

Article

Visual Design and Application of Zodiac IP for the Bingwu Year of the Horse Empowered by Auspicious Culture

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of building a culturally powerful country and the booming national trend consumption, cultural and creative products rooted in traditional culture have gradually become mainstream among young consumers. Based on the Chinese zodiac culture of the Bingwu Year of the Horse, this paper integrates auspicious culture with modern national trend aesthetics to conduct research on the visual design of the blessing horse IP "Gallop Horse for Grand Ambition". Addressing the prevalent drawbacks of homogeneous design, outdated expression and superficial cultural exploration in existing zodiac cultural and creative works, this project develops four scenario-based IP figures themed "Wealth Comes at Once", "Blessings Arrive Instantly", "Immediate Academic Success" and "Reunion Right Away". With rounded and soothing cartoon modeling, warm red-beige color palette and traditional auspicious motifs, the design realizes the youthful reinterpretation of traditional folk customs. This research explores innovative approaches to zodiac IP creation from both theoretical and practical dimensions, and completes diversified practical applications including emoticon packs, plush dolls and cultural and creative derivatives, offering references for the revitalization of traditional culture, innovative development of national-style IPs and industrialization of cultural and creative industries.

Keywords: Bingwu Year of the Horse; Zodiac IP; Auspicious Culture; Cultural and Creative Products

1. Introduction

With the advancement of the strategy to build a culturally powerful country and the rise of national trend consumption, cultural and creative products featuring traditional culture have gradually dominated consumption among young people. Leveraging its strong periodicity and rigid demand, zodiac-themed cultural and creative products continuously unlock market potential, with lightweight daily cultural creations and digital cultural derivatives emerging as new growth drivers [1]. Driven by commercial promotion, zodiac culture has gained extensive utilization and corresponding commercial rewards, remaining well-integrated into the information society. Nevertheless, domestic zodiac cultural and creative IPs are widely plagued by homogenization. Statistics indicate that the homogenization rate of the industry reaches 67%, and 72% of consumers consider most products mere "sticker-style designs" that simply copy zodiac animal appearances. Such works suffer from outdated cultural expression and insufficient exploration of cultural connotations, failing to meet young consumers' demands for original IPs featuring sophisticated aesthetics, distinct implied meanings and resonant emotional connections.

Against such a backdrop, this project centers on the traditional folk custom of "praying for blessings via horse-themed symbolism", taking horse culture embodying the spirits of perseverance, progress, auspiciousness and smooth fortune as the core to

Received: 30 August 2026

Revised: 09 October 2026

Accepted: 22 October 2026

Published: 26 October 2026



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conduct research on the original IP image design of the blessing horse series "Gallop Horse for Grand Ambition". Adopting modern design language to reconstruct the traditional auspicious zodiac culture and break free from rigid stereotyped modeling frameworks, this project explores innovative expression approaches for national-style zodiac IPs. It fills the industry gap caused by monotonous design and poor adaptability of existing similar figures, facilitates the youthful and visualized living inheritance of traditional folk culture, and provides original practical references with both commercial potential and cultural value for the development of cultural and creative derivatives and national-style visual design.

2. Overall Design Conception of the "Gallop Horse for Grand Ambition" IP

2.1. Design Orientation

The overall design orientation of this work Gallop Horse for Grand Ambition – Visual Design of Blessing Horse IP for the Bingwu Year of the Horse is a comprehensive creative direction formulated by integrating the connotations of traditional zodiac culture, contemporary national trend aesthetic trends and the demands of young audiences. The creation of the complete set of IP figures and the design of cultural and creative derivatives strictly comply with unified, integral and standardized design criteria.

2.1.1. Cultural Orientation

Taking the zodiac culture of the Bingwu Year of the Horse and the artistic aesthetics of horse motifs in the Tang Dynasty as its core cultural foundation, this design deeply excavates the auspicious spirit and Spring Festival blessing folk connotations embodied in traditional horse images. From the creative perspective of modern revitalization of traditional culture, it retains the elegant, full and grand cultural temperament as well as auspicious implications of traditional Tang-style horses, while conducting modern visual reinterpretation of classical cultural symbols. The design eliminates the flaws of traditional zodiac works including one-sided cultural expression, piled symbols and superficial connotations, endowing the work with profound traditional cultural heritage and cultural communication value for the new era, and realizing the innovative inheritance of traditional folk culture in the new media environment.

