

# Unraveling the Symbolic Enigma of Bashu Figure Language in Sanxingdui Culture: A Translation Semiotics Approach

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**Abstract:** This paper endeavors to embark on a comprehensive journey through the intricate and profound realm of Bashu figure language within the storied context of Sanxingdui Culture, a veritable treasure trove of ancient Chinese civilization. Bashu figure language occupies a pivotal position, serving as a vital conduit that intertwines the intricate fabric of social structures, religious beliefs, and cultural practices within the ancient Bashu region. Hence, this paper undertakes a systematic investigation into the transformation between tangible and intangible symbols based on the theoretical framework translation semiotics, thereby exploring the evolution and application scenarios of these tangible and intangible symbols by applying the document analysis method. The result shows that the Bashu figure language not only records the lifestyle, religious beliefs, and artistic achievements of ancient Bashu people but also reflects the process of transforming their abstract spiritual beliefs and social structures into tangible and concrete symbols.

**Keywords:** Bashu Figure Language; Translation Semiotics; Symbols.

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## 1. Introduction

The enigmatic Sanxingdui Culture, nestled in the fertile basin of Sichuan Province, China, stands as a testament to the profound and intricate history of the ancient Shu Kingdom (Zhu Fayuan, 2018). This ancient civilization, dating back to the late Neolithic Age through the Bronze Age, has captivated scholars and enthusiasts alike with its unique blend of architectural wonders, intricate artifacts, and enigmatic symbols known as Bashu characters (Ding Yiping, 2017). The Bashu figure language engraved on bronzes and jades are of different forms, neither traditional Chinese characters nor any known ancient writing systems. These symbols are like messengers through time and space, carrying the information and secrets of the ancient Shu civilization and waiting to be interpreted and deciphered by future generations. However, the related study of Ba Shu figure language is not an easy task. Its unique symbolic system, complex compositional logic, and the lack of directly corresponding documentary records have put the research in this field in a bottleneck for a long time. The current research on Bashu characters is marked by a growing body of literature that spans disciplines from archaeology to linguistics, yet a comprehensive understanding of their meanings remains elusive. Translation Semiotics is a discipline that seeks to uncover the processes and mechanisms involved in the translation of symbols across different cultural and linguistic contexts. Therefore, Translation semiotics with its interdisciplinary character has the explanatory power for Bashu figure language.

Hence, this study aims to focus on the intricacies of Bashu characters, exploring how they function as symbols, conveying meaning beyond their immediate visual representations. This investigation will delve into the semantic layers embedded within these symbols, examining how they relate to the socio-cultural, religious, and cosmological beliefs of the ancient Shu people. Furthermore, it further explores the potential for Translation Semiotics to reveal connections between Bashu figure language and other

ancient writing systems or symbolic traditions, thus contributing to a more holistic picture of early Chinese civilization.

## 2. Literature Review

The in-depth exploration of translation in the field of semiotics has a long history, and this topic has attracted much attention from research scholars. At the end of the 19th century, translation and interpretation had become an important focus of inquiry in Peirce's semiotic studies (Zhao Xingshi, 2017). Stepping into the 20th century, Lady Welby's semiotic explorations further expanded the research scope of the translation problem and provided a profound and systematic analysis of it. Accordingly, there are many scholars who have conducted extensive and in-depth discussions on translation issues from a semiotic perspective in western community. French philosopher and semiotician Paul Ricoeur, with his unique dual background of philosophy and semiotics, has made an in-depth analysis of the translation problem, which not only provides new perspectives on the translation research paradigm, but also conducts an exhaustive study on the problem of untranslatability in translation (Ricoeur, 2006). Meanwhile, Italian scholar Umberto Eco has made an in-depth interpretation of translation activities from the perspective of semiotics. He focuses on translation research in audiovisual fields such as theater translation, film and television translation, thereby analyzing and exploring translation practices in these fields in detail from a unique perspective of semiotics (Eco, 2001). Susan Petrilli (2014) points out that translation theory is inextricably linked to semiotics, and conversely, semiotics can draw from the rich contributions of translation theory and practice. Other scholars such as Peirce and Jacobson are important representatives of the semiotic school in the field of translation studies (Kourdis, 2015). The sustained attention of semiotics scholars to the issue of translation not only demonstrates the deep theoretical relationship between semiotics and translation studies, but also highlights the

indispensable theoretical value of semiotics in translation studies.

