

From Sacred Objects to Open Symbolic Text: Symbolic Consumption and the Contemporary Transformation of Chinese Religious Art—A Case Study of Dehua White Porcelain Statues of Gods and Buddhas

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Abstract

The contemporary transformation of Chinese religious art is often interpreted through the frameworks of secularization, commodification, or the decline of religious authority. While these perspectives explain important aspects of modern cultural change, they provide only a partial account of how religious artworks continue to generate new meanings within contemporary consumer society. This article examines the transformation of Dehua white porcelain statues of gods and Buddhas as a representative case of Chinese religious art and asks how symbolic meanings are reconstructed under conditions of symbolic consumption.

Drawing upon artistic semiotics and symbolic consumption theory, the study combines historical analysis, iconographic analysis, visual analysis, interviews, and case studies to investigate the historical continuity and contemporary reinterpretation of these sculptures. Rather than understanding their transformation as a linear process of desacralization, the findings suggest that sacred meanings are reconfigured within an expanding symbolic system in which artists, consumers, market institutions, and Chinese religious culture jointly participate in meaning construction. In this process, Dehua white porcelain statues of gods and Buddhas evolve from relatively stable sacred objects into open symbolic texts, capable of supporting multiple context-dependent interpretations while maintaining historical continuity.

The article argues that symbolic consumption does not eliminate sacredness but redistributes interpretive agency across multiple cultural actors. Based on this case, it proposes that the concept of open symbolic text provides a more appropriate framework than the conventional secularization paradigm for explaining the contemporary transformation of Chinese religious art. The study therefore contributes to research on religious art, applied art, artistic semiotics, and craft-heritage studies by offering an analytical perspective that emphasizes symbolic reconfiguration rather than symbolic loss.

Keywords: Chinese religious art; Dehua white porcelain statues of gods and Buddhas; symbolic consumption; artistic semiotics; open symbolic text

Introduction

1.1 Contemporary Transformation of Chinese Religious Art

Chinese religious art has undergone profound transformation under the combined influence of urbanization, cultural industries, heritage policies, tourism, and contemporary consumer culture. Religious images that once functioned primarily within temples and ritual settings now circulate across museums, galleries, digital media, cultural industries, and everyday domestic spaces, performing religious, artistic, cultural, and commercial functions simultaneously (Yang, 2021; Zhao, 2023).

Existing studies have frequently interpreted these developments through the concepts of secularization, commodification, or desacralization (Einstein, 2008; Featherstone, 2023). While these perspectives explain important aspects of the expanding circulation of religious imagery, they tend to frame commercialization as a process that weakens or replaces sacred meaning. Such interpretations only partially explain how traditional religious artworks continue to maintain historical continuity while acquiring new cultural functions in contemporary society.

Against this background, Dehua white porcelain statues of gods and Buddhas provide an appropriate case for examining how traditional religious artworks negotiate continuity and transformation across changing social and cultural contexts.

1.2 Existing Research and Research Gap

Existing scholarship on Chinese religious art has mainly developed along three directions. The first examines the history, iconography, and religious functions of Buddhist, Daoist, and folk religious imagery (Panofsky, 1939; Yang, 2021). The second focuses on Dehua white porcelain, emphasizing ceramic technology, sculptural traditions, export history, and heritage preservation (Donnelly, 2006; Sun & Zheng, 2017; Dehua County People's Government, 2024). A third body of literature explores symbolic consumption, consumer culture, and artistic semiotics (Baudrillard, 2014; Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone, 2023; Zhao, 2023).

Although these studies provide valuable insights, they remain largely disconnected. Art-historical research rarely considers how traditional religious artworks acquire new meanings in contemporary consumer society, while studies of symbolic consumption seldom address historical religious art. Consequently, the mechanisms through which religious meanings are maintained, negotiated, and transformed across changing cultural contexts remain insufficiently understood.

To address this gap, this study integrates artistic semiotics with symbolic consumption to investigate how the symbolic meanings of Dehua white porcelain statues of gods and Buddhas are reconfigured in contemporary society.

