

A Study on the Ridge Decoration Characteristics of Xiaozhai Traditional Village Along the Beijing-Shanxi Ancient Post Road

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Received: 26 April 2026; Accepted: 18 May 2026; Published: 15 June 2026

Abstract:

The Beijing-Shanxi Ancient Post Road served as the core official road connecting Shanxi with the capital during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Traditional villages along the road converge diverse cultural information including post station transmission, military affairs, commerce and architecture. Xiaozhai Village, located in the Jinzhong section of the post road, is a typical fortress settlement with well-preserved architectural relics, distinctive regional features and clear historical traces in ridge decorations. Taking the ridge decorations of Xiaozhai Village as the research object, this paper adopts field investigation, literature research, comparative analysis and image interpretation methods to systematically sort out their morphological types, pattern themes and carving techniques. It explains the internal relationship between decorative characteristics, post road culture, traditional construction norms of Taiyuan Prefecture and folk aesthetic orientation, and reveals their cultural connotations and heritage values. The research provides empirical materials and academic references for the protection, inheritance and in-depth research on architectural decorations of traditional villages along the Beijing-Shanxi Ancient Post Road.

Keywords:

Beijing-Shanxi Ancient Post Road, Xiaozhai Village, Ridge Decoration, Architectural Characteristics, Cultural Connotation

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Beijing-Shanxi Ancient Post Road functioned as a vital traffic artery connecting the capital region and Shanxi for government decree transmission, personnel exchange and material transportation. Starting from Huitongguan in Beijing, the post road crosses the Taihang Mountains via Jingxing Pass to reach Taiyuan Prefecture, linking settlements and resources between Shanxi and Hebei, and gradually forming a continuous linear cultural heritage corridor. The Jinzhong section (from Zhuanjing Village to Yaoluo Village in Yuci) is situated in the hinterland of Taiyuan Prefecture, adjacent to Pingding Prefecture. It acts as a key node of the post route as well as a frontier for the exchange

and integration of diverse architectural cultures. Most villages along the road retain physical architectural relics of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Their decorative practices not only follow the regional construction norms of Taiyuan Prefecture but also bear unique cultural imprints due to frequent exchanges along the post road.

Xiaozhai Village is under the jurisdiction of Wujinshan Town, Yuci District, Jinzhong City. Located at the intersection of the Beijing-Shanxi Ancient Post Road and Beijing-Shaanxi Ancient Post Road, it is a representative fortress-type traditional village along the Ming and Qing post routes. Nestled against Wujinshan Mountain and surrounded by gullies on three sides, the village features a terrain higher in the north and lower in the south. Enclosed by fortress walls in history, it undertook dual functions of defense and residence. A large number of well-preserved Ming and Qing dwellings, temple buildings and opera stages remain in the village, among which Wuni Pavilion is a county-level cultural relic protection unit, and many other cultural relic sites have been registered in the Third National Cultural Relics Census. As a well-preserved traditional village along the post road, Xiaozhai Village boasts rich types of architectural decorations. The ridge, as the visual core at the top of buildings, centrally reflects local craftsmanship, folk aesthetic tastes and value orientation, making it a typical sample for studying architectural decoration culture of post road settlements.

With the increasing attention paid to rural revitalization and cultural heritage protection, the linear cultural heritage of the Beijing-Shanxi Ancient Post Road has gradually entered the academic vision. However, existing research mainly focuses on textual research of post road routes and macro analysis of architectural styles, while special studies on micro decorations of specific villages are still insufficient, and targeted research on ridge decorations remains blank. The ridge decorations of Xiaozhai Village embody the common characteristics of dwellings in Taiyuan Prefecture and form a unique style influenced by cultural exchanges along the post road. Meanwhile, they are facing threats from natural weathering, artificial modification and development activities. It is urgent to carry out systematic investigation and research to clarify decorative features and explore cultural connotations, so as to provide a reliable basis for protection and inheritance.

1.2. Research Significance

Theoretically, taking the ridge decorations of Xiaozhai Village as the breakthrough point, this paper systematically summarizes their types, patterns and technological characteristics, filling the research gap in special studies on ridge decorations of traditional villages along the Beijing-Shanxi Ancient Post Road and expanding the research scope of traditional dwelling decorations in Shanxi. By revealing the internal correlation between ridge decorations, post road culture and regional architecture of Taiyuan Prefecture, it deepens the understanding of the integration mechanism of linear cultural heritage and regional architectural decoration, and provides referable ideas and methods for the study of similar post road settlement decorations.

