

The Application of Semiotics Theory in the Landscape Construction of Rural Vacation Areas

Jing He^{1,2}

¹School of Foreign Languages, Chaohu University, Chaohu, China

²School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Wuhan University, Wuhan, China

Email: daisy_0683@163.com

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Abstract

This study employs the framework of semiotic theory to explore the application of semiotics in the landscape construction of rural vacation areas, using Sanhua Commune in Chaohu City as a case study. It analyzes how symbols convey cultural connotations and enhance visitor experiences within the landscape. Through field research and semiotic analysis of Sanhua Commune, this paper outlines the conditions for landscape construction in rural vacation areas and reveals the symbolic expressions of natural resources, local culture, and agricultural experiences in landscape design. The research starts with the configuration of points, lines, and planes in the landscape, proposing ways to organically integrate landscape elements through symbolic representation, thereby enhancing the aesthetic quality and functionality of the space. Furthermore, this paper discusses the design of language symbols in various functional zones, illustrating how the cultural exhibition area, leisure and entertainment area, and agricultural experience area uniquely present their cultural charm and interactivity through a symbolic system. Ultimately, the study concludes with the multifaceted roles of symbols in the landscape of rural vacation areas, asserting that the application of semiotic theory can effectively enhance cultural expression and deepen visitor engagement within the landscape. This research not only provides theoretical support for the design of rural vacation area landscapes but also offers practical guidance for the cultural transmission and innovative development of rural tourism in the future.

Keywords

Semiotics, Rural Vacation Areas, Landscape Construction, Sanhua Commune, Symbol Design

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

In recent years, with the increasing demand for green ecological tourism, rural vacation areas have emerged as a significant focus within the tourism market. As a tourism model that integrates nature, culture, and recreational experiences, rural vacation areas not only provide urban residents with a retreat from the hustle and bustle of city life but also contribute to sustainable societal development by promoting rural economic growth, protecting the ecological environment, and preserving local culture (Buckley, 2012). However, rural vacation areas currently face a series of pressing issues in their development, such as balancing ecological protection with tourism development, homogenization in landscape design, insufficient community participation, and inadequate infrastructure and management levels. These challenges have, to some extent, constrained the sustainable development of rural vacation areas, impacting both visitor experience and satisfaction.

Against this backdrop, how to scientifically and effectively design landscapes that possess both cultural depth and experiential value in rural vacation areas has become an urgent issue to address. Semiotic theory provides a novel theoretical framework for analyzing symbols in landscape design. This theory posits that elements within the landscape are not merely physical entities but symbols that embody cultural, historical, and social meanings. These symbols are interpreted within specific contexts and significantly influence visitors' perceptions, emotions, and behaviors (Akgün et al., 2020). In the landscape construction of rural vacation areas, applying Semiotic theory can assist designers in organizing and showcasing local cultural symbols, thereby creating landscape spaces with cultural recognition and emotional resonance, ultimately enhancing visitors' sense of experience and belonging.

1.2. Research Object and Scope

This study focuses on Sanhua Commune in Chaohu City as the research object. Sanhua Commune is a rural vacation area that integrates rural culture, natural landscapes, and agricultural experiences, boasting rich natural resources and unique local culture, making it an ideal site for applying semiotics in landscape design. This rural vacation area retains traditional agricultural cultural symbols while meeting modern tourism demands, resulting in a fusion of diverse cultures and ecology. The scope of this research primarily encompasses the overall landscape design of Sanhua Commune, including the natural landscape area, cultural exhibition area, leisure and entertainment area, and agricultural experience area. By analyzing these different functional zones, the study aims to explore how Semiotic theory can effectively construct landscapes with cultural depth and ecological value.

The research will focus on the organization and interpretation of language

symbols within the landscape, specifically investigating the configuration of symbols among points, lines, and planes, as well as their application in various spaces. The goal is to enhance the cultural expression and visitor experience of rural vacation areas through symbolic design. Additionally, the research will address the interaction and cultural dissemination functions of various symbols within the landscape of rural vacation areas, providing new perspectives and practical evidence for the application of semiotic theory in rural tourism landscape design.

