

# *Interpretation of Cultural Symbols in Inner Mongolian Ethnic Clothing: Patterns, Colors and Symbolic Meanings*

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**Abstract:** The ethnic costumes of the Mongolian people are the material carriers of the historical memory, aesthetic concepts and spiritual beliefs of the northern nomadic ethnic groups. The patterns and colors within them constitute a highly condensed cultural symbol system. This article systematically interprets the cultural symbols in the ethnic costumes of the Mongolian people by focusing on three core dimensions: pattern types, color systems and symbolic meanings. The article begins with animal patterns, geometric patterns and plant patterns, analyzing the form characteristics and composition rules of each type of pattern, and revealing the modeling logic derived from nomadic life and natural observation; it also explores the high purity, strong contrast features of the color system and the cultural encoding functions of colors in indicating age, status and occasions; and comprehensively interprets the symbolic system formed by patterns and colors. The research shows that the patterns and colors of the Mongolian ethnic costumes are not merely decorative; they constitute a complete visual language that records the nomadic people's understanding of the relationship among heaven, earth and man, and are facing the dual situations of symbol extraction and meaning reconstruction in contemporary society.

## **1. Introduction**

As a dual carrier of the material culture and spiritual world of the northern nomadic tribes, Inner Mongolian ethnic attire has developed a unique and stable visual language system through prolonged historical evolution [1]. This system, with patterns and colors as its core elements, condenses the grassland peoples' reverence for natural forces, understanding of social order, and interpretation of life's meaning into a wearable symbolic system. However, long-term research on Inner Mongolian ethnic attire has primarily focused on archaeological descriptions of clothing forms, technical records of craftsmanship, and the collection and organization of folk customs, lacking systematic cultural interpretation of the symbolic logic and representational systems hidden behind patterns and colors [2]. Based on this research background, this paper takes "Interpreting Cultural Symbols in Inner Mongolian Ethnic Attire" as its entry point, concentrating on the two core dimensions of patterns and colors to analyze the types and formal characteristics of animal, geometric, and plant patterns. It further examines the basic color palette, color coordination principles, and their cultural encoding functions, then provides a comprehensive interpretation of

the symbolic system formed by patterns and colors, while exploring their transformation and preservation pathways in contemporary contexts. Through this research, the paper aims to offer a systematic interpretive framework for the cultural symbols of Inner Mongolian ethnic attire and provide theoretical support at the formal language level for the contemporary transformation of ethnic culture.

## **2. Patterns and Form Characteristics of Inner Mongolian Ethnic Clothing**

As an important part of the material culture of the northern nomadic people, the visual characteristics of Inner Mongolian ethnic clothing are mainly concentrated in the pattern system. These patterns are not random decorative embellishments but are a symbol system formed during a long historical evolution with stable form patterns and cultural logic [3].

### **2.1 Animal Patterns: Visual Indicators of Nomadic Life**

In the pattern system of Inner Mongolian ethnic clothing, the animal theme occupies the most prominent position. This feature is rooted in the inseparable survival relationship between the nomadic people and animals. Horses, cows, sheep, and camels are not only sources of production materials and living resources but also the core imagery of the spiritual world of the grassland culture. The animal patterns in the clothing are not a faithful representation of natural forms but are visual symbols that have been highly stylized and abstracted [4]. Their form logic is subject to the spatial limitations of the decorative parts and the overall form aesthetics.

The image of horses appears most frequently in the pattern system of Inner Mongolian ethnic clothing. As the most important means of transportation and war companions in nomadic life, horses are endowed with the symbolic connotations of strength, speed, and loyalty. The typical treatment of horse patterns in the clothing includes two methods: one is the side silhouette representation of a single horse, emphasizing the relationship between the horse's head, mane, and tail, and the body part is often simplified into smooth arcs; the other is the continuous horse patterns in rows, formed by repetitive units, commonly seen at the collar, cuffs, and hem edges of the robe. The image of sheep is also an important theme in Inner Mongolian ethnic clothing, but the form of expression is quite different from that of horses. The sheep horn pattern is the most common variant, composed of symmetrical curved lines, which can appear alone or be repeated to form continuous decorative bands. Sheep horn patterns are frequently seen in the borders of fur robes, the clasps of belts, and the components of women's headwear. Compared with the dynamic image of horses, the image of sheep is more focused on the static sense of order and fullness, which is consistent with the cultural positioning of sheep as representing abundance and tranquility in nomadic economy. In addition, animal images such as deer, eagles, and fish also appear in specific types of clothing. Deer horn patterns and sheep horn patterns have a kinship in form, but the forked structure of deer horns is more complex, often blending with the image of tree branches, forming a composite pattern between animals and plants. The image of an eagle is often seen on the chest and back decorations of men, appearing in a frontal posture with wings spread, emphasizing symmetry and dignity. These animal patterns together constitute the most vivid category of visual symbols in Inner Mongolian ethnic clothing. They use concise and expressive form language to solidify the core experiences of nomadic life on the clothing.

