

Original Paper

Symbolic Coding and Intertextual Narration of Hani Marriage

Belief

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Abstract

Objective As an ancient ethnic group with “a language but no written script”, the Hani people often preserve their cultural memory and social contracts through specific material carriers. This study examines two representative Hani marital tokens—the gold craft “Riyue Pan” and the woven artifact “Pa An”—from a semiotic perspective, analyzing their transformation from practical objects to emotional symbols. *Methods* By integrating Peirce’s semiotic trinity and Roland Barthes’ mythological theory, fieldwork and image analysis were conducted to deconstruct the signifier composition, referential meanings, and pragmatic contexts of these artifacts. *Results* The Riyue Pan, as a rigid symbol, achieves a semantic shift from fertility worship and amulets to marital alliances through the metaphor of “milk nail patterns” and animal/plant totems. The Pa An, as a flexible symbol, visually represents the Hani people’s migratory habitats and craftsmanship through interwoven geometric patterns, creating tangible emotional connections. *Conclusion* These artifacts not only serve as witnesses to romantic relationships but also materialize the Hani people’s cosmology, collective memory, and gender division of labor. Through intertextual symbolic rhetoric, they construct a transcendent cultural identity in marital rituals.

Keywords

Hani nationality, sun and moon disk, Pa case, semiotics, narrative of object image, marriage and love token

1. Introduction

The Hani people, a quintessential rice-farming ethnic group in China's southwestern mountainous regions, possess profound historical heritage and a distinctive cultural ecosystem. However, due to their historical characteristic of "having a language but no written script", their collective memory, social norms, and cosmological beliefs are not transmitted through written texts across generations. Instead, they rely heavily on oral epics like the "Mobi" and material artifacts such as clothing and utensils as intertextual witnesses. Within this unique cultural context, objects are not merely practical tools or aesthetic objects; they serve as a coded symbolic system that functions both narratively and semantically.

Among the Hani ethnic group's various rituals for building social relationships, marriage and love formation undoubtedly stands as the most central element. The marital tokens circulating throughout this process serve not only as mediums for emotional exchange between men and women, but also as symbolic representations of established family contracts and sustained cultural identity. However, previous studies on Hani artifacts have predominantly focused on morphological descriptions within the realm of arts and crafts or event documentation in folklore studies, with few delving into the symbolic mechanisms behind these tokens or their underlying operational logic within spiritual and cultural contexts from a semiotic perspective.

This study examines the Hani ethnic group's iconic marriage tokens—the Sun-Moon Disk (silver ornament) and Pa An (weaving belt)—through a dual analytical lens of cultural semiotics and material culture studies. Grounded in Charles Sanders Peirce's symbolic trinity theory, we conceptualize these tokens as dynamic systems comprising "representations (Representamen)", "objects (Object)", and "interpretants (Interpretant)". The research investigates not only their physical attributes (primary dimension) but also how they acquire collective symbolic meanings within specific mythological contexts and ritual frameworks (secondary dimension). By incorporating structuralist anthropology's concepts of "binary opposition" and "intertextuality", we demonstrate that the Hani's "male gold, female weaving" token system operates as a cohesive network. This system constructs a rigorous symbolic syntax through material contrasts (rigid vs. flexible), geometric patterns (circular vs. square), and gendered production entities. In the modern context of intangible cultural heritage preservation, this study advocates transcending superficial replication to prioritize meaning production. By decoding the symbolic mechanisms behind these tokens, it facilitates effective cultural translation and living inheritance amidst modernization challenges.

2. The Construction of Signifier and the Dual Coding Mechanism

In the deep structure of Hani culture, the object image must go through a specific symbolization process when it enters the human society from the nature. For the marriage and love token, this process is manifested as the "first coding" of the transformation from the material physical attribute to the

cultural metaphor, and the “second coding” of the sublimation from the mythic convention to the social norm.

