

Research Article

From Folk Craft to Commercial Aesthetics: The Translation of Yuxian County Paper-Cut Motifs in Contemporary Packaging Design

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Abstract

The Yuxian paper-cutting technique, included in the UNESCO Representative List in 2009 and known as the only painting technique for paper cuts in China, has more often been incorporated into modern packaging designs; however, its decorative patterns have often been added without any communicative intent. The current research investigates the process of translating Yuxian paper-cut patterns into commercial packaging designs using a four-tier model. Artistic base investigation of Yuxian through documentary analysis is complemented by case-to-case comparison with regional agricultural products, cultural-creative gift boxes for festivals, and cross-branding. Layer imbalance turns out to be the cause of most failure modes, including symbolic appropriation, cultural vacuuming, and visual homogeneity. The strategy for progressive optimization from formal likeness through spiritual connection to semantic cohesion is presented as an organized correction process. Results build upon current research on transcreation of motifs in heritage and provide practical guidance for designers and brand managers working on heritage regeneration projects.

Keywords

Yuxian County paper-cut, Motif translation, Packaging design, Commercial aesthetics, Intangible cultural heritage revitalisation

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background and problem statement

The accelerated rate of cultural consumption in China has raised intangible cultural heritage to the status of cultural capital and economic value, where cultural capital is understood in the sense given by Bourdieu (1986) as an accumulated stock of symbolic assets that can be converted, under

determinate conditions, into economic advantage. As of December 2024, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism had listed 1,557 ICH entries at the national level, and of those, Yuxian paper-cut, included in UNESCO's Representative List in 2009, stands out as unique in that it is the only paper-cut that uses painting techniques. However, in today's product packaging, the motifs of Yuxian paper-cut are used decoratively rather than informatively. Eye tracking research on in-store buying behaviour indicates that packaging elements frequently operate through rapid visual attention rather than deliberate decoding of content, and recent work on packaging design characteristics confirms that visual features shape purchase decisions through perceptual appeal, which together support the reading of such motifs as decorative surface rather than communicative substance when no anchoring discourse accompanies them (Clement, 2007; Wang et al., 2023). Cognitive-based semiotics have revealed that culture-bound visual icons can affect brand choice via cognitive processes (Zhao et al., 2026), where the term icon is used in the sense of the second trichotomy of the sign proposed by Peirce (1998), in which an icon signifies through resemblance to its object rather than through convention or existential connection, and studies conducted regarding heritaged labelling suggest that indicators for ICH have the ability to affect consumers' behavioural intentions (Qiu & Zuo, 2023). However, the significant mismatch between the existing communicative potential and its current poor transposition within packaging remains the primary issue of this paper.

1.2. Literature review and definition of core concepts

The available literature is spread out into various uneven sections. Studies conducted on paper-cutting have mainly been concerned with preservation, with some recent studies taking into consideration digitization and reconstruction of the motif system using virtual reality technologies (Zhao & Kim, 2024). However, this type of study rarely touches upon any business-oriented design outcomes. Simultaneous research in traditional cultural components in contemporary packaging includes studies on symbolic language and pattern innovation in translating folk craft designs into paper packaging using principles of shape grammar and decoding (Chen, 2025). Other than these craft-related researches, semiotic research on commercial communication has also connected culturally symbolic metaphors, using structural equation modelling, to perceived value, cultural identity, and purchase intention (Liu & Zhao, 2024). The interplay between the above bodies of literature points to the relative lack of overlap in the two fields, with Yuxian paper-cut being noticeably under-theorized from the design field perspective.

The word "translation" will be employed in this paper to describe the structured procedure of re-encoding, not the transplantation of images. The distinction between translation and transfer deserves precise statement. Transfer, as used here, denotes the relocation of a motif from one support to another while its internal organisation remains untouched, so the image travels but is not reworked.

Translation denotes an interpretive operation in which the motif is reorganised according to the codes of the receiving system, an operation that follows the account of intersemiotic translation given by Jakobson (1959), where meaning moving between sign systems is necessarily selected, reduced, and recombined rather than merely displaced. Every layer of the model presented in Section 3 involves such reorganisation, which is why the study speaks of translation and treats transfer as its degenerate case. The aesthetics of commerce will be used in this paper to describe the regime of aesthetics in which symbolic and affective values are compressed into market-oriented visual artifacts, a regime that Lipovetsky and Serroy (2013) analyse as the aestheticisation of the world under artist capitalism, in which aesthetic production migrates from the autonomous art field into consumer industries and style becomes a general condition of merchandise. The infiltration of heritage imagery into packaging examined below is one local instance of that broader movement.

