

The Aesthetics of Line and Form: Formal Language in Yigong Wood Sculpture of Wang Grand Courtyard

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Abstract: This study focuses on the yigong (bracket arms) wood sculpture in the Wang Grand Courtyard in Shanxi Province, approaching the subject from the perspective of fine arts to explore their aesthetic characteristics and visual expression mechanisms within the context of traditional Chinese architectural decoration. As both essential structural connectors and highly ornamental sculptural elements, yigong exemplifies the integration of architecture and art. Through image line-drawing analysis, field observation, and interviews, this research systematically analyzes their compositional strategies, linear organization, and cultural symbolism. The findings reveal that these motifs construct a formal and symbolic visual language between structure and narrative, embodying the traditional Chinese aesthetic ideal of “harmony between form and spirit” and “meaning beyond words.” The study adopts theoretical frameworks from aesthetic scholars to analyze the formal beauty and cultural significance of yigong sculpture from the dimensions of “significant form,” “rhythmic order,” and “symbolic signification.” By examining the yigong sculpture of the Wang Grand Courtyard in depth, the research reveals their visual guidance function in spatial decoration, their narrative function in conveying ethical values, and their symbolic function in representing social identity—demonstrating the multifaceted interaction between decorative art, architectural space, and social consciousness. This research concludes that yigong wood sculpture, as a representative form of traditional Chinese decorative art, are not only the product of exquisite craftsmanship but also a visual narrative system that embodies historical memory and aesthetic concepts. Their refined composition, abstract formal language, and integration of cultural symbols reflect a unique path of artistic expression within architectural contexts, offering significant inspiration and resources for contemporary art design and cultural heritage revitalization.

Keywords: Wood sculpture Art; Yigong; Traditional Chinese Fine Arts; Decorative Aesthetics; Formal Language

1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese timber architecture, regarded as a gem in the history of world architecture, integrates exquisite craftsmanship with profound cultural connotations. Among its many elements, the Yigong—a critical bracket component connecting beams, dougong, and eaves—not only fulfills essential structural functions such as load-bearing and seismic resistance but also serves as a significant medium for decorative wood sculpture art (Wang et al., 2022). The Wang Grand Courtyard, renowned for its grand scale, rigorous structural logic, and exquisite ornamentation, features particularly refined Yigong elements that hold outstanding artistic and research value. As Liang (1998) noted, the design of Yigong exemplifies the harmonious unity of function and aesthetics in ancient Chinese architecture, providing a solid theoretical foundation for exploring its dual significance in both construction and art.

However, existing studies on traditional Chinese architecture have predominantly focused on dougong, column-beam systems, and spatial layout, while the relatively “hidden” yet symbolically rich Yigong has received limited scholarly attention. Structurally, the Yigong disperses the roof’s weight and stabilizes the frame; aesthetically, it communicates religious beliefs, ethical ideals, and social identity through its rich carvings. As Steinhardt (2014) has pointed out, the carved transitional components in architecture “constitute a visual language that bridges function and symbolism.” In this sense, an in-depth study of Yigong fills a critical gap in current scholarship regarding the fine detailing and semiotic interpretation of Chinese architectural art.

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The significance of this research lies in its potential to deepen our understanding of the intrinsic logic and aesthetic principles of traditional Chinese wooden architecture through the lens of this unique structural component. Moreover, it offers new theoretical perspectives and practical references for the preservation of cultural heritage and the revitalization of traditional craftsmanship. As Craig Clunas (1997) observed, the symbolic systems embedded in decorative art serve as vital entry points for interpreting the social landscape of a historical period, and the Yigong carvings of the Wang Grand Courtyard function as a miniature reflection of such a system. Therefore, this study holds considerable theoretical and practical importance, providing valuable insights and inspiration for scholars in related fields.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, with case study methodology serving as the primary research strategy. The case study focuses on an in-depth analysis of the Yigong wood sculpture components, paying particular attention to motifs inspired by natural elements and social narratives. Specifically, the research examines the carved patterns of Yigong in the Wang Grand Courtyard, including motifs featuring animals, human figures, plants, objects, and geometric forms (Tuffour, 2017). Through line-drawing analysis, the study explores their symbolic meanings and aesthetic characteristics. The research relies on multiple methods of data collection, including direct observation, field investigation, in-depth interviews, and material-based analysis of cultural relics, ensuring multidimensional data acquisition and a truthful reflection of the subject matter. Data were collected through the researcher's on-site participation and fieldwork, involving continuous observation, documentation, and analysis within the original environment. This approach guarantees contextual authenticity and cultural integrity of the materials under study. By emphasizing meaning and employing expressive interpretative language, this research aims to engage readers and draw attention to the aesthetic and cultural significance of Yigong wood sculpture within the broader context of traditional Chinese architecture.

