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## Integrating Thai and Chinese cultural symbols in contemporary painting: A cross-cultural artistic creation model

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### Abstract

This study aims to develop a cross-cultural artistic creation model that integrates Thai and Chinese cultural symbols in contemporary paintings. It addresses the need for a methodological synthesis that bridges traditional art-historical scholarship and design-oriented approaches to preserve cultural heritage while fostering innovative practices. Adopting a qualitative research design, this study employs comparative visual analysis, cultural semiotics, and interpretive methodologies. Traditional Thai and Chinese paintings were analyzed in terms of their symbolic repertoires, aesthetic philosophies, and narrative structures. Semiotic interpretation was applied to decode recurring symbols, such as the lotus, naga, dragon, and phoenix, and to explore their roles as dynamic signifiers in both traditions. The analysis reveals both convergence and divergence between Thai and Chinese symbolic systems. Thai paintings emphasize narrative pedagogy, vibrant polychromy, and Buddhist cosmology, whereas Chinese paintings prioritize contemplative abstraction, monochromatic harmony, and Daoist-Confucian philosophy. The findings demonstrate that cultural symbols function as living mediators linking heritage, ethics, and identity and can be hybridized to form a coherent intercultural visual language. This study proposes the Anzhi model, a cross-cultural creative framework that positions cultural symbols as semiotic bridges between tradition and innovation. This model contributes theoretically to semiotic and symbolic culture studies and practically to the design of strategies for intercultural artistic creation. The proposed model provides actionable guidelines for artists, designers, and educators to embed cultural meaning into contemporary visual arts, thereby supporting cultural continuity, global dialogue, and sustainable creative practices aligned with SDGs 11 and 16.

**Keywords:** Chinese painting, Cross-cultural artistic model, Cultural semiotics, Qualitative research, Thai painting.

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## 1. Introduction

The historical and aesthetic links between Thailand and China form a highly interwoven cultural nexus that developed over centuries through politics, religion, and the arts. From a geopolitical perspective, the two kingdoms established centralized monarchical institutions that influenced sociocultural dynamics and legitimized artistic production. Tributary connections between Siam and different Chinese Dynasties not only facilitated diplomatic exchanges, but through this diplomatic protocol, they promoted the circulation of motifs, imagery, and symbols; on the one hand, the export of Buddhism Theravada from Thailand (and of Mahayana from China) fertilized a common spiritual vocabulary, albeit filtered through different doctrinal templates. Thai temple murals often depict story cycles from the Jataka tales, while Chinese Buddhist art mixes Indic cosmologies with Daoist and Confucian elements, resulting in hybrid iconography. This is a clear example of symbolic convergence, a theory of scholarly interest that encourages differences to find common symbolic not-coming meaning while still retaining localized meaning.

Economically and ecologically, rice cultivation underpins civilizational imaginaries of fertility and abundance, symbolized artistically through depictions of water and agriculture. Trade routes, particularly the Silk Road and maritime Nanyang Corridors, facilitated the diffusion of pigments, techniques, and stylistic paradigms. This aligns with the cultural diffusion theory, which emphasizes the translocation of semiotic codes across time and space [1]. Artistically, Chinese shanshui landscape painting and Thai mural traditions encode ecological consciousness and metaphysical notions of human–nature connectivity. Symbols such as the lotus, dragon, elephant, and peony operate not only as ornamental motifs but also as ontological and ethical carriers embedded in visual form. In the contemporary globalized context, these shared symbolic repertoires provide fertile terrain for intercultural artistic innovation, rendering Thai–Chinese artistic dialogue both historically resonant and relevant to present-day cultural discourse.

Cultural symbols function beyond ornamental motifs; they constitute a sophisticated visual language system through which societies articulate cosmologies, identities, and collective memories. Within the semiotic paradigm, symbols are not static but dynamic carriers of multilayered meanings capable of generating both denotative and connotative dimensions in artistic discourse. For instance, the lotus in Asian art denotes a natural form but connotes purity, transcendence, and spiritual awakening, operating simultaneously as a botanical element and a cultural archetype.

As a visual language, cultural symbols facilitate what Geertz termed “thick description,” wherein symbols embody not only material representation but also contextualized social values [2]. In Thai mural paintings, cosmological diagrams and Jataka narratives operate as pedagogical codes that convey Buddhist ethics across generations. In Chinese ink painting, bamboo and plum blossoms convey ethical ideals of resilience and integrity, serving as culturally legible “visual metaphors.” From the perspective of communication studies, cultural symbols enable intercultural intelligibility and function as semiotic bridges across cultural boundaries. Their reiteration in artistic practice ensures continuity, whereas their reinterpretation affirms contemporary art’s adaptability. This aligns with Hall’s framework of representation, in which meaning is socially constructed and circulated through signifying practices such as advertising [3]. Consequently, cultural symbols are indispensable not only for preserving heritage but also for enabling innovative artistic dialogues in globalized contexts.

While the body of scholarship on Thai and Chinese works of art is rich and complex in various art historical studies, much of this research is still grounded in descriptive historiography, stylistic chronology, and iconographic interpretations. Art history, in its traditional mode, should see itself as primarily concerned with the diachronic development of forms and techniques, and thus should involve detailed catalogues of motives, schools, and aesthetic genealogies. While such approaches are extremely useful in recording the development and transformation of artistic traditions, they frequently isolate symbols into independent static things, far from the real dynamism of current creative praxis. Conversely, design research has increasingly emphasized the functional and communicative potential of visual elements within applied contexts, situating symbols as part of semiotic systems that operate in broader fields of cultural production. However, design studies have seldom engaged rigorously with the historical depth and philosophical substrata of Asian visual traditions, resulting in what Manovich terms a “cultural analytics gap” between quantitative visual analysis and interpretive art-historical inquiry [4].

