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# Visual Construction of National Image: A Semiotic Comparison of Museum Exhibition Posters in China and Korea

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## Abstract

In the context of contemporary cultural governance and national image construction, national museums not only function as institutions for the preservation and display of cultural heritage, but also actively participate in the production and dissemination of national narratives through visual design. As highly condensed visual texts within museum public communication, exhibition posters encapsulate how museums articulate history, culture, and national identity at the visual level. This study takes exhibition posters from the National Museum of China and the National Museum of Korea as its research objects. Adopting a qualitative research approach, it integrates semiotic theory and visual grammar to conduct a comparative analysis of the visual mechanisms through which national museums construct meaning. The analysis systematically examines visual symbols, compositional structures, and viewer relationships across three dimensions: representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. The findings indicate that exhibition posters of the National Museum of China tend to foreground material artifacts as central visual subjects. Through centralized compositions and low levels of viewer interaction, these posters emphasize historical authenticity, cultural continuity, and institutional authority. In contrast, the National Museum of Korea more frequently employs symbolic and design-oriented visual expressions, transforming artifacts into culturally interpretable symbols. By adopting decentralized compositions and highly interactive visual strategies, its posters highlight contemporary interpretations of cultural meaning and openness. This study argues that such visual differences are not merely stylistic choices, but reflect deeper divergences in museum role positioning, national narrative strategies, and cultural governance philosophies. By introducing a design-oriented perspective into museum and national image studies, this research offers a new analytical pathway for understanding the role of visual design in the cultural construction of the nation.

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**Keywords:** museum visual design; semiotics; visual grammar; exhibition posters; national image; China–Korea comparison

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background: The Rise of Visualized National Narratives in National Museums

In the context of intensifying global cultural competition and growing attention to national image construction, museums—particularly national museums—have gradually evolved beyond their traditional roles of artifact preservation and academic research. They are increasingly recognized as key institutional platforms for the production of national cultural narratives and

public cultural communication. In recent years, with the widespread academic and policy-level discussions surrounding cultural soft power and nation branding, museums have been conceptualized as forms of cultural governance apparatuses that shape internal cultural identity while projecting national images externally through exhibitions, education, and communication practices (Gudjonsson, 2005; Joinau, 2023; Lee, 2023).

Within this transformation, visual communication has emerged as a crucial medium through which museums participate in national image construction. On the one hand, visual forms possess cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communicative advantages, enabling the rapid transmission of complex cultural meanings. On the other hand, in an era characterized by the pervasive presence of digital media and social platforms, museum visual content often circulates beyond the physical exhibition space. Exhibition posters, key visuals, and digital images increasingly enter the broader public visual environment as relatively autonomous cultural texts.

Against this backdrop, exhibition posters acquire renewed analytical significance. As an important interface connecting museums, exhibition themes, and the public, exhibition posters not only convey informational content but also construct specific cultural imaginaries and value positions through the integrated use of imagery, color, composition, and typography. Particularly within national museums, exhibition posters are rarely isolated design outcomes; instead, they are embedded within institutional visual strategies, reflecting standardized interpretations of historical narratives, cultural identity, and national representation (Knell, 2014).

### ***1.2. From “Artifact Display” to “Visual-Semiotic Systems”: The Visual Turn in Museum Studies***

Traditional museum studies have long focused on collection systems, exhibition histories, and curatorial philosophies, with visual design often treated as a secondary or technical concern. However, recent scholarship increasingly recognizes that visual representation is not a neutral medium, but rather a semiotic system imbued with ideological and cultural significance. Visual design shapes public understanding of history, culture, and the nation by determining what is displayed, how it is displayed, and how it is meant to be seen (Albers, 2013).

In response, museum visual research has undergone a notable theoretical shift—from an emphasis on aesthetic styles and design techniques toward an examination of how visual forms participate in the production of cultural meaning and the construction of power relations. Scholars have begun to conceptualize museum visuals as forms of visual discourse, highlighting their role in shaping cultural memory, identity formation, and national narratives (Thiemeyer, 2015; Knell, 2014).

Semiotic theory and visual grammar provide critical methodological tools for this analytical turn. Semiotics examines how meaning is constructed through sign systems, while visual grammar further reveals the structural logic of images at the levels of representation, interaction, and composition (Chandler, 2022; Friedman & Ron, 2017). Compared with purely descriptive image analysis, this theoretical approach enables a systematic interpretation of the value orientations and cultural positions embedded in museum visual design.

Despite these advances, notable gaps remain in existing research. First, many studies of museum visibility focus on single national contexts or individual institutions, lacking systematic cross-cultural and cross-national comparisons. Second, although national image has become a prominent topic in cultural and communication studies, research that directly integrates national image construction with museum visual design—particularly through in-depth analysis of concrete visual texts—remains limited.

### ***1.3. National Museums as Institutional Sites of Visualized National Image***

National museums are institutionally distinct from other types of museums. Beyond presenting official interpretations of history and culture, they symbolically function as embodiments of national cultural authority. Consequently, their visual strategies tend to exhibit a

high degree of consistency and standardization, forming relatively stable visual paradigms through long-term institutional practice (Anderson, 2006; Winter, 2022).

Within the East Asian context, national museums in China and South Korea offer a particularly valuable basis for comparison. Both countries possess long-standing historical traditions and strong senses of cultural continuity. Moreover, in the processes of modern nation-state formation, museums in both contexts have played active roles in shaping national identity and participating in international cultural communication. Yet whether these similarities translate into convergent visual strategies remains an open question. How do their visual-semiotic systems differ, and what distinct national narrative logics do these differences reflect?

