Research on the Semiotic Dilemma of Auspicious Motifs in Fashion Design within Cross-Cultural Contexts: A Semiotic Analysis Based on Design Practice

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Abstract. Amidst the intensification of cross-cultural exchange in global fashion, traditional Chinese auspicious motifs have become prominent visual resources. However, their translation by international luxury brands frequently results in semiotic misinterpretation, cultural appropriation, and ethical controversy. This study investigates the mechanisms of semantic drift and cultural dislocation in the cross-cultural application of Chinese symbolic elements through a semiotic analysis grounded in design practice. A "Form-Semantics-Pragmatics" triaxial model is constructed to deconstruct representative case studies from 2000 to 2025, including Dior's mamianqun, Gucci's dragon motifs, and YSL's qipao reinterpretations. The analysis reveals three primary deviations: (1) visual symbolization-formal simplification and fragmentation of motifs; (2) contextual misinterpretation-semantic substitution due to cultural dissonance; and (3) ethical conflict-functional alienation through ritual subversion and commodification. Diachronically, these misinterpretations have evolved from single-element appropriation to symbolic collage and, recently, to systemic cultural substitution. The triaxial model elucidates the structural imbalance in cross-cultural translation, where emphasis on visual form undermines cultural semantics and social pragmatics. To address this, the study proposes strategies such as localized collaboration, cultural paratext integration, and ethical calibration. Theoretically, it advances cultural semiotics in design research; practically, it offers methodological guidance for achieving a dynamic balance between commercial innovation and cultural authenticity in global fashion discourse.

Keywords: Cultural Semiotics; Cross-cultural Design; Chinese Auspicious Motifs; Fashion Branding; Semantic Drift; Cultural Appropriation; Form-Semantics-Pragmatics Model; Luxury Fashion; Symbolic Translation; Design Ethics.

1. Introduction

Amidst economic globalization, traditional Chinese cultural elements have become significant visual and cultural resources for international fashion brands. Since Yves Saint Laurent drew inspiration from Qing Dynasty attire in the 1980s, motifs such as blue-and-white porcelain, ink-wash calligraphy, and garden lattice windows have increasingly appeared on the global fashion stage. These elements not only embody Eastern aesthetics but also enhance brand distinctiveness. However, as cross-cultural dissemination intensifies, the application of Chinese cultural symbols has revealed issues such as semantic drift, cultural misinterpretation, and ethical controversy, provoking debate in academic and public spheres.

Although Chinese elements have established a systematic presence in international fashion, their cross-cultural adaptation often exposes deep-seated dilemmas in semiotic decoding. For example, Burberry's mirrored rendering of the "福" (*fú*, blessing) character in its 2021 Lunar New Year collection drew criticism for disrespecting Chinese traditions, while Dior's reinterpretation of the mamianqun (horse-face skirt) was criticized for lacking cultural understanding. Such cases illustrate the "disjunction between the signifier and the signified" in Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural translation, highlighting tensions between appropriation and innovation.

Recent scholarship on traditional Chinese elements in international fashion brands focuses on three main areas:

First, semiotic analyses often remain at the surface level, deconstructing visual symbols without exploring their deeper cultural connotations. For example, [8] examined motifs such as dragons (long),

phoenixes (fenghuang), and auspicious clouds (xiangyun), highlighting their dual role as decorative elements and cultural conveyors, but overlooking philosophical concepts such as "天人合一" (tiān rén hé yī – unity of heaven and humanity) and "道法自然" (dào fǎ zì rán – the Dao follows nature), as well as aesthetic principles like "气韵生动" (qì yùn shēng dòng – spirited resonance/vitality) in design. Similarly, [7] analyzed the symbolic meanings of "中国红" (Zhōngguó hóng – China red) and "明黄" (míng huáng – bright yellow) and their effects in garment coordination, but paid less attention to how such color applications reflect Eastern aesthetics, including "虚实相生" (xū shí xiāng shēng – interplay of void and substance) and "计白当黑" (jì bái dāng hēi – treating white space as ink).

