Article

From "Cultural Symbol" to "Cultural Confidence": Translation Path of Traditional Culture in Advertising Illustration Design

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Abstract: ***Background:*** In the era of globalization and visual communication, advertising illustration design has become more uniform. Traditional culture is often simplified to symbolic elements in educational contexts, with its cultural significance inadequately translated into design practice. ***Objective:*** To explore the translation pathways of traditional culture within the context of advertising illustration education and analyze how it contributes to design generation through the processes of design judgment and visual organization. ***Methods:*** Based on visual culture education and cultural representation theories, a practice-oriented qualitative case study was conducted to analyze the teaching process and student projects in university advertising illustration courses. ***Results:*** The cultural translation pathway in the design process helps students transition from using symbols to creating structured narrative. This process enhance student's cultural awareness in design. ***Conclusion:*** This translation pathway is practical and valuable, providing a reference to deepen value orientation and cultural identity in design courses.

Keywords: Advertising illustration; Traditional culture translation; Cultural confidence; Cultural symbol; Value orientation

1. Introduction

As digital media and global communication technologies advance rapidly, advertising visual language is increasingly experiencing a trend of homogenization. Research indicates that combined influence of global visual systems and algorithmic platform mechanisms, design practices tend to replicate popular styles resulting in a cyclical reproduction of formal patterns. This often reduces local cultural experiences to superficial symbols (Wang, 2015). This visual homogenization not only diminishes the aesthetic diversity of advertising illustrations but also weakens the depth of cultural expression in design works. In higher design education, this trend is evident in an overemphasis on software skills, style imitation, and market adaptability, while aspects such as cultural perspective and value expression receive relatively insufficient attention.

Traditional Chinese culture is an important resource for contemporary visual design. However, in specific teaching practices, traditional culture is often simplified into basic visual elements. These elements are then used in advertising illustration through symbolic collage or image reproduction. Although this approach can enhance the recognizability of "Chinese elements" at the visual level, it often fails to convey the deeper cultural significance embedded within these elements. As a result, although cultural features is "present" in the artwork, but its meaning does not play a significant role in the organization process of visual expression.

In recent years, China's higher education has increasingly focused on cultural identity and cultural awareness. Its advocacy is to promote contemporary expression

and innovative transformation of excellent traditional Chinese culture through disciplinary teaching. In this context, advertising illustration is not only a visual tool for commercial communication but can also become an important medium for the dissemination of cultural values. It is necessary for advertising illustration teaching to go beyond simple application, transforming traditional culture into the internal logic that guides design thinking and visual expression. This approach will enable students to gradually develop the ability to understand and express cultural significance in design practice.

This study builds on this foundational understanding of how traditional culture influences the meaning-making process in illustration design through a systematic pedagogical approach. Rather than analyzing how students use cultural elements, the research investigates how cultural factors shape visual organization and design judgment. The paper addresses three key questions: 1) How does traditional culture facilitate the transition from symbolic representation to meaningful transformation in advertising illustration instruction? 2) How do culturally adapted teaching models enhance students' visual expression and design thinking? 3) What are the roles and pathways of advertising illustration education in fostering cultural confidence and achieving value-oriented professional training objectives?

2. Theoretical Perspectives and Research Framework

2.1 Design Transformation and Cultural Representation of Traditional Culture

Culture is not simply a direct reflection of reality, but a system of meanings that are selected, reorganized, and expressed within specific contexts. The theory of cultural representation emphasizes that cultural meanings are not inherently attached to symbols, but are continuously produced and constructed through concrete expressions (Hall, 1997). Therefore, to determine whether a student's work achieves "cultural transformation" involves not only whether the elements are traditional or the details are historical, but also whether cultural meaning is constructed through visual relationships. This includes considering what is emphasized, what is downplayed, and how the image guides the audience's understanding.

Furthermore, the contemporary reinterpretation of traditional culture often involves "recontextualization" —where the same cultural imagery, when introduced into advertising, undergoes meaning reconstruction shaped by audience experiences, media conventions, and communication objectives. This process of "reinterpreting within new contexts" can be understood through Bhabha's (1994) perspective on how cultural meanings emerge through transfer and negotiation. In essence, cultural transformation is not merely the replication of tradition but rather a form of "meaning negotiation," where designers seek expressive approaches that align with traditional narratives, contemporary communication, and audience expectations.

