

# ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES AND SYMBOLIC ROLES OF *BINH PHONG* IN HUE'S COMMUNAL HOUSES

## ĐẶC ĐIỂM KIẾN TRÚC VÀ VAI TRÒ BIỂU TƯỢNG CỦA *BÌNH PHONG* TRONG CÁC ĐÌNH LÀNG HUẾ

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**Abstract** - *Dinh* (Vietnamese communal houses) are central to village life, and in Hue they preserve vernacular layouts where the *Binh Phong* (screen) is a defining yet understudied feature. 43 *Binh Phong* among 50 *Dinh* were surveyed to clarify typology, proportions, and motifs. The surveyed *Binh Phong*, mostly brick, were positioned on the main axis between gate and hall. Two dominant types are identified: scroll-shaped (mean Rbp/Hbp  $\approx$  1.7) and roofed ( $\approx$  1.5). Vertical composition is stable, with the base 15-20%, body 58-80%, and top 20-27%; horizontally a [1:2:1] ratio reflects vernacular principles of centrality and balance. Motifs cluster into five groups - geometric/cloud/objects (31%), plants (27%), animals (20%), inscriptions (15%), and landscapes/legends (7%) - distributed symbolically across structural parts. By linking forms, ratios, and iconography, the study highlights the ingenuity of Hue artisans and offers a scientific basis for conserving *Dinh* heritage.

**Key words** - *Binh Phong*; *Dinh* architecture; Decorative motifs and meanings; Hue traditional villages

### 1. Background

Village communal houses (*Dinh*) represent one of the most distinctive architectural and socio-cultural institutions of traditional Vietnamese villages, embodying historical, spiritual, religious, and communal values. With dual functions as both a temple dedicated to the village's tutelary deity (*Thanh Hoang*) and the center of communal activities, the *Dinh* reflects the organizational structure of rural society and the relationship between villagers and sacred space ([1, p. 53], [2, p. 111], [3, p. 70]). In traditional *Dinh* architecture, particularly in Hue, the *Binh Phong* (screen) is a nearly ubiquitous component, located directly in front of the main hall, where it plays a crucial spatial, aesthetic, and symbolic role. To date, few studies have focused specifically on the *Binh Phong* as an independent architectural element, while most research has paid greater attention to the overall layout and principal structures of the *Dinh*. Therefore, a systematic study of the *Binh Phong*, its architectural form, proportions, and decorative motifs offers important insights into establishing a representative typology of this element within the overall layout of Hue's *Dinh*. Moreover, such research contributes to raising awareness for the preservation of intangible heritage by highlighting the craftsmanship of vernacular artisans.

**Tóm tắt** – Đình là thiết chế trung tâm của đời sống làng quê, và tại Huế chúng vẫn bảo tồn bố cục dân gian, trong đó bình phong là một yếu tố định hình nhưng ít được nghiên cứu. 43 Bình Phong trong 50 Đình được khảo sát nhằm làm rõ kiểu loại, tỷ lệ và hoa văn. Các Bình Phong, chủ yếu là gạch, nằm trên trục chính giữa cổng và chính đình. Hai dạng chính được nhận diện: cuốn thư (tỷ lệ Rbp/Hbp  $\approx$  1,7) và có mái ( $\approx$  1,5). Bố cục theo chiều đứng ổn định, với phần đế chiếm 15-20%, thân 58-80%, và đỉnh 20-27%; theo chiều ngang, tỷ lệ [1:2:1] phản ánh nguyên tắc bản địa về tính trung tâm và cân bằng. Hoa văn được phân thành năm nhóm: hình học/mây/đồ vật (31%), thực vật (27%), động vật (20%), câu đối/chữ (15%), và phong cảnh/tích xưa (7%), được phân bố mang tính biểu tượng. Bằng cách liên kết hình thức, tỷ lệ và biểu tượng, nghiên cứu làm nổi bật sự tinh xảo của nghệ nhân Huế và cung cấp cơ sở khoa học cho việc bảo tồn di sản Đình làng.

