



# An Interpretation of the Value of Ancient Chinese tiles Art

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**Abstract.** Tiles are one of the crucial components in ancient Chinese architecture, embodying significant functions of historical and cultural memory within their physical forms. As architectural elements, tiles exemplify the advanced level of ancient Chinese scientific and technological civilization; as representations of aesthetic symbols, they vividly reflect classical Chinese aesthetic ideas such as "observing objects to grasp their imagery" and "the unity of heaven and humanity." In the museum context, tiles undergo a process of symbolic encoding, classification, and knowledge production, and are narrated historically as cultural artifacts. This process constructs a discourse system concerning the material and spiritual civilization of ancient China, thereby fostering national identity and cultural confidence for the Chinese nation. Examining the value connotations of tiles art provides an effective pathway for understanding how "objects" participate in the shaping of social ideology and the generation of socio-cultural meanings.

**Keywords:** tiles; architectural component; aesthetic symbol; cultural memory

## 1 Introduction

Tiles are one of the crucial components in ancient Chinese architecture. They serve both practical purposes, such as protecting the ends of roof rafters from wind and rain erosion, and decorative functions. Despite their average diameter of less than 20 centimeters, tiles display a myriad of forms, resembling a string of exquisite and lively beads that connect the social and cultural life of ancient China from the Zhou Dynasty to the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

Most of the surviving tiles in China have been unearthed from the palaces and tomb sites of the Qin and Han capitals in Shaanxi province. These tiles exhibit distinctive aesthetics, historical narratives, and cultural values, reflecting their era's unique characteristics and artistic expressions. This paper aims to explore the diverse development of tiles throughout Chinese history, tracing their transformation from architectural components to cultural memory symbols, and examining how they trans-

end their material existence to participate in the inscription of ancient Chinese social and cultural memory.

## 2 Tiles as Architectural Components

China began using tiles as architectural components in the late Neolithic period. The earliest known tiles were discovered at the Zhouyuan site in Zhaocheng Village, Fufeng County, Shaanxi Province. The emergence of tiles resulted from the development of ancient Chinese science and technology. The production process of tiles involved mixing water and clay, as evidenced by archaeological findings from sites such as Qiaozhen in Baoji, Shaanxi, Xiangfen in Shanxi, and Qiaocun in Pingliang, Gansu, where tile fragments dating from the Miaodigou Phase II to the Longshan period have been discovered. This marked the beginning of creating material forms through chemical reactions in human history, showcasing the progress of ancient Chinese technological civilization.

Early tiles, primarily made of gray clay, were often plain and either rectangular or circular, sometimes in the form of half-cylindrical tiles. The production techniques evolved from manual crafting to standardized mold-making, laying the foundation for the mass production of Qin and Han tiles.

tiles were official kiln products during the Qin and Han Dynasties, managed by the central government's "Dusi" under the "Zongzheng" and "Zuosi" under the "Shaofu" of the Three Lords and Nine Ministers. This system had a strict management structure from institutional setup and operation to the branding of works. tiles were all produced by official kilns and managed by central government agencies. To date, most of the discovered Qin and Han kilns are concentrated in the Guanzhong region, with numerous kilns unearthed in locations such as Qin Xianyang, the mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor, and the Weiyang and Jianzhang Palaces of Han Chang'an. Hundreds of tiles adorned with animal patterns, cloud patterns, and inscriptions have been excavated, showcasing a rich diversity of styles.

The Han Dynasty's architectural accomplishments extended beyond Qin's, as noted in the *Miscellaneous Records of the Western Capital, Volume 1*, which documented that Weiyang Palace had "forty-three terraced halls, thirty-two outside and eleven in the inner palace, thirteen ponds, and six mountains, with one pond and one mountain also in the inner palace, and a total of ninety-five gates and portals." Han Dynasty architecture made significant breakthroughs in structural layout and decorative techniques, becoming a foundational stage in the development of ancient Chinese architectural styles.

