

Cross-Cultural Semiotic Analysis of Architectural Ornamental Elements: A Comparative Study of Ming-Qing Dynasty Architecture in China and Baba-Nyonya Architecture in Malacca

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Abstract: *This study explores the similarities and differences in the decorative elements and semiotic connotations of architecture during the Ming and Qing dynasties in China and the Baba-Nyonya architecture in the Malacca region from a cross-cultural perspective. Based on a literature review, field research of typical case studies, and semiotic theory analysis, the study finds that: on one hand, the decoration of imperial and residential buildings during the Ming and Qing periods emphasized rituals and hierarchy, using totems like dragons, phoenixes, and qilins to signify imperial authority and social structure. On the other hand, Baba-Nyonya architecture, while inheriting traditional Chinese auspicious symbols, incorporated cultural influences from Malay, Portuguese, Dutch, and British cultures, resulting in a decorative style that blends tropical characteristics with diverse aesthetic appeals. This cross-cultural adaptation process showcases the reinterpretation of decorative elements in different social, religious, and economic contexts. The study's findings not only contribute to the understanding of the evolution of architectural decoration symbols in a multicultural coexistence context, but also offer theoretical insights for historical heritage preservation and contemporary cross-cultural design practices.*

Keywords: Ming-Qing Architecture; Baba-Nyonya; Cross-Cultural Comparison; Semiotics; Ornamental Elements

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Significance

In an era of globalization, architectural art increasingly reflects cultural hybridity. Examples include China's Ming-Qing palaces and Malaysian Baba-Nyonya buildings, where ornamentation encapsulates political, social, religious, and aesthetic messages. These elements serve as both aesthetic symbols and cultural identifiers for specific communities.

Malacca, a strategic trading hub since the 15th century, experienced Portuguese (1511–1641), Dutch (1641–1824), and British (1824–1957) colonial rule. Meanwhile, China's Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1636–1912) dynasties refined traditional ritualistic architectural systems. Chinese immigrants introduced these architectural philosophies to Southeast Asia, giving rise to Baba-Nyonya culture (*Peranakan*). By examining the semiotic evolution of Ming-Qing and Baba-Nyonya architectural ornaments, this study provides deeper insights into cross-cultural architectural research and heritage conservation.



Figure 1: Malacca Old Town street scene and colonial ruins (Dutch red house and Chinese tiled roof)

1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

Research Questions:

- i. How did Ming-Qing architectural ornaments reflect political, social, and religious functions?
- ii. How did Baba-Nyonya architecture synthesize Chinese, Malay, and European styles, and what cultural translations emerged?
- iii. What connections and divergences exist between the symbolic and functional aspects of ornaments in these two contexts?

Objectives:

- i. Systematically analyze core motifs in Ming-Qing architectural decoration and their sociocultural values.
- ii. Investigate decorative details and cross-cultural adaptations in Baba-Nyonya architecture.
- iii. Compare symbolic meanings and contemporary relevance through case studies.

1.3 Methodology

- i. Literature Review: Examined historical texts on Ming-Qing architectural regulations and Baba-Nyonya scholarship.
- ii. Case Studies: Surveyed the Shi Family Grand Courtyard (Tianjin, representing northern Chinese merchant houses) and the Baba-Nyonya Museum (Malacca, exemplifying Sino-Malay-European fusion).
- iii. Semiotic Analysis: Decoded symbols through *denotation* (literal motifs) and *connotation* (cultural meanings), focusing on patterns, colors, materials, and spatial layouts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Traditional Symbolism in Architectural Decoration during the Ming and Qing Dynasties

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, China established a comprehensive system of architectural rituals and decorative norms (Lou, 2011). In buildings such as imperial palaces, official residences, and religious temples, ornamental motifs carried rich symbolic meanings.

Common animal patterns included dragons, phoenixes, and qilin, which respectively represented imperial authority, the nobility of empresses and consorts, and aspirations for success in the imperial examination system. Floral motifs were equally symbolic: peonies signified wealth and prosperity, lotuses symbolized purity and transcendence from the mundane world, while the “Four Gentlemen”—plum blossom, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum—were metaphors for noble character and moral integrity.

Color symbolism also followed strict hierarchical regulations. Yellow was exclusively reserved for the imperial family, red was used in palaces and sacrificial rituals, blue and green tones were typically associated with temples dedicated to heaven, and black was linked to the elemental philosophy of “water overcoming fire,” reflecting fire-prevention beliefs in architecture (Shen, 2002).



