

Innovative Application of the Six-Tusked White Elephant in Dunhuang Murals in Cultural and Creative Design

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Abstract

This article takes the Six-Tusked White Elephant in the Dunhuang murals as the research object. Focusing on the analysis of visual features and cultural connotations, the exploration of aesthetic value, and the exploration of transformation strategies for cultural and creative design, it conducts arguments by applying imageology, visual semiotics, and cultural regeneration theory. It adopts a research method that combines literature studies, image analysis, market research, and user-oriented questionnaire analysis. Firstly, it systematically examines the modeling language, decorative elements, and symbolic meanings of the Six-Tusked White Elephant in the Dunhuang murals, clearly defining core visual paradigms such as side-view composition, head tilting forward, and prominent six teeth. Secondly, it explains its cultural aesthetic value in Buddhism and folk traditions, clarifying the evolution logic from religious symbols to cultural IPs. Finally, it investigates current problems such as homogenization in cultural creative development and superficiality of symbols, and combines the needs of mainstream users aged 18-35 to propose transformation paths such as cute visual, healing emotions, and game mechanisms.

This research provides theoretical and practical support for the modern innovation of Dunhuang traditional elements, enriches the Dunhuang cultural and creative design system, offers a new design framework for the contemporary transformation of the Six-Tusked White Elephant, and holds significant value for the modern dissemination of traditional culture.

Keywords: Six-Tusked White Elephant, Dunhuang Murals, Cultural Connotation, Visual Language, cultural and creative design

Introduction

The Mogao Grottoes of Dunhuang are not only a sacred treasury of human religious art but also a significant cultural heritage site where traditional Chinese aesthetics intersect with diverse

cultural influences. Within the millennium-long tradition of cave art, animal imagery constitutes an essential component of both narrative and decorative systems, carrying profound religious connotations and aesthetic significance. In these images, the Six-Tusked White Elephant, as a miraculous animal in the birth narrative of Buddha Sakyamuni and as the sacred mount of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, appears with high frequency and strong visual recognizability in Dunhuang murals, such as those in Cave 278 from the Sui dynasty and Cave 329 from the early Tang dynasty.

Under the backdrop of the rise of "national culture" and the revival of traditional culture, the artistic symbols of Dunhuang have transformed from a mere religious heritage into a highly dynamic cultural IP. However, the creative development of the Six-Tusked White Elephant still remains at the superficial level of graphic transfer and symbol accumulation, lacking systematic structural deconstruction and emotional value exploration. This study takes qualitative research as the core, relying on imageology, visual semiotics and cultural regeneration theory, and using methods such as literature research, image analysis, market research and user-oriented analysis, first to sort out the historical background, cultural connotation and research status of Six-Tusked White Elephant, then to analyze its structural form, decorative elements and form patterns, identify current problems such as homogeneity of cultural products and insufficient dissemination power, and construct a research path of "image analysis - symbol interpretation - design translation".

This research systematically extracted the visual characteristics and cultural connotations of the Six-Tusked White Elephant, and combined the aesthetic preferences and emotional needs of contemporary young people to form practical and feasible innovative design strategies. The research results can be directly applied to pattern design, the creation of cartoon IPs, story-based narration, and game-based cultural product development, providing a clear direction for the cute, healing, and game-like transformation of the Six-Tusked White Elephant image. It promotes the integration of traditional sacred imagery with modern aesthetic life, enhancing the depth of Dunhuang cultural design, and providing a replicable practical framework for the contemporary revitalization and innovative dissemination of Dunhuang art and similar traditional cultural heritages.

Objectives

1. To examine the visual characteristics, narrative contexts, and symbolic meanings of the Six-Tusked White Elephant depicted in Dunhuang murals.
2. To analyze the aesthetic value and cultural significance of this imagery within Buddhist and folk visual traditions.
3. To explore strategies for applying Six-Tusked White Elephant imagery in Dunhuang mural paintings to cultural and creative design.

