

Regional Expression in Ming–Qing Merchant Courtyard Brick Carvings: A Comparative Study of Shanxi and Huizhou Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Chinese merchant courtyard architecture served as a visual language through which regional identity, family ideology, and cultural memory were expressed. Brick carvings in these spaces reveal how different regions in China developed unique aesthetic and symbolic traditions. Purpose: This study examines how brick carvings in merchant residences from Shanxi and Huizhou reflect regional values, social structures, and cultural symbolism. It aims to explore how visual traditions embody merchant identity and Confucian worldviews rather than relying on generalized assumptions of Western artistic influence. Method: A qualitative, comparative case study approach was adopted, drawing from secondary data in scholarly databases, visual archives, and historical sources. Cultural Transfer Theory and visual semiotics provided the framework for analyzing regional adaptation and symbolic meaning. Findings: Shanxi carvings emphasize bold relief, symmetry, and public expression of status and patriarchal authority. In contrast, Huizhou carvings are refined, symbolically rich, and oriented toward moral storytelling and ancestral reverence. Both regions encode Confucian values, but through different visual strategies shaped by geography, economy, and cultural orientation. Implications: The study reframes Chinese courtyard ornamentation as an expression of internal regional diversity. It contributes to heritage discourse by advocating for preservation approaches that consider symbolic meaning and local aesthetic traditions, moving beyond binary narratives of foreign influence.

Keywords: Chinese Courtyard Architecture; Brick Carvings; Western Influence; Cultural Transfer Theory; Shanxi Merchant Residences; Huizhou Architectural Symbolism.

INTRODUCTION

Research Background

The architecture of the Ming (1368 to 1644) and Qing (1644 to 1912) dynasties represents a pinnacle in traditional Chinese residential design. Among the most culturally significant forms are the courtyard houses built by wealthy merchant families, particularly in Shanxi (northwestern China) and Huizhou (southeastern China). These two regions, geographically and ideologically distinct, offer contrasting interpretations of architectural aesthetics and brick carving traditions. Rather than defining "East" and "West" in global terms, this study reframes them as intracultural regional distinctions: Shanxi representing the "West" and Huizhou the "East" within the Chinese cultural and geographic context.

Brickwork carvings, a hallmark of Ming and Qing residential architecture, provide insight into symbolic narratives, regional identity, and socio-cultural values. While previous research has often emphasized global exchange as a driving force behind stylistic evolution, recent scholarship suggests that perceived Western influences, particularly in decorative patterns, were subtle, selective, and often mediated through interior furnishings or printed materials, rather than directly visible in core structural elements (Shao, Wen & White, 2022).

Shanxi 's Jin merchants, a term used here to refer to the elite merchant class from Shanxi province, not the historical Jin dynasty, amassed wealth through expansive trade networks across northern China, Mongolia, and along the Silk Road. Their courtyards, monumental in scale and layout, frequently served as visual declarations of economic power and social order. Decorative brick carvings in Shanxi often combine traditional Confucian iconography with more ornate and symmetrical arrangements. According to Liu, Fu, and Li (2024), this aesthetic shift correlates with increased exposure to foreign goods and images introduced through missionary activity and cross-border trade. However, many of the so-called Western features, such as Gothic or Baroque forms, appear more evidently in interior artifacts (for example, clocks and chandeliers) than in exterior architectural carvings.

Figure 1, for instance, showcases a multi-storey pagoda structure from Shanxi. While its bracket systems and overhanging eaves reflect classical Chinese construction, the imposing symmetry and scale reveal a broader aspiration toward grandeur, possibly influenced by imported visual hierarchies. The layout's emphasis on alignment and visibility signals both Confucian values and a performative engagement with modernity (Rudolph, 2020).

By contrast, Huizhou merchant residences, deeply rooted in Neo-Confucian ideology, emphasize modesty, moral order, and literary refinement. Brick carvings in Huizhou are meticulously placed in liminal spaces such as door lintels, corridors, and courtyard walls, reinforcing ethical instruction and ancestral veneration. Zhang, Chen, and Zhang (2011) note that while Western visual elements, such as floral scrolls and perspectival depth, began to appear during the late Qing period, these were integrated in ways that complemented rather than disrupted traditional forms.



