



# Analysis of Wood Carving Decorative Motifs in the Huizhou House Cheng Zhi Tang

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**Abstract.** Huizhou ancient houses represent an important aspect of Huizhou culture, and their wood carving decorative motifs are regarded as a significant aspect of folk art. The wooden carvings of Cheng Zhi Tang are exquisitely crafted, making it a quintessential example of ancient Huizhou residential architecture. The decorative motifs of its wooden carvings are rich in subject matter, executed with superb technique, and characterized by a unique style. They hold significant artistic and cultural value. This paper takes the wood carving decorative patterns of Cheng Zhi Tang as the research object and discusses the characteristics of its wood carving decorative motifs. A comprehensive literature review is conducted, and the decorative motif themes and compositions about Cheng Zhi Tang are studied and discussed. As a case study, a descriptive analysis of the woodcarving decoration of Cheng Zhi Tang in Yi County was conducted. Our analysis indicates that the woodcarving motifs of Cheng Zhi Tang are diverse, encompassing a range of styles, including animals, figures, plants, and abstract motifs. These motifs are predominantly observed in scenes featuring combinations of figures and natural plants. Additionally, the cultural values underlying these woodcarving motifs, which reflect Chinese folk culture, are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Cheng zhi Tang; wood carving decorative motifs; artistic features; cultural value.

## 1 Introduction

Huizhou is an ancient Chinese collective name for a region, also known as the modern area of Huangshan City, Ji xi County in Anhui Province and Wu yuan County in Jiangxi Province. It has a strong and unique Huizhou regional culture, and was historically an important area for Chinese economic and cultural development. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Huizhou merchants, supported by their strong economic power, had a keen interest in buying residences. Architectural decoration became a means for these merchants to showcase their wealth and embody their ideal values in life. Huizhou architecture developed a distinctive language of architectural decoration, reflecting the region's cultural heritage.

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This paper explores the cultural connotations of the motifs, such as the traditional symbols and symbolic meanings of the woodcarving groups, and attempts to understand the cultural and historical background behind them. A systematic analysis of the formal characteristics and stylistic features of Huizhou woodcarving swaps is conducted, revealing their aesthetic value and artistic expression. The main types and styles of woodcarving motifs in Cheng Zhi Tang are identified and classified, and the aesthetic elements of the motifs, including lines, composition, and proportions, are analyzed. The influence of color treatment and material selection on the aesthetics of the motifs is explored.

The study of the aesthetic characteristics of the woodcarving patterns of Case Cheng Zhi Tang can facilitate cultural inheritance and protection on the one hand, and on the other hand, it can enhance the level of art appreciation and promote design innovation, which is of great significance to the theoretical construction and practical guidance in the field of design studies. This kind of research injects rich traditional cultural elements into modern design and promotes the integration and development of tradition and modernity. The study can address the research gap in the field of modern design science regarding traditional art, as well as explore the application of traditional cultural elements in contemporary design. Furthermore, focusing on the aesthetic characteristics of the wood carving patterns of Huizhou houses can address the shortcomings in the study of the aesthetics of traditional art in a specific geographical area, and provide more cases and data.

A qualitative research methodology will be employed in the study. By analyzing and summarizing the existing literature, we gain insight into the existing research results and theoretical background. The design of Huizhou woodcarving patterns is influenced by a number of factors, including traditional values, religious beliefs, and other traditional cultural factors. These factors reflect the local people's way of life and aesthetic interests. This paper will describe the historical and cultural background of the woodcarving patterns of Huizhou Cheng Zhi Tang in order to provide background support for the subsequent analysis of woodcarving patterns. This paper presents a summary of the research results and theoretical perspectives on Huizhou woodcarving art as presented in the existing literature. The woodcarving patterns will be classified and described according to different categories and characteristics. A thorough examination of the aesthetic characteristics of woodcarving patterns will be conducted, including an analysis of lines, textures, and compositions. The analysis will examine the association between woodcarving patterns and Huizhou regional culture, elucidating the cultural connotations and symbolism behind the patterns. Finally, the main findings and conclusions of the study will be summarized.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 The History of Huizhou Woodcarving Decorative Motifs**