This epistemological bifurcation has generated a significant lacuna; few studies have attempted to integrate the rigorous contextual grounding of art history with the methodological pragmatism of design. Accordingly, Thai and Chinese art and cultural symbols are reduced to static heritage historicizing items or to designing mechanical motifs with no deeper semiotic meaning. To fill this gap, it is necessary to conduct a methodological synthesis to make cultural symbols immanent to their own historical genealogies, while transfiguring them as active agents in modern design practices. This would allow for a more complete unification of visual language, ideally bridging the long *durée* of art history with the forward-thinking innovation of design integration.

This qualitative research project investigates the confluence of Thai and Chinese cultural signifiers in visual form, mediated through the lens of contemporary painting. Based on these art-historical and semiotic perspectives, as well as a design-integration perspective, the following three specific objectives were achieved.

- *To conduct a comparative visual and semiotic analysis of traditional Thai and Chinese paintings in relation to cultural symbols.*

This entails examining the aesthetic, thematic, and technical dimensions of temple murals, natural motifs, and narrative compositions to reveal both their convergence and divergence. Through a semiotic lens, this study interprets how visual forms signify religious, ecological, and philosophical values within their respective contexts [5].

- *This study explores strategies for integrating Thai and Chinese cultural symbols into contemporary artistic practices.*

By tracing the circulation of symbols such as the lotus, dragon, elephant, and bamboo across cultural and historical boundaries, this study identifies design pathways for transforming heritage-based symbols into active components of cross-cultural artistic creation. This objective responds to calls for embedding cultural semantics into design and communication studies [6].

- *To develop a cross-cultural artistic creation model grounded in Thai and Chinese symbolic traditions.*

The model synthesizes insights from comparative art history and qualitative design research, positioning cultural symbols as epistemic mediators that connect heritage and innovation. This responds to the need for methodological integration in art and design research, where symbols are recontextualized as dynamic agents in both theoretical and applied practices.

Collectively, these objectives aim to overcome the epistemological bifurcation between art and historical scholarship and design integration by situating cultural symbols within a dual framework: as historically situated signifiers and contemporary design resources that drive cross-cultural artistic innovation.

## **2. Literature Review**

The literature on the confluence of Thai and Chinese cultural symbols in modern painting includes suitable publications from diverse fields, such as art history and cultural studies, as well as semiotics and design research. Such work has shown the richness of symbolic traditions within both cultures, as well as the historical flow and ebb of their exchanges across religious, political, and economic networks. Nonetheless, the degree of critical engagement with these traditions varies across disciplines: art historians tend to focus on their chronological and stylistic evolution, whereas design theorists, communication scholars, and semioticians concentrate on the semiotic and pragmatic roles of visual displays. This split has led to a fragmented body of knowledge that needs to be synthesized further. This review is structured along five thematic lines. The first studies are cross-cultural research in China and Thailand, with a focus on the historical movement of symbolism and art exchanges. The second focuses on contemporary paintings, especially globalized reinterpretations of traditional genres. The third section discusses traditional Thai and Chinese paintings in historical and artistic contexts. The fourth thread is the symbol of culture as a mediator of social, religious, and philosophical content. The response test ends with the defense of the theoretical construction of this project through the examination of the contributions of other theories, such as semiotics and symbolic culture, and the justification of a discussion that helps to articulate the concept that guides the work.

### *2.1. Cross-Cultural Research between China and Thailand*

Cross-cultural research between China and Thailand reveals a long-standing network of cultural exchanges shaped by diplomacy, religion, trade, and the transfer of art. Historical accounts highlight the tributary relations between the Siamese kingdoms and successive Chinese dynasties, which not only reinforced political reciprocity but also enabled the circulation of religious and artistic motifs [7]. Within this framework, Buddhism was a critical conduit for symbolic diffusion. Theravada Buddhism in Thailand and Mahayana Buddhism in China developed distinct visual languages, yet both incorporated shared cosmological references that became legible across cultural boundaries.

Artistic evidence underscores the hybridization of motifs. Thai temple murals depicting Jataka narratives frequently incorporate compositional strategies reminiscent of Chinese pictorial conventions, such as landscape spatialization and floral embellishment. Conversely, Chinese religious paintings absorbed Southeast Asian iconographies through maritime routes and monastic networks, exemplifying the term “visual hybridity” [8]. These processes demonstrate that cultural symbols do not migrate unchanged but undergo transformation, negotiation, and resignification in different socio-historical contexts.

Theoretically, these are examples of cultural hybridity theory, which acknowledges the formation of new semantic repertoires beyond simple origins or influences from intercultural encounters. This may be especially true in the context of contemporary art, where Thai and Chinese painters have historically enmeshed visual grammar to articulate novel aesthetic syntheses that transcend cultural boundaries. After all, even if there is extensive source material concerning the social, diplomatic, and religious contacts between Jesuits and Chinese, previous accounts do not deal systematically with artistic hybridization as an analytical problem, which allows further qualitative research on the way in which cultural signs are semiotically reappropriated in the production of cross-cultural artistic works.

### *2.2. Contemporary Paintings*

In discussing contemporary painting, we stand confronted by discourse that has been fundamentally altered as a result of globalization, digitization, and the postmodern shift. Theorists claim that there currently exists a “painting as play” which no longer belongs to one aesthetic model, but to several ways and symbolic dictionaries, in which pictorial practices do not feel as plethoric. This plurality confounds the conventional (national) borderlines between “high” and “low” forms of culture, allowing paintings to incorporate personal emblems, “outsider” art, and various visual idioms in a transnational context.

