

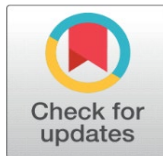
FROM HISTORICAL SYMBOL TO COMMUNICATIVE EXPRESSION: THE SYMBOLIC TRANSLATION OF LIANGZHU TOTEMS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Liangzhu totems are transformed from historical symbols into communicative expression through symbolic translation in contemporary cultural communication. Its central concern is not the renewed verification of the original meanings of these totems, but the ways in which they may be reconstituted as forms of cultural expression that are intelligible to the public once detached from their original contexts. Employing a qualitative research design, the study integrates literature review, image analysis, and interpretive induction to investigate Liangzhu jade artifacts and representative totemic motifs through the relationship among cultural meaning, symbolic structure, and conditions of communication. The findings indicate that the principal obstacle to the contemporary communication of Liangzhu totems lies not in their invisibility, but in the difficulty of making their deeper cultural meanings directly accessible to the public. On this basis, the article proposes a symbolic translation mechanism composed of meaning selection, structural reorganization, and contextual adaptation, arguing that the modern transformation of Liangzhu totems is not a matter of simply replicating original images, but of reorganizing the relationships among cultural core, structural logic, and communicative expression. Contextual feedback from public communicative settings represented by high-speed rail interior spaces further suggests that this mechanism can generate a relatively clear translational pathway between specific symbolic objects and real spatial environments.

Keywords: Liangzhu Totems, Symbolic Translation, Cultural Communication, Intelligibility, Contemporary Expression

1. INTRODUCTION

Against the backdrop of contemporary cultural communication shifting from knowledge-based explanation to perceptual construction, the question of how culturally significant symbols with deep historical resonance can cross the threshold of specialized knowledge and enter communicative systems that are publicly intelligible and perceptible has become increasingly prominent. This issue is particularly acute in the case of cultural symbols that depend heavily on their original contexts: although they often embody clear and substantial historical value, such value does not automatically translate into effective understanding in actual communicative practice (Bruns, 2023).

Liangzhu culture occupies an important place in research on the origins of Chinese civilization. Its jade system, ritual structure, and visual repertoire together constitute crucial materials for understanding early complex society. As one of its most representative visual symbols, Liangzhu totems not only embody sacredness, order, and symbolic authority, but have also become among the most readily recognizable visual resources of Liangzhu culture because of their highly condensed formal characteristics (Renfrew & Liu, 2018; Luo, 2022). Yet precisely because of their high degree of abstraction and strong dependence on original context, Liangzhu totems encounter evident obstacles when entering contemporary communication: the public may be able to see them, but cannot readily grasp their cultural meanings through the image alone.

This problem has already become visible in actual communicative practice. Since the inscription of Liangzhu culture on the World Heritage List, it has received greater public attention; however, the expansion of communicative reach has not necessarily led to a corresponding deepening of public understanding (Wu & Zhao, 2021). The issue is not whether the object of communication is important, but whether its historical significance has been rendered in forms accessible to public understanding. In the case of Liangzhu totems, if they continue to be presented directly in their original forms, they are more likely to be perceived as ancient motifs or enigmatic images than to generate stable cultural recognition. What this article seeks to address, therefore, is precisely how Liangzhu totems may be transformed from historical symbols into communicative expressions that are accessible to the public.

Against this background, the article takes Liangzhu totems as its object of inquiry and examines their symbolic translation within the context of cultural communication. Here, “translation” does not refer to the simple transfer of original totemic forms, but to the reorganization of semantic relations, structural logic, and communicative modes without weakening their cultural core. Integrating literature review, image analysis, and interpretive induction, the study analyzes the formal features, visual structures, and systems of meaning embodied in Liangzhu totems, and compares them with the thresholds of understanding encountered in contemporary communication. Figure 1 presents the original visual objects under discussion, Figure 2 outlines the mechanism of symbolic translation, and Figure 3 uses the divine-human-animal-mask motif as an example to demonstrate how this mechanism unfolds as a translational pathway within a public communication setting. In addressing this problem, the article focuses on three main issues: what relatively stable formal features and structural relations characterize Liangzhu totems; what interpretive obstacles these features encounter in contemporary communication; and how Liangzhu totems may be transformed from historical symbols into communicative expression through the sequential process of meaning selection, structural reorganization, and contextual adaptation.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Representative Liangzhu Jade Artefacts and Totemic Motifs

