

Understanding the Meixi Stone Paifang as a Catalyst of Urban Identity and Cultural Heritage Symbolism through the Interpretation of the Iconographic Semiotics Method

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Abstract

Under the dual influences of globalisation and modernisation, the symbolic significance of traditional heritage sites, exemplified by the Meixi Stone Paifang in Guangdong Province, is increasingly complex. This research explores the role of the Paifang as a catalyst of urban identity and cultural heritage symbolism through an iconographic semiotics approach, integrating the Conceptual Reference Model developed by the International Committee for Documentation of Cultural Heritage (CIDOC CRM) and Panofsky's iconography framework. Employing document analysis, field observation, and iconographic interpretation, this research decodes the architectural and symbolic features of the Meixi Stone Paifang. The findings reveal the layered significance of the Paifang as a historical monument and a living cultural asset that embodies Confucian virtues, familial honour, and community values. This research presents a structured model for interpreting architectural symbolism at heritage sites, offering insights into cultural heritage preservation and sustainable urban design.

Keywords: Meixi Stone Paifang; cultural heritage; urban identity; iconographic semiotics; symbolism

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Introduction

In the contemporary context of globalisation and rapid urbanisation, the preservation and interpretation of cultural heritage have become increasingly complex. Accelerated urban development has gradually obscured the symbolic prominence of traditional heritage markers, challenging their role as integral elements of urban identity and collective memory. As cultural artefacts, architectural symbols play a significant role in constructing urban identity and reinforcing community values. Yet the nuanced meanings embedded within these symbols are often overlooked (Caneva et al., 2020), creating a potential disconnect with their cultural context. The idea of a 'sense of place' has become a critical link between heritage conservation and urban development, guaranteeing that cultural heritage remains a basis for community identity and value continuity (Ettehad et al., 2014; Poplatek, 2017; Huang & Ann Achin, 2023). Discussions increasingly emphasise the importance of cultural heritage as a distinctive component of urban identity. According to Khalaf (2021), the continuity and symbolic authority of heritage markers are often understated in academic and practical frameworks, which restricts the effective role of these symbols in the urban milieu. Cultural heritage is a form of symbolic capital that is unique to each city and strengthens residents' sense of belonging, contributing to tourism and economic vitality (Guttormsen & Fageraas, 2011). In

rapidly developing urban areas, these representative assets attract new visitors while strengthening the city's special identity through its historical and cultural legacy. If cultural heritage is used as a main resource in the formation of urban identity, cities have to address the double task of preserving historical authenticity and adapting to the needs of the present. In this dynamic context, cultural heritage is an important aspect of urban identity, and the importance of 'place' in maintaining cultural continuity and collective memory is highlighted.

Iconography is a methodological tool for interpreting the historical development and cultural symbolism of buildings through the analysis of visual materials (such as photographs or architectural drawings). Yet scholars have pointed out how iconographic methods accurately illuminate important symbols in architecture, but they have limited capacity to decode complicated settings of history and disparate symbolic layers. The limited dataset sizes, insufficient cross-cultural applicability, and inadequate spatiotemporal analysis of architectural heritage studies are constraints (Caneva et al., 2020; Milani & Fraternali, 2020; Abdullah & Abdillah, 2021; Chandran & Chon, 2022; Dugnoille, 2023).

The Meixi Stone Paifang is a structure with rich cultural and symbolic meaning, and this research focuses on it as a case study to explore its role in the formation of contemporary urban identity in Guangdong Province through an iconographic semiotic approach. Mayer and Pawlik (2023) suggest that memory infrastructures are essential to the reconstitution of collective identity, especially in China, where historical, political, and social elements overlap to produce a complex tension between cultural preservation, economic development, authenticity, and modernisation. Since 1949, however, this dynamic tension has been pronounced, surpassing any previous period when traditional symbols and values had often been neglected or suppressed, as in the Cultural Revolution. In the framework of Confucian values, cultural heritage has been revived since the 1990s with the rise of nationalism and patriotism (Mayer & Pawlik, 2023). Although there is growing interest in architectural features such as Paifang, which are often considered 'minor' structures, they have not been given due recognition in China's historical heritage, nor has their symbolic value been fully incorporated into urban planning. Jacobs (2016) points out that the cultural value of a city is not only in its material features but also in its emotional connections and the feeling of belonging held by city residents. According to Astakhova (2020), the complexity of traditional symbols and changing public perceptions create difficulties in heritage preservation and inheritance because heritage is lost in this process as modernist design trends do not consider the cultural meaning of historical heritage.

In exploring the Meixi Stone Paifang, three key concepts underpin the analytical approach of this study. Iconographic Semiotics refers to a theoretical and methodological approach integrating iconography with semiotic analysis to decode layered symbolic meanings embedded in architectural elements (Panofsky, 2018; Caneva et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Urban Identity encompasses collective memory and a sense of belonging, shaped by unique cultural, symbolic, and historical characteristics of a city (Ettehad et al., 2014; Guttormsen & Fageraas, 2011). Lastly, Cultural Heritage Symbolism involves the communication and preservation of traditions, values, and historical continuity within communities through heritage architecture (Astakhova, 2020; Huang & Ann Achin, 2023) in figure 1.