Practically, the on-site investigation fully records the existing information of ridge decorations, offering direct empirical support for the protection and renovation of architectural decorations in Xiaozhai Village. Meanwhile, exploring the folk beliefs, living customs and post road cultural connotations contained in ridge decorations helps enhance villagers' awareness of protection, promote the adaptive reuse of

traditional village heritage along the post road, and better serve the revitalization of rural culture.

1.3. Research Methods and Scope

Based on field investigations, the author conducted on-site surveys in Xiaozhai Village for many times from 2019 to 2025, collecting original data of ridge decorations comprehensively through photography, mapping, interviews and written records to establish a complete research archive. Meanwhile, referring to classics such as *A History of Chinese Architecture*, *Regulations on Qing-style Construction*, *Shanxi Dwellings*, as well as local chronicles including *Yuci County Chronicle* and *Taiyuan Prefecture Chronicle*, this paper sorts out the historical evolution of the post road, regional architectural traditions and relevant theories of ridge decoration. It conducts a horizontal comparison of ridge decorations between Xiaozhai Village, the core area of Taiyuan Prefecture, Pingding Prefecture and Fenzhou Prefecture to analyze similarities and differences and reveal the characteristics of regional cultural integration. Collected pattern images are sorted and interpreted to elaborate their artistic features and cultural implications.

The research scope is limited to ridge decorations of existing Ming and Qing traditional buildings in Xiaozhai Village, including main ridges, inclined ridges and tile ends of residential courtyards (No.10, 41, 53, 58, 60 and others in Menli), temples (Lvzu Altar, Shenqi Palace) and opera stages (Wuni Pavilion). Emphasis is placed on analyzing type composition, pattern features, carving craftsmanship and cultural connotation.

1.4. Research Status

Domestic research on traditional dwelling decorations in Shanxi has accumulated certain achievements. Wang Jinping's *Shanxi Dwellings* divides Shanxi dwelling regions according to natural environment, historical changes and dialect distribution, clarifying the regional characteristics of Jinzhong dwellings and laying a foundation for the regional comparative research of this paper. Yan Wengang's *A Study on Wall Head Decorations of Ancient Taiyuan Prefecture* proposes that the research on Ming and Qing architectural decorations should be combined with the administrative scope of prefectures, providing ideas for the discussion of regional affiliation of Xiaozhai Village. Lou Qingxi's *Roof Art* systematically discusses the forms and decorative features of traditional roofs, offering theoretical references for this study.

In terms of research on the Beijing-Shanxi Ancient Post Road, Zhang Xiangong's *A Study on Traffic Geography of Shanxi in the Ming and Qing Dynasties* textualizes post road routes and post station settings, revealing the influence of the post road on local development. Scholars such as Wang Ziyao analyze the traditional landscape characteristics along the Eight Taihang Passes from the perspective of cultural routes, yet none involve village ridge decorations. Existing studies on Xiaozhai Village mainly focus on village pattern and wall head decorations, while special and systematic research on ridge decorations is still lacking, which constitutes the research focus and innovation direction of this paper.

2. Overview of the Research Area and Architectural Background of Xiaozhai Village

2.1. Overview of the Jinzhong Section of the Beijing-Shanxi Ancient Post Road

The Jinzhong section of the Beijing-Shanxi Ancient Post Road is mainly located in Yuci District, Jinzhong City, covering the area from Zhuanjing Village to Yaoluo Village. Affiliated to Taiyuan Prefecture in the Ming and Qing dynasties, it was an essential passage for Taiyuan Prefecture to enter the capital via Pingding Prefecture, where post station transmission, commerce and military culture converged and integrated. According to Water and Land Routes of the World and General Chronicle of Shanxi, post stations such as Mingqian Post and Tai'an Post were set up along the road. Most villages along the route undertook functions of residence, defense and commerce, gradually forming two major settlement types: fortress-type and commercial-type settlements.

Located in the loess hilly area with widespread loess and sufficient brick and tile raw materials, this area provided stable material conditions for traditional architectural construction. As the border area between Taiyuan Prefecture and Pingding Prefecture, local architectural culture presents the feature of “consistent mainstream and integrated marginal style”, maintaining the core architectural characteristics of Taiyuan Prefecture while absorbing decorative styles from Pingding Prefecture. The smooth post road drove economic and cultural exchanges, enabling the infiltration of crafts and aesthetics from various regions, which laid an important environmental foundation for the formation and development of ridge decorations in Xiaozhai Village.

