

Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi Theme in Architectural Decorations of Lingnan Guangfu during Qing Dynasty: An Iconological Analysis

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Abstract

Based on an iconological perspective, this study provides an in-depth interpretation of the unique regional characteristics of the Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi (Blessing, Prosperity, Longevity, Happiness) theme in Qing Dynasty architectural decorations within the Lingnan Guangfu region. This study selected 18 Lingnan Guangfu Qing Dynasty buildings from the 131 cultural relics protection units in the List of National Key Cultural Relics Protection Units in Guangdong Province as the research objects. Combining the cultural characteristics, geographical characteristics, religious beliefs, and folk customs of the Lingnan Guangfu region, this study summarizes its characteristics in four aspects: the expression of regional elements, the composition of narrative elements, the elements of cultural diversity, and the unity of function and decoration. By summarizing the unique regional expressions presented through the element combination features and modes used in the Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi theme in traditional Guangfu architecture, this study provides modern designers with a deeper understanding and more precise expressive pathways for Lingnan decorative elements of the Qing Dynasty, allowing traditional decorative motifs to showcase the charm and vitality of regional culture in modern design.

Keywords: Iconological analysis, Lingnan Guangfu culture, Qing Dynasty, Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi theme, Decorations.

Introduction

Traditional architecture reflects rich cultural values that today's audiences tend to have limited knowledge of. The decorative patterns that once held deep spiritual significance are now difficult to interpret due to shifts in society, politics, and the economy, making it challenging to connect with their original meanings. (Wang, 2014) The Lingnan region, as a significant cultural area in southern China, has fostered a unique regional culture shaped by its distinct geographical environment, climatic conditions, and abundant natural resources. Within Lingnan culture, Guangfu culture stands out for its profound historical heritage and distinctive regional characteristics. The Qing Dynasty marks an important period in the development of Guangfu culture, where its architectural decorative art not only showcases superb craftsmanship but also deeply reflects the societal values, religious beliefs, and aesthetic pursuits of that time. These Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi themes (Blessing, Prosperity, Longevity, and Happiness) as the core auspicious motif in Guangfu architectural decoration, embody the Lingnan people's aspirations and pursuits of a better life, as shown in Figure 1: Interpretation of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi, below.

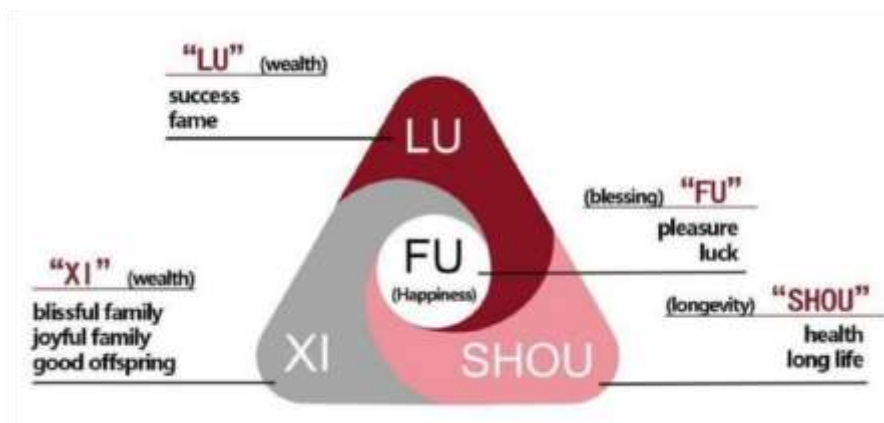


Figure 1: Interpretation of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi

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Image Source: Self-drawn by the author

Fu serves as a foundation; Lu signifies personal achievement; Shou represents health; and Xi symbolizes marital harmony. Together, they form a cyclical relationship that embodies people's values and aspirations, remaining a timeless cultural theme.

