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From Motif to Typeface: Semiotic Translation of Ancient Dian Bronze Drum Visual Systems into Contemporary Typography

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Abstract

This study investigates how visual motifs from ancient Dian bronze drums can be systematically translated into contemporary typography through a semiotic design framework. Ancient Dian bronze drums, dating from approximately the 3rd century BCE to the 1st century CE in the Yunnan region of southwestern China, represent a distinctive material culture characterized by complex symbolic and decorative systems.

Adopting a qualitative design-based research approach, this study integrates literature review, artefact analysis, field investigation, and design experimentation. Selected bronze drum examples were analyzed based on visual clarity, representativeness, and symbolic relevance. Semiotic analysis was conducted using Saussure's signifier–signified model and Peirce's classification of signs to examine the relationship between visual form and cultural meaning. Based on this analysis, a four-stage design process—cultural decoding, symbol extraction, design reconstruction, and functional and semiotic validation—was developed. Key formal elements, including circular forms, curved contours, and linear structures, were abstracted and translated into typographic components while maintaining visual coherence and legibility.

The findings suggest that semiotic translation provides a systematic and transferable approach for integrating indigenous material culture into contemporary visual communication. The resulting "Bronze Drum Font" demonstrates how culturally embedded meanings can be preserved and rearticulated within a contemporary typographic system. This study contributes to design research by proposing a structured methodology for culturally informed typographic design and highlights the potential of traditional visual systems as sources of design innovation in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: Semiotic translation, Dian bronze drums, Typographic design, Cultural heritage design, Visual semiotics

Introduction

Typography functions not only as a system for textual communication but also as a visual medium through which cultural values and historical meanings are conveyed. In contemporary design practice, increasing attention has been given to the integration of cultural heritage into visual communication, particularly in response to globalization and the growing need for culturally grounded design approaches (Navarrete, 2013). However, although traditional motifs have been widely incorporated into graphic and product design, relatively limited research has systematically examined how indigenous material culture can be translated into structured typographic systems.

Ancient Dian bronze drums, dated approximately between the 3rd century BCE and the 1st century CE in the Yunnan region of southwestern China, represent a distinctive material culture characterized by complex symbolic and decorative systems. Within the broader context of Southeast Asian bronze drum traditions, including the Heger typology, Dian drums reflect localized cultural expressions while sharing formal and symbolic features with regional traditions. The decorative motifs found on these artefacts—such as geometric patterns, animal representations, and narrative scenes—are closely associated with belief systems, ritual practices, and social structures of Dian culture (Zhang, 2000; Eberhard, 2006). Within this broader framework, Dian bronze drums can therefore be

understood as a localized variation that reflects both shared structural features and distinct cultural expressions. While the Heger typology provides a comparative classification of bronze drums across regions, Dian examples exhibit unique decorative compositions closely associated with regional belief systems and social practices (Zhang, 2000).

Previous studies have interpreted motifs found on Dian bronze artefacts—such as geometric patterns, animal representations, and narrative scenes—as reflections of ritual practices, social hierarchy, and symbolic belief systems (Sullivan, 1992; Zhang, 2000). While these studies provide important archaeological and art historical insights, their potential as structured visual systems applicable to contemporary design remains underexplored.

In this study, specific motifs were selected based on their frequency of occurrence, visual clarity, and symbolic relevance within Dian material culture. This selection ensures that the extracted visual elements are not arbitrary but grounded in both cultural significance and formal structure, thereby providing a reliable basis for typographic abstraction.

At the same time, many contemporary typographic designs that draw upon cultural elements tend to rely on intuitive stylistic adaptation rather than systematic analytical processes (Navarrete, 2013). This limitation highlights the need for a methodological framework capable of translating cultural forms into typographic structures while preserving both symbolic meaning and functional readability.

To address this gap, this study adopts semiotic theory as both an analytical and design-oriented framework. By conceptualizing visual elements as signs composed of form and meaning, semiotics enables a structured interpretation of how cultural symbols can be transformed into typographic components (Saussure, 2011; Peirce, 1998; Chandler, 2017).

