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Semiotic Analysis of the Auspicious Images of a Taiwanese Folk Religion Temple

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ABSTRACT

In Taiwan, temples were decorated with painted and sculptured auspicious images that promote the communication between worshippers and deities. In this study, we adopted grounded theory and ethnography with applied semiotic theory to analysis the semiotic meanings of the auspicious images of Taiwanese folk religion temple, identify the semiotic characteristics of the images, and summarize the signs associated with the images. A total of 126 image samples were collected from field study, and the KJ method was subsequently performed to categorize and analyze the samples. Finally, some significant findings were obtained, the functional aspects of the aforementioned images mostly belong to the categories of symbol and homonymy, whereas their mental aspects belong to the categories of psychological and physiological requirements. In sum, humans perceive the world through signs and that human life is the semiotization of the world, although Eastern and Western cultures are characteristically different, they share much similarity in communication methods. The findings of this study can foster the understanding of the truth, goodness, and beauty of the architectural decoration of temples in Taiwan and the modesty, hospitality, generosity, and religiosity of Taiwanese society.

Keywords: Auspicious image, semiotics, Taiwanese folk religion temple, temple decoration.

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1.0 Introduction

A distinctive geographical location and the past two millennia of immigration have made Taiwan an ethnically diverse society. Its experience in different eras of political governance has also given the present Taiwanese society a multicultural identity, as is manifested in its local temple culture (Morris, 2004). Temples are the spiritual gatekeepers for the Taiwanese people and the place of worship for practicing folk religions (Lin & Hsing, 2001) whose cultural essence is embodied by communal worship activity (Katz, 2003). The temple culture is intertwined with folk customs, and because folk religions are part of public life, temples abound countrywide, coupled with various religious festivities that, for Taiwanese people, signify an act of religious devotion and the tracing of a person's origins rather than cultic or superstitious practices (Weller, 1999). The ethnic population of Taiwan is predominantly Han Chinese. Thus, throughout Chinese history, priest- astronomers have made astronomical observations and diviners have predicted the national fate. Likewise, farmers have performed rituals in which they make sacrificial offerings to Heaven and worship gods to pray for favorable weather and bountiful harvests. Such rituals reflect the deference of Han Chinese to Heaven and their wish for a peaceful life.

The religious history of Taiwan suggests that the Taiwanese entrust their lives and livelihood to their ancestors or deities through verbal or nonverbal communication (Fig. 1). They also use metaphoric images to express their deference to Heaven, gods, and the spirits of the dead, and pray for safety and prosperity throughout the year (Fig. 2). These metaphoric images have become a decorative element of temple architecture and are now widely applied to sacrificial offerings as an emblem of auspiciousness (Han, 2014). From the perspective of semiology, the auspicious images of Taiwanese folk religion temples are a symbolic representation and serve as a communication medium between humans and the heavenly world. Each of these images has its own meanings that are worth investigation. These meanings serve as a nonverbal means of communication with the gods and embody Taiwanese conventional architectural craftsmanship for decorative applications in temple buildings. From the perspective of Taiwanese immigration history, these auspicious images represent the life experience of early Taiwanese, describe their shared life goals, and are a type of visual art product (Morris, 2004). On the basis of the Saussurean semiotic theory, which was developed by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), this study interpreted the auspicious images of Taiwanese folk religion temples systematically, and thereby examined the formats and meanings of the images and summarized the practices and conceptions of Taiwanese folk religions.

Figure 1: May money and treasure be plentiful
(Chinese: 招財進寶)



Figure 2: May there be bounty every year
(Chinese: 年年有餘)



The analysis approach of the qualitative analysis used in this study followed a process of induction to deduction to induction. Specifically, the relevant literature was collated and reviewed to define the problem statement; subsequently, a case study was conducted, and the findings of the case analysis were summarized to derive conclusions. Furthermore, grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) were both employed on the basis of the theoretical framework of this study. This study had three objectives: (1) to collate and review the literature on the

auspicious images of Taiwanese folk religion temples; (2) to analyze the semiotic characteristics of the auspicious images of a Taiwanese folk religion temple; and (3) to systematically interpret the auspicious images of a Taiwanese folk religion temple. The findings of this study can foster the understanding of the truth, goodness, and beauty of the architectural decoration of temples in Taiwan and the modesty, hospitality, generosity, and religiosity of Taiwanese society.