Exhibition posters, as one of the most publicly visible visual texts produced by national museums, provide an ideal analytical entry point. Situated at the intersection of institutional visual regulation and contemporary visual culture, exhibition posters must simultaneously adhere to official representational norms and attract public attention. Through systematic analysis of exhibition posters, it becomes possible to examine how national museums visually negotiate historical authority and contemporary expression in constructing national images (Black, 2021; Stylianou-Lambert, 2023).

#### ***1.4. Research Questions and Objectives***

Based on the above considerations, this study takes exhibition posters from the National Museum of China and the National Museum of Korea as its research objects. Employing a qualitative research approach that integrates semiotics and visual grammar, it conducts a systematic comparative analysis of visual-symbolic construction strategies in national museum posters, with the aim of revealing the mechanisms through which visual design contributes to national image construction.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do national museums construct national images through the visual symbols and visual grammar of exhibition posters?
2. What systematic differences can be identified between the exhibition posters of the National Museum of China and the National Museum of Korea in terms of visual representation, viewer interaction, and compositional logic?
3. How do these visual differences reflect divergent national cultural narratives and museum discourse strategies?

By addressing these questions, this study seeks to deepen the intersection between museum visual studies and national image research at a theoretical level, demonstrate the methodological value of semiotics and visual grammar in museum design research, and provide practical insights for visual communication strategies in national museums.

#### ***1.5. Research Questions and Objectives***

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in introducing national image research into the analytical framework of museum visual design. By moving beyond approaches centered on curatorial discourse or cultural policy, it advances an understanding of national museums' cultural functions from the perspective of visual-semiotic systems. Through a comparative analysis of Chinese and South Korean national museums, the study further elucidates shared patterns and distinctive divergences in East Asian cultural narratives and visual expression.

Methodologically, this research focuses on exhibition posters as specific and comparable visual texts, combining semiotics and visual grammar to establish a qualitative analytical framework that is both replicable and extensible within design and museum studies.

Practically, the findings offer insights into how national museums may balance historical authority, cultural tradition, and contemporary visual expression in their design practices, contributing to more effective museum visual communication and public cultural engagement.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Museums, National Image, and Cultural Narratives

The concept of national image has long been a central concern in international relations, communication studies, and cultural research. Over the past five years, alongside the deepening discussion of cultural soft power and public diplomacy, scholars have increasingly conceptualized national image as a dynamic process continuously constructed through cultural practices, rather than as a fixed set of symbols (Gudjonsson, 2005; Lee, 2023).

Within this theoretical shift, cultural institutions—particularly museums—have been re-evaluated as key media and institutional sites for national image construction. Studies in museum research emphasize that national museums occupy an irreplaceable position in national cultural narratives. Beyond their traditional functions of collecting and preserving heritage, they actively participate in the official articulation of national history through curatorial narratives, spatial design, and public communication strategies (Knell, 2014; Ivaniš et al., 2025).

Recent scholarship further argues that national museums are not neutral knowledge spaces, but sites where selective representations of history, culture, and art contribute to the construction of specific national discourses and value systems (Cummings, 2025). Such discursive construction operates not only at the level of exhibition content but also through exhibition forms and visual modes of representation. However, compared with extensive discussions on curatorial ideology and cultural policy, the specific mechanisms through which museum visual design contributes to national image construction remain underexplored.

### 2.2. Museum Visual Design and Exhibition Communication

With the consolidation of the so-called “visual turn” in cultural studies, museum research has increasingly recognized visual form as a central mechanism of meaning production. Studies from the last five years suggest that exhibition design, visual identity, and media dissemination have become integral components of museum public communication, often extending far beyond the physical exhibition space (Redaelli et al., 2025; Wilkin et al., 2025).

Within this context, exhibition posters, key visuals, and museum branding systems have emerged as important research objects. Some studies adopt a communication-oriented perspective, examining how visual design enhances public visibility, audience curiosity, and visit intention (Pan et al., 2025). Others approach museum visuals from the perspectives of design history or stylistic analysis, focusing on the integration of traditional cultural elements with contemporary design languages (Ghifari et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, this line of research exhibits clear limitations. First, many studies treat visual design primarily as a functional communication tool, emphasizing effectiveness while overlooking how visual forms actively construct meaning. Second, existing analyses often remain descriptive, lacking systematic theoretical frameworks capable of explaining the cultural logic and power relations embedded in museum visual design (Albers, 2013; Achsani & Wonorahardjo, 2020).

In the context of national museums, exhibition posters should not be understood merely as design outcomes but as components of institutionalized visual strategies. The values, historical perspectives, and cultural positions conveyed through these visuals carry explicit political and ideological implications. Yet, few studies have approached exhibition posters as visual texts subject to rigorous analytical scrutiny, and even fewer have examined them within the broader framework of national image construction.

### 2.3. Applications of Semiotics and Visual Grammar in Museum Studies

Semiotic theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how visual meaning is constructed. Classical semiotics emphasizes that signs do not naturally reflect reality but acquire meaning through culturally situated conventions and practices (Chandler, 2022). In recent

years, semiotics has been reintroduced into museum studies to analyze meaning-making processes embedded in exhibitions, artifacts, and visual representations (Thiemeyer, 2015; Fares et al., 2025).