3. Results and Discussion

The application of wood sculpture art in architectural decoration can be traced back to the Shang and Zhou dynasties, making it a traditional technique with a history of thousands of years in China. In the traditional dwellings of Jinzhong, Shanxi, wood sculptures adornments are found throughout architectural elements such as beams, lintels, rafters, and window lattices, forming a harmonious integration of structure and aesthetics. Among these, the Wang Grand Courtyard stands out as a quintessential example of Jin merchant culture and traditional architectural craftsmanship. Renowned for its grand scale, rigorous structure, and intricate design, it is particularly distinguished by the artistic excellence of its wood sculptures. Walking through the courtyard, one is immersed in the lingering aroma of wood, which blends with an atmosphere of classical elegance and refined grandeur. Under the dual influence of visual and olfactory perception, these artistic crystallizations—bearing the aesthetic sensibilities, wisdom, and technical mastery of the ancients—quietly enrich the artistic cultivation of every visitor (Liang & Wang, 2013).

The decorative patterns found in traditional residential wood sculptures encompass a vast array of motifs. Virtually every object in daily life has become a subject for wood sculpture. These traditional motifs can generally be categorized into figures, animals, plants, objects, and geometric patterns, each imbued with auspicious meaning (Li Xiaojian, 2013). As integral components of architectural decoration, patterns have penetrated every corner of architectural art, forming an inseparable relationship with the built environment. Decorative motifs are not dispensable elements of architecture; we cannot avoid their influence. In interpreting any historical type of architecture, we cannot exclude the role of ornamentation, for these patterns—together with space and structure—form a unified architectural whole (Jiren, 2007).

The placement of architectural wood sculpture motifs often reflects the refinement of craftsmanship. Even in modern society, these decorative wood sculptures remain valuable cultural assets that continue to inspire contemporary architectural design (You, 2020). Whether considering the natural material characteristics and grain of the wood itself, or the carved rhythmic lines, structural order, and aesthetic form, all are fundamentally expressions of human aesthetic consciousness and artistic pursuit. As a product of nature, wood carries a raw beauty within its unique color, texture, and tactile quality. This unadorned, nature-born beauty not only provides visual and tactile pleasure but also evokes feelings of tranquility, warmth, and intimacy on a spiritual level. As Wang Guowei once said: “When I look at things, they are imbued with my colors.” When wood is transformed into a work of art, it becomes an external manifestation of inner aesthetic awareness. Reverence for nature, unity of mind and hand—beauty emerges at the moment when the blade meets the wood, and when creativity and craftsmanship are inscribed upon each carved piece (Li, 2024).

In Chinese traditional aesthetics, beauty lies in the unity of form and spirit, where external elegance corresponds to inner symbolic resonance (Li, 2017). As Weitz (1956) suggested, the aesthetic experience involves a dynamic interplay between unity, complexity, and intensity. This framework aligns with the visual structure of yigong wood sculptures, which combine compositional harmony with layered symbolism and expressive carving techniques to evoke both visual and emotional resonance. According to Danto (1981), art transcends mere form by endowing objects with meaning through metaphor and stylistic transformation. The carved brackets in traditional Chinese architecture exemplify this, as they elevate structural components into symbolic and aesthetic expressions of cultural identity. From an anthropological perspective, Gell (1998) argued that art operates as a system of social communication, carrying symbolic meaning rather

than existing solely for aesthetic pleasure. The motifs on the yigong brackets—mythical animals, historical figures, or ritual scenes—reflect this symbolic function, serving as visual narratives of cultural belief systems.

