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CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND INNOVATION: DOOR GOD IMAGERY IN MODERN VISUAL COMMUNICATION

Ren Yutian¹, Dubrivna Antonina Petrivna²

¹ Postgraduate Student at the Department of the Digital Art,
Kyiv National University of Technology and Design, Kyiv, Ukraine;
Shaanxi University of Science and Technology, China,
e-mail: 767328531@qq.com, orcid: 0009-0004-7855-7703

² Candidate of Art Studies, Associate Professor,
Associate Professor at the Department of the Digital Art,
Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design, Kyiv, Ukraine,
e-mail: dubrivna.ap@knutd.com.ua, orcid: 0000-0001-8012-6946

Abstract. The purpose. The purpose of this paper is to systematically analyze the evolution of the style of regional door god paintings, revealing how folk art images enter the modern visual context through cultural translation, especially the practical transformation in the medium of book design. The study is not only committed to tracing the historical trajectory of door god images, but also emphasizes the reconstruction of their value in contemporary graphic design, in order to find a sustainable and innovative integration path for traditional visual symbols in modern design language.

Methodology. Based on systematic and analytical, comparative, figurative and stylistic, complex historical, and descriptive analysis, which allowed for an in-depth study of the artistic features of door paintings in different regions of China and for drawing reasonable conclusions.

The results. The research results show that as a typical representative of traditional folk art, the rich visual language of door god paintings has a high potential for transformation in modern book design. The door god paintings in the four major regions of east, west, south and north have their own characteristics: the eastern region mostly reflects the delicate and gorgeous style with soft lines; the southern region prefers bright colors and exaggerated shapes; the western door gods focus on mysterious atmosphere and religious symbols; and the northern region presents a heavy realistic, majestic and majestic style. These image languages not only provide a source of inspiration for the visual beauty of modern books, but also enhance the cultural depth and emotional resonance of books through the embedding of cultural identity and folk symbols. In the practice of modern book design, these door god images are often used to express the covers, chapter pages or local decorations of festival, folk and historical books, becoming a bridge connecting tradition and modernity, folklore and art.

Scientific novelty. The scientific innovation of this study is that, from the perspective of cross-regional comparison, the artistic style of Chinese door god paintings is systematically sorted out, and its evolution model in visual design language is proposed. At the same time, the study combines the analysis of traditional folk images with modern book design practice, and constructs the logical chain of

"traditional images-design language-cultural transformation" from the two levels of image culture and design application, providing a new perspective and theoretical support for the regeneration of traditional cultural symbols in the design context. In addition, the study also proposed the strategic method of "visual appropriation and redesign", that is by retaining the core spirit of traditional images and reshaping them in modern design language in form, the contemporary expression of traditional images can be achieved.

Practical relevance. *This study not only provides image resources and design ideas for reference for the current book design that increasingly values cultural values, but also provides clear theoretical guidance for designers on how to understand, select and use traditional elements in practice. Especially in publications that emphasize cultural identity and regionality, the regional style classification and application model constructed by the research can effectively improve the cultural accuracy and visual appeal of the design. The study also proposed specific paths for the integration of traditional culture and modern aesthetics, including methods such as element extraction, semantic reconstruction, and media translation, which will help design works convey traditional spirit while having the appeal of modern aesthetics.*

Keywords: *door god painting, regional style, Chinese folk culture, modern design, traditions, image, cultural heritage, book design, innovation, graphic design, visual communication, museum, cultural heritage.*

INTRODUCTION

In the context of the increasing globalization and digitalization of contemporary visual communication, how to reflect the uniqueness and deep value of local culture in design has become an important issue that the design field needs to face urgently. With the proposal and promotion of the concept of "cultural confidence" in China, more and more designers and researchers have begun to pay attention to the reproduction and reconstruction of traditional cultural elements in modern design, trying to explore an expression method that is both culturally profound and in line with modern aesthetics. In this context, as a highly representative image form in traditional Chinese folk beliefs, door god paintings not only carry the symbolic meaning of folk beliefs, religious connotations and family protection, but also become an important part of traditional visual culture that cannot be ignored with its unique visual language, formal beauty and regional style. However, compared with its profound cultural heritage and visual expression, the application research of door god images in modern design, especially in book design, is still weak, lacking the support of systematic exploration and theoretical framework, which has become the "breaking point" between the inheritance of traditional images and the integration of contemporary visual language.