### **2.2 Geometric Patterns and Natural Symbols**

If animal patterns represent concrete objects, then geometric patterns represent another dimension of abstract thinking in Inner Mongolian ethnic costumes. These patterns, composed of

basic forms such as points, lines, triangles, squares, and circles, are not purely decorative abstractions, but stem from the observation and refinement of natural phenomena. In long-term production and life practice, grassland ethnic groups have transformed natural objects such as mountains, rivers, stars, and wind and snow into stable geometric symbols, forming a highly condensed visual language.

Sawtooth pattern is one of the most common and distinctive geometric patterns in Inner Mongolian ethnic costumes. It is composed of continuous triangular or serrated lines, which are distributed in a strip shape when used alone, or can be combined with other patterns. The origin of sawtooth patterns is usually considered to be the contour lines of mountains, especially the layered ridges when viewed from afar on grasslands. In clothing applications, sawtooth patterns are commonly found on the collar, placket, and hem edges of robes, creating an interesting contrast between their sharp corners and soft fur or silk materials [5]. Ripples and folds are another important type of geometric pattern. Ripples simulate the flow pattern of water in a continuous curve, with both gentle wave like undulations and staggered flow patterns. In the arid and rainless grassland environment, water is the source of life, and the ripple symbol carries a clear auspicious meaning. The loop pattern is composed of continuous turning structures formed by square folded lines, and its closed and open relationship forms a cyclic visual rhythm. Wrinkles are often used in clothing in conjunction with ripples, creating a tension rich contrast between the rigid and flexible, square and round forms. Circular and diamond patterns are associated with observational experience of the sun, moon, and stars. A regular circle represents the sun, often appearing in core positions such as the chest and back; Crescent and polygonal star shapes appear in edge decorations; The diamond is regarded as a symbol of the earth, with its four corners pointing in four directions: southeast, northwest, and northwest, reflecting the spatial orientation concept of nomadic peoples.

### 2.3 Plant Patterns and Symbolic Plants

Compared with animal patterns and geometric patterns, plant patterns account for a relatively smaller proportion in Inner Mongolian ethnic clothing, but their forms and cultural connotations are more complex. These foreign patterns, after a long process of dissemination, have merged and transformed with the original decorative traditions of the grassland, forming variant styles with Inner Mongolian local characteristics [6].

The lotus pattern is one of the core decorative motifs in Buddhist art. It is widely used in religious occasions and festival costumes in Inner Mongolian ethnic clothing. Its typical form is a fully expanded lotus petal, composed of layered arcs, with a circular flower bud in the center. Unlike the highly realistic lotus in Buddhist art, the lotus patterns in Inner Mongolian clothing are often simplified to two to three layers of overlapping petal structures, with an overall shape tending towards regularity and geometry. The peony pattern is mainly influenced by the cultural system of the Central Plains and appears in more solemn ceremonial and wedding costumes. The peony patterns in Buddhist art pursue the layering and curling of petals, emphasizing the effect of wealth and magnificence; while the peony patterns in Inner Mongolian clothing show a distinct style transformation: the number of petals is reduced, the curling amplitude is increased, and the overall contour shifts from a circular shape to a rhombic or square shape. The scroll pattern is the most abstract type of plant pattern. It is mainly composed of continuous, S-shaped curved branches, from which simplified leaves and flower buds are derived, forming an infinitely extending and dynamic structure. During the dissemination process, the scroll pattern gradually separated from the specific reference to specific plants and became a purely decorative form language, which gives it stronger adaptability and enables it to seamlessly connect with various local patterns.

### 3. The Color System and Cultural Connotations of Inner Mongolian Ethnic Clothing

#### 3.1 Basic Color Spectrum and Color Preference

The color world of Inner Mongolian ethnic clothing is centered around five colors: blue, white, red, green, and yellow. These five colors are not evenly distributed; each has its specific application scenarios, symbolic meanings, and aesthetic preferences. Overall, blue holds the most prominent position, followed by white and red, while green and yellow are more often found in specific parts or specific types of clothing. The formation of this color spectrum structure is influenced by both the natural environment and the Mongolian people's religious beliefs, historical memories, and social customs.