Second, cultural communication studies often critique cultural appropriation from a one-way perspective, overlooking the potential for innovation in cultural fusion. (Li, 2018) discusses the recreation of Chinese aesthetics, while (Jing Yang, 2023) confirms that integrating traditional Chinese cultural values into modern fashion design fosters global heterogeneity, localization, and the preservation of ethnic culture. However, such studies generally lack a systematic brand strategy perspective and do not address practical challenges in design implementation.

Third, research on design practice reveals a gap between theory and application, often resulting in "形似神离" (xíng sì shén lí – similar in form but divergent in spirit) outcomes. [6] proposed a fashion design evaluation index system, yet without criteria tailored to Chinese elements, making it difficult for brands to assess cultural value or market acceptance. While some works examine the negative impacts of cultural appropriation (Bhatnagr, 2024); (Chumo Lewis, 2023)], few explore strategies for balancing cultural respect with market success. Studies such as (Guo Qi, 2023) on Chinese–Western design fusion, (Yuru Ma, 2020) on differing interpretations of Chinese-themed fashion by Chinese and Western designers, (Yuxue Zou, 2019) on integrating traditional elements with modern trends, and (Na Zhang, 2024) on applying Chinese cultural elements in creative product design, all note existing challenges but offer limited actionable guidance for the international fashion market.

Although the use of Chinese elements offers commercial appeal, it also presents risks of cultural bias and semiotic rupture (Qi & Yilin, 2023). These issues are primarily seen in:

1. **Semiotic Misinterpretation** – reducing motifs to visual symbols, for instance, simplifying the dragon to represent power while neglecting its philosophical meaning of "天人合一" (tiān rén hé yī – unity of heaven and humanity) (Li, X, 2019).
2. **Design Ethics Conflicts** – misusing elements in ways that spark appropriation controversies, such as Gucci's misinterpreted dragon embroidery posture.
3. **Lack of Cultural Translation Mechanisms** – superficial adoption without exploring cultural roots, causing misalignment between brand strategies and Chinese cultural archetypes.

This study addresses these problems by constructing a "Form–Semantics–Pragmatics" analytical model to examine cognitive biases and cultural misinterpretations in the translation of Chinese elements by international brands. Through diachronic analysis of representative luxury fashion cases, it aims to reveal the mechanisms of semiotic variation, expand the application of cultural semiotics in cross-cultural design, and provide a theoretical foundation for building translation models. In practice, it offers methodological guidance for brands to integrate Chinese elements effectively, balancing commercial innovation with cultural authenticity.

Research questions:

1. How is the mechanism of semantic drift formed for cultural symbols in cross-cultural contexts?
2. What systematic misalignments exist between brand design strategies and Chinese cultural archetypes?
3. How can brands achieve a dynamic balance between commercial innovation and cultural authenticity?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Paradigm and Path Design

This study adopts a multi-dimensional methodology—semiotic analysis, case comparison, and model construction—to deconstruct the translation mechanisms of Chinese auspicious motifs in cross-cultural fashion contexts. Drawing on cultural semiotics, it develops a "Form–Semantics–Pragmatics" tri-axial model, analyzing the material form of visual symbols (Form), the cultural semantic system they convey (Semantics), and their functional realization in specific social contexts (Pragmatics). The model addresses not only static symbolic features but also the dynamic interplay of these dimensions in cross-cultural flows, offering a systematic framework for explaining cultural misinterpretation.

A diachronic and synchronic cross-case analysis was conducted on representative international luxury brand designs incorporating Chinese elements from 2000 to 2025. Case selection followed three criteria: (1) **Element Typicality** – clear origin in the traditional Chinese cultural system; (2) **Social Impact** – significant cultural controversy or commercial success; (3) **Temporal Coverage** – representing different stages of Western fashion's interpretation of Chinese elements. Based on these, seven core case clusters were identified (Table 1), forming a cross-case comparison matrix.

