

A Study on the Similarities and Differences in Decorative Features of Ancient Residential Buildings in Jinzhong: A Case Study of Gable's head Decorations in Xiaozhai Village

Jiawei Yang^{1,*}

¹ Jinzhong University ,Shanxi, China, acaatyz@163.com

*Corresponding author,E-mail: acaatyz@163.com

Abstract

Research on Ancient Residential Buildings in Shanxi Province usually divides Shanxi into five regions based on historical geography, agricultural zoning, and folk dialects: Jinzhong, Jinbei, Jinnan, Jindongnan, and Jinxibei. Within the Jinzhong region, different areas and historical backgrounds have unified common features in ancient residential architecture, yet each also possesses distinct characteristics. Local standards for architectural details exist, serving as indicators for determining the attributes of residential buildings. This paper aims to analyze and compare architectural decorations in the Jinzhong region, focusing on the decorative components of the Gable's head, and study the variations in the characteristics of ancient residential buildings within the same region.

Keywords: Xiaozhai Village, Gable's head decorations, similarities and differences comparison

1 INTRODUCTION

The geographical division used in the study of ancient residential buildings in Shanxi Province does not align with the present-day administrative divisions. Shanxi dwellings emerged during specific historical periods and in specific spatial regions. Therefore, the regional delineation of Shanxi dwellings should not be limited by current administrative boundaries but should be based on historical geography, agricultural zoning, and linguistic systems(Wang, J. P.). There are three reasons for this. First, within certain geographical areas, people use the same dialect, engage in similar productive labor, share common beliefs and values, and inherit consistent construction techniques, resulting in significant homogeneity in the architectural forms of dwellings within specific regions, which have been preserved and handed down to this day. Second, dwellings in the same geographical conditions tend to have common characteristics, while those in different geographical conditions exhibit distinct features. The cultural environment is variable, while the natural environment is relatively stable. Certain social structures are relatively stable and coordinated during specific historical periods, and stability is a significant characteristic of the region. Third, influenced by natural and cultural conditions, Shanxi dwellings exhibit different architectural forms depending on the regions they are situated in, which align with the developmental trajectory of ancient Shanxi culture.

Based on the historical geography, agricultural zoning, and dialect division of Shanxi, and according to the internal structure and external characteristics of Shanxi dwellings, they are divided into five major regions: Jinzhong dwellings, Jinnan dwellings, Jinxi dwellings, Jinbei dwellings, and Jindongnan dwellings, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Map of Residential Areas in Shanxi Province (Adapted from Wang Jinping's "Residential Buildings in Shanxi")

Due to historical evolution and cultural context, residential buildings in the five major regions exhibit both common characteristics and distinctive external expressions. Taking the Jinzhong region as an example, the Jinzhong region within the subdivision of ancient residential areas refers to a geographical area, including parts of Yangquan City, Jinzhong City, and Lvliang City, as shown in Figure 2. The definition of the Jinzhong region based on the administrative divisions during the Ming and Qing dynasties covers parts of Pingding Prefecture, Taiyuan Prefecture, Liao Zhou, and Fenzhou Prefecture. For instance, the geographical scope referred to by terms such as ancient Taiyuan Prefecture, Taiyuan City, Jinzhong region, Jinzhong City, Pingding Prefecture, Yangquan City, Fenzhou Prefecture, Lvliang City, and Liao Zhou varies due to historical reasons, involving relationships such as parallelism, intersection, subordination, and inclusion(Yan, W. G.).



Figure 2. A Comparison between Qing Dynasty and Modern Administrative Divisions (Adapted from Wang Jinping's "Residential Buildings in Shanxi")

The preservation of ancient residential buildings in the Jinzhong region mainly consists of dwellings from the Ming and Qing dynasties. In the study of Ming and Qing cultures, despite the subdivision based on historical evolution, agricultural zoning, and dialects, it is still essential to consider the differing influences of historical evolution and development sequences on the decorative features of residential buildings. These differences manifest in the details of residential architecture, which holds practical significance for the study of ancient residential buildings from the Ming and Qing dynasties.