2.1 Primary Coding: Metaphorical Projection of Material Physical Attributes

Pierce observed that the primary forms of symbols are typically rooted in “iconicity” or “indexicality”. In the symbolic system of the Hani people, artisans achieve the initial cultural meaning by selecting and processing the material’s physical properties.

The bronze storage vessel with shell-shaped lid, unearthed from Tomb M69 at Li Jiashan in Jiangchuan and housed in the Li Jiashan Bronze Ware Museum in Yunnan Province, depicts a scene from the Eastern Han Dynasty. It shows women from Yunnan region gathered around, weaving cords and using waist looms to produce cloth over 2,000 years ago.



Figure 1. Bronze Storage Vessel with Textile Scene

2.1.1 The “Entropy-Resistant” and Permanence of Silver Encoding

The male ritual object “Riyue Pan” (Sun-Moon Plate) strictly uses silver (or silver-like alloys during economic hardship) not merely for monetary value, but due to silver’s unique physical properties. In nature, organic matter decays easily (entropy increase), while silver exhibits exceptional chemical stability (anti-oxidation, corrosion resistance) and high reflectivity. The Hani ancestors keenly recognized this “entropy-resistance” and encoded it as the “permanence” of emotional bonds and the “purity” of divinity. During this encoding process, silver’s cold, hard, and immortal physical attributes were projected as cultural symbols of male power and unbroken family lineage. This encoding logic is intuitive: only the immortal can bear the infinite vow.

Table 1. Total Set of Calendar Types

type	outside drawing	formulation	Scene
Arillate lunisolar disc		The outer contour is not a standard circle. The outermost circle of the disk is a circle composed of overlapping dots, and the middle is an abstract geometric pattern composed of dots and lines. The center of the disk is convex, and because its shape is like a woman's nipple, it is called the areola pattern sun and moon disk.	
Silver chain sun moon plate		The outer contour is circular, with the outer circle of the disc composed of regular dots and linear circles. In the center are four figurative animal totems, with a convex circular shape at the very center. Below it hangs a silver chain, which usually features figurative animal and plant totems.	
Relief of the Sun and Moon		The outer contour is round, the whole volume is large, generally placed on the outer wall of the building, the outer circle of the disc is composed of a relatively regular circle of points, the middle is composed of more animal totems, and the concrete totems are more, the center is a convex round.	

**Water
God Sun
Moon
Plate**



The outer contour is circular, with four figurative animal totems of fish, shrimp, and frog in the center. The central circular protrusion is typically larger than that of other types of sun and moon discs. It is often worn with other silver ornaments. The name originates from the totems, which are all related to the water god in the Hani ethnic epic.



**Central
hollowed-
out sun
and
moon
plate**



The outer contour is not a standard circle but a petal-shaped one, and its pattern is composed of points and lines. One petal is used as a unit, and the number of petals is usually even. The overall pattern of the sun and moon plate is symmetrical in the center. Different from other sun and moon plates, the hollow carved position in the center is raised, and the back is a functional module similar to a pin.



2.1.2 Continuity and Vitality Coding of Meridians and Parallels

The Hani women's sacred artifact "Pacan" is rooted in cotton, linen, and silk threads. Unlike the blocky structure of metals, textiles are fundamentally woven through linear interweaving. Weft threads (longitudinal) form the framework, while warp threads (transverse) add the flesh, with countless interlocking nodes creating the fabric. This physical continuity and nodal structure are metaphorically encoded in Hani culture as symbols of life's reproduction. The unbroken silk threads represent the enduring lineage of families (called "Apo Api" in Hani), while the weaving process symbolizes the reproductive union of the sexes. The stark red-black contrast on Pacan also reinterprets nature's fundamental elements: black signifies the nurturing earth (the mother), and red represents the flowing blood (vitality).