2.2. Village and Architectural Background of Xiaozhai Village

Xiaozhai Village is situated in the loess hilly area about 19 kilometers northeast of Yuci urban area, near Provincial Highway 216, at the intersection of the ancient Beijing-Shanxi and Beijing-Shaanxi official roads with a special geographical location. According to Brief Chronicle of Yuci Villages, in the early Ming Dynasty, the Zhao clan moved here from Jiezhou via Hongtong and gradually formed a stable fortress village. Based on defensive functions and feng shui concepts, the village is surrounded by gullies on three sides with only the east side accessible, easy to defend and difficult to attack. The whole village was enclosed by fortress walls in history, and relics of residual walls and village gates still exist today. In 2014, villagers moved as a whole to a new village east of the original gate, keeping the ancient village buildings relatively intact. There are 7 immovable cultural relics in the village, including Wuni Pavilion (county-level cultural relic protection unit) and 6 cultural relic sites registered in the Third National Cultural Relics Census.

Traditional buildings in Xiaozhai Village are mainly relics of the Ming and Qing dynasties, covering residential houses, temples and opera stages. Gable and hip roofs dominate the roof forms, and only Wuni Pavilion adopts the combined roof style of one hall and one rolling shed. Architectural decorations are concentrated on ridges, wall heads, screen walls and heaven-earth niches. As the visual focus at the top of buildings, ridge decorations feature exquisite craftsmanship and rich themes, inheriting the regional style of Taiyuan Prefecture and integrating cultural elements of the post road, standing out as a highlight of village architectural decorations.

Affected by natural erosion, tourism development and improper renovation, some ridges suffer from damage, component loss and style destruction. For instance, the sparrow braces of Wuni Pavilion have been replaced with modern components, and ridge beasts of some residential houses are missing, making systematic protection and research urgent.

3. Types and Structural Characteristics of Ridge Decorations in Xiaozhai Village

Following traditional construction concepts and adapting to local material and technological conditions, ridge decorations in Xiaozhai Village are dominated by gable roof ridges with concentrated decorative parts and standardized structures. Divided by location and function, they are categorized into main ridges and inclined ridges. Tile ends, as auxiliary components, together form a complete ridge decoration system with the above two types.

3.1. Types and Structure of Main Ridge Decorations

Located at the horizontal axis where two roof slopes intersect, the main ridge is the core of ridge decoration, and its complexity directly reflects the grade and scale of buildings. The main ridges of Xiaozhai Village are mainly made of bricks and tiles with round carving as the main technique, divided into two types.

Ordinary main ridges are mostly applied to common residential courtyards such as No.22, 35 and 49 in Menli, with simple structures arranged continuously in independent units of three bricks. The main decorations are round carved flowers including treasure flowers, lotus and chrysanthemum, featuring concise lines and plain shapes, balancing practicality and aesthetics. Ridge beasts at both ends are simple and unsophisticated without the solemn momentum of official buildings, reflecting the aesthetic orientation of folk architecture.

Complex main ridges are used for large-scale and high-grade buildings such as the main houses of No.58 and 60 in Menli and public buildings including Wuni Pavilion, featuring complex structures and segmented layout with clear layers. The main ridge of No.58 main house is divided into three sections, decorated with grass dragons on both sides and phoenix in the middle, with dragon and phoenix images hidden among flowers and mountains, complying with traditional grade regulations and carrying auspicious implications. The main ridge of No.60 main house is divided into five sections, with grass dragons on both sides and peony, lotus and treasure flower arranged in the middle in sequence. Combining round carving, openwork carving and relief carving with exquisite workmanship, it is a representative work of main ridges in the village.

Structurally, all adopt traditional gable main ridge construction with clear layers including ridge tiles, upper and lower mixed bricks, vertical slabs, tile strips and gutter tiles. Later renovations basically follow the original system, well preserving the craftsmanship characteristics of the Ming and Qing dynasties. The height and length of the main ridge are coordinated with the building volume, not only stabilizing the roof and shielding rainwater but also significantly improving the artistic effect of buildings.

3.2. Types and Structure of Inclined Ridge Decorations

Extending vertically downward from both ends of the main ridge to the roof corners, inclined ridges echo the style of main ridges and jointly shape the overall roof image. Made of bricks and tiles with relief carving techniques, inclined ridges in Xiaozhai Village are mainly decorated with lotus and chrysanthemum patterns, arranged continuously in single-brick units with a strong sense of order.

Lotus inclined ridges are the most widely used in residential houses and temples, themed on lotus flowers, leaves and stems with stretched lines and full shapes. They symbolize noble character and imply family harmony and neighborhood concord by the homophony of “lotus”. Chrysanthemum inclined ridges are mostly applied to some main houses and wing rooms with clear petal layers and neat carving, symbolizing perseverance and implying peace and good fortune via the homophony of “chrysanthemum”. With a simple linear shape adapting to the gable roof form, inclined ridges coordinate with the roof slope in length and assist in fixing the roof. Ridge beasts are set at the junction of inclined and main ridges with simple shapes consistent with the main ridge, enhancing the overall integrity.

