

Semiotic Analysis of Idol Images in China and the Pacific Region: Interpreting Religious and Cultural Beliefs from Visual Art

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RITA_22
December 2024
ISSN: 2340-9711
e-ISSN: 2386-7027

Received: 22-08-2024
Revised: 08-10-2024
Accepted: 15-11-2024
Published: 31-12-2024

Abstract

This study conducts a comparative semiotic analysis of idol images in China and the Pacific region, focusing on the Buddhist Guanyin statue and Buddha statue in China as well as the Fijian Degei idol and Malangan figures in Papua New Guinea. It examines how these idols represent key religious and cultural beliefs, such as compassion, enlightenment, creation, and ancestor worship, in their respective societies. The research employed a qualitative method, using semiotic analysis to interpret visual elements, such as posture, facial expressions, and symbolic gestures. Secondary data were collected from academic papers, books, and visual archives. The findings reveal that Chinese idols emphasize spiritual enlightenment and inner transformation, with a focus on Buddhist values, while Pacific idols highlight themes of creation, ancestral connections, and the interplay between physical and spiritual realms. This study contributes to the existing literature on religious iconography by illustrating how visual art not only reflects but also preserves cultural and spiritual values in these regions. Future research could explore the impact of globalization on the evolving symbolism of traditional idol imagery.

Keywords: Semiotic Analysis, Idol Imagery, Religious Iconography, Cultural Beliefs, Chinese Buddhism, Pacific Ancestor Worship.

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, art has been used to portray the religious and cultural practices of societies across the world. In both China and the Pacific region, the images of idols contain the essential elements of religious, social, and cosmological images¹. As noted by Aiello², the analysis of these images is best approached in terms of semiotics that is, the study of signs and symbols to help decipher and understand their meanings within their respective cultures. Semiotic analysis involves analysing the structures of visual symbols, thereby facilitating an understanding of how societies convey more complex religious and cultural messages through art³.

In China, images related to religion, especially Buddhism, Taoism, and traditional folklore, have been used to represent will, the cosmos, and the spirit realm⁴. According to Köppel-Yang⁵, the semiotic approach is useful for showing how visual religious symbols in Chinese art are interrelated with religious rituals and socio-political factors. Similarly, the Pacific region, where ancestor worship and animism are prevalent, uses idols to portray the images of sacred figures⁶. In both regions, not only is art used to signify devotion to the religion, but it also serves as an intermediary between the worldly and the celestial.

Problem Statement

The religious and cultural beliefs of societies are often reflected in their visual art, particularly idol images. However, there is limited research on the comparative semiotic analysis of idol imagery in China and the Pacific region, two areas with rich and distinct traditions. How these symbols convey deeper cultural, spiritual, and social meanings remains underexplored. This study seeks to address this research gap by analysing the symbolic significance of idol images from both of these regions to reveal their underlying religious and cultural messages.

Objectives of the Study

1. The first objective is to conduct a semiotic analysis of the Buddhist Guanyin statue and Buddha statue in the Longmen Grottoes in China, exploring how these idols symbolize compassion, enlightenment, and religious beliefs in Chinese culture.
2. The second objective is to /perform a semiotic analysis of the Fijian Degei idol and Malangan figures in Papua New Guinea, examining how these Pacific idols represent creation, ancestor worship, and the connection between physical and spiritual realms.

Aims of the Study

This research aims to analyse the religious and cultural references associated with idol images in China and the Pacific region using a semiotic approach. Through the analysis of two prominent idols from each region namely, the Buddhist Guanyin statue and Buddha statue in China as well as the Fijian Degei idol and Malangan figures in Papua New Guinea, this study seeks to uncover the symbolic meanings of these images. Overall, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how visual art reflects and communicates spiritual and cultural values in both regions. While numerous studies have explored religious iconography in individual cultural contexts, there remains a notable lack of comparative semiotic research across non-Western traditions, particularly between regions as distinct as China and the Pacific. Existing literature often isolates symbolic analysis within specific religious systems, overlooking the broader cross-cultural dialogues and evolving meanings these images can convey. This study addresses this research gap by conducting a comparative semiotic analysis of idol imagery, offering a nuanced understanding of how visual art reflects, preserves, and adapts cultural and spiritual beliefs in different societies. In doing so, it contributes to expanding semiotic frameworks beyond predominantly Western models.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Visual Art in Religious and Cultural Expression

Art as a visual form has always been pivotal in the depiction of abstract belief systems, encompassing religious and cultural elements, and icons are often a representation of spiritually oriented values and worldviews⁷. As pointed out by Belting⁸, across different cultures, religious images serve as the bridge between humanity and deities and are widely involved in rites and other religious activities. This implies that idol images are not mere artefacts; rather, they are social actors that participate in religious processes and define the social reality of a given community. However, religious art (including idol imagery) is multifunctional, as opposed to purely religious⁹. For instance, in China, political authorities have always used religious art to support existing social and political systems. This is evident in the manner in which Buddhist and Taoist images were employed in the past to advance political authority and assert political power in Imperial China¹⁰.