2 OVERVIEW OF XIAOZHAI VILLAGE



Figure 3. Location Map of Xiaozhai Village (Self-drawn by the Author)



Figure 4. Relationship Diagram between New and Old Villages in Xiaozhai Village (Self-drawn by the Author)



Figure 5. Relationship Diagram of Prefectures in the Jinzhong Region during the Ming and Qing Dynasties (Self-drawn by the Author)



Figure 6. Plan and Courtyard Numbering of Xiaozhai Village

Xiaozhai Village is currently under the administrative jurisdiction of Yuci District, Jinzhong City. It is located in the central area of the Jinzhong region, which is delineated based on residential divisions, at the junction of the ancient Taiyuan Prefecture and Pingding Prefecture, within the scope of the ancient Taiyuan Prefecture. It was founded by the Zhao clan in the early Ming Dynasty. The village is situated in the loess hills 19 kilometers northeast of Yuci City, along the southern bank of the Bailong River, and 17 kilometers north of Provincial Highway 216 (at the intersection of the former Jing Province and Jing-Shaan official road). It borders Nanyao Village to the northeast and southeast, Longbai Village to the west, Beiyao Dian Village to the southwest, and Hanjiazhai to the north, covering an area of 2.23 square kilometers. It is a relatively complete ancient village in the style of a fortified stronghold (see Figure 3 for the location map of Xiaozhai Village). The red road in the figure is the first expressway in Shanxi Province and also the first expressway from Shanxi Province to Beijing. This expressway largely overlaps with Provincial Highway 216 (which was the ancient road to Beijing during the Ming and Qing dynasties). Shetie Town and Xiaozhai Village are close to the ancient road. This road extends eastward, passing through Pingding Prefecture (now Yangquan City) and exiting through Niangziguan into Hebei Province. This route was also the main provincial highway from eastern Taiyuan during the Ming and Qing dynasties, as shown in Figure 5. The villagers of Xiaozhai Village have been relocated to the new village as a whole. The new village is adjacent to the original ancient village, as shown in Figure 4. The red area indicates the new village area, the green area represents the old village area, and the black area indicates the original village gate. Not only have the original ancient buildings not been demolished or renovated, but the original villagers also frequently return to their ancestral homes for maintenance. The village committee also regularly maintains and guards public facilities in the ancient village. Therefore, not only are the ancient buildings relatively well-preserved, but various types of buildings and the original appearance of the village are also relatively intact. Xiaozhai Village currently has seven immovable cultural relics. Among them, there is one county-level key cultural relic protection unit, namely, Wuni Pavilion; and six cultural relics protected by the "Three Imperatives" filing system, including the east gate of Xiaozhai Village, Xiaozhai Fenghuotai (Fire Beacon Tower), Xiaozhai House No.1, Xiaozhai House No.2, Lüzu Altar, and Shensu Temple (as shown in Figure 6).

The gable's head decorations in Xiaozhai Village are distributed on both sides of the courtyard gates, the gable's head on both sides of the second entrance (if there is a second courtyard), the main house gable walls, the wing house gable walls, and the street-facing gable walls of the back buildings. Occasionally, the drainage holes on the walls of the main house are replicated to resemble the appearance of gable's head decorations. Xiaozhai Village is located in a hilly area, where the roofs of the houses below may face the roads above. The ridge and finial decorations are often damaged due to theft. The special height and position of the gable's head decorations, as well as their structural characteristics, make them less susceptible to theft and touching. Therefore, the gable's head decorations are relatively well-preserved compared to other decorative components of the village buildings, with a larger quantity in stock. The gable's head decorations in Xiaozhai Village are diverse in type, widely distributed, and abundant in stock. They exhibit typical regional characteristics, which is why Xiaozhai Village gable's head decorations were chosen as the research sample.

3 CONCEPT OF GABLE'S HEAD DECORATIONS

Gable's head decorations, commonly known as "gable's head" in Chinese folk parlance, refer to the collective term for the ends of the gable walls of traditional Chinese buildings with hard roofs. They became prominent when earth and bricks became the primary building materials for houses. As the gable walls or gable's head protrude conspicuously, the gable's head decorations became a focal point of decoration in Shanxi residential architecture during certain periods. Homeowners invested considerable effort and resources into decorating the gable's head, making them a typical representation of Qing Dynasty residential architecture in Shanxi. In the Jinzhong region, gable's head decorations in residential buildings simulate the design of pavilions, towers, and bay windows, incorporating brick carving patterns and motifs. These spaces are suitable for adoration, although in Shanxi, the midsection of the gable's head is not dedicated to deities but rather to the expression of aspirations for an ideal life. The brick carvings on the gable's head typically serve a dual purpose: to showcase and to support. The showcasing aspect is tangible, while the support is symbolic. Gable's head decorations display the exquisite craftsmanship and the sincere yet beautiful desires of the architectural design.

