

Contemporary Chinese Serigraphy from a Semiotic Perspective

Sifei Xu¹, Supath Kookiattikoon²

¹PH.D. candidate, Academy of Arts and Philosophy, Shinawatra University, Bangkok, Thailand

²Asst. Professor, Academy of Arts and Philosophy, Shinawatra University, Bangkok, Thailand

Abstract

This article proposes a three-level semiotic framework for analyzing how contemporary Chinese serigraphy generates and transforms meaning across the image, linguistic, and cultural levels. Drawing on Saussurean and Peircean semiotics and visual semiotic theory, it treats serigraphic works as multilayered sign systems and examines how material surface, visual grammar, and cultural coding interact in representative works by Guang Jun, Zhang Guilin, Zhou Jirong, Zhang Lian, Song Guangzhi, and Luo Biwu. Through close visual analysis, the study traces serigraphy's shift from technical imitation and propaganda to personalized, conceptually driven practices embedded in China's post-reform sociocultural transformations, showing how techniques such as layering, overprinting, misregistration, and mixed-media integration recode urbanization, memory, identity, and cultural rupture. It argues that contemporary Chinese serigraphy has evolved from a unidirectional, indexical print medium into an open, multilayered semiotic network, advancing the "iconic signs-cultural coding" model to explain its role in producing and reconfiguring cultural meaning under conditions of media hybridity and globalization.

Keywords: contemporary Chinese serigraphy; semiotics; visual language; artistic signs; linguistic level; cultural level; urban memory; cultural identity

I. Introduction

Chinese serigraphy is often described as "an ancient technique, yet a young art," whose technical origins can be traced to resist-dyeing (jiaxie) practices that developed between the Qin and Han periods and later clamp-resist dyeing on silk and cotton. Its emergence as an independent art form in the PRC context began with the establishment of the Screen Printing Studio at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in the early 1980s, the first specialized silkscreen printmaking studio on the Chinese mainland (Fan, 1997; Liu, 1998). From its early functional role in cultural propaganda to its turn toward expressing personal emotions and subjective experiences after the Reform and Opening-Up period, and more recently, its engagement with cross-cultural issues in the context of globalization. In the contemporary context, Chinese serigraphy undergoes three interrelated transformations: in visual language, it moves from traditional forms toward cross-media and conceptual practices; in symbolic characteristics, it evolves from a single functional carrier into a multidimensional system of meaning; and in social function, it becomes a medium through which artists intervene in reality and respond to their time (Yu, 2022; Ling, 2019; Yu, 2020). This evolutionary process mirrors broader socio-cultural transformations in China and

simultaneously reveals the renewed vitality of traditional techniques within contemporary artistic contexts (Li, 2006; Pan, 2010; Sullivan, 1996).

In serigraphic practice, artists' lived experiences and emotional perceptions permeate what may be called the image level, the linguistic level, and the cultural level, forming an internal logic that shifts from passive reflection to active creation (Crow, 2010; Saussure, 1983; Eco, 1976). Specific case studies make this process concrete. Guang Jun's *Hello, Autumn* introduces silkscreen techniques into artistic creation and opens new possibilities for Chinese printmaking; Zhang Guilin's *Wall* series develops a restrained visual vocabulary that foregrounds emotional resonance; Zhang Lian's *Post-Pop · Bird's Nest* reworks Pop iconography to construct a culturally symbolic visual field; Song Guangzhi's *Shenzhen · Vibrant Life* presents a large-scale serigraphic panorama of Qianhai as a visual narrative of the new era; and Luo Biwu's "*Nan Ting Cun Shu*" combines printmaking images with reclaimed old roof tiles, creating a cross-media installation of print art symbols and physical tiles to express the transformation of social values brought about by urban-rural changes. Taken together, these works collectively reveal that only through a pluralistic socio-cultural perspective can we fully comprehend the artistic practice of contemporary serigraphy and the interpretive positions viewers themselves occupy.

Against the backdrop of these rich cultural and artistic traditions, this study adopts a semiotic perspective to investigate the internal logic of symbolic generation and cultural coding in contemporary Chinese serigraphy across the image, linguistic, and cultural levels, while critically reflecting on the artistic positions and conceptual frameworks formed through practice (Crow, 2010; Eco, 1976; Yu, 2022). Specifically, it pursues three interrelated objectives: first, to analyze representative works by Guang Jun, Zhang Guilin, Zhou Jirong, Zhang Lian, Song Guangzhi, and Luo Biwu in order to trace the evolution of serigraphic signs in contemporary China; second, to construct a three-level analytical model of **"iconic signs—cultural coding"** that links visual form with symbolic structure and cultural context; and third, to situate contemporary Chinese serigraphy within broader debates on visual culture, memory, and social transformation, thereby demonstrating its role as a dynamic system of visual meaning (Crow, 2010; Eco, 1976; Yu, 2022).

