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Contemporary Graphic Interpretation of Tibetan Opera Imagery within the System of Visual Culture

Master's Thesis submitted for the degree of **Master**

Specialty B2 Design

Educational and Professional Program "Visual Communication Design"

The qualification work contains the results of independent research.

The use of ideas, results, and texts of other authors is properly referenced.

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ABSTRACT

Li Jiahui. Contemporary Graphic Interpretation of Tibetan Opera Imagery within the System of Visual Culture. — Manuscript.

Master's Thesis submitted for the degree of Master, specialty B2 Design, Educational and Professional Program "Visual Communication Design."

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Tibetan Opera is a national-level intangible cultural heritage in China. Its value lies not only in performance, but also in Tibetan beliefs, stage conventions and the way it is passed down between generations. Today, however, its reach is still limited, its communication formats are repetitive, and much of its visual material looks dated to younger viewers. Most digital heritage projects in China and abroad rely on 3D scanning, digital twins or AI generation. These tools are good at recording physical forms. They are less effective at translating the stories, kinship lines and human context that surround a living heritage item.

I used four methods: literature review, fieldwork, semiotic analysis and case comparison. Peirce's semiotics helped me break down Tibetan Opera's visual signs; visual narrative theory helped me arrange them into a series. I grouped the visual material into masks, costumes, performance scenes and plateau landscapes. From this coding, I set four design principles: cultural authenticity, visual integrity, clear hierarchy and narrative variety. I then completed three illustrations — Soul of the Mask, Light of the Stage and Path of Inheritance — under the concept "translation of traditional aesthetics, dialogue between ancient and modern cultures". The works combine Thangka composition and colour with flat vector illustration.

My fieldwork and design tests suggest that these three series illustrations can work as a lightweight addition to the existing digital conservation chain. They do not replace 3D scanning or digital twins. Instead, they help lower the entry barrier for viewers who know little about

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Tibetan Opera. For young audiences in particular, the flat visual language makes the masks, costumes and inheritance scenes easier to approach. The project therefore offers one practical example for the visual communication of ethnic-minority intangible cultural heritage in China.

Keywords: Tibetan Opera;Intangible Cultural Heritage;Contemporary Aesthetics;Visual Translation;Serial Illustrations;Thangka

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INTRODUCTION

Relevance of the research: In the post-World Heritage inscription era, the protection philosophy for intangible cultural heritage has shifted from "emphasizing nomination and general surveys" to "systematic protection, living transmission, and creative transformation and innovative development." As a national-level intangible cultural heritage, Tibetan Opera embodies profound connotations of Tibetan ethnic beliefs, stage art, and intergenerational transmission, and carries significant cultural value and social meaning.Tibetan Opera currently encounters three major obstacles in modern public communication. Firstly, its influence is largely confined to local Tibetan settlements, lacking systematic promotion strategies that span different regions and cultural backgrounds. Secondly, its publicity channels remain rather single and rigid. Traditional live shows are mainly held within Tibetan inhabited areas, while online digital resources only consist of scattered, short video clips. Thirdly, the conventional visual styles of Tibetan Opera fail to keep pace with modern aesthetic trends, making it difficult to attract contemporary viewers, particularly young audiences. Meanwhile, existing digital practices for intangible cultural heritage mostly focus on data collection, digital replication, immersive exhibitions, and industrial transformation, with technical paths dominated by 3D scanning, digital twins, and AI generation. Such practices are adept at preserving the material information of heritage entities, yet find it difficult to fully translate the folk tales, emotional memories, and inheritance lineages behind intangible cultural heritage. In other words, technology can replicate patterns and forms, but it can hardly replace lightweight narrative dissemination aimed at the general public.

Purpose of the research: This study aims to explore a visual translation path that adapts Tibetan Opera culture to contemporary aesthetics. Through theoretical review and design practice, it excavates the multi-layered cultural

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connotations of Tibetan Opera masks, stage performance, and intergenerational transmission, and produces a complete set of Tibetan Opera-themed serial illustrations, so as to dissolve the public's sense of estrangement from Tibetan Opera culture and promote the modern and youth-oriented dissemination of Tibetan Opera as intangible cultural heritage among contemporary audiences.The theoretical significance lies in introducing Peircean semiotics and visual narrative theory into the study of Tibetan Opera visual translation, thereby supplementing the theoretical perspective of "lightweight narrative translation" in the digital protection of intangible cultural heritage. The practical significance lies in producing visual materials applicable to cultural and creative products, posters, and book illustrations, and providing a referable practical sample for the visual innovation of ethnic minority intangible cultural heritage.

To achieve this purpose, the **following objectives** are set:

1.To sort out the history, culture, and visual resources of Tibetan Opera, investigate relevant cases of intangible cultural heritage digitization and visual transformation at home and abroad, and summarize the advantages and limitations of existing protection and dissemination models;

2.To analyze, with the help of semiotics and visual narrative theories, the existing problems in the contemporary dissemination of Tibetan Opera, and to distill the design principles and visual expression goals that should be followed in the creation of Tibetan Opera illustrations;

3.To establish the core concept of "translation of traditional aesthetics, dialogue between ancient and modern cultures," build a progressive thematic narrative framework of "soul–form–inheritance," and complete the overall conception of theme, narrative, and visual design for the illustrations;

4.To complete the full practice of the three Tibetan Opera-themed serial illustrations, namely The Soul of Masks, The Light of the Stage, and The Path of Inheritance, and to achieve the integrated implementation of traditional Thangka aesthetics and flat modern illustration language;

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5.To analyze the diverse application scenarios of the serial illustrations, verify the feasibility of serial illustrations as a lightweight dissemination carrier for ethnic minority intangible cultural heritage, and provide practical reference for the visual design of similar intangible cultural heritage.

Object of the research – This study focuses on Tibetan Opera, a national-level intangible cultural heritage of China. It explores its cultural and visual resources, investigates the visual translation of Tibetan Opera under contemporary aesthetics, and completes a creative research project on a series of flat illustrations themed around Tibetan Opera.

