

Research on the Visual Translation and Illustration of Huxiang Folk Narratives from a Semiotic Perspective: A Case Study of the Panhu Legend

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Abstract: The visual construction and illustrative representation of Huxiang folk tales serve as vital channels for preserving regional culture and fostering cultural exchange. Taking *The Legend of Panhu* as a central case study, this paper employs semiotics and cultural memory theory as an analytical framework. By distilling visual symbols such as the patterns found in Yao ethnic silver ornaments and clothing, as well as the regional landscapes of the Yuan River, the study explores the artistic methods of illustration in folk tales. From a semiotic perspective, the visual construction of *The Legend of Panhu* can be viewed as a process of meaning encoding, wherein creators transform oral narratives into a perceptible visual symbolic system by strategically configuring visual signifiers, such as color, patterns, and composition, with their signifieds, including the supernatural, loyalty, and ancestors. From the perspective of cultural memory, this process of visualization serves to solidify communicative memory into stored memory, thereby facilitating cultural recreation through intergenerational transmission. The narrative framework of human-divine coexistence in *The Legend of Panhu*, the symbolic significance of ethnic attire, and the emotional resonance of natural imagery collectively embody the Huxiang cultural philosophy of harmony and ethnic cohesion.

Keywords: Huxiang Folk Tales; Visual Translation; Illustrative Expression; *The Legend of Panhu*; Semiotics; Cultural Memory

1. Introduction

Driven by the dual forces of globalization and digital technology, research on traditional folk

literature and intangible cultural heritage is undergoing a profound epistemological and methodological shift. Throughout history, the myths and legends of China's southern ethnic minorities, typified by Huxiang regional culture, have largely been passed down through generations via high-context methods such as oral transmission, ritual performance, and intra-ethnic conventions. However, when these ancient narrative texts, such as Ehuang and Nüying, *The Kingfisher Robe*, and *Liu Hai Chopping Firewood*, encounter modern digital media, their modes of transmission, audience boundaries, and forms of cultural representation undergo fundamental restructuring. Consequently, how to effectively preserve and present Huxiang folk tales in the context of the new era, thereby infusing them with new vitality, has become an urgent cultural challenge.

Deeply influenced by the "belief in spirits and reverence for rituals" inherent in Chu-Wu culture, Huxiang folk tales are imbued with romanticism and an aura of the supernatural. Both academia and the practical field have already achieved certain results in the visualization of Huxiang folk tales. At the theoretical level, some scholars, using cultural memory theory as a starting point, argue that Huxiang folk woodblock prints are not only ritual media of regional life but also bear the ethnic sentiments, ritual ethics, and cultural continuity of the people of Hunan. They contend that image analysis holds significant value for "unraveling the survival wisdom of the people of Hunan during the agricultural era and constructing a shared memory of hometown sentiment among the people of Hunan" [1].

On a practical level, initiatives such as the *Dragon-Dog and Panhu* series of picture books, including *The Magical Dragon-Dog* and *Panhu Steals the Grain* by Professor Xu Ming's team at Central South University, and artist Cai Gao's

The Sixth Day of June: Drying the Dragon Robe have successfully integrated children's aesthetic cognition to transform the Yao ethnic group's ancestral myths into visual reading materials. This marks the transition of the visual construction of the Panhu legend from academic exploration toward social application and educational practice. Picture book artist Cai Gao's *The Sixth Day of June: Drying the Dragon Robe* and the "Dragon Dog and Panhu" series of picture books by Professor Xu Ming's team at Central South University signify that the visual construction of folk tales is shifting from academic exploration toward social application. Overall, current research on the visualization of Huxiang folk tales has made progress on both theoretical and practical levels. However, theoretical discussions primarily remain at the level of macro-level dissemination strategies, lacking systematic exploration of the micro-mechanisms of visual translation. Furthermore, empirical analyses employing semiotics as a methodological tool remain relatively weak.

