

From sacred totem to folk symbol: a Panofskian iconological and semiotic reading of Huaiyang Nini Dog clay figurine motifs

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ABSTRACT

Decorative motifs on the Huaiyang Nini Dog clay figurines, produced for the Taihao Ling Temple Fair, constitute a rich visual symbol system encoding deep cultural meanings, yet systematic analysis of these motifs as an autonomous symbolic unit distinct from figurine-form typology remains absent. This study integrates Panofsky's three-stage iconological theory with Peirce's icon/index/symbol classification and Barthes' denotation/connotation/myth model to interpret eight core motif types: human-face, frog, concentric circle, serpent, sun/radial, fertility, beast-face, and composite. The motifs share a visual grammar of four basic line types on a black-ground five-colour system, and encode four symbolic themes: ancestor worship, fertility worship, life cycle and cosmology, and totemic interpenetration, tracing a progression from icon to symbol along Peirce's continuum. Crucially, the motifs have not disappeared under commercialisation but have undergone hierarchical functional shift from ritual-functional to aesthetic-commercial marking, a mechanism characterised by form persistence with meaning migration. The dual iconological-semiotic framework offers a replicable model for folk-craft motif studies, and the findings ground intangible-heritage conservation strategies that prioritise cultural encoding over figurine-form replication, with implications for heritage education, curatorial documentation, creative-industry development.

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1. Introduction

Decorative motifs on traditional folk handicrafts constitute a visual symbol system that operates independently of the figurine forms to which they are attached. These motifs frequently encode cultural memories and collective beliefs at a depth that the figurine shapes alone cannot reach. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage provides an institutional umbrella for the protection of such crafts globally, yet at the implementation level the Convention continues to negotiate a structural tension between cultural-diversity imperatives and standardised operational procedures (Lázaro Ortiz & Jiménez de Madariaga, 2022). China has responded with a multi-tier legislative protection system, though empirical research has shown that such interventions can simultaneously reshape the cultural dynamics of the crafts they seek to protect (Xu & Tao, 2022). The Huaiyang Nini Dog – originating in Huaiyang District, Henan Province, and inseparable from the Fuxi–Nüwa creation mythology – entered the national intangible-heritage list in 2014. Its motif repertoire spans human-face patterns, frog patterns, serpent patterns, sun patterns, fertility symbols, concentric circles, zigzag lines, and composite designs, together composing what may be the most archaic totemic visual symbol system surviving in the Central Plains.

That system is anchored in the Fuxi–Nüwa creation myth. The Fuxi worship ceremony persists at the Taihao Ling Temple Fair to this day, and the figurines function within that ritual field as sacrificial objects mediating between mythological narrative and living folk belief (Li & Champadaeng, 2025). Totems in the Chinese tradition operate as sacred symbols bridging the human and divine, discharging the twin

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functions of ethnic identification and cosmological orientation. The Nini Dog motifs give that totemic logic tangible, visual form in a folk-craft medium (Hartati et al., 2020). Core motif types such as the frog and serpent patterns share conspicuous morphological affinities with 'life' and 'ancestor' symbols documented in Hongshan Culture rock paintings. A morphological affinity spanning several millennia does not by itself constitute proof of direct cultural transmission, but it does suggest that these motifs are not ornamental afterthoughts but plausible symbolic carriers of ancestor worship and fertility belief (Tie & Yushu, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). The distinctive black-ground, five-colour palette (black, red, yellow, green, white/pink) corresponds structurally to the traditional Chinese five-colour theory, a coding logic shared across Chinese folk-art forms including Fujian puppetry (Kong et al., 2025). Viewed through the lens of Chinese heritage politics, the Nini Dog has traversed a transformation from sacred ritual object to folk tourist souvenir, a trajectory that has profoundly reconfigured its cultural functions and social significance (Zhu & Maags, 2020).

Commercialisation has accelerated the standardisation and routinisation of Nini Dog production. Motif systems face simplification, homogenisation, and the progressive emptying of cultural content. Digital technology has opened new channels for intangible-heritage craft creation and dissemination, but it cannot by itself close the widening gap between motif symbols and their deep cultural referents (He & Wen, 2024). The urgency of systematic motif analysis is therefore compounded by the accelerating pace of this gap: once the meaning-generation logic of a motif system is lost to living practitioners, no amount of formal replication or digital archiving can recover it. Existing scholarship has addressed the Nini Dog from the angles of craft transmission, form classification, and colour analysis, yet the overwhelming majority of these studies treat the figurine shape as the analytical unit. What remains unaccounted for is the motif as an independent symbol system: how motifs constitute meaning at the visual level, convey cultural themes at the symbolic level, and carry collective-unconscious cultural codes at the structural level. The complete chain from signifier to signified to myth has not been systematically traced. Recent work on the sacred-to-secular transformation of traditional cultural practices in other contexts has demonstrated the resilience and reconstructive capacity of ritual functions under secularisation pressures (Min & Zhang, 2025), offering a transferable analytical lens. A dual iconological-semiotic framework directed specifically at the motif as an autonomous symbol system, one capable of tracing the complete chain from visual form through symbolic theme to deep cultural meaning and meaning-transformation mechanism, remains absent from the literature.

This study addresses that gap. Taking the Nini Dog motif system as its object, it integrates Panofsky's three-stage iconological theory (pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, iconological interpretation) with semiotic tools (Peirce's icon/index/symbol classification and Barthes' denotation/connotation/myth model) to construct a dual-theory framework for interpreting folk-craft motifs. Three research questions guide the inquiry: What is the visual composition, factual meaning, and expressive meaning of Nini Dog motifs (RQ1)? What themes, concepts, and symbolic meanings do the motifs encode (RQ2)? What deep cultural significance do the motifs carry, and by what mechanism has their meaning migrated from sacred totem to folk symbol (RQ3)? The study contributes on three fronts. Theoretically, it proposes an integrated iconological-semiotic framework that can be replicated for other folk-craft motif systems. At the object level, it is the first systematic analysis of the Nini Dog motif symbol system – as distinct from figurine-form typology. At the discovery level, it identifies the meaning-transformation mechanism as hierarchical functional shift and superposition rather than simple disappearance. On the practical side, the study argues that protecting the cultural encoding carried by motif symbol systems should take priority over replicating figurine shapes, providing a theoretical foundation for 'knowing both the what and the why' in intangible-heritage conservation.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

Academic interest in the Huaiyang Nini Dog spans folklore, art studies, and cultural-heritage research. A sociological reading of grassroots cultural values in the Central Plains has shown that local folk traditions, including those of Huaiyang, sustain a continuous tension between national discourse and local practice as modernisation advances (Mingming et al., 2021), yet this sociological lens operates at the level of community values rather than the visual-symbolic encoding of specific motif systems.

