



# Spatial Narrative and Ethical Cultivation: Symbolic Construction and Contemporary Reconstruction of Traditional Door Plaques in Pingyao Ancient City

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**Abstract.** Traditional door plaques are not only the artistic carriers of architectural decoration, but also the visual expression of the social governance order of traditional Chinese society. This paper breaks through the previous research perspective of single calligraphy appreciation or literature textual research, introduces "spatial narrative" and "social semiotics" theories, takes 278 existing traditional door plaques in Pingyao Ancient City as the research object, and through field investigation and quantitative statistical analysis, explores their symbolic construction mechanisms in different social spaces. The research finds that the Pingyao door plaque system is not an isolated textual existence, but through "power discipline of official space", "credit contract of commercial space", and "micro-cultivation of residential space", jointly constructs a rigorous ethical narrative network. This finding reveals how traditional urban space participates in the reproduction of social morality as a medium, providing a theoretical basis for contemporary ancient city protection to turn from simple material repair to deep contextual activation, and based on this, proposes a cultural tourism development path based on narrative reconstruction.

**Keywords:** Pingyao Ancient City, Traditional Door Plaques, Spatial Narrative, Symbolic Capital, Ethical Cultivation.

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background and Problem Proposition

As a living specimen of traditional Chinese architectural culture, the door plaque is praised as "the home and country on the lintel, the cultural vein between beams and pillars". These characters engraved in a square inch are not only the witness of family rise and fall, but also the material carrier of Confucian ethics and Jin Merchant spirit. However, in the process of modern urbanization, with the changes in residential forms and the disintegration of traditional community structures, door plaques are often simplified into a pure decorative symbol or a static tourism landscape, and their deep functions as "mass media" and "social governance tools" of traditional society are gradually forgotten.

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In the specific space-time of Qing Dynasty Pingyao, how did the ancient city, as the financial center of the late Qing Dynasty, construct social order through this visual symbol system of door plaques? How did these symbols hanging high above the lintels assist in establishing the Jin Merchants' commercial credit system across regions, and maintain the rigorous moral norms within the family? Clarifying these questions not only helps to restore the historical original appearance of Pingyao Ancient City, but also has important academic significance for understanding the internal logic of how traditional Chinese cities achieve social governance through spatial media.

## 1.2 Literature Review and Theoretical Perspective

Previous research on traditional plaques has mostly focused on calligraphy art appreciation, textual research of literary allusions, or simple cultural relic filing and organization. In recent years, although some scholars have begun to pay attention to the cultural connotation of architectural decoration, they are still insufficient in conducting deep mechanism analysis combining spatial theory, often severing the dialectical relationship between text content and spatial field.

To bridge this perspective gap, this paper introduces "Spatial Narrative" and "Social Semiotics" as theoretical lenses. As Henri Lefebvre stated in *The Production of Space*, space is not a passive container, but a product and producer of social relations [1]. Door plaques, as texts attached to architectural interfaces, essentially participated in the social production of the ancient city space; they defined the attributes of the space and regulated the behavior of users. At the same time, drawing on the social semiotics perspective of Kress and van Leeuwen [2], this paper views the door plaque as a "multi-modal discourse"—its text content, calligraphy style, material craftsmanship, and hanging position together constitute a complex symbol system. This paper aims to analyze how this system tells specific social rules in different types of spaces, thereby achieving ethical discipline and identity construction for social members.

## 2 Research Object and Method

### 2.1 Data Sources

The data for this paper mainly comes from field investigations and historical literature mutual verification. The research team conducted a dragnet-style systematic census of existing door plaques in Pingyao Ancient City, photographing and recording the text, material, dimensions, and hanging positions of the plaques. At the same time, combined with local chronicles such as *Pingyao Ancient City Annals* and *Pingyao County Annals*, the era and background of the plaques were verified [3]. After eliminating samples with blurred handwriting, fractures, or missing parts that could not be identified, 278 traditional door plaques with complete forms and clear content were finally sorted out as the core research samples.

