

Layered Semantic Analysis of Tibetan Mask Imagery Based on Peirce's Triadic Sign Theory

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is 1) to investigate the semantic generation mechanism of Tibetan mask imagery at the iconic level, 2) to analyze the indexical functions of Tibetan mask imagery within ritual and spatial contexts, 3) to explore the cultural coding mechanism of Tibetan mask imagery at the symbolic level, and 4) to construct the superimposed and coupled semantic structure of Tibetan mask imagery based on Peirce's triadic sign theory. The sample consisted of representative Tibetan masks, including deer masks, charnel ground masks, and guardian deity masks. They were selected by purposive sampling based on their cultural representativeness and symbolic diversity. The instruments for collecting data were document analysis forms and semiotic analysis frameworks. Data were analyzed by descriptive analysis and content analysis. The research results were found as follows: 1) at the iconic level, Tibetan masks construct perceptual recognition through figurative, diagrammatic, and metaphorical resemblance, forming a cross-cultural visual foundation; 2) at the indexical level, masks embed meaning within ritual processes and spatial structures through temporal, behavioral, and contextual indications; 3) at the symbolic level, deep meanings are generated through religious doctrines and socio-cultural conventions, forming a stable cultural coding system; and 4) these three semiotic layers constitute a superimposed and coupled semantic structure that jointly produces the complete meaning of Tibetan mask imagery.

Keywords: Tibetan masks, Peirce Semiotics Triadic, Symbolism Visual, Symbols Semantic Generation

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Introduction

Against the backdrop of accelerating globalization and the continuous evolution of digital media technologies—particularly emerging contexts such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted design, and social media-based visual communication—traditional cultural visual resources are increasingly becoming important sources for contemporary design innovation and cultural dissemination. As an important component of China's intangible cultural heritage, Tibetan masks integrate multiple attributes such as religious beliefs, ritual practices, and ethnic aesthetics. They not only served functions like sacrifice, exorcism, and identity symbolism in historical contexts, but also demonstrate significant potential for continuous revitalization and reinterpretation within contemporary digital environments, including immersive media experiences, interactive cultural exhibitions, and cross-platform visual storytelling.

Therefore, how to deeply understand the structural logic and meaning system of Tibetan masks from the perspective of visual symbols has become an important research topic connecting traditional cultural resources with contemporary design practice, especially in the context of digital transformation and mediated visual culture.

However, existing research largely focuses on descriptive analyses of stylistic features, artistic styles, or cultural connotations of Tibetan masks, lacking a systematic exploration of their symbolic structure and semantic generation mechanisms. At the design application level, this insufficient research often leads to the superficial appropriation or formal collage of mask visual elements, particularly in digital design practices such as UI/UX interfaces, animation assets, and cultural IP development, failing to effectively convey their deeper cultural meanings. This limitation further affects their accurate expression and value transformation in cross-cultural communication and contemporary digital design contexts. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce robust theoretical frameworks to conduct a structured analysis of Tibetan mask imagery, revealing its generative path from visual form to cultural meaning.

Based on this, this paper introduces Peirce's triadic sign theory in semiotics, analyzing the semantic layers of Tibetan mask imagery from three dimensions: iconicity, indexicality, and symbolicity. It explores the mechanisms of meaning generation across perception, contextual interaction, and cultural conventions, and further constructs an analytical framework that supports their translation into contemporary design systems, especially within digital media environments. This research not only contributes to a deeper semiotic understanding of Tibetan masks but also provides theoretical support and methodological reference for the effective integration of intangible cultural heritage visual elements into digital dissemination, interactive media design, and cultural innovation practices.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the semantic generation mechanism of Tibetan mask imagery at the iconic level by analyzing the perceptual logic constructed through figurative, diagrammatic, and metaphorical resemblance.
2. To analyze the indexical functions of Tibetan mask imagery within ritual and spatial contexts, with particular attention to temporal, behavioral, and contextual indications.
3. To explore the cultural coding mechanism of Tibetan mask imagery at the symbolic level by examining how religious doctrines and socio-cultural conventions generate stable symbolic meanings.
4. To construct and explain the superimposed and coupled semantic structure of Tibetan mask imagery based on the interaction of icon, index, and symbol in the overall meaning-generation process.