Source: Compiled by the Author Based on Museum and Archaeological Data

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. ESTABLISHED FOUNDATIONS IN THE STUDY OF LIANGZHU TOTEMS

Research on Liangzhu culture has already established with considerable clarity its important position in the formation of complex society in China. Existing studies show that the Liangzhu jade system and its associated imagery should not be understood as merely decorative remains; rather, they are closely connected to ritual order, social stratification, and structures of power (Renfrew & Liu, 2018). Within this framework, the divine-human-animal-mask motif, jade cong patterns, and related totemic images have been regarded as important materials for understanding the spiritual structure and civilizational form of Liangzhu culture. Luo’s (2022) discussion of the divine-human-animal-mask motif in the Liangzhu period and its lines of influence further underscores the continuity of such imagery within the early Chinese visual-symbolic system.

The principal contribution of existing scholarship lies in its relatively thorough explanation of what Liangzhu totems meant within their original contexts. As a result, the historical value, cultural hierarchy, and symbolic significance of Liangzhu totems already rest on a comparatively stable scholarly foundation. The limitation, however, is that this body of research remains primarily concerned with historical interpretation rather than contemporary communication. Put differently, much attention has been devoted to what Liangzhu totems are, whereas far less has been paid to how they may be understood by contemporary publics.

2.2. THE RESEARCH GAP FROM “HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION” TO “COMMUNICATIVE TRANSFORMATION”

Most existing studies of Liangzhu totems have centered on artifacts, motifs, and ritual systems, emphasizing the relationships between imagery and belief, power, and social hierarchy. This line of inquiry is indispensable for civilizational history, yet its limitations become apparent once the focus shifts to contemporary communication: the more strongly a totem depends on its original context, the more difficult it becomes for its meaning to be directly understood by the public once removed from that context.

This issue has already become visible in the communicative practice of Liangzhu culture. Wu and Zhao (2021) note that although the reach of Liangzhu cultural communication has expanded in the context of new media, such expansion has not automatically led to a corresponding deepening of public understanding. This suggests that the practical challenge facing Liangzhu totems is not merely one of insufficient display, but rather the absence of an expressive mechanism capable of translating historical meaning into public intelligibility. What is genuinely lacking at present is therefore not a renewed confirmation of the historical value of these totems, but an analytical framework oriented toward communicative transformation.

2.3. INSIGHTS FROM CULTURAL TRANSLATION STUDIES AND THEIR LIMITS

Existing research on cultural translation offers important methodological insights for addressing this issue. Jiang (2021) argues that when traditional cultural elements enter modern design systems, they must undergo a process that moves from the extraction of cultural features to the reorganization of visual expression. Li (2013) likewise emphasizes that when traditional cultural resources are incorporated into contemporary landscape or design systems, the key lies not in the transplantation of motifs, but in structural extraction and contextual adaptation. Taken together, these studies suggest that design is not a simple vehicle for carrying cultural symbols, but an intermediary process through which cultural meaning is reorganized.

However, such studies have largely focused on local motifs, folk graphics, or landscape-based cultural elements, whose symbolic backgrounds are relatively open and whose interpretive thresholds are comparatively low. By contrast, Liangzhu totems are highly abstract prehistoric cultural symbols that depend strongly on original context; the bond between their forms and meanings is therefore much tighter, and they cannot be approached simply through the general frameworks developed in existing cultural translation research. In other words, prior studies of cultural translation provide useful methodological orientation, but they remain insufficient for directly explaining the communicative transformation of symbols with such high cultural density as Liangzhu totems.

2.4. THE PERSPECTIVE OF “INTELLIGIBILITY” IN CULTURAL COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Research in communication further suggests that whether a cultural object can enter public cognition depends not only on whether it is displayed, but also on whether it can be organized into interpretive cues accessible to the public. Drion (2022) conceptualizes cultural communication as a process of continual reconfiguration within specific media and situational contexts, while Bruns (2023) argues that contemporary public communication no longer relies on a single center of meaning, but instead generates meaning through multiple forms of public contact. For cultural symbols, this implies that visibility does not automatically lead to intelligibility.

