



**Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts**

**A Study on the Visual Symbols of the Guangdong Awakening Lion's  
Head Mask**

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A Study on the Visual Symbols of the Guangdong Awakening Lion's Head  
Mask

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## DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Except where due acknowledgements have been made, the work is that of the author alone. The thesis has not been accepted for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature of any other degree.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Lion dance, an ancient cultural symbol deeply embedded in Chinese heritage, particularly in Guangdong Province, boasts a unique and rich visual language. This research explores the visual symbols and elements within the lion dance masks of Guangdong, revealing the profound cultural, traditional, and artistic expressions they embody. The primary objective is to establish a comprehensive and reliable data framework of visual symbols associated with Guangdong lion dance masks, serving as a valuable resource for government agencies, traditional culture researchers, artistic creators, and industry professionals. This framework will lay the theoretical foundation for the effective protection, promotion, and development of this cherished cultural heritage. Employing a multifaceted approach, the study combines literature review, interviews, field investigations, theoretical analysis, image analysis, and comparative methods to meticulously examine the visual symbols of lion dance masks. This comprehensive approach provides a holistic overview of the visual landscape of lion dance masks across four distinct regions within Guangdong Province. Through a semiotics approach, the study unravels the intricacies and diversity of Guangdong lion dance culture, shedding light on its rich cultural significance and values. A thorough analysis of the visual symbols embedded within Guangdong lion dance masks, juxtaposed with existing literature and interviewee perspectives, reveals inconsistencies and gaps in the available documentation. Consequently, this study systematically addresses these shortcomings, filling the void in knowledge within this domain. This research serves as a cornerstone for future scholarly endeavors dedicated to Guangdong lion head culture. To fully harness its potential for cultural preservation, transmission, and global recognition, the government should implement appropriate measures. Such initiatives will undoubtedly empower this

research to contribute significantly to the safeguarding, perpetuation, and international dissemination of China's rich cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Lion dance masks, Visual symbols, Chinese heritage, Cultural preservation, Semiotics

## ***Kajian tentang Simbol-Simbol Visual pada Topeng Kepala Singa Pemanggil Guangdong***

### ***ABSTRAK***

*Tarian singa, simbol budaya kuno yang tertanam dalam warisan Cina, khususnya di Wilayah Guangdong, memiliki bahasa visual yang unik dan kaya. Penyelidikan ini meneroka simbol dan elemen visual dalam topeng tarian singa Guangdong, mendedahkan ekspresi budaya, tradisi, dan seni yang mendalam. Objektif utama adalah untuk membentuk rangka kerja data yang komprehensif dan boleh dipercayai mengenai simbol visual yang berkaitan dengan topeng tarian singa Guangdong, yang berfungsi sebagai sumber yang bernilai bagi agensi kerajaan, penyelidik budaya tradisional, pencipta seni, dan profesional industri. Rangka kerja ini akan meletakkan asas teori untuk perlindungan, promosi, dan pembangunan yang berkesan bagi warisan budaya yang dihargai ini. Menggunakan pendekatan pelbagai aspek, kajian ini menggabungkan tinjauan literatur, wawancara, penyelidikan lapangan, analisis teori, analisis imej, dan kaedah perbandingan untuk meneliti dengan teliti simbol visual pada topeng tarian singa. Pendekatan yang komprehensif ini memberikan gambaran menyeluruh mengenai landskap visual topeng tarian singa di empat wilayah yang berbeza di Wilayah Guangdong. Melalui pendekatan semiotik, kajian ini merungkai kehalusan dan kepelbagaian budaya tarian singa Guangdong, menyoroti kepentingan dan nilai budaya yang kaya. Analisis menyeluruh terhadap simbol visual yang tertanam dalam topeng tarian singa Guangdong, disusun dengan literatur sedia ada dan perspektif temubual, mendedahkan ketidakselarasan dan jurang dalam dokumentasi yang ada. Akibatnya, kajian ini secara sistematik menangani kekurangan ini, mengisi kekosongan pengetahuan dalam bidang ini. Penyelidikan ini berfungsi sebagai asas bagi usaha ilmiah masa depan yang didedikasikan untuk budaya*

*kepala singa Guangdong. Untuk sepenuhnya memanfaatkan potensinya untuk pemeliharaan budaya, penulisan, dan pengiktirafan global, kerajaan harus melaksanakan langkah-langkah yang sesuai. Inisiatif sedemikian tidak diragukan lagi akan memperkasakan penyelidikan ini untuk menyumbang secara signifikan kepada pemeliharaan, penerusan, dan penyebaran antarabangsa warisan budaya kaya China.*

