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A Study on the Artistic Characteristics of Architectural Decorative Patterns in the Qiao Family Compound

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Abstract. The art of the architectural carving decorative patterns of the Qiao Family Compound is a typical representative among the dwellings of the Jin merchants. This paper takes the "three carvings" of the Qiao Family Compound as the research object, starts from its carving types and techniques, analyzes its expression in many kinds of carving pattern subject matter such as figure stories, animals and plants, and folk objects, and analyzes its artistic characteristics from several dimensions. The study shows that the architectural carving decorative patterns of the Qiao Family Compound are the embodiment of the superb skill of the folk craftsmen of Shanxi in the Qing Dynasty, and they also hold folk traditional culture and the Jin merchant spirit. This study aims to enrich the understanding of the decorative art of the Chinese traditional dwelling, and to push forward the protection and the inheritance of the Jin merchant cultural heritage. The study has certain academic value and practical significance.

Keywords: the Qiao Family Compound, carving, architectural decoration, decorative patterns

1. Introduction

Architectural decorative patterns are an important part of the traditional dwelling. They are the direct presentation of beauty in the building, and they also show the historical and social ideas, the folk beliefs, and the aesthetic taste of the time when the building was built.

The Qiao Family Compound is a typical fully enclosed castle building of the Qing Dynasty. It is located in Qiaojiabao Village, Dongguan Town, Qi County, Jinzhong City, Shanxi Province. It is the ancestral house of the Qiao family of the Jin merchants, and it is made up of Zaizhong Hall, Dexing Hall, Ningshou Hall, Baoyuan Hall, and the garden, with a total area of more than 24,000 square meters. The layout of the building is symmetrical around the central road and is divided into two large parts, the south part and the north part. Seen from the air, the courtyard is just like the character "double happiness" [1]. The Qiao Family Compound is famous for its grand building complex, and it is also famous because in brick, tile, wood, and stone it shows the building skill of the Shanxi traditional architecture very well. Among the many building complexes of the Shanxi Jin merchant compounds, the decorative patterns of the Qiao Family Compound have many kinds, the carving is fine, and the content is rich, so they have rich research value. These architectural decorations all record and carry the local traditional folk culture.

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This paper takes the architectural carving decorative patterns of the Qiao Family Compound as the research object. It aims, through the systematic analysis of the kinds of carving art, the pattern subject matter, the artistic characteristics, and the cultural symbols, to show its special characteristics and content, and to give a reference for the research of the decorative art of the traditional dwelling.

2. The types and techniques of the architectural carving of the Qiao Family Compound

The architectural carving of the Qiao Family Compound is mainly in three forms, brick carving, wood carving, and stone carving. The three have their own features in material, technique, and meaning. The three each play a role that cannot be missing, and together they form the three main pillars of the courtyard decoration.

2.1. Brick carving

Brick carving is the most widely used kind of carving in the Qiao Family Compound, and it is also the kind with the largest number. In the compound, the number of brick carving pieces alone reaches more than three hundred, and it is the main body of the architectural decoration of the Qiao Family Compound. Its distribution is very wide, including the roof ridge, the balustrade wall, the gable wall, the screen wall, the wing wall, the chimney, and so on. In technique, there are also deep carving, shallow carving, round carving, and other kinds. Different positions use different techniques.



Figure 1. "Longevity of One Hundred Characters" (source: Internet)

The brick carving of the Qiao Family Compound takes its material from the grey brick produced locally in Shanxi. The texture is fine and solid, and it resists corrosion over a long time. This makes

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these brick carvings still clear in outline after more than two hundred years of wind and rain. For example, the "Longevity of One Hundred Characters" screen wall outside the main gate (Fig. 1) is 4.05 meters high and 3.05 meters wide. The center of the wall is arranged with one hundred characters of "longevity" in different scripts. The top is carved with the wan-character fret pattern, and the lower part is carved with old coin and bronze mirror decorative patterns. It mixes the art of calligraphy with the skill of brick carving perfectly, and it is a model work of the brick carving of the north. The "Shengfenzhen" screen wall on the front of the new courtyard gate was written by Zhao Tieshan in the clerical script. It brings high relief, shallow relief, and round carving together in one body. Around the brick carving there are Hidden Eight Immortals patterns and auspicious animal patterns such as the qilin and the crane. On the two sides of the lower part, there are the "rising three ranks in peace" halberd-and-vase pattern and the "auspicious celebration with surplus" chime-and-fish pattern. The layers are rich [1].

