



Research Article

Hierarchical Differentiation and Mutual Interaction Between Official and Vernacular Ridge Ornamentation in Ming-Qing China

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Abstract

Ridge ornaments (jishou), as essential decorative components of traditional Chinese roof architecture, serve both practical functions and carry rich symbolic significance. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, a marked hierarchical differentiation emerged between official and vernacular ridge ornamentation. Official architecture established a rigorous correspondence system between ridge beast quantities, types, materials, and building ranks, grounded in codified regulations such as the Daqing Huidian (Collected Statutes of the Great Qing). Vernacular architecture, operating under strict sumptuary constraints, nonetheless developed a remarkable diversity of regional substitute forms and creative adaptations. Yet hierarchical differentiation did not imply two parallel lines that never intersected—official norms exerted a top-down radiating influence on the vernacular sphere, while the flexible innovations of folk practice generated a bottom-up permeation and feedback, together shaping the overall landscape of Ming-Qing ridge ornament culture. Building upon a historical survey of ridge beast origins, this paper examines the institutional forms and regional characteristics of official and vernacular ridge ornamentation respectively, and then analyses the mechanisms of interaction and cultural implications between the two systems, with the aim of deepening our understanding of the dialectical relationship between "order and adaptation" in traditional Chinese architectural decoration culture.

Keywords

Ming-Qing Period, Ridge Ornaments (Jishou), Official Architecture, Vernacular Architecture, Hierarchical Differentiation

1. Introduction

The roofs of traditional Chinese architecture during the Ming and Qing dynasties have long been regarded as the crowning achievement of ancient building arts. The ridge ornaments placed upon the main ridge (zhengji), hip ridges (chuiji), and diagonal ridges (qiangji) serve not only the practical function of securing roof tiles and preventing leakage, but also embody a composite cultural significance encompassing ritual norms, auspicious symbolism, and aesthetic sensibility.

From the embryonic form of the chiwei (owl-tail ornament) in the Han dynasty, through the institutional standardisation recorded in Li Jie's Yingzao Fashi (Treatise on Architectural Methods) of the Song dynasty, to the final formalisation during the Ming-Qing period, ridge ornaments underwent a long and complex evolutionary trajectory [1]. The Ming and Qing dynasties represent both the golden age of ridge ornament development and the period when hierarchical regulation

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Received: 2 September 2026; **Accepted:** 15 September 2026; **Published:** 28 September 2026

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reached its most rigorous expression. During this era, official architecture developed a comprehensive system of "determining rank by number and displaying precedence by sequence," with the Hall of Supreme Harmony (Taihedian) in the Forbidden City standing alone in its specification of ten walking beasts (zoushou) plus the immortal riding a phoenix (qifeng xianren)—eleven ridge ornaments in total—serving as the ultimate symbol of ancient architectural hierarchy. In contrast, vernacular architecture unfolded its creative endeavours within a seemingly "unregulated" space: the brick-carved wenshou (ridge-end beasts) of Shanxi merchant courtyards, the dragon-fish (aoyu) main-ridge ornaments of Huizhou architecture, the figural ceramic ridge decorations of Shiwan in Lingnan, and the tile cats (wamao) of the Yunnan borderlands all display distinctive regional colours and folk ingenuity.

Nevertheless, existing scholarship has tended to focus on typological descriptions of ridge beasts or case studies of specific building types, leaving a notable gap in research concerning the structural connections and interactions between the official and vernacular systems. Did official ridge beast regulations actually constrain vernacular building practices? How did vernacular ridge ornamentation seek adaptation and breakthrough within the boundaries of sumptuary prohibition? Did a bidirectional cultural flow exist between the two systems? These questions remain open to further investigation. This paper attempts, from the dual perspectives of "differentiation" and "interaction," to systematically examine the hierarchical differences and interactive relationships between official and vernacular ridge ornamentation during the Ming-Qing period, with the aim of illuminating the connection between "institutional regulation" and "vernacular creativity" in traditional Chinese architectural culture.

