



Visual Semiotics and Lacquer Art Translation: A Study on the Dialectical Relationship between War and Peace in the Chariot and Horse Imagery of the “Chariot and Horse Procession” Painting

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Abstract- This study examines the lacquer painting Procession of Chariots and Horses excavated from Warring States Chu tombs, with the objective of elucidating its visual symbolism and reassessing its relevance within contemporary lacquer art practice. The research is guided by two core questions: first, in what ways does the chariot and horse motif articulate the dialectical relationship between war and peace; and second, how can this imagery be reinterpreted to inform present-day creative approaches. Employing a mixed-methods design, the study integrates qualitative analysis—including literature review, iconographic and semiotic interpretation, and expert interviews—with quantitative audience surveys (n = 30). The findings reveal that the imagery simultaneously embodies connotations of power, military mobilization, ritual order, and aspirations for peace. Audience responses further demonstrate a preference for reinterpretation over replication, with higher acceptance of abstraction, symbolism, and material innovation. The study concludes that the dialectical tension of war and peace may be effectively translated into contemporary lacquer art through strategies of symbolic reconstruction, spiritual continuity, and material experimentation. These insights not only advance the art-historical understanding of Chu lacquer painting but also provide valuable references for cultural heritage preservation, creative industries, and the evolving discourse of “Guochao” design.

Keywords: Chu Tomb Lacquer Painting, Visual Semiotics, Warring States Chu Culture, Contemporary Reinterpretation of Lacquer Art.

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

As a significant artistic expression of Chu culture during China’s Warring States period, lacquer paintings from Chu tombs hold both rare archaeological value and profound cultural and symbolic significance. Among these, the lacquer boxes and vessels unearthed from Tomb No. 2 at Baoshan in Jingmen, Hubei, featuring depictions of chariots, horses, and ceremonial processions, have been regarded as crucial evidence for understanding Chu rituals, social hierarchies, and cosmology (Hubei Sheng JingshaTieluKaogu Dui, 1991; Thote, 1988). The Baoshan lacquer box in particular, decorated with chariots, horses, trees, birds, and human figures in contrasting tones of deep red, orange-red, earth yellow, turquoise, and black lacquer, is often celebrated as a masterpiece of pre-Qin Chinese lacquer painting (Google Arts & Culture, n.d.).

Previous scholarship has revealed that chariot and horse imagery in Chu culture carries dual symbolic significance. On one hand, it functioned as a marker of status and ritual hierarchy, appearing in funerary contexts at sites such as Baoshan and Mawangdui to highlight the social standing of the deceased (Wei, Pintus, Pitthard, & Song, 2011). On the other hand, such imagery was closely tied to warfare and military mobilization, reflecting the centrality of conflict and power in Chu society, as confirmed by archaeological discoveries of large numbers of chariots and horse remains (Wu et al., 2021). More recent art historical and semiotic studies further note that processional depictions often combine martial elements with



ceremonial and cosmological order, suggesting that war and peace in Chu culture are not opposites but coexist within a dialectical framework of ritual and symbolism (Chaffin, 2022).

Despite these contributions, several research gaps remain. First, existing studies often focus on either material-technical analysis or iconographic description, but few have systematically combined visual semiotics with archaeological evidence to explain how imagery simultaneously conveys martial and ritual meanings. Second, the dialectical relationship between war and peace in Chu chariot imagery remains under-theorized, particularly in terms of how audiences—both ancient and contemporary—might interpret such symbolism. Third, while technical analyses have clarified pigments and lacquer layering (Wei et al., 2011), less attention has been given to how these material choices reinforce symbolic meaning. Finally, there is still a lack of frameworks for translating these historical visual codes into contemporary lacquer art practices in a way that balances fidelity to tradition with innovative expression. Addressing these gaps, this study aims to explore, through the lens of visual semiotics, how the imagery of chariots and horses in the “Chariot and Horse Procession” painting embodies the dialectical relationship between war and peace in both form and symbolism. It further seeks to translate this symbolism into contemporary lacquer art practice, thereby revitalizing traditional craftsmanship while contributing new strategies for cultural inheritance and artistic innovation.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Important Research on Chu Lacquer and Craftsmanship Techniques

In recent years, research on the materials, techniques, and decorative imagery of lacquerware and lacquer paintings from the Chu state during the Warring States to Han dynasty periods in China has become increasingly detailed. For instance, Wu, Zhao, Fang, & Dong (2023) conducted cross-section observations, Raman spectroscopy, and thermally assisted hydrolysis/methylation pyrolysis coupled with gas chromatography/ Mass Spectrometry (Py-GC/MS) on lacquer Lian samples spanning the Warring States to Yuan periods. They identified cinnabar as the red mineral pigment applied to lacquer surfaces. While early and late lacquerware exhibited a three-layer structure in their base and intermediate layers, the types of drying oils used underwent changes during the Song and Yuan dynasties. This research provides empirical support for understanding the continuity and evolution of lacquer craftsmanship over millennia.

