

A Semiotic Analysis of the Popularity of the Products of the Palace Museum

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Abstract

In recent years, the cultural and creative products of the Palace Museum have become “the oldest” popular products on social media. This paper aims at investigating the distinctiveness about products and the reason for their success. The research analyzes two main product lines of the products by semiotic approach. Through analyzing the products of the royal-culture line and the Ming-and-Qing-dynasty-aesthetic line, the research found that the integration of ancient cultural elements and modern cute style into product design through innovation helped the product to attract young fans.

Key words: Semiotics; Cultural and creative products; The Palace Museum

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is in recent years that “the cultural and creative product” become a hot spot after its emergence. When it comes to these products, people will think of the Palace Museum and the Palace Museum Taobao store at the first time. With the help of the Internet, the sudden change in the Palace Museum greatly surprises the public.

In history, since the establishment of the Palace Museum in 1925, its main function was to display cultural relics. Restricted by the economic condition and technical means at that time, the Palace Museum, like the imperial

palace with multiple temples, seems to be so mysterious. It has always been a solemn existence in public impression and represents the peak of the art culture in ancient China. In 2013, the Palace Museum Taobao store began to transform its position and act cute. It gains people’s recognition with a new appearance.

Statistically, the sales of cultural and creative products of the Palace Museum increased from 600 million yuan in 2013 to nearly 1 billion yuan in 2016. In 2017, the offline revenue of the cultural and creative department of the Palace Museum was nearly 100 million yuan, and that of the online Taobao store was nearly 50 million yuan. In addition, other departments also contributed to the revenue of cultural and creative products. The total annual revenue of all cultural and creative products of the Palace Museum reached 1.5 billion yuan, exceeding the income of 15 A-share listed companies. Data perfectly reflected the success of the cultural and creative transformation of the Palace Museum (*China Securities Journal*, 2019). These cultural and creative products are popular on the Internet with such a cute and adorable appearance. They not only use the typical cultural characteristics of the Palace Museum, but also take into account practicality. It can be seen that cultural and creative products have a large audience in China, and the public likes such folksy and tasteful cultural products.

There are various reasons behind the popularity of cultural and creative products of the Palace Museum. This paper mainly studies how these products can achieve the integration of traditional and modern design and make innovation. Cultural and creative products of the Palace Museum have both cultural heritage and fashion elements. Modern elements are added to the appearance of ancient design. Combined with clothing, jewelry, decoration and daily necessities, they become practical products with cultural added value and become down to earth, which meet the taste of contemporary young people and meet the actual needs of the public. The success of the Palace

Museum can also bring enlightenment and reference to other cultural and creative enterprises and museums. Usually in the eyes of Chinese people, cultural enterprises are serious. However, if they make use of their unique cultural elements, take the cultural core as the foundation, combine the characteristics of the times and popular trends, they can complete their own brand innovation and cultural and creative product design. Breaking the tradition, catering to the trend, and going to the public with an innovative appearance is also a point of attracting customers.

This paper analyzes the design of different types of cultural and creative products of the Palace Museum by semiotic approach. The plenty of cultural and creative products can be roughly divided into two product lines: the royal-culture line and the Ming-and-Qing-dynasty-aesthetic line. The Forbidden City is a huge treasure house for collecting royal treasures of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and is also a vivid record of royal history. The designers use these collections, which represent the royal majesty, combining them with daily necessities to launch a series of cultural and creative products, such as the mobile phone holder of embroidered uniform guards and the purse with a face of Zhong Kui, etc. The other product line that embodies the aesthetics of the Forbidden City is greatly represented by makeup. The Palace Museum has launched a series of makeup products. The design inspiration and color matching of the packaging all come from the treasures of the Palace Museum. The once-popular lipstick is packed with a purse in the style of ancient China. The colors are taken from the ruby collection in the Qing Dynasty, which is also the best example of integration of fashion products with traditional cultural elements. In fact, behind every popular product is countless creative output combined with the characteristics of the times, as well as the insight and analysis of consumer psychology.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Semiotics is a general theoretical discipline to study symbols. Its core is to study the communication function and symbolic meanings realized by sign system. The term "sign" comes from "sema" in Greek. The sign is the combination of signified and signifier. Saussure put forward the semiotics theory of dichotomy (Qi, 2010), that is, the theory of "signifier" and "signified". "Signifier" refers to the sound and shape of the sign, and "signified" refers to the conceptual connotation of the sign, which is the concept and meaning expressed by words. Although signifier and signified are closely related, the corresponding signifier of a signified is arbitrary. For example, the rose is a sign, when expressing love. Its signifier refers to the rose itself as a plant and its signified is the idea of love. The rose as a signifier is totally different from a rose as a signified. The former is

