

Semiotic Analysis of Visual Symbol Reconstruction in Chinese Installation Art: Interpreting Daoist Thanatology through Works by Xu Bing, Cai Guoqiang, and Gu Wenda.

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Abstract

Driven by the imperatives of globalization, contemporary Chinese installation art increasingly mobilizes the structural transmutation of indigenous Eastern philosophies to forge globally resonant visual narratives¹. This study conducts a semiotic analysis of Visual Symbol Reconstruction (VSR) in Chinese installation art, focusing on Gu Wenda's United Nations—The Great Wall of Blood and Flesh, Cai Guoqiang's Sky Ladder, and Xu Bing's Background Story. Addressing the lack of systematic semiotic methodologies in existing scholarship, this research constructs a conceptual framework of VSR by employing Roland Barthes' second-order semiological system to interpret how Daoist philosophies of death are encoded into visual form. Data were collected through direct observation and literature analysis. The analysis indicates that these artists reconstruct philosophical concepts through the material properties of their works: Gu Wenda integrates human hair with the form of the Great Wall to construct a myth of "Way of nature"; Cai Guoqiang's ascending gunpowder imagery visualizes the "State of unity," linking the earthly realm with the celestial through the simultaneity of destruction and creation; and Xu Bing's manipulation of discarded materials and light-shadow relations embodies the principle of "Way of non-action," revealing the nature of reality through the interaction between illusion and existence. This study advances visual culture studies by unpacking a critical mechanism: the Material-Semiotic Transmutation through which contemporary installation art preserves and regenerates traditional spiritual values.

Keywords: Semiotic Analysis, Chinese installation art, Visual symbol reconstruction,, Daoist thanatology, Cultural Regeneration, Materiality.

INTRODUCTION

For the past few decades, contemporary installation art has globally emerged as an important medium for formulating philosophical reflection and reforming cultural identity. Within the evolving context of Chinese contemporary art, the creative practices of Gu Wenda, Cai Guoqiang, and Xu Bing are widely regarded as demonstrating a profound intrinsic resonance with traditional Daoist thanatology, with their works vividly reflecting core ontological concepts such as the “State Of Unity” “Way Of Nature,” and “Way Of Non-action”². There is substantial academic rationale for choosing the representative practices of these three artists as the analysis focus. On one hand, their large - scale installation works, e.g., *United Nations* and *Sky Ladder*, go beyond the boundaries of traditional two - dimensional media. They generate highly sensorial and immersive spatial settings, converting the act of viewing into embodied phenomenological participation. This gives an ideal physical area for rigorous in - situ semiotic analysis³. Meanwhile, leading international art institutions, such as the Guggenheim, have systematically examined their works. This has led to the collection of extensive visual and documentary resources with strong empirical value⁴.

Despite the wide recognition of the Daoist spiritual underpinnings in these avant - garde artistic practices in academic discourse, existing scholarship mostly stays at the level of broad thematic description or individual material appraisal. A systematic theoretical framework able to interpret their deeper operational logic is still not available. To put it specifically, current studies have not clearly illustrated the mechanisms of Visual Symbol Reconstruction (VSR) by which artists change highly abstract ancient beliefs into material forms perceptible to contemporary audiences. This methodological shortcoming directly causes scholars to have problems systematically decoding, at the micro - structural level, how traditional philosophy undergoes a semiotic change in contemporary installation art, from a “purely physical signifier” to a “contemporary cultural myth”. Some research has demonstrated the critical worth of semiotics for analyzing the socio - political dimensions of Chinese avant - garde art⁵, but an integrated semiotic investigation of deeper ontological transformation mechanisms is still remarkably absent.

As pointed out by Castaldi⁶, the most efficient way to decode the operation of signs in particular cultural and visual representations is through strict semiotic analysis. As installation art depends a great deal on material transformation and conceptual metaphor, traditional generalized classifications of signs, such as Peirce’s logic - centered model emphasizing icons and indices, usually fail to offer sufficient explanation for complex ideological constructions. By way of contrast, Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory supplies a very specific analytical framework for the present study. Artists like Gu Wenda and Cai Guoqiang take the generation, deconstruction, and regeneration of signs as a main driving force in their creative activities. Structurally, this mode of practice shows a close correspondence to Barthes’ second - order signification system of signifier (form) – signified (concept) – myth (signification)⁷. So, the introduction of Barthes’ theoretical framework is an important way to figure out how abstract Daoist beliefs are turned into contemporary visual codes.

