Highlights in Art and Design
ISSN: 2957-8787 | Vol. 13, No. 3, 2026

Construction of "Super Symbols" for Visual Images of Folk Shehuo and Strategies for Urban Brand Image Renewal

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Abstract: Against the backdrop that urban brand building is generally trapped in the homogenization dilemma of "thousand cities with the same appearance", how to explore regional cultural resources and shape a distinctive urban image with high recognizability has become an important issue in the fields of urban governance and cultural inheritance. As a traditional folk activity carrying regional identity and collective memory, folk Shehuo contains abundant symbolic resources in its visual elements such as facial masks, costumes, props and dynamic rituals, which has the potential to be transformed into a "super symbol" for urban brands. Taking the visual image of folk Shehuo as the research object, this paper systematically discusses the construction logic of its "super symbol" and the interactive relationship between it and the renewal of urban brand image. From the dual perspectives of semiotics and urban brand theory, this paper proposes that the construction of "super symbol" follows a three-stage logic of "extraction–translation–reinforcement": in the extraction stage, core symbols with the greatest transformation potential are selected through the identification and screening of visual prototypes; in the translation stage, the gap between traditional symbols and the modern communication context is bridged through meaning reconstruction and formal recreation; in the reinforcement stage, symbols are transformed from abstract concepts into brand assets through mediatization and scenario-based implantation. On this basis, this paper constructs a four-dimensional strategy system for urban brand renewal: the positioning strategy anchors the core urban value through symbols; the narrative strategy takes symbols as the hub to drive the production of urban stories; the experience strategy transforms static symbols into participatory dynamic experiences; the governance strategy establishes a multi-stakeholder coordination mechanism to achieve a dynamic balance between symbol protection and operation. This paper selects Baoji City of Shaanxi Province as a typical case to verify the explanatory power and practical value of the theoretical framework.

Keywords: Folk Shehuo; Visual Image; Super Symbol; City Brand; Image Renewal; Cultural Translation.

1. Shehuo Visual Image: The Symbolic Basis of Urban Brand Resources

1.1. Types and Characteristics of Shehuo Visual Images

The visual image of Shehuo is a composite symbolic system, which can be divided into four basic types according to its forms of presentation: facial makeup and masks, costumes and props, dynamic rituals and bodily performances, and scenes and installations[2].

Facial makeup is the most recognizable core element in the visual image of Shehuo. Shehuo facial makeup emphasizes exaggeration, deformation, and symbolism, with strong color contrasts and intricate patterns, built around basic makeup styles such as full-face, three-tile, and flower-faced designs. Colors follow a strict symbolic system—red represents loyalty, courage, and justice; black symbolizes firmness and bravery; white is mostly used for treacherous characters; gold and silver are primarily for deities in Taoism and Buddhism. Masks are commonly seen in Nuó dance Shehuo, featuring simple and rugged shapes with a mysterious aura of primitive religious rituals. Costumes often imitate historical figures or mythological characters, with warriors wearing armor and civil officials garbed in long robes; props include weapons, transportation tools, and musical instruments, reflecting concentrated folk craftsmanship. Dynamic rituals are the fundamental feature of the Shehuo visual image, with activities such as stilt walking, pole balancing, and dragon dancing creating unique visual rhythms in motion, allowing the audience to experience visual changes over time. Scenes and installations include floats, lantern clusters, and archways—temporary artistic setups that extend Shehuo visual language from characters to spaces [5].

Overall, the visual image of Shehuo exhibits four notable characteristics. First, a high degree of visual recognizability. Bold colors and exaggerated forms create a strong visual impact, providing the foundational condition for constructing “super symbols.” Second, the balance of stylization and symbolism. Strict formal norms ensure the recognizability and reproducibility of symbols, while each detail carries specific meaning, tightly linking visual form with semantic content. Third, collective creation and folk nature. The Shehuo visual image is the crystallization of collective wisdom from generations of folk artists, with a broad social foundation and deep emotional resonance, naturally possessing empathetic potential. Fourth, living inheritance and plasticity. The Shehuo visual image continues to be inherited in a living state among the people, with openness and plasticity that allow for creative transformation.