Subject of the research –

1.To review relevant studies and cases, and analyze the existing problems in the dissemination of Tibetan Opera;

2.To organize the visual resources of Tibetan Opera and establish design principles by integrating semiotics and visual narrative theory;

3.To clarify the design concept and complete the illustration practice of the series The Soul of Masks, The Light of the Stage, and The Path of Inheritance;

4.To analyze the application value of the works and summarize the practical experience of visual translation for intangible cultural heritage.

Chronological framework of the research – It traces traditional Tibetan Opera imagery from the 14th century, with the core study focusing on the period from 2000 to the present, examining its graphic reinterpretation under contemporary visual culture.

Territorial framework of the research – The core territory is China's three major Tibetan-inhabited regions.

Research methods: Literature research method: To review literature related to Tibetan Opera and the visual translation of intangible cultural heritage, thereby laying a theoretical foundation;Field investigation method: To obtain first-hand materials such as Tibetan Opera masks and performances through interviews and data collection;Semiotic analysis method: To

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deconstruct the visual symbols of Tibetan Opera and complete the extraction and reconstruction of cultural elements;Case analysis method: To analyze domestic and international cases of intangible cultural heritage digitization and summarize their strengths and weaknesses.

Practical significance of the research: This research produces a series of Tibetan Opera-themed illustrations applicable to cultural and creative products, posters and book illustrations, enriching visual materials for Tibetan Opera communication. By means of visual narrative, it compensates for the deficiency of humanistic narration in technical digital projects, lowers the public's cognitive threshold of Tibetan Opera. Meanwhile, it verifies the integration path between traditional aesthetics and modern illustrations, and provides practical references for the visual innovation of ethnic minority intangible cultural heritage.

Publications on the topic (if any): NO

Structure and scope of the thesis.

The work consists of an introduction, three chapters, conclusions, a list of references (__ items), and an illustration album (__ items). The main body of the research comprises … pages, the total volume with appendices is … pages.

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CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

1.1.Literature Review

1. Research Status in China

China's ICH research began to expand after the country joined the UNESCO Convention in 2004. Early work concentrated on nominations and general surveys. In the post-inscription period, the focus has shifted to systematic conservation, living inheritance and creative transformation. Researchers come mainly from folklore, anthropology and art studies, but jurisprudence, digital humanities, public administration, design and rural revitalization studies are now involved as well.

Over two decades of development, ICH research has yielded abundant outcomes in data compilation, policy research and case investigations. Digitalization, rural revitalization, inheritors and systematic conservation constitute popular research topics. Existing limitations involve insufficient original theories, unbalanced research distribution, conflicts between industrialization and cultural authenticity, and inadequate interdisciplinary integration. Overall, research is transforming from project-oriented studies toward comprehensive research targeting living inheritance and sustainable development.

(1) Intangible Cultural Heritage

China has built a four-level national-provincial-municipal-county inventory system for intangible cultural heritage, covering over 100000 items at all levels, among which 1557 are national-level items and 45 are inscribed on UNESCO’s ICH lists — ranking first globally. The Intangible

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Cultural Heritage Law provides legal guarantees. More than 90000 inheritors have been accredited at different administrative levels. Initiatives such as the ICH Documentation Project, inheritor training programs, “ICH Entering Campuses” and ICH workshops promote living inheritance. Short-video platforms, cultural-and-creative industries and cultural-tourism integration further expand dissemination channels.

Even so, multiple hurdles remain. Many veteran inheritors are aging, and there is a lack of young people willing to take up this craft. Urbanization has broken the original living environment where these heritages once thrived, while over-commercialization may gradually wear away their core cultural essence. Guided by the principle of “prioritizing protection and pursuing rational utilization”, relevant policies promote digital construction and cultural ecological protection zones, aiming to integrate intangible cultural heritage into people’s modern daily life.

Under such circumstances, digital means have turned into an important way to conserve and spread intangible cultural heritage. In this field, pictorial visual re-creation represented by serial illustrations is worthy of in-depth exploration.Compared with dynamic media such as videos and live streaming, series illustrations feature controllable production cycles, consistent stylistic performance and high communication adaptability. They can condense scattered ICH elements into recognizable and extendable visual-symbol systems. With unified color palettes, modeling languages and narrative structures, series illustrations can fully present craft workflows, character genealogies or pattern systems for given heritage items. In a lightweight manner, they can be deployed across diverse scenarios including social-media platforms, cultural-and-creative commodities and urban cultural-tourism projects.

(2) Practical Case Study

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Guizhou Miao Embroidery — “AI + Gene Bank” Reconstructing Production Chains. This project systematically collects Miao-embroidery patterns from representative ICH inheritors and applies cutting-edge algorithms such as Retinex-Net and GAN to build the world’s first digital-conservation gene bank for Miao embroidery. It has archived 12766 basic patterns with a pattern-recognition accuracy exceeding 90%. Its AI-driven generative model supports text-to-image and image-to-image creation: designers input keywords, and the AI generates 30-50 new patterns within one minute. It shortens the design cycle for Miao-embroidery costumes from 14days to 2days and cuts design costs by two-thirds. On the production side, a collaborative “hand-embroidery + machine-embroidery” mode is adopted: intelligent embroidery machines produce basic patterns while embroiderers focus on sophisticated details.

Shanghai Fengyuzhu “China in Intangible Heritage Exhibition Hall”: Immersive Light-and-Shadow Show. Deploying digital projection and interactive-sensor technologies, this project transforms ICH crafts including copper carving, iron-flower forging and Liuyang firework-making into interactive light-and-shadow experiences. A core design principle is to “extract the most touching and life-oriented segments of ICH items”. For instance, Xunpu flower-headdress customs are converted into a “digital flower-wearing” photo-taking experience; Inner-Mongolia equestrian skills are developed into a horse-archery somatosensory game. Statistics show visitor volume exceeded 100000 within 100days after opening and nearly 300000 in its first anniversary.

