Vol.5 Iss.3 2024
https://doi.org/10.37420/j.adr.2024.034

The Symbolic Expression and Innovative Design of "Intangible Cultural Heritage" Elements: From Traditional Symbols to Modern Cultural Creations

Riyang Li[1]*, Song Qi[2], Bingjie Sun[3]
1 Guangdong Polytechnic, GuangdonUniversity g, China
2 Guangdong University of Finance and Economics, Guangdong, China
3 Foshan University, Guangdong, China
Corresponding author, e-mail: 283889205@qq.com

Abstract:

Purpose: This paper aims to explore the symbolic expression and innovative design of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) elements in modern cultural creative (cultural-creative) product design. Through the lens of semiotics, the study examines how traditional cultural symbols are effectively translated and reinterpreted in contemporary design contexts. It further investigates how to balance cultural preservation and design innovation during the symbol translation process. The research seeks to provide theoretical support for the application of ICH cultural symbols in modern design while offering new pathways for the design practice of ICH-based cultural products.

Methods: The study adopts semiotic theory as its foundational framework, utilizing Peirce's triadic semiotic model to systematically analyze the translation of ICH symbols. Through literature review, case studies, and semiotic analysis, the paper delves into the processes of symbolization, symbol translation pathways, and innovative symbol design in the context of traditional symbols.

Results: The research reveals that the symbolic expression of ICH elements can be modernized not only through visual elements but also by reinterpreting the function and cultural meaning of the symbols via design innovation. During the symbol translation process, designers can deconstruct and reconstruct traditional symbols, preserving their core cultural values while integrating them with modern design demands.

Conclusion: This analysis from a semiotic perspective highlights the significant potential of ICH symbols in modern cultural creative design. Symbol translation offers a crucial theoretical and practical framework for the preservation and innovation of ICH culture, retaining the historical value of cultural symbols while fulfilling contemporary market demands for design innovation. Future research may further explore the application of symbol translation in cross-cultural communication to promote the global development of ICH culture.

Keywords:

cultural creative design, symbol translation, innovative design

© 2024 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

1. The Symbolization of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and the Background of Design Innovation

With the rise of the "Guochao" (Chinese fashion) movement and the strengthening of cultural confidence, numerous intangible cultural heritage (ICH) elements have been presented with new opportunities to assert their value in contemporary society. The protection and inheritance of ICH should not be confined to museum exhibits or galleries; instead, these elements should be creatively transformed and integrated into everyday life. One effective way to bring ICH into modern life is through cultural and creative product design. By doing so, traditional cultural symbols can be revitalized in a modern context, enabling a dialogue between ICH and contemporary consumer needs.

However, the application of "ICH elements" in cultural and creative product design still faces several challenges. First, the use of ICH elements in product design often lacks innovation and depth. Currently, the public's primary access to "ICH elements" is through museums dedicated to intangible cultural heritage, where content is mostly curated by experts. As a result, the material is often complex and difficult for the average person to comprehend, creating a sense of distance. Additionally, designers may misinterpret these elements, as the current use of "ICH elements" in cultural products is still in its early stages. This early stage is characterized by the basic collection and application of elements without deep integration into creative design, leading to an underutilization of the rich cultural, aesthetic, and historical values inherent in ICH. It is not uncommon to witness the incorrect or excessive use of ICH elements in design due to a lack of comprehensive and accurate interpretation.

On the other hand, when reinterpreting "ICH elements" in the field of cultural product design, there is a lack of systematic methodologies to support innovative transformation and creative expression. As a unique form of cultural expression, ICH carries deep historical memories and cultural DNA. However, the recreation and application of these cultural elements often rely heavily on a designer's personal interpretation and creativity. The ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in the product design process make this intuition-based approach less scientifically grounded, hindering the development of a systematic, sustainable technical support framework for the innovative application of ICH elements.

Globally, the protection and inheritance of ICH have become a widely recognized issue. However, traditional preservation methods tend to focus on static conservation, lacking meaningful interaction with contemporary society. For ICH to thrive and sustain itself in modern society, innovative pathways must be sought by combining ICH with contemporary design and business models. This integration would allow ICH to play a more significant role in cultural dissemination and economic activities.

2. Semiotic Theory and the Symbolic Translation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Elements

2.1 Semiotics and the Symbolic Expression of ICH Elements

Semiotics is a science that investigates the functions and impact of signs in human cognition, thought pro-

© 2024 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

cesses, and communication. [2] Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure, both renowned for their distinct semiotic theories, are widely regarded as the founders of different schools of semiotics. [3] Saussure proposed that the meaning of a sign is not fixed, but rather arises through relational and differential processes within specific socio-cultural contexts. Peirce's triadic model of semiotics further enriched the theoretical framework by asserting that signs generate meaning through the interaction of three components: the "sign," the "object," and the "interpretant." This paper's discussion of the symbolic expression and innovative design of ICH elements is primarily grounded in Peirce's semiotic theory.