**Kata kunci:** *Topeng tarian singa, Simbol visual, Warisan Cina, Pemeliharaan budaya, Semiotik*



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Baidu scholar	Baidu scholar official website
CAQDAS	computer assisted qualitative data analysis software
CNKI	China National Knowledge Infrastructure
De Sheng	De Sheng Musical Instrument Factory
Fo,He-style	Foshan & Heshan-style
Guan	Guan Gong; Guan Yu
H	height
Huang	Huang Zhong
L	length
Liu	Liu Bei
Ma	Ma Chao
W	weight
Zhan	Zhan Sudan
Zhang	Zhang Fei
Zhao	Zhao Yun

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Study Background

This study takes the visual symbol of lion dance masks as its research object. Starting with the visual elements of lion dance masks, it traces the origin and development of Chinese lion dance culture, outlines the historical context of Chinese lion dance culture, and uses the Guangdong Awakening Lion mask as a “viewfinder” to explore the inheritance and evolution, prosperity and decline, and intrinsic and expressive aspects of the visual symbol of the Guangdong Awakening Lion mask.

The development of lion dance culture in China has gone through several stages: it originated in the Eastern Han Dynasty, became popular during the Three Kingdoms period, thrived in the Tang Dynasty, widely spread during the Song Dynasty and developed various types of lion dances, and the “Awakening Lion” with distinct characteristics was developed in the late Qing Dynasty and early Ming Dynasty, but declined before the reform and opening-up era in China (Xie, 2020). Since the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization issued the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003), protecting human intangible cultural heritage has become a universal desire and common concern, and various forms of lion dance have re-emerged in front of the public as manifestations of “Intangible Cultural Heritage”.

### **1.1.1 Origin of Lion and Lion Dance**

The earliest book that recorded that lions were presented to China as gifts by the Western Regions was *The History of the Han Dynasty - Biography of the Western Regions*, which recorded that “the land of Wuyi is hot and flat. There are vegetation, livestock, grains, fruits and vegetables, food and drink, palace, market, money and goods, weapons, Taoba, Shizi, and rhinoceros”. Among them, “Shizi” means lions. Jin (*Jin Dynasty*) recorded in Volume 1 of “*The Biography of Mu Tianzi*” that “Suanni is also a lion and comes from the Western Regions”. Li (1982) is also indicated “*The Lion from the Western Regions*” in his book. The above information can clearly indicate that lions are not produced in China. During the Eastern Han Dynasty, Buddhism was introduced to China. In the Chinese version of the Buddhist scripture, the riding animal of Wenshu Bodhisattva is a green lion, which is known as the spirit animal of Dharma protector (Liang, 2012). The model of the green lion in Chaoshan, Guangdong, also follows the model of the legendary Green Lion. The appearance of lions is powerful and fierce, and they are often accompanied by Bodhisattvas. Since the Eastern Han Dynasty, folk people have closely linked “exorcism” with the model of lions. The legend and origin of lions in China have a wide influence on the decorative elements in ancient China. In Chinese folk, lion art has a variety of forms, mostly appearing in murals, stone carvings, gold and silver objects and other static objects. Lion dance is a performance activity and an important branch of lion culture (Ji, 2017).

There are also many explanations about the origin of lion dance. Ban, G., a famous historian of the Eastern Han Dynasty, recorded the “Xiangren” in the “*Book of Han · Rites*

and Music Annals”, it refers to people wearing masks to perform in sacrifice. Meng, K., a man from the Wei Dynasty of the Three Kingdoms, wrote in a note for “Xiangren” that “those who act fish and shrimp, which can also act lions”. This means that “Xiangren” is a masked artist who acts fish, shrimp and lion. It can be seen that there were lion role plays in the Han Dynasty, which was also called the predecessor of Lion Dance by scholars. Another origin is that during the Northern Wei Dynasty, there was a rebellion by the Huns. The Tartars made a wooden lion head and dressed as a lion with hemp rope. When paying tribute, the emperor of Wei was assassinated by a lion dance. Fortunately, the courtiers saw through and repelled the foreign enemies. Later, because the emperor of the State of Wei liked lion dancing, he ordered his courtiers to imitate the lion, so lion dancing was spread (Zeng, 2011). Yang (2011), the Northern Wei Dynasty wrote in the Records of “Luoyang Jialan” that “the six-tooth white elephant negates Sakya in the void. The solemn Buddha knows how to use gold and jade. It is difficult to be different in work. On April 4, this image often appears. The evil dispelling lion guides him in front of Buddha”. That is, when traveling in Buddhism, the lion leads the way with the role of law protection and exorcism. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the Buddhist temples were large, and the temple fairs were popular, the lion dance rose with it then.

By the Tang Dynasty, lion dance had become extremely popular. This can be seen in the “Yuefu Zaxun - Qiuci Department”: There are five lions in play. They are more than ten feet tall, each dressed in five colours. There are twelve people, they wear red, and they love to touch their forehead. They use the red brushes paint their clothes in red. People called them “Lion Man”, and this play called “Tai Ping Music”, it means “peaceful music dance” (Duan, Tang Dynasty). This is the five square lion dances in the court of the Tang