In Asian contexts, contemporary painters frequently re-appropriate traditional motifs, not as static heritage artifacts but as dynamic resources for critical engagement with identity, politics, and spirituality [9]. For instance, contemporary Chinese painters have reinterpreted classical ink techniques through abstraction and conceptual art strategies, whereas Thai painters have incorporated mural symbolism into canvases that address issues such as modernization, globalization, and cultural memory. Such practices exemplify what Smith describes as contemporaneity—the coexistence of multiple temporalities and cultural perspectives within a single artistic field [10].

Contemporary painting has also been theorized as a site of cultural translation, wherein symbols migrate across contexts and acquire new meanings [11]. This makes painting not only an artistic but also a semiotic practice that negotiates inherited traditions and emergent global discourses. The recontextualization of Thai and Chinese cultural symbols in contemporary art aligns with broader debates in visual cultural studies, highlighting the role of paintings as both a medium of preservation and a platform for innovation.

### *2.3. Thai and Chinese Traditional Painting*

Thai and Chinese traditional paintings represent two of the most enduring visual traditions in Asia, each rooted in distinct cosmological frameworks yet sharing affinities in symbolic richness and didactic purposes.

Chinese painting (*guohua*) has developed a sophisticated ink-and-brush system that emphasizes brushstroke vitality (*qiyun shengdong*) and literary aesthetics. From the Tang and Song dynasties onward, *shui* (mountain–water) landscapes became metaphysical reflections of Daoist and Confucian philosophies, depicting the harmony between humanity and nature. Symbolism was central: bamboo, pine, and plum blossoms became metaphors for moral virtues, whereas the dragon and phoenix embodied imperial authority and cosmic balance. The literati tradition framed painting as both a medium for aesthetic refinement and a vehicle for philosophical cultivation [12].

In contrast, traditional Thai paintings are characterized by vivid colors, linear ornamentation, and narrative density. Temple murals (*phap phra phutthachao*) often depict Jataka tales, Buddhist cosmology, and local folklore. Compositions are typically structured by hierarchical spatial registers rather than perspectival depth, producing a visual grammar that conveys ethical lessons and reinforces the Buddhist doctrine [13]. Decorative motifs such as the lotus, *kinnari*, and *naga* function simultaneously as religious symbols and markers of Thai cultural identity. The “golden lacquer” (*lai rod nam*) technique further illustrates the integration of material craft and spiritual symbolism in the Thai art.

While Chinese painting favors monochromatic ink tonality and philosophical abstraction, Thai painting emphasizes chromatic vibrancy and narrative pedagogy. However, both traditions foreground cultural symbols as semiotic vehicles of collective memory and spiritual guidance. This complementarity highlights the potential for cross-cultural artistic integration, in which symbolic repertoires serve as dynamic resources for contemporary reinterpretation [9].

### *2.4. Cultural Symbols*

Cultural symbols operate as a visual-semiotic infrastructure that mediates collective memory, moral order, and aesthetic forms. Rather than being inert emblems, symbols regulate social boundaries (e.g., purity/impurity), encode ritual efficacy, and scaffold meaning-making in images and objects. In Cassirer’s symbolic philosophy, such forms are not merely representational but world-constituting, shaping how communities perceive, value, and act. Painters mobilize these symbolic forms to stabilize their identities while enabling new interpretations [14].

At the semiotic process level, symbols are dynamic signs whose meanings emerge through culturally learned conventions and conceptual mappings. Conceptual metaphor theory explains how visual forms (lotus, dragon, elephant) recruit entrenched mappings, such as purity is a lotus or strength/royalty is an elephant, to condense complex values into legible motifs [15]. These meanings are stabilized and transmitted through cultural memory, wherein recurrent images and rites maintain durable repertoires across generations [16].

Asian art offers canonical cases of symbol–value coupling in its art. In Buddhist visual culture, the lotus synthesizes doctrinal purity and awakening, functioning as both a denotation (botanical form) and a connotation (soteriological ideal) [17]. In the Thai context, elephants oscillate between state symbolism and ethical pedagogy, including metaphoric idioms and courtly/royal semiosis [18]. In Chinese visual traditions, peonies index prosperity and auspiciousness, but also travel across religious communities (e.g., Hui Islamic art), evidencing transcultural resignification [19].

In contemporary practice, symbols act as designable semiotic resources, and their compositional salience (scale, position, color, and framing) can be re-specified to negotiate heritage and innovation. The social-semiotic grammar of images clarifies how artists orchestrate representational, interactional, and compositional meanings to recontextualize cultural symbols without erasing their historical depth [6]. Critically, ritual theory reminds us that symbolic efficacy is not purely pictorial; it is performed and renewed in liminal passages, where forms acquire force through patterned practice.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the divergence and convergence between Chinese and Thai religious symbolism in traditional paintings. Chinese works (Figure 1) privilege ink-based lines, tonal subtlety, and philosophical abstraction, in which deities are rendered with restrained chromatic palettes and meditative gestures aligned with Daoist and Mahayana Buddhist metaphysics. In contrast, Thai pieces (Figure 2) emphasize polychrome intensity, linear tracery, and narrative complexity, portraying the Buddha, mythic creatures, and cosmological imagery with bold colors capable of instructing in a didactic narrative according to Theravada Buddhism.

Nevertheless, both traditions deploy religious figures and natural symbols (the Buddha, lotus, and *devas*) as semiotic pegs that support the weight of ethical teachings, ritual enactment, and cultural distinctiveness. This relationship of complementarity implies that through the language of meditative minimalism, Chinese painting encodes the spiritual world; however, in Thai painting, through an extravagant narrative, we are engaged with moral universes. Together, they form a binary canon of symbolic devices available for synthesis in contemporary intercultural artwork.



