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Visualizing the Spatial Network of Cultural Heritage Based on Spatial Genes: A Case Study of Kulangsu, Xiamen

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KEYWORDS

Spatial Gene;
Cultural Heritage;
Heritage Value;
Spatial Network Visualization;
Kulangsu

ABSTRACT

Grounded in the theoretical framework of spatial genes, this study focuses on 51 core heritage elements of Kulangsu to explore multi-dimensional visualization approaches for the spatial network of cultural heritage. Through systematic analysis across four dimensions—construction period, architectural function, stylistic features, and spatial layout—time-series maps and spatial distribution maps were constructed. These maps reveal the characteristics of spatial genes underlying Kulangsu's evolution from an indigenous settlement to an international community. Combined with a "point-line-plane" hierarchical identification, a heritage spatial network structure encompassing historical, social, and cultural values was established and visualized to demonstrate its integrity and diversity. The research demonstrates that the identification of spatial genes and their multi-dimensional visualization of Kulangsu's core heritage elements can effectively elucidate its historical evolution and cultural significance. Future work requires continuous improvement in data precision enhancement, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and public participation mechanisms to enhance the scientific rigor and communicative efficacy of cultural heritage spatial representation, thereby better serving heritage conservation and revitalization practices.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage, as a witness to the long course of history, serves not only as a spatial medium carrying social identity and emotional resonance but also as a spiritual coordinate of human civilization evolution. In the current era of accelerating digitalization and informatization, the spatial patterns and cultural values of traditional cultural heritage face the risks of fragmentation and homogenization (Xie et al., 2022). Consequently, how to scientifically categorize and systematically express the

profound values underpinning heritage has become an urgent issue. Recent academic research has focused on constructing frameworks for heritage value systems and precisely deconstructing core values based on spatial characteristics and cultural essences (Jones, 2017; Łaszkiewicz et al., 2022; Alonso, 2014). Traditional value assessments often prioritize the conservation of physical entities and explicit features, while neglecting the underlying spatial genes that shape the individuality and spiritual character of heritage. Spatial

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genes, representing the spatial order, functional organization, and cultural symbolism sedimented over the long historical process of a heritage site, are the key to understanding the uniqueness of cultural heritage. They also provide a novel perspective for the scientific identification and systematic interpretation of heritage values.

Against the backdrop of digitalization and informatization, integrating spatial gene theory with cultural heritage research to explore pathways for constructing the spatial networks of cultural heritage has emerged as a critical topic in digital heritage studies. Based on this premise, this study proposes a visualization study of the cultural heritage spatial network based on spatial genes: **1)** Using spatial gene theory as the methodological foundation; **2)** Focusing on 51 core heritage elements of Kulangsu as the research objects; **3)** Employing multi-dimensional analysis across construction period, architectural function, architectural style, and spatial layout to construct time-series maps and spatial distribution maps; **4)** Systematically visualizing the heritage spatial network based on the "point-line-plane" hierarchical identification method.

This research aims to explore:

- 1) How to reveal the core characteristics and evolutionary trajectory of heritage through the extraction of spatial genes;
- 2) How to visualize the multi-dimensional values and structural relationships of the heritage network;
- 3) How to leverage visualization to facilitate precise heritage conservation, dissemination, and revitalization.

Through this research, we aim to move beyond the traditional "mere listing of elements" approach to interpretation. Instead, we seek to construct an integrated pathway of "spatial genes – multi-dimensional network – visualization expression," thereby providing new theoretical support and methodological insights for the in-depth understanding, precise conservation, and dynamic transmission of cultural heritage.

CULTURAL HERITAGE AND SPATIAL GENES

Cultural Heritage

In 1972, UNESCO adopted the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (referred to as the World Heritage Convention), which was the first document to define the concept of cultural heritage. Cultural heritage refers to the material and intangible heritage that has been preserved in the course of human history and cultural development and holds significant cultural value. The World Heritage Convention has made a preliminary and relatively clear definition of the concept of cultural heritage (internationally, the forms of existence of cultural heritage are considered to include tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage, but here it refers to tangible cultural heritage), classifying it into three types: ancient sites, architectural complexes and ruins (**Table 1**).

The case study site, Kulangsu, which is the focus of the research in this article, is a renowned World Cultural Heritage Site. World Cultural Heritage is defined by the level of cultural heritage. It is the highest level of cultural heritage of mankind and will be supervised and assisted by the World

Table 1 | Definition of cultural heritage

Type	Value dimension	Content
Ancient sites	Historical, artistic or scientific value	A combination of buildings, carvings and paintings, components or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, caves and landscapes
Architectural complex	Historical, artistic or scientific value	A single or connected architectural complex in terms of architectural style, uniform distribution or integration with the surrounding scenery
Ruins	Historical, aesthetic, ethnographic or anthropological values	Areas such as human engineering or combined natural and artificial engineering, as well as archaeological sites

Source: World Heritage Convention

Heritage Committee. In terms of type, Kulangsu is a tangible cultural heritage. It brings together a unique type of architectural complex and is a witness to modern civilization. But at the same time, its historical and cultural heritage is also inseparable from the intangible cultures of Kulangsu, Xiamen and even Minnan. Therefore, when the concept of cultural heritage is mentioned in this article, it encompasses both the tangible cultural heritage of Kulangsu itself and the intangible cultural heritage of Gulangyu culture.

Spatial Genes

"Gene" is the basic functional unit that carries genetic information in organisms. By guiding protein synthesis, it determines the traits, characteristics and some instinctive behaviors of organisms under environmental regulation (Suzukiet al., 1986). "Spatial genes" originated from the theory of urban complex systems (Holland, 1995; Priogogine & Stengers 2018). The concept of spatial genes mentioned by the team of Academician Duan Jin from Southeast University of China internationally in 2019 aims to take "genes" as the biological basis and morphology as the main means to discover the genetic elements that can be stably inherited in the region and reconstruct the spatial characteristics of the region (Jin et al., 2022). Spatial genes do not simply point to a single isolated spatial element. Instead, they evolve into a unique and relatively stable spatial composition method and organizational logic under the interaction of multiple factors such as the natural environment, historical culture, and social structure (Duan, 2019). Duan Jin (2023) further pointed out that the core characteristics of spatial genes include the correlation of spatial elements, the interaction between natural ecology and urban systems, as well as the social identity demonstrated by indigenous people. Therefore, spatial genes are not only representations of form but also spatial coding carriers of cultural and social relations.

On this basis, spatial genes have gradually become the integrated bond connecting natural, material and immaterial spatial elements. Their formation, inheritance and development are deeply influenced by external variables such as the natural environment, social policies and economic and technological factors (Zhang & Yang, 2024). In recent years, the academic community has continuously expanded the application of spatial genes, especially demonstrating significant value in the protection of rural heritage and traditional settle-

ments. On the one hand, spatial genes are regarded as the core carrier of cultural diversity in traditional villages. By constructing diversity indices, the risk of cultural decline is diagnosed, and the role of public Spaces in social cohesion is emphasized (Xiang, 2022). On the other hand, some studies have revealed the intrinsic mechanisms of material form generation based on quantitative inheritance models, providing a scientific basis for heritage protection and cultural revitalization (Nie, 2024). The research of these two aspects has jointly promoted the application shift of spatial genes in cultural value identification and sustainable management.

In conclusion, the proposal of the spatial gene theory not only deepens the understanding of regional spatial structure and cultural logic, but also provides a concrete and structured analytical path for the identification, assessment and regeneration of cultural heritage, increasingly becoming an important bridge connecting physical space and cultural connotations.

The Association Between Cultural Heritage and Spatial Genes

Spatial genes are unique and relatively stable spatial composition patterns formed in the interaction with the natural environment and historical culture (Jin et al., 2022). It not only focuses on the spatial elements themselves, but also emphasizes the structural connections among the elements, highlighting the dynamic interaction among the ecosystem, urban form and social identity. As a deep-level spatial expression mechanism, spatial genes embed and convey the cultural information and historical memory of a specific region through carriers such as architectural forms, urban textures and landscape features.

Cultural heritage, as the material and intangible carriers of local culture and historical experience, forms a deep coupling relationship with spatial genes. On the one hand, spatial genes provide a stable morphological basis and cultural logic for cultural heritage, making heritage no longer an isolated static entity but an organic node embedded in the regional spatial network. On the other hand, the protection, activation and reuse of cultural heritage are constantly enriching and updating the connotation of spatial genes, endowing them with the ability to evolve over time and adapt to culture. The interaction between the two jointly maintains the historical continuity and cultural vitality of regional space: spatial genes endow cultural

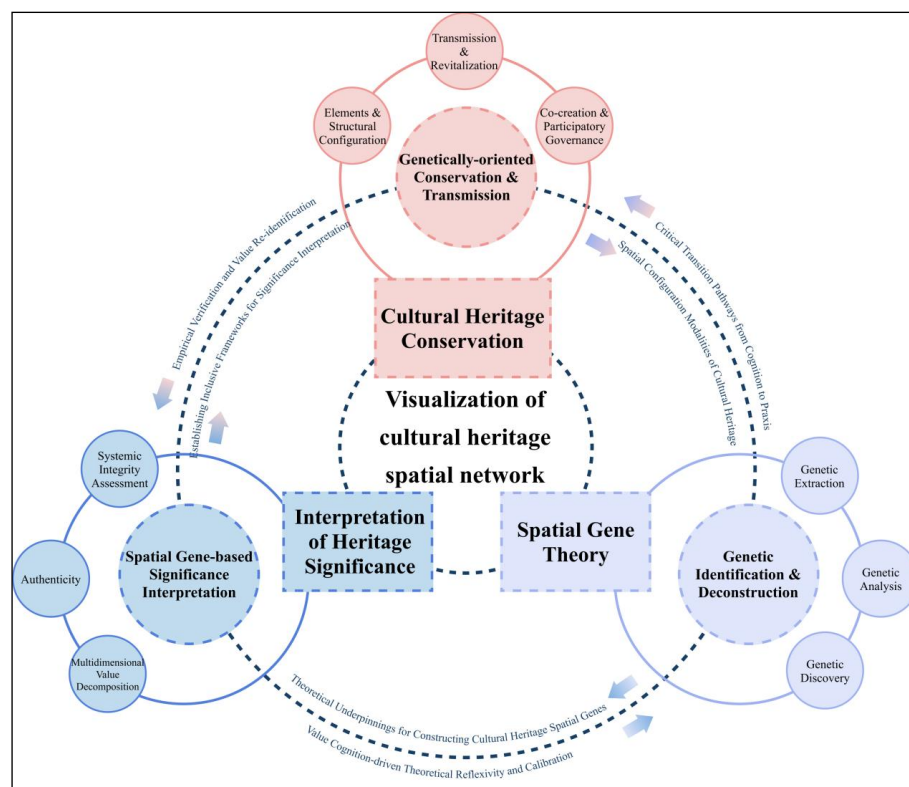


Figure 1 | Theoretical framework for the study of spatial pedigree construction of cultural heritage

heritage with structural support and a sense of identity, while cultural heritage in turn nourishes the cultural expression and social significance of spatial genes. Therefore, to understand the value of cultural heritage, it is not only necessary to interpret its surface material form, but also to delve into the spatial genetic logic behind it, so as to achieve the overall protection and sustainable development of cultural space.