In the field of translation semiotics, domestic scholars have carried out in-depth and fruitful discussions centering on multiple dimensions such as disciplinary definition, theoretical structure and deep disciplinary significance. Chinese scholar Wang Mingyu (2015), with a unique linguistic-semiotic perspective, carefully constructed the disciplinary structure of translation semiotics and meticulously combed the areas in which translation studies and semiotics are intertwined at home and abroad. This work not only lays a solid foundation for the further development of translation semiotics, but also provides new ideas for the cross-fertilization between disciplines. Jia Hongwei (2016) further points out that the intertwined relationship between semiotics and translation goes with multiple features, such as the use of semiotics theories to analyze and explain the phenomenon of literary translation, and translation research from the perspective of social semiotics. He stated that translation semiotics, with the help of the theory and methodology of semiotics, has carried out a meticulous research on the issue of symbol transformation in the translation process. This research not only transcends the limitations of traditional semiotics in terms of monolingual and monocultural symbolic representation, but also further broadens the research boundaries and frontiers of semiotics. In addition, Wang Mingyu (2015) has already put translation semiotics on par with linguistic semiotics and regarded translation semiotics as an indispensable sub-discipline of semiotics. In a word, Chinese scholars work to lay a solid cornerstone for the research in this field in the theoretical construction of translation semiotics and the deep excavation of translation practice, and aim to provide a powerful guide for the future research direction. Further research points out that the core goal of translation semiotics lies in “constructing a set of theoretical systems of semiotics subdisciplines with symbol transformation as the focus of research” (Wang Mingyu & Ren Wei, 2017). Similarly, Linlin Pan (2018) also emphasizes the importance of symbol transformation in the study of translation semiotics, taking it as the central topic of research. This further highlights the core value and far-reaching impact of symbol transformation in translation semiotics. This common concern over the issue of symbol transformation in translation activities not only highlights the urgency of the dialogue between semiotics and translation studies, but also further proves the great potential of translation semiotics, an interdisciplinary study, in promoting the development of the fields of semiotics and translation studies.

In further exploring the theoretical framework of translation studies, a series of doctoral dissertations have thoroughly examined the semiotic ideas of Charles Morris and Peirce, and these findings have provided valuable theoretical support for the study of translation semiotics. It is worth noting that the four doctoral dissertations on translation semiotics research by domestic scholars are mainly unfolded based on the theory of social semiotics (Wang Mingyu & Ren Wei, 2017), reflecting the deep accumulation and unique insights of domestic scholars in the field of translation theory research. It is worth noting that although Western scholars have made remarkable achievements in the field of translation semiotics, some of their studies seem to focus more on theoretical discussions than on solving practical problems. This phenomenon triggers in-depth thinking about the

research methodology and application value of translation semiotics, and also provides important insights for our future research direction.

### 3. Translation Semiotics

In Translation and Semiotics, Peeter Torop puts forward a new field of research that integrates semiotics and translation, Translation Semiotics. “Translation semiotics itself can be regarded as a discipline that deals with mediation processes between various sign systems, and, on the macro level, with culture as a translation mechanism (Torop, 2008). He believes that Translation Semiotics belongs to both translation and semiotics from the perspective of cultural semiotics. The former explores translatability, from the linguistic worldview to the cultural function of the translated text, focusing on the symbolic coherence in textual analysis. The latter analyzes the symbolic system and its intrinsic interrelationships with the semiotics of translation in a comparative way, focusing on both the theory and application of semiotics. Translation Semiotics, on the basis of semiotics theory and methodology, takes the symbol transformation in translation as the research object and studies the different levels involved in the symbol transformation in translation, including the symbolization process, the symbol relationship, the symbol function, and so on.

