

Analysis of the Symbols and Symbolic Meanings of Ink Graphics

Jiayue Pei, Yakup bin Mohd Rafee*

Faculty of Art, Sustainability, and Creative Industry, Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjong Malim 35900, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: Yakup bin Mohd Rafee, 502189631@qq.com

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Abstract: This article focuses on the symbols and symbolic meanings of Chinese ink graphics, aiming to deeply explore the artistic characteristics of ink graphics and the cultural connotations they carry. By analyzing the origin, development, and representative works of ink graphics in various historical periods, this study reveals the symbolic features and meanings of ink graphics. Adopting a qualitative research method, the study applies the theory and methodology of semiotics to the research of ink graphics through a literature review. By visually analyzing artists' works, the study combines the artistic value and cultural value of ink graphics, providing readers with a new aesthetic experience and research perspective.

Keywords: Ink graphics; Semiotics; Symbolic meaning; Artistic characteristics; Historical development

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1. Introduction

The exploration of the symbols and symbolic meanings of ink graphics is a research topic rich in connotation and inspiration. As an essential component of Chinese traditional art, ink painting has attracted the attention of countless researchers and enthusiasts with its unique aesthetic charm and profound historical context. Symbols and symbols are important ways of human thinking and expression. They convey certain ideas, concepts, and social values through specific forms and connotations.

2. Research background

Wang Yifei mentioned that ink painting is an important form of traditional Chinese painting, using water, ink, and paper as basic materials, and demonstrating unique aesthetics through various brushwork, ink techniques, and composition skills ^[1]. In this context, further exploring the symbols and symbolic meanings of ink graphics not only helps better inherit and promote this precious heritage but also has profound significance for promoting

the exchange and development of cross-cultural arts. Chinese traditional elements cover many aspects, including modern painting, architecture, music, and other fields at the artistic level, and ancient painting is based on ink elements ^[2]. As a unique art form, ink elements enrich people's imagination with their rich artistic effects of blending shades, expressing the artistic realm of "everywhere without painting becomes a wonderful scene", enhancing the connotation of products, and better displaying the artistic conception and hierarchy ^[3]. Different combinations of lines can express different emotions and implications.

3. Literature Review

Ink graphics, as a unique form of artistic expression, carry rich cultural connotations and symbolic meanings. In recent years, more and more researchers have focused on the application of ink graphics in various fields and conducted in-depth explorations of their symbols and symbolic meanings.

Liu Haisu, a famous modern Chinese painter and an outstanding representative of modern painting, has had a profound influence on later generations with his artistic concepts and creative practices. When exploring the artistic characteristics of ink painting, Liu Haisu once pointed out: "The spirit of Chinese painting lies entirely in the use of brush and ink." This statement reveals that the essence of Chinese painting lies in the exquisite use of brush and ink, which is not only a display of skill but also an expression of the painter's emotions and thoughts. This combination of skill and emotion forms a unique artistic language through the symbols and symbolic meanings of ink graphics, endowing Chinese painting with profound cultural connotations and artistic value. In Liu Haisu's view, "brushwork" is the soul of the artistic expressiveness of ink painting. Brushstrokes in ink painting are not only a display of skill but also a symbolic language. For example, a strong line can symbolize the steadfastness of mountains and rivers, while a gentle curve may represent the tenderness of flowing water. These brushstrokes symbolically express the vitality of nature and the emotional world of the artist. In terms of symbolic meaning, the diversity and richness of brushwork make ink painting a graphic symbol system with profound cultural connotations. The use of "ink" is equally important. The five color changes of ink are not only a visual effect but also a symbol rich in symbolic meaning. Thick ink represents stability and depth, like the solidity of mountains and rocks; light ink implies lightness and etherealness, like the misty distant mountains; the rough texture of dry ink seems to tell the vicissitudes of time; and the smoothness of wet ink symbolizes the vitality of life. These symbolic and symbolic meanings of ink colors make ink painting more than just a visual art, becoming a vehicle for conveying philosophical ideas, aesthetic emotions, and cultural values. Liu Haisu's artistic concepts and practices, based on this level, have had a profound impact on later generations' understanding and creation of ink paintings.