II. Theoretical Framework and Method

This study draws on semiotic theory to construct a three-level analytical model for contemporary Chinese serigraphy. Following Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified and Peirce's typology of icon, index, and symbol, as well as visual semiotics in the context of art and design (Crow, 2010; Eco, 1976), serigraphic works are treated as multilayered sign systems rather than mere images. Within this model, the image level refers to the material and perceptual layer of the work: tonal fields, halftone dots, textures, and compositional structures that function primarily as iconic signs. The linguistic level denotes the internal organization or "grammar" of visual elements—procedures such as overprinting, repetition, misregistration, and spatial montage that generate syntactic relations and narrational effects. The cultural level encompasses the broader networks of cultural codes, historical memory, and social discourse that serigraphic signs mobilize and rewrite. Methodologically, the article conducts close visual analysis of representative works by Guang Jun, Zhang Guilin, Zhou Jirong, Zhang Lian, Song Guangzhi, and Luo Biwu, moving from the image level through the linguistic level to the cultural level in each case. This procedure makes it possible to trace how iconic signs in serigraphy undergo processes of cultural coding and recoding in response to China's social transformation, thereby operationalizing the proposed "iconic signs—cultural coding" framework.

III. The Image Level: The Evolution of Artistic Signs

The artistic signs of contemporary Chinese serigraphy display distinctive iconic characteristics at the image level. From the late 1970s onward, the production of meaning within serigraphic practice has undergone an evolutionary process—from an initial phase of technical imitation, through the emergence of cultural self-awareness, to increasingly diverse forms of individual expression (Fan, 1997; Ling, 2019; Zhang, 2020). In semiotic terms, the icon in serigraphy is inseparable from its technical attributes: the image level constitutes the material information first encountered by the viewer’s senses and functions as a perceptible field of signifiers through which meaning is activated (Crow, 2010; Eco, 1976). When artists construct image-representational signs with aesthetic and visual appeal, they simultaneously establish an initial framework of meaning that invites further interpretation. Through material and formal elements such as halftone dots, layered color, surface texture, and compositional structure, serigraphy produces a relationship of visual similarity with its referent, while also generating space for abstraction, displacement, and metaphorical reading (Yu, 2022).

From the 1970s to the mid-1980s, serigraphy in China remained largely in a phase of technical exploration and visual-language formation. As many first-generation practitioners were trained in woodcut printmaking, early serigraphic works inevitably retained iconic features derived from woodcut traditions, particularly in compositional structure, linear emphasis, and chromatic restraint (Fan, 1997; Ling, 2019). During this formative stage, iconic signs functioned primarily as unconscious technical residues and inherited aesthetic habits rather than as intentionally constructed symbolic systems. Guang Jun’s *Hello, Autumn* (1979) (Figure 1) stands as a representative work of this period, visually marking the transition from relief-print conventions toward the chromatic layering and surface possibilities unique to silkscreen.



Figure 1, *Hello, Autumn* (1979) by Guang Jun

Before the emergence of *Hello, Autumn*, Chinese printmaking was dominated primarily by woodcut techniques, especially in propaganda and documentary imagery (Fan, 1997; Sullivan, 1996). By introducing silkscreen printing into artistic creation, Guang Jun opened up new possibilities for the development of printmaking in China, transforming screen printing from an industrial and propagandistic process into a medium for personal, lyrical expression (Yu, 2022). Created in 1979, the work coincided with the early stage of China’s Reform and Opening-Up, a period in which society was gradually breaking free from ideological constraints and entering a phase of intellectual emancipation and cultural revival

(Pan, 2010; Hung, 2011). The overall social atmosphere has shifted towards openness, exploration, and diversity. In the field of art, artists are actively seeking new visual languages and modes of expression to respond to social transformation.

