

# SEMIOTIC DECONSTRUCTION OF JIANGXI NUO MASK VISUAL SYMBOLS: A CLASSIFICATION OF CORE AND ADAPTABLE ELEMENTS AS A BASIS FOR METRO ENVIRONMENTAL GRAPHIC DESIGN TRANSLATION

Yanqin LI<sup>1</sup>, Akapong INKUER<sup>1</sup>, Chanoknart MAYUSOH<sup>1</sup> and Pisit PUNTIEN<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand;  
s66584948003@ssru.ac.th (Y. L.); akapong.in@ssru.ac.th (A. I.);  
chanoknart.ma@ssru.ac.th (C. M.); pisit.pu@ssru.ac.th (P. P.)

## ABSTRACT

Jiangxi Nuo masks are highly recognizable visual symbols of Gan Nuo culture, carrying ritual meanings, belief systems, role identities, and regional cultural memory. As intangible cultural heritage increasingly enters contemporary public spaces, the question of how to deconstruct and translate traditional visual symbols while retaining their cultural meanings has become important in visual communication design and environmental graphic design. This paper focuses on the semiotic deconstruction of the visual symbolic system of Jiangxi Nuo masks and classifies their core cultural elements and adaptable translation elements. The study adopts literature analysis, visual material review, and visual symbol coding. Four representative mask samples, including Kaishan, Nuo Gong, Bao Sanniang, and Sun Wukong, are coded through five dimensions: form structure, color system, decorative motifs, expression features, and role meaning. The coding results show that role identity, ritual function, core symbolic meaning, and typical structural features should be retained as core cultural elements, while contours, local motifs, color relationships, and expression intensity can be adapted according to the visual order, information hierarchy, and psychological comfort requirements of metro public space. The findings provide a structured basis for selecting Nuo mask symbols and matching their adaptable forms and visual intensity with different functional contexts in metro environmental graphic design.

**Keywords:** Jiangxi Nuo Mask, Visual Symbol, Semiotic Deconstruction, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Metro Environmental Graphic Design

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## INTRODUCTION

Jiangxi Nuo culture is an important component of folk belief, ritual performance, and regional artistic tradition in southern China. As one of the most visually recognizable material carriers in Nuo rituals, Nuo dances, and Nuo operas, Jiangxi Nuo masks possess distinctive features in form, color, motifs, and expression. They also carry cultural meanings related to exorcism, blessing, role transformation, divine symbolism, and local memory. Therefore, Jiangxi Nuo masks are not ordinary decorative patterns but a visual symbolic system with high semantic density, shaped by ritual context, role function, and visual form.

Against the background of intangible cultural heritage preservation and contemporary design transformation, the question of how traditional visual symbols can enter modern public spaces has become important in design research. Metro spaces differ from museums, exhibition halls, or cultural commercial spaces because their primary functions include traffic organization, wayfinding, safety communication, and passenger flow transition. If Nuo mask symbols are directly transplanted as decorative patterns, they may cause semantic misinterpretation, visual pressure, or interference with wayfinding information. Therefore, this paper focuses on the semiotic deconstruction of the visual symbolic system of Jiangxi Nuo masks, with particular attention to their visual composition, cultural meanings, and translation boundaries. By reviewing literature, visual materials, and relevant studies, it summarizes their visual symbolic composition from five aspects: form structure, color system, decorative motifs, expression features, and role meaning, providing a foundation for subsequent metro environmental graphic design translation.

### Research Objectives

The research aims to conduct a semiotic deconstruction of the visual symbolic system of Jiangxi Nuo masks. It aims to identify the main visual components of these masks, including form structure, color system, decorative motifs, expression features, and role meaning, and further distinguish core cultural elements from adaptable translation elements, thereby providing a foundation for subsequent research on visual translation in metro environmental graphic design.

