



# Study of Grey Sculpture Art in Zigong Xiqin Guild Hall

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## ABSTRACT

During the Qing Dynasty, the economy of the Zigong salt fields flourished, and the Shaanxi merchants established the Xiqin Guild Hall, a quintessential Qing-era edifice, which holds significant historical importance in the annals of Zigong's salt industry. The Zigong Xiqin Guild Hall, an architectural manifestation borne from the management needs of the salt industry, emerged during the heyday of Zigong's salt trade prosperity. Encompassing a wealth of architectural artistry such as stone carvings, wood carvings, and plaster reliefs closely intertwined with salt culture, it embodies the aspirational pursuits of the Shaanxi salt merchants in Zigong during this era, as well as the artistic achievements of the Qing Dynasty's salt field craftsmen. This paper examines the plaster relief and sculpture art of the Zigong Xiqin Guild Hall from an aesthetic perspective, analyzing the socio-economic context of the salt industry era that gave rise to this art, the techniques employed, the spiritual ethos, artistic forms, and stylistic elements. The study aims to provide practical experience for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, such as plaster reliefs and sculptures, within Zigong's salt industry history.

**Keywords:** Xi Qin Guild Hall, Ash Sculpture, Craftsmanship, Aesthetics.

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional Chinese architecture places great emphasis on the aesthetic beauty of a building's form. In architectural design, details are meticulously adorned, exemplifying exquisite decoration. Ancient Chinese buildings feature an array of artistic works on exposed elements such as stone, wood, brick, tile, plaster, and clay, all elaborately carved, chiselled, molded, or painted. Profuse decorative sculptures in plaster, brick, wood, and stone carvings are commonly found on roof ridges and upturned eaves. Moreover, architectural surfaces often bear totemic patterns depicting mythical beasts, scrollwork, deities, theatrical characters, and folktales. The choice of materials for these artworks varies greatly, each crafted to perfection. Due to regional cultural differences and climatic conditions, these decorative arts vary in form, location, material, and patterns. The content, intricacy, and scale of these embellishments also differ based on the building's function and size. Such decorative art is fundamental to the formation of regional styles in Chinese architecture and is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese aesthetic values. Among the representative Ming and Qing architectural series in the southern Sichuan region, the artistic architecture of the Xiqin Guild Hall in Zigong is the quintessential case. An aesthetic analysis of its plaster and relief sculptures yields a clearer understanding of its significance.

The gray sculptures found in the Zigong Xiqin Guild Hall represent the pinnacle of Zigong's salt industry, intricately intertwined with the development of both the local and national salt trade. Their aesthetic value, characterized by meticulous craftsmanship and intricate layering, is a direct reflection of the economic prosperity brought about by the salt industry. The choice of subjects in these sculptures correlates closely with the needs of salt well drilling, salt transportation, and salt merchants. The fire dragon orb selected for the rooftop gray carvings exemplifies the reverence for the fire used in salt boiling (Figure 1). The artistry of these sculptures at the Xiqin Guild Hall fully embodies an aesthetic born from the salt industry. The water dragon sculptures, primarily situated on the tops of walls and pond sides, depict a vibrant and dynamic image, braving the wind and waves,

symbolizing the salt merchants' hope for smooth sailing in salt transportation (Figure 2).



Figure 1. The Dragon Pearl Totem at the Zigong Xi Qin Guild Hall



Figure 2. The Clay Modeling of the Water Dragon

The salt industry is one of the oldest traditional handicraft industries in China; Salt merchants were one of the wealthiest groups among Chinese historical merchants. The Shaanxi salt merchants who built the Xi Qin Guild Hall, their aesthetic pursuits, cultural literacy, and economic prowess shaped the artistic orientation of the guild hall. Although the era's characteristics and humanistic value preferences at the time have some disconnection from the present, these gray carvings and sculptures still radiate their brilliance today. The reason lies in their unique artistic allure. It is not difficult to find that the gray plastic decoration of the Xiqin Guild Hall in Zigong plays an important role in the decoration of historical and folk buildings. Grey sculpture not only serves a decorative role, but also reflects the emotional attachment and value externalization of the builder. Unearthing their initial artistic pursuits from the research and recognizing the various messages conveyed by the artworks also aligns with the primary intention of the researchers.

