

Article

# Research on the Transformation of Cultural Symbols of the Li and Miao Regions in Hainan in Commercial Illustration Teaching

Yufei Zhang <sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology, Haikou, Hainan, 571126, China

\* Correspondence: Yufei Zhang, Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology, Haikou, Hainan, 571126, China

**Abstract:** In the context of the development of the Hainan Free Trade Port and the coordinated advancement of cultural and tourism industries, the contemporary visual transformation of regional culture has become a significant topic in design education. As an important medium of visual communication, commercial illustration possesses notable advantages in conveying regional culture due to its strong intuitiveness, visual appeal, and rapid dissemination across multiple platforms. However, in current teaching practice, students' application of cultural symbols often remains at the level of surface imitation, leading to problems such as mechanical symbol accumulation, fragmented visual expression, and misunderstandings of cultural connotations. Focusing on the cultural symbols of the Li and Miao ethnic groups in Hainan, this study systematically analyzes their graphic structures, color characteristics, compositional logic, and creative methods from the perspective of visual genes, aiming to clarify the internal structural rules and aesthetic principles embedded in traditional visual forms. By integrating these analytical results with the teaching practice of commercial illustration courses, this paper further explores effective pedagogical pathways for transforming traditional cultural symbols into contemporary design language. The findings indicate that, on the premise of ensuring cultural accuracy and respecting original semantic contexts, teaching strategies centered on form refinement, stylistic integration, contextual reconstruction, and narrative application can guide students to move beyond superficial reproduction toward meaningful reinterpretation. Through structured training in visual abstraction, modular reorganization, and thematic storytelling, students are able to achieve a balance between cultural authenticity and modern aesthetic expression, thereby enhancing both creative depth and communicative effectiveness in commercial illustration. This research provides a systematic framework for incorporating regional cultural resources into design education and offers practical insights into cultivating culturally grounded and innovation-oriented design thinking.

**Keywords:** Hainan Li and Miao Culture; Illustration; Teaching transformation; Regional cultural symbols

Received: 27 August 2025

Revised: 16 October 2025

Accepted: 28 October 2025

Published: 31 October 2025



**Copyright:** © 2025 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

---

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background

With the continuous integration of tourism and visual design, illustration has gradually evolved into an important visual medium for the communication and regeneration of regional culture [1]. In recent years, cultural and tourism-related industries have placed increasing emphasis on visual identity construction, thematic product development, and diversified communication strategies, which has further expanded the practical application space of illustration [2]. As distinctive regional cultural resources of Hainan, the cultural traditions of the Li and Miao ethnic groups possess rich visual elements, including

unique patterns, symbolic motifs, color systems, and decorative structures [3]. These elements demonstrate strong recognizability, structural regularity, and aesthetic value, thereby providing substantial potential for contemporary visual transformation. In cultural tourism branding, creative product packaging, environmental graphics, and digital media communication, related visual resources have been widely adopted and adapted [4].

However, within the teaching of commercial illustration in higher education institutions, the application of Li and Miao cultural symbols often remains at the level of intuitive material reference rather than systematic research and structured transformation [5]. In many cases, traditional patterns are directly extracted and incorporated into student works without sufficient analysis of their compositional logic, symbolic meaning, or cultural context. Such practices easily lead to superficial imitation, mechanical stacking of visual symbols, and a lack of coherence in overall composition. As a result, the expressive effect of the works becomes formalized and fragmented, and the deeper cultural connotations embedded in the original symbols may be weakened or misunderstood. This situation reflects a gap between cultural resource utilization and methodological guidance in design education. Therefore, from a pedagogical perspective, it is necessary to explore systematic transformation methods for regional cultural symbols, clarify their visual structures and semantic foundations, and construct an operable teaching framework that supports both cultural accuracy and creative innovation.