4 GABLE'S HEAD DECORATIONS IN XIAOZHAI VILLAGE

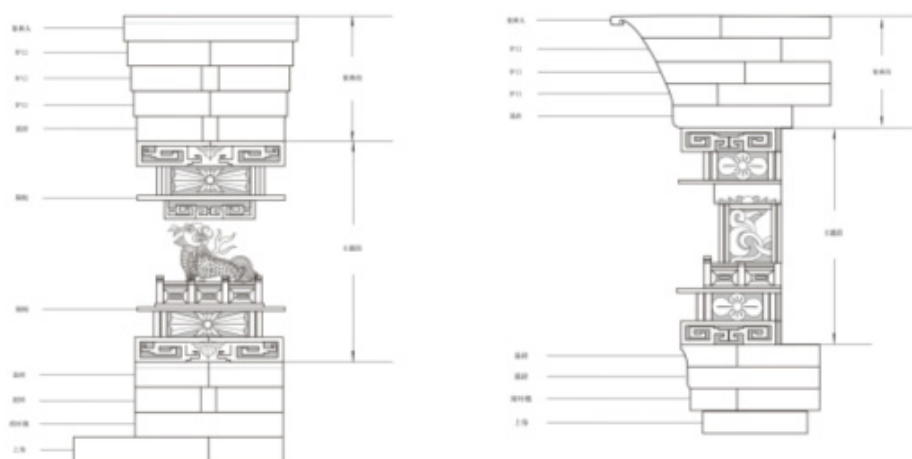


Figure 7. Plan View and Side View of a Typical gable's head Decoration in Xiaozhai Village (Self-drawn by the Author)

Taking the gable's head decorations of the wing house at Lüzu Altar in Xiaozhai Village as an example, as shown in Figure 8. The brick-carved section is the independent decorative part, which constitutes the thematic section of the entire gable's head decoration. Between the thematic section and the upper body, there are lotus leaf pedestals, mixed bricks, and owl bricks. The upper part of the thematic section is the "elephant

trunk" section, which consists of mixed bricks, furnace openings, and elephant trunk heads. Except for one undecorated gable's head decoration, all other gable's head decorations in Xiaozhai Village are decorated, meaning the main section is carved with decorations, either simple or intricate. The undecorated gable's head decoration is an exception in the village and should not be used as a reference for classifying gable's head decorations in the village. As shown in Figure 8, the main section of the gable's head decoration at Lüzu Altar simulates the appearance of a pavilion, divided into three sections by two narrow-edged panels in the middle. The central part is the most elaborate and complex, with waistbands at the top and bottom, and carvings of patterns that harmonize with the theme of the central part. The "elephant trunk" section, main section, and lotus leaf pedestals, mixed bricks, and owl bricks together form a complete gable's head decoration. The gable's head decoration of the wing house at Lüzu Altar serves as a typical, standard, and complete sample of gable's head decorations. The author categorizes the gable's head decorations of Xiaozhai Village based on different types of main sections for further research.

Pavilion-style: As shown in Figure 9, the gable's head decoration at the gate of Courtyard No. 10 inside the door exhibits a pavilion-style design. The brick-carved section above is called the "elephant trunk" section, composed of mixed bricks, furnace openings, and elephant trunk heads. Below the thematic section and above the upper body, it lacks owl bricks compared to the gable's head decoration at Lüzu Altar, retaining lotus leaf pedestals and mixed bricks. The thematic section is divided into three sections by two panels, with the central part simulating a pavilion-style carving decoration, featuring auspicious beasts on the front and landscapes on the sides. The gable's head decoration is installed in an embedded manner. Pavilion-style gable's head decorations come in single-section, two-section, and three-section varieties, with the three-section style being the most standard form, relying on square panels placed flat. Each section is waist-banded, with the largest section being the thematic section. The pavilion's characteristics are reflected through the corner pillars, railings, and hanging flowers of the thematic section, creating the appearance of a small stage or pavilion.