Figure 1. Pagoda in Shanxi with Layered Eaves and Subtle Western-Influenced Symmetry (Rudolph, 2020).

Figure 2 illustrates this subtlety. The curved roof ridges and detailed carvings of a Huizhou ancestral hall display the region 's artisanal craftsmanship and symbolic placement of decoration (Fila, 2013). Rather than monumentalizing space, Huizhou architecture internalizes value through refinement and moral storytelling.



Figure 2. Huizhou ancestral hall with curved roofs and detailed brick carvings, (Fila , 2013).

According to Songyi (2009), the regional divergence stems from differing economic roles and ideological orientations. Shanxi merchants, embedded in global trade, adopted more extroverted spatial and decorative strategies, while Huizhou builders maintained introspective visual languages rooted in Confucian orthodoxy. Interdisciplinary research confirms that Western motifs entered Chinese architectural vocabulary not through structural transformation, but through symbolic translation via missionary schools, pattern books, and visual media (Pinter, Penn, Theraulaz & Fiore, 2018). Ultimately, the comparison reveals not a binary between tradition and foreignness, but a spectrum of regional aesthetic agency within China 's own cultural landscape.

Problem Statement

Despite extensive studies on traditional Chinese architecture, limited scholarly attention has been given to the cross-cultural influences embedded in the brick carvings of merchant courtyards during the Ming and Qing dynasties. In particular, the contrast between Shanxi's outward adoption of Western motifs and Huizhou's conservative yet refined stylistic evolution remains underexplored. This research addresses the gap by comparing how Western elements were integrated differently in the architectural ornamentation of these two regions, shedding light on regional variations in cultural assimilation and architectural expression.

Research Objectives

To examine how brick carvings in Shanxi and Huizhou express distinct regional aesthetics, values, and social meanings.

To demonstrate how this regional visual language reflects merchant culture, family ideology, and cultural memory.

Research Significance

This study is significant for revealing how brick carvings in Shanxi and Huizhou express distinct regional aesthetics, social values, and cultural meanings. By analyzing these carvings as visual languages, the research highlights their role in reflecting merchant identity, Confucian family ideology, and local cultural memory. It challenges generalized narratives of Chinese architecture by emphasizing regional specificity. The findings contribute to architectural heritage scholarship and promote a deeper understanding of how visual traditions encode social meaning. This perspective also supports culturally informed conservation practices, preserving not just architectural forms but the intangible values embedded within regional design traditions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Merchant Patronage in Shaping Architectural Identity

The economic success of merchants in those dynasties led to their own patronage of architecture, which influenced the way various regions designed their buildings. Trade in other regions by families in Shanxi and Huizhou allowed them to gather impressive fortunes, which they then used to build grand houses that mirrored

their standing, beliefs and thoughts about life. Ma and Roosli (2025) argue that merchant patronage helped form the plans of these buildings and inspired the design of brick carvings that combines regional and imported styles.

Nevertheless, Li, Xie, Shi, Lin, He and Ao (2024) suggest that architecture did more than look nice; it also highlighted Confucian values, family order and respect for ancestors. Still, although this principle generally matches Huizhou homes with their ancestral halls and meaningful carvings, the approach fails to describe the bold inclusion of International motifs in Shanxi houses.

Shanxi 's Qiao Family Courtyard shows how adopting Gothic-style pointed arches into traditional Chinese designs resulted from merchants influencing these designs (F. Qiao, 2019). This adaptation highlights the role of architecture in allowing merchants to represent their wealth and cultural knowledge. Figure 3 illustrates that the symmetrical design, fancy woodwork and differing levels in the courtyard blend the best aspects of each culture. They served as cultural declarations by showing how identity, tradition and modernity were negotiated within them.



Figure 3. Merchant Courtyard in Shanxi with Symmetrical Layout and Decorative Elements, (Tripadvisor, 2025).

The Impact of Cross-Cultural Exchange on Brick Carving Aesthetics

Brick carving, as a significant decorative art in traditional Chinese architecture, evolved not only through regional craftsmanship but also through interactions with external cultures. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, increased contact with Western traders, missionaries, and printed media introduced new artistic ideas that gradually permeated local architectural traditions. According to Qiao (2019) cross-cultural exchange during this period led to the subtle incorporation of Western visual motifs such as floral scrolls, cherubs, and perspective techniques into the aesthetic vocabulary of brick carving.

