

# *Semiotic interpretation of traditional festivals to construct regional brands*

Gao Mingzhe

*School of Journalism and Communication, Jinan University, Guangzhou, 510632, China*

**Keywords:** Semiotic; regional brands; Chinese traditional festivals

**Abstract:** The cultural resources of festivals are transformed into the cultural landscape of festivals through the reproduction of local cultural identity and the staged production of sacrificial ceremonies, and the cultural landscape of festivals is transformed into a festival cultural experience through the interactive links of symbols of "watching the ceremony" and "sacrificing" of the participants, and the scene of the festival activities allows the participants to be placed in the "field" of symbol consumption inspired by the country through the weaving of symbols and elements.

## 1. Introduction

Festival & Special Event is a collective term for "Festival" and "Special Event".<sup>[1]</sup> Festivals are not only a comprehensive cultural performance, but also a rich cultural symbol system, with its own unique meaning construction mechanism.<sup>[2]</sup> Symbols are used as carriers of meaning, and Peirce's triadic symbol theory brings more room for the extension of symbolic ideographies and cultural imagination. Based on Peirce's ternary symbol theory, this study preliminarily forms a semiotic analysis framework for the construction of regional brands of festival event symbols, and further investigates: how are festival cultural symbols reflected in festival activities? How to realize the construction of the regional brand of the host city through the cultural symbols of the festival? How can the interactive process of festival cultural symbols integrate and link the festival activities with the regional culture of the host city, and then continuously expand the cultural tension and spatial imagination of the regional brand?

## 2. Theoretical framework

The core of Peirce's semiotics is the "triadic composition theory of signs", which determines that the production and dissemination of symbolic meaning is the central horizon of his semiotic theory. According to Peirce, any sign is composed of three things: the representman, the object, and the interpretant, the representer is the carrier of the sign, the object is the thing that the sign represents, and the interpretive is the equal, or more developed, sign created by the sign in the interpreter's mind.<sup>[3]</sup>

Zhang Xiaoming once pointed out that "as far as the study of traditional festivals is concerned, it is true that the festival itself can be regarded as a symbolic whole, and some symbols that have been recognized in the festival as a symbolic whole."<sup>[4]</sup> Specifically, the ideographic process of festival

cultural symbols is developed as a referential and operable symbol system, and the "festival cultural resources", "festival cultural landscape" and "festival cultural experience" are identified as the triadic elements that constitute the symbol system, and the ideographic process of festival cultural symbols is regarded as the interrelationship between the ternaries. This identification and correspondence establishment was deeply inspired by Peirce's "trial reasoning".<sup>[5]</sup> Abduction is the construction of a hypothetical reasoning behavior after discovering various possible connections between phenomena. And whether it's a simple question or a certain degree of conviction, the first step in making and accepting a hypothesis is to make an inference. Peirce acknowledges the guessing element of trial extrapolation, but argues that as long as the conditions are observable, there is no need to worry about making a major mistake, since the hypothesis presented can be checked if necessary. In fact, trial reasoning is not only the most common way of thinking in real life, but also the basis for more rigorous reasoning methods such as deduction, induction, and probability. Although we recognize the possibility of mistakes, the greatest value of trial reasoning lies in the ability to come up with conjectures and hypotheses that can be further tested, which is the opportunity and link to generate new knowledge.

In the analytical framework of the construction of regional brands of festival cultural symbols established with reference to the Pierce symbol ternary system in this study, the "object" is "self-generated and unprocessed regional festival cultural resources", and the "reproduction" is "the festival cultural landscape created through rich and diverse forms and contents". The "explanatory item" corresponds to "the public's communication behavior and perception experience in festival activities and the generated cognition and emotion of the local area". In short, the three-dimensional interaction of representation, object and interpretation is embodied in the three-dimensional interaction of festival cultural resources, festival cultural landscape, and festival cultural experience, between which "festival cultural resources" are transformed into "festival cultural landscape" through symbol production, and "festival cultural landscape" is generated into "festival cultural experience" through symbol interaction, and "festival cultural resources" are generated into "festival cultural experience" through symbol consumption.

