

Signs and Symbols: A Visual Culture Study of Civilization Markers in the Yangtze River Basin

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Abstract

This study employs visual culture theory and semiotics theory to systematically examine the visual symbols embedded in material cultural remains from different regions and periods of the Yangtze River Basin. The research reveals that the civilization marker system in the Yangtze River Basin exhibits the following characteristics: First, the visual symbols in material cultural remains are diverse, encompassing archaeological sites, cultural relics, architectural symbols, and artifact patterns; Second, the diachronic evolution of symbols reflects a developmental trajectory from images to symbols to text, demonstrating shifts in social structure and cultural concepts; Third, symbol systems from different regions maintain their uniqueness while influencing each other, forming a unified yet diverse civilizational pattern; Fourth, these visual symbols embody ecological wisdom of harmony between humans and nature, humanistic spirit of respect for ritual and ethics, and enduring creative vitality. The study concludes that in-depth research of civilization markers in the Yangtze River Basin has significant theoretical and practical value for inheriting cultural genes, strengthening cultural confidence, and promoting the creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese culture.

Keywords: Yangtze River Basin; Visual Culture; Material Carriers; Symbol Systems; Civilization Markers; Cultural Concepts.

Introduction

The Yangtze River Basin is one of the important birthplaces of Chinese civilization, forming a magnificent panorama of civilization with the Yangtze River as its bond. Particularly since the 1980s, major archaeological discoveries such as the Sanxingdui and Liangzhu sites have greatly expanded our understanding of the origins and development of Yangtze civilization (Lin, 2021). The rich visual symbols contained in the cultural remains of the Yangtze River Basin are both crystallizations of ancient wisdom and important sources of excellent traditional Chinese culture. Analyzing and interpreting these symbol systems embedded in material carriers has significant theoretical and practical importance for inheriting cultural genes, highlighting national spirit, and promoting the creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese culture under new historical conditions.

This paper aims to employ visual culture theory and semiotics theory to systematically study the visual symbols contained in material cultural remains from different regions and periods of the Yangtze River Basin, striving to answer the following questions: 1. What are the types of visual symbols in the Yangtze River Basin civilization markers? How do their forms, structures, and combination patterns evolve under different spatiotemporal backgrounds? 2. What are the cultural connotations and spiritual symbolism of visual symbols in different domains? 3. What cultural concepts and value pursuits are reflected in the Yangtze River Basin civilization markers? 4. How can we creatively transform and innovatively develop the symbolic resources of Yangtze civilization from a new era perspective?

This research theoretically integrates multiple disciplinary perspectives including archaeology, anthropology, semiotics, and communication studies, expanding research approaches to topics such as civilization origins and regional cultural interactions, enriching the content of civilization morphology. Methodologically, it breaks through the "two-dimensional" limitations of physical remains research, examining them within broader contexts of social structure and cultural concepts, highlighting the significance of "thick description" in cultural interpretation. From a perspective standpoint, it is grounded in Chinese cultural subjectivity, emphasizing the contemporary value of Yangtze civilization, having important significance for strengthening cultural confidence and constructing philosophy and social sciences with Chinese characteristics, Chinese style, and Chinese charm.

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Theoretical Foundation and Literature Review

Related Theoretical Research

Since the 1980s, "visual culture" has gradually emerged as an interdisciplinary research field (Pink, 2003). Visual anthropologists define visual culture as "the perception of culture through visuals," emphasizing the constructive role of visuals in human culture. Philosophers and cultural theorists have focused on ideological aspects behind visual representation. Michel Foucault developed the concept of "gaze" to examine the relationship between acts of looking and power discourse in works like "The Birth of the Clinic" and "Discipline and Punish" (Foucault, 2002; Ristić et al., 2021). W.J.T. Mitchell and Nicholas Mirzoeff proposed the theoretical concept of the "pictorial turn," marking a shift in humanities and social science research from linguistic to visual analysis of symbols and images (Purgar, 2016).

In visual narrative and cultural memory studies, Assmann J. developed "cultural memory" theory, arguing that cultural symbols including texts, images, and rituals serve as mediators for the externalization and materialization of collective memory (Assmann, 2015).

