

Research on Innovative Brand Image Design for the Intangible Cultural Heritage “Kite Wei”

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Abstract: With deepening cultural confidence strategies and growing demand for modernising intangible cultural heritage, brand development for traditional heritage projects has become crucial for achieving “living transmission.” This paper examines the nationally recognised intangible cultural heritage “Kite Wei”, addressing the research gap that prioritises craftsmanship preservation over brand building. Through literature review and case studies, the research clarifies the cultural essence and contemporary challenges of “Kite Wei.” The study innovatively employs the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) to systematically extract core cultural genes across material, behavioural, and spiritual dimensions, using quantitative analysis to enhance scientific rigour. Building on this foundation, the study constructs a four-dimensional design strategy framework integrating “visual-emotional-semantic-expressive” dimensions. Guided by this framework, design practice creates a visual symbol system encompassing brand logos, colour systems, and auxiliary graphics. Practice demonstrates that through systematic visual translation, “Kite Wei” can transform from “static heritage” into a cultural brand embodying emotional memory and contemporary aesthetics, achieving dual success in cultural inheritance and market acceptance. Finally, this paper summarises the theoretical and practical significance of this approach, offering reference strategies and future research directions for brand innovation in traditional craft-based intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Intangible cultural heritage; Kite Wei; Brand image; Innovative design; Analytic hierarchy process; Cultural translation

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1. Introduction

Against globalisation and digitalisation, China’s traditional culture faces unprecedented transmission challenges alongside significant opportunities. As the spiritual lifeblood of national culture, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has evolved from early approaches of “emergency documentation” and “static preservation” toward deeper stages of “creative transformation” and “innovative development.” National policies explicitly advocate “endowing traditional culture with new contemporary connotations and modern

forms of expression”, charting the course for ICH contemporary practice.

Among numerous ICH categories, traditional arts and crafts such as kite-making demonstrate immense modern transformation potential due to their combined artistic, technical, and practical qualities. Tianjin’s “Kite Wei” stands as a pivotal school within Chinese kite artistry, renowned worldwide for intricate techniques, distinctive painting styles, and durable materials. However, like many traditional crafts, Kite Wei faces contemporary challenges including fragile transmission chains, ageing audiences, outdated brand imagery, and insufficient market competitiveness. Existing academic research primarily focuses on historical origins and production technique documentation. While valuable, this approach has not effectively addressed brand identity and communication efficacy issues within consumer society. Specifically, a critical challenge has emerged: how to systematically organise, symbolically distil, and visually translate the profound cultural resources embodied within “Kite Wei” while upholding its core techniques and heritage, constructing a brand identity that showcases traditional essence while aligning with contemporary aesthetic and consumer demands.

Consequently, this study conducts a systematic exploration of innovative brand image design for “Kite Wei” from a design studies perspective, integrating methodologies from cultural studies, brand communication, and decision sciences. The research addresses two core questions: First, how can one transcend intuitive experiential descriptions to systematically and scientifically extract representative core cultural symbols from the “Kite Wei” cultural complex? Second, how can an effective design strategy framework be constructed to translate these cultural symbols into contemporary brand visual language? Through in-depth exploration and practical validation, this research aims to provide concrete solutions for “Kite Wei’s” brand rebirth and establish a design paradigm for the modern transformation of similar ICH projects.

2. The cultural value and branding dilemma of “Kite Wei”

2.1. The cultural value system of Kite Wei

Originating in the late Qing Dynasty through Mr Wei Yuantao’s pioneering efforts, “Kite Wei” derives its core ICH value from its distinctive craftsmanship system. The technique manifests in the frame-binding process characterised by “eyelet-through tenons ensuring front-to-back alignment”, embodying traditional Chinese mortise-and-tenon joinery ingenuity, while the painting technique of “layered colour gradation with meticulous brushwork” inherits the essence of Chinese fine-line painting. After over a century of development, “Kite Wei” has transcended mere handicraft, deeply embedding itself within Tianjin’s regional cultural fabric. It stands as an outstanding representative of folk craftsmanship, embodies Tianjin’s port culture spirit, and reflects citizens’ aesthetic sensibilities and practical wisdom. Over time, it has absorbed auspicious symbolism from folk beliefs and integrated traditional festival cultural essence, evolving into a comprehensive cultural practice.