### *1.2. Research Objectives*

Taking the cultural symbols of the Li and Miao ethnic groups in Hainan as the research entry point, this paper aims to address the problem of superficial application of regional cultural elements in commercial illustration teaching and to propose feasible and operable transformation strategies [4]. First, through a structured analysis of representative patterns and visual forms, the study seeks to sort out their graphic structures, formal composition rules, color characteristics, and stylistic features, thereby identifying their underlying visual logic. Second, these analytical results are integrated into classroom teaching practice, guiding students to move from direct copying toward processes of abstraction, refinement, reorganization, and contextual reconstruction [5].

On the basis of respecting original cultural connotations and maintaining semantic consistency, the study emphasizes redesign through contemporary visual language, enabling traditional elements to adapt to modern communication scenarios. By constructing a teaching pathway that combines theoretical interpretation, formal training, and project-based practice, this research aims to enhance students' ability to conduct culturally grounded design exploration [6]. Ultimately, the objective is to improve the depth, accuracy, and expressive quality of cultural representation in commercial illustration courses, promote a more rational and systematic use of regional cultural resources, and contribute to the sustainable integration of traditional cultural elements and contemporary visual design.

## **2. Feature Extraction and Visual Gene Deconstruction of Hainan Li and Miao Cultural Symbols**

### *2.1. Deconstruction of Visual Genes*

In order to systematically clarify the transmissible features and artistic essence of Hainan Li and Miao cultural symbols for modern illustration creation, this section comprehensively sorts out the visual genes of these ethnic cultural symbols [7]. The analysis is conducted from three primary dimensions: graphic structure, color composition, and material creation methods. This exploration is deeply rooted in the study of traditional Li brocade patterns, extensive ethnographic documents, and physical artifacts preserved in regional museums.

In terms of graphic structure, the cultural symbols of the Li and Miao ethnic groups represent a sophisticated transformation from objective natural images to highly abstract geometric configurations [8]. Taking the renowned Li brocade patterns as a primary example, the traditional frog pattern transforms the ethnic reverence for life and ecological vitality into a remarkably stable visual schema [9]. This is achieved through strict symmetrical structures and repetitive spatial arrangements, which profoundly reflect the indigenous philosophical understanding of the infinite cycle of nature and life. Furthermore, the Dalishen, or the mythological hero patterns, predominantly adopt a frontal, upright, and symmetrical posture [10]. By utilizing a highly simplified and geometric human figure structure, these patterns successfully enhance the visual sense of majestic power and historical solemnity. Additionally, geometric motifs such as the continuous rhombus and undulating water wave patterns are meticulously arranged in an interconnected manner to create a strong visual rhythm. This orderly composition vividly demonstrates the rational structural tendency embedded within the traditional aesthetic consciousness of the local ethnic groups [11].

Regarding color composition, the traditional visual culture of the Li and Miao groups is predominantly characterized by the profound application of black, red, blue, and yellow [12]. This specific color palette is inextricably linked to the unique tropical natural environment of Hainan Island and the rich historical experience of local agricultural production and daily life. Black is frequently utilized as a foundational background color, which effectively stabilizes the overall visual composition and provides a strong contrast for other vibrant hues. Red is passionately employed to emphasize the vibrant meaning of life, auspicious blessings, and solemn ceremonial rituals. Meanwhile, blue and yellow significantly enrich the overall color gradation by drawing direct associations with essential natural elements such as the clear tropical sky, the surrounding ocean, and the radiant sun. These colors maintain relatively clear functional divisions within the traditional textile and craft systems, rendering their visual expression highly recognizable and deeply symbolic.

From the perspective of creation methods and craftsmanship, traditional Li and Miao artifacts place a strong emphasis on the organic integration of inherent material properties and accumulated production experience. The meticulous carving of a single piece of wood based on its natural grain, the structural variation in the shaping of a traditional bone hairpin, and the preservation of the original texture in the production of intangible cultural heritage like tree bark garments all demonstrate a profound respect for the innate characteristics of natural materials. This material-based logic of artistic creation endows the physical object itself with definitive formal features. Over long periods of historical development, these material-specific characteristics have gradually evolved into culturally directed visual symbols that carry the collective memory of the ethnic groups.