In light of this background, the present study aims to make use of Roland Barthes’ semiotic analysis framework to precisely identify and examine the specific operational mechanisms of Visual Symbol Reconstruction (VSR) in Chinese contemporary installation art. The research examines in depth how physical-level signifiers—such as biological human hair, gunpowder with immense destructive energy, and everyday household waste—undergo complex processes of symbolization, transforming into signified concepts that embody philosophical principles such as “Way of Nature,” the “Way of Non-Action,” and the “The state of unity,” ultimately constructing a mythological system of contemporary Daoist thanatology. Based on this, the study aims to extract and develop a conceptual framework of VSR, defined as Material–Semiotic Transmutation. By handling the methodological gap in visual translation mechanisms, this research not only tries to clarify the specific semiotic means by which ancient Daoist principles present in modern material forms but also wants to give a substantial theoretical contribution to understanding how traditional spiritual values are preserved and culturally regenerated within the globalized vocabulary of contemporary art.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research On Visual Symbol Reconstruction in Installation Art

Visual Symbol Reconstruction (VSR) makes up a core theoretical basis in the field of contemporary visual culture and semiotics. In recent academic investigations, the analysis of visual symbols has changed from regarding images

as static visual forms to understanding them as active players in the creation of cultural meaning. Under the strong influence of social semiotics, this paradigm shift proposes that visual elements are recontextualized constantly to convey emerging sociocultural values ⁸. In the specific context of contemporary art, VSR functions as a structural scheme. Artists deliberately handle signs and their material forms by it to generate new ideological narratives or break the existing cultural myths ⁸. Since contemporary art work has grown from two - dimensional surfaces to multisensory physical settings, the scope of VSR operation has correspondingly broadened to take in spatiality and materiality deeply. In the world of contemporary installation art, the physical medium is a primary semiotic resource. Recent research on the visual semiotics of contemporary artists shows that physically adapting space and material can directly link up with viewers' emotions and memories, making abstract cultural themes into tangible, spatialized visual stories ⁹. As a result, establishing VSR as the main analytical perspective and carrying out an in - depth semiotic examination of it gives a reliable methodological path to understand how traditional philosophical concepts acquire modern significance.

Once the general operational logic of the VSR mechanism is established, a look at how Chinese contemporary installation art interacts with traditional philosophy shows it represents a peak expression of this reconstructive process. In academic exchanges, it's well - accepted that Gu Wenda, Cai Guoqiang, and Xu Bing are leading players in this field ¹⁰. They've managed to convert traditional Chinese aesthetics into an internationally resonant visual language (See Table 1). However, a review of the scholarly literature from the past decade (2015–2025) indicates that although VSR has been widely applied to analyze aesthetic and sociocultural transformations across contemporary visual media ⁸, a significant methodological gap remains in its systematic application to deeper ontological frameworks—particularly the transformation of Daoist thanatology. Existing discussions usually center on the “Chineseness” of the works or posthumanist biopolitics, leading to a sociological narrative that often masks ontological inquiry. For example, in their recent anthropological study, Klotz¹¹ interpret Gu Wenda's use of human hair primarily as a form of “sensory skin” that transcends racial boundaries, emphasizing its metaphorical relation to hybridized genetic identities in a globalized context. In a comparable way, recent critiques of Cai Guoqiang's gunpowder art frequently focus on the contemporary discord between “visual spectacle” and ecological ethics ^{5,12}. When it comes to Xu Bing, existing research mostly zeroes in on the ecological critique of consumerism shown in his use of discarded materials ¹³. These mainly macro - sociological viewpoints often neglect how key Daoist concepts, like the “equivalence of life and death,” “governance through non - action,” and “Dao follows nature,” are re - encoded by means of the specific physical properties of materials. In this way, scholars are yet to obtain a micro - level understanding of how traditional philosophy goes through a semiotic shift in contemporary installation art, moving from material signifier to cultural legend.

Table 1: Justification for the Leadership of Gu, Cai, and Xu

Dimension	Core Action ----->	Global Resonance
Media	Reconstructing the material signifier	Broaden the boundaries of global contemporary art ⁷ .
Philosophy	Visualizing the Ontology of Taoism	Break through the cultural cognitive barriers between the East and the West ¹⁴ .
Authority	Intervene in the top-tier curatorial system	Establish a world-class position in art history ⁵ .

To bridge this gap in clarifying the “material–philosophical” transformation mechanism, an analytical framework with strong explanatory power needs to be introduced. In view of the degree to which installation art depends on phenomenological experiences of materiality, notable differences surface in the applicability of existing semiotic models.

The comparative analysis in Table 2 shows that even if Ferdinand de Saussure's binary model functions effectively in linguistic frameworks, it is prone to the so - called “linguistic trap,” making it tough to capture the material agency beyond language in installation art. The logical semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, formed by the triadic classification of icon, index, and symbol, gives a dependable system of logical categorization. Still, its pragmatic - focused approach lacks a critical mechanism to expose ideological myth. This limitation restricts its capacity to fully analyze how Daoist ontology is reconstructed as a form of contemporary cultural intervention ¹⁴. In contrast, the two - order semiological system put forward by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* shows the highest degree of theoretical compatibility. By using Barthes' model, it is possible to precisely decode how the material form of an installation receives and encloses particular conceptual meanings from Daoist thanatology, thereby turning physical

substance into a cultural myth with traditional ontological value^{7,15}. Relying on Barthes’ well - matched theoretical system, the study constructs the all - encompassing conceptual framework of Visual Symbol Reconstruction (VSR) guiding the entire analysis.

