

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Symbolism and regional identity in Hakka vernacular decorative arts: Insights from Southern Jiangxi, Western Fujian, and Northeastern Guangdong, China

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Abstract

Hakka vernacular dwellings in the core regions of Jiangxi, Fujian, and Guangdong constitute a culturally continuous yet stylistically diverse architectural heritage; however, their decorative arts—and the symbolic meanings through which they articulate regional identity—remain comparatively underexamined, particularly from a cross-regional perspective. To address this aim, this study investigates vernacular architectural decoration in traditional Hakka dwellings across Southern Jiangxi, Western Fujian, and Northeastern Guangdong—the core regions of Hakka culture—using fieldwork, image-symbol analysis, and qualitative comparison. Fifteen representative dwellings are examined to identify regional variations and connections in roof, wall, and plinth ornamentation. The research aims to highlight the architectural individuality and cultural distinctions among different Hakka cultural areas, elucidate auspicious symbolism and underlying cultural concepts, and reveal how a continuous Hakka cultural identity is expressed through regional decorative practices, thereby contributing to heritage understanding, preservation, and creative reuse.

Keywords: Cultural core area; Hakka architectural; Vernacular decorative; Differences and connections

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Vernacular architecture in China, especially traditional dwellings, constitutes a living heritage with historical, cultural, and artistic value. Within this broader tradition, Hakka architecture has exerted a considerable influence on architectural development in Southeast Asia. The core Hakka region symbol analysis and qualitative comparison are characterized by diverse building styles, long-standing design principles, and rich decorative traditions. Representative examples include the Fujian Tulou (a UNESCO World Heritage Site), Jiangxi's enclosed buildings (Weilou), and Guangdong's dragon-shaped roundhouses (Weilongwu). In 2012, the Gannan Walled Villages were included in the "Tentative List of World Cultural Heritage Sites," and areas such as Shaoguan, Meizhou, and Heyuan are actively pursuing World Cultural Heritage recognition.

Collectively, these sites are receiving increasing national and international attention for their historical significance. In accordance with World Cultural Heritage nomination requirements and relevant provisions of the Cultural Relics Protection Law of the People's Republic of China, documentation has been compiled and archived on their construction histories, building techniques, and distinctive construction materials. These sites are also subject to ongoing research, conservation, and management by specialized institutions or designated personnel. Together, they exemplify Hakka vernacular architecture, reflect cultural continuity, and provide important evidence of the enduring legacy of Hakka culture across geographically adjacent and architecturally related regions.

1.2. Research problem

While Chinese vernacular architecture has gained scholarly interest, Hakka decorative arts remain underexplored and are often overshadowed by structural analyses. Most existing studies are descriptive, lack cross-regional comparisons, and treat ornamentation as a secondary. In particular, the symbolic meanings of decorative elements and their role in shaping regional identity in Southern Jiangxi, Western Fujian, and Northeastern Guangdong have received limited attention.

To address these gaps, the present study examines decorative elements in 15 representative Hakka dwellings, compares stylistic traits across roofs, walls, and plinths, and analyzes how cultural, ecological, and historical factors influence regional variation.

1.3. Existing studies

Existing research on Hakka vernacular architecture has primarily focused on architectural history, origins, typologies, spatial configurations, structural characteristics, and conservation. Decorative arts, by contrast, have typically been treated as a secondary concern. Key theoretical perspectives on historical urban forms (Schinz, 1996) and modern architectural visions (Weston & Blondal, 2002) have rarely been applied to analyses of Hakka ornamentation. Predominant methodologies include fieldwork, surveys, and archival analysis. Notable contributions to the field encompass regional overviews classified by ethnic distinctions (Q. Wu, 2008), typological documentation and analysis (H. Huang, 2003; H. Huang, 2020; W. Wu, 2009), and localized case studies (Z. Chen & Li, 2007). While some scholarship has addressed decorative elements, these studies are largely descriptive and case-based, with limited systematic comparisons or explicit theoretical framing. Recent work also highlights the role of digital heritage approaches (Barboutsis *et al.*, 2023) and artistic reproduction in documenting and representing

decorative traditions. Nevertheless, a significant gap remains in comprehensive comparative studies of Hakka architectural decorative arts.

1.4. Research questions and objectives

This study aims to systematically analyze the decorative arts of Hakka vernacular architecture in Southern Jiangxi, Western Fujian, and Northeastern Guangdong by addressing existing gaps. Using a comparative approach, it seeks to clarify regional stylistic characteristics of decorative elements. The central research question guiding this study is: What are the connections and distinctions in the decorative arts of vernacular architecture across the core Hakka cultural regions?

To further explore this inquiry, the study addresses three sub-questions:

- (i) What is the current state of decorative arts in Hakka vernacular architecture?
- (ii) How do decorative elements exhibit regional distinctiveness across architectural zones, such as the roof, body, and plinth?
- (iii) What factors contribute to regional variations in Hakka architectural decorations?

Accordingly, the study objectives are:

- (i) To investigate and categorize decorative elements in 15 selected dwellings across three regions.
- (ii) To compare regional variations in decorative designs across the roof, body, and plinth zones.
- (iii) To analyze the underlying factors influencing regional variations in decorative elements.

By addressing these objectives, the research contributes both theoretically and practically to understanding and applying regional decorative features in vernacular architecture.

1.5. Article structure

This article is organized as follows: Section 1 introduces the research background. Section 2 reviews relevant literature and identifies gaps. Section 3 outlines the analytical framework, including comparative and symbolic analyses. Section 4 compares decorative arts across different regions. Section 5 examines factors contributing to regional variation. Finally, Section 6 concludes with key findings, discusses limitations, and suggests directions for future research.

2. Literature review

Hakka vernacular architecture is primarily distributed across Northeastern Guangdong, Western Fujian, and Southern Jiangxi, which together constitute the core Hakka cultural region (G. Xie *et al.*, 2022). Representative

dwelling types include Guangdong's Weilongwu (dragon-shaped roundhouses), Fujian's Tulou (earthen buildings), and Jiangxi's Weilou (enclosed buildings). These forms reflect distinct regional characteristics while embodying Hakka cultural traditions.

Shaped by migration histories and environmental adaptation, Hakka dwellings exhibit structural and decorative features closely tied to cultural identity and esthetic philosophy (K.D. Lowe, 2012). Ancestral halls, which are central to these settlements, symbolize family bonds and collective unity (Y. Chen, 2023). However, rapid urbanization, uneven conservation capacity, and limited adaptive design innovation increasingly threaten their continuity.

