

Translating the Body Language of Intangible Cultural Heritage Crafts through Picture Books: A Case Study of Nanjing Velvet Flowers

Xinge Li *

Department of Painting, Nanjing University of the Arts, Nanjing, China

* Corresponding Author Email: 3369905203@qq.com

Abstract. Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) carries historical memory and cultural continuity, yet in many craft traditions its most important knowledge is not fully visible in the finished object. It is held in the maker's gestures, rhythm, posture, and control of force: forms of bodily knowledge that are central to the craft but difficult to pass on. This thesis, with Nanjing velvet flowers as a case study, investigates the dissemination challenges faced by craft-based ICH, and explores the potential of an interactive craft picture book as a more accessible media for the communication of this embodied knowledge. The study proposes a five-part strategy based on field experience and design practice: to create a narrative entry point through visual symbols; to bridge the generation gap through a companion character; to translate key bodily experiences into interactive units; to incorporate timely feedback into the reading process; and to extend participation through an online community. These strategies translate the bodily knowledge embedded in the five major stages of velvet-flower making into concrete, visible, and operable interactions. The study suggests that the value of an interactive craft picture book is less in reproducing the craft in full than in providing younger audiences with a low-threshold first encounter with how the craft actually feels to make. In this way, ICH communication can go beyond the display of finished objects and into an understanding of the process, labor, and bodily knowledge that went into them.

Keywords: Intangible cultural heritage communication, embodied knowledge, body language, Nanjing velvet flowers, interactive craft picture book.

1. Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage is an important part of China's traditional culture, and a living means through which historical memory and cultural continuity are carried forward. In recent years, national cultural policy and the broader emphasis on cultural confidence have brought greater attention to the safeguarding and communication of ICH. At the First Session of the 13th National People's Congress, President Xi Jinping called for the creative transformation and innovative development of fine traditional Chinese culture so that the influence, cohesion, and appeal of Chinese civilization could be more fully expressed [1]. The 15th Five-Year Plan has placed cultural inheritance and ICH protection in an increasingly prominent position. ICH, however, is not simply a collection of objects or techniques. It is a form of living culture. This raises a practical question for current research and design: how can the inner logic and cultural meaning of a living craft be communicated rather than merely displayed?

Current modes of ICH transmission include oral teaching, written documentation, practice-based learning, community participation, and digital preservation. Each has contributed to wider public awareness, but many remain limited in terms of interaction and sustained engagement, particularly among younger audiences. The problem is especially evident in crafts such as Nanjing velvet flowers. Preliminary research and interviews indicated that, within the pace of contemporary life, few young people are willing to devote years or even decades to mastering a craft that has only a weak connection with the mainstream employment market. At the same time, public communication often concentrates on polished finished works and recognizable cultural symbols. What tends to disappear from view is the difficult but compelling part of the learning process itself: the artisan's gestures, posture, rhythm,

pressure, and timing. These details contain both technical skill and accumulated experience, and they are also among the hardest elements to transmit.

2. Translation Media and Limitations in ICH Transmission

Picture books combine image, text, sequencing, and graphic design in a form that is generally easier to approach than conventional explanatory media. Pop-up and handmade picture books add another layer by allowing the reader to touch, unfold, pull, bend, or otherwise manipulate the page. Yet existing examples seldom take the bodily language of a craft as their main design problem. Even when a craft is introduced through an engaging visual format, the movements and sensory judgments involved in making it are often left unexplained. The question is not only how to make ICH attractive, but also how to lower the threshold of comprehending its embodied dimension and encourage an initial willingness to participate.

In picture books, words and pictures work together, and visual sequences often do a lot of the storytelling [2]. This makes them particularly good at taking abstract ideas and putting them into concrete situations, and also at developing narrative through composition, color, pacing and page turns. They have been used for a long time in children's education and for cultural communication. Matsui Tadashi, in a well-known pronouncement, referred to picture books as 'seeds of happiness' [3], stressing the pleasure of reading itself, as opposed to the mere accumulation of knowledge. The idea is relevant: a first encounter with heritage does not have to work like a textbook. More recently, pop-up and interactive picture books have made the page a spatial, tactile environment. Chen Shiyu points out that interactivity, participation, playfulness and enjoyment are important features of pop-up books [4]. Xia Ping emphasizes the importance of diverse materials in picture-book illustration [5]. Collectively, these studies offer a hopeful avenue for rendering bodily knowledge visible, tangible, and testable.