1.2. The Cultural Meaning and Regional Identity of Shehuo Visual Symbols

The visual symbols of Shehuo carry profound cultural meanings. First, they serve a ritual function of praying for blessings and warding off disasters. The mouth-swallowing designs on facial masks and the peachwood swords in props, for example, originate from ancient sacrificial traditions,

forming the deepest emotional foundation of Shehuo visual symbols. Second, they act as a symbolic expression of historical memory. The red face of Guan Yu and the black face of Bao Zheng compress complex historical narratives into succinct visual identifiers, allowing historical memory to be passed down through generations[3]. Third, they metaphorically present social order. The arrangement of roles and formation in processions imply an idealized social order, reflecting the values of a balance of civil and martial virtues, hierarchical respect, and the promotion of good while punishing evil. Fourth, they provide a release of festive spirit. Shehuo occurs during the 'liminal' period from the Spring Festival to the Lantern Festival, and its exaggerated and grotesque visual features create a carnival space distinct from daily life[11].

On the level of regional identity, the visual symbols of Shehuo form multiple connections with local society. First, Shehuo serves as a visual anchor of 'locality'; specific patterns on facial masks and local materials in props constitute cultural markers that distinguish one place from another. Second, Shehuo functions as a ritual expression of community identity[3]; the clothing style and facial mask characteristics of a village's Shehuo troupe become cultural markers that differentiate the village from neighboring ones. Third, Shehuo acts as a cultural link for intergenerational transmission; each generation of inheritors continues the tradition while incorporating innovations, carrying the temporal continuity of local society.

1.3. The Possibility of Transforming Folk Custom Resources into Brand Resources

The visual image of Shehuo has the potential to be transformed from a folk resource into a brand resource. This transformation requires three preconditions: the transferability of symbols — Shehuo facial masks, stilts, and other forms already possess independent aesthetic value and have circulated among the people as decorative items; the translatability of meaning — 'warding off evil' can be translated as 'protection,' 'praying for blessings' can be translated as 'hope[8]'; the extensibility of form — facial mask patterns are highly ornamental and structured, and can be developed into a variety of applications through design techniques.

The transformation path includes the shift from 'presence' to 'replicability,' the coordination from 'collectiveness' to 'copyright,' the expansion from 'cohesiveness' to 'extensiveness,' and the extension from 'festivity' to 'everyday life.' At the same time, it is necessary to be cautious of risks such as symbol 'hollowness,' cultural appropriation, and homogenization, and to handle the dialectical relationship between inheritance and innovation properly[4].

2. The Construction Logic of 'Super Symbols': From Visual Prototypes to Brand Assets

2.1. Extraction: Identification and Screening of Visual Prototypes

Visual prototypes are the starting point for constructing 'super symbols.' The core task of the extraction phase is to identify the visual prototypes with the highest potential for transformation from the rich visual materials of community celebrations. The identification criteria include recognizability (distinctive form, color impact, structural simplicity), cultural representativeness (historical depth, meaning conveyed, community recognition), extendibility (modular structure, variability of details, stylistic inclusiveness), and emotional resonance. The selection mechanism needs to focus on the 'core prototypes' from 'symbiotic prototypes,' evaluate the potential for transformation from 'local knowledge' to 'universal language,' consider the adaptability from 'festival presence' to 'everyday usability,' and balance the dual calibration of the inheritor's 'internal perspective' and the designer's 'external perspective.'

2.2. Translation: Modern Reconstruction of Traditional Symbols

The task of the translation phase is to bridge the gap between traditional symbols and the modern communication context. In terms of meaning reconstruction, 'exorcism' is translated as 'protection,' 'praying for blessings' as 'hope,' 'carnival' as 'vitality,' and 'order' as 'inclusion,' establishing a translation chain of 'traditional meaning—deep structure—contemporary value.' In terms of formal reconstruction, shapes are simplified and geometrized, colors are purified and systematized, texture language is reconstructed according to new media, and dynamic features are transformed into applicable visual language. Translation must balance the tension between tradition and modernity[1]: preserving the 'cultural fingerprint' while achieving formal innovation, respecting the 'original context' while adapting to the 'application scenario,' integrating the 'internal knowledge' of inheritors with the 'external perspective' of designers, and seeking a balance between 'one-time transformation' and 'continuous evolution[5].'

