

Qinglü shanshui Colours and the Innovative Integration into Cultural and Creative Design: A Study from the Perspective of Saussurean Semiotics

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Abstract

Qinglü shanshui is a major genre of traditional Chinese painting with a unique colour language and rich cultural symbolism. Amid the rapid development of cultural and creative industries, the innovative transformation of traditional art in contemporary design has become an important research topic. Based on Saussure's semiotic theory, this paper takes the colours of Qinglü shanshui as a semiotic system of form and meaning. Combining the needs of modern cultural and creative design, it proposes an application logic: 'symbolic recognition—semantic analysis—semiotic translation—contextual reconstruction'. The conclusion provides a theoretical and methodological reference for the modern application of traditional Chinese painting elements, cultural product design, and visual communication.

Keywords

Saussurean semiotics; Qinglü shanshui; colour symbolism; cultural and creative design; innovation in traditional culture

1. Introduction

Qinglü shanshui (QLSS) is a representative genre of traditional Chinese painting, characterised by the use of blue-green mineral pigments to depict landscapes. Its distinctive features include vivid colours, the delicate effects achieved through the layering of multiple coats of paint, and a compositional structure that is both decorative and orderly. This painting style is highly recognisable. Since the Sui and Tang dynasties, QLSS has served not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a vehicle for the aesthetic ideal of 'harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature' within Chinese culture[1]. In other words, it is not merely an artistic style, but a visual manifestation of a cultural concept.

In contemporary society, with the development of the cultural and creative industries, traditional imagery and colour schemes are increasingly being applied to product design and everyday consumer contexts. Against this backdrop, how to translate the colours of QLSS from the context of traditional painting into a modern design language has become a key issue in current research on cultural and creative design.

However, judging by current design practice, the application of QLSS colours in cultural and creative design still faces significant challenges. Some products merely replicate the colours of ancient paintings, resulting in a disconnect from the original cultural context. Ultimately, this leads to designs that remain at the level of formal appropriation, failing to achieve a cultural expression with genuine distinctiveness and emotional depth. This creates an urgent need to establish a more interpretative theoretical bridge between traditional art research and contemporary design practice. Consequently, this paper introduces Saussure's semiotic theory

to interpret the deeper cultural connotations of QLSS, and, in conjunction with modern design, explores the pathways for the transformation of its colours from traditional symbols to a design language. This study aims to reveal the symbolic value of these colours and provide a theoretical reference for the modern design transformation of traditional Chinese colours.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Overview

2.1. Saussurean Semiotics

In his work on modern linguistics, Saussure pointed out that a sign is not a single entity, but rather a unity of the 'signifier' and the 'signified'. The former is the perceptible form, whilst the latter is the meaning generated through that form[2]. In the context of design, graphics, colour, materials, composition, patterns and even product form can all be regarded as signifiers at different levels; whilst the historical associations, emotional experiences, cultural identity and value judgements triggered by these forms constitute the signified dimension.

As a quintessential visual form, colour inherently possesses symbolic attributes. When it enters a specific cultural system, it transforms into an expression of historical memory, aesthetic identity and value systems. In the field of design studies, semiotics emphasises the interconnection between form and meaning, making it particularly well-suited to addressing the issue of recoding traditional cultural resources within a modern context. It is thus evident that Saussure's 'signifier–signified' analytical framework provides a clear pathway for research into the colour palette of QLSS.

2.2. A Study of QLSS Colours and Their Applications

Research on the colour palette of QLSS has largely focused on art history, traditional pigment techniques, and the aesthetic conception of landscape painting. Qi analysed the fundamental characteristics of classical QLSS paintings, ranging from form to colour[3]. Zhang conducted an in-depth analysis of the use of gold in traditional QLSS[4]. Chu using the 'Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains' as a case study, elucidates traditional Chinese aesthetic thought and values, as well as the traditional aesthetic criteria of literary grace and elegance[5]. He conducted an analytical study of the technical language and the creation of artistic atmosphere in QLSS[6]. These findings have provided a comprehensive insight into the historical context of QLSS's formation, its painting techniques, and its relationship with Eastern aesthetics and the veneration of nature.

