

Visual Taste of Culture: The Semiotics of Traditional Chinese Elements in Modern Fusion Restaurant Branding

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ABSTRACT

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Spaces of cultural engagement, such as restaurants, often incorporate cultural elements to promote a sense of cultural resonance through the use of visual and design elements. This paper aimed to investigate the application of the traditional Chinese design elements by international as well as local modern fusion restaurants, which leads to the construction of cultural image and identity narratives of the brands. Accordingly, the paper investigates the two set objectives, which were: to study the employment of traditional Chinese design and visual elements by fusion restaurants to promote cultural authenticity and hybridity, and to analyse the enhancement of the global brand identity distinction and consumer interaction through semiotic implementation of traditional elements. The paper conducted a qualitative analysis through a comparative case study of nine Chinese fusion restaurants from both domestic and international contexts, sourcing the observations through their online data sampled through purposive methods. The findings revealed that in China, the traditional motifs function as tactile tools of belonging, which are culturally rooted and embedded in the identity framing of these restaurants. This creates a sense of belongingness and continuity of cultural memory for the domestic fusion restaurants. In the international context, those same motifs are often abstracted into modular brand codes that signal sophistication and distinctiveness to cosmopolitan audiences. The paper contributes to the reframing of authenticity as performative and situational, offering a usable framework for scholars of visual culture, hospitality design, and transnational branding. It recommends that future applied work should pair visual audits with designer narratives to secure both descriptive

1. Introduction

The process of integrating design elements and promoting visual culture has become a key mode of communication for promoting cultural and aesthetic principles. Chinese traditional cultural and design elements are often introduced within visual culture, which enhances the creative approach to increasing the implications of the visual designs (Li et al., 2020). Repeated implementation of traditional cultural elements within visual design can help to promote a nationalised identity in the form of designs. Zheng (2022) found that implementing traditional visual culture in architectural design elements promotes a strong traditional environment and traditional culture. Notably, people also display positive attitudes towards the use of traditional cultural elements in the planning and designing of public spaces, such as parks. This also helps to promote the relationship between the traditional and the modern, while also influencing the psychology and behaviour of individuals differently in each generation (Yixuan, 2018). Notably, “design not only reflects cultural identity in products, but also integrates it into the present, determines the development of society in general, and influences people's thinking and social values” (Zeqian, 2023, p.61). These observations present an understanding of the importance of including traditional Chinese design themes in modern architectural and visual design culture. Accordingly, it becomes important to study, in the context of this paper, how the traditional Chinese design patterns are integrated with fusion design elements through the cross-cultural collaboration of China with other neighbouring nations. This is attributed to the historical cross-cultural interaction of China through trade via the Silk Road with other neighbouring countries such as India, Persia, and Central Asia, which also connected the East and the West (Wang, 2024). This led to the exchange of art, ideas, and philosophies, thereby establishing the notion of fusion in the cultural context. To that end, this paper investigates how this fusion unfolds in the context of architectural and spatial design, as utilised by modern fusion restaurants.

1.1. Aim and Research questions

This research paper aims to investigate the application of the traditional Chinese design elements by international as well as local modern fusion restaurants, which leads to the construction of cultural image and identity narratives of the brands. The paper examines the interaction of the global and the local through the application of semiotic analysis of cultural visual elements, which influences the viewers and their interpretation of the brand identity. It studies the use of traditional elements by the fusion restaurants in maintaining their cultural identities through the following objectives:

- To study the employment of traditional Chinese design and visual elements by fusion restaurants to promote cultural authenticity and hybridity
- To analyse the enhancement of the global brand identity distinction and consumer interaction through the semiotic implementation of traditional elements.

1.2. Significance of this research

This current research is significant in presenting a semiotic description of how the integration of traditional Chinese visual elements can influence a dynamic semiotic

image interpretation, which creates a cultural meaning, rather than being mere decorative points. The paper notes how the fusion restaurant brands, both global and local, incorporate and translate these semiotic elements to establish cultural identity across the global market. The paper bridges any existing theoretical gaps by conducting a semiotic analysis of glocalisation and brand culture to note the mediation of cultural authority and market positioning through visual designs. The paper is also important for offering a comparative framework for analysing domestic versus international cases to demonstrate the development of varying emotional economies through the same motifs based on native belongingness and distinct prestige abroad. The paper contributes to the debates of authenticity by presenting it as negotiable and performative, which justifies the claim that cultural expressions evolve through contextual coherence. It provides guidance on retaining semantic layering, beneficial for brand designers and strategists as a measure to enhance brand meaning through traditions. It contributes to the scholarship on cultural globalisation by tracing a visual route through which local heritage becomes a globally legible design vocabulary, useful for studies in visual culture, hospitality, and transnational branding.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Semiotics of visual culture and design