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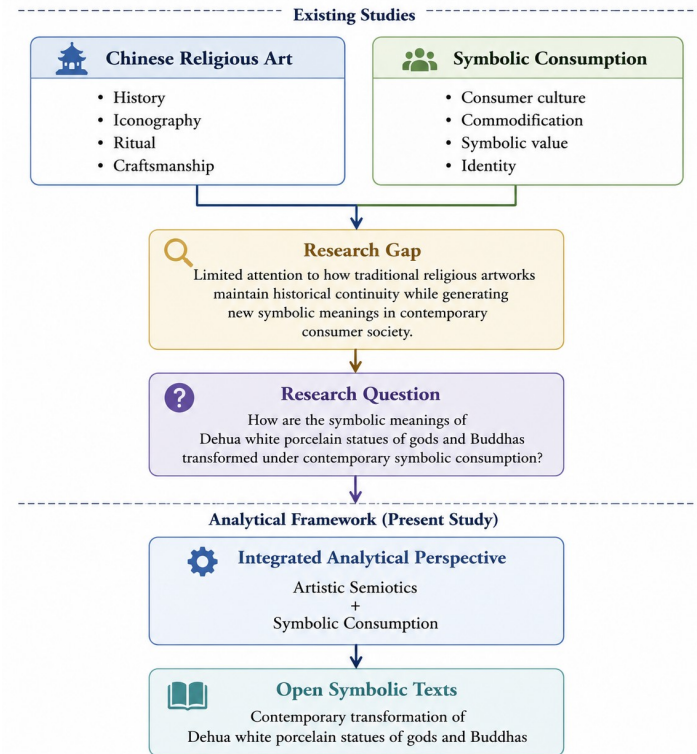


Figure 1. Research Gap and Analytical Framework

1.3 Research Question

This study addresses the following research question:

How has the symbolic meaning of Dehua white porcelain statues of gods and Buddhas been transformed under contemporary symbolic consumption?

To answer this question, the study further asks:

How are traditional religious meanings reconfigured through contemporary circulation and consumption?

How does the interaction between artistic semiotics and symbolic consumption explain this transformation?

1.4 Case Selection

Dehua white porcelain statues of gods and Buddhas were selected because they have circulated historically across religious, artistic, and commercial contexts while retaining a highly recognizable iconographic tradition. Their contemporary expansion into museums, cultural industries, contemporary ceramic art, and everyday consumption provides an ideal case for examining how traditional religious artworks maintain historical continuity while accommodating new symbolic functions.

Although this study focuses on a single case, the analytical perspective developed here may also contribute to research on other forms of traditional religious art and craft heritage.

1.5 Contribution

This article contributes to the study of Chinese religious art by shifting attention from whether religious symbols become secularized to how their meanings continue to evolve in contemporary cultural contexts. Using Dehua white porcelain statues of gods and Buddhas as a case study, it integrates artistic semiotics with symbolic consumption and contributes to current debates on religious art, symbolic consumption, and heritage transformation.

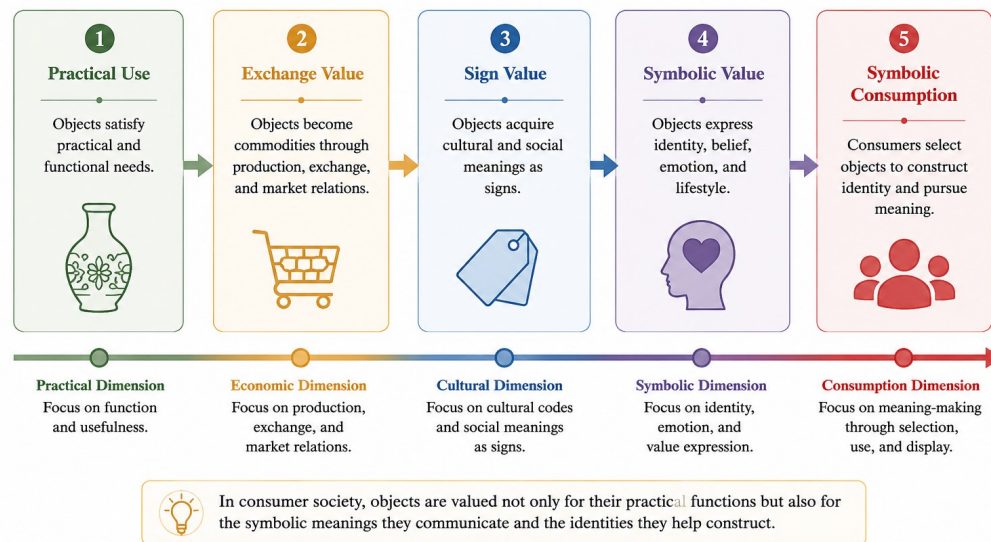
Theoretical Framework

2.1 Symbolic Consumption as a Supporting Perspective

Contemporary consumer society is characterized by the circulation of meanings as much as by the exchange of goods. Rather than acquiring objects solely for their practical functions, consumers increasingly value the symbolic meanings they communicate. Baudrillard (2014) argues that commodities operate as signs within systems of social communication, while Bourdieu (1984) and Featherstone (2023) further demonstrate that consumption expresses identity, taste, and cultural affiliation rather than merely satisfying material needs.

