

# WOOD CARVING DECORATIVE ART AS A FORM OF PRESERVATION AT WANG GRAND COURTYARD IN CHINA

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## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the wood carving art of the Wang Grand Courtyard, aiming to uncover its intrinsic artistic value and formal aesthetics through a systematic investigation grounded in fine arts research. Emphasis is placed on analyzing the visual structure, compositional logic, and material expression of the carvings, while also considering potential strategies for their preservation and reinterpretation in the context of contemporary art. A qualitative research methodology was adopted, involving ten semi-structured interviews with selected participants, including intangible cultural heritage (ICH) inheritors, traditional craftsmen, and art scholars. The sampling adhered to principles of purposiveness and representativeness to ensure both technical insight and disciplinary diversity. The interviews explored key dimensions of wood carving practice, such as motif selection, technique application, compositional design, symbolic layering, and current transmission practices. Data were thematically coded and categorized through inductive analysis, with the aid of NVivo software to support visual mapping and pattern recognition. The theoretical framework integrates semiotics to decode visual symbols and structures, while formalist aesthetic theory guides the interpretation of linework, spatial rhythm, and compositional harmony, emphasizing the internal visual logic of the works. The findings reveal that the wood carvings exemplify refined craftsmanship and a highly structured visual language, articulating order and symbolism through form rather than narrative. Based on this, the study proposes strategies such as digital modeling, art-based pedagogy, and contemporary design adaptation to ensure the ongoing relevance of traditional carving within fine art practice. By situating wood carving within a formal-aesthetic discourse, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of traditional Chinese visual systems and expands the methodological toolkit for contemporary fine arts scholarship.





## SENI HIASAN UKIRAN KAYU SEBAGAI PEMELIHARAAN DI WANG GRAND COURTYARD DI CHINA

### ABSTRAK

Kajian ini memfokuskan kepada seni ukiran kayu di Wang Grand Courtyard, Shanxi, dengan tujuan mendedahkan nilai artistik dalaman dan ciri-ciri keindahan formal melalui analisis seni halus yang sistematik. Penyelidikan ini menumpukan perhatian kepada struktur visual, logik komposisi, dan ekspresi material dalam ukiran kayu, serta meneroka strategi perlindungan dan penafsiran semula dalam konteks seni kontemporari. Penyelidikan ini menggunakan kaedah kualitatif dengan menjalankan temu bual separa berstruktur ke atas sepuluh orang informan, termasuk pewaris warisan budaya tidak ketara, tukang tradisional, dan sarjana dalam bidang seni. Pemilihan sampel berdasarkan prinsip purposif dan representatif, bagi memastikan keseimbangan antara kepakaran teknikal dan profesionalisme. Kandungan temu bual merangkumi pemilihan tema ukiran, teknik pengukiran, reka bentuk komposisi, lapisan simbolik serta keadaan semasa dalam proses pemindahan ilmu. Data yang diperoleh dianalisis melalui kaedah pengkodan tematik dan induktif, disokong oleh perisian NVivo untuk pemetaan visual dan pengelasan corak. Dari segi teori, kajian ini menggabungkan kerangka analisis semiotik untuk mentafsir struktur dan makna simbolik dalam imej ukiran, serta menggunakan teori estetika formalis bagi meneliti susunan garis, irama ruang dan keharmonian komposisi, dengan penekanan terhadap logik visual dalaman karya. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa ukiran kayu di Wang Grand Courtyard memperlihatkan kawalan teknik yang halus dan bahasa visual yang tersusun secara struktur, di mana ekspresi bentuk membina makna simbolik yang lebih utama daripada naratif figuratif. Berdasarkan hal ini, kajian mencadangkan strategi seperti pemodelan digital, pendidikan seni, dan ekspresi kontemporari sebagai cara untuk menterjemahkan semula ukiran tradisional dalam wacana seni halus masa kini. Kajian ini memperluas pemahaman tentang sistem visual tradisional China daripada perspektif estetika formalis, serta menawarkan pendekatan metodologi baharu dalam penyelidikan seni kontemporari.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                     | Page |
|-------------------------------------|------|
| <b>DECLARATION OF ORIGINAL WORK</b> | ii   |
| <b>DECLARATION OF THESIS</b>        | iii  |
| <b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b>              | iv   |
| <b>ABSTRACT</b>                     | v    |
| <b>ABSTRAK</b>                      | vi   |
| <b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>            | vii  |
| <b>LIST OF TABLE</b>                | xvii |
| <b>LIST OF FIGURE</b>               | xx   |
| <b>LIST OF APPENDIX</b>             | xxii |
| <b>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION</b>       |      |
| 1.1 Introduction                    | 1    |
| 1.2 Background of the Study         | 3    |
| 1.3 Statement of Problem            | 6    |
| 1.4 Research Questions              | 8    |
| 1.5 Research Objective              | 9    |
| 1.6 Significance of Research        | 9    |
| 1.7 Operation Definition            | 12   |
| 1.7.1 Decorative art                | 12   |
| 1.7.2 wood carving                  | 13   |
| 1.7.3 Wang Grand Courtyard          | 13   |
| 1.7.4 Preservation                  | 13   |

|     |         |    |
|-----|---------|----|
| 1.8 | Summary | 14 |
|-----|---------|----|