Hakka decorative arts play a crucial role in preserving heritage and expressing cultural identity. Decorative motifs convey shared values and promote cultural cohesion (X. Lei *et al.*, 2023). Integrating these elements into modern design can support the transmission of intangible heritage and foster public appreciation (X. Qiu *et al.*, 2023). Accordingly, Hakka ornamentation not only conserves tradition but also provides a resource for contemporary creative practice (P. Wang, 2024).

2.1. Historical evolution of Hakka decorative arts

The historical evolution of Hakka decoration reflects broader cultural changes and social transitions. During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), defensive priorities constrained ornamentation. By the late Qing dynasty (1644–1912), affluent families introduced more elaborate carving and painted decoration, sometimes incorporating Western stylistic influences (C. Yao, 2017). In the Republican period (1912–1949), some Guangdong examples adopted hybrid architectural styles (P. Wang, 2024). After 1949, traditional construction practices declined; however, renewed cultural awareness has contributed to a revival of interest in Hakka heritage and decoration (J. Huang *et al.*, 2013).

Current research broadly exhibits three patterns. First, regional overviews address ethnic identity and architectural culture (e.g., *Guangdong Folk Houses* [Y. Lu & Y. Wei, 2008] and *Chinese Hakka Architectural Culture* [Q. Wu, 2008]), but these accounts are largely descriptive. Second, studies focusing on specific building types—such as Tulou (H. Huang, 2003; R. Lin, 1995) and Weilongwu (Q. Wu, 2008)—tend to emphasize spatial form and construction while paying limited attention to ornamentation. Third, localized case studies (e.g., Z. Chen & Q. Li, 2007, on Meixian dwellings) interpret decorative elements within broader cultural contexts.

Despite these contributions, few comparative studies systematically encompass Guangdong, Fujian, and Jiangxi,

and regional culture, history, and social structure are often insufficiently integrated—thereby limiting a deeper understanding of decorative diversity across the core Hakka region.

2.2. Classification and characteristics of Hakka decorative arts

Hakka decorative arts are commonly categorized by material, technique, and motif. Drawing on Peircean semiotics, L. Guo & H. Li (2020) and X. Xie *et al.* (2022) classify motifs as icons (e.g., animals, plants), indices (elements associated with protection or blessing), and symbols (abstract or textual elements), thereby linking decorative form to Hakka esthetics, values, and spirituality.

Nevertheless, many studies remain either regional-specific or component-specific, and cross-regional comparisons of symbolic usage are limited. Such comparative analyses could clarify broader regional trends and provide a more robust basis for cultural product development.

Previous research has largely focused either on decorative styles and components (L. Guo & H. Li, 2020) or on symbolic meanings and craft techniques (H. X. Lü, 2016; Q. Z. Wu, 1998; Q. Z. Xiong, 2010). Scholars generally agree that, due to practical constraints, Hakka architecture often favors simple and functional forms, with relatively restrained ornamentation in defensive and everyday living spaces (C. Yao, 2017). By contrast, ritual spaces frequently exhibit denser and more elaborate decoration; P. Wang (2024) notes this functional contrast in decorative system complexity.

Nonetheless, the absence of comparative frameworks spanning the three key regions restricts insights into how symbolic forms vary regionally and how they articulate regional identity within a shared Hakka cultural context.

2.3. Cultural value of decorative arts

Hakka decorative arts convey ethical values, spiritual beliefs, and historical memory (Q. Z. Wu, 1998; C. Yao, 2017). Auspicious motifs—often associated with fertility, longevity, and harmony—align with Confucian moral ideals, while religious elements commonly draw on Daoist and Buddhist concepts (J. Huang *et al.*, 2013). Architectural forms such as Weilongwu also encode migration histories and reinforce group identity (W. Wu, 2010).

However, much of the existing literature discusses symbolic themes in generalized terms, with limited attention to regional distinctions in meaning and usage. Further research is needed to reveal localized cultural expressions across Northeastern Guangdong, Western Fujian, and Southern Jiangxi. In this context, cultural

space theory offers a useful lens for understanding how decorative elements shape regional distinctiveness and mediate human–environment relationships (Fei, 2019; Wei, 2019). Applying this lens to Hakka decoration can clarify how symbolism anchors identity within place-based cultural landscapes.

2.4. Summary of research gaps

Recent studies have tended to prioritize spatial form over ornamentation. For example, L. Guo & H. Li (2020) analyzed spatial differences in Guangdong, and Y. Chen (2023) compared Tulou and Weilongwu houses, but decorative elements received limited analytical attention. P. Wang (2024) discussed broader trends in vernacular architecture, whereas G. Xie *et al.* (2022) introduced a more international and comparative perspective.

Overall, few studies systematically examine decoration arts across the three core regions of Northeastern Guangdong, Western Fujian, and Southern Jiangxi. Even Q. Fei's (2019) discussion of regional variation does not explicitly integrate these zones. Moreover, an integrated analytical framework that combines cultural space theory with semiotic interpretation remains underdeveloped. This gap constrains understanding of how decorative arts both shape and reflect regional identity within Hakka vernacular architecture. Bridging this gap is therefore essential for advancing scholarship on vernacular cultural expression.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study examines the characteristics and regional variations of decorative elements in Hakka vernacular architecture across Northeastern Guangdong, Western Fujian, and Southern Jiangxi, with the aim of identifying both shared features and region-specific expressions within the core Hakka cultural regions.

To achieve this objective, a qualitative comparative case-study framework is employed, incorporating cross-regional comparisons of representative dwellings. This approach is particularly suitable for the study of architectural ornamentation, which often involves symbolic, intangible, and context-dependent attributes that are difficult to quantify.

Data collection integrates field integration and interviews, while analysis is based on visual documentation, image interpretation, and symbolic decoding (Figure 1). The comparative framework enables systematic cross-regional examination, revealing how historical trajectories, environmental conditions, and spatial organization shape localized decorative expressions. At the same time, the case-study approach adds depth by uncovering symbolic meanings and localized adaptations within broader Hakka cultural contexts.

This design facilitates dual-level analysis: At the micro level, it examines individual motifs and ornaments; at the macro level, it evaluates distribution patterns across the three regions. Together, these levels provide a comprehensive view of regional characteristics in Hakka decorative arts.

3.2. Data sources and collection

3.2.1. Fieldwork

Fieldwork documented the structural and decorative features of Hakka vernacular architecture through participant observation. From 2016 to 2024, systematic surveys were conducted in nine representative counties across Southern Jiangxi, Western Fujian, and Northeastern Guangdong, including Meixian, Jiaoling, Dapu, Yongding, Liancheng, Shanghang, Hua'an, Longnan, and Ganxian (Figure 2A).

