



## Souvenirs as Cultural Symbols: A Case Study of Panda Symbolism and the Chinese Knot from China

Dian Sari Unga Waru<sup>1✉</sup>, Nirdayanti Mustarih<sup>2</sup>, Andi Faisal<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universitas Hasanuddin, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup> Universitas Hasanuddin, Indonesia

### Keywords

*Souvenir, Cultural Symbol, Semiotics, Panda, Chinese Knot*

### Abstract

This study explores the role of souvenirs as cultural symbols, focusing on two iconic representations from China: the panda and the *Chinese knot*. In the context of global tourism, souvenirs serve not only as mementos but also as representations of a nation's identity and cultural values. The study applies Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory to analyze two iconic Chinese souvenirs: the panda and the Chinese knot. Using qualitative textual analysis, it explores how these symbols function within the triadic semiotic framework—representamen (the physical form), object (the cultural meaning), and interpretant (the perceived interpretation). The key findings highlight that the panda, as a national symbol, not only embodies China's identity and commitment to conservation but also serves as a tool of cultural diplomacy, promoting a peaceful image globally. Meanwhile, the Chinese knot reflects Confucian values such as harmony, good fortune, and eternity, while also showcasing the aesthetic and philosophical aspects of traditional Chinese craftsmanship. This study demonstrates that souvenirs act as powerful media of cultural communication and play a role in shaping global perceptions and strengthening a nation's identity. Therefore, souvenirs should be studied not only from economic and tourism perspectives but also through cultural and semiotic lenses.

✉ Corresponding Author:  
E-mail: [diansariungawaru@unhas.ac.id](mailto:diansariungawaru@unhas.ac.id)

## INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization and high mobility, tourism activities are no longer merely understood as a form of recreation, but also as a process of interaction and cultural exchange between tourists and local communities. One real form of this interaction is the habit of bringing home souvenirs or mementos from the places visited. More than just souvenirs, souvenirs play an important role as cultural symbols—they represent the identity, values, and image of a nation in a concise, simple, and easily recognizable form. Behind their small physical form, souvenirs hold complex cultural narratives, connecting the personal experiences of tourists with a system of signs that reflect the collective identity of a country.

Souvenirs literally mean “keepsake or mementos.” However, in the context of culture and travel, souvenirs function as markers of identity and symbols of the country or place visited. Souvenirs are a way for a country to introduce itself to the world in the most concise yet meaningful form. They carry stories, values, and cultural identities that can be remembered even after the trip is over. In every key chain, refrigerator magnet, or handicraft, there is a small piece of a nation hidden. When we buy or receive souvenirs from a country, we don’t just get objects; we are holding cultural symbols that represent the history, values, and image of the nation.

This phenomenon is clearly seen in the habits of tourists who choose souvenirs that are visually directly associated with their country of origin. For example, souvenirs with panda pictures or Chinese knots will automatically be associated with China. Pandas are not only known as endemic animals of China, but also as national symbols used in cultural diplomacy. Meanwhile, Chinese knots are traditional crafts that are rich in philosophy and symbolic meaning in Chinese culture. Both not only represent physical elements of Chinese culture, but also convey cultural values such as harmony, luck, eternity, and peace.

However, in academic studies, the role of souvenirs as cultural symbols is still often ignored or discussed more from an economic and tourism perspective. Very little research examines souvenirs as part of a sign system in cultural communication. Therefore, this paper aims to examine how souvenirs can function as cultural symbols of a country using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach. The main focus of this study is two questions: (1) How do souvenirs function as cultural symbols of a country? and (2) How do souvenirs such as pandas and Chinese knots represent Chinese culture within the framework of Peirce's semiotic theory?

By answering these two questions, this paper attempts to show that souvenirs have an important role in strengthening a nation's cultural identity in the eyes of the world, as well as functioning as an effective medium of cross-cultural symbolic communication.