Literature Review

To establish a solid theoretical and research foundation for this study, it is necessary to systematically review existing literature related to Tibetan masks, visual symbol theory, and their applications in contemporary design contexts. This review aims to clarify the current state of research, identify existing limitations, and position the present study within the broader academic discourse. Specifically, the literature review is structured around three key dimensions: (1) studies on Tibetan masks as cultural and visual artifacts, (2) research on semiotic theories with a focus on visual symbolism, and (3) existing explorations of visual element extraction and design translation in the context of intangible cultural heritage. Through this structured examination, the study seeks to reveal the gap between traditional cultural analysis and contemporary design application, thereby justifying the necessity of introducing a semiotic framework for systematic interpretation and design translation.

Peirce (1931–1958) proposed a tripartite division of "analogous sign—indicator—conventional sign" in his semiotic theory, arguing that the generation of symbolic meaning depends on the dynamic relationship between the medium, object, and interpreter, providing a fundamental theoretical framework for understanding the multi-layered meaning of visual signs. This theory emphasizes that signs are not static correspondences, but rather continuously generate meaning during the interpretation process, and has had a profound impact on subsequent visual culture studies.

Eco (1976) further pointed out in semiotic research that symbols not only have natural referential relationships, but are also constrained by cultural encoding and social conventions, emphasizing the cultural nature of symbol systems and the diversity of interpretations, providing important theoretical support for analyzing the cultural meaning in visual symbols.

Chandler (2017) systematically reviewed Peirce's theory in his semiotics research, clearly defining three types of signs: illusory, indicative, and conventional. He also emphasized the cognitive and experiential factors in the process of sign recognition, providing a methodological reference for contemporary visual communication research.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) proposed in their visual grammar theory that images are not only a medium for reproducing reality, but also a symbolic system with structural rules and the ability to produce meaning. They emphasized that the relationship between visual elements constitutes the key to meaning expression, providing a systematic method for image structure analysis and visual semantic research.

Barthes (1977), from the perspective of cultural semiotics, pointed out that the meaning of an image not only comes from its surface form, but also depends on the "myth" and symbol encoding mechanism in the cultural context. He revealed the deep symbolic meaning of visual symbols in the socio-cultural structure and provided a theoretical basis for the study of normative symbols.

Ye Xingsheng (1990) pointed out in his research on Tibetan mask art that Tibetan masks have important functions in religious rituals and folk culture. Their shapes, colors and decorations all carry rich religious symbolic meanings and reflect the spiritual connotation and aesthetic characteristics of Tibetan culture.

Beer (2003) systematically sorted out the correspondence between color, deity and religious symbolism in the study of Tibetan Buddhist symbol system, and pointed out that visual symbols have strict coding rules in religious context, which provides an important reference for understanding the cultural norms in Tibetan masks.

In his study of Tibetan guardian deities and religious images, Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956) analyzed in detail the relationship between the image of the deity and the ritual function,

emphasizing the indicative role of visual images in religious practice, and providing an anthropological perspective for the study of the function of masks in ritual contexts.

In summary, existing research has achieved certain results in semiotic theory, visual image analysis, and the study of Tibetan mask culture, but some shortcomings remain. On the one hand, semiotic research largely remains at the theoretical level, lacking integration with specific cultural images; on the other hand, research on Tibetan masks mainly focuses on cultural interpretation and artistic description, lacking systematic analysis of symbolic structure, especially layered semantic research based on Peirce's triadic approach. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a systematic semantic deconstruction and structural analysis of Tibetan mask images under the guidance of semiotic theory to compensate for the deficiencies of existing research and provide theoretical support for their translation in contemporary design.