## 2.2 Reconstruction of Classification Logic

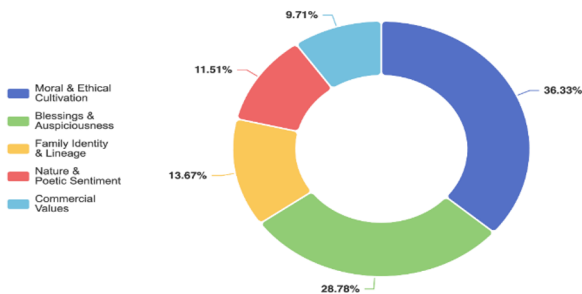
Different from traditional research that only classifies based on surface forms such as word count (e.g., two-character plaques, three-character plaques, four-character plaques), this paper believes that the meaning of door plaques can only be fully interpreted when placed in their specific spatial context. Therefore, this research constructs a two-dimensional classification framework based on the Architectural Function Attribute and Spatial Social Attribute where the door plaque is located.

First is the Official and Public Space, which covers buildings such as city gates, county yamens, Confucian temples, and City God temples. Its door plaques mainly undertake political declaration and religious sacrifice functions, focusing on grand political and religious narratives. Second is the Commercial Semi-public Space, mainly involving draft banks (piaohao), money houses (qianzhuang), and various shops. The door plaques here are both commercial signboards and declarations of commercial ethics, focusing on credit narratives. Finally, it is the Residential Private Space, which is the vast traditional residential courtyards. The door plaques here face family members and neighbors, focusing on micro-narratives of family cultivation and identity recognition.

## 3 Spatial Distribution and Statistical Characteristics of Pingyao Door Plaques

### 3.1 Overall Quantitative Analysis: Ethical Map with "Virtue" as Core

Based on text mining and classification statistics of 278 samples, Pingyao Ancient City door plaques show a significant tendency towards ethical cultivation, revealing the deep spiritual construction of the ancient city space.



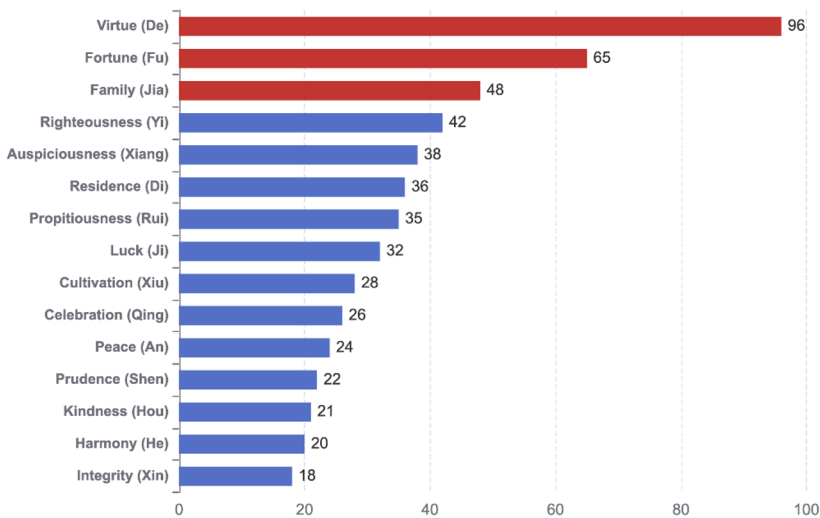
**Fig. 1.** Statistical Chart of Cultural Connotation Classification of Traditional Door Plaques in Pingyao Ancient City. (Note: Fig. 1 displays the proportion of various types of door plaques, data derived from the field census of this research.)

As shown in the statistical results of Figure 1, "Moral Cultivation Category" door plaques account for the highest proportion among all samples, reaching 36.3% (101

pieces), a ratio far exceeding other categories. This data powerfully confirms an important fact: although Pingyao is famous as the "Capital of Jin Merchants", its urban spiritual core is still a "rule of virtue" society deeply dominated by Confucian ethics. The prosperity of commerce did not dilute the pursuit of morality, but rather strengthened the necessity of cultivating oneself with virtue. Followed by "Blessing and Avoiding Disaster Category", accounting for 28.8%, which reflects the folk society's simple appeal for survival safety and family continuation in a historical environment full of uncertainty. Although "Commercial Operation Category" accounts for 9.7% in quantity, considering it is mainly distributed on the South Street axis at the core of the city, its visual distinctiveness and dissemination influence are still huge.

### 3.2 High-Frequency Semantic Analysis: Visual Presentation of Core Values

To further explore the deep semantic structure of door plaque texts, this paper conducted word segmentation and word frequency statistics on all samples, attempting to draw a "value word cloud" of Qing Dynasty Pingyao society.



