

# Image Interpretation of the Eave Tile Decorative Patterns in Qin and Han Dynasties in the Context of Semiotics

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## ABSTRACT

The eave tile decorative patterns in Qin and Han dynasties are an important heritage of Chinese culture and art. With unique artistic forms and rich cultural connotations, they demonstrate the ancient people's pursuit of beauty and cultural inheritance. Semiotics has important theoretical value and practical significance for understanding and interpreting the eave tile decorative patterns in Qin and Han dynasties. As an important component of ancient architecture, the decorative patterns and images of eave tiles are not only decorative elements of functional building components, but also a symbol system that carries profound cultural connotations and social collective consciousness. The semiotic characteristics of the eave tile decorative patterns in Qin and Han dynasties include symbolism, hierarchy, and structure. Through indicative, symbolic, expressive, aesthetic, and emotional semantics, they convey the religious beliefs, values, aesthetic tastes, and collective consciousness of the Qin and Han society.

**Keywords:** *Semiotics, Eave tiles in Qin and Han dynasties, Decorative patterns.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Eave tiles first appeared in the Western Zhou Dynasty and underwent significant changes in form and decoration over several periods, which are closely related to the history, economy, and culture of each period. In the pre-Qin period, there were a wide variety of unearthed eave tile patterns with a wide range of decorative themes, which had high artistic value. In the Han Dynasty, there were even more exquisite eave tile patterns, written eave tile patterns, that emerged. From the perspective of artistic achievements and production techniques, the decorative pattern art of Qin and Han eave tile had already reached a prosperous trend. From the early simple and rustic style to the later intricate and exquisite style, and then to the rich and colorful style evolution during the Qin and Han dynasties, it can be seen that the evolution and development of eave tile patterns explain people's pursuit of beauty and exhibit strong semiotic characteristics.

Semiotics is a theoretical discipline that studies symbols. Simply put, it is the process of humans using symbols to systematically express meaning.

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) first proposed the concept of semiotics in his 1916 book "A Course in General Linguistics". Pierce's classification of symbols became an important category in modern semiotics, such as the symbol triad of index, icon, and symbol, as well as the theory of symbol growth, which are important theoretical foundations in semiotics. Maurice (1901-1979), after Pierce, based his theory on behaviorism, pointed out that the symbolic process is behavior, and his most important contribution was proposing a semantics that studies the relationship between symbols. Greimas, who holds a leading position in French semiotics, led the school of thought to focus on the construction of meaning systems. His representative works include "Structural Semantics" (1966), "On Meaning" (1970), and others. He examined linguistics as a discipline and conducted extensive and detailed analysis and research on language phenomena. Later linguist Benveniste developed the theories of Saussure and other scholars, conducting theoretical research on "subjectivity" and "declarative activity". Based on the theoretical achievements of semiotics

and research materials on eave tiles of Qin and Han dynasties, this article focuses on discussing the semiotic characteristics and semantics of the decorative patterns on eave tiles during the Qin and Han dynasties.

## **2. SEMIOTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF EAVE TILE DECORATIVE PATTERNS IN QIN AND HAN DYNASTIES**

### **2.1 Symbolism**

Eave tiles can provide shelter from wind and rain, as well as sun and rain, to the eaves and tenons of buildings, greatly improving their safety factor and prolonging their service life. On the one hand, the practicality of the eave tiles plays a role in decorating and protecting the building. On the other hand, the profound symbolism behind the various types of decorative patterns on the eave tiles also reflects the life ideals and aspirations pursued by ancient people. From this, it can be seen that tile is a building component that integrates "practical craftsmanship" and "aesthetic art", and has a dual nature.

Clive Bell, a British formalist aesthetician, said: "The reason why works of art exist is because they have the characteristic of arousing people's aesthetic emotions", and this artistic commonality is called "meaningful form". He said, "In each work, the lines and colors, specific forms and relationships that are combined in a unique way, inspire our aesthetic emotions. I call these combinations and relationships of lines and colors, as well as these aesthetically striking forms, 'meaningful forms', which are the commonalities that all visual art works possess." [1] This type of so-called impressive artistic attribute - "meaningful form" - is essentially an aesthetic form of art.