The exhibition materials from the Hunan Museum, titled *The Flowing Charm of Charcoal and Cinnabar – The Beauty of Lacquerware in the Chu and Han Dynasties*, also point out that numerous lacquerware pieces unearthed from the Chu and Han periods in Hunan feature striking contrasts between red and black lacquer in their surface decoration. These pieces not only exhibit rich ornamental patterns but also center their aesthetic appeal on color and texture.

Furthermore, the application of traditional lacquer painting techniques in contemporary creation has begun to attract attention. For instance, Guan & Dechsubha (2023) in their study “Application of Chinese Traditional Lacquer Techniques in Contemporary Lacquer Painting” examine the relationship between “people, objects, and environment” in lacquer painting art from archaeological and design perspectives. They explore how traditional lacquer techniques are preserved and innovated in contemporary works, providing valuable case studies and methodological references for the “translation of lacquer art” section.



2.2 Visual Semiotics and the Application of Semiotics in Images and Art

Visual semiotics theory has been widely applied to the analysis of images, logos, artworks, and cultural symbols. For instance, in their paper “A Visual Semiotic Analysis of Graphic Chinese Character City and Provincial Logos,” Zhang & Kluensuwan (2022) employed the “representational resource,” “interactive resource,” and “compositional resource” from visual grammar to interpret how graphic Chinese characters and symbolic elements in city and provincial logos construct meaning.

Regarding the integration of traditional art and regional cultural symbols, the article “Traditional Visual Language: A Geographical Semiotic Analysis of Indigenous Linguistic Landscape of Ancient Waterfront Towns in China” This study conducts field investigations and semiotic analyses of handwritten characters, traditional signage, and historical linguistic artifacts within ancient towns. It emphasizes how symbols—including written characters and visual ornamentation—construct “cultural memory” and “regional identity” within the context of visual-linguistic integration.

2.3 Transformation and Cultural Inheritance in Contemporary Lacquer Art

In contemporary art and design practices, traditional lacquer techniques and visual symbols undergo continuous transformation and innovation. A study on “paper-based lacquer paintings” transplants the traditional lacquer art's rich colors and surface textures onto paper, reducing the heaviness and color saturation of conventional lacquer paintings while preserving their semantic and aesthetic impact. Surveys and audience feedback indicate that this innovative form resonates aesthetically, offering new expressive possibilities for traditional lacquer art.

Another example is the study “Construction and Management of Lacquer Painting as a Discipline in Chinese Colleges and Universities.” Through literature analysis and comparison, this paper examines the current status, issues, and challenges of lacquer painting as a college course and academic discipline. Such research helps understand how contemporary lacquer painting education preserves traditional techniques, symbols, and aesthetics while adapting to the demands of modern art, design, and visual culture.

Furthermore, news coverage of local craft inheritors reflects the social significance of lacquer art translation. For instance, reports highlight how lacquer art inheritors in Hunan Province integrate Chu-style lacquer techniques with everyday design, incorporating traditional lacquer decoration into modern home furnishings and artifacts to enhance the tangible presence and practical value of cultural heritage.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

3.1 Research Objectives

- 1) To study and analyze the visual symbolism of the chariot and horse motif in the Chu lacquer painting *Chariot Procession*, with particular attention to its material, compositional, and cultural dimensions.
- 2) To reinterpret the dialectical imagery of war and peace embedded in the motif within the framework of contemporary lacquer art practice, highlighting its relevance to present-day artistic creation and cultural discourse.

3.2 Research Question

This study is guided by the following research questions:

How does the imagery of chariots and horses in the lacquer painting *Traveling by Chariot and Horse* symbolize the dialectical relationship between war and peace in Chu culture?

How can the symbolic imagery of Chu chariots and horses be effectively reinterpreted in contemporary lacquer art?