Table 1. Core Case Selection and Analysis Dimensions

Brand/Event	Chinese Element	Cultural Carrier	Core Controversy	Time Node
Dior *Mamianqun* Incident	*Mamianqun* structure	Garment Structure	Cultural Appropriation Claim	2022
Gucci Zodiac Series	Dragon motif, Zodiac animals	Pattern Motif	Symbol Westernization	2018-2025
Louis Vuitton Peking Opera Mask Bag	Peking Opera Masks	Color Symbol	Context Stripping	2014
YSL Qipao Series	Qipao silhouette	Garment Form	Sexualized Transformation	2004
Armani *Fu* Character & Bat Motif Embroidery	*Fu* character, Bat motif	Auspicious Symbol	Meaning Reconstruction	2019 (Spring Festival)
Cartier Dragon Jewelry	Dragon Totem	Totemic Form	Fierce Image Portrayal	2012 (Year of Dragon)
Valentino Qingming Series	Four Gentlemen (Plum, Orchid, Bamboo, Chrysanthemum)	Literati Imagery	Context Misplacement	2021

At the data collection and analysis level, the study employs multimodal corpus analysis, unfolding from three dimensions: identifying key visual features (*Form*); tracing original symbol semantics within Chinese culture and parsing brand translation strategies (*Semantics*); assessing public acceptance through social media comments, sales figures, and media reports (*Pragmatics*). This approach reveals the complete chain variation mechanism from form extraction to semantic reconstruction to functional positioning.

2.2 Theoretical Basis of the "Form-Semantics-Pragmatics" Triaxial Model

The "Form-Semantics-Pragmatics" Triaxial Model is rooted in cultural semiotics structural analysis tradition, explaining misreading, mistranslation, and functional alienation phenomena during cross-cultural symbol translation.

Form level focuses on visual materiality of auspicious motifs—dragon modeling characteristics, cloud line patterns, and color symbolic coding. These elements are most readily extracted but frequently subjected to formal simplification (Dai & Liu, 2024). China Unicom's "盘长" (páncháng - endless knot) motif originally signified "endless continuity" but is often simplified into geometric decoration internationally [16].

Semantics level explores cultural genetic coding of symbols within Chinese cultural systems. The bat motif (biānfú) became auspicious through homophony with "福" (fú - blessing), but Western culture associates it with "vampires." Dragon motifs symbolize "imperial authority" in China versus "evil" in Christian tradition, causing semantic fractures during translation.

Pragmatics level examines functional realization within social contexts, including consumer acceptance and cultural power relations. The 1920s Shanghai qipao was originally a "battle robe for women's liberation," but YSL reduced it to sexualized symbol, completely reconstructing its social function.

The Triaxial Model reveals cultural symbol variation mechanisms through the complete communication chain of Form extraction - Semantics conversion - Pragmatics reconstruction.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 A Typology of Cross-Cultural Translation Deviations

3.1.1 Visual Symbolization (Simplification at the Form Level)

Visual symbolization deviation manifests as superficial extraction and formalistic treatment of Chinese elements:

(1) Element Fragmentation: Isolating auspicious motifs from cultural context and downgrading them to decorative patterns. Gucci's 2024 Year of the Dragon series simplified the Forbidden Palace "行龙" (xínglóng - traveling dragon) into print patterns, dissolving its architectural function of "warding off evil spirits."

(2) Structural Alienation: Ignoring cultural logic of traditional garment structures. Dior's mamianqun variant retained typical features but severed connection to the Han clothing ritual system of "上衣下裳" (shàng yī xià cháng - upper garment, lower garment) [5].

(3) Color Decoding Misalignment: Valentino's use of imperial "黄袍" (huángpáo - yellow robe) for everyday dress dissolved ritual symbolism into fashion palette [9].