This ability is particularly pertinent for tacit or experiential knowledge. Meng Xing and Yang Yan discuss the possibility of the picture books as a medium of the contemporary transmission of intangible cultural heritage [6]. Moreover, Kang Min and Yang Dongxian argue that the introduction of ICH in children's picture-book creation can provide young readers with an entry point into traditional culture and help with cultural identification [7]. Similarly, Luo Jie's work on a series of picture books about Gannan tea-picking opera demonstrates the communicative and expressive potential of the form [8]. These studies have contributed to the development of picture books as a viable means to communicate ICH. Most still focus though on cultural imagery, narrative themes, or the presentation of completed results.

This omission matters for craft-based ICH, because transmission is fundamentally embodied. Merleau-Ponty believes that the body is one of the main means of perception and expression [9]. In craft practice the pressure of the fingers, the rhythm of repeated movements, the angle of the wrist and the posture of the body are not incidental details. They influence the result. This dimension has been addressed in a small body of research. For example, Guan Xiaohui writes about the significance of hands and senses in Western craft traditions and points out forms of embodied knowledge that are hard to verbalize [10]. In the same way, discussion about Chinese traditional craft ICH is still limited, resulting in a gap between research on cultural representation and that on the actual feeling and learning of skill.

Literature therefore provides both a foundation and a clear point of departure for this study. Existing work has demonstrated the value of visual narration and interactive picture books, but it has rarely examined how bodily experience itself might be analyzed and redesigned as part of the medium. This research addresses that gap by treating body language not as supplementary illustration, but as the organizing principle of a visual and interactive system. The aim is to offer a design perspective on how local craft heritage can be encountered through action as well as observation.

3. Transmission Challenges and Experiential Findings of Nanjing Velvet Flowers

To move beyond the detached viewpoint of an observer, I placed myself in the position of a beginner and used hands-on practice as part of the research. The purpose was to understand, at a bodily level, where difficulty actually appears during the learning of velvet-flower making and which parts of the process resist verbal explanation. The discussion below draws on this field experience and uses it to reconsider the practical barriers involved in craft transmission.

The fieldwork began with a visit to the Nanjing Folk Art Museum. Following the museum explanation provided a basic understanding of the history, artistic features, and present condition of Nanjing velvet flowers. The visit was useful, but it also exposed a limitation of exhibition-based communication. Static objects and broad historical narratives could show what velvet flowers are and why they matter; they could not answer the more difficult question of how embodied skill moves from one person to another.

I therefore enrolled in a beginner workshop run by Nanjing Wuyihuang Velvet Flowers, shifting from observer to learner. The class began with the basic materials and tools, including velvet thread, copper wire, and tweezers, and continued through to the final stage of assembling the flower. I participated throughout the session, photographed parts of the process, and spoke with other apprentices afterwards. These experiences became the most direct material for understanding the bodily language of the craft, because the difficulties were no longer described from the outside; they were felt in the hands.

At its core, velvet-flower making operates as a highly embodied form of tacit knowledge. Practitioners describe an ideal state in which hand, eye, and mind work together. The process can be divided into five main stages: combing the velvet, hooking the strips, trimming the tips, ironing, and assembling the flower. Each stage has its own rhythm, and success depends on familiarity with both material and technique. Watching a demonstration created the impression that the steps were understandable. Doing them revealed something different. My fingers could not immediately hold a stable angle or apply consistent force, and the first results were uneven. The frustration came from a clear gap between knowing what the movement should look like and being able to produce it. What craftspeople call a 'feel' for the material gradually appeared to me as a form of muscle memory built through repeated failure and adjustment. When trimming a velvet strip, for instance, the angle of the scissors and the force of the wrist have to work together. These fine judgments are difficult to explain in words. As one practitioner repeatedly emphasized, the learner has to watch, follow, and then 'find' the right feeling through the body. In this context, finding means making small adjustments until the movement begins to settle into an effective state.