As an intangible cultural heritage, gray sculpture has high artistic, technological, and cultural value. From the perspective of artistic value, each gray sculpture work has unique characteristics and uniqueness, diverse artistic forms and cultural ideas; From the perspective of technical value, the production and repair process of gray plastic decoration is cumbersome and requires the use of professional craftsmen on-site for manual production and repair; From the perspective of emotional value, gray plastic decoration has visual and tactile characteristics,

with different themes and types of gray plastic symbolizing different meanings and containing distinct regional cultures.

This study primarily employs the methodology of literature review to extensively collect and organize ancient texts, documents, and research outcomes pertaining to the Grey Sculpture Art in traditional Chinese architecture. It also consults related literature on the history of Sichuan's salt industry, local chronicles of Zigong region, historical classics, cultural customs, and so forth, thereby laying a theoretical foundation and rationale for conducting in-depth field research, classification, summarization, and decorative origin tracing in this study. Subsequently, the fieldwork method is adopted, through which research materials are obtained via on-site investigations, photography, and other means. Then, the interview method is utilized to conduct interviews with researchers at the Xiqin Guild Hall, acquiring information on the technical processes, construction tools, folk beliefs, biographies of craftsmen, mentoring lineages, and other aspects related to plaster carvings and sculptures. Finally, the typological approach is employed to categorize and analyze the formal characteristics, construction techniques, decorative arts, and other aspects of the plaster carvings and sculptures at the Xiqin Guild Hall. This comprehensive analysis aims to uncover the underlying wisdom of construction and symbolic values embodied in these art forms.

## THE SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF WEST QIN GUILD HALL'S GREY SCULPTURE AND CARVING

### Economic Background of the Zigong Salt Fields

During the tumultuous transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasty, a period of warfare that lasted for several decades, the brutal chaos instigated by Zhang Xianzhong in Sichuan dealt a tremendous blow to the salt industry in the Zigong area. Since the Tianqi era of the Ming dynasty, it has been recorded that,

*Following the ravages of war, the ancient salt wells in the Ziliujing area, originally numbered 380, suffered the collapse of 360. Only 20 remained in operation, with 50 and a half evaporation pans, and were considered the top-tier wells. The small wells in Xinluo, originally 74, saw 64 collapses, leaving merely 10 in operation with 17 and a half evaporation pans. With their brine dilute and salt scant, they were regarded as middle-tier wells. The small wells in Songwang, originally 38, experienced 34 collapses, leaving just four for salt extraction, and possessing 31 evaporation pans. Due to their heavy brine but light salt yield, they were classified as lower-tier wells. (Zhong, Lin, & Huang, 1993, p. 89)*

In order to restore the vitality of Sichuan's economy, the Qing government immigrated a large number of people from Hubei, Jiangxi, Shaanxi, Fujian and other places to Sichuan, and issued laws to reduce taxes and encourage cultivation. In terms of salt industry policies, it is encouraged to open wells and set up stoves, appropriately reducing the heavy burden on salt workers. As recorded in the "Sichuan Salt Law", "only the amount of salt is allowed to be collected, and external extortion of surplus silver is not allowed". In the early Qing dynasty, following the gradual stabilization of society, policies promoting financial support were loosened. After the pacification of the Three Feudatories rebellion, people were free to dig their own wells. This led to a significant development in Sichuan's salt industry. By the 25th year of Emperor Kangxi's reign (1686), the region of Ziliujing was a bustling hub for salt producers. During the Qianlong-Jiaqing period, migrants and unemployed masses flocked to the salt fields and wells, a total of 1182 salt wells have been opened and repaired throughout Sichuan. Concurrently, a large number of merchants arrived to engage in the salt trade, with salt ships gathering in Zigong. Fushun County, which had a population of 22,716 during the reign of Song Chongning (1102-1106 AD), saw a dramatic increase to 215,562 people by the end of the Jiaqing era, with many transient individuals seeking employment (Zhong et al., 1993). Due to government initiatives to stimulate industry, the salt industry quickly rebounded. Shaanxi-based salt merchants, who invested in salt wells in the Zigong area, jointly funded the construction of the Xi Qin Guild Hall (now the Zigong Salt Industry History Museum) at the foot of Longfeng Mountain in the heart of Ziliujing in the first year of Emperor Qianlong's reign (1736). "The Xi Qin Guild Hall, built with a collective investment of more than 50,000 taels of silver by Shaanxi people, was the most renowned" (Zhong et al., 1993, p. 123). At the same time, the Chinese salt merchants in the Qing Dynasty were one of the country's largest taxpayers, and were also the largest contributors and donors to the imperial court. According to the "Continuation of the Qing Dynasty's General Examination of Documents", the annual revenue from salt taxes between the 18th and 20th years of Guangxu (1892-1894) was 13,659,000 Liang.