However, the study of Cohen (2010) challenges the extent of this influence, arguing that while Western motifs were occasionally adopted, they were often reinterpreted through a Chinese lens and integrated selectively, preserving local values and narrative traditions. This critical view emphasizes that foreign influence did not replace indigenous traditions but rather blended with them to create hybrid visual forms.

Fang, Li, Gao, Liu and Cheng (2024) further supports this by noting that brick carvers adapted Western elements in a way that aligned with Confucian moral storytelling and symbolic representation, ensuring continuity of meaning within a changing aesthetic. In many cases, carvings of architectural borders, lintels, or door frames would combine Western-inspired curves with Chinese mythical figures or poetic scenes demonstrating artistic flexibility. Thus, brick carving became a site of cultural dialogue, where imported styles were localized and embedded within a broader heritage framework. This fusion not only enhanced visual complexity but also reflected the adaptability of Chinese artisans to changing cultural landscapes.

The Interpretation of Western Motifs in Regional Chinese Architecture

During the late Ming and Qing dynasties, the world was connected more closely, bringing in Western artistic designs to many Chinese forms, especially architecture. Architects adopted these motifs, for example arches,

flowery designs and symmetry into their local styles, but it depended on the regional culture and society how they did so. Qi & Yang (2024) point out that, in the north, like Shanxi, merchant group 's often-valued foreign styles openly as a symbol of their wealth, stylishness and progressive way of thinking.

However, Zhao, Liang and Lu (2022) propose that in Huizhou, the Western elements were respected and incorporated in more symbolic, careful ways. Confucian moral control in the south and commercial open-mindedness in the north, they believe, are the real reasons behind this difference. Zhou (2021) explains that the characteristic styles of Romanesque arches and Baroque flowers were usually adapted to each place in terms of materials, arrangement and meaning. As a result, the old traditional Chinese style and the new style from the West lived together and complemented each other.

As an example, a decorated doorway might have a Western arch form and still include Chinese mythological images along with inscriptions showing both styles (Jimenez, 2021). The way these motifs were used regionally illustrates that architects chose which Western styles worked best with Chinese traditions. It underlines how architecture acts as a mix of worldwide trends and original local customs.

Cultural Transfer Theory

Cultural Transfer Theory helps explain how practices, styles and ideas travel from one culture to another and are sometimes adapted in the new surroundings. The theory grew from ideas in translation and reception studies and is now commonly used in art, literature and architecture. Truskanov and Prat (2018) believe that cultural transfer goes beyond copying foreign things by adapting them, reading them in a new way and integrating them into the local context. Consequently, this theory is important for examining how artistic and architectural features merge.

As a result, Larkin (2020) points out that when transferred elements are adapted to suit local customs, they can become entirely original, carrying hints of their cultural origins and new local themes. Still, Jimenez (2021) adds that, from his point of view, cultural transfer can become an expression of struggle between those with authority and those who resist, since cultural borrowing may lead to a mix of cultural continuity and disruption.

This theory plays a significant role in this study, which examines how designs from the west were used in the brick carvings of Shanxi and Huizhou merchant courtyards. Cultural Transfer Theory demonstrates that the use of some Western architectural elements in China was gradual and selective. It makes sense of why architects used different designs and symbols in different regions, which shows how people identified with their culture during the Ming-Qing era.

Literature Gap

While several studies have explored Chinese courtyard architecture and merchant culture during the Ming and Qing dynasties, limited research specifically examines how Western motifs were interpreted differently across regions such as Shanxi and Huizhou. Existing literature often treats these influences as uniform or secondary. This study addresses the gap by providing a comparative analysis of regional interpretations, emphasizing cultural transfer and architectural identity through brick carvings, an area that remains underexplored in architectural and cultural heritage scholarship.

METHODOLOGY

Research Method

The study utilizes qualitative methods to investigate how Western patterns were understood in Chinese buildings from rural areas. Using a qualitative study is helpful because it helps to understand the significance, artistic aspects and background stories shown in the carved bricks. This approach was helpful in understanding how different architectural parts contribute to Chinese culture, rather than just measuring them. As the research is tied to Chinese historical and contextual background, qualitative approach helps best to explore how cultural customs spread and vary from place to place.