Roland Barthes' work on semiotics, especially in "Mythologies", examines how visual signs function within broader systems of myth and ideology, establishing a sociocultural approach to studying signs (Lawes, 2019). He demonstrated that symbols are not purely aesthetic objects but carriers of ideological meaning. This theoretical framework provides important resources for interpreting cultural symbols and their social construction.

In semiotic research, the cultural value of symbols depends not only on their structural relationships but also on their practical application. Cultural semiotics further emphasizes the negotiation and construction of symbolic meanings by different social groups, providing theoretical interpretation for the generation of specific ethnic group values.

In regional civilization theory research, the formation and development mechanism of regional civilizations is the focus of civilization origin studies. Scholars generally believe that specific geographical and ecological environments have a shaping effect, while changes in livelihood patterns are key to driving civilizational evolution. Yao Xiang and Liu Linlong preliminarily examined the relationship between Chinese prehistoric civilization evolution and early state formation, exploring the development trajectory of Yellow River Basin civilization.

Review of Current Research Status

Literature review shows that Yangtze civilization research is an important topic of common concern among Chinese and international scholars, yielding fruitful results. However, some issues exist: first, there is an overemphasis on archaeological excavation evidence, with insufficient utilization of cultural heritage such as art, religion, and customs; second, cultural interpretation of material cultural remains needs deepening, and semiotic analysis showcasing regional characteristics and cultural connotations needs strengthening; third, macro-civilizational morphology research needs expansion, and the dynamic mechanisms of exchange and mutual learning between different regional civilizations still require further discussion.

This paper attempts to build on previous research, fully utilizing the visual cultural heritage of the Yangtze River Basin, employing semiotic theory to conduct typological analysis of visual symbol systems in typical sites and remains, interpreting the cultural connotations of Yangtze civilization from material to meaning. On this basis, it further explores the unique position of Yangtze civilization in the pluralistic yet unified pattern of Chinese civilization, aiming to provide insights for cultural inheritance and innovation in the new era.

Symbol Types and Characteristics of Yangtze River Basin Civilization Markers

Archaeological evidence shows that material cultural remains from different regions and periods in the Yangtze River Basin contain rich visual symbolic resources, serving as keys to observing social structures and revealing cultural concepts. This section provides a scanning typological description of typical symbol systems according to the types of material cultural remains.

Visual Symbols in Material Cultural Remains

Archaeological Site Symbol Systems

The Yangtze River Basin is home to numerous significant archaeological sites, which themselves constitute vast and complex symbol systems. From the perspective of site selection, most follow certain geographical and ecological patterns, such as proximity to water sources, flat terrain advantageous for defense, etc. This site selection method represents both functional and cultural symbolic expression, suggesting ancient humans' understanding and utilization of the natural environment, as well as their definition of security and living space (Zhejiang Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, 2002; Yao, 2013).



Figure 1: Archaeological Sites along the Yangtze River (Yao, 2013)

The site layout also contains rich symbolic information. For example, the Liangzhu ancient city site presents a triple concentric layout, with the palace area at the center, followed by the inner and outer cities extending outward. This layout reflects the strict social hierarchical order of the time, representing a spatial symbolization of social class differentiation. The division of different functional zones, such as residential areas, sacrificial areas, and handicraft areas, each carries specific cultural symbolic connotations. The architectural regulations and special remains in sacrificial areas reflect the religious beliefs and spiritual world of the time, while the layout and production remains of handicraft areas suggest the technological level and economic patterns of the period (Wang & Liu, 2015; Renfrew et al., 2018).

From the perspective of architectural remains as symbols, the stilt-style buildings in the Yangtze River Basin are highly representative symbols. Their elevated ground-floor structure adapted to the local humid and rainy climate conditions, representing a cultural symbol of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. The buildings' structure, materials, and construction techniques all reflect, to some extent, the technological level, social organization forms, and cultural traditions of the time. Regional variations in stilt-style building details, such as roof forms and support structures, have become symbolic markers of regional cultural characteristics (Fang, 2022; Li, 2024).

Cultural Relic and Implement Symbol Systems

The Yangtze River Basin has yielded diverse types of cultural relics and implements, with each type carrying unique symbolic information, becoming key codes for interpreting the social culture of that time.

