

# A Study on the Atmospheric Construction of Performance Spaces at the Wuzhen Theatre Festival from the Perspective of the Aesthetics of Atmosphere

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**Abstract:** Against the backdrop of the deepening integration of the experience economy and cultural tourism, performance spaces are shifting from traditional “containers for viewing” toward “immersive perceptual fields.” This paper takes the Wuzhen Theatre Festival as a case study, adopting the aesthetics of atmosphere proposed by Gernot Böhme as its theoretical framework, while incorporating the traditional Chinese concept of *qi*. It systematically examines the mechanisms through which atmosphere is generated in performance spaces. The study finds that the Wuzhen Theatre Festival achieves a coordinated production of atmosphere across three dimensions—materiality, mediality, and meaningfulness—through the theatrical reinterpretation of site foundations, the immersive orchestration of event systems, and the guided engagement of the audience’s embodied participation. This construction of atmosphere not only serves as the technical foundation for immersive experiences, but also points to the emergence of a new aesthetic relationship, transforming audiences from passive spectators into “co-producers” of atmosphere. The case of the Wuzhen Theatre Festival demonstrates that the aesthetics of atmosphere provides an effective interpretive framework for understanding the aesthetic mechanisms of contemporary performance spaces, while also offering theoretical reference points for the development of immersive cultural tourism industries.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics of Atmosphere; Wuzhen Theatre Festival; Performance Space; Immersive Theatre; Audience-Performance Relationship

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, immersive performance has emerged as a key form in the upgrading of cultural consumption, reshaping the spatial structure and spectatorial relationships of traditional theatre. Represented by events such as the Wuzhen Theatre Festival, cultural festivals have transformed entire historical environments into performative fields. By doing so, they break away from the conventional spatial paradigm centered on the “proscenium stage,” extending performance from enclosed theatres into open, lived environments. When an ancient town becomes a stage and its bridges and waterways are woven into the narrative, the “curtain” of traditional theatre effectively dissolves. Here, the “curtain” signifies not only the physical stage drape but also the boundary between performance and reality—most notably embodied in the invisible “fourth wall” that separates actors from audiences. By turning a millennium-old water town into a “boundaryless theatre,” the Wuzhen Theatre Festival creates a distinctive aesthetic phenomenon through its atmospheric construction of performance space. According to statistics, during the 12th edition of the festival in 2025, a total of 25 invited productions were presented, involving 437 theatre professionals. Eighteen groups, comprising 86 young performers, participated in competitions at the Bangwan Theatre. The Ancient Town Carnival brought together 89 domestic and international troupes and 711 performers, presenting 117 programs that spanned parades, intangible cultural heritage, dance, and theatre. Approximately 350,000 visitors flocked to this Jiangnan water town, experiencing theatrical performances across theatres, streets, docks, and granaries. The high degree of immersion and contextual affect generated within these performance spaces constitutes an aesthetic phenomenon worthy of in-depth exploration. Existing studies have largely approached the Wuzhen Theatre Festival from the perspectives of cultural tourism, festival economy, or theatrical form, while paying relatively limited attention to the core issue of how “atmosphere” is generated within spatial experience. This paper therefore introduces the theory of Aesthetics of Atmospheres proposed by Gernot Böhme as its analytical framework. Böhme argues that atmosphere is a “perceptible presence existing between subject and environment”—neither a purely material property nor a purely

subjective emotion, but an “in-between phenomenon” generated through the interaction between bodily perception and spatial surroundings[1]. Within this theoretical framework, the Wuzhen Theatre Festival is not merely a platform for theatrical presentation, but a composite field in which atmosphere is co-produced through the interaction of space, events, and audiences. Here, the notion that “theatre is life, and life is theatre” is no longer a slogan but becomes a perceptible atmospheric reality. Accordingly, this study takes the aesthetics of atmosphere as its theoretical foundation, supplemented by the traditional Chinese concept of qi, and focuses on the following questions: First, how is atmosphere generated within performance spaces? Second, how does the Wuzhen Theatre Festival achieve atmospheric construction through spatial transformation and the reconfiguration of performer–audience relationships? Third, can atmosphere be understood as a spatial production mechanism that can be designed and regulated? Through addressing these questions, this paper aims to deepen the understanding of the aesthetic mechanisms of immersive performance spaces and to provide theoretical references for related practices.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations of Atmosphere Construction in Performance Spaces

