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Visual communication of traditional Yangzhou puppet theater in contemporary cultural product design

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

Specialty B2 Design

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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

Qian Jun. Visual communication of traditional Yangzhou puppet theater in contemporary cultural product design— Manuscript.

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This study selects Yangzhou rod puppetry as its research subject. It explores ways to apply its traditional visual elements to modern cultural and creative products for effective cultural communication. Drawing on literature review, fieldwork and comparative case analysis, the research summarises the artistic traits of Yangzhou rod puppetry in sculptural craftsmanship, manipulation performance and repertoire content. It analyses practical flaws of local existing merchandise such as superficial cultural interpretation, design homogenisation and insufficient narrative interaction. Four design principles are therefore proposed: authenticity, innovation, narrativity and user-orientation. Following the timeline of puppetry from its early emergence to modern inheritance, visual symbols including puppet figures, performers' costumes, historical scenes and colour palettes are extracted. A four-scene historical narrative blind box series is developed, with digital design software used for image refinement while taking product manufacturability into consideration. This research aims to explore viable visual transformation strategies tailored for Yangzhou rod puppetry and offer modest references for cultural and creative innovation of stage-based intangible heritage.

Keywords: Yangzhou rod puppetry ; Intangible Cultural Heritage ; Visual Transformation; Cultural and Creative Products; Historical Narrative

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INTRODUCTION

Relevance of the research: As a distinctive performing-art intangible cultural heritage, Yangzhou rod puppetry boasts unique visual characteristics and complete performance systems. Although ICH-themed cultural and creative products have gained popularity in recent years, most creations for stage-based heritage merely copy superficial decorative patterns. Existing local puppetry-related merchandise suffers from shallow cultural interpretation, serious homogenisation and insufficient interactive-narrative design, failing to make full use of puppet masks, costumes and colour aesthetics. Most academic papers focus on folk history, stage performance and heritage conservation, while few explore visual adaptation and practical cultural-creative development from a graphic-design perspective. Against this practical and academic background, the present research is carried out.

Purpose of the research: This research intends to explore unique visual resources of Yangzhou rod puppetry, work out feasible strategies for visual element extraction and adaptation, and deliver a set of historical-narrative blind-box cultural-creative designs. By means of cultural-creative products, this study seeks new ways for Yangzhou rod puppetry to reach wider audiences and offers practical references for other stage-oriented intangible heritage design projects.

To achieve this purpose, the following objectives are set:

- Review domestic and international publications on Yangzhou rod puppetry and ICH visual transformation, and identify existing research gaps.
- Sort out the developmental timeline of Yangzhou rod puppetry and analyse its core artistic features including puppet modelling, rod-manipulation skills and repertoire themes.
- Examine major drawbacks of current local puppetry-themed cultural-creative goods and summarise visual-communication design principles for such products.

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- Select, extract and modernise visual resources from four dimensions: puppet forms, performers' costumes, scene symbols and colour palettes. - Complete the full design and technical optimisation of the four-episode historical-narrative blind-box series based on puppetry's historical timeline. - Verify the practicability of the proposed visual-translation framework through design practice and sum up experience for similar ICH design work.

Object of the research – Yangzhou rod puppetry and its existing cultural-creative products.

Subject of the research – The visual language of Yangzhou rod puppetry, as well as approaches for visual communication and design adaptation of its visual elements applied in contemporary cultural-creative products.

Chronological framework of the research – The research covers the whole developmental course of Yangzhou rod puppetry: its initial emergence of plate-bell puppets in the Tang Dynasty, its golden age in the Qing Dynasty, industrial decline in the late Qing period, up to modern-day inheritance under new-media circumstances.

Territorial framework of the research – Centred on Yangzhou city. Primary materials refer to physical puppets, documents and performance archives collected from the Yangzhou Puppet Research Institute and Yangzhou Rod Puppet Troupe.

Research methods: Four methods are adopted: literature review, fieldwork, case study and design-based practice. Relevant papers are retrieved from CNKI, Wanfang and other databases for theoretical sorting. Field visits are conducted at local ICH institutions; interviews with inheritors and craftsmen, together with photos and records of real-world puppets, help build a visual material library. Typical domestic and overseas ICH cultural-creative cases are compared to conclude element-transformation

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strategies. Finally, blind-box design practice is implemented on the basis of previous theoretical and field findings.

Practical significance of the research: The finished four-scene historical-narrative blind-box series turns the millennium-long history of Yangzhou rod puppetry into collectible cultural-creative items. It breaks time-space restrictions of stage shows and helps general public better understand the history and artistic value behind this heritage. The visual-extraction and adaptation strategies concluded in this project can support future local puppetry-related product development. This study also supplies practical references for cultural-creative design of other performing-art-type intangible heritage, and contributes to local cultural-tourism development and the living inheritance of ICH.

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 (_35_ items), and an illustration album (_42_ items). The main body of the research comprises … pages, the total volume with appendices is … pages.

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CHAPTER 1
HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE ISSUE. RESEARCH METHODS

1.1Review of the Literature

1. Research Status in China

(1) Research on Intangible Cultural Heritage Creative Design

The integration of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and cultural and creative product design has remained a popular research direction in design studies in recent years. In her master's thesis *Research on the Application of Yangzhou Intangible Cultural Heritage in Cultural and Creative Product Design*, Gao Yue constructed a complete set of methods for the extraction and secondary design of ICH elements. She divided intangible cultural heritage resources into two core categories. The first covers tangible and visible contents, including traditional patterns, overall shapes, color matching and material textures. This second one pertains to the spiritual dimension, where there are elements of emotionality, traditional ideologies, and unique handmade crafts. The three major design methods that she identified in her research include collage and representation, symbolic metaphor, and grafting and extension. Through the study of artworks created by the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, she was able to confirm that cultural and creative products can act as carriers of the local intangible cultural heritage.

