
Cultural Temporality of Ridge Beasts in the Shenyang Imperial Palace: Symbolic Evolution and the Construction of National Identity in Chinese Architectural Heritage

Yanlin Pu (Corresponding Author)

Faculty of Fine-Applied Arts and Cultural Science, Maharakham University, Thailand

E-mail: puyanlin1027@gmail.com

Sakchai Sikka

Faculty of Fine-Applied Arts and Cultural Science, Maharakham University, Thailand

Received: 22/01/2025

Accepted: 29/04/2025

Published: 07/05/2025

Volume: 6 Issue: 3

How to cite this paper: Pu, Y. & Sikka, S. (2025). Cultural Temporality of Ridge Beasts in the Shenyang Imperial Palace: Symbolic Evolution and the Construction of National Identity in Chinese Architectural Heritage. *Journal of Practical Studies in Education*, 6(3), 42-50

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46809/jpse.v6i4.105>

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Abstract

Ridge beasts on the rooftops of the Shenyang Imperial Palace embody a unique intersection of symbolism, power, and cultural identity within Qing dynasty architecture. This study explores their symbolic evolution and cultural temporality, focusing on how these architectural ornaments were adapted to support political legitimacy and national identity construction by the Manchu regime. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates literature review, field investigation, qualitative interviews, and quantitative analysis. Fieldwork was conducted in three palace zones—Dazheng Hall, Chongzheng Hall, and Wensu Pavilion—documenting ridge beasts' type, order, and materiality. A total of 400 valid questionnaires were collected from tourists, museum interpreters, cultural planners, and Manchu descendants. SPSS was used for statistical analysis, and NVivo was used for qualitative coding. The findings reveal an evolutionary trajectory in ridge beast symbolism—from establishment to integration and eventual symbolic decline—structured along the palace's spatial hierarchy. By selectively imitating and modifying Han architectural symbolism, Manchu rulers crafted a hybrid visual system asserting continuity and difference. While 76% of respondents expressed aesthetic appreciation for ridge beasts, only 29% recognized their institutional meaning, indicating a contemporary divide between visual resonance and symbolic understanding. This study highlights the role of traditional symbols in shaping historical narratives and intercultural dynamics. It provides insights into the revitalization of heritage imagery through exhibition design, public interpretation, and cultural communication strategies.

Keywords: Ridge Beasts, Shenyang Imperial Palace, Cultural Temporality, Symbolic Evolution, National Identity Construction

1. Introduction

The ridge beasts (also known as roof spine beasts) of the Shenyang Imperial Palace constitute a key component of Qing dynasty palace architecture and serve as an important entry point for understanding the intersection of visual culture, political authority, and ethnic identity (Lester, 2011). Traditionally regarded as decorative and institutional, these symbolic figures are arranged hierarchically along roof ridges to convey cosmological beliefs, architectural status, and ritual regulation. However, in the case of the Shenyang Imperial Palace—a vital architectural complex representing the early Manchu court—ridge beasts performed functions far beyond ornamentation (Li, 2019). As a political and cultural center during the formative years of the Qing dynasty, Shenyang became the site where the Manchu elite sought to legitimize their rule and unify diverse ethnic groups through selective appropriation and transformation of Han architectural symbolism (Liu, 2017).

In this context, the ridge beasts assumed new semiotic roles. They were inherited from the Ming tradition and deliberately altered in order, type, and stylistic expression to reflect Manchu authority, cultural hybridity, and strategic visual communication (Chen, 2021). Through such symbolic adaptations, the early Qing regime articulated a visual discourse of power, continuity, and differentiation—projecting cultural intersubjectivity to various audiences, including Han Chinese officials, Manchu nobles, and frontier ethnic groups (Zhao, 2017).

Despite these deep symbolic undercurrents, most existing scholarship has focused narrowly on the ridge beasts' aesthetic value, technical execution, or quantitative distribution (Pu, 2024). Others have given their cultural temporality less attention, as they are seen as visual symbols subject to time constraints and shifting meanings embedded in broader narratives of historical memory, cultural negotiation, and national identity formation (Liu & Zhang, 2017).

This study seeks to address this gap by adopting a visual cultural approach grounded in symbolic reconstruction and intercultural theory. Moving beyond the conventional "decoration–institution" dichotomy, it repositions the ridge beasts as dynamic communicative agents within the architectural landscape. By tracing their evolution across spatial hierarchies and historical phases within the Shenyang Imperial Palace, the study explores how these symbolic forms were mobilized to mediate interethnic relationships, reinforce imperial ideology, and contribute to the layered construction of Chinese national identity within the architectural heritage system.

