

Cultural and Artistic Significance of Woodcarving Window Motifs in Traditional Huizhou Architect

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Abstract: *This study explores the cultural significance, aesthetic principles, and symbolic meanings of woodcarving window motifs in traditional Huizhou architecture, a distinctive architectural style prominent during the Ming and Qing dynasties in China. Through an interdisciplinary approach integrating cultural heritage theory, visual culture studies, semiotics, and material culture analysis, this research examines how these motifs function as carriers of cultural identity and social values within the Huizhou region. The study employs a rigorous visual analysis methodology to document and interpret the formal characteristics, iconographic elements, and contextual significance of these motifs, situating them within the broader historical and social context of Huizhou society. The findings reveal that these woodcarving motifs are not merely decorative, but are deeply embedded with layers of symbolic meaning that reflect the cultural, philosophical, and social ideals of the time. The study also highlights the role of these motifs in reinforcing social hierarchies and cultural narratives, as well as their contribution to the aesthetic and functional coherence of Huizhou architecture. By providing a comprehensive analysis of these motifs, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Huizhou's architectural heritage and underscores the importance of preserving these cultural artifacts as part of China's intangible cultural heritage.*

Keywords: Huizhou Architecture, Woodcarving Motifs, Cultural Identity, Symbolic Meanings, Visual Analysis

1. Introduction

Huizhou architecture, recognized for its unique aesthetic and cultural expression, stands as one of the most significant representations of traditional Chinese architecture, particularly during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Located in present-day Anhui province, the Huizhou region developed a distinct architectural style that reflects its geographical isolation, economic prosperity, and deeply rooted Confucian values (Fang et al., 2024). Among the various elements that contribute to the distinctiveness of Huizhou architecture, woodcarving window motifs hold a special place due to their intricate craftsmanship, symbolic richness, and cultural resonance (Shu & Sun, 2020).

The woodcarving motifs in Huizhou windows are not merely ornamental; they are imbued with layers of meaning that encapsulate the cultural, social, and philosophical ideals of the Huizhou people. These motifs, meticulously carved by artisans, serve as a visual language that communicates stories, beliefs, and values across generations (Ren, 2021). The windows, as

interfaces between the private and public realms, also play a critical role in shaping the lived experience of space within Huizhou homes, blending aesthetic beauty with practical function.

This study seeks to explore the cultural and artistic significance of these woodcarving motifs within the broader context of Huizhou architecture. By examining the formal characteristics, iconography, and contextual relevance of these motifs, the research aims to uncover the ways in which they function as carriers of cultural identity and social values. Through an interdisciplinary approach that integrates cultural heritage theory, visual culture studies, semiotics, and material culture analysis, this study will provide a comprehensive understanding of how these motifs contribute to the aesthetic and symbolic coherence of Huizhou architecture. The investigation is particularly timely as China continues to grapple with the preservation of its intangible cultural heritage in the face of rapid modernization. Huizhou woodcarving, with its rich symbolic meanings and artistic sophistication, represents a crucial aspect of this heritage (Shu & Sun, 2020). By documenting and interpreting these motifs, the research not only sheds light on their historical and cultural significance but also advocates for their preservation as vital elements of China's architectural legacy.

1.1 Issues and Problem Statement

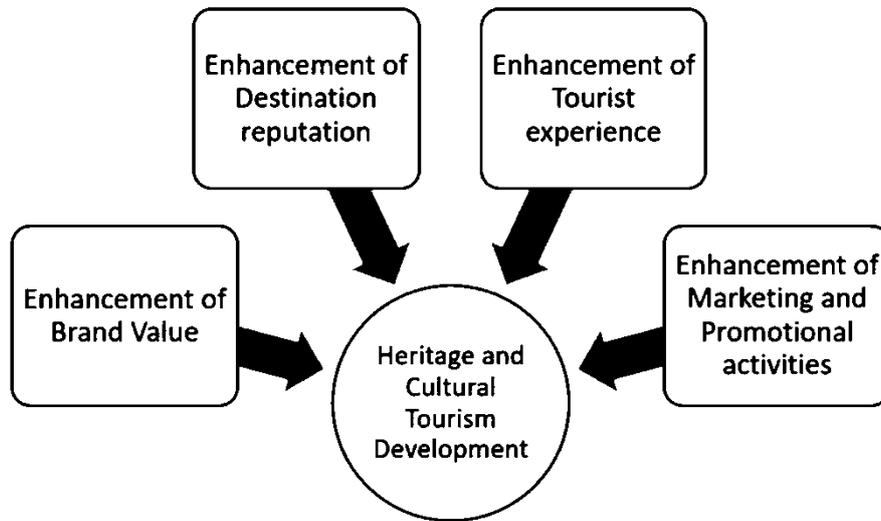
As the country continues to develop at a breakneck pace, many traditional architectural forms, including those in Huizhou, face the threat of being overshadowed by contemporary building practices that prioritize efficiency over cultural and historical preservation. This shift often leads to the neglect or demolition of historical buildings that house these intricate woodcarving motifs, resulting in an irreversible loss of cultural heritage. The issue is further exacerbated by a lack of awareness among the younger generation about the cultural significance of these architectural elements, which were once integral to the daily lives and social structures of the Huizhou people.

