THE VISUAL IMAGE DESIGN OF THE CORE CHARACTER IN THE STORY OF "ZHULANG NIANG MEI": TAKING ZHULANG AND NIANGMEI AS EXAMPLES*

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Abstract

Zhulang Niangmei is a national intangible cultural heritage of the Dong ethnic group, and its core characters, Zhulang and Niangmei, carry the cultural genes of the Dong ethnic group. This study takes "cultural authenticity+modern communicability" as the balance point, focusing on the visual image design practice of the two individuals. Through literature research, field investigation, and design practice, firstly, the corresponding relationship between character personalities and Dong cultural symbols is sorted out; Subsequently, a five stage path of "trait extraction symbol selection visual translation normative solidification application verification" was constructed. The system completes the design of styling, color, clothing, and auxiliary elements, ultimately forming a visual image system that combines cultural recognition, modern aesthetics, and communication adaptability, and formulates corresponding design specifications and application plans. This study provides a feasible path for the visual activation

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of core characters in folk stories, and also provides practical reference for the concrete development of intangible cultural heritage IP of ethnic minorities.
Keywords: Zhulang Niang Mei, Character image, Visual image design, Activation of intangible cultural heritage, Dong ethnic cultural symbols

Introduction

Zhulang Niang Mei "is a representative text of Dong ethnic folk literature, mainly circulated in Dong ethnic settlements adjacent to Guizhou, This narrative was included in the second batch of national intangible cultural heritage list (folk literature category, project number I-73) in 2008, and was applied for inclusion in the sixth batch of autonomous region level intangible cultural heritage list by Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in 2016. The story revolves around "loyal love" and "resistance against oppression", and portrays two distinct characters: Zhulang is brave, tenacious, and daring to resist; Niangmei is gentle, courageous, intelligent, and steadfast, embodying the Dong people's pursuit of justice, freedom, and an ideal life.

At present, the visual presentation of Zhulang and Niangmei is mainly scattered in traditional books, opera costumes, folk Paper Cuttings and other carriers, and there are three shortcomings: First, the image is homogenized, and the opera program is mostly used, so the recognition is not high; Second, cultural symbols are blurred, and key elements such as silver jewelry and clothing are simplified or alienated, weakening ethnic identity; Third, the application adaptation is limited, and traditional shapes are complex, making it difficult to adapt to modern scenarios such as digital communication and cultural and creative derivatives. With digital communication becoming an important path for promoting intangible cultural heritage, Zhulang and Niangmei, as the image foundation for the development of the "Zhulang Niangmei" IP, urgently need systematic and standardized visual design.

The research is based on design practice, with the goal of "restoring character traits, inheriting cultural genes, and adapting to modern communication". Through field research and collection of cultural materials, combined with modern design theory, image creation is completed to achieve creative transformation of traditional character images.

Objectives

1. Cultural symbol extraction: Sort out the personality and behavioral characteristics of Zhulang Niang Mei, extract core visual symbols from the Dong ethnic cultural system, and clarify the cultural core and expression boundaries of image design;

2. Visual system construction: Build an overall visual image system for Zhulang and Niangmei, complete the design of styling, color matching, clothing, and auxiliary elements, and form a unified and executable visual standard;

3. Application and path extraction: Complete the creation and implementation of character visual images, verify them in multiple scenarios, and summarize a replicable visual design method for the core characters of folk stories.

Literature Review

The visual image design of folk story characters involves interdisciplinary research. With the increasing demand for digital protection of intangible cultural heritage, how to transform oral traditions into concrete symbols through visual design has become a hot topic in academia.

1. Research on the Visual Image Design of Core Characters in Folk Stories

The visual image design of folk story characters is located at the intersection of cultural inheritance and innovation. Tang (2024) proposed the concept of "cultural rebirth", exploring the use of role design to transform

museum artifacts into vivid visual images, emphasizing the extension space of role-playing expression in the dissemination of cultural heritage. This study suggests that the integration of visual art and character design can enhance the visibility and influence of cultural relics in international communication.

In terms of the correspondence between character personality and visual symbols, Ekstrom (2013) proposed an application framework for "shape language": circular associations are friendly and gentle, square expressions are stable and reliable, and triangles imply dangerous attacks. This provides a path for achieving "precise symbol matching" in character expression design in folk stories.