The research sample initially comprised 77 residential buildings distributed across the three core Hakka cultural regions. All selected buildings are recognized as national

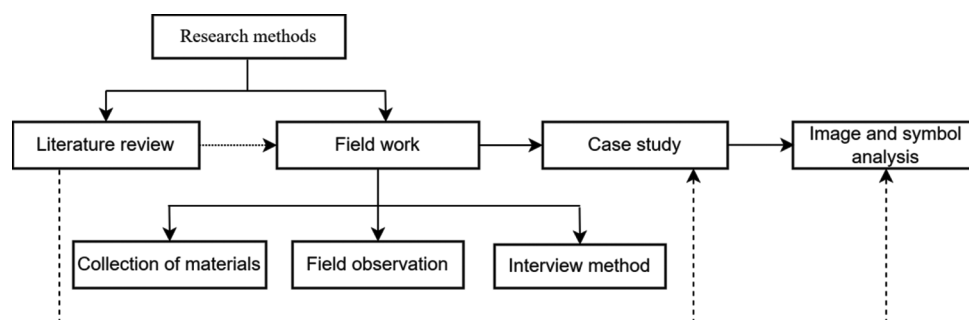


Figure 1. Research plan for the present study
Source: Flowchart by the authors

or provincial cultural heritage sites, with many inscribed as components of World Cultural Heritage properties. These buildings were selected for their relatively high degree of decorative richness and distinct local characteristics.

From this pool, 15 representative dwellings—five from each region—were selected for detailed comparative analysis, accounting for approximately 20 percent of the surveyed cases. Most of these buildings date to the mid-to-late Qing dynasty. Apart from regional and environmental differences, their construction periods are broadly comparable, thereby minimizing chronological bias in the analysis of decorative variation.

Spatial layouts, functional organization, and decorative styles were documented through direct observation, photography, videography, and measured drawings. Collaboration with local homeowners and cultural stakeholders facilitated semi-structured interviews with scholars and heritage practitioners, providing valuable insights into the symbolic and sociocultural contexts of decorative practices.

3.2.2. Documentary sources and archival materials

To contextualize the historical and cultural dimensions of Hakka decorative arts, this study collected documentary

sources such as local gazetteers, historical records, and academic publications. These materials provided a theoretical and historical foundation for interpreting regional variation and the developmental trajectories of decorative elements. Most referenced sites are officially designated at the national, provincial, or municipal level and are characterized by relatively good preservation conditions.

3.2.3. Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with homeowners, local residents, heritage inheritors, and cultural scholars to better understand construction techniques, craftsmanship traditions, and the cultural significance of decorative elements. Interview topics included production processes, materials, and symbolic meanings. Conducted in a semi-structured and informal manner, these interviews generated qualitative insights that were integrated into the broader interpretive analysis.

3.3. Data analysis

Image-based analysis and symbol interpretation were used to examine decorative elements across the three regions, enabling the interpretation of visual forms, symbolic

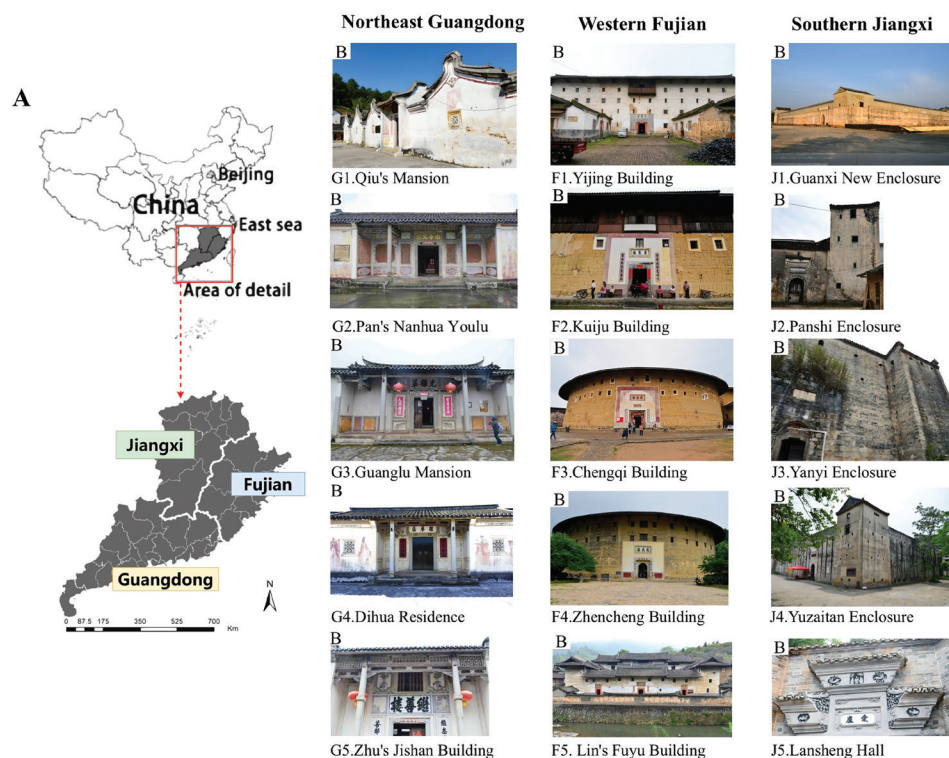


Figure 2. Location and research scope of selected vernacular architectures. (A) Map showing the geographical locations of Jiangxi, Fujian, and Guangdong provinces in China. (B) Analyzed dwellings from Northeastern Guangdong (G1–G5), Western Fujian (F1–F5), and Southern Jiangxi (J1–J5)

Source: (A) Map by the authors and (B) Photos by the authors (2025)

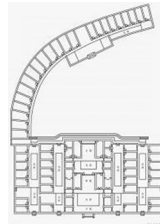
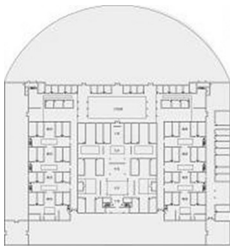
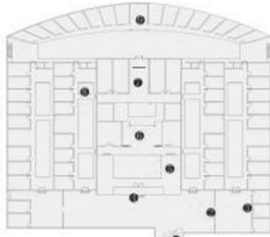
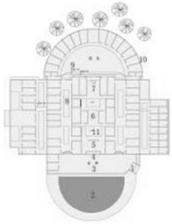
meanings, and cultural significance (J.A. Walker, 1989). To support systematic and replicable coding, a content-analysis procedure was applied:

- (i) Case selection: A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 15 representative Hakka dwellings (five per region) based on historical significance, preservation integrity, and representativeness of regional typologies (Table 1 and Figure 2B).
- (ii) Unitization: Decorative elements were coded within three primary architectural units: roof, body, and plinth. The body unit was further subdivided into gatehouse/gate, walls, wooden-frame decorations, and ancestral halls. This framework clarifies the functional and symbolic roles of each decorative category and provides a foundation for cross-

regional comparison.