Guild halls during the Ming and Qing dynasties were social organizations rooted in regional connections, further linked with professions and industries. They served as a sanctuary for fellow townsmen and peers who were displaced, providing a venue for hometown sentiment in foreign locales.

*The emergence of guild halls was necessitated by the commercial activities of the time; they also addressed*

*a psychological need for solace and emotional comfort. The presence of guild halls played a unique role in sustaining connections to one's native place throughout specific historical periods, preserving local peace, spurring urban prosperity, and contributing distinctively to societal advancement.* (D. Zhang & Tang, 2006, p. 110)

The establishment of the Xi-Qin Guild Hall in Zigong by Shaanxi merchants were driven by commercial needs, the architecture's extravagant and colorful brilliance reflecting the affluent and substantial economic foundation of the salt merchants. The enormity of the salt merchants' economic strength was showcased through the construction of numerous art pieces. In all these artistic endeavors, the salt merchants selected the finest craftsmen for collective creation. Under such an economic backdrop, combined with the collective energy of the craftsmen, the Xi-Qin Guild Hall was constructed. This is a concentrated reflection of social life and artistic pursuits during the zenith of Zigong's salt industry.

### **The Artisan Culture of Zigong Salt Fields**

The construction of the West Qin Guild Hall is inextricably linked to the energy of the craftsmen. During the building process of the hall, each piece of artwork reflects the spirit of the artisans of that era. The highly developed salt industry in Zigong during the Ming and Qing dynasties had already fostered the Zigong craftsman spirit. The "self-discipline, self-vigilance, self-perfection" artisan consciousness emanating from the architecture of the West Qin Guild Hall primarily manifests in the following respects.

1. In their relentless pursuit of excellence, artisans pay meticulous attention to details, aspiring for the perfection and ultimate quality of their creations. They spare no effort and tirelessly refine their work, dedicating copious amounts of time and energy to its continual improvement.
2. Rigorous and thorough. In the competitive landscape of Zigong's artisan community, a reputation for subpar craftsmanship or lack of skill can precipitate a survival crisis. This has cultivated a professional ethic of never cutting corners, ensuring the integrity and continuity of every part of the crafting process. They impose strict standards on their work, never deeming it complete until it meets their high benchmarks.
3. Professional and dedicated. Zigong artisans aim to produce the finest products in their industry. The transmission of skills in the craft of Zigong clay sculpture is conducted in a focused and confidential manner, intended to create superior products that are unrivalled by their peers.
4. Unconcerned with fame or wealth. The artisans' work in clay sculpture emanates from a profound love for the craft, reflecting an artistic state that is true to the soul. Uninterested in recognition or financial gain, they are driven purely by the desire to perfect their art.

