

Gate eyes - Unique features in decoration and belief of Hoi An ancient town XVI-XVII centuries

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Abstract:

In the sixteenth century, Hoi An flourished as a Southeast Asian trading port, attracting international ships. To this day, Hoi An retains significant elements of its traditional culture and historic architecture. Among its distinctive architectural features are the gate eyes, which are unique to Hoi An houses and reflect the spiritual and cultural identity of its inhabitants. Unfortunately, there are few existing studies on Hoi An's gate eyes, and those that do exist lack sufficient detail, making it difficult to engage in further research or discussions. This study aims to address that gap by providing information on the gate eyes and their cultural value. The study employs scientific observation, investigative techniques, and expert interviews. It explores the historical development of gate eyes, categorises their patterns in Hoi An, and situates them within a broader architectural context. The study also investigates why gate eyes are more prevalent in Hoi An than in other regions with Chinese communities. Finally, it discusses the significance of gate eyes to the local people. The preservation and promotion of this architectural feature could be leveraged to enhance Hoi An's tourism industry.

Keywords: gate eye, Hoi An's gate eye, unique feature of Hoi An.

Classification numbers: 8.1, 9.3, 10

1. Introduction

Since 1999, Hoi An has been recognised as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site. Hoi An ancient town continues to preserve its historic value through its architectural structures, including pagodas, communal houses, chapels, ancient houses, and temples. Visitors will notice that gate eyes are a unique feature of Hoi An's architecture, regarded as a spiritual emblem and a distinctive mark of the Hoi An people.

The objective of this research is to provide a comprehensive analysis of Hoi An's gate eyes. Currently, there is a lack of in-depth studies and discussions on the subject. Existing studies tend to offer only brief insights into gate eyes within broader topics, such as the worship of Gate Gods by Hoi An's Chinese residents or the architectural uniqueness of gate eyes, without exploring their historical context in detail. However, a thorough examination of the

uniqueness of gate eyes, as well as an analysis of the images associated with various types, is crucial for understanding why gate eyes are distinct to Hoi An and are not commonly found in other regions where Chinese communities have settled.

For the benefit of the Hoi An community, it is important to explain the cultural and spiritual significance of gate eyes. By conducting observations and research, this study aims to address this fundamental question.

2. Research methods

This research utilises observational methods to collect data on gate eyes. During a research trip in May 2023, I visited and studied 76 ancient houses in Hoi An, documenting the various shapes of gate eyes. In addition, the study draws on expert interviews and conversations with local residents to understand the symbolic meanings behind different types of gate eyes.

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The research also incorporates analysis and synthesis methods to explain why gate eyes are prevalent in Hoi An but are absent in district 5, Ho Chi Minh city, where many Chinese migrants reside.

3. Results

3.1. Overview of the gate eyes

3.1.1. What is gate eyes

Gate eyes are known as clips of the gate (gate clips) in Chinese culture. This is a common accessory for women that is worn as jewellery and is used to keep hair neat. The Chinese may have implied that these clips add a noble touch to the building where a distinguished family resides by referring to the gate eyes of the architectural work [1]. For that reason, gate eyes are also called gate clips. Furthermore, “people in Dongshan, Suzhou, China consider that (mendanghupair) is a common name for gate stones, and gate eyes are also called (Mendang: prospective), the rest (Hupair: well matched) is usually a pair of stones or wood, lifting the shaft beneath the gate threshold always goes together. This is an idiom presenting the meaning of two objects that fit well together...” [2]. In the context of marriage in the past, this idiom indicated that the families of each party were well matched in terms of social status when discussing marriage. Depending on the pattern and shape of the gate eyes, they have different lucky meanings. The symbolism of the gate eyes varies depending on the pattern shape. It is common to see gate eyes in Hoi An, prominently displayed on the front gates of houses throughout the ancient town. The gate eyes have a nail-like form, with a canopy that is 8 to 10 cm thick and a diameter of more than 20 cm. The front canopy is around 30 cm in length, with a rectangular shape to which the chisel cotter is affixed. Originally, the purpose of the gate eyes was to decorate and safeguard the gate set. They helped ensure smooth opening and closing of the gates without disengagement and provided security. The key part of the function is more important, “but perhaps to enhance the appearance of the house, people gradually carved it to make it look more appealing, even assigning it a value that is one step less than the wooden beam (The wooden beam is referred to as the first rank, and the gate eyes as the second)” [3].