hollow, while the latter is meaningful. What makes the sign full of meaning is the signified (Li, 2000). Therefore, the signifier, signified and sign form a trinity. The sign connects the signifier and the signified, and the signifier and the signified constitute the sign. Semiotics is widely used by scholars to study the design of various cultural and creative products. It can be seen that semiotics can help scholars better understand the source of inspiration and the promotion of products.

Cultural and creative products can help the brand spread widely through the spontaneous promotion and pursuit from consumers. When an author from *Nanjing Daily* analyzed the design of Starbucks' coffee cups with semiotics (*Nanjing Daily*, 2019), he found that the cat's paw cup, which used the sign of cat's paw, was popular among young girls because of its cute, pink and other cultural elements. The city series coffee cups, using the representative buildings, persons, and places of a city as the core of design, have become souvenirs and art collections. Cultural and creative products that can be favored and actively spread by young people will help the brand and cultural symbol of Starbucks go around the world.

Each brand has its own unique cultural characteristics. Only the cultural and creative products designed by grasping the unique characteristics can become representative. For example, Huang Zhaohui has analyzed the cultural and creative product design of Huazhong University of Science and Technology (Huang, Wu, & Jin, 2019). Similar to the Forbidden City, the university is also a carrier of cultural brand. Xu Binxin pointed out that in the design of cultural and creative souvenirs of universities, "the deep-emotion extraction method of the fusion of campus culture and emotion" (Xu, 2015) is one of the methods for extracting cultural and creative elements from campus. In other words, culture is transformed into product design. When designing cultural and creative products, the most representative elements that can arouse people's resonance should be extracted and integrated into product design as signs.

The most widely existing classical elements in the Forbidden City have long been used in various products. Taking classical architecture as an example, Wang Xianchang pointed out that the patterns of lattice windows can be decomposed, segmented and reconstructed, and be made into relatively basic patterns. After adjustment of arrangement, symmetry and density, the patterns can be applied into the design of fragrance box, which can be easily sold and spread. The products designed with classical elements are elegant and cater to modern aesthetics, which provides rich inspiration for the cultural and creative industry (Wang, Liang, & Peng, 2020). In addition, the royal elements can also be used. Wang Xiaoxuan used semiotics to analyze the coffee cup of the Turret Coffee in the Forbidden City. The designer took the signifier of the dragon totem on ancient emperors'

clothing as a cultural symbol to be integrated into the design of coffee cups, and the signified behind it is good wishes as auspiciousness and happiness (Wang, 2020).

In conclusion, the value of cultural and creative products is not only reflected in their function, but also in a cultural form. It has rich meanings. Through cultural and creative products, people can experience a culture, a life and even a period of history, which reflects its significance, and cultural and creative products become our so-called signs. The design of cultural and creative products includes external appearance and internal essence. External appearance refers to the signifier, such as its shape, color, decoration, material, etc., which is tangible. It's the first impression and specific features that the appearance of these products can give. The inner essence is the meaning expressed by signs, and cultural values or other internal meanings expressed by the signifier. Therefore, the cultural and creative products are two-sided bodies containing signifier and signified. The designers of cultural and creative products need to express their meanings by proper signifier. The extraction of cultural and creative elements can be combined with the contemporary young people's preferences and popular things, or the cultural core of different cities. In addition, the traditional classical and royal culture of the Forbidden City can also be used as the source of product design. Such elements with high cultural added value are also favored by young people.

