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## Visual Reconstruction of the Colour Spectrum in Chinese Huishan Clay Figurines within the Context of Guochao

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### Abstract

The colour system of Huishan clay figurines serves as a key visual symbol for understanding the folk aesthetics and cultural identity of the Jiangnan region. This study explores the pathways of contemporary transformation for this traditional colour spectrum within the context of the ‘Guochao’ trend. Through an analysis of colour semiotics and visual culture, this paper demonstrates that the colours of Huishan clay figurines are rooted in the Chinese philosophy of the ‘Five Elements and Five Colours’, forming a stable spectrum characterised by high saturation, strong contrast, and auspicious symbolism. Driven by the ‘Guochao’ trend, traditional colours undergo creative transformation through three mechanisms: the recoding of visual symbols, digital translation, and cross-sectoral industrial integration. The research demonstrates that ‘Guochao’ does not constitute mere appropriation, but rather breathes new life into traditional colours by reconstructing their semantic meanings and embedding them within cultural and creative industries, fashion, and urban branding. This study provides concrete case studies and theoretical references for the contemporary innovation of intangible cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** *Huishan clay figurines, colour spectrum, Guochao*

### 1. Introduction

In the contemporary context where the protection of global intangible cultural heritage and ‘creative transformation’ have become central issues, how local traditional crafts can transcend the constraints of their original geographical and historical functions to gain new vitality amidst the tides of globalisation and digitalisation has become a crucial academic and practical challenge (Smith, 2006; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). In recent years, the ‘Guochao’ cultural phenomenon that has emerged in China has provided a highly dynamic arena for observing this complex process. Guochao is not merely a form of retro revival or commercial marketing, but a profound movement of cultural reproduction: rooted in cultural self-awareness, it systematically extracts, translates, and recodes traditional cultural symbols, integrating them into modern design syntax, consumer logic, and the digital media ecosystem, thereby constructing a new national aesthetic and identity that connects with history whilst looking towards the future (Wang, 2022; Li et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, this study focuses on Huishan clay figurines, a signature folk craft of Wuxi City in Jiangsu Province, China. As a National Intangible Cultural Heritage, one of the core elements of its visual appeal lies in a highly sophisticated and distinctive colour system. Renowned for its vivid, saturated hues, stylised colour combinations, and strong folkloric symbolism, this system serves as a visual key to understanding the folk aesthetic concepts, communal beliefs, and life philosophies of the Jiangnan region (Ying, 2013; Shen et al., 2012). However, existing research has largely concentrated on the craft history and folkloric dimensions of Huishan clay figurines, with insufficient attention paid to a structured analysis of their colour system and its contemporary significance; in particular, there is a lack of systematic exploration of the mechanisms of its transformation within the context of the ‘Guochao’ trend. This study aims to fill this gap by analysing the internal structure of the traditional colour spectrum of Huishan clay figurines and dissecting its transformation pathways within the context

of the ‘Guochao’ trend, thereby providing an analytical framework that combines theoretical depth with practical insights for the modern transformation of traditional crafts and the living transmission of intangible cultural heritage (Ionică, 2022).

## 2. Objectives

This paper aims to achieve the following three core research objectives through a specific case study:

1) To analyse the structure of the traditional colour spectrum: to systematically elucidate how the colour spectrum of Huishan clay figurines, drawing upon classical Chinese philosophy (the theory of the Five Elements and Five Colours), has evolved into a stable visual symbolic system with a high degree of cultural coding within the specific natural and cultural environment of the Jiangnan region.

2) To reveal the mechanisms of contemporary transformation: to conduct an in-depth analysis of how ‘Guochao’, as a cultural context and production mechanism, filters, translates, and reimagines the traditional colour spectrum through specific pathways (such as semantic reconstruction, digital translation, and cross-disciplinary applications).