Colour-system studies, meanwhile, have traced how traditional Nini Dog colour schemes are inherited and re-created in contemporary design through the lens of consumer psychological perception, yet these analyses operate at the level of colour preference in applied design and stop short of interrogating colour as a culturally coded symbol in the iconological sense (Xu, 2021). Panofsky's method has been tested on non-Western folk crafts: the iconographic and iconographic-historical analysis of Indonesia's Ondel-ondel demonstrated that the three-stage framework retains cross-cultural applicability for interpreting visual symbols outside the Western canon, though that study targeted overall visual appearance rather than the independent motif system (Wahidiat & Carrollina, 2023). Cross-cultural comparison of totem symbols in Chinese and Thai clothing reveals that such symbols undergo parallel shifts from sacred function to aesthetic function in distinct cultural settings – a finding that supplies a comparative frame for understanding Nini Dog motif evolution, albeit at the design-translation level rather than at the level of the meaning-generation mechanism itself (Zou et al., 2024). More recently, the integration of cultural-memory semiotics with functional-behaviour modelling in the digital inheritance of Huizhou woodcarving has widened the application boundaries of semiotic methods in traditional Chinese crafts, yet its focus falls on AI-driven digital innovation rather than on systematic cultural-meaning interpretation of motifs per se (Qian et al., 2026). Taken together, these strands have built a substantial foundation – form classification, craft inheritance, colour analysis, regional cultural value, cross-domain application of Panofsky and semiotics – but none has attempted the systematic, dual-perspective integration of iconology and semiotics directed at the motif as an autonomous visual symbol system. That is the gap this study sets out to fill. By establishing the complete meaning-generation chain from visual form through symbolic theme to deep cultural significance, the study provides a replicable analytical model applicable to other folk-craft motif systems beyond the Nini Dog. At the practical level, the findings directly inform intangible-heritage conservation strategies by demonstrating that protecting cultural encoding in motif symbol systems should take priority over the replication of figurine forms – a principle with direct implications for heritage education, curatorial practice, and the sustainable development of folk-craft industries.

Panofsky's iconological theory partitions the interpretation of visual artworks into three progressive stages. Pre-iconographic description addresses natural themes, factual meaning, and expressive meaning. Iconographic analysis identifies conventional themes and concepts. Iconological interpretation uncovers internal meaning or content. This vertical progression – from visual surface through symbolic theme to deep cultural significance – retains considerable methodological purchase in contemporary art-history research, particularly when the object under analysis carries multiple layers of cultural encoding (Bühren & Jasiński, 2024). The method's core insight is to treat visual interpretation as an act of 'writing images', with each stage governed by a distinct corrective principle drawn from historical knowledge: style history for description, type history for analysis, cultural history for interpretation (Targia, 2023). Panofsky supplies the directional architecture. What it lacks is precision at the level of sign-meaning encoding within each stage. Barthes' semiotic theory fills part of that deficit by disaggregating meaning generation into denotation, connotation, and myth – the last of these theorising how cultural ideology is naturalised into self-evident 'common sense', a position Barthes himself later complicated by moving toward a more fluid, anti-structuralist account of meaning (Manghani, 2020). Introducing semiotic tools into the study of visual objects has been shown to expose the constructive logic of meaning beneath surface form, especially where decorative visual elements generate, transmit, and transform cultural meanings (Holt, 2017). Complementing Barthes' layered model, Peirce's triadic classification – icon, index, symbol – offers a taxonomy for the relationship between a sign and its referential object. Empirical work on Chinese festival-tourism landscapes has confirmed that this taxonomy can effectively decode the referential pathways and meaning-generation routes of cultural symbols in specific contexts (Li & Yu, 2023). The present study fuses these resources into a single operational framework. Pre-iconographic description maps onto denotation: the motif's visual appearance is matched to the natural object it directly denotes. Iconographic analysis maps onto connotation: conventional cultural themes and symbolic meanings are identified. Iconological interpretation maps onto myth: the study asks how motifs are elevated from specific totemic signs to cultural 'myths' encoding collective unconscious content. At every stage, Peirce's icon/index/symbol classification and Barthes' signifier/signified pairing are simultaneously embedded, furnishing horizontal semiotic encoding precision for the vertically progressive meaning interpretation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design and data sources

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative research design, with the Panofsky Imageology Three-Stage Theory (pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, iconographic interpretation) as the main theoretical framework, and the Peirce Semiotic Three-Part Theory and Barthes' Signification Hierarchical Model as auxiliary analytical tools, to conduct a systematic visual symbol interpretation of the Huaiyang clay figurine pattern system. The analytical unit of the study is clearly defined as the decorative patterns (motifs) on the surface of the clay figurines, rather than the figurine forms themselves. This definition is based on the core premise that the patterns serve as an independent visual symbol system carrying more concealed cultural codes than the forms; figurines function in this study as visual carriers that provide contextual grounding for motif analysis rather than as objects of formal typological study in their own right. The Nini Dog motif repertoire encompasses approximately fifteen to twenty identifiable motif types when minor variants are consolidated. From this repertoire, this study selects eight core types as analysis objects – human-face, frog, concentric circle, serpent, sun/radial, fertility, beast-face, and composite – on the basis of two criteria: typological representativeness (covering the major morphological categories) and symbolic richness (carrying identifiable cultural encoding). Operationally, typological representativeness was confirmed by verifying that the eight selected types collectively span all major morphological categories present in the full repertoire; symbolic richness was confirmed by cross-referencing each candidate type against historical literature and published artisan accounts to verify the presence of traceable cultural referents. Motif types excluded from the present analysis, such as simple dot clusters, single-line borders, and purely geometric fill patterns, function primarily as compositional auxiliaries rather than as independent meaning-bearing units, and are therefore reserved for future systematic cataloguing. Each type is presented through a typical carrier figurine: the Ancestral Monkey for the human-face motif, the Straw-Hat Tiger for the beast-face motif, the Toad for frog and concentric-circle motifs, the Serpent for serpent and radial motifs, the Cat-pulling-Monkey for composite and fertility motifs, and the Monkey-riding-Beast for the rider-beast composite motif. This 'motif-centred, form-as-carrier' organisation ensures systematic coverage while anchoring each motif type in a concrete visual referent. The data sources of the study cover five dimensions: academic literature (Chinese and English academic works on clay figurine patterns, Huaiyang culture, and totem symbol studies), historical literature (local chronicles, folklores, and Vusi culture-related classics), field image materials (high-definition photographs of clay figurine surface patterns collected by the first author at the Taihao Ling Temple Fair site and artisan workshops in Huaiyang District), published artisan interview records (documented accounts of practising artisans drawn from existing scholarly publications and cultural heritage reports, not independently conducted interviews), and museum collection archives (photographic and descriptive records accessed via published institutional catalogues). This multi-source data triangulation strategy is consistent with the data integration path adopted in existing qualitative research on traditional Chinese craftsmanship (Xu et al., 2022). Source triangulation was operationalised by cross-checking visual motif features identified in field photographs against descriptions in historical literature and published artisan accounts; where sources diverged, primary visual evidence and textual documentation were given precedence.