### **3. The process and characteristics of ancestor sacrifice cultural activities on regional brand construction**

#### **3.1 Symbol production: the cultural resources of festivals are transformed into cultural landscapes of festivals**

As a cultural heritage, the Tianshui Fuxi Festival is not a fixed and rigid process or form, and its sacrificial procedures are fluid and changing with the development of the times, and successive dynasties have different regulations on the specifications and processes of Fuxi sacrifices. Compared with the previous generation, the public sacrifice of Fuxi in the new era has undergone great changes, and the process is formulated as playing music, beating drums and ringing bells, reading the sacrificial texts, bowing and worshipping the sacrifice, music and dancing to the sacrifice, offering flower baskets, and worshipping ancestors in the temple, trying to increase the ornamentation of the festival at the same time, but also make the guests and spectators have a stronger sense of participation on the spot. Compared with other links, the "Music and Dance Festival" link reflects the great innovation and changes of the festival in the new era, and reflects the symbolic production logic from local festival cultural resources to festival cultural landscape. Specifically, the "music and dance sacrifice" link is an extension of the traditional sacrificial ritual procedures, and in the new era, a large number of elements of Tianshui folk music and dance and other Chinese dance elements have been absorbed.

All the cultural connotations of sacrificial music and dance are to worship Fuxi, praise merits,

and remember nostalgia at the intuitive level, but the internality refers to social harmony, national peace and security, prosperity and development, etc., especially in the process of dance performance, with the host's narration interpretation, introducing the content of music and dance to the guests, and directly and clearly expressing the interpretation of music and dance on the above content. The design of all dance sections is combined with the theme of Fuxi sacrifice and the function of the sacrificial activities and created, the music and dance sacrifice contains the cultural connotation of Fuxi culture, Taoist culture, Confucian culture, farming culture and other aspects, showing obvious national and contemporary characteristics, and has functional, cultural and artistic diverse values, so that the "sacrificial" and "edifying" of the public sacrifice Fuxi ceremony have achieved a perfect integration, and clearly reflect the logic of transforming local cultural resources into festival cultural landscape.

### **3.2 Symbolic interaction: the cultural landscape of festivals is transformed into a cultural experience of festivals**

After 1989, the public sacrifice Fuxi ceremony developed into the Fuxi Cultural Tourism Festival, and the "Public Sacrifice of Fuxi Ceremony, the Ancestor of Chinese Humanities" and the "Tianshui Fuxi Cultural Tourism Festival" were integrated and developed in an all-round way. Local tourism activities take the public memorial ceremony as the brand "brand", and the public memorial ceremony has also become the content of tourism activities, gradually forming a new symbolic narrative of regional brands. During the public festival of Fuxi, the increase of the opening of the mountain to gather gods, lantern festivals, moxibustion red paper figures, drama performances, dragon and lion dance performances, sheepskin drum performances, splint performances and other folk performances, the tour itself has a strong tourist taste and since the 1990s Fuxi public festival festival tourism trend is closely related, is the local government to focus on the launch of the tourism theme. The public festival is constantly held at the same time as various tourism fairs, cultural and art festivals, international tourism festivals, and cross-regional trade fairs. During these business meetings, a large number of business and political figures came to Tianshui, and the Tianshui Municipal Government also took the opportunity to invite them to participate in public memorial activities and take the opportunity to expand the influence of the Fuxi Sacrifice Ceremony.

With the series of activities of the China Tianshui Fuxi Cultural Tourism Festival, the Gangu County Daxiangshan Cultural Tourism Festival, the Tianshui Hexagram Taishan Folk Sacrifice Fuxi Ceremony, the Qin'an County Worship to the Ancestor of Chinese Humanities Nuwa Ceremony, the Wushan Water Curtain Cave Lazi Temple Blessing Cultural Tourism Festival, the Zhangjiachuan County Guanshan Cultural Tourism Festival, and the Qingshui County Xuanyuan Cultural Tourism Festival will be held in the surrounding counties and districts of Tianshui City, integrating the characteristic symbol resources in the region, and taking "Fuxi" as the large regional brand. The integration drives the development of other brands in the region, and gradually builds the synergy of regional brands, so as to become an experience for more people.

### **3.3 Symbolic consumption: the cultural resources of festivals are transformed into cultural experiences of festivals**

How to transform the cultural resources of Fuxi into the cultural experience of the festival for the audience mainly lies in the cultural significance of Fuxi, the creation of the field through the cultural resources of the festival, and the stimulation of the emotional connection of the visitors.

