

## **Semantic Function of Dragon Patterns in Ming Dynasty Clothing**

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**Abstract:** The Ming Dynasty is renowned for its rich cultural and artistic achievements, which had a profound impact on various aspects of Chinese society, including fashion and clothing. A notable feature of Ming dynasty clothing was the intricate dragon patterns adorning it. These patterns were not just decorative elements, but also carried profound symbolic meanings. This paper aims to explore the semantic function of dragon patterns on Ming dynasty clothing, delving into the cultural significance and symbolism associated with these designs. The focus of this study is on the semantics of the visual composition of dragon patterns in Ming dynasty clothing, that is, the implications and representation of their meaning. An analysis of pictorial data was conducted from a semantic perspective, including the visual aesthetics, usage, and cultural significance of the dragon patterns. The dragon patterns of the Ming Dynasty encapsulate Chinese traditional aesthetic design, cultural beliefs, and traditional rituals, becoming a representation of China's rich history and traditional heritage.

**Keywords:** Semantic Function; Dragon Patterns; Ming Dynasty Clothing; Aesthetic Function; Indicating Function; Symbol Function

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the field of Ming Dynasty clothing research, dragon patterns, as a typical decorative element, carry profound historical background and cultural connotations. Symbolizing the hierarchical system of ancient Chinese society, dragon patterns played a crucial role in Ming Dynasty clothing, reflecting the social, political, and aesthetic values of the time (Pan, 1999). Dragons hold a special place in Chinese mythology and culture. In Chinese folklore, dragons are revered as powerful yet benevolent creatures associated with luck, prosperity, and protection. They symbolize imperial power and are often found in the art and

clothing of the Ming Dynasty emperors and the ruling class. The appearance of dragon patterns on Ming Dynasty clothing (DPMC) conveyed a sense of authority and legitimacy. It was a visual representation of the wearer's connection to the court and their elevated social status. The intricate details and craftsmanship of the dragon patterns demonstrated the wearer's wealth and elegance, as well as the skill of the artisans who created these garments. DPMC were carefully composed to convey specific meanings and evoke awe. The placement and arrangement of dragons on the clothing were not arbitrary but followed specific design principles.

The semantic function of DPMC plays a crucial role in enhancing knowledge of traditional Chinese design culture and nurturing cultural values. Early research primarily focused on the aesthetic design of DPMC patterns, such as those by Zhou, X (Zhou, 1984). Works by Zhang, Z. Y also focused on the art and aesthetics of Ming Dynasty clothing, providing basic characteristics of DPMC patterns (Zhang, 2009), such as color, shape, and composition. Recent research has started to explore the differential use of DPMC, revealing how dragon patterns were used to signify social status or rank in Ming society, and the occasions for their use, as studied by Hua, M. & Wang, C. X and Lv & Zhou (Hua & Wang, 2012; Lv & Zhou, 2020).

Analyzing the Indicating function of dragon patterns allows for a better understanding of their practical application in Ming Dynasty clothing. The symbolic meaning and cultural symbolism of DPMC have also become a focus of research, with (Lei, 2021) and (Yue, 2015) exploring the symbolic significance of dragon patterns in Ming Dynasty culture and their interrelation with other cultural symbols. Through the analysis of the symbolic function of dragon patterns, we can gain a deeper insight into their significance in Ming Dynasty clothing design. These studies explore the appearance, use, and symbolic meaning of DPMC from different perspectives. A comprehensive and systematic study of DPMC is still to be explored.

## 2. SEMANTIC FUNCTION THEORY

Semantics is the discipline that studies meaning, used to understand human communication through language. Semantic functions in product language theory (Gros, 1984) are classified as formal aesthetic functions, indicating functions, and symbolic functions. The semantic function

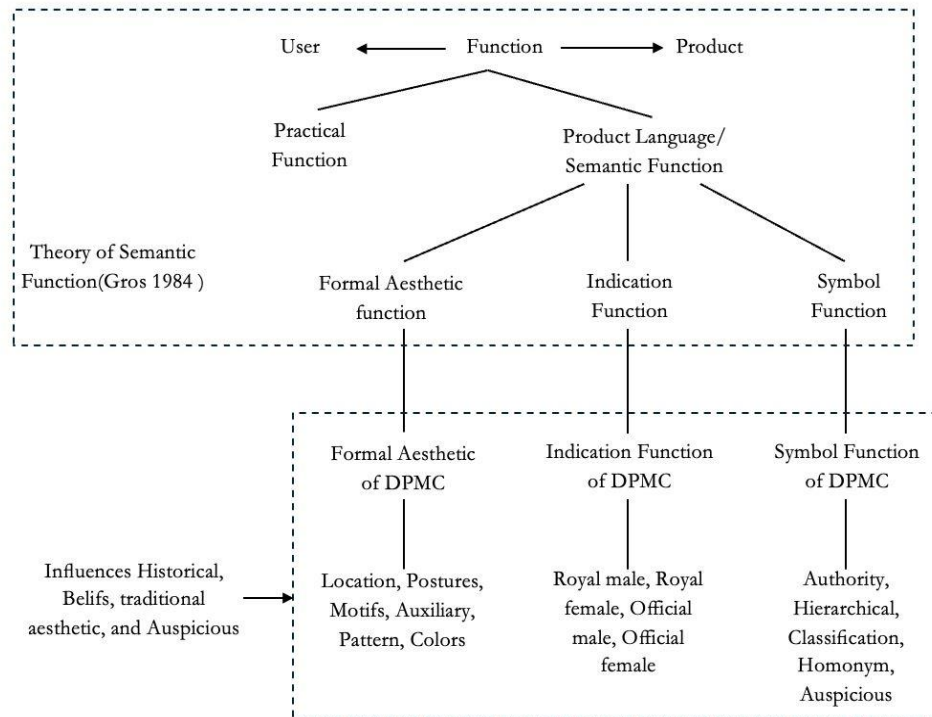
theory proposed by Jon Gros and Richard Fischer is a conceptual model designed to understand the form and communication aspects of product design. This theory posits that a product has both practical functions (such as ergonomics, economy, and ecological functions) and form and communication aspects, which Gros refers to as "product language functions".

