

# A phased teaching strategy for integrating intangible cultural-heritage papercutting into university illustration courses: a new liberal arts perspective

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**Abstract.** This study addresses the pedagogical challenges of integrating Weixian papercutting—an element of China's intangible cultural heritage—into university-level illustration courses. It proposes and implements a phased instructional strategy that progresses from technique simplification to symbol decoding and finally to narrative reconstruction. Based on in-depth comparative analyses of students' midterm and final projects alongside classroom observations, the course demonstrates that the strategy effectively enhances students' command of papercutting techniques, deepens their understanding of cultural symbols, increases their autonomy in narrative expression, and strengthens their ability to synthesize traditional and contemporary visual languages. The approach facilitates a progression from mere formal and technical imitation to creative cultural translation. The study also explores the limits of AI-Generated Content (AIGC) as a supportive tool in these courses. Findings offer a practical pathway for the living transmission and innovative application of intangible cultural heritage within contemporary art education.

**Keywords:** teaching reform, cultural translation, phased instruction, AIGC

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## 1. Introduction

In the context of globalization and digital information flows, aesthetic education in higher education carries the dual responsibilities of transmitting national cultural spirit and cultivating students' innovative capacities. As a key vehicle of visual communication, illustration education must not only refine students' artistic perception and creative skills, but also deepen their acquaintance with and understanding of indigenous culture. Weixian papercutting, celebrated for its distinctive visual aesthetic and rich cultural depth, has been described as "a way to converse with the world through a resonant papercutting artistic language" [1]. It therefore supplies valuable cultural material and creative stimulus to illustration pedagogy. However, effectively embedding this traditional intangible cultural heritage in contemporary illustration curricula is not a matter of simple technical transplantation. As Qiao Xiaoguang observes, "the development of the times requires innovation; shifts in younger generations' life conceptions and value orientations, and changes in rural society, necessitate the creative inheritance and innovative development of traditional culture" [2]. This call for creative inheritance and innovation highlights a core instructional dilemma: students encountering Weixian papercutting typically confront technically complex methods and a high entry threshold, which hinders rapid

acquisition of its essence and creative application. A deeper pedagogical challenge is guiding students beyond surface imitation of papercutting motifs toward a profound comprehension and effective cultural translation of their embedded meanings and narrative structures, so that these elements can meaningfully serve the narrative demands of contemporary illustration design.

## **2. The narrative symbol system of Weixian papercutting and its pedagogical compatibility**

Weixian papercutting, as a distinguished representative of traditional Chinese papercutting art, derives its significance not only from its unique visual appeal but also from its deeply embedded narrative qualities and symbolic system of expression. It has been described as "a medium through which papercutting artists narrate or express their inner worlds, belonging to the category of creative imagery within pictorial narrative" [3]. By setting story themes and designing characters and scenes that correspond to them, artists transform their observations of everyday life into artistic visual narratives.

The essence of this narrativity lies in the elaborate system of symbols and visual grammar that Weixian papercutting has developed. Its narrative logic—comprising symbolic encoding, distinctive treatment of time and space, and the creation of emotional atmosphere—naturally resonates with the narrative functions of modern illustration. Narrativity is one of illustration's core values; as Wang Shouzhi notes, "illustration is related to text, and therefore has narrativity, descriptiveness, and entertainment value" [4]. Through the interplay of visual elements such as form, color, and composition, illustration reinforces textual themes or extends storylines, offering readers an immediate channel of comprehension. Thus, introducing the narrative wisdom embedded in Weixian papercutting into illustration pedagogy provides students with a reservoir of cultural resources and fresh perspectives for innovation, inspiring them to draw on its symbolic strategies, spatial-compositional rules, and narrative techniques.

Nevertheless, the integration of this sophisticated narrative-symbol system into university illustration courses, with the goal of advancing from technical instruction to creative cultural translation, entails a range of inherent challenges. First is the problem of symbolic interpretation: students must be able to move beyond the superficial allure of papercutting motifs to decode their multilayered semantic structures—spanning the figurative, the functional, and the symbolic. Failure to do so risks reducing symbols to mere ornamentation or misrepresenting their meaning, undermining effective cultural translation. Second, the complexity of papercutting techniques can itself constrain narrative expression. At the early stages of training, students' limited technical proficiency often confines them to mechanical imitation of form, resulting in works that replicate appearances but lack narrative depth. A third challenge lies in the temporal transformation of narrative grammar: the traditional narrative logic of Weixian papercutting, closely tied to particular historical contexts and collective memories, must be reinterpreted to serve the needs of contemporary illustration, which often addresses diverse, individualized, and even fragmented themes. Finally, when adapting the planar and decorative aesthetics of papercutting to modern illustration, instructors must guard against two extremes—rigid adherence to traditional forms, which can lead to monotony, and excessive abstraction or dissolution of formal features, which risks the erosion of cultural essence.