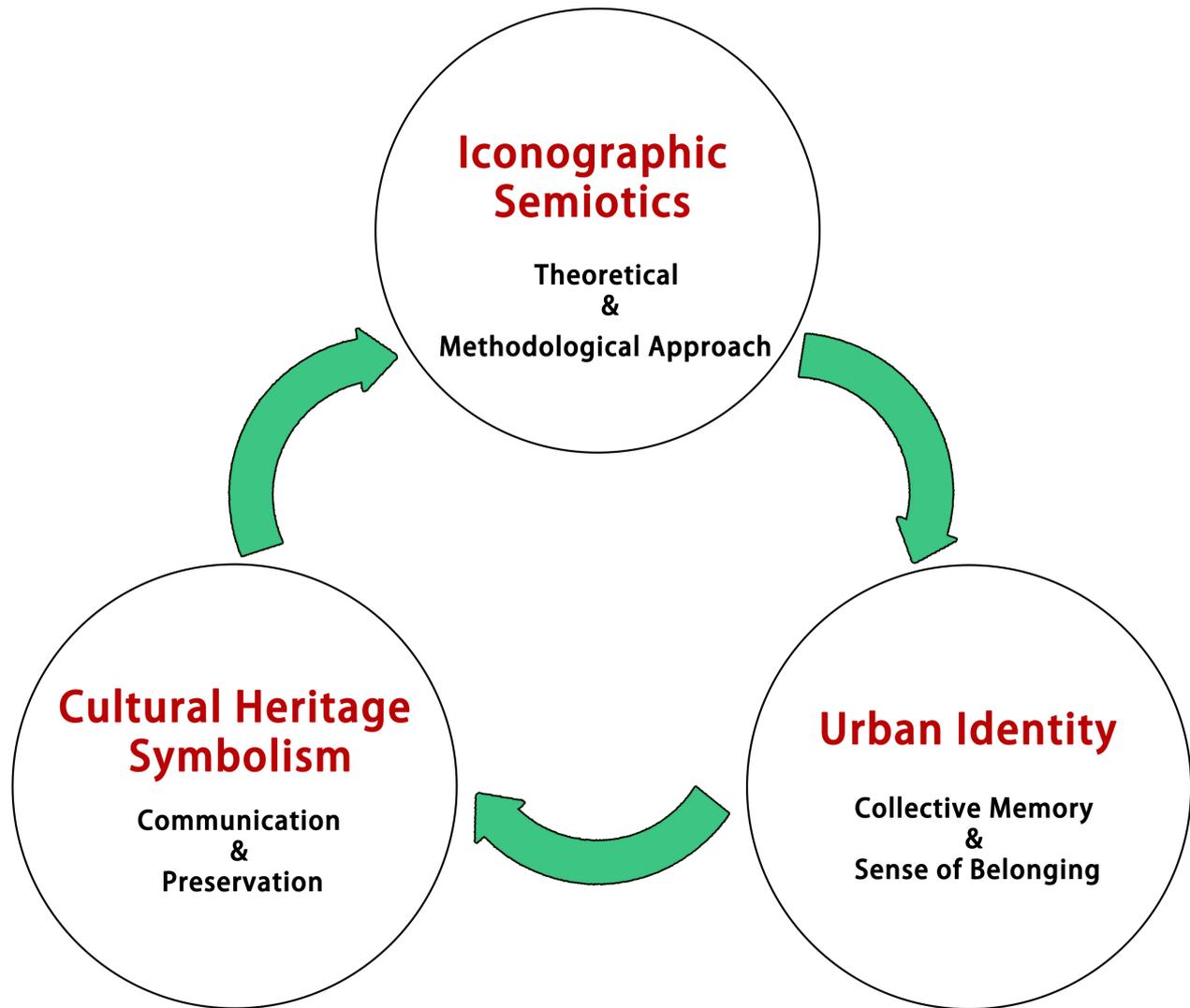


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Key Terms.

Aim and Objectives

The gaps in the application of iconographic methods to architectural heritage are addressed in this research, including the limitations in interpreting complex historical contexts and symbolic layers that arise from constraints such as dataset availability, cross-cultural applicability, and spatiotemporal analysis. The research seeks to use semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic methods within a semiotic framework to address these challenges and develop a flexible reference model that enables a comprehensive and nuanced interpretation of cultural symbolism in heritage structures, thereby increasing the academic and practical value of heritage transmission.

In this context, the research explores the symbolic and aesthetic contributions of the Meixi Stone Paifang, as well as its interpretation and contemporary applications. The research explores the architectural details and symbolic meanings of the Paifang through a semantic analysis of its iconography in order to understand how its overall structure and design elements can inform contemporary Paifang construction. Through an iconographic semiotics approach, the research uncovers

the multilayered symbolism of the Meixi Stone Paifang as a unique cultural landmark in the urban landscape and its contribution to urban identity and cultural heritage presentation.

Overall, this research focuses on two primary objectives. The first is to develop a structured reference model for interpreting the cultural and symbolic meanings embedded in the Meixi Stone Paifang by examining its multilayer spatial structure, intricate architectural details, and design elements, which reflect underlying virtues and beliefs. The second objective is to analyse the moral symbolism—rooted in Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist traditions—and the symmetrical aesthetics conveyed through carved inscriptions and decorative patterns in historical Paifang (Tang & Chen, 2014; Wang, 2004).

Method

Three primary research methods—document analysis, field observation, and iconographic analysis—are used in this research to support the core aim of developing an analytical model for the Meixi Stone Paifang. These methodologies offer an organised way to study the Paifang's architectural and symbolic meaning and to reach a profound cultural interpretation.

Document Analysis

According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is useful for providing rich data and increasing research credibility. Document analysis was used in this research to develop a comprehensive understanding of the historical and cultural importance of the Meixi Stone Paifang. Books and literature databases such as the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), historical paintings, and the Guangzhou local gazetteer were selected as sources for their relevance and depth in covering regional heritage. These resources provide crucial details about the cultural, stylistic, and historical facets of Guangzhou's Paifang, as well as the unique qualities and background of the Meixi Stone Paifang.

The document analysis was organised into three critical areas. First, the origins, construction periods, and social implications of the Meixi Stone Paifang were first traced in a historical context. The Meixi Stone Paifang is located at the former site of Chen Fang Garden in the Meixi Community, Qianshan Subdistrict, Xiangzhou District, Zhuhai City, Guangdong Province. It originally consisted of four Paifang (archways), three of which still exist. Constructed in the twelfth (1886) and seventeenth (1891) years of the Guangxu period, these structures were built under an imperial decree by Emperor Guangxu to honour the philanthropic contributions of the Chen family. Historically, the Paifang are ranked as national cultural heritage sites, and they are evidence of the social influence of the Chen family.

Second, the stylistic patterns and symbolic motifs of the Meixi Stone Paifang were analysed to identify the architectural characteristics and visual elements that define the Meixi Stone Paifang. Archival sources and historical paintings provide visual evidence supporting the identification of decorative elements and motifs commonly used in Qing Dynasty Paifang, as well as the identification of inscriptions. However, this analysis shows the more subtle patterns and symbolic details that communicate the Chen family's values and social standing, and it demonstrates the artistic and cultural forces of the day.

Third, the Meixi Stone Paifang is situated in the context of its cultural importance in local society. By examining records from local gazetteers, the research explores the impact of Paifang on community identity and social memory in Guangdong. However, as enduring elements of the collective national cultural heritage, these structures also come to represent the pride and moral values of the community, which are based on the Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist traditions.

Field Observation

Konior and Pokojnska (2020) noted that the observation method is unique in revealing the spatial characteristics of architectural heritage and its relationship with the community. Systematic field observation of the architectural features of the Meixi Stone Paifang was conducted, including its spatial orientation, structural layout, and relationship with the surrounding environment. On-site photography, measurements, and detailed drawings were used to record the structure and aesthetic characteristics of the Paifang. A DJI Mini 3 Pro drone was used for obtaining aerial views; an Apple iPhone 14 for high-resolution images; an Apple iPad Air for drawing support; AutoCAD software for precise architectural and spatial layout drawings; and Adobe Photoshop and Procreate software for the drawing, post-processing, and enhancement of visual materials.

A comprehensive dataset of the physical dimensions, decorative details, and spatial arrangement of the Paifang structures was obtained through the field observation method. The systematic approach through which the Meixi Stone Paifang's architectural features, as well as its place within the surrounding context, could be precisely and richly documented provided the basis for a nuanced knowledge of its symbolic and cultural meaning. These methods provide data that could become the basis for further analysis, guaranteeing the reliability and correctness of interpretations in any related research.

Iconography Analysis

In this research, the CIDOC Conceptual Reference Model (CIDOC CRM) (CIDOC CRM Special Interest Group, 2023), and Erwin Panofsky's iconographic framework (Panofsky, 2018), were used to develop a model for interpreting the cultural symbolism and architectural features of the Meixi Stone Paifang. This dual framework provides an organised, multilayered perspective on the Paifang's social, cultural, and historical relevance, as well as its symbolic systems

CIDOC Conceptual Reference Model (CIDOC CRM)

The International Committee for Documentation (CIDOC), a specialised committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), works to develop documentation standards and practices for cultural heritage institutions. One of its cornerstone initiatives is the CIDOC Conceptual Reference Model (CRM), which is a framework for exchanging and harmonising cultural heritage information. The CIDOC CRM defines a semantic network for the organisation and interpretation of complex cultural data by defining structured classes (E) and properties (P).

The CIDOC CRM (version 7.2.4) is a semantic model consisting of 99 classes and 199 properties that systematically represent aspects of cultural artefacts such as the Person (E21), Period (E4), Place (E53), Event (E5), and Dimension (E54). Object attributes and relationships are defined by properties (P) and can be systematically interpreted through semantic connections. For example, the model defines properties such as having dimension (P43) for attributes like height and width, having a specific purpose (P20), showing visual items (P65), and foresees use of (P68) to link heritage items to historical events and time points, thereby constructing a structured spatiotemporal context. Its cornerstone initiative, the CIDOC Conceptual Reference Model (CRM), integrates and standardises cultural heritage information into a coherent semantic framework.