1.3. Research Methodology

This study employs a variety of research methods aimed at conducting a semiotic analysis and design construction of the landscape in Sanhua Commune rural vacation area. Firstly, a literature review method will be utilized to collect relevant literature on rural vacation areas and semiotic theory, organizing existing research outcomes to clarify the research direction and theoretical foundation. Secondly, field research will be conducted in Sanhua Commune to analyze its natural resources, cultural symbols, and existing landscape layout, while incorporating feedback from visitors' experiences to gather foundational data for symbol extraction and design optimization. Subsequently, a semiotic analysis method will be employed to classify and interpret the landscape symbols discovered during the research, exploring the cultural expression and functionality of these symbols within the landscape in conjunction with semiotic theory. Finally, through a design practice method, a landscape design scheme for Sanhua Commune based on semiotic theory will be developed to validate the operability of symbol theory in rural landscape design and to summarize the semiotic design principles for constructing rural vacation area landscapes.

1.4. Research Content

The research will unfold in five aspects regarding the application of Semiotic theory in the landscape construction of rural vacation areas. The first part will provide an overview of the development background of rural vacation areas and the relevant content of Semiotic theory, clarifying the purpose and significance of this research. The second part will review the current research status of domestic and international scholars in this field. The third part will outline the theoretical foundation, focusing on the intrinsic relationship between semiotic theory and the landscape construction of rural vacation areas, and propose the application value of Semiotic theory in the landscape design of rural vacation areas. The fourth part will analyze the existing landscape conditions of Sanhua Commune, emphasizing the extraction of symbols within the landscape using Semiotic theory, generating design proposals in line with practical landscape planning needs, and analyzing the symbolic construction and spatial design of each functional zone. The fifth part will summarize the innovations and practical effects of this research, synthesizing the results and proposing potential directions and suggestions for future research.

1.5. Research Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this study is to reveal the symbolic system and cultural meanings within the landscape of Sanhua Commune rural vacation area from a semiotic perspective, and to propose an optimized landscape design scheme based on semiotic theory. Through this research, it is expected to provide theoretical support and design guidance for the symbolic construction of rural vacation area landscapes, as well as new ideas and methods for local governments and tourism developers in rural tourism landscape design. The significance of this research is multifaceted. Theoretically, it expands the application of semiotic theory in landscape design, thereby enriching the theoretical foundation for designing landscapes in rural vacation areas. Practically, it provides actionable recommendations for the landscape design of Sanhua Commune, facilitating the dissemination and preservation of local culture. Socially, through the analysis and application of semiotics, this study enhances the cultural expressiveness and tourism appeal of rural vacation areas, promoting the simultaneous development of rural economy and culture.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Rural Vacation Areas

Research on rural vacation areas began relatively early, with rural tourism being regarded as an important means to promote local economic development. First, sustainable development and rural tourism have been key themes. Scholars have explored how to balance economic benefits with ecological protection in the development of rural vacation areas. For instance, some studies indicate that by employing green building techniques, energy-saving facilities, and ecological restoration measures, it is possible to protect the rural natural environment while developing tourism (D'Amato et al., 2017). Second, community participation is a significant topic in the study of rural vacation areas abroad. Researchers argue that active involvement from local communities not only enhances the cultural representation of the vacation area but also strengthens the interaction and cultural exchange between visitors and local residents. Some studies suggest that successful rural vacation areas are often developed and managed in close collaboration with local communities (Jones, 2016). Third, the design of rural tourism experiences has shifted from a "sightseeing" focus to an "experiential" approach. Researchers analyze visitor behavior patterns and propose design concepts that emphasize active participation, highlighting the importance of interactive and participatory activities to enhance the visitor experience. For example, some rural vacation areas attract visitors through agricultural experience activities and craft-making workshops, encouraging deeper engagement (Huang et al., 2017).

In China, the development of rural vacation areas has gradually become a focal point of research alongside the implementation of rural tourism. Scholars primarily study rural vacation areas from several aspects: first, innovation in rural tourism models. Research indicates that rural vacation areas, as a combination of

agriculture, culture, and ecology, have become important drivers of rural economic development (Xu & Sofield, 2017). Scholars have proposed various innovative development models, such as the “Agriculture + Tourism” model, which combines leisure agriculture with rural vacation areas to enhance agricultural efficiency while promoting rural tourism (Ndhlovu & Dube, 2024). Second, the integration of culture and ecological protection has been examined. Some studies investigate how to incorporate local cultural symbols, historical relics, and ecological elements into the design of rural vacation areas, ensuring that these areas serve not only as spaces for tourist leisure but also as platforms for showcasing local cultural features and promoting ecological preservation (Zhang, 2022). Third, the localization of rural landscape design has gained increasing attention. With the rapid development of rural tourism, designers and researchers have come to recognize the importance of “localized design”. In recent years, numerous studies have focused on how to reflect local cultural characteristics through rural landscape design, promoting the dissemination and preservation of local culture. For instance, some research indicates that preserving traditional dwellings and integrating local artistic symbols can enhance the cultural identity and attractiveness of vacation areas (Zhang, 2021).

