

The Visual Symbol System and Narrative Mechanisms of Guangfu Plaster Sculpture

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Abstract: This study focuses on the visual symbol system and narrative mechanisms of Guangfu plaster sculpture, aiming to explore its internal logic in image classification, structural organization, spatial embedding, and cultural expression. Drawing upon theories from visual semiotics and architectural iconography, the paper analyzes representative images from traditional buildings in the Guangfu region. Through typological classification, narrative structure interpretation, and spatial semantic analysis, it reveals how plaster sculpture forms a highly organized system of visual language. The findings show that the imagery is not a random decorative overlay, but a culturally encoded system that reflects social ethics, regional identity, and collective memory. The research contributes to the understanding of how traditional image systems function in spatial rituals and cultural communication, and offers a theoretical foundation for their contemporary interpretation and application.

Keywords: Guangfu Plaster Sculpture, Visual Symbols, Narrative Structure, Spatial Semantics, Regional Identity.

1. Introduction

Guangfu plaster sculpture represents a significant decorative form in traditional architecture across the Lingnan region, widely applied in ancestral halls, temples, and residential buildings. These images integrate motifs of human figures, animals, plants, objects, and characters, forming a structurally complete and symbolically rich visual system that reflects strong folkloric and regional characteristics (Liu & He, 2020; Peng, 2015)[1].

Current studies at home and abroad primarily focus on the craftsmanship, materials, and historical transmission of plaster sculpture, or interpret its imagery from the perspective of decorative aesthetics. For instance, Fu (2020) investigates its role in shaping regional identity[2], while Peng (2015) highlights its aesthetic features[3]. However, systematic research on the internal structure of its imagery, narrative patterns, and spatial nesting logic remains scarce—particularly from the theoretical perspective of “image as visual language” (Shen, 2022; Zhou & Luo, 2022)[4].

This study takes typical plaster sculptures from traditional buildings in the Guangfu region (including Guangzhou, Foshan, and Panyu) as its focus, particularly those applied to key architectural elements such as ridge beams, floral gables, and lintels. The study aims to address the following three questions:

How are the types and structural systems of visual symbols constructed?

In what ways do images express semantic meaning through narrative logic?

How are images embedded and functionally coupled with spatial and cultural systems?

Methodologically, this study adopts an integrated approach that combines image classification and visual analysis, semiotic structural deconstruction, spatial semantic analysis, and case studies. Image sources include field documentation, local chronicles, museum archives, and academic literature, with key cases such as the Chen Clan Ancestral Hall, Foshan Zumiao Temple, and Liang Garden serving as primary subjects of analysis.

In summary, Guangfu plaster sculpture not only serves as decorative embellishment but also functions as a visual language embedded within architectural and cultural systems. By analyzing its image structure and semantic construction, this paper seeks to uncover the integrated logic behind its visual and cultural functions.

2. Visual Symbol Types and Structural Logic in Guangfu Plaster Sculpture

2.1. Typological System of Visual Elements

The visual imagery in Guangfu plaster sculpture reflects a deep-rooted folk aesthetic tradition, structured around five core categories of symbolic motifs:

(1) Human Figures:

Iconic representations such as the Three Star Gods (Fu, Lu, Shou), the Eight Immortals, Zhong Kui, and Nezha serve symbolic functions related to blessings, moral instruction, and divine protection. These figures often occupy central positions within the composition, acting as focal points and symbolic anchors (Liu Shuqin, 2022)[5].

(2) Animals:

Common motifs include dragons, phoenixes, lions, qilin, and cranes, which signify auspiciousness, authority, and hierarchical power. Themes like “Two Dragons Playing with a Pearl” or “Qilin Delivering a Child” are emblematic of fortune and frequently found on ridge ornaments and gables (Zhou Bihui & Luo Xiaohong, 2022)[6].

(3) Plants:

Elements such as pine, bamboo, plum blossoms, pomegranates, peonies, and lotuses symbolize longevity, purity, prosperity, and fertility. They are often used as background components and combined with other motifs (Peng Yu, 2015)[3].

(4) Objects and Architectural Elements:

Motifs such as ruyi scepters, vases, incense burners, and antique shelves express Confucian ideals or ritual values, embodying a harmony between traditional lifestyles and architectural decoration (Liu Bing & He Yang, 2020)[1].

(5) Characters and Decorative Patterns:

Calligraphic characters like “fu” (fortune), “shou” (longevity), and “xi” (happiness), alongside decorative patterns like cloud scrolls or grass motifs, either directly convey blessings or enrich the narrative through visual layering (Xu Zhaoyang, 2020)[7].

These symbolic units function not only as standalone icons but also in syntactic visual relationships. The systematic classification of these motifs provides the structural basis for more complex visual narratives.