Research Design

For this research, secondary data was collected and analyzed to understand the influence of Western motifs in the brick carvings of merchant courtyards. This design was chosen due to the historical scope of the study and the availability of documented architectural analyses, scholarly articles, and visual records. Utilizing secondary data ensures access to expert interpretations, heritage archives, and previously validated case studies. This approach is also efficient in addressing the research objectives without compromising depth, as it enables the integration of multiple perspectives from credible academic sources across disciplines such as history, architecture, and cultural studies.

Data Collection

Study Sample

The study sample comprises two historical case studies: a Shanxi merchant courtyard and a Huizhou merchant courtyard. These were selected due to their architectural significance and rich visual examples of brick carvings with identifiable Western influence. Both sites have been widely referenced in academic literature, making them suitable for comparative cultural and architectural analysis.

Databases

Secondary data for this study was retrieved from scholarly databases known for their relevance to humanities, history, and architectural studies. As shown in Table 1, eight key databases were consulted for literature, images, and case study materials.

Table 1. Academic Databases Used

No.	Database Name
1	Google Scholar
2	JSTOR
3	Scopus
4	Web of Science
5	ProQuest
6	China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI)
7	Taylor & Francis Online
8	SpringerLink

Keywords

To ensure relevant literature was identified, a series of keywords were developed, as shown in Table 2. These keywords reflect the study's focus on architecture, cultural exchange, and regional identity.

Table 2. Keywords Used in Search

No.	Keywords
1	"Chinese courtyard architecture "
2	"Western influence in Chinese architecture "
3	"brick carving aesthetics "
4	"Ming-Qing architecture "
5	"Shanxi merchant homes "
6	"Huizhou architecture "
7	"Cultural transfer in architecture "
8	"architectural hybridity China "

Boolean Operators

Boolean operators were used to refine and combine keyword searches effectively. These combinations are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Boolean Operators Used

No.	Search Combination
1	"Chinese architecture " AND "Western influence "
2	"brick carving " OR "architectural ornamentation "
3	"Ming dynasty " AND "cultural exchange "
4	"Huizhou " NOT "modern architecture "

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis within the case study method. This involved identifying key

visual, symbolic, and stylistic themes that demonstrate Western influence in the selected architectural samples. This method allows for a structured yet flexible analysis of qualitative data, revealing patterns in how cultural transfer was interpreted through design.

Case Study 1 (Shanxi)

This case examines a well-documented Shanxi merchant residence featuring Gothic-style arches and decorative motifs influenced by foreign design. The analysis focuses on the integration of these elements within traditional spatial planning.

Case Study 2 (Huizhou)

This case explores a Huizhou courtyard known for its conservative yet refined incorporation of Western floral and geometric details within moralistic brick carving traditions. The focus is on symbolism and aesthetic adaptation.

Ethical Standards

Despite the fact that the data is only from external sources, everyone involved in the research maintained standards of ethics. All the resources, whether they are published articles, books or visual materials, are properly cited to prevent plagiarism and maintain academic integrity. Since no personal data or direct contact with humans was needed, the study was exempt from needing ethics approval. At the same time, the intention was to present all the results objectively and with respect, paying special attention to materials from culture or history. All guidelines for ethical academic conduct and careful data use at the institution were followed by the research. The images used for architectural views came from open and credited repositories the public could use.

RESULTS

Case Study 1: Shanxi

Shanxi merchant courtyard houses represented the prosperity of families, domestic pecking order and pride in the region during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Jin merchants, who had been influential in the long-distance trade, spent their money on large courtyards in symmetrical patterns and the use of comprehensive carvings of bricks, which served to strengthen Confucian principle like filial piety, loyalty and respect against the ancestors (Kong, 2010). Although the previous interpretations were pointing to the dominant Western influence in these homes, new evaluations contradict this opinion. Zhou (2020) contends that the only forms of Western motifs were interior, i.e. imported furniture or clocks, as opposed to structural motifs and exterior ornamentation.