## LITERATURE REVIEWS

### Ritual Context and Cultural Value of Jiangxi Nuo Masks

The cultural meaning of Jiangxi Nuo masks is first rooted in their ritual context. Nuo culture has long existed in folk rituals, exorcistic practices, blessing ceremonies, Nuo dances, and Nuo operas, while masks function as important media connecting roles, bodies, and sacred meanings. Zhou (2015) points out that Jiangxi Nuo masks are not independent decorative craft objects but are embedded in the broader meaning system of Nuo rituals, dances, and operas. Yu and Feng (2006), in their study of Nuo mask forms in Pingxiang and Nanfeng, also indicate that these masks are closely related to folk beliefs concerning exorcism, blessing, and protection. Therefore, the visual form of Jiangxi Nuo masks cannot be understood separately from their ritual functions.

In traditional Nuo ritual contexts, masks not only cover the performer's face but also enable role transformation and symbolic attribution. Once a performer wears a mask, the everyday identity of the performer is temporarily weakened, while the identity represented by the mask, such as a deity, ancestor, general, ghost, or secular figure, becomes visually emphasized. In this sense, a Nuo mask is not merely a facial form but a visual expression of role identity and ritual meaning. For this reason, Nuo masks often use exaggerated facial features, strong colors, and symbolic motifs to strengthen role functions, allowing viewers to recognize sacredness, deterrence, protection, or entertainment within ritual viewing.

In terms of cultural value, Jiangxi Nuo masks embody local beliefs, folk art, traditional craftsmanship, and regional memory. They are not only important visual carriers in the

transmission of Jiangxi Nuo culture, but also valuable materials for understanding local spiritual life and aesthetic experience. Li (2020) argues that Jiangxi Nuo masks have distinctive artistic features in form, color, and graphic expression, and possess potential for modern design transformation. Zhao and Hui (2021) also discuss the extraction and design application of visual elements from Gan Nuo masks from the perspective of cultural factors. Recent research has further examined Jiangxi Nuo masks from the perspective of intangible cultural heritage protection, focusing on their materials, craftsmanship, color application, and value for visual reconstruction. This indicates that Jiangxi Nuo masks possess not only traditional craft value but also the potential to be reorganized and transformed in contemporary visual design (Lei & Cheng, 2025). These studies indicate that Jiangxi Nuo masks are significant not only for intangible cultural heritage preservation but also for contemporary visual design research.

However, the cultural value of Jiangxi Nuo masks does not mean that their visual images can be directly transplanted into modern public spaces. Because they originally carry ritual, sacred, and sometimes deterrent meanings, their significance changes when they move from ritual spaces into everyday public spaces such as metro stations. Without semiotic analysis and contextual transformation, mask images may be reduced to surface decoration, or may even create unfamiliarity or psychological pressure. Therefore, before translating Jiangxi Nuo masks into metro environmental graphic design, it is necessary to conduct a systematic semiotic analysis of their cultural meanings and visual structures.

### **Visual Symbolic Features of Jiangxi Nuo Masks**

Jiangxi Nuo masks are suitable objects for visual symbolic research because their visual system is highly recognizable and structurally organized. Existing studies generally suggest that the visual characteristics of Nuo masks are mainly reflected in form structure, color system, decorative motifs, expression features, and role meaning. Feng (2010) notes that Jiangxi Nuo mask art contains rich image symbols, and its exaggerated forms and strong visual language can express the divinity, authority, or theatrical effect of specific roles. Recent research on cultural and creative product design based on Nanfeng Nuo masks further indicates that Nuo mask images can be transformed into contemporary design elements through classification, deformation, and reconstruction (Chen & Fan, 2024).

In terms of form and structure, Jiangxi Nuo masks are often characterized by exaggeration and stylization. Facial features such as eyebrows, eyes, nose, and mouth are frequently enlarged, strengthened, or transformed to highlight role personality and ritual function. Fierce deity masks often feature glaring eyes, broad noses, large mouths, or fangs to strengthen the meanings of exorcism and deterrence. Benevolent deity masks tend to show more balanced, calm, or gentle facial structures, suggesting protection and harmony. General or heroic masks often express loyalty, authority, and order through helmet forms, eyebrow-eye structures, and facial contours. Secular or comic masks place greater emphasis on everyday expression and theatrical humor.