In this model, Gros subdivides the specific objects of product language into formal aesthetic functions, such as shape, color, texture, etc., which are aspects observable without considering their content meaning, and semantic functions, which involve the meaning and significance of the product. The semantic function theory is a method of understanding how product language conveys meaning and value, analyzing the various formal and semantic aspects of a product. Jon Gros and Richard Fischer's development of semantic function theory considers that a product (such as a piece of clothing) has both practical functions (such as warmth) and form/communication functions, including formal aesthetic functions (like the shape and color of the clothing) and semantic functions (such as the symbolic meaning behind the design). Klaus Krippendorff proposed a new foundation for design - "the semantic turn," emphasizing meaning and communication in the design process (Krippendorff, 2006). Krippendorff believes that design is not just about form and function but also includes their significance in people's lives (Krippendorff, 2006).

### 3. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Based on the theory of product semantic functions and incorporating the characteristics of dragon patterns, this study has developed a research framework for the semantic functions of dragon patterns. It will comprehensively investigate the dragon patterns in Ming Dynasty clothing from the perspective of their semantic functions, focusing on three major functions.

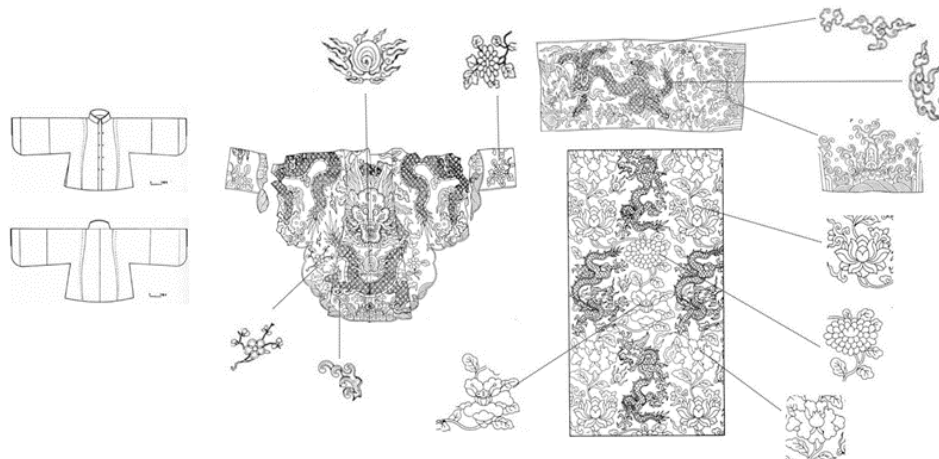
The study of formal aesthetics will examine the appearance of dragon patterns, including the posture of dragons, colors, composition, auxiliary patterns, and layout. The indicating function will primarily explore the rules of usage of dragon patterns, the users, and the occasions of use. The symbolic function encompasses the symbolic meaning of dragon patterns, the symbolic significance of the main dragon-themed patterns, and the symbolic meaning of auxiliary patterns (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Research Framework of Semantic Function Theory for DPMC

#### 4. RESEARCH SCOPE

DPMC specifically refers to the dragon patterns on the costumes of the extremely high-class people in the Ming Dynasty. These patterns are composite, consisting of dragons or transformed dragon figures combined with other motifs. Intricate and exquisite, these patterns frequently adorn the collar, placket, front, and back of garments. The figure 2 below illustrates a dragon pattern from a garment unearthed at the Dingling tomb (The mausoleum of the Wanli Emperor, 1572- 1620), composed of a combination of various types of motifs.



**Figure 2:** Dragon pattern from a garment unearthed at the Dingling tomb

## 5. RESEARCH METHODS

This study aims to delve deeply into the semantics of DPMC, employing a comprehensive set of research methodologies. These methodologies encompass a wide collection, analysis, and interpretation of the dragon patterns from various angles. The research methods primarily include the following steps:

**Data Collection:** The data is mainly sourced from the Confucius Museum, Shandong Museum, the Palace Museum, unearthed clothing relics, documentary materials, and character portraits. A total of 121 dragon patterns from different periods of the Ming Dynasty were collected. These collected patterns were categorized, and a selection of representative patterns were rendered into line drawings using Illustrate software, ensuring clear visibility of the patterns in subsequent research, unaffected by color and material.