Table 2: Comparative Justification of Semiotic Frameworks. (Source: Author)

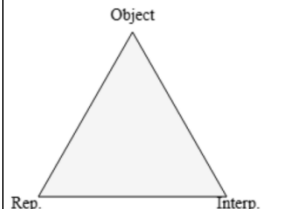
F. de Saussure 	LIMITATION: The Linguistic Trap Saussure’s binary model operates effectively within linguistic systems but fails to account for the “Material Agency” of installation art. Contemporary critics argue that structuralism ignores the phenomenological experience of materials (e.g., gunpowder and human hair) essential to Daoist aesthetics¹⁶				
C.S. Peirce 	LIMITATION: The Logical Constraint Peirce provides a robust taxonomy (Icon/Index/Symbol) for logical deduction. However, his pragmatism lack!the critical mechanism to expose “ideological myths”. It cannot fully explain how Daoist philosophy is reconstructed as a cultural intervention¹⁴				
Roland Barthes’ Semiotic Theory and Interpretation of Myth. (High Fit) <table><tr><td>Signifier (Form)</td><td>Signified (Content)</td></tr><tr><td colspan="2">Sign (Meaning)</td></tr></table> MYTH(Signification) <i>Reconstructed Daoist Thanatology</i> JUSTIFICATION & EVIDENCE Barthes’ framework is exclusively selected to decode the “Visual Symbol Reconstruction mechanism. It explains how the installation serves as the ‘Form’ that receives the specific ‘Concept’ of Daoist Thanatology, This reveals how materials like gunpowder or human hair are reconstructed from physical substance into carriers of the Daoist thanatology¹⁷.		Signifier (Form)	Signified (Content)	Sign (Meaning)	
Signifier (Form)	Signified (Content)				
Sign (Meaning)					

Figure 1 shows the study’s core inferential path and conceptual framework. It shows how Roland Barthes’ second - order semiological theory acts as the basis for a detailed analysis of specific installation artworks by Gu Wenda, Cai Guoqiang, and Xu Bing. Through the systematic exploration of these representative visual texts, the study gets the core mechanism of VSR (Visual Symbol Reconstruction). Drawing from this mechanism, the study further refines and orders VSR into three successive strategic levels: Materialization, Embodied Experience, and Philosophical Significance. To look into the internal operational logic of these three levels in depth, the study gets involved in the physical properties and interactive perceptual aspects of specific media. In this process of doing so, it studies how abstract Daoist thanatology undergoes a systematic visual shift in contemporary installation art, from material signifier to cultural myth.

As shown in Tables 3 and 4, the strategic sequence of VSR from the case analyses starts at the Materialization Level. At this foundational stage, artists employ highly specific material media—such as the biological human hair used by Gu Wenda to reconstruct cultural symbols, the gunpowder employed by Cai Guoqiang to visualize cosmic energy, and the daily waste materials and light-shadow manipulation used by Xu Bing to reconfigure landscape imagery—to anchor abstract philosophical concepts in concrete physical signifiers¹.

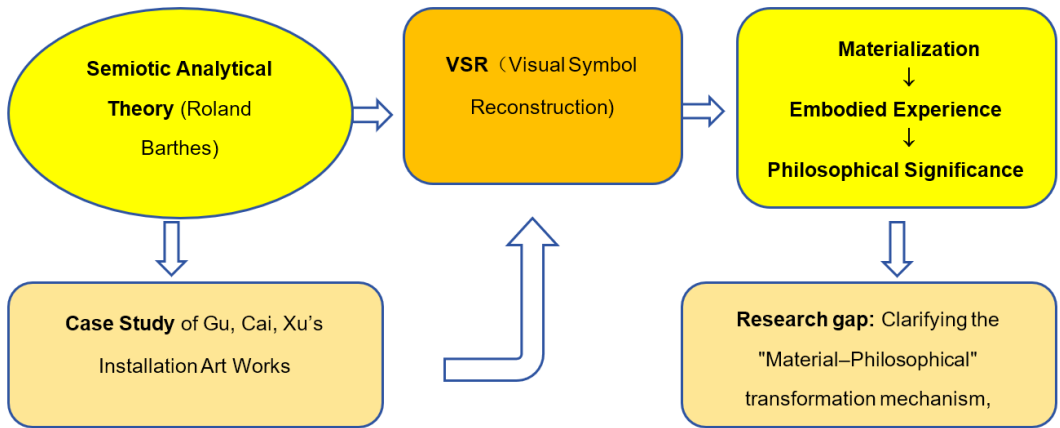


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of VSR (Source: Author)