2.2. Motif Organization and Composition Mechanisms

Guangfu plaster sculpture demonstrates a highly stylized and formulaic approach to motif arrangement, typically structured through a “primary symbol + auxiliary element + background pattern” composite model. For instance, “Laurel Branch for Promotion” combines a laurel tree, an official on a crane, and auspicious clouds to signify upward mobility; “Eight Immortals Celebrating Longevity” aligns eight figures with props like peaches, cranes, and censers.

Three dominant compositional structures are observed:

Central Symmetry: Applied to gables and door panels, with the main motif centered and flanked symmetrically, reinforcing ritual solemnity.

Axial Expansion: Used on roof ridges to distribute elements along architectural axes, emphasizing spatial directionality.

Nested Scenes: Employing visual layering and spatial depth to form narrative vignettes or dramatic tableaux.

These composition logics enhance the complexity of visual storytelling while increasing the functionality of the sculpture in conveying cultural meanings.

2.3. Symbolic Semantics and Cultural Encoding

The imagery of Guangfu plaster sculpture is not merely decorative—it embodies an encoded cultural system shaped by long-term social consensus. Each symbolic category carries stable semantic connotations grounded in regional cultural cognition.

Examples include:

Zhong Kui represents exorcism and is typically placed above ancestral hall entrances.

Peonies and Ruyi Scepters form the motif “prosperity and fulfillment,” expressing aspirations for wealth and well-being.

Qilin with Children underscores reproductive values and fertility ethics.

Loyal Subjects and Filial Children promote Confucian virtues and didactic themes.

These symbols draw from local ethics and social values, enabling plaster sculpture to serve as a legible and enduring visual language. Through continuous reproduction and social recognition, Guangfu plaster imagery evolves into a culturally resonant semantic network—a system that can be not only viewed, but also “read” and understood..

3. Narrative Modes and Structural Logic in Plaster Imagery

Guangfu plaster sculpture constitutes a highly organized visual system in which motifs are not randomly arranged on architectural surfaces but are deliberately composed to convey narrative intent. Through directional layout, scene construction, and symbolic sequencing, a unique visual storytelling framework emerges—one that integrates visual,

spatial, and semantic dimensions.

3.1. Typologies of Narrative Structures

Based on extensive case analysis, the narrative modes of Guangfu plaster imagery can be classified into three major structural types:

Horizontal Narrative Composition: Commonly found in horizontally extended architectural components such as gables and roof ridges, this mode employs linear unfolding to express sequence and interaction. Representative subjects include “The Eight Immortals Celebrate Longevity,” “Hundred Sons,” and “Ten Beauties.” These grand scenes are populated by numerous figures, with the visual flow advancing from one end to the other, suggesting temporal progression and narrative development (Peng Yu, 2015)[3].

Vertical Nested Composition: Typically used in vertical structures such as door frames or screen walls, these compositions place the main image centrally or lower in the frame, with symbolic elements layered upward. For instance, in “Carp Leaping over the Dragon Gate,” the carp occupies the base, while clouds and dragons are layered above to symbolize upward social mobility and transformation (Fu Rong, 2020)[2].

Centralized Composition: This format centers on a primary symbolic motif, such as the Three Star Gods (Fu, Lu, Shou) or Qilin Delivering a Child, around which supporting elements are arranged concentrically. This type is often deployed in key spatial locations to signify ritual centrality and visual authority (Liu Shuqin, 2022)[5].

3.2. Plot Construction and Visual Logic

Narrative in plaster imagery is not merely a function of subject matter but also reflects implicit visual logic and symbolic sequencing, demonstrated in the following ways:

Hierarchical Character Arrangement: In multi-figure scenes, central or elevated placement is reserved for the protagonist, while supporting characters are positioned around them symmetrically or subordinately. For example, in “Nezha Conquers the Dragon King,” Nezha occupies the central visual space, flanked by the Dragon King and background waves, forming a dramatic and oppositional visual structure.

Symbolic Progression: Meaning is developed through the accumulation of symbolic objects. In “Laurel Branch for Advancement,” for example, the motif evolves from tree (laurel) to person (official) to animal (crane), guiding the viewer upward in understanding the aspiration toward advancement.

Spatial Pathway Alignment: The layout of motifs often corresponds to the spatial path of the viewer. Along the roof ridge, for instance, images are arranged from center to periphery in alignment with ceremonial procession routes, reinforcing the narrative through experiential engagement.

3.3. Cultural Functions of Narrative Forms

The narrative framework of Guangfu plaster imagery serves not only aesthetic purposes but also significant cultural roles within the socio-ritual context of southern China:

Didactic Function: Motifs such as loyal ministers, filial sons, or virtuous women convey Confucian moral values and reinforce the hierarchical order within clan spaces (Liu Bing & He Yang, 2020)[5].

