

A Study on the Translation Strategies of Miao Embroidery Visual Symbols from the Perspective of Intercultural Communication

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Abstract: Amid globalization, culturally rich traditional ethnic visual symbols often face semantic dilution or misinterpretation in cross-cultural communication. Focusing on the butterfly motifs of Miao embroidery, this study investigates how visual translation design can enhance the cross-cultural comprehensibility of ethnic symbols while preserving their cultural authenticity. Through literature review and theoretical analysis, the study integrates semiotics and cross-cultural communication theories to construct a three-stage analytical framework: “symbolic decoding–cross-cultural analysis–principle induction.” Based on this framework, the paper proposes three specific translation principles—visual simplification, cultural semantic reconstruction, and contextualized communication—alongside a systematic translation framework. While the three principles address specific communication barriers at the levels of visual form, cultural meaning, and communication context, the framework integrates them into a progressive operational path: “visual form optimization–cultural semantic reconstruction–communication context adaptation.” Ultimately, this framework not only applies to Miao embroidery but also provides a theoretical and design reference for the cross-cultural communication of other traditional ethnic visual symbols rooted in specific cultural contexts.

Keywords: Miao embroidery; Butterfly motifs; Cross-cultural communication; Visual translation; Design principles

Online publication: August 5, 2026

1. Introduction

Accelerating globalization and the proliferation of digital media technology pose new challenges for the cross-cultural communication of traditional culture. Audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds differ significantly in their aesthetic habits, cognitive modes, and symbolic decoding logic. Consequently, culturally rich ethnic visual symbols are often reduced to mere decorative elements in foreign contexts, hindering the effective transmission of their deep-seated meanings ^[1]. In her research on the cross-cultural communication of visual symbols, Shi Jingwei points out that this process is not a simple replication of form; rather, it requires semiotic reorganization and semantic reconstruction to communicate effectively in foreign

cultural contexts^[2]. As a vital repository of Miao cultural memory, Miao embroidery features motifs such as butterflies, birds, and beasts that embody complex mythological narratives of the origin of life and ancestor worship. However, this deeply context-dependent symbolic system is highly susceptible to semantic dilution or shift during overseas dissemination. Therefore, enhancing the cross-cultural comprehensibility of Miao embroidery symbols through visual design while preserving their cultural authenticity has become an urgent issue.

While existing literature extensively explores the aesthetic characteristics, indigenous symbolism, and product design applications of Miao embroidery, it often lacks a theoretical perspective on cross-cultural communication. Conversely, while cross-cultural communication research emphasizes meaning adaptation and reconstruction, it rarely offers concrete, design-oriented pathways for traditional visual symbols. To bridge this gap, this paper addresses three core questions: What obstacles do Miao embroidery symbols encounter in cross-cultural communication? How can visual translation design mitigate these barriers? And how can a framework of translation principles be established to guide design practice? The contributions of this study are twofold. Theoretically, it integrates semiotics and cross-cultural communication theory into traditional pattern design, constructing a design-oriented “visual translation framework.” Practically, this framework not only applies to the Miao embroidery butterfly motif but also provides a methodological reference for the international dissemination of other ethnic visual heritage.

2. Literature review

Existing literature on Miao embroidery primarily focuses on its pattern characteristics, cultural connotations, and transmission pathways, establishing a foundational understanding of its visual system^[3]. Regarding design applications, scholars have predominantly explored the extraction and reconstruction of Miao embroidery elements within cultural and creative products or packaging design, though these studies remain largely confined to the domestic market^[4,5]. Within cross-cultural communication and visual semiotics, research emphasizes the context-dependency of visual signs and how cultural differences affect communication outcomes^[2]. Here, the mechanism of meaning generation in visual signs serves as a theoretical departure point for addressing the challenges of cross-cultural communication. Semiotics posits that the meaning of a sign is not inherent to its visual form but is continuously constructed through audience interpretation^[6]. Indeed, visual communication is fundamentally a process of cultural interpretation^[7]. Consequently, while the butterfly pattern in Miao embroidery serves as a visual manifestation of the creation myth within its native culture, overseas audiences may perceive it merely as a decorative abstraction of a natural object, thereby risking the dissolution of its rich cultural connotations.