2.1.2. Styling Orientation

Surveys reveal that national trend cultural and creative products are evolving toward youth-oriented, minimalist and soothing styles. Accordingly, this design abandons the rigid, sharp and overly solemn depictions of horses in traditional art, and avoids childish and low-end cartoon aesthetics targeting young children. It adopts a modern national trend cartoon style characterized by rounded lines, soft shapes and clean visuals, matched with festive and mild main color tones to create a harmonious and pleasant festive visual atmosphere. The IP figures feature high recognizability and strong affinity, echoing the festive vibe of the Spring Festival and aligning with the mainstream aesthetic preferences of contemporary young people, making them adaptable to diverse new media communication and cultural and creative application scenarios.

2.1.3. Functional Orientation

This IP design breaks the single function of traditional zodiac images limited to festival viewing, and constructs a comprehensive IP system integrating cultural communication, visual application and commercial implementation [2]. It can serve as a visual carrier for the Spring Festival cultural communication of the Bingwu Year of the Horse, undertaking communication functions including holiday blessing, atmosphere creation and cultural popularization. Relying on systematic visual specifications, it expands diversified online visual applications and offline cultural and creative derivatives, realizing the transformation from flat visual images to implementable, communicable and iterable cultural and creative IPs. It effectively improves the practicability, scalability and market adaptability of zodiac IPs, and provides complete

design support for the youth-oriented communication and commercial development of traditional zodiac IPs.

2.2. Construction of Thematic System

Based on the creative background of the 2026 Bingwu Year of the Horse, this project breaks the rigid framework of traditional zodiac IPs, deeply integrates the spiritual core of "Gallop Horse for Grand Ambition" with Spring Festival blessing culture, and establishes a three-dimensional thematic system consisting of "Zodiac Culture + Auspicious Implication + Youth-oriented Expression". Taking "blessing" as the emotional main line, the IP is no longer a cold design symbol, but an emotional carrier that holds contemporary people's beautiful expectations for the new year and daily life. Diverse blessings including "immediate academic success" for student groups, "galloping horse for grand ambition" for workplace people, as well as reunion, fortune and blessing for the general public all find corresponding emotional resonance points in the IP. It enables traditional zodiac IPs to truly integrate into young people's lives and achieve two-way integration of cultural inheritance and emotional resonance.

2.3. Core IP Image

As shown in Figure 1, the basic modeling adopts an endearing auspicious horse. While retaining the recognizability of horse features, sharp lines are softened, and rounded and full outlines convey a festive and amiable temperament. Red and beige are selected as the main color palette, which not only fits the lively atmosphere of the Spring Festival, but also adapts to visual presentation in various derivative scenarios.



Figure 1. Core IP Images of the Bingwu Year of the Horse

2.4. Scenario-Based Visual Extension

From creative conception of conceptual sketches to physical presentation on carriers such as stamps, red envelopes and plush dolls, as well as expansion of derivatives including emoticon packs, ornaments and phone cases, the thematic symbols break the limitations of flat design and adapt to diverse communication and usage scenarios, making the image of "Blessing Horse" permeate every aspect of daily life.

2.5. Conception of Visual Elements

Chibi-style design caters to mass aesthetic demand and presents a relaxed and lively visual effect [3]. In terms of visual expression, the core style adopted is "cute national trend". The overall modeling applies rounded and lovely cartoon lines with softened edges to strengthen the intuitive expression of emotions, realizing harmonious integration of traditional elements and modern aesthetics. The Bingwu Year corresponds to Fire in the Five Elements; Chinese red is adopted as the primary color, which conforms to the Five Elements theory and symbolizes auspicious vitality and enterprising spirit [4]. Warm yellow serves as the base tone, matched with classic festive colors such as scarlet and gilded gold. The palette retains the inherent auspicious atmosphere of zodiac IPs, while low-saturation warm tones avoid the heaviness of traditional national style, making the design suitable for visual display on various chat interfaces.

