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Research on the Practical Significance of the Dual Functions of Painting Theory in Two-Dimensional Innovative Design of Intangible Cultural Heritage Cloud Collars

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Abstract: Put forward by Li Shutong, the Dual Functions of Painting Theory marks the core theoretical origin of modern Chinese indigenous design aesthetic education. It clearly defines the dual values of fine art—'applied beauty' and 'noble beauty'—breaking the conventional mode of traditional art aesthetic education that prioritizes spiritual connotation over practical utility. Currently, the inheritance of the cloud collar, an item of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), faces multiple challenges, including homogeneous innovation, superficial cultural interpretation, and a disconnect between practical function and aesthetic appreciation. Innovative approaches limited to copying traditional patterns fail to meet the requirements of contemporary living inheritance. Centered on Li Shutong's theory and integrating his aesthetic education viewpoints, this paper explores the adaptive logic and practical approaches of the theory in the planar innovation of ICH cloud collars. This is examined from three perspectives: practical creation innovation, infiltration of spiritual aesthetics, and sublimation of personality-oriented aesthetic education. The research concludes that the Dual Functions of Painting Theory furnishes standardized theoretical support for the two-dimensional innovation of cloud collar heritage. It enables two-way empowerment: practical design facilitates modern industrial application while aesthetic inheritance preserves traditional culture. Ultimately, the theory effectively eliminates the shallow development bottleneck in the innovative transformation of traditional costume heritage, delivering an innovative paradigm for the modern conversion of Chinese traditional apparel ICH.

Keywords: painting theory; cultural heritage; aesthetic education; innovative design; traditional apparel; living inheritance

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1. Introduction

As a representative costume heritage originating from the Ming and Qing dynasties in China, the traditional cloud collar exemplifies China's symmetrical aesthetic philosophy, auspicious folk customs, and classic weaving craftsmanship. It constitutes a vital component of Chinese apparel civilization [1, 2]. In the context of the prevailing national-chic trend and the drive for revitalized inheritance of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), cloud collar elements have been extensively integrated into apparel design, cultural and creative product development, digital visual communication, cultural tourism souvenirs, and research-based study activities. These elements have evolved into a core iconic symbol for the modernization of traditional garments. However, current innovative practices surrounding cloud collars exhibit significant shortcomings. Many designs merely replicate classic patterns, overuse colors, and prioritize surface decoration, neglecting the practical functionality and deeper spiritual essence of ancient craft creation. Additionally, these practices fail to address industrial commercialization and the construction of aesthetic education. As a result, related works suffer from severe homogenization, limited industrialization, a shortage of skilled inheritors, superficial

cultural connotations, a disconnect between usability and aesthetics, and a loss of the inherent aesthetic education value and cultural vitality of intangible heritage. These challenges highlight the need for a more comprehensive approach to preserving and innovating cloud collar heritage.

Li Shutong, a pioneer of China's modern art and design aesthetic education, introduced the Dual Functions of Painting Theory in his work *Methods of Painting Improvement* published in 1905. This theory proposed the core viewpoint that "painting serves two purposes: practical application and spiritual elevation." For the first time in China's aesthetic education history, this theory distinguished applied aesthetic education for functional craft design from spiritual aesthetic education aimed at personal cultivation. It established an indigenous design aesthetic education system characterized by the coexistence of practical utility and noble sentiment, as well as the integration of craft production and human cultivation. Unlike aesthetic theories focused solely on fine art, this theory emphasizes aesthetic innovation and educational enlightenment in traditional crafts, garment fabrication, and daily necessities [3]. This perspective aligns closely with the planar design innovation, market-oriented application, and cultural tourism promotion of cloud collars. It perfectly matches the demands for innovative transformation of traditional costume intangible heritage, offering a theoretical framework to guide the modernization and revitalization of these cultural artifacts.

Existing academic research on cloud collars predominantly focuses on craft restoration, pattern analysis, structural textual research, and visual design application. However, few studies undertake systematic innovative research on heritage design grounded in classic domestic aesthetic education theories. This creates a research gap characterized by an overemphasis on practical operation at the expense of theoretical construction and a prioritization of technical skills over aesthetic education. In response to this gap, this paper adopts the Dual Functions of Painting Theory as its theoretical foundation to systematically explore its adaptive logic, practical pathways, and realistic value in the two-dimensional innovation of cloud collar ICH. The study aims to establish an academic closed loop where theories guide design, design promotes cultural heritage, culture enriches aesthetic education, and industrialization supports heritage succession. This approach offers new research perspectives for the living inheritance of traditional apparel heritage and the modern advancement of domestic design aesthetic education. By bridging the divide between usability and aesthetics, this framework seeks to restore the cultural vitality and aesthetic significance of cloud collars while ensuring their relevance in contemporary contexts.

