

Semiotic Interpretation and Cultural Genes of Mexican Traditional Festivals from the Perspective of Symbolic Anthropology: A Case Study of Día de los Muertos

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Abstract

To address the issues in the study of Mexico's Día de los Muertos, including fragmented theoretical frameworks, superficial interpretation of symbols, and the neglect of cultural gene differences in the comparison between Chinese and Mexican festivals, this study constructs an analytical framework based on the theory of symbolic anthropology. By systematically sorting out the symbolic system and cultural genes of Día de los Muertos, it conducts a comparative analysis with China's Qingming Festival. This approach provides theoretical support for the mutual exchange and learning between Chinese and Mexican civilizations. In terms of research methods, this study adopts an integrated approach combining theoretical construction, empirical analysis, and comparative verification. Firstly, it combs through relevant theoretical achievements through a literature review to clarify the research dimensions; secondly, it analyzes the cultural connotations of the core symbols of Día de los Muertos with specific cases; finally, it compares the two festivals from multiple dimensions to deeply explore their cultural roots. The study verifies the effectiveness of symbolic anthropology in festival research, clearly defines the core cultural genes carried by the symbols of Día de los Muertos, and reveals the essential differences between Día de los Muertos and Qingming Festival in terms of life-and-death concepts, ethical values, and cultural roots. This study innovatively constructs an integrated analytical paradigm of symbols and cultural genes, breaking through the limitations of existing research. It not only provides a new methodological reference for cross-cultural festival research but also offers useful insights for promoting the international communication of traditional Chinese festivals and deepening the practice of cultural exchange and mutual learning.

Keywords

Symbolic anthropology; Cultural genes; Mexico's Día de los Muertos; Cross-cultural comparison.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Significance

Mexico's Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead)—a blend of Maya, Aztec, and other Indigenous sacrificial traditions with Catholic culture—was inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2008, serving as an ideal case to decode Mexican cultural genes. Centered on scene and object symbols like family altars (ofrenda), Pan de Muerto (bread of the dead), and calaveras (skull decorations), it builds a unique "symbol of life and death" cultural system through rituals such as altar-building and street parades, embodying core values of ancestor remembrance, life celebration, and three key cultural genes include views on life and death, family values, and multicultural integration. However, this rich symbolic system lacks systematic interpretation, with most existing studies remaining phenomenological and failing to explore the interrelated logic of symbols and their cultural genes.

As cultural exchange is a core pillar of the China-Mexico comprehensive strategic partnership, systematically exploring the cultural connotations of Mexican traditional festivals responds to the national strategy of “promoting mutual learning among civilizations” and fills gaps in China-Mexico cultural research.

Academically, this study uses symbolic anthropology to analyze the internal connections of the festival’s symbols, breaking through limitations like “superficial exploration” and “theoretical fragmentation” to provide a “symbol-gene” analytical paradigm for festival research. Practically, by interpreting Día de los Muertos’ symbols and genes and comparing it with China’s Qingming Festival (Tomb-Sweeping Day), it highlights the festival’s cultural uniqueness, offering references for the international communication of Chinese traditional festivals and realizing the goal of “each beauty shines in its own way, and all beauties complement each other [1, 12, 10].”

1.2. Research Status at Home and Abroad

Foreign research on Mexico’s Día de los Muertos dates to the early 20th century, with Robert Redfield’s *Folk Culture of Yucatan* as the most representative work. His decade-long follow-up investigations systematically documented the festival’s core rituals and first proposed that it “sustains family identity and community cohesion in rural societies,” with his data remaining foundational today.

Domestic research emerged later, evolving from “cultural introduction to in-depth analysis.” Early studies focused on phenomenological sorting [20], while recent specialized research has deepened—including comparisons with the Qingming Festival (e.g., sacrificial color, costume symbols) and refinement of the festival’s “three types of death” value [1, 12]. However, limitations involve singular theoretical perspectives, lacking systematic support, oversimplified classification of the two festivals as “sacrificial,” and insufficiently in-depth symbol decoding.

In summary, two key gaps are “theoretical fragmentation” without an integrated framework, and comparative studies overcentered on the Qingming Festival that overlook Día de los Muertos’ multicultural uniqueness. Thus, this research adopts symbolic anthropology as a unified prospective to interpret the festival’s symbolic system, with appropriate comparison to the Qingming Festival, aiming to address the following three questions:

How can symbolic anthropology theory provide an analytical framework for interpreting the symbolic system and cultural genes of Día de los Muertos?

From the perspective of symbolic anthropology, how do the altar, food, costume, and makeup symbols of Mexico’s Día de los Muertos specifically carry its cultural genes?

