Reimagining neo-chinese interiors via the lens of semiotics

Reimaginando interiores neo-chineses através das lentes da semiótica

Reimaginando el interior de China a través de la lente de la semiótica

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ABSTRACT
Globalization has inevitably disrupted the sanctity of the local culture of countries in the world under the impact of dominant foreign culture. Ignoring the preservation of domestic culture will lead to cultural homogenization and loss of identity. Attributable to this, protecting local culture has become one of the most crucial agendas in many countries’ cultural development planning, including China. One of the most potent approaches to this is through design. The emergence of Neo-Chinese interior design in China has created a window to forward new interpretations and meanings while preserving the Chinese culture through contemporary interior design. The study attempts to formulate a new design model by interpreting and conveying meanings of Chinese traditional culture through the material form using semiotics. Meanings from Chinese traditional paintings will be decoded to help formulate the structures for the new proposed model of the Neo-Chinese interior design. They will serve as the research variable and the basis of the study. The outcome of this research can be helpful to Chinese interior designers while also acting as a reference for other countries to maintain and develop the nationality of their design.

Keywords: neo-chinese interior design, semiotics, chinese traditional culture, chinese traditional painting, design methodology.
RESUMO
A globalização inevitavelmente rompeu a santidade da cultura local dos países do mundo sob o impacto da cultura estrangeira dominante. Ignorar a preservação da cultura doméstica levará à homogeneização cultural e à perda de identidade. Atribuído a isso, a proteção da cultura local tornou-se uma das agendas mais cruciais no planejamento de desenvolvimento cultural de muitos países, incluindo a China. Uma das abordagens mais potentes para isso é através do design. O surgimento do design de interiores neo-chineses na China criou uma janela para encaminhar novas interpretações e significados, preservando a cultura chinesa através do design de interiores contemporâneo. O estudo tenta formular um novo modelo de design interpretando e transmitindo significados da cultura tradicional chinesa através da forma material usando semiótica. Significados de pinturas tradicionais chinesas serão decodificados para ajudar a formular as estruturas para o novo modelo proposto do design de interiores neo-chineses. Eles servirão como variável de pesquisa e base do estudo. O resultado desta pesquisa pode ser útil para os designers de interiores chineses, ao mesmo tempo em que atua como uma referência para outros países manterem e desenvolverem a nacionalidade de seu design.

Palavras-chave: design de interiores neo-chineses, semiótica, cultura tradicional chinesa, pintura tradicional chinesa, metodologia de design.

1 INTRODUCTION

Today’s world has entered a new era of economic globalization and cultural diversity. Regional economic exchanges not only bring development opportunities to countries but also impacted the local culture of countries. Since opening herself up to
outside world in 1978, China has been participating in increasing international economic and cultural exchanges. Foreign cultures have progressively influenced the country’s local culture. Many Chinese people have greatly admired mainstream Western culture, resulting in the gradual decline of traditional Chinese culture. In this context, a group of Chinese designers began to integrate traditional Chinese culture into modern designs, aiming to maintain contemporary Chinese design’s nationality and avoid losing local Chinese culture. The Neo-Chinese style emerged in this period and spread widely in the interior design field.

Chinese interior designers often label designs containing forms and elements of traditional Chinese cultural symbols and characteristics as Neo-Chinese. However, when approaching the design containing traditional cultural elements in modern interior spaces, many Chinese designers choose the most superficial ways to frame the decorative elements, focusing only direct and superficial adaptations of traditional symbols and elements within the design. The actual values and meanings of traditional Chinese culture are not accurately translated within them. The outcomes are pompous and artificial. The designs produced are rigid, lacking innovation and inharmonious with the essence of traditional culture within modern forms.

Semiotics is a subject that studies how "signs" create and convey meaning. The core objective of Neo-Chinese interior design is to interpret and represent the connotation of traditional Chinese culture in modern architectural spaces. Hence, from the perspective of cultural interpretation and representation, semiotics would be an ideal theoretical tool for analyzing the process of representing traditional Chinese culture with modern design language in Neo-Chinese interior design.