In visual studies, the theory of visual grammar, developed by Kress and van Leeuwen, offers a systematic approach to analyzing the structural organization of images. By distinguishing among representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning, visual grammar reveals how images construct social relations and cultural values at the visual level. This framework has been widely applied in advertising, political communication, and digital media studies (Friedman & Ron, 2017; Wang et al., 2025), and has gradually entered museum and heritage research.

Recent studies applying visual grammar to museum contexts have identified tendencies toward authoritative viewpoints, centralized compositions, and reduced viewer interaction in museum visual presentations (Dancu, 2021; Mason & Sayner, 2020). At the same time, other research highlights emerging visual strategies that emphasize interaction, openness, and participatory engagement, reflecting contemporary audiences' expectations for inclusivity and plural narratives (Hooper-Greenhill, 2021; Kidd, 2022).

Despite these advances, the application of semiotics and visual grammar in museum research remains fragmented. Systematic comparative studies, particularly those focusing on national-level institutions, are still scarce. Most existing research concentrates on single cases and lacks a cross-cultural or cross-national perspective capable of revealing institutional differences in visual sign construction.

#### ***2.4. Current State and Limitations of Sino–Korean Museum Visual Studies***

Within the East Asian research context, both Chinese and Korean museum studies have developed substantial scholarly traditions. Chinese research often emphasizes museums' roles in national identity formation, historical narration, and ideological dissemination (Li, 2021; Wang, 2023). Korean scholarship, by contrast, tends to foreground issues of cultural diversity, contemporary design, and public participation (Kim, 2020; Park, 2022).

However, at the level of visual analysis, significant imbalances remain. Chinese studies frequently prioritize artifact interpretation and curatorial philosophy, while systematic analyses of visual design are relatively limited. Korean research, although more attentive to museum design and visual communication, rarely situates visual strategies explicitly within frameworks of national image or state narrative (Choi, 2021; Lee, 2023).

Most notably, direct visual comparisons between the National Museum of China and the National Museum of Korea are virtually absent. This absence limits our understanding of how different national institutions employ visual strategies to construct cultural identity and national image, and constrains the theoretical development of museum visual studies in an international context.

#### ***2.5. Current State and Limitations of Sino–Korean Museum Visual Studies***

In summary, the existing literature reveals several critical gaps:

First, although national image studies and museum studies have each developed robust research traditions, their intersection remains insufficiently explored, particularly from the perspective of visual design.

Second, research on museum visual design often remains at the level of stylistic description or communication effectiveness, with limited engagement with semiotic and visual-grammatical frameworks capable of uncovering deeper meaning-construction mechanisms.

Third, within the East Asian context, comparative cross-national research on visual strategies employed by national museums is notably lacking, especially with regard to systematic visual analyses of Chinese and Korean national institutions.

Addressing these gaps, the present study examines exhibition posters from the National Museum of China and the National Museum of Korea through a qualitative comparative approach grounded in semiotics and visual grammar. By doing so, it seeks to illuminate how national museums employ visual design to construct national image, thereby contributing new theoretical insights and methodological pathways to museum studies, design research, and national image scholarship.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. *Research Paradigm and Methodological Position*

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm grounded in an interpretivist approach, aiming to understand how visual symbols are constructed and endowed with meaning within specific cultural and institutional contexts. Unlike quantitative research, which emphasizes variable relationships and causal inference, qualitative research focuses on processes of meaning-making, cultural context, and the internal logic of symbolic systems. It is therefore particularly suitable for the analysis of visual texts and cultural representations (Creswell & Poth, 2021).

Within museum studies and design research, visual design should not be regarded as a neutral mode of expression, but rather as a symbolic practice embedded in institutional structures, ideological frameworks, and cultural values. Accordingly, this study conceptualizes exhibition posters produced by national museums as visual texts, arguing that their meanings do not arise solely from individual design elements but are constructed through semiotic systems and visual grammar within specific socio-cultural contexts.

Based on this methodological stance, the present study does not seek to evaluate whether exhibition posters are “successful” or “effective” in promotional terms. Instead, it focuses on how visual symbols and structured visual grammar participate in the construction of national image.

#### 3.2. *Research Objects and Sample Selection*

##### 3.1.1. *Definition of Research Objects*

This study focuses on the National Museum of China and the National Museum of Korea, as these two institutions exhibit a high degree of comparability in terms of institutional status, cultural authority, and symbolic representation of the nation. As the highest-level museum institutions in their respective countries, both museums represent official interpretations of national history and culture, while also playing a central role in the public communication of national cultural identity.

With regard to specific research materials, this study concentrates on exhibition posters, rather than exhibition spaces or curatorial texts. Exhibition posters offer several methodological advantages:

They are among the most publicly visible visual texts produced by museums and frequently circulate in both physical and digital public spaces;

Posters present a highly condensed visual form, encapsulating the museum’s visual interpretation and representational strategy for a given exhibition;

Compared with exhibition spaces, posters are more suitable for cross-national comparison, as they reduce distortions caused by differences in spatial scale, architectural conditions, and exhibition infrastructure.