2. Historical Origins and Hierarchical Systems of Ridge Ornaments

The origins of ridge ornaments can be traced to the practical demands of building construction. The junctions of roof ridges represented the most vulnerable points for water leakage in early architecture; craftsmen therefore covered the exposed tile nails with decorative protective components—this was the embryonic form of ridge beasts. Architectural images depicted on Han dynasty pictorial bricks already show ridge-end decorations. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, ridge ornaments evolved into the fish-tail-shaped chiwei; by the Tang dynasty, dragon-head ridge decorations had appeared, and high-ranking buildings began consciously employing ridge ornaments to signify status.

The Song dynasty marked a crucial period in the institutionalisation of ancient Chinese architecture. Li Jie's *Yingzao Fashi*, compiled under official auspices, was the first codified regulation to specify the use of ridge beast components such as the chuishou (hip-ridge beast), marking the transition of ridge ornaments from scattered decorative practice toward

systematic ritual construction. Nevertheless, the Song dynasty ridge beast system remained relatively simple: typically only a single beast figure was placed upon the hip ridge [2].

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, ridge beast forms entered a phase of comprehensive standardisation and strict regulation. The chiwei at either end of the main ridge evolved into fully dragon-shaped forms; the number of walking beasts on hip ridges increased substantially; and the standard pattern of the "immortal riding a phoenix" leading the procession of walking beasts took shape. The Qing dynasty's Daqing Huidian established the arrangement sequence and usage grades of ridge beasts in the form of national statutes, completing the institutional construction of the ridge beast system and making it one of the most vivid expressions of ritual order in traditional Chinese architecture [3].

It is worth noting that this process of formal standardisation was not merely an aesthetic evolution, but was intimately connected with the highly centralised political system, rigorous hierarchical order, and increasingly mature official building construction system of the Ming-Qing period. The transformation of ridge ornaments from practical components into ritual symbols refracts the deep-seated cultural logic of "the vessel carries the Way" (qi yi zai dao) in traditional Chinese society.

3. The Hierarchical Regulatory System of Official Ridge Ornaments

Qing dynasty official architecture imposed extremely strict regulations on the use of ridge beasts. The number of small beasts installed upon hip ridges had to be an odd number such as three, five, seven, or nine, and glazed ceramic ridge beasts were permitted only on glazed-tile roofs. The greater the number of walking beasts, the higher the building's rank; the highest-grade halls could employ nine walking beasts. The Hall of Supreme Harmony in the Forbidden City went further by adding an extra "Hangshi" (ranked tenth), becoming the sole building in China to possess ten walking beasts, representing the supreme pinnacle of ancient architectural hierarchy [4].

This numerical encoding of hierarchy was precise and immediately legible: the Palace of Heavenly Purity (Qianqinggong) and the Hall of Preserving Harmony (Baohedian) employed nine beasts; the Hall of Central Harmony (Zhonghedian) and the Palace of Earthly Tranquillity (Kunninggong) employed seven; the Six Eastern and Western Palaces employed five. From the highest Hall of Supreme Harmony down to ordinary government offices (using only three to five beasts), ridge beast quantities constituted a clear social hierarchy map. Each reduction of two beasts signified a descent of one grade in building rank, with a corresponding decline in the political status of the building's occupant.

The selection and arrangement of ridge beast types likewise embodied rigorous ritual logic. According to the Daqing Huidian, the standard sequence of walking beasts is: dragon,

phoenix, lion, celestial horse, sea horse, suanni (lion-like mythical beast), yayu (fish-like mythical beast), xiezhi (unicorn-like beast of justice), douniu (ox-like mythical beast), and Hangshi. Each ridge beast was endowed with specific symbolic meaning: the dragon represents the supreme authority of imperial power; the phoenix symbolises sacred virtue and peace; the lion embodies martial prowess and majesty; the celestial horse and sea horse signify the imperial virtue reaching heaven and sea; suanni and yayu portend the summoning of clouds and rain and the prevention of fire disasters; xiezhi symbolises impartiality and strict justice; douniu represents the elimination of calamities; and Xingshi, bearing the likeness of the Thunder God, serves to ward off lightning and prevent fire [5].

This arrangement was no arbitrary composition. The dragon and phoenix occupy the foremost positions, manifesting the sanctity of imperial identity; lions, horses, fish, oxen, and others follow in sequence, constituting a complete semantic progression from the sacred to the secular, from power to function. The ridge beast procession thus becomes a cartography of power order written in the language of material objects, with each beast fulfilling a specific ritual function.

