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Visual Translation of Intangible Cultural Heritage Resources and IP Character Design: A Case Study of Cultural Tourism Image Design of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Shaanxi Province

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Under the current context of deep culture-tourism integration, the ways in which intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is communicated are undergoing transformation. No longer confined to static museum displays and traditional folk-custom scenarios, ICH increasingly calls for modern communication approaches that align with public aesthetics and appeal to younger audiences. Shaanxi Province possesses a rich and diverse array of ICH resources with distinctive characteristics and a profound regional cultural heritage; however, the external promotion of most ICH projects remains conventional, and their visual presentation is outdated and rigid, lacking a youthful and systematic visual identity, which makes it difficult to build memorable impressions and communication influence among young people. Taking Heyang Huamo (flower-shaped steamed dough art) of Shaanxi as the specific research subject and drawing on theories of visual translation, this paper reviews the overall status of cultural tourism visual design for Shaanxi's ICH, analyzes the homogenization problem prevalent in the industry, and investigates the aesthetic preferences of young people and the characteristics of new media communication. On the basis of a complete theoretical review and status analysis, the paper extracts the representative visual symbols of Heyang Huamo and completes the overall design of two exclusive cultural tourism IP characters, Huanuobao and Hudundun. While preserving the folk-custom connotations and cultural core of traditional Huamo, the design reconstructs the visual images with a modern cartoon formal language, and further develops a series of derivative visual designs, including multi-pose character extensions, themed posters, and business cards. This design practice demonstrates that the reasonable simplification and cartoon-style translation of traditional ICH visual elements can effectively meet the aesthetic needs of contemporary youth, break the outdated and rigid visual impression of traditional ICH, and provide a practical reference for the innovative design and rollout of similar ICH cultural tourism IPs in the Shaanxi region.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage, visual translation, IP character, intangible cultural heritage cultural tourism

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Introduction

With the continuous development of China's cultural tourism industry, regions across the country have begun to explore their local intangible cultural heritage (ICH) resources in depth, attempting to revitalize traditional culture by creating exclusive cultural tourism IPs and to enhance the communication influence of regional culture. Relying on its profound historical and cultural accumulation, Shaanxi Province has preserved a large number of ICH items with strong regional characteristics. Heyang Huamo, a representative folk art of Weinan's ICH, has a deep mass foundation in folk life. Also known locally as mianhua (dough flowers), Heyang Huamo is widely used in various life scenarios such as festival celebrations, weddings and birthday wishes, and folk sacrificial rituals. With plump and vivid forms and bright, rich colors, it carries the beautiful folk expectations of ordinary people for blessings, good fortune, peace and prosperity.

Judging from the actual situation of current cultural tourism promotion, the external presentation of Heyang Huamo remains highly traditional, relying mostly on photographs of the physical objects and textual introductions for communication. No exclusive, unified, and youthful cartoon visual IP has been developed, and the overall recognition is low, making it difficult for young people to notice and remember it in the information-saturated new media environment. Moreover, the creative approaches of most ICH IP designs on the market are relatively homogeneous; the design process mostly stops at applying and splicing superficial elements, simply attaching traditional patterns to the surface of cartoon characters without exploring the folk-custom background and cultural connotations behind the ICH. As a result, design works suffer from severe homogenization and lack distinctive features. Young audiences prefer visual images that are relaxed in style, cute in form, and rich in emotion and storytelling. A design model that merely replicates traditional retro patterns is too rigid to arouse young people's affection and willingness to spread content voluntarily. Based on the current state of ICH cultural tourism design and the aesthetic needs of young people, this paper adopts visual translation as the core design method, deeply refines the distinctive visual elements of Heyang Huamo, creates exclusive IP characters suitable for contemporary cultural tourism communication, and interprets traditional folk culture with a youthful visual language, thereby providing a new direction for the modern communication and IP innovation practice of Shaanxi's ICH.