3.1 Composite Motifs Centered on Human Figures

This yigong (bracket arm) employs axial symmetry, with the figural scenes placed on either side, forming a balanced and harmonious composition. The extending branches create a natural arch-like structure that unifies the visual focus and establishes a rhythmic “visual corridor.” The combination of straight and curved lines, along with the deliberate variation in density, results in a strong sense of form—an example of what Bell (2018) referred to as “significant form,” capable of evoking aesthetic emotion.

Although the motif presents clearly defined characters and narrative elements, its visual expression emphasizes decorative structure through line and form. Facial details of the figures are simplified, shifting attention toward their posture and relational dynamics. Natural elements, such as leaves and vines, enhance the sense of enclosure within the ornamental background. The composition thus reveals a dual aesthetic effect that merges figurative storytelling with abstract formalism. This formal treatment of narrative imagery aligns with De Saussure’s (2006) theory of signs, where the cultural linkage between the signifier and the signified is emphasized. Fig. 1. shows the motif human of figures.



Figure 1. The Motif of Human Figures

The depiction of figures conversing under a tree, accompanied by child attendants, rendered within a symmetrical structure, reflects themes such as traditional Confucian hierarchy, familial ethics, or historical storytelling. These narrative elements are consistent with the conventions of Chinese wood sculpture, which often centers on Confucian narratives. Such visual storytelling is widely found in traditional Chinese decorative arts, functioning as a form of visual encoding of cultural values (Clunas, 1997).

3.2 Composite Motifs Centered on Animal Imagery

This yigong wood sculpture adopts the grass-dragon motif (cao long), a common visual theme in traditional Chinese wood art. It merges mythological imagery with botanical forms to convey fluidity, vitality, and auspicious symbolism. Although the dragon originates from Chinese cosmology and folklore, in this piece, its representation transcends literal depiction. The dragon's body is rendered through a series of continuous, undulating curves, resembling naturally coiled vines, thereby evoking a sense of dynamic motion seemingly frozen in wood. This fusion of flora and mythological beast is not merely decorative but operates as a cultural symbol—dragons and plants together signify growth, prosperity, and cosmic harmony.

The overall composition follows a rhythmic formal structure, aligning with Bell’s (2018) notion of “significant form,” which asserts that the essence of art lies in the arrangement of lines, shapes, and volumes that evoke aesthetic emotion. The dragon's horns, whiskers, limbs, and scales are not depicted with anatomical precision but are abstracted into ornamental motifs. Spirals, S-curves, and interlocking patterns form a visually dynamic rhythm, akin to musical phrasing, allowing viewers to be moved by the beauty of form without the need to comprehend a specific narrative. From a formalist perspective, this piece exemplifies how traditional craftsmanship emphasizes visual syntax over narrative semantics. Through abstraction, the dragon becomes a vessel for rhythm and visual delight, rather than a medium of explicit storytelling. This design abandons concrete narration and instead seeks to evoke sensory and emotional responses—what Zarchi & Levine Keini (2024) termed “presentational symbolism,” where form itself communicates emotion. Fig. 2. shows the motif of animal imagery.



Figure 2. The Motif of Animal Imagery

The carving features a bilaterally symmetrical structure, characteristic of yigong elements in traditional Chinese architecture, aligning with the architectural principles of balance and harmony. However, subtle variations in the texture of lines and the density of patterns within the symmetry introduce vitality and prevent visual monotony. From a semiotic standpoint, the entwinement of the dragon with plant forms can be read as a compound cultural sign. According to Barthes' theory of myth as a second-order system of signification, the dragon functions not merely as a decorative motif, but as a symbol of cultural values—representing imperial authority, seasonal renewal, or the unity of humanity and nature (Barthes & Lavers, 2000). Nevertheless, the abstraction in this work weakens any singular symbolic fixation, instead inviting multiple interpretations and deepening its openness and immersive aesthetic appeal. This yigong carving operates simultaneously on two levels: on one hand, it is a refined formal composition that captivates through dynamic visual elements; on the other, it serves as a material vessel for historical and cultural symbolism. As Bell emphasized, “We need not know what it means to be moved by it.” Through its pure formal beauty, this piece achieves an artistic expressiveness that transcends both materiality and function (Bell, 2018).

