

# Haihe River Cultural Belt Based on Image Narrative

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the application methods and value manifestations of elements within the Tianjin Haihe River Cultural Belt in cultural and creative (C&C) design, drawing on image narrative theory. By examining the historical connotations and cultural characteristics of the Belt, alongside the current status of C&C design, it clarifies the core advantages of using C&C products as a medium for disseminating Tianjin Haihe River culture. Influenced by contemporary cultural communication, graphic and narrative design approaches have become key methods for activating regional culture and enhancing emotional connections. This paper systematically analyzes the application of image narrative theory in this context, proposing specific design strategies that combine market demand with user aesthetics. The research aims to empower C&C products to delve into the spiritual essence of the Haihe River Cultural Belt, bridge the gap between culture and users, create immersive cultural experiences, and achieve efficient dissemination and living inheritance of the culture.

**Keywords:** Image narrative; Haihe river culture; Cultural and creative design

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## 1. Overview of image narrative theory

Narratology, the study of story narration, traces its development to 1969 when French structuralist scholar Tzvetan Todorov proposed the term “narratology”, defining it as “the science of narrative works.” Classical narratology intersects with multiple disciplines such as psycholinguistics, philosophy, and design science, characterized by exploration and interdisciplinarity<sup>[1]</sup>. Narrative theory is divided into text narrative and image narrative. Image narrative, with its intuitive visual advantages, has demonstrated significant application value in contemporary design. Targeted design research on C&C products helps refine value advantages, endow products with unique cultural attributes, and explore new paths for cultural promotion<sup>[2]</sup>.

The core of image narrative lies in transforming information into intuitive visual forms through story description and scenario construction. This form traces back to primitive rock paintings, where early humans depicted life scenes with simple lines. Since the 1980s, post-classical narratology has expanded the horizon

of narrative research, strengthening the connection between narratology and disciplines such as culture and communication <sup>[3]</sup>. Regarding its composition, American image theory expert W.J.T. Mitchell proposed in *Picture Theory* that plot, temporality, and spatiality are the three core elements. Plot requires images to carry complete story clues, connecting cultural connotations into a complete story chain; temporality reveals the sequence of stories through dynamic implications and sequential arrangement; spatiality uses composition and scene construction to shape space, enhancing the audience's immersion. Visual narrative transforms information into visual symbols through scenario-based descriptions, effectively conveying the product's connotation <sup>[4]</sup>.

In contemporary design, image narrative is particularly prominent in C&C design. Through the narrative transformation process of "people borrowing objects, objects conveying events, and events evoking emotions", it optimizes product appearance design and conveys cultural connotations <sup>[5]</sup>. A narrative work usually contains three basic levels: story content, the author's conception and expression, and the reader's acceptance and re-creation, where the reader interacts dynamically with the work <sup>[6]</sup>. The core competitiveness of C&C products lies in their cultural attributes. Image narrative transforms abstract cultural symbols into intuitive visual language by constructing unique visual images and narrative plots. For example, in traditional Chinese culture-themed C&C design, restoring historical scenes through images allows the audience to understand cultural implications while feeling visual beauty, achieving a dual enhancement of dissemination and value. Image narrative has deeply integrated with fields such as design and communication, injecting new vitality into C&C design.

## **2. Current status of C&C development in the Tianjin Haihe River cultural belt**

Research by scholars such as Kapmeier indicates that sustainable urban tourism development requires rational planning of tourism resources and continuous innovation in C&C products <sup>[7]</sup>. As Tianjin's "Mother River", the Haihe River has nurtured the unique cultural essence of "Zhigu Haihe Pulse, Industrial Land, and Vibrant Daily Life." Haihe C&C products are concrete carriers of "culture, creativity, and product": with culture as the core, bearing water transport history and civic customs; creativity as the soul; and product as the carrier. The design essence should extract core contents such as water transport symbols of the Sancha Estuary and industrial elements of the Dagu Dockyard, linking culture with life. With the advancement of cultural-tourism integration, the C&C industry has taken shape, with product forms enriching. However, under the prosperous appearance, Haihe C&C products still face many problems.

First, cultural connotations are superficial, and symbol piling replaces value excavation. Many products simply replicate elements, such as directly printing the Tianjin Eye on fridge magnets or rigidly copying Clay Figure Zhang shapes, without deconstructing the historical significance behind them. This "sticker-style design" strips away the spiritual core of cultural symbols, reducing products to "element illustrations" and making it difficult to trigger emotional resonance.