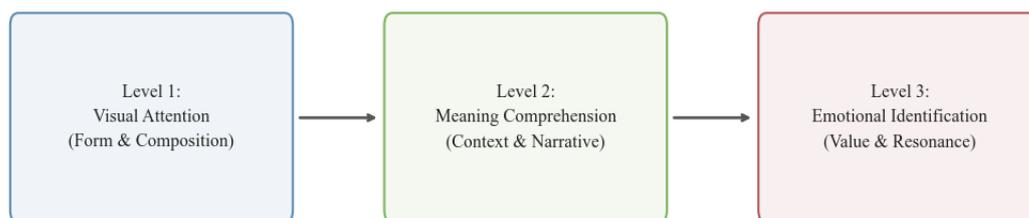
## *2.2. Connotative Translation of Cultural Symbols*

In the contemporary context of cultural tourism and creative industries, the effective dissemination of regional cultural symbols depends not only on their captivating external forms but also heavily relies on the deep understanding and positive emotional experience of the modern audience. The cognitive process through which general tourists and modern consumers recognize and internalize these ethnic cultural symbols can be systematically divided into three progressive levels: visual attention, meaning comprehension, and ultimate emotional identification [13].

Visual attention serves as the crucial starting point of cultural cognition. In today's highly dynamic and information-intensive communication environment, visual symbols equipped with distinct, contrasting, and unique formal features are significantly more likely to capture the fleeting attention of the audience. Consequently, the fundamental form, color application, and spatial composition of cultural illustrations must possess a certain degree of visual tension and aesthetic appeal to stand out.

Meaning comprehension constitutes a pivotal stage in the deepening of cultural cognition. Once the audience is successfully attracted by the external visual presentation of the picture, their cognitive focus will naturally shift towards exploring the profound cultural connotations, historical narratives, and auspicious meanings contained within the symbol [14]. Modern illustration practices must rely on logical image organization and appropriate context creation to accurately convey this essential cultural information, bridging the gap between ancient ethnic symbols and contemporary understanding.

Emotional identification represents the ultimate deepening stage of cultural communication. True cultural memory is successfully formed only when the audience resonates emotionally with the artwork on the basis of a thorough understanding of its cultural background. Therefore, in the process of illustration creation and cultural product design, the application of Li and Miao cultural symbols must transcend mere superficial replication of their formal expressions. Designers should deeply excavate their intrinsic emotional value, ethnic wisdom, and narrative potential. By doing so, traditional visual genes can be successfully translated into modern visual languages that resonate with contemporary aesthetic values while authentically preserving the core identity of Hainan's ethnic cultures. As illustrated in Figure 1, the cognitive translation process of cultural symbols forms a structured and progressive pathway from initial visual perception to profound emotional resonance.



**Figure 1.** The Cognitive Translation Process of Cultural Symbols.

### 3. Transformation strategies in the teaching of Cultural and Tourism illustrations

Based on the comprehensive analysis of the visual characteristics inherent in Hainan Li and Miao cultural symbols, it becomes evident that cultural transformation within the pedagogical framework of cultural and tourism illustration should not be confined merely to the superficial level of material borrowing. Instead, it necessitates the establishment of a clear, systematic, and structurally sound teaching guidance path. In light of contemporary educational practice and the specific demands of the creative industry, the effective translation and adaptation of regional cultural symbols within illustration curricula can be systematically executed through the interconnected dimensions of form, style, and function. These dimensions are not isolated from one another; rather, they are deeply intertwined and collaboratively constitute a relatively complete and scientifically rigorous teaching logic that bridges traditional cultural heritage with modern visual communication.