2.0 Literature review

2.01 Architectural decorations of temples in Taiwan

An architectural accomplishment throughout human history, temples boast a variety of features designed using architectural, sculptural, and drawing techniques. Such features can be identified not only in Western religious structures of historical value, but also in Taiwanese folk religion temples. Early Taiwanese society comprised immigrants migrating by sea from China. While building their new homes and settling in Taiwan, they erected temples to seek consolation and relief from their religious beliefs (Chan, 2005). The architectural development of Taiwanese folk religion temples began with the Chinese immigration during the Qing dynasty (1683–1895) and evolved through the Japanese colonial period (1895–1945) and the economic miracle of the 1960s. The sociocultural landscape and economic development of these periods, coupled with the public emphasis on folk religions and the religious services thereof, contributed to the diversity of materials, drawings, themes, and layouts of the decorations of the domestic temples (Morris, 2004). Currently, the cultural and artistic value of Taiwanese temple architecture attracts numerous international visitors.

Taiwanese folk religions have flourished since the latter years of the Ming dynasty, with every ethnic group building temples to practice its religious beliefs and the authorities encouraging the construction of these shrines to provide psychological comfort for the public at large. Different ethnic communities worshipped different deities; however, their places of worship were all elaborately decorated (Lin, 2001). Many representative temples (e.g., the Longshan Temple and Qingshui Zushi Temple in Taipei and the Mazu Temple in Taichung) in Taiwan are noted for their interior and exterior structures, which are artistically embellished with a variety of stone carvings, colored drawings, and clay sculptures. All of these decorations created by dedicated artisans can be seen outside (e.g., stone-carved lions and dragon pillars) and inside (e.g., plafonds and wallboards) of the temples and even on their rooftops and roof ridges (Weller, 1999). In addition, most domestic temples have supporting and accompanying structures that possess symbolic meanings (Lee, 2001). Decorative techniques for these structures, previously applied to ancient buildings, evolved to their modern forms through architectural and artistic ingenuity. These techniques have given rise to temple decorations imbued with folktales and can be divided into carvings, sculptures, frescos, and brickwork according to the material, characteristic, and technique used (Lee, 2001). Auspicious temple images are typically formed using carvings, sculptures, and frescos. These three types of temple decoration are defined in terms of technique and application as follows.

1. **Carvings:** These are crafted in the form of real or fictitious objects and, depending on the material used, divided into stone carvings, wood carvings, and brick carvings. Typically, stone carvings are made into steps, handrails, and columns; wood carvings (one of the most widely applied carving formats in Taiwan) into plafonds and brackets; and brick carvings (that resemble stone carvings in technique and use red bricks as the main material) into wall plates and wallboards (Fig. 3).
2. **Sculptures:** These are crafted out of porcelain clay, lime, or clay, then glazed and fired into clay figures or any other particular patterns. Sculpted decorations play a dominant role in the architecture of Taiwanese folk religion temples and can be divided into clay sculptures, clip-paste, or Koji pottery. Clay sculptures are shaped out of clay and lime and subsequently colored and are a common decoration for roof ridges. Clip-paste involves shaping a three-dimensional pattern out of mortar, coloring the pattern, and subsequently pasting pottery pieces on it; clip-paste artworks are also a common roof ridge decoration. Koji pottery is constructed by shaping ceramic material into a hollow model, glazing and firing the model at low temperatures, and subsequently pasting it on walls. This crafting technique is typically applied in the construction of door lintels (Fig. 4).
3. **Frescos:** These are drawings of floral patterns, monsters, or picture stories that are made on beams,

brackets, pillars, and walls by using different colors of paint. Frescos are decorative and protect wooden structures from erosion and moth damage. Frescos are divided into flat, pima, and relief frescos, depending on the form they take; as well as door-god frescos and beam frescos, depending on the structure they are painted on (Fig. 5).