Literature Review

Concepts and theories related to architecture and decoration in Qing Dynasty

The Qing Dynasty (1636–1912) was a period of great development for ancient architectural systems, and it was also an important period in the development and maturity of Lingnan architecture, which developed a unique architectural style and decorative features. Due to material constraints, Qing Dynasty architecture separated structural and decorative functions. Structures developed in a simple and reasonable direction, while the artistic style of the architecture became more complex and extravagant. During this period, the cultural differences between the development of multiple ethnic groups and different regions became increasingly apparent, resulting in diversity and complementarity in architectural design and decoration. Qing Dynasty architectural decoration was influenced by the aesthetic orientation of arts and crafts, and often pursued fullness, delicacy and multiplicity. Fullness refers to the decoration covering the entire object, delicacy refers to slenderness, and multiplicity refers to piling up decorations, which is similar in meaning to fullness and mostly used as a measure word, with the concept of fullness being space. The characteristic forms of slenderness and complexity are the result of an emphasis on technology on the one hand, and the influence of the French Baroque Rococo decorative style on the other. This ultimately led to the formation of a wide variety of decorative techniques in architectural decoration.

Up to Qing Dynasty, the expression of auspicious themes gradually shifted from a single pattern to a narrative style. The decorative elements that make up the themes are no longer just symbols, but incorporate storylines and plots, greatly enriching the themes and the space for appreciation. This change is also reflected in the architectural decoration of Qing dynasty, with the transformation of formal beauty and rules into specific formal content, as well as an evolution towards the secular and the popular, which is closely related to the prosperity of the commodity economy in the Qing dynasty.

Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi theme

Auspicious themes flourished greatly in the Qing Dynasty, becoming the mainstream in decorative patterns. Everywhere, one could see patterns featuring the motifs of Fu, Lu, Shou, and Xi, which mirrored people's aspirations for life, their pursuit of ideals, and the profound influence of folk traditions in decoration. In contrast, auspicious patterns in the Qing Dynasty were characterized by combination, utilizing multiple themes to form a single cohesive content. This expanded the connotations of auspicious patterns and presented a diverse and integrated characteristic.

During the Qing Dynasty, society was relatively stable, the population grew rapidly, urbanization accelerated, and commerce and handicrafts prospered. Many commercial cities and handicraft centers were formed, providing a material basis for the prosperity of architectural decoration and the wider application of auspicious patterns such as Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi in architectural decoration. In terms of culture, folk art such as auspicious New Year paintings, was already quite developed. There were a large number of auspicious themes presented in New Year paintings, which on the one hand reflected people's yearning and pursuit of a better life, and on the other hand provided a basis for the reference of the expression of auspicious themes in architectural decoration. Qing economy was based on a feudal smallholder economy, and agriculture, handicrafts and commerce all developed significantly. Commerce in particular benefited from well-developed land and water transport and a flourishing foreign trade, leading to the formation of many commercial cities and regional commercial centers. The economic development promoted the prosperity and diversification of architectural decoration. Merchants often used auspicious patterns and luxurious materials in large quantities in architectural decoration to show off their wealth and status. Auspicious patterns such as Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi were very popular because of their auspicious meanings and beautiful

shapes, and became an important element in architectural decoration. Qing political system was centered on the emperor, and a strict monarchy was implemented. Qing government implemented a series of economic reforms and policies that promoted the development of agriculture, handicrafts, and commerce. At the same time, Qing dynasty also selected officials through the imperial examination system to promote social mobility. Political stability and effective governance provided a guarantee for the prosperity of architectural decoration. Officials and wealthy merchants often used auspicious patterns and luxurious materials in architectural decorations to show off their power and status. Auspicious patterns such as Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi were popular because of their auspicious meaning and beautiful appearance, and became an important element in architectural decoration. Finally, historical developments have had a profound impact on architectural decoration. Qing dynasty Lingnan Guangfu architectural decoration not only inherited traditional elements from previous dynasties, but also incorporated Lingnan regional elements and Western cultural elements, forming an architectural decorative style with Lingnan Guangfu regional cultural characteristics and cultural connotations.

Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi shows different perspectives on people's pursuit of happiness. People put their wishes into auspicious patterns, and as society, culture, economy, politics and history develop, the expressive elements of Fu,Lu,Shou,Xi are constantly changing. These expressive elements either have the characteristics of inheritance or the characteristics of the times, but like religion, these four have become eternal themes that people pursue. The decorative elements of the Fu,Lu,Shou,Xi theme are composed of diverse subjects and varied styling techniques. In general, figures of gods and immortals, auspicious birds and beasts, immortal flowers and herbs, auspicious objects and treasures, as well as myths and legends and historical stories are all visual carriers of the concept of good fortune. The visual communication of the pattern elements and shapes uses different methods such as symbols, metaphors, homophony, and words and signs. As a conceptual and symbolic form of visual art, the theme of Fu,Lu,Shou,Xi expresses the special ideology and spiritual sustenance of the Chinese people, and also reveals the characteristics of the traditional decorative art form and its techniques. The Fu,Lu,Shou,Xi theme in Lingnan Guangfu Qing Dynasty architectural decorations also has a large amount of religious content, expressing a symbolic expression of the Taoist immortal landscape and the Buddhist world.