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

|         |                                                                                           |    |
|---------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 2.1     | Introduction                                                                              | 15 |
| 2.2     | Overview of the Wang Grand Courtyard                                                      | 17 |
| 2.3     | The Advantages of Wang Grand Courtyard wood carving in Architectural Decorative Arts      | 22 |
| 2.3.1   | Differences in Thematic Freedom and Content Scope                                         | 23 |
| 2.3.2   | Differences in Compositional Logic and Visual Organization                                | 24 |
| 2.3.3   | Comparison of Carving Techniques and Artistic Styles                                      | 25 |
| 2.3.4   | Differences in Visual Relationships and Viewer Experience                                 | 25 |
| 2.3.5   | Openness to Academic Research and Methodological Compatibility                            | 26 |
| 2.4     | Semiotics                                                                                 | 27 |
| 2.4.1   | Semiotic definition                                                                       | 27 |
| 2.4.2   | Symbol                                                                                    | 28 |
| 2.4.3   | The Main Theory of Semiotics                                                              | 30 |
| 2.5     | Formalist Aesthetics                                                                      | 32 |
| 2.5.1   | Aesthetic Definition of Formalism                                                         | 32 |
| 2.5.2   | Main Theories of Formalism Aesthetics                                                     | 32 |
| 2.6     | Theoretical Framework                                                                     | 35 |
| 2.6.1   | A Semiotic Perspective on the wood carving Art of the Wang Grand Courtyard                | 36 |
| 2.6.1.1 | The "Signifier–Signified" Structure of wood carving Imagery                               | 37 |
| 2.6.1.2 | The Polysemic Structure of Visual Signs: Semantic Generation Through Form and Composition | 37 |

|         |                                                                                                                    |    |
|---------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 2.6.1.3 | Spatial Arrangement of Symbols and the Mechanism of Meaning Generation                                             | 38 |
| 2.6.1.4 | Cultural Contexts and the Interpretive Authority of Symbols                                                        | 39 |
| 2.6.1.5 | Constructing an Iconographic Taxonomy from a Semiotic Perspective                                                  | 40 |
| 2.6.2   | Formalist Aesthetic Analysis of the wood carving Art in the Wang Grand Courtyard                                   | 41 |
| 2.6.2.1 | Lines and Composition: Foundational Elements of Formal Language                                                    | 41 |
| 2.6.2.2 | Rhythm and Repetition: The Musical Organization of Carved Imagery                                                  | 42 |
| 2.6.2.3 | Layering and Space: The Organizational Logic of Visual Depth                                                       | 42 |
| 2.6.2.4 | Structural Purity and Autonomy: Aesthetic Beyond Content                                                           | 43 |
| 2.6.2.5 | Viewing Pathways and Formal Activation: Form as a Medium of Emotion                                                | 43 |
| 2.7     | Previous studies                                                                                                   | 44 |
| 2.7.1   | The True Presentation of Emotions and the Exploration of Value Aesthetics in wood carving art (2025)               | 44 |
| 2.7.2   | Research on the wood carving Art of Jinzhong Residential Buildings from the Perspective of Art Anthropology (2024) | 47 |
| 2.7.3   | The Path of Integration and Innovation of Tradition and Modernity in wood carving Art (2024)                       | 49 |
| 2.7.4   | The Current Development Issues of Traditional Chinese wood carving(2023)                                           | 51 |
| 2.7.5   | The Application of Traditional wood carving Decorative Art in Residential Buildings (2023)                         | 53 |
| 2.7.6   | Research on the Art of Hanging Patterns of wood carvings in the Courtyards of Shanxi Merchants (2023)              | 55 |

|        |                                                                                                                                                                            |    |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 2.7.7  | An Analysis of Emotional Expression in wood carving Language (2023)                                                                                                        | 58 |
| 2.7.8  | Analysis of the Decorative Patterns and Artistic Features of wood carvings in Qiao Family Courtyard (2022)                                                                 | 60 |
| 2.7.9  | Research on the Formal Language of wood carving (2022)                                                                                                                     | 62 |
| 2.7.10 | Characteristics and Applications of Architectural wood carving Decorative Patterns (2022)                                                                                  | 64 |
| 2.7.11 | Analysis of the Decorative Art of Traditional Chinese Wooden Components, the "Que Ti" (2022)                                                                               | 67 |
| 2.7.12 | Research on the Decorative Characteristics of Ming and Qing Dynasty Wood-Carved Flower Windows (2022)                                                                      | 69 |
| 2.7.13 | Research on the Development and Design of Tourist Souvenirs in Wang Grand Courtyard (2022)                                                                                 | 72 |
| 2.7.14 | The artistic characteristics of traditional Que Ti decoration and its cultural implications: A case study of Que Ti decoration in traditional Huizhou architecture. (2022) | 74 |
| 2.7.15 | A Preliminary Study on wood carving Decoration in Ancient Chinese Folk Architecture (2022)                                                                                 | 75 |
| 2.7.16 | Research on the Design of Cultural and Creative Products of wood carving Patterns in Shanxi Ding Village Residences from the Perspective of Semiotics (2022)               | 77 |
| 2.7.17 | Exploration of the Decorative Art Characteristics and Cultural Connotations of Traditional Residential Buildings in Shanxi (2021)                                          | 80 |
| 2.7.18 | The Artistic Ecology of Wang Grand Courtyard Architecture as Seen from the "Three Carvings" Decoration (2020)                                                              | 83 |
| 2.8    | Research Gaps and Research Values                                                                                                                                          | 85 |
| 2.8.1  | Research Gaps                                                                                                                                                              | 85 |

|       |                 |    |
|-------|-----------------|----|
| 2.8.2 | Research Values | 87 |
| 2.9   | Summary         | 88 |