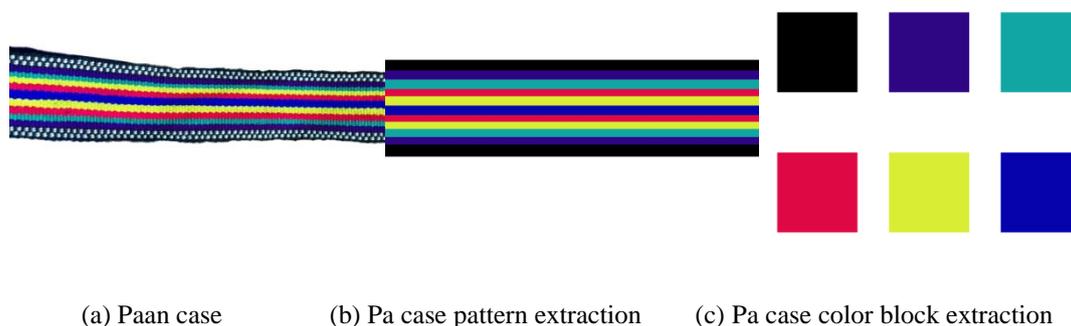


Figure 2. Paan Legend and Color Extraction



Figure 3. Hani People Carrying the Backpack Straps of the Paan Case **Figure 4. Pahan Tassel**

2.2 Secondary Coding: Deepening of Schema Reference under Mythic Conventions

2.2.1 The Miniature of Cosmic Schema: The Sacred Patriarchal Power of the Sun-Moon Plate

The core design of the sun-moon disk—its concentric circles, a central silver bulge, and radiating patterns—represents not a decorative geometric play, but a symbolic reinterpretation of the “establishment of sun-moon order” motif from the Hani Apei Congpo Po Po (a creation epic). In shamanic tradition, the sun and moon signify the end of chaos and the dawn of order, often associated with paternal deities like the sky god Osu. By condensing this cosmic narrative onto the chest ornament, the craftsman transforms the sun-moon disk from a mere silver piece into a symbol of cosmic order in daily life. Wearing it signifies a man’s endorsement of mythological order, with his marital authority sanctified through this “borrowed scenery” technique.

2.2.2 Geometization of Totem Lineage: Protection and Fertility in the Case of Pa

The embroidery patterns on the Pa case underwent profound symbolic encoding. Realistic natural elements (such as white pheasants, fish, and gourds) were stripped of their figurative forms, transformed into abstract geometric symbols: the white pheasant became a serrated motif, while fish

and gourds evolved into continuous diamond or wave patterns. This process of “defiguration” essentially purified the symbolic meaning. The white pheasant, as a Hani ethnic totem of salvation, symbolizes “protection”; fish and gourds, as seed-bearing creatures, represent “abundance”. Through secondary encoding, the Pa case became a “totem index” worn on the body. It no longer points to specific birds or fish but directly signifies the social aspirations of “family prosperity” and “prosperity through many children”. This geometricized schema facilitates standardized replication and transmission across generations, ensuring the stability of cultural genes.

3. Intertextual Narration and Embodied Practice of Social Structure

When viewed as independent morphemes, the mutual exchange, wearing, and display of these tokens in Hani marriage rituals form a complete “symbolic syntax”. From the perspective of Peirce’s semiotics, the sun-moon disk and the Pah case are not isolated entities but rather mutually defined and complementary within an intertextual relationship, collectively embodying the Hani ethnic group’s social structure in individual lives.

3.1 Intertextual Confirmation of Gender Division of Labor

The traditional society of Hani people strictly adheres to the gender division of labor of “men plough and women weave” and “men take charge of the outside and women take charge of the inside”, which is materialized through the intertextual relationship of tokens.

The metallic, rigid, and cool-toned elements of the sun-moon plate contrast sharply with the fabric, flexible, and warm-toned fabrics of the pa case, creating a stark dichotomy in material composition. Yet this opposition is not designed to provoke conflict, but rather to affirm mutual dependence. In traditional wedding customs, men acquire silver through smelting or trade (a symbol of external conquest/economic power), while women produce pa cases by cultivating cotton and hemp and weaving (representing domestic production/household labor).