**Từ khóa** – Bình Phong; Kiến trúc Đình làng; Hoa văn trang trí và ý nghĩa; Làng truyền thống Huế

Most studies on Vietnamese *Dinh* have concentrated on history, culture, and village festivals. Some scholars suggest that the *Dinh* originated from China, initially serving as a roadside pavilion (*Dinh trạm*) before being introduced into Vietnam ([4, p. 267], [1, p. 5]). During the reign of the King Tran Thai Tong (1226–1258), these pavilions even housed Buddha statues for worship [5, pp. 405–406]. By 1496, communal care and rituals at the *Dinh* became the responsibility of local communities [6, p. 306].

From the late fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, the *Dinh* gradually transformed from a private or roadside pavilion into communal property, serving as a temple for tutelary deities, village founders, and agricultural pioneers, while also functioning as a socio-cultural and religious institution ([7, pp. 9–11], [8, pp. 146–172], [9, p. 189], [10, pp. 65–66]). Historical evidence suggests that *Dinh* first appeared during the Le and Mac dynasties (16th century), such as Lo Hanh *Dinh* (1576, Ha Bac) [11, p. 44] and Thuy Phieu *Dinh* (before 1531, Ba Vi) [1, p. 34].

In Hue, the origin of *Dinh* remains unclear but is generally linked to the process of land reclamation and settlement. Most *Dinh* in Hue, particularly in rural areas, were reconstructed on a large scale in the early nineteenth century [12, p. 160]. A few sites suggest earlier origins,

such as *Dinh* of Thai Dương village (before 1553) [13, p. 188] or *Dinh* of La Chu village (late 14th century) [14, p. 173]. However, these claims require further verification, as most sources indicate that *Dinh* became widespread only from the 16th century onward.

Research on *Binh Phong* remains limited, often focusing on historical context, symbolic meanings, and decorative motifs. The *Binh Phong* is thought to have originated in China, closely associated with feng shui principles, functioning as an external screen ([15, p. 17], [16, pp. 79–82]). In traditional architecture, *Binh Phong* were classified into internal and external types, with the *Binh Phong* serving as the external screen placed in front of the main structure. In Hue, *Binh Phong* walls are commonly found in various architectural settings, including imperial mausoleums, palaces, garden houses, *Dinh*, temples, pagodas, and ancestral halls [16, pp. 44–48].

Regarding architecture and decorative motifs, Tran Thi Quynh Huong and co-authors surveyed 50 *Binh Phong* in Hue traditional garden houses, identifying their typologies, architectural characteristics, and decorative themes [17]. Other works have largely emphasized artistic aspects and the symbolic meanings of decorative patterns [15]. Additional sources from art history and cultural studies have been consulted for comparative purposes, including works by E. Lip [18], Ung Tieu [19], Nguyen Du Chi [20], and L. Cadriere [21]. Collectively, these studies elucidate the symbolic system of *Binh Phong* ornamentation, reflecting communal aspirations for peace, prosperity, longevity, and auspiciousness.

2. Methodologies

To enhance analytical clarity, the study is guided by the following questions: (Q1) What typological groups and characteristic proportions define the *Binh Phong* in Hue’s *Dinh*? (Q2) How do spatial ratios, particularly the relationship between the *Binh Phong* and the hall, structure the sacred axis of the *Dinh* complex? (Q3) What are the principal decorative motif groups, how are they distributed across façade zones, and how do these patterns express protective and auspicious meanings within the sacred axis?

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining secondary data collection, field survey, and architectural analysis:

- Secondary data collection: Relevant published and unpublished sources, including books, journal articles, theses, archival documents, and visual materials, were reviewed to establish an overview of the surveyed *Dinh* and contextual information regarding *Binh Phong*.
- Field survey: On-site investigations were conducted through photographic documentation, direct observation, and dimensional measurements. The survey focused on the size, proportions, and spatial relationship of the *Binh Phong* to the main hall and other architectural components within the *Dinh* complex. During the fieldwork, on-site measurements were conducted using a laser distance meter in combination with a steel tape to record ground plans, elevations, and the distance between the *Binh Phong* and the main hall. Decorative details were measured by taking the

overall dimensions and photographing each motif, followed by scanned drawings for verification. Although minor perspective distortion may occur, the relatively small size of the *Binh Phong* structures keeps measurement errors within an acceptable tolerance (approximately  $\pm 1\text{--}2\%$ ).