Overall, the spatial foundation provides deep structural support and cultural logic for cultural heritage, while cultural heritage continuously updates and enriches the connotation of spatial genes through protection and revitalization. Both jointly maintain the historical authenticity and cultural vitality of the regional space.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND OBJECTS

Research Framework

In this study, Kulangsu in Xiamen was selected as a typical case. Through a systematic analysis of the spatial genes of historical building remains, the internal logic and presentation path of its cultural heritage value were explored. As important carriers of cultural inheritance, these historical buildings not only record the glorious development of

Kulangsu over more than a hundred years, but also maintain a relatively stable structure in spatial form, presenting unique features of the integration of Chinese and Western styles and the interweaving of local traditions and international styles in different periods. Based on this, this study analyzes the spatial combination mode and local characteristics of architectural heritage as well as its constituent elements, constructs a cultural heritage spatial network to interpret the heritage value, and achieves the inheritance of cultural heritage through targeted means of "understanding through interpretation, appreciating through understanding, and protecting through appreciation" (Tilden, 2009). The research framework is shown in **Figure 1**. As the foundation and methodology of research, the spatial gene theory, by identifying and analyzing the material spatial elements such as historical buildings and street textures and their combination patterns, reveals the natural, social and cultural imprints behind the spatial form of Kulangsu, providing a key perspective for understanding the spatial essence of cultural heritage. Interpretation of heritage value is the core objective of the research. Through systematic analysis based on spatial genes, its authenticity, integrity and the multi-dimensional values (history, culture, art, etc.) it carries are demonstrated and evaluated to make the expression of heritage value more

Table 2 | Classification and summary of heritage elements

Classification dimension	Subclass	Typical representatives/examples	Core value
Construction year	The period of accumulation of local culture (Song Dynasty - 1840	Dafudi Courtyard, Four-courtyard Mansion, The Minor branch of the Huang family, Zhongde Taoist Temple	It reflects the historical evolution and spatial network of Kulangsu from its local cultural roots, to the influence of foreign cultures brought about by the opening of concessions, and then to the diverse integration of the local and Western cultures
	The Period of Foreign cultural Dissemination (1840-1902)	Former Japanese Consulate, Former HSBC Bank Managers' Residences, American Consulate Site, Former Hope Hospital and the Nurses' Residence	
	The period of multicultural integration (1903-1941)	Hai Tian Tang Gou Mansion, Fanpo Mansion, Trinity Church, The Chuncao Mansion, Huang Rongyuan Villa	
Style and pattern	The traditional style of southern Fujian	Sunlight Rock Temple, Four-courtyard Mansion, Dafudi Courtyard	Present the diversity of the spatial genes of Kulangsu: the introduction of foreign styles, the continuation of local traditions, and the unique architectural art forms formed by integration and innovation
	Nanyang decorative style	Bagua Building, Fanpo Mansion	
	Colonial eclecticism	Catholic Church, Union Church	
Building function	Religious buildings	Catholic Church, Trinity Church, Zhongde Taoist Temple	Showcase the functional diversity and openness of Kulangsu as a modern and contemporary international community and settlement for immigrants
	Consulates and public institutions	Former British Consular Residences, Former Kulangsu Mixed Court	
	Residential building	Huang Family Villa, Huang Cimin Villa, Former HSBC Bank Staffs' Residences	
	Public service facilities	Former Hope Hospital and the Nurses' Residence, Enlightenment School Site	
	Commercial cultural space	Former HSBC Bank Managers' Residences, Yanping Theater	
Spatial layout	Religious and cultural district	Concentrated areas of temples and churches	Following the natural terrain and the texture of the streets and alleys, we strengthen the complementarity of themes and the interconnection of functions, and build a spatial layout with distinct layers and rich experiences
	Historical features Exhibition area	Concentrated areas of consulates, banks and mansions	
	Art and Humanities Experience Zone	Concert halls, garden villas, etc	
	Commercial, educational and health district	Markets, schools, hospitals, etc	
	Residential residential area	Local residents, overseas Chinese communities, etc	
Value presentation	The value of historical testimony	A complex of architectural exhibitions from all over the world	Enrich the comprehensive value system of Kulangsu as a World Cultural Heritage site and strengthen its public awareness and educational functions
	The value of cross-cultural communication	The fusion of Chinese and Western styles and overseas Chinese architecture	
	Social memory and identity recognition	The cultural context of Southern Fujian and the memories of overseas Chinese	
	Architectural art and aesthetic value	Diverse styles and exquisite craftsmanship	

concrete, systematic and based on regional characteristics (Lan et al., 2025; Łaszkiewicz et al., 2022). The protection of cultural heritage is the ultimate goal of research. Based on a profound understanding of spatial genes and their values, targeted protection and activation strategies should be formulated, with emphasis on protecting the elements and structural relationships of spatial genes. Public education and community participation should be combined to achieve contemporary expression and sustainable inheritance of values. The three interact with each other, jointly forming a closed loop of "identification - interpretation - protection", achieving a complete path from recognition to action, and promoting the true preservation and contemporary activation of cultural heritage.

Research Objects

The 51 core heritage element buildings on Kulangsu are classified and summarized in terms of "construction period - style and pattern - architectural function - spatial layout - value presentation" (Table 2). Through the sorting out of the construction period, it can clearly show that Kulangsu has evolved from the period of local cultural accumulation (Song Dynasty - 1840) to the period of foreign cultural dissemination (1840-1902). Then to the development context and historical spatial network during the period of multicultural integration (1903-1941): There were not only traditional red brick residences and temple buildings of southern Fujian, but also consulates and mansions of foreign styles, as well as innovative buildings that combined Chinese and Western styles, fully demonstrating the evolution and diversity of the spatial genes of Kulangsu (Li et al., 2022).

In terms of style and form, these buildings combine local, foreign and integrated characteristics: they not only preserve the structural and decorative features of traditional Minnan architecture, but also introduce Western styles such as Victorian and Gothic, and through localized innovation, have formed a unique blend of Chinese and Western architecture. The functions of the buildings cover various types such as religion, diplomacy, residence, commerce, education and medical care, reflecting the complexity and internationalization of social life on Kulangsu at that time.

In combination with the spatial layout, the author proposes that heritage buildings can be integrated into functional zones such as religious and cultural areas, historical and cultural display areas, art and humanistic experience areas, commercial, educa-

tional and health areas, and residential areas based on their organizational models and functional characteristics in space. This not only highlights different historical and cultural themes but also achieves complementarity and interaction in space. At the same time, from the perspective of value presentation, the diverse values carried by the architectural complex of Kulangsu, such as historical testimony, cross-cultural exchange, social memory and architectural art, are further refined.

RESEARCH ON SPATIAL GENE IDENTIFICATION AND SPATIAL NETWORK VISUALIZATION OF KULANGSU

Kulangsu, as a brilliant pearl of Xiamen City, has attracted much attention for its profound historical accumulation, diverse cultural background and unique architectural style. To more systematically reveal the historical context and cultural logic behind the spatial pattern of Kulangsu's heritage, this chapter takes the spatial gene theory as the core method and combines data visualization techniques to conduct multi-dimensional analysis and expression of 51 core heritage elements of Kulangsu.

Temporal Visualization Analysis of the Core Heritage Elements of Kulangsu

This section is based on the 51 core heritage elements of Kulangsu on the World Cultural Heritage List, and combines the drawn time series diagram (Figure 2) to conduct a comprehensive analysis from four dimensions: construction year, building function, architectural style and spatial area. Through multi-perspective image expression and data interpretation, this paper explores the historical evolution path, functional organizational structure, and feature relationship of Kulangsu's cultural heritage. The research attempts to integrate the time dimension, architectural symbols, and social memory into the visualization design of the spatial network, which is similar to the digital image art through methods such as unmanned aerial vehicle remote sensing and collage photography. The research idea of exploring the temporal form and symbolic space of photographic art is consistent (Li et al., 2025). It also provides multi-dimensional visualization support and a basic cognitive framework for the subsequent "point-line-

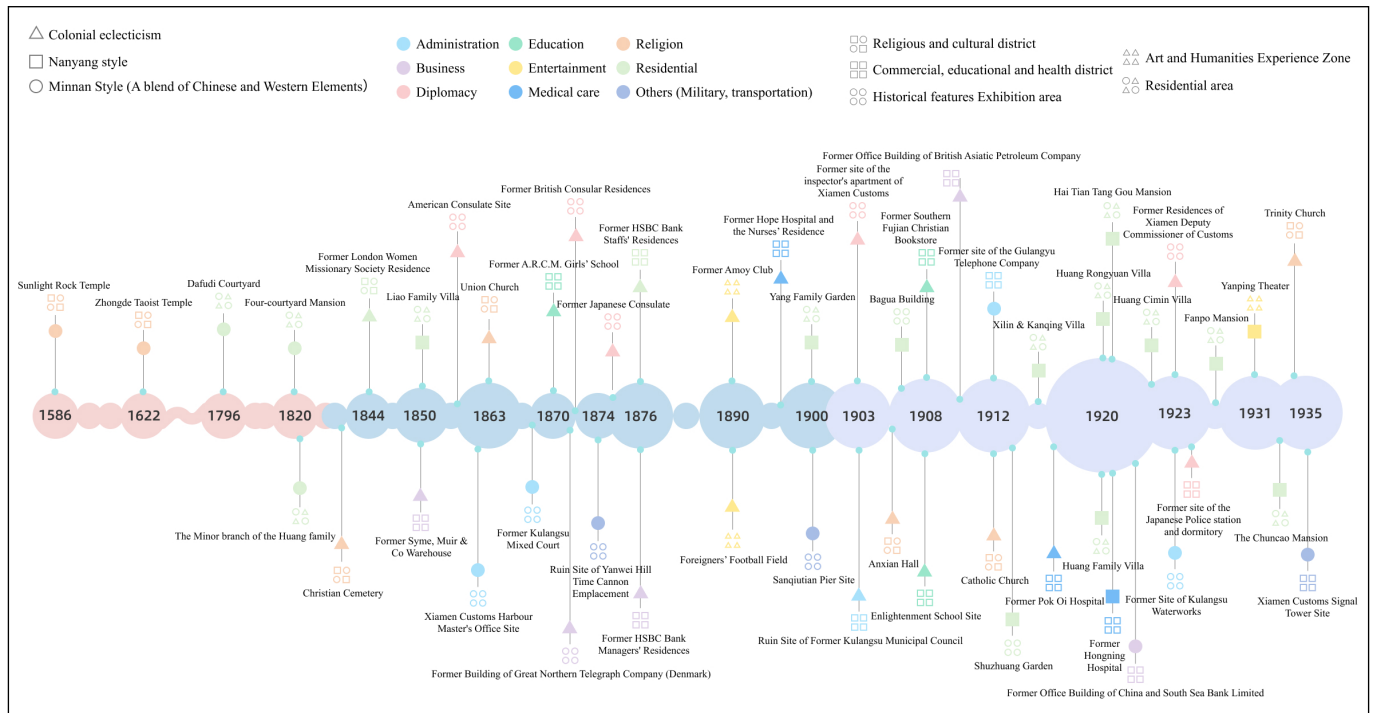


Figure 2 | Timeline of the 51 Core Heritage Buildings on Kulangsu

surface" multi-level spatial recognition and network structure analysis.

It is worth noting that the construction and visualization of the spatial network of cultural heritage are not merely the results of technical or rational analysis, but are closely related to emotional identification, social memory and ethical values. As some studies have pointed out, the acceptance of technological applications often goes beyond instrumental rationality and is profoundly shaped by emotional vulnerability and moral tension (Fu et al., 2022). In the research on the visualization of spatial genes on Kulangsu, this social emotion and cultural identity have also profoundly influenced the screening and value expression of spatial elements, making the spatial network not only a presentation of historical information but also a medium for public emotional resonance and collective memory.

Construction Period: The concentrated construction period of the core heritage and its historical evolution

From 1586 to 1840, it was the period of accumulation of local culture. The buildings mainly consisted of local temples and traditional residences, such as Sunlight Rock Temple, Zhongde Taoist Temple, and Four-courtyard Mansion, which reflected the early religious belief system and local

settlement form of Kulangsu. The spatial genes of this period possess the organizational characteristics of a "religious core - neighborhood dependence" type, emphasizing locality, continuity and a sense of spiritual belonging. From 1840 to 1902, it was a period of the spread of foreign cultures, as well as a stage of strong intervention by foreign forces and cultural collisions. With Kulangsu being listed as a "Public Settlement", foreign consulates, churches, banks and other buildings emerged densely (such as American Consulate Site and Former HSBC Bank Managers' Residences). At this stage, spatial genes did not naturally fuse but presented a "forced embedding type" transformation, reflecting the initial entry of the modernization process and colonial influence into the island space. From 1903 to 1941, it was a period of multicultural integration and the most concentrated construction period of heritage buildings on Kulangsu. During this stage, social functions expanded diversely. A large number of buildings have emerged one after another, covering educational (such as Enlightenment School Site), religious (such as Catholic Church), medical (such as Former site of the Hong Ning Hospital), commercial and financial (such as Former site of the Central South Bank), entertainment (such as Former site of the Yan Ping Cinema), and many other types of buildings. During the same period, some overseas

Chinese built villas and residences with Nanyang style on the island, usually in areas with higher terrain and superior views.

