A Feature Analysis of Oroqen Ethnic Group’s Semiosphere

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The traditional pattern is the cultural sign of the Oroqen ethnic group, which is the concentrated embodiment of the history, society, customs and religion of Oroqen ethnic group. Semiosphere is an important theoretical concept in Lotman cultural semiotics. Starting from the theory of Lotman’s semiosphere, the paper interprets the concept of semiosphere and the connotation of Oroqen traditional pattern semiosphere, analyzes the overall characteristics of Oroqen traditional patterns, and provides certain theoretical basis for better protection and inheritance culture.

Keywords: Lotman’s semiosphere, Oroqen ethnic group’s traditional patterns, feature

Oroqen ethnic group is one of the smallest population in the Northeast part of China and according to China’s National Census of 2000, the population of Oroqen ethnic group is only 8,198. Oroqen ethnic group is the one that only has an oral language and does not have written language. Besides, it is an ethnic group which directly transits from the primitive society to the socialist society. Before 1953, Oroqen ethnic group had been living in the forests, which was a nomadic hunting ethnic group. Therefore, they were called “the people living in the forests”, “the people living in the mountains”. Up to the present, Oroqen ethnic group has gone through four social transitions, including autonomy change, settling down from mountains, farming after being prohibited hunting and the social development with the guidance of the 18th CPC National Congress. All these transitions have formed unique Oroqen ethnic group’s culture, and constitute the semiosphere of Oroqen ethnic group. In this ethnic group with only language without words, traditional patterns carry the symbolic function of recording history and inheriting culture, and have also become a characteristic sub-sign domain in the cultural semiosphere of Oroqen ethnic group.

Research Status of Oroqen Ethnic Group’s Traditional Patterns

The Oroqen ethnic group is a unique ethnic group in the Northeast part of China. As one of the least populous ethnic groups in China, they have been living in the Khinggan Mountains. It is a nomadic ethnic group and has always made a living by hunting. In the last second half of the 20th century, the Oroqen people have experienced four historic leaps, respectively establishing the first autonomous place of residence (autonomous regime change) in China in 1951, the downhill settlement in 1953 (lifestyle change), the hunting ban from agriculture (production mode change) in 1996, and the all-round economic and social development of the Oroqen ethnic group.
people since the 18th CPC National Congress. In its unique development process, Oroqen has continuously formed and evolved into rich cultural signs, forming Oroqen cultural signs with oral creation, music, dance, plastic art and pattern. It can be said that the semiosphere of the Oroqen ethnic group is the cultural background, cultural environment and cultural space of the Oroqen ethnic group, and the aggregation of the history, concepts and customs of the Oroqen ethnic group. Because the semiosphere is a dynamically developed multi-dimensional space, “it is not only a unified parent system including various independent subsystems, but also the premise and conditions for the existence and function of many subsystems” (Zheng, 2005, p. 52). That is, the semiosphere of Oroqen ethnic group’s art patterns is a subsystem of the semiosphere of Oroqen ethnic group’s culture. Oroqen ethnic group is a hunting one in the northeast of China, whose traditional pattern is a decorative art with special hunting ethnic characteristics in the northeast of China.

There are also many scholars studying Oroqen ethnic patterns, mainly focusing on the perspectives of clothing art, social culture, national history and so on. Most works are not genuine academic works, but a collection of Oroqen ethnic group traditional patterns. The works of Oroqen ethnic group briefly expounds ancient Chinese culture, the formation and development of unified multi-ethnic countries, the contribution of ethnic groups to the history of Chinese art, and then explores the art in the primitive social period to the history of ethnic group art in the Qing Dynasty. From the following works, it can be concluded that the Oroqen pattern is composed of a single pattern or multiple pattern elements. The pattern content includes animal pattern, plant pattern and geometric pattern. The shape structure is mostly symmetrical and balanced “one” shaped structure, “ten” structure, “human” Chinese character structure, “X”-shaped structure and “meter” shaped structure. However, few people interpret the Oroqen patterns from the theoretical dimension, but only it is the elaboration of the collection or production principle of the Oroqen patterns.