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

|        |                                                                 |     |
|--------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 3.1    | Introduction                                                    | 91  |
| 3.2    | Research Design                                                 | 93  |
| 3.3    | Population and Sample                                           | 97  |
| 3.4    | Data Collection Methods                                         | 100 |
| 3.4.1  | Observation Method                                              | 101 |
| 3.4.2  | Semi-structured Interviews                                      | 102 |
| 3.4.3  | Literature Research                                             | 103 |
| 3.5    | Data Analysis Techniques                                        | 106 |
| 3.5.1  | Observational Interpretation                                    | 107 |
| 3.5.2  | Thematic Analysis                                               | 109 |
| 3.5.3  | Content Analysis                                                | 110 |
| 3.5.4  | Theoretical Analysis                                            | 112 |
| 3.6    | Research Tools                                                  | 114 |
| 3.7    | Ensure Data Reliability and Consistency                         | 116 |
| 3.8    | Ethical Considerations                                          | 118 |
| 3.9    | Alignment of Methodology with Research Questions and Objectives | 118 |
| 3.10   | Limitations                                                     | 119 |
| 3.11   | Reliability and Validity Assessment                             | 122 |
| 3.11.1 | Reliability Analysis                                            | 122 |
| 3.11.2 | Validity Analysis                                               | 123 |
| 3.12   | Summary                                                         | 124 |

**CHAPTER 4 FINDING**

|         |                                                                  |     |
|---------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 4.1     | Introduction                                                     | 127 |
| 4.2     | Research Objective 1 Analysis (Observation and Case Description) | 129 |
| 4.2.1   | Dragon and Phoenix Queti                                         | 130 |
| 4.2.1.1 | Motif Identification                                             | 132 |
| 4.2.1.2 | Form and Craftsmanship                                           | 133 |
| 4.2.1.3 | Visual Experience & Functional Role                              | 134 |
| 4.2.1.4 | Artistic and Cultural Significance                               | 135 |
| 4.2.2   | Eight Barbarians Presenting Treasures Lian Jia                   | 136 |
| 4.2.2.1 | Motif Identification                                             | 138 |
| 4.2.2.2 | Form and Craftsmanship                                           | 139 |
| 4.2.2.3 | Visual Experience & Functional Role                              | 140 |
| 4.2.2.4 | Artistic and Cultural Significance                               | 141 |
| 4.2.3   | Hu Man Chuang Gua Luo                                            | 142 |
| 4.2.3.1 | Motif Identification                                             | 143 |
| 4.2.3.2 | Form and Craftsmanship                                           | 144 |
| 4.2.3.3 | Visual Experience & Functional Role                              | 145 |
| 4.2.3.4 | Artistic and Cultural Significance                               | 146 |
| 4.2.4   | Three Stars Blessing Window Lattice                              | 147 |
| 4.2.4.1 | Motif Identification                                             | 149 |
| 4.2.4.2 | Form and Craftsmanship                                           | 150 |
| 4.2.4.3 | Visual Experience & Functional Role                              | 151 |
| 4.2.4.4 | Artistic and Cultural Significance                               | 152 |
| 4.2.5   | Plum and Bamboo Ya Ban                                           | 153 |
| 4.2.5.1 | Motif Identification                                             | 155 |



|         |                                                             |     |
|---------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 4.2.5.2 | Form and Craftsmanship                                      | 156 |
| 4.2.5.3 | Visual Experience & Functional Role                         | 157 |
| 4.2.5.4 | Artistic and Cultural Significance                          | 158 |
| 4.2.6   | Prosperity and Integrity Gua Luo                            | 160 |
| 4.2.6.1 | Motif Identification                                        | 161 |
| 4.2.6.2 | Form and Craftsmanship                                      | 162 |
| 4.2.6.3 | Visual Experience & Functional Role                         | 163 |
| 4.2.6.4 | Artistic and Cultural Significance                          | 164 |
| 4.2.7   | Yigong with motifs of vase , ding and yi-zun ritual vessels | 165 |
| 4.2.7.1 | Motif Identification                                        | 166 |
| 4.2.7.2 | Form and Craftsmanship                                      | 167 |
| 4.2.7.3 | Visual Experience & Functional Role                         | 168 |
| 4.2.7.4 | Artistic and Cultural Significance                          | 169 |
| 4.2.8   | Carved Dougong Bracket                                      | 170 |
| 4.2.8.1 | Motif Identification                                        | 172 |
| 4.2.8.2 | Form and Craftsmanship                                      | 172 |
| 4.2.8.3 | Visual Experience & Functional Role                         | 173 |
| 4.2.8.4 | Artistic and Cultural Significance                          | 174 |
| 4.2.9   | Yi Lu Lian Ke Zhu Tou                                       | 175 |
| 4.2.9.1 | Motif Identification                                        | 176 |
| 4.2.9.2 | Form and Craftsmanship                                      | 177 |
| 4.2.9.3 | Visual Experience & Functional Role                         | 177 |
| 4.2.9.4 | Artistic and Cultural Significance                          | 178 |
| 4.2.10  | Circular Window Lattice (Five Blessings Bearing Longevity)  | 179 |