In addition, the cultural and geographical context of the Dian Kingdom provides an important foundation for understanding the significance of bronze drum visual systems. The Yunnan region, located in the southwestern frontier of China, has historically functioned as a cultural intersection connecting East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. Archaeological evidence indicates that Dian culture shares certain structural and symbolic characteristics with broader bronze drum traditions across Southeast Asia, including the Dong Son culture of Vietnam and related material cultures in mainland Southeast Asia (Sullivan, 1992; Zhang, 2000). This interconnected context suggests that Dian bronze artefacts should not be understood in isolation but as part of a wider regional system of visual and symbolic exchange.

Furthermore, previous research has emphasized the archaeological, historical, and artistic values of Dian bronze artefacts; however, their modes of cultural transmission remain relatively limited, often confined to museum display and academic interpretation (Navarrete, 2013). In contemporary contexts, where visual communication plays a central role in cultural dissemination, there is a need to reinterpret such artefacts through design-oriented approaches that enhance accessibility and engagement.

Accordingly, this study aims to develop and validate a systematic framework for translating the formal and symbolic characteristics of Dian bronze drum motifs into a contemporary typographic system. By positioning typographic design as a medium for cultural translation, the study rearticulates the visual language of ancient artefacts into forms that are communicative and adaptable to contemporary media, thereby bridging the gap between cultural heritage and contemporary visual communication practice.

Literature review and theoretical framework

Previous studies on bronze drums have primarily focused on typological classification, decorative analysis, and their socio-cultural functions within ancient societies. The Heger typology has been widely adopted as a comparative framework to identify regional variations in form, structure, and decorative systems across Southeast Asia and southern China. Research on the Dian Kingdom further emphasizes the relationship between bronze artefacts and burial practices, social hierarchy, and ritual symbolism, highlighting their role as markers of cultural identity (Sullivan, 1992; Zhang, 2000). However, these studies are predominantly grounded in archaeological and art historical perspectives, and the potential of bronze drum motifs as structured visual systems for contemporary design—particularly typographic design—remains underexplored.

Semiotic theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding how visual forms generate meaning through systems of signs. Saussure's model of the sign, consisting of the signifier and the signified, establishes a fundamental basis for interpreting the relationship between visual form and conceptual meaning (Saussure, 2011). Complementing this, Peirce's triadic classification of signs—icons, indexes, and symbols—offers a more nuanced understanding of how visual elements operate within cultural contexts (Peirce, 1998). These theoretical perspectives have been widely applied in visual communication and design studies to examine processes of symbolic representation and meaning construction (Peirce, 1998; Chandler, 2017).

In the field of design, semiotics has increasingly been employed as a methodological tool for translating cultural elements into contemporary visual forms. Previous studies have demonstrated its application across graphic design, product design, and visual identity systems, showing how cultural symbols can be adapted for modern audiences (Navarrete, 2013). Nevertheless, many of these approaches rely primarily on intuitive or stylistic interpretation rather than systematic analytical processes. In particular, limited research has examined how semiotic analysis can be rigorously applied to the development of typographic systems derived from traditional visual motifs.

Building on these perspectives, this study positions semiotic translation as a structured methodological approach that bridges cultural analysis and typographic design. By integrating semiotic interpretation with visual structural analysis, this research establishes a systematic process for transforming the formal and symbolic characteristics of Dian bronze drum motifs into contemporary typographic forms.

The relationship between signifier and signified in visual motifs is illustrated in Figure 1.