Expanding on its semantic framework, the CIDOC CRM (version 7.2.4) facilitates the integration and analysis of cultural artefacts by linking their diverse attributes through a cohesive network of classes and properties. This model enables a deeper understanding of complex cultural data by connecting dimensions such as physical measurements (P43), purposes (P20), visual representations (P65),

and historical associations (P68). These connections support the creation of a structured spatiotemporal context, allowing for the systematic exploration of cultural heritage artefacts and their broader significance. The layered attribute design of the model turns it into a dynamic semantic network, which allows P to analyse Paifang's information in multidimensional ways. The CIDOC CRM connects information across categories to provide a powerful cultural and historical analysis tool. Encoding essential information about each Paifang offers a basis for further iconographic analysis.

This research uses nine core CIDOC CRM E and P properties, expanded as needed to capture the architectural details and cultural symbolism of the Meixi Stone Paifang.

Panofsky's Iconographic Framework

Panofsky's iconographic framework provides a structured approach to interpreting imagery on three levels: pre-iconographical description, iconographical analysis, and intrinsic meaning (Panofsky, 2018). This approach underlines how cultural heritage is a visual object and a channel through which ideas, traditions, and social values are communicated.

According to Panofsky (2018) iconographic framework, the first level is pre-iconographical description, based on the identification and surface characterisation of the visual components within the framework. The study is centred on the basic architectural forms, structural features, and decorative details of the Paifang: its type, form, style, scale, plan, colour, and decoration. This level provides a basic understanding of the concept of description and observation through the observation and description of the physical appearance and main components of Paifang, which is the basis for the second level of the symbolic meaning of Paifang.

The second level is an iconographic analysis (Panofsky, 2018), which is grounded on the descriptive approach to explaining the cultural and social significance of the Paifang symbols and images. At this level, the architecture is deciphered through its symbolic language of sculptures, designs, symbols, and writings, which explain how it reflects the history and culture of the society. This analysis highlights the values, beliefs, and moral principles of society as reflected in the architectural elements. For example, on the Meixi Stone Paifang, the decorative patterns of the Qing Dynasty contain the moral concepts of righteousness. Therefore, the Meixi Stone Paifang is an example of the social function and cultural connotations of this type of structure.

The third level, intrinsic meaning, as defined by Panofsky (2018) refers to the underlying cultural and historical significance of imagery. Building on this framework, the Paifang can be interpreted as a tool for creating and preserving collective memory, while also serving as a bearer of philosophical and social values. At this level, this investigation examines how the Paifang's physical characteristics go beyond the built environment and instead act as an imperial endorsement and an embodiment of moral values, thus underlining its cultural role during the Qing Dynasty. However, its visual and symbolic elements link its connections at this stage with their historical context, to the extent that this emphasises how the Paifang is a cultural heritage symbol at this level.

The Meixi Stone Paifang is explained through Panofsky's three levels of reading, which move from the physical to the metaphysical. This study analyzes its historical and cultural context to highlight its role within Qing Dynasty heritage.

Research Conceptual Guidance Model Framework

Since there is currently no specialised database for Paifang structures in China, this work seeks to establish a reference model that is based on iconographic semiotics to support the interpretation of cultural heritage. The model is intended to help researchers to systematically and easily analyse the historical background and cultural meaning of Paifang. Thus, the CIDOC CRM's semantic encoding is combined with Panofsky's multilevel analysis of the Paifang, providing a detailed framework for the description of the object's architectural and cultural meaning. In addition, the model enables both the integration and close analysis of Paifang data, providing a more complex understanding of how these structures reflect the moral values of the Qing Dynasty, contribute to the formation of collective memory, and influence the identity of modern cities. As a reference tool for practitioners in the field of heritage conservation, the model also indicates possible uses in other fields of cultural preservation and design, thus affirming the Meixi Stone Paifang as a historical monument and a living cultural icon in the context of the dynamic cityscape.

On this basis, the systematic approach of CIDOC CRM's formalised encoding and Panofsky's layered analysis framework enables the construction of a detailed model of the Meixi Stone Paifang. Using data derived from prior field observations, the semiotic interpretation is organised into a 17-code multi-tier system divided into two primary categories: Object Information Encoding and Architectural Structure Encoding.

The Object Information Encoding (Part 1) category uses the CIDOC CRM to systematically describe the essential aspects of the Meixi Stone Paifang. This encoding segment incorporates seven core CIDOC CRM codes: E22, E73, E21, E4, E53, E5, and E54.

To address both the overall and component-level features of the Paifang, the Architectural Structure Encoding (Part 2) category is further subdivided into "Comprehensive Interpretation" and "Details Interpretation". The interpretation of the Paifang is comprehensive, focusing on its overall style, type, and spatial organisation (SC1 types, SC2 forms, SC3 styles, SC4 scale, SC5 plan, SC6 colours, SC7 decoration), as well as its visual impact and cultural symbolism. On the other hand, Details Interpretation focuses on particular architectural elements, namely the eave section (SD1), stand pillar section (SD2), and substrate section (SD3), using a more detailed analysis. This category encompasses 10 custom semiotic codes: SC1, SC2, SC3, SC4, SC5, SC6, SC7, SD1, SD2, and SD3 (SC1 corresponds to CIDOC CRM code E55). The layered structure of this article enables an exploration of how architectural components communicated moral values and social norms in the context of Qing society.

This research incorporates image analysis and processing techniques to standardise encoding and ensure data consistency to ensure the accuracy and applicability of the model. In addition, it stresses the importance of semiotically deconstructing architectural structures, particularly with regard to Chinese architectural terminology and structural frameworks. This deconstruction offers a more nuanced view of architectural details, enabling a rigorous analysis of the cultural and historical values contained in these Paifang structures (Table 1).

Table 1. Hierarchical coding was performed using the semantic description of the CIDOC CRM model (version 7.2.4) (CIDOC, 2023)

Object (Paifang)	Classification	Observation Category	Code	Observation Focus
Human-Made Object (E22)	Part 1: Information object (E73)	Person	E21	Historical and contextual attributes
		Period	E4	
		Place	E53	
		Event	E5	
		Dimension	E54	
	Part 2: Symbolism Framework for Syntactic Analysis (SC/SD codes)	Types	SC1	General architectural and symbolic features
		Forms	SC2	
		Styles	SC3	
		Scale	SC4	
		Plan (Spatial Layout)	SC5	
		Colours	SC6	
		Decoration	SC7	
		Eave Section	SD1	
	Stand Pillar Section	SD2	Detailed structural sections	
Substrate Section		SD3		
Observation Method	Iconographic Interpretation	—	E36	Photographic documentation, survey, and drawing

Note. The SC/SD Codes are Author-Defined Extensions Developed to Complement the CIDOC CRM Framework.

Results

Document Analysis Findings

The Meixi Stone Paifang complex is a Jing Biao (commemorative) Paifang and of the 'righteousness' type, which commemorates virtues like loyalty, filial piety, chastity, and righteousness (Yan, 2013). In the Ming and Qing dynasties, Paifang, in this category, were constructed to commemorate individuals who contributed notably to society through public service and philanthropy. These structures required imperial approval, with a hierarchical system reserving this honour for individuals who had made significant social contributions, symbolising elevated social status and recognition. During the Qing dynasty, these Paifang were divided into four ranks: Yu Zhi Paifang, funded by the imperial treasury; En Rong Paifang, funded by local government; Sheng Zhi Paifang, funded by the honouree or their family; and Chi Jian Paifang, which were also privately funded (Ren & Chen, 2019). According to Qing statutes, individuals donating over 1,000 taels of silver for disaster relief were eligible for a Paifang inscribed "Le Shan Hao Shi" as a testament to their contributions (Liu & Xu, 2007).

