

Identity in Flux: Tourism and the Semiotics of Hmong Cultural Symbols in Sa Pa

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Abstract

This paper explores how tourism reconfigures the semiotic meanings of Hmong cultural symbols in Sa Pa, northern Vietnam. Drawing on selective qualitative data from interviews and field observations, it analyzes the transformations of dresses, the *khèn* (bamboo flute), and community festivals as signs—shifting from indexes of lived practice to icons of visual consumption and, ultimately, to symbols redefined by local actors. Using a heritage semiotics framework (Bendix, 1997; Smith, 2006; Waterton & Smith, 2010), the study traces three semiotic states—*Seen*, *Staged*, and *Redefined*—and argues that Hmong youth and artisans actively reclaim semiotic agency by reinterpreting these symbols. The paper contributes a typology of semiotic shifts in living heritage under tourism influence and highlights implications for semiotic literacy in sustainable cultural interpretation..

Keyword: Cultural Symbols, Heritage Semiotics, Hmong Culture, Sa Pa Tourism, Semiotic Shifts.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Context: Sa Pa and the Visual Explosion of Hmong Culture

Nestled in the highlands of northern Vietnam, Sa Pa has transitioned from a remote outpost to a premier national tourism destination, drawing millions of domestic and international visitors annually. This tourism boom has catalyzed a visual explosion of Hmong culture, the region's most prominent ethnic group. The vibrant textiles, intricate dresses, the resonant melodies of the *khèn* (a bamboo flute), and colorful community festivals have become ubiquitous. These cultural elements proliferate not only in their original contexts but also as decontextualized images across a vast commercial landscape, including souvenirs, hotel décor, marketing materials, and digital platforms (Michaud, 2017). This phenomenon creates a state of "visual saturation," where the aesthetic surfaces of Hmong culture are intensely visible and widely circulated.

This intense visibility aligns with John Urry's (1990) seminal concept of the "tourist gaze," which describes how destinations are visually consumed by tourists, often through pre-established expectations and imagery. In Sa Pa, the tourist gaze tends to frame Hmong culture as a set of picturesque and consumable signs, privileging the visual over the experiential. Consequently, a critical observation emerges: Hmong culture risks becoming mere imagery detached from its lived realities and complex meanings. As cultural forms are increasingly tailored for visual appeal, their deeper social, spiritual, and functional dimensions can be obscured, transforming them into objects of sight rather than windows into a way of life (Cohen, 1988). This paper, therefore, begins with the premise that this visual saturation is not a neutral backdrop but an active force that reconfigures the very meaning of Hmong cultural symbols.

1.2. Research Gap and Firewall Declaration

This paper develops from a broader dataset used in a prior publication (Author, 2025) that analyzed the socio-economic adaptation mechanisms of the Hmong community in response to tourism. The current study isolates the semiotic dimension, focusing specifically on how tourism reshapes the meanings of Hmong cultural symbols.

The existing body of literature on tourism in Sa Pa has extensively documented its socio-economic impacts, such as economic development, social change, and the commodification of culture (see Turner & Tran, 2018; Di Giovine, 2009). These studies, including the author's previous work, have analyzed the *impacts* of tourism and

the *mechanisms* of cultural adaptation. However, a significant gap remains in understanding the underlying **semiotic transformations**. Little research has systematically analyzed *how* cultural symbols are semiotically decontextualized from their lived practices and recontextualized within the tourism framework as new types of signs. This study addresses this gap by moving beyond impacts to investigate the processes of meaning-making and meaning-shifting, exploring how Hmong cultural heritage is semiotically translated, contested, and reclaimed in the tourism arena. Unlike the author's previous work (Author, 2025) which examined socio-economic adaptation, this paper isolates symbolic transformations, offering a purely semiotic inquiry.

1.3. Objectives and Research Questions

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the semiotic shifts of Hmong cultural symbols in Sa Pa under the influence of tourism. To achieve this, the research is guided by the following questions (RQs):

1. How do Hmong symbols (e.g., traditional dress, the *khèn*, community markets) shift from *indexes* of lived practice to *icons* of visual consumption under the tourist gaze?
2. How does the staging and commercialization of heritage fix and circulate these icons, potentially emptying them of their original connections?
3. How do local actors, particularly Hmong youth and artisans, actively re-index and re-symbolize these cultural forms to reclaim semiotic agency?

