The Social Space of Legal Life: A Theoretical and Conceptual Analysis of the "Rule of Law Cultural Square"

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Abstract: *The Rule of Law Cultural Square, as a social space for legal life, represents a form of public space that embodies both Chinese characteristics and modern values. It integrates the orderliness of traditional Chinese squares with the openness characteristic of Western ones. Through architecture, sculpture, informational displays, and other mediums, it gives tangible and visible form to the ideals of the rule of law, enabling citizens to internalize legal norms and values subtly as part of their everyday lives. As a new frontier in legal education and public engagement, the Rule of Law Cultural Square embeds legal principles into the routines of ordinary people, serving as a spatial carrier for the formation and development of socialist rule of law practices with Chinese characteristics in the new era.*

Keywords: Rule of Law Culture Square; Social Space; Rule of Law Construction.

1. Introduction

Since the launch of the Reform and Opening-up policy, China has experienced an accelerated process of urbanization, accompanied by a nationwide surge in the construction of Rule of Law Cultural Squares. These squares have emerged as key platforms for advancing legal development and promoting legal literacy among the public. On June 7, 2021, then-Minister of Justice, in his report to the 29th meeting of the Standing Committee of the 13th National People's Congress on the implementation of the State Council's "Seventh Five-Year Plan" for legal education, stated: "Socialist rule of law culture is flourishing, and the reach of rule of law cultural infrastructure continues to expand. Over 3,500 rule of law-themed parks, 12,000 squares, and 34,000 corridors have been established nationwide." [1] From bustling metropolises to remote towns, from newly developed urban districts to aging neighborhoods, tens of thousands of Rule of Law Cultural Squares have appeared like bamboo shoots after a spring rain. Some serve as newly built modern landmarks, while others are the result of upgrades and transformations of existing spaces. This widespread and dynamic wave of construction has added vibrant new dimensions to the urban landscape, forming a distinctive cultural scene rooted in the rule of law.

At present, Chinese academia has produced a substantial body of theoretical and empirical research on legal infrastructure. [2,3,4,5] However, existing studies have largely focused on traditional legal institutions such as "courts." In contrast, theoretical inquiry and empirical investigation into emerging legal facilities—particularly the "Rule of Law Cultural Square"— remain relatively limited and have not received sufficient scholarly attention.[6] Liu Bin has argued that the Rule of Law Cultural Square constitutes a legal facility—"a built environment dedicated to promoting the spirit of the rule of law and implementing and safeguarding the legal system" [7]—and represents a tangible, material expression of legal culture. Yet the Rule of Law Cultural Square is not merely a physical entity; it also embodies a spatial form of legal presence. As Li Qirui and Lin Fang have emphasized, "legal cultural spaces are not only relatively autonomous materialized social and cultural spaces, but also conceptual and symbolic cultural domains that transcend geographical boundaries." [8] Scholars such as Zhu Yaliang, Xie Yao, and Tan Jun have offered insightful analyses of the spatial turn in legal studies, contributing significantly to the evolving discourse. [9,10,11,12] These scholarly contributions have substantially expanded the

theoretical horizon for studying the Rule of Law Cultural Square and form a critical foundation for this paper. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives—including law, communication studies, and architecture—this study seeks to situate the Rule of Law Cultural Square within the broader temporal and ideological context of socialist legal culture with Chinese characteristics. By clarifying its theoretical implications, the aim is to offer meaningful insights for the ongoing construction of a socialist rule of law culture.

2.   The Historical Dimension of the "Rule of Law Cultural Square"

2.1 Conceptual Comparison: The "Square" in China and the West

As an essential form of urban public space, the "square" carries distinct cultural meanings and historical trajectories in different civilizations. In the Western tradition, the concept of the square emphasizes openness and diversity. As early as ancient Rome, thinkers discussed the relationship between the scale of the square and urban life. During the Renaissance, scholars elaborated on the multifunctional and pluralistic character of squares. In the modern and contemporary periods, urban planners have expanded the square's definition to encompass a broader range of civic functions. Throughout this evolution, the Western square has consistently served as a site for free public interaction—a space for gatherings, recreation, cultural expression, and political discourse—functioning as a vital stage for everyday social life.

By contrast, the Chinese conception of the square has historically centered on order and cultural symbolism. In imperial China, squares were often spatial domains of the ruling elite within the feudal hierarchy. Their layout, scale, and architectural configuration were strictly governed by ritual codes and hierarchical norms. Rather than fostering open civic engagement, traditional Chinese squares primarily hosted grand ceremonies, state rituals, and displays of imperial authority—serving to reinforce social order and legitimize sovereign rule. Everyday social interaction among common people, by contrast, tended to occur in more informal settings such as alleyways and neighborhood streets.