Deconstructing its cultural value reveals three interrelated dimensions: materially, its worth lies in premium material selection—sourcing specific-maturity Moso bamboo for frame elasticity, employing specially treated silk for breathability, and developing proprietary pigment formulas ensuring vibrant colours. These materials constitute the physical foundation for skill transmission. At the behavioural level, value resides in the rigorous production process and the craftsman’s embodied techniques. From bamboo selection to frame assembly, pattern design to colour application, each step embodies decades of accumulated

expertise—a quintessential “embodied practice” manifesting ICH’s “living” nature. On a spiritual level, value transcends into philosophical thought and emotional expression. Kite flying manifests the “unity between heaven and humanity” philosophy. Ornamental patterns carry auspicious meanings reflecting yearning for a prosperous life, while the kite’s soaring flight embodies humanity’s spiritual pursuit of freedom. These three dimensions mutually reinforce, collectively forming “Kite Wei’s” profound cultural value system.

This value system’s uniqueness lies in seamlessly integrating practicality with artistry, technical skill with cultural significance, and individual creativity with collective memory. As *The Classic of Crafts* states: “Heaven has seasons, earth energies, materials beauty, craftsmen ingenuity. Only when these four converge can excellence be achieved.” “Kite Wei” exemplifies this philosophy. Its synthesis of material selection, craftsmanship, artistic expression, and cultural significance elevates it to a pinnacle of traditional Chinese craftsmanship, offering invaluable insights for contemporary ICH preservation and innovation. Notably, this multi-layered system is not static—throughout history, it has continually absorbed new cultural elements, sustaining enduring vitality. This provides ample theoretical grounding for exploring its modern transformation and brand innovation.

2.2. The practical dilemmas of branding

However, profound cultural value does not automatically translate into robust brand momentum. In the current market environment, “Kite Wei’s” branding process faces several challenges:

First, systemic deficiency in brand visual identity. Current visual representations largely remain confined to direct product displays or employ antiquated typography, lacking a unified, modern, highly recognisable Visual Identity System. This results in a blurred image during dissemination, hindering its ability to stand out in information-saturated consumer markets and struggling to capture younger generations’ attention.

Second, superficial and disconnected translation of cultural symbols. Experimental designs often fall into two extremes: rigidly replicating traditional patterns that clash with contemporary aesthetics, or pursuing innovation divorced from cultural roots, stripping designs of Kite Wei’s essence. This stems fundamentally from insufficient exploration of Kite Wei’s cultural DNA and the absence of systematic mechanisms translating cultural substance into design expression.

Third, weakness in emotional connection and brand narrative. In marketing communications, “Kite Wei” is predominantly positioned as a “time-honoured craft object” rather than a “living brand” capable of fostering emotional resonance with contemporary consumers. The profound narratives embodying artisan spirit, life philosophy, and auspicious symbolism remain under-explored, hindering the establishment of robust emotional bonds between brand and users. These challenges collectively point to a core imperative: adopting a more scientific, systematic, and culturally immersive design strategy to drive comprehensive innovation of “Kite Wei’s” brand identity.

3. Research framework and methodology: Constructing a systematic design strategy

To address these issues, this study constructs a multi-layered, interdisciplinary research methodology. The study first established a multi-tiered theoretical framework, systematically examining core tenets of ICH preservation theory, brand image design theory, semiotics theory, and affective design theory. Regarding ICH preservation theory, it examines the paradigm shift from “emergency preservation” to “productive

preservation”, providing theoretical grounding for ICH modern transformation. Within brand image design theory, this study systematises VIS fundamental components while emphasising cultural brand construction particularities, elevating brand shaping beyond mere visual embellishment into systematic cultural value reconstruction.

Semiotic theory incorporation provides methodological support for extracting and translating cultural genes. The study employs Saussure’s dualistic sign theory and Peirce’s tripartite sign classification to construct an analytical framework from cultural elements to design symbols, establishing a robust theoretical foundation for subsequent cultural symbol extraction. Affective design theory application ensures a human-centred orientation for brand innovation. Building upon Norman’s three design dimensions—instinctive, behavioural, and reflective—this study constructs an emotional bridge between traditional craftsmanship and contemporary users.

3.1. Cultural gene extraction method based on AHP

To overcome subjectivity in cultural symbol extraction, this study innovatively employs the Analytic Hierarchy Process. As a multi-criteria decision-making method integrating qualitative and quantitative analysis, AHP’s systematic hierarchical structure is particularly suited to handling complex decision problems such as cultural gene extraction ^[1].