2. Theoretical Interpretation: Core Connotations of Li Shutong's Dual Functions of Painting Theory

Serving as the cornerstone of Li Shutong's design aesthetic education system, the Dual Functions of Painting Theory represents China's first systematic modern framework for craft-oriented aesthetic education. This groundbreaking theory challenges the traditional artistic mindset that historically emphasized spiritual principles over tangible utensils and refined taste over practical utility [4]. By shifting focus toward the integration of aesthetic refinement and functional practicality, it provides essential theoretical support for the modernization and innovation of traditional crafts and garment design. Drawing from foundational works such as *Methods of Painting Improvement* and *On Art*, its core connotation is structured into two complementary dimensions. These dimensions are dialectically unified, forming a cohesive and integrated design aesthetic education system that bridges the gap between artistic expression and practical application, fostering a holistic approach to creative development.

2.1. Applied Beauty: Fundamental Design Logic for Functional Craft Creation

Li Shutong emphasized that painting aesthetics extend beyond mere artistic appreciation, serving as a foundational skill integral to handicraft production and everyday life. He asserted that no craft could materialize without the guidance of painting.

This concept, referred to as applied beauty, integrates artistic styling and pictorial aesthetics into the practical development of products. It ensures that functional requirements of artifacts and real-life applications are met while achieving a harmonious balance between utility and ornamental appeal. In the context of garment production, applied beauty is evident in the thoughtful design of styles, the alignment of patterns, and the coordination of color schemes. These designs preserve the visual essence of traditional craftsmanship while adapting to modern lifestyles, contemporary design principles, and the demands of digital communication. This approach opposes superficial decorative elements, unnecessary innovations, and excessive embellishments [5]. The principle aligns with the modern design philosophy that form should inherently follow function, ensuring both practicality and aesthetic value in crafted products.

2.2. Noble Beauty: Ultimate Educational Core for Personal Cultivation and Spiritual Edification

Noble beauty, as an elevated concept within the Dual Functions of Painting Theory, transcends mere visual enjoyment and emphasizes the profound impact of aesthetic refinement, spiritual growth, personality development, and societal advancement. This perspective highlights the transformative power of fine art, which not only enhances the appeal of everyday objects and enriches life but also plays a pivotal role in shaping human character, fostering ethical values, and uplifting communities. Li Shutong articulated that the true essence of fine art lies in its ability to refine human temperament, elevate social morals, and contribute to the collective betterment of society. Meticulously crafted works of art exert their influence through both visual perception and tactile experience, thereby improving public taste, nurturing emotional depth, and fostering moral integrity. This holistic approach bridges the gap in contemporary heritage design, which often prioritizes visual impact at the expense of deeper meaning. By integrating aesthetic appeal with spiritual and moral enrichment, innovative traditional craft works gain enduring vitality, ensuring their relevance and resonance across generations.

2.3. Dual Unification: Dialectical Coexistence of Design and Aesthetic Education

Applied beauty functions as the practical foundation that ensures the usability, market adaptability, and contemporaneity of heritage innovation. It provides the necessary framework for creating designs that are functional and relevant in modern contexts. On the other hand, noble beauty represents the core spirit of cultural depth, spiritual significance, and educational value, which imbues innovative works with a profound sense of meaning and purpose [6]. These two dimensions are inherently interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Aesthetic principles devoid of practical functionality risk becoming mere superficial decoration, while craftsmanship lacking spiritual depth results in lifeless, mass-produced goods. The integration of these dual aesthetic standards establishes a comprehensive three-tier benchmark encompassing practical feasibility, cultural inheritance, and educational significance. This theoretical framework serves as a critical tool for addressing and rectifying prevalent issues in current heritage innovation practices, ensuring a balanced approach to design and aesthetic education.