In contrast, in the Pacific region, figures and idols such as the Fijian idol and Malangan figures are an inherent part of the spiritual and cultural activities of the people¹¹. According to Hansen¹², these are figures revered as dead individuals and are in use in cultural ceremonies, such as burials and passaging. Thus, while religious art can be instrumentalized in the service of politics, as in China, these images remain essentially religious and fulfil their purpose of strengthening common sentiment and preserving tradition across the Pacific region.

Semiotics as a Method for Analysing Religious Symbols

Semiotic analysis employs a heuristic approach to the interpretation of the symbols of a religion, which enables researchers to analyse how images convey multifaceted spirituality and culture¹³. As pointed out by Mohammed¹⁴, semiotics yields important epistemological knowledge on how signs, such as religious symbols and idols, function within predefined cultural frameworks. Mohammed¹⁴ opines that symbols in religious art represent the culture and belief system of a given society inasmuch as they serve as a channel for proffering meaning within the society. This concept is useful when studying representations of idols that possess religious and cultural subtexts.

However, this approach does not give due consideration to how religious signs function in modern and globalized conditions. According to Domingo, *et al.*¹⁵, semiotic analysis has been concerned with defining a set of consistent meanings relevant to a specific culture; however, this is not valid in the present-day world, which is characterized by constantly shifting meanings across different cultures and periods. Domingo, *et al.*¹⁵'s critique also points out that artefacts such as the idols found in China and the Pacific region do not necessarily have single standardized meanings; instead, meanings are constructed based on one's perception. This calls for a dynamic assessment of the semiological signification of such religious artefacts.

In contrast, Lorusso¹⁶ emphasizes the importance of the formal properties and matter of religious signs. Moreover, Lorusso¹⁶ argues that aspects such as the hue, mixture, and feel of a picture are not merely extraneous to the perceived significance of icons but are fundamental cues in icon decipherment. Interestingly, Lorusso¹⁶'s study demonstrates that semiotic analyses of divine cult sculptures, including idols, must also encompass the vessel's traits to determine how materiality influences emotions and observers. Therefore, semiotics is a suitable and efficient approach to reading religious signs and symbols, as it is capable of incorporating a high-cultural approach alongside the question of what a visual image contributes to the text.

Comparative Studies on Religious Iconography in China and the Pacific Region

A cross-cultural analysis of religious art in China and the Pacific region provides evidence of differences in the symbolism, style, and meaning of art. Confucianist, Taoist, and Buddhist symbols found in China are often associated with moral and philosophical concepts related to balance, reason, and spirituality¹⁷. This is a typical feature of Confucianist and Taoist attitudes to life, in which both the composition and the subjects' poses are centralized and harmonized. This aesthetic is specifically intended to convey the idea of spiritual cleanliness and compliance with other tendencies in Chinese cosmology.

In contrast, Pacific religious representations explicitly pertain to the manifestation of ancestral authority and consolidated group personae. According to Duntley¹⁸, Pacific religious art is generally vivid and graphic when depicting gods, spirits, or natural forces, showing the people's sense of belongingness to the land and their forebears. These icons are less rigid and represent the physical and divine power of the depicted deities, which generally belong to Polynesian and Fijian mythology. While Chinese religious art can be most consonant with the private contemplation they represent, Pacific idols can be clearly used for actual ritual purposes, which denotes their engagement in community activities.

However, both regions are similar in how religious signs and images serve as aids in the transition from the material world to the spiritual one. Wang¹⁹ explains that both Chinese and Pacific religious iconographies have supreme importance in addressing the harmony of the cosmos and society, and despite the disparities, their ways and imports may be mutual. Furthermore, a schematic perception of the associative relations of the chosen motifs differs between Chinese and Pacific religions: the former reflects the metaphysical and ethical program of life, whereas the latter is more concerned with the cycles of life and communication with ancestors. Therefore, the spiritual symbolism of Chinese and Pacific portraits seems to be culturally sensitive and spiritually generalizable.

Literature Gap

Although numerous studies on religious symbolism in China and the Pacific region exist, there is a conspicuous disparity regarding the number of comparative approaches that employ semiotic analysis to uncover latent meanings between these regions. Several previous studies have restricted themselves to analysing religious symbols within their cultural frameworks, and relatively few attempts have been made to cross-culturally compare the use of symbols in visual arts. Furthermore, there is very limited focus on how these traditional symbols undergo transformations in the current world, where global cultural interactions affect their symbolism. The current research intends to fill this gap through a comparative semiotic analysis of idol images from these two regions, with the aim of providing novel insights into how art can play the social and cultural role of reflecting and influencing religious life in two different geographical locations.

Although existing literature provides valuable insights into religious symbolism within Chinese and Pacific traditions individually, there remains limited comparative research that applies semiotic analysis to both contexts simultaneously. Much of the previous work tends to analyse idol imagery within isolated cultural frameworks, without examining how visual elements like posture, facial expressions, and gestures operate across different societies. This study extends the current literature by offering a cross-regional semiotic comparison, focusing on specific visual symbols embedded within religious and social practices. By doing so, it highlights both the universality and cultural specificity of idol imagery, offering a richer, more interconnected understanding.

METHODOLOGY

Overview

This study employs a qualitative research approach focusing on semiotic analysis to interpret symbols in religious idols in China and the Pacific region. Secondary sources, namely academic papers, books, and visual archives, inform the research. The study sample comprises key idols from both regions, and data are collected from multiple academic databases. Semiotic decoding reveals symbolic meanings (see fig. 1).