This visual simplification results from Cultural Compression: brands simplify multi-dimensional cultural symbols into recognizable visual labels, losing the creative principle "图必有意，意必吉祥" (tú bì yǒu yì, yì bì jíxiáng - the image must have meaning, the meaning must be auspicious).

3.1.2 Contextual Misinterpretation (Substitution at the Semantics Level)

Misinterpretation stems from misaligned grafting of cultural semantic systems:

Symbol System Substitution: Cartier's dragon jewelry used three-toed claws (Western dragons) instead of five-toed Chinese imperial dragons. Armani's bat motifs triggered negative Western associations, contradicting their Chinese meaning of "遍福" (biàn fú - widespread blessings) [15].

Philosophical Connotation Extraction: Valentino's "Qingming Series" combined "Four Gentlemen" motifs with backless gowns, stripping away their ethical function. Louis Vuitton's Peking Opera mask bag dissolved the "离形得似" (lí xíng dé sì) aesthetic essence.

Historical Narrative Rupture: Dior's mamianqun incorporation severed historical continuity by placing Ming Dynasty cultural symbols within "brand new design" discourse, triggering "cultural plagiarism" accusations.

3.1.3 Ethical Conflict (Functional Alienation at the Pragmatics Level)

Conflict manifests as inappropriate cultural function reconstruction:

Ritual Function Subversion: Gucci's use of imperial "十二章纹" (shí'èr zhāng wén) on handbags transformed imperial power symbols into consumer products [4]. Buddhist "卍" (wàn) characters were mistaken for Nazi symbols, creating sacredness-secularization conflicts.

Gender Politics Reconstruction: YSL's qipao modifications transformed Shanghai women's 1920s liberation symbol into "Orientalist" sexualized imagery through high slits and deep V-necks.

Production Ethics Controversy: Power inequality in symbol commodification. Western brands employ Chinese artisans for hand embroidery without cultural attribution rights, as seen in Su Xiu gowns selling for 300,000 RMB while embroiderers receive only 300 RMB daily wages, exposing capital hegemony and cultural labor exploitation.

3.2 Operational Mechanism of the Triaxial Model and Case Deconstruction

3.2.1 Dynamic Analysis of Model Operation

The "Form-Semantics-Pragmatics" Triaxial Model reveals semantic reconstruction mechanisms for Chinese auspicious motifs in cross-cultural communication. Under ideal conditions, the three dimensions should form a structurally balanced equilateral triangle: accurate Form extraction, faithful Semantics transmission, and appropriate Pragmatics matching. However, international brands often focus on visual symbols while ignoring cultural semantics and social functions, causing triangular structure imbalance.

Gucci's 2023 Spring Festival series exemplifies this: it accurately extracted "S-shaped" curve aesthetics from Ming-Qing dragon motifs (*Form*), but mistakenly used three-clawed instead of imperial five-clawed dragons, destroying the hierarchical symbol system (*Semantics* loss). The dragon motif was simplified into seasonal packaging, weakening its cultural function as temporal cycle symbol (*Pragmatics* mismatch).

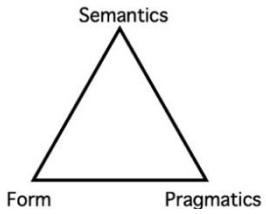


Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of the Form-Semantics-Pragmatics Triaxial Model Showing Imbalance (Form emphasized, Semantics and Pragmatics diminished

3.2.2 Diachronic Evolution of Misinterpretation Mechanisms

Cross-cultural translation of Chinese elements has undergone three-stage evolution (2000-2025):

(1) Single-Element Appropriation Stage (2000-2010): Visual extraction of single symbols lacking cultural understanding. YSL's 2004 qipao series borrowed stand-up collar and diagonal fastening while ignoring the "衣冠治国" (yī guān zhì guó - governing through dress and conduct) ritual background. Misinterpretations remained at the *Form* level.

