Semiotic Analysis of Political Symbolism in Shi Lifeng's 'The Puppet Player'

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Shi Lifeng's painting *The Puppet Player* constructs and communicates political narratives through visual symbolism. Despite the frequent use of Mao Zedong's imagery in Chinese contemporary art, limited research examines how Lifeng's visual language functions as a political statement. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework—denotation, connotation, and myth—this qualitative study analyzes color, spatial composition, object symbolism, and figure gestures in the artwork. The analysis reveals that dominant red hues, hierarchical composition, and theatrical staging signify ideological control and social struggle. These visual strategies expose how authority and manipulation are normalized through aesthetic codes. The findings highlight Lifeng's critical stance toward power structures and his use of design principles to challenge political memory. This research contributes to the discourse of visual communication by demonstrating how semiotic analysis can decode layered meanings in politically charged imagery, offering insights for designers and researchers in understanding symbolism and narrative construction within visual art.

Keywords: Shi Lifeng, semiotic analysis, political symbolism, visual communication, Chinese political art

INTRODUCTION

Shi Lifeng's *"The Puppet Player"* presents a striking visual metaphor: a puppet master manipulating miniature figures on stage, interpreted as Mao Zedong—a symbol of centralized power in Chinese history. Rather than offering a direct historical narrative, the painting reframes Mao's political legacy into a visual commentary on control, authority, and individual agency. Such imagery resonates with long-standing debates on how art encodes political critique within visual symbols.

In Chinese contemporary art, political figures—particularly Mao—have been recurrent subjects, often refracted through satire, irony, or symbolic abstraction (Andrews, 1994; Langefeld, 2023; Wang, 2019). Previous studies have examined how artists reinterpret socialist iconography to critique modern China's socio-political reality, such as in *Political Pop* works that manipulate historical imagery for new meanings (Langefeld, 2023), or in collaborative art projects re-enacting Maoist history to engage with collective memory (Hung, 2011; Tan, 2012). However, much of this scholarship focuses on well-documented figures like Yu Youhan or collective works, leaving a gap in the analysis of Shi Lifeng—whose surreal theatrical staging and use of Mao-era symbols create an ambiguous yet potent critique.

Shi Lifeng, a contemporary artist born in Shijiazhuang in 1968, is recognized for his persistent use of red tones, Mao-era references, and allegorical characters (Ravenel International Art Group, 2018). Drawing from both personal memory and collective history, his works function simultaneously as aesthetic artifacts and political statements. In *"The Puppet Player"*, the puppet-master motif becomes a vehicle for exploring the mechanisms of political control and their social consequences, aligning with Barthes' idea that images carry a "second order" of meaning beyond the literal (Barthes, 1977).

This study addresses the limited scholarly attention to Lifeng's semiotic strategies in visualizing power during the Mao era. By applying Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, it seeks to uncover how *"The Puppet Player"* constructs and communicates political meaning. Such an inquiry is timely, given the enduring relevance of political symbolism in visual culture and its implications for the field of Visual Communication Design—particularly in informing the creation of symbols, narratives, and visual campaigns that engage with political histories and contested memories.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach grounded in semiotic analysis within the discipline of Visual Communication Design. The focus is to examine how the visual elements in Shi Lifeng's *the Puppet Player* function as deliberate communication devices that construct and convey political narratives. This approach prioritizes interpretive decoding over statistical generalization, enabling the identification of how composition, symbolism, and color operate as communicative signs in political artwork (Pelkey, 2020).

Roland Barthes' semiotic framework—denotation, connotation, and myth—is employed to decode the painting's visual signs and link them to the historical, political, and cultural context of Mao-era China. In this context, the artwork is treated not only as an aesthetic object but as a designed visual message with embedded ideological content, aligning with Wood's (2017) designer-centric adaptation of pragmatic semiotics for visual communication studies.