The master thesis of Zhou Yun titled "Research on the Design and Development Strategy of Yangzhou Tourism Cultural and Creative Products from the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage" highlighted some major shortcomings of the tourism cultural and creative product industry of Yangzhou. These products do not sufficiently capitalize on the cultural heritage of the region. Most of the works are restricted to being purely aesthetic in nature, and overall design quality is relatively poor. The study put forward certain recommendations for the development of these products from four different angles.In parallel research of the same period, Xiong Yanpu further supplemented relevant discussions. He argued that most local cultural and creative works in Yangzhou lack professional design support and systematic brand

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operation thinking. Many producers simply print regional decorative patterns on finished products, resulting in superficial cultural presentation rather than genuine integration of intangible cultural heritage into design practice.

(2) Research on Yangzhou Stick Puppet Show

With a long-standing reputation as "the Hometown of Puppets", Yangzhou features distinctive rod puppetry performances. The local performing style combines rigidity and softness, with delicate and vivid details, forming a unique regional artistic feature. At present, domestic academic research on Yangzhou rod puppetry mainly focuses on folk custom history, ICH protection and stage performance studies. Specialized design-oriented research is still scarce and scattered, lacking systematic and in-depth discussion.

In the journal article *Canal Social Changes and the Artistic Reconstruction of Yangzhou Rod Puppetry*, Lu Lu and Lü Jinwei analyzed the artistic evolution of Yangzhou rod puppetry based on the regional cultural background of the Grand Canal[17]. The study clarified the internal logical relationship between its historical evolution and local cultural development. However, its research core is confined to folk sociology and stage performance analysis. It does not disassemble the core visual elements of rod puppetry from a graphic design perspective, including puppet facial makeup, costume patterns and color systems. In addition, the research ignores the visual transformation, communication and innovative application of puppetry elements in cultural and creative design.

Yuan Hongyan's master's thesis *Research on the Living Conservation and Inheritance of Yangzhou Rod Puppetry* adopted the living inheritance theory to explore the current inheritance status and practical development dilemmas of Yangzhou puppetry[23]. Her research focuses on inheritance mechanisms and living protection strategies of intangible cultural heritage, yet it also lacks professional interpretation of puppetry visual language and practical exploration of cultural and creative transformation.

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In general, domestic research systems and methods for ICH cultural and creative design have become relatively mature, but they cannot fully adapt to the unique creative characteristics of stage-based intangible cultural heritage. Existing studies on Yangzhou rod puppetry overly focus on cultural sorting, inheritance and protection, while ignoring practical design application and market-oriented transformation. Up to now, academia has not formed an exclusive visual symbol system for Yangzhou rod puppetry, nor has it established a complete cultural and creative transformation path based on graphic visual communication. This is the key research gap that this study intends to fill.

2. Foreign Research Status

(1) Research on Intangible Cultural Heritage Creative Design

Research outside China on modernised design and cross-cultural communication of intangible cultural heritage started much earlier and has yielded relatively mature theoretical outcomes. Many of these studies focus on cultural translation, cross-visual communication and the renewal of traditional art, and most scholars recognise the communication potential of visual symbols. Bypassing language barriers, visual graphics act as a key medium for global dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. Researchers also argue that modern design innovation for traditional ICH should strike a balance between maintaining cultural authenticity and meeting contemporary public aesthetic tastes. Methods like design ethnography and symbol reconstruction are commonly used to reimagine traditional elements for modern contexts.

Even so, existing overseas research has obvious constraints in geographic coverage and research focus. Most case studies examine European and American handcrafts and folk intangible heritage from Southeast Asia, while few works specifically explore Yangzhou rod puppetry in China. In addition, foreign scholarship tends to prioritise new media directions such as digital interaction and virtual presentation, with most work remaining at the theoretical level of cross-cultural studies. Little attention has been paid to graphic visual design and real-world implementation of physical cultural and creative products. For this reason, those

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established theoretical frameworks cannot be directly adopted for localised cultural and creative design practice of Yangzhou rod puppetry ICH.

（2）Research on Puppet Art

Scholars overseas began researching puppet art at an earlier date, and most of their work is rooted in theatre studies and performance aesthetics. In Routledge Handbook of Asian Theatre, Foley outlines the performance systems and visual aesthetics of puppet arts across multiple Asian countries[12]. His work introduces the artistic traits and cultural connotations of Chinese puppetry from a broad macro perspective. Still, this study serves only as a general regional overview. It does not break down the unique visual symbols of Yangzhou rod puppetry, such as its shapes, colour schemes and facial masks. The research remains focused on stage performance, with limited relevance to graphic visual design and cultural and creative communication.

Besides, overseas case studies on the visual design of puppets mainly draw on shadow puppetry, Burmese string puppets and Indonesian wayang puppets. The visual translation approaches derived from these examples fail to fit the distinct artistic system of Yangzhou rod puppetry. On the whole, foreign researchers have built up abundant theories in ICH design and puppet art, yet such research lacks targeted analysis. To date, no overseas studies have specifically explored visual communication and cultural and creative design for Yangzhou rod puppetry. Existing theories and design models cannot be directly applied to the graphic cultural and creative transformation of this form of intangible heritage.

1.2Research Methods

1.Literature Review Method

This study retrieves literature on intangible cultural heritage, the plastic art of rod puppetry, cultural and creative product design and other related topics from Chinese databases including CNKI and Wanfang. By sorting relevant materials, it sorts out the development context, artistic characteristics and cultural connotations of

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Yangzhou rod puppetry, clarifies theories and design methods related to ICH cultural and creative design, and establishes the theoretical foundation for this research.

2.Fieldwork Method

Field investigations were carried out at ICH preservation institutions such as the Yangzhou Puppet Research Institute and Yangzhou Rod Puppet Troupe. The research team interviewed ICH inheritors and puppet craftsmen, captured photos and videos of physical puppets, documented the full puppet-making workflow and collected first-hand raw data. The investigation focused on visual features including puppet head shapes, costume patterns, colour schemes and manipulation structures to build a visual material library for Yangzhou rod puppetry.