Against this backdrop, illustration, as a visual medium that combines narrative and aesthetic qualities, is not merely a supplement to text but an independent and highly effective mechanism for generating meaning, offering an excellent pathway for the contemporary transmission of folk tales. In the contemporary context of the "Pictorial Turn," visual images are not merely appendages to text but independent and efficient mechanisms for meaning generation [2]. This study introduces semiotics and cultural memory theory into the analytical framework of Huxiang folk tales, not only dissecting their visual forms but also delving into the mechanisms of cultural code generation, narrative strategies, and the reproduction of meaning during the process of visualization. By transforming traditional stories into visual forms such as illustrations, this study conducts a case analysis using *The Legend of Panhu* as an example, preserving its unique cultural DNA while infusing it with contemporary vitality through reconstruction.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is constituted by the intersection of semiotics and cultural memory theory, which together provide micro- and macro-level explanatory frameworks for how images construct meaning and why they are constructed.

First, semiotics provides a scientific methodology for the visual translation of illustration creation. Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure proposed that a sign consists of a "signifier" and a "signified" [3]. Building on this foundation, French scholar Roland Barthes extended semiotics to the realms of culture and the visual, proposing a theoretical framework of first-order signification (denotation) and second-order signification (connotation) [4]. Barthes revealed how signs are appropriated and naturalized in everyday life [5]. Within this theoretical framework, illustration is not a simple reproduction of meaning but a dynamic process of encoding, wherein the creator conveys cultural significance through the combination and arrangement of symbols. The creation of illustrations for Huxiang folk tales is, in essence, a process of "encoding" the cultural significance found in oral and written narratives into a system of visual symbols.

Second, German scholar Jan Assmann distinguishes collective memory into "communicative memory" and "cultural memory" [6]. With communicative memory relying on interpersonal interaction, while cultural memory is encoded and performed through media such as text, images, and dance. Huxiang folk tales represent a classic form of "communicative memory." In their original form, they were primarily transmitted through oral narration and ritual recitation, relying on specific storytellers and narrative contexts. However, with the acceleration of modernization, this oral tradition faces the crisis of an intergenerational rupture. Transforming folk tales into illustrated works is a cultural act of re-creation that solidifies "communicative memory" into "stored memory" and subsequently activates it as "functional memory."

In illustration creation, visual translation is essentially a process of meaning reconfiguration and encoding. The creator does not mechanically depict the text but must select specific visual "signifiers", including lines, colors, ethnic patterns, and character designs, and associate them with the cultural "signifieds" within the legends, namely ancestor worship, ethnic strength, and sacredness. Viewed through Barthes's theory of denotation, a visual symbol in illustration, like the multicolored Panhu symbol, manifests not only its literal animalistic feature in its denotation but is also encoded in its connotation to represent a cultural image of

“divine mystery” and “extraordinary power.” Semiotics provides a scientific methodology for this study to deconstruct and guide illustration creation. Moreover, Aleida Assmann emphasizes that images serve as memory media possessing an irreducible emotional potential [7]. Transforming *The Legend of Panhu* into illustrations constitutes an act of “cultural re-inscription.” It counters the natural law of oral narratives fading away over time, transforming ephemeral communicative memory into enduring stored memory, and reactivating its identity value as “functional memory” within a modern aesthetic context.

3. The Cultural Core of *The Legend of Panhu* and Extraction of Visual Symbols

3.1 Analysis of Narrative Text and Core Themes

The Legend of Panhu originated in the Wuling region of southern China and is widely circulated among ethnic groups such as the Miao, Yao, and She, with the highest concentration in the Yuan River basin of Hunan Province. To this day, the area still preserves numerous landform relics and ritual sites, such as Panhu Cave and Xinnü Rock. The legend centers on the marriage between Panhu, the ancestor of dogs, and the princess of the Gao Xin clan, and their subsequent procreation, embodying core themes such as human origins and ethnic migration. It is not only a national-level intangible cultural heritage but also a crucial cultural text for exploring the “unity in diversity” structure of the Chinese nation, ethnic identity, and survival wisdom.