Literature Review

1. Research on Dunhuang Murals and Animal Imagery

Scholarly research on Dunhuang murals has long focused on Buddhist iconography, stylistic evolution, religious narratives, and cultural heritage conservation. Foundational publications produced by the Dunhuang Academy-such as *The Complete Collection of Dunhuang Grottoes* and the *Interpreting Dunhuang* series-have systematically documented the chronological development, compositional logic, and ritual functions of Dunhuang murals, establishing a relatively comprehensive research framework. Yin (2020), through a systematic examination of the types, chronological distribution, and functional evolution of animal imagery in the Dunhuang Grottoes, points out that animal images exhibit a historical shift from primarily narrative functions to more decorative roles, reflecting the dynamic interaction between Buddhist thought and social culture.

Zhao (2023) argues that animals depicted in Dunhuang murals are not merely decorative elements but function as important symbolic media connecting religious doctrine, narrative structure, and social belief. Cha (2012) and Jin (2012) further suggest that zoomorphic imagery in Chinese visual culture often integrates multiple layers of meaning, including totemic worship, Buddhist symbolism, and philosophical metaphor. However, such studies largely remain within the domains of art history and iconography, with relatively limited discussion of contemporary visual translation. From the perspective of the development of visual analysis methods, the Gestalt visual cognition theory in Western art theory provides an important supplement for the study of image structure. This theory emphasizes that when humans perceive images, they will spontaneously form an overall structure, and understand the picture through visual center of gravity, graphics, background relationships and structure. This perspective helps to deepen the understanding of the composition style of animal images in Dunhuang murals.

With regard to the Six-Tusked White Elephant, existing research has mainly focused on its scriptural origins and its iconographic functions in classical narrative scenes such as *Entering the Womb Riding a White Elephant* and the *Samantabhadra Transformation*. These studies provide detailed interpretations of the symbolic associations between the Six-Tusked White Elephant, the Six Perfections, compassion, and ideals of Buddhist cultivation, forming a solid foundation for iconographic analysis. Nevertheless, this line of research remains largely confined to art historical and iconographic perspectives, with insufficient systematic exploration of the Six-Tusked White Elephant's potential as a resource for contemporary cultural and creative design.

2. Animal Imagery in Dunhuang Murals and Cultural and Creative Design Research

With the development of the cultural and creative industries, scholars in recent years have increasingly focused on the transformation pathways of animal imagery from Dunhuang murals within contemporary design contexts. Sun et al. (2022) examines auspicious animal imagery in Dunhuang murals and explores its application in cultural and creative products from the perspectives

of form, color, and cultural symbolism, arguing that the extraction of visual elements combined with modern aesthetic reconstruction can effectively enhance the contemporary dissemination of traditional imagery. Du & Zhang (2023) This study takes the Dunhuang Academy's animated short film "The Deer and the Snitch" (inspired by the story of the Nine-Colored Deer) as an example to discuss how digital animation can transform the story of the Nine-Colored Deer mural into an educational medium for cultural heritage that is acceptable to teenagers.

In design practice-oriented research, Sun & Cao (2024) Taking the Dunhuang motif of "Three Hares Sharing Ears" as the central theme, this study translates and applies its design to the creation of Linglong porcelain lighting artifacts from Jingdezhen. It offers a detailed analysis of the cultural symbolism and stylistic features of the three-hares pattern as depicted in Dunhuang murals, demonstrating the adaptability of animal imagery within contemporary design contexts while also embodying metaphors of religious and multicultural exchange. From a more specialized perspective, Dong et al. (2023) This study conducts a systematic analysis of "The Nine-Colored Deer" animation, examining how its visual language is distilled from the murals of Cave 257 at the Mogao Grottoes. Through methodologies such as "moderate exaggeration" and "color symbolism," the animation's redesign process is thoroughly investigated. The formal characteristics of the nine-colored deer derived from Dunhuang murals are systematically evaluated, along with their potential application in cultural and creative product design. A design approach centered on the reconstruction of visual language is accordingly proposed.