3.3 Composite Motifs Centered on Plant Imagery

This yigong adopts a centrally symmetrical structure, with peony branches on both sides mirroring each other to establish a visually balanced and harmonious composition. Such an arrangement enhances the aesthetic principle of “symmetry,” which aligns with Brubaker et al. (2015) notion of “liveliness within order” as a hallmark of classical Chinese aesthetics. The lines primarily consist of flowing curves, with interwoven branches and extending leaves forming a rhythmic progression of “dense–sparse–dense” across the structure. The peony petals are layered to emphasize a sense of fullness and dimensionality, while the leaves are outlined with precision and clarity, displaying a stylized, pattern-like aesthetic. The space is thoroughly filled yet avoids visual clutter, embodying the traditional craft aesthetic ideal that “a horse can gallop through the sparse, but wind cannot pass through the dense.” Fig. 3. shows the motif of plant imagery.

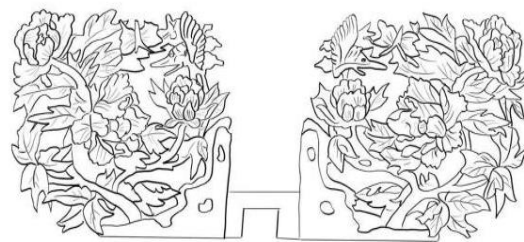


Figure 3. The Motif of Plant Imagery

In its spatial handling, the motif demonstrates a thoughtful interplay between “solid” and “void”: the dense clusters of leaves are substantial without feeling congested, while the open background retains a sense of intentional emptiness—creating an atmosphere of lingering resonance. The clear spatial hierarchy reflects the aesthetic of *liubai* (negative space) found in traditional Chinese painting and carving. As Woon et al. (2022) observed, traditional Chinese art emphasizes the dialectical unity between fullness and emptiness, constructing rich artistic atmospheres and spatial depth through techniques such as “expressing the void through the solid” and “mutual generation of fullness and emptiness.”

3.4 Composite Motifs Centered on Artifacts

The yigong carvings in this section depict ancient ritual bronzes—venerated national treasures. Vessels such as ping (vases), ding (tripods), yi, and zun (wine containers) were used during the Shang and Zhou dynasties as ceremonial

implements and daily utensils among the aristocracy. As ritual objects and status symbols, their quantity, craftsmanship, and scale were closely tied to social hierarchy and political rank. Among them, the ding held particular significance as a symbol of national sovereignty and state authority. All of these artifact motifs are enclosed within uniform square frames, forming a visual rhythm of repetition and variation that evokes a sense of order and stability. Although the contents of each frame differ in detail, they share a unified style, expressing a principle of “diversity within unity.” This reflects the traditional Chinese aesthetic ideal that values harmony and structured order (Yang, 2023). Clive Bell similarly argued that the greatness of an artwork lies in the coexistence of “order and variation”—neither monotonous nor chaotic. Fig. 4. shows the motif of artifacts.

