

THE BUTTERFLY MOTHER IN MIAO CULTURE: DESIGN INTERPRETATION OF MYTH, MATERNAL SYMBOLISM, AND VISUAL MEANING*

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Abstract

This research article aims to: (1) clarify how mythological narratives shape maternal symbolism in the Butterfly Mother motif of Miao culture; (2) explain how visual structures encode and convey cultural meaning within traditional artifacts; and (3) explore how these symbolic principles can be translated into contemporary design contexts through a qualitative research study collecting data from documented mythological texts, ethnographic literature, and representative visual materials such as embroidery, costume decoration, and batik artifacts. The data were analyzed using mythological analysis, visual semiotics, and comparative design case analysis.

The research results found that:

1. The Butterfly Mother operates as a composite maternal symbol representing origin, fertility, protection, and cultural continuity within Miao cosmology.

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2. Traditional visual patterns encode myth-based maternal meanings through structural elements such as symmetry, repetition, organic forms, and symbolic color systems, forming a coherent visual-semantic system.

3. Effective contemporary design translation depends on processes of symbolization, abstraction, and recontextualization, ensuring cultural continuity through meaning-based reinterpretation rather than surface ornamentation.

Keywords: Butterfly Mother, Miao Culture, Mythological Symbolism, Maternal Imagery, Visual Design

Introduction

Miao culture represents one of the most distinctive ethnic traditions in China, characterized by rich mythological narratives, symbolic systems, and visually sophisticated expressions transmitted across generations through costume, embroidery, and ritual practices. Among these cultural symbols, the Butterfly Mother occupies a central position as a mythological origin figure, embodying concepts of creation, fertility, and maternal authority within Miao cosmology. Existing scholarship has highlighted the cultural and historical significance of Miao traditions, particularly in relation to ethnic identity, collective memory, and material culture (Shi, Wang & Li, 2019).

In recent years, increasing academic attention has been directed toward Miao costume patterns, embroidery, and batik practices, emphasizing their aesthetic value, symbolic meanings, and roles in cultural heritage preservation and rural development (Han & Cong, 2021; Chen, Ren & Zhang, 2021; Quan, Luo & Zhong, 2024). However, despite the recognized importance of mythological imagery within these visual traditions, the Butterfly Mother motif has rarely been examined as a systematic visual and design-oriented symbol. Existing studies tend to document mythological narratives or material practices independently, offering limited analysis of how mythological meaning, maternal symbolism, and

visual structure operate together as an integrated design system. As a result, the transformation of the Butterfly Mother motif from mythological meaning to contemporary design language remains insufficiently explored.

Within the broader context of globalization and cross-cultural exchange, traditional cultural symbols face the dual challenge of preservation and reinterpretation. Scholars argue that sustainable cultural development requires moving beyond static conservation toward adaptive innovation that maintains cultural meaning while engaging contemporary social and aesthetic contexts (Matos & Britto, 2011; Ergashev & Farxodjonova, 2020). Research in cross-cultural design further emphasizes that meaningful innovation depends on decoding underlying symbolic structures rather than applying superficial visual ornamentation (Du & Jiang, 2024). Similarly, studies on ethnic visual transformation stress that cultural motifs can only be sustainably integrated into contemporary design when their semantic and symbolic foundations are clearly understood (Xu, Luo, & Zhong, 2024).

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the Butterfly Mother motif in Miao culture through an integrated analytical framework that connects mythological narratives, maternal symbolism, and visual design interpretation. By examining how myth-based maternal imagery is constructed, visually encoded, and translated into contemporary design contexts, this research addresses an important gap between cultural symbolism and design practice. The study aims to contribute to discussions in ethnic cultural studies, visual semiotics, and design research by demonstrating how traditional mythological motifs can function as dynamic visual systems, offering theoretical and practical insights for culturally grounded and sustainable design innovation.