Peirce's semiotic theory, built on a logic-rhetorical foundation, posits that the meaning of any given sign must be interpreted through another sign, resulting in what he called the "infinite semiosis" of meaning. This concept provides a theoretical basis for understanding how semiotics shapes the cultural context in which signs operate. [4] In the symbolic expression of ICH elements, Peirce's semiotic approach offers an effective method for deconstructing and reconstructing cultural symbols. As cultural symbols, ICH elements are not merely representations of a specific culture or historical period; they also carry collective memory and cultural identity. When these traditional symbols enter the realm of modern cultural-creative design, they require reinterpretation and re-expression to align with contemporary cultural contexts and aesthetic preferences. In this process, Peirce's notion of "infinite semiosis" provides designers with a practical analytical tool for navigating the symbolic expression of ICH elements.

2.2 The Relationship Between Traditional Symbols and Modern Cultural-Creative Design

Symbols are a key means of cultural expression, and semiotics is widely applied in the design of cultural-creative products. [5] Traditional symbols, as part of cultural heritage, often possess fixed forms and symbolic meanings, deeply embedded in the historical and cultural context of a society. These symbols are frequently associated with specific rituals, customs, or ways of life, and therefore exhibit a high degree of cultural recognition and symbolism in their original environments. As users engage with cultural-creative products, cultural symbols become the primary medium through which they interpret and connect with cultural information. Designers systematically collect and interpret these cultural elements, transforming them into visual forms, a process known as cultural symbol design. [6]

However, with societal changes and the advancement of globalization, the connection between traditional symbols and contemporary life has become increasingly blurred. The question of how to effectively transmit and innovate upon these symbols in modern society has thus become a critical issue.

Modern cultural-creative design embodies an innovative design mindset that not only pursues functionality and aesthetic value but also emphasizes the integration of cultural transmission with market demand. As an integral part of cultural heritage, ICH symbols play a crucial role in this process. The challenge for designers is to modernize these symbols through cultural-creative design, thereby balancing cultural preservation with innovation. In their work, designers must respect the traditional meanings of these symbols while simultaneously granting them new forms and functions to meet the needs of contemporary society.

© 2024 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

3. Symbolic Translation in the Design of Cultural-Creative Products Incorporating ICH Elements

3.1 The Theoretical Framework of Symbolic Translation and Innovative Design

Peirce's theory of the "interpretant" is one of his most significant contributions to modern semiotics, shifting the focus of meaning-making to the receiver. Derived from this concept is the idea of "unlimited semiosis," which reveals the dynamic, open-ended, and continuous nature of the meaning-making process. [7] This concept fosters connections between different cultures by demonstrating how the interpretation of symbols extends and evolves across various domains. After dividing a symbol into three components, Peirce emphasized how meaning continuously expands and derives new interpretations, creating an interconnected web of cultural symbols, which contributes to the complex world of human perception and understanding (see Figure 1). [8] This process is symbolic translation: extracting symbols from their original cultural or historical contexts, deconstructing, linking, and reorganizing them to fit new environments or aesthetic demands. In the realm of cultural-creative design incorporating ICH elements, symbolic translation is especially crucial. It involves reinterpreting traditional symbols with rich cultural connotations and applying them to modern design scenarios. This process is not merely a transformation of form but a reinvention of meaning and a reproduction of cultural significance.

From a semiotic perspective, product design can be seen as a symbolic act in which designers use products as a medium to convey meaning. In semiotics, the transmission of a symbol involves three components: the sender, the text, and the receiver. In product design, this process corresponds to the "designer-product text-user" model. [9] The essence of symbolic translation lies in the "interpretation, derivation, and recreation" of symbols. Semiotics offers designers a powerful theoretical tool that enables them to analyze the structure and meaning of traditional symbols and appropriately translate and recreate them within innovative designs. By deconstructing and reorganizing traditional symbols, designers can reassign contemporary symbolic meanings that resonate with today's cultural context. Symbolic translation is not merely a conversion of symbols from one form to another; rather, it involves imbuing symbols with new vitality through creative design while maintaining their cultural essence.

