

# *A Semantic Study of Teochew Woodcarving from the Perspective of Semiotics*

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**Abstract:** As a National Intangible Cultural Heritage, the intricate visual motifs of Teochew woodcarving serve as a concentrated embodiment of the regional culture of the Chaoshan area. Existing research has predominantly focused on its craftsmanship and stylistic evolution, leaving a gap in the structural analysis of its internal meaning-making system. This study introduces a semiotic semantic analysis framework. Using a sample of 203 pieces from the Guangdong Museum collection and employing both quantitative statistics and qualitative interpretation, it systematically deconstructs the semantic layers of Teochew woodcarving. The research reveals that its semantic system exhibits a clear dual structure. At the denotative semantics level, its themes can be categorized into seven major groups—floral and botanical motifs, auspicious animals and mythical beasts, decorative patterns, scenes from operas and classics, folktales, Buddhist and Daoist immortals, and river and marine creatures—forming a referential system reflecting the geography, history, and livelihood of the Chaoshan region. At the connotative semantics level, these themes are transformed, through cultural coding rules such as homophony, metaphor, and allusion, into a dense symbolic network centered on the core aspirations for "blessings, prosperity, longevity, joy, and wealth." This network profoundly manifests the collective psychology and value hierarchy of the Teochew folk society. This study provides a semiotic pathway for Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) research, shifting from "formal analysis" to "meaning decoding," and lays a semantic foundation for the contemporary transformation of Teochew woodcarving.

## 1. Introduction

Teochew woodcarving, also known as Gold and lacquer wood carving, is a representative traditional craft of the Lingnan region, inscribed on the National Intangible Cultural Heritage list of China in 2006. While existing scholarship has yielded significant results regarding its historical origins [1], technical documentation [2], and aesthetic appreciation [3], it has often been treated as a static aesthetic object or artisanal specimen. This approach fails to fully reveal its internal logic as an active system of meaning production.

Semiotics provides a key theoretical tool for unraveling this "web of meaning." Ferdinand de Saussure posited that a sign is a union of a signifier (form) and a signified (concept) [4]. Charles W.

Morris further subdivided semiotics into three dimensions: semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics [5]. Semantics, the focus here, concerns the relationship between the sign and what it signifies. In design and cultural studies, meaning is often distinguished between denotation (the direct, referential meaning) and connotation (the associative, symbolic, and emotional values accrued within a specific cultural context) [6]. The recurrent images in Teochew woodcarving are, therefore, not mere decoration but cultural signs carrying specific denotative references and rich connotative meanings.

The core questions of this study are: What are the fundamental semantic units (denotation) within the visual sign system of Teochew woodcarving? How are these units culturally encoded to form a connotative symbolic system that expresses specific values and worldview (connotation)? Addressing these questions constitutes a deep reading of this heritage form itself and serves as a case study responding to the broader question of how folk art participates in socio-cultural construction through visual language.

## 2. Research Methods and Sample

This study adopts a mixed-methods design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. The sample consists of 203 representative pieces cataloged in the Guangdong Museum's publication *Teochew Woodcarving* [7], selected for its authority and systematic coverage.

The research methods include: First, Content Analysis. This involved identifying, classifying, and performing frequency counts on the themes of the 203 pieces to establish an objective framework for denotative semantic categories. Second, Semiotic Semantic Analysis. By consulting local historical records, folklore studies, and related research, this method facilitated a deep decoding of the thematic categories, explaining the mechanism of meaning generation from denotation to connotation, with a focus on analyzing coding rules such as homophony, metaphor, and allusion.

## 3. The Denotative Semantic System: Thematic Classification and Referential Structure

Denotative semantics constitute the foundational layer of signification. Statistical classification of the themes in Teochew woodcarving (Table 1) is the primary step in clarifying its denotative system.