Through investigating the cultural temporality, symbolic transformation, and communicative function of ridge beasts in the Shenyang Imperial Palace, this study focuses on their role in visualizing political authority, negotiating cultural identity, and contributing to the symbolic architecture of Chinese national heritage. Moving beyond traditional interpretations that emphasize decorative and institutional functions, this research seeks to reposition ridge beasts as active visual agents embedded within intercultural negotiation and historical meaning-making processes.

2. Literature Review

Ridge beasts, as emblematic components of traditional Chinese palace architecture, have long attracted scholarly attention within the domains of art history, architectural studies, and heritage conservation. Existing literature has predominantly examined their aesthetic forms, structural typologies, and symbolic meanings within hierarchical architectural systems. Scholars such as Wang (2005) and Zhang (2010) have traced the historical evolution of ridge beasts from early prototypes in the Han and Tang dynasties to their institutionalized use in the Ming and Qing periods. These studies emphasize the function of ridge beasts in reinforcing Confucian order, ritual hierarchy, and imperial authority.

However, relatively few studies have addressed the role of ridge beasts as dynamic visual symbols in the intercultural and political processes of the Qing dynasty. Recent research on the architecture of the Shenyang Imperial Palace has noted its dual inheritance of Han architectural conventions and Manchu symbolic innovations, highlighting how architectural forms were adapted to legitimize the Manchu regime and mediate ethnic identities (Liu, 2017; Li, 2019). However, the ridge beast as a specific symbolic medium remains underexplored in visual communication, intercultural negotiation, and identity formation.

Theoretical contributions from visual culture and semiotics—especially those of Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, and Mikhail Bakhtin—offer valuable frameworks for understanding how symbols like ridge beasts are encoded, reinterpreted, and recontextualized across different historical and political conditions. According to Hall (1997), cultural symbols are never static but are continuously reconstructed through shifting power structures and representational practices. Within this framework, ridge beasts can be viewed as static relics of tradition and as active “visual apparatuses” capable of shaping perception, reinforcing memory, and mediating interethnic relations.

Recent heritage and memory studies scholarship explores how architectural heritage contributes to forming national identity narratives in multi-ethnic contexts. Scholars such as Liu (2020) and Chen (2021) have argued that architectural symbols in heritage sites—especially those like the Shenyang Imperial Palace—play a key role in constructing shared cultural memory and expressing state narratives of unity and continuity.

The visual representation of narratives across different cultural artifacts must also be examined as a vital aspect of meaning-making. From visual arts to digital media, the application of symbolic representation serves to construct and convey complex cultural stories. For instance, the role of indigenous symbols in sculpture projects facilitates deeper engagements with the meanings inherent within them, enriching students' understandings of their cultural heritage and values (Boakye-Yiadom et al., 2024). This participatory and integrative approach emphasizes the active role of individuals in shaping and reshaping cultural narratives as they negotiate personal and collective identities.

As cultural symbols continue to evolve, their interpretations and meanings shift within varying temporal and contextual frameworks. Research concerning the Ifugao Rice Terraces illustrates how even longstanding symbols can generate new narratives that challenge prevailing historical assumptions, thereby prompting a reevaluation of cultural identity as it relates to heritage (Acabado & Martin, 2024). Through employing archaeological data to inform community narratives, this critical examination showcases how historical memory can be reconstructed to foster a more nuanced understanding of identity formation amidst ongoing cultural negotiations.

In sum, while prior studies have enriched our understanding of ridge beasts as decorative and institutional symbols, a notable gap exists in examining their cultural temporality, symbolic evolution, and function as visual media in national identity construction. This study seeks to bridge that gap by positioning ridge beasts within the larger framework of cultural intersubjectivity, intercultural visual dialogue, and the semiotic architecture of Chinese heritage.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively explore the cultural temporality and symbolic evolution of ridge beasts in the Shenyang Imperial Palace. It integrates qualitative inquiry, quantitative analysis, field investigation, and theoretical interpretation. This interdisciplinary approach enables the researcher to examine ridge beasts' material attributes and socio-cultural meanings within their historical and contemporary contexts.

3.1 Field Investigation and Visual Analysis

On-site fieldwork was conducted at three core architectural zones of the Shenyang Imperial Palace—Dazheng Hall (West Axis), Chongzheng Hall (Central Axis), and Wensu Pavilion (East Axis). Detailed photographic documentation and schematic recording were used to analyze the ridge beasts' quantity, spatial distribution, typology, stylistic features, and material composition. These data were used to identify patterns of symbolic hierarchy and visual adaptation across different palace sections.