This view is also supported by studies of public space. Wang and Rong (2022) point out that when regional culture is introduced into public space, it should be articulated through a clearer logic of recognition. Xie (2021) likewise shows that when cultural elements remain at the level of superficial addition, effective communication is rarely achieved. In relation to Liangzhu totems, the significance of these studies lies in the insight that the central communicative difficulty

is not simply the depth of their cultural content, but the fact that such deeper meanings have not yet been transformed into expressive cues that the public can readily recognize and enter.

2.5. POSITIONING OF THE PRESENT STUDY

Taken together, existing scholarship provides three important foundations. First, the historical meanings and cultural attributes of Liangzhu totems have already been interpreted in considerable depth. Second, studies of cultural translation offer a basic methodological route from the extraction of cultural elements to the reorganization of formal expression. Third, communication research has shown that cultural expression must address the question of intelligibility.

Yet effective integration across these three lines of inquiry remains limited. Existing studies tend either to remain at the level of historical interpretation, to focus on the design translation of more general cultural elements, or to address public understanding from the perspective of communication. Relatively few, however, have examined Liangzhu totems in a sustained way as highly abstract cultural symbols marked by strong contextual dependence.

It is precisely within this gap that the present study is positioned. Rather than reiterating established judgments about the historical value of Liangzhu totems, or reducing translation to the mere updating of visual motifs, this article centers on the question of how Liangzhu totems may be transformed from historical symbols into communicative expression. To this end, it develops an analytical framework grounded in the relationship among cultural meaning, symbolic structure, and conditions of communication, and proposes a three-stage process of meaning selection, structural reorganization, and contextual adaptation. Table 1 further compares the emphases of existing scholarship with those of the present study, while Figures 2 and 3 elaborate this issue respectively at the levels of mechanism and pathway.

Table 1

Table 1 Comparison Between Previous Studies and the Focus of This Study				
Research Direction	Key Focus	Main Contributions of Existing Research	Unresolved Issues	This article's entry point
Liangzhu Culture and Totem Studies	Historical background, artefact types, and symbolic meanings of Liangzhu totems	Clarifies the civilizational value, ritual significance, and cultural hierarchy of Liangzhu totems	Research remains centered on historical interpretation, with limited attention to their transformation in contemporary communication	Moves Liangzhu totems from objects of historical interpretation toward objects of communicative expression
Cultural Translation and Design Research	Extraction, reorganization, and design transformation of traditional cultural elements	Provides basic methodological approaches to cultural translation	Most studies focus on general local cultural elements rather than highly abstract prehistoric symbols	Establishes a symbolic translation mechanism applicable to Liangzhu totems
Cultural Communication and Public Space Research	Visibility, perceptibility, and comprehensibility of culture in public environments	Shows that communication effectiveness depends on context, medium, and modes of expression	Lacks specific analysis of high-context cultural symbols such as Liangzhu totems	Examines the communicative expression of Liangzhu totems from the perspective of comprehensibility

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1. RESEARCH APPROACH

This study adopts a qualitative research design and combines literature review, image analysis, and interpretive induction to examine the cultural connotations of Liangzhu totems and the mechanisms of their translation. Its concern is not with statistical causality, but with the transformative relationships among cultural meaning, symbolic structure, and conditions of communication. At the level of image analysis, the study draws on the analytical logic of visual grammar—particularly with respect to compositional relations, salience, and information value—to interpret the center–boundary relations, hierarchical organization, symmetrical structures, repetitive patterns, and visual focal points within totemic imagery. These analytical results are then compared against archaeological interpretation, translation research, and communicative context in order to reduce the subjectivity that may arise from purely impressionistic

visual reading. Compared with formal description alone, this approach is better suited to addressing the translation of Liangzhu totems from historical symbols into communicative expression (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Jiang, 2021; Li, 2013).

3.2. SOURCES OF MATERIALS

The materials used in this study consist primarily of two categories: textual sources and visual sources.