Expression of Folk Aspirations: Themes such as abundance, promotion, and harmony reflect everyday desires and enhance the emotional resonance of domestic and ritual spaces (Shen

Li, 2022)[4].

Symbolic Assertion of Power: Centralized placement of motifs such as dragons, phoenixes, or the Three Star Gods reinforces the authority and prestige of the building and its patrons (Zhou Bihui & Luo Xiaohong, 2022)[6].

These narrative structures establish a coherent semantic system in which imagery becomes not only decorative but also communicative—capable of constructing and sustaining a collective cultural consciousness and spatial order.

4. Functional Embedding of Symbols and Narratives in Architectural Space

The visual symbol system of Guangfu plaster sculpture not only constructs aesthetic structures through image formation but also achieves cultural expression through precise spatial placement and component coordination. Within architectural space, these images are never arbitrarily applied; rather, they follow spatial rituals, functional zoning, and viewing paths. This triadic embedding of “image–component–semantic” logic endows the system with a communicative depth beyond surface-level decoration.

4.1. Correspondence between Architectural Components and Image Placement

In traditional Guangfu architecture, plaster decorations are spatially differentiated according to function. Each structural component assumes distinct visual and symbolic responsibilities, including:

Main Hall Roof Ridge and Gables: As the central visual and symbolic locus of ancestral architecture, these areas typically feature motifs such as Fu Lu Shou (Fortune, Prosperity, Longevity), Qilin Delivering a Child, and Laurel Branch for Advancement, thereby reinforcing hierarchy, family honor, and Confucian values (Peng Yu, 2015)[3].

Doorways and Screen Walls: As transitional and welcoming spatial nodes, these structures frequently display narrative motifs such as the Eight Immortals, Carp Leaping over the Dragon Gate, and the Hundred Sons. These dynamic compositions cultivate ceremonial ambience and serve as visual transitions (Zhang Lu, 2023)[8].

Side Corridors and Auxiliary Spaces: These locations host motifs like Pine and Crane for Longevity, Phoenix Couple, and Five Sons Achieving Success, expressing everyday aspirations and easing the transition from sacred to secular space. This spatial semiotics establishes a Cultural Logic of Center–Periphery Structuring (Fu Rong, 2020)[2].

Such functional and symbolic matching between component type and image subject reveals a systematic configuration governed by the coupling of “position–function–semantic logic.”

4.2. Spatial Pathways and Visual Reading Mechanisms

Guangfu architecture is organized along a ceremonial path composed of “looking up–entering–passing through.” Plaster imagery is aligned accordingly to guide visual reception:

Upward Viewing (Roof Ridge and Gables): Dominant motifs are placed at height to create a sense of reverence and focus.

Entrance (Doorways and Gates): Highly narrative scenes are used to capture attention and foreshadow the building’s function.

Passing Through (Courtyards and Side Walkways): Sequential or lyrical imagery maintains spatial continuity and emotional resonance.

This alignment between image layout and viewer movement fosters a process of “viewing–interpreting–identifying,” turning architectural circulation into a visual-cultural narrative (Liu Bing & He Yang, 2020)[1].

4.3. Semantic Nesting of Image Functions and Spatial Roles

The embedding of plaster imagery into space is not only structural but also symbolic, reflected in three levels of semantic nesting:

Functional Embedding: Imagery corresponds to the intended use of the space—main halls convey order and hierarchy, doorways emphasize welcome, and side rooms express domestic aspirations.

Narrative Embedding: The spatial layout supports a narrative arc akin to theatrical structure, with phases of initiation, development, transition, and climax.

Symbolic Embedding: Abstract cultural concepts such as lineage authority, moral values, and auspicious desires are rendered into visual motifs and spatially encoded to ensure effective communication.

This multidimensional nesting mechanism enables plaster imagery to function not merely as ornamentation, but as a structural and semantic component of the building. It helps construct an integrated visual system rooted in spatial logic and cultural meaning.

5. Multilayered Cultural Semantics Embodied in Guangfu Plaster Imagery

Guangfu plaster sculpture imagery is not merely decorative but functions as a “visual semantic system” deeply embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of Lingnan society. Through symbolic motifs, structural combinations, and spatial distribution, these images perform multiple roles—ranging from ethical instruction and social order representation to the construction of regional cultural identity. In essence, this visual system operates as a culturally encoded language.

5.1. Ritual Norms and Ethical Instruction

Guangfu plaster sculpture frequently features visual representations of Confucian moral values such as loyalty, filial piety, chastity, and righteousness. These motifs—depicting loyal officials, filial sons, virtuous women, and benevolent sages—serve as vivid translations of Confucian principles. They are often found in ancestral halls and temples, which function as spaces of social authority and ceremonial ritual (Liu Bing & He Yang, 2020)[1].