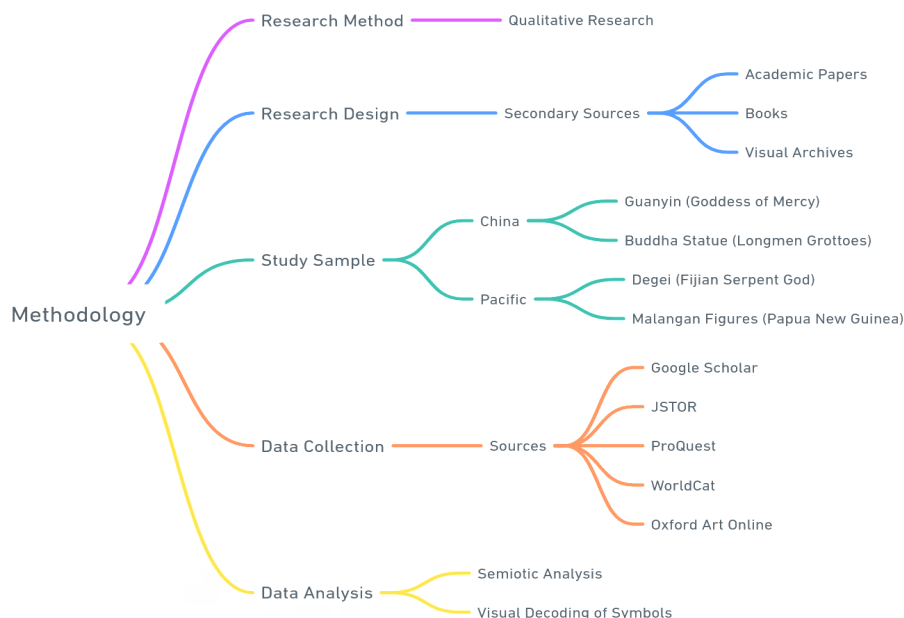


Figure 1: An Overview of the Methodology (Source: Author).

Research Method

A qualitative research approach was employed to understand and analyse the semiotic structures underlying religious and cultural idol images in China and the Pacific region. This method is particularly appropriate as it allows for the interpretation of non-numerical data, including visual signs, symbolic gestures, postures, and ornamentation. Semiotic analysis in this study involved a structured decoding process where visual elements (signifiers) were systematically linked to their underlying cultural and spiritual meanings (signified). Specifically, the study drew upon foundational semiotic theories proposed by Roland Barthes and Charles Peirce, applying concepts such as

denotation, connotation, and icon-index-symbol classifications to the visual data. Each idol image was analysed by first identifying key visual features (e.g., facial expressions, gestures, attire) and then interpreting their associated meanings within their specific cultural and religious contexts. By adopting this methodological framework, the study ensures a consistent and rigorous analysis across all selected idols. As the primary focus was to interpret symbolic meanings rather than quantify observations, a qualitative method proved most suitable.

Research Design

The research design of this study is based on qualitative, secondary-source analysis, focusing on semiotic interpretation of religious and cultural idol images. Secondary data were gathered from existing scholarly research, including academic papers, books, and curated visual archives, selected through a structured search across recognized academic databases. This design allows for a comprehensive synthesis of diverse scholarly perspectives on idol imagery, ensuring the study is grounded in well-established knowledge. The visual materials of the selected idols were analysed through a semiotic coding framework informed by the theories of Barthes and Peirce, enabling systematic identification of visual signifiers and their cultural or spiritual signified. Each idol was examined individually, and findings were subsequently compared across cultural contexts to highlight both unique and shared symbolic meanings. The decision to rely on secondary data was based on the availability of rich, detailed prior research and the need to access visual interpretations recorded in historical, cultural, and anthropological sources. This design ensures analytical depth while maintaining methodological transparency and rigor.

Study Sample

The study sample comprises four key idol images: the Buddhist Guanyin statue and the Buddha statue in the Longmen Grottoes (China), and the Fijian Degei idol and Malangan figures (Pacific region). The selection process involved a targeted secondary research strategy, focusing on literature that critically analysed the visual, cultural, and religious significance of these idols. The primary criteria for inclusion were the idols’ central importance within their respective religious and cultural traditions, their embodiment of core beliefs such as compassion, enlightenment, creation, and ancestor worship and the availability of comprehensive academic and visual documentation. These particular idols were chosen not only for their iconic status but also for their frequent use in religious rituals, social practices, and scholarly discourse. Their established symbolic roles make them well-suited for a comparative semiotic analysis, offering rich layers of meaning to decode. This purposeful sampling approach ensures that the idols analysed represent both region-specific traditions and broader spiritual themes, providing a strong foundation for cross-cultural interpretation.

Data Collection

The secondary data required for this research have been retrieved from different scholarly databases to ensure adequate coverage of the relevant literature. The databases shown in Table 1 have been used to source peer-reviewed articles, books, and other academic resources. These databases offer access to high-quality scholarly publications, which are helpful for the semiotic interpretation of religious and cultural images in the selected idols. From these platforms, this study has collected relevant sources that can provide an overview of the state of existing knowledge and facilitate a systematic literature review of research gaps and future research directions.