When these two elements are exchanged as tokens, they essentially represent the exchange of two forms of productive forces. Men relinquish externally acquired “hard currency”, while women reciprocate with internally produced “soft labor”. This intertextual relationship confirms that marriage is not merely an emotional union but also an organic integration of two heterogeneous productive forces. The interplay of material rigidity and flexibility metaphorically illustrates the indispensable dual functions of “defense and nourishment” within family structures. The symbolic meaning also depends on its physical placement. The sun and moon disk, typically hung at the center of the chest, occupies a central visual position, presenting a demonstrative posture that symbolizes paternal authority in public spaces—akin to a protective shield. While the pa case (a traditional Chinese garment) is also part of the attire, its role as a belt or headdress often manifests in coiling and wrapping forms, embodying implicit and supportive characteristics.

This spatial arrangement of “the visible and the hidden, the straight and the curved” replicates the power structure of Hani society in terms of bodily schema: patriarchy as the explicit social framework, and matriarchy as the implicit emotional bond and foundational support. The two complement each other, jointly maintaining the equilibrium of the social organism.

3.2 *Holistic Mapping of Cosmology*

3.2.1 Coupling of Dynamic Time and Static Space

The Hani people’s cosmology is deeply influenced by animism and nature worship. Their symbolic narratives further evolve into simulations of spatiotemporal order. The circular design of the sun-moon disk symbolizes celestial cycles and temporal recurrence (dynamic), representing the perpetual vitality and cyclical renewal of the family. Meanwhile, geometric patterns on the Pahan (traditional ceremonial table) – such as squares and rhombuses—often represent land, farmland, and village boundaries (static), symbolizing the stability and expansion of living space.

In the wedding ceremony, when the sun and moon symbolizing “heaven/time” is combined with the “earth/space” symbolized by the “Pachan”, a complete space-time universe is constructed. This intertextuality implies that a perfect marriage should be the combination of “heavenly timing” and “earthly advantage”, where the flowing life time is placed in a stable social space.

3.2.2 Social Operation of Entropy Reduction Mechanism

In the Hani people’s monumental creation epic *Hani Apei Cong Popo*, the universe’s formation is depicted as a process marked by intense thermodynamic turbulence. The epic vividly recounts the catastrophic era when “nine suns scorched the sky, with all life withering away”, until a hero cast the surplus suns, leaving only the sun and moon to orbit. This transition from chaos to order paved the way for the establishment of agricultural civilization.

The design of the sun-moon disk epitomizes the microcosmic reenactment of the “transformation from chaos to order”. Its central hemisphere-shaped silver bubble visually references the sole sun deity “Aboma”, while the concentric circular patterns surrounding the core are not arbitrary decorations. Structurally, they mimic the sun’s orbital path (ecliptic) and the rhythm of its radiant light.

From the perspective of systems theory, a monogamous society resembles an isolated system, facing the risk of entropy increase (chaos). The ritual of gift exchange, in essence, introduces a negative entropy flow.

Men introduced high-value, corrosion-resistant metal symbols (order input), while women brought textile symbols imbued with vitality and reproductive imagery (energy input). Their ritual fusion symbolizes the new family as an open system that successfully establishes an “anti-entropy mechanism” to resist external chaos and maintain internal order for reproduction. This profound philosophical metaphor elevates Hani ethnic marriage tokens beyond ordinary gifts, transforming them into sophisticated devices that preserve the wisdom essential for the ethnic group’s survival.

