

AIGC Empowering the Inheritance and Innovation of Wuqiang New Year Paintings: A New Path for County Cultural Revitalization

YU Yan, Dong Ying

Institute For Design, Hebei Academy of Fine Arts

School of Design, Tongmyong University

ABSTRACT

Actively building a practice model for intangible cultural heritage with Wuqiang characteristics in the new era is an important pathway to promoting the sustainable development of Wuqiang's county-level culture. This study focuses on Wuqiang New Year paintings. By analyzing their historical context and artistic features, and combining them with the current cultural development status of Wuqiang County, it explores how to utilize AI-generated content (AIGC) technology, particularly tools like Midjourney, to demonstrate innovative forms of Wuqiang New Year paintings that integrate modern aesthetics through specific case studies. The research indicates that AIGC technology not only holds unique advantages in preserving and inheriting intangible cultural heritage but also provides new avenues for revitalizing Wuqiang's county-level culture. It serves as a typical case of intangible cultural heritage driving county-level cultural revitalization, thereby uncovering mechanisms and models through which intangible cultural heritage can spur the rejuvenation of county-level cultures.

Keywords: AIGC; Wuqiang New Year Paintings; Cultural Inheritance; County-Level Culture; Innovative Design

1 Introduction

As an outstanding representative of Chinese woodblock New Year paintings, Wuqiang New Year paintings embody profound cultural heritage and artistic value. Their artistic language is characterized by vivid shapes, vibrant colors, and profound symbolism, reflecting the unique charm of folk art while conveying people's aspirations for a better life. However, with societal development and evolving aesthetic preferences, the influence of Wuqiang New Year paintings in contemporary communication contexts has gradually diminished, facing dual challenges of disrupted inheritance and a lack of innovation. In recent years, the application of digital technology in cultural heritage preservation has become increasingly widespread, offering new methods for the transmission and development of traditional culture. Among these advancements, the rapid

development of AI-generated content (AIGC) technology, particularly the tools like Midjourney, has revolutionized the forms and methods of artistic creation. Through AIGC technology, traditional artistic elements can not only be reproduced but also creatively reconstructed according to contemporary aesthetic needs, thereby achieving the modern reinterpretation of traditional culture.

2 Artistic Characteristics of Wuqiang New Year Paintings

(1) Exaggerated Deformation and Essential Presentation

Wuqiang New Year paintings use exaggerated deformation techniques to depict people, animals, and natural scenery. Their creation does not strictly adhere to realism but highlight the essential characteristics and spiritual core of the subjects by abstracting and

artistically processing images. For example, in shaping character, exaggerated facial features, postures, and movements are often used to enhance personality and emotional expression. Typically featuring five-segment body proportions (with the head occupying 1/5 or even 1/4 of the body), emphasis is placed on the head and eyes, with expressive eyes conveying emotions, making the characters naturally amiable. With minimal strokes, they are vividly expressive and lifelike (Fig. 2). This deformation not only enhances the visual impact of the artwork but also endows the works with unique aesthetic value. The technique stems from folk art's observation and refinement of life, aiming to convey cultural connotations through intuitive visual language.

Taking the "Door God" theme as an example, the Door God is usually depicted with broad shoulders, thick eyebrows, large eyes, and giant feet, creating a powerful image that emphasizes authority and justice, reinforcing the ritualistic sense of protecting the household. Such formalized treatment aligns with people's psychological expectations of New Year paintings and enhances cultural dissemination through symbolic imagery (Bo, 2008). Furthermore, exaggerated deformation reflects the artists' profound understanding towards the essence of life. This technique simplifies complex realities, condensing multiple emotions and cultural meanings into visual images, making the works visually appealing, easily understood, and accepted by viewers. The depiction of lions, for example, appears ancient, vivid, resembling both carved stone lions and dancing lions, yet not naturalistic. The painting maxim "Ten pounds of lion, nine pounds of head," with large ears and round eyes, portrays an imposing yet endearing image. As a symbol of power and auspiciousness, the lion conveys both authority and good fortune (Fig. 3).