During Emperor Wu of Han's reign, the nation's strength and economic prosperity led to a resurgence of palace and garden construction. The rationale was that grand and magnificent palaces would inspire awe and maintain the ruler's absolute authority. As recorded, when Emperor Gaozu saw the grand construction of Weiyang Palace, he questioned its extravagance amidst the unsettled state of the empire. Xiao He responded, emphasizing the importance of such grand structures for the emperor's dignity and future generations' respect.

Han rhapsodies provide detailed descriptions of urban architecture, court life, and imperial hunting scenes, including meticulous portrayals of tiles as architectural components. For instance, Sima Xiangru's *Shanglin Fu* describes them as "decorated rafters and jade tiles," and subsequent annotations explain that tiles were crucial decorative elements enhancing the visual splendor of buildings.[1]

The grand compositions of the Han Dynasty offer detailed depictions of urban architecture, court life, and imperial hunting scenes, including meticulous descriptions of the Tile as architectural components. In Sima Xiangru's *Shanglin Fu*, it is described as follows: "Thus the palaces and separate buildings spread over mountains and across valleys, with high corridors extending in all directions, tiered pavilions with winding galleries, decorated beams and jade tiles, roads for carriages connected in a network, and steps surrounding the long pathways where travelers rest." In *Wen Xuan*, Li Shan uses Sima Xiangru's *Shanglin Fu* to explain "tile": "Decorated beams and jade tile. Liu Liang said: 'The carvings are on the columns, the capstones are under the columns, and the tile are the decorations on the ends of the rafters. They are adorned with five-colored brilliant light, making the shadow vivid and clear.'" [2] Here, tiles refers to the 'tiles' used to decorate the ends of rafters. It is a crucial component in ancient wooden structures, combining functionality, aesthetics, and cultural value.

The consistent depiction of tiles in classical literature underscores their historical and architectural significance, serving contemporary political ideologies and shaping cultural perceptions. Therefore, tiles are not merely architectural components exemplifying ancient Chinese scientific and technological civilization but also aesthetic symbols with systemic paradigmatic significance, playing a vital role in the cultural memory of ancient Chinese society. They represent one of the most iconic historical and cultural relics of the Shaanxi region and hold significant importance in Chinese cultural history.

### 3 Tiles as Aesthetic Symbols

In the long history of Chinese art, tiles have not only served as architectural components but also emerged as aesthetic symbols, reflecting the profound level of ancient Chinese aesthetic thought and craftsmanship. Similar to the production of other artifacts, tiles exemplify the spirit of Chinese classical aesthetics through their design concepts, artistic techniques, aesthetic styles, and cultural connotations. The most prominent characteristics include the artistic principles of "observing objects to derive symbols" and "the unity of heaven and humanity." The method of observing objects through attentive observation, encompassed in "observing objects to derive symbols," was a primary approach in early Chinese artistic creation, leaving a significant impact on the history of Chinese classical aesthetics and art. The cosmological view of "the unity of heaven and humanity" reflects the primitive beliefs of the Chinese people, nurturing a spiritual world and behavioral guide for early inhabitants that connected the cosmos with human actions.

Among the unearthed tiles, those featuring images, patterns, and inscriptions are prominent, often showcasing symbols such as animals and cloud motifs, including deer, badgers, tigers, geese, toads, birds, and beetles. These vividly realistic decorative motifs exemplify the traditional Chinese artistic principle of "observing objects to derive symbols." During the ancient period, when mainstream philosophical concepts were yet to be established, ideas of shamanistic culture, totem worship, and theocratic politics coexisted in societal ideologies, profoundly influencing artistic creation. The *Commentary on the Appended Phrases* mentions: "The sages' way in the 'I Ching' involves four things: prioritizing words for those who speak, prioritizing actions for those who act, prioritizing symbols for those who create artifacts, and prioritizing divination for those who use divination." This highlights the concept of "prioritizing symbols" in artifact creation. The numerous animal motifs on tiles illustrate how ancient people selected meaningful symbols from their daily environment to create rich and diverse artistic images, ultimately forming the Chinese tradition of "creating symbols to convey meanings."