Blue holds an irreplaceable core position in Inner Mongolian ethnic clothing. The main colors of robes are mostly shades of blue, with dark and light blue being the most common. Dark blue is deep and stable, often used as the main color for adult men and elderly people's robes; light blue is bright and expansive, often seen in women's and young people's clothing, as well as ceremonial dresses for festivals. The lofty status of blue stems from the Mongolian people's worship of the sky. In the cosmic view of the nomadic pastoral people, the sky is the abode of the supreme deity and the creator and protector of all things [7]. Designing the main color of the clothing as blue means that the wearer is always under the protection of the sky, expressing the person's gratitude and reverence for the divine favor. White occupies an important position second only to blue in Inner Mongolian ethnic clothing. White is mainly used for borders, cuffs, collars, linings, belts, headwear, and other decorative parts. The symbolic meaning of white comes from two aspects: one is related to milk, in the nomadic economy, milk is the source of life and the highest symbol of hospitality, thus white is associated with purity, auspiciousness, and kindness; the other is related to the worship of white in Shamanism, white is regarded as a sacred color that can communicate with heaven and earth. Red and green play the role of embellishment and balance in the color spectrum. Red is often seen in belts, collars, clasps, the edges of robe hems, etc., and its high saturation visual effect makes it the visual focus of the entire piece of clothing. Red in Mongolian culture symbolizes fire and life energy. Fire has the functions of expelling evil and purifying, and red is thus endowed with the meaning of protecting the wearer from evil spirits. Green is used conservatively in clothing, mostly in the lining or local embroidery patterns of the robes, rarely as the main color of the robes. This is related to the visual experience of the grassland environment. In an environment surrounded by green grasslands, the green color of the clothing is difficult to form a striking visual contrast, so green is more reserved for plant patterns in the patterns rather than the overall color of the clothing. Yellow is the color with the lowest frequency among the five basic colors. In secular clothing, yellow is limited to the noble class that has received Buddhist ennoblement or appears in specific religious festivals. This color usage taboo keeps yellow in a special position in Inner Mongolian ethnic clothing, being rare yet eye-catching.

#### 3.2 Formal rules of color matching

The color matching of Inner Mongolian ethnic costumes presents three distinct characteristics: high purity, strong contrast, and clear boundaries. These features together constitute its unique visual appearance, making it highly recognizable in grassland environments.

High purity is the primary characteristic of colors used in Inner Mongolian ethnic costumes. Whether it's blue, red, or white, the colors used have extremely high saturation levels, and there are very few gray or cloudy intermediate tones. This color habit is closely related to the natural environment of the grassland. In a high-altitude environment with strong sunlight and clear air, high-purity colors can maintain their visual impact, making them clear and distinguishable even

from a distance. The high-purity use of colors in Inner Mongolian ethnic costumes is not only an aesthetic choice, but also has clear functional rationality. Strong contrast is the second significant feature. The juxtaposition of complementary or contrasting colors such as blue and red, white and blue, red and green is very common, creating a strong and tense visual effect. A deep blue robe paired with a bright red waistband and white border, forming a distinct boundary between several colors without any gradient transitions or harmonious intermediate colors in between. This strong contrast pairing method may be considered too stimulating or even vulgar in many cultural traditions, but it precisely constitutes its unique aesthetic charm in Inner Mongolian ethnic costumes [8]. The clarity of boundaries is the third important feature. The boundaries between different colored regions in Inner Mongolian ethnic costumes are often handled very clearly, with almost no "blending" effect as in Chinese painting or "transition" effect as in Western painting. A border is a clearly defined ribbon, and an embroidery pattern is an independently colored block. This boundary treatment method is closely related to the production process of clothing. Whether it is fur splicing, fabric sewing, or embroidery coloring, clear stitching or contour lines are required between color areas as boundaries, and the production technology itself does not encourage the handling of blurred boundaries. At the same time, this clear boundary also forms a logical unity with the high purity and strong contrast mentioned earlier.

### 3.3 Cultural coding function of color

The colors in Inner Mongolian ethnic costumes not only have aesthetic significance, but also serve a clear cultural coding function. Color is used to identify the wearer's age, marital status, social status, and the nature of the occasion, forming a recognizable visual language.