IV. RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

This study was conducted under the following explanatory hypotheses:

H1: The chariot imagery in “*Traveling by Chariot and Horse*” carries dual cultural connotations of war and peace.

H2: Different audience groups exhibit significant differences in their preferences for “replication” versus “translation.”

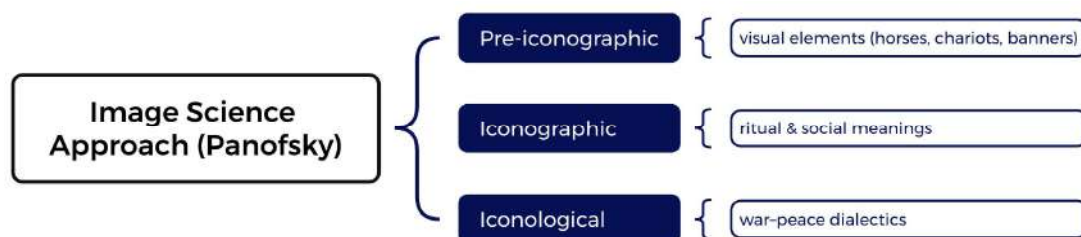
H3: Lacquer art translation can achieve formal innovation while preserving its spiritual essence.

V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study integrates four interrelated theoretical frameworks

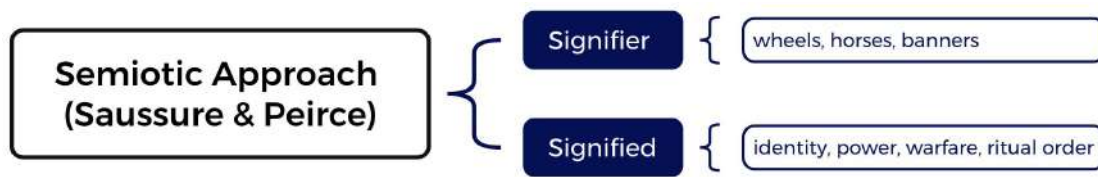
5.1 Image Science Approach

Erwin Panofsky's three-tiered iconographic analysis—pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconographic interpretation—provides the foundational framework for this study. Through pre-iconographic description, one can identify the fundamental visual elements in the “*Horse-Drawn Chariot Procession*” painting, such as chariots, horses, banners, and human postures. Through iconographic analysis, these elements can be understood within the ritual systems and social context of Chu culture to reveal their symbolic meanings; while at the highest level of iconographic interpretation, the dialectical relationship between war and peace inherent in the chariot-horse imagery is unveiled. This approach facilitates the integration of pictorial form with cultural significance, avoiding either purely formal analysis or the mere accumulation of symbols.



5.2 Semiotic Approach

Ferdinand de Saussure's “signifier-signified” theory and Charles S. Peirce's triadic semiotics provide analytical pathways for understanding the symbolic function of the chariot-horse imagery. In the “*Carriage and Horse Procession*,” the wheels, horses, and banners serve as the concrete “signifiers” while simultaneously pointing to the ‘signifieds’ of identity, power, warfare, and ritual order. This semiotic analysis reveals that lacquer paintings transcend mere “pictorial representation,” functioning instead as a cultural coding system that conveys deep-seated social values and worldviews through visual forms.



5.3 Cultural Hermeneutics and Horizon Fusion

Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory of "fusion of horizons" emphasizes that dialogue and integration between cultural contexts of different historical periods can be achieved through understanding and interpretation. In this study, the historical context of the "Chariot and Horses on the Road" painting and the contemporary context of lacquer art practice are not disconnected. Instead, they achieve a fusion across time and space through the creator's reinterpretation. This theory supports the translation of traditional chariot and horse imagery from the historical backdrop of the Warring States period into artistic symbols within the contemporary social context, enabling ancient imagery to gain new cultural vitality.



5.4 Theory of Craft Translation and Cultural Gene Activation

Theories such as "Modern Transformation of Traditional Craftsmanship" and "Activation of Cultural Genes" proposed by Chinese scholars like Wang Shouzhi and Hang Jian provide highly practical approaches for lacquer art practice. Traditional craftsmanship should not be viewed as static "ancient relics," but rather as "cultural genes" capable of being activated and reborn through contemporary design language. In the lacquer art adaptation of "The Procession of Chariots and Horses," this means more than mere formal replication. It involves "translating" the symbolic meanings of war and peace into visual expressions that resonate with contemporary audiences—preserving the spiritual core while embodying innovative value.



