

Translating Tradition: The Modern Visual Identity System and Commercial Repositioning of Chashan Clay Sculpture in the Art Toy Era

Yajun Liu

Graduate University of Mongolia, Mongolia Ulaanbaatar 15141, Mongolia

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Abstract

Based on a historical Intangible Cultural Heritage from Lingnan area in southern China — clay sculpture craft from Chashan of Nanxiong, this paper carries out visual translation and rebranding from craft heritage to Visual Identity for contemporary art toys. Faced with the impending danger of crafts becoming obsolete and being replaced by new forms of cultural expression, many craft heritage has to carry out productive protection through the means of design, rather than mere conservation. Using the rich saturated color palette of Kailian and the semantic representation of motifs, as well as taking the neotenic proportion for illustration, this research develops a set of design approach in transforming tacit knowledge from traditional craft heritage into formalised and quantitative terms. Following design principles that include reduction of visual noise through vectorisation and using modular geometric elements, this research carries out the practical design for a rebranded logo that caters to the Guochao (National Trend) elements and in turn secures the long term development and changes of an agriculture-based ritual clay sculpture craft heritage into one of mass demand commodity and has succeeded in taking roots in Dongguan, Guangdong province's prominent global Art Toy industrial city of Dongguan, thereby develops a design strategy that can be applied in an industry wide scale in order to sustain folk culture of each region.

Keywords

Chashan Clay Sculpture; Lingnan Folk Art; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Visual Noise Reduction

1. Introduction: From Heritage Crisis to Visual Reshaping

1.1. The Visual Disconnect: The Temporal Dislocation of Chashan Clay Sculpture

Dongguan is on the path to becoming "China's Capital of Art Toys" as well as the cradle of popular culture (Wu and Zhang, 2023). Zhao and Lin (2021) document this transformation from folk craft to pop culture in Southern China's art toy industry. Meanwhile, the traditional fine arts intangible cultural heritage that Dongguan has

preserved for generations, such as Dongguan clay sculpture art of Chashan, is increasingly encountering a severe survival crisis. Su (2019) analyzes how the heritagization process of traditional crafts in China often creates tensions between preservation and contemporary relevance. As a sociological and heritage perspective, after the disappearing of the original farming and ceremonial characters of the Chashan clay sculpture, it now turns into "paradox of preservation" while serving as a "static heritage" (Kuang, 2022). Li (2020) further examines this paradox between authenticity and commercialization in the productive protection of Chinese folk art. When we focus on this conflict through the perspective of art and design, we may realize that this conflict is merely attributed to "visual disconnect".

While the highly saturated, primary colours of exaggerated head to body ratio of the Chashan clay figures may be explained by the symbolic function to frighten and ward away evil spirits under the faint light of traditional ancestral shrines (Liu and Kuang, 2018), they are still too rural and even look like "visual litter" or incompatible to the aesthetic of modern Pop art that young consumers are familiar with under the condition of modern urban white light and high-tech digital screens. A commercial visual identity language that is more in line with modern tastes has not been established for the Chashan clay sculpture, therefore it has lost its "voice" for consumption in the current market.

1.2. Research Objectives: Modern Brand VI Reshaping Based on "Kailian" Colors

Gao (2021) believes that there should be productive protection to turn the cultural protection from a visual discrepancy to a rational behavior. Modern design comes in as the catalyst that changes the implicit cultural genes in traditional crafts into universal visual language that can meet the modern standard of consumer marketing (Chen, 2022).

Based on many years of empirical study of Chashan clay sculpture of Fuyu, this study focuses on the craftsmanly technique of utmost aesthetic value, namely Kailian. The main purpose of this research is to unravel the folk color genes of Lingnan through decomposing and analyzing the Kailian craft of Chashan clay sculpture, and to achieve the research target through eliminating the empirical and opaque way of folk art Colour Mixing technology. The aim is to realize scientific modern color values through quantitative expression through such advanced technical systems and measuring means as to transform the expressive artistic primary colors into the modern standardized CMYK and RGB colour spaces.