Table 1: Databases

Database	Description
Google Scholar	Broad collection of scholarly articles and books
JSTOR	Archive of academic journals, books, and primary sources
ProQuest	Access site for dissertations, theses, and journal articles
WorldCat	Global catalogue of library collections for books and articles
Oxford Art Online	Comprehensive resource for art and iconography studies

Note. Source: Author.

Data Analysis

The semiotic analysis follows a systematic approach in order to decode the visual elements of the selected idols, in line with the study’s objectives. This method breaks down the signifiers (such as posture, facial expressions, gestures, and colours) and interprets their signified meanings (the cultural, spiritual, or social concepts they represent). This process is structured around a coding framework, ensuring that each element is meticulously analysed and linked to relevant cultural meanings.

In analysing the Buddhist Guanyin statue and Buddha statue in the Longmen Grottoes, visual elements such as the statues' calm facial expressions, *mudras* (hand gestures), and simple attire are decoded to reveal how they emphasize compassion, enlightenment, and the rejection of materialism in Chinese Buddhism. Similarly, the analyses of the Fijian Degei idol and Malangan figures in Papua New Guinea focus on their serpent form, raised arms, and geometric patterns, which symbolize creation, protection, ancestor worship, and the connection between physical and spiritual realms in Pacific cultures. Each idol is examined through a semiotic coding framework (fig. 2). This ensures consistency in decoding the symbols and comparing the cultural significance across regions. This method ensures that the analysis is not only general and abstract but also takes into account cultural differences, thereby enabling a comparison between how Chinese and Pacific idols portray the different religious beliefs and values in these regions.

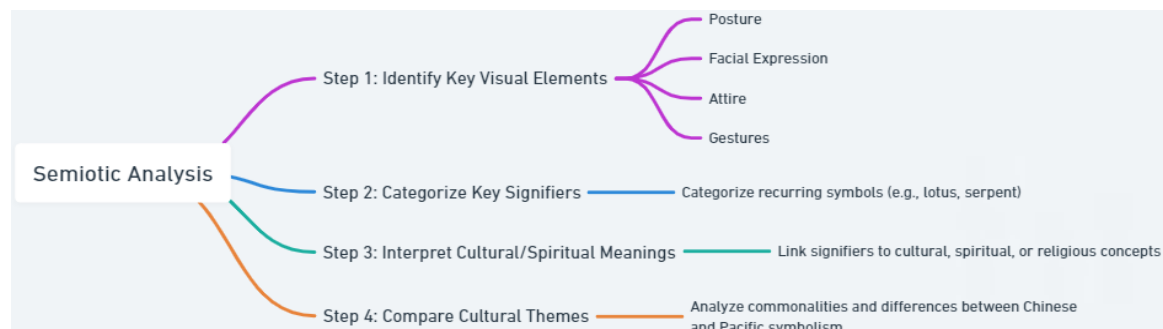


Figure 2: Semiotic Analysis Steps and Coding Framework (Source: Author).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Semiotic Analysis of The Buddha Statue in The Longmen Grottoes

The Buddha statue in the Longmen Grottoes is a powerful visual representation of Chinese Buddhist beliefs and conveys deep symbolic meaning through its artistic elements. Using semiotic analysis, the following interpretation breaks down the visual components (the signifiers) and connects them to the underlying spiritual and cultural meanings (the signified).



Figure 3: The Buddha Statue in the Longmen Grottoes (Longmen Caves)²⁰

Signifiers

- **Facial Expression**

The Buddha has a passive facial expression that evokes the image of a man at ease and in deep meditation, which symbolizes contentment. According to Mitchell²¹, passive expressions in Buddhist statues reflect a state of tranquillity and detachment associated with meditation. They are quite subtle, and the lack of a glaring aggression in the posture seems to embody the Buddhist concept of the path to *nirvana*.

- **Posture**

The Buddha in fig. 3 is portrayed with high energy, self-confidence, and a commanding stance, representing the invincibility of the spirit. This posture indicates that the Buddha is strong and ready to lead people toward enlightenment and liberation. As Trainor²² mentions, such postures in Buddhist art symbolize spiritual authority and the readiness to guide others.

- **Mudra (Hand Gestures)**

The right hand is closed in front of the statue; this is likely the *abhaya mudra* (fearlessness), as the palm's outer surface faces outward. This symbolizes protection, assurance, and calmness, suggesting that the Buddha protects people and liberates them from fear. The *abhaya mudra* is frequently highlighted in Buddhist semiotic studies, in which it signifies fearlessness and reassurance.

- **Ornamentation and Attire**

While other gods have opulent attire and tools, the Buddha is clad in simple attire to symbolize the rejection of wealth and the religious virtue of non-attachment. His robe is stylized and free in movement, signifying the acknowledgment of humility and the Buddhist's dream of a simple mass.

- **Lotus Pedestal**

The statue is most often represented as a standing or seated figure on a lotus, which is typical in Buddhist mythology. The lotus is linked with purity, spiritual awakening, and divinity because, although it is born in waters that are considered unclean, it rises above the water surface to blossom, illustrating the Buddha's capability of escaping the impurities of the world. As Lin²³ describes, the lotus in Buddhist art is a symbol of spiritual elevation and enlightenment, reflecting the purity of the mind.