However, most existing studies have focused on the application process of "element extraction - re-design", and the structural analysis of the image itself is still relatively weak. In particular, there is a lack of systematic methods based on artistic composition principles. From the perspective of design studies, the classic composition theory constitutes the basic framework for visual expression (Kim, 2006). For instance, rhythm is formed through repetition and variation to create a visual guiding path, contrast enhances visual tension, and balance determines the stability and visual comfort of the picture. These principles are not only applicable to design creation, but also to the analysis of existing images of Dunhuang murals.

Conceptual Framework

As shown in Figure 1, this study constructs a conceptual framework consisting of four components: the cultural context of Dunhuang murals, traditional image elements of the Six-Tusked White Elephant, relevant theoretical foundations, and contemporary cultural and creative design practice. Through systematic image analysis and theoretical interpretation, the framework explores pathways for translating traditional visual elements into contemporary design, Transform traditional visual elements into contemporary aesthetic cultural and creative design language, and form application paths such as patternization, cartoonization, and storyization. The scope of this research

mainly focuses on representative images such as "Entering the Womb Riding a White Elephant" and "Samantabhadra Transformation", as well as the transformation practice of the Six-Tusked White Elephant in cultural and creative design.

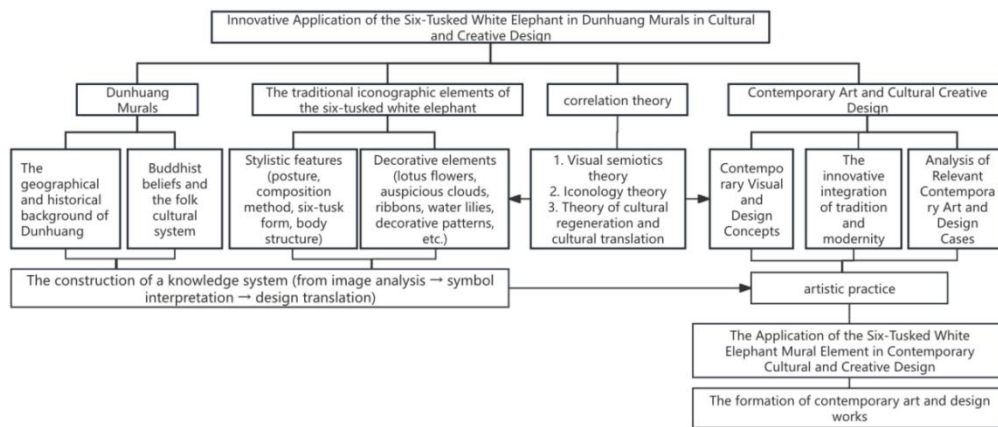


Figure 1 Research Conceptual Framework Diagram

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology centered on visual analysis and cultural interpretation. First, a literature review is conducted to systematically examine Buddhist scriptures related to Dunhuang murals and the Six-Tusked White Elephant, existing iconographic studies, and contemporary literature on cultural and creative design, in order to clarify the historical background, cultural connotations, and current state of research. Second, image analysis is employed to conduct an in-depth examination of representative depictions of the Six-Tusked White Elephant in Dunhuang murals, focusing on visual characteristics and formal principles such as structural form, compositional strategies, decorative elements, and symbolic meanings. During the analysis process, the theories of artistic composition and Gestalt visual theory were introduced as methodological support to enhance the systematicness and explanatory power of the analysis. Specifically, this includes: balance (analyzing the distribution of visual weight in the picture), rhythm (identifying the visual flow of repetitive elements such as lotus flowers and ribbons), emphasis (judging the visual center such as ivory and head), contrast (analyzing the dynamic relationship), as well as unity and proportion (evaluating the overall coordination).

At the theoretical level, visual semiotics, iconographic theory, and cultural regeneration theory are introduced to interpret the symbolic system and mechanisms of meaning production embedded in the imagery of the Six-Tusked White Elephant, providing a theoretical foundation for design translation. On this basis, market research and case analysis are carried out to evaluate existing Dunhuang-themed cultural and creative products, identifying issues such as visual homogenization and limited communicative effectiveness. The study further incorporates user-oriented methods,

including questionnaire analysis, to explore contemporary consumers' aesthetic preferences and emotional expectations. Semiotic theory and cultural regeneration theory together constitute the conceptual framework of this research, offering an interpretive lens for understanding the representation of traditional symbols within modern design systems.