Artisans in Zigong maintain a special relationship between master and apprentice. They believe that all craftsmanship is passed down through word of mouth and heartfelt mentorship. The master not only imparts technical skills but also instils the spirit of craftsmanship, characterized by patience, focus, and persistence. This cultivation of traits can only be fostered through emotional interaction and behavior influence between individuals. It is the embodiment of the "spirit of craftsmanship" that must be carried under the organizational structure and operational procedures of the guild of master craftsmen at Xiqin Hall. The inheritance of the "spirit of craftsmanship" relies on the ancestral teachings passed on by word of mouth and personal example. It cannot be recorded in text but rather as procedural guidance, reflecting the historical value of the apprenticeship and professional heritage system of this era. Artisans continually refine their products and improve their techniques, revelling in the process of their work's elevation in their own hands.

### **Climatic Conditions of Zigong Salt Fields**

Situated amid rolling hills with rivers crisscrossing and abundant surface vegetation, Zigong Salt Yard is perennially shrouded in mist. The unique climatic conditions marked by pervasive briny vapors pose a challenge for wooden structures, which are prone to mildew. To achieve a balance between aesthetic appeal and durability, art pieces were employed to enhance the architectural character. Specifically, at the Xiqin Guild Hall, there was a deliberate avoidance of wooden decorations on the lower half of the structures, which are susceptible to mold. Instead, the emphasis was placed on the upper sections of the buildings, favoring relief sculptures as focal art forms. The rooftops, central ridges, and numerous upturned eaves feature intricate layers of relief and sculpture, creating a dense tapestry of artistic works.

Simultaneously, the materials used in plaster and clay sculpture, such as lime, shell ash, charcoal ash, and glutinous rice soup, demonstrate powerful abilities to resist mold and salinization. Craftsmen also inlay porcelain pieces into these sculptures, further enhancing their anti-corrosion properties. This practice helps to prevent dampness and mold, which may result from residual salt air, and also lends the works a refined artistic effect.



## THE TECHNIQUES OF CLAY SCULPTURE AND ASH CARVING AT THE ZIGONG WEST QIN GUILD HALL

The grey sculpture and relief works at Zigong's Xi Qin Guild Hall are primarily found on the ridges, rooftops, and parts of the walls. Artisans have combined special skills and artistic techniques in their application of these decorative relief works. They choose various materials for grey sculpture and relief, which, after specialized treatment, are directly shaped on the walls using a relief knife, or molded directly onto the eaves. The landscapes, figures, animals, and deities created through such pure manual skill are incredibly exquisite, achieving an artistic effect unattainable by other materials. These works are characterized by their convenient materials, ease of operation, and enduring preservation.

### The Techniques of Clay Sculpture and Ash Carving at the Zigong West Qin Guild Hall

The materials for gray carving and sculpting primarily consist of proportionately blended plastic gray, which is a mixture of clam shell powder, pig blood, plaster of Paris, lime, alum, brown sugar, and glutinous rice soup. These ingredients are combined in various ratios to form a mortar with high viscosity that hardens after drying.

Ash sculpture and ash molding employ distinct materials. The latter primarily utilizes "ash clay" for shaping on wall surfaces. This technique predominantly features additive processes, hence the name "ash molding". It is extensively adorned on the gables, wall tops, screen walls, gate towers, and doors and windows of ancient buildings, not only bolstering the wall's durability but also offering aesthetic appeal. Furthermore, such decorations carry auspicious and festive connotations. The ash molding works on either side of the fire wall at the Zigong Xiqin Guild Hall have withstood the test of time, preserving well despite a century of exposure to the elements, thanks to this very "ash clay" material (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Ash Sculpture on the Fireproof Wall of the Rear Hall in the Xi Qin Guild Hall

The process of ash molding using "Huini" material is characterized by a unique and critical component called "Hammered Ash". This substance is made by initially mixing raw lime, charcoal ash, sand, clay, and glutinous rice paste in specific proportions, then incorporating hemp fiber, bamboo fluff, cotton, hair, rag heads, and brown sugar. The mixture is then amalgamated using glutinous rice paste and repeatedly hammered with a wooden mallet. After being left in an ash pool for seven days, it solidifies into a porcelain-like, sticky substance that is malleable and easy to shape into the desired form. The preparation of such "Hammered Ash" is meticulous in material selection, with the quality and origin of each ingredient carefully scrutinized. Adjustments may be made to the ratio of certain components, or the moisture level of the ash material might need to be controlled. Other factors, such as the season during which the material is used, the climate of the building's location, and the orientation of the structure concerning sunlight and shade, must also be considered. With these considerations, the "Hammered Ash" becomes easy to handle and mold, adhering firmly and securely. The resulting decorations do not crack, fall off, soften, deform, or decay. Instead, they stand proudly, enduring for centuries.