3. THE SEMIOTICS BEHIND THE PRODUCTS

In this study, the two most popular product lines of cultural and creative products of the Palace Museum are selected as the core cases for analysis, which are the royal-culture line and the Ming-and-Qing-dynasty-aesthetic line

3.1 The Royal-Culture Line

In most people's impression, "the Forbidden City" and "the museum" are serious and solemn existence, let alone the Palace Museum. In the past, the historical and cultural elements of the Forbidden City stood high above the masses and were restricted in the three-meter-tall red wall. General public could hardly have access to them. Since 2014, the Palace Museum has launched a series of cultural and creative products with the style of "unexpected cuteness". The products have been integrated with the characteristics of cute and folksy, forming a huge contrast with the image of imperial power and prestige. It has completely changed people's views on the "cold", "rigid" and "authoritative" of the Palace Museum in the past, allowing these valuable cultural elements to enter consumers' daily lives. By the end of 2016, there have been 9.170 types of cultural and creative products in the Palace Museum (Wang, 2018). These products are

historical, practical and interesting, and thus capture the hearts of a large number of young people.

Next, several examples of products are used to illustrate how the Palace Museum keeps a low profile and integrates cute elements into cultural and creative products.



Product 1: Mobile phone holder in the shape of a kicking embroidered uniform guard

The embroidered uniform guard first appeared in the Ming Dynasty as an exclusive military and political intelligence gathering agency set up by Zhu Yuanzhang, the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty. It had great power, second only to the emperor. As a military organization of the emperor, it was under the direct control of the emperor alone. It also had wide responsibilities and handled various affairs for the emperor. It not only protected the emperor as a bodyguard, but also was mainly engaged in reconnaissance, arrest and interrogation of prisoners. Most of the embroidered uniform guards had skilled Kungfu and great power. In ancient times, they were frightening. They wore uniforms with flying fish patterns and embroidered blades on their waists. They appeared and disappeared mysteriously, and used cruel means, which made people scared. However, the existence of the embroidered uniform guard consolidated the imperial power and strengthened the rule. From the analysis of the products, the Palace Museum launched this mobile phone holder made of the image of a kicking guard. Its signifier is that the ancient embroidered uniform guard is made into cartoon characters. Although the appearance is a Q version, it retains the traditional elements of the embroidered uniform guard, such as the yellow uniform with flying fish and the black cap. Even with a serious facial expression, it makes people feel friendly and lovely. The kicking gesture of the guard is the best-designed part. After re-designing, it not only highlights the guard's skilled Kungfu and great power, but also makes the guard approachable and adorable. It is in contrast with the frightening image of the embroidered uniform guard, which makes people feel secure and feels that they can give the mobile phone to him for safekeeping. Thus, the re-designed image of the embroidered uniform guards combined with the popular mobile phone holder used in daily life stands out in many derivative products and is favored by young people.



Product 2 Purse with a face of Zhong Kui

Zhong Kui comes from Chinese mythology. In ancient times, the image of Zhong Kui was widely used as decoration. During the New Year's Festival, every family pasted new year pictures with Zhong Kui on it. But Zhong Kui's appearance is very ugly. He has a scowled face with savage eyes and a beard covered his dark face. People even ghost will be afraid when seeing him. Although he has a ferocious look, Zhong Kui is open-minded and courageous. In Chinese folklores, he is the God of fighting ghosts and exorcising evil spirits. His main job is to catch ghosts. It is said that Zhong Kui can dispel evil spirits, guard houses, bless the society, and protect the people. He is a Taoist immortal who can meet people's needs and is also worshiped by ancient people.

The Palace Museum designed this purse made from the image of Zhong Kui. It's in the shape of Zhong Kui's head. The color is corresponded to Zhong Kui's red cloak. The design of the front of the purse has changed the original fierce image and added some adorable elements, such as the blush on his cheek and a heart on his hat. But it still retains Zhong Kui's unique appearance of hairy eyebrows and beard, glaring eyes are big nose, and a serious facial expression. The back of the wallet has a saying of "Heaven rewards the good". The designer has transformed the ancient God of fighting ghosts and exorcising evil spirits into a lovely purse. The most important idea is that it also contains the meaning of protecting money and blessing people. The ancient traditional meaning of Zhong Kui and the function of a purse are combined together. A purse with such design makes people feel more secure.

In conclusion, the cultural and creative products of the Palace Museum have cleverly transformed the inherent image of the original majestic, fierce, and superior ancient

characters into a folksy, friendly, and cute image through a series of cartoonization, and simplification. They achieve an "unexpected cute" effect, and integrate into daily life. The signifier of the product is transformed from the embroidered uniform guard, Zhong Kui and other authoritative officials or gods used for deterrence, into practical mobile phone holders, purses and other objects in people's lives. Thus, the original signified of threatening and eliminating evil spirits of the embroidered uniform guard and Zhong Kui has changed into a lovely, lively, and approachable image, allowing cultural elements to enter daily lives. The embroidered uniform guard and Zhong Kui are famous characters in history, and they are closely related to the Forbidden City and Royal Court. Changes in the signified of these concepts can also affect young consumers' associations with the concept of the Forbidden City, helping it get rid of the original aloof and decadent symbol of imperial power and become grounded, lively, interesting and modern. Therefore, it allows young people to have a close and affectionate feeling of the Forbidden City.