The symbolic relationship reflected in eave tile patterns of the Qin and Han dynasties is not only the symbolic thinking of ordinary graphic symbols, but also the creative thinking and continuation of tile patterns through accumulation, analogy, comparative perception, and experiential intuition. That is to say, the eave tile decorative patterns during the Qin and Han dynasties not only were distinguished from other traditional symbols by their symbolic characteristics, but also gained an understanding of their value through human perceptual relationships and analogical thinking, becoming a recognized and accepted existence by

the group, and a relatively fixed and standardized thing in the collective consciousness of several dynasties. The development of eave tile decorative images is not a product of individual consciousness, but a need for social progress. The way of inheriting social civilization is not only a reflection of people's concentrated instincts, but also a cultural consensus reached by individual units in the process of exchanging information, constantly playing the role of social consciousness individualization and personal consciousness socialization.

### **2.2 Hierarchy**

Soviet aesthetician M.S. Kagan believed that "the earliest form of art is the transition from non-art to art, which has a dual nature of normativity and dual functionality." [2] He believed that the multifunctionality of primitive art is manifested by the combination of "muses" and applied forms, as well as the combination of practicality and aesthetics. It is obvious that the tile also reflects this dual attribute of art and non-art. In the process of producing and using eave tiles, people's aesthetic consciousness, thoughts, interests, psychology, and so on, have been integrated with the materials, craftsmanship, processes, and other technological content of eave tiles. Therefore, eave tile is a work with multifunctionality, or a work that combines "utility - art".

With the vigorous development of the architectural field, the improvement of eave tile making technology, and the enhancement of people's artistic aesthetic taste, eave tile is increasingly demonstrating its unique artistic aesthetic charm while maintaining its original functionality. In the later stage, this aesthetic value became the focus of attention. The works of Marcus Vittorius Polio, an outstanding ancient architect, written during the Augustan era, still shine with the light of wisdom to this day. The three elements of architecture he proposed — applicability, solidity, and aesthetics — have been widely recognized by later generations. Modern critics also use these three elements as criteria to search for architectural designs that are fully functional, structurally sound, and full of creativity. From the era of Vitruvius to the present day, although the emphasis on these three elements varies in different historical periods, they have always been the cornerstone of excellent architecture. Among them, "applicability" and "sturdiness" focus on the practicality and physical stability of the building, while "aesthetics" touch on

the artistic level and aesthetic value of the building. In fact, in modern architectural practice, the standards of "applicability" and "solidity" have been well met. Therefore, as American architect Tobert Hamling said, the value of a building often ultimately depends on its aesthetic standards. [3] In other words, beauty is the core element for measuring the quality of buildings. Therefore, pursuing architectural aesthetics has become the primary consideration for architects in the design process.

The same applies to ancient Chinese architecture. Whether it is residential buildings, imperial palaces, temples, Taoist temples, or garden ornaments, tombs and burial mounds all emphasize the pursuit of artistic aesthetics without exception. So how is the beauty of ancient Chinese architecture displayed? This question is not simple and difficult to answer. However, based on the characteristic that ancient Chinese architecture is composed of different components, people can examine its "beauty" through building components. Given the unique construction method of ancient Chinese architecture, which is ingeniously composed of diverse components, its unique aesthetic charm can be fully explored through these architectural components. In the book "Atlas of Chinese Ancient Architectural Components" co-written by Zheng Peiguang and Mr. Wang Zhiying, they made a detailed analysis of a series of key architectural components, such as eave tiles, mouth animals, arch of wooden architecture, Queti, columns, plinth, railings, drum-shaped bearing stones, balustrades, windows, dragon heads, corner stones, hanging fish, arches, doors, wall heads, stone carvings, royal roads, bricks, stone seats, and so on. Among them, eave tiles are undoubtedly an extremely important and valuable representative of these components. It is found that in ancient Chinese architecture, eave tiles are almost an indispensable element, and even modern antique buildings are often embedded with intricately designed and beautiful eave tiles. These eave tiles not only enhance the stability of the building, making it safer and more reliable, but also add unparalleled beauty to the building. Eave tiles are not simply "covering" the roof, they actually carry the dual task of decorating and beautifying the building. Furthermore, eave tiles are not just "additional" decorations of architecture, they themselves contain profound aesthetic connotations and possess unique aesthetic value.