Figure 2: Dragon and Phoenix Motifs in the Imperial Ancestral Temple during the Ming and Qing Dynasties in China

Despite these rigid ritualistic distinctions in decorative motifs and color usage, architectural ornamentation in remote regions and vernacular settings often displayed a degree of creative adaptation and hybridity. For instance, dragon and qilin patterns were frequently stylized and incorporated into folk architecture through techniques such as “grass dragons” or “hooked dragons” in brick carvings and wood sculptures (Sun, 2015). These local reinterpretations not only reflect regional aesthetics and craftsmanship but also demonstrate the fluidity and resilience of symbolic traditions beyond the imperial center.

2.2 Multicultural Characteristics of Baba-Nyonya Architecture

Malacca’s strategic position as a maritime hub facilitated centuries of cultural exchange with China, India, the Middle East, and Europe. Established as a trading post during Zheng He’s expeditions in the 15th century, the city became a melting pot where Chinese immigrants—primarily from Fujian—intermarried with local Malays, birthing the unique *Peranakan* (Baba-Nyonya) community (Tan, 2021). Subsequent colonial rule by Portugal (1511–1641), the Netherlands (1641–1824), and Britain (1824–1957) introduced European architectural languages, further diversifying Malacca’s built environment. Baba-Nyonya architecture embodies a syncretic fusion of Chinese, Malay, and European elements, manifesting in three distinct layers:

Symbolic Motifs: Traditional Chinese auspicious symbols such as dragons, phoenixes, and qilins were retained, often carved in wood or stone to adorn doorways, beams, and ancestral altars. These motifs reinforced Confucian values of familial piety and continuity.

Functional Adaptations: While maintaining Chinese aesthetics, structural adjustments were made to accommodate tropical climates. For instance, open-air *serambi* (verandas) replaced enclosed courtyards, enhancing cross-ventilation—a hallmark of Malay vernacular architecture (Esmawee, 1999).

Climate-Responsive Design: The *atap genting* (ventilated thatch roof) and elevated stilts (*kaki lima*) exemplified Malay ingenuity in mitigating humidity and flooding. These elements coexisted with Chinese-style tiled roofs, creating a hybrid thermal comfort system.

Organic Motifs: Indigenous floral patterns like *pucuk rebung* (bamboo shoot), symbolizing growth and prosperity, were integrated into decorative panels, blending seamlessly with Chinese lattice designs.

Architectural Vocabulary: Renaissance-era arches, Baroque moldings, and Victorian ironwork appeared in grand merchant residences, reflecting Malacca's integration into global trade networks. Stained-glass windows and Dutch Delft tiles further attested to Portuguese and Dutch influences (Tan, 2021).

Material Syncretism: Imported materials such as terracotta floor tiles and teakwood from Europe and India were recontextualized within traditional Chinese joinery techniques, showcasing Malacca's role as a nodal point in the Indian Ocean exchange system. This multicultural synthesis is epitomized in the Baba-Nyonya Museum (Figure 3), where a Chinese-style courtyard is flanked by Malay-style verandas adorned with European ceramic mosaics, creating a spatial narrative of transcultural dialogue.



Figure 3: Facade of the Nanyang Museum

2.3 Semiotic Perspective and Cross-Cultural Interpretation

Semiotics posits architectural ornamentation as a dual system: a material entity and a vehicle for transmitting sociopolitical, economic, and religious ideologies (Krampen, 1995). In Ming-Qing and Baba-Nyonya architectures, identical motifs—such as dragons, phoenixes, and lotuses—undergo divergent semantic reconfigurations, reflecting the sociohistorical contexts of their deployment.

2.3.1 Imperial Chinese Context

Dragons (*long*) with five claws and phoenixes (*fenghuang*) were monopolized by the emperor and empress, respectively, serving as immutable emblems of cosmic order. Their rigid iconography reinforced the Ming-Qing mandate of heaven, with violations punishable by death (Chang, 2012).

2.3.2 Folk Chinese Adaptations

Merchants circumvented sumptuary laws by adopting simplified dragons (e.g., *sanjiao long*, or triangular dragons) and auspicious phrases (*fulu* charms), recasting imperial motifs into private expressions of wealth and lineage continuity (Wu, 2024).

2.3.3 Baba-Nyonya Reinterpretations

In Malacca, dragon-phoenix motifs migrated from ritual spaces to commercial settings. A merchant's mansion might feature a dragon-head door knocker symbolizing protection against pirates, while an interior screen depicting phoenixes celebrated marital alliances between Peranakan tycoons and Malay elites. Here, the dragon evolved from a celestial guardian to a *naga*-inspired protector, hybridized with Malay animist beliefs (Esmawee, 1999).

