

Toward a Theoretical Framework for Multimodal IP Design with ICH Symbols: The Case of Southeastern Chongqing Earthenware

Mengqi Fang¹, Lei Su^{2*}

¹Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, Chongqing 400053, China

²Chongqing Normal University, Chongqing 401331, China

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Abstract: This study examines earthenware from southeastern Chongqing to develop a theoretical framework for integrating intangible cultural heritage (ICH) symbols into multimodal IP design. Grounded in semiotics and visual communication theory, it analyzes the roles of ICH symbols in brand-oriented IP design and the pathways for their innovative application. Based on a systematic literature review, the paper articulates a three-part framework—symbol extraction, visual translation, and multimodal dissemination—and applies it to a case analysis of the pottery’s form language, color composition, and cultural connotations. The findings indicate that ICH symbols embody substantial cultural value and aesthetic features; semiotic decoding enables the distillation of core elements, visual communication methods support modern reinterpretation and image reconstruction, and multimodal dissemination broadens application contexts and impact. The framework promotes the creative transformation and innovative development of ICH and offers theoretical guidance and practical pathways for regional branding and national image building.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage (ICH) symbols; multimodal IP design; semiotics; visual communication; southeastern Chongqing earthenware

Online publication: August 26, 2025

1. Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) constitutes vital cultural symbols that carry regional historical memory and spiritual values. Amid the rise of the “Guochao” (China-chic) trend and growing cultural confidence, integrating ICH symbols into brand-oriented IP design not only supports the creative transmission of tradition but also contributes to place branding and national image building. Through systematic planning and visual articulation, IP design turns cultural themes into recognizable identities that can circulate across media; a multimodal IP approach further spans visual, auditory, and narrative channels to achieve holistic shaping and amplify communicative impact. In recent years, practical efforts to develop ICH into IP have proliferated, yet theoretical research remains insufficient^[1]. Using earthenware from southeastern Chongqing as a case, this paper constructs a framework of “symbol extraction–visual translation–multimodal dissemination,” analyzes its formal language, color scheme, and cultural connotations, and summarizes pathways and theoretical models for the modern transformation of ICH symbols, offering methodological and practical references for

ICH-oriented IP design.

2. Literature Review

As the integration of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) with the cultural-creative sector deepens, an increasing body of research focuses on how to transform traditional cultural symbols into modern IP forms. On the one hand, practical explorations show that ICH symbols can empower brands and yield distinctive cultural IPs. For example, People's Daily has noted that early development often remained at the level of simple pattern extraction and replication, whereas current practice emphasizes deeper cultural expression and multi-dimensional innovation pathways. Typical cases include incorporating ICH elements such as Beijing-Opera facial makeup and auspicious cloud motifs into automobile exteriors to create "Peking-Opera IP editions," indicating that ICH symbols are breaking through traditional boundaries toward fashionable, youth-oriented, and everyday expressions. On the other hand, the academy has begun to synthesize experience with the IP-ization of ICH symbols. Taking Nantong blue calico as an example, Yin Yue and others examine the innovative integration of ICH elements into IP character design, analyzing how patterns and colors are embedded in costumes and accessories and demonstrating market potential through derivative IP products (Liu et al., 2024)^[2]. Studies suggest that traditional craft patterns can be implanted as visual symbols in IP imagery to confer cultural connotation and recognizability, thereby achieving the modern transformation and value enhancement of ICH. In addition, some scholars focus on the IP-ization of minority legends: Liu Ning and Sun Yujun, adopting a semiotic-semantics approach, distilled cultural symbols from the Mulao legend of the White Horse Goddess into a symbol library for IP design and, using Panofsky's three-level iconological analysis, explored new avenues for translating minority mythic symbols into IP imagery. Collectively, this literature indicates that extracting archetypal imagery from ICH symbols and recombining it through semiotic analysis and contemporary design methods constitutes the main pathway in current ICH-oriented IP design. However, most existing studies remain case-driven, with insufficient discussion of underlying theoretical frameworks—especially a lack of systematic research on multimodal dissemination.