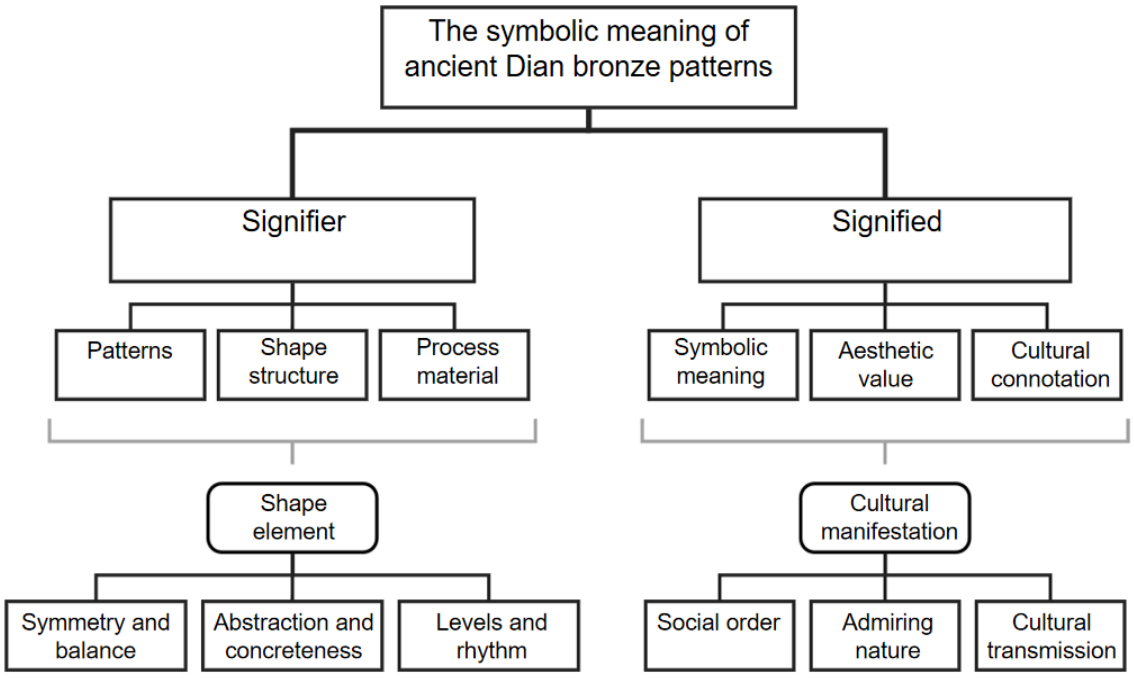


Figure 1 Semiotic framework illustrating the relationship between signifier and signified in ancient Dian bronze patterns. **Source:** Drawn by the author

Methodology

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative design research approach that integrates document analysis, field investigation, and practice- based design. Semiotic analysis and visual structural analysis are employed to interpret cultural symbols embedded in

Dian bronze artefacts and to translate these elements into contemporary typographic design.

Data sources and research materials

The primary research materials consist of bronze artefacts from the Lijiashan Bronze Museum, selected as representative examples of Dian material culture. A total of 11 artefacts, including bronze drums and shell containers, were selected using purposive sampling based on three criteria: visual clarity, completeness of decorative motifs, and symbolic relevance. These artefacts exhibit a range of decorative motifs and compositional structures that are relevant to both visual analysis and symbolic interpretation.

Data collection was conducted through multiple methods. Field investigation enabled direct observation of material characteristics, including casting techniques, surface textures, and compositional arrangements, which are not fully accessible through secondary sources. Semi- structured interviews with experts provided interpretative insights into symbolic meanings and approaches to design translation. In addition, questionnaire data were used to examine audience perception of the design outcomes.

The integration of these methods supports the analysis of both visual structure and cultural meaning, and facilitates the translation of artefact- based visual elements into typographic design.

Data collection methods

Document analysis

Relevant literature, including archaeological reports, historical records, and academic publications related to Dian culture and bronze artefacts, was systematically reviewed to establish the historical and cultural context of the study. These sources provided foundational knowledge regarding the development, characteristics, and cultural significance of Dian bronze culture, and informed the interpretation of visual motifs in relation to belief systems and social structures (Zhang, 2000).

Field investigation

Fieldwork was conducted at the Lijiashan Bronze Museum. Artefacts were examined through direct observation, photographic documentation, and visual sketching. Structured observation forms were used to record motif structures, compositional arrangements, casting techniques, and aesthetic features. This process enabled the systematic documentation of visual elements and supported subsequent visual structural analysis.