3.1.2. The origins and development of gate eyes

Gate eyes originated from two main beliefs: animatism and faith in the worship of Gate Gods. The Hoai river, where fishermen and traders live and work, is located next to Hoi An. Therefore, people generally design two large, clear eyes at the head of the boat (Fig. 1). The idea that “a boat exists as well as a living creature” helps sea monsters recognise the boat as a moving object of the same species and thus not a threat. At the same time, the boat’s eyes assist sailors in seeing far ahead, finding fish and shrimp, and predicting dangers.



Fig. 1. The belief in painting eyes for boats among Hoi An residents.

The eyes represented a prayer for a peaceful life on the river and turned the boat into a symbol of good fortune. Over time, the Cua Dai estuary in Hoi An has become increasingly narrowed by sediment, preventing large ships from accessing the harbour. As a result, the Co Co river has turned into a “dead river” after experiencing many historical changes over time. “The Quang people virtually ignore the river and the view of the boat floating down it, as well as the life attached to the river” [4]. Therefore, locals who had previously lived on boats wanted to leave that life behind and build houses on land. Moreover, the people of the area were heavily influenced by the custom of drawing eyes on boats and their belief in worshipping the Chinese Gate Gods.

Additionally, because the entrance is the first thing that visitors see when arriving at a house, “the old gate frame is often narrow, not as splendid as the gate itself, but it is still respected and carefully decorated” [5]. According to Chinese architectural traditions, the people of Hoi An adapted the clips into gate eyes with their own characteristics, making them an essential feature in every house.

3.2. The shape of gate eyes

Based on Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist concepts, Hoi An currently has more than 20 different forms of gate eyes. The most common are the whirling chrysanthemum gate eyes, with 63 pairs. There are also 8 pairs with a circular shape, 3 pairs with square shapes, and 3 pairs with octagonal shapes. The most widely recognised gate eyes shapes are the chrysanthemum whirling and circular shapes, but other shapes include hexagonal, rectangular, and rhombus.

3.3. Size and quantity

The size of the gate eyes symbolises the homeowner’s power and authority. In ordinary or wealthy homes, the number of gate eyes ranges from one to two pairs, while in Siheyuan households, there can be up to six pairs. The size of the gate eyes depends on the size of the house, indicating the owner’s class and prosperity. Hoi An residents also believe that only a house with gate eyes demonstrates that the owner is a true local.

3.4. The pattern on the gate eyes

The structure of the gate eyes is divided into two parts: the rim and the centre. The rim surrounds the chrysanthemum flower with vortex petals in the shape of leaves, Bagua, Water Monster, Five Blessings, a long geometric art drawn on the shape, ancient characters or gate eyes with only one word of longevity, or creating a clew that only has ledges outside the centre.

The centre part often displays symbols such as yin, yang, five symbols, a pistil-shaped pole, or the letter of happiness, longevity, seal script, or yijing. Some gate eyes are only circular, and the front contains images of Rahu or Han characters. “According to the Chinese concept, the circle signifies the desire to give birth to heaps of descendants, which means expecting a

prosperous family, someone to inherit the fire” [5]. The pattern on the gate eyes helps indicate whether the family’s beliefs are aligned with Buddhism, gods, or Taoism.

3.5. The colour of gate eyes

Gate eyes are frequently gilded with gold leaf, although they can also be coloured in black, blue, or natural wood tones. Each colour holds a distinct meaning. Red symbolises wealth, renown, and good fortune. The shade of blue evokes images of bygone eras along rivers and represents one’s career. White symbolises innovation and the expectation of receiving support from those in power. Yellow denotes prosperity and wealth, while blue represents health and nature.

3.6. General characteristics and significance of each type of gate eyes

Gate eyes share the common feature of being elaborately and meticulously carved. They are typically made from round wood in their original form. While the rim is more varied and flexible in its design, the inner decorations usually feature Taiji and chrysanthemums.

3.6.1 Gate eyes in the shape of 6-spiral chrysanthemums

In Hoi An, the most common gate eyes with a rim are the chrysanthemum petals shaped like the leaves of the ficus rhynchophylla (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Six-petal chrysanthemum gate eyes in swirling shape, gilded with gold leaf.

Yellow chrysanthemums are thought to symbolise prosperity and lavishness. “The ancients considered September to be symbolised by chrysanthemums. The pronunciation of ‘save’ (retained) and ‘chrysanthemum’

is the same in Ju. Therefore, September means ‘Jiu,’ which is also a homonym for the word ‘Nine,’ carrying the meaning of eternity” [6]. Chrysanthemums are said to represent wishes for longevity, balance, and overall well-being.