1.3. Research approach and methodology

The study employs a qualitative methodology that relies on multiple sources. Documentary sources on the Yuxian tradition comprise the collection and exhibition materials of the Yuxian Paper-cut Museum in Yuxian county, the inheritor records maintained by the China Intangible Cultural Heritage Digital Museum, and pattern albums, instructional materials, and demonstration records produced by nationally recognised representative inheritors, among them Zhou Zhaoming of the first national batch and Zhou Shuying of the fourth batch, whose lineage descends from the founding master Wang Laoshang through Zhou Yongming. Contemporary packaging cases incorporating Yuxian elements were assembled through purposive sampling under stated criteria. Inclusion required a verifiable use of Yuxian motifs rather than generic paper-cut styling, availability on the market during the collection period, and documentation sufficient for analysis across all four layers of the framework, while items whose motif source could not be attributed to the Yuxian tradition were excluded. Cases were gathered through retail observation in Zhangjiakou and neighbouring markets, the official online stores of the brands concerned, and publicity materials released for festival campaigns. The corpus was screened so that the three product categories examined in Section 4 retain the spread of motif types, craft levels, and price tiers observable in the wider population of Yuxian-themed packaging, which keeps the purposive sample aligned with the regularities of the universe from which it is drawn (Patton, 2015). Each case was coded layer by layer against the four-level framework of form, semantics, craftsmanship, and context, the coding for each layer was completed before cross-case comparison began, and the resulting comparison matrix underlies the analysis reported in Section 4. Common transposition techniques, expressive limitations, and optimization opportunities are revealed using cross-case analysis, with the results also being verified using semiotic theory.

2. Artistic Form and Cultural Semantics of Yuxian County Paper-Cut Motifs

2.1. Historical trajectory and artistic positioning

Some contextual orientation assists readers unfamiliar with the tradition. Yuxian is a county under the administration of Zhangjiakou in northwestern Hebei province, situated roughly two hundred kilometres west of Beijing on the edge of the Loess Plateau. Window flowers are paper cuts pasted on the paper-covered lattice windows of rural dwellings during the Spring Festival, and daylight passing through the translucent window paper displays the dyed design to viewers inside the room, a viewing condition that explains the local preference for transparent pigments over opaque monochrome cutting. Yuxian paper cuts have a history dating back to the Ming Dynasty and originate in the rural northwest of Hebei province, where the culture of the window flowers came into contact with the culture of block printing which arrived with Nanjing and Shanxi provinces. It was during the reign of Qianlong, during the Qing Dynasty, that Yuxian became a distinct style school. The inscriptions on the national inventory for ICH in 2006 and UNESCO's List of Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009 provided an official endorsement of this art form. Indeed, the process employed by the artisans from Yuxian is well documented in literature that focuses on designs. Here, the artisans begin by cutting forty sheets of Xuan paper with a knife and then proceed to hand-color the transparent pigments, leading to the creation of the only existing paper-cutting painting in the world (Shi & He, 2025). As far as demographic structure is concerned, there is a fair amount of individuals involved in their activity from more than thirty villages, while Nanzhangzhuang town becomes the main center of production. This is due to the fact that Yuxian paper cuts have a double meaning – as a domestic tradition and as a marker of regional identity.

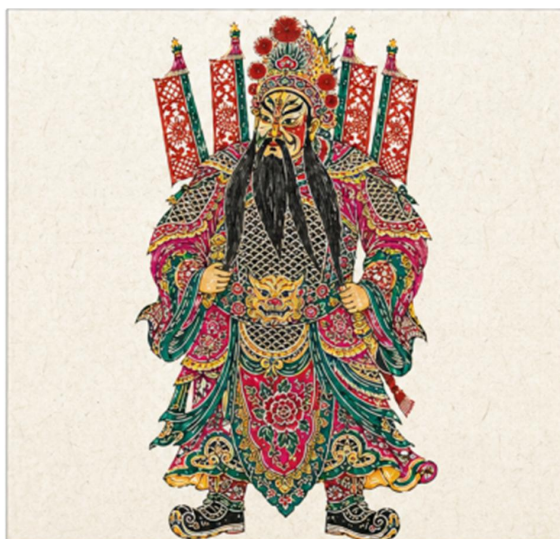
2.2. Subject typology and visual language