The transmission of the legend has evolved from classical texts to oral folk traditions. The earliest written record appears in Ying Shao’s *Fengsu Tongyi* from the Eastern Han Dynasty, which briefly states: “Pan Hu, the dog of the Gaoxin clan, subdued the Quanrong; Gaoxin married his youngest daughter to him and enfeoffed the Pan Hu clan” [8] Later, through Fan Ye’s *Book of the Later Han* of the Southern Dynasties [9]. The story was elaborated and standardized: During the reign of Emperor Gao Xin, the Quanrong invaded. Emperor Ku offered a reward consisting of gold, a fiefdom, and his daughter’s hand in marriage to anyone who could bring him the head of General Wu of the Quanrong. Pan Hu, a dog raised by Emperor Ku, brought back General Wu’s head in his mouth, astonishing all

the ministers. Though Emperor Ku hesitated, his daughter insisted that the promise must not be broken, so she married Pan Hu. Pan Hu carried her into a stone chamber in the Southern Mountains, and three years later, they gave birth to six sons and six daughters. After Pan Hu’s death, his children married one another and gradually multiplied into the barbarian tribes. In folk oral traditions from places like Luxi in Hunan, the narrative takes on a much stronger romantic and tragic tone. After Panhu brought General Wu’s head to the palace, King Gaoxin reneged on the marriage pact and imprisoned Xin’s daughter in a cold palace. One night, the palace gates opened of their own accord, and Panhu carried Xin’s daughter out of the palace, flying to a secluded peak on the west bank of the middle reaches of the Yuan River to live in seclusion. When Panhu was with Xin’s daughter, he would remove his colorful sash to transform into a handsome young man; when leaving the cave, he would fasten the sash to revert to his dog form. The couple had four sons. Xin’s daughter told her sons that Panhu was their biological father. Out of shame and anger, the sons lured Panhu into a ditch and beat him to death. Xinnü was overcome with grief, and her tears turned into the Xinnü Stream. Panhu appeared to the four sons in a dream, instructing them to open the grave. Upon discovering a human body rather than a dog, they realized they had mistakenly killed their father, yet they still refused to admit their mistake. Xinnü spent her days in constant longing and eventually transformed into the Xinnü Rock. This folk variant not only enriches the mythical narrative with fantastical elements but also profoundly reveals the cultural conflicts inherent in identity. As a form of deep-seated cultural memory, *the legend of Panhu* is not a mechanical record of objective history, but rather a form of “selective historical memory.” This narrative deliberately downplays the long-standing conflicts and power struggles between the Panhu tribe and the Gao Xin clan, instead highlighting episodes of alliance and friendship between the two groups. It profoundly reflects the survival wisdom of a weaker tribe in resolving crises and seeking coexistence within a complex geopolitical environment [10]. From the perspective of cultural memory theory, the Panhu legend is precisely a cultural practice through which ethnic minorities such as the Yao and Miao construct their identity and express their cultural

politics via “selective memory.” As scholars Zhao Jingyang and others have pointed out, the Panhu legend has become a “historical narrative paradigm and historical representation” through which groups such as the She people articulate the source of their identity legitimacy [11]. This aspect of ethnic identity construction provides an important theoretical premise for the visual transformation examined in this study: the illustrative representation of *The Legend of Panhu* is by no means a neutral visual reproduction, but rather a recoding of the group’s selective memory and a reproduction of cultural meaning.

The core plot of *The Legend of Panhu* can be divided into four stages:

First, The War Bounty and Panhu’s Meritorious Service and Enfeoffment. King Gaoxin, facing an unfavorable war against the Quanrong Kingdom, offered a bounty: whoever could bring him the head of General Wu of the Quanrong would be granted his daughter’s hand in marriage, along with a monetary reward and a fiefdom. Panhu brought back General Wu’s head, thereby earning military merit. As the story’s opening, this plot point embodies conflict and a turning point, with Panhu breaking the deadlock of the war through his extraordinary actions.

Second, Xin’s daughter goes into seclusion after fulfilling the marriage vow. Upon realizing the hero was a dog, King Gaoxin considered reneging on the marriage, but Xin’s daughter insisted on honoring the promise and was soon banished to the cold palace. Panhu carried Xin’s daughter out the window, flying into a cave on the west bank of the Yuan River within the Lu Xi region to live in seclusion. This plot point highlights Xin’s daughter’s commitment to her promise and marks the beginning of their new life together.

Third, the proliferation of descendants and Panhu’s death. Panhu and Xin gave birth to six sons and six daughters. When the children grew up, the sons learned that Panhu was their father. Finding this shameful, they beat him to death and threw his body into the Yuan River. This plot point reveals the story’s tragic undertones and cultural significance, touching on conflicts related to identity.