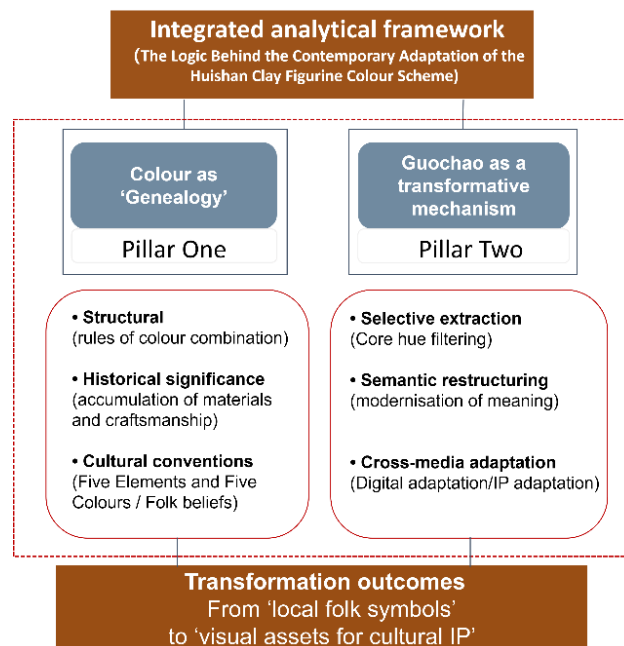
3) To assess the value and challenges of this transformation: to explore the cultural significance, industrial value, and potential risks (such as the dilution of cultural connotations and aesthetic homogenisation) of the aforementioned transformation process, whilst reflecting on the balance between tradition and innovation to provide a theoretical framework for relevant practices.

## 3. Materials and Methods

This study employs an interdisciplinary qualitative research methodology, combining literature review, semiotic analysis, and case studies.

### 3.1 Theoretical Framework: Colour as a Genealogy and the Mechanisms of Transformation in the ‘Guochao’ Movement

This study establishes an integrative analytical framework to elucidate the logic underpinning the contempThis study establishes an integrative analytical framework comprising two core pillars: firstly, treating colour as a ‘genealogy’ with an intrinsic structure and cultural conventions; and secondly, viewing the ‘Guochao’ movement as the core mechanism driving the creative transformation of this genealogy in the contemporary context.



**Figure 1** Theoretical Framework  
Source: Illustrated by the author

### 3.1.1 Colour as a 'Genealogy': A Semiotic and Material Cultural Analysis

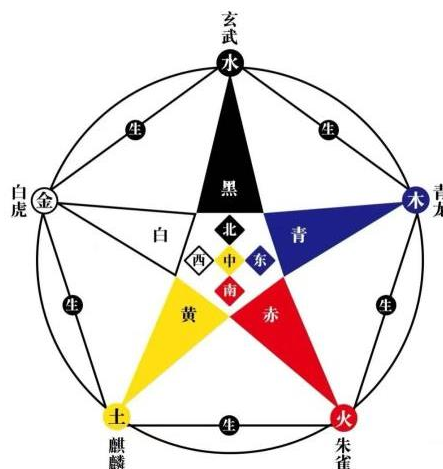
This study rejects the traditional view that regards the colours of Huishan clay figurines as isolated, random decorative elements, and instead adopts the concept of 'colour genealogy' as a core analytical tool. This concept integrates perspectives from colour semiotics and material culture studies, emphasising its systematic, historical, and culturally encoded nature.

Firstly, from a semiotic perspective, colour is a quintessential visual sign. According to Ferdinand de Saussure's classic theory (Lagopoulos & Boklund-Lagopoulou, 2020), the physical manifestation of colour (such as a specific shade of red) constitutes its 'signifier', whilst the socio-cultural meaning it conveys (such as auspiciousness or festivity) constitutes its 'signified'. The colour system of Huishan clay figurines has, within a specific historical and folkloric context, established a stable set of 'signifier-signified' correspondences shared by the community—what Roland Barthes termed 'cultural coding' (Bouzida, 2014). This coding is not innate, but rather a product of cultural construction.