1.4. Theoretical Framework: Heritage Semiotics

This study is grounded in a heritage semiotics framework, integrating key concepts from heritage studies and semiotics to analyze how signs and meanings are constructed, circulated, and contested. This framework draws on the foundational semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce (1931-1958), particularly his triadic model of the sign, which distinguishes between *index* (a sign with a direct, existential connection to its object), *icon* (a sign that resembles its object), and *symbol* (a sign whose meaning is determined by convention or rule).

This Peircean model is complemented by critical theories from heritage studies. First, we adopt Regina Bendix's (1997) perspective that authenticity is not an inherent essence but is constantly negotiated and produced through "circulation" in social and commercial contexts. Second, the concept of the "Authorized Heritage Discourse" (AHD), as defined by Laurajane Smith (2006), provides a lens to understand how powerful institutions and commercial interests construct and legitimize certain meanings of heritage while marginalizing others. Finally, the work of Emma Waterton and Laurajane Smith (2010) on "affective misrecognition" and emotional re-attachment helps analyze the community's response, highlighting how local actors emotionally re-engage with and reclaim their heritage when its meaning is misappropriated by the AHD. Together, these theories provide a robust framework for tracing the semiotic journey of Hmong symbols from lived indexes to consumable icons and, ultimately, to redefined symbols of reclaimed identity.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

This study employs an interpretive-semiotic case study design to provide an in-depth understanding of the semiotic transformations of Hmong cultural symbols in a tourism context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach is particularly suitable as it allows for a focused, holistic investigation of a complex social phenomenon within its real-world setting (Yin, 2018). The case study method enables the exploration of the nuanced processes of meaning construction and negotiation that quantitative methods might overlook.

Sa Pa was chosen purposively as a critical case due to the intensity of cultural symbol commodification and the high visibility of the Hmong community in its tourism landscape. This setting provides a rich and concentrated environment to observe the dynamic interplay between cultural representation, commercial interests, and local agency. The research adopts an analytical lens focused on three interconnected elements: the **sign** (the cultural symbol itself, e.g., dress patterns, the *khèn*), the **discourse** (the narratives and explanations surrounding the sign from different actors), and the **context** (the socio-economic environment of tourism in which the sign operates).

This tri-focal lens allows for a comprehensive analysis of not just what the symbols mean, but how those meanings are produced, circulated, and contested.

2.2. Data Sources and Selection

The data for this paper are drawn from a larger ethnographic corpus collected for a previous study (Author, 2025), which originally comprised 15 in-depth interviews and 6 participant observations. For this specific semiotic analysis, a purposive subset of the data was selected. The selection criterion was the richness of **semiotic discourse**—that is, conversations and observations that explicitly dealt with the meaning, interpretation, and transformation of cultural symbols.

This focused subset includes data from 5 interviews and 3 observations that were most pertinent to the research questions. The selected sources provide a polyvocal perspective on the semiotic shifts, including the views of cultural producers, mediators, and administrators. Table 1 summarizes the representative data sources utilized in this analysis.

Table 1: Selected Data Sources for Semiotic Analysis

Code	Source	Symbolic Focus	Context
P2	Craftswoman	Dress patterns, color meaning	Workshop
P3	Local guide	Sound & performance	Tour & class
P5	Culture officer	"Scripted festival" narrative	Event planning
P6	Hmong student	Identity discourse	Youth perception
O3	Observation	Khèn, stage, sound	Event
O5	Observation	Dress display	Marketplace

While the larger dataset comprised fifteen interviews and six observations, this paper selected eight data points distinguished by rich semiotic discourse. A semiotic lens prioritizes depth of meaning-making over quantitative breadth; therefore, only transcripts containing explicit symbolic reflections were analyzed. This ensures analytical integrity and prevents overlap with the prior socio-economic study (Author, 2025).

2.3. Analytical Procedure

The analytical procedure was conducted in three distinct steps, moving from data extraction to semiotic coding and conceptual grouping.

