

# A Methodology Model for Neo-Chinese Interior Design within Theoretical Frame of Semiotics

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## ABSTRACT

Neo-Chinese interior style is a style that aims to express the essence of traditional Chinese culture and the aesthetic pursuit of contemporary Chinese people within modern architectural space. Since its inception, it has received widespread attention from Chinese interior designers. The theoretical and practical explorations of this style have always been one of the hot topics in the field of Chinese interior design. However, the literature review shows that few focused on the methodology study of Neo-Chinese interior design. This paper attempts to formulate a methodology model for Neo-Chinese interior design within the theoretical frame of semiotics. The semantic field and synaesthesia concepts are introduced to help construct the methodology model. The decoding of Chinese traditional painting is used to help elucidate the application of this methodology model. The outcome of this research can be helpful to Chinese interior designers while also acting as a reference for interior designers in other countries to maintain and develop their nationality in interior design.

**Keywords:** Neo-Chinese interior design, Semiotics, Traditional Chinese culture, Methodology model, Semantic field, Synaesthesia.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the policy of opening up to the outside world in 1978, China has been participating in international economic and cultural exchanges with increasing frequency. Globalization has brought development opportunities to China and made the country's local culture under the significant influence of foreign cultures. Many Chinese people have greatly admired mainstream Western culture, resulting in the gradual decline of traditional Chinese culture. In this context, a group of Chinese designers proposed applying traditional Chinese culture to contemporary design, and the Neo-Chinese style emerged. In October 2003, Liu Wenjin, a scholar of Chinese furniture design, put forward the concept of "Neo-Chinese" for the first time. His article, Exploring the Neo-Chinese Furniture Design Style, was published at the forum of the International Symposium on Furniture Design and Manufacturing in the 21st Century. In October 2004, China's first Interior Designers Summit officially defined this category of design style as "Neo-Chinese Style" (Zhou, 2012).

However, expressing traditional Chinese culture within modern interior design has become critical for Chinese interior designers. The standard method they use to express traditional Chinese culture is by reproducing traditional patterns, colors, and shapes. Some designers even attempt to interpret traditional Chinese culture by placing ancient Chinese furniture and porcelain in the interior space or by hanging traditional Chinese paintings, calligraphy, and embroidery fabrics on the walls. These design approaches often make their works look superficial and rigid, lack cultural connotation, and are incapable of

harmonizing the essence of traditional Chinese culture with modern forms, giving an expression of pompous and artificial. (Kewei, 2024)

In response to the design method that dwells on simply and directly copying the traditional Chinese elements, the Chinese architect, winner of the 2012 Pritzker Prize, Wang Shu (2006), comments, “Today I have met too many architects with this kind of confusion. There is a kind of anxiety after too much copying (design form). Of course, all those who have this kind of anxiety are good architects, while their problem is like grass without roots.” In the same essay, Mr. Wang also criticized the designs that rigidly borrowed traditional Chinese elements, “I think what we need to avoid is the set pattern that when we think of Chinese housing, we only think of traditional Chinese housing and how to express it by using the styles of traditional space, courtyards, or gardens.” Mr. Wang’s comments have pointed out the wrong ways that contemporary Chinese designers choose when exploring the development approach of the Neo-Chinese style. All this shows that a scientific and efficient method for Neo-Chinese interior design is needed to help contemporary Chinese designers.

Thankfully, some Chinese scholars have begun to focus on the theoretical study of Neo-Chinese interior design. There is extensive literature on interpreting and manifesting traditional Chinese culture in Neo-Chinese interiors (Liu, 2012; Zhu, 2016; Chen, 2016; Zhang, 2017; Xiong, 2019; Zhang, 2019; Zhu, 2023). However, there is little in-depth research on the methodology of Neo-Chinese interior design.

Ever since its appearance, the aim of Neo-Chinese interior design has been expressing traditional Chinese culture with modern design language in contemporary interior space. From the semiotics perspective, each Neo-Chinese interior space is a cluster of symbols composed of three-dimensional substantial symbols, namely symbolic discourse (Kewei, 2024). Therefore, as a kind of coding work for a symbolic discourse, the process of Neo-Chinese interior design should be studied with the theoretical tools of semiotics.

This paper chooses the semiotic theories based on the school developed by Saussure to construct a methodology model for Neo-Chinese interior design. The semiotic theory of Hejlslev, one of this school's most critical representative figures, is used in this paper. As supplementary theoretical tools, the linguistic concept of the Semantic Field and the rhetorical concept of synaesthesia are introduced into this study to explain the working mechanism of the methodological model. The results of this study will provide theoretical guidance for Chinese interior designers and help them express traditional Chinese culture more deeply and creatively in their design practice.