4. Mythological Intertextuality: The Generation of Reference and Meaning Coding of Love and Marriage Relics

In the deep structure of semiotics, a signifier (material form) must point to a specific signified (concept/significance) to form a complete symbol. For the Hani ethnic group's marriage tokens, their signified is not a floating signifier but is deeply anchored in the myth-historical (Myth-History) context of the ethnic group. This chapter will employ intertextuality theory to analyze how the "Sun-Moon Plate" and "Pai Case" function as material texts, forming isomorphisms with the Hani's creation epic and totem worship. They are not merely ornaments but vessels of "sacred time" as described by Mircea Eliade, elevating secular marital relations to an unshakable cosmic order.

4.1 *The Cosmology of Silver: The Apomah Myth and the "Passive Capture" of Light*

As the core token of the gift from the groom, the "Sun-Moon Plate" is not only sacred due to the scarcity of silver, but also because it embodies the material translation of the Hani people's "Sun Mythology" system. Here, mythology is no longer just a background story, but a meta-language that endows material objects with divinity.

4.1.1 Microcosm of Creation: From "Nine Suns Scorching the Sky" to the Isomorphism of Order

In the Hani people's monumental creation epic *Hani Apei Cong Popo*, the universe's formation is depicted as a process marked by intense thermodynamic turbulence. The epic vividly recounts the catastrophic era when "nine suns scorched the sky, with all life withering away", until a hero cast the surplus suns, leaving only the sun and moon to orbit. This transition from chaos to order paved the way for the establishment of agricultural civilization.

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This morphological isomorphism carries profound semiotic significance: When a man presents this silver plate to a woman at a wedding, he subconsciously reenacts the moment when the primordial hero establishes cosmic order. It suggests that marriage is not merely the union of two individuals, but the beginning of creating order for a microcosmic family. This new family must possess irreversible regularity and stability, akin to the movement of the sun and moon. The myth is not rigidly repeated here, but rather serves as a deep-seated grammar that governs the symbolic logic of the object—only a circular, silver plate can bear this grand primordial memory.

4.1.2 Alchemy of Materials: Silver as the "Cold Fire" and the Divine Mediator

In the mythological thinking of the Hani people, silver and the sun share a subtle metaphorical metonymy, forming a unique "mythical alchemy".

The sun, blazing with absolute yang energy and destructive force (fire), would inevitably cause burns and death upon direct contact with mortal flesh. Yet the Hani ancestors keenly observed that silver, as a

metal, possessed visual attributes most akin to the sun—its extreme white luster and high reflectivity—while its tactile sensation remained cold and stable.

Levi-Strauss observed that myths often serve to resolve the contradictions of binary oppositions. In this context, the sun-disk functions as a mediator between “fire (danger/sacred)” and “human (fragility/secular)”. Silver, “as bright as fire yet as cold as water”, symbolically tames the sun’s divine power, transforming it into a safe energy that can be worn and touched. When a bride wears it, she channels the tamed divine light into her body, gaining fertility and vitality while avoiding the backlash of sacred forces. Thus, silver is not merely a symbol of wealth but also a magical device through which humans, guided by mythological logic, passively capture the uncontrollable forces of nature.

4.2 The Meridian and Parallel of the Pheasant: Totem Salvation and Maternal Deification in the Pachan Pattern

If the silver plate points to the sky and the father god, constructing a grand cosmic background, then the “Pai case” (woven belt) given by the woman pulls the gaze back to the earth and the primordial mother, whose complex geometric patterns are the textualized fabric of the Hani totemic myth.

4.2.1 The Carrier of Grain Species: The Concrete Index of the White Pheasant Totem

In the Hani people’s totemic lineage, the white pheasant (Hani: Wualil) holds a central position. This significance stems not merely from admiration for its beauty, but from a mythological tale of “species salvation”: after the great flood in ancient times, when humans lost their seeds for survival, the white pheasant flew across the ocean, carrying grains stuck to its feathers to the Ailao Mountains. This act enabled the Hani people to transition from foraging to farming, preserving their ethnic lineage.