The Qiao and Wang family compounds that are usually presented as examples demonstrate the architectural magnificence that was based on the traditional Chinese planning. The massive gateways, in-depth courtyards and stratified spaces indicate social order and ritual purpose instead of style merger. Deep relief carvings of brick show scenes of stories and favorable signs to form a local visual communication of strength and lineage. Although its use of decorative elements such as balanced geometry or floral scrolls might be vaguely similar in reimportation to imported styles, it is filtered into local aesthetics and Confucian symbolism. Therefore, the Shanxi courtyards are clear demonstration of Chinese traditional ideals being quite bold and extroverted, but not a good example of the hybridity of the architectural style with the western one.

Case Study 2: Huizhou

The Neo-Confucian ethics and literati culture gave Chinese architecture a stylish and contemplative look to Huizhou merchant architecture. In contrast to the grandeur of the Shanxi courtyards, the Huizhou houses were simple and abundant with symbolic decorations. Brick carvings were finely positioned in doorways, lintels, and corridors and passed moral teachings and traditional values through images of the natural world, poem, and classical storeys. Li, Hu, and Wang (2024) point out that storytelling, accuracy, and spiritual significance were critical to Huizhou artisans rather than the decorative super-fluoresces.

Even though one can identify some Western-inspired motives in some of the carvings (perspectival depth or floral patterns), they were introduced in a subtle manner and integrated into the background of the visual concepts. This was presumably due to exposure to missionary schooling or imported drawings, but they were never allowed to stand alone of the Confucian worldview of the area. Instead of signalling fusion in style, these details represent those elements of Huizhou that selectively apprehended external imagery. The outcome is a reserved and symbolic aesthetic upholding family dignity, academic research, and social control. The Huizhou courtyards therefore can be regarded as a conservative but extremely advanced visual tradition, where carving on the brick performed a decorative as well as an educative role based on the local cultural recollection and moral ideology.

Theme 1: Regional Expression in Shanxi and Huizhou Brick Carvings

The brick carvings in Shanxi and Huizhou merchant residences demonstrate two distinct modes of regional aesthetic expression shaped by geography, ideology, and social function. In Shanxi, carvings often emphasize monumentality, symmetry, and visual boldness, reflecting the merchant class's pursuit of public identity and hierarchical order. While earlier interpretations suggested direct Western influence through elements such as Gothic arches or Baroque flourishes, contemporary scholarship stresses that these features, if present, were often confined to interior décor and symbolic motifs rather than structural forms (Z. Qiao, 2017; Zhang, 2020).

Shanxi courtyard ornamentation does not manifest open elements of other foreign architectural styles but rather expresses local authority in huge composition, deep relief carving, and symmetrical faces. These were visual practises based upon Confucian principles of order and lineage, but adjusted to the new commercial prominence of wealthy families. As an example, the Wang Family Courtyard has a huge gate entrance and equal structure which might be indicative of a proximate demand with respect to foreign artistic practises, yet certainly Chinese in tonal content and spatial structure. Ornamental items, including floral scrolls or symmetrical frames were more likely to be borrowed out of pattern books or imported objects than architectural drawings (Figure 4). It is not all about imitating Western patterns but through visual clarity and ornamental wealth states prosperity, legitimacy and status.



Figure 4. Western-style arch at Wang Family Courtyard, Shanxi, (Veronica, 2023).

In contrast, Huizhou architecture reveals a more inward-facing and symbolically refined decorative tradition. Rooted in Neo-Confucian philosophy, Huizhou courtyards highlight restraint, ethical symbolism, and artisanal precision. According to Jiang (2014) and Xiong (2024), brick carvings were not designed to impress outwardly but to encode family morals, scholarly values, and regional identity. Even where elements like floral scrolls or geometric detailing suggest limited exposure to Western visual culture, they were seamlessly absorbed into traditional iconography and subordinated to Confucian meaning systems.

As seen in Figure 5, the entrance of a Huizhou courtyard features detailed stone and brick carving with botanical themes, rendered with naturalism and subtle symmetry. These details demonstrate aesthetic sophistication but remain grounded in Chinese symbolism. Unlike the expressive boldness of Shanxi, Huizhou's decorative language favours metaphor, restraint, and continuity, reflecting an elite culture of moral cultivation and cultural preservation rather than stylistic innovation.



Figure 5. Refined floral carving at a Huizhou courtyard entrance (H. Zhao, 2014).

