

Original Paper

Power Coding and Hierarchical Metaphor in Ancient Chinese Costume Symbol System

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Abstract

This study focuses on the power coding and hierarchical metaphor in the symbol system of ancient Chinese costumes. With the help of Pierce's Semiotics Theory as an analytical tool, it explores how the abstract power order is transformed into material symbols by the elements of color, pattern, material and shape. The study found that ancient costumes constructed a set of symbol system through color dictatorship, pattern metaphor, material regulation and shape constraints, and its power coding mechanism has the characteristics of icon (such as the visual similarity of sun and moon patterns), index (such as the causal relationship between complement and official rank) and symbol (such as the ritual agreement of dragon patterns). Pierce's interpretive term theory also further reveals that dress symbols in physical practice and ritual performance will realize the reproduction of power meaning through the hierarchical transformation of direct, dynamic and final interpretive terms. The author hopes that this study can be helpful to the semiotics of Chinese ancient traditional costumes.

Keywords

Semiotics, Ancient Chinese costumes, Dress symbols, Pierce Semiotics

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Significance

Chinese ancient costumes not only have the basic practical functions of covering the body from the cold and being convenient for action, but also carry rich cultural symbolic significance and social and political functions. Since the clothing system of "distinguishing between the superior and the inferior, and distinguishing between the noble and the humble" established in Zhou Li, clothing has gradually gone beyond the simple material attribute and become an important visual symbol to maintain the order of the etiquette system, distinguish social identity and highlight political power. In the Chinese traditional etiquette society, the shape, pattern, color, material and even the way of wearing clothing are strictly regulated by the system, which reflects the social relations and values with hierarchical order as the core. It has formed a unique practical system of "clothing is the symbol of power".

Most of the existing studies focus on the textual research of clothing system and the interpretation of

static symbols, and lack of systematic interpretation of the dynamic mechanism of power symbolization. This study takes Pierce's symbolic ternary theory as the core framework, and analyzes how clothing symbols transform into abstract hierarchical order from the perspective of icon, index and symbol. On the one hand, it helps to expand the theoretical dimension of clothing culture research, and on the other hand, it also provides a new path for the interdisciplinary integration of semiotics and Oriental material culture research.

1.2 Research Status

At the level of institutional textual research, Shen Congwen (2011) sorted out the evolution of clothing form and system from Shang and Zhou Dynasties to Ming and Qing Dynasties through mutual verification of archaeological objects and documents, revealing the code of imperial power symbol of "Twelve chapter pattern"; Zhou Xibao (1984) established a quantitative correspondence system of dress color, pattern, material and official rank based on the rules and regulations. At the level of material and cultural symbols, Sun Ji (2001) analyzed the carriers such as the goldfish bag of the Tang Dynasty and the tonic of the Ming Dynasty, put forward the theory that "clothing is identity license", and explained the role of official dress patterns in strengthening the hierarchical order.

At the symbolic level of ritual system, Wang Yuan (2017) interpreted the power metaphor of "deep clothing system" from the perspective of ritual theory, and proposed that clothing is "a body of ritual text"; Zhuhekai (2006) pointed out that the Dragon Robe patterns create a sense of power sublimity through "symbol redundancy".

On the basis of semiotic theory, western academic circles have formed three research paradigms: Umberto Eco (1979) explained the institutionalization of power metaphor of dress patterns from the perspective of cultural semiotics; Roland Barthes (2013) put forward the viewpoint of "writing" of clothing, which provided a terminology support for the analysis of the official clothing system. Dieter Kuhn (2012) used it to analyze the color scale of official clothing in the Song Dynasty; Craig Clunas (2004) and Joanne Entwistle (2015) combined with body politics, respectively discussed the class classification of life women's crowns and the discipline effect of clothing on the body.

1.3 Research Questions

Core question: in the ancient Chinese social system, how did the power status be encoded in the clothing symbol system through the elements of color, pattern, material and shape, so as to build and strengthen the hierarchical order?