3.2 Questionnaire Survey

A structured questionnaire was distributed to four targeted respondent groups: domestic and international tourists, heritage interpreters, cultural planners, and Manchu descendants. Four hundred valid responses were collected using a purposive sampling strategy at major visitor points within the palace and affiliated cultural venues between October and December 2024—the sample aimed for demographic diversity in age, gender, educational background, and ethnic identity. The questionnaire assessed participants' aesthetic reception, cultural awareness, and interpretive understanding of ridge beast symbolism. Data were analyzed using SPSS for descriptive statistics, cross-tabulation, and correlation analysis.

3.3 Semi-Structured Interviews and Qualitative Coding

In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 participants, including museum staff, architectural historians, and local community representatives. These interviews explored participants' perceptions of ridge beasts' symbolic and cultural significance. Thematic coding and qualitative analysis were conducted using NVivo to extract recurrent themes, such as identity expression, historical memory, and intercultural symbolism.

4. Theoretical Framework

The connection between Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory and semiotics (especially the semiotics expounded by Roland Barthes) allows us to understand how society constructs meaning and identity through shared narratives and symbols. Barthes's semiotic theory allows us to analyze the layers of meaning contained in cultural products. In contrast, Assmann's cultural memory framework provides a perspective that allows us to analyze how these meanings are transmitted, preserved, and transmitted between generations.

This study is grounded in a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that draws on visual culture theory, semiotics, and cultural memory studies to analyze the ridge beasts of the Shenyang Imperial Palace as culturally embedded symbols with evolving meaning. Central to this approach is the concept of cultural temporality—the idea that cultural symbols shift in meaning and function across historical contexts, political regimes, and social interpretations.

4.1. Visual Culture and Symbolic Representation

Following Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation, this study considers ridge beasts as part of a broader system of visual culture in which meaning is not fixed but produced through representational practices. Hall's emphasis on the encoding/decoding process enables examining how ridge beasts, initially rooted in Han Chinese architectural traditions, were recontextualized by the early Qing Manchu regime to articulate new forms of political legitimacy and ethnic identity.

4.2. Semiotics and Symbolic Reconfiguration

Roland Barthes' (1977) semiotic theory further informs the analysis, particularly his notion that symbols function as “myths” that naturalize cultural ideologies. Ridge beasts are examined for their denotative architectural function and connotative role in expressing dynastic values and imperial power. Barthes' layered model of meaning allows this study to trace how the symbolic order of ridge beasts transitioned from ritual decorum to tools of cultural negotiation.

4.3. Cultural Intersubjectivity and Identity Construction

The concept of cultural intersubjectivity, drawn from Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic theory, underlines the mutual, dynamic construction of meaning between different cultural groups—in this case, the Manchu and Han peoples. This dialogic interaction

is reflected in the architectural symbolism of the Shenyang Imperial Palace, where ridge beasts serve as visual agents in expressing shared and contested identity narratives. Such a perspective is particularly relevant in analyzing how the Manchu elite selectively absorbed and transformed Han traditions to construct a multi-ethnic imperial ideology.

4.4. Cultural Memory and Heritage Semiotics

Cultural memory theory, particularly the works of Jan Assmann, further supports this framework. These theories view heritage symbols as carriers of collective identity and historical continuity. Ridge beasts, as semiotic fixtures in the built environment, mediate between past meanings and present interpretations, thus participating in the ongoing process of national identity construction.

In synthesizing these theoretical strands, the study conceptualizes ridge beasts as semiotic nodes within a temporally layered architectural discourse—simultaneously historical artifacts, political instruments, and contemporary communicative media. This framework supports a nuanced understanding of how symbolic elements in architectural heritage function within evolving cultural, political, and aesthetic systems.

5. Findings

This study reveals that the ridge beast system in the Shenyang Imperial Palace is not merely a decorative feature of palace architecture but a multidimensional symbolic construct that evolved in response to dynastic needs, cultural politics, and visual ideology. Through a combination of fieldwork, architectural analysis, and public perception studies, five significant findings emerged as follows.

5.1. Spatial-Temporal Evolution of Symbolism

The development of ridge beasts in the palace follows a precise spatial and temporal progression across the three primary architectural zones:

1) On East Road, particularly in Dazheng Hall, ridge beasts are limited in number and stylistically rudimentary. They reflect a phase of symbolic emergence when Manchu rulers began experimenting with Han visual forms to express power and ritual. Their uneven quantity and handcrafted simplicity underscore a tentative stage of symbolic appropriation (Hu & Tang, 2024).