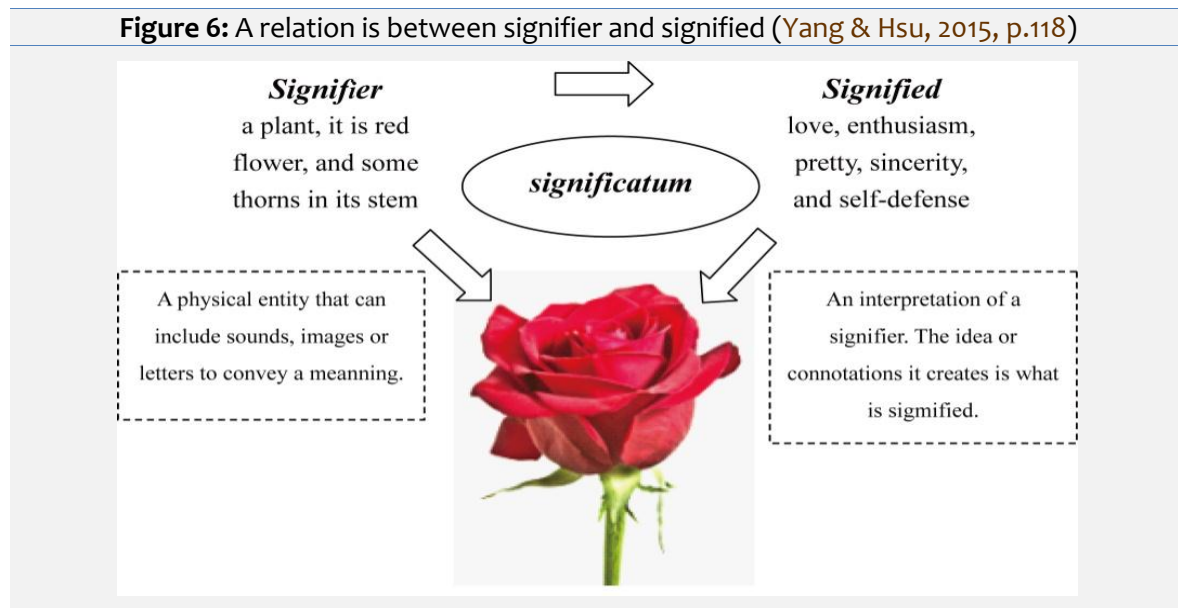
| Figure 3: The carvings decoration | Figure 4: The sculptures decoration | Figure 5: The frescos decoration |
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2.02 Analysis of Semiotic theories

Humans perceive the world through signs. Human life is the semiotization of the world, and perception is an act of selecting, combining, transforming, and recreating signs (Emmeche & Hoffmeyer, 1991). Semiotics began in the Western academic community in the late nineteenth century with the aim of investigating human signification systems and underwent a major change in the mid-twentieth century (Heim & Kratzer, 1998). In the late nineteenth century, Saussure constructed the concepts of semiotics on the basis of sociology and associationist psychology, and Charles Peirce developed pragmatism as a foundation of semiotics from behaviorism. Following the development of both semiotic theories, numerous scholars began to explore semiotics in the 1960s and have since conducted semiotic research in media and cultural contexts to examine the means of nonverbal communication between people (Caesar, 2013).

Signs enrich everyday life by conveying the meanings of numerous words and the connotations of concrete and abstract things. For example, the sun as a “heat source” connotes “vitality,” “passion,” and “youth”; and as a “light source,” it means “hope,” “direction,” and “guidance.” In addition, the sun embodies royal or imperial power and symbolizes “authority” and “sacrosanctity” (Bruce-Mitford, 2008). Signs are also used to deliver simple information promptly, and as a part of human visual communication, their meanings are defined based on social conventions or rules of thumb. For example, traffic signs on the road, restroom signs in department stores, and legends on amusement park maps all efficiently provide their intended messages. Furthermore, the design and use of signs can not only bridge language gaps but enliven communication (Yang & Hsu, 2015).

Semiotics was proposed by Saussure, who explicated the concepts of signs in his *Course in General Linguistics* and argued that a sign comprises a signifier (the physical form of a thing) and a signified (the concept of the thing that is formed in the minds of people) (Saussure, 2011). Anything that exists in the universe has its own appearance and characteristics; thus, people provide denotative concepts to these things when they attempt to explain them. Accordingly, the denotations of things are based on cultural conventions, a process known as significatum (Fiske, 1991). In addition, Saussure (2011) noted that language is a semiotic system that conveys thoughts in the form of sounds and referred to this system as a combination of the representamen and object of which the form and concept of a meaning is defined as the signifier and the signified, respectively (Fig. 6).