**Fig. 2.** Bar Chart of High-Frequency Character Semantic Analysis of Pingyao Door Plaques. (Note: Fig. 2 displays the top 15 Chinese characters with the highest frequency, derived from text disassembly and statistics.)

The statistical data (as shown in Figure 2) presents a phenomenon of profound meaning: the character "De" (Virtue) tops the list with a high frequency of 96 times, becoming the "super symbol" of the Pingyao Ancient City door plaque system. This means that walking in the ancient city, almost every time one passes three courtyards, one will

see an emphasis on "De" on the lintel. Closely following are "Fu" (Fortune, 65 times), "Jia" (Family, 48 times), and "Yi" (Righteousness, 42 times).

This high-frequency word genealogy (De-Fu-Jia-Yi) clearly outlines the value sequence of Qing Dynasty Pingyao society: "De" is the foundation, the root of an individual's standing and conduct in the world; "Fu" is the goal, the return expected after cultivating virtue; "Jia" is the carrier, the basic unit of all value practices; and "Yi" is the criterion, regulating extensive interactions from family to society. This visual repetition of high-frequency characters forms a strong psychological suggestion in the urban space, continuously reinforcing residents' identification with mainstream Confucian values.

## **4 Deep Intertextuality and Social Functions of Door Plaque Symbols**

### **4.1 Power Discipline of Official Space: Order under Panopticism**

As recent scholarship on Chinese architectural politics reveals, architectural space is never neutral but serves as a complex arena for power struggles and authority construction [4]. The official door plaques of Pingyao Ancient City, by occupying the commanding heights and core nodes of the city, constructed a "panoptic"-like disciplinary space, transforming the will of political power into visible visual symbols.

Taking the Pingyao County Yamen as an example, its door plaque system constitutes a rigorous record of official admonitions. "Tian Li Guo Fa Ren Qing" (Heavenly Principle, State Law, Human Sentiment) above the main gate and "Sheng Qian Jiu Miu" (Correcting Faults and Errors) hanging in the second hall are not simple decorative texts, but visual extensions of power. "Sheng Qian" means correcting faults with an ink line, and "Jiu Miu" means correcting errors; these texts hang high above the head of the official's trial hall, forming a vertical visual pressure. For officials, it is a "motto" constantly reminding them to enforce the law impartially; for the people being tried, these solemn texts constitute a part of legal deterrence, reinforcing the image of the government office as the arbiter of morality and law. In addition, city gate plaques such as the South Gate's "Ying Xun" (implying receiving the gentle breeze from the south, symbolizing imperial grace) and the North Gate's "Gong Ji" (implying stars bowing to the North Star, symbolizing subjects' hearts turning to the ruler) incorporated the city's geographical orientation into the Confucian cosmic schema and political order, establishing the border city's political loyalty to imperial power through naming.

### **4.2 Credit Contract of Commercial Space: Transformation of Symbolic Capital**

Contemporary studies on heritage branding suggest that cultural symbols function as intangible assets, transforming recognition and trust into social or economic value [5]. In the context of the lack of a modern financial legal system and credit rating agencies

in the Qing Dynasty, Pingyao Jin Merchants cleverly used the door plaque as a medium to transform abstract "commercial credit" into visualized "symbolic capital".

Taking the famous Rishengchang Draft Bank as an example, its "Hui Tong Tian Xia" (Exchange across the World) and "Ri Sheng Chang Ji" plaques used extremely exquisite materials and superb calligraphy, which itself is a display of strength. But what is more profound is that a large number of shops chose to hang plaques involving moral commitments such as "Gong Yi Ke Feng" (Public Justice is Exemplary), "Yi Li Bing Zhong" (Righteousness and Profit Equally Stressed), and "Tao Zhu Yi Feng" (Legacy of Tao Zhu). Here, "Yi" (Righteousness) is no longer just a moral category, but is creatively transformed into a commercial asset. Merchants swore their absolute observance of Confucian ethics to the public through door plaques, thereby reducing the trust cost between transaction parties and establishing a commercial contract network based on "personality trust". This strategy of "raising business with virtue" made door plaques the "moral collateral" of Jin Merchants, serving as the cultural password that allowed them to mobilize huge amounts of funds nationwide.