2.3. Enhancement: Mediation and Contextual Implantation of Symbols

The reinforcement phase transforms symbols from abstract concepts into brand assets through medialization and scenarization implantation. Medialization includes the systematic application of print media, interactive presentation of digital media, functional transformation of product media, and scenarized implantation of public media. Scenarized implantation includes ritualistic presentation in festive scenes, artistic expression in public spaces, functional integration of urban furniture, decorative presentation on building facades, and immersive creation of experiential spaces[6] . The reinforcement mechanisms include repetition mechanism, association mechanism, participation mechanism, evolution mechanism, and evaluation mechanism, collectively achieving the transition from symbol recognition to brand asset.

3. Urban Brand Renewal Strategy Based on the 'Super Symbol' of Shehuo

3.1. Positioning: Symbols Empower the Identification of Urban Core Values

The "super symbol" of Shehuo endows urban core value recognition with its "concentration" and "projection", transforming abstract conceptual descriptions into concrete symbolic anchors. Based on the logic of "symbol-value" bidirectional anchoring, key symbols are refined from the visual prototype of Shehuo to condense urban values, or

matching symbols are reversely screened according to existing positioning directions. Through the three steps of "meaning extraction-value transformation-system anchoring", urban brand positioning gains visual support.

3.2. Narrative: Symbol-driven Production of Urban Stories

The symbol of Shehuo has become the narrative hub for the production of urban stories. Establish a narrative system centered around symbols, encompassing three levels: "the story of the symbol", "the story of the symbol and the city", and "the story of people and symbols". In terms of narrative form, achieve multimodal expression through visual narrative, spatial narrative, and digital narrative. Through the continuous interaction mechanism of "story-symbol", the symbol gains emotional warmth, and the story gains a memory focus[6].

3.3. Experience: Revitalization of Urban Space Guided by Symbols

Symbols and space have a natural inter-constructive relationship - space provides a field for symbols to manifest, while symbols inject meaning and direction into space. Experience types include festival ritual experience, daily space experience, and immersive themed experience. Experience design follows the progressive logic of "recognizable - participatory - memorable", enabling the audience to transition from being mere observers of symbols to participants[12].

3.4. Governance: Symbol Protection and Operation with Collaboration Among Multiple Stakeholders

The symbols of Shehuo (a traditional Chinese festival) embody publicness, tradition, and collectiveness. Their protection and operation necessitate the establishment of a collaborative governance mechanism involving multiple stakeholders. The role of each stakeholder is defined as follows: the government serves as the provider of systems and the coordinator of overall efforts, the inheritor as the guardian of cultural authenticity, the designer as the bridge for symbol transformation, the market entity as the amplifier for value realization, and the public as the ultimate evaluator and co-owner. The governance mechanism encompasses decision-making and consultation mechanisms, benefit-sharing mechanisms, conflict mediation mechanisms, and dynamic evaluation mechanisms[7]. The governance path needs to shift from "project management" to "system governance," establishing a dynamic balance between protection and operation[9].

4. Case Analysis: The Interactive Practice of Constructing Baoji Shehuo Symbols and Brand Renewal

4.1. Overview of the Case Site

Baoji City, located in the western part of the Guanzhong Plain in Shaanxi Province, is the birthplace of Zhou and Qin culture and boasts abundant Shehuo resources. The Baoji Shehuo facial makeup is most famous for its "ladle facial makeup", which was listed in the national intangible cultural heritage list in 2006[9]. The city's brand positioning has undergone a transformation from an "industrial hub" to a "cultural city", and Shehuo has been included as a key development target in the city's brand identity system.