Figure 8. Front and Side View of Pavilion-style gable's head Decoration in Xiaozhai Village (Photographed by the Author)

Cabinet-style: As shown in Figure 10, the gable's head decoration at the gate of Courtyard No. 22 inside the door is designed in a cabinet-style. The thematic section simulates a cabinet-style design, with auspicious beasts carved on the front and flowers on the sides. Between the thematic section and the upper body, it consists of lotus leaf pedestals, mixed bricks, and owl bricks. The structure of the "elephant trunk" section above the thematic section is complete, with clear and distinct mixed bricks, furnace openings, and elephant trunk heads. The gable's head decoration is also installed in an embedded manner. Cabinet-style brick carvings are similar to pavilion-style brick carvings in that they are segmented, but the number of segments is not fixed. Cabinet-style features include: firstly, the bottom segment always uses relief to mimic the base of a cabinet;

secondly, several upper segments are less waist-banded, all imitating a cabinet. The brick-carved patterns resemble those displayed in a cabinet, with themes and meanings similar to other types of gable's head decoration brick carvings.



Figure 9. Front and Side View of Cabinet-style gable's head Decoration in Xiaozhai Village (Photographed by the Author)

Mandala-style: For the following two gable's head decorations, the Shensu Temple annex and the gate of Courtyard No. 45 inside the door were selected as typical samples. Both gable's head decorations are of the mandala style. The mandala style features the thematic section simulating a mandala, with additional layers added above and below the mandala. Between the thematic section and the upper body, lotus leaf pedestals and mixed bricks are still present, while the "elephant trunk" section above the thematic section consists of mixed bricks, furnace openings, and elephant trunk heads. The gable's head decoration is still installed in an embedded manner. The frontal and lateral carvings of the thematic section of the gable's head decoration are decorated with floral motifs.

The mandala-style gable's head decorations in other courtyards of the village are similar to these two typical mandala-style gable's head decorations. They also feature a mandala as the main element, with additional layers added above and below, either adding one layer or multiple layers, or expanding it in a layered and segmented manner to increase its volume. The mandala-style brick carvings have standard and complete upper, waistband, and lower sections, with lotus petal patterns often found on the surfaces of the upper and lower sections. Sometimes, there is an additional section imitating the base of a cabinet using brick carving, which is related to the cabinet-style brick carvings. However, this section is optional and not sufficient to be considered a characteristic feature of the brick carving style.



Figure 10. Front and Side View of Mandala-style gable's head Decoration in Xiaozhai Village (Photographed by the Author)



Figure 11. Front and Side View of Mandala-style gable's head Decoration in Xiaozhai Village (Photographed by the Author)

Altar-style: gable's head decorations at the gate of Courtyard No. 49 and the wing house of Courtyard No. 53. The thematic sections of both gable's head decorations are carved to simulate the style of an altar, with elephant trunk heads, furnace openings, mixed bricks, lotus leaf pedestals, and mixed brick structures both above and below the thematic section. The segmented structure is the same, simulating the style of an altar. Except for the differences in the carved patterns, the thematic section of the gable's head decoration at the gate of Courtyard No. 49 has a thicker waistband section below the thematic section, which is also carved. The remaining altar-style gable's head decorations in the village simulate typical altar characteristics, with variations in the number and complexity of segmented layers, but all conform to the features of altar-style decorations. Segmented layers are added to simulate the legs of the altar, with decorations placed on top of the altar surface.



Figure 12. Front and Side View of Altar-style gable's head Decoration in Xiaozhai Village (Photographed by the Author)



Figure 13. Front and Side View of Altar-style gable's head Decoration in Xiaozhai Village (Photographed by the Author)

Simple gable's head: The gable's head decoration of the wing house in Courtyard No. 22 of Xiaozhai Village is relatively unique compared to the above gable's head decorations. What makes it unique is that the thematic section is a cross-section of a wall brick, which is decorated with relief. Mixed bricks are used above and owl bricks below the thematic section to frame the range of the thematic section. This type of gable's head decoration belongs to the simple gable's head type. Although it appears somewhat simpler compared to other gable's head decorations, it still retains an "elephant trunk" section with a complete structure. Between the upper body and the thematic section, there are lotus leaf pedestals, mixed bricks, and owl bricks. The gable's head decoration is installed in an embedded manner.