Another significant issue lies in the methodological challenges associated with studying these woodcarving motifs. The motifs themselves are rich with symbolic meanings that are often rooted in the specific historical, cultural, and social contexts of the Ming and Qing dynasties. However, these contexts are not always easily accessible or fully understood by contemporary researchers, particularly those without a deep background in Chinese cultural history or the symbolic systems embedded within it. The problem is compounded by the fact that much of the knowledge related to the creation and interpretation of these motifs has traditionally been passed down orally or through apprenticeship, leaving a gap in written records (Shu & Sun, 2020). This lack of documentation presents a substantial challenge for researchers attempting to decode the intricate layers of meaning and cultural significance embedded within these carvings (Wei, 2023).

Moreover, the preservation of Huizhou's woodcarving motifs is hampered by the economic pressures facing the region (Ren, 2021). Many of the traditional buildings that feature these motifs are located in areas that have not fully benefited from China's economic boom, leading to a lack of financial resources for proper maintenance and preservation efforts (Loang, 2025). The high costs associated with restoring and maintaining these intricate carvings often deter local governments and property owners from undertaking such projects, resulting in the gradual deterioration of these cultural artifacts. This economic challenge is further aggravated by the limited availability of skilled artisans capable of restoring or replicating the traditional techniques used to create these motifs, as modern construction methods and materials increasingly dominate the industry (Loang, 2025).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Underlying Theory: Cultural Heritage Theory



Cultural Heritage Theory serves as a foundational framework for understanding the significance of woodcarving window motifs in traditional Huizhou architecture. At its core, Cultural Heritage Theory posits that cultural heritage, including tangible artifacts like architectural motifs, is not merely a static relic of the past but a dynamic expression of identity, memory, and continuity within a community (Loang, 2024). This theory emphasizes the importance of preserving cultural artifacts because they embody the values, beliefs, and practices that define a community's identity over time. In the context of Huizhou architecture, woodcarving motifs are more than decorative elements; they are symbolic representations of the cultural and philosophical principles that shaped Huizhou society during the Ming and Qing dynasties (Fang et al., 2024). By applying Cultural Heritage Theory, this study seeks to explore how these motifs function as carriers of cultural identity, connecting the past with the present and ensuring the continuity of cultural memory in the Huizhou region.

Cultural Heritage Theory also provides a lens through which the social and symbolic functions of these woodcarving motifs can be understood. According to this theory, cultural artifacts like Huizhou woodcarvings are imbued with meanings that extend beyond their aesthetic value. They are embedded within a broader cultural system that includes social hierarchies, religious beliefs, and communal values. The motifs carved into Huizhou windows, therefore, serve not only to adorn but also to communicate specific cultural narratives and social norms. These carvings often depict scenes from traditional Chinese mythology, symbols of Confucian virtues, or elements from the natural world that hold particular significance within Huizhou culture (Cao & Mustafa, 2023). By analyzing these motifs through the lens of Cultural Heritage Theory, this study aims to uncover the layers of symbolic meaning embedded within the woodcarvings and to understand how these symbols reinforced and perpetuated the social and cultural structures of Huizhou society.

Furthermore, Cultural Heritage Theory underscores the critical importance of preserving these woodcarving motifs as part of the broader effort to safeguard intangible cultural heritage. The theory advocates for the protection of cultural artifacts not just as physical objects, but as embodiments of the intangible knowledge, skills, and traditions that they represent (Wei, 2023). In the case of Huizhou woodcarvings, the motifs are closely tied to traditional carving

techniques, artistic expressions, and cultural practices that are at risk of being lost in the face of modernization and globalization. Cultural Heritage Theory, therefore, provides a rationale for the urgent need to document, preserve, and transmit the knowledge associated with these motifs to future generations. By situating the woodcarving motifs within this theoretical framework, this study emphasizes their significance as living cultural heritage that requires active preservation efforts to maintain their relevance and meaning in contemporary society.

2.2 Cultural Significance

The cultural significance of woodcarving window motifs in traditional Huizhou architecture is deeply rooted in the rich history and cultural heritage of the Huizhou region, which is located in what is now modern-day Anhui Province, China (Xu, 2024). This area is renowned for its distinctive architectural style, which flourished during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties. Huizhou architecture is characterized by its elegant simplicity, harmonious proportions, and intricate woodwork, particularly in the form of carved window motifs that hold both aesthetic and symbolic value.

