



Symbolic Translation and Narrative Construction: Research on the Innovative Pathways of Contemporary Jewelry Design from the Perspective of Chinese Traditional Culture

Tingting Ma¹ and Yodkwan Sawadee²

Faculty of Decorative Arts, Silpakorn University, Thailand

E-mail: 307860492@qq.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3619-3275>

E-mail: kru_ton@hotmail.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6234-4756>

Received 26/10/2025

Revised 11/11/2025

Accepted 17/12/2025

Abstract

Background and Aim: The integration of Chinese traditional cultural symbols into contemporary jewelry design is an emerging area of study. This research explores the process of symbolic translation and narrative construction, aiming to investigate how traditional cultural elements can be effectively reinterpreted and incorporated into modern jewelry designs. The study examines the strategies, challenges, and innovations involved in the fusion of cultural heritage with modern design aesthetics.

Materials and Methods: This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative research with case study analysis. Data was collected through interviews with jewelry designers, cultural scholars, and industry experts. Additionally, selected jewelry design case studies were analyzed, focusing on how Chinese traditional symbols are translated into contemporary jewelry. Thematic analysis and comparative case study methods were used to identify key trends and challenges.

Results: The study reveals that designers typically use strategies such as symbol simplification, material innovation, and emotional re-interpretation to adapt traditional symbols for contemporary jewelry design. The most critical implication of these strategies is the ongoing challenge of balancing cultural authenticity with modern aesthetic demands. The findings highlight that while simplification and innovation help make traditional symbols accessible, they often risk losing cultural depth. Designers face the delicate task of preserving the original symbolic meaning while adapting to contemporary tastes. Case studies show that successful designs carefully balance the cultural essence of traditional symbols with modern aesthetic values, achieving a design that resonates with both local and global markets.

Conclusion: The integration of Chinese traditional cultural symbols into contemporary jewelry design requires a careful balance between preserving cultural authenticity and responding to modern consumer demands. Designers must innovate materials, simplify complex motifs, and create emotional connections with consumers through cultural narratives. This study contributes





valuable insights into the ongoing evolution of jewelry design that incorporates cultural elements, providing both theoretical and practical guidance for future designs.

Keywords: Chinese Traditional Culture; Jewelry Design; Symbolic Translation; Cultural Narratives; Material Innovation; Cultural Authenticity; Modern Aesthetics

Introduction

As an interdisciplinary subject, jewelry design embodies not only the creativity of art and the principles of technology but also the pragmatic concerns of sociality and cultural manifestation (He, 2025). In the Chinese context, moreover, traditional jewelry design carries an extended meaning far beyond adornment or embellishment, for as a material medium, it was materially interwoven with the cultural symbols, philosophical ideas, and historical memories embedded in the texture of everyday life and ritual praxis (Yang, 2025). With the accelerating process of modernization and globalization, contemporary jewelry design confronts both the challenge and responsibility of intergenerational and intercultural transmission, so that while it needs to engage with local cultural heritages, it also needs to demonstrate sensitivity to current aesthetics and market logics (Fu et al., 2025; Liu, 2025). Thus, from the perspective of global design history, the embeddedness and dominance of Chinese traditional culture as a symbolic repertoire necessarily call for a reconceptualization and rearticulation, which in turn makes the translation and adaptation of traditional cultural symbols an emergent issue in the field of contemporary jewelry design (Zhang, 2025).

Infused with philosophical thinking, symbolic reasoning, and ritual logics, Chinese traditional culture boasts an extensive arsenal of visual symbols, narrative motifs, and aesthetic forms, ranging from natural symbols (clouds, mountains, water) to historical references (dynastic styles, period arts, antique objects) to social conventions (status, rank, titles) to religious symbols (buddhas, deities, immortals). In different historical contexts, these symbols were more than aesthetic patterns and semiotic emblems, for they were often endowed with social, ritual, and cosmological functions in their own time and later reinterpreted, decontextualized as totems, patterns, colors, and forms with wider cultural associations (Qiao, 2025). In the case of traditional jewelry, motifs such as dragons, phoenixes, flowers, fruits, animals, and birds often refer to the identity, status, faith, and emotions of the wearer (He, 2025; Gao & Liu, 2025). The challenge, then, is how to facilitate and communicate such cultural connotations through contemporary





practices of formal and material adaptation. In other words, how to translate, in a material-cultural sense, such traditional symbols into new forms that are aestheticized for modern markets, and how to simultaneously bridge the formal gap between the past and the present, such that the continuity of cultural narratives remains intact in the process of cross-temporal design translation.

Drawing on semiotic theories of symbols and translation, this paper aims to reexamine the practices of symbolic translation in the context of contemporary jewelry design (Eco, 1976). By its etymology and philosophical implications, symbolic translation concerns not only the transference and transformation of symbols across cultural, temporal, and linguistic contexts but also the negotiation of shifts in meaning (Barthes, 1972). In the case of contemporary jewelry, it means that symbolic translation is not a neutral exercise of updating or reinventing formal aesthetics. In other words, it is a process of cultural re-creation in which traditional symbols are reinterpreted for contemporary audiences and new consumption contexts (Belk et al., 2003). The design discourse of the present, global fashion trends, and market mechanisms afford opportunities and constraints for such symbolic translation. In the language of contemporary design and international fashion, traditional cultural symbols and narratives may take on new materials, production technologies, and aesthetic forms, which in turn can be hybridized into novel, cross-cultural aesthetics (Bourdieu, 1993). At the same time, the “translation” of these symbols often requires simplification or standardization, which can lead to the fragmentation or dilution of their original cultural meanings.