## METHODOLOGY

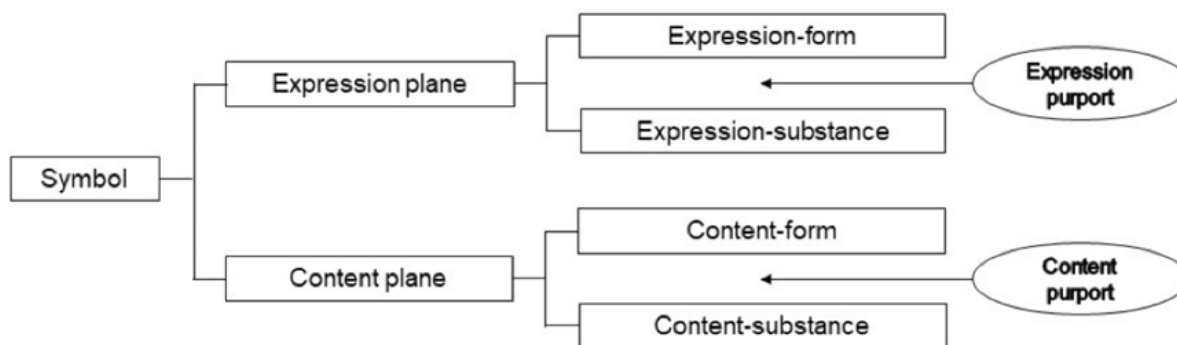
This paper takes Hejlslev’s theory of the “two-sided and three-tiered structure of a sign” as the theoretical framework to formulate the methodology model for Neo-Chinese interior design. In addition, the concepts of “Semantic Field” and “Synaesthesia” are introduced into the methodology model to help realize the deduction from “The Phase of Designing Conception” (content plane) to “The Phase of Designing Expression” (expression plane).

### **The theoretical framework of the methodology model: Hejlslev’s two-sided and three-tiered structure of a sign**

Hejlslev’s semiotic and linguistic approach is grounded in his belief in the importance of formalism and sign function. His understanding of the sign further develops the Saussurean sign model. Hejlslev replaces Saussure’s division of the sign into *Signifier* and *Signified* with two mutually interdependent planes -- an *expression plane* and a *content plane*. However, in contrast to Saussure’s simple distinction, Hejlslev divides each of these planes further so that we arrive at both an expression form and an expression substance, as well as a content form and a content substance. Besides this, Hejlslev discovers beyond what he calls the semiotically formed, structured sign systems a pre-semiotic amorphous world, which he names purport and which he divides into expression-purport and content-purport, as shown in Figure 1. (Browne,

2016) Hjelmslev's semiotic theory, which is based on Saussure's structuralism linguistics, provides an efficient theoretical tool for the analysis of symbolic discourse.

Figure 1. The two-sided and three-tiered structure of a sign.



Source: elaborated by the author

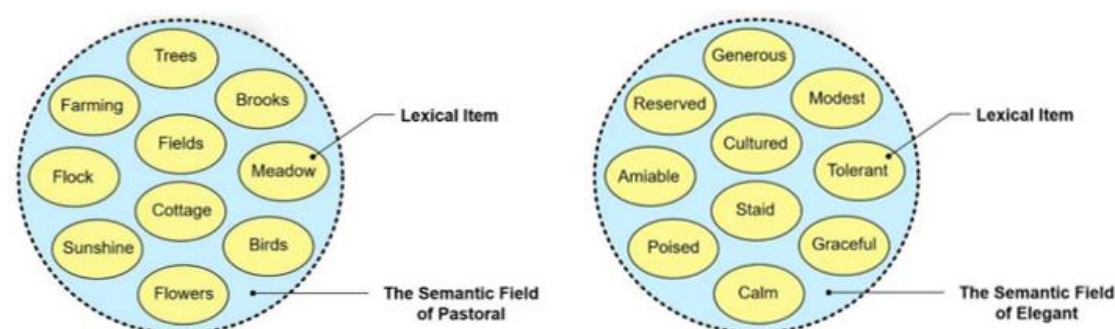
As a symbolic discourse in the form of three-dimensional space, the design process of the Neo-Chinese interior can be taken as the coding process of a symbolic discourse. By adapting Hjelmslev's semiotic theory to the process analysis of Neo-Chinese interior design, we get "the phase of design conception" as the period of forming the "Content plane" and "the phase of design expression" as the period of forming the "Expression plane". After constructing the Neo-Chinese interior design methodology model, this paper takes Chinese traditional paintings, a category of arts in traditional Chinese culture, as a variable to put into the model to explain how to use the methodology model.

### A search engine for searching design elements: the semantic field

"Field" was originally a physical term, and linguistics borrowed the concept of "Field" to represent the semantic relations between a group of words that reflect similar things. (Han, 2018) The "Semantic Field" comprises several interrelated words, and each word is not isolated. In other words, the "Semantic Field" comprises interrelated and distinct lexical items. Each lexical item reflects the characteristics of the meaning target in some respect and plays a role in facilitating and directing the realization of the meaning target of the semantic field. To explain the relationship between "meaning target" and "lexical item" in the semantic field, Figure 2 gives an example.

