio. The first was the nostalgic return to traditional Shui iconography, either via selected elements as a simplistic affirmation of Shui culture or via the recounting of grand narratives based on the biased ways of engaging with and interpreting the Shui world as the other. The second was the rushed introduction, or blind imposition, of a modern institution with little consideration for the Shui's formation as an Indigenous group, an approach that is frequently seen in contemporary building designs in other minority ethnic territories of Guizhou province. West-Line Studio opted for a third way to reach a degree of autonomy through the intensified use of Indigenous references towards a new Shui monumentality.[19] This monumentality would provide a counterpoint to the superficial ethnic citizenship and identity found in the secularized, neoliberal, state-capitalist production of public buildings. This approach allowed the architects to articulate the Indigenous Shui Cultural Center as a spatial and intellectual archipelago in the forthcoming sea of contemporary urbanization.[20]

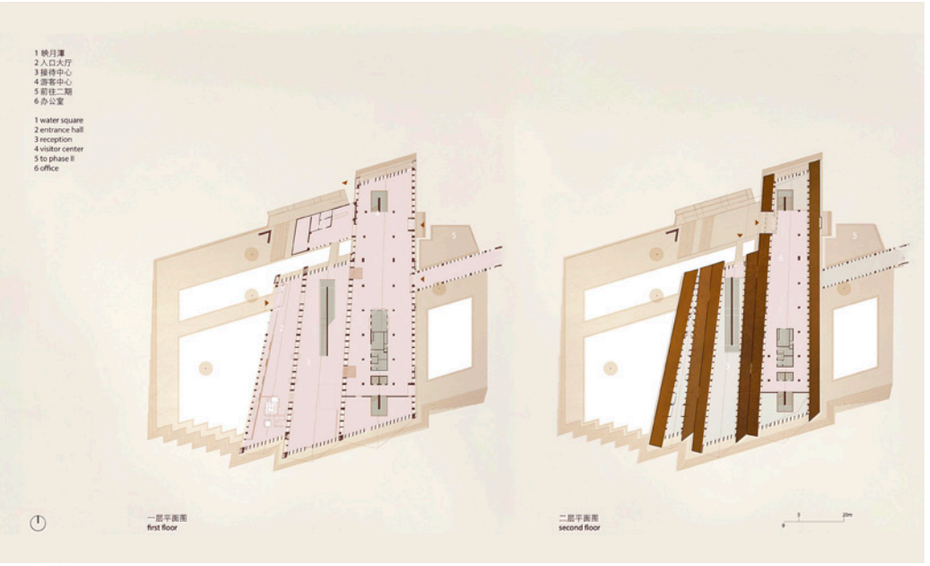
Geometry and Tectonics

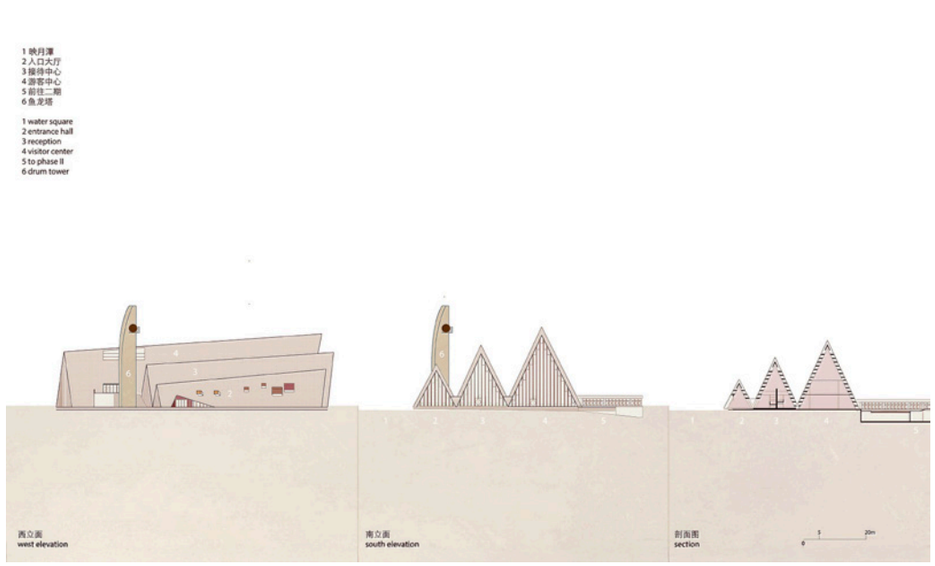
Complementing the site strategy, West-Line Studio settled on a pure and powerful form for the Indigenous Shui Cultural Center. The search was based on extensive studies of Shui script and rituals. Initially, a few selected characters from the Shui script, in which each form of the character was associated with a specific meaning, such as the rain on the mountain, were approached from the perspective of the architectural discipline only. West-Line Studio was highly motivated to learn in a

[18] Haobo Wei, "From Ritual to Mnemonic: A Mark System Reflecting Our World," *Contemporary Architecture*, no. 8 (2020): 43–47.