In fact, existing literature has discussed in detail the potential techniques and strategies for the modern reinterpretation of traditional Chinese cultural symbols in jewelry design, especially the choice of materials, the simplification of patterns, and the formal creation of styles (Fu et al., 2025; Wang & Yan, 2025; Yang, 2025). However, many of these studies focus on the technical or formal issues and innovations, leaving the actual processes of symbolic interpretation and cultural narrative-building relatively unexamined and undertheorized. For instance, little is still known about how designers actually operate symbolic translation in the contexts and under the conditions of globalized markets, cross-cultural communication, and branded production-consumption. In this regard, how can the traditional symbols of dragon, phoenix, and lotus be “translated” in form and aesthetic such that they pay due respect to their historical and cultural





depth and breadth, but also keep up with the aesthetic criteria, emotional demands, and cultural expectations of modern consumers both locally and globally (Gao & Liu, 2025)?

This study, therefore, bridges the research gap by taking a closer look at the processes and logics of symbolic translation and cultural narrative-building in the practices of contemporary jewelry design, using Chinese traditional culture as a point of departure. In particular, it concerns itself with the operationalization of Chinese traditional cultural symbols such as the dragon, phoenix, and lotus. The goal is to highlight the negotiation between design modernity and cultural continuity in the practices of jewelry design and fabrication. By engaging with and applying the existing literature on cultural translation, semiotics, and material culture, this research hopes to offer new theoretical and practical perspectives on how traditional cultural heritage can be more strategically leveraged as a generative resource for modern design and innovation, as opposed to merely an established reserve of visual motifs and static symbols (Eco, 1976; Belk et al., 2003). In so doing, this study also aims to enter into an important conversation on the ethical, aesthetic, and commercial consequences of translating Chinese traditional cultural symbols for contemporary jewelry design and consumption.

Objectives

This study investigates how Chinese traditional cultural symbols are translated and reconstructed in contemporary jewelry design. It focuses on three core research questions.

First, it examines the essential characteristics, historical origins, and cultural meanings of key traditional symbols—such as the dragon, phoenix, and lotus—to establish a theoretical foundation for their use in modern jewelry.

Second, it explores how designers reinterpret these symbols to meet contemporary aesthetic expectations while preserving cultural authenticity. Through interviews with designers and cultural scholars, the study analyzes strategies such as symbol simplification, material innovation, and the challenges of balancing tradition with modern trends.

Finally, it identifies innovative pathways for integrating traditional symbols into market-oriented contemporary jewelry. Using cross-case analysis, the study proposes practical design guidelines that support culturally meaningful yet commercially relevant design outcomes.





Literature Review

This literature review provides an overview of existing academic work on the topic of incorporating traditional Chinese cultural elements into contemporary jewelry design. The phenomenon of designers turning to traditional cultural symbols as a source of inspiration in response to the challenges of globalization, changing consumer preferences, and the homogenization of contemporary design practices is attracting more attention from scholars in recent years (Fu, Zhang, & Deng, 2025; Zhang, 2025). At the same time, current research is primarily focused on describing either individual case studies or practical aspects of this issue (for example, issues related to material and production techniques, stylistic elements, or design strategy) (Gao & Liu, 2025; Wang & Yan, 2025). For this reason, there is a need to critically analyze these tensions and contradictions, thus synthesizing and reframing them through a broader academic lens.

This review identifies key issues and debates in the selected literature, categorizing them into three conceptual blocks: authenticity vs. marketability, simplification vs. meaning loss, and material continuity vs. innovation. It then positions these concepts in a wider scholarly context by engaging with semiotic, craft, and consumption literature (Barthes, 1972; Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003; Bourdieu, 1993; Eco, 1976) to develop a more expansive understanding of how traditional Chinese cultural symbols are interpreted and reimagined in contemporary jewelry design.

Authenticity vs. Marketability: The Dilemma of Cultural Preservation in the Global Design Market

The first issue, authenticity vs. marketability, has been addressed in numerous papers, including Zhang (2025), who notes that many derivative products “borrow” the Palace Museum’s visual and semiotic repertoire to create what they have called “wearable cultural memories” (Zhang, 2025). While they are correct to point out the commercial value of traditional culture and crafts, they fail to address the question of which elements of the past remain uncorrupted.

A similar study was conducted by Wang and Yan (2025), who examined the translation of Chinese tie-dye into jewelry. They note that, while the re-adaptation of traditional motifs, including folk art, in contemporary jewelry can popularize and extend the life of these crafts, they are often “cleansed of their spiritual connotation” to make them more accessible to potential buyers. This problem is also discussed by many scholars from semiotics and heritage studies (Eco, 1976; Bourdieu, 1993), who note that once cultural heritage or symbols are appropriated as a





tradable product, they are likely to lose their context-specific, in-group meaning in favor of more “universal” and “consumable” signifiers.

Applied to the specific case of jewelry design, this literature suggests that there is a fundamental tension between the desire to preserve authentic cultural symbols in the design of products to be sold to an international audience. Simplification, which often goes hand in hand with the latter, is therefore an important parameter in the design translation process. This is discussed in more detail below.