## **3. Concrete manifestations and underlying causes of pedagogical challenges**

The theoretical challenges surrounding the integration of Weixian papercutting into illustration pedagogy emerge in the classroom as tangible and observable dilemmas. Analysis of teaching records and student

projects reveals recurring difficulties: symbolic misinterpretation, technical obstacles, strained narrative transformation, and ineffective stylistic integration.

At the level of symbolic interpretation, student works often demonstrate limited engagement with the deeper cultural meanings of papercutting motifs. In several cases, visual elements that traditionally carry cultural metaphors were reduced to mere ornamentation. For example, the figure of the "topknot child"—historically associated with fertility and prosperity—was stripped of its reproductive-worship context and casually applied to illustrations on contemporary urban themes, creating a disconnect between symbol and narrative. Such cases confirm that students tend to remain on the surface of aesthetic form, failing to decode the embedded historical-cultural codes and symbolic logic. This difficulty can be traced to students' insufficient knowledge of rural cultural contexts and folk traditions, compounded by the course's limited early-stage emphasis on cultural backgrounds of symbols. Consequently, the crucial first step of cultural translation—deep decoding—was already hindered.

Technical limitations further constrain students' narrative expression. Attempts to employ papercutting techniques often faltered due to unsteady knife control, inadequate line fluidity, or imbalanced treatment of positive and negative space, undermining intended storytelling effects. Tool use was a particular challenge. Unlike standard craft knives, traditional Weixian papercutting blades are forged from steel wire through a demanding process of hammering, filing, sharpening, and repeated tempering [5]. Skilled artisans are, in effect, also master toolmakers, producing instruments tailored to their craft. In class, widely available commercial craft knives were substituted, which partially addressed practical constraints but limited expressive potential. As a result, students found themselves unable to fully convey nuanced emotional shifts or dynamic power through their designs. Excessive time and energy were consumed by technical struggles, leaving less room for reflection on narrative structure and cultural expression. This problem reflects the inherent contradiction between the refined demands of traditional papercutting and the limited training duration in higher-education settings.

A further challenge lies in negotiating the integration of traditional and modern visual languages. Student works tended toward two extremes. On one side, some remained overly rigid, treating papercutting's planar and decorative forms as static collages with modern subjects, resulting in disjunctions between visual style and narrative content and producing formulaic, monotonous outputs. On the other side, some works leaned too heavily toward modern illustration techniques, nearly effacing the distinctive "knife flavor," paper texture, and rhythmic charm of papercutting, thereby weakening its cultural recognizability. Both extremes highlight students' difficulty in striking a balance between preserving artistic essence and responding to contemporary design needs. In this context, some students experimented with AIGC technologies to generate references for compositions and motifs. Although this improved efficiency and encouraged exploration of new visual effects, overreliance on algorithmic tools risks diminishing students' engagement with the handcrafted, improvisational, and affective dimensions of papercutting, thereby obscuring the artisanal identity and heritage value of this intangible cultural practice.

#### 4. Staged teaching strategy design



**Figure 1.** Student work, 29.7 × 42 cm, marker and carbon pen, 2024

In response to the challenges exposed in teaching practice, the course adopted a staged teaching strategy. This strategy aims to guide students through a structured learning pathway, helping them gradually overcome obstacles and achieve progressive advancement—from mastering traditional techniques to creatively translating cultural symbols.

In the initial stage, the course focused on lowering technical barriers and building basic operational confidence. To address the narrative limitations caused by students' unfamiliarity with techniques, the course departed from the traditional apprenticeship model of exhaustive technical training. Instead, it distilled the core visual language and operational logic of Weixian paper-cutting. Students practiced common motif patterns, such as "dot patterns, crescent patterns, cloud patterns, zigzag patterns, waterdrop patterns, and leaf patterns" [6], thereby forming modular technical training units and developing confidence in their abilities.

Once the technical obstacles were initially cleared, the teaching shifted toward deepening the understanding and decoding of cultural symbols to resolve issues of misinterpretation and decontextualization. The course systematically examined high-frequency cultural symbols in Weixian paper-cutting, analyzing their

visual features, functional indications, and multilayered cultural connotations. Particular attention was given to interpreting "the religious symbolism of traditional motifs in Ren Yude's works and their narrative functions within the visual language [7]. This was complemented by workshops led by invited inheritors, who provided live demonstrations and contextual explanations. Through such multidimensional training in symbol decoding, students gained a deeper understanding of the folk beliefs, historical memories, and emotional attachments embedded in the symbols, laying the cognitive foundation for creative translation.