|     |          |                                                                |     |
|-----|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
|     | 4.2.10.1 | Motif Identification                                           | 180 |
|     | 4.2.10.2 | Form and Craftsmanship                                         | 181 |
|     | 4.2.10.3 | Visual Experience & Functional Role                            | 181 |
|     | 4.2.10.4 | Artistic and Cultural Significance                             | 182 |
| 4.3 |          | Data Analysis                                                  | 183 |
|     | 4.3.1    | Interview Process Overview                                     | 183 |
|     | 4.3.2    | Themes and Sub-themes                                          | 185 |
|     | 4.3.3    | Research Objective 1 Analysis (Symbolic Expression)            | 188 |
|     | 4.3.3.1  | Human Symbolism                                                | 192 |
|     | 4.3.3.2  | Animal Symbolism                                               | 201 |
|     | 4.3.3.3  | Plant Symbolism                                                | 209 |
|     | 4.3.3.4  | Object Symbolism                                               | 219 |
|     | 4.3.3.5  | Geometric Pattern Symbolism                                    | 228 |
|     | 4.3.4    | Research Objective 2 Analysis (Techniques and Materials)       | 234 |
|     | 4.3.4.1  | Techniques: Full from carving, Relief , Openwork Carving       | 236 |
|     | 4.3.4.2  | Northern Carving Techniques                                    | 245 |
|     | 4.3.4.3  | Southern Carving Techniques                                    | 253 |
|     | 4.3.4.4  | Wood Carving Materials                                         | 260 |
|     | 4.3.4.5  | Wood Carving Use                                               | 266 |
|     | 4.3.5    | Research Objective 3 Analysis (Cultural Heritage Preservation) | 274 |
|     | 4.3.5.1  | Preservation and Inheritance                                   | 276 |
|     | 4.3.5.2  | Development and Innovation                                     | 285 |
|     | 4.3.5.3  | International Dissemination                                    | 294 |

|         |                                                                        |     |
|---------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 4.4     | Data Theoretical analysis                                              | 298 |
| 4.4.1   | Semiotics                                                              | 299 |
| 4.4.2   | Formalist Aesthetics                                                   | 311 |
| 4.5     | Result                                                                 | 321 |
| 4.5.1   | Result of Objective 1                                                  | 322 |
| 4.5.1.1 | Identification of Core Symbolic Motifs                                 | 322 |
| 4.5.1.2 | Visual Organization and Thematic Composition                           | 323 |
| 4.5.1.3 | Interpretations of Symbolic Meaning Across Interview Groups            | 324 |
| 4.5.2   | Result of Objective 2                                                  | 325 |
| 4.5.2.1 | Application of Carving Techniques: Relief, Openwork, and Other Methods | 325 |
| 4.5.2.2 | Material Selection and Texture Integration                             | 326 |
| 4.5.2.3 | Interrelationship of Technique, Material, and Symbolic Meaning         | 327 |
| 4.5.3   | Result of Objective 3                                                  | 328 |
| 4.5.3.1 | Wood Carving as a Carrier of Cultural Memory                           | 328 |
| 4.5.3.2 | Adaptation and Transformation in Contemporary Art and Design           | 329 |
| 4.5.3.3 | The Interactive Mechanism Between Tradition and Innovation             | 330 |
| 4.6     | Summary                                                                | 331 |

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

|       |                                                         |     |
|-------|---------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 5.1   | Introduction                                            | 333 |
| 5.2   | Discussion in Relation to the Three Research Objectives | 335 |
| 5.2.1 | Discussion with RO1                                     | 335 |

|                   |                                                            |     |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 5.2.2             | Discussion with RO2                                        | 342 |
| 5.2.3             | Discussion with RO3                                        | 345 |
| 5.2.4             | Summary                                                    | 349 |
| 5.3               | Practical Implications                                     | 350 |
| 5.4               | Result–Theory Consistency Analysis                         | 356 |
| 5.4.1             | Consistency between results and Saussure semiotics         | 356 |
| 5.4.2             | Consistency between results and formalist Aesthetic Theory | 360 |
| 5.4.3             | Minor deviations and their explanation                     | 363 |
| 5.5               | Conclusion                                                 | 364 |
| 5.5.1             | Conclusion on RO1                                          | 364 |
| 5.5.2             | Conclusion on RO2                                          | 366 |
| 5.5.3             | Conclusion on RO3                                          | 369 |
| 5.5.4             | General Conclusion                                         | 372 |
| 5.6               | Recommendations for Future Research                        | 374 |
| 5.7               | Contribution of the Study                                  | 378 |
| 5.8               | Summary                                                    | 381 |
| <b>REFERENCES</b> |                                                            | 383 |

## APPENDICES



## LIST OF TABLE

| Table No. |                                                              | Page |
|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| 3.1       | Reliability Test Results of Interviews                       | 123  |
| 4.1       | Themes and Sub-themes                                        | 185  |
| 4.2       | Experts Interpretations of Human Symbolism                   | 192  |
| 4.3       | ICH inheritors Interpretations of Human Symbolism            | 195  |
| 4.4       | Craftsmen Interpretations of Human Symbolism                 | 198  |
| 4.5       | Experts Interpretations of Animal Symbolism                  | 201  |
| 4.6       | ICH Inheritors Interpretations of Animal Symbolism           | 204  |
| 4.7       | Craftsmen Interpretations of Animal Symbolism                | 207  |
| 4.8       | Experts Interpretations of Plant Symbolism                   | 209  |
| 4.9       | ICH Inheritors Interpretations of Plant Symbolism            | 212  |
| 4.10      | Craftsmen Interpretations of Plant Symbolism                 | 215  |
| 4.11      | Expert Interpretations of Object Symbolism                   | 219  |
| 4.12      | ICH Inheritors Interpretations of Object Symbolism           | 222  |
| 4.13      | Craftsmen Interpretations of Object Symbolism                | 225  |
| 4.14      | Expert Interpretations of Geometric Pattern Symbolism        | 228  |
| 4.15      | ICH Inheritor Interpretations of Geometric Pattern Symbolism | 230  |
| 4.16      | Craftsmen Interpretations of Geometric Pattern Symbolism     | 233  |
| 4.17      | The expression of experts on Techniques                      | 236  |
| 4.18      | The expression of (ICH) Inheritors on Techniques             | 239  |
| 4.19      | The expression of Craftsmen on Techniques                    | 242  |
| 4.20      | The expression of expert on the Northern Carving Techniques  | 245  |