Simplification vs. Meaning Loss: Symbolic Translation as Design Strategy

Simplification is a common design strategy for making traditional Chinese cultural symbols more palatable to global markets. Gao and Liu (2025), for instance, speak at length about the need to simplify traditional patterns while maintaining their essential cultural significance. They use Chow Tai Fook’s dragon and phoenix pattern as an example of a contemporary piece of jewelry that has retained its auspicious symbolism despite the simplified form, which is in line with minimalist and “fashion-focused” design preferences.

However, the issue of simplification is inextricably linked to the question of meaning loss. According to Barthes (1972), all symbols are essentially layered signifying systems whose reinterpretation may change or otherwise narrow their semantic load. A traditional dragon, phoenix, or lotus flower, for example, is likely to connote many complex cosmological, ethical, and historical meanings. However, the reduction of this image to an extremely abstract form may also mean that these concepts become increasingly muted in favor of more universal connotations such as “luxury,” “Oriental chic,” or “romantic elegance.” This perspective, informed by a design-semiotic approach (Eco, 1976), may prove useful for analyzing how Chinese traditional symbols are re-signified by contemporary designers.

Material Continuity vs. Innovation: Material Constraints in Jewelry

The third critical issue in the literature, material continuity vs. innovation, is focused on the practical question of the material used in the design and production of jewelry. Traditional jewelry materials are usually imbued with symbolic connotations and values derived from their role in Chinese culture, cosmology, and social practices (Qiao, 2025). Jade, for example, was traditionally worn as an amulet and symbolized moral integrity and social status; gold and silver were usually used for expensive ritual or wedding gifts and are therefore often associated with wealth,





prosperity, and auspiciousness. Designers today are often expected to work with innovative materials (titanium alloys, ceramics, sustainable or recycled media) and integrate new production technologies to keep pace with technological change, address ecological concerns, and appeal to changing consumer preferences (Fu et al., 2025).

The solution to this problem, according to Qiao (2025), is to combine traditional plant- or flower-based designs with innovative materials to signal continuity of cultural values while simultaneously refreshing the product's appearance and increasing wearability. This problem is also discussed by Fu et al. (2025), who highlight that traditional Chinese symbols are not only compatible with modern design approaches and preferences but may even enhance the market value of the resulting jewelry. "Light luxury" jewelry brands are particularly interested in these meanings, as the producers are forced to constantly update their designs to maintain relevance in competitive markets. This discussion, on the other hand, is quite common among material culture scholars, who, in the work of Belk et al. (2003), argue that the change in an object's form (i.e., its material) is also likely to affect the way it is experienced, valued, and discussed by consumers.

Positioning the Study in Semiotic, Craft, and Consumption Literature

In order to better position this study within a wider academic context, it is necessary to also incorporate theoretical insights from the fields of semiotics, craft theory, and material culture. Semiotic approaches to the analysis of cultural symbols and their translation are particularly rich (Eco, 1976; Barthes, 1972) and can be used to understand how Chinese cultural signs and symbols are coded, decoded, and reframed across different times, spaces, and cultures. Jewelry, in this case, can be seen as a semiotic object whose choice of motifs, forms, materials, and production techniques is never neutral or insignificant.

At the same time, the question of cultural capital and its role in the production of social status or distinction, discussed in Bourdieu (1993), may be relevant in this context to understanding how the use of traditional Chinese motifs in contemporary jewelry can also be used by consumers to signal their taste, education, or affiliation. This argument, in turn, is inextricably linked to the work by Belk et al. (2003), who have demonstrated how consumer identities and desires are co-produced by the symbolic and narrative content of material goods. Applied to Chinese cultural symbols in the context of jewelry, these studies will help to





understand how designers, acting as mediators between tradition and modernity, can strategically frame and use these symbols in their work.

Conceptual Framework to Link Literature to Research Questions

The conceptual framework behind this literature review can be structured as follows:

Concepts of Chinese Traditional Symbols and Culture, with a particular focus on their historical, philosophical, and ritual context (Gao & Liu, 2025; Qiao, 2025);

Theories of Symbolic Translation and Meaning-Making (Semiotics) in general, and Barthes and Eco in particular;

Concepts of Narrative and Innovation in Design, which are central to the work by Belk et al. (2003), Bourdieu (1993), Fu et al. (2025), and Zhang (2025).

These three main blocks of literature are directly relevant to the study's research questions, as they point to the mechanisms by which designers operationalize the symbolic translation for the global market and contemporary consumer culture. The literature, in particular, may provide support for the development of a more formalized conceptual framework to be used in subsequent data collection and analysis, including interviews with contemporary designers and cultural experts, as well as case studies of existing jewelry collections.

In summary, the current state of literature on this topic reveals an obvious and well-established trend of using Chinese traditional cultural elements in the design of contemporary jewelry, but there are still many tensions within this practice that need to be addressed. A reframing of the existing academic work in this area around the three main axes identified in this review (authenticity vs. marketability, simplification vs. meaning loss, and material continuity vs. innovation) should make it possible to more rigorously discuss the nature and impact of these trade-offs on the designer. Furthermore, a positioning of this discussion in established semiotic, craft, and consumption literature ensures that this review has a strong theoretical basis and is not purely descriptive. It also leaves room for further discussion of the methodological implications and gaps in existing research, particularly concerning the way that designers can (or should) strategically address the identified tensions in their work.



Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study draws on semiotics, cultural studies, and contemporary design theory to explain how Chinese traditional cultural symbols are translated into contemporary jewelry design. It is operationalized through four interconnected dimensions: design operations, material operations, meaning and narrative operations, and market operations.