The aesthetic value of a eave tile is mainly manifested in the aesthetic characteristics of

decorative art. The aesthetic value of eave tiles is significantly reflected in its unique decorative art aesthetic characteristics. The so-called "decorative patterns", also known as "patterns", as described in "Cihai", are a general term for decorative patterns on objects, including individual patterns, suitable patterns, corner patterns (corner patterns), edge patterns, scattered patterns, and continuous patterns. In Tian Zibing and others' "History of Chinese Patterns", they delved into the essence of patterns - their aesthetic and decorative significance. With the increasing demand of people's lives, the aesthetic significance of patterns gradually takes a dominant position, and the pursuit of pure decorative beauty has become the main direction of its development. Decoration does not simply have independent value, it is more of a medium of value. Although the themes of decoration are divided into reality and non-reality, objective creation and subjective creation, their common feature is the pursuit of formal beauty. Visually, there are realism, variation, and abstraction; Structurally, there is rhythm and cadence; From the perspective of effects, there is both static beauty and dynamic beauty, both full of powerful effects. The function of decoration is to enrich the creation itself, elevate it from the material level to the spiritual level, and give people a pleasant and beautiful feeling.

Therefore, the patterns on the eave tiles are not only outstanding creations of ancient arts and crafts, but also the crystallization of the artistic wisdom of ancient craftsmen. The decorative beauty they display contains various formal beauty elements such as image, structure, and effect. To this day, the fundamental reason why eave tile is still cherished by people is the rich artistic aesthetic information contained in its patterns, which transcends time and space and can still touch people's hearts.

### **2.3 Structure**

In the development history of eave tiles, the early form of eave tiles was usually considered semi-circular. Although archaeological excavations have provided evidence of the existence of circular tiles, it is undeniable that semi-circular eave tiles did dominate during the Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn periods. Over time, the eave tile patterns of various dynasties gradually became mainly circular, as well as occasionally semi-circular, moon shaped, or other shaped eave tiles. Taking the Qin Dynasty as an example, the Kui patterned tiles at that time adopted a semi-circular design, and their shape was close to a full circle.

And during the peak period of eave tile development in the Western Han Dynasty, semi-circular character eave tiles appeared, such as the famous "Liyang" eave tiles. The evolution from semi-circular to circular not only demonstrates the advancement of eave tile making techniques, but also reflects the progress of people's artistic aesthetic concepts. The reason why circular eave tiles gradually occupy a dominant position is partly because their larger space can accommodate more diverse patterns, showcasing a freer form of art; On the other hand, circular eave tiles not only meet the visual instinctive needs of viewers, but also conform to people's psychological aesthetic pursuits. This change in form not only reflects the advancement of eave tile making technology, but also deeply reflects the traditional aesthetic culture and poetic philosophical connotation of life.

The second issue is the construction of eave tile patterns. Early eave tile patterns had simple and irregular structures, such as the heavy ring pattern in the Western Zhou Dynasty, where heavy ring patterns, string patterns, and triangular patterns were irregularly arranged on the faces of the semicircles. During the Warring States period, the decorative patterns on eave tiles exhibited a regular symmetrical structure, mainly showing left, right, top, and bottom symmetry. At the same time, animal patterned eave tiles with free-form structures similar to those of the Qin Dynasty also emerged. During the Qin and Han dynasties, the decorative patterns on eave tiles became more diverse in structure, such as transitional, radiating, and swirling styles. During the Western Han Dynasty, the decorative patterns and structures of eave tiles were more varied and richer in form. The diverse and versatile structure of the eave tile patterns, as well as the graceful and varied forms of decorative art expression, are dazzling and breathtaking.

In composition, composition forms include symmetrical composition, triangular composition, straight line composition, diagonal composition, circular composition, square composition, spatial segmentation composition, multi-perspective composition, and composite composition. The circular shape characteristic of the eave tiles determines that the composition form of eave tiles is circular composition. Circular composition, also known as "spiral composition", is one of the common and most popular forms of composition. From ancient times to the present, the circle has always been regarded as one of the most beautiful shapes. It symbolizes the order of the universe, the

laws of movement and change of all things, and conveys the beauty of nature, primitiveness, the interplay of movement and stillness, the cycle of repetition, vastness and infinity, harmony and perfection, and eternal beauty. Although circles are such beautiful shapes, drawing inside them is not a simple task.

Regarding circular composition, painter Mr. Li Feng pointed out: "Circular composition is a form of composition that is saturated, complete, rich, rotating, moving, and has tension. There are two explanations for circular composition: one is that the outside of the picture is circular; Another type is that the structure of the main content in the picture is circular. Circular composition can be divided into two types: inner circle and outer circle. The former is mainly composed of inner circle and outer circle as a supplement; The latter is supplemented by the inner circle and dominated by the outer circle." [4] For circular eave tiles, firstly, their decorative outer wheels are circular, and secondly, their internal decorative configuration is circular, so their composition is also a combination of "inner circle" and "outer circle". Therefore, in general, the composition principle of eave tile patterns is to follow the shape (circle) and layout. That is to say, when composing the decorative patterns on the eave tiles, they must be transformed according to the spatial changes of the circle, so that the decoration is suitable and elegant. In terms of the composition structure of eave tile patterns, they can be divided into symmetrical structures from a compositional perspective; Radiation, conversion, and cyclotron structures, arbitrary structure, spiral structure, free structure, gradient structure, repetitive structure, comparative structure, approximate structure, etc. One is that the division is too detailed, and the other is that it appears repeatedly. People conduct a macroscopic examination of the eave tile patterns based on the principle of "following the shape and layout", attempting to summarize the complex and diverse eave tile pattern constructions into the following three types:

### 2.3.1 Flat Structure

This type of eave tile decoration structure is arranged in a straight and flat manner on the surface of a circular eave tile. This structure can fully utilize the space on the surface of the eave tiles, depicting and displaying images to the greatest extent possible. They not only enrich the decorative content, but also expand the visual space, giving

people a sense of smooth and relaxed expression. Like the Qin running deer patterned eave tile ("Figure 1"), it is full of dynamism, coupled with smooth and rounded edges, the overall decoration shows a visual psychological effect of moving to the right and forward. This type of decorative pattern has clear and prominent images, vivid and interesting painting style, and is full of dynamism.



Figure 1 Running deer patterned eave tiles. Source: Brief report on excavation of Yangjiawan tomb in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province.

### 2.3.2 Rotating Structure

The rotating construction of eave tile patterns is a type of pattern that is composed and drawn in a regular clockwise or counterclockwise direction around the center of the eave tile. The design of this structure is mainly based on the circular shape of the eave tile, first of all, it is necessary to follow the composition of the circle. For example, the Qin sunflower patterned eave tile will immediately form a vivid sunflower image as long as the sunflower petals radiate from the central circle; The second is to try to accommodate as many things as possible, enrich the pictures, and highlight the theme. Rotating structural eave tile patterns generally form a radiating symmetrical shape ("Figure 2"), thus presenting the beauty of rotational force, balance, and rhythm.



Figure 2 Leaves and cirrus eave tiles. Source: Brief report on excavation of Yangjiawan tomb in Xi'an Shaanxi Province.

### 2.3.3 Centripetal Structure

This structural eave tile decoration is symmetrically arranged around the center of the circle and balanced under its cohesive force. The top or bottom of the heart-shaped figure points uniformly towards the center of the circle, making it compact, orderly, and tidy. For example, in the "Being Eternal" tile (Figure 3), the four characters "Being Eternal" and the mushroom shaped cloud pattern gather towards the center circle at the head and extend towards the outer circle at the tail, symmetrically placed in the grid. The decorative pattern on the eave tile appears orderly, magnificent, and highly decorative, fully showcasing the art of eave tile decoration.



Figure 3 Being Eternal. Source: Xi'an Qin Brick and Han Tile Museum.

As can be seen from the previous text, after careful design, on the one hand, the decorative patterns are appropriately placed on the surface, which can vividly present the shape; On the other hand, due to the ingenuity and regularity of the arrangement of the decorative structure on the eave tile, the formal beauty of the decorative structure is invisibly displayed to the fullest. The eave tiles of the Qin and Han dynasties exhibited characteristics of great beauty.

### **3. SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF DECORATIVE PATTERNS ON EAVE TILES IN QIN AND HAN DYNASTIES**

#### **3.1 Indicative Semantics**

In order to convey certain information and enable viewers to understand the profound connotations of symbols, the eave tile decorative patterns in Qin and Han dynasties often express themselves through symbolism. If people see the Taotie pattern, it will be associated with bronze ware and Shang and Zhou culture, with a kind of indication. In addition, through semantic symbols and forms, it can influence the thoughts and behaviors of the audience. For example, when people see Taotie patterned eave tiles, they will gather their national strength, full of worship and respect for the ancestors of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, and strive to become stronger. As Mr. Li Zehou said, "Bronze ware decorations, with Taotie as a prominent representative, are no longer abstract geometric decorations. They are far from concrete animal images, but they are no longer meant to 'imagine something real'. There is no corresponding animal in the real world. They belong to 'something truly imagined', which is a 'auspicious pattern' or mark imagined and fabricated for the interests and needs of their rule." [5] The existence of indicative semantics in the eave tile decorative images of Qin and Han dynasties is aimed at arousing emotional resonance among the audience, exerting deeper connections, and achieving a certain effect unconsciously.