As an important auxiliary tool of the methodology model for Neo-Chinese interior design, the concept of the "Semantic Field" is used to help search for the design elements that can support and express the thematic meaning of the design. Besides directing the search orientation, the "Semantic Field" also acts as a limitation of the search scope.

Figure 2. The semantic fields of "Pastoral" and "Elegant".



Source: elaborated by the author

## A Filter for Selecting Design Elements: The Synaesthesia

Although the “Semantic Field” can help direct the search orientation and limit the search scope, designers often find they have searched out too many (redundant) design elements. They frequently struggle to find the most appropriate design elements to express the theme of design. Therefore, it is necessary to use a filter to help them select design elements, and the concept of synaesthesia is introduced.

Synaesthesia is a comprehensive feeling produced by human beings with the help of association and imagination. The physiological basis of synaesthesia is the communication in experience between the original transverse neural channels and internal connections between the cerebral cortex regions. The psychological basis is the experience accumulated in practice and the information stored in the stimulation of current things. These experiences not only cause the excitement of the same receptor and related areas of the brain but also cause the excitement of other receptors and other brain areas. (Jin, 2003)

To explain why we introduce the concept of Synaesthesia into the methodology model, we take the semantic field of “elegant” as an example for analysis. The word “elegant” is chosen because its meaning is consistent with the ideological connotation of the Neo-Chinese, or even a part of it. Now, we set “elegant” as the “original word” (the meaning target) while the other words in its semantic field are set as the “paraphrasing words” (the lexical items). According to the principle of “Synaesthesia”, when we need to choose “paraphrasing words” to explain the word “elegant”, we should choose the word that can make readers have similar thoughts or resonant emotions with the “original word”. That is, to use the words whose meanings are most consistent with the “original word” in meaning direction. By this method, we can improve the meaning expression efficiency of the “paraphrasing words” and avoid the problem of excessive interpretation and meaning ambiguity.

Furthermore, this paper constructs a three-dimensional coordinate system for spatial meaning expression to realize the function of “Synaesthesia” as a filter. The effectiveness of each design element on the expression of aim-meaning will be labeled in the form of three-dimensional coordinate values, and the evaluation tool to assess and assign coordinate values to the design elements is the synaesthesia of designers.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

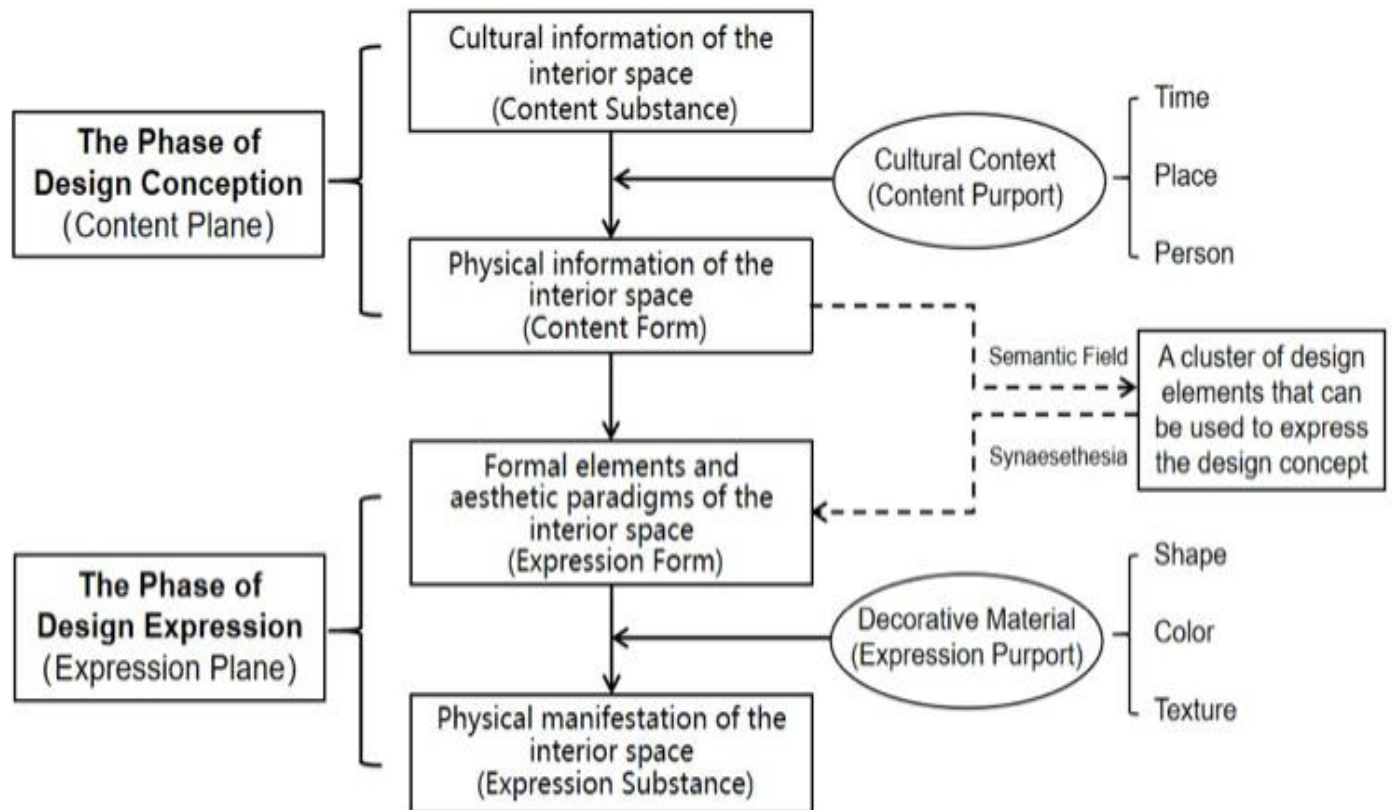
The main result of this paper is the methodology model for Neo-Chinese interior design. This chapter takes Chinese traditional painting as a variable and shows the working flowchart of the model to explain how to use the methodology model. It also describes how to use the two introduced theoretical tools, “Semantic Field” and “Synaesthesia.”