3.2. Analysis process and research boundaries

In terms of the analytical process, this study adopts a four-step approach: data collection, sample selection of patterns, three-stage progressive analysis with semiotic decoding embedded within each stage, and comprehensive discussion. The analytical procedure and the correspondence among its steps, Panofsky's three stages, and the embedded semiotic frameworks are illustrated in [Figure 1](#).

In the pre-iconographic description stage, systematic identification and objective recording are conducted at the visual form level for the structural form, line organization, color distribution, and composition features of each type of pattern. Simultaneously, a referential/indicated code of the signifier/

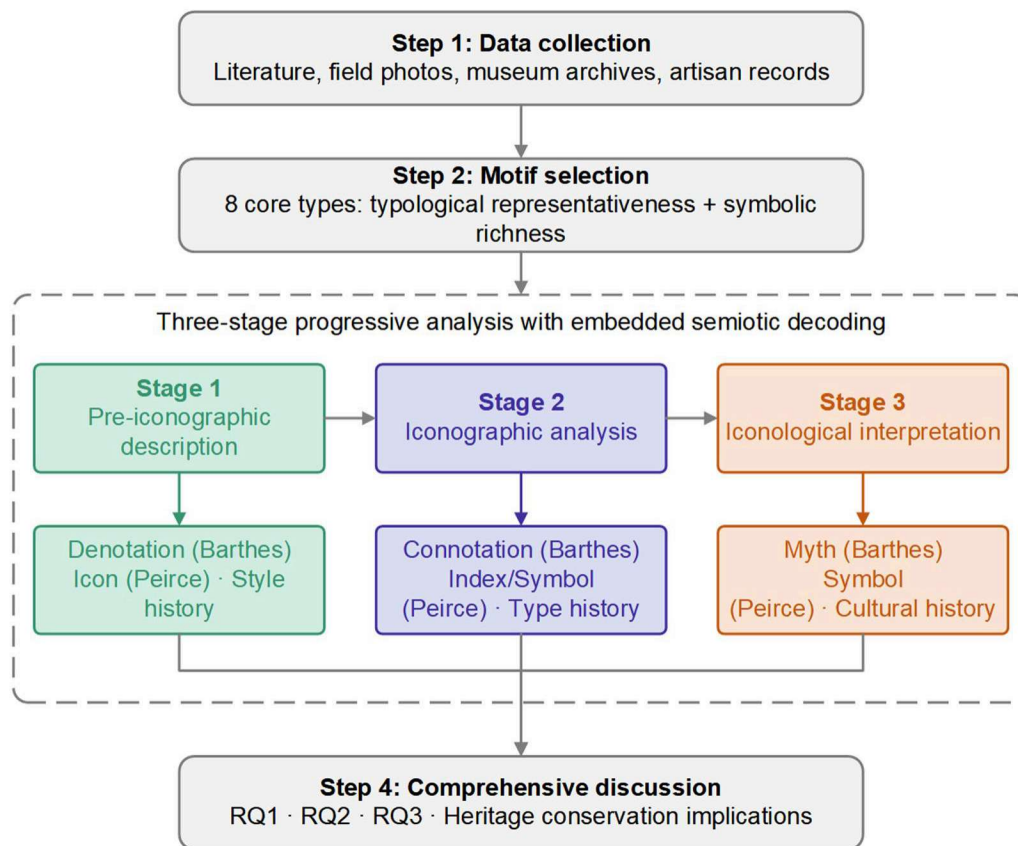


Figure 1. Analytical procedure of the study.

signified level based on Barthes' direct meaning (denotation) is established, and the visual appearance of the patterns is correspondingly matched with the natural objects they directly refer to – this stage uses style history knowledge as the correction principle to determine the visual expression tradition of the patterns. In the iconographic analysis stage, the visual form elements identified in the previous stage are associated with specific mythological motifs, belief themes, and symbolic systems, and the conventional cultural meanings carried by the patterns are identified. The operational link between visual form and symbolic meaning is established by matching each formally documented motif feature against culturally established referents recorded in historical literature and published artisan accounts, ensuring that symbolic interpretations are grounded in traceable evidence rather than independent inference. Peirce's icon/index/symbol classification is used to type the symbolic relationship between the patterns and their referential objects – this stage uses type history knowledge as the correction principle to trace back and compare the patterns in the historical context of Fu Xi culture, Yangshao painted pottery patterns, and the traditional totems of the Central Plains. In the iconological interpretation stage, beyond the identification of the symbolic meaning of specific patterns, the deep cultural significance structure behind the pattern system and the mechanism of meaning transformation from sacred totem to folk symbol are revealed. Corresponding to Barthes' myth analysis level, the study explores how specific totem symbols are elevated to cultural 'myths' that carry the collective unconsciousness – this stage uses cultural history knowledge as the correction principle, and links the different historical periods' belief systems and spirit of the times in Huaiyang region with the research strategy of similar Chinese clay sculpture intangible cultural heritage studies, which limits the analysis focus to cultural representation and meaning generation while treating the technical aspects as an independent issue (Zhou et al., 2023). The analytical paradigm of progressing from ritual-cultural characteristics to interpretable meaning structures through hierarchical qualitative analysis finds precedent in cognate research on the transformation of ancient Chinese ritual vessels into modern product forms (Sun et al., 2022).