- Architectural and decorative analysis: The study examined the formal composition and proportional system of the *Binh Phong*, with particular attention to height–width ratios, structural subdivisions, decorative themes, frequency of occurrence, and symbolic meanings of ornamental motifs.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. General Information on the Surveyed *Dinh* and *Binh Phong*

The study surveyed 50 representative *Dinh* in Hue, many of which are of outstanding historical, artistic, and architectural value (Figure 1). Among these, 10 are classified as national heritage sites, 11 are designated at the municipal level, and 23 are listed in the 2024 inventory of heritage sites [22]. The remaining seven, although not officially classified, are well-known and frequently mentioned in scholarly works and publications. The sample was selected purposively to ensure both diversity and reliability, considering heritage status, spatial distribution across urban and rural areas, preservation condition, and accessibility for measurement. This approach allows the survey to reflect a representative range of preserved *Dinh* while acknowledging practical limitations in site availability.

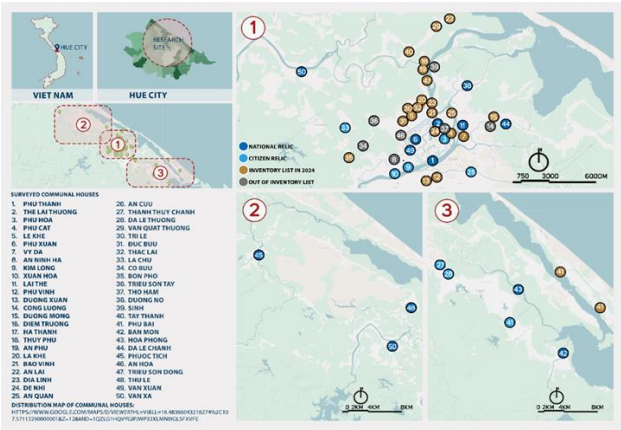
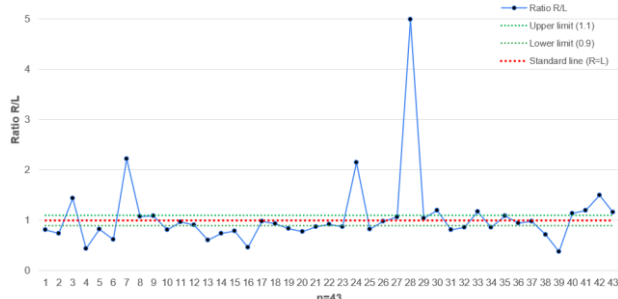


Figure 1. Distribution map of the surveyed *Dinh* (source: authors)

Among 50 *Dinh*, 43 retain their *Binh Phong*, while seven no longer have one due to wartime destruction or later urban modifications. Notably, apart from *Dinh* of Duong No village (facing southeast), most cases without a *Binh Phong* are oriented away from the south and southeast directions considered to bear “strong fire energy” in feng shui, thus traditionally requiring a *Binh Phong* to regulate and balance the flow of energy. In this role, the *Binh Phong* operates as a geomantic regulator that moderates wind and ‘qi’ within the bright court. In terms of materials, *Binh Phong* were predominantly built in brick, with surfaces plastered or painted, and decorated in relief using cement and porcelain inlay, reflecting the vernacular craftsmanship of Hue.

In the overall spatial composition, the *Binh Phong* is centrally located on the main axis: immediately behind the gate (*Nghi mon*) and in front of the main hall, forming a “sacred axis.”<sup>1</sup> This position not only blocks direct sightlines but also defines the threshold of sacred space. Such placement materializes the liminal boundary between the secular village path and the sacred precinct, turning the act of entry itself into a ritual transition.