Judging from the date arrangement, the public sacrifice Fuxi ceremony was chosen to be held at 9:50 on June 22 of the Gregorian calendar every year. The reason why the summer solstice day was

chosen is because Fuxi is the "sun god" on the summer solstice in ancient Chinese legends, and also has the merit of 'making a calendar and determining the solar terms'; From the perspective of Tianshui place, "the summer solstice is also the season with the best climate in Tianshui, which is conducive to holding large-scale festivals and cultural and economic and trade activities". The time is set at 9:50 because Fuxi is the head of the Three Emperors and Five Emperors, and this time is chosen to give the festival a sense of sacredness and solemnity in Chinese culture. Through the role of Fuxi as the sun god, the contribution to agriculture in mythology, the advantages of local climate and the choice of a specific time, the sacrifice of Fuxi is set on the summer solstice day to convey the symbolic messages of light, prosperity, dignity and solemnity. It reflects the importance of ancient culture, agriculture and social order, while providing a moment of celebration, joy and unity in the new era.

Similarly, "beating drums and ringing bells" was originally a ritual that has been passed down through the ages. In the new era, the public festival Fuxi ceremony invented the tradition, beating 34 drums, symbolizing the 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities across the country, Hong Kong, Macau S.A.R. and Taiwan to worship Fuxi; The bell rings 9 times, representing the highest number of traditional rituals of the Chinese nation. In this way, it reflects "the high respect of all Chinese sons and daughters for the founding achievements of the ancestors of humanity". "34 Drumming" and "9 Ringing Bells" are symbols that use numbers and instruments as symbols to convey specific meanings and symbols through specific times and musical sounds. They represent the solemnity and sacredness of the traditional culture of the Chinese nation, as well as the unity and cooperation in which all regions participate. Through the use of these symbols, the importance and expression of the traditional values of the Chinese nation are conveyed. By attaching the date numbers to the symbols of cultural traditions, the public sacrifice of Fuxi pointed the symbols of "Fuxi" to grand propositions such as "children of China" and "China".

In the "Respectful Reading of the Sacrificial Text" link, the party and government leaders of the national and provincial party committees served as the chief priests, read the memorial texts and announced the beginning of each important link of the ceremony, which not only reflected its political authority on this stage, but also rehearsed the familiar words of national construction, that is, the picture of the culture of the Chinese sons and daughters with the same roots. The content of the memorial is to commemorate the great virtue and great cause of Taihao Fuxi's "continuous education and eternal life, and Haohao Deze is used in all directions", praise the brilliant achievements of the great motherland in various fields, respond to the policies of the contemporary Party Central Committee and report on the economic and social development of Gansu Province, and call on the sons and daughters of China to work together to devote themselves to the rejuvenation of the motherland and call for the early reunification of the two sides of the strait. For example, during the fight against the new crown pneumonia epidemic, the advanced medical personnel group of the local epidemic was invited to participate in the ceremony, and this theme will be reflected in the memorial text. The memorial text combines the image of Fuxi, the legend of Fuxi and the beautiful expectations for the development of the motherland, showing China's enduring national spirit and the national image of peace, wisdom, unity and responsibility.

The Fuxi sacrifice originated from the local folk activities, and the ancient Tianshui people expressed their expectations for the country's peace and security and their yearning for a bumper harvest and prosperity by holding the Fuxi sacrifice activities. With the passage of time, the Fuxi sacrifice became solemn and reflected the people's good wishes and devotion to pursue peace and prosperity. The holding of the public festival is not only the inheritance of this ancient cultural activity, but also gives it modern significance. By participating in the worship service, people feel as if they have entered the world that their ancestors aspired to, and the worship process gives future generations a foundation to imagine their own past, and the ritual process allows them to establish a

sense of identity with their ancestors. The holding of such traditional cultural activities contributes to the modern goals of social unity, consensus building and cultural inheritance. The Fuxi Festival forged a cultural "boundary" for the sons and daughters of China to position themselves in the era of globalization and thus gain identity. The interweaving and mutual construction of multiple time and space allow people to obtain the rationality of identity while worshipping ancient "ancestors". and grasp the future by retelling and confirming the past.