(2) Drama Within the Painting and Meaning Behind the Painting

Wuqiang New Year paintings are not only visual art but also narrative art. Their creation often tells stories through images and conveys thoughts through figures, embodying the artistic feature of "drama within the painting and meaning behind the painting." Common

themes include historical legends, folk tales, and auspicious meanings, expressed through vivid images and clever compositions that endow the paintings with strong storytelling and symbolism. The characters and plots depicted through exquisite techniques and delicate brushwork showcase powerful expressive force, allowing viewers to appreciate the visual beauty while also understanding the historical, social, and cultural messages embedded within.

For example, the story of "The Marriage of Mice" is often used to satirize unreasonable or absurd marriage arrangements. The tale narrates how a mouse, seeking a husband for its daughter, approaches cats, dogs, tigers, and other animals as potential sons-in-law, but they all refuse due to predator-prey relationships. Ultimately, the mouse chooses the sun, believing it to be the most powerful existence. In visual art, this story uses the absurd marriage scenario to reveal the imbalance between the strong and the weak, reflecting misjudgments or misunderstandings in certain decisions (Fig. 4). On the other hand, the phrase "meaning behind the painting" highlights the importance of metaphorical expression in New Year paintings. In an era when cultural education was not popular, artists exquisitely used visual symbols with homophonic meanings in Chinese to convey good wishes. For example, the common theme "Abundance Year After Year" is represented by the combination of fish and lotus flowers, symbolizing prosperity and family harmony (Fig. 5). The composition is not only decorative but also communicates auspicious blessings through symbolic patterns. This metaphorical expression makes New Year paintings an important medium for communication, showcasing folk wisdom and strengthening cultural identity.

(3) Oral Transmission and Color Arrangement Rules

The artistic characteristics of Wuqiang New Year paintings are also reflected in their use of color, which follows unique color arrangement rules, creating a distinct visual style. These rules have been passed down orally, embodying the wisdom and artistic experience of the folk. The color palette is highly vibrant, with high-saturation colors such as red, green, and yellow

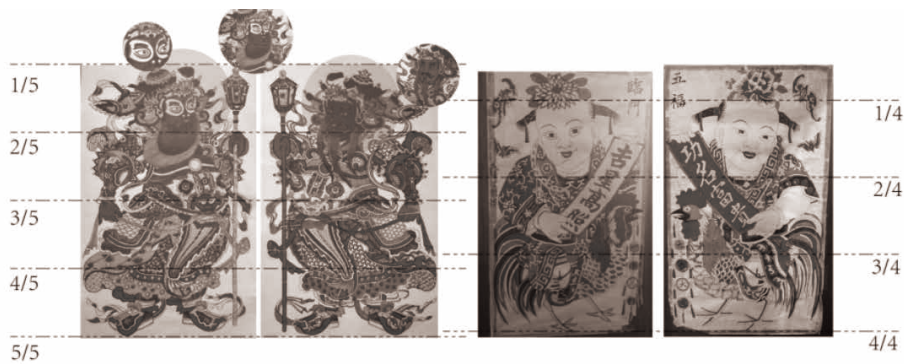


Fig. 2 Proportional Illustration of Figures in Wuqiang New Year Paintings (Made by the Author)



Fig. 3 “Lion Rolling the Embroidered Ball” in Wuqiang New Year Paintings

dominating the compositions. During field research at the Wuqiang New Year Painting Museum, the author learned about folk rhymes passed down through generations, including the saying, “To convey joy, use red and green.” This strong contrast of complementary colors caters to festive atmospheres, enhancing the visual impact and decorative effect. For example, in New Year paintings displayed during the Spring Festival, red symbolizes joy and warmth, while yellow represents wealth and prosperity. Together, these colors convey a strong sense

of celebration and cultural significance.