To quantify its spatial relationship, the study defines the distance from the *Binh Phong* to the main structure (bright court) as L, and the hall’s width as R. According to Nguyen Thua Ke [16, p. 81], L is usually equivalent to R, i.e.,  $R/L = 1$ . Allowing for a  $\pm 10\%$  margin, the survey found 13 cases conforming to this ratio (Figure 2). However, most examples diverge significantly, with some showing extreme deviations such as Kim Long (No. 9,  $R/L = 2.2$ ), Da Le Thuong (No. 28,  $R/L = 2.2$ ), and Co Buu (No. 34,  $R/L = 5.0$ ). Such discrepancies largely result from the overall site configuration and spatial constraints of each village. This demonstrates that the symbol of the bright court, while theoretically standardized, exhibits variability in practice, reflecting adaptation to specific natural and social conditions.



**Figure 2.** Chart of the R/L ratio of the surveyed Dinh  
(source: authors)

Based on architectural form, the 43 *Binh Phong* surveyed can be divided into three main categories: roofed, scroll-shaped, and other types.

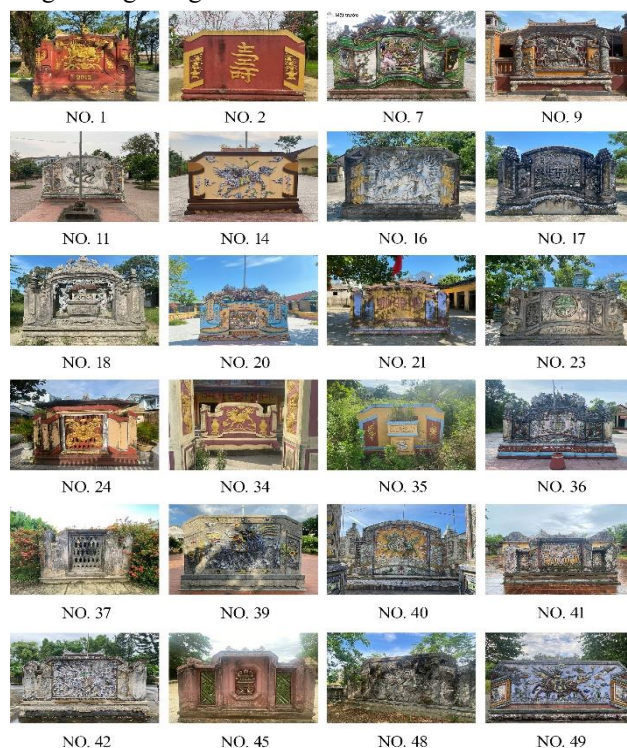
- Scroll-shaped *Binh Phong*: Twenty-four examples fall into this category, featuring a rectangular form with indented sides resembling an ancient scroll (Figure 3). Some integrate motifs of swords and brushes along the edges, symbolizing the harmony of civil and martial virtues. Central panels often display motifs such as dragon-horse (*long ma*), tiger talismanic mark (*ho phu*), or Chinese characters.

- Roofed *Binh Phong*: These structures simulate tiled roofs at the upper section, sometimes with additional decorative reliefs (Figure 4). They evoke the impression of a miniature architectural unit. Most have a central ridge higher than the sides, except for Da Le Thuong, where the roof curves upward.

- Other types: The *Binh Phong* at Van Xa is exceptional, differing from others in size, structure, and decoration (Figure 5). The exceptional size of the Van Xa *Binh Phong* may relate to the village’s historically elevated social position, as this community was home to a royal consort and the mother of a king. It resembles a monumental gate, with a central arched entrance

surmounted by two tiers of roofs, flanked by compartmentalized sections topped with smaller roofs.

At present, the specific criteria determining the appearance of each *Binh Phong* type remain unclear. Interviews with local residents suggest that such choices were often made collectively by the village head or the village council, who typically referred to the designs of neighboring villages.