3.Case Study Method

Typical ICH cultural and creative cases at home and abroad were selected for comparative analysis, including products from the Palace Museum, National Palace Museum Taipei, and puppetry cultural and creative works from various regions. This research compares how traditional visual elements are applied in these cases, and summarises transformation ideas and practical implementation pathways for ICH symbols in cultural and creative design.

4.Design Practice Method

Drawing on materials obtained from literature review and fieldwork, representative visual elements of Yangzhou rod puppetry are extracted. Using both concrete extraction and abstract refinement strategies, the traditional visual symbols of puppets are translated into modern visual language to develop a series of cultural and creative product design schemes. This design practice verifies the feasibility of the overall research framework.

Conclusions to Chapter 1

This chapter sorts out the domestic and international research status and research framework of this project. Domestic design studies on ICH cultural and creative products have established sound research logic and transformation approaches. Nevertheless, local cultural and creative works in Yangzhou often suffer from shallow

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cultural interpretation and design homogenisation. Meanwhile, existing research on Yangzhou rod puppetry mostly centres on folk history, ICH preservation and stage performance. Few studies analyse its visual symbols or explore practical cultural and creative development from a graphic design perspective.

Overseas scholarship has built a solid foundation in cross-cultural communication of intangible heritage and puppet art theories. However, most of its research subjects are ICH forms from Europe, America and Southeast Asia, with a heavy tilt toward theoretical discussion and digital media research. No targeted exploration into visual communication and cultural and creative design for Yangzhou rod puppetry has been carried out yet.

Given the above, this thesis adopts four research methods: literature review, fieldwork, case study and design practice. It constructs a complete research workflow ranging from theoretical investigation and case reference to design implementation and verification. This provides solid support for the subsequent cultural and creative design practice.

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CHAPTER 2
ANALYSIS OF DESIGN THEORY AND PRACTICE

2.1 The theoretical significance of visual communication in Yangzhou puppet shows

This study carries theoretical value in four aspects. First, it broadens the research scope of the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. ICH preservation today moves beyond mere conservation and archiving, with growing attention paid to visual transformation and cultural reinvention. By systematically sorting diverse visual materials of Yangzhou rod puppetry, this research breaks away from earlier policy-oriented perspectives and adds theoretical references for the innovative transformation of intangible heritage. Second, it helps establish a local visual symbol framework for Yangzhou. Puppets' facial forms, costume patterns and colour schemes preserve unique urban cultural memories of Yangzhou. Applying semiotic theories to puppetry research enables a complete research logic spanning cultural interpretation, visual conversion and innovative design. Third, the research enriches academic content within visual communication design. The shaping of rod puppets aims to convey characters' inner charm through outer forms, embodying traditional Eastern aesthetic ideas. Research on this subject pushes design inquiry past superficial discussions of visual appearance. It further explores cultural narratives behind design works and investigates the deep cultural drivers that inform creative design. Lastly, this work fills gaps in existing scholarship. Few current studies offer full, systematic discussions focusing specifically on the visual communication of Yangzhou rod puppetry. The methods and thinking summarised in this thesis can also provide academic references for similar design practices in future.

2.2 The application significance of contemporary cultural and creative product design

Applying visual elements of Yangzhou rod puppetry to modern cultural and creative design yields practical value on multiple levels. Physical cultural and creative products break the time and spatial limits of theatre performances. Traditional visual

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assets including puppet forms, costume patterns and colour palettes can be adapted into blind-box figures and other everyday goods, freeing this intangible heritage from purely on-stage viewing. Lightweight, life-friendly cultural and creative items bring traditional culture into ordinary people's daily lives and broaden the reach of puppetry culture. Carrying out cultural and creative design practice also delivers feasible ideas for modern reinterpretation of classic puppet forms. Designers extract, simplify and restructure the original visual elements of puppets. Puppet props originally created for stage performance are transformed into product symbols with standalone aesthetic appeal and distinct cultural recognition. Throughout the design process, the core artistic trait of expressing inner spirit through outward puppet shapes is retained, while matching contemporary consumers' aesthetic tastes and daily usage demands. Besides, developing cultural and creative products themed on rod puppetry can support the coordinated growth of Yangzhou's cultural tourism industry. Such products can be deployed in cultural and tourism scenarios such as scenic spots and exhibitions. As intuitive visual carriers, they showcase Yangzhou's local cultural features. These items strengthen the city's unique cultural identity and help boost the local cultural tourism economy.

2.3 Core Artistic Features of Yangzhou Rod Puppetry

1. Diachronic Evolution of Figurative Art

The figures of Yangzhou rod puppetry evolved from wooden burial figurines in Yangzhou Han-dynasty tombs. Few surviving puppets used for performances from the Tang and Song dynasties remain. According to documentary records, early puppets featured simple, plain forms with relatively rough carving. Craftsmen only outlined basic facial features and body shapes. For painting, solid single-colour application dominated; colours simply distinguished character identities to meet the needs of basic public performances.

Yangzhou Huafang Lu, written in the Qing Dynasty, first clearly documented the shape and structure of Yangzhou rod puppets: "Two chi in height, with hips but no feet, flat base, fitted with tenon and mortise at the bottom." At that time, puppet design

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was heavily influenced by traditional opera, forming a complete set of puppet head types covering sheng, dan, jing and chou roles. The deity-style puppets had square heads and large ears, bold and expressive, mostly for jing roles and mythical characters. Human-style puppets excelled in delicate, lifelike detailing and were mainly used for sheng and dan roles. Puppet design became highly operatic. Craftsmen adopted “painted facial patterns” and “blended facial colouring” techniques, building a facial makeup system based on red, white and black[2]. Red stood for loyalty and bravery, black for forthright toughness, and white for treachery. Coarse linen served as the primary material for costumes, modelled after opera robes. Puppet heads were mostly carved from solid wood, and production techniques grew standardised, laying the foundation for traditional Yangzhou rod puppet design.