Following the data extraction process, the research proceeds to apply the techniques of visual noise reduction and color reorganization to create a contemporary Brand Visual Identity (VI) for the Chashan clay sculpture. The proposed Brand Visual Identity system will incorporate the 'New National Trend'

Pop-art style with a minimalist design approach. The design is not merely a surface-level rebranding of an endangered intangible cultural heritage. It is intended to empower traditional culture through design by providing a commercial visual expression that can connect the cultural heritage to the mainstream blind-box market, social media, and new retailing models.

2. Deconstruction: The Color Genes and Visual Semiotics of Chashan Clay Sculpture

2.1. Semantic Extraction of Lingnan Folk Colors

The optical structure of the Chashan clay sculpture is only the first layer, and we need to dig into the color system of the sculpture in order to understand the depth of the meaning (Cai, 2015). In general, in Chinese folk art, colors are not used for the sake of beauty, but have a deeper level of meaning that reflects the philosophical, social and psychological needs of Chinese people (Feng, 2012). In order to build a brand that can resonate with modern people, we need to excavate, analyze and redefine the original semantics into brand values that are relevant to today's society. In Chinese folk art, color is a significant component of symbolic meaning, and this is particularly evident in the chromatic palette of the Chashan figures. The most dominant colours have special meanings for agriculture and for ritual practice. Crimson red, the colour most frequently and copiously applied, stands for energy, power and blood. However, it is above all an evil spirit-repelling charm designed to avert evil spirits and misfortune in the home. Emerald green, which was the most commonly used colour for the robes of the figures, represents agriculture, the vitality of the landscape and the continuation of the patriarchal line. The bright yellow, which symbolizes the earth and the richness of the land and, therefore, secular happiness and prosperity, can be seen on some parts of the figures.

Colors as a resource is most frequently referred to in design discourse. The visual language of Lingnan folk art (Zhang, 2017) treats colors as a database that defines meanings rooted in agrarian life and ritual practices. It is also possible to treat the colors as a database that defines a visual language that informed an agrarian population about the concepts of comfort, survival and the success of their agricultural activities. Looking at the possibilities of modern brand strategy through the lens of ancient colours opens up a treasure trove of authentic narrative meanings. Meaning of vital, developing and protecting from evil can easily be translated into contemporary values of young city-dwellers such as: vitality, fashion, psychological safety.

2.2. The "Neoteny" Aesthetic and Proportional Distortion

The Kailian colorful effect is partly determined by the physical body surface on which the colorful patterns are depicted. Traditional techniques and aesthetics of Chinese clay toys (Ouyang, 2011) demonstrate how color application relates to

three-dimensional form. The visual genes of the clay sculpture of Chashan Land cannot be revealed by the morphological deformation characteristics. Unlike the more vivid and more accurate forms of modeling clay art in the North and Jiangnan region, the body of Chashan clay figures tends to use more intentional deformation and disproportionate exaggeration.

If there is one characteristic that defines these strange creatures, it is their head-to-body proportion that is stretched to an otherworldly 1:3 or even 1:4. This intentional stretching of facial features brings the full force of Kailian color contrast to bear on the single feature that the human eye wishes to attend to. When we consider this from the perspective of design psychology, we can notice that these peculiar features embody the concept of neoteny, or the retention of juvenile characteristics in adults. Large faces, rounded forms, and vibrant hues of the primary color spectrum are all present in these objects. By exploiting the sacred-religious themes of the original images of powerful warrior-gods or powerful generals, the craftsmen have made the most humorous and toy-like objects. Wang (2018) traces this evolution from ritual to play in Chinese folk clay arts. This ancient use of neoteny is unmistakably in sync with the formal requirements of the Art Toy and blind-box commodity-objects that have their roots in pop culture. In this way, these historical objects morph seamlessly into artifacts of the consumerist world of pop culture.

2.3. The Temporal Disconnect of Traditional Pigments

The high-contrast, neotenic visual system was evolved for the original environment and so, in this chapter, we shall discuss what happens when this system is directly and unedited transplanted into the more complex commercial environment of the 21st century and why, although very effective in the original environment, it is not so in the new. The reason for the failure is to do with a change in environment which is architectural as well as spatial.