As a comprehensive visual communication behavior, modern book design requires the organic unity of content and form, and faces

the challenge of reconstructing the aesthetics of traditional books in the context of multimedia reading and digital publishing. In this process, how traditional image elements can achieve cultural continuity and innovative expression through visual redesign has become a key issue in design practice. As an image with strong symbolic meaning and modeling expression, the totemic image, rich decorative vocabulary and strong color style of door gods provide cultural materials with great potential for modern book design. On the one hand, these traditional elements can give books a profound cultural atmosphere and visual appeal through the renewal of design language; on the other hand, by reinterpreting the cultural background and aesthetic characteristics of traditional images, it is helpful to promote the contemporary expression and international dissemination of local visual culture.

This study was carried out under the above background, attempting to reveal its visual characteristics and aesthetic system through a systematic combing of the artistic styles of door god paintings in the four major regions of China, namely the east, south, west and north, and further analyze how these traditional images are transformed and applied in modern book design. The core issue of the study is: in the current era of cultural diversity and the continuous evolution of design language, how can the door god image, as a part of traditional folk art, reconstruct its form and semantics while maintaining its cultural core, so as to achieve

its effective communication and aesthetic innovation in contemporary book design.

ANALYSIS OF RECENT RESEARCH

As a religious image, the origin of door gods can be traced back to the ancient Chinese culture of warding off evil spirits. As early as the Shang Dynasty, people had the custom of hanging peach charms and drawing images on their doors to ward off evil spirits. The "Shen Tu and Yu Lei" recorded in ancient books such as "Classic of Mountains and Seas" and "Book of Rites" are considered to be the earliest door god images, and this tradition continued during the Qin and Han Dynasties (21 BC – 220 AD). With the spread and integration of Buddhism and Taoism, the image of door gods gradually evolved from abstract symbols to concrete figures. Xiang Jing and Zhang Wei conducted a detailed review of the evolution of the image of door gods in their research, pointing out that the image of door gods gradually evolved from early gods to historical figures (such as Qin Qiong, Yuchi Gong, Guan Yu, etc.), forming a new image system that is both religious and folk [17; 20]. Door gods thus went from mythology to folk, becoming an important visual symbol of the home. In addition, he also pointed out that after the Tang Dynasty, the image of door gods became increasingly secular and life-oriented, and their functions also changed from purely religious to practical and aesthetic. Huang Yongchun and Sun Yujie focus on the relationship between door god paintings and printing technology in their works. They believe that the development of woodblock printing has greatly promoted the popularity of door god paintings. Especially in the Ming and Qing dynasties, New Year painting workshops flourished in various places. As an important theme of New Year paintings, door god paintings are widely circulated among the people [4]. At the same time, Ouyang Qiuzi pointed out that the development of door god paintings is closely related to people's festivals, especially the custom of "sticking door gods" during the Spring Festival, which makes door god paintings an indispensable festival decoration for every household [7]. Sun Facheng further pointed out that door god paintings are not only a part of New Year paintings, but also have independent cultural value. The door gods in New Year paintings often appear in pairs with rigorous composition. This stable and regular composition feature deepens the symbolic meaning of auspiciousness and peace in Chinese folk culture [11]. On the other hand, as a visual image, door god paintings are highly symbolic and decorative. Their composition, color, shape,

symbols and other aspects reflect the aesthetic characteristics of traditional Chinese art. In their research, Du Jie, Wang Yawen and Cai Yushuo compared the door god paintings in Zhuxian Town, Taohuawu and Fengxiang, and pointed out that the door god paintings in different regions have their own characteristics in style [1; 3]. The door gods in the north have rough lines and powerful shapes, emphasizing power and majesty; the door gods in the south have bright colors and delicate lines, focusing on decoration and emotional expression; the door gods in the east tend to be elegant, focusing on the expressions of the characters and the composition level; the door gods in the west integrate religious and natural elements, and their style is free and unrestrained. Xie Yufeng pointed out that the symbols in the door god paintings not only have specific meanings, but also construct a complete visual symbol system, reflecting the cultural identity and psychological needs of the people. He believes that the image language of door god paintings is a visual presentation of collective beliefs and a "visual expression of beliefs" [18]. Ma Yanning proposed in his research that the symbol system of door god paintings reflects the characteristics of "image folklore", that is, the image itself not only carries aesthetic information, but also a comprehensive reflection of folk customs, belief systems and social psychology. He pointed out that in door god paintings, color is not only an important component of visual language, but also has symbolic meaning: red symbolizes auspiciousness and joy, black symbolizes evil and authority, and gold symbolizes dignity and sacredness. The use of color is an important means of constructing image meaning [6].

