Interpretation of the Symbol of Ancient Chinese Pottery

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Abstract. The invention and use of pottery have facilitated and consolidated the settlement of human life and expanded the meaning of the agricultural production to progress of human society. The pottery is not the language and text, but it is the physical legacy of a bygone era and the fossil of human life from the passing era in another sense. This article is trying to analyze the class and decorative patterns of the ancient Chinese pottery from the perspective of the semiotic cognitive view, in order to find his semiotic meaning.

Keywords: pottery, semiotics, signifier, signified.

Pottery appeared with the sedentary human life from the prehistoric time into the Neolithic. According to archaeological findings and scientific determination the earliest extant pieces of pottery date back to about 9000 ~ 10000 years ago. In the long course of historical development significant changes in terms of form, name meaning and function of the pottery have taken place. There changes not only reflect the development of socio-economic activities, but also reveal the cultural evolution during the time. This article attempts to use the knowledge of modern semiotics to re-examine and interpret the development of the pottery.

The representative of semiotics, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, has an important theoretical insight, “Language is a structured social system and value system, and it is also a historical convention”. If people want to communicate with the language, they must abide by it. The "language" here is constituted by a number of symbolic elements. People get the value and meanings of each symbol by comparison with other symbols. We use the above insights in the reinterpretation of pottery in order to understand the pottery from a new perspective.

1 Class of Pottery and Semiotics

Potteries in the Neolithic are mainly daily necessities. According to different purposes of use the can be divided into drain devices, cooking devices, drinking vessels, tableware, container and some other things. The use of some potteries can be guessed and determined today with modern people’s thought. But the use and purposes of some classes of pottery are still unknown. The naming of these classes of pottery is only based on their general distinctions. The scope of their use should not be limited to what we know.
In different areas and in different culture types, the details of the different potteries differ from each other quite well. The combinations of the pottery classes are also different. This reflects the different lifestyles of different community groups. In fact, the pottery with the same name may have different forms because of the different regions and different culture and there may be quite obvious differences. If we use Saussure’s semiotic theory to analyze it, the different form and use of the potteries with the same name are called “signified” and the sound and the image of the name are called “signifier”. As a result, we find that the relationship between “signified” and “signifier” of the pottery is not inevitable. If we believe that their relationship is “conventional” – that means, their relationship is “established by custom” –, then the meaning of “signified” and “signifier” should be ruled by a group of people who lived in a particular historical period and at a region with particular geographical factors. But, this ruled relationship indicates just the human contact between the different regions. The same “signifier” has different correspondent “signified” with it. How can the same “signifier” be known and recognized by people living in different regions and be given different correspondent “signified” by these people in different regions? There may be a reason for this: the forming and understanding of “custom” shall be from a specific period on, when not many people were living together. But in this period the same “signifier” referred to the same “signified”. People had common understanding of “signifier” and “signified” on this basis. After that people began to live dispersed and settle in different regions. People in these regions lived in a same, similar or different way and formed different “customs”. Because of the common life experience and the formed common understanding of “signifier” before the dispersed living there were no changes on sounds and images even after the dispersed living. “Convention” should be understood based on this level. The meaning of the “signifier” here deviates from the definition in the concept of Saussure. Maybe the “signifier” of sign language should include not only its acoustic image, but also its auditory image. Both can be regarded as “signifier”. If this works, the relationship between “signifier” and “signified” turns to the relationship between the word, which exits as a sound and physical shape, and the represented concept by the word. Thus, it is not one to one correspondence between “signifier” and “signified”.

2 How to Name the Ancient Objects

1. The ancient objects are generally named by comparing the objects with the similar objects today, such as cylinders, cans, cups, bowls etc.. But the ancient and modern way of life are different, the name and use of the objects may not be exactly the same. This shows that “signifier” and “signified” in the language of semiotics are strictly temporal and spatial concepts. The reflect the language of the contemporary human concept, not the ancient language and intellect continued till today. For the same object there may be break in term of language and symbol during the language development. Even if modern people make a thorough study of the behavior of the ancient people, they are still not creator and maker of the ancient objects. We are talking about the language and symbol of an era or a period, not only the language or symbol for the object itself.