Although symbolic consumption has been widely applied to fashion, branding, and lifestyle commodities, its application to traditional religious art remains limited. Existing studies have tended to interpret the commercialization of religious art as a process of secularization, paying less attention to how symbolic meanings continue to evolve after religious artworks enter contemporary cultural circulation (Einstein, 2008).

In this study, symbolic consumption is employed as a supporting perspective for explaining how religious artworks acquire new symbolic meanings across changing social and cultural contexts without necessarily abandoning their historical significance.



Placement: This figure should be placed at the end of Section 2.1 “Symbolic Consumption as a Supporting Perspective” to illustrate the conceptual process of symbolic consumption.

Figure 2. Symbolic Consumption as a Supporting Perspective

2.2 Artistic Semiotics and Open Symbolic Texts

While symbolic consumption explains why meanings continue to evolve, artistic semiotics explains why these changes remain connected to the artwork itself. Building on Panofsky's (1939)

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iconological approach, artistic semiotics understands artworks as symbolic structures whose meanings emerge through the interaction between artistic form, cultural convention, and interpretation (Zhao, 2023). Meaning is therefore neither fixed within the object nor determined exclusively by its creator, but develops through continuous processes of interpretation (Panofsky, 1939; Zhao, 2023).

From this perspective, Dehua white porcelain statues of gods and Buddhas are understood as open symbolic texts. Their material qualities, iconographic traditions, and artistic forms provide relatively stable symbolic structures, while contemporary cultural contexts enable multiple legitimate interpretations. Religious devotion, aesthetic appreciation, cultural identity, collecting, and everyday consumption therefore coexist as different symbolic readings of the same artwork rather than replacing one another.

Open symbolic texts should not be understood as permitting unlimited interpretation. Instead, artistic form and historical tradition establish symbolic boundaries within which meanings remain historically grounded while continuously adapting to new cultural contexts.

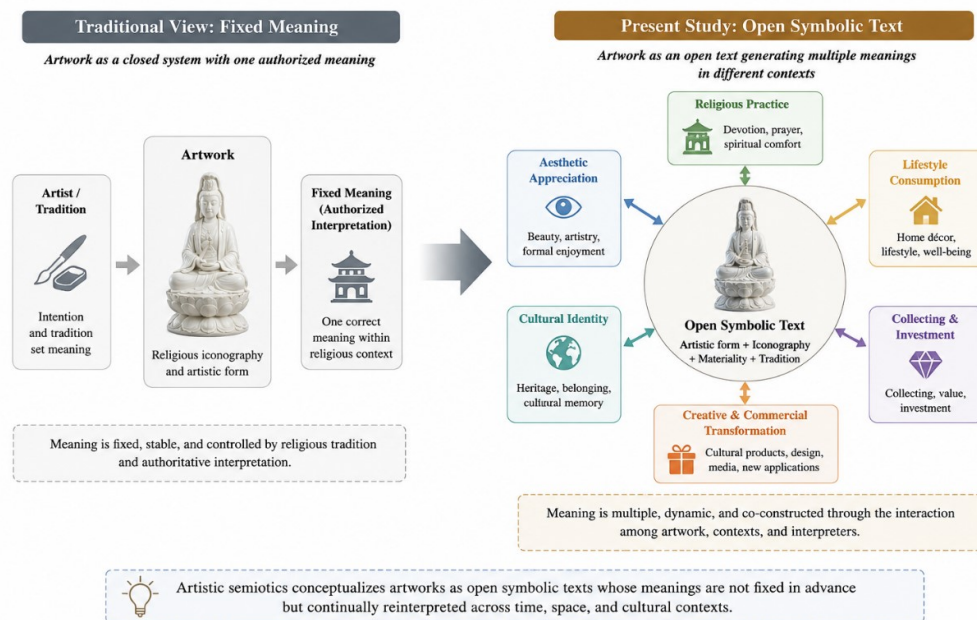


Figure 3. The Formation of Open Symbolic Text

2.3 Explaining Open Symbolic Texts

Neither symbolic consumption nor artistic semiotics alone sufficiently explains the contemporary transformation of Chinese religious art. Symbolic consumption clarifies how meanings expand through changing patterns of circulation and consumption, whereas artistic semiotics explains how artworks preserve symbolic continuity despite these changes. Together, they provide a complementary analytical perspective for understanding why traditional religious artworks remain simultaneously stable and open to reinterpretation.

Accordingly, this study understands the contemporary transformation of Dehua white porcelain statues of gods and Buddhas as the emergence of open symbolic texts. Their symbolic meanings are not replaced as they circulate through religious, artistic, commercial, and cultural contexts; rather, new meanings accumulate upon existing symbolic foundations. This perspective

shifts analytical attention from whether sacred meanings decline to how multiple symbolic meanings coexist and are continuously negotiated within contemporary society.