Nanjing Yunjin Museum “Pocket Museum” Series of Digital Interactive Products. This product selects ten national-treasure-grade Yunjin brocade artifacts. Via NFC touch or QR-code scanning, mobile phones turn into portable “pocket museums”. Three-dimensional laser scanning and AI restoration achieve reproduction precision up to 0.02millimeters. Visitors can activate 3D models on mobile terminals for arbitrary rotation and

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zoom-in to observe weaving structures barely visible behind glass showcases. Voice-based AR guides are embedded simultaneously. In conventional exhibitions, spatial logics of core Yunjin techniques such as “warp-dominated weft brocade” and “color-changing per flower” can hardly be perceived by audiences. Digital interactive cards convert static, untouchable exhibits into manipulable, decomposable digital objects, delivering alternative cognitive experiences.

These three Chinese projects are technology-driven. They archive resources, transform production or create sensory experiences. What they do less well is keep the human side of ICH visible. The inheritors' emotions, oral memories and local meanings are often left out. A scanner can copy a pattern, but it cannot reproduce the feeling attached to that pattern.

1. Current Status of International Research

International research on ICH digitalization has developed a relatively systematic phased analytical framework between 2020-2026. A scoping review based on 102 studies divides digital conservation into five phases: data acquisition and documentation, classification and identification, digital restoration, exhibition and education, and cultural innovation. It distinguishes conventional digital methods from AI-enabled approaches: the former prioritizes authenticity and contextual preservation, while the latter focuses on processing and multi-modal interpretation. A dual-path model integrating both approaches is accordingly proposed.

(1) **Practical Case Study**

Digital-twin conservation project for prehistoric cave paintings in Altamira, Spain. Spain’s national cultural-heritage agency launched a high-precision digital-twin conservation project with special funding. BIM

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modeling, 3D laser scanning and environmental-sensor monitoring capture fine-grained data covering cave-rock structures, painting lines and textures, pigment compositions and superimposed paint layers. An integrated digital platform combines geospatial data, environmental parameters and craft-technology models to realize precise digital reproduction and permanent archiving of cave-painting appearances, preservation conditions and original painting techniques. It provides comprehensive technical datasets for artifact restoration, deterioration monitoring and academic research.

Digital-conservation project for the Azulejo tile-painting craft, Portugal. Inscribed on UNESCO ICH Lists in 2003, this craft is documented through high-definition scanning, spectral color detection and digital modeling to collect patterns, glaze formulas, coloring and firing-process parameters of classical tiles in bulk. An online digital-image library and craft database are built for pattern storage, reproduction and web-based display, delivering standardized data for craft restoration and cultural-and-creative design.

Digital-reconstruction project for medieval manuscript illumination craft, France. The French National Library cooperates with research teams on digital reconstruction. Hyperspectral imaging, 3D scanning and color analysis decompose pigment compositions, coating techniques, brush-stroke skills and parchment-processing workflows of medieval manuscripts. Computer-algorithm-driven craft models simulate illumination techniques and produce high-fidelity reproductions, preserving core technical parameters for material formulas and production procedures to support artifact restoration and academic research.

These three foreign cases represent conventional digitalization practices centered on data acquisition and documentation. They rely on 3D scanning, spectral detection and BIM modeling to archive physical heritage and craft information, guarantee heritage authenticity and extend to digital reproduction and online exhibitions. Large-scale multi-modal interpretation

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and intelligent identification empowered by AI have not yet been widely implemented; the dual-path model merging traditional digital methods and AI is still underdeveloped. The cases confirm the five-phase progressive chain for digital heritage conservation, where current practices mostly concentrate on early-stage procedures, and conventional digital technologies remain mainstream for practical deployment.

Against the five-phase digital-conservation framework proposed by foreign scholars, existing domestic and international practices are largely confined to data acquisition, digital reproduction, immersive exhibitions and cultural innovation. There remains room for advancement in lightweight educational-oriented public communication and cultural-symbol extraction. While 3D scanning, digital twins and AI-pattern-generation technologies excel at recording physical-heritage data, they struggle to systematically conduct narrative translation of folk tales and inheritor-related humanistic contexts embedded in ICH. Graphic visual transformation with series illustrations as the carrier can integrate ICH crafts, folk customs and inheritor stories leveraging pictorial-narrative strengths, construct standardized visual-symbol systems and serve as a supplementary measure for exhibition-education and cultural-innovation links within the digital-conservation chain. It achieves lightweight dissemination of ICH cultural connotations and balances technology-oriented digitalization with humanistic-content expression.

1.2.Visual Translation of Intangible Cultural Heritage and Illustrative Narrative

Visual translation of intangible cultural heritage refers to converting cultural connotations, symbolic systems and narrative structures of ICH into perceptible and communicable visual languages. Compared with dynamic media such as video and live streaming, series illustrations possess

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controllable production cycles, consistent stylistic features and high communication adaptability. They can condense scattered ICH elements into recognizable and extendable visual-symbol systems. Via unified color schemes, modeling languages and narrative structures, series illustrations can present craft workflows, character genealogies or pattern systems of a heritage item, and enter diverse scenarios including social-media platforms, cultural-and-creative commodities and urban cultural-tourism in lightweight forms.

Chen Nan proposes a methodology for visual-design-driven revitalization of intangible cultural heritage, emphasizing extracting visual symbols from cultural genes for modern-design transformation. Zhou Zhenhui and Li Xiangyuan investigate flat-graph representation in illustration design and point out that flat-style languages improve information-delivery efficiency and adaptability to contemporary aesthetics. Hu Huiwen discusses contemporary-aesthetic transformation of traditional elements within Chinese-style illustrations and stresses that traditional symbols require extraction, reconstruction and re-contextualization. These studies offer methodological references for this research. Nevertheless, systematic visual-translation research specifically targeting Tibetan Opera remains insufficient.

1.3. Research Methods

Existing studies on Tibetan Opera mainly focus on its historical origins, mask art, conservation-and-inheritance and living development. A History of Chinese Tibetan Opera by Liu Zhiqun systematically sorts out its historical context[Error! Unknown switch argument.]; Hware Sonam Tseten explores the symbolic system of Tibetan Opera masks[Error! Unknown switch argument.]; Cao Yali focuses on conservation and inheritance of Tibetan Opera as intangible cultural heritage[Error! Unknown switch argument.]; Zhuang Chunhui discusses its living inheritance and innovative development[Error! Unknown switch argument.].

