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A Study on the Redesign and Revitalization of Visual Symbols in Intangible Cultural Heritage Crafts from the Perspective of Digital Media

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of rapid development in digital media, new media has opened up new avenues for the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) crafts. However, it has also exposed practical challenges such as the inherent weakness of transmission and the digital divide faced by practitioners. Furthermore, some revitalization efforts have given rise to issues such as superficial appropriation of symbols and the erosion of cultural significance. This paper adopts a digital media perspective, focusing on the visual symbols of intangible cultural heritage crafts as its research subject. Employing methods such as literature review, semiotic analysis, and case studies, it explores approaches to the graphic redesign of visual symbols across three dimensions—fundamental principles, semiotic deconstruction, and graphic reconstruction—and further examines implementation pathways such as the digitization of visual materials and the establishment of online dissemination channels. By translating traditional visual symbols through graphic redesign and leveraging digital media to promote the living transmission of intangible cultural heritage crafts, this study aims to provide design references for similar innovation practices in the field of intangible cultural heritage crafts.

Keywords: Intangible cultural heritage crafts; Digital media; Visual symbols; Living heritage revitalization

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1. Introduction

In the era of new media, most print media have been replaced by digital and electronic media. The development of the Internet has ushered people into the digital age. Digital media has fully permeated people's daily lives, and various online platforms have provided entirely new opportunities for the dissemination and promotion of traditional intangible cultural heritage crafts. This has broken through the geographical and in-person limitations of the past, allowing niche traditional crafts to enter the public eye. However, in the actual process of inheritance and development, intangible cultural heritage crafts still face numerous pressing practical issues that require urgent resolution. In particular, as modern lifestyles shift, urbanization and industrialization advance rapidly, traditional folk customs continue to disappear, and rural

lifestyles undergo drastic changes, the original foundation for the survival of these crafts is gradually eroding, and the traditional cultural spheres upon which they depend are suffering severe shocks [1].

At the same time, it is important to recognize that the visual presentation of many traditional crafts tends to be outdated, which inevitably puts them out of step with contemporary aesthetic tastes. Practitioners often encounter numerous difficulties when using new media tools, which can easily lead to a two-way communication impasse; as a result, many valuable intangible cultural heritage resources are unable to be effectively disseminated online.

In light of these practical challenges, this paper, grounded in the current communication environment, focuses on the innovative design and revitalization of visual symbols in intangible cultural heritage crafts. The paper first examines the various practical challenges faced in the transmission of these crafts, then explores specific approaches to the extraction, deconstruction, and graphic redesign of visual symbols, in an effort to identify strategies for the digital transformation of visual resources that are suitable for craftspeople.

2. Real-world challenges facing the development of intangible cultural heritage crafts in the new media environment

2.1. The space for passing down traditions is shrinking, making it difficult to continue the transmission of these skills

Since their inception, intangible cultural heritage crafts have been deeply rooted in folk life, folk customs, and regional culture, passing down from generation to generation through everyday contexts, folk rituals, and the master-apprentice tradition. In the past, various festive customs and rural settings served as vital platforms for the display, use, and transmission of these crafts. Ordinary people could encounter and learn these skills in their daily lives, naturally fostering a local atmosphere of cultural transmission. However, as lifestyles have changed and urbanization and industrialization have continued to advance, traditional folk customs have gradually faded, the rural landscape has undergone significant changes, and the cultural foundations that sustain intangible cultural heritage crafts have steadily weakened.