These brick carving works are also very careful in the order of layout and in height. The screen wall is at the entrance of the gate. The chitou is at the height that is level with the line of sight of a person. The carving on the chimney enriches the roof. The size and the degree of complexity of the brick carving in different positions are not the same, and this forms the viewing effect of "taking the form from far away, taking the quality from near". The blue-grey tone of the grey brick itself is in harmony with the natural environment of the loess plateau of central Shanxi, and it answers to the restrained and implicit hall name of the Qiao family, "the Doctrine of the Mean". Brick carving is the most common means of decoration in the Qiao Family Compound, and it plays a role that cannot be missing in every corner.

2.2. Wood carving

Wood carving is another carving form with great artistic value in the architectural decoration of the Qiao Family Compound. In the late Ming and the early Qing, the skill of wood carving developed fast, and the Jin merchants also began to prosper and rose fast in the same period. At that time, the rich merchants and the nobles used the wood carving craft in large amounts when they built their houses. The wood carving architectural artworks in the compound are concentrated on the gate tower, the doors and windows, the lattice partitions, and the plaques. The material of the wood carving is ordinary wood, but the carving is very fine and clear. These wood carvings have gone through more than one hundred years of wind and rain, and they are still lifelike today.

In terms of position, the wood carvings in the compound are mostly in indoor or semi-indoor positions, such as under the eaves, inside the door, in the passage hall, and so on. They all belong to structural or transitional components, and they are within the reach of the line of sight of a person. Compared with brick and stone, wood has better toughness, and it is more suitable for expressing and carving the finer parts such as the faces of figures and the folds of clothes. This is also one of the important reasons why the figure subject matter in the wood carving has many kinds. There are many forms such as "the heavenly official grants fortune", "the gods of fortune, prosperity, and longevity", and "attracting wealth and treasure". On the partition lattice of the passage hall there is the famous large relief "the Eight Immortals offer birthday wishes". The shape is beautiful and it is lifelike. Between the window lattices, the grape vines are tangled with a hundred seeds, which has the meaning that the descendants will continue for a hundred generations [2].

Among these many kinds of wood carving, the most special is the horse-riding queti wood carving decoration of the Qiao Family Compound. It has the typical style features of the wood carving of the dwelling of the Qing Dynasty. The horse-riding queti is mostly between the two columns of the gate head and under the architrave, and it is one of the decorative components with

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special features in the old buildings of Shanxi. The wood carving decorative patterns of the Qiao Family Compound are fine and detailed, the styles are many, and they are full of humanistic feeling. What is different from brick carving is that, compared with the hard and cold quality of brick and stone, the special grain of the wood and the soft color of the wood give the living space in the compound more of a feeling of life, and this shows the special charm of the architectural decorative art of the Jin merchant compound.

2.3. Stone carving

The number of stone carvings in the Qiao Family Compound is small. They are mostly seen on the components or the decorations of the stone column, such as the stone lion and the stone railing. The reason why stone carving appears in these places is that stone carving has features that are clearly different from brick carving and wood carving: the hardness of the material is the highest, the durability is the strongest, and the load-bearing capacity is also the best. These three features decide the range where stone carving can be used, that is, the parts that need load-bearing, moisture protection, wear resistance, and long-term exposure outdoors. In all these places, stone carving is the first choice for decoration. Among them, the stone lions that guard the gate are the most common. Two lions stand on the two sides of the main gate, and they play the role of protecting the house and driving away evil. The whole body of the stone lion is mainly made of bluestone, and it mostly uses the carving method that combines round carving and line carving. The stone carvings of the compound are mostly made of bluestone with a flat and fine texture, and the stone carvings carved with sandstone have a style that is more plain and rough.