Results

1. Analysis of the Characteristics of the Six-Tusked White Elephant in Dunhuang Murals

The elephant culture in China mainly consists of the following three aspects: First, totem worship, such as the Dai people in Yunnan who revere the elephant as the "Elephant God", believing that the elephant is a divine being sent by heaven to protect humans; second, the combination of the elephant with traditional Chinese philosophical thought, in which people in traditional Chinese culture pursue the "image" of things in connection with ancient philosophy; third, the elephant and religious worship, where the elephant in Buddhism symbolizes auspiciousness, prosperity and power, and the elephant culture in Taoism is integrated with the idea of retribution for good and evil (Zhao, 2012). The elephant images in the Dunhuang Grottoes are mainly divided into the following four categories: Buddhist story paintings, mounts, sutra transformation paintings, and Esoteric Buddhism images.

A total of 44 murals in Dunhuang feature Six-Tusked White Elephant. This study selected 8 representative images related to Six-Tusked White Elephant, each from an individual cave, as the key analysis objects. These images can clearly present the structural form, decorative elements, and symbolic meanings of the Six-Tusked White Elephant in the Dunhuang murals, thus having strong representativeness.

1.1 The Traditional Culture and Modern Cultural Creativity of the Six-Tusked White Elephant

The Six-Tusked White Elephant holds profound symbolic significance in Buddhist imagery. It is not only the central theme in the story of the birth of Sakyamuni, but also a symbol of the Buddha's enlightenment and compassionate spirit. According to the "Collection of Scriptures" and the "Great Prajna Paramita Sutra", Queen Maya dreamed of the Six-Tusked White Elephant descending from the sky, which symbolizes the conception of the holy one and the impending moment of enlightenment. This imagery was subsequently widely depicted in the Dunhuang murals, becoming a quintessential representation within the Buddhist narrative tradition (Wang, 2005).

The earliest extant depiction of Entering the Womb Riding a White Elephant appears on the northern side of the west wall of Cave 278 at the Mogao Grottoes from the Sui dynasty. Centered on the Six-Tusked White Elephant treading upon lotus blossoms and moving through the air, the composition establishes a canonical iconographic motif combining the elephant, lotus, and celestial music (Figure 2). In Dunhuang murals, the most prevalent elephant-related theme is the

image of Samantabhadra riding an elephant, with an early example found in Cave 331 from the early Tang dynasty. Here, the massive and stable posture of the six-tusked white elephant contrasts with the light, dynamic movement of flying apsaras, reinforcing the elephant's symbolic role as a sacred and dignified mount (Figure 3). A total of 151 such images survive in the Dunhuang Grottoes, primarily dating to the Tang, Five Dynasties, and Song periods (Jin, 2018)



Figure 2 Entering the Womb Riding a White Elephant, Cave 278, Mogao Grottoes, Sui Dynasty.

Source : Dunhuang Academy (2000)



Figure 3 The Samantabhadra Transformation Scene, Cave 331, Mogao Grottoes, Early Tang Dynasty.

Source : Dunhuang Academy (2000)

1.2 Analysis of the Formal Language of the Six-Tusked White Elephant Image

The Samantabhadra Transformation in Dunhuang murals is primarily concentrated in the Early and Middle Tang periods and originates from Buddhist narratives depicting Samantabhadra and the Six-Tusked White Elephant. As shown in Table 2, the Six-Tusked White Elephant is generally portrayed in a static, standing posture. In Yulin Caves 25 and 340, the elephant is depicted in full view, whereas in Caves 205 and 159 it appears in a 45-degree oblique perspective. Structurally, the imagery emphasizes the tusks and muscular form, conveying a sense of stability and solemnity. Variations are evident in trunk shape, head orientation, and body structure: in Yulin Cave 25, the trunk hangs downward with detailed facial features; in Cave 340, the trunk forms a C-shape with simplified facial details; in Caves 205 and 159, the head tilts to the left-Cave 205 shows a downward-sloping torso with a slightly raised foreleg, while Cave 159 presents an S-shaped body curve with evenly distributed weight.