The concept of 'genealogy' further emphasises that this coding exhibits characteristics of systematicity, historicity, and cultural normativity: (1) Structural: There exists a clear hierarchy among colours, along with rules of combination and even taboos regarding their use (such as the artisanal adage 'red against yellow makes it gleam'), which together constitute an organically unified symbolic system; (2) Historical: Contemporary colour practices are the result of the continuous selection and evolution of material conditions (such as mineral pigments), core technical skills (such as colour application techniques) and the aesthetic preferences of successive generations within the community; (3) Cultural Conventionality: The use of colour is deeply constrained by traditional cosmologies (such as the philosophy of the Five Elements and Five Colours) (Bogushevskaya, 2016), folk belief systems (such as the desire to invite good fortune and ward off evil), and social ritual norms. Consequently, the 'colour spectrum' transcends the static concept of a 'colour palette', pointing instead to a dynamic visual cultural system that embodies local knowledge, collective memory, and cultural identity.

### 3.1.2 'Guochao' as a Mechanism of Transformation

'Guochao' constitutes the core contemporary cultural context and driving force of transformation examined in this study. Within the international academic community, Guochao may be regarded as a manifestation of cultural nationalism in the consumer sphere (Phillips, 2021), whilst also representing a specific form of heritage commodification (Baillie et al., 2021; Guo, 2004). This framework analyses the process by which the 'Guochao' trend transforms traditional colour systems into three interlinked mechanisms: (1) Selective Extraction: screening core hues and colour combinations based on contemporary aesthetics and market logic; (2) Semantic Reconstruction: expanding or shifting the original folkloric connotations of traditional colours to connect them with contemporary values; (3) Cross-media adaptation: embedding the reconstructed colours into new media such as digital screens and fashion products to form a standardised visual identity system.



**Figure 2** Traditional Chinese Five Colours, Five Directions, Five Elements Diagram  
Source: Rednote

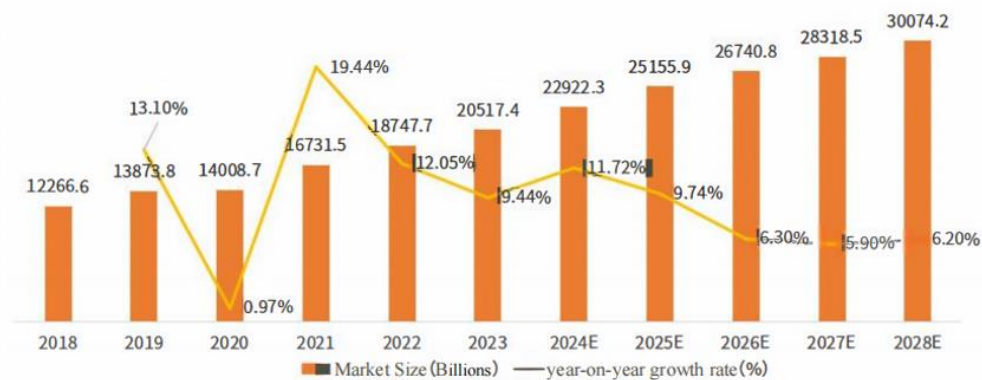
### 3.2 Research Materials

The sources of materials for this study comprise three categories:

1. Textual materials: historical documents on Huishan clay figurines (Ying, 2013; Shen et al., 2012), records of craftsmanship and artisanal techniques, as well as academic papers and industry reports on ‘Guochao’ culture and design transformation (A Century of Chinese National Style).



**Figure 3** Wuxi County Annals  
Source: Photographed by the author at the Wuxi Archives



**Figure 4** Chinese Consumers Will Recommend China-Chic Products in 2024.  
Source: data.iimedia.cn

**Table 1** Key Stages in the Evolution of the Concept of Guochao

| Period              | Core Concept            | Intrinsic characteristics                                           | Representative literature references                                   |
|---------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 17th-18th centuries | Chinoiserie             | Imitation of Oriental Styles in European Decorative Arts            | Wang (2021).                                                           |
| 1920                | China Trend             | Carrier of the trend toward national rejuvenation                   | Recorded in “Tsinghua Weekly”, Tsinghua University.1920. Yifeng (2021) |
| 2018                | Year One of the Guochao | The Rise of New Consumer Brands and the Revival of Cultural Symbols | Tmall Guochao initiative, (International Financial News, 2020)         |
| 2020s               | Guochao                 | Digital technology + cultural IP + global dissemination             | Wanfang data, 2024                                                     |