Current research status

Lu and Wei (2018) conduct research on architecture and decoration during the Qing Dynasty through the use of field study and case studies. Types, layouts, decorative features and evolution of traditional Lingnan Guangfu architecture have been explored. Their research reveals the historical development, and regional as well as cultural characteristics of the decoration, forming a basis for the study of Lingnan Guangfu architectural decoration. The part on the Qing Dynasty provides an empirical basis for the analysis and evidence for the judgment and selection of samples of Lingnan Qing Dynasty architecture in this study. Liang (2014), Xue (2012), and Zeng (2014) focus on the craftsmanship of brickwork, stone carving, wood carving, stucco and ceramic sculpture in Lingnan Guangfu architecture, revealing the application of these crafts in architectural decoration and their artistic characteristics. Although their studies do not contain in-depth discussions on the architectural decoration during the Qing Dynasty, these research results provide important background for the in-depth analysis of the Fu,Lu,Shou,Xi themes in this current paper, involving the part of architectural decoration technology and craftsmanship.

Most current research on the Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi theme in Lingnan Guangfu architectural decoration focuses on graphic design and patterns, especially the use of visual elements (Wang,2020). However, less attention has been given to understanding the relationship between these elements, their composition, and their symbolic meanings. This can be better explored through an iconological approach, which helps to uncover the unique characteristics and deeper meanings of the decorations (Ding, 2020).Additionally, there is limited research that looks at the cultural significance of these auspicious themes (Guo, 2012).

Xu (2018) and Zeng (2014) discuss how the Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi elements are used in modern design, considering regional culture and landscape. Ding (2020) and Sun (2015) analyze the origins, historical development, and modern uses of these auspicious patterns. However, none of these studies focus

specifically on the use of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi in Lingnan Guangfu architectural decoration during Qing Dynasty.

In the researcher's opinion, studies on this particular architectural decoration are often incomplete and do not fully explore the symbolic meanings of these decorations, which have led to a lack of diversity in the use of regional visual elements in modern design. This paper aims to explore the characteristics and symbolic meanings of the auspicious themes in Lingnan Guangfu architectural decoration during Qing Dynasty, using iconological analysis. The goal is to offer insights that can inform the variety of the use of Lingnan Guangfu elements in contemporary design.

Research Methodology

Research Questions

Two questions are as follows:

What are the forms and symbols used for the expression of the auspicious themes of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi?

How is the aesthetic significance of the Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi auspicious patterns expressed in the architectural ornamentation of Guangfu during the Qing Dynasty?

Research samples

In this study, samples were selected along three dimensions. First, the geographical scope of the study was determined according to the distribution of ethnic groups. Second, buildings or parts of architectural decoration with clear records of the construction period during the Qing Dynasty were selected. Finally, buildings in the Key Protected Architectural Units in China were classified and identified according to different architectural styles, and buildings with Guangfu architectural styles were selected as research samples.



Figure 2: Sample distribution map of Guangdong Province's core area

Image Source: Self-drawn by the author

This study focuses on Qing Dynasty Guangfu Lingnan architecture in the Lingnan-Guangfu ethnic region. The centre of the Guangfu ethnic group is in the Pearl River Delta, including cities such as Guangzhou and Foshan, and is the birthplace of Guangfu culture. The western and northern parts of Guangdong Province are important sub-regions or radiation zones. The study focuses on traditional Guangfu architectural decoration from the Qing Dynasty. Due to the hybrid nature and variability of cultural sub-regions, this study selected the centre of the Guangfu ethnic group, such as cities like Guangzhou, and peripheral cities like Yunfu, as samples. See Figure 2, the orange area is the main research city, and the numbers represent the number of protected research units to ensure the typicality of the sample.

Analysis of the data

This study mainly uses iconological methods to analyse the unique regional characteristics of the Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi theme in Qing Dynasty architectural decoration in the Lingnan Guangfu area. The iconological analysis, combined with documentary examination, field study, interdisciplinary approach, and comparative analysis assist the recognition of the characteristics of the Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi auspicious themes in Qing Dynasty architectural decorations in the Lingnan Guangfu area.

