

Original Paper

A Study on the Transmission and Evolution of the Duanwu Festival Calamus Custom in Japan from the Perspective of Peirce's Semiotics

Yuanyuan Pan

School of foreign languages, Changjiang University, China

Received: April 25, 2026

Accepted: May 16, 2026

Online Published: May 26, 2026

doi:10.22158/sss.v7n2p29

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sss.v7n2p29>

Abstract

Acorus calamus is an important material symbol carrying the cultural connotation of the Dragon Boat Festival to ward off evil spirits and avoid epidemic diseases. Based on Pierce's symbolic ternary theory, this study explores the path of cross-cultural communication and meaning reconstruction of the Dragon Boat Festival Acorus custom in Japan. The study found that on the basis of the common monsoon climate and agricultural civilization between China and Japan, the primary common interpretation term of Acorus calamus' disaster elimination and blessing 'was constructed. In the long historical evolution, this explanation item has gone through the evolution from the "spirit grass to ward off evil spirits" in the court imitation period, to the symbol of "martial spirit" in the Wu family society based on the homophonic Association transformation, and then to the "surge of meaning" in modern society as the carrier of "seasonal aesthetics" and "cultural inheritance". The localization process of Acorus calamus custom reveals the dynamic generation law of symbolic meaning in the cross-cultural context, and provides beneficial enlightenment for the international dissemination of Chinese traditional culture.

Keywords

Pierce semiotics, Acorus calamus in Dragon Boat Festival, Cross cultural communication, localization

1. Introduction

As a traditional festival inherited by the East Asian cultural circle, the core symbol system of the Dragon Boat Festival presents a semantic evolution phenomenon of great research value in the process of transmission. In the traditional Chinese context, the Dragon Boat Festival is closely integrated with the commemoration of Quyan and the summer epidemic prevention and health. Its core symbol "Acorus calamus" mainly exists as a kind of "evil avoiding" plant with medicinal function, and carries the cultural

connotation of detoxification and decontamination. With the prosperity of diplomatic contacts and folk trade in the Tang Dynasty in history, the Dragon Boat Festival was introduced into Japan, and *Acorus calamus* as a popular form of the Dragon Boat Festival was retained, but gradually stripped of the original context. Especially after the rise of the Takeshi regime in the Kamakura era, it gradually evolved into the symbol of "warrior" and "Bushido", and finally established as the core element of modern Japan's "children's Day". This change of meaning from "avoiding evil" to "advocating martial arts" is not only a cultural change in folklore, but also a profound semiotic proposition.

Looking at the current situation of the academic community, domestic studies mostly focus on the textual research of *Acorus calamus* custom in the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival cultural system, or comb the context of Sino Japanese folk exchanges from a macro historical perspective, often lacking in-depth analysis of the symbolic meaning. For example, Tang Qiangqiang and others are reviewing various ancient books and documents from Nara to Edo in Japan to investigate the various forms of Chinese Dragon Boat Festival culture using *Acorus calamus* in Japan. Although the Japanese academic circles have detailed folklore descriptions of the local "*Acorus calamus* Festival (Martial Arts Festival)" and "cypress leaf" and other derived customs, revealing the characteristics of their localization and transformation, few scholars have systematically discussed the nature of their dissemination from the perspective of semiotics. Ren Dongquan, a famous folklorist in South Korea, published a paper entitled "*Acorus calamus*" in the Journal of comparative folklore studies of the University of Tsukuba, listing various forms of *Acorus calamus* used in the Japanese Dragon Boat Festival in the dictionary. On the whole, the existing research has not fully used Pierce's ternary communication model to analyze the dynamic evolution of *Acorus calamus* custom in the cross-cultural field of "symbol object explanation", and the absence of this theoretical perspective needs to be filled.

2. Theoretical Basis: Pierce's Semiotic Ternary Theory and Communication Mode

As a study of meaning activities, semiotics believes that symbols are the fundamental carrier of meaning communication, and that symbols are the fundamental media for human beings to cross cognitive barriers, exchange information and convey meaning. In the early traditional semiotics research represented by Saussure, scholars mostly hold the view of binary opposition, and regard symbols as the static combination of "signifier" and "signified". Although this structuralist perspective defines the form and concept of symbols, it often ignores the dynamic evolution of meaning in communication due to its closeness.