### Structural Analysis of the Methodology Model for Neo-Chinese Interior Design: Two Phased and the Four Sub-Stages

From the perspective of symbolic discourse analysis, the Neo-Chinese interior design process is a process of three-dimensional spatial coding for the thematic meanings of the design. Based on Hjelmslev’s theory of “The two-sided and three-tiered structure of a sign”, the coding process of Neo-Chinese interior design is composed of two phases: “The phase of design conception (content plane)” and “The phase of design expression (expression plane)”. Within each phase, there are two sub-stages below. The first sub-stage of “The phase of design conception” is “Cultural information of the Neo-Chinese interior (content substance)”, and the second sub-stage is “Physical information of the Neo-Chinese interior (content form)”. The first sub-stage of “The phase of design expression” is “Formal elements and aesthetic paradigms of the Neo-Chinese interior (expression form)”, and the second sub-stage is “Physical manifestation of the Neo-Chinese interior (expression substance)”. Therefore, we get the methodology model for Neo-Chinese interior design, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. The methodology model for Neo-Chinese interior design.



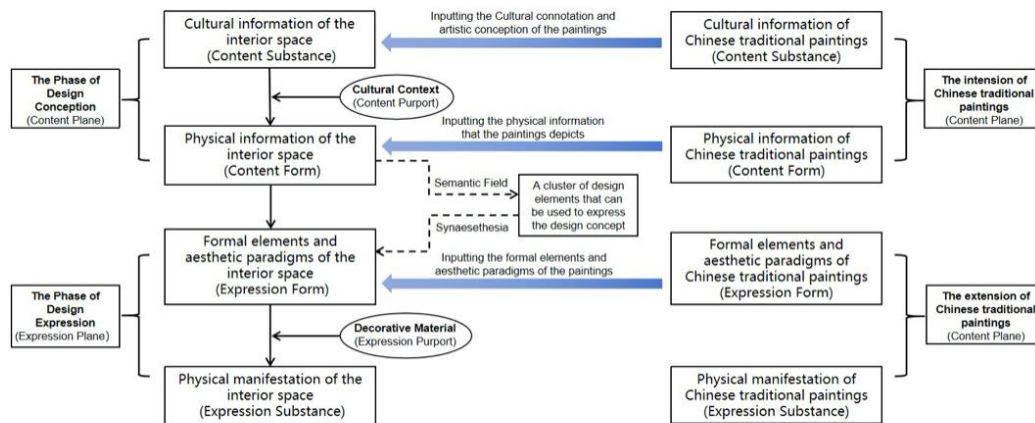
Source: elaborated by the author

The concept of “purport” is also introduced in Hjelmslev’s theory. He puts forward that there is a medium named “content purport” between “content form” and “content substance”, which connects the two and finally forms the “signified”. Similarly, there is a medium named “expression purport” between “expression form” and “expression substance”, which connects the two and finally forms the “signifier”. In the methodology model for Neo-Chinese interior design, the “content purport” is renamed as “Cultural context”, and the “expression purport” is renamed as “Decorative materials”. The “Cultural context (content purport)” has three attributes: time, place, and character. The “Decorative materials (expression purport)” has three attributes: shape, color, and texture, as shown in Figure 3.