The **unit of analysis** comprises design components such as color schemes, spatial composition, symbolic objects, figure gestures, and foreground-background relationships. These elements are examined as multimodal communicative tools that structure visual storytelling and guide audience interpretation (Magnusson & Godhe, 2019).

Data collection involved high-resolution visual documentation of the artwork, direct observation, and literature review covering Shi Lifeng's artistic corpus, Mao-era socio-political contexts, and prior applications of semiotics in political visual design. The analysis followed the interpretive process of Strauss and Corbin's (2017) grounded theory coding, ensuring a systematic breakdown of visual signification into analyzable units.

Through this methodological lens, the study seeks to reveal how Shi Lifeng's design strategies transform static visual forms into politically charged narratives, thereby contributing to semiotic scholarship in Visual Communication

Design and informing contemporary approaches to political messaging and symbolic visual storytelling.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Roland Barthes (1981) in his semiotic theory outlined three levels of meaning—denotation, connotation, and myth—used to deconstruct visual signs. In this study, Barthes' framework is applied to analyze Shi Lifeng's painting *The Puppet Player* (2007), focusing on how visual elements operate as communication devices in constructing political narratives. The analysis is positioned within the field of Visual Communication Design, where design elements such as color, composition, form, and symbolism function as tools to shape messages and influence audience interpretation (Wood, 2017; H. Zhang & Wei, 2024).

Shi Lifeng is known for his dominant use of red, dense compositions, and faceless puppet-like figures as a metaphor for the Chinese collective. His post-stroke stylistic changes—marked by more expressive lines, intense colors, and a more fragmented structure—add a connotative dimension of psychological tension that merges with a critique of political repression. Within Barthes' framework, these visual changes enrich the connotative and mythical layers of meaning, where emotional instability becomes part of the narrative of oppressive power (Zeng & Zhu, 2024; J. Zhang, 2025).

Figure 1. Shi Lifeng, 2007, Shi Lifeng
Source: https://www.liveauctioneers.com/price-result/shi-lifeng/

A. Denotation and Connotation Analysis

1. Denotation

The painting depicts Mao Zedong standing behind a red chair adorned with Chinese motifs, manipulating several small red puppets via strings attached to a stick. The background is a flat, pale blue. The puppets occupy different positions—some on the stage of the chair, others climbing, flying, or at the base.

2. Connotation

From a Visual Communication Design perspective, the red color palette functions as a dominant visual code, connoting revolution, collective struggle, and ideological intensity (Dong, 2023; Yu et al., 2025). Mao's placement at the compositional apex establishes a clear visual hierarchy, directing the viewer's gaze toward the power figure before guiding it downward along the puppet strings to the subjugated figures. The tight, confined spatial composition communicates a

sense of entrapment, while the expressive, sometimes fragmented lines suggest instability and coercion (Riaz, 2024).

The stage-like chair operates as a visual metaphor, separating the sphere of political performance from reality, thereby framing the narrative as a constructed spectacle. Here, Barthes' idea of connotation emerges through the interplay of formal elements: color conveys ideological charge, composition enforces dominance, and texture expresses psychological tension.

B. Myth Analysis

At the level of myth, *The Puppet Player* visualizes the concept of ideological control—Mao as the orchestrator of societal movements, the puppets as citizens shaped by political will. The upward-placed puppets symbolize aspirational progress within the regime, while those pushing or cutting the chair embody resistance to established authority.

Integrating Barthes with Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, the work communicates how visual signs—color dominance, symbolic objects, and compositional hierarchy—naturalize power relations, making control appear inevitable or even justified (Duan, 2021; Gramsci, 1992). The painting's mythic layer thus reveals how design elements operate not only as aesthetic choices but as ideological instruments that shape collective perception.Linking Visual Elements to Barthes and Visual Communication Design.