The Yuxian paper-cut motif archive is traditionally categorised into four major theme clusters, which include motifs of opera characters inspired by the bangzi drama tradition, a regional opera form of northern China accompanied by wooden clapper percussion whose costumed role types supplied the figure repertoire of local cutters, flowers and animals motifs that highlight peonies, lotuses, magpies, and carps, auspicious characters motifs that revolve around Fu and Shou characters, and everyday agricultural motifs. From empirical analysis, visual organization in a corpus of Chinese carved paper-cutting works has been found to be made up of central symmetry, symmetry, balance, conformance, and arbitrary shape composition, while yin-yang carving, broken-skill line drawing, perspective-free vision, and intentional distortion serve as main modeling mechanisms (Yang et al., 2024). In Yuxian's paintings, this set of conventions blends with a unique chromatic palette based on

magenta, cyan, viridian, and chrome yellow, applied translucently to allow the underlying paper surface to show through. The recent computational categorization of images of paper cuts into twenty-seven different motif groups has also shown that when there is high preservation of contour and pigment contrast, subject identification can be quite consistent (Zhang et al., 2025). From among a selected group of samples chosen from each of the four different categories of subjects, illustrated in Figure 1 below, the study of motifs can be done comparatively prior to their symbolism. The samples shown in Figure 1 were selected to preserve the regularities of the motif archive as a whole, one representative unit was drawn from each of the four subject clusters, and within each cluster the unit chosen displays the compositional and chromatic conventions documented for that cluster in the sources cited above, so the figure functions as a proportionally faithful reduction of the archive rather than a collection of striking exceptions.

Figure 1

Representative Motif Atlas of Yuxian County Paper-Cut



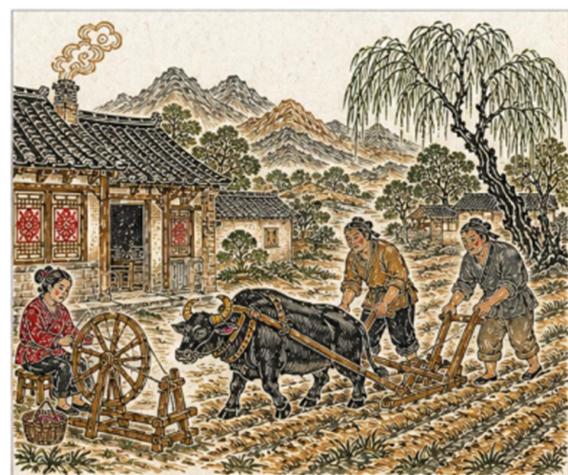
(a) Operatic Figures



(b) Floral and Faunal



(c) Auspicious Characters



(d) Agrarian Scenes

2.3. The multi-layered structure of symbolic meaning

The signifying potential of these symbols is not limited to surface decoration alone. A four-level semiotic model designed for cross-cultural analysis of totemic symbolism identifies the levels of contact, art-form use, multi-semiosis, and culture context, revealing that totemic imagery functions in parallel across the sign relations theorised by Peirce (1998), the pairing of signifier and signified described by Saussure (1959), and the second-order mythical signification analysed by Barthes (1972), a parallel operation synthesised for cross-cultural application by Zou et al. (2024). When applied to motifs within Yuxian, the model exposes a layered approach whereby homophonic elements act as the basis for denotation while ethical stories provide the connotative layer, leaving the mythological level to be supplied by the local cosmology. In other studies carried out on craft-design involving symbolic-semantic analysis, there is an identification of the external culture layer composed of elements such as forms, colours, crafts, and compositions from the internal culture layer comprising beliefs, ethics, and ideologies (Chen et al., 2025).