Hjelmslev did not address whether the “content plane” or the “expression plane” comes first in his theoretical exposition. However, as a kind of human creative activity, “The phase of design conception (content plane)” usually comes before “The phase of design expression (expression plane)”. Meanwhile, there is also a sequence between the sub-stages within the two phases, that is: “Cultural information of the Neo-Chinese interior (content substance)” comes before “Physical information of the Neo-Chinese interior (content form)”, and “Formal elements and aesthetic paradigms of the Neo-Chinese interior (expression form)” comes before “Physical manifestation of the Neo-Chinese interior (expression substance)”.

This paper analyzes Chinese traditional painting as a variable example and explains how to use this methodology model. First, Hjelmslev’s theory is applied to the discourse analysis of Chinese traditional painting (a symbolic discourse in two-dimensional spatial form). Then, the analysis result is substituted into the methodology model. Finally, we obtain a diagram, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Analysis of Chinese traditional painting as a variable in the methodology model for Neo-Chinese interior design.



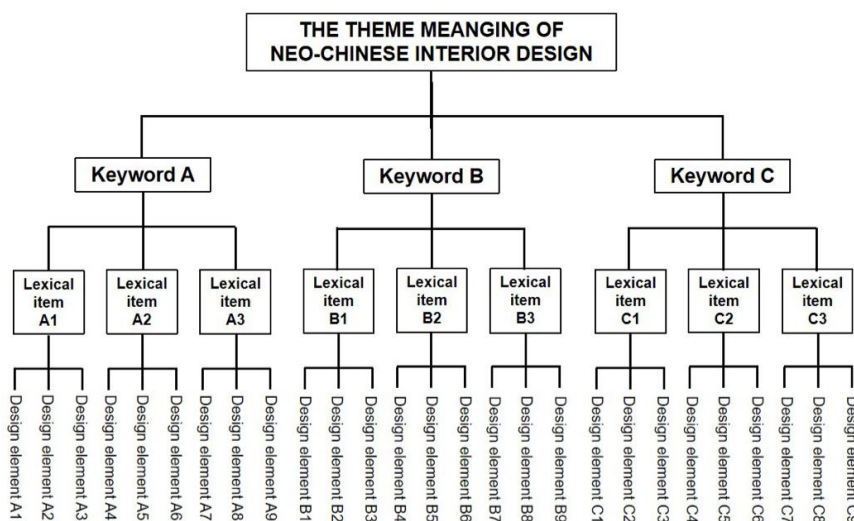
Source: elaborated by the author

To accomplish the transition from “Physical information of the Neo-Chinese interior (content form)” to “Formal elements and aesthetic paradigms of the Neo-Chinese interior (expression form)”, two concepts in linguistics, the Semantic Field and Synaesthesia, are introduced into the construction of the methodology model. These two concepts will help designers find the optimal design elements and aesthetic paradigms that can express the thematic meaning of the design. The mechanisms of their operation will be discussed in the following sections.

## THE APPLICATION OF THE SEMANTIC FIELD IN SEARCHING FOR DESING ELEMENTS

As long as the “Theme Meaning of Neo-Chinese Interior Design” is determined, we can find several keywords to describe it. Then, each keyword will be the meaning target of its semantic field, composed of several lexical items. Finally, we can use these lexical items as clues to search forms, paradigms, and methods (design elements) to express these lexical items in architectural interior space. Figure 5 explains the structure of this process.

Figure 5. The semantic field structure of the theme meaning of Neo-Chinese interior design.



**NOTE:** There may be many keywords that actually make up the theme meaning, but here we only list three of them as representatives, and so is the lexical items.