Pottery, as an indispensable implement in early human life, has rich excavated examples in the Yangtze River Basin. Taking the pottery of Hemudu culture as an example, its shapes are mainly flat-bottomed and round-bottomed vessels. This simple and practical design adapted to the living scenarios of the time, reflecting early humans' pursuit of life convenience, embodying utilitarian cultural symbols (Gao & Chen, 2019). The patterns on pottery surfaces carry deeper meanings - geometric patterns such as cord marks and mat impressions are not merely decorative but likely related to weaving techniques and daily utensils of the time, suggesting the development level of social production. Some figurative animal patterns, such as pig patterns on pottery bowls, may be closely linked to primitive totem worship and livestock farming culture, reflecting the spiritual beliefs and economic lifestyle of the time (Fang, 2023).

Bronze ware holds an important position in the civilization process of the Yangtze River Basin. Represented by Sanxingdui bronzes, their unique shapes and mysterious patterns are eye-catching. The tall bronze standing figures, with their exaggerated forms, distinctive attire, and held objects, have become important clues for academic research into ancient Shu culture's religion, politics, and social structure. The strange-shaped bronze masks, with their huge eyes and protruding ears, may symbolize ancient Shu people's worship of supernatural powers or special expression of ancestral spirits, representing the symbolic manifestation of ancient Shu culture's unique belief system (Li & Wang, 2024). The patterns on bronze ware, such as taotie and cloud-thunder patterns, while sharing similarities across different regions, also show regional variations, demonstrating both cultural exchange and integration as well as regional cultural uniqueness (Sage, 1992).

Additionally, jade artifacts are an important component of the cultural relic symbol system in the Yangtze River Basin. Liangzhu culture jades are known for their exquisite craftsmanship and complex patterns. The cong tube, as a typical representative of Liangzhu jade, with its square exterior and round interior design, embodies ancient people's understanding of heaven and earth. The god-human-beast face patterns on the cong body are core symbols of Liangzhu culture's religious beliefs and divine power concepts, reflecting the highly developed spiritual cultural world of that society (Liu, 2022). The differences in types, quantities, and qualities of jade artifacts unearthed from tombs of different ranks provide direct symbolic expression of social class differentiation, highlighting the special status and symbolic significance of jade in that society.

Architectural Symbol Systems

Religious Architectural Symbols

Religious buildings have always occupied a unique and crucial position in the process of human civilization. They are not only physical carriers of faith but also important stages for power display and cultural expression. Religious buildings from different historical periods and regions, such as temples and altars, with their unique architectural forms and spatial layouts, convey the subtle and profound hierarchical relationships between heaven, earth, and humans, becoming important codes for interpreting the spiritual world and power structure of ancient society.

Taking the Sanxingdui sacrificial pits as a typical case, the pyramid-shaped buildings in its sacrificial area tower above tall stone pillars. This unique architectural form and spatial layout was not coincidental but contains profound religious significance. Some scholars point out that this upward-reaching architectural form, through hierarchical spatial construction, symbolizes a channel connecting heaven and earth, highlighting the ancient Shu people's strong "heaven-connecting" religious consciousness, attempting to establish connections with deities and obtain divine protection and revelation through this means. Sun Hua proposed his analysis of the age, nature, owners, and background of the two artifact pits at Sanxingdui (Sun, 2013).

The palace area, altar, and highly representative god-human-beast face symbols of Liangzhu ancient city interweave

and organically combine, vividly reflecting the social form where royal power and divine power were highly unified at that time. The palace area, as the center of power, was closely connected with the altar that served religious sacrificial functions, suggesting that rulers used divine power to consolidate royal authority, using religious rituals as an important means for the upper society to control social contradictions and consolidate rule (Xu, 2008).

Taoist temple architecture has its unique style, with layouts particularly emphasizing harmony with the natural environment, adhering to the principle of adapting to local conditions, fully embodying the profound concepts of unity between heaven and humans and following nature's way in traditional Chinese philosophy. Taoism pursues conformity with nature and return to authenticity, thus Taoist buildings are often cleverly situated among famous mountains and rivers. When people are immersed in them, the serene natural environment and harmonious architectural atmosphere blend together, naturally conveying the spiritual realm of returning to simplicity and forgetting the distinction between self and objects (Wang, 2019).