Chashan clay figures are generally displayed in the illuminated sectors of the windowless Lingnan lineage halls during the Lantern Lighting (Kaideng) festivals, and in the dimly lit domestic altars (Tang, 2015). The hypersaturated colours and the thick white primer used were necessity, to ensure that the figures remain highly visible at all times, thus radiating a sense of presence even in conditions of low ambient illumination. Material analysis of traditional Chashan clay and firing techniques (Xu, 2021) reveals how these material choices were optimized for low-light environments.

Things have changed dramatically in terms of spatial conditions, and in retail environments, vinyl toy displays, and smartphone screens people are used to glow with powerful white light, which is uniformly even and strongly illuminating. Placing the old "horror vacui" style, which is heavy in contrast, competition and highly vibrant and intense color values into a condition of very bright lighting

results in a very dull and even chaotic optical effect, which as we have said, consumers no longer regard as being vibrant or culturally significant. Therefore, rather than continuing along a familiar path of composition, modern VI design needs to abstract the information and translate the traditional components into numerical, standardized color codes, so that the original emotional energy of the folk art of Lingnan can still inspire the creative design process, while the second design phase is carried out with the aid of spatial simulation technology to create an optimal shopping environment.

3. Translation: Modern VI Translation Strategies for Lingnan Folk Colors

3.1. Color Space Standardization and the Digitization of Tacit Knowledge

The first challenge to solve in order to transform the antique art of Chashan clay sculpture into a new, digital brand is to render explicit the tacit knowledge that has always governed it (Polanyi, 1962). The bright, deep colors characteristic of the Kailian technique, which is the result of years of experimentation and transmitted through local tradition, are directly tied to the clay's humidity and temperature as well as to the needs of the ceremony for which each object is designed (Meggs and Purvis, 2016). While the 'natural' variability of these colours reflects the artisanal spirit of an heterogeneous and dynamic practice, it is entirely at odds with the need for uniformity and stability that lies at the very heart of a Visual Identity system and governs the totality of our communicative interactions from the logos on the screens of our mobile phones to the plastic packaging of the supermarkets, with nothing left to chance or uncertainty along the way.

First of all, the "Lingnan Folk Color Gene Bank" will be set up. It needs digital calibration. With the aid of spectrophotometers, by testing the light reflectance of the various well-preserved Chashan relics, the empirical "auspicious red" and "emerald green" can be converted into the CMYK color space adopted in the printing industry or the RGB color space adopted in the electronic industry, or to convert them into HEX, in order to carry out the subsequent design work.

However idealized calibration is not a simple copying and pasting of a new standard. There is an element of historical "digital filling in" since the colors of old time historical paints have degraded over centuries. Using some sort of digital interpolation the calibrator brings these pigment hues back to their intended high-vibration "state" — which is then embedded as an inalterable element of the brand identity whatever its visual representation on any given occasion. As such it may embody the feel of a particular craft on a 16 pixel favicon just as much as it does in say a shopping mall billboard outside of an Indian fabric emporium. In this way the feel of that craft is reduced to the status of a "brand color asset" that can be applied to a seemingly endless number of different designs.

3.2. Visual Noise Reduction and the Psychology of Modern Minimalist Rebalancing

In the aesthetic conventions of Lingnan folk art there is a persistent fear of empty space. In this regard, the expression of traditional Chashan imagery is representative of the prevalent trend of the time: The surface of traditional Chashan figures was designed to be as dense as possible in terms of the quantity of information they presented. A glance at any centimeter square of the surface reveals an overwhelming density of visual information with an almost bewildering density of visual details, including different patterns and vibrant colors that interweave with one another almost seamlessly. Of course, in the low light of the grand lineage halls this design effectively served to illustrate the dynamism and power of the images, and it played a significant role in heightening the mystique of the figures. However, in terms of contemporary aesthetics the design is undoubtedly baffling and thereby difficult for today's consumer to relate to.

