

The Interpretation Mode of Folk Signs

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Abstract

As a cross-cultural discipline, the interpretation of folk signs faces many challenges, such as unclear interpretation, insufficient emphasis on the interpreting items of the human brain, and the need for a unified interpretation mode to facilitate cultural dissemination. This paper proposes an interpretation mode of folk signs from three parts, the semiosis of folk sign, the three logical reasoning modes, and the scope of the interpretation. This proposed interpretation mode can provide theoretical support for the development of the discipline of folk sign studies.

Key words: folk sign, interpretation mode, semiosis, logical reasoning modes, the scope of the interpretation.

1 Introduction

Folk signs are an important part of cultural heritage and reflect the unique cultural characteristics of a community. Previous research on folk signs has primarily focused on their symbolic meaning and cultural significance. Folk signs has been analyzed from different perspectives such as linguistics, the dualistic view of semiotics, anthropology, and folklore, etc. Interpretation of folk signs is essential to understanding cultural practices and social norms of different groups. However, despite some existing studies on the interpretation of folk signs, there is still a lack of systematic and interdisciplinary approaches to analyzing the various types of signs and their meanings. Additionally, insufficient consideration of local contexts and challenges in interpretation due to the complexity and diversity of signs can lead to incomplete or inaccurate interpretations. There is also a need for more comparative studies to explore similarities and differences in the interpretation of folk signs across different cultural contexts. These gaps hinder a comprehensive understanding of the cultural significance and universality of folk signs.

Therefore, there is still a lack of a process and specification to form interpretation mode. This essay will elaborate how to interpret folk

signs, what is the process of interpretation, what is the mode of reasoning, and in what interpretive domain interpretation is carried out.

2 Literature Review

When we put forward the study of folk signs, we need to draw on the contributions of Roland Barthes, the representative of French literacy critic, in semiotics. In Barthes' view, the use of the sign system is not only the arrangement in form but also the profundity of its inner meaning. Even the arrangement and combination of those signs are not merely a form problem; more importantly, they represent specific meaning. In his *Mythologies*, Barthes analyzed the myths and explained how human beings encode and add their ideological products to nature (Barthes, 1989). In his *Elements of Semiology*, he analyzed the characteristics of women's life customs in detail and revealed the "code" implied (Barthes, 1970). He believes that all kinds of signs used in human society are "codes" that express the subconscious in human psychology; at the same time, in the process of historical development, people often unconsciously add the different meanings of "information" to the codes. These are of direct significance to our study of folk semiotics.

Saussure closely combines the study of linguistic signs with the cultural background to which language belongs. People express culture through language, and we can also find out the cultural factors behind it through a person's language. At the same time, non-verbal socialization behavior is also a kind of sign. When encoding and decoding such signs, we can better understand the relevant cultural information. French structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss analyzed the cultural phenomenon which is a non-linguistic sign in society by linguistic method, he said in the *Le Totémisme Aujourd'hui* in 1962 that the code function of totem exists as a language means of communication in culture.

Hawkes said that human beings also communicated through non-linguistic words. Gestures, posture, dress, hairstyle, fragrance, accent, and social background are all helpful to complete the communication, and even use the actual meaning of language to achieve a variety of purposes. He believed that we coded our experience of the world so that we could experience it. Generally, there is no experience in the original state before us. Although the viewpoint comes from linguistics and develops in structural anthropology, its contribution to folk semiotics can not be ignored.

Although their main achievements are not a specific analysis of folk culture phenomena, it can be seen that the achievements of modern international semiotics have essential significance and direct application value for us to explore folk semiotics.

Gao Letian and Deng Changqing put forward that from the perspective of semiotics, folklore has distinct symbolic functions (Gao Letian & Journal of South-Central University for Nationalities: Humanities and Social Sciences Edition, 1998). Taking folklore as a cultural sign provides clues for revealing the mysteries of human culture. Meanwhile, many other important cultural heritages of humankind, such as literature, art, etc., may be interpreted from the study of folklore. For instance, in traditional Chinese painting, some animal and plant shapes have been given fixed sign information. Folklore research is a reliable means to decipher this sign information.