In order to break through this limitation, pierce broke the binary thinking and constructed a more open symbolic ternary theory. Pierce believes that the symbolic process includes three core elements: representation, object and interpretant. In this system, representation is a perceptible form of symbols, which inherits the function of signifier in traditional theory; The object is the objective entity or idea referred to by the symbol, corresponding to the signified; The most innovative explanatory term refers to "the meaning or effect of the symbol in the mind of the interpreter". This shift in theoretical perspective

emphasizes that symbols are not rigid and static means of reference, but a dynamic system that must be interpreted to take effect. As pierce stressed, "a symbol can become a symbol only if it can be interpreted as a symbol".

Based on the symbolic ternary theory, pierce further constructed a communication model including the interaction of three explanatory terms. He defines communication as the communication between two minds, and distinguishes between the "intentional interpretant" that determines the sender's mind, the "effective interpretant" that determines the interpreter's mind, and the "common/cominterpretant" that determines the integration of the sender and the interpreter in order to make communication happen. The essence of communication is not a one-way transmission of information, but a process in which intention and effect explanatory terms seek to integrate in the interaction, so as to form a common explanatory term. As a new symbol, this common interpretation item enters the next round of communication, which makes "communication a circular process of meaning production and reproduction, interaction and re interaction of symbols", and finally forms the phenomenon of "meaning surge" with unlimited extension of meaning.

3. The Spread and Evolution of Acorus Calamus Custom in Japan

Pierce's ternary communication model has significant theoretical applicability for cross-cultural communication research. It breaks through the mechanical malpractice of the binary opposition between "transmission and reception" in traditional communication studies, and no longer focuses solely on the efficiency of information transmission, but turns to "meaning production and interaction". From the perspective of Pierce's Semiotics, the Acorus calamus custom spread from East China to Japan and evolved into a cultural symbol with Japanese national characteristics, which is a typical dynamic process of "symbol object explanation" ternary interaction. This process is not a simple cultural transplantation, but the transformation of symbolic meaning through the reconstruction of meaning in different historical stages. Based on literature research and theoretical analysis, this communication process can be clearly divided into three key stages.

(1) The construction of common foundation and the one-way transmission of intention interpretation items (from Heian era to early EDO)

The tradition that Acorus calamus was used to expel evil spirits and poison can be traced back to the narration in the Qin Dynasty Literature "Lushi Chunqiu": "Acorus calamus, Acorus calamus, and water plants were born on the seventh day of the fifth day after the winter solstice. Acorus calamus was born on the fifty seventh day after the winter solstice. Acorus calamus, the master of all kinds of grass, was also born. So he began to cultivate." Zheng Zhen, a Ming Dynasty man, wrote in the poem "inscribed Acorus calamus": "mountain people love to live in the north mountain and grow nine kinds of Acorus calamus. If they take it to meet the longevity test, they must ride a crane to the capital of Qing Dynasty." in traditional culture, the leaves of Acorus calamus are as long and narrow as a sword, which is called "water sword" and "Pujian" moral.

At the initial stage of the spread of *Acorus calamus* custom to Japan, it was mainly the process that the Chinese cultural subject as the sender passed the "intention explanation item" to the upper class society as the receiver. The core feature of this period was the imitation and overall acceptance of Chinese Dragon Boat Festival Culture by the Japanese court. Based on the common agricultural civilization in East Asia and the concept of exorcism, the two sides have built a "common foundation" for the dissemination of symbols.

Pierce theory points out that the occurrence of effective communication depends on the "common foundation" built between the sender and the interpreter. China and Japan are geographically located in the same monsoon climate zone. May of the lunar calendar is regarded as a "bad month", and the climate characteristics of high temperature and humidity are very easy to induce diseases. This common living environment experience builds the physiological and psychological basis for both sides' cognition of *Acorus calamus* symbol. According to the ancient Chinese document *Jingchu Suishi Ji*, "the fifth day of May is called the Yulan Festival. The four people step on a hundred grasses together, and today people have the play of fighting a hundred grasses. AI is taken as a person, hung on the door, and used to poison gas. *Acorus calamus* or wisps or scraps are used to spread wine" [Zong Ji. *Jingchu Suishi Ji* [m]. songjinlong, annotation Taiyuan: Shanxi people's publishing house, 1987.], which clearly defines the function of *Acorus calamus*'s "anti plague gas" and endows plants with the cultural connotation of anti evil function. *Acorus calamus* is a perennial herb of Araceae. Its rhizome has the pharmacological value of "strengthening stomach, calming and removing phlegm" and the function of "warding off evil" widely recognized by the people. It is this dual consensus based on medicinal practicability and anti evil function that provides a solid cognitive premise for the acceptance and dissemination of *Acorus calamus* custom in Japan.