In *Hello, Autumn*, broad fields of red and yellow are overprinted in translucent layers, their bleeding edges and mottled textures suggesting both autumnal light and emotional warmth, while the fine black silhouette of the tree and the small flight of birds introduce a sharply defined linear counterpoint within the chromatic expanse. These serigraphic signifiers—flat yet subtly modulated color fields, delicate tonal gradations, and the granular textures produced by the screen mesh—retain the compositional economy and symbolic clarity of earlier woodcut imagery but translate them into a new language of color and surface (Fan, 1997; Yu, 2022). The work thus becomes a highly emblematic image-sign of the transitional period from old media to new media: not merely an aesthetically refined image, but an artistic marker of its time that symbolizes innovation and breakthrough in Chinese printmaking. It records Chinese artists' early experimentation with silkscreen techniques, visual language, and emotional expression during the initial years of Reform and Opening-Up, laying an important foundation for the subsequent development of contemporary Chinese serigraphy. The construction of artistic signs in *Hello, Autumn* is therefore rooted in its position at a pivotal historical juncture. Its symbolic system preserves traces of earlier collective, ideologically charged image paradigms while opening toward more introspective and metaphorical modes of visual narration. At the image level, the contrast between the saturated, porous color fields and the crisp, almost calligraphic tree silhouette announces the emergence of a new iconography in which serigraphy's material properties, layering, transparency, and mesh texture, become central carriers of meaning.

From the mid-1980s to the 1990s, cultural self-awareness and a more distinctive artistic language gradually took shape in Chinese serigraphy (Fan, 1997; Ling, 2019). During this period, the medium shifted toward the exploration of symbols rooted in national and traditional culture, integrating specifically Chinese aesthetic sensibilities with the technical and textural possibilities of serigraphy (Yu, 2022). Artists increasingly reflected on how serigraphy could “speak Chinese,” moving beyond straightforward depiction toward images that condensed cultural memory and historical reflection. Through color, texture, and planar composition, they drew on architectural remains, folk ornament, and ritual forms, transforming these sources into poetic visual structures that endowed Chinese serigraphy with renewed vitality (Li, 2006; Hung, 2011).

Zhang Guilin's *Wall* series (Figure 2), centered on ancient architectural motifs, exemplifies this turn. In these works, the measured outlines of gate towers and walls are juxtaposed with large fields of saturated color, so that the serigraphic surface functions both as a record of historical traces and as a field of subjective emotion. By consciously exploiting the material qualities of serigraphy—its flat chromatic planes, precise linear edges, and layered printing—Zhang allows the images themselves to operate as iconic signs of weathered stone, enclosed space, and cultural endurance, thereby converting architectural fragments into a visual language of memory and introspection (Yu, 2022; Zhang, 2020).

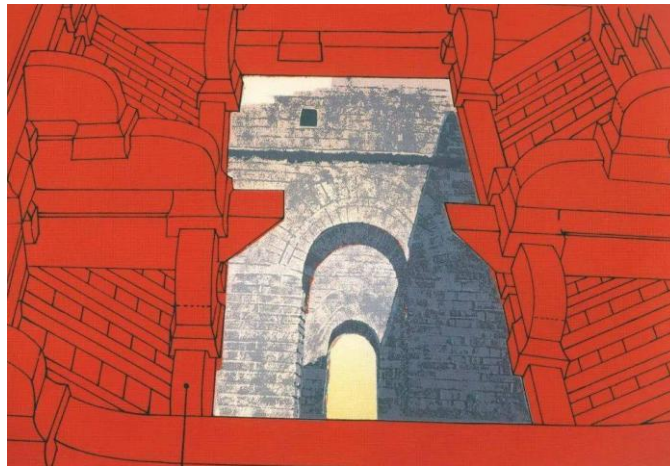


Figure 2, *Wall* (1993) by Zhang Guilin

Zhang Guilin’s *Wall* series of serigraphic prints is highly representative of this culturally introspective phase. Its carefully constructed visual symbols constitute a sustained dialogue on history, culture, memory, and individual existence, using architectural forms as both image and metaphor. Motifs such as walls and ancient structural elements evoke a sense of ultra-stable order and grand historical narrative space, functioning as carriers of Chinese historical and cultural memory (Li, 2006; Hung, 2011). Symmetrical compositions, planar treatment, and the use of blank space create an atmosphere of stability, stillness, and subtle surrealism, absorbing the aesthetic concept of “emptiness” from traditional Chinese painting and prompting contemplative reflection (Sullivan, 1996). Large zones of saturated, subjective color strip away concrete detail, strengthening formal qualities and emotional intensity, while the overall symbolic system is imbued with personal memory and affective traces that disrupt absolute visual order and introduce temporality, narrative, and contemporary concerns. In this way, a seemingly monumental historical narrative is transformed into a nuanced experience of individual life situated within history. Through the creative practice of the *Wall* series, Zhang not only explores the distinctive visual language and expressive possibilities of Chinese serigraphy, but also redirects a medium long associated with Western Pop and commercial imagery toward the articulation of indigenous cultural thought (Hong, 2000; Yu, 2022). This process can be understood as elevating material objects—stone walls, gate towers, architectural fragments—into cultural intentions, turning built remnants into visual propositions about time and identity. At the same historical moment, as the market economy became established, consumer culture and mass media expanded, and globalization accelerated, a wide range of public images—commercial advertisements, popular icons, news photographs, canonical artworks, and political propaganda—were extensively appropriated by Chinese printmakers (Wu, 2009; Hung, 2011). Artists juxtaposed and recombined symbols from divergent contexts to produce new layers of meaning, and serigraphy in particular absorbed strong elements of social critique and political Pop, exposing the illusory nature of consumer society, reflecting on ruptures in history and memory, and articulating individual confusion, irony, and questioning (Pan, 2010; Zhang, 2020). After 2000, contemporary Chinese serigraphy entered a phase of comprehensive diversification in subject matter, techniques, and conceptual approaches. Artists sought a balance between refined technical mastery and more rigorous intellectual inquiry, exploring how the serigraphic medium could more effectively serve conceptual and affective expression rather than merely showcasing craftsmanship (Yu, 2022; Ling, 2019). In this period, symbolic characteristics increasingly took the form of personalization, abstraction,

