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Research on the Decorative Bogu Woodcarving of the Eight-Sided Hall in Huangshan

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ABSTRACT
Bogu woodcarving refers to woodcarved decorations themed around "bogu"(博古)—the depiction of ancient bronzes, curios, and antique treasures. Its artistic origin can be traced back to ancient bogu paintings, which portrayed ritual objects, antiquities, and collectibles. In the Eight-Sided Hall of Huangshan, bogu woodcarving is mainly applied to architectural components such as ceilings, niutui (brackets), and quetì (supporting brackets). The motifs commonly feature vases as the central element, complemented by flowers, scholarly objects, and ornaments, forming decorative patterns rich in auspicious symbolism that convey wishes for blessings and good fortune. As a form of decoration that integrates epigraphic knowledge with auspicious meanings, bogu woodcarving not only reflects the ingenuity of ancient craftsmen but also embodies the owner's refined taste and admiration for antiquity.

KEYWORDS
Eight-sided hall in huangshan; Bogu woodcarving; Decorative art

1 Introduction

Traditional Chinese woodcarving is an important part of the cultural system of ancient architecture. Among these, bogu woodcarving, centered on the theme of "bogu" (博 古), combines the cultural heritage of epigraphy and antiquarianism with folk auspicious symbolism, and carries traditional aesthetics and spiritual connotations. As a representative example of ancient architecture in the Jiangnan region, the Eight-Sided Hall in Huangshan features exquisite craftsmanship and diverse themes in its bogu woodcarvings. These carvings not only demonstrate the high level of skill possessed by regional artisans but also reflect the cultural aesthetics of a specific historical period. Focusing on the bogu woodcarvings found on components such as niutui and quetì within the Eight-Sided Hall, this paper aims to analyze their artistic characteristics and cultural value, providing a reference for further research on bogu woodcarving.

2 The History and Flourishing of Bogu Woodcarving

The direct origin of bogu woodcarving can be traced back to the rise of epigraphy (jinshixue) during the Northern Song Dynasty. The term "bogu" comes from the Xuanhe Bogu Tu, a catalog compiled during the Northern Song that systematically recorded and classified ancient bronzes. This work established the methodology and aesthetic paradigm of bogu connoisseurship and provided substantial visual references for later artistic creation [1]. At the time, bogu motifs were mainly objects of appreciation for scholars and literati, appearing primarily in paintings. During the Qing Dynasty, epigraphy, antiquarian studies, and evidential scholarship flourished, further stimulating the widespread creation of bogu paintings [2]. Literati and officials were particularly enthusiastic about collecting ancient artifacts, conducting textual research, and engaging in antiquarian reproduction. Amid this environment, the bogu theme gradually expanded from two-dimensional images to three-dimensional decoration, moving from the scholar's study into folk architecture, eventually becoming one of the mainstream themes in woodcarving art. The prosperity of the commercial economy during the Ming and Qing dynasties gave rise to a wealthy merchant class capable of building luxurious residences. The Eight-Sided Hall of Huangshan, built by the local wealthy merchant Chen Zichen, serves as a typical example. Bogu woodcarving—carrying both refined cultural symbolism and auspicious meaning—fulfilled these merchants' pursuit of material elegance while also meeting their cultural and spiritual aspirations. Hence, it gained extensive popularity in the market. Bogu motifs are not only reflections of literati taste but also embody rich auspicious meanings through homophonic metaphors and symbolic imagery. For example, the vase (ping) is associated with "peace" (ping'an) through homophony, merging the literati's "elegance" with the folk belief in "auspiciousness." For merchants, bogu woodcarving demonstrated a family tradition of valuing culture and education, expressed hopes for the prosperity of future generations, and conveyed wishes for family peace and flourishing. In this way, it harmonized Confucian commercial ethics with popular aspirations. From a craft perspective, bogu woodcarving aligns well with traditional carving styles found in Zhejiang's ancient residential architecture, while its compositions are relatively straightforward, making it a common theme for artisans to undertake [2].

Driven by multiple factors—including culture, economy, and craftsmanship—bogu woodcarving experienced rapid development during the Ming and Qing dynasties, ultimately forming a unique artistic style appreciated by both the refined and the common, rich in symbolism and cultural meaning. As an outstanding representative of Dongyang woodcarving, the architectural decoration system of the Eight-Sided Hall in Huangshan preserves a large number of bogu

woodcarving examples, providing important physical materials and research samples for exploring the aesthetic tastes and sociocultural context of central Zhejiang during the Ming and Qing periods.