Visual culture and design function as semiotic systems where images, materials, and motifs operate as layered signs, producing meanings that extend beyond aesthetic ornament to encode cultural values, ideologies, and identities. Jha (2025) notes that visual semiotics function as cultural interfaces through which the visual motifs, such as traditional arts, religious and cultural symbols, along with national icons, promote a sense of inclusivity and empathy in identity formation. Accordingly, integration of the local and traditional semiotic codes with designs focusing on human identities can promote socially resonant communication within multicultural contexts. Li (2015, as cited in Hu et al., 2019) notes that “Traditional Chinese symbols and patterns, as the key elements of traditional Chinese visual language developed over the past 5000 years of Chinese history, are the core components of visual culture in China”. To that end, the cultural symbols and their rich diversity and content create a unique traditional image and language, which can visually convey the cultural connotations and significance in the form of traditional Chinese culture. This is because interpreting the grammar of the visual signs by reading images provides a systemic and comprehensive understanding of these signs through their formal and structural elements, such as colour, framing, composition, and perspectives (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2005). These observations present visual culture and its semiotic analysis at the critical juncture of inferring and interpreting cultural context, where it functions as a tool for exploring the spatial, visual, and textual interactions in contemporary designs. This offers a methodological insight into how the layered meanings of visual signs are established and interpreted within the environment of brand identity formation.

2.2. Brand culture and the commodification of tradition

Brand culture transforms living traditions into marketable symbols, packaging heritage and authenticity as consumable narratives that both construct and commodify cultural memory. “Brand designs signify not only the product and product attributes, they also signify a value – the brand equity – that is created by way of symbolic meaning where meaning emerges from a personal, social and cultural context” (Huang, 2021). In

conducting brand authenticity research for the identification of cultural and commodification of traditions by the brands, the primary identifications include characteristics that distinguish between the real and the fake identity of the brand, legitimise its function of authenticity, and emphasise the moral and emotional aspects of authenticity (Södergren, 2021). Accordingly, there is a recent surge in research on design trends in the everyday aspect. Gu and Fang (2024) note that research on design semiotics focuses mostly on the fields of Education, Engineering, Business, Computer, and Social Sciences, among others. This provides a semiotic demonstration of the combination of design with other sensory approaches to cognitive experiences of sensory design interfaces that affect the psychological approach to meaning interpretation of the design semiotics within interdisciplinary contexts. This presents the question of brand authenticity and how the viewers interpret this authenticity through the interpretation of the visual messages implied by the brands. In research concerning 26 luxury wine firms, Beverland (2005) notes that promoting the image of authenticity is the primary cornerstone in marketing practices, where ideating self-authenticity by brands requires creating a story of sincerity and an authentic identity through the creative blend of industrial and rhetorical communication. This highlights how brand communication of cultural identity promotion and self-image sustenance of traditional aspects promotes tradition in an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural setting that leads to its deliberate commodification within the marketing sector.

2.3. Glocalisation and the cultural translation of design

Design in the age of glocalisation mediates between universal modern aesthetics and localised cultural codes, translating global design idioms into hybrid visual languages that resonate with regional sensibilities. Gandla and Vemali (2023) note that “the use of signs and symbols can establish a strong emotional bond between a brand and its audience, evoking positive feelings and associations that contribute to a favourable brand perception”. Accordingly, translating the cultural and traditional design elements into the global and local brand identity space influences the way the brand is perceived by its consumers and the emotional resonance they form with the brand. This is because the translation of the traditional and cultural elements promotes a form of cultural negotiation rather than mere replication, wherein the local adaptations reshape the global elements and forms, which creates a hybrid in design idioms to connect global aesthetics with local meanings (Sun, 2009). Cultural hybridity formations function through the fusion of cultural streams of varied (and sometimes unspecified) origins, leading to the formation of a glocalised image, where the interpretation of the hybrid identity develops from the interpretation of diverse cultural logics within global and local settings (Mancuso, 2022). This creates a significant influence on the glocalised cultural image through the translation of global and local meanings of the cultural products. To that end, this frames the image of a spatial memory within the architectural design space that influences the consumer experience.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The paper conducts qualitative research through comparative case studies of domestic and international Chinese fusion restaurants using semiotic analysis of visual design culture. The paper applies the theoretical frameworks of brand culture theory to analyse the inclusion of semiotic visual elements in the design of space. The theoretical