3.3. Types and Structure of Tile End Decorations

Located at the end of eave tiles, tile ends mainly protect the eaves and prevent rainwater infiltration, enriching roof details with patterns. All tile ends in Xiaozhai Village are round with unified specifications and concise patterns, forming a stable decorative language.

Floral pattern tile ends are dominated by treasure flower, lotus and chrysanthemum with condensed shapes, echoing main ridges and inclined ridges. Geometric pattern tile ends are composed of squares, circles and rhombuses with regular arrangement, reflecting simple and practical aesthetics. Auspicious symbol tile ends are mainly decorated with Chinese character “Shou” (longevity) and square sheng pattern, expressing good wishes for longevity and auspiciousness.

With unified diameter and neat installation, tile ends meet structural requirements and enhance the overall decorative effect with details, forming a complete visual system of ridges together with main ridges and inclined ridges.

4. 4 Pattern Characteristics and Cultural Implications of Ridge Decorations in Xiaozhai Village

4.1. Classification of Pattern Themes

4.1.1. Floral Patterns

Florals are the dominant decorative theme of ridges in Xiaozhai Village, covering main ridges, inclined ridges and tile ends, represented by treasure flower, lotus, chrysanthemum and peony with definite implications closely related to folk life.

Integrating the forms of lotus and peony with Buddhist auspicious connotations, treasure flowers are full and dignified, symbolizing good fortune, perfection, wealth and health, reflecting the infiltration of Buddhist culture into folk decorations. Elegant and pure lotus symbolizes noble character and implies harmony via homophony. Upright and tough chrysanthemum symbolizes perseverance and implies good luck and peace via homophony. Peony is mostly applied to the main ridges of high-grade courtyards with elegant shapes, symbolizing prosperity and wealth and reflecting the economic and social status of household owners.

4.1.2. Animal Patterns

Animal patterns are mainly distributed on main ridges, dominated by dragon, phoenix and ridge beasts with usage abiding by traditional hierarchy and simple shapes. Dragon patterns appear implicitly hidden among flowers and plants, reflecting

folk worship of dragons and yearning for authority and good fortune. Paired phoenix and dragon patterns imply prosperity of family and good luck. Ridge beasts have concise shapes with the implication of guarding houses and expelling evil spirits and disasters, reflecting folk demands for safety.

4.2. Pattern Layout and Artistic Characteristics

The ridge patterns of Xiaozhai Village follow the principles of symmetry, balance and orderly rhythm, coordinating with building structures. Main ridges mostly adopt segmented layout with clear logical layers; inclined ridges are arranged in repeated units to form rhythmic beauty; tile ends are evenly distributed to echo upper patterns, achieving overall harmony and unity.

Artistically, they are characterized by simplicity and conciseness, straightforward implications and exquisite craftsmanship. Patterns avoid excessive complexity and focus on practicality and aesthetics; each theme carries definite auspicious implications deeply integrated with folk customs; relief carving, round carving and openwork carving are comprehensively adopted with smooth lines and full shapes, embodying local craftsmanship level.

4.3. Cultural Implications of Patterns

Ridge patterns carry multiple cultural connotations including folk custom, religion and post road culture. At the folk custom level, themed on wealth, harmony, longevity and peace, they directly reflect people's life ideals. At the religious level, themes such as treasure flowers show the influence of Buddhist culture, forming local characteristics integrated with folk aesthetics. At the post road cultural level, the complex decorations of high-grade courtyards reflect economic accumulation brought by post road commerce, and diverse patterns embody cross-regional aesthetic exchanges, forming the unique decorative style of Xiaozhai Village.

5. Carving Craftsmanship of Ridge Decorations in Xiaozhai Village

Ridge decorations in Xiaozhai Village adopt a combination of relief carving, round carving and openwork carving with mature techniques tailored to materials. Relief carving is the most widely used for inclined ridges, tile ends and partial main ridges, featuring raised patterns, distinct layers and smooth lines with balanced durability and expressiveness. Round carving is applied to main ridge flowers, dragons and phoenixes, presenting three-dimensional shapes with multi-angle appreciation. With complex craftsmanship and strong three-dimensional sense, it marks the building grade. Openwork carving enhances layers and permeability through hollowing, often combined with round carving and relief carving to boost artistic appeal. Craftsmen make full use of the hard texture and carving adaptability of bricks and tiles, selecting appropriate techniques to ensure decorative effect and service life, embodying the practical wisdom of folk construction.