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Yangzhou rod puppet design entered a phase of refinement and innovation. Professional puppet-making positions were established in theatre troupes, splitting carving, painting and costume production into separate workflows instead of leaving all tasks to puppet operators. Designers broke the limits of solid wood carving, shifting from stylised opera aesthetics toward refined, individualised modelling. It was not until 1958 that the technique of moulding with clay was adopted for the first time. Clay and plaster moulds were utilized for mass production in order to produce smoother heads of the puppets and better depiction of facial features. The color palette for makeup exceeded three colors. Moreover, lighter materials including paper and bamboo were applied to produce torsos of puppets instead of solid wooden bodies. It resulted in reduction of puppet weight and made it easier for the puppeteers to control them for a long period of time.

In the modern world where advancements in technology rule, the puppets of Yangzhou come in many styles, incorporating tradition along with current trends. The makeup and color patterns are no longer adhered to any particular opera design but are now designed according to the personality of characters. There are two main groups, which are traditional style and the cartoon style of children. The traditional puppets

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make use of high contrast colors along with metallic gold and silver. At the same time, the materials used in puppet making have been upgraded comprehensively. Traditional wood and fabric have been partially substituted with PE, silicon and high-density foam. Thanks to 3D printing technology, it is possible to manufacture complicated structures. The creation of puppet Ne Zha in 2021 became an innovation when using the technique of applying kraft paper on puppets' faces and helped to solve the issue of reflection of light from the faces of the puppets due to strong lighting on the stage. At the present moment, Yangzhou Puppet Troupe is the only professional team of rod puppet manufacturing in China that produces about 80% of rod puppets in the country[11].

2. Performance Characteristics of Rod Manipulation

The three styles of Chinese puppetry have their own modes of operation. String puppets operate on a thread, enabling the delicacy of motions, while glove puppets operate within the confines of the hand of the puppeteer and thus their range is limited to a small area. Yangzhou rod puppetry employs its unique system of three rods as its defining characteristic that makes it different from any other style of puppetry. The three rods perform different roles. The control rod operates through the connection with the puppet's head and is held by the puppeteer[9]. It carries the weight of the puppet and controls its position and facial expressions. The other two hand rods individually operate the arms of the puppet, thus controlling its gestures and positions.

A particular unique tradition of Yangzhou Rod Puppetry involves the use of concealed inner hand rods, which are inserted inside the puppet dress itself. It requires more technical expertise from the performers because they are not able to see the position of the rods themselves. It also resulted in the emergence of exclusive techniques of rod puppet manipulation in Yangzhou Rod Puppetry, namely pulling and swinging motions. Rod manipulation requires much more than the skills necessary to operate the puppets but also to breathe life into them. The classic puppet heads were mainly made of carved wood with non-moveable facial features. Their eyes, brows, nose, and mouth could not freely move the way humans' can and were thus limited in

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the expression of emotions. It became natural to develop the method of delivering emotions with gestures and movements of the body. Performers embody emotions of happiness, anger, sadness, and excitement with physical gestures.

The capacity to convey the spirit via form is rooted in the intimate connection between the performer and the puppet. Proficient rod puppeteers must have more than just the dexterity in their hands. Instead, emotion is conveyed via their entire body. While performing on stage, the performer synchronizes the breathing, eye contact, and the physical rhythm with the puppet. For example, the performer leans forward when the puppet climbs up, leans back when the puppet descends, and changes his footwork when the puppet is in the rattling carriage.The performer does not simply command the puppet in one-way control; the two merge to achieve a state of unity between human and puppet.

3. Repertoire Themes and Artistic Qualities

Over centuries of development, Yangzhou rod puppetry repertoires fall broadly into three categories: traditional plays, modern revolutionary realistic dramas and contemporary children's productions. Most traditional works are adapted from classical opera, with roots tracing back to the Qing Dynasty. Heavily influenced by popular Hui opera at that time, representative pieces emerged such as The Nine-Titles Official, Rolling the Drum Mountain and The Empty City Stratagem. Plots are generally concise, with stories driven primarily by physical performance. By the late Qing and early Republican period, Hui opera declined while Peking opera rose as a nationwide major opera[20]. Puppetry repertoires were updated accordingly, incorporating Peking opera classics like Chasing Han Xin and Xu Ce Rides the City Wall. At this stage, puppetry lacked independent scriptwriting. Repertoires were passed down mostly through oral instruction from senior artists, focusing on tales of talented scholars, beautiful ladies, emperors and generals.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Yangzhou rod puppetry underwent a major modern transformation with new revolutionary realistic themes. Under guidance from cultural authorities, the troupe created modern works

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including Singing for River Network Construction and Yang Gensi. Stage design achieved notable breakthroughs with new puppet props such as aircraft, warships and automobiles, enriching the stage space[13].

From the reform and opening-up era to the present, puppetry repertoires have diversified to cater to varied audience groups. On one hand, traditional mythological plays such as Flame Mountain, Sun Wukong Subdues the White-Boned Demon Three Times and Chang'e Flies to the Moon returned to the stage. These have been staged thousands of times domestically and toured internationally to Japan, Australia, Iran and other countries, earning global recognition. On the other hand, children's works gradually became the main focus of repertoire development. Jade Flower Fairy, premiered in 1995, ran continuously for eighteen years with nearly 3,000 performances and more than 1.5 million young viewers, setting a performance record for puppetry. In the new century, cartoon-style dramas adapted from animations including New Tale of the Three Monks, Snow White and Calabash Brothers premiered one after another and won multiple national awards. The troupe also adapted many primary school textbook stories for stage, such as Sima Guang Smashes the Vat, The Emperor's New Clothes and The Fox Pretends to Be the Tiger. Presented in schools with an educational and entertaining spirit, the plays enhance the educative role of puppetry[14].