Three sub problems

- ① How does the power discourse transform the abstract concept of hierarchy into the visual language of dress symbols?
- ② How does Pierce's symbolic trichotomy explain the power coding mechanism of dress symbols?
- ③ How can costume symbols reproduce the meaning of power in the interaction between physical practice and society?

1.4 Research Methods

This study uses an interdisciplinary research method to sort out the "Yu Fu Zhi", "Huidian" and other institutions by using the method of literature research, and establishes a historical corpus of costume symbols combined with archaeological unearthed objects and handed down images; By using Pierce's symbolic dichotomy, this paper analyzes the relationship between signifier and signified of clothing symbols, and restores the meaning generation process of clothing symbols in physical practice.

2. Pierce's Semiotic Theory and Its Applicability

2.1 The Core Connotation of Pierce's Symbolic Trisection

Based on the relationship between symbols and their objects, Charles Sanders Peirce divided symbols into three basic types: icon, index and symbol. This classification is not only concerned with the external form of the symbol itself, but also emphasizes how the symbol establishes a meaningful relationship with the object it refers to, which provides an important theoretical framework for the analysis of clothing, a symbol system with both material attributes and cultural significance.

Icon. It relies on similarity to establish symbol Association, and physical features such as shape and color will directly map the attributes of objects. The sun and moon pattern on the official dress is an example. The circular pattern directly symbolizes the celestial body, and the visual similarity helps it build a sacred image.

Index. This type depends on causality or proximity, and there must be a real connection between the symbol and the object. The material (ruby, coral, sapphire, etc.) of the flower plume worn by officials in the Qing Dynasty is directly related to the grade, and the difference in material has become the index symbol of the official rank.

Symbol. Its significance depends on the established rules of society, and the way of association can only be understood through cultural acquisition. As a symbol of imperial power, the dragon pattern is not based on morphological similarity or causality, but a mandatory symbolic agreement formed by the millennial ritual system.

2.2 Interpretive Term Theory and Symbolic Meaning Generation

Pierce's interpretant concept reveals the dynamic generation process of symbolic meaning. After the symbol acts on the interpreter, there are three levels of interpretation. The term of direct interpretation refers to the immediate perception triggered by symbols. For example, when you see bright yellow, you associate it with the royal family; The dynamic interpretation term is the specific meaning generated in combination with the context, such as the dignity brought by the court dress in the court ceremony; The final explanation is the stable significance of the formation of social collective consciousness, such as the continuous strengthening of the hierarchical order by the clothing system. With this theoretical framework, there are available tools to analyze the meaning transmission of dress symbols in different scenes and different subjects.

3. Symbolic Elements and Power Coding Basis of Ancient Chinese Clothing

3.1 Color Symbol System: Visual Discipline of Power

The color of Chinese ancient costumes is the core of power coding, which realizes the stratum separation through color dictatorship and hierarchical color scale. Since the Tang Dynasty, yellow has gradually become exclusive to the royal family. The combination of bright yellow and the concept of five elements has formed a mandatory symbol after the ban in the record of public service (Zhou Xibao, 1984); Officials set up a hierarchy of purple, Fei, green and green. For example, in the Tang Dynasty, "purple for three grades and above, and Fei for five grades and above" became a visual symbol of official rank (Shen Congwen, 2011); Civilians are limited to simple colors, which is essentially the discipline of power on visual space (Gao Chunming, 2001).

3.2 Pattern Symbol System: Grade Code in Patterns

The power code of dress patterns can be divided into two categories: exclusive imperial power and bureaucratic level. The twelve chapter patterns of the emperor's coronal clothes have their own symbols, and the dragon pattern strengthens the monopoly of imperial power with "five claws as the dragon" (Shen Congwen, 2011); Officials' supplementary clothing of animal patterns is strictly corresponding to their grades. Civil officials embroider birds and military officials embroider animals, which has become a "table of official positions worn on the body" (Sun Ji, 2001). Patterns and processes are heterogeneous, and a strict hierarchical network has been established (Gao Chunming, 2001).