2.5.1. Conception of Modelling and Form

This design takes the artistic modeling of traditional Tang horses as the core creative prototype. It extracts the classical features of Tang Dynasty horses, including full body shapes, smooth lines and dignified charm, which distinguish them from the sharp and

rigid body structures of ordinary horse images. To cater to the aesthetic preferences of young audiences for IP images, the traditional modeling is modernized in the design. By softening the overall outline, simplifying redundant structures, and moderately optimizing the proportions of facial features and body shape, the heavy visual sense is weakened, creating a gentle, lively, approachable and soothing cartoon horse image. Props and costumes are iconic elements of an IP image, representing its personality, capabilities and other traits, leaving a deep impression on audiences [5]. While retaining the traditional Chinese style of Tang horses, the overall modeling reduces the solemnity and sense of alienation inherent in classic horse forms, making it better suited to the visual presentation requirements of new media communication and cultural and creative products.

2.5.2. Conception of Auspicious Symbol Elements

To match the thematic connotation of multi-faceted blessings of this IP, traditional auspicious visual symbols that fit the folk custom context of the Spring Festival are integrated into the design. Centered on four thematic attributes - wealth, safety, academic success and family reunion, classic folk elements including fortune bags, Chinese knots, lanterns, scrolls and reunion patterns are selectively incorporated, with their corresponding auspicious implications subtly embedded into the detailed design of the character. The design avoids rigid piling of decorative motifs. Instead, decorative elements are naturally integrated with the IP's body shape with clear primary and secondary layers, endowing the visuals with both ornamental and cultural value, and achieving a profound integration of external visual aesthetics and internal blessing culture.

2.5.3. Conception of Color System

In terms of color matching, the overall palette follows the color logic of national trend design and Spring Festival celebrations. Traditional Chinese red and warm beige are adopted as primary tones to set off the festive, warm and peaceful atmosphere of the Lunar New Year, aligning with the public's color cognition of zodiac folk culture. Meanwhile, low-saturation auxiliary colors are applied to enrich visual layers and eliminate the gaudy feel of highly saturated hues, resulting in a mild, elegant and consistent overall color scheme. This color system is compatible with new media communication scenarios such as emoticon packs and digital red envelopes, and also meets the color standards for printing physical cultural and creative products, ensuring consistent visual effects of the IP when applied across multiple scenarios.

3. Design and Implementation of Derivative Cultural and Creative Products of IP

3.1. Design of Digital Cultural and Creative Applications

Instead of confining the IP to the single narrative of "zodiac blessings", this design covers over 90% of young people's daily chatting scenarios. The IP is no longer merely a "limited-edition character" exclusive to the Spring Festival, but an "everyday companion" that can be used and shared at any time. It depicts a flustered office worker rushing to morning classes with a fortune bag on his back, shouting "Hurry up! I'm going to be late"; anxious moments when faced with piles of work and homework, frantically typing while complaining "Hurry up and finish this!" "Oh no, I'll never get my homework done"; a laid-back mood of hugging a pillow and sighing "Nothing matters more than sleep"; proud moments carrying a painting tube with arms folded across the chest; a greedy look salivating over a bento box; a petty tantrum with puffed cheeks huffing "Hmph, I'm mad"; and a playful wink toward the camera. Paired with witty copywriting and an adorable visual image, the sticker pack is inherently shareable. It accurately conveys the resonant feelings among office workers and students' grievances about academic stress alike. Within young people's social context, the IP transforms from a "design artwork" into a form of "social currency".

As shown in Figure 2, this series of stickers breaks away from the misconception of traditional digital cultural creation that prioritizes form over practicality. As a lightweight

medium, sticker packs offer a new approach to revitalizing zodiac IPs: the character is no longer a static symbol displayed in museums or disposable festival supplies, but an emotional, warm cultural carrier integrated into young people's daily lives. The auspicious blessing "May the horse gallop toward a grand future" is no longer a distant wish, but accessible warmth embedded in every chat conversation. It also delivers a practical path for the youth-oriented interpretation of traditional zodiac IPs that balances profound cultural essence and market vitality.