Gao and Lee (2021) used the character "Guangdong Awakening Lion" in the game "King of Glory" as an example to analyze the dissemination effect of embedding intangible cultural heritage symbols into game character design, and pointed out that the extraction and reorganization of intangible cultural heritage elements can help achieve cultural cognition linkage online and offline. The research of Li and Weng (2025) and Gao (2015) also indicates that traditional cultural elements are not only design innovation resources, but also key media for constructing national cultural images, providing theoretical basis for the visual development of folk story characters.

2. Research on Dong ethnic cultural symbols and visual transformation

Liu et al. (2023) used aesthetic morphology methods to analyze the visual identity of Dong ethnic costumes, pointing out that the formal language and style characteristics of costumes constitute their unique aesthetic structure. Totem patterns (fish patterns, bird patterns, flower patterns) carry specific cultural meanings and reflect Dong ethnic understanding of happy life and natural order, providing theoretical support for the design of ethnic character images from the perspective of "visual identity".

Jiang (2025) proposed to rely on computer vision technology to extract traditional cultural image symbols, and to use adaptive convolutional neural networks to achieve digital expression and redesign applications of traditional symbols, providing technical reference for the contemporary transformation of cultural symbols.

3. Visual Design Practice Theory in the Context of Intangible Cultural Heritage Revitalization

Li et al. (2025) studied the design of non heritage cultural and creative products based on 3D visualization technology, and introduced information entropy evaluation method to quantitatively evaluate design elements. The results showed that the dissemination effect of 3D visualization scheme was significantly better than traditional design, providing empirical basis for the digital development of folk story character images.

Zhang et al. (2024) used knowledge graphs to sort out the research themes of intangible cultural heritage, pointing out that "design application," "in-depth case studies," and "innovative communication pathways" have become the current research focus directions. Zhang et al. (2022) focused on the visual representation and digital preservation of intangible cultural heritage, proposing digital protection and innovative transformation strategies for traditional handicrafts. Overall, it can be seen that effective visual translation of intangible cultural heritage should be based on preserving the core meanings of cultural symbols and moderately optimizing formal language to match contemporary aesthetic and communication needs.

Existing research has provided theoretical support and methodological references for the development of visual images of the core characters in "The Beauty of Zhulang Niang", but there is still a relative lack of systematic image construction research around this epic character. This study will combine the cultural characteristics of the Dong ethnic group to promote systematic role

visual design practices, with a focus on addressing the balance between "cultural authenticity" and "modern communicability".

Methodology

This article adopts a closed-loop research framework of "theoretical basis field acquisition design implementation effect verification", and comprehensively uses four methods: literature research, field investigation, case analysis, and design practice to systematically complete the design research of the visual image of Zhulang Niang Mei.

1. Literature research method

By systematically studying the original work and related academic monographs of "Zhulang Niang Mei", analyzing existing research papers and ethnic art literature, extracting the character traits and cultural symbol keywords in the story, and constructing the theoretical basis and symbol list required for image design.

2. Field investigation method

In order to obtain authentic and vivid first-hand cultural materials, the research team has conducted field work in Sanjiang Dong Village, Guangxi three times, conducting in-depth interviews with 22 Dong ethnic singers, villagers, and inheritors of intangible cultural heritage. They have captured more than 1800 images of folk scenes, clothing patterns, architectural decorations, and other visual materials, providing solid visual references for subsequent design.

3. Case analysis method

Select successful cases of ethnic themed visual design such as "Ne Zha", "Liang Zhu", and "Ashima", analyze their design strategies from the aspects of character modeling, color application, and symbol transformation, summarize the experiences and rules that can be learned from, and avoid common problems in similar creations.

4. Design Practice Method

On the basis of theoretical sorting, material collection, and experience reference, the image creation is completed in three stages: first sketch drawing, multiple scheme comparison; Then deepen the design and determine the main character image; Finally, establish visual standards such as color, proportion, and combination, and develop derivative application solutions. Through the above closed-loop process, ensure that the design results have both cultural foundation and innovation and practicality.

Results

This study is based on the correspondence between character traits and cultural symbols. Through systematic design practices in four dimensions: shape, color, clothing, and auxiliary elements, the personality traits of Zhulang and Niangmei are transformed into visual language, resulting in the following three core achievements that correspond to the three research objectives.