Literature research method: The target literature was searched using the keywords of this study, including paper books, e-books and related dissertation literature, and these literatures were extracted as they related to this study.

Field research and interview: The fieldwork involved visiting the 21 sample sites in this study and taking photographs and videos. Interviews were conducted with researchers from the cultural centres in the areas where the sample buildings are located in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the sample buildings. Photographs and videos were used to complement the data from the iconographic analysis. The interviews were classified according to the following themes: temples and shrines, residential buildings, Gakugong academy halls, and religious temples.

Table 2 Iconology interpretation method illustrated

Iconology interpretation	Interpretation act	Interpretation Object	Interpretation Conditions	Corrective Principles
First Layer	The Analysis of Pre-Iconographic Description Form	I. The First-order or Natural Subject Description Constituted by the Artistic Motifs of Fact and Representation	Actual experience (familiarity with objects and events)	Style history (insight into styles, familiarity with the ways objects and events are expressed in different historical contexts)
Second Layer	Iconographic Analysis	II. The Constitution of Second-order or Traditional Themes, Images, Stories, and Allegories	Familiarity with Literary Resources (Familiarity with Specific Themes and Concepts)	Genre History (Insight into Styles, Familiarity with the Expression of Specific Themes and Concepts in the Representation of Objects and Events in Different Historical Contexts)
Third Layer	Iconological Interpretation	III. Inner Meaning or Event	Comprehensive Intuition	The History of General Cultural Symbols or "Symbols"
		The Value of "Symbols" 1. Artistic Value (Form, Symbolism) 2. Cultural Value (Beliefs, Language)	(Familiarity with the Essential Tendencies of the Human Mind) Based on Personal Psychological Conditions	(Insight into Styles, Familiarity with the Fundamental Tendencies of the Human Mind in Expressing Specific Themes and Concepts in Different Historical Contexts)

Iconology interpretation method: This study uses iconographic research methods to investigate the theme of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi in the traditional architectural decoration of Qing Dynasty Guangfu, in order to understand its symbolic meaning and ideological content through images. Pannowsky's three levels of iconographic research (as shown in Table 2) are used to explain the deeper content of the visual elements

contained in the theme of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi and to examine it in relation to the regional culture, folk culture and religious beliefs of Lingnan.



Figure 3: The south side of the first entry to Guangzhou's Chen's ancestral temple is decorated with a roof ridge pattern of 'achievements and wealth'

Image Source: Created by researcher, 2023

Preiconography: This stage analyzes the basic meanings of images through visual elements like lines and colors. In studying the pre-Iconography of the auspicious theme of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi attention is paid to the formal system of auspicious symbolic images and decorative artefacts. The compositional elements and carriers of the images are examined, such as the theme of Lu in the architectural decoration in Figure 3, which includes the male pheasant, peony and so on. Iconography is related to Wolfring's rules of formal analysis, and the thesis combines the two approaches. The analysis of style history needs to take into account the materials and forms of expression, such as the grey sculpture works in Figure 3, which need to be identified by the combination of modelling features, colours, and so on. At the same time, attention is paid to the influence of geographical differences on identification to avoid errors in the next stage of analysis.

Iconography: At this stage, the traditional meanings of visual images need to be discovered and interpreted, i.e. examining the particular themes represented by the pictorial images. The symbolism of the images is presented by combining regional culture, image symbols and folk beliefs. In this study, we conduct Iconography research on Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi architectural decorative motifs to explore their symbols and themes. According to Pannowsky's theory, to explore the symbols and themes, we need to use stories and fables in literary materials. In different spatial and temporal contexts, 'Fu,Lu,Shou Xi' motifs imply different meanings and are expressed in different ways in different places, but the commonalities are relatively large. In Figure 3, for example, the male pheasant symbolises fame and fortune, while the peony symbolises glory and wealth, and the combination signifies fame and fortune.