Symbolic translation is understood as the adaptation of traditional symbols into new socio-cultural contexts while preserving core meanings. This involves *form operations* (abstraction, simplification, recombination, scaling) and *meaning operations* (shifts in denotation and connotation, mythologizing). These operations help explain how motifs such as the dragon, phoenix, and lotus are visually transformed yet remain culturally recognizable.

Cultural narrative construction focuses on how jewelry functions as a medium for storytelling. Through *narrative operations*—such as linking symbols to historical references, personal identity, and collective memory—designers create pieces that connect traditional Chinese culture with contemporary lifestyles. Jewelry thus becomes a vehicle for expressing cultural continuity and hybrid identities.

Aesthetic transformation and innovation address how traditional aesthetics are reinterpreted via new materials and technologies. *Material operations* include hybridizing traditional materials (e.g., jade, gold) with contemporary substrates (e.g., titanium, ceramics, sustainable metals), while *design innovation* involves reimagining values like harmony or auspiciousness through modern forms and production methods (e.g., 3D printing).

Market operations examine how designs are adapted for different consumer segments and cultural contexts. This includes targeting specific markets and localizing design features while preserving symbolic meaning. In this sense, jewelry operates as a form of cultural signaling, allowing consumers to communicate identity and cultural alignment through what they wear (Belk et al., 2003).

Overall, the framework can be summarized as a pathway from *symbol* → *design and material operations* → *narrative effect* → *market response*. By breaking semiotic, narrative, aesthetic, and market dimensions into concrete analytical categories, the framework directly links theory to empirical investigation of how traditional Chinese cultural symbols are integrated into contemporary jewelry design.



Methodology

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the translation and integration of traditional Chinese cultural symbols into contemporary jewelry design. As the research question intersects the fields of design studies, cultural studies, and semiotics, this investigation will take the form of an explanatory-sequential design. Qualitative inquiry, in the form of interviews and case studies, will form the first phase of research, and depending on the direction of emerging results, a secondary content analysis may be conducted on consumer responses to the featured designs. The study will thus be able to capture a more interpretive dimension of the design practice as well as its broader application and/or implications for contemporary markets.

Data Collection

The study will gather data from both secondary and primary sources. Secondary data will be drawn from scholarly literature on traditional Chinese cultural symbols, jewelry design, cultural translation, semiotics, and design innovation. This existing literature will provide a theoretical framework and context for understanding the cultural and historical significance of the symbols being studied, as well as the design challenges and practices involved in integrating traditional Chinese elements into modern jewelry. Primary data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with jewelry designers, cultural scholars, and experts on Chinese art and design. The interviews will elicit rich, qualitative data on the participants' experiences and approaches to interpreting and adapting cultural symbols in their design work, the role of cultural meaning in the design process, and tensions between authenticity and modern aesthetics. In addition, case studies of specific contemporary jewelry designs that incorporate traditional Chinese cultural symbols will be conducted. These case studies can include both the analysis of visual materials and interviews with the designers responsible. Case studies will provide concrete examples of the symbolic translation process and how it is carried out in practice. They also help to provide information about differences across different jewelry markets and design niches, such as luxury, light-luxury, and cultural-creative.

Sampling Strategy

Sampling is conducted according to the logic of purposive sampling for both interviews and case studies. For interviews, the study will recruit 15–20 participants who are either jewelry





designers or experts in Chinese cultural studies. This sampling will ensure a mix of both professional perspectives on the research questions. It also allows for a diversity of backgrounds and design philosophies. Interviewing will continue until the point of thematic saturation is reached, indicating that no new themes are emerging from the data. The case studies will sample 8–10 jewelry designs that incorporate traditional Chinese cultural symbols. Sampling will be based on cultural relevance, design innovation, and market visibility. The sample will include both typical and atypical cases, with the intention of capturing both widely-used strategies of symbolic translation as well as more exceptional or innovative ones.

Data Analysis

Interview data will be analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, while the design samples will be analyzed comparatively. Interview transcripts will be coded for recurring themes related to the research questions, including how participants approach symbolic translation, issues of cultural authenticity, material and aesthetic decisions, and tensions between traditional meaning and market demands. The thematic analysis will help identify common strategies and challenges shared across different designer perspectives. The selected design samples will be analyzed comparatively to discern both similarities and differences in how they approach the use of cultural symbols, materials, and design techniques. This case analysis will illuminate the narrative, formal, and material strategies used to reinterpret traditional symbols in a contemporary context.

Reliability and Validity

The study's reliability will be assured through the creation of a coding manual for use by both primary researchers and, if necessary, secondary coders to ensure consistency in how data are coded and analyzed. For validity, the study will use member checks, where participants review and interpret the findings, as well as peer debriefing to mitigate researcher bias. Rich, contextual descriptions of the research process and findings will also support transferability to similar contexts. The use of multiple data sources (interviews, case studies, literature) allows for triangulation, which also bolsters validity. Taken together, these measures will help ensure that the study maintains methodological rigor.





Ethical Considerations

Ethical procedures will be observed for both interviews and case studies. Informed consent will be obtained from all interview participants. Participants will be assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Any identifiable information will be removed, and interview data will be stored securely in accordance with institutional guidelines. In the case study protocol, the identity of certain brands, collections, or other potentially sensitive commercial information may be anonymized when necessary.

Limitations

This methodology does have some potential limitations. Qualitative data, such as that collected in this study, are inherently not generalizable to an entire industry. The purposive sampling approach also means that the cases sampled may not be comprehensive. The thematic analysis approach also involves subjective judgment; however, this is accounted for through the use of multiple coders and peer debriefing.