Figure 14. Simple gable's head Decoration in Xiaozhai Village (Photographed by the Author)

Based on a comparative analysis of the gable's head decorations preserved throughout the village, Xiaozhai Village gable's head decorations are classified into five types: pavilion-style, mandala-style, altar-style, cabinet-style, and simple gable's head. These five types differ only in the independent brick-carving styles between the upper body and the "elephant trunk" section, but overall structural features remain common. Firstly, the thematic brick carvings are all installed in an embedded manner and serve as non-primary load-bearing components, a conclusion supported by gable's head decorations in Jiazhaio Village in the central part of Jinzhong region (as shown in Figure 15). Secondly, the width of the upper body and the lower base of Xiaozhai Village gable's head decorations is consistent, while the width of the "elephant trunk" section and the thematic section is noticeably reduced compared to the upper body. Thirdly, thematic brick carvings are

all located above lotus leaf pedestals, which are fixed components that have never been missing. Lastly, the complete and unified structural method consists of the "elephant trunk" section, thematic section, lotus leaf pedestal (or owl bricks and mixed bricks if present), upper body, and lower base from top to bottom.



Figure 15. gable's head Decoration of Residential Houses in Jiazhao Village (Photographed by the Author)

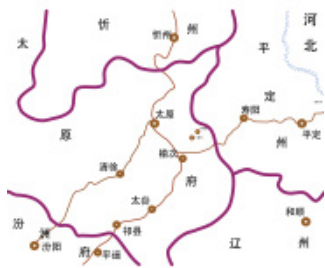


Figure 16. Location Map of Jiazhao Village

5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper takes the decorative features of gable's head in ancient residential buildings in Jinzhong as the starting point of research. Targeted selections of ancient residential buildings from different regions in Jinzhong were conducted for field investigations and literature reviews. The characteristics of gable's head architectural decoration were then compared and summarized. Subsequently, a theoretical framework for the architectural decoration characteristics of ancient residential buildings in Jinzhong was preliminarily constructed, aiming to uncover the underlying patterns behind the similarities and differences(Yan, W. G.).

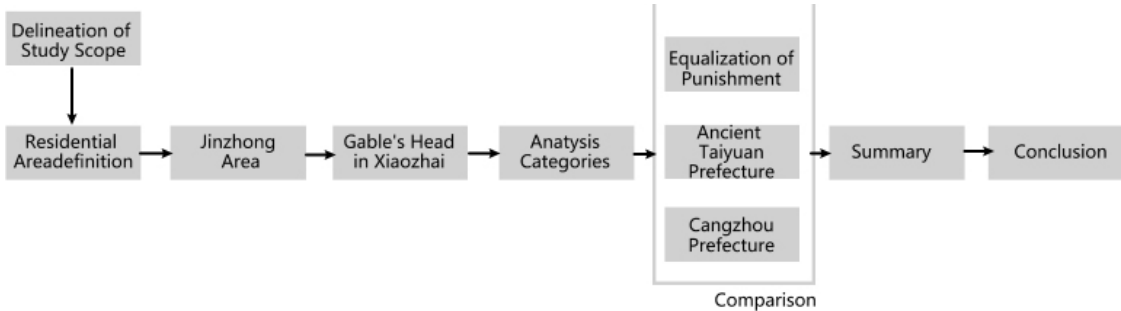


Figure 17. Model of Research Methodology

6 GABLE'S HEAD IN EASTERN JINZHONG REGION COMPARED WITH GABLE'S HEAD IN SOUTHERN JINZHONG REGION



Figure 18. Comparison of gable's head in Dayangquan Village and Xiaozhai Village (Photographed by the Author)



Figure 19. gable's head in Dayangquan Village (Photographed by the Author)



Figure 20. gable's head in Dayangquan Village (Photographed by the Author)

The author conducted on-site investigations in Dayangquan Village, which is located in the eastern part of Jinzhong region. Dayangquan Village belonged to Pingdingzhou during the Ming and Qing dynasties and is currently administratively under Yangquan City, Shanxi Province. The author selected three typical gable's head decorations in Dayangquan Village as samples, as shown in Figures 19 and 20. Based on the collection

and research of gable's head decorations throughout the village, a planar structure diagram of the gable's head in the village was drawn (as shown in Figure 21), summarizing the following characteristics of gable's head decorations in Dayangquan Village. Firstly, the thematic brick carvings are installed in an embedded manner and play a load-bearing role. Secondly, the width of the lower base, upper body, "elephant trunk" section, and thematic section is consistent. Thirdly, the thematic brick carvings are located between the upper body and the "elephant trunk" section, with owl bricks used for distinction and no lotus leaf pedestals. Additionally, the thematic brick carvings mainly simulate cabinet-style, with auspicious patterns placed in the "cabinets". For more elaborate gable's head decorations, they may simulate altars under the "cabinets" and directly carve them into altar-like shapes. Lastly, the overall structure of gable's head throughout the village is relatively uniform, consisting of an "elephant trunk" section, thematic section (sometimes extended), upper body, and lower base from top to bottom.