Design Theory Foundations from Semiotics and Visual Communication. Semiotic theory provides an essential framework for understanding and designing cultural symbols. Saussure's classic signifier–signified model posits that a sign consists of an external form (signifier) and an internal meaning (signified), whose union constitutes the sign's full meaning^[3]. In design practice, the extraction and application of symbols amount to a process in which designers select, organize, and translate visual elements so that audiences can clearly grasp the intended information and affect. Cassirer famously argued that "man is a symbolic animal," and that cultural creation and transmission rely on symbolic thinking^[4]. Accordingly, traditional cultural patterns and totems, sedimented over time, have become symbols that carry specific connotations. Visual communication focuses on conveying meaning and aesthetic value through visual sign systems; in the modern rearticulation of ICH symbols, designers must balance "form" and "meaning," that is, outward formal beauty and inward cultural implication. Recent studies propose concrete methodologies for symbolic translation: Zhang Yuting et al. (2024) argue that innovation in traditional pattern design can proceed from three angles—extraction of constituent elements, articulation of value connotations, and innovation in design applications—thereby enabling the transformation of traditional symbolic patterns into contemporary design. This entails, first, analyzing the basic elements and formal principles of traditional symbols; second, excavating and expressing their cultural values in design; and third, integrating new media and application scenarios to revitalize traditional symbols with contemporary vitality and industrial value^[5]. Research by Yu Guitao and colleagues on the cultural genes of Qianjiang earthenware likewise shows that cultural-creative design can adopt techniques such as reduction and generalization, realistic simplification, and exaggerated emphasis to artistically process traditional vessel features, creating elements that are both ethnically distinctive and fashion-forward. In sum, semiotics offers theoretical support for extracting and interpreting traditional symbols, while visual communication provides methodological support for symbolic reconstruction and aesthetic presentation. Combining the two enables a theoretical framework to guide ICH-symbol IP design that remains faithful to cultural connotations while meeting

contemporary aesthetic and multimodal communication requirements.

3. Theoretical Framework Construction

This paper proposes a multimodal IP design framework for ICH symbols comprising three core stages: symbol extraction, visual translation, and multimodal dissemination. Grounded in semiotics and informed by visual communication methods, the framework is intended to guide the systematic transformation of ICH symbols from traditional contexts into contemporary IP forms. First, in the symbol extraction stage, ICH symbols are decoded from the perspectives of signifier and signified; their historical origins, symbolic meanings, and aesthetic characteristics are analyzed to distill typical forms, motifs, color schemes, and formal principles (e.g., symmetry, balance, proportion, rhythm). The underlying cultural values and emotional connotations are further excavated to ensure design materials that are accurate and culturally substantive^[6].

Building on this foundation, visual translation reshapes symbol images through techniques such as reduction, simplification, and exaggeration so that they preserve cultural connotations while meeting contemporary aesthetic and application needs; for example, the extraction of ICH image elements based on visual recognition and generative design highlights the feasibility and effectiveness of these methods^[7]. Multimodal dissemination then extends the finalized IP forms across print, digital, and spatial media, while endowing them with narrative backgrounds and personae to form a cross-media communication matrix that broadens audience reach and cultural impact—an approach already evidenced in applications of digital art and generative AI to ICH design and communication^[8]. Throughout dissemination, authenticity must be maintained to avoid meaning drift caused by over-commercialization. In sum, symbol extraction serves as the foundation, visual translation as the core, and multimodal dissemination as the safeguard; together they constitute a complete pathway for ICH-symbol IP design and provide the theoretical basis for the subsequent case analysis of southeastern Chongqing earthenware.

4. Case Study: IP Design Transformation of Symbols in Southeastern Chongqing Earthenware

Southeastern Chongqing earthenware—an outstanding representative of traditional hand-made pottery in the Wuling Mountain area (inhabited largely by Tujia and Miao peoples)—has a transmission history of over a thousand years. Its production technique (the pottery-making technique of Shijituo in Zhuoshui, Qianjiang District) has been inscribed on the Representative Items List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Chongqing Municipality^[9]. Using locally specific clay and white sandstone as raw materials, artisans combine hand modeling and wheel throwing, followed by natural drying, glazing, and firing in wood-burning kilns, thereby preserving a complete workflow of distinctive traditional methods^[9]. This ICH item is renowned for its simple forms, light texture, and practical beauty, crystallizing the life wisdom and aesthetic ideals of Tujia ancestors.

4.1. Analysis of Symbolic Features

Southeastern Chongqing earthenware contains abundant symbolic elements and formal language. The following analysis considers vessel form, motifs, color, and craftsmanship.