As the receiver of symbols, Japan mainly adopted the imitation and replication of Chinese ritual behavior at this stage. According to the records in the sequel to Japan, at the festival held on May 5 in the 19th year of the reign of emperor Tianping (747), the Imperial Palace province not only offered *Acorus calamus* and wormwood, but also set up a "*Acorus* machine". What is particularly striking is that the imperial edict at that time strictly stipulated that participants must wear "*Acorus* garland" (that is, headdress woven with *Acorus*), and stipulated that "those who do not wear *Acorus* garland are not allowed to enter the palace". According to the ancient and modern synopsis draft, "*Acorus calamus* wine is finely cut from the *Acorus calamus* root of one inch and nine knots, which floats in the wine like fine filaments. If you drink it on May 5, you can avoid the pestilence and the poison of snakes and insects, which can be seen in the Han Dynasty and Japan." it can be seen that the "object" of the *Acorus calamus* symbol clearly points to the core concept of "anti evil herbs".

(2) The generation of effective explanatory terms and the local reconstruction of symbolic meaning (Edo era to Meiji period)

Entering the Kamakura, Muromachi and Edo era, the rise of the samurai class triggered profound changes in Japan's social structure. During this period, the Japanese people and samurai, as the recipients of

symbols, were no longer limited to the simple imitation of the Chinese calamus custom, but creatively interpreted and reconstructed it in combination with the local cultural context, thus generating a "validity interpretation item" with distinctive Japanese characteristics.

According to Pierce's ternary theory, the formation of effective explanatory terms is deeply influenced by the interpreter's cognitive psychology. When Japanese society accepted the custom of Acorus calamus, it closely combined its physical characteristics of "leaf tip like sword" with the spirit of local Bushido. Because the pronunciation of "Acorus calamus" in Japanese is the same as that of "martial spirit" and "victory and defeat", and its slender leaf shape is like a sword, Acorus calamus is endowed with a new connotation of "martial spirit". Thus, symbolic items such as "Acorus calamus sword" and "Acorus calamus helmet" were derived, and the Dragon Boat Festival gradually evolved into a festival dominated by men. This change reflects the reinterpretation of the symbolic meaning in the local context. The symbolic object of Acorus calamus has changed from a simple "anti evil herb" to force and combat. The generation of this localized interpretation item promoted the Acorus calamus custom from the static ceremony in the palace to the dynamic competition of "Acorus calamus fight" in the civil society, which greatly promoted its spread among the civilian class.

In the Edo era, with the relative stability of the Japanese social environment and the vigorous development of the plebeian culture, the Acorus custom further penetrated into the daily life of ordinary people, and built a set of life aesthetics and ritual system with unique Japanese national characteristics. During this period, the use of Acorus calamus showed a high degree of life and aesthetic characteristics. According to relevant Japanese documents, the "Acorus pillow" was not only widely used in the society at that time, but people believed that its fragrance not only contributed to sleep, but also played a role in driving away evil and disease. At the same time, the unique custom of "Acorus calamus repair" emerged, that is, the Acorus calamus was paved on the roof on the day of the Dragon Boat Festival to protect the house. In particular, the widespread popularity of "Acorus calamus soup" marks the true transformation of the meaning of Acorus calamus symbol to secularization. At this time, the "Acorus calamus soup" was not only a simple imitation of ancient Chinese etiquette, but also evolved into a popular ceremony integrating the practical health care function and the religious concept of Shinto "Zoroaster". With the help of this personal bathing ceremony, Japanese people not only cleaned the body dirt, but also completed the purification and blessing of the spiritual level, thus establishing the core position of Acorus calamus as a symbol of "health protection" in daily life.

(3) The deepening of the common interpretation term and the infinite extension of the "surge of meaning" (since World War II)

After entering the modern society, the phenomenon of surge of meaning described by Pierce is particularly prominent in the evolution of Acorus calamus custom. At this time, the propagation is no longer a simple one-way flow, but evolved into a cyclic dynamic process. At this stage, the "common interpretation" of the Acorus calamus custom has gone beyond the traditional religious beliefs and medical and health categories, and gradually expanded to multiple fields such as cultural heritage,

aesthetic experience and commercial consumption.