2.3.4 Chromatic Hierarchies

While Ming-Qing red symbolized imperial auspiciousness, Baba-Nyonya interiors employed a polychromatic palette—red-gold accents against teal-tiled walls—to evoke both Chinese festivity and Malay earthiness. This chromatic pluralism mirrored Malacca's role as a trading crossroads.

2.3.5 Spatial Paradoxes

The *serambi* (veranda), a Malay innovation for climate adaptation, was refunctionalized in Baba-Nyonya homes as a liminal space for multicultural interaction—a site where Confucian ancestor worship coexisted with Malay cockfighting rituals and European tea ceremonies (Tan, 2021).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Literature Review and Fieldwork

This study initiated with a systematic triangulation of archival resources and on-site investigations to establish a robust foundation for cross-cultural analysis.

3.1.1 Primary Sources

Chinese Architectural Treatises: Critical examination of the *Journal of the Society for the Study of Chinese Architecture* (*Zhongguo Yingzao Xueshe Huikan*), particularly volumes documenting late Qing decorative norms (e.g., *Qing Shi Gao*'s stipulations on merchant residence ornamentation).

Malaccan Colonial Records: Analysis of 19th-century Dutch land deeds and British colonial surveys from the National Archives of Malaysia, which detail hybrid construction practices in Heeren Street's Peranakan quarters.

Museum Collections: High-resolution digitization of architectural drawings from the Palace Museum (Beijing) and Malacca Sultanate Palace Museum, enabling comparative iconographic studies.

3.1.2 Fieldwork Methodology

- i. Shi Family Grand Courtyard (Tianjin)
- ii. Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum (Malacca)

3.2 Case Selection and Comparative Analysis

Rationale for Case Selection

- i. 1. Two archetypal merchant residences were chosen as controlled comparators, representing: Late Qing Northern Chinese Elite Architecture: Shi Family Courtyard exemplifies socioeconomic stratification under Confucian-patrilineal frameworks.
- ii. 2. Colonial-Era Southeast Asian Hybridity: Baba-Nyonya Museum embodies transcultural negotiation between Chinese diaspora identity and European-Malay influences.

3.3 Case Profiles

a. Shi Family Grand Courtyard (Tianjin, 1875)

Constructed during the Tongzhi Restoration (1862–1874), this complex embodies the resurgence of merchant wealth following the Taiping Rebellion, serving as the regional headquarters for the salt trade. Its decorative programs use scholarly motifs to legitimize commercial success and social aspiration. Architecturally, the structure features a pronounced spatial hierarchy, with nine interconnected courtyards arranged along a 128-meter central axis. The outer courtyards were designated for commerce, housing accounting halls and warehouses, while the inner courtyards were reserved for ancestral worship and clan education. The ornamental syntax reinforces these functions, with *dougong* brackets intricately carved with *ruyi* (scepter) motifs symbolizing hopes for bureaucratic advancement, and gable-end *chui-hua* (hanging flowers) displaying pomegranates for fertility and gourds for health.



Figure 4: Shi Family Grand Courtyard

b. Baba-Nyonya Heritage Museum (Malacca)

The Baba-Nyonya Museum in Malacca (1865–1919) reflects the rich cultural and architectural hybridity of the Peranakan Chinese during the British Straits Settlements' economic boom, funded by wealthy towkay merchants involved in tin and rubber exports. Originally a hybrid residence-warehouse, the building merges Hokkien clan traditions with colonial cosmopolitan influences. Its architectural features showcase material hybridity, such as teakwood *pintu pagar* (swing doors) adorned with Hokkien coin motifs and mounted on Dutch wrought-iron hinges,

as well as atap genting (clay tile roofs) that blend Malay thatching with Cantonese ridge decorations. The spatial design also emphasizes fluidity, with a central tianjing (air well) that serves as a multifunctional hub—hosting an ancestral altar by day and transforming into a kroncong (Portuguese-Malay music) performance space by night.