Conceptual Framework

Based on Peirce's triadic semiotic theory, this paper views Tibetan mask images as a multi-layered meaning-generating system and constructs a hierarchical analytical framework of "imitator—indicator—regulator" (Figure 1). The imitator level corresponds to visual form and perceptual recognition, the indicator level corresponds to ritual behavior and spatiotemporal context, and the regulator level corresponds to cultural rules and symbolic systems. These three are not isolated but rather form a superimposed and coupled relationship within specific images, jointly influencing the semantic generation process. This framework, with "visual form—practical context—cultural encoding" as its main thread, reveals the logical path of Tibetan masks from surface recognition to deep meaning construction, and provides a structural analytical basis for subsequent design and translation.

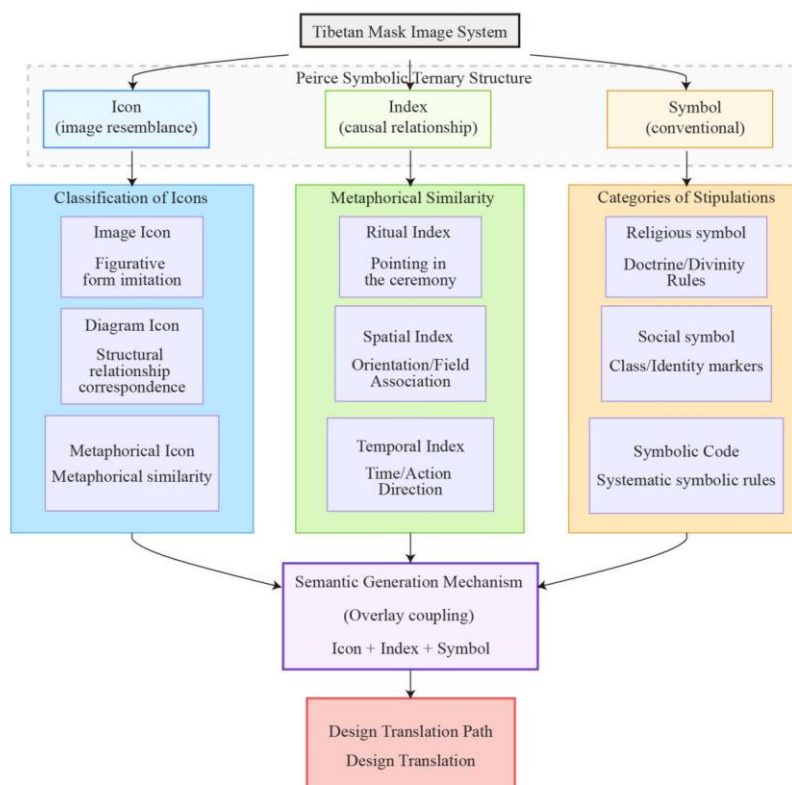


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This research is qualitative research. The research area is the study of Tibetan mask imagery within the context of semiotics and visual communication design. The population is Tibetan mask cultural artifacts and related visual materials derived from religious rituals and traditional performances.

The sample group consists of representative Tibetan masks, including deer masks, charnel ground masks, and guardian deity masks. The number of samples is 16 typical cases selected from existing literature and visual archives. The samples were selected by purposive sampling, based on criteria such as cultural representativeness, symbolic richness, and diversity of visual forms.

The research instruments are 2 types, including:

Document analysis form, which was constructed based on Peirce's triadic sign theory (icon, index, and symbol). The instrument includes components such as visual form analysis, contextual interpretation, and cultural coding identification. It was used to study the theoretical framework and semantic structure of Tibetan mask imagery.

Semiotic analysis framework, developed according to Peirce's semiotic concepts and supported by visual semiotics theories (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Chandler, 2017). The framework consists of three analytical dimensions: iconic resemblance, indexical indication, and symbolic convention. It was used to analyze the semantic generation mechanisms of Tibetan mask imagery.

Data were collected by reviewing academic literature, visual archives, and museum resources between October to December 2025.

The qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis and interpretative analysis. Document research was applied to analyze and synthesize the data, and the results were presented in descriptive form.

Results

Peirce's semiotic theory provides a fundamental framework for understanding the generation of meaning in visual symbols. According to Peirce, the function of a symbol is realized through the relationship between three elements: the symbol (representation), the object, and the interpreter. Therefore, meaning is not inherent in the visual form itself, but rather arises through interpretation within a cultural and contextual system. From this theoretical perspective, Tibetan mask images can be understood as a complex system of visual symbols, whose meaning is generated through multiple levels of symbols.