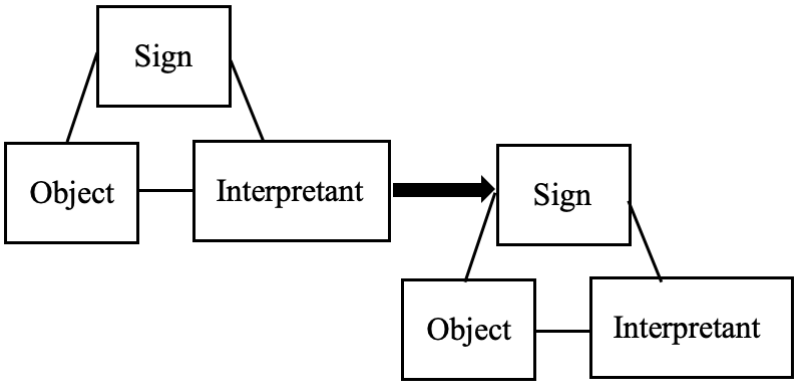


Figure 1: The Process of Transcoding Between Signs

© 2024 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

3.2 Case Study of Semiotic Transcoding in Cultural Creative Design

This case study examines the design of a cultural creative bookmark inspired by the "Foshan Lion Head (Paper Craft)," a national intangible cultural heritage item from the second batch declared by Foshan. The aim of this research is to analyze the semiotic expression of intangible cultural heritage elements and explore specific strategies for their implementation in innovative design.

According to Peirce's semiotic theory, the "object" represents a relatively stable system of things. In this case, the cultural creative bookmark takes the "Foshan Lion Head Spewing Couplets" as the object. The "sign" (representamen) reflects the specific characteristics of this object, such as the sense of ritual, the shape of the couplets, and their colors—all of which are features of the object, represented by the sign. Zhao Yiheng's interpretation of Peirce's triadic sign relationship suggests that the "sign-object" relationship constitutes a "denotative" connection, while the meaning or value perceived in the interpretant is derived through the explanation of this connection .

In this case, the "Foshan Lion Head Spewing Couplets" and the "shape of the couplets" form a denotative relationship, and the interpretant, representing perceived meaning or value, can be interpreted as "frozen blessings." For another "object," the bookmark, certain perceptible features—such as marking a location, closing a book, or opening a book—also serve as the sign. The designer uses the previously constructed interpretant of "frozen blessings" to interpret the bookmark's sign of "opening a book," thus transcoding this set of signs into a new sense of meaning and value for the user. In this design, when the reader uses the bookmark to mark their place, they are not only opening the contents of the book but also unlocking the blessings that have been captured and frozen (see Figure 2).

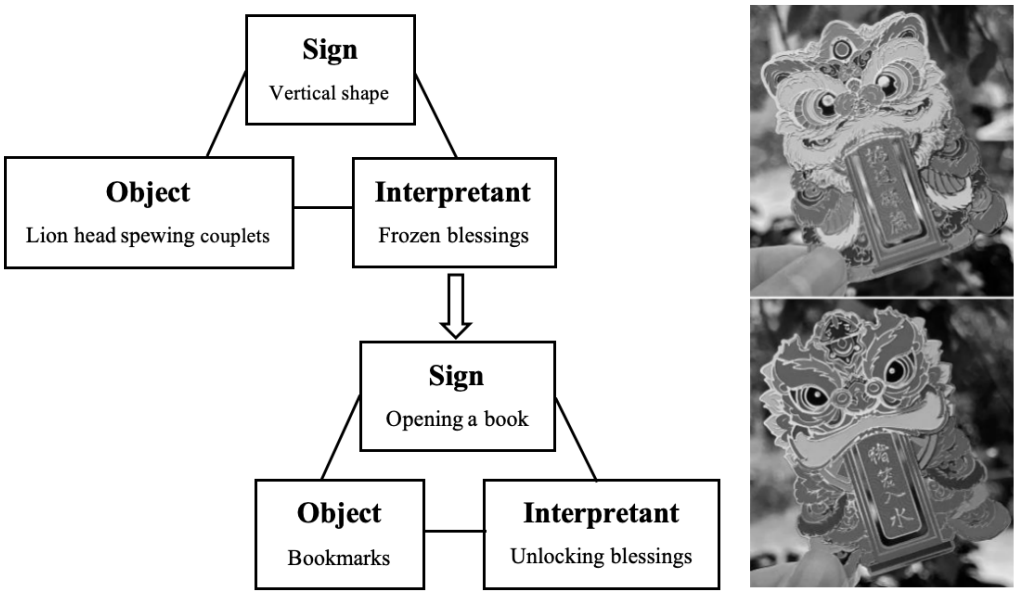


Figure 2: The Process of Transcoding Between Signs

© 2024 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

4. The Impact and Insights of Intangible Cultural Heritage Symbol Translation on Design Innovation

On one hand, symbol translation provides an effective balance between cultural preservation and innovation in design. One of the challenges faced by designers in the creation of cultural and creative products based on intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is how to innovate while maintaining respect for cultural symbols. Leveraging semiotics as a theoretical framework, designers can engage in innovative design while preserving the core cultural values of ICH symbols. Symbol translation involves not only the innovation of form but also the modernization of cultural content. Through this approach, designers can flexibly incorporate symbolic elements, respecting traditional culture while creating designs that both honor the past and cater to contemporary tastes and lifestyles.