In the Meixi Stone Paifang complex, the three remaining Paifang are designated "Imperial Decree Paifang", symbolising the esteemed status of the Chen family and the royal favour bestowed upon them. Each Paifang is made of granite and constructed using traditional mortise-and-tenon joints. The architectural features include a Wudian-style roof in Ming-Jian (the highest form of Chinese architectural roofing), supported by stone Dougong structures. The stone square beams rest on Fei Zhao (architraves), which transfer the structural load to the stone columns, ultimately directing the force down to the substrate section. The eave section is adorned with symbolic elements such as the Ridge Finial, Gongfu, Chaofeng, Chiwei, and an imperial edict board (Table 3). The stand pillar and

substrate sections feature stone carvings of floral patterns, auspicious animals, and images of the An Ba Bao (Figures 9-11). This blend of Chinese and Western artistic styles highlights the advanced craftsmanship of Qing dynasty stone carving (Lu, 2015). The complex was designated as a cultural heritage protection site by Zhuhai City in 1987, upgraded to a provincial heritage protection site in 1989, and listed as a National Key Cultural Relics Protection Unit by the State Council in 2006 (Guangdong Provincial Cultural Relics Bureau 2013, p. 200). Overall, these Paifang showcase the precision and material selection of Qing dynasty architecture, reflecting the Chen family's sense of honour and social responsibility.

Chen Fang, known as the first Chinese millionaire expatriate, was a notable historical figure who served as a legislator in Hawaii and was appointed as China's first consul to Hawaii by Emperor Guangxu in 1881. Upon his return, he engaged extensively in philanthropy (Liu & Xu, 2007). In 1886, following a major flood in Zhuhai, he donated 3,000 taels of silver for disaster relief, earning the "Ji Gong Hao Yi" Paifang from Emperor Guangxu and a second-grade official insignia as a mark of imperial gratitude. In 1891, Chen's grandson, Chen Yong'an, successfully petitioned for a second Paifang, the "Le Shan Hao Shi" Paifang (East), in honour of his parents, both of whom were conferred titles by the imperial court. Another Paifang, also named "Le Shan Hao Shi" and located beside the "Ji Gong Hao Yi" Paifang, was reportedly funded by Chen Fang's father in recognition of his ongoing local welfare contributions. Although one structure from 1878 was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, the remaining Paifang were preserved through community efforts.

The western "Le Shan Hao Shi" Paifang, also constructed in 1891, was granted by Emperor Guangxu in honour of Chen Fang's parents and their charitable contributions. Chen's father, Chen Renchang, was awarded the title "Rong Lu Da Fu", and the title "Yi Pin Gao Ming" was conferred upon his mother, Madam Zeng (Pang, 2024; Ma, 2013).

Field Observation Findings

The Meixi Stone Paifang complex consists of four distinct Paifang structures: the eastern Le Shan Hao Shi Paifang, the central Ji Gong Hao Yi Paifang, the western Le Shan Hao Shi Paifang, and an unnamed Paifang. Each structure exhibits a unique architectural and symbolic layout that reflects the Chen family's dedication to community values and social honour.

The eastern Le Shan Hao Shi Paifang, standing at 10.1 metres in height, 9.4 metres in width, and 4.6 metres in depth, features a single-wing layout with a three-bay, four-pillar structure. Inscriptions such as "Hui Ze" and "Ren Jie" on stone plaques commemorate its dedication by Chen Fang's grandson, Chen Lebin, on June 20, 1891, honouring his parents and symbolising the family's values of filial piety and charity (Figures 2, 3, and 4, Marked Position ①).

The central Ji Gong Hao Yi Paifang, similar in structure to the western Paifang, stands 12 metres high, 12.2 metres wide, and 4.6 metres deep, featuring a double-wing layout with a three-bay, eight-pillar, single-depth structure. Inscriptions reading "Zhong Cheng" (Loyalty) and "Li Ji" (Beneficence) highlight Chen Fang's humanitarian contributions as China's consul in Hawaii and his disaster relief efforts in Zhuhai in 1886, for which he was honoured by Emperor Guangxu (Figures 2, 3, and 4, Marked Position ②).

An unnamed Paifang, partially destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and now reduced to its foundations, is located to the left of the Ji Gong Hao Yi Paifang. Due to its damaged state, specific details regarding its dedication are unknown (Figures 2, 3, and 4, Marked Position ③).

The western Le Shan Hao Shi Paifang has dimensions similar to the central Paifang, standing at 12 metres in height, 12.2 metres in width, and 4.6 metres in depth, and it also follows a double-wing layout supported by eight pillars. Plaques bearing the inscriptions “Cheng En” (Gratitude) and “Shou Zhi” (Blessing) reflect the Chen family’s commitment to their community. This structure, commemorating Chen Fang’s parents, received imperial recognition on June 20, 1891 (Figures 2 and 5, Marked Position ④).

In terms of spatial layout, the three main Paifang structures are aligned in a linear formation, following the standard building-style Pailou format. The unnamed Paifang is positioned slightly to the west in an elevated location. Each Paifang adopts unique floor plans: the eastern Le Shan Hao Shi Paifang utilises a traditional linear layout “—” common in Chinese Paifang structures, while both the western Le Shan Hao Shi and central Ji Gong Hao Yi Paifang feature rectangular enclosed layouts “”, conveying a sense of gravity and solemnity.

Constructed from locally sourced stone, the Meixi Stone Paifang complex has endured long-term exposure to natural elements, leading to some weathering and fading of the carvings. However, the primary motifs remain intact, showcasing the refined stone-carving techniques characteristic of the Qing dynasty. This craftsmanship reflects Guangdong’s unique approach to material selection and dedication to artistic detail, emphasising both cultural and historical significance.

Field observations indicate that the Meixi Stone Paifang complex embodies significant cultural and urban values, commemorating notable figures and ideals through distinct dimensions and symbolic elements. The earliest Paifang, now destroyed, was built in 1878 to promote community welfare. The Ji Gong Hao Yi Paifang, constructed in 1886, honours Chen Fang’s humanitarian acts, symbolising loyalty and benevolence. The Le Shan Hao Shi (East) and (West) Paifang, erected in 1891, represent values of filial piety, charity, family honour, and respect, underscoring the role of architectural heritage in preserving social virtues and cultural identity (Table 2).

Table 2. Cultural Symbolism and Urban Identity of Meixi Stone Paifang.

Paifang Name	Date/Period	Historical Figures	Dimensions	Plan	Urban identity	Cultural heritage symbolism
Unnamed (Destroyed)	1878(Late Qing)	Unknown	9 × 4.6 × 10.1 m		Benefits the community	Promotes local welfare
Ji Gong Hao Yi	1886 (Late Qing)	Chen Fang	12.2 × 4.6 × 12 m		Recognized by the Qing Emperor for humanitarian acts	Highlights loyalty and benevolence
Le Shan Hao Shi (East)	1891 (Late Qing)	Chen Fang's son and daughter-in-law	9 × 4.6 × 10.1 m		Represents community values and promotes charity	Symbolizes filial piety and charity
Le Shan Hao Shi (West)	1891 (Late Qing)	Chen Fang's parents	12.2 × 4.6 × 12 m		Serves as a family honour and community landmark	Emphasizes respect and familial honor

Iconographic Analysis Model Framework Findings

Model Framework for Encoding Findings



Figure 2: The Locations of the Meixi Stone Paifang Complex ①- ④.