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Ahmed S. T. analyzes identity and communication issues of "Lhamo" (Tibetan Opera) within contemporary-cultural-politics contexts[Error! Unknown switch argument.]; Attisani A. discusses multi-faceted dimensions of traditional Tibetan theatre[Error! Unknown switch argument.]; Wang Y. compiles textual materials of Tibetan-Opera stories and lays foundations for its narrative research[Error! Unknown switch argument.].

Overall, abundant outcomes have been accumulated regarding Tibetan Opera's theatrical ontology, folk-custom contexts and conservation policies. However, few studies adopt visual-design perspectives, especially series-illustration-oriented visual-translation research oriented toward contemporary aesthetics.

1.4. Research Gaps

Reading across these studies, I found three gaps that directly shaped my research. First, most ICH digitization projects are strong on technical archiving and industrial application, but weak on lightweight narrative translation. Second, visual translation studies tend to focus on patterns, cultural products or Chinese-style illustration; they rarely sort out Tibetan Opera's masks, costumes, stage scenes and regional landscapes as a connected visual system. Third, Tibetan Opera research remains centered on theatre history and conservation policy. Few studies combine contemporary aesthetics, semiotics and visual narrative theory in a design practice. My thesis addresses these three gaps through a series-illustration project.

1.5.Theoretical Foundations

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(1)Peircean semiotics: Peirce classified signs into icons, indices, and symbols.Iconic signs: Establish referential relationships relying on formal resemblance.Indexical signs: Realize reference through objective correlations between entities.Symbolic signs: Derive meanings from social conventions and cultural customs.

(2) Within graphic illustrations, iconic signs realize image reproduction via formal similarities; symbolic signs carry specific meanings based on socio-cultural conventions. Kress G. and van Leeuwen T. point out in visual-grammar studies that images do not merely reproduce reality but also construct meanings through composition, color and spatial relations[Error! Unknown switch argument.]. Tibetan Opera masks, clothing motifs and color schemes are analyzable via this categorization framework. White masks denote benevolence, purity and auspiciousness, and blue masks embody justice, bravery and power as typical symbolic signs[Error! Unknown switch argument.]. Serial illustrations help form cohesive symbolic systems for extracting and reworking original cultural symbols. They turn abstract cultural implications into pictorial visual languages and reconcile modern aesthetic standards with semantic communication.

(3) Visual Narrative Theory:Visual narrative theory focuses on information transmission and storytelling through the arrangement of visual images. Rather than relying on written descriptions, it builds narrative logic using picture content, composition and the combination of visual components. When applied to serial illustrations, this theory organizes image sequences around a core theme. Each separate artwork holds a fragment of the narrative, and these individual pieces echo and supplement each other to form a complete narrative storyline. Designers may unify the overall visual style, arrange the logical connections between different pictures, and use composition and element hierarchy to direct the audience’s viewing sequence. Narrative rhythm can thus be established within static visuals,

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allowing the illustration series to develop a consistent system of meaning construction.

This study integrates the above theories into an analytical framework of "Symbol Extraction — Narrative Organization — Visual Translation". First, Peirce's semiotics deconstructs visual symbols of Tibetan Opera. Second, visual-narrative theory organizes thematic sequences for series artworks. Finally, contemporary translation is completed through flat-style illustration languages.

1.6.Research Methods

(1)Sort out historical origins, play scripts, mask symbols, costume patterns, performance conventions and folk-custom contexts of Tibetan Opera; meanwhile consult publications concerning ICH digitalization, ICH visual translation, illustration narration and ethnic-themed visual design.

(2)Field Investigation: Conduct on-site or online interviews with Tibetan-Opera inheritors, folk artists and academic researchers; record oral histories, performance customs, mask implications and color symbolism. Observe live Tibetan-Opera performances and photograph stage dynamics, performers' facial expressions, costumes and props. Collect first-hand image materials including masks, costumes, murals and Thangka paintings related to Tibetan Opera.

(3)Semiotic Analysis: Deconstruct Tibetan-Opera masks, costume patterns, color systems, character genealogies and stage props. Extract exclusive visual symbols of Tibetan Opera to establish unified visual language, modeling and color palettes for series illustrations, guaranteeing stylistic consistency and cultural validity.

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(4) Case Study: Analyze domestic and international cases of ICH visual transformation and digitalization. Compare strengths and weaknesses of diverse digital-solution pathways and demonstrate unique values of series graphic illustrations as lightweight visual-transformation approaches.

Conclusions to Chapter 1

This chapter reviews domestic-and-international outcomes of ICH digital conservation, ICH visual translation and Tibetan-Opera-related research. Three research gaps are identified: ICH digitalization overemphasizes technical archiving with insufficient attention to lightweight narrative translation; ICH visual-translation research mostly focuses on patterns and cultural-and-creative products without systematic sorting of Tibetan-Opera visual resources; Tibetan-Opera research lacks interdisciplinary design practice combining contemporary aesthetics, semiotics and visual-narrative theory. On such grounds, Peirce’s semiotics and visual-narrative theory are adopted as the theoretical framework for this research, integrated into the analytical pathway “Symbol Extraction — Narrative Organization — Visual Translation”. It lays theoretical foundations for visual-resource analysis and deduction of design principles in Chapter2.

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CHAPTER 2

ANALYSIS OF TIBETAN OPERA'S VISUAL RESOURCES AND ITS DESIGN PRINCIPLES

2.1.Research Design

This chapter targets visual resources of Tibetan Opera and adopts combined field-investigation and semiotic-analysis approaches. Data sources include interview transcripts of Tibetan-Opera inheritors and folk artists, observation records of live performances, physical images of masks and costumes, relevant visual materials from Thangka and murals, as well as documented Tibetan-Opera images from existing literature[Error! Unknown switch argument.]. Specific research procedures are as follows:

Interviewees: 3 Tibetan-Opera inheritors, 5 folk artists and 2 academic researchers (10 participants in total). Interviews cover mask connotations, costume norms, performance conventions, color symbolism and inheritance status.