The other main stone carvings are mainly concentrated on the column base, the railing, the gate pier, and other parts, and most of the patterns are of the intaglio line carving type. The surface of the stone carving pattern on the gate pier is mostly carved with intaglio lines, and around the picture there are wan-character flower brocade patterns or Hidden Eight Immortals patterns [3]. On the column base there are many intaglio line carvings of mythological figures, opera stories, literati allusions, folk legends, and other patterns. On the column base of the No. 1 courtyard of Zaizhong Hall, the "four plates" are carved. The immortal peach, the Buddha's hand, the citron, and the pomegranate are used as auspicious fruits, and they stand for fortune, prosperity, longevity, and joy. These stone carving column bases with meaning, together with the brick carving and the wood carving, form the special system of the three carvings of the Qiao Family Compound, and they carry the hundred-year deposit of the Qiao Family Compound.

3. The subject matter of the carving decorative patterns

The subject matter of the architectural carving decorative patterns of the Qiao Family Compound is very rich. It covers figure stories, animals and plants, folk objects, and many other types. Each type of subject matter has its own cultural content and deep meaning.

3.1. Figure story patterns

The figure story patterns are the type of subject matter with the most humanistic feeling in the carving decoration of the Qiao Family Compound. These patterns mostly take their material from myths and legends, historical allusions, opera stories, and folk legends, and they have the traditional function of teaching and moralizing.

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In terms of mythological figures, the common ones are "the Two Immortals of Harmony and Union", "the Eight Immortals offer birthday wishes", "the gods of fortune, prosperity, and longevity", "the qilin sends a son", and so on. "The Two Immortals of Harmony and Union" stands for harmony and union and a happy marriage. "The Eight Immortals offer birthday wishes" is a typical birthday subject matter, the carving is fine and the shape is beautiful, and it means long life and health. Opera stories and literati allusions are also presented a lot, and on the stone carving column base one can see opera stories, literati allusions, and other patterns. Folk legends such as "Liu Hai plays with the toad" and "Magu offers birthday wishes" are also shown in the carving.

3.2. Animal and plant patterns

The animal and plant patterns are the type of subject matter with the largest number and the richest changes in the carving decoration of the Qiao Family Compound.

In terms of plant patterns, the use is very wide. The common plant subject matter includes the pomegranate, the grape, the gourd, the lotus, the peony, the pine, the bamboo, the plum, the orchid, the chrysanthemum, and so on. The pomegranate has many seeds, and it means many sons and much fortune. The grape vines are tangled with a hundred seeds, and it stands for the reproduction of the family and the continuation of a hundred generations (Fig. 2). The peony stands for great wealth and great honor. The plum, the orchid, the bamboo, and the chrysanthemum stand for the character of the gentleman. In the Qiao Family Compound there are nine kinds of plant patterns that are used in a large range, and each has its own features in the skill, the shape, and the decorative effect.



Figure 2. Wood carving with grapevine motif (source: Qiantu.com)

The animal patterns are also rich and colorful. The bat is a homophone for "fortune", and five bats holding up the character for longevity is a common auspicious pattern. The deer is a homophone for "prosperity", and the deer and the crane in spring mean "smooth in the six directions". The fish is a homophone for "surplus", and it means rich with surplus. The lion is an auspicious beast, and the lion rolling a silk ball means great joy. The qilin is a traditional auspicious beast, and it has the function of driving away evil and of praying for blessing and peace. The magpie on the plum branch means "happiness on the eyebrows". The animal patterns mostly use homophones and symbols, and they put the auspicious meaning into lively and vivid images.

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3.3. Folk object patterns

The folk object patterns are a type of subject matter with its own special features in the carving decoration of the Qiao Family Compound. They mainly include the Bogu patterns, the "Hidden Eight Immortals", and auspicious objects.

