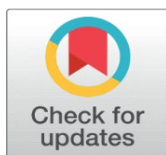
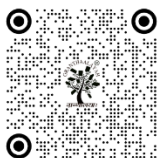


RECONSTRUCTING TRADITIONAL SYMBOLS: FEMINIST SEMIOTIC TRANSLATION IN CONTEMPORARY FUZHOU SOFTWOOD CARVING JEWELRY DESIGN

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Received 15 February 2026

Accepted 19 April 2026

Published 13 May 2026

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i1.2026.8088](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i1.2026.8088)

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Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the contemporary reinterpretation of traditional cultural symbols in Fuzhou softwood carving jewelry from a feminist perspective. As an important form of Chinese intangible cultural heritage, Fuzhou softwood carving has historically incorporated symbolic systems derived from Song Dynasty aesthetics, particularly botanical and animal motifs associated with moral discipline, social hierarchy, and gender norms. However, limited research has explored how these traditional symbols can be reconstructed to reflect contemporary female subjectivity and identity within modern design contexts. Using a qualitative and practice-oriented methodology, the study combines field investigation, iconographic analysis, cultural semiotics, and feminist theory to investigate the transformation of symbolic meanings in contemporary jewelry design. Fieldwork conducted in Fuzhou between 2024 and 2025 was combined with iconographic and semiotic analysis of representative Song Dynasty artworks. The research further adopts a “research through design” approach to semiotically translate traditional symbolic elements into contemporary feminist wearable forms. The findings demonstrate that traditional motifs such as the lotus, bamboo, orchid, and crane possess significant semiotic flexibility and can be reconstructed through semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic transformation. Rather than functioning as symbols of female discipline and moral restraint, these motifs are reinterpreted as expressions of autonomy, resilience, self-growth, and spiritual subjectivity. The study also reveals that contemporary jewelry design provides an effective medium for activating intangible cultural heritage within everyday cultural practice. By integrating feminist reinterpretation with heritage design, this research contributes to the development of localized feminist design discourse in East Asian contexts and proposes a contemporary pathway for the living inheritance and cultural sustainability of traditional crafts.

Keywords: Fuzhou Softwood Carving, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Feminism, Semiotic Translation, Song Dynasty Aesthetics, Female Jewelry, Cultural Innovation



1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and rapidly expanding cultural and creative industries, traditional crafts are increasingly confronted with the dual challenge of cultural preservation and contemporary transformation. As forms of intangible cultural heritage, traditional crafts not only embody historical techniques and regional aesthetics, but also carry symbolic systems, social memory, and cultural values accumulated through long-term historical development. In recent years, scholars and international cultural organizations have emphasized that the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage depends not solely on preservation, but also on its ability to remain socially meaningful within contemporary life (UNESCO, 2003; Smith, 2006). As a result, increasing attention has been given to how traditional

cultural symbols can be reinterpreted through contemporary design practices, particularly within heritage and visual culture studies.

Fuzhou softwood carving is a representative traditional Chinese craft characterized by intricate openwork carving, lightweight natural materials, and highly decorative symbolic imagery. Deeply influenced by Song Dynasty aesthetics and literati culture, its visual language frequently incorporates botanical and animal motifs such as lotus flowers, orchids, bamboo, pine trees, cranes, and plum blossoms. These motifs historically functioned not only as decorative patterns but also as symbolic carriers of moral philosophy, social hierarchy, and Confucian cultural values. Through the traditional principle of *Bi-de*, natural imagery was transformed into visual metaphors associated with purity, chastity, restraint, loyalty, and idealized human virtue (Han, 2015). Within this symbolic framework, many motifs also participated in the cultural construction of femininity and gender expectations.

However, contemporary social and cultural changes have significantly altered the interpretation of traditional symbols. Under the influence of feminist discourse, individualized consumption culture, and contemporary identity politics, younger generations increasingly reinterpret inherited cultural imagery according to personal emotion, self-expression, and subjective identity rather than traditional moral ideology. In particular, the rapid development of contemporary jewelry design and the “she-economy” has created new possibilities for integrating traditional craft symbolism into everyday wearable practices. Jewelry has gradually evolved from decorative ornamentation into a medium of emotional communication, cultural memory, and identity expression. Against this background, it becomes necessary to reconsider how traditional symbolic systems in Fuzhou softwood carving can respond to contemporary feminist perspectives and changing social values.