4. Results

4.1. Pre-iconographic description

The visual form characteristics of the pattern system of Huaiyang clay figurines can be systematically presented through six representative forms of the figurine shapes, as shown in Figure 2.

The human-face motif on the Ancestral Monkey (Figure 2A) organises itself around dots composing the circular eyes and curved lines forming the nose-mouth unit. Symmetrical arcs and radial stripes spread across the chest and abdomen, generating a longitudinal composition that radiates outward from the facial centre. The beast-face and straw-hat motifs on the Straw-Hat Tiger (Figure 2B) obey a different visual logic altogether: the face is assembled from multi-colour blocks, zigzag mane lines fan outward along the head's edge, and the pointed conical hat at the crown establishes a vertical hierarchy with the trunk decoration below. The frog and concentric-circle motifs on the Toad (Figure 2C) are dominated by nested concentric rings on the flattened abdomen; the face resolves into spiralling dot-and-line formations, and the limbs are sketched with short zigzag strokes. Along the coiled body of the Serpent (Figure 2D), radial colour bands fan from a central axis, feather-edge patterns run symmetrically down both flanks, and five-colour blocks alternate in rhythmic sequence. The Cat-pulling-Monkey (Figure 2E), a dual-body composite form, concentrates its composite and fertility motifs at the junction where the two bodies meet: the cat's trunk carries symmetrical dot-and-arc patterns, while the monkey body displays a variant of the human-face motif. The Monkey-riding-Beast (Figure 2F) arranges its rider-beast composite motif in a vertical stacking structure – broad stripes on the beast body, dense dot patterns on the rider – producing a sparse-versus-dense rhythmic contrast.

The above six types of patterns share a unified color grammar and line system, and their composition rules can be confirmed through local specializations of the patterns and quantitative analysis of colors, as shown in Figure 3.

The close-up views in Figure 3A–C expose the micro-level visual logic of the motifs. The human-face motif builds from circular dots as elementary units linked by arc-line scaffolding. The concentric-circle and fertility symbols on the toad abdomen repeat a regular ring structure. The Cat-pulling-Monkey's trunk displays the black-ground five-colour grammar (black, red, yellow, green, white/pink) and the characteristic zigzag line form in plain view. Colour-area proportions were obtained by applying pixel-based



Figure 2. Representative Huaiyang Nini Dog clay figurines bearing key motif types. (A) Ancestral Monkey, bearing human-face motif. (B) Straw-Hat Tiger, bearing beast-face and straw-hat motifs. (C) Toad, bearing frog motif and concentric circle motif. (D) Serpent, bearing serpent motif and radial sun motif. (E) Cat-pulling-Monkey, bearing composite motif and fertility symbol. (F) Monkey-riding-Beast, bearing rider-beast composite motif.

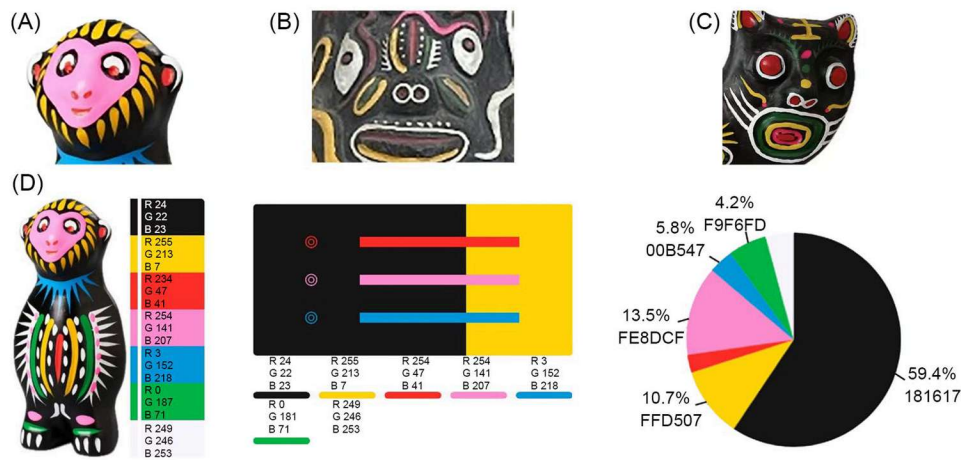


Figure 3. Colour composition and line characteristics of Nini Dog motifs. (A) Detail of human-face motif on Ancestral Monkey. (B) Detail of concentric circle motif and fertility symbol on Toad. (C) Detail of five-colour system and zigzag lines on Cat-pulling-Monkey. (D) Colour proportion analysis of Ancestral Monkey. Left: RGB colour values with corresponding colour swatches. Centre: bar chart of major colour area proportions. Right: pie chart of overall colour distribution (black ground $\approx$ 59.4%, pink $\approx$ 13.5%, yellow $\approx$ 10.7%), confirming the ‘black-ground five-colour’ grammatical structure.

RGB colour sampling to the high-definition field photographs, with each colour zone identified by its RGB value and its share calculated as a percentage of the total figurine surface area. The quantitative colour analysis in Figure 3(D) corroborates these observations with data: the Ancestral Monkey’s colour-area proportions show black ground at roughly 59.4%, pink at 13.5%, and yellow at 10.7%, with red, blue, and green occupying smaller shares. These figures confirm the ‘black-ground five-colour’ system in which black dominates absolutely and chromatic hues are applied over it as dot-and-line elements. The motif line vocabulary consists of four types – dot, straight line, arc, and zigzag – executed with sorghum-stalk brushes that yield a naturally rough texture and a primitive, unpolished visual character. At the level of factual meaning, the morphological features of these motifs and their variation across carrier forms point to a stable, finite visual-morpheme inventory. At the level of expressive meaning, the high-contrast black-and-colour juxtaposition, the jagged rhythm of the zigzag lines, and the gravity of symmetrical compositions jointly produce an immediate impression of mystery, primordality, and surging vitality. Semiotically, at the denotation level, the direct referential relationships are straightforward: the frog motif on the Toad denotes amphibian morphology, the coiled motif on the Serpent denotes a serpent’s coiled posture, and the red-and-black palette denotes the material properties of primitive mineral pigments. Applying style history as the corrective principle, the visual characteristics of Nini Dog motifs belong to the primitive-expressive style, and their formal logic maintains a recognisable historical continuity with the visual traditions of Neolithic painted pottery. These visual characteristics – line vocabulary, colour grammar, and compositional structure – constitute the evidential foundation upon which the iconographic analysis in Section 4.2 builds its symbolic interpretations.