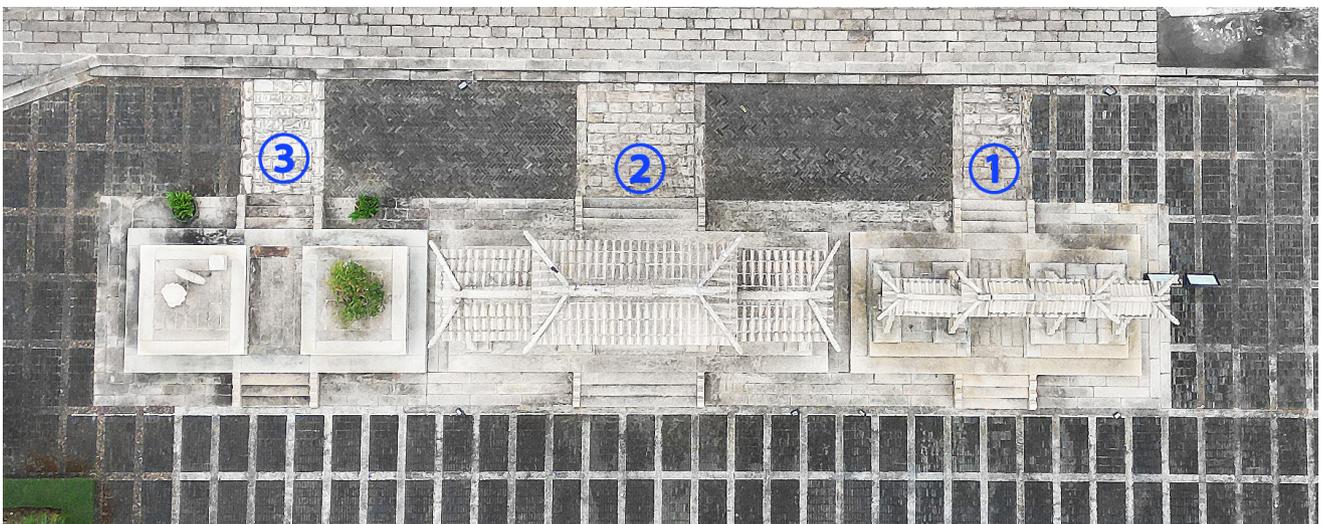


Figure 3: Plan View of ①-③.



Figure 4: View towards ①-③.



Figure 5: View towards ④.

The findings from the encoding model framework provide a systematic approach to documenting the structural and symbolic attributes of the Meixi Stone Paifang. The architectural features and symbolic meanings of the Paifang are understood through a layered framework. As a specific example, selecting the “Le Shan Hao Shi” Paifang as the primary research case shows that the framework can capture representative architectural and symbolic elements. As a foundational basis for detailed analysis and Interpretation, its four-pillars, three bays, and three-lou structure contrasts with more complex structures in the architectural complex (Figures 6 and 7).

The framework categorises the Paifang as an artefact (E22) and captures its attributes through two primary dimensions: informational and symbolic. The former consists of the most important metadata of the Paifang, such as the name, historical period, location, and physical dimensions. The observational data derived from photographs, survey drawings, and spatial measurements are systematically documented, following the CIDOC structured approach to iconographic interpretation. In addition to providing a reliable basis for architectural analysis of the Paifang, this dimension guarantees the consistency and depth of the documentation.

Furthermore, the symbolic dimension organises symbolic attributes through a syntactic analysis framework, capturing characteristics such as type, form, style, scale, plan, colour, and decoration. The encoding process results in a finer classification of the structural elements and symbolic features of the Paifang, which in turn permits a more subtle interpretation of its cultural and social functions. The systematic organisation of this architecture highlights the symbolic layers of the architecture, enabling further semiotic analysis. The findings show that symbolic encoding within this framework reveals more cultural significance than the Paifang’s architectural structure.

Additionally, the hierarchical coding approach within the framework enhances observational accuracy by systematically documenting specific architectural sections such as the eave, stand pillar, and substrate sections. Therefore, this detailed classification grasps stylistic nuances, as well as the decorative and spatial characteristics of the Meixi Stone Paifang. The framework integrates different types of observational data, including photographs and syntactic analysis, into the framework to provide a comprehensive analysis of each architectural component, yielding a holistic understanding of the symbolic and structural dimensions of the “Le Shan Hao Shi” Paifang.

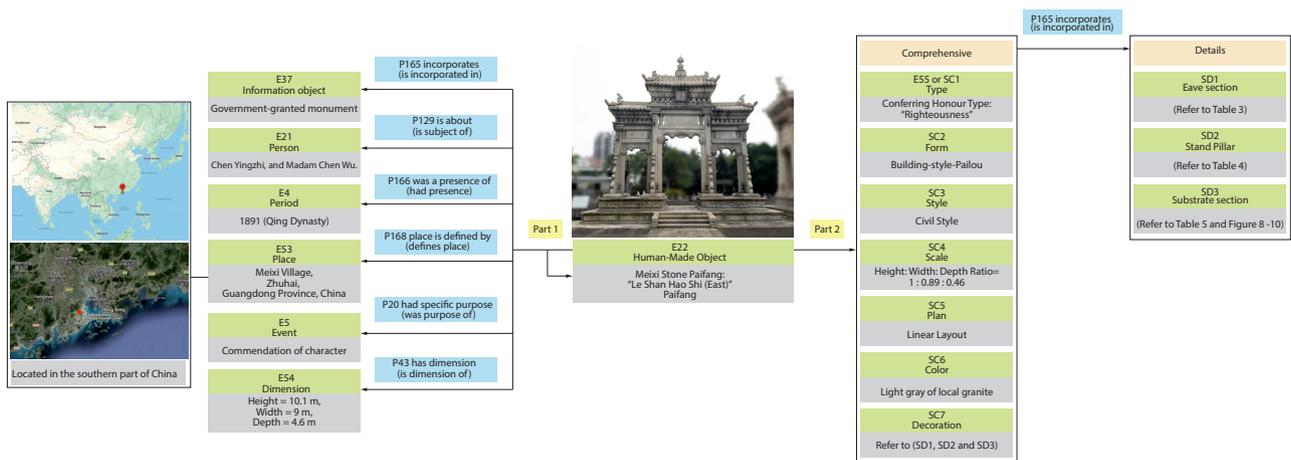


Figure 6: The Layered Encoding Model of the Iconography of the “Le Shan Hao Shi” Paifang.