What are the core differences in the cultural genes (concerning views on life and death, ethics) and ritual symbols between Día de los Muertos and the Qingming Festival?

1.3. Research Design

To address research gaps, this study focuses on “interpreting Día de los Muertos’ symbols and extracting cultural genes,” adopting a “theoretical support, empirical analysis, comparative verification” framework with three integrated methods:

Literature research lays the foundation by sorting out relevant studies on Día de los Muertos and the Qingming Festival, as well as symbolic anthropology theories, to clarify comparative dimensions.

Case study provides empirical support by analyzing core symbols such as family altars, calaveras, Pan de Muerto and key rituals, explaining their contextual meanings to inform gene extraction.

Comparative research highlights Día de los Muertos' uniqueness by comparing it with the Qingming Festival which also carries of life cognition and ancestral memory with symbolic logic, ritual functions, and life-death views, emphasizing its multicultural traits in Latin America. The innovations of this research are mainly reflected in two aspects: an integrated framework forming a logic "from symbol selection, meaning interpretation to uniqueness highlighting", and a comparative perspective that respects cultural distinctiveness, offering a referential model for cross-cultural traditional festival research.

2. Theoretical Basis of Symbolic Anthropology and Festival Research

2.1. Core Theories of Symbolic Anthropology

Symbolic anthropology centers on "symbols" and "symbolism", interpreting the meaning system behind cultural symbols to offer key theoretical support for traditional festival symbol analysis. A core theory is Clifford Geertz's "thick description," which posits culture as "a web of meanings woven by humans"—anthropological research thus aims to interpret this web [3]. "Thick description" explores deep logic through cultural practices, requiring consideration of both symbolism's "surface structure (symbol carriers)" and "deep structure (cultural meanings)"—their connection is pivotal for festival symbol interpretation [14].

Victor Turner's "ritual symbolic structure" and "liminality" theory provide a key perspective for dynamic festival ritual analysis [4, 5]. He proposed the three-stage ritual structure from "separation" "liminality" to "incorporation", with the "liminality" stage where participants shed daily identities as a critical node for meaning transmission [4] Additionally, rituals act as "converters between daily life and cultural traditions," reorganizing meanings via music, behaviors, and other elements [11].

Symbolic anthropology's core logic—from "symbols to cultural meaning"—is deeply intertwined with semiotics [15]. Symbolism carries cultural genes, achieving intergenerational transmission through repeated symbolic reinforcement in festival ritual, with semiotics supporting meaning interpretation.

2.2. Cultural Symbolism of Traditional Festivals

Traditional festivals, as concentrated cultural carriers, are essentially symbolic systems. Organic wholes of "three-dimensional symbol carriers" that interact to form a cultural meaning network [21].

Scene symbols, the spatial foundation of rituals, align with Turner's "liminality" time-space transformation theory [5]. Divided into physical space include family and public space, with public spaces strengthening national identity through group rituals and meaning scenes in which "sacred-secular" dual space formed during festivals, their core function is to provide a "meaning field" for ritual transmission.

Object symbols, practical and symbolic, embody symbolism's "surface structure" [16]. Intuitive carriers convert abstract cultural meanings into concrete forms, enabling sensory perception—an essential link in symbolic anthropology's "interpreting deep meanings from concrete symbols" [21, 6].

Behavioral symbols, dynamic expressions of meaning, are core to rituals—symbolic practices of "transmitting cultural meaning through repetitive ritualized actions" [1]. Their fixed processes and stable meanings ensure intergenerational cultural gene transmission [1], with the core function of activating static symbols to realize cultural inheritance.

The system's interpretation logic "concrete carriers and cultural contexts"—aligns with symbolic anthropology [2], requiring three conditions: group consensus, specific time-space, and intergenerational inheritance [14].

2.3. Research on Día de los Muertos from the Perspective of Symbolic Anthropology

Guided by symbolic anthropology's meaning-interpretation logic and traditional festival symbol characteristics, this section focuses on Mexico's Día de los Muertos, establishing a "core symbol selection, meaning interpretation and cultural gene extraction" framework to bridge theory and empirical research.

Core symbols are selected for cultural representation and theoretical relevance, focusing on repeated ritual elements tied to core cultural concepts [21]. For Día de los Muertos, these include scene symbols such as family altars, cemeteries, object symbols such as Pan de Muerto and calaveras, representing "life continuation" and "life-death dialogue", and behavioral symbols involve altar construction and food sharing. Their repetitive, fixed rituals ensure stable cultural meaning transmission [1].

Multidimensional interpretation, grounded in multicultural contexts, follows Geertz's "thick description" to transcend surface behaviors [3]. For example, family altar construction involves surface rituals (marigold paths, layered offerings), middle-level intent (welcoming ancestors' souls), and deep cultural integration (Indigenous "soul immortality" and Catholic "redemption").