2. Visual materials: A systematic collection of high-resolution images of representative Huishan clay figurines (primarily sourced from the collections of the China Clay Figurine Museum, the Wuxi Museum, and

publicly available publications), as well as examples of innovative designs within the ‘Guochao’ context (including cultural and creative products, brand collaborations, and urban visual identities; a total of eight typical cases were selected).

3. Colour Data: Colour sampling and analysis of representative visual materials (5 traditional works and 8 ‘Guochao’ adaptations). Sampling was conducted using the Eyedropper tool in Adobe Photoshop, selecting the centre point of areas with uniform colour within the images. For each sample, 3–5 colour points were collected and averaged to compare the effects of traditional mineral pigments with RGB colour values in digital applications.



**Figure 5** Vertical Piles Wang Nanxian Collection of the National Art Museum of China  
Source: The Life of Clay Wuxi Huishan Clay Sculpture Art Exhibition



**Figure 6** Li Ning Guochao Series Design  
Source: Li-Ning Brand Website



**Figure 7** Sampling with the Photoshop Eyedropper Tool  
Source: Author's selection

### 3.3 Analytical Methods

This study employs three analytical methods:

1. Textual analysis: tracing the historical and cultural origins of colour schemes;
2. Iconographic and semiotic analysis: examine the patterns of colour combination and their symbolic meanings;
3. Comparative case analysis: to summarise the specific pathways and strategies for the transformation of ‘Guochao’ (Chinese-inspired fashion). The analytical process follows these steps: first, colour samples are taken from traditional works to establish a baseline colour spectrum; second, similar samples are taken from ‘Guochao’ adaptations; and finally, through comparative analysis, the patterns and mechanisms of colour variation are identified.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 The Core Structure of the Traditional Colour System of Huishan Clay Figurines

#### 4.1.1 The Folk Interpretation of the Five Elements and Five Colours: From Philosophical Concepts to Folk Symbols

Having undergone centuries of transmission and development, the colour system of Huishan clay figurines has been profoundly influenced by the traditional Chinese philosophical concepts of the ‘Five Elements’ (Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, Earth) and the ‘Five Colours’ (White, Blue, Black, Red, Yellow). This colour philosophy, which originated in the pre-Qin period, is not a rigid dogma, but has been vividly transformed within the daily life and spiritual world of Jiangnan’s folk society into a practical and perceptible system of auspicious symbols and aesthetic practices.

**Table 2** Correspondence Chart of the Five Elements and Five Colours

| Five Elements | Five Colors | Symbolism                                  | Traditional cultural functions             |
|---------------|-------------|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Wood          | Blue        | Growth,Vitality,Orient                     | Spring ritual color, auspicious wish color |
| Fire          | Red         | Warmth,Radiance,Sacrifice                  | Celebrations and Wedding Rejoicing         |
| Earth         | Yellow      | Central Authority, Imperial Power, Harvest | Royal Hue, Noble Hue                       |
| Metal         | White       | Clean,Solemn, Ceremonial                   | Ancestral Temple Worship, Purity           |
| Water         | Black       | Profound,Steadfast, Primordial life        | Ward off evil spirits, Offer protection    |

#### 4.1.2 Visual Syntax and Stylistic Characteristics

Guided by this symbolic system, Huishan clay figurines have developed a highly distinctive visual syntax. High saturation and flat-painting technique: The aim is to achieve pure and intense colours, with very little use of grey tones or complex gradients. Pigments are predominantly applied in flat layers onto the clay forms, creating a clean, crisp effect of large blocks of colour that are unadorned; this aligns closely with the folk aesthetic preference for vividness and directness.