4.2. The Construction Practice of Shehuo Symbols

In the extraction phase, Baoji leveraged the core visual prototype of the ladle face mask, capitalizing on its high recognizability, profound cultural connotation, established independent aesthetic value, and abundant resources of inheritors, to refine the core visual characteristics of "arc-shaped base, symmetrical design, and high saturation[10]." In the translation phase, the phrase "ladle wards off evil spirits" was translated into "guarding the city's peace," and the symbolic meanings of colors were translated into the city spirit of "integrity, honesty, and bravery." The patterns were simplified, colors were standardized, and shapes were modularized, with the deep involvement of inheritors to ensure cultural authenticity[8]. In the reinforcement phase, through media integration (city promotional videos, tourist brochures, cultural and creative products, government new media) and scene integration (public art at transportation hubs, scenic spot guidance systems, street lamp decoration, Shehuo Museum), the symbols were normalized and present on a regular basis[7].

4.3. Actual Effect of Brand Renewal

At the positioning level, the ladle face mask has become a visual substitute for "Baoji", enhancing the city's brand recognition by approximately 25%. At the narrative level, a narrative system centered around the ladle face mask has gradually taken shape, with the hashtag #Baoji Shehuo# accumulating over 50 million views. At the experiential level, the Shehuo parade has become an annual cultural event, with interactive experiences at the Shehuo Museum extending visitors' stay time, and the embedding of symbols in daily spaces making Shehuo culture "ever-present"[10]. At the governance level, the government takes the lead, with inheritors deeply involved, designers playing a bridging role, market entities gradually stepping in, and a preliminary public participation mechanism established.

4.4. Experience and Enlightenment

The experience of Baoji practice includes: taking the most distinctive visual prototype as a breakthrough point, respecting the core position of inheritors in symbol construction, exploring multi-scenario implantation of symbols, and focusing on the deep design of experience. The existing deficiencies include: insufficient systematicness in symbol construction, the need to enhance the integration of brand narrative, the immature collaborative mechanism among multiple subjects, and the sustainability challenges faced by symbol operation. The case study reveals that the mutual construction of Shehuo symbols and urban brands is a gradual and cumulative process. There exists a dynamic balance between cultural authenticity protection and brand value development. The power of symbols comes from community identity and participation. Mutual construction needs to transcend "instrumental rationality" and return to "value rationality"[11].

5. Conclusion: Theoretical Summary and Practical Implications of the Interconstruction Mechanism

From a theoretical perspective, the mutual construction mechanism between the "super symbol" of Shehuo (a traditional Chinese festival) and the city brand image is embodied in the triple logic of "bidirectional empowerment, multi-layer nesting, and dynamic balance". Bidirectional empowerment refers to the injection of unique cultural genes into the city brand by the Shehuo symbol, and the renewal of the city brand provides opportunities for re-contextualization of the Shehuo symbol. Multi-layer nesting indicates that mutual construction occurs in multiple dimensions, including symbols, brands, cultural identity, spatial production, media communication, and governance mechanisms. Dynamic balance means that the maintenance of the mutual construction relationship relies on the dynamic adjustment of tension between protection and development, tradition and modernity, and multiple subjects.

From a practical perspective, this study provides five insights for the development of urban community festival symbols and the renewal of brand image: symbol construction should follow the strategy of "starting from a single point and gradually expanding to the whole"; meaning reconstruction should focus on "creative transformation of tradition"; experience design should pursue a progressive effect of "recognizable-participatory-memorable"; governance mechanism should establish a co-construction pattern of "multi-subject collaboration"; and value orientation should transcend "instrumental rationality" and return to "value rationality".

This study has certain limitations: the depth of theoretical construction needs to be improved, a single case study is difficult to cover diversity, and the effect evaluation lacks a systematic indicator system. Future research can be deepened and expanded in directions such as strengthening theoretical construction, expanding comparative case studies, constructing a scientific evaluation system, paying attention to the transformation challenges in the digital era, and deepening policy and governance research.

The construction of "super symbols" for the visual image of Shehuo (a traditional Chinese festival) and the renewal of urban brand image are not only related to how folk culture emerges from its original context and enters contemporary urban life, but also to how cities can find their cultural identity in homogenization competition and safeguard their spiritual home amid rapid changes. When Shehuo facial makeup moves from rural stages to urban squares, when Shehuo patterns are integrated into urban furniture, and when Shehuo rituals are transformed into daily experiences, a new cultural ecology is emerging - where tradition and modernity meet, folklore and the city mutually construct, and inheritance and development are unified.

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