**Data Analysis:** The physical features of the patterns were analyzed using Nvivo 12 software, conducting cluster analysis of the elements and categorizing them. Interviews with relevant experts were conducted to define the research themes, followed by thematic analysis of the collected data.

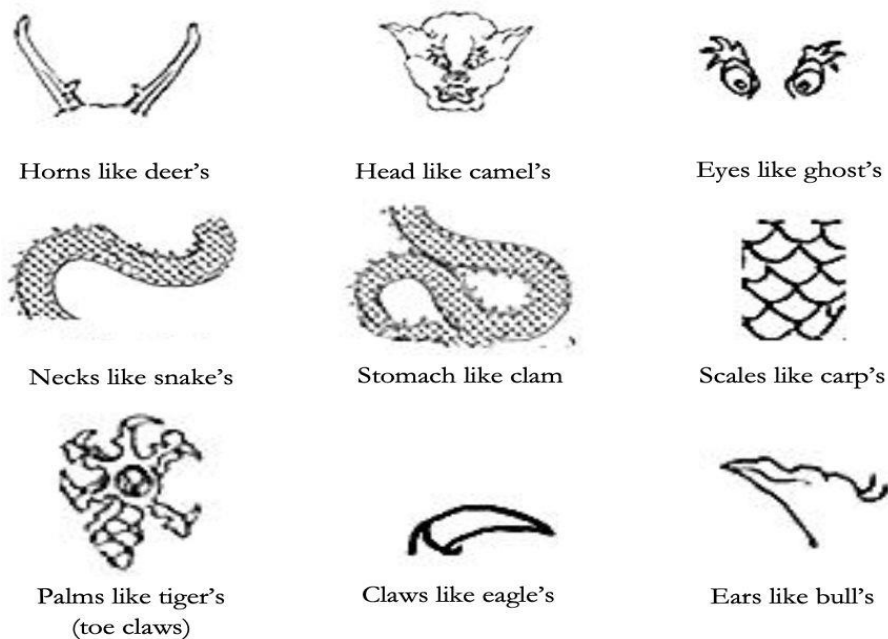
**Analytical Methods:** Visual Analysis involves the identification, classification, and interpretation of the visual diagrams of dragon patterns, primarily interpreting the constituent elements within these patterns. Textual Analysis combines documentary material to interpret the appearance, usage rules, and symbolic meanings of DPMC, thereby uncovering the cultural implications behind these patterns. Through these comprehensive research methods, not only is the aesthetic appreciation of the dragon patterns from the Ming Dynasty enhanced, but also a deep understanding of their semantic value within the social, cultural, and historical contexts is achieved.

## 6. THE FORMAL AESTHETICS OF DPMC

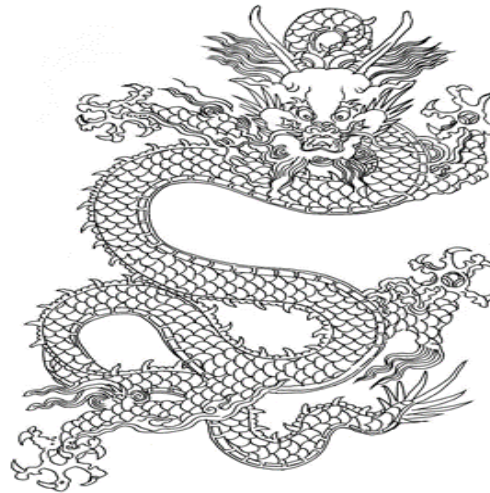
### 6.1 The Aesthetics of the Dragon motif

In the Ming Dynasty, dragon patterns were regarded as exclusive motifs for imperial clothing. In the detailed depiction of dragon patterns, the head is relatively oversized, with a more square shape, protruding cheeks, and antler-like horns. The dragon's eyes are glaring, eyebrows often connected, and the mouth is open with a protruding tongue, visible teeth, and a longer

lower jaw. The upper jaw muscles are developed and protruding, resembling a pig's snout, and the dragon's nose is often ruyi-shaped and curls upwards. The dragon's belly is robust with significant graceful curves, conveying a sense of dynamism and power. The dragon's body features various postures, including flipping, wrapping, and intersecting limbs, tapering gradually from the belly to the tail, which curls upwards with the tip adorned with long fins. Some tails are naturally curved, some bend from inside to outside, and some are serrated, connecting to the fin part, creating a dynamic aesthetic. The legs of the dragon claws are robust and sturdy, with sharp and powerful claws in a grabbing, walking, or ascending posture, complementing the twisting of the body, portraying an image of robustness, dignity, and vigorous strength (Wang, 2010a). The image of the dragon pattern in the Ming Dynasty is a mature representation in Chinese history, inheriting characteristics from nine different animals, each symbolizing distinct qualities (see Figure 2). As recorded in Li Shizhen's "Compendium of Materia Medica - Wings" from the Ming Dynasty, "The dragon is considered the leader of scaled creatures. According to Wang Fu, its shape resembles nine animals: the head of a camel, the horns of a deer, the eyes of a rabbit, the ears of a cow, the neck of a snake, the belly of a mirage, the scales of a carp, the claws of an eagle, and the palms of a tiger. The dragon's back carries eighty-one scales, representing the yang number of nine times nine. Its voice is like the sound of a copper plate. Beside its mouth are whiskers, under its chin is a dragon pearl, and beneath its throat are reverse scales" (Li, 2016) (Figure 3, 4).