Table 3: Attribution and Method (source) of Visual Symbol Reconstruction

The Attributions and source	VSR(Visual Symbol Reconstruction)			
	Gu Wend (The Great Wall of Flesh and Blood.1993)	Cai Guoqiang (Sky ladder.2015)	Xu Bing (The Story Behind.2014)	Comment
Materialization				
Medium ⁶	Biological media	Gunpowder	Light and Shadow	Material specificity functions as a semiotic trigger, transforming physical properties into philosophical signifiers
Spatial Composition ⁸	Enclosed Space	Verticality	"Foreground - Back" double level space	Spatial strategies regulate spectatorship, guiding perception from physical immersion to symbolic interpretation.
Embodied Experience				
Interaction ¹⁸	Sensory Pressure	Collective Participation	Cognitive Interaction	Interaction shifts meaning production from the artwork itself to the viewer's experiential and cognitive engagement.
Sensory Impact ¹¹	The texture of the hair bricks and the shape of the Great Wall	The dynamics of the firelight	The paradox of visual cognition	Sensory perception operates as the embodied entry point for philosophical meaning.
Emotional Resonance ⁴	Strong symbolism	Highly ritualistic	From curiosity and confusion to sudden enlightenment	Affective responses stabilize symbolic meanings through empathy and ritualized experience.
Philosophical Meaning				
Concept ¹⁹	Biological materials transform cultural symbols	Communication between man and heaven	Trigger self-reflection through illusions	Conceptual frameworks translate abstract Daoist philosophy into operable visual logic.
Contextual Reference ⁸	Cultural Identity and the Context of globalization	Cosmic concepts and local practices	Knowledge system and cognitive reconstruction	Contextual embedding enables visual symbols to function within broader cultural and relational systems.

Table 4: The Strategic Process of Visual Symbol Reconstruction (VSR)

Level of Analysis	Associated Attributes (from Table 2)	Strategic Findings
Materialization Level	● Medium ● Spatial Composition	Transmuting physical matter and space into a formal "signifier" base for philosophical expression.
Embodied Experience Level	● Interaction, ● Sensory Impact, ● Emotional Resonance	Shifting the focus from the object to the viewer's bodily engagement and ritualized resonance.
Philosophical Significance Level	● Concept ● Contextual Reference	Rooting the visual symbols in specific cultural backgrounds and Daoist philosophical systems.

Meanwhile, particular spatial set - ups, such as the enclosed spatial arrays in United Nations, the vertical rise of Sky Ladder, and the “front/back” dual visual space in Background Story, act as structural means that efficiently govern the viewer’s ways of perception and visual engagement routes ¹. Once the perceiving subject enters the experiential field, the reconstructive mechanism goes deeper into the Embodied Experience Level. At this stage, artistic signification moves beyond the mere presentation of objects: phenomenological sensory tensions—such as the tactile presence of hair bricks juxtaposed with the monumental form of the Great Wall, the instantaneous dynamism of gunpowder explosions, and the perceptual paradox of light-shadow cognition—combine with highly ritualized emotional resonance to create an embodied entry point into deeper philosophical meaning ^{9,11}. So then, the model for generating meaning moves from a static textual model to a dynamic process with viewer’s cognitive awareness and interactive interaction ⁹. When all is said and done, the reconstructive chain reaches the Philosophical Significance Level. In this final phase, a distinct conceptual logic turns implicit Daoist philosophical notions, like “Way of nature,” “State of unity ,” and “Way of non - action,” into visual discourses that can be systematically deciphered ¹³. Then, these discourses are precisely located within particular contextual references, including globalized identity, local practice, and the reconstruction of cognitive frameworks ¹⁵.

Briefly speaking, this study rigorously theorizes Visual Symbol Reconstruction (VSR) as a three - step progressive process that goes from Materialization to Embodied Experience and then to Philosophical Significance. By integrating this reconstructive mechanism with Roland Barthes’ second-order semiological system, the study not only addresses the absence of micro-level analysis of visual transformation in the existing literature, but also provides a comprehensive, multidimensional, and operational methodological foundation for interpreting the renewed articulation of traditional Daoist thanatology within the globalized discourse of contemporary art. The sound theoretical deduction and conceptual framework so that it can lead to the subsequent empirical decoding of the three major artistic case studies in this research.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative multiple–case study design to conduct an in-depth decoding of the Visual Symbol Reconstruction (VSR) mechanism through which Daoist thanatology is articulated in Chinese contemporary installation art, employing Roland Barthes’s second-order semiological system²⁰. To make certain of analytical rigor and theoretical depth, the process of data collection was based on the triangulation principle. It combined direct observation of specific installation spatial arrangements with visual archives and scholarly literature from authoritative databases such as Oxford Art Online and ProQuest²¹. For the purpose of the research design, visual materials were systematically broken into three semiotic levels - signifier, signified, and myth - to study how physical materiality is transformed into philosophical ideas¹⁶. Guided by the principle of replication logic, the study first conducts independent analyses of each artist’s case and subsequently performs cross-case synthesis, thereby identifying both distinctive and shared cultural meanings within the pattern of Material–Semiotic Transmutation²² (see Fig.2).