Fourth, Xinnü’s Transformation into a Rock. Upon hearing the tragic news of Panhu’s death, Xinnü was overcome with grief. After rebuking her sons, she picked up his body by the banks of






the Yuan River, only to have it snatched away and thrown into the water once more. Consumed by sorrow, she eventually turned into a stone—Xinnü Rock. This marks the story’s conclusion, heightening the sense of tragedy and emotional tension.

3.2 Extraction of Huxiang Regional Elements and Ethnic Visual Symbols

From a semiotic perspective, the refinement and transformation of visual symbols is essentially a process of semantic encoding involving the reconfiguration of the “signifier-signified” relationship. To ensure the cultural authenticity of the illustrations for *The Legend of Panhu*, typical visual “signifiers” must be extracted from the Huxiang region and the Yao ethnic group: (1) Dog totem symbols; (2) Ethnic attire and totemic patterns, including the Yao people’s classic “Panwang Seal” motif, octagonal star patterns, and dog-tooth patterns. (3) The Chu-Wu color system: Huxiang culture has been deeply influenced by the shamanic culture of the Chu region, with “a preference for red and an emphasis on black” forming its color foundation. Red represents life, deities, and blood, while black symbolizes mystery and the profound. The incorporation of these two colors establishes a mystical and romantic visual tone for the illustrations. (4) Natural Landscape Imagery: The story is set in the Wuling Mountain Range and the Yuan River basin. The meandering ripples of the Yuan River, the unique and rugged karst topography of Western Hunan, and the sense of space shrouded in mist and clouds were drawn upon as environmental symbols for the illustrations, serving to evoke the otherworldly atmosphere of “living in seclusion deep in the mountains.”

As shown in Table 1, the illustrations are not merely simple visual representations of *The Legend of Panhu*, but strictly adhere to the logic of semiotic coding. The artist extracts the “Panwang Seal” and “Eight-Pointed Star Pattern” from Yao ethnic attire as visual signifiers. At the first level of signification, these elements recreate the regional landscape; at the second level, these geometric patterns are successfully encoded as cultural signifieds representing ethnic identity, ancestor worship, and reverence for nature, thereby achieving a visual transformation from communicative memory to stored memory.

Table 1. Analysis of the Two-Tier Signification of Core Visual Symbols in *The Legend of Panhu*

Visual symbols	Name	Textual Concepts	Visual signifier/The First Level	Cultural signified/The Second Level
	Panhu Totem	The Five-Colored Divine Dog, Ancestor of the Yao People	Animal figures or half-human, half-animal forms exhibiting “dragon-dog” characteristics; fur rendered in rich, vibrant colors such as red, blue, and yellow	The Supernatural and Ancestor Worship: A sense of the sacred that transcends the boundary between humans and animals; a symbol of a people’s origins; a national spirit that embodies loyalty, bravery, and wildness.
	Panwang Motifs	The Mark of the Yao Ancestors, the Covenant of King Gaoxin	Square, simple geometric seal patterns; core motifs found on traditional Yao clothing and silver jewelry; typically rendered with red lines on a black background.	Ethnic Identity and Authoritative Memory: The materialization of the historical contract represents internal cohesion and the legitimacy of identity within the ethnic group.
	Octagonal Star Patterns	The Stars, the Laws of Nature	A star-shaped geometric pattern radiating symmetrically in eight directions	Cosmology and the Continuation of Life: The worship of nature in Chu-Wu culture symbolizes the everlasting vitality of life and auspicious meanings.
	Chu-Wu Colors	Life, Deities	A large-scale composition featuring a striking contrast between “vermillion red” and “mysterious black.”	Tragedy and Eternity: Red symbolizes the hymn of life and sacrifice; black embodies darkness and mystery.
	Imagery of Natural Landforms	Natural landscape imagery	Rivers and mountains	Sinuuous, undulating water ripples; geometric, angular mountain patterns

Source: The author conducted fieldwork at the China Yao Museum and the World Guoshan Yao Museum in Ruyuan, Guangdong.