At the same time, research into the application of QLSS colours has gradually attracted attention. The use of classical colours such as celadon, ochre, cinnabar and gold leaf is on the rise in visual communication, fashion design and brand packaging. Jin et al. explored the application of QLSS in the design of 'Guochao' trainers using modern design paradigms and the celadon colour scheme[7]. Li et al. extracted and reconstructed the colour elements of QLSS, applying them to ceramic cultural and creative design[8]. Zhou took the blue-green hues of the Song Dynasty as the subject of their research, applying the conceptual system, artistic expression and dyeing techniques of these hues to modern womenswear design[9].

Taken as a whole, existing research still has its shortcomings. At present, many analyses of QLSS place greater emphasis on art-historical descriptions, whilst failing to sufficiently explore the intrinsic structure of colour as a semiotic system. Applied research tends to focus more on design practice and case studies, lacking an explanation of the underlying logic behind the contemporary reinterpretation and acceptance of traditional colours. This indicates that there remains a lack of an intermediate analytical framework—one that combines cultural depth with practical applicability—between QLSS and cultural and creative design. This paper adopts a Saussurean semiotic perspective precisely to address this research gap.

3 A Semiotic Analysis of QLSS Colours

3.1 The 'Signifier' and 'Signified' of QLSS Colours

At the signifier level, the QLSS colour scheme manifests as a highly recognisable visual form. QLSS employs mineral pigments such as azurite and malachite to establish the dominant tones, complemented by materials such as ochre, white pigment and gold leaf to harmonise the rhythm and emphasise spatial elements. This colouring approach lends the composition a vivid, substantial, layered and highly decorative quality. The interplay of blue and green creates a complementary chromatic order across mountains, trees, rocks, clouds, water and architecture, thereby forming a cultural visual style that is instantly recognisable.

On a symbolic level, the stone blue in QLSS is not merely a natural attribute of 'blue', but is more commonly understood as an aesthetic image evoking grandeur, tranquillity and ethereality; stone green often symbolises vitality, nature and the continuity of life. The warmth conveyed by ochre is frequently associated with the earth, historical layers and the profound sense of mountains and rivers; gold, meanwhile, transcends its decorative function to further suggest opulence, solemnity and a sense of the sacred. Through long-standing cultural practice, the colours of QLSS have evolved from mere painting pigments into significant symbols embodying traditional Chinese cosmology, views of nature, and aesthetic ideals.

3.2 The QLSS Colour Coding System

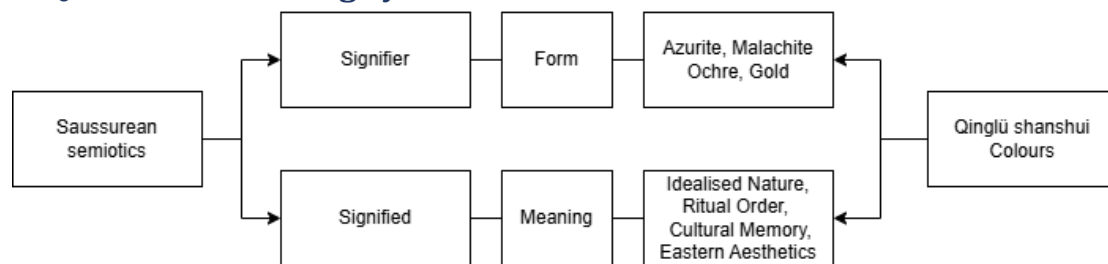


Figure 1: Colour structure diagram of QLSS based on semiotic theory

From the perspective of Saussurean semiotics, the QLSS colour system constitutes a cultural semiotic system composed of both 'signifier' and 'signified'. It can be summarised as a dual 'form-meaning' structure (Figure 1). In this system, colour forms such as azurite blue, malachite green, ochre and gold constitute the 'signifier'—that which is directly perceptible—whilst the natural concepts, aesthetic ideals, ritual order and cultural spirit embodied by these colours form their deeper 'signified'. It is precisely through the combination of these two elements that QLSS has formed a colour symbolic system with stable cultural connotations. The generation of its meaning relies both on the visual properties of the colours themselves and on the long-term accumulation and collective cognition within the context of traditional Chinese culture.