Performance observation: Four live Tibetan-Opera performances are observed; hundreds of photographs documenting stage dynamics, performers' expressions, costumes and props are collected.

Material collection: Roughly one hundred sets of first-hand image materials of masks, costumes, Thangka and murals are gathered, alongside another hundred documented Tibetan-Opera images from publications.

Analytical methods adopted in this study are conducted in three steps. First, the collected materials are categorized into four core dimensions, including cultural character symbols, artistic figure modeling, theatrical performance scenes and regional contextual features. Second, this research applies Peirce's semiotic theory to interpret the iconic, indexical and symbolic attributes of these visual resources. Third, it evaluates both the feasibility and existing limitations of transforming such cultural materials into illustrative visual designs.

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2.2. Core Visual Resources of Tibetan Opera

(1) Character-symbol resources: Tibetan-Opera masks

Masks stand as the most iconic core visual symbol of Tibetan Opera and serve as the key modeling source for this illustration creation. The hues and outward features of Tibetan Opera masks differentiate roles' identities, dispositions and moral traits, forming a well-established and steady visual symbolic system. Plain and dignified white masks signify benevolence, purity and auspiciousness, while elaborately shaped blue masks with striking outlines embody justice, courage and power. The outlines, decorative ornaments and color matching of various masks boast strong recognizability and decorative value. They can be extracted as core visual symbols for graphic illustrations and provide fundamental modeling materials to build character images of Tibetan Opera.

From the perspective of semiotics, the colors and shapes of Tibetan Opera masks are typical symbolic signs. In accordance with local cultural conventions, white masks represent kindness and purity, whereas blue masks convey justice and courage[Error! Unknown switch argument.]. Furthermore, the outlines and decorative details of masks carry both iconic and indexical meanings. Their visual resemblance allows viewers to recognize corresponding character prototypes, while differences in ornamentation indicate unique roles and personal traits. Such rich symbolic resources provide sufficient original modeling references for the creation of the illustration series.

(2) Figure-modeling resources: Traditional Tibetan-Opera costumes

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Tibetan-Opera costumes are important visual resources for shaping character postures and enriching pictorial details. Featuring loose and stretch-tailored silhouettes complemented by capes, aprons, head-ornaments and pendants, they present multi-layered structures and distinctive ethnic features. Tibetan Opera costumes feature highly saturated yet well-balanced color palettes, paired with traditional Tibetan auspicious patterns that integrate ceremonial solemnity with unique aesthetic charm. Standardized specifications for costume silhouettes, color combinations and ornamental accessories vary by role, intuitively distinguishing the identity and status of different characters. These standardized costume features offer stable and reliable modeling foundations for the unified character shaping and consistent visual style design of the illustration series.

(3) Stage-atmosphere resources: Tibetan-Opera performance scenes

Traditional Tibetan Opera is mostly performed in open-air public squares without elaborate stage backdrops, with open performance spaces as its core-scene characteristic**Error! Unknown switch argument.**. Performance venues are plain and unadorned, prioritizing ritual atmosphere and performance ontology. Clean frames with prominent subjects are highly compatible with compositional requirements for graphic illustrations. Original performance postures, ensemble-performing forms and folk-ritual ambience supply dynamic and vivid plot-oriented materials for illustrations, enhancing narrativity and on-site perception of series artworks.

(4) Geographical-cultural resources: Landscapes of Tibetan-inhabited regions

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Tibetan-Opera culture is rooted in the geographical environment of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. This illustration project integrates distinctive natural and human-istic Tibetan landscapes as background resources, including plateau snow-capped mountains, temple architectures, prayer flags and grasslands. Such geographical-landscape elements accentuate unique plateau-cultural temperaments of Tibetan Opera, contextualize the original living environment of this ICH, and remedy empty frames caused by character-only compositions. They strengthen overall ethnic atmosphere and cultural completeness of pictures.

To sum up, this research systematically sorts visual resources of Tibetan Opera across four dimensions: character symbols, figure modeling, performance scenes and geographical contexts. The four categories respectively correspond to primary modeling, character details, plot contents and background atmosphere for illustrations, forming an integrated visual-creation system and delivering comprehensive material support for subsequent innovative visual-element translation and series-illustration production.

2.3.Diagnosis of Contemporary Communication Issues of Tibetan Opera

Based on literature review and field investigations, three core problems exist within contemporary communication of Tibetan Opera. Manifestations, root causes and connections with this research are analyzed respectively.

(1)Noticeable geographical limitations: Dissemination is largely confined to Tibetan-inhabited regions; systematic cross-regional and cross-cultural promotion is limited, resulting in fragmented public perceptions of Tibetan Opera. Root causes lie in heavy reliance of Tibetan-Opera performances on original-cultural contexts and local

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organizational networks alongside scarce external-communication channels[Error! Unknown switch argument.]. This research extracts Tibetan-Opera visual symbols from localized contextual constraints via series illustrations, enabling dissemination within broader-media environments.

(2)Monotonous communication forms: Live performances are mostly held in Tibetan-inhabited regions with few external tours; online resources are dominated by fragmented on-site video clips, leading to limited digital-presentation formats. Root causes are that Tibetan-Opera is performance-centered with high digital-transformation costs, and existing content remains documentary-oriented. This research adopts series illustrations as lightweight carriers to supplement visual-communication forms beyond moving-image media.

(5) Deficient visual expression: Existing communication-related imagery for Tibetan Opera appears old-fashioned and crude, lacking appeal for young-generation aesthetic tastes. Root causes include insufficient visual-design awareness and absence of systematic extraction and contemporary translation of traditional symbols[Error! Unknown switch argument.]. This research merges Thangka aesthetics and flat-style illustration languages to enhance contemporaneity and recognizability of Tibetan-Opera's visual communication.