**Figure 3:** Nine Likenesses of Dragon Patterns



**Figure 4:** Dragon

## 6.2 The Aesthetics of the Dragon Pattern Family motifs

In the Ming Dynasty, emperors created derivative dragon patterns to win over ministers and reward those with meritorious service. These patterns, closely resembling dragon patterns, include the Python, Flying fish, Fighting bull, and Qilin, which are all part of the bestowed clothing patterns. The python pattern is extremely similar to the dragon pattern, making it difficult to distinguish between python and dragon clothing without close inspection. According to Ming Dynasty literature, Shen Defu recorded: "The python robe is a garment that resembles the dragon, similar to the supreme robe worn by the highest dignity, but with one claw less." (Company, 1959). The dragon pattern has five claws, while the python pattern has four, with the five claws corresponding to the number of fingers on a person or god's hand. During the reign of the Zhengde Emperor (1505-1521) of the Ming Dynasty, the flying fish pattern was introduced into garment decoration for the first time, ranking just below the python clothing. The flying fish patterns on Ming Dynasty bestowed clothing typically feature a dragon head and body but with a fish tail, usually set against a water pattern background. The distinction between flying fish clothing and dragon robes is slightly more evident due to the often-present small pair of wings on the flying fish. The fighting bull is very similar to the dragon but is distinguished by two bull horns on the forehead. Typically, it features a dragon head with two curved horns pointing downward, marking its primary difference from python and flying fish patterns. The body is round and long with scales and a qilin tail, ranking just below the flying fish clothing. The qilin pattern of the Ming Dynasty generally resembles a dragon with double horns, a dragon head, a lion's tail, and a scaly body, but it is shorter than the dragon, unlike the dragon's elongated body (Zhao, 2012) (Figure 5).




























Motif forms	Pattern data from nvivo statistics	Patterns	Head	Scales	Claws	Tail	Horn
dragon	77		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nine likenesses</li> <li>Front-face or Side-face head</li> </ul>	fish scale 	five claws 	dragon tail 	Deer horn 
Bullfighting	2		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Like dragon head</li> <li>Side-face head</li> </ul>	fish scale 	four claws 	dragon tail 	Bull horn 
Flying fish	8		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Like dragon head</li> <li>Side-face head</li> </ul>	No scale 	four claws 	fish tail shape 	Deer horn 
Kirin	10		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Like dragon head</li> <li>Side-face head</li> </ul>	fish scale 	hoof 	lion tail shape 	Deer horn 
python	21		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Like dragon head</li> <li>Front-face or Side-face head</li> </ul>	fish scale 	four claws 	dragon tail 	Deer horn 











Figure 5: Differences between dragon family motifs

In the Ming Dynasty, dragon patterns on clothing formed a complete and standardized set of styles. In terms of form, dragons were categorized into different types such as walking dragon, coiled dragon, frontal dragon, sitting dragon, ascending dragon, descending dragon, etc. (Wang, 2012). Frontal dragons are characterized by their heads facing forward, bodies coiling, and limbs distributed symmetrically – one each at the top, bottom, left, and right – typically embroidered on the chest, back, and sleeve ends of clothing. The frontal dragon's face points straight ahead, and its mane is divided into two tufts, floating upwards.



Standing dragons are characterized by their bodies being vertical and heads tilting sideways (Wang, 2012), resembling a standing posture, hence the name "standing dragon." They are different from frontal sitting dragons and coiled dragons with their coiled and winding postures. Their bodies are slender and are often used for decorative edges on clothing, hats, and curtains. Ascending dragons have their heads up and tails down, opposite to descending dragons, which have their tails up and heads down, resembling a flipping and leaping posture. These dragon patterns were widely used in Ming Dynasty weaving and embroidery, as recorded in "The History of Ming - Records of Rites and Music"(Qian & Watson, 1993). Walking dragons are characterized by their bodies facing sideways, heads raised, tails erect, and feet pointing downward, in a running or walking posture. Offspring dragons were exclusive patterns for the imperial family, typically composed of intermingled large and small dragons. The large dragon is in the center, surrounded by several smaller coiled dragons. Ming Dynasty coiled dragons represent a circular dragon pattern, usually composed of cloud dragons and other motifs. The dragon pattern is in the center, coiling and winding; the surrounding area forms a circle made of auspicious clouds, creating a whole. Among these cloud dragons, elements like fire pearls, flames, seawater, and river cliffs are often embellished. There are also coiled patterns formed solely by the dragon figure, commonly seen in small-sized coiled patterns. Compared to frontal dragons, coiled dragons have more flexible body dynamics, with the dragon's face being frontal or sideways (Table 1).