3 Themes and Symbolism of Bogu Woodcarving in the Eight-Sided Hall of Huangshan

Among the surviving bogu woodcarvings in the Eight-Sided Hall of Huangshan, their thematic categories are centered on auspicious bogu motifs. From the perspective of specific visual composition, this type of auspicious bogu imagery commonly features the "vase" as the core visual element—a design choice based on the homophonic association between the Chinese characters "ping" (vase, 瓶) and "ping" (peace, 平), thereby endowing the carving with the fundamental meaning of "peace and safety." Around the vase, various auspicious flowers and scholarly objects are arranged: the floral motifs often include lotus, peony, and magnolia, which symbolically represent purity, prosperity, and good fortune in traditional folk culture; the scholarly objects encompass ruyi scepters, scrolls, bronze mirrors, brush pots, and other items that possess both practical functions and cultural symbolism. Through the coordinated combination of these elements, the carvings construct harmonious and meaningful auspicious compositions with layered connotations.

At the same time, another distinctive thematic category can be found in the bogu woodcarvings of the Eight-Sided Hall—those that convey auspicious meanings through the combination of mythological figures and scholarly objects. In such compositions, the cultural symbolism of mythological figures is integrated with the representative meanings of the bogu items. Figures such as Tieguai Li, Zhong Kui, Liu Hai, and the Tiger-Taming Arhat, who traditionally embody the powers of blessing, warding off evil, or attracting wealth, are juxtaposed with bogu shelves, vases, scrolls, and similar objects. This thematic approach reflects the Qing-dynasty aesthetic tendency of merging folk beliefs with the scholarly elegance admired by literati. Through the fusion of mythological symbolism and the emblematic meanings of bogu objects, these carvings realize both apotropaic and decorative functions, becoming works that resonate with both refined and popular tastes. To present the surviving bogu woodcarvings in the Eight-Sided Hall more clearly, the distribution of the carvings, their core decorative elements, symbolic meanings, and sources of imagery are summarized in the following table:

	Figures	Location and Name of the Woodcarving	Core Decorative Elements	Symbolic Interpretation
1		Hall Building Ceiling Bogu Woodcarving	Vase with lotus flowers, ruyi, scrolls, bronze mirror, and bat	"Lotus (lián)" symbolizes "integrity (lián)"; the bronze mirror implies "self-reflection and calmness"; the inverted bat symbolizes "good fortune arriving"; the vase ("ping") implies "peace (ping)". Together they express wishes for peace, integrity, calmness, and incoming blessings.
2		Hall Building Ceiling Bogu Woodcarving	A vase holding flowers and scrolls, pennywort, and a basket of peonies	The vase symbolizes peace; the scrolls express reverence for learning and elegance; pennywort symbolizes abundant wealth; peonies carry the meaning of great prosperity and honor, together forming a multi-layered auspicious system.
3		Hall Building Ceiling Bogu Woodcarving	A vase with magnolia, ruyi, scroll, and mirror	The combination of magnolia and the vase conveys peace, good fortune, and smooth prosperity; the ruyi reinforces blessings and success; the scroll signifies cultural aspiration; the mirror extends the meaning of tranquility and clarity.
4		Hall Building Ceiling Bogu Woodcarving	A vase with peonies and an auspicious beast	Peonies symbolize wealth and honor, the vase ("ping") implies peace, together forming the blessing of "wealth and peace"; the auspicious beast adds meanings of protection, good fortune, and flourishing destiny.
5		Partial Bogu Woodcarving on the Bracket Arm of the Northern Wing of the Hall Building	A vase with chrysanthemums, vase decorated with kui-dragon pattern, and rockery with flowers and plants	Chrysanthemums symbolize longevity; the kui-dragon motif conveys auspiciousness; the vase ("ping") symbolizes peace. Altogether, the composition expresses wishes for safety, good fortune, long life, and wellbeing, while retaining a classical aesthetic.
6		Partial Bogu Woodcarving on the Bracket Arm of the Northern Wing of the Hall Building	A vase with crabapple blossoms, scrolls, and books	"Tang" in crabapple (haitang) is a homophone for "hall," carrying an implicit meaning of prosperity; combined with the vase ("ping" for peace), it reinforces the message of "prosperity and peace." Scrolls and books highlight the owner's emphasis on literary cultivation and scholarly pursuit.
7		Bogu Woodcarving on the Corbel (Quechi) of the Hall Building	A vase with peacock feathers, inkstone screen, scrolls, and brush holder	Peacock feathers symbolize auspiciousness, smooth advancement, and elevation in official rank; the scholar's desk objects highlight literati elegance and the pursuit of learning and propriety.