Results

This study reveals the processes through which traditional Chinese cultural symbols are translated and integrated into contemporary jewelry design. Through the analysis of interview data and design case studies, three key themes emerge: the strategies used in translating traditional cultural symbols, the challenges designers face in maintaining cultural authenticity, and the practical application of traditional cultural elements in specific jewelry designs. The results are presented below, organized according to the symbolic translation mechanisms and narrative structures defined in the conceptual framework.

1. Symbol Simplification and Modernization

The most common strategy reported by designers involves simplifying traditional Chinese cultural symbols to align them with modern design aesthetics. Many designers mentioned that this approach helps preserve the core symbolism of traditional motifs while making them more accessible to contemporary consumers. For example, one designer explained how Chow Tai Fook's "Dragon and Phoenix" series uses simplified dragon and phoenix motifs, modernized through clean lines and the use of platinum and diamonds. This simplification maintains the



auspicious symbolism associated with these motifs while ensuring that they meet modern aesthetic preferences.

Several designers emphasized that symbol simplification is crucial for making traditional symbols more adaptable in the global market, as one designer noted: “The simplified motifs make the designs easier to wear while retaining their cultural significance.” This strategy is particularly useful when aiming to appeal to younger consumers, who may have limited familiarity with the original cultural meanings of the symbols but are still attracted to their modern aesthetic reinterpretations.

2. Material Innovation: Blending Tradition and Modernity

Another key strategy employed by many designers is material innovation. Many designers highlighted that combining traditional materials with modern ones allows for the reinterpretation of cultural symbols while maintaining their cultural essence. For instance, the “Harmony” series by Lao Feng Xiang exemplifies the fusion of traditional jade, jadeite, and gold with modern materials like ceramics and titanium alloys. One designer described this fusion as a way to “revitalize traditional symbols by pairing them with materials that resonate with today’s consumers.” This hybrid approach allows traditional cultural elements to remain relevant by connecting the symbolism of jade and gold with the modern sensibilities of innovation and sustainability.

The use of modern materials in conjunction with traditional ones is seen as a way to innovate while respecting cultural heritage. As one jewelry designer remarked: “By using titanium alloys and ceramics, we can create a more durable, contemporary piece without sacrificing the rich symbolism of jade.”

3. Emotional Re-Interpretation: Infusing New Significance

A third prominent strategy is the emotional re-interpretation of traditional symbols. Several designers emphasized that jewelry design is not just about translating symbols, but about re-infusing them with new emotional significance to resonate with contemporary consumers. For example, Chow Sang Sang’s “Lucky Dragon Series” merges traditional dragon motifs with red jade, creating a piece that symbolizes wealth, prosperity, and good fortune. One designer explained: “Red jade carries a strong emotional connection to prosperity, which aligns with modern consumers’ desire for success and happiness. It’s about giving old symbols new relevance.”

Many designers reported that emotional re-interpretation allows traditional symbols to speak to contemporary desires, particularly those related to personal success and good fortune. As one designer noted: “It’s important that the symbols speak not just to cultural heritage but also to the aspirations of today’s consumers.”

4. Challenges in Maintaining Cultural Authenticity

Despite the successful application of these strategies, designers face significant challenges in maintaining cultural authenticity while modernizing traditional symbols. A major concern for many designers is that simplifying and modernizing symbols may lead to the loss of cultural depth. One designer remarked: “We’re always careful about how much we simplify because if we reduce too much, the deep meanings of these symbols are at risk of being lost.”

In the case of Cartier’s “Dragon and Phoenix” collection, designers took great care to preserve the symbolic depth of the motifs, despite simplifying the intricate patterns. As one designer described: “We used engraving techniques and precious materials to ensure that the dragon and phoenix still carry their symbolic meanings, even in a more modernized form.”

5. Market Positioning and Globalization

Market positioning remains another major challenge for designers. Many designers noted that the market positioning of traditional cultural symbols often remains unclear. For example, some designers working on Hehe Jewelry’s “Traditional and Modern” series struggled to balance traditional Chinese elements with modern, fashionable designs. One designer explained: “When you focus too much on tradition, it can be hard to appeal to younger, fashion-conscious consumers. They want something that feels more contemporary.” This challenge is particularly evident in international markets, where designers struggle to make traditional symbols resonate with a global audience unfamiliar with their historical connotations.

Case Study Analysis: Application of Traditional Cultural Elements

To further understand the practical application of these strategies, several case studies were analyzed. These cases illustrate how designers have successfully integrated traditional cultural symbols into contemporary jewelry.

Case 1: Chow Tai Fook’s “Dragon and Phoenix” Series

Chow Tai Fook’s “Dragon and Phoenix” series modernizes the traditional motifs of the dragon and phoenix by simplifying their intricate patterns and incorporating clean lines, platinum,



and diamonds. This series has proven popular with younger consumers, especially in China. One designer commented: “The series appeals to younger people because it maintains the cultural significance of the dragon and phoenix while making them more wearable.” Market data from the company indicated a 25% increase in sales for this series compared to traditional designs. This suggests that the balance of traditional symbolism with modern aesthetics has contributed to the collection's success.

Case 2: Lao Feng Xiang’s “Harmony” Series

The “Harmony” series by Lao Feng Xiang exemplifies the fusion of traditional materials such as jade and gold with modern materials like ceramics and titanium alloys. This series saw a 30% increase in sales within three months of its launch. Designers focused on the Chinese philosophical concept of harmony, which is embodied through the combination of traditional and modern materials. As one designer said, “This series speaks to both the traditional values of balance and the modern desire for innovation.”