In addition, there have been few studies explaining ethnic culture from the dimension of semiosphere. Although Wu (2011) and Yuan (2019) applied semiosphere to Dongba visual art and dance symbols respectively, the study of Oroqen signs, especially the pattern semiosphere, is still not much.

**Semiosphere**

Lotman proposed the concept of “semiosphere” in 1984 and explained it in his monograph in *The World of Thinking*. Lotman’s idea of semiosphere stems from Vernatsky’s concept of “biosphere”. Semiosphere views culture as a system of signs, a space where signs exist and operate. The space here refers to the cultural environment and cultural background. That is, the semiosphere is the space where signs exist. The collection of semiotic forms functionally precede a single isolated language and becomes a condition for the existence of the latter. Without a semiosphere, the language not only does not work, but also exist.

The concept of semiosphere is closely related to semiotic homogeneity and individuality, which implies the boundary between sign and non-sign space in the sign domain and surroundings.

Vertically, the semiosphere is divided into non-semiotic and extra-semiotic spaces, nuclear and periphery structures from the point of the boundary. Irregularity is a rule of the organisation of the semiosphere (Lotman, 2005, p. 207). Therefore, the core task of Lotman’s cultural semiotics is to study the functions of how culture works, expresses meanings, and generates new meanings.
The Semiosphere of Oroqen Ethnic Group’s Patterns

“When human beings acquire a great sensitivity to material control and sense of form due to the making of tools, it gradually leads to a brand new aesthetic need: People are no longer satisfied with the making of daily utensils, nor even with the shape of the utensils themselves, but should try their best to add certain decorations on the utensils or engage in the creation of utensils for the main purpose of service and decoration” (Kong, 2000, p. 48). The traditional art form of Oroqen ethnic group is different from the special form of documentary history, but it quietly conveys the ancient information with its own unique, exaggerated and abstract decorative modeling (Guo, 2014). These ancient information cannot be separated from the space of the Oroqen ethnic life. The Oroqen people live in the Greater and Minor Khinggan Mountains all the year round. Nature presents rich natural resources to the Oroqen ethnic group. To some degree, the traditional material access of the Oroqen people often comes from the lifestyle of hunting and production. The traditional patterns of Oroqen ethnic group originate from the living space they live in. They use animals, flowers and birds with unique thinking creation, artistic techniques and processing creation to create unique traditional decorative patterns of Oroqen ethnic group and a strong culture of ethnic and regional characteristics.

Since the traditional Oroqen people live in the mountains all the year round, they have conceived a kind of awe and worship towards everything in nature. The Oroqen ethnic group view nature from a spiritual perspective, and they add worship elements of nature to the production of patterns. Oroqen women have been doing food collection work and have deep feelings for the plants they contact in daily labor. When they are engaged in another work, such as embroidery or carving, these plants in contact become the source of their materials, so embroidery patterns naturally reflect their familiar life, which is the main characteristic of the early development of the traditional Oroqen patterns.

However, the formation of the Oroqen traditional pattern semiosphere is not a single static one. Its formation, development and evolution are all influenced by various semiosphere. “Semiosphere as a carrier of national culture, as a national cultural environment, it embodies the cultural semiotic system and cultural spirit connotation, and embody the national cultural integrity” (Zheng, 2007, p. 83). In the process of Oroqen’s marriage with other ethnic groups, Oroqen traditional patterns are gradually being abundant, for example, on the basis of the traditional bears, tigers and fire magic lines, dragon lines appears. When trading with other ethnic groups, elements such as horse string patterns, cloud patterns and eight-treasure patterns are also woven into the traditional patterns of Oroqen ethnic group.