Iconology: This stage is a reading of the meaning of the work, beyond the intentional expression of the creator. The study of the Iconology of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi and the interpretation of its inner meaning is placed in the cultural context of the Qing Dynasty. In Figure 3, "Gong" and "Ming" symbolise merit, and the pheasant was chosen because of its Confucian "five virtues", which promote moral education. The architectural decorations contain metaphors of indoctrination, reflecting the function of the memorial hall and the college. The design elements change with the times, reflecting the social, political, economic and cultural philosophies. The images are elaborate, figurative, asymmetrical and colourful, reflecting the aesthetics of the Qing Dynasty. Research and interpretation of the inner meaning of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi images, digging into the aesthetic characteristics and cultural connotations, and deepening the understanding through the interpretation of the circular flow.

Through Pannowski's three-stage developmental discourse, like going through the cycle of hermeneutics, from the local to the whole, and back to the local, which renews the meaning and strengthens the understanding. This study explores the aesthetic characteristics and cultural connotations of the auspicious theme of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi from the inner depth through the circular flow of interpretation. This study explores the aesthetic characteristics and cultural connotations of the auspicious theme of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi from the inner depth through the circular flow of interpretation.

Interdisciplinary research approach: An examination of auspicious decorative motifs of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi is rather complex. Interdisciplinary research approach was employed with the purpose to integrate various factors from different disciplines such as sociology, folklore and religion, and an understanding of the interactions between those components in different disciplines. For example, in the Shou theme, the Shou Xing (The god who brings longevity to the people) and Shou Tao (A type of peach) are often used. They originate from folklore and relate to folk culture, while the crane element in Taoism often appears in the theme of Shou and relates to religious symbols. These elements are often combined to form one or more combinations of the Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi theme in architectural decorative patterns.

Findings and Discussions

In this study, the decorative elements of Qing Dynasty architectural decorations in Lingnan Guangfu are categorized based on specific parts, identifying four main areas: roof decorations, wall decorations, floor decorations, and wooden structure decorations. An analysis of these areas reveals four key characteristics: regionalization, storytelling, diversification, and a harmonious blend of function and aesthetics. The auspicious meanings are primarily conveyed through techniques such as symbolism, homophony, and narrative themes. Notably, local craftsmanship also integrates Western cultural influences, exemplified by elements like the use of colored glass and cast iron materials, as well as the incorporation of Western religious imagery such as angels, highlighting the pragmatic, open, and tolerant nature of Lingnan culture.

Localization--homophone, images and processes

Decorative elements often utilize the homophone of Chinese characters to convey auspicious meanings, blending explicit and implicit semantics which varied by their associated contexts surrounding those elements. The following explains the auspicious motifs and their symbolic meanings embedded in Lingnan Guangfu architecture.

The homophone symbolism of lychee

Lingnan Guangfu architectural decorations use a lot of local natural landscape, birds, animals and flowers as the theme, in addition to promoting ethical concepts and express. In addition to promoting ethical concepts and expressing the traditional ideas and methods of celebration and auspiciousness, more use of pineapple, lychee, banana, papaya, plantain, bamboo and other Lingnan fruit trees as the theme. Lingnan visual cultural elements in modern design, of which lychee is the most characteristic fruit in Lingnan, so it is more common in the decoration. However, many designers only focus on the visual image of lychee performance, but do not realize that lychee has a deeper symbolic meaning in the auspicious theme of architectural decoration. There is a phenomenon that Chinese characters have the same pronunciation but different meanings. The use of Chinese language harmonies can be used as an expression of some kind of auspicious symbolism, which is very common in the decoration of Lingnan buildings in the Qing Dynasty in Lingnan Guangfu. In the theme of Xi, the lychee is cherished not only for its local significance but also for its homophone sound, "laizi," which symbolizes family prosperity (Lü, 2022). Its round shape symbolizes Lu and is often associated with success in academic pursuits, making it a symbol of wealth and achievement in Guangfu culture (Liang, 2022). This shows that the use of lychee elements in Qing Dynasty architectural decorations is due to the fact that lychee are native plants, and on the other hand, their homophone and morphological characteristics give it a multi-dimensional meaning.

Plantain Symbolism

Lingnan has its own unique natural ecology, environment, conditions and other factors, which have formed various ecological attributes. The people of Guangfu use the unique animal and plant ecological elements around them as symbols of good luck. For example, the banana tree, a plant unique to Lingnan, is often used in the theme of Fu. Because the banana tree has large branches and leaves and is lush and green, it is often used in the decorations of Guangfu doors and windows to symbolize prosperity in the family. The banana tree is one of the characteristic plants of the Lingnan region and has an important place in Lingnan Guangfu culture. Therefore, the use of banana tree elements in auspicious patterns is not only a display of natural beauty, but also an acknowledgement and inheritance of the Lingnan regional culture. The use of this cultural symbol enhances the regional characteristics and cultural connotations of the pattern.