The third is the study of regional differences and cultural background of door god paintings. In recent years, regional research on door god paintings has gradually deepened. Different geographical environments, social structures and cultural traditions have had a profound impact on the evolution of door god painting styles. Qi Xu, & Jia Guotao and Chen Xiaoyu pointed out that the formation of door god painting style is closely related to regional culture [2; 8]. The northern region is full of wars and worships power. The image of door god is mainly military generals, focusing on deterrence and power symbols; the western region is the first region where Buddhism was introduced to China, and religion is prosperous, so there are rich religious patterns in door god paintings; the south is a multi-ethnic coexistence, and the cultural characteristics of each ethnic group are obvious. Door god paintings combine Buddhist

and Taoist images with nature worship; the eastern coastal area has a developed economy and a prosperous culture. The style of door god paintings tends to be elegant, and pays attention to the proportion of shapes and details [13]. Ren Helin, Li Li, & Ren Tao believe that the evolution of door god painting style is not only a change in artistic language, but also a comprehensive reflection of local social structure, religious beliefs, and economic forms. Taking Wuqiang as an example, he analyzed the widespread popularity of military door gods in the region and believed that this phenomenon reflects the high trust and awe of the local people in the image of military generals as a military stronghold [10].

Finally, the current research status of the integration of door god paintings and modern visual design. With the development of the cultural industry and the increasing demand for contemporary expression of traditional culture, the application of traditional images in modern design has become a hot research direction. Shang Yamin and Zhang Chunxia pointed out in their research that the modern application of traditional images requires the use of methods such as "image simplification, symbol extraction, and semantic reconstruction" to achieve the visual regeneration of traditional images. In the application of door god paintings, she emphasized that the symbolic processing of images helps to enhance the cultural depth and modernity of design [12; 19].

However, the current application of door god paintings in modern design is mostly limited to cultural and creative products, advertising packaging, and other fields, and the systematic research on modern book design is still insufficient.

In summary, although existing research has achieved rich results in the history, artistic style, and folk function of door god paintings, there are significant deficiencies in many aspects. For example, there is a lack of systematic research on the integration of regional styles of door god paintings and modern design. Regional research mostly stays at the level of folklore and art, lacking linkage analysis with modern visual design practice. At the same time, there is a lack of theory of visual transformation mechanism, and how door god images are transformed from traditional image systems into modern design language, especially in terms of color, composition, symbols, etc., the concrete transformation path has not yet been clarified.

PURPOSE

This study aims to analyze the regional artistic evolution of Chinese door god paintings

across eastern, southern, western, and northern China, highlighting their stylistic and cultural differences. It further explores strategies for integrating these traditional visual elements into contemporary book design, proposing practical methods to achieve their modern transformation and cultural continuity. The research is conducted through two approaches: (1) a systematic analysis of the artistic styles and historical evolution of door god paintings, and (2) an examination of modern book design cases that successfully incorporate traditional imagery, focusing on their application in covers, illustrations, and color schemes. Ultimately, this study seeks to establish a framework for translating traditional symbols into modern design, fostering innovation in book design while preserving cultural heritage.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND THEIR DISCUSSION

This study will conduct an in-depth discussion on the regional style evolution of door god paintings, application strategies in modern book design, the influence of traditional symbolic elements, and the mechanism of cultural inheritance and artistic transformation.

First, China has a vast territory, and door god paintings in various regions have formed unique artistic styles in the long-term development process. By sorting out and analyzing the door god paintings in the four major regions of east, south, west and north, it can be seen that the eastern region of China is represented by Yangjiabu in Shandong and Taohuawu in Jiangsu. This region has rarely experienced wars, the people live a stable life, and the natural environment is favorable. It has always been a region with prosperous economic and cultural development in China [16]. Therefore, the door god paintings in the east are deeply influenced by the concept of literati paintings, focusing on the smoothness of lines and the elegance of color matching. In addition to military generals, civil officials also account for a large proportion of the characters, reflecting the pursuit of a peaceful and stable life [14] (Fig. 1, a).