In academic theory, through academic websites such as CNKI, research results on ink form design and its applications, as well as studies on the diverse manifestations of ink graphic forms, can be retrieved. These resources cover a series of books or atlases on the creative industry of ink art, domestic and foreign master's and doctoral dissertations, articles published in domestic academic journals, and related papers published on international academic platforms. By studying these documents and portfolios, it can be seen that the application of ink graphics in the field of modern design is increasingly widespread, covering various aspects such as cultural and creative product packaging design, integrated media artistic expression, modern font design, film and television peripheral product design, and augmented reality technology experiential design. Researchers have conducted in-depth explorations of the symbols and symbolic meanings of ink graphics from multiple perspectives

such as semiotics, aesthetics, and cultural studies. These research results not only enrich the theoretical system of ink graphics but also provide solid theoretical support and rich practical guidance for the future application of ink graphics in a wider range of design fields. However, further research is still needed on the symbols and symbolic meanings of ink graphics to contribute to the inheritance and innovation of traditional Chinese culture.

4. Methodology

4.1. Data collection

To deeply explore the symbols and symbolic meanings of ink graphics, this study adopted a qualitative research method. The research team first extensively collected ink paintings from ancient, modern, and contemporary artists. These works came from museums, galleries, private collections, and internationally renowned exhibitions both domestically and abroad, providing rich visual material for the study. Simultaneously, the team conducted interviews with some well-known ink painters to understand their creative philosophies, skill applications, and the symbols and symbolic meanings in their works. These first-hand materials provided empirical support for the study.

Furthermore, the research team also gathered and organized a large amount of literature on ink graphics, including academic papers, monographs, reviews, and news reports. Among them, Li Ming and Jin Yuexian emphasized that in modern graphic creative visual design, the language of ink painting is an indispensable trend^[4]. At the same time, its artistic language is essential in the field of modern art design. Especially in modern graphic creative design, it is very necessary to draw lessons from and apply the contents of “vivid charm, skillful brushwork, image creation according to objects, color application based on categories, and composition arrangement” in the language of ink painting. Through deep reading and analysis of these documents, the team could better grasp the current research status and development trends of ink graphics. In the Internet era, network resources provide a wealth of data sources for research. By searching and sorting out relevant ink graphic materials, including online exhibitions, artist blogs, and social media, the team could further expand the research’s horizon and depth.

4.2. Data analysis

Data analysis is a crucial aspect of qualitative research methods, involving systematic interpretation and explanation of collected data. Through content analysis, the symbols and symbolic meanings of ink graphics are revealed. Below is a data analysis table exploring the symbols and symbolic meanings of ink graphics. This table organizes common symbols or imagery in ink graphics and their corresponding symbolic meanings from different aspects.

In semiotic analysis, the research focuses on the symbolic elements contained in ink graphics, such as lines, colors, shapes, and structures, and how these elements are intertwined to create a unique visual communication style. Ink paintings exhibit Chinese traditional culture through the variations in shade of black and white tones, where diverse changes in lines reflect rich emotions and artistic conceptions. For instance, slender lines evoke elegance and delicacy, while bold lines express strength and unrestrained vigor. In Gu Wenda’s “Lost Dynasty”, the use of lines is just right, outlining the vicissitudes of the dynasty’s rise and fall (**Figure 1**). Gu Wenda also skillfully employs color contrast, giving the painting a strong visual impact and expressing deep reflections on historical vicissitudes. The utilization of shapes not only embodies the charm of traditional ink paintings but also demonstrates the innovative spirit of modern art.



Figure 1. Gu Wenda's "Lost Dynasty"

Table 1 covers the common characteristics of lines, colors, shapes, and compositions in ink graphics, along with their corresponding cultural backgrounds and symbolic meanings. Each feature not only has a unique symbolic meaning in different cultural contexts but can also be better understood and appreciated through specific representative works. In practical analysis, in-depth exploration can be conducted by combining specific works with the artist's life story.