	Figures	Location and Name of the Woodcarving	Core Decorative Elements	Symbolic Interpretation
8		Bogu Woodcarving on the Corbel (Quechi) of the Main Hall	A vase with lotus flowers, various blossoms, and a book chest containing books	Lotus represents purity and integrity; the vase ("ping") symbolizes peace, together conveying a wish for peaceful integrity. The book chest and books express reverence for knowledge and a scholarly, refined cultural orientation.
9		Bogu Woodcarving on the Corbel (Quechi) of the Main Hall	A vase with peonies and a body decorated with entwined-floral patterns	Peonies symbolize wealth and honor; the vase ("ping") conveys peace, together forming the meaning of "wealth and peace." The entwined-floral pattern enhances the ornamentation, presenting an overall antique and elegant aesthetic.
10		Bogu Woodcarving on the Corbel (Quechi) of the Hall Building	A vase with ruyi and peacock feathers; a bogu stand (displaying a jue censer and books); the vase decorated with an ice-crack pattern	The combination of the ruyi and peacock feathers conveys the meaning of "auspiciousness and rising in rank." The jue censer symbolizes "promotion in official rank," and the books express aspirations for scholarly advancement. The ice-crack pattern on the vase strengthens the implication of peace and safety.
11		Bogu Woodcarving on the Corbel (Quechi) of the Main Hall	A vase with lotus flowers and a qing (stone chime)	The lotus in the vase symbolizes "peace and integrity," while the qing, whose pronunciation echoes "celebration," conveys an auspicious wish for peace and joyful blessings.
12		"Peace and Prosperity with Elephants" Bogu Woodcarving on the Corbel (Quechi) of the Main Hall	An elephant; a vase with chrysanthemums; a brush holder containing a ruyi	The elephant symbolizes great peace and auspiciousness.Chrysanthemums in the vase combine the meanings of peace and longevity.The brush holder signifies reverence for culture, while the ruyi represents smooth fortune in all matters, enriching the theme of scholarly virtue and aspiration.
13		Bogu Woodcarving of Tieguai Li in the Main Hall	Motifs: Image of Tieguai Li, vase, flowers, ornamental rockery, jade qing (stone chime)	Tieguai Li, one of the Eight Immortals, embodies the meaning of bringing blessings and auspiciousness.The inclusion of bogu objects reinforces themes of prosperity and good fortune, reflecting a fusion of folk beliefs and literati aesthetics.
14		Bogu Woodcarving of Zhong Kui in the Main Hall	Motifs: Image of Zhong Kui, bat, bogu objects, plum blossoms	Zhong Kui symbolizes the power to ward off evil and dispel misfortune.The bat, whose pronunciation (fu) echoes "good fortune," conveys the arrival of blessings.Bogu objects and plum blossoms enhance the literati aesthetic, together forming a visual expression of dispelling evil and inviting auspiciousness.
15		Bogu Woodcarving of Liu Hai in the East Courtyard of the South Wing	Motifs: Image of Liu Hai, bogu stand, lotus flower, ruyi	Liu Hai symbolizes attracting wealth, prosperity, and abundance.The lotus and ruyi reinforce auspicious meanings of purity, smooth fortune, and joyful success, creating a cohesive system of auspicious symbolism.
16		Bogu Woodcarving of Liu Hai and the Golden Toad in the East Courtyard of the South Wing	Motifs: Image of Liu Hai, golden toad, bogu stand, lotus flower, ruyi	The combination of Liu Hai and the golden toad reinforces themes of attracting wealth, inviting blessings, and attaining abundance.The lotus and ruyi further enhance auspicious meanings of purity, smooth fortune, and joyful success, aligning with the "elegant yet popular" aesthetic characteristic of bogu motifs.
17		Bogu Woodcarving of the Tiger-Taming Arhat in the East Courtyard of the South Wing	Motifs: Image of the Tiger-Taming Arhat, bogu stand, submissive tiger	The tiger is a concrete symbol of fierce and ominous forces; its being subdued by the arhat signifies a transformation from "ferocity" to "protection."This imagery reflects the homeowner's wish for safety and peace within the domestic space.
18		Bogu Woodcarving of "Lord Ye Loves Dragons" in the East Courtyard of the South Wing	Motifs: Image of Lord Ye, real dragon, bogu stand	Drawing on the classical allegory, this carving conveys a critique of hypocrisy—where external appearance contradicts inner truth.It communicates the values of sincerity, authenticity, and pragmatism, infusing the bogu theme with a moral and cautionary dimension.