2.1.1 The Western "Square": Combining "Openness" and "Diversity"

The concept of the "square" in Western societies is rooted in a long and rich historical tradition. As early as ancient Rome, the architect Vitruvius emphasized the central role of public squares in urban life. He argued that the design of a square should reflect the size of the city's population and the nature of its residents' livelihoods. A square that is too small fails to serve the needs of the public, while one that is excessively large becomes empty and functionally disconnected. [13] In subsequent periods, architectural thought increasingly embraced the humanistic spirit, warning against grandiose but impersonal environments. Oversized and poorly proportioned spaces, it was noted, could evoke feelings of emptiness and alienation, preventing individuals from achieving a sense of harmony or belonging within their surroundings. During the Renaissance, scholars such as Leon Battista Alberti offered further elaboration on the diversity of Italian squares. Alberti identified two key dimensions of this diversity: the richness and variation of everyday civic life, and the wide range of spatial forms and scales that different squares could take. [14] Traditional European squares were not always products of meticulous planning. Often enclosed by surrounding buildings, they varied greatly in size and shape, reflecting both organic urban growth and regional architectural styles. By the 17th and 18th centuries, influenced by the political ferment of events such as the French Revolution, public squares began to expand in scale and function. Larger, more open spaces emerged as vital arenas where citizens could gather to express democratic aspirations. This shift reflected a broader transformation in spatial culture: from enclosed, segmented, aristocratic courtyards to open-air, unbounded, and neutral civic spaces. The public square became a physical embodiment of freedom and inclusivity. In the modern era, national capitals and cities across the West have continued to construct public squares in this spirit of openness. These spaces are no longer reserved for formal ceremonies alone but serve multiple roles—hosting festivals, offering spaces for rest and leisure, and accommodating the public expression of individual and collective opinion. By the late 19th century, urban theorist Camillo Sitte, in his influential studies of medieval and Renaissance squares, vividly described them as bustling with people, scenes of public celebration, theatrical performances, administrative proceedings, and the proclamation of laws. [15] These activities, he observed, collectively underscore the defining feature of the Western square: its frequent and dynamic use by the people.

It is worth citing several commonly accepted modern definitions of the "square" here. One describes it as "a space created in response to urban functional demands, designed for public activity... Squares accommodate gatherings,

transportation interchange, leisure and sightseeing for residents, commercial services, and cultural dissemination." [16] Another emphasizes its centrality: "It is often the hub of residents' sociocultural and political life, and the location where major public buildings are concentrated." [17] A third definition offers a more spatial perspective: "A square is an outdoor public space, primarily hard-paved and off-limits to motor vehicles. Its main functions include strolling, sitting, dining, or observing the surrounding world. Unlike sidewalks, which serve as transitional paths, the square constitutes a distinct spatial domain in its own right." [18] These definitions collectively highlight the core features of the Western concept of the square—its openness to the public, the diversity of its uses, and its role as a node in urban circulation and connectivity.

2.1.2 The Chinese "Square": Emphasizing "Orderliness" and "Cultural Symbolism"

In the Chinese context, the concept of the "square" places greater emphasis on its relational role within public space—particularly in terms of its function in shaping sociocultural and political life. Rather than merely a site of physical gathering, the square in traditional Chinese thought often reflects deeper associations with order, ritual, and authority.In classical Chinese literature, the term "square" (广场) typically appears as a compound of the characters "广" (broad or expansive) and "场" (field or open space). For example, during the Eastern Han dynasty, Zhang Heng in his Rhapsody on the Western Capital wrote: "Facing the expansive square, one observes the exquisite performances of wrestling and mock combat" (临迥望之广场，程角抵之妙戏). The Tang dynasty, in the biography of Ma Sui, records: "After one year, he cleared a large square, assembling thirty thousand troops to cultivate military might and awe the northern regions" (居一年，辟广场，罗兵三万，以肄威震北方). In the Song dynasty, the poet Ge Shusi wrote: "The imperial exam in the broad square, thousands lined up in formation; I admire your success in the examination—it is like masterful archery striking the mark, winning the highest honor." (广场笔阵数千人，喜汝穿杨箭镞亲). The History of Liao, notes: "The emperor abandoned imperial privilege to pursue entertainment in the broad square" (轻万乘之贵，逐广场之娱). Even during the Qing dynasty, Emperor Qianlong wrote: "In the broad square, a forest of performances unfolds; colorful torches blaze through the night less evening" (广场百戏林离奏，彩炬千枝不夜陈).

In Chinese classical poetry and literature, the character "广" emphasizes spatial dimensions, specifically the vastness of an area that can accommodate a wide range of activities, including the mass assembly of troops for review. On the other hand, "场" highlights the notion of a designated space for human activities, focusing on its functional capacity to host a variety of social events, such as theater performances, hunting, and military parades. However, when considering the usage of the term "广场" (square), a significant distinction emerges between ancient China and the West. In ancient China, the square primarily referred to the domain of the feudal ruling class, and there was a clear demarcation between social strata within these spaces. The public nature of a square typically became evident only during large-scale social events, when it might be opened to different social classes. In most other instances, the square served as a private domain of the imperial family and a political symbol revered by the common people, who were generally prohibited from using these spaces for everyday activities. For instance, the Tiananmen Square was off-limits to commoners, and spaces like the Temple of Heaven also had strict usage regulations governed by seasons and ritual protocols.

From the perspective of their characteristic attributes, the concept of the square in ancient China placed greater emphasis on orderliness and cultural significance, whereas the Western conception stressed the openness and diversity of space. In the West, squares provided a social function oriented toward everyday social interaction: they offered a setting where people could engage in face-to-face encounters, conversations, gatherings, even laughter and quarrels. By contrast, in ancient China, the square's social function was primarily embedded within a ritualistic context. Entering such a space entailed a repeated reinforcement of one's awareness of social position and demanded strict adherence to ritual propriety. In traditional Chinese society, ritual codes were not merely reflections of social order and moral norms; they were also crucial instruments for maintaining the sovereignty of the ruler. This institutional logic profoundly shaped both the form and content of traditional squares, making them a key stage for the display of imperial authority. Within this framework, the people primarily occupied the role of an audience. First, the spatial layout of squares was constrained by the ritual system: ritual-centered squares were situated in spacious, central locations, whereas squares for commoners were relegated to the city's outskirts, cramped and marginal, reflecting the hierarchical order of social status. Second, official palace squares were vast, underscoring the power of the sovereign and symbolizing ritual supremacy, while other squares were strictly regulated in size and scale, required to correspond to the status of their builders, and prohibited from exceeding

the dimensions of official squares—lest they be regarded as seditious. Third, the placement of buildings and statues within squares had to comply with a rigid hierarchy: palaces, altars, temples, and imperial statues occupied the most central and important positions. Finally, the activities held in these squares were subject to strict supervision and control, further underscoring their ritual and political character.