Table 1. The common characteristics of lines, colors, shapes, and compositions in ink graphics, along with their corresponding cultural backgrounds and symbolic meanings

Analysis aspect	Feature	Cultural background	Symbolic meaning	Representative work/notes
Line	Bold and unrestrained	Wuxia culture, unrestrained poets	Strength, boldness	Xu Beihong's "Gallop Horse"
	Delicate and soft	Literati painting, elegant culture	Delicate, soft	Wen Zhengming's "Landscape Painting"
	Curve line	Naturalism	Natural, flowing	Huang Gongwang's "Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains"
	Straight line	Confucianism, regularity	Stable, upright	Zheng Banqiao's "Ink Bamboo"
Color	Heavy ink	Buddhist precepts, Zen thought	Deep, solemn	Liang Kai's "Ink Splashing Immortal"
	Light ink	Taoism, nihilism	Nihilism, lightness	Liang Kai's "Cow Herding"
	Black and white contrast	Yin-Yang harmony in traditional aesthetics	Balance, unity of opposites	The contrast of ink thickness, such as in "Fish and Duck" by Bada Shanren
Shape	Circle	Perfection in Taoism and Buddhism	Perfect, harmonious	Representation of jade and round mountain stones
	Square	Rules and stability in Confucianism	Stable, rigorous	Description of ancient buildings, e.g., palaces

Table 1 (Continued)

Analysis aspect	Feature	Cultural background	Symbolic meaning	Representative work/notes
Composition	Irregular shape	Natural state pursued by Taoism	Natural, unrestricted	Shi Tao's "Huangshan Mountains"
	Symmetrical balance	Confucian middle way	Harmony, stability	Forbidden City buildings
	Asymmetry	Natural state of Zen, changing worldview	Natural, dynamic	Bada Shanren's "Lotus and Duck"
	Multi-layered	Taoist harmony, emphasis on rich layering	Profound, layered	Li Cheng's "Pine Trees in the Valley"
	Use of white space	Emptiness and infinity emphasized by Taoism	Infinite possibilities and quietness	Wang Wei's "Wangchuan Scenery"

Symbolic meaning interpretation focuses on understanding the metaphors and symbols behind ink graphics. Ink paintings, which derive inspiration from nature, possess a unique form of expression where the external manifestations of the artwork are seamlessly integrated with its inherent cultural implications^[5]. Through careful observation and in-depth analysis of the works, researchers aim to uncover how the symbolism in ink graphics resonates with viewers and how these symbolic meanings evolve with changes in time and culture. For instance, towering mountains in landscape paintings symbolize lofty ideals and steadfast beliefs, while flowing water represents the circulation and adaptability of life. By interpreting the symbolism of natural landscapes, people can glimpse artists' understanding of nature and the order of the universe. Bold and heavy ink strokes may signify strength and depth, whereas light and delicate brushwork may embody detachment and transcendence^[6]. In Marlene Dumas's "Black Drawing", black is not just a representation of color but a vehicle for emotions and ideas, symbolizing silence, profundity, and even death (**Figure 2**). This artwork demonstrates how the artist utilizes fundamental elements to create a piece with profound symbolic significance. It is not only an exploration of the color black but also a deep reflection on life, death, and the essence of existence. Interpreting the symbolic meaning of "Black Drawing" enables a deeper comprehension of the artist's creative intentions and the profound messages conveyed through the work.



Figure 2. Marlene Dumas's "Black Drawing"

5. Findings

5.1. Symbolic characteristics of ink graphics

Symbols, as a spiritual expression beyond physical entities, are abstract representations of the material world and also the carrying medium of material existence^[7]. In the world of art, every stroke and ink contains a poetic soul, and every scene and painting is filled with the artist's emotions and feelings. The language of ink painting begins with the form of brush and ink. The basic elements of points, lines, and planes, as well as their positions in the picture and the way they are handled with brush and ink, all exhibit unique artistic languages in different eras.