By combining the translation semiotics proposed by Torop and Jakobson’s category of translation, Jia Hongwei (2018) subdivided the process of translation semiotics involving the elaboration, transformation and integration of one or more measured texts within the same language and culture into three categories, i.e., the transformation from tangible symbols to tangible symbols, the transformation from tangible symbols to intangible symbols, and the transformation from intangible symbols to tangible symbols, and this category is considered as Intrasemiospheric Translation.

Transformation from tangible symbols to tangible symbols, with the external existence of the material as a carrier, symbols transform dependent on the physical medium. It can be subdivided into five cases: (1) the transformation from tangible symbols to linguistic symbols, such as integrating different textual contents into a symbolic text after studying different textual materials according to personal intention; (2) the transformation from tangible symbols of linguistic symbols to non-linguistic symbols, such as after making certain behaviors according to the requirements of the textual symbols. (3) Transformation from linguistic signs of tangible symbols to a combination of linguistic and non-linguistic signs, e.g., after reading a text, stating the text while performing the corresponding action as required. (4) Transformation from non-verbal symbols of tangible signs into verbal symbols, e.g., converting behavioral actions to textual symbols. (5) Transformation from non-verbal symbols of tangible symbols to a combination of verbal and non-verbal symbols.

The transformation from tangible symbols to intangible symbols is the transformation process of thinking triggered by symbols, tangible words, images, colors or sounds, etc. The process is not easy to detect, and in the short term, the transformation affects the mood, cognition and attitude of the subject of the symbols. While in the long term, it affects the subject’s mode of thinking, and different views on the world, life and values. Within the same national culture, the transformation from tangible symbols to intangible symbols

can be divided into three situations: (1) the transformation of tangible symbols from linguistic symbols to brain-thinking symbols, such as the deep thinking triggered by reading a book; (2) the transformation of tangible symbols from non-linguistic symbols to brain-thinking symbols, such as the thinking about human behavior triggered by seeing kid's behavior, as well as the idea of martial arts triggered by seeing animal behavior; (3) the transformation of tangible symbols into non-linguistic symbols; and (4) the transformation of tangible symbols into non-linguistic symbols. Verbal and non-verbal symbols of integrated text transformed into brain-thinking symbols.

The transformation from intangible symbols to tangible symbols is the transformation process of human internal thinking activities into symbols, tangible words, images, colors or sounds. Within the same national culture, the transformation from intangible symbols to tangible symbols is also divided into three situations: (1) Brain thinking symbols, i.e., thinking, thinking, conceptualization and other processes resulting in the transformation from thinking symbols to verbal symbols, such as a long studied paper released in language or text; (2) Brain thinking symbols transformed to non-verbal symbols, such as the conceptualization of the reporting procedures, reporting preparation presented in the reporting process; (3) Brain thinking symbols transformed to verbal and non-verbal symbols, such as after reading the regulations or requirements, the leader instructs the employees or subordinates to operate with his language and behavior.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1. Transformation from Tangible Symbols to Tangible Symbols**

The interaction between tangible symbols includes between non-linguistic symbols and linguistic symbols, as well as the interaction and conversion between linguistic symbols. The transformation between linguistic symbols is reflected in the changes of different historical periods and stylistic styles. As an ancient hieroglyphic writing system, Bashu figure language shows unique evolution and adaptability in different historical periods and different literary styles. For example, early bronzes are mostly filled with simple pictographs that directly depict objects in nature, such as animals, plants and artifacts. More geometric shapes and abstract patterns appear on later bronzes with the passage of time. These symbols were not only used to record information, but also decorative and symbolic. At the same time, it reflected the development of the civilization in this region and how do Ba Shu people understand and know the nature, religion and society around them. Secondly, these symbols also show diversity in different literary styles. It is often used in religious and witchcraft ceremonies with mystical and symbolic meanings. In other words, these symbols are usually found on ritual objects and in religious sites, and are used to record and convey religious rituals and beliefs. In transaction records and contract instruments, however, they are mainly used to record transaction details and legal terms. The transformation between linguistic and non-linguistic symbols is mainly reflected in the diversity of symbols and the wide range of applications in varied scenarios since it is not only a writing system, but also contains a large number of non-verbal symbols, such as decorative patterns and totem signs.