Figure 5: Baba-Nyonya Museum

3.4 Comparison of architectural decorative elements between Ming and Qing Dynasties and Nongya

First of all, in terms of animal and divine animal patterns, lion, dragon, Qilin, phoenix, bat, crane and other images are common in Shijia courtyard. The lion means "everything goes well", while the Qilin is often associated with "sending children" to look forward to the imperial examination and the prosperity of future generations (Zhang, 2015). The Nongya Museum also retains symbols such as dragon and phoenix, but more emphasis is placed on "prosperity of the prosperous people", "continuity of heirs" and "longevity of blessings", and auspicious patterns that are closer to local social customs such as butterflies, magpies and fish can be seen (Li, 2020). Secondly, in terms of flowers and plant patterns, Shijia courtyard prefers traditional flower patterns such as peony, lotus, plum, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum, among which peony represents wealth and fortune, while lotus emphasizes dust and purity of heart (Sun, 2015). On the basis of inheriting Chinese flower patterns, the architecture of Nongya also introduced tropical floral patterns (such as pineapple, mango, etc.), and combined with the European color brick collage process to form a more colorful decorative effect (Fadhline, 2015).



Figure 4: Comparison between the lion pattern of Shijia Courtyard and the lion pattern of the Heritage Museum of Nongya

Then, in terms of color and technology, the rites of the Ming and Qing Dynasties strictly distinguished architectural colors: yellow was reserved for the royal family, red was used for palaces and sacrifices, blue was used for buildings offering sacrifices to heaven, and black was related to the concept of fire prevention (Shen, 2002). The Stone family compound uses a lot of red, green and gold in the people's houses, and the external walls are green bricks and gray tiles to cope with the northern climate. On the other hand, the Chinese festive colors such as red and gold are used in the architecture of Baba Nyonya, while the Malay social blue, green and European style colored brick and glass decoration are added to make the overall structure more diverse and brighter (Esmawee, 1999).



Figure 5: Details of the patios and wood carvings of the Museum of Baba Nyonya

Finally, in terms of spatial structure and function, the Shijia courtyard adopts a multi-courtyard layout, with the main gate, the flower gate and the inner gate advancing layer by layer, highlighting the closed etiquette and family level. The Nongya Museum is adapted to the tropical climate with an Air Well and a Malay high house designed for light and ventilation as well as ancestral worship and social interaction (Chung, 2012).

3.5 Semiotic research perspective

Denotation refers to the basic forms and motifs of the decorations, such as dragons, phoenixes, flowers, birds, and other traditional imagery. These elements represent the literal content or visual appearance of the ornamentation. Connotation, on the other hand, involves the symbolic meanings these decorations carry within specific socio-cultural contexts. For example, a dragon motif may symbolize imperial power and political authority, while floral designs might represent beauty, harmony, or seasonal cycles. Similarly, the use of particular symbols can communicate ethnic identity, religious beliefs, or commercial status.

Beyond merely identifying these denotative and connotative aspects, this research further explores how architectural typologies and spatial functions interact with symbolic layers to

reflect broader systems of values and cultural ideologies. For instance, decorations within imperial palaces are often deliberately arranged to convey messages of hierarchical order, divine legitimacy, and centralized power, reinforcing the strict stratification of society. In contrast, decorative schemes in merchant residences might emphasize motifs associated with prosperity, longevity, and auspiciousness, reflecting the owner's aspirations for wealth, family continuity, and social mobility. By situating decorative patterns within their respective architectural settings—such as palaces, temples, or domestic dwellings—and linking them to specific historical and cultural practices (including ritual ceremonies, ancestor worship, or cosmological beliefs), this approach demonstrates how decorative elements transcend mere aesthetic value. They function as carriers of meaning that express social hierarchy, construct identities, and facilitate cultural transmission. In this way, ornamentation becomes a multidimensional medium, embodying and communicating the underlying value systems and worldviews embedded in architectural space.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Semiotic Analysis from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

From a political symbolic standpoint, architectural decorations featuring dragons and phoenixes during the Ming and Qing dynasties in China were primarily used to signify imperial authority, the noble status of imperial consorts, and scholarly success through the imperial examination system. These motifs were deeply embedded in the hierarchical structure of the imperial state and were exclusive to high-ranking individuals. In contrast, within the *Baba Nyonya* (Peranakan Chinese) communities of Melaka, the dragon and phoenix motifs underwent a process of secularization. Rather than representing royal power, these symbols were reinterpreted to signify prosperity, commercial success, and familial flourishing in a mercantile context (Wu, 2024).

In terms of religious and folk symbolism, Ming and Qing China exhibited a syncretic tradition combining Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. In Melaka, however, religious pluralism was further enriched by the coexistence of Islam, Christianity, and local folk beliefs. This diversity is vividly reflected in the decorative elements found in Peranakan architecture, where traditional Chinese mythological beasts coexist harmoniously with Malay geometric patterns. Such a blend mirrors the hybrid religious landscape and cultural negotiation within these spaces.

