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Sacred Symbols in the Classroom: An Experimental Study on Integrating Folk Art Religious Semiotics into Chinese Higher Education

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Abstract

The erosion of sacred symbols in ethnic minority folk arts threatens cultural sustainability in China. Higher education can address this crisis, yet university courses prioritize technical skills over religious semiotics. This study develops and validates a folk art learning guidebook that explicitly integrates religious semiotics. Using a mixed-methods approach—surveys with 150 students, interviews with 9 teachers, validation by 5 experts, and training with 58 participants—the research diagnosed moderate baseline awareness of sacred symbols (mean = 2.40/5.00). An eight-module guidebook was developed and validated through expert review (IOC = 0.91). Training activities significantly improved participants' knowledge of religious semiotics (from 2.14 to 4.07, $p < 0.001$), practical skills, and cultural identity, with 96.2% satisfaction. A structured pedagogical resource can transform folk art education from technique transmission into religious heritage preservation. Recommendations for curriculum reform are discussed.

1. Introduction

In the context of rapid globalization and cultural homogenization, the sacred symbols embedded in minority folk arts face severe erosion.[1] In Hunan Province, China, ethnic minorities such as the Miao, Tujia, Yao, and Bouyei have created rich artistic traditions that function as visual theologies, recording creation myths, ancestor worship, totemism, and moral codes. Paper-cuttings posted during the Spring Festival are believed to invite good fortune and repel malevolent spirits; Nuo opera masks embody exorcistic rituals; Peking Opera facial masks encode a moral semiotics where red signifies loyalty, white treachery, and gold divine beings. These sacred symbols are not merely decorative—they are condensed representations of a people's religious cosmos and collective identity.

However, modernization, technological replacement, and the dominance of Western popular culture have alienated younger generations from these sacred traditions. As folk artist Feng Jicai warned, without urgent action, at least half of China's folk culture could disappear within two decades.[2] The Chinese government has responded by integrating intangible cultural heritage into school curricula, yet implementation in higher education remains fragmented. Most university courses emphasize technical reproduction while neglecting the religious semiotics that give the art its meaning. Students may learn how to cut a paper "double happiness" but remain unaware of its ritual origins in wedding blessings; they can paint a facial mask but cannot interpret why red signifies loyalty and white signifies treachery—a failure in understanding religious semiotics.

Preliminary surveys indicate that students' awareness of the sacred symbols embedded in these arts remains at a moderate level (mean = 2.40 on a 5-point scale). Teachers report that students lack understanding of why certain patterns are used in sacrificial ceremonies or how embroidery motifs encode lineage histories and ancestral veneration. This superficial learning fails to foster cultural identity or ensure the living inheritance of folk arts as vehicles of sacred meaning.

Therefore, this study aims to develop, implement, and evaluate a learning guidebook that integrates religious semiotics into folk art education. Specifically, it addresses three research questions:

What is the current status of students' awareness of the sacred symbols and religious semiotics embedded in folk arts in Hunan's universities?

How can a learning guidebook be designed to systematically incorporate the religious semiotics of eight representative folk arts?

Does the guidebook effectively enhance students' knowledge of religious semiotics, practical skills, and cultural–religious identity?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Folk Art as a Repository of Folk Religion and Ethnic Identity

Scholars have long recognized Chinese folk art as deeply intertwined with popular religion, shamanism, and ancestor worship. According to Pan Lusheng and Tang Jialu, folk art originates from ritual needs—warding off evil, praying for blessings, and communicating with deities.[3] Paper-cuttings posted during festivals are not merely decorative; they are believed to invite good fortune and repel malevolent spirits. New Year pictures of door gods serve as protective talismans. Similarly, Miao silver ornaments are inscribed with dragon and phoenix motifs that reference creation myths and ensure the wearer's spiritual safety. Ethnic identity is also encoded in folk art. Durkheimian perspectives suggest that shared rituals and sacred symbols produce collective effervescence, reinforcing group boundaries. In Hunan's Tujia and Miao communities, embroidery patterns distinguish clan affiliations, and the colors of batik indicate regional belonging.