Age and life stages are important areas where color coding plays a role. Generally speaking, young women's clothing colors are more vibrant and diverse, with blue leaning towards bright sky blue, red having a larger usage area, and white borders being wider. The color of belts for unmarried women differs from that of married women, with the former mostly being bright red and the latter tending towards deep red or replaced by blue. After entering old age, the overall color of clothing tends to be simple and elegant, with dark blue and dark green becoming the main choices, red taking a back seat as a small area decoration, and the width of the white border will also narrow. This change trajectory clearly reflects the differences in social expectations at different stages of life: young people are expected to show vitality and vitality, so clothing colors are more prominent; Older people need to demonstrate stability and restraint, and their clothing colors tend to be restrained accordingly. Social status and marital status are also conveyed through color. In traditional society, the clothing of the aristocratic class had more possibilities in terms of color usage. Especially in the Qing Dynasty, according to the court's regulations, the clothing of Mongolian nobles was strictly classified in terms of color, pattern, and decorative materials. In addition, although blue is widely used, its depth and purity also imply differences in identity, with deep blue often associated with higher status. The function of identifying marital status is particularly prominent in women's clothing. The color difference of the waistband mentioned earlier is the most direct way of identification. The proportion of red in married women's headwear is usually lower than that of unmarried women, which implies a certain constraint on women's expressiveness under marital status. The nature of the occasion and etiquette standards are another important dimension of color coding. There are systematic differences in color usage between festive costumes and everyday costumes. For festive occasions such as Nadam Fair, Spring Festival, and weddings, the overall color scheme of clothing tends to be full and bold, with an increased usage area of red, sky blue, and white, and stronger color contrast. During funerals or mourning periods, clothing is mainly in plain colors, with dark blue or even close to black robes being the

preferred choice. Red is completely prohibited, and decorative borders and embroidery are greatly simplified. The color switching between such occasions reflects the important function of color coding in regulating social behavior and regulating etiquette expression. The color of clothing is not only an expression of personal aesthetics, but also a way for individuals to follow social norms and fulfill their social roles.

## **4. The Symbolic System and Contemporary Significance of Patterns and Colors**

### **4.1 Symbolic Expression of Natural Worship**

The symbolic system of Inner Mongolian ethnic costumes first points to the relationship between humans and nature. In traditional nomadic societies, human survival is highly dependent on natural conditions: rainfall determines the abundance of grasslands, wind and snow determine the survival of livestock, and the sun, moon, and stars provide time references for migration and grazing. Faced with this uncontrollable force of nature, nomadic peoples have developed a spiritual attitude centered on awe and gratitude. This attitude is systematically symbolized in clothing, with patterns and colors serving as symbolic links between humans and nature.

Blue and the worship of the heavens it symbolizes are the most central part of the entire symbolic system. Dyeing the robe blue signifies that the wearer has placed themselves within the protection of the heavens, and also expresses gratitude for the blessings bestowed by heaven. This blue worship is not an abstract philosophical speculation, but a concrete practice that runs through daily life. From a deeper perspective, the widespread use of blue also implies a worldview: humans are not conquerors of nature, but part of the natural order. The sky is above, people are below, and there is an appropriate tension relationship between people and the sky. This worldview is consistent with the inherent logic of nomadic economy, which is not to transform nature, but to conform to the rhythm of nature. White and red complement this natural worship system from different dimensions. White symbolizes milk and purity, corresponding to the aspect of the earth nurturing life. The white border surrounds the edge of the blue robe, like milk nourishing life on the grassland, and like clouds embellishing the blue sky. Red symbolizes fire and life energy, corresponding to the power of transformation and regeneration. Fire can drive away wild beasts, heat food, forge tools, and also serve as an intermediary for communicating with gods in shamanic rituals. The red belt is tied around the waist, which is both the center of body heat and the area where vitality is most concentrated. The three colors each play their respective roles, forming a complete natural symbolic system: heaven above, earth below, and fire at the center of the human body, all interconnected and echoing with each other.