The southern region, such as Guangxi and Yunnan, is a multi-ethnic area. Door god paintings are deeply influenced by local folk customs and religious beliefs. The climate in southern China is hot, and the Dai, Miao and other ethnic minorities living there are warm and open-minded. Therefore, door god paintings tend to use strong contrasting colors (Fig. 1b). The western region is the region where Buddhism was first introduced to China. It has developed

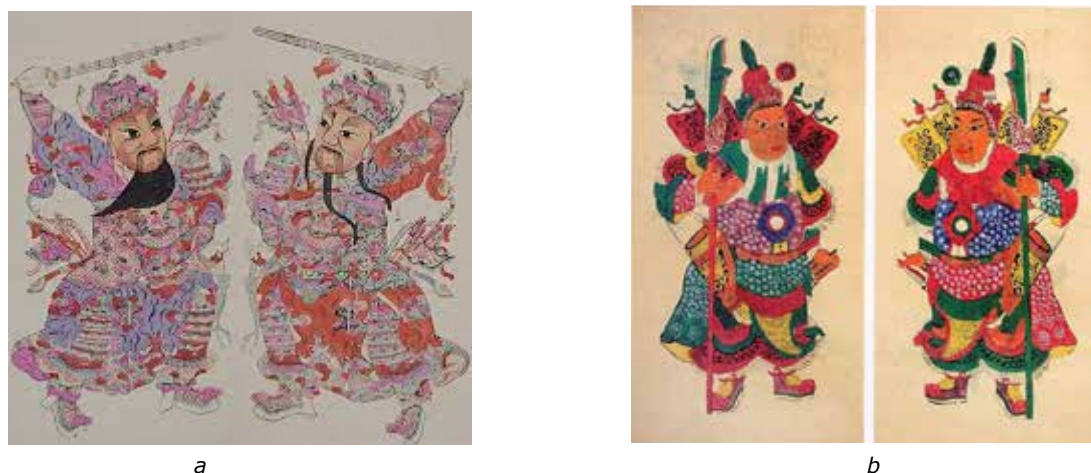


Fig. 1. a – Door God painting in Eastern China, b – Door God painting in Southern China

relatively prosperously and has a profound integration with Taoism and Confucianism in China. Therefore, the folk culture in this region is deeply influenced by religion. The content and characters of door god paintings often have many religious decorations and patterns, and the colors are mainly gold and red, reflecting the unique aesthetic orientation and cultural characteristics of the region [5; 15] (Fig. 2a).

In northern regions such as Wuqiang, Hebei, door god paintings pursue symmetry in composition, exaggerated character modeling, strong colors, and the main content is mostly generals holding weapons (Fig. 2b). Because the north has always been a military stronghold in ancient China and wars have occurred frequently, the worship of military generals reflects the northern people's desire for a sense of security brought by strong military power [9].

These regional style differences reflect the differences in aesthetic concepts, religious beliefs and lifestyles of people in different

regions, and also provide rich visual resources for modern book design.

Secondly, with the continuous development of design concepts, traditional door god painting elements are widely used in modern book design. In terms of cover design, the door god image is used as the main visual element, combined with modern typography design techniques, to create a cover that has both traditional charm and contemporary aesthetics. For example, the cover of Hansheng magazine directly uses a partial enlargement of the door god pattern to enhance the visual impact of the book in the most intuitive way (Fig. 3a).

In terms of illustration design, using the lines, shapes and color characteristics of door god paintings to draw illustrations can give them a strong traditional cultural attribute. At the same time, the introduction of these traditional elements also enhances readers' reading experience, cultural identity and understanding of the content. For example, Liu Dongxia's



Fig. 2. a – Door God paintings in Western China, b – Door God paintings in Northern China



Fig. 3. a – "Hansheng Magazine", b – "Beasts on Stilts", c – "Chinese Memory – Five Thousand Years of Civilization Treasures"

illustrations for "Beasts on Stilts" (Fig. 3b). Finally, the symmetrical composition and line characteristics of door god paintings can be used to decorate the layout of the book to form a unique visual rhythm and beauty. For example, "Chinese Memory – Treasures of Five Thousand Years of Civilization" designed by Lv Jingren uses a symmetrical cover design to simulate the form of opening a door, reflecting a sense of rigorous order (Fig. 3c).

The practice of these application strategies reflects the innovative transformation of traditional cultural elements in modern book design. Through the modern processing of door god painting elements, designers can realize the organic combination of traditional culture and modern aesthetics in book design, providing designers with new creative ideas and methods.

Finally, the application of door god painting elements in modern book design involves the mechanism of cultural inheritance and artistic transformation. Designers need to think and practice in many aspects. In the creation, we must respect the original cultural connotation. When extracting and using door god painting elements, we must fully understand the cultural meaning and symbolism behind them, avoid one-sidedness or misreading, and ensure the cultural accuracy of the design works. This is the premise of the unity of content and form. At the same time, combined with modern design concepts and technical means, the door god painting elements are innovatively recreated so that they retain traditional characteristics and meet contemporary aesthetic needs.