After World War II, although the Japanese social life style was highly westernized, the Acorus calamus custom as a symbol of national cultural identity was deliberately retained and strengthened. On the Dragon Boat Festival, Emperor Showa not only enjoyed "cypress cake" and "zongzi" as usual, but also bathed in "Acorus soup" with Acorus calamus and wormwood grown in the imperial garden. As a national symbol, the royal family's retention is actually an official support for the new common interpretation of "traditional cultural heritage" in the modern context. This shows that Acorus calamus is not only an exorcising herb, but also a link between Modern Japan and ancient traditions. Its symbolic value has been sublimated from practicality to symbolism.

In Modern Japan, the explanation of Acorus calamus symbol has further expanded to the field of aesthetics and art. As a kind of "fairy grass and dew grass", Acorus calamus has been endowed with high aesthetic value because of its "fragrance, beauty and vitality". For example, the screen of the Tokyo National Theater is painted with Acorus calamus, marking that it is recognized as "one of the traditional Japanese cultures". In addition, in the food culture, such as the May season cuisine launched by Nara gupu "Ju Shui Lou", although it is not directly cooked with Acorus calamus, it is decorated with Acorus calamus leaf roots to create a romantic charm of "bright aroma, gorgeous and elegant". This phenomenon of transforming Acorus calamus from religious ritual props into artistic aesthetic objects is the embodiment of "infinite derivation" in Pierce's Semiotics. Through the "Acorus calamus appreciation meeting" and other forms, the interpreter produced a new meaning of "seasonal sense", "elegance" and "harmony aesthetics" in the symbolic interaction.

4. Enlightenment and Suggestions on Cross Cultural Communication in China

The spread and evolution of Acorus calamus custom in Japan is essentially a typical case of how foreign cultural symbols realize localization through meaning reconstruction. Based on Pierce's semiotic ternary model, this process provides a deep theoretical reference and practical experience for the current "going out" of Chinese excellent traditional culture and the construction of effective cross-cultural communication strategies.

(1) Building a common foundation beyond geography

As Pierce's Semiotics reveals, the construction of "common foundation" between sender and receiver is the premise of effective communication. The reason why the Acorus calamus custom can spread in Japan across geographical constraints lies in the common physiological experience of the Chinese and Japanese people on the "evil moon" climate and their universal pursuit of health and longevity. This historical experience has important practical significance for the present.

In the contemporary pattern of international communication, the "going out" of Chinese culture is facing the key node of transformation from "quantitative expansion" to "qualitative improvement". The 2025 international communication index report of Chinese cultural symbols reveals a profound change in this field: international communication is undergoing a paradigm shift from "content going to sea" to

"ecological co construction", from "symbol display" to "dialogue among civilizations". This trend shows that the simple display of cultural symbols is not enough to support the demand for in-depth communication. The future communication efficiency will depend on whether we can establish deep emotional resonance and psychological connection in the hearts of audiences with heterogeneous cultural backgrounds. In this context, if we simply emphasize "national characteristics", it will often strengthen the "otherness" of symbols, leading to "cultural discount" in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, we should abandon the one-way output thinking and focus on excavating the value core of "harmonious coexistence between man and nature" and "healthy life" which are common to all mankind.

On the practical path, on the one hand, we should use multimodal means to expand "subsidiary experience". Through non-verbal symbols such as tourism, food and VR experience, we build the common foundation of vision and sensory, and use AI algorithm to inject high-quality corpus to ensure the digital interpretation of Chinese culture. On the other hand, the accurate dissemination should be based on the theory of "mutual benefit and common meaning", emphasizing ecological ethics and aging response for the "global north", and sharing agricultural wisdom and poverty reduction experience for the "Global South". Through the transformation and reconstruction of this universal common foundation, the "cognitive fence" can be eliminated to a certain extent, and the deep emotional resonance and psychological connection can be established in the hearts of heterogeneous cultural audiences.

(2) Endow the audience with localization interpretation space

The essence of communication is not the complete reproduction of the sender's intention, but the active construction process of the receiver's generation of "validity explanation". Japan creatively interprets "Acorus calamus" as "warrior", which seems to deviate from the original meaning of the localization interpretation, which is precisely the key to the inheritance of this symbol in Japan. Therefore, in the practice of foreign communication, China should hold a more open and inclusive cultural attitude, and respect and attach importance to the subjective interpretation of the receiver based on its own cultural context. Do not excessively pursue the audience's reproduction of the original Chinese culture, and leave space for others to interpret the localization and reconstruction. Only when the Chinese cultural symbols can be integrated into the local social narrative and people's daily life practice, can we truly realize the transformation from the object of "other gaze" to the component of "self life", so as to achieve deep cultural identity.