Element extraction analysis indicates that lotus motifs frequently appear beneath and around the elephants in Yulin Caves 25, 340, and 205, while all four caves include reins, water tack, and carpet decorations. Differences include wave-like patterns in Cave 340, cloud motifs in Cave 205, and relatively minimal surrounding decoration in Cave 159. Overall, in the Samantabhadra Transformation, the Six-Tusked White Elephant is consistently configured with reins, water tack, and lotus bases, presenting a classical and dignified aesthetic. After refinement, the lotus motifs appear more naturalistic with smaller lotus centers than those in Entering the Womb Riding a White Elephant; the water tack resembles that in the Manjusri Transformation and appears delicate; the reins emphasize realistic texture; and the carpet patterns continue the decorative treatment seen in Entering the Womb Riding a White Elephant.

Table 1-Entering the Womb Riding a White Elephant

cave	278	322	329	375
elephant images in the murals				
structural analysis	Dynamic pose, side view, standing.	Dynamic pose, side view, standing, walk.	Dynamic pose, side view, standing, run.	Dynamic pose, side view, standing, walk.
Physical features	The head is tilted forward, with prominent long	The head is tilted forward, with prominent long teeth,	The head is tilted forward, with prominent long	The head is tilted forward, with prominent long

	teeth, a drooping nose, and weakened facial features. The limbs have a square structure.	the nose extending upwards, and the facial features clearly defined. The limbs form a square structure.	teeth, the nose is upturned, and the facial features are weakened. The limbs are arranged in a straight line.	teeth, a drooping nose, and weakened facial features. The limbs are in a square structure.
decorative element	Surrounded by auspicious cloud patterns, it is decorated with horse trappings, water reins and lotus elements.	Horse harness and water bridle decorations.	Surrounded by ribbon and auspicious cloud patterns, it is decorated with lotus elements.	Surrounded by the auspicious cloud pattern, the horse gear, water reins and lotus elements are decorated.
extraction of decorative elements	 lotus motifs	 flowing ribbon motifs	 auspicious cloud motifs	 carpet motifs

Source : Dunhuang Academy et al. (2010)

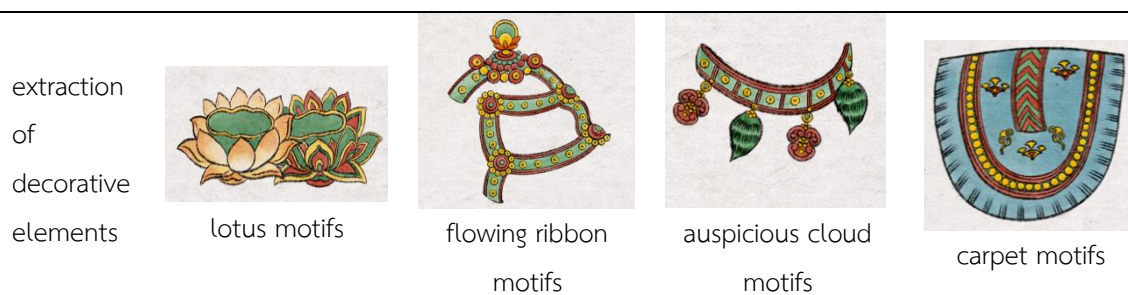
The Samantabhadra Transformation in Dunhuang murals is primarily concentrated in the Early and Middle Tang periods and derives from Buddhist narratives depicting Samantabhadra and the Six-Tusked White Elephant. As shown in Table 2, the Six-Tusked White Elephant is generally represented in a static, standing posture. In Yulin Caves 25 and 340, the elephant is depicted in full view, whereas in Caves 205 and 159 it appears in a 45-degree oblique perspective. The overall form emphasizes the tusks and muscular structure, conveying a sense of stability and solemnity. Variations occur in trunk shape, head orientation, and torso structure: in Yulin Cave 25, the trunk hangs downward with detailed facial features; in Cave 340, the trunk forms a C-shape with simplified facial treatment; in Caves 205 and 159, the head tilts to the left. In Cave 205, the torso slopes downward with the foreleg slightly raised, while in Cave 159, the torso follows an S-shaped curve with evenly distributed weight.

