

Chinese Peony Culture: Symbolic Interaction and Identity Construction in the Context of Chinese National Community

¹Chen Yuxiao, and ^{2*}Metta Sirisuk

**Corresponding Author*

Faculty of Fine-Applied Arts and Cultural Science, Mahasarakham University, Thailand

E-mail: ¹18625990723@163.com, ^{2*}msirisuk159@hotmail.com

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Abstract

The peony is China's national flower, called the "King of Flowers" by the Chinese for its large size, beautiful shape, rich color, and refreshing fragrance. It has become a symbol of national prosperity, people's wealth, and good fortune and is a typical representative of Chinese cultural symbols. The objectives of this study were: 1) to summarize the symbolic components of Chinese peony culture; 2) to analyze the components of Chinese peony cultural imagery; and 3) to study the development and integration process of Chinese peony cultural imagery. This study used qualitative research methods to collect information about peony cultural symbols, connotations, and identity through literature and fieldwork. The research results were found as follows: 1) Chinese peony cultural symbols are diverse, complex, and dynamic; 2) peony cultural symbols are interpreted differently within the cultural community; and 3) peony cultural symbols interact to produce everyday interpretive items through a process of difference, recognition, and acceptance. From the process of transforming the symbolic imagery of peony culture, Exploring the typical process of constructing the symbolic identity of the Chinese national community.

Keywords: Chinese peony culture; symbolic interaction; cultural identity; Chinese national community

Introduction

As Liang Qichao noted in his *Observations on the Chinese Nation in History* (1905), the Chinese nation was not a nation from the beginning, but a mixture of many nationalities. The idea of the “Chinese Nation” at this time examined how the state and nation were established from the standpoint of historical development. At the Central Ethnic Work Conference in 2014, General Secretary Xi Jinping introduced the “Chinese National Community” idea. Drawing on the nation–state theory, he argued that as our nation develops historically, all ethnic groups should come to share common values, a common material foundation, a common identity, and a shared spiritual home. The word “Chinese nation” now has a new connotation because of the phrase “common.” Chinese cultural symbols are people’s distinctive spiritual marks and identification symbols. They represent the highly condensed and historically formed Chinese exceptional cultural character (Feng, 2023). At the National Commendation Conference for Progress in National Unity in 2019, General Secretary Xi Jinping made the following proposal: Promote the inheritance and protection of the cultures of all ethnic groups as well as innovation and intermingling of the cultures of all ethnic groups, establish and highlight the symbols of Chinese culture and the image of the Chinese nation that is shared by all ethnic groups, and enhance the identity of the Chinese culture among the people of all ethnic groups (Xi, 2019). The creation of Chinese cultural symbols and images of the Chinese country that all ethnic groups share is an attempt by the state to foster cultural identification and the development of the Chinese national community.

Cultivated for over 1600 years, the peony is a decorative plant and bloom renowned as the “King of Flowers” and “National beauty and heavenly fragrance” in China. Peonies have been continuously incorporated into people’s thoughts, feelings, and cultures for thousands of years through the customs of cultivating, appreciating, tasting, singing about, and painting peonies among the people of the Chinese nation. This has resulted in a peony–related cultural phenomenon and a peony–centered cultural system, or Chinese peony culture (Zhang, 2007).

Over thousands of years, people have not consistently interpreted peony cultural symbols within different communities. However, in the process of mutual influence and development, the interpretation of peony cultural symbols gradually moved towards an ordinary meaning, and the peony was endowed with the symbolism of loyalty, bravery, atmosphere, wealth, good fortune, happy life, and good love (Cheng et al., 2014). The process of transforming the symbolic imagery of peony culture is also the process of mutual influence and eventual homogenization of the cultures of various ethnic groups of the Chinese nation

Research Objectives

1. To study the symbolic components of Chinese peony culture.
2. To study the expressions of peony cultural imagery within different cultural communities under symbolic interaction.
3. To study the development and integration of peony cultural imagery within the Chinese national community under the dimension of cultural identity.