Ashlar carving is a sculptural technique primarily used for ridgepoles, central piles, and eave corners, combining materials with ceramic shards to create a lasting and luminous artistic effect. Although there are no explicit textual records regarding the materials used in the ashlar carvings of the West Qin Guild Hall, there exists oral transmission among master-apprentice lineages in the Zigong region. According to this record, Mr Xiong Deqiang, a resident of the Nanhuagong in the Zhongquan town of Ziliujing district, was a craftsman of the Xiong family team, known as "mud masons" or "brick masons", who constructed the Palace of King Yu. He shared with the author that the process for preparing materials for ashlar carving is simpler than that for clay sculpture, but it involves the addition of pig's blood as a mixing ingredient. This material is softer, sets quickly, and is easy to dry, making it suitable for creating "large ink" (large-scale models). He stated that ash mixed with pig's blood doesn't require "curing" time, facilitating direct modeling.

### **The Artistry and Techniques of Clay Sculpture and Clay Carving in Zigong's Xiqin Guild Hall**

The modelling of gray plaster and carved gray sculptures at the Zigong Xi Qin Guild Hall adheres to specific differentiation criteria. The gray plaster technique is part of the bas-relief series, with bas-relief being an art form attached to a flat surface. Gray carving techniques consist of full-round and hollow-carving series; full-round sculptures are three-dimensional, while hollow-carvings feature emptied spaces. Their technical applications are distinctly different. Gray plastering techniques are primarily used to model on wall surfaces, gradually shaping without relying heavily on a layered construction approach, focusing on crafting more intricate details. Gray carving is often employed at significant architectural spots, where other materials fail to convey the full intent of the designers or builders, making gray carving the material of choice. For instance, the layered shapes and constructs on the ridgeline can only be achieved through gray carving techniques, essential for sculpting these critical architectural elements.

## **THE MOTIFS IN THE CLAY SCULPTURES AND CLAY CARVINGS OF ZIGONG'S WEST QIN GUILD HALL**

### **The Architectural Ridge Sculptures of Zigong Xiqin Guild Hall**

The ridge sculpture, typically rendered in gray, occupies a prominent position along the rooftop's ridge. Comprehensive ridge ornamentation in gray sculpture usually consists of five sections:

1. A linear decoration of gray sculpted motifs on the outside of the rooftop's ridge, characterized by ridge tiles or latticed multi-layer structure stacked along the ridge line.
2. At the center of the ridge line, a multitude of tiles are stacked layer upon layer to form a towering and intricately complex pattern decoration. This forms the central "ridge pile gray sculpture", which constitutes the overall centerpiece of the rooftop decoration.
3. At the left and right ends of the rooftop's ridge, the design gradually advances forward, shaping an "upward curl" where the ridge line extends diagonally upwards into two soaring "wings". This element, often referred to in folklore as "curling corners", serves as the focal point in the gray sculpture.
4. Starting from both ends of the rooftop's ridge, the design extends downwards to about three-quarters of the roof surface, forming the "ridge frame". Along this frame, patterns are sculpted, culminating in a closure formed by the gray sculpture at the end of the ridge frame.
5. From the midpoint of the ridge frame to the corner of the eaves, ornamental details, mythical creatures like dragons and kylin, cranes, human figures, and other gray sculptures are linked to form the "flying eaves". Hence, the ridge line, central pile, curling ridge, ridge frame, and flying eaves collectively outline the rooftop's gray sculpture.