2) On Central Road, dominated by Chongzheng Hall (Figure 1), ridge beasts are abundant, standardized, and hierarchically arranged. This stage signifies institutional integration, where symbolic elements from Ming tradition were fully codified and infused with Qing martial values (Luo, 2014). These beasts follow formal architectural grammar while strategically modifying traditional sequencing.

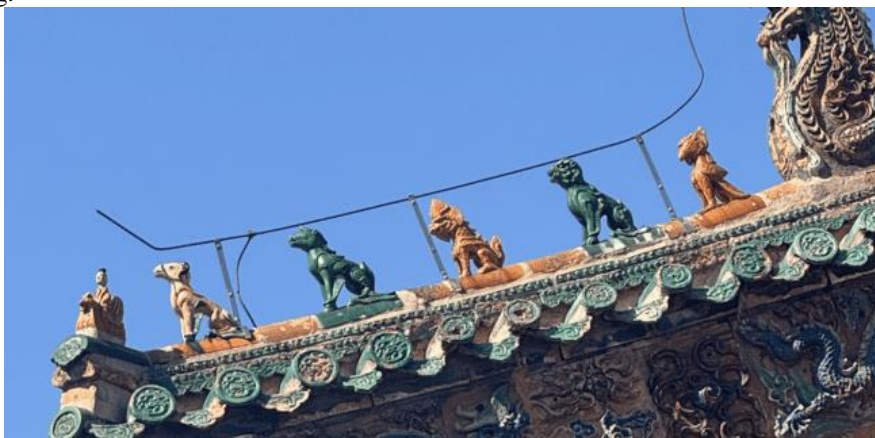


Figure 1. The Order of the Ridge Beasts in Chongzheng Hall of Shenyang Imperial Palace
(Source: Photographed by Yanlin Pu, 2024)

3) On West Road, particularly around Wensu Pavilion (Figure 2), ridge beasts are absent but have been replaced by restrained Jiangnan-style detailing. This represents a phase of symbolic retreat, where imperial power shifted from overt display to subtle literati aesthetics during the Qianlong period (Xie, 2015). The spatial silence reflects a cultural pivot from visible authority to internalized cultivation.



Figure 2. Shenyang Imperial Palace Wensu Pavilion
 (Source: Photographed by Yanlin Pu, 2024)

This evolution encapsulates a narrative of political consolidation and cultural maturity, tracing the transformation of the Manchu regime’s visual discourse from symbolic assertion to institutional establishment and, ultimately, reflective withdrawal.

5.2. Symbolic Reconfiguration and Dual Coding

While visually resembling Ming and Han precedents, the ridge beasts were symbolically re-coded to reflect Qing values. The Qing modified their iconographic content and reoriented symbolic logic from religious to political:

Beasts like horses and sheep were positioned at the front of ridges in key halls—unlike their placement in Central Plains precedents—signifying conquest and peaceful submission, respectively (Zhang, 2010). Their placement narrates the Qing’s self-image as civilizing rulers from the frontier.

The spiritual imagery of previous dynasties (e.g., lotus pedestals, Taoist guardians) was removed in favor of aggressive poses, bolder scale, and use of imperial colors (yellow and green), symbolizing power and control (Wang, 2005). The substitution of religious motifs with imperial identifiers reflects a semiotic shift from divine protection to sovereign authority.

This reflects a dual-coded symbolic strategy: external conformity to Han ritual norms, internal assertion of Manchu identity, and Eight Banners authority. These manipulations underscore the active role of architecture in the Manchu regime’s cultural-political strategy.

5.3. Cultural Intersubjectivity and Ethnic Negotiation

The Shenyang Ridge beast system served as a medium for cultural intersubjectivity—a site where Han and Manchu cultural codes were preserved and creatively negotiated.

The East–Central–West zoning reflects a visual metaphor of how the Qing dynasty positioned itself within Han spatial orthodoxy while embedding distinct ethnic perspectives (Fu, 2021). Through spatial layout, symbolic reordering, and selective appropriation, the ridge beasts became tools for symbolic boundary-making, enabling cultural legitimacy and ethnic sovereignty.

The symbolic dialogism revealed in the substitution of beast order, stylistic exaggeration, and material use (e.g., high-fired yellow glaze over a carved stone) illustrates that identity was not merely asserted but also adapted. As such, the Ridge beast system exemplifies a nuanced cultural synthesis rather than a static replication of precedent.

5.4. Public Perception: Aesthetic Engagement and Symbolic Disconnect

Survey data (N = 400) revealed a widespread recognition and appreciation of ridge beasts (82%), with strong public associations of power, mystery, and imperial grandeur (Table 1). However, only 29% of respondents accurately understood their original hierarchical function.

