

# Study on Traditional Architectural Decoration Patterns of Temple of the Three Sus

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**Abstract:** Temple of the Three Sus, which was first established during the Yuan Dynasty, features a natural, unrestrained, and classically elegant garden architectural style. This paper discusses the multiple characteristics and meanings of traditional architectural decorative patterns at Temple of the Three Sus from a semiotic perspective. First, it analyzes the denotative aspects of these patterns, including their stylistic forms, structural frameworks, and craftsmanship techniques. Second, the paper classifies the traditional architectural decorative patterns of the Temple of the Three Sus based on the types of sources of these patterns and interprets the implied meanings of each. Finally, the paper explores the application of these traditional decorative patterns in modern urban design, specifically in Meishan City, discussing the inheritance and innovation of these patterns in contemporary urban design and emphasizing the importance of integrating tradition with modernity.

**Keywords:** Temple of the Three Sus; Traditional architecture; Decorative patterns; Auspiciousness

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## 1. Introduction

The Temple of the Three Sus, originally the home of Su Xun, Su Shi, and Su Zhe, has transformed over time, becoming a temple in the Yuan dynasty and later a commemorative garden. It suffered damage in the Ming dynasty but was rebuilt in the Qing and modern times. Located on a peninsula, the garden reflects the simplicity of West Sichuan gardens and the solemnity of ancient temples. It is lush with greenery and lotus ponds. As a Bashu celebrity commemorative garden, it showcases an ancient and charming landscape and serves as a medium for Sansu culture transmission. The traditional decorative patterns in the buildings, bridges, and walls convey historical depth and meaningful intentions.

Studying the styles, content, and design applications of these patterns can enrich the expressions of Sansu culture. The motifs' profound implications deepen the cultural connotations of Sansu culture. Analyzing their characteristics and evolution patterns in different spaces offers more possibilities for Sansu cultural expression.

## **2. Style and patterns of traditional architectural decoration in the Temple of the Three Sus**

Traditional Chinese decorative patterns convey deep meanings linked to auspiciousness. They reflect users' spiritual aspirations and creators' craftsmanship. Production involves carving, coloring, gilding, and molding for harmonious effects. Traditional buildings, like the Temple of the Three Sus, share similar decorative features. Craftsmen extract and reconfigure auspicious natural elements, using specific techniques and materials. They create designs based on component locations and purposes. Western Sichuan gardens demonstrate unique craftsmanship, integrating spaces with decorative culture for lively environments. This article analyzes the design system and expressive logic of patterns, focusing on morphology, structural composition, and techniques.

### **2.1. Pattern techniques**

#### **2.1.1. Realistic technique**

In Chinese tradition, decorative patterns are replicas of motifs used in architecture, courtyards, furniture, clothing, and other elements. These patterns have been preserved over time, adhering to traditional rules. Temple of the Three Sus showcases this, with patterns reflecting daily life in realistic or exaggerated forms to convey rich meanings. This reinterprets natural objects creatively. For instance, the Mei Lan Zhu Ju pattern on the bridge at the south gate of the temple is realistically yet exaggeratedly depicted, adjusting elements to create a realistic composition. This enhances the artistic value of the patterns, making the space lively. This decoration method, based on realistic depiction with modifications like omission, deformation, and recombination, is easily recognizable, offering clear denotations and connotations for various interpretations. This type of pattern is the most common and forms the basis of all decorative designs <sup>[1]</sup>.

#### **2.1.2. Abbreviation technique**

The method of omission is an artistic technique in pattern expression that refines and simplifies features based on realism. This technique involves removing repetitive and similar lines to highlight typical characteristics, achieving a simplified effect. This not only meets the needs of pattern expression but also brings a minimalist and striking impact to decorations. For instance, in the decorative patterns of Temple of the Three Sus, many forms have been simplified to suit structure and function, such as the lion's mane being reduced from thousands to dozens of strands. This simplification approach in pattern creation demands high aesthetic and technical skills, showcasing the profound artistic cultivation of the ancients.

#### **2.1.3. Creative technique**

The auspicious patterns of ancient times were not merely imitations of nature but were integrations of deep cultural backgrounds and transcendent spiritual meanings. Influenced by ancient cultural periods such as Chaos, the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors, the Spring and Autumn Period, the Warring States, and the Pre-Qin eras, people facing natural adversities, political struggles, or personal setbacks created numerous totems and symbols that represented spiritual solace. Many of these patterns, such as the "Dragon" seen in various places in Temple of the Three Sus, were innovations based on the characteristics of different animals, combining traits of auspicious creatures from water, land, and air, endowing dragons with mythical capabilities such as soaring into the sky or diving deep into the sea to call the rain. Although dragons do not exist in reality, they symbolize power, control over nature, and supreme status. Similarly, patterns like the Phoenix, Chiwen, Qilin, and Zhaofeng are artistic recreations of real objects that represent specific spiritual and cultural significances.