**Figure 1.**  
Chinese Religious Symbols.

Figure 1. Selected examples of Chinese religious symbols depicted in traditional paintings illustrate Buddhist iconography and cultural motifs.



**Figure 2.**  
Thai Religious Symbols.

Figure 2. Selected examples of Thai religious symbols in traditional murals and decorative paintings illustrate Buddhist narratives, mythological figures, and ritual iconography.

**Table 1.**  
Comparative analysis of Thai and Chinese traditional painting symbols, styles, and meanings.

| Aspect                 | Thai Traditional Painting  | Chinese Traditional Painting  |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Symbolic Repertoire    | Buddha, lotus, naga, kinnari, celestial deities  | Buddha, lotus, dragon, phoenix, bamboo, plum blossom  |
| Visual Style           | Polychromatic intensity; flat hierarchical spatial registers; linear ornamentation             | Monochrome ink tones; dynamic brushwork ( <i>qi yun sheng dong</i> ); landscape spatialization ( <i>shan shui</i> ) |
| Narrative Function     | Didactic storytelling of Buddhist Jataka tales, cosmology, and folklore                        | Philosophical reflection on harmony, Daoist/Confucian values, meditative spirituality                               |
| Iconographic Role      | Decorative motifs (lotus, naga, kinnari) serve as both religious and cultural identity markers | Literati symbols (bamboo, plum, pine) as moral metaphors; imperial motifs (dragon, phoenix) as cosmic order         |
| Aesthetic Philosophy   | Emphasis on color vibrancy and narrative density; pedagogy through visual drama                | Emphasis on brush vitality and abstraction; cultivation of inner virtue through contemplative minimalism            |
| Semiotic Function      | Symbols as didactic tools embedding Buddhist ethics and communal identity                      | Symbols as philosophical mediators linking human, nature, and cosmos  |
| Contemporary Relevance | Provides resources for narrative-rich reinterpretations in modern art                          | Provides resources for abstraction, minimalism, and philosophical symbolism in contemporary practice                |

Source: Compiled by Author (2025) based on a visual analysis of traditional artworks.

2.5. Related Theories and Research

A growing body of scholarship positions visual symbols not as inert ornaments but as semiotic operators that structure perception and meaning. Social-semiotic accounts of images specify a “grammar of visual design” framing, salience, vectors, and modality that artists and designers mobilize to encode power, affect, and cultural stances. For the present study, this grammar furnishes analyzable lever composition, gaze, and perspective that can be systematically mapped to Thai–Chinese symbols as signifiers in contemporary painting. Complementarily, iconological and pictorial-theory perspectives underscore how images “act” in culture and how even technical conventions, such as linear perspective, operate as historically situated symbolic forms [20]. Taken together, these frameworks legitimize the project’s analytic move from motif to meaning to compositional rule.

Ritual theory provides a second line of inference. Rather than treating rituals as rote formulas, theorizes ritualization as a strategy of differentiation that produces and polices cultural boundaries, which are often visualized through iconography and spatial ordering [21]. In parallel, work in material and visual religion demonstrates how images do not merely represent the sacred but also generate presence through embodied seeing the “sacred gaze” and through the

sensorial mediation of objects [22, 23]. For painters, this literature clarifies how the palette, surface, and spatial rhythm can performatively stage rites, such as auspicious thresholds and purity/impurity partitions within a single pictorial field.

Cultural memory studies provide a third pillar, explaining how symbols endure and travel. Assmann's notion of cultural memory articulates long-duration systems (texts, monuments, and images) through which groups preserve their identities. Erll synthesizes this into a transdisciplinary account of memory's media, while Ricoeur's hermeneutics of memory/forgetting problematizes how communities narrate the past [16, 24, 25]. Warburg's Mnemosyne project and Belting's image anthropology further emphasize the agency of images in carrying affective-historical "pathos formulas" across epochs [26]. For contemporary painting, these insights justify the montage, citation, and reenactment strategies that activate shared Thai–Chinese reservoirs of remembrance.

Finally, research on visual metaphors and material culture clarifies how paintings can re-map cultural schemas. Visual-metaphor analysis offers operational criteria for identifying cross-domain mappings in images, while Appadurai's "social life of things" frames symbols as things-in-motion, whose meanings are reconstituted as they circulate across communities and economies. Within the Thai–Chinese context, this underwrites the study's design interventions: recombining dragon-lotus, cloud-wave, and dharmic geometry into new yet culturally legible pictorial metaphors calibrated for contemporary publics.

Synthesis for this study. The integrated framework operationalized here (i) reads motifs as semiotic resources structured by visual grammar, (ii) stages ritualized relations thresholds, containers, and auspicious directions through compositional procedures, and (iii) curates mnemonic resonance via a citational montage. This three-way alignment provides analytic reliability (code-able features), cultural validity (ritual semantics), and communicative potency (memorial affect), thereby supporting a qualitative methodology for crafting contemporary paintings from Thai–Chinese cultural symbols.

### **3. Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology to investigate the integration of Thai and Chinese cultural symbols within contemporary paintings. Unlike quantitative approaches, which rely on measurement and statistical generalization, qualitative methods are particularly suited to interpretive analysis of images, narratives, and symbolic meanings. By combining perspectives from art history, semiotics, and cultural studies, this methodology foregrounds the role of cultural symbols as epistemic mediators bridging heritage and innovation. The process is structured around four, interrelated components. The first section introduces the research design and context of the study within a comparative interpretive framework. The second emphasis is on the visual analysis of selected works of art and a study of their formal, stylistic, and compositional qualities. The third involves semiotic interpretation, decoding cultural signs as multilayered signifiers that open up religious, philosophical, and aesthetic signification. The fourth section explores cross-cultural communication paths and situates the interaction between Thai and Chinese symbols where they meet and differ in contemporary artistic expression. These methodological elements are expected to lead to analytical depth, cultural validity, and theoretical soundness through the construction of a coherent theoretical model for cross-cultural painting creation.