Ancestral halls, as important buildings in patriarchal society, are distinct symbols of blood ties. Ancestral halls of different clans show clear differences in architectural regulations, from building scale and decorative details to layout structure, all strictly following the hierarchical patriarchal ethics. They are not only places for family ancestral worship and cultural inheritance but also symbols of family internal power order and status.

Mausoleum architecture can be considered the ultimate form of power expression. The hierarchical differences in tombs from different historical periods are significant, from tomb scale and abundance of burial goods to the complexity of tomb chamber structure, all clearly reflecting the identity, status, and social class of the tomb owner. These tomb remains provide crucial references for our in-depth observation of ancient social structure, helping us understand political, economic, cultural, and other aspects of information from that time.

Artifact Pattern Systems

Geometric Patterns

Geometric patterns are the earliest and most far-reaching visual symbols in the Yangtze River Basin. Neolithic pottery was often decorated with simple stripes and diagonal patterns, reflecting the rhythmic sense of agricultural civilization. The prevalence of patterns such as the meander, spiral, and ruyi patterns conveys ancient people's understanding of time cycles and spiritual pursuit of eternity. Cloud and thunder patterns externalize celestial worship into visual forms. Various combinations of geometric patterns were widely used on ritual vessels, such as the "hui" (回) pattern on bronze plates symbolizing the cycle of the Way of Heaven, and the "wave" pattern symbolizing the eternal flow of rivers.

Biological Patterns

Animal and plant patterns are ancient people's depictions of nature in their production and life. Fish patterns and bird patterns are commonly found on Neolithic pottery and jade objects, reflecting the cultural psychology of harmony between humans and nature through clean and bright lines. The coiled serpent pattern and kui dragon pattern demonstrate imagination under shamanistic concepts, conveying spiritual aspirations of ascension and mastery over objects (Li et al., 2023).

As time progressed, patterns became increasingly formalized. The beast face patterns and dragon-phoenix patterns on Shang and Zhou dynasty bronzes were often composed of multiple animal characteristics, with neat and powerful lines full of rhythm, emphasizing majesty and mystery. During the Eastern Han period, the widespread popularity of foreign patterns such as grape patterns and Changning date-pit patterns reflected increasingly frequent cultural exchange between East and West.

Visual symbols carry conceptual worlds and convey cultural ideas. Interpreting the visual cultural heritage of the Yangtze River Basin requires in-depth cultural interpretation based on meticulous archaeological research. By examining symbol evolution from a diachronic perspective, we explore cultural landscapes of different stages; from a synchronic dimension, we compare cultural exchanges between different regions, revealing the pluralistic yet unified civilizational essence. Through this, we can see essence through form and comprehend the spiritual core of Yangtze civilization.

Analysis of Historical Symbol Evolution

Temporal Evolution

From an overall perspective, the visual symbol system of the Yangtze River Basin experienced evolution from images to symbols to text. This developmental trajectory corresponds with regional civilization's progression from germination to development to maturity.

As early as 7,000 years ago, numerous geometric patterns emerged in the Juandian and Daxi cultural remains of the Yangtze River Basin. These patterns were not merely decorative designs but important markers of rice agriculture's emergence (Hong, 2023). According to archaeological research, the appearance of these geometric patterns was closely related to agricultural production activities, reflecting ancient people's preliminary understanding of natural laws and attention to agricultural production. As productivity gradually improved, by the Qujialing and Shijiahe cultural periods, symbols became increasingly complex. Among them, S-shaped hybrid rice patterns and water wave decorations were particularly prominent, these unique symbols strongly expressed ancient people's emphasis on agricultural production, vividly embodying an agriculture-dominated social economy. Meanwhile, the unique shape of jade cong tubes and the elaborate design of god-human-beast face patterns demonstrated ancient people's transcendent religious consciousness, reflecting the spiritual pursuits of that society.

In summary, the diachronic evolution of visual symbols in the Yangtze River Basin deeply reflects the transitions in production methods and social structures, while also carrying the development and changes in ancient people's emotional experiences, religious consciousness, and philosophical ideas. Deeply understanding these changes and inheritances, and comprehending the cultural representations behind them, has important significance for enhancing cultural consciousness and strengthening cultural confidence in the new era.