## 2.2. Structural framework

The traditional architectural decoration patterns of the Temple of the Three Sus blend realism with innovation. Simple elements like flowers or birds are reorganized to form complex decorative symbols, following compositional rules and aligning with practicality and aesthetics. Designers embed these patterns into frames, forming a basic structure called the “constitutional skeleton.” The main skeletons include “single patterns,” “bifacial continuity,” “quadrifacial continuity,” and “decorative fenestration.” These skeletons are combined and restructured to match the contours of the medium and follow the “suitable pattern” principle, facilitating pattern recognition. Overall, these techniques and rules ensure decoration diversity and complexity, satisfying practical and aesthetic demands.

### 2.2.1. Individual pattern

Single patterns usually exist independently as the main pattern, being complete and displaying their symbolic meaning alone. This can be seen in central patterns on screen walls, hanging fish-shaped decorations, floor patterns, and roof decorations. Since a single pattern consists of one or a few basic units, it often becomes a visual focal point, highlighting its core value and importance<sup>[2]</sup>. When employing single patterns, it is necessary to adhere to appropriate pattern organization principles to ensure they appropriately fill or decorate specific spaces. Due to their punctiform characteristics, single patterns provide excellent possibilities for combination, forming continuous patterns that create linear or planar structures. Additionally, single patterns are often used in combination with “border enclosures” and “decorative fenestration.”

### 2.2.2. Two-way continuous

Bifacial continuity is a highly regular and rigorous compositional skeleton achieved by repeating the same pattern or unit pattern continuously in horizontal or vertical directions. In Temple of the Three Sus, bifacial continuity is commonly used to create the basic structure of patterns, with floral and herbaceous motifs being the most frequent themes, followed by geometric shapes **Figure 1**. To break the inherent monotony, different thematic patterns are occasionally inserted to add variation. This structure is especially prevalent in architectural components such as ridges and fang ridges, and also in decorations along plaques, paths, and courtyard edges. Bifacial continuity not only serves as a structural form but also creates a strong visual rhythm. In Western Sichuan garden decoration, the basic structures of bifacial continuity can be further divided into four types: wavy, zigzag, scattered, and adjacent bifacial continuity, each with its unique rhythm and visual effect.



**Figure 1.** West Wing Room cloud scroll pattern (Source: Photographed by the author)

### 2.2.3. Four-way continuous

Quadrifacial continuity is the seamless extension of a pattern horizontally and vertically, creating a square or rectangular graphic space. This structure enlarges the graphic area, creating an elegant and finely crafted decoration with strong iconic characteristics. It gives a sense of visual regularity. In Temple of the Three Sus, patterns are based on geometric shapes, floral elements, and intertwined motifs, commonly used in door and window decoration.

### 2.2.4. Ornamental openwork

“Decorative fenestration,” also known as “box heart,” is a refined decoration technique primarily applied to functionally significant and structurally complex elements<sup>[3]</sup>. This method is meticulous in choosing patterns, compositional layout, and carving techniques due to its crucial positioning and profound meaning. It involves drawing a specific shape of a “box,” which is then decorated with thematic patterns to form a complete and appropriate design. In the realm of porcelain decoration, this method is known as “brocaded fenestration,” while in garden decoration, it is referred to as “decorative fenestration,” where space is reserved on the decorative surface to accommodate various patterns. In Temple of the Three Sus, “decorative fenestration” is commonly seen in doors, windows, arches, parapets, and drum stones. The thematic patterns used in this technique are varied and cover all types of subjects. The shapes of the drawn “boxes” are flexible, including circles, rectangles, fan-shapes, rhombuses, and triangles, as well as natural shapes like gourd, moon, and heart. The surrounding patterns typically feature dragon motifs **Figures 2 & 3**.



**Figure 2.** Antechamber double phoenix peony pattern  
(Source: Photographed by the author)



**Figure 3.** Xiangtang Hall lion and embroidered ball with sparrow replacement  
(Source: Photographed by the author)

## 2.3. Craftsmanship techniques

The Temple of the Three Sus utilizes craftsmanship techniques like plaster sculpture, tile work, and inlaid flowers to express traditional architectural decoration patterns. These techniques, known for their exquisite skills and vivid expression, meet the spiritual needs of users. The main materials include wood, brick, and stone, with various carving techniques like relief, round sculpture, and openwork. Decorative patterns fully utilize these materials and techniques, with choices varying based on function and location. Heavy stone carvings are used for ground decorations, while wood carvings are for upper areas. Different materials and techniques offer distinct tactile experiences. The skilled carvings display the physiological features, textures, and composite artistic effects of objects, creating masterful works of art.