|      |                                                                       |     |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 4.21 | The expression of (ICH) inheritors on the Northern Carving Techniques | 248 |
| 4.22 | The expression of Craftsmen on the Northern Carving Techniques        | 250 |
| 4.23 | The expression of expert on the Southern Carving Techniques           | 253 |
| 4.24 | The expression of (ICH) inheritors on the Southern Carving Techniques | 255 |
| 4.25 | The expression of Craftsmen on the Southern Carving Techniques        | 258 |
| 4.26 | Expert expression on materials                                        | 260 |
| 4.27 | Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritors expression on materials       | 261 |
| 4.28 | Craftsmen expression on materials                                     | 263 |
| 4.29 | Experts' Statements on the Functionality of wood carving              | 266 |
| 4.30 | The expression of (ICH) inheritors on the uses of wood carving        | 269 |
| 4.31 | The expression of Craftsmen on the uses of wood carving               | 271 |
| 4.32 | The expression of experts in preservation and inheritance             | 276 |
| 4.33 | The expression of (ICH) inheritors in preservation and inheritance    | 279 |
| 4.34 | The expression of Craftsmen in preservation and inheritance           | 282 |
| 4.35 | The expression of experts in development and innovation               | 285 |
| 4.36 | The expression of (ICH) inheritors in development and innovation      | 288 |
| 4.37 | The expression of Craftsmen in development and innovation             | 291 |
| 4.38 | The expression of experts in international Dissemination              | 294 |
| 4.39 | The expression of ICH Inheritors in international Dissemination       | 297 |
| 4.40 | The expression of Craftsmen in international Dissemination            | 297 |
| 4.41 | Experts' Perspectives                                                 | 299 |
| 4.42 | ICH Inheritor's Perspectives                                          | 303 |
| 4.43 | Craftsman's perspective                                               | 306 |
| 4.44 | Experts' Perspectives                                                 | 311 |
| 4.45 | ICH Inheritor's Perspectives                                          | 314 |



|      |                                                                                                     |     |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 4.46 | Craftsman Group Perspectives                                                                        | 318 |
| 5.1  | Strategy Matrix for the Conservation and Innovation Practices of Wang Grand Courtyard wood carvings | 351 |
| 5.2  | Overview of Application Domains and Practice Modes for Activating wood carving Symbols              | 354 |



## LIST OF FIGURE

| No. Figures                                                                                 | Page       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 2.1 Wang Grand Courtyard                                                                    | 17         |
| 2.2 Floor plan of the Wang Grand Courtyard                                                  | 18         |
| 2.3 Saussure's theory of semiotics                                                          | 31         |
| 2.4 Clive Bell meaningful formal theory                                                     | 33         |
| 2.5 Roger Fry's double life formalist aesthetic theory                                      | 34         |
| 2.6 Theoretical framework                                                                   | 35         |
| 3.1 Research Design                                                                         | 93         |
| 4.1-a Dragon and Phoenix Quet                                                               | 130        |
| 4.1-b Dragon and Phoenix Queti (Hand-drawn illustration)                                    | 130        |
| 4.2-a Eight Barbarians Presenting Treasures Lian Jia                                        | 136        |
| 4.2-b Eight Barbarians Presenting Treasures Lian Jia (Hand-drawn illustration)              | 136        |
| 4.3-a Hu Man Chuang Gua Luo                                                                 | 142        |
| 4.3-b Hu Man Chuang Gua Luo (Hand-drawn illustration)                                       | 142        |
| 4.4-a Three Stars Blessing Window Lattice                                                   | 147        |
| 4.4-b Three Stars Blessing Window Lattice (Hand-drawn illustration)                         | 148        |
| 4.5-a Plum and Bamboo Ya Ban                                                                | 153        |
| 4.5-b Plum and Bamboo Ya Ban (Hand-drawn illustration)                                      | 153        |
| 4.6-a Prosperity and Integrity Gua Luo                                                      | 160        |
| 4.6-b Prosperity and Integrity Gua Luo (Hand-drawn illustration)                            | 160        |
| 4.7-a Yigong with motifs of vase , ding and yi-zun ritual vessels                           | 165        |
| 4.7-b Yigong with motifs of vase , ding and yi-zun ritual vessels (Hand-drawn ILLUSTRATION) | 165<br>165 |



|        |                                                                                      |            |
|--------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 4.8-a  | Carved Dougong Bracket Set                                                           | 170        |
| 4.8-b  | Carved Dougong Bracket Set (Hand-drawn illustration)                                 | 170        |
| 4.9-a  | Successive Civil Service Success Column Capital                                      | 175        |
| 4.9-b  | “Successive Civil Service Success” Column Capital (Hand-drawn illustration)          | 175<br>175 |
| 4.10-a | Circular Window Lattice (Five Blessings Bearing Longevity)                           | 179        |
| 4.10-b | Circular Window Lattice (Five Blessings Bearing Longevity) (Hand-drawn illustration) | 179<br>179 |
| 4.11   | Interview Process Flowchart                                                          | 183        |
| 4.12   | Histogram of the number of nodes of the theme topic                                  | 188        |
| 4.13   | Histogram of Technique and Material Node Counts                                      | 234        |
| 4.14   | Histogram of Technique and Material Node Counts                                      | 274        |



## LIST OF APPENDIX

- A List of interviewees
- B Interview Outline
- C Approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of Sultan Idris Education University
- D Interview Photos
- E Published Paper





## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction



Chapter One serves as the starting point of this study, with the primary purpose of establishing the overall structure and fundamental logic of the research. It acts as the theoretical foundation and methodological orientation for the entire dissertation. This chapter begins by introducing the background and rationale of the research topic. From the disciplinary perspective of fine arts, it briefly reviews the current developments and research trends in the relevant field, identifying key areas of focus and theoretical gaps concerning traditional carving within the context of contemporary art discourse. Through this review, the academic entry point and research motivation of the study are defined.