Woodcarving in Huizhou architecture is not merely a decorative art; it is a medium through which cultural narratives, social values, and philosophical ideas are expressed. The window motifs, in particular, are imbued with deep symbolic meanings that reflect the beliefs, aspirations, and daily lives of the people who lived in these homes. These motifs often draw upon traditional Chinese iconography, incorporating elements such as flowers, animals, and geometric patterns, each carrying specific cultural connotations. For example, the lotus flower, frequently featured in Huizhou woodcarving, symbolizes purity and spiritual enlightenment, while the peony represents wealth and honor (Jian & Xiaoyan, 2020). The placement of these motifs in windows is also significant. Windows in traditional Huizhou architecture serve as both literal and metaphorical openings to the outside world, allowing light and air to enter while also providing a connection between the interior domestic space and the broader natural and social environment. The carved motifs, therefore, act as mediators between the inner and outer worlds, filtering not only light but also the cultural and symbolic meanings that flow into the home. Through these carvings, homeowners could express their cultural identity, social status, and moral values, embedding their living spaces with layers of meaning that transcended mere functionality.

Moreover, the craftsmanship involved in creating these woodcarving motifs reflects the high level of skill and artistry that was cultivated in the Huizhou region (Cao & Mustafa, 2023). The artisans who produced these works were highly trained, often over several years, mastering techniques that allowed them to create intricate designs with great precision and detail. The process of woodcarving required not only technical skill but also a deep understanding of the cultural and symbolic significance of the motifs. As such, the artisans were not merely craftsmen but also cultural transmitters, preserving and perpetuating the rich heritage of Huizhou through their work (Ooi et al., 2024). The motifs themselves often tell stories or convey moral lessons, drawing from Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions that were prevalent in Huizhou society. For instance, scenes from classical Chinese literature or historical events might be depicted in the carvings, serving as constant reminders of the values and virtues that were important to the inhabitants. These visual narratives reinforced social norms and ethical behavior, aligning the domestic space with the broader moral and philosophical frameworks that guided Huizhou society.

In addition to their symbolic and moral functions, woodcarving window motifs in Huizhou architecture also played a role in the social and economic life of the region. The intricate

woodwork was a marker of wealth and social status, with more elaborate and finely crafted motifs indicating a higher standing in the community. As such, these carvings were often commissioned by wealthy merchants and scholars, who used them to demonstrate their cultural refinement and social prestige. The prominence of woodcarving in Huizhou architecture also contributed to the region's economy, as the demand for skilled artisans fostered a thriving industry that supported many families.

2.3 Aesthetic and Design Principles



Figure 1: Huizhou woodcarving window motifs

The aesthetic and design principles underlying the woodcarving window motifs in traditional Huizhou architecture are a testament to the sophisticated craftsmanship and cultural sensibilities of the region. These principles reflect a deep appreciation for harmony, balance, and symbolism, which are central to Chinese artistic traditions. The woodcarving motifs are not only decorative elements but also integral components of the architectural design, contributing to the aesthetic coherence of the buildings in which they are found.

One of the fundamental aesthetic principles guiding the design of woodcarving window motifs in Huizhou architecture is the concept of yin and yang, which represents the dualistic nature of the universe. This principle is often manifested in the balance between solid and void, light and shadow, and symmetry and asymmetry within the carvings. The intricate patterns carved into the wooden windows often juxtapose positive and negative spaces, creating a dynamic interplay of light and shadow that changes throughout the day. This interplay not only enhances the visual appeal of the carvings but also imbues the living space with a sense of rhythm and movement, reflecting the fluidity and interconnectedness of all things.

Symmetry is another key aesthetic principle that is meticulously observed in the design of woodcarving window motifs. Symmetrical designs are favored not only for their visual harmony but also for their symbolic connotations of balance, order, and stability. In traditional Chinese culture, symmetry is often associated with harmony in the universe and within the home. As such, the symmetrical arrangement of motifs on windows is intended to promote a sense of peace and equilibrium within the household. However, this symmetry is not rigid; it is often softened by subtle variations and asymmetrical elements that introduce a degree of spontaneity and naturalism into the design, preventing the composition from becoming too static or mechanical. The use of symbolic imagery is another crucial aspect of the aesthetic and design principles in Huizhou woodcarving. Each motif is carefully chosen for its cultural significance and is often imbued with layers of meaning that go beyond mere decoration. Common motifs include representations of flora and fauna, such as bamboo, plum blossoms, cranes, and deer, each carrying specific symbolic meanings. Bamboo, for instance, is a symbol of resilience and integrity, while plum blossoms represent perseverance and purity. These

symbols are often arranged in patterns that tell a story or convey a moral lesson, making the window carvings not only beautiful but also didactic.