This paper aims to state the feasibility in applying semiotic theory to Neo-Chinese interior design. Based on this objective, this paper will answer following question: What is the feasibility of applying semiotic theory to Neo-Chinese interior design? To answer the question, this paper makes an analysis to the formation and composition of Neo-Chinese style through the semiotic point of view, and explains why certain semiotic theories are selected to formulate the Neo-Chinese interior design methodology.
2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 PREVIOUS RESEARCHES ON NEO-CHINESE STYLE

Along with the increasing number of Neo-Chinese interior projects, Chinese scholars and professionals began to focus on the study of Neo-Chinese interior style. This theme has become the central attention in the academic circle of Chinese interior design recently. The following is a brief introduction to some relevant research which were published in recent years.

In her paper titled Research on Neo-Chinese Style in Architecture, Zhou (2012) proposed that the Neo-Chinese style should not base their design solely on traditional forms, but explore new interpretation and manifestation of the design by using spiritual and traditional meanings. She believes that the highest stage of Neo-Chinese style designing is innovation, which is the “nirvana” of excellent Chinese traditional architecture. Even though it is one of the earliest papers that discuss the Neo-Chinese style and has certain theoretical foresight, this article only analyzes the characteristics and development direction of the Neo-Chinese style from the architectural vision. It lacks a vision from outside of architecture such as literature, painting, music, drama, clothing, religion, folk customs and so on. Neo-Chinese architecture should not be bound to the influence of Chinese traditional architectural civilization but should look at the whole Chinese traditional cultural system and draw inspiration from it.

Chen Han, in his paper titled Zhonghe Beauty: Aesthetic View of Neo-Chinese Style Design (2016) puts forward that the Neo-Chinese interior design should aim to express the aesthetic pursuit of ancient Chinese literati, namely the pursuit of harmony between man and self, as well as the harmony between man and nature. The Zhonghe Beauty is an aesthetic theory of “neutralization” that values internal harmony and gentleness. It was put forward by Confucius and had greatly influenced the orthodox aesthetics of ancient Chinese society. At the end of his article, Chen draws a conclusion that the aesthetic concept of Zhonghe Beauty is still in the mainstream position in contemporary China (Chen, 2016), which is the reason why the Neo-Chinese style has been flourishing for a long time. Although this article discussed the methods and principles of applying Zhonghe Beauty in Neo-Chinese interior design, there are limitations in his studies, where its basic is still in generalities and its focus is only on one kind of Chinese traditional aesthetic thought.
In his paper titled *The Influence of Chinese Traditional Culture on Interior Design*, Xiong (2019) proposed a method to refine the art form of traditional Chinese poetry, calligraphy, and painting and apply it to interior design. This requires the designer to fully understand the art forms of traditional Chinese poetry, calligraphy, and painting, as well as modern art forms, then harmoniously integrate these elements in their practical designs. For example, traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting emphasize freehand brushwork. Even a few strokes can fully show an artistic conception of concise, which is similar to a well known modernism design concept “Less is more”. Xiong (2019) has shown broad cultural vision, and its innovation lies in taking into account other art categories in traditional Chinese culture except for architectural art. As well as putting forward a constructive idea on how to apply them concretely. However, it is a pity that the author prolongs this idea furthermore.

Zhang siqi, in her paper titled *The Aesthetic Orientation of Song Dynasty Literati Embodied in Contemporary Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design* (2019) points out the formalism that Chinese interior designers often showed in Neo-Chinese interior designs, and advises contemporary Chinese interior designers to learn from the spacial concept of Chinese traditional painting. Zhang (2019) states that compared with the precise of space, the organization and arrangement of position in Chinese traditional painting is a poetic creation. The line of sight in Chinese painting follows the methods of “Three distance”, which are flowing and turning, from high to deep and from deep to near, becoming a rhythmic movement. It is the spatial concept contained in the aesthetic orientation of literary men during the Song Dynasty, and it should be studied by contemporary Chinese interior designers. Zhang’s point of view coincides with that of this paper, but she only proposes a research direction in her paper without carrying out any in-depth theoretical or practical research (Zhang, 2019).