In visual culture studies, images are never isolated visual entities but are inherently connected with socio-cultural experiences. Freedman (2000) suggests that image meaning doesn't derive solely from visual forms, but gradually emerges within specific social contexts and viewing experiences. This indicates that understanding images often depends on how viewers interpret the relationship between visual symbols. Tavin (2003) further emphasizes in his research on visual culture education that visual imagery not only conveys information but also actively contributes in constructing cultural meaning. When students view traditional culture merely as graphic materials in their design, their works remain superficial displays of symbols. However, when they begin exploring visual composition, hierarchy, and narrative connections, the cultural significance can penetrate beyond surface-level symbols into the visual structure. Therefore, cultural expression in design practice requires not only the selection of elements but also the

reorganization of composition and symbolic relationships. This enables traditional culture to gain more interpretive power within new visual contexts.

2.2 Visual Culture Education and the Perspective of Ideological and Political Education in Curriculum

Visual culture education emphasizes the social and cultural dimensions of imagery, asserting that visual expressions are deeply rooted in specific value systems and ideologies (Zhou, 2017). From this perspective, advertising illustrations go beyond simple image creation to become cultural practices that actively shape social meaning. The real challenge in integrating traditional culture into design education lies not in knowledge deficiency, but in students' tendency to equate cultural understanding with "symbol recognition." Research in visual culture education has long demonstrated that image learning involves not only aesthetic skills but also the development of social meanings, identity experiences, and value orientations (Freedman, 2000; Duncum, 2001). In other words, design education that focuses solely on style and technique risks reducing students to "mere image-makers." Only when courses transform cultural understanding into "processes requiring selection and judgment" can learning progress to deeper cognitive training.

From a value-oriented professional pedagogical perspective, design courses should not simply include ideological and political content. Instead, they should integrate value guidance through the discipline's inherent knowledge framework and practical methodologies. Learning theory indicates that design learning typically follows a cycle of "action-reflection-reaction". Research into design practice demonstrates that professional judgment develops gradually through continuous practice and reflection, rather than by just applying existing theories to problem scenarios (Kimbell, 2011). This explains why the sketch-final draft iteration in this study serves as empirical evidence: students' "cultural judgment" is not initially stable but evolves through iterative feedback and refinement.

Furthermore, research on experiential learning indicates that learning goes beyond mere information absorption. It involves developing conceptual understanding through reflective practice based on concrete experiences, followed by practical verification and refinement of actions (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). In the context of advertising illustration pedagogy, a curriculum that supports a cycle of "cultural comprehension → transformational judgment → visual creation → re-verification" can transform cultural content from passive objects of representation into active design guides. This process aligns with the fundamental logic of value education: values are not instilled through slogans but gradually internalized as habitual judgments through professional problem-solving (Lickona, 1996). By integrating traditional culture as a cognitive resource in illustration instruction, educators can naturally incorporate cultural identity, value judgments, and awareness of social responsibility into the design process. This approach enables the effective realization of value-oriented professional teaching objectives through practical implementation.

2.3 Visual Grammar and Meaning Construction

Visual grammar provides structured tools for analyzing how images "speak." Research shows that images have language-like organizational structures, with meaning often developed through visual elements like compositional hierarchy, focal points, spatial relationships, and narrative sequencing (Machin, 2013). In advertising illustrations, images must quickly shift from capturing attention to conveying information and motivating emotional responses. Thus, organizing visual structures often proves more effective than the number of elements for communication efficiency (Pieters et al., 2010).

Methodologically, this study uses visual-grammar dimensions—including composition, structure, visual focus, information distribution, and narrative organization—to compare sketches with final designs. The approach avoids rigidly analyzing student works within fixed frameworks, instead using these dimensions to identify where transformations occur. When students' designs shift from "symbolic juxtaposition" to "center-periphery" layouts, demonstrate clear subject-object relationships, or exhibit more focused narrative threads, it indicates that students' cultural understanding begins to influence design decisions. In this context, culture is no longer just depicted as an object but becomes the basis for organizing visual relationships. This foundational concept leads into the subsequent discussion on "cultural expression consciousness" in this paper.

2.4 Visual Design Education from the Perspective of Cultural Representation

In today's highly developed visual media society, images have become a vital medium for the dissemination of cultural meaning. The concept of "representation" in cultural studies provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between images and culture. According to Hall (1997), in his cultural representation theory, cultural meaning is not an inherent attribute of things, but rather a process of continuous construction and interpretation within symbolic systems and social contexts. Images, language, and symbols play pivotal roles in this process. Thus, visual images not only serve to represent reality but also actively contribute to the creation and transmission of cultural meaning.