**Figure 3.** Facade of scroll-shaped *Binh Phong*  
(source: authors)



**Figure 4.** Facade of roofed *Binh Phong*  
(source: authors)

<sup>1</sup> Among the surveyed *Dinh*, *Binh Phong* of Bon Pho Dinh (No. 35) is in front of the gate.





Figure 5. Binh Phong at Dinh of Van Xa village  
(source: authors)

3.2. Architectural Morphology

Based on the frontal elevation, a *Binh Phong* can be divided into three principal parts: base, body, and top (Figure 6, Figure 7). Figure 8 illustrates the proportional distribution of height (Hbp) and width (Rbp) among the surveyed examples, allowing classification into three basic morphological groups.

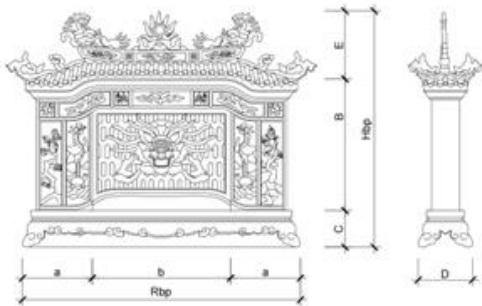


Figure 6. Conventional components of a roofed Binh Phong  
(source: authors)

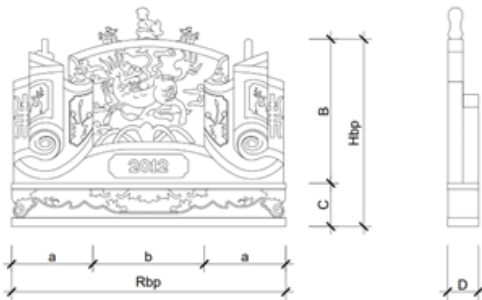


Figure 7. Conventional components of a scroll-type Binh Phong  
(source: authors)

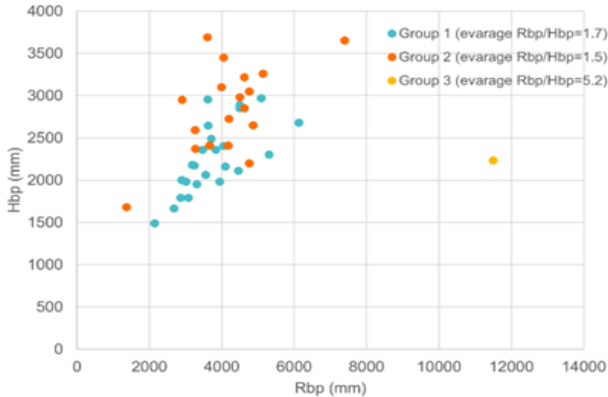


Figure 8. Chart of the width (Rbp) – height (Hbp) ratio of Binh Phong  
(source: authors)

For the scroll-type *Binh Phong*, the average ratio  $Rbp/Hbp \approx 1.7$ . Widths typically range from 3.0-5.5 m, while heights concentrate between 2.0-3.0 m. This can be considered the “standard ratio” characteristic of this type. Roofed *Binh Phong* exhibit a mean ratio  $Rbp/Hbp \approx 1.5$ , resulting in a squarer appearance compared to scroll types, with dimensions distributed around the average range. An exceptional case is *Van Xa Dinh*, where  $Rbp/Hbp = 5.2$ , with width greatly exceeding height. Overall, despite variations, the data suggests a positive correlation between  $Rbp$  and  $Hbp$ , reflecting a balance between horizontal and vertical proportions in design. These values indicate a stable typological signal, scroll-type tending toward elongated horizontality ( $\approx 1.7$ ) and roofed *Binh Phong* toward squarer profiles ( $\approx 1.5$ ), with *Van Xa* as an outlier. The observed positive association between  $Rbp$  and  $Hbp$  suggests a balanced design logic between horizontal and vertical dimensions.