In the context of souvenirs as Cultural Representation, according to Swanson and Timothy (2012), souvenirs not only function as mementos of a trip, but are also narrative media that represent the

cultural identity of a region. Souvenirs carry symbolic values that are constructed visually and culturally, and are often used as indirect cultural diplomacy tools. Types of souvenirs that often appear include replicas of famous buildings, national animals, traditional crafts, traditional clothing, or visual motifs related to local history and mythology. All of these forms contain internationally recognizable cultural iconography, albeit in a simplified form.

This study uses Charles Sanders Peirce's Semiotic Theory, where Peirce divides signs into three main elements:

1. Representamen: the physical form of the sign, namely what is seen or experienced directly (for example: a panda-shaped key chain).
2. Object: what the sign refers to, namely the cultural meaning or identity represented (for example: the national symbol of China).
3. Interpretant: the result of understanding or meaning formed in the mind of the recipient of the sign (for example: the perception of China as a country with a unique culture and deep spirituality).

This structure allows us to analyze souvenirs as a sign system that not only represents physical objects, but also conveys complex cultural values and identities.

## METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a library research method. The purpose of this approach is to understand in depth how souvenirs function as cultural symbols through an analysis of the symbolic meanings contained therein, especially in the context of Chinese culture. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore contextual and interpretive meanings, which cannot be measured quantitatively.

The data sources in this study consist of secondary literature, such as academic books, scientific journal articles, research reports, and trusted online sources that are relevant to the topics of cultural symbolism, semiotics, and Chinese culture. Data were collected through an in-depth literature review of works that discuss souvenirs, Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics, and cultural symbols such as pandas and Chinese knots. The literature used was selected based on its relevance and academic credibility.

Data analysis was carried out by applying Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic semiotic theory, which consists of three main components: representamen (physical form or visual sign), object (meaning or concept referred to), and interpretant (meaning or understanding formed in the mind of the sign recipient). The two main objects of study, namely panda and Chinese knot, are analyzed based on the three elements to see how the process of forming cultural meaning takes place through souvenirs.

This research is interpretive and aims to provide a conceptual understanding of the role of souvenirs in cross-country cultural communication. Data validity is strengthened through source triangulation, namely by comparing and confirming information from various different literatures to ensure the consistency and accuracy of the information used in the analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although the panda and the Chinese knot both serve as symbols of Chinese culture, they have different characteristics and ways of conveying cultural meaning.

As cultural symbols, pandas and Chinese knots represent two different sides of Chinese identity. Pandas serve as a powerful national symbol, often used in diplomatic and international relations contexts. Their presence in foreign zoos through panda diplomacy is a concrete form of the use of this animal symbol as a soft power tool. Pandas present the image of China as a peaceful, friendly country committed to nature conservation. Meanwhile, the Chinese knot plays a greater role as a symbol that reflects the depth of the spiritual values and philosophy of life of the Chinese people. Unlike the panda, which is more easily interpreted universally, the Chinese knot contains a more complex symbolic meaning: it symbolizes harmony, good luck, and eternity. The knots that are connected without breaking become a visual metaphor for the continuity of life and close social relations. In this case, the Chinese knot not only shows cultural identity, but also moral values and philosophies that are passed down from generation to generation. Thus, although both serve as cultural symbols, the panda is more oriented towards aspects of nationalism and diplomacy, while the Chinese knot is rooted in spiritual values and local traditions.

Visually, the panda has an immediate and universal appeal. Its round body shape, contrasting black and white colors, and gentle facial expressions make it easily recognizable and loved by a wide range of people. In souvenir form, panda representations are often made cute and friendly—an effective visual strategy in conveying a positive impression of China to the world. The aesthetics of the panda need no in-depth explanation; its beauty lies in its visual simplicity and strong emotional appeal. In contrast, the Chinese knot appears in the form of a richly detailed handicraft. Its designs are symmetrical and intricate, often made with red or gold rope—two colors that are fraught with meaning in Chinese culture. Red symbolizes good luck and happiness, while gold symbolizes prosperity and glory. The aesthetics of the Chinese knot lie not only in its final form, but also in the process of making it, which requires precision, skill, and patience. Each woven knot reflects the beauty of order and a structured philosophy of life. Thus, the panda stands out for its simplicity and emotional appeal, while the Chinese knot stands out for its complexity, color symbolism, and aesthetic depth.