Literature review

1. Research on the Chinese National Community

The Chinese National Community is currently a hot concern for all sectors of Chinese society. The researchers Qing Jue and Xu Xinchun provided an overview of the fundamental components of the Chinese national community and conducted a significant investigation into the field's early research (Qing & Xu, 2018). According to Wang Yue and Qin Zhaoxiang, Chinese cultural symbols are a form of culture with national will and should be involved in the process of constructing a sense of community in the Chinese nation (Wang & Qin, 2021). The relevant literature was reviewed, and it was determined that the Chinese national community's perspective was introduced using the theoretical research tools of symbolic interaction and cultural identity. This contribution to the study of peony culture was theoretically and practically valuable, and it had a significant impact on the development of high-quality Chinese cultural symbols, the expansion of the theories of symbolic interaction and cultural identity into new fields, and the investigation.

2. Research on Chinese Peony Culture

Flower culture is an integral part of traditional Chinese culture. Studying flower and plant culture has recently become a hot research topic. China has established such relevant societies and associations as the Ethnobotanical Society and the Chinese Flower Culture Research Society and has organized such academic forums as the International Symposium on Chinese Flower Culture and the Forest Culture Symposium, which have extensively promoted the research and development of Chinese flower culture.

Some researchers have compiled the natural characteristics of peonies, such as their growing habit and variety cultivation, in their studies on peony culture. For instance, Fan Lulin and Sa Rina looked at peonies' origins, evolution, and classification from a biological and historical

perspective (Fan & Sa, 2012). Some scholars have studied peony literature, famous paintings, and operas, covering various topics. For example, Wei Wei explained peony cultivation, peony appreciation history, peony literature, and peony art in Chinese history (Wei, 2009). From the comprehensive view of many books and literature, the current research on peony culture not only involves drilling and exploring the natural attributes and scientific and technological cultivation of peonies but also pondering and summarizing the history, culture, and economic value of peonies and their development has been characterized by diversification, multiple perspectives, and connection.

3. Research on symbolic interaction theory in national culture

Symbolic interactionism, developed by American sociologist Mead and formalized by his pupil Brummer in 1937, is concerned with human interaction. Symbolic interaction theory has proven valuable in various domains, including psychological counseling, school instruction, media communication, and interpersonal communication. Up to now, there is a limited amount of literature exploring issues related to national cultural symbols based on symbolic interactionism. American sociologist Blumer has articulated the role and significance of symbolic interactionism from historical, religious, and philosophical perspectives (Blumer, 1986). Zhang Ji and Xu Honggang studied the interpretation of Chinese cultural symbols' meanings in the process of interaction between the subject and the guest from a micro perspective (Zhang & Xu, 2019).

4. Research on Ethnic Cultural Symbolic Identity

According to McCowan, C. J and Alston, R. J, ethnocultural identity is the degree to which an individual accepts and participates in the cultural identity of the group, and the greater the acceptance and participation in the group culture, the stronger the individual's sense of identity (McCowan & Alston, 1998). According to Zhan Xiaomei, national cultural identity is the process by which members of a nation recognize, acknowledge, and agree with their own culture, which leads to a sense of belonging and then to the acquisition of national cultural self-consciousness (Zhan, 2013). Hao Shiyuan studied the role of traditional ethnic culture in enhancing the cultural identity of the Chinese nation (Hao, 2020).

From anthropology, culture, and folklore viewpoints, those above domestic and international studies have examined the form, function, and relationship with the national identity of national cultural symbols. These investigations have significant theoretical and practical implications. Based on previous studies, this paper intends to innovatively explore the mechanism

of forming the shared historical memory, ordinary psychological consciousness, and expected behavior of the nation from the symbols of Chinese peony culture.