Theoretical Basis

Visual Translation

Visual translation is a commonly used creative approach in the modern design of traditional culture, whose core is to transform abstract cultural connotations, folk-custom implications, and the characteristics of traditional artifacts into intuitive, easily comprehensible visual graphic language that fits modern communication. This approach differs from simple pattern copying and physical reproduction: It requires designers to deconstruct the overall characteristics of traditional art in depth, screen out the visual symbols that are most representative and best reflect the cultural core, and reintegrate them creatively according to modern aesthetic standards.

In the application of ICH design, visual translation consistently follows the core logic of preserving the cultural core while optimizing the visual form, and never abandons the original folk-custom implications and cultural characteristics of the ICH merely to fit a modern style. The shapes, patterns, and color combinations of Heyang Huamo all correspond to specific folk-custom cultural connotations. In the translation process of this

design, the classic floral forms, tiger-head patterns, and traditional color system of Huamo were prioritized for preservation, while the trivial and complicated details of the physical objects that are unfavorable to visual presentation were removed. The resulting visual images retain a traditional charm while being more concise and coordinated, and can fit multiple modern application scenarios such as cultural product production, online communication, and offline promotion.

IP Character

An IP character is a visual role with high recognition, a complete persona system, and sustained derivative development value, and is currently the most intuitive and popular visual carrier of cultural tourism communication. Unlike ordinary flat illustrations, a complete IP character is not merely a single visual image; it also includes unified modeling proportions, color specifications, and character settings, and can be continuously extended to create various derivative works according to usage needs. In cultural tourism communication, an exclusive IP character can serve as the visual spokesperson of regional ICH culture: With vivid and adorable concrete images, it shortens the distance between traditional culture and the general public, especially young people, and weakens the sense of heaviness and remoteness inherent in ICH. Systematic IP design ensures visual consistency across all derivative works. Whether themed posters, promotional business cards, or various cultural and creative products, the consistency of character features can be maintained; long-term use can accumulate stable visual memory points and effectively enhance the communication intensity and brand recognition of the Heyang Huamo ICH culture.

Visual Resources and Current Status of Shaanxi ICH Cultural Tourism

Representative Categories of Shaanxi ICH and Their Visual Art Characteristics

Shaanxi has rich and profound folk ICH resources. The folk-custom forms of Guanzhong (central Shaanxi), northern Shaanxi, and southern Shaanxi differ from one another and together form a distinctive northwestern folk art system. Handicrafts such as paper-cutting, shadow puppetry, clay sculpture, dough flowers, and fabric art are rooted in folk life and serve various folk rituals including festivals, weddings, and blessing ceremonies. Through long-term immersion in regional culture, Shaanxi's ICH has generally developed visual characteristics of plump and sturdy forms, plain lines, and intense colors, with an overall warm and festive atmosphere. This distinguishes it from the delicate texture of southern folk art and gives it strong regional recognizability.

The Heyang Huamo studied in this paper belongs to the characteristic dough-sculpture ICH of eastern Guanzhong and is a folk handicraft with relatively complete inheritance within the Weinan dough-flower system. Unlike ordinary staple food, Huamo is not mainly made for eating but serves folk rituals. Its forms are mostly derived from various flowers and auspicious animals, with rich stacking layers and strong color contrast in painting. Compared with two-dimensional ICH forms such as paper-cutting and shadow puppetry, Huamo has an inherent three-dimensional plastic quality and more varied formal layers, which gives it a natural advantage in visual IP transformation. Every form in Huamo corresponds to a fixed folk-custom connotation: Tiger-shaped patterns carry the expectation of protecting children, while dough flowers bear the wish for blessings and good fortune. These explicit cultural implications lay the foundation for the subsequent extraction of IP symbols and cultural translation in this study.

Homogenization Problems in the Current Visual Presentation of Shaanxi ICH

There is no shortage of cultural tourism visual works related to Shaanxi's ICH on the market, yet a large number of designs remain at the level of surface expression and lack in-depth exploration of the cultural core of ICH. Many designs directly appropriate generic traditional patterns without purposefully refining the unique visual language of the corresponding ICH project. Visual creation targeting Heyang Huamo suffers from the same problem: Many works simply apply ordinary floral patterns and ignore Huamo's distinctive formal characteristics such as handmade kneading and shaping, layered three-dimensional dough flowers, and folk hand-painted color schemes. As a result, the final products are disconnected from the cultural features of real Huamo and can hardly establish exclusive recognition.