Photographed by the author. Part of the information is sourced from the exhibition hall notices and the oral explanations given by the tour guides.

From a cultural perspective, the rise of the bogu tu (antique-display paintings) as an artistic form is closely tied to the development of the epigraphic movement during the mid-Qing period. The flourishing of epigraphy stimulated widespread research and collecting of ancient artifacts. As bogu tu could visually present the forms and cultural meanings of antiquities, they gradually circulated among the literati and became an important medium for demonstrating scholarly accomplishment and refined aesthetic taste.The extensive use of bogu motifs in the Huangshan Bamenting is precisely a product of this cultural context. On the one hand, their prevalence directly reflects the homeowner's conscious admiration for gentry culture, revealing a desire to use artistic decoration as a means to draw closer to the cultural sphere of the scholar-official class. On the other hand, the frequent appearance of books, scrolls, and similar elements further enriches the layers of cultural expression. These symbols of knowledge and learning are not only typical emblems of literati culture but also embody the homeowner's aspiration for personal cultural cultivation, as well as the earnest hope that descendants would inherit cultural traditions and advance their scholarly attainments. This practice of expressing cultural aspirations through architectural decoration essentially mirrors the cultural orientation of the merchant class during this particular historical period of the Qing dynasty—namely, the active alignment with the world of scholars and literati, adopting their aesthetic standards and value systems as ideals for self-cultivation in an attempt to achieve symbolic upward mobility in cultural identity.

4 Composition and Forms of the Bogu Woodcarvings in the Huangshan Bamenting

4.1 Composition

The bogu woodcarvings of the Huangshan Bamenting display distinctive formulaic characteristics in their compositional design. Most scenes do not employ background settings; instead, independent bogu objects are combined into a decorative ensemble, producing a visually pure aesthetic effect. In terms of viewpoint, the carvings generally adopt a frontal or slightly elevated perspective so that the shapes and details of each object can be clearly and fully presented. Although the objects do not form a continuous narrative scene, their flexible arrangement collectively serves the central theme of auspicious symbolism. In terms of combination methods, the composition primarily adopts the "vase-centered insertion" format, in which the vase serves as the visual focal point, and seasonal flowers, ruyi scepters, peacock feathers, and other objects with specific auspicious meanings are inserted into it. This approach can be further divided into two modes: 1. Free combination mode — The vase functions as the main subject, accompanied by three to five scholar's objects or mythological figures placed beside it. These objects are generally arranged along the same horizontal axis, with subtle foreground – background staggering used to create spatial depth. 2. Cabinet-display mode — The vase and other antiquities are arranged evenly and systematically within a bogu-style display shelf, forming a stable and elegant visual presentation.In terms of architectural placement, bogu woodcarvings on brackets (niutui) and ceiling panels most often utilize the first free combination mode, whereas bracket-arms (quetì) flexibly employ both compositional modes depending on their spatial configuration.

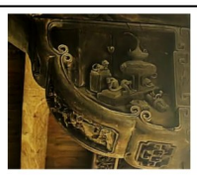
4.2 Form

The forms of the Bogu woodcarvings in the Huangshan Bamienting are not independent entities; rather, they are integrated with the functions and shapes of the architectural components, demonstrating strong spatial adaptability. The woodcarving artisans fully considered the relationship between architectural structure and carving expression, and primarily employed shallow relief as the main carving technique so as to achieve a balance between decorative effect and structural stability [5]. This spatial adaptability is manifested in several ways: In relatively open areas such as ceilings and niutui (brackets), Bogu woodcarvings often adopt circular outer frames, decorated with scrolling foliage or continuous branch patterns. The internal compositions are full and complete, with the objects typically presented from a frontal perspective, arranged in a balanced and stable layout.In contrast, on components such as quetis (bracket arms), which are narrow and irregular in shape, the carved motifs strictly follow the physical form and structural direction of the element. Although the outer edges are also decorated with scrolling patterns, the internal composition—while remaining visually rich—adjusts the placement of objects according to the shape of the quetis, resulting in shifting horizontal alignments. In this way, the carvings achieve the richest possible expression within limited space. The Bogu woodcarvings in the Huangshan Bamienting exemplify an art of creating beauty within constraints. Through techniques such as emphasizing the main motif, achieving balanced fullness, and adapting forms to the shape of the architectural elements, they seamlessly integrate the "elegance" of Bogu themes with the "function" of the structural components.