3. Pathways for Translating Yuxian County Paper-Cut Motifs into Packaging Design

The transplantation of Yuxian paper cutting art forms onto modern packaging design cannot be fully captured using a dichotomy of preservation versus innovation. Transplantation is performed simultaneously along the lines of structure, symbolism, craftsmanship, and use, and all these aspects are interconnected and cannot be isolated from one another. The model of the transplantation process consisting of four stages, shown in Figure 2 below, reflects the above mentioned complexity in the division of the transplanting task according to the operational level, each of which involves its unique mode of transformation. The numerical ranges reported in this section and in Section 4 are indicative values compiled from practitioner documentation, production specifications disclosed in the collected cases, and side-by-side visual comparison between source works and packaging reproductions, and they are offered as descriptive approximations for design guidance rather than as measured statistics.

Figure 2

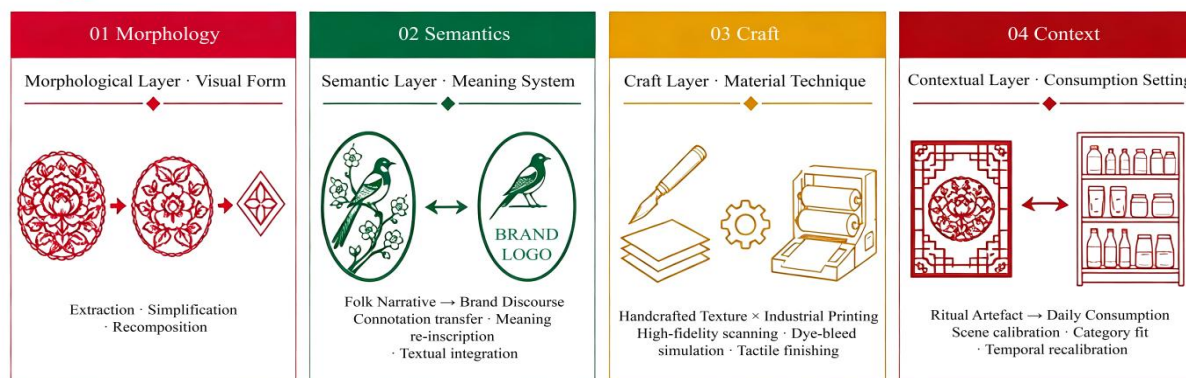
Four-Layer Translation Pathway Model of Paper-Cut Motifs



Yuxian Paper-Cut Motifs

Source: Hebei Province ICH

Packaging Artefact



3.1. Morphological layer: extraction, simplification, and recomposition of motifs

The Morphological Translation deals with the transformation of motif elements from their natural supports into the artificial space created by packaging. Extraction includes digitalization of the chosen artworks, vectorization of their contours, and segmentation of separate parts like central motifs, decorative borders, and corner motifs. The simplification process is bound to involve reductions in line density to the level of printability, where experience dictates that the starting number of fifty lines per five centimeters of strips used in Yuxian artworks is to be reduced by about sixty to seventy percent. Recomposition includes a restructuring process of these abstractions within the framework of package designs, where vertical paper cutouts of images are reconstructed for horizontal packages, circles for bottled products, and irregular shapes for packets. At this stage, the critical things are retaining the mark of the yin-yang cutting, keeping the disruption of contours that would suggest that the design was made by hand, and balance of negative space – in the case of Yuxian designs, negative space takes about thirty to forty percent of the whole picture. However, when this element is absent in well-branded packaging, the picture ceases to be a picture despite all of its parts being visible. The phrase refers to the loss of pictorial coherence rather than to the disappearance of any single element. Negative space in Yuxian composition is not empty background but a structural component that establishes the relation of figure and ground, paces the reading of the image, and binds separate motifs into one pictorial field. When packaging compresses or fills that space with logotypes, information panels, or decorative texture, the figure and ground relation collapses, the remaining elements read as isolated ornamental fragments, and the viewer perceives an assortment of decorations where the source presented a unified picture. The failure is therefore compositional and perceptual at once, since every part survives while the whole disappears.