Theme 2: Integration of Foreign Elements (Architectural Experimentation in Shanxi vs. Structural Continuity in Huizhou)

In Shanxi, the integration of Western elements into merchant architecture reflected a spirit of experimentation and adaptive innovation. The wealthy merchant families of the region leveraged their global trade ties to introduce stylistic features such as arched gates, floral and geometric stonework, and layered symmetrical designs (Long & Zakaria, 2024). The alterations were not cosmetic but actually involved revising how rooms were arranged traditionally. Shanxi courtyards commonly borrowed from abroad to highlight their designs and to highlight their outwardly focused way of thinking, as mentioned by Wang, Cui, Song and Hao (2025). Architectural styles that are not traditional for Asia include the use of imported tiles, curved lines from Rome and Western-style balustrades and facades. As seen in Figure 5, the Shanxi courtyard stands out for its raised stairs, dragon pillars and a well-proportioned layout that highlights both its openness and its ceremonial air. Although the dragons still use traditional Chinese emblems, their big and prominent sculpture reveals a performing style popularized by Western masonry, proving that the area accepts and adopts new and mixed styles of art.



Figure 6. Shanxi courtyard with elevated stairway and dragon sculptures (Zhang et al., 2022).

In contrast, Huizhou architecture preserved structural continuity, integrating Western motifs sparingly and without disrupting the foundational spatial layouts rooted in Confucian tradition. Huizhou courtyards strictly adhered to hierarchical organization, axial symmetry, and enclosed family spaces, all designed to reflect ancestral respect and moral discipline. Even when foreign influences were present, such as floral scrollwork or linear patterns they were carefully adapted to serve as enhancements rather than transformations. According to Cao and

Mustafa (2023), Huizhou artisans employed these motifs to elevate artisanship while consciously maintaining philosophical and spatial integrity. Rather than incorporating structural elements from the West, they opted to embed symbolic references through ornamental detailing. As shown in Figure 7, the Huizhou courtyard retains its traditional roofline, layered eaves, and symmetrical form, with decorative elements applied subtly around columns and windows. The balanced combination of refinement and restraint demonstrates how Huizhou's builders selectively engaged foreign aesthetics while firmly preserving cultural identity and architectural continuity.



Figure 7. Huizhou Courtyard Maintaining Traditional Symmetry with Refined Decorative Integration (Page, 2015).

Theme 3: Interpretation of Aesthetic Influence, Cosmopolitan Projection in Shanxi vs. Confucian Preservation in Huizhou

In Shanghai, aesthetic practises used in the design of merchant courtyards indicated the successes of trade in the region and its desire to become cosmopolitan. Being significant participants in the trans regional commerce, the elite merchants in Shanxi were exposed to foreign merchandise, visual characters, and imports of missionaries which could have played a role in their selection of decorations (Chin, 2010). Nonetheless, instead of direct architectural borrowing of Western designs, the impact was symbolic, in terms of ornamental details, floral scrolls, repetitive symmetry or ornamental motifs, imitating imported visual terms. According to Chumley (2016), the idea behind such aesthetic decisions was being on par with the perceived sophistication of the world and securing the local position. Accommodations such as the Wang Family Courtyard incorporating both the Chinese traditional iconography and ornamentation, perhaps influenced by outside fashions, were not meant to emulate western architecture, but to enhance the observability, social status, and social learning.

Instead, Huizhou architecture approached the external aesthetic genres with a stance of cultural conservatism and philosophical staunchness. Influenced by Neo-Confucian principles, Huizhou artisans gave more attention to symbolic continuity, reverence to ancestors and moral education. Cao and Mustafa (2023) state that Western-inspired details (e.g. botanical decoration, geometrical finesse, etc.) were imported only when they underscored or enriched already existing visual subjects. These aspects were very fine decorations on doorframes, screens or lintels that were designed into their places without having to disturb spaces or hierarchies. It was not trying to be exterior but rather interior. Therefore, the architectural style in Huizhou is a proper balance of the important fineness and the tradition and the use of the Confucian pattern without the timid use of the foreign visual image. Instead of the cosmopolitan projection, the aesthetical approach of Huizhou emphasises the preservation and the identity based on philosophical restraint.