Conceptual Framework

This paper uses qualitative research methods, collecting data through fieldwork and reviewing the literature, then categorizing and organizing the collected data under the concepts of “symbolic interaction” and “cultural identity,” and finally carrying out descriptive analysis to form a text (Fig.1).

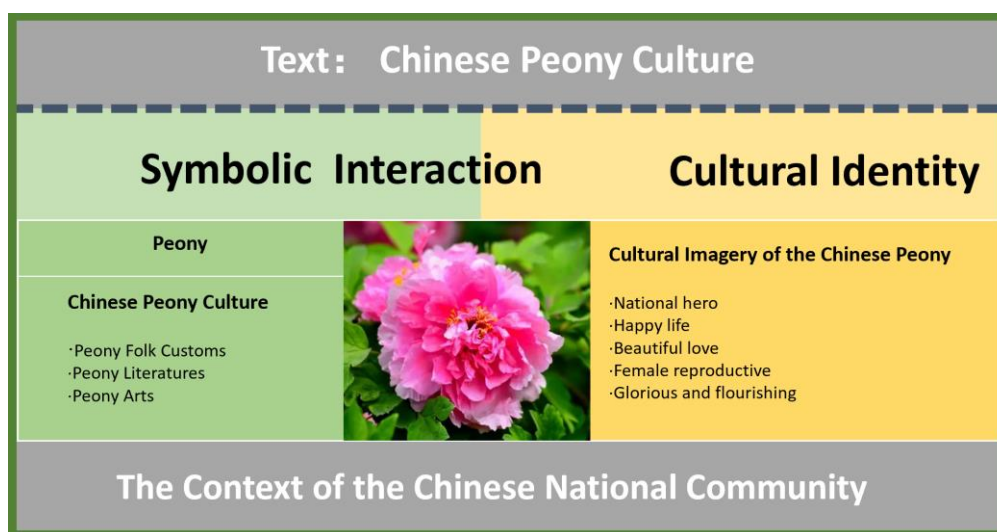


Fig.1 Conceptual Framework (source: Created by researchers, 2023)

Research Methodology

1. Literature research method

Collect government documents, academic writings, and dissertation materials related to Chinese peony culture, symbolic interaction, and cultural identity theory, and organize and analyze the research materials.

2. Participatory observation method

Participatory observation method. Go to Luoyang, Henan Province, and Heze, Shandong Province, the capital of peony in China, for investigation and research, and went to different geographic spaces, including the Chinese Peony Museum, Luoyang Folk Museum, and Heze Peony Culture and Historical Materials Museum, etc., to obtain a large amount of first-hand information.

3. General interview method

Through exchanging and communicating with peony culture research scholars, peony literature and art workers, peony farmers, and other groups, we can understand the relevant knowledge of peony culture from multiple angles and aspects.

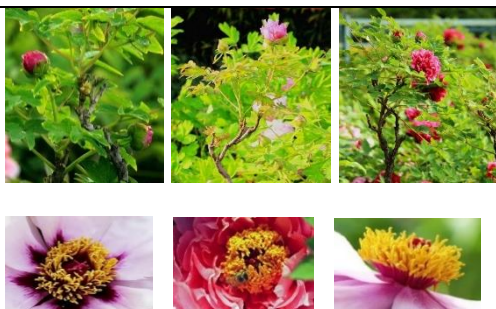
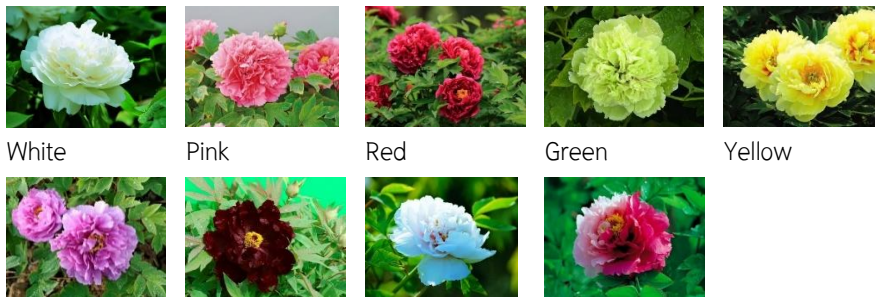