4.1.1. Formal language

Most earthenware pieces are everyday utilitarian vessels (jars, urns, vats, pots, bowls, etc.), with forms that balance utility and aesthetics. Common types feature broad shoulders, a globular belly, a constricted mouth, and a small base; this profile—tapered at top and bottom with a full midsection—facilitates water storage and stable placement in mountainous environments. Artisans emphasize harmonious proportions; in many traditional pieces, height-to-width and mouth-to-belly

ratios approximate the golden ratio of 0.618, which is believed to impart a natural sense of harmony^[10]. The vessel body often presents graceful curves: in side view a symmetrical “S”-shaped streamline, and in plan view concentric circles, producing rhythmic line combinations. Overall, the forms are plain yet dignified—hefty yet elegant—reflecting the Tujia aesthetic of “unity of heaven and humanity”: honoring material truth and function while seeking consonance with the natural environment.

4.1.2. Decorative motifs

The surface ornament of these vessels is among their most symbolically meaningful elements, condensing emblematic meanings of ethnic culture. Based on survey and synthesis, common Shijituo motifs may be broadly grouped as follows: (1) totemic motifs, such as the Tujia white-tiger totem and solar-deity totem, simplified and applied to vessel surfaces to signify protection and blessing; (2) emblematic/diagrammatic motifs, including the “Four Spirits” (Azure Dragon, White Tiger, Vermilion Bird, and Black Tortoise) and traditional geometric signs such as the cross, the swastika, and broken-line patterns, symbolizing the four quarters of the cosmos and auspicious eternity; (3) auspicious motifs that use figurative images to convey specific meanings—for example, bats signifying fu (good fortune), gourds signifying fu-lu (fortune and emolument), and dragons signifying propitiousness—thus integrating auspicious culture into decoration; (4) plant motifs—such as pine, bamboo, and plum, or the “Four Gentlemen” (plum, orchid, bamboo, chrysanthemum)—to symbolize noble character and refined taste. These motifs are rendered by carving, appliqué, and painting, transforming reverence for nature and aspirations for a good life into direct visual symbols. Layout emphasizes symmetry and filled compositions—rugged yet delicate—exhibiting a strong ethnic artistic style.

4.1.3. Color composition

The color scheme is dominated by natural clay hues and oxidized glazes, yielding an overall palette that is understated and calm. Because local clay fires to gray-black or earth-red tones, the ware carries an unadorned, earthy quality. In traditional practice, some pieces receive partial application of an iron-based bluish-green glaze (“half green glaze”), producing a contrast between gray-green underglaze and brown-yellow overglaze. This partial-glazing technique preserves the rough clay texture while adding a touch of green at the rim or inner wall, enhancing both utility and beauty. In addition, some craft pieces are painted on the biscuit with concise black-red-white patterns, set against the clay body for stronger decorative effect. In sum, the palette is modest rather than flamboyant, with restrained glaze accents against natural clay, embodying an aesthetic of returning to simplicity—consistent with Tujia values that esteem nature and gravitas.

4.1.4. Craft and formal details

In terms of making, Southeastern Chongqing earthenware integrates hand modeling with wheel throwing, yielding forms that combine the expressive quality of hand shaping with the symmetry and regularity of wheel production. As noted in the introduction to the 8th China Intangible Cultural Heritage Expo, “hand modeling is combined with wheel-thrown firing, with the ‘chicken’ of Shijituo as a primary form, producing various folk animal-shaped craft pieces ...”. Certain special vessel types (e.g., pieces named after “chicken” in Shijituo ware) employ sculptural techniques to add animal attachments, heightening three-dimensional sculptural effect. Local artisans are adept at modeling small animals as handles or spouts on jars and pots—for example, chicken-headed ewers, dragon-headed pots, and toad cups—subtly fusing utilitarian vessels with animal imagery to convey auspicious wishes. Such detailing confers a distinctive regional cultural character, making the ware not only everyday utensils but also artworks that carry stories and emotion.