### **4.2 Visual coding of social order and life etiquette**

If the symbolic expression of nature worship answers the relationship between "man and nature", then the visual encoding of social order and life etiquette answers the relationship between "man and others". Clothing is not only a medium between humans and nature, but also a tool for identifying identity, transmitting information, and coordinating behavior between people. The patterns and color systems of Inner Mongolian ethnic costumes serve a clear social coding function, transforming abstract social structures and life rituals into visual language. The complexity and spatial distribution of patterns are important dimensions of social coding. In traditional society, the aristocratic class had the right to use more complex and intricate patterns, while the general public often used simplified patterns. For example, the use of dragon and phoenix patterns is strictly restricted, and only nobles can embroider such patterns symbolizing imperial power on their robes. The function of color in identifying age and life stages is particularly prominent. As mentioned

earlier, there are systematic differences in color usage between young women and the elderly, as well as between unmarried and married individuals. These differences are not accidental, but cultural consensus formed through long-term social adjustment. The color of clothing thus becomes a visual window for reading the wearer's life process. In traditional societies with underdeveloped communication and low literacy rates, this visual encoding has extremely high practical value. People don't need to ask, they can roughly judge the way and degree of interaction with the other person by just looking at their clothing color.

Life etiquette is the most concentrated occasion where color coding plays a role. Wedding is one of the most solemn ceremonies in life, and the use of colors in wedding attire is therefore the most abundant and flamboyant. The groom's robe is mainly bright blue, with white borders and a red waistband; The bride's attire is a combination of red and blue, with a large amount of red coral and silver decorations used in the headwear. Red symbolizes auspiciousness, reproduction, and vitality in this occasion, and the paired bird and animal patterns symbolize harmony between husband and wife and the abundance of children and blessings. Funeral etiquette presents a completely opposite color logic. During the mourning period, clothing was mainly in plain colors, with dark blue and black robes being the most common. Red was completely banned, and all bright decorative patterns were simplified or removed. From weddings to funerals, colors undergo a complete cycle from full and bold to subdued and subdued, which corresponds to the natural trajectory of an individual's life from peak to finish.

#### 4.3 Symbolic Changes and Transmissions in the Contemporary Context

The most prominent trend in the contemporary application of traditional patterns is the extraction and recombination of symbols. In modern clothing design, cultural creative products, brand visualizations, etc., a large number of traditional patterns are extracted and used as decorative elements. Sheep horn patterns are printed on phone cases, scroll patterns are used as cover decorations for notebooks, and galloping horse patterns appear in sportswear brands. This extraction behavior objectively spreads traditional symbols, enabling more people to come into contact with the visual language of Inner Mongolia ethnic costumes. However, extraction often involves stripping: Symbols are taken out of their original overall structure and placed separately in a new context. In the original robes, there are clear hierarchical relationships and combination logics between serrated patterns, wave patterns, and animal patterns. After being extracted, these relationships are reduced to zero, and the function of the symbols shifts from "social encoding" to simple "stylistic decoration". The meaning of the symbols is diluted or lost during the extraction process.

How to seek transmission in the process of change is a core issue that must be faced in the contemporary context. One feasible approach is to distinguish different levels of transmission goals. For cultural preservation places such as museums, folk villages, and intangible cultural heritage exhibitions, traditional patterns and colors should be retained as much as possible in their original appearance, including their forms, positions, combination methods, and symbolic meanings. For daily wear and commercial design, moderate innovation and modification are allowed, but the recognizable core symbols should be retained.

The pattern and color symbol system of Inner Mongolia ethnic costumes is the crystallization of the nomadic people's experience of coexisting with the grassland and communicating with nature over thousands of years. It records people's reverence for the sky, dependence on the earth, gratitude for fire, as well as the identity boundaries and emotional connections between people. In contemporary society, this symbolic system faces the risk of disappearance, but also gains new expression space. The true meaning of protection lies not in sealing the clothing in the display

cabinets of museums, but in allowing its symbolic logic and cultural spirit to continue in new ways. When a young designer embeds a white sheep horn pattern border in the collar of a modern coat, and when a city youth wears a red drawstring on a sky-blue hoodie, tradition has not disappeared, it is continuing to tell the story of the grassland in another language.

## 5. Conclusion

Through a systematic analysis of the patterns and colors in the ethnic costumes of Inner Mongolia, this paper argues that the cultural symbol system of these costumes exhibits three basic characteristics: the duality of symbol sources, the hierarchical organization of symbols, and the integrity of symbolic meanings. Patterns and colors are not independent of each other; instead, they jointly serve three major symbolic themes: nature worship, social order, and life rituals, forming a set of wearable cosmic images and social maps. In the contemporary context, this symbol system is undergoing a transformation from practical coding to aesthetic resources, and the symbolic meanings of the symbols are facing the dual challenges of dilution and reconstruction. The true meaning of protection lies not in sealing the costumes in museums, but in allowing the cultural logic carried by the patterns and colors to continue in new ways, enabling traditional symbols to regain vitality in contemporary life.

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