The combination and arrangement of basic elements such as points, lines, and planes in ink graphics are not only a visual construction but also a reflection of cultural inheritance and artistic innovation. Tracing back through history, researchers can discover that the primitive form of brush and ink emerged as early as the Banpo culture period. On the painted pottery decorations of the Neolithic Age, researchers are pleasantly surprised to find brushstroke traces similar to those of modern calligraphy. This style bears striking similarities to certain elements of modern design, demonstrating a transcendent artistic resonance across time and space.

Continuing to trace the long river of history, it can be seen that the further development of brush and ink lines in the wall paintings of the pre-Qin period. In the "ink methods" of the Sui and Tang dynasties, researchers feel the maturity and diversity of brushwork. In the freehand painting and calligraphy forms of the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, researchers witness the peak and transformation of ink painting art. The inkworks of each period are a concentrated expression of the cultural spirit and aesthetic concepts of that era.

From the germination of Banpo culture to the echoes of modern design, the artistic language of ink painting has continuously evolved and is enriched in the long river of history. It is not only a visual art but also a cultural symbol that carries the profound cultural heritage and artistic wisdom of the Chinese nation. Every innovation in ink painting is a deep understanding and recreation of traditional art, as well as an unremitting pursuit and expression of beauty. Today, ink painting still attracts the world's attention with its unique charm, inspires artists' creative inspiration, and continues to shine on the global art stage.

5.2. Symbolic meaning of ink graphics

The symbolic meaning of ink graphics is extremely rich, and its artistic elements are filled with the cultural heritage and artistic temperament of the Chinese nation. In ink paintings, through delicate depictions of natural elements such as mountains, running water, clouds, and rocks, artists convey their reverence for nature and their aspiration for harmony^[8]. The symbolic meanings in the paintings are profound, revealing the painter's deep understanding of life and emotions. As a carrier of traditional culture, ink painting incorporates philosophical ideas such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, inheriting and transmitting a rich cultural spirit. These cultural elements converge, endowing ink painting with unparalleled artistic charm and profound cultural implications.

5.3. Analysis of the symbolic meaning of ink graphics

5.3.1. Artistic conception and aesthetic value

The artistic conception and aesthetic value of ink graphics are among the most important symbolic meanings in cultural inheritance. Ink painting expresses the abstract aesthetic concept of "artistic conception" through simple lines and variations in the shade of ink. This artistic conception bears strong personalized characteristics, reflecting both the painter's aesthetic orientation and the spiritual connotation conveyed by the work. Ink art is developed from traditional Chinese painting and narrowly refers to the painting art created using water and ink^[9].

5.3.2. History and tradition

Black and white, as the iconic colors of ink art, possess a simple yet profound quality that constitutes the unique aesthetic charm of ink painting. These two seemingly simple colors actually contain rich layers and connotations. White creates an illusionary space in the painting, evoking infinite imagination, while black, with its steady and weighty presence, tightens and solidifies the structure of the painting, avoiding the emptiness and monotony of white. In the world of ink painting, whether it is landscapes, figures, or flowers and birds, each subject carries a deep historical and cultural heritage. They are not just depictions of nature and life but also miniatures of Chinese history and culture, reflecting the aesthetic tastes and spiritual pursuits of the Chinese nation over thousands of years.

5.3.3. Philosophy and ideology

The symbolic meaning of ink graphics is profound and philosophical, closely connected to the philosophical thoughts and spiritual pursuits of the Chinese nation. As a unique cultural language, ink art is deeply rooted in China's long history and cultural soil, thus possessing distinct national characteristics and regional styles. It is not only a visual art but also an expression full of poetry and Eastern philosophical dialectic spirit. In the rhythm and cadence of ink art, people can feel a deep national emotion and profound understanding of the universe and life. This art form, with its unique abstraction and artistic conception, conveys the Chinese people's pursuit of harmony, nature, and simplicity, as well as their philosophical reflections on life, the universe, and society^[11].