Existing studies on Fuzhou softwood carving have mainly focused on craftsmanship preservation, historical development, decorative aesthetics, and regional cultural characteristics. Although these studies contribute significantly to the documentation and protection of traditional craft heritage, relatively limited attention has been paid to the gendered meanings embedded within traditional symbolic systems and their reinterpretation in contemporary design contexts. Similarly, current research on Chinese traditional craft design often emphasizes formal innovation and commercial development while overlooking the relationship between symbolic reconstruction, female subjectivity, and cultural identity. Moreover, few studies have integrated feminist theory, cultural semiotics, and research-through-design methodology to investigate the contemporary transformation of traditional symbolic imagery within wearable cultural products.

To address these gaps, this study examines the reconstruction of traditional symbols in Fuzhou softwood carving jewelry from a feminist perspective. Drawing upon cultural semiotics, feminist visual culture theory, and research-through-design methodology, the study investigates how traditional motifs derived from Song Dynasty aesthetics are transformed within contemporary jewelry design. Through field investigation, iconographic analysis, semiotic interpretation, and design experimentation, the research explores how symbolic meanings shift from representations of moral discipline and patriarchal values toward expressions of autonomy, resilience, emotional independence, and contemporary female identity.

This study aims to achieve three main objectives. First, it analyzes the symbolic structures and cultural meanings embedded within traditional Fuzhou softwood carving imagery. Second, it examines how these symbolic systems historically participated in the visual construction of gender identity and social norms. Third, it explores how traditional motifs can be reconstructed through contemporary jewelry design to support localized feminist expression and cultural sustainability. By integrating heritage research with contemporary design practice, the study attempts to establish a culturally localized pathway for the contemporary activation of traditional crafts within rapidly changing social and cultural environments.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE AND CONTEMPORARY DESIGN TRANSFORMATION

In recent decades, the relationship between intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and contemporary design has become an increasingly important topic in cultural studies, heritage research, and creative industries discourse. Traditional crafts are no longer understood merely as static objects of preservation; rather, they are increasingly recognized as dynamic cultural systems capable of adaptation, reinterpretation, and innovation within contemporary society (Smith, 2006; UNESCO, 2003). Under the influence of globalization and the rapid expansion of cultural and creative industries, many

scholars have emphasized the importance of transforming traditional cultural resources into contemporary visual and material practices in order to sustain their cultural vitality (UNCTAD, 2022).

Previous research on Chinese traditional crafts has mainly concentrated on craftsmanship preservation and regional decorative traditions, while relatively less attention has been paid to symbolic reinterpretation in contemporary contexts. Research on Fuzhou softwood carving, for example, has primarily examined its craftsmanship, historical development, and artistic characteristics. Although these studies contribute to the documentation and protection of traditional techniques, they often prioritize material preservation over symbolic interpretation and contemporary cultural transformation. Comparatively limited attention has been paid to how traditional symbolic systems embedded within these crafts can be reconstructed to address contemporary social issues such as gender identity, cultural subjectivity, and emotional expression. Guzmán (2026)

Recent discussions surrounding “living heritage” have further shifted attention from static conservation toward cultural reactivation within everyday life. UNESCO (2003) emphasizes that intangible cultural heritage should remain socially meaningful through continuous transmission and reinterpretation. In this context, integrating traditional crafts into contemporary jewelry design represents not only a process of product innovation but also a strategy of cultural sustainability. Wearable design enables traditional symbols to move from ritualistic and decorative contexts into contemporary personal and emotional experience, thereby allowing heritage to participate actively in modern identity construction.

2.2. SONG DYNASTY AESTHETICS AND TRADITIONAL SYMBOLIC SYSTEMS

Song Dynasty aesthetics occupies an important position in the history of Chinese visual culture and has profoundly influenced later artistic and craft traditions. Scholars have widely regarded the Song Dynasty as a period characterized by refined aesthetic consciousness, literati culture, and the philosophical integration of nature and morality (Han, 2015). Within painting, ceramics, textiles, and decorative crafts, botanical and animal motifs gradually evolved into a highly systematized symbolic language.

Traditional symbolic imagery such as plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, lotus flowers, cranes, and golden pheasants was deeply connected to the cultural principle of Bi-de—the analogy between natural characteristics and moral virtues. Through this symbolic mechanism, natural forms became visual carriers of ethical ideals, social hierarchy, and cultural identity (Cheng, 2014; Tang, 1965). For example, bamboo symbolized integrity and resilience, while orchids represented modesty and inner refinement. Similarly, cranes often embodied spiritual transcendence and political legitimacy within imperial visual culture.

Existing research on Song Dynasty symbolism has mainly focused on art historical interpretation and aesthetic philosophy. Scholars have explored compositional structure, literati ideology, and symbolic conventions in classical paintings and decorative arts. However, relatively few studies have examined how these symbolic systems continue to function within contemporary cultural production and design practice. More importantly, limited research has critically analyzed the gendered meanings embedded within these traditional symbolic structures.