Table 1. Statistical Classification of Denotative Semantics in Teochew Woodcarving Themes (N=203)

No.	Thematic Category	Exemplary Motifs	Count	Percentage
1	Floral & Botanical	Peony, Lotus, Chrysanthemum, Plum Blossom, Grape, Magpie	127	31.3%
2	Auspicious Animals & Mythical Beasts	Dragon, Phoenix, Lion, Qilin, Bat, Deer, Crane	100	24.6%
3	Decorative Patterns	Coin pattern, Fret pattern, Scroll pattern, Interlocking branch pattern, Cloud pattern, Longevity character	59	14.5%
4	Operas & Literary Classics	Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars, Seven Sages Journey to the Capital, Guo Ziyi Celebrates Birthday	37	9.1%
5	Folktales	The Fisherman, Woodcutter, Farmer, and Scholar, Top Scholar in Imperial Examination, Foreigners	34	8.4%
6	Buddhist & Daoist Immortals	Three Stars (Fu, Lu, Shou), Eight Immortals, Liu Hai, Magu	24	5.9%
7	River & Marine Creatures	Crab basket, Fish and Shrimp, Lobster, River Snail	19	4.7%

This system exhibits three characteristic features:

(1) **Hybridity of Origins:** It integrates pan-Chinese cultural motifs (e.g., dragon, phoenix), local legends (e.g., "Seven Sages of Chaozhou"), reflections of unique livelihoods ("River & Marine Creatures"), and products of modern social encounters ("Foreigners"). It is thus a crystallization of cultural sedimentation and localized creation [8].

(2) **Secularity of Themes:** Themes directly related to secular life aspirations dominate (70.4%), revealing the craft's fundamental attribute of serving worldly life.

(3) **Functionality as Identifier:** The choice of theme is often linked to the function of the object. For instance, "River & Marine Creatures" frequently appear on desk ornaments to showcase openwork carving techniques, while "Operatic Stories" are commonly used on architectural beams and screens to carry narratives [7].

#### **4. The Connotative Semantic Structure: Coding Rules and Symbolic Network**

Connotative semantics refer to the associative and symbolic meanings that are constructed and shared within a specific socio-cultural context. The connotative semantics of Teochew woodcarving extend far beyond mere decoration. They adhere to a highly systematic set of cultural coding rules, mutually understood within Teochew folk society, which weave visual motifs into an extensive symbolic network. This network centrally articulates the community's values, ethics, and worldview. The formation of this system relies on stable coding rules, clearly stratified thematic clusters, and ultimately, its deep integration with the underlying cultural structure of the Chaoshan region.

##### **4.1. Core Coding Rules and Semantic Generation**

Meaning generation primarily relies on three interwoven rules:

**Homophonic Association:** Leveraging homophones in Chinese (particularly the Teochew dialect) to transform concrete objects into auspicious concepts. For example, the bat is employed to signify blessings, the deer represents official salary and prosperity, and the fish symbolizes surplus and abundance. The classic motif "Rats Dragging Grapes" is potent because "rat" sounds similar to "grandson" in Teochew, combined with the prolific grapes, strongly expressing the clan ideology of praying for numerous offspring [8].

**Attribute Metaphor:** Deriving value metaphors from natural attributes or culturally assigned characteristics. Through metaphorical attribution, the peony, with its opulent blooms, conveys wealth and honor; the lotus, rising unsullied from mud, embodies purity and integrity; the pine, bamboo, and plum, enduring winter's cold together, symbolize the resilience of the noble scholar; the crab's hard shell is linked to success in imperial examinations; and the lion represents the power to ward off evil.

**Allusion and Narrative:** Citing scenes from history, opera, or mythology to condense ethical teachings and life ideals. Narrative scenes such as those from the Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars serve to promote filial piety, while the Seven Sages Journeying to the Capital motif encourages scholarly diligence and fosters local pride [7]; similarly, the depiction of the "Three Stars" functions as a visual symbol of a complete and blessed life.

##### **4.2. Core Symbolic Themes and the Stratified Value System**

Through the sustained operation of the aforementioned coding rules, the intricate connotative semantics of Teochew woodcarving ultimately coalesce into several interrelated and distinctly layered core symbolic themes. Together, they constitute a complete folk system for expressing values.

#### 4.2.1. Life Procreation and Clan Continuity

This forms the cornerstone of the value system. Centered on motifs such as “Rats Dragging Grapes,” “Vines with Continuous Melons (Gua Die Mian Mian),” “Kylin Delivering a Son,” and “Chart of One Hundred Children,” these themes directly address and reinforce the fundamental, ultimate concern of traditional clan society for a flourishing populace and the eternal continuity of the family line. Commonly found on marital furniture and in ancestral hall decorations, such motifs directly serve the social reproduction of the clan.