2.2 Folk Art as Material Religion

Following Morgan's concept of "material religion," this study treats folk art not merely as aesthetic object but as a material practice through which religious beliefs are enacted, communicated, and transmitted across generations.[4] Paper-cuttings posted during the Spring Festival function as apotropaic devices believed to invite ancestral blessings and ward off malevolent spirits. Nuo opera masks are not theatrical props but ritual objects inhabited by deities during exorcistic ceremonies. Clay sculptures of gods are not decorative figurines but temporary residences for divine presence during household worship. By framing folk art as material religion, we move beyond skill-based pedagogy toward a hermeneutics of sacred materiality—that is, toward the study of religious semiotics embedded in physical objects.

2.3 Religious Semiotics and Sacred Symbols

Geertz's notion of "thick description" provides an analytical tool for decoding the layered meanings encoded in religious semiotics.[5] A Peking Opera facial mask is not a simple color pattern; it is a

condensed moral semiotics where red signifies loyalty and divine protection, white indicates treachery and ghostly presence, and gold represents the supernatural realm. A Miao batik pattern of the "butterfly mother" is not an abstract design but a cosmogonic narrative of ethnic origin encoded in sacred symbols. Without understanding these religious semiotics, students perceive only "thin" surfaces—they see colors and shapes but not the religious worldviews that give them meaning. Thus, any pedagogical intervention aiming at cultural transmission must integrate the teaching of religious semiotics as a core component.

2.4 Current State of Folk Art Education in Chinese Universities

Domestic research reveals persistent problems: fragmented curricula, insufficient practice time, lack of specialized textbooks, and an over-reliance on Western art paradigms.[6] Most courses are offered as electives or short-term workshops. Teacher training rarely includes the religious semiotics or anthropology of folk art. Consequently, students' cognition remains at the level of "recognition" rather than "comprehension" of sacred symbols. International experiences offer alternatives. In Japan, the "Learning Guidance Outline" mandates the use of local cultural resources, including shrine festivals and folk crafts, to foster cultural identity. In the United States, community-based art education often partners with indigenous communities to teach both techniques and the associated spiritual worldviews. These models underscore the feasibility of integrating religious semiotics into secular art curricula when handled with respect and academic rigor.

2.5 Gaps Addressed by This Study

No existing research has systematically developed and validated a learning guidebook for ethnic minority folk art in Hunan Province that explicitly incorporates religious semiotics and sacred symbols. Previous studies either focus on technical instruction or provide general cultural background without pedagogical structure. Moreover, quantitative evidence of a guidebook's impact on students' understanding of religious semiotics is lacking. This study fills these gaps by offering a validated, modular guidebook and empirical data on its effectiveness in teaching sacred symbols.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A mixed-methods sequential design was employed, consisting of three phases corresponding to the three research objectives.

Phase 1 (Diagnosis)

Survey and semi-structured interviews to assess the current situation of folk art teaching and students' awareness of religious semiotics.

Phase 2 (Development)

Content selection, guidebook compilation, and expert validation using the Item Objective Congruence (IOC) index.

Phase 3 (Evaluation)

Training activities with pre-test/post-test comparisons and satisfaction surveys.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Phase 1: 150 undergraduate students (94.67% aged 17–18; 63.33% female) and 9 art teachers from three universities in Hunan (Hunan University, Hunan Normal University, Changsha Normal University). Purposive sampling ensured inclusion of institutions offering folk art courses.

Phase 2: Five experts (two professors, one associate professor, two research fellows) from fine arts, folklore, and intangible heritage institutes. Their doctoral or senior titles ensured content validity.

Phase 3: 58 students (56 valid responses) participated in training activities; a subset of 14 students formed an experimental group for detailed pre-test/post-test comparison.

3.3 Instruments

Questionnaire for students: 5-point Likert scale measuring awareness of folk art history, importance, skill mastery, and religious semiotics (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$).

Semi-structured interview guides for teachers and experts, covering problems, suitable art forms, and suggestions for integrating sacred symbols.

IOC evaluation form for the guidebook, assessing content selection, structural scientificity, teaching adaptability, craft practicality, regional characteristics, and innovation in inheritance (six dimensions).