2.4.Establishment of Design Principles and Objectives for Visual Expression

Design Principles

(1)Cultural authenticity principle: Root creation in inherent connotations of the culture, respect original meanings of relevant symbols

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and aesthetics, and pursue innovation under preconditions of preserving core cultural spirits[Error! Unknown switch argument.].

(2)Integrity principle: Construct unified and holistic visual systems. Harmonize visual languages among different components; individual artworks interrelate to constitute an organic whole.

(3)Visual-hierarchy principle: Rationalize information hierarchies within pictures, focus on central subject figures and deploy surrounding patterns to set off themes. Achieve clear primary-secondary relations so viewers can rapidly grasp pictorial narratives[Error! Unknown switch argument.].

(4)Narrative-diversity principle: Within unified visual frameworks, individual artworks feature independent themes and express contents from diverse dimensions to enrich narratives of the complete series.

Visual-Expression Objectives

(1)Element-extraction requirement: Screen traditional symbols and convert them into graphic forms, build thematic visual-material libraries and guarantee cultural recognizability and consistency of visual elements[Error! Unknown switch argument.].

(2)Aesthetic-empathy requirement: Deploy contemporary-aesthetic visual languages to mitigate sense of remoteness attached to folk traditions and evoke audiences' emotional resonance[Error! Unknown switch argument.].

(3)Series-building requirement: Unify visual languages of the whole set of artworks; realize coherent and complete serial visual storytelling relying on multi-frame division-of-narrative-labor[Error! Unknown switch argument.].

(4)Application-implementation requirement: Pictures adapt to output characteristics of diverse carriers and preserve artistic expressiveness when deployed across multi-media platforms[Error! Unknown switch argument.].

Conclusions to Chapter 2

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This chapter accomplishes a key transition from theory to practice via explaining research design, sorting Tibetan-Opera visual resources, diagnosing communication problems and deducing design principles. First, concrete procedures for field investigation and semiotic analysis are clarified to guarantee reliability of source materials. Second, a systematic material system for Tibetan-Opera visual resources is built across four dimensions: character symbols, figure modeling, performance scenes and geographical contexts. Third, defects and root causes of Tibetan-Opera communication regarding dissemination scope, communication forms and visual expression are analyzed. Finally, four design principles (cultural authenticity, integrity, visual hierarchy, narrative diversity) and four visual-expression objectives (element extraction, aesthetic empathy, series building, application implementation) are deduced, furnishing theoretical grounds and realistic foundations for design-scheme generation in Chapter3.

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CHAPTER 3

DESIGN PROPOSAL

1.1. Design Concept

Targeting Tibetan Opera, a national-level intangible cultural heritage, this project creates themed series illustrations. Oriented toward excavating cultural connotations of Tibetan Opera and advancing its contemporary communication, core design concepts for artworks are defined.

This design adheres to the core philosophy of "Translation of Traditional Aesthetics, Dialogue Between Ancient and Modern Cultures". Tibetan Opera constitutes a living carrier of Tibetan culture. Its masks, stage performances and oral-teaching-based inheritance patterns collectively form its complete cultural system**Error! Unknown switch argument.**. This design avoids superficial stacking of Tibetan-cultural symbols and deeply excavates three-tiered connotations of Tibetan Opera: masks embody national spiritual beliefs; stages demonstrate artistic charms of Tibetan Opera; inheritance sustains the vitality of intangible heritage.

Taking modern illustrations as media, artworks merge aesthetic paradigms of Tibetan Thangka to re-interpret Tibetan-Opera culture visually**Error! Unknown switch argument.**. On one hand, it respects traditional Tibetan-cultural contexts, retains visual features of Thangka such as symmetrical composition, auspicious patterns and traditional color systems and safeguards core spiritual essence of Tibetan-Opera culture. On the other hand, flat-style modern-illustration languages simplify and reconstruct traditional imagery to mitigate remoteness of ethnic-traditional art and accommodate aesthetic habits of contemporary audiences especially young groups. Through series illustrations, this study transforms Tibetan Opera from a distant heritage textual record into perceptible visual stories, arouse

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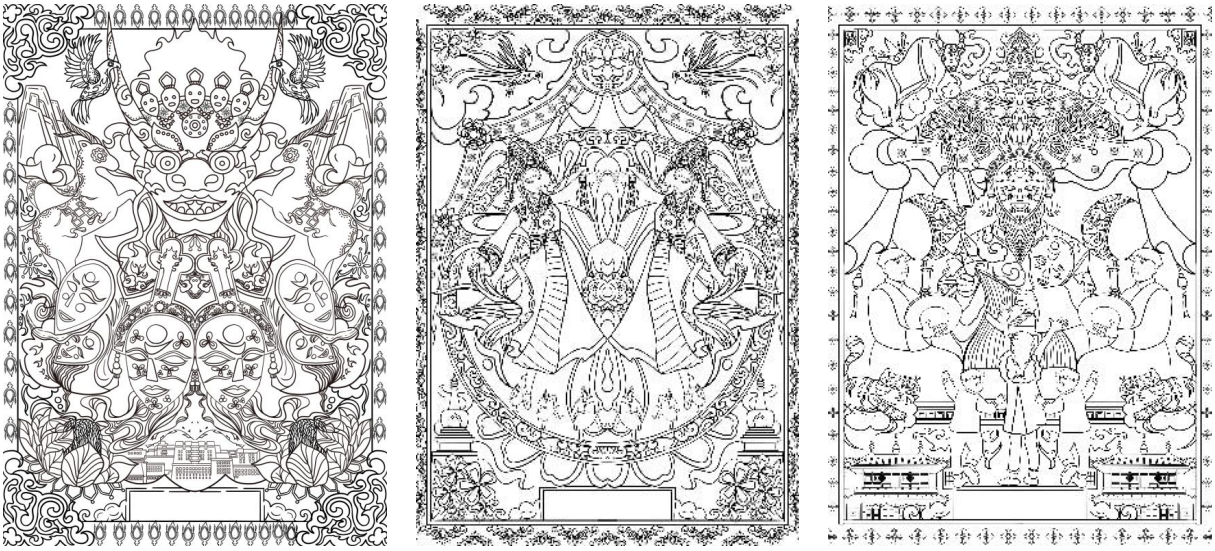
public attention toward its living inheritance and realize modern-day communication of traditional intangible-cultural heritage.