4 The Mechanisms of Translating QLSS Colours in Cultural and Creative Design

At the heart of cultural and creative design lies the identification, selection, reorganisation and reinterpretation of cultural symbols, enabling them to continue to evolve within new media, consumer contexts and aesthetic frameworks. Drawing on Saussurean semiotics, when QLSS Colour is integrated into cultural and creative design, it should follow a translational pathway that moves from the signifier to the signified, and then from the signified back to a new signifier. At the heart of cultural and creative design lies the identification, selection, reorganisation and reinterpretation of cultural symbols, enabling them to continue to evolve within new media, consumer contexts and aesthetic frameworks. Drawing on Saussurean semiotics, when QLSS

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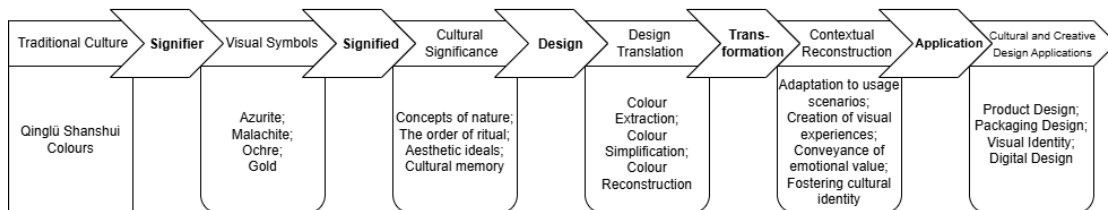


Figure 2: QLSS colour symbol conversion model

Figure 2 illustrates the QLSS model for the transformation of colour symbols. Traditional colour symbols are first identified as visual signifiers, and their cultural connotations are then interpreted as signified concepts. Through the application of design transformation strategies, these traditional symbols are transformed into contemporary cultural and creative designs.

4.1 Symbol Recognition

Table 1: Table of Core Colour Symbols Extracted from QLSS

Colour symbols	Source	Visual characteristics	Symbolic reference (signifier)	Cultural connotations (signified)
Azurite #1685a9	Mineral pigment: ultramarine blue	Vibrant colours with a distinct cool tone and profound depth	Visual representation of blue mountains, sky and mist	Clear, ethereal and vast, embodying the lofty aesthetic of Eastern landscapes
Malachite #206864	Mineral pigment: malachite green	Vivid and rich, full of vitality, with a strong decorative quality	A comprehensive colour scheme for forests, vegetation and slopes	Natural, vibrant and harmonious, symbolising vitality and ecological awareness
Ochre #845a33	Natural mineral or earth pigments	A calm, warm and earthy colour palette	Rock formations, land textures and transitional colour layers	Substantial, stable and unpretentious, reflecting the earth’s foundations and a sense of historical depth
Gold #eacd76	Decorative materials such as gold leaf and gold paste	Bright and opulent, highly reflective, with a pronounced decorative quality	Outline definition, focal accents and enhanced order	Noble, sacred and elegant, reflecting the ceremonial significance inherent in traditional aesthetics

Designers need to identify the representative primary, secondary and accent colours in traditional paintings, and understand the underlying logic of their combinations (Table 1). For example, azurite blue and malachite green are suitable for forming the visual focal point, ochre can serve a harmonising and transitional function, whilst gold is well-suited to enhancing a sense of ceremony and refinement. In addition to scientific colour values, designers should also pay attention to the aesthetic structure formed by colour relationships, ensuring that an order is established between colours.

4.2 Interpretation of Meaning

The QLSS colour palette has evolved over millennia of Chinese cultural heritage, giving rise to multiple layers of meaning. Examples include the philosophical concept of ‘the unity of heaven and humanity’ and the solemn, elegant aesthetic of the East. Designers must adapt the palette to the specific context. If a product emphasises its role as a cultural gift, the solemnity, elegance and sense of preciousness within the QLSS palette can be accentuated; if it is aimed at a younger consumer demographic, its freshness, naturalness and attributes of Eastern aesthetics can be highlighted. The transformation of symbols must be grounded in a thorough understanding of

the traditional cultural context to prevent design expressions from becoming vague or superficial.