The textual materials are drawn mainly from published journal articles, theses, and related academic studies, and are concentrated in three areas. The first includes research on Liangzhu culture, jade systems, and totemic motifs, which is used to establish the historical and cultural significance of Liangzhu totems. The second comprises studies of cultural translation and design transformation, which provide a basis for identifying how traditional cultural elements are reworked when entering contemporary systems of communication and design. The third includes research on cultural communication and expression in public space, which is used to analyze the conditions of understanding and the expressive requirements involved when cultural symbols enter present-day communicative environments. Taken together, these three categories of materials constitute the theoretical foundation for discussing the relationship among meaning, structure, and context in this article. Jose and Baby (2026)

The visual materials consist mainly of representative Liangzhu jade artifacts and their associated totemic motifs, with particular attention to the divine-human–animal-mask motif and patterns related to jade cong. The purpose of these visual materials is not to construct an exhaustive image archive, but to identify relatively stable compositional features, such as contour relations, symmetrical organization, hierarchical structure, and forms of local repetition. Figure 1 presents the primary visual objects examined in this study, while Figure 3 uses the divine-human–animal-mask motif as an example to provide an objectified account of the translational pathway.

The study employs purposive sampling, emphasizing the explanatory value of the selected materials in relation to the research questions rather than seeking comprehensive coverage in terms of sample quantity. The divine-human–animal-mask motif was selected as the core object in Figure 3 for two main reasons. First, it is highly representative within Liangzhu totem studies, concentrating key features of sacredness, order, and composite structure. Second, it contains both clear hierarchical relations and a recognizable semantic core, while also exhibiting a relatively high degree of abstraction and a substantial threshold of understanding. It is therefore particularly well suited as a key sample for examining the mechanism of meaning selection, structural reorganization, and contextual adaptation.

3.3. CRITERIA FOR MATERIAL SELECTION

Separate selection criteria were established for textual and visual materials in this study.

With regard to textual materials, the studies included in the analysis were required to meet at least one of the following conditions. First, they needed to provide a direct interpretation of the cultural meanings of Liangzhu totems, related motifs, or jade imagery. Second, they needed to offer methodological guidance for the contemporary translation of traditional cultural elements. Third, they needed to address the issue of intelligibility in cultural communication and the expression of culture in public space.

For visual materials, selection was based primarily on three criteria: representativeness, structural clarity, and interpretive relevance. Representativeness refers to the extent to which an image has been frequently discussed in Liangzhu scholarship and can reflect the basic characteristics of Liangzhu visual culture. Structural clarity refers to the presence of relatively explicit contours, hierarchical organization, and compositional relationships that make the image suitable for formal and structural analysis. Interpretive relevance refers to whether the selected image can be meaningfully aligned with interpretations established in archaeological or cultural studies.

On the basis of these criteria, the study focuses on core samples that possess both an established interpretive foundation and strong potential for structural extraction and translation analysis. To enhance analytical credibility, the study adopts a process of mutual verification across three dimensions—textual interpretation, image reading, and comparison with communicative scenarios—so as to avoid deriving translational conclusions solely from isolated visual impressions. The treatment of the divine-human–animal-mask motif in Figure 3 is developed precisely as an objectified illustration grounded in this logic of selection and cross-validation.

3.4. ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

The analysis in this study proceeds in three stages. First, relevant scholarship is reviewed in order to identify the core cultural meanings of Liangzhu totems, as well as the key concepts developed in studies of cultural translation and communication. Second, representative totemic images are analyzed with particular attention to contour, hierarchy, symmetry, repetitive structure, and visual salience. Third, the results of image analysis are examined in relation to conditions of communication so as to identify the pathway through which Liangzhu totems are transformed from historical symbols into communicative expression, a process summarized in terms of three stages: meaning selection, structural reorganization, and contextual adaptation. To strengthen the credibility of the analysis, the study adopts a strategy of cross-validation among textual interpretation, image reading, and comparison with communicative scenarios, thereby triangulating its core arguments (Flick, 2018). Figure 2 is used to summarize this mechanistic framework, while Figure 3 takes the divine-human-animal-mask motif as an example to provide an objectified illustration of how the process unfolds across specific symbolic objects and public communicative settings.