4.2. Iconographic analysis

Continuing with the visual forms listed in the pre-iconographic description, the iconographic description now identifies the secondary, conventional cultural meanings represented by the motifs. The human face motif, which places human features on an animal body, indicates the ‘human ancestor’ mythological archetype represented by the Fuxi-Nüwa legend, and its symbolic theme is ‘ancestor worship’ (Hartati et al., 2020; Li & Champadaeng, 2025). The frog and concentric circle motifs, which place concentric rings and fertility symbols on the abdomen of a toad, indicate ‘prayers for procreation’, and their symbolic theme is ‘fertility worship’ (Tie & Yushu, 2024). The serpent and radial motifs, which place coiled forms radiating from a central axis, indicate ‘eternal cyclical renewal’ and ‘solar veneration’, and their symbolic theme is ‘life cycle cosmology’ (Hartati et al., 2020). The composite motif, which places multiple animal motifs on a single carrier, indicates ‘animistic worldview’ represented by ‘primitive belief’, and its symbolic

theme is ‘totemic interpenetration’ (Hartati et al., 2020). It should be noted that these symbolic theme attributions are interpretive conclusions drawn from the convergence of visual-formal evidence, historical literature, and published artisan accounts, rather than from direct ethnographic observation.

The referential/indicated relationship at the semiotic connotation level of the core patterns and their Peirce symbol type designation can be presented through a systematic semiotic decoding table, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 exposes a gradient across Peirce’s classification. The frog motif retains high visual resemblance to its amphibian referent (icon). The human-face motif resembles human facial features directly enough, but the grafting of that face onto an animal body requires culturally conventional knowledge to be read as ancestor worship (icon/symbol). The beast-face motif likewise straddles resemblance and convention (icon/symbol). The serpent’s coiled form combines resemblance with causal contiguity (icon/index); the concentric-circle’s nested rings simultaneously denote natural form and index the reproductive process (icon/index). The radial motif’s radiating structure is dominated by causal contiguity (index). The fertility motif’s diamond-shaped incision carries both indexical and conventionally symbolic weight (index/symbol). The composite motif depends entirely on cultural convention for its meaning (symbol). Taken together, the eight motif types occupy systematically ascending positions on the icon–index–symbol continuum, confirming a complexity gradient from concrete denotation to abstract symbolization within the motif system.

The deep symbolic themes carried by the composite patterns can be further revealed through four types of composite totemic shapes, as shown in Figure 4.

The Nine-headed Bird (Figure 4A) displays the multi-headed composite motif, where the heads of several animal species are combined in one body, an extreme form of the interpenetration of the totemic, with echoes of the multi-headed, multi-limbed beings found in the Shanhaijing. The Mother-and-Child Monkey (Figure 4B) translates the fertility theme from abstract symbol to narrative image through its embrace motif. The Multi-child Monkey (Figure 4C) accomplishes the symbolic encoding of ‘many children, much fortune’ through the repetition of multiple human face motif units in parallel. The Multi-headed Serpent-bodied Composite (Figure 4D) combines the life cycle and totemic interpenetration themes in a single structure. Applying type history as the corrective principle, these motifs can be traced back to the Yangshao Culture painted pottery prototypes (Gu & bin Said, 2025). The morphological similarity between the concentric circle composition of the Nini Dog frog motif and the ring belly composition of the Yangshao frog motifs can be noted, as can the similarity between the coiled radial composition of the Nini Dog serpent motif and the spiral composition of the Yangshao serpent motifs. These morphological

Table 1. Semiotic decoding of representative Huaiyang Nini Dog motifs at the iconographic level.

No.	Motif name	Denotation (visual referent)	Connotation (symbolic theme)	Peirce sign type	Panofsky level
M1	Human-face motif	Stylised human facial features (round eyes, curved nose-mouth) on animal body	Ancestor worship-Fuxi-Nüwa ‘human ancestor’ mythological archetype	Icon/symbol	Pre-iconographic → Iconographic
M2	Frog motif	Splayed limbs and flattened torso resembling amphibian morphology	Fertility worship-prayer for procreation and clan continuity	Icon	Pre-iconographic → Iconographic
M3	Concentric circle motif	Nested concentric rings on toad abdomen	Womb/fertility symbolism-cyclical reproduction	Icon/index	Pre-iconographic → Iconographic
M4	Serpent motif	Coiled body with rhythmic colour segmentation	Life cycle and cosmic renewal-eternal return	Icon/index	Pre-iconographic → Iconographic
M5	Sun / radial motif	Radiating lines emanating from a central point	Solar worship-cosmological order and vital energy	Index	Iconographic
M6	Fertility motif	Diamond or almond-shaped incised mark at lower torso	Reproductive worship-matriarchal procreative power	Index/symbol	Iconographic
M7	Beast-face motif	Multi-colour block facial composition with zigzag mane lines	Apotropaic guardian-protective totemic spirit	Icon/symbol	Pre-iconographic → Iconographic
M8	Composite motif	Fusion of multiple animal motifs on a single figurine body	Totemic interpenetration-animistic worldview of myriad beings	Symbol	Iconographic → Iconological



Figure 4. Composite totemic figurines of Huaiyang Nini Dog bearing complex motif combinations. (A) Nine-headed Bird, bearing multi-headed composite motif. (B) Mother-and-Child Monkey, bearing fertility narrative motif. (C) Multi-child Monkey, bearing multi-face group motif. (D) Multi-headed Serpent-bodied Composite, bearing serpent-body multi-head motif.

parallels do not in themselves demonstrate direct historical transmission; they are offered here as corroborating evidence consistent with the interpretation that the Nini Dog system encodes symbolic structures pertaining to ancestor worship and fertility belief, rather than constituting proof of unbroken cultural continuity.