Among the 19 roofed *Binh Phong*, the relative proportions of the base (C), body (B), and top (E) are shown in Figure 9. Results indicate that the body accounts for ~58% of total height, serving as the central mass; the base averages ~15%, functioning as a pedestal; and the top ~27%, emphasizing decorative articulation and the architectural “crown.” Exceptional cases show the top reaching nearly 40% of total height, such as *Thac Lai* (No. 32, Figure 4) with its “Two dragons adoring the Sun” motif, or *Hoa Phong* (No. 43, Figure 4) with its two-tiered roof composition. This distribution highlights the body as the compositional and symbolic core, while the reduced base and accentuated top reflect both structural stability and visual emphasis on the sacred crown.

For the 24 scroll-type *Binh Phong* (without roofs), the base-body proportions are illustrated in Figure 10. The base averages ~430 mm in height, while the body measures ~1800 mm, corresponding to a base/body ratio of approximately 1/4 (20%–80%). This can be regarded as a common structural pattern of this type, highlighting the body as the compositional core. The consistent base-body ratio ( $\sim 1/4$ ) asserts a visual center in the body, stabilizing the *Binh Phong*’s stance while preserving axial emphasis.

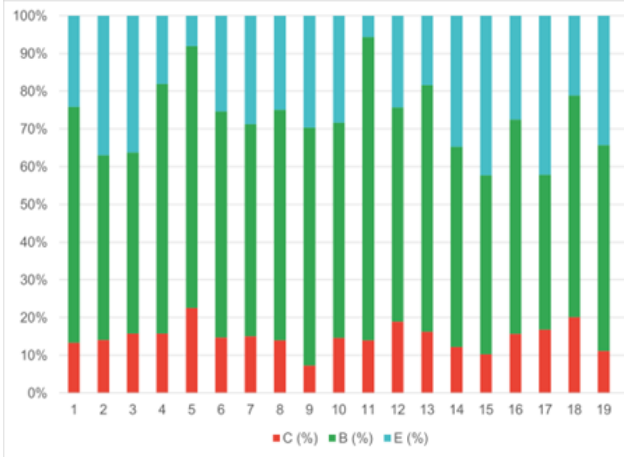
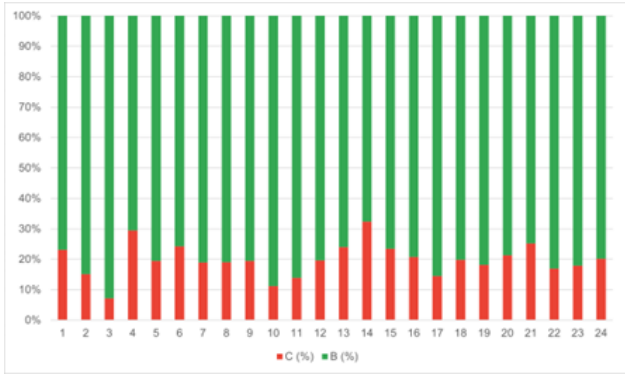


Figure 9. Proportional relationship among the components in the facade of roofed Binh Phong  
(source: authors)



**Figure 10.** Proportional relationship among the components in the facade of scroll-type Binh Phong (source: authors)

Regarding the lateral (a) and central (b) segments as defined in Figure 6-7, the survey (excluding Van Xa as an outlier) reveals that b averages 52.2% of the total width, while each a accounts for 23.9%. Thus, the characteristic proportional model can be summarized as [a: b: a] = [1: 2: 1], underscoring the prominence of the central axis while maintaining bilateral symmetry and compositional harmony. This symmetrical order re-centers the viewer’s gaze along the sacred axis, reinforcing the Confucian notion of hierarchical centrality between center and flanks.

3.3. Decorative Motifs

Beyond its geomantic function, the *Binh Phong* plays a crucial role in spatial organization and architectural ornamentation [15, p. 17]. The survey reveals that the decorative system of *Binh Phong* in Hue’s *Dinh* is highly diverse and aesthetically refined, reflecting both the craftsmanship and artistic sensibility of vernacular artisans.