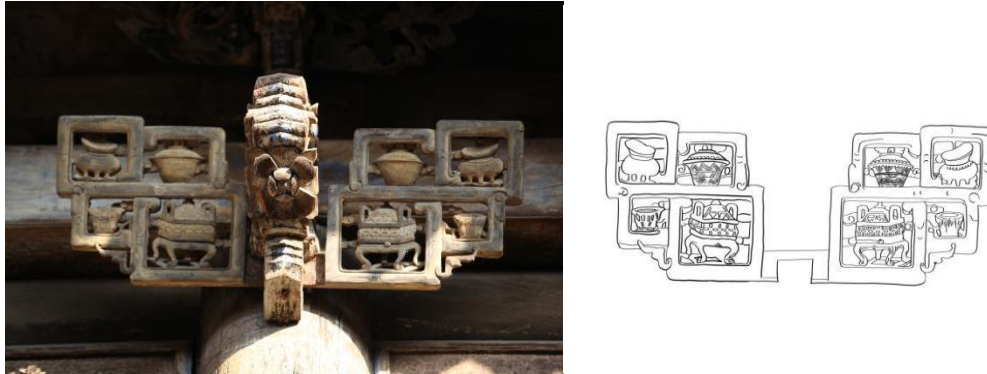


Figure 4. The Motif of Artifacts

Although rendered in wood, each vessel motif is highly decorative in form. Details such as lid patterns, curved feet, and surface ornamentation are carefully crafted—realistic yet restrained—emphasizing contour and geometric rhythm overshadow and volume. These carvings do not aim to imitate nature, but rather to generate a visual rhythm and formal beauty. As Bell (2018) stated, “Lines and colors combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions.” He warned against relying on “trivial details” and “vivid imitation,” which he believed degraded art into sentimentality or literary emotion. Instead, Bell emphasized that true art must regulate emotional expression through formal structure—a principle that resonates deeply with the “realistic yet refined” visual language of the carved artifact motifs. The exploration of Yigong—a distinctive structural element in traditional Chinese timber architecture—reveals a profound integration of structural function and aesthetic expression. In the Wang Grand Courtyard, Yigong serves not only as a crucial supporting component connecting beams, columns, and eaves but also as a bearer of visual symbolism and artisanal craftsmanship through its intricate carving, fluid curves, and harmonious proportions. This unity of art and structure reflects the philosophical pursuit of balance and order that lies at the heart of Chinese aesthetics (Clunas, 1997).

This study highlights that the aesthetic value of Yigong lies in its dual identity as both a structural necessity and a sculptural form. Its curved configuration layered rhythmic patterns, and decorative motifs—such as auspicious symbols, floral totems, and mythical creatures—embody a poetic structural logic. The integration of structure and ornamentation is a defining feature of Chinese architectural art; ornament does not undermine the structural integrity but rather enhances its expressive power. As Sizhen Fang (2009) pointed out, the components of classical Chinese architecture often achieve a synthesis of structural and decorative beauty through *yijiang* (intentional artistry), allowing the overall architecture to present a highly unified visual and cultural symbolism. At the same time, the visual richness of Yigong carvings in the Wang Grand Courtyard reflects the cultural ideals and identity consciousness of the time. These details not only signify wealth and social status but also embody Confucian values of propriety (*li*) and hierarchy (*xu*). From the perspective of visual semiotics and material culture studies, this research emphasizes how artisans encoded cultural meaning into architectural form, turning each Yigong into a medium of storytelling (Rawson, 1985). This aligns with art historian Clunas's (2004) assertion that in Chinese art, the boundary between “art” and “craft” is intentionally blurred, allowing functional objects to become vessels of cultural identity.

Moreover, the aesthetic value of Yigong continues to inspire contemporary art and architectural design. In the pursuit of traditional reinvention, the geometric logic, material wisdom, and symbolic motifs embodied in Yigong infuse modern design with the intellectual tension of Eastern aesthetics. It prompts a rethinking of beauty as something that can be structurally embedded. As architect Ma Yansong has emphasized in his “Shan Shui City” concept, the integration of traditional architectural elements with the natural environment provides rich inspiration for contemporary design. In his residential project in Huangshan, the coordination between architectural form and the surrounding mountains and waters manifests the harmonious convergence of traditional aesthetics and modern design, inviting a renewed understanding of the relationship between structure and beauty.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the beauty of Yigong lies not merely in its visual appeal but in its ability to merge architectural logic, cultural narrative, and philosophical thought. Taking the Wang Grand Courtyard as a case study, Yigong emerges as a crystallization of traditional timber artistry and a vivid embodiment of the unity between form and meaning. It stands as one of the most representative symbolic components of traditional Chinese architectural aesthetics.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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