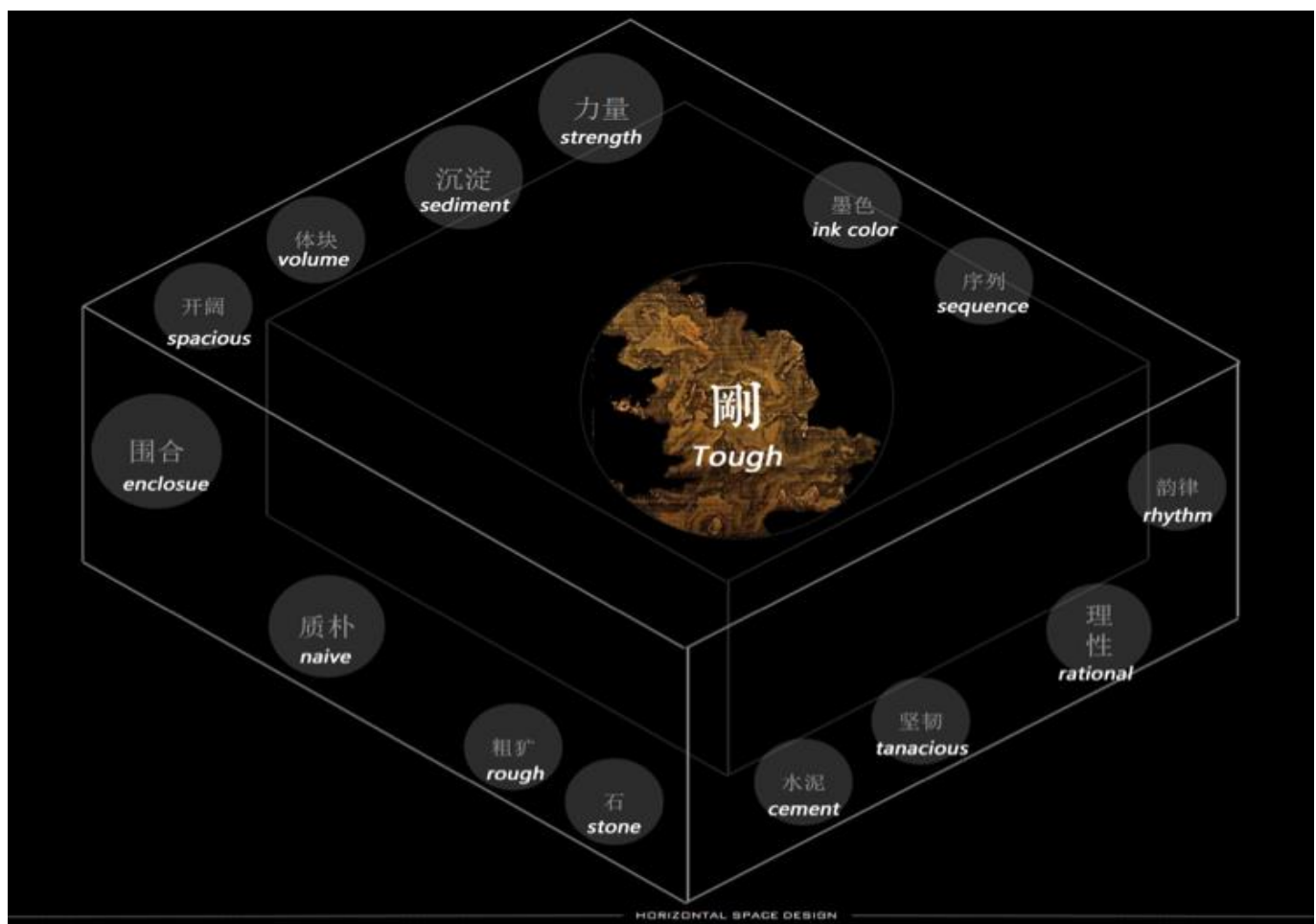
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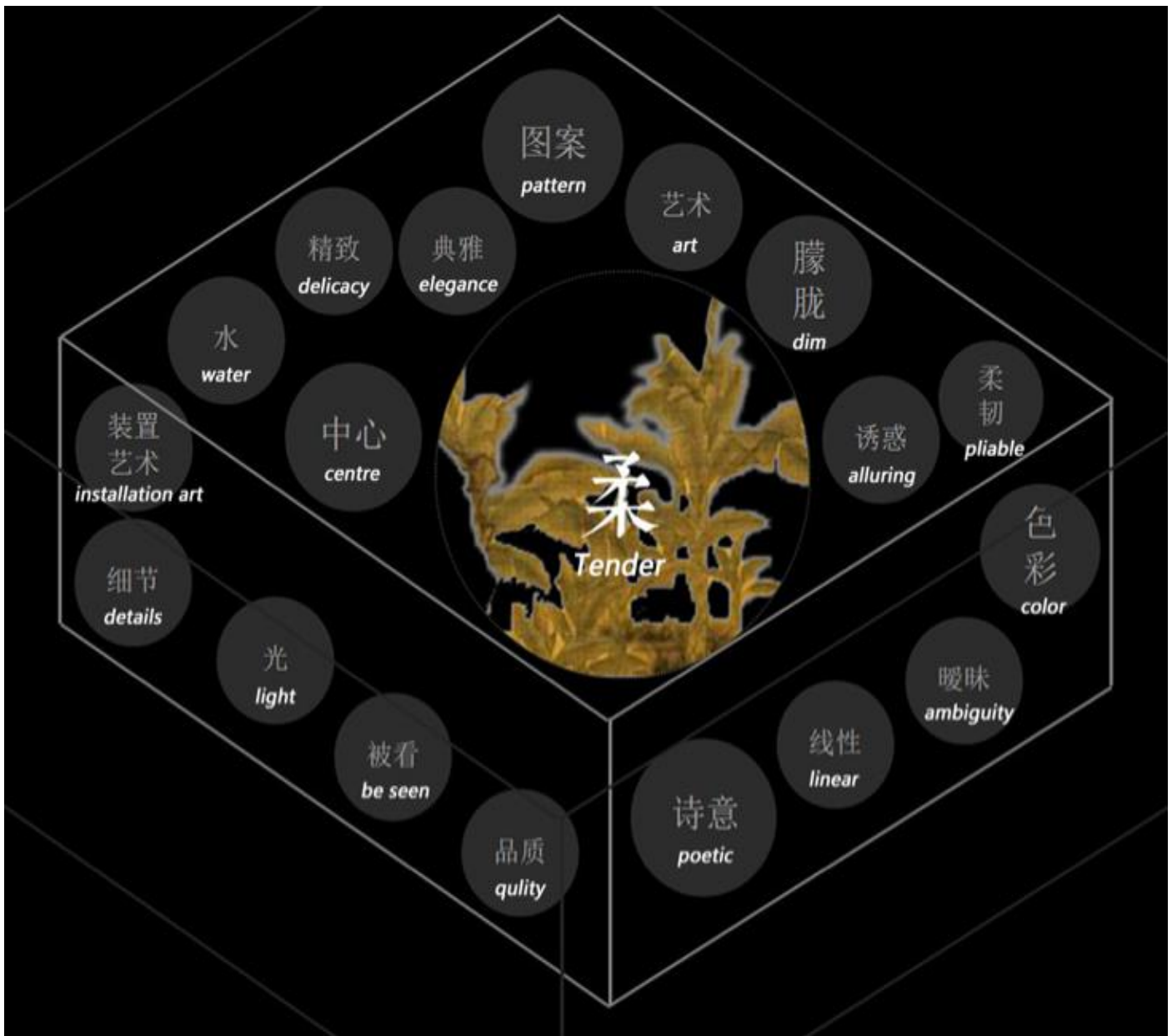
As shown in Figure 5, the number of lexical items is uncertain and extensible in the semantic field, defined by the thematic meaning. When the number of lexical items (meta-information) exceeds the essential meaning expression requirement of the semantic field (total information), these excessive lexical items might hinder the distinct expression of the “Theme Meaning”. Although they support the meaning integrity of the semantic field or logically contribute to the meaning transmission of the semantic field, these excessive lexical items must be controlled and filtered so that the theme meaning can be expressed clearly and accurately. Nevertheless, even though the excessive lexical items might make the boundary of the theme meaning of Neo-Chinese interior fuzzy, extensible, and dynamic, this process will also produce some novel appearances and imagination-provoking charms.