This experience made the transmission problem more concrete. A short workshop can generate curiosity, but sustained learning demands much more: time, repeated trial and error, and physical practice long enough for bodily judgment to develop. Many young learners therefore stop after the introductory experience, not necessarily because they lack interest, but because the cost of continuing is high in both time and effort. Effective tactile instruction also depends heavily on small classes or one-to-one guidance. A teacher often needs to correct the learner's movement at the moment an error occurs. Such close instruction is valuable precisely because it is difficult to scale, and this creates tension with the standardized and efficiency-oriented structures of contemporary education.

The scarcity of this kind of embodied teaching also shapes how the public values craft. A finished velvet flower may communicate delicacy and beauty, yet it gives little indication of the physical labor required to produce it. There is therefore a gap between the aesthetic value perceived by an audience and the bodily cost experienced by the maker. Spending several hours on a single petal changes that perception in a way that viewing the final object cannot. Because this learning normally takes place in relatively closed teaching settings, the public rarely encounters the effort, repetition, and correction that lie behind the finished work. The result is not only a training problem but also a problem of cultural understanding.

The central difficulty, then, cannot be reduced to a simple difference in taste between generations. The deeper conflict lies between the tacit, body-based character of velvet-flower skills and the pace and learning habits of contemporary society. Traditional mastery depends on slow accumulation, while modern learners are accustomed to faster access to information and more immediate feedback. Recognizing this mismatch became the starting point for the design strategies developed in the next section.

4. Design Strategies for Velvet Flower Picture Book Creation and Heritage Transmission

The challenge of craft transmission is that much of its knowledge is normally learned through close master-apprentice interaction. If a learner has no access to that relationship, the 'feel' of the craft is difficult to encounter at all. An interactive craft picture book cannot replace apprenticeship, nor is that its purpose. Its value lies in creating a lower-threshold situation in which beginners can notice, test, and begin to understand selected aspects of bodily knowledge. Because the medium combines visual narrative with tactile paper structures, it can preserve the intimacy of reading while introducing actions that require the reader to touch and manipulate the page. Based on this premise, the following five strategies describe a gradual path from recognition to participation and, eventually, continued engagement.

4.1. Extracting Visual Symbols to Build a Narrative Entry Point

Before developing the story, I first thought back to what had remained most vivid from the velvet-flower workshop: the artisan's hands. Thin calluses covered the fingertips, yet the movements were precise and light. Twisting, wrapping, trimming, and shaping followed one another with an ease that only became impressive after I had tried the same actions myself. Watching the hands move between silk velvet and copper wire suggested a narrative image: a young girl sitting at the workbench beside an experienced maker, awkward at first, gradually finding a rhythm, and finally seeing a flower take shape at her own fingertips. That image became the initial narrative seed for the picture book.

The larger design problem emerged from the same observation. Craft heritage is difficult to transmit partly because bodily knowledge cannot be fully separated from the person performing it, and the time required for mastery creates another barrier between generations. The project therefore asks how knowledge that is usually understood through 'feeling' rather than explanation might be given a form that readers can perceive and begin to learn. The design uses a concrete visual image as a narrative anchor and treats the maker's hands and movements as recurring symbols throughout the book. This turns an abstract problem of heritage transmission into a story of learning and gradual change. The same visual system then connects to the paper-engineered interactions, so that readers do not remain spectators but begin to act on the page. More generally, any craft tradition that relies heavily on embodied skill can find a recurring visual symbol as an emotional and narrative entry point before moving on to more demanding forms of participation.

4.2. Using Emotional Companionship to Bridge the Generational Gap

A common difficulty in ICH education is the psychological distance between traditional craft and younger audiences. Educational materials often present the artisan primarily as an authority figure. Although respectful, this framing can unintentionally reinforce the impression that heritage belongs to an older generation and has little to do with a child's own experience. Research on cognitive development suggests that children are more likely to identify with characters who feel closer to them in age and situation [11]. For this reason, the picture book introduces a companion character who learns alongside the reader rather than speaking from a position of mastery. Visually, the character incorporates motifs related to velvet flowers through clothing, accessories, and other details, allowing cultural information to enter the story without becoming a separate lecture. Narratively, the character demonstrates, hesitates, attempts, and offers prompts. The aim is to create familiarity before

instruction: by reducing the emotional distance between the reader and the heritage practice, the book can make participation feel less intimidating and more personally relevant.