These heritages integrate Chinese and Western elements in spatial organization and architectural vocabulary, becoming a spatial expression of "cross-cultural identity" and further enriching the "private residence - social symbol" dimension in the spatial genes of Kulangsu. The spatial genes of this period were characterized by a "multi-dimensional superposition type", that is, under the constraints of multicultural logic and natural landforms, functional coordination and spatial coupling were achieved, which was a crucial stage for Kulangsu's transformation from a local settlement to an international community. This historical evolution not only reflects the changes of The Times but also shapes the spatial heritage structure of Kulangsu today: early buildings are scattered, while modern ones are dense, forming a multi-layered spatial pattern along the street and alley axes - along the coastline - built against the mountains.

Overall, the spatial genes of Kulangsu have undergone an evolutionary process from a single endogenous source to exogenous embedding and then to multi-source fusion in three historical stages. This process not only encodes the historical texture of cultural heritage, but also shapes the spatial network structure of Kulangsu today, which is both layered and continuous.

Building Function: Spatial Mapping of Diverse Social Demands

The evolution of architectural functions on Kulangsu reflects the continuous transformation of the social structure and lifestyle on the island, and also reflects the response and shaping ability of spatial genes to multiple functional demands in different periods (Jing et al., 2022).

Before the mid-19th century, the spatial genes of Kulangsu were mainly centered around local life and religious beliefs. The architectural types were mainly temples and traditional residences, presenting a "religious-life" type of settlement pattern, emphasizing the spatial connection between the faith center and the community. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, with the opening of ports for trade and the entry of Western forces, functional buildings for diplomacy, commercial finance, religion, etc. gradually emerged, marking the "institutional embedding type" reconstruction of spatial genes. Functional nodes with foreign institutional attributes, such as consulates, banks, and

churches, have begun to be embedded in the local spatial texture. The spatial structure tends to be multi-axis parallel and functionalized, reflecting the needs of island society for external communication and capital circulation. From the early 20th century to the 1930s, a large number of social service facilities such as education, medical care and cultural entertainment were built on the island, demonstrating the refinement of social life demands and the integration of urban functions. At this point, the spatial gene further transforms into a "composite functional type", that is, on the basis of the original living and power system, it superimposes public attribute spatial units such as education, health, and culture, forming an urban living structure oriented towards the middle class and knowledge groups.

Furthermore, during this period, many overseas Chinese built villa residences on the island. These villas not only reflected the overseas Chinese's borrowing of Western architectural forms, but also retained the local traditional courtyards and decorative customs of southern Fujian, presenting the dual characteristics of a combination of Chinese and Western structures and "private - social" functions, such as Shuzhuang Garden, Huang Cimin Villa, etc. It often has multiple functions such as a residence, reception and cultural activities, reflecting the "cross-cultural self-shaping" feature in the spatial genes of Kulangsu. Overall, the historical evolution of architectural functions on Kulangsu shows a progressive process from "single religious life" to "diverse social demands". The network structure composed of buildings with different functions not only reflects the complex trend of social life on the island but also constructs a spatial gene network with hierarchy and heterogeneity.

Architectural Style: The Spatio-temporal Evolution of the Fusion of Chinese and Western Styles

The evolution process of architectural styles on Kulangsu demonstrates the convergence and adaptation of local and foreign cultures at different historical stages, and also reflects the continuous renewal of spatial genes at the morphological level and their cultural coding capabilities.

Before the late Qing Dynasty, the architectural style on the island was mainly in the traditional Minnan style, emphasizing the adaptation to the natural landscape, the use of local materials, and the enclosed spatial layout, thus forming a spatial genetic form centered on clan order and local be-

liefs. The architectural style of this period demonstrated a strong sense of locality and continuity, serving as the foundation for the spatial expression of local culture. In the middle and late 19th century, with the entry of European and American powers, typical colonial architectural styles such as Gothic and Victorian began to appear on the island, such as the former site of the British and American consulates and the Catholic Church. This type of architecture often emphasizes verticality, decoration and institutional symbolism. As a result, the spatial genes undergo a disruptive variation, presenting an "forced embedding" exogenous style feature, that is, the local spatial layout is strongly intervened by foreign architectural language, forming a heterogeneous superposition in cultural vision.

At the beginning of the 20th century, under the joint influence of the foreign exchange economy, cross-cultural exchanges and the construction practices of local artisans, Kulangsu gradually developed the "Nanyang Style", "Sino-Western Fusion Style" and "Colonial Eclectic Style" that integrated Chinese and Western elements. Representative buildings such as the Bagua Building and the Huang Rongyuan Villa often organically combine traditional Chinese symmetrical axes and carved decorations with Western architectural elements like arches, balconies, and brick and stone structures, demonstrating an adaptive mechanism of spatial genes under "cultural re-encoding". The architectural style of this stage is not only an aesthetic expression but also a spatial practice of identity construction and cultural recognition, marking the transformation of the spatial genes of Kulangsu from a "single traditional type" to a "mixed and integrated type", demonstrating the selective absorption and local re-creation of regional culture under the influence of foreign influences.

Visual Interpretation and Presentation of Heritage Value

Through a systematic review and multi-dimensional visual expression of 51 core heritage elements, the cultural heritage value of Kulangsu can be interpreted in a three-dimensional way from multiple dimensions such as historical process, artistic style, social function and cultural memory.

Historical value: The core heritage buildings bear witness to the entire process of Kulangsu's evolution from a local settlement to an international community, and carry the spatial imprints of politi-

cal, economic and cultural changes in different periods. **Artistic and architectural value:** The diverse integration of architectural styles and the spatial layout along streets and alleys, against mountains and along the coast reflect the deep convergence of Chinese and Western architectural art in specific natural landforms and cultural contexts. **Social and life values:** Multi-functional buildings such as those for education, religion, healthcare, and commerce coexist and thrive, reflecting the increasingly diverse structure of modern urban life and the spatialization of social division of labor. **The cultural memory value:** The overseas Chinese patriotic sentiments, modern diplomatic history and local life traditions carried by the architectural complex constitute the unique cultural identity and collective memory field of the island.

This study breaks through the limitations of traditional textual description and visual presentation by visualizing the value of heritage. It not only strengthens the spatial perception and image cognition of value interpretation, but also provides intuitive support and multi-dimensional perspectives for subsequent "point-line-surface" spatial recognition and spatial network relationship analysis, further promoting the transformation of cultural heritage from static display to dynamic understanding and structural cognition.

Point-Line-Surface Spatial Identification of the Core Heritage Elements of Kulangsu

This section is based on the 51 core heritage elements of Kulangsu and conducts the identification and analysis of spatial genes from the three levels of point, line and surface (**Figure 3**). By means of geographic information visualization and classification analysis, this paper explores its distribution characteristics, spatial connections and aggregation patterns, reveals the spatial structure features of the diverse symbiosis and distinct context of the cultural heritage of Kulangsu, and lays a solid foundation for the subsequent construction of the spatial network.

Point: Spatial Distribution and Character Interpretation of Core Heritage Sites

This study takes the 51 core heritage elements listed in the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage directory of Gulangyu as the starting point for identifying spatial genes. These architectural entities, officially recognized based on multi-dimensional evaluations including historical, artistic, and social values, represent the most concentrated expression of the cultural and spatial DNA of Gulangyu.

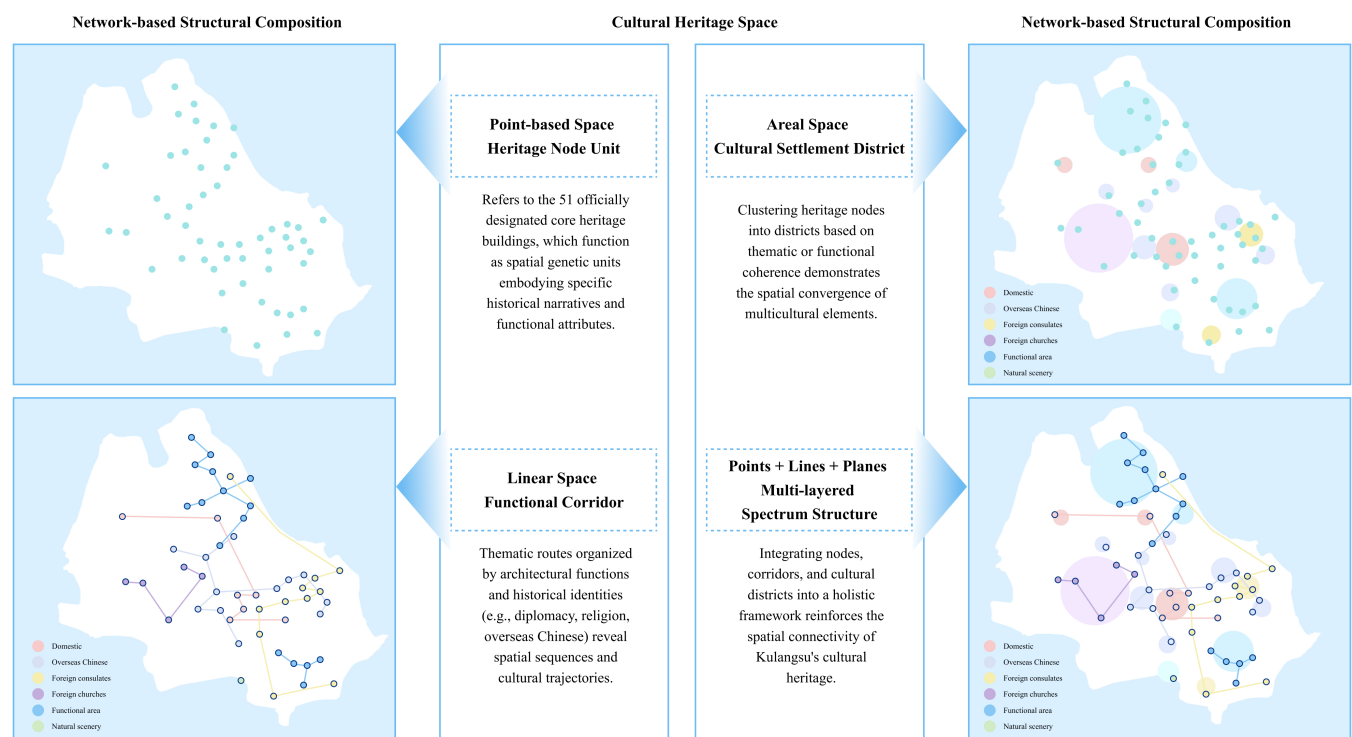


Figure 3 | Kulangsu Cultural Heritage Spatial Genetic Identification Model

An analysis of the official spatial distribution map of these 51 core elements reveals a dispersed, multi-nodal layout characterized by an organic integration of inner street axes, coastal lines, and natural landforms. Traditional local buildings are predominantly situated along natural topographies, often clustered near features such as Sunlight Rock, forming a landscape closely interwoven with the environment. In contrast, consulates, foreign firms, and Western-style buildings tend to align linearly along the coastline, facing the harbor to emphasize their diplomatic functions. Overseas Chinese residences are typically located adjacent to Western-style architectural zones, creating transitional spaces that embody the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures.

From a temporal perspective, these buildings span across distinct historical phases, including the period of indigenous cultural accumulation, the era of foreign cultural dissemination, and the subsequent stage of multicultural integration. They bear witness to the transformation of Gulangyu from a traditional settlement into an international community. In terms of stylistic expression, the architecture encompasses a range of types, including Western consulates, hybrid Sino-Western dwellings, and vernacular red-brick houses. Functionally, the heritage elements reflect a wide spec-

trum of uses—diplomatic, religious, commercial, educational, and residential—demonstrating the diversity of social organization and lifestyle on the island. As the fundamental units of spatial genetics, these officially designated heritage sites encapsulate the historical evolution, regional characteristics, and cultural richness of Gulangyu. They thus provide an authoritative and robust foundation for the thematic route design and regional classification in subsequent spatial analysis.