Rather than constituting independent theoretical contributions, artistic semiotics and symbolic consumption function in this study as complementary analytical perspectives that explain the formation of open symbolic texts. This framework provides the theoretical basis for the case analyses presented in the following sections.

Historical Stability of Sacred Symbols

3.1 Historical Stability of Sacred Symbols

Before examining contemporary transformation, it is necessary to establish the historical baseline from which change can be understood. For centuries, Dehua white porcelain statues of gods and Buddhas circulated primarily within religious and culturally shared interpretive contexts. Their symbolic meanings were sustained through established iconographic conventions (Yang, 2021), ritual practices, and collective cultural memory, allowing figures such as Guanyin, Maitreya, and Guan Gong to remain consistently recognizable across different historical periods.

This historical stability did not imply that meanings were entirely fixed. Rather, interpretation occurred within relatively stable symbolic boundaries shaped by religious traditions, inherited artistic conventions, and shared cultural knowledge. Although individual sculptures differed in craftsmanship and style, their symbolic identities remained closely associated with established religious and cultural meanings.

The long-standing sculptural tradition of Dehua white porcelain further reinforced this continuity. Since the Ming dynasty, its distinctive material qualities, artistic language, and iconographic conventions enabled these sculptures to circulate as devotional objects, artworks, and commercial products without fundamentally altering their symbolic identity (Donnelly, 2006; Sun & Zheng, 2017). Market exchange therefore existed historically, but it generally operated within established religious and cultural frameworks rather than serving as the primary source of symbolic meaning.

From the perspective of artistic semiotics, this historical condition represents a relatively stable relationship between artistic form and symbolic interpretation. This historical baseline provides the point of comparison for the following analysis. The contemporary transformation examined in this study therefore reflects not the disappearance of sacred meanings, but the emergence of new interpretive contexts through which existing symbolic meanings continue to evolve.

3.2 Mechanisms of Symbolic Expansion

The findings indicate that the contemporary transformation of Dehua white porcelain statues of gods and Buddhas occurs primarily in the mechanisms through which symbolic meanings are produced rather than in their artistic form. Although traditional iconography remains largely recognizable, contemporary symbolic meanings are generated across increasingly diverse social, cultural, and commercial contexts. Religious meaning therefore no longer functions as the sole interpretive framework but becomes one symbolic layer within a broader process of meaning-making.

As these sculptures circulate through museums, galleries, cultural and creative industries, tourism, online marketplaces, and everyday domestic spaces, they acquire new symbolic functions

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while maintaining their historical associations. A single sculpture may simultaneously be understood as a devotional object, an artwork, a cultural heritage item, a collectible, or a lifestyle product, depending on the context in which it is encountered and interpreted. Rather than replacing religious significance, these new interpretations accumulate upon existing symbolic traditions, allowing multiple symbolic meanings to coexist.

This process is sustained through the interaction of four interrelated mechanisms: artistic creation, market circulation, cultural mediation, and consumer interpretation. Contemporary artists reinterpret traditional iconographic forms through new artistic languages while preserving recognizable symbolic characteristics. Expanding markets introduce these sculptures into broader cultural and commercial environments, creating new occasions for interpretation. Museums, exhibitions, heritage institutions, and media further mediate historical knowledge by connecting traditional religious symbols with contemporary cultural discourse. Consumers, in turn, actively construct meaning through their own aesthetic preferences, cultural experiences, and everyday practices, while remaining influenced by the symbolic resources embedded in the artwork itself.

These mechanisms should not be understood as competing sources of authority but as complementary processes through which symbolic meanings continue to develop. Meaning is therefore produced through the interaction between relatively stable artistic forms and continuously changing interpretive contexts. The contemporary transformation of Dehua white porcelain statues of gods and Buddhas is consequently better understood as a process of symbolic expansion rather than symbolic replacement, establishing the conditions under which they function as open symbolic texts.