According to Liu, the second color core strategy for VI is Visual Noise Reduction. In contemporary design, clarity is money and therefore the color translation of the Chashan colors must undergo a process of "radical isolation." The extracted pure individual colors are then used as "focal points" in a neutral colored low-noise background.

Modern Brands strategy is rooted in the concept of figure-ground, which is a fundamental principle of psychology. Through the use of contemporary white slip primer analogous to classical times in the form of absolute white, charcoal grey or matte black, we elevate the 'figure' of the ancient Lingnan red or green, thus achieving the desired counterbalance.

3.3. Strategic Alignment: "Guochao" and the Global Art Toy Ecosystem

Translation is often reduced to formal interpretation, overlooking the complexity of how a brand is positioned socially and economically. Since then, the existence of the Chashan clay sculpture has been subsumed into the broader context of Dongguan, which has itself been reimagined as the "Capital of Art Toys." To ensure the commercial survival of the unique visual language of the clay sculpture, it must facilitate the embedding of the brand in the "New National Trend" (Guochao) — a contemporary Chinese socio-cultural phenomenon in which young Chinese people strive to create for themselves a personal identity through the innovative reinterpretation of traditional culture using postmodern aesthetics.

Our translation strategy can be described as a method called "vectorization of heritage" (Armstrong, 2016). The intricate, organic and hand-shaped characteristics of the folk traditional handcrafted clay figures are translated into uniform, modular and geometric vector graphics. After "flattening out" the craftsmanship of the 3D art into a 2D flat graphic, which enables for a smoother inclusion in contemporary product design processes such as vinyl toy molding, 3D printing or digital drawing.

3.4. The Modular System: Ensuring Cross-Media Adaptability

Of course there is the modularity of the visual system to consider when making final decisions regarding the strategy of a translation. As has been mentioned before, folk art is generally a singular object; modern VI must be a singular system which can be adapted to any number of media. Our translation should yield a modular vocabulary of graphic elements from which we can generate an infinite variety of adaptations. This modular vocabulary should include primary logos, secondary designs, and typography in a variety of widths, heights, shallowness and degree of modulation. Extracting all repeated elements from the costumes of the clay figures and transforming them into dynamic motifs that can be used multiple times in a design. These motifs are then adjusted to match the Lingnan color palette of the brand to be used as a texture for anything from a decorative box's inner lid to a website background so as to embody the spirit of the Chashan craft in all aspects of the brand's identity thus maximizing brand recognition and leading to the highest brand equity.

4. Practice: Modern Brand Visual Identity Design for Chashan Clay Sculpture

4.1. The Core Identity: Logo Vectorization and Typographic System

The transition from a theoretical framework to a tangible design practice begins with the creation of the core brand identity: the logo and its accompanying typographic system. The primary challenge in designing the logo for the modernized Chashan clay sculpture brand was distilling a complex, three-dimensional, hand-molded artifact into a scalable, two-dimensional vector graphic that retains immediate cultural recognizability while appealing to the contemporary Art Toy market in Dongguan (Wheeler, 2017).

The central icon is derived from the most identifiable morphological feature of the Chashan figure: the exaggerated, neotenic facial proportions. By tracing the distinct, sweeping curves of the traditional "smiling brow" and the rounded, jovial cheekbones, the design team extracted a minimalist geometric silhouette. This silhouette was then refined using a strict mathematical grid system to ensure optimal optical balance and scalability. The resulting icon is highly stylized, resembling a modern pop-art emblem rather than a historical relic, effectively bridging the visual language of traditional Lingnan crafts with the slick, commercial aesthetics of modern vinyl toys.

Complementing the abstract icon is a highly customized typographic system. Following Lupton's (2014) principles for type on screen, standard, off-the-shelf commercial fonts proved insufficient for this brand identity. Standard, off-the-shelf commercial fonts proved insufficient; traditional calligraphy felt overly antiquated, while standard geometric sans-serifs felt too sterile and disconnected from the brand's artisanal roots. Therefore, a bespoke logotype was engineered. The

structural foundation of the typography utilizes a heavy, modern sans-serif skeleton to project industrial stability and contemporary boldness, aligning with Dongguan's manufacturing identity. However, the terminals and crossbars of specific letterforms are subtly modified to incorporate the fluid, tapering dynamics of a traditional Chinese brushstroke. This hybrid typographic approach creates a visual tension that perfectly encapsulates the brand's core narrative: a traditional heritage reborn through modern industrial design.