During the application, the study first deconstructed “Kite Wei’s” cultural gene system into three primary levels: objective, criterion, and scheme. The objective layer was defined as “accurate extraction of core cultural values”; the criterion layer was divided into material culture, behavioural culture, and spiritual culture; the solution layer was refined into specific cultural elements such as materials, tools, craft processes, and auspicious symbolism. This hierarchical decomposition laid the foundation for quantitative analysis.

In practical implementation, the study emphasised integrating this methodology with design practice requirements. When constructing the judgement matrix, experts evaluated not only cultural value but also these elements’ transformative potential within contemporary design contexts. This prompted multiple in-depth discussions, occasionally sparking intense debates over balancing “traditional essence” and “modern aesthetics.” Through AHP quantitative analysis, these diverse professional insights were synthesised, ultimately forming a core cultural symbol system honouring tradition while embracing modernity.

Notably, during weighting calculations, the study observed remarkably similar weight values for “dynamic nature of craft processes” and “distinctiveness of formative characteristics.” This reflects a quintessential dilemma in traditional culture’s modern transformation. Addressing this, supplementary interviews and thematic workshops led us to adopt a dual-emphasis solution: preserving craft process narrative quality within brand identity while simultaneously enhancing visual symbol recognisability.

The methodology’s efficacy was fully validated in subsequent design implementations. Core cultural symbols identified through AHP analysis—including “mortise-and-tenon imagery”, “sand swallow form characteristics”, and “traditional colour systems”—were successfully translated into key brand design elements. Compared to previous reliance on designers’ subjective experience, this quantitative approach rendered design decision-making more transparent and traceable, significantly enhancing design proposals’ cultural representativeness, as illustrated in **Figure 1**.

构建层次结构模型	将“风筝魏”的文化基因系统分解为目标层（核心文化价值）、准则层和方案层。准则层划分为三大维度
物质文化层	包括材料如毛竹、绢帛、工具如裁刀、扎架、成品形态如沙燕、蜈蚣造型等
行为文化层	包括核心技艺动作如扎、糊、绘、放、制作工序、节令习俗等
精神文化层	包括吉祥寓意如福寿安康、哲学思想如天人合一、审美理念如对称均衡、色彩浓丽等
构造判断矩阵与权重计算	邀请非遗研究专家、品牌设计专家及资深从业者，对各层级元素进行两两比较，判断其相对重要性，从而构造判断矩阵，并计算出各文化基因元素的组合权重
确定核心文化符号	根据权重排序，筛选出权重最高的若干元素，作为品牌形象设计的核心文化符号

Figure 1. Operational steps (Image source: Author’s creation)

3.2. The four-pronged design strategy framework: “Visual–emotional–semantic–expressive”

Building upon cultural gene weightings from AHP analysis, this study constructs a systematic design strategy framework comprising four interrelated dimensions.

The visual dimension, serving as the foundational layer, focuses on constructing formal aesthetics. This dimension requires visual translation of core cultural symbols through contemporary design language, transforming the “sand swallow silhouette” into fluid curved forms, abstracting the “mortise-and-tenon structure” into clean geometric relationships, and deconstructing the traditional colour system into contemporary-appealing palettes^[2-3].

The emotional dimension focuses on design outcomes’ psychological impact, striving to establish an emotional connection between brand and users. Grounded in Norman’s affective design theory, this dimension employs visual elements to evoke users’ instinctive responses and behavioural experiences, ultimately sparking profound emotional resonance. This dimension particularly emphasises evoking “collective memory” and constructing “cultural identity.”

The meaning dimension forms the framework’s cultural bedrock, ensuring every design choice possesses cultural origins and narrative value. Design elements must transcend mere formal aesthetics to become vessels for cultural storytelling. Each curve in the brand emblem should embody craftsmanship wisdom; colour selections must resonate with traditional philosophy; supporting graphics should carry auspicious symbolism.

The expression dimension focuses on medium realisation and contextual application of design outcomes, representing the framework’s ultimate implementation. This dimension demands thorough consideration of brand presentation across diverse media carriers—from traditional packaging to digital interfaces, physical spaces to social media—ensuring consistency and innovation in brand experience^[4].

These four dimensions form an organic whole: the visual dimension establishes brand recognisability; the emotional dimension builds brand affinity; the meaning dimension underpins cultural depth; the expression dimension ensures market adaptability. The framework’s innovation lies in systematically integrating rational cultural analysis with intuitive design creation.