##### 3.1.1. *Sample Selection Criteria*

To ensure analytical rigor and comparability, the sample selection followed four key criteria:

Institutional consistency: All samples were drawn from official exhibitions organized by national-level museums;

Temporal consistency: The posters were primarily selected from exhibitions released within the past five years (approximately 2020–2024);

Public communication function: Samples consisted of official exhibition posters used for public dissemination by the museums;

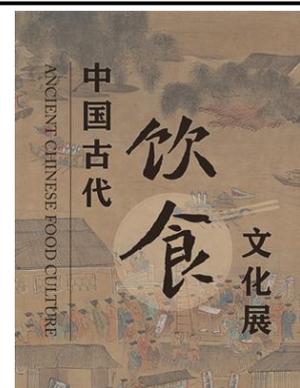
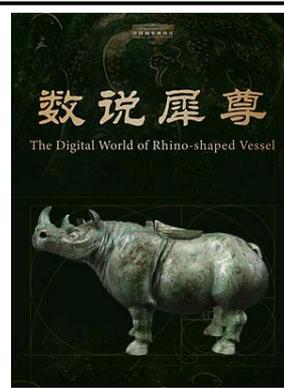
Visual integrity: Each poster contained a complete set of visual components, including imagery, text, composition, and color.

Based on these criteria, the sample from the National Museum of China consists mainly of exhibition posters centered on historical artifacts and civilizational themes, whereas the sample from the National Museum of Korea includes posters related to traditional culture, cross-cultural exchange, and contemporary visual expression. Although the exhibition themes differ between the two groups, they remain consistent in terms of institutional function and communicative purpose, making them suitable for comparative analysis.

**Table 1.** Analytical Framework of Semiotics and Visual Grammar.

Analytical Dimension	Key Concepts	Operational Definition in This Study	Representative Theoretical Sources
Representational Meaning	Narrative vs. Conceptual Representation	Whether visual elements depict actions/events or symbolize abstract cultural values	Kress & van Leeuwen; Machin
Interactive Meaning	Gaze, Distance, Perspective	How posters construct a visual relationship between exhibition content and viewers	Jewitt & Oyama; Rose
Compositional Meaning	Information Value, Salience, Framing	Spatial hierarchy, visual emphasis, and coherence of poster layouts	Kress & van Leeuwen
Cultural Symbolism	Motifs, Icons, Metaphors	Use of traditional symbols (e.g., dragons, ritual objects, calligraphy) to convey cultural identity	Barthes; Bal
Typography as Semiotic Resource	Script Style, Language Choice	Role of typography in mediating authority, tradition, and modernity	van Leeuwen
Color Semiotics	Hue, Saturation, Contrast	Symbolic and affective meanings of color schemes in national museum posters	Aiello & Parry
Visual Narrative Strategy	Historicization vs. Abstraction	Whether visual language emphasizes historical continuity or contemporary reinterpretation	Macdonald; Park

This framework integrates social semiotics and visual grammar to systematically interpret how national museums construct cultural narratives through exhibition posters.





**Figure 1.** Comparative Samples of Exhibition Posters from the National Museum of China and the National Museum of Korea.

### 3.3. Analytical Methods: Visual Semiotics and Visual Grammar

#### 3.3.1. Semiotic Analytical Framework

Semiotics provides a foundational theoretical basis for understanding how visual meaning is constructed. In this study, images, textual elements, and compositional structures in exhibition posters are conceptualized as components of a visual sign system. The analysis focuses on three primary semiotic functions:

**Iconic signs:** Signs that refer to real-world objects through visual resemblance, such as depictions of artifacts or figurative imagery;

**Indexical signs:** Signs that suggest meaning through causal, material, or spatial association, including traces of history, material textures, or indications of temporality;

**Symbolic signs:** Signs that convey abstract meanings through cultural convention, such as national symbols, cultural values, and institutional identities.

By distinguishing among these different types of signs, the analysis examines how exhibition posters shift from the mere representation of objects toward the construction of cultural and national meaning. This framework further enables a systematic comparison of semiotic strategies employed by Chinese and Korean national museums, as illustrated through the comparative poster samples presented in Figure 1.

#### 3.3.1. Dimensions of Visual Grammar Analysis

Building upon the semiotic framework, this study incorporates visual grammar theory, as developed by Kress and van Leeuwen, to analyze how visual meaning is structured at an organizational level. The analysis is conducted across three interrelated dimensions:

##### Representational Meaning

This dimension examines what is visually represented in the poster, including the selection of visual subjects, degrees of figuration or abstraction, and the organization of cultural symbols.

##### Interactive Meaning

This dimension analyzes how posters construct relationships between the image and the viewer through visual perspective, distance, gaze, and visual tension. It assesses whether the poster positions the viewer as a passive observer of authoritative statements or as an active participant invited into interpretation.

##### Compositional Meaning

This dimension focuses on how visual elements are arranged within the image, including centralized or decentralized compositions, symmetrical or asymmetrical structures, the relationship between text and image, and overall color order and hierarchy.

Together, these three dimensions form a reproducible analytical framework for systematically comparing structural differences in visual design across national museum contexts. The operationalization of these dimensions is summarized in the comparative analytical tables and visually contextualized through the poster samples shown in Figure 1.

### **3.4. Analytical Procedure and Research Steps**

The analytical procedure followed a structured, stepwise design to ensure methodological rigor and comparability across cases. As illustrated in Figure X, the study conceptualizes exhibition posters as a visual translation mechanism through which national image is mediated, rearticulated, and communicated to the public. Guided by this conceptual framework, the analysis was conducted in four sequential stages.