Second, creativity is seriously homogenized and lacks depth. Market products mostly concentrate on "standard" categories like fridge magnets and keychains, with highly similar forms; creativity stays on surface modifications, lacking story reconstruction. For example, some tableware is only printed with Yangliuqing Woodblock New Year Picture patterns without combining with food culture. This homogenization makes products short-term souvenirs, unable to realize the continuous cultural dissemination value.

Third, function and creativity are disconnected. Some products prioritize form over function, such as large ornaments imitating cruise ships that lack practical storage functions; others are daily necessities merely labeled with “Haihe C&C” without creativity. This imbalance fails to meet consumers’ demand for “cultural life” and causes cultural dissemination to lose an effective carrier.

These problems point to a cognitive bias regarding the integration logic of “culture-creativity-product.” Only by deeply excavating the spiritual core of Haihe culture and combining water transport stories, industrial memories, and civic customs with modern life needs can the current dilemma be cracked, upgrading Haihe River Cultural Belt C&C products into a business card conveying Tianjin’s charm.

### **3. Adaptability between image narrative theory and C&C products**

Image narrative theory constructs an information transmission system through plot, temporality, and spatiality. As a complex of “culture-creativity-product”, the core purpose of C&C products is to transform culture into a perceptible carrier. The two are highly compatible in the goal of “cultural translation”, forming a bi-directional adaptive relationship.

W.J.T. Mitchell emphasized the specificity of the image as a narrative medium <sup>[8]</sup>. The adaptation is reflected in three dimensions:

First, the adaptation between the plot and cultural connotation. Plot requires constructing complete story clues through visual elements, which aligns with the need to convey cultural connotations. It transforms fragmented symbols into logical visual stories. For example, the “Water Transport Memory” series selects key historical scenes like “Cao Ship Arriving in Tianjin” and “Unloading at Zhigu.” Using comic-style design, it presents the complete story on notebooks, integrating geographical features and ship structures to form a visual plot chain that immerses the audience and stimulates consumption interest.

Second, the adaptation between temporality and cultural memory. Image narrative visualizes “linear cultural memory” through dynamic implications and sequential arrangement. Chinese scholar Long Diyong pointed out that “the essence of image narrative is the temporalization of space” <sup>[9]</sup>. For instance, the “Twenty-Four Solar Terms” interactive calendar combines the Yangliuqing New Year Picture style with solar terms customs. Designers create continuous images monthly to present custom changes, constructing a timeline through the progression of character actions. Detachable cards allow consumers to splice them into a “Solar Terms Scroll”, intuitively feeling folk changes. This design organizes cultural memory and reflects the adaptive potential of “temporality.”

Third, the adaptation between spatiality and usage scenarios. Spatiality creates immersion through composition, matching the “usage scenario” of products. Three-dimensional structures can guide narrative content and the user’s sightline <sup>[10]</sup>. For the “Machine Tool Shape” home C&C, the design team created storage boxes shaped like “machine tool drawers” with handles imitating machine operations. This retains industrial visual recognizability while ensuring practical function, integrating industrial culture into home spaces. This verifies that “spatiality” helps products integrate into usage scenarios, realizing “cultural utility.”

In summary, this adaptability solves three core contradictions: transforming abstract culture into concrete images; making culture present dynamically; and lowering the understanding threshold through plotted design. This enhances the cultural dissemination power and market competitiveness of C&C products, providing an effective path for the “living inheritance” of regional culture.

## **4. Design embodiment of image narrative in Haihe River Cultural Belt C&C design**

### **4.1. Narrative theme construction: Anchoring the core of Haihe culture**

The narrative theme serves as the “spiritual skeleton” of C&C design, defining not only the depth of its content but also acting as an emotional bridge connecting the public to cultural memory <sup>[11]</sup>. Its core value lies in evoking emotional resonance and recognition of historical essence through authentic cultural storytelling. For the Haihe C&C project, theme construction should not remain at the level of formal imitation but must delve deeply into the unique regional gene of “river-sea symbiosis”—a characteristic of both geographical and cultural integration that distinguishes the Haihe River from other water systems. Taking “Prosperity of Water Transport Memory of Zhigu” as an example, this theme can be built upon the historical geographical scene of the Sancha Estuary, where rivers and seas converge, and boats come and go. It can incorporate real historical events and folk activities such as Tianhou Palace sacrifices, the departure of grain transport ships, and gatherings of merchants. Through spatial narration, visual symbols, and experiential design, the glorious history of the Haihe River as a water transport hub during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties can be transformed into a tangible, participatory, and inheritable thematic expression. Such a thematic design not only allows consumers to intuitively touch the historical context within the setting but also evokes a sense of identity and belonging to the city’s origins, achieving a deep dialogue between cultural memory and modern life.

