

Conveying Spirit Through Form: An Exploration on the Shape Symbols of Foshan Awakening Lion Head

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Abstract

This study begins by focusing on the shape elements of the Foshan lion head, aiming to understand the unique design symbols and cultural significance of the vibrantly colored Foshan Awakening Lion. The research delves into the distinct features of the Foshan lion head, examining its role as a confluence of historical heritage, regional characteristics, and folk beliefs. Through an analysis of various visual elements of the lion head, such as size, shape, and decorative patterns, the study unveils the embedded cultural narratives and historical significances. Additionally, this research discusses the evolution of these elements within the Foshan lion dance culture, highlighting their importance in the preservation and development of Southern Chinese lion dance traditions.

The findings of this research contribute to a deeper understanding of the artistic value and cultural implications of the Foshan lion head. This work is of significant importance for the preservation of cultural heritage in the Foshan region and provides theoretical support for the research and inheritance of Southern Chinese lion dance culture. By offering a comprehensive cultural interpretation of the Foshan lion head's stylistic features, this study enhances the reader's understanding of its role and significance in the traditional culture of the Foshan area, offering valuable insights and directions for future research and practices in related cultural fields.

Keywords: Foshan Awakening Lion Head, shape element, shape symbol

1. Introduction

Foshan Awakening Lion, representing the Southern Lion, has garnered global attention for its unique artistic form and profound cultural depth. Since 2006, Guangdong's lion dance, particularly the Foshan variant, has become an integral part of China's intangible cultural heritage. The Foshan lion head, an indispensable prop in the Foshan Awakening Lion dance, not only carries the rich historical and cultural heritage of the Foshan area but was also officially recognized as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2008. The design, color, patterns, and decorations of the Foshan lion head perfectly blend the local folklore and regional characteristics of the Foshan area, making it a unique visual art form.

In China, there are Northern Lions in the north and Southern Lions in the south. Due to regional differences in customs and beliefs, there are significant differences in the appearance and performance styles of the Northern and Southern Lions (Gong, B. H., 1999; Zeng, Y. F., 2011). Generally, Southern Chinese lion dances focus more on decoration and exhibit more agile performance skills. The Northern Lions emphasize dance steps and performance content. For instance, the Xushui lion dance from Hebei Baoding features light and playful steps with realistically shaped props. In contrast, typical representatives of the Southern Lions in Guangdong, like the Foshan Awakening Lion, excel in dance performances, emphasizing drama and stories, with abstract and brightly colored props. In appearance, the Northern Lion resembles a real animal, while the Southern Lion is more exaggerated and imposing, resembling a lion in spirit.

This paper aims to deeply explore the stylistic symbols of the Foshan lion head, discussing its unique form and cultural symbolism. We will analyze the design elements of the Foshan lion head, including the structure and details of its shape proportions, cheeks, nose, mouth, ears, eyes, and horns, and how these elements reflect the history and cultural traditions of the Foshan region. Through an in-depth study of the various stylistic features of the Foshan lion head, this paper intends to reveal the cultural meanings and symbolic significances behind them, further elucidating how these design elements visually convey the essence of the Foshan Awakening Lion.

2. Literature Review

In the study of Chinese lion dance culture, some scholars believe that the core concept of the Awakening Lion lies in its performance, namely dance steps and skills. However, others argue that the development of lion dance culture requires efforts in multiple directions.

There is a close relationship between the Awakening Lion mask and cultural export. As background information indicates, the production methods for lion heads in the Guangdong region include “tying, pasting, painting, and embellishing”, based on these four production steps, the visual elements of lion head masks can be categorized into shape, color, pattern, and decoration. Research in the visual domain of the Awakening Lion is relatively underdeveloped, primarily due to the lack of materials in “lion head making”, a folk craft, and the difficulties in conducting field research.

Although lion head masks hold an important position in art and cultural studies, in-depth research on their visual symbols is relatively sparse. Most studies on the visual symbols of lion dance masks remain confined to basic descriptions of their shape or color. Scholars’ introductions to the shape of the Awakening Lion head are rather general. Wu, N., & Wang, X. C. (2021) mentioned that the Awakening Lion is derived from the Northern Lion but has transitioned from a concrete to a contemplative image style, with exaggerated and dramatized features... the Awakening Lion has a full forehead, protruding eyes and mouth, a single horn on top of the head, and an imposing figure. However, these descriptions stay at an abstract level, lacking detailed explanations of the design details, origins, or implications of the shapes. Similar literature is not uncommon. Zhou, J. (2014) analyzed the impression factors of Foshan Awakening Lion’s shape, noting the “exaggerated features, high forehead, huge eyes, and apricot-shaped nose”, along with detailed descriptions of the shape, including “the philtrum of the lions mouth turning upwards, and its lower jaw being a thin piece that can move up and down”. These descriptions, when combined with images in the text, present a clear picture of the lion head mask’s shape, yet the symbols represented by the shape remain unexplained.

Li, F. (2017) analyzed the origin of the Lingnan Awakening Lion’s horn, stating that the shape of the Awakening Lion is a fusion of the lion and unicorn features, with the single-horned lion’s shape originating from a legend: In the early Ming Dynasty, a terrifying unicorn appeared in Foshan. People wanted to “fight beast with beast”, so they made a lion with a single horn out of bamboo and paper, scared the monster away with drums and firecrackers, and since then, the single-horned lion has been considered an auspicious mascot. However, the article does not specify the source of the legend, nor does it provide further analysis of the horn’s shape. There are various shapes of horns on Foshan lion head masks. Yu, W. S. (2015) mentioned that the initial shape of the horns on the Foshan lion head was pointed, but as the design and performance of the lion head evolved, craftsmen created various shapes of horns, such as “spiky horns”, “fist horns”, “eagle horns”, “turtle horns”, and “elephant trunk horns (long curved horns)”. Descriptions like these, without visual illustrations, fail to convey to readers the distinctive features of the shapes, nor do they present the specific appearance, application scenarios, or design philosophy of these shapes.

It is evident that research related to the shape of the Foshan lion head still leaves much to be explored.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs qualitative research methods to delve deeply into and understand the design and cultural significance of the Foshan lion head masks. Qualitative research allows for detailed and in-depth analysis of various aspects of the lion head masks, thereby gaining a richer and deeper understanding of their artistic form and cultural background. The research process encompasses multiple steps from data collection to analysis, each aimed at gradually deconstructing the complexity and diversity of the lion head masks. This process includes extensive literature reviews, expert interviews, field observations, and case studies, ensuring a comprehensive capture of the essence of Foshan lion head masks from multiple perspectives.

Figure 1 presents the methodological framework adopted in this study. The research initially identifies the focal point as the design features of the Foshan lion heads, followed by the data collection phase, primarily conducted through diversified means such as literature reviews, expert interviews, and on-site investigations. Specifically, the core objective of this research is to identify the specific shape elements present in the Foshan Awakening Lion masks. To this end, an initial task is to conduct an in-depth analysis of related literature to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research topic’s background, which is crucial for subsequent data collection.