The Bogu patterns take the old bronze mirror, the string of copper coins, the book, the painting scroll, the incense burner, the table, and other objects as their subject matter, and they mean "bright and rich", "wealth in an unbroken chain", and "a family of scholars". On the wall of the south room of the side courtyard of the No. 1 courtyard of Zaizhong Hall, there are five balustrade carvings, and four of the panels are "Bogu patterns".

The "Hidden Eight Immortals" means the magic instruments held by the Eight Immortals: the gourd, the round fan, the fish drum, the sword, the lotus, the flower basket, the transverse flute, and the yin-yang board. The objects stand for the immortals, and this is both implicit and elegant and it also means good fortune. Besides, there is also the pattern of three halberds in a vase, which is a homophone for "rising three ranks in peace", and there is the combined pattern of the chime and the fish, "auspicious celebration with surplus", and other combinations of auspicious objects. These folk object patterns give the daily objects an auspicious cultural content, and they show the creative tradition and custom of the folk art that "the picture must have a meaning, and the meaning must be auspicious".

4. The artistic characteristics of the architectural carving decoration of the Qiao Family Compound

4.1. Diverse subject matter

The most clear artistic characteristic of the architectural carving decorative patterns of the Qiao Family Compound lies in the diversity of the subject matter. This diversity is shown in three aspects: the wide coverage of the types of subject matter, the rich changes inside the same type, and the flexible and varied ways of combining the subject matter.

Seen from the types of subject matter, the carving patterns of the Qiao Family Compound cover almost all the categories of the Chinese traditional auspicious patterns. The figure story category includes mythological figures, historical stories, opera stories, literati allusions, and so on. The animal and plant category covers dozens of concrete images such as flowers, trees, auspicious birds, and auspicious beasts. The folk object category includes Bogu objects, the Hidden Eight Immortals, the qin, the chess, the calligraphy, and the painting. Besides these, there are also carving subject matters that use homophones, such as one vine with a thousand branches, the two immortals of the lotus and the box, the three stars shining high, the flowers of the four seasons, five bats holding up the character for longevity, and so on. The kinds are many.

Inside the same type of subject matter, the ways of expression are very rich. For the symbol of "fortune" alone, there are many ways, such as five bats holding up the character for longevity, the three stars of fortune, prosperity, and longevity, and the Hundred Longevity Characters. The Hundred Longevity Characters screen wall is carved with one hundred characters of "longevity" in different scripts, and each script has its own features.

Seen from the way of combining the subject matter, the carving decoration of the Qiao Family Compound is good at combining different subject matter to form a more complete decorative picture. For example, in the auspicious picture of the three stars of "fortune, prosperity, and longevity", the strangely shaped Shoushan stone is combined with deer of different shapes. This

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mixing of the diverse subject matter makes every carving a carrier of auspicious meaning that is both independent and complete, and it greatly enriches the visual layers and the cultural content of the architectural decoration.

4.2. Rich techniques

The architectural carving decoration of the Qiao Family Compound also shows a high degree of richness in technique. Brick carving, wood carving, and stone carving each have their own system of techniques, and inside the same material many carving methods are often used together.

The techniques of brick carving include line carving, relief carving, openwork carving, and so on. For example, the chimneys on the roofs of the courtyards are all different from one another, and the craftsmen carved the chimneys into miniature buildings, using the right carving techniques flexibly in different parts. The base of the lower half, which is in the shape of a square measure, is mainly built with strip bricks, and this makes the structure of the chimney more stable. The brick surface of the lower half is treated in a relatively simple way, and only in some positions there are line carving patterns as decoration. The upper half of the chimney is where the techniques of brick carving are concentrated. The craftsmen use relief carving together to make the roof and the flying eaves stand out in a three-dimensional outline, and they use openwork carving to hollow out the doors and windows, so that the miniature building has clearer layers. They also use line carving to draw the detailed texture of the tile ridges and the window lattices, so that it is finer and more true to life. Every part of the chimney brick carving is carved according to the proportion of a real building. The use of these many brick carving techniques together makes the brick carving, whether on the flat level or on the three-dimensional level, both realistic and a fine decoration.

