

Study on Cultural and Creative Design from the Perspective of Semiotic Aesthetics

-- A Case Study of the "Sunshade Umbrella" Derivative of the Shenyang Palace Museum IP

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Abstract

As a core theory for analyzing the transmission of cultural meanings, semiotic aesthetics provides a systematic analytical tool for the cultural expression of cultural and creative design. The essence of cultural and creative design is a process of modern translation of cultural symbols, and its value realization relies on the effective connection between the signifier (formal carrier) and the signified (cultural connotation) of symbols. Based on the perspective of semiotic aesthetics theory, this paper explains the application path of semiotic aesthetics in cultural and creative design through the case study of the "sunshade umbrella", a derivative product of the Shenyang Palace Museum IP.

Keywords

Semiotic Aesthetics, Cultural and Creative Design, Signifier and Signified, Semiotic Coding, Cultural Identity.

1. Introduction to the Interface of Mi Home APP

1.1. Research Background

Against the backdrop of the upgrading of cultural consumption and the "IP-based" wave, cultural and creative products have transformed from mere "cultural derivatives" into carriers for the dissemination of cultural symbols. The essence of consumers' demand for cultural and creative products lies in their recognition and consumption of the cultural meanings behind symbols—from the symbol of the "Zhengda Guangming" (Upright and Honest) plaque of the Palace Museum to the symbol of the Feitian (Flying Apsaras) patterns of Dunhuang, symbols have become a key link connecting traditional culture with modern life. Focusing on the core proposition of "how symbols generate meaning", semiotic aesthetics provides a precise perspective for analyzing the transmission mechanism of cultural connotations in cultural and creative design. However, the application of symbols in most current cultural and creative designs still remains at the level of "element transplantation", lacking in in-depth control over the relationship between the signifier and the signified of symbols. This leads to vague or disconnected transmission of cultural meanings, and there is an urgent need for systematic sorting out and guidance based on the theory of semiotic aesthetics.

1.2. Research Significance

Theoretical Significance: Break through the traditional research paradigm of "element extraction", construct a theoretical analysis framework for cultural and creative design from the perspective of semiotic aesthetics, clarify the internal logic of symbol selection, coding, and decoding, fill the gap in systematic research in the interdisciplinary field of semiotic aesthetics and cultural and creative design, and enrich the theoretical system of cultural and creative design.

Practical Significance: Reveal the generation law of symbolic meaning in cultural and creative products, provide designers with practical paths for "accurately translating cultural symbols and effectively conveying cultural meanings", help solve the practical dilemmas of cultural and creative design such as "having symbols but no connotations" and "having forms but no identity", and enhance the cultural communication efficiency and market competitiveness of cultural and creative products.

2. The Core Theory of Semiotic Aesthetics and its Inherent Connection with Cultural and Creative Design

2.1. The Core Categories of Semiotic Aesthetics

Signifier and Signified: Core concepts proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure. The "signifier" refers to the material form of a symbol (such as visual symbols like the shape, color, and pattern of cultural and creative products), while the "signified" refers to the cultural meaning carried by the symbol (such as historical allusions and values behind the pattern). The organic connection between the two is the foundation for a symbol to generate meaning. For example, the signifier of the "dragon pattern" is the curled line shape, and the signified is the cultural connotation of imperial power and auspiciousness [1].

Classification of Symbols: By nature, symbols can be divided into linguistic symbols (such as characters and inscriptions in cultural and creative works) and non-linguistic symbols (such as visual symbols like shape, color, and material). By cultural attribute, they can be classified into historical symbols (such as bronze vessel decorations), folk symbols (such as paper-cut patterns), and regional symbols (such as Suzhou embroidery patterns). Different types of symbols require differentiated translation strategies.

Coding and Decoding: The symbolic operation mechanism proposed by Roland Barthes. "Coding" is the process by which designers infuse cultural meaning into symbolic forms, and "decoding" is the process by which users interpret cultural meaning through symbolic forms. The success of cultural and creative design depends on the accuracy of coding and the smoothness of decoding-only when the coding logic matches users' cultural cognition can the effective transmission of meaning be achieved [2].

2.2. The Symbolic Nature of Cultural and Creative Design

The essence of cultural and creative design is a "modern coding process of cultural symbols": designers extract core symbols from traditional culture (such as historical artifacts, traditional patterns, and folk custom elements), encode them through design techniques like shape simplification, color reconstruction, and function integration, and infuse the "signified" (cultural meaning) of traditional symbols into the "signifier" (material form) of modern products, which are ultimately transmitted to users through the products. Users complete decoding through behaviors such as using and appreciating the products, thereby forming cognition and identification of cultural meanings. Therefore, symbols are the core medium for cultural and creative design to realize "cultural inheritance" and "aesthetic expression" [3].