The decorative motifs can be classified into five principal groups: (1) geometric patterns - cloud motifs - objects; (2) plants; (3) animals; (4) characters and numerals; and (5) legends - human figures - landscapes (Table 1). Among these, the geometric-cloud-object group is the most frequent (31%). Cloud motifs appear on nearly all *Binh Phong*, serving as subsidiary elements that provide a dynamic background to the main compositions. Objects are found on only nine *Binh Phong*, though the motifs of the “sword” and “writing brush tower” are clearly expressed through architectural massing, especially in scroll-type *Binh Phong*. Plant motifs account for 27%, prominently featuring four seasons (plum, orchid, chrysanthemum, bamboo), as well as pine, leaves, and fruits. Animal motifs, though representing 20%, hold central symbolic weight: the image of the dragon-horse appears 51 times, often positioned at the very center of both front and rear façades; the dragon motif appears 25 times, mainly in the composition of “Two dragons adoring the moon” at the top, or in the “Interaction” motif on the flanking sides.

The motif of characters and numerals occurs less frequently, typically on the base or the sides, marking construction or restoration dates, or featuring the character “longevity”. The least common group is legends - landscapes - human figures (7%), usually framed within lateral panels, depicting themes such as “Return in glory” or scenes of rural life.

**Table 1.** Decorative motifs and themes on Binh Phong (source: authors)

No	Topics	Frequency of occurrence	Illustrative images	
1	Animals (dragon, qilin, phoenix, tortoise, tiger...)	20%		
2	Plants (flower, leaves, fruit...)	27%		
3	Chinese characters, numerals	15%		
4	Legend, people, landscape ...	7%		
5	Geomantic decoration, clouds, objects	31%		

To systematize the analysis, decorative positions are categorized as in Figure 11-12:

- Top section (1): The most frequent motif is the “Two dragons adoring the Moon/Sun/Pearl”, found on 18 *Binh Phong*, symbolizing authority and prosperity. An exception is *Binh Phong* of Phu Thanh *Dinh* (No. 1), where a “Qilin” occupies the central position, a rare occurrence in the tradition, likely the result of later modifications.

- Flanking sides (2): The most common motifs are vegetal patterns (flowers, leaves, four season plants), often paired with animals in couples (chrysanthemum-chickens, plum-birds, pine-deer). Parallel couplets appear up to 31 times, alongside motifs of phoenix, turtle, geometric patterns, and landscapes. Decorations on the rear side are generally less elaborate than on the front.

- Central body (3): This is the most important position. The “dragon-horse” appears on 27 *Binh Phong* (front) and nine (rear). The character “longevity” is found on 11 *Binh Phong*. The motifs of “tiger heads” occur on five *Binh Phong* at the front and seven at the back. These motifs strongly embody protective functions, warding off evil, and expressing aspirations for permanence. By gathering auspicious and protective symbols at its central panel and crown, the *Binh Phong* expresses and concentrates on the sacred meanings of the communal space. Floral, cloud, and geometric motifs often frame and complement these central themes.
- Base (4): Mostly left plain, except for cloud patterns (38 *Binh Phong*), with a few cases of floral motifs (5) or turtle imagery (1).
- Lateral sides (5): Thirty-four *Binh Phong* are either left plain or decorated with simplified motifs, while some feature porcelain inlays or simple plant motifs.

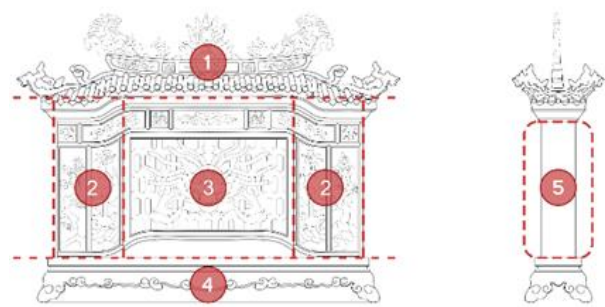


Figure 11. Conventional decorative zones on the *Binh Phong* (source: authors)