Signified Meanings

- **Compassion and Enlightenment**

The serene and relaxed appearance of the Buddha represents mercy. As Cooper²⁴ notes, these calm expressions often symbolize inner peace and compassion in Buddhist art. It helps reinforce that people can be liberated through love and kindness. These characteristics make the Buddha appear approachable, which aligns with his role as a teacher of peace.

- **Spiritual Authority and Guidance**

Essentially, the position of the statue highlights the subject's spiritual leadership, confidence, and stability. This implies that Buddhism possesses the ability to help its followers attain enlightenment, given that the central deity in the religion is the Buddha. According to Lin²³, the statue's posture often signifies spiritual wisdom and authority, serving as a guiding force for Buddhist practitioners on their path to enlightenment. This represents the power of spiritual wisdom and the Buddha as a guardian of those who practice Buddhist teachings.

- **Protection and Reassurance**

The *abhaya mudra* is a *mudra* meant to impart fearlessness or reassurance to the beholder. It reassures followers that the Buddha is there for them to shield them from gloom and to comfort them in their belief system. The gesture is entirely unthreatening, and the arm outstretched with the finger pointed upward conveys the message of safety and freedom from any form of darkness. As Adams²⁵ highlights, this *mudra* is commonly used in Buddhist iconography to signify protection and reassurance.

- **Purity and Transcendence**

The lotus, which is included at the base or in images of the Buddha, is one of the prominent symbols of purity. It symbolizes undergoing various trials and tribulations and subsequently emerging out of them and overcoming all forms of worldly temptations to attain a state of spiritual enlightenment. This depicts the journey that the Buddha went through as he tried to attain enlightenment and how he was able to overcome worldly vices. As highlighted by Luo, and Kozicz²⁶, the lotus in Buddhist art represents spiritual transcendence and purity. Therefore, the artistic features of the Buddha statue in the Longmen Grottoes symbolize major concepts of Buddhism, including compassion, protection, authority, and purity. In the semiotic analysis of these components, the way these idols represent culturally pervasive religious concepts in Chinese Buddhism emerges.

Semiotic Analysis of The Buddhist Guanyin Statue In China

The Buddhist Guanyin statue depicts one of the most popular deities in Chinese Buddhism: the *bodhisattva* associated with compassion, referred to as Guanyin. Based on the semiotic analysis, it can be concluded that this statue represents benevolence, spirituality, and clemency in Chinese culture and reflects the corresponding principles of Chinese Buddhism.



Figure 4: The Buddhist Guanyin Statue ²⁷

Signifiers

- **Facial Expression**

Guanyin's face, as shown in fig. 4, appears austere in a pardoning manner, denoting the mercy attribute associated with this *bodhisattva*. The lips exude a sort of gentle compassion, which aligns with Guanyin's responsibility to listen to the appeals of the world. As Phuong, and Van Dung²⁸ point out, such expressions in Buddhist art symbolize the *bodhisattva's* role in responding to humanity's suffering.

- **Posture**

The position of the leg that is drawn back and the positioning of the hand signify comfort and friendliness. Although it seems to reflect more conventional realistic representations of deities, such a relaxed position underlines Guanyin's focus on humanity; it brings her close to people and makes the concept of compassion seem comforting. Palmer, *et al.*²⁹ emphasize that this posture conveys Guanyin's accessibility and her role as a compassionate guide for humanity.

- **Attire**

The clothing is light, with long hems and few patterns. The imagery shows characters with their legs covered; "modest" is an understatement. Gods and goddesses are typically depicted in fancy garments. Thus, Guanyin's plain clothing strongly highlights the message of the nonmaterialistic pursuit of the spiritual. As noted by Xu³⁰, the simplicity of Guanyin's attire reflects the Buddhist virtue of detachment from material wealth.

- **Hand Gesture**

The right hand placed lightly on the knee likely signifies calmness and protection in this context. This positioning indicates that Guanyin is always available to help and guide those who seek her help, thus denoting the eternal compassion of a goddess.

- **Crown and Headdress**

The crown, which has a small figure of the Buddha, shows that Guanyin is related to enlightenment and wisdom. This adds to the understanding that Guanyin is both kind and wise; she herself has been enlightened and is helping others achieve the same state. According to Chien³¹, crowns in Buddhist iconography often symbolize divine wisdom, further highlighting Guanyin's role in guiding others toward enlightenment.

Signified Meanings

- **Compassion and Mercy**

Guanyin is a figure in Chinese Buddhism who represents compassion. The calm facial expression, mild eye contact, and welcoming body language highlight her essential characteristic of being caring. As Meulenbeld³² explains, Guanyin is depicted as the embodiment of compassion, responding to the cries of the suffering. She is said to listen to those who are in pain in the world and help unconditionally. Thus, she is associated with hope for those who are in pain.

- **Accessibility and Enlightenment**

The comparatively casual and informal positioning of the figure indicates Guanyin's easy availability and accessibility. This, in the context of the opportunities to become a *bodhisattva* and thus attain spiritual salvation and *nirvana*, suggests that the given message is universal. According to Dobbins³³, such postures in Buddhist art indicate divine figures' closeness to ordinary people, symbolizing compassion and wisdom in daily life. Guanyin's simple standing position gives observers the idea that compassion and wisdom cannot be separated from reality since they can be achieved and emulated in everyday life.