1. Achievement 1: Corresponding System of Cultural Symbols

By interpreting literature and cross referencing field data, we have summarized the key personality traits of Zhulang, including "bravery, perseverance, resistance spirit, loyalty, and responsibility," and Niangmei, including "gentleness, loyalty, courage, intelligence, and inner resilience," and established a mapping relationship between them and representative cultural symbols of the Dong ethnic group.

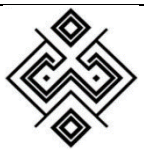
1.1 Character traits - cultural symbol correspondence

Zhulang corresponds to Dong ethnic men's clothing, headscarves, and Dong ethnic dragon patterns. The visual design points to firm lines, clear contours, and a strong and upright posture, highlighting masculinity and a sense of resistance. Niangmei corresponds to Dong ethnic women's clothing, silver jewelry, and Dong ethnic phoenix and bird patterns. The visual design points to soft lines,

dignified posture, or dynamic lightness, highlighting softness and spirituality, with exquisite details.

1.2 Pattern symbol system

Table 1 Pattern Redesign

Name	Pattern	Meaning	Simplified Pattern
Dragon pattern		Auspicious and safe, brave and responsible	
Pheenix pattern		It symbolizes a better life and noble quality of women	
Sluake pattern		The meaning is that having many children brings blessings and strong vitality.	
Cloud andthunder pattern		It symbolizes high promotion and good luck, implying a better life	

Strengthening the masculine sense of responsibility of Zhulang with the kind and agile dragon pattern, highlighting the spirituality of Nianmei with the light phoenix pattern, and enriching the layers with the snake pattern symbolizing vitality and the cloud and thunder pattern praying for protection, jointly constructing a complete national decorative pattern system. Among them, the dragon pattern is regarded as a kind and auspicious deity in Dong culture, with various and lovely images. Unlike the solemn dragon patterns of ancient imperial

courts, it often blends harmoniously with nature and all things; The phoenix pattern is not as elegant and luxurious as the Han ethnic group, and its form is more concise and light; Snake patterns originated from totem worship and symbolize the blessings of having many children and good fortune due to their strong vitality. They are often accompanied by dragons; The cloud and thunder pattern originates from the worship of gods and thunder gods, reflecting reverence for nature. The swirling lines symbolize the endless vitality and prosperity of life. The pattern redesign process (original Table 1) modernized and streamlined the above patterns, retaining the core recognition features. The dragon patterned phoenix bird corresponds to the masculine and feminine beauty of Zhulang, while the snake pattern symbolizes vitality and the cloud and thunder pattern pray for protection, jointly constructing a complete semantic system of Dong ethnic decoration.

2. Achievement 2: Construction of Visual Image System

After clarifying the core of intangible cultural heritage stories and cultural symbols, combined with modern aesthetic and communication needs, a systematic visual design of the two core characters, Zhulang and Niangmei, was completed, covering three dimensions: form, color, and clothing.

2.1 Styling Settings

Zhulang is a brave and resolute Dong youth: adopting a 7-head body ratio, slightly higher than the average Asian male, strengthening the "hero" and "guardian" image by elongating the leg lines, with a tall and powerful body shape; Square face contour, clear and firm jawline, thick eyebrows and big eyes, exuding heroic and loyal aura between the eyebrows; The short hair is neat and neat, and the headband is made of traditional green cloth material. The edges are integrated with Dong ethnic dragon patterns, echoing its guardian identity with strong lines.

Niangmei is a gentle and resilient Dong girl: she adopts a 6.5 head body, highlighting the rounded lines and soft contours of women, avoiding the coldness

caused by excessive height, and appearing more friendly and agile; Melon seed face shape, rounded and soft facial lines, slender willow leaf eyebrows, and plump cherry lips; Curl up the hair bun, revealing a slender neck, and wear a silver hairpin and three-layer silver collar; In terms of hand and foot characteristics, the hands are slender and elongated, but there are traces of labor due to years of weaving, tea picking, and pounding rice - the fingertips are slightly thick, and the palms are slightly red; The feet are symmetrical and sturdy, with slender and strong ankles, presenting a body language of "softness with rigidity" overall, echoing his gentle appearance and resilient inner character.