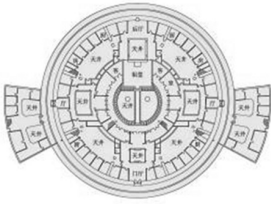

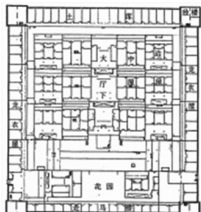
- (iii) Data reduction: Visual records were systematically screened and summarized to extract key attributes, including motif type and style, material, and craft techniques. This step ensured consistency in coding across regions and building types.
- (iv) Data comparison: A horizontal comparative approach was used to examine the frequency, distribution, and co-occurrence patterns of typical decorative elements across the selected cases. This approach provided comparative evidence for identifying regional characteristics.
- (v) Interpretation: Drawing on semiotic theory, decorative images and symbols were interpreted in relation to their meanings, cultural origins, and

Table 1. Selected vernacular architectures

Code	Name	Year	Location	Floor plan diagram
Northeast Guangdong				
G1	Qiu's Mansion	1884	Bailong Xinlian village, Xiyang town, Meixian district, Meizhou city	
G2	Pan's Nanhua Youlu	1886–1904	Qiaoxiang village, Nankou town, Meixian district, Meizhou city	
G3	Zhang's Guanglu Mansion	1901–1908	Chelong village, Xihe town, Dabu county	
G4	Qiu's Dihua Residence	1918	Bailong Xinlian village, Xiyang town, Meixian district, Meizhou city	

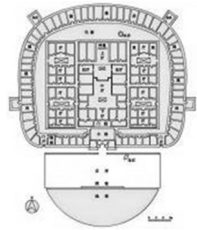
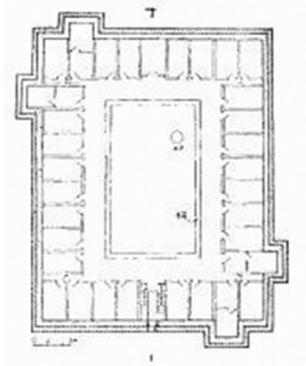
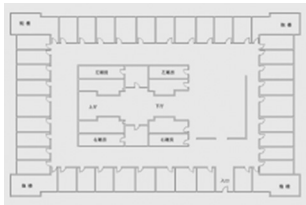

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Table 1. (Continued)

Code	Name	Year	Location	Floor plan diagram
G5	Zhu's Jishan Building	1902–1920	Qiaoxiang village, Nankou town, Meixian district, Meizhou city	
Western Fujian				
F1	Chen's Yijing Building	1806	Shangyang village, Gaopi town, Yongding district, Longyan city	
F2	Lin's Kuiju Building	1834	Hongkeng village, Hukeng town, Yongding district, Longyan city	
F3	Jiang's Chengqi Building	1628–1709	Gaobei village, Gaotou town, Yongding district, Longyan city	
F4	Lin's Zhencheng Building	1912–1917	Hongkeng village, Hukeng town, Yongding district, Longyan city	
F5	Lin's Fuyu Building	1880–1883	Hukeng town, Yongding district, Longyan city	
Southern Jiangxi				
J1	Xu's Guansi New Enclosure	1798–1827	Xinwei village, Guanxi town, Longnan county	

(Cont'd...)

Table 1. (Continued)

Code	Name	Year	Location	Floor plan diagram
J2	Panshi Enclosure	1579–1610	Wushi village, Yangcun town, Longnan county	
J3	Lai's Yanyi Enclosure	1650–1677	Yangcun town, Longnan county	
J4	Li's Yuzaitan Enclosure	1829–1838	Xinli village, Liren town, Longnan county	
J5	Lansheng Hall	1796–1820	Bailu village, Gan county	

Source: The floor plans for J1, J2, and J3 were adapted from existing literature (Zhang, 2001; Wan, 1999, 2001), while the remainder were drawn by the research team

sociohistorical contexts, with attention to factors shaping regional variation across Northeastern Guangdong, Western Fujian, and Southern Jiangxi.

3.4. Research scope and case selection

This study examines vernacular architectural decorative arts within the core Hakka dialect regions of Southern Jiangxi, Western Fujian, and Northeastern Guangdong. The geographic scope is defined based on the distribution of relatively concentrated Hakka-speaking areas, as outlined in the *Languages Atlas of China* (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Language Research Institute *et al.*, 2012). Accordingly, Hakka architectural traditions in other regions are not included in the analysis.

The temporal scope spans from the Ming and Qing dynasties to the Republic of China, as most extant Hakka vernacular structures date to these periods.

Case selection followed the principles of representativeness and comparability. Fifteen dwellings (five per region) were selected according to the following criteria (Table 1):

- Historicity: The selected structures date from the 19th and early 20th centuries, reflecting key phases in the development of Hakka vernacular decoration.
- Integrity: The selected buildings retain well-preserved decorative elements in the roof, body, and plinth zones, enabling a comprehensive analysis of traditional decorative practices.

- **Regionality:** Each case exemplifies distinctive architectural forms and decorative styles of its respective region, supporting interregional comparison of decorative variation.

4. Results

The study analyzes 15 representative Hakka dwellings from three regions. The selected buildings preserve essential architectural forms and display a wide range of decorative elements that reflect regional characteristics. Decorative features are mainly distributed across three architectural

zones: roof, body, and plinth. Major techniques include wood carving, stone carving, plaster sculpture, polychrome painting, and gold lacquer. Table 2 summarizes the coded frequency patterns of typical decorative elements across the three regions.

4.1. Roof

In Northeastern Guangdong, roofs often combine suspended-gable and flush-gable forms. High-status residences feature dragon-patterned ridge ornaments (e.g., G1) and glazed, scroll-patterned eave tiles (e.g.,