The design of these motifs is also guided by the principle of *qiyun shengdong*, which can be translated as “spiritual resonance” or “lifelike movement.” This principle emphasizes the importance of capturing the essence or spirit of the subject matter rather than merely replicating its physical appearance. In the context of woodcarving, this means that the motifs are designed to evoke a sense of vitality and energy, even within the constraints of a static medium. For example, a carving of a dragon might be depicted in a sinuous, flowing form that suggests movement and power, while a cluster of flowers might be arranged to convey the impression of a gentle breeze. This attention to spiritual resonance ensures that the carvings are not only visually compelling but also emotionally engaging.

Another important design principle is the use of proportion and scale. In traditional Huizhou architecture, the size and placement of woodcarving motifs are carefully calibrated to maintain the harmony of the building's design. The motifs must be proportionate to the size of the window and the surrounding architectural elements to avoid overwhelming the viewer or disrupting the aesthetic balance of the structure. This consideration of scale extends to the level of detail within the carvings themselves, where intricate patterns are balanced with broader, more open spaces to create a sense of depth and dimension. The craftsmanship involved in creating these motifs also adheres to the principle of meticulous attention to detail. Artisans would spend countless hours perfecting the fine lines and intricate patterns that define Huizhou woodcarving. The precision required to achieve such detail is a reflection of the high standards of craftsmanship that were expected in the creation of these architectural elements. This attention to detail is not only a testament to the skill of the artisans but also an expression of the cultural values of diligence, patience, and respect for tradition that were deeply ingrained in Huizhou society.

2.4 Motif Typology and Classification

The motif typology and classification of woodcarving window motifs in traditional Huizhou architecture are deeply influenced by the rich cultural, religious, and social contexts of the region (Jaremka et al., 2020). The diversity and complexity of these motifs reflect the integration of various cultural elements, including Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist symbols, as well as local customs and beliefs. The classification of these motifs can be broadly categorized into thematic groups, each with its own set of symbolic meanings and aesthetic principles.

One of the most prominent categories within the typology of Huizhou woodcarving motifs is nature-inspired imagery. This category includes motifs that depict flora and fauna, which are deeply rooted in traditional Chinese symbolism. Floral motifs, such as plum blossoms, chrysanthemums, lotus flowers, and peonies, are among the most commonly used in Huizhou woodcarvings. Each flower carries specific connotations: for example, the plum blossom symbolizes perseverance and purity, especially in the face of adversity, while the peony represents wealth, honor, and social status (Helsper, 2021). Fauna motifs include animals like dragons, phoenixes, cranes, and deer, all of which are imbued with rich symbolic meanings. The dragon, a symbol of power and authority, often appears in dynamic, swirling forms, while the phoenix represents rebirth and immortality. These motifs are carefully chosen and intricately carved to convey specific cultural messages, often reflecting the values and aspirations of the homeowner.

Another significant category in the typology of Huizhou woodcarving motifs is geometric patterns. These motifs are characterized by their abstract and often symmetrical designs, which include lattice patterns, interlocking shapes, and repetitive geometric forms. Geometric motifs in Huizhou architecture serve both aesthetic and symbolic purposes. Aesthetically, they contribute to the visual rhythm and harmony of the architectural space, while symbolically, they often represent concepts such as infinity, continuity, and the cyclical nature of life. The use of geometric patterns in window carvings also reflects the influence of ancient Chinese cosmology and numerology, where certain shapes and numbers are believed to hold auspicious meanings.

Narrative motifs constitute another important classification within the typology of Huizhou woodcarving. These motifs depict scenes from classical Chinese literature, historical events, or folklore, often rendered with meticulous detail and artistic skill. Narrative motifs are particularly significant as they serve as visual stories that convey moral lessons or cultural ideals. For example, scenes from the "Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars," a classic Confucian text that illustrates the virtue of filial piety, are commonly depicted in Huizhou woodcarvings (Chang et al., 2020). These narrative motifs are not only decorative but also didactic, reinforcing the Confucian values of loyalty, respect for elders, and moral integrity that were central to Huizhou society. The choice of narrative scenes often reflects the homeowner's educational background and social status, as well as their commitment to upholding traditional values.