Cultural gene extraction, the ultimate goal, identifies three stable core genes: "symbiosis of life and death" (death as a life-cycle link), "family-oriented ethics" (sacrifice as a blood-tie bond), and "multicultural integration" (skull decorations reflecting heterogeneous cultural absorption). These genes are inherited via "scene bearing-object embodiment-behavioral transmission."

Theoretically aligned with symbolic anthropology, this framework addresses existing gaps of "theoretical fragmentation" and "shallow interpretation". It provides an operable methodology for Día de los Muertos analysis and a unified dimension for cross-cultural comparison with the Qingming Festival, highlighting their cultural uniqueness through symbol, meaning, and gene comparisons.

3. Symbolic Meanings of the Mexican Day of the Dead

From the perspective of symbolic anthropology, the core of culture lies in a system of symbolic signs. Humans construct a world of meanings through symbolic carriers such as rituals, objects, and art [3]. As a core carrier of Mexican cultural genes, the Mexican Day of the Dead encompasses a rich network of symbolic signs in its ritual processes, material carriers, and artistic expressions. These symbols do not exist in isolation; instead, they are interconnected and progressive, and serving as a key to decoding the core of their culture.

3.1. Altar Symbols

The altar is the central venue for Day of the Dead rituals and is regarded by Mexicans as a "sacred passage" connecting the mortal world and the realm of the deceased. Its spatial layout and constituent elements are not randomly arranged but follow specific cultural logics and symbolic rules.

3.1.1. Spatial Layout of the Altar

Altars for the Day of the Dead mostly adopt a multi-tiered structure, commonly with three, seven, or nine tiers (as shown in Figure 1). Among these, the three-tiered altar is the most prevalent. This well-structured spatial arrangement transforms the abstract cosmic order into a perceptible ritual space, endowing the connection between life and death with a tangible form of expression.

Furthermore, the placement of the altar also carries symbolic significance. Most families place the altar in core family areas such as the living room, rather than in hidden corners. This choice reflects Mexicans' attitude of accepting death—the deceased are not beings to be avoided, but important members of the family, and their return deserves a grand welcome and respect. The integration of the altar into the family's living space breaks down the absolute boundary between life and death, turning the family into a place where both the living and the deceased coexist during the Day of the Dead.



Figure 1. Altar Structure

3.1.2. Symbolic Meanings of the Altar's Constituent Elements

The constituent elements of the altar strictly adhere to the symbolic logic of the “Four Elements,” as illustrated in Figure 2 Fire, water, earth, and air—regarded as the fundamental components of the universe—are endowed with the sacred function of connecting the realms of the living and the deceased. Together with other items, they work to summon and sustain the souls of the departed.

The primary symbolic carrier of fire is candles; several white or yellow candles are typically lit on the altar, with the number often corresponding to the number of deceased family members. Water is an indispensable element on the altar, usually placed in a transparent container as clean water. In Mexican culture, water symbolizes the origin and continuation of life, and also serves the purpose of purifying the soul. The symbolic meaning of earth is embodied through food: items such as Pan de Muerto (Bread of the Dead), fruits, corn, and tequila placed on the altar are all gifts from the earth, representing the concrete manifestation of the “earth” element. The symbolic carriers of air include colorful paper cuttings, incense, and papel picado (traditional Mexican perforated paper banners). As an intangible carrier, air embodies the animistic belief that “all things possess a soul.”



Figure 2. Altar elements

3.2. Food Symbols

Food serves as a vital carrier of cultural memories. During the Day of the Dead, special foods are not only offerings to the deceased but also symbolic signs that bear family emotions and convey cultural values. Representative foods like Pan de Muerto (Bread of the Dead) and sugar skulls, they enable the remembrance of the departed and the inheritance of cultural genes.

3.2.1. Pan de Muerto (Bread of the Dead)

Pan de Muerto is the most iconic food of the Day of the Dead. As illustrated in Figure 3, its production techniques and design have preserved a centuries-old tradition, with every detail carrying specific symbolic connotations. In terms of shape, Pan de Muerto is round overall, symbolizing the cycle and eternity of life—it implies that death is not the end of life, but a phase within the cyclic process. For ingredients, Pan de Muerto mainly uses corn flour and wheat flour as the base, combined with spices such as orange blossom water, aniseed, and cinnamon. This combination of ingredients not only continues the traditional dietary culture of the Indigenous peoples but also incorporates spice elements introduced during the Spanish colonial period, reflecting the diverse and integrated nature of Mexican culture.