### **4.2. Narrative plot arrangement: Connecting cultural fragments**

Narrative plot serves as the “flesh and blood” of C&C design, materializing themes through logical visual sequences and transforming abstract cultural connotations into perceptible spatial language. Reasonable plot arrangement elevates products from mere “symbol carriers” to “story containers” that carry memory. In the “Water Transport Memory” theme design, a complete narrative chain can be constructed through three core scenes: “Departure of the Grain Transport Ship”, “Unloading at Zhigu”, and “Worship at Tianhou Palace.” The first scene depicts the grand moment of a grain transport ship setting sail from the Sancha Estuary at dawn; the second focuses on the labor of dockworkers unloading grain at the Zhigu warehouses; the third recreates the ritual of merchants and locals burning incense at Tianhou Palace, praying to Mazu for safe voyages. Applying these sequential scenes to the page-turning design of notebooks or the layered structure of cultural gift boxes allows consumers to immerse themselves in the spatiotemporal context of water transport culture as they flip through pages or open the packaging. Similarly, the “Civic Customs” theme can arrange plots around “A Day by the Haihe River”, presenting continuous scenes of daily life—from morning exercises by the riverbank and afternoon crosstalk performances near the bridge to fishing boats returning at dusk—through wrap-around prints on canvas bags or a series of postcards. This approach builds lasting emotional connections with everyday objects, seamlessly integrating cultural narratives into the rhythm of modern life <sup>[12]</sup>.

### **4.3. Narrative style binding: Matching audience needs**

Narrative style serves as the direct embodiment of aesthetic value and must be tailored according to the cultural characteristics of the Haihe River and the preferences of target audiences. Haihe culture carries both a profound historical weight and a vibrant, everyday civic atmosphere, necessitating a multi-layered approach to narration. For the young consumer demographic, a “Guochao minimalist” style can be adopted.

This involves extracting key motifs from elements like the ridge ornaments of Tianhou Palace and patterns of grain transport ships, combining them with high-saturation colors and geometric compositions, and applying them to trendy items such as phone cases and tote bags. For parent-child family audiences, a cartoon picture book style is suitable. This style can personify images like Haihe cruise ships and Clay Figure Zhang dolls, transforming them into interactive pop-up books or AR animations, conveying stories of water transport through childlike fun. As for elderly cultural enthusiasts, a retro-realistic style is more appropriate. Techniques such as restoring old photographs and reconstructing miniature scenes can vividly recreate historical industrial heritage settings, like the commercial port at Sancha Estuary or the loading and unloading activities at old docks. This approach uses a simple yet evocative visual language to stir intergenerational memory resonance. Together, these diverse narrative styles construct a multi-dimensional expression of Haihe culture, allowing history to connect with the emotional needs of different audience groups.

## 5. Conclusion

With the continuous evolution of social culture, the cultural and creative (C&C) industry faces multiple challenges, including intensified homogenized competition and evolving consumer demands. Under such circumstances, only by deeply excavating artistic characteristics and regional cultural connotations, and empowering products with unique narratives, can the core competitiveness of C&C products be genuinely enhanced. Image narrative, through the organic synergy of “theme-plot-style”, provides a systematic solution for the C&C design of the Tianjin Haihe River Cultural Belt. This design method effectively addresses traditional issues such as “symbol piling, lack of creativity, and functional disconnection”, elevating C&C products from “traffic commodities” to “cultural dissemination business cards.” Through vivid and tangible visual language, it conveys the unique charm of daily life along the Haihe River, the memory of water transport, and the convergence of river and sea. It meets the core demands of contemporary consumers for cultural experience and emotional connection, ultimately promoting the “living inheritance” of Haihe culture in modern life.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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