

A Computational Framework for Integrating Zhuxian Town Woodblock New Year Pictures into Contemporary Illustration

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Abstract: This article examines how folk visual symbols can be translated into contemporary illustration without losing their cultural meaning. Taking Zhuxian Town woodblock New Year pictures as a design reference, it argues that traditional imagery should not be treated as a decorative database of colors, patterns, and auspicious figures. Instead, folk motifs need to be reinterpreted through visual grammar, narrative function, material memory, and contemporary communication context. The article proposes a compact model of visual translation based on source reading, formal reconstruction, and contextual adaptation. Through this approach, designers can move from imitation to transformation, from surface borrowing to cultural interpretation, and from nostalgic reproduction to living design practice.

Keywords: folk visual culture, contemporary illustration, visual communication design, cultural translation, design strategy

1. Introduction

Traditional folk art has become an important resource for contemporary design. In posters, packaging, cultural products, city images, picture books, and digital illustration, designers often borrow folk colors, ornaments, figures, and festive symbols to create works with local or national visual identity. This tendency reflects a broader desire to reconnect design practice with cultural memory. However, the use of folk imagery also creates a design problem. If a designer only extracts bright colors or recognizable motifs, the result may look traditional but remain culturally shallow. It may become an aesthetic label rather than a meaningful visual translation.

Zhuxian Town woodblock New Year pictures provide a useful case for rethinking this problem. Existing studies describe Zhuxian Town New Year pictures as a folk visual tradition with distinctive cultural interpretation, digital preservation value, modeling, composition, color, and symbolic meaning [1][2]. As a print tradition connected with festival rituals, household protection, moral storytelling, and local craft, these images are more than decorative graphics. Their value lies in the relationship among image, function, material, belief, and ordinary life. For contemporary illustration, the task is not to copy old images directly, but to understand how their visual language can be transformed for new media, new audiences, and new commercial or public communication scenes.

2. Folk imagery as visual grammar

A folk motif should first be read as visual grammar. In woodblock New Year pictures, composition, color, line, figure posture, symbolic object, and empty space all carry meaning. The symmetrical arrangement of door gods, the frontal gaze of protective figures, the saturated contrast of red, yellow, green, and black, and the firm printed contour are not random stylistic features. They form a visual system shaped by craft technique and ritual use. When such elements are moved into contemporary illustration, their original logic should be analyzed before they are redrawn.

Reading folk imagery as grammar helps designers avoid two common mistakes. The first is museum-style preservation, in which the designer keeps the old form so faithfully that the new work cannot communicate with contemporary viewers. The second is decorative extraction, in which symbols are detached from context and used as fashionable texture. Research on folk-art teaching and visual communication similarly emphasizes that folk forms should become design resources through guided interpretation rather than mechanical copying [3]. Between preservation and extraction, visual translation asks the designer to identify which features are structural and which can be adjusted.

3. Visual translation strategy

The first stage is source reading. Designers should collect historical images, observe printing texture, compare figure types, study symbolic objects, and understand the social use of the picture. This stage is not merely academic preparation; it determines the ethical quality of the design. A designer who knows why a figure holds a specific object or why a color appears in a festival image is less likely to turn folk culture into empty ornament. Source reading also helps select the most

appropriate material for a design task.

The second stage is formal reconstruction. After understanding the source, the designer can reorganize line, color, proportion, texture, and composition. Reconstruction does not mean making the image modern by erasing its origin. It means finding a new balance between recognition and transformation. A contemporary illustration may simplify a traditional figure, enlarge a symbolic object, change the viewing angle, or combine woodblock texture with flat digital color. What matters is whether the new form still carries the expressive force of the source culture.

The third stage is contextual adaptation. Folk images originally lived inside festivals, homes, markets, temples, and local social relations. Contemporary illustrations appear in screens, packages, exhibitions, children's books, tourism campaigns, social media, and cultural IP systems. Each context changes the viewing condition. Studies of intangible cultural heritage in product form also show that visual communication should connect heritage protection with contemporary form, media, and user experience [4]. Therefore, adaptation should be guided by communication purpose rather than by the desire to show many traditional elements at once.