Table 1. Ridge Beast Cultural Awareness Survey Summary
 (Source: Collected by Yanlin Pu, 2025)

Variable	Yes (%)
Recognize Ridge Beasts	82.00
Understand Hierarchical Function	29.00
Associate with Power	75.00
Associate with Mystery	67.50
Associate with Royalty	71.25

This suggests that while the visual identity of ridge beasts persists, their semantic integrity has been eroded. Modern audiences, especially younger generations, tend to interpret ridge beasts through the lens of aesthetic entertainment rather than symbolic knowledge (Figure 3). Explanations from guides and signage often rely on simplified narratives (“dragon and phoenix,” “auspicious creatures”), which, while emotionally engaging, fail to convey the deep ritual and political meanings embedded in these symbols (Figure 4).

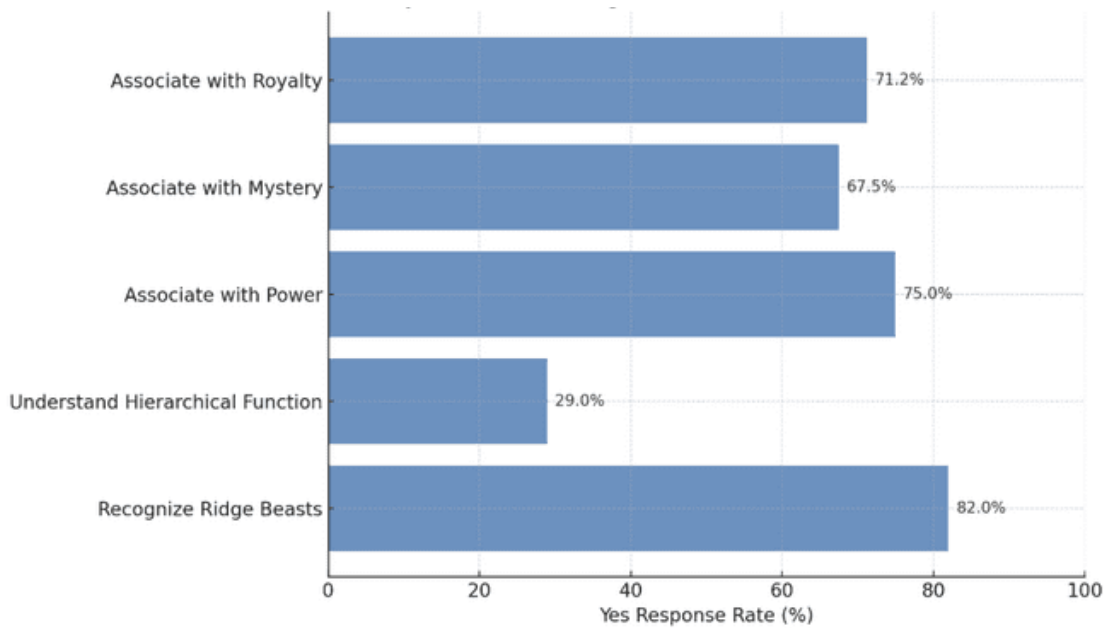


Figure 3. Survey Results on Ridge Beast Cultural Awareness (N = 400)
 (Source: Collected by Yanlin Pu, 2025)

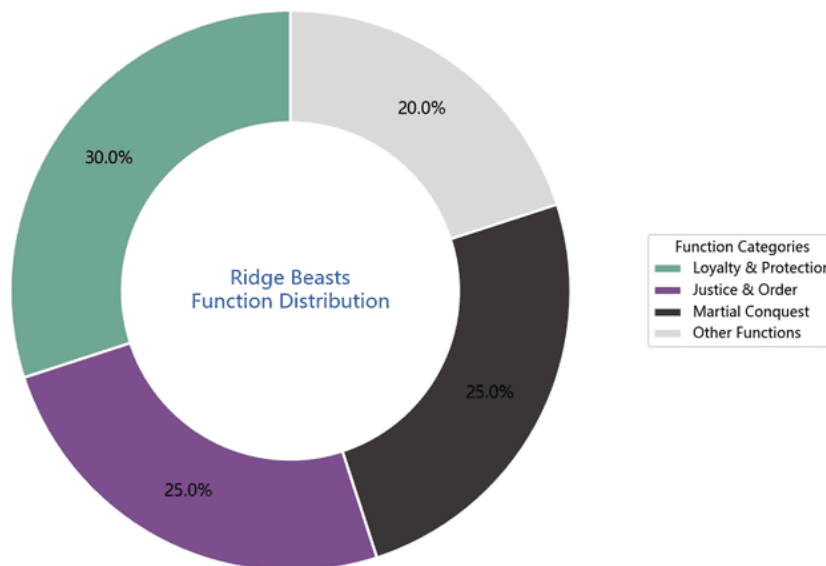


Figure 4. Symbolic Function Proportions of Ridge Beasts in Shenyang Imperial Palace Architecture
 (Source: Made by Yanlin Pu, 2025)