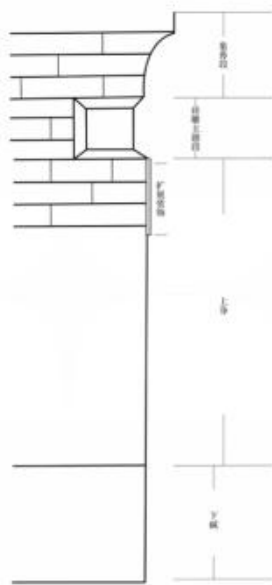


Figure 21. Planar Structure Diagram of Pingdingzhou gable's head (Drawn by the Author)

In the southern part of the Jinzhong region, the author conducted field investigations in Nanzhuang Village. Due to the relatively small variation in the appearance of gable's head throughout the village and the relatively uniform structural features, a planar diagram of the gable's head in Fenzhou Prefecture was drawn as follows (as shown in Figure 22). Based on the investigation of gable's head throughout the village, the following characteristics of gable's head in Nanzhuang Village were summarized. Firstly, the thematic brick carvings are not installed independently or in an embedded manner. Secondly, the width of the lower base and upper body of gable's head throughout the village is consistent, and the decorative part of the gable's head protrudes forward and is perpendicular to the ground. Thirdly, above the owl bricks is the balyan, without an "elephant trunk" structure. Lastly, the overall structure of gable's head throughout the village is relatively uniform, with the basic structure from bottom to top being upper body - mixed bricks - stove mouth - forward-protruding thematic section - owl bricks - balyan.

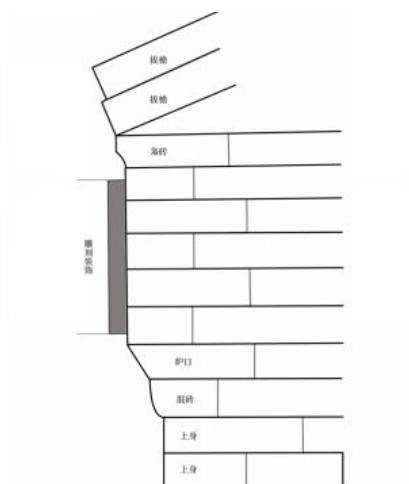


Figure 22. Planar Structure Diagram of Fenzhou Prefecture gable's head (Drawn by the Author)

Comparison of the central, southern, and eastern parts of the Jinzhong region is depicted in Figure 23 and Table 1.

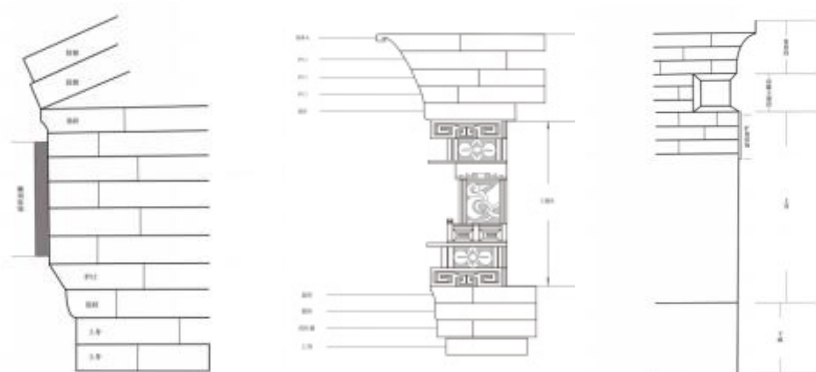


Figure 23. Comparative Diagram of gable's head Structures in the Southern, Central, and Eastern Parts of the Jinzhong Region

Table 1.