#### 3.1. Form Transformation

Form transformation, positioned at the very beginning of the instructional sequence, serves as a fundamental and indispensable step for students to accurately recognize, deconstruct, and innovatively apply regional cultural symbols. Because traditional patterns and ethnic designs inherently possess highly complex structural frameworks and numerous subtle details, directly utilizing them in their original state for modern illustration creation can easily result in a visually cluttered and conceptually messy picture. Therefore,

it is pedagogically necessary to guide students through a rigorous process of simplification and extraction to forge a clear, highly effective modern visual language.

Simplification in this pedagogical context is primarily reflected in the meticulous handling of form, spatial gradation, and color application. In terms of form, the instructional focus is on retaining the fundamental outline features and core geometric silhouettes of the traditional symbol while intentionally weakening or omitting excessive decorative details that might cause visual fatigue. In terms of spatial hierarchy, students are taught to transform historically complex and multi-layered physical structures into a flattened, two-dimensional expression that aligns with contemporary graphic design trends. Regarding color composition, the objective is to summarize the original, often highly variegated color system to form a relatively stable, harmonious, and modern dominant color relationship, thereby ensuring high visual impact. Refinement, as a subsequent critical step, requires students to deeply grasp the underlying aesthetic rules of the form, critically analyze the internal composition of the traditional pattern, and extract the most representative modeling elements. These extracted elements are then systematized to serve as reusable, modular visual units within a broader design vocabulary.

Building upon this structural foundation, the pedagogical approach encourages students to innovatively alter the ways in which these extracted elements are combined. By adjusting the scale and proportional relationships, and by intentionally breaking traditional arrangement orders, students can effectively make these ancient cultural symbols adapt to the dynamic composition requirements of modern commercial illustration. In addition, different contemporary visual styles can be strategically employed for the redesign process. This stylistic exploration gives the traditional ethnic symbols a completely new, culturally resonant visual look while simultaneously retaining their fundamental historical and cultural identity.

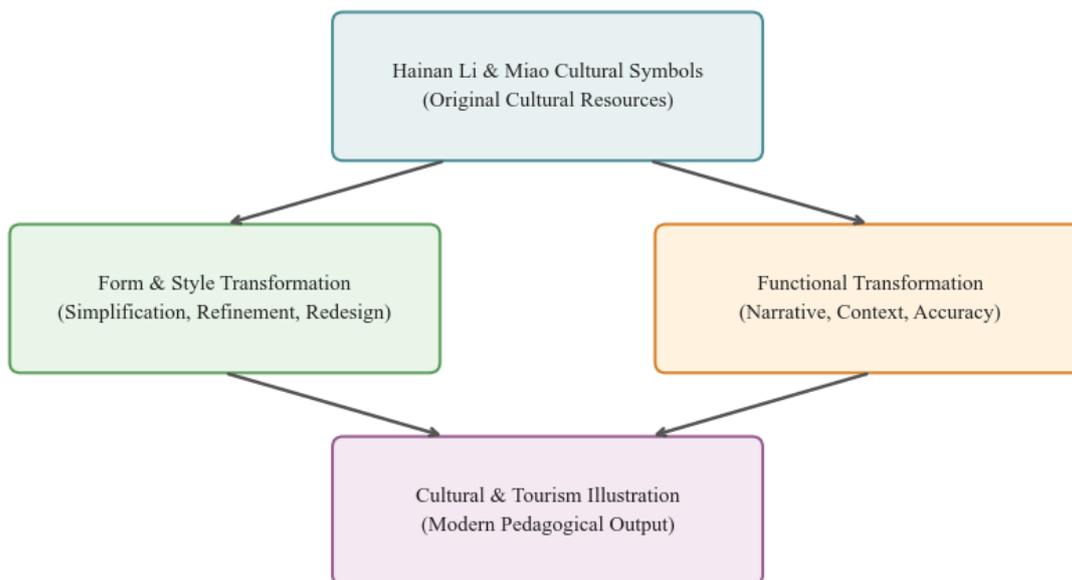
### *3.2. Functional Transformation*

Beyond the physical restructuring of visual elements, functional transformation focuses on the communicative purpose and narrative depth of the design. In practical teaching scenarios, the central subject of the illustration project should be carefully determined to ensure direct relevance to the rich repository of local culture. This includes drawing inspiration from indigenous myths and legends, traditional festivals and communal events, or the authentic production and everyday living scenes deeply rooted in Hainan Li and Miao culture. Through the meticulous selection and narrative organization of the visual plot, students are instructed to present a highly representative and culturally significant segment within the limited spatial confines of the picture, deliberately avoiding cognitive information overload for the viewer.

