

Cultural symbols in Huizhou architectural decoration: Guangyu Hall as a case study

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<i>Article history:</i> Received March 28, 2026 Received in revised form June 18, 2026 Accepted August 02, 2026 Available online September 01, 2026 <i>Keywords:</i> Architectural decoration Cultural symbols Guangyu Hall Huizhou architecture Wood carving *Corresponding author: Safial Aqbar Bin Zakaria School of Housing, Building and Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia Email: ssafial@usm.my ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8299-6387	<i>This study examines the cultural symbols and craft aesthetics of Huizhou architectural decoration through a case study of Guangyu Hall in Pingshan Village, Anhui Province. It focuses on the building's wood carving, brick carving, and stone carving, with particular attention to how these decorative elements express local cultural meaning and aesthetic ideas in the setting of an ancestral hall. The research uses a qualitative case study method, supported by field investigation, photographic documentation, document analysis, and visual analysis. The findings show that the decorative system of Guangyu Hall has clear visual importance and also carries cultural meanings related to family prosperity, moral values, social order, and Huizhou identity. The carvings further demonstrate careful material use and skilled craftsmanship. At the same time, the study shows that these traditional decorative arts are facing practical challenges, including environmental deterioration, limited conservation resources, and difficulties in the transmission of craft skills. Based on the case of Guangyu Hall, the paper argues that Huizhou architectural decoration is more than ornament. It should be understood as an important part of local architectural culture and heritage conservation.</i>

Introduction

Huizhou architecture is known for its strong regional character, clear spatial order, and rich decorative tradition. Developed mainly in southern Anhui, it is often associated with white walls, grey tiles, horse-head gables, and carefully crafted decorative details. Among these features, architectural decoration occupies an important place. Wood carving, brick carving, and stone carving are widely used in Huizhou buildings to enrich their visual appearance and to convey symbolic meanings and aesthetic ideas rooted in local architectural practice. Previous studies have shown that carved decorative elements often carry clear symbolic value, while decorative patterns

also follow certain aesthetic principles in their composition and visual organization (Yang 2022; J. Sun 2022). Decoration in Huizhou architecture should therefore not be understood simply as surface ornament, because it is closely related to architectural space, social order, and local cultural life.

Within this tradition, ancestral halls are especially important. They served as places for clan rituals, ancestor worship, meetings, and other collective activities, while also reflecting family identity and ethical order. For this reason, their decorative treatment often carried meanings beyond visual appearance. Motifs, carving themes, and material expression all contributed to the cultural atmosphere of the building. Research

has shown that symbolic expression in Huizhou architectural decoration was closely linked to moral values, family ethics, and social ideals (Guo, Chen, and Ma 2023). The decorative system of Huizhou buildings was shaped not simply by visual preference, but by the interaction of construction techniques, cultural ideas, and architectural thinking (W. Sun and Shi 2024). For this reason, architectural decoration provides an important way to understand both cultural meaning and craft logic in Huizhou architecture.

Existing studies have discussed Huizhou decorative culture from different perspectives. Some focus on decorative symbols and pattern aesthetics, while others examine the cultural meanings embedded in architectural ornament. These studies provide a useful basis for understanding Huizhou decorative art as both visual form and cultural expression. Recent discussions have also emphasized the importance of protection and sustainable continuation in the study of traditional Huizhou buildings (J. Yu and Wu 2021; Z. Yu and Geng 2024).

Guangyu Hall in Pingshan Village provides a suitable case for this discussion. As a relatively well-preserved ancestral hall in the Huizhou region, it retains clear decorative features and strong local characteristics. Recent studies have examined the gatehouse of Guangyu Hall in terms of historical continuity, spirit of place, formal aesthetics, and spatial expression, confirming its value as a local architectural case (Y. Zhang, Li, and Bi 2025; Bin and Yu 2024). However, these discussions pay more attention to the gatehouse space and overall spatial atmosphere. Less attention has been given to how wood carving, brick carving, and stone carving work together as an integrated decorative system, and how their cultural meanings and craft aesthetics can be understood through a specific ancestral hall case.