In terms of color system, Jiangxi Nuo masks commonly use high-contrast colors such as red, black, white, yellow, and blue-green. Color here is not merely decorative; it also functions to distinguish roles and convey symbolic meanings. For example, red is often associated with loyalty, intensity, and exorcistic power; black often expresses integrity, authority, or deterrence; and white may suggest purity, coldness, or complex character traits in different contexts. Environmental psychology studies indicate that sharp contours may evoke threat-related negative bias, while colour saturation and brightness influence emotional arousal (Bar & Neta, 2006; Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994). In enclosed and information-intensive metro environments, contour sharpness, colour saturation, graphic area, and expression intensity should therefore be moderated near wayfinding and safety information.

In terms of decorative motifs, flame patterns, cloud patterns, animal horns, fangs, head ornaments, and helmet motifs are common visual elements. These motifs are not isolated

decorations but are related to divinity, power, identity, and role function. They can become important resources for later visual translation because motifs are easier than complete mask images to simplify, abstract, and modularize, and they are more suitable for low-interference applications in public space.

In terms of expression and role meaning, Jiangxi Nuo masks form a multi-layered visual expression ranging from deterrence and sacredness to kindness and humor. Different roles are not identified by a single visual element but by the combination of role function, facial expression, facial structure, color configuration, and decorative motifs. Therefore, the visual symbolic system of Jiangxi Nuo masks can be understood as a combination of multiple elements.



**Figure 1** Role Types and Visual Symbolic Features of Jiangxi Nuo Masks

Figure 1 shows the visual features of different role types in Jiangxi Nuo masks. Fierce deity, benevolent deity, general, and secular masks form role recognition through facial structure, color relationships, motifs, and expression intensity. The figure indicates that Jiangxi Nuo mask symbols are not single decorative patterns but a symbolic system formed by role identity, formal structure, motifs, and expressions.

This paper summarizes these visual features into five analytical dimensions: form structure, color system, decorative motifs, expression features, and role meaning, providing a basis for distinguishing core cultural elements from adaptable translation elements.

### **Semiotic Translation of Intangible Cultural Heritage Visual Symbols**

When visual symbols of intangible cultural heritage enter contemporary design contexts, they usually undergo a transformation from their original cultural context to a modern communication context. For Jiangxi Nuo masks, their original meanings are mainly formed in ritual activities and local belief systems, while metro environmental graphic design belongs to a visual information system in everyday public space. The two differ significantly in spatial attributes, viewing modes, functional goals, and public psychological expectations. Therefore, before Jiangxi Nuo masks are introduced into metro environmental graphic design, they should not be treated simply through pattern copying or surface decoration. Instead, their core meanings and transformable forms need to be identified through semiotic analysis.

Semiotic studies emphasize the relationship between symbolic form and meaning. Hall (1997) argues that cultural meaning is not fixed within visual form but is constructed through systems of representation and interpretation. Chandler (2017) also suggests that symbolic meaning should be understood through the relationship between signifier, signified, and the context of use. Following this perspective, the visual translation of Jiangxi Nuo masks should consider two levels at the same time: first, the visual forms of mask images, such as contours, facial features, colors, and motifs; and second, the cultural meanings behind these forms, such as role identity, ritual function, exorcistic protection, and regional memory. Only by connecting form

and meaning can intangible cultural heritage symbols avoid being reduced to simple decoration in contemporary design.