Existing cartoon IP creations for ICH also show template rigidity. A large number of cultural tourism IPs adopt similar big-headed doll forms, with converging facial features and character proportions, making it difficult to distinguish ICH projects of different regions and categories by visual image alone. Heyang Huamo itself possesses highly recognizable elements such as tiger-face forms and layered dough flowers, but few designs take these features as the visual core, so the images are easily lost among a large number of similar China-chic IPs.

Most ICH visual outputs consist of a single promotional illustration and lack a complete set of visual specifications. Characters are seldom extended into multiple poses and scenarios, and there are no unified standards for color and pattern usage. Scattered visual materials are difficult to reuse, can hardly support long-term cultural tourism promotion and serial cultural product development, restrict the sustainable development of ICH visuals, and are unfavorable to the long-term communication of ICH culture.

Aesthetic and Communication Needs of Young Audiences for ICH Cultural Tourism

The new media environment has changed the communication logic of ICH content. Young people are an important audience of ICH communication and the main force of secondary content dissemination. The previously serious and documentary-style presentation of ICH can no longer fit the viewing habits of contemporary young people. When engaging with ICH today, young audiences no longer simply receive knowledge-based introductions; they value visual experience more. Cartoon images with simple, soft forms and built-in character stories are more likely to attract attention. On social platforms, IPs with multiple dynamic images that can be made into wallpapers and stickers are more easily shared and forwarded by young people, generating spontaneous dissemination.

Young people also value the practical utility of design and tend to favor visual works that can be translated into actual products; blind boxes, stickers, promotional materials, and new media illustrations all fall within the scope of demand. This means that ICH IP design cannot pursue visual effect alone, but must also ensure cultural accuracy and visual consistency while fitting multiple application scenarios. The IP visual translation of Heyang Huamo in this study is precisely based on this communication context: While preserving folk-custom connotations, it reconstructs the traditional images with a lightweight visual language to fit the practical needs of new media communication and the cultural tourism market.

Design Practice of Visual Translation for Shaanxi ICH Cultural Tourism IPs

Principles of Symbol Extraction and Modern Reconstruction of Shaanxi ICH

This design carried out an IP visual translation practice centered on the Heyang Huamo ICH. In the symbol

extraction stage, the blessing-related folk-custom connotations inherent in Huamo were prioritized for preservation, and the most recognizable elements—floral dough flowers and tiger-head forms—were selected as the core materials without altering the cultural implications originally carried by the patterns.

The physical Heyang Huamo relies on large numbers of stacked dough flowers and painted patterns to create a splendid and elaborate visual effect. However, if these trivial decorations were directly applied to cartoon IPs, the images would easily become crowded, and excessive lines would also be unfavorable to subsequent cultural product prototyping, mold making and printing. The original patterns were therefore simplified: Small repetitive decorations were removed, and only the core silhouettes and features were retained. The two IP characters, Huanuobao and Hudundun, both adopt a chibi-style cartoon body proportion with a consistent head-to-body ratio, and their color systems echo each other, ensuring a unified visual style across the whole set of works. Finally, four types of core visual symbols were extracted: layered floral patterns, Huamo headdress forms, traditional tiger-face forms, and high-saturation folk color schemes. This extraction and simplification approach also established a unified framework for the subsequent design of the two IP characters, realizing the transformation of traditional ICH elements into a modern cartoon visual language.

Design Scheme of the Gentle Folk-Style IP Character: Huanuobao

Huanuobao is set as an eight-year-old girl with a gentle and dexterous personality who loves making Huamo. Her image is inspired by Heyang floral dough flowers, transforming the layered petal forms of Huamo into a dough-flower headdress on top of the character's head. The headdress references the growth structure of real Huamo dough flowers: Flowers of different sizes are arranged in staggered layers with leaf accents, reproducing the plump texture of dough flowers growing layer by layer. The character has a round and soft face with delicate brow and eye lines, and a small floral pattern adorns the center of the face to reinforce the connection with the Huamo ICH. The main color scheme uses red and pink tones with small amounts of blue and green as accent colors, matching the girl's gentle and sweet temperament.