Research on visual culture has further expanded this perspective. Mitchell (2005) stated in his study of images that they are not simply passive visual objects but active media that continuously generate meaning through socio-cultural interactions. The meaning of images often depends on the ways they are viewed, cultural experiences, and social contexts. It is within this context that visual culture has gradually become a significant research focus in art education. Studies emphasize that contemporary art education should not merely focus on formal techniques but also address how students comprehend the meaning structures of visual images within socio-cultural contexts. Through the discussion and analysis of visual materials, students can gradually develop the ability to understand the socio-cultural significance of images (Duncum, 2001).

The evolution of art education research indicates that visual culture education has become an essential connection between artistic practice and cultural comprehension. Freedman (2000) demonstrated how visual culture education helps students interpret the relationship between visual symbols and socio-cultural contexts, transforming image interpretation into a process of cultural understanding. Tavin (2003)highlighted, from a critical perspective, that visual imagery is deeply linked to social power structures, ideologies, and cultural values. Through critical analysis of visual materials, students develop an awareness of how images contribute to cultural construction. Research confirms that visual culture education not only examines visual forms but also prioritizes understanding the cultural context that shapes them.

In design education research, scholars have also focused on cognitive structures in design learning processes. Cross (2001) proposed that design knowledge operates through distinct cognitive mechanisms compared to scientific knowledge. Design learning involves not only developing formal expression skills but also understanding concepts and meanings. Design activities often require transforming abstract concepts into visual forms, a process that simultaneously involves interpreting and reconstructing cultural significance. Oxman (2004) further emphasized that design learning can be understood as a continuous transformation between conceptual construction and formal expression. Through repeated experimentation and adjustments in design practice, students gradually establish a link between visual forms and design concepts.

From the perspective of design cultural studies, design practice inherently has cultural expression attributes. Research in design communication indicates that visual design is not just about formal organization but also serves as a vital medium to convey cultural meanings (Buchanan, 1985). The graphics, symbols, and visual structures in design works are invariably deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts. When organizing visual elements, designers must not only consider formal relationships but also contemplate how cultural symbols manifest in today's contexts.

A review of existing research highlights the interconnected frameworks among cultural representation theory, visual culture education studies, and design education research. Cultural representation theory explains the relationship between imagery and cultural significance. Visual culture education focuses on helping students comprehend visual symbols and their cultural contexts, while design education examines how students integrate concepts with visual structures in design practice. From this perspective, visual design instruction is not just a formal training process but also a practical journey toward cultural understanding and expression. By incorporating perspectives on visual culture and cultural representation into design curricula, students can gradually develop an understanding of cultural significance through their design practice and explore contemporary manifestations of cultural symbols in visual expression.

3. Research Methods and Teaching Context

3.1 Research Methods

Design learning typically happens through practical activities. To understand students 'design thinking processes, it is essential to observe them in authentic teaching contexts. Classroom instruction provides a direct setting for observing design learning. This study examines course teaching activities as the research setting, collecting materials such as students' sketches, classroom discussion records, and learning reflections during the course implementation. Through a comparative analysis of these materials, the study investigates how students' thinking evolves as they form their design concepts.

In the field of design research, scholars acknowledge that design knowledge has distinct cognitive characteristics that differ from traditional scientific research. Cross (2001) states that design knowledge typically develops through sketches, visual representations, and iterative conceptual refinements. Consequently, evaluating designs solely based on final products often fails to capture the formation process of design concepts. Current research indicates that relying exclusively on completed works makes it challenging to illustrate the developmental trajectory of design thinking. Integrating materials such as sketches, discussion records, and reflective learning into analysis provides a more concrete understanding of students' judgment and adjustments throughout the design process.

Research indicates that the design process typically unfolds through iterative experimentation and refinement. Johansson-Sköldberg et al. (2013) noted, in their review of design thinking studies, that design activities develop new understandings through continuous exploration. Dorst (2011) similarly emphasized that understanding and solving design problems is not a linear process but evolves through iterative adjustments to problem frameworks. Kimbell (2011) further proposed that design practice itself serves as a context for knowledge generation, where discussions, feedback, and peer interactions collectively shape design judgments. Building on these perspectives, this study adopts classroom teaching as a case study setting. Through a comprehensive analysis of diverse learning materials, it aims to illustrate the conceptual evolution of students' design practices.

3.2 Teaching Context

This research focuses on a teaching unit designed for visual design students at a university. Titled "Visual Representation of Traditional Cultural Elements in Advertising Illustration," the four-week course is a required professional course for 35 third-year students. The curriculum includes case analysis, sketch development, classroom discussions, and final project presentations.