In the context of public space, symbolic translation also involves recontextualization. When sacred symbols originally belonging to ritual space enter metro space, their mode of viewing changes. Passengers are usually engaged in rapid movement, wayfinding, or short-term waiting, and they do not have sufficient conditions to understand complex cultural narratives over a long period of time. Therefore, design needs to reduce the burden of interpretation while retaining cultural recognition. This means that not all Nuo mask elements are suitable for complete preservation. Role identity, core symbolic meanings, and typical formal structures should be retained as cultural elements, while contours, local motifs, color relationships, and expression intensity can be simplified, abstracted, or weakened according to the needs of public space.

Based on the above theoretical discussion, this paper deconstructs the visual symbols of Jiangxi Nuo masks into two categories: core cultural elements and adaptable translation elements. Core cultural elements refer to contents closely related to ritual meaning, role identity, and symbolic function in Nuo culture, which should not be arbitrarily removed or misused in translation. Adaptable translation elements refer to formal resources that can be simplified, reorganized, or weakened according to the visual order, information hierarchy, and public acceptance conditions of metro space. This distinction provides a theoretical basis for subsequent symbol selection and visual translation in metro environmental graphic design.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Literature and Visual Material Collection**

This paper adopts a qualitative research approach and conducts a semiotic deconstruction of the visual symbolic system of Jiangxi Nuo masks through literature review, visual material analysis, and visual symbol coding. The literature materials mainly include studies on Jiangxi Nuo culture, Gan Nuo masks, visual transformation of intangible cultural heritage, semiotics, and environmental graphic design. The visual materials are mainly derived from published literature, mask images in relevant studies, field investigation materials, and visual samples collected by the author. The selection of materials focuses on masks with clear Jiangxi regional attributes, masks representing different role types, and samples with high recognizability in form, color, motifs, or expression.

### **Visual Symbol Coding Dimensions**

To systematically analyze the visual symbolic system of Jiangxi Nuo masks, this paper establishes five coding dimensions: form structure, color system, decorative motifs, expression features, and role meaning. Form structure is used to identify the overall contour, facial proportion, and head ornament structure of the masks. The color system is used to analyze colors such as red, black, white, yellow, and blue-green, as well as their symbolic relationships. Decorative motifs are used to identify transformable resources such as flame patterns, cloud patterns, animal horns, fangs, and helmet motifs. Expression features are used to judge emotional intensity, such as deterrence, sacredness, kindness, dignity, or humor. Role meaning is used to understand the identities represented by different masks, such as deities, ancestors, generals, ghosts, or secular figures. In the results section, the coding is reported through a matrix of four named samples shown in Figure 1: Kaishan, Nuo Gong, Bao Sanniang, and Sun Wukong. These samples represent fierce deity, benevolent deity, general, and secular or comic role types, allowing the analysis to compare how the five dimensions operate across different visual identities.

### **Distinguishing Core Cultural Elements and Adaptable Translation Elements**

After visual coding, this paper further distinguishes Jiangxi Nuo mask visual symbols into core cultural elements and adaptable translation elements. Core cultural elements refer to contents

closely related to ritual meaning, role identity, and symbolic function in Nuo culture, which should not be arbitrarily removed or misused in translation. Adaptable translation elements refer to visual forms that can be simplified, abstracted, reorganized, or reduced in expressive intensity according to the needs of modern public spaces while maintaining basic cultural recognizability. The coded elements were then organized as a translation matrix according to the degree of formal adjustment, visual intensity, and appropriate metro context. This procedure links the retention of core meanings with the simplification, modularization, or weakening of adaptable forms before their use in metro environmental graphic design.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### Sample Coding of Selected Jiangxi Nuo Mask Visual Symbols

On the basis of the five coding dimensions defined in the methodology, the selected mask images were read as visual cases rather than as isolated decorative patterns. Four masks in Figure 1, namely Kaishan, Nuo Gong, Bao Sanniang, and Sun Wukong, were used to represent fierce deity, benevolent deity, general, and secular or comic role types. The coding focused on how form structure, colour relationship, decorative motif, expression, and role meaning work together to produce role recognition. Table 1 therefore functions as a translation matrix, linking coded evidence to what should be retained, how adaptable forms should be modified, and where they may be applied in metro space.

