



# Research on the Design Transformation Mechanism of Rural Brand Public Art from a Semiotic Perspective

Jingwen Qian, Xinyu Zhang\*

Zhejiang University of Technology University Hangzhou, 310014, Zhejiang, China  
929132905@qq.com, \*c1y0420@ziut.edu.cn

**Abstract.** Rural public art, characterized by the process of "symbol extraction, reconstruction, translation, and identification," is becoming one of the significant approaches to shaping rural culture, developing rural industries, and building rural brands. From a semiotic perspective, this paper analyzes the theoretical value of regional cultural symbols in rural public art and the design transformation principles that should be followed when translating these local symbols into design objects. It discusses the spatial expression features of the spatialization of regional cultural symbols, the new shifts in the branding process of rural public art, and existing practical issues. Furthermore, it proposes a design logic process centered on "symbol extraction— reconstruction— translation— identification," aiming to integrate regional cultural symbols into the design of rural public art, thereby promoting the integrated development of culture, art, and branding. This study seeks to offer references and assistance for the branded development and sustainable construction of rural public art within the context of rural revitalization.

**Keywords:** Regional Cultural Symbols; Rural Public Art; Branding.

## 1 Introduction

Under the rural revitalization strategy, public art has become an important tool for rural renewal and brand building, yet it often suffers from issues like aesthetic homogenization and superficial symbolism, limiting its brand-building potential. Regional cultural symbols, embodying local history and collective memory, are valuable branding resources. From a semiotic perspective, transforming these symbols through public art is a process of making abstract regional culture perceptible. However, in practice, local symbols are often used merely as surface-level decoration, lacking the necessary symbolic extraction to form a supportive branding system. Therefore, it is essential to explore, by integrating semiotics and spatial design, how regional cultural symbols can be effectively translated into public art expressions, thereby enhancing their brand effect and influence.

## 2 Theoretical Value and Spatial Expression of Regional Cultural Symbols

### 2.1 Spatial Expression Attributes of Regional Cultural Symbols

Regional cultural symbols are crucial carriers of rural cultural connotations, encapsulating local historical memory, folk traditions, production methods, and aesthetic concepts. They are rich in environmental and cultural resources and can attract a new and increasing, but still unmet, demand for culture from those seeking a broad and deep experience of place-specific resources, such as crafts and gastronomy, traditional knowledge and practices.<sup>[1]</sup>

In the context of rural public art, they are not simply individual visual images but are constructed through a synthesis of spatial forms, material vocabularies, and environmental contexts, forming integral parts based on spatial settings. Compared to purely formal or decorative imagery, this cultural significance must be situated within specific environments and places, combined with usage scenarios, to manifest substantive meaning.

From the perspective of spatial generation mechanisms, regional cultural symbols exhibit strong situational orientation. Symbols are formed through processing and fusion under certain natural conditions and social contexts within a specific era and region, becoming representative. Public art integrates regional cultural symbols into the overall spatial structure of the countryside by responding to local topography, traditional architectural forms, and landscape textures, achieving localized expression that feels indigenous and non-intrusive. Public art design features an exploration of folk beliefs, ritual practices, religiosity, liturgy, and a connection to the land and the rhythms of nature—an ethnographic trend.<sup>[2]</sup>

Spatially, regional cultural symbols are carried by public art; symbols are not frozen entities but the internalization of local culture. Public art forms such as sculptures, murals, and installations utilize traditional crafts, folk activities, and rural life experiences as content materials, transforming traditional skills, folk customs, and rural life experience into observable and tangible geographical memories. Thus, rural public spaces become sites rich with symbolic meaning for interpreting geographical memory.

### 2.2 The Branding Shift in Rural Public Art

Against the backdrop of rural beauty, rural public art is no longer merely a means of spatial beautification but serves as an important medium participating in rural brand building, transforming its previous functional positioning and design logic. As awareness of rural branding grows, integrating public art into the overall shaping of the rural image plays a significant role in cultural expression and spatial renewal.<sup>[3]</sup>

Specifically, rural public art has shifted from initially focusing on the visual representation of forms and landscapes to a symbolically structured approach based on regional cultural symbols. Previously, efforts often centered on extracting certain forms or elements, possessing some innovative intent but lacking sufficient embodiment of cultural meaning. Public art created in the cause of place-marketing has become a

common component of regional regeneration. <sup>[4]</sup>Today, brand-oriented rural public art expresses the cultural significance of the rural brand through the extraction and spatial translation of regional cultural symbols. Branding is one of the most interesting aspects of design. <sup>[5]</sup>

### **3 Paradigm Dilemmas and Transformative Possibilities in Rural Brand Public Art Practice**

In specific practice, rural brand construction increasingly utilizes public art to enrich rural public space content, fulfilling functional requirements for visual presentation, cultural dissemination, and spatial creation. However, overall, the current paradigm for rural brand public art practice still faces significant issues, primarily the inability to achieve synergy between cultural expression and brand building. This is not an isolated case but reflects a persistent adherence to an older paradigm framework that confines rural public art practice to the levels of "landscape creation" and "image decoration." This overlooks the inherent characteristic of public art as a compelling medium for cultural symbols, resulting in a lack of innovation within this rural brand public art paradigm.