Research Results

Objective 1. Symbolic Components of Chinese Peony Culture

1.1 Peony Folk Custom Symbols

Peony-viewing practices are at the heart of Chinese peony folk customs. Meanwhile, the peony-viewing custom is the core of Chinese peony culture, and people's emotions accompany all other forms of peony culture after viewing peonies. Chinese people greatly admire peonies, appreciating their beauty from all aspects, including looking at branches and leaves, observing color and shape, and inhaling scent (Table 1). Peony Viewing Fairs are held annually in Luoyang, Heze, Beijing, Taiyuan, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Tongling, Tujia ethnic group of Hubei Enshi, Bai ethnic group of Yunnan Dali, which provide peony viewing sites for the people. It can be seen that Chinese people love peonies and peony-viewing customs are found all over the country.

Table 1 Peony Viewing Customs of the Chinese (source: Created and Photographed by researchers, 2023)

View Peony Leaves and Stamens	<p>Peony leaves, layered and sparsely interspersed, are an artistic combination.</p> <p>Peony stamens as if the gold set stationed, the gift of flowers rising into the air, a thousand variations.</p>	
View Peony Colors	<p>White Pink Red Green Yellow</p> <p>Purple Black Blue Compound</p>	
View Peony Patterns	<p>The peony has nine colors, which are brilliant and rich.</p>	
Smell Peony Fragrance	<p>According to the petal level of peony, peony flower type is divided into three major categories: single petal type, with 5–15 petals; semi-heavy petal type, with 20–100 petals; and heavy petal type, with more than 100 petals.</p> <p>The peony features enormous, attractive blossoms and a gentle, refreshing aroma. The Chinese call the peony “Heavenly Fragrance,” “Wild Fragrance,” “National Fragrance,” and “The First Fragrance.”</p>	

1. 2 Peony Literary Symbols

Much literature on peonies has been passed down through the ages in China, demonstrating that reciting poems and appreciating flowers was an everyday pastime a thousand years ago. These myths and legends, folk tales, poems, and songs about peonies, with diverse contents and a wide range of subjects, have a universal mass base in Chinese folklore, expressing

people's pursuit of and yearning for truth, goodness, and beauty, and attacking and accusing falsehood, evil and ugliness. Contemporary Chinese people organize peony poetry sessions every year when peonies are in bloom to tell stories and spread the qualities of peonies (Fig.2). The poems' themes are typically centered around the noble peony, which is said to encourage lovely traits like honoring one's parents, overcoming adversity, loving one's hometown, conserving the environment, being grounded, punishing evil, and advancing good, husband and wife trust and love.









Fig.2 Peony Poetry Sessions Organized Across China to Spread Peony Culture

(Source: Luoyang Daily News, 2023)

1.3 Peony Art Symbols

The peony, with its enormous blossoms, vibrant color, and invigorating scent, has evolved into a functional and aesthetically pleasing object for humans. This artistic endeavor has given rise to vibrant and unique peony art, the most exquisite aspect of peony culture. Chinese people enjoy using peonies as a subject for their artwork. As a result, they have produced many paintings, calligraphy, sculptures, photos, audiovisuals, and other artwork featuring peonies that capture the “National beauty and heavenly fragrance” of the peony and convey their love for it (Table 2).