This issue becomes especially relevant when considering that many traditional symbols were historically linked to expectations surrounding femininity, morality, and social behavior. As contemporary gender discourse continues to evolve, the reinterpretation of these inherited symbols becomes increasingly important within design and visual culture studies.

2.3. FEMINIST THEORY AND GENDERED VISUAL CULTURE

Feminist theory provides an important critical framework for understanding how visual culture participates in the construction of gendered identity and social power relations. Rather than treating images and decorative forms as neutral aesthetic objects, feminist scholars argue that visual systems often function as cultural mechanisms that reinforce normative gender ideologies (Buckley, 1986; Butler, 1990).

From a post-structuralist perspective, gender is not understood as a fixed biological essence but as a socially constructed and culturally performed identity (Butler, 1990). Visual symbols, material culture, and aesthetic practices therefore play important roles in shaping how femininity is represented, disciplined, and normalized within society.

Foucault's theory of discourse and power further suggests that symbolic systems operate through repeated cultural practices that regulate acceptable forms of behavior and identity (Foucault, 1978).

Within East Asian visual culture, many traditional decorative motifs historically reflected Confucian moral systems and patriarchal social structures. Symbols associated with flowers, plants, and domestic imagery were often used to represent ideals of female virtue, obedience, fertility, and emotional restraint (Tan, 2012; Liu, 2011). Although these symbolic systems were aesthetically sophisticated, they also contributed to the cultural construction of gender hierarchy.

In recent years, feminist design studies have increasingly emphasized the importance of reconstructing traditional symbols through localized cultural perspectives rather than simply applying Western feminist models directly to non-Western contexts. Scholars have argued that feminist expression in Asian cultural environments should emerge through dialogue with local history, material culture, and symbolic traditions. This perspective encourages the reinterpretation of inherited cultural symbols as resources for contemporary female subjectivity, autonomy, and self-expression rather than as passive carriers of traditional gender discipline.

However, current research on feminist design in relation to Chinese intangible cultural heritage remains relatively limited. Existing studies often focus on fashion, media representation, or contemporary art, while comparatively few explore the intersection of feminist reinterpretation, traditional craft symbolism, and jewelry design. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to this emerging field by examining how symbolic systems in Fuzhou softwood carving can be reconstructed within contemporary feminist design discourse.

2.4. CULTURAL SEMIOTICS AND SYMBOLIC RECONSTRUCTION

Semiotics provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how cultural symbols generate and transform meaning across historical and social contexts. Eco (1976) argues that symbols are not fixed entities but dynamic sign systems whose meanings are continuously reconstructed through interpretation and cultural usage. Within visual culture, symbolic meaning is shaped not only by formal appearance but also by historical discourse, social ideology, and contextual practice.

Morris's semiotic framework further divides symbolic analysis into syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions. The syntactic level concerns the formal relationship among signs, the semantic level focuses on symbolic meaning, and the pragmatic level examines how meanings are produced and interpreted within specific social contexts. This multi-level analytical structure provides an effective method for examining how traditional symbols evolve within contemporary design environments.

Recent studies on cultural semiotics have increasingly emphasized the concept of symbolic reconstruction, particularly within heritage design and cultural innovation. Rather than preserving traditional symbols in unchanged forms, symbolic reconstruction involves processes of abstraction, reinterpretation, and recontextualization that allow traditional imagery to acquire new meanings within contemporary society. In design practice, this process often includes the transformation of historical motifs into modern visual language through simplification, modularization, and material experimentation.

Despite the growing application of semiotic analysis in design studies, existing research on Chinese traditional crafts still tends to prioritize formal symbolism over contemporary identity politics and emotional expression. The relationship between semiotic reconstruction and feminist reinterpretation remains underexplored, especially in the context of wearable cultural products such as jewelry.

Therefore, this study combines cultural semiotics with feminist theory to examine how traditional symbolic systems in Fuzhou softwood carving can be reconstructed into a contemporary visual language that supports both cultural continuity and female subjectivity. Through this interdisciplinary framework, the research attempts to establish a localized pathway for integrating intangible cultural heritage into contemporary feminist design practice.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a qualitative and practice-oriented research design to investigate the contemporary reinterpretation of traditional symbols in Fuzhou softwood carving jewelry from a feminist perspective. The research integrates cultural semiotics, iconographic analysis, feminist theory, and research-through-design methodology to

examine how traditional symbolic systems derived from Song Dynasty aesthetics can be reconstructed within contemporary jewelry design contexts.