The panda as a cultural symbol has relatively modern roots, especially since the 20th century when China began to use it as a diplomatic tool. Its popularity increased globally along with the increasing awareness of animal conservation and the role of pandas in international cooperation. Pandas were

then associated not only as rare animals, but also as symbols of peace and goodwill from the Chinese government to other countries. In this context, pandas reflect the contemporary side of China's national identity which seeks to appear friendly on the international stage.

In contrast, the Chinese knot has very long historical roots. This craft has existed since the Tang Dynasty and flourished during the Song and Ming Dynasties. It is not only used as decoration, but also as a symbol of good luck in rituals, weddings, and traditional celebrations such as Chinese New Year. The values inherent in the Chinese knot are closely related to Confucian teachings, which emphasize the importance of social harmony, family, and balance in life. In the context of history and culture, the Chinese knot is a cultural heritage that reflects the continuity of tradition and the depth of Chinese philosophy.

Therefore, in terms of cultural and historical background, the panda reflects the modern, political, and diplomatic aspects, while the Chinese knot reflects the traditional, spiritual, and philosophical aspects of Chinese culture.

Souvenirs are not just physical objects brought home from a place, but also a means of cultural communication that conveys symbolic messages. In the context of Chinese culture, pandas and Chinese knots are two representative examples that contain deep symbolism and have become part of cultural diplomacy and global perceptions of China. Using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, this section will detail how these two souvenirs function as cultural signs through three main elements: representamen, object, and interpretant.

#### a. Panda as a National Representative of China

##### 1. Representation

Panda, in the form of souvenirs such as dolls, key chains, refrigerator magnets, or other knick-knacks, becomes a highly recognizable visual form (representation). This representation tends to be visually simplified with an emphasis on the panda's distinctive features such as black and white fur, large eyes, and gentle and friendly expression. This visualization not only makes it aesthetically appealing, but also strengthens the collective memory of the world community towards this icon.

##### 2. Object

Panda not only functions as a symbol of China's national fauna, but also contains several cultural and political meanings. As an animal that is only found naturally in China, pandas symbolize geographical exclusivity, natural uniqueness, and national identity. Furthermore, in the practice of international diplomacy known as panda diplomacy, the Chinese government actively sends pandas to other countries as a symbol of friendship and bilateral relations. In this case, pandas represent China's image as a peaceful, friendly, and environmentally conscious country (Liu, 2016).

### 3. Interpretant

For tourists and the international community, panda-shaped souvenirs give rise to an almost automatic interpretation: China. Moreover, the meaning formed can include the impression that China is a country that has rich fauna, is gentle, and has a unique diplomatic approach. Pandas not only remind us of China as a geographical place, but also shape the perception of the nation's character: peaceful, wise, and highly valued in preserving natural heritage.

The symbolic power of pandas lies in the consistency of the narrative built by their country of origin. By presenting pandas in various international arenas—both in physical form and as pop culture icons—the Chinese government has succeeded in forming a global collective understanding of the meaning of pandas. In this case, souvenirs become a kind of narrative medium that conveys ideological and diplomatic messages in a subtle but effective manner.

#### b. Chinese Knot: Philosophical Symbol, Aesthetics, and Tradition

##### 1. Representation

Chinese knot or traditional Chinese knot is a handicraft that has a distinctive visual characteristic: ropes tied symmetrically to form intricate and beautiful patterns, often in red or gold. This representation not only reflects the craftsmanship of the craft, but also the Chinese aesthetic that upholds balance and symmetrical beauty. The color red symbolizes good luck and happiness, while the color gold is associated with wealth and prosperity.