Table 1: Different Poses of dragon motifs

Postures	Ascending	Descend	Stand	Round Shape	Front-face
					
Patterns					
Features	Dragon head is on the top, the dragon tail is on the bottom	Dragon head is at the bottom, the dragon tail is at the top	Dragon is standing, supported by two claws	The pattern is a round outer contour	Front of the dragon's face

### 6.3 The Aesthetics of DPMC Composition

Data analysis reveals that the composition of dragon patterns includes persimmon calyx shape, circular, square, bi-continuous, quad-continuous, and symmetrical composition. Integrating the previous style analysis, it can be deduced that the persimmon calyx shape is located at the collar part of the garment, where the layout of the dragon patterns often has the dragon head on the front, the dragon body over the shoulder, with compositions including both single and double dragons. Circular and square patches are often located on the front and back, with these layouts typically featuring cloud dragon patterns, emphasizing the posture of the dragon. Bi-continuous, quad-continuous, and symmetrical refer to the arrangement of the main patterns in the composition. Among them, the "persimmon calyx hollow" structure in Ming Dynasty clothing represents the most classical composition of DPMC, characterized by its formal aesthetic symmetry and balance. This study summarizes three structures: 1. Central symmetry: typified by the "persimmon calyx over the shoulder" style, where two identical shapes form a whole, displaying absolute central symmetry; 2. Axial symmetry: the pattern folds along a line, with the graphics on both sides able to overlap, presenting visual stability and balance; 3. Balanced: without a strict axis of symmetry, the decorative area is divided by S-shaped or vortex-shaped curves, showing a sense of visual balance.

### 6.4 The Aesthetics of DPMC Color

An analysis of pictorial data reveals that the predominant colors of dragon patterns are yellow, black, red, green, and white. In ancient China, these colors were pure, not intermediate shades created by mixing, and were characterized by high saturation and vividness, enhancing the luxurious and splendid appearance of the wearer. Yellow and white, being colors of higher brightness, were primarily utilized in the intricate details of dragon patterns, claws, the dragon's body outline, and horns. With the strengthening national power of the Ming Dynasty and the evolution of craftsmanship, the dragon patterns also underwent transformation. Initially, the dragon patterns were simple in color, with shorter and slimmer bodies, resembling lizards from a distance. In the middle period, the most significant change was the elongation and thickening of the dragon's body, making the trunk sinuously coiled. The color palette expanded, with a special emphasis on the dragon's facial features, claws, horns, and eyes, with the use of white making them particularly eye-catching. In the later stages, dragon patterns became even more elaborate and exaggerated. To accentuate the sinuousness of the dragon's body, white was used along the

edges of the dragon's body. The facial expressions of dragons became much more varied and expressive, with some depictions showing dragons with wide-open mouths, conveying a sense of ferocity.

#### 6.5 The Aesthetics of Auxiliary Patterns of DPMC

Ming Dynasty clothing features complex dragon patterns with the primary motif being the dragon, surrounded by other decorative patterns serving as auxiliary elements. According to nvivo data analysis, these auxiliary patterns of dragon motifs often include animals, plants, auspicious symbols, and human figures. Underneath the dragon's body, the patterns are commonly adorned with representations of seas, rivers, and cliffs, with seas depicted as rolling waves or flowing ripples; and river cliffs portrayed as towering mountain shapes. Cloud patterns are ingeniously placed around the dragon's body, with their shapes and quantities determined by the size of the space, all appearing elegantly flowing.

Silk artisans, drawing inspiration from the variations of clouds in nature, refined and abstracted these observations to create a variety of exquisite patterns such as the four-cloud combination, large and small hooked clouds, moving clouds, resting clouds, bonnet clouds, and mushroom clouds. Some are grand and magnificent, others are fresh and elegant. They curl, wind, flow, and float around the dragon patterns, adding a touch of mystery and sparking endless imagination (Wang, 2012). When dragons are combined with floral motifs, the design is cleverly natural, with four types of flowers strung together, and dragons swimming through in various poses. The dragon patterns on skirts, though not as robust and powerful as those on dragon robes, are lively and adorable (Wang, 2010b). Beneath the dragon, there are patterns of mountains, seas, ganoderma, orchids, daffodils, and other flowers, with the dragon's head adorned with a "Ji Shou" character woven in gold, its tail with a crane holding a ganoderma. The dragon's claws are strong and powerful, with one claw tightly grasping a flaming pearl, as if just bursting out of the tumultuous waves, proudly advancing through layers of dense clouds, especially full of vitality. The patterns on the sleeve bands and collar are often quite large, offering ample space for creativity. This part frequently features rich, scenographic depictions of dragon patterns to emphasize the fierceness and vividness of the dragon, while also incorporating traditional Chinese patterns. The scenes are filled with imagination, combining both dynamic and static elements. Each composite pattern of the dragon is a vivid tableau.