Rather than treating Fuzhou softwood carving solely as a craft technique, this study approaches it as a dynamic cultural semiotic system embedded in historical discourse, gender ideology, and contemporary identity construction. The research combines theoretical analysis with field investigation and design practice, allowing symbolic meanings to be examined both conceptually and materially.

3.2. RESEARCH MATERIALS AND FIELD INVESTIGATION

The research materials consist of three main categories: textual materials, visual materials, and fieldwork data.

Textual materials include classical painting treatises, historical literature, craft archives, and contemporary academic studies related to Song Dynasty aesthetics, cultural semiotics, feminist theory, and intangible cultural heritage. Important primary sources include *The Lofty Message of Forests and Streams* (Linquan Gaozhi) and *Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings* (Xuanhe Huapu), which provide historical interpretations of symbolic imagery in Song Dynasty visual culture.

Visual materials include digital reproductions of representative Song Dynasty artworks, particularly Emperor Huizong's *Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant and Auspicious Cranes*, as well as Ma Lin's *Quietly Listening to the Wind in Pines*. These artworks were selected because they contain highly representative botanical and animal symbolic systems closely associated with traditional moral and gender discourse.

Fieldwork was conducted in Fuzhou, China, between October 2024 and February 2025. The researcher visited five traditional softwood carving workshops, two museums, and one local craft exhibition center to document contemporary carving practices and symbolic applications. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 softwood carving artisans, 4 jewelry designers, and 8 female consumers aged between 22 and 45. Approximately 1,000 photographic records and 15 hours of observational notes were collected during the field investigation. The fieldwork focused on symbolic usage, design transformation, material techniques, and contemporary consumer perceptions of traditional motifs.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Field Investigation

Source: Photographed by the author (December 25, 2024).

All interviews and image documentation were conducted with the informed consent of the participants.

3.3. LITERATURE RESEARCH METHOD

A systematic literature research method was employed to establish the theoretical and historical foundation of the study. The literature review focused on Song Dynasty aesthetics, cultural semiotics, feminist design theory, and intangible cultural heritage studies.

Primary historical texts and painting theories were analyzed to reconstruct the symbolic genealogy of botanical and animal motifs in traditional Chinese visual culture. Secondary literature in art history, visual culture, and feminist studies was critically examined to identify how symbolic systems have historically participated in the construction of gendered meanings.

Through this combination of sources, the research was able to examine historical symbolism alongside contemporary cultural discourse and design practice.

3.4. ICONOGRAPHIC AND SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

This study adopts a cross-analytical framework combining Panofsky's theory of iconography with Morris's semiotic model to establish a systematic visual analysis method.

At the first analytical level, the formal structures of symbolic imagery were examined, including composition, proportion, spatial hierarchy, rhythm, and morphological characteristics. Representative motifs such as lotus flowers, bamboo, cranes, orchids, and plum blossoms were analyzed to identify the visual grammar underlying Song Dynasty aesthetic systems. This stage corresponds to the syntactic level of semiotics, focusing on the internal organizational relationships among visual elements.

At the second level, the conventional meanings of symbols were interpreted through historical and cultural contexts. Song Dynasty painting treatises, literary texts, and traditional symbolic narratives were compared to establish the relationship between symbolic forms and their associated moral, political, and gendered meanings. For example, the crane was interpreted not only as an auspicious symbol but also as a representation of spiritual hierarchy and political legitimacy, while the lotus was analyzed in relation to purity, fertility, and moral discipline within traditional gender discourse. This stage corresponds to the semantic level, emphasizing the relationship between signifier and signified meaning.

At the third level, the research explored the broader cultural ideology and social discourse embedded within symbolic systems. Particular attention was given to how symbolic meanings are transformed when traditional motifs are recontextualized within contemporary jewelry design and feminist discourse. The study focused on how traditional symbols shift from collective moral representation to individualized identity expression in contemporary wearable practices. This stage corresponds to the pragmatic level of semiotic analysis, emphasizing meaning generation within specific social and cultural contexts.

3.5. FEMINIST INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS

To critically examine the relationship between symbolic systems and gender construction, this study incorporates post-structuralist feminist theory, particularly Judith Butler's concept of performativity and Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and power.

Traditional symbolic motifs were analyzed as cultural mechanisms that historically contributed to the normalization of femininity, obedience, chastity, and moral discipline. Through feminist reinterpretation, the study investigates how these inherited symbolic systems can be reconstructed to support contemporary expressions of female autonomy, resilience, self-worth, and subjective identity.