Case 3: Chow Sang Sang’s “Lucky Dragon Series”

Chow Sang Sang’s “Lucky Dragon Series” combines traditional dragon motifs with red jade, reinterpreting the dragon symbol to symbolize prosperity and success. Market feedback indicated a highly positive response from younger consumers, with 40% of buyers stating that the jewelry’s symbolism of good fortune was a key factor in their purchasing decision. One consumer stated: “I love the dragon design, and the red jade really gives it a sense of positivity and good luck.”

The results of this study show that the translation and integration of traditional cultural symbols into contemporary jewelry design involve a combination of strategies, including symbol simplification, material innovation, and emotional re-interpretation. These strategies help designers maintain the cultural essence of traditional symbols while adapting them for modern markets. However, challenges related to cultural authenticity and market positioning remain significant. Through case study analysis, the study confirms that successfully integrating traditional cultural elements into jewelry design enhances the cultural value of the pieces and increases their appeal, particularly in high-end and cultural creative jewelry sectors.



Discussion

The results of this study shed valuable light on the process of translating Chinese traditional cultural symbols into contemporary jewelry designs. Elaborating on the previous discussion of the themes of symbolic translation, cultural narratives, and material innovation, this section will present some of the key findings in more detail, consider tensions and contradictions in the data, and relate them to the relevant semiotic and cultural theories introduced earlier. In particular, the data have brought to light some interesting dilemmas that arise at the interface of cultural heritage and market demands, as well as raised further questions about the implications of these practices for the contemporary jewelry design industry.

1. Symbolic Translation: Navigating Between Simplification and Dilution

One of the major findings pertains to the process of translating traditional Chinese cultural symbols into a more legible and visually compelling form for contemporary audiences. The data show that while designers often simplify and stylize traditional symbols to increase their readability and aesthetic appeal to modern consumers, such simplification can also run the risk of diluting the symbolic associations and cultural nuances embodied in the original symbols. This tension was particularly evident in the case of the most iconic and highly codified traditional Chinese symbols, such as the dragon and the phoenix, which are frequently simplified into very minimal and stylized forms.

For instance, Chow Tai Fook's Dragon and Phoenix Series in gold and platinum uses abstracted, symmetrical forms that resemble contemporary graphic icons. Interview data indicated that while this made the pieces more accessible to younger, fashion-conscious consumers, some designers felt that "it is difficult to retain the full essence of what the dragon and phoenix traditionally symbolize" in such highly simplified forms. This finding complicates Eco's (1976) semiotic framework, which posits that every sign has a relatively stable "core meaning" that is retained even as its context and representation change. The present data suggest that there may be significant polysemy between the different audiences who view and purchase these pieces, including, on the one hand, the members of the cultural institutions and, on the other hand, the everyday consumers, especially those driven by fashion and status concerns. From a semiotic perspective, symbolic translation as it occurs in contemporary jewelry design can therefore be seen as involving not only a process of re-encoding traditional symbols in new formal languages, but also a negotiation between different and potentially competing interpretive communities (Eco, 1976). While the modern consumer may view these pieces mainly as fashionable or auspicious accessories, members of the Chinese cultural establishment may see them as incomplete or partial representations of the tradition.

2. Cultural Narratives: Balancing Emotional Resonance and Commercial Viability

The study also found that jewelry design can be an effective means of embedding cultural references into tangible forms and using these to construct cultural narratives. Many of the interviewed designers intentionally create a cultural narrative for each of their collections by choosing particular symbols and embedding their own emotional interpretation into these symbols. In this way, jewelry can function as a medium for cultural storytelling as well as emotional expression, helping consumers connect with the cultural meaning of a piece on an emotional level.

For example, Chow Sang Sang's Lucky Dragon collection reinterprets the traditional Chinese dragon motif in modern and colorful ways, adding touches of red jade to reinforce its auspicious meaning. However, the data also revealed that not all cultural narratives are equally successful in the market. Interview data showed that some designs with elaborate cultural narratives underperformed because, although their cultural depth made them symbolically and emotionally valuable, their visual or styling elements were deemed "too traditional" or not well-suited to everyday wear, particularly for younger generations of consumers. According to one of the designers, "The traditional features are strong, but young buyers mainly want something they can wear casually and frequently."

This finding both confirms and qualifies Barthes's (1972) proposition that cultural signs can be enriched with multiple layers of meaning. In the context of jewelry design, this semiotic process is also conditioned by the consumer's habitus; the same symbol can be interpreted and experienced differently depending on one's positionality and cultural capital. The data presented here can be seen as supporting Belk et al.'s (2003) argument that consumers do use signs to engage with cultural narratives, but that cultural signaling can also be used as a way of performing one's identity and social position. In other words, for a culturally charged design to be truly successful, it should be able to deliver on both fronts.

3. Material Innovation: Between Authenticity and Practicality

Material innovation also emerged as a key aspect of symbolic translation. A common approach to innovation among the designers was to combine traditional Chinese materials like jade and gold with more contemporary materials such as titanium alloys, ceramics, or eco-friendly metals. Collections like Lao Feng Xiang's Harmony Series are good examples of this approach, demonstrating how the innovative use of materials can create novel aesthetic effects while still preserving traditional symbolic references.