Huizhou woodcarving art originated in the Song Dynasty, developed rapidly in the Ming Dynasty, and reached its peak in the Qing Dynasty. Its development benefited

from the unique geographical environment, profound cultural background and prosperous Huizhou merchant economy of the region. With the economic development in the middle of the Ming Dynasty, Huizhou merchants achieved great commercial success and utilized their wealth to build many ancestral halls, pagodas and mansions in their hometowns, displaying their wealth through architectural decoration. The accumulation of wealth of Huizhou merchants provided economic support for the development of decorative wood carving motifs in Huizhou houses (Liu& Yao. 2020)<sup>[8]</sup>. Huizhou craftsmen improved their aesthetic level in this cultural atmosphere, their carving skills were exquisite, and their works embodied the ideals and aspirations of life. For example, the wood carvings of Cheng Zhi Tangin Hongcun are exquisite and vivid, with a high degree of combination of technology and art, demonstrating a high artistic value.

Huizhou's complex topography and beautiful scenery, coupled with the migration of the great families from the Central Plains, a strong academic atmosphere and many schools, made it a center of culture and education (Liu.2009)<sup>[7]</sup>. When Huizhou merchants became well developed, they attached great importance to education and did not hesitate to spend a lot of money to support their sons and daughters to study in the hope that they could achieve good results in the imperial examinations. As a result, people in the Huizhou region preferred Confucianism even though they were engaged in commercial activities, and the combination of commerce and culture and education gradually took shape. Cheng-Zhu science, Xin'an School of painting, medicine, Huizhou prints, Huizhou engraved books, Huizhou opera, and Huizhou ink and inkstone all had a great influence in the country. After getting rich, Huizhou merchants took "loyalty", "filial piety", "section" and "righteousness" as their spiritual support, and "loyalty" in Chinese means faithfulness, dutifulness and responsibility. Zhong in Chinese means loyalty and devotion to one's duties, especially loyalty to the state and the ruler. "Filial piety" means filial piety, honoring and supporting one's parents and elders." Jie" represents modesty and chastity, especially a woman's fidelity to her husband. "Righteousness" refers to justice, fairness and moral righteousness. Under the domination of feudalism at that time, Huizhou people demonstrated their moral qualities through luxurious decoration and competition (Liu& Yao. 2020)<sup>[8]</sup>. In the old society with strict hierarchy, the construction of buildings was not determined by money, but strictly constrained according to the hierarchy, and the political status of merchants all belonged to a relatively low level, so the construction of grandiose mansions were restricted, and so showy and exquisite indoor wood carving decorative motifs arose.

The ancient residential wood carving decoration in Huizhou during the Yuan and Ming periods collectively formed a distinct style. The lacquer craft carving pattern and carving method prevalent during the Yuan period influenced the development of Huizhou wood carving, resulting in a simple and concise style during the early Ming dynasty. This style was characterised by shallow relief carving. As the financial strength of Huizhou merchants increased during the middle of the Ming Dynasty, the wood carving process became increasingly complex and refined. Multi-layer carving, rather than plane carving, became the dominant technique. The decoration of Huizhou ancient houses with wood carvings became a local architectural custom (Jin & Li. 2013)<sup>[6]</sup>. After the Qing Dynasty, Huizhou decorative wood carving became increasingly intricate, with a focus on facade decoration. The carving was concentrated in the eaves

gallery, hanging falls, and window lattices, as well as other parts, such as the lattice core, polyester ring board, and so forth. The carving technique became more sophisticated, with a shift towards multi-layer high relief carving and plane carving becoming the dominant technique.