2.4 Practical problems in the cultural and creative industry of Yangzhou's stick puppet plays

1. Shallow culture

Most existing cultural and creative products themed on Yangzhou rod puppetry focus merely on outward visuals. They just imitate puppet forms and puppets' costumes without exploring deeply into the essential culture and creative concept, causing a lack of cultural depth and creativity in the goods. Yangzhou rod puppetry has a long history going back to the Tang Dynasty. It has continued to develop through the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties, incorporating features of opera performances such as Hui Opera and Peking Opera, and developed its own unique

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technique of rod control performance. However, this long-shaped historical background and unique artistic characteristics are rarely shown in any cultural and creative goods that are accessible. The majority of these goods just imitate the symbols of puppets. They do not explore the thousands-of-years development process of puppetry, handcraft technique of making puppets, rod control performance techniques and materials from traditional plays. Thus, there is no cultural element in these goods[16].

2.Limited Product Categories

Present cultural and creative products that can be attributed to Yangzhou rod puppetry include fridge magnets, keychains, and figurines. They look quite similar to each other and only play decorative and commemorative roles. Such products find no place in the daily life of modern people, lacking practical applications because traditional elements of culture are not well-suited for the current lifestyle. Most consumers buy such goods and put them away somewhere and hardly ever use them in their lives. This way, there is no desire to purchase the same thing again, making a constant demand unattainable. The mentioned model of "buy-and-store" consumption cannot provide a stable source of income to ensure the perpetuation of Yangzhou rod puppetry, as well as access to the culture of puppetry for ordinary people[7].

3.Severe Homogenisation

When it comes to style and design as well as the forms of the existing products associated with Yangzhou puppet shows, they do not have any distinctive characteristics and could easily be mistaken for general tourist memorabilia. Designers adopt narrow approaches when selecting and combining ICH elements. The available product range remains small, targeting only a restricted group of audiences. When browsing various tourist souvenirs, consumers can hardly recognise fridge magnets, keychains and similar common goods as works related to Yangzhou rod puppetry. They also struggle to distinguish them from other puppet styles such as Quanzhou string puppetry and Zhangzhou glove puppetry. Such homogenisation weakens the

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market competitiveness of these products and blurs the unique traits of Yangzhou rod puppetry[22].

4.Lack of Narrative and Interactive Experience

As a performing art, puppetry draws its greatest charm from live manipulation and narrative storytelling. Even so, most commercially available cultural and creative products are static display pieces that abandon puppetry's inherent performative and interactive qualities. Users cannot experience the subtle skills behind the three control rods, nor can they take part in bringing puppet characters to life. The only connection between users and these products becomes passive viewing, with little room for hands-on play or interactive engagement. Besides, these items poorly convey narrative content. This weakens cultural communication and creates barriers for the general public to build an intimate bond with this intangible heritage.

Common fridge magnets simply replicate puppet head portraits, keychains are miniaturized puppet ornaments, and plush toys feature cutified character designs. All of these exist as isolated visual symbols with no attached historical context or cultural clues. It is difficult for audiences to learn how Yangzhou rod puppetry's visual forms evolved from its early Tang and Song phases to maturity in the Qing Dynasty. They also miss the craftsmanship embedded in the three control rods, as well as the aesthetic traditions reflected in facial makeup techniques. Individual products lack narrative connections with one another[19]. Even sold as sets, they fail to construct a complete cultural storyline. Such static, fragmented products with weak storytelling only show users the puppets' outward appearance. They cannot help audiences grasp the underlying history, making in-depth cultural understanding and emotional identification hard to achieve.

2.5 Design Principles of Visual Communication in Cultural and Creative Products

1.Authenticity Principle

The visual design of this communication design is rooted within the initial culture of the art of puppetry. This design appreciates the inherent forms of the costumes and

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color features of the Yangzhou rod puppetry, keeping in mind the historical background of the art form[18]. In the course of designing, traditional symbols are not selected randomly or overly stylized.

2.Innovation Principle

The development of innovation design is based on the initial characteristics of culture and the direction of creative development[21]. By means of form restructuring, function development, and innovative media utilization, traditional puppets' symbolic meanings acquire new visual images and practical significance to help develop unique cultural products.

3.Narrative Principle

Visual symbols are used to construct storylines. Historical scenes and character plots from puppetry are extracted and converted into tangible visual narrative elements. Cultural and creative products can thereby carry puppetry’s cultural stories, shorten the distance between audiences and intangible heritage, evoke emotional resonance and improve cultural communication outcomes[4].

4.User-oriented Principle

Visual design should consider modern users’ aesthetic preferences, usage scenarios and emotional needs[3]. It also prioritises product experience, interactive modes and collectible value, so that the expression of ICH culture can better resonate with young consumers.

Conclusions to Chapter 2

This chapter examines design theories and practical conditions of Yangzhou rod puppetry and establishes the foundational framework for this research. It illustrates the theoretical and practical value of the project: cultural and creative design can broaden communication channels for puppetry and empower Yangzhou’s cultural tourism sector.The chapter also sorts out core artistic traits including the evolution of puppet forms, the features of rod manipulation and diverse repertoire themes. It analyses existing weaknesses of available cultural and creative products: superficial cultural exploration, narrow product ranges, design homogenisation, insufficient narrative and

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interactive elements, and slow progress in brand building.In line with established rules for ICH cultural and creative design, four design principles are defined: authenticity, innovation, narrativity and user-orientation. These serve as design criteria and theoretical backup for the subsequent extraction of visual elements, symbol translation and cultural and creative design practice in later chapters.

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CHAPTER 3

DESIGN PROPOSAL

The third chapter substantiates the design proposal, outlines the prerequisites for practical implementation, etc. The title of this chapter should reflect the specific task, for example:

3.1Concept and Idea

This design takes the developmental history of Yangzhou rod puppetry as its main storyline. Four key periods are selected: its early emergence, flourishing, decline and modern inheritance. Four blind box figurines are made on the basis of watercolour illustration scenes[15]. The main concept transforms the history of puppetry over a thousand years into static illustration scenes to be viewed and collected. With users opening and collecting these, they will have the opportunity to understand the whole development history of Yangzhou rod puppetry.