"In the grand ceremonial activities held in squares, one often found interludes of folkloric opera performances—a medley of popular entertainments—which infused these solemn spaces with a touch of secular festivity." [19] However, the everyday social interactions of ordinary people occurred far more frequently in markets and residential wards. Although these spaces also qualified as open and public in a broad sense, they lacked the expansive scale and culturally symbolic functions of the square. This distinction is also reflected in the semantic extensions of "square" in Chinese, which came to signify places like parade grounds or examination halls, both deeply embedded in official or institutional contexts. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that popular cultural and entertainment practices remained the wellspring of the official opera performances seen in imperial squares. These folk traditions, especially those associated with seasonal festivals and communal gatherings, laid the groundwork for square-based cultural expressions across various regions. Over centuries of historical development, grassroots rituals like deity processions and festive parades evolved into widely shared square-centered cultural phenomena, and in doing so, squares ultimately provided a vast social space for the flourishing of popular culture.

2.2 From "Square" to "Rule of Law Cultural Square"

The contrast between Chinese and Western conceptions of the "square" reflects fundamentally different trajectories in the development of spatial forms and modes of social activity. In contemporary socialist China, the concept of the square synthesizes the essential features of both traditions. On the one hand, squares are closely integrated with human settlements and are shaped through deliberate design and planning. Their boundaries are demarcated by architectural structures, roads, and natural terrain, forming open-air public spaces. On the other hand, many modern squares are constructed around specific themes and outfitted with designated facilities, allowing them to serve multiple functions. As such, they may operate as single-purpose or multifunctional centers for social, political, economic, and cultural exchange.

A wide range of public social activities and collective practices in production and daily life have come to rely on the square as a crucial spatial platform. The square has thus become an indispensable part of people's everyday existence. This is due to humanity's inherent need for outdoor and natural spaces, as well as a widespread desire for interpersonal interaction. As a result, people gather in squares to engage in various forms of communication, interaction, and expression, thereby showcasing the diversity of society and the richness of culture. At the same time, the square serves as an important landmark for enhancing people's spatial awareness. In contrast to the vast skies and chaotic horizons found in natural environments, the square and its architectural features prompt an awareness of verticality and horizontality, as well as mass and volume. The cultural and orderly nature of the square underscores a critical issue: through architecture and its symbolism, individuals come to understand who they are and where they are located. By observing the forms and scales of human-made environments, people are able to grasp the meanings of qualities such as "calm," "seriousness," and "grandeur" within specific social contexts. While nature also offers such landscapes, there are two key challenges: first, natural landscapes are often too scattered; second, they tend to be too abstract. For instance, when observing the sea, how does one interpret the calmness of the ocean versus the danger of the waves? Nature contains such contrasting forces, but in human settlements, through spaces like squares, individuals encounter a more structured and orderly version of the secular world itself.

In the past, the concept of the Rule of Law Cultural Square was typically examined merely as an objective spatial entity, a physical presence. However, "space" is not just a material existence confined by geographical and physical distances, as traditionally understood; it also encompasses a range of social meanings, including power, production, daily life, and interaction. Through his studies of institutions such as prisons, hospitals, and schools, Michel Foucault argued that power is omnipresent and permeates architectural spaces, embedded within them. [20] Space, to some extent, carries and reflects social relationships. Therefore, this paper does not merely treat the Rule of Law Cultural Square as an objective material entity but extends the analysis to consider it as a social space.

2.2.1 The Extrinsic Properties of the Rule of Law Cultural Square as a Social Space

Social space cannot be understood in isolation; rather, it derives its external definition through coexistence with

other spatial forms—namely, objective space and subjective space. It is, in essence, "the subjectively transformed objective or the objectified subjective" [21] —an organic whole that fuses individual will, external material conditions, and socially sanctioned meaning.

Objective space is generally understood as a material form of existence and can be viewed from two distinct perspectives: ontological and epistemological. As ontology, objective space refers to the thing-in-itself—existing independently of human cognition—and thus lies beyond the scope of this paper. As phenomenon, however, objective space becomes available to human perception and is the focus of this discussion. When objective space, as phenomenon, is apprehended through human cognition, it gives rise to subjective space. Subjective space encompasses not only individual experiences but also collective ones. For example, emotional fluctuations may move individuals personally, but they can also evoke shared resonance within a group. Similarly, moral reflection may occur at the level of personal introspection, while entire communities may also hold shared moral convictions. It is within this collective subjective space that group sentiment, collective memory, and value consensus emerge. This value consensus is multidimensional: it includes emotional agreement and moral consensus, as well as behavioral norms and shared standards of conduct.

The construction of the Rule of Law Cultural Square, along with the series of activities it hosts, is inseparable from the role of human agency. As a social space, it emerges from the interaction between subjective intentionality—rooted in human practice—and external objects as material forms. It is, therefore, a category of praxis. In this sense, social space is intrinsically connected to the legal systems and normative frameworks that regulate relationships not only between people and material objects but also among individuals themselves. Legal institutions and norms play a foundational role in shaping, mediating, and sustaining the relational dynamics that the Rule of Law Cultural Square seeks to embody and enact.

