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Translating the Visual Language of Jinshan Peasant Painting into Narrative Illustrations of "New Farmers": A Design Transformation Study

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Abstract: Jinshan peasant painting is a typical work of modern Chinese folk art. The visual language of Japanese art is flat and exaggerated, with pure colours, whole compositions and strong decorative patterns. Currently, it lacks cultural background and is mainly used by older generations; therefore, it has failed to attract the interest of young people. The research subject is the visual language of Jinshan peasant painting, the narrative theme is "New Farmers" for rural revitalization, and the creative medium is narrative illustration; this study will explore how the language of traditional folk painting can be transformed in contemporary design. Based on the literature review and creative practice, the visual grammar of Jinshan peasant painting has been divided into four parts: form, colour, composition and schema; a method of "visual analysis - feature extraction - design transformation - creative practice" has been introduced, and six narrative illustrations have been created under the sub-themes of live-streaming for agricultural aid, rural study tours, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) tourism, returning home to start businesses, smart agriculture and the new rural landscape. Therefore, it can be proposed that the visual language of Jinshan peasant painting should be integrated into contemporary narrative illustration to retain its folk aesthetic qualities and strengthen narrativity and communication power, providing a practical model for the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage and visual representation of rural revitalization.

Keywords: Jinshan Peasant Painting; Visual Language; Narrative Illustration; New Farmers; Design Transformation.

1. Introduction

With the revival of traditional culture and the change in the idea of protecting intangible cultural heritage from "rescue-oriented preservation" to "living transmission", how to integrate traditional folk art into the contemporary visual communication system has become a problem of design research. In 2007, Jinshan peasant painting was added to Shanghai's first municipal ICH list. It is based on the agrarian culture of the Wu-Yue region in the south of the Yangtze River and draws inspiration from local folk crafts, such as indigo-and-white resist-printed cloth (blue calico), paper-cutting, embroidery and stove-wall painting, to create a distinctive style with bright colours, simple shapes, full compositions and strong decorative qualities.[1] With the acceleration of urbanization and changes in the structure of rural society, Jinshan peasant painting has now faced a transmission problem: its practitioners are aging, the economic return on painting is small, and its dissemination channels are narrow.[1,2] We believe that this crisis is not due to an "old-fashioned" visual language, but rather because it has not yet found an effective way to connect with contemporary cultural consumption.

At the same time, the rural revitalization strategy has given rise to the "new farmers". In a 2015 report by the Ali Research Institute, it was noted that their number in China had reached millions, and they were described as a product of "Internet+" applied to agriculture, rural areas and farmers.[3] "New Farmers" in this paper refer to individuals who are returning to or beginning the construction of the countryside with new ideas, technology and business models; this group includes university graduates who have returned to their hometowns to start businesses, young people involved in rural e-commerce, practitioners of ecological agriculture and rural cultural creators. They present tensions between tradition and modernity, the countryside and the city, perseverance and change, and are rich materials for narrative art.

Taking the visual language of Jinshan peasant painting as its subject and narrative illustration of "New Farmers" as its carrier, this paper aims to answer the following three questions: How can the visual language of Jinshan peasant painting be extracted? How can it be changed into the language of narrative illustration? This will offer a new way for the living inheritance of ICH to be passed down and spread visually in the countryside. The three are a literature review, image analysis and creative work. Section 2 introduces the cultural background and visual features of Jinshan peasant painting; Section 3 reviews the current situation of narrative illustration and the use of traditional elements; Section 4 shows the transformation method and six creative works; finally, Section 5 provides a conclusion and points out limitations.