In this study, cultural symbols refer to the meanings conveyed by decorative motifs, materials, and carved imagery within the ancestral hall setting, especially those related to family values, ritual order, and local identity. Craft aesthetics refers to the visual and material qualities expressed through carving techniques, compositional treatment, and the relationship between ornament and architectural components. This paper uses Guangyu Hall as a case study to examine the cultural symbols and craft aesthetics of Huizhou architectural decoration. It focuses on wood carving, brick carving, and stone carving, and discusses how these decorative forms convey

cultural meaning in Huizhou architecture and how craft aesthetics are expressed through them. It also provides a useful reference for the documentation and conservation of Huizhou architectural decoration.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative case study method. Guangyu Hall in Pingshan Village was selected as the main research object because it is a relatively well-preserved ancestral hall in the Huizhou region and has clear local architectural value (Y. Zhang, Li, and Bi 2025). Its preserved decorative system in wood, brick, and stone makes it suitable for examining the relationship between craft aesthetics and cultural symbolism in Huizhou architectural decoration.

Data were collected mainly through field investigation and document analysis. Field investigation was carried out through on-site observation of Guangyu Hall, focusing on the location, distribution, and visual characteristics of its decorative components. Photographic documentation was used to record details of wood carving, brick carving, and stone carving, including motif types, carving positions, material expression, and compositional features. Document analysis supported the study through a review of related research on Huizhou architectural decoration, symbolic motifs, craft aesthetics, and Guangyu Hall.

The collected material was analyzed through visual analysis and qualitative interpretation. Visual analysis focused on motif selection, composition, carving treatment, and the relationship between decoration and architectural parts. Qualitative interpretation was used to examine how these decorative forms relate to cultural meanings within the ancestral hall setting, especially in relation to family ethics, symbolic expression, and local values in Huizhou culture. In this study, the carvings are understood as part of an integrated decorative system closely related to architectural space and cultural expression, rather than as isolated ornaments.

Results and discussion

Guangyu Hall as an architectural setting

Guangyu Hall in Pingshan Village provides an important architectural setting for understanding Huizhou decorative art within its cultural and spatial context. As a relatively well-preserved ancestral hall, it reflects key features of Huizhou architecture in both spatial organization and decorative treatment. Studies on Huizhou ancestral halls and traditional decorative art have shown that architectural carving serves more than a visual function, because it also expresses ritual order, aesthetic value, and cultural meaning within the building environment (G. Sun, Chen, and Li 2022). For this reason, Guangyu Hall is a useful case for examining how decorative elements function within a larger cultural and spatial system.

As an ancestral hall, Guangyu Hall was historically associated with clan rituals, ancestral worship, and communal activities. Its architectural layout should therefore be understood in relation to social hierarchy and ritual order, rather than only in functional terms. Research on Huizhou residential and ancestral hall architecture has pointed out that hall space and decorative treatment are closely connected with aesthetic expression and the ethical structure of traditional family life (Xiao and Zhang 2021). Within this setting, decoration helps shape an atmosphere of solemnity, continuity, and cultural belonging. It is more than visual enrichment and forms part of the spatial expression of family values and social ethics. Figure 1 shows the spatial organization of Guangyu Hall, including the entrance, successive courtyards, and the main hall, which together reflect the hierarchical and processional character of the ancestral hall.