3.2. Semantic layer: from folk narrative to brand discourse

Semantic translation relies on the meaning construction systems linked to the themes of Yuxian,

as partially inscribed in brand narratives. Brand narratives are understood here as the organised body of stories, claims, and values through which a brand presents itself across packaging copy, product naming, campaign storytelling, and retail display, and packaging occupies a privileged position within that body because it is the narrative surface that accompanies the product into the home and is re-read after purchase. Motifs inscribed on packaging are therefore never received in isolation, they are read against whatever story the brand has already established, and semantic translation succeeds or fails according to how the motif and that established story interact. These involve the folktales constructed via the motifs created in opera scenes, farming cycles, and homophonic fortune statements that had been addressed to ritual audiences located within specific familial/seasonal contexts. But that is certainly not the situation for the modern day receivers of packaging since they lack the common ground of meaning. Experimental work on culturally symbolic brands supports this claim, since consumer response to culturally charged designs depends on whether the cultural schema cued by the symbol is accessible to the audience and congruent with the product category, and recent evidence from the national tide market shows that the effect of traditional symbols on purchase intention runs through cultural identity and emotional value rather than through the symbol alone, which together indicate that meaning transfer cannot be assumed for audiences whose exposure to the source tradition is limited (Torelli & Ahluwalia, 2012; Zong et al., 2023). Therefore, the direct borrowing of motifs results in the creation of decoration with no communication taking place at all. The importance of transposition resides in the ability to choose motifs that have a denotational meaning that relates in some way to the meaning of the brand, selecting certain elements and eliminating others. The creation of compositions featuring magpies and plums is characterized by the preservation of their denotational meaning related to the news of the arrival of early spring, although in connection with their use in a brand context, there is a narrower range of meanings referring either to celebration or renewal.

3.3. Craft layer: integrating handcrafted texture with contemporary printing techniques

Craft translation is a medium through which there is mediation between the materiality of the artwork of Yuxian on one side and the mass production involved in packaging design on the other. These properties, including the use of Xuan paper, along with the transparency and dye absorbance of the material, cannot be replicated through printing technologies. The compensatory actions include high-resolution scanning of the source material of at least 1200 dots per inch, creation of color bleed effect through variable settings for ink bleed, and selective use of particular manufacturing processes such as die cutting, foil stamping, embossing, and spot UV coating. The choice of material also has an influence on the authenticity of the craft; the presence of more tactile authenticity is felt in uncoated kraft paper and also in laminated rice paper, rather than coated white card. In this case, the intention is

not to reproduce the carved and painted look that will be difficult to produce in the industrial packaging of the product.

3.4. Contextual layer: from ritual artifacts to everyday consumption scenes

Contextual translation entails the transfer of symbols from their ritualized context to the routinized context of consumerism. Yuxian paper-cutting has always operated within a time and space bound ritual context that includes festivals like the Spring Festival, weddings, and ancestral worship. The consumption of packaging is based on an inverted process marked by personal engagement, a momentary focus at point of sale, and re-engagement after purchase. Good contextual translation ensures that motif force is balanced to fit such a situation, with complete motifs reserved only for products destined for festival use. The contextual layer controls the congruence between the product and motif level, with food, regional, and culture/creativity-based gifts having the capacity to carry more complex motifs systems compared to the health and personal care or drug categories. Mismatch in this context creates semiotic inconsistency that negatively affects both the branding process and credibility of heritage representation.

4. Case Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Translation practices in regional agricultural product packaging

The cases discussed in this and the following section were drawn from the corpus described in Section 1.3, and within each category the cases retained for detailed discussion were those whose configuration recurs across the category, so the discussion reports the regular pattern of each category rather than its outliers. Products of agriculture in the northern part of Hebei Province have emerged as an important commerce platform for the translation of Yuxian paper-cut, especially in the categories of millet, vinegar, and dried fruits manufactured in Zhangjiakou. Examples in this category incorporate traditional designs such as opera and flowers in the central part and indications of geography on the periphery. The reproduction techniques all seem to lead to offset printing onto uncoated kraft paper stock with line thicknesses scaled down to about thirty percent of what is seen in the master-quality version to allow for flexographic specifications. Observations have been made that while some attention is paid to the color balance featuring mainly magenta and viridian, others fail because of the need for economy. The effect of communication generated by these packages relies more on clarity about the place of origin association, where the power of the motifs is used primarily to validate regional identity rather than storytelling, a system that fits well with the layers-of-context approach described in the previous chapter.