framework of semiotic analysis was introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure, who emphasised the presence of signs in human language in various forms which communicate certain meanings of their own (Yakin & Totu, 2014). To that end, Charles Sanders Peirce idealised the notion of semiotics instead of semiology, where he parallels it with logic, suggesting that it is the human brain that draws logical interpretation of meaning from a set of signs, icons, and symbols present in human communication. To that end, the concept of 'brand culture' in brand culture theory refers to the cultural identity that a brand promotes through certain cultural codes, which indicate the brand values that create the identity and inspirational power of the brand (Maden, 2013). Accordingly, the paper interprets the brand's cultural identity through the visual codes of signs and symbols that a brand applies within its cultural context, which establishes a certain brand image and identity and allows the viewers to interpret the meaning of the brand image through these cultural codes. Accordingly, the paper applies these concepts in the context of Chinese fusion restaurants in the context of glocalisation to interpret how the traditional symbols and sign motifs of the design culture can be integrated within the global dynamics of visual aesthetics. It examines how traditional cultural symbols and design motifs, such as dragons, clouds, and lattice motifs, are visually adapted for international appeal while retaining the traditional Chinese identity within the global context.

3.2. Comparative case study

The paper conducts a comparative case study of 9 Chinese fusion restaurants, 5 from the domestic range and 4 others from the international range, to study how they implement traditional Chinese design elements into their brand's visual culture. According to Bartlett and Vavrus (2017, p.10), "the CCS [comparative case study] heuristic features an iterative and contingent tracing of relevant actors—both human and non-human—to explore the historical and contemporary processes that have produced a sense of shared place, purpose, or identity with regard to the central phenomenon". To that end, the CCS attempts to understand the perspectives of the social actors and their contributions in shaping a phenomenon and incorporates that within the analysis of the case, an observation true for ethnographic and ethnography-oriented case studies. To that end, the paper conducts the case studies of these chosen restaurants, both domestic and international, which are listed in Tables 1 and 2, respectively, to study how these restaurants integrate the visual signs and traditional symbols within their visual culture that frames their brand identity as well as promotes the connectivity with the modern as well as traditional aesthetics. The paper accordingly analyses the semiotic visual elements in the form of logos, interiors, and packaging, to note how these restaurants communicate their brand identity and culture through visual design communication.

3.3. Sampling and data collection

In selecting the restaurants as the data set for this paper, purposive sampling was used to maintain resonance between the collected data and the objectives of the research. Purposive sampling, in the context of qualitative research studies, promotes sample selection that is aligned with the "ontological, epistemological and axiological perspective" (Campbell et al., 2020, p.653). It is guided by the objectives of the study, whereby the sampling process is implemented with the aim of increasing the depth of analysis as opposed to widening the breadth or range of the findings. This research applies purposive sampling in selecting the fusion restaurants as data, both domestic and international, to fit the objective of the study, so that the most suitable datasets can

be included as the final set of data in the research findings. To that end, this approach helps to undertake an in-depth analysis of these restaurants and their brand image through the analysis of their inclusion of traditional Chinese design elements to promote their fusion identity between the modern and the traditional.

4. Findings And Analysis

This section presents the findings from the case studies conducted on the domestic fusion restaurants in China, from locations such as Beijing and Shanghai, as well as the observations from internationally situated Chinese fusion restaurants. Following these findings in Table 1 and Table 2 for the semiotic analysis of the restaurant designs, Table 3 presents a comparative semiotic analysis from the observations of both domestic and international restaurants.