4.3. Extracting Embodied Experience to Translate into Interactive Units

The bodily nature of the craft means that images alone are insufficient. The tightness of copper-wire wrapping, the angle at which scissors meet the velvet, and the judgment required during ironing are all small sensory decisions that can determine whether a step succeeds. In Polanyi's terms, such knowledge is tacit: it grows out of experience, repeated practice, and intuitive accumulation rather than being fully captured in explicit instructions [12]. This is why a written description, or demonstration video can be helpful without being enough. Learners still need to form their own bodily judgments through action. Yet most people who encounter ICH through public communication have never touched the relevant materials. The design problem is therefore to identify which part of the 'feel' of a craft can be made available, even in simplified form, through a paper-based medium.

One answer could be the tactile system of an interactive picture book. Instead of trying to literally recreate all five stages of production, the design takes a key variable from each stage and turns it into a small, self-contained interaction. A reader may need to turn, press, bend, align, pull or touch a material to proceed. These actions are not meant to teach the entire technique. Instead, they introduce the reader to the sort of physical choices upon which the technique depends, so that the distinctive character of velvet-flower making can be experienced through the hands as well as the eyes.

In this system visual and tactile information interact. Comparative images give the reader a reference point, showing what the target form should look like before they do anything. Tactile elements then allow them to test that understanding through simplified operations or real materials, such as touching velvet or bending metal wire. Brief technique phrases at the end of an interaction encapsulate the sensory cue in language that can be remembered and repeated. In this way, a scattered bodily impression is linked to a more explicit form of knowledge. For a young reader who has never handled the materials, the result is not mastery but access: the page provides a first physical encounter with the logic of the process even when an artisan is not present. This marks a shift from presenting heritage as something to look at toward presenting it as something that can, at least in part, be experienced.

4.4. Providing Timely Feedback to Sustain Motivation

Feedback is especially important when a skill is learned through repeated physical adjustment. One strength of the traditional master-apprentice model is that mistakes can be corrected as they happen. A teacher can point out an angle, pressure, or movement before the learner repeats it many times. Once teaching is transferred to a static medium, this immediacy is easily lost. A reader may complete an operation but have no clear sense of whether it was done in the intended way. For an educational product based on participation, the absence of feedback can quickly turn curiosity into uncertainty.

The proposed solution is to build confirmation into the interaction itself. Each action should produce a response that the reader can notice immediately, whether through touch, sight, spatial fit, or the gradual revelation of information. Five forms of feedback are used as a design framework. Tactile feedback lets the fingertips register a change in the material. Visual feedback shows progress or difference through markers and comparisons. Spatial feedback allows the reader to adjust and try again until parts align or move as intended. Cognitive feedback reveals information in stages, so that discovery follows action rather than preceding it. Motivational feedback appears at the end of a sequence and leaves room for variation or further creation. These categories need not appear in equal measure; they can be combined according to the physical character of each craft step.

The key point is to translate part of the interpersonal feedback found in apprenticeship into a response generated by the object itself. When an action produces a clear result, the reader is no longer only receiving information from the page. The page answers back. This small change turns reading into a two-way process and gives the learner a reason to continue experimenting. It also suggests a

broader role for interaction design outside digital interfaces, particularly in educational media where touch and material behavior are themselves meaningful.

4.5. Extending through Community to Promote Exchange and Mutual Learning

Paper media has an obvious boundary: the experience often ends when the book is closed. For ICH communication, this can be a serious weakness. A reader may have just developed an interest in the craft but still lacks a place to show a result, ask a question, or see how others have interpreted the same activity. The project therefore treats an online community as an extension of the physical book rather than as a separate digital product. Its basic functions are to provide a space for sharing works, exchanging experience, and participating in themed activities.