2.2.2 The Intrinsic Properties of the Rule of Law Cultural Square as a Social Space

Publicness is an intrinsic property of social space. This is because the individuals who construct space do not exist in isolation; they are always embedded within and cannot be separated from the social community to which they belong. As such, individual space is necessarily encompassed within social space. Human beings are the active agents within social space, defined in classical sociological terms as "the sum total of all social relations." The very concept of "we" only arises when the self-encounters and coexists with other, unfamiliar subjects within a shared social space. Two conditions must be met for this concept to emerge: first, the recognition of difference—that others are not the same as oneself; and second, the acceptance that such differences can coexist, thereby allowing the transformation from "I" to "we." Within social space, individuals engage in productive and practical life activities by projecting their subjective intentions onto objective spatial conditions through externalized behavior. When an individual discovers an unclaimed piece of land—for instance, a barren plot—and proceeds to labor upon it, thereby asserting possession, they are effectively declaring: "This space belongs to me." However, individuals cannot divide and claim all physical space for exclusive ownership. A significant portion of objective space belongs to the community, and while individuals may enjoy usage rights, they cannot assert absolute control. On one hand, space is a finite resource. If every individual were to claim ownership in this manner, it would lead to a proliferation of competing private spaces and a state of spatial disorder. The mere factual existence of private space, based solely on unilateral intention or self-assertion, is not sufficient to establish its normative legitimacy. On the other hand, humans are inherently limited in capacity and resources; in order to enable sustained collective development, people not only demarcate their own domains but also leave room for others to construct their individual spaces.

Therefore, through processes of social interaction, the social nature of human beings imparts publicness to space: individual space implicitly requires recognition by other members of the community—or by the collective will—thereby subordinating personal social space to the larger framework of public social space. In turn, collective social space is inherently endowed with explicit public significance. This recognition constitutes a form of legitimacy judgment, grounded in commonly accepted normative frameworks within the community, such as legal norms, customary practices, and moral codes. The most representative of these is the use of legality to signify legitimacy: "When a social space is recognized by the law of the state, it becomes a legally valid social space; otherwise, it is deemed an illegal social space." [21]

At the macro level, a series of policy documents issued by the state—such as the Five-Year Plans for Promoting

Legal Education—constitutes a form of institutional recognition of the Rule of Law Cultural Square. At the micro level, the management regulations and ordinances adopted across various regions serve as a complementary form of recognition by governments, communities, and the general public. Following the earlier definition of "square," the Rule of Law Cultural Square may thus be defined as:

A thematically law-oriented, open-air, public social space, equipped with architectural and educational facilities dedicated to legal publicity and education, serving as a platform for cultural and civic activities, and oriented toward the public to promote legal development and awareness.

3. The Relationship Between Rule of Law and Space in the "Rule of Law Cultural Square"

The Rule of Law Cultural Square is a social space centered on the theme of legal culture, and at the same time, it embodies distinct legal significance. Through legal guidance and regulation, space becomes a carrier of fairness, justice, and social order. The rule of law plays a critical role in the planning, usage, management, and educational functions of space, while space, in turn, serves as a key domain for expressing legal principles and provides the foundational setting for realizing a law-based way of life. The relationship between law and space, as manifested in the Rule of Law Cultural Square, is thus characterized by interconnectedness and dialectical relationship.

3.1 The Interconnectedness Between Rule of Law and Space

As early as ancient Greece, Aristotle explored the relationship between the rule of law and social space—particularly the polis—in his *Politics*. According to his view, the size and scale of a given social space directly affect the nature and efficiency of its political system. Specifically, when the population is large and the spatial unit is excessively expansive, the bonds between citizens tend to weaken, leading to a decline in concern for public affairs and a reduction in political participation. Conversely, if the spatial unit is too small, it fails to provide sufficient resources for its citizens and inhibits the formation of a diverse social structure—conditions that are not conducive to the development of good governance under the rule of law. By the time of the Enlightenment, Montesquieu further advanced this line of thought in *The Spirit of the Laws*, where he examined the interrelations between law and a state's "material conditions"—such as climate (whether cold, hot, or temperate), soil quality, geographical position, and territorial scale. [22] At the core of Montesquieu's thought lies an environmental determinist perspective, which argues that varying objective environmental conditions give rise to different social systems and legal structures. For instance, he believed that a temperate climate is conducive to the development of democratic governance, whereas extreme climates—either excessively cold or hot—tend to foster more authoritarian and rigid forms of rule. However, as later scholars have noted, Montesquieu's theory leaves a critical gap: although he assumes that individual will or emotion leads to certain behaviors, the specific mechanisms linking those behaviors to objective environmental conditions remain underdeveloped. As one critique puts it: "Montesquieu posited that will or emotion determines action, but he never fully clarified how action is concretely conditioned by the environment." [11] For a long period thereafter, space continued to be viewed as a transcendental container—a passive, pre-existing backdrop for human activity. As Immanuel Kant once described, space is "the substrate and stage upon which our habitual games are played," [23] portraying it as a lifeless, factual existence. In this tradition, space was reduced to a neutral vessel, lacking agency or social meaning, existing merely to accommodate events rather than shape them.

Later, Karl Marx sought to reconstruct the concept of space within the framework of historical materialism. He emphasized the social construction of space, arguing that space is not merely a natural or physical entity, but one that is shaped and transformed by social relations, the level of productive forces, and human practical activity. Humanity possesses both the capacity to understand nature and the ability to reshape it. Thus, space should be understood as a "social fact of nature"—a domain wherein practical intentions and spatial forms are intrinsically linked. [24] The practical turn in the concept of space further influenced the early 20th-century Chicago School of Urban Sociology. Through empirical fieldwork, its scholars discovered that the organization of social space profoundly shapes people's patterns of social interaction, lifestyles, and sense of emotional belonging. The Chicago School emphasized the reciprocal relationship between social space and sociocultural structures: different types of social space reflect distinct social cultures. For instance, the spatial location of institutions such as courthouses embodies their role and status within the local cultural landscape. Conversely, cultural characteristics in turn influence the use, planning, and evolution of space. Changes in spatial patterns and forms are not merely physical transformations—they also reflect the historical development of local cultures, normative expectations, and shared

emotional attachments. [25]

In summary, the interconnectedness between the rule of law and space can be encapsulated in the idea that a certain correspondence exists between different geographical spaces and different legal forms. Spatial conditions in different regions exert varying degrees of influence on the shaping of legal systems, just as different legal systems rely on spatial configurations to differing extents. [26] This observation suggests that we can approach the study of legal development and the practice of the rule of law from a spatial perspective—exploring how legal norms are produced, function, and evolve in relation to the spatial environments they inhabit.