Table 1: Semiotic observations from domestic Chinese fusion restaurants

Brand	Traditional Visual Elements Used	Semiotic Function (Iconic / Indexical / Symbolic)	Cultural Narrative Constructed	Brand Positioning	Emergent Themes
Lost Heaven (Shanghai)	Dark-wood furnishings, red lanterns, carved doors, Yunnan tribal artefacts, decorative murals (Silk-Road influences) (Condé Nast Traveler, n.d.; Time Out Shanghai, 2011).	Iconic (lanterns, carvings); Indexical (Yunnan / ethnic identity); Symbolic (mysticism, regional pride). (Condé Nast Traveler, n.d.)	Re-imagines Yunnan/Silk-Road heritage as a curated “ethnic-mystic” narrative for urban diners; heritage becomes experiential theatre (Time Out Shanghai, 2011; Condé Nast Traveler, n.d.).	Upscale ethnic-fusion; cultural-tourism dining. (Condé Nast Traveler, n.d.)	Internal exoticism; heritage spectacle; curated nostalgia.
%Arabica (multiple China locations: Shanghai, Beijing)	Minimalist interiors, use of glass modules / custom glass blocks, lattice-inspired patterns in site-specific stores, restrained palette and signature logo treatments (Shuang, 2019;	Iconic (glass blocks, logotype); Indexical (craft + calm coffee ritual); Symbolic (global minimalism localised through subtle Chinese patterning) (Shuang, 2019;	Adapts global minimal café language to local site details (lattice/roof patterns, parasol-tree streetscape), producing a quiet “glocal” modernity (Shuang, 2019)	Global café brand localised through site-sensitive design (Shuang, 2019)	Minimalist glocalism; modularity; subtle localisation of global design grammar.

TRB Hutong (Beijing)	Arabica.design, n.d.). Courtyard site in a historic temple; restrained contemporary fittings set within grey-brick courtyard, heritage stonework visible; spatial use of courtyard typology (TRB Hutong, n.d.; Michelin Guide, n.d.).	Arabica.design, n.d.) Iconic (courtyard, temple), Indexical (hutong urban heritage), Symbolic (authentic rootedness & refined hospitality) (TRB Hutong, n.d.; Michelin Guide, n.d.)	Positions contemporary cuisine within an authentic hutong-temple spatial narrative—tradition used to convey exclusivity and rooted experience (TRB Hutong, n.d.)	High-end contemporary dining in heritage setting (courtyard authenticity) (TRB Hutong, n.d.; Michelin Guide, n.d.)	Spatial nostalgia; heritage-as-context; authenticity of place.
Ultraviolet by Paul Pairet (Shanghai)	Immersive digital projections, atmospheric shifts, occasional references to Chinese cloud/ink motifs in projection sequences; minimal fixed décor to foreground media (Beaton, 2012).	Symbolic (sensory/ambient expressions of “Chineseness”), Indexical (projected motifs reference cultural signs), Iconic (when traditional motifs are projected) (Beaton, 2012)	Uses technology to project and perform cultural motifs episodically rather than embedding static material artefacts—tradition becomes cinematic atmosphere (Beaton, 2012)	Avant-garde experiential dining; multi-sensory cultural performance (Beaton, 2012)	Projection-as-tradition; ephemeral heritage; sensory dramaturgy.
Mansion Feast (Beijing) — alternative/additional documented case	Retains siheyuan courtyard, seasonal plantings, restored wooden panels, ceremonial furniture and imperial-referencing details (Zhang, 2022).	Iconic (siheyuan courtyard, wood panels); Indexical (imperial/elite domestic tradition); Symbolic (aristocratic continuity). (Zhang, 2022; Design	Recreates “aristocratic” dining through restored courtyard typologies, performing Chinese court/imperial imagery within a contemporary restaurant program.	Heritage-aristocratic positioning; theatricalised continuity of elite tradition. (Zhang, 2022)	Courtyard continuity; aristocratic nostalgia; heritage restoration as brand identity.

Anthology,
2022)

Table 2 below presents the semiotic findings from the international Chinese fusion restaurants.