Figure 2. Application Design of Digital Stickers for Bingwu Horse IP

3.2. Physical Cultural and Creative Product Design

As shown in Figure 3, a series of phone cases in various styles including traditional Chinese illustration, festive red-gold, and fresh minimalist designs are developed around different IP themes. Wear-resistant and practical, these products carry auspicious implications to accompany users at all times. Metal keychains and themed badges are also launched. Compact and exquisite, they serve as daily accessories that express individuality and best wishes. Meanwhile, the IP character is adapted into soft, adorable and soothing plush dolls that restore the Blessing Horse's chubby figure and delicate decorative details. Made of skin-friendly fabrics, the dolls retain the iconic elements of the IP: saddles decorated with colorful tassels, flowing red silk ribbons, scrolls symbolizing academic success, and fortune bags representing wealth. Every detail echoes the core blessing concept of the IP. More than a three-dimensional reproduction of the IP, the plush dolls can be used as home decorations, throw pillows or companion toys, bringing the warm companionship of the IP into daily life.

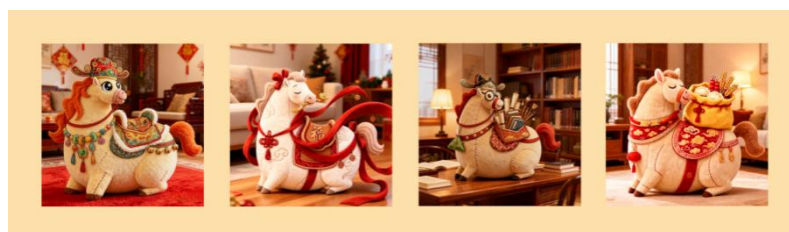


Figure 3. Physical Cultural and Creative Product Design of Bingwu Horse IP

3.3. Multi-Scenario Adaptation Analysis

Guided by user demands, this IP design achieves adaptation to diverse scenarios. Stationery, sticker packs and other products deliver academic blessings of "immediate success in examinations", fitting students' daily communication and study scenarios to strengthen emotional bonds. Plush dolls, home decorations and other physical products suit the reunion atmosphere of the Spring Festival, convey warm implications and serve as emotional ties for families. Meanwhile, digital products cater to platform communication demands. Leveraging the IP's interesting characteristics, viral communication is realized to expand audience coverage. The IP enables comprehensive penetration of zodiac culture from online to offline, and from daily life to festival

occasions. Balancing cultural connotations and scenario requirements, it improves practicality and communication efficiency.

4. Conclusion

This study empowers the zodiac IP design for the Bingwu Horse Year with auspicious culture, effectively addressing prevalent industry pain points of traditional zodiac cultural and creative products, including homogeneous design, outdated styles and poor scenario adaptability. By extracting the artistic charm of Tang horses and the blessing connotations of the Lunar New Year, a cute national-trend Blessing Horse image with great affinity and communication potential is created, forming an integrated design system combining culture, style and functionality. The project realizes dual-track implementation of digital cultural creations and physical products, integrating zodiac blessings into daily social and life scenarios, and accomplishing the living inheritance of traditional culture as well as the transformation of commercial value. This research provides referable practical models and innovative ideas for the youth-oriented transformation of traditional folk customs, systematic design of zodiac IPs and their multi-scenario applications.

Funding: The 2026 Class A Project of the College of Dalian University of Engineering of Technology's Innovation and Entrepreneurship Training Program, titled "Visual Design and Application of Zodiac IP for the Bingwu Year of the Horse Empowered by Auspicious Culture" (Project Number: X202613198286).

Declaration: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author contributions: Dan Ni offered guidance and support to the design project and assisted in manuscript preparation. Yu Xin coordinated the overall project planning. Zi Yin conducted project background investigation. Liqi Xiao led the visual creation work, and Chenchen Xu completed the post-work organization.

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