Line: Spatial Linkages of Functional and Cultural Themes

On the basis of point-based distribution, multiple thematic and functional routes are constructed according to architectural functions—such as religion, diplomacy, commerce, education, and residence—as well as historical identities (including indigenous buildings, Western consulates, and overseas Chinese architecture) and associated cultural themes. The Local Life Memory Route uses vernacular architectural elements such as red-brick dwellings, ancestral halls, and traditional residences as core nodes to connect indigenous communities and traditional living spaces, thereby reflecting the local cultural fabric. The Diplomatic and Cultural Axis links various former consulates, embassy sites, and associated structures, tracing the spatial trajectory of Gulangyu’s international

exchanges during the modern period. The Religious and Humanistic Route interconnects Christian and Catholic churches, illustrating the spatial diffusion and clustering patterns of religious heritage on the island. The Overseas Chinese Memory Route integrates the residences of overseas Chinese, mansions of prominent community leaders, and related educational institutions, highlighting the significant role of the diaspora in the development of their hometown. The Natural Landscape Experience Route is anchored in key natural features such as Sunlight Rock, Shuzhuang Garden, and the coastline, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between ecological landscapes and architectural heritage. These functional and thematic pathways transform isolated heritage points into an integrated spatial network with narrative coherence and functional continuity, thereby embedding architectural heritage more deeply within the island's historical evolution and social life.

Plane: Functional Zones and Spatial Aggregation Patterns of Heritage

Building upon the linear connections, this section further identifies planar spatial units and functional zones through an integrated analysis of spatial distribution density and topographical conditions.

The Traditional Indigenous Residential Zone is characterized by compact spatial morphology, human-scale environments, and the preservation of traditional architectural forms, lifestyle patterns, and local cultural practices. The Consular District comprises a concentration of consulates from various nations and their associated diplomatic facilities, fostering a strong atmosphere of international cultural exchange. The Religious and Cultural Zone centers on Christian and Catholic churches, supplemented by religious schools and institutions, forming a key spatial domain for religious activities. The Overseas Chinese Residential Zone features a dense distribution of overseas Chinese mansions and Chinese-funded educational buildings, reflecting the distinctive characteristics and collective memory of the diasporic community. The Natural Ecological and Recreational Zone, with Sunlight Rock and Shuzhuang Garden as its core scenic resources, establishes a leisure space that integrates ecological preservation with cultural heritage.

These planar aggregations not only reflect the spatial responses to historical evolution and functional differentiation, but also form a complementary and diverse regional layout, highlighting the

integrity and complexity of Gulangyu's spatial genes. Collectively, they demonstrate the layered spatial interplay and functional overlap among natural landforms, indigenous living patterns, international engagement, and religious-educational practices—ultimately shaping a multifaceted, hierarchically structured spatial configuration of coexistence on the island.

Integrated Hierarchies of Point–Line–Plane

Through the analysis of point distribution, thematic linkage via lines, and functional aggregation in planar zones, the spatial characteristics of Gulangyu's cultural heritage manifest a comprehensive pattern composed of multi-point dispersion, interwoven functional lines, and the convergence of diverse districts. **1)** Points represent the fundamental units of spatial genes, comprising individual heritage sites; **2)** Lines serve to connect these points through thematic and functional routes, enhancing cultural and operational relationships among heritage elements; **3)** Planes form through the spatial aggregation of functions and themes, exhibiting the integrity, stratification, and cultural diversity of the overall landscape.

This hierarchical integration of point–line–plane reveals both the intrinsic structure and external morphology of Gulangyu's heritage spatial genes. More importantly, it establishes a clear spatial foundation and logical entry point for the construction of the cultural heritage spatial network discussed in the following section.

The identification of point–line–plane is not merely a categorization of tangible heritage, but a spatialized interpretation of its historical trajectory, functional interrelations, and cultural logic. It provides a robust analytical framework and foundational basis for subsequent visualization of spatial networks and the comprehensive interpretation of heritage value.

Comprehensive Interpretation and Value Discussion of the Spatial Gene Network Visualization

This section constructs a visual analysis framework based on the temporal evolution, functional interconnections, stylistic transitions, and spatial distribution of Gulangyu's heritage by means of time-series analysis of 51 core heritage sites, statistical evaluation of functional attributes, and “point–line–plane” spatial identification. The resulting visualization clearly delineates the structure and evolutionary logic of Gulangyu's cultural heritage spatial network.

Overall, the cultural heritage spatial network of Gulangyu exhibits the following typical characteristics. **1) Multilayered Temporal Context:** The evolution of architectural styles and functional structures on Gulangyu has transitioned from a period dominated by indigenous constructions, through phases of external influence, to an era of multicultural integration. This process forms a spatial historical tableau with clearly defined strata and progressive evolution, reflecting both the continuity and the phased characteristics of its spatial genes. **2) Functionally Integrated Spatial Connections:** The coexistence and intertwining of diverse social functions—ranging from diplomacy, religion, education, and healthcare to commerce—transform isolated heritage sites into spatial nodes embedded within the social life and collective memory network. This reveals the dynamic social value of the heritage spaces. **3) Regionally Aggregated Network Layout:** Functional districts—such as the religious zone, consular area, overseas Chinese sector, and indigenous residential area—organically converge and mutually reinforce one another. While each retains its unique cultural characteristics, together they construct a diverse yet integrated spatial structure across the island.

Through the visualization and comprehensive interpretation of the spatial gene network, this study not only unveils the generative logic and underlying mechanisms of Gulangyu's heritage spaces but also provides a structured and graphical theoretical framework along with practical pathways for cultural heritage preservation and value interpretation.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This study takes 51 core heritage elements on Kulangsu as the object, based on the spatial gene theory, combined with time series analysis and the multi-level spatial identification method of "point-line-surface", systematically explores the historical evolution, functional distribution, style features and spatial aggregation relationship of heritage buildings, and constructs a visualization model of the cultural heritage spatial network. It aims to provide new understanding paths and methodological support for the protection, display and research of cultural heritage.

Main Findings and Conclusions of the Research

In terms of the temporal dimension, the research has drawn a chronological evolution diagram of the heritage buildings, revealing that the cultural heritage of Kulangsu has gone through three stages: "accumulation of local culture - infiltration of foreign culture - integration of diverse cultures". In the early stage, the buildings were mainly religious and residential. In the middle stage, a large number of Western-style diplomatic, religious and commercial buildings emerged. In the late stage, it developed into an international community pattern with complex functions and mixed styles. This evolutionary trajectory clearly reflects the dynamic transformation process of spatial genes from endogenous stability to exogenous fusion and then to native regeneration.

In the spatial dimension, the research, through the three-level recognition method of "point - line - surface", has extracted the following features; At the point level: Core heritage buildings are distributed along the mountain terrain, along the coast, and along the streets and alleys, demonstrating a high degree of coupling between natural form and functional organization, and forming a network of heritage nodes with diverse textures. At the line level: Extract functional cultural channels such as the "diplomatic Cultural axis", "religious and humanistic route", and "Overseas Chinese Memory Path", achieving a spatial logic transformation from isolated nodes to narrative corridors. At the surface level, spatial units such as the consulate area, religious and cultural area, overseas Chinese villa area, local residential area and natural leisure area have been summarized, demonstrating the structural hierarchy and regional agglomeration of the heritage space on Kulangsu.

Through the above analysis, the constructed spatial network visualization model not only realizes the medium transformation from textual description and two-dimensional drawings to dynamic network expression, but also enhances the perceptibility and dissemination potential of the spatial characteristics of heritage, providing multi-dimensional support for the cognition and interpretation of heritage value.

Research Innovation and Contribution

In terms of methods, this study introduces the "spatial gene" theory and time-space composite visualization technology to construct a multi-dimensional visualization path suitable for heritage

analysis in historical urban areas. In terms of content, it presents in a three-dimensional way the interactive logic of the time series, functional structure, style evolution and spatial organization of the buildings on Kulangsu, revealing the internal mechanism of the spatial generation of cultural heritage. In practice, it provides structured, visualized and networked cognitive models for heritage protection, exhibition design and management decision-making, and expands the forms of expression and dissemination methods of traditional heritage research.

Research Limitations and Prospects

This study still has certain limitations. The data sources mainly rely on the 51 core heritage elements officially announced, and have not yet comprehensively covered a wider range of historical buildings and intangible cultural elements. Spatial network analysis mainly relies on visual expression, lacking the support of quantitative indicators and the intervention of social network analysis methods. Visualization presentation still mainly relies on two-dimensional static images and has not yet fully integrated emerging expression technologies such as interactive and immersive ones.

Future research can be expanded in the following directions: broadening the scope of data and incorporating non-core heritage sites, intangible cultural expressions, and folk memory resources; Introduce GIS spatial analysis and network analysis indicators to strengthen the quantitative modeling and evaluation of spatial structure; Explore immersive visualization methods such as AR/VR and digital twins to enhance the interactivity and experience of heritage value dissemination.

Overall, this study takes the spatial gene theory as its core framework and uses visualization methods to decode the structural logic and evolution path of Gulangyu's cultural heritage. It not only provides a concrete and networked interpretation paradigm for the research of local historical heritage, but also offers beneficial theoretical references and methodological inspirations for the identification, value interpretation and digital display of spatial heritage in other historical urban areas.

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The Historical Context and Realist Orientation of Erich Auerbach's Figural Interpretation (*Figura*)

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KEYWORDS

Erich Auerbach;
Figural Interpretation;
Aryan Philology;
Mixture of Styles;
Realism of Everyday Life

ABSTRACT

In the 1930s, Erich Auerbach, exiled amid Nazi antisemitism and Aryan philology, revived the Latin-patristic concept of *figura*: a historical-grammatical method connecting Old Testament prophecy to New Testament fulfilment. In contrast to the prevailing pure philology of the period, figural interpretation embraced a teleological view of history, transforming Hebrew scripture from narrowly Jewish law into a cultural bridge linking everyday reality and transcendental redemption. This article argues that Auerbach's figural interpretation constitute not merely a philological method but a cultural-political theory consciously devised to defend Judeo-Christian humanism and redefine Western literary realism. By tracing the concept's patristic origins, examining its wartime deployment against Nazi ideology, and highlighting its role in *Mimesis*—where mixture of styles elevates ordinary experience into the primary measure of literary realism—the article demonstrates figural interpretation as a threefold intellectual strategy: sharpening historical insight, confronting cultural-political crises, and innovating literary criticism.

INTRODUCTION

Erich Auerbach's theory of figural interpretation (*figura* in Latin) has become a vital methodology in current literary studies. Originating from the Latin Church Fathers' dual historical schema of Old-Testament type and New-Testament fulfilment, Auerbach reconfigures *figura* into a hermeneutic practice that both insists on reconstructing the historical-grammatical context in which a text first emerged, and demands that interpreters trace the transcendent meanings subsequently reactivated by later narratives, thus simultaneously grasping both historical specificity and reinterpretation. This dual orientation supplies the theoretical framework

underlying the concept of "everyday realism" articulated in *Mimesis*, and during the Nazi anti-Semitic campaigns, provided Auerbach with a scholarly weapon to defend the historical continuity of Judeo-Christian humanism—demonstrating the combined significance of methodology, intellectual history, and political critique. Recently, figural interpretation has been adapted within fields such as postcolonial studies, narratology, and digital humanities to investigate the interactions between texts and history. However, existing scholarship has scarcely addressed how Auerbach implicitly critiques the ideology of Aryan philology and upholds a comprehensive vision of European history

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grounded in Judeo-Christian humanism. This paper, therefore, takes the formative context of figural interpretation as its starting point, systematically examining its theoretical structure and critical practice, with the goal of illuminating the real-world values and intellectual-historical significance underpinning Auerbach's hermeneutic approach.

Figural interpretation, forged by Erich Auerbach during his years of exile, serves simultaneously as a methodological tool, a historical-philosophical vision, and a form of political critique. Born into a German-Jewish family, Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) left Germany following the Nazi rise to power in 1933, subsequently holding academic positions at Istanbul University and Yale University. Together with Ernst Robert Curtius and others, he helped establish comparative literature as a rigorous philological discipline. In his influential 1938 essay, *Figura*, Auerbach meticulously traced the etymology of *figura* and outlined two competing traditions of biblical exegesis in patristic literature. Taking the interpretive relationship between Hebrew Scripture and Christianity as his point of departure, he articulated the notion of figural interpretation, thus formulating a distinctly humanist conception of historical continuity. This theoretical approach reached its systematic culmination in his landmark 1946 work, *Mimesis*. In it, Auerbach deployed the concept of *figura* to trace the evolution of realism in Western literature, explicitly challenging the Nazi ideology of a racially “pure” literary canon. Furthermore, by advocating the mixture of elevated and everyday stylistic registers, he established realism grounded in ordinary lived experience as a critical benchmark, directly responding to contemporary concerns about democracy and humanist values.