Peirce's triadic theory of the symbol provides a fundamental dimension for understanding visual images. Its division logic not only involves the representation of symbols and objects but also reveals how humans interpret images through perception, experience, and convention (Peirce, 1934). Therefore, Tibetan masks can be understood as a visual complex composed of multiple juxtaposed symbols.

1. Research on the semantic generation mechanism of similar symbols in Tibetan mask images

In Peirce's semiotic system, a salience is a type of symbol that establishes a referential relationship based on its similarity to an object in shape, structure, or texture. Its meaning generation depends on the "isomorphic relationship" between the symbol and the object in shape or structure. In Tibetan mask imagery, saliences constitute the foundational layer of visual cognition, serving as a key path for viewers to make initial recognition and perceptual judgments. Tibetan masks contain numerous images such as bulls, eagles, and deities; these visual elements are directly presented in the mask's form through similar shapes or symbolic

features, allowing viewers to recognize them without textual explanation. This symbolism based on "analogical representation" enhances the intuitiveness and sensory impact of the mask image. In Tibetan masks, this layer constitutes the most intuitive and cross-culturally understandable visual foundation of the image (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020).

Based on the degree of similarity, Peirce classified similarities into three types: figurative similarity, pictorial similarity, and metaphorical similarity.

1.1 Figurative Resemblance: The Foundation of Intuitive Representation and Cross-Cultural Recognition

Figurative resemblance possesses "representational transparency," where the relationship between the symbol and the object is naturally and intuitively expressed as a direct visual representation, giving the viewer a sense of "directness." Some Tibetan masks imitate animal or human facial features; the overall facial structure of the mask (the positional relationship of the eyes, nose, and mouth) is isomorphic to the physiological structure of the human or animal face. This allows the viewer to immediately recognize it as a "face" or "head," thus presupposing its possibility as a representation of a living being. The antlers of the deer mask are similar in shape to real deer antlers, directly referring to the natural object of "deer" (Table 1). In the interpretation of Tibetan mask images, figurative resemblance helps to highlight the visual characteristics of the mask, enabling the viewer to quickly identify the deity or figure it represents, thereby enhancing the intuitive effect of cultural transmission and maintaining the integrity of traditional meaning.

1.2 Diagrammatic Resemblance: Structural Relationships and Meaning Mapping Mechanisms

Chart-based similarity is not a mere reproduction of the external form, but rather an analysis of the relationships between the various parts of a symbol to reveal a structural resemblance. For example, the Tashi Sherab yellow mask (Table 1). Tashi Sherab is one of the most mature and diverse artistic schools in Tibetan opera, and its masks are further decorated based on the later Aruowa (Wenba) masks, with the face covered in yellow wool as a base color. Yellow symbolizes wisdom, prosperity, and strength, representing radiance, immeasurable merit, and profound knowledge. Its meaning does not derive from natural similarity, but rather forms a cognitive association through a structural mapping of "color—cultural meaning."

1.3 Metaphorical Similarity: Abstract Symbolism and Emotional Triggering Mechanisms

Metaphorical imagery possesses a higher level of abstraction, triggering psychological associations in viewers through visual form. For example, the main mask of the charnel ground evokes the awareness of death and impermanence through its skull form, thereby constructing a sense of religious awe (Table 1).

This mechanism illustrates that iconic symbols not only possess cognitive functions but also serve to evoke emotions and provide psychological suggestion, acting as a crucial bridge connecting visual form and spiritual experience.