The watercolor has a mild, gentle visual appearance that includes freehand expression and aligns with the gentle nature of the culture in Yangzhou. In this way, there is no feeling of being distant when it comes to traditional heritage and the viewing experience is rather relaxed. While common blind boxes consist of characters alone, this one goes further than that.Background settings, prop details and character poses together reconstruct puppet performances and living conditions across different eras. The four blind boxes echo one another and form a continuous narrative. When users collect the full set, they trace the whole evolution of puppetry. This lightweight cultural and creative format conveys rich, profound content of the intangible heritage.

3.2 Project Description

The whole design workflow of this project contains three main stages. First, sorting and translating diverse visual elements of puppetry. During research, the study thoroughly organises puppet forms, performers' costumes, scene symbols and colour palettes of Yangzhou rod puppetry, and selects visual materials suitable for design application[5]. Using both realistic extraction and abstract simplification, traditional

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ICH elements are adapted to fit the watercolour illustration style and generate usable design assets.

Second, creating four groups of themed scene illustrations. The scenes correspond respectively to village makeshift-stage shows in the budding period, lively private banquets in urban opera houses during its peak, performers struggling to make a living in the declining phase, and the new look of innovative inheritance in contemporary times. The creation proceeds through sketch ideation, line drawing and watercolour colouring. Every scene keeps historically accurate features, while maintaining a consistent visual style across the whole series.

Third, building 3D render models for the blind boxes. Based on the finished scene illustrations, 3D modelling software converts flat artwork into three-dimensional blind-box prototypes[6]. It simulates surface texture and packaging appearance of real products to present the complete design output.

3.3 Extraction and Transformation of Visual Elements

At the preliminary design stage of cultural and creative products, extracting and reworking visual elements serves as a vital link connecting historical research and design outputs. Yangzhou rod puppetry has thrived for more than a thousand years, and its visual presentation shifted from era to era. Centred on four phases — emergence, prosperity, decline and inheritance — this section extracts and transforms visual elements across four dimensions: puppet forms, performers' costumes, scene symbols and colour systems. It builds a systematic visual language framework for the subsequent blind-box series design[8].

1.Extraction and Transformation of Puppet Form Elements

Yangzhou rod puppetry originated in the Tang Dynasty, with plate-bell puppets as its earliest form. Few surviving physical relics or ancient paintings can verify the appearance of Tang plate-bell puppets, so their look can only be inferred from written records. Historical records indicate that puppets in the Tang Dynasty era featured a very basic structure with plain puppet heads and no ornamentation whatsoever. This

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style includes some of the key features such as the rough outline of logs, large heads, and simple bodies. As for the process of transformation, the style is converted to the Q-style design. The feature of large heads and small bodies is appropriate for the cute style of blind boxes.

This is the peak period of Yangzhou rod puppetry when the development of puppet craft was motivated by the economic prosperity of the salt merchants. Two types of styles were developed – the deities and people. Tiaojiaguan was one of the performances which were shown at the beginning of the opera performance in Qing Yangzhou. Jiaguan, or the Heavenly Official, is the symbol of blessings from heaven and the representative figure of the folk gods of that period. This is why Jiaguan is chosen to be the puppet IP for the prosperous period in this blind box series. In the traditional puppet representation, the Jiaguan has the specific white mask with a smile, civil official hat, and bright red python robe holding silk scroll with the inscription "Heaven blesses"[10]. The refined image will maintain the majesty of such puppet, flatten the patterns on the costumes and retain the basic features like masks, hats and props.

During the latter part of the Qing Dynasty, wars and unrest forced the rod puppetry of Yangzhou to fall into disarray. Gradually, the performances shifted to take place in rural areas, where clown dolls, performing stories from folklore tales, became the predominant form of the time. Many troupes went bankrupt, with only small numbers of artist-farmers traveling in the countryside. Clown puppets were easier to control and had less complicated costuming and props. They suited well for these small troupes to perform, and enjoyed great popularity in the rural areas, indicating the difficulties in survival of the puppetry industry. The clowns attracted the audiences with funny performances, which mirrored how the grassroots performers earned their living during such difficult times. This reflected the vitality of the puppetry despite its hard time. For element extraction and design conversion, the aged look of puppets will be focused on. The faded clothing and worn-out control sticks will be recreated along with the exaggerated facial paint of the clowns.

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In the current inheritance stage, the Jade Flower Fairy is the most characteristic puppet role of Yangzhou rod puppetry. This puppet character was designed by the Yangzhou Puppet Troupe and originated from an award-winning play that received the recognition from the whole country and often appeared in international cultural exchange activities. Based on the city flower of Yangzhou called the jade flower, this special puppet IP is closely connected with the local culture and has higher recognition than other characters. In the process of reinventing this puppet, the traditional characteristics of the puppet are retained, along with the aesthetic features that fit into the digital age. The traditional facial style is preserved but complemented with the fluorescent eyeshadow; the control rods are transformed into the neon lines; the outfit retains the traditional shape but with a cyberpunk look.

2. Extraction and Transformation of Performers' Costume Elements

The costumes of performers integrate the four part storyline and make distinctions between characters through time periods. Based on authentic costume styles, visual distinction is made. Tang Dynasty puppet performers dressed in everyday clothes including headgear called "futou" and round collar robe along with hemp footwear which was easily portable for performances in the marketplace. The costumes of male performers in Kang-Qian period and late Qing had much in common. Queue hairstyle, melon hats, long robes with mandarin jackets were worn. The main difference between them is in condition and function of garments. During the salt merchants' banquet in Kang-Qian period, the costumes were clean and well-kept. In late Qing, travelling performers wore old and ragged clothes, but the costume system did not change[19]. Contemporary performers wear casual clothes which suit streaming well and appeal to the younger audience, embodying the image of inheritors of the new era. There are two artistic approaches used in extraction and transformation – contour tracing and simplified reshaping. The core outlines of costumes are traced and unnecessary details are deleted. Original outlines are transformed using geometrical style and cartoonisation, line curves and proportions are changed accordingly to the contemporary taste.