#### **3.1 Issues of Symbolic Failure in Rural Brand Public Art**

On the one hand, the application of public art in rural spaces often leads to its reduction to formalized Landscape. During rural environmental renewal, public art frequently becomes a visual landscape feature or spatial node. Evaluations tend to prioritize formal novelty and visual impact, neglecting its ability to resonate with the broader rural spatial structure, people's lifestyles, or even local collective memory. This design logic centered on "landscape effect" renders public art an isolated spatial symbol, detached from the context of villagers' daily lives and further diminishing its role in rural brand shaping. Villagers participation is deemed to be crucial for sustainability and resilience planning. <sup>[6]</sup>

On the other hand, from a brand-building perspective, rural public art lacks a systematic mechanism for symbol integration. A rural brand is not equivalent to a single image or specific object; it is constituted through multiple interrelated cultural symbols. However, in reality, public art is often implemented through project-based, point-like distributions, lacking a unified cultural theme and symbolic system. This makes it difficult for different public artworks to organically combine and exert a collective effect, preventing the presentation of the rural brand's cultural connotation through a more complete visual language. Consequently, this can lead to a loss of distinctiveness for some rural brands and reduce the role of public art in sustained brand construction.

### **3.2 Transformative Possibility: From Landscape Creation to Cultural Identification**

To address the above issues, rural branding needs to shift public art from its original "landscape-creation orientation" to a "cultural-identification orientation." This does not mean public art should cease to pay attention to spatial aesthetics, but rather that it needs to take on more functions: endowing space with cultural identity. The connection between rural public art and rural identity presents a significant opportunity for understanding cultural representation, sociopolitical attitudes, and the preservation of cultural heritage.<sup>[7]</sup> Moreover, the shaping of a rural brand cannot do without regional cultural symbols as supportive carrier.

From a semiotic perspective, regional cultural symbols are highly localized and identifiable; their meaning is not inherent to the symbolic form itself but is continuously activated based on the specific spatial and social context. Public art, as a design intervention in public space, can transform cultural symbols into spatial experiences, integrating regional cultural symbols with local daily life. Through public art, regional cultural symbols are injected into public spaces. As these symbols are grounded in space, they are continuously perceived and comprehended in daily life over time through long-term cultural nurturing, gradually forming brand cognition. These elements contribute to the sustainable growth of rural regions while reinforcing their unique identity within competitive global markets.<sup>[8]</sup>

## **4 Application Strategies of Regional Cultural Symbols in Rural Brand Public Art**

After clarifying the mechanism of how regional cultural symbols intervene in rural brand public art, the real question to consider is how to translate abstract cultural symbols into concrete and effective operational strategies. Regional cultural symbols cannot be directly displayed in artworks; instead, they must be integrated through a series of systematic design processes, enabling the works to function in terms of formal expression, spatial organization, and brand identification. By continuously incorporating regional cultural symbols, the regional brand can be sustainably constructed.

### **4.1 Symbol Translation Strategies at the Formal Level**

In public art design, form is the most direct manifestation of cultural symbols. For regional cultural symbols at the formal level, one should not simply copy traditional concrete symbolic images. Instead, contemporary expression should be achieved through abstraction and structural methods, extracting the most typical formal characteristics from regional cultural forms. Using these as a basis for public art creation results in works that retain the cultural core while conforming to contemporary aesthetics and being appropriate to the scale of the local rural space.

Furthermore, formal translation should also consider the overall relationship between public art and the rural environment. Rural public spaces are mostly open and

continuous. During formal translation, it is essential to consider this relationship, adapting forms to connotation, following the surrounding topography, architectural texture, and the processes of people's lives and production activities. This approach "embeds" cultural symbols into the corresponding space rather than simply "imposing" them suddenly onto the site. It allows public art to become a constituent element of the rural brand's visual identity rather than an isolated entity.

#### **4.2 Symbol Integration Strategies at the Spatial Narrative Level**

Compared to a single form of expression, spatial narrative facilitates the persistent dissemination of regional cultural symbols. In the rural public art design process, one should take into account the spatial structure of the countryside and the movement patterns of people, employ spatial sequencing methods, and integrate cultural symbols into specific scenes to create a logical public art system. This is not merely a few scattered artworks but utilizes multi-node spatial layout technique to form a memory-type public art experienceable during movement.

This strategy distributes regional cultural symbols in the form of public art across different public space nodes, creating a coherent relationship according to a certain spatial sequence. As people move through daily life or the site, they continually encounter these cultural symbols of the rural region, gradually developing self-identity for the rural regional culture and cognition for the rural regional brand. From a spatial narrative perspective, based on symbols promotes strong participation and sustainability in public art, enabling the rural brand to benefit from the brand equity accrued through prolonged use.