4.2. Festival cultural-creative gift boxes and cross-brand collaborations

Festival gift packs and cross-branded products have significantly varying modes of translation. For instance, Spring Festival and Mid-Autumn collections, which also include collections from various national brands specializing in tea, sweets, and beverages, can handle greater density of motif and intricate finishing since there is ritual value associated with the packaging for a finite period. For the cross-branded items that include makeup, sportswear, and lifestyles, the strategy differs in that the Yuxian designs will become iconic representations without preserving their integrity. For this type of run, the quantity is usually estimated between ten thousand pieces and fifty thousand pieces according to the campaign disclosures accompanying the collected cases, using hot foil printing, die cut hollows, and spot UV printing in an attempt to reproduce the tactile sensation of the carved paper. Approaches to translation within each of the key case categories vary systematically based on motif preservation, craftsmanship, and suitability, as illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Comparative Matrix of Translation Strategies across Representative Cases

Case category	Motif retention	Craft investment	Contextual fit	Communicative outcome
Regional agricultural products	High; full motif units	Moderate; offset on kraft	Strong	Origin authentication
Festival cultural-creative boxes	High; ritual configurations	High; foil, emboss, UV	Strong	Ceremonial resonance
Cross-brand collaborations	Selective; abstracted signatures	Variable; selective finishing	Moderate	Brand differentiation

4.3. Challenges in translation: symbolic appropriation, cultural hollowing, and visual homogenisation

There are three main forms of failure that reduce the effectiveness of such translations culturally and commercially. One is that of symbolic appropriation, whereby images are stripped of their contextual relationships and operate as mere decorations, and where auspicious configurations can be found on objects for which their meanings are unsuitable. Metz (1974) observes that the image taken alone is polysemic and depends on surrounding discourse to stabilise its meaning, and the packaging surface rarely supplies such anchoring on its own, so a motif detached from its narrative frame drifts toward whatever reading the retail setting happens to suggest. This process can be observed whenever the surface characteristics of an object retain their visibility, but the signifying layers of the signified described in the previous chapter, especially the connotative and mythical levels, become stripped off due to simplification. Visual standardization has emerged as particularly evident within the broader category of national tide packaging, which, through industry commentary, demonstrates that a significant portion of heritage-inspired packaging from mid-range consumer products uses an

extremely limited palette of red and gold colors and auspicious symbols, stripping away the unique regional character that distinguishes Yuxian paper-cut from others.

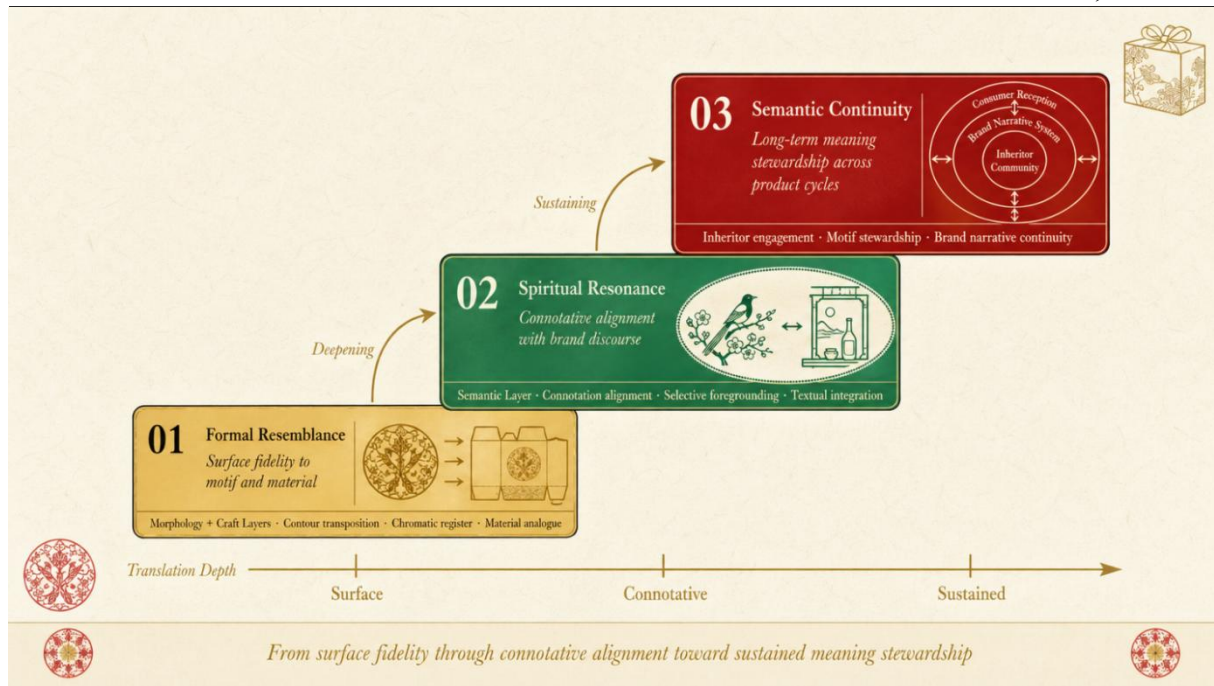
The four-layer model also functions as a diagnostic instrument for such failures, which demonstrates its applicability beyond description. Consider, as an illustration, a configuration in which an opera figure is reproduced at high print quality on coated board with no supporting text and no relation between the figure and the product story. A layer-by-layer reading returns adequate performance at the morphological layer, partial performance at the craft layer since the coated surface suppresses the material cues of the source, and absence at the semantic and contextual layers. The diagnosis locates the failure in layer imbalance rather than in reproduction quality, and this is precisely the pattern that recurs across the problematic configurations observed in the corpus, so the model tells the designer not only that a translation has failed but at which layer the correction must begin.