The use of color in New Year paintings is not merely a pursuit of aesthetics but also carries rich symbolic meanings and functional considerations. Different colors play distinct narrative roles within the composition. For instance, in Door God paintings, large areas of red and black not only highlight the figures’ authority and mystery but also suggest their function of warding off evil and disasters. This combination of functionality and aesthetics makes the color arrangement rules of Wuqiang New Year paintings a unified expression of art and culture. Furthermore, the orally transmitted color arrangement rules also reflect the craftsmanship involved in New Year painting production. Folk rhymes emphasize that “Using fewer colors yet achieving the best effect depends on skillful combinations.” In the hand-printing process, the selection and mixing of natural pigments not only determine the visual performance of the artwork but also give the paintings a unique texture, preserving their traditional charm and serving as a crucial artistic hallmark.

3 Challenges Faced by Wuqiang New Year Paintings from the Perspective of County Culture

(1) Temporal Deviations in Cultural Identity

The mainstream trends in social aesthetics and the expressive forms of traditional culture have gradually shown significant cognitive biases. This deviation is reflected not only in the acceptance of artistic styles but also deeply rooted in the fissures of cultural identity. Firstly, the dynamic nature of contemporary aesthetics



Fig. 4 The "Marriage of Mice" in Wuqiang New Year Paintings



Fig. 5 The "Abundance Year After Year" in Wuqiang New Year Paintings

has led to differences in value systems between tradition and modernity. Wuqiang New Year paintings are characterized by vivid colors, full compositions, and simple themes. However, modern aesthetics tend to favor simplicity, abstraction, and minimalism, reducing the appeal of traditional forms among younger generations. Furthermore, the reinterpretation and redefinition of traditional cultural symbols highlight this identity deviation. The folk elements and ethical concepts embodied in Wuqiang New Year paintings are often assigned new meanings in contemporary contexts. For example, auspicious animals or folk story motifs that once represented collective emotional expressions within specific cultural backgrounds are now often simplified into decorative symbols. This semantic shift weakens the paintings' role as cultural carriers and may lead to misunderstandings or neglect their intrinsic value.

(2) Limitations of Traditional Communication Methods

As a significant representative of Chinese intangible cultural heritage, Wuqiang New Year paintings have traditionally relied on folk activities and local market reputation for dissemination. However, this approach is increasingly showing limitations in modern society, directly impacting the sustainability and reach of cultural transmission. The regional nature of traditional dissemination methods restricts the tourist range of Wuqiang New Year paintings. Their creation and sales are primarily concentrated in local markets, fairs, and folk activities, resulting in a limited transmission radius.

While this method aligned with functional demands in traditional society, it struggles to break geographical boundaries in the modern context. Compared to the rapid dissemination supported by information technology and globalization, Wuqiang New Year paintings have limited national and international recognition. Additionally, traditional communication methods lack modern media support, leading to inefficient information dissemination. The transmission process heavily relies on oral instruction and demonstration by artisans, with the master-apprentice model creating high barriers to transmission, resulting in low efficiency and limited reach. Consequently, the historical evolution and technical inheritance of the paintings have difficulty forming a comprehensive knowledge system.

(3) Insufficient Economic Empowerment from Culture

As an essential part of Chinese folk art, Wuqiang New Year paintings carry rich cultural connotations with their distinctive ethnic characteristics and artistic value. However, their contribution to county-level economic development remains limited due to low economic conversion capabilities, incomplete industrial chains, and insufficient marketization. Wuqiang New Year paintings have not formed synergistic effects with related industries such as tourism and education, leading to a short industrial chain that fails to maximize economic value. Additionally, their brand building and promotion are insufficient, resulting in low market recognition. Compared with other regional cultural symbols like Guizhou Miao embroidery

or Fujian Dehua ceramics, Wuqiang New Year paintings have not yet achieved a large-scale branding effect, failing to fully exploit the potential value of their cultural IP. Moreover, the lack of integration with new media and digital platforms further limits their recognition and acceptance among younger consumer groups, reducing their economic impact through broader market coverage.