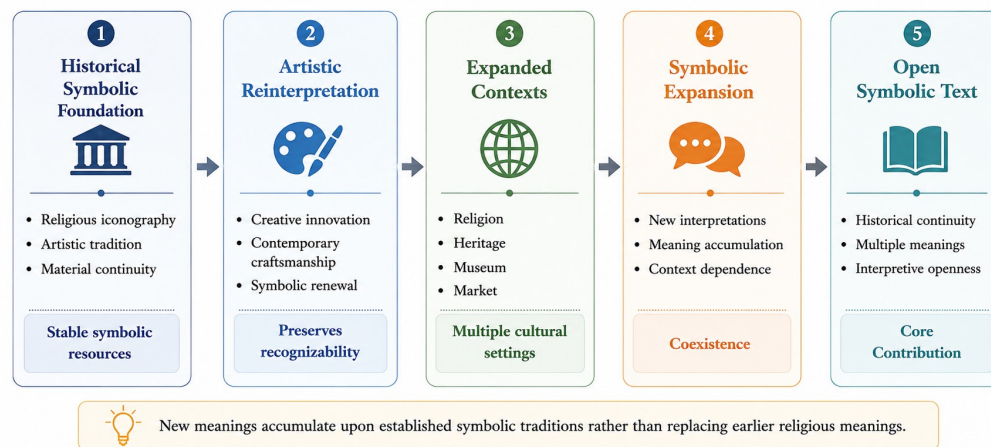


Figure 4. Mechanisms of Open Symbolic Text Formation

3.3 Open Symbolic Text

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the contemporary transformation of Dehua white porcelain statues of gods and Buddhas is best understood not as a shift from sacred objects to secular commodities, but as the emergence of open symbolic texts. Their symbolic openness arises not from the disappearance of historical meanings, but from the interaction between enduring artistic traditions and increasingly diverse contexts of interpretation.

Viewed in this way, Dehua sculptures retain recognizable symbolic structures while accommodating multiple, context-dependent meanings. Religious devotion remains an important interpretive layer, but it now coexists with aesthetic appreciation, cultural identity, heritage value,

collecting, and everyday lifestyle practices. These meanings are neither mutually exclusive nor hierarchically ordered; rather, they accumulate upon a shared symbolic foundation as the artworks circulate through contemporary society.

Understanding these sculptures as open symbolic texts shifts analytical attention away from the question of whether religious symbols have been secularized or commercialized. Instead, it highlights how historical continuity and symbolic transformation operate simultaneously. Traditional artistic forms preserve symbolic recognizability, while changing social and cultural contexts continually generate new interpretations. The contemporary significance of Dehua white porcelain statues therefore lies not in the replacement of sacred meaning, but in their capacity to sustain multiple symbolic meanings across different cultural settings.

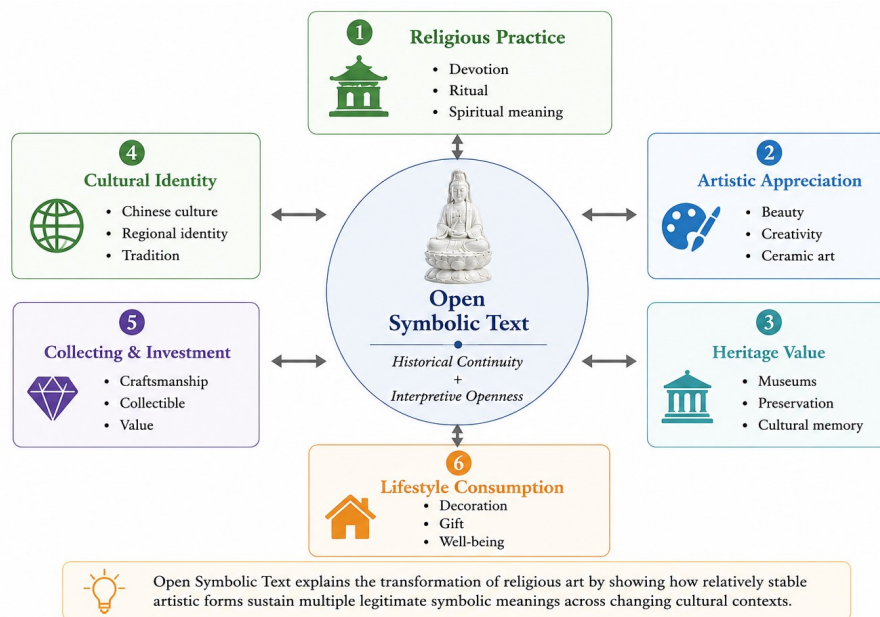


Figure 5. Analytical Framework of Open Symbolic Text

This interpretation also resonates with recent discussions of material religion and heritage as dynamic processes of cultural meaning-making.

Case Analyses

4.1 Case 1: He Chaozong—Historical Symbolic Stability

The mature development of Dehua white porcelain sculpture during the Ming dynasty established many of the symbolic conventions that continued to shape later generations of ceramic production. Religious sculptures functioned primarily as devotional objects embedded within shared religious practices and collective cultural memory. Although Dehua porcelain circulated through domestic and overseas trade, commercial exchange generally reinforced rather than transformed established religious symbolism.