### 4.3 Micro-Cultivation of Residential Space: Family Memory and Habitus Formation

If the door plaques of official and commercial spaces are grand narratives, then in residential space, door plaques act as the "Habitus" generating device mentioned by Bourdieu. Residential door plaques translate the grand Confucian ethics (Grand Narrative) into micro family behavior rules, permeating into every detail of daily life.

First is the Construction of Identity. Plaques such as "Ming Jing Di" (Mansion of Mingjing) and "Mao San Huai" (Flourishing Three Scholar-Trees), by displaying the family's imperial examination honors or specific historical allusions (e.g., "Three Scholar-Trees" alludes to the Wang family), externally established the family's social status and prestige in the community, defining its position in the social hierarchy; internally, they became spiritual totems condensing clansmen, enhancing family members' sense of pride and belonging.

Second is the Discipline of Daily Behavior. Plaques such as "Xiu Qi" (meaning Cultivate oneself and Regulate the family), "Shen De" (Cautious Virtue), and "Ke Sheng Zu Wu" (Able to Follow Ancestors' Footsteps) are usually hung on the lintel of the main room, the most conspicuous place in the courtyard. This spatial layout compels family members to have visual eye contact with these texts during their daily entries, exits, and daily living. This high-frequency visual contact causes concepts advocated by Confucianism such as "Filial Piety", "Diligence", and "Farming and Reading" to be imperceptibly internalized into the behavior habits and thinking modes of descendants. This cultivation achieved through spatial vision is more lasting and profound than verbal admonitions, effectively realizing the transmission of values between generations within the family [6].

## 5 Contemporary Value and Revitalization

### 5.1 Value Reevaluation: from Cultural Relic Protection to Spiritual Marker

When re-examining the cultural heritage of Pingyao Ancient City, we should realize that the value of traditional door plaques should not only remain in the rarity of their materials or the exquisiteness of their calligraphy, but more in the social governance wisdom they contain [7]. It demonstrates how to build harmonious community order and commercial ethics through visual symbols. In contemporary society where the atomization trend is intensifying and interpersonal trust is relatively fragile, the "Family Style Culture" and "Integrity Spirit" represented by door plaques are important spiritual resources for rebuilding community belonging and commercial morality, possessing strong realistic correction significance.

### 5.2 Revitalization Strategy: Cultural Tourism Reconstruction based on "Narrative"

Aiming at the homogenization and superficiality problems currently existing in the Pingyao Ancient City tourism experience, it is suggested to deeply develop door plaque resources from the perspective of "spatial narrative" to achieve a transformation from "viewing scenery" to "reading the city":

First, Construct Linear Narrative Tour Routes. Break the current scattered visiting mode, and plan and design theme routes such as "Jin Merchant Seeking Virtue Tour" and "Ancient City Family Style Study Line". Link up the "De" (Virtue) plaques and "Yi" (Righteousness) plaques scattered in different streets and courtyards, and through the guidance system, tell the complete story chain of how Jin Merchants cultivated themselves, regulated their families, and managed their businesses, allowing tourists to read the ethical map of the ancient city while walking.

Second, Enhance Embodied Experience. Combine Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) technologies to develop a digital door plaque interpretation system. Tourists only need to scan the door plaque to see the historical allusions, family rise and fall stories, and even the calligraphy evolution process behind it. This interactive experience can restore the historical context of the door plaque, realizing the transformation from passively watching "dead artifacts" to actively reading "living history".

Third, Modern Transformation of Community Construction. The inheritance of cultural veins must ultimately return to life. In modern community construction and the improvement of the lives of the ancient city's indigenous people, the educational function of door plaques should be borrowed to encourage residents to excavate their own family styles and establish "New Family Style" markers with modern significance. This is not only a tribute to traditional forms, but also an effective way to reshape neighborly relations and build modern community spirit.

## 6 Conclusion

Door plaques are the "eyes" of Pingyao Ancient City's history. Through these eyes, what we see is not only the ink of calligraphy or the texture of wood and stone, but the exquisite governance logic of a traditional society with "isomorphic structure of family and country". This research indicates that the Pingyao door plaque system is not scattered decoration, but through the organic combination of official, commercial, and residential triple spaces, it successfully internalized Confucian ethics into a social lifestyle and spatial order. In the wave of digitization and modernization, the key to protecting this heritage lies in activating its narrative function, letting these silent symbols "speak" again, and continuing to provide spiritual nourishment regarding integrity, responsibility, and feelings for home and country for modern civilization.

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