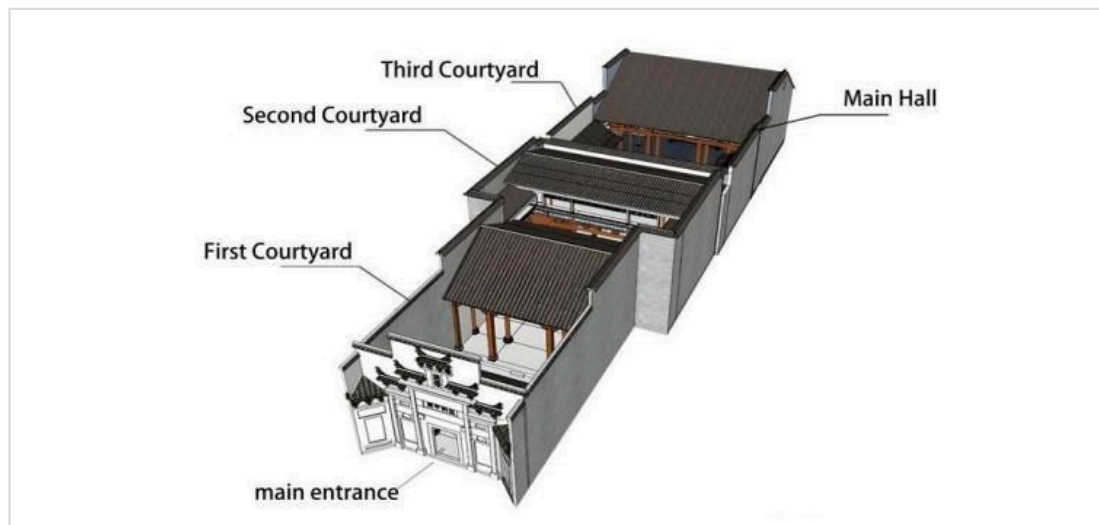


Figure 1. Spatial organization of Guangyu Hall, showing the entrance, courtyards, and main hall

From the perspective of architectural composition, Guangyu Hall shows a clear relationship between structure and ornament. Decorative elements appear in important architectural positions such as beams, columns, doors, windows, partitions, bases, and gate-related components. Their distribution suggests that decoration was organized in relation to the hierarchy of space and the visibility of architectural parts. Areas with stronger symbolic or ceremonial importance tend to receive more refined decorative treatment, while different materials are used in ways that respond to both construction logic and visual effect. This

understanding is consistent with recent studies on Huizhou ancestral hall wood-carving patterns, which note that decorative motifs are often closely related to spatial position, formal order, and the symbolic role of architectural components (C. Zhang et al. 2023).

The value of Guangyu Hall as a case also lies in the fact that its decorative system can still be read in relation to the building as a whole. Research on Huizhou ancestral halls suggests that decorative treatment is closely related to spatial order, architectural expression, and the cultural atmosphere of this building type (Wang 2022; Xiao and Zhang 2021). In Guangyu Hall, this

relationship can still be observed through the arrangement of decorative elements within the ancestral hall setting. From this point, the study turns to how wood carving, brick carving, and stone carving work together in the same architectural setting. This allows the discussion to move from a general understanding of ancestral hall decoration to a closer reading of how decoration supports cultural expression through space, material, and craftsmanship.

Guangyu Hall is therefore not just the physical setting of the study; it is also an important part of the findings. Its architectural condition helps explain why decoration in Huizhou ancestral halls cannot be separated from space, ritual, and cultural meaning. The building provides the spatial basis for the decorative system discussed in the following sections, where wood carving, brick carving, and stone carving will be examined in greater detail.

Wood carving and symbolic expression

Among the decorative elements of Guangyu Hall, wood carving is one of the most visually prominent and culturally expressive forms. In Huizhou architecture, wood carving is valued for its decorative effect and for its close connection with artistic expression and architectural culture

(Q. Xu 2021; Chen 2022). In Guangyu Hall, wood carving appears on important architectural components such as beams, columns, doors, windows, and partitions, where it contributes not only to the visual richness of the ancestral hall, but also to the symbolic atmosphere of the space.