3.2 The Dialectical Relationship Between Rule of Law and Space

In the interconnectedness, space often remains in a passive position. However, Henri Lefebvre advanced the notion that "space is productive," [27] thereby repositioning space from a passive container to an active agent. First, he distinguished among physical space, mental space, and social space. Physical space refers to objectively existing natural and built environments—such as geographical terrain or urban architecture. Mental space refers to individuals' subjective perceptions and imaginations of space. Social space, meanwhile, emphasizes the use and meaning of space as shaped by social practices. Through the production and use of space, social relations are both expressed and consolidated. In turn, spatial structures and characteristics shape human behavior and modes of interaction, making space a key site for the reproduction of social relations. This spatial practice inherently contains a dialectical quality. Moreover, space plays a decisive role in constructing social totality. Even before external public spaces like squares are engaged, individuals first become aware of their own bodily space, which serves as a junction of self-awareness and social relationship. To fully understand bodily space, it must be recognized as more than a physical entity; it is subject to multiple layers of influence—legal, social, and cultural.

For instance, legal normative systems regulate bodily space by defining what constitutes lawful bodily behavior or appropriate attire. Meanwhile, social and cultural systems shape bodily expression through customs, beliefs, and moral standards. These systems are interwoven and mutually influential. For the individual, bodily space becomes the site where the "concrete totality" first emerges. It is "concrete" in the sense that it synthesizes multiple social relations, and "total" as a unified object constituted by rich layers of normative determination. [11]

When it comes to the "square," the spatial configurations of ancient Greek and ancient Chinese societies offer striking contrasts that reflect differing political and cultural logics. In the city-states of ancient Greece—such as Athens—the square served as a space for assemblies, debates, and public deliberation. Located at the center of the city, it radiated outward to reach citizens in close proximity and functioned as a multifunctional site—combining commercial exchange, political discussion, legal adjudication, and public ritual. This overlapping of roles and spatial openness encouraged citizen interaction and debate, thereby fostering broad participation in democratic politics and collective supervision of public affairs. By contrast, squares in ancient China were often situated away from the residential areas of ordinary people, spatially segregated from commercial and secular life. Access was tightly regulated, and such spaces were primarily reserved for ritual, communication, and moral-political education conducted by the ruling elite. This spatial configuration reflected a deliberate strategy by the governing class to use space as a tool to maintain social order and hierarchical authority. The positioning and control of these squares not only enhanced the symbolic legitimacy and mystique of centralized power, but also psychologically reinforced political-ethical ideologies such as the harmony between Heaven and humanity.

By comparing these two models, it becomes evident that the social functions and symbolic meanings of space are not fixed, but vary according to different cultural frameworks and political systems. Moreover, space itself plays an active historical and material role in shaping distinct forms of social structure and interpersonal relations. As Lefebvre observed, spaces formed under different ideological regimes become distinct "semantic fields", filled with symbols, images, and codes that operate as signals of social operation—revealing a dialectical relationship between the socialization of space and the spatialization of society. [28]

To summarize the above analysis, space is a critical factor influencing the development of the rule of law. From the perspective of intrinsic normative values, social space must operate under the premise of legality, and the formation of a law-based society is inseparable from the sound construction of social space. First, the rule of law provides a set of norms and procedures for resolving social conflict. People are more inclined to settle disputes through legal channels—by knowing, respecting, and using the law—rather than resorting to violence or unlawful

means. This preference contributes to the harmony and stability of social space. Second, law protects individual rights and freedoms, including freedom of expression and the right to assembly. The protection of these rights enables individuals to express opinions, exchange ideas, and build social connections. Within a shared legal framework, individuals and social groups can coexist peacefully, promoting communication and mutual understanding among different segments of society. In doing so, the law facilitates a more open and pluralistic form of social interaction. From the perspective of external material foundations, the Rule of Law Cultural Square—as both a legal facility and a social space—encompasses a range of architectural elements, including buildings, sculptures, gardens, and informational displays. These man-made structures collectively form the spatial environment of the Rule of Law Cultural Square, distinguishing it from the external natural environment. First, architects must consider where to build, what materials to use, and the architectural style to adopt. Through the creation of these artificial spaces, they aim to alter or enhance people's perceptions and experiences of the environment. Second, users of the space will come to clarify their social roles and relationships through their interaction with the specific spatial environment. This affects how individuals recognize themselves and subsequently how they act. As the famous analogy suggests: "Once individuals understand that the arena is a human-made construct rather than a stage of the natural world, they will know how to behave." [29] Architecture is typically categorized into two types: public buildings and private territories. In addition to this distinction, Tuan Yifu further proposes two types of spatial categories: public symbols and nurturing spaces.

The Rule of Law Cultural Square is clearly a public building designed as a public symbol, intentionally constructed with meaning that is carefully controlled. On the other hand, nurturing spaces refer to those that, through repeated use, become embedded in social relationships, transcending the simple division between private and public. These spaces, over time, evolve into carriers of memory and social interaction, becoming human-centered environments that foster social care and emotional connection. A well-planned Rule of Law Cultural Square prompts us to reflect on how to develop a more just and inclusive normative system, while respecting individual rights and freedoms. At the same time, the Rule of Law Cultural Square also serves as a nurturing space for the public. It plays a purposeful, educational role, subtly reinforcing the principles of the rule of law. In this way, it helps the public understand and practice the rule of law, making it a way of life.