4.3. Iconological interpretation

Iconographic interpretation, being the deepest level of iconographic analysis in terms of Panofsky's three-stage model, attempts to move beyond the identification of specific symbols to uncover the deeper cultural significance of structure in the patterns on the clay figurines – worship of reproduction, yin-yang harmony, and the cosmological perspective on the unity of heaven and man. At the symbolic-mythological level of iconographic analysis, the patterns on the clay figurines have already moved from the specific totem symbols to a cultural 'myth' that represents the collective unconscious; the human face pattern has already moved to a deeper level from 'looking like a human face' (denotation) to 'worship of ancestors' (connotation) to 'collective memory of human origin'. The frog pattern has already moved to a deeper level from 'looking like a frog' to 'worship of reproduction' to 'eternal anxiety over the continuation of the race'. At the mythological level of iconographic analysis, the patterns are no longer merely connoting a specific mythological narrative or belief theme; as a naturalized cultural ideology, they already express the specific cosmic perspective and life perspective as self-evident visual common sense. It should be acknowledged that this third-stage interpretation rests on the convergence of visual-formal evidence, historical documentation of Fuxi worship practices, and published artisan testimony rather than on first-hand ethnographic fieldwork; the claims advanced here regarding collective-unconscious structures are therefore analytical inferences warranted by the available textual and visual record, not empirically observed mental states.

The meaning transformation of the patterns of the clay figurines from sacred totem to folk symbols constitutes the core discovery of iconographic interpretation. This transformation process can be visually presented through the comparison of traditional totemic designs and contemporary zodiac designs, as shown in Figure 5.

The three traditional totemic patterns in the upper row of Figure 5 demonstrate the functional characteristics of the patterns in the sacred ritual context: The combination of the patterns of monkey and bird in the Monkey Head Sparrow (Figure 5A) unifies the face patterns of the monkey, who lives on the earth, with the body patterns of the bird, who lives in the heaven, in the same carrier medium. This is not the application of the patterns in the form of a visual collage, but rather the direct visual representation of the concept of interpenetration between the patterns of the monkey (earth) and the sparrow (heaven), which is the spiritual medium for communication between the heaven and the earth. The dense patterns on the Multi-Crane Beast (Figure 5B) are centered on the beast face pattern, supplemented by multiple radiating patterns and serrated patterns in a highly complex combination. The visual information content itself is a manifestation of the efficacy of witchcraft to expel evil. The pattern of concentric circles, the pattern of female genitals, and the symmetrical arc pattern of the Body of the Tuozhibei (Figure 5C) combine the two fundamental symbolic themes of reproductive worship and the cycle of life with the round bird-shaped carrier. The bird of the sparrow form, according to Chinese folk belief, originally represents the dual symbol of 'many offspring' and 'the carrier of the soul', and the body patterns of the bird are functional symbols (ritual-functional symbols), with their legitimacy depending on the ritual system. The three contemporary twelve zodiac designs in the next row of Figure 5 demonstrate the functional transformation of the patterns in the contemporary folk context: The floral decorative patterns on the zodiac rat (Figure 5D) replace the totem patterns, the patterns on the zodiac tiger (Figure 5E) are simplified to realistic stripes, and the patterns on the zodiac dragon (Figure 5F) tend towards auspicious decoration – although all three follow the same black background with five-color pattern system, the patterns have transformed from functional symbols to decorative-commercial symbols, with the ritual function fading and the aesthetic and commercial functions highlighting.

The systematic comparison of the above pattern meaning transformation can be presented through Table 2.



Figure 5. Comparison of traditional totemic figurines and contemporary zodiac figurines illustrating the sacred-to-folk transformation of Nini Dog motifs. (A) Monkey-headed Sparrow, bearing primate-bird composite motif. (B) Multi-horned Beast, bearing dense ritual-protective motifs. (C) Tuozhi Turtledove, bearing dense fertility and life-cycle motifs. (D) Zodiac Rat, bearing floral decorative motif. (E) Zodiac Tiger, bearing simplified naturalistic stripes. (F) Zodiac Dragon, bearing auspicious decorative motif.

From the comparative analysis in Table 2, we can see the essential mechanism for the transformation of meaning: The visual forms of these patterns (five colors on a black background, basic line styles) retain a certain degree of continuity from the sacred ritual context to the modern folk context. Meanwhile, the meanings carried by these patterns have experienced a hierarchical transformation from ritual functionality to aesthetic decoration: The human face pattern transforms from a spiritual medium to a cultural symbol; the frog pattern transforms from a reproductive prayer to an auspicious decoration; the snake pattern transforms from a cosmic cycle to a folk decorative pattern; the beast face pattern transforms from a witchcraft intimidation to a fun decorative element; and finally, the female genital pattern tends to fade out or transform to floral patterns screened by commercial aesthetics. The composite pattern is reduced from the cosmic structure carrying pantheistic beliefs and the unity of yin and yang to a decorative means reflecting the diversity of forms. This transformation is not uniform – the more concrete patterns (such as the frog pattern and the snake pattern) are more likely to be re-given realistic decorative meanings, while the more abstract patterns (such as the concentric circle pattern and the radial pattern) retain their forms but have a broken reference. The patterns with the strongest cultural taboos (such as the female genital pattern) face the most intense weakening or even disappearance. Based on the principle of cultural history, this transformation is closely related to the historical transformation of the Huaiyang region from a farming belief society centered on the Taishao Ling sacrificial ceremony to a cultural tourism society dominated by temple fairs. The transformation of the pattern function can also be said to reflect the profound transformation of the collective spirit (*weltanschauung*) in Huaiyang from sacred cosmology to secular life view. It should be noted that, in contrast to the painted decorative patterns in Tianjin Liuzhang with realistic images or narrative elements in the decorative patterns of Fengxiang clay sculpture with elements in opera, the clay dog patterns still bear the image genes of primitive totem symbols such as the image of concentric circle patterns, radial

Table 2. Meaning transformation of Nini Dog motifs from sacred totem to folk symbol.