Interviews

Semi- structured interviews were conducted with five experts from relevant fields, including bronze culture, iconology, typography design, museum management, and exhibition design. The interviews focused on the interpretation of symbolic meanings, analytical approaches to visual motifs, and strategies for design translation. The data obtained provided qualitative insights that supported both cultural interpretation and the development of the typographic design process.

Questionnaire survey

A questionnaire survey was conducted to evaluate the design outcomes and exhibition effectiveness. A total of 200 exhibition visitors participated in the survey, with a target of at least 150 valid responses. In addition, three design experts with professional experience were invited to evaluate the typographic design. The questionnaire focused on aesthetic perception, readability, and communicative effectiveness. The results were used to assess audience reception and to support the evaluation of design performance.

Analytical framework

The analytical framework integrates semiotic analysis and visual structural analysis. Semiotic analysis was employed to interpret symbolic meanings embedded in bronze motifs, including representations of animals, rituals, and social activities, based on the theoretical perspectives of Saussure and Peirce (Saussure, 2011; Peirce, 1998) . Visual structural analysis was used to examine formal characteristics such as composition, symmetry, repetition, and line structure. The integration of these approaches enabled the identification of key visual elements and their translation into typographic components (Chandler, 2017).

Data analysis

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key insights related to cultural meaning and design evaluation. Questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, and mean values, to assess audience perception and the effectiveness of the typographic design. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data supported the interpretation of both design process and design outcomes.

Design translation process

Based on the analytical results, key visual elements were extracted from bronze motifs and translated into typographic components through three main strategies: (1) symbol extraction, focusing on essential visual and symbolic features; (2) stroke replacement, integrating extracted elements into typographic stroke structures; and (3) structural embedding, applying compositional logic derived from bronze patterns to typographic organization. These strategies were applied iteratively to ensure consistency between cultural representation and typographic functionality.

Design implementation

Three sets of experimental typefaces were developed based on the extracted motifs. Each typeface consists of approximately 20 Chinese characters, designed by integrating bronze pattern elements with the fundamental stroke system of Chinese characters. The design process was carried out using digital design tools, with iterative refinement to ensure both aesthetic coherence and readability.

Evaluation and validation

The design outcomes were evaluated through expert assessment and audience feedback. Expert evaluation focused on cultural representation, visual translation accuracy, and structural coherence, while audience feedback assessed readability, aesthetic perception, and communicative effectiveness. To ensure research validity, data triangulation was applied by integrating document analysis, field observation, interviews, and questionnaire data (Chandler, 2017).

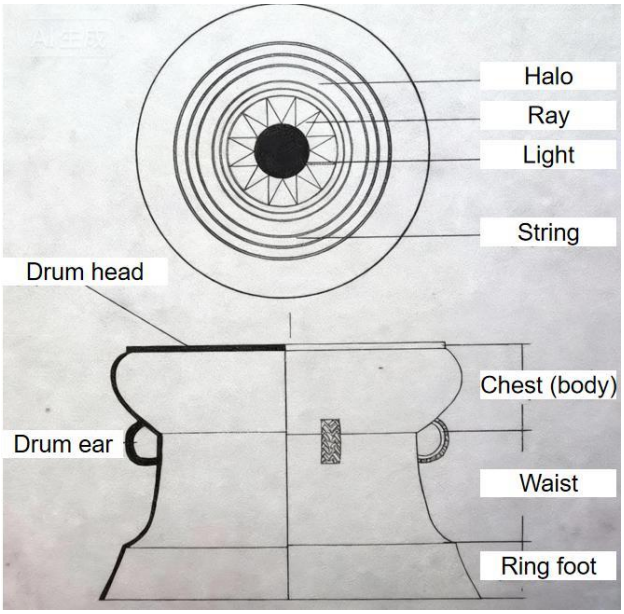


Figure 2 Structural components of an ancient Dian bronze drum, illustrating the relationship between the drumhead, body, waist, base, and suspension ears.

Source: Lijiashan Bronze Museum.