Among the most representative examples is He Chaozong's *Auspicious Cloud Guanyin*, one of the best-known works in the history of Dehua porcelain sculpture. The sculpture demonstrates the mature integration of porcelain craftsmanship and Buddhist iconography characteristic of Ming-period Dehua ceramics. Guanyin's serene facial expression, flowing robes, elegant posture,

and cloud-supported composition are rendered through refined white porcelain, producing a visual language immediately recognisable within traditional Chinese Buddhist culture.



Figure 6. Overall and detailed views of He Chaozong's *Auspicious Cloud Guanyin*

From the perspective of artistic semiotics, the symbolic meaning of this sculpture derives from the close correspondence between artistic form and established cultural interpretation. Visual elements such as the lotus imagery, compassionate expression, graceful posture, and distinctive costume function as stable iconographic signs directing viewers toward relatively consistent religious meanings. Although individual appreciation may vary, interpretation remains largely guided by inherited religious traditions and shared cultural conventions rather than personal identity or consumer preference. This case therefore establishes the historical baseline of the study: symbolic continuity was primarily maintained through the close alignment between artistic form and culturally shared interpretation.

4.2 Case 2: Su Qinghe—Expansion of Symbolic Meanings

Since the late twentieth century, the revival of Dehua white porcelain sculpture has unfolded alongside cultural revitalization, heritage preservation, and the rapid expansion of China's cultural industries. While traditional religious iconography continued to provide the principal visual language, museums, exhibitions, tourism, creative industries, and art markets increasingly became important contexts in which religious sculptures acquired new cultural significance.

A representative example of this transitional stage is Su Qinghe's *Standing Lotus Guanyin*. The sculpture retains the essential iconographic features of traditional Guanyin imagery—including the standing posture, flowing robes, lotus pedestal, and characteristic Dehua white glaze—while displaying greater refinement in sculptural proportion, artistic expression, and

exhibition-oriented presentation. Rather than transforming traditional religious imagery, Su Qinghe reinterprets inherited visual conventions through contemporary craftsmanship.



Figure 7. Overall and detailed views of Su Qinghe's *Standing Lotus Guanyin*

From the perspective of artistic semiotics, *Standing Lotus Guanyin* represents a transitional stage in symbolic development. Traditional religious iconography remains immediately recognisable, enabling viewers to associate the sculpture with compassion, blessing, and spiritual cultivation. However, religious meaning no longer functions as the sole interpretive framework. Through circulation within museums, exhibitions, collections, tourism, and cultural industries, the sculpture gradually acquires additional meanings as contemporary ceramic art, cultural heritage, regional identity, and collectible craftsmanship. Importantly, these emerging meanings do not replace its religious significance. Instead, they expand the symbolic structure while preserving historical continuity, demonstrating how new interpretive contexts begin to accumulate upon an existing symbolic foundation.

4.3 Case 3: Lin Siqin—Open Symbolic Text

The rapid development of China's contemporary cultural economy has created increasingly diversified contexts for the production, circulation, and interpretation of religious art. Digital media, museum exhibitions, cultural tourism, creative industries, and social media have expanded both the audiences and cultural functions of Dehua white porcelain sculpture. Within this environment, symbolic meaning is no longer stabilized within a single religious interpretive framework but continually expands through interactions among artistic practice, cultural institutions, markets, and everyday cultural participation. Rather than replacing earlier meanings, these new interpretations accumulate upon established symbolic traditions, creating the conditions under

which religious artworks functions as an open symbolic text.

A representative example of this contemporary transformation is Lin Siqin's *Panda Patriarch: Crossing (Du)*. Instead of reproducing the conventional image of Bodhidharma, the sculpture combines the iconic panda with traditional Chan imagery through Dehua porcelain craftsmanship. While recognizable references to Chinese religious culture remain, contemporary popular culture and national cultural identity are simultaneously incorporated, allowing the work to transcend the conventional boundaries separating religious icon, contemporary artwork, cultural product, and creative design.



Figure 8. Overall and detailed views of Lin Siqin's *Panda Patriarch: Crossing (Du)*

From the perspective of artistic semiotics, *Panda Patriarch: Crossing (Du)* demonstrates how relatively stable artistic forms can sustain multiple legitimate symbolic interpretations. References to Bodhidharma remain recognisable, yet they no longer prescribe a single authoritative meaning. Instead, different cultural contexts generate different symbolic readings. Within religious settings, the work continues to evoke Zen traditions and spiritual cultivation; in museums and exhibitions, it is interpreted as contemporary ceramic art and cultural heritage; collectors value its artistic originality and craftsmanship; while broader audiences may appreciate it as a symbol of Chinese cultural identity, a creative cultural product, or an expression of contemporary aesthetic taste. These interpretations do not compete for exclusivity but coexist and accumulate upon the same symbolic foundation.