The research further clarifies the central research problem and sets out the corresponding research objectives and questions. These inquiries revolve around three major aspects: formal language, symbolic expression, and carving techniques, which together form the core analytical framework of the study. The research not only focuses on the visual and structural analysis of wood carving imagery but also emphasizes the interconnection between theoretical constructs and artistic expression, thereby achieving an organic integration of form, technique, and symbolism within the context of fine arts research.

This research outlines the academic significance and expected contributions of the study. Through the integration of theoretical interpretation and methodological design, the research aims to offer valuable outcomes across multiple dimensions, including visual analysis of traditional art, theoretical development in fine arts, and the reproduction of artistic language. The chapter also defines the scope and boundaries of the study, specifying the research focus and analytical pathway, in order to ensure a coherent and clearly directed investigation.

This research provides a brief introduction to the theoretical framework and methodological foundation that support the research, highlighting the roles of semiotic theory and formalist aesthetic theory. It also offers an overview of the dissertation's structural organization. Through this introductory chapter, readers are offered a clear understanding of the overall design and conceptual layout of the study, laying the groundwork for the detailed discussions in the chapters that follow.



## 1.2 Background of the Study

The Wang Grand Courtyard, located in Lingshi County, Shanxi Province, stands as one of the most significant architectural complexes in northern China, celebrated for its intricate wood carvings and rich historical heritage. Built by the Jingsheng Wang family—one of the four prominent families of Shanxi during the Qing Dynasty—the complex consists of five alleys, six fortresses, and one street, with a total construction area exceeding that of the Forbidden City in Beijing. It has earned the titles “Chinese Folk Forbidden City,” “Shanxi Forbidden City,” and “The First Residence of Chinese Residential Architecture,” representing the culmination of Qing Dynasty residential architecture and a symbol of power and hierarchy (Wang et al., 2023). One of the defining features of this vast complex is its decorative wood carving, renowned for exceptional craftsmanship, deep symbolism, and its embodiment of cultural values. These works serve as a vital lens through which to examine the historical, social, and cultural contexts of late imperial China, making them a significant subject in art history, cultural heritage, and fine arts research. Ancient Chinese architecture was not merely a place of residence but a site for sustaining family traditions and moral education. As Tang and Pan (2000) observed, material production was initially intended to meet practical needs, which were inextricably tied to human values and the principles of life. Such architecture fulfilled basic living requirements while also serving as a bearer of intangible cultural connotations, transcending its utilitarian function.

This research examines three core aspects of the Wang Grand Courtyard’s wood carving: the symbolic meanings embedded in its motifs, the artistic techniques



and materials employed in its production, and its role in cultural heritage preservation and influence on contemporary artistic practices. By exploring these aspects, the study aims to deepen understanding of how traditional art forms bridge historical preservation and modern creativity. The carvings are an outstanding representative of traditional Chinese residential wood carving, uniting aesthetic form and symbolic meaning. From a formalist aesthetic perspective, as articulated by Clive Bell and Roger Fry, these works exhibit “significant form”—an arrangement of lines, shapes, and volumes capable of eliciting direct aesthetic emotion independent of narrative (Yang, 2023). The refined craftsmanship emphasizes the purity and tactile vitality of wood, producing a sensory engagement rooted in form itself. From a Saussure semiotic viewpoint, the motifs function as signs, with their signifiers linked to culturally specific signifieds (Valdivieso Benavente, 2023). In this way, the carvings operate as visual texts encoding philosophical, ecological, and social values of the Qing period.

Covering more than 250,000 square meters, the Wang Grand Courtyard comprises numerous courtyards and halls, each adorned with elaborate wood carvings (Ma & Wen, 2025). The decorative vocabulary encompasses mythological figures, historical personalities, and natural motifs, each associated with virtues or cultural ideals. For instance, dragon-and-phoenix imagery—central to Chinese totemic culture—symbolizes imperial authority, marital harmony, and auspicious blessings (Garrido, n.d.). Floral motifs also hold layered meanings: bamboo for resilience and advancement, peony for wealth, pomegranate for fertility, and pine for longevity (Rong Xiping, 2018). These carvings, while aesthetically compelling, also act as carriers of shared cultural values. Technically, the works demonstrate mastery of



traditional carving methods—including high relief, openwork, and carving in the round—executed primarily in durable elm or cypress. Material choice enhanced both longevity and visual richness. As Mariam et al. (2024) note, the visual elements of wood carving embody decorative beauty and the sculptor’s intended message, yet such symbolic depth often remains unrecognized by the broader public.