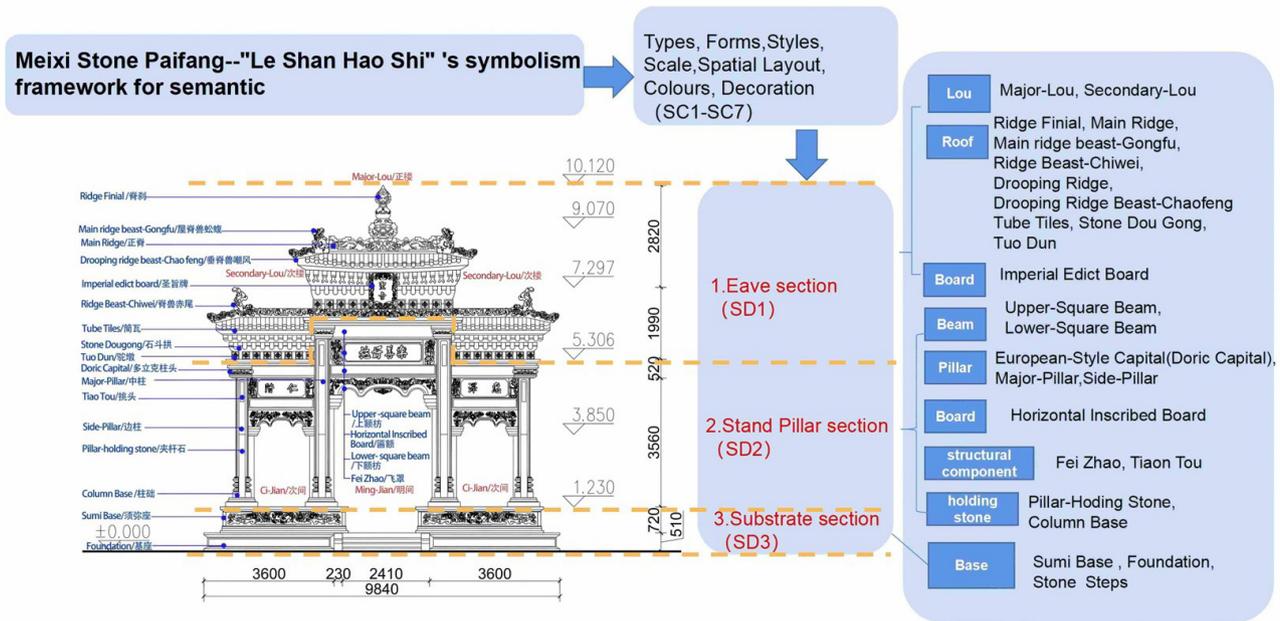


Figure 7: Framework Model of the “Le Shan Hao Shi” Paifang Based on Part 2 Symbolism Framework for Syntactic Analysis.

Architectural Symbolism and Iconography of the Meixi Stone Paifang Findings

In order to understand the Meixi Stone Paifang as a cultural and moral symbol, it is necessary to understand its architectural symbolism and iconography. Nevertheless, little research has been done on the structured semantic layers that are embedded in such heritage structures. The Meixi Stone Paifang is decoded in this research by means of a framework model to unveil its symbolic and architectural layers and its cultural and moral meanings in different dimensions. The findings show that the symbolic elements of the Meixi Stone Paifang’s characters are arranged in three main layers, which together form the Paifang’s function as a representation of community values and social ideals. More specifically, the first layer of text stands for the emperor’s honour, or moral validation and social status, which plays a part in publicly vindicating commendable virtues through the Paifang. The second layer of text further explains individual virtues and the historical timing of these honours. It also places the Paifang in a historical context, highlighting its commemorative value. The third layer of the text provides an account of the honouree’s charitable acts or his contribution to the community while associating individual virtues with communal ones, thus linking the Paifang with the wider cultural values of the community (Figure 8).

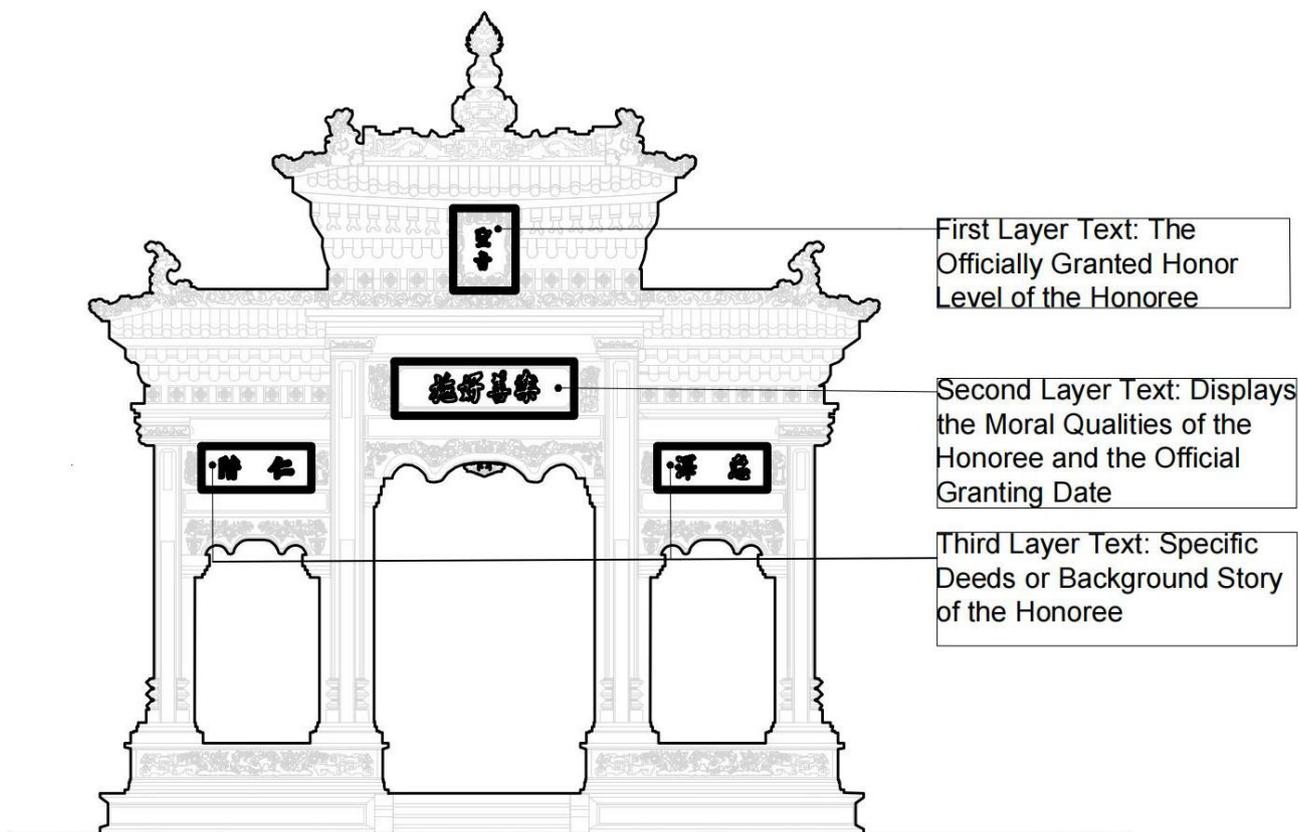


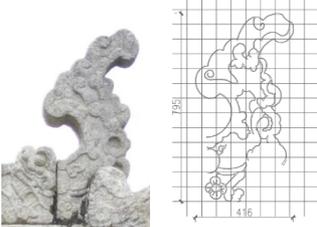
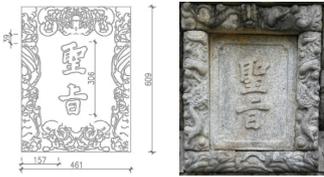
Figure 8: The Three-Tier Text Layout of the "Le Shan Hao Shi" Paifang.

Furthermore, the Meixi Stone Paifang offers a multifaceted symbolic architectural interpretation of its cultural significance. This research develops a model that categorises the Paifang's physical and symbolic characteristics, thereby improving our understanding of its cultural impact. Motifs such as Daoist deities, loyalty, wisdom, or benevolence are not only decorative but also visual representations of Daoist moral ideals. Floral motifs such as peony and lotus symbolise prosperity, purity, and longevity, which synchronises with architectural elements, creating harmony between notions and human life. Complexity is added to the symbolic language by way of animal motifs, such as the Qilin, the Kui dragon, and the bat. The dragon here is strength and resilience, and the phoenix is nobility or rebirth. Together, these motifs can help create a balanced expression of power and refinement, and they are consistent with the symbolic meanings and aesthetic feelings of traditional Chinese culture.