2. Cultural Background and Artistic Characteristics of Jinshan Peasant Painting

2.1. Historical Development and Cultural Connotations

Chinese peasant painting in the 1950s was the result of the interaction between mainstream culture and folk culture. [4,5] Jinshan peasant painting, which began in Jinshan District, Shanghai, during the 1970s, is one of the most regionally specific works. It was not created from nothing but is deeply

rooted in the folk craft traditions of the Wu–Yue region. It can directly use the blue-and-white contrast and flat colours of local blue-and-white porcelain, the openwork form and continuous lines of paper-cutting, the stitch arrangement and colour gradation of embroidery, and the concise outline and symbolic meaning of stove-wall paintings to create a distinctive regional style.[1] Zheng Tuyou believes that Jinshan peasant painting is a typical example of the "modernisation" of traditional folk art.[1] Functionally, traditional folk crafts are mainly for daily life, but since its beginning, Jinshan peasant painting has been made "to be looked at"; it has aesthetic value and also records culture, serving as a visual chronicle of rural life in the Jiangnan region. Therefore, it can be changed more easily now.

2.2. Composition and Expressive Features

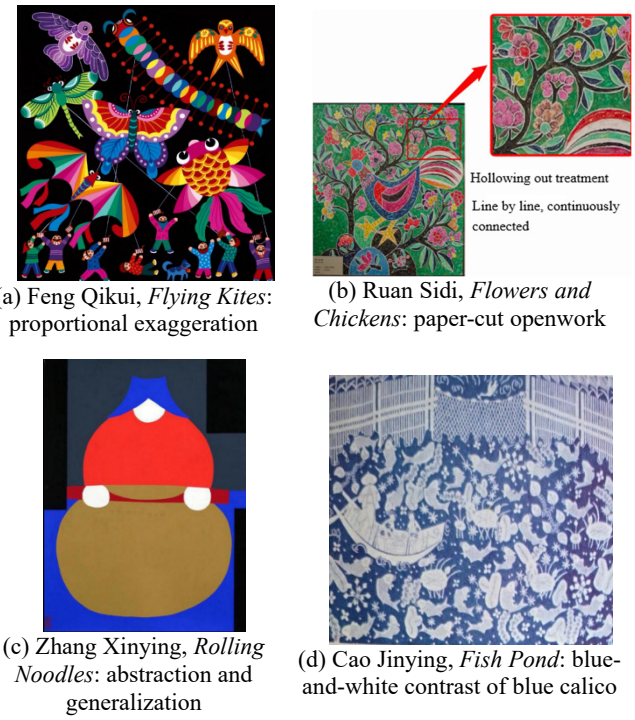
The features and style types of Jinshan peasant painting have been systematically studied in the literature so far. [6,7] The four kinds of visual language mentioned above are form, colour, composition and schema (Figure 1).

Two main characteristics of the form of this painting are exaggeration and distortion, and abstraction and generalisation.[6] Proportional exaggeration can be observed in Feng Qikui's Flying Kites; that is to say, the kites are enlarged and the figures are reduced to create a sense of motion through contrast, and perspectival exaggeration is shown in Zhang Meiling's Grinding Flour, where the table is seen from many angles at the same time and there is no focal point. Zhang Xinying's "Rolling Noodles and Big Bowls and Water Pipe" is simple and uses silhouettes to show life. Zheng Tuyou summarized the above as an "exaggerated distortion; the spirit is conveyed rather than resemb[5]lance", and Yang Yingjing pointed out that peasant painters often use "conceptual representation".[8]

Colours in the painting are used to show a person's em[9]otions. Liang Jiaying believes that high-purity primary colours are often combined with colours that provide contrast to create a colourful effect, and this idea can evoke people's sense of happiness and joy, as shown in festivals. He also listed three qualities of colour: rich and saturated, freely decorated, and harmoniously contrasting; painters often use colours to express their own feelings and thus create emotional expressions in their works.[6]

Composition is the general term for the basic aesthetic. There is no blank area; instead, scattered-point perspective or flat-space is used to arrange figures and scenery side by side without hierarchy, creating a simple, unadorned sense of story.[9] The composition is subjective, full and flat; near, middle and far ground are often on the same plane, and juxtaposed viewpoints can show a large amount of information.[6] Zheng Tuyou believes that the "whole composition" is a visual expression of the folk psychology of "completeness and satisfaction".[5]