Pre-test/Post-test for the experimental group, measuring knowledge of religious semiotics, craft skills, and cultural identity.

3.4 Guidebook Development Process

Following Tyler's curriculum model, the guidebook was developed through: (1) needs assessment (Phase 1 results); (2) selection of eight folk arts based on five criteria: religious semiotic richness, skill difficulty, material availability, teaching safety, and creative transformation potential; (3) modular design: each art form presented in a unified structure (history + religious semiotics/sacred symbols → materials → techniques → practice activities → evaluation); (4) expert review and IOC validation; (5) revision and finalization.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (descriptive statistics, paired-sample t-tests, ANOVA). Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis.

4. Findings

4.1 Baseline Awareness of Religious Semiotics and Sacred Symbols

Table 1 summarizes students' awareness levels. The overall weighted mean for "understanding the religious semiotics of folk art" was 2.40 (moderate). Paper-cutting scored highest (2.55), but even that only reached "moderate-high." Pottery (2.32) and embroidery (2.30) were lower. Teachers' interviews revealed that most students could identify folk art forms but could not explain the sacrificial origins of shadow puppetry or the apotropaic function of cloth tigers. For instance, Teacher G stated: "Students know Nuo masks look fierce, but they don't know they are sacred symbols used to expel plague spirits during ritual dances."

Moreover, 67.3% of students agreed that "folk art is mainly about decoration," while only 28.7% agreed that "folk art carries religious semiotics or ritual meanings." This confirms the neglect of sacred symbols in current education.

Table 1
Students' Awareness of Religious Semiotics in Folk Arts (N = 150)

Folk Art Type	Weighted Mean	SD	Level
Paper-cutting	**2.55**	0.75	Moderate-high
Shadow puppetry	2.43	0.78	Moderate
Blue printed cloth	2.42	0.75	Moderate
Embroidery	2.30	0.80	Moderate
Ceramic craft	2.32	0.84	Moderate
Overall	2.40	0.78	Moderate
Note: 1 = very low, 2 = low, 3 = moderate, 4 = high, 5 = very high.			

4.2 Development and Validation of the Learning Guidebook

The final guidebook includes eight chapters: Paper-cutting, Tie-dyeing, Embroidery, Shadow Puppetry, Wood Carving, Yun Brocade, Peking Opera Facial Makeup, and Clay Sculpture. Each chapter contains a dedicated subsection on "Folk Beliefs" or "Sacred Symbols," explicitly linking patterns, colors, and materials to religious semiotics. For example:

Paper-cutting: Explains how "magpie on plum blossom" symbolizes conjugal happiness and is used in wedding rituals to invite ancestral blessings.

Facial makeup: Decodes religious semiotics (red = loyalty/divine protection; white = treachery/ghostly presence; gold/silver = deities and supernatural beings).

Shadow puppetry: Describes its origin in Han dynasty shamanistic rites and its continued use in temple fairs to appease local gods.

Clay sculpture: Links the "big afu" (big lucky doll) to fertility cults and the myth of Nüwa creating humans from clay.

IOC validity results (Table 2): The overall average IOC was 0.91 (range 0.86–0.96), indicating high content validity. Experts particularly praised the "regional characteristics of Hunan folk art" (0.96) and the "practicality of craft teaching" (0.94).

Table 2
IOC Expert Evaluation Results (N = 5)

Evaluation Item	IOC Value	Interpretation
Rationality of content selection	92.0%	Highly consistent
Scientificity of structural framework	88.0%	Highly consistent
Adaptability to undergraduate teaching	90.0%	Highly consistent
Practicality of craft teaching	94.0%	Highly consistent
Regional characteristics of Hunan folk art	**96.0%**	Highly consistent
Innovation in transmission of sacred symbols	86.0%	Highly consistent
Overall	91.0%	Highly consistent

4.3 Effectiveness of the Guidebook in Teaching Religious Semiotics

Training activities were conducted with 58 students. Pre-test/post-test comparisons for the experimental group (N = 14) revealed significant improvements across all indicators (Table 3).