### 2.1 Gernot Böhme’s Aesthetics of Atmospheres: From Object Properties to In-Between Phenomena

The aesthetics of atmosphere proposed by Gernot Böhme emerged from a critique of traditional aesthetics. He argues that conventional aesthetic theories either focus on the formal properties of objects or on the aesthetic judgment of subjects, while overlooking what exists “in between” the two—namely, atmosphere. Atmosphere is a produced, affectively charged spatial condition[2]. The key to this theory lies in a rethinking of the concept of the “thing.” Böhme distinguishes between the “properties” of a thing and its “ecstasies”. While the “properties” of an object can be measured, a thing also “steps out of itself” into space, emitting its inherent affective qualities into the surrounding environment[3]. Atmosphere arises from this outward radiation of things and acts upon the perceiving subject; it is a co-presence of subject and object, a shared reality between the two. In this process of overflow, things are no longer confined to themselves; instead, through elements such as light, color, material, and scale, they release specific emotional tonalities into the environment, thereby forming the basis for the generation of atmosphere. In performance spaces, for instance, stage lighting does not merely serve an illuminative function—its variations in brightness and color actively participate in emotional construction. Similarly, theatre architecture is not simply a functional container; its historical texture and spatial scale continuously shape the audience’s perceptual experience.

Importantly, the generation of atmosphere depends on the “bodily presence” of the perceiver. Böhme emphasizes that atmosphere cannot exist independently of perception—it is something that is directly felt by those who experience it[4]. This implies that the study of atmosphere must adopt a phenomenological perspective, taking embodied perception as a central analytical dimension. It requires attention to how individuals participate in the formation of atmosphere through sensory experience, movement paths, and emotional responses within space. In other words, atmosphere is neither an inherent objective property of the environment nor a purely subjective projection of emotion; rather, it is a dynamic, emergent field of sensibility arising from the continuous interaction between body and situation.

Based on these theoretical premises, Böhme further argues that stage art represents a paradigmatic practice of atmospheric aesthetics. This claim is grounded in the inherently scenographic nature of theatre: it always situates something within a specific context, allowing it to “appear” to the audience in a particular way. From the perspective of atmospheric aesthetics, the fundamental task of performance space is neither simply to narrate stories nor merely to display performative skills, but to generate an atmosphere that can be holistically perceived by the audience within a specific spatiotemporal framework. This mode of atmosphere construction, centered on the total situation, exemplifies the operational logic of atmospheric aesthetics in performance practice (see Table 1). Elements such as lighting, sound, stage design, actors’ bodily movements, as well as the positioning and circulation of the audience, do not function as isolated symbols or tools; rather, through their coordination, they collectively form a sensuous whole oriented toward a unified emotional tonality. It is precisely this integrative coherence that enables the audience, through their embodied presence, to be immersed in a pervasive aesthetic experience, thereby facilitating the transformation from physical space to atmospheric space.

Table 1: Analysis of Atmospheric Perception in the Process of Performance Space

Physical Space	Performance Content	Audience Perception	Perceptual Hub	Perceptual Channels
1.Spatial Form and Layout 2.Decoration and Visual Elements 3.Acoustic and Light-Shadow Design	1.Narrative and Theme 2.Performance Form 3.Actor's Presence	1.Multisensory Integrated Experience 2.Bodily Sensation and Emotional Resonance 3.Interaction and Co-creation	Eyes, Ears, Nose, Mouth, Body	Sight, Hearing, Smell, Taste, Touch, Imagination