Through the review of the above literature, it can be seen that scholars in the field of Chinese interior design have reached a consensus, that is, Chinese traditional culture is an important content of the study of Neo-Chinese interior design. For how to express Chinese traditional culture in the Neo-Chinese interior, scholars also put forward research ideas and methods from different angles. However, in the existing research results, there are few scholars involved in the research of Neo-Chinese interior design methodology, which is the focus for this paper. By applying semiotic theories, this research will formulate a methodology model for Neo-Chinese interior design to help Chinese interior designers express the essence and charm of Chinese traditional culture in modern interior
2.2 WESTERN STUDY OF APPLYING SEMIOTICS TO ARCHITECTURE

The study of applying semiotics to architecture has gone a long way in the Western world. In fact, the structuralist linguistic view (Puech, 2004) initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure has a profound influence on the generation and development of architectural semiotics. Ever since the introduction of semiotics to architecture in Italy in the late 1950s, a lot of famous architects have developed their architectural theories based on semiotics.

In 1969, Charles Jencks, an American architectural critique who invited semiotics into architecture with English, published his book *Semiology and Architecture*. He stated, the bottom-most concept of semiotics and architecture is that any form in the environment or any symbol in the language is active and can be activated. In 1978, Jencks wrote his book *Post-Modern Architectural Language*. He put forward a series of design principles for modern and postmodern architecture in this book. These principles are equivalent to the rules of linguistic semiotics: the organization of grammar and semantics, and initially formed a scientific thinking method to grasp design rules from the architectural language system. In his essay titled “13 Propositions of Post-Modern Architecture”, Jencks presented that all of the architecture is created and felt through the code (Jencks, 1978), the double code of architecture is a common code that exists between the experts and the folks.

Since 1977, American architect C. Alexander has successively published several notable books that has push forward the idea of semiotics into architecture. Three important books namely *The Oregon experiment* (Alexander, Silverstein, Angel, Ishikawa, & Abrams, 1975, “A pattern language: towns, buildings, construction” (Alexander, 1977) and *The timeless way of building* (Alexander, 1979) explored how to form a complete set of “architectural language”.

In *The Timeless Way of Building*, Alexander argued that architecture should be as unpretentious as nature, what he called its "nameless quality." In achieving this "nameless quality," he proposes a must in creating a dynamic pattern language. Once we have mastered the method of discovering which patterns are alive, we can create language for ourselves through the current building process. Although Alexander's discourse does not directly refer to semiotics, his extensive use of the word "language" in his discussion
reflects that semiotics has widely participated in the analysis of his theories on architecture and city (Alexander, 1979).

2.3 CHINESE STUDY OF APPLYING SEMIOTICS TO INTERIOR DESIGN

Compared with the Western academic circles, semiotics research in China started relatively late and the introduction of semiotics into various fields only gradually emerged at the end of the 20th century. Nowadays, as a methodological science semiotics has been applied by many Chinese scholars in their academic research within many fields, such as linguistics, philosophy, literature, culture, art, communication, folklore, etc. However, semiotics research in the field of interior design is relatively rare. Among them, there are even fewer applied researches that focus on semiotics’ application in Neo-Chinese interior design.

In her paper titled Research on the Leading Role of the Aesthetic Value of Semiotic Form in Current Chinese Interior Design, Liu (2012) puts forward that semiotic techniques can be adopted to communicate emotions and create an artistic atmosphere through interior design. The paper focuses on the abstract and simplified characteristics of symbols and only puts forward the important theoretical guiding value of semiotics for interior design on the forms and design techniques.

In A Study of Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design Based on Semiotic Theory, Zhu (2016) asserts that semiotic theory could provide a novel thinking mode for interior design, and designers could explain the meaning of the interior environment through the selection, planning, arrangement, and combination of symbols. This paper points out the important theoretical value of semiotics for interior design from the perspective of methodological research but only stops here without in-depth study.

Zhang (2017) proposed that interior design involves many products and contents, which is the same as industrial design in her paper titled Research on Interior Design Method under Semiotic Theory. She explained that the colors, materials, plane forms, space structures, furniture, and light environment in interior design will all affect the final result of interior design. This paper analyzes the guiding value of pragmatics and semantics in semiotics toward interior design methods, but lacks in-depth and specific methodological research work (Zhang, 2017).
3 METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative approach based on theoretical research. The study engages fundamental semiotic theories to analyze the ideographic process of Neo-Chinese interior design, using Chinese traditional painting as a sign vehicle. And here, the Chinese traditional painting acts as a representation of the category of traditional Chinese culture. The study will explore the connections and commonalities between them.