## 2.2 Cheng Zhi Tang

Cheng Zhi Tang was constructed in the late Qing Dynasty, around 1855, as the private residence of Wang Ding gui, a salt merchant. This private residence covered an area of 2,800 square feet, and the entire house was constructed with a brick and wood structure, comprising 136 wooden pillars, 9 patios, and more than 60 rooms (Wang, 2019)<sup>[10]</sup>. During the period of the late Qing Dynasty, there was a change of regime, and the ruling class at that time lacked the time to take care of the ritual rule everywhere. Consequently, Chengzhi Tang was established during this transitional period (Feng, 2022)<sup>[4]</sup>. In the context of the political environment of the late Qing Dynasty and the exquisite carving skills of Huizhou woodcarvers, the Cheng Zhi Tang was constructed in a lavish and elaborate woodcarving style. It is said to have been completed by more than 20 craftsmen over a period of four years and has been described as the "Folk Forbidden City." This 100-year-old mansion is now open for tourists to visit. As a World Heritage Site, the wood carving art of the Cheng Zhi Tang is notable for its rich pictorial elements and cultural value. The image system of Cheng Zhi Tang comprises thousands of localized images, each with its own shape and scale, which constitute the visual form (Chen, 2012)<sup>[2]</sup>.

## 2.3 The Thematic Decorative Motifs of Cheng Zhi Tang

The interior wood carving decoration of Cheng Zhi Tang in Hongcun, Huizhou is profoundly influenced by regional culture, and its themes and contents reflect the preferences and aesthetic interests of Wang Dinggui, the owner of the building, with a pronounced folk aesthetic inclination (Chen, 2013)<sup>[1]</sup>. The woodcarving motifs of Cheng Zhi Tang are generally classified into six categories: seeking good fortune and auspiciousness, ethical education, suppressing the house and avoiding evil spirits, religious myths, scenes of daily life, and poetic allusions. The graphics involved figures, landscapes, birds and flowers, plants and animals, and a number of abstract motifs (Pan, 2024)<sup>[9]</sup>. In terms of architectural layout, the Cheng Zhi Tang is divided into a front hall and a back hall. The front hall is dedicated to the theme of "blessing," while the back hall is dedicated to the theme of "longevity." The upper end of the Yi Gate in the front hall features a depiction of the Hundred Children (Fig. 1), while the upper end of the Ming Room displays a Banquet of Officials by Emperor Suzong of the Tang Dynasty. The upper end of the Riding Gate in the back hall portrays the Birthday of Guo Ziyi, while the upper end of the Riding Gate in the back hall features a Nine Shires in One Hall. Collectively, the Fig. 1 shows various types of children's games in folklore in a single image represents a more comprehensive representation of these activities.



Fig. 1. Hundred Children

#### 2.4 Composition and Shapes of Decorative Motifs in Cheng Zhi Tang

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the local art of engraving flourished, exerting a profound impact on the entire field of woodcarving. Local woodcarvers were highly respected by society, and their work came to be appreciated by literati and wealthy merchants, who in turn contributed to the upgrading of themes and aesthetic tastes in woodcarving art. Concurrently, the painting arts, such as the Xin'an School of Painting and Huizhou Printmaking, exerted a profound influence on woodcarving art. Huizhou woodcarving artists assimilated the content, composition, and aesthetic appeal of paintings, imparting to their works a distinctively pictorial quality. Some pieces even incorporated directly the patterns of the Xin'an School of Painting. For instance, the decorative woodcarving pattern on the left door of the front room depicts the figures of the Eight Immortals (Fig. 2), a traditional Chinese mythological story. This pattern is a facsimile of the paintings of the Xin'an School of Painting. The Eight Immortals depicted in the image are deep-relief figures of the Eight Immortals.



Fig. 2. The Eight Immortals

The decorative motifs of wood carvings in Cheng Zhi Tang adhere to a set of rigorous rules and exhibit clear indications of a discernible programmatic structure. The wood carvers refined and improved the artistic shapes by emphasizing order and organization, thereby forming the typical features that are characteristic of this style. These features were concentrated, simplified, and fixed, thereby leading to the emergence of a more unified form of woodcarving art. A significant proportion of the wood carvings in Cheng Zhi Tang are often displayed with the use of various lines, which serve to create a strong rhythmic beauty. The wood carvings are composed in a rich and harmo-

nious manner, with no blank spaces and a profusion of patterns, including trees, flowers, leaves, and cloud motifs. The figures are depicted with remarkable lifelike realism and vividness, which has a profound visual impact on the viewer (Chen, 2013)<sup>[1]</sup>.