Objectives

1. To identify and clarify the core cultural meanings of the Butterfly Mother motif in Miao mythology, particularly its representations of origin, fertility, protection, and cultural continuity.
2. To analyze how these myth-based maternal meanings are visually encoded in traditional Miao artifacts through structural elements such as form, symmetry, repetition, color, and composition.
3. To explore how the symbolic and visual principles of the Butterfly Mother motif can be translated into contemporary design contexts through processes of symbolization, abstraction, and recontextualization, thereby supporting cultural continuity.

Literature Review

1. Studies on Miao Mythology and the Butterfly Mother Motif

Mythology has long been recognized as a core framework for understanding Miao cultural identity, cosmology, and collective memory. Shi et al. (2019) provided a comprehensive overview of the historical development of the Miao people, emphasizing the role of mythological narratives in shaping ethnic consciousness and social cohesion. Within this mythological system, the Butterfly Mother is widely regarded as a primordial creator figure symbolizing life origin, fertility, and ancestral continuity. Early ethnographic studies focused primarily on documenting oral traditions and ritual practices, establishing the Butterfly Mother as a central spiritual symbol within Miao cosmology.

In recent years, scholarship has increasingly examined the material and visual manifestations of Miao mythology. Existing studies have shown that mythological symbols are encoded into textile patterns and garment structures, functioning as important visual expressions of cultural meaning. Similarly, Song, Prompongsaton, and Kotchapakdee (2024) discussed the preservation and revival

of traditional Miao costume patterns, noting that myth-based imagery continues to function as a visual carrier of cultural memory. These studies highlight the continuity of mythological symbols within everyday cultural practices.

Research on cultural heritage and rural development has further contextualized mythological motifs within contemporary socioeconomic frameworks. Chen, Ren, and Zhang (2021) explored batik production among China's Miao population, showing how traditional motifs contribute to both cultural sustainability and local economic development. While these studies acknowledge the symbolic importance of motifs such as the Butterfly Mother, they largely focus on heritage management and production systems rather than the internal visual logic of myth-based design. As a result, the Butterfly Mother motif remains underexplored as a distinct visual and design system.

2. Maternal Symbolism in Mythological and Cultural Studies

In the context of globalization, scholars have stressed the importance of balancing cultural preservation with adaptive innovation. Ergashev and Farxodjonova (2020) argued that national and ethnic cultural symbols must be reinterpreted rather than merely preserved in order to remain relevant within global cultural exchanges. From this perspective, maternal symbolism is not static but capable of transformation while retaining its core cultural meaning.

Recent studies have begun to address female and maternal symbolism within Miao cultural artifacts. Zhang (2025) examined female symbols in Miao ethnic dress patterns, revealing how maternal imagery contributes to cultural memory and gender representation. These findings suggest that maternal symbolism in Miao culture extends beyond biological motherhood, encompassing broader meanings related to ancestry, spiritual protection, and social identity. However, much of the existing literature approaches maternal symbolism at a conceptual or narrative level, offering limited analysis of how

such meanings are visually structured through design elements such as pattern composition, color, and form. This gap indicates a need for research that connects symbolic interpretation with visual design analysis.

3. Visual Symbolism and Ethnic Pattern Design

Visual symbolism is fundamental to ethnic pattern design, serving as a medium through which intangible cultural meanings are materialized. Han and Cong (2021) provided an in-depth examination of Miao traditional patterns, tracing their origins and design transformation processes. Their study emphasized that Miao patterns operate as symbolic systems rooted in mythological narratives rather than as purely decorative elements. Formal characteristics such as repetition, symmetry, and organic shapes—often associated with butterfly imagery—reinforce symbolic meanings related to life continuity and protection.

Contemporary design research has increasingly focused on innovative visualization and cross-cultural interpretation of ethnic symbols. Xu, Luo, and Zhong (2024) explored aesthetic-based visualization strategies for Miao costume imagery, arguing that meaningful innovation must be grounded in cultural semantics. Du and Jiang (2024) similarly highlighted the importance of cross-cultural design frameworks that enable adaptation while maintaining symbolic integrity.