3.5. SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

It should be noted that this article is interpretive in nature, and its primary aim is to propose a theoretical analytical framework for the cultural translation of Liangzhu totems rather than to conduct empirical verification. The analysis is based mainly on published literature and visual materials, without the inclusion of interviews, questionnaires, or user testing. Accordingly, the conclusions presented here should be understood primarily as theoretical inferences, and further examination will still be needed in relation to specific communication media or spatial design contexts.

4. RESULTS

4.1. THE COMMUNICATIVE CHALLENGE OF LIANGZHU TOTEMS LIES NOT IN VISIBILITY, BUT IN INTELLIGIBILITY

As Figure 1 shows, Liangzhu totems do not present an obvious problem of invisibility. Whether in the divine-human-animal-mask motif or in related composite patterns, their central compositions, symmetrical relations, and geometrically defined contours all exhibit a relatively strong degree of visual recognizability. In other words, the public is generally able to perceive their distinctiveness, yet is rarely able to infer their cultural meanings from the image surface alone.

This observation is broadly consistent with existing scholarship. Liangzhu totems are not ordinary decorative motifs; rather, they are cultural symbols embedded in ritual order and social structure, and their meanings cannot be directly decoded through everyday visual experience (Renfrew & Liu, 2018; Luo, 2022). Accordingly, the central issue in the contemporary communication of Liangzhu totems is not whether they can be seen, but whether they can be understood.

4.2. THE TRANSLATIONAL BASIS OF LIANGZHU TOTEMS LIES IN THE LAYERED RELATIONSHIP AMONG MEANING, STRUCTURE, AND FORM

The complexity of Liangzhu totems arises not primarily from decorative detail, but from the superimposition of meaning, structure, and form. For this reason, the translation of these totems cannot remain at the level of visual simplification alone; it must first distinguish among cultural core, identificatory logic, and expressive register.

At the level of meaning, Liangzhu totems are not ordinary decorative motifs, but cultural symbols associated with ritual order, social organization, and sacred significance. What must be retained in the process of translation is therefore not the isolated motif itself, but the deeper cultural orientations it embodies.

At the level of structure, although the divine-human-animal-mask motif and related images exhibit considerable variation in detail, they share relatively stable organizational features. These are expressed primarily through center-boundary relations, vertical hierarchy, symmetrical arrangement, and localized repetitive structures. Such relations constitute the framework through which the totem becomes recognizable and historically continuous.

At the level of form, contour, line, rhythm, and localized geometric relations make up the dimensions that are first perceived when the totem enters contemporary communicative contexts. Form does not independently carry cultural meaning; rather, it enables deeper cultural content to be presented in perceptible ways.

Accordingly, the translatability of Liangzhu totems does not lie in the direct reuse of original images, but in the fact that meaning, structure, and form can be read in layers and reorganized. The mechanism summarized in Figure 2 is grounded precisely in this layered relationship, while Figure 3 further provides an objectified illustration of how this relationship unfolds through the example of the divine-human-animal-mask motif.

4.3. THE SYMBOLIC TRANSLATION MECHANISM OF LIANGZHU TOTEMS CONSISTS OF THREE SEQUENTIAL STAGES

Building on the layered relationship outlined above, this article conceptualizes the symbolic translation of Liangzhu totems as a process composed of three sequential stages: meaning selection, structural reorganization, and contextual adaptation. As shown in Figure 2, this mechanism provides an overall framework for understanding the contemporary translation of Liangzhu totems. Rather than involving the direct transfer of original images, this process unfolds progressively from cultural meaning to symbolic structure and ultimately to communicative expression.