The roof of the Zigong Xiqin Guild Hall is enveloped, layered, carved, and adorned with ash carvings and molded art pieces, which exhibit a fluid and vibrant beauty, resplendent in their complexity. Accompanied by the accentuation of the tile eaves, the uplift of the flying brackets and ox-leg wooden carvings under the eaves, and the elevation of the stone-carved columns, beams, brackets, archways, and purlins around the wall, the overall architecture is rendered even more spectacular and resplendent. The parapet wall, much like the roof, is decorated with a full set of ash carvings and molded artworks, many of which are further embellished with carved openwork curves, adding to the grandeur and splendor in a unique way. Apart from the ridge ornaments, the molded art is also extensively applied to the walls, under the eaves, door lintels, screen walls, main halls, side rooms, and niches. These molded artworks, unlike those on the roof, are crafted into "bas-reliefs" in varying depths and heights using the technique of applied molding.

### **The Plane Composition of the Clay Sculptures in Zigong Xiqin Guild Hall**

The ash carvings and sculptures of the Xi Qin Guild Hall extensively adopt artistic forms composed in two dimensions. Craftsmen have transformed these designs into sequential patterns that narrate stories (Figure 4). These patterns are harmoniously integrated within the architectural style, and the basic elements within the sequential patterns allow for the craftsmen's creative improvisation. In many instances, square sequential patterns are used, which are more conducive to manifesting the artistic stylization of the architecture. In certain special areas, such as the patterns at the drainage outlets on the walls, special models are sculpted specifically for these locations. Among these, the most exquisite is the "Dragon Head Spouting Water" ash sculpture (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Planar Composition Pattern of the Xi Qin Guild Hall



Figure 5. The Architectural Relief of the Xi Qin Guild Hall Featuring a Combination of Bas-relief and Round Sculpture Depicting a "Spouting Dragon Head" in Ashlar Carving

The "Spouting Faucet" clay sculpture at the Xiqin Guild Hall stands as one of the premier classic creations within its collection. Frequently observed on firewalls and at the water outlet ends, these dragon head sculptures serve the practical purpose of channelling rainwater off the roof through the mouths of the dragons. Mastering the artistic effect of these drainage spouts on the wall surfaces is a challenging feat. The artisans who built the Xiqin Guild Hall crafted these faucets with open dragon mouths, seamlessly merging artistry with functionality in the expulsion of water. The dragon heads, whiskers, and horns are skillfully integrated to form a complete piece of art, where the clay carvings of the heads and horns harmonize with the clay modeled whiskers, achieving a flawless technical symphony. This form of flattened clay modeling and the volumetric carving coalesce to create an aesthetic with rich layers and varying textures, encompassing round carving, openwork, retrospection, and bas-relief techniques. Such works are commonplace throughout the Xiqin Guild Hall, representing a particularly brilliant example among its vast collection of clay sculpture artistry.



## Patterns of the Artistic Elements in Clay Sculpture and Clay Carving at the Zigong Xi Qin Guild Hall

The clay sculpture and bas-relief art elements of the Zigong Xiqin Guild Hall mainly utilize patterns associated with well salt, combined with folk motifs. The primary images are as follows:

### Scroll Grass Pattern

This pattern is broadly applied to the numerous clay sculptures and bas-reliefs in the Xiqin Guild Hall, making it a concentrated motif in flat materials. Particularly at major nodes, the application of the scroll grass pattern is incredibly prominent. Utilizing a continuous bi-directional pattern technique, the scroll grass design is gradually shaped, forming a standard pattern arrangement. Thanks to the high skill level of the artisans, they have transformed this pattern into a novel art form, establishing a normative standard, and placed it at the top of the roof ridge, creating a perforated artistic effect (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Scroll Patterns in the Xi Qin Assembly Hall

### Animal Motifs

The most commonly encountered motifs in the plaster sculptures and reliefs of the Zigong Xiqin Guild Hall are dragon head patterns. These designs represent transformative and exaggerated interpretations of dragons, which inherently exhibit an upward and exuberant form. Positioned atop roof ridges, upturned corners, and on either side of flying eaves, they give rise to a unique artistic effect in relief sculpture. The depiction of dragons is fundamentally present on all roof ridges, with this stylistic approach having become a hallmark representative of Zigong's regional identity (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Dragon-Shaped Ash Sculpture from the Xi Qin Guild Hall