Previously, chrysanthemums were reserved for royalty, as they were believed to bring wealth and blessings to the household and symbolise love, filial piety, and respect. The numbers 6 and 8 are highly favoured by Chinese people. According to tradition, six (growth) is a lucky number denoting abundance, wealth, and prosperity. The pair of gate eyes with six petals of chrysanthemum flowers is the crystallisation of family bonds, filial piety, a full lineage of descendants, and the homeowner’s desire for fortune.

3.6.2. Gate eyes in the shape of 8-spiral chrysanthemums

“The Cantonese pronunciation of ‘eight’ as ‘fa,’ which is similar to how prosperity is pronounced, is the reason why the Chinese are fascinated by the number eight [7]”. In addition to symbolising prosperity, luck, and wealth, it also represents fullness and peace. The number eight in the Bagua denotes a favourable shift in one’s circumstances. The image of eight chrysanthemum petals swirling around the rim also symbolises each person’s flourishing business (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. A pair of gate eyes in the shape of 8-spiral chrysanthemums.

3.6.3. Gate eyes in Taiji diagram

The Taiji often appears in the centre of the gate eyes, which is a circle with two symmetrical ‘S’ halves embracing each other (Fig. 4). The concept of Taiji embodies the essence of Eastern philosophy, particularly the yin and yang theory. Black signifies yin, while white signifies yang. A yin and yang equilibrium is represented by black dots on a white background or vice versa. The outer circle symbolises infinity.



Fig. 4. A pair of gate eyes in the combined shape of the Bagua and 6-spiral chrysanthemums.

The colour of Taiji may vary depending on the views and beliefs of the host family, such as white-yellow, white-red, etc. “The symbol of Taiji represents the beginning, perfection, integrity, bringing auspiciousness and happiness, while also serving to appease demons and exorcise evil spirits” [6], with hopes of harmony and goodness in all things.

3.6.4. Gate eyes in Bagua shape

Taiji is frequently associated with the Bagua, a common cosmological symbol that is often found on the rim of the gate eyes (Fig. 5). “In the ‘Yijing,’ it is said that the universe has its origin in Taiji; Taiji generates heaven and earth, heaven and earth generate The Four Symbols, and The Four Symbols generate Bagua” [8]. The Bagua has two forms: the early heaven sequence and the later heaven sequence.



Fig. 5. A pair of gate eyes in the shape of the Bagua.

People apply the Bagua to the gate eyes in the hopes of attracting wealth, luck, and good health. Moreover, the Bagua symbol on the gate eyes also attracts luck for the family and wards off evil spirits and bad omens.

3.6.5. Gate eyes in the shape of two dragons attending the sun and two dragons flanking a moon

Gate eyes shaped like “two dragons fighting for the pearl”, “two dragons flanking a moon” or “two dragons attending the sun” are symbolic of sovereignty and royal orders (Fig. 6). This design can be seen on the rim of the gate eyes in the harem of Fukian Assembly Hall. These “eyes” are large, blending in with the surrounding architecture. The pair of gate eyes were painstakingly carved at the Fukian Assembly Hall and gilded with gold leaf.



Fig. 6. A pair of gate eyes in the shape of two dragons attending the sun at the rear of the Fukian Assembly Hall.

“The traditional belief that “all things begin with water” portrays the dragon as a symbol of water, which is responsible for life and growth of all things” [9]. The dragon symbolises the confluence of power, development, and the dispersal of essence. The phrase “two dragons” symbolises duality-yin and yang, heaven and earth.

3.6.6. Gate eyes in Rahu shape

The “Rahu” figure in Chinese culture, also referred to as “Taotie,” is depicted on the gate eyes at Quang Cong temple (24 Tran Phu, Hoi An) with a fierce visage. Rahu is believed in Chinese culture to ward off bad luck and evil spirits while safeguarding the tranquillity of the household.

3.6.7. Gate eyes in the Wǔ Fú Lín Mén (Five Blessings) shape

In Chinese culture, the expression “Five Blessings” conveys the wish for blessings and benefits to the homeowner: longevity, happiness, well-being, virtue, and goodness. In Vietnamese culture, the Five Blessings are happiness, fortune, longevity, well-being, and security. The bat is considered a symbol of the Five Blessings, as its pronunciation in Chinese, 蝙蝠 (biānfú), is homophonic with 福 (fú) in beatitude.