Table 2. Regional frequency of decorative elements across architectural zones

Zone	Subcategory	Decorative element	Technique	Northeastern Guangdong	Western Fujian	Southern Jiangxi	Key characteristics
Roof	Ridge end	Dragon/ <i>aoyu</i> ridge ornament	Lime/clay sculpture	—	—	○	Common in Northern China
		Swallow-tail ridge	Lime sculpture	○	○	—	Predominant in Northeastern Guangdong and Western Fujian
	Ridge body	Mosaic ridge ornament	Mosaic/lime sculpture	—	△	—	
		Coin-pattern ridge	Glazed ceramics	○	○	—	Functional for wind resistance
	Eaves	Glazed eaves tiles	Ceramic/glazed	●	○	—	Southern Jiangxi uses plain gray tiles.
	Gable	Five-element gable	Lime sculpture/painting	●	●	—	Unique to Northeastern Guangdong and Western Fujian
Body	Suspended fish	Decorative motifs	Lime/painting/wood carving	●	●	—	Unique to Northeastern Guangdong and Western Fujian
		Gourd-shaped loopholes	Stone carving	△	—	○	Distinctive in Southern Jiangxi
		Geometric loopholes	Stone/brick carving	—	●	●	Common in Western Fujian and Southern Jiangxi
	Exterior wall	Small stone windows	Stone/glazed carving	●	—	—	Unique to Northeastern Guangdong
		Archway	Scroll-pattern murals	○	—	—	Regional feature of Northeastern Guangdong
		Partitions	Gold-lacquered partition carvings	○	—	—	Regional feature of Northeastern Guangdong
	Interior wall	Murals	Painting/ink wash	●	—	—	Highly frequent in Northeastern Guangdong
	Columns	Western-style capitals	Wood carving	△	—	—	Influenced by Southeast Asian styles
	Wall	Screen wall decorations	Brick carving	—	—	○	Southern Jiangxi features; influenced by the Huizhou style
		Horsehead wall with decoration	Brick/lime sculpture	—	—	○	
	Beams	Melon-shaped column bracket	Wood carving/painting	○	△	—	Regional feature of Northeastern Guangdong
		Lion brackets	Wood carving/gold lacquer	●	△	—	Regional feature of Northeastern Guangdong
		Western-style corbels	Ironwork	○	—	—	Influenced by Western culture
Plinth	Flooring	Patterned flooring	Line engraving	●	—	—	Western Fujian and Southern Jiangxi use pebble flooring

Notes: ●: High frequency (≥70%); ○: Moderate frequency (30–70%); △: Low frequency (<30%); —: Absent

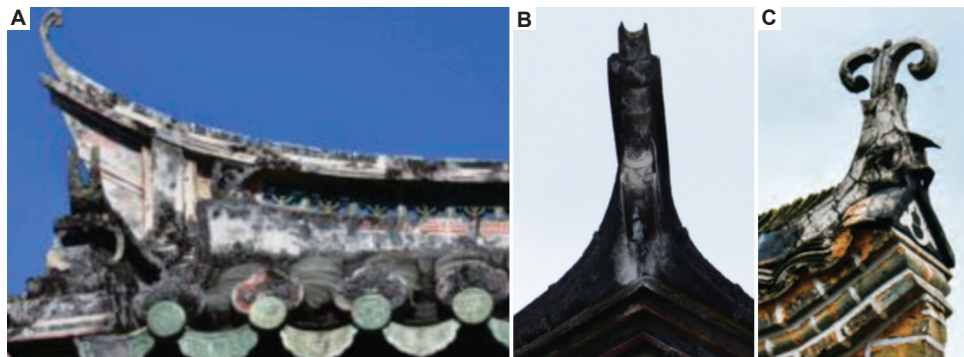


Figure 3. Ridge-end decorations: (A) Swallow-tail ridge (G3, Northeastern Guangdong); (B) Swallow-tail ridge (F5, Western Fujian); (C) Aoyu ridge (J2, Southern Jiangxi)

Source: Photos by the authors (2025)

G5), integrating functional requirements with auspicious symbolism. Notable examples include Zhang's Guanglu Mansion (G3), which incorporates swallow-tail ridges, and Zhu's Jishan Building (G5), where bat motifs on drip tiles reflect both folk and scholarly esthetics.

In Western Fujian, suspended gables predominated (F1–F5), with frequent use of swallow-tail ridges (F1) and more complex roof profiles such as tiered hip-and-gable forms (F5). Chen's Yijing Building (F1) employs peony and swastika motifs to convey prosperity and auspiciousness. Lin's Zhencheng Building (F4) introduces Western-style columns in the ancestral hall, indicating the selective incorporation of foreign elements during the late Qing period.

In Southern Jiangxi, roof decoration emphasizes functional considerations, with comparatively simplified roof forms (J1) and aquatic ridge motifs (J2), such as the mythical *aoyu* (鳌鱼, a fish-like ridge ornament associated with rainmaking and fire prevention), which symbolizes rainfall and protection against fire.

Despite regional differences, all three regions adopt sloped roofs suited to high rainfall. Swallow-tail ridges in Northeastern Guangdong and Western Fujian convey harmony and scholarly ideals (Figure 3A and B), whereas aquatic motifs in Southern Jiangxi reflect locally salient environmental concerns (Figure 3C). Frequency coding indicates that swallow-tail ridges and coin-patterned ridges appear in 60 percent of structures in both Northeastern Guangdong and Western Fujian.

4.2. Body

4.2.1. Gateways

Gateways in Northeastern Guangdong and Western Fujian follow standardized, symmetrical compositions. Qiu's

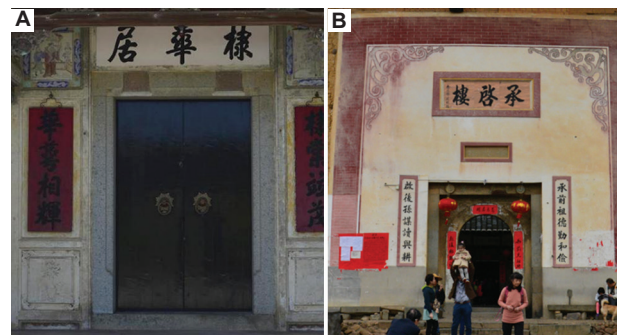


Figure 4. Gateway designs: (A) Seven-unit gate (G4); (B) Circular-rectangular hybrid gate (F3)

Source: Photos by the authors (2025)

Dihua Residence (G4) features a seven-unit gate with a central plaque and mural decoration, combining symbolic motifs with narrative imagery (Figure 4A). Motifs such as pomegranate vines and fans convey prosperity and cultural aspiration.

In Western Fujian Tulou architecture, gateways commonly adopt circular–rectangular hybrid forms, exemplified by the main entrance of F3. The entrance is framed by white plaster detailing against yellow rammed-earth walls and is adorned with lime-sculpted plaques; its balanced proportions enhance visual prominence (Figure 4B).

By contrast, Southern Jiangxi emphasizes defensive gateway forms, such as the Huizhou-style octagonal entrance at Lansheng Hall (J5), where ornamentation is comparatively restrained and includes simplified Five Blessings motifs. Across all three regions, inscribed plaques and paired couplets reinforce clan identity (e.g., G1, F4, and J3). In addition, doorstep stones carved with lions or *qilin* (麒麟; an auspicious mythological beast) recur as shared protective motifs.

