

Research on Translation Design in Communication Design : A Case of Suzhou Museum's Cultural and Creative Design

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes the cultural and creative products of Suzhou Museum as its research object, focusing on the translation design of regional cultural symbols in visual communication design. Firstly, it reviews relevant theories of regional cultural symbols and visual communication design, and clarifies the connotation, characteristics, and operational mechanism of regional cultural symbols in visual communication design. On this basis, the paper analyzes the historical context and core features of Suzhou's regional culture, and extracts representative material and intangible cultural symbols. Subsequently, with Suzhou Museum as a case study, it explores the specific translation methods of regional cultural symbols in cultural and creative products—including the translation of form, color, material, and craftsmanship—and conducts an in-depth analysis of typical cultural and creative products. Additionally, the paper examines the challenges and opportunities encountered by museums in the development of cultural and creative industries. It is found that Suzhou Museum's cultural and creative products effectively disseminate Suzhou's regional culture through diverse translation methods, which not only provides a reference for the translation practice of regional cultural symbols in visual communication design, but also offers insights for the development of cultural and creative industries in other regions, and serves as a methodological reference for the revitalization of cultural heritage through design.

KEYWORDS

Regional culture; Visual translation; Cultural and creative design; Semiotics; Suzhou Museum

1 Introduction

In today's globalized, information-driven era, regional culture's role in visual communication design grows prominent. As economic globalization accelerates cultural exchanges and convergence, many distinctive regional cultures face dilution and marginalization, making their inheritance and innovation an urgent issue.

Policy-wise, China emphasizes cultural industry development and regional cultural inheritance. policies like the State Council's opinions on integrating cultural creativity with related industries have supported exploring traditional elements and boosting high-end creative services.

Local governments, e.g., Suzhou, enhanced support: its 2015 policies prioritized creative design, offering financial aid and original work incentives. During the "13th Five-Year Plan," Suzhou allocated over 100 million yuan yearly, creating a favorable environment for regional cultural practices in visual communication.

2 Theoretical framework: the academic logical construction of regional cultural translation

2.1 Layered characteristics of regional culture

According to Redfield's theory of "big traditions-small traditions", Suzhou's regional culture presents distinct layered characteristics. At the material level, Suzhou is famous for its garden architecture, handicraft products, and cultural relics. Garden buildings such as the Humble Administrator's Garden and the Lingering Garden, with exquisite spatial layout and exquisite architectural structure, show the superb skills of ancient craftsmen; Suzhou embroidery, silk and other handicraft products, with delicate stitching and gorgeous colours, have become the material carrier of Suzhou regional culture; The abundant cultural relics silently tell the historical changes of Suzhou. In terms of institutional level, Wudi folk customs, scholar culture, and craftsman system constitute the unique connotation of Suzhou's regional culture. Wudi folk customs, such as the Lantern Festival Walking on the Three Bridges, the Dragon Boat Festival, etc., carry the life wisdom and emotional sustenance of local residents; In the scholar and merchant culture, the interaction and integration of literati and merchants formed a unique cultural atmosphere. The craftsman system ensures the inheritance and development of traditional crafts and maintains the continuation of regional culture. At the spiritual level, Suzhou's regional culture contains the values of reverence for literature and education, the natural concept of "the unity of nature and man", and the aesthetic ideal of poetic dwelling. The emphasis on literature and education has enabled Suzhou to produce many talents and form a profound cultural heritage; The natural concept of "harmony between man and nature" is embodied in the construction of the garden, pursuing the harmonious coexistence of man and nature; The aesthetic ideal of poetic dwelling permeates the lifestyle and artistic creation of Suzhou, and has become the soul of Suzhou's regional culture.

2.2 Semiotic interpretation of visual translation

From the perspective of Roland Barthes's semiotic theory, the visual translation process of regional culture has a unique logic. In terms of signifier transformation, concrete symbols such as garden window lattices and Suzhou embroidery patterns are transformed into visual design elements. For example, the hollow pattern of garden window lattices can be abstracted into the geometric patterns of modern graphic design, and the colour combination and stitching texture of Suzhou embroidery can provide inspiration for textile design.

In terms of referential reconstruction, new semantics are given to symbols such as "Moon Cave Gate" and "Taihu Stone" through the technique of "defamiliarization". The moon cave door in the traditional garden was originally just a component of space separation and passage, but in modern design, it can be transformed into a symbolic symbol, representing the exploration of the integration of tradition and modernity. The strange form of Taihu stone, after reinterpretation, can imply the spirit of innovation that breaks through the convention. Through the refinement and recreation of Suzhou's regional cultural symbols, the modern cultural myth of "Jiangnan imagery" is constructed. Integrate Suzhou's gardens, silk, pingtan and other cultural symbols, and create an attractive and appealing image of Jiangnan culture in the context of modern communication, making it a cultural brand with extensive influence, and helping the inheritance and development of regional culture in contemporary society. This kind of semiotics-based visual translation not only realizes the modern expression of regional culture, but also provides a new path and method for cultural communication and innovation.