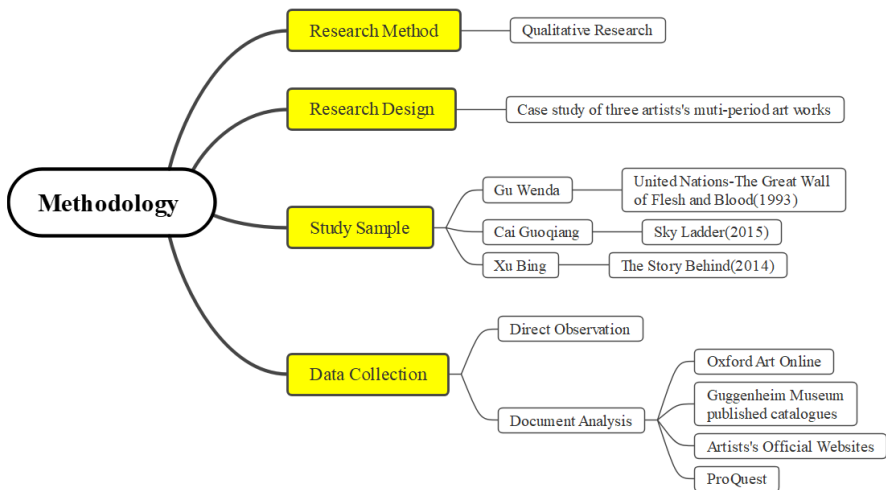


Figure 2: An Overview of the Methodology (Source: Author).

Study sample

With regard to sample construction, the study adopts a purposive sampling strategy, focusing on three emblematic installation works that have exerted significant influence within the global discourse of contemporary art: Gu Wenda’s United Nations-The Great Wall of Flesh and Blood (1993), Cai Guoqiang’s Sky Ladder (2015), and Xu Bing’s Background Story (2004–2014). To precisely determine the representativeness and analytical limits of these samples in the VSR conceptual framework, explicit selection criteria were defined according to material specificity and ontological harmony with Daoist philosophy (see Table 5). As illustrated in Table 5, the inclusion of these works was not based on arbitrary aesthetic preference; rather, they were selected because their transformation of specific physical media—biological materials, gunpowder, and everyday waste—precisely rearticulates the central philosophical propositions investigated in this study, namely “Way of nature,” “State of unity,” and “Way of non-action”. Besides, the authoritative scholarly literature has well - recorded these installations. As representative cases that connect material entities and metaphysical concepts, they give rich and visually explicit proof for the application of Barthes’ theory in multi - level semiotic decoding²³.

Table 5: Selection Criteria and Visual Evidence of the Study Sample in Terms of VSR

Selected Artworks	Selection Criteria	Visual Evidence (From Signifier to Myth)
Gu Wenda (United Nations-The Great Wall of Flesh and Blood-1993)	The physical integration of millions of human hair strands (meaning individual mortality) is woven into the architectural contour of the Great Wall, bringing about the myth of cyclical life and natural dissolution. .	 Sample 1: The physical fusion of millions of strands of human hair (signifying individual mortality) woven into the architectural shape of the Great Wall, generating the myth of cyclical existence and natural dissolution.
Cai Guoqiang (Sky Ladder-2015)	The artwork must employ elemental performativity (e.g., gunpowder) to visualize metaphysical energy, structurally aligning with the Daoist dialectic of the “State Of Unity”	 Sample 2: The dynamic, instantaneous combustion of the 500-meter ladder, where physical destruction (explosion) and visual creation (ascension) occur simultaneously as a cosmic return.
Xu Bing (Background Story-2004)	The artwork must employ spatial illusion and ordinary debris to uncover the dialectical link between physical reality and emptiness, embodying the “Way of Non - action”..	 Sample 3: Dual - space contrast is evident. The front presents a calm traditional landscape (an illusory representation), and the back shows discarded branches and plastic bags (real signifiers), breaking the clear - cut separation between waste and traditional beauty.

Data Collection

The data collection in this study made use of a well - integrated triangulation strategy. It combined direct observation of artworks with systematic archival and documentary research to preserve the empirical validity and theoretical solidity of the visual semiotic analysis²¹. Drawing inspiration from empirical research models in contemporary art studies, the investigation started with careful direct observation of three key samples: Gu Wenda’s United Nations, Cai Guoqiang’s Sky Ladder, and Xu Bing’s Background Story. In the course of this particular process, the researcher explored the physical spatial configurations, dynamic tensions existing, and material properties of the installations, systematically extracting and recording significant visual images of the artworks. According to recent multimodal critical research, the direct visual capture of an artwork’s materiality is needed to understand how it conveys deeper ideological and philosophical implications¹⁶. In consequence, it is important to keep these primary visual images as core evidence since they are key visual anchors for the subsequent systematic analysis of the semiotic change from physical signifier to cultural myth¹⁶.

Besides the direct collection of visual imagery, some essential data were obtained from highly accessible and authoritative documentary records to comprehensively understand both the artists’ creative goals and the philosophical environments of the works. The sources consist of published exhibition catalogues that are systematically collected from leading art institutions such as the Guggenheim Museum and the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, high - resolution visual records from official digital archives, and artist statements of interpretive worth as cited by Asia Society Texas Center²⁴. The research extended its scope in the academic world by carrying out thorough searches for peer - reviewed articles and monographs on Daoist thanatology and Chinese contemporary installation art via established academic databases such as Oxford Art Online and ProQuest (see Table 6)⁴. This integrated data collection process—combining first-hand visual observation, authoritative curatorial documentation, and systematic academic database retrieval ¹⁶—not only comprehensively reconstructs the material signifying details of VSR but also provides a solid empirical foundation for a deeper and more objective analysis of how traditional philosophy is reconstructed within contemporary contexts²².All core visual evidence and textual archives obtained in this study will be systematically investigated under Roland Barthes’ second - order semiological framework. Detailed coding and interpretive decoding will be carried out in the following section.