VI. METHODOLOGY

This study combines qualitative research and practical experimentation to balance theoretical depth with artistic innovation. Qualitative methods include literature review, iconographic and semiotic analysis, field observation, and expert interviews, aiming to uncover the semiotic significance of chariot and horse imagery and its dialectic of war and peace. The practical component employs lacquer art experiments to reconstruct symbols such as chariots, horses, and banners, exploring the regeneration of traditional imagery in contemporary contexts.



6.1 Data Collection

a. Research Subjects and Sampling

The study employed a multi-tiered sampling approach encompassing three distinct groups: (1) expert panel comprising archaeologists, art historians, and lacquer artisans (n=6); (2) art student cohort from fine arts academies; and (3) lacquer and traditional craft enthusiasts. The total sample size for audience surveys was 30 participants. Purposive sampling was utilized to ensure all participants possessed relevant background knowledge and could provide informed perspectives on both traditional Chu culture and contemporary artistic practices.

b. Research Tools

This study employed three research tools: (1) literature and image analysis tables to systematically organize sources and visual features; (2) semi-structured interview outlines focusing on Chu lacquer culture, war–peace symbolism, and contemporary innovation.(3) Questionnaire (30 participants, Likert scale)

The questionnaire was administered through online survey platforms between September and October, 2025, with an average completion time of 15-20 minutes. It employed a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree) and was structured into three sections: demographic information, preferences regarding traditional versus contemporary artistic approaches, and evaluations of specific symbolic interpretations in lacquer art.

c. Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis incorporated both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitative analysis of literature, visual materials, and interview transcripts employed thematic analysis to identify core symbolic patterns related to war, peace, power, and ritual order. Quantitative analysis of the 30 questionnaire responses utilized descriptive statistics including frequency distributions and percentage calculations to elucidate audience preferences concerning replication versus reinterpretation and realistic versus abstract stylistic approaches.

6.2 Data Analysis

Data analysis combined qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitative analysis of literature, images, and interview materials identified core symbols of war, peace, power, and order. Quantitative analysis of 30 audience questionnaires, using a 5-point Likert scale with frequency and percentage distributions, revealed preferences regarding replication versus translation and realism versus abstraction.

VII. RESEARCH HAS FOUND

The research findings are grouped into three main thematic clusters :

7.1 Cultural and Symbolic Dimensions

Through iconographic and semiotic analysis, it becomes evident that the chariots, horses, banners, and ceremonial processions depicted in the “Chariot and Horse Procession” are not merely a straightforward representation of ritual protocols. They also embody the dialectical relationship between ‘war’ and “peace” within Chu culture. On one hand, chariots and horses symbolize power and military mobilization, highlighting the Chu state’s military expansion and social order during the Warring States period. On the

other hand, these elements within ceremonial scenes project an atmosphere of order and harmony, suggesting social stability and visions of peace. This duality of symbols demonstrates that war and peace were not mutually exclusive in Chu culture, but rather achieved tension and equilibrium through visual artistry.