Special attention was given to how female consumers and designers reinterpret traditional motifs through everyday practices of wearing, sharing, and aesthetic consumption.

3.6. RESEARCH THROUGH DESIGN

This study further adopts a "research through design" methodology to transform theoretical findings into practical design outcomes. Rather than treating design as a final application stage, the research understands design practice as a form of knowledge production and cultural interpretation.

The design process involved symbolic selection, imagery refinement, morphological transformation, and technical realization. Representative traditional motifs with strong cultural and gender associations were first identified and analyzed. These symbolic forms were then abstracted and simplified through geometric reconstruction and modular composition to adapt them to contemporary jewelry aesthetics.

Finally, symbolic concepts were translated into wearable prototypes through material experimentation and softwood carving techniques. Through iterative sketching, prototyping, and visual testing, the study explored how traditional symbolic systems can be reconstructed into contemporary jewelry forms that simultaneously communicate feminist identity and cultural continuity.

3.7. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH VALIDITY

The collected field notes, interview transcripts, and visual materials were analyzed using thematic interpretation and semiotic coding methods. Symbolic meanings were categorized according to traditional connotations, gender associations, and reconstructed contemporary interpretations.

To improve research credibility, the study adopted methodological triangulation by combining literature analysis, field observation, interview data, visual interpretation, and design practice. Using multiple forms of evidence also helped improve the credibility and interpretive depth of the analysis.

4. RESULTS

4.1. NATURAL SYMBOLISM AND HIERARCHICAL ORDER IN HIBISCUS AND GOLDEN PHEASANT

The visual analysis of Emperor Huizong's Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant (Figure 2) reveals how Song Dynasty aesthetics transformed natural imagery into a highly structured symbolic system associated with hierarchy, morality, and cultural order. The composition combines hibiscus flowers, butterflies, and a golden pheasant within an asymmetrical spatial arrangement that reflects the refined visual balance characteristic of Song Dynasty court painting. Rather than functioning as purely decorative imagery, the painting establishes a hierarchical relationship between natural forms through differences in scale, placement, and visual emphasis.

Figure 2



Figure 2 Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant by Emperor Huizong (Zhao Ji).

Source: Retrieved from <https://minghuaji.dpm.org.cn>, 2025.

In traditional Chinese visual culture, the golden pheasant frequently symbolized nobility, prosperity, and political order, while hibiscus flowers were associated with elegance, prosperity, and feminine beauty. The coexistence of botanical and animal imagery therefore constructs a symbolic framework linking natural harmony with social hierarchy.

The careful arrangement of branches and floral elements also reflects the literati pursuit of restraint, refinement, and controlled emotional expression. In this context, Song Dynasty symbolic imagery appears to have functioned not only as decoration, but also as part of a broader moral and social framework.

Field interviews conducted during the research indicate that motifs derived from Hibiscus and Golden Pheasant continue to influence contemporary softwood carving practice. Several artisans explained that floral imagery remains popular because it communicates cultural familiarity and auspicious meaning to consumers. However, younger jewelry designers increasingly reinterpret these motifs through simplified geometric structures and wearable compositions. During the design process, hibiscus petals and branch forms were repeatedly abstracted into curved linear structures suitable for pendants and earrings. In practice, this process allows traditional hierarchical imagery to be adapted into contemporary jewelry forms while still preserving elements of its historical identity.

4.2. SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY AND SYMBOLIC TRANSFORMATION IN AUSPICIOUS CRANES

The analysis of Auspicious Cranes (Figure 3) demonstrates how symbolic imagery in Song Dynasty visual culture was used to express spiritual authority, transcendence, and imperial legitimacy. The circular movement of cranes above the palace roof creates a strong visual rhythm that directs the viewer's attention upward, emphasizing the relationship between heaven, political order, and cosmic harmony. Within traditional Chinese symbolism, cranes were often associated with longevity, spiritual elevation, and communication between earthly and transcendent realms.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Auspicious Cranes by Emperor Huizong.

Source: Photographed by the author, 2025.

The painting also reflects the integration of political ideology and symbolic representation in imperial art. The spatial distance between the flying cranes and the architectural structure below reinforces a visual hierarchy connecting the emperor to heavenly authority. In this context, the crane functions not only as an auspicious animal but also as a symbolic extension of imperial legitimacy and moral governance.

However, field interviews suggest that contemporary interpretations of crane imagery differ significantly from traditional symbolic frameworks. Younger consumers rarely associate cranes with political hierarchy or imperial power. Instead, many interviewees interpreted the image as representing freedom, emotional independence, and spiritual selfhood. One participant described crane imagery as conveying “a feeling of calmness and personal space rather than authority” (Participant F5, 2025). The interview responses also show that contemporary interpretations of symbolism are becoming more closely connected to personal emotion and individual experience.