2.3. The Theoretical Connection between Semiotic Aesthetics and Cultural and Creative Design

Semiotic aesthetics provides an analytical framework for "meaning generation" in cultural and creative design, while cultural and creative design offers a concrete practical field for semiotic aesthetics. Li Yanzu points out that symbols in product design are not only the presentation of visual elements but also the carriers of cultural meanings, and this view provides theoretical support for the integration of semiotic aesthetics and cultural and creative design [4]. The core of the connection between the two lies in: using symbols as the medium to achieve the accurate

transmission of traditional cultural meanings and the construction of identity in modern life scenarios.

3. The Application of Semiotic Aesthetics in Cultural and Creative Design

3.1. Symbol Selection: Anchor the Cultural Core and Clarify the "Signified" Positioning

Symbol selection should take "the typicality of cultural meaning" as the core criterion, giving priority to symbols with universal recognition and core cultural value. At the same time, it is necessary to consider the cultural background of the target user group and balance "traditionality" and "recognition"-for the mass market, it is necessary to select well-known universal symbols, while for the niche market, unique personalized symbols can be chosen.

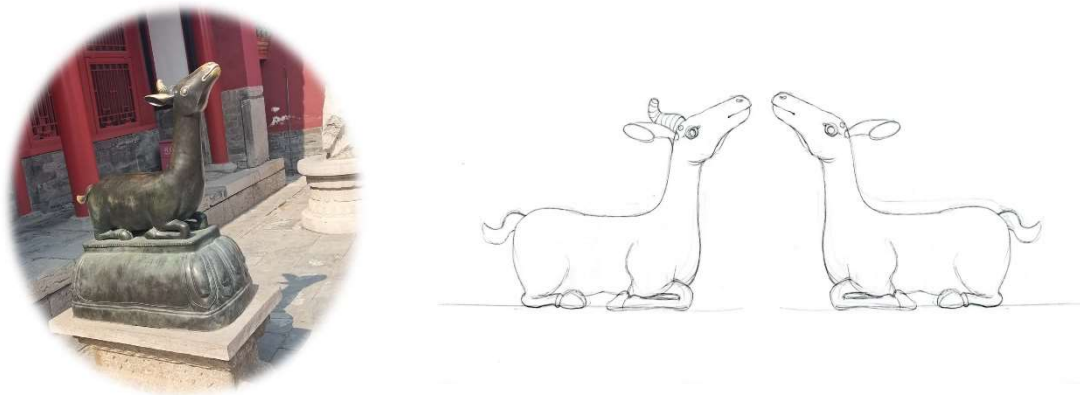


Figure 1. Design Manuscript for Symbol Extraction of the Bronze Recumbent Deer in Front of Jiezhiben Palace of Shenyang Palace Museum

As shown in Figure (1), this is the design manuscript for extracting the symbol of the bronze recumbent deer in front of the Jiezhiben Palace of the Shenyang Palace Museum. For example, in the design of the "sunshade umbrella", a derivative product of the Shenyang Palace Museum IP, the image of the deer was extracted as a symbol using the two auspicious "bronze lying deer" in front of the Jiezhiben Palace, a traditional building of the Shenyang Palace Museum, as the cultural carrier. This anchored "good fortune and official prosperity" (Fulu) in traditional Chinese culture and clarified the positioning of the "signified". Accurate symbol selection anchors the core of cultural meaning, laying a foundation for subsequent coding.

3.2. Symbol Coding: Formal Translation and Meaning Superposition to Construct the "Signifier-Signified" Connection

Coding is the core link in cultural and creative design, which needs to achieve the dual goals of "formal translation" and "meaning superposition". Formal translation refers to converting the visual characteristics of traditional symbols into modern product language (e.g., simplifying complex patterns into minimalist lines); meaning superposition refers to integrating modern contexts based on traditional meanings (e.g., combining the meaning of "auspiciousness" with "practical functions"), enabling symbols to not only retain their cultural roots but also adapt to modern life.



Figure 2. Umbrella Surface Design of "Sun Umbrella/Rain Umbrella" (IP Derivatives of Shenyang Palace Museum)

As shown in Figure (2), For example, in the design of the "sunshade umbrella" (a derivative product of the Shenyang Palace Museum IP), the designer coded with the core symbol of "bronze lying deer". During the coding process, the designer first conducted formal translation-transforming the outline of the two lying deer into the pattern on the umbrella surface (signifier reconstruction). Then, meaning superposition was carried out-the umbrella has the implied meaning of "protection", so the practical function of "protection" was superimposed with the auspicious meaning of "good fortune and official prosperity (Fulu)" (signified extension). When users use the sunshade umbrella, they not only perceive the culture of the Palace Museum through visual symbols but also gain life value through its practical functions, realizing a deep connection between the "signifier and signified" [5].