7.2 Audience Feedback Level

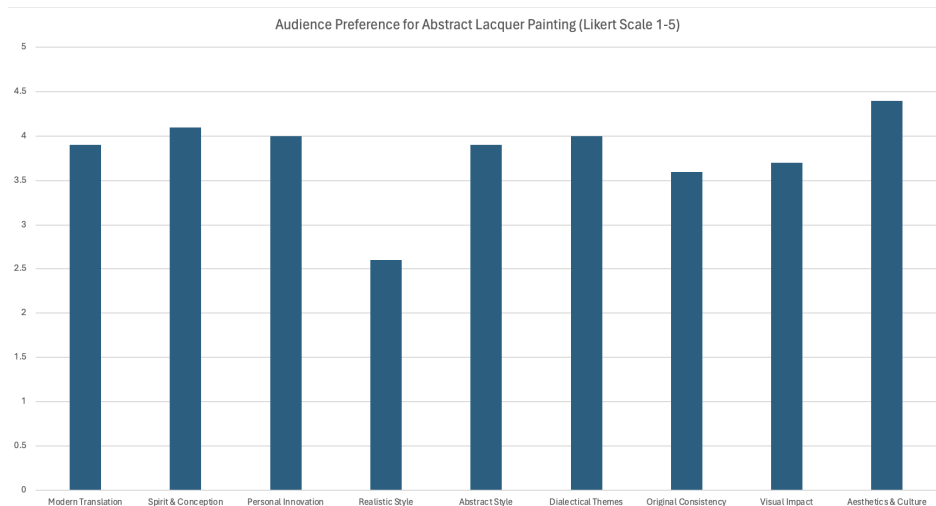


Figure 1: Audience preference scores for abstract vs. realistic styles

Table 1: Detailed survey results across all dimensions

Audience Feedback Data Table				
No.	Survey Dimension	Specific Question	Average Score (1-5)	Level
1	Modern Translation	Prefer modern translation over simple reproduction	3.9	Agree
2	Spiritual Expression	Should emphasize continuation of spirit and artistic conception	4.1	Agree
3	Innovative Elements	Incorporate personal innovation while retaining cultural symbols	4	Agree
4	Style Preference	Prefer realistic style (Reverse scored)	2.6	Disagree
5	Abstract Value	Abstract/symbolic style better reflects cultural connotation	3.9	Agree
6	Thematic Depth	Should express dialectical relationship between war and peace	4	Agree
7	Traditional Constraints	Colors, lines and composition should match original (Reverse scored)	3.6	Agree
8	Visual Impact	Focus more on visual impact than historical accuracy	3.7	Agree
9	Comprehensive Quality	Should balance aesthetic appeal with cultural depth	4.4	Strongly Agree
1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree				

Survey data reveals a clear preference among audiences for the creative concepts underpinning abstract lacquer painting. Quantitative results, summarized in Table 1, show that “abstract style embodying cultural connotations” scored 3.9 out of 5, indicating a solid level of agreement. By contrast, “preference for realistic style” received only 2.6 points, highlighting a marked divergence in stylistic acceptance. This contrast is visually represented in Figure 1, which illustrates the overall preference distribution across stylistic dimensions.

Furthermore, “continuation of spiritual essence” earned 4.1 points, reinforcing the value audiences place on spiritual and conceptual inheritance beyond formal replication. “Modern reinterpretation” and “personal innovation” received 3.9 and 4.0 points respectively, reflecting moderate yet consistent support for creative transformation of traditional motifs. Notably, “balancing aesthetic appeal with cultural depth” scored the highest among all dimensions, at 4.4 points, underscoring its recognition as a crucial criterion in contemporary lacquer art practice.



These findings align with Gadamer's concept of the "fusion of horizons," where traditional symbols are revitalized through contemporary interpretation. The data corroborate that audiences are not only open to but affirm an artistic approach that merges abstract visual language with cultural continuity, thereby supporting the theoretical and practical direction of this study.

VIII. DISCUSSION

This study reveals the dialectical relationship between war and peace embodied in the chariot imagery of the "Chariot and Horse Procession Painting." This not only responds to the functional interpretation of Chu lacquerware within ritual systems and social order but also further expands the connotations of visual symbols in Chu culture. Findings indicate that contemporary audiences tend to interpret traditional imagery through abstract and symbolic translation, aligning with Saussure's (1959) "signifier-signified" semiotic framework and Peirce's (1931) triadic semiotic model. The emphasis on spiritual continuity among audiences validates Gadamer's (2004) concept of "fusion of horizons," suggesting that cultural revitalization can be achieved through reinterpretation—a dialogue between traditional and modern contexts. Simultaneously, the audience's appreciation for material texture, craftsmanship, and "handmade traces" corroborates theories proposed by Chinese scholars on "cultural gene activation" and "contemporary transformation of traditional craftsmanship" (Wang Shouzhi, 2012; Hang Jian, 2015). Therefore, this study argues that the contemporary translation of lacquer art should center on its spiritual core, leveraging material authenticity and symbolic innovation as fulcrums to achieve the regeneration and value continuity of traditional art in contemporary society.

IX. CONCLUSION

The lacquer painting "Procession of Chariots and Horses" from the Chu tomb, with its stylized figures, grand narrative, and symbolic elements, presents the social hierarchy, ritual norms, and aesthetic pursuits of Warring States Chu culture. Through documentary analysis, close image examination, and questionnaire surveys, this study reveals the painting's artistic value and cultural significance while reflecting contemporary audiences' recognition and acceptance of traditional symbols. Findings indicate that the "Chariot and Horse Procession" not only symbolizes the status and power of Chu nobility during the Warring States period but also offers valuable insights for contemporary cultural heritage preservation and national trend design.

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