Social identity and commercial status also emerge as critical dimensions in the symbolic interpretation of architecture. For example, the Shijia Courtyard in northern China emphasizes family reputation and scholarly achievement as central themes, often expressed through inscriptions, plaques, and symbols of academic distinction. In contrast, *Baba Nyonya* residences tend to highlight symbols of commercial wealth, social mobility, and cultural pride, reflecting the merchant class's aspirations and success within colonial and postcolonial Southeast Asia.

4.2 Discussion: Cultural Adaptation and Contemporary Implications

This study demonstrates that auspicious motifs undergo a dual transformation—both in form and meaning—as they travel across cultures. In terms of form, these motifs are adapted through variations in pattern details, color schemes, and materials to suit local aesthetic preferences and climatic conditions. In terms of meaning, the same motifs acquire new layers of connotation shaped by differing social structures, religious beliefs, and cultural narratives. These findings carry significant implications for contemporary architectural heritage conservation. One of the

key challenges lies in balancing historical authenticity with cultural integration. As Khoo (1998) points out, heritage conservation is not merely about preserving static historical artifacts, but also about enabling cultural symbols to evolve meaningfully within changing social contexts. The experience of *Baba Nyonya* architecture highlights the importance of adaptive localization and hybrid usage in keeping traditional symbols relevant and vibrant. Through thoughtful reinterpretation and innovative application, traditional architectural elements can be revitalized to meet the diverse needs of modern multicultural societies.

In the era of globalization and expanding tourism, *Baba Nyonya* architecture has not only become a cultural emblem of Melaka but also serves as an inspiration for new forms of cross-cultural architectural practice. By carefully excavating symbolic resources from traditional architecture and combining them with contemporary functions and technologies, it is possible to create built environments that embody both historical depth and creative vitality.

5. Conclusion

Through a systematic review and comparative case analysis of architectural decorative elements from the Ming and Qing dynasties and the *Baba Nyonya* architecture of Melaka, this study has explored, from a semiotic perspective, how traditional decorative motifs have been cross-culturally adapted and creatively reinterpreted across different historical and cultural contexts. The main findings can be summarized as follows:

Symbolic Transformation of Shared Motifs

Decorative motifs such as dragons, phoenixes, qilin (mythical beasts), and floral patterns, though visually similar, underwent significant shifts in meaning depending on their cultural setting. In Ming and Qing China, these motifs primarily served to reinforce imperial authority, Confucian ritual order, and the legitimacy of scholarly achievements via the imperial examination system. In contrast, within the *Baba Nyonya* architectural tradition, these same motifs were recontextualized to symbolize commercial prosperity, familial harmony, and cultural pride—reflecting the values of a merchant-based society situated in a colonial trade hub.

Hybrid Aesthetic Influenced by Multicultural and Climatic Factors

The architectural style of Melaka, shaped over centuries of trade and colonial influence, reflects a complex fusion of cultural elements drawn from Malay, Portuguese, Dutch, British, and Chinese traditions. This convergence gave rise to a distinctive tropical decorative language in which Chinese auspicious symbols coexist with European ceramic tiles and Malay-inspired ventilation structures. The result is a rich and vibrant architectural identity that is both historically layered and environmentally responsive.

Dynamic Evolution of Decorative Symbols Under Multiple Forces

The process of cross-cultural fusion observed in these decorative elements highlights the dynamic and multifaceted evolution of symbolic forms under the combined influence of politics, economy, religion, and regional climate. This study emphasizes that traditional symbols are not static relics but living cultural expressions capable of transformation. As such, the findings offer valuable insights for contemporary practices in historic district preservation and cross-cultural architectural design.

In conclusion, the historical trajectory of architectural ornamentation in Ming-Qing China and *Baba Nyonya* Melaka illustrates the potential for traditional symbols to be sustainably

continued and innovatively reimagined through localized adaptation. For architects, planners, and cultural heritage practitioners, this underscores the importance of context-sensitive design strategies—ones that respect cultural origins while embracing creative hybridity. Such an approach ensures that traditional symbols remain relevant and meaningful in today's increasingly interconnected and multicultural built environments.



Figure 6: Schematic diagram of research conclusions and application prospects

On the whole, the comparison between the decoration system of Ming and Qing dynasties and that of Baba Nyonya not only expands people's understanding of ancient Chinese ceremonial architecture and Southeast Asian immigrant culture, but also provides more inspiration for contemporary cross-cultural architecture practice. Future studies can further combine the multi-disciplinary perspectives of architectural archaeology, cultural anthropology, materials science, etc., to make a more in-depth discussion on the evolution of symbols under the cross-cultural background, and carry out practical application in the contemporary design context.

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