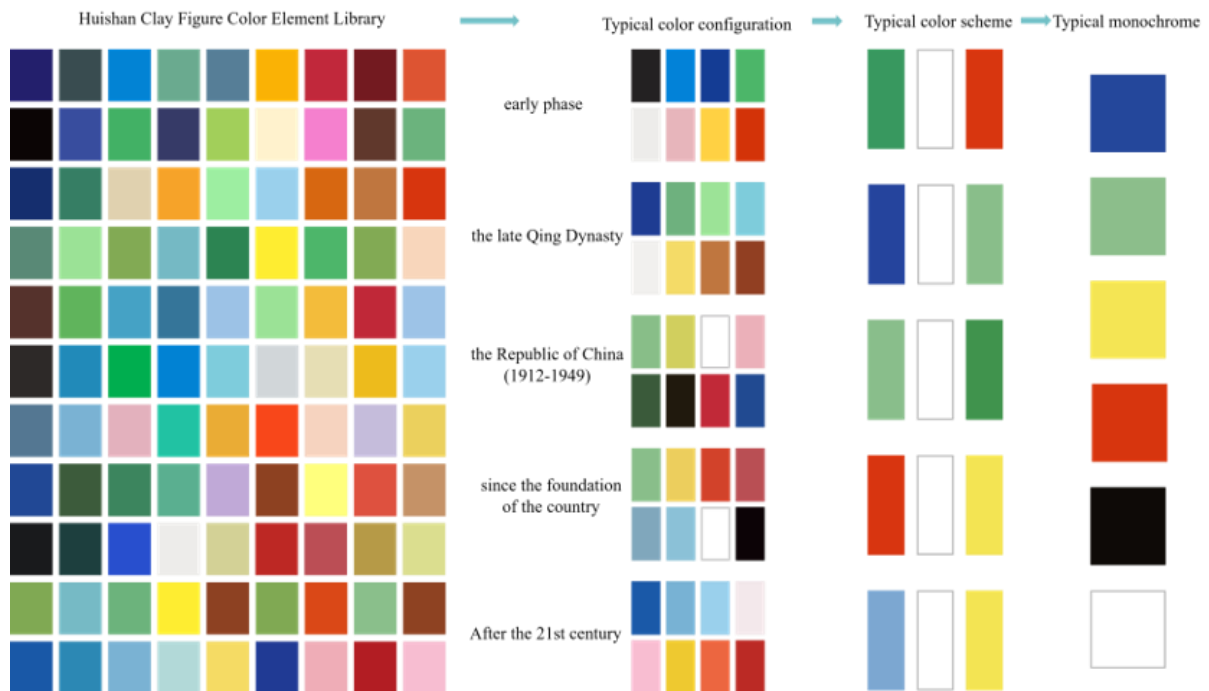
Functional colour composition: The distribution of colour is not arbitrary, but serves the narrative of the figure and the shaping of its structure. The main figures are often highlighted using high-purity ‘forward-moving colours’ such as red and yellow, whilst the background or supporting elements may be rendered in ‘backward-moving colours’ such as blue and green; facial colours are stylised (such as the ‘three-white method’), and the colours of clothing follow relatively fixed conventions based on the character’s status (scholar, warrior, immortal, child), creating a visual structure that unifies narrative and decorative elements.



**Figure 8** Āfū Wang Nanxian Clay Figurine Studio  
Source: Photographed by the author

#### 4.1.3 The Emergence of a Local Visual Language

This colour palette is a product of the specific natural and cultural environment of the Jiangnan region. Its style, which is bright, mellow, and delicate yet retaining a rustic simplicity-distinguishes itself from the bold, intense character of northern clay sculptures, and differs from the understated elegance or mystique found in the folk art of other regions. It is deeply embedded in the everyday life, temple fairs, and family rituals of the Wuxi region, serving as a shared emotional anchor and aesthetic code for the local people. Consequently, the colours of Huishan clay figurines are not merely ‘Chinese’, but specifically Jiangnan and Wuxi in character; they constitute a living ‘local’ visual language that embodies collective regional memory and cultural identity.