2.2. Semiotic Theory

Research on semiotic theory is relatively mature, especially in the fields of cultural studies, design studies, and visual communication. Semiotics is widely used to analyze various symbolic systems, ranging from language and art to social phenomena (Webb, 2003). The research primarily encompasses several aspects. First, the expansion of semiotic theory in design. Many scholars have analyzed the symbolic systems within design products through semiotics, revealing how designs convey meaning through various sensory modalities, including visual and tactile experiences. For example, studies have shown that in architecture and landscape design, symbols are not merely decorative elements; they can convey the cultural context, history, and functionality of the structures (Sørensen et al., 2019). Second, the globalization and localization of cultural symbols. Semiotic theory has also been applied to analyze the dissemination and reconstruction of cultural symbols in the context of globalization. International researchers explore cross-cultural symbol transmission and how symbols are reinterpreted and utilized within different cultural contexts. For instance, how Western symbol, such as the golden arches of McDonald’s coexist with local cultural symbols during global dissemination and adapt to regional cultural practices are significant topics in semiotic research (Long & He, 2021). Third, the interaction between symbols and spatial design. Researchers analyze the relationship between symbols and spaces, revealing how symbols influence people’s perception and experience of spaces. Studies indicate that symbols convey meaning not only visually but also through various modes of interaction, including tactile and auditory experiences. For example, urban landscape design research explores the interactive relationships among public signage

systems, architectural symbols, and cultural symbols (Raaphorst et al., 2016).

In China, research on semiotic theory has primarily focused on linguistics, communication studies, and cultural research (Dai et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2021; Zou et al., 2024). In recent years, with the cross-disciplinary development of design and cultural studies, semiotic theory has gradually been introduced into landscape design. Research includes various aspects. First, the application of semiotic theory in cultural studies. Domestic semiotic research mainly focuses on analyzing and interpreting cultural symbols. Researchers explore how symbols within cultural products influence consumers' perceptions and behaviors. For instance, some studies analyze the modern transformation and innovative applications of traditional Chinese cultural symbols discussing the reconstruction of their meanings in contemporary society (Ma et al., 2023). Second, the application of semiotic theory in landscape design. Although there is relatively little research on the application of semiotics in landscape design, existing studies are beginning to focus on how to enhance the cultural connotation of landscape design through symbolic systems. For instance, some studies examine the signage systems and cultural symbols in public spaces, suggesting that these symbols can visually guide visitors while conveying the culture and history of the region (Leontovich & Kotelnikova, 2022) Despite many rural vacation areas achieving significant results in natural resource development and infrastructure construction, there remains a deficiency in showcasing cultural connotations and creating profound visitor experiences. Many rural vacation areas exhibit homogeneity in landscape design, lacking in-depth exploration and utilization of local cultural symbols, leading to superficial tourist experiences. By introducing Semiotic theory, it is possible to delve deeper into the cultural symbol systems within landscapes, enhancing the cultural depth and experiential quality of landscape design, thereby improving the overall competitiveness of rural vacation areas.

3. Related Theoretical Research

3.1. The Connotation of Rural Vacation Areas

Rural vacation areas are comprehensive recreational tourism zones developed based on the natural resources, cultural heritage, and ecological landscapes of rural regions, integrating modern tourism demands. They not only provide urban residents with a space to reconnect with nature and experience rural life but also serve as significant means to promote rural economic development. The core of rural vacation areas lies in the integration of natural landscapes, agricultural experiences, and cultural exhibitions, creating a tourism space that encompasses sightseeing, leisure, and educational functions. Their connotation extends beyond mere entertainment and relaxation to include ecological protection, cultural heritage, and sustainable development of the local economy. In designing rural vacation areas, emphasis is often placed on environmental conservation, the rational use of agricultural resources, and the integration of local cultural symbols, aiming to construct a space that harmoniously coexists with nature and fosters deep

participation and emotional resonance among visitors.