4.2.2. Walls

In Northeastern Guangdong, walls typically combine rammed earth with lime sculpture and tile inlays at gateways and halls (e.g., G5), balancing defensive requirements with decorative expression. Western Fujian commonly uses raw earth coated with lime plaster to improve moisture resistance and incorporates fire-prevention partition walls (e.g., F4) adapted to local conditions. Southern Jiangxi often integrates rammed earth and brick and features dense defensive elements such as loopholes and artillery ports.

Frequency coding reveals distinct regional patterns. Gourd-shaped loopholes occur in 40 percent of Southern Jiangxi and 20 percent of Northeastern Guangdong cases and are absent in Western Fujian. Geometric loopholes occur in 80 percent of cases in both Western Fujian and Southern Jiangxi. In Northeastern Guangdong, carved stone windows and murals were observed in all cases (100%; Figure 5A). Five-element gables occur in 100 percent of Northeastern Guangdong and Western Fujian cases, whereas Huizhou-style horsehead walls occur in 40 percent of Southern Jiangxi cases (Figure 5B and C).

4.2.3. Wooden structural decorations

In Northeastern Guangdong, wooden decoration is primarily concentrated in ritual spaces aligned along the central axis—such as gateways, lower halls, central halls, upper halls, and ancestral shrines—whereas living and defensive areas are comparatively plain. High-status residences, such as Zhang's Guanglu Mansion (G3), feature robust beams with intricate carvings, including moonbeams, beam brackets, *que ti* (雀替; corbels), and *gua zhu* (瓜柱; melon-shaped column brackets). The ancestral shrine, especially its wall surface and framing elements, serves as a focal point and is richly adorned with flora and fauna motifs, peaches, and pomegranates, conveying both grandeur and reverence.

Western Fujian and Southern Jiangxi show similar spatial priorities but differ in decorative complexity. Western Fujian woodwork is generally less refined than that of Northeastern Guangdong, whereas Southern Jiangxi tends to favor simpler structural detailing.

Frequency analysis indicates clear regional variations:

- Lion brackets occur in 80 percent of Northeastern Guangdong cases (e.g., G4), 20 percent of Western Fujian cases, and are absent in Southern Jiangxi (Figure 6A).
- Gold-lacquered wooden partition carvings occur in 60 percent of Northeastern Guangdong cases (e.g., G3) and are absent in the other two regions (Figure 6B).

- Melon-shaped column-bracket details occur in 60 percent of Northeastern Guangdong cases and 20 percent of Western Fujian cases (Figure 6C).
- Figure 6D presents a representative bracket-detail sequence, including the short column and interlocking elements.

These findings underscore the prominence of symbolic wooden decorations in Northeastern Guangdong in contrast to the more function-oriented approach observed in Western Fujian and Southern Jiangxi.

4.2.4. Ancestral halls

In Western Fujian and Southern Jiangxi, ancestral halls function as ritual centers for worship, weddings, funerals, and clan ceremonies, thereby reinforcing kinship identity. Regardless of household socioeconomic status, ancestral halls tend to be consistently ornate compared with the relative simplicity of living quarters.

In Northeastern Guangdong, ancestral halls frequently incorporate gold-lacquered wood carving and scroll-shaped murals, reflecting reverence for Confucian ideals. For instance, the gilded plaque in Zhang's Guanglu Mansion (G3) highlights core virtues (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trust). Zhu's Jish Building (G5) also displays literati-themed mural subjects, such as *Tao Yuanming Admiring Chrysanthemums* (Figure 7), which symbolize moral integrity (Table 3).

In Western Fujian, ancestral halls blend traditional ritual esthetics with selectively adopted Western elements, integrating calligraphy and auspicious patterns with classical elements. For example, Lin's Zhencheng Building (F4) uses Western-style columns to support a peaked roof form. By contrast, Southern Jiangxi often integrates worship with daily living in a more pragmatic manner, exemplified by the minimally carved shrine of Xu's Guansi New Enclosure (J1), which contrasts with the more elaborate gold-lacquered interiors observed in Northeastern Guangdong.

Despite regional differences in preferred motifs—floral themes in Guangdong, *kuilong* (夔龙; archaic stylized dragon) in Fujian, antique-themed patterns in Jiangxi—the underlying symbolic logic is broadly shared. Auspicious imagery functions metaphorically to express prosperity, nobility, and cultural continuity.

4.3. Plinth and flooring

In Northeastern Guangdong, stone plinth detailing commonly features square column bases (e.g., G1) and cement flooring (e.g., G5). In G5, the cement floor is engraved with the swastika motif, which symbolizes

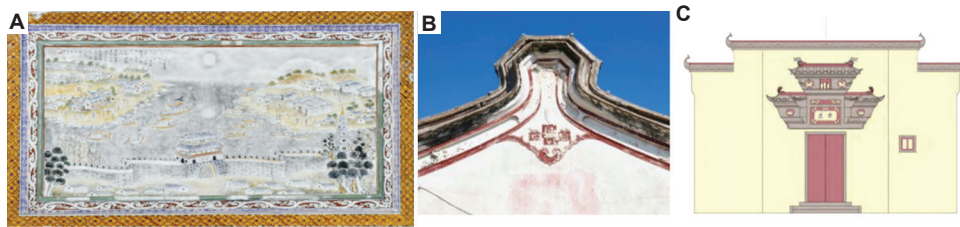


Figure 5. Wall decorations: (A) Murals (G5); (B) Five-element gable (G1); (C) Huizhou-style horsehead wall (J5)
Source: Photos by the authors (2025)