## 7. THE INDICATING FUNCTION OF DPMC

### 7.1 Indicating Function of Themes Motifs of DPMC

In the Ming Dynasty, dragon patterns were exclusively reserved for the royal family, including the emperor, his brothers, descendants, and female relatives, making it a symbol of the royal household. The dragon pattern had a strong decorative presence, frequently featured around the collar, chest, back, sleeve bands, and knee bands, prominent parts of the clothing. The range of individuals eligible for these bestowed robes during the Ming Dynasty was quite extensive, typically including three main categories: firstly, a minority of court officials or descendants of renowned individuals who were awarded special clothing surpassing their official rank due to their exceptional achievements or special status. Secondly, eunuchs within the palace were given these garments, with python robes being granted to subordinate officials, initially enjoyed by eunuchs before high-ranking officials. Thirdly, these robes were bestowed upon kings of vassal states and visiting envoys (Zhao, 2012). These bestowed robes were highly precious and were only worn by high-ranking officials during significant events or portraits. Many families have treasured these as heirlooms, with a collection in the Confucius Mansion being passed down to this day. The emperor would grant different luxurious garments according to the official's rank and contributions to the court as an encouragement, thereby maintaining the feudal state. There was a pronounced hierarchy, with the python robe generally ranking first among bestowed robes. The depiction of the python beast on these robes served as a symbol of rank distinction, categorized into "sitting python" and "walking python," with the sitting python being particularly esteemed. "The History of Ming - Records of Imperial Carriages and Clothing" states: "Bestowing a python robe is not easily attainable even for civil and military officials of the first rank. The single python face is slanted, while the sitting python faces forward, which is particularly esteemed." Flying fish robes rank second in bestowed clothing, and fighting bull robes approximately third. Zhang Juzheng received a fighting bull robe from Emperor Shenzong as a reward when he first entered the cabinet (Zhang, 1974). Qilin robes rank after fighting bull robes. However, the ranking order sometimes changed during the Ming Dynasty, as recorded in "The External Record of the Zhengde Emperor" (Mao, 1982): "In the thirteenth year (1518), as the imperial carriage was about to return to the capital, the Ministry of Rites prepared the welcoming rituals, instructing officials in the capital to wear their official robes for reception. Moreover, orders were given for yisuo, large hats, luan belts, and

also bestowed red silk and gauze robes to civil and military officials. The embroidered colors indicated the rank: first rank fighting bull, second rank flying fish, third rank python, fourth rank qilin, fifth to seventh rank tiger leopard." These main patterns played a significant indicative role, clearly distinguishing the wearer's status through the pattern indications, with dragon patterns for royal family members and other main patterns for high-ranking officials, eunuchs, or foreign kings. This Indicating function had a distinct hierarchical distinction, related to the Confucian doctrine of distinction between ruler and subject, and the culture of rites and rituals in the Ming Dynasty, representing the emperor's external symbolic oppression over high-ranking officials. On the other hand, it also served to win over these officials, allowing them to enjoy similar royal clothing symbols, winning their hearts, and ensuring their better service to the emperor.

## 7.2 Indicating function of 'Theme Motifs' Poses

Frontal dragons occupy the highest rank in the hierarchy of dragon postures and are typically exclusive to the emperor, often featured prominently on the front chest area of the emperor's clothing. Coiled dragons, originating from the Tang Dynasty, are often ranked by quantity and are known for their strong decorative nature, symbolizing unity and completeness. Standing dragons are commonly used for the decorative edges of clothing, hats, and curtains. Walking dragons are frequently embroidered at the waist and lower hem of garments. The imperial robes unearthed at Dingling are all adorned with the twelve symbol patterns, which represent the highest ceremonial clothing of the emperor. These twelve coiled dragons are embroidered separately and then attached to various parts of the imperial robe. All twelve coiled dragons depict the dragon rising and playing with a pearl from the side, with the sea and river cliffs embroidered below, and surrounded by cloud patterns, portraying the dragon soaring from the sea into the clouds. In the imperial clothing unearthed at Dingling, most of the dragon patterns are ascending dragons, but descending dragons and walking dragons are also present (Archaeology, 1990). In the early Ming Dynasty, the emperor's yellow robe featured four coiled dragons, but this was changed to twelve symbol patterns and twelve coiled dragons during the reign of Emperor Yingzong (mid-early Ming Dynasty), a tradition that was continued by subsequent emperors. The number of coiled dragons is explicitly regulated, with a higher number of coiled dragons indicating a higher rank. There is a clear hierarchical distinction in the postures of dragon patterns, with ascending

dragons ranked higher than descending dragons. Descending dragons are often paired with ascending dragons, for instance, in a centrally symmetrical arrangement on a persimmon calyx-shaped collar, featuring one ascending and one descending dragon. Walking dragons are typically found on the knee bands and horizontal bands of skirts. Frontal dragons are ranked higher than side-facing dragons. In the collected data, side-facing dragons are most common, with many bestowed robes for high-ranking officials featuring side-facing postures. Frontal postures are mostly used by the imperial family.

### 7.3 The Indicating Function of DPMC Color

The Ming Dynasty clothing system aimed to restore the traditional ritual system of the Zhou Dynasty, within which colors had explicit hierarchical distinctions. "Zhou Li - Dong Guan Kao Gong Ji" states: "The affair of painted silks involves mixing five colors. The east is called blue, the south is called red, the west is called white, and the north is called black. Heaven is called dark, and earth is called yellow. Blue and white are next to each other, red and black are next to each other, dark and yellow are next to each other. The earth is yellow, symbolizing squareness. The color of heaven changes with time" (Wang, 2005). The initial Chinese color perception was connected with space and time, turning the chaos of the wilderness into an ordered universe and establishing cosmic order. At the same time, colors also confirmed another order, that of human relations. Colors are linked with directions, and the hierarchy of directions naturally reflects the hierarchy of colors. The center is higher than the four directions, so the yellow corresponding to the center is higher than the colors of the four directions. The supreme status of yellow in the color spectrum of the Han ethnicity (as in the color of the emperor's dragon robe) probably originates from this. The five primary colors are regarded as noble, while the secondary products of two paired colors are considered inferior. Different ranks of people choose corresponding colors based on their official rank and class. From the statistical data of patterns, it can be seen that in Ming Dynasty dragon pattern clothing, yellow dragon patterns were exclusively for the emperor, while other colors also appeared in bestowed clothing. Red is the most common color in bestowed clothing.