3.2. Introduction to Semiotic Theory

Semiotic theory posits that a sign consists of a “signifier” and a “signified”, where the signifier represents the physical form of the sign, such as an image or sound, and the signified is the concept or meaning conveyed by it (Saussure, 1916). According to Peirce’s triadic classification, signs can be categorized into icons, indexes, and symbols: icons resemble their objects, indexes point to their objects through causal or proximity relations, and symbols convey meaning based on cultural conventions (Peirce, 1932). Morris further developed semiotic theory by dividing it into syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, focusing respectively on the form, meaning, and contextual usage of signs (Morris, 1938). Semiotic theory emphasizes the relationship between signs and their cultural context, asserting that the meaning of signs is generated and interpreted within specific social, historical, and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the application of semiotic theory has expanded from linguistics to fields such as design, cultural studies, and communication, providing a theoretical foundation for examining how signs convey information and emotions within particular context.

3.3. The Relationship between Symbols and Landscape Construction in Rural Vacation Areas

Symbols play a crucial role in the landscape construction of rural vacation areas. Through symbols, landscapes not only showcase the aesthetic quality of physical spaces but also convey local culture, ecological philosophies, and historical memories (Eco, 1976). The symbols within landscapes can be tangible or intangible such as cultural activities, customs, and languages (Gunn & Var, 2002). Tangible landscapes can be represented through physical elements such as sculptures, architecture, and vegetation that embody cultural symbols or historical narratives. For instance, architectural forms and materials chosen in landscape design can reflect local history and traditions, creating a sense of place and continuity with the past. Similarly, sculptures or monuments can serve as focal points, visually anchoring cultural heritage or ecological values within the space. By carefully integrating natural elements, such as native plants or water features, designers can reinforce ecological themes and local biodiversity. These tangible symbols invite visitors to engage with the landscape not only as a physical space but as a meaningful, multi-layered experience that resonates with the cultural and environmental identity of the region.

In rural vacation areas, the use of symbols helps to enhance cultural experiences and emotional connections for visitors. For example, the preservation or recreation of traditional dwellings can serve as symbols of local culture, communicating the history and humanistic depth of the countryside to visitors; natural elements such as plants and waterways act as ecological symbols, reminding visitors to respect and protect the environment. Therefore, symbols not only provide aesthetic support for landscape design but also establish a cultural exchange bridge between

visitors and the landscape.

3.4. Interpretation of Language Symbols in Rural Vacation Area Landscapes

Language symbols in the landscape design of rural vacation areas are primarily reflected in elements such as signage systems, informational panels, and interactive installations. These language symbols serve not only as tools for conveying information but also embody cultural expression and emotional communication (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Through the interpretation of language symbols, visitors can gain insights into the stories, cultural backgrounds, and ecological philosophies behind the landscape (Clavla, 2005). For instance, informational panels within scenic areas can narrate local history and customs, while some interactive installations can guide visitors to engage in experiences through visually enriched content, thereby deepening their understanding of local culture. The effective design and interpretation of language symbols can enhance the cultural atmosphere of rural vacation areas, improve visitors' sense of immersion and interaction, and ultimately achieve deeper cultural dissemination and recognition.

4. Application of Semiotic Theory in the Landscape Design of Sanhua Commune Rural Vacation Area

4.1. Landscape Construction Conditions of Sanhua Commune

Sanhua Commune, located in Chaohu City, is a rural vacation area collaboratively developed by Anhui Huai Commerce Group and the Chaohu Economic Development Zone. This area integrates ecological resources with cultural history, and its landscape construction conditions are primarily reflected in abundant natural resources, profound cultural heritage, and unique agricultural experiences. First, Sanhua Commune boasts beautiful natural landscapes, including picturesque rural scenery, wetland resources, and abundant vegetation, which provide a solid ecological foundation for landscape design. Second, the local culture is deep-rooted, encompassing traditional agricultural practices, local handicrafts, and farming customs, all of which offer rich cultural elements for the construction of symbols within the landscape. Additionally, Sanhua Commune combines agricultural experiential tourism, adding modern tourism's participatory and interactive elements to the landscape symbol design.