#### **Stage 1: Preliminary review and categorization**

All exhibition posters from the National Museum of China and the National Museum of Korea were first examined holistically. At this stage, the posters were categorized according to exhibition theme, overall visual style, and dominant design characteristics. This initial review established a contextual understanding of each poster and informed subsequent analytical coding.

#### **Stage 2: Semiotic coding**

In the second stage, a semiotic coding process was applied. Drawing on the semiotic framework outlined in Section 3.3, major visual elements within each poster were coded as iconic, indexical, or symbolic signs. Particular attention was paid to how material artifacts, graphic motifs, textual elements, and compositional cues functioned as carriers of cultural and national meaning. This step enabled the identification of recurring patterns in sign usage within and across national contexts.

#### **Stage 3: Visual grammar analysis**

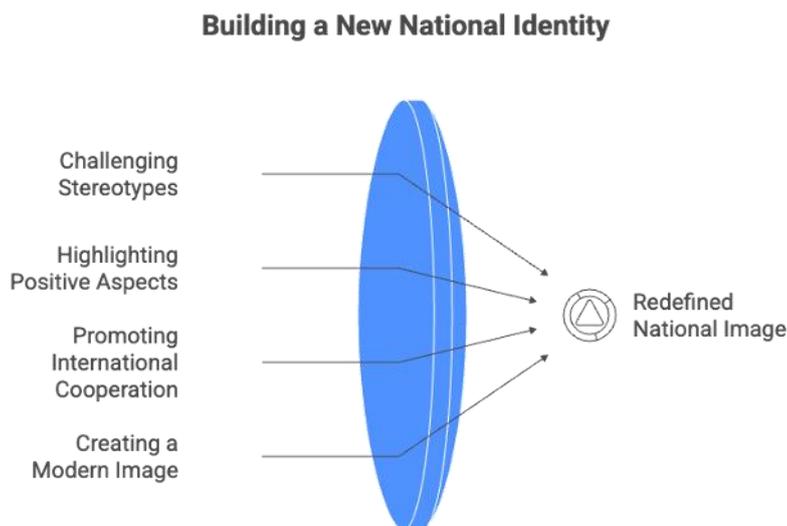
Following semiotic coding, each poster was systematically analyzed using the three dimensions of visual grammar—representational, interactive, and compositional meaning. This stage examined how visual subjects were selected and framed, how viewer–image relationships were constructed through perspective and distance, and how compositional arrangements and color structures contributed to overall meaning-making. Analytical records were produced for each sample to ensure consistency and transparency.

#### **Stage 4: Comparative interpretation**

In the final stage, findings from the within-group analyses were synthesized through cross-national comparison. Differences and shared patterns in visual construction strategies were identified and interpreted in relation to broader frameworks of national image construction and cultural narrative. In line with the conceptual model presented in Figure 2, this comparative interpretation focused on how visual strategies contribute to the redefinition of national image by challenging stereotypes, highlighting cultural values, promoting international visibility, and articulating modern national identities.

Through this stepwise procedure, the study maintains both analytical depth and structural consistency, allowing visual design to be examined not merely as an aesthetic outcome but as a culturally embedded mechanism of national image construction.

Figure 2. Conceptual framework illustrating the visual translation mechanisms of national image construction.



**Figure 2.** Building a New National Identity.(Source: Author’ s own illustration)

**3.5. Research Trustworthiness and Methodological Reflection**

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed:

Analytical transparency: The analytical dimensions and procedures are explicitly described, allowing the research process to be clearly understood and critically examined;

Clear sample provenance: All visual materials were obtained from official museum publications and authorized channels, minimizing bias introduced by informal or non-institutional sources;

Comparative consistency: Identical analytical frameworks were applied to both Chinese and Korean samples, ensuring structural equivalence in comparison.

It should be noted that this study focuses specifically on exhibition posters as visual texts, and its findings are not intended to represent all visual practices of national museums. Future research may extend this approach by incorporating audience interviews, curatorial documents, or exhibition space analysis, thereby enriching the understanding of visual mechanisms in museum-based national image construction.

**4. Discussion**

**4.1. Visual-Semiotic Characteristics of Exhibition Posters at the National Museum of China**

Based on the analytical framework integrating visual semiotics and visual grammar, a systematic analysis of recent exhibition posters from the National Museum of China reveals a highly consistent design logic across the dimensions of visual representation, viewer interaction, and compositional structure. Together, these characteristics reflect a stable and institutionalized mode of national visual narration, Table 1.

**Table 2.** This is a table. Tables should be placed in the main text near to the first time they are cited.

Coding Dimension	Code Category	Coding Description	Example Indicators in Posters
Representational Mode	R1: Object-centered	Central placement of artifacts or relics	Large-scale artifact imagery
R2: Symbolic abstraction	Use of stylized motifs or graphic forms	Abstract patterns, symbolic animals	

Cultural Symbolism	C1: Traditional motifs	Explicit use of historical symbols	Dragons, ritual vessels, lotus
C2: Reinterpreted motifs	Contemporary redesign of traditional elements	Simplified or deconstructed symbols	
Visual Composition	V1: Symmetrical hierarchy	Balanced and centralized layout	Axial symmetry
V2: Dynamic composition	Asymmetry and visual movement	Flowing or fragmented layouts	
Typography Strategy	T1: Calligraphic authority	Traditional or calligraphy-based fonts	Brush-style Chinese characters
T2: Experimental hybridity	Mixed or modern typographic styles	Custom Latin–Hangul typography	
Color Semiotics	K1: Historical palette	Earth tones, gold, subdued colors	Brown, dark red, bronze
K2: Contemporary contrast	High saturation and contrast	Bright blues, reds, black–white	
Viewer Positioning	I1: Reverential viewing	Distance and solemn tone	Monumental scale, low interaction
I2: Interpretive engagement	Inviting or conceptual stance	Graphic play, visual metaphors	

Note: This coding scheme was applied iteratively to all selected exhibition posters from the National Museum of China and the National Museum of Korea.