The three folk crafts that form the basis of the schema are paper-cutting, embroidery and blue calico. As shown in Ruan Sidi, the schema of paper-cutting has soft and simple lines, openwork treatment and continuous lines. The embroidery scheme is shown in Cao Xiuwen, and it uses various densities to represent light and shadow in an orderly manner. Cao Jinying's blue-calico scheme is a type of blue-and-white pattern that is both bold and regular. The three schemes are often combined with each other to form a "compound" decorative grammar.



(a) Feng Qikui, *Flying Kites*: proportional exaggeration

(b) Ruan Sidi, *Flowers and Chickens*: paper-cut openwork

(c) Zhang Xinying, *Rolling Noodles*: abstraction and generalization

(d) Cao Jinying, *Fish Pond*: blue-and-white contrast of blue calico

Figure 1. Representative Works of Jinshan Peasant Painting and Their Characteristics

2.3. Imagery Types and Narrative Potential

Yang Yingjing categorises the vernacular imagery in Jinshan peasant painting into five themes: nature, folk customs, animals, plants and people, which carry cultural memories of farming, fishing, festivals and family life.[8] Zheng Tuyou categorises the works into three types based on function: documentary, lyrical and narrative.[5] Jinshan peasant painting is thus not only for decoration but also a way to record and tell stories. Semiotically speaking, the openwork of paper-cutting, the stitching of embroidery and the blue-and-white contrast of blue calico are all formal signs and narrative vocabulary that can be translated; thus, the visual language of Jinshan peasant painting has an inherent capacity for narrative illustration.

3. Narrative Illustration and the Use of Traditional Elements: The Current Situation

3.1. Concept and Evolution of Narrative Illustration

Narrative Illustration is a type of modern illustration design. At the base is to tell stories, create plots, develop characters and express emotions with one or several pictures. Most studies have applied the four elements of narration—character, time, place and plot[10]—to analyze narrative expression in illustrations and have found that these elements can be used to present historical and tourism-related cultural information visually.[11] Narrative illustration has gone from being a supporting tool in book illustration to an independent type of visual narrative, and with the development of digital media, it has spread to screens, moving images and interactive design, significantly expanding its scope and applicability.

3.2. Characteristics and Demands of Contemporary Narrative Illustration

Modern narrative illustration employs form, colour and

composition not only to create beauty but also as means to tell stories; character design presents characters and emotions, colour sets the mood for a particular emotion, and composition directs the reader's attention. The style of narrative illustration can be realistic, decorative or abstract. Decorative styles have formal beauty and rhythm, and express themselves through patterns, subjective colours and flat composition; therefore, they are in harmony with the visual language of Jinshan peasant painting. Most of the existing visual works on the theme of rural life are either documentary-realistic or overly romanticised as a "pastoral idyll", and thus lack both artistic charm and narrative truth. Therefore, the visual language for rural subjects should be able to tell stories and communicate with the public.

3.3. Application of Traditional Folk Elements in Illustration

Recently, traditional folk-art elements have been used more and more frequently in illustrations and designs. Most of the research on Jinshan peasant painting has focused on non-narrative works, such as poster design,[6] a children'[12]s art-education app and digital media art.[13] In terms of dissemination, digital communication has moved away from "authoritative narration" and is now focused on "public co-creation".[14] Wang Xinyi has taken folk stories and created pictures by employing traditional composition and moderately exaggerated graphic symbols to "tell folk stories well through visual language" based on the folktales of Zouma Town,[15] and Zhu Zhehao has been inspired by Xiangshan peasant painting to create illustrations and cultural-creative designs of autumn harvest scenes, emphasizing that the subject matter should remain close to rural life and the original artistic language of peasant painting needs to be preserved.[16]

Most existing applications are still at the stage of "symbol appropriation"; they have simply copied traditional patterns and colours in images without learning the deeper logic of the visual grammar of folk art. Systematic exploration of narrative illustration is still lacking, and its combination with the theme of "New Farmers" has been done very rarely. This paper will address that problem.