In the initial phase of the course, instructors introduce diverse cultural visual expressions through case studies, guiding students to explore various approaches for incorporating cultural elements into visual design. Students then select specific cultural themes based on their personal interests and develop preliminary concepts through sketching.

In subsequent classroom activities, students are required to elaborate on their sketch concepts and engage in discussions with classmates about composition structure, visual symbols, and cultural expressions. Some students refine their ideas based on peer suggestions or teacher feedback, such as modifying graphic layouts or reorganizing visual elements. Through multiple rounds of revisions, students gradually develop a more complete illustration proposal.

In the final phase of the course, students submit their final project along with a brief reflective text. This reflection should explain the reasons behind any design modifications and the rationale for those changes. Sketches, class discussion records, and student reflection materials collectively constitute the primary sources of data for this study.

3.3 Research Data and Coding Process

The data for this study were mainly collected from learning materials generated during the course, which include students 'design sketches, final projects, classroom discussion records, and reflective writings. These diverse data sources provide comprehensive insights into students' development of design thinking. Table 1 summarizes the sources of the research materials and their analytical purposes.

Table 1. Description of study data and analysis structure

Module	Content Description	Specific constitution	Research role
Research field	Undergraduate Advertising Illustration Course (Full Semester)	35 students majoring in Visual Communication	Define clear case boundaries and identify a single practice field
Work Materials	Student Final Draft and Stage Sketch	35 final drafts; 35 sketches	Create a "Generation Process Comparison Unit"
Reflection Text	Reflection on the Stage Design of Students	35 copies (300–500 words)	Provide evidence for design judgment and cognitive change
Seminar	Transcribe audio to text	6 class discussions (about 9 hours)	Supplementary Design Modification Basis and Concept Discussion
Teacher Notes	Post-class observation notes	16 times	Restore the teaching context (not as a standalone conclusion)
Sample selection	Purposive sample	12 key samples; 2 in-depth cases	Ensure the depth and completeness of case analysis

From a data composition perspective, this study examines not only the final design outcomes but also the various stages of the design process. Sketch materials demonstrate students 'conceptual attempts and adjustments during the initial planning phase, while classroom discussion records document shifts in perspectives during group exchanges. Reflective texts provide students' self-explanations of the design process. Through

comparative analysis of these materials, the gradual formation of design decisions becomes more clearly visible.

During data organization, researchers first conducted a comprehensive review of classroom discussion records and student reflection texts to identify design thinking-related content. They then extracted initial tags and compared them across different materials. Based on this, they further consolidated the tags into several analytical themes. Table 2 provides a structured overview of the coding and analysis process.

Table 2. Coding and Analysis Workflow Structure

Analysis phase	Mode of operation	Analysis Highlights	Output result
Stage I	Sketch vs. Final Draft	Has the composition hierarchy changed? Has the narrative logic shifted? Have the cultural elements been reorganized?	Identify structural changes
StageII	Open Text Annotation	Highlight sentences related to cultural understanding, design judgment, and revision reasons	Preliminary formation of coding categories
Phase III	Aggregated coding	Cultural understanding; visual organization strategy; modification basis type	Establish an explanatory framework
Phase IV	Triple Cross Validation	Visual evidence × text evidence × discussion record	Confirm the correspondence between cognitive changes and structural changes

During the initial coding phase, the study focused on how students interpreted cultural elements and adapted visual expressions. To illustrate coding methods, Table 3 presents example annotations from selected textual materials. These examples demonstrate how researchers extracted analytical clues from student responses, gradually establishing the conceptual framework for subsequent analysis.

Table 3. Example of the first round of coding labels

Coding category	Subclass label	Explain
Cultural understanding mode	Image reproduction type	Understanding Culture as a Directly Depictable Image
	Replay scenario	Emphasize story integrity
	Structural expression type	Understanding culture as order, relation, or symbolic structure
Visual organization strategy	Element overlay	Display cultural elements side by side
	Recomposition	Reorganize the visual center or hierarchy
	Symbolic compression	Transforming the plot into symbolic implications
Change based on type	Adjustment of communication objectives	Modify according to the logic of advertising communication
	Logic correction of composition	Adjustment based on visual hierarchy
	Cultural clarification	Adjustment through re-understanding of culture

It should be noted that the researchers in this study were also involved in teaching the course, which could introduce observational bias during data analysis. To minimize such bias, the analysis focused primarily on traceable materials, including classroom records, student reflection texts, and both preliminary sketches and final drafts, rather than relying solely on immediate classroom impressions. During the data organization phase, the researchers conducted multiple rounds of text reading and cross-verification. They cross-checked changes in student work against their self-reported content to enhance the reliability of their conclusions.