[19] Wu Hung, *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), xviii.

[20] Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011).





more in-depth way from the last living generation of Shui script masters, like anthropologists do. As none of the architects from West-Line Studio were of Shui origin, the design itself was an interpretation, rather than a translation, of the Shui's mythical and metaphysical autonomy in nature. The design process in which West-Line Studio engaged led the architects not only to synthesize fragmentary elements from ceremonial rituals, such as drum displays, dances, animal and plant patterns, and the spatial layout and organization of performative worship, but also to include songs and texts as the more intangible layers of Shui world-making. This iterative process of an engaged approach resulted in the reinvention of an archetypal geometry in the final building, which not only is self-evident but also refers to the writing tradition of the Shui and their worship of mountains ***(fig. 5)***.

Enclosed by a ritual plaza containing a pond and a few trees, the cultural center is organized in three primary halls dedicated to reception, exhibition, and ritual celebration respectively. The halls are broadly aligned in parallel yet subtly splayed by small degrees, thereby reinterpreting the inherent qualities of Indigenous spaces for gathering to engage in ceremonial performances ***(fig. 6)***. Each hall is sheltered by a triangular roof that connects to the ground ***(fig. 7)***. Support facilities such as offices, storage spaces, and washrooms are contained between the halls. A freestanding ramp near the central axis of the ceremonial hall acts as a focal point while connecting to the external stairs and plaza. The spatial potential of the non-orthogonal geometry, the interiors' a-perspectival qualities, and the construction of the halls and their interconnections go beyond the limits of the reductive modernist open plan to embrace the means of an organic architecture. For West-Line Studio, the point of departure of such a spatial conception is to be found in the Shui ritual tradition of ancestor and nature worship, of unity and separation, of water-text narratives and pattern languages, of guiding principles on interaction and interconnection with public space and mountains. The ground is the locus for all these forms of worship that provide the foundations for the rich lifeworld of the Shui.[21]

fig. 6
Floor plans articulate the three primary halls and their in-between spaces. Drawing and source: West-Line Studio, China, 2017.

fig. 7
Elevations and cross section indicate how the design resonates with Shui mountain worship. Drawing and source: West-Line Studio, China, 2017.

[21] Wei, "From Ritual to Mnemonic," 47.

In its additive composition, the exposed roof structure is visible at every corner, thereby preserving the site's atmosphere and the Shui's attachment to mountain worship ***(fig. 8)***; the rawness and thickness of the in situ concrete is expressed throughout the transition between floors and roofs. The traces of human labor, of artisan's improvisations, of happy accidents, and of the local timber formwork are all legible in the construction, from the whole volume down to the elemental parts, such as doorways, window frames, ramps, terraced steps, and so on ***(fig. 9)***.

The fundamental architectural elements of the Indigenous Shui Cultural Center—the hall, the wall, the roof, and the threshold—develop restrained yet bold architectural expressions of publicness, vast interiors, material tectonics, visual depth, sense of weight, and an evocation of the primitive hut ***(fig. 10)***. Yet the architectural elements only gain their deepest meaning from the perspective of the Indigenous Shui people, whose lifeworld unfolds there generation after generation but whose voices and ideas remain hidden to outsiders: "The 'myth' of meaning in the geometry of architectural form stems from the notion of architecture as a 'natural' language—a system of formal elements and rules of composition which express specific readable social meanings—underlying much of the architectural discourse and the work of architects."[22]

Use and Reuse

Beyond anyone's imagination, the post-occupancy of this major building proposed for Sandu County and the Shui witnessed several dramatic U-turns. The site was unexpectedly forced to close shortly after its public opening due to a complicated local administrative issue, with the main building near a state of abandonment for several years until it shockingly reopened as a themed hotel.[23] Not long after, the hotel business went bankrupt, and it was possible to return the building to its original program as a cultural center; however, this was no longer just for the Shui but with a new business plan to accommodate study visits from afar.[24] This demonstrates that, in the real world, architecture is used in a highly relational manner, rather than

fig. 8
The roof, the wall, and the mountain. Photo and source: Xiang Ren, 2024.