Through the establishment and implementation of the above mechanisms, it can effectively promote the revitalization and inheritance of traditional cultural elements in

modern design and realize the continuation and innovation of cultural values.

According to the research results, door god paintings are not only visual symbols of traditional culture, but also carry the cultural symbolic meaning of praying for blessings and warding off evil spirits, and expelling evil spirits and bringing good luck. At the same time, their unique artistic expression also provides modern book design with extremely tense visual resources and aesthetic values. In the regional style analysis of door god paintings, we found that door god paintings in various places have their own characteristics in character images, composition methods, color matching and symbol systems. These differences not only stem from the aesthetic tendencies and religious customs of different geographical regions, but also reflect the diversity of regional culture.

In the context of modern book design, the introduction of door god paintings is not only reflected in the superficial reference of visual elements, but also in the reconstruction of its cultural semantics and the modern translation of image language. The study found that designers usually use three paths to integrate door god paintings into design practice: the first is "direct reproduction", that is, using traditional images intact to emphasize the originality and historical sense of culture, which is suitable for historical themes or folk culture publications, such as "Collection of Chinese New Year Woodblock Prints" and "Chinese Door Gods-Traditional Folk Arts and Crafts" (Fig. 4a, b).

The second is "symbolic translation", which reconstructs the symbolic meaning of door gods through the reorganization of abstract graphics, colors or elements. It is suitable for popular literature or cultural communication books, such as "Dance Leaves Traces: Oral History



a



b



c



d

Fig. 4. a – "Collection of Chinese New Year Woodblock Prints", b – "Chinese Door Gods-Traditional Folk Arts and Crafts", c – "Dance Leaves Traces: Oral History of Shandong's "Intangible Cultural Heritage" Dance", d – "Representative works of Chinese New Year woodblock prints"

of Shandong's "Intangible Cultural Heritage" Dance" and "Representative works of Chinese New Year woodblock prints" (Fig. 4 c, d). The third is "creative mix and match", which combines door god elements with other cultural symbols and contemporary graphic languages to form a cross-cultural and diversified visual experience. It is especially suitable for children's books, art books and other types that require creative expression, such as "Chinese Classical Comic Book: Investment of the Gods (Collector's Edition)", "Taiwan Door Gods Catalog" and "Chinese Immortal Painting Album" (Fig. 5).

Book covers or illustrations with folk elements are more likely to attract attention and stimulate interest. The application of door god images must be based on the understanding and respect of cultural context. Door gods are not just "images", but a cultural symbol deeply embedded in people's daily life and belief system. Therefore, designers need to avoid mechanical and curious "cultural appropriation" in the

application process, but should make the door god image gain the legitimacy and emotional resonance of contemporary expression in new media through textual research and re-creation.

Through the systematic analysis of regional styles and visual strategies, we have initially established a "traditional image-modern design fusion model" for subsequent research and practice reference. Future research can expand the dialogue mechanism between door god paintings and other traditional folk images (such as New Year paintings, shadow puppets, etc.), build a broader folk visual symbol system, and provide more theoretical support and design paths for the creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese traditional culture.

CONCLUSIONS

This study systematically explores the regional style evolution of Chinese folk traditional images – door god paintings and



Fig. 5. Examples of "Creative Mix and Match" Application of Door God Elements: a – "Chinese Classical Comic Book: Investment of the Gods (Collector's Edition)", b – "Taiwan Door Gods Catalog" c – "Chinese Immortal Painting Album"

their practical application in modern visual communication. The artistic style characteristics of Chinese door god paintings in the four major regions of east, west, south and north are systematically sorted out. Secondly, the study deeply analyzes the various application paths of door god images in modern book design. Through empirical observations on cover design, illustration design, layout decoration and other aspects, this paper summarizes three typical fusion strategies: direct reproduction, symbolic translation and creative mix and match. These three paths represent the three stages of traditional cultural images from "reproduction" to "translation" to "recreation", which not only reflects the depth of contemporary designers' understanding of traditional images, but also shows the cultural communication strategies between different design purposes and reader groups. It provides theoretical support for the cross-border integration between tradition and modernity, and also provides an operational reference path for future design practice. For example, other folk art forms such as New Year paintings, paper-cutting, shadow puppets, etc., explore the application of different traditional image elements in modern book design. In summary, as one of the most representative and vital visual resources in Chinese folk culture, the creative transformation of door god images in modern book design not only continues the visual language of traditional culture, but also provides an infinite source of inspiration for contemporary designers.