Among the various categories of traditional Chinese culture, Chinese traditional painting is one of the most significant visual art categories. The visual image elements presented by it can be intuitively perceived, and the meaning it points to is therefore easy to be interpreted by readers. In his illumination on this subject, Wang (2020) asserts that:

“In the early 19th century, the American semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce believed that images in real society are a kind of symbol, which appear in the form of images and have certain symbolic meanings.”

As one of the most important components of the Chinese traditional paintings, the Chinese literati paintings were created by ancient Chinese literati (You, 2018). Although the themes of these paintings were mainly scenery, figure, or animal, they also contained the aesthetic feelings and worldviews of the artists on the Chinese culture. Moreover, as the elites of past Chinese dynasties, the ancient Chinese painters will inevitably reflect the cultural characteristics of their times in their paintings. For example, Wen Zhengming (a famous representative of the Wumen School of painting in the Ming Dynasty) painted the beautiful scenery of mountains and forests in spring in his famous drawing "Late Spring and High Trees" (shown in Figure 1). Besides showing the natural scenery of the mountain and trees, the painting also shows two persons sitting leisurely on the ground in front of their wooden cottage. In addition to the exquisite artistic expression of the painting, this painting also reflects the cultural and spiritual environment of the Ming society, that is the pursuit of the philosophical thought "Harmony between man and nature" (Fang, 2015). Hence, Chinese traditional paintings can provide visual art materials and philosophical thought nutrients for Neo-Chinese interior design. Based on the above reasons, this paper takes Chinese traditional painting as the variable to help formulate the design methodology model for Neo-Chinese interior design.

However, traditional Chinese culture is comprised of multiple categories including literature, painting, music and so on. It is arduous to do an analysis that covers
all of these cultural categories. This research would only choose selected categories of traditional Chinese culture as the variables, which will be put into the methodology model to realize the aim in this paper. Hence, the applicability of this research's outcome might be limited in some facets, and the application effect can only be predicted theoretically while the variables are changed to other categories of traditional Chinese culture.

Figure 1. “Late Spring and High Trees”, Ming Dynasty, Wen Zhengming

Applying semiotic theories to formulate a methodology model for Neo-Chinese interior design is not to make the designs stylized and dogmatic. In lieu of this, Neo-Chinese interior design is perceived as a symbolic system or a narrative text, which symbolizes traditional Chinese culture. The process of applying semiotic theories to the Neo-Chinese interior design is equivalent to the process of compiling explanatory texts
of the Neo-Chinese style. In this process, the application of semiotic theories can help Chinese interior designers to grasp the theme of design and express it more accurately. It can also help Chinese designers to find the most appropriate designing vocabulary or construction grammar when interpreting traditional culture with modern design language.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 SAUSSURE’S SEMIOTIC THEORY: "SIGNIFIER" AND "SIGNIFIED"

In this research, "Neo-Chinese interior design" and "Traditional Chinese painting" are both studied by using Saussure's semiotic theories. The justification to this approach is based on the view that Neo-Chinese interior design and Chinese traditional painting are both symbolic systems, and they could be read in a structured-like manner. They both have the semiotic characteristics which Saussure named: “signifier” and "signified".