[22] Helen Tsoskounoglou et al., editorial, *9H: Architectural Translations Criticisms and Projects*, no. 7 (1985): 1.

[23] The author's conversations with the founding architect and director of West-Line Studio, during 2020–22.

[24] The author's on-site interview with the current manager of the building, on August 3, 2024.

as autonomous objects, facing contingencies and controversies. All the same, the design decisions and the architectural idea are still present in the final physicality. In this material sense, architecture retains a limited yet critical capacity for a degree of autonomy. In the case of the Indigenous Shui Cultural Center, its non-designable pattern of use and reuse can be accommodated in an autonomous, resilient form that not only follows function but also informs function(s) and programs.[25]

Thick Interpretation[26]

The Indigenous Shui Cultural Center expresses an aspect of the autonomy of architecture at its most elemental level, weaving in the tectonic, the tactile, and the topographic respectively as anchors, as mnemonics, and as means of storytelling. At the same time, the center expresses the fundamental human condition of the Shui in the way in which they engage with both their own autonomous world-making and their relationship to the external modern world. West-Line Studio juxtaposes a reconciled form of architecture, which provokes the reinvention of architecture from within the preexisting conditions of indigeneity, striking a delicate balance between the architecture's "autonomy" on the one hand and its "engagement" on the other. This reconciled form of architecture, to follow Durkheim, refers to an elementary form of architecture that can be conceptualized and articulated from the creation and reception of familiar forms by means of a series of fundamental architectural elements, such as the ground, the roof, the hall, and the threshold, and their archetypal connections to the sacred mountains and the Indigenous people who inhabited and imagined their world long before the modern world. All those constituted of an elementary form of architecture require a "thick interpretation" taken not so much from the architectural field but more the philosophical and anthropological fields. Using "thick interpretation," a middle ground might be negotiated between

fig. 9
The ground articulation and a series of windows punctured in the building envelope with a pattern informed by the word for "mountain" in Shui script. Photo and source: Xiang Ren, 2024.

fig. 10
The raw and rough material tectonic exposes the depth and weight of the interior space. Photo and source: Xiang Ren, 2024.

[25] The author owes this viewpoint mostly to Prof. Carlos Eduardo Comas in the open discussions during the CICA International Conference on October 19, 2024.

[26] "Thicker interpretation" is an architectural methodological approach advocated by Peter Blundell Jones, which was built upon the anthropological idea of "thick description" from the works by Clifford Geertz. See more details in Peter Blundell Jones, *A Forty Year Encounter with Hans Scharoun* (PhD by publication thesis, School of Architecture, The University of Sheffield, 2013), 47.

internal autonomy and external engagement, though one that is constantly in flux. In this way, the artificial line between "autonomy" and "engagement" in architecture might be overcome, as exemplified by the Indigenous Shui Cultural Center in the way that it empowers an ethnic citizenship and identity for the Shui people through and towards a new identification and agency, instead of an old confrontation between the self and the other.

In response to the rapidly decaying and dissolving intellectual and professional status of architecture, the elementary form sheds intellectual light on the interpretation of a public building for a specific context defined by a remote location and an Indigenous group of people; it also legitimates a type of architecture with sensitivities and sensibilities outside the conventional canon. The elementary form of the Indigenous Shui Cultural Center demonstrates that architecture is a form of knowledge, that there are past ideas that can be reinterpreted and intensified via contemporary design practices, thereby showing how pre-modern societies and Indigenous peoples negotiated that body of knowledge and how it is still as valid today as it was long ago.

Biography
Xiang Ren, BArch, MA, PhD, is an architect and associate professor in architecture at the University of Sheffield School of Architecture and Landscape and a cofounder of Studio Cloud, a RIBA Chartered Practice based in the UK. His teaching, research, and practice seek to reinvent the discipline of architecture based on its tradition and collaborative practice, centered on humanities and design, often with a global East-West comparative lens and architectural-anthropological close-reading. Ren recently edited *Case Studies in Architecture and Landscape: Expanding the Legacy of Peter Blundell Jones* (Routledge, 2025) with Jan Woudstra and completed the Endangered Wooden Architecture Programme Large Grant project Decoding Dong as its principal investigator.