3.2. Theme and Narrative Framework

Three illustrations compose this series: Soul of the Mask, Light of the Stage, Path of Inheritance. They construct a progressive thematic logic of "Spirit-Form-Inheritance".

(1)Soul of the Mask focuses on cultural origins of Tibetan Opera. As the most representative symbol of Tibetan Opera, masks are more than performance props: they materialize Tibetan myths, beliefs and national spirits**Error! Unknown switch argument.**. This artwork highlights spiritual connotations behind Tibetan-Opera masks.

(2)Light of the Stage centers on artistic forms of Tibetan Opera. Tibetan Opera is a comprehensive singing-and-dancing stage ar**tError! Unknown switch argument.**. Taking stage-performance scenes as its core, this piece displays artistic charms embedded in costumes, dances and performances and presents vivid stage expressiveness of Tibetan Opera.

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(3)Path of Inheritance targets living continuity of Tibetan Opera. Passed down from generation to generation via oral instruction[Error! Unknown switch argument.], this frame depicts interactive scenes among senior folk artists, musicians and children, symbolizing intergenerational transmission of ICH and envisioning Tibetan Opera's future.

(4)The three artworks shape a closed narrative loop for Tibetan-Opera culture, advancing progressively: the narrative originates from spiritual core of Tibetan Opera and traces Tibetan-cultural beliefs; it then shifts to external artistic expressions of Tibetan Opera and exhibits its artistic forms; finally it lands on contemporary contexts and portrays inheritance scenarios. Proceeding from abstract spiritual symbols to concrete stage performances and then to living inheritance stories, it guides viewers to gradually comprehend the complete value system of Tibetan-Opera culture and convert abstract ICH concepts into visualized visual narration.

3.3. Visual Translation Strategies

Visually, artworks draw on visual systems of traditional Tibetan Thangka combined with modern flat-style illustration aesthetics[Error! Unknown switch argument.].

(1)Composition design: In this study, all three illustrations adopt the traditional central-axis symmetrical composition inherited from Thangka aesthetics. This approach effectively strengthens the visual focus, while surrounding decorative patterns frame the core subjects to retain the solemn, ritual and full-bodied visual temperament typical of Thangka paintings. Furthermore, unified Tibetan-style border decorations are applied across all works, ensuring consistent visual integrity throughout the illustration series[Error! Unknown switch argument.].

(2)Color design: This study inherits the classic color system of Thangka art, which mainly consists of Tibetan blue, bright red, vivid yellow, cyan and

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white, thereby preserving the traditional cultural connotations of Tibetan color symbolism. On the basis of traditional color matching rules, the hierarchical color layout is further optimized to enrich visual vitality and conform to the aesthetic standards of modern illustrations.

(3)Modeling and rendering techniques: Flat-style vector-illustration rendering is adopted. Crisp contour lines shape figures while complex hand-painted textures of traditional Thangka are simplified[Error! Unknown switch argument.]. Tibetan-cultural symbols including Tibetan-Opera masks, costumes, Buddhist pagodas, lotus flowers, Potala Palace and auspicious mythical beasts are extracted, selected and recombined according to thematic requirements of each frame. Symbol stacking is avoided; visual elements serve pictorial narration.

3.4. Presentation of Series Design Works

(1) Soul of the Mask

Centering on spiritual origins of Tibetan-Opera culture, this artwork places Tibetan-Opera masks at its visual core. A Dharma-protector mask of Tibetan Opera occupies the central position; multi-headed deity imagery is superimposed above. Diverse Tibetan-Opera character masks with varied appearances and symbolic meanings are arranged symmetrically on both sides. Divine-bird and auspicious-beast patterns are distributed bilaterally; the Potala Palace is depicted at the bottom; surrounding spaces are filled with Tibetan-style auspicious ornaments such as cloud and scroll-grass motifs.

Tibetan-Opera masks are more than performance props; they embody Tibetan myths and ethnic beliefs[Error! Unknown switch argument.]. Through a rich gallery of masks, this artwork intuitively conveys that masks constitute the spiritual core of Tibetan Opera and traces profound Tibetan-cultural and belief systems behind it.

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Design intention: The Dharma-protector mask in the center highlights faith-related and symbolic attributes of Tibetan-Opera masks, enabling audiences to perceive deep-seated connections between Tibetan Opera and Tibetan religious culture at first glance.



(2) Light of the Stage

Focusing on stage-performance art of Tibetan Opera, symmetric composition is adopted in this frame. Two dancing actresses in magnificent Tibetan-Opera costumes are depicted in the center; patterns and color schemes of traditional Tibetan-Opera costumes are preserved. Groups of minor dancer figures embellish the lower portion; auspicious elements including Buddhist pagodas, phoenixes and flowers decorate both sides.

Tibetan Opera is a comprehensive performing art integrating singing, dancing and theatrical performance[Error! Unknown switch argument.]. This illustration restores stage-performance scenarios of Tibetan Opera, showcases visual

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aesthetics of its costumes and dances and manifests vivid artistic appeal of Tibetan Opera on stage.

Design intention: Dancing performers in the center present dynamic charms of singing-and-dancing Tibetan Opera and let audiences experience its infectious power as comprehensive stage art.



(3) Path of Inheritance

This artwork addresses living inheritance of Tibetan Opera. In the center stands a senior folk artist holding Tibetan-Opera props; accompanying musicians are positioned on both sides. In the foreground, several children stretch out their hands with longing gazes. Decorative elements such as Tibetan-style ancient buildings, auspicious mythical beasts and cloud patterns complement the scene.

Tibetan Opera relies on oral teaching for intergenerational transmission**Error! Unknown switch argument.**. Character relationships of "senior folk

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artist — children" symbolize passing-on of ICH craftsmanship and depict continuous and vigorous development of Tibetan-Opera culture in contemporary times.