Religious and mythological motifs form another distinct category within the classification of Huizhou woodcarving motifs. These motifs draw heavily from Daoist, Buddhist, and folk religious traditions, and often depict deities, immortals, or mythical creatures. For instance, the Eight Immortals, a group of Daoist deities, are frequently depicted in Huizhou woodcarvings, each carrying their own symbolic attributes that represent various virtues and blessings. Similarly, motifs featuring the Buddha or bodhisattvas reflect the influence of Buddhism in the region, often symbolizing protection, enlightenment, and spiritual guidance. Mythological creatures, such as the qilin (a benevolent creature associated with good omens) and the dragon-turtle (symbolizing longevity and prosperity), are also commonly featured. These religious and mythological motifs are deeply embedded in the spiritual and cultural life of Huizhou, serving both as protective symbols and as expressions of the homeowner's piety and religious devotion.

Additionally, auspicious symbols form a key category in the typology of Huizhou woodcarving motifs. These motifs include objects or symbols that are believed to bring good fortune, happiness, and prosperity. Common auspicious motifs include the bat, which symbolizes good luck, the coin, representing wealth, and the ruyi (a ceremonial scepter), which symbolizes power and success. These motifs are often integrated into larger compositions or used as standalone designs to convey wishes for a prosperous and fortunate life. The presence of these motifs in window carvings reflects the deeply held belief in the power of symbols to influence one's destiny and well-being.

In terms of classification, these motifs are often organized according to their thematic content, symbolic meanings, and stylistic features (Xu, 2024). The classification system not only serves as a tool for understanding the diversity and richness of Huizhou woodcarvings but also helps to preserve the cultural heritage associated with these motifs. Artisans and scholars categorize motifs based on their historical origins, regional variations, and the specific techniques used in their creation. This classification allows for a deeper appreciation of the artistic and cultural

significance of Huizhou woodcarvings, as well as their role in the architectural and social fabric of the region.

3. Methodology: Visual Analysis

The methodology of visual analysis is a crucial approach in the study of woodcarving window motifs in traditional Huizhou architecture. This method enables a systematic and comprehensive examination of the visual elements, styles, and symbolic meanings embedded within the architectural features. Visual analysis, as a methodological framework, involves a detailed observation and interpretation of the motifs, considering both their aesthetic qualities and their cultural, historical, and social contexts. Visual analysis begins with the close observation of the woodcarving motifs, focusing on their formal characteristics such as line, shape, texture, color, and composition. The intricacies of the carvings, including the precision of lines, the depth of the relief, and the interplay of light and shadow, are meticulously documented. This initial stage of analysis is essential for understanding the technical skill and craftsmanship involved in the creation of the motifs. The detailed observation allows researchers to identify stylistic features that are characteristic of specific time periods, regional variations, or individual artisans. This process of careful scrutiny provides the foundation for further interpretative analysis.

In addition to the formal aspects, visual analysis in the context of Huizhou woodcarving also involves an examination of the motifs' iconographic elements. Iconography, the study of symbols and images, is a critical component of visual analysis that delves into the symbolic meanings of the motifs. This involves identifying and cataloging the various symbols, figures, and patterns depicted in the woodcarvings, and interpreting their meanings within the cultural and religious framework of Huizhou society. For instance, researchers might analyze how specific motifs, such as the lotus flower or the dragon, are used to convey particular values or beliefs, and how these motifs relate to broader cultural narratives. This iconographic analysis is essential for uncovering the layers of meaning that are encoded within the visual imagery.

Another important aspect of visual analysis is contextual interpretation, which situates the woodcarving motifs within their broader historical, social, and architectural contexts. This involves exploring how the motifs relate to the design of the building, their placement within the architectural structure, and their function within the space. For example, researchers might examine how the motifs are positioned in relation to other decorative elements, such as latticework or roof carvings, and how they contribute to the aesthetic and symbolic unity of the building. Contextual analysis also considers the social and cultural factors that influenced the design and production of the woodcarvings, such as the patronage of wealthy merchants, the influence of Confucian, Daoist, or Buddhist beliefs, and the role of artisans in the local economy. By situating the motifs within their historical and cultural contexts, visual analysis reveals how they functioned as part of a broader system of visual communication and cultural expression.

Moreover, visual analysis in the study of Huizhou woodcarving often incorporates comparative analysis, where the motifs are compared with similar examples from other regions or time periods. This comparative approach allows researchers to identify common stylistic trends, trace the development of specific motifs, and understand the influences that shaped the visual language of Huizhou woodcarving. For instance, by comparing Huizhou motifs with those from other regions, researchers can explore how regional variations in style and symbolism reflect local cultural identities and interactions with broader artistic traditions. Comparative

analysis also helps to highlight the uniqueness of Huizhou woodcarving within the wider context of Chinese architectural decoration.