Table 2: Semiotic analysis of international Chinese fusion restaurants globally

Brand / Location	Traditional Visual Elements Used	Semiotic Function (Iconic / Indexical / Symbolic)	Cultural Narrative Constructed	Brand Positioning	Emergent Themes
Hakkasan (global; brand overview)	Dark wood screens, lattice panels, lantern-like lighting, rich materials (bronze/mahogany), subtle scent & sound design (Tao Group Hospitality, n.d.)	Iconic (lattice, screens), Indexical (heritage cues), Symbolic (opulence, sensual luxury) (Tao Group Hospitality, n.d.)	Sinicised modern luxury — Chinese motifs are integrated to signal premium, immersive heritage (Tao Group Hospitality, n.d.)	High-end, globally replicable Chinese luxury dining (Tao Group Hospitality, n.d.)	Oriental luxury, curated sensuality, and modular motif export. (E2 Architecture)
Hakkasan — Bruton Street flagship (design brief)	Layered materiality (mahogany, bronze, marble), “reveal” corridor sequences inspired by Shanghai bordellos; kinetic lighting installations (large sculptural/kinetic elements) (Gensler, n.d.)	Indexical (Shanghai modernity; theatrical reveal), Symbolic (journey, exclusivity) (Gensler, n.d.)	A narrative of discovery and staged heritage — movement through spaces reveals curated Chinese motifs (Gensler, n.d.)	Flagship destination; theatrical, narrative luxury (Gensler, n.d.)	Spatial dramaturgy, narrative staging of Chineseness (Gensler, n.d.)
Mr Chow (flagships: London / NY / Beverly Hills)	Polished lacquer surfaces, bespoke art pieces, occasional dragon/red lacquer referencing, large sculptural installations	Iconic (lacquer, art, sculpture), Indexical (celebrity/art world cachet), Symbolic (diasporic elite Chineseness as fashionable spectacle)	Chineseness performed as artful glamour — the restaurant as social stage combining Chinese culinary cues with a celebrity-art	Iconic, celebrity-oriented fine dining; art + dining hybridity (Ramzi, 2018)	Performative Chineseness, art-dining hybrid, celebrity spectacle (Binlot, 2016)

	(e.g., kinetic 'Moon' in Las Vegas). Interiors frequently combine art-world décor with luxurious finishes (MR CHOW, n.d.)	(Blasberg, 2018)	narrative (Blasberg, 2018)		
Din Tai Fung (global; selected flagship design coverage)	Seal-style typography and logo, repeated use of bamboo-steamer motif (in imagery/packaging), ordered/neutral interiors in many flags; bespoke architecture interventions for flagship sites (Din Tai Fung, n.d.)	Iconic (steamer, seal logo), Indexical (craftsmanship, ritual), Symbolic (discipline, artisanal precision) (Rockwell Group, n.d.)	Codified authenticity: ritualised food craft and disciplined production are central to brand meaning; visual minimalism signals mastery (Din Tai Fung, n.d.)	Accessible premium — reproducible global format with consistent visual markers of authenticity (Din Tai Fung, n.d.)	Ritualised craft aesthetics, brand consistency as a trust signal, modular authenticity (Rockwell Group, n.d.)

Based on the above observations, Table 3 presents a comparative analysis of the semiotic data found in both domestic and international cases to identify how these restaurants negotiate cultural meanings. The table presents the semiotic themes and their coded meanings for interpretation in the context of domestic and international fusion restaurants, and how these promote the traditional image of these brands through a sense of cultural hybridity.

Table 3: Thematic coding for comparative semiotic analysis of the restaurants

Analytical Dimension	Domestic Fusion Restaurants (China)	International Fusion Restaurants (Abroad)	Comparative Interpretation	Theoretical Implication	Emergent Glocal Semiotic Pattern
Function of Tradition	Tradition operates as an immersive spatial and emotional context. Motifs such as courtyards, carved wood, and lanterns are embedded in material environments,	Tradition functions as a portable design resource. It is abstracted into symbolic icons — lattice patterns, jade tones, calligraphic forms — that	Domestic settings use tradition to evoke rooted identity; international settings deploy it to signify cosmopolitan sophistication.	Demonstrates how cultural symbols migrate from lived experience to marketable semiotic capital.	Tradition is a transferable code linking emotion and differentiation.

	inviting belonging and cultural continuity.	convey heritage through controlled aesthetic cues.			
Aesthetic Strategy	Relies on atmospheric realism: tactile materials, muted lighting, and heritage architecture produce a sensory authenticity that feels lived.	Relies on theatrical design: curated lighting, reflective surfaces, and minimal geometries stage Chinese motifs as global luxury.	Domestic = intimacy and continuity; International = spectacle and aspiration.	Supports the notion that authenticity can be performed through both material depth and aesthetic surface.	Dual grammar of authenticity: emotional vs. visual performance.
Symbolic Narrative	Constructs narratives of memory and community—nostalgia for “old Beijing,” regional diversity, or artisanal craft.	Constructs narratives of prestige and modern hybridity — “refined Oriental luxury” and transnational identity.	Both reinterpret Chineseness but for different emotional economies: domestic warmth versus global admiration.	Reveals how symbolic value is context-dependent, shifting between cultural empathy and exotic distinction.	Motif volatility: the same symbols express belonging at home and aspiration abroad.
Materiality & Medium of Expression	Tradition expressed through tangible material craft—brick, wood, fabric, and spatial form. Authenticity arises from tactility and locality.	Tradition expressed through abstraction—logos, packaging, modular décor, and colour palettes. Authenticity arises from stylistic coherence.	Domestic practice privileges substance; international practice privileges reproducibility.	Marks the transition from physical craft to digital-era design modularity in cultural branding.	From craft to code: material heritage evolves into scalable brand language.
Narrative of “Chineseness”	Presents Chineseness as continuous, introspective, and emotionally grounded — heritage embedded in daily modern life.	Presents Chineseness as stylised, aspirational, and outward-facing—a curated identity for global circulation.	Domestic narratives internalise tradition; international narratives externalise it for recognition.	Aligns with glocalisation: local culture reframed through global visual grammar.	Exportable Chineseness: cultural memory transformed into universal design vocabulary.