This symbolic transformation is also reflected in contemporary jewelry reconstruction. During the design process, the circular movement of cranes was simplified into modular curved structures and flowing wearable forms. Rather than

emphasizing imperial symbolism, contemporary adaptations focused on movement, openness, and psychological freedom. The reinterpretation of crane imagery therefore demonstrates how traditional visual symbols can shift from collective political ideology toward individualized emotional expression within contemporary feminist design contexts.

4.3. FEMININE RESTRAINT AND EMOTIONAL SPACE IN QUIETLY LISTENING TO THE WIND IN PINES

The painting *Quietly Listening to the Wind in Pines* (Figure 4) provides another important example of how Song Dynasty visual culture constructed symbolic space through emotional restraint and literati philosophy. The composition emphasizes emptiness, asymmetrical balance, and the quiet interaction between human figures and the natural environment. Pine trees occupy a dominant visual position within the landscape, while the human figure appears relatively small and contemplative. This spatial arrangement reflects traditional ideals of humility, self-cultivation, and emotional discipline.

Figure 4



Figure 4 *Quietly Listening to the Wind in Pines* by Ma Lin.

Source: Retrieved from <https://m.thepaper.cn/baijiahao>, 2025).

Within traditional symbolic systems, pine trees often represented endurance, moral integrity, and unwavering loyalty. At the same time, the quiet and restrained atmosphere of the painting reflects broader Confucian values associated with moderation and controlled emotional expression. In gendered cultural contexts, these symbolic ideals were frequently connected to expectations surrounding feminine obedience, patience, and silent endurance.

Nevertheless, interview responses collected during the field investigation reveal that contemporary female audiences often reinterpret these symbolic qualities differently. Rather than viewing emotional restraint as passive obedience, many participants associated the imagery with introspection, psychological resilience, and emotional independence. One jewelry designer explained that younger consumers are increasingly attracted to minimalist symbolic imagery because it creates “a sense of inner calmness and personal emotional space” (Designer D3, 2025).

These reinterpretations were also reflected throughout the jewelry design process developed during the study. Pine branches and landscape lines were simplified into elongated linear structures and open compositional forms to preserve the painting's sense of spatial stillness while adapting it to wearable aesthetics. The use of negative space in pendant and brooch design further reflected the emotional atmosphere of the original artwork. These findings demonstrate that symbolic reconstruction involves not only changes in iconographic meaning but also the transformation of emotional and spatial experience through material design.

4.4. CONTEMPORARY RECONSTRUCTION STRATEGIES IN JEWELRY DESIGN

Based on field investigation, visual analysis, and design experimentation, the study identified several major strategies through which traditional symbolic systems are reconstructed within contemporary jewelry design.

The first strategy involves semantic reinterpretation. Traditional motifs historically associated with purity, chastity, obedience, and reproductive morality are redefined through feminist discourse as symbols of autonomy, resilience, self-awareness, and emotional growth. For example, the lotus shifts from representing feminine discipline toward expressing self-development and psychological independence.

The second strategy involves visual abstraction and morphological simplification. Rather than directly reproducing historical decorative patterns, contemporary jewelry design selectively extracts representative visual structures from traditional imagery and transforms them into geometric, modular, and minimalist compositions. This process enables traditional symbols to adapt to contemporary wearable aesthetics while maintaining cultural continuity.

The third strategy involves contextual transformation. Traditional symbolic motifs originally associated with court painting, ritual decoration, and collective cultural ideology are relocated into everyday personal experience through wearable objects. Jewelry therefore becomes a form of embodied cultural communication connecting memory, identity, emotion, and individual expression.

The final strategy involves material integration. The lightweight texture, delicate carving structure, and organic qualities of softwood carving materials allow traditional symbolic imagery to be translated into contemporary jewelry forms while preserving tactile continuity with traditional craftsmanship. In this process, materiality itself becomes part of symbolic reconstruction and emotional expression (Table 1).