Element extraction analysis indicates that lotus motifs frequently appear beneath and around the elephant in Yulin Caves 25, 340, and 205, while all four caves include reins, water tack, and carpet decorations. Differences include wave-like patterns in Cave 340, cloud motifs in Cave 205, and relatively simplified surrounding decoration in Cave 159. Overall, the Six-Tusked White Elephant

in the Samantabhadra Transformation is characterized by a consistent configuration of reins, water tack, and lotus bases, presenting an elegant and stable classical aesthetic. After refinement, the lotus motifs appear more naturalistic with smaller lotus centers than those in Entering the Womb Riding a White Elephant; the water tack resembles that in the Manjusri Transformation and is delicately rendered; the reins emphasize material texture; and the carpet patterns continue the decorative treatment found in Entering the Womb Riding a White Elephant.

Table 2 The Samantabhadra Transformation Scene

cave	YU 25	159	205	340
elephant images in the murals				
structural analysis	Mainly static, side view, standing posture.	Static pose, three-quarter (45-degree) side view, standing position.	Static pose, three-quarter (45-degree) side view, standing position.	Mainly static, side view, standing posture.
Physical features	The head is tilted forward, with prominent long teeth and a drooping nose. The facial features are distinct. The overall form is stable and well-proportioned.	Turn the head to the left, show the long teeth, the nose droops in an S shape, and the facial features are clear. The overall form is stable and well-proportioned.	The head is tilted to the right, with prominent long teeth and a drooping nose. The facial features are distinct. The left front leg is slightly raised, and the overall posture is stable and balanced.	The head is tilted forward, with prominent long teeth, a nose curved in a C shape, and weakened facial features. The overall form is stable and balanced.
decorative element	Horse gear, water reins, carpets and lotus element decorations.	Harnesses, water reins and carpet decorations.	Horse gear, water reins and carpets, lotus elements, decorated with wavy lines.	Horse gear, water reins and carpets, lotus elements, decorated with wavy lines.



Source : (Dunhuang Academy et al., 2010)

The analysis presented in this chapter demonstrates that the Six-Tusked White Elephant depicted in specific narrative contexts of Dunhuang murals follows identifiable patterns in both formal representation and decorative configuration. Guided by these regularities, the systematic analysis and extraction of the motif provide a clear pathway for integrating the Six-Tusked White Elephant into cultural and creative product design. Furthermore, the extraction and reinterpretation of decorative patterns not only help reveal their compositional logic and deepen the understanding of Dunhuang's artistic language, but also offer valuable resources for incorporating traditional elements into contemporary design practice.

The examination and summary of the visual language and decorative structures of the Six-Tusked White Elephant within particular narrative scenes reflect the aesthetic preferences of Chinese tradition and highlight the artistic manifestation of Buddhist culture. This study not only provides important references for understanding the iconography of the Six-Tusked White Elephant itself, but also offers concrete guidance for its integration into cultural and creative design, thereby supplying theoretical support for the contemporary reinterpretation and development of traditional animal imagery in modern design contexts.

2. Modern Interpretation of the Six-Tusked White Elephant in Cultural and Creative Design

The purpose of exploring traditional culture lies not only in understanding and preserving its characteristics, but more importantly in promoting its contemporary transmission and renewal. Continuous reinterpretation and creative transformation are essential for integrating traditional culture into modern life. Combining traditional cultural elements with modern theories and design practices enables cultural heritage to respond to contemporary needs while retaining its core values (Lin, 2024). Integrating the Six-Tusked White Elephant from Dunhuang murals into cultural and creative product design facilitates the modern transformation of traditional imagery and allows wider audiences to experience the spiritual depth of Dunhuang art through tangible design outcomes.