The technique of wood carving has openwork carving as its main feature. Most of the wood carving craft of the Qiao Family Compound uses the openwork carving method. Openwork carving is to hollow out the part outside the image, so that the carving work shows a visual effect that is clear and transparent. The wood carving hanging ornament in the compound carries and shows this special texture very well, and it shows the traditional aesthetic and the wisdom of the people in old times [4].

The technique of stone carving has the combination of round carving and line carving as its feature. The stone carving method of the gate pier is mainly flat carving and line carving, and the surface of the pattern is mostly carved with intaglio lines. The intaglio line carving draws the image with thin lines, and it pays attention to the clarity and the smoothness of the outline. On the column base, the intaglio line carvings of the incense burner, the Bogu objects, the mythological figures, and other patterns have fine lines and vivid images.

One clear feature of the carving techniques of the Qiao Family Compound is the perfect combination of different materials and techniques. The thick and plain quality of the brick carving, the clear and transparent quality of the wood carving, and the solid and fine quality of the stone carving shine together in the same building, and they form a decorative effect that is rich and unified. In the shape, it pays attention to the combination of form and spirit. In the structure, it stresses symmetry, balance, and the proportion of size. In the form, it also combines lines and surfaces, and it pays attention to the combination and the interaction of different elements.

4.3. Natural colors

Color is also a dimension that cannot be ignored among the artistic characteristics of the architectural carving decoration of the Qiao Family Compound. Different from the bright and

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colorful decoration of the dwellings of the south, the carving decoration of the Qiao Family Compound shows the aesthetic features of being plain and steady in color, and this is closely related to the geographical environment of the north, the features of the building materials, and the aesthetic customs of the Jin merchant families and of the folk.

The brick carving mainly uses the natural color of the grey brick, and it shows a blue-grey base tone. This plain color comes from the physical properties of the brick material itself, and it also shows the strong and bold style features of the brick carving of the north in the Qing Dynasty. The grey tone of the grey brick is in harmony with the natural environment of the loess plateau of the north, and it forms a visual effect that is steady and restrained. As some scholars have said, the brick carving is "plain but mild, severe but elegant".

The wood carving mostly keeps the natural color of the wood. The wood carving works of the Qiao Family Compound mostly use good wood such as walnut wood and tieli wood, and the natural grain and color of the wood is itself a kind of decoration. The wood carving is not as hard as the stone carving, and it is not as good at carving as the brick carving, but it shows a warm aesthetic effect through its own special texture. The painted decoration uses the painting techniques of true-gold painting, raised gold paste, and three-blue five-color painting, and after a long time of wind and sun it is still shining today.

The stone carving uses bluestone as the main material, and it shows a blue-grey base tone. The color of the stone carving is steady and heavy. It forms an echo in color with the blue-grey tone of the brick carving, and it also forms a contrast with the warm tone of the wood carving. Together they form the whole color system of the Qiao Family Compound, which is harmonious and unified.

This natural and plain color of the compound building, which is mainly blue-grey and which combines with the natural color of the wood in some parts, fits the regional features of the dwellings of the north, and it also fits the restrained and modest character of the Jin merchant families. The restrained and careful choice of color shows the elegance of the architectural decorative art of the Qiao Family Compound.

4.4. The embodiment of traditional culture and of the Jin merchant culture

The deepest and the most central artistic characteristic of the architectural carving decorative patterns of the Qiao Family Compound lies in its deep cultural meaning. Every carving pattern is not simple decoration, it carries rich cultural information. In it there is the moral teaching of the Confucian ethics, there is the folk belief of praying for good fortune, and there is also the special philosophy of life and the value pursuit of the Jin merchant families.