Because traditional handicrafts are no longer necessities in people's daily lives and their practical value has rapidly declined, it is difficult for young people to come into contact with these craft techniques and the associated culture in their daily lives. Take the silverware forging craft of Leishan, Guizhou, as an example: once a traditional craft essential to the daily lives of the Miao people, it has seen its foundation for transmission continue to erode as the outflow of labor due to urbanization has turned core villages into "ghost villages," leading to a sharp decline in the number of local artisans [2]. At the same time, most intangible cultural heritage (ICH) crafts rely solely on the master-apprentice model of oral and practical transmission passed down from generation to generation. The learning process is lengthy, the skills are difficult to master, and financial returns are slow to materialize. Compared to industries that offer immediate employment opportunities, it is difficult to attract young people to learn and carry on these traditions actively. Currently, the majority of intangible cultural heritage bearers are middle-aged or elderly, and with young people showing little willingness to carry on these traditions, the talent gap is becoming increasingly severe. As the scope of traditional inheritance gradually shrinks, many outstanding intangible cultural heritage craft skills will fail to be successfully passed down, leading to an awkward situation where there is no one to learn, no one to teach, and no one to carry on the tradition—a situation that severely impacts the long-term development of these crafts.

2.2. There are obstacles to the two-way exchange of intangible cultural heritage crafts

The ongoing deterioration of the preservation environment is merely a minor aspect of the challenges facing the development of intangible cultural heritage crafts. In the process of promoting these crafts through new media, two major issues—an aesthetic disconnect and the digital divide—have persistently plagued the sector, and these are the key obstacles that have long hindered their online dissemination.

The entire visual system of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) originates from the agricultural era; whether in terms of patterns and color schemes or overall design, it aligns with the aesthetics of that bygone era. However, contemporary audiences prefer a minimalist, trendy visual style. Consequently, there is a significant disconnect between the visual presentation of traditional crafts and the current aesthetic preferences of the general public. It is precisely this aesthetic gap that makes it difficult for online ICH content to retain young users, significantly diminishing its reach and impact.

At the same time, the digital divide has further compounded the challenges of disseminating intangible cultural heritage. Many veteran masters who have dedicated years to their craft—despite their exceptional skills and solid foundations—are, due to their age, largely unfamiliar with digital communication tools such as short-form video production. As a result, traditional crafts are not being disseminated as effectively as they could be.

In contrast, young professionals who specialize in new media operations generally lack a deep understanding of the cultural significance and technical details of intangible cultural heritage. This immediately highlights the imbalance between supply and demand in the dissemination of such heritage. With traditional visual formats falling behind and older-generation practitioners lacking digital skills, a two-way communication challenge arises.

3. Methods for redesigning visual symbols of intangible cultural heritage crafts

3.1. Extraction and deconstruction of visual symbols in intangible cultural heritage crafts

To address the issue of outdated visual styles in intangible cultural heritage crafts, the first step is to organize, distill, and deconstruct traditional visual symbols systematically—this serves as the fundamental basis for visual redesign. The visual symbols of intangible cultural heritage go far beyond mere surface patterns; they embody regional characteristics, folkloric significance, and the depth of craftsmanship.

In the actual production process, it is important to first understand that the primary reason for the differences among intangible cultural heritage (ICH) crafts lies in the varying methods and skills used to create a single product—and even the materials and forms employed differ—resulting in products with distinct characteristics. This practice of “using locally available materials” and “adapting to local conditions” is the defining feature of ICH crafts [3]. Next, traditional visual materials related to ICH crafts are collected, including classic patterns, distinctive color palettes, and other elements. Once the collection is complete, the complex visual elements must be filtered: secondary elements that do not align with contemporary aesthetics are removed, while the core visual symbols that best represent the craft’s distinctive characteristics are retained.

3.2. Methods for the reconstruction of graphic visual symbols in contemporary communication

After extracting, screening, and semantically deconstructing the visual symbols, the next step is to reinterpret

the visual symbols of intangible cultural heritage in a graphic design context and establish a brand-new visual system tailored for digital media. This design transformation primarily involves optimizing visual effects while upholding the core cultural essence, thereby better adapting ancient traditional elements to modern communication contexts.

The key to simplifying forms lies in simplification and reconstruction. Since traditional handicrafts feature complex lines, the optimization process must distill core symbols, eliminate superfluous decorative details, and retain only highly recognizable outlines and primary structures. The optimized forms are simple and can be adapted to mainstream digital communication contexts; Targeted adjustments to color schemes are also necessary. Most traditional intangible cultural heritage color palettes have low saturation, which does not align with modern aesthetics. The specific solution involves making subtle color adjustments during the design process; by maintaining the traditional color palette, the designs can better align with the aesthetic preferences of younger audiences.