This article examines the unique historical context in which figural interpretation emerged, exploring the underlying ethical and political commitments embedded in both Auerbach's theoretical construction and his critical practice. Put differently, it seeks to uncover precisely what values Auerbach defended during a profound crisis in political culture. By clarifying this ideological dimension, the paper aims to offer fresh insight into Auerbach's philological paradigm and to deepen our understanding of how he sought to defend humanism at a pivotal moment of Western civilization's peril.

ALLEGORICAL VS. FIGURAL (TYPOLOGICAL) EXEGESIS IN EARLY PATRISTIC CHRISTIANITY

This chapter traces how the early Church Fathers diverged between allegorical and figural (*figura*) exegesis when interpreting Scripture and charts the emergence of the term *figura* alongside the evolution of its interpretation. It begins by reconstructing the formation of figural reading among the Fathers, showing how this approach links concrete Old Testament events—such as Moses' exodus from Egypt and Israel's passage through the Red Sea—to their New Testament fulfillment in Christ's passion and resurrection. By forging this link, figural exegesis bequeaths a teleological-historical narrative template that would go on to anchor European theological discourse for centuries. Clarifying this foundational historic-grammatical paradigm provides the theoretical basis for the chapter's later analysis of Erich Auerbach's appropriation of *figura*—both in his critique of classical stylistic hierarchies and in his formulation of a realist criticism rooted in everyday life.

Originally, the Latin *figura* denoted a strictly three-dimensional “shape” or “model” (Auerbach, 2014; Lewis & Short, 1879). The term first appears in the second-century BCE dramatists Terence and Pacuvius, who speak of a *nova figura*—literally a “new kind of molding.” As Erich Auerbach shows, by the first century BCE authors such as Varro, Lucretius, and Cicero were already exploiting *figura* to translate or approximate the richer Greek vocabulary of “form” (Efal, 2009, 2012), thereby shifting the word's reference from the concrete to the abstract. The driver of this semantic drift was the broader “Hellenization of Roman education”: once Greek scholarly and rhetorical traditions introduced terms like μορφή (*morphē*), σχῆμα (*schēma*), and above all τύπος (*typos*, “imprint, paradigm”) into the Latin milieu, a single Latin equivalent was needed that could subsume the senses of shape, pattern, and norm (Lury et al., 2022). *Figura* took on that burden and steadily widened its semantic range. Among the Greek loan-terms, τύπος proved the most consequential. In early Greek Christian literature, *typos* regularly designates historically real “types” or “prefigurations.” Because *figura* in late-antique and medieval interpretations became inseparable from this typological notion, Auerbach made it the keystone of his celebrated theory of figural exegesis—a philological practice grounded in a philosophy of history

in which the Old Testament foreshadows and the New Testament fulfils.

In patristic biblical interpretation, two markedly different hermeneutic tracks gradually crystallized (Hovind, 2012). The first, allegorical exegesis, associated with Philo of Alexandria and later Origen, presses beyond the literal sense of Scripture to uncover its moral and spiritual metaphors. The second, figural exegesis, grounded in Tertullian's and Augustine's arguments for the historical continuity between the Old and New Testaments, stresses the typological bond whereby concrete events in Israel's past "prefigure" and are "fulfilled" in Christ (Hovind, 2012). In *Figura*, Erich Auerbach sharply distinguishes these two approaches and pointedly criticizes allegory for attenuating the historical dimension of revelation. His preference for figural exegesis—precisely because it honors historical reality—forms the decisive fulcrum of his entire theory of "figura".

The drive to penetrate Scripture for a "spiritual" or *anagogical* sense—a quest that later Christian writers would call allegorical exegesis—arose from the deep seepage of Greek philosophy, especially Middle Platonism and Stoicism, into the infant church's hermeneutical habits. By privileging the soul's ascent over the text's surface narrative, this mode of reading supplied one of the chief intellectual threads by which Christianity, on both theological and cultural planes, loosened itself from its Jewish matrix. Its transcendental orientation finds a canonical expression in the Gospel of John: when the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, goaded by the Pharisees, charges Jesus with aspiring to kingship, Jesus replies, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36), bluntly asserting the non-mundane character of the *basileia tou theou*. Philo of Alexandria gave this spiritualizing impulse its first systematic form (Seland, 2014). Steeped in the Platonism that pervaded the Hellenistic East, Philo sought to recast Hebrew sacred history through philosophical speculation, transmuting its persons and events from literal chronicle into interior stages of the soul's drama. In his commentaries the historical and grammatical strata are intentionally muted, while the mystical and moral dimensions are thrust into the foreground. The Old Testament thus becomes, for Philo, a grand narrative of the soul's progress—from fall, through hope, to ultimate redemption. As Auerbach puts it, "He saw in the fate of Israel in general, as well as in the lives of the individual actors in Jewish history, an allegory of the movement of the sinful soul in

need of salvation from its fall through hope to its final redemption" (Auerbach, 2014: 97). By reading the collective fate of Israel and the lives of its patriarchs as emblematic of "the soul weighed down by passions and in need of liberation" (Philo, c. 20 CE/2004a: 23), Philo laid the methodological groundwork upon which the later Christian tradition would build its full-blown edifice of allegorical interpretation.

Philo's mode of allegorical exegesis—one that detaches the biblical text almost entirely from history and foregrounds a purely spiritual horizon—was adopted by the Catechetical School of Alexandria and deepened by Origen. Yet Origen's allegory is not as abstract as Philo's: whereas Philo allows the natural and cosmic dimensions to recede in favor of the moral and the mystical, Origen argues that careful, rational reflection on the *natural*, literal sense of Scripture provides the most secure springboard for drawing out its ethical and spiritual insights. Influenced by the Middle-Platonic tripartition of reality into body, soul, and spirit, Origen maintains that Scripture likewise contains three strata of meaning: **1)** a corporeal, *literal-historical* sense; **2)** a psychic, *moral-ethical* sense; **3)** a pneumatic, *spiritual* or *mystical* sense. Within this framework the historical-grammatical level is no longer eclipsed but serves as the indispensable point of departure. This more "concretized" allegorical method enables Origen—without violating the core tenets of Christian theology—to fuse the biblical text with principles drawn from Greek philosophy; his fundamental aim is to refashion and elevate Greco-Roman culture through the authority of Scripture (Ramelli, 2009). Writing from an apologetic stance, he weds Judaism's concern for historical reality to Greek speculative reason, guiding believers toward a right understanding of humanity's relation to God and toward self-regulation. Even so, the ultimate horizon of his exegesis remains spiritual. As Gerich observes, Origen by "compos[ing] an allegorization that devalues the relevance of the historical record by rendering the entire Old Testament as a mere shadow show of moral concepts and future happenings" (Lerer, 1996a: 109). Thus, the Old Testament—originally the national law of Israel—loses its primordial historical and popular character in his reading and becomes an esoteric book whose inner truth can be grasped only by passing beyond its literal and commonsense interpretation.

Figural exegesis that foregrounds the historical-grammatical level is rooted in the biblical logic of

typology: persons and events in the Old Testament possess their own spatio-temporal significance yet simultaneously foreshadow the redemptive realities to be effected in the New Testament. Within this framework the antecedent occurrence or figure is called a type: it refers both to itself and to its future fulfilment. The later occurrence or figure is the antitype, whose advent both completes and discloses the type's true meaning. In the patristic period typological reading was systematized. Pivotal here is the Latin Father Tertullian, who employed the term *figura* with such frequency that it acquired theological weight far beyond its original sense of "form" or "shape," gradually supplanting the Greek *typos* (which in Greek Christian authors denoted a historically real prophecy). On this basis a hermeneutical scheme centered on *figura–eventus* (figure–fulfilment) took shape, bequeathing to later interpreters such as Augustine an exegetical template that balanced historical fact with spiritual meaning.

Tertullian's biblical interpretation pointedly rejects any reading that relies on a "purely spiritual" allegory. Instead, he secures the authority of the Old Testament at the literal-historical level: interpretation must stand on palpable historical facts, not on abstract mystical projections. Whereas Philo and Origen tend to "spiritualize" the events of both Testaments—thereby diluting their historical texture—Tertullian insists on preserving Scripture's full historicity while simultaneously unveiling a deeper mystery: the people and events of the Old Covenant are merely *figurae*, images that presage a future reality ultimately accomplished in the appearing and redemptive work of Christ in the New Covenant. In *Adversus Marcionem* he cites the renaming of Hoshea (Oshea) to Joshua (Jehoshua) as a paradigm. The moment Moses and the congregation first address Nun's son as "Joshua," they already foreshadow the coming "Jesus." Joshua leads Israel into a land "flowing with milk and honey"; likewise, Jesus Christ will guide a "second people"—Gentile believers drawn from the "wilderness"—into the promise of eternal life. This grand design is fulfilled not by the Law (Moses) but by the grace of the Gospel (Jesus) (Auerbach, 2014:78-79). Thus the very name-pair "Joshua–Jesus" becomes a figure of the future Christ: a concrete historical episode announces a greater redemptive fact, which will be realized in equally concrete history (Wilken, 2003). Within this reciprocal *figura–eventus* dynamic—figure and fulfilment—the Old Testament is understood as the

figure of the New, and the New Testament as the disclosure of the Old's consummation. Because both are anchored in the same continuum of history, they jointly attest the truth of divine revelation.

Augustine likewise takes a clear stand against any allegorical method that divorces Scripture from its literal plane. In De Trinitate he observes:

Consequently, in order that the human mind may be cleansed from errors of this kind, Sacred Scripture, adapting itself to little ones, has employed words from every class of objects in order that our intellect, as though strengthened by them, might rise as it were gradually to divine and sublime things. (Augustine, ca.400/2010:4)

For Augustine, then, the literal-historical level and the factual reliability of the biblical narrative are paramount. Precisely because the Bible is not dependent on esoteric allegories, its sacred truth remains open to *all* believers; the literal sense becomes the common doorway into revelation. At the same time Augustine seeks a reconciliation between Tertullian's insistence on history and Origen's orientation toward the spirit, fashioning a figural hermeneutic that is both historically grounded and eschatologically dynamic. In his scheme, type and fulfilment do not form a simple binary; instead they trace a *three-step movement* through salvation history: first, the Mosaic Law and Israel's story as a prophetic promise of Christ's coming; second, the New Testament as a realm of partial fulfilment and fresh promise; and third, the complete realization that will arrive in the eschaton (Auerbach, 2014: 87). This triadic structure both extends the traditional *figura–eventus* pattern and displays Augustine's deep sense of how history itself participates in, and progressively discloses, the logic of salvation.

In Auerbach's view, the divide between figural (*figura*) and allegorical (*allegoria*) exegesis is more than a technical disagreement about method; it mirrors a long-standing clash between a *historico-realist* orientation and a *purely spiritual* one that runs through early Christianity and its wider cultural milieu. In the Western tradition, the line championed by Tertullian and Augustine—with its insistence on historical concreteness—ultimately prevailed (Snediker, 2024). Auerbach himself is unmistakably aligned with the figural perspective. He treats the doctrine of the Incarnation as a historical principle: God's promise of future redemption must

first appear in sensory, datable events, and Christ's *fulfilment* is never an abstract idea but an embodied realization fixed in space and time. Hence both the Old/New-Testament relation and the type/fulfilment relation must retain a heightened historical specificity. In this framework, "In every case, the only spiritual moment is the moment of understanding, the *intellectus spiritalis*, which recognizes the figure in its fulfillment (Auerbach, 2014:81). On that basis Auerbach translates the Christian dogma of the *Word made flesh* into a hermeneutical model that binds history and spirit together: the types of the Old Covenant are real events, the fulfilment narrated in the New is enacted in flesh and blood, and the work of the intellect is to trace the trajectory of redemption through them (Warley, 2025). This double orientation toward historical concreteness and spiritual discernment, he argues, forms the core paradigm by which Western Christian culture—and its literature—represents reality.