**Figure 9** Huishan Clay Figurine Colour Palette  
Source: The author collected and drew

## 4.2 Pathways for the Transformation of Colour Palettes within the Context of the ‘Guochao’ Trend

### 4.2.1 Semantic Reconstruction: From Folk Symbolism to Modern Identity Markers

‘Guochao’ design expands and updates the folkloric connotations of traditional colours, connecting them with contemporary values. For instance, vermilion, which symbolises ‘auspiciousness’, has been reimagined as a fashion label representing ‘Eastern vitality’ and ‘cultural confidence’; whilst green, representing ‘vitality’, has been imbued with the modern concept of ‘nature and environmental protection’. Colours are thus liberated from their specific folkloric functions, becoming abstract symbols that express a pan-Chinese cultural identity.

### 4.2.2 Visual Enhancement and Digital Adaptation

To suit digital dissemination, ‘Guochao’ applications have further enhanced colour saturation and contrast. Through colour sampling of eight ‘Guochao’ works, the RGB values for red have been increased to (220–240/30–45/35–50), whilst the RGB values for green have been raised from the traditional (60–120/60–120/60–120) to (80–140/150–210/70–130), with saturation increasing by an average of approximately 15–20%.

This process essentially involves the translation of colours from physical media to standard colour values for digital media, establishing precise RGB colour standards.



**Figure 10** Examples of Red and Green in Guochao Colour Palettes  
Source: Li Ning Brand Website



**Figure 11** The Evolution of Guochao Colours  
Source: Illustrated by the author

#### 4.2.3 Cross-Boundary Applications and Lineage Expansion

Within industrial transformation pathways, a notable trend involves abstracting and separating traditional colours from the specific three-dimensional forms of clay figurines. This elevates them into independent core visual assets, subsequently infusing them into entirely new product carriers.

1. Cultural and Creative IP Development. The colour palette of ‘Da Afu’ has undergone a modern reinterpretation, transitioning from traditional craftsmanship to digital design: the classic red, yellow, and green have been simplified into high-saturation, high-contrast flat colour blocks, serving as the ‘visual DNA’ system for this core IP and applied to products such as blind boxes and trendy toys. This process has elevated colour from a secondary element of craftsmanship to a core asset capable of cross-sectoral adaptation, significantly expanding the vitality and commercial scope of intangible cultural heritage within the contemporary consumer market, whilst retaining its cultural distinctiveness.



**Figure 12** A-Fu Series Blind Boxes: Generation I & Generation II  
Source: Wuxi Huishan Clay Figurine Factory WeChat Official Account

2. Fashion and Brand Collaborations. Traditional colour schemes from Huishan clay figurines have been adapted and reinterpreted for use in fashion products such as clothing, elevating colour from mere decoration to a cultural medium. Signature colours such as ‘Afu Red’ have been refined into brand symbols, with their auspicious connotations transformed into labels such as ‘traditional Chinese style’ and ‘vitality’. Through commercial partnerships, these elements have been integrated into the lives of young people, forging a connection between brand identification and consumer spending.



**Figure 13** Huishan Clay Figurines Brand  
Source: Wuxi Huishan Clay Figurine Factory WeChat Official Account

3. City Branding. Colour concepts such as 'Afu-Red' and 'Huishan-Green' have been developed into cultural IP for the city of Wuxi, evolving from craft-specific characteristics into shareable visual assets. Incorporated into cultural and tourism signage and public facilities, these colours have enhanced the city's brand recognition and achieved a deep integration of intangible cultural heritage resources with the city's image-building efforts.



**Figure 14** The Application of Huishan Clay Figurines in Wuxi City Promotion  
Source: Wuxi City Promotional Film

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Theoretical Contributions and Mechanisms of Transformation

The first theoretical contribution of this study lies in proposing the 'colour spectrum' as a core concept for analysing the visual system of traditional crafts, elevating colour from a decorative element to a symbolic system that carries cultural codes. This concept helps to transcend the binary opposition of 'form and meaning' in traditional craft research, offering a new perspective for understanding the visual dimension of intangible cultural heritage.