4. Upholding Tradition and Embracing Innovation: The Cultural Connotations of China's "Rule of Law Cultural Square"

The square is a symbol and embodiment of public life, rich in cultural significance. As Liang Sicheng once sincerely remarked, "On the eve of this cultural construction boom, it is necessary for us to re-examine this brilliant architectural tradition." [30] His words underscore the importance of recognizing the cultural depth embedded in spatial forms like the square especially as they evolve into contemporary public institutions. History is the most direct textbook of a nation. The Rule of Law Cultural Square is a uniquely Chinese form of public space. Although the term itself has only emerged in the past two decades, the concept has evolved through specific historical transformations. This distinctively Chinese character is inherited from the traditional square of ancient China— "the result of a largely independent process of evolution, far removed from the Greek-Roman or Judeo-Christian trajectories of the West." [31] At the same time, it bears the deep imprint of China's socialist development since the founding of the People's Republic, particularly in the construction of democratic legal institutions.

4.1 The Cultural Inheritance of Traditional Chinese Squares in the Rule of Law Cultural Square

Historically, the square emerged to accommodate public social activities, and the origin and development of public space have always been closely linked to factors of belief and faith. In ancient China, typical squares such as those in ancestral temples and monasteries were spaces where individuals and groups were brought together through experiences and a collective sense of identity rooted in ancestral worship and religious faith. These spaces provided a cosmic meaning to people's lives, transcending the ordinary world and offering a sense of spiritual cohesion.

With changes in the modes of production and social relations, the model of these traditional squares gradually expanded and permeated secular life. Squares evolved into political centers, places of worship, and also key sites for public assembly, commerce, and entertainment. New forms emerged, such as palatial squares, entertainment squares, and commercial squares. The role of belief in shaping these spaces can be identified in several ways: First, belief and worship gave rise to a series of ritualistic activities, forming the original genetic foundation for public gatherings. Without rituals such as sacrifices and ceremonial music, square culture would have been difficult to

establish. Second, belief provided and shaped the public spiritual object, with cultural activities in traditional squares often centered around the idea of "entertaining the gods". Whether the object was a personalized deity like a feudal monarch or a collective spiritual focus, people organized and structured their lives around a unified spiritual object. Third, belief influenced the rise and fall of square cultural activities: from the religious fervor of early societies to the standardization of rites by figures, and later, to the widespread dissemination of Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist teachings. Square cultural activities expanded from the official to the popular sphere, and eventually, grassroots square culture became the primary force driving vibrant public engagement.

From an architectural perspective, the built environment serves as a medium for education; architectural space carries both demonstrative and pedagogical functions. By conveying a sense of reality, it helps sustain tradition or foster reform. The architectural forms of traditional Chinese squares represent a valuable cultural resource. Even today, many locally rooted ancestral temple squares still exist across various regions, offering a living historical textbook for the transmission of China's rich cultural heritage.

First, in terms of continuity, architecture has consistently reflected social order. For example, in ancestral hall squares, inscribed steles inform individuals of their lineage and generational rank, which in turn determine one's attire, position, and prescribed behavior. Even today, such spaces continue to provide many people with a sense of spiritual order. Similarly, traditional architectural styles were designed to reflect social status—through spatial scale and decorative elements. Modern architecture, while inheriting the craftsmanship of traditional forms, now emphasizes local cultural expression and dilutes the hierarchical symbolism embedded in the past. Architectural space continues to exert a direct influence on people's sensations and perceptions. Features like openness and enclosure, verticality and horizontality, mass and volume, brightness and shadow—all shape how the body reacts within space. Moreover, architectural symbols still carry meaning: though their referents have shifted in modern contexts, many enduring symbols—such as the Xiezhi or the square tripod (Fangding)—retain their educational value by conveying warnings, moral lessons, and collective ideals..

Second, in terms of transformation, people's understanding of architecture has gradually shifted from material presence to abstract symbol. Before the rise of modern industry, individuals in traditional settlements often built their own homes and contributed to the construction of public spaces—frequently more than once, such as during ancestral house renovations or major life events like marriage. Building and renovation were routine, generating a rich and varied spatial atmosphere. As a result, private homes and public buildings functioned as textbooks of behavioral norms, embodying values broadly recognized within the community. In modern society, however, conflicting values and fragmented ideologies prevail. With rising literacy, books and visual media have gradually replaced architecture's educational role. Cultural meaning and value expression have become less dependent on physical environments, as language-based symbols begin to replace material ones. Whether people share an understanding of the same building or symbol now depends on whether the world still possesses internal coherence. Clearly, today's condition is one of fragmentation and pluralism—architecture and symbols no longer exert a universally shared influence on perception and thought. Even within the same era, some perceive ancestral squares as outdated, arrogant, or backward, while others see them as refined, solemn, and rooted. When it comes to modern architecture, consensus is even harder to find. Still, "a living symbol, by definition, does not require excessive explanation." [29] Tangible architectural space continues to offer an irreplaceable sense of reality, directly evoking physical and emotional experience. Whether traditional or modern, contact with architectural space reveals vast cognitive dimensions—it may be man-made, but it symbolizes a richly layered spiritual and cultural world.