### Figurative Clay Sculptures

The figurative clay sculptures at the Xiqin Guild Hall in Zigong are sparse, but a few typical ones can be found on the ridge of the main hall's roof. Their dynamic poses encapsulate some of the fundamental ideologies during the construction of the Xiqin Guild Hall. Additionally, a set of Eight Immortals totems adorns the top of the main hall. These were crafted by artisans striving to showcase the roof's elevation without distorting its shape (Figure 8).



Figure 8. The Eight Immortals Pattern on the Ridge of the Xiqin Guild Hall Roof

## THE ARTISTIC STYLE OF CLAY SCULPTURE AND ASH STATUARY AT ZIGONG XIQIN GUILD HALL

The artistic styles of ash sculptures and ash carvings in the Zigong Xiqin Guild Hall differ significantly from the wood and stone carvings typically seen in such buildings. As wood and stone carvings are situated closer to the viewer's perspective, the audience can admire them up close, and in some places, even physically touch them. In contrast, ash sculptures and carvings are farther from the viewer's line of sight, leading to different visual presentation requirements compared with their stone and wood counterparts.

### Plaster Relief on Walls

The function of plaster relief on walls is to aesthetically fill empty spaces. This art form manifests in two distinct styles. One represents patterns on firewalls, while the other involves artistic treatment of specific walls, such as the "Dragon Head Emanates Water" plaster relief. The emphasis of these different plaster works is on the 'knife technique' rather than the carving method. The technique of plaster relief involves using a small plaster knife to mold and build up the material, stroke by stroke. Given that plaster dries quickly, the craftsman must complete the sculpting in one go, making the speed and skill of the 'knife technique' the key to the process. The artistic style of plaster relief is also reflected in the craftsman's knife technique, which leaves many traces in the form of lines in the finished work. The craftsman meticulously 'marks' the plaster with a knife, creating a unique artistic effect that carries a distinctive 'knife flavor.' This type of plaster relief relies on the craftsman's intuition, where each stroke contributes to the overall form, ultimately resulting in a complete sculpture.

### Ridge Round Carvings

Two scenarios can be observed with the round carvings situated on the ridge of the roof. One involves the addition of a layer of clay sculpture onto a preformed ridge, creating an intricately hollowed pattern. This type of hollow pattern stands as a significant artistic feature of the Zigong Xi Qin Guild Hall. Due to the inclusion of these patterns along the architectural ridge line and the edges of the building, it shares considerable similarities with the architectural style of Shaanxi. However, because it is an independent sculpture formed on a curved line, it also aligns with the artistic characteristics of the ancient Sichuan Shu state. The other scenario involves the use of certain unique techniques in the handling of the sculpture. For instance, craftsmen construct a small clay sculpture above the median line of the roof ridge, rather than forming the typical layered patterns seen in other mainlines. The sculpture, in its corners and overall formation, utilizes more pattern-based modeling approaches (Figure 9).



Figure 9. The layered gray sculptures on the upper levels of the Xi Qin Guild Hall

### Ceramic Adhesion

Among the clay sculptures and relief carvings at Zigong's Xiqin Guild Hall, there exists a highly unique technique known as ceramic inlay applied to relief carvings. The process of inlaying ceramics is known locally as "ceramic adhesion". The adhesion method is used based on the artistic effects required by the sculpture. On the roof ridge of the Xiqin Guild Hall, numerous ceramic pieces are inlaid, possessing no specific representational shapes, serving instead as external decorations for the clay sculptures. Viewed from afar, these ceramic pieces gleam brilliantly under the sunlight. Another method of applying ceramic pieces involves inlaying them onto completed clay sculptures. This method transforms clay art pieces into sturdier "ceramic-adhesive" artworks that are beneficial for drainage and moisture prevention, thereby forming a distinctive artistic style. "Porcelain pasting" is a decoration that adapts to the regional climate. Zigong is hot in summer, with rainstorm and relatively high air humidity. Specific climatic conditions impose requirements on the material and process of "porcelain-faced" for regional adaptability. Porcelain tiles have the characteristics of water absorption, weather resistance, and salt and alkali resistance, which are very suitable for the climate characteristics of the Zigong area.