**Table 1** Sample Coding and Metro Translation Matrix of Selected Jiangxi Nuo Mask Visual Symbols

| Mask sample / role type     | Five-dimensional coding result                                                                                                                                           | Observed evidence                                                                                                | Translation operation and metro application                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Kaishan / fierce deity      | Enlarged contour, staring eyes, open mouth and fangs; strong red-black relationship; flame-related motifs; deterrent expression; exorcistic and protective role meaning. | In Figure 1, the annotations link the fierce face, fangs, and flame motifs with a deterrent ritual role.         | <b>Retain:</b> fierce deity identity, exorcistic-protective meaning, and eye-mouth-fang structure.<br><b>Adapt:</b> simplify the flame motif and contour; reduce colour area, saturation, and expression intensity.<br><b>Apply:</b> use partial motifs in cultural display and non-decision areas; avoid the complete fierce face near major wayfinding and safety information. |
| Nuo Gong / benevolent deity | Calm face, balanced proportion, symmetrical structure; moderate colour relationship; head decoration; gentle expression; blessing and protective meaning.                | In Figure 1, recognition depends mainly on calm face, balanced form, and symmetry rather than visual aggression. | <b>Retain:</b> benevolent deity identity, protective meaning, and balanced facial structure.<br><b>Adapt:</b> soften the contour, simplify facial lines, and adjust colour brightness.<br><b>Apply:</b> use simplified contours in waiting areas, facility interfaces, and low-interference auxiliary graphics.                                                                  |

| Mask sample / role type            | Five-dimensional coding result                                                                                                                                 | Observed evidence                                                                                              | Translation operation and metro application                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Bao Sanniang / general role        | Helmet structure, prominent eyes, dignified proportion; role-distinguishing colour contrast; helmet motifs; orderly expression; authority and loyalty meaning. | In Figure 1, helmet motifs, prominent eyes, and dignified form function as military and heroic visual markers. | <b>Retain:</b> general or heroic identity, authority and loyalty meaning, and helmet-eye structure.<br><b>Adapt:</b> simplify facial lines, modularize helmet motifs, and control colour contrast.<br><b>Apply:</b> use modular helmet motifs on cultural walls and in auxiliary directional zones.     |
| Sun Wukong / secular or comic role | Lively facial structure, simplified graphic tendency, vivid colour impression, local facial features, playful expression, secular narrative meaning.           | In Figure 1, lively form and playful mood connect the role with theatrical humor and everyday viewing.         | <b>Retain:</b> secular or comic role identity, playful narrative meaning, and recognizable facial character.<br><b>Adapt:</b> simplify the lively contour, extract local motifs, and reduce colour area.<br><b>Apply:</b> use simplified graphics in cultural display and digital interpretation areas. |

### Worked Deconstruction of the Kaishan Mask

Among the selected samples, the Kaishan mask offers a useful case for examining the relationship between role identity, symbolic meaning, and visual adaptation. Its fierce deity role is conveyed through an enlarged facial contour, staring eyes, an open mouth, fangs, a strong red-black relationship, and flame-related motifs. These features form a deterrent visual image associated with exorcism and ritual protection, rather than a facial style with only theatrical or decorative value.

Accordingly, Kaishan's fierce-deity identity, exorcistic-protective function, and eye-mouth-fang structure are treated as core cultural elements. Its flame motifs and outer contour may be simplified, while red-black area, saturation, and emotional intensity may be reduced near wayfinding information. The complete fierce face should therefore be avoided at major decision points; partial motifs are more suitable where cultural recognition is required with low visual interference.