### **4.2. Transformation from Tangible Symbols to Intangible Symbols**

The transformation of tangible symbols to intangible symbols includes three cases linguistic symbols, non-linguistic symbols, and the synthesis of linguistic symbols and non-linguistic symbols, which are converted to intangible symbols. The typical cultural style of ancient Shu in Sanxingdui site conveys the abstract cognition and attitude formed by the subject of ancient Shu symbols under the influence of cultural thinking mode. Linguistic symbols mainly refer to those symbols with clear phonetic or semantic reference, and the transformation of linguistic symbols to intangible symbols is more common in the thinking or discursive process triggered by the symbolic text, which is similar to the thinking activities when conducting modern text reading. For example, the typical patterns like the tiger figure, the palm pattern, and the floral motifs, were not regarded as characters at the beginning due to their resemblance to decorative patterns, while now archaeologists regard them as the tools used by the Bashu ancient tribes to record their language, tribal emblems, totems, or religious symbols, which are the prototypes of the Bashu characters. This sort of language, to a certain extent, went through the stage of development of the script with strong hieroglyphic significance of "drawing things", bringing its degree of symbolization improved. Take one for example, the brushwork style of the "tiger figure" symbol is formed in a three-dimensional perspective, and it will trigger related connotations in one's mind as soon as he/she sees it for the first time. Non-verbal symbols refer to the non-linguistic symbols such as clothes, eye contact, body language, background lighting, sound and other symbols that are used to convey the meaning in the process of human communication, with verbal symbols as the main and non-verbal symbols as the auxiliary means in daily communication. This language system still embodies the fusion of various cultural elements although the ancient characters of Bashu are no longer "alive" and being separated from its context. There are a series of important archaeological discoveries, especially the Sanxingdui, the Twelve Bridges of Early Shu Civilization Site, Moon Bay, Zhuwajie in Pengxian County, and the Wooden Outer Coffin Tomb of the Warring States Period. The excavation of large sites or tombs has made the archaeologists aware of the possibility of a glorious civilization that once existed in the Ba Shu region. For example, the structure and form of the characters appearing on the tiger-patterned copper goblet unearthed in Hongguang Town are different from those of the gold and oracle-bone inscriptions in the Central Plains, but they are considered being belong to the category of ideograph. The transformation between the non-verbal symbols and linguistic symbols reflects the possibility of two parallel scripts during this period, which leads to a reflection on the uniqueness of the Ba Shu script. The combination of linguistic and non-linguistic symbols is converted into intangible symbols, such as the bronze tiger pattern goad on display in the Sichuan Museum, on one side of which a man with a bun and a sword hanging from his waist is cast in relief; on the other side is engraved with the Ba Shu symbols. It shows that the ancient Shu civilization maintained its uniqueness while absorbing and integrating foreign cultures, reflecting the fact that Bashu once played an essential part as a major transportation route and cultural exchange center in ancient

times.