3.0 Methodology







3.01 Signifier of auspicious images

The auspicious images of Taiwanese folk religion temples vary in content. The themes of these images pertain to nature worship, reproduction worship, totem worship, mythology, folklore, religion, homonymy, and object association. These images represent animals, plants, instruments, deities, and characters (Welch, 2013). On the basis of the concept of the signifier, the themes and representations of the images were generalized into the following categories: Animal and Plant, Custom and Tradition, History and Folktale, Religion and Mythology, Literature and Opera, and Character and Sign. These six categories of auspicious images, which are typically used to decorate the walls, columns, eaves, and steps of Taiwanese folk religion temples, are outlined below.

1. **Animal and Plant:** Humans share a symbiotic relationship with nature and have throughout their history lived deferentially with natural phenomena (e.g., clouds, rain, the sun, moon, and stars). The early Taiwanese had a mix of curiosity and fear for some faunal and floral species, as manifested by images engraved on temple structures by artists and sculptors. These temple images, which include lions, bats, and lotuses (Fig. 7), have their own meanings and reflect Taiwanese deference to Heaven and nature.
2. **Custom and Tradition:** Many Taiwanese customs and traditions pertain closely to local social norms and cultural practices, which are typically concretized in the form of auspicious images. These images are associated with the pursuit of luck. Chinese zodiac signs are an example of such images (Fig. 8); it is the custom for a Taiwanese to perform required rituals at temples to “pacify *Taisui*” (the title of a deity whose constellation is designated as the monarch for the years of zodiac animals) in the year of his or her zodiac sign to pray for good luck and avoid bad luck. (For example, 2016 is the year of the Monkey, and people born in that year are generally considered to be in direct opposition to the *Taisui* of that year and should pacify the deity when the year of the monkey occurs.)
3. **History and Folktale:** The Han culture has a long history and is rich in folktales. Thus, some auspicious temple images are thematically based on ancient Chinese history and folk stories. The early Taiwanese exploited these narrative elements to preach to their descendants the importance of acting in the interests of their nation. Such stories include the following: Yue Fe (1103–1142 A.D.), a military general of the Song dynasty (960–1279 A.D.), was tattooed “absolute devotion to my homeland” on the back by his mother; and Mencius (372–289 B.C.), a Chinese philosopher of the Warring States period (453–221 B.C.), moved with his mother three times because she wanted to facilitate furthering his education (this story later came to be known as “moving three evictions,

optional neighboring states”) (Fig. 9).

4. **Religion and Mythology:** Early Taiwanese society was heavily influenced by Buddhism and Taoism. Thus, myths or objects related to religions are typically perceived as allusions to peace and happiness or as words of advice for their worshippers that only by harboring good thoughts can one receive the favor of the gods. Some of these myths include *Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and *Journey to the West* (Fig. 10).
5. **Literature and Opera:** Scenery narrated in Chinese classic literary works are sculptured and painted on temple walls. These artworks serve as reminders to emulate ancestors and resist the temptation of money and fame. For example, a fresco that illustrates poet Tao Yuanming’s love for chrysanthemum originated from his poem *Return to the Field*, and it allegorically pertains to the importance of detaching oneself from fame and wealth (Fig. 11).
6. **Character and Sign:** Chinese characters are ideographic; each of them carries a meaning. Thus, culturally constructed characters that are symbolic of auspiciousness such as spring (*chun* “春”), luck (*fu* “福”), and wealth (*cai* “財”) are painted or sculptured on temple walls for worshippers to pray for good luck. In addition, religious signs are also employed as auspicious pictorial decorations. For example, the gammadion cross, 卍 (referred to as *wanzi* in Chinese), signifies humanity’s wish for eternal happiness (Fig. 12).

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| <p>Figure 7: The flowers and plants-Lotus flower</p> | <p>Figure 8: The Chinese zodiac-Tiger figure</p> | <p>Figure 9: The historical story-Absolute devotion to my homeland</p> |
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| <p>Figure 10: The fairy story-Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea</p> | <p>Figure 11: The literary work-Return to the Field poem</p> | <p>Figure 12: The religious sign-“卍” (referred to as <i>wanzi</i> in Chinese)</p> |
|  |  |  |

3.02 Signified of auspicious images

Under the Saussurean semiotic system, the signified denotes the mental conception or meaning of a sign (Fiske, 1991). It is the shared understanding or idea of the sender and recipient. Saussure (2011) suggested that the link between the signified and the signifier is arbitrary, and this link is determined not only by the speaker but by the shared experience or knowledge between the speaker and the listener. Thus, once a sign is designated within a linguistic system, it cannot be semantically changed in any way. This is referred to as the semantic formalization of signs. Based on the concept of the signified, eight common auspicious images used to decorate Taiwanese folk religion temples are summarized as follows.