The techniques of Three Carvings and Two Sculptures

Located in southernmost mainland China, Lingnan features hilly terrain and abundant rivers, with a hot, humid climate that significantly impacts architectural design. The region's unique geography, along with cultural and climatic factors, shapes its distinctive architectural style, blending structures harmoniously with the natural environment (Lu, 2005). Lingnan architecture showcases local craftsmanship through "three carvings" (wood, stone, and brick), "two sculptures" (pottery and grey sculpture), and "colourful painting" (murals). The materials used in the stone, wood, brick and lime carvings and plasterwork of the "Three Carvings and Two Plasters" are specially treated or selected to adapt to the humid, hot and sunny climate of the Lingnan region. As shown in the picture, the architectural decorations with the theme of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi are all expressed in the plaster technique. The main raw material of plaster is lime, which is a water-absorbent material. In the Lingnan region, due to the hot, humid and rainy climate, traditional building materials need to have good moisture resistance. In addition, the color scheme of plaster usually uses bright and cheerful colors such as red, yellow and green, which look extra dazzling in the sun in the Lingnan region and add a unique artistic charm to the buildings.

Story--belief, aspiration and enlightenment

In the architectural decorative art of the Lingnan Guangfu region, story elements centered on Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi are prevalent, primarily drawn from traditional novels, operas, myths, and legends.

Moral of myth and legend

According to Huang (2012), Architectural decorations such as partitions, beams, columns, and Shiwan ceramic ridge ornaments often showcase these narrative themes. Examples include Mu Guiying Takes Command, Nezha Disturbs the Sea and Fishermen Singing in the Evening. These motifs reflect traditional feudal values like loyalty, filial piety, and justice, while also embodying aspirations for blessings, wealth, longevity, and joy. For instance, the Fishermen Singing in the Evening pattern expresses a yearning for an idyllic life, emphasizing harmony with nature, which is a key aspect of Lingnan's water town culture, where many water-related economic activities flourish.

Use of story elements in Cantonese opera

The architectural decorations of Lingnan Guangfu are rich in opera story themes, earning the reputation of "Singing Grand Opera on the Roof" (Wang, 2012). After the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty, the flourishing economy and popularity of court drama led to a vibrant development of folk drama (Ai, 2018). Cantonese opera, the dominant form in Guangdong, greatly influenced Foshan Shiwan ceramic artists, who studied its costumes, makeup, and sets to create magnificent roof ridge decorations featuring various characters. These motifs, based on Cantonese opera and historical tales like Nezha Disturbs the East Sea and Mu Guiying Takes Command, reflect Lingnan's cultural vibrancy while conveying moral lessons.

Characters such as Nezha (fearlessness and justice) and Mu Guiying (female bravery and wisdom) embody significant virtues. In an era when people could not read or write, these realistic and figurative character stories had a didactic effect on people. On the one hand, they all had a happy ending through their own hard work, which also reflected people's wishes for the auspicious meaning contained in them. The above

two stories do not seem to be directly classified under any of the four themes of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi, but like Liu Bei Crossing the River to Recruit a Wife. (Luo, 2019) This symbolizes happy marriage and Celebrating a Birthday in the Fairy Poolsignifying longevity (Ge, 2020). To the researcher, these decorations are not only visually striking but also subtly influence viewers through their symbolism.

Diversification-- inheritance, local and foreign

The introduction of cast iron and glass materials during the Qing Dynasty reflects social changes and increasing foreign trade, particularly after the Opium War of 1840. (Tang, 2005) After the Opium War, with the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing, Guangzhou, as one of the treaty ports, experienced rapid foreign trade prosperity. A large number of foreign merchants flocked to Guangzhou, bringing with them various goods and cultures, including building materials such as stained glass. These foreign merchants not only brought stained glass products, but also promoted the development of the local glass industry in Guangzhou. When the Lingnan Guangfu architecture of the Qing Dynasty used stained glass, it did not completely copy Western styles, but integrated them into the local culture.(Zeng, 2014)

Stained Glass and Western Expression

The study found similarities between the themes of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi in Lingnan Guangfu architectural decoration and the symbolic techniques used in other parts of China. For example, stone-carved bats are used to symbolize good fortune, expressing the theme of Fu. However, during the Qing Dynasty, Guangfu's inclusive and pragmatic culture infused this theme with both local and significant foreign influences, creating a unique decorative expression distinct from traditional Central Plains styles.