Folklorist Wu Bingan put forward the concept of folk semiotics in the year 2000, which helps form the frame of contemporary folk semiotics. Wu pointed out that the folk semiotics system objectively exists in the folk phenomenon in people's lives rather than transplanting or making up. He contacted and drew lessons from the discourse on the signs in linguistics. Since the signs are divided into linguistic signs and non-linguistic signs, he had a very clear classification of folk signs, that is, signs are divided into folklore signifiers of verbal signs and folklore signifiers of non-verbal system. Among them, the folklore signifier of speech signs includes the signifier about colloquialism and conundrum, as well as signifier about myth; folklore signifier of a non-speech system can be divided into six categories, namely 1. sound designator of hearing, 2. marker designator of vision, 3. Veins adom and image designator of vision, 4. material object signifier of vision, 5. the color signifier of vision, 6. signified signifier of other senses.

However, linguists emphasize the role of linguistic signs in human life but ignore the ability of non-linguistic signs which could lead, suggest and indicate our life. The world we live in is full of folk signs. Folklore becomes a science that tends to explain or analyze the signs of folklore in the development of its theory and practice.

According to the literature review, the establishment of folk semiotics is facing problems as follows:

First, using signs to study folk culture has gradually formed a trend in recent years, but it has not established a system yet. Although the founders and pioneers of folklore have paid attention to a large number of folk signs and phenomena in life, they still have not treated these signs as the natural elements of folk culture, and the studies only stay on the external expression or surface understanding of folk culture.

Second, most of the scholars expound on the signifier, the signified, the synchronic, and the diachronic of folk phenomena from the perspective of Saussure, but lack emphasizing the role of human thought in the interpretation of folk signs. However, they rarely involve the systematization of folk semiotics, the classification of folk customs from

the perspective of semiotics, or the generation, dissemination, and interpretation of the meaning of folk customs.

Third, the author searches for keywords in CNKI such as “folk culture from the perspective of semiotics” and “folk semiotics”, with almost no corresponding results. It means there is still a large gap in the study of folklore from a semiotics perspective.

Based on the above reasons, it is necessary to establish a folklore study from the perspective of semiotics and forming an interpretation mode of folk signs is urgent.

3 Interpretation Mode of Folk Signs

The interpretation mode draws from various approaches in semiotics, cultural studies, and anthropology, as well as considers the specific cultural and historical contexts in which the folk signs originated and evolved. To interpret folk signs effectively, there are certain steps to follow.

First, it is important to have a background understanding of the folk signs and to classify the target sign accordingly. Then, during the interpretation process, it is essential to understand the division of the scope of interpretation and to apply the three major logical reasoning modes - abduction, induction, and deduction - to analyze the dynamic triadic relationship between sign, object, and interpretant. It is also important to recognize that the semiosis of folk signs is an infinitely recursive process. After interpretation, it is necessary to continuously refine and adjust the interpretation of the folk signs to ensure accuracy.

1. Background of folk signs

We should try to understand the cultural, historical, and social context in which the sign is used; gather as much information as possible about the sign, including its origins, history, and usage. This can be done through a variety of methods, such as consulting books, searching the internet, and conducting fieldwork, in order to break the barriers to interpretation caused by limited background knowledge.

2. Analysis of folk signs

Signs should be classified. Interpreters can analyze whether signs belong to linguistic signs or non-linguistic signs. According to the relationship between signs and objects, we can further understand whether signs belong to icon, index or symbol. This step is helpful for the interpreter to have a clearer understanding of folk signs. Then, the interpreter should classify the signs into firstness, secondness and thirdness, so as to understand and analyze the different meanings of signs.

3.1 Classification of folk signs

Folk signs are an important part of cultural heritage, reflecting the beliefs, customs, and traditions of a community. These signs can be classified into signs themselves and sign collections. The classification of signs themselves can further be divided into linguistic and non-linguistic signs. In sign collections, folk signs are gathered together for a common purpose, reflecting the overall folk meaning. For instance, let's take the example of the Hahag offering, which involves presenting a hada (a piece of silk) to guests as a gesture of respect and hospitality. This folk matter is accompanied by a variety of folk signs, which represent the community's values and traditions. By interpreting these signs together, one can appreciate the overall meaning of the folk matter.