- **Step 1: Data Extraction.** The analysis began with the systematic extraction of all quotes and descriptive fieldnotes from the selected transcripts and observation logs that referred to material culture and symbolic interpretation. This step focused on isolating segments of data directly related to the meaning-making of Hmong dresses, the *khèn*, and festivals.
- **Step 2: Semiotic Coding.** Subsequently, these extracts were coded across three semiotic levels derived from Peirce's (1931-1958) sign theory. Each quote or observation was analyzed to determine whether the cultural object was functioning as:

- An **Index**: A sign directly connected to its function or lived practice (e.g., a dress pattern signifying a specific clan).
- An **Icon**: A sign representing an image detached for visual consumption (e.g., the same pattern used in a souvenir because it looks "authentically Hmong").
- A **Symbol**: A sign whose meaning is redefined through discourse and social convention (e.g., a young Hmong person explaining the pattern as a symbol of cultural resilience).
- **Step 3: Conceptual Grouping**. Finally, the coded data were grouped under the study's overarching conceptual triad: **Seen – Staged – Redefined**. This framework helped to structure the findings by mapping the semiotic journey of the symbols: from being 'seen' by the tourist gaze (Index → Icon), to being 'staged' for commercial purposes (Icon → Empty Signifier), and ultimately 'redefined' by the local community (Icon → Symbol).

It is crucial to note that this semiotic analysis is distinct from the thematic analysis used in the prior publication (Author, 2025), which focused on broader socio-economic themes. This study maintains a clear "firewall" by concentrating exclusively on the analysis of meaning and sign-systems.

3. FINDINGS

The analysis identifies three semiotic states that reveal how Hmong cultural symbols transform under tourism: *Seen*, *Staged*, and *Redefined*. Each stage reflects a distinct relationship between the material sign, its context, and the meanings negotiated by local actors.

3.1 The “Seen” Symbols (Index → Icon)

In the first state, Hmong cultural objects such as dresses and musical instruments transition from practical indexes of everyday life to visual icons consumed by tourists. Traditional clothing, once functioning as an *index* of clan affiliation and seasonal adaptation, has become a primary *icon* of ethnic identity marketed through tourism. A female artisan (P2) described this change:

“I used to embroider patterns only for weddings and New Year. Now I make them for tourists, using brighter colors. If I keep the old ones, no one buys them.”

The transformation of material practice into display reflects the *visual economy* of tourism. Similarly, musical instruments such as the *khèn*—originally an indexical medium of spiritual communication—are increasingly performed for visitors as cultural shows. As one young guide (P3) observed:

“When tourists come, they expect to see the *khèn*. Sometimes it’s not for the ceremony anymore, just for the photo.”

These examples show that *visibility* itself has become a form of value. The *index* of lived practice thus shifts toward an *icon* detached from its ritual grounding but celebrated for its aesthetic surface.

3.2 The “Staged” Symbols (Icon → Empty Signifier)

The second state emerges when icons become standardized, staged, and repeated—gradually losing their connection to lived meaning.

Field observation (O3) documented a community festival reconfigured as a performance event with amplified sound, lighting, and choreography:

“As observed in O3, the festival was carefully scripted with sound systems and lighting, transforming ritual into spectacle.”

A local cultural officer (P5) elaborated on this logic of staging:

“We keep the inner ritual for ourselves and show the outer festival for visitors. It’s the only way both can coexist.”

Here, the act of scripting stabilizes the *icon* while concealing the *index*, producing what Laclau might term an *empty signifier*: a sign endlessly circulated but emptied of its internal referent.

The staging of the *khèn* and dance performances exemplifies this mechanism—objects and gestures once embedded in communal time are reoriented toward tourist expectation, creating an externally legible but internally hollow representation of heritage.

3.3 The “Redefined” Symbols (Icon → Symbol)

In the final state, local actors—especially youth and artisans—reclaim interpretive authority by reinvesting icons with new symbolic meaning.

Rather than rejecting tourism, they selectively reinterpret its imagery. A young Hmong student (P6) explained:

“Tourists look at us like we are from a museum. But I don’t mind—as long as I can explain who we really are.”

Similarly, guide P3 reflected on his role as both performer and interpreter:

“When I teach tourists to play the *khèn*, I tell them it’s not only music—it’s a language of the heart.”

Such statements exemplify *re-indexing*—the process of attaching new meanings to symbols that had been commodified. What was once a passive icon for tourist consumption becomes an active *symbol* of self-definition and cultural pride.

This stage also shows emerging *semiotic literacy*: awareness among local actors that heritage operates as a communicative system. Through dialogue with visitors and reinterpretation of performances, they convert staged signs into shared symbols that mediate between authenticity and adaptation.