### Patterns Observed from the Sample Coding

The comparison of the four samples suggests three tendencies. First, role meaning is the primary constraint in visual translation. Fierce deity, benevolent deity, general, and secular or comic roles are connected with different ritual or narrative functions, and their identities cannot be freely exchanged. Second, local motifs usually have greater translation flexibility than complete mask images. Flame motifs, helmet motifs, head ornaments, and partial facial lines may be simplified or reorganized while still retaining a recognizable link to the source image. Third, expression intensity and colour area need to correspond to specific spatial nodes. Strong expressions and high-contrast colours are more appropriate for cultural display or non-decision areas, while areas close to wayfinding information require smaller graphic scale, softer expression, and lower visual dominance.

### Core Cultural Elements Identified from the Sample Coding

The sample comparison indicates that core cultural elements are not simply the most visually striking parts of a mask. They are the features that sustain role identity and symbolic function. These include role identity, ritual function, core symbolic meaning, and representative structural features. For Kaishan, the core lies in its fierce deity identity and exorcistic-protective

meaning; for Nuo Gong, in its benevolent and protective role; for Bao Sanniang, in its general or heroic identity; and for Sun Wukong, in its lively secular narrative role. These features need to be handled cautiously in design translation. Removing them, replacing them, or mixing them across roles would weaken the cultural logic of Jiangxi Nuo masks and make the visual translation more decorative than culturally grounded.

#### Adaptable Translation Elements Identified from the Sample Coding

Compared with these role-bound features, adaptable translation elements are formal features that may be adjusted while retaining a visible connection with the source image. In the four samples, contour treatment, local motifs, colour relationships, and expression intensity show relatively greater flexibility. Complete mask images may therefore be transformed into simplified contours, partial facial lines, repeated motif modules, or softened colour systems. For example, the flame motif of Kaishan may become an auxiliary graphic pattern; the helmet motif of Bao Sanniang may be developed as a modular visual element; and the balanced contour of Nuo Gong may be used as a calmer cultural graphic. Such adaptations allow Nuo mask symbols to enter metro space while reducing visual pressure, possible misreading, and interference with wayfinding information.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This paper examines the visual symbolic system of Jiangxi Nuo masks through semiotic deconstruction and classifies selected elements into core cultural elements and adaptable translation elements. The analysis is based on the five-dimensional framework and is further supported by the coding of four representative samples: Kaishan, Nuo Gong, Bao Sanniang, and Sun Wukong. The focused reading of the Kaishan mask clarifies how role identity, symbolic meaning, and adaptable visual form can be separated without cutting the mask off from its cultural source. The analysis indicates that Jiangxi Nuo masks should be understood as a cultural symbolic system shaped by ritual context, role identity, symbolic meaning, and visual form, rather than as ordinary folk decorative patterns.

From a semiotic perspective, the visual translation of Jiangxi Nuo masks cannot stop at surface pattern extraction. The sample coding suggests that role identity, ritual function, core symbolic meaning, and representative structural features need to be retained as core cultural elements. At the same time, contours, local motifs, colour relationships, and expression intensity may be simplified, abstracted, modularized, or moderately weakened according to the visual order of metro space and public acceptance conditions.

These findings are relevant to the use of intangible cultural heritage visual symbols in metro public space. Because passengers move through an enclosed, information-dense environment, complete fierce masks and high-contrast colours may intensify visual tension or compete with functional information. Softened contours, reduced colour saturation and graphic area, and lower expression intensity can preserve cultural recognition while improving psychological comfort. Stronger expressions are therefore more suitable for cultural display or non-decision areas, whereas simplified motifs should be used near wayfinding and safety information.

The scope of this paper is limited to symbol identification, classification, and a conceptual metro translation matrix rather than the verification of final design outcomes. Future research should link the matrix to specific nodes at Wolongshan Station, develop design mockups, and conduct passenger evaluation.

Overall, distinguishing core cultural elements from adaptable translation elements provides a practical basis for integrating Jiangxi Nuo culture into metro public infrastructure. For local governments and metro authorities, this approach can strengthen regional identity and sense of place by making local heritage visible in everyday travel, while preserving the clarity of wayfinding, safety, and operational information. It also offers a transferable reference for the public-space translation of other forms of intangible cultural heritage.

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