4.3 Symbol Translation

Colour schemes in traditional painting often feature complex textures, intricate linework and shading, and two dimensional decorative effects. Given the constraints of modern cultural and creative products, such as material and manufacturing processes, production costs, media limitations and aesthetic simplification—designers can transform these traditional colour symbols into a visual language suited to modern communication. This might involve establishing a flat colour palette system, refining gradient relationships, simplifying the use of gold accents, or retaining the layered elegance of QLSS through the use of negative space, layout and material combinations. During this process of translation, it is essential to ensure that cultural attributes are preserved whilst employing modern design paradigms to make traditional symbols more accessible within contemporary life.

4.4 Contextual Reconstruction

Designers must ensure that the QLSS colour symbols, having undergone a modern transformation, are truly integrated into contemporary cultural and creative applications, thereby bringing the cultural value of traditional colours to life. For instance, cultural and creative products intended as gifts can create a sense of ceremony, allowing the audience to intuitively experience the cultural depth of QLSS. For everyday cultural and creative products aimed at younger audiences, designers can align with contemporary lifestyles by weaving QLSS's natural charm and Eastern aesthetics into the finer details of daily life. Ultimately, this enables the QLSS colour symbols to transcend the original context of traditional calligraphy and painting, forming a complete process of meaning transmission within new contemporary settings, thereby making traditional cultural symbols perceptible, usable and capable of being passed down through the generations.

5. Strategies for the Innovative Integration of Traditional Chinese Landscape Painting Colours and Cultural and Creative Design

5.1 Simplified Integration



Figure 3: QLSS coloured stationery packaging design

Designers can retain QLSS's most distinctive primary colour scheme, whilst streamlining and standardising the core visual symbols. This ensures that traditional colour symbols can be adapted to meet the production requirements of fast-moving consumer goods in the creative sector, such as stationery. As shown in Figure 3, the author's custom QLSS-inspired stationery

packaging design extracts core primary colours such as azure and verdigris, whilst rendering the landscape motifs with simple lines. This enhances the recognisability of the QLSS colour scheme and instantly evokes associations with Eastern colours in the audience.

5.2 Reconstructive integration



Figure 4: QLSS colourful scarf design

Designers can extract the underlying structure from QLSS colours and reinterpret them through modern materials, techniques and product forms. Take, for example, the scarf designed by the author (Fig.4), which transforms the layered interplay of blue-green hues into a gradient effect in the fabric, enabling the product to retain its traditional character whilst embodying the aesthetics of modern living. This reconstructive fusion better reflects design creativity than simplification, and is more conducive to generating high added value.

5.3 Narrative integration



Figure 5: QLSS Colour Gift Box Design

Designers can use the QLSS colour palette as a central narrative thread to weave together its historical context, landscape aesthetics and philosophical implications. Through the rhythmic variation, hierarchical progression and contextual adaptation of colour, they can guide the audience in perceiving the cultural significance of QLSS. For instance, in the gift box packaging (Fig. 5), the designer employs a colour gradient from azurite blue to malachite green to correspond with the spatial narrative of the landscape in 'A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains', allowing the audience to immerse themselves in the QLSS culture as they unbox the

item. The incorporation of narrative transforms QLSS colours from static visual elements into a cultural medium capable of forging emotional connections.

6 Summary

Drawing on Saussurean semiotics as its theoretical foundation, this paper offers a systematic discussion of the cultural structure of QLSS colours and the pathways for their transformation into cultural and creative design. The research indicates that QLSS colours are not merely visual forms, but rather a symbolic system jointly constituted by concepts of nature, ritual order, aesthetic ideals and collective cultural memory. Truly valuable innovative integration in cultural and creative design should enable the audience to naturally immerse themselves in the cultural atmosphere created by QLSS whilst using the product. Only when both the visual and semantic layers of the symbols are simultaneously activated can QLSS colours gain new vitality in contemporary design.

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