Fig. 7. A pair of gate eyes in the Five Blessings shape.

The rim of the gate eyes is adorned with a circular arrangement of the “Five Blessings” (Fig. 7). “Small circles, ribbons, or transformations of grass, flowers, and leaves are often prioritised for decoration alongside the bat motif” [10]. This is a symbol of the hope for good fortune, achievement, wealth, and contentment. While not everyone achieves the full Five Blessings, they have become a deeply desired aspiration for many.

3.6.8. Gate eyes in the Finger citron fruit shape

The image of the Finger Citron fruit is found at the centre of the gate eyes, surrounded by chrysanthemum petals shaped like the leaves of *Ficus rhynchophylla* (Fig. 8). The Finger Citron fruit, also known as Buddha's fingers, is represented in the gate eyes with inward-pointing "fingers" like flowers, as if blessing and protecting the family. The design of the Finger Citron fruit symbolises respect for ancestors and hopes that they will bless the family with success in career, fame, and well-being. Beyond its spiritual and feng shui benefits, this image reminds all family members to act with kindness, compassion, and goodwill.



Fig. 8. A pair of gate eyes in the shape of finger citron fruit.

3.7. The relationship between gate eyes and the overall architecture of ancient houses in Hoi An

When Chinese merchants migrated to Hoi An and settled there, in an effort to remember their homeland and preserve their ancestral culture, "the Chinese people built residential and spiritual structures according to Chinese architectural principles, with details constructed based on the concept of the yin-yang universe, emphasising aesthetics, symmetry, and orderliness" [11]. This concept is evident in the roof structure of houses in the ancient town, which is always covered with yin-yang tile roofing (except for houses built in the French architectural style during a later period). Gate eyes are no exception, as they are placed symmetrically, following this principle to create harmony and balance in the overall architecture.

When constructing houses, the craftsmen from Kim Bong woodworking village infused spirit into Hoi An's wooden architecture, not only through the gate eyes but also by carving decorations in many other parts of the house, such as the trusses (especially crab-shell roofs), wall panels, roof edges, and furniture. Even though, during this period, King Gia Long issued a

prohibition "against painting and decorating, forbidding the use of ironwood for houses, and banning the carving of trusses... houses that were too beautifully made would be considered an excess" [12], the artisans continued to innovate and skilfully incorporate architectural details. The motifs they used primarily included Chinese characters (blessing, prosperity, longevity, delight), flowers, leaves, branches, the five fruits, the four sacred animals, bats, and carp. These carvings were predominantly located at the front of the house, in the reception area, highlighting the importance placed on the house's exterior. The motifs harmonised with the patterns of the gate eyes, all sharing the common purpose of wishing peace and prosperity for the homeowner.

3.8. Red brocade fabric as decoration for gate eyes

The gate eyes are adorned with red brocade fabric, which gives the house an opulent, old-world appearance (Fig. 9). Red fabric is a symbol of good fortune, luck, and protection against evil spirits. People typically take out the gate eyes at the end of the year to clean them and usually replace the slot of the gate eyes with a new square piece of red cashew fabric, which they use throughout the year. By doing this, they create an atmosphere for the house, ward off evil luck from the previous year, and anticipate good fortune. However, since there are now so many tourists, people tend to keep the red fabric hanging year-round instead of taking it down.



Fig. 9. An example of gate eyes adorned with a piece of red brocade fabric.

3.9. The uniqueness of Hoi An gate eyes

3.9.1. The uniqueness of Hoi An gate eyes

“Hoi An is perhaps the only city in Southeast Asia that still maintains an 18th-century lifestyle with wooden architectural structures” [10]. Largely unaffected by wars, changes in lifestyle, and trends of architectural modernisation, as well as partially restored to its original appearance, Hoi An has preserved its ancient charm. A prime example of this preservation is the gate eyes, which continue to exist in Hoi An’s ancient town, contributing to its unique identity. While some gate eyes have been found in cities like Hue, Khanh Hoa, and Hung Yen, this is likely due to the spread of architectural styles throughout history [13, 14]. However, as the ethnic Chinese population has dwindled in these provinces and cities, the presence of gate eyes is less common compared to Hoi An.