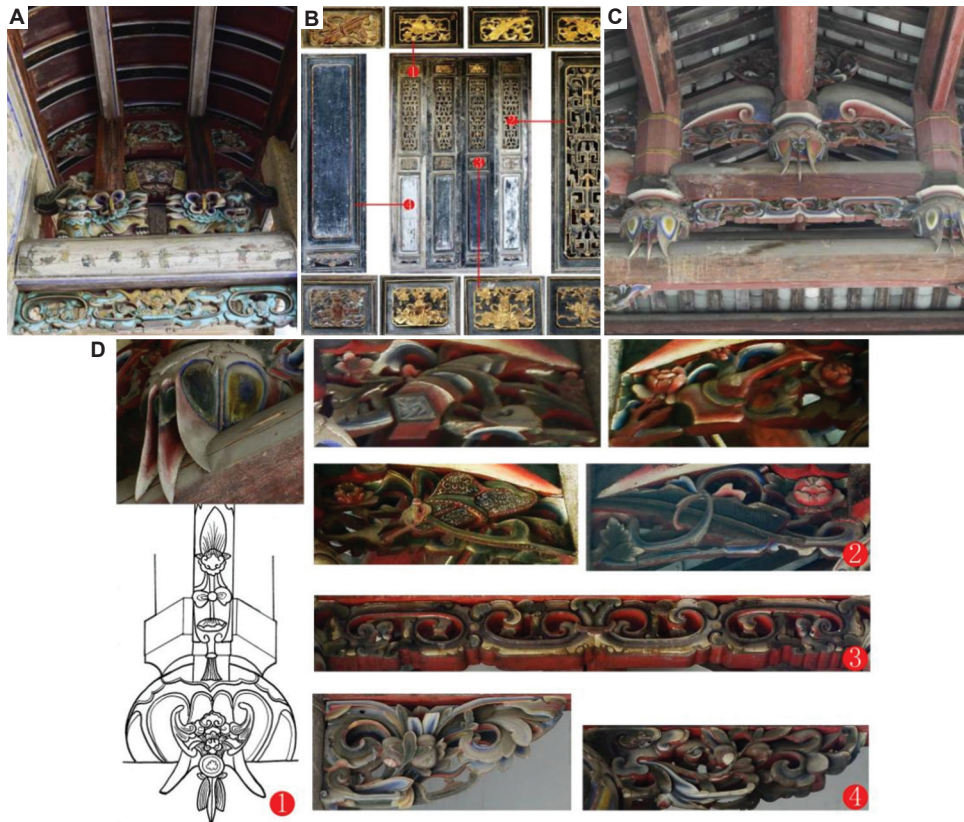


Figure 6. Wooden decorations: (A) Lion bracket (G4); (B) Gold-lacquered partition (G3); (C) Column bracket detail (G3); (D) Bracket-detail schematic showing the ① short column (*gua zhu*) and ②③④ interlocking elements
Source: Photos by the authors (2025)

auspicious continuity, whereas geometric and gourd motifs in G2 convey prosperity (Figure 8A). In Western Fujian, plinth stonework is characterized by octagonal column bases and cobblestone paving. At Chen's Yijing Building (F1), the column bases display finely carved plant and animal motifs, indicating a high level of craft skills (Figure 8B). In Southern Jiangxi, plinth and threshold stonework similarly features auspicious animal reliefs (J1) and cobblestone paving (J3) (Figure 8C).

5. Discussion

The decorative architecture of Hakka local buildings has already established a relatively comprehensive theoretical

foundation. However, the dissemination of this culture and the overall attention it receives remain insufficient. As a result, the decorative similarities and differences among Northeastern Guangdong, Western Fujian, and Southern Jiangxi have not been fully recognized or analyzed. Based on a comparative analysis of 15 traditional Hakka dwellings across Northeastern Guangdong, Western Fujian, and Southern Jiangxi, this study identifies regionally differentiated decorative practices shaped by cultural diffusion, ecological adaptation, and local social organization. At the same time, shared theme preferences, styles, and feng shui-related spatial logics are evident across the three core regions.

5.1. Shared decorative features: Cross-regional traditions

Influenced by ecological conditions, clan-based social organization, and shared cultural values, Hakka decorative arts exhibit significant cross-regional consistency:

(i) Universal symbolism of decorative themes

Across all regions, motifs such as dragons, phoenixes, auspicious inscriptions, and fertility-related symbols (e.g., pomegranates, peaches) convey shared aspirations for prosperity and lineage continuity, closely linked to ancestral worship and clan identity.

(ii) Formal similarities in decorative techniques

Lime-based wall finishes, carved beams, stone bases, and lime sculptures are widely observed, especially in



Figure 7. Location of scroll-shaped wall mural decoration in G5 (*Tao Yuanming Admiring Chrysanthemums*)
Source: Photos by the authors (2025)

ritual areas. Gateways commonly feature paired couplets and inscribed plaques, while beams and brackets often carry painted and carved symbolic imagery. Although stylistic refinements vary by region, overall motif types and compositional logic remain broadly comparable.

(iii) Shared feng shui principles

Across three regions, dwellings generally follow feng shui-informed spatial principles intended to harmonize built space with the surrounding environment, including concepts such as the “five positions and four spirits.” In Meizhou and Western Fujian, gable forms are more frequently designed to correspond to shapes associated with the five elements. In Southern Jiangxi, by contrast, decorative gable symbolism is comparatively restrained, with greater emphasis placed on overall spatial layout, suggesting a localized adaptation of broader Han feng shui principles to site-specific conditions.

5.2. Distinctive regional characteristics

Despite shared cultural origins, each region developed distinctive decorative styles that reflect its local historical and cultural context.

(i) Regional differences in decorative craft skills

- Northeastern Guangdong: Influenced by Chaoshan culture and return migration from Southeast Asia, this region features ornate carving, gold-painted latticework, and selectively adopted Western elements such as cast-iron brackets.
- Western Fujian: Influenced by Southern Fujian culture, decoration balances practicality with symbolism. Motifs such as auspicious animals, clouds, and seal-script characters—often carved on Tulou beams—reflect values of stability and simplicity.
- Southern Jiangxi: Influenced by Huizhou traditions, decoration more often favors naturalistic carvings of flora and fauna with relatively direct symbolic meanings. Compared

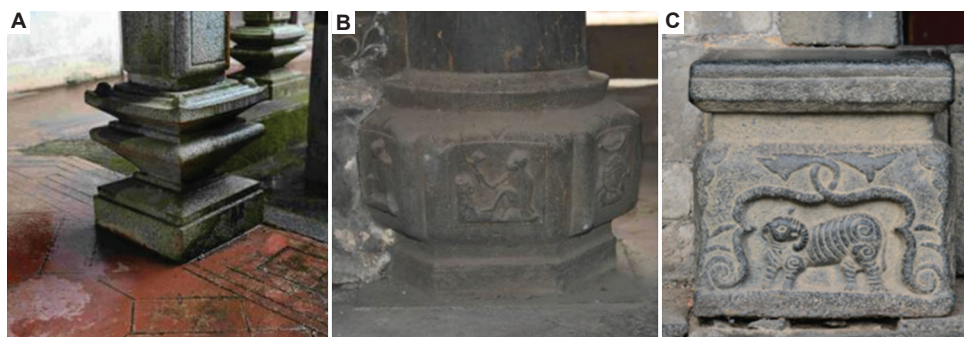


Figure 8. Plinth decorations: (A) Column base (G2); (B) Column base (F1); (C) Threshold carving (J1)
Source: Photos by the authors (2025)

Table 3. Ancestral-hall decorations

Code	Front hall	Middle hall	Upper hall	Detailed decoration of the ancestral hall
G1				 <p>Gilt-wood carved altar table</p>
G2				 <p>Gilt-wood carved altar table</p>
G3				 <p>Gilt-wood carved altar table</p>

(Cont'd...)

Table 3. (Continued)

Code	Front hall	Middle hall	Upper hall	Detailed decoration of the ancestral hall
G 4				 Polychrome painting  Gold-lacquer wood carving with <i>aoyu</i> interlocking motif  Ceiling wood carving  "Wind window" wood carving
G 5		None		
F1	None	None		
F2		None		

(Cont'd...)