Table 1 Semiotics gene bank of Suzhou regional culture Self-drawn by the author

Symbol category	Core symbols	Symbolic gene traits	Cultural orientation	Symbol carriers
Architectural gardens	Suzhou Gardens	The teaching method is natural, the winding path is secluded, and the white walls are tiled.	Hidden thoughts, Heaven and man are one	Pavilions, rockeries, ponds, and windows.
	Pingjiang Road neighbourhood	A double chessboard pattern with parallel water and land and adjacent river streets	The wisdom of life in the water town	Bluestone pavement, pillow river dwellings, stone bridges
Traditional craftsmanship	Embroidery	Fine and elegant, painting and embroidery in one.	Feminine and aesthetic	Embroidery and embroidery workshops
	Ming-style furniture	The lines are concise, the mortise and tenon joints are exquisite, and the sky is round and the place is shaped.	Minimalist aesthetic, The device is used to carry the road.	Circle chairs, strips, flowers
Food culture	Subang cuisine	Pay attention to the original taste and skip eating from time to time.	Exquisite pursuit, Health wisdom	Squirrel mandarin fish, seasonal pastries
	Reviews to talk about Tea House	Wu Nong's soft language, storytelling and singing music are combined with tea tasting.	Tastes Linguistic identity	Bookshop, Reviews to talk about artist, purple clay pot
Folklore festivals	Dragon Boat Race	The combination of racing and commemoration of Wu Zixu.	Historical Memory, Community cohesion	Dragon boat, Panmen City Tower
	Mid-Autumn Festival moon viewing (Master-of-Nets Garden)	Enjoy the scenery under the moon, taste crabs and listen to music.	Poetic interpretation, Family ethics	Moon cave door, osmanthus, moon cake
Natural imagery	Taihu Lake	The smoke wave is vast, including the pregnant Wu Yue and the mother river.	Geographical support, inclusiveness and openness	Taihu Lake stones, fishing boats, Taihu Lake three white.
	Smoke and rain in the south of the Yangtze River	Hazy artistic conception, visual sense of ink painting.	Poetic dwelling, hazy beauty preference	Ink paintings, related poems
Language and Literature	Wu	The tone is soft and retains the vocabulary of ancient Chinese.	Audible symbols, Identity	Daily conversations, comments, playing, singing, and lyrics.
	Poetry of Suzhou literati	Aria landscape pastoral, poems and paintings	Aria Lands Cap Pastoral, Poms Andpentins	Poetry collections, garden inscriptions

3 Analysis of the pain points and current situation of cultural and creative design in traditional museums

3.1 Homogenisation dilemma: the shallowness of symbol appropriation and market convergence

Current museum cultural and creative markets face homogenization as a key bottleneck, with many products trapped in "copy-paste" cycles—simply transplanting or patching cultural relic elements. A 2023 China Cultural Heritage Exchange Centre survey shows over 65% of 328 key museums' cultural and creative products share similar core elements, like

bookmarks or postcards based on bronze patterns or ceramic shapes, leading to high convergence on shelves. After Suzhou Museum's "Wen Zhengming Calligraphy and Painting Series" bookmark succeeded, nearly 20 museums copied it half a year later, lacking local cultural excavation.

Such homogeneity dissolves regional cultural identity: museums' cultural and creative products, once carrying distinct regional/historical traits, now look identical, failing to reflect unique cultures. Consumers face numerous products but struggle to perceive regional differences, leading to growing aesthetic fatigue. China Tourism Academy data shows 73% of consumers find museum cultural and creative products "less novel yearly," and 68% think "most lack purchase appeal"—homogenization seriously weakens market attractiveness and cultural dissemination.