- **Spiritual Guidance**

The direction of the hand and the physical body shows that Guanyin is an ideal guide toward enlightenment, which is further supported by the depiction of the Buddha in her crown. This image on the crown symbolizes enlightenment passing from the Buddha to Guanyin, who, in turn, guides others to enlightenment. Twist³⁴ highlights that crowns in Buddhist art often symbolize the divine transmission of wisdom and spiritual authority. Even Guanyin's stance and hand position underscore her willingness to answer the pain of the world, thus strengthening the mantle of protector assigned to her. Therefore, the presented Chinese Buddhist Guanyin statue reflects the main principles of Chinese Buddhism, namely empathy, the availability of divine help, and spiritual teaching, through the expression on the statue's face, the plain and unpretentious attire, and the positioning of the hands.

Semiotic Analysis of The Fijian Degei Idol

The Fijian Degei idol is an important deity in Fijian mythology a serpent god who is the creator of the Fiji Islands and its people. Degei can be considered as both the maker and the judge; thus, he lies at the heart of the Fijian universe, carrying connotations of creation, ancestor veneration, and the connection between physical and spiritual realms. Based on this semiotic approach, this section seeks to understand how the visual as well as symbolic nature of the Fijian Degei idol bears such deep cultural and religious significance.



Figure 5: The Fijian Degei Idol (Serpent God), Degei The Snake God ³⁵

Signifiers

• Serpent Form

Degei's serpent shape, as illustrated in fig. 5, is the most important feature of the idol. Many cultures consider serpents as a motif symbolizing creation, transformation, and the cyclic process of life, death, and rebirth. According to Fijian legends, Degei has the shape of a serpent, suggesting that he is the founder of the Fijian islands and the first inhabitants. As noted by Nalesu³⁶, his snake body signifies fertility, growth, and nature's endless processes of creation. In addition, the coiled posture of the idol underlines the themes of protection and preparedness. The snake form also shows a readiness to strike, which represents the side of Degei that guards the Fijian people to ensure their safety.

• Eyes and Expression

Degei's large yellow-golden eyes distinctly establish him as an all-knowing character and a judge. The piercing gaze represents his ability to oversee the actions of living creatures. The fire in his eyes indicates that he is the defender and the avenger of his people, depending on their moral conduct. Furthermore, the serpent tongue is partially protruding from the mouth, representing both wisdom and speech. In this context, the tongue means Degei's mouth or capability to induce spirits to speak to Fijians. This trait underlines his role as a spiritual guide and a person who gives a moral perspective to events.

• Ornamentation

The Fijian Degei idol has beautiful golden ornaments, such as earrings, bracelets, and a crown. These attributes function as signifiers of his divinity and spirituality. Furthermore, these golden ornaments signify mastery over the material world as well as the otherworldly one; they also refer to the riches he extends to his devotees. According to White³⁷, such ornamentation in Pacific deities symbolizes both divine authority and protection. In addition, the crown has curves and ornaments; this supports Degei's role as a king, not only in the physical sense but also in the supernatural one. The crown, which transforms him from a simple protector, also implies that he controls life, death, and even the afterlife.

Signified Meanings

• Creation and Origins

Degei, who takes the form of a serpent for the most part, translates the basic wisdom of creation as featured in Fijian culture. Degei is reputed to have formed the islands and created the first human beings on the earth. His coiled figure implies creation; namely, through movement, he breathed life into the land and its inhabitants. According to Torri³⁸, serpents are often symbolizing of fertility and creation in Pacific mythologies. Although the concept of serpents as a fertility symbol is also present in this regard, the main aspect here points to Degei as the nourisher and defender of life.

• Ancestor Worship and Spiritual Connection

Degei's vigilant eyes are always watching the Fijian people, which also has implications regarding his role in identifying ancestors for worship. Fijians have strong bonds between the living and the dead, and as shown through the entire story, Degei fulfils this role. He serves as an intermediary between the living people and the spirits of the dead, thereby emphasizing the continuous existence of ancestors as a part of people's lives. As noted by Abramson³⁹, such symbols are crucial in connecting spiritual realms with everyday life in Fijian culture. The gold ornaments and holy aura further emphasize Degei's role in ancestor worship. Fijian people say prayers and make sacrifices to Degei not only to propitiate him but also and most importantly to appease the spirits of their ancestors whom Degei personifies.

• Moral Authority and Judgment

From the Old Testament, it is known that Degei looks determined and even dangerous, which is emphasized by his glare and the position of his serpent body. The fact that he is kind and gentle but also fearsome and acts to punish the people of Fiji is in line with the Fijian belief that deified power is twofold. His power to offer vengeance or benevolence, depending on people's ethical behaviours, makes him iconic to Fijian ethical existence, as he enforces the correct behaviours dictated by Fijian elders. Cox, *et al.*⁴⁰ argue that Pacific deities often embody both protection and retribution, shaping societal behaviour through divine judgments. Everything, from the crown to the jewellery, shows that Degei has the power to bless or curse. Thus, he is a figure of finality in terms of spiritual growth and forgiveness.