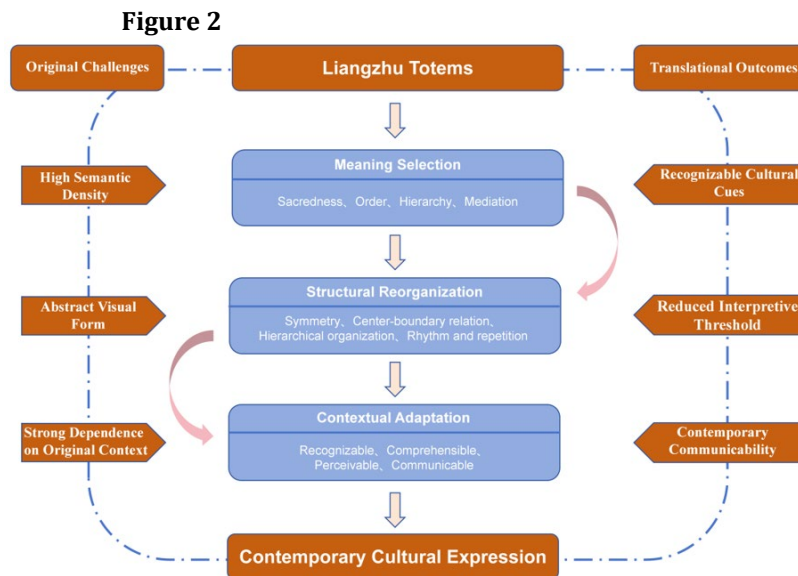


Figure 2 Symbolic Translation Mechanism of Liangzhu Totems

Within this process, meaning selection addresses the question of what must be retained. The core of Liangzhu totems lies not in isolated decorative details, but in the ritual character, sense of order, and sacred symbolism they embody. The starting point of translation, therefore, is not the replication of the original image, but the identification of those elements that carry enduring cultural significance.

Structural reorganization addresses the question of how identificatory logic can be sustained. Although the divine-human-animal-mask motif is complex in its details, its center-boundary relations, hierarchical organization, symmetrical arrangement, and localized concentric structures exhibit a high degree of stability. What possesses continuity is thus not the surface pattern itself, but these underlying structural relations.

Contextual adaptation addresses the question of how the symbol may enter contemporary communicative environments. Whether a cultural symbol can function effectively in communication depends not on whether it is directly displayed, but on whether it is organized into expressive cues that the public can recognize and approach. Translated expression must therefore respond to the perceptual conditions of specific contexts, rather than remain at the level of reproducing the original image.

Figure 3 further provides an objectified illustration of this mechanism through the example of the divine-human-animal-mask motif. The feathered-crown motif, the concentric-eye pattern, and the core divine-face module shown in

the figure should not be understood as the mechanical disassembly of the original totem, but as the extraction of its cultural core and structural relations. Through reorganization, these elements are further transformed into patterned language, component-based language, and modular forms, which are then introduced into settings such as seat-side interfaces, overhead grille lighting bands, and door-area wayfinding zones within high-speed rail interiors. In other words, Figure 2 offers a schematic summary at the level of mechanism, whereas Figure 3 presents the pathway through which this mechanism unfolds across a specific totemic object and a concrete public communicative setting. Taken together, the two figures demonstrate that the translation of Liangzhu totems does not move directly from original image to spatial expression, but is accomplished progressively through the preservation of meaning, the extraction of structure, and adaptation to context.

Figure 3

Symbolic Translation Path of the Liangzhu Divine Human–Beast Motif

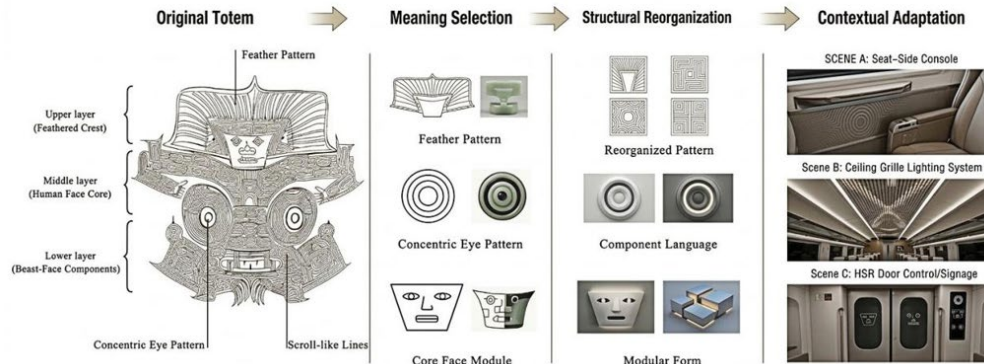


Figure 3 Symbolic Translation Path of the Liangzhu Divine Human–Beast Motif

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. FROM HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION TO COMMUNICATIVE TRANSFORMATION: ADVANCING THE STUDY OF LIANGZHU TOTEMS