3.2 The Ming-and-Qing-dynasty-aesthetic line

Among all cultural and creative products of the Palace Museum, the most popular one is undoubtedly the Palace Museum makeup series. Makeup is a necessary fashion item for modern women. It is a trend and a symbol of aesthetic. In ancient times, women in palace also had their own objects to express beauty and show their status. The Palace Museum integrates the unique oriental aesthetic elements into modern cosmetics, which gives consumers a feel of the collision of ancient and modern cultures. Even though modern aesthetics is deeply influenced by western culture, the traditional aesthetics of oriental women still affects the world. More than 50,000 pieces of lipsticks were sold within 10 hours after the official launch of the Palace Museum Lipstick, with a sales volume of more than 5 million. The cosmetics launched by the Palace Museum were highly praised by consumers (Guo, Li, & Zhang, 2019). Here are two representative products.





Product 1
The Palace Museum Pouch Lipstick

As can be seen from its name, the Pouch Lipstick has a body made from the inspiration of the design and style of a pouch, and the color is inspired by the collections in the Palace Museum. The signifier of the pouch is the accessory of ancient residents. It is worn by both men and women. The pouch has a variety of shapes, and the patterns include simple and complex ones, such as flowers, plants, birds, beasts or landscapes, characters and auspicious words. As an auspicious decoration, the pouch has different signified meanings, but most of the them are used as a symbol of luck, peace, and happiness. In ancient times, the pouch embroidered by women was also used as a token of love, representing the affection. In addition, it was also favored by nobles as a symbol of status and rank. The ancient court women's lipstick was called "the rouge". It was originally made with bone marrow and beef tallow mixed with spices, and cinnabar. In the Tang Dynasty, beeswax replaced the marrow and fat (*Casual Ruminations*, 2015). In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, its formula changed to a blend of Cera Chinensis and safflower juice or vermilion. They could also take a piece of red paper and squeeze it between the lips. This is the earliest makeup used by ancient women to color their lips. In modern times, lipstick is a must-have for most women. Its signifier is the basic makeup for beauty, but the signified also expresses the pursuit of beauty by modern women and is a symbol of charm and elegance. The Pouch Lipstick launched by the Palace Museum is a combination of the ancient pouch and modern lipsticks. The outer front of each lipstick is a pouch of different patterns, which perfectly restores the shape and color of the pouch. On the sides of the product is the traditional auspicious pattern of "卐". (This pattern appeared in ancient India, Persia, Greece and other countries, and was later used by ancient religions. People first regarded it as a symbol of the sun or fire. Later, it was widely used as a symbol of auspiciousness (*Hanyu*, 2019). With the spread of ancient Indian Buddhism, "卐" was also introduced into China, with a meaning of auspiciousness in everything.) In addition, each color of the lipsticks is

taken from the cultural relics in the Palace Museum. They use a traditional oriental color – the oriental red. The color of the lipstick in the figure is inspired by the ruby from the Qing Dynasty, which is a collection in the Palace Museum.

The Chinese-style design of the Palace Museum brings ancient beauty back to young people's vision. Combined with contemporary fashion items, it satisfies young people's curiosity about ancient traditional beauty, without losing modern fashion styles.



Product 2: The Royal Seal Fragrance Balm

Another cultural and creative product is a combination of ancient literature and aesthetics. There were many types of seals in ancient times, including the official seals usually printed on documents to indicate identification or signature, book seals used for communication and announcements, and appreciation seals printed on the collection of books and paintings. The signifier of a seal is stationery used for signature or identification on documents and letters. The seal is also one of the representatives of traditional Chinese culture. Its signified reflects the noble interest of ancient literati, or represents a person's status. It also has a certain value of collection. The balm is similar to the seal in its signified. The balm can be said to be the ancestor of skin care products. From ancient times, it has been used as an effective way to maintain appearance and improve demeanor. Its signifier is the gel made from the extract of natural buds and petals. It was used by ancient women to decorate themselves. Its signified is the pursuit of beauty by the ancient literati and the embodiment of an exquisite life. Using and appreciating fragrance has long become the