Cultural Transformation

From the perspectives of communication studies and cultural anthropology, examining the visual symbol system of the Yangtze River Basin reveals a complex cultural dynamic mechanism of "inheritance-development-integration-regeneration" (Appadurai, 1996).

The historical context of cultural transmission shows that the Yangtze River Basin has consistently maintained the totem worship tradition of agricultural civilization. The evolution of pottery patterns, transitioning from early primitive worship to dragon and phoenix totems, not only reflects the continuity of religious concepts but also demonstrates the progress in human cognitive ability and mastery over nature.

The window of inter-regional cultural exchange can be vividly interpreted through the cross-regional popularity of dragon and phoenix patterns. Archaeological discoveries reveal striking similarities between different cultural sites: the bronze vertical-eyed masks of Sanxingdui and the jade cong tubes of Liangzhu show astonishing isomorphism in form and decoration. The gold-silver-inlaid bronze shell container unearthed at the Jiuxi site in Taoyuan, Hunan, further proves the profound influence of Jiangnan region's bronze culture on the lower Yangtze River region. This archaeological cultural fusion and complementation became a key driver in forming the integration of Yangtze River Basin civilization.

Spiritual Cultural Perspective

The visual symbols of the Yangtze River Basin are material carriers of the human spiritual world, displaying cultural ideologies from different historical periods through artifacts, patterns, and architecture. These symbols record the evolutionary trajectory of human cognition and spiritual pursuits, from totem worship in primitive society to rational expression in ritual civilization, and then to cultural integration after Buddhism's eastward spread.

Primitive society's awe of natural forces gave birth to totem worship, as evidenced by the bronze standing figures at Sanxingdui and the god-human-beast face patterns on Liangzhu jade cong tubes, reflecting primitive beliefs that personified deities. Dragon and phoenix patterns from the shamanic period conveyed spiritual aspirations of mastering nature and pursuing transcendence, while oracle bone inscriptions from the Shang and Zhou periods reflected complex religious consciousness.

In the ritual civilization stage, visual symbols became increasingly formalized, with geometric patterns containing philosophical implications of celestial cycles, and bronze inscriptions gradually incorporating Confucian ethics. During the Wei and Jin periods, Taoist thought influenced garden art, embodying the concept of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. The eastward spread of Buddhism further enriched the spiritual landscape of the Yangtze River Basin, with the Longmen Grottoes and Dazu Rock Carvings displaying complex interactions between secular power and religious forces.

Overall, the visual symbols of the Yangtze River Basin present a pluralistic and inclusive cultural context. The interweaving influences of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism collectively shaped a rich and diverse spiritual world. These symbols are not merely artistic expressions but key to understanding the spiritual core of Chinese civilization, providing deep historical nourishment for creative cultural transformation.

Symbolic Significance: Deep Interpretation of Cultural Spirit

Symbols are not merely abstract visual forms, but deep expressions of specific ethnic groups' survival ideals and value pursuits. They crystallize the collective memory of the Chinese nation, reflecting spiritual pursuits that transcend time and space (Geertz, 2017).

Evolution Logic of Formal Language

The formal language of visual symbols in the Yangtze River Basin exhibits an evolutionary trajectory from realism to abstraction, from casualness to formalization, reflecting the progressive development of human cognitive abilities.

In the early stage, Neolithic pottery took nature as its model, with bird patterns and beast face patterns being clean and bright, displaying primitive feelings of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. Entering the Bronze Age, ritual vessel patterns tended toward formalization, with exaggerated beast faces and geometric patterns displaying a solemn and mysterious cultural temperament.

During the period of cultural fusion, Buddhist art and local culture mutually integrated, as exemplified by the Northern Wei statues in Longmen Grottoes embodying a dignified and elegant aesthetic style. From the Song and Yuan dynasties onward, literati painting and calligraphy arose, initiating the artistic tradition of freehand brushwork, with artists sublimating personal spiritual content through techniques such as "borrowed scenery" and "hidden scenery".

Multidimensional Interpretation of Cultural Connotations

Through visual forms, we can glimpse ancient people's profound thoughts on life, the universe, and existence. The cultural codes of Yangtze River Basin civilization can be summarized in three dimensions:

Ecological wisdom of unity between heaven and humans: From primitive worship to bronze vessel decorations to garden art, it consistently embodies the ecological concept of harmonious coexistence between humans and

nature, highlighting Chinese civilization's value pursuit of respecting nature.