Region	Installation Method	Layered/Segmented Theme Section	Carving Method	Structural Features	Decorative Content	Material of Theme Section
Central (Xiaozhai Village, Ancient Taiyuan Prefecture)	Embedded	Yes	Relief, Perforated carving, Round carving, High relief	With elephant nose section, lotus base	Traditional auspicious patterns	Brick
Eastern (Dayangquan Village, Pingding Prefecture)	Embedded	No	Relief	With elephant nose section, no lotus base	Traditional auspicious patterns	Brick

Southern (Nanzhuang Village, Fenzhou Prefecture)	Non-embedded, Externally mounted	No	Relief	No elephant nose section, no lotus base	Traditional auspicious patterns	Brick
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7 CONCLUSIONS

Taking the village of Xiaozhai in the central part of the Jinzhong region as the primary research focus, this study utilized the architectural ornamentation component of the gatepost as a point of entry to systematically study and analyze the decorative features of gable's head in ancient residential buildings in Xiaozhai village. Unified characteristics of gatepost decoration were summarized. Furthermore, targeted comparisons were made with the gatepost architectural decorations of Dayangquan village in the eastern part and Nanzhuang village in the southern part of the Jinzhong region. The comparisons revealed that although there are common features in architectural decorations among different regions of the Jinzhong area, there are also certain differences, which tend to remain consistent within the same region. Referring to the paradigm of gatepost structural formation as depicted in the "Qing Dynasty Architectural Construction Regulations", it was found that the gatepost structures of residential buildings in the Jinzhong area differ from this paradigm. However, they exhibit unified and fixed regional appearances and structural characteristics, indicating that different regions of the Jinzhong area have their own fixed structural paradigms.

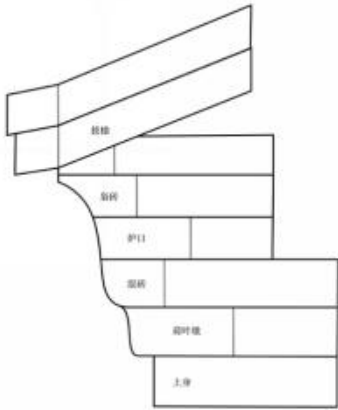


Figure 24. Structure of gable's head in Qing Dynasty Architectural Standards

The study of ancient dwellings in Shanxi Province is typically defined based on historical geography, agricultural zoning, linguistic systems, and the internal and external characteristics of Shanxi dwellings. Shanxi dwellings are divided into five regions for classification and study. This division based on natural environment, dialect systems, and agricultural zoning is reasonable and reflects the diversity of Shanxi dwelling forms, in line with the development sequence of Shanxi culture. Ancient dwellings in the Jinzhong region are primarily from the Ming and Qing dynasties. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Jinzhong region consisted of three prefectures, and ancient dwellings within each prefecture had relatively uniform architectural decorative features. The selected research objects are not isolated or exceptional cases. Each prefecture has fixed norms and paradigms for ancient dwelling architecture. Folk architectural decorations did not strictly adhere to official standards. For example, the gable's head in the Jinzhong region differ from the official gable's head presented in the Qing Dynasty architectural regulations. Gable's head in residential areas across the Jinzhong region are noticeably different from this paradigm. The study indicates that historical evolution and local paradigms have a certain influence on architectural decoration, leading to unified yet fixed differences within a certain region. This suggests that within a unified paradigm, there are fixed local standards for architectural details (Yan, W. G.).

8 RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

Through the comparative study of the decorative similarities and differences of ancient residential gable's head in different regions of Jinzhong during the same period, the clarification of local residential architectural decorative patterns and their causes is conducive to studying the reasons behind architectural features, historical evolution, and changes in administrative regional development.

The gable's head of ancient residential buildings in Jinzhong differ from official standards, providing reference for studying folk architectural decoration and helping to clarify the norms of architectural styles in various prefectures.

9 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND PROSPECTS

This study focuses on gable's head as the entry point, summarizing and comparing their similarities and differences in external appearance and internal structure. However, there has been no research or comparison conducted on other architectural components. Further summarizing and researching the differences between local architectural norms and official standards are needed. The study also lacks comparative research on the decorative attributes of architectural styles in different regions of Jinzhong, such as the differences arising from variations in regional cultural concepts, local customs, changes in values, and different natural environments. Future research will provide further exploration and validation in this direction.

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