Semiotic Analysis of the Malangan Figures in Papua New Guinea

The Malangan figures in Papua New Guinea are central to the rituals that are part of the community's rites of passage, burial rituals, and ways of connecting the living with the spirits of ancestors as well as Malangan spirits. Overall, this

sculpture represents creation myths as well as a preoccupation with ancestor worship and the cycle of life and death. A semiotic analysis of the figure reveals how its visual elements (the signifiers) convey these deeper cultural meanings (the signified).



Figure 6: A Malangan Figure in Papua New Guinea, Tribal & Oceanic Art ⁴¹

Signifiers

- **Facial Expression and Head**

The large facial features, especially the open mouth and bared teeth, displayed in fig. 6 symbolize power, authority, and communication with the world beyond the mortal realm. The open mouth may denote chanting or perhaps calling for the spirits of ancestors during the aforementioned ceremonies. As observed by Kivori⁴², such features in Melanesian art often represent spiritual communication. Furthermore, complex designs painted on the face and body refer to social status, specific clans, and ancestors' lineages, in addition to connecting the figure with specific spirits of the tribal tradition. In Melanesian cultures, the head is held sacred and linked with spiritual force, which highlights the role of the head in directing the flow of ancestral force.

- **Arms and Gesture**

The figure's arms are raised, and this can be understood as an invitation for the spirits of ancestors to join the living during the ritual. This gesture is also one of protection and guidance; in essence, the ancestors are embracing the community through this spiritual show. The open stance is associated with the visibility and relevance of the ancestors in the present; these ancestors are presented not only as passive spirits but also as active participants in people's lives.

- **Colour and Ornamentation**

Red and black are normally associated with power, whereas white reflects purity. Black is also often used to symbolize danger. In addition, red symbolizes life and energy, white symbolizes spirits, and black symbolizes death and the other side. When combined, these colours depict the recurring process of life and death, which is evident in Malangan customs and traditions. The geometric patterns and colours also help distinguish cultural identity; each specific pattern can be attributed to certain families or clans and may be representative of them and their lineage.

Signified Meanings

- **Ancestor Worship**

The specific emotions conveyed by the faces and hands of the Malangan figures utilized in dance reflect their functions in ancestor rituals as mediatory spirits. Through such figures, the living can pay their dues to their ancestors, who offer protection and guidance in return. According to Wibowo, and Mahardika⁴³, the intricate designs on these figures represent people's social connections and spiritual relationships with their ancestors. The patterns convey the ongoing presence of ancestral spirits. They also amplify the notions of lineal and social relationships, as the patterns formed convey the existence of connections with the spirits of ancestors in Azure.

• Connection between Physical and Spiritual Realms

The figures' posture and colours represent the continuity between this world and the otherworld. These are not mere dolls or statistics on the wall; rather, they are the real representatives of the Malangan people coming to life during rituals to ensure that they are still a part of society. As noted by Aime Yambisang⁴⁴, the figures embody the local creation myths and serve as icons linking the earthly realm to the spiritual one, emphasizing the interplay between both worlds. Thus, the figures depicted on the Malangan weavings from Papua New Guinea possess both rich semiotic and symbolic meanings as icons of the local creation myth, ancestor cult, and even the relationship between the earthly realm and the otherworldly one.

Comparative Semiotic Analysis of Chinese and Pacific Idols

Comparing Chinese and Pacific idol images, the semiotic analysis demonstrates that the images have similarities but differ culturally. The Buddhist Guanyin statue and Buddha statue in the Longmen Grottoes in China illustrate certain abstract beliefs of Buddhism, including compassion, enlightenment, and spiritual power. The facial expressions are relaxed, and the clothes are simple; this denotes a lack of desire and mental calm, which are the main principles of Buddhism. As Behrendt⁴⁵ notes, the *abhaya mudra* in the Buddha statue symbolizes protection and fearlessness, while Guanyin's stance indicates compassion and spiritual guidance. These figures represent the aspiration of the Buddhist way of attaining *nirvana*, and the positive messages depicted in the artwork emulate the Buddhist teachings on embrace love, benevolence, and moral conduct. Both depict individual spiritual transformation as a key concept and the instruction that comes from holy leaders.

The Pacific idols, namely the Fijian Degei idol and Malangan figures in Papua New Guinea, represent creation, ancestor worship, and the connection between physical and spiritual realms. Degei, as a serpent, is a symbol of fertility, protection, and rebirth, as well as life and death, which can be said to make him a creator and a destroyer⁴⁶. Similarly, Malangan figures serve as the intercessor between the living and the spirits of the dead, demonstrating the relevance of the spirit world in the daily lives of Pacific people. These idols are relevant to people's relationships in the community, with an emphasis on ancestors, who are believed to have continued influence on their lineage⁴⁷. While the Chinese idols portray their concern with self-identified salvation and ethical behaviour, the Pacific idols depict concerns about ancestor worship and communal relationships with supernatural forces; this demonstrates how different cultural systems employ iconography to articulate their religious and social beliefs.