4. Teaching Practice: Implementation of Cultural Translation Path in Advertising Illustration

This course focuses on the fundamental question of "how traditional culture can be effectively translated into advertising illustrations." The goal is not to present a wide variety of cultural elements but to emphasize the cultural significance in design decisions and its influence on the visual production process. To prevent traditional culture from being reduced to mere tools or symbols in teaching, the course structure is built around the principle of "cultural transformation". Through a series of structured lessons, students gradually develop illustration design thinking that is rooted in cultural understanding.

4.1 Cultural Understanding

In the initial phase of the course, illustration training was not directly introduced. Instead, the focus was on text analysis, case discussions, and guided questioning to help students explore the cultural values and narrative patterns of selected traditional elements. Rather than asking "how this culture could be visualized," teachers focused on guiding students to explore "what core message this culture conveys" and "how this message still resonates emotionally or holds contemporary relevance." Through this process, students gradually realized that traditional culture is not an isolated historical symbol, but a meaningful system that can be reinterpreted and expressed in modern contexts.

In classroom discussions, students often develop different interpretations of the same cultural theme. These differences are intentionally preserved as the cognitive foundation for subsequent visual transformations. Rather than requiring a uniform conclusion, the teaching approach emphasizes the open-ended nature and interpretive potential of cultural understanding, thereby enabling diverse expressions in the creation of illustrations.

4.2 Cultural Transformation

Before starting the sketching phase, the course includes a "cultural transformation assessment" segment. Students are required to briefly explain their design direction in writing prior to formal drafting. They must address three key aspects: first, how cultural significance will be conveyed through visual narratives; second, which visual relationships can effectively communicate this meaning; and third, which intuitive symbols should be softened or replaced. This segment does not aim for academic precision but rather encourages students to conduct essential curation and selection of cultural content before initiating visual conceptualization.

In teaching practice, this assessment is typically conducted through guided questioning. For instance, students are asked to analyze the core meaning of cultural content and determine whether it is best conveyed through concrete imagery or through relational structures and narrative atmosphere. Observations in the classroom indicate that students initially tend to rely on layering traditional imagery to achieve what they consider "cultural expression." Through pre-posed cultural transformation assessments,

students gradually realize that not all cultural elements need direct presentation and that some cultural meanings are better conveyed through implicit visual structures.

As the teaching process progressed, cultural interpretation transformed from an external requirement to a self-driven design tool for students. During subsequent conceptualization and sketching phases, some students began to actively revisit their earlier cultural judgments, adjusting the necessity and expression of various visual elements in their compositions. Consequently, culture ceased to be merely an object of depiction but gradually became a crucial basis for visual selection and compositional strategies.

4.3 Design Generation

During the subsequent sketching and refinement phase, teachers focus on assessing students 'ability to continuously refine design proposals based on their initial cultural transformation judgments. In the actual design process, students' understanding of "cultural transformation" evolves dynamically through iterative sketching and adjustments. For instance, in classroom assignments, students often begin by selecting a single, concrete traditional cultural image as the visual core, relying on direct representation to achieve cultural identification. At this stage, illustrations typically feature concentrated compositions with a single narrative thread, where cultural meanings are primarily interpreted through viewers' existing experiences.

In subsequent teaching discussions, the instructor refrained from outright rejecting the student's expression, instead guiding them to revisit their earlier cultural transformation analysis and reflect on whether the cultural significance had genuinely permeated the visual composition. Through a comparative analysis of different sketch proposals, students gradually recognized that if cultural elements were limited to subjects depicted in their artwork, the pieces might retain cultural uniqueness but struggle to establish stable narrative connections or emotional resonance. At this stage, some students began to reorganize the visual hierarchy by transforming cultural symbols, which were originally presented as focal points, into structural components that help organize compositional relationships. This was achieved through techniques such as spatial distribution, symbolic connections, or rhythmic arrangements to effectively convey cultural connotations.

As the design progresses, cultural transformation becomes a continuous guiding principle. When revising illustrations, students no longer base their decisions solely on aesthetic appeal or stylistic preferences. Instead, they consistently evaluate whether their visual choices support their cultural understanding. In the final illustrations, culture is no longer represented through isolated symbols but embedded in visual composition and narrative structure, becoming central to the meaning conveyed. This design process demonstrates how contextualized cultural transformation continuously influences creative decisions, gradually highlighting its methodological value through iterative adjustments.