The NVivo coding summary reveals that 78% of respondents visually recognize ridge beasts and associate them with mythic or decorative elements, only 64% understand their symbolic meaning, and 52% connect them to cultural memory or institutional knowledge. Additionally, 46% expressed interest in redesigning ridge beasts for cultural products. These findings suggest that although ridge beasts remain visually prominent, their original meaning has faded, highlighting the need for renewed interpretation and cultural education (Table 2).

Table 2. Coding Summary Table: Ridge Beast Awareness (Nvivo Analysis)
 (Source: Collected by Yanlin Pu, 2025)

Theme	Description	% of Respondents
Visual Recognition	“It looks like a mythic creature”, “I noticed them on roofs”	78%

Symbolic Misunderstanding	“I thought it’s just decorative”, “No idea about ranks”	64%
Cultural Memory Disconnection	“No one explained that”, “Seems like an old icon”	52%
Suggestion for Redesign	“Could be turned into cartoons”, “Good for exhibitions”	46%

This results in symbolic erosion, where ridge beasts are celebrated visually but are increasingly disconnected from their original cultural significance. The implications extend to heritage education and the future transmission of semiotic architectural knowledge.

5.5. Visual Translation and Contemporary Activation

The study developed the Ridge Memory visual communication project to address the symbolic gap. This initiative reinterprets ridge beast symbolism through data visualization, abstraction, and narrative design:

Line-based illustrations simplify complex symbolic functions (e.g., loyalty, justice, conquest). Color-coded systems associate ridge beasts with their respective palace zones (East, Central, West) (Figure 5). Booklets, infographics, and packaging designs transform traditional iconography into engaging educational tools.

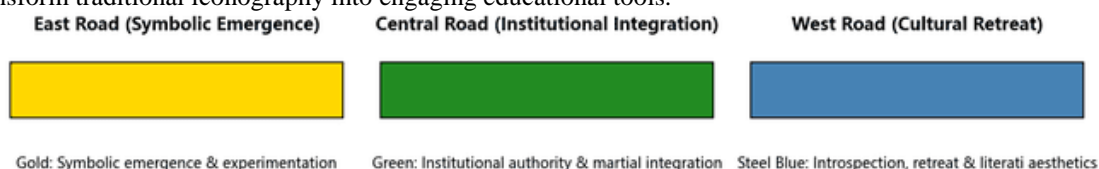


Figure 5. Color-coded System For Ridge Beasts in Shenyang Imperial Palace (Ridge Memory)
(Source: Made by Yanlin Pu, 2025)

The project demonstrates how design can serve as cultural translation, transforming passive heritage symbols into active vehicles for public understanding, aesthetic education, and identity formation.

Ultimately, the findings affirm that the ridge beasts of the Shenyang Imperial Palace operate as architectural texts that encode dynastic values, mediate ethnic identities, and communicate cultural authority. Their evolution from political instruments to heritage symbols underscores the enduring relevance of visual language in constructing, negotiating, and revitalizing national identity.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the ridge beast system in the Shenyang Imperial Palace is far more than a vestige of architectural ornamentation—it is a living, mutable system of imperial symbolism that has evolved through deliberate cultural coding, political negotiation, and modern reinterpretation. The discussion situates these findings within broader theoretical frameworks, linking spatial practices, visual semiotics, and cultural intersubjectivity to processes of identity formation, power display, and heritage reinterpretation.

6.1. Architecture as Symbolic Governance

This study confirms that Qing rulers utilized architecture—specifically ridge beasts—as a platform for symbolic governance. The deliberate transformation of Ming-era ridge beast systems into Manchu-coded hierarchies illustrates Barthes' (1977) theory of visual symbols shifting from spiritual representation to ideological function. By adjusting beast sequencing, iconography, and material finishes, the early Qing regime visually articulated political legitimacy while embedding martial identity into Han ritual architecture.

This aligns with Hall's (1997) cultural theory of representation, which posits that meaning is constructed, contested, and continuously negotiated within systems of signification. Ridge beasts became signifiers through which the Manchu regime asserted authority while fostering cultural continuity. The East–Central–West symbolic shift reflects a calculated visual strategy: from experimentation to institutionalization, followed by aesthetic introspection—a pattern that mirrors dynastic consolidation and maturity.