However, this classification alone is not comprehensive enough to capture the diversity and complexity of folk signs. Peirce's classification can be used to better understand the relationship between signs and objects. According to Peirce, there are three types of signs: icons, indexes, and symbols. Icons are signs that resemble or have a similar relationship with the object they represent. For example, a drawing of a bird represents a bird through visual similarity. Indexes, on the other hand, have a direct relationship with the object they represent. For instance, smoke indicates the presence of fire because they are causally related. Finally, symbols rely on convention or agreement to represent an object or idea. For instance, using a red heart to represent love is a symbol that is universally understood through cultural conventions.

In conclusion, folk signs are a rich source of cultural information, reflecting the values, beliefs, and traditions of a community. By understanding the different types of signs and their relationship with objects, one can gain a deeper appreciation of the diversity and complexity of folk signs.

3.2 Categories of folk signs

Peirce's classification system categorizes the phenomenal world into three kinds of beings: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. Firstness refers to subjective qualities, like colors or sensations. Secondness refers to the relationship between two objects or experiences, like cause and effect. Thirdness is the realm of signs and representation, which enables us to interact with the world and with each other through language and signs.

These categories of folk signs can be observed in various ways. For example, the sounds of drums and other instruments used in folk music can be enjoyed for their sensory experience alone, representing firstness. The use of totems or animal symbolism to represent a group or clan highlights their relationship with each other and their environment, representing secondness. Finally, the use of the Chinese character “福”

(fu) means “good fortune” in New Year’s decorations and greetings represents thirdness.

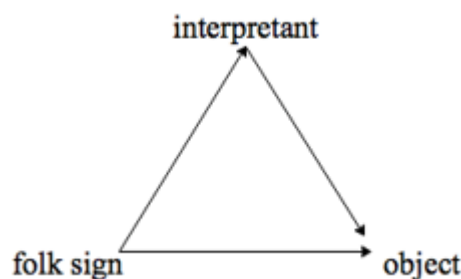
Peirce’s classification system provides a useful framework for understanding the diverse types and functions of folk signs in different cultural contexts.

4 Interpretation of Folk Signs

4.1 Semiosis of Folk Signs

The sign serves as a mediator that connects the interpreter and the object. The object is the thing or concept represented by the sign. The interpretant is the interpreter’s understanding and interpretation of the relationship between the sign and the object. In the process of sign interpretation, the interpretant plays a crucial role, which directly reflects the role and importance of human thinking and cognitive ability in the process of sign meaning embodiment. In the process of sign interpretation, these three factors are indispensable.

The semiotic triangle of folk sign is a mode used to explain the relationship between the folk sign, its object (the thing or concept that the sign refers to), and the interpretant (the understanding or meaning that the sign produces in the mind of the interpreter). This model is similar to the Peircean semiotic triangle but adapted for the study of folk signs.

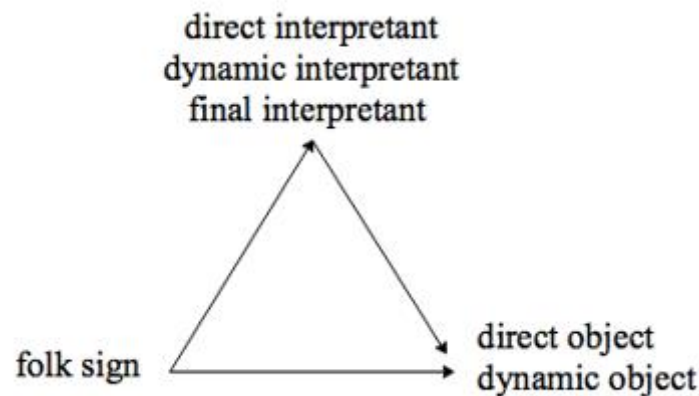


In the above triadic relationship, Peirce makes a further division between objects and interpretant. Where objects are divided into immediate objects and dynamical objects. The interpretant is divided into immediate interpretant, dynamical interpretant and final interpretant.