Some Chinese interior designers have explored using the Semantic Field in their practice. Although they did not explicitly acclaim that they used the Semantic Field in their designs, their works showed apparent influence from the principle of the Semantic Field. For example, a famous Chinese interior designer, Ju Bin used a similar expression of semantic field in his *Tianyuan · Zhenting Chaozhou Restaurant* interior design concept analysis, as shown in Figure 6.

Mr. Ju Bin used the Semantic Field to explain his design concept and listed the lexical items for each keyword. However, it can be noticed from the figure that the meanings of some lexical items deviate from the meaning target of the Semantic Field or even have no obvious correlation with it. In addition, Figure 6 only shows the two-level structure of the Semantic Field, the levels of “Keyword” and “Lexical item”, as Figure 5 shows. It does not mention how the designer searches design elements according to this idea, which is the most substantial function of the Semantic Field in the design process. Therefore, the purpose of introducing the Semantic Field into the methodology model for Neo-Chinese interior design is to establish a cluster of lexical items for the keywords and, more importantly, to search for the design elements that can express the thematic meaning following the clues indicated by the lexical items.

Figure 6. The concept pages of *Tianyuan · Zhenting Chaozhou Restaurant* interior design.





Source: <https://www.doc88.com/p-59616443711373.html?r=1>

(translated by the author)

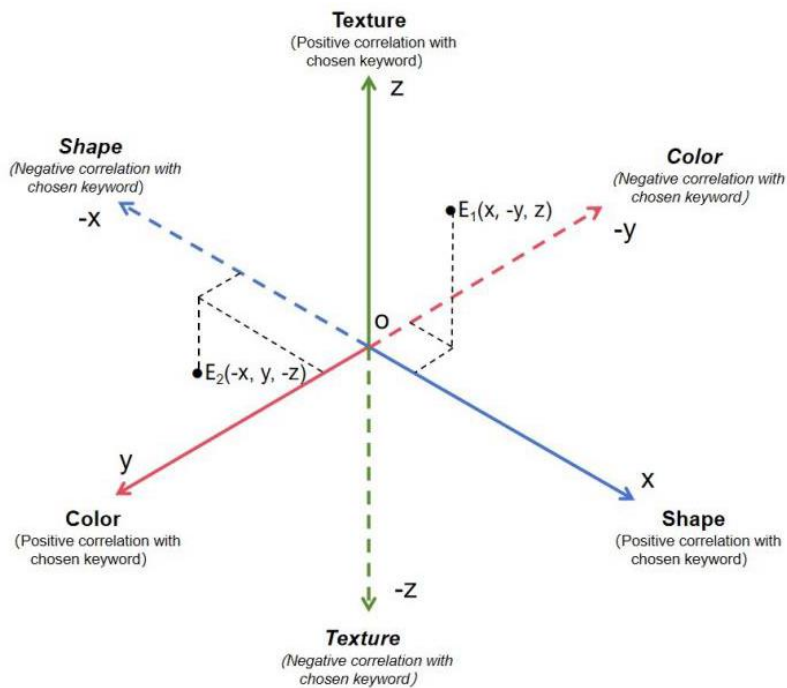
## The Application of the Semantic Field in Searching for Desing Elements