This mythological narrative is intricately encoded within the patterns of the Pa case. The recurring “V-shaped motifs” and “feather-like patterns” along with the tassel-like ends on the Pa case form a visual semiotic index of the white pheasant’s feathers and flight posture. These patterns are no longer abstract geometric lines but rather “signifier fragments” of the divine bird’s wings.

More crucially, when women became both weavers and wearers of this symbolic system, a “mythical identification” emerged. In Hani society’s division of labor, women undertook core agricultural tasks like seed cultivation and rice transplanting, serving as “guardians of grain seeds” in daily life. By replicating the white pheasant’s patterns on the Pahan cloth, women essentially symbolized themselves as “substitutes for the white pheasant”. This process granted their arduous agricultural labor a sacred legitimacy—demonstrating not just familial duty but an ancient fulfillment of the totemic divine bird’s blessing mission. Every stitch and thread of weaving became a tribute and emulation of that monumental “species redemption” act.

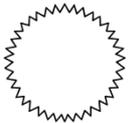
4.2.2 Cucumber and Swimming Fish: The Sliding of Signifier Chains in Reproductive Coding

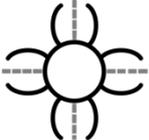
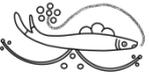
In addition to the bird motif, the diamond patterns and their variants frequently appearing in the Pā case are often interpreted by the older generation of Mo Pi (priests) as “fish scales” or “gourd seeds”. This involves another layer of mythological intertextuality concerning the origin of life.

The Hani people have preserved two origin legends: “Humans emerge from gourds” and “Humans and fish share the same origin”. In these myths, the gourd symbolizes the womb (a vessel), while the fish, with its remarkable reproductive capacity, represents the enduring vitality of life. Within the symbolic system of Pahan, a clear chain of signifiers unfolds: diamond = fish scales = gourd seeds = womb/abundance.

This polysemy is not confusion, but a superposition of signification. When the bride wears the embroidered paan around her or the groom’s waist, it transcends mere decoration—it becomes a form of sympathetic magic rooted in mythological logic. As Frazer observed in *The Golden Bough*, the law of similarity creates connections. By mimicking the multi-seeded gourd and the prolific fish, the paan aims to “convey” and “envelop” the primal, vigorous reproductive power of mythology within the wearer’s reproductive domain. This process elevates the biological instinct of reproduction into a return to and homage to ancestral origin myths, thereby sanctifying the act of procreation.

Table 2. Total Set of Sun-Moon Pattern Types

Name	Pattern	Meaning	Intension
Water wave		refers to river water (e.g., the Red River, Lancang River, etc.).	territorial environment
Silver foam		It refers to “Bala Ma” (the moon) and “A Gou Xi” (the stars), representing beauty and wealth.	nature worship
Canine		During the establishment of the settlement, dogs were used to mark the boundary between humans and ghosts; dogs assisted in retrieving grain seeds and expressed gratitude; “The righteous dog rescues its master” and gratitude.	Witchcraft beliefs, animal worship

Sunspot		The sun god “Noma” has the meaning of fairness and justice, good luck and good wishes.	nature worship
Frog pattern		Frog is the weather forecast god.	totem worship, animal worship
Crab claw pattern		The water god of the Hani people is said to dig up springs day and night to provide water for the Hani people.	totem worship, animal worship
Starflower		In reality, there is no control object, the Hani people love the symmetry beauty, in the evolution of decoration gradually appeared, meaning good luck, good luck.	nature worship
Fish pattern		The mythical fish gives birth to all things, symbolizing creativity and vitality.	totem worship, fertility worship
Flower and Butterfly Pattern		Butterflies and flowers are superimposed to represent softness, elegance and beauty.	animal cult
White pheasant pattern		The divine bird in the epic is the symbolic form of the spiritual support of the Hani people.	animal cult

4.3 Synthesis of the Structure: Mythological Logic in the Legitimation of Real Marriage

In his book *Mythology*, Roland Barthes pointed out that the core function of myth is to transform “historical intention” into “natural attribute” in order to justify the established social order.