This is particularly evident in the choice of materials, such as the use of cast iron and glass, the most typical representative is the stained glass window, which is used as a door or window decoration. Manchurian windows have two meanings. One is a geographical meaning, referring to the Manchuria region outside the Great Wall. The other is a historical meaning, referring to the Qing Dynasty, when the Manchus ruled the Lingnan region. Manchurian windows can be said to be a form of window sash brought by the Manchus when they migrated south to Lingnan. It was a popular form of window sash in the Guangfu region during the Qing Dynasty. The decorative themes of Manchu windows are mainly flowers, birds and insects, plus geometric patterns such as ice cracks symbolizing the power of life, auspicious cloud patterns symbolizing good fortune, and the character “回” (hui) symbolizing endless life. These patterns have a distinctively Chinese character and are both beautiful and symbolic.



Figure 3: Guangzhou Yuyin Shanfang Butterfly-patterned Manchurian window

Image Source: Created by researcher, 2023

As shown in Figure 3, in the Yu Yin Shan House in Guangzhou, there is a Manchurian window with a butterfly-loving flower pattern in the Xi theme. First of all, there are nine windows in total, and the method of seeking perfection that satisfies the auspicious number is often used in auspicious themes. The number

nine represents the completeness and perfection of things. For example, there is a Chinese proverb that says "Nine times nine equals one", which means perfection. In addition, the pattern is called Die Lian Hua, which means "butterflies in love with flowers". As a symbol of happiness and love, butterflies give people encouragement, intoxication and longing, while flowers represent beauty and warmth. The nine windows, inlaid with coloured glass, create a dappled pattern of light, creating a dreamy atmosphere. This colour scheme and presentation is reminiscent of Western stained glass, blending traditional Chinese elements with Western materials and styles.

Cast iron materials in building structures

The findings of the current study also revealed that, as shown in Figure 4, in Guangfu's Qing Dynasty architectural decorations, stained glass was employed, and new building materials were also partially incorporated into the building structure. The most notable of these is cast iron, a novel material that gained popularity in Western countries during the same period as the Qing Dynasty. Cast iron was not only utilized for localized decorative effects (such as the application of cast iron components in the balustrade panels of the Chens' ancestral temple), but also served as a supporting element of the building structure, demonstrating the integration of decoration and structure. This, in turn, reflects the pragmatic attitude towards life of the people of Guangfu in Lingnan.



Figure 4: Cast-iron corridor frame, Chens' ancestral temple, Guangzhou

Image Source: Created by researcher, 2023

The Chen Ancestral Temple in Guangzhou, built in 1898, exemplifies the use of cast iron in its architectural design. The cast iron columns, influenced by contemporary Western styles, were cast in sections and feature Western-style bases and capitals bolted to the ground. These columns blend harmoniously with the overall structure and serve their architectural purpose effectively (Wang, 2015). Painted black to complement the woodcarvings, the cast iron columns reflect a balanced approach, leveraging the advantages of new materials while maintaining a reserved aesthetic. The decorative elements atop the columns mimic the

patterns and techniques of traditional wood and stone carvings, further integrating modern and traditional design elements.

Western image elements are added to the auspicious theme performance



Figure 5: Cast-iron corridor frame, Chens' ancestral temple, Guangzhou

Image Source: Created by researcher, 2023

The findings also shed light on the architectural decoration theme of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi in Lingnan Guangfu, with many symbols incorporating Western imagery. The local people mixed their interpretations of good luck with Western imagery, creating unique decorative patterns. The people of Guangfu combined auspicious elements from Western countries, as they understood them, with local Lingnan imagery in the design of architectural decorations and patterns. Common Western flowers such as roses and tulips appear in the form of exquisite carvings or paintings on architectural doors, windows, beams, columns and other parts. The addition of these elements gives Lingnan Guangfu architectural decoration a hybrid image not found elsewhere.