Saussure used a “dyadic” approach derived from ancient Greek and developed by Rene Descartes in his semiotic analysis. The “Dyadic” is a philosophical theory that takes the diverse world as two primordials, independent of each other, existing and developing in parallel. In explaining the double-sided structure of symbols, he drew an analogy: a linguistic symbol is like a piece of paper that has two sides, with the thought as the front and the sound as the back. The front of the paper cannot be cut without cutting the back. So do the two sides of a symbol. Thus, the sign is a bipartite two-sided mental entity, which is composed of concepts and sound. Saussure uses the terms “signified” (concept) and “signifier” (sound) to refer to these two sides, respectively, which form a sign. (Guo, 2008) However, the dyadic approach is not a new idea of Saussure. The conception of ‘Yin’ and ‘Yang’ in traditional Chinese culture was also discussed a lot in the book of ‘Yi Jing’. Therefore, from the ideological basis, the dyadic approach in traditional Chinese culture is the same as that in Saussure’s semiotics. This study uses Saussure's semiotic theory of "signifier" and "signified" to analyze traditional Chinese culture (taking Chinese traditional painting as an example), and also uses this theory to analyze Neo-Chinese interior design. In this way, two dualistic semiotic structures are formed respectively, and the comparative analysis of them is as the diagram shown below.
As shown in Figure 2, the two-dimensional graphic elements such as scenes, objects, and figures in Chinese traditional paintings have the function of expressiveness, which can be understood by the readers. These graphic elements together make up the "signifier" (mental object) as Saussure mentioned, and the concepts they refer to (the picture content and its meaning) are "signified" (mental concept). The Neo-Chinese interior is a modern indoor environment with Chinese aesthetic characteristics, which is constructed with various materials. In Neo-Chinese interior space, all the three-dimensional substantial elements (architectural components, furniture, ornaments, etc.) together make up the "signifier", and the concepts they refer to (the material function and the spiritual function) are the "signified".

The above is a comparative analysis of the semiotic structure of "Chinese traditional painting" and "Neo-Chinese interior" from the overall perspective. If we descend a level and analyze them from the perspective of parts and elements, each element that makes up the Chinese traditional painting and the Neo-Chinese interior can be regarded as a symbol. It is because they all have visual forms (signifier) that can be perceived by people and functions (signified) that refer to certain concepts and meanings. Hence, it can be derived that each Chinese traditional painting is a cluster of symbols that...
is composed of two-dimensional image symbols namely symbolic discourse. As an example of this, the two-dimensional image symbols in traditional Chinese painting mainly include the following types: rocks, trees, clouds and water in landscape painting; Face, body posture, clothes and ornaments in figure painting; Flowers, birds, insects, etc in flower-and-bird paintings. These two-dimensional image symbols are expressed through lines, ink, brush strokes and other techniques, which form the unique artistic style and expression techniques of Chinese traditional painting. Similarly, each Neo-Chinese interior space is also a cluster of symbols which is composed of three-dimensional substantial symbols, namely symbolic discourse.

4.2 ROLAND BARTHES’ SEMIOTIC THEORY: CONNOTATION AND METALANGUAGE

Barthes’ theory involves the process of the reading of signs is very innovative, where his signification approach focuses on culturally significant signs. His works center on interpretations of different cultures or societies, which escalated through the process of the second level of connotation (which brings about “MYTH”). In his book *Mythologies*, Bathes (1972) claims that: “Myth is a peculiar system, in that it is a second-order semiological system.” He explained that in the first system a sign is composed of its image (signifier) and concept (signified). In the second system, the first system becomes a mere image (signifier) that points to the concept (signified) of the second system. Barthes defined the symbolic system as E “expression” (or signifier), R “relation”, and C “content” (or signified). This symbolic system can be one of the components of a more complex symbolic system. If the content of this symbolic system is extended, it (E1, R1, C1) will become the expression part (signifier) of a new symbolic system: E2 (=E1, R1, C1), R2, C2. In this case, the primary symbolic system is denotative and the secondary is connotative. As an example, Barthes (1972) peruses a photograph on the cover of a French magazine showcasing a black African in a French military uniform saluting the French flag, which is C1. But there was another implication (C2) beyond the original symbol: France was a large colonial empire with a loyal black army. The primary symbolic system can also extend its expressive components. In this case, the primary symbolic system becomes the object to be explained, and the secondary system becomes the meta-language, as shown in Figure 3.
According to Barthes' theory of "connotation and metalanguage", any "signified C2" can be resolved to its next level "signifier E1" and "signified C1" and explained by the cluster they constitute. Here, we select the relationship between "ancient Chinese literature", "Traditional Chinese painting" and "Traditional Chinese culture" as research examples to verify the application of Barthes' theory of "connotation and metalanguage", as shown in Figure 4.