4. Implementation pathways for revitalizing intangible cultural heritage crafts through digital media art

4.1. Building a diverse communication matrix to bridge the digital divide in the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage

To truly achieve the long-term revitalization of intangible cultural heritage crafts, the key lies in establishing online communication channels and addressing the critical issue of inheritors' limited digital operational capabilities. Since most inheritors have virtually no foundation in digital operations, they are simply unable to independently create content or manage social media accounts. In response to this situation, a diverse and streamlined online communication framework can be established, which would significantly lower the barrier to entry for intangible cultural heritage inheritors participating in digital communication.

A practical approach would be to leverage major new media platforms to create dedicated accounts for intangible cultural heritage (ICH). These accounts could showcase the entire handmade production process and innovative visual design works in an accessible manner. Young people, who are more familiar with new media strategies, could be tasked with filming, editing, and promotion, while ICH masters focus on demonstrating their exquisite craftsmanship and interpreting the cultural significance of the techniques. This arrangement would allow both parties to benefit from complementary collaboration; In addition, a small-scale online exhibition platform can be established to showcase original ICH works and craft details in one place, breaking through the geographical limitations of physical exhibition halls and making it easier for the public to gain a deeper understanding of ICH culture.

4.2. Establish a comprehensive, coordinated system to ensure the long-term revitalization and transmission of intangible cultural heritage

The digital revitalization of intangible cultural heritage crafts is not merely an innovation in dissemination, but a systematic endeavor encompassing cultural transmission, design innovation, industrial development, and ecosystem building. Taking the design transformation of Tu ethnic embroidery artisans as an example, the juxtaposition of "tradition and modernity" that has emerged in the emerging digital media environment has prompted their creative practices to transcend the narrow model of "cultural replication." Under this model, the embroidery artisans proactively adopt a cultural innovation paradigm that symbolically fuses

ethnic motifs with contemporary aesthetics, thereby preserving the genetic identity of the "pan embroidery" technique while also providing interpretive space that aligns with contemporary tastes [4].

If we are to establish a comprehensive system for the innovation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), the most critical step is to resolve communication barriers between designers and ICH inheritors, bridge the gap between design creation and craft production, and further enable designers to uncover hidden techniques and deeper cultural connotations within ICH, thereby transforming modern design concepts into concrete solutions compatible with traditional craftsmanship; In this process, inheritors can also engage with entirely new modern aesthetic approaches, refresh their design thinking, and thereby transform their years of accumulated craftsmanship experience into innovative, practical, and visual design resources, achieving a deep integration of traditional techniques and modern design.

5. Conclusion

Inheriting and developing China's outstanding traditional culture is an integral part of building a socialist cultural powerhouse and a modern Chinese civilization. The evolution of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in modern society undoubtedly serves as an ideal entry point for examining the processes and mechanisms underlying the inheritance and development of China's outstanding traditional culture [5]. The digital media era offers entirely new opportunities for the transmission and development of ICH crafts, while also placing higher demands on their modernization and innovative dissemination. The practical challenges currently facing ICH crafts—such as the shrinking scope of transmission, a misalignment of visual systems, and the digital divide—constitute the core bottlenecks constraining their development. To break through these developmental challenges, we cannot rely solely on promotional efforts; instead, we must make concerted efforts in two dimensions: visual innovation and digital revitalization.

This paper systematically examines the various challenges facing the development of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) crafts in the new media environment and clearly identifies the core contradictions between traditional inheritance models and modern digital dissemination. By integrating real-world communication scenarios, this study explores effective pathways for the digital transformation of online visual materials. Using visual redesign as a starting point, it optimizes the methods of ICH dissemination, leveraging digital technology to overcome communication limitations and enabling traditional crafts to adapt to the pace of development in the digital age. The study aims to provide practical guidance for the digital revitalization of ICH crafts, helping traditional ICH overcome current development bottlenecks as quickly as possible and achieve sustainable, stable, and dynamic transmission and innovative development in the digital age.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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