The immediate object refers to the thing or concept to which the sign refers, while the dynamical object refers to the whole of all things and concepts associated with the sign. For example, a red apple as a sign, its immediate object is this specific apple, while its dynamical object is the set of things and concepts associated with the apple, such as fruit, food, health, etc.

Interpretant refers to all the elements involved in the interpretation or semiosis. Immediate interpretant refers to the most basic, obvious, and direct interpretation of a sign, usually the literal meaning of the sign. For example, the immediate interpretant of a red apple is “a red apple.” Dynamical interpretant refers to a broader range of things and concepts associated with the sign, such as fruit, food, health, and so on. The final interpretant refers to the final interpretation or meaning obtained through deep thinking and discussion.

In the process of interpretation, the object and interpretant are constantly intertwined and developed. By exploring the immediate and dynamical objects of the sign, the interpreter can gradually understand the things or concepts that the sign refers to; at the same time, through analysis and deduction of the immediate, dynamical, and final interpretants, the interpreter can gradually gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of the sign and the information it conveys.



Semiosis varies according to the dynamic changes of the object and interpretant, forming an infinite recursive process. Because the relationship between the object and the interpretant is interactive, a new object may give rise to the emergence of new interpretant, while a new interpretant may lead to a re-interpretation of existing objects. This dynamical change and recursive process are the core of the semiosis, so is the semiosis of folk signs.

Here is an example in the Inner Mongolian welcoming ritual, the host offers a bowl of milk to the guest. When the interpreter first notices this sign, the immediate object is the bowl of milk and the immediate interpretant is a gift of hospitality. However, as the interpreter delves deeper into the cultural context and history of the ritual, the dynamical object expands to include concepts such as respect, friendship, and harmony, and the dynamical interpretant becomes a sign of the cultural values and traditions of the Mongolian people. Through further analysis, the interpreter arrives at the final interpretant, which is the expression

of the host's desire for a harmonious and respectful relationship with the guest, and a reflection of the traditional Mongolian culture of hospitality and generosity.

4.2 The Logical Reasoning Mode of Folk Signs

Peirce's three major modes of reasoning are abduction, induction, and deduction. This triadic reasoning model can be widely applied to all signs, including the process of interpreting folk signs.

Abduction is the inference and hypothesis made without a clue, and the interpreter will make his own brainstorming on the target sign and draw his own conclusion, though the conclusion may be taken for granted, which is most common in the interpreter's interpretation of folk signs. Abduction corresponds to the firstness and is an immediate response. When in an environment full of folk signs, the interpreter instinctively interprets the perceived signs and gives his or her own understanding.

Induction is a summary of the existing situation, where the interpreter draws a certain conclusion and verifies in reality whether the result of abduction is correct. Induction corresponds to secondness. When the same folk sign is seen several times, the interpreter makes a summary of the meaning of the sign and continues to verify the correctness of his thinking as the number of occurrences of the sign increases and draws a conclusion about the meaning of the folk sign. Although the interpretation at this point may not be completely correct, it is a conclusion reached after many times of thinking and examination, which fully reflects the meaning of interpretant.

Deduction refers to summarizing the general law of things on the basis of abduction and induction. Deduction is thirdness that infers specific symbolic meaning from general laws. The ultimate goal of this mode is to form definite theorems. That is to say, the interpreter in this mode will, through continuous deduction, constantly test and get the final conclusion. This is where the meaning of the folk signs is created, and it involves several times of thinking and verifying, and getting an interpretation that can be used continuously. It is through the stages of such patterns that thinking becomes clear. Convincing evidence is obtained in a large number of inductions until the best interpretation of the folk signs is obtained.

In the abduction mode (firstness), the interpreter generates immediate understanding and makes his or her own judgments. As the frequency of the target sign increases, the interpreter enters the inductive mode (secondness), summarizing the corresponding situation in his mind and further judging whether it is correct, whether it has the same meaning as the previously appeared sign, etc. When the same folk sign appears more frequently, the more background information the interpreter has, the smoother the induction process will be and the closer to the truth. Finally, the interpreter enters the deduction mode (thirdness), and

through the summary of folk sign interpretation, he or she has the ability to predict and judge the same sign afterwards and can tell the interpretation to the others.