Chinese decorative wood carving has a long history, serving both functional and symbolic roles in architecture, religious spaces, and furnishings. As Wang, Yuan et al. (2024) observe, these works integrate varied visual symbols into coherent programs governed by established cultural and aesthetic principles. In the traditional context, they conveyed social rank, expressed religious devotion, and articulated moral instruction, drawing from mythology, Confucian ethics, and Buddhist iconography (Wang, 2019). The Wang Grand Courtyard’s wood carvings belong to this broader tradition but stand out for the exceptional integration of technical precision with symbolic complexity (Anwar, 2024). Their preservation aligns with the wider field of cultural heritage conservation, which, as Jigyasu (2021) emphasizes, demands both physical protection and recognition of intangible cultural value. Auspicious decorative patterns—merging traditional architectural craft with Chinese auspicious culture—constitute an important cultural legacy (Wu Yan, 2022). However, threats such as environmental deterioration, neglect, and shifting social values necessitate sustained preservation efforts.

The diversity and refinement of decorative patterns also reflect evolving aesthetic sensibilities, with modern interpretations enriching the traditional repertoire (Chen Lei, 2022). Increasingly, contemporary artists draw on traditional motifs and

methods, reimagining them in digital media, installation art, and design. The Wang Grand Courtyard's carvings thus remain an active source of creative inspiration, exemplifying the productive dialogue between heritage and innovation. Grounded in Saussure's semiotics and the formalist aesthetics of Bell and Fry, this thesis treats the Wang Grand Courtyard's wood carvings as both aesthetic compositions and culturally coded texts. By integrating these frameworks, the research illuminates the layered historical, artistic, and symbolic meanings of the works, offering theoretical foundations for their protection and transmission. The selection of ten representative carvings for detailed study was based on location, subject matter, size, and technique. Field documentation and expert consultation ensured these examples hold high scholarly value and effectively support the research objectives.

### 1.3 Statement of Problem

The decorative wood carving art in traditional Chinese residential architecture represents a profound integration of architectural structure and craft aesthetics, particularly prominent in the Shanxi-style courtyard buildings of northern China. As a hallmark of Qing Dynasty Shanxi merchant architecture, the wood carvings of the Wang Grand Courtyard are distributed across gates, hanging panels, bracket sets, beams, and columns. These carvings not only demonstrate exceptional craftsmanship and aesthetic sophistication but also encode regional cultural symbolism and ethical values. Through precise carving techniques, they enhance the architectural visual dynamics while embodying the aesthetic philosophy of traditional Chinese culture, which “imbues meaning in objects and conveys aspirations through form” (Yao & Fan,



2023). Consequently, the Wang Grand Courtyard's wood carvings form an intersection of folk art, patriarchal ideology, and social hierarchy, making them a critical lens for studying the relationship between decorative art and cultural identity in traditional Chinese architecture.

Previous scholarship has examined the Wang Grand Courtyard's wood carving art from various perspectives, primarily addressing motif content, stylistic features, and historical value. For example, Zheng (2020) analyzed brick, wood, and stone carvings as part of a regional visual narrative system, while Liu (2022) emphasized the artistic characteristics of composition, modeling, and technique. Dai et al. (2023) have begun exploring its intangible cultural heritage attributes and potential for contemporary transformation. Sun (2022), drawing on Saussure , semiotics, highlighted the reinterpretation of traditional Shanxi wood carving motifs within modern cultural contexts. Recent studies have also emphasized that the symbolic meaning of architectural decoration is inseparable from its formal and technical construction, and that decoding such symbolism requires an integrated study of design, material, and craftsmanship (Nilam, 2023).

Despite these contributions, significant gaps remain. First, while prior research acknowledges the cultural and artistic value of these works, few studies systematically investigate the design logic and symbolic mechanisms underlying the decorative forms. Specifically, there is insufficient analysis of how formal elements such as line, composition, modeling, and structural arrangement generate and communicate symbolic meaning. Second, the interaction between carving techniques and material selection — and how this interplay shapes aesthetic form and symbolic clarity —



remains under explored. Finally, there is a lack of integrated studies on how these carvings contribute to cultural heritage preservation while inspiring contemporary reinterpretations through innovative adaptations . As Partarakis (2025) note, bridging the historical significance of traditional craft with its modern applicability is essential for sustainable heritage transmission.

This research addresses these gaps by adopting a semiotic and formalist aesthetic framework to analyze the Wang Grand Courtyard's wood carvings. It systematically examines the design structures and symbolic content of selected examples, investigates the relationship between carving techniques and material qualities, and evaluates their role in sustaining cultural heritage while fostering innovative reinterpretations. Through detailed case studies of ten representative carvings, the study not only reconstructs their multilayered symbolic system but also redefines them as autonomous sculptural artworks with independent visual language, offering theoretical and practical insights for the preservation and revitalization of traditional wood carving art.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

RQ1: What are the symbolic expressions embedded in the decorative wood carvings at Wang Grand Courtyard, and how do they demonstrate elements of art?

RQ2: In what ways do the artistic techniques and materials used in the wood carvings at Wang Grand Courtyard contribute to the expression and preservation of



symbolic meanings?

RQ3 : How do the wood carvings at Wang Grand Courtyard contribute to preserving cultural heritage and influencing contemporary art?

## 1.5 Research Objective

RO1: To identify the design and symbolic meanings embedded in the decorative wood carving at Wang Grand Courtyard.

RO2: To examine the wood carving techniques and aesthetic characteristics



that define the decorative art in the Courtyard.

RO3 : To analyse how wood carvings at Wang Grand Courtyard support cultural heritage preservation and inspire reinterpretation in contemporary art through the balance of tradition and innovation.

## 1.6 Significance of Research

This study takes the wood carving art of the Wang Grand Courtyard as its research object, aiming to explore the intrinsic relationship between its formal language, carving techniques, and symbolic expression from the perspective of fine arts(Fang, Li, Gao, Liu, & Cheng, 2024). By introducing semiotic theory and formalist aesthetic





theory, the research constructs an analytical framework that simultaneously addresses both the construction of symbolic meaning and the organization of visual form(Guo, 2024). This framework contributes to expanding the theoretical discourse on traditional Chinese carving within the contemporary academic system of fine arts.