4.2. The Standardized "Kailian" Color Palette System

The theoretical color extraction discussed in the previous chapters is actualized here through a rigorous, standardized digital color palette. This palette is the most vital asset in the new Visual Identity system, serving as the primary emotional and visual trigger for the consumer. The empirical pigments used by traditional artisans have been translated into precise, cross-media data points to guarantee absolute consistency across both physical printing and digital screen illumination.

Crucially, to prevent visual fatigue and modernize the application of these intense colors, the VI system mandates a strict proportional usage rule, introducing a robust Secondary Neutral Palette. Inspired by the white slip primer of the original clay figures, the system utilizes "Absolute White" (HEX: #FFFFFF) and "Charcoal Matte" (HEX: #1A1A1A) as foundational canvases. The brand guidelines dictate a spatial distribution of roughly seventy percent neutral space to thirty percent primary color application. This massive injection of negative space isolates the traditional pigments, allowing their high chromatic intensity to act as focal points rather than overwhelming the viewer.

4.3. Generative Auxiliary Graphics and Modular Motif Extraction

A modern brand requires more than just a logo and a color palette; it requires a flexible visual language that can adapt to various spatial constraints. To achieve this, the design practice involved the extraction and modernization of traditional auxiliary graphics. Traditional Chashan clay figures are heavily adorned with auspicious motifs, such as stylized clouds, water waves, and geometric representations of historical garments.

Instead of directly copying these intricate, hand-painted details, the design process subjected them to vector simplification. The fluid, often irregular brushstrokes of the cloud motifs were standardized into clean, interlocking geometric bezier curves. These simplified vectors were then programmed into a modular grid system, creating a dynamic, generative pattern library.

This modularity is essential for cross-platform application. The patterns are designed to be infinitely repeatable without displaying obvious seams, allowing them to function as subtle background textures on a website or as bold, wrapping graphics on a large physical shipping box. Furthermore, the VI system allows for

these patterns to be rendered in varying opacities and scales using the standardized color palette. By isolating specific segments of the generative patterns, designers can create unique but distinctly "on-brand" compositions for different product lines, ensuring that the brand remains visually engaging over time without diluting its core identity.

4.4. Application and Touchpoints: The Art Toy Ecosystem

The ultimate test of the new VI system is its application across physical and digital touchpoints, specifically within the highly competitive Dongguan Art Toy ecosystem. The primary physical deliverable for this redesign is the conceptualization of blind box packaging, which represents the most dominant consumer format in the contemporary art toy market.

The packaging design synthesizes all previous visual elements. The exterior of the blind box utilizes the "Charcoal Matte" from the secondary palette as its base, printed on heavy-weight, soft-touch cardstock. This dark, tactile, and minimalist exterior stands in stark contrast to the traditional, hyper-colorful aesthetic of rural folk art, immediately signaling to the consumer that this is a premium, modern product. The vectorized Chashan logo is applied using a spot-UV gloss finish, creating a subtle, high-end optical variance against the matte background.

The high-intensity "Kailian" colors are reserved for the unboxing experience. Upon opening the stark exterior, the consumer is greeted by an interior lining saturated in "Chashan Auspicious Red," populated with the generative geometric cloud patterns. This creates a moment of sudden visual explosion and emotional delight, replicating the aggressive optical vibration of the original clay figures but controlling its delivery through modern packaging pacing.

Simultaneously, the VI system is applied to digital User Interface and User Experience touchpoints. For the brand's e-commerce presence, the "Absolute White" canvas dominates the screen, ensuring that high-resolution photographs of the physical art toys remain the primary focus. Norman's (2013) principles of user-centered design inform this interface approach. The extracted primary colors are utilized functionally: Chashan Auspicious Red is strictly coded for primary "Add to Cart" call-to-action buttons, while Lingnan Emerald is utilized for secondary navigational elements. This creates a digital environment that is clean, highly navigable, and subconsciously infused with the heritage's color genes.