The wood carvings in Guangyu Hall show a close relationship between decorative content and the social role of the ancestral hall. Motifs such as dragons, phoenixes, floral patterns, and figures are not only ornamental choices, but also carriers of cultural meaning. In Huizhou traditional architecture, wood carving often combines decorative beauty with symbolic expression, making it an important medium for conveying wishes for prosperity, moral order, and family continuity (Chen 2022; Liang and Lu 2021). In the ancestral hall setting, these carved images help shape an environment that emphasizes dignity, order, and cultural inheritance. In some wood-carved panels of Guangyu Hall, figurative scenes are arranged with layered composition and framed architectural elements, creating a narrative effect rather than a purely repetitive ornament. Such treatment suggests that wood carving was used not only to decorate surfaces, but also to organize symbolic content in a visually structured way.

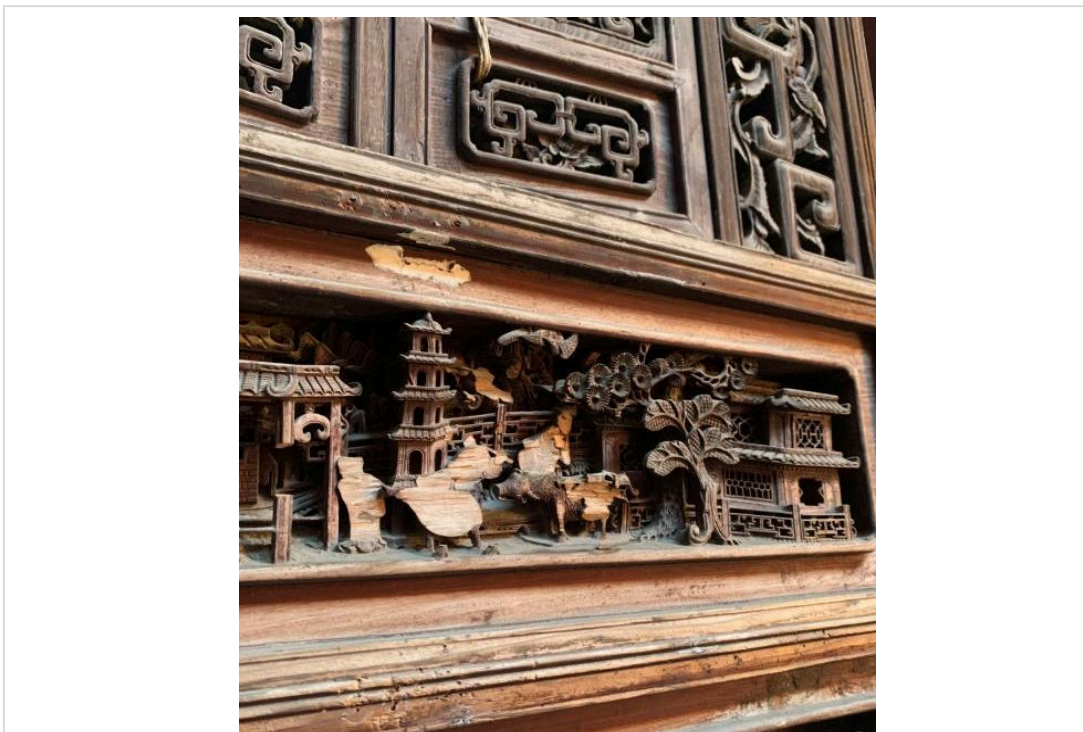


Figure 2. Representative wood-carving detail in Guangyu Hall

From a craft perspective, the wood carvings reveal careful treatment in composition, layering, and detail. The carved surfaces are not arranged randomly, but respond to the shape, position, and visibility of the architectural elements on which they appear. Decorative patterns often follow the structural rhythm of beams, frames, or openings, creating a close relationship between ornament and construction. The carving techniques also create a sense of depth and movement, making the motifs more vivid and visually clear. Studies on Huizhou architectural decoration have shown that wood carving depends not only on artistic design, but also on the close relationship between decorative intention and architectural form (Q. Xu 2021; Chen 2022).