inwardness, and virtualization, as the deep penetration of the internet and digital technologies produced more pluralistic, fragmented socio-cultural conditions and shifted attention toward inner experience, identity formation, and spiritual belonging (Hung, 2011; Wu, 2009). Rather than relying on ready-made iconic signs from the public sphere, many artists began to create highly personalized abstract signs or intentional symbols, constructing distinctive visual systems grounded in private imagery and idiosyncratic codes. Serigraphy thus turned toward deeper self-exploration, with works engaging more frequently with metaphysical and philosophical themes—time, space, memory, and life—while also responding to the visual overload and dematerialization of the digital age (Zhang, 2020; Yu, 2022). In such works, meaning no longer derives primarily from physical resemblance but from the viewer’s empathetic engagement, projection, and interpretation of the artist’s inner experience, foregrounding the interpretive openness of the image level. This shift marks a transition in contemporary serigraphy from a focus on technical pathways and cultural symbolization toward personalization and spiritualization, resulting in highly individualized visual systems that complicate the earlier opposition between “traditional” and “modern.” Turning to Zhang Lian’s serigraph *Post-Pop · Bird’s Nest* (Figure 3), the work overlays the urban cultural landmark of the Bird’s Nest with an infinite grid of clearly scaled five-pointed stars, printed in shifting chromatic registers across a diptych format. Landscapes of the same architectural motif, rendered in contrasting color schemes, are transformed—through the multiplicity, overprinting, and subtle misalignments inherent to serigraphy—into a highly personal visual statement that recontextualizes Pop’s vocabulary of repetition within a Chinese urban image.

At the image level, the primary signs consist of three interacting elements: the iconic outline of the Bird’s Nest stadium, the endlessly repeated star motif that recalls both Warhol-era seriality and socialist emblems, and the distinctive granular textures and halftone patterns produced by the serigraphic process.

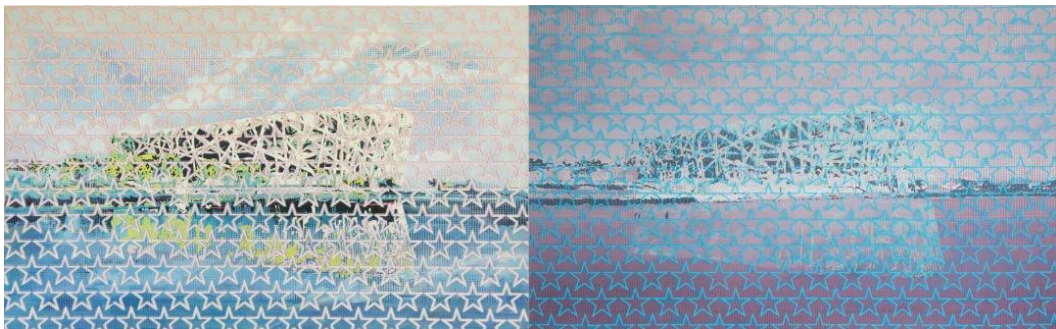


Figure 3, Post-Pop *Bird’s Nest* by Zhang Lian

The architectural outline of the Bird’s Nest, as a figurative cultural landscape derived from a real-world structure, has a strong basis in public recognition and functions as an emblematic sign that points to the Beijing Olympic landmark and to narratives of China’s modernization. The endlessly repeated five-pointed stars recall Andy Warhol’s mechanically reproduced serigraphic techniques; their ordered, mass-produced form becomes a Pop-style symbol. Meanwhile, the dense background texture operates as a visual “text,” suggesting information explosion and cultural hybridity, and thereby evoking conditions of overload and intercultural exchange in a globalized media environment.