In Hoi An’s ancient town, gate eyes only appear on houses, temple communal houses, and assembly halls belonging to Hoi An residents of Chinese descent. In contrast, the houses of indigenous people do not have gate eyes. The design of the gate eyes is in harmony with the house, becoming an integral part of it. This image also evokes the ancient practice of drawing eyes on boats. Although gate eyes are now primarily considered decorative elements in modern architecture, they still hold significant cultural and spiritual meaning. They contribute to heritage conservation and create spaces rich in tradition, ensuring that the memories and culture of Hoi An’s people remain vibrant for future generations.

3.9.2. Comparison of beliefs in house decoration of the Chinese in Hoi An and Ho Chi Minh city

When the Chinese came to Vietnam, they brought their culture and customs with them, but gate eyes only appeared in Chinese houses in Hoi An, not in Chinese houses in Ho Chi Minh city. The reason for this is that Chinese people living in Ho Chi Minh city continue to maintain their belief in the worship of Gate Gods. According to Chinese custom, they place images of the two Gods and Yulei on both sides of the gate (Fig. 10). However, since the homes of Chinese people in Ho Chi Minh city are often adjacent to production and commercial areas, close to the market, the spaces within these residences are frequently small, as they serve both as living quarters and locations for production, hosting, and performance. As a result, “they worship the Gate Gods more simply, using two iron pipes as symbols to insert incense on either side of the gate, with one placed above and one below the house” [15]. In addition to lighting incense daily, homeowners also frequently place red paper with phrases such as



Fig. 10. Examples of the worship of Gate Gods by the Chinese in Ho Chi Minh city.

“Wish you a safe journey/trip”, “Five Blessings” etc., in front of the gate in hopes of attracting good fortune and peace.

For the Chinese people in Hoi An, the architecture of their ancient houses is built according to traditional principles, and the gate eyes follow feng shui guidelines. The customs of trade and business along the river, combined with spiritual beliefs, led to the creation and appearance of gate eyes in Hoi An.

3.10. The meaning of gate eyes for Hoi An

The gate eyes have become a distinctive architectural feature that visitors can only see in Hoi An. Gate eyes enhance the appearance of the owner’s residence, making it more elegant, dynamic, and magnificent, while also reflecting the owner’s aesthetic sensibilities. Despite this, the design remains consistent with the house’s overall structure and decor.

From a spiritual perspective, the people of Hoi An place great importance on gates, “worshipping every night by placing incense sticks on both sides of the gate, showing the owner’s respect for the gods” [16]. The gate eyes symbolise family and authority, as well as the homeowner’s wealth and good fortune. Like the eyes of the gods, the pair of gate eyes constantly observe the thoughts and actions of each family member, serving as a reminder to act morally, avoid evil, and instil good manners in their children and grandchildren. Gate eyes serve as an amulet for the homeowner, symbolising their wish for a peaceful life free from illness, natural disasters, and evil omens.

Beyond their decorative function, gate eyes play a key role in preserving the beliefs, culture, and religious practices of the people of Hoi An. Additionally, from an educational and tourism perspective, gate eyes offer valuable insights into the history and culture of Hoi An.

They attract tourists, especially those with an interest in architecture, culture, and history, and serve as a unique cultural symbol of the town.

4. Conclusions

The gate eyes are a distinctive and unique feature of Hoi An's architecture. Every detail is not only aesthetically pleasing but also carries deep spiritual significance for the homeowner. With the frequent buying and selling of properties in Hoi An, new owners may not fully appreciate the importance of gate eyes, as they may be unfamiliar with local traditions. As historic structures gradually disappear, the concept of gate eyes risks fading from memory. However, the gate eyes reflect the aesthetics and cultural identity of the people who live in these homes.

Therefore, it is essential to research and preserve the gate eyes to prevent them from being forgotten. This can be achieved by promoting awareness and studying the relationship between Hoi An's gate eyes and the town's architecture and spiritual culture. Integrating the significance, culture, and history of gate eyes into tourism, events, and even traditional products and souvenirs, can serve not only as an educational tool but also help raise funds for the sustainable conservation and development of the ancient town. This contributes to promoting sustainable tourism and preserving the cultural heritage of Hoi An.

Each pair of gate eyes represents a part of the soul of the ancient town and forms a part of Quang Nam's broader cultural identity. Conserving and promoting their value is not just the responsibility of local residents but also of the international community. Only through a clear understanding and proper evaluation of the role of gate eyes can we ensure that memories and traditional culture are preserved and passed down to future generations.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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