This study extends existing semiotic frameworks by emphasizing the dynamic and culturally embedded nature of non-Western religious iconography. While classical semiotic analyses, such as those by Barthes and Peirce, primarily focused on Western visual traditions, the findings in this study demonstrate that signifiers and signified in Chinese and Pacific idol imagery operate within distinct cosmological, social, and spiritual systems. In contrast to prior research, which often approached religious iconography through a universalist lens, this study highlights the need for culturally sensitive semiotic models that acknowledge localized meanings, such as ancestor veneration in the Pacific or spiritual transcendence in Chinese Buddhism. Furthermore, by decoding the idols' visual elements within their specific socio-religious contexts, the study challenges the assumption that semiotic codes are static across cultures. Instead, it reveals that idol imagery functions as an evolving medium of spiritual and communal communication, reshaping semiotic theory to better accommodate non-Western perspectives. These findings not only deepen the understanding of semiotic processes within non-Western religious art but also provide a foundation for a broader discussion on the cultural and theoretical implications of idol imagery, which the following section explores in greater detail.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study, which highlight the symbolic significance of idol images in China and the Pacific region, align closely with existing research on the cultural and spiritual roles of visual art in these contexts. The semiotic analysis has demonstrated how idol images, such as the Buddhist Guanyin statue and Buddha statue as well as the Fijian Degei idol and Malangan figures, serve not only as religious artefacts but also as conduits of cultural identity and community values. The findings are in line with Boretz⁴⁸'s work, in which he highlights the interconnections of religious symbols and performance in Chinese artworks⁴⁸. Thus, the aesthetics of these idols indicate their cultural significance in various ritual contexts, emphasizing that visual art is a compelling means of articulating intricate spiritual notions. This contributes to this study's results, as the findings indicate how the Buddhist Guanyin statue and Buddha statue represent compassion and enlightenment, respectively. In addition, Dundon⁴⁹ describes the role of

idols within Pacific communities: they are still vital for sustaining a connection and cultural identity. This is reflected in this study's findings, which establish that the Fijian Degei idol and Malangan figures are depicted as significant symbols of creation and ancestor veneration.

The findings are also in accordance with Arca⁵⁰'s assertion that religious art depicts both religious spirituality and the politics of power. This duality is particularly noticeable in the semiotic analysis of the Buddha's facial expression, which reconciles a stance of passive benevolence with active authority regarding Buddhist teachings. Similarly, the analysis presented in this study reveals how the visual aspect of the Fijian Degei idol symbolizes protection and morality while also highlighting the inherent contradictions in religious art. Furthermore, these observations explain the findings of Mackley-Crump⁵¹, who points out the role of look and feel in presenting philosophical concepts and beliefs in relation to religious murals and paintings. In China, religious artworks depict morality and philosophical tenets, whereas the religious aspects of Pacific Islander art concern the spirits of the dead, as demonstrated by Mackley-Crump⁵¹. These perspectives support the conclusion of the current study, suggesting that there are certain major themes that apply to the idol images of both regions, although these themes are different from one another.

Finally, the findings are also in line with Lorusso¹⁶'s claim regarding the visibility that shapes the ways religious signs are semiotised. The detailed descriptions of the visual aspects of the idol images used in this research show how body positioning, facial expressions, adorning decoration, and other enhancements play a vital role in the spiritual and cultural narratives related to these idols. Hence, the findings support the recognition of form as an indispensable factor for analysis in religious art. In conclusion, according to the findings of this study, the functions of idol images in China and the Pacific region entail embodying various forms of culture and spirit as well as reflecting and constructing cultural and spiritual identities.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the symbolic significance of idol images in China and the Pacific region through a comparative semiotic analysis, revealing the intricate relationship between visual art and cultural beliefs. By employing a qualitative research method focused on semiotic analysis, the study has effectively unravelled the layers of meaning embedded in four prominent idol images: the Buddhist Guanyin statue and Buddha statue in China as well as the Fijian Degei idol and Malangan figures in the Pacific region. Therefore, the semiotic analysis used in this study offers a solid theoretical grounding for engaging with the visuals of these idols and for understanding how art conveys culture in an intricate manner. The concept of signifying is highly intertwined, enabling key signifiers such as posture, facial expressions, and ornamentation to be identified and directly related to the signified value within each cultural framework. The study reveals that these idol images are not only symbols of spiritual concepts but also emblems of cultural and community standards. Specifically, it explains how the meanings of the Buddhist Guanyin statue and Buddha statue represent compassion and enlightenment, two eternal principles of Buddhism, thus underlining how these values remain essential to Chinese individuals. The Fijian Degei idol and Malangan figures have been illustrated to depict creation, ancestor cult, and cosmology in relation to life and death in the context of Pacific cultures.

In conclusion, this study advances the existing knowledge base on religious iconography through a comparison between idol images in China and the Pacific region. It is in this context that the social and spiritual aspects of culture interrelate, depicting how societies function and communicate their values through art. Future studies could follow and further develop these observations by investigating modern interpretations of such symbols, especially in the globalized community. Thus, this analysis paves the way for more research on how art, culture, and spirituality continue to evolve in response to new challenges in an increasingly complex world.

LIMITATIONS

One of the limitations of this study is that it relies largely on secondary sources, which can be assumed to not provide an exhaustive listing of various contemporary interpretations of idol images. Moreover, this study focuses only on four specific idols in China and the Pacific region and thus does not capture the full spectrum of the idols present in these regions. Furthermore, semiotic analysis is rather subjective in the sense that it may elicit different meanings depending on the bias of the researcher as well as their cultural background. Thus, it is possible that future research could variegate and enrich the interpretations of the study subjects.

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