Theme 4: Regional Variations in Aesthetic Strategy—Decorative Adaptation in Shanxi vs. Artisan Refinement in Huizhou

In Shanxi, Decorative adaptation was a way of showing rank and global interest. Enriched merchants from this area were recognized for their homes, which mixed several different architectural features. Grand entrances,

curved arches and tall rooflines were typically given a complex ornament of Western scrolls, symmetry and colorful designs covering the outside of these buildings. As explained by Qu (2018), Shanxi architecture became a place to display identity and decoration reflected the city's modern side. According to Jolaoso and Bello (2014), these architectural touches shaped the way the building was seen and recognized, not only through their symbolism. The famous striking and multi-layered gate at the entrance of a Shanxi courtyard is designed for impressing. Light effects, style of architecture and rhythmic elements within the space create an atmosphere of theatrical splendour and luxury. It illustrates that by inserting new styles, decorating Shanxi spaces helped reconstruct old traditions, as [Figure 8](#) indicates.



Figure 8. Grand decorative gateway in Shanxi merchant architecture (Anthony, 2025).

In contrast, Huizhou adopted a refined artisan-based strategy that preserved local craftsmanship while subtly engaging with foreign aesthetics. Rather than transforming structural forms, Huizhou artisans infused surfaces with intricate carvings that narrated moral stories or depicted symbolic flora and fauna. Western motifs were rarely used, appearing just as details along the edges or in decorative reliefs. Huizhou's design style focused on achieving equilibrium as opposed to creating visual noise, Fang, Li, Gao, Liu and Cheng (2024) concluded. According to De Munck (2019), artisans kept spatial symbolism under control and made the spaces attractive by meticulously completing every detail. One example is the use of stone panels, which feature natural perspective and exact botanical details inspired by Western styles. All these elements were formed using imagery from Confucianism, helping to keep culture intact. Huizhou art and literature clearly exhibit a concentration on informative detail over flashiness, as [Figure 9](#) reveals.



Figure 9. Intricate Stone Carvings in Huizhou Architecture Blending Tradition with Refined Detail (China Today, 2025).

DISCUSSION

The study indicates that Shanxi merchants approached architectural expression with an extroverted and status-driven strategy, while Huizhou merchants adopted a more conservative and philosophically grounded approach. In Shanxi, merchant courtyard designs emphasized formality, symmetry, and visual grandeur, reflecting the economic strength and social aspirations of the Jin merchant class. Rather than directly adopting Gothic forms or Baroque motifs, Shanxi artisans selectively incorporated ornamental features — such as floral scrolls or bilateral symmetry—that may have been inspired by exposure to foreign goods, missionary art, or printed materials (Chin, 2010). These features were integrated into a fundamentally Confucian spatial framework. Murray (2018) observes that Jin merchants even adopted coordinated dress to collectively display elite status, and their architecture similarly functioned as a visual expression of unity and prestige. According to Suhadolnik (2019), despite the possible influence of Western stylistic concepts on some of the decorative elements, the Shanxi architects set out to design a localised object that aligns with local cultures and traditions instead of copying.

Conversely, there was structural integrity and moral symbolism in Huizhou courtyard architecture, and the outside visual motifs are absorbed very carefully. Ornamental motifs like floral scrolls or straight edges, even on the basis of imports, were limited to carvings and panel work, so as to accommodate Neo-Confucian spatial principles. The authors, Zhang, Chen and Zhang (2011) highlight that Huizhou architects embraced features that helped in adding to the craftsmanship without affecting the clarity of ideology. Such results correspond to the conclusion made by Cheng (2022), who notes that the concept of the built environment in Huizhou was formed due to the philosophical admiration of history and the hierarchical position of culture. Instead of changing the language of architecture, the artisans of Huizhou employed ornament to support traditional values. Decorative styles were directed toward elegant habits, not toward invention, marking the interest of Huizhou in symbolic conservation (Wendland, 2012). This analogy emphasises the internal systems of value as the main influence on the regional creation of architecture rather than direct foreign influence.