The second contribution of this study is the identification of the threefold mechanism underlying the transformation of the 'Guochao' phenomenon. This framework transcends the one-dimensional narrative of 'traditional revival', revealing the systematic operational logic of the 'Guochao' phenomenon as a mechanism of cultural reproduction. Compared with existing research (Fabian, 2023; Wang, 2022), this study demonstrates more concretely how the transformation process from 'folkloric symbols' to 'cultural IP assets' is realised at different levels.

### 5.2 Critical Reflection: The Tensions and Risks of Transformation

The transformation of Huishan clay figurine colours within the 'Guochao' movement exemplifies an effective model of 'creative transformation', yet it is accompanied by multiple tensions. Firstly, the tension between authenticity and branding: in the practice of the 'Guochao' movement, traditional colours are standardised and refined to meet the demands of brand communication. However, this standardisation may lead to the loss of the 'authentic' craftsmanship and the unique variations inherent in handmade work. As notes (Mabrouk, 2025), the commercialisation of heritage often faces a fundamental contradiction between 'cultural essence' and 'market adaptability'.

Secondly, the tension between cultural nationalism and local distinctiveness: the 'Guochao' trend shapes traditional colours into visual representations of 'Chinese identity', but this process may obscure the subtle differences within regional cultures. When 'Afu Red' is abstracted into a universally applicable 'Guochao red', the cultural distinctiveness of Wuxi may be diluted. This phenomenon corroborates Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (2004) argument regarding 'heritage being stripped of its original context'.

Thirdly, the tension between commercial logic and spiritual significance: excessive commercialisation may lead to a superficialisation of colour meanings. In some cases, the profound spiritual connotations carried by traditional colours such as 'blessings' and 'protection' are simplified into consumer labels like 'fashionable' and 'trendy'. Whilst this simplification broadens the audience, it also carries the risk of diluting cultural significance.

### 5.3 Practical Implications

For the fields of design studies and cultural heritage research, this case study highlights a universal issue: how local traditional arts can integrate into contemporary life through flexible visual strategies, whilst retaining their cultural roots. The ideal transformation should strike a balance between innovative application and respect for the core of the tradition. Specifically, the transformed colours should still be traceable to the core elements of the traditional lineage; the transformation process should preserve the connection between the colours and the cultural memory of the locality; and innovative practices should, as far as possible, involve the participation of tradition bearers, ensuring that the right to interpret the culture is not entirely ceded to commercial logic.

### 6. Conclusion

This study confirms that the colour system of Huishan clay figurines constitutes a visual lineage deeply embedded within the structure of traditional culture. Contemporary practices within the context of the ‘Guochao’ movement have, through semantic reconstruction, visual enhancement, and cross-disciplinary application, successfully transformed this local folk colour scheme into a dynamic visual resource that contributes to the construction of contemporary Chinese national aesthetics and identity. The essence of this transformation lies in a process of cultural ‘re-contextualisation’, demonstrating that the vitality of the traditional colour spectrum resides in its ability to adapt and to be continuously reinterpreted, allowing it to be imbued with new meanings across different historical contexts.

The theoretical contributions of this study are as follows: firstly, it proposes the ‘colour spectrum’ as a core concept for analysing the visual systems of traditional crafts, thereby providing a new tool for understanding the visual dimension of intangible cultural heritage; secondly, it identifies a three-pronged framework of mechanisms underpinning the transformation of the ‘Guochao’ trend, which can be applied to the analysis of the contemporary transformation of other traditional crafts; and thirdly, it reveals the inherent tensions within the transformation process, offering a theoretical perspective for a critical understanding of the ‘Guochao’ phenomenon.

Future research could explore the following avenues: firstly, conducting audience surveys to quantitatively analyse consumers’ perceptions and acceptance of the ‘Guochao’ colour palette; secondly, tracking the emerging influences of digital media (such as AR and VR) on colour experiences and the construction of meaning; and thirdly, undertaking cross-regional comparative studies to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the common patterns and unique pathways underlying the contemporary transformation of folk art colour palettes.

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