4 Practical Pathways for AIGC to Promote County-Level Cultural Revitalization

County-level cultural revitalization is essential for achieving regional cultural confidence and economic development. Using Wuqiang woodblock New Year paintings as an example, their status as a national intangible cultural heritage highlights challenges in cultural inheritance and economic development, including a lack of vitality, limited dissemination, and insufficient market transformation. With AIGC technology, integrating human-machine craftsmanship, creating a diverse communication ecosystem, and building cultural brands can provide systematic solutions for cultural revitalization.

(1) A New Path for Inheritance and Dialogue with the Times: Human-Machine Craftsmanship Integration

The protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage require not only the continuation of traditional craftsmanship but also integration with modern technology and social demands. AIGC technology, through deep learning and generative models, provides strong technical support for the innovative design of Wuqiang woodblock New Year paintings. The bidirectional construction of technological rationality and value rationality is the foundation for the positive effects of AIGC-driven digital cultural production. In the process of inheritance and innovation, artisans often work to meet the rapidly changing aesthetic demands in modern society due to the expressive limitations of traditional styles. AIGC effectively addresses this challenge.

By comparing and practicing various AIGC image generation tools, it is evident that Midjourney can efficiently identify, analyze, and flexibly process diverse image generation needs. With the support of AIGC

technology, the new generation of artisans can input precise keywords to iterate and upgrade Wuqiang New Year paintings, combining traditional elements with modern abstract art. This approach breaks the constraints of traditional styles while enhancing the expressive forms of woodblock New Year paintings to align with contemporary aesthetics, solving the problem of insufficient vitality in cultural inheritance. For example, integrating traditional auspicious patterns with modern minimalist design concepts generates works that retain traditional charm while appealing to contemporary tastes (Fig. 6). Moreover, AIGC records and learns the design logic and creative tendencies of artisans during the creative process, generating design solutions, which better meet the personalized needs of artisans. This digital creation model, centered on artisans, achieves the dual goals of “inheritance of craftsmanship + innovative upgrading” ensuring the historical continuity of intangible cultural heritage while promoting its deep integration with modern cultural contexts.

(2) A New Path for Multicultural Development: Creating a Diverse Communication Ecosystem

The dissemination of intangible cultural heritage involves not only preserving traditional art forms but also diversifying their cultural value and innovative expressions. In contemporary dissemination, cultural heritage such as Wuqiang New Year paintings often fails to reach a broader tourist due to its limited formats and contexts. AIGC technology expands communication contexts, creating a new communication ecosystem for Wuqiang New Year paintings.

For example, in poster design, AIGC can combine traditional patterns from Wuqiang New Year paintings with modern design elements to generate visually striking artworks with high artistic value. By integrating auspicious motifs and vibrant colors from New Year paintings with geometric compositions and dynamic effects in modern advertising posters, AIGC enriches the visual language of New Year paintings and conveys their cultural connotations in a more intuitive and appealing manner (Fig. 7). Additionally, cross-disciplinary collaboration is essential for constructing a