#### 4.1.1. Representational Meaning: A Logic of Historical Representation Centered on Material Artifacts

At the level of representational meaning, the most prominent feature of exhibition posters from the National Museum of China is the centralized presentation of material artifacts. Whether depicting bronze vessels, details of historical objects, or artifact-based historical imagery, tangible cultural objects consistently occupy the visual center of the composition and function as the primary carriers of visual narrative.

From a semiotic perspective, these artifact images first operate as iconic signs, directly referring to historical objects through visual resemblance. Simultaneously, they are endowed with symbolic functions, representing the continuity of national history, the legitimacy of civilization, and cultural authority. This dual semiotic status transforms artifacts from objects of observation into visual evidence of national historical legitimacy.

Moreover, artifacts are predominantly rendered in a realistic or highly faithful manner, with minimal abstraction or stylistic transformation. Such representational choices visually reinforce notions of authenticity, authority, and archaeological credibility, thereby emphasizing the museum's dominant role in historical interpretation.

#### 4.1.2. Interactive Meaning: A Low-Interactivity Visual Discourse of Authoritative Statement

At the level of interactive meaning, exhibition posters from the National Museum of China generally establish a low-interactivity, non-inviting visual relationship with viewers. From the perspective of visual grammar, these posters often employ frontal or slightly elevated viewing angles, while artifacts rarely engage in direct “gaze” with the audience. Human figures are largely absent.

This visual configuration corresponds to what Kress and van Leeuwen define as an “offer image”, in which information is presented to viewers rather than demanding their engagement.

Viewers are positioned as relatively passive recipients, primarily expected to observe, read, and accept the information conveyed.

Such low-interactivity visual relations align closely with the institutional role of national museums. By avoiding emotionalization, entertainment-oriented imagery, or strong interactive cues, these posters subtly reinforce the seriousness and authority of national narratives, presenting history as a set of established facts rather than as negotiable or interpretive cultural texts.

#### **4.1.3. Compositional Meaning: Centralized Order and Stable Visual Structure**

At the level of compositional meaning, exhibition posters from the National Museum of China commonly adopt centralized and stabilized visual structures. Compositions are often organized along a central axis, emphasizing symmetry, balance, and visual order. Clear hierarchies are established between imagery and textual information—such as exhibition titles and institutional affiliations—resulting in a functional and legible layout.

In terms of color usage, deep reds, browns, dark golds, and bronze greens frequently dominate. Within the Chinese cultural context, these colors have long been associated with ritual, history, and state symbolism. Color thus functions not merely as an aesthetic choice, but as a cultural signifier, reinforcing the historical and national connotations of the artifacts depicted.

Overall, through centralized composition and stable chromatic order, exhibition posters from the National Museum of China visually communicate a national image characterized by continuity, unity, and institutional authority.

### **4.2. Visual-Semiotic Characteristics of Exhibition Posters at the National Museum of Korea**

In contrast to the Chinese samples, exhibition posters from the National Museum of Korea display markedly different approaches to visual sign construction. These differences extend beyond stylistic variation and reflect distinct semiotic logics and visual discourse strategies.

#### **4.2.1. Representational Meaning: From Artifact Representation to Cultural Symbol Reconfiguration**

At the level of representational meaning, exhibition posters from the National Museum of Korea exhibit a pronounced tendency toward symbolization and design-oriented abstraction. Although some posters draw inspiration from historical artifacts, the concrete forms of these objects are often simplified, abstracted, recomposed, or, in some cases, entirely absent.

In such posters, visual subjects more frequently take the form of patterns, motifs, totemic figures, abstract shapes, or symbolic imagery. These elements primarily function as symbolic signs, whose meanings are activated through cultural convention and design context rather than visual resemblance. Artifacts are no longer treated as evidentiary objects but are transformed into cultural resources open to reinterpretation and re-encoding.

This representational strategy indicates a visual emphasis on the contemporary articulation of cultural meaning rather than on the direct presentation of historical authenticity.

#### **4.2.2. Interactive Meaning: A High-Interactivity Visual Relationship of Invitation**

At the level of interactive meaning, Korean exhibition posters generally demonstrate a higher degree of visual dynamism and emotional engagement. Dynamic compositions, strong color contrasts, and movement-oriented forms are frequently employed to attract immediate viewer attention.

From the perspective of visual grammar, these posters more closely resemble “demand images”, actively inviting viewers to enter the cultural world constructed by the image. In this relationship, viewers are positioned as potential participants rather than passive recipients of information.

This high-interactivity visual discourse repositions the museum from a symbol of authoritative knowledge toward an open and dialogic cultural space, aligned with contemporary expectations for engagement and plurality.

#### **4.2.3. Interactive Meaning: A High-Interactivity Visual Relationship of Invitation**

At the compositional level, exhibition posters from the National Museum of Korea commonly adopt decentralized, asymmetrical, and open visual structures. Central axes are often de-emphasized, while images and text tend to carry more balanced visual weight. In some cases, typography itself is integrated as a primary visual element within the composition.