1. **Safety:** As a Taiwanese saying goes, “Being safe and sound is a real blessing.” Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs shows that psychological and physical security is the first priority of people concerning their wellbeing, and safety needs take precedence over other levels of human needs. Thus, when Taiwanese folk religion worshippers go to a temple, they typically pray for the wellbeing of themselves and their family members. Many totems in Taiwanese temples of the natural world (e.g., of an apple, vase, calabash, bat, tangerine, and elephant) signify safety, luck, and auspiciousness.
2. **Success:** The ancient Chinese viewed holding government posts as the greatest personal achievement. To land a job in the state bureaucracy, they were required to pass imperial examinations. This civil service examination system has continued into modern Taiwanese society and inculcated in the society the belief that examination results are the measure of success. In addition, the Taiwanese public typically perceive success as not only the fulfillment of a person’s pursuit but the honor of his or her family. Thus, totems symbolic of “success” and “job prospects” are a common decorative element of Taiwanese folk religion temples, and include deer and the *sheng* (a traditional Chinese musical instrument).
3. **Authority:** Wielding “power” and “dominance,” authority was feared but desired by people of both the Western world and ancient China. Some forms of authority are exclusive only to the imperial or royal family. The Taiwanese have historically followed this tradition to strive for bureaucratic power and expected their offspring to do the same. Auspicious temple images symbolizing desire and respect for authority are typically represented by mythological animals such as the dragon, tiger, and lion.
4. **Wealth:** Taiwan used to be a struggling nation, with its settlers struggling to survive. Their difficult life circumstances begot public desire for wealth; the early Taiwanese desired to become rich to satisfy personal requirements and beget their riches to their descendants. Thus, they drew relevant totems (e.g., of the toad, fragrant tea olive, Japanese pagoda tree, Chinese tree peony, and the hibiscus) on temple structures for worshippers to use to pray for wealth.
5. **Fame:** The Taiwanese highly value the social prestige of their families. Despite their desire for wealth, the early Taiwanese expected their descendants to achieve integrity in the public administration without engaging in any acts that would disgrace their ancestors and to lead a dignified but austere life after leaving office. Auspicious temple images symbolizing fame include the crane, bamboo, lotus, plum, and chrysanthemum.
6. **Marriage:** A Taiwanese saying that “Men and women should all marry upon coming of age” urges people to marry when they reach a suitable age. For the Taiwanese, marriage is a happy event and a milestone during which married couples leave their respective families and establish new ones. Thus, almost every man or woman hopes to find a partner worth spending the rest of his or her life with. Auspicious temple images that symbolizes marriage include the Eurasian magpie, mandarin duck, lily, lute, and psaltery (a traditional Chinese musical instrument).
7. **Fertility:** Fertility is the natural capability of creatures to reproduce. Typically, creatures naturally seek mates to produce offspring with, including humans. The Taiwanese believe that having more children results in having more happiness and that God’s blessings can facilitate sexual reproduction. Thus, many Taiwanese tend to go to a temple to pray for fertility. Taiwanese folk temples have a range of images symbolizing fertility, such as the pomegranate, watermelon, and pumpkin.
8. **Longevity:** People age and eventually die, but many of them desire to live longer. In imperial China, emperors ordered their physicians to develop panaceas, and ascetics lived in seclusion, devoting themselves to creating panaceas. Such folk stories pertain to the Chinese wish for longevity. The early Taiwanese society used various images symbolizing longevity in decorating temples, such as the Siberian crane, turtle, pine tree, peach, and Ganoderma.

4.0 Analysis and Finding

This study investigated the Qingshui Zushi Temple, a nationally renowned folk religion temple in Sanxia District, New Taipei City, in northern Taiwan. Built in 1769 and dedicated to Qingshui Zushi, the temple receives numerous worshippers annually and has a prominent role in the Taiwanese temple community, with the deity of the shrine being widely worshipped in Taiwan. The Qingshui Zushi Temple has been damaged by earthquakes and warfare and undergone three major restorations, the last of which was

overseen in 1947 by Li Mei-shu. A highly regarded artist with considerable ingenuity, Mr. Li drew on traditional Taiwanese construction techniques to reconstruct the temple into an aesthetic shrine with an interior structure that features a vast array of drawings, sculptures, and auspicious images. Finely constructed, exquisitely decorated, and hugely popular among international visitors, the temple is hailed as a “shrine of eastern art” (Fig. 13).