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3.Extraction and Transformation of Scene Symbol Elements

Tang puppet theatre was basically a form of entertainment for the regular folk of the town. Cloth tents on streets and flags hung outside taverns are used as the setting props, with basic architecture reflecting the relaxed environment of folk performances. With the rise of Kang-Qian period, most of the shows were staged at the homes of salt merchants, and hence merchant's house and opera stages are selected as the setting icons.In late Qing, the puppetry industry slumped. Canal ferry crossings and boats are used to evoke the wandering life of travelling performers, matching the backdrop of industrial decline. For modern digital inheritance, live-stream screens, stage lights and mobile phones symbolise new online communication forms[21]. Scenes are simplified geometrically, stripping away extra ornament while keeping core outlines to fit the blind-box visual style.

4. Extraction and Transformation of Colour Elements

In the Tang Dynasty, when rod puppetry first emerged, grassroots performances had limited resources. Low-saturation earthy yellow and beige-brown tones are adopted to restore the simple, primitive look of early marketplace shows. The Kang-Qian era marks the peak of puppetry. The thriving salt merchant economy supported exquisite stages, costumes and props with richer, bolder colours. Vermilion and gilded hues dominate to evoke the lively, opulent vibe of performances at that time. In late Qing, puppetry declined and artists wandered for work. Grey-blue, dull brown and pale grey with low brightness are selected to build a bleak, desolate atmosphere for this troubled age. For modern digital inheritance, colour schemes break free from purely retro styling[20]. Classic base tones remain, complemented by bright fluorescent accents. The palette feels fresh and striking, suiting online media and young viewers' tastes and achieving innovative digital expression of ICH colour language.

3.4 Four-Scene Historical Narrative Blind Box Series

This blind-box series follows the thousand-year history of Yangzhou rod puppetry as its narrative thread. Four distinct scene illustrations are created for four

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pivotal periods: its emergence in the Tang Dynasty, prosperity in the Qing Dynasty, decline in the late Qing, and rebirth in contemporary times. The design philosophy of the blind box is described below, along with the rationale behind composition of the scene, character models and the general mood of the designs. Also provided here are the actual designs, which include the sketch, watercolour illustration and 3D renders of the actual blind boxes that will be made.

1.Tang-Dynasty Marketplace

Tang-Dynasty Marketplace draws inspiration from puppet shows on the streets of Yangzhou in the Tang Dynasty. Set amid ancient market lanes lined with traditional teahouses, fluttering tavern flags decorate the streets to recreate a bustling, lively street atmosphere. At the centre sits a simple open-air cloth tent, a temporary stage for folk performers. A young artist stands under the tent, fully focused on manipulating a plain plate-bell puppet. With a natural, uncomplicated composition, authentic scene details and character gestures bring to life the early street performances of Yangzhou rod puppetry.







2.Salt Merchants of the Qing Dynasty

Salt Merchants of the Qing Dynasty is set inside the private residence of a Yangzhou salt merchant in the Qing Dynasty, recreating a private banquet performance. The courtyard holds an exquisite Chinese opera stage with neat

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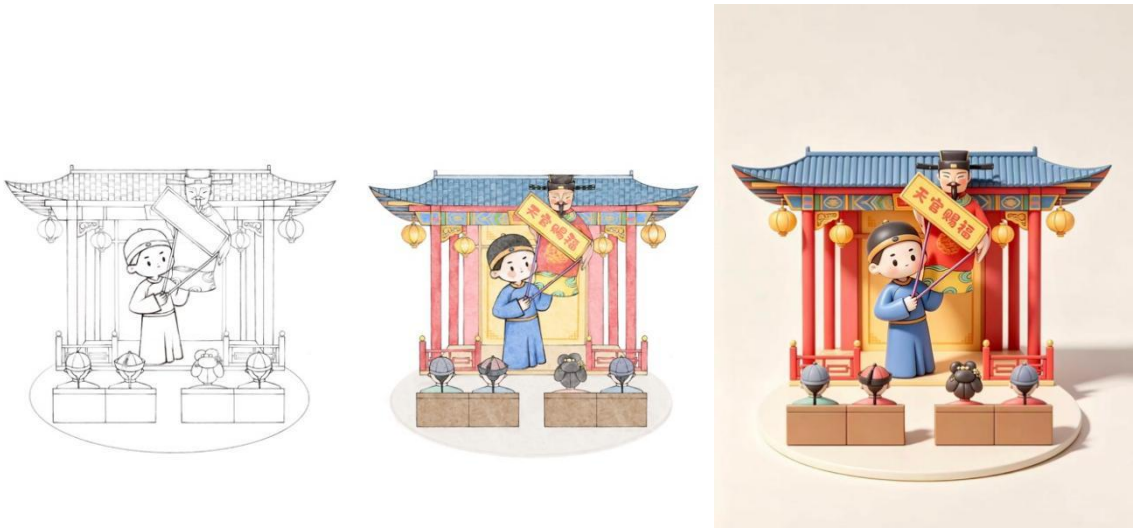
proportions and delicate carvings, quite different from simple grassroots venues. At the centre, a young performer operates the auspicious Jiaguan puppet with elaborate, richly detailed features. A handful of guests sit quietly watching the show in the background. The well-balanced composition vividly depicts the refined, exclusive high-end performances of Yangzhou puppetry for private feasts during the Kangxi and Qianlong reigns.



3. Late Qing Canal Ferry

Late Qing Canal Ferry takes the ancient Grand Canal ferry crossing in late Qing Yangzhou as its setting. The cool, restrained colour palette sets a sombre tone for this declining era. Instead of a lively performance, the scene features a travelling puppeteer beside a boat. He carries a performance box slung over his shoulder, holding the common clown puppets of that time. These props are both his means of earning a living and vessels to pass down his craft. Facing away from the old city, he is about to board the boat. Though the scene appears calm, it carries deep emotion. The clean, understated composition strips away ornate decorations, showing the resilience of artists wandering far and struggling to preserve their craft in the late Qing period.