Plaster sculpture, famous for its intricate modeling, is widely utilized on the roofs of the Temple of the Three Sus, captivating with its delicate forms and uncomplicated texture. Created from viscous soils like

yellow loam and white mortar, enhanced with structural elements like straw, quicklime, and wire, along with accessories such as glazed tiles and porcelain fragments, the craftsmanship is intricate and sophisticated. This material is resilient to weather and highly pliable, ideal for adorning walls and roofs (Figures 4 & 5).



**Figure 4.** Lai Feng Pavilion “Thousand Character” pattern gray sculpted ridge decoration (Source: Photographed by the author)



**Figure 5.** Xiandian Lucky Star Tower pattern gray sculpted ridge spire (Source: Photographed by the author)

“Tile work” refers to tiles, a common building material in Western Sichuan’s residential architecture. The Temple of the Three Sus, situated in the forest plateaus, showcases a typical rustic and simple style, making extensive use of tiles. Tiles are not only practical but also decorative, used on roofs, walls, screen walls, and windows. Drip tiles are often adorned with motifs symbolizing “fortune,” “prosperity,” “longevity,” and “joy” (Figures 6 & 7). These patterns are fired into the tiles, reflecting a regional affection and conveying simple wishes through their straightforward composition and designs.



**Figure 6.** Courtyard wall “bat creature” pattern tile work (Source: Photographed by the author)



**Figure 7.** Lai Feng Pavilion Ruyi lotus pattern tile work (Source: Photographed by the author)

Inlaid flowers are created through techniques like inlaying, setting, piecing, and sticking. Inlaid porcelain flowers involve selecting colorful or blue-and-white porcelain pieces, shaping them, or using broken pieces directly. These are then placed on plaster sculptures or prototypes to represent various objects and scenes. This technique is commonly used for ridge decorations, like those found on the Cape Pavilion and Embracing Moon Pavilion of the Temple of the Three Sus (Figures 8 & 9).



**Figure 8.** Cape Pavilion porcelain piece inlaid flower ridge spire (Source: Photographed by the author)



**Figure 9.** Baoyue Pavilion porcelain piece inlaid flower ridge spire (Source: Photographed by the author)

### 3. Detailed analysis of traditional architectural decoration patterns in the Temple of the Three Sus

#### 3.1. Natural patterns

The Temple of the Three Sus' traditional decorative patterns mainly feature natural motifs like water and cloud patterns. These patterns are often carved into flying eaves or the frontal kiss using gray sculpture. Water and cloud patterns, both representing “water” elements, are common on roof decorations, primarily symbolizing fire prevention and safety. Water patterns also convey values of abundance, rank, auspiciousness, wealth, longevity, and safety. Cloud patterns express hopes for auspiciousness, successful career advancements, and fulfilled wishes <sup>[4]</sup> (Figure 10 & 11).



**Figure 10.** Dongpo Academy Ruyi cloud pattern main ridge (Source: Photographed by the author)



**Figure 11.** Baipo Pavilion Ruyi water pattern flying eaves (Source: Photographed by the author)

#### 3.2. Plant patterns

The scroll pattern, a traditional Chinese decorative motif, features curved and intertwined plant images, creating a dynamic and fluid appearance. This motif is commonly seen in the carvings of the Temple of the Three Sus,

symbolizing infinity and cycles. It blends well with other motifs, such as the six-petal flower pattern, to convey continuous happiness. The stone bridge carvings at the temple depict the “Four Gentlemen” - plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum <sup>[5]</sup>. The plum represents resilience, the orchid symbolizes nobility, the bamboo represents humility and resilience, and the chrysanthemum embodies elegance and longevity.

### 3.3. Animal patterns

The architectural carvings at Temple of the Three Sus showcase traditional animal motifs, like dragons, lions, *qilins*, and *chiwen*. Patterns like grass dragon and bent dragon are creatively rendered to appear harmonious and approachable, emphasizing the dragon’s spirit and vigor with elegance and suppleness. Other patterns mix animal motifs with diverse elements. For example, the deer and lotus pattern metaphorically represents “success in exams,” (Figure 12) and the lion with the embroidered ball symbolizes wealth and prosperity (Figure 13). The *qilin* spewing books, a motif derived from Confucius’ enduring classic “Spring and Autumn Annals,” is often used to express hopes for academic achievements in offspring <sup>[6]</sup>. The *chiwen*, legendarily the ninth dragon son, sports a dragon head, fish body, and curled tail, exuding a fierce temperament. This mythical beast is renowned for its lively movements and water-spitting, fire-breathing abilities. Typically, it adorns both ends of the main ridge of buildings in ancient Chinese architecture, serving as a decorative and fire-preventive symbol <sup>[7]</sup>.



