

# Evolution and Inheritance of Animal Head Applique on Shanxi Houses

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**ABSTRACT:** Animal head applique is an important part of Chinese traditional door leaf. Started with the origin and evolution of animal head applique, this paper is to study its original practical functions in Shanxi. I propose some ideas to improve the traditional animal head applique and apply it on the modern doors, so that people can accept and understand this long-standing decoration method and it can be preserved as the cultural heritage. Thus, the significance of the traditional components is illustrated and further the irreplaceability of the animal head appliques is demonstrated.

**KEYWORD:** animal head applique; architectural door decoration; decoration; inheritance

The door is the face as well as the main entrance of the whole traditional architecture. It is the way that people have to pass for working and living, and is also the status symbol of the house owner. Therefore, the traditional building always lays particular emphasis on decoration of the door. The decorative art of the door covers the knocker, the animal-faced ornament, the warded lock, the nipple-shaped nail, the iron covered body and the like which make the door exquisite and unique. The animal-faced ornament plays a significant part in the face of the door, and is always made marvelously exquisite and unique. A perfect animal-faced ornament not only embodies the identity and status of the house owner, but also adds the finishing point to bring the whole door to life.

English as “In the house decorated with patterns of serial green rings and silver animal-faced ornaments lives a beautiful lady”, “the golden animal-faced ornaments complement each other” and “the dew moistens the copper animal-faced ornaments while the moss covers the stone well”, wherein the animal-faced ornaments are also referred to as the decorations on the door. (Fig. 1)

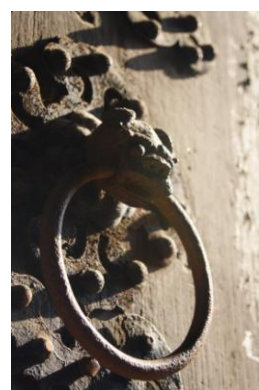


Figure 1. Animal Head Applique

## 1 ORIGIN OF ANIMAL-FACED ORNAMENT

As far as we know, the word “animal-faced ornament” was firstly recorded in the Han Dynasty (202 BC-220 AD). Since then, various versions of legends and stories about the animal-faced ornament were derived. For example, as recorded in History of Han Dynasty - Emperor Ai Chronicle (Ban Gu 80 AD), the word appeared in a traditional Chinese verse which means in English that the copper animal-faced ornaments taking the shape of crossed turtles and snakes whine. After the Han Dynasty (202 BC-220 AD), there were traditional Chinese verses, which also describe the animal-faced ornaments and can be respectively expressed in

As for the origin of the animal-faced ornament, there is a legend that in the early period of the Spring and Autumn Period (770 BC-476 BC), a man called Gongshu Ban walked along the shore, and saw that a margarya was climbing up the shore. The margarya stretched its head out of the shell, drew a circle on the ground with its feet, and finally retracted its head after finishing the drawing. After then the margarya closed itself in the shell and never got out. Inspired by the behavior of the margarya, Gongshu Ban made the knockers taking the shape of the head of the

margarya for the door. The knockers were used for closure, protection, decoration and exorcism.<sup>1</sup>

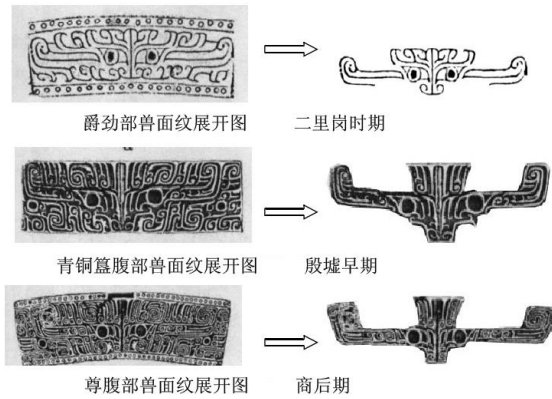


Figure 2. Relationship between Beast-face Vein and Animal Head Applique Formation

Anyway, that is just a legend. According to researches by the scholars, the origin of the animal-faced ornament generally focuses on three points:

- the animal-faced ornament is related to and inherits the beast-face veins on the bronze ware manufactured in the Shang Dynasty (1555 BC-1059 BC) and the Zhou Dynasty (1059 BC-255 BC).
- the animal-faced ornament is related to and inherits the beast-face veins on the jade articles manufactured in the Liangzhu Period (about 3300 BC-2250 BC).
- the animal-faced ornament is related to the prehistoric statuary art.