Table 2 Chinese Peony Ceramics, Painting, and Sculpture (source: Created and Photographed by researchers, 2023)

	Traditional Peony Arts	Modern Peony Arts
Peony Ceramics Art		
Peony Painting Art		
Peony Carving Art		
	<p>One of the most popular decorative themes in Chinese porcelain is the peony. Peonies are often carved into ceramics and other everyday items as a way to adorn and beautify them as well as to convey positive intentions.</p> <p>Chinese paintings frequently feature peonies. Peonies symbolize wealth and good fortune and have a distinct biological beauty that cultivates people's spirituality and aesthetic senses.</p> <p>The peony, a flower of prosperity and good fortune is frequently incorporated into architectural sculptures and used to adorn historic structures.</p>	

Objective 2 . Peony cultural imagery within different cultural communities under the dimension of symbolic interaction

2.1 Peony as happy life image

Peony's brilliant and festive colors. Chinese people view peonies, primarily brightly colored in shades of red, purple, and yellow, as symbols of luck and happiness. This belief is connected to traditional Chinese thought patterns around color preferences. The Chinese use bright colors to decorate feasts, red is always present during significant life events. In China, children and

adults alike observe certain customs and traditions. For instance, newborns are wrapped in red ropes, friends and family celebrate the child's first month of life with red eggs, children grow up receiving a red packet of New Year's money every year during the Spring Festival, adults are required to wear red wedding clothes on their wedding day, and the dying are required to hang red lanterns and cloths, a practice known as “joyful mourning” (Lei, 2008). Therefore, red, or a range of gaudy colors with red as the dominant hue, is a pleasing color in Chinese folk culture.

The natural properties of peony longevity. Peonies generally have a life cycle of 30–50 years, and the longest-lived peony in China is currently 210 years old, commonly known as the “longevity flower” in Chinese folklore. People desire a long and healthy life for themselves and their family members because they are afraid of dying. Given that peonies have hundreds of years of life cycle, people will regard them considerably and develop an appreciation for the “longevity flower” in place of their previous affection for peonies. During my fieldwork, I discovered that several ethnic groups in China's central plains traditionally granted “peony locks” to newborns (Fig.3). In reality, these are “long-life locks.”



Fig.3 “Peony Lock,” symbolizing peace and longevity

(Source: Photographed by researchers, 2023)

Influence of Buddhist Culture in the Tang Dynasty. Because white peonies are so elegant, they were planted in monasteries during the Tang Dynasty (618 AD–907 AD). Peony motifs were also incorporated into Buddhism and employed as mural paintings and architectural carvings to adorn the monasteries. The peony can enter Buddhism, never because of its rich and noble imagery but has the same auspicious imagery as the lotus flower in Buddhism. Buddhism does not pursue riches, and because its goal is to disseminate good vibrations and relieve suffering, the adoption of Buddhism makes the peony's pleasant and auspicious imagery even more meaningful.

2.2 Peony as beautiful love image

The peony has historically been associated with love imagery due to its enormous blossoms and exquisite hues. It enables young people in love to convey the beautiful emotions they are experiencing more effectively. Red peonies symbolize the fiery passion in young people's hearts, while white peonies stand for the purest love. This is very much in keeping with the Chinese custom of using straightforward, uncomplicated language to convey love. "Love flower" is the nickname the locals gave in the peony-growing regions of central and northwest China.

The peony is said to be China's "love flower" in historical accounts. The Shangsi Festival, which fell on the third day of the third month in ancient China, celebrated love. During the festival, young men and women would give peonies to express their love and admiration, according to the Book of *Poetry*, the first collection of Chinese poetry.

In some ethnic minority areas in northwestern China, there is a custom of singing "Hua'er." The term "peony" appears frequently in the lyrics of "Hua'er," which may be explained by looking at the following passage: The good sister is the peony in the garden, you are long, and your roots are rooted in my brother's heart. The Northwest Minority people used peonies to express love between the sexes (Pu et al., 2023).

2.3 Peony as National Heroes Imagery

When natural or artificial disasters strike, people in China have a spiritual orientation that expects heroes to save the day. The peony has thus been elevated from its status as an ordinary ornamental flower to that of a brave, devoted, and loyal folk hero and a protector of the people in a significant number of literary works by the peony's natural growth habit of "giving up one's life without giving up one's flower" and the heroic culture that has existed in China since ancient times.