Another important aspect of the wood carving in Guangyu Hall is its role in shaping visual hierarchy. More elaborate carvings tend to appear in positions of stronger symbolic or ceremonial importance, which suggests that decoration was distributed according to the cultural significance of space. In the ancestral hall, wood carving helps direct visual attention. It guides the eye, strengthens the character of key architectural parts, and supports the overall solemn and refined atmosphere of the building. The continued study of these carvings remains important because decorative meaning and architectural expression are closely connected in Huizhou traditional buildings (Liang and Lu 2021).

The wood carvings of Guangyu Hall show clearly that decoration in Huizhou ancestral halls is far more than visual embellishment. Through motif selection, symbolic content, and technical execution, wood carving becomes an important way of expressing cultural values and craft

aesthetics. It reflects the close relationship between architecture, local belief, and inherited craftsmanship, and shows how decorative art can function as both material practice and cultural expression.

Brick and stone carving as material craft

Compared with wood carving, brick carving and stone carving in Guangyu Hall show a different material character and decorative logic. While wood carving often gives a stronger sense of delicacy and pictorial richness, brick and stone carving are more closely related to architectural surface, structural position, and material texture. In Huizhou architecture, brick carving and stone carving are both important parts of the decorative system, carrying regional cultural meaning as well as decorative value (H. Xu and Suo 2022; Hao and Zhou 2025). In Guangyu Hall, these two forms appear mainly in gate-related parts, walls, bases, and other architectural components that require both durability and visual definition.

Brick carving in Guangyu Hall is especially important in areas with strong representational value, such as the entrance and wall surfaces. Because brick provides a relatively stable surface for carving, it allows decorative motifs to be arranged with clarity and order. Studies on Huizhou brick carving have shown that this art form combines decorative effect with cultural symbolism and often carries meanings related to blessing, status, and architectural identity (Li 2023). In Guangyu Hall, brick carving is not merely decorative. It also strengthens the ceremonial character of the ancestral hall and makes the cultural meaning of the façade easier to read.



Figure 3. Brick- and stone-carving details on the gate façade of Guangyu Hall

Stone carving presents another aspect of material craft. In Guangyu Hall, it is mainly associated with architectural components such as bases and other structurally important parts. Compared with the more intricate surface expression of wood carving and brick carving, stone carving tends to show a stronger sense of stability, restraint, and permanence. Its aesthetic effect depends not only on carved motifs, but also on the texture, weight, and physical presence of the material itself. Research on Huizhou stone carving has pointed out that this medium reflects both regional artistic expression and inherited craft tradition, and that its value lies in the close relationship between material quality, visual form, and cultural continuity (Hao and Zhou 2025).

From a material perspective, brick carving and stone carving together show how decorative art in Huizhou architecture is shaped by the practical qualities of different materials. Each material creates different possibilities for decorative expression. Brick supports surface order and

symbolic display, while stone emphasizes durability, structural gravity, and tactile presence. The decorative treatment of these materials reflects both artistic preference and an understanding of how craft responds to architectural function and material condition. This is also why the protection and inheritance of Huizhou brick carving has been discussed in relation to intangible cultural heritage and contemporary transmission strategies (Li 2023).

Brick carving and stone carving in Guangyu Hall extend the decorative language of the ancestral hall beyond the wooden interior. They help build a coordinated decorative system in which visual order, material character, and cultural meaning remain closely connected. Their importance lies in the way they support the architectural identity of the building and reflect the regional craft tradition of Huizhou, not simply in their decorative appearance. To make this comparison clearer, table 1 summarizes the main features of wood carving, brick carving, and stone carving in Guangyu Hall.