2.4. Compatibility between Dual Functions of Painting Theory and Two-Dimensional Cloud Collar Innovation

Remarkable compatibility exists between the Dual Functions of Painting Theory and the planar innovative development of cloud collar heritage. Theoretically, this alignment reflects China's ancient design philosophy of "carrying moral messages via utensils," offering a localized theoretical framework for the renovation and modernization of cloud collar designs. This approach not only preserves the cultural essence of this intangible heritage but also ensures its relevance in contemporary contexts. Practically, it addresses significant shortcomings in current cloud collar designs, such as limited functionality, shallow cultural representation, and the absence of educational significance. By integrating these elements, the innovation fosters a deeper connection between traditional aesthetics and modern utility. Furthermore, both the theory and cloud collar innovation

emphasize the living inheritance of intangible heritage, promoting cultural dissemination and enhancing societal aesthetic education. This dual focus establishes clear theoretical principles and actionable guidelines for the effective redesign of planar cloud collars, ensuring their enduring cultural and practical value [7].

3. Predicaments in Current Two-Dimensional Innovation of Cloud Collar Intangible Heritage

Evaluated through the dual aesthetic principles outlined in the Dual Functions of Painting Theory and integrated with practical innovation efforts, several critical challenges have emerged in the modernization of planar cloud collar designs. These obstacles include limitations in adapting traditional artistic elements to contemporary formats, difficulties in achieving a balance between cultural preservation and aesthetic appeal, and constraints in technological applications for enhancing visual and structural integrity. Addressing these bottlenecks requires a multidisciplinary approach that combines artistic expertise, technological innovation, and cultural sensitivity to ensure the sustainable development of cloud collar heritage.

3.1. Overemphasis on Decoration While Ignoring Practicality: Deficiency of Applied Beauty

Most contemporary two-dimensional cloud collar designs tend to emphasize elaborate patterns and visually striking effects, often achieved by mechanically replicating intricate ancient structures and dense decorative motifs. However, this approach frequently neglects the principles of minimalist modern design and fails to consider the practical requirements of multi-scenario applications. As a result, many of these designs remain static decorative graphics, lacking adaptability for integration into modern clothing, cultural and creative products, or digital media platforms. This disconnect undermines the balance between aesthetic appeal and functional utility, which is a fundamental principle in design [8]. Such an imbalance also contradicts the philosophy that artistic endeavors, including painting, should serve craft production and align aesthetic design with practical needs, as emphasized in traditional design principles.

3.2. Blind Pattern Duplication Instead of Original Creation: Superficial Cultural Presentation

Many contemporary innovations in cloud collar design are limited to the superficial replication of traditional patterns and color schemes, lacking a deeper exploration of the cultural and symbolic meanings embedded within these historical artifacts. This approach often neglects the rich tapestry of auspicious connotations, folk traditions, and the inherent aesthetic principles that define the essence of traditional cloud collars [9, 10]. As a result, such designs frequently suffer from significant homogenization, failing to establish distinctive visual identities or convey profound cultural narratives. Without effectively merging ancient aesthetic values with contemporary design methodologies, these efforts fall short of their fundamental purpose: to preserve, reinterpret, and promote the enduring legacy of traditional Chinese culture in a meaningful and innovative manner.

3.3. Focus on Technical Skills Rather Than Educational Value: Vacant Spiritual Connotation

Existing academic studies on intangible cultural heritage (ICH) design often emphasize technical aspects such as design techniques, visual expression, and craft innovation. However, this focus tends to prioritize commercial applications while neglecting the deeper aesthetic and educational values inherent in handmade artifacts. As a vital medium for preserving traditional Chinese aesthetics and rich folk culture, cloud collars are frequently reduced to mere commercial design elements. This approach undermines their potential to serve as tools for aesthetic education, which could enrich public appreciation of traditional culture and foster personal development. By failing to integrate the philosophical essence of traditional craftsmanship—rooted in the idea of "enlightening society and cultivating individuals through artistic objects"—many ICH innovations risk becoming superficial and devoid of meaningful cultural depth. This lack of spiritual and educational connotation diminishes the ultimate value of these traditional crafts, leaving them disconnected from their original purpose and societal impact.

4. Practical Paths for Applying Dual Functions of Painting Theory to Two-Dimensional Cloud Collar Innovation

Grounded in the dual core principles of applied beauty and noble beauty, this approach integrates the artistic characteristics of cloud collar heritage with the demands of modern innovation. By constructing a three-dimensional framework for contemporary heritage revitalization, it aims to foster a dynamic interplay between theoretical guidance and practical design. This framework not only preserves the cultural essence of the cloud collar but also ensures its relevance in contemporary applications, thereby achieving a harmonious balance between tradition and innovation in design practices.