Table 3. (Continued)

Code	Front hall	Middle hall	Upper hall	Detailed decoration of the ancestral hall
F3	None	None		 Mural painting
F4	None			 Western-style columns
F5		 Ancestral hall		 Wooden carvings of <i>chilong</i> (蟠龙; coiled dragon) motifs around the stove
J1				 <i>Lingzhi</i> (灵芝; auspicious fungus motif symbolizing longevity) motif with interlocking pattern

(Cont'd...)

Table 3. (Continued)

Code	Front hall	Middle hall	Upper hall	Detailed decoration of the ancestral hall
J2				 <p>Shrine decorated primarily with bogu (博古; "antiquities" motif depicting ancient objects)</p>
J3	None	None		 <p>Sliding door panel</p>
J4		None		 <p>Tie-beam wooden structural decoration</p>
J5		None		 <p>Interlocking "magpies meeting" motif</p>

Source: Drawings and photos by the authors (2025)

to the other regions, the overall effect is more restrained and pragmatic, emphasizing a preference for simplicity and symbolism.

(ii) Differences in symbolic motifs and their local emphases

While themes of fertility and fortune are shared, their preferred expressions vary:

- Northeastern Guangdong: Weilongwu often incorporates motifs symbolizing success in the imperial examinations (e.g., to be granted a marquisate on horseback).
- Western Fujian: Common motifs include dragons, phoenixes, and symbols of longevity and happiness, foregrounding values of prosperity and harmony.
- Southern Jiangxi: Motifs often adopt a more realistic visual style, using lotuses to symbolize integrity and “fish leaping over the dragon gate” to signify success, reflecting a pragmatic worldview.

These differences illustrate how regional identity is expressed through localized motif selection while remaining anchored in a broader Hakka auspicious-symbolic framework.

(iii) The influence of foreign decorative culture

Northeastern Guangdong shows the most explicit incorporation of external influences, especially during the late Qing and Republican periods. As Hakka migrants returned from Southeast Asia, they introduced Nanyang esthetic elements that significantly shaped local architecture.

In Weilongwu from areas such as Dapu and Meixian, wall and beam carvings may combine Western classical-derived motifs (e.g., scrolls and grapevines) with traditional elements such as gold-painted wood carving and porcelain inlay. Such selective fusion can produce a distinctive eclectic decorative idiom, reflecting intensified transregional contact during this period. The incorporation of external elements into traditional forms highlights Hakka architecture as a site of innovation and cultural exchange.

5.3. Theoretical implications

From a cultural space theory perspective, Hakka vernacular decoration reflects cultural inheritance and adaptive transformation within specific regional contexts. Core motifs—such as dragons, phoenixes, unicorns, which are named Qilin, elephants, lotuses, and pomegranates—express cultural continuity and convey shared Hakka spiritual and esthetic values. At the same time, regional variation emerges through localized artistic lineages and historical contact: Northeastern Guangdong integrates Chaoshan craft techniques with selectively adopted

Western elements; Western Fujian exhibits Minnan stylistic features; and Southern Jiangxi reflects Huizhou-influenced carving traditions. This interaction between continuity and localization positions Hakka decorative arts as a cultural space that preserves symbolic heritage while incorporating regional artistry into hybrid forms.

Within Peirce’s semiotic framework, Hakka decorations operate at three interrelated levels:

- (i) Icons: Representational images (e.g., dragons, phoenixes, flowers, and birds) on beams that visually resemble their referents.
- (ii) Indices: Formal and spatial features (e.g., ridge decorations informed by feng shui logics and five-element gables) that point to local environments and region-specific cultural practices.
- (iii) Symbols: Textual decorations (e.g., 福 [*fu*; blessing or good fortune], 禄 [*lu*; emolument], and 寿 [*shou*; longevity] characters) whose meanings are culturally learned and socially shared.

Western-derived motifs can be understood as conventional symbols introduced through cultural exchange and recontextualized within local decorative systems without disrupting overall stylistic coherence. Tulou and enclosure-type dwellings tend to emphasize decoration in ritual and communal spaces, whereas Weilongwu often intensifies domestic and lineage-signifying ornamentation—supporting an interpretation of Tulou as more collective in orientation and Weilongwu as more household-centered. Overall, decorative practice reflects spatial function and everyday life by integrating tradition, symbolism, and regional identity.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Research significance and contributions

This study identifies distinctive decorative features of Hakka dwellings in Southern Jiangxi, Western Fujian, and Northeastern Guangdong and clarifies how ornamentation contributes to regional identity formation. Despite local differences, shared materials, compositional conventions, and auspicious symbols indicate common cultural values across the Hakka core region. Regional characteristics arise through the interaction of local craft lineages with external influences and historical contact. While these decorations preserve cultural identity and collective memory, they face challenges in the modern era. This research offers field data and a methodology to support future heritage studies.

6.2. A broader perspective and future research directions

Focusing on typical Hakka structures—Weilongwu, Tulou, and enclosures—this study was limited to three regions

due to resource constraints. However, Hakka architecture extends across provinces such as Sichuan, Hunan, and Hainan, as well as internationally to countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore.

To address this gap, we propose:

- (i) Comprehensive genealogy of Hakka decoration: A systematic national-level study could build a foundational database for the symbolic reuse of motifs in modern design.
- (ii) Cross-national comparison: Expanding the study globally would offer insights into evolution, adaptation, and cultural exchange.

Methodologically, integrating cultural gene theory with geographical information systems and artificial intelligence could enhance documentation and application, thereby advancing both academic understanding and the practical preservation of Hakka decorative arts. As foundational material for World Heritage applications and as a supplement to the atlas of traditional Chinese decorative arts, this approach could support the future activation and development of documented heritage. It also aims to emphasize the importance of vernacular architecture, particularly with respect to sustainability-related lessons derived from intangible cultural heritage and traditional crafts today.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: All authors

Data curation: Zhen Wang

Formal analysis: Zhen Wang

Investigation: Zhen Wang

Methodology: All authors

Project administration: Thirawut Bunyasakseri

Visualization: Zhen Wang

Writing—original draft: Zhen Wang

Writing—review & editing: Thirawut Bunyasakseri

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Institutional Review Board of Naresuan University and the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the International Review Board (P2-0345/2567). All participants provided written informed consent prior to their inclusion in the study.

Consent for publication

All participants provided informed consent for the publication of the findings derived from this study.

Availability of data

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions and institutional policies regarding student privacy. However, anonymized data and relevant supporting materials may be provided upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to approval by the institutional review board of Naresuan University. Please contact the author for further details.

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