Technological approaches have further expanded research perspectives. Quan et al. (2024) examined the protection of Guizhou Miao batik culture through knowledge graphs and deep learning, demonstrating how digital tools can support cultural preservation. Zheng et al. (2024) explored fast style transfer techniques for ethnic pattern innovation, offering new possibilities for visual transformation. Despite their technical contributions, these studies caution that technological innovation should not override cultural meaning.

Overall, existing literature provides valuable insights into Miao mythology, maternal symbolism, and ethnic pattern design, yet these strands remain insufficiently integrated. Few studies systematically link mythological meaning,

maternal symbolism, and visual design interpretation within a unified analytical framework. This gap underscores the need for a design-oriented study of the Butterfly Mother motif that bridges mythology and visual meaning, contributing to both cultural studies and contemporary design research.

Existing studies on Miao culture have primarily addressed mythology, maternal symbolism, and ethnic pattern design as separate research areas, with limited integration of these perspectives into a unified analytical framework. In particular, the Butterfly Mother motif remains underexplored as a systematic visual and design-based symbol, and its transformation from mythological meaning to contemporary design language has not been sufficiently examined.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in cultural analysis and design interpretation. An interdisciplinary approach is employed, integrating perspectives from mythology, visual semiotics, and design studies to examine the Butterfly Mother motif as both a cultural symbol and a visual system. Rather than relying on quantitative measurement, the research emphasizes interpretive and comparative analysis to reveal how mythological meaning is constructed, visually encoded, and translated into design language across traditional and contemporary contexts.

1. Mythological Text and Visual Analysis Methods

The study conducts a qualitative analysis of representative mythological texts and documented narratives related to the Butterfly Mother in Miao culture. These sources are selected from ethnographic studies, cultural history literature, and previous scholarly documentation of Miao mythology. The analysis focuses on identifying recurring narrative structures, symbolic themes, and maternal

attributes associated with the Butterfly Mother, such as origin, fertility, protection, and continuity.

This textual analysis is combined with visual semiotic analysis to examine how mythological meanings are transformed into visual expression. Visual elements—including form, symmetry, repetition, spatial organization, and symbolic imagery—are analyzed as sign systems that encode cultural meaning. By linking narrative symbolism with visual structures, this method establishes a systematic connection between mythological content and visual representation, allowing cultural meaning to be interpreted beyond literal depiction.

2. Pattern, Image, and Design Case Analysis

Traditional visual materials featuring the Butterfly Mother motif serve as the primary objects of analysis. These materials include embroidery patterns, costume decorations, and batik motifs documented in existing literature, museum collections, and visual archives related to Miao material culture. The selection of visual samples follows a purposive sampling principle, focusing on patterns that clearly demonstrate butterfly imagery, maternal symbolism, or structural characteristics associated with the Butterfly Mother narrative.

In addition to traditional artifacts, selected contemporary design cases inspired by Miao cultural symbols are examined to explore processes of reinterpretation and transformation. These cases are drawn from visual design and product design contexts where traditional motifs are adapted to modern aesthetic and functional requirements. Comparative analysis is employed to identify both continuity and transformation, highlighting how symbolic principles are preserved, abstracted, or recontextualized in contemporary design applications.

3. Research Framework

The research framework is organized around three interrelated dimensions: Culture, Visual, and Design Translation. Within this framework, cultural meaning derived from mythological narratives forms the conceptual

foundation, visual structures function as mediating symbolic systems, and design translation represents the process through which cultural meaning is adapted to contemporary contexts.

Three key processes—symbolization, abstraction, and recontextualization—guide the analytical progression. Through their cyclical interaction, myth-based maternal symbolism is transformed into visual language and subsequently translated into modern design forms. This framework emphasizes cultural continuity as the central outcome of design-oriented interpretation, demonstrating how traditional symbolic meaning can be sustained through adaptive visual and design practices (Figure 1).