To further promote rural revitalization and enhance landscape design capabilities, the Sanhua Commune has established the Bantang Rural Academy, focusing on the integration of agriculture, culture, and tourism, as well as rural development. The Academy employs a modular teaching approach, centered around problem-solving training that encourages participants to explore new perspectives in landscape design, thereby providing intellectual support for rural development. An examination team, consisting of three to five experts and scholars, conducts field studies in the area and offers targeted planning suggestions.

Through these training initiatives, Sanhua Commune effectively enhances the

design capabilities of local residents, equipping them with an understanding of semiotic theory and deepening their comprehension of local cultural symbols. This not only aids in the effective application of these elements in landscape design but also ensures a richer immersive experience for visitors. Consequently, landscape construction should fully embody the natural ecological and cultural characteristics while employing semiotic design strategies to render the rural vacation area more attractive and meaningful.

4.2. Configuration of Language Symbols in the Plane

1) Configuration of Points and Lines

In landscape design, points represent fixed landscape elements such as sculptures, monuments, and observation decks, while lines signify the paths along which visitors move, including walkways, rivers, or landscape axes (Cullen, 1961). In the design of Sanhua Commune, points can be buildings or art installations that hold cultural significance, symbolizing the local history and culture to attract visitors. Lines can guide visitors between different scenic spots through pathways or waterways, creating fluid touring routes. The reasonable combination of points and lines can establish a sense of rhythm in the space, allowing visitors to shift perspectives continuously during their tour, experiencing various cultural symbols.

2) Configuration of Lines and Planes

The relationship between lines and planes determines the overall framework of the landscape space (Alexander, 1977). Lines connect different functional areas, while planes represent the expansiveness of these areas, such as squares, lawns, and water surfaces. The design of lines and planes in Sanhua Commune can integrate pathways and green spaces, allowing visitors to enjoy natural scenery while entering clearly defined resting or experience areas. For example, the combination of water surfaces and agricultural fields not only reflects the integration of natural landscapes and agricultural culture but can also create a visually rich landscape through the design of water bodies.

3) Configuration of Points, Lines, and Planes in Overall Planning

In overall planning, points, lines, and planes need to be organically combined to create continuity and layering. The landscape design of Sanhua Commune can integrate culturally symbolic buildings (points), pathways connecting different functional zones (lines), and expansive natural and agricultural landscapes (planes) to form a complete experiential route. For instance, the main avenue could link various important scenic spots, while pathways guide visitors into more intimate resting and viewing areas. Finally, through squares and open water surfaces, the overall space can be extended, creating a layered and varied touring experience.

4.3. Configuration of Spatial Language Elements in Various Functional Zones

In the design of Sanhua Commune, different functional areas need to possess

unique symbolic expressions to clearly convey their functions and cultural implications. The cultural exhibition area can utilize historical buildings, local crafts, and informational panels to showcase the local cultural history and customs (Tuan, 1977). The leisure and entertainment area can attract visitors' visual attention with brightly colored seating, recreational facilities, and thoughtfully arranged plantings, creating a relaxing atmosphere. The agricultural experience area can display local agricultural culture through symbolic elements such as farming tools and pastoral landscapes, providing opportunities for visitors to engage in participatory experiences. The symbolic design of each functional area should not only possess aesthetic value but also consider functionality and the actual needs of visitors, enhancing the interactivity and enjoyment of the space.

5. Conclusion

This study employs Semiotic theory to conduct a semiotic analysis and design exploration of the landscape construction in Sanhua Commune's rural vacation area. In the process of landscape construction, symbols are presented not only as aesthetic elements but also as media for conveying culture and history. Through the analysis and thoughtful arrangement of symbols, it is possible to effectively enhance the cultural expression of rural vacation areas and the immersive experience of visitors. The organic integration of points, lines, and planes creates the structural framework of the space, while the symbolic elements of each functional area further enrich the spatial layers and cultural connotations. By applying Semiotic theory, Sanhua Commune not only reflects regional characteristics in landscape aesthetics but also strengthens cultural identity and interactive experiences through symbolic construction. In the future, research on the application of semiotic theory in rural tourism landscapes should be further deepened to explore more symbolization design methods, contributing innovative ideas for cultural transmission.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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