#### *3.1. Research Design*

The research design followed a qualitative, interpretive framework oriented toward comparative and cross-cultural analysis. Unlike positivist approaches that prioritize generalization, this study adopted an exploratory design [27], enabling nuanced interpretations of Thai and Chinese cultural symbols within their historical and aesthetic contexts. The study design was based on two methodological axes.

*Comparative Dimension:* A systematic juxtaposition of Thai and Chinese traditional paintings was undertaken to identify points of convergence and divergence in symbolic repertoires, visual styles, and narrative strategies. This comparative logic grounds research in art historical depth while facilitating intercultural insights [28].

*Interpretive Dimension:* Symbolic motifs are analyzed not merely as artistic decorations but as semiotic resources that convey religious, ethical, and cosmological values. Through hermeneutic interpretation [29] this study seeks to reveal the layers of meaning embedded in cultural symbols and their potential for recontextualization in contemporary paintings.

By combining these dimensions, the research design ensured theoretical rigor and cultural validity. The ultimate purpose is not only to document symbolic similarities and differences but also to build an integrative model that positions Thai and Chinese visual traditions as dynamic resources for cross-cultural artistic creation.

#### *3.2. Visual Analysis*

The visual analysis in this study employs a qualitative, semiotic-oriented approach to examine the formal, stylistic, and compositional properties of traditional Thai and Chinese paintings in relation to cultural symbols. Following Tate, et al. [30] visual methodologies are not limited to descriptions but involve systematic strategies for interpreting how images produce meaning. This requires attention to multiple levels of analysis.

*Formal and Stylistic Features:* Attention is paid to line, color, texture, tonality, and spatial organization. In Chinese ink painting, emphasis is placed on brushstroke vitality (*qi yun sheng dong*) and landscape spatialization (*Shashui*). For Thai mural paintings, the analysis focuses on polychromatic intensity, narrative layering, and ornamental motifs.

*Iconographic Content:* The analysis decodes recurring motifs such as the lotus, naga, kinnari, dragon, and phoenix, considering how they operate as semiotic markers of religious, philosophical, or political values. This step draws on iconographic and iconological methods to situate symbols within broader cosmological and ethical frameworks.



*Compositional Grammar:* Following Kress and Van Leeuwen [31] visual grammar is used to examine salience, gaze, framing, and perspective. This explains how symbolic components regulate viewers' attention, organize narrative hierarchies, and assemble intercultural meaning.

Through this layered analysis, visual evidence is systematically coded, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of cultural symbols, not simply as contingent motifs but as constitutive parts of a semiotic system that mediates between Thai and Chinese aesthetic traditions.

### 3.3. Semiotic Interpretation

The semiotic interpretation in this study is grounded in the classical and contemporary traditions of semiotics, treating cultural symbols as dynamic signifiers whose meanings are historically and culturally situated. According to Łozowski [32], a sign is composed of a signifier (form) and a signified (concept), a binary structure that illuminates how motifs such as the lotus or dragon acquire symbolic significance beyond their literal referents. Peirce's triadic model of icon, index, and symbol further enriches this perspective by clarifying the multiple modalities through which visual forms signify: the lotus as an icon of a botanical form, an index of ritual purity, and a symbol of enlightenment [33].

Barthes [34] this study decodes cultural symbols across two layers of meaning: denotation (the literal image, e.g., a dragon) and connotation (the cultural associations of power, prosperity, and cosmic balance). In this regard, Thai murals and Chinese ink paintings are interpreted as semiotic systems, wherein symbolic elements function as mythologies, thus naturalizing cultural and religious ideologies into a visual form. Eco [5] theory of unlimited semiosis further underscores the open-endedness of interpretation, allowing symbols to generate new meanings in contemporary artistic practice.

Within this framework, semiotic interpretation is not merely descriptive but hermeneutic: symbols are read as layered signifying practices that negotiate between heritage (tradition) and innovation (contemporary reinterpretation). Thus, the lotus, naga, dragon, and phoenix are treated not only as decorative motifs but also as epistemic mediators, shaping cross-cultural communication and enabling Thai–Chinese artistic dialogue.

### 3.4. Cross-cultural Communication Pathways

The final methodological approach is to explore cross-cultural channels of communication, with an emphasis on how Thai and Chinese cultural symbols intersect, translate, and gain significance in recent paintings. Building on Hall's work on representation and Hannerz's work on cultural flow, this reading theorizes symbols as mobile signifiers that traverse cultural terrain to carry new meanings in new contexts.

*Tracing Symbolic Circulation:* Identifying how motifs such as the lotus, dragon, naga, and phoenix migrate between Thai and Chinese artistic traditions through historical trade, religious networks, and diplomatic exchanges.

*Analyzing Processes of Translation and Transformation:* Examining how these motifs are adapted, hybridized, or resignified when embedded in different aesthetic systems. For instance, the Thai lotus is a cosmological marker in mural paintings, while in Chinese art, it signifies purity and spiritual enlightenment.

*Modeling Intercultural Integration:* This section proposes a cross-cultural creation model in which symbols are reinterpreted as semiotic bridges, enabling dialogue between Thai and Chinese traditions while accommodating contemporary global aesthetics.