Table 1 Image Analysis

Mask name	Deity Deer Mask	Arowa (Wemba) Mask	Corpse Dharma Forest Master Mask
Legend			
Similarity-based element recognition	Head features of a deer	Human characteristics	Skull structure。
Formal iconicity analysis	Image-like similarity	Diagrammatic Iconicity	Figurative similarity
Semantic function	Cross-cultural recognition / Natural attribute implies	Instant role positioning / Emotional resonance	Physiological impact / Ritual awe foundation

Note: Illustration and Photographed by the author, 2025

2. Research on the semantic referential mechanism of indicative symbols in Tibetan mask images

Indicative symbols guide the recipient to associate with a corresponding object through relationships such as causality, adjacency, and part-whole. Their function is to direct attention to a specific object, and this can be achieved through any symbolic medium. They refer to the object by being adjacent to it in time and space, or by having a logical causal or sequential relationship (Peirce, 1931–1958). This level connects the mask image from its static form to dynamic practice and context. Indicative symbols are crucial in the interpretation of Tibetan masks, guiding viewers to associate with deities and cultural connotations within the ritual through elements such as masks, clothing, movements, and music, revealing their deeper meaning.

2.1 Ritualistic Instructions: Visual Expression of Temporal Structure and Behavioral Logic

Ritualistic indications refer to the use of masks as indicators of the entire ritual process during religious ceremonies, such as the "Cham" Vajra Dance. The appearance of a specific mask directly indicates that the ritual has entered a particular stage or that a specific ritual action is about to be performed. For example, the "Cham" Vajra Dancer's mask (Table 2), used in the ritual, directly indicates that the ritual has reached the core teaching stage of "demonstrating impermanence and severing ego." The mask becomes a time code in the ritual narrative, a direct imitation and extension of the physical characteristics of a "skull," indicating the "movement of an inanimate body," thus visualizing the concept of "death." The act of wearing the mask is an indication of "spirit possession" or "role transformation."

2.2 Spatial Indication: Religious Spatial Structure and Functional Positioning

Spatial indications, such as the hanging position of the mask in the temple, like at the entrance of the protector deity hall or around the main deity, indicate its rank and function in the pantheon of deities. The "Protector (Mahakala) Mask" (Table 2) hanging in the temple's protector deity hall is fixedly hung to the side of the main deity image or above the mandala

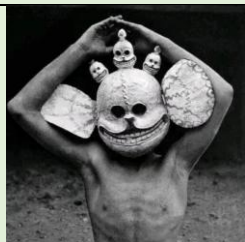
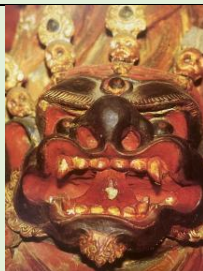
entrance. Its position directly indicates its sacred function as the guardian of the mandala and reinforces the religious function of the protector deity as "overseeing and protecting".

The semantic function at this level is to anchor static images within dynamic practical, historical, and spatial contexts, making the image a direct sign or index of action, time, and sacredness.

2.3 Behavioral and Identity Instructions: Role Transformation and the Construction of the Divine-Human Relationship

The act of wearing a mask is itself an act of instruction, marking the transformation of the "human-divine" identity. After wearing the mask, the dancer becomes a temporary vessel for the deity, and this relationship is clearly identified through visual symbols. For example, the mask of the Dragon Girl character in Tibetan opera (Table2) is used to guide and facilitate the instantaneous transformation of the character and the plot, controlling the time and space of the drama.

Table 2 Case Analysis of Indexical Signs

Mask name	Corpse Dharma Forest Master Mask	Huzhu (Maha Kala) Mask	"Dragon Lady" detachable mask
Legend			
Indicative element recognition	Rigid, jerky movements of the bones	Hanging position / Orientation and height	Lightweight, easy to put on and take off quickly
Semantic construction of indicators	It indicates the flow direction of ritual energy.	It serves as an "indicator sign".	It guided and facilitated the instantaneous transitions between characters and plot.

Note: Illustration and Photographed by the author, 2025

3. A Study on the Conventional Cultural Coding Mechanism of Tibetan Mask Images

Peirce's semiotics emphasizes the connection between a symbol and an object established through social conventions, cultural rules, or learning habits. The connection between a symbol and an object depends entirely on the conventions, habits, or rules within the social group (Barthes, 1977).

In Tibetan mask art, the conventions form the core of its semantic system, representing the most fundamental, complex, and culturally specific aspect of Tibetan mask semantics. For example, different colors represent different deities, and symmetrical mask structures symbolize cosmic order. The generation of this meaning depends on specific cultural contexts and social conventions, lacking universal intuition and requiring the decoding of specific "cultural codes." It is a set of encoding rules that bind visual form with deep cultural meaning. (Beer, 2003).