Figure 3 Geometric and rhythmic pattern arrangements observed on the surface of ancient Dian bronze drums.
Source: Lijiashan Bronze Museum.



Figure 4 Decorative patterns and figurative motifs on ancient Dian bronze drums, reflecting ritual practices and social activities.
Source: Adapted from archaeological records.

Results and analysis

Classification of visual motifs

The structural components of Dian bronze drums, including the drumhead, body, waist, and base, provide a framework for understanding the spatial organization of decorative motifs (see Figure 2). The analysis of Dian bronze artefacts identifies three primary categories of visual motifs: geometric patterns, animal representations, and human or figurative scenes. These motifs are consistently integrated within the surface composition of bronze drums and related artefacts (Zhang, 2000).

Geometric patterns are predominantly organized in repetitive and radial arrangements, often forming concentric structures (see Figure 3). These patterns emphasize symmetry, rhythm, and continuity, contributing to the overall visual coherence of the artefacts.

Animal motifs, including stylized representations of birds and other creatures, are characterized by simplified forms and dynamic contours (see Figure 4). These motifs frequently exhibit directional movement and curved line structures, contributing to a sense of visual flow.

Human or figurative motifs appear in narrative compositions, where multiple figures are arranged in structured sequences (see Figure 5). These scenes demonstrate hierarchical organization and spatial relationships, indicating a high level of compositional complexity.

Beyond their formal characteristics, the visual motifs identified in Dian bronze artfacts also convey symbolic meanings associated with belief systems, social organization, and ritual practices. The analysis indicates that these motifs can be interpreted across three interconnected dimensions.

First, a significant number of motifs reflect forms of nature worship, including representations of animals, celestial elements, and natural phenomena (Zhang, 2000; Sullivan, 1992;). These visual elements suggest a cosmological worldview in which human life is closely linked to natural forces. Animal motifs, in particular, are associated with symbolic meanings related to fertility, protection, and abundance (Eberhard, 2006).

Second, the motifs illustrate aspects of social life and collective activities. Figurative scenes depicting human interaction, ritual gatherings, and processional arrangements reveal insights into the social structure and communal practices of Dian society (Zhang, 2000). The organization of these scenes demonstrates hierarchical relationships, indicating distinctions in status and social roles.

Third, certain motifs function as symbols of power and authority. The presence of specific animals, objects, and compositional arrangements is associated with elite identity, ritual leadership, or political status. For example, the representation of large animals such as cattle has been interpreted as a signifier of wealth and social hierarchy, particularly in funerary contexts (Eberhard, 2006; Zhang, 2000).

These symbolic dimensions support the interpretation of Dian bronze artefacts as structured visual systems in which form and meaning are closely integrated. This interpretation provides a foundation for their subsequent translation into typographic design.

Structural characteristics of motifs

The visual analysis identifies several key structural features across the motif categories. First, radial symmetry functions as a dominant compositional principle, particularly in geometric patterns, where elements are arranged around a central axis. Second, repetition and modularity are observed in both geometric and figurative compositions, enabling motifs to extend across the surface. Third, line structure plays a critical role in defining form. Curved lines are frequently used to construct contours, while straight and segmented lines define internal structures. These characteristics provide a formal basis for visual abstraction and transformation (Williams, 2012; Eberhard, 2006).

Typographic translation

Based on the identified structural features, the visual elements were translated into typographic components through three main strategies: symbol extraction, stroke replacement, and structural embedding. These strategies were derived from the formal and compositional characteristics identified in the previous analysis.

Geometric motifs informed the development of circular and modular typographic structures, particularly

in the organization of letterform proportions and spatial alignment. Curved contours derived from animal motifs were applied to stroke formation, introducing variation in line quality and enhancing visual dynamism. In addition, the compositional logic observed in figurative motifs was adapted to guide spatial arrangement and structural balance within typographic forms. Through this process, visual elements derived from bronze patterns were systematically integrated into letterform construction while maintaining legibility and structural consistency (Navarrete, 2013).