Table 1

Table 1 Feminist Reconstruction of Traditional Symbolic Systems in Contemporary Jewelry Design				
Traditional Symbols	Traditional Connotations (Associated with Women)	Contemporary Feminist Reconstructed Meanings	Reconstruction Strategies	
Lotus	Purity; reproductive discipline; prosperity and fertility	Life autonomy; self-growth; emotional independence	Semantic; Pragmatic	
Pine Tree	Chastity; loyalty; emotional restraint	Resilient subjectivity; inner strength	Semantic	
Plum Blossom	Solitary virtue; feminine endurance	Courage; active self-expression	Semantic; Syntactic	
Orchid	Modesty; inner refinement	Independent aesthetic identity; elegant self-possession	Semantic	
Red-crowned Crane	Maternal symbolism; auspicious hierarchy	Spiritual freedom; personal transcendence	Semantic; Pragmatic	
Bamboo		Moral discipline; literati integrity	Psychological resilience; adaptive growth	Semantic; Syntactic

Figure 5 illustrates the symbolic transformation process from Song Dynasty imagery to contemporary feminist jewelry design. The diagram demonstrates how traditional motifs—including the lotus, crane, pine tree, orchid, plum blossom, and bamboo—are reinterpreted through semiotic analysis and feminist perspectives, then translated into contemporary wearable jewelry forms through visual abstraction and design reconstruction. The process highlights the shift from traditional moral symbolism toward contemporary expressions of autonomy, resilience, emotional independence, and female subjectivity.

Figure 5

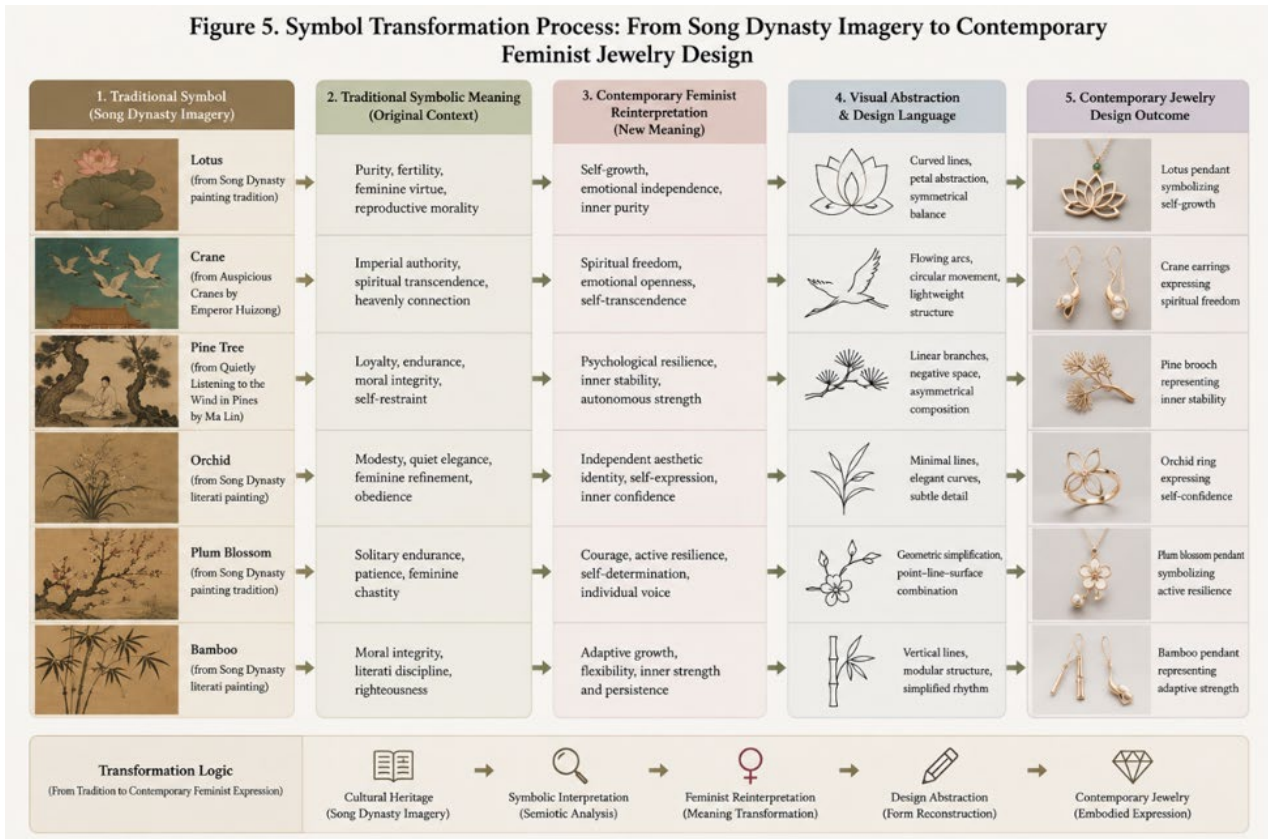


Figure 5 Symbol Transformation Process: From Song Dynasty Imagery to Contemporary Feminist Jewelry Design.