5.3.4. Society and folklore

The symbolic meaning of ink graphics deeply permeates social structures and folklore traditions. Subjects such as landscapes, flowers, birds, and figures in the paintings not only reflect various aspects of social life at that time but also serve as direct embodiments of cultural concepts and folk customs. In the context of agricultural culture, the philosophy of "harmony between nature and humanity" inherent in landscape painting, and the spirit of "literati painting" exhibited in flower and bird paintings, are closely linked to social customs and folk beliefs, jointly constituting the spiritual landscape of an era. As a treasure of Chinese art, ink painting creates a transcendental artistic conception with its unique charm of five shades of ink and harmonious tones. This is not only a pursuit of beauty but also a profound embodiment of cultural inheritance. The artistic value of ink painting lies in its ability to not only depict nature and life but also silently convey the historical emotions and spiritual pursuits of the Chinese nation^[12].

5.4. The relationship between symbols and symbolic meanings in ink graphics

The symbols and symbolic meanings in ink graphics are closely interrelated. As a unique art form, ink graphics not only possess distinctive aesthetic value but also embody rich cultural connotations and philosophical ideas. When ink and water fuse, they generate a certain dynamism that propels their flow in random directions, leaving trails of movement in the process^[13]. In ink graphics, symbols and symbolic meanings are intertwined and interdependent.

There exists a tight and subtle connection between the symbols and symbolic meanings of ink graphics. Ink art, as a distinctive artistic form, emphasizes direct and sincere emotional expression by artists. It pursues a more simple, natural, and vivid pictorial effect. Drawing inspiration from the natural world, artists depict the vast and varied universe with a heart close to nature. These symbols can be elements from the natural world, such as mountains, rivers, flowers, birds, fish, insects, and human figures, or they can originate from the essence of

traditional culture, like classical poetry, idioms, allusions, historical legends, and so on.

Through skillful application of these symbols, artists transform their emotional experiences and depths of thought into visual symbolic languages, thereby conveying their personal aesthetic pursuits and philosophical reflections. In this process, the symbols of ink graphics are not merely visual decorations; they carry deeper meanings and become bridges between the artist and the world.

The symbols and symbolic meanings of ink graphics are also deeply influenced by the artist's personal experiences and cultural background. As a treasure and representative of China's traditional culture, the creative art of traditional ink painting has had its creative concepts, expressive techniques, and aesthetic viewpoints borrowed and absorbed by modern graphic designers. The application of these traditional elements in modern design not only aligns with the lifestyle and aesthetic philosophy of modern society but also achieves a harmonious and unified effect in visual communication.

Taking Wang Jinsong's paper-based ink work "Clouds Rising from the Sea" as an example, people can see how the artist combines the symbols of natural landscapes with personal emotions and thoughts (**Figure 3**). In this work, the scene of clouds swirling over the sea is not only a reproduction of natural beauty but also a symbol of the artist's inner world. The unpredictable changes of clouds and fog resemble the uncertainties of life and the vagaries of thought, while the vastness of the sea symbolizes the breadth of mind and the depth of soul. Through the medium of ink, Wang Jinsong integrates personal emotions and philosophical reflections into the painting, making "Clouds Rising from the Sea" not just a visual artwork but also a spiritual exchange and dialogue.



Figure 3. Wang Jinsong's "Clouds Rising from the Sea"

6. Conclusion

Through exploring the symbols and symbolic meanings of ink graphics, this paper delves deeply into the artistic characteristics and cultural connotations of traditional Chinese ink paintings. Ink graphics are not only a form of artistic expression but also a carrier of cultural symbols and symbolic meanings. Their symbolic significance

is reflected in the unique black, white, and gray colors and ink variations, demonstrating a sense of depth and dimensionality. Simultaneously, the symbolic meanings conveyed through lines and brushstrokes reflect the artist's emotions and the values of traditional culture.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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