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АНОТАЦІЯ

Рен Ютянь, Дубрівна А. Культурна спадкоємність та інновації: зображення дверного бога в сучасній візуальній комунікації

Метою роботи є систематизація процесів розвитку стилю регіональних розписів дверних божеств, виявлення того, як образи народного мистецтва входять у сучасний візуальний контекст, трансформуючись у сучасному дизайні книги. Дослідження спрямоване не лише на те, щоб відстежити історичну траєкторію образів богів дверей, а й наголошує на реконструкції їх значення в сучасному графічному дизайні, щоб знайти стійкий та інноваційний шлях інтеграції традиційних візуальних символів у сучасну мову дизайну.

Методологія базується на системно-аналітичному, порівняльному, образно-стилістичному, комплексно-історичному, описовому аналізі, що дозволило поглиблено вивчити художні особливості розписів дверей у різних регіонах Китаю та зробити обґрунтовані висновки.

Результати. Результати дослідження показують, що як типовий представник традиційного народного мистецтва багата візуальна мова розписів дверних богів має високий потенціал для трансформації в сучасному дизайні книги. Картини бога дверей у чотирьох основних регіонах сходу, заходу, півдня та півночі мають свої особливості: східний регіон здебільшого відображає делікатний та чудовий стиль із м'якими лініями; південний регіон віддає перевагу яскравим кольорам і витонченим формам; західні дверні боги зосереджені на таємничій атмосфері та релігійних символах; а північний регіон являє важкий реалістичний і величний стиль. Ці образні мови не лише є джерелом натхнення для візуальної краси сучасних книг, а й підсилюють культурну глибину та емоційний резонанс книг через вбудовування культурної самобутності та народних символів. У практиці сучасного книжкового дизайну ці образи дверних богів часто використовуються для вираження обкладинок, сторінок розділів або місцевих прикрас фестивальних, фольклорних та історичних книг, стаючи містком, що з'єднує традицію та сучасність, фольклор та мистецтво.

Наукова новизна дослідження полягає в тому, що з позиції міжрегіонального порівняння художній стиль китайських картин бога дверей систематично відсортовано та запропоновано модель його еволюції в мові візуального дизайну. Водночас дослідження поєднує аналіз традиційних народних образів із сучасною практикою книжкового дизайну та будує логічний ланцюг «традиційні образи – мова дизайну – культурна трансформація» із двох рівнів культури зображення і застосування дизайну, забезпечуючи нову перспективу та теоретичну підтримку для регенерації традиційних культурних символів у контексті дизайну. Крім того, в дослідженні також запропоновано стратегічний підхід «візуального присвоєння та редизайну», тобто, зберігаючи основний дух традиційних образів і переформовуючи їх у форми сучасної мови дизайну, можна досягти сучасного вираження традиційних образів.

Практична значущість. Це дослідження не лише надає джерела зображень та ідеї дизайну для довідки щодо поточного оформлення книжок, які все більше цінують культурні цінності, але також формує чіткі теоретичні вказівки для дизайнерів щодо того, як розуміти, вибирати та використовувати традиційні елементи на практиці. Особливо в публікаціях, які наголошують на культурній ідентичності та регіональності, класифікація регіональних стилів і модель застосування, створена в результаті дослідження, може ефективно покращити культурну точність і візуальну привабливість дизайну. У дослідженні також запропоновано конкретні шляхи інтеграції традиційної культури та сучасної естетики, включаючи такі методи, як виділення елементів, семантична реконструкція та медіапереклад, які допоможуть дизайнерам передавати традиційний дух, маючи при цьому привабливість сучасної естетики.

Ключові слова: розпис бога дверей, регіональний стиль, китайська народна культура, сучасний дизайн, традиції, образ, культурна спадщина, книжковий дизайн, інновації, графічний дизайн, візуальна комунікація, музеї, культурна спадщина.

АВТОРСЬКА ДОВІДКА:

Рен Ютянь, аспірант кафедри цифрового мистецтва, Київський національний університет технологій та дизайну, Київ, Україна; Шеньсі, Китайська народна республіка, e-mail: 767328531@qq.com, orcid: 0009-0004-7855-7703.

Дубрівна Антоніна Петрівна, кандидат мистецтвознавства, доцент, завідувач кафедри цифрового мистецтва, Київський національний університет технологій та дизайну, Київ, Україна, e-mail: dubrivna.ap@knutd.com.ua, orcid: 0000-0001-8012-6946.

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