Table 6: Databases

Database	Description
Oxford Art Online	Used to retrieve authoritative art historical canons to establish the historical basis for the reconstruction of Daoist visual symbols
Guggenheim Museum published catalogues	Descriptions of works and high-resolution visual records in published catalogues
Artists’ Official websites	Used to obtain primary artwork images and artist statements to verify the authenticity of the visual signifiers
ProQuest	Used to search for doctoral dissertations to provide deep theoretical and methodological support for the semiotic analysis of this study.

Source: Author.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Data Analysis

To exactly work out the mechanism by which Daoist thanatology is visually re - presented in Chinese contemporary installation art, this section adheres to a systematic semiotic inferential approach. In the empirical analysis stage, the study gets over isolated readings of the surface imagery of art expressions. Instead, it makes a strict use of Roland Barthes’ second - order signification system. It places the core material signifiers in the representative works of Gu Wenda, Cai Guoqiang, and Xu Bing, which are biological human hair, instantaneous gunpowder, and everyday discarded materials, into specific cultural contexts for analytical deconstruction. According to recent studies in multimodal critical discourse analysis, the generation of symbolic meaning and the construction of ideology greatly depend on the material aspect of the medium through which signs function¹⁶. Accordingly, as illustrated in Figure 3, the analytical and coding process constructed around Visual Symbol Reconstruction (VSR) aims to systematically decode how these heterogeneous media transcend their status as mere physical facticity, becoming structurally transformed into signified meanings that carry Daoist ontology, and ultimately being naturalized within contemporary contexts as cultural myths concerning the philosophy of life and death ⁴.

Based on this unified coding and analysis framework, the next subsections carry out an in - depth study of the specific practices of the three artists. The analysis of Gu Wenda’s United Nations and Cai Guoqiang’s Sky Ladder focuses respectively on how the material fusion of human hair with architectural form, and the dynamic spatiotemporal trajectory of gunpowder explosions, map onto the cosmic rhythm of “Way of nature” and the dialectical logic of the “State of unity”. Similarly, when discussing Xu Bing’s Background Story, it centers on the artist’s reverse re - construction of discarded materials and light - shadow space, bringing to light the philosophical core of “Way of non - action” and the tension between existence and illusion within its visual presentation. By situating these three landmark works within the unified analytical framework of VSR, the study not only ensures methodological consistency in cross-case semiotic interpretation²², but also reconstructs, at a structural level, the complete signifying network through which Chinese avant-garde artists rearticulate traditional spiritual values¹⁷.

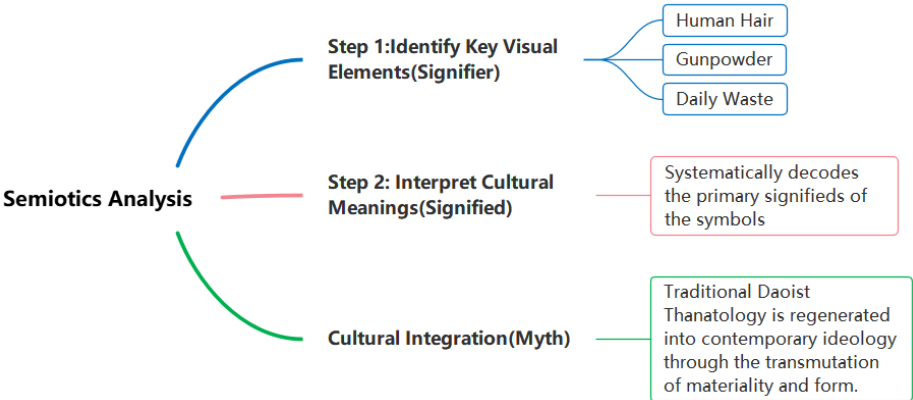


Figure 3: Semiotic Analysis Steps and Coding Framework (Source: Author)

Analysis of the Semiotic Framework of Gu Wenda’s Installation Art Works that incorporate Daoist Thanatology

Gu Wenda’s appropriation of biological media in United Nations: Great Wall of Blood and Flesh constitutes a radically subversive semiotic practice. Millions of strands of human hair, spanning diverse racial origins, are physically woven and reconstituted into the monumental volume of the Great Wall; fraught with an intense physiological oppressiveness, this hybrid construct establishes the installation’s core physical signifier. Biologically, human hair inescapably provokes a gaze upon somatic decay and individual mortality, whereas the grand architectural configuration of the Wall operates as a metaphor for the eternal perpetuation of human civilization. Approached from the dimension of the signified, the ephemeral, microcosmic death of the individual and the immortal, macrocosmic historical entity are forcibly juxtaposed on this plane, triggering severe semantic friction. Far transcending a mere lamentation for the passing of life, this visual mechanism is thoroughly naturalized into a contemporary entity that pierces through cultural boundaries. It flawlessly projects the ontology of the “Way of nature” nested deep within Daoist thanatology¹¹.