#### **3.2 Symbolic Semantics**

The decorative patterns on Qin and Han Dynasty eave tiles not only express their decorative and beautifying functions, but also have symbolic significance. Symbolic meaning is defined based on social consensus. For example, the Four Divine eave tiles with patterns of Green Dragon, White

Tiger, Vermilion Bird, and Black Tortoise symbolize the four directions of east, west, south, and north, and is also a manifestation of cosmology and values. The symbolic semantics of the eave tile decorative patterns on Qin and Han Dynasties are formed based on the roles and specific concepts of the times. Symbolism can express semiotic values, social and historical status, national economic conditions, and folk customs, among others. At the same time, these can all be used as factors that influence symbolism.

#### **3.3 Expressive Semantics**

The expressive semantics of the eave tile decorative patterns in Qin and Han dynasties are influenced by two aspects. On the one hand, it is unconscious, that is, a concentrated mapping of society, culture, and history; On the other hand, it is conscious, incorporating the aesthetic ideas of creators and craftsmen in layout, classification style, line thickness, and tension expression. For example, in the Western Han Dynasty, Changli eave tiles was inscribed with the word "Changli" in seal script and adorned with milk nails. ("Figure 4") The structure is broad, rough and heavy. The character "Chang" is dignified, while the character "Li" is rounded, with a combination of rigidity and softness, giving off a sense of grandeur and expressiveness. The ancient traditional aesthetic ideas have gathered hundreds of years of exploration and sedimentation. The eave tile decorative patterns in Qin and Han dynasties are not created out of thin air, and their expressiveness is related to economic conditions and ruling methods. The beliefs and needs bestowed by the slave era are no longer compatible and coordinated with the feudal society, and rulers also hope to receive changes that are beneficial to their own rule. So, after being endowed with new semiotic meanings and values, the decorative images of eave tiles were displayed with different expressiveness and used to meet the needs of the ruling class and the people.



Figure 4 Changli. Image source: Linfen Museum, Shanxi Province.

### 3.4 Aesthetic Semantics

The aesthetic semantics of the eave tile decorative patterns in Qin and Han dynasties are modified based on the principles of formal beauty, and this unique aesthetic semantics constitutes the visual beauty of the eave tile decorative patterns in Qin and Han dynasties. For example, the unique regulations and compositions, rich decorative patterns and designs, flexible expression and decoration of the eave tile, and so on, make the aesthetic semantics of calligraphy very distinct when viewed from a single textual tile. They rely on a certain material carrier to express aesthetic characteristics, so eave tile patterns do not exist independently and cannot be separated from reality. Artists integrate the beauty of the times, art, and faith into the production of eave tiles, creating a unique aesthetic meaning. So, it can also be said that the aesthetic expression of eave tiles in Qin and Han dynasties is closely related to the subjective emotions of artistic craftsmen.

### 3.5 Emotional Semantics

The transmission of emotions requires social recognition, adherence to the values of the times, and emotional resonance with the receiver in order to have the possibility of continuity and greater value. The emotional factors of the eave tile decorative patterns in Qin and Han dynasties are the result of the comprehensive influence of history, geography, culture, and social customs. The pottery makers, through the organization and reproduction of natural phenomena, inherit deeply rooted traditions, obey historical trends, and awaken aesthetic consciousness, evoke deep emotional resonance in the recipients' hearts. The receivers

can discover emotional appeals, psychological support, strength, and hints from it. Taking animal shaped pottery as an example, the various patterns of flying birds and beasts on the pottery present a wonderful and extraordinary animal world, expressing emotions through them. For example, frogs and toads jumping and crouching, deer galloping and horse running, tigers howling and cranes dancing, geese spreading their wings, and other expressions of different emotions.

## 4. CONCLUSION

In summary, these semantics not only reflect the actual function and role of the tile in ancient architecture, but also carry social consensus, historical roles, and specific concepts, making it an important carrier of historical culture. As an outstanding representative of ancient Chinese arts and crafts, the aesthetic value of eave tiles in Qin and Han dynasties shines brightly in the long river of history. Through in-depth research on the decorative patterns of eave tiles, people can gain a deeper understanding of the aesthetic concepts and cultural connotations of people during the Qin and Han dynasties, and also demonstrate the important role of semiotics in interpreting artistic works. This study not only helps to deepen the understanding of the artistic value of eave tiles in Qin and Han dynasties, but also provides useful references for the application of semiotics in related fields. Therefore, as a precious cultural heritage of our country, eave tiles in Qin and Han dynasties will continue to attract people's attention with their unique shapes, exquisite production techniques, and profound cultural connotations, leaving valuable artistic wealth and historical memory for future generations.

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