In conducting visual analysis, researchers often utilize various tools and techniques to enhance their observations and interpretations. High-resolution photography, for example, allows for the detailed documentation of motifs, capturing fine details that may not be visible to the naked eye. Digital imaging technologies, such as 3D scanning and modeling, provide additional insights into the spatial and structural characteristics of the carvings, enabling a more nuanced understanding of their design and execution. These technological tools complement traditional methods of visual analysis, offering new ways to engage with and interpret the visual material. The interpretative aspect of visual analysis also involves a critical engagement with existing literature and theoretical frameworks. Researchers draw on art historical theories, semiotics, and cultural studies to inform their interpretations of the motifs, considering how they function as signs within a system of visual communication. This theoretical engagement allows researchers to situate their analysis within broader scholarly debates, contributing to a deeper understanding of the cultural and symbolic significance of Huizhou woodcarving.

4. Results on Typology of Huizhou Woodcarving Window Motifs

The typology of Huizhou woodcarving window motifs represents a sophisticated and nuanced system of visual symbolism that embodies the cultural, social, and religious values of the region (Cao et al., 2024). Each motif, carefully chosen and meticulously crafted, serves not only as a decorative element but also as a powerful medium of cultural expression. The diversity in the motifs reflects the complex cultural landscape of Huizhou, where Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist influences converge with local customs and social practices.

Nature-inspired motifs form one of the most prominent categories within this typology, with flora and fauna frequently depicted in the carving (Figure 2). These natural elements are not merely ornamental; they carry profound symbolic meanings deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture. For instance, the plum blossom, often carved into Huizhou windows, symbolizes resilience and purity. This flower blooms in the harsh winter, representing perseverance and the ability to overcome adversity—qualities highly valued in Huizhou society (Alison, 2022). Similarly, the lotus flower is another common motif, symbolizing purity, spiritual enlightenment, and the transcendence of worldly attachments. The presence of these floral motifs in Huizhou woodcarvings reflects the community's connection to nature and its philosophical ideals, particularly those related to spiritual purity and moral integrity.



Figure 2: Nature-inspired motifs

The representation of fauna in Huizhou woodcarvings is equally rich in symbolism. The dragon, a frequent subject in these motifs, embodies power, strength, and good fortune. In Chinese mythology, the dragon is a revered creature, often associated with the emperor and imperial authority. In the context of Huizhou architecture, the depiction of dragons in window carvings might symbolize the homeowner's aspirations for success and prosperity. The phoenix, another mythical creature commonly featured in these motifs, symbolizes rebirth, immortality, and harmony. The pairing of the dragon and phoenix often symbolizes a harmonious marriage or a prosperous union, reflecting the societal emphasis on family and continuity. Fish (with the Chinese word for “fish” sounding like “abundance”) usually symbolizes “surplus” or “abundance year after year,” implying wealth and prosperity. Due to its strong reproductive ability, the fish also represents fertility and family prosperity (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Fish motifs

Geometric patterns in Huizhou woodcarving represent another significant category within the typology, characterized by their abstract and often symmetrical designs (Figure 4). These patterns are not only aesthetically pleasing but also serve symbolic and cosmological purposes (Zeyu, 2024). In traditional Chinese culture, geometric patterns, such as interlocking shapes and lattice designs, are often associated with concepts like infinity, continuity, and the cyclical nature of life. The repetitive nature of these patterns, coupled with their symmetry, embodies the Confucian ideals of order, balance, and harmony. These motifs often serve to unify the architectural space, creating a sense of rhythm and coherence that enhances the overall aesthetic experience.



Figure 4: Geometric patterns

Narrative motifs occupy a unique place within the typology, providing visual stories that convey moral lessons and cultural ideals. These motifs often depict scenes from classical Chinese literature, historical events, or folklore, rendered with meticulous detail (Xu, 2024). For example, scenes from the "Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars," a Confucian text that extols the virtues of filial piety, are commonly found in Huizhou woodcarvings. These narratives are more than just decorative; they serve as didactic tools that reinforce the moral and ethical codes central to Huizhou society. The inclusion of such scenes in domestic architecture highlights the

importance placed on education, morality, and the transmission of cultural values across generations.

Religious and mythological motifs further enrich the typology of Huizhou woodcarvings, reflecting the spiritual life of the region. These motifs often draw from Daoist, Buddhist, and folk religious traditions, depicting deities, immortals, and mythical creatures. For instance, the Eight Immortals, a group of revered Daoist figures, are frequently depicted in these carvings, each carrying attributes that symbolize virtues such as health, wealth, and longevity (Jian & Xiaoyan, 2020). The depiction of these religious figures in Huizhou architecture serves not only as an expression of piety but also as a protective measure, believed to bring blessings and ward off evil. The integration of religious motifs into the architectural fabric of Huizhou homes illustrates the deep interconnection between spiritual beliefs and daily life in the region.