Marriage in reality is often filled with economic calculations, family games, and fluctuations of individual emotions, which are highly uncertain. However, when the marital relationship is mediated by two major symbols—the “Sun Moon Chart” and the “Pai Case”—it is forcibly incorporated into the track of mythology.

Through the exchange of sacred tokens, ordinary newlyweds are transformed into embodiments of mythological figures: the groom is not merely a husband, but wears silver to symbolize the masculine vigor and cosmic order of Apollo, the sun god; the bride is not just a wife, but weaves the Pahang (a sacred loom) to represent the compassion and fertility of the white pheasant and Mother Earth. This presence of mythological figures elevates the marital covenant beyond secular legal boundaries, making it a “natural and sacred” cosmic event. The myth conveys to the clan through these tokens that this union, like the sun and moon traversing the sky or rivers flowing across the earth, is an integral part of natural law—thus it is sacred and cannot be dissolved at will.

The sun and moon disc giveaway ceremony is full of ritualistic charm, often accompanied by traditional Hani music and dance, adding a rich ethnic cultural atmosphere.

The patterns in the case include fish bone, triangle, diamond (representing fish), spiral, dragon (representing dragon or snake), circle (representing sun), tooth (representing mountain), water wave and whirlpool (representing water).

The gift in the case of Pa is not only an expression of personal emotion but also a confirmation and reinforcement of familial and social relationships. In this process, Pa serves as a symbolic sign, where the random combination of patterns generates various arrangements, conveying the giver’s affection and commitment while also embodying the expectations of the family and society.

5. Ritual Pragmatics: Emotional Narration of Marriage and Love Relics in Relationship Construction

Mythological intertextuality endows tokens with profound cultural genes, while in actual marital practices, these tokens transform into a silent yet potent emotional language. Returning to the essence of marriage, this study examines how the “Pai Case” and the “Sun-Moon Disk” function as emotional conduits and relational anchors during the stages of courtship, marriage, and symbiosis, following the chronological progression of relationship development.

5.1 Pa's Emotional Expression: Private Communication and Physical Companionship During Courtship

In the initial stage of Hani marriage, the “Papan” (a traditional Hani wedding object) plays a pivotal role in breaking barriers and conveying affection. It is not only a symbol of commitment but also an embodiment of women’s emotions and labor.

First and foremost, the Pa case is a gift of time. Unlike commercially available items, this handwoven masterpiece embodies the young artisan’s life’s work—each warp and weft meticulously woven with her life’s devotion and artistic vision. To present the Pa case is, in a sense, a tacit declaration of intimacy: entrusting a fragment of one’s life to the recipient. This symbolic exchange of objects establishes an exclusive, intimate bond between the two.

Secondly, the pa (a traditional Chinese waist belt) serves as a “physical companion”. When a man wears this belt woven by his partner, it signifies not only an emotional response but also creates a tangible “soft bond” through its physical presence. The pa’s practical function of supporting the waist symbolizes women’s appreciation and support for men’s labor capabilities. Even when they work separately in the fields, the tightness of the belt provides a sense of psychological presence, foreshadowing the future intimate relationship of mutual dependence.

5.2 Silver Plate Alliance: Public Coronation and Contract Establishment at Wedding

If the case of Pa represents the intimate warmth, then the “sun and moon plate” solemnly presented by the groom at the wedding symbolizes the solemnity of the marriage system and the conclusion of the social contract. It marks the decisive turning point where the relationship elevates from “romance” to “marriage”.

The sun and moon ritual plate fulfilled the “public declaration of commitment”. Silver, as a precious metal, commands exceptional public visibility and stability. During the pivotal moments of the wedding procession or the wedding ceremony, the groom would hang a heavy silver plate on the bride’s chest—a ritualistic gesture that publicly announced to the community: the woman was now legally recognized. The silver plate served as a monumental seal, its dazzling luster legally establishing the exclusivity and legitimacy of the marital bond.