4. Contemporary illustration application

One strategy is narrative renewal. Instead of repeating a fixed festival scene, designers can place folk figures in contemporary situations while preserving their symbolic roles. A protective figure may be translated into a guardian of community memory, environmental care, or urban warmth. This approach keeps the moral and emotional function of the image while opening it to present-day themes. The challenge is to avoid novelty that weakens dignity or cultural depth.

A second strategy is modular pattern design. Many folk prints contain units such as flowers, clouds, weapons, animals, costume details, and border ornaments. These units can be redrawn as flexible modules for packaging, interface decoration, exhibition identity, or cultural product systems. Recent work on traditional patterns in Chinese folk art argues that contemporary visual presentation requires a balance between cultural continuity and modern design language [5]. Modular design works best when the original hierarchy is respected.

A third strategy is material translation. The tactile quality of woodblock printing is part of its visual meaning. The slight misalignment of color, the pressure of carved line, and the grain of paper all suggest handmade memory. Contemporary illustration can translate this material quality through digital brushwork, textured flat color, risograph-like layers, or print-based exhibition formats. Material translation prevents folk culture from becoming a clean but lifeless vector style.

5. Design education and practice

For design education, folk visual translation should be taught as a research-based studio method rather than as a short styling exercise. Students can begin by building a source archive that includes original prints, local stories, color notes, craft-process observations, and comparative examples from contemporary design. They can then make analysis boards that separate motif, line, color, composition, texture, and symbolic function. This process trains students to see folk art as a structured visual system rather than as a collection of attractive fragments.

Studio assignments should require several levels of transformation. A first draft may preserve the original composition in order to understand its structure. A second draft may change the narrative scene while keeping symbolic hierarchy. A third draft may adapt the image into a specific medium, such as a poster, package, book spread, exhibition guide, or digital sticker set. By comparing these drafts, students learn that innovation is not a sudden break with tradition. It is a series of design decisions that make cultural memory legible under new conditions.

For professional practice, collaboration is equally important. Designers who work with regional folk resources should consult historical materials, craft practitioners, local museums, cultural institutions, or community audiences whenever possible. Such consultation can prevent visual misuse and can also make the final work more precise. A brand illustration, for example, may become more convincing when its ornament, character gesture, and color discipline are tied to a documented source rather than to a general impression of tradition.

6. Evaluation and conclusion

The main risk in folk-inspired illustration is symbolic simplification. When cultural signs are used only to signal tradition, they lose their specificity. A red background, a cloud pattern, and a smiling child may create a festive atmosphere, but they do not necessarily communicate the regional, historical, or narrative quality of Zhuxian Town prints. Another risk is excessive modernization. If the source is reshaped only according to current fashion, the work may become visually smooth but culturally anonymous. Digital visual communication research on folk paper-cutting also suggests that feature extraction and redesign must preserve recognizable cultural features while adapting them to new media conditions [6].

Evaluation should include four criteria. First, recognizability: can viewers identify the cultural source or at least feel its visual logic? Second, transformation: does the work create a new design language rather than copy the source? Third, contextual fit: does the illustration serve its medium, audience, and communication task? Fourth, cultural respect: does the design avoid careless mixture, stereotype, or misuse of ritual symbols? Bibliometric work on folk art indicates that the field increasingly crosses visual culture, heritage studies, education, and creative industry research, which supports a more interdisciplinary design approach [7].

In conclusion, the contemporary use of folk visual culture should not stop at visual borrowing. For illustration and visual communication design, the deeper task is to translate traditional imagery into forms that can still act in present life. Zhuxian Town woodblock New Year pictures show that folk art contains strong visual grammar, public emotion, ritual function, and material memory. When designers read these qualities carefully, they can create works that are contemporary without being rootless and traditional without being static. The proposed route of source reading, formal reconstruction, and contextual adaptation offers a practical method for design education and creative practice.

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