Material and decorative pattern likewise served as important means of hierarchical distinction. High-grade ridge beasts in official architecture had to employ glazed ceramic material, while yellow glazed tiles were designated the exclusive prerogative of imperial buildings; the five colours of blue, white, red, black, and yellow corresponded to the Five Elements system [6]. Vernacular architecture was restricted to grey earthenware ridge beasts [7]. The "nine patterns, ten colours" construction system established by Ming imperial kilns imposed extraordinarily fine specifications on the decorative patterns of glazed ridge beasts. The twelve imperial patterns—including cloud-and-thunder motifs (yunlei wen), pearl-and-flame designs—between the scales of the chiwen (ridge-end dragon) at the Hall of Supreme Harmony, had to be executed with millimetre-level precision. These patterns were not merely decoration, but the externalisation of institutional order—the construction philosophy of "Heaven's craftsmanship dares not descend in grade" (tiangong bu gan jiang dengdi) demanded that every detail strictly correspond to the building's political rank [8]. The distinction in materials and the differentiation in patterns rendered ridge beasts the most visually immediate marker of architectural hierarchy in Ming-Qing China.

4. Vernacular Localisation and Creative Adaptation of Ridge Ornaments

In sharp contrast to the rigorous standardisation of official architecture, vernacular ridge ornamentation demonstrated remarkable flexibility and creativity beneath the constraints of sumptuary prohibition. Qing regulations stipulated that "non-imperial persons are not permitted to employ dragon forms

without authorisation"; consequently, the ridge-end beast forms of vernacular buildings varied enormously, presenting a scene of vigorous diversification. Unable to employ large dragon-form chiwen, folk builders developed substitute forms such as the dragon-fish (aoyu), brooding hen (buji), and treasure vase (baoping); unable to use glazed ceramic, they lavished their skill upon the humble medium of grey earthenware, compensating for material limitations through formal richness. On some local dwellings, the quantity and arrangement of ridge beasts "followed no fixed standard, displaying considerable arbitrariness, with forms of great diversity" [9]. Yet this "arbitrariness" was not disorder; rather, it represented a creative adaptation operating within the ritual framework. Vernacular craftsmen, having comprehended official regulations, developed an expressive mode that was simultaneously ritually appropriate and richly regional in character.

The Shanxi merchant courtyard complexes merit particular attention as a case study in vernacular ridge ornamentation. Shanxi merchants, drawing upon formidable wealth, constructed numerous grand residences, yet their ridge ornamentation consistently navigated the boundaries of ritual propriety [13]. The ridge ends of Shanxi merchant courtyards typically adopted wenshou (ridge-end beast) forms, "taking their significance from fire prevention and auspicious celebration," but deliberately avoided direct imitation of official dragon-form chiwen. The ridge ornamentation of such complexes as the Chang Family Estate, Qiao Family Compound, and Wang Family Compound predominantly employed brick carving and grey earthenware, with carving subjects centred upon auspicious birds and beasts and propitious patterns, their forms rustic and dignified rather than ostentatious. This cautious posture reflects the delicate equilibrium that vernacular merchant families struck between political hierarchy and economic power. On the one hand, ridge ornaments served as "symbols of status," and nearly every household in the Shanxi merchant compounds possessed exquisitely carved divine beasts upon their roof ridges; on the other hand, the restraint in form and the modesty in material manifested respect for and compliance with official hierarchical institutions. Ridge ornaments thus became a cultural tool through which Shanxi merchants positioned themselves within the ritual order—seeking to "display" their status, yet without "transgressing" its limits.