4.1. Centered on Applied Beauty: Practically Oriented Innovation for Modern Scenarios

Guided by Li Shutong's pragmatic aesthetic ideology, designers prioritize functionality and simplicity by discarding excessive ornamental elements. They apply modern planar transformations to the outlines, patterns, and color schemes of cloud collars, ensuring these designs align with contemporary needs. While maintaining the core Chinese symmetrical aesthetic, traditional multi-layered structures are streamlined into standardized vector planar graphics. This approach facilitates their integration into modern apparel tailoring, cultural product printing, and digital display applications. Advanced digital technology is utilized to extract, restructure, and refine auspicious patterns, preserving their cultural essence while eliminating unnecessary details. This process results in a simplified yet contemporary pattern system that retains its symbolic significance. Furthermore, traditional high-saturation contrasting colors are moderated and adjusted to create standardized palettes that cater to modern aesthetic preferences and diverse application scenarios. This systematic planar design approach embodies the educational principle that painting supports handicraft development, as outlined in the Dual Functions of Painting Theory. By addressing the challenges of limited application scope and practicality in existing cloud collar innovations, this methodology ensures that traditional aesthetics are effectively adapted for modern use, enhancing their relevance and accessibility across various fields.

4.2. Rooted in Noble Beauty: In-Depth Interpretation and Expression of Cultural Connotations

Following the unification principle of applied and noble beauty, designers delve deeply into the cultural significance embedded within the cloud collar, such as its representation of prayers for blessings, the pursuit of harmony, and the refinement of aesthetics. By integrating ancient folk symbolism and the logic of Chinese aesthetics into contemporary planar design, they aim to modernize traditional styling while preserving its cultural essence. This approach ensures that the designs remain practical and marketable, while also visualizing the symbolic meanings of patterns and expressing cultural connotations through thoughtful color matching. The modernization process breaks away from monotonous imitation and establishes a revitalized visual system for the cloud collar, characterized by innovative forms, enduring charm, and profound cultural implications. The finalized designs not only meet the practical needs of modern consumers but also inherit the core essence of traditional Chinese garment culture. This harmonious integration of ancient craftsmanship and contemporary design thinking fully embodies the cultural and spiritual value of the Dual Functions of Painting Theory, offering a renewed perspective on cloud collar renovation that bridges historical artistry with modern functionality.

4.3. Elevated Dual Unification: Integrated Development of Aesthetic Education and Industrialization

Rooted in the foundational principles of aesthetic education, which emphasize 'enlightening society and cultivating individuals through artifacts,' the planar innovation of cloud collars represents a significant advancement in integrating aesthetic education with industrialization and cultural communication. Guided by the dialectical unity of 'applied beauty' and 'noble beauty,' this innovation promotes diversified and coordinated development across multiple domains. The optimized planar designs of cloud collars hold

immense potential for application in various scenarios, including campus aesthetic education, social aesthetic education, cultural tourism experiences, and public cultural communication. These designs can be transformed into cultural and creative products, aesthetic education teaching aids, visual exhibitions, and experiential courses, making traditional costume culture more accessible and relatable to the public in everyday contexts. At the industrial level, fostering collaborative partnerships among intangible cultural heritage inheritors, design universities, cultural and creative enterprises, and cultural tourism platforms can facilitate the transformation of cloud collar innovations from conceptual designs to tangible products [11–13]. This process establishes an integrated inheritance model encompassing design, production, communication, and experience. From a cultural perspective, this research prioritizes innovation grounded in cultural heritage, ensuring that contemporary expressions of cloud collars retain their core cultural essence and aesthetic characteristics. It also seeks to prevent cultural hollowing, which can result from excessive commercialization. By harmonizing practical, cultural, aesthetic education, and industrial values, the planar innovation of cloud collars offers a sustainable and promotable pathway for the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. This approach not only preserves the cultural significance of cloud collars but also enhances their relevance in modern contexts, ensuring their continued appreciation and utilization across diverse sectors.