On the other hand, symbol translation serves as a bridge that promotes cross-cultural communication in design innovation. With the rapid development of globalization, cultural exchange and integration have become key trends in design. The translation of ICH symbols is not limited to the domestic market; by reconstructing and innovating cultural symbols, they can be understood and appreciated in different cultural contexts. For instance, symbols with significant traditional Chinese cultural meanings, when analyzed and reshaped through semiotics, can become popular elements in international design markets. This process highlights the polysemy of symbols—where the same symbol can take on new meanings in different cultural contexts. By employing symbol translation, designers can integrate traditional cultural symbols into global design languages, enhancing the international influence of ICH culture while enriching the cultural dimension of design innovation.

5. Conclusion

In the dual context of modern design and cultural heritage preservation, the application of semiotics, particularly Peirce's semiotic theory, allows ICH symbols to transcend their traditional cultural representations. Through processes of deconstruction, reconstruction, and innovation, these symbols are imbued with new meanings and functions. This study explores the application of ICH symbol translation in modern cultural and creative design, revealing the deep connection between cultural content and design expression. In practice, the translation of ICH symbols not only preserves their role as mediums of cultural transmission but also breathes new life into them in modern design, showcasing the dynamism and sustainability of culture.

The translation of ICH symbols is not merely a visual transformation but a modern expression of cultural meaning. This demands a deep understanding and respect for the cultural essence of the symbols during the innovation process. Effective symbol translation enables designers to fuse ICH culture with contemporary design needs in the context of globalization, allowing ICH culture to continually evolve through innovation and gain broader recognition on the international stage. However, this process also presents challenges; designers must balance the cultural foundations of symbols with the demands of modern markets, avoiding the oversimplification or misinterpretation of symbolic meanings. This study underscores the importance of symbol translation in design innovation and provides a theoretical foundation and practical direction for future research. Looking ahead, the continued translation of ICH symbols will open new pathways for design inno-

© 2024 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

vation, advancing the transmission and development of ICH culture in contemporary design.

Funding:

1.This paper is a result of the 2019 Youth Innovation Talent Research Project funded by the Guangdong Provincial Department of Education, titled “Research on the Innovative Design of Foshan Intangible Cultural Heritage Creative Products in the Context of the Greater Bay Area’s Humanities” (Project No. 2019GWQNCX076).

2.This paper is a research outcome of the 2023 Regular Project and Category III Research Special Fund of the Guangdong Provincial Philosophy and Social Sciences Planning, titled “Study on the Design of Elderly Volunteer Services in Rural Cultural Facility Management Systems” (Project No. GD23CYS19).

3. This study was supported by the grant of "Innovative Research on Inquiry-based Teaching Based on the Demand for π-type Design Professionals" from 2024 Quality Engineering Project of Foshan University.

References:

[1]Zhu, S. S., & Luo, S. J. (2013). Reconstruction of cultural relic elements based on semiotics in product design. Journal of Zhejiang University (Engineering Edition), (11), 2066.
[2]Guo, H. (2003). Review and prospect of semiotics: On the nature, scope, and research methods of semiotics. Foreign Languages and Foreign Language Teaching, (5), 9-12.
[3]Yang, Y. (2020). International communication of Chinese traditional culture from the perspective of semiotics: A case study of Guizhou tea. Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China), (11), 60-63.
[4]Zhang, J. (2022). Study of semasiology in the unconscious design system method. Nanjing: Jiangsu Phoenix Fine Arts Publishing House, 48, 49.
[5]Sun, S. B., & Gao, B. X. (2022). The application of semiotics in cultural and creative product design. Packaging Engineering, (18), 283.
[6]Zhang, Y., & Yu, D. J. (2024). Cultural and creative product design of Weifang kites based on Peirce's semiotics. Packaging Engineering, (14), 255.
[7]Zhao, X. Z. (2016). Is "unlimited semiosis" really unlimited? Revisiting Peirce's interpretant theory. Journal of Henan Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), (6), 138.
[8]Zhang, J. (2021). Reflections on the systematic construction of semiotics in product design (1) — The choice between two semiotic models. Art Panorama, (12), 139.
[9]Zhang, J. (2024). Reflections on the systematic construction of semiotics in product design (4) — Controlling the product design system for designers’ composition and users’ interpretation. Art Panorama, (140), 139.

© 2024 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)