(3) Promoting the transformation of traditional symbols into modern life

The evolution of Acorus calamus custom into "seasonal aesthetics" and "commercial symbols" in Modern Japan shows that the vitality of symbols lies in the infinite extension of meaning under the "tide of meaning". Traditional culture should not be a static remains sealed in the museum, but a living system that constantly generates new meanings. When improving the effectiveness of international communication, China should pay attention to the deep integration of traditional symbols and modern lifestyle, contemporary aesthetic taste and commercial consumption logic. Through creative design and cross-border empowerment, traditional cultural symbols are endowed with modern aesthetic value and

practical functions, such as the development of cultural and creative products, the integration of digital art, and the creation of experience economy, so that they can realize the global expression and sustainable inheritance of Chinese civilization in the continuous self-renewal and meaning proliferation.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, this study systematically combs the cross-cultural evolution of the Dragon Boat Festival Acorus custom in Japan within the theoretical framework of Pierce's semiotic ternary theory. The research shows that the change of Acorus calamus custom from the "spirit grass to ward off evil spirits" in Central China to the "symbol of martial arts" in Japan and even the modern "public cultural identity" is not a simple change in the form of symbols, but the result of the interaction and transformation of "representation object explanation" in the heterogeneous cultural context. From the intention acceptance in the initial stage of communication, to the effectiveness reconstruction in the localization stage, and then to the "surge of meaning" in modern society, the vitality of Acorus calamus symbol is established in the continuous derivation and regeneration of the "common foundation" between China and Japan.

This case provides a profound reference for the international dissemination of Chinese culture. Effective cross-cultural communication is essentially a dynamic negotiation of meaning rather than a one-way transmission. In the future, when promoting the "going out" of culture, we should devote ourselves to excavating the universal value beyond national boundaries as the starting point of communication and building a solid "common foundation". At the same time, the subjectivity of the receiver should be respected, and the reproduction of meaning in line with the local context should be allowed and encouraged. Only when foreign symbols can be embedded in the audience's life practice and cause deep emotional resonance, can Chinese culture really break the cognitive barrier and achieve "rooting" and long-term inheritance in cross-cultural communication.

References

- Hiro Hyun. (1995). *On behalf of the house Ancient and modern manuscripts are required Dakang*.
- Lu Buwei, & Xu Weiyun. (2009). *Collected and interpreted the Lu family spring and Autumn Annals*, Ren di. Zhonghua Book Company, 2009:9.
- Ren Dongquan. (1995). Acorus calamus. *Comparative folklore research*, 1995(12), 1-6.
- Tang Qiangqiang, & Zhou Jin. (2022). The eastward spread of Chinese culture Changpu. *Masterpiece of famous experts*, 2022(12), 98-101.
- Wu Songlin, & Deng Ge. (2025). Taking tea as the medium: Research on the international communication path of Liubao tea culture under the ternary symbol communication mode. *Audio visual*, 2025(14), 7-10. <https://doi.org/10.19395/j.cnki.1674-246x.2025.14.015>
- Xiao Jun, & Zhang Chi. (2024). The meaning of reciprocity is common: the ideographic interpretation of digital symbols towards the exchange and mutual learning of civilizations. *Modern publishing*, 2024(2). <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.2095-0330.2024.02.002>

- Zhang Zixian. (2022). "Cultural discount" and the study of English translation of Zhuangzi from the perspective of international communication. *Research on Chinese foreign translation*, 2022(1), 134-142.
- Zhao Xingzhi. (2017). On the communication thought in Pierce's Semiotics. *International press*, 39(06), 87-104. <https://doi.org/10.13495/j.cnki.cjjc.2017.06.005>
- Zhao Xingzhi. (2015). The significance of Pierce's ternary model in communication. *Chinese and foreign culture and literary theory*, 2015(03), 180-189. <https://doi.org/10.13760/b.cnki.csalt.2015.0081>
- Zhu Wanzhang. (2021). The change of the schema of Acorus calamus in the Ming Dynasty and the presentation of its interest. *Journal of fine arts*, 2021(04), 17-25.
- Zong Yujing. (1987). *Chu's age*. Songjinlong, proofreading Taiyuan: Shanxi people's publishing house.