This paper conducts a structured comparison of two students' work by incorporating visual grammar analysis to avoid merely describing teaching outcomes. The analysis focuses on four key dimensions: compositional structure, visual focus, information distribution, and narrative organization.

Case 1: Illustration of the "Great Cold" Solar Term in Qingcheng Mountain

The paper is based on the Taoist culture of Qingcheng Mountain.



Figure 1. Comparison of the generation process of the advertising illustration for the "Great Cold" solar term in Qingcheng Mountain

Table 4. Visual Grammar Dimension Comparison (Case 1)

Analysis of reading	Character of first draft	Final draft characteristics	Revision basis
Composition structure	Lack of a central focus in the juxtaposition of scenery	Central focus structure	"Seasonal Terms are the Time Order, the Picture Should Have a Center"
Optic center	Pine and background balance distribution	Emperor Zhenwu becomes the visual focus	The concept of "guardian" requires a person to embody it (the True Martial Emperor in Taoism corresponds to the meaning of guardian).
Information distribution	Uniform distribution of top and bottom information	Centralized and peripheral	"Don't just pile up scenery."
Narrative logic	Winter Climate and Plant Reproduction	The Expression of Time Concept in Winter Storage and Keeping Quiet	The Great Cold is a state that marks the end of the year.

To avoid inferring students' cognitive changes based solely on the format of their work, this study simultaneously collected classroom discussion records and written reflections from students at three stages. The following excerpts have been anonymized.

During the initial sketching phase, students 'cultural understanding remained at a superficial level of imagery. Their reflective notes revealed: "My initial focus was on conveying a sense of cold, so I used pine trees and a pale green background to create a chilly atmosphere. When asked by the teacher about the differences between' Great Cold 'and other winter seasons, I couldn't provide an answer." The sketches demonstrate that students 'design judgments were still primarily centered on climatic sensations (cold, understated tones) rather than the temporal structure and cultural significance associated with the solar terms. The composition of their artwork was organized around the concept of ' visual coldness.'

During the mid-term artwork evaluation, the teacher guided students to reconsider the traditional seasonal concept of "Great Cold" and to examine how Taoist cultural elements shaped character design and composition. After the second round of critiques, students submitted revised drafts with written explanations: "I researched Taoist culture at Mount Qingcheng and discovered the importance of winter preservation and conservation. The teacher emphasized that solar terms represent temporal order, which

made me realize the artwork needed a central focus rather than just a haphazard arrangement of scenery.“ As the second round progressed, cultural interpretation became increasingly integrated into the compositional process. The inclusion of human figures evolved from decorative elements to a visual logic centered on concepts such as “conservation of stillness“ and “winter preservation.“

The final design achieves a strikingly focused central composition. In their reflective course summaries, students noted: “Where I used to focus on specific elements, I now prioritize the core philosophy of the solar term before structuring the composition.“ Their revision notes reveal a clear evolution in design logic—from “element selection“ to “conceptual priority.“ For instance, the snow-capped cedar not only represents winter vegetation but also symbolizes the duality of “softness with inherent strength,“ while auxiliary imagery establishes temporal metaphors within the visual hierarchy. Cultural interpretation has become a fundamental prerequisite for both compositional design and visual layering.

The case study reveals that students’ design development process goes beyond simply gathering cultural elements. Through iterative cycles of sketch refinement, classroom discussions, and self-reflection, they progressively embed cultural judgments into their work. A comparison between the initial draft and final version demonstrates that while the former remains at the stage of cultural element selection, the latter has already achieved structural organization at the cultural level.

To verify how cultural judgment intervenes in the design generation mechanism, this study selects another student’s work from the course “Mianzhu New Year Picture Advertising Illustration Design“ for comparative analysis.

Case 2: Mianzhu New Year Picture Illustration

The assignment centers on the symbolism of the Child Gate God, with its core meaning being “good fortune, happiness, and harmonious fulfillment.“ The evolution from the student’s initial draft and final version is as follows.



Figure 2. Comparison of the generation process of Mianzhu New Year Picture advertisement illustration

Table 5. Visual Grammar Dimension Comparison (Case 2)

Analysis of reading	Character of first draft	Final draft characteristics	Revision basis
Composition structure	Tile elements	Center-periphery structure	“Children should be at the center.“
Optic center	Single vertical	The highly focused image of the animalized child	Good luck is not just a simple accumulation of single elements.
Information distribution	Lotus flowers and lotus leaves side by side	Around the Child Organization	Other elements revolve around the child
Narrative logic	Superimpose auspicious symbols	Protective structure expression	I understand it as a protective structure.