The process of typographic translation requires a balance between the preservation of cultural characteristics and the functional requirements of typography. Based on the analysis, three design principles were identified to guide this process.

The first principle, cultural authenticity, emphasizes the representation of visual elements derived from bronze motifs through selective abstraction. Instead of directly replicating decorative forms, essential structural and symbolic features were retained to preserve cultural meaning.

The second principle, visual harmony, focuses on the integration of extracted elements into coherent typographic forms. This involves the adjustment of proportions, stroke relationships, and spatial organization to ensure consistency across the typeface system.

The third principle, functional adaptability, addresses the practical requirements of typography, including readability, scalability, and usability across different media contexts. The typographic forms therefore maintain a balance between expressive visual qualities and communicative clarity.

In addition, the translation process involves a shift from representational imagery to abstract structural components. This transformation enables the integration of motif- derived elements into typographic systems without compromising legibility, while retaining their cultural reference.

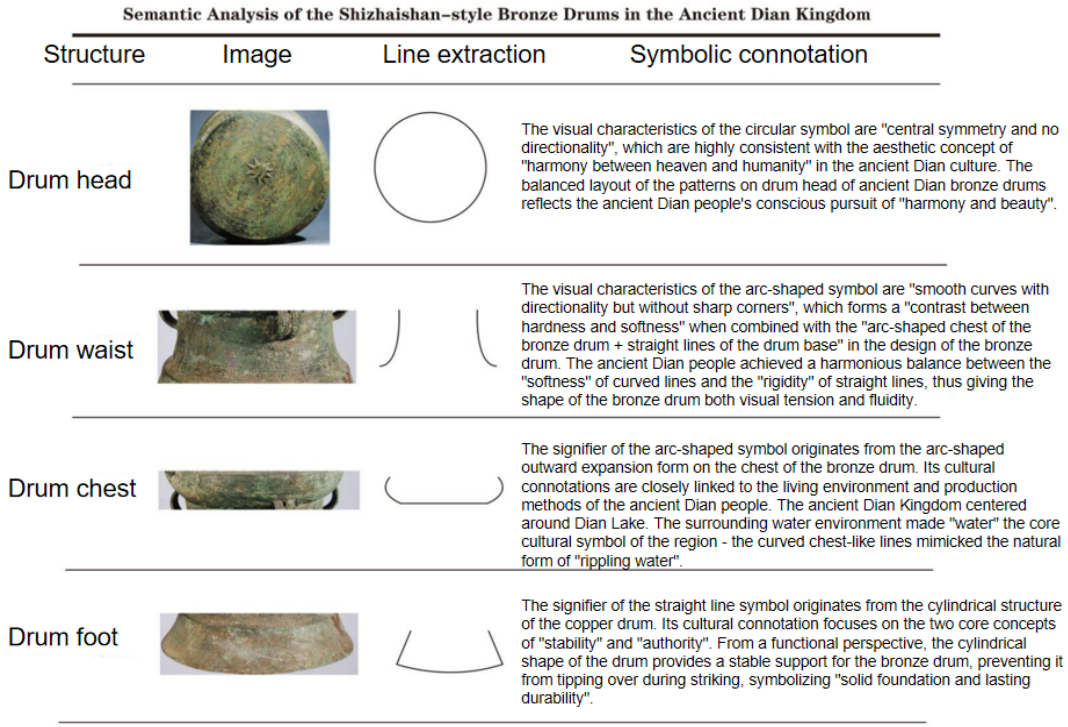


Figure 5 Analytical diagram illustrating the semiotic extraction of formal elements from ancient Dian bronze drums.
Source: Drawn by the author.