The Xi'an Qin Brick and Han Tile Museum houses tiles with animal motifs such as the Azure Dragon, White Tiger, Vermilion Bird, Black Tortoise, Phoenix, Kui Dragon, Jade Rabbit, and Toad. These motifs inherit the ancient tradition of attempting to communicate between heaven and humanity. The *Zuo Zhuan: Duke Xuan, Year 3* records King Zhuang asking Wangsun Man about the size and weight of the cauldrons, to which Wangsun Man replied: "It is virtue, not the cauldrons, that matters. When the Xia Dynasty was virtuous, people from afar presented tribute, and the nine regions cast cauldrons with images of all things, ensuring people knew the divine and the treacherous." This indicates that the Xia people cast animal images on ritual vessels to aid shamans in communicating with heaven, allowing people to discern which animals facilitated this communication. Thus, ritual vessels and their "symbolic images" were "used to coordinate between heaven and earth, receiving divine favor." Therefore, whether in "prioritizing symbols" in artifact creation or casting images on cauldrons, the practice of observing objects to derive symbols for divine communication and categorizing myriad things was integral. This method of creating hexagrams and artifacts gradually established itself as a guiding principle in traditional Chinese art due to its alignment with the creation of aesthetic images. These creations, drawing from natural phenomena and social life, became essential means for later generations to understand the societal forms and appearances of ancient times.

The Four Guardian tiles have long been regarded as treasures among tiles. Five sets of these tiles, unearthed from three different Han Dynasty architectural sites in Chang'an, each display distinct surface designs but share the central imagery of the Four Guardians. Zhao Guang in his *Chinese Intellectual History* noted: "Han Dynasty people generally believed that the cosmos consisted of an absolute center, the dual poles of yin and yang, and five fundamental elements, creating a perfect and harmonious order. This order was the basis for all rationality, supported by a mysterious force." [3] This concept posits 'Heaven' as the center, yin and yang as the dual poles, and the five elements as crucial components, forming a regulated celestial movement, seasonal changes, and the alternation of day and night. This worldview was the foun-

ation of the contemporary cosmic understanding, directly influencing the production and lifestyle of the society.

#### 4 Cultural Memory in Tiles Art

According to Jan Assmann, the core of cultural memory is the construction of a cultural identity by a social group (including nations and states) over a certain period through media such as text, images, or rituals[4]. The key aspect of this is the canonization of these memories, where ordinary texts are maintained and organized by authoritative institutions or cultural elites, thus becoming exemplary. This process of canonization inevitably involves value judgments and the distillation or acknowledgment of specific societal experiences. The concept of identity has two fundamental meanings: one refers to the basis or criteria used by individuals or collectives to confirm their status in society, generally indicated by "identity"; the other pertains to the search for or confirmation of one's cultural identity, generally expressed as "identification." Both point to the issue of "sameness"[5]. In the current context of diverse cultural exchanges and collisions, these questions reflect an attempt to clarify "who we are socially and culturally" and "how and why we inquire about 'who we are'," which inherently have ideological implications.

As an aesthetically valuable architectural component, tiles participated in ancient Chinese social life in diverse forms, expressing the ideology of the time. tiles, exclusively used in royal or ritual buildings, symbolized identity, class, and power from the beginning. The famous "Qin Bricks and Han Tiles" does not specifically refer to bricks of the Qin Dynasty or tiles of the Han Dynasty. Instead, it highlights the world-leading ceramic and firing techniques of the Qin and Han, representing the pinnacle of contemporary ceramic technological civilization, and illustrating the splendor of Qin and Han culture. These bricks and tiles, having endured millennia, epitomize the material and spiritual civilizations of the Qin and Han periods, and their memory, encapsulated in imagery and text, helps us understand the social context, historical appearance, and cultural heritage of specific groups and individuals during those times.