4. The Visual Construction Practice in the Illustrations of *The Legend of Panhu*

4.1 Stylistic Positioning: The Fusion of Meticulous Brushwork with Heavy Colors and Modern Aesthetics

Conceptually, the illustrations aim not only to recreate the myth but also to align with the contemporary visual context. From the perspective of cultural memory theory, this stylistic choice constitutes an act of “re-engraving” in itself. Jan Assmann notes that cultural memory must be continuously reinscribed through specific media and practices to endure. The illustration practice in this study rejects both Western realism and Japanese anime-style aesthetics, instead drawing on the foundation of traditional Chinese meticulous brushwork while integrating modern graphic design language. Meticulous brushwork

emphasizes form-defining linework and subject-appropriate coloration, with its delicate lines perfectly capturing the intricate patterns of Yao ethnic clothing, while the use of heavy colors echoes the magnificent hues of Chu culture. In terms of modern interpretation, the scattered perspective typical of traditional Chinese painting is minimized, while geometric division and block composition are introduced, allowing the artwork to possess both the rustic charm of the East and modern visual tension and ornamentation. From the perspective of cultural memory, this stylistic choice is essentially a rhetorical strategy—using a highly refined visual language to elevate folk mythology to the status of a classic cultural text.

In the process of constructing the imagery for *The Legend of Panhu*, the core concept lies in preserving the allure of the myth while deeply exploring the ethnic cultural connotations and spiritual character underlying it. In Yao folklore,

Panhu is revered as an ancestor; therefore, the visual creation should focus on depicting key elements and characters from the myth. Through artistic interpretation, the ancient legend is revitalized within a modern context, sparking viewers' interest in traditional culture and thereby fostering exploration and understanding of the roots of ethnic culture.

Stylistically, inspiration can be drawn from the picture book *The Ode to the Goddess of the Luo River*. Its illustrations feature delicate, flowing lines and profound attention to detail in characters' clothing and hair ornaments. Specifically, the rendering of fabric folds, floral patterns, and intricately carved accessories vividly exemplifies the characteristics of traditional meticulous brushwork, which emphasizes precise linework and refined detailing. This stylistic approach effectively highlights traditional attire and artifact designs, reconstructing ancient life scenes and aesthetic paradigms to endow the work with a simple yet elegant charm.

4.2 Design of the Signifiers for the Characters “Panhu” and “Xinnü”

From a semiotic perspective, character design is the soul of visual translation and a core element in constructing the primary level of meaning in an image. In the text, Panhu is originally described as a “five-colored divine dog.” In the illustration, the artist has artistically reimagined his form as a “dragon-dog” to express the deep fusion of divinity and animal nature. In his canine form, his fur is rendered with rich, layered colors such as red, blue, and yellow, (Figure 1). When transformed into human form, his facial features are stern, with arched eyebrows and eyes, and he retains his bound hair; the colorful sash serves as a visual remnant of his divine canine essence, symbolizing both his wildness and loyalty. The choice of the “five-colored divine dog” as Pan Hu's signifier is not a subjective conjecture by the artist, but is strictly constrained by a threefold cultural logic. First, the design is solidly anchored in historical texts. The explicit account in the *Book of the Later Han* documenting Pan Hu's five-colored coat establishes an authoritative source for this visual signifier. Deviating from this polychromatic framework while merely retaining its supernatural essence would sever the intertextual connection between the image and the classical text, thereby weakening its

historical depth as an intangible cultural heritage.



**Figure 1. Pan Hu Character Design Sketch
(Designed by the Author)**

Second, Drawing upon the conventions of the Chu shamanic color tradition, Huxiang culture is characterized by an aesthetic foundation that venerates red and prioritizes black [12]. In this illustration, Panhu's red fur is interwoven with a blue mane, a stylistic choice driven by deeper cultural resonance rather than mere aesthetics. In the context of Chu culture, red symbolizes life and deities, while blue represents the East and the supernatural. Selecting these two colors as the dominant hues from the classic pentachromatic palette effectively anchors Panhu's divine nature within the framework of Chu shamanic color symbolism.