Visual Element	Denotation	Connotation	Myth (Ideological Meaning)
Dominant red color	Mao's body, chair, and puppets in deep red.	Represents revolution, collective strength, and intense emotion (Dong, 2023).	Communist revolution as the "natural" historical destiny of Chinese society.
Vertical composition	Mao at the top, puppets below, chair in between.	Visual hierarchy emphasizing Mao's dominance.	Power "naturally" placed at the top of the social order.
Chair with Chinese motifs	Large red chair with traditional patterns as puppet stage.	Symbol of political stage and performance of power.	Power presented as culturally sanctioned tradition.
Puppets in various positions	Some on top, climbing, flying, or at the base.	Social dynamics: success, struggle, or resistance.	Social hierarchy seen as inherent to the system.
Flat blue background	Solid color behind Mao and chair.	Visual contrast to highlight the subject; sense of ideological "space."	Power isolated in an idealized realm.
Expressive, broken lines	Uneven, sometimes fragmented contours.	Suggests tension, instability, and coercion.	Social instability normalized within authoritarian order.
Tight spatial layout	Figures and objects closely packed, little empty space.	Implies confinement and lack of freedom.	Restricted space as a natural consequence of authoritarian structure.

Table 1 Relationship between visual elements, denotation, connotation, and myth in the puppet player
Source: author's documentation

C. Critical Perspective and Research Contribution

Unlike previous studies that broadly discuss color symbolism in Chinese contemporary art (Bao, 2020; Chen & Chu, 2022; Gladston & Hill, 2014; Li & Dechsubha, 2023; Vecco et al., 2016), this research positions *The Puppet Player* squarely within Barthes' semiotic framework and directly links it to Visual Communication Design principles. The focus is on how visual elements are not merely aesthetic, but function as a medium of communication, shaping perception,

delivering critique, and influencing public interpretation of political ideology (Yu et al., 2025; Zeng & Zhu, 2024).

This combination of semiotic analysis with visual communication design reveals how design decisions—such as spatial constriction, hierarchical composition, and symbolic color—serve as rhetorical tools. By mapping denotation, connotation, and myth to specific visual strategies, the study highlights how Lifeng's work operates as both an artistic creation and a communicative act embedded in ideological discourse (Riaz, 2024; J. Zhang, 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study set out to apply Roland Barthes' semiotic theory—denotation, connotation, and myth—to analyze Shi Lifeng's painting *The Puppet Player* in order to uncover how visual symbols construct and communicate political narratives. The findings show that Barthes' approach enables a layered reading of the work: at the denotative level, the imagery presents Mao Zedong as a puppet master; at the connotative level, color, spatial hierarchy, and symbolic objects reinforce perceptions of control, struggle, and confinement; and at the mythical level, these elements naturalize authoritarian power as culturally and historically legitimate. By mapping these meanings systematically, the study demonstrates how visual elements function not merely as aesthetic choices but as deliberate communication strategies within the framework of Visual Communication Design.

Academically, this research contributes to the discourse on political art by illustrating how semiotic analysis can reveal the ideological functions of design elements in contemporary Chinese painting. It also expands methodological perspectives in visual analysis, showing the applicability of Barthes' framework to both fine art and design contexts. Beyond art education, the study reinforces the role of visual literacy and critical image interpretation in design practice, particularly when addressing artworks embedded with political and cultural critique.

The study's scope is limited to a single painting, which may not fully represent Shi Lifeng's broader oeuvre or the diversity of contemporary Chinese political art. Furthermore, the exclusive reliance on Barthes' theory, while effective in uncovering symbolic layers, could be enriched through interdisciplinary approaches that integrate historical, sociological, or political perspectives.

Future research should examine a wider selection of Shi Lifeng's works or conduct comparative studies with other artists to explore how semiotics and visual communication strategies evolve across different political and historical contexts. Integrating additional theoretical frameworks could yield a more comprehensive understanding of how visual narratives operate. Specific directions include analyzing changes in symbolic motifs over time, investigating audience reception of political artworks, and applying semiotic insights in curatorial and exhibition design to foster public engagement with art as a medium of social critique.

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