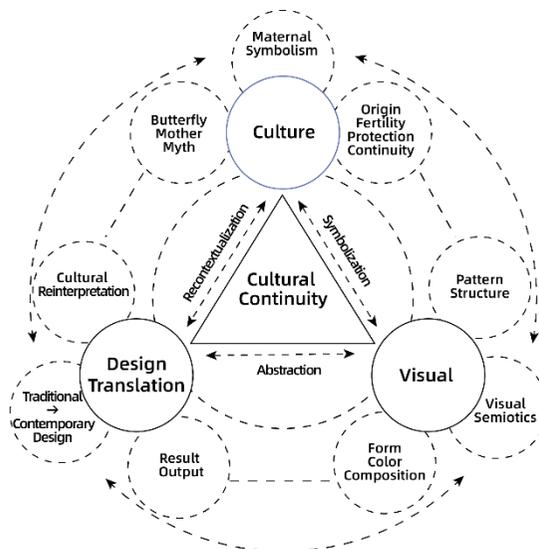


Figure 1 Conceptual framework (Source: Constructed by the researchers)

Results

This section presents the research findings derived from the integrated analysis of cultural meaning, visual structure, and design translation of the

Butterfly Mother motif in Miao culture. Guided by the proposed research framework, the results reveal how mythological and maternal symbolism are visually constructed and subsequently translated into contemporary design contexts, highlighting cultural continuity as a central outcome.

1. Cultural Meanings of the Butterfly Mother Motif

The analysis of mythological narratives and cultural literature reveals that the Butterfly Mother functions as a foundational maternal symbol within Miao cosmology. Rather than representing a single narrative figure, the Butterfly Mother embodies a composite system of meanings related to life origin, fertility, protection, and continuity. These meanings are deeply embedded in oral traditions, ritual practices, and collective cultural memory.

First, the Butterfly Mother is consistently associated with origin and creation, positioning her as a primordial ancestor responsible for the emergence of life and the natural order. This origin narrative establishes a cosmological framework in which human existence, nature, and spirituality are interconnected. Second, fertility and regeneration emerge as core maternal attributes, symbolizing the cyclical renewal of life and the continuity of lineage. These meanings extend beyond biological reproduction to encompass agricultural prosperity and social sustainability.

Additionally, the Butterfly Mother symbolizes protection and guardianship, reflecting maternal authority and care within Miao society. This protective dimension reinforces social cohesion and moral values, situating maternal symbolism as a stabilizing force within the cultural system. Collectively, these meanings form a unified cultural foundation rather than discrete symbolic elements, providing the semantic source from which visual and design expressions are derived.

2. Visual Structures and Symbolic Representation

The visual analysis of traditional Miao artifacts demonstrates that the cultural meanings associated with the Butterfly Mother are systematically

encoded into visual structures rather than expressed through literal depiction. Patterns found in embroidery, costume decoration, and batik textiles reveal a consistent use of symbolic abstraction, where mythological meanings are translated into formal visual language.

Key visual characteristics include symmetry and repetition, which visually reinforce ideas of continuity and balance. Circular and organic structures frequently appear in Butterfly Mother-related patterns, symbolizing life cycles, regeneration, and harmony between humans and nature. These structural principles reflect the transformation of maternal symbolism into a visual system governed by order and rhythm.

Color usage further contributes to symbolic representation. Contrasting and layered color schemes emphasize vitality and protection, while compositional arrangements guide visual attention toward central motifs associated with maternal presence. Through visual semiotics, these forms function as signifiers that convey cultural meaning without direct narrative explanation.

Overall, the findings indicate that Butterfly Mother imagery operates as a coherent visual-semantic system, in which form, color, and composition collectively communicate cultural values. This visual system serves as an intermediary layer that enables the subsequent translation of cultural meaning into design language.