This transformation cannot merely rely on superficial graphic borrowing; it must be based on clear theories and methods. From the perspective of image theory, the Six-Tusked White Elephant is a visual carrier of Buddhist narratives and religious concepts. In modern design

interpretation, one should first understand its narrative background and symbolic connotations, and then carry out visual translation to avoid weakening the traditional cultural significance in the design. From the perspective of visual semiotics, elements such as six teeth, lotus flowers, auspicious clouds, reins, and blankets not only have form characteristics but also undertake symbolic communication functions. For instance, six teeth symbolize Six Perfections, lotus flowers symbolize purity and sanctity, auspicious clouds and flowing ribbons enhance auspiciousness and an otherworldly atmosphere. Therefore, in cultural and creative design extracting these representative symbol elements and retaining their core identification features in modern design language can make the products not only have contemporary aesthetics but also continue the original cultural connotations. The Gestalt theory and art composition theory provide methodological support for image reorganization and design translation. Through principles such as balance, rhythm, emphasis, contrast, unity, and proportion, the visual refinement and reorganization of the Six-Tusked White Elephant in the Dunhuang murals are carried out. For example, using the repetitive relationship of lotus flowers and flowing ribbons to form a rhythmic pattern, and emphasizing the features of the tusks and the forward-leaning head as visual focal points, the originally solemn and sacred mural image is transformed into a more suitable graphic language for modern dissemination. Finally, the theory of cultural regeneration provides an overall path for the modern application of the Six-Tusked White Elephant. This theory emphasizes that traditional culture should enter modern life through reinterpretation, media transformation, and emotional reconstruction. Therefore, the design transformation of the Six-Tusked White Elephant can be summarized as the following process: image selection - visual feature extraction - symbol meaning interpretation - composition reorganization - contemporary design translation. During this process, traditional image resources are gradually transformed into design outcomes that meet the needs of contemporary users and form various expressions such as patternization, cartoonization, storytelling, and emotionalization.

2.1 Pattern Design

The Six-Tusked White Elephant depicted in Dunhuang murals features vivid imagery, smooth lines, and symmetrical structures, possessing great decorative appeal. It is suitable for processing in terms of planarization, orderliness and continuity. Through pattern-based extraction, complex decorative details are simplified while key features-such as curved tusks, lotus motifs, and cloud patterns-are retained to form repeatable decorative units. Hand-drawn techniques are employed to flatten lines and enhance color clarity, preserving the most recognizable visual characteristics.

2.2 Cartoonization

Cartoonization is a design approach that enhances friendliness by adjusting proportions, softening lines and emphasizing expressions. By transforming the solemn religious image into a soft, approachable, and emotionally expressive form, this approach enhances visual affinity

and contemporary appeal (Hou, 2020). Rounded proportions, gentle lines, and expressive eyes create a warm and healing impression, supported by soft color palettes such as ivory white, pale pink, light gold, and sky blue to evoke calmness and comfort.

2.3 Narrative Design

Narrativization is a design strategy that transforms cultural symbols into emotional experiences through storytelling, implication, or narrative extension. It represents a key step from symbolic representation toward cultural regeneration in cultural and creative design. By drawing on classical Buddhist narratives such as *Entering the Womb Riding a White Elephant* and the *Elephant King Benshin*, themes of compassion and self-sacrifice are reinterpreted as contemporary narrative series, endowing traditional symbols with renewed emotional relevance and humanistic concern.

2.4 Influence of Modern Culture

In traditional Chinese culture, the elephant was revered as a sacred symbol of wisdom, compassion, and auspiciousness. Through its diffusion in folk culture, the image of the Six-Tusked White Elephant gradually became more approachable and widely recognized. In contemporary visual culture-particularly among younger audiences-greater emphasis is placed on emotional resonance and visual intimacy (Liu et al., 2024). As a result, the modern representation of the white elephant has shifted from a distant religious icon to a gentle, pure, and healing symbol, characterized by softened lines, warm expressions, and postures conveying companionship rather than awe (Wang, 2022). This transformation reflects the contemporary aesthetic of “humanized sacredness” and aligns closely with the “Guochao” trend, making the Six-Tusked White Elephant a distinctive visual expression in contemporary cultural and creative design.