Auspicious symbols also play a significant role in the typology of Huizhou woodcarving motifs, reflecting the community's desire for prosperity, happiness, and success. Common auspicious symbols include bats, which symbolize good luck; coins, representing wealth; and the ruyi scepter, symbolizing power and authority. These symbols are often strategically placed in the carvings to convey specific wishes for the household, whether for wealth, longevity, or familial harmony. The pervasive use of auspicious symbols in Huizhou woodcarvings underscores the cultural belief in the power of symbols to influence one's destiny, a belief that is deeply embedded in Chinese culture (Cao et al., 2024). The classification and typology of Huizhou woodcarving motifs are not merely academic exercises; they serve as crucial tools for preserving and understanding the region's rich cultural heritage. By categorizing these motifs based on thematic content, symbolic meanings, and stylistic features, scholars and artisans can better appreciate the diversity and complexity of Huizhou woodcarvings. This classification also facilitates the transmission of traditional knowledge and skills to future generations, ensuring that the cultural legacy of Huizhou is not lost. Moreover, the typology of these motifs provides insights into the social and economic conditions of the time, as the choice and intricacy of motifs often reflected the homeowner's status and wealth.

4.1 Identify of Woodcarving Window Motifs

The identity of woodcarving window motifs in traditional Huizhou architecture is a complex and multi-layered concept that encompasses their aesthetic, cultural, symbolic, and functional aspects (Alison, 2022). These motifs are not merely ornamental; they serve as visual markers of the cultural and social identity of the Huizhou region. Understanding the identity of these motifs requires an exploration of their origins, the cultural narratives they embody, the craftsmanship involved in their creation, and the ways in which they contribute to the architectural and social fabric of Huizhou society.

At the most fundamental level, the identity of woodcarving window motifs is rooted in their aesthetic characteristics. These motifs are distinguished by their intricate designs, precise craftsmanship, and the use of traditional woodworking techniques that have been passed down through generations of artisans. The aesthetic identity of these motifs is defined by their stylistic features, which often include fluid lines, symmetrical compositions, and a harmonious balance between positive and negative space. The visual complexity and elegance of the motifs reflect the high level of skill and artistic sensibility of the Huizhou craftsmen, who were renowned for their ability to transform wood into detailed and expressive forms. The aesthetic identity of these motifs is therefore closely linked to the regional style of Huizhou architecture, which is characterized by its refined and understated beauty.

Culturally, the identity of woodcarving window motifs is deeply intertwined with the traditional values, beliefs, and social norms of the Huizhou region. These motifs often depict symbols and scenes that are imbued with cultural significance, reflecting the collective identity of the community (Gaskins, 2021). For example, motifs featuring images of the lotus flower, bamboo, or pine trees are not just decorative elements; they are symbols that convey specific cultural meanings related to purity, resilience, and longevity. Similarly, motifs depicting scenes from classical Chinese literature or folklore serve to reinforce cultural narratives and moral lessons that were central to the identity of Huizhou society. The cultural identity of these motifs is thus shaped by the ways in which they communicate shared values and beliefs, acting as visual embodiments of the region's cultural heritage.

The symbolic identity of woodcarving window motifs is also a key aspect of their identity. Each motif carries a set of symbolic meanings that are understood within the cultural context of Huizhou. These symbols often draw from Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions, which have played a significant role in shaping the worldview of the region's inhabitants (Pae & Pae, 2020). For example, the dragon, a common motif in Huizhou woodcarvings, is a symbol of power, strength, and good fortune, while the phoenix represents rebirth, immortality, and harmony. The symbolic identity of these motifs is therefore closely connected to the religious and philosophical beliefs that have historically influenced Huizhou culture. By incorporating these symbols into their architectural designs, the people of Huizhou were able to express their spiritual and philosophical ideals, thereby reinforcing their cultural identity.

In addition to their aesthetic, cultural, and symbolic dimensions, the identity of woodcarving window motifs is also shaped by their functional role within the architecture. These motifs are integral components of the building's design, serving both practical and symbolic functions. On a practical level, the carved windows allow for the passage of light and air while maintaining privacy and security. The motifs themselves often enhance the functional aspects of the windows by creating patterns that modulate light and shadow, contributing to the atmosphere of the interior spaces (Ching, 2023). On a symbolic level, the placement and design of the motifs are carefully considered to align with the principles of Feng Shui, which emphasize the harmonious flow of energy within the built environment. The functional identity of these motifs is therefore linked to their ability to mediate between the interior and exterior worlds, enhancing both the aesthetic and spiritual qualities of the architectural space.