The primary significance of this research lies in its in-depth analysis of visual language in traditional Chinese carving (Wang et al., 2025). The wood carvings of the Wang Grand Courtyard feature a diverse array of motifs, compositional structures, and narrative symbols, forming a highly codified yet varied visual system. Through the classification of these images, symbolic interpretation, and structural analysis, the study reveals their complexity in terms of visual grammar and compositional logic (Lin, Chen, & Tang, 2024). This helps fill a gap in fine arts research, which often lacks a systematic account of the interrelationship among image, form, and meaning in traditional wood carving. The findings not only enrich the field of sculptural language but also offer new empirical cases for iconographic and decorative arts studies.

By closely examining the formal language and carving techniques of traditional wood carving, the study highlights its composite structure as an integration of material, technique, and artistic form. Techniques such as relief carving, openwork, and carving in the round each present distinct visual effects and expressive structures, contributing to the unique aesthetic performance of wood carving in terms of spatial depth, light-shadow interplay, and compositional order. The use of technique as a medium of form-building exemplifies the unity of craft logic and aesthetic principle, providing a substantial foundation for theoretical inquiry into the concept of





"technique as expression" within the fine arts (Dai & Yu, 2024).

This research emphasizes the inspirational potential of traditional wood carving imagery within contemporary art contexts. By extracting and analyzing the structural and formal logic of traditional patterns, the study explores how elements such as modeling language, compositional rhythm, and symbolic sequencing can be extended into contemporary artistic creation. In this way, traditional carving is not only “understood” as a subject of academic inquiry but also “translated” into a reservoir of visual resources, establishing a dynamic dialogue between historical art forms and current practices in fine arts.

The significance of this research lies in its rigorous theoretical vision and systematic methodology, which advance the interpretation of Chinese traditional wood carving from a fine arts perspective. More importantly, the study builds a conceptual bridge between traditional visual language and contemporary artistic expression. Its outcomes contribute to deeper inquiry within the discipline of fine arts, particularly regarding how traditional imagery generates formal order and constitutes artistic expression, while also offering a sustainable foundation of visual resources and theoretical insight for the development of carving, decorative arts, and their modern applications.





## 1.7 Operation Definition

Some key words used by the researcher in the study: Decorative art, wood carving, Wang Grand Courtyard ,Preservation need to explain its operation.

### 1.7.1 Decorative art

Decorative arts:Decorative arts are artistic disciplines focused on the design, embellishment, and aesthetic enhancement of objects that serve functional purposes. Unlike fine arts, which prioritize autonomous artistic expression, decorative arts integrate beauty with utility, often manifested in furniture, textiles, ceramics, metalwork, and architectural ornamentation (Cicalò, 2024). As Nikolaus Pevsner (1936) famously stated, “Decorative arts represent a domain where the line between artistry and craftsmanship is blurred, emphasizing both the visual appeal and the practical application of an object.” In this sense, decorative arts may be understood as plastic arts, as they involve the physical shaping of materials; yet they are “attached to a subject,” meaning their artistry is directed toward fulfilling external functional or symbolic purposes. As such, decorative arts play a vital role in material culture by transforming utilitarian objects into carriers of cultural, symbolic, and aesthetic meaning (Dormer, 1997), serving not only practical needs but also expressing identity, taste, and social values through crafted form.



### 1.7.2 wood carving

wood carving: wood carving also belongs to the category of folk art. It is a kind of work separated from carpentry, which is called ‘fine carpentry’ in the industry terminology. Can be divided into architectural decorative wood carving, ornamental wood carving. Craft techniques are divided into flat carving, bas-relief carving, picking carving, translucent carving and sticking carving, inlay carving (Rong Xiping, 2013).

### 1.7.3 Wang Grand Courtyard

Architectural complexes of the Ming and Qing Dynasties in Shanxi Province, China. The Wang Grand Courtyard is located in Jingsheng Town, east of Lingshi County, Shanxi Province. It is a residential complex of the Wang family, one of the four major families in Lingshi County and a descendant of the Wang family in Taiyuan. The total construction area exceeds that of the Forbidden City in Beijing. It is commonly referred to as the "Chinese Folk Forbidden City", the "Shanxi Forbidden City", and the "First Residence of Chinese Residential Buildings".(Wang et al., 2023).

### 1.7.4 Preservation

Preservation, in the context of cultural heritage and archival science, refers to a systematic range of preventive conservation activities designed to prolong the life of

records, objects, or cultural properties while minimizing alterations to their original state (Mendoza, De La Hoz Franco, & Gómez Gómez, 2023).

## 1.8 Summary

As the opening chapter of this dissertation, Chapter One provides a systematic overview of the research background and academic context, clearly identifying the problem domain and theoretical focus of the study. By reviewing the development of relevant fields and summarizing existing scholarly achievements, this chapter highlights the current gap in fine arts research regarding the lack of systematic exploration into the relationship among visual form, symbolic structure, and technical language in traditional wood carving. The Wang Grand Courtyard, as a representative Qing Dynasty official-style residence, features wood carving art that combines formal regularity with rich visual diversity, making it an exemplary case for investigating the visual language of traditional Chinese carving. Based on this context, the chapter further clarifies the core issues addressed in this research, and outlines specific research objectives and questions. It also lays a solid foundation for the analysis progress of the subsequent chapters.