Figure 3. Pan de Muerto

The consumption and ritual practices of Pan de Muerto also hold symbolic significance. In the lead-up to the festival, family members gather to participate in making the bread together. This process itself serves as a means of strengthening family bonds and passing down culture from one generation to the next. During the festival, the entire family shares the Pan de Muerto, and some families even break off small pieces to scatter at cemeteries—this act symbolizes sharing the food with the deceased, forging an emotional connection that bridges life and death. This complete cycle of “making-ritual-sharing” elevates Pan de Muerto beyond its basic function as food, transforming it into a vital symbolic sign that links family history, sustains kinship ties, and preserves cultural heritage.

3.2.2. Calavera de Azúcar (Sugar Skull)

Calavera de Azúcar (Sugar Skull) is the most visually striking food symbol of the Day of the Dead. Crafted from sugar paste, it features vivid colors and exaggerated designs—traits that completely subvert traditional perceptions of death and stand as a concentrated expression of Mexicans’ optimistic view of life and death (as shown in Figure 4).

Mexicans believe death is not a painful end, but a joyful process of escaping earthly troubles and returning to nature. The sweetness of sugar serves as a tangible embodiment of this optimistic outlook on death. Meanwhile, sugar’s tendency to melt and dissipate easily also metaphorizes the transience and impermanence of life, reminding people to cherish their present existence and face death with equanimity.



Figure 4. Calavera de Azúcar

The design and decoration of sugar skulls are rich in symbolic elements. With its sweet material, bright colors, and playful shape, it transforms the heavy theme of death into a lighthearted and joyful cultural expression. It not only carries the memory of the deceased but also conveys Mexicans' core values of "equality between life and death" and "optimism and open-mindedness," making it one of the most representative cultural symbols in the symbolic system of the Day of the Dead.

3.3. Symbols of Clothing and Makeup

During the Day of the Dead, Mexicans' clothing and makeup are not merely festival decorations, but symbolic signs that carry cultural attitudes and express views on life and death. The brightly colored traditional clothing and artistic skull-themed makeup together form an expression system of "death aesthetics." Through the impact of visual symbols, they break the inherent association between death and terror, demonstrating Mexicans' acceptance of death, love for life, and strong sense of cultural identity.

3.3.1. Traditional Clothing

The traditional clothing for the Day of the Dead integrates the dual characteristics of Indigenous culture and Spanish culture, with rich symbolic meanings in its colors, styles, and materials (as shown in Figure 5). By wearing traditional clothing, Mexicans engage in a dialogue with their ancestors during the festival, integrating historical memories and cultural traditions into their current life scenarios, ensuring that cultural genes are passed on from generation to generation.



Figure 5. Day of the Dead's costume

3.3.2. La Calavera Catrina (Catrina Makeup)

"La Calavera Catrina" (Catrina Makeup) is the most iconic makeup symbol of the Day of the Dead (as shown in Figure 6). Taking the skull as its prototype, it transforms death into an elegant and humorous aesthetic expression through artistic modification and color matching. This makeup is not a mockery of death, but a reverence for life—it reminds people that death is an inevitable part of the life cycle. Rather than fearing or evading it, one should face it calmly and pursue beauty and happiness in the limited span of life. Meanwhile, the universal participation in Catrina Makeup also reflects the inclusiveness of Mexican culture. Regardless of age, gender, or social class, people can express their identification with the culture through this makeup, and strengthen national cohesion in the collective aesthetic practice.



Figure 6. Day of the Dead's makeup

In summary, by focusing on three core symbols—altars, food, and clothing,makeup—this section has analyzed the symbolic system of the Mexican Day of the Dead. Though distinct in form, these three types of symbols all revolve around the core of “connecting life and death, inheriting memories, and uniting the collective.” Through their respective symbolic logics, they collectively convey Mexicans’ view of life and death— “accepting death and valuing the cycle of life”—while reflecting the traits of cultural integration and national cultural identity. This section not only clarifies the core connotation of the symbolic system but also lays the foundation for subsequent cross-cultural comparisons, confirming the value of symbolic anthropology in interpreting culture.

4. Comparison between the Day of the Dead and the Qingming Festival

4.1. Similarities and Differences in Ritual Symbols

Ritual symbols are concrete manifestations of cultural values. Although the sacrificial rituals of the Mexican Day of the Dead and the Chinese Qingming Festival both take “connecting the living and the deceased” as their core goal, they present different symbolic logics due to differences in their cultural foundations.

4.1.1. Comparison of Sacrificial Rituals

In terms of the core ritual process, the first difference between the two festivals lies in the “selection of sacrificial space,” as shown in Figure 7. The Day of the Dead takes the “family altar” as its core sacrificial venue, with rituals mostly carried out within the family; while the Qingming Festival takes the “cemetery” as its core sacrificial space, with rituals focusing on “visiting and paying respects at the cemetery.”