To facilitate an overview of the key design points for Southeastern Chongqing earthenware, **Table 1** summarizes the preceding analysis in a four-column structure—“Dimension–Features–Cultural Connotations–Design Implications.” Drawing on four dimensions—form (broad shoulders, globular belly, constricted mouth), motifs (white tiger, bagua trigrams, bat, geometric patterns), color (gray-black, earth-red, partial green glaze), and craft (hand modeling combined with wheel throwing)—the table distills core cues related to function and aesthetics and offers actionable guidance for

design translation, enabling rapid alignment with IP characters, identity marks, and derivative development (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Overview of Symbolic Features of Southeastern Chongqing Earthenware and Key Points for Design Translation

Dimension	Features	Cultural Connotations	Design Implications
Form	Broad shoulders; globular belly; constricted mouth	Stability; storage utility	Can be abstracted into a geometric silhouette
Motifs	White tiger; <i>bagua</i> trigrams; bat; geometric patterns	Apotropaic (warding off evil); blessing; auspiciousness	Develop as graphic motif “seeds”
Color Palette	Gray-black; earth-red; partial green glaze (<i>ban-qing</i>)	Plainness; veneration of nature	Emphasize a “natural + subtle accents” scheme
Craft	Combination of hand modeling and wheel throwing	Craftsmanship ethos; regional character	Suited to anthropomorphized character design

4.2. IP Design Transformation

Building on the foregoing symbolic features of Southeastern Chongqing earthenware, this study applies the proposed framework to explore pathways for its IP-oriented design.

4.2.1. Symbol Extraction

Identify core symbolic elements and cultural themes from the earthenware. For example, abstract the typical broad-shouldered, globular-belly vessel into a concise geometric silhouette; distill representative motifs from the pottery (e.g., white tiger, *bagua* trigrams, bat) as design seeds and summarize their auspicious, benedictive meanings^[6]. In terms of cultural connotations, concepts embedded in the ware—such as “reverence for nature,” “craftsman spirit,” and a “plain-living aesthetics”—should likewise be extracted, aligning with recent research on the “output of value connotations” in ICH symbol studies^[11].

4.2.2. Visual Translation

When deploying these elements in concrete IP forms, both personified and symbolized approaches may be adopted. For instance, one may design a character whose body contour derives from the earthenware silhouette (“Tutaowa”), with an exaggerated Tujia white-tiger motif integrated into the headpiece, garment patterns sourced from typical pottery motifs, and a colorway featuring clay brown as the main tone accented by touches of bluish green—conveying an image that is at once rustic and lively. Alternatively, one may create a mascot or logo based on a pottery vessel, highly abstracting a jar together with a coiling snake motif to form a fluid line-based icon that communicates the vessel’s typological features while implying protective serpent totemism. Such methods accord with visual communication practices of “simplification–abstraction–recomposition”^[12]. During design development, exaggeration can be used to reinforce the ware’s sturdy, affable form (e.g., emphasizing the rounded “belly” to enhance cuteness and approachability), while simplification can reduce complex ornament so that the IP remains legible at small sizes^[7]. Iterative refinement ensures the IP form expresses the distinctive symbolic aesthetics of Southeastern Chongqing earthenware, aligns with contemporary tastes, and appeals to younger audiences. For clarity, a process diagram is provided to visualize the traditional-to-modern design pipeline—“Original Artifact – Symbol Extraction – Visual Translation” (**Figure 1**).

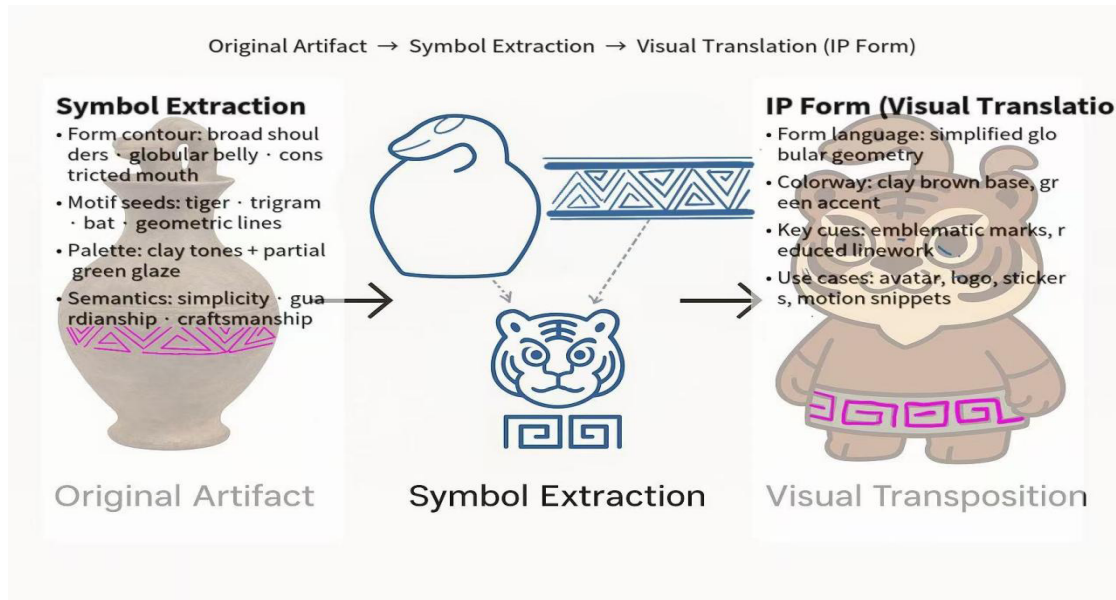


Figure 1. Schematic of IP Design Transformation for Southeastern Chongqing Earthenware