This path emphasizes cultural symbols as objects of heritage and simultaneously as communicative devices that encode values in the responding society and enable them to be articulated in an intercultural discourse of art. The methodological design is attentive to historical specificity and contemporary relevance, consonant with recent scholarly engagement with cultural hybridity and transcultural visibility [8].

## 4. Results and Analysis

The results and discussion present the findings guided by comparative visual analysis, semiotic interpretation, and qualitative data. Instead of treating works or cultural symbols as standalone elements, the analysis demonstrates the interplay between Thai and Chinese traditions, represented through identical motifs, different aesthetic methods, and shifting roles as symbols. The module comprises four integrated parts. The first is a comparative analysis that discusses the similarities and differences between Thai and Chinese artistic practices. The second examines symbolic functions by analyzing how recurring motifs operate across the religious, philosophical, and aesthetic dimensions. The third incorporates artist interviews and perspectives, providing qualitative evidence from practitioners to validate and enrich the interpretive framework. Finally, the fourth section presents a cross-cultural synthesis, integrating insights into a conceptual model that positions Thai–Chinese cultural symbols as active resources for contemporary artistic creation. Together, these components ensure that the analysis moves beyond the description of theoretical interpretation and methodological innovation.

### 4.1. Comparative Findings

This comparative analysis of traditional Thai and Chinese paintings demonstrates significant differences and similarities in their systems of symbols, styles, and aesthetic attitudes. For example, as illustrated in Table 1, Chinese paintings are inclined toward monochromatic ink tonalities, brushstroke energy, and philosophical abstraction, expressing Daoist and Confucian notions of cosmological equilibrium (Figure 1). Thai paintings (Figure 2), on the other hand, emphasize polychromatic coloring, linear detail, and narrative depth and are utilized as pedagogical and didactic tools within the Theravada Buddhist tradition.

Despite these differences, several symbolic motifs overlap across traditions. The lotus operates as a cross-cultural signifier of purity and enlightenment, although in Chinese contexts, it often embodies spiritual transcendence, while in Thai

murals, it functions as a cosmological anchor within the Buddhist cosmology. Similarly, the mythological beings Chinese dragon and Thai naga both signify power and protection, yet the dragon reflects imperial and cosmic order, whereas the naga embodies spiritual guardianship and ecological symbolism.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate these comparative patterns. Chinese representation places the gods in meditation-friendly, sparsely populated landscapes, while Thai representation arranges figures and symbols within spatial registers by quoting moral and cosmic lessons. These observations indicate that if Chinese art favors nuanced meditation, Thai art engages in didactic narratives. Thus, taken together, they reveal a system of closely integrated yet independent signifiers: the potential for a diverse and multitalented set of works of recent cross-cultural reinscription.

#### 4.2. Symbolic Functions

The symbolic functions of the key motifs of the lotus, naga, dragon, and phoenix demonstrate the complex semiotic operations by which Thai and Chinese paintings transmit religious values, encode cultural memories, and articulate aesthetic philosophies. These motifs are not passive decorations but active signifiers that mediate cosmology, morality, and identity.

*Lotus (Purity and Enlightenment):* In both Thai and Chinese contexts, the lotus symbolizes purity emerging from impurity and embodies the Buddhist path to enlightenment. Thai murals deploy the lotus as a cosmological anchor within the Jataka narratives and temple architecture, reinforcing Theravada teachings. In Chinese painting, the lotus conveys transcendent spirituality and the Confucian–Daoist ideal of harmony, functioning as both an icon of botanical form and a metaphor for moral virtue.

*Naga (Guardianship and Ecology):* In Thai tradition, the naga serves as a spiritual guardian, protecting temples, sacred water, and the Buddha. Its serpentine imagery encodes ecological symbolism that links natural forces with a cosmological order. In contrast, naga imagery is less prevalent in Chinese visual culture; however, serpent-like beings appear in Daoist cosmologies as elemental guardians.

*Dragon (Power and Cosmic Order):* In Chinese art, dragons are central symbols of imperial authority, cosmic energy (qi), and auspicious power. Its presence signifies sovereignty and cosmic balance, aligning human order with celestial law. In the Thai context, the dragon is less dominant but is sometimes integrated through Chinese cultural contact, where it hybridizes with local mythology.

*Phoenix (Renewal and Harmony):* The phoenix (Feng Huang) in Chinese tradition symbolizes renewal, the balance of yin–yang and benevolent governance. They are usually depicted in coiled formations, with dragons representing cosmic coherence. In Thai art, the phoenix is not as important; as such, the figures produced are derived from equivalent mythological birds, such as kinnari or Hongsa, which embody the same values of beauty, transcendence, and moral exemplarity.

Together, they operate as semiotic moorings linking the sacred and social. Their recurrence in visual traditions underscores the use of symbols to maintain ethical guidance, ritual power, and cross-cultural exchange; thus, they serve as helpful tools for cross-cultural development in the arts.