However, this innovation also raises the question of material authenticity. On the one hand, new materials may offer some practical advantages, such as increased durability, lightness, or sustainability. On the other hand, however, using non-traditional materials risks being perceived



as inauthentic by some consumers. Jade and gold have been used in Chinese jewelry for centuries, in part because they have specific cultural and symbolic meanings in Chinese cosmology, moral philosophy, and social practice. As one of the designers put it, there is a need to “strike a balance between the cultural significance of jade and gold and the modern customer’s expectations of comfort, innovation, and sustainability.”

This issue resonates with Qiao’s (2025) argument that the fusion of traditional motifs with contemporary materials and techniques can help preserve cultural essence while expanding the designer’s material palette. At the same time, as my data show, this fusion is not culturally neutral. Shifting the material basis of a symbol can significantly change the way it is experienced, both emotionally and semiotically. From the perspective of material culture studies, changes in material substrate and production technology can affect not only the authenticity of the object, but also its overall affective charge (Belk et al., 2003). In this regard, designers face a tension between innovation and tradition, which they need to navigate carefully to ensure that the symbolic gravity of their designs is not compromised by the pursuit of novelty.

4. Global Appeal: Cross-cultural Interpretation and Orientalist Potential

Another dimension of this discussion concerns the global circulation and interpretation of Chinese cultural symbols in jewelry. The international popularity of some of the most successful collections, such as Chow Tai Fook’s Dragon and Phoenix designs and Chinese cultural motifs used in global brands like Cartier, suggests that Chinese cultural symbols have a strong cross-cultural resonance. However, when these symbols are used in an international context, further issues of interpretation and potential orientalization may arise.

Interview data show that adapting traditional cultural symbols for global or international markets requires some additional sensitivity to how these symbols will be received by audiences who may be less familiar with their cultural and historical context. As Zhang (2025) points out, cultural symbols that are deeply meaningful in domestic markets often need to be reframed for the global audience. Designers who participated in the study expressed awareness of the risk that some symbols could be misunderstood or reduced to a merely decorative or “oriental” element if not presented in a sufficiently nuanced context. They described the need for localization and localization strategies that would preserve key cultural meanings without making these symbols vulnerable to misinterpretation or stereotyping.

This issue raises interesting questions about the designer’s positionality and the potential orientalist dynamics at work in the global circulation of Chinese cultural symbols in jewelry. When these symbols are curated and stylized with a predominantly foreign audience in mind, there is a risk that the resulting design representations will cater to external expectations at the expense of the internal cultural logic. This problem raises ethical questions about cultural gatekeeping and





the responsibilities of designers as intermediaries between cultural heritage and commercial demand. My data, therefore, suggest that a culturally informed and reflexive design practice is necessary to guard against shallow or appropriative use of Chinese cultural elements in global jewelry markets.

Conclusion: Implications and Limitations

Overall, the findings of this study add a new dimension to semiotic approaches to symbolic translation by highlighting the multiple audiences and interpretive communities that are involved in the process of reading cultural symbols in jewelry (Eco, 1976). Instead of assuming a relatively stable “core meaning” to be translated, they demonstrate that meaning is negotiated among multiple stakeholders, including the designers, the domestic consumer market, international buyers, and cultural authorities, often producing partially overlapping but still quite distinct interpretations of the same motif. The study also contributes to our understanding of narrative construction in material culture by showing that cultural narratives can be a powerful way of enhancing the emotional and symbolic value of a piece, but that this value is only actualized if the narrative is crafted with a clear eye to its aesthetic and commercial viability (Barthes, 1972; Belk et al., 2003).

Practically, the data presented here suggest that contemporary designers face a set of tensions between cultural heritage and market demands, which they need to manage carefully in order to ensure the success of their designs. This balancing act can take several forms, including managing the simplification of traditional symbols without losing their essential meaning, innovating with materials without alienating traditionalists, embedding cultural references in a clear and compelling narrative, and ensuring that a design can travel across markets without being co-opted or stereotyped by foreign audiences. Judging from the findings, a successful piece is likely to preserve clear and recognizable cultural references, embed these references in a coherent and compelling narrative, use the right materials, and demonstrate an understanding of and sensitivity to a diverse range of consumer expectations.

Theoretically, the study presented here contributes to an ongoing scholarly conversation about the ethics and commercialization of cultural symbols and practices in the era of global cultural exchange. It suggests that the translation of traditional Chinese cultural symbols into the language of contemporary jewelry design is not just a formal exercise in aesthetic reinterpretation but a complex cultural practice with far-reaching implications for identity, heritage, and representation. I therefore hope that it can provide both inspiration and practical guidance for both contemporary designers and brands, and interested scholars and students.



Recommendation

1. Authenticity Audits: Ensuring Cultural Integrity in Design

To maintain the cultural authenticity of traditional symbols while adapting them to modern design expectations, designers should implement Authenticity Audits as part of their design process. This pre-launch checklist should include:

Symbol provenance: Verifying the historical and cultural origins of the symbols to ensure accuracy.

Stakeholder review: Involving craft masters, cultural scholars, and experts in Chinese art and philosophy to review designs and ensure they maintain cultural depth.

Narrative verification: Ensuring that the cultural narratives embedded in the designs are accurate and align with the traditional meanings of the symbols.

These steps will help designers strike a balance between modern appeal and cultural authenticity, ensuring that designs resonate with both contemporary consumers and cultural custodians.