Conclusion and Discussion

1. Conclusion

This study investigates the Six-Tusked White Elephant of Dunhuang through integrated perspectives of traditional culture, mural image analysis, cultural and creative design, and market application. The research results indicate that the Six-Tusked White Elephant has relatively stable visual characteristics in the Dunhuang murals, mainly manifested as lateral view composition, head tilting forward, prominent tusks, simplified body structure, and the repeated appearance of decorative elements such as lotus flowers, auspicious clouds, reins, and blankets. These visual characteristics form a relatively clear image pattern, providing a basis for subsequent design refinement. At the same time, the Six-Tusked White Elephant is not merely an animal decorative image; it is closely related to Buddhist narratives such as “*Entering the Womb Riding a White Elephant*” and “*Samantabhadra Transformation*”, carrying cultural connotations such as compassion, wisdom, and auspiciousness. Therefore, it possesses both formal beauty and spiritual symbolic value.

2. Discussion

From the perspective of the current market performance of cultural and creative products related to the Six-Tusked White Elephant, its overall communicative impact and cultural potential have not yet been fully realized. Although related products have appeared in categories such as accessories, cultural souvenirs, and blind-box collectibles, they commonly exhibit problems of visual homogenization and superficial expression of cultural content (Liu & Zhao, 2024). Most designs remain at the level of formal appropriation of Dunhuang elements, relying excessively on “cute” and “auspicious” visual strategies, which weakens the Buddhist symbolic meanings and spiritual connotations originally embodied by the Six-Tusked White Elephant. This phenomenon reflects a broader tendency in contemporary cultural and creative products toward the simplification of symbols and the dilution of meaning in the process of translating traditional culture.

From the perspective of design mechanisms, existing product categories are relatively concentrated, with a singular derivative structure and a lack of systematic IP development and narrative extension, making it difficult to establish sustained cultural recognition and brand memory. Ru (2024) believes that the application of Dunhuang animal images in cultural and creative design should take into account the form, color, and cultural connotations, rather than simply being a collage; Yan (2023) further pointed out that emotionalization and youth-oriented strategies can help enhance the dissemination power and user identification of Dunhuang-themed images. In addition, current sales and dissemination models remain largely dependent on offline heritage sites and fragmented e-commerce channels, while online content operation and interactive experiences are insufficient (Li et al., 2018). Thus, it can be seen that the bottleneck in the development of the Six-Tusked White Elephant cultural product is not the lack of market demand, but the lack of systematic method support in the design translation.

Accordingly, this study argues that it is necessary to re-examine the positioning of the Six-Tusked White Elephant within the contemporary cultural and creative system from the perspectives of visual symbolic reconstruction, emotional value integration, and experiential mechanism design. Only by respecting its cultural origins and adopting systematic design translation and multi-dimensional dissemination strategies can the Six-Tusked White Elephant be transformed from a “surface-level symbol” into a “deep cultural medium”.

Recommendations

At present, the primary target user group for cultural and creative products is concentrated among young adults aged approximately 18 to 35. This demographic group possesses greater consumer autonomy and demonstrates a stronger willingness to pay for engaging and innovative cultural and creative products. They tend to favor novel and stimulating new products and, in terms

of preferences for derivative product categories, place greater emphasis on fun and interest rather than practicality. At the same time, they show relatively high sensitivity to cost-effectiveness.

Furthermore, future research can expand the scope of the research sample and compare the Six-Tusked White Elephant with other animal images in the Dunhuang murals to verify the similarities and differences in visual language and design transformation among different animal images. Additionally, it can focus on the application of digital media, immersive displays, and interactive design in the dissemination of Dunhuang cultural creativity, exploring more possibilities for the Six-Tusked White Elephant image in digital cultural creation, game design, and new media dissemination. Through the continuous combination of theoretical research and design practice, the Six-Tusked White Elephant is expected to further develop from a traditional religious image into a contemporary cultural symbol with continuous dissemination power.

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