Within this community, velvet-flower enthusiasts can upload photographs of completed work, browse other participants' experiments, and join recurring themed challenges. The important shift is from reader to maker and from individual activity to shared practice. Seeing other people's results can be reassuring and inspiring, especially when the results are imperfect or differ widely. The conversation around these works also allows for the circulation of practical knowledge in a horizontal rather than only vertical (expert to novice) direction. Over time, new combinations and interpretations made by participants can expand the meanings attributed to the craft, contributing to its contemporary re-creation.

From a design perspective the community presents a one-off reading experience that can be extended into a more sustained form of participation. The physical book provides material depth and tactile attention, the online space offers exchange, comparison and repeated engagement. Together, the two media allow for heritage transmission to continue beyond the final page and the prospect of a small but active community of practice.

5. Conclusion

Using Nanjing velvet flowers as a case, this study has examined the transmission of craft-based ICH from the perspective of artisans' bodily language. It has focused on a problem that is easy to overlook when heritage is presented primarily through finished objects: much of the knowledge that makes the craft possible remains tacit, sensory, and difficult to verbalize. As a response, the study investigates the medium of the interactive craft picture book and presents a design approach for translating selected forms of bodily knowledge into visible, touchable and operable learning experiences.

Field experience suggests that the heart of the velvet-flower technique lies in subtle tactile judgments and bodily habits that normally develop through long-term interaction between master and apprentice. This establishes an invisible standard for starters. The difficulty of transmission is therefore not simply a shortage of interest. It exposes a conflict of contrasting learning rhythms: craft mastery requires slow repetition and accumulated experience, while modern learners are becoming used to efficiency, quick access and immediate response.

For this reason, the study argues that the task of design is not only to record bodily language but also to analyze and reconstruct it. The five strategies proposed here—narrative entry through visual symbols, emotional companionship, tactile interaction units, timely feedback, and community extension—form a progressive system from initial recognition to active participation. The study also brings Polanyi's concept of tacit knowledge into design practice, using visual and tactile means to make parts of an otherwise implicit learning process more accessible. In addition, it extends the perceptual scope of interaction design beyond digital human-computer interfaces. By using paper structures and material actions to give form to force, rhythm, angle, and other tacit variables, the project offers a practical case for interaction design in non-digital media. The picture book does not replace the artisan or the apprenticeship system; rather, it creates an introductory space in which more people can begin to understand what the craft asks of the body and why that knowledge matters.

References

- [1] Xi Jinping. Speech at the First Session of the 13th National People's Congress [EB/OL]. (2018-03-20). https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2018/content_5286355.htm.
- [2] Wang Ming, Cheng Guanhua. Creative editing of intangible cultural heritage picture books in the "image-reading era". *Editors Monthly*, 2022, (2): 55-61.
- [3] Matsui Tadashi. *The Seed of Happiness*. Translated by Liu Dizhao. Nanchang: 21st Century Publishing House, 2013.
- [4] Chen Shiyu. The emerging pleasure: A study on the interactivity of pop-up books. *Packaging World*, 2013, (3): 133-135.
- [5] Xia Ping. A study on non-painterly visual expressions in picture-book illustrations. *Editors Friend*, 2015, (2): 93-98.
- [6] Meng Xing, Yang Yan. Making picture books the seeds of the contemporary inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. *Journal of Inner Mongolia Arts University*, 2020, 17(2): 11-15.
- [7] Kang Min, Yang Dongxian. The value, dilemmas, and pathways of intangible cultural heritage in the creation and transmission of children's picture books. *Jimu*, 2025, (4): 92-96.
- [8] Luo Jie. Inheriting intangible cultural heritage through picture books and revitalizing culture: The creation of a series of picture books on Gannan Tea-Picking Opera. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 2024, (3): 8-9.
- [9] Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Jiang Zhihui. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2001: 265.
- [10] Guan Xiaohui. On the bodily attributes and embodied forms of Western handicrafts. *Creation and Design*, 2020, (3): 66-70.
- [11] Yang Jingjing. A practical study on picture-book creation based on fish-lantern culture: Taking the picture book *Shuang Shuang Lin Ying Wu Zhen Yu* as an example. Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, 2025.
- [12] Ruan Chenhai. A study on the relationship between tacit knowledge and design inspiration. *Art Education Research*, 2025, (18): 50-53.