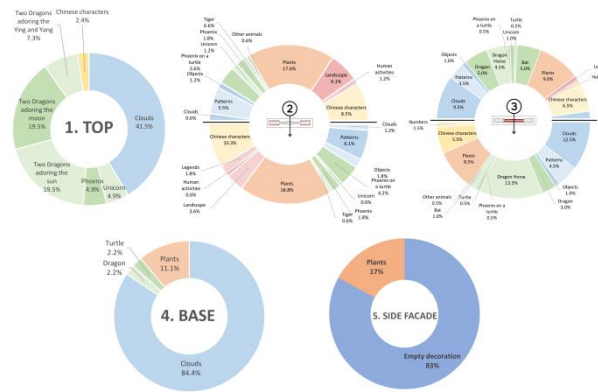


Figure 12. Frequency of distribution of decorative patterns on *Binh Phong* (source: the authors)

In sum, the compositional and spatial distribution of motifs reflects a consistent decorative logic: the base emphasizes stability (clouds, geometry), the flanking sides symmetry and softness (vegetal patterns, parallel inscriptions), the central body authority and sacredness (dragon-horse, tiger head, dragons), and the top asserts symbolic value through “Four sacred creatures” especially dragons and phoenixes. This integrated scheme not only enhances aesthetic richness but also conveys profound geomantic and spiritual meanings within Hue’s village communities.

From these consistent spatial, proportional, and symbolic patterns, the *Binh Phong* can be understood not as an optional decoration but as a necessary architectural mediator. It materializes the transition from the profane to the sacred, defines the axial order of the precinct, and encodes the community’s beliefs through localized artistic expression. This dual role, both spatial and symbolic, explains why the *Binh Phong* became indispensable in Vietnamese sacred architecture and a distinctive marker of Hue’s communal identity

4. Conclusion

The survey of 50 *Dinh* in Hue demonstrates that the *Binh Phong* is a widespread architectural element, playing a crucial role in the spatial composition of the *Dinh*. In terms of form, two principal types are identified: the scroll-shaped *Binh Phong*, with an average ratio of  $R_{bp}/H_{bp} \approx 1.7$ , and the roofed type, with a ratio of  $\approx 1.5$ . The elevation composition exhibits relative consistency: the body occupies approximately 58-80% of the total height, serving as the central focus; the base accounts for about 15-20%, functioning as the foundation; and the top makes up 20-27%, providing a visual and symbolic conclusion. Notably, the horizontal ratio [a:b:a] approximates [1:2:1], reflecting the balance, center principle characteristic of vernacular architectural reasoning.

With regard to decorative motifs, five main thematic groups were recorded: geometric-cloud-objects (31%), vegetal (27%), animal (20%), script (15%), and landscape-narrative (7%). Their distribution follows a discernible order: the base is usually plain or decorated with clouds, the flanking sides emphasize vegetal motifs and parallel inscriptions, the central body highlights dragon-horse, tiger heads, and the character “longevity”, while the top predominantly features mythical creatures such as dragons and phoenixes. This arrangement reveals how artisans harmonized geomantic principles with vernacular aesthetics, ensuring both the feng shui screen function and the expression of communal aspirations for prosperity, longevity, abundance, and cosmic balance

Thus, the *Binh Phong* in Hue’s *Dinh* is not merely a geomantic screen but a highly symbolic architectural component, embodying local craftsmanship and the aesthetic-cultural values of the community. Building upon this scientific foundation, the study translates the measured proportions into practical parameters for conservation. The recommended references include  $R_{bp}/H_{bp} \approx 1.7$  (scroll-type) and  $\approx 1.5$  (roofed type), the [1:2:1] horizontal composition, and vertical divisions of base 0.15–0.20H, body 0.58–0.80H, and top 0.20–0.27H (with exceptional tops approaching  $\sim 0.40H$  in particular cases as documented). The documented decorative motifs provide comparative evidence for reconstructing lost or damaged details, while restoration practice may consider traditional lime- or cement-based renders consistent with local practice and careful resetting of porcelain inlays to maintain both material durability and visual authenticity. As such, the *Binh Phong* not only defines the sacred boundary but also embodies the cultural identity of Hue’s *Dinh* architecture.

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