## 2.2 The Concept of “Atmosphere” in the Chinese Context: From Qi to Yun

From a cross-cultural perspective within the aesthetics of atmosphere, there exists a profound theoretical affinity between traditional Chinese aesthetics and German atmosphere aesthetics. Wang Qian points out that qiyun (spirit resonance) can be regarded as a particular form of atmosphere. It does not merely belong to the static attributes of artistic images; rather, it is an intentional aesthetic experience co-constituted by artistic images and viewers, by things and perceivers[5]. This definition reveals the structural commonality between qiyun and atmosphere: neither refers to a fixed property inherent solely in the object or the subject, but instead emerges through the interactive relationship between the perceiver and the perceived. In contrast to modern Western aesthetics, which has long emphasized subject-object dualism and object-oriented cognition, Chinese aesthetics places greater importance on holistic and fluid aesthetic experience. Within this framework, qi is understood as a fundamental existence that permeates both subject and object. It is neither purely material nor purely spiritual; rather, it functions as an intermediary medium through which perception occurs and affective tones diffuse. This conception resonates intrinsically with the core category of “mediality” in atmosphere aesthetics. Similarly, atmosphere aesthetics resists reducing aesthetic experience to either subjective emotion or objective environmental features; instead, it situates atmosphere at the interface between subject and world, emphasizing its mode of existence as both “half in the object” and “half in the mind.” Therefore, the traditional Chinese concept of qiyun not only provides cross-cultural theoretical support for atmosphere aesthetics but also expands its vocabulary and pathways for analyzing sensuous experience.

Liu Huili has divided theatrical atmosphere into two dimensions: materiality and meaningfulness. From the perspective of qiyun, so-called materiality does not merely refer to physical existence; rather, it emphasizes *qi* as a dynamic medium capable of carrying and transmitting emotional and intentional information within space. In traditional Chinese conceptions of the body, actors employ *qi*—through breathing, vocalization, and bodily movement—to project their mental and emotional states into the theatrical space, while audiences respond through embodied perception to the flow of this *qi*. As Wang Qian observes, the “spirit” or qiyun of things is not a hidden inner essence; instead, the fundamental characteristics of things themselves constitute the way in which they manifest. This reflects the modern expression of the idea that “the nature of mountains is my nature, and the nature of water is my emotion.”

Meaningfulness, by contrast, points to an aesthetic space of surplus meaning. The essence of yun lies in the notion of “images beyond images and scenes beyond scenes,” whereby finite artistic forms evoke an infinite expansion of embodied experience. The atmospheric meaningfulness of the Wuzhen Theatre Festival arises not only from the coordinated organization of spatial elements, but also from its capacity to guide audiences into an aesthetic state that is both inhabitable and traversable. In this state, viewers move from a finite physical environment into a profound and resonant emotional-aesthetic space. In other words, atmosphere endows spatial objects with affective tone, and objects acquire meaning within atmosphere, thereby transcending their physical properties. This Chinese understanding of atmosphere provides a multidimensional theoretical foundation for analyzing the performance spaces of the Wuzhen Theatre Festival.









**3. The Atmospheric Construction of Performance Space at the Wuzhen Theatre Festival**

**3.1 The Dimension of Materiality: The “Scenographic” Transformation of Space**

The most distinctive feature of the Wuzhen Theatre Festival lies in its transformation of a historically continuous Jiangnan water town into an integrated performative field. This transformation is not a simple utilization of existing spaces, but rather a process of “scenographic” construction oriented toward aesthetic experience. Through multiple strategies, it activates the latent perceptual qualities of space, shifting it from an environment of everyday life into a situational space with aesthetic intentionality.

First, at the physical level, Wuzhen preserves historical spatial elements such as residential houses, waterways, and stone bridges. The very “presence” of these elements constitutes a perceptual foundation imbued with temporal depth. The texture of bluestone pavements, the patina of architectural facades, and the reflective qualities of water surfaces together generate a historical atmosphere directly accessible to bodily perception. When theatrical performances are embedded within this environment, they do not obscure or replace the original space; rather, through interaction with the existing setting, they produce a layering and intensification of atmosphere.