Folklore refers to the natural growing pattern of peonies as sacrificing one's life for the flowers. To ensure that the final peony blossom may bloom, all nutrients will be transported to the flowers first if the roots of a peony tree are nearing death due to nutrient depletion. The peony would sooner give up its life to provide beautiful flowers for people to enjoy. This is the meaning of flowers' existence (Lyu & Zhang, 2022). Peonies' growth habits have been "personified" by those who adore them, and it is thought that this behavior is comparable to that of our nation's fighters, who would sooner die than surrender their lives. Humans view peonies as warriors who are not frightened of dying and are willing to give their lives to accomplish their blossoming mission.

2.4 Peony as Female Reproductive Imagery

A lot of places in the world, including China, utilize flowers as a metaphor for female genitalia. Because the flower appears to be a woman's feminine cunt when it first blooms and seems to be a woman's womb giving birth to life when it has fully bloomed. There is an old Indian story that says Lord Brahma was created from a lotus flower (Zhang, 2004). Legends about flowers sustaining life may also be found in China. One such tale is the Zhuang myth, which describes how grass initially appeared on Earth and then bloomed. A woman known as M'Liujia, the first human grandma, emerged from this flower. Reproductive imagery is familiar in peony artistic expression. Similar to the old Indian story that Brahma was created out of a lotus flower, the image of a baby playing on Yaozhou kiln porcelain from the Northern Song Dynasty represents a baby developing out of a peony flower, signifying "the peony is transformed into a newborn" (Fig.4).



Fig.4 The image of a baby playing on Yaozhou kiln porcelain
(source: Redmotionchina.com)

During the field study, I discovered that there is a 210-year-old ancient peony in Chaoyang Town, Mengjin County, Luoyang, at the residence of Cui Li, the "Flower King of the Generation," which produces up to 1,100 flowers annually (Fig.5). According to the author's conjecture, the traditional Chinese belief is that if a person sees peonies with hundreds of petals or peony trees with hundreds of flowers, they should associate these with their family's prosperity. As a result, peonies will inevitably become associated with folk reproduction cults, as people will naturally place their prayers for many children and grandchildren on them.



Fig.5 210-year-old peony in Mengjin, Luoyang, China

(Source: Photographed by researchers, 2023)

2.5 Peony as Prosperity and Flourishing Imagery

With a mere 10–15 days of blossoming, peonies have high requirements regarding climate, environment, soil, and other growing factors. Consequently, peonies and peony culture will only flourish to a greater extent in a politically stable, economically advanced, and culturally prosperous nation. There is a Chinese folk saying, the flowers of the country are in full bloom, and the flowers of the country are in honor, which describes the imagery of the peony's prosperity.

The artificial cultivation of peonies began during the Sui Dynasty. However, the Sui Dynasty was only 27 years old, and when the Sui Dynasty fell, the main task of the people was to survive the war, so by the beginning of the Tang Dynasty, peonies were very scarce. The Tang Dynasty brought stability to the nation and saw widespread cultivation of peony by the populace. Events featuring peonies got bigger and bigger, with a spectacular display for everyone to enjoy. With the political and economic stability of the nation by the Song Dynasty, peony flower markets, peony literature, peony paintings, and peony folklore flourished quickly. From this angle, it can be seen that the era of peony prosperity coincided with political and economic stability in the nation, giving people the time and leisure to cultivate and enjoy peonies. On the other hand, the country was politically and economically unstable during the dynasties of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, Liao, Xixia, Jin, and Yuan Dynasties, and there were frequent wars. As a result, peonies needed a stable development environment, and peony culture developed relatively slowly.