### 7.4 The Indicating Function of Auxiliary Patterns of DPMC

During the Ming Dynasty, everyone, from the royal court to commoners, paid great attention to the transition of seasons and festivals. It was

customary for the Ming royal court to change clothing patterns according to the season, and it was also popular among the people to wear festive clothes during holidays to celebrate the New Year and show off new outfits. Liu Ruoyu, a courtier of the Ming Dynasty, described the festive life in the Ming court in his book "Zhuo Zhongzhi", providing detailed introductions to the seasonal and festive patterns on clothing. According to "Zhuo Zhongzhi," "from the 24th of the last lunar month after stove worship, the courtiers and officials would wear gourd-patterned patches and python robes. During the Lantern Festival, the courtiers and officials all wore lamp-patterned patches and python robes... From the first to the thirteenth day of May, the courtiers and officials wore the Five Poisons and Tiger-patterned patches and python robes... On the Qixi Festival (Double Seventh Day) of the seventh lunar month, the courtiers wore Magpie Bridge patches... For the Double Ninth Festival in September, they wore Chrysanthemum patches and python robes... On the Winter Solstice, the courtiers and officials all wore Yangsheng (Nurturing Life) patches and python robes," illustrating that during the festive periods, the courtiers and officials in the Ming court wore thematic patches and python robes. Each seasonal festival corresponded to one or two thematic patterns. These patterns were often randomly matched with other auspicious patterns, further enhancing the grandeur and opulence of the court (Liang & Zhang, 2017). The tiger, being regarded as the leader of all beasts in ancient times, was seen as a divine creature capable of suppressing evil spirits and ensuring peace. The folk tradition of ancient times considered May to be the "poisonous month," and the fifth day of May was known as the "poisonous day." With the weather getting warmer in May, poisonous creatures such as snakes, scorpions, lizards, toads, and centipedes became more active. Various methods were adopted by the people to prevent the harm caused by these five poisons, including embroidering the five poisons on clothing, all bearing the significance of driving away evil spirits. In the royal court, it was recorded that "from the first to the thirteenth day of the lunar May every year, the courtiers and officials wore Five Poisons and Tiger-patterned patches and python robes" ("Zhongzhi") (Liu, 2018). These festive patterns added vibrant colors to the court life, reflecting the change of seasons and the importance of festivals. In Ming society, wearing seasonal clothing and celebrating festivals were significant traditions, widely inherited not only in the royal court but also among common people. The diversity of these patterns and clothing added brilliance and unique elements to the cultural traditions and court life of the Ming Dynasty.



## 8. SYMBOLIC FUNCTION OF DPMC

### 8.1 The Symbolic Meaning of the Dragon Motif

The symbolic meanings of the dragon primarily encompass totem worship, deity worship, dragon worship, and emperor worship. By the Ming Dynasty, with the formation of emperor worship, the dragon became a symbol of the emperor and led to the establishment of a dragon culture within the court (Liu & Yang, 1992). The composition of dragon patterns merges the characteristics of nine different animals, each symbolizing unique qualities. According to Li Shizhen's "Compendium of Materia Medica - Wings" and records by Wang Fu, the construction of the dragon pattern includes the head of a camel, the horns of a deer, the eyes of a rabbit, the ears of a cow, the neck of a snake, the belly of a mirage, the scales of a carp, the claws of an eagle, and the paws of a tiger. These features respectively represent health, endurance, purity, agility, inclusiveness, resilience, decisiveness, and bravery. The details of the dragon pattern, such as the ruler on its head, the whiskers beside its mouth, the luminous pearl under its jaw, and the scales on its back, further enrich its symbolic meaning, reflecting the deep cultural and philosophical connotations of the dragon pattern as an essential element in ancient Chinese patterns.

### 8.2 The Symbolic Meaning of the Dragon Family Motifs

The python pattern represents the large snake, viewed as a high-level pattern, second only to the dragon, symbolizing nobility. The python robe became a special commendation from the emperor to meritorious court officials, an important marker of status and position. The flying fish pattern originates from ancient Indian mythology, symbolizing good omens, and was considered by the ancients as a sign of "prosperity throughout the world." The flying fish pattern evolved over time, featuring a python-shaped flying fish maintaining the characteristic fish tail, but without wings. The fighting bull pattern derives from astronomical constellations, symbolizing a lucky beast similar to the dragon, with downward-bending horns resembling those of a bull. The qilin, viewed as an auspicious divine beast, symbolizes good fortune, peace, and longevity. Renowned for its kindness, the qilin does not tread on grass or consume living creatures, and its appearance is considered highly auspicious. The qilin has legendary connections with Confucius, symbolizing the advent of a peaceful and prosperous era (Gu, 2010).