Historically affiliated to Taiyuan Prefecture, the ridge decorations of Xiaozhai Village share high commonalities with the core area of Taiyuan Prefecture. In terms of type, they are dominated by gable main ridges and inclined ridges made of bricks and tiles, with decorative focuses on main ridges, inclined ridges and tile ends. Florals serve as the main patterns with a simple and grand style conforming to the folk aesthetics of Taiyuan Prefecture. Technically, they inherit the local tradition of combining round carving, relief carving and openwork carving, emphasizing the unity

of craftsmanship and practicality. Culturally, the connotations focus on good fortune, peace, family harmony and longevity, consistent with the folk culture of Taiyuan Prefecture.

6. Protection Status and Inheritance Suggestions of Ridge Decorations

6.1. Protection Status and Existing Problems

Although traditional buildings and ridge decorations in Xiaozhai Village have attracted certain attention, they still face multiple pressures. In terms of natural weathering, brick and tile components suffer from long-term wind and rain erosion, resulting in cracking, efflorescence, fading, blurred patterns and even falling off, especially serious for round carvings on main ridges. In terms of human influence, some courtyards are poorly managed after the relocation of the ancient village, causing component damage and loss; modern materials and construction methods are adopted in tourism development and partial renovations, damaging original forms and historical information and reducing cultural relic value. The protection system is imperfect, lacking special planning and professional technical support. Relying only on village-level daily care, it faces insufficient funds and lack of professional teams, making scientific restoration difficult. Craftsmanship inheritance faces a fault: the younger generation works outside, traditional carving skills lack successors, and the shortage of craftsmen hinders long-term inheritance.

6.2. Protection and Inheritance Suggestions

First, carry out comprehensive investigation and digital archiving. Organize professional personnel to survey, map and record ridge decorations, establish information archives, and retain data of damaged components to provide a basis for restoration.

Second, implement scientific renovation and daily maintenance. Strive for special funds and employ professional ancient architecture teams to follow the principle of "restoring the old as the original". Repair damaged components by imitating traditional structures, craftsmanship and forms; establish regular inspection and maintenance mechanisms to slow down weathering.

Third, standardize tourism development and utilization. Delimit heritage protection scope, prohibit destructive reconstruction, incorporate ridge decoration culture into the exhibition system, enhance public awareness of protection, and achieve win-win between protection and utilization.

Fourth, strengthen inheritance and talent training. Enhance villagers' cognition through village history publicity and new media promotion; cooperate with vocational colleges and ancient architecture institutions to carry out skill training and cultivate local inheritors for the continuation of traditional craftsmanship.

Fifth, promote cultural adaptive reuse. Extract pattern and craft elements to develop cultural and creative products and decorative designs, integrate ridge culture into rural public spaces and cultural activities, realize the living inheritance of heritage, and boost rural cultural revitalization.

7. Conclusions

As a typical fortress village along the Beijing-Shanxi Ancient Post Road, Xiaozhai Village's ridge decorations are physical witnesses to the integration of regional architectural culture of Taiyuan Prefecture and exchange culture of the post road, featuring distinct regionality and contemporaneity in type, pattern and craftsmanship. Dominated by main ridges, inclined ridges and tile ends, the main ridges are divided into ordinary and complex types; inclined ridges take lotus and chrysanthemum as the main themes; tile ends feature unified patterns and standardized structures. Patterns are mainly florals, animals and auspicious symbols with orderly layout and rich implications. The craftsmanship integrates relief carving, round carving and openwork carving with mature skills and prominent local characteristics.

Inheriting the architectural tradition of Taiyuan Prefecture on the whole, the ridge decorations of Xiaozhai Village are also influenced by the decorative style of Pingding Prefecture, reflecting the cross-regional cultural integration promoted by the post road, and possessing important historical, artistic and scientific values. Currently, their protection is confronted with natural weathering, artificial damage, insufficient protection capacity and inheritance fault of craftsmanship. Sustainable protection can be realized through investigation and archiving, scientific renovation, standardized utilization, talent training and innovative adaptive reuse.

The systematic sorting of ridge decorations in Xiaozhai Village provides research samples for the study of architectural decorations of similar villages along the Beijing-Shanxi Ancient Post Road, and offers practical references for heritage protection and rural revitalization. Future research can further deepen the correlation between ridge decorations and post road systems, regional craft systems and social life changes, continuously explore their cultural values, and promote the living inheritance and innovative development of traditional architectural decoration heritage.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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