Huizhou architecture displayed distinctive regional characteristics in ridge ornamentation. Although ancestral halls, temples, and large residences in ancient Huizhou followed official construction methods, their main-ridge ornaments differed from official forms—Huizhou buildings predominantly employed the dragon-fish (aoyu) as the main-ridge ornament [14]. The aoyu image derived from the traditional chiwei and developed during the Ming-Qing period; since the official chiwei was not permitted for unauthorised use, Huizhou lineages with examination degrees selected the aoyu as their ancestral hall ridge ornament. This substitution strategy carries significant implications. The aoyu maintains a visual connection

with the dragon (through the fish-dragon transformation motif), while ritually avoiding direct transgression against the prohibition on "dragon" imagery. After Huizhou merchants acquired degrees through the civil examination system, the aoyu ridge ornament became a legitimate symbol of family status. The "fish transforming into dragon" (yu hua long) form metaphor precisely corresponds to the social ascent path of Huizhou merchants from commerce to officialdom, rendering the ridge ornament a material witness to social advancement.

Ridge ornament art in the Lingnan region followed a bolder path during the Ming-Qing period. Shiwan ceramic ridge decorations (also known as "floral ridges" or "figural ridges") emerged in the late Ming and early Qing, reaching their zenith in the mid-to-late Qing dynasty. Their most distinctive feature lay in transferring numerous human figures onto the roof ridge—opera stories, mythological legends, and folk tales were laid out upon the ceramic ridge, with a single ridge sometimes accommodating over three hundred figures [15]. This phenomenon holds revolutionary significance in the history of ridge ornamentation. Traditional ridge beasts centred upon divine and auspicious beasts, with human figures absent; Shiwan ceramic ridges, by contrast, allowed "numerous human beings to ascend to the highest point of the building, establishing an unprecedented precedent." The thematic shift from divine beast worship to human narrative, and from ritual proclamation to secular aesthetic, manifests the conscious distancing of Lingnan folk culture from official ritual norms and its creative self-expression. Lineages vied to engage renowned craftsmen to adorn their ancestral halls and residences, transforming ridge ornamentation into a social externalisation of wealth and status.

The tile cat (wa mao) of Yunnan represents another fascinating case in vernacular ridge ornamentation. The tile cat, modelled upon the tiger but resembling a cat in appearance, is prevalent in KunMing, DaLi, ChuXiong, WenShan, and other regions, revered as a guardian deity warding off evil and protecting the home. Central Plains ridge beast culture was transmitted to YunNan through Ming dynasty migration; among these, the ridge tiger beast gained widespread popularity among multiple ethnic groups with tiger-veneration cultures, and was subsequently renamed "cat" due to the taboo against "raising tigers to invite disaster." The tile cat thus became a symbol of multiple cultural stratification: it carries the genetic imprint of Han Chinese ridge beast culture while incorporating the Bai people's tiger totem worship and the Naxi people's nature spirit beliefs, condensing the cultural genes of multiple ethnicities. The tile cat emerged precisely as a product of the mutual fusion between Central Plains official traditions and local ethnic beliefs. Its existence demonstrates that the interaction between official and vernacular spheres occurred not only between centre and periphery, but also between Han and minority ethnic cultures, constituting a far more complex field of cultural dialogue.

5. Interaction Mechanisms Between Official and Vernacular Systems

The influence of official ridge beast institutions upon vernacular architecture first manifested as a top-down normative radiation. Prince Gong's Mansion, as a representative example of princely official architecture, embodied the hierarchical characteristics of official construction in the form, style, and colour tone of its ridge ornamentation, serving as a model for vernacular architecture in the capital and throughout the country to emulate [10].

The creative adaptations of vernacular ridge ornamentation continuously expanded the aesthetic boundaries and semantic territories of ridge beast culture. The figural ceramic ridges of Shiwan in Lingnan extended ridge ornament themes from divine beasts to human narratives; the brick-carved ridge beasts of Shanxi merchants integrated auspicious symbolism with commercial ethics; and the aoyu main-ridge ornaments of Huizhou linked examination degrees to ridge beast symbols—these innovations, though born within vernacular contexts, exerted a subtle influence upon the aesthetic conceptions of official ridge beasts through channels such as craftsman mobility, commercial exchange, and cultural communication [11].