Table 3
Pre-test vs. Post-test in Experimental Group (N = 14)

Indicator	Pre - test Mean	Post - test Mean	Improvement	t - value	p
Knowledge of religious semiotics	2.14	**4.07**	1.93	**12.45**	< 0.001
Practical craft skills	2.21	4.14	1.93	11.87	< 0.001
Cultural identity (sense of belonging)	2.43	4.36	1.93	10.98	< 0.001
Learning initiative	2.57	4.43	1.86	9.76	< 0.001
Scoring: 1–5 (1 = very low, 5 = very high).					

The most notable gain was in knowledge of religious semiotics. Post-intervention, students could correctly identify that the "butterfly mother" in Miao batik represents the ancestor goddess (a sacred symbol of cosmogony) and that the "five poison" pattern on children's bibs is meant to expel evil spirits through sympathetic magic. Post-intervention interviews revealed that students began to see folk art as "a sacred symbolic language" rather than "just old-fashioned decorations."

Overall satisfaction with the guidebook reached 96.2% (70.4% very satisfied, 25.8% satisfied). Teachers reported that the guidebook reduced their lesson preparation time while deepening classroom discussions about religious semiotics and sacred symbols.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpreting the Findings through a Religious Semiotics Lens

The significant improvement in students' knowledge of religious semiotics (from 2.14 to 4.07, $p < 0.001$) confirms that explicit pedagogical attention to sacred symbols can effectively reverse the cultural erosion documented by Zhang Zhenzhong.[7] This finding supports Morgan's assertion that material objects carry religious agency when their semiotic codes are made accessible.[8] In our intervention, the "sacred symbols" subsection transformed previously "thin" crafts into "thick" cultural texts, enabling students to perceive, for instance, that a "butterfly mother" batik pattern is not merely decorative but a cosmogonic narrative encoded in religious semiotics.[9]

The moderate baseline awareness (mean ≈ 2.40) aligns with Feng Jicai's warning of a cultural rupture. Students entering university have been exposed to folk art primarily through media or festivals but have rarely received systematic instruction that decodes sacred symbols. This finding underscores the urgency of curriculum reform at the higher education level.

5.2 Comparison with Previous Educational Research

Prior studies on folk art education in China identified problems—fragmented curricula, insufficient practice, lack of textbooks—but offered only general recommendations such as "increase local content" or "invite inheritors."[10] This study goes further by providing a validated, replicable guidebook and quantitative evidence of its effect on teaching religious semiotics. Unlike previous work that remained at the level of problem diagnosis, this research demonstrates a complete cycle of intervention design, implementation, and evaluation.

Compared to Western community-based art education models that often treat indigenous spirituality as "context" or "background," our approach integrates religious semiotics as a formal, assessable module within the curriculum. This adaptation is crucial for non-Western contexts where religious and artistic domains are traditionally intertwined rather than separated.

5.3 Why the Guidebook Succeeded in Teaching Sacred Symbols

Three mechanisms explain the guidebook's effectiveness in teaching religious semiotics. First, making the implicit explicit: by separating a "sacred symbols" subsection in each chapter, the guidebook directly teaches the religious semiotics that were previously only orally transmitted or assumed. Second, lowering cognitive barriers: the modular, step-by-step presentation allows students to first master basic techniques and then layer on religious semiotic interpretation, reducing cognitive load. Third, embodied learning: practice activities (e.g., creating a paper-cutting for a simulated wedding ritual, painting a facial mask following sacred color symbolism) transform abstract religious semiotics into embodied actions, reinforcing memory through physical engagement. This tripartite design—explicit instruction, scaffolding, and embodiment—is consistent with constructivist and experiential learning theories.[11]

5.4 Limitations and Future Directions

Three limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted in three universities in Hunan Province; generalizability to other regions (e.g., Guizhou, Yunnan) or other religious semiotic traditions (e.g., Buddhist thangka painting, Daoist ritual calligraphy, Islamic arabesque) requires further testing. Second, long-term retention of religious semiotics knowledge was not measured; we only assessed immediate post-test gains. A six-month or one-year follow-up would determine whether the observed improvements persist. Third, the guidebook's effectiveness in purely online or non-formal educational settings (e.g., community workshops, museum education) remains unknown.