A notable example found from the current study was that the angel motifs at the Chen Ancestral Temple in Guangzhou, as shown in Figure 5, reflected the influence of Christianity introduced in the late 19th century (Wu, Y., 2005). Two brick carvings of angels adorn the threshold of the first east hall. One pair, positioned below a lion carving, is arranged in an "eight" shape, while another pair, below traditional Chinese theatre characters, faces away from each other but looks back.

These playful angels, characterized by their small topknots and panties, merge Western art elements with traditional Chinese aesthetics. This combination reflects the inclusiveness of Lingnan culture, as angels symbolize happiness and good luck, fitting well within the Fu theme. These images retain the characteristics of Western angels while incorporating the aesthetic elements of traditional Chinese culture. The pattern combination has a strong blend of Chinese and Western characteristics. In addition to the brick carvings, there are also wood carvings in the bracket arms, and similar images can be seen in the drum-stones of other memorial hall buildings. This universality reflects, from one perspective, people's understanding and identification with the Western culture represented by this image.



Figure 6: Brick carving of the Chens' ancestral temple in Guangzhou

Image Source: Created by researcher, 2023

In addition to the Western elements, the movements of the figures in Lingnan Guangfu decorations reflect Western cultural wishes for Fu. For example, the god of the sun, depicted with a "victory" gesture in Figure 6, embodies this unique auspicious motif. While the gesture has Western significance, the tianguan (heavenly official) represents blessings and good fortune in traditional Chinese culture. Thus, regardless of the gesture's variation, the image retains its traditional meaning of enduring blessings and is integral to the Fu theme.

Unity-- Functional, Decorative and Allegorical

The first step in creating architectural art is to analyze the building's environmental characteristics, ensuring it meets functional needs while enhancing aesthetic and landscape value. Lingnan Guangfu architectural decoration reflects the pragmatic nature of its people, uniting functionality with artistry.

For example, the gable of traditional Lingnan architecture serves multiple purposes: as a firewall to prevent the spread of flames and to provide shade, while also offering decorative beauty. The Pot Ear Gable, with its curved arc shape, effectively blocks fire, sunlight, and wind, enhancing indoor ventilation and security. Its design symbolizes prosperity, resembling the ears of an official's hat, which historically indicated success and wealth.

Research shows that many symbols within the Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi theme align with northern cultural elements but differ due to regional influences. In the Qing Dynasty, with low literacy rates, auspicious themes were expressed figuratively, often through stories and composite graphics. This interactive "indoctrination" allows viewers to engage with the architectural decoration, as seen in the larger, downward-tilted ceramic figures that enhance visibility and connection.

Despite the economic development in Lingnan, the focus on wealth in auspicious themes is subtle, with fewer representations of copper coins and Yuanbao. Instead, Fu is associated with merit and social status rather than mere wealth. The exaggerated decorative elements reflect social status and local craftsmanship, indicating that the themes of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi are often intertwined, creating a rich tapestry of meanings that embody diverse aspirations and emotional values.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the charm and cultural connotation of the theme of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi in the architectural decoration of Lingnan Guangfu in the Qing Dynasty from the perspective of Iconology. There are four main features in the expression of the theme of Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi in the Qing Dynasty architectural decoration of Lingnan Guangfu: obvious regionalisation, using Guangfu harmonic symbols and Lingnan characteristic plants and animals to express the symbols; storytelling, with the decorative themes originating from religious beliefs, folk customs, traditional novels, Cantonese opera repertoire and myths and legends; cultural expressions, incorporating western figurative elements and material technologies; and the function and cultural connotation of the decoration and auspiciousness. Diversified forms of cultural expression, incorporating western image elements and material technology; unity of decorative function and auspicious theme symbolism, both practical and symbolic. This study deepens people's understanding and awareness of the auspicious themes of Lingnan Guangfu Qing Dynasty, explores the visual elements of auspicious culture in Lingnan architectural decorations, and provides references for the expression of Lingnan Guangfu regional visual art design and architectural design in modern design.

Modern designs often incorporate Lingnan cultural symbols in architectural decorative elements. However, a lack of understanding of their traditional meanings can limit design creativity. By thoroughly exploring the auspicious Fu, Lu, Shou, Xi theme of Lingnan Guangfu Qing Dynasty architecture decorations, designers can innovate while maintaining a strong connection to the traditions and values that define the community's cultural heritage. This approach not only preserves tradition but also offers opportunities to enhance modern design in a way that reflects local pride and connects with contemporary society.

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