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4.Modern Live Stream

Modern Live Stream captures the new performance form of Yangzhou rod puppetry spread through live streaming today. Centred on a young performer holding the Jade Flower Fairy puppet for an online show, the scene includes contemporary gear such as stands and fill lights. This modern machinery forms an interesting combination with the ancient puppetry art, forming a unique blend of the past and present elements. This bright and dynamic scene goes beyond the static old style opera stage and shows us how this ICH puppetry art is inherited in the new age media.



3.5 Technical Support and Optimization

This historical blind box model featuring Yangzhou puppetry in four scenes involves the use of popular digital design programs to realize a full suite of visual designs and imagery refinements. Photoshop and Illustrator are used as the key

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software programs in the design process to render and refine the imagery of puppets, costumes, and scene symbols. The modern reinterpretations of the visual elements of the ICH have been achieved through the means of flat graphics and color grading[1].

Considering that the four images depict a lengthy period with clearly distinct color schemes, the brightness and color variables in the entire series have been adjusted to remove color inconsistencies. The completed piece complies with technical standards set for the manufacture of cultural and artistic products. In light of the considerations of mass production of blind boxes, complex patterns and structures have been reduced to some extent. On the one hand, while keeping the cultural elements of Yangzhou puppetry intact, the design is optimized according to the typical process like printing, injection molding and coating, in order to reduce implementation difficulties. On the other hand, the composition and rhythm have been refined to align with the visual tastes of the younger generation.

Conclusions to Chapter 3

This chapter is concerned about the modern transformation of Yangzhou rod puppetry in terms of culture and creativity and covers the entire process of the design practice. Based on the thousand-year development history of puppetry, this design work will create a four-story narrative blind box series through four historical stages: emergence, prosperity, decline, and modern inheritance.

The core elements of intangible cultural heritage are selected from four perspectives: puppet images, performers' attire, scene symbols, and color system. By combining realism and abstraction, the traditional visual elements are transformed into a watercolor illustration style. Four theme stories have been created for these four historical stages: Market of Tang Dynasty, Qing Dynasty Salt Merchant House, Canal Ferry in the Late Qing Dynasty, and Modern Live Stream.

The chapter introduces the complete design process, from sketching out line artwork to completing illustrations and creating 3D mockups of the actual blind box designs. In order to achieve more refined colors, compositions and visual hierarchy, the Photoshop and Illustrator programs are employed. Complicated shapes and

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patterns are modified to be compatible with blind-box mass production. With the core cultural spirit of the intangible culture preserved in mind, the final result should meet the modern aesthetic and production standards.

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis aims to study the visual communication of Yangzhou rod puppetry in today's cultural and creative products. Through analyzing domestic and foreign literature, it is found that there is a shortage of academic literature on the application and transformation of this art. In order to make the best use of visual communication design theory, this paper discusses the artistic characteristics of the puppetry, analyzes the shortcomings of the cultural merchandise industry, formulates the principles of visual communication design and completes the actual designing, creating the story through four periods: the Tang Dynasty, the Qing Dynasty, the late Qing Dynasty and now. Through this work, the historical-themed blind box set is realized. It is concluded that the scenography cultural products with storytelling are able to get rid of time-space restrictions of theatres and let the intangible culture heritage get closer to people. This design practice is not only helpful for the inheritance of Yangzhou puppetry in terms of design idea, but also provides reference for other similar stage intangible cultural heritage.

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APPENDIX A







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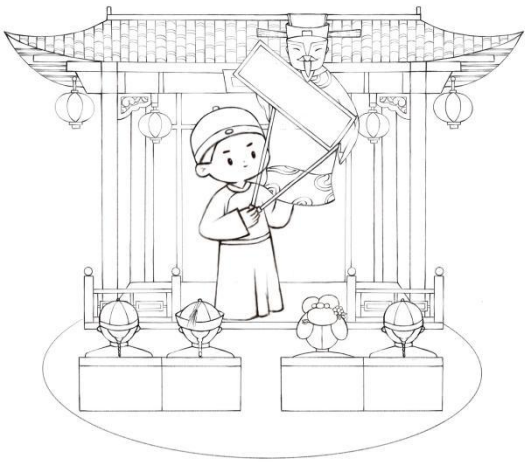
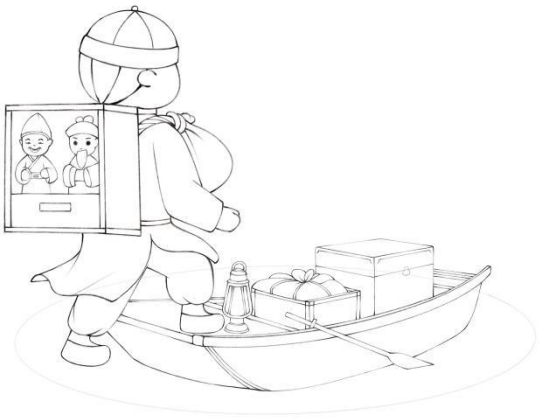
APPENDIX Б









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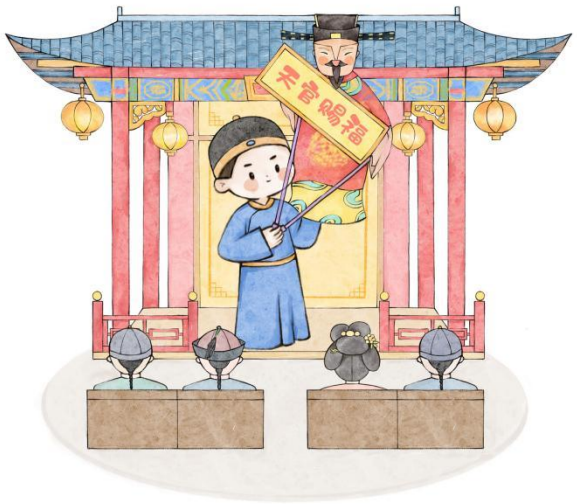

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