Design intention: Interactions between senior artists and children in the center emphasize living and intergenerational nature of Tibetan-Opera inheritance and arouse audiences' attention and emotional resonance regarding ICH inheritance.



3.5. Design Value of the Project and Application Prospects

This study achieves a complete practical workflow for Tibetan Opera heritage research, spanning theoretical analysis to visual design creation. By interpreting and reconstructing Tibetan Opera culture through modern illustration, this design reduces the public's difficulty in understanding

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traditional ethnic art. It also breaks the stereotype that Tibetan Opera is distant and hard to comprehend, making heritage dissemination more approachable and targeted toward young audiences.

The completed illustration series boasts broad application prospects and can be adapted for diverse scenarios, including promotional posters, book inserts and cultural and creative products. This design practice further proves that integrating traditional ethnic artistic aesthetics with modern illustration techniques is an effective approach to popularizing intangible cultural heritage among young audiences[Error! Unknown switch argument.].

Conclusions to Chapter 3

Taking national-level intangible cultural heritage Tibetan Opera as its design object, this chapter conducts themed series-illustration creation under the core concept of "Translation of Traditional Aesthetics, Dialogue Between Ancient and Modern Cultures". It avoids superficial stacking of Tibetan-cultural symbols and deeply excavates cultural connotations of Tibetan Opera in spiritual-belief, stage-art and living-inheritance dimensions. A progressive thematic framework of "Spirit-Form-Inheritance" is built, and three complete illustrations Soul of the Mask, Light of the Stage and Path of Inheritance are delivered. Narratives unfold from inner spirits to external artistic forms and further toward living intergenerational inheritance, sequentially presenting spiritual origins of masks, artistic forms of stage performances and intergenerational continuation of ICH craftsmanship. Visually, Thangka aesthetic systems merge with modern flat-style vector-illustration languages. Cultural implications of traditional composition, color schemes and auspicious patterns are retained, while complicated textures are simplified for contemporary-aesthetic adaptation. This design realizes practical implementation of Tibetan-Opera culture from theoretical research to tangible visual works, lowering comprehension thresholds for intangible heritage. Series illustrations can be extended for

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posters, book illustrations and cultural-and-creative derivatives. It validates that combining traditional ethnic fine arts and modern illustrations is an effective pathway for youth-oriented communication of intangible cultural heritage.

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CONCLUSIONS

This thesis takes Tibetan Opera, a national-level intangible cultural heritage, as its object. It responds to three communication problems: limited geographical reach, monotonous presentation forms, and outdated visual expression. Using Peirce's semiotics and visual narrative theory, I completed three series illustrations: Soul of the Mask, Light of the Stage and Path of Inheritance. In these works, I combined Thangka aesthetics with modern flat-style illustration. The result is not a simple mixture of styles, but a translation process: first extracting symbols, then organizing narrative, and finally converting them into contemporary graphic language.

The research demonstrates that existing digital-conservation practices for ICH mostly prioritize technical archiving and industrial transformation yet lack sufficient attention to lightweight narrative translation. Series illustrations can serve as effective supplements for exhibition-education and cultural-innovation segments within the digital-conservation chain. Visual resources of Tibetan Opera can be systematically sorted under four dimensions: character symbols, figure modeling, performance scenes and geographical contexts. Cultural semantics can be extracted with classifications of iconic, indexical and symbolic signs. The progressive "Spirit-Form-Inheritance" narrative framework organizes Tibetan-Opera content from spiritual origins and artistic forms to living inheritance into complete visual narration, enabling coherent meaning-generating systems for series artworks under unified stylistic constraints. Integrating flat-style vector-illustration techniques with Thangka aesthetics helps lower cognitive thresholds for Tibetan-Opera culture and enhances appeal for young audiences, offering referential practical samples for youth-oriented visual communication of ethnic-minority intangible cultural heritage.

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During field investigations, this research emphasizes masks, costumes and performance scenes; visual translation of auditory dimensions such as Tibetan-Opera music and vocal tunes receives limited coverage. Large-scale audience testing and market verification for artwork applications are not completed. Follow-up research can expand creation content, promote implementation of artworks in cultural-tourism, cultural-and-creative and digital-interactive contexts, and test communication effects of visual translation through combined quantitative-and-qualitative audience evaluations. Approaches such as audio-visualization can also be trialed to compensate for deficiencies regarding visual translation of auditory dimensions.

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APPENDIX A(analogues)

Ключовий еталонний проєкт/Key Reference Projects



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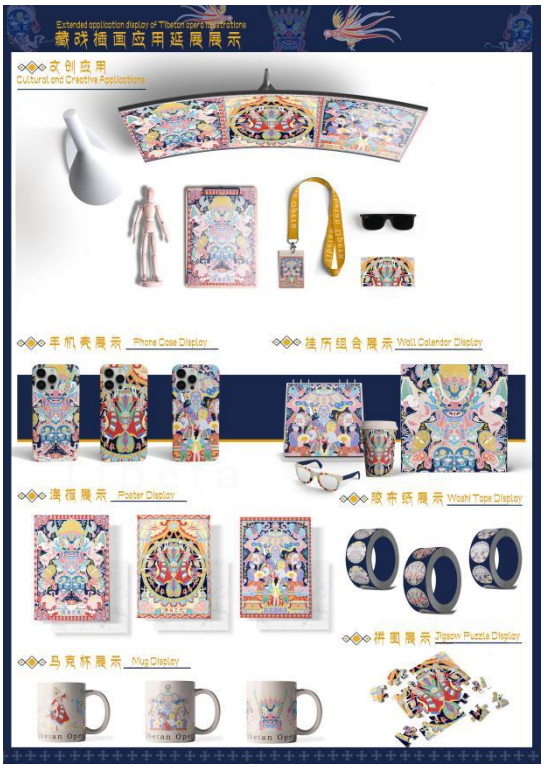
Derivative product design







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APPENDIX Б(sketch and project proposal)

Чорно-біла інфографіка / Information infographic black-and-white draft







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