JUDEO-CHRISTIAN HUMANISM VS. ARYAN PHILOLOGY

This chapter situates figural exegesis within the political context of the Nazi campaign for an Aryan philology in the 1930s and 1940s. It explores how Erich Auerbach mobilized the figural structure—above all the indivisible unity of Old and New Testaments—to refute the myth of de-Judaization and to defend the historical continuity of the Jewish-Christian humanist tradition. In this perspective, *figura* is not merely a philological term but an ideological strategy for resisting racist discourse and safeguarding Europe's collective cultural memory. That historical function, in turn, supplies the motive and logic for the next chapter's deeper analysis of figural exegesis as a practice of literary criticism.

During the earliest expansion of the Christian faith, a purely "spiritual" or *tropological* mode of allegorical exegesis failed to attract new peoples. Its built-in mysticism often rendered doctrine unintelligible to ordinary hearers. As Erich Auerbach observes, "as a result of its origin and nature, it was restricted to a relatively small circle of intellectuals and initiates; they were the only ones who could take pleasure in and be sustained by its teachings" (Auerbach, 2014:98). The limitations of allegorical exegesis are twofold. First, its moral lessons usually stand far from the literal text and lack any common yard-stick; the exegete is thus free to dismantle the scriptural fabric, shattering its

historical-grammatical coherence. Second, abstraction eclipses the divine economy of salvation: to non-Jews the Old Testament comes to look like an obsolete code that bears no relation to Christ's redemptive work. Confronted with this impasse, the earliest Jewish believers urgently required a new hermeneutic—one that preserved the place of the Old Testament within salvation-history while at the same time offering prophetic warrant for the advent of Jesus. Auerbach therefore traces the *origin* of figural interpretation back to Paul's Letters. In passages such as 1 Cor 15:21 and Rom 5:13, Adam is written as a "type" (*typos*) of Christ, whose grace supersedes the Mosaic Law. Paul thereby "strips away" the normative function of the Hebrew Scriptures and recasts the Mosaic narrative as a genuinely prophetic witness to the Messiah, laying the groundwork for the later, historically concrete method of figural exegesis.

At the historical moment when Christianity was breaking with Judaism, figural exegesis—that is, reading the Old Testament as "real prophecy"—proved decisive. By offering a coherent teleological view of history and a world order governed by divine providence, it captured the imagination and inner emotions of newly converted peoples (Auerbach, 2014:98). Although it emerged later than tropological allegory, figural interpretation, with its dynamic sense of concrete history, furnished the Church with fresh liturgical forms and narrative settings: the specifically Jewish aspect of law and norm in the Old Testament was quietly toned down, allowing Celtic, Germanic, and other groups to appropriate the Hebrew Scriptures as part of a single "universal history of salvation." Christ, understood as the final *figura/fulfilment*, endowed the faithful with a distinctive consciousness of world history; as that consciousness fused ever more firmly with belief, it gradually became, for nearly a millennium in Europe, the only legitimate philosophy of history.

By distinguishing between two modes of biblical interpretation—allegory (*allegoria*) and figure (*figura*)—Auerbach isolates a crucial thread: within the Christian tradition, an exalted and profound religious experience must be wedded to Judaism's esteem for everyday life and the material world. Even at the moment of the kingdom's ultimate fulfilment, the earthly realm of flesh and matter retains its concrete reality; it is not dissolved into an abstract, purely spiritual order. In the humanist criticism of *Mimesis*, Auerbach extends this figural logic to the whole of Western literature and culture.

The fundamental difference between allegory and figure, he argues, lies in the dimension of movement. Allegory is horizontal—it remains within the linear chain of historical time and causal relations. Figure, by contrast, is vertical: “It can be established only if both occurrences are vertically linked to Divine Providence” (Auerbach & Said, 2013:74). In other words, allegory unfolds symbols laterally within secular time, whereas figure, by vertically linking “heaven and earth, the sacred and the secular,” elevates each moment of reality into a segment of salvation history, generating a multilayered pattern that combines historical concreteness with transcendent depth (Zakai & Weinstein, 2012). From this vantage point Auerbach installs the Hebrew Bible at the center of European humanism and insists that every event in ordinary reality simultaneously belongs to world history and sacred history. By foregrounding the primacy of figure in Christian thought, he forges an interior, indivisible bond between Old and New Testaments. Figure thus becomes the pivotal dimension that bridges the divine and the mundane, the historical and the transcendent, furnishing Western literature with its deepest metaphysical underpinning for representing reality.

In Erich Auerbach’s hands, the practice of figural exegesis forged in late-antique and medieval scriptural scholarship acquires an urgent contemporary resonance: it is not merely a technical term of philology but a weapon for resisting racial mythmaking and defending cultural continuity. To grasp this stance one must return to the historical setting of *Figura*. At that moment the Nazi Third Reich was recasting the origins of an “Aryan” nation through radical racial and anti-Jewish policies, seeking to expel the Old Testament from the Christian canon and, by extension, to erase the Jewish strand from the foundations of European civilization. As Avihu Zakai (2016:2-3) has noted, Auerbach’s investigations in *Figura* and *Mimesis*—into philology, history, and philosophy—were a direct answer to this pressing crisis: not only a political and social emergency, but a crisis within his own discipline, where “Aryan philology” had been elevated to official orthodoxy after 1933, zealously grounding scholarship in racism, antisemitism, and narrow nationalism. By reviving figural interpretation and reaffirming the indissoluble structure of Old and New Testaments, Auerbach rebuts attempts to purge Jewish elements from European culture and furnishes robust historical and theological arguments for a Judeo-Christian humanism.

Aryan philology began as a late-eighteenth-century linguistic breakthrough but was recast over the next two centuries as an ideological weapon in Europe’s nationalist quest for a civilizational origin. In 1786 the Sanskritist Sir William Jones famously proposed that Sanskrit shared a common ancestry with Greek, Latin, and other classical European tongues, thereby laying the foundation for the hypothesis of an “Indo-European language family” and an accompanying Proto-Indo-European people. This discovery not only punctured the outdated conviction that classical antiquity is humanity’s sole cultural center, it also inspired nineteenth-century comparative linguists to construct a new Western genesis independent of the Judeo-Christian tradition. As Arvidsson remarked, “Now it was no longer the authority of the Bible, but that of comparative linguistics that supported the new people” (Arvidsson, 2006: 60). By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, German Orientalists had further ideologized Aryan philology: it was repackaged as the scholarly fulcrum for forging a new Aryan people, poised to supplant the cultural centrality of Judeo-Christian humanism. “This rediscovered Aryan territory became the primitive homeland of Western man in search of legitimation” (Olender, 1992:139). In this discourse, comparative linguistics ceased to be a neutral pursuit of knowledge and became a tool by which the West sought both to legitimize its own history and culture and to provide a scientific foundation for racist mythologies.

When Auerbach composed *Figura* in 1938, Germany was in the throes of a political-religious mobilization that sought—through a newly minted “Rassenmythos” (Evola, 2018)—to overturn the Judeo-Christian cultural heritage. As early as 1899, the philosopher of history Houston Stewart Chamberlain—later dubbed John the Baptist to Hitler—had declared in *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* that any intermarriage between Aryans and other peoples would spell their decline; only an Aryan Jesus, he insisted, could supply the German nation with a new Germanic Christianity, one purged of the Old Testament. By 1930 the fascist theorist Alfred Rosenberg, in *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, had advanced the so-called “myth of blood,” proclaiming that

History and the task of the future no longer signify the struggle of class against class or the conflict between one church dogma and another, but the settlement between blood and blood,

race and race, Folk and Folk. And that means: the struggle of spiritual values against each other. (Rosenberg, 1993: 5)

The year after Auerbach published *Figura* (1939) the Nazi-fascist camp had seized the upper hand in the anti-humanist debate: the Godesberg Declaration portrayed Christianity and Judaism as irreconcilable, and the Wartburg Institute, founded under the theologian Walter Grundmann, vowed to carry Luther's work to completion by thoroughly de-Judaizing the German church (Heschel, 1994). In this climate the Third Reich replaced the older European humanist tradition with a myth of blood-people-soil, creating the intellectual and spiritual crisis that confronted Auerbach directly. *Figura* is written precisely against this backdrop; by insisting on the inseparable unity of Old and New Testaments, Auerbach deploys figural interpretation as a reply to—and a resistance against—the Nazi project of eradicating the Judeo-Christian legacy.

Against this harsh political backdrop, Auerbach's distinction between allegorical and figural exegesis is far more than a dispute over philological technique; it embodies a profound political and epistemological agenda. On the surface the two methods differ only in how they handle the Bible's hidden meaning. In substance, however, each projects a radically opposed vision of history and of cultural lineage. Figural interpretation, by anchoring the Old–New Testament relationship in a chain of *type and fulfillment*, places the Judeo-Christian tradition at the very heart of real, lived history. *Figura* may appear to trace this system within a purely philological frame, yet its deeper aim is to construct a philosophy of history capable of countering Nazi “myth of blood.” In direct opposition to the Third Reich's cult of Aryan philology, Auerbach proclaims that Jewish law, custom, and thought are inextricable components of Western civilization. Hence his demotion of allegory and elevation of figure serve a strategic purpose: to demonstrate that Europe's tradition of representing reality in literature and culture does not spring from the pagan Hellenic lineage worshipped by the Nazis, but is rooted instead in the Jewish-Christian spiritual heritage.

In his direct confrontation with the racist rhetoric of “Aryan philology,” Auerbach labored to vindicate the Old Testament's centrality, authority, and reliability within Christianity and, by extension, the entirety of Western civilization. *Figura* (1938) can therefore be read as an apologia for the Judeo-

Christian humanist tradition written at a moment of extreme peril. By the time of *Mimesis* (1946), Auerbach's mission had widened still further—now to defend the historical continuity of Western literature and culture as a whole. To borrow Avihu Zakai's vivid metaphor: The essay “Figura” is a *figura* of *Mimesis*, or conversely, *Mimesis* is the fulfillment and realization of “Figura” (Zakai, 2016:72).

FIGURAL EXEGESIS AS IDEOLOGICAL PRACTICE: TOWARD A REALISM OF EVERYDAY LIFE

This chapter seeks to demonstrate how Erich Auerbach transforms figural exegesis into a methodological key for literary-historical criticism. He begins by attacking the long-standing classical scheme that divides styles into noble and tragic (*stilus gravis*) versus low and comic (*stilus humilis*). In its place he champions the *mixtus* narrative strategy exemplified by Scripture and by Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in which everyday scenes stand side by side with sublime themes and are raised to an equal aesthetic and cognitive dignity. From this vantage point Auerbach introduces a new yardstick for evaluating narrative art: a realism of ordinary life. In so doing, figural exegesis completes its passage from a theological concept to a modern paradigm of literary criticism, offering a fresh theoretical framework for re-thinking the trajectory of Western realism.

Rooted in the Judeo-Christian humanist tradition, figural exegesis offered Auerbach the ideal point of departure for charting the landscape of Western literature and, at the same time, supplied an intellectual weapon against the racial mythology of Aryan philology. In the companion volume to *Mimesis*—the introduction to *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*—he openly acknowledges the tight knot that binds philology to ideology:

Spitzer's interpretations are always concerned primarily with an exact understanding of the individual linguistic form, the particular work or author. I, on the contrary, am concerned with something more general; my purpose is always to write history. Consequently I never approach a text as an isolated phenomenon; I address a question to it, and my question, not the text, is my primary point of departure. . (Auerbach, 1965, pp. 19–20)

Starting with what appear to be isolated linguistic texts, Auerbach thus pursues a historical consciousness that embraces the whole of European literary-cultural life. He is convinced that philological research must serve humanist values: his inquiry into figural interpretation not only goes beyond Spitzer's purely linguistic analysis but also carries the larger thesis of the Jewish foundations of Western culture and literature. Guided by Judaism's esteem for this-worldly reality, Auerbach threads that concern through the development of Western letters; in *Mimesis* it crystallizes into a distinctive realism and sense of history—history, with all its concrete forces, is ever a *figura* that remains concealed and urgently awaits disclosure.