## 2 EVOLUTION OF ANIMAL-FACED ORNAMENT

After evolution of more than two thousand years, the early form of the animal-faced ornament took shape firstly in the Shang Dynasty in China, and appeared on the bronze ware at that time in the form of beast faces without knockers. However, there is no door decoration discovered. The animal-faced ornament was matured and developed in the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring State Period, people no longer worshiped the totem of the animal-faced ornament, and the beast-face vein occurred and developed. Through evolution of the animal-faced ornament during the Qin Dynasty (221 BC-207 BC) and the Han Dynasty (202BC-220AD), the decoration of the door developed to be perfect, and the basic shape and structure of the decoration of the door were formed. Moreover, the animal-faced ornament began to appear on the stone portrait. Due to multi-element fusion of the animal-faced ornament during the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties as well as influences of cultures of other nationalities such as the western region culture and the Buddhism culture, various forms of

animal-faced ornaments were formed. The development of the animal-faced ornament achieved the highest point during the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties. Especially in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the animal-faced ornament was gradually divorced from the meanings of original totem worship and feudal privilege symbol, and no longer was the privilege of the governor. It began popular in the vernacular dwellings and spread widely.

## 3 ANIMAL-FACED ORNAMENT FOR VERNACULAR DWELLINGS IN CENTRAL AND SOUTH REGIONS OF ANCIENT SHANXI PROVINCE

Shanxi Province plays a special role in the civilization history of the Chinese nation, and is honored as “the treasury of the ancient Chinese architecture” as the ancient architectures exist all over the province with abundant aboveground and underground cultural relics. The vernacular dwellings in Shanxi Province have unique features, and even there is a saying that Shanxi Province in the north is as famous as south Anhui Province in the south. The vernacular dwellings in Shanxi Province are featured with courtyards and cave dwellings. Particularly, the courtyard culture formed in the end of the Ming Dynasty is particular about the decoration, and therefore, a unique culture of door decoration is also formed.

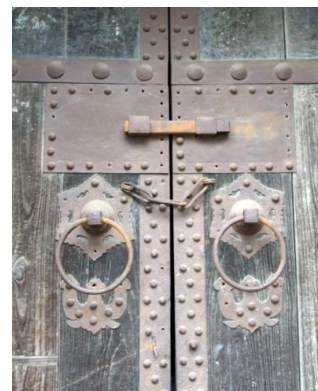


Figure 3. Bat-like Ornament on Doors in Ding Village

We drew a conclusion from investigation on part of the vernacular dwellings in the central and south regions of ancient Shanxi Province, and classified the animal-faced ornaments into the following categories in aspects of decorative patterns:

### 3.1 Bat-like knocker

The bat-like knocker was widely used in Ding Village in Xiangfen County of Linfen City of Shanxi Province (Fig.3). The architectural complexes built in the Ming and Qing Dynasties are preserved well in Ding Village. There are plenty of animal-faced

ornaments and knockers in Ding Village. Each ancient house in Ding Village comprises more than one door, and all doors vary in size and are plank doors. Generally, the door manufactured in the Ming Dynasty is simple and plain while the door manufactured in the Qing Dynasty is gorgeous and splendid in decoration. Particularly, the door decorated with the bat-like knocker is unique in feature. The cushion sheet between the knocker and the door plank is made into the shape of the bat, which is common means for taking advantage of the homophonic effect. As the pronunciations of the bat and the blessing in Chinese are same, the bat is usually regarded as one of the mascots and is called the lucky star.