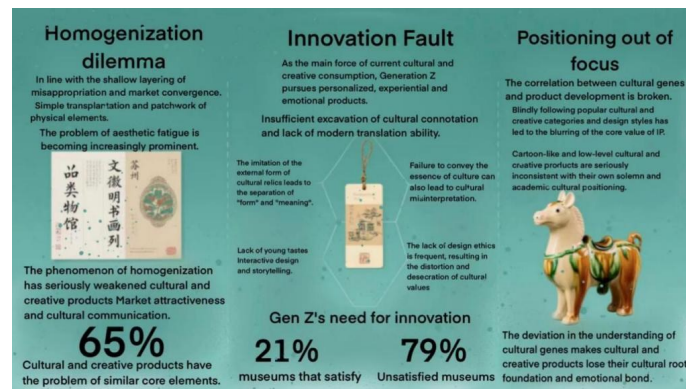


Figure 1 Analysis of the dilemma and current situation of museums

3.2 Innovation fault: the imbalance between cultural decoding and modern translation

At present, there are problems in the cultural and creative design of museums, such as insufficient excavation of cultural connotation and lack of modern translation ability. Many designs only stop at the imitation of the external form of cultural relics, and fail to deeply interpret the cultural semantics behind them, resulting in the separation of "form" and "meaning". For example, some museums directly reduce the animal shapes of Tang Sancai into ornaments, but ignore the special significance of Tang Sancai in the funeral culture of the Tang Dynasty, which not only fails to convey the essence of culture, but also may cause cultural misinterpretation. This innovation gap is especially evident when facing young consumers. As the main force of current cultural and creative consumption, Gen Z pursues personalised, experiential, and emotional products. However, according to iiMedia Research's 2024 survey data, only 21% of museum cultural and creative products can meet Gen Z's demand for "innovation". Most of the products still use traditional pattern printing and reproduction methods, and lack interactive design and story-based expression that meet the tastes of young people. In addition, the lack of design ethics is frequent, and some cultural and creative industries abuse traditional cultural symbols in pursuit of visual impact, such as using solemn religious patterns for entertainment products, resulting in the distortion and desecration of cultural values.

3.3 Positioning out of focus: the correlation between cultural genes and product development is broken

The cultural and creative design of museums often falls into the dilemma of ambiguous positioning, and fails to accurately grasp the convergence point between their own cultural genes and product development. Many museums fail to dig deep into the core value of cultural relics in their collections, and blindly follow popular cultural and creative categories and design styles, resulting in the blurring of the core value of intellectual property. For example, some museums that focus on history and humanities have launched a large number of cartoonish and low-quality cultural and creative products, which are seriously inconsistent with their own solemn and academic cultural positioning.

The hollowing out of local narratives is particularly prominent in local museums. These museums often ignore the unique local regional culture and folk customs, and blindly imitate the cultural and creative models of large museums such as the Forbidden City and the National Museum. A local museum in the western part of the country copied the "palace style" cultural creativity of the Forbidden City, and launched a series of dragon and phoenix pattern products, which have no connection with the local minority culture, which can neither reflect the regional characteristics nor arouse the cultural resonance of local consumers. The "unadaptation" of the cross-regional cultural and creative model is essentially a deviation in the understanding of cultural genes, which makes cultural and creative products lose their cultural roots and emotional bonds.

4 Suzhou museum's cultural and creative creativity: the practice of translating regional cultural

symbols

4.1 Overview of the cultural and creative development of Suzhou Museum

4.1.1 Review of development history

Suzhou Museum's cultural and creative development is a journey of continuous exploration. Initially, it relied on its collections and Suzhou's regional culture to develop basic products—simple relic reproductions or souvenirs like garden miniatures and calligraphy postcards. Though traditional, these laid groundwork by combining local culture with modern products, targeting basic tourist commemoration needs with limited market influence.

As the cultural and creative industry boomed and demand diversified, Suzhou Museum entered a rapid development phase. It hired professional designers, formed an independent team, and established a cultural and creative department in 2016 for systematic R&D. The team delved into Suzhou's culture—gardens, silk, handicrafts—and innovated regional symbols with modern design.

In recent years, its cultural and creative sector thrived, expanding product lines and sales channels. Beyond traditional categories, it added tech-savvy, interactive items: AR guidebooks for intuitive cultural understanding, puzzles and board games boosting participation. Sales expanded from on-site stores to Tmall, JD.com, and cross-brand collaborations. Brand building via events and exhibitions enhanced recognition. Now a model of regional culture-creative integration, its products sell domestically and overseas, gaining wide acclaim.

4.1.2 Market performance and influence

Suzhou Museum has made remarkable achievements in the market. Judging from the sales data, in 2024, the annual cultural and creative income of Suzhou Museum (including the West Hall) will exceed 117 million yuan, a year-on-year increase of 28.6%, and Suzhou Museum's cultural and creative activities have also had a far-reaching influence in cultural communication and brand building. In terms of cultural communication, its cultural and creative products have become a vivid carrier of Suzhou's regional culture, and through the circulation of products, Suzhou's garden culture, silk culture, traditional handicrafts and other regional cultural elements have been spread to all parts of the country and even overseas. After purchasing cultural and creative products, many consumers will share their purchasing experience and feelings about Suzhou's regional culture through social media and other channels, further expanding the scope of cultural dissemination. In terms of brand building, Suzhou Museum has established a good brand image with its unique design concept, exquisite production technology and profound cultural connotation. Its brand awareness and reputation have been continuously improved, and it has become a representative of high-quality cultural and creative products in the minds of consumers. Many tourists come here not only to visit the museum, but also to buy cultural and creative products with Suzhou characteristics. Suzhou Museum has also further expanded its brand influence through cross-border cooperation with other brands. Cooperate with fashion brands to launch co-branded clothing, combining Suzhou's regional culture with fashion trends, attracting the attention of more young consumers and enhancing the brand's fashion sense and youthful vitality.