Regarding color, Korean samples retain references to traditional cultural palettes while more boldly incorporating high-saturation contrasts or minimalist schemes. Together, these compositional and chromatic strategies form a visual language characterized by openness, flexibility, and contemporary design sensibility.

Overall, through decentralized composition and symbolic abstraction, the National Museum of Korea visually conveys a national cultural image that is open to reinterpretation and continuously in the process of becoming, rather than fixed or finalized.

### ***4.3. A Comparative Analysis of Visual Construction Mechanisms in Exhibition Posters of Chinese and Korean National Museums***

Building on the preceding single-case analyses, clear and systematic differences can be identified in the visual-semiotic construction mechanisms employed by Chinese and Korean national museums. These differences do not reflect isolated design choices at the level of individual exhibitions, but rather reveal structural divergences in institutional roles and national narrative strategies embedded within museum visual practices.

#### **4.3.1. Differences in Visual Subjects and Semiotic Strategies**

Exhibition posters from the National Museum of China consistently position material artifacts as the primary visual subjects, employing a layered combination of iconic and symbolic signs. Through this strategy, historical authenticity and the legitimacy of national culture are foregrounded, with artifacts functioning simultaneously as visual representations and as symbolic anchors of official historical narratives.

In contrast, exhibition posters from the National Museum of Korea more frequently transform artifacts into symbolic resources, subject to abstraction, recomposition, or graphic reinterpretation. Rather than emphasizing direct historical reference, these posters prioritize the translatability and contemporaneity of cultural meaning, allowing historical materials to be re-coded within modern visual languages.

This divergence indicates a fundamental difference in semiotic orientation: while Chinese posters emphasize historical continuity and evidentiary authority, Korean posters foreground cultural flexibility and interpretive openness.

#### **4.3.2. Differences in Visual Interaction and Viewer Positioning**

In terms of visual interaction, Chinese exhibition posters predominantly adopt a low-interactivity, declarative visual discourse, positioning viewers as recipients of authoritative historical knowledge. This mode of address reinforces the stability and fixity of national historical narratives, minimizing ambiguity or participatory interpretation.

By contrast, Korean exhibition posters frequently employ high-interactivity visual strategies, characterized by dynamic composition, expressive color schemes, and visually engaging forms. These elements actively invite viewer participation, positioning audiences as interpretive agents rather than passive observers.

The contrast reflects differing approaches to public engagement: whereas Chinese posters privilege narrative stability and institutional authority, Korean posters emphasize dialogic interaction and cultural accessibility.

#### **4.3.3. Differences in Compositional Structure and National Image Expression**

At the compositional level, exhibition posters from the National Museum of China tend to favor centralized, symmetrical, and ordered visual structures, often accompanied by restrained,

historically resonant color palettes. Such compositional strategies correspond to a national image emphasizing continuity, coherence, and cultural unity.

In contrast, posters from the National Museum of Korea commonly adopt decentralized, open, and asymmetrical compositions, integrating typography and imagery in more fluid and experimental ways. Color schemes frequently display greater contrast or minimalism, contributing to a visual language that conveys creativity, plurality, and cultural dynamism.

Collectively, these compositional differences result in distinct visual articulations of national image: one oriented toward stability and historical continuity, the other toward openness and semantic multiplicity.

**Table 1.** This is a table. Tables should be placed in the main text near to the first time they are cited.

Analytical Aspect	National Museum of China	National Museum of Korea
Dominant Visual Mode	Object-centered realism	Graphic abstraction and symbolic composition
Use of Cultural Motifs	Emphasis on historical artifacts and ritual forms	Stylized reinterpretation of traditional motifs
Visual Narrative Orientation	Historical continuity and civilizational depth	Conceptual storytelling and cultural reinterpretation
Typography Strategy	Calligraphic and serif typefaces emphasizing authority	Experimental typography blending tradition and modernity
Color Scheme	Earth tones, gold, deep reds	High-contrast palettes with bold chromatic accents
Degree of Abstraction	Low to medium (representational clarity)	Medium to high (symbolic and metaphorical)
Viewer Positioning	Reverential and observational	Engaging and interpretive
Implied Cultural Identity	State-centered historical narrative	Pluralistic and design-driven cultural identity

The comparison reveals distinct visual strategies through which national museums articulate cultural authority and identity in East Asia.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Museum Visual Design as a Mechanism of National Image Construction

The findings of this study indicate that exhibition posters produced by national museums are not merely visual communication tools, but rather function as visual construction mechanisms deeply embedded within national systems of cultural governance. The comparative analysis of exhibition posters from Chinese and Korean national museums demonstrates that visual design does not simply “represent” the nation; instead, it actively participates in the production of national narratives at the intersection of institutional frameworks, cultural traditions, and design practices.

At the National Museum of China, the visual strategy centered on material artifacts situates national image construction upon foundations of historical authenticity and civilizational continuity. Artifacts are not only visually represented as historical objects, but also function symbolically as markers of national legitimacy and cultural authority. This artifact-centered visual construction renders the national image as stable, unified, and largely non-negotiable.

By contrast, the visual strategies adopted by the National Museum of Korea place greater emphasis on the contemporary articulation and design-based translation of cultural meaning. Through abstraction, stylization, and graphic reconfiguration of artifact-related symbols, Korean exhibition posters visually downplay the authoritative status of historical evidence and foreground the openness and interpretability of cultural symbols. In this context, national image is no longer anchored solely in historical depth, but is continuously reactivated through contemporary design languages.