As the central signifier, the representation of the Bird’s Nest is overlaid by a network of stars, forming a layered structure that juxtaposes monumental imagery with repetitive patterns. This juxtaposition is not a simple collage; rather, through the layered techniques of serigraphy, it achieves transparency and

coexistence of signs, enabling viewers to simultaneously perceive the architectural entity and its symbolic ornamentation. This structure points toward deeper signifiers of national imagery and collective memory. The fusion of traditional Chinese openwork ceramic patterns with Western modern steel-structure technology becomes a metaphor for East–West cultural negotiation. Through repetition and chromatic variation, the five-pointed star is stripped of its original solemnity and transformed into a consumable visual motif, reflecting the proliferation and dilution of symbolic meaning in a postmodern context.

Through the representational deployment of emblematic signs at the image level, Zhang Lian realizes a threefold deconstruction, forming a dynamic narrative within the image layer. The integration of serigraphy with mixed-media painting breaks through the traditional boundaries of serigraphy, endowing the image layer with multiple forms of materiality and dissolving fixed media distinctions. By appropriating the language of Pop art, the work accomplishes a cross-cultural translation, shifting from a critique of consumerism toward a reflection on cultural identity. The repetition and expansion of the five-pointed star further suggest the fluidity and reconstruction of collective memory in processes of dissemination.

Of course, Zhang Lian’s artistic approach goes beyond mere image representation. At the image level, Post-Pop · Bird’s Nest breaks away from the traditional surface function of imagery and transforms it into a culturally symbolic field characterized by strong visual impact and polysemic structures. Through this transformation, the work realizes intertextuality at the image level, cross-media engagement, and the fluid transformation and reconstruction of signs. Any artwork can be regarded as a sign, and the specificity of artistic signs lies in their multilayered, open-ended meanings and rich interpretive tension. The image level primarily corresponds to the signifier, serving as the material carrier of meaning. By fully engaging the inherent aesthetic value and internal logic of serigraphy as a medium, the artist’s technical and procedural choices directly shape the appearance of the image level. Emotional representation constitutes a crucial component of this level, as the artist consciously regulates the cultural information embedded within the medium itself. This process becomes both the point of self-discipline in the artist’s construction of the image layer and the starting point for the viewer’s perceptual experience.

IV. The Linguistic Level: Visual Language and Symbolic Structures

As one of the representative artists who has directly witnessed China’s rapid urbanization and cultural transformation, Zhou Jirong has taken serigraphy as his primary creative medium, using it to construct a visual language marked by historical insight and conceptual depth. Across more than three decades of artistic practice, his work shows a clear transformation in symbolic structure, reflecting both his individual mode of visual thinking and the broader shift in contemporary Chinese serigraphy from figurative narration toward more conceptual frameworks (Ling, 2019; Yu, 2022). A diachronic comparison of two key works—Beijing No. 3 (1987) (Figure 4) and Landscape · Drum Tower (2018) (Figure 5)—makes it possible to observe how the “linguistic” organization of images evolves from linear, documentary composition to layered, drifting structures, thereby reconfiguring the cultural meanings attached to urban space and memory (Zhang, 2020; Wu, 2009).



Figure 4, *NO.3 Beijing* (1987) by Zhou Jirong

In *Beijing No. 3*, Zhou Jirong employs a single viewpoint and linear perspective to construct a stable and clearly defined visual order, organizing hutongs, façades, and alleyways into a coherent spatial axis that resembles a documentary photograph of everyday Beijing. The image possesses a high degree of documentary realism, and the combination of objects relies on the mimetic qualities of iconic signs—courtyard houses, tiled roofs, birdcages, elderly figures—to guide the viewer’s recognition of a specific historical lifeworld. These strong iconic relationships endow the work with a referential, documentary orientation, so that serigraphic marks appear to “record” urban reality rather than to distort or fragment it. In semiotic terms, the depicted elements function both as direct presentations of their objects and as vehicles that refer to broader, dynamic cultural objects, such as “old Beijing” or vanishing communal life (Crow, 2010; Eco, 1976). They do not merely reproduce the surface of lived reality; they also reveal the precarious fate of traditional ways of life under the early wave of Reform and Opening-Up, when demolition and reconstruction began to transform the urban fabric. As viewers follow the image’s linear perspective into the narrowing alley, they are drawn into an affective reading of fragmented historical order and unstable cultural identity, completing a semiotic shift from perceiving a scene to constructing meaning. At this stage of his practice, Zhou still relied primarily on visual representation and narrative logic, emphasizing pictorial stability, structural integrity, and contextual certainty. Serigraphy thus functions here as an image medium for recording the immediacy of its time, while simultaneously forming an iconic structure of cultural memory that fixes a particular vision of Beijing just as it begins to disappear (Ling, 2019; Zhang, 2020).