### 3 Research Methodology

When studying Huizhou woodcarving window patterns, choosing the right research method is crucial. Qualitative research methods aim to explore and understand the subjective meanings of social phenomena. This approach uses techniques like in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis to gather rich descriptive data. This helps reveal deep insights and complex backgrounds of the research subjects (Creswell, 2013)<sup>[3]</sup>. The research method employed in this paper is qualitative. All the necessary information for this chapter was obtained by reading past literature. This research began with a literature review, during which the research questions were identified through the discussion of the literature review. Additionally, an observational method was employed, which describes and analyzes the patterns by observing their forms, lines, and compositions. This study is a case study of Cheng Zhi Tang as a case study to gain insight into the cultural, historical, and social background behind the motifs. These methods can reveal the deeper meanings and symbols of the motif designs and provide a deeper understanding of the object of study. Qualitative research methods ensure that the results are authentic, reliable, and of theoretical and practical value when studying the aesthetic characteristics of wood carving patterns and their design-oriented significance.

Data were collected through fieldwork in Cheng Zhi Tang, Yixian County, Anhui Province, where detailed observations of the types, layouts, techniques, and details of wood carving motifs were made. A Conversations with wood carving craftsmen provided insights into the carving techniques, creation processes, and artistic styles. First-hand image data and detailed records were obtained through field observations and inspections. Interviews with experts and craftsmen were used to gather oral histories and technical details. Document analysis provided theoretical support and historical context, while archival and image materials were used to supplement and verify the field findings. A comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the auspicious wood carving patterns at Cheng zhi tang was carried out, revealing their cultural significance and artistic value.

### 4 Conclusion

As evidenced by the woodcarvings at Cheng Zhi Tang, the majority of these works are based on symbols associated with "fortune, luck, longevity, happiness, and wealth." These symbols serve to express the expectation of a positive future and the desire for a better life. This observation indicates that woodcarvings in Huizhou are predominantly secular and folkloric in nature. The woodcarving images of Huizhou architecture are influenced by local folk culture and traditional Confucianism, with graphics involving people, plants, animals, and geometric abstract patterns. The woodcarving images are

finely carved and more complex than the simple and rough woodcarving style of the Ming Dynasty, which was mainly influenced by the extravagance of the Qing Dynasty.

Consequently, the carving technique evolved from plane shallow-relief carving to multi-layer translucent carving and deep-relief carving. These motifs not only demonstrated the high craftsmanship skills of woodworkers but also conveyed Chinese tradition, profound ethics, and cultural connotations. However, during the Qing Dynasty, figure subjects were widely used in Huizhou woodcarving, becoming an important part of Huizhou decorative images. In contrast, Malaysian woodcarving, which also employs traditional techniques, is distinguished by simpler, botanical motifs compared to the complex and fine woodcarving of Huizhou. Malaysian Hinduism exerted a distinctive influence on the cultural formation of Malay society. However, with the advent of Islam into the Malay world, the art of woodcarving in Malaysia underwent a profound transformation, with Islamic values becoming increasingly evident in the choice of wood motifs (Hussin, H., Baba, Z., & Hassan, A. 2012)<sup>[5]</sup>. Formerly significant biological motifs underwent stylization, becoming botanical motifs and Islamic calligraphic carvings. It is evident that Huizhou woodcarving motifs were profoundly influenced by Buddhism and Taoism, particularly in the architecture of houses and ancestral halls. Taoist deities and symbols are more prevalent in the decoration of numerous houses and ancestral halls in the Huizhou region. This is likely due to the fact that Taoism is more closely aligned with the values and beliefs of the local population.

The theme of "loyalty and filial piety" is frequently depicted in Huizhou woodcarvings. Some designs are inspired by literary works. The wood carving techniques in Cheng zhi tang are highly advanced, combining various methods such as high relief, low relief, round carving, and openwork carving. The theme of "loyalty, filial piety, righteousness, and integrity" is predominantly represented by figures, which are intricately carved and rich in detail. In contrast, the theme of "righteousness and integrity" is primarily depicted through plant motifs, which are conveyed through symbols and metaphors.

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