4. Transforming the Visual Language of Jinshan Peasant Painting into Narrative Illustrations of “New Farmers”

4.1. Theoretical Basis and Method

Based on semiotics and the idea of cultural translation, this paper takes the visual language of Jinshan peasant painting as a system of visual signs with cultural connotations and reconstructs its forms while retaining the original cultural ideas. Xu Xiaozhen's way of extraction is to deconstruct the visual language of peasant painting from the aspects of decoration, form, colour and composition,[17] and he adopts a research model of "visual analysis - feature extraction - design transformation - creative practice" (Figure 2). First, the formal elements of representative works are broken down, and the visual grammars of the paper-cut, embroidery, abstract-generalized, and blue-calico styles are summarized; then, these are organised around the theme of "New Farmers" to achieve a transfer of narrative function. The Tools are a literature database, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator and Procreate.

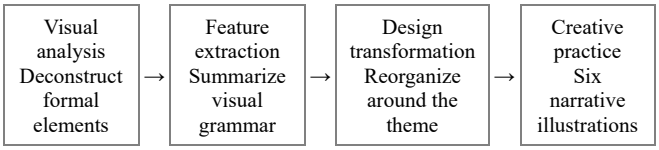


Figure 2. Research Path: Visual Analysis - Feature Extraction - Design Transformation - Creative Practice

4.2. Abstraction and Simplification of Form and Composition

Zhang Xinying can be used to abstract and generalize the form of "New Farmers", reducing the details of new farmers to dynamic silhouettes and highlighting key activities such as live-streaming, farm work and entrepreneurship; Ruan Sidi's openwork lines in the style of paper-cutting can be used to draw trees, farm tools and buildings; and Cao Xiuwen's stitch arrangement in the style of embroidery can be applied to add richness to clothing and scene details. Generally speaking, the form of Jinshan peasant paintings is a whole composition, and scattered-point perspective and juxtaposed viewpoints are used to break the constraints of time and space; several narrative links, such as picking, live-streaming, packaging and logistics, can be combined in one picture to increase information density and visual rhythm.

4.3. Modernization of Color and Schema

High-purity primary colours, such as red, yellow, blue, green and purple, are selected for the colours; complementary contrasts are employed and subjective palettes are designed according to the themes of different "New Farmers": Warm red and orange-yellow can create a harvest atmosphere for live-streaming agricultural aid; Green and blue-white can show freshness and nature in rural study tours; Red and yellow can add a festive mood to ICH tourism; and Blue-green combined with warm accents can represent technology in smart agriculture. Openwork paper-cutting, embroidery stitches and the contrast of blue and white in blue calico are used in the Design to create a visual language that preserves folk charm and is also suitable for screen communication in digital reconstruction via Procreate and Photoshop. The new ideas are as follows: Table 1.

4.4. Creative Practice: Six Narrative Illustrations of “New Farmers”

The six narrative illustrations with the theme of "New Farmers" and their corresponding sub-themes are shown in Figure 3.

First, Live-streaming Agricultural Aid: The New Farmers' "New Farm Tools". A streamer is in the centre, and around him are an orchard, a mobile phone and parcels. Figure 1 is an abstract and general one; in the background, there are paper-cut style fruit-tree patterns and embroidery-style stitch lines, and highly saturated colours are used to present a new model of e-commerce-assisted agriculture.

Second, Rural Study Tours: A Field Classroom for City Children. A flat, multi-angled picture shows transplanted rice seedlings, picking and paper-cutting; a green colour scheme with blue-calico style blue and white details indicates the urban-rural connection.

Table 1. Correspondence between the Visual Language of Jinshan Peasant Painting and its Transformation into Narrative Illustration.