For instance, the "Chanyu Descends from Heaven" and "Chanyu Marries" tiles, unearthed from a Han Dynasty site in Baotou, Inner Mongolia, serve as historical testimonies to the harmonious relations between the Han and Xiongnu, reflecting the political, economic, and cultural prosperity of the Han Dynasty.. Other tiles, such as "Han Unifies the World," bear witness to the Han Dynasty's gradual consolidation of a multi-ethnic unified state under a centralized system. Through economic and cultural exchanges with various ethnic minorities, the Han fostered a sense of "one family under heaven," acting as a catalyst for the integration of multiple ethnicities and maintaining psychological bonds among them. These artifacts document the enduring strength of China's multi-ethnic unity amidst historical upheavals.

Museums are institutions for the reproduction of cultural knowledge and the storage of historical memory, and they also play a crucial role in shaping cultural memory. In his book *Sites of Memory and Cultural Palaces: Museums of Our Time*,

Cao Bingwu states: "Museums directly confront humanity with material evidence of their living environment, serving as spaces of historical memory that transcend time and space. Although museums, as cultural facilities, are public social institutions committed to the protection and transmission of cultural heritage as a collective human endeavor, this memory is actually necessary for every individual." [6].

When tiles enter museums, they leverage the social function of museums as "patriotic education bases" to guide audiences through a nostalgic journey of memory and a cultural roots-seeking tour, completing the construction and recognition of their self-identity. The motifs on these tiles, interpreted through painting, calligraphy, sculpture, and decoration, illustrate the enduring achievements of Chinese material and spiritual civilization. The architectural artistry of the Qin and Han periods is reflected not only in the diverse motifs on the tiles but also in the broad range of subjects they cover, including natural ecology, mythological totems, court life, political diplomacy, and the livelihoods of the people. These motifs create a magnificent tapestry of the natural landscapes, human pursuits, political aspirations, and historical culture of the time. The small tiles encapsulate the artistic principles, aesthetic pursuits, life ideals, and political ambitions of ancient Chinese ancestors, becoming valuable evidence for later generations to study and explore the features of ancient Chinese society.

When displayed in museums according to specific cultural logics, these tiles, as "cultural relics," enable visitors to construct historical reality in their imagination. This practice integrates the tiles into the city's cultural construction and spatial practice, and their depiction of ancient societal features serves as the foundational logic for later generations to construct a national ideology centered on centralization, economic prosperity, and cultural diversity.

## 5 Conclusion

Tiles, as architectural components, aesthetic symbols, and carriers of cultural memory, comprehensively illustrate their narrative as "objects." This provides a sample for us to observe the evolution and continuity of ideological significance through materiality. Consequently, we discover the role of material in articulating social ideology, as it stores and inscribes the high level of ancient Chinese material and spiritual civilization.

Firstly, world-leading manufacturing technology and unprecedentedly prosperous architectural artistry fostered the flourishing development of tiles as architectural components, thereby becoming symbolic of the era's art. This constructs a historical memory of a powerful, technologically advanced, and artistically prosperous society, providing material evidence for the historical transmission of Chinese technological civilization.

Secondly, as aesthetically rich architectural components, tiles embody key ideas of Chinese classical aesthetics. They open up the practical domain of the concepts of "observing objects to take images" and "the unity of heaven and man," representing the aesthetic continuity of tiles as architectural elements.

Lastly, museums encode the physical artifacts of Qin and Han tiles into symbols. By classifying, displaying, and interpreting them according to a specific order and within the framework of relevant knowledge, museums reconstruct the "past" through these artifacts. This reconstruction enters the public domain, recreates historical social contexts, and evokes a grand national image and cultural confidence in the minds of the people. It fosters an identification with the unified national ideology of the Chinese nation.

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