(2) Symbol Collage Stage (2010-2020): Mixing Chinese elements with other cultural symbols caused semantic confusion. Louis Vuitton's 2014 combination of Peking Opera masks with African totems resulted in ambiguous cultural propositions, extending misinterpretation to the *Semantics* level.

(3) System Substitution Stage (2020-Present): Brands attempt to "dominate interpretation" of Chinese culture. Dior defining the *mamianqun* as "signature silhouette" attempts to reset its identity within Western fashion discourse, touching deep *Pragmatics* misinterpretation and sparking "cultural ownership" discussions.

This three-stage evolution accompanies the intensification of the "Orientalist commodification" of the global fashion industry, where brands systematically introduce Chinese cultural symbols due to market demand, but cultural understanding does not deepen correspondingly, instead exacerbating cultural misinterpretation and communication conflicts.

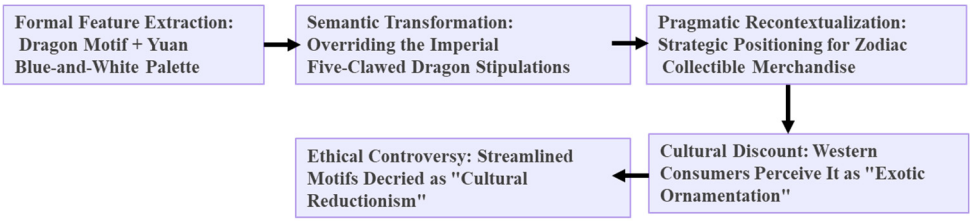


Figure 2. Timeline Diagram Illustrating the Three Stages of Cross-Cultural Translation Evolution

4. Conclusion

4.1 Theoretical Contribution and Practical Implications

By constructing the "Form-Semantics-Pragmatics" Triaxial Model, this study provides a systematic analytical framework for cultural semiotics in cross-cultural design. The model reveals multi-dimensional imbalance mechanisms in cultural translation: Form simplification leads to cultural signifier hollowing; Semantics substitution causes meaning system misalignment; Pragmatics alienation results in ethical conflicts. This framework provides universal methodology for cross-cultural design research.

Based on model analysis, culturally sensitive design strategies are proposed:

Localized Collaboration in Form Translation: Establish "Chinese Motif Knowledge Base" through collaborations with institutions like the Palace Museum. The 2025 CCTV mascot "巳升升" (sì shēng shēng) extracted snake form from oracle bone script "巳" (sì), incorporated cloisonné craftsmanship, and used bat motifs implying "福从头起" (fú cóng tóu qǐ - blessing starts from the head), achieving three-dimensional unity.

Context Reconstruction in Semantics Interpretation: Adopt "Cultural Paratext" strategy through product narratives and digital exhibitions. London's Chinatown AR Spring Festival couplets synchronize Form display with Semantics interpretation.

Ethical Calibration in Pragmatics Positioning: Respect cultural functional genealogy. Dragon motifs should be applied to high-end couture (echoing imperial symbolism), avoiding casual categories. Establish cultural dividend mechanisms for source communities.

4.2 Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study has limitations including lack of quantified impact measurement on consumer purchasing decisions and insufficient validation of Triaxial Model weight distribution. Future research can develop Cultural Translation Assessment Tools such as a "Cultural Sensitivity Index (CSI)" to quantitatively assess cultural respect in designs, construct cross-cultural design knowledge bases systematically annotating motif semantics, and design brand training systems guiding designers to understand cultural contexts beyond visual extraction.

Chinese auspicious motifs represent "spiritual totems of Chinese aspirations for goodness and beauty." Their international dissemination constitutes civilizational dialogue micro-practice. Only through historical reverence in Form extraction, understanding bridges in Semantics translation, and ethical consensus in Pragmatics reconstruction can we realize Fei Xiaotong's cross-cultural ideal: each appreciates its own beauty, appreciates others' beauty, and together appreciates shared beauty.

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