Dimension	Visual features of Jinshan peasant painting	Transformation strategy for "New Farmers" narratives	Narrative function
Form	Exaggeration and distortion; abstraction and generalization; capturing spirit rather than resemblance	Simplify New Farmers into dynamic silhouettes; enlarge key actions and props (live streaming, farm work, entrepreneurship)	Strengthens expressiveness and sense of movement
Color	High-purity primary colors, complementary contrasts, subjective color schemes	Set a dominant palette for each sub-theme, e.g., warm red-orange-yellow for harvest, green with blue-and-white for study tours, blue-green with warm accents for smart agriculture	Rapidly builds emotional atmosphere
Composition	Full composition, scattered-point perspective, juxtaposed multiple viewpoints	Place picking, live streaming, packaging, and logistics on one picture plane, or use triangular and handscroll compositions	Accommodates rich narrative information and guides reading order
Schema	Paper-cut openwork, embroidery stitching, blue-and-white contrast of blue calico	Digitally reconstruct as editable pattern resources for trees, clothing, buildings, and backgrounds	Enhances decorative quality and regional recognizability

Third, ICH Tourism: Cultural Rebirth in an Ancient Town. Situated in the old town area, there are many dragon dances, peasant painting studios, embroidery workshops and displays of blue-calico; scattered-point perspective and a red-yellow dominant palette are used to evoke a sense of life and tradition.

Fourth, Returning Home to Start a Business: Young People Dream and Build. According to whether it is homestays or agricultural processing, a regular triangle and warm orange-yellow colours are used to show the life and vitality of young returnees' businesses.

Fifth, Smart Agriculture is Leading the Way. Cool blue-green colours and warm colours can be used in many pictures with field backgrounds to show drone crop protection, intelligent greenhouses and traceability systems.

Sixth, New Rural Landscape: A New Scroll of the Beautiful Countryside. A handscroll composition can be arranged from left to right to show an organised village, a cultural square, an e-commerce centre and ecological farmland; bright, warm colours are generally associated with happiness and warmth in rural revitalization.

In all six works, form, colour, composition and scheme have been borrowed from the visual language of Jinshan peasant painting and organised around the theme of the "New Farmers", which shows that this language system can be applied to contemporary rural subjects.



Figure 3. Agricultural Live Streaming: The "New Tools" for New Farmers.

4.5. Inheritance and Innovation of Cultural Connotations

The goal of the new creation is not to copy the symbols but to reveal their spirit anew. The visual language of the New Farmers frequently places "traditional rural symbols" next to "modern technological sy [18, 19] mbols", which is the same as how Jinshan peasant painting combines "traditional schemas" with "subjective expression", and both are rooted in rural life and use contrast and exaggeration. Therefore, the basic attitude of our creative work is to keep the subject matter close to rural life, to preserve the original artistic language of peasant painting in style, [16] and at the same time to give visual expression to the stories of new farmers with folk aesthetic qualities.

5. Conclusion

Taking the visual language of Jinshan peasant painting as the research object and the narrative illustration of "New Farmers" as the creative medium, this paper has analysed the four dimensions of the visual characteristics in Jinshan peasant painting—form, colour, composition and schema—put forward a path for transformation of "visual analysis - feature extraction - design transformation - creative practice", and created six thematic narrative illustrations. The above results show that the visual language of Jinshan peasant painting can be used in modern narrative illustration to keep the folk aesthetic and add more stories and expression. It provides a new form for the living inheritance of Jinshan peasant painting and is also a fine work of rural revitalisation imagery with folk aesthetic qualities.

The study has flaws. The above samples are the main styles but are not exhaustive; the actual effect of transformation largely depends on the creator's self-assessment and lacks audience feedback; and its application to other kinds of folk art has not been verified. In the future, more subjects will be collected; public opinion polls and cultural-creative product assessments will also be carried out to explore applications of this framework in paper-cutting, New Year prints, embroidery, etc.

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