Synthesis

Across these three stages—*Seen*, *Staged*, *Redefined*—the trajectory of meaning moves from *visibility* to *emptiness* to *reclamation*.

Tourism first amplifies the visibility of signs, then risks hollowing their meaning, and finally enables new forms of agency as communities reinterpret their heritage through the lens of experience and dialogue.

Figure 1. Semiotic Transformation Process

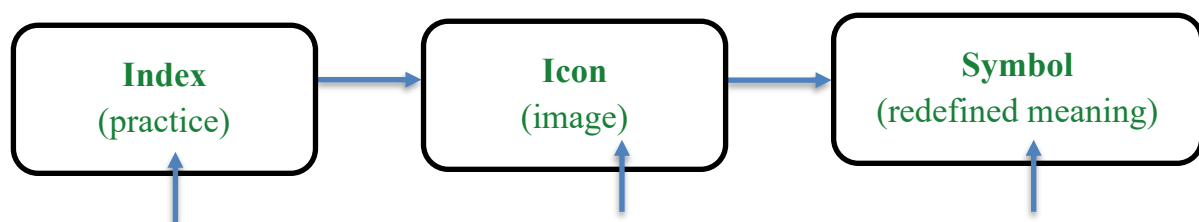


Figure 1 illustrates the three-stage process through which emerging cultural expressions move from *seen practice* to performative representation and finally to redefined symbolic meaning under tourism influence.

Table 2. Mapping of Symbolic Shifts

Object	Index Meaning	Icon Meaning	Symbol (Redefined Meaning)
Dress	Clan identity and practical attire	Tourist fashion emphasizing color and visibility	Heritage pride and ethnic continuity

Khèn (bamboo flute)	Spiritual call, link to ancestors	Stage performance for tourist shows	“Heart language” expressing identity and emotion
Festival	Agricultural ritual tied to community cycle	Public show with scripts, sound systems, and choreography	Dual-layer event balancing ritual integrity and tourism display

Table 2 summarizes how three key cultural objects—dress, khèn, and festivals—shift semiotically across the Seen–Staged–Redefined continuum.

4. DISCUSSION AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Beyond Authenticity: Circulation and Transformation of Signs

Following Bendix (1997), the notion of authenticity in heritage should not be confined to an origin-based purity but understood as a dynamic process of circulation. In Sa Pa, the transformation of Hmong textiles and craftwork from functional dress to tourist fashion demonstrates this ongoing negotiation of meaning. Rather than viewing these changes as “loss,” they can be interpreted as the semiotic migration of cultural signs into new contexts. This fluidity allows heritage to remain “living,” constantly producing and reproducing meanings.

In this perspective, when artisans like the Hmong craftswoman choose brighter colors or simplified motifs to meet tourist tastes, they are not abandoning authenticity but translating it into a new semiotic register. The act of modification itself is an authentic gesture—an effort to keep the sign communicable in a shifting cultural economy. Such an approach moves the discussion away from binary oppositions of “authentic/inauthentic” toward the understanding of authenticity as relational, dialogic, and performative.

4.2 Authorized Heritage Discourse and Co-authorship

Smith’s (2006) concept of the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) emphasizes how official heritage narratives often privilege expert and institutional voices over community ones. Yet, in Sa Pa, this study finds evidence of *co-authorship*—a subtle collaboration between state, tourism operators, and local actors. The “festival scripting” by cultural officers and local leaders does not simply reproduce state control; it also provides a platform for community members to negotiate visibility and voice.

When local cultural officers, themselves Hmong, participate in writing scripts and curating performances, they act as mediators of meaning. Through this process, they reclaim partial authorship of how Hmong heritage is represented to outsiders. Rather than a unidirectional imposition, the AHD in this case becomes a dialogical space, where the meanings of dress, music, and ritual are co-constructed through continual adjustment between political, economic, and emotional expectations.

This co-authorship complicates conventional critiques of commodification by revealing that staged performances may also embody cultural agency. What appears as “performance” for the tourist gaze can simultaneously serve as a form of internal communication, reinforcing community pride and coherence.

4.3 Re-indexing as Semiotic Resistance

Waterton and Smith (2010) argue that emotional engagement and self-recognition play key roles in how heritage is produced and contested. In the case of Sa Pa, young Hmong individuals reinterpret cultural expressions such as playing the *khèn* or wearing traditional dress as acts of *re-indexing*—reconnecting the sign (icon) with its social and emotional referent (index). By explaining meanings to tourists or teaching others to perform these practices, they are not merely reproducing images but re-anchoring them in lived experiences.