Cultural Transfer Theory clearly shows how strategies from Shanxi and Huizhou evolved by selecting, altering and adapting to local conditions. Dávila (2012) explains that cultural aspects are not moved directly from one society to the next; they are reworked to fit in with different cultural values. As mentioned by Van Noort in 2020, the addition of Western themes helped Shanxi 's merchants create new and respected identities for themselves. On the other hand, Huizhou shows the "filtered transfer " described by Di Natale and Sangiovanni (2010), in which only elements that match existing systems are accepted. For this reason, Huizhou 's architecture stuck with Confucian-style features even though it faced identical outside influences. Petra Longkumer (2023) agrees with Ding (2021) that movements in Shanxi architecture were shaped by the desire for social status and the wish for acclaim, while Dykstra (2016) believes the importance placed on skilled workmanship and conventional symbols in Huizhou held back different design styles. Therefore, the architecture of these two regions represents both the materials they use and the cultural, economic and ideological ways they understand their environments differently. Cultural Transfer Theory helps frame these patterns, confirming that the outcomes of foreign influence are determined not by access alone, but by how meaning is negotiated within local architectural and cultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

This research was aimed at examining how aesthetic values and cultural identities were manifested through brick carvings in merchant court architecture of Ming to Qing periods with reference to two separate regions of China; Shandong and Huzhou. The study did not focus on Western artistic influence, but instead turned the analysis into the focus on how social, philosophical and cultural patterns of specific regions influenced the visual and architectural strategies. The heavily trade-driven and mercantilistic Shandong area took on a more outward-looking and grander design, and the think-backward-old-fashioned Huizhou region took to a deeply self-resonant and highly aesthetic vocabulary.

Although both regions had little access to Western visual culture throughout the later imperial period, their reactions were extremely selective, and filtered through strong Confucianism worldviews. In Shanxi, hierarchical order, social rank, and cultural assertiveness became represented through the carvings of bricks in the area, whereas moral narrative, family ancestry, and artisanship were already prioritised in the carvings of Huizhou. This comparative method shows that regional visual self-expression was determined more by domestic cultural priorities than direct foreign integration of styles.

The study brought these patterns through a qualitative and comparative case study approach. It utilised

secondary materials, architectural records, and professional critique in order to use the Cultural Transfer Theory to trace how foreign visual experiences were transformed in local terms. The study concludes that decoration that might seem to be inspired by the West was in many cases a way of strengthening regionality, and not an indicator of style hybridity. Finally, the results are used to build a better idea of Chinese architectural heritage by emphasising the significance of regional diversity, symbolic continuity and design practises, which were firmly rooted in culture towards the end of the imperialism era.

The outcomes are clear enough to indicate the different architectural styles adopted in Shanxi and Huizhou. Decorative features were applied in a very vocal way to project status, commercial success, and social hierarchy in Shanxi. Although some of the decorative patterns might have been brought on board by international artistic expressions, they have been selectively borrowed and applied within an established Confucian spatial system. In comparison, Huizhou was more conservative in their aesthetic; any interaction with outside factors was purely symbolic and had to be institutionally contextualised in the context of moral and philosophical narratives. The results demonstrate that cultural exchange was not followed in the same way in late imperial China and it was predetermined by ideologies, values, and social conditions of various areas.

In this comparative frame, the research agrees with the idea that architecture, especially, ornamental carving of bricks, constitutes the visual expression of the local identity, the global vision and local values. Rather than indicating hybridity in either of the styles, or Westernisation, the decorative choices hailed on in each of the two areas refer to deliberate policies of cultural chastity in which my visual space is engaging with third-wave of changing perceptions. By doing so, the study becomes an excellent addition to the discourse of Chinese heritage of architecture and shows how the local traditions and the Confucian ethics remained as the driving force behind the choice of aesthetics. It also serves as a source of additional investigation of cultural adaptation, continuity in style and application of symbolism in the East Asian architectural and artistic activities.

Research Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data, which may not capture the full range of undocumented architectural features or recent restorations. The analysis is also confined to two case studies, which, while representative, may not reflect the diversity of responses across other regions. Additionally, the absence of fieldwork and direct interviews with heritage practitioners restricts the ability to assess contemporary interpretations and local narratives surrounding the integration of Western motifs in these historical structures.

Future Directions

Future studies could expand the scope by including additional regional case studies to explore broader patterns of cross-cultural architectural adaptation across China. Field-based research, including site visits, architectural surveys, and interviews with local artisans or conservationists, would provide richer insights into material techniques and evolving interpretations. Moreover, integrating digital tools such as 3D scanning or visual mapping could enhance documentation and comparative analysis. Interdisciplinary collaboration with art historians and cultural geographers may also deepen theoretical perspectives on architectural hybridity.

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