Figure 5, *Landscape – Drum Tower* (2018) by Zhou Jirong

In contrast, *Landscape · Drum Tower* (2018) (Figure 5) adopts a radically different visual strategy and symbolic mechanism. Linear perspective and a unified viewpoint are dismantled; instead, the pictorial structure is built from multiple visual layers—transparent overlays, drifting contours, and spatial dislocations—that together form a non-linear, non-documentary, and highly conceptual space. The Drum Tower appears in multiple, slightly shifted versions within the image; these repetitions overlap, intersect, and blur, weakening straightforward iconic resemblance while strengthening conventional signs and conceptual structures. Through continuous replication and displacement of the same motif, the image ceases to point to a single urban scene and becomes a visual composite in which history, memory, and perception intersect.

This mode of image organization loosens indexical ties to empirical reality, transforming the Drum Tower from a representational landmark into a “symbolic matrix of cultural memory” that condenses different temporalities and affective registers (Hung, 2011; Wu, 2009). Faced with unstable image relations, viewers are compelled to search for interpretive frameworks within constantly shifting layers of meaning, producing an open, indeterminate, and fluid semiotic understanding rather than a fixed reading. In this sense, *Landscape · Drum Tower* no longer constructs a figurative depiction of the cityscape; it constructs a contemporary visual-cultural structure preoccupied with the blurring of history, the dissolution of stable identity, and the fragmentation of urban experience in post-reform China (Ling, 2019; Zhang, 2020).

A comparison of these two works clearly reveals the depth of Zhou Jirong’s transformation in image language. From figurative narration in the 1980s to more conceptual expression in the twenty-first century, his image signs shift from iconicity toward symbolism and from narrativity toward structurality, (Eco, U. 1976). *Beijing No. 3* relies on iconic signs to generate visual meaning, emphasizing pictorial stability and a documentary function that records cultural life, whereas *Landscape · Drum Tower* constructs a conceptual visual mechanism in which conventional signs and drifting image relations reposition the image from “representing the world” to “producing meaning.” Spatial logic likewise moves from linear perspective to flattened, multi-layered structures, enabling not a chronological temporality of reality but a composite time in which history and memory coexist (Hung, 2011; Wu, 2009). The distance between the two works thus reflects not only the evolution of Zhou’s personal style, but also a microcosm of the broader trajectory of contemporary Chinese serigraphy—from constructing visual order to generating conceptual tension, and from narrative visual systems to visual structures interwoven with multiple cultural symbols (Ling, 2019; Zhang, 2020).

Zhou Jirong’s practice therefore moves beyond nostalgia or simple urban documentation to become an important visual text for understanding social transformation, urbanization, and the reconstruction of cultural identity in China. *Beijing No. 3* portrays a vanishing era and its modes of life, guiding viewers—through the narrative organization of iconic signs—toward reflection on cultural continuity and identity (Hung, 2011). *Landscape · Drum Tower*, by contrast, exposes the blurring of historical memory and the “symbolic reproduction” of cultural landscapes under rapid urban restructuring, its drifting, layered spatial structures foreshadowing the ways in which history is continually rewritten in contemporary contexts (Wu, 2009; Zhang, 2020). Through this diachronic development, one sees how Zhou repeatedly reconfigures image signs to construct a semiotic system concerned with urban memory, cultural temporality, and the lived experience of modernity, thereby helping to move Chinese serigraphy from figurative narration toward a more comprehensive and conceptually oriented field of contemporary art (Ling, 2019; Yu, 2022). Such visual language does not correspond to the linear grammar of verbal language, but rather constitutes a multidimensional network of conceptual expression formed by symbolic relations within art. This

implies that images are no longer mere imitations of the real world, but signs that generate meaning within specific cultural contexts, in line with Saussure’s emphasis on meaning as a function of relations between signifier and signified (Saussure, 1983). In serigraphy, this relational network manifests as visual language through image combinations, layered structures, and formal strategies that organize how viewers read and connect individual signs.