Cross-cultural communication theory further elucidates the underlying causes of this disparity. Hall’s theory of high- and low-context cultures posits that communication in high-context settings relies heavily on shared background and implicit consensus, whereas low-context cultures favor explicit and direct modes of encoding^[8]. The mythological narratives and ethnic beliefs embedded in the Miao embroidery butterfly motif exemplify such high-context cultural products, making them highly susceptible to a “rupture” in meaning within low-context environments. However, this theory remains primarily diagnostic, offering few actionable solutions at the level of visual design. Recently, the design field has begun to explore “visual translation” as an intermediary mechanism for semantic transformation. Jakobson’s concept of “intersemiotic translation” provides a theoretical foundation for converting meaning across different semiotic systems^[9]. Yet, existing

research has largely focused on brand communication, leaving a gap in systematic translation principles for highly context-dependent traditional ethnic patterns like Miao embroidery. Ultimately, while semiotics, cross-cultural communication theory, and visual translation research address meaning generation, cultural differences, and modes of conversion respectively, a cohesive framework capable of directly guiding design practice at their intersection has yet to be established.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

Grounded in semiotics and intercultural communication theory, this study adopts a theoretical-constructive research approach to construct a system of operational principles centered on the intercultural translation of Miao embroidery visual symbols. Through literature and theoretical analyses, the study systematically reviews relevant theoretical achievements to extract the cultural connotations and intercultural communication barriers of the Miao embroidery butterfly motif, thereby formulating visual translation principles. The research unfolds in three consecutive stages: “semiotic analysis, intercultural analysis, and principle induction.” The first stage applies Peirce’s semiotic theory to analyze the visual form and meaning-making logic of the butterfly motif. The second stage integrates Hall’s high- and low-context theory to diagnose its communication barriers in overseas contexts. Finally, building upon the outcomes of the previous two stages, the third stage proposes actionable translation design principles across three dimensions of design intervention: visual form, cultural semantics, and communication context.

3.2. Research object

This paper selects the butterfly motif in Miao embroidery as its research object. The butterfly motif is one of the most representative traditional patterns in Miao embroidery. It is directly associated with the core mythological narratives of the Miao people concerning the origin of all things and the veneration of matrilineal ancestors, and it carries rich ethnic memory and symbolic meaning. As such, it functions not merely as a decorative motif but as a quintessential cultural visual symbol. Moreover, the butterfly motif appears extensively across diverse media—including traditional garments, handicrafts, cultural and creative products, and digital platforms—and thus holds considerable value for design communication. In cross-cultural communication practice, its cultural meaning is frequently misread or flattened due to contextual disparities, a predicament that makes it an ideal case study for examining the common challenges facing the international dissemination of traditional ethnic symbols.

3.3. Analytical framework

This paper establishes a three-stage analytical framework comprising semiotic analysis, cross-cultural analysis, and principle induction. In the first stage, semiotic analysis, Peirce’s triadic theory of signs is employed to decode the visual formal structure, signified cultural concepts, and meaning-generation logic of Miao embroidery butterfly motifs, thereby clarifying the constitution of their cultural connotations. The second stage, cross-cultural analysis, integrates Hall’s high- and low-context theory with Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory to diagnose the comprehension barriers and underlying causes encountered by butterfly motifs during overseas dissemination, focusing on differences in cultural backgrounds, cognitive habits, and value orientations^[10]. Finally, the third stage, principle induction, synthesizes the findings from the preceding

stages. Guided by visual translation theory, this stage formulates a set of actionable design principles for the cross-cultural translation of Miao embroidery visual symbols across three dimensions of design intervention: visual form, cultural semantics, and dissemination context.

4. Strategies: Principles of visual translation for Miao embroidery symbols

Drawing on the preceding analysis of the cultural connotations of Miao embroidery butterfly motifs and the discussion of cross-cultural communication challenges, this study proposes the following four principles of visual translation:

Principle 1: Visual Simplification. The original forms of Miao embroidery butterfly motifs typically integrate intricate geometric divisions, auxiliary animal and plant patterns, and multiple decorative layers—a visual complexity that in itself carries a complete cultural narrative. However, for overseas audiences who lack familiarity with Miao cultural backgrounds, the high density of visual information significantly increases cognitive load and diminishes the recognizability and memorability of the symbols. Therefore, in translational design, designers should, while preserving the core formal characteristics of the butterfly motif, appropriately refine and distill repetitive auxiliary patterns, subtle decorative lines, and redundant details. Visual simplification does not diminish cultural characteristics; rather, it renders the core symbolic forms more distinct and prominent through visual “noise reduction,” thereby lowering the recognition threshold for cross-cultural audiences.