From the perspective of national image studies, these two visual construction paths correspond to distinct modes of national cultural narration. While the Chinese case emphasizes

historical continuity and cultural orthodoxy, the Korean case highlights cultural creativity and contemporaneity. This comparison suggests that national image is not constructed through a single, universal model, but rather emerges through diverse visual strategies shaped by specific cultural institutions and design practices.

### ***5.2. Visual Grammar and the Differentiated Expression of Museum Cultural Discourse***

By introducing visual grammar theory, this study further reveals differences in the discursive functions of national museum visual design. Exhibition posters from the National Museum of China predominantly employ low-interactivity visual structures, positioning viewers primarily in roles of observation and reception. Such visual discourse reinforces the museum's role as an authoritative cultural institution, presenting historical narratives as top-down statements.

This visual discourse is not an accidental outcome of design preference, but closely aligns with the institutional role of national museums within the broader cultural system. Through centralized compositions, stable chromatic order, and limited interactive cues, visual design subtly reproduces an authoritative mode of cultural communication, in which national history is presented as objective, fixed, and indisputable knowledge.

In contrast, the high-interactivity visual grammar observed in exhibition posters from the National Museum of Korea reshapes the relationship between museums and the public. Through decentralized compositions, dynamic visual elements, and strong design interventions, these posters construct an invitation-based visual discourse, positioning viewers as participants in the generation of cultural meaning rather than passive recipients.

These differences indicate that visual grammar operates not merely as a formal structure, but as a strategic mode of cultural discourse. Through different configurations of visual grammar, national museums articulate varying understandings of cultural authority, public engagement, and modes of national narration.

### ***5.3. Implications for Museum Visual Research from a Design Studies Perspective***

From the perspective of design studies, the findings of this research further demonstrate that museum visual design should not be regarded as a subsidiary or technical component of curatorial practice or cultural communication. Instead, it constitutes an independent research object with significant cultural implications. By integrating semiotic analysis with visual grammar, design studies can meaningfully engage with core issues in museum studies and national image research.

First, this study highlights the mediating role of design within national museums. Design functions as a bridge between history and the present, as well as between institutional authority and public experience. In the case of the National Museum of China, design primarily serves to reinforce established national narratives; in contrast, at the National Museum of Korea, design is mobilized as a tool for reinterpreting cultural symbols and activating contemporary meanings.

Second, the findings suggest that design research in museum contexts should move beyond stylistic analysis toward a systematic examination of visual structures, semiotic logic, and cultural discourse. Only at this level can design studies enter into substantive dialogue with cultural studies and museum studies.

### ***5.4. Research Limitations and Directions for Further Discussion***

Despite revealing significant differences in visual construction mechanisms through a comparative analysis of Chinese and Korean national museums, this study has several limitations. First, the analysis focuses on exhibition posters as a specific visual medium and does not encompass other visual forms such as exhibition spatial design or digital interfaces. Second, the study adopts a design- and semiotics-oriented perspective and does not incorporate empirical data on audience interpretation or reception.

Future research may build upon this study by integrating audience interviews, visitor surveys, textual analysis of public responses, or digital media research methods. Such approaches would enable a more comprehensive understanding of how museum visual design influences public interpretation and cultural identification.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1. Summary of Findings

This study examines exhibition posters from the National Museum of China and the National Museum of Korea as its primary research objects. By adopting a qualitative research approach that integrates semiotic analysis with visual grammar theory, the study systematically compares the mechanisms through which national image is constructed in the visual design practices of national-level museums in the two countries. The findings demonstrate that visual design in national museums plays an active and constructive role in shaping national cultural narratives.

The analysis reveals that the National Museum of China employs an artifact-centered visual strategy that emphasizes historical authenticity, cultural continuity, and national legitimacy. Its visual grammar is characterized by low interactivity and a declarative, authoritative mode of address. In contrast, the National Museum of Korea adopts more symbolized and design-oriented visual expressions that foreground the contemporaneity and openness of cultural meaning, resulting in a visual grammar that is more interactive and participatory.

These differences are not limited to stylistic preferences in design. Rather, they reflect deeper divergences in national cultural governance philosophies, institutional role definitions of museums, and broader pathways of national image construction in the two countries.

### 6.2. Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

At the theoretical level, this study bridges research on national image with studies of museum visual design, thereby extending the interdisciplinary dialogue between museum studies and design studies. By introducing an analytical framework that combines semiotics and visual grammar, the study offers a replicable methodological approach for examining meaning construction in museum visual design.

At the practical level, the findings provide insights for national museums seeking to balance historical authority with contemporary modes of expression in visual design. For museums that prioritize historical orthodoxy, visual design may further explore ways to enhance public engagement while maintaining institutional authority. Conversely, for museums that emphasize cultural creativity, sustaining cultural depth and historical continuity alongside design innovation remains an important consideration.

### 6.3. Directions for Future Research

Future research may extend this study in several directions. First, the scope of analysis may be expanded to include emerging visual media such as digital museum interfaces and visual communication on social media platforms. Second, multi-method research designs combining visual analysis with audience studies could be employed to examine how different visual construction strategies are interpreted and received by the public. Third, comparative frameworks may be broadened to include additional countries and cultural contexts, thereby deepening cross-cultural understanding of visual construction mechanisms in national museums.

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