In the whole process of interpretation, the interpreter's thinking is constantly advancing. From immediate reaction to continuous thinking, summarizing and concluding, and finally forming a fixed interpretation content, this is the process of interpretation of folk signs.

4.3 the Division of the Scope of Interpretation

Inspired by Peirce's classification, Jakobson proposed three types of translation in 1959: intralingual translation, interlingual translation, and intersemiotic translation. However, Toury (1986), Torop (2002), Huang Zhonglian (2015), and Jia Hongwei (2016b) have criticized this classification to varying degrees, pointing out that it relies too heavily on structuralism and Saussurean binary opposition, neglecting the role of individuals in the process of semiotic interpretation, and also, as a narrow type of language translation, it blurs the distinction between interlingual and intersemiotic translation. Building on Lotman's concept of the semiosphere in 1984, which refers to the space in which a certain ethnic sign exists, Jia Hongwei (2016c) proposed the concepts of intrasemiospheric translation, intersemiospheric translation, and superasemiospheric translation. According to them, in order to describe the process of interpreting folk signs more accurately, this essay divides the scope of interpretation into intrasemiospheric interpretation, intersemiospheric interpretation, and co-semiospheric interpretation. Intrasemiospheric interpretation refers to the process of interpreting folk signs within the same culture or ethnicity. Intersemiospheric interpretation refers to the interpretation of the same folk sign across different cultures or ethnicities. Co-semiospheric interpretation refers to the interpretation of folk signs in cultures that share similarities or have certain connections.

Intrasemiospheric interpretation: When the interpreter and the sign belong to the same ethnic group, the interpreter can more accurately understand the meaning of the sign from their own cultural background and experience. For example, in China, the color red is generally seen as a sign of auspiciousness, enthusiasm, and happiness. Therefore, in Chinese folk culture, red folk signs are often associated with auspiciousness, celebration, and other aspects, such as the red "xi" character at weddings, and red lanterns during the Spring Festival.

Intersemiospheric interpretation: If the interpreter and the sign belong to different ethnic groups, the interpreter needs to gradually understand the meaning of the sign in that culture through cross-cultural communication and research. For example, in the United States, the eagle is often seen as a national sign, so Americans may use the eagle as a folk sign in celebrations such as Independence Day. In China, the eagle

is often seen as a sign of fierceness and sharpness, and is associated with courage and strength, so the Chinese may use the eagle as a folk sign in military and martial arts fields.

Co-semiospheric interpretation refers to the existence of similar or overlapping signs in the cultural backgrounds of two or more ethnic groups, which can be interpreted through comparison and analogy. For example, although the “dragon” in traditional Chinese culture and in western culture have different cultural connotations and symbolic meanings, they both have common aspects such as mystery, sacredness, and authority. Therefore, they can be interpreted and understood through comparison and analogy. Co-semiospheric interpretation is both a way to compare the similarities and differences of folk signs in different cultural backgrounds, and an important way to promote mutual understanding in cross-cultural communication.

This categorization allows us to better understand the diversity and complexity of the semiotic interpretation process of folk signs, while highlighting the important role of subjectivity and mental activity in it. At the same time, we need to be aware that these interpretation domains are not isolated, but interwoven and permeable to each other, and therefore require comprehensive analysis to obtain a more complete understanding.

5 Conclusion

Based on the analysis and discussion presented in this essay, it can be concluded that the interpretation of folk signs is a complex and challenging task, which requires a clear understanding of the background and context of the signs, as well as the use of a unified and systematic interpretation mode. The proposed interpretation mode, which includes the contextualization of the sign, the analysis of the sign, and the interpretation of the sign, can provide a theoretical framework for the study of folk signs and promote the development of this interdisciplinary field. Moreover, the adoption of the logical reasoning mode and the division of the scope of interpretation can enhance the accuracy and reliability of the interpretation results and facilitate the dissemination and transmission of cultural information. Therefore, it is recommended that scholars and researchers in this field further explore and apply the proposed interpretation mode in their studies and practices as well as make continuous efforts to advance the discipline of folk signs.

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