4.2 Translation of regional cultural symbols in cultural and creative products

4.2.1 Morphological translation: the use of figuration and abstraction

In Suzhou Museum's cultural and creative design, form translation—especially figurative and abstract techniques—is key to translating regional cultural symbols.

Figurative translation directly applies specific forms of Suzhou's cultural symbols. For example, garden pavilions, rockeries, and ponds are miniaturized into ornaments, retaining details like cornices and carved railings, letting consumers instantly recognize Suzhou gardens. Similarly, Suzhou water town bridges are replicated on keychains, with arch curvature and pier shapes preserving their uniqueness, blending practicality with nostalgic appeal.

Abstract translation refines, simplifies, or deforms these symbols to convey cultural connotations concisely. Garden flower window patterns, for instance, are simplified into geometric lines and modern motifs for stationery/household packaging—retaining their beauty while adding contemporary flair. Traditional Suzhou silk patterns, after abstract deformation, adorn clothing with smooth lines and rhythmic designs, embodying silk elegance and fitting modern aesthetics. This approach refreshes regional symbols, enriches design language, and helps culture integrate into modern life, winning wider consumer acceptance.

4.2.2 Colour translation: the inheritance and innovation of jiangnan tones

Suzhou's regional culture features distinct elegant Jiangnan tones: black, white, grey (from white walls and black tiles), water-town green, and soft silk hues, embodying Jiangnan's gentle, delicate spirit. Suzhou Museum's cultural and creative designs use color translation—inheriting and innovating these tones—to convey unique regional charm.

Inheriting traditional Jiangnan colors is foundational. Many products borrow hues from Suzhou's architecture and

gardens, using black, white, and grey for a simple, elegant vibe. For example, a puzzle's background mimics garden walls' black-white-grey, with green plants and blue sky adding natural touches, resembling a Jiangnan ink painting. Water-town-themed items (e.g., fridge magnets) use blues and greens for rivers/vegetation, paired with white boats and grey houses, evoking Jiangnan's softness. Building on tradition, the museum innovates color combinations to fit modern aesthetics. Traditional tones blend with modern pops: gold/silver metallics enhance black-white-grey, as in a silk notebook with black fabric and gold garden embroidery—fusing silk's nobility with modern fashion. Color gradients and layering add depth, such as in flower-themed products, making designs vivid and artistic. These innovations retain Jiangnan essence, cater to diverse tastes, and boost market competitiveness.



Figure 2 Suzhou Museum's cultural and creative products display

4.2.3 Translation of materials and crafts: contemporary interpretations of traditional crafts

Suzhou's traditional crafts—Suzhou embroidery, silk, jade carving, wood carving—are vital to its regional culture, valued for exquisite skills and unique style. In Suzhou Museum's cultural and creative design, material and craft translation links regional cultural symbols effectively: blending traditional craftsmanship with modern materials/tech preserves heritage while infusing products with new vitality.

Applying traditional crafts to modern materials is common. Suzhou embroidery, known for delicate stitching, adorns modern fabrics and leather in handkerchiefs, handbags, etc. A cotton handkerchief uses Suzhou embroidery to depict flowers and butterflies—soft, functional, and retaining embroidery's artistry. Silk craftsmanship weaves garden patterns into modern scarves via "warp-weft" techniques, making them both warm and collectible.

Integrating modern tech with traditional crafts is another hallmark. 3D printing pairs with jade carving: rapid 3D models are refined by craftsmen, creating complex, lifelike jade works (e.g., garden architectures with detailed carvings). Laser cutting enables precise wood carved bookmarks and fans, with smooth edges and intricate patterns, adding tech charm. This fusion retains regional culture, showcases innovation, and meets diverse consumer needs.

5 Summary

Nowadays, regional cultural symbols are increasingly utilised in design, and the translation and design of these symbols in visual communication design impart rich emotional connotations to design products, constructing a unique cultural and creative visual system for the region's design. This design approach not only highlights the diversity of regional culture but also enriches the aesthetic and spiritual world of the public, enhancing their quality of life.

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