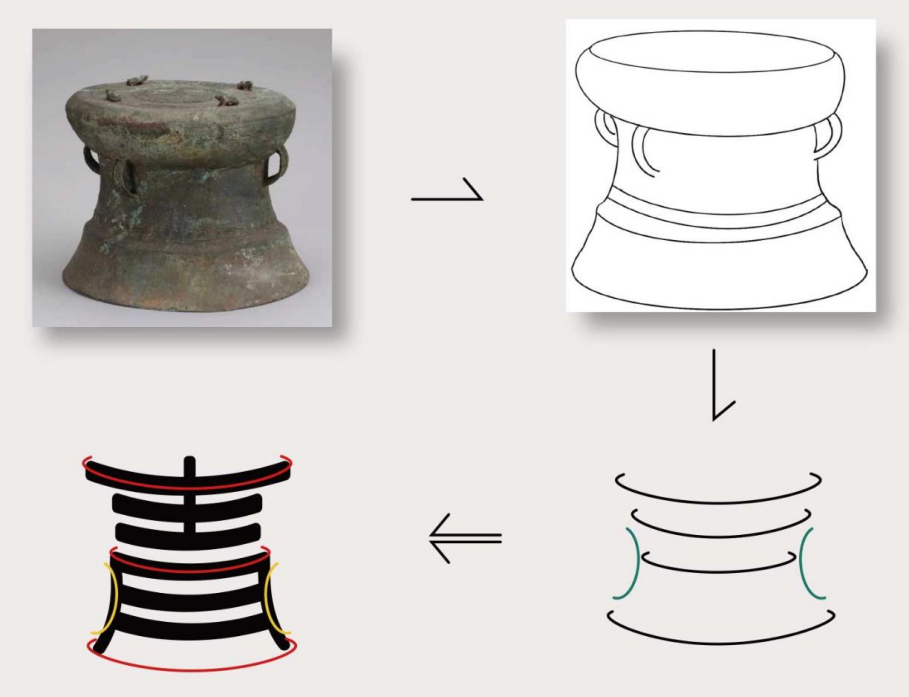


Figure 6 Schematic diagram of the design process.
Source: Drawn by the author.

Design outcomes

The final design outcome consists of three sets of experimental typefaces developed through the typographic translation process described in Section 4.3. Each typeface reflects different levels of abstraction and structural integration derived from bronze motifs, demonstrating variations in the application of symbol extraction, stroke transformation, and compositional embedding. The typefaces were applied in the exhibition project " Patterns of Bronze," demonstrating their adaptability across different visual communication contexts. The applications include exhibition graphics, visual displays, and supporting communication materials, in which the typefaces function both as informational text and as visual identity elements.

The evaluation results, based on expert assessment and audience feedback, indicate that the integration of traditional visual elements into typographic design can maintain both functional readability and a distinct visual identity (Samara, 2020; Heller & Anderson, 2016).

The expert evaluation demonstrated that the proposed typeface successfully established a distinctive visual identity by drawing inspiration from the structural characteristics of ancient Seal Script while integrating the symbolic motifs of Dian bronze drums. The experts agreed that the typeface effectively conveyed a sense of historical authenticity and cultural continuity, making it highly appropriate for communicating themes associated with ancient Yunnan civilization and bronze drum culture.

Despite these strengths, the experts identified several aspects requiring further refinement. The most significant concern was the consistency of stroke construction. Variations in stroke thickness, curvature, and structural treatment across different characters reduced the overall visual harmony and coherence of the typeface. In addition, the experts observed that the spacing between characters and the distribution of internal white space were not sufficiently balanced, resulting in uneven visual rhythm and composition.

Another important issue involved character legibility. Although the highly stylized forms enhanced the artistic quality and cultural identity of the typeface, some complex characters became difficult to distinguish because several strokes had been excessively stylized. Consequently, viewers were required to exert greater effort to recognize and read certain characters.

To improve the design, the experts recommended establishing more consistent standards for stroke thickness and curvature throughout the typeface,

refining character spacing and internal composition to achieve better visual balance, and simplifying selected character structures while preserving the overall cultural identity and artistic expression of the design. Furthermore, they suggested strengthening the cultural representation through an appropriate colour scheme inspired by the natural patina of ancient bronze artefacts. Specifically, they recommended using verdigris green as the primary colour, complemented by light green, dark green, and copper- red accents to evoke the weathered surface of Dian bronze drums and reinforce the symbolic and cultural associations embedded in the typeface.