Existing scholarship has already provided a substantial account of the significance of Liangzhu totems within ritual order, social structure, and civilizational formation. Accordingly, this article does not seek to reiterate established archaeological interpretations. Its contribution lies instead in shifting the center of inquiry: rather than continuing to ask what these totems originally meant, it asks how they may remain intelligible once removed from their original contexts. This shift does not alter the historical nature of Liangzhu totems, but it does reorient the analytical perspective. They are no longer treated solely as historical objects awaiting interpretation, but also as cultural symbols that require analysis within the framework of contemporary communication.

The necessity of this shift follows directly from the findings of the present study. The obstacle confronting Liangzhu totems in contemporary communication does not lie in any deficiency of cultural value, but in the fact that their meanings depend heavily on original context. In other words, the issue is not whether they are worth communicating, but how they can be transformed into communicative expressions that are publicly accessible. The mechanistic framework summarized in Figure 2 is proposed precisely in response to this problem: the contemporary transformation of Liangzhu totems cannot remain at the level of reiterating historical knowledge, nor can it rely on the mere redisplay of original images. Instead, it requires the construction of an intermediate layer linking cultural meaning, structural relations, and communicative expression. In this sense, what this article advances is precisely the problem of how Liangzhu totems can be transformed from historical symbols into communicative expression.

5.2. EXTENDING CULTURAL TRANSLATION RESEARCH: TRANSLATION IS FIRST AND FOREMOST A QUESTION OF MEANING

Existing studies of cultural translation have already shown that when traditional cultural elements enter modern design, the process cannot remain at the level of formal borrowing alone, but must involve extraction, reorganization, and re-expression. The present study is consistent with this general view, but argues further that for prehistoric cultural

symbols such as Liangzhu totems—symbols characterized by high contextual dependence and strong historical embeddedness—the starting point of translation is not formal treatment, but meaning selection.

If the cultural core is not first clearly identified, what is described as structural extraction can easily collapse into the abstraction of pattern, yielding only a more simplified visual form rather than a clearer mode of cultural expression. As the translational pathway of the divine-human-animal-mask motif shown in Figure 3 demonstrates, what is actually retained is not the full detail of the original totem, but those elements that carry enduring cultural significance and structural recognizability. The feathered-crown motif, the concentric-eye pattern, and the core divine-face module become the basis for subsequent translation not because they are most suitable for decorative reuse, but because they perform identificatory functions at both the semantic and structural levels.

This also means that structural reorganization is not a neutral formal technique. The sacred character of the original totem derives to a considerable extent from its complex structure, ritual context, and threshold of interpretation. When these dimensions are extracted, compressed, and introduced into contemporary communicative settings through translation, the public's mode of perception also changes. The totem no longer appears primarily as a historically distant image marked by mystery and authority, but is reconfigured into a cultural expression that is more readily recognizable and approachable. Such transformation enhances communicative accessibility, yet it may also weaken the ritual sensibility and estrangement specific to the original totem. This, in turn, suggests that translation is not a lossless conversion, but a process of negotiation between preservation and reconstruction. From the perspective of cultural heritage studies, authenticity is not a fixed and singular standard, but must instead be understood in relation to the cultural context to which it belongs (The Nara Document on Authenticity, 1994).

5.3. IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION RESEARCH: INTELLIGIBILITY IS NOT AN INCIDENTAL OUTCOME, BUT AN ORGANIZED ONE

Communication research has already shown that cultural content does not become intelligible simply by being displayed in public communicative space. The findings of this study further suggest that, for symbols of high cultural density such as Liangzhu totems, the key to communication lies not in increasing visibility, but in transforming deeper cultural meanings into expressive cues that the public can recognize and approach. In this sense, intelligibility should not be understood as a natural by-product of dissemination, but as an outcome that must be actively constructed through the organization of expression.