Table 1. Summary of decorative carvings in Guangyu Hall

Type	Material	Motif	Meaning	Location
Wood carving	Wood	Floral, figure, and symbolic motifs	Family continuity, moral order, prosperity	Beams, doors, windows, partitions
Brick carving	Brick	Decorative motifs on facade surfaces	Blessing, status, ceremonial expression	Entrance and wall surfaces
Stone carving	Stone	Structural and ornamental motifs	Stability, permanence, architectural dignity	Bases and structural parts

Cultural meanings and conservation concerns

The decorative system of Guangyu Hall shows that Huizhou architectural decoration carries cultural meaning as well as visual value. Through the combined use of wood carving, brick carving, and stone carving, the ancestral hall presents a decorative language shaped by family values, moral ideas, social order, and local identity. These meanings are embedded in specific motifs, materials, positions, and craft treatments, becoming part of the architectural atmosphere of the building. In Guangyu Hall, decoration is closely connected to the ritual and social role of the ancestral hall.

One important feature of Guangyu Hall is that its decorative elements work together as a system rather than as isolated details. Wood carving contributes symbolic imagery and narrative richness, while brick and stone carving strengthen material presence, spatial order, and architectural dignity. Read together, these decorative forms

show how visual meaning was organized across the building. In Huizhou architectural carving, decorative images often carry aesthetic and cultural implications beyond ornament itself. Studies on imperial examination imagery in Huizhou architectural carving, for example, suggest that decorative motifs can embody social aspirations, cultural values, and symbolic expression within the architectural setting (Xuan 2022). This also helps explain why decorative art in Huizhou architecture should be understood in relation to the building as a whole rather than as separate decorative fragments.

At the same time, the case of Guangyu Hall points to current conservation concerns. Traditional decorative elements such as carving are vulnerable to weathering, surface erosion, material aging, and inadequate maintenance. The transmission of traditional craft knowledge has also become increasingly difficult. As earlier studies on southern Anhui architecture have

noted, the preservation and inheritance of traditional buildings are related not only to the survival of architectural form, but also to the continuation of historical memory and regional culture (Zhao, Liu, and Liu 2021). Recent studies have also shown that digital documentation and conservation methods are becoming increasingly important in the protection of Huizhou traditional architecture, especially where decorative details are concerned (Zhong and Xu 2024). For Guangyu Hall, the loss of decorative elements would also weaken the cultural meanings carried by the building.

Seen from this perspective, the value of Guangyu Hall lies not only in its survival as a historic building, but also in its ability to show the close connection between decoration, architecture, and cultural meaning in Huizhou ancestral halls. The case suggests that the conservation of traditional architectural decoration should go beyond physical repair and also consider symbolic content, material logic, and craft knowledge, so that the cultural significance of these decorative systems can continue to be understood in the present.

Conclusions

This study examines the cultural symbols and craft aesthetics of Huizhou architectural decoration through the case of Guangyu Hall in Pingshan Village. Focusing on wood carving, brick carving, and stone carving, it shows that decorative elements in Huizhou ancestral halls are not merely ornamental, but important parts of the architectural and cultural system. Their meanings are related to spatial order, family values, ritual atmosphere, and regional identity.

The analysis shows that different decorative materials perform different roles within the ancestral hall. Wood carving contributes symbolic richness and refined craft expression, while brick carving and stone carving strengthen the material character and ceremonial presence of the architecture. As summarized in table 1, these carvings should not be understood as separate decorative elements, but as interconnected parts of the ancestral hall's overall decorative system.

The case suggests that the value of Huizhou architectural decoration should be understood not only in terms of artistic form, but also in relation to cultural continuity and heritage preservation.

Guangyu Hall provides a useful example for understanding Huizhou architectural decoration through cultural symbolism, material craft, and spatial expression.

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Author(s) contribution

Pei Wang contributed to the research concepts preparation, methodologies, investigations, data analysis, visualization, articles drafting and revisions.

Safial Aqbar bin Zakaria contribute to the research concepts preparation and literature reviews, data analysis, of article drafts preparation and validation.

Zhicheng Yang contribute to methodology, supervision, and validation.