**Table 2.**

Comparative analysis of Thai and Chinese traditional painting symbols, styles, and meanings.

| Aspect                 | Thai Traditional Painting   | Chinese Traditional Painting  |
|------------------------|---|---|
| Symbolic Repertoire    | Buddha, lotus, naga, kinnari, celestial deities                   | Buddha, lotus, dragon, phoenix, bamboo, plum blossom  |
| Visual Style           | Polychromatic intensity; linear ornamentation; narrative layering | Monochrome ink tones; brushstroke vitality ( <i>qi yun sheng dong</i> ); landscape <i>shan shui</i> |
| Narrative Function     | Didactic storytelling (Jataka, Buddhist cosmology)                | Philosophical contemplation (Daoist/Confucian harmony)  |
| Iconographic Role      | Decorative motifs (lotus, naga, kinnari) as identity markers      | Literati motifs (bamboo, plum, pine) as moral metaphors   |
| Aesthetic Philosophy   | Vibrant colors, narrative density, pedagogical drama              | Abstraction, minimalism, cultivation of inner virtue  |
| Semiotic Function      | Symbols as didactic tools embedding ethics                        | Symbols as philosophical mediators linking human cosmos   |
| Contemporary Relevance | Resource for narrative-rich reinterpretations                     | Resource for abstraction and symbolism  |

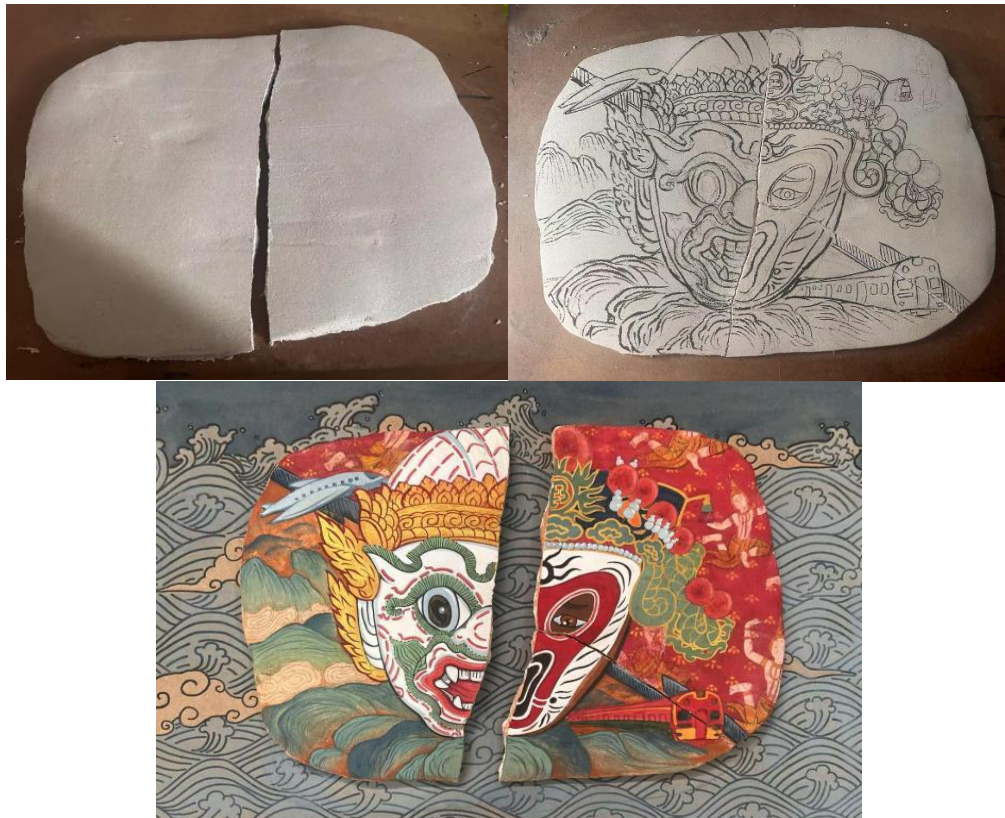
The integration of Thai and Chinese symbol repertoires can also be demonstrated through modern re-interpretation. As Images 3 and 4 indicate, such collaged iconography reconciles the Thai khon mask visage with decorative Chinese patterns as signifiers of difference from those of sameness. The process of painting demonstrates how symbolic functions of traditional iconography may develop into hybrid modalities of visual communication.

Figure 3. The artwork combines Thai khon mask iconography with Chinese decorative motifs, symbolizing intercultural dialogue and the principle of “unity in diversity.” This composition demonstrates how cultural symbols from two traditions can coexist within a single visual frame, creating new semiotic meanings.





**Figure 3.**  
Unity in Diversity: A Thai–Chinese Hybrid Mask Imagery.



**Figure 4.**  
Unity in Diversity: Painting Process of the Thai–Chinese Hybrid Mask.

Figure 4. The sequence illustrates the transformation from a blank clay surface to a completed hybrid mask, highlighting how Thai and Chinese symbolic elements are gradually integrated through drawing, detailing, and colorization. This procedure highlights the reinterpretation of cultural signs in interculturally unified artwork.

Figures 3 and 4 exemplify the hybridization of Thai and Chinese symbolic repertoires in contemporary art. Composite mask imagery merges the Thai khon mask (guardian figure) with Chinese decorative motifs, producing a semiotic bridge that unites the two cultural traditions. From a Peircean perspective, the mask can be viewed as an icon of theatre legacy, an index of ritual shield, and a symbol of intercultural communication. In addition, the painting process (Figure 4) is a manual verification that the conventional iconographic symbols can be expanded imaginatively and interpreted into a hybrid visual language, which is expressed from sketch to colorization and imbibes the concept of unity in diversity. In this respect, the work illustrates cultural signs in dynamic operation, not simply as frozen artifacts but as living material with which to create meaning across Thai and Chinese cultures.

#### *4.3. Artist Interviews and Perspectives*

Based on qualitative interviews with Thai and Chinese artists, the strategic deployment of identified symbolic cultural motifs in current canvases, proposed as a result of conscious acts of appropriation, transfer, and mixture, is presented. Instead of perceiving the symbols as stable, tropic signifiers, the artists specifically articulated the symbology as living, dynamic semiotic matter for expressing conceptions of subjectivity, cultural perpetuity and global conversation.