2.2. color system

Constructing a color system based on the Dong ethnic group's natural concept of "taking indigo from the mountains and blue from the sky". The main color tone of Zhulang is indigo (CMYK: 98/94/46/13), taken from the color of the mountains in Guangxi (Figure 1). Mountains are a symbol of male strength in Dong culture, and indigo is also a classic base color of Dong cloth, giving Zhulang a simple, steady, and reliable temperament like mountains; The auxiliary color is dark gray (CMYK: 78/74/73/47), taken from the color of mountains and rocks (Figure 2), symbolizing the hardness and backbone of Zhulang's simple appearance. The main color tone of Niangmei is light blue (CMYK: 69/36/0/0), derived from the early morning sky of the Dong village (Figure 3), which is in line with Niangmei's gentle and lively personality; The auxiliary color is black brown (CMYK: 88/83/83/73), taken from the base color of the pleated skirt (Figure 4), representing the power of beauty to "root in the countryside". The color of the mountains shapes a man's firmness, while the color of the sky endows his daughter with elegance; Deep gray is the bone of the mountain, black brown is the soul of the earth. Four colors blend together, combining hardness and softness.



Figure 1 Indigo Coloring (Source: Drawn by the author)



Figure 2 Dark Grey Coloring (Source: Drawn by the author)



Figure 3 Light Blue Coloring (Source: Drawn by the author)

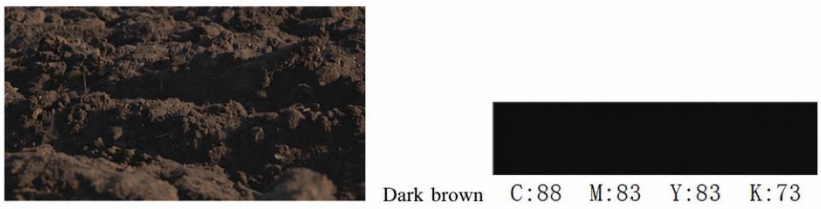
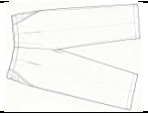


Figure 4 Black Brown Coloring (Source: Drawn by the author)

2.3 Clothing Details

Zhulang Clothing: The indigo cloth headscarf is decorated with Dong ethnic dragon pattern (Dong ethnic male identity symbol), and the collarless short jacket is suitable for labor. The wide tube pants and layered shoes reflect practicality, and the cuffs and headscarf of the top are printed with dragon pattern. The headscarf is usually about five meters long and can be called a "cultural calling card" worn on the body; The men's top features a straight collar and front placket, fabric buttons, four pockets, and no embroidery decoration; The pants are made of wide crotch and narrow tube fabric, and the cloth shoes are not decorated (Table 2).

Table 2 Zhalang Clothing Design

Name	Physical Prototype	Extraction of Basic Shape	Integration of New Elements	New Form
scarf				
tops				
pants				
shoe				

Mother's beauty clothing: headwear decorated with flowers, implying that love is as beautiful and short-lived as flowers; Wearing a three-layer silver collar (the symbol of Dong women's ethnic group), the collarless right lapel short sleeve is decorated with Dong phoenix patterns, the pleated long skirt is simplified to

48 layers to show agility, the silver headband simplified design implies a clean and neat look, the silver bracelet is decorated with Dong patterns, and the black cloth shoes without patterns suggest a bleak ending to the story. Dong ethnic silver jewelry is the most important, mostly created during maternal transmission or marriage, and is divided into headwear, earrings, necklaces, and bracelets (see Table 3). The final image of Zhulang is shown in Figure 5, and the final image of Niangmei is shown in Figure 6.

Table 3 NiangMei Clothing Design

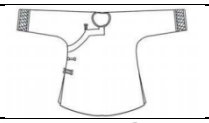
Name	Physical Prototype	Extraction of Basic Shape	New Design
hairpin			
earring			
collars			
Bracelets			
tops			
pleated skirts			
Leggings			
Shoes			



Figure 5 The final image of Zhulang (Source: Drawn by the author)



Figure 6 The final image of Niangmei (Source: Drawn by the author)

2.4 Auxiliary graphic elements

Three types of auxiliary elements for system development: natural elements (banyan trees, oil tea trees, bamboo weaving patterns, symbolizing the Dong village environment); Cultural symbols (geometric patterns of Dong brocade, spiral patterns of silver jewelry, bird shaped patterns, symbolizing

freedom and love); Narrative elements (spindle, straw drying, wind and rain bridge outline, echoing the story scene).