6.2. Cultural Intersubjectivity in a Multi-Ethnic Empire

The visual and spatial adaptations observed in ridge beast deployment exemplify cultural intersubjectivity. Rather than passively assimilating Han norms, the Manchu elite strategically adopted and restructured Han symbolic language to construct a hybrid imperial identity. This aligns with Berry's (1997) intercultural framework, where meaning emerges from mutual adaptation rather than one-sided acculturation.

The Qing visual system absorbed and altered Han traditions by placing martial animals like horses and rams at the symbolic forefront and omitting spiritual motifs such as lotus pedestals. This confirms that cultural symbols—especially in built form—are dialogic rather than static and function as media of interethnic negotiation.

6.3. *Visual Authority and the Semiotics of Power*

The analysis also highlights the role of ridge beasts in projecting visual authority. Drawing on Peirce's semiotic theory and Lester's (2011) visual communication studies, the ridge beasts act as "indexical signs"—directly linked to the imperial order they represent. In Chongzheng Hall, their size, arrangement, and spatial rhythm create a coherent narrative of imperial strength rooted in hierarchical display.

As the study shows, symbols only retain power if their meanings are understood. The contemporary disconnection between visual recognition and symbolic literacy reveals the fragility of inherited symbols in postmodern contexts. When ridge beasts are reduced to decorative spectacles, they risk becoming "floating signifiers" detached from their institutional anchors.

6.4. *Revitalizing Symbolic Meaning Through Design*

The Ridge Memory project presents a viable model for the cultural reactivation of symbolic architecture. By translating complex imperial codes into accessible visual language, the project validates Hall's (1980) call for cultural codes to be continuously reinterpreted. Traditional forms like ridge beasts can bridge historical knowledge with contemporary identity through abstraction, narrative tools, and educational applications.

Integrating digital tools designed to improve user interaction is an important component of the Ridge Memory project methodology. Digital applications using a gamified learning framework can improve user experience by enhancing memory recall. Emotional memory is closely related to user experience. Therefore, effective digital application design can improve usability and significantly impact memory retention and user engagement (Rodrigues et al., 2022). According to these principles, providing users with an interactive gamified experience will make them more likely to engage with the presented content, thereby strengthening their connection to the preserved historical narrative.

This echoes broader debates in heritage studies: that preservation must go beyond physical conservation to include semantic and communicative renewal. Symbols such as ridge beasts must be mediated, not merely displayed, to reengage the public with their historical significance and political depth.

In sum, the ridge beasts of the Shenyang Imperial Palace operate as influential visual texts, encoding authority, culture, and ethnicity within the empire's architectural language. Their evolution reflects broader mechanisms of symbolic governance, intercultural negotiation, and design-based memory work. In their original and reinterpreted forms, they offer critical insight into how architectural heritage functions as a national identity and cultural continuity platform.

7. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the ridge beasts of the Shenyang Imperial Palace are far more than decorative remnants of traditional architecture—they are dynamic, multi-layered symbols deeply embedded in the processes of imperial visual communication, ethnic negotiation, and heritage construction. Through spatial analysis, historical interpretation, and cultural theory, the research has revealed the transformative journey of these architectural symbols from their symbolic emergence to institutional codification and eventual cultural abstraction.

The Qing dynasty's adaptation of Han ridge beast symbolism illustrates a deliberate strategy of dual coding: externally aligned with ritual orthodoxy, yet internally infused with Manchu political identity. This duality enabled the ridge beasts to function simultaneously as tools of legitimacy, visual articulations of Eight Banner's ideology, and manifestations of intercultural governance. The tripartite spatial evolution across the East, Central, and West palace zones reflects the symbolic trajectory from assertion to codification to retreat.

The study highlights the tension between aesthetic appreciation and institutional cognition in contemporary public perception. While ridge beasts remain visually compelling, their deeper meanings are increasingly overlooked for entertainment-driven interpretations. This calls for more innovative communication strategies that translate heritage symbolism into accessible, meaningful formats.

The Ridge Memory project exemplifies such an approach by using design as a method of cultural translation. The project demonstrates how traditional symbols can be repositioned as tools for education, identity formation, and cultural continuity by reactivating the symbolic potential of ridge beasts through contemporary visual language.