Figure 7. Differences in Sacrificial Venues

In terms of the types of offerings and their placement methods, the two festivals share similarities while also exhibiting significant differences. The similarity lies in both selecting items related to the deceased as offerings, embodying the sacrificial logic of “centering on the needs of the deceased.” The difference, however, rests in the “symbolic orientation” of the offerings: Offerings for the Day of the Dead focus more on “meeting the secular needs of the deceased” -for instance, clean water to quench the deceased’s thirst and food to replenish their energy — conveying the belief that “there is no barrier between life and death, and the deceased still require material sustenance.” In contrast, offerings for the Qingming Festival emphasize more on “expressing the respect of the living” -such as presenting elaborate food to demonstrate “filial piety” toward ancestors, and burning joss paper to symbolize “providing financial support for ancestors in the underworld” -reflecting the perception that “there is a distinction between life and death, and communication requires specific forms.”

4.1.2. Cultural Foundations Behind the Differences in Ritual Symbols

The differences between the two sets of ritual symbols stem from the distinct cultural foundations of China and Mexico. The “diversity and integration” of Mexican culture have fostered the richness and flexibility of Day of the Dead rituals. In contrast, the stability of

Qingming Festival rituals originates from China's "time-honored agricultural civilization and Confucian ethics," which have been passed down in an unbroken line.

4.2. Differences in the Cultural Connotations of Food Symbols

Food serves as a crucial symbol linking "taste memories" and "cultural values." Although representative festival foods — such as the Day of the Dead's Pan de Muerto (Bread of the Dead) and sugar skulls, and the Qingming Festival's qingtuan (green rice cake) (as shown in Figure 8) — are exclusive to their respective festivals, they have been endowed with vastly different cultural connotations due to the contrasting views on life and death in China and Mexico. These foods thus become key carriers for interpreting the two distinct outlooks on life and death.



Figure 8. Differences in Food Symbols

In terms of the "shape and symbolic orientation" of food, the two festivals exhibit distinct differences: Pan de Muerto (Bread of the Dead) centers on core symbols of "circularity" and "bone-shaped decorations" — the circle symbolizes the "cycle of life," implying that death is a continuation of life. More representative is the sugar skull: made from sugar and adorned with bright colors, it directly transforms the skull — a symbol of death — into food. This "direct acceptance of death symbols" reflects Mexican culture's attitude of "not shying away from death and regarding it as an integral part of life."

In contrast, the qingtuan (green rice cake) of the Qingming Festival is characterized by "avoiding death symbols and focusing on life and family bonds." Qingtuan implies "the reproduction of life and the continuation of the family"; its circular shape symbolizes "reunion," conveying the perception that "even though family members are separated by life and death, emotional bonds must still be maintained." There are no direct symbols of death in the shape of qingtuan; instead, it ties ancestor worship to "embracing new life and following nature" through its "natural ingredients" and "spring seasonal association," embodying the trait of Chinese culture to "alleviate death anxiety through life metaphors."

The core of this difference lies in the contrasting attitudes toward "death symbols" in Chinese and Mexican cultures: Due to its cultural pluralism and integration, Mexican culture has no taboos regarding death symbols; instead, it transforms them into symbols of "accepting death" through artistic and daily-life-based treatment. Influenced by Confucianism's ideology of "valuing life and avoiding mention of death," Chinese culture regards death as an "inauspicious" symbol, and tends to avoid direct death symbols. Instead, it uses "life symbols" to indirectly express remembrance for ancestors, conveying the perception of "honoring the dead through respect for life."

Overall, through the analysis of "symbol interpretation and cross-cultural comparison," this study not only clearly presents the connotations of the Mexican Day of the Dead's symbolic system but also, in the comparison with the Qingming Festival, highlights the essential differences between Chinese and Mexican cultures in terms of cultural foundations, outlooks on life and death, and cultural psychology. Ultimately, it jointly verifies the value of symbolic anthropology in "decoding culture through symbols," and provides a complete analytical path—"from singularity to pluralism"—for understanding the diversity of global death cultures.

5. Cultural Gene Comparison of Festival Symbols and Cross-Cultural Insights

5.1. Analysis of Differences in Core Cultural Genes

5.1.1. Essential Differences in the Gene of Views on Life and Death

Cultural genes are like roots buried deep underground, nourishing the festival customs of different ethnic groups. As a crucial component of cultural genes, the view on life and death is profoundly and uniquely manifested in festival rituals. The Día de los Muertos and the Chinese Qingming Festival, as two highly representative traditional festivals, each contain distinctly different views on life and death as cultural genes, exhibiting rich cultural connotations and distinct differences from their origins to ritual practices.