Moreover, the eave section (SD1) incorporates symbolic imagery to indicate themes of protection, prosperity, and authority, which link the visual coherence between the primary and secondary roof structures. At the top, the flame pearl finial indicates prosperity and auspiciousness by affirming the Paifang's theme of success and wealth. The scroll grass and Kui dragons (collectively called "Gongfu") with intricate patterns symbolise peace and stability; traditional ridge beasts like Chiwei can drive off fire and disaster, magnifying the protective meaning of the eaves. On the roof tiles of the Paifang, there are additional floral motifs, including gardenia and Ruyi, which layer purity, transcendence, and authority, leading to additional value in the spiritual and hierarchical senses (Table 3).

In the stand pillar section (SD2), inscriptions on the board and carvings on the horizontal show virtues such as generosity and integrity, which are characteristic of the Qing dynasty’s moral guidance and the fostering of social harmony. Images of bats, coins, and local flora adorn this section, which offers wishes of prosperity, wealth, and harmonious relations. It serves structural and foundational symbolic functions but combines artistic craftsmanship with ethical principles. Among those motifs, which include the Kui dragon and inverted Ao fish on the main pillars, authority and protection are represented, while the acanthus leaves on the pillar bases are a blend of East and West, symbolising growth, prosperity, and unity (Table 4).

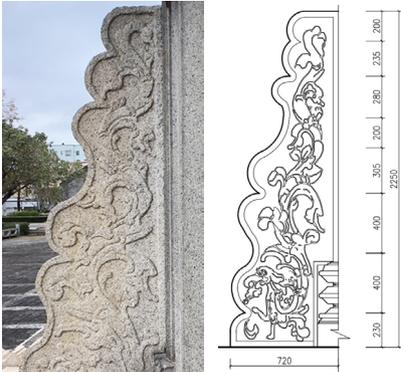
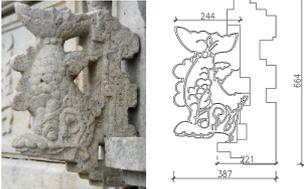
Table 3. Eave Section (SD1)

Name	Iconography/ Symbolism /Pattern	Name	Iconography/ Symbolism /Pattern
Ridge Finial	Flame Pearl/ propitious 	Drooping Ridge, Drooping Ridge Beast- Chaofeng	Beast- Chaofeng / Home safety and peace 
Main Ridge, Main ridge beast-Gongfu	Middle: scroll grass + Kui Dragon, Ends: Beast-Gongfu / Peace in all directions 	Tuo Dun	Gardenia / Purity and transcendence 
Ridge Beast-Chiwei	Ridge Beast-Chiwei/ Quell fires and avoid disasters 	Imperial edict board	Character, Sitting Dragon, Auspicious Cloud / The rank is third class, which Signifies royal endorsement and authority. 

Additionally, the substrate section (SD3), comprising the Sumi Base, foundation, and stone steps, introduces a complex symbolic dimension to the Paifang (Figures 9–11). Inspired by Buddhist architectural styles, the Sumi Base refers to sanctity and elevation, and it incorporates the element of the Sumi Base, indicating that elevating Sumi and Yue is compatible with Western cultures (Yang, 1993; Mo, 1999). This section presents eight symbolic patterns of prosperity, harmony, longevity, wisdom, and protection, constructed with relief techniques to create a layered narrative. These elements are provided with the opportunity to sequentially focus viewers to a final left and then central point, creating a dynamic visual flow. For example, the book scroll and passionflower motifs represent wisdom and long life. The An Ba Bao reinforces values of peace, prosperity, and protection, closely playing with Daoist philosophical and moral traditions (Zhu & Wang, 2007; Hu, 2021) (Table 5).

Finally, the foundation and stone steps provide essential structural support, elevating the Sumi Base platform and thus enhancing its prominence. Though functionally usable, this elevation is symbolic in outlining the Paifang as a narrative that draws attention to the cultural importance of the Sumi Base. With their combinations, these elements constitute an architectural monument that is not only imperishable but also one of connection between the material and spiritual. It serves as a channel conveying cultural and philosophical delights.

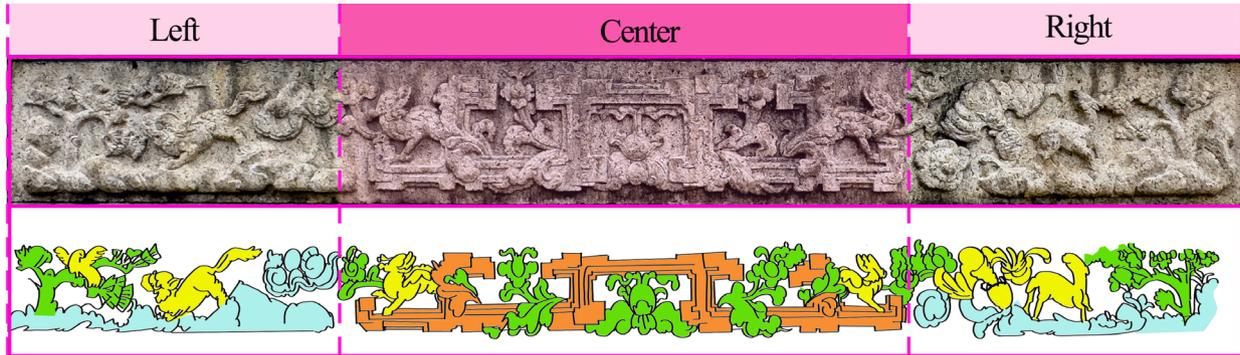
Table 4. Stand Pillar Section (SD2)

Name	Iconography/ Symbolism /Pattern	Name	Iconography/ Symbolism /Pattern
Main-Horizontal inscription board+ round sculpture of persons	Character Pattern, Person pattern/ Comments dedication and altruism, serving as a moral guide to inspire others to perform good deeds. 	Fei Zhao	Bat + coin + flowers + local fruits + Passiflora caerulea (European style) / blessings of prosperity, wealth, beauty, abundance, and harmonious relationships. 
Tiao Tou (Side-Pillar)	Upside-down Ao fish/ protection and authority. 	Pillar-Holding Stone	Acanthus Leaves(European style) + Acanthus Leaves scroll grass pattern +Grass dragon/ Merges East and West influences, symbolizing prosperity, growth, and harmony. The grass dragon further symbolizes longevity and strength. 
Tiao Tou (Major-Pillar)	Kui dragon pattern + upside-down Ao fish/ protection and authority. 		
Side-horizontal inscription board, Round sculpture of persons	Character Pattern, Person pattern/ Good moral qualities 	Column Base	Building structure /Stability and foundation 

To further illustrate the spatial structure and comprehensive architectural layout of the Meixi Stone Paifang complex, three-view orthographic projections have been prepared (Figure 12). These projections clearly demonstrate the dimensions, spatial relationships, and symmetry of the Paifang structures, visually complementing the earlier detailed descriptions. Compared to previous studies that mainly focused on general symbolic identification or isolated iconographic interpretations (Caneva et al., 2020; Astakhova, 2020; Dugnoille, 2023; Milani & Fraternali, 2020), the systematic integration of CIDOC CRM with Panofsky’s three-level iconographic analysis presented here provides a more structured and replicable approach, significantly enhancing the interpretation of complex heritage symbols.