Space is an inescapable aspect of people's lived experience, yet its significance may be diminished, especially in a diverse modern society. Activities occurring in the square may face a separation of social, economic, and cultural forms. Space may be arranged and designed to highlight social hierarchy, but such arrangements often lack cultural depth and may not align with economic development. [32] Belief plays a significant role in traditional Chinese squares and can similarly be inherited and applied in the construction of Rule of Law Cultural Squares. Through cultural activities and architectural design, belief factors can highlight cultural values and spiritual strength, supporting the Rule of Law Cultural Square in preserving and passing on traditional culture. For example, the Xiezhi—a symbol widely recognized in Chinese society—retains its basic signification. In traditional squares, it represented authoritarian power and a culture of justice, upholding the principles of punishment and reward. In contemporary squares, however, the symbol rejects the connotations of despotism and instead emphasizes fairness and justice, evolving into a symbol of China's rich tradition of legal culture.

4.2 Embedding the "Rule of Law Cultural Square" into the Construction of Socialist Rule of Law

The Bolshevik Party in Russia had almost no experience with political art forms during the October Revolution of 1917. The Communist Party of China was different. Even before taking power in 1949, it had already become adept at using art forms favored by the masses to carry out effective propaganda campaigns among a rural population that was largely illiterate. [33] Before the founding of the People's Republic, Mao Zedong had already proposed many ideas for propaganda in public spaces. In one work report he sharply pointed out: "Too much aimed at city dwellers, not enough reaching the common people; too much in written form, not enough in pictures." [34] Propaganda, he emphasized, was a necessary political tool, capable of creating a favorable climate of opinion and winning over more participants. But propaganda must have a target audience. Mao Zedong urged breaking through the confines of the city, stressing that the broad peasant masses were "especially receptive to revolutionary propaganda" and should be included. [35] Through propaganda and organization in Peasant Movement Training Institutes and other peasant associations, people in revolutionary base areas would gather in open public spaces such as threshing grounds, dancing Yangko, listening to speeches, and learning communist slogans and ideas together. In a certain sense, this was already a kind of "prototype" of today's Rule of Law Cultural Square.

Under the force of propaganda and mobilization, the masses—especially peasants—became fearless actors and a vital force in revolutionary construction. While distributing pamphlets and printing leaflets served as forms of education, the square as a space had a stronger capacity to gather both body and mind. Choosing to step into the square, to dance and assemble collectively, bridged bodily experience and emotional awareness. By sensing the contrast in numbers and strength between the individual and the group, people's sense of agency was more deeply activated. What changed was not only individual opinion, but also individual action—many individuals came together to form a purposeful collective, in which subjective will and external object merged into practice.

This is the allure of the "Mass Line": the masses not only learn through propaganda but also through their active participation, experiencing the effects of change firsthand and thereby further adjusting their positions and emotions. Before this, spaces like threshing grounds and temple squares had long been open areas for daily activities. However, these past activities were monotonous, and the relationships between people never found a form of collective action grounded in shared values. With the onset of mass movements, an atmosphere of unity emerged, offering individuals repeated opportunities for change. The once dull threshing grounds and temple squares were imbued with new meanings due to these changes. For instance, people were eager to go to the square for a "meeting." In the past, such gatherings were merely proclamations or announcements; now, the masses understood that "meetings" were central to social activities where they could voice opinions and vote.

The construction of squares has always been closely linked to the mass line, providing a spatial platform for the social, political, economic, and cultural activities of the people. Even when these spaces are not explicitly named "squares", they often serve as public areas large enough to accommodate broad participation, and can still be analyzed through the lens of square space. Activities such as land reform grievance meetings, "recalling the bitterness" campaigns during various social movements, mass rallies, Yangko performances, revolutionary model operas, and public singing events all relied on the square as their spatial carrier. The physical construction of squares also gradually expanded in parallel with the advancement of socialist development.

There is no better example than Tiananmen Square to illustrate the importance of square construction. On October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong announced the formal establishment of the People's Republic of China in Tiananmen Square. As a newly opened social space, Tiananmen Square "has been carefully interpreted, transformed, and even recreated." [33] As an important part of the new socialist capital, Tiananmen Square was redesigned. The original Tiananmen Square was expanded and the high walls surrounding it were demolished. The expansion project was basically completed from 1949 to 1959, and the area was expanded to 44 hectares, becoming one of the largest political squares in the world.[33]

The removal of high walls transformed the Tiananmen Square into a completely open space, symbolizing an open society. Its scale and layout enabled it to function as a venue for large political gatherings and national celebrations. The reconstruction also emphasized overall coherence, integrating the surrounding environment with architectural forms. Almost simultaneously, the Ten Great Buildings of the 1950s began to take shape; among them, the Great Hall of the People, the Museum of the Chinese Revolution, and the National Museum of Chinese History were

positioned on the east and west sides of the square, creating a new spatial arrangement reminiscent of the traditional "left ancestral hall, right altar" configuration. The grandeur of Tiananmen Square added a new social space to the heart of Beijing and served as tangible evidence of New China's legitimacy, symbolizing its political authority. Domestically, it reinforced the expression of national sentiment among the people; internationally, it projected the image of independence and sovereignty. Following its completion, the national focal point shifted from the Forbidden City—long the emblem of imperial supremacy under the Ming and Qing dynasties—to the newly created symbolic space in front of its gates. This shift marked the replacement of the old order, centered on imperial power, with a new order that embodied the principle of the people as masters of the state. The Forbidden City, once a symbol of autocracy, receded to the background as the "backyard" of the People's Square. With the Tiananmen Square's completion, public activities flourished on this vast open ground. Grand parades for National Day and May Day, major speeches, and political mobilizations were staged here, making the square a platform for mass participation and national rituals. These events attracted attention from across the country and, in the name of the people, extended their influence nationwide.