*Table 2: A Comparative Overview of the “Scenographic” Transformation of Performance Spaces at the Wuzhen Theatre Festival*

Space Type	Daily State	Festival State
Pier / Water Terrace	 Mooring boats, resting	 <i>The Lies Game</i>
Zhaoming Academy	 Reading, resting	 <i>Su Lan Performance</i>
East of Yudu Bridge	 Idle space	 <i>Glove Puppetry</i>
Dyeing and Drying Racks	 Taking photos, art installations	 <i>The Outcast</i>

Second, at the functional level, the festival re-encodes spatial usage, transforming everyday spaces into performative ones. During the festival, ordinary sites are assigned new functions: granaries become theatres, workshops are converted into exhibition spaces, and docks turn into performance venues (see Table 2). For example, *The Game of Lies* transforms a waterside platform originally intended for rest into a performance scene, while *Tracing Blue* reconfigures the flow of visitors at Zhaoming Academy, turning movement into moments of pause and spectatorship. Through such

processes, traditional spaces are translated into narrative-driven performance fields. This transformation produces a juxtaposition of “real” and “performative” attributes, generating a dual semantic structure characterized by tension. Audiences remain aware of the space’s everyday identity while simultaneously perceiving its theatrical qualities, thus creating an interactive dynamic between cognition and perception.

Third, at the level of overall composition, the Wuzhen Theatre Festival takes “spatiality” as a core curatorial principle. Taking the “Theatre Dream Granary” section as an example, its performance spaces are themselves non-theatrical artistic zones, where creation unfolds within pre-existing spatial conditions. Architectural structures and on-site installations become integral to theatrical expression. In this sense, space is no longer a passive “container” for performance but a crucial element in the generation of atmosphere, co-constituting the situational whole together with the performance itself.

This mode of spatial transformation exemplifies what Gernot Böhme describes as “staging” (scenographization). As Zou Yuanjiang notes in his analysis of Mei Lanfang’s 1930 visit to the United States, such “staged” atmosphere-making is holistic and systematic, encompassing public discourse, textual dissemination, speech mobilization, and spatial construction, forming a multidimensional and coordinated “aesthetics of production.” In contrast, the Wuzhen Theatre Festival does not generate novelty by inserting exotic cultures into unfamiliar contexts. Instead, it is rooted in local cultural textures, reinterpreting and aesthetically translating everyday living spaces. By theatrically activating streets, waterfronts, and courtyards, the festival endows familiar life scenes with aesthetic distance and perceptual tension, transforming them into artistic fields open to contemplation and experience. In this process, space is no longer merely a physical container for performance but becomes a key medium for the generation of atmosphere. Audiences, in turn, shift from passive viewers to active participants in the construction of atmosphere. Thus, the “scenographization” realized by the Wuzhen Theatre Festival is not only a reconstruction of spatial form but also points to a mechanism of aesthetic reproduction grounded in locality.

### ***3.2 The Dimension of Mediality: The Liminal Reconfiguration of Performer–Audience Relations***

The aesthetics of atmosphere emphasizes that atmosphere is generated within an “in-between state” between subject and environment. In the context of performance, this “in-betweenness” is concretely manifested in the relational structure between audience and performance. Traditional theatre relies on a viewing mechanism structured by the proscenium stage, whose defining feature is a clear spatial and perceptual boundary between spectators and actors. Although immersive performance appears to break this boundary in form, its essence does not lie in simply eliminating separation, but in reorganizing performer–audience relations.

The practice of the Wuzhen Theatre Festival demonstrates that the transformation of the spectator–performance relationship relies on the refined construction of “liminality.” Taking the 2024 Ximeng Granary unit production *Burn Paper When Something Happens* as an example, the performance traverses open streets and is embedded within a marketplace setting. The creators establish differentiated auditory channels through the use of microphones for performers and headphones for audiences, while unified masks provide visual identification. In this way, an “auditory community” and a “visual community” are formed within public space, delineating a perceptible liminal boundary. Importantly, this boundary does not isolate the audience from reality; rather, it situates them within an overlap of “situational presence” and “real presence.” As spectators participate in the performance, they remain aware of the surrounding everyday environment, thereby forming a structure of “dual presence” that intensifies the tension of atmospheric generation.

Therefore, the “liminal reconfiguration” of performer–audience relations does not signify the disappearance of boundaries, but rather a transformation in their form—from a fixed and unidirectional viewing structure to a fluid and interactive perceptual relationship. This transformation provides the necessary “in-between space” for the generation of atmosphere. From the perspective of the traditional Chinese concept of *qi*, this can be understood as a contemporary manifestation of how performers and audiences communicate not necessarily through direct visual exchange, but through embodied presence and the shared circulation of *qi*, enabling the transmission of mental and emotional states.