Figure 13: The building exterior and internal engraving of the Qingshui-Zushi Temple in Sanxia (The pictures obtained from Wikipedia)



In this field study, the auspicious images in the Qingshui Zushi Temple, which are presented in the forms of stone, wooden, and bronze sculptures and Koji pottery, were photographed. To minimize the effects of researcher bias on the data analysis, interviews were conducted with five revered local elderly residents to investigate the genuine meanings of the images and the motivations of their creators. With overlapping images excluded, the dataset comprised a total of 126 image samples. The KJ method was subsequently performed to categorize and analyze the samples (Scupin, 1997). The significations, or the combination of the signifier and signified (Bruce-Mitford, 2008), of the images were explicated on the basis of the Saussurean semiotic theory.

The signifiers of the auspicious images of the Qingshui Zushi Temple, which denote the functional aspects of the images, were divided into four categories: symbol, homonymy, polysemy, and “character.” A symbol represents a concept or emotion associated with the physical characteristics of an object. For example, Chinese tree peonies symbolize wealth and bamboos symbolize advancement. Homonymy refers to the semantic borrowing or change of a character that shares the same pronunciation with another character. For example, *juzi* (tangerine) symbolizes *jili* (propitiousness) because the characters *ju* and *ji* have similar pronunciations; and twin lions, or *shuangshih*, homophonically mean that good things come in pairs. Polysemy refers to the semantic replacement or borrowing of a character that shares the same pronunciation with another character. For example, *huaping* (vase) symbolizes *pingan* (safety) because both words share a homophonic character *ping*; and *bianfu* (bat) symbolizes *fuqi* (luck) because both words share a homophonic character *fu*. Character refers to culturally constructed words or human-made signs that are symbolic of auspiciousness. Examples include “*卍*” (*wanzi*) and “*壽*” (*shou* or “longevity”).

The signified of the auspicious images of the Qingshui Zushi Temple, which represent the mental aspects of the images, were divided into four categories: physiological requirements, psychological requirements, political tactics, and religious beliefs. Physiological requirements refers to the requirements related to physical wellbeing, such as fertility, longevity, and health. Psychological requirements refers to the requirements related to mental wellbeing, such as a happy marriage, a fortunate life, and wealth accumulation. Political tactics refers to the requirements related to a person’s involvement in the workplace or political career, such as a job promotion, power attainment, and favorable examination performance. Religious beliefs refers to the requirements related to a person’s religious beliefs, such as worshipping ancestors, favorable weather, and world peace. Based on the findings, a semiotic analysis of the auspicious images of the Qingshui Zushi Temple was conducted and all the signs associated with the images were summarized, with the results shown in Tables 1-3.

Table 1: The auspicious-sign system of animals and plants









| Signifier | Signified | Signification | | Auspicious meaning | Combination of auspicious pattern |
|--|---|--------------------|------------------------|---|---|
| | | Function | Mentation | | |
| Plum blossom Lotus Chrysanthemum Camellia | chaste incorruptible high-hearted unassuming | symbol | psychological needs | Be blessed with peace and safety in all four seasons (Chinese: 四季平安) |  |
| Peony Vase | Riches peaceful | symbol homonymy | psychological needs | Fortune comes with blooming flowers (Chinese: 花開富貴) |  |
| Pine Crane | longevity | symbol | psychological needs | Wish you longevity and health (Chinese: 松鶴遐齡) |  |
| Calabash | happiness and longevity | homonymy | physiological needs | To enjoy both happiness and longevity (Chinese: 福壽雙全) |  |
| Magpie | joyous occasion | polysemy | psychological needs | A happiness appears on the eyebrows (Chinese: 喜上眉梢) |  |
| Pumpkin | descendants | symbol | physiological needs | Have many descendants (Chinese: 子孫滿堂) |  |