4.4. Optimization pathway: from formal resemblance to spiritual resonance to semantic continuity

The course of action open to designers and brands could be described in terms of three phases, as illustrated in Figure 3, from form similarity to spiritual resonance to meaning continuity. Formal equivalence takes into account morphological and craft concerns, guaranteeing that contours, colors, and materiality can be properly reproduced. The stage of spiritual affinity is defined here in semiotic rather than metaphysical terms. It denotes the condition in which the connotative values carried by the selected motif cluster and the values projected by the brand discourse belong to a single signifying system, so that the motif confirms rather than contradicts what the brand claims about itself. Research on marketing semiotics treats brand value as the outcome of managed sign systems of exactly this kind, and the alignment described here corresponds to the coherence between cultural codes and brand codes that such analysis pursues (Oswald, 2012). The spiritual affinity is achieved via engagement with the semantic level, which entails the prominence of motif groups that connote the same meanings as the brand discourse, the suppression of inappropriate historical connections, and the incorporation of textual and graphic components into one signifying system. The hardest part is related to semantic continuity, which implies prolonged cooperation with the inheritors, maintenance of the motif custodianship through various cycles of product development, and constructing the brand history, where the mentions of the heritage act as continuous semantic constructs.

Figure 3

Progressive Model of the Optimization Pathway



5. Conclusion

The process of motif transfer from the paper cut technique to packaging has been analyzed from the perspective of a stratified activity rather than a style borrowing one. The analysis presented in the previous chapters shows that the factors of morphological extraction, semantic re-interpretation, compensatory craftsmanship, and contextual re-positioning have a significant impact on the success of these package products. The case studies involving regional agricultural products, festive gift boxes, and brand collaborations show that the four levels do not function equally well in all product categories. Also, the issues of symbol stealing, culture stripping, and homogeneity of visual imagery keep coming up not because of the limitations of any technology but because of layer inequality. An optimal sequence of designing, which involves progression from form to spirit to meaning, offers a way out. Apart from expanding existing knowledge on the transcreation of heritage symbols, the findings of this study also offer tangible benchmarks that may be considered by individuals who wish to exploit intangible heritage for profit.

Several limitations bound these findings and mark out future work. The analysis rests on a qualitative reading of a purposive corpus, so the reported patterns describe the collected cases rather than the full population of Yuxian-themed packaging, and the numerical ranges given in Sections 3 and 4 remain descriptive approximations rather than measurements. The study examines the production side of translation and does not test how consumers actually receive the translated motifs, so claims about communicative outcomes are inferential and await verification. The focus on a single regional tradition limits the direct transfer of the four-layer model to other crafts, whose material logic may weight the layers differently, embroidery for instance carries its craft layer in thread relief where

paper-cut carries it in dyed transparency. Future research could pair the framework with reception studies using interviews or eye tracking to test the communicative claims, extend the comparison to other listed paper traditions to probe the generality of the model, and follow individual brand collaborations across successive product cycles to observe whether semantic continuity can be sustained in commercial practice.

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