The sculpture therefore exemplifies an open symbolic text. Stable iconographic traditions continue to provide symbolic continuity, while contemporary cultural contexts continually generate additional layers of interpretation. Rather than replacing sacred meanings, artistic, cultural, heritage, commercial, and everyday meanings progressively accumulate within a single symbolic structure, allowing symbolic continuity and symbolic expansion to occur simultaneously.

4.4 Comparative Discussion

Case	Historical Stage	Symbolic Structure	Dominant Interpretive Pattern	Theoretical Significance
He Chaozong	Historical tradition	Relatively stable	Shared religious interpretation	Symbolic stability
Su Qinghe	Cultural revival	Expanding	Religious meaning plus emerging cultural interpretations	Symbolic expansion
Lin Siqin	Contemporary cultural economy	Open symbolic structure	Multiple coexisting interpretations	Open Symbolic Text

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of the Three Cases

The three cases should be understood as successive stages within a single process of symbolic transformation rather than as isolated artistic examples. He Chaozong's *Auspicious Cloud Guanyin* establishes the historical condition in which symbolic meaning remained relatively stable through the close correspondence between artistic form and shared religious interpretation. Su Qinghe's *Standing Lotus Guanyin* demonstrates how new cultural contexts gradually introduced additional symbolic meanings without disrupting this historical continuity. Lin Siqin's *Panda Patriarch: Crossing (Du)* further illustrates how these accumulated meanings eventually form an open symbolic structure capable of accommodating multiple legitimate interpretations simultaneously.

Taken together, the cases demonstrate that the contemporary transformation of Dehua white porcelain religious sculptures is not adequately explained as a process of desacralization or simple commercialization. Rather than replacing earlier religious meanings, new artistic, cultural, heritage, commercial, and identity-related meanings progressively accumulate upon existing symbolic traditions. This empirical progression provides the foundation for the following discussion, which situates these findings within current debates on Material Religion, Heritage Studies, Consumer Culture, and ultimately develops the concept of Open Symbolic Text as a theoretical explanation for the cumulative coexistence of symbolic meanings.

Discussion

Recent scholarship has increasingly challenged the assumption that modernization inevitably leads to the desacralization of religious objects. Material Religion increasingly emphasizes that religious objects continue to acquire new forms of value and significance across changing historical contexts (Burchardt, 2025; Morgan, 2021). Material Religion argues that religion is enacted through the dynamic interactions among objects, bodies, spaces, practices, and sensory experience rather than existing solely in beliefs or doctrines (Katz-Harris, 2023; Meyer et al., 2010; Morgan, 2010, 2021). Religious objects are therefore understood not as passive representations but as active participants that shape religious experience and social life (Meyer et al., 2010). Their meanings are continuously reconfigured as they circulate across different material and social contexts (Katz-Harris, 2023; Morgan, 2021), allowing religious continuity to coexist with historical transformation (Burchardt, 2025; Meyer et al., 2010). The development of Material and

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Experiential Religion further emphasizes that religious experience is co-produced through material engagement (Morgan, 2021), reinforcing the idea that religious objects actively participate in generating new forms of religious knowledge and practice. These perspectives provide an important foundation for understanding why Dehua white porcelain sculptures of gods and Buddhas continue to function beyond their original ritual settings. Material Religion has convincingly demonstrated that religious objects acquire new meanings as they move across historical and social contexts (Burchardt, 2025; Katz-Harris, 2023; Morgan, 2021). However, it has paid comparatively less attention to how these successive meanings remain simultaneously valid rather than replacing one another. It is precisely this theoretical gap that the concept of Open Symbolic Text seeks to address.

Heritage Studies extends this discussion by shifting attention from material objects themselves to the social processes through which heritage is continually produced. Rather than treating heritage as a fixed inheritance, scholars increasingly understand it as an ongoing process of cultural meaning-making (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013). Recent studies further conceptualize heritage-making as a dynamic and ongoing process through which heritage is continually reconstructed in response to changing social, cultural, and economic contexts (Watson, 2023). Heritage is therefore constantly reconstructed through the interactions of governmental institutions, local communities, museums, religious organizations, collectors, and other social actors, reflecting the multiple agencies involved in heritage-making (Bekus, 2019). From the perspective of living heritage, moreover, continuity is sustained not through static preservation but through the ongoing reinterpretation and adaptation of heritage within changing cultural contexts (Walter, 2020). From this perspective, Dehua white porcelain religious sculptures are not simply preserved as historical artefacts but continually acquire new meanings as religious heritage, artistic heritage, local cultural heritage, and museum collections. Nevertheless, existing Heritage Studies primarily explains how new meanings are created through heritage-making and reinterpretation but provides only limited explanation of why these multiple interpretations remain simultaneously valid rather than replacing one another.