The logic of figural exegesis decisively shapes both the argumentative architecture and the rhetorical stance of *Mimesis*. Its most visible symptom is Auerbach's redefinition of the opposition between separation of styles and mixture of styles. For him, style is not simply a matter of rhetorical choice or linguistic ornament; it is inseparably bound to social hierarchy and the spirit of an age. From Greco-Roman antiquity, and later through the agency of seventeenth-century French classicism, separation of styles became normative: elevated tragedy was permitted to treat only nobles, gods, and heroes, while the quotidian realities of the common people were relegated to the supposedly lower realm of comedy. The historical horizon opened up by figural interpretation overturns this hierarchy. Auerbach openly repudiates separation of styles and, in biblical narrative, discovers the principle of mixture of styles (*mixtus*)—the sublime and the humble, the sacred and the secular, can coexist within a single text, thereby legitimizing ordinary life as a fit subject for literary grandeur. Hence the subtitle of *Mimesis*, *The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, does not point to a simple mimetic reflection of reality; rather, it underscores the imperative to seize and to render the era's collective sensibility in the flux of social history and in the mental life of the lower strata, capturing the age's spirit precisely within everyday things.

Within the framework of figural exegesis, *Mimesis* explores the far-reaching impact of biblical narrative on three fronts of European letters—representation of reality, consciousness of time, and understanding of history. In the inaugural chapter, *Odysseus' Scar*, Auerbach sets *Genesis* alongside the *Odyssey*: whereas Homer's epic is vast yet legendary and fictive, the Old Testament, through

a continuous and solemn historical narration, foregrounds reality and rationality. Auerbach thus concludes that both the Western sense of history and its practice of representing reality are grounded in the comprehensive *type-and-fulfilment* perspective furnished by the Hebrew Bible. His distinction between *allegory* and *figure* is shaped by Rudolf Bultmann's discussion of Jewish-Hellenistic Christianity: allegorical interpretation dilutes the historical weight and legal authority of the Old Testament, whereas figural interpretation preserves it (Zakai, 2016:65). The pairing of *Genesis* with the *Odyssey* is therefore meant to rebut anti-Jewish polemics, underscoring the psychological depth and historical reach of Hebrew narrative over the Winckelmann ideal of Greek clarity and harmony. This stance also answers to the long-standing disputes between Athens and Jerusalem. Between the fourth and eighth centuries, the Germanic tribes acquired a sense of time and history through the Hebrew Bible; in the twentieth century, however, the Nazis—brandishing the myth of blood and soil (*Blut und Boden*)—rejected the Old Testament and sought to resurrect classical Greece. Auerbach insists that such Aryan historiography lacks any factual basis. Compared with Greek mythology, it is the Hebrew Scriptures that provide Europe with a framework for grasping the parallel courses of secular history and salvation history; their reverence for historical reality underpins the foundational paradigm of Western literary realism.

Figural exegesis provides Auerbach with a humanist vision of history and reshapes his judgment on the separation of styles versus mixture of styles. True realism, he maintains, must present the everyday within the sweep of grand history, integrating any character or episode into the larger movement of an age. Hence he rejects the classical hierarchy of noble tragedy / low comedy, advocates the democratization of subject matter and style, and champions the sublime of ordinary tragedy. Chapter 2 of *Mimesis*, "Furnasanta", offers a close reading of Peter's threefold denial in Mark's Gospel to illustrate the point:

Through God's incarnation in a human being of the humblest social station, through his existence on earth amid humble everyday people and conditions... it portrays something which neither the poets nor the historians of antiquity ever set out to portray: the birth of a spiritual movement in the depths of the common people, from within the everyday occurrences of con-

temporary life, which thus assumes an importance it could never have assumed in antique literature. What we witness is the awakening of 'a new heart and a new spirit. (Auerbach & Said, 2013:41-43)

By juxtaposing Peter's coarse speech and actions with his profound inner turmoil, Auerbach uncovers the complexity of the common psyche. He thus interprets Jewish narrative as a form of everyday realism: the Incarnate Christ appears among the lowliest, and faith germinates in the textures of daily existence and in the depths of ordinary souls. The most mundane experiences thereby open onto the sublime—human beings discern spiritual power in quotidian life and perceive how the present moment is embedded in the history of redemption, discovering the grave depth latent in the commonplace. This ordinary sublime and the spiritual movement of the common people become the core of Western realist writing. Judaism and Christianity are reconciled, and Auerbach's realist stance serves as a potent rebuttal to the Aryan philology project that sought to excise the Old Testament from European cultural memory.

In Auerbach's view, the Bible is the true point of departure for Western literature's shift from the separation of styles to the mixture of styles; the realist aesthetic grounded in the Judeo-Christian figural vision reaches its climax in Dante's *Divine Comedy*—a vernacular elevated to the realm of the sublime, and the earthly Roman Empire presented as a *figura* of the Kingdom of Heaven. Chapter VIII, *Farinata and Cavalcante*, is exemplary: the poet introduces two sinners in a stately high style, then, in the *Inferno* scene, renders the sensual texture of their worldly desires, displaying

...open before us a world of earthly-historical life, of earthly deeds, endeavors, feelings, and passions, the like of which the earthly scene itself can hardly produce in such abundance and power. Certainly they are all set fast in God's order, certainly a great Christian poet has the right to preserve earthly humanity in the beyond, to preserve the figure in its fulfillment and to perfect the one and the other to the best of his capabilities. (Auerbach & Said, 2013: 201)

The contrast with Auerbach's early study *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* (1923) is striking. In that book he still followed the German-philological tradition, treating classical Greece as Europe's sole point of origin and claiming that "ever since Eu-

ropean literature first arose in Greece, it has possessed the insight that man is an inseparable unity of 'body' and 'spirit'" (Auerbach, 1961:1). Yet in the post-war *Mimesis* Dante is cast explicitly as a Christian poet; his characters gain concreteness and power through figural interpretation, reflecting Auerbach's pronounced *anti-classical* turn (Uhlig, 1996). Put differently, he no longer explains European letters through a Greek paradigm. Instead, he elevates the Bible-to-Dante lineage as the core tradition of Western realism and historical consciousness—thereby countering the Nazi project of Aryan philology, which sought to erase the Hebrew Scriptures from Europe's cultural foundations.

Auerbach's wariness toward the classical Greek legacy occasionally puts him in tension with the historicist credo he inherited from Vico. Vico had summed up the matter as follows: Every civilization, every age, possesses its own potential for aesthetic perfection ... Works of art and life-forms must be regarded as products of mutable historical conditions and judged according to their internal laws, not by any absolute standard of beauty or ugliness (Auerbach, 2014:36). Yet whenever the value judgment between separation of styles and mixture of styles comes into play, Auerbach's balance clearly wavers: in his account, the French classicists—Corneille, Molière, Racine—become guardians of an outworn regime of stylistic partition, provoking "unhistorist wrath" (Ankersmit, 2002). Fired by a zeal to defend Judeo-Christian realism, he temporarily abandons the neutrality that historicism ought to maintain. This oscillation is closely linked to Auerbach's attempt to reconcile the Hegelian world-spirit with a perspective centered on existence and individuation. In his essay "Philology of World Literature" he justifies his stance: humanistic inquiry, he argues, is concerned not merely with material objects but with a system of valuation that penetrates and confers meaning, that writes the internal history of humanity and thereby shapes a conception of man tending toward unity in diversity (Auerbach, 2014:254). In other words, our grasp of the *Zeitgeist* does not arise from abstract metaphysics; it is rooted in the continual action of historical forces within everyday life: the world-spirit rides not only on Napoleon's horse, but also emerges quietly in the daily events and spiritual movements of ordinary people.

CONCLUSION

Auerbach treats figural exegesis, with its insistence on historical-grammatical concreteness, as the very fountainhead of Europe's historical consciousness; and he presents the displacement of allegory by *figura* as an immanent line of progress in the Western representation of reality, thereby championing the mixture of styles exemplified by Scripture. Yet his verdict on the two patristic modes of interpretation is less a disinterested historical assessment than a value proclamation shaped by the exigencies of the Nazi era. Confronted with Aryan philology, which sought to replace humanism with a myth of blood, race, and soil and to excise the Hebrew Bible from Christian tradition, Auerbach elevated philology into an intellectual battleground: by exposing the fissure between classical culture and Christian faith—both in form and in spirit—he resolutely defended the Old Testament as an indivisible component of Christianity and of Western civilization as a whole. He wove Judaism's esteem for everyday life together with Christianity's democratic impulse into an original, inseparable bond: through the value of an everyday realism, he linked the spiritual movements of ordinary people to the grand design of world history. From this teleological and progressive vantage point, the Western representation of reality becomes a vast drama steadily advancing toward democracy and universal openness.

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Culture in Technology, Technology in Culture: The Generative Logic and Meaning Construction of Qiqiao IP Image Design

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KEYWORDS

*Generative Artificial Intelligence (AIGC);
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ABSTRACT

This study takes Generative Artificial Intelligence (AIGC) as a technological pivot to investigate its empowering mechanisms and pathways of cultural representation in the IP image design of Qiqiao culture, a form of Chinese intangible cultural heritage. By analyzing core cultural symbols such as the "Weaving Maiden" and "craftsmanship" associated with the Qiqiao Festival, and integrating the prompt-based generation logic and image construction capabilities of advanced diffusion models, the research proposes a five-stage design framework: cultural theme extraction–model training–image generation–visual refinement–media dissemination. Empirical practices conducted on platforms such as "MiduDream" demonstrate that AIGC not only improves the creative efficiency of traditional IP imagery but also expands the boundaries of Qiqiao culture's digital communication. Moreover, from a techno-cultural perspective, the study critically examines the encoding and disciplining mechanisms of cultural meaning embedded in AIGC generation processes, highlighting that while algorithmic expression enhances visual appeal, it also risks cultural superficiality and symbolic entertainment. Finally, the article outlines future research directions focusing on algorithmic localization, immersive experience construction, and co-creation mechanisms. The findings provide a replicable methodology that integrates cultural depth with technological efficiency for the design of intangible cultural heritage IP images.

INTRODUCTION

"Culture is the soul of a nation, a witness to its history, and a vessel of collective emotional identity." As an integral part of traditional Chinese culture, Qiqiao culture carries rich historical, folkloric, and artistic significance (China News Service (CNS), 2024). Originating during the Han Dynasty, the Qiqiao Festival has a history spanning over a

thousand years, reflecting the Chinese nation's enduring reverence for wisdom and craftsmanship. However, with the acceleration of modernization, the transmission and innovation of Qiqiao culture have encountered significant challenges. The decline of traditional handicrafts has led to a gradual weakening of the festival's cultural connotation, and younger generations exhibit increasingly su-

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perficial understanding of traditional festivities. Simultaneously, the advent of the digital age has posed new questions regarding the preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage. In response, the Chinese government has in recent years emphasized the importance of digital transformation for traditional culture, promoting policies under the rubric of “digital empowerment for cultural innovation” to support the sustainable development of the cultural industry through technological means ([Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2024](#)).

Against this backdrop, the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AIGC) offers new opportunities for the modern articulation of Qiqiao culture. In particular, AIGC shows great potential in the areas of IP character design, cultural symbol communication, and the innovation of cultural and creative products ([Huang, 2024](#)). This study aims to explore a systematic design framework for Qiqiao cultural IP imagery based on AIGC technologies. The research not only focuses on the construction of technical workflows and the generation of visual content, but more crucially, investigates the mediating role that AIGC plays in the translation and reconstruction of cultural meaning.

As a generative mechanism driven by deep learning, AIGC operates through a process of “prompt input – semantic modeling – image output,” transforming traditional cultural symbols into algorithmically recognizable linguistic structures and visual elements. This process is not a value-neutral technological execution; rather, it constitutes a structural reconfiguration and disciplinary framing of cultural meaning ([Couldry & Hepp, 2018](#)). For example, the image of the “Weaving Maiden” (Zhinü) in Qiqiao culture encapsulates traditional values of feminine wisdom, dexterity, and virtue. These cultural attributes are encoded within prompts and visual generation parameters as semantic templates that can be systematically recognized and algorithmically reproduced—forming what may be called an “algorithmic production of meaning.”