3. Achievement Three: Design Specification and Application Verification

3.1 Design Specifications

The minimum size for the character image is 5cm × 10cm; the ratio between the core pattern and the main and auxiliary colors cannot be changed arbitrarily; At the same time, constraints are imposed on the adaptation conditions and limitations of different application scenarios (such as digital media, printed materials, cultural and creative carriers, etc.) to ensure visual consistency and communication stability.

3.2 Application verification

Produce application examples in three scenarios: cultural and creative, digital, and cultural tourism, to verify the feasibility and dissemination efficiency of the image. At the same time, a five stage path of "character extraction symbol selection element translation standard solidification application verification" was extracted, as well as transferable experiences such as "few but refined, simple and accurate", providing method references for the activation of similar intangible cultural heritage characters.

The above three achievements correspond to the three research objectives of "cultural symbol extraction", "visual system construction", and "application and path extraction", together forming a complete output system for the visual image design of Zhulang Niang Mei.

Discussion

This is a summary of experience based on design practice, discussing from three dimensions: cultural balance, visual correspondence, and innovative value, to verify the effectiveness and replicability of the method path.

This study adopts the strategy of "retaining the core meaning and optimizing the formal expression" to achieve a balance between cultural authenticity and modern dissemination: the traditional pleated skirt of Niang Mei has been adjusted from at least one layer of pleats to 48 layers of pleats, and the pattern of Zhulang Tou Palong has been linearized and simplified. At the same time, personality expression is achieved through multidimensional linkage of "proportion shaping - color emotion - clothing details": Zhulang enhances his sense of strength with his inverted triangle body shape and tough face, while Niangmei conveys gentleness and toughness through soft contours. Combining Ekstrom's (2013) shape language theory, the matching of visual attributes and personality semantics directly affects recognition efficiency and dissemination effectiveness.

Innovation is reflected in three aspects: establishing a corresponding system of "traits symbols visual presentation" to reduce the expression drift caused by symbol stacking; Output executable design specifications (including CMYK values, minimum usage size, etc.) to provide standardized basis for IP development; The pre construction stage of the plan involves multimedia adaptation to balance static cultural and creative elements with dynamic communication.

This study achieves cultural balance through "preserving symbolism and optimizing form", strengthens personality expression through multidimensional linkage mechanism, innovatively constructs a trait symbol correspondence system, standardized design specifications, and multimedia adaptation scheme.

Conclusion

This study focuses on the core characters of "Zhulang Niangmei", Zhulang and Niangmei, and comprehensively uses literature research, field investigation, and design practice to complete a visual image design that combines cultural

authenticity and modern dissemination. The study clarified the correspondence between character traits and Dong ethnic cultural symbols, and constructed a systematic design practice path. The final image not only restored the core traits of Zhulang's "courage and perseverance" and Niang Mei's "loyalty and gentleness", but also adapted to modern communication and IP development needs through simplification, reconstruction, and other techniques. User testing has verified the effectiveness of the design, with high levels of cultural recognition, aesthetic acceptance, and dissemination willingness.

The research value lies in: firstly, concretizing this intangible cultural heritage project, laying the foundation for its cross media dissemination and industrialization; Secondly, it provides a feasible reference path for the visual activation of core characters in folk stories of similar ethnic minorities. In the future, dynamic image design and application scenario expansion can be further improved to promote the continuous dissemination and dynamic inheritance of the intangible cultural heritage of "Zhulang Niang Mei".

Recommendations

Application landing direction: Prioritize the development of lightweight cultural and creative products such as blind boxes and keychains, and combine traditional craftsmanship to enhance texture; Simultaneously launching digital emoticons and short video templates to enhance social communication; Import a guidance and display system into the Dong ethnic cultural tourism scene to achieve continuous exposure (Summary: Promote Zhulang Niang Mei from design to life, from static to dissemination).

Industrialization Promotion Direction: Establish clear IP operation and authorization mechanisms, as well as profit distribution rules; Strengthening community participation and benefiting the Dong ethnic community; Strive for

policy alignment and incorporate the image into local cultural and tourism promotion resources.

Subsequent research directions: supplementing dynamic expression and action libraries; Develop image variants for age groups; Tracking market data for iterative optimization; Conduct cross-cultural comparative research to test symbol acceptance.

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