Motif name	Sacred totem: Motif as ritual-functional symbol	Folk symbol: Motif as decorative-commercial symbol	Transformation mechanism
Human-face motif	Spiritual medium communicating with ancestral deities, marking the visual 'presence' of Fuxi-Nüwa divinity on the figurine	Regional cultural identifier and tourist souvenir symbol, with the 'human ancestor' meaning becoming increasingly vague	Ritual context recedes; divine reference weakens into a cultural-recognition label
Frog motif	Fertility prayer symbol, serving as a functional carrier for clan procreation requests during temple-fair rituals	Auspicious decorative pattern, with the 'many offspring' meaning generalised into secular well-wishing	Ritual demand for fertility belief dissolves; procreation meaning shifts toward generic auspiciousness
Concentric circle motif	Symbol of womb and reproductive cycle, jointly constituting the core visual code of fertility ritual with the fertility motif	Geometric decorative element, with the ring structure perceived as purely visual rhythm	Signified of reproductive symbolism ruptures; signifier form is retained but meaning is aestheticised
Serpent motif	Symbol of eternal life cycle and cosmic renewal, with the coiled form embodying the shamanic belief in 'death and rebirth'	Folk ornament and animal decoration, with the coiled composition simplified into naturalistic serpent form	Cosmological encoding recedes; motif is demoted from cosmological symbol to animal representation
Sun/radial motif	Visual representation of solar worship and cosmological order, with the radial structure symbolising the radiation of sacred energy	Decorative radial pattern, with visual impact retained but cosmological meaning detached	Desacralisation of the worshipped object; energy symbolism converts into aesthetic expression of form
Fertility motif	Direct symbol of matriarchal procreative power, serving as the core functional symbol for fertility prayer in ritual context	Tends to be weakened or omitted in contemporary products, partially replaced by floral motifs	Dual screening by cultural tabooisation of reproductive symbols and commercialised aesthetics
Beast-face motif	Shamanic-functional symbol for warding off disasters and evil, embodying the sacred intimidating power of protective totemic spirits	Facial decoration of folk figurines with playful appeal, with intimidation softened into approachability	Shamanic functional demand disappears; protective meaning transforms into aesthetic appeal and emotional companionship
Composite motif	Extreme expression of totemic interpenetration, with fusion of multiple animal motifs embodying animistic belief and the cosmic structure of yin-yang unity	Decorative means for figurine variety, with motif fusion understood as artisan creativity rather than belief expression	Animistic worldview retreats; totemic interpenetration logic is replaced by commodity diversification logic

patterns, and symmetrical composition in contemporary society. The special mode of ‘form continuation – meaning transformation’ allows clay dog art to occupy an irreplaceable coordinate position in Chinese folk clay sculpture.

5. Discussion

The three-tiered iconological method, supported by semiotic encoding at each level, has provided empirical results to all three research questions. Pre-iconographic description (RQ1) found a limited visual repertoire including four-line types and a black ground five-color visual grammar, as well as an organizing principle of ‘motif as core, form as carrier’ for eight motif types on six representative figurines. Iconographic analysis (RQ2) identified four symbolic themes and a symbol-complexity continuum from icon to symbol; iconological interpretation (RQ3) traced the meaning-transfer mechanism to a collective-spiritual shift from sacred cosmology to secular life view.

The finding with the most theoretical weight – and the one most transferable to cognate research on folk-craft traditions – is the mechanism of meaning migration. What has occurred is not the disappearance or rupture of motifs but a hierarchical shift in their function. The five-colour-on-black visual grammar persists as a ‘signifier shell’ across both sacred ritual and contemporary folk contexts, while the meaning it encodes has migrated from ritual functionality (ritual-functional) to aesthetic decoration (aesthetic-decorative) and commodity marking (commodity-marking). This ‘form persists, meaning migrates’ pattern resonates structurally with broader findings in Chinese heritage-transformation research: the transition of religious heritage from sacred to secular typically involves the simultaneous retention of material form and re-encoding of spiritual content, and it is hierarchical shift rather than outright replacement that constitutes the default logic of heritage modernisation in the Chinese context (Zhu, 2024). A cross-cultural parallel sharpens the point. Traditional batik motifs in Southeast Asia have also undergone functional displacement from ritual symbol to fashion sign, yet the continuity of their visual grammar and production technique has itself constituted a form of ‘symbolic resistance’, sustaining cultural-identity legibility at the aesthetic level even as ritual meaning recedes (Poon, 2020). A systematic review of batik production in Malaysia and Indonesia adds a further dimension: the survival of cultural encoding in motifs depends heavily on the integrity of the production context, and when industrial manufacture replaces manual transmission, encoding density undergoes irreversible dilution (Syed Shaharuddin et al., 2021). The trajectory of Nini Dog motifs – from densely encoded shamanic patterns to simplified naturalistic stripes – fits that dilution curve closely. A more proximate comparison is offered by research on Fengxiang clay sculpture and Junxian clay-whistle traditions in the Central Plains, where motif systems have similarly undergone functional displacement from ritual to decorative contexts under commercialisation pressures; the present study’s finding of ‘form persistence with meaning migration’ extends and specifies that pattern by identifying the hierarchical superposition mechanism responsible for it.

The dual-theory integration tested here offers an analytical strategy that combines vertical depth with horizontal precision. Panofsky’s three-stage progression supplies a directional scaffold for deepening meaning interpretation layer by layer; semiotic encoding analysis (denotation, connotation, and myth, along with the classification of icon, index, and symbol) supplies specific operational tools within each layer. The complementarity helps fill a gap that cannot be filled by either theory in isolation. Operationally, Panofsky’s three stages provide the vertical direction of analysis – moving from visual surface to symbolic theme to deep cultural meaning – while Barthes’ denotation/connotation/myth model and Peirce’s icon/index/symbol classification supply horizontal precision at each stage by specifying the encoding mechanism through which a given motif generates meaning at that level. This complementarity is an operational rather than a paradigmatic one, in that it does not aspire to a reconciliation between the historicist underpinning of Panofsky’s iconology and the pragmatist semiotics of Peirce or the structuralist lineage of Barthes, but instead uses each theory at the level of analysis at which its explanatory power is greatest – that of Panofsky for depth in direction, that of Barthes for stratification of meaning, that of Peirce for classification by type of sign. Table 1’s semiotic decoding and Table 2’s meaning-transformation comparison jointly demonstrate the framework’s analytical power in exposing both the multi-layered structure and the historical dynamics of motif meaning. Iconology alone can trace vertical meaning progression