Furthermore, choosing the appropriate narrative perspective is critical and should be tailored to the specific emotional and communicative needs of the creation. Different narrative perspectives will invariably result in different psychological and emotional distances within the picture, thereby creating different focal points of visual expression and audience engagement. Pedagogical emphasis must also be placed on the underlying logical relationship between the chosen symbols. Students must learn that cultural implications and historical depth should be conveyed organically through deliberate image combinations and thoughtful context settings, rather than merely presenting a superficial, disconnected listing of ethnic elements.

Throughout this creative translation process, teachers play a vital supervisory role. They must actively guide students to maintain a high level of vigilance regarding cultural accuracy, ensuring that the modern application of these symbols strictly conforms to their original cultural context and respectful traditions. This rigorous academic oversight is essential to prevent any misinterpretation or inappropriate visual translation caused by a superficial misunderstanding of the source material. Ultimately, this approach guarantees that the resulting cultural and tourism illustrations are not only aesthetically innovative

but also culturally responsible. As shown in Figure 2, the transformation strategies in illustration teaching form a comprehensive pedagogical framework linking formal simplification with functional narrative.



**Figure 2.** Transformation Strategies in the Teaching of Cultural and Tourism Illustrations.

#### 4. Evaluation and Reflection on the Value of Cultural and Tourism Illustration Teaching

##### 4.1. Dimensions of Teaching Value Evaluation

In the pedagogical practice of cultural and tourism illustration, the comprehensive evaluation of student works should transcend the mere technical completion of visual forms. Instead, it must establish a dual-track assessment mechanism that equally prioritizes profound cultural expression and sophisticated visual presentation. Therefore, a scientifically constructed evaluation system must rigorously take into account both cultural integrity and aesthetic innovation, ensuring that students develop a holistic understanding of regional design.

The cultural evaluation dimension primarily assesses the historical accuracy and narrative creativity of the applied ethnic symbols. Accuracy strictly requires students to demonstrate a correct, respectful, and profound understanding of the original meaning, historical background, and specific usage context of the traditional Li and Miao cultural symbols. The modern transformation of these symbols must never deviate from their fundamental cultural orientation, and educators must ensure that no cultural conflicts or misrepresentations arise due to inappropriate misuse or superficial appropriation. Creativity, on the other hand, is built firmly upon the foundational basis of this accurate understanding. It focuses on evaluating whether students have successfully expanded the expressive spatial boundaries of traditional symbols by employing new, contemporary forms of visual expression, rather than simply replicating or mechanically repeating existing historical patterns.

Simultaneously, the aesthetic evaluation dimension attaches great importance to the contemporary visual quality and design logic of the students' works. On the one hand, the illustration should seamlessly conform to the aesthetic habits and visual preferences of the contemporary audience. It must reflect the progressive characteristics of modern times in terms of dynamic form, harmonious color palettes, and innovative spatial composition. On the other hand, there must be a high standard of basic artistic completion. This involves ensuring a crystal-clear picture structure, a reasonable visual hierarchy, and an

engaging visual rhythm. Only through such rigorous aesthetic structuring can the rich cultural content and ethnic narratives be effectively and emotionally conveyed through the language of modern illustration.