Figure 4: United Nations-The Great Wall of Flesh and Blood (Gu Wenda.1993)

Signifier: A hybrid installation composed of hair and the shape of the Great Wall.

Signified: The Human hair (symbolizing individual death) and the Great Wall (symbolizing eternal civilization)

Myth: Death is the natural dissolution of life in accordance with the operation of the Dao. (Way of nature)

Analysis of the Semiotic Framework of Cai Guoqiang's Installation Art Works that incorporate Daoist Thanatology

Cai Guoqiang's Sky Ladder completely divests gunpowder—a highly unstable physical medium—of its secular attributes, directly transforming it into a core arena for profound philosophical inquiry. The trajectory of flames ascending vertically across a five-hundred-meter expanse constructs the installation's most direct physical signifier; within the dimension of the signified, this continuously rising path of combustion is definitively interpreted as an individual life's transgressive leap toward a transcendent spiritual realm. The absolute ontological destruction triggered by the ignition of gunpowder and the visual genesis of the ladder rising from the earth achieve a rigorous simultaneity within a brief physical instant. Consequently, instantaneous annihilation and eternal derivation are seamlessly fused. Transcending the paradigm of a mere chemical reaction, this visual mechanism is thoroughly naturalized into a contemporary entity that symbolizes death and rebirth as mutually constitutive. It precisely maps onto the cosmology of "State of unity" at the core of Daoist thanatology²⁵.



Figure 5: Sky Ladder (Cai Guoqiang, 2015)

Signifier: The flame burns up the ladder, forming a dynamic visual trajectory.

Signified: The rising flame trajectory in the signified plane can be understood as "life seeking higher realms".

Myth: The burning of the flame (destruction) and the rising of the ladder (creation) occur simultaneously, symbolizing the unity of death and rebirth. (State of Unity)

Analysis of the Semiotic Framework of Xu Bing's Installation Art Works that incorporate Daoist Thanatology

Through challenging linguistic symbols and systems of visual perception, Xu Bing conducts a conceptual exploration of Daoist perspectives on life and death⁷. Semiotic analysis reveals that Background Story employs the principle of impermanent transformation to present the natural circulation of all things under the logic of Wu Wei (Way of Non-Action). This intervention constructs a second-order semiological system (myth), effectively redirecting viewers' attachment to the fixed meanings of human-made signs toward an understanding of deeper philosophical significance. In this way, the work ultimately realizes a visual articulation of the dialectical relationship inherent in the Daoist life–death worldview under the principle of "The Way of Non-action"^{25,26}.



Figure 6: The Story Behind (Xu Bing, 2014)

Signifier: The daily waste is spliced into a light and shadow image with the connotation of traditional Chinese landscape painting.

Signified: The artist did not “create” a new picture, but rather “discovered” and “reorganized” the hidden Chinese Landscape connotations in the waste

Myth: All things in the universe are in an eternal natural cycle and there is no absolute high or low. True “beauty” lies in this seemingly impermanent transformation process itself, rather than any fixed form. (Way of non-action)

DISCUSSION

Cross-Case Synthesis of Analysis

Through comparing the works of Gu Wenda, Cai Guoqiang, and Xu Bing, a clear commonality is discovered: each artist shows an excellent ability to turn seemingly ordinary materials into symbols with deep - seated philosophical meanings¹³. Even though Gu Wenda makes use of human hair, Cai Guoqiang makes use of gunpowder, and Xu Bing works with ordinary waste materials, in their own creative logics, these substances are disconnected from their original physical functions. Gu Wenda’s fusion of human hair with architectural forms reveals the inevitability of life’s return to nature; Cai Guoqiang’s instantaneous gunpowder explosions visualize the simultaneity of destruction and creation; and Xu Bing’s reconfiguration of discarded materials through light and shadow constructs a conceptual space in which reality and illusion coexist. These examples show that, even with medium differences, the artists follow a similar basic logic. They transform the form and perceptual context of matter, endowing it with spiritual and philosophical meaning, thus making the transition from ordinary objects to artistic symbols possible¹⁷.