#### 4.2.2. Wealth, Status, and Secular Success

This is the most pervasive and dynamic theme. Through a dense constellation of imagery including “Peonies and Phoenix,” “A Hall Full of Gold and Jade,” “Promotion in Rank and Title,” “Immediate Ennoblement,” “Golden Toad Spitting Coins,” and “Carp Leaping over the Dragon Gate,” it systematically expresses a fervent aspiration for material abundance, success in the imperial examinations, and elevation in social status. This embodies a spirit of secular rationality and active engagement with the world.

#### 4.2.3. Longevity, Well-being, and Apotropaic Protection

This theme focuses on the safety and well-being of the individual and the family. Motifs like the “God of Longevity,” “Magu Presenting Longevity,” “Pine and Crane Symbolizing Perpetual Youth,” and the “Peach of Immortality” express wishes for health and long life. Meanwhile, images and symbols such as the lion, the Taiji diagram with the Eight Trigrams, the door-god Zhong Kui, the sword, and the swastika (卍) pattern perform the faith-based function of warding off evil, dispelling misfortune, attracting good fortune, and safeguarding the household. This reflects a psychological defense mechanism against life’s uncertainties.

#### 4.2.4. Moral Cultivation and Humanistic Ideals

This represents the sublimation and refinement of the value system. “The Fisherman, Woodcutter, Farmer, and Scholar” depicts an idyllic social ideal and a lifestyle of farming combined with scholarly pursuit. The “Four Gentlemen” (plum blossom, orchid, bamboo, chrysanthemum) serve as personified symbols, alluding to the noble qualities of the virtuous gentleman: loftiness, reclusiveness, steadfastness, and detachment. Stories such as “Li Bai in Drunken Ecstasy” and “Su Dongpo Appreciating an Inkstone” celebrate the talent, free-spiritedness, and unfettered artistic spirit of literati and scholars.

### 4.3. Cultural Implications and Integration of the Value System

The connotative semantic network reflects the deep structure of Teochew culture:

**Imprint of Marine Culture:** The prominence of “River & Marine Creature” motifs elevates the joy of a bountiful harvest into an artistic pursuit (showcasing openwork technique) and a marker of cultural identity, reflecting the dependence on and mastery of the ocean within a livelihood model of “three parts farming, seven parts fishing” [9].

**Visualization of Clan Consciousness:** Themes chosen for ancestral hall and altar decorations directly serve the social function of strengthening clan cohesion and venerating ancestors [8].

**Syncretic Cultural Character:** The blending of Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist, and folk belief elements embodies a pragmatic rationality that accommodates pluralistic beliefs.

In summary, the connotative semantics of Teochew woodcarving constitute a highly organized,

richly imagistic, and praxis-oriented symbolic system. Functioning as a “visual ritual code” and “map of meanings” carved in wood, it employs a set of stable, decipherable folk coding rules to transform multifaceted social values—pertaining to survival, development, order, and aspiration—into an artistic form that is perceptible, tangible, and functional. It does not merely “reflect” culture on a static level; rather, within the dynamics of ritual and daily life, it continuously participates in the reproduction, transmission, and reinforcement of Chaoshan socio-cultural fabric, thereby achieving an organic integration of art, society, and spiritual life.

## 5. Conclusion

This study decodes the meaning system of Teochew woodcarving from a semiotic semantic perspective, yielding the following main conclusions:

First, its semantic system possesses a clear dual structure: a denotative system comprising a catalog of seven thematic categories, and a connotative system built through folk coding rules into a symbolic network targeting secular values.

Second, this system represents a unity of function and aesthetics. Theme selection is constrained by object function while serving decoration, with the deeper function being the artistic expression and reinforcement of a community's shared cultural psychology.

Third, this study validates the effectiveness of the semiotic semantic analysis framework in exploring intangible cultural heritage, providing a pathway for understanding intangible cultural heritage as a carrier of 'cultural genes'.

In the contemporary context, the preservation and innovation of Teochew woodcarving should look beyond imitation of technique and form, focusing instead on the creative transformation of its deep semantic rules. Future design practices could extract its semantic generation logic and core value themes, integrating them with modern design language to facilitate the genuine transformation of this heritage from "cultural legacy" to "contemporary vocabulary" [10].

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## Author contributions

Z.Y. conceived the idea of the study, analyzed the data and wrote the paper.

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