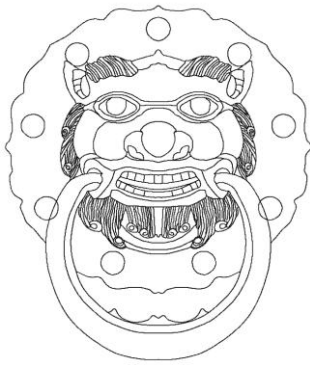


Figure 4. Animal-faced Ornament on Doors in Wang Family Courtyard

### 3.2 *Beast-face knocker*

The beast-face knocker was mainly used by the emperors rather than in the vernacular dwellings in the ancient time, and was later used by the officers and the nobilities in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The beast-face animal-faced ornaments for the Wang Family Courtyard in Shanxi Province are the typical examples of the beast-face knockers (Fig.4). This kind of knocker is characterized by a beast face holding a ring or an iron leaf in the mouth, wherein the animal-faced ornament takes the shape of a beast face which is expected to protect the house and exorcise the evil spirits as per the folklores (Li Wenjuan 2005).

### 3.3 *Cymbal-shaped knocker*

The cymbal-shaped knocker is the most common form of animal-faced ornament in the vernacular dwellings in Shanxi Province. The bottom surface of the cymbal-shaped knocker takes the shape of a hexagon or an octagon, and a hemispheric bulge with diameter less than that of the bottom surface is formed on the bottom surface. An ornament such as a ring or an iron leaf is arranged in the center of the hemispheric bulge. As the appearance of this kind of animal-faced ornament is much similar to a traditional percussion instrument named cymbal,

people also call it door cymbal. When a visitor flaps the knockers, a wonderful sound can be made. Therefore, it can be used as a doorbell in the ancient time, and thus is also referred to as the percussion instrument originally (Fig.5).



Figure 5. Cymbal-shaped Ornament for Vernacular Dwellings in Central Regions of Shanxi Province

### 3.4 *Iron-sheet knocker*

The iron-sheet knocker is the most commonly used knocker in the urban regions of ancient Shanxi Province (Fig.6). Generally, it has few features of the animal-faced ornament, and takes the knocker as the main body. The iron-sheet knockers comprise four upper iron hoops and four lower iron hoops which are all attached to the iron sheets. The four lower iron hoops are used for suspending a couple of rings, while the four upper iron hoops are used for inserting an iron bolt and locking the door. By using the iron-sheet knockers, people can lock the door from the outside when going out.



Figure 6. Iron-sheet Ornament for Vernacular Dwellings in Urban Regions of Shanxi Province

## 4 FUNCTION ANALYSIS FOR ANIMAL-FACED ORNAMENT

When the knockers are usually used, the rings are pulled; the pulling force is delivered to the animal-faced ornaments via the rings; then the force is dispersed on the door planks via the bottom surfaces of the animal-faced ornaments; in this way, the door planks are subjected to uniform force, people can open the doors with slight force, and the stability of the animal-faced ornaments are also enhanced (Fig.7).

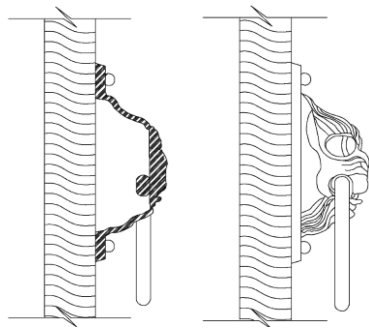


Figure 7. Profile and Elevation of Animal-faced Ornament of Animal-faced Ornament

The iron sheet arranged at the bottom of the animal-faced ornament is generally flat sheet with holes therein, and thus can be fixed to the door plank by pins penetrating the holes. The bulge on the sheet generally takes the shape of a hemisphere (the beast-face knocker is by and large hemispheric even though being complicated in vein) for the purposes of convenience in installation and avoidance of direct contact between hands and the door plank. Therefore, people can be protected from hurt on hands when knocking at the doors and the paint on the door planks can be prevented from falling off. So, the design conforms to the modern human engineering.

## 5 CONCLUSION

In order to study the spiritual connotation of the animal-faced ornament deeply, we should firstly

figure out the purposes thereof. Nowadays, the traditional cultural construction is promoted, such as application and development of the animal-faced ornament in the current. Every nation has its own tradition and style, and animal-faced ornament will reflect the history and the culture of the eternal Chinese nation in the current diversified time. Meanwhile, the culture of the Chinese nation varies and develops all the time to adapt to the environment of every period. So, we have the responsibility to spread our culture and art and carry it forward in the history of architecture.

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