Every society functions this way: opportunities for spiritual and artistic pursuits arise only once basic requirements are met. A more stable political and economic environment is necessary for peonies to survive. Therefore, the country's prosperity can be seen from the prosperity of the peony, which is regarded as a symbol of the country's wealth and prosperity and the stability and happiness of the people.

Objective 3. The Flux and Integration of Peony Cultural Imagery under the Dimension of Cultural Identity

We must discuss the Luoyang peony to examine the evolution and integration of peony cultural images. Since Luoyang's natural environment is conducive to peony growth and because of its significant role in Chinese peony development during pivotal moments, Luoyang has emerged as the epicenter of Chinese peony origin and cultivation, with the remaining peony cultivation areas being considered the peony cultivation's periphery (Fig.6). From the geographical point of view, the people of Sui, Tang, and Song, who used to take Luoyang as the center of peony cultivation, gave birth to the heroic, happy, love, reproduction, and prosperity images of peony amidst their desire for ever-increasing requirements for the standard of living. Moreover, these five types of peony imagery were brought into the marginal planting areas along with the peony varieties in the later dynasties, and each marginal planting area attached a slightly different degree of importance to these five types of imagery according to its characteristics.

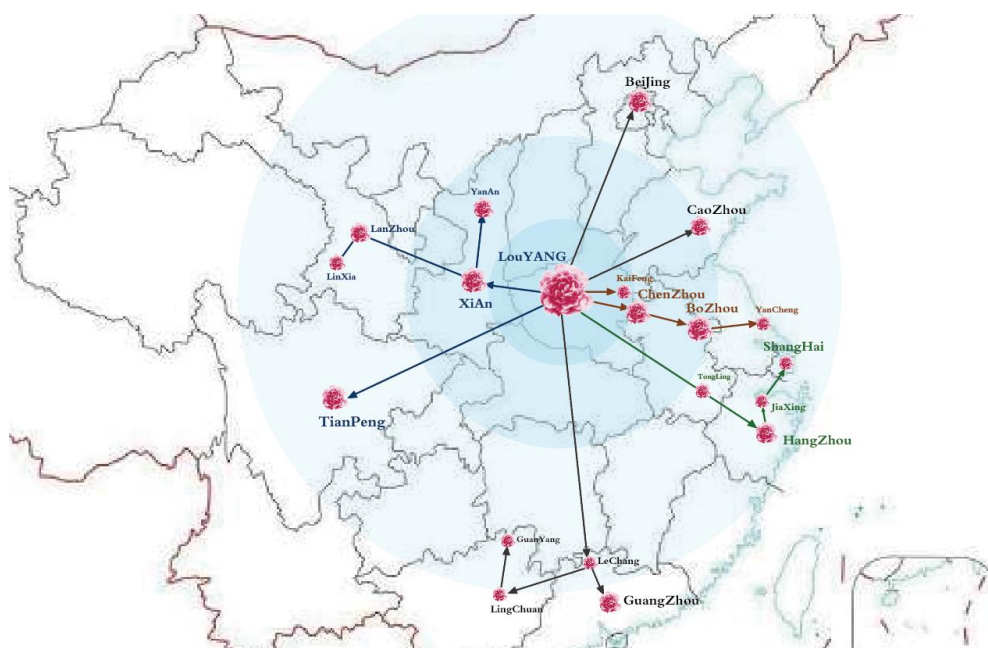


Fig.6 Roadmap of Luoyang Peony Spreading Abroad

(Source: Created by researchers, 2023)

Most ethnic minorities in Northwest China are gregarious, fearless, and native to the cold. Therefore, it is unsurprising that they have incorporated the peony's symbol of love into their "Hua'er." East China has a higher proportion of hills and low mountainous islands, contributing to the region's gentler inhabitants. In this area, peonies are planted as a joyful representation of prosperity, good fortune, longevity, and health. Because the southwest is mountainous and experiences year-round rains, people seek out happier imagery because their living conditions are riskier than in the central plains. The Central Plains have always been a gathering place for literati and peony farmers, so these lower and middle-class people revered the peony's heroic imagery of loyalty and bravery (Lei, 2008). While the peony's reproductive imagery is equally auspicious, it is more complex than that of the pomegranate or the lotus seedpod, both representing having many offspring. This peony reproductive imagery may gradually fade throughout subsequent generations' propagation, but it will not vanish from folklore.