#### 4. Conclusion

Through the reproduction of local cultural identity and the staged transformation of sacrificial ceremonies, the cultural resources of festivals are transformed into festival cultural landscapes, and the festival cultural landscapes are transformed into festival cultural experiences through the symbolic interaction of arranging participants to "watch the ceremony" and "sacrifice", and the scene of festival activities allows participants to be placed in the "field" of symbol consumption inspired by their home and country through the weaving of symbols and elements. The process of excavation, design, use and transformation of the festival cultural resources of the Tianshui Fuxi Sacrifice reflects the process of regional brand construction of the "Public Sacrifice to the Fuxi Grand Ceremony, the Ancestor of Chinese Humanities", which is essentially the process of commercialization of local festival cultural resources under the background of local development, and the "symbolization" process reflects the reconstruction of the production order of festival activities under the dominance of this commoditized thinking. As the public sacrifice ceremony is gradually upgraded to a major cultural event in the national annual agenda, the political meaning of the festival has become more and more abundant, and the ceremony has been better maintained as the core of the ceremony.

The official positioning of "setting up a stage for festivals, singing opera for economy and trade" has become a common practice in the Fuxi Grand Ceremony in the subsequent development. To a large extent, in the process of integrating the cultural resources of the festival, the local government on the one hand continued the function of the festival sacrifice Fuxi ceremony, and on the other hand, the tourism economy and local development were used as the fulcrum to integrate the festival again, and the "public sacrifice of Fuxi, the ancestor of Chinese humanities", developed into a "regional brand". This kind of "regional branding" can be seen as a reflection of the "economic localism" or "eco-nomicorcultural regionalism" proposed by some scholars,<sup>[7]</sup> that is, the operation and construction of local culture and identity by local governments for the sake of economic development. As Timothy Oakes and Anne-Marie Broudehoux point out in their discussion of the relationship between global capitalism and local cultural identity, commercialization is not a disappearance of local culture, but often a "stimulant".<sup>[8]</sup> But this stimulus manifests itself in the reshaping of local cultures, making them more attractive to capital and consumption.

Guided by Peirce's theory of the ternary composition of symbols, this study establishes a semiotic analysis framework for the construction of regional brands of festival cultural symbols, so as to decompose the process of local restoration and development of festival activities to build regional brands into three links: the integration and excavation of festival cultural resources, the production of festival cultural landscape, and the provision of festival cultural experience. A detailed analysis of how festival cultural activities serve the process of regional brand building was carried out. In the process of tourism development, the cultural resources of festivals have been recombined, reconstructed or reshaped, and in the context of local development, people can either criticize it as a cultural symbol or think that it continues to exist in a new form. As a force of "modernization", the "Public Sacrifice to Fuxi, the Ancestor of Chinese Humanities", not only provides space and opportunities for the development of traditional culture, but also accelerates the

change of the connotation and meaning of traditional culture.

## Acknowledgements

Fund Project: Phased Research Results of Gansu Philosophy and Social Sciences Planning Project (Project No. 2021YB050).

## References

- [1] Oakes T S. *The cultural space of modernity: ethnic tourism and place identity in China* [J]. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 1993, 11(1): 47-66.
- [2] Li, J., & Yu, G. (2023). *Constructing the festival tourist attraction from the perspective of Peircean semiotics: The case of Guangzhou, China*. *Plos one*, 18(2), e0282102.
- [3] Liszka, J. J. (1996). *A general introduction to the semiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Indiana University Press.
- [4] Zhang Xiaoming, Chen Xiaoying. *Semiotic research on traditional festivals: framework reconstruction and case analysis* [J]. *Tourism Journal*, 2017, 32(11):26-40.
- [5] Peirce C S. *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*[M]. New York: Dover Publications, 1955:150-156; 272-273; 282.
- [6] Broudehoux A M. *Images of power: Architectures of the integrated spectacle at the Beijing Olympics*[J]. *Journal of Architectural Education*, 2010, 63(2): 52-62.
- [7] Love, J. L. (1974). *An approach to regionalism*. In *New Approaches to Latin American History* (pp. 137-155). University of Texas Press.
- [8] Hansen, N. (2017). *The new regionalism and European economic integration*. In *Regional Development* (pp. 57-82). Routledge.