Taking Song Guangzhi’s *Shenzhen Vibrant Life* (Figure 6) as an example, an understanding of its deeper implications requires moving beyond the image level to examine how the artist constructs a dynamic image of Shenzhen through a distinctive visual language at the linguistic level.



Figure 6, *Shenzhen · Vibrant Life* (2022) by Song Guangzhi

The staggered high-rise buildings form upward-growing linear rhythms, while the flat application of color characteristic of serigraphy, together with gradated halftone imprints, suggests vigorous vitality, rapid urban pulse, and a visual metaphor of densely interwoven information. Seagulls, plants, and urban elements are not purely realistic depictions, but refined and stylized signs: the flying seagulls trace a prominent dynamic trajectory that symbolizes struggle, progress, and individuals engaged in urban construction, whereas the plants signify the coexistence of nature and the city. The calm, balanced composition produces a sense of temporal transcendence and detached observation, so that “vibrancy” appears not as noisy chromatic spectacle but as an inward, resilient life force.

In the age of symbolic consumption, contemporary serigraphic practice thus extends beyond deconstruction and critique. It increasingly functions as an active, constructive form of value formation: through its distinctive medial grammar, serigraphy participates in the visual narration of the spirit of the times, endowing representations of reality with layered cultural meaning and positive value orientations (Yu, 2022). The large-scale serigraph *Shenzhen · Vibrant Life*, created by Song Guangzhi and his team, stands as an exemplary instance of this tendency, centering on the development and opening of Qianhai and artistically re-presenting major achievements of construction in the new era. Rather than remaining at the level of straightforward urban depiction, the work mobilizes serigraphy’s capacities for symbolic integration and spatiotemporal superimposition, weaving together modern architecture, innovation-driven elements, and humanistic vitality into an image that symbolizes the spirit of a new era while metaphorically evoking the plurality, complexity, and futurity embodied by Shenzhen as a frontier of

reform.

This artistic language transcends the singular narrative logic of traditional documentary art, constructing a new visual landscape that combines epic resonance with conceptual depth. In doing so, it offers an artistic interpretation and elevation of the epochal theme of “Chinese-style modernization,” while exemplifying a broader creative shift in serigraphy from passive recording to active construction (Yu, 2022). Song Guangzhi’s emphasis on a “value-guided view of history” indicates that art is positioned as a site for active participation in the visual narration and value formation of China’s modernization process, rather than as a neutral medium of representation.

Accordingly, the core contribution of *Shenzhen’s Vibrant Life* lies in its provision of a symbol-production model grounded in mainstream values and concrete social realities. Rejecting the emptiness and nihilism often associated with symbols under consumerism, the work instead commits to visual narratives rooted in lived experience, responsive to historical memory, and oriented toward the future. This suggests that the reconstruction of contemporary serigraphy can encompass both critical reflection and affirmative value-building, endowing the medium with strong narrative capacity and humanistic concern in the dialogue between art and society, the individual and the times (Ling, 2019; Zhang, 2020). Taken together, these cases reveal the central position of the visual language level in contemporary serigraphy: images cease to be mere carriers of pre-given meanings and instead become the very mechanisms through which meaning is generated, negotiated, and transformed within specific cultural contexts.

V. The Cultural Level: Cultural Symbols and Meaning

The relationship between artistic signs and the cultural level is a dynamic process of mutual shaping. The cultural level provides the deep semantic ground from which artistic signs emerge, while artworks in turn mobilize, activate, and sometimes reconfigure that cultural ground (Crow, 2010; Eco, 1976). It can be imagined as a vast, heterogeneous database in which the artist acts as a visual programmer: artistic signs are the “codes” written into this database, and the artwork is the execution of those codes. Selection chooses particular symbolic resources; juxtaposition places symbols from different contexts in one visual field; transformation rewrites forms and structures; creation generates new meanings; critique dismantles existing codes; and consolidation lets new meanings sediment back into culture (Li, 2006; Hung, 2011). In this sense, constructing artistic signs is a continuous act of “reading from and writing into” the cultural level, through which artists actively participate in the renewal of cultural meaning rather than merely reflecting it.

No artist operates outside the cultural level; every visual choice is made within pre-existing cultural systems that provide both constraints and possibilities. Artistic signs carry deep cultural signifieds, which supply latent frameworks of meaning for creation and reception. Material signs such as architectural remains, utensils, or discarded objects have strong indexical force, while structural signs—scattered perspective in Chinese painting, reading patterns of traditional texts, ritualized spatial orders—shape how time, narrative, and viewing are organized (Sullivan, 1996; Wu, 2009). Thus the cultural level is not just a storehouse of motifs, but a structuring mechanism that influences artistic form, perception, and judgment. In contemporary Chinese serigraphy, artists respond to cultural referents, material remnants, and narrative structures in ways that register urban renewal, rural disappearance, cultural rupture, and the

reconstruction of memory, revealing a pronounced engagement with social consciousness.