On the other hand, this marks the visual coronation of the bride’s identity. In the ceremony, the sun-disk sits at the absolute center of the bride’s visual representation, serving as both a protective shield and a radiant sun. It helps the bride transcend the liminal transition from “daughter” to “daughter-in-law”. Wearing the silver disk signifies not only the acquisition of her husband’s family’s financial security but also her formal acceptance of the sacred duties of wife and mother, completing a fundamental reshaping of her social role.

5.3 Flexibility and Rigidity: Gender Collaboration and Symbiosis behind the Exchange of Trust Tokens

In the mature marriage, the belt of the man and the silver plate of the woman form an inseparable complementary system, which symbolizes the ideal couple community of the Hani nationality.

This embodies a philosophical metaphor of balance between strength and gentleness. Materially, silver's cold hardness and eternal symbolism represent the father, heaven, and wealth, while the warmth and fluidity of fabric symbolize the mother, earth, and labor, achieving perfect harmony between yin and yang. Physiologically, the chest—the spiritual and emotional center—resonates with the waist, the center of strength and action. These two elements are not isolated but deeply interwoven through mutual exchange, becoming inseparable parts of each other's existence.

According to Mose's exchange theory, this reciprocity reaches its highest level: men wear women's labor, and women wear men's wealth. The tokens become material evidence of mutual interdependence. This exchange transcends the material level, pointing to the surrender and fusion of the self.

6. Conclusion

Based on the perspective of Peirce's semiotics and structuralism, this study conducts an in-depth description and deconstruction of the Hani ethnic group's marriage tokens "Riyue Pan" and "Pa An". The research reveals that these two artifacts are not merely aesthetic decorations, but rather a rigorous cultural semiotic system in the Hani's writingless society.

Its operational mechanism manifests as dual encoding. The primary encoding employs silver's corrosion resistance and fabric's warp-and-weft structure to metaphorically represent the enduring masculine power and the continuous female reproduction. The secondary encoding elevates natural objects into sacred symbols that regulate gender roles and establish patriarchal order through creation myths and totem worship. From an intertextual perspective, the combination of these two elements constructs a body politics and cosmic schema of "round heaven and square earth" and "harmony of hardness and softness", thereby materializing social structures through embodied practices at the micro-individual level.

Amid the rapid modernization, particularly with the rise of tourism economy, the symbolic artifacts of the Hani ethnic group are confronting a severe crisis of semantic erosion. Under commercialization logic, sun-moon disks and Pashan (traditional Hani ritual objects) have been stripped of their original sacred contexts and ceremonial functions, reduced to mere tourist souvenirs or stage props. The substitution of aluminum alloy for silver and nylon threads for cotton linen has rendered the physical semiotics of 'anti-entropy' and 'vitality' obsolete. To cater to mainstream aesthetics, traditional geometric sacred patterns have been modified into garish figurative designs, resulting in the rupture of the second-order encoding of mythological conventions. This phenomenon of 'form without substance' essentially represents symbolic hollowing out—retaining the shell of the signifier while losing the soul of the signified.

The preservation of Hani ethnic group's intangible cultural heritage should evolve from mere technical rescue to profound cultural revitalization. Conservation efforts must transcend documenting traditional craftsmanship like forging or embroidery, prioritizing the documentation and dissemination of

associated myths, folk songs, and wedding rituals. Only by reconstructing the historical contexts behind these artifacts can they regain their cultural significance. This approach enables communities to revive traditional gift-giving ceremonies and wearing norms, rather than reducing them to museum exhibits. By reintegrating these artifacts into authentic social networks, they can continue fulfilling their social functions of defining identity and sustaining emotional bonds. In cultural and creative development, designers should respect the original symbolic logic. They must comprehend the cultural syntax behind concepts like “round and square” and “silver and weaving”, achieving modern aesthetic reinterpretation while preserving core meanings.

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