#### **4.3 Symbol System Construction Strategies at the Brand Identification Level**

The creation of a rural brand cannot do without a unified, stable, and spread capable symbol system. The application of regional cultural symbols in public art should serve the overall identification system of the rural brand, not merely exist as an independent forms of artistic expression. In practical design, public art can be considered part of the rural brand's symbol system. creatives have played a central role in place branding.<sup>[9]</sup>Unified design can be achieved through consistent formal language, coherent spatial expression, unified cultural themes, and similar contextual settings for the artworks.

Continuously employing representative local symbols across different public art projects gradually forms stable brand identification cues. Diverse expressions under the same cultural motif allow the rural brand image to possess distinct characteristics while also reflecting spatial richness. Findings reveal that place branding is increasingly understood not merely as a promotional tool but as a governance mechanism that shapes rural identity, supports economic revitalization, and advances sustainable development.<sup>[10]</sup>Constructing a symbol system at the brand identification level is helpful for promotion public art's long-term role in rural brand communication, transforming cultural symbols into sustainable brand assets through spatial practice.

The place brand must become something close to a denomination of origin that, informally, invites us to define the future of this agrarian area. <sup>[11]</sup>

## 5 Conclusion

With the rise of rural brand construction, public art is gradually participating in the renewal of rural spaces and the creation of rural culture. However, issues such as symbolic superficiality, formalistic landscaping, and lack of brands in actual public art practice hinder rural brand development. Therefore, it is necessary to start from regional cultural symbols and, through analysis of public art and brand development, develop a set of guidelines on how to utilize public art in the cultural transformation mechanism and design methods within rural brand building. This holds significant importance for explore the unique regional cultural elements of the area and subsequently driving local cultural brand construction.

Regional cultural symbols are crucial mediators linking rural cultural essence with brand identification. They are not directly manifested as visual elements but participate as cultural symbols in the generation process of the rural brand, achieved through extraction, reconstruction, and translation. In the rural brand building process, public art, as a symbolic intermediary, transforms intangible rural brand information into observable spatial forms. While integrating regional cultural symbols into the contemporary cultural context, it enhances the quality of the rural brand and ultimately allows people to experience the charm of excellent traditional culture.

Objectively speaking, to achieve effective construction, rural brand public art requires holistic design thinking, achieving unified and coordinated effects across formal expression, spatial language, and brand identification levels, avoiding fragmented and unsystematic overall presentation. Simultaneously, public art should be incorporated into the entire rural brand's symbol system. Through continuous application and repeated experience, the cultural symbols of the rural construction brand can gradually develop into stable identification mark within rural public spaces. The logical process of "symbol extraction — reconstruction — translation — identification" can provide a viable methodology for shifting rural construction public art from landscape creation towards cultural identification.

Furthermore, this paper primarily discusses how regional cultural symbols influence the manifestation of rural brand public art. It does not directly analyze the long-term communication effects of regional cultural symbols on rural brand public art, and the relevant conclusions drawn require further empirical verification. In the future, scholars can conduct specific analyses on the application of regional cultural symbols in the design of concrete rural public art projects and their impact on brand formation, brand promotion, and public brand perception.

## References

1. Cerquetti, M., Ferrara, C., Romagnoli, A., & Vagnarelli, G. (2022). Enhancing intangible cultural heritage for sustainable tourism development in rural areas: The case of the “Marche food and wine memories” project (Italy). *Sustainability*, 14(24), 16893.
2. Izdebska, K. (2024). Countryside, Borderlands, Nature—Public Art beyond the City☆. *Rural Sociology*, 89(3), 431-455.
3. Gulisova, B., Horbel, C., & Bjørnshave Noe, E. (2023). Rural place branding processes: actor engagement in service ecosystems. *Journal of place management and development*, 16(3), 415-439.
4. Farley, R. (2025). ‘Welcome to the North’: Public Art, Place-Marketing and the Northern Imaginary. *Visual Culture in Britain*, 23(1), 65-81. Author, F.: Contribution title. In: 9th International Proceedings on Proceedings, pp. 1–2. Publisher, Location (2010)
5. Ala-Olla, L. (2019). Revitalizing rural areas in Finland through branding: Case: Artmerkut.
6. Paunovic, I., Müller, C., & Deimel, K. (2023). Citizen participation for sustainability and resilience: A generational cohort perspective on community brand identity perceptions and development priorities in a rural community. *Sustainability*, 15(9), 7307.
7. Douglas, R. L. (2026). *The Radicalization of Rural America: Country Music and Identity* (Master's thesis, Harvard University)
8. Jafarli, F., & Canavari, M. (2025). Place branding in rural areas: A literature review. *AIMS Agriculture and Food*, 10(1), 129-152.
9. Sandbach, K. (2022). Authenticity, local creatives and place branding: a case study from the Blue Mountains, Australia. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 15(2), 149-166.
10. Logar, E. (2025). Place branding as an approach to the development of rural areas: a systematic analysis of web of science ‘geography’ literature. *GeoJournal*, 90(4), 195.
11. de San Eugenio Vela, J., Ginesta Portet, X., Compte-Pujol, M., Frigola-Reig, J., & Fernández-Rovira, C. (2023). Local and sustainable production as vectors of an agrarian branding strategy in Catalonia: Case study of the Baixà Tordera. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 16(3), 329-346.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