Porcelain tiles are decorative elements attached to the main structure of a building. They are affixed to the exterior surface of stucco, and do not bear the weight load of building components, the celadon and pastel colors of the ceramic pieces, under different light refractions, produce dazzling spots of myriad colors, making the entire architecture of Xiqin Guild Hall resplendent with a golden brilliance, but its anti-collision performance is poor. The clay sculptures and relief carvings of Zigong's Xiqin Guild Hall originally bear no color, but rely entirely on "ceramic adhesion" for additional hues. This is distinctive from the colorful relief carvings found in other regions of China (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Reliefs in Glazed Ceramic Tiles of the Xi Qin Guild Hall

## CONCLUSION

Zigong's Xiqin Guild Hall, with its plaster sculptures and carvings, exemplifies the traditional architectural style of the southern Sichuan region. Its ridge decorations and wall sculptures form a truly dazzling masterpiece. Like many intangible cultural heritages, it is incredibly precious and in urgent need of protection. It not only inherits the aesthetic tradition of Chinese aesthetics but also embodies the Xi aesthetic demand for functionality and technical beauty. At the same time, it is a microcosm of the brilliant history of Zigong's salt industry during that era, encapsulating profound cultural depths and a unique aesthetic philosophy. It is a carrier of the exquisite skills and wisdom of the people of southern Sichuan and a treasured legacy left by our ancestors. It is heartening to see the potential for the revival of plaster sculpture and carving skills today. As the modern era calls for a return to traditional architectural culture, the art of plaster carvings and sculptures is slowly awakening. The traditional teaching methods passed down from generation to generation, from master to apprentice, present the origin of traditional culture to the new era. Actively exploring the aesthetic essence contained in these plaster sculptures and carvings, imagining the patterns meticulously traced down from generation to generation from the founding masters, studying these unparalleled skills in plaster carvings and sculptures and the secrets of their artistic forms, feeling the craftsmen's ingenious skills, and watching their superb crafting techniques, they have left a series of artistic miracles on the ridges and walls. This allows the descendants of today to have the opportunity to appreciate the unique scenery of this exquisite building of the Xiqin Guild Hall and experience a very splendid and unique artistic world.

Today, the development of new architectural decoration techniques has had a huge impact on the development of traditional gray sculpture architecture art. Faced with the dilemma of a narrow market, the loss of human resources, and the loss of craftsmanship, the narrow market demand for gray sculpture has curbed the free creative development of gray sculpture, resulting in a lack of innovation in its content and craftsmanship, which is at a disadvantage in the new architectural decoration techniques that are flourishing in the new era. At the same time, the gray sculpture culture lacks an effective inheritance and protection mechanism. The government should give full play to the role of functional departments, vigorously promote the gray sculpture culture, and increase the publicity of the gray sculpture culture. The government or non-governmental organizations can regularly convene gray sculpture artists for cultural exchanges, and explore gray sculpture art creation, cultural inheritance and innovative development. Incorporating the gray sculpture culture into education can inject new vitality and development momentum into the gray sculpture culture, such as through art teaching in local primary and secondary schools. Secondly, the biggest cultural characteristic of gray sculpture lies in its exquisite and complex artistic modeling process. Inheritors should innovate in modeling design, material selection, and technology application when creating, and developing new styles and uses of gray sculpture art on the basis of preserving the connotation and uniqueness of the culture, so as to keep pace with the times and innovate and develop. And the use can not be fixed as a building decoration technique, it can be considered as a gift and collectable, as well as a home, office and urban decoration, etc., realizing the diversified carrier of tourism and cultural development, as an important part of the gray sculpture cultural industry development.



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