Characteristics of Oroqen Traditional Pattern Semiosphere

According to Peirce, signs are divided into representatum, object and interpretant (CP 1.372). The interpretation of signs depends on the role of interpreters, who involve both the makers of the pattern and consumers at the individual level. As signs, the Oroqen traditional pattern semiosis is endowed with the meaning of Oroqen signs by the designers and producers of the signs, which carry the meaning. Appreciators of the pattern symbols interpret the meaning. In other words, the pattern designer gives the intention meaning and becomes the sender of the meaning; the pattern works carries the meaning and has the text meaning, and the appreciator or consumer of the pattern signs has the explanatory meaning of the patterns. Zhao (2016, p. 51) points out that “three meanings of semiosis are embodied the former step by step; intention meaning is embodied in text
meaning (subjective ideas are implemented to text expression), text meaning is embodied in explanatory meaning (the ‘pending’ meaning of text becomes the meaning of ‘becoming’). In turn, these three meanings are also denying the former step by step. Therefore, “intention meaning”, “text meaning” and “interpretation meaning” jointly build the network of the meaning of the Oroqen pattern, from producers of patterns to consumers all contain the interpretation of meaning. Signs must have meanings. “Once the receiver sees a certain perception as a sign, it becomes the explanatory object, and once the sign becomes the explanatory object, it must make meaning. The interpreter’s intention to interpret, so that the signs carry meaning” (Zhao, 2016, p. 49). In Lotman’s opinion, the continuum formed by various signs is called the text, the text and the combination of text will form the culture, and the various combinations of culture will need to operate in a specific circle of signs (Yuan, 2019, p. 73). Therefore, the existence of the semiosphere is to provide a large interpretable existence space for the Oroqen culture. Meaning arises from the interaction between the elements of the pattern and the semiosphere. According to Lotman, semisphere has a feature of irregularity, asymmetry and boundary, so does Oroqen ethnic group’s cultural semiosphere, where the generation, development and evolution of any Oroqen pattern are inseparable from the influence.

**The Irregularity of Oroqen Ethnic Group’s Traditional Patterns**

The irregularity of the overall structure of semiosphere show various different signs with different features, and their development speed and number are not consistent. Irregularity is mainly reflected in the different properties of languages, different rates of development in the semiosphere, and the heterogeneity of semiosphere is often unusually complicated by various levels of mixing. Although Lotman’s theory of semiosphere is centered on the natural language, it still guides the art language as a third language.

First, in terms of the composition of traditional Oroqen patterns, they are rarely composed by a single pattern. Even if there is a single symbol composition, the elements of the symbol composition are different. Through literature review and interviews with traditional orqen folk artists and inheritors of intangible culture, we know that the patterns of Oroqen mainly include animal patterns, plant patterns and geometric patterns.

Second, from the perspective of semiosis of Oroqen traditional pattern, different combinations of pattern signs constitute different meanings. For example, the traditional Oroqen patterns are human Chinese character structures, and the graphics formed are triangular composition, and its composition gives people a firm, steady and lasting formal aesthetic feeling. The beauty of the traditional schema composition of the Oroqen ethnic group inherits the crystallization of wisdom and expresses the positive and living will of the people of Oroqen for hard struggle.

Third, the “mixing” of various signs in the semiosphere of the Oroqen ethnic group makes itself complex, reflecting the richness of the traditional patterns of the Oroqen ethnic group. With the continuous development of ethnic decorative art in Oroqen, the early Oroqen animal patterns as the theme gradually transits to abstract freehand brushwork and plant patterns with distinctive ethnic characteristics. Flower patterns include abstract pattern with leaves as the prototype of the leaf pattern, tree pattern, flower and plant lines based on the decorative pattern, flower bud grain. Geometrical pattern is mainly single and double return pattern, water ripple, triangle pattern, round dot pattern, thong pattern, vortex pattern, etc. Plant ornamentation is mostly symmetrical pattern symbols, cross frame and radiation form, with the most prominent flowers-nanchuoluo flower, whose decorative
style is simple, rich in levels, and very representative of ethnic groups. While developing the ethnic decorative patterns, the Oroqen people also absorbed the pattern signs from other ethnic groups, such as “Swastika” and signs standing for longevity to enrich their own pattern signs.