### 8.3 The Symbolic Significance of DPMC Colors

In Ming Dynasty clothing, the colors of dragon patterns were not merely visual decorations but also significant symbols of social hierarchy, power, and cultural values. The choice of colors reflects the profound cultural connotations and symbolic meanings of colors in ancient China. Below are common dragon pattern colors in Ming Dynasty clothing and their symbolic meanings: In traditional Chinese culture, yellow is often viewed as the color of the center and the earth, representing authority and nobility. The emperor's dragon robe during the Ming Dynasty was predominantly yellow, symbolizing supreme imperial power and the noble status of the royal family. Red symbolizes celebration, auspiciousness, and power. Ming Dynasty emperors often wore red clothing during significant celebrations, indicating national peace and prosperity. Additionally, red is associated with the royal family name "Zhu," reinforcing the symbolism of imperial power (Ying & Xiaohong, 2020). In ancient times, black was associated with water, symbolizing winter and the north. Black dragon robes were often used in solemn occasions like rituals, symbolizing solemnity, stability, and mystery. Blue (Azure) is associated with wood, symbolizing spring and the east. In Ming Dynasty clothing, azure was often used to represent scholarship, freshness, and tranquility. In traditional Chinese culture, white is often associated with metal, symbolizing autumn and the west. White also symbolizes mourning and purity and was used with caution in Ming Dynasty clothing (Dusenbury, 2015) (Table 2).

Table 2: The Five Elements Corresponding to Five Colors

Direction	Season	Element	Color	Planet
South	Summer	Fire	Red	Mars
East	Spring	Wood	Blue/Green	Jupiter
North	Winter	Water	Black	Mercury
West	Autumn	Metal	White	Venus
Center	*Interseasonal	Earth	Yellow	Saturn

### 8.4 The Symbolic Significance of Auxiliary Patterns of DPMC

In the design of patterns for Ming Dynasty clothing, the expression of symbolic meaning is rich and profound, covering a wide range from abstract motifs to animals, plants, and human stories. The pattern design in Ming Dynasty clothing is not only a manifestation of aesthetics but also a deep reflection of culture, philosophy, and religious beliefs. The rich symbolic meanings embedded in these patterns reflect the societal values and cultural background of the time. Below is a summary of the symbolic

significance of these auxiliary patterns (Table 3):

Table 3: Symbolic meanings of these auxiliary patterns

Category	Pattern	Symbolic Meaning
Abstract	Dragon Pattern	Imperial authority, majesty, and dignity.
	Shoushan Stone	Longevity, eternity, and sturdiness.
	Dragon Pearl	Protection, blessing, and mystical power.
	Swastika, "Shou" Character	Auspiciousness, longevity.
Animals	Phoenix	Peace, nobility, and a symbol for the empress.
	Bat	Happiness (due to "bat" sounding like "fortune" in Chinese).
	Crane	Longevity, auspiciousness, loyalty of ministers to the emperor.
	Sheep	Auspiciousness, prosperity.
	Butterfly	Beauty, grace, happiness, blissful marriage, longevity.
Plants	Plum, Orchid, Narcissus	Elegance, strength, modesty.
	Chrysanthemum	Steadfastness, longevity.
	Peony	Prosperity, peace, and fortune.
	Peach Blossom	Spring, beautiful life, tranquility, longevity.
	Lingzhi Mushroom	Immortality, auspiciousness.
Figures	Hundred Sons Clothing	Many children, blessings, and happy life.
Category	Pattern	Symbolic Meaning
	Mythical Figures	Cultural heritage, belief in legends (e.g., Cowherd and Weaver Girl, Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea, Zhong Kui chasing ghosts).

## 9. CONCLUSION

In Ming Dynasty clothing, the semantic function of dragon patterns is manifested as a complex symbol system. It not only represented social status and hierarchy but also profoundly reflected the cultural and ritualistic notions of the time. With their diverse forms (such as walking, coiled, frontal, sitting, ascending, and descending dragons), dragon patterns appeared on clothing, becoming significant symbols in court rituals. The postures and colors of these dragon patterns were rich and varied, each with its unique cultural significance and symbolic function. The ancient Chinese ritual system was a complex symbol system expressing meanings through gifts and ceremonies. Rituals were not only expressions of emotions and values but also reflections of the social structure, providing a crucial perspective for understanding a nation's spiritual consciousness (Geertz, 1973; Wang, 2016). The clothing system and rituals of the Ming Dynasty exemplified a deep understanding and practice of Confucian concepts, especially under Zhu Yuan zhang and his successors, who, through the establishment and implementation of the

clothing system, reinforced the social hierarchy and political order (Zhang, 1974). As a significant symbol of emperor and deity worship, the usage rules and hierarchy of dragon patterns were strictly defined, reflecting the profound cultural connotations and influence of Confucian thought in ancient China. Ming Dynasty emperors strengthened their control over their subjects by granting banquets or food, with rituals and clothing playing an important role in this process. They not only maintained identity recognition but also shaped the social order (Zhao, 2012). In summary, DPMC were not merely decorative elements; they had profound semantic functions, conveying cultural meanings, symbolism, and a sense of authority. These patterns showcased the exquisite craftsmanship of artisans and reflected the social status of the wearers. The complex usage rules and strict hierarchical regulations made dragon patterns a symbolic representation of Ming Dynasty court rituals, reflecting the significant aspects of ancient Chinese culture. From the Ming Dynasty to the present, dragon patterns continue to be revered and celebrated, embodying the enduring legacy of the Ming era and the broader Chinese culture.

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