4.2.3. Multimodal Applications

Apply the completed IP image of Southeastern Chongqing earthenware across diverse media and settings to effectively tell the “earthenware IP” story. On one hand, endow the IP with a narrative background—for example, cast it as a pottery spirit from Tujia folklore tasked with transmitting ceramic culture—and embody traits such as diligence, simplicity, and guardianship of the homeland; such narrative framing strengthens the IP’s emotional appeal^[13]. On the other hand, develop a series of derivatives and communication carriers: produce animated shorts or sticker packs themed on the earthenware IP, weaving the making process and cultural lore into the storyline^[14]; design cultural-creative products such as figurines, plush toys, stationery, and apparel to meet the preferences of different consumer segments^[15]; install IP sculptures or photo spots at production-area attractions and transform traditional workshops into immersive experience spaces so that visitors can interact and take photos with the IP, thereby enhancing tourism appeal^[16]. Through online–offline, cross-media integration, increase the exposure and influence of the earthenware IP, promote market conversion of local ICH products, and support rural revitalization and cultural-industry development^[17]. It is essential, however, to uphold respect for ICH in commercial applications—for instance, by inviting heritage bearers to serve as advisors or supervisors—so as to keep the IP aligned with the cultural core of earthenware and prevent symbolic distortion^[18]. Only in this way can the IP of Southeastern Chongqing earthenware truly integrate cultural and economic value and become a successful case of traditional pottery flourishing in the new era.

The above analysis shows that, as a Southwest ethnic ICH symbol, Southeastern Chongqing earthenware provides valuable material for IP design through its rich formal symbols and cultural connotations. Under the guidance of semiotics, systematic extraction and translation, supplemented by multimodal creative communication, can transform this ancient ICH symbol into a vibrant modern IP image^[6]. This case also offers a reference pathway for the IP-ization of other ICH symbols. Numerous ICH elements in Southwest China—such as embroidery patterns, instrumental music and traditional opera, and myths and legends—can follow this approach to achieve creative transformation and innovative development^[19].

5. Conclusion

This study examines multimodal IP design for ICH symbols, integrates semiotics and visual communication theory, and proposes a systematic framework of symbol extraction, visual translation, and multimodal dissemination, validated through the case of Southeastern Chongqing earthenware. The findings show that ICH symbols embody rich formal beauty and

cultural connotations, offering distinctive resources for IP design; semiotic decoding helps grasp cultural essences, visual communication provides pathways for modern reconfiguration, and multimodal strategies secure broad application and impact^[14]. The framework enables designers to achieve creative transformation while respecting tradition, allowing ICH symbols to retain their cultural roots and acquire contemporary vitality.

The theoretical model of IP-ization for Southwest ethnic ICH proposed here has implications for research and practice: (1) emphasize deep cultural interpretation grounded in semiotics to avoid superficial collage; (2) foreground cross-disciplinary design methods, integrating digital modeling, AR, and related technologies to expand modes of expression; and (3) consider the value of ICH IP from the perspectives of cultural soft power and national image building, thereby supporting the dissemination of Chinese aesthetics and international cultural exchange. It should be noted that this study focuses on a single case (Southeastern Chongqing earthenware); other ethnic ICH symbols and multimodal dimensions—such as sound, haptics, and interaction—require further exploration. Future work should curb over-commercialization while strengthening the protection of heritage bearers and techniques to maintain a dynamic balance between transmission and innovation, enabling ICH IP design to drive the sustainable development of national culture^[18].

Funding

This work was supported by the Doctoral Project of the Chongqing Social Science Planning Program (2022), titled “A Study on the Modern Construction Path of Traditional Ethnic Earthenware in the Wuling Mountain Area of Southeast Chongqing” (Project No.: 2022BS101), hosted by Mengqi Fang.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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