but cannot specify the encoding mechanism within each level; semiotics alone can dissect encoding structure but lacks a directional architecture from visual form to deep cultural meaning. Their integration enables the study to answer ‘what do motifs mean?’ and ‘how do motifs mean?’ simultaneously, and the framework is transferable to other folk-craft motif systems. The effectiveness of this integration, though, does not exempt its theoretical instruments from epistemological scrutiny. Applying an iconological framework rooted in Western art history and a semiotic model rooted in European structuralism to Chinese folk-craft analysis entails the risk of ‘epistemic injustice’ – the presupposed categories of the analytical apparatus may screen out the cultural logic native to the analysed object (Lassen et al., 2024). The systematic split in motif meaning between sacred ritual context and contemporary folk context revealed in Table 2 is itself a concrete index of this limitation: the same frog motif triggers fundamentally different meaning constructions in the cognition of a ritual participant and in that of a tourist consumer. The ‘deep cultural meaning’ that iconological interpretation claims to reach is not a fixed essence; it is a construct dynamically generated by the interpretive context.

The findings carry direct consequences for intangible-heritage conservation practice. The meaning-migration mechanism exposes a risk that is less visible than form alteration but more damaging: the hollowing-out of cultural encoding in the motif symbol system. Heritage-tourism commercialisation research has framed this as the systematic screening-out of ‘backstage meaning’ by ‘front-stage display’ – tourists consume the visual surface of motifs while their ritual function and cultural encoding are progressively suspended in the commodification process (Wang et al., 2024). The attenuation and disappearance of the fertility motif in contemporary Nini Dog products is a textbook instance. Workable conservation strategies must negotiate a normative balance between commercialisation and cultural integrity: unchecked commercialisation irreversibly dilutes motif encoding, yet moderate commercialisation can itself underwrite the economic viability of heritage survival (Bortolotto, 2021). Derivative design has emerged as one feasible path – its operating principle is ‘symbol extraction plus semantic translation’ rather than direct appropriation of original motifs, a dual operation that can reconcile encoding retention with contemporary aesthetic adaptation (Wang & Chen, 2025). Digital technology, meanwhile, opens new possibilities for the complete recording and dissemination of motif structure and colour information; image-generation techniques grounded in structural and colour-perceptual awareness can achieve creative transformation without compromising the integrity of the visual grammar (Zou et al., 2025), supplying technical support for a move from ‘knowing the what’ to ‘knowing the why’ in motif conservation. Viewed within the broader field of folk-art symbolism and visual culture studies, the present findings align with research demonstrating that decorative motifs in traditional crafts function as autonomous semiotic systems rather than mere ornamentation (Holt, 2017), and extend that line of inquiry by providing a dual-framework model that makes the meaning-generation mechanism – not just the symbolic content – analytically visible. Within intangible-heritage scholarship, the study contributes an evidence-based rationale for prioritising the preservation of symbolic encoding over the replication of craft form, complementing policy-oriented arguments for balancing commercialisation with cultural integrity (Bortolotto, 2021).

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The motif sample covers eight core types on six representative carrier figurines and does not exhaust the full Nini Dog motif repertoire. Data sources are predominantly academic literature, historical texts, and field photographs, without the backing of large-scale systematic fieldwork. The study confines itself to visual-symbol analysis and does not address production processes or material techniques. Regional variation in motifs across different artisans and villages likewise falls outside the present scope. Future research could pursue larger-scale systematic motif coding and classification, cross-regional comparison of Nini Dog motifs with those of Fengxiang clay sculpture, Junxian clay-whistle, and other Central Plains folk clay-sculpture traditions, and digital pathways for the complete recording, dissemination, and creative transformation of motif structure and colour information.

6. Conclusion

This study took the Huaiyang Nini Dog motif system as its analytical object and applied an integrated Panofsky iconological and Peirce–Barthes semiotic framework to answer three research questions. At the

visual-composition level, Nini Dog motifs draw on four basic line types and a black-ground five-colour visual grammar to constitute a stable, finite visual lexicon; the eight core motif types (human-face, frog, concentric circle, serpent, sun/radial, fertility, beast-face, composite) trace a systematic progression from icon to symbol in Peirce's classification. At the symbolic-theme level, the motifs encode four cultural themes – ancestor worship, fertility worship, life cycle and cosmology, totemic interpenetration – composing a symbolic system whose spiritual core is Fuxi belief. It should be noted that these findings are grounded in eight core motif types across six representative carrier figurines; while this sample covers the major morphological and symbolic categories of the Nini Dog repertoire, generalisations to the full motif system or to other Central Plains folk-craft traditions should be advanced with appropriate caution pending larger-scale systematic cataloguing.

The central finding of this study – that motif meaning migrates through hierarchical functional shift rather than disappearing – reframes the core object of intangible-heritage protection: safeguarding the cultural encoding carried by the motif symbol system must take priority over the replication of forms and the transmission of craft technique alone. At the deep cultural-meaning level, motifs have migrated from sacred totem to folk symbol through a mechanism that is not disappearance or rupture but the simultaneous persistence of visual-grammatical form and functional transformation of cultural encoding – a hierarchical superposition process. The core object of intangible-heritage protection should extend beyond the replication of forms and the transmission of craft technique to encompass the cultural encoding carried by the motif symbol system. Understanding the meaning-generation logic of motifs – from denotation through connotation to myth – equips conservators to resist the hollowing-out of cultural content during commercialisation and provides a theoretical foundation for heritage protection strategies grounded in depth of understanding rather than surface replication. Beyond folk-craft studies, the Nini Dog motif system – as a surviving visual embodiment of Fuxi-Nüwa creation mythology – constitutes a form of intangible cultural memory with implications for regional cultural identity, heritage education, curatorial documentation, and derivative design in the creative industries.

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Bingqian Zhou's research interests include iconological studies, intangible cultural heritage, cultural visual design, AI-generated content (AIGC), and fashion communication.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available within the article. The field photographs and visual materials analysed in this study are retained by the corresponding author and are available upon reasonable request.

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