Therefore, Barthes' theory of "connotation and metalanguage" can be extended to the "signifier-signified" structure of any symbolic system. In any symbolic system, "connotation" can be understood as how the symbol contains implications beyond the surface meaning. On the contrary, "metalanguage" can be understood as how the complex (multiple) meanings are interpreted by the symbolic codes below. In this research, the formula of "metalanguage" will be used to analyze the "Neo-Chinese style", a symbol...
system that has complex (multiple) meanings and many symbolic codes below it. Meanwhile, to ensure the meaning produced will not go astray, the symbol system will do a cording job here to control the “metalanguage” of the design practice.

Assuming that the formula "Neo-Chinese style = Traditional Chinese culture + Modern design language" is valid, then "Neo-Chinese style" in the formula is regarded as $C_2$—"signified", and "Traditional Chinese culture + modern design language" in the formula is regarded as $E_2$—"signifier". Since $E$ in this formula is composed of two terms, we can decompose it into $E_2 = E_2' + E_2"$. According to Barthes' "connotation and metalanguage" theory, the $E_2'$ and $E_2"$ can be decomposed into the lower metalanguage $C_1' + E_1'$ and $C_1" + E_1"$. Therefore, based on his theory, the semiotic system of the "Neo-Chinese style" is analyzed and shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. The symbolic system of "Neo-Chinese style" - A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Chinese culture + Modern design languages</th>
<th>Neo-Chinese style</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Chinese literature $E_2'$</td>
<td>$C_2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Chinese painting $E_2'$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Chinese architecture $E_2'$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese classical music $E_2'$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Chinese technology $E_2'$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$E_2' + E_2"$

Note:
- $E_2$ is formed by the combination of more than two arbitrary $E_2'$ and $E_2"$ terms.
- Each $E_2'$ or $E_2"$ can be decomposed into $E_1'$, $C_1'$ and $E_1"$, $C_1"$ (Refer to the examples in the diagram 10).

As shown in Figure 5, many branches of cultural categories help to build the Neo-Chinese style. Here, each Chinese traditional culture ($E_2'$) is one of the elements that make up "Chinese traditional culture", and any of them can combine with modern design language ($E_2"$) to form the signifier ($E_2$) in the "Neo-Chinese style" symbolic system. Among these cultural categories, Chinese traditional architecture and Chinese traditional
paintings have the greatest influence on Neo-Chinese interior design. During the past years, many scholars in China had made in-depth research and practice in this field through the view of Chinese traditional architecture. However, these researches are limited to the architectural perspective and seldom pay attention to other categories of traditional Chinese culture. Therefore, this research takes Chinese traditional painting as the entry point and analyzes the relationship between "image" (signifier) and "artistic conception" (signified) based on semiotic theories, as shown in Figure 6. By exploring the law of Chinese aesthetics and arts which is rooted in Chinese traditional paintings, the methodology model for Neo-Chinese interior design will be formulated.

Figure 6. The metalanguage groups of the Neo-Chinese style

According to the former analysis of Saussure’s theory adaptation in Neo-Chinese interior design, it can be sure that the "Neo-Chinese interior" can be regarded as a discourse composed of symbols. Thus, it can also be analysed using Barthes’ theory of Mythology, which is used by him to analyze mythical speech. In his book Mythologies Barthes states that "Myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse. Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message, ... It can consist of modes of writing or of representations: not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all these can serve as a support to mythical speech". (Barthes, 1972) Barthes analyzes textual symbols into two stages: the first stage is called the primary order, which belongs to the natural domain. In this stage, the symbol is in the surface layer, and it
produces the meaning (denotation). The next stage is called the secondary order, which belongs to the cultural domain (Guo, 2008). In this stage, the symbol becomes a mere signifier of a greater symbolic system that will produce connotations and generate the “myth”. Therefore, the “Neo-Chinese interior design” can also be analyzed by Roland Barthes’ theory of Mythology as Figure 7 shows.

Figure 7. The connotation of Chinese traditional painting into Neo-Chinese interior design

Source: author’s own scheme.