According to the study above, peony cultural imagery has a distinct way of expressing itself inside various cultural bodies. It is created when people's hunger for life changes within those bodies. However, the artistic intention of peonies is also dynamic, ever-evolving, and constantly interacting and exchanging with other locations. Despite minor variations in the centers and peripheries, the general trend in transmitting creative imagery does not vary. That is to say, they are all closely related to the living conditions of the folk, showing the pattern of the peony center and the fringe echoing each other in terms of folk cultural imagery.

Discussions

Peirce believed that thinking is fundamentally a social behavior and that it is impossible to think independently of society. Because of this, deriving all symbols is an ongoing evolutionary process influenced by history and custom. People of all ethnic groups in the Chinese nation have shared the goal of survival and the quest for a better living throughout the country's 5,000-year history. The Chinese nation has developed into not only a political community and an ethnic community but also a cultural community and a community of destiny, and the core of all these communities lies in identity. The evolution of the peony emblem is precisely a microcosm of China's history, where a considerable enhancement of national consciousness and identity has accompanied every central federal integration process.

The same symbol will branch from several interpretations to "community consensus" in multi-ethnic cultures during cultural coupling because of the symbolic process's dynamism,

openness, and continuity. The symbol of the peony has gone through many kinds of deformation, metaphors, and layers of interactive advancement, forming a common national identity in the dissemination, and the meanings of this symbol have coalesced together, ultimately pointing to the ordinary meaning of the Chinese nation.

Knowledge from Research

1. Peony cultural symbols are composed of many elements, and people form an overall cognition of peony culture through peony folk customs symbols, peony art symbols, and peony literary symbols, which are both sensual and rational.

2. Peony cultural imagery is interpreted differently in different cultures. Peony artistic imagery includes heroic, happy, love, reproduction, and prosperous imagery. People display positive cultural attitudes and emotions toward peony culture, forming a psychological level of identity.

3. Emotional recognition has led to the formation of conscious cultural activities by individuals from all ethnic groups. The peony cultural symbols that all ethnic groups share in the Chinese national community are formed by the interactive advancement of the layers containing peony artistic imagery.

Conclusion

The place is a historical construct. It is unquestionably more than local, national, and international forces that eventually shape the history that creates it. From the “love flower” symbolizing beautiful love to the “hero flower” of loyalty and bravery to the “gender flower” of female reproduction, and finally to the “wealth flower” of national prosperity and the “happiness flower” of people's happiness. The peony's development as a cultural icon is remarkably emblematic. Changing the symbol's meaning also represents how Chinese civilization started to absorb, change, and eventually radiate multi-ethnic and multi-region cultures outward, the only way a sense of community can ever arise. The creation of peony cultural symbols that all ethnic groups share helps to tell a positive China story and advance the development of a community of human destiny while also strengthening the identity of Chinese culture that is shared by all ethnic groups on the inside and creating a sense of community within the Chinese nation.

Suggestions

Because most of the research on symbolic interaction theory and cultural identity theory are in foreign language literature and writings, their limitations in theoretical comprehension and understanding of the symbols of Mudan national culture may not be accurate enough in applying and grasping the symbolic interaction theory and cultural identity theory in the study of symbols of national culture. There may be controversy in the degree of in-depth application and interpretation and deduction of specific applications. Thus, further research is required to better comprehend the symbolic elements of Chinese peony culture based on a thorough understanding of academic theories, meticulously and thoroughly organize and summarize them, and more precisely grasp peony cultural imagery from various peony cultural elements.

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