Several Thai artists have highlighted the pedagogical function of symbols, noting that motifs such as the lotus and naga are deployed to connect audiences with Buddhist ethics, while simultaneously allowing for creative experimentation with

color and form. One Thai muralist stated, The naga is not only a guardian of the temple but also reminds us of our relationship with water and the environment. When I paint today, I try to show both its sacred and ecological meanings.

Chinese artists have underscored the philosophical depth of traditional motifs, such as the dragon and phoenix. A Beijing-based painter remarked: “The dragon is not just about imperial power; for me it is about balance between heaven and earth, and how we humans must find our place within it.” Others have emphasized the adaptability of ink painting, suggesting that brushwork vitality (*qi yun sheng dong*) enables the continuous reinvention of cultural symbols for modern audiences to appreciate.

Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate that artists from both traditions regard symbols as living links between the past and present. This is because the testimony of their stories reveals what I theorize in methodological terms as a non-inert formation of culture, a resource for innovation that mediates a cross-cultural semiotic dialogue, a form of mediation that accords with the larger aims of this study.

#### 4.4. Cross-cultural Synthesis

The synthesis of the findings suggests that Thai and Chinese cultural symbols are not discrete visual stimuli but interrelated elements within an overarching cross-cultural semiotic network. A comparison (Table 1, Figures 1-2) showed different priorities in Thai paintings, insisting on didactic narrative and chromatic intensity, while Chinese painting accounts for philosophical abstraction and ink-based minimalism. Despite their differences, symbolic functions converge on shared symbols, motifs such as the lotus, naga, dragon, or phoenix, which serve as semiotic anchors in both traditions. The testimonies of artists contributed to confirming these and emphasized that the symbols are still living energies for creative work and do not only pertain to the past.

Allowing these convergences to emerge, a cross-cultural integration model comprising three interacting dimensions is as follows.

*Symbolic Anchoring:* Denoting common spiritual and ethical values through the recognition of primary symbols (lotus, naga, dragon, and phoenix).

*Narrative–Philosophical Complementarity:* Leveraging Thai art’s narrative pedagogy and Chinese art’s contemplative abstraction to generate hybrid visual strategies.

*Dynamic retextualization:* Positioning cultural symbols as adaptable resources that can be reconfigured in response to contemporary global aesthetics while retaining their cultural resonance.

The above synthesis indicates that traditional painting traditions from Thailand and China offer a rich sum of symbolic, stylistic, and cognitive tools for contemporary painting practice. Consequently, in the model, the semiotic bridges in question are cultural symbols, heritage, intercultural dialogue and innovation in graphic and visual design.

The findings of this study underscore the dynamic role of Thai and Chinese cultural symbols as semiotic resources that preserve historical memory and enable innovative artistic production. By situating motifs such as the lotus, naga, dragon, and phoenix within comparative, semiotic, and cross-cultural frameworks, this study demonstrates how symbols function as living mediators between heritage and contemporary creative expression.

*Theoretical Implications:* This semiotic study confirms the stratification of signs suggested by Saussure’s binaries, Peirce’s triads, and Barthes connotations. In both Thai and Chinese paintings, symbols work iconically, indexically, and symbolically, so that they can have polyvalent meanings that are not limited to the original ritual or mystical matrix. These findings align with Bhabha [35] notion of cultural hybridity, showing that cross-cultural artistic exchange generates hybrid forms that negotiate differences while producing new meanings.

*Cultural and Pedagogical Implications:* The widespread recurrence of the same motifs across cultures demonstrates their long-term significance in fostering education and identity. Thai artists focused on the didactic nature of the naga and lotus in conveying Buddhist morality, whereas Chinese artists stressed the cosmological symbolism of the dragon and phoenix as metaphors of reconciliation. These kinds of revelations communicate the significance of cultural symbols as carriers of meaning that preserve the memory and perceptions of generations.

*Design and Practice Implications:* This essay locates Thai and Chinese symbols as semiotic bridges between tradition and modernity, rituals and aesthetics, and local and global heritage. This investigation contributes to semiotic theoretical discourses and strategic principles in graphic and design disciplines, articulating the potential of cultural symbols as agents of innovation in a networked global society.

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## 5. Conclusion and Future Work

This study demonstrates that Thai and Chinese cultural symbols, such as the lotus, naga, dragon, and phoenix, function not merely as decorative motifs but also as semiotic bridges that mediate between tradition and modernity, spirituality and aesthetics, and local identity and global creativity. Through comparative analysis, semiotic interpretation, and cross-cultural synthesis, research has shown how these motifs serve as dynamic resources in contemporary painting and graphic design. Artist interviews further validated that symbols remain alive, adaptable, relevant, and capable of expressing ecological consciousness, ethical pedagogy, and philosophical reflection.

This study has implications for art history, cultural policies, and design practices. This study helps achieve the objectives of the United Nations SDGs by focusing on cultural hybridity and symbolic innovation. In particular:

**SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities** Cultural symbols strengthen community identity, support cultural continuity, and provide resources for sustainable, creative economies.

**SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions** Cross-cultural artistic dialogue fosters mutual understanding, intercultural respect, and symbolic frameworks for peaceful coexistence through art.

**Future Work.** Based on these results, three future research directions should be developed.

**Expanded Case Studies:** Incorporating other South and East Asian visual traditions to strengthen the comparative aspect.

**Digital Integration:** Investigating how cultural symbols transfer from their physical forms to digital art, AR/VR environments, and interactive media to maintain a link between new design practices.

**Community Co-Creation:** Involving local artists, communities, and cultural institutions in participative projects that deploy the proposed integration model in authentic design and learning scenarios.

In conclusion, this study affirms that cultural symbols are not static relics of the past but are active resources for designing a more sustainable, just, and interconnected future.

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