The costume references the style of traditional folk short jackets. The body, cuffs, and hem are decorated only with simplified Huamo patterns, with the number of decorations controlled to avoid visual clutter. Wavy lace trims the edges of the costume, echoing the curled silhouette of Huamo dough flowers. The character continues the folk-custom implication of dough flowers as carriers of blessings and good fortune, and multiple dynamic poses—waving, holding flowers and standing—have been designed to fit different cultural tourism scenarios such as posters, display panels, and blind box modeling. Through this set of visual designs, the IP translation of the floral dough-flower symbol is completed, producing a gentle-style ICH IP that fits young people's aesthetics and can be used for multi-scenario communication.



Figure 1. Design Scheme of Intangible Cultural Heritage IP Character Hualanubao.

Design Scheme of the Festive Traditional-Style IP Character: Hudundun

Hudundun is set as an eight-year-old boy with a lively and enthusiastic personality who excels at making tiger-face Huamo. Tiger-face Huamo is a highly representative category of Heyang Huamo, and local folk belief holds that tigers can protect children's safety. Drawing on this cultural background, the traditional tiger-face Huamo form is transformed into a tiger-head cap for the character, with an emphasis on retaining highly recognizable elements such as the tiger's round eyes, curled eye makeup patterns and petal-shaped mouth and nose, while colorful dough flowers surround the cap to reproduce the decorative characteristics of Huamo.

The overall color scheme is dominated by orange and yellow, creating a festive and lively atmosphere. The colors are differentiated from those of Huanuobao but maintain consistent hue and saturation, ensuring that the whole IP set is coordinated and unified. The costume adopts a one-piece folk outfit: The chest is decorated with a large dough flower, the cuffs and trouser legs are paired with wavy patterns, and a tiger tail with polka-dot patterns and a pink-blue gradient is added as an accessory to enrich the character's layers. Based on this character, derivative designs such as posters, cultural and creative products and blind box models can be developed for cultural tourism display and ICH promotion. This character completes the modern translation of the tiger-face Huamo cultural symbol. Paired with Huanuobao, it constitutes a complete Heyang Huamo cultural tourism IP, carrying folk-custom connotations through a cartoon-based youthful form and facilitating the communication of the Heyang Huamo ICH.



Figure 2. Design Scheme of Intangible Cultural Heritage IP Character Hudundun.

Conclusion and Outlook

This study carried out design practice on the visual translation of ICH cultural tourism IPs centered on Heyang Huamo, reviewed the current state of Shaanxi's ICH visual resources, and, in response to the superficial and homogenized problems of current ICH visual design, explored a feasible path for transforming traditional folk symbols into modern cartoon IPs. ICH IP design cannot simply apply traditional patterns; it requires in-depth exploration of the formal characteristics, color language and folk-custom connotations of the ICH itself, extraction of core visual symbols with high recognition, and visual reconstruction in accordance with the aesthetic preferences of contemporary youth. This practice completed the design of two IP characters, Huanuobao and Hudundun, which respectively extract the floral dough-flower and tiger-face form elements of Heyang Huamo. The two characters complement each other visually—one gentle and one vigorous—and the whole IP set maintains a unified color system and formal specification. It can fit multiple derivative carriers such as posters, cultural and creative products and blind box models, can meet the usage needs of new media communication and cultural tourism promotion, and provides a youthful visual communication solution for Heyang Huamo.

This design practice still has limitations: The derivative applications of the IP currently remain at the level of visual proposals and lack field testing in actual promotion. In the future, the IP extension design can be continuously improved in response to real feedback from the cultural tourism market, and more forms of content such as emoji stickers and offline installations can be developed to broaden the communication channels of the

Heyang Huamo ICH, while also providing a reference for the IP visual translation of other folk ICH items in Shaanxi.

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