The divine-human-animal-mask motif provides a clear example. The original totem is not transferred wholesale into the interior space of high-speed rail; rather, through the extraction of visual elements, structural reorganization, and the transformation of symbolic vocabulary, it is redistributed across different settings, including seat-side interfaces, overhead grille lighting bands, and door-area wayfinding zones. Such treatment is not an arbitrary design variation, but a response to communicative conditions. Within the public environment of high-speed rail interiors, audience dwell time is limited and attention is dispersed. Cultural expression therefore cannot rely on complete background knowledge in order to achieve understanding; instead, it must establish contact through low-threshold structural cues that can be recognized quickly. In this respect, the interior space of high-speed rail is not treated here as an independent object of study, but as a public communicative context that, in turn, helps demonstrate why a translation mechanism is necessary.

This, however, also raises an unavoidable question: how should the tension between intelligibility and cultural authenticity be negotiated in the process of contextual adaptation? If translation pursues clarity, simplicity, and rapid recognizability without restraint, the historical depth, sacred character, and ritual significance embedded in the original totem may be weakened, or even reduced to mere decorative pattern. Conversely, if authenticity is overemphasized, the totem may remain too dense in information to become publicly intelligible. The mechanism proposed in this article does not seek to eliminate this tension altogether; rather, it emphasizes that translation must begin with the identification of the cultural core. Only when the meaning-selection stage clearly determines what cannot be discarded can contextual adaptation avoid collapsing into mere visual simplification. For communication research, this suggests that the entry of high-context cultural symbols into contemporary communication is not only a matter of expression, but also one of interpretive boundaries and cultural ethics.

5.4. RESEARCH BOUNDARIES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This article is an interpretive study whose primary objective is to propose an analytical framework for the translation of Liangzhu totems rather than to provide empirical verification. The analysis is based mainly on literature review, image analysis, and theoretical induction; likewise, the adaptation to high-speed rail interior space presented in Figure 3 should be understood as a contextual illustration rather than as validated design evidence or tested communication outcomes. The mechanism proposed here therefore remains, at this stage, an analytical conclusion whose applicability still requires further examination in more specific media and spatial settings.

This limitation does not diminish the value of the study, but it does define the scope of its claims. What the article has accomplished is to move Liangzhu totems from being treated solely as objects of archaeological interpretation to being addressed as objects of communication analysis, while proposing an intermediate framework capable of linking cultural meaning, symbolic structure, and communicative context. To advance this framework further, future research may introduce design peer review, expert interviews, or comparative studies of user perception in specific settings so as to examine how different modes of translation perform in balancing intelligibility and cultural retention.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The central concern of this article is how Liangzhu totems may be transformed from historical symbols into communicative expression. The study shows that Liangzhu totems are not ready-made visual resources that can be directly inserted into modern systems of communication; rather, they constitute a category of cultural symbols that depend heavily on historical context, possess relatively stable structural logic, and entail a high threshold of understanding.

On this basis, the article proposes that the symbolic translation of Liangzhu totems should proceed through three stages: meaning selection, structural reorganization, and contextual adaptation. Meaning selection determines the preservation of the cultural core, structural reorganization ensures the continuity of symbolic logic, and contextual adaptation enables the totem to enter contemporary communicative environments in forms that are publicly recognizable.

In doing so, this study establishes an analytical intermediate layer linking Liangzhu totem studies, cultural translation research, and communication research, thereby enabling Liangzhu totems to be repositioned from objects of historical interpretation to objects of communication analysis. The translational pathway of the divine-human–animal-mask motif presented in Figure 3 further indicates that this mechanism can generate a clear connection between a specific totemic object and the public communicative setting of high-speed rail interior space.

At the same time, this study remains interpretive in nature, and its arguments have not yet been further validated through design prototyping, user testing, or comparative assessment of communication effects. Future research may therefore subject the translation mechanism proposed here to more in-depth examination across specific media and spatial contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study is based on publicly available literature, images, and secondary textual materials. It does not involve human subjects, interviews, observations, or experimental interventions, nor does it involve informed consent procedures. Throughout the research, the authors adhered to the fundamental principles of academic integrity, proper

citation, and respect for intellectual property rights, ensuring that all materials used were accurately cited and used solely for academic research purposes.

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