#### 4.2. Problems and Countermeasures in Teaching

During the practical teaching process, two prominent pedagogical challenges frequently emerge: symbol stuffing and cultural misinterpretation. Symbol stuffing, or visual fragmentation, occurs when students indiscriminately utilize an excessive number of cultural elements within the same picture without establishing a clear, unifying theme. This ultimately results in scattered visual information, diluting the core narrative and causing visual fatigue for the audience. As a targeted countermeasure in teaching, educators should actively enhance students' thematic awareness. Teachers must guide students to carefully select and extract only the most essential symbols structured around a singular core content. By deliberately reducing the number of decorative elements, students can significantly increase the visual concentration and narrative power of their expression.

Furthermore, the majority of cultural misinterpretations in student works are directly caused by a critical lack of deep understanding regarding the historical and social background of the selected symbols. When students initiate the creation process without thoroughly comprehending the authentic cultural context, it inevitably leads to meaning deviation and narrative distortion. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to heavily emphasize the systematic study of indigenous cultural materials in the preliminary research stage. Educators should consistently incorporate detailed case analyses of successful and unsuccessful cultural translations. Moreover, establishing a phased, multi-stage formative feedback system is crucial. This structured feedback loop allows teachers and peers to detect and correct any cognitive or conceptual understanding deviations in a timely manner, thereby effectively enhancing the cultural accuracy, historical responsibility, and overall quality of the final illustrative work. As shown in Figure 3, a structured evaluation and feedback framework is essential to identify pedagogical problems and implement targeted teaching countermeasures.

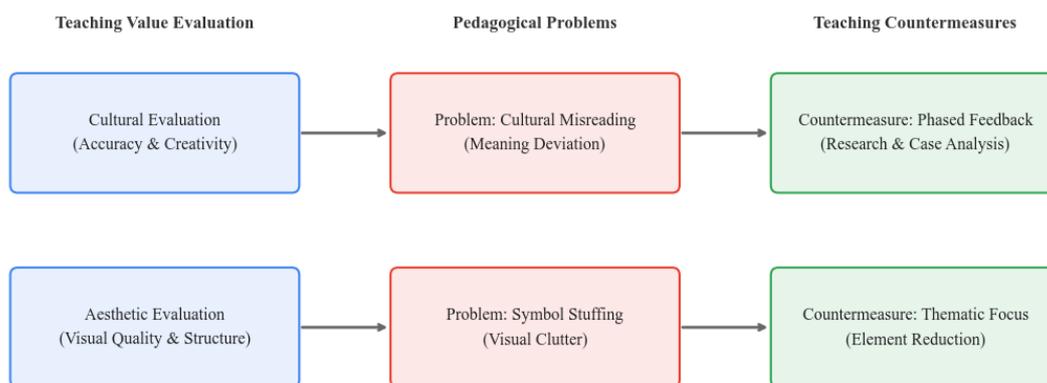


Figure 3. The Comprehensive Evaluation and Feedback Framework in Illustration Teaching.

## 5. Conclusions and Prospects

### 5.1. Research Conclusions

By deeply analyzing the unique visual characteristics of Hainan Li and Miao cultural symbols and systematically applying them to the practical teaching of cultural and tourism illustration, this paper firmly argues that the pedagogical application of regional cultural elements must be rooted in a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the culture itself. It should never merely remain at the superficial level of formal borrowing, direct replication, or mechanical patchwork. Throughout the educational process, guiding

students to gradually undergo a logical design transformation—starting from initial form refinement, advancing through aesthetic style integration, and ultimately culminating in profound narrative expression—proves to be a highly effective pedagogical framework. This progressive teaching strategy not only significantly enhances the depth of students' cognitive understanding regarding regional cultural heritage, but it also proactively mitigates common design flaws encountered in student projects, such as the chaotic piling of visual symbols and the unintentional misinterpretation of traditional historical meanings. Consequently, this structured method comprehensively improves the cultural expression ability, narrative clarity, and overall artistic quality of students' illustration works, enabling them to create professional designs that are both aesthetically appealing and culturally responsible.