3.1 Religious Doctrine Conventions: The Doctrine Expression of Visual Symbols

In Tibetan masks, most religious masks adhere to clear stylistic norms and utilize these conventions to express deeper cultural connotations. The **Image Measurement Sutra** in the Tibetan Buddhist classic **The Treatise on Crafts** clearly defines the size, characteristics, shape, gestures, symbols, postures, and all decorative forms of deities and monsters. For example, the three eyes of the wrathful guardian deity are not based on physical resemblance but symbolize "omniscience," the wisdom to see the past, present, and future. The five-crane headdress does not originate from the terrifying appearance of a skull but symbolizes "conquering the five poisons" and "achieving the five wisdoms." The fangs and flame-shaped eyebrows do not refer to actual anger but symbolize the doctrinal concept of "destroying afflictions and obstacles with the anger of wisdom" (Ye, 1990). Specific colors in religious doctrines reflect the strict regulations of the Tibetan Buddhist color theory system (Table 3).

Table 3 Color Symbol Framework under Religious Doctrine Norms.

Blue	White	Red	Yellow	Green	Black
					
Wrathful Deities	Silent Deities	Half Wrathful Deities	Silent Deities	Compassion Deities	Wrathful Deities
Wrathful and Subjugation	Compassion and purity	Power and Karma	Gain and Divinity	Achievement and Salvation	Elimination and Deterrence

Note: Illustration and Photographed by the author, 2025

3.2 Sociocultural Norms: The Symbolic System of Roles and Narratives

Different types of masks are associated with a complete set of mythological narratives, spiritual practices, and functions of praying for blessings and warding off disasters. This association is established through scriptures, oral traditions, and conventions. In Tibetan opera, the colors and patterns of masks conventionally indicate the social status, moral attributes, and personality types of the characters, which constitutes a set of symbolic rules of theatrical culture (Table 4).

Table 4 Framework of Color Symbols under Sociocultural Norms.

Blue	White	Yellow	Red	Green	Yin-Yang
					
Wenba (hunter), fisherman	Elderly male, minister, father	Living Buddha, eminent monk, immortal	King, minister, military general	Female, princess, fairy	Traitorous officials, sorcerers, and double-dealers
Brave, rugged, forthright, and a trailblazer	Loyalty, kindness, purity, harmony, and longevity	Sacred, wise, highly respected, and perfected	Majesty, power, bravery, and dominance	Beautiful, kind, gentle, and pure	Hypocrisy, cunning, insidiousness, duplicity

Note: Illustration and Photographed by the author, 2025

The semantic functional specifications at this level, revealed by the analysis of Tibetan mask specifications, demonstrate that the essence of Tibetan masks is a highly developed cultural code system: endowing images with deep, culturally encoded symbolic meanings. It answers the fundamental question, "What does this image mean in a specific culture?" The visual forms of these masks are, in fact, compressed visual documents of complex religious philosophy, historical memory, moral concepts, and social structures (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956). As the soul of cultural symbols, their semantics can only be acquired through learning specific cultural rules.

4. Study on the Superimposed and Coupled Semantic Structure of Tibetan Mask Images

This paper proposes a superimposed coupling model of "likeness-indication-convention," providing a systematic framework for understanding traditional visual symbols. The semantics of a complete Tibetan mask image are the result of the interweaving and combined effects of these three layers. The likeness provides a "perceptible form," allowing the viewer to recognize it as a living head, constructing the basic perceptual layer. The indicator provides contextual location, linking the image to specific ritual behaviors, history, and usage contexts, establishing a contextual association layer. The convention provides cultural interpretation, ultimately guiding form and context towards a complex system of religious philosophical concepts and social values, forming the meaning interpretation layer. These three layers of symbols constitute a synergistic mechanism, realizing a complete explanatory path from "form-context-culture."