Principle Two: The Principle of Cultural Semantic Reconstruction. The cosmogonic myths and ancestral veneration embedded in the butterfly motif cannot be naturally conveyed through the mere graphic “transplantation” of its form. Accordingly, translational design must move beyond formal-level adaptation and engage with the visual encoding of cultural semantics. Designers should identify the core cultural concepts underlying the butterfly motif—such as the origin of life, ethnic reproduction, and divine symbolism—and may employ means such as graphic metaphor, the retention or adjustment of symbolic color, and the explicit articulation of compositional narrative, so that the originally implicit cultural information attains a more direct and intuitive visual expression.

Principle Three: The comprehension of visual symbols depends not only on the graphic forms themselves, but also on the informational environment in which they are perceived. Miao embroidery symbols originate from the specific cultural soil of the Miao people, and once removed from that context, static patterns alone make it difficult for overseas audiences to grasp their full meaning. Consequently, translation design should not remain at the level of graphic output alone; it should also actively establish connections between the symbols and their cultural background. Specific approaches include: incorporating narrative cues within the visual composition, supplementing designs with brief cultural annotations or background stories, and leveraging the interactive functions and dynamic visuals of digital media to create a more immersive experience. Through these means, designers can construct a “bridge of understanding” for overseas audiences, helping them connect the butterfly motifs they encounter with the mythological meanings embedded within, thereby reducing the comprehension barriers arising from cultural difference.

Principle Four: A Systematic Translation Framework. The three principles outlined above are not independent of one another; rather, they are interrelated and form a progressively structured whole. This paper proposes a three-tiered operational sequence of “visual form optimization—cultural semantic reconstruction—communicative context adaptation,” constituting a systematic translation framework. In

practice, designers may proceed in the following order: first, simplify the original symbols visually to ensure that their core forms are easily recognizable; second, on the basis of the simplified graphics, translate cultural concepts into visual language so that abstract meanings become perceptible; third, according to the specific communication medium and target audience, apply appropriate contextualization strategies to complete the overall cross-cultural communication design proposal. This framework is applicable not only to the butterfly motifs in Miao embroidery but also holds a degree of general value for other traditional visual symbols rooted in specific cultural soils. In practical projects, designers should flexibly adjust the emphasis of each principle according to the specific communicative purposes and cultural contexts, while consistently maintaining two fundamental criteria: “preserving the authentic appearance of the culture” and “ensuring comprehensibility for audiences from other cultures.”

5. Discussion

The translation principles framework proposed in this study contributes to the theoretical landscape in several key respects. First, the principles of visual simplification and cultural semantic reconstruction translate the abstract semiotic premise that “meaning is generated in interpretation” into concrete design interventions. Specifically, they guide designers to actively foster cross-cultural understanding through two operational approaches: “identifying core features” and “encoding abstract concepts.” Second, the principle of contextualized communication directly addresses the practical challenges arising from disparities between high-context and low-context environments. By embedding narrative clues, providing cultural background prompts, and integrating digital media, it offers actionable strategies for designers to compensate for contextual deficits. Finally, this systematic framework synthesizes the three principles into a progressive operational sequence: “visual form optimization → cultural semantic reconstruction → communication context adaptation.” Departing from the fragmented recommendations common in existing literature, it establishes a coherent logical chain for design decision-making.

Nevertheless, as this study is primarily oriented toward theoretical construction, the validity and applicability of these four principles have yet to be empirically verified through design practice or audience cognitive testing. Consequently, they require further validation through real-world design cases and feedback from international audiences. Additionally, because the framework is formulated at the level of strategic design decision-making, its application may need to be adapted for communication scenarios targeting general consumers.

6. Conclusion

Focusing on Miao embroidery butterfly motifs through the lens of cross-cultural communication, this study constructs a framework of visual translation principles. Specifically, it proposes four core components: visual simplification, cultural semantic reconstruction, contextualized communication, and a systematic translation framework. The first three address cross-cultural barriers at the levels of visual form, cultural meaning, and communication context, respectively, while the fourth integrates them into a progressive operational path. Theoretically, this study translates semiotic and cross-cultural communication theories into actionable guidelines for design decision-making, thereby addressing a methodological gap in the “how-to-design” phase of existing research. Practically, the framework offers a general design reference for other traditional

ethnic visual symbols rooted in specific cultural contexts. Although the validity of this framework requires further validation through design practice and audience testing, future research can refine these principles through targeted case experiments and explore how different media types or cultural spheres influence translation outcomes.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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