4. Existing Problems in Cultural and Creative Design from the Perspective of Semiotic Aesthetics

4.1. The Signifier is Disconnected from the Signified, Resulting in the Disruption of Symbolic Meaning

Some cultural and creative designs only copy the "signifier" (form) of traditional symbols without conveying their "signified" (meaning), causing the symbols to become decorations without connotation. For example, a large number of cultural and creative products featuring "blue-and-white porcelain patterns" on the market merely print blue-and-white patterns on water cups and notebooks. They neither interpret the meaning of "continuous auspiciousness" represented by the interlocking lotus patterns behind the designs nor endow them with new meanings in combination with modern life. What users see is just "blue patterns", and they cannot perceive the cultural value of blue-and-white porcelain, resulting in a disruption characterized by "having symbols but no meaning".

4.2. The Symbol System is Chaotic, and the Coding Logic is Vague

Some cultural and creative designs blindly pile up multiple symbols without constructing a unified symbol system, leading to chaotic coding logic. For example, a certain "intangible cultural heritage (ICH) cultural and creative gift box" incorporates three symbols-paper-cutting, embroidery, and shadow puppetry-at the same time. The signifiers (shape, color) of these three symbols lack visual coordination, and their signifieds (folk connotations) also have no inherent connection. When decoding, users find it difficult to form a unified cultural cognition; on the contrary, they experience aesthetic fatigue due to symbol overload, making it impossible to achieve the effective transmission of meaning.

4.3. Commercial Alienation of Symbols Dissolves Their Cultural Connotations

To pursue commercial interests, some enterprises excessively simplify or distort the core signifiers and signifieds of symbols, leading to the dissolution of cultural connotations. For instance, a certain "Guochao (China-chic) clothing brand" simplified the symbol of "Hanfu frog buttons" into plastic fasteners (signifier alienation) and distorted "the etiquette culture symbolized by frog buttons" into a "trendy decoration" (signified alienation). Such commercial-driven symbol transformation deprives symbols of their original cultural attributes, reducing them to mere commercial gimmicks and violating the essence of cultural inheritance in cultural and creative design [6].

5. Optimization Strategies for Cultural and Creative Design from the Perspective of Semiotic Aesthetics

5.1. Accurate Coding: Establish a Strong Connection between the "Signifier" and "Signified"

Designers need to systematically sort out the cultural genealogy of symbols, clarify the corresponding relationship between the signifier and signified of symbols, and avoid the disconnection between form and meaning. They can use the "symbolic meaning map" tool to first mark the core signified of the symbol (e.g., the meanings of "majesty and blessing" of the "taotie pattern"), and then design the signifier form in combination with product functions (e.g., simplifying the taotie pattern into non-slip lines on the handle of tableware to realize the combination of the meaning of "blessing" and the function of "practicality"). At the same time, they need to briefly interpret the symbolic meaning in the additional product information (instruction manuals, packaging) to assist users in decoding.

5.2. Constructing an Organic Symbol System: Avoiding Symbol Piling and Logical Confusion

Cultural and creative design should focus on a core cultural theme and construct an organic system consisting of "core symbols + auxiliary symbols". Core symbols carry the main cultural meanings (e.g., taking "the Hall of Supreme Harmony in the Palace Museum" as the core symbol), while auxiliary symbols (such as dougong patterns and glazed tile colors) are subordinate to the core symbols. They form a visual echo in terms of signifiers and strengthen the core meaning in terms of signifieds. For example, in the stationery set themed on "the Hall of Supreme Harmony" of the Palace Museum, the outline of the Hall of Supreme Harmony's roof serves as the core symbol, supplemented by simplified lines of dougong as auxiliary symbols. The colors are uniformly cinnabar red and gold, forming a symbol system with "a prominent core and coordinated auxiliaries" and a clear and understandable coding logic.

5.3. Balancing Commercial and Symbolic Value: Upholding the Bottom Line of Cultural Connotations

Enterprises need to establish the concept of "prioritizing the cultural value of symbols" and adhere to the core signifiers and signifieds of symbols in their business operations. They can use a "list of core attributes of symbols" to identify elements that cannot be alienated (e.g., the handcrafted technique and symmetrical structure of "Hanfu frog buttons"), and conduct commercialized design on the basis of retaining these core attributes (e.g., developing detachable frog button decorations that are suitable for different types of clothing). At the same time, they can ensure the professionalism of symbol translation through cultural co-branding (e.g., co-branding between museums and designers), so as to prevent the dissolution of cultural connotations by commercial interests.

6. Conclusion

In the future, with the development of digital technology, cultural and creative symbols are extending from physical forms to digital forms (such as virtual IP symbols and interactive digital symbols). The analytical framework of semiotic aesthetics needs to further incorporate the encoding and decoding rules of digital symbols. Only by taking semiotic aesthetics as a guide and realizing "rooted forms, originated meanings, and effective recognition" can cultural and creative products truly become effective carriers of cultural communication and contribute to the construction and inheritance of cultural confidence.

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