Figure 7 Demonstration of the "Bronze Drum Font" design effects.
Source: Drawn by the author.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that the visual system embedded in Dian bronze artefacts can be systematically translated into a contemporary typographic framework through the integration of semiotic analysis and design practice. The findings confirm that geometric, animal, and figurative motifs are not merely decorative elements, but structured visual forms that convey cultural meanings related to ritual practices, social hierarchy, and symbolic belief systems (Zhang, 2000; Eberhard, 2006).

The analysis further indicates that formal characteristics such as radial symmetry, repetition, and dynamic line structures provide a coherent visual logic that can be adapted into typographic design. These features enable the transformation of cultural motifs into functional letterforms while maintaining visual consistency and readability. In this respect, the study extends previous research on bronze artefacts, which has primarily focused on archaeological classification and cultural interpretation, by demonstrating their applicability within a design- oriented framework (Zhang, 2000).

From a methodological perspective, the results highlight the importance of a structured approach to cultural design translation. Unlike many contemporary design practices that rely on intuitive or stylistic adaptation, this study shows that semiotic analysis can serve as a systematic framework for identifying and transforming cultural symbols into typographic elements (Chandler, 2017; Eco, 1976). This approach establishes a clear linkage between cultural

interpretation and design implementation. At the same time, the study emphasizes that Dian bronze culture represents a predominantly non-literate visual system. The translation of these visual elements into typography does not imply direct linguistic correspondence, but rather a visual-structural reinterpretation. The resulting typefaces should therefore be understood as semiotic transformations rather than literal representations of historical meaning. This distinction clarifies a key theoretical limitation in applying archaeological imagery to contemporary typographic design.

The evaluation results further support the effectiveness of the proposed approach. Expert assessment indicates that the typographic designs retain essential cultural characteristics while achieving structural coherence. Audience feedback suggests that the designs are visually engaging and communicatively effective, reinforcing the potential of typographic design as a medium for cultural communication.

This study contributes to design research in three main aspects. First, it proposes a semiotic-based framework for translating cultural motifs into typographic systems. Second, it demonstrates the applicability of archaeological visual resources in contemporary design practice. Third, it establishes a systematic process that integrates cultural analysis, visual structure, and design implementation.

However, the study is subject to certain limitations. The selection of artefacts from a single museum context may not fully represent the diversity of Dian bronze visual systems. In addition, the evaluation focuses primarily on perceptual responses rather than long-term usability in typographic applications. Future research may extend this suggests that the proposed semiotic translation framework has broader applicability beyond Dian bronze artefacts, particularly in the development of culturally grounded typographic systems in other heritage contexts.

Conclusion

This study investigates the semiotic translation of visual motifs from Dian bronze artefacts into contemporary typographic design. By integrating cultural analysis, semiotic interpretation, and practice-based design, the research establishes a systematic framework for transforming traditional visual elements into typographic forms.

The findings demonstrate that structural characteristics of bronze motifs—such as symmetry, repetition, and line organization—can be effectively adapted into typographic construction while preserving their cultural significance. The proposed design strategies, including symbol extraction, stroke replacement, and structural embedding, provide a practical and transferable approach for integrating cultural elements into contemporary visual communication.

This study contributes to design research in two key respects. First, it demonstrates that indigenous material culture can serve as a structured visual resource for typographic innovation when examined through a systematic analytical framework. Second, it highlights the role of semiotic theory as a methodological bridge between cultural interpretation and design practice.

However, the study is limited to selected artefacts and specific design applications, which may not fully represent the diversity of Dian bronze visual systems. Future research may extend this approach by examining a broader range of cultural materials and by testing the applicability of the proposed method across different design contexts.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

The author(s) used generative AI tools only for language editing and grammar improvement. All content was reviewed, verified, and approved by the author(s), who take full responsibility for the manuscript.

CRediT author statement

Geng Yun: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – original draft; **Puvasa Ruangchewin:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Correspondence; **Chakkrit Buakaew:** Validation, Resources, Writing – review & editing.

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