More direct feedback occurred at the material and technical level. During the Ming-Qing period, glazed ceramic technology in the ShanXi-ShaanXi region achieved high development, and the production techniques of folk kilns even fed back into official architecture's demand for ridge beasts. Certain local government offices, when repairing official buildings, commissioned ridge beast components from folk kilns, thereby allowing vernacular craft techniques to enter the official construction system. This technical-level "vernacular-to-official" flow broke through the seemingly impermeable boundaries of the hierarchical system [12]. Craftsmen at imperial glazed ceramic kilns were largely conscripted from the folk population; the technical norms they acquired in official construction were subsequently brought back to their home regions upon retirement or rotation, promoting the vernacular dissemination of official techniques. Conversely, innovative techniques and distinctive forms from folk kilns would also be partially absorbed into the official construction system through the entry of craftsmen.

It is important to recognise that this interaction was not a symmetrical exchange. Official institutions possessed the power to define legitimate forms and prohibit illegitimate ones, while vernacular adaptations operated within a space of structural constraint. Yet within this asymmetrical relationship, vernacular creativity was not merely passive compliance or covert resistance; it represented an active negotiation with the ritual order, generating new cultural forms that enriched the overall repertoire of ridge ornamentation.

6. The Dialectical Relationship of Cultural Significance

Surveying the overall configuration of ridge ornamentation during the Ming-Qing period, "order" and "adaptation" constitute the dialectical framework for understanding its cultural significance. Official ridge ornaments represent the pole of order—grounded in codified institutions, oriented toward hierarchical distinction, and incorporating architectural decoration within a rigorous ritual regulatory system [16]. Vernacular ridge ornaments represent the pole of adaptation—operating at the boundaries of institutions to unfold flexible creativity, employing strategies of substitution, metonymy, and fusion to respond to ritual constraints, and opening up rich expressive possibilities within a seemingly restricted space.

Yet order and adaptation are not in simple opposition. The establishment of official order itself constituted a systematic codification of preceding ridge beast practices, incorporating numerous elements derived from folk experience; while the direction and boundaries of vernacular adaptation remained fundamentally delimited by the basic parameters of official order. The interaction between the two represents, in essence, a form of "structural dialogue"—encompassing both top-down normative radiation and bottom-up reverse permeation; involving both boundaries and demarcations, as well as flows and intermingling. It is precisely this tension-filled dialogic relationship that enabled Ming-Qing ridge beast culture to present an overall visage that was simultaneously rigorously ordered and richly diverse.

This dialectic also illuminates a broader theoretical concern in the study of traditional Chinese material culture. The relationship between official and vernacular ridge ornamentation exemplifies how ritual institutions and creative practice co-constituted each other in premodern China. Official norms provided the structural framework within which vernacular creativity operated, while vernacular innovations continually tested, stretched, and occasionally transformed the boundaries of that framework. Neither pole can be understood in isolation; their mutual constitution produced the dynamic cultural field of Ming-Qing ridge ornamentation.

7. Conclusion

The Ming-Qing period represents both the golden age of ancient Chinese ridge ornament development and the historical era when hierarchical differentiation reached its most pronounced expression. Official architecture, through codified regulations such as the Daqing Huidian, established a strict correspondence between ridge beast quantities, types, materials, and building ranks, elevating ridge ornaments from practical components to ritual symbols.

The relationship between official and vernacular spheres was not a simple binary opposition. Top-down normative radiation permeated official aesthetic and ritual conceptions into

the decorative practices of vernacular architecture; bottom-up reverse permeation enriched the overall connotations of ridge beast culture through craftsman mobility, technical exchange, and aesthetic innovation. The interaction between the two constituted a sustained cultural dialogue—order setting the boundaries for adaptation, and adaptation infusing vitality into order.

From a broader perspective, the hierarchical differentiation and interaction of Ming-Qing ridge ornaments serve as a microcosm of the relationship between "ritual-legal order" and "vernacular vitality" in traditional Chinese society [17]. It reminds us that understanding traditional Chinese architectural culture requires looking beyond either the regulatory nature of institutions or the local character of the vernacular alone; rather, we must grasp its overall visage and historical trajectory through the interactive relationship between the two. Small though ridge beasts may be, they bear the multiple cultural significations of institution, power, aesthetics, and belief. Through this unique cultural phenomenon, we may attain a deeper understanding of the dialectical logic between order construction and individual adaptation in traditional Chinese society.

Author Contributions

Yuxi Xing: Conceptualization, Investigation, Resources

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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