Humanistic spirit of respecting ritual and ethics: The concepts of "virtue," "ritual," "benevolence," and "filial piety" in bronze inscriptions, Buddhist karmic ethics, and the ideals of self-cultivation and family management contained in Ming and Qing literati gardens constitute the moral foundation of Chinese civilization.

Endless creative vitality: From the human-face fish patterns of Majiabang to the golden staff of Sanxingdui, from lotus-crane square vessels to Yue kiln celadon, artifacts from different periods convey the nation's continuous pursuit of a better life and spirit of innovation.

Interpretation of Cultural Connotations in Yangtze River Basin Civilization Markers

Based on the above analysis, the Yangtze River Basin civilization marker system is rich in connotations and resplendent, writing a magnificent civilizational epic. This section will synthesize the previous analysis, attempting to further theoretically elevate its cultural connotations from a macro civilizational morphology perspective.

A consistent thread throughout is the nurturing, development, and elevation of ecological civilization concepts. From primitive worship to philosophical speculation, from following nature to mastering nature, the simple belief in animism and unity of heaven and humans runs through cultural symbols of different periods. The bird patterns of Majiabang culture and the god-human-beast faces of Liangzhu culture all demonstrate the vital connection between humans and nature. The prevalent Taoist thought during the Wei and Jin periods recreated a spiritual homeland of returning to simplicity through ethereal landscape paintings and Jiangnan gardens with their bridges and flowing waters.

With the advancement of civilization, humanistic care emphasizing ritual systems and ethical goodness became increasingly prominent. The emergence of altars during the Longshan culture period marked the embryonic form of the patriarchal system. Ritual vessels were not only markers of identity but also stabilizers of society. Bronze inscriptions progressing from "virtue" and "ritual" to "benevolence" and "filial piety" heralded the rise of Confucian thought. The widespread dissemination of Buddhist doctrines further strengthened karmic ethical views of good causes bringing good effects. Ming and Qing gardens emphasized hierarchical differences, embodying Confucian ideals of self-cultivation, family management, state governance, and world peace.

Meanwhile, endless creative passion has always pulsed through typical cultural symbols of different historical stages. From Majiabang culture to Liangzhu culture, from Daxi culture to Shijiahe culture, from Shang-Zhou bronzes to Buddhist art of the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, to Ming-Qing literati gardens, the vessel forms, patterns, and layouts from different periods and regions all demonstrate cultural creativity in reforming the old to bring forth the new.

The civilizational process is not simply linear development, but achieves spiral ascension through interaction between tradition and modernity, inheritance and innovation. The rounded solemnity of Liangzhu jade cong tubes is consistent with the simple magnificence of pre-Qin geometric patterns; while Ming dynasty Jingdezhen blue-and-white porcelain absorbed techniques from Yongle blue-and-white and Xuande five-color wares, creating unique connotations of prosperity, auspiciousness, and natural motifs. Visual symbols from different periods illuminate each other, revealing the historical logic of civilizational development through comparison.

In summary, the Yangtze River Basin civilization markers, with their rich visual forms and profound cultural connotations, together constitute an enduring and ever-flowing civilizational landscape. As important markers embodying the Chinese nation's creativity, they display enduring vitality with the magnificent momentum of a great river's ceaseless flow, while also demonstrating Chinese civilization's unique cultural character of inclusiveness and broad-mindedness. This character is based on preservation, driven by innovation, rooted in native soil while looking globally, developing through inheritance and inheriting through development.

Standing in the new era, we can draw wisdom from the historical logic of its formation and development to understand how to inherit and promote the value pursuits and spiritual temperament carried by this civilizational symbol system.

First, we should uphold the ecological civilization concept of unity between heaven and humans and following nature's way, establishing ideas of respecting, conforming to, and protecting nature, adhering to sustainable development, and following a path prioritizing ecology and green development. This concerns not only the sustainable development of the Chinese nation but also the future landscape of human civilization.