Therefore, Peirce's tripartite division clearly reveals that a complete understanding of the semantics of Tibetan masks requires penetrating their resemblance to form, tracing their indicative context, and ultimately arriving at and interpreting their normative symbolic system. Any analysis at a single level is incomplete; only by combining all three can the full meaning of their significance as cultural symbols be decoded.

Discussion

The results of research objective 1 found that Tibetan mask imagery constructs semantic meaning at the iconic level through figurative, diagrammatic, and metaphorical resemblance, which establishes a perceptual recognition foundation. This may be because iconic signs rely on visual similarity between the sign and the object, allowing viewers to interpret meaning directly through sensory perception. This finding is consistent with Peirce's theory of signs, which states that icons represent their objects through resemblance (Peirce, 1931–1958), and also aligns with Chandler (2017), who emphasizes that iconicity plays a crucial role in visual cognition and interpretation.

The results of research objective 2 found that Tibetan mask imagery functions at the indexical level by embedding meaning within ritual processes and spatial contexts, including temporal sequence, behavioral interaction, and spatial positioning. This may be because indexical signs are based on existential or contextual connections between the sign and its object, linking visual forms with actual practices and ritual settings. This result is consistent with Eco (1976), who highlights the role of contextual relationships in meaning-making, and also corresponds with Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956), who explains the functional role of ritual objects in Tibetan religious practices.

The results of research objective 3 found that Tibetan mask imagery generates deep semantic meaning at the symbolic level through religious doctrines and socio-cultural conventions, forming a stable cultural coding system. This may be because symbolic signs depend on collectively shared codes, learned conventions, and culturally specific interpretive rules. This finding is consistent with Barthes (1977), who argues that cultural meaning is produced through systems of signification, and with Beer (2003), who demonstrates that Tibetan visual symbols follow strict religious and symbolic conventions.

The results of research objective 4 found that the complete meaning of Tibetan mask imagery is produced through a superimposed and coupled semantic structure formed by the interaction of icon, index, and symbol. This may be because visual cultural symbols do not operate through a single semiotic mode, but through the simultaneous interaction of perceptual form, contextual indication, and cultural convention. This finding is also consistent with Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), who propose that visual meaning is generated through the structured interaction of multiple signifying elements within a broader cultural system.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed to investigate the semantic generation mechanism of Tibetan mask imagery based on Peirce's triadic sign theory. The findings reveal that Tibetan mask imagery operates as a multi-layered semiotic system consisting of iconic, indexical, and symbolic dimensions. At the iconic level, meaning is constructed through visual resemblance, enabling perceptual recognition and cross-cultural readability. At the indexical level, meaning is embedded within ritual practices and spatial contexts, linking visual forms with temporal and behavioral processes. At the symbolic level, meaning is generated through religious doctrines and socio-cultural conventions, forming a stable cultural coding system.

Furthermore, the study found that these three semiotic layers are not independent but function in a coupled and integrated manner. The iconic layer provides perceptual access, the indexical layer situates meaning within context, and the symbolic layer delivers cultural interpretation. Together, they form a complete semantic structure of Tibetan mask imagery. This research contributes to the application of Peircean semiotics in visual culture studies and provides a theoretical framework for the interpretation and design translation of intangible cultural heritage.

Recommendations

First, at the theoretical level, future research should further expand the application of semiotic theories in the study of intangible cultural heritage. Researchers may integrate additional perspectives such as cognitive semiotics and multimodal analysis to deepen the understanding of visual meaning-making processes.

Second, at the practical level, designers and cultural practitioners should apply the layered semiotic framework proposed in this study to improve the accuracy and depth of cultural representation. By considering iconic, indexical, and symbolic dimensions simultaneously, designers can avoid superficial appropriation and enhance the cultural authenticity of design outcomes.

Third, in terms of future research directions, further studies may expand the sample scope to include a wider range of Tibetan masks and conduct comparative analyses across different regions and cultural contexts. In addition, empirical methods such as audience perception studies and experimental design research may be incorporated to validate the effectiveness of semantic interpretation and design translation.

Finally, in the context of digital media and cultural dissemination, future research should explore the integration of Tibetan mask imagery into virtual environments, interactive systems, and digital storytelling platforms, in order to enhance cultural engagement and communication.

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