Moreover, the identity of woodcarving window motifs is also shaped by their role in the social and economic life of Huizhou. The production of these motifs was closely tied to the region's thriving merchant culture, where wealthy families often commissioned elaborate woodcarvings as a means of displaying their social status and cultural refinement. The identity of the motifs is thus reflective of the social hierarchies and economic conditions of the time, with more intricate and finely crafted motifs serving as indicators of wealth and prestige. The artisans who created these motifs were highly skilled and respected members of the community, and their work played a crucial role in the cultural and economic life of the region (Chen et al., 2021). The social identity of the motifs is therefore inseparable from the broader context of Huizhou society, where they functioned as both markers of status and expressions of cultural identity. Finally, the identity of woodcarving window motifs is also shaped by their historical continuity and evolution. Over time, these motifs have become emblematic of Huizhou's architectural heritage, representing a continuous tradition that links the past with the present. While the motifs have evolved in response to changing cultural and social conditions, they have retained their core identity as symbols of Huizhou's cultural legacy. This historical dimension of their

identity underscores the enduring significance of these motifs as cultural artifacts that embody the history and heritage of the Huizhou region.

5. Conclusion

The identity of woodcarving window motifs in traditional Huizhou architecture is a complex and multi-layered concept that encompasses their aesthetic, cultural, symbolic, and functional aspects. These motifs are not merely ornamental; they serve as visual markers of the cultural and social identity of the Huizhou region. Understanding the identity of these motifs requires an exploration of their origins, the cultural narratives they embody, the craftsmanship involved in their creation, and the ways in which they contribute to the architectural and social fabric of Huizhou society.

At the most fundamental level, the identity of woodcarving window motifs is rooted in their aesthetic characteristics. These motifs are distinguished by their intricate designs, precise craftsmanship, and the use of traditional woodworking techniques that have been passed down through generations of artisans. The aesthetic identity of these motifs is defined by their stylistic features, which often include fluid lines, symmetrical compositions, and a harmonious balance between positive and negative space. The visual complexity and elegance of the motifs reflect the high level of skill and artistic sensibility of the Huizhou craftsmen, who were renowned for their ability to transform wood into detailed and expressive forms. The aesthetic identity of these motifs is therefore closely linked to the regional style of Huizhou architecture, which is characterized by its refined and understated beauty.

Culturally, the identity of woodcarving window motifs is deeply intertwined with the traditional values, beliefs, and social norms of the Huizhou region. These motifs often depict symbols and scenes that are imbued with cultural significance, reflecting the collective identity of the community. For example, motifs featuring images of the lotus flower, bamboo, or pine trees are not just decorative elements; they are symbols that convey specific cultural meanings related to purity, resilience, and longevity (Figure 5). Similarly, motifs depicting scenes from classical Chinese literature or folklore serve to reinforce cultural narratives and moral lessons that were central to the identity of Huizhou society. The cultural identity of these motifs is thus shaped by the ways in which they communicate shared values and beliefs, acting as visual embodiments of the region's cultural heritage.



Figure 5: Motifs symbolizing blessings and good wishes

The symbolic identity of woodcarving window motifs is also a key aspect of their identity. Each motif carries a set of symbolic meanings that are understood within the cultural context of Huizhou. These symbols often draw from Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions, which have played a significant role in shaping the worldview of the region's inhabitants. For example, the dragon, a common motif in Huizhou woodcarvings, is a symbol of power, strength, and good fortune, while the phoenix represents rebirth, immortality, and harmony

(Figure 6). The symbolic identity of these motifs is therefore closely connected to the religious and philosophical beliefs that have historically influenced Huizhou culture. By incorporating these symbols into their architectural designs, the people of Huizhou were able to express their spiritual and philosophical ideals, thereby reinforcing their cultural identity.



Figure 6: Dragon motifs

In addition to their aesthetic, cultural, and symbolic dimensions, the identity of woodcarving window motifs is also shaped by their functional role within the architecture. These motifs are integral components of the building's design, serving both practical and symbolic functions. On a practical level, the carved windows allow for the passage of light and air while maintaining privacy and security. The motifs themselves often enhance the functional aspects of the windows by creating patterns that modulate light and shadow, contributing to the atmosphere of the interior spaces. On a symbolic level, the placement and design of the motifs are carefully considered to align with the principles of Feng Shui, which emphasize the harmonious flow of energy within the built environment. The functional identity of these motifs is therefore linked to their ability to mediate between the interior and exterior worlds, enhancing both the aesthetic and spiritual qualities of the architectural space.

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Finally, the identity of woodcarving window motifs is also shaped by their historical continuity and evolution. Over time, these motifs have become emblematic of Huizhou's architectural heritage, representing a continuous tradition that links the past with the present. While the motifs have evolved in response to changing cultural and social conditions, they have retained their core identity as symbols of Huizhou's cultural legacy. This historical dimension of their identity underscores the enduring significance of these motifs as cultural artifacts that embody the history and heritage of the Huizhou region.

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