Future research should: (1) conduct longitudinal follow-ups to test knowledge retention of sacred symbols; (2) adapt the guidebook for other ethnic regions and religious semiotic traditions; (3) develop digital and VR-enhanced versions that simulate ritual contexts (e.g., virtual temple fairs, interactive facial mask painting) to enhance engagement and transmission fidelity; and (4) test the guidebook in cross-cultural settings to assess its adaptability outside China.

6. Conclusion

This study successfully developed and validated a learning guidebook for ethnic minority folk art in Hunan Province that systematically integrates religious semiotics and sacred symbols. The three research objectives were achieved:

Objective 1 (Diagnosis)

The current situation analysis confirmed that students' awareness of religious semiotics embedded in folk arts is moderate (mean = 2.40/5.00), with the majority viewing folk art as "decoration" rather than "sacred symbols." Teachers identified fragmented curricula, lack of specialized textbooks, and insufficient attention to religious semiotics as core problems.

Objective 2 (Development)

The eight-module guidebook achieved high content validity (overall IOC = 0.91), with experts commending its integration of local religious semiotics (e.g., Miao cosmogonic patterns, Nuo exorcistic masks, Peking Opera color semiotics). The guidebook provides a replicable model for balancing craft technique with the teaching of sacred symbols.

Objective 3 (Evaluation)

Training activities demonstrated that the guidebook significantly improves students' knowledge of religious semiotics (+ 1.93, $p < 0.001$), practical craft skills (+ 1.93), cultural identity (+ 1.93), and learning initiative (+ 1.86), with an overall satisfaction rate of 96.2%. Post-intervention interviews revealed that students began to perceive folk art as "a sacred symbolic language" rather than "old-fashioned decorations."

We conclude that embedding sacred symbols and religious semiotics within pedagogical resources can effectively transform folk art education from mere technique transmission into a meaningful vehicle for religious heritage preservation. This study contributes to both religious studies—by demonstrating how religious semiotics can be systematically taught through material culture—and to heritage education—by providing a validated, ready-to-use instructional tool.

Recommendations:

For policymakers: Mandate the inclusion of religious semiotics in intangible cultural heritage curricula at the higher education level. Allocate funding for teacher training in the religious semiotics of folk arts.

For educators: Adopt the modular guidebook as a core or supplementary text. Implement the "theory → skill → religious semiotics interpretation → creative application" teaching model, allocating at least 40% of class time to discussion and practice of sacred symbols.

For future research: Conduct longitudinal follow-ups, adapt the guidebook for other ethnic regions and religious semiotic traditions (Buddhist, Daoist, Islamic calligraphic arts), and develop digital/VR versions that simulate ritual contexts.

Footnotes

[1] Zhang Zhenzhong, "The Inheritance Crisis of Chinese Folk Culture and Its Educational Responses," Journal of Ethnic Culture Studies 11, no. 3 (2019): 45–52. (in Chinese)

[2] Zhang, "Inheritance Crisis," 47.

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[6] Xie Lifang, Experimental Report on the "Dandelion Action" Art Education Project (Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2017), p. 23. (in Chinese); Li Na, "Integrating Folk Art in Rural Primary and Secondary Schools in Shandong and Heilongjiang" (Master's thesis, Harbin Normal University, 2019), p. 34. (in Chinese)

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[8] Morgan, Religion and Material Culture, 15.

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Declarations

Funding Declaration: *This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.*

Clinical trial number: *not applicable.*

Ethics approval

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Rajamangala University of Technology Tawan-ok (RMUTTO-IRB-2025-028). All procedures were performed in accordance with the ethical standards of the

institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments.

Consent to participate

All participants provided verbal informed consent before data collection. The ethics committee waived the requirement for written consent due to the anonymous and low-risk nature of the educational intervention.

Consent to publish

Not applicable. No individual person's data are presented in this manuscript.

Data availability

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The pre-/post-test data are not publicly available because they contain educational records of students, but anonymized summary data can be shared for verification purposes.

Author Contribution

Zeng WeiAn: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft.Krisada Daoruang: Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition.

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