Therefore, AIGC should be understood not only as a technological enabler for traditional culture, but also as an active mechanism of cultural discourse reconstruction. Through the digital generation of Qiqiao's symbolic system, this study seeks to reveal the inherent tensions between technological logic and cultural logic, and to explore the interdisciplinary mechanisms that enable the visual

representation of intangible cultural heritage within the context of artificial intelligence. Ultimately, this research provides both theoretical insights and practical guidance for the visual and contemporary expression of traditional culture in the digital era.

OVERVIEW OF AIGC

Generative Artificial Intelligence (AIGC) represents a significant branch of deep learning, playing an increasingly important role across various domains of creative design. One of its most prominent implementations is the Generative Adversarial Network (GAN), which operates through the adversarial training of two neural networks—a generator and a discriminator—enabling the automated generation of images, music, text, and other forms of content ([Goodfellow et al., 2020](#)). Since the introduction of GANs by Ian Goodfellow et al. in 2014, AIGC technologies have undergone rapid development, with applications extending into fields such as artistic creation, digital design, and brand marketing. These advancements have infused traditional cultural expressions with new vitality.

In the cultural and creative industries, AIGC—empowered by deep learning algorithms—significantly enhances both efficiency and originality in the design process ([Brock et al., 2018](#)). Designers can generate diverse artistic concepts within a short time frame, offering a rich source of inspiration for brand development and cultural product creation. AIGC tools are capable of rapidly producing various styles of IP imagery based on predefined parameters, thereby supporting the diversification of visual identities. For example, traditional figures such as the Weaver Girl from Qixi mythology can be reimagined through contemporary aesthetics like cyberpunk or “Guochao” (Chinese trend), enriching the cultural IP with enhanced fashion appeal and public engagement.

In the context of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) visual identity design, Generative Artificial Intelligence (AIGC) functions not merely as a tool for visual content production, but also as a system of structural encoding for cultural symbols. The generative logic embedded in the AIGC process—comprising the tripartite sequence of “prompt–model–output”—essentially translates cultural imagery into algorithmic variables, thereby establishing a techno-cultural mechanism for symbolic reconstruction. Taking the figure of the “Weaver Girl” (Zhinu) as an illustrative example, semantic labels

embedded in prompts—such as “feminine,” “graceful,” and “intelligent”—encode traditional expectations and idealizations of female attributes within the festive context. These labels not only reflect the aesthetic tendencies in the generated images but also reveal the reconfiguration and normative modulation of cultural symbols within a computational framework. Therefore, the design of cultural IPs driven by AIGC should be understood as a hybrid process of “technological–cultural symbiosis,” wherein the outcomes transcend mere visual outputs to entail the rearticulation and reallocation of cultural meaning (Couldry & Hepp, 2018). This perspective offers critical insight into the mechanisms by which AI participates in the visual reproduction and reinterpretation of cultural heritage.

A Study of Qiqiao Culture From the Perspective of the Digital-Intelligent Era

Historical Origins and Current Status of Qiqiao Culture

The Qiqiao Festival originated from ancient Chinese worship of the Vega star (Zhinü Xing) and can be traced back to the Han Dynasty. According to the Records of the Western Capital (Xijing Zaji), palace maids during the Han period would engage in needle-threading activities on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month to pray for dexterity—an early form of the Qiqiao tradition. Centered around women's handicraft skills, this traditional festival involved weaving, embroidery, and other forms of artistic creation to express wishes for wisdom and ingenuity. It reflects the important and intelligent roles women played within both familial and societal contexts in ancient China (Chen & Tao, 2017). Over the course of centuries, the Qiqiao Festival accumulated a rich array of legends and customs associated with love and craftsmanship. However, in modern times, its traditional forms have gradually declined. Records from the Jiaqing era of the Qing Dynasty already noted the waning of Qiqiao customs, and reports from the Republican period frequently mentioned the retreat of Qixi-related activities. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Qiqiao customs in many regions were temporarily interrupted (Li et al., 2014). In contemporary society, the growing popularity of Western Valentine's Day, combined with changing lifestyles and accelerated social rhythms, has further diminished the cultural impact of the traditional Qixi Festival (TiMedia Research, 2023). Younger generations exhibit limited aware-

ness of the festival's core values, and the number of inheritors and participants in traditional handicraft practices has sharply decreased. These challenges have posed serious threats to the continuity of Qiqiao culture, highlighting the urgent need for innovative strategies to reawaken public interest and revitalize this intangible heritage.

Cultural Symbols and Core Values of Qiqiao Culture

Qiqiao culture is rich in symbolic meanings, which are not only reflected in festival rituals but also imbued with broader social significance. Foremost among these symbols is the notion of “skillful craftsmanship” (qiao yi), which represents the intelligence and artisanal talents of women in ancient China. On the evening of the Double Seventh Festival, young women would demonstrate their dexterity through needle threading and crafting symbolic Qiqiao objects, in hopes of receiving blessings of wisdom and agility from the Weaving Maiden (Zhinü). This reverence for skill and ingenuity reflects the traditional society's veneration of female virtues such as diligence, cleverness, and craftsmanship (Gao, 2021). The image of the Weaving Maiden is among the most iconic symbols of Qiqiao culture. As both the protagonist of celestial folklore and the embodiment of feminine creativity, she is commonly portrayed in folk belief as “intelligent, beautiful, and highly skilled.” It is said that praying to her on the Qixi night would bestow clear vision and dexterous hands. Thus, the Weaving Maiden symbolizes the fusion of love, wisdom, and delicate artistry, expressing people's aspirations for a fulfilling life and admiration for female talent. Other symbolic elements associated with the festival include the magpie bridge (queqiao), the seven-holed needle (qi kong zhen), and the melon flowers (hua gua), which respectively represent faithful love, exceptional skill, and blessings for fertility and abundance. Together, these symbols form the spiritual core of Qiqiao culture—celebrating the transmission of craftsmanship, the recognition of feminine wisdom, and the affirmation of self-worth.

Through the ritualized practices of the Qixi Festival, traditional society provided women with a culturally sanctioned platform to exhibit their artistic talents and express their emotions. In doing so, the festival not only strengthened familial and communal bonds but also fostered a sense of cultural identity and pride among women (Zhao, 2022).

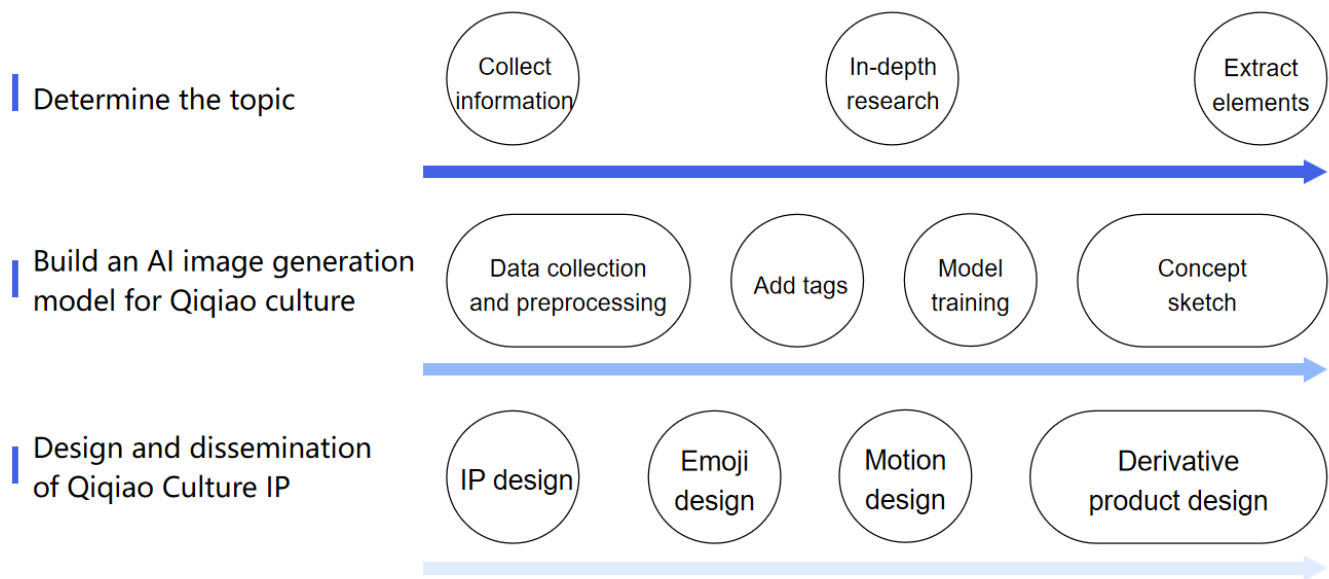


Figure 1 | shows the design path of the Qiqiao Culture IP image based on AIGC

Optimizing the Design Pathway of Qiqiao Cultural IP through AIGC

The current design of Qiqiao Festival cultural IP faces multiple challenges, including symbolic homogenization, superficial emotional expression, and limited modes of dissemination, which hinder the effective transmission of its deeper cultural connotations. The integration of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AIGC) offers a potential breakthrough by not only enhancing content production efficiency but also enabling automated modeling and rearticulation of cultural semantics. Technically, AIGC employs deep neural networks to embed and reconstruct traditional symbols such as the “Weaver Girl,” “Skill Fruit,” and “Magpie Bridge,” thereby facilitating an algorithmic translation of cultural imagery. In this process, AIGC functions as a ‘programming language of cultural meaning,’ wherein designers guide the model through prompt engineering to recode cultural characteristics. The resulting outputs represent a form of ‘technologically mediated living heritage’e (Cong, 2024).

On one hand, designers can use advanced generative models like MidJourney and Stable Diffusion to rapidly produce concept art based on specific prompts related to Qiqiao themes. This approach significantly shortens the design cycle while expanding stylistic possibilities. For example, the traditional image of the Weaving Maiden can be integrated with Guochao illustration styles or

infused with futuristic technological elements, breathing new life into traditional symbols and enhancing their appeal among younger audiences (Yang et al., 2025). On the other hand, from a communication perspective, AIGC-generated IP imagery is highly adaptable to new media formats such as short videos, emojis, and virtual idols, thereby transcending the spatial and temporal constraints of conventional dissemination methods. A notable example is the Dunhuang Academy, which developed AI-powered digital avatars inspired by mural figures from the Mogao Grottoes. These virtual representations became viral on social media, garnering over 200 million interactions across platforms—demonstrating the immense potential of AIGC applications in cultural communication (China Daily, 2023).

Taking the Qiqiao Festival as a case study, this research reflects on how to strike a balance between “cute chibi aesthetics” and the symbolic representation of female artisanal skill, while avoiding the algorithmic reduction of traditional female roles into monolithic visual archetypes. AIGC should thus be understood not merely as a technical tool, but as a cultural governance mechanism. Its generative logic and design paradigms form a critical nexus for constructing contemporary expressions of intangible heritage.

A Design Pathway for Qiqiao Festival Cultural IP Based on AIGC Technologies

This section systematically outlines the AIGC-centered design pathway for Qiqiao cultural IP imagery, encompassing three key stages: thematic extraction, image generation, and communicative application (**Figure 1**).

Defining the Thematic Focus of Qiqiao Culture

At the initial stage of design, it is essential to conduct a comprehensive and systematic collection of materials related to Qiqiao culture in order to clarify the thematic direction. Specifically, both online and offline channels should be employed to gather representative elements and visual resources associated with Qiqiao traditions—such as the image of the Weaving Maiden (Zhinü), magpies, the seven-holed needle (qi kong zhen), balsam flower motifs, and other traditional symbols—as well as relevant myths, folklore activities, and forms of traditional art. Designers are encouraged to consult official documentation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) projects, academic literature, and historical archives to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural ethos and aesthetic characteristics embedded in Qiqiao culture. In addition, field research plays a crucial role in this process. By engaging directly with local tradition bearers and folk experts in regions such as the Lingnan (Cantonese) cultural area, designers can obtain firsthand oral histories and craft-related insights, enriching their comprehension of the detailed practices associated with the Qiqiao Festival.

After collecting and analyzing this material, the data should be systematically classified and archived according to dimensions such as cultural symbols, visual motifs, and artisanal techniques. This facilitates the construction of a digitized Qiqiao cultural resource database. By leveraging AIGC-related technologies, designers can process and store textual, visual, and video materials digitally, resulting in a searchable knowledge repository. This not only streamlines subsequent design retrieval