Third, the visual design employs a strategy of recoding the totemic image. It is worth noting that the original text merely describes Panhu as a five-colored divine dog and does not explicitly require his metamorphosis into a dragon-dog hybrid. By aligning Panhu's form with that of the dragon, the creators employed a proactive encoding strategy: by borrowing the dragon motif, which in Han culture signifies absolute authority, they elevated Panhu's sacred status as an ancestral figure, thereby securing greater cultural authority for him within the Huxiang context of coexisting ethnic groups. This visual choice has been “naturalized” through the interplay of historical texts, regional aesthetics, and ethnic intentions, profoundly confirming the mechanism of semiotic operation revealed by Roland Barthes: what appears to be an inherently

organic visual representation is, in fact, the product of multiple cultural power negotiations and constructions.

Meanwhile, Xinnü's depiction precisely reflects the transformation of her identity attributes through the dynamic evolution of the first-order signification. During her court period, her visual signifier consists of ornate hair ornaments and intricate brocades, embodying the nobility and grace of an imperial princess; during her seclusion, her attire gradually shifts to cotton and linen fabrics infused with elements of the Miao and Yao ethnic groups of Western Hunan, accompanied by bold yet rustic silver jewelry featuring coiled Yao patterns. This deliberate material simplification and ethnic localization of sartorial symbols is by no means a casual visual treatment, but rather a precise encoding of Xinnü's denotative transition from an imperial royal to a foundational matriarch of the wilderness.

It is worth noting that the texts do not explicitly state Xinnü's Yao ethnicity; therefore, the creator's deliberate choice to use Yao silver ornaments to encode her reclusive image is, in essence, a proactive strategy of ethnic localization. This not only visually anchors the legend's regional cultural attributes but also reinforces its narrative function as an ethnic origin myth. As Barthes's concept of signification points out, the signified is the additional meaning conferred by culture [13]. Panhu's multicolored fur and Xinnü's ethnic silver ornaments are, at the denotative level, merely objective physical depictions; however, within the overall context of the mythical narrative, they have been deeply shaped and transformed into second-order connotations. These elements elegantly encode themes of supernatural wonder, covenantal fidelity, and ethnic identity, ultimately accomplishing the visual reconstruction of the cultural text.

4.3 Spatial Rhetoric and Multidimensional Construction of Mythical Ambience

(1) Asymmetrical composition and multidimensional spatio-temporal layering
 In terms of compositional rhetoric, the illustration breaks the rule of central symmetry, establishing an asymmetrical horizontal layout characterized by a visually heavier left side and a lighter right side. On the left side of the composition, the bust of Xinnü serves as the absolute visual anchor. Her dark ethnic attire and

the profusion of flowers in her hair establish a rustic tone, whereas the right side balances the composition through negative space, mist, and a calligraphic scroll. This composition not only expands the visual space but also selectively highlights the narrative focus.

In terms of spatiotemporal construction, the painting abandons linear perspective in favor of a layered superimposition with surrealistic overtones (Figure 2). Xinnü's cascading hair resembles a river of time, skillfully weaving together the reclusive Xinnü, who embodies present reality, and the red-robed court maid, who symbolizes past memories. The central narrative focus lies in a highly dramatic hand positioned at the top of the composition, using tweezers to extract the embryonic form of a dragon-dog from Xin's ear. This supernatural moment, acting as a highly condensed depiction of the mythic origin motif, interweaves and overlaps with the abstract Yao brocade in the midground and the cloud-shrouded space in the background on a two-dimensional plane. Ultimately, this precision powerfully constructs a mythical atmosphere of human-divine coexistence.



Figure 2. Preliminary Sketch of the Legend of Panhu I (Drawn by the Author)

(2) Visual negative space and symbolic recoding

At the level of signification, the composition skillfully appropriates the traditional painting technique of intentional blank space (Figure 3). The composition connects the real and the ethereal by utilizing the flow of the clouds and the long hair. From a semiotic perspective, this conceptualization of the void as a tangible form serves as a powerful visual signifier. It not only conveys the ethereal quality of space but also deeply encodes the unspoken mystery inherent in Eastern aesthetics, representing a cross-cultural visual sublimation of ethnic minority narratives through an elegant paradigm.