This study affirms that architectural heritage is not static but a living system of meaning. The ridge beasts of the Shenyang Imperial Palace continue to offer valuable insight into how architecture embodies political ideology, negotiates ethnic identity, and endures through reinterpretation. As heritage discourse moves toward more participatory and design-driven models, such symbols must be re-engaged as relics of the past and as active participants in the construction of cultural memory and national imagination.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the staff and curators of the Shenyang Imperial Palace Museum for their support and access to site resources during the field investigation. Appreciation is also extended to the cultural heritage experts, museum interpreters, and local community members who participated in interviews and contributed valuable perspectives to this research.

Special thanks are due to the anonymous reviewers and editorial team for their constructive feedback, which improved the quality and clarity of this article. The author also acknowledges the efforts of the research assistants and all survey participants, whose contributions were essential to the completion of this study.

References

- Acabado, S. and Martin, M. (2024). Older is not necessarily better: decolonizing ifugao history through the archaeology of the rice terraces. *Land*, 13(2), 237. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land13020237>
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, music, text* (S. Heath, Trans.). Fontana Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (M. Holquist, Ed., C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). University of Texas Press.
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology*, 46(1), 5–34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x>
- Boakye-Yiadom, F., Donkor, E., & Mensah, R. (2024). Toward indigenous knowledge systems: the role of project-based learning in higher education: insights into sculpture students' projects on Ghanaian Adinkra symbols. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-5180598/v1>
- Chen, X. (2021). The visual politics of heritage in multi-ethnic China: A study of spatial symbolism in imperial sites. *Journal of Chinese Cultural Studies*, 18(2), 45–60.
- Elliott, M. C. (2001). *The Manchu way: The eight banners and ethnic identity in late imperial China*. Stanford University Press.
- Fu, X. (2021). The hierarchy of architectural decoration systems in the Qing Dynasty. *Studies in Architectural History*, 18(3), 45–58.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language: Working papers in cultural studies, 1972–79* (pp. 128–138). Hutchinson
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage & Open University.
- Hu, M. and Tang, Y. (2024). Research on the conservation and restoration of architectural coloured paintings in the Shenyang Imperial Palace. *Cultural Heritage Conservation Quarterly*, 12(1), 77–84.
- Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Lester, P. M. (2011). *Visual communication: Images and messages* (6th ed.). Wadsworth.
- Li, J. (2019). Symbolic appropriation in early Qing palace architecture: A study of the Shenyang Imperial Palace. *Architectural Heritage Review*, 9(1), 62–75
- Liu, Y. and Zhang, W. (2017). A study on the ridge beast system of Ming and Qing palaces. *Architecture and Culture*, 12, 102–105.
- Liu, Y. (2017). Ethnic hybridity and symbolic representation in Qing dynasty architecture. *Journal of Manchu Studies*, 12(3), 101–118.
- Liu, Z. (2020). Architecture and collective memory in modern Chinese heritage discourse. *Cultural Memory Studies*, 7(1), 89–106
- Luo, H. (2014). Research on the symbol system of Qing dynasty palace architecture. *Research on Ancient Architecture*, 6, 22–30.
- Peirce, C. S. (1991). *Peirce on signs: Writings on semiotic* (J. Hoopes, Ed.). University of North Carolina Press.
- Pu, Y. (2024). Ridge memory: Visualisation of cultural symbols of ridge beasts in the Forbidden City of Shenyang [Unpublished design research project]. Luxun Academy of Fine Arts.
- Rawski, E. S. (1996). The last emperor: A social history of Qing imperial institutions. *The China Quarterly*, 145, 1–32. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741000004734>
- Rodrigues, L., Arndt, D., Palomino, P. T., Toda, A. M., Klock, A. C. T., Avila-Santos, A. P., & Isotani, S. (2022). Affective memory in gamified learning: a usability study. *Anais Do XXXIII Simpósio Brasileiro De Informática Na Educação (SBIE 2022)*. <https://doi.org/10.5753/sbie.2022.225748>
- Steinhardt, N. S. (2002). *Chinese imperial city planning*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Wang, Q. (2005). *A study of decorative beasts in traditional Chinese architecture*. China Architecture & Building Press.
- Wang, X. and Guo, J. (2021). Study on the public communication of Qing Palace architectural symbols. *Cultural Heritage Communication*, 4(2), 52–59.
- Xie, H. (2015). Mythological and political metaphors in images of ridged beasts. *Decoration*, 10, 90–93.
- Zhang, G. (2010). *Symbolism and ritual hierarchy in Ming and Qing imperial buildings*. Tongji University Press.
- Zhao, Y. (2017). A study on the relationship between Qing dynasty northeast palace architecture and Central Plains ritual system. *Qing History Series*, 25, 33–48.