Luo Biwu's *The Book of Nanting Village* (2015) (Figure 7) offers a paradigmatic example of symbolic logic operating at the cultural level.



Figure 7, *The Book of Nanting Village* (2015) by Luo Biwu

VI. Conclusion

Over more than four decades, Chinese serigraphy has moved from technological introduction to symbolic construction, and from formal exploration to conceptual deepening. Early experimentation in the 1980s broke from woodcut traditions and localized silkscreen techniques; the 1990s consolidated a language rooted in indigenous imagery and cultural reflection; and the period after 2000 has been marked by refined techniques, pluralistic concepts, and integration into broader visual culture. Across these phases, serigraphy has evolved from a primarily representational structure into a semiotic network, becoming a key visual coding medium for narrative, ideology, and cultural identity under changing social, cultural, and technological conditions. From a semiotic perspective, the crucial transformation lies in the shift from relatively unidirectional indexical signs to an open cultural-symbolic system. Contemporary serigraphy infuses formal elements—composition, color separation, layering, and surface effects—with expanded cultural references, so that images point not only to objects but to structures of experience, and materials function as carriers of memory, temporality, and spatiality.

Techniques such as fragmentation, overprinting, misregistration, repetition, and occlusion operate as “linguistic actions” that organize narrative strategies and rhythms, producing visual texts that often resemble “visible historical fragments” addressing spatial transformation, ruptured memory, and modern anxieties. On the cultural level, serigraphy has become an active mode of cultural inquiry and narration. Artists continuously extract, recombine, and rewrite symbols from the cultural level, using the medium’s reproducibility, medial openness, and layered technical language to engage with urbanization, rural disappearance, shifting social structures, and evolving media environments. In an era of media convergence, serigraphic semiotics intersects with photography, video, and digital images, extending into

public culture, urban narratives, and social critique; thus contemporary Chinese serigraphy functions not only as visual expression, but as a mechanism for producing cultural meaning and an important component of China's current visual culture system.

References

1. Crow, D. (2010). *Visible signs: An introduction to semiotics in the visual arts* (2nd ed.). AVA Publishing.
2. Eco, U. (1976). *A theory of semiotics*. Indiana University Press.
3. Eliade, M. (1954). *The myth of the eternal return: Cosmos and history*. Princeton University Press.
4. Fan, M. (1997). *History of modern Chinese printmaking* [In Chinese]. China Youth Publishing House.
5. Grabowski, B., & Fick, B. (2012). *The complete manual of printmaking: Concepts and techniques* (H. Yu & J. Zhang, Trans.) [In Chinese]. Zhejiang People's Fine Arts Publishing House.
6. Hong, F. (2000). *Biography of Andy Warhol* [In Chinese]. Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House.
7. Hung, W. (2011). *Remembrance: Visual culture and collective memory in contemporary China*. Reaktion Books.
8. Li, Z. (2006). *Aesthetic education and the structure of feeling in Chinese art* [In Chinese]. Peking University Press.
9. Ling, Y. (2019). On the context and transformation of contemporary Chinese printmaking [In Chinese]. *Art Evaluation*, (23), 37–39.
10. Liu, Y. (1998). *Photomechanical screen printing technology* [In Chinese]. Printing Industry Publishing House.
11. Pan, Y. (2010). Cultural reform and the poetic imagination: A new wave of regionalism in Chinese art. *Asian Art Journal*, 16(1), 33–47.
12. Peirce, C. S. (1998). *The essential Peirce: Selected philosophical writings* (Vol. 2, 1893–1913; The Peirce Edition Project, Ed.). Indiana University Press.
13. Saussure, F. de. (1983). *Course in general linguistics* (R. Harris, Trans.). Duckworth. (Original work published 1916)
14. Sullivan, M. (1996). *Art and artists of twentieth-century China*. University of California Press.
15. Wu, H. (2009). Displacement and memory in Chinese visual culture. *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 8(3), 12–21.
16. Yu, H. (2022). *The art of serigraphy* [In Chinese]. China Academy of Art Press.
17. Yu, L. (2020). Ontological persistence and individual exploration in printmaking creation [In Chinese]. *Fine Arts*, (5), 140–141.
18. Zhang, S. (2020). *Print and psyche: Identity and memory in post-1978 Chinese printmaking* [In Chinese]. Shanghai University Press.