Chinese traditional painting contains profound Chinese aesthetics and cultural deposits, which also have a profound influence on other Chinese traditional arts. Based on the Chinese calligraphy, we can see that the strokes of painting are skillfully applied in the strokes, which makes the calligraphy works have both the meaning of the words and the beauty of the picture. In ancient Chinese ceramic decoration, the elements of Chinese traditional painting are often integrated into it to make the ceramic ware both functional and aesthetic. In ancient Chinese architecture and garden design, the composition principle of Chinese traditional painting is often used to guide the spatial
layouts, so that the buildings and gardens conform to the concept of "Harmony between man and nature" in traditional Chinese philosophy. This research will analyze the semiotic similarity and relevance between Chinese traditional painting and Neo-Chinese interior design, to help Chinese designers to build a theoretical bridge for applying "tradition" to "contemporary". Furthermore, semiotics is helpful for Chinese designers to grasp and extract the aesthetic rules and spiritual connotations which are contained in Chinese traditional paintings, and then reproduce them in modern design language.

4.3 HJELMSLEV’S SEMIOTIC THEORY: TWO PLANES OF THE SIGN

This study regards "Neo-Chinese interior design" as a representative symbol containing multiple and complex meanings. As explained earlier, Roland Barthes’ theory of Connotation and Metalanguage has revealed the multiple and complex code structures hidden under the symbol’s surface structure level. Hence, Neo-Chinese interior design can be analyzed by decoding its representation. In this circumstance, the semiotic theory of Louis Hjelmslev’s “expression plane and content plane” can be used to decode the Neo-Chinese interior design from the sense of cultural expression.

Hjelmslev proposed that the internal structure of a symbol consists of two elemental planes, namely, the “expression plane” and “content plane”. The “expression plane” can be divided into two planes: “expression-form” and “expression-substance”, while the “content plane” could also be divided into two planes: “content-form” and “content-substance”. This research adapts the internal structural layers of this theory into the symbolic structure analysis of Chinese traditional painting and architectural interior space. Meanwhile, this research will examine the similarities and relationships between Chinese traditional painting and Neo-Chinese interior design by Hjelmslev’s theory, as shown in Figure 8 and 9, which will assist in constructing the Neo-Chinese interior design methodology.
As mentioned above, Neo-Chinese interior design aims to express the connotation of Chinese traditional culture in modern architectural space. This research takes Chinese painting as the variable to formulate a methodology model for Neo-Chinese interior design. Therefore, here we take an example that we need to express the cultural connotation of a traditional Chinese painting in Neo-Chinese interior design. In this case, we can apply Hjelmslev’s theory to deduce which design elements should be used in the design and how to use them.

As can be seen in Figure 9, the "content substance" of this particular painting is its deep meaning, which covers various information such as the artist's personality, emotions, experience, and cultural background of the era in which he lives. The "content substance" of this painting defines the specific scope of the cultural connotation to be expressed in the Neo-Chinese interior design, and the designer's job is to determine this
scope through the analysis of the "content substance" of this painting. The "content form" of this painting is its surface meaning, which is the concrete expression of the two-dimensional image on the picture. These contents can be used as a reference range for selecting the expression content of visual objects in Neo-Chinese interior design. The "expression form" and "expression substance" of this painting directly or indirectly provide the aesthetic language for the Neo-Chinese interior designers as a reference, influencing the visual aesthetics such as modeling features, color matching, texture, and spatial composition.

5 CONCLUSION

Semiotics is a capable theoretical instrument that would be applied to aid the process of interpreting traditional Chinese culture into modern Chinese interior designs. The approach in constructing a methodological model for Neo-Chinese interior design does not intend to make Chinese interior design stylized and dogmatic. Instead, Neo-Chinese interior design is here seen as a symbolic system or a narrative text, which symbolizes traditional Chinese culture. The process of applying semiotic theories to the Neo-Chinese interior design is equivalent to the process of compiling explanatory texts of the Neo-Chinese style. In this process, the application of semiotic theories can help Chinese interior designers grasp the theme of design and express it more accurately. It can also help Chinese designers find the most appropriate design vocabulary or construction grammar when interpreting traditional culture with modern design language. The following research objective of this research will focus on the formulation of a methodology model for Neo-Chinese interior design.
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