Table 5: Sumi Base in the Substrate section (SD3)

Patterns of expression	Iconography	Location of Sumi Base (Plan)	Symbolism
combination	Scenes of Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter + Animals		Prosperity, harmony, good fortune, and longevity
combination	Book Scroll + Passionflower Pattern + Curled Grass Dragon Pattern		Wisdom, longevity, prosperity, and good fortune
combination	Gourd + Fan + Jade board + Flute+ Lotus+ Percussion instrument+ Fower basket+ Sword (An Ba Bao)		Prosperity, longevity, peace, wisdom, good fortune, and protection against evil



From Left to Right:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Animal Pattern:
Eagle, Qilin, Kui dragon, Kui dragon,
Bat, Turtle, and Deer ■ Background pattern:
Mountain and Cloud | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Floral Pattern:
Pine tree, Passion flower, Chinese parasol tree ■ Geometric Pattern :
Hooked pattern |
|---|--|

Figure 9: Patterns 1–4 on the Sumi Base.



Figure 10: Patterns 5–6 on the Sumi Base.

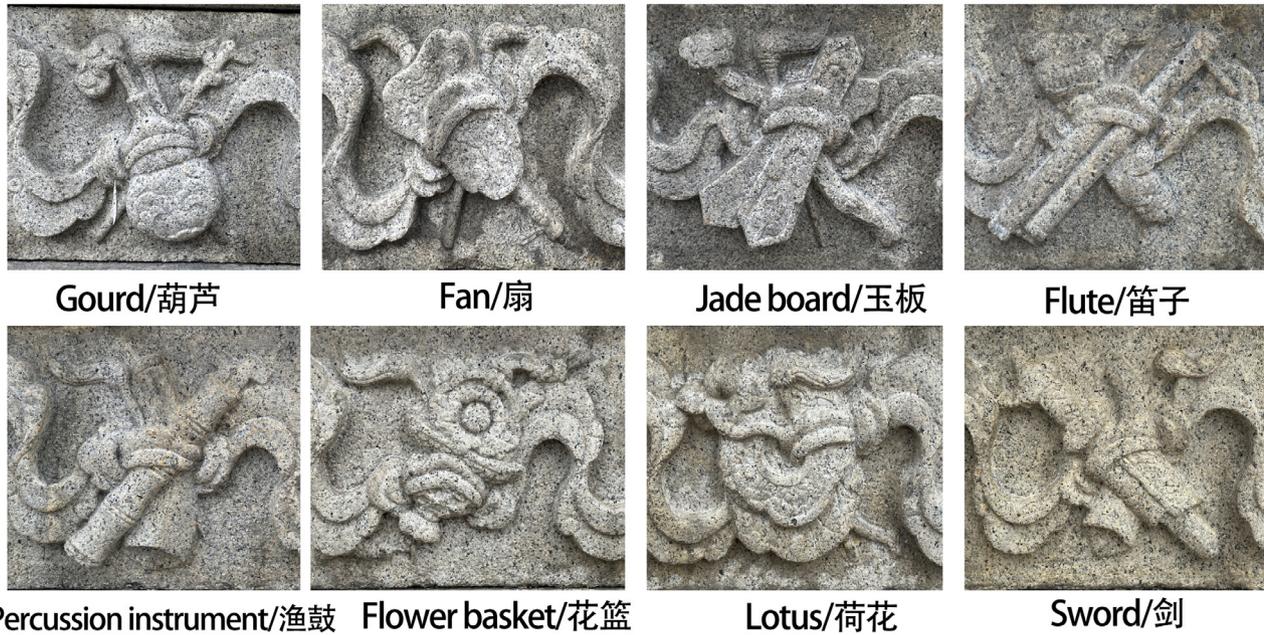


Figure 11: Patterns 7–8 on the Sumi Base.

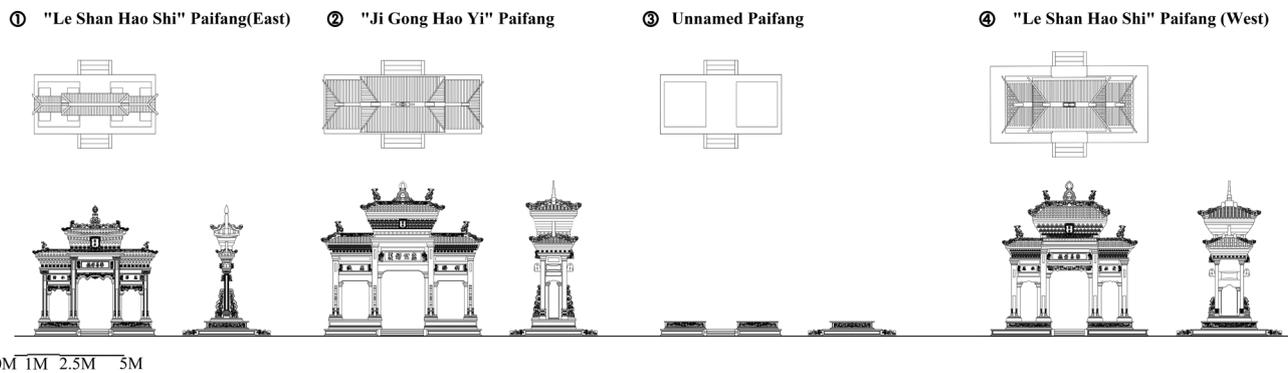


Figure 12: Three-View Orthographic Projections of the Meixi Stone Paifang (①-④).

Conclusion

In this research, the Meixi Stone Paifang is set up as a deep symbol of the interweaving of historical and contemporary cultural identity across urban landscapes. Central to the development of the new method is the contribution of this study to a systematic approach to Paifang iconographic semiotics via structured analysis of architectural and symbolic elements. This work presents the Paifang as a comprehensive tool to decode its layered iconography and as a standardised methodology to understand its cultural and historical significance.

Based on this framework, we demonstrate that Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist virtues are reflected in the Meixi Stone Paifang’s architectural design and symbolic attributes, aligning it with the ideals of loyalty, wisdom, and benevolence. Guangdong’s adaptive cultural landscape is further evident in the integration of traditional and foreign motifs in the Paifang. Additionally, the iconographic semiotics approach nuances the moral and cultural functions of the Paifang, framing it as both a historical landmark and a bridge to continuity in urban development.

The results of this research indicate that traditional Paifang can still maintain their resilience as symbols of urban identity within the modern urbanisation process and contribute to creating a sense of place and communal memory. Nevertheless, the spatial focus on Guangdong Province limits the study, and it is proposed that future studies utilise this systematic method to examine this type of structure in other areas. Such extensions might further expand the range of insights into how Paifang symbolism contributes to urban identity creation in various cultural and urban contexts.

Overall, this research contributes to the existing literature by offering a more rigorous and systematic semiotic approach as compared to the previous iconographic studies that tended to restrict their focus to symbolic identification or superficial interpretations (Astakhova, 2020; Caneva et al., 2020). The combination of CIDOC CRM and Panofsky's iconographic framework enhances theoretical knowledge of heritage symbolism and provides a replicable analytical model applicable to wider cross-cultural heritage research.

Ethics Approval

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Universiti Putra Malaysia Ethics Committee. JKEUPM Ref No: JKEUPM-2024-281.

Data Availability Statement

All relevant data supporting the findings of this research are included within the manuscript and its supplementary materials. Additional data, if required, can be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this manuscript.

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