Source: Made by the Author, 2025.

5. DISCUSSION

The symbolic system embedded within Fuzhou softwood carving continues to show strong adaptability in contemporary cultural and design contexts. Rather than functioning as fixed historical symbols, traditional motifs continue to generate new meanings through reinterpretation and changing social experience. This perspective closely relates to Smith’s (2006) concept of “living heritage,” which emphasizes that heritage survives through continued participation in contemporary life. The analysis of Song Dynasty imagery further indicates that botanical and animal motifs were not merely decorative forms; they also reflected literati philosophy, moral order, and social values deeply embedded within traditional Chinese visual culture (Han, 2015; Cheng, 2014).

The study also reveals that many traditional symbols historically carried clear gender implications. Motifs such as the lotus, orchid, and pine tree were closely associated with ideals of chastity, obedience, modesty, and emotional restraint within patriarchal social systems. In this sense, the findings support Butler’s (1990) and Buckley’s (1986) arguments that visual culture often participates in the construction and normalization of gender expectations. However, the field investigation suggests that contemporary audiences no longer interpret these motifs entirely according to their original moral meanings. Younger consumers and designers increasingly associate traditional symbols with emotional identity, individuality, and self-expression. For example, several participants described the lotus as representing “personal growth” and “inner independence” rather than reproductive virtue or feminine discipline. These responses indicate that symbolic meanings are continuously reshaped through contemporary cultural experience and individual interpretation.

The study also highlights the role of jewelry as a practical medium through which intangible cultural heritage can re-enter everyday life. Compared with traditional symbolic applications in painting, ritual decoration, or architecture, wearable design allows cultural symbols to become part of personal emotional experience and daily identity construction. In this process, traditional motifs are not simply preserved but actively transformed through abstraction,

simplification, and material adaptation. The lightweight texture and delicate carving qualities of softwood carving further support this transformation by enabling traditional imagery to be translated into contemporary wearable forms while maintaining tactile and cultural continuity. This observation also extends existing studies on Chinese traditional crafts, which have often focused more on technical preservation and decorative aesthetics than on symbolic reconstruction and identity expression.

At the same time, the study demonstrates the value of combining semiotic analysis with research-through-design methodology in heritage research. Through field investigation, visual interpretation, and iterative design experimentation, the research was able to examine symbolic transformation simultaneously at cultural, visual, and material levels. Nevertheless, several limitations remain. The analysis mainly focuses on representative motifs derived from Song Dynasty aesthetics and therefore does not fully cover broader regional folk traditions. In addition, the jewelry designs developed in this research remain largely conceptual and prototypical, requiring further evaluation regarding user experience, cultural reception, and long-term practical application. Future studies may further explore digital technologies, interactive exhibition methods, and interdisciplinary collaboration to expand the contemporary dissemination and reinterpretation of traditional craft symbolism.

6. CONCLUSION

This research explored how traditional symbolic systems in Fuzhou softwood carving can be reconstructed through contemporary feminist jewelry design. By integrating cultural semiotics, feminist theory, and research-through-design methodology, the research demonstrates that traditional motifs derived from Song Dynasty aesthetics, including the lotus, orchid, bamboo, and crane, are not fixed cultural symbols but dynamic cultural resources capable of reinterpretation within contemporary society. The findings reveal that symbols historically associated with morality, chastity, obedience, and social discipline can be transformed into contemporary expressions of autonomy, resilience, emotional independence, and female subjectivity. The study further demonstrates that jewelry design provides an effective medium for activating intangible cultural heritage within everyday cultural practice, enabling traditional symbolic systems to participate in contemporary identity construction through wearable and emotionally meaningful forms.

At the theoretical level, this research contributes to discussions on living heritage, feminist visual culture, and cultural sustainability by proposing a localized framework for symbolic reinterpretation in East Asian contexts. The study also expands existing research on Chinese traditional crafts by emphasizing the relationship between symbolic transformation, material practice, and identity formation. Methodologically, the integration of field investigation, iconographic analysis, semiotic interpretation, and design experimentation demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary approaches in heritage research. Nevertheless, the study mainly focuses on representative symbols from Song Dynasty aesthetics and the design outcomes remain at the conceptual stage, requiring further user-based evaluation and broader cultural investigation. More broadly, the reinterpretation of traditional symbols in Fuzhou softwood carving reflects an ongoing process of cultural reconstruction that reconnects traditional craft culture with contemporary social values and feminist discourse.

INFORMED CONSENT

All interviews and image data collection were conducted with the prior informed consent of the participants.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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