Consumer Semiotic Experience	Visitors feel a sense of rooted familiarity and cultural pride; the experience is immersive and emotionally resonant.	Visitors perceive a sense of exclusivity and distinction; the experience is aesthetic and symbolic rather than emotional.	Domestic audiences seek a reflection of self; global audiences seek aestheticised difference.	Suggests that brand semiotics mediate between identity affirmation and cultural curiosity.	Experiential duality: belonging vs. discovery as coexisting modes of engagement.
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Employment of traditional Chinese design and visual elements by fusion restaurants to promote cultural authenticity and hybridity. The visual semiotic strategies used by fusion restaurants reveal that traditional Chinese symbols are not simply aesthetic references but cultural mediators—bridges between the inherited and the contemporary, the local and the cosmopolitan. In domestic contexts, these symbols act as anchoring devices, grounding modern design within recognisable cultural frameworks. Courtyard architecture, carved woodwork, calligraphic lines, and muted lighting evoke a collective memory of place and identity. Such design elements perform authenticity by materialising cultural continuity. They invite emotional recognition, transforming the dining space into an embodied experience of belonging. This authenticity does not arise from historical accuracy but from the felt coherence between spatial atmosphere and cultural expectation.

Accordingly, cultural hybridity does not create a dilution of the authenticity of the cultural identity of the brands, but rather presents a reconfiguration of the cultural rootedness and their brand identity. To that end, the idea of authenticity in the context of global cultural identity production does not remain restrained to the idea of 'pure' but rather implies the ability of a brand or an individual to negotiate the multiplicity of the cultural identity. This justifies the application of the cultural design motifs with the modern minimalist visual culture which applies avant-garde ideologies with a hint of cultural connotation. This justifies the idea of fusion in these cultural spaces that promotes the transformative practices of these brands and their negotiation of cultural authenticity. To that end, the juxtaposition of the elaborate traditional Chinese design elements, such as their calligraphic grandeur, with the minimalist application of aesthetic visual culture, or the inclusion of bamboo with white marbles ideate the fusion of cultural elements, thereby presenting a new meaning of authenticity and identity formation.

Moreover, this interplay mirrors broader cultural transitions in contemporary China and its diasporas: the shift from tradition as fixed heritage to tradition as dynamic design grammar. The fusion restaurant, therefore, becomes a cultural laboratory in which identity is continually tested, re-staged, and refined. The use of traditional motifs is not nostalgic but strategic—it acknowledges the visual authority of the past while simultaneously asserting a modern, globally legible identity. In this negotiation, hybridity emerges as both a method and a message: an aesthetic condition through which tradition retains its relevance by learning to speak the language of the global.

The semiotic use of traditional Chinese elements functions not only as a cultural gesture but as a brand differentiation strategy in an increasingly homogenised global dining

landscape. In the global marketplace, where design languages converge toward minimalist sameness, traditional motifs reintroduce symbolic distinctiveness. The lattice pattern, jade hue, or seal-script typography instantly signals cultural depth and narrative density—qualities that distinguish Chinese fusion brands from the neutral aesthetics of international modernism. The strategic deployment of these signs transforms cultural heritage into aesthetic capital, positioning the brand as both authentic and aspirational.

This differentiation, however, extends beyond visual recognition. It operates on an emotional and ideological level, shaping how consumers imagine their relationship to culture itself. For local consumers, traditional symbols affirm continuity and self-recognition; for global consumers, they offer a sense of discovery and cultural sophistication. Through this dual address, fusion restaurants construct a multi-layered semiotic field where identity and desire intersect. The consumer does not simply consume food or décor but participates in a narrative of global cultural exchange. Tradition becomes a shared symbolic currency that both reassures and excites—a visual promise of authenticity within the spectacle of cosmopolitanism.