Second, we should promote the excellent tradition of respecting ritual and ethics and governing by virtue, promoting moral force within the framework of rule of law. "Without virtue, neither country nor person can stand." Excellent traditional virtues such as honesty, friendliness, frugality, and inclusiveness are both foundations for personal cultivation and cornerstones of social civilization progress. Only when moral high ground stands firm can the edifice of civilization be stable as bedrock.

Third, we should activate endless, progressive cultural creativity. The contemporary value of excellent traditional culture lies not in simple copying but in creative transformation and innovative development. Using the past to mirror the present and the present to guide the past, innovation within preservation can activate the vitality of traditional culture. From digital protection and utilization of material cultural heritage, to productive and lifestyle development of intangible heritage, to widespread use of traditional symbols in cultural creative industries, all reflect the vibrant vitality of tradition in modern contexts.

Finally, we need to maintain an open-minded attitude of inclusiveness. Excellent Chinese traditional culture has never been closed and rigid but has shown vigorous vitality through dialogue and integration. Inheriting and promoting Yangtze civilization in the new era requires learning from all excellent civilizational achievements of humanity, finding differences through comparison and seeking consensus through exchange, continuously expanding Chinese culture's global influence.

Research Conclusions and Outlook

In summary, based on sorting through the visual cultural heritage of the Yangtze River Basin, this study conducted systematic examination of typical archaeological remains using visual culture theory and semiotic theory, reaching the following basic conclusions:

First, the Yangtze River Basin is the birthplace of diverse civilization markers. The visual symbol systems contained in material cultural remains from different regions and periods are colorful and rich in variation, jointly writing an enduring civilizational epic.

Second, the diachronic evolution of symbol systems is closely related to transitions in social structure and humanistic concepts. The evolution from images to symbols to text carries the temporal imprint of social structure differentiation and conceptual world elevation. This evolutionary logic also demonstrates Chinese civilization's cultural genes of preserving tradition while constantly reforming the old to bring forth the new.

Third, different regional symbol systems both display obvious regional characteristics and are interconnected, linking together a pluralistic yet unified civilizational landscape. Frequent material exchange and cultural interaction are important drivers of regional visual form convergence and cultural identity formation.

Fourth, the deep cultural context and implications carried by symbols jointly point toward a spiritual homeland of ecological harmony, ethical reconstruction, and endless vitality. Reverence for heaven, earth, and all things, yearning for ritual governance and moral transformation, and unremitting pursuit of a better life constitute the spiritual core of Yangtze River Basin culture, becoming a source of strength for national rejuvenation.

It should be noted that this study still has many limitations. Regarding research objects, it lacks detailed case analysis of typical visual symbols such as Jiangnan gardens and tomb murals. Regarding research perspective, it focuses more on physical evidence itself, while descriptions of contemporary social structure and material living conditions remain thin. Future research needs to broaden the scope of materials, widely absorbing diverse historical materials such as literature and artworks based on archaeological discoveries, emphasizing the integration of multidisciplinary perspectives, further deepening comprehensive understanding of the Yangtze civilization landscape.

Meanwhile, strengthening indigenous theoretical perspectives is also a proper direction for future research. Past research has largely drawn on Western literary theory; future research should proceed more from indigenous experience, generating theory within the Chinese context to provide methodological support for interpreting Chinese civilization.

Additionally, with the advancement of modern technology, digital humanities research is flourishing. Using high-tech means for digital collection, storage, and reproduction of cultural relics and ancient sites not only helps permanently preserve cultural heritage but can also provide immersive cultural experiences for the public. Developing cultural and creative products from cultural heritage resources can make historical culture "come alive" with new vitality. These are all important paths for future research.

Looking back through the ages, the vast banks of the Yangtze River nurtured a brilliant civilization. Surveying the material cultural remains of the Yangtze River Basin, every inch of land is steeped in the dedication of ancient people; every typical symbol crystallizes national wisdom. Inheriting and promoting this civilizational symbol system requires us to be guided by cultural consciousness and cultural confidence, striving to achieve creative transformation and innovative development of excellent Chinese traditional culture. Under new era conditions, using the spiritual landscape of ecological harmony, moral reconstruction, and endless vitality to provide spiritual momentum and cultural nourishment for national rejuvenation and human progress, we can surely make the banner of Chinese civilization fly high in the vast ocean of world civilizations.

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