### 5.2. Research Prospects

Although this study has established a functional theoretical and practical framework, the innovative application of regional cultural symbols in the teaching of cultural and tourism illustrations remains a dynamic academic field that requires continuous and in-depth exploration. Moving forward, future research should actively seek to integrate advanced digital media and emerging visual technologies. By incorporating modern technological tools, educators and designers can greatly expand the multidimensional representation forms of regional culture, allowing traditional symbols to seamlessly adapt to diverse contemporary communication scenarios such as interactive exhibitions, digital cultural products, and immersive tourism experiences. Furthermore, subsequent academic endeavors should aim to validate and dynamically adapt these theoretical strategies within a much broader scope of educational practice, encompassing various design disciplines and diverse institutional contexts. Through continuous pedagogical experimentation, theoretical refinement, and practical application, educators can constantly optimize and perfect the regional culture-oriented illustration teaching model. Ultimately, this ongoing pedagogical evolution will deeply contribute to the sustainable development of cultural tourism design education and play a vital, active role in the contemporary inheritance and innovative dissemination of excellent traditional cultures.

## References

1. S. XU, "VISUAL SYMBOLS OF YUNNAN ETHNIC MINORITIES IN DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION DESIGN," *INNOVATION*, vol. 18, pp. 138-142, 2024.
2. J. He, "Research on Emotional Design Teaching of Digital Illustration in Universities Under New Media Environment," *The Educational Review, USA*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2024. doi: 10.26855/er.2024.04.008
3. W. U. Jianxia, "Research on the Reform Practice of Illustrator Course Based on Skill Oriented Concept in the Digital Background," *The Theory and Practice of Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, vol. 8, no. 13, p. 43.
4. F. Wang, "Study on the Aesthetic Transformation Design of Traditional Cultural Elements in Visual Language," *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, vol. 7, no. 11, 2023. doi: 10.26855/jhass.2023.11.036
5. L. Xiuyun, "Innovation and Research of Ethnic Art Elements in Contemporary Design," *Frontiers in Art Research*, vol. 5, no. 6, 2023.
6. X. Zhu, B. Duan, X. Cao, and Y. Tan, "Developing a digital illustration curriculum based on A/R/Tography: Integrating AI-generated art and Chinese-Spanish heritage patterns for cross-cultural education," *International Journal of Information and Education Technology*, vol. 15, no. 8, pp. 1573-1583, 2025.
7. C. Ma, C. Gao, and X. Wu, "The application of Chinese minority pattern in modern design based on information visualization," *International Journal of Frontiers in Sociology*, vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 35-42, 2021.
8. Y. Mei, and Y. Hu, "Application of Project-based Teaching in the Tourism Marketing Course," *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice*, vol. 18, no. 6, 2018.
9. F. Brauer, "Picturing evolution and extinction: regeneration and degeneration in modern visual culture," *Cambridge Scholars Publishing*, 2015.
10. D. Huo, and N. V. Skliarenko, "Digital redesign of traditional Chinese textile patterns: a synthesis of national traditions and innovations," *Art and Design*, 2024.
11. M. Silva, R. Raposo, and L. Oliveira, "Visual Data Using Community Storytelling: Cultural Tourism Mapping," In *Iberian Conference on Information Systems and Technologies*, June, 2024, pp. 463-474. doi: 10.1007/978-3-032-12879-9\_42

12. N. Seredkina, "The construction of a positive ethnic identity in the current artistic practices (Doctoral dissertation, Sibirskiy Federal'nyy Universitet (Russia))," 2016.
13. E. Steriopoulos, C. Khoo, H. Y. Wong, J. Hall, and M. Steel, "Heritage tourism brand experiences: The influence of emotions and emotional engagement," *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 489-504, 2024. doi: 10.1177/13567667231152930
14. M. J. M. Ameen, and R. M. Mashi, "Semantic Transformation In Cultural Heritage Study In The Semiotics Of The Mark," *Opción: Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales*, no. 19, p. 28, 2019.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of the publisher and/or the editor(s). The publisher and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.