When selecting expression forms as design elements, designers take the meaning of keywords as a reference and use synaesthesia as a filter to choose specific design techniques and styles. The process is as follows.

Firstly, a three-dimensional coordinate system for a keyword of the thematic meaning needs to be established. The three axes of this coordinate system are shape, color, and texture, which describe the attributes of the design elements. Besides these three attributes, each axis has a posited and negative pole, respectively representing the “positive correlation” and “negative correlation” relationships with the keyword meaning. Secondly, the designer should evaluate the design element by using the filter function of his Synaesthesia and drawing a point E (x, y, z) for the design element in the three-dimensional coordinate. That is to use the thinking function of Synaesthesia to analyze and determine the values of the design element in the three axes of shape, color, and texture, as shown in Figure 7.



Figure 7. The three-dimensional coordinate system to test the expression of the design element.



Source: elaborated by the author

Through this approach, the designer can judge whether the design element enhances or reduces the expression of the keyword meaning. Since evaluating whether the connotative effect of a design element aligns with the meaning of the keyword is a form of qualitative assessment, we can remove the letters “x”, “y”, and “z” that represent the coordinate values and only use the positive and negative symbols of the value, that is, “+” or “-”. It can be recorded as “0” when the connotative effect of the design element neither enhances nor diminishes the meaning of the keyword. Thus, the three-dimensional value of the design element may be one of the values shown in Table 1.

Table 1. A table of the possible three-axis coordinate values of the design element.

Original values	Simplified values
(x, y, z)	(+, +, +)
(x, y, 0) (x, y, -z) (x, 0, z) (x, -y, z)	(+, +, 0) (+, +, -) (+, 0, +) (+, -, +)
(x, 0, 0) (x, 0, -z) (x, -y, 0) (x, -y, -z)	(+, 0, 0) (+, 0, -) (+, -, 0) (+, -, -)
(0, 0, 0)	(0, 0, 0)
(0, 0, z) (0, 0, -z) (0, y, 0) (0, -y, 0)	(0, 0, +) (0, 0, -) (0, +, 0) (0, -, 0)
(0, y, z) (0, -y, -z) (0, y, -z) (0, -y, z)	(0, +, +) (0, -, -) (0, +, -) (0, -, +)
(-x, -y, -z)	(-, -, -)
(-x, -y, z) (-x, y, -z) (-x, -y, 0) (-x, 0, -z)	(-, -, +) (-, +, -) (-, -, 0) (-, 0, -)
(-x, y, z) (-x, 0, 0) (-x, y, 0) (-x, 0, z)	(-, +, +) (-, 0, 0) (-, +, 0) (-, 0, +)

Source: elaborated by the author

As can be seen from Table 1, the three-dimensional coordinate values of a design element may be one of the following results: no coordinate value is “+”, only one coordinate value is “+”, and two or more coordinate values are “+”. We suggest that the design elements with two or more “+” coordinate values should be preferred and applied in the design to achieve the optimum expression effects. However, if no design elements meet the above conditions, we suggest selecting a design element with one coordinate value of “+” and two other coordinate values of “0”.

*Human Design* is a biological, individual, subtle, and even unpredictable process filtered by the human's thinking and feelings. On the contrary, AI design is a regular process that involves mechanical and non-biological characteristics. Humanity is one of the essential attributes of human culture, and the crucial difference between human beings and artificial intelligence is that humans have compound feelings and emotions. Therefore, Synaesthesia is the key to human designers' superiority over AI designers. It makes human designers' work more spiritual, makes it easier to evoke the emotional resonance of other human beings, and is more conducive to the inheritance and development of human culture.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the theoretical framework of semiotics and the concepts of Semantic Field and Synaesthesia, this paper constructs the methodology model for Neo-Chinese interior design. It uses Chinese traditional paintings as a variable to illustrate its application method. At this point, the construction and demonstration of the methodology model for Neo-Chinese interior design have been completed theoretically. The practical effectiveness of this methodology model will be verified and evaluated through subsequent design practice projects.

The results of this paper are expected to provide theoretical guidance and practical application value for contemporary Chinese interior designers. At the same time, we hope these results will be a reference for interior designers in other countries or regions and help them express the nationalities and cultures of their nations in their interior designs.

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