The elements of the Confucian culture have a clear expression in the carving patterns of the Qiao Family Compound. Through the patterns of "a worthy woman", "the plum, the orchid, the bamboo, and the chrysanthemum", and so on, the brick and stone carving of the Qiao Family Compound holds rich elements of the Confucian culture. The plum, the orchid, the bamboo, and the chrysanthemum are called "the Four Gentlemen". They stand for a noble character and the conduct of the scholar, and they are the ideal symbol of personality in the Confucian tradition. The "Four Arts picture" made up of the qin, the chess, the calligraphy, and the painting shows the respect for a family of scholars and for passing on the books from generation to generation. These patterns turn the moral ideal of the Confucian school into a visible art image, and they make the architectural decoration itself an important way of moral teaching.

The idea of praying for good fortune is another important cultural content of the carving patterns. The carving subject matter of the Qiao Family Compound mostly takes natural subject matter such as mountains and water, flowers and birds, and animals, and it means good fortune and harmony.

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Five bats holding up the character for longevity stands for both fortune and long life. The deer and the crane in smoothness stands for fortune, prosperity, and long life. The grape with a hundred seeds stands for many sons and much fortune. The qilin sending a son stands for the reproduction of descendants. These auspicious patterns all reflect the wish of the master of the Qiao family to pray for fortune and to add to his life.

Besides this, the Jin merchant spirit is also an important part of the cultural meaning of the carving decoration of the Qiao Family Compound. As a typical representative of the dwellings of the Jin merchants, the Qiao Family Compound has clear regional features. The door couplets and the plaques that can be seen everywhere in the compound all show the spiritual style of the Jin merchants, who valued virtue and cultivated themselves, who did business with honesty, and who took profit by righteousness. The subject matter of "harmony brings wealth" in the carving decoration expresses the business idea of the Jin merchants even more directly. The carving decoration of the Qiao Family Compound is not only an art creation, it is also the material carrier of the Jin merchant culture, and it records the value ideas and the spiritual pursuit of the Jin merchant families.

5. Conclusion

The architectural carving decorative patterns of the Qiao Family Compound are an outstanding representative of the decorative art of the Chinese traditional dwelling. Its brick carving, wood carving, and stone carving, the "three carvings" craft, each has its own features and they are harmonious and unified. Together they build a decorative art system with diverse subject matter, rich techniques, steady color, and deep culture.

Seen from the subject matter, the carving patterns of the Qiao Family Compound cover rich types such as figure stories, animals and plants, and folk objects. Each type of subject matter has its own cultural content and symbolic meaning, and they form a complete system of auspicious symbols. Seen from the techniques, the relief carving and the openwork carving of the brick carving, the openwork carving of the wood carving, the round carving and the line carving of the stone carving, and the combined use of different materials and techniques show the superb skill level of the folk craftsmen. Seen from the color, the color system that is mainly blue-grey and that uses painted decoration in some parts shows the plain and steady aesthetic character of the dwellings of the north. Seen from the cultural meaning, the Confucian ethics, the praying for good fortune, and the Jin merchant spirit are all expressed and passed on in the art of the three carvings.

The architectural carving decorative patterns of the Qiao Family Compound are not only the precious heritage of the architectural art of the dwellings of the north in the Qing Dynasty, they are also important material for the research of the Chinese traditional architectural decoration culture, the Jin merchant culture, and the folk art. Its special artistic language breaks the bond of time and space, and on the basis of satisfying the need of the decorative subject matter picture and of the subjective consciousness, it integrates all the elements. It gives the decorated object rich expressive force and visual effect, and it also makes the whole building give out a very strong cultural and artistic quality [5]. Under the background of the protection and the inheritance of the cultural heritage today, digging deep into the artistic characteristics and the cultural value of the architectural carving decorative patterns of the Qiao Family Compound has important practical meaning for the protection, the inheritance, and the innovation of the traditional architectural decorative art. As the researchers have said, these carving decorations "have already become a cultural treasure that we cannot get again".

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