The Bogu woodcarvings in the Huangshan Bamienting are mostly made of camphorwood and fir [6]. Unlike the woodcarvings favored in commercial architecture of the Lingnan region—known for their flamboyant style and extensive use of gilding—those in the Huangshan Bamienting preserve the natural appearance of the wood. With their refined and cultured themes, they present a restrained form of luxury.

In addition to the conventional compositional forms discussed above, the Huangshan Bamienting also preserves two Bogu woodcarvings that incorporate background elements, both located on the bracket-arm (quechi) components of the upper hall. Unlike other carvings that depict only isolated arrangements of objects, these two works feature background structures resembling Bogu shelves.In Figure 19, a censer serves as the central motif, surrounded by seals, a ruyi scepter,

and other objects. The chosen perspective appears to capture a partial view inside a Bogu shelf. Similarly, Figure 20 also adopts a perspective that frames a partial interior section of a Bogu shelf, on which are displayed a vase, an ink box, flowers, and other items. From the standpoint of compositional features, the perspectives in both carvings display a clear sense of specificity and intentional directionality. This suggests that the craftsmen may have created these works based on the actual display arrangements found in the house of the owner, using real domestic settings as visual references.



Figures 19: Bogu Woodcarvings on the Bracket Arms (Quechi) of the Upper Hall in the Huangshan Bamienting



Figures 20: Bogu Woodcarvings on the Bracket Arms (Quechi) of the Upper Hall in the Huangshan Bamienting

Figure 4

5 Conclusion

The Bogu woodcarvings of the Huangshan Bamienting, with their exquisite craftsmanship and profound cultural depth, stand as exemplary works of decorative art in Ming-Qing Jiangnan architecture. Their value is reflected in the persistent pursuit of auspicious symbolism, a deep yearning for refined culture, and an aesthetic expression characterized by understated luxury. Centered on the motif of the vase, the woodcarvings combine flowers, scholarly objects, and divine figures, constructing a rich auspicious system through techniques such as homophonic symbolism and visual metaphor. The vase (ping) symbolizes safety through its homophone "ping" (peace); the bat (fu) symbolizes good fortune through its homophone "fu" (blessing); lotus flowers signify integrity; chrysanthemums imply longevity. Concepts such as peace, prosperity, advancement, and long life are seamlessly incorporated into the carvings. These motifs fulfilled the homeowner's wishes for family harmony and prosperity, aligned with the traditional cultural psychology of warding off misfortune and seeking good fortune, and made the carvings vivid carriers of auspicious culture.

On the cultural level, the Bogu woodcarvings are rooted in the flourishing scholarly interest in epigraphy and antiquities, embodying the owner's aspiration toward classical refinement and reflecting the merchant class's cultural tendency to emulate the literati. The frequent presence of books and ancient artifacts in the carvings highlights a household ethos that valued culture and education while expressing earnest expectations for the cultural cultivation of future generations. The integration of mythological figures with Bogu objects further merges folk beliefs with literati aesthetics, transforming the woodcarvings into a medium that conveys cultural ideals and spiritual aspirations.

The understated yet luxurious aesthetic is one of the most distinctive features of these woodcarvings. The artisans employed shallow-relief techniques, adapting their designs to the shapes of the architectural components. Without relying on flamboyant displays, they achieved remarkable subtlety and refinement. In terms of material, the natural grain of camphor and cedar wood was preserved, avoiding ostentatious techniques such as gilding. Instead, an elegant palette and meticulous craftsmanship were used to express texture and quality. The compositions are balanced and full, with clear visual hierarchy—richness within simplicity, sophistication within restraint—embodying the gentle elegance unique to Jiangnan culture. In summary, the Bogu woodcarvings of the Huangshan Bamienting integrate auspicious wishes, cultural aspirations, and understated aesthetics into a harmonious whole. They not only demonstrate outstanding craftsmanship but also reflect the cultural psychology and aesthetic trends of their historical period, providing a precious model for the inheritance and study of traditional woodcarving art.

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