Examples include: “Filial Piety Moves Heaven” or “King Wen Seeks a Worthy Man”, typically placed in the central section of main halls to emphasize the ancestral value of “loyalty and filial piety as family virtues.”

Combinations of “Ren Yi Li Zhi Xin” (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith) with character illustrations visually reinforce ethical hierarchies and ritual propriety (Xu Chaoyang, 2020)[7].

Such a system of ethical visibility transforms architectural space into a site for moral education and identity formation, constituting a visual mechanism for cultural norm transmission in traditional society.

5.2. Regional Cultural Identity and Symbolic Recognition

Beyond abstract ethical values, Guangfu plaster imagery also visually constructs regional identity. Local elements such as kapok, longan, and lychee flowers, Cantonese opera characters (e.g., The Legend of the White Snake, Lu Wenlong with Two Spears), and folk deities (e.g., Mazu, Guanyin of the South Sea) all carry explicit regional markers, giving the visual system a distinctly “Guangfu” identity (Shen Li, 2022)[4].

Through repeated visual presentation, these motifs cultivate a collective “regional visual memory,” making architectural decoration a tangible medium for expressing local cultural identity. Particularly in private spaces such as residences and clan halls, this symbolic mechanism reinforces communal belonging and lineage cohesion.

5.3. Visual Translation of Everyday Aspirations

Themes such as “many children bring blessings,” “five fortunes arrive,” and “ascending step by step” reflect the visual translation of folk aspirations for marriage, fertility, social advancement, and wealth. These motifs do not originate from canonical texts but from long-term community experience and vernacular narratives (Zhou Bihui & Luo Xiaohong, 2022)[6].

They are typically expressed through symbolic associations: pomegranates symbolize fertility, carp signify abundance, and ladders imply promotion. This translation between “imagery narrative” and “lived experience” gives the plaster system strong emotional resonance and supports its longevity and continued transmission.

5.4. Mechanism of Shared Visual Cultural Memory

The high repetition and formal stability of Guangfu plaster motifs—such as Fu Lu Shou, Pine and Crane for Longevity, and the Hundred Sons—have established a regionally shared visual memory. These motifs are consistently recognized across Guangzhou, Foshan, Zhongshan, and Shunde, forming a widely accepted “visual dictionary of cultural imagery” (Peng Yu, 2015)[3].

This collective visual memory, reinforced by symbolic repetition, enhances the recognizability and cultural resonance of the imagery. As such, Guangfu plaster imagery continues to influence fields such as cultural creativity and visual communication, demonstrating its latent potential for contemporary reinterpretation and transmedial dissemination.

6. Conclusion

This study focuses on the image system of Guangfu plaster sculpture, applying analytical methods from art history, vernacular iconography, and spatial culture studies to conduct a systematic exploration across four dimensions: symbolic structure, narrative patterns, spatial embedding, and cultural semantics. Through the classification of typical visual elements, structural composition, and cultural functions, the following conclusions are drawn:

(1) Guangfu plaster sculpture forms a structured visual symbol system

Rather than a random assemblage, the visual elements of Guangfu plaster sculpture constitute a systematic symbolic language composed of figures, animals, plants, objects, and

calligraphic motifs. These components are clearly categorized, follow regular patterns of combination, and convey coherent symbolic meanings, collectively establishing a codified visual system.

(2) Narrative styles reflect diverse visual logics and cultural functions

By employing three main compositional types—horizontal unfolding, vertical nesting, and central focus—the imagery transitions from visual guidance to narrative expression. These visual structures demonstrate a strong spatial awareness and cultural expressiveness, reinforcing the interaction between image content and the viewer's spatial experience.

(3) Symbolic content is embedded within architectural space through functional coupling

Guangfu plaster motifs are strategically arranged according to architectural functions, constructing a coupling mechanism between structural components, imagery, and cultural semantics. This spatial-semantic layout serves not only an aesthetic purpose but also facilitates the site-specific transmission of visual culture.

(4) The imagery system conveys multiple layers of cultural semantics

Beyond decoration, Guangfu plaster imagery embodies Confucian ethics, regional identity, folk aspirations, and collective memory. Its visual symbols—repetitive and stylistically consistent—form a shared cultural memory mechanism, making it a vital medium for the visualization of traditional Lingnan culture.

In conclusion, this study positions Guangfu plaster sculpture as a highly coded folk visual system that transcends its decorative function. As an integral part of Lingnan architectural aesthetics, it operates as a network of visualized cultural symbols. Through its motif composition, narrative forms, and spatial semantics, it conveys traditional values, social identity, and cultural emotion. The findings of this study aim to provide foundational references for future research in heritage image revitalization, visual culture analysis, and transmedia communication.

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