3.3 Material and Shape Symbol System: Material Power Narrative

Material and shape are important dimensions of power coding. In terms of materials, silk and other high-end fabrics are controlled by the ritual system. Special fabrics in the Ming and Qing Dynasties are exclusive to the royal family and aristocrats, and scarcity corresponds to identity status; In terms of shape, the imperial coronal uniform is dignified, the official court uniform emphasizes order, the civilian short combat is simple and practical, and the power discipline is realized through the way of wearing (Sun Ji, 2001).

3.4 Cooperative Operation Mechanism of Symbol System

The color, pattern, material and shape form a composite coding system. For example, the twelve chapter patterns on the emperor's coronal clothes have specific symbolic meanings, which express the symbolic construction of the order of heaven and earth, the legitimacy of monarchy and the virtue of the emperor through the patterns of the sun, the moon, the stars, mountains, dragons and insects; The tonic in official clothing distinguishes civil and military officials and their grades through different animal patterns, so that the abstract official rank system can be presented in social communication in an intuitive visual form. At the same time, the clothing color also has a distinct hierarchical attribute. Yellow gradually established close ties with imperial power in a specific historical period, while the restrictions on the use of clothing color by officials and ordinary people further strengthened the identity boundary between different social classes.

4. Power Coding Mechanism and Hierarchical Metaphor Realization of Chinese Ancient Costume Symbols

4.1 *Dynamic Symbolic Mechanism of Power Discourse*

The formation of ancient Chinese costume symbol system is a dynamic process of transforming abstract power discourse into a material carrier, which is realized through three mechanisms: first, power discourse institutionalizes the idea of hierarchy through the system of laws and regulations. For example, the six codes of the Tang Dynasty defines the color scale of official clothes, and defines the color norms of royal families and officials based on the five element theory, so that the color is separated from the natural attribute and becomes a political identity index (Yin, 2025); Second, the institutionalized standardization has strengthened the visualization of power through the figuration of pattern metaphor and material discipline, such as the spatial design of the "Wenqin Wushou" tonic system in the Ming Dynasty and the square tonic system in the Qing Dynasty (Sun Ji, 2001); Third, the symbolic meaning was naturalized through body practice and ritual performance. Officials in the Qing Dynasty wore accessories such as flower feathers and walkers' belts to transform the power pyramid into a perceptible body space narrative and complete the reproduction of symbolic meaning.

The institutionalized power coding of ancient costumes also demonstrates unique historical adaptability and social permeability that distinguishes it from ordinary cultural symbols. As a bodily embedded symbolic system, costume norms penetrate into daily social interactions, subtly regulating individual behaviors and interpersonal hierarchical relations beyond rigid legal constraints. In ancient social scenarios including official administration, folk rituals and daily communication, standardized costume collations continuously output hierarchical information, enabling social members to quickly identify identity differences and maintain orderly social operation. Unlike written institutional decrees that require active reading and learning, dress symbols achieve unconscious power education through intuitive visual perception and physical experience. Such implicit disciplinary effect makes the hierarchical values embedded in the costume system internalized into public behavioral norms. It effectively complements the national institutional system, stabilizes the social class structure, and endows ancient Chinese costume power symbols with lasting vitality and profound social governance value throughout different dynasties.

4.2 *The Application of Pierce's Symbolic Ternary Theory in Ancient Clothing and Power Expression*

Once Pierce's symbolic ternary theory is introduced (combined with Zhao Yiheng, 2023), the original static research approach is a little inadequate. What the researchers want to ask is: how is the dress power order constructed step by step in the process of dynamic generation.