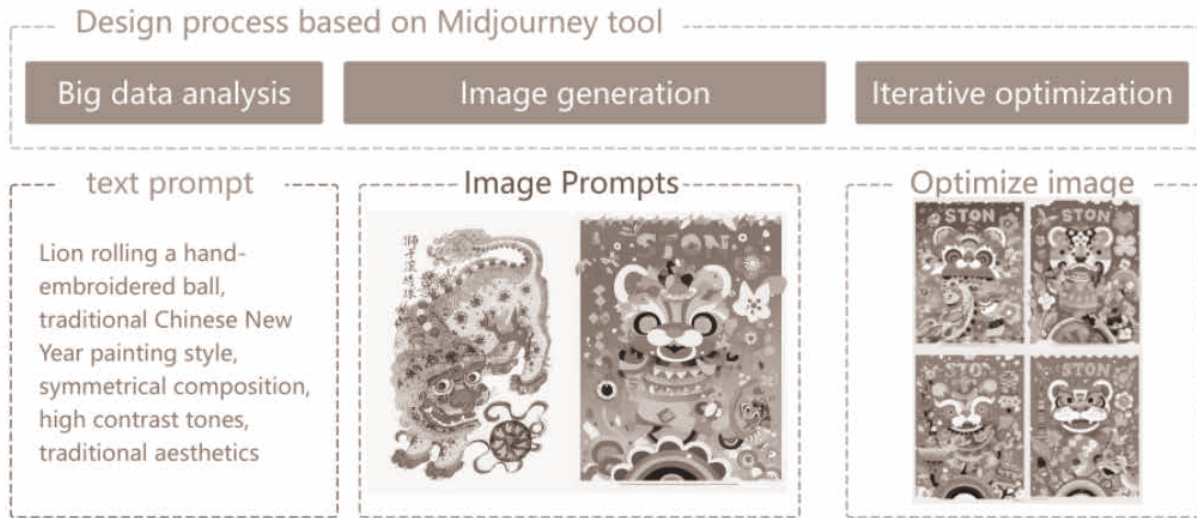


Fig. 6 AI-Generated Artwork of “Lion Rolling the Embroidered Ball” Combined with Wuqiang New Year Paintings

new communication ecosystem. By hosting innovative activities that combine intangible cultural heritage with art and design, more young designers can be attracted to get involved. For instance, inviting professional designers to collaborate with artisans to develop new cultural products not only enhances the social influence and economic value of Wuqiang New Year paintings through exhibitions and collections but also achieves commercialization through online and offline channels. This enables the iterative dissemination and reinterpretation of New Year paintings in diverse cultural contexts, encouraging younger generations to engage with and understand traditional culture, ultimately promoting the dissemination and collection of intangible cultural heritage in a multicultural society.

(3) Cultural Empowerment for County Economies: Brand Building Based on New Year Painting Heritage

Cultural empowerment is a crucial factor in driving county-level economic growth, and branding intangible cultural heritage is key to transforming cultural resources into industrial assets. During the branding process, New Year painting culture provides distinctive artistic expressions and cultural identity, injecting unique cultural symbols and value recognition into economy in the county. For example, AIGC-assisted picture books featuring Wuqiang New Year paintings demonstrate an innovative approach that integrates tradition and modernity, promoting cultural inheritance and brand building.

AIGC technology digitally analyzes and deeply



Fig. 7 AI-Generated Poster Featuring “Auspicious Patterns” Inspired by Wuqiang New Year Paintings

learns the elements of Wuqiang New Year paintings, accurately reproducing symbolic patterns, colors, and stylistic features in book design. This technology not only improves production efficiency but also ensures the authenticity and artistic value of cultural elements, revitalizing Wuqiang New Year paintings through new media. In terms of brand building, AIGC technology provides new avenues for the market promotion of Wuqiang New Year paintings. By releasing digital picture books online and creating interactive experiences, the brand can reach tourists both at home and abroad, transforming from a regional cultural resource into a widely recognized cultural brand (Fig. 8). Moreover, the sustainability and derivative potential of digital content enable innovation to continue, positioning Wuqiang New Year paintings as an essential vehicle for cultural empowerment in county-level economies.

5 Conclusion and Outlook

As a treasure of Chinese traditional culture, Wuqiang New Year paintings are deeply rooted in folk life with significant artistic and cultural value. However, the challenges of inheritance and development in the context of modernization and globalization include the loss of craftsmanship, market contraction, and misalignment with contemporary aesthetic demands. In this context, the introduction of AI-generated content (AIGC) technology provides new possibilities for protecting and innovating traditional culture. By leveraging AIGC, the patterns, compositions, and color languages of Wuqiang New

Year paintings can be precisely replicated and creatively restructured in digital environments, revitalizing their artistic forms.

Driven by AIGC-based creation and dissemination methods, the revitalization of Wuqiang New Year paintings will achieve a deep fusion of tradition and modernity through diverse approaches. By constructing an open cultural ecosystem that closely integrates traditional craftsmanship, digital technology, and market demands. These paintings can preserve their cultural essence while achieving dynamic inheritance, providing vital support for regional economy and cultural development.

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Fig. 8 AI-Generated Picture Book Illustrations of “Kylin Delivering a Son” and “Renewal of All Things” Combined with Wuqiang New Year Paintings