5. Practical Significance of Empowering Cloud Collar Innovation via Dual Functions of Painting Theory

5.1. Theoretical Significance: Filling Research Blanks of Domestic Design Aesthetic Education Applied in Heritage Innovation

This research introduces an innovative integration of Li Shutong's indigenous modern aesthetic education theory with a two-dimensional approach to traditional costume heritage innovation. By doing so, it addresses the prevailing reliance on Western design theories in heritage design studies and revitalizes the contemporary relevance of China's early modern indigenous design aesthetic education [14]. The study, centered on the Dual Functions of Painting Theory, establishes a comprehensive academic framework that spans theoretical origins, practical design applications, and educational enhancement. This framework effectively compensates for existing research gaps, such as the overemphasis on craft skills at the expense of theoretical development and educational depth. Furthermore, it provides localized and systematic theoretical support for the innovation of traditional apparel heritage, enriching the scope of research in China's design aesthetic education and the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. By bridging these gaps, the study contributes to a more holistic understanding of design practices and their educational implications, fostering a deeper appreciation for the integration of tradition and innovation in contemporary contexts.

5.2. Practical Significance: Resolving Homogenization and Superficiality Defects in Cloud Collar Innovation

Aligned with the dual aesthetic benchmark that harmonizes practical utility and spiritual value, the theoretical framework addresses critical issues in cloud collar innovation. These include the misalignment between functionality and aesthetics, the lack of profound cultural content, and the absence of educational significance in contemporary designs. By employing standardized and systematic planar design methodologies, the approach enables the creation of cloud collar designs that are versatile and adaptable to a wide range of modern application scenarios. This not only supports the living inheritance of intangible heritage but also promotes its market-oriented transformation [15]. Furthermore, it provides replicable and practical models for enhancing traditional costume design, contributing significantly to the broader context of China's national-chic development and cultural revitalization.

5.3. Value Significance: Mutual Empowerment between Heritage Succession and Public Personality Education

This study transcends the limited scope of design renovation and pattern enhancement by establishing a dynamic connection between the revitalization of cloud collar heritage and broader objectives such as individual personality development, the reinforcement of cultural confidence, and the systematic promotion of public aesthetic education across the nation. Through the continuous dissemination of educational value embedded in optimized and innovative cloud collar planar designs, the rich traditional apparel culture subtly integrates into the daily aesthetic experiences and lifestyles of ordinary individuals. This integration not only supports the contemporary transmission and widespread appreciation of exceptional traditional Chinese culture but also contributes to the gradual improvement of public aesthetic literacy and the holistic development of personal moral character. Furthermore, the research outcomes align with the core educational mission of cultivating individuals with aesthetic sensibilities, as emphasized in national educational guidelines [1, 11]. Simultaneously, they underscore the profound social significance of traditional intangible cultural heritage within the context of modern societal progress. By bridging heritage succession with public personality education, this approach fosters a harmonious balance between cultural preservation and the advancement of societal values, ensuring the enduring relevance of traditional heritage in contemporary life.

6. Conclusion

The core proposition of balancing 'applied beauty' and 'noble beauty' as outlined in Li Shutong's Dual Functions of Painting Theory offers a robust localized framework for the innovative development of traditional costume intangible heritage. This theory addresses critical challenges in the contemporary innovation of two-dimensional cloud collar designs, such as the prevalence of homogenized aesthetics, the disconnect between functionality and visual appeal, shallow cultural representation, and the neglect of educational significance. By emphasizing applied beauty, the theory ensures that practical considerations form the foundation of heritage innovation, while noble beauty enriches the spiritual and cultural essence of redesigned works. Together, these elements create a synergistic development cycle where theoretical insights inspire design innovation, design serves as a vessel for cultural transmission, and cultural heritage fosters the cultivation of public aesthetic sensibilities. This closed-loop approach not only enhances the practical and artistic dimensions of traditional designs but also ensures their relevance and resonance in modern contexts, paving the way for sustainable cultural preservation and aesthetic education.

In the context of heritage revitalization and the growing emphasis on nationwide aesthetic education, the application of the Dual Functions of Painting Theory transcends its theoretical origins to provide actionable solutions for the living inheritance and contemporary transformation of cloud collars. By addressing developmental barriers, this framework revitalizes the cultural and artistic vitality of China's early indigenous design aesthetic education theories. It introduces innovative paradigms and practical methodologies for the renovation of traditional heritage, fostering advancements in domestic design education and nurturing a refined public aesthetic consciousness. Furthermore, the theory's emphasis on integrating cultural depth with practical design ensures that heritage artifacts not only retain their historical significance but also adapt to modern tastes and functional demands. This dual focus offers a pathway for future research to explore interdisciplinary applications, such as the integration of digital technologies in heritage preservation or the development of educational programs that bridge traditional craftsmanship with contemporary design principles. Ultimately, this approach underscores the enduring relevance of traditional aesthetics in shaping a culturally enriched and aesthetically aware society.

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