tradition of oriental aesthetics. For this fragrance balm of the Palace Museum, the designer connects two elegant objects. The seal is used as a ceramic container with perfume inside, which has great elegant charm. In modern times, traditional seals are rare, replaced by official seals commonly used in corporate offices. At the same time, fragrance balm has become a thing of the past. At present, perfume has become a must-have fashion item for young people and many famous brands make perfumes. The signifier of perfume is a liquid with a special fragrance, which is extracted from natural flowers and trees. It is made into different spices and used to leave fragrance. Usually the signified of perfumes is an item used to enhance temperament and embody charm. It is also a social etiquette in modern society, common for both men and women. This antiquity balm combines elements of seals and fragrance balm from ancient times, and its function is the same as perfume. The purpose of its ancient appearance is to make modern young people who are pursuing beauty have a better experience and have a connection with the ancient fragrance balm, thus arousing interests in the culture of the Forbidden City while using it.

To summarize, the Palace Museum cosmetics products contain both the cultural heritage of the Forbidden City and popular fashion elements, combining and contrasting two aesthetic representatives which are originally hardly related. These products with cultural added value are creative, practical, and culturally stylish. People can gain knowledge from them and have a high pursuit of these products. This is also the reason why the makeup of the Palace museum becomes so popular.

CONCLUSION

Today's society is a highly information-based. To achieve both social and economic benefits, cultural products require not only creativity and quality, but also proper planning and marketing, and the gap between traditional culture and modern life needs to be narrowed.

There are three main reasons for the popularity and success of the cultural and creative products of the Palace Museum. First, from the perspective of product design, the Palace Museum has an experienced design team that strives to grasp the traditional culture on the one hand, and focuses on exploring modern expression on the other, in order to express the cultural creativity of the Forbidden City in various aspects. The solemn historical background of the Forbidden City is the foundation of its cultural and creative products. The Palace Museum integrates traditional elements such as architecture, collections, historical stories, images, colors, and patterns into products with modern design. The return to traditional aesthetics has given this great intellectual property a new life. Therefore, one of the core competitiveness of

cultural and creative products produced by the Palace Museum is to incorporate "cultural paradigm" into the design. Therefore, the cultural and creative products of the Palace Museum are based on the research results of the collections. The second point is to meet the practical needs of the public and promote a cultural life. The early cultural products of Chinese museums are mostly collection catalogs and reproductions, which can only attract a few collectors because of their low utility. Practical cultural and creative products can not only better satisfy consumers' pursuit of a cultural life, but also help increase the breadth and depth of museums' cultural publicity. In view of the products sold in the "Palace Museum Taobao", in addition to the general decorations, there are more commonly used daily necessities, such as mobile phone cases, mobile phone holders, bookmarks, wallets, lipsticks, and so on. These cultural and creative products are very popular with consumers for their unique designs, affordable prices and high practicability. Third is combination and innovation. The emergence of cultural and creative products gives people a chance to have a new understanding of the Palace Museum. The original dignified and solemn Forbidden City also has a down-to-earth side. With this contrasting and cute setting, the image of the majestic emperor in general impressions is reversed and deconstructed using the modern speech skills that meet young people's preference. People's inherent cognition is broken, and the historical characters become fresh and lively and close to the people. It not only incorporates traditional cultural elements into practical daily necessities, but also combines modern and cartoon design to achieve innovation.

Analyzing the success of the cultural and creative products of the Palace Museum has considerable significance and reference for the development of domestic museums, art galleries, cultural and creative institutions and even urban cultural brands. The Palace Museum is a world-class museum in China. Its collections and artworks represent the highest level in our country. From unsalable to popular, the cultural and creative design of the Palace Museum has achieved the creation of its own brand, which is of considerable significance. This is the root of the series of cultural and creative products in the Palace Museum, which spreads the idea of inheritance, and also brings novel ideas to practitioners. The rejuvenation of old brands is never to attend to trifles and neglect the essentials. The genes and culture of the brand will always be the core competitiveness. Whether for art gallery, museum or other cultural institutions, it can build its own brand and setting through the unique cultural heritage or urban characteristics.

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