### ***3.3 The Dimension of Meaningfulness: The Generation of Atmospheric Meaning***

Building upon the mechanisms of materiality and mediality, atmosphere further manifests as an aesthetic experience with a distinct tonal orientation—namely, its “meaningfulness.” Liu Huili argues

that “overall coordination determines the mode of existence of theatrical objects,” and that “this mode of existence in turn determines how theatrical objects act upon the atmosphere, while the atmosphere reciprocally endows these objects with meaning.” The key lies in how different spatial elements form a unified structure of meaning through holistic coordination. In other words, only when all constituent elements achieve internal coherence at the perceptual level can atmosphere transcend the mere accumulation of fragmented stimuli and be elevated into a sensuous field of affect that can be genuinely experienced by the body.

The atmosphere-making of the Wuzhen Theatre Festival largely manifests as a systematic regulation of overall coherence. First, this coherence is prominently reflected in the prudent modulation of commercial elements. During the festival, commercial signage and consumption-related activities are consciously confined to a range that aligns with the spatial character of the historic town, thereby avoiding high-intensity symbolic interference with perceptual continuity. From the perspective of atmosphere aesthetics, overly prominent functional signs tend to disrupt immersive experience, repeatedly directing the body toward consumerist engagement and hindering entry into a stable aesthetic state. In this sense, the “attenuation” of commercial elements can be understood as a mechanism of atmospheric maintenance: rather than negating commercial operations, it relegates them to the background, allowing the material textures, lighting, and historical traces of the space to assume perceptual primacy.

Finally, the Wuzhen Theatre Festival deliberately preserves spaces of “contingency” within its overall planning. Atmosphere cannot be fully designed; its formation inherently involves elements of uncertainty and emergence. Street parades, impromptu performances, and unplanned encounters provide audiences with additional perceptual opportunities beyond the predetermined structure, such as unexpectedly encountering a parade or witnessing an improvised performance by a bridge. These moments of serendipity reinforce the spontaneity of atmosphere, making theatre appear as if it naturally arises from the space itself. At the same time, contingency disrupts the unidirectionality of prearranged order and activates the audience’s immediate bodily responses—such as pausing, gazing, and eracting—thereby contributing to the dynamic construction of atmosphere. It is precisely through the dialectical relationship between overall coordination and localized contingency that the festival’s atmosphere acquires an aesthetic quality that is at once stable and vibrant, controllable yet irreproducible.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study adopts the perspective of atmosphere aesthetics, in conjunction with the traditional Chinese concept of *qi*, to conduct a systematic analysis of the generative mechanisms of atmosphere-making within the performance spaces of the Wuzhen Theatre Festival. The findings indicate that, through scenographic transformation of space, the liminal reconfiguration of the spectator–performance relationship, and the coordinated integration of multiple elements, the festival constructs an aesthetic field characterized by “in-betweenness.” Within this field, atmosphere is no longer treated as a subsidiary effect; rather, it functions as a generative mechanism that connects subject and environment, deeply participating in the formation of aesthetic experience.

At the theoretical level, this study introduces the atmosphere aesthetics of Gernot Böhme into the study of immersive performance spaces. Under an analytical framework of “materiality–in-betweenness–signification,” it systematically delineates the pathways of atmospheric generation, thereby offering a new interpretive dimension for understanding the aesthetic mechanisms of contemporary performance spaces. At the same time, through a dialogue with the traditional Chinese discourse of *qi*, the study expands the interpretive possibilities of atmosphere aesthetics within a cross-cultural context.

At the practical level, the research suggests that the key to immersive performance lies not in the accumulation of technological means or the replication of scenes, but in the integrated organization of spatial structures, bodily perception, and interactive relations, thereby constructing an atmospheric field with sustained perceptual tension. It should be noted, however, that this study is based on a single case—the Wuzhen Theatre Festival—and its conclusions are therefore to some extent context-dependent. Future research may further examine the universality and variability of atmospheric generation mechanisms through comparative case studies and cross-cultural analysis, as well as conduct empirical investigations of audience experience to provide a more nuanced and dynamic account of the perceptual processes of atmosphere

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