##### 2. Object

The cultural meaning referred to by the Chinese knot includes spiritual and philosophical values rooted in Confucian teachings and ancient Chinese traditions. The unbroken knot symbolizes eternity, the continuity of life, and the unity of relationships between individuals, especially in the context of family and society. In addition, this knot is often used in major celebrations such as Chinese New Year and weddings as a symbol of hope for eternal happiness and good fortune.

##### 3. Interpretant

For recipients or outside observers, the Chinese knot can be interpreted as a symbol of Eastern exoticism, spirituality, and traditions that are full of meaning. This interpretation can be universal—such as the values of harmony and happiness—but also specific to Chinese culture as a nation that values social order, aesthetics, and historical continuity. In a global context, Chinese knots reinforce China's image as a country with a deep, meaningful, and philosophical cultural heritage.

The meaning conveyed by Chinese knots is not only limited to the visual, but also to the process of making them, which requires precision, patience, and hereditary techniques. In this case, souvenirs

become more than just passive objects, but living evidence of the continuity of cultural values that are maintained and passed down across generations.

Both the panda and the Chinese knot demonstrate that souvenirs can be effective cultural communication tools. The panda conveys a narrative of nationalism and soft power diplomacy, while the Chinese knot emphasizes deep spiritual and aesthetic values. Both are not just passive objects, but active media that shape cross-cultural perceptions of China.

Through Peirce's semiotic framework, it can be concluded that souvenirs function as cultural shorthand—a concise yet powerful way to convey a nation's identity, values, and image to the world. This study shows how the symbolic power of a small object can play a big role in the process of global cultural communication.

The phenomenon of souvenirs as cultural representations does not only occur in China. Almost every country has its own typical souvenirs that directly reflect their national identity and cultural values:

- Miniature Eiffel Tower (France): representing romance, art, and iconic architecture.
- Balinese Mask (Indonesia): reflecting spirituality, religious rituals, and performing arts.
- Traditional Japanese Fan: a symbol of politeness, aesthetics, and graceful Japanese tradition.

In each of these examples, the sign structure proposed by Peirce still applies. The representamen is the physical form of the souvenir, the object is the cultural values and identities referred to, and the interpretant is the understanding that arises in the mind of the recipient of the souvenir. These three elements form a sign system that facilitates the delivery of cultural messages in a concise but meaningful.

## CONCLUSION

Souvenirs are not just souvenirs or gifts, but also cultural representation tools that store the narrative of a nation's identity. Through Peirce's semiotic theory, we can understand that souvenirs consist of a sign structure that forms communication between the sender's and recipient's cultures. A study of panda and Chinese knot souvenirs from China shows that small objects can carry great meaning—either as national symbols, spiritual symbols, or aesthetic symbols. Thus, souvenirs can be studied not only from the tourism and economic perspectives, but also from the cultural and semiotic dimensions, because they play a role in forming cross-cultural perceptions and strengthening the global identity of a nation. This proves that souvenirs function not only as merchandise, but also as cross-cultural symbolic communication.

## REFERENCES

Chandler, D. (2017). *Semiotics: The Basics* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

- Liu, H. (2016). *Panda Diplomacy: The Cutest Way to a Foreign Policy*. China Policy Journal, 4(2), 45–57.
- Peirce, C. S., dalam Sebeok, T. A. (2001). *Theories of Signs*. University of Toronto Press.
- Swanson, K. K., & Timothy, D. J. (2012). *Souvenirs: Icons of Meaning, Commercialization and Commodification*. Tourism Management, 33(3), 489–499.
- Wang, Y. (2012). *The Art and Culture of Chinese Knotting*. Beijing: Foreign Language Press.
- Yang, L. (2009). *Symbols of Chinese Culture*. China Intercontinental Press.