4.5. Market Repositioning and Cultural Sustainability

The culmination of this comprehensive visual reshaping is not merely an aesthetic upgrade, but a strategic market repositioning. By systematically deconstructing the historical material constraints, semantic color meanings, and morphological proportions of Chashan clay sculpture, and subsequently translating them through the lenses of visual noise reduction and modular vector design, the heritage is

fundamentally transformed.

It ceases to be a static, endangered artifact confined to glass museum cases or anthropological studies. Instead, it becomes an active, aggressive participant in the modern visual economy. The new VI system equips the Chashan brand to compete directly alongside international art toy IPs on retail shelves and digital platforms. This design intervention proves that true cultural sustainability — or "productive protection" — is not achieved by freezing a craft in the past, but by ruthlessly and respectfully engineering its visual language to resonate with the aesthetic and psychological demands of the contemporary consumer. Lu (2020) discusses the semiotics of bridging heritage and pop culture in modern Chinese design. Through this modern design practice, the ancient pulse of Lingnan folk art is given a new, highly visible, and commercially viable life.

5. Conclusion: The Future Paradigm of Heritage Design

5.1. Synthesis of the Visual Translation Process

This research has systematically demonstrated that the survival of regional Intangible Cultural Heritage, specifically the Chashan clay sculpture of Dongguan, depends not on rigid historical preservation, but on strategic visual translation. By deconstructing the materiality and optical physics of the traditional Kailian painting technique, this study identified the core visual genes of Lingnan folk art: high-saturation primary colors, stark optical contrast, and neotenic morphological proportions.

Rather than replicating these elements directly into a modern context — which often results in visual clutter and consumer alienation — this project applied contemporary minimalist design principles. The resulting Visual Identity (VI) system successfully transitions the aesthetic of an agrarian ritual object into the sleek, modular visual language required by the modern "Art Toy" industry. Through vectorization, visual noise reduction, and the strategic use of negative space, the original heritage's vitality is preserved and repackaged as a highly competitive "Guochao" (National Trend) brand asset. This transition embodies "productive protection," proving that heritage can function as a dynamic commercial engine rather than a static museum artifact.

5.2. Limitations of the Design Intervention

Despite the commercial viability of this modernized VI system, it is crucial to acknowledge the inherent limitations of this design intervention. The primary compromise in translating a physical craft into a digital, mass-produced art toy ecosystem is the inevitable loss of the aura of the handmade object (Benjamin, 1935). The mathematical standardization of the Lingnan color palette, while necessary for cross-media consistency, explicitly strips away the empirical, unpredictable variations that characterize authentic folk art.

Furthermore, while this rebranding introduces the Chashan aesthetic to Generation Z consumers, it risks alienating the original practitioners of the craft. The shift from low-fired red clay to injection-molded vinyl, and from localized lineage rituals to globalized blind-box consumption, fundamentally alters the cultural context. The VI system saves the visual shell of the heritage, but the deeper, tacit knowledge of the manual crafting process remains endangered.

5.3. A New Paradigm for Intangible Cultural Heritage

Ultimately, this study establishes a scalable paradigm for the future of heritage design. The methodology applied to Chashan clay sculpture — extraction, standardization, modularization, and contextual repositioning — can be adapted for other endangered visual traditions. Specifically, within the manufacturing hub of Dongguan, this paradigm offers a blueprint for industrial upgrading. By infusing mass manufacturing with localized cultural IP, the region can transition from being the "factory of the world" to a primary creator of original cultural value.

As the global market for cultural commodities expands, the success of "Guochao" will rely increasingly on sophisticated design methodologies rather than simple patriotic nostalgia. The future of heritage design lies in this delicate balance between respect and modernization. By viewing traditional crafts as robust datasets of visual information, designers can ensure that the aesthetic DNA of regional cultures continues to evolve and thrive within the contemporary commercial landscape.

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