The final stage concentrated on achieving stylistic balance between traditional visual language and modern illustration design. At this stage, students returned to concrete creative practice. The task was to integrate the Weixian paper-cutting symbols, techniques, and narrative methods learned earlier into personalized illustration work. Under the guiding principle that "form serves narrative and emotion," teachers encouraged students to avoid both rigid imitation of traditional styles and blind adherence to modern trends. Classic cases of successful integration between traditional elements and modern styles were analyzed, with emphasis placed on preserving the core identifying features of paper-cutting art while flexibly employing modern illustrative methods and media to serve contemporary narrative needs. Particularly regarding the use of AIGC technologies at this stage, clear boundaries were set: AIGC was restricted to auxiliary roles such as compositional exploration, color scheme previewing, or complex pattern generation. The core creative process (especially the drafting stage) had to be carried out by hand, as this constitutes the foundation upon which paper-cutting artists "rely on solid artistic skills infused with imagination and originality" [8]. This requirement also ensures the experiential value and intrinsic essence of intangible cultural heritage are preserved and transmitted. Nonetheless, students actively experimented with using software in the composition stage, a phenomenon that itself reflects the emerging trend of cross-boundary integration between traditional art and modern technology.

## 5. From artwork to cognitive transference and sublimation



**Figure 2.** Student work, 29.7 × 42 cm, paper-cut with marker coloring, 2024

The effectiveness of the staged teaching strategy is most clearly reflected in the evolution of students' visual expression and the transformation of their cultural understanding. By systematically analyzing the developmental trajectory of representative student works produced during the course, together with classroom observations and reflective feedback, it is possible to empirically assess the substantive progress made in overcoming difficulties such as symbolic misinterpretation, technical limitations, narrative conversion obstacles, and stylistic integration challenges.

A visual comparison of student work sequences provides the most direct evidence of effectiveness. The midterm assignment shown in Figure 1 demonstrates an early attempt to integrate traditional cultural symbols (such as "flowers," "doors," and "walls") into a modern emotional theme ("My father's flowers have fallen, and I am no longer a child"). The student drew on the simplified forms and planar spatial features characteristic of paper-cutting, yet the medium remained primarily modern tools such as markers, rather than direct use of paper-cutting techniques. At this stage, the incorporation of Weixian paper-cutting "narrative symbols" was still rudimentary. The connection between symbol and theme relied heavily on textual explanation, while the coherence and symbolic depth of the visual narrative itself remained underdeveloped—

indicating that students' understanding of cultural symbols and their narrative design capacity were still in the exploratory stage.

In sharp contrast, the final work presented in Figure 2 demonstrates the student's ability to employ Weixian paper-cutting techniques with greater proficiency. Using red paper as the base, the work employs the interplay of positive and negative space between wall surfaces, figures, and backgrounds to strengthen narrative tension. In composition, the student preserved classic methods of traditional paper-cutting—such as outlining figures with linear contours and highlighting scenes through overall shapes—while creatively integrating details of Republican-era clothing into the paper-cutting idiom, thereby embodying the fusion of different aesthetic traditions. Most crucially, compared with the midterm work, this final piece shows a heightened pursuit of narrative integrity and expressive depth. Rather than relying on external text or explicit visual cues (such as fallen leaves), the student conveyed meaning through the bamboo motif—a culturally significant symbol—enabling the image to carry richer cultural implications and emotional resonance. This marks a deeper comprehension of the "visual narrativity" inherent in Weixian paper-cutting.

The shift in students' cognition and creative awareness is another important dimension for evaluating the breakthrough. After weeks of practice and the completion of their final projects, students generally demonstrated a more profound understanding of both the cultural connotations and technical characteristics of Weixian paper-cutting. They no longer focused solely on the formal beauty of patterns, but began to actively explore the cultural codes behind symbols and their possibilities for reinterpretation in contemporary contexts. As Fang Fang's study on Yan'an woodcut prints points out, traditional art forms often appeal to public sentiment and resonate with social-cultural situations through visual symbols [9]. Similarly, in this course, students' reconsideration of social contexts and aesthetic needs in their final works—alongside their innovative transformation of visual language while respecting tradition—manifested this deeper symbolic understanding and proactive awareness of translation.

## 6. Conclusion

This study examined the teaching practice of integrating Weixian paper-cutting into a university illustration course, offering an in-depth analysis of the opportunities and challenges faced by intangible cultural heritage in contemporary higher education for illustration. In response to these challenges, the course constructed and implemented a staged teaching strategy that progressed step by step—from simplifying techniques and building confidence, to decoding cultural symbols, restructuring cross-media narratives, and ultimately achieving a creative fusion of traditional and modern visual languages. This process gradually guided students to accomplish the practical leap from technique acquisition to cultural translation.

Future research may further explore the ethical boundaries and best practice models for integrating AIGC technologies with handmade creative processes, while extending this pathway to broader intersections between craft-based intangible cultural heritage and other design disciplines. Such efforts will continue to promote the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional culture within contemporary educational ecosystems.

## Funding project

Science Research Project of Hebei Education Department (BJS2024076)



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