When people observe a building, they pay attention to its scale and height. The size, height, and the arrangement of elements within a structure all carry symbolic significance, reflecting the close connection between power, architecture, and space. The expansion of Tiananmen Square and Chang'an Avenue created a new east-west axis intersecting with the existing north-south axis, establishing a new spatial layout for Beijing. This shift symbolizes the arrival of a new era—China's search for a socialist construction path imbued with national characteristics. After its reconstruction and reorganization, the traditional symbolism of Tiananmen Square has gradually been diminished. People marvel at its vastness and grandeur, but they also encounter new symbolic icons through its large buildings (now the Great Hall of the People and the National Museum of China) and monuments (the Monument to the People's Heroes), which have redefined the square's rich meaning. While Tiananmen Square is irreplaceable, several factors contribute to this uniqueness: first, no other square built across the country will have the same regional background to symbolize the "center" of the nation; second, the scale and investment of architecture cannot be replicated elsewhere; third, the architectural style and artistic design of Tiananmen Square cannot be exactly duplicated. However, Tiananmen Square still serves as an excellent model for square construction in other regions in several ways: first, in terms of planning and design as a landmark, it inspired the nationwide square construction boom; second, from an architectural style perspective, Tiananmen Square combines national characteristics with a sense of order, stability, grandeur, and permanence, ultimately achieving a synthesis of Chinese and Western influences, providing a valuable reference for square architecture elsewhere; third, in terms of symbolic meaning, Tiananmen Square demonstrates how a square space can function as a social space for public education and propaganda, a cultural space for collective memory, and a living space that bridges art and everyday life. It plays a significant role in maintaining socialist order and promoting the construction of socialist rule of law.

Since the reform and opening-up, square construction has flourished across the country, including both newly built squares and renovated or renamed ones. Square names generally fall into two categories: one defined by function—such as "Commercial Square," "Transport Square," "Civic Square," or "Leisure Square"; the other shaped by the spirit of the times, including names like "People's Square," "Mass Square," "Reform Square," "Opening Square," "Century Square," "Era Square," "Development Square," "Integrity Square," "Ecological Square," "Law Square," and, most recently, the widely promoted "Rule of Law Cultural Square." "As symbolization means attributing meaning to various perceptions and representing them through different carriers," [10] people, through practical activities, assign subjective meaning to the objective world and express this through naming or designation. A square's name itself is an important symbol, and the evolution of these names reveals how their referents shift along with changing historical and social contexts.

"Stacking door planks, bundling straw, sweeping the ground, speaking politely, fair trading, returning borrowed items, and compensating losses—all are forms of propaganda." [36] Both actions and their outcomes can be understood as a kind of "diffuse propaganda." As socialist development has entered a new era, square activities have become increasingly diverse and dispersed, integrating cultural, economic, and political functions while drawing more people into everyday participation. These activities have given rise to hybrid and composite forms of engagement. Today, the general public—unlike in the past when people were governed in a state of ignorance—is no longer passive. With rising education levels and increasingly complex issues in social governance, it is all the more important to adhere to the principles of "from the masses, to the masses," and to give full play to the

creative initiative of the people. This allows their wisdom to be effectively exercised under sound and scientific policies and laws.

The construction of Rule of Law Cultural Squares provides the public with a comprehensive space for action—combining the resolution of practical problems with ideological guidance. It offers tangible material benefits while also stimulating the internal capacity of citizens to respond to challenges and solve problems. In doing so, it strengthens public understanding and support for the ideas of the Party and the state, and for the construction of socialist rule of law. The Mass Line is a fine tradition of the Party in governing the country, and also a distinctly Chinese approach to promoting the culture of socialist rule of law. The Rule of Law Cultural Square embodies this by conducting broad educational and propaganda work among the people, so that they understand China's real situation and direction, and develop confidence in their own strength.

5. Conclusion

As an important vehicle for legal development in the new era, the Rule of Law Cultural Square bears the responsibility of promoting the spirit of the rule of law, shaping legal consciousness, and fostering social consensus. It is not only an organic component of urban space but also a vivid expression of the deep integration between legal culture and everyday life. From a historical perspective, the Rule of Law Cultural Square inherits the orderliness and cultural depth of traditional Chinese squares while also incorporating the openness and diversity of Western public spaces—making it a hybrid public space that blends Chinese characteristics with modern values. Centered on legal culture, the square employs architecture, sculpture, and visual media to render legal principles visible and tangible, allowing individuals to absorb legal norms subtly through daily experience. Its construction and development not only provide citizens with spaces for leisure and recreation but also offer solid cultural support for the construction of a law-based society. Through rich and diverse legal cultural activities, it enhances public enthusiasm and initiative for participating in legal development, transforming the rule of law from an abstract concept into a concrete dimension of everyday life and embedding the legal spirit deeply in people's consciousness.

As a new frontier in legal education and public outreach, the Rule of Law Cultural Square is becoming increasingly embedded in the everyday lives of citizens. It is not merely a venue for legal education, but a spatial medium for cultivating legal belief and practicing the rule of law. With its multifunctional nature and interactive design, it has become an important site for public engagement with legal knowledge and norms. Looking ahead, the construction of Rule of Law Cultural Squares should continue to uphold tradition while embracing innovation, continually enriching their cultural substance and practical formats. On the one hand, it is essential to explore and draw from the rich legacy of traditional Chinese legal culture, integrating it meaningfully with modern legal concepts so that the square becomes a platform for both inheritance and innovation. On the other hand, these spaces must respond to the evolving needs of socialist legal development, actively exploring new methods of public legal education and making full use of modern technology to enhance interactivity and participation—thereby increasing the reach and influence of legal culture. Scientific planning and rational integration into the urban spatial system should also be prioritized to meet the growing public demand for legal cultural experiences. Only in this way can the Rule of Law Cultural Square play a more significant role in the new era, contributing distinctive cultural strength to the realization of 全面依法治国 (comprehensively governing the country according to law) and becoming a vivid and enduring symbol of China's commitment to the rule of law.

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