In the students' initial proposals, the compositions primarily centered on traditional auspicious motifs like "child" and "lotus," emphasizing the symbolic connection to "continuous abundance." Their classroom presentations demonstrated a design approach focused on conveying auspicious meanings while preserving the integrity of traditional symbols: One student stated, "I believe New Year paintings should showcase the familiar child imagery paired with auspicious elements like lotus, creating a fitting and lively composition." At this stage, their cultural understanding remained at the level of symbolic correspondence in visual representations. They achieved meaning from combined symbols without developing an organized awareness of visual hierarchy or narrative relationships.

During the mid-stage discussion phase, students 'design judgments began to shift from focusing on symbolic meaning to considering structural significance. In a classroom evaluation session, the teacher asked questions such as: "If the lotus is removed, does the child still retain its symbolic power?" and "Is good fortune created through the stacking of elements, or can it be emphasized through the composition of the image?" In their revised explanations, students noted: "We later realized that it's not about individual elements, but rather positioning the child as the central figure, with other elements surrounding him." At this stage, cultural judgment shifted from "symbolic object selection" to "core imagery organization."

The final design establishes a striking central-peripheral composition, with the Child as the visual focal point. Goldfish and lotus flowers radiate outward, forming a cohesive visual hierarchy. Compared to the initial draft, the Child has evolved from a secondary element to a central symbol. In addition, the decorative elements have transitioned from "filling additions" to "narrative-supporting integrations." In their course reflections, students noted: "Previously, I thought New Year paintings simply depicted their original forms. Now I understand them as a 'protective structure,' where the Child serves as the core, and other elements extend blessings." This transformation reveals a shift in students' cultural understanding from surface-level image interpretation to a deeper structural comprehension. As a result, their cultural judgments are now directly shaping the visual organization of artworks.

4.4 Practical Verification in Design Generation

It is crucial to emphasize that the "traditional culture translation pathway" proposed in this paper is not a retrospective summary of completed works. Instead, it serves as a design judgment mechanism pre-embedded in teaching practice, directly participating in the creation of advertising illustrations. In curriculum implementation, design activities do not start from visual forms, but rather begin with the question of "how culture influences design decisions." This approach makes cultural translation a key basis for the design initiation phase.

In practical design practice, students must first evaluate the relationship between cultural significance and visual expression before sketching conceptual ideas. This involves understanding core traditional cultural concepts, their application in advertising contexts, and exploring visual organization strategies. Through this preparatory process, the design workflow is guided by cultural comprehension from the outset. During subsequent adjustments, students must continually revisit their initial judgments to refine visual structures and communication methods. Thus, the cultural translation approach remains active throughout the design process, demonstrating its practical applicability as a design methodology. From a visual cognition perspective, this design philosophy—prioritizing cultural judgment over formal creation—aligns with research in design studies on the role of visual structure in meaning construction (Cross, 2001).

It should be noted that the cultural translation approach does not apply universally to all design contexts. Its usefulness is somewhat limited when instructional objectives

are focused on stylistic training or specific visual representations. However, in the context of advertising illustration pedagogy, which emphasizes conceptual generation and meaning articulation, this methodology demonstrates greater methodological value. Therefore, cultural translation is not a universal alternative to conventional design training, but rather a design thinking tool tailored to specific educational goals. Overall, the implementation of cultural translation in advertising illustration education reveals that its significance lies not in providing a fixed model, but in helping students develop culturally grounded design judgment, thereby progressively increasing awareness of cultural perspectives in visual expression.

5. Discussion: Cultural Expression Consciousness in Advertising Illustration Teaching

5.1 Generative Manifestations of Cultural Confidence

In this study, "cultural confidence" is observed not as an abstract macro-level value proposition but within specific teaching contexts. By comparing students' reflective texts with their stage-specific works, it becomes evident that when traditional culture is presented only as visual symbols, students tend to prioritize formal effects and cultural recognizability. However, when cultural significance becomes the foundation for design judgment, their modes of expression undergo structural transformations.

First, this transformation is evident in the linguistic aspects. Initially, some students repeatedly emphasized phrases such as "adding elements" and "reflecting traditional aesthetics."However, in the final draft phase, their focus shifted to "core meaning" and "visual composition." This shift in wording is not merely a difference in phrasing but signifies a realignment of the focus in their design thinking.