The Asymmetry of Oroqen Ethnic group’s Traditional Patterns

The asymmetry of the Oroqen pattern semiosphere is mainly reflected in the relationship between the core and periphery on the structure. The core space is the most developed part of semiosphere and the most organized in structure, while periphery space is less developed and organized in structure. Therefore, core and periphery embody the asymmetry of semiosphere (kang, 2006, p. 44). Actually, Lotman’s semiosphere is limited in glottocentrism or logocentrism), but it is still instructive for non-verbal symbols.

The formal beauty of symmetry and equilibrium is the most distinctive in the traditional patterns of the Oroqen ethnic group, and is always in the center of the semiosphere, for example. The mass flower pattern of Oroqen ethnic group takes the main image of a flower as the center, and other decorative patterns revolve around the main image in turn, forming the effect of gradual change layer by layer. However, this fixed central pattern, although ensuring the stability of the pattern, at the same time the diversity is lost, making the pattern appear single and rigid. The intelligent Oroqen people have changed on the periphery of the pattern, such as the width of form, the main and secondary of content, and the cold and warmth of color. It is these contradictory changes that make the pattern full of vitality and more vivid. The core and the periphery of the two are indispensable, which constitutes the artistic characteristics of lively Oroqen traditional ethnic pattern, and shows the strong artistic creation ability and interesting aesthetic consciousness of the Oroqen ethnic people.

The Boundary of Oroqen Ethnic group’s Traditional Pattern Semiosphere

The boundary of the Oroqen pattern semiosphere is mainly reflected in the two internal and external spaces. The internal space refers to the original ethnic culture or living environment of the Oroqen ethnic group; relative to the internal space, the boundary of the Oroqen pattern semiosphere is like a “filter”, which integrates the cultural pattern of the outer space with the text of the semisphere of the Oroqen cultural semiosphere, transforming the others of the outer space. Due to the continuous intensification of ethnic integration, the dragon culture satisfied after the Qing Dynasty also entered the Oroqen people combined the god of rain with the river god, which was the early Oroqen dragon god, and is reflected in its pattern carving into the self of the internal space. After four social changes, Oroqen ethnic group has brought about changes in the way of life or living environment, which has made the patterns constantly enriched and changed.

It is the boundary of the pattern semiosphere of Oroqen Ethnic Group can maintain its own distinctive cultural characteristics, reflecting the ancient tradition and production and life. Patterns of Oroqen ethnic group can be handed down and passed on by generations of ethnic cultural inheritors. In addition, Oroqen pattern semiosphere boundaries and fusion, in the process of ethnic integration, can absorb other cultural signs into its culture, making its culture richer and richer.

Conclusion

Up to now, few researchers explore culture of ethnic groups from the perspective of semiosphere, not to mention combining it with the Oroqen ethnic group. Semiosphere for the Oroqen ethnic group is the space
where signs of traditional patterns exist, which has a feature of asymmetry, irregularity, and boundary. For the irregularity, it shows that traditional patterns mostly contain different elements and various combinations of pattern signs constitute different meanings. In terms of asymmetry, it mainly reflects the relationship between the core and periphery of the structures of traditional patterns. As for the boundary, it embodies the influence that other ethnic groups have on the Oroqen ethnic group’s traditional patterns. Therefore, from the Lotman’s semiosphere, the definition, connotation and characteristics of semiosphere are analyzed, and used for the analysis of Oroqen ethnic cultural semiosphere. It can be found that the Oroqen pattern semiosphere is a dynamic system, with “asymmetry”, “heterogeneity” and “boundary”, having laid the foundation for further explore the inheritance of Oroqen cultural signs.

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