Table 2: The auspicious-sign system of deific animals and implements

| Signifier | Signified | Signification | | Auspicious meaning | Combination of auspicious pattern |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|--|---|---|
| | | Function | Mentation | | |
| Dragon Fire-pearl | power auspicious sign | symbol polysemy | political tactics, religious belief | The two dragons are snapping at a pearl (Chinese: 雙龍戲珠) |  |
| Hornless dragon Stove | descendants reunion | polysemy character | physiological needs | The hornless dragons are surrounding furnace (Chinese: 螭虎圍爐) |  |






| | | | | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|--|--|
| Phoenix Unicorn | descendants | symbol | physiological needs | A prosperity brought by the unicorn and the phoenix (Chinese: 麟鳳呈祥) |  |
| Lion Colorful ball | avoid calamity seek luck | symbol charactery | religious belief | The two lions are snapping at a ball (Chinese: 雙獅戲球) |  |
| Eagle Pheasant Lion | Hero Silk banner avoid calamity | homonymy | political tactics | To be a hero wining a silk banner (Chinese: 英雄奪錦) |  |
| Unicorn | descendants | symbol | physiological needs | Lucky unicorn brings child(Chinese: 麒麟 送子) |  |
| Tiger | avoid calamity | symbol | religious belief | To put down a evil thing by deific tigers (Chinese: 陣宅神虎) |  |

Table 3: The auspicious-sign system of animals and implements

| Signifier | Signified | Signification | | Auspicious meaning | Combination of auspicious pattern |
|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--|---|
| | | Function | Mentation | | |
| Soft-shelled turtle | achievement | polysemy | political tactics | To take a high official positions and riches (Chinese: 科 甲連登) |  |
| Vase Elephant | peaceful appearance | homonymy polysemy | religious belief | The world is at peace (Chinese: 太平 有象) |  |
| Bat Stove | good fortune | homonymy | psychological needs | The five blessings descend upon this home (Chinese: 五 福臨門) |  |
| Roost Crown | royal crown | homonymy | political tactics | To achieve success and win recognition (Chinese: 舉冠功名) |  |
| Jackal Ancient coins | wealth | homonymy charactery | psychological needs | Be going to get a lot of wealth (Chinese: 財在眼前) |  |

| | | | | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---|---|
| Deer Ruyi stick | Prosperity wish | homonymy charactery | psychological needs | To take salary and rank rise high (Chinese: 祿位高昇) |  |
| Lion Ancient coins | avoid calamity wealth | symbol charactery | religious belief | Lucky lion brings prosperity and good fortune (Chinese: 祥 獅獻瑞) |  |

5.0 Conclusion

Temples are the spiritual symbol of the Taiwanese. Built by the early Taiwanese, who migrated from China during the Qing dynasty, to practice their religious beliefs, these religious structures have been constructed nationwide. Over time, they have become the locale of cultural activity, folk religion rituals, information exchange, and interpersonal interaction at the local level. In addition, the images of the temples, which the early Taiwanese created to seek psychological comfort and communicate with deities, are not only a form of semiotic communication but a representation of artistry. This study applied semiotic theories to investigate the images of Taiwanese folk religion temples, thereby uncovering the meanings of these images and elucidating the artistic philosophy of the early Taiwanese. The architecture and decoration of Taiwanese folk religion temples embodies the received wisdom that “Any form of artistic expression is inextricably bound with culture.”

Much research on auspicious images has been based on semiotics but lacked a systematic semiotic analysis of the images. Based on semiotics, this study applied grounded theory and ethnography to examine the semiotic meanings of the auspicious images of Taiwanese folk religion temples and identify the functional and mental aspects of these images from the perspective of signification. The functional aspects of the images were predominantly expressed in the form of symbol and homonymy. According to Western rhetoricians, symbols function through metaphorical effects and homonyms through pun effects. Metaphors contain duality, which is the result of the interaction between two inherently different things (Forcevill, 2002). Puns are essentially riddles, which comprise two different things that share a similar pronunciation (Yang, 2015). Overall, although the Eastern and Western cultures are characteristically different, they share much similarity in communication methods.

Regarding the mental aspects of the auspicious images of Taiwanese folk religion temples, the majority of these images were determined to be associated with psychological requirements, as well as physiological requirements. This indicated that the decoration of Taiwanese temples is intended to not only display the architectural features of these religious structures but comfort worshippers and give them mental strength to pursue their life goals. Furthermore, from the perspective of its immigration history, Taiwan was an impoverished nation (dismissed as such by its early rulers) where the early Taiwanese struggled to survive and reproduce. Their financial and procreate wishes corresponded to the levels of safety needs and physiological needs in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Only when physiological and safety needs are met, as Maslow (1943) argued, do other levels of needs become relevant to a person. This explains the preponderance of the auspicious images in Taiwanese folk religion temples, specifically, images that are associated with psychological and physiological requirements.

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