3. Design Translation and Cultural Continuity

The results of the design-oriented analysis show that effective translation of the Butterfly Mother motif into contemporary contexts depends on meaning-based reinterpretation rather than surface ornamentation. By abstracting symbolic principles from traditional visual structures, designers can transform

cultural meaning into adaptable design elements suitable for modern visual and product design.

Design translation involves three interconnected processes. First, symbolization enables cultural meanings derived from myth and maternal symbolism to be visually articulated. Second, abstraction allows these visual forms to be simplified, reorganized, or modularized without losing their symbolic integrity. Third, recontextualization situates the transformed motifs within contemporary design environments, responding to modern aesthetics, functions, and user contexts.

As synthesized in the research framework, these processes collectively support cultural continuity. Rather than preserving tradition as a static form, design translation facilitates the renewal of cultural meaning through contemporary reinterpretation. The Butterfly Mother motif thus functions as a dynamic cultural resource, capable of sustaining its symbolic significance while adapting to evolving design practices.

The findings demonstrate that design plays an active mediating role between tradition and modernity. Through systematic translation grounded in cultural and visual analysis, traditional maternal symbolism can continue to inform contemporary design, contributing to the sustainable transmission of ethnic cultural identity.

Overall, the results confirm that the Butterfly Mother motif operates as an integrated system of cultural meaning, visual structure, and design translation, in which cultural continuity is achieved through symbolization, abstraction, and recontextualization.

Discussion

Designers engaging with ethnic cultural motifs should move beyond direct visual imitation and adopt a meaning-oriented design translation approach.

Traditional motifs such as the Butterfly Mother are better understood as culturally embedded visual systems rather than decorative patterns. By interpreting underlying cultural symbolism and visual structures, designers can abstract and reinterpret symbolic principles in ways that respond to contemporary aesthetic, functional, and contextual demands while preserving cultural integrity.

Future research may extend this study through comparative and cross-cultural investigations of myth-based and maternal symbolism in different cultural traditions. Examining similarities and differences in symbolic structures and visual expression can enhance the broader applicability of the proposed culture–visual–design translation framework and contribute to theoretical discussions on cultural symbolism within design studies.

Subsequent studies are encouraged to incorporate user-centered evaluation methods, such as audience perception analysis, interviews, or design testing. Assessing how contemporary users interpret and respond to translated cultural symbols can provide empirical support for design translation strategies and strengthen the connection between cultural analysis and design practice.

The use of digital and intelligent technologies, including digital archiving, visualization tools, and intelligent design-support systems, is recommended to facilitate the documentation, analysis, and translation of intangible cultural heritage. When applied with cultural sensitivity, these technologies can support both preservation and innovation, enabling traditional cultural motifs to adapt to contemporary design environments without weakening their symbolic meaning.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed for future research and design practice.

First, designers working with ethnic cultural motifs are encouraged to adopt a meaning-based design translation approach rather than direct visual replication. Understanding the cultural symbolism and visual logic underlying traditional motifs—such as the Butterfly Mother—can support more authentic and sustainable contemporary design outcomes.

Second, future research may expand this framework through comparative and cross-cultural studies, examining how maternal symbolism and myth-based visual systems are translated in different cultural contexts. Such comparisons would help refine the applicability of the proposed framework beyond a single ethnic tradition.

Third, integrating user-centered evaluation methods, such as audience perception studies or usability testing, could further assess how effectively translated cultural symbols are understood and accepted in contemporary design contexts. This would strengthen the practical relevance of design-oriented cultural research.

Finally, emerging digital technologies, including visualization tools, digital archives, and intelligent design systems, are recommended as supportive means for documenting, analyzing, and translating intangible cultural heritage. When applied responsibly, these technologies can enhance cultural preservation while enabling innovative design reinterpretation.

Overall, these recommendations aim to support the sustainable integration of traditional cultural symbolism into contemporary design practice and to encourage further interdisciplinary research at the intersection of culture, visual studies, and design translation.

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