In a broader view, this cross - case similarity offers strong evidence for the general operational role of Visual Symbol Reconstruction (VSR) in contemporary art²⁶. Instead of just showing traditional culture, these artists apply symbolic reconstruction to make ancient Daoist ideas like “Way of nature,” “State of unity,” and “Way of non-action” come back to life in a modern artistic context⁷. In this procedure, materials that were once individual, scattered, and commonplace are merged into cultural myths able to represent collective human reflection. Through this transformation, viewers can move past the material substance and directly experience the philosophical force in the art pieces. The general pattern inferred from these diverse cases not only shows how Chinese contemporary art engages with traditional spiritual values, but also provides obvious evidence for understanding how visual culture can store and recreate traditional philosophies in contemporary cultural talk.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study systematically constructs an analytical framework of “Material–Semiotic Transmutation” through the representative installation practices of Xu Bing, Cai Guoqiang, and Gu Wenda, thereby addressing the theoretical gap concerning the visual translation of Daoist thanatology in contemporary Chinese installation art, several limitations remain. First, the purposive sampling strategy enhances the interpretive depth and theoretical focus of the selected cases, yet it may simultaneously constrain the broader applicability of the framework to emerging artistic practices, particularly digital media art, virtual installations, and younger generations of contemporary

artists. Second, the study primarily relies on Roland Barthes' second-order semiological system, resulting in an interpretive approach centered largely on textual analysis and researcher-oriented decoding, while lacking empirical validation from actual audience reception.

Accordingly, future research should expand the scope of case selection by incorporating artistic practices across diverse media forms and generational contexts. In addition, interdisciplinary approaches, including Audience Reception Theory, embodied cognition²⁷, and cognitive science, may provide empirical insight into how cross-cultural audiences perceive, interpret, and emotionally engage with installations shaped through processes of visual symbol reconstruction. Such developments would further evaluate the explanatory capacity of the proposed framework and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the cross-media translation of traditional philosophy within contemporary visual culture.

IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Implications

At the theoretical level, this study greatly broadens the range of visual semiotics in the analysis of contemporary multimodal art. In the recent period, scholars in critical discourse and multimodal visual studies have strongly promoted a theoretical shift from metafunctional analysis to materiality. They note that the physical medium serves as a central signifier with ideological and philosophical import¹⁶. The present research actively meets this scholarly tendency. By integrating Barthes' myth - production mechanism, it effectively surmounts the "linguistic trap" that traditional structuralist semiotics, like the Saussurean model, face when dealing with the complex physical experiences in installation art. The VSR conceptual framework developed here therefore gives a rigorous and operational structuralist method for decoding non - linguistic and highly materialized artistic practices.

To be specific, the study greatly deepens theoretical conversations on the symbiotic relation between Daoist philosophy and contemporary art. Past studies of Daoist art have frequently been at the level of regular iconographic comparison, short of a detailed analysis of the micro - mechanisms by which spiritual doctrines are made into spatial configurations¹⁷. By establishing a close semiotic linkage between Daoist thanatology and the specific properties of materials—such as the biological quality of human hair, the instantaneous nature of gunpowder, and the constructed artificiality of discarded objects—this study demonstrates that the philosophical meanings embedded in Daoist visual imagery are not static historical residues. On the contrary, they can be re - built in contemporary situations to generate cultural myths of global and universal consequence¹⁴.

Practical Implications

In practical terms, this study presents a valuable visual - translation approach for cultural regeneration in cross - cultural settings. While globalization progresses, a significant challenge for artists is to free local spiritual traditions from the constraints of unclear textual talk, so that audiences from different cultural settings can understand and perceive them. The three - part evolutionary model obtained from this research, Materialization, Embodied Experience, and Philosophical Significance, gives contemporary artists a practical guide to transform abstract beliefs into perceptible visual codes. By means of this particular symbolic mechanism, artists can deliberately use everyday materials or local media to create forms of ecological and spiritual resonance that go beyond cultural boundaries⁴.

In parallel, the findings of this study are of great importance for the curatorial practices of global art institutions. They put forth that curators and art critics, when presenting Chinese contemporary installation art, ought to lead audiences over the shallow label of "Chineseness". Instead, more notice should be taken of the ontological structures and material interactions in the artworks. Interpretive guidance based on semiotic decoding can greatly improve cross - cultural audiences' understanding of how philosophical beliefs are translated into visual art forms²⁶.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how contemporary Chinese installation art rearticulates Daoist views of life and death through processes of Visual Symbol Reconstruction (VSR). An examination of works by Gu Wenda, Cai Guoqiang, and Xu Bing suggests that these artists are not simply reusing traditional cultural imagery. Instead, they reorganize materials, spatial structures, and modes of perception in ways that allow ordinary objects to acquire philosophical

meaning within contemporary visual contexts. Materials such as human hair, gunpowder, and discarded objects gradually move beyond their original physical functions and become symbolic carriers of Daoist ideas, including the “Way of Nature,” the “State of Unity,” and the principle of “Non-Action.” What ultimately emerges from these works is not only a visual form, but also a layered relationship between materiality, bodily perception, and metaphysical reflection.

Drawing from the comparison of these three cases, the study further develops a three-level VSR framework consisting of Materialization, Embodied Experience, and Philosophical Significance. The findings indicate that contemporary Chinese installation art functions not merely as aesthetic experimentation, but as a process through which traditional spiritual thought is reconstructed within present-day cultural conditions. Through the reconfiguration of materials, spatial interaction, and audience experience, abstract philosophical concepts are translated into perceptible visual experiences. In this sense, the transformation from physical matter to symbolic meaning also demonstrates how Daoist philosophy continues to generate new forms of cultural expression within contemporary global visual culture.

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