Consumer Culture Theory further demonstrates that symbolic meanings are continuously generated through identity construction and market participation. Consumption is increasingly understood as a process through which individuals construct identities and pursue meaningful lives rather than merely satisfying functional needs (Baudrillard, 2014; Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 2008; Anker, 2024). This emerging emphasis on meaning-oriented consumption has also been confirmed by recent systematic reviews of consumer research (Jain et al., 2023). At the same time, recent research argues that marketization does not eliminate religion but fundamentally restructures religious beliefs, practices, and symbolic meanings by introducing religious objects into new cultural, artistic, commercial, and lifestyle contexts (Einstein, 2008; Lynch, 2007; Izberk-Bilgin & Belk, 2025). Consequently, Dehua white porcelain religious sculptures are no longer interpreted solely as devotional objects but also as works of art, cultural heritage, aesthetic commodities, and symbols of cultural identity. Yet Consumer Culture mainly explains how new meanings emerge through consumption, while leaving unresolved why these diverse symbolic meanings remain historically cumulative rather than mutually exclusive.

Taken together, these three theoretical traditions converge on an important conclusion: the meanings of religious objects are neither fixed nor singular but continuously generated through material practices, heritage-making, and cultural consumption. However, none of them fully

explains how successive meanings accumulate while earlier meanings remain legitimate. To address this theoretical gap, this study proposes the concept of Open Symbolic Text. Rather than viewing symbolic transformation as a process in which new meanings replace old ones, Open Symbolic Text conceptualizes religious art as an open symbolic structure capable of accommodating multiple legitimate interpretations across changing historical and social contexts. The case of Dehua white porcelain religious sculptures demonstrates that religious, artistic, heritage, aesthetic, commercial, and identity-related meanings do not compete for exclusivity but progressively accumulate, allowing the object to maintain both historical continuity and interpretive openness. In this sense, Open Symbolic Text extends existing scholarship by explaining not only how symbolic meanings are continually produced, but also why they remain open, cumulative, and coexistent over time.

Conclusion

This study has examined the contemporary transformation of Dehua white porcelain religious sculptures through the complementary perspectives of symbolic consumption and artistic semiotics. Rather than interpreting their changing social roles as evidence of secularization or the decline of religious significance, the findings demonstrate that these sculptures have undergone a process of symbolic expansion in which historical continuity and contemporary reinterpretation operate simultaneously. While their artistic forms and iconographic traditions remain recognisable, the symbolic meanings attached to them continue to evolve as they circulate across religious, artistic, heritage, commercial, and everyday cultural contexts.

The historical analysis and three case studies reveal a coherent process of symbolic development. The works of He Chaozong represent a historical condition in which symbolic meanings remained relatively stable through established religious traditions and shared iconographic conventions. Su Qinghe's sculptures illustrate how new artistic, cultural, and heritage meanings gradually emerged without displacing earlier religious interpretations. Lin Siqin's contemporary works further demonstrate that these accumulated meanings eventually form an open symbolic structure capable of sustaining multiple legitimate interpretations simultaneously. Together, the cases show that the transformation of Dehua white porcelain religious sculptures is better understood as the cumulative expansion of symbolic meanings than as the replacement of sacred meanings by secular ones.

Based on these findings, this study proposes Open Symbolic Text as its central theoretical contribution. Existing scholarship in Material Religion, Heritage Studies, and Consumer Culture has demonstrated that religious objects possess agency, continually acquire new meanings, and are repeatedly reinterpreted through changing social contexts. However, these perspectives offer only limited explanation of why successive symbolic meanings remain historically cumulative rather than mutually exclusive. The concept of Open Symbolic Text addresses this theoretical gap by explaining how relatively stable artistic forms enable multiple legitimate symbolic meanings to accumulate and coexist across different historical and cultural contexts. In doing so, it shifts analytical attention from symbolic replacement to symbolic accumulation, offering a new perspective for understanding the long-term transformation of religious art.

Although this study focuses on Dehua white porcelain religious sculptures, the analytical framework developed here has broader implications for the study of religious art, craft heritage, and culturally significant material objects undergoing transformation in contemporary society.

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More generally, it suggests that the contemporary evolution of religious art should not be understood primarily through narratives of desacralization, but through the capacity of material forms to remain symbolically open while preserving historical continuity.

Future research may extend this framework through comparative studies of other religious artistic traditions, cross-cultural investigations of symbolic transformation, and analyses of how digital media and emerging cultural platforms further expand the interpretive possibilities of religious material culture. More broadly, this study suggests that the concept of Open Symbolic Text provides a useful perspective for understanding how religious art preserves historical continuity while remaining open to new symbolic interpretations in contemporary society.

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