**Figure 12.** Xiangtang Hall “Continuous Success” pattern sparrow replacement (Source: Photographed by the author)



**Figure 13.** Xiangtang Hall “Kirin Spouting Books” pattern sparrow replacement (Source: Photographed by the author)

Additionally, the traditional decorative patterns of the Temple of the Three Sus include magpies and bats. In Chinese culture, magpies symbolize auspiciousness, joy, good fortune, and celebration, often representing marital harmony and familial bliss <sup>[8]</sup>. Bats are also significant, symbolizing good fortune due to their name’s phonetic similarity to “luck” in Chinese, reflecting the cultural desire for prosperity.

### 3.4. Object patterns

The Temple of the Three Sus commonly features motifs of the “Four Arts” and “Four Treasures of the Study.” These motifs are depicted in gray sculpture and incorporated into roof decorations with other patterns. In traditional Chinese culture, the “Four Arts” — *qin* (zither), *qi* (chess), *shu* (calligraphy), and *hua* (painting) — are considered the essential arts that literati should master (Figures 14–17), serving as a measure of cultural refinement and widely used in family education <sup>[9]</sup>. The “Four Treasures of the Study” — paper, ink, brush, and

inkstone — have evolved as symbols of erudition and civilized society. These tools are crucial for study and daily life, while also representing cultural attainment in social settings<sup>[10]</sup>.



**Figure 14.** Xiangtang Hall “Zither” pattern flying eaves  
(Source: Photographed by the author)



**Figure 15.** Xiangtang Hall “chess” pattern flying eaves  
(Source: Photographed by the author)



**Figure 16.** Xiangtang Hall “book” pattern flying eaves  
(Source: Photographed by the author)



**Figure 17.** Xiangtang Hall “painting” pattern flying eaves  
(Source: Photographed by the author)

## **4. Application of the Temple of the Three Sus’ traditional architectural decoration patterns in Meishan City’s public space landscape design**

### **4.1. Necessity of using traditional architectural decoration patterns in landscape design**

The decorative patterns of the Temple of the Three Sus are ancient Chinese cultural heritage in Meishan City. Incorporating these elements into urban landscape design preserves and inherits traditional culture. This approach highlights Meishan’s historical depth and showcases the integration of tradition and modernity. It shifts focus from concrete construction to emphasizing humanistic values, creating a modern urban visual experience rich in cultural atmosphere.

### **4.2. Significance of using Temple of the Three Sus’ traditional architectural decoration patterns in Meishan’s urban landscape design**

The traditional decorative patterns of the Temple of the Three Sus convey cultural and historical aesthetics from Meishan. The modern urban landscape reflects the city’s historical and cultural meanings. Integrating traditional elements from the temple with modern landscapes enhances the aesthetic quality of Meishan’s urban design and adds deeper emotional and meaningful layers to the urban landscape.

Under the design philosophy, Meishan’s urban spaces transcend work and living spaces, embodying emotional and cultural attachments. Incorporating traditional architectural decorative patterns from the Temple



of the Three Sus into the modern environment, every step feels like admiring a painting. These patterns enrich the cultural atmosphere and aesthetic value of the city, drawing appreciation and attention, and enhancing the city's social value.

### **4.3. Heritage and innovation of Temple of the Three Sus' traditional architectural decoration patterns in Meishan City urban landscape design**

Integrating traditional culture into modern urban landscape design is key. Traditional architecture and decorative patterns are essential for this integration, requiring inheritance and innovation. In Meishan's urban landscape design, the main innovations are: First, the Temple of the Three Sus' buildings represent different historical eras and cultural meanings, containing unique symbols and memories. Auspicious decorative patterns should be selectively used and their meanings explored. Second, chosen patterns should be re-innovated for various urban scenes and architectural forms, preserving traditional elements while adapting to modern aesthetics. Third, innovative means can achieve traditional and modern integration in Meishan's diverse spatial scenes, enhancing the urban landscape's visual and cultural appeal.

Through such design strategies, it is possible not only to preserve and inherit traditional culture but also to add new visual and cultural layers to modern urban landscape design.

## **5. Conclusion**

Overall, studying the traditional architectural decorative patterns of the Temple of the Three Sus not only promotes understanding and dissemination of traditional culture and spirit but also provides rich inspiration and references for modern design. These patterns possess profound cultural and historical value and achieve harmony in practicality and aesthetics. Therefore, they offer valuable learning opportunities for modern designers, helping modern design to better integrate and inherit Chinese traditional culture.

## **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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