### 4.3. Transformation from Intangible Symbols to Tangible Symbols

The difference between tangible and intangible symbols lies in the fact that tangible symbols have a material carrying medium, while intangible symbols don't. This sort of transformation in fact began with the use of symbols by human beings, such as the knotted rope to keep track of things. Intangible symbols, on the other hand, are the visual reflection of the spiritual pursuit and value orientation of the people of the ancient Ba Shu region which is a reminder of their abstract emotions and flourishing cultural connotations. For example, the bronze masks of Sanxingdui used for rituals are of different sizes, but the shapes of the masks are similar. These bronze masks represented by the longitudinal eye mask group, are the most characteristic of the Sanxingdui cultural relics, and one of the most spiritual and cultural connotations of the cultural relics since they are the earliest and largest group of masks unearthed in China. The overall shape of the longitudinal eye mask gives people a sense of shock, the most unique is its protruding eyes. It is speculated that the bronze longitudinal masks may symbolize the sun god "Candle Dragon" in ancient Shu mythology, and the longitudinal eyes emphasize the divine power of his eyes and the yearning for divine power. On the other hand, according to Records of Huayang Kingdom, "There is Marquis of Sichuan whose eyes are longitudinal, and began to call himself a king." The bronze mask here may symbolize the ancestor of ancient Shu people, Silkworm Cong, whose longitudinal eyes may reflect the special worship and belief of ancient Shu people on the first king. Some scholars believe that the society of Sanxingdui was under the control of sorcerers and theocratic rule although Sanxingdui culture and Yinshang culture were in the same period, which reflects that Sanxingdui culture was closer to Liangzhu culture in East China based on the level of social development and functioning mechanism. Also, the bronze and copper seals excavated in the ship coffin burials in the 1950s, and are cast with a large number of symbols different from the ancient Chinese writing system in the Central Plains. These seals, often intricately designed, were likely used for administrative purposes, indicating a well-organized society with a system of governance. The presence of such artifacts suggests that the ancient Bashu people may have developed a sophisticated culture with a strong emphasis on ritualistic and ceremonial practices. Followings are bronze inscriptions, copper seals, lacquer inscriptions and pottery symbols in Chongqing, the western Sichuan Plain and the southern Sichuan Basin, as in Hunan and Yunnan Province. The patterns and symbols on various types of excavated bronzes, jades and potteries record the lifestyles, religious beliefs and artistic achievements of the ancient Shu people. These symbols are formed when the people of ancient Shu try to express abstract spiritual beliefs and social structures with the help of concrete and tangible symbols. This figurative transformation not only helps us understand the connotation of ancient Shu culture but also provides rich empirical materials for semiotic research. Moreover, the Sanxingdui site, with its rich array of artifacts, continues to be a focal point for understanding the cultural and spiritual life of the ancient Ba Shu region. The combination of tangible and intangible symbols found at the site offers a unique glimpse into the values, beliefs, and technological advancements of this enigmatic civilization. The ongoing excavations and research

at Sanxingdui promise to reveal even more about the intricate tapestry of life in ancient China, shedding light on the connections between different cultural regions and the evolution of early Chinese civilization.

## 5. Conclusion

The distinction between tangible and intangible symbols is rooted in their physical presence. Tangible symbols, such as the knotted rope used by early humans, have a material medium that carries meaning. Intangible symbols represent the abstract and spiritual values of a culture, reflecting the emotions and cultural connotations of the people. In the context of the ancient Ba Shu region, intangible symbols are exemplified by the bronze masks of Sanxingdui. These masks, used in rituals, are notable for their similar shapes but varying sizes. The relatively distinctive feature of these masks is their protruding eyes, which are believed to symbolize the sun god in ancient Shu mythology. This feature emphasizes the divine power of the eyes and the people's yearning for such power. The Sanxingdui culture, which coexisted with the Yinshang culture, is thought to have been under theocratic rule, with sorcerers playing a significant role in society. This cultural framework aligns more closely with the Liangzhu culture of East China, indicating a similar level of social development and functioning mechanisms. In conclusion, the study of tangible and intangible symbols in the Sanxingdui culture reveals a rich tapestry of spiritual and cultural significance. The bronze masks, with their profound symbolic meanings, offer a glimpse into the ancient Shu people's beliefs and societal structure, highlighting the intricate relationship between material artifacts and intangible cultural heritage.

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