The “symbiosis of life and death” gene embodied in the Día de los Muertos traces its cultural roots to the cosmic outlook and life cognition system of the Aztec civilization. The Aztecs believed that death is not an absolute end of life, but a key link in the cycle of life, and the souls of the deceased would enter different “life domains” based on their circumstances during life [18]. This cognition is materialized in the rituals of the Día de los Muertos: family altars construct a space for communication between the living and the dead by placing the deceased’s personal belongings, laying marigold, and juxtaposing religious symbols; during the cemetery vigil, people light candles, share food, and “converse with the deceased,” transforming the cemetery into a social space shared by the living and the dead, thereby blurring the boundary between life and death [4].

In contrast, the “separation of life and death” gene behind the Chinese Qingming Festival is rooted in the Confucian linear view of time and the Taoist cyclical view of nature. Confucianism emphasizes the sequence of birth and the order of death, regarding death as the end of life and advocating the principle of paying due respect to the deceased and cherishing the memory of ancestors [13]. Within the Confucian ethical system, life and death are not a cyclical process but a chain of intergenerational inheritance—the value of the deceased is sustained through the rituals of their descendants, while the responsibility of the living is to continue the family lineage and pass on the virtues of their ancestors. This cognition is reflected in the emphasis on order during Qingming Festival rituals: tomb-sweeping must follow the etiquette sequence based on seniority, the arrangement of sacrificial offerings must conform to the ethical norms of hierarchy, and even the orientation and decoration of tombstones must adhere to Fengshui traditions to ensure the peace of the deceased and the well-being of the living [7]. Although Taoism contains the idea of the transformation between life and death, it does not alter the core of “separation of life and death.” Taoism holds that life and death, like the alternation of seasons and the cycle of day and night, are manifestations of natural laws. This concept is embodied in the custom of spring outings during the Qingming Festival. After paying respects at ancestral tombs, people go into nature to admire the vitality of spring, implying that the deceased have merged into nature and the living should cherish life [9].

Through their distinctly different genes of life and death views, the Día de los Muertos and the Qingming Festival have constructed differentiated ritual systems. The former, centered on “symbiosis of life and death,” breaks down the boundaries between life and death and emphasizes the cyclic continuity of life; the latter, adhering to the concept of “separation of life and death,” respects the order of death while focusing on maintaining intergenerational inheritance and family ethics through sacrificial rituals.

5.1.2. Differences in Emphasis on Ethical Genes

Cultural genes are materialized in festival rituals, among which ethical genes possess unique features in festivals of different cultures. The Día de los Muertos and the Qingming Festival show significant differences in ethics: the former centers on emotional bonds and is marked by

flexibility, while the latter is deeply rooted in Confucian filial piety rituals, combining emotional expression with institutional rigidity.

The ethical gene of the Día de los Muertos focuses on family emotional connection, exhibiting emotional and non-institutional characteristics. It originates from the tradition in Indigenous cultures where families served as ritual communities—within Aztec society, family members maintained emotional bonds through the worship of the deceased. During the rituals, family altars are jointly built by family members, who contribute items related to the deceased, reconstructing family memories and consolidating emotions [10]. Unlike the Chinese patriarchal system, Mexican family ethics prioritize emotional authenticity over formal norms. There are no uniform standards for the size of altars, the types of offerings, or the ritual procedures; even family members living overseas can participate in altar construction by mailing items, thereby integrating into the ritual community, which demonstrates the emotional core that transcends spatial limitations.

The ethical gene of the Qingming Festival is deeply rooted in Confucian teachings of filial piety, embodying both affective and normative dimensions. This cultural construct is intricately intertwined with the traditional patriarchal social structure, reflecting its enduring significance within Chinese societal and familial norms. Confucianism advocates that one should serve the living with rituals, bury the deceased with rituals, and worship ancestors with rituals [8], a concept fully implemented during the Qingming Festival. Ritual procedures are strict: from the preparation of sacrificial offerings and the folding of paper money to the order of ritual salutations and the distribution of offerings, all follow ritual norms, embodying the materialization of the patriarchal system. In terms of function, filial ethics not only serve as a vehicle for emotional expression but also act as a tool for maintaining family order and constructing identity. In traditional society, a family's demonstration of filial piety influenced its social reputation; even today, many families still hold ancestral hall worship ceremonies during the Qingming Festival to strengthen the sense of family community and reaffirm ethical norms.

The distinct differences in family ethics between the Día de los Muertos and the Qingming Festival profoundly reflect the diverse understandings and practical approaches to family relationships across different cultures. The former breaks institutional constraints through emotional connection, while the latter maintains family order through ritual norms, together forming a rich landscape of human cultural diversity.