4. Design practice and application: The case of “Kite Wei” brand identity innovation

4.1. Brand logo design

The proposed scheme employs the seal script structure of the character “Wei” as its skeletal framework, incorporating the “Sand Swallow” kite silhouette—particularly its characteristic head and dual-wing features. At stroke junctions, the design borrows imagery from mortise-and-tenon joints used in kite construction. Subtle breaks and connections in strokes metaphorically represent this core craftsmanship, endowing the logo

with both Eastern calligraphy elegance and artisanal skill wisdom ^[5-6].

Regarding colour, the primary palette opts for pale green (C60 M0 Y40 K0). This choice embodies both cultural consideration and contemporary consciousness: drawing inspiration from kite-flying's natural setting while conveying modern values of nature and sustainability.

4.2. Construction of the visual symbol system

Based on core cultural gene weights from AHP analysis, this study constructed a visually coherent, hierarchically structured symbol system, following cognitive logic progressing from material to spiritual ^[4].

At the material symbol translation level, the study abstracted Moso bamboo's naturally occurring rhythmic grain patterns, generating linear motifs imbued with cadence. For silk transformation, the study digitally captured microscopic warp-weft interlacing, converting it into translucent layered textures. In tool symbol refinement, the study undertook a minimalist redesign of bamboo-binding implements: the thread spool's spiral trajectory simplified into fluid arcs, the cutter's outline distilled into sharp triangular form ^[7].

Regarding behavioural symbol translation, the study captured representative bodily postures and tool trajectories within three key processes: binding, pasting, and painting. These sequential motion sequences were transformed into a time-based visual narrative: the wrist's rotational trajectory during binding formed spiral-like linear combinations; the brush's movement path during paper pasting created fluid stroke arrays; the brush tip's dotting actions during painting were rendered as gradient colour layers ^[8].

At spiritual symbol translation, the study simplified the bat motif curved contours into elegant undulating forms, preserving "fortune" culture auspicious connotations while aligning with modern minimalist aesthetics. Deconstructing cloud pattern spiralling structures into fluid geometric forms inherits "auspicious clouds" symbolism while imparting dynamic visual tension. Particularly noteworthy is translating "unity of heaven and humanity" into a three-tiered visual structure through foundational geometric forms—circle (Heaven), square (Earth), triangle (Humanity)—establishing profound cultural metaphors ^[2, 9].

These three tiers form an organic symbolic ecosystem, collectively constructing "Kite Wei's" distinctive visual identity system. This system pioneers an effective pathway for ICH modern visual translation ^[3].

4.3. Brand application and emotional experience

Product packaging utilises recyclable, eco-friendly paper, mimicking traditional scroll unfurling. The opening act is crafted into a ritualistic experience. Online, the study designed animated emojis blending kite flight's graceful motion with contemporary social contexts like "delight", "take-off", and "blessings."

Building upon digital and physical touchpoints, the study extended emotional experience through immersive workshops, allowing direct engagement with craftsmanship. These workshops transform passive observers into active participants by guiding them through simplified kite-making processes. Collaborations with contemporary artists have led to limited-edition collections reinterpreting "Kite Wei" motifs in modern contexts, such as wearable accessories. By creating these multi-layered interactions, the study has cultivated a living ecosystem around "Kite Wei" ^[5-6].

5. Conclusions and outlook

This study systematically explored innovative pathways for "Kite Wei's" brand image by integrating AHP with design practice. AHP introduction provided effective tools for systematically extracting and

quantitatively evaluating ICH cultural genes, shifting design decision-making from experiential intuition toward scientific approaches. Through an integrated design strategy, “Kite Wei’s” cultural resources were successfully transformed into a brand visual system characterised by modernity, emotional resonance, and cultural depth. This facilitated metamorphosis from “static heritage” to “living brand.” Beyond this case study, the theoretical framework holds universal reference value for traditional craft-based ICH projects facing similar transformation challenges^[2, 7].

Areas for further refinement remain. First, deepening brand system development through comprehensive brand VIS. Second, deepening user research engagement through empirical methods to evaluate target consumers’ responses. Finally, expanding cross-media narratives within new media contexts like VR and AR^[4].

In summary, ICH modern transformation constitutes a long-term, systematic endeavour. This research offers Kite Wei and similar initiatives a viable pathway to “living heritage revitalisation” through innovative brand identity design.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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