This *re-indexing* represents a subtle yet powerful form of semiotic resistance. It pushes back against the flattening tendencies of tourism that turn cultural expressions into mere visual commodities. Instead, youth reinterpret these signs as markers of dignity and belonging. In doing so, they reclaim what Bendix (1997) calls the “authorship of meaning,” asserting their capacity to define what their culture signifies in modernity.

This perspective reframes the Hmong community not as passive custodians of a vanishing culture, but as active semiotic agents who continuously negotiate, contest, and recreate their symbolic world. Their actions transform the tourist encounter into a site of dialogue—one where meanings circulate, clash, and re-emerge anew.

4.4 Implications for Heritage Semiotics

The findings from Sa Pa demonstrate that semiotic transformations are not mere reflections of external economic pressures, but intrinsic to how living heritage survives. The proposed typology—*Seen, Staged, and Redefined*—offers an analytical framework to examine the dynamic circulation of meanings across contexts. By understanding heritage as a communicative process rather than a fixed object, this study contributes to what might be called *heritage semiotics*: a perspective that bridges material culture, discourse, and emotion.

Practically, this implies that heritage management and tourism education should integrate *semiotic literacy*—the ability to read, interpret, and communicate cultural meanings responsibly. Training local guides, festival organizers, and policymakers to articulate both the *indexical* and *iconic* layers of performance can foster intercultural understanding and prevent misrecognition.

In this sense, semiotic awareness becomes a tool not only for analysis but also for empowerment. It enables communities like the Hmong to manage their visibility and authenticity on their own terms, ensuring that the evolving language of their culture remains both intelligible and respected.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that tourism not only commodifies Hmong cultural practices but also reshapes their semiotic trajectories.

Through the typology of *Seen, Staged, and Redefined* symbols, it reveals how meanings migrate from material practice to performative imagery and finally to renewed symbolic agency. The findings highlight that local actors—especially youth and artisans—are not passive bearers of heritage but active semiotic agents who reinterpret and re-signify their traditions within the tourist gaze.

This study advances heritage semiotics by providing a typology of sign transformations that informs both theory and practice. By foregrounding community’s semiotic agency, it redefines living heritage as an evolving communicative process.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

This guide outlines the main thematic questions used to elicit semiotic discourses from participants. It was used flexibly to allow for emergent themes.

1. Opening & Role

- Could you please describe your role in practicing, managing, or engaging with Hmong culture?

2. Cultural Practice & Symbolic Meaning

- (For artisans) What is the traditional meaning of these patterns/colors? When they are changed for tourists, how does that meaning shift?
- (For performers) What is the role of the *khèn* in rituals? How does it feel different when you perform for tourists?

3. Tourism Interaction & Change

- What aspects of your culture (dress, music, festivals) do tourists seem most interested in?
- How do you feel Hmong culture is being represented or portrayed in tourism?

4. Redefinition & Youth Perspective

- (For youth) For your generation, what does it mean to wear traditional dress or participate in festivals today? Is it different from the older generation?

Appendix B: Summary of Anonymized Interview Participant Characteristics

This table provides anonymized context for the participants cited in the study, demonstrating the diversity of roles within the sample.

Code	Described Role	Age Range (Est.)	Gender
P2	Craftswoman (textiles)	30–40	Female
P3	Local guide	25–35	Male
P5	Culture officer	40–50	Male
P6	Hmong student (Tourism major)	20–25	Female

Appendix C: Example of the Semiotic Coding Framework

This table illustrates the analytical process, showing how theoretical semiotic concepts (Index, Icon, Symbol) were applied to code empirical data.

Original Quote (Example)	Semiotic Code	Interpretation & Grouping
P2: <i>"This color is more popular with tourists, easier to sell."</i>	Icon	Seen/Staged: Meaning is driven by tourist visual demand.
P6: <i>"They look at me like a living museum exhibit."</i>	Icon	Seen: The wearer is objectified as a cultural image.
P3: The <i>khèn</i> is the heart language."	Symbol	Redefined: Redefines the <i>khèn</i> as a symbol of emotion and identity.
P6: "We wear this not for show, but to feel who we are."	Index	Redefined: Re-indexing; re-establishes a link to lived experience.