Secondly, in terms of visual strategy, the final works often exhibit clearer hierarchical relationships and narrative structures. Culture is no longer presented in parallel but is organized through central-peripheral or dominant-subordinate relationships. Cultural meaning shifts from being "displayed" to being "constructed".

More importantly, during the revision phase, students begin to evaluate designs through the lens of cultural understanding. For instance, they consider questions like "Does this composition effectively convey the concept of guardianship?" or "Does this visual focus diminish the sense of temporal progression in the solar term?" When cultural considerations become a recurring benchmark, the design process inherently incorporates cultural perspectives. Thus, the cultural confidence discussed in this article does not stem from replicating traditional forms, but rather from redefining the sequence of design judgments—transforming cultural elements from raw materials into structural principles.

5.2 The Cultural Transformation Value of Advertising Illustration

Advertising illustrations have distinct communicative attributes that require visual expressions to convey meaning quickly. Hall's (1997) research on cultural representation demonstrates that meaning in visual media is not simply presented but continuously constructed through encoding and decoding processes. This perspective provides a crucial theoretical reference for translating traditional cultural meanings in advertising illustrations. Design communication studies indicate that visual design is not a one-way information transmission but an ongoing communication process that involves understanding and reconstructing meanings within specific social and cultural contexts (Krippendorff, 1989). Advertising illustration education trains students to understand the relationship between visual encoding and cultural meaning, enabling effective translation of traditional culture in contemporary communication contexts. This characteristic makes it an ideal medium for evaluating the effectiveness of cultural

transformation. In their studies, students must simultaneously consider the accuracy of cultural expression and the clarity of advertising communication. This dual requirement drives them to refine and reorganize cultural meanings rather than simply replicating them.

From the perspective of teaching effectiveness, students' understanding of culture often deepens when they recognize that cultural expression must serve communication objectives. Some students reflected that cultural transformation does not weaken cultural characteristics, but rather reorganizes visual language to make culture more accessible and acceptable to contemporary audiences. This realization marks a shift from passively using cultural elements to actively taking responsibility for how culture is expressed.

5.3 Consciousness of Cultural Expression in Professional Practice

In the teaching scenario presented in this study, students' understanding of traditional culture is not formed through direct indoctrination, but gradually deepens through multiple rounds of design deliberation and discussion. From the changes in works and reflective texts, it is evident that culture did not enter the design process with a clear stance from the outset, but became a basis for judgment through the comparison of sketches, classroom questioning, and revisions.

It should be noted that this shift is better described as "the initial emergence of cultural expression awareness" rather than a stable value construction mechanism. When students actively engage with cultural understanding in specific task contexts and adjust their compositional and visual hierarchies, it demonstrates that cultural judgment is beginning to influence design decisions. However, such participation still relies on curriculum structure and teacher guidance, and its sustainability and stability require long-term observation.

Rather than labeling it as "path to value internalization," this approach should be understood as a design trend emerging in practical teaching. When culture is positioned as a framework for problem-solving rather than merely decorative material, students demonstrate greater awareness and restraint in their visual expression. This represents an important milestone, as its significance lies in offering a practical way for design curricula to engage with traditional culture, rather than establishing a universally applicable model.

5.4 Researcher Role Reflection and Bias Control

In the aforementioned case study, the research data primarily came from classroom teaching scenarios. It should be noted that the researcher, who also served as a course instructor, may have been influenced by their prior teaching experience or classroom expectations when observing and interpreting the teaching process. To minimize the impact of this factor on the research conclusions, multiple control measures were implemented during the data organization and analysis phase.

The study employed a comprehensive approach to data utilization, not relying solely on classroom observation impressions. Instead, it integrated student works, reflective texts, and classroom discussion records. Through cross-referencing various types of materials, a comprehensive evaluation of the design evolution process was conducted. During the case analysis phase, two experienced design educators were invited to independently observe and analyze six anonymized student cases. Their findings were then compared to the researcher's analysis to minimize potential interpretive bias arising from a single perspective. Additionally, a delayed coding approach was adopted. All textual and visual materials were systematically organized and coded after the course had concluded. This strategy helped prevent immediate impressions formed during teaching from influencing subsequent analysis. Furthermore, complete records were maintained throughout the coding and analysis process,

including initial coding, category adjustments, and analytical notes, ensuring traceability of the research methodology.

Through the above measures, the research aims to reflect on the researcher's role in teaching practice situations and, to a certain extent, reduce the impact of classroom teaching expectations on research interpretation.

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