Let's talk about iconicity first. It's about the relationship between power metaphor and ritual system. The sun and mountain patterns in the twelve chapter patterns all rely on the iconicity at the morphological or conceptual level to convey the ruling idea. It is easy to understand that the sun pattern symbolizes brightness; The mountain pattern has slowly evolved into a metaphor for the eternal stability of the country, and is deeply bound to the ritual scene (Zhao Yiheng, 2023). The evolution of the dragon patterns

in the Ming and Qing dynasties can also explain the influence of the ritual system. The dragon patterns in the Ming Dynasty were powerful, and the Manchu and Han elements were integrated in the Qing Dynasty. The biological iconicity was weakened, while the cultural iconicity was enhanced, and finally became the power symbol of the ethnic group (Zhu Gekai, 2019:152).

Let's look at indexing, which deals with the causal relationship between dress and power. In the Tang Dynasty, purple dyes were scarce, and this scarcity was bound to the official rank. The six classics of the Tang Dynasty institutionalized economic differences, so color became a visual symbol of the official rank (Wu You et al., 2023:4), which was consistent with the physical correlation characteristics of Pierce index. At the other end, the walkers' belt of the Tang Dynasty restrained officials' gait through the wearing rules of belt material and "front hanging three and back hanging four", and the body movement became a display of power, which confirmed the behavior explanation term theory of indexers (Peirce, CP 5.475). The last is symbolism, that is, the shaping of the symbolic meaning of clothing by the ritual system. The reason why the dragon pattern has become the exclusive symbol of imperial power is that it is supported by three aspects: Code prohibition, process monopoly and ritual activation. Its significance is shaped by the ritual system (Zhao Yiheng, 2023) (Zhang Geyu et al., 2021:3). Taking bright yellow as an example, from visual perception (direct interpretation item) to five element moral (dynamic interpretation item), and then gradually solidified into the social consensus of "abuse is treason" (final interpretation item), the dynamic evolution of symbolic meaning is reflected (Peirce, CP 5.475) (Wang Weiwei et al., 2024:69).

5. Conclusion: The Theoretical Contribution of Chinese Ritual Semiotics

This study further deconstructs the symbolic operation mechanism of ancient Chinese costumes and reveals that its symbolic meaning is not simply derived from the corresponding relationship between the form of costumes and the object, but from the institutional symbol system formed and stabilized under the continuous discipline of etiquette and social system. Compared with the western modern fashion symbols which mainly rely on social customs, cultural conventions and consumption practices, the ancient Chinese clothing symbols have more significant characteristics of institutional anchoring. In particular, the distinction between institutional symbols and customary symbols provides an important perspective for understanding the stability of the meaning of ancient Chinese clothing symbols: the meaning of the former is not naturally formed only by the long-term use of social members, but is jointly stipulated and strengthened by the rules and regulations, etiquette practice and ethical norms. Thus, clothing is no longer just an external medium to express individual identity, but an important carrier for social hierarchy, political power and ethical order to be embodied and visualized. Its power significance has also been continuously solidified in the repeated confirmation of institutional norms and social practice.

The theoretical significance of this discovery is that, based on Pierce's analysis of the relationship between symbol and object, it further highlights the role of institutional environment in the generation and stability of symbol meaning, thus providing a complementary perspective for understanding the

social power attribute of dress symbols. Its practical significance lies in that it provides a new interpretation path for understanding the disputes arising from the shape, pattern, color and dress norms in the process of the revival of contemporary Hanfu. From this perspective, the "shape dispute" of contemporary Hanfu is not only the difference of aesthetic preference or clothing design concept, but also involves the reinterpretation of traditional symbol coding in modern society and the negotiation and game between different subjects on the interpretation right of traditional culture. Therefore, this study finally points to a deeper understanding: the power of dress symbols is not only derived from its visual form, but from the dual inscription of institutional norms and physical practice. Only by fully understanding the historical system and cultural context behind clothing symbols can we avoid mechanical retro and rootless innovation in the continuous dialogue between tradition and modernity, and realize the creative transformation with cultural foundation on the basis of respecting the traditional cultural coding.

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