Simultaneously, the intricate Yao embroidery in the background is distilled into abstract geometric color blocks. This formal abstraction does not represent a reduction of cultural meaning but rather a recoding of significance within a modern context. As mediators of cultural memory, these visual symbols function through their modern reconstruction to unleash powerful “emotional potential.” They directly resonate with viewers’ emotions, evoking a sense of ethnic identity that is more intuitive and profound than abstract text.



Figure 3. Final Painting of the Legend of Panhu I (Drawn by the Author)

4.4 Color Configuration: Emotional Mapping from Denotation to Connotation

From a semiotic perspective, color is not restricted to the physical representation of objective phenomena (first-order denotation) but rather functions as a metaphorical vehicle for cultural psychology and deep-seated emotions (second-order connotation). In the illustration practice of *The Legend of Panhu* (Figure 3), color is highly refined into a tool for encoding meaning, constructing a visually compelling discourse of intermingled red and black. The dominant color scheme features a striking contrast between expansive swaths of cinnabar red and abyssal black. On the denotative level, these colors serve merely as objective depictions of the characters’ attire and the somber background. Nevertheless, within the deeper cultural coding, red functions not only as a metaphorical representation of the blood shed by Panhu in his heroic battle but also evokes profound associations within Chu shamanic culture concerning life, divinity, and the proliferation of the clan. In contrast, black precisely evokes the gloom of the Nanshan Stone Chamber and the unpredictability of mythical fate, visually capturing abstract emotions including tragedy, eternity, and

altruistic sacrifice.

The interplay of red and black transcends the mere depiction of the objective environment, transforming into a visual confrontation between the affirmation of life and the inevitability of mythical tragedy. This process of rigorous color symbolization precisely translates the emotional depths of the mythological text onto the visual image. Consequently, it endows the artwork with a profound affective power, evoking deep cultural resonance within the contemporary viewing experience.

5. Conclusion

This study, drawing on an interdisciplinary framework of semiotics and cultural memory theory, systematically explores the visual construction and illustrative strategies of the Huxiang folk tale *The Legend of Panhu*. The research demonstrates that transforming ancient oral folk tales into modern illustrations is by no means a simple visual representation, but rather a profound practice of cross-media cultural translation and semantic reconstruction.

At the level of empirical analysis, this study reveals the intrinsic mechanisms driving the visual translation of *The Legend of Panhu*: it operates as a process of semantic encoding involving the reconfiguration of the signifier and signified relationship. By precisely extracting visual components such as Yao ethnic patterns and traditional silver ornaments, the creators effectively anchor the identity attributes of foundational ethnic ancestors. Simultaneously, through rhetorical devices including Chu-shamanic color palettes and multidimensional spatiotemporal compositions, they perform a profound visual encoding of abstract cultural connotations, notably ancestor worship and the spirit of sacrifice, thereby ensuring that the illustrations retain their cultural authenticity within a contemporary aesthetic context.

At the level of theoretical construction, the cross-disciplinary intertextuality between semiotics and cultural memory theory elevates these illustrations from mere visual aesthetic endeavors to a rigorous practice of cultural meaning analysis. This demonstrates that in the visually dominant digital age, images are not merely appendages to text but rather highly efficient mechanisms for generating meaning.

From the macro-perspective and practical value of cultural memory, this image-construction

process has successfully transformed “interactive memory,” an orally transmitted tradition on the verge of fading, into “stored memory” that possesses both modern aesthetic tension and enduring vitality. This is not merely a contemporary re-creation of intangible cultural heritage; it signifies that modern illustration art, together with traditional folk rituals such as the Yao people’s *Huanpan Wangyuan*, has jointly established a multi-layered support system for the cultural memory of the Panhu legend. This rigorous visual transformation provides a core arena for the modern interpretation and value reconstruction of traditional culture, enabling dormant Huxiang folk treasures like *The Legend of Panhu* to finally radiate a brilliant contemporary glow within the visual experiences and ethnic identity of today’s youth.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Hunan Provincial College Students' Innovation and Entrepreneurship Training Program (“A Practical Study on Ink-wash Illustrations of Hunan Folktales”, Grant No. S202410545039). This research was supported by the Ethnic Research Project of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission (“A Study on the Visual Narrative of Painted Murals in the Nanling Corridor and the Sense of Community for the Chinese Nation”, Grant No.2025-GMC-024).

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