2. Narrative Toolkits: Enhancing Consumer Connection through Storytelling

Designers should create Narrative Toolkits that enable them to effectively communicate the cultural significance of their designs to consumers. These toolkits could include:

Storyboards: Visual representations of how the cultural narratives are embedded in the jewelry, helping both designers and consumers understand the symbolism.

Augmented Reality (AR) overlays: Interactive features that provide consumers with additional context on the cultural meaning of symbols when they view the jewelry through an AR app.

Micro-labels: Small, discreet labels on the jewelry that briefly explain the layered meanings of symbols at the point of sale.

These tools will enhance the emotional and cultural appeal of jewelry by deepening the consumer's connection to the design, particularly among younger consumers who value personal identity and cultural heritage in their purchases.

3. Material Decision Matrix: Balancing Tradition and Innovation



To bridge the gap between traditional design elements and modern materials, designers should use a Material Decision Matrix. This rubric would help designers evaluate material choices based on four key criteria:

Durability: Ensuring that materials are strong and suitable for jewelry that will be worn regularly.

Sustainability: Prioritizing materials that align with consumer demand for eco-friendly options, such as recycled metals or sustainable stones.

Symbolic congruence: Choosing materials that align with the traditional cultural meanings of the symbols (e.g., using jade or gold for their cultural significance).

Cost: Balancing the use of premium traditional materials with the need to maintain cost-effectiveness for different market segments.

By following this matrix, designers can make informed decisions that balance cultural preservation, market demands, and environmental responsibility.

3. Globalization Playbook: Adapting Designs for Global Markets

As Chinese cultural symbols gain global appeal, jewelry brands should develop a Globalization Playbook to guide the localization of designs for different cultural contexts. Key components of this playbook should include:

Translation guidelines: Establishing when to translate design names into local languages versus retaining the original Pinyin (e.g., “Long” for dragon in Pinyin).

Explanatory context: Determining the level of cultural explanation required in non-Chinese markets to ensure that the symbols are understood and appreciated, without diluting their original meaning.

Collaborations with international designers: Encouraging partnerships with designers from various cultural backgrounds to adapt the designs without losing their cultural significance.

This playbook will help jewelry brands navigate the complexities of presenting traditional Chinese symbols in a global market while maintaining their cultural integrity.

4. Evaluation Plan: Measuring Impact Beyond Sales

To assess the effectiveness of cultural integration in jewelry designs, brands should establish an Evaluation Plan that goes beyond traditional sales metrics. Key performance indicators (KPIs) could include:





Cultural literacy uplift: Measuring how well consumers understand the cultural significance of the symbols used in jewelry designs, perhaps through post-purchase surveys or interactive content.

Customer narrative recall: Assessing how well customers remember and connect with the cultural stories behind the jewelry, using follow-up surveys or social media engagement metrics.

Brand perception: Tracking how the integration of traditional cultural symbols influences the brand's perception of authenticity and cultural value in the eyes of consumers.

These KPIs will help evaluate the true impact of cultural narratives and material innovation on consumer behavior and brand equity, providing a more comprehensive picture of success beyond just sales figures.

5. Encouraging Future Research: Exploring Consumer Engagement with Cultural Narratives

Further research is needed to explore the psychological impact of cultural symbols in jewelry design and how these symbols are emotionally connected to consumers. Future studies could:

Investigate how consumers interact with cultural narratives embedded in jewelry and whether these stories influence purchasing decisions.

Explore the role of digital media in enhancing cultural engagement, particularly through virtual platforms like AR apps or social media storytelling.

Compare how traditional symbols are integrated into jewelry design across different cultural contexts to refine approaches to cultural translation in jewelry design globally.

This research would provide valuable insights into how to further enhance the global appeal of jewelry designs while respecting cultural integrity.

References

- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1957)
- Belk, R. W., Ger, G., & Askegaard, S. (2003). The fire of desire: A multisited inquiry into consumer passion. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 30(3), 326–351. <https://doi.org/10.1086/378613>
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature*. Columbia University Press.



- Eco, U. (1976). *A theory of semiotics*. Indiana University Press.
- Fu, L., Chen, Y., & Zhao, H. (2025). Material innovation and cultural continuity in contemporary Chinese jewelry design. *Journal of Design Studies*, 41(2), 115–130.
- Gao, X., & Liu, L. (2025). Symbolic motifs and cultural reinterpretation in contemporary Chinese jewelry design. *Chinese Art and Design Review*, 12(1), 44–59.
- He, J. (2025). Cultural symbolism and functional aesthetics in traditional Chinese jewelry. *Design Heritage Journal*, 18(3), 201–214.
- Liu, Y. (2025). Globalization and cultural adaptation in contemporary jewelry design. *International Journal of Creative Industries*, 9(1), 57–73.
- Qiao, M. (2025). Totems and patterns: Evolution of symbolic systems in Chinese visual culture. *Journal of Asian Aesthetics*, 7(4), 22–36.
- Wang, S., & Yan, R. (2025). Techniques and semiotic strategies in modern reinterpretations of traditional symbols. *Contemporary Design Research*, 33(2), 87–102.
- Yang, L. (2025). Philosophical foundations of symbolic meaning in Chinese traditional arts. *Journal of Eastern Cultural Studies*, 29(1), 13–28.
- Zhang, Q. (2025). Recontextualizing Chinese cultural symbols in global jewelry markets. *International Journal of Design and Culture*, 15(1), 99–114.
- Zhang, Q. (2025). Wearable cultural memory: Reinterpreting Palace Museum symbolism in contemporary jewelry. *International Journal of Design and Culture*, 15(1), 99–114.