At the same time, this semiotic economy exposes an inherent tension between cultural depth and commercial stylisation. As tradition becomes a brand asset, its meaning risks being flattened into surface appeal. Yet the best fusion brands counter this by maintaining semantic layering—allowing symbols to operate simultaneously as cultural memory and as design innovation. When executed effectively, the use of traditional semiotics enables the brand to cultivate both global prestige and emotional intimacy. It transforms visual culture into relational storytelling, where symbols are not static decorations but vehicles of connection.

Ultimately, the semiotic use of tradition in global fusion branding demonstrates how design can perform diplomacy. It reconciles the demands of commercial modernity with the need for cultural rootedness, showing that authenticity and globality need not be opposites. In the interplay between motif and modernism, between the sign and its reinvention, Chinese fusion restaurants articulate a new form of cultural authorship—one that turns the language of tradition into a transnational conversation.

5. Conclusion

This research paper aimed to investigate the application of the traditional Chinese design elements by international as well as local modern fusion restaurants, which leads to the construction of cultural image and identity narratives of the brands. The paper examined the interaction of the global and the local through the application of semiotic analysis of cultural visual elements, which influences the viewers and their interpretation of the brand identity. It studied the use of traditional elements by fusion restaurants in maintaining their cultural identities through the following objectives:

- Employment of traditional Chinese design and visual elements by fusion restaurants to promote cultural authenticity and hybridity.
- Enhancing the global brand identity distinction and consumer interaction through the semiotic implementation of traditional elements.

The paper identified that visual language in the context of Chinese fusion restaurants, both in the local and international settings, has transformed into a strategic system of semiotic meaning communication, where the meaning communication of these symbols

can be inferred and re-applied in any form. This allows these elements to function within the contemporary cultural as well as the commercial frameworks, where the traditional design systems interact with each other to create a hybrid meaning structure guided by the influence of the global on the local. This removes the elements from static relics and transforms them into cultural conductors of identity that influence the perception of the brand image by the viewers and the resulting collective memory formation. In the Chinese context of cultural image formation within the boundaries of these fusion restaurants, these symbols become the tools for the formation of emotional resonance and spatial connectivity that evoke a sense of cultural belonging. This becomes more applicable in the context of international fusion restaurants, where the integration of these cultural visual elements promotes emotional resonance for the customers while reinforcing the cultural rootedness of the brand. Accordingly, it examines how the meaning interpretation is influenced by the geographical distance of the brands, which influences the cultural memory for the viewers. The fusion restaurants function as a cultural microcosm through their integration of the traditional design elements within the globalised space that motivates the hybrid approach to appreciating cultural rootedness while embracing ideologies of modernity.

The paper presents certain limitations in its methodological approach, as the analysis is essentially based on the visual documentation of the design elements, which lacks a direct field observation of the restaurants in an ethnographic approach. The paper also refrains from any interaction or interview with stakeholders or customers of these restaurants due to the geographical limitation of the research. Accordingly, the analysis remains inferential and subjective, which presents a sense of bias in the interpretation of the cultural codes in the research. To that end, the paper remains limited in integrating the experiences and perceptions of the visitors engaging with these restaurants and their cultural experiences in their interaction with the hybrid models of these restaurants. To that end, the research fails to integrate how the perception of the visitors of these restaurants frames their dining experiences, especially in the international context.

Keeping this current research in mind as a foundational approach, future studies can include on-site ethnographic observation to understand how patrons emotionally and culturally respond to semiotic design elements. Future research studies can consider expanding the research sample to more regional fusion restaurants and independent restaurants rather than global chains. This can help to identify alternative possible interpretations of the cultural identity, which go beyond the notions of mainstream brand image formation and luxury identity shaping. Future research studies can also conduct comparative research analysis based on different cultural cuisines, which can help to evaluate if the semiotic translation is similar in every other global context. Accordingly, future studies may also conduct interviews with various stakeholders, including the designers and planners, the architects, or even the visitors of these restaurants, to understand their perspectives and experiences. Interdisciplinary approaches combining marketing, design, and cultural anthropology could enrich future analyses.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA. All procedures performed in this study involving human

participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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