5.2. Common Core of Cultural Genes

Despite the significant differences in cultural genes between the Día de los Muertos and the Qingming Festival, both take ancestral worship rituals as their core carrier to achieve the inheritance of collective memory and the construction of cultural identity. This commonality stems from humanity's shared confusion about life and death and universal emotional needs, manifested in three dimensions: the inheritance of collective memory, the construction of cultural identity, and the communication between the living and the deceased (yin and yang). From the perspective of collective memory inheritance, during the Día de los Muertos, items such as the deceased's photos and personal belongings on family altars carry memory codes; elders pass down family history to younger generations by explaining these items. Symbols in street parades, such as skull masks and traditional dances, recreate the Aztec civilization and the cultural integration during the colonial period, allowing participants to perceive the historical depth of their ethnic culture. During the Qingming Festival, elders recount the life stories of ancestors during tomb-sweeping rituals; combined with customs such as abstaining from fire during the Cold Food Festival and spring outings with willow branches, these practices transform Chinese historical legends into collective memory, realizing the intergenerational transmission of culture [19].

In terms of cultural identity construction, the Día de los Muertos strengthens Mexicans' sense of identity through community parades and collective cemetery vigils, forming visual and behavioral consistency through unified costumes and dances. The Qingming Festival, on the other hand, relies on clan banquets in traditional society and collective public memorial ceremonies in contemporary society to construct kinship-based cultural identity and identity with urban cultural communities respectively, achieving the dual confirmation and construction of individual cultural identity.

Both festivals also construct paths for communication between the living and the deceased through symbolic signs. During the Día de los Muertos, marigolds, candles, and offerings create a channel for communication between the living and the dead, alleviating people's fear of death; the Qingming Festival, through symbols such as paper money, sacrificial offerings, and eulogies, provides a channel for the living to express care for the deceased, easing feelings of longing and providing psychological comfort.

Although the Día de los Muertos and the Qingming Festival possess different cultural genes, both provide a meaningful framework for humanity to understand life and death and comfort emotions through ancestral worship rituals, demonstrating the shared wisdom and emotional resonance of humanity in the face of life and death.

5.3. Cross-Cultural Insights: Cultural Diversity and Universal Human Values

The cross-cultural comparison between the Día de los Muertos and the Qingming Festival not only reveals the differentiated symbolic expressions of different cultures regarding the universal human issue of life and death, confirming the core connotation of cultural diversity, but also extracts the universal human values of remembering the deceased and cherishing life, providing theoretical support and practical paths for seeking common ground while respecting differences in cross-cultural communication.

From the perspective of cultural diversity, the differences between the two festivals reflect the unique wisdom of different cultures in addressing life and death. The Día de los Muertos interprets the "symbiosis of life and death" through carnival-like rituals, demonstrating the Indigenous concept of harmonious coexistence with nature; the Qingming Festival embodies the "separation of life and death" through solemn rituals, inheriting Confucian ethical order. The former has spread globally through forms such as the film *Coco*, reshaping people's perception of death [17]; the latter has achieved the integration of tradition and ecological civilization through innovative methods such as flower-based tomb offerings. The differentiated practices of the two festivals indicate that cultural diversity is not the root of cultural conflicts, but a diverse path for humanity to address common challenges—for the eternal issue of "life and death," different cultures can provide unique solutions through distinct symbolic systems and ritual practices, collectively enriching the connotation of human culture. In terms of universal human values, although the two festivals differ in form, both embody the core values of remembering the deceased and cherishing life. The family altars and cemetery vigils of the Día de los Muertos, as well as the tomb-sweeping rituals and eulogy recitations of the Qingming Festival, all represent emotional sustenance for loved ones; the Día de los Muertos uses carnival to highlight the beauty and transience of life, while the Qingming Festival implies the continuity of life through spring outings—both return to the cherishing of life through the perception of death. This resonance transcends cultural barriers; for example, Chinese audiences felt emotional resonance with the family memory and kinship inheritance in *Coco*, which became a bridge for cultural understanding. Cherishing life is the shared value orientation of both festivals, and this value has become an important cultural resource amid global challenges. For instance, the view of life and death in the Día de los Muertos can help people alleviate death anxiety, while the ethical concepts of the Qingming Festival can assist in

building family support systems; the combination of these two cultural wisdoms can provide a more comprehensive mental health solution for contemporary people.

Furthermore, the cross-cultural comparison of the two festivals provides specific paths for seeking common ground while respecting differences in cross-cultural communication practices. On one hand, we should respect differences and avoid ethnocentric biases. On the other hand, we should seek common ground and build platforms for cross-cultural dialogue through shared values. For example, launching Sino-Mexican youth cultural exchange programs centered on festivals, and organizing the creation of artworks with themes of life and death to promote cultural mutual learning. This approach of respecting differences while seeking common ground not only protects cultural diversity but also promotes cross-cultural understanding, providing cultural support for the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind.

6. Research Conclusion

6.1. Research Conclusion

Taking symbolic anthropology as the core theoretical perspective, this study conducts an analysis focusing on the symbolic interpretation of Mexico's Día de los Muertos, the extraction of its cultural genes, and the comparison between Día de los Muertos and the Chinese Qingming Festival. The key conclusions are as follows:

First, symbolic anthropology provides a systematic framework for the study of Día de los Muertos. Clifford Geertz's theory of "thick description" enables an analysis path from "superficial carriers", like altars and costumes to deep-seated meanings, facilitating the interpretation of the views on life and death as well as ethics embedded within these symbols. Victor Turner's theory of "liminality" explains the meaning-making logic behind the transformation of spatial significance—for instance, how cemeteries shift from solemn sites to reunion spaces during the festival. Additionally, the triadic relation of symbols theory disassembles the multi-layered connotations of symbols such as skull decorations and pan de muerto. Together, these three theoretical tools form a complete chain encompassing symbol selection, meaning interpretation, and cultural gene extraction, effectively addressing the limitation of theoretical fragmentation in existing studies.

Second, this study clarifies the mechanism through which core symbols of Día de los Muertos embody cultural genes. Altar symbols, with their multi-tiered structure and layout of four elements (earth, water, fire, air), materialize the cosmic view of "symbiosis between life and death." Among food symbols, the circular shape of pan de muerto and the ritual of sharing it convey the ethical gene of family-centeredness, while sugar skulls communicate the view of equality between life and death through their sweet texture and vibrant colors. Costume and makeup symbols—such as the cultural fusion reflected in traditional attire and the universal participation in Catrina makeup—strengthen the cultural gene of pluralistic integration for identity construction. These three categories of symbols, from static carriers to dynamic practices, collectively facilitate the transmission of cultural genes.

Third, the study reveals the core differences between Día de los Muertos and the Qingming Festival. In terms of cultural genes, Día de los Muertos upholds "symbiosis between life and death" and emotional family bonding, whereas the Qingming Festival emphasizes "separation between life and death" and institutionalized filial ethics. At the level of ritual symbols, the former constructs scenarios for "dialogue between life and death" through festive altars, food, and costumes, while the latter conveys reverence through solemn tomb-sweeping, plain-colored offerings, and willow branches. Such differences originate from the cultural fusion of Indigenous traditions and colonial influences in Día de los Muertos, and the inheritance of Confucian ethics and Taoist views of nature in the Qingming Festival.

In conclusion, through the systematic interpretation from the perspective of symbolic anthropology, this study not only fills the gap in the theoretical research on Día de los Muertos and provides an integrated analytical paradigm for cross-cultural studies on views of life and death but also reveals the differences in cultural logic of life-death narratives across distinct civilizations through the comparison with the Qingming Festival. It offers an important reference for understanding human cultural diversity and promoting inter-civilization exchange and mutual learning, while also providing a theoretical basis for the modern transformation, inheritance, and protection of traditional festival cultures.

6.2. Research Limitations and Prospects

This study has two notable limitations: First, the geographical coverage of symbolic interpretation is insufficient. It focuses on the universal symbols of Mexico's Día de los Muertos, but fails to conduct an in-depth analysis of regional variations in the festival's symbols, which may lead to a one-sided interpretation of cultural genes. Second, the depth of comparative research is limited. The analysis of the Qingming Festival mostly remains at the level of the connection between traditional rituals and cultural genes, and fails to fully integrate the contemporary transformations of the Qingming Festival for a dynamic comparison with Día de los Muertos, making it difficult to fully present the differences and commonalities between the two festivals in the contemporary context.

Based on these limitations, future research can be expanded in three directions: First, conduct research on regional variations of Día de los Muertos, collect data on symbolic practices of the festival across different regions through fieldwork, and analyze the shaping effect of regional cultures on symbolic systems and cultural genes. Second, deepen the dynamic comparison between Mexican and Chinese festivals, focus on their innovative forms in the contemporary era, such as digital altars for Día de los Muertos and flower-based tomb-sweeping for the Qingming Festival, and explore the inheritance and variation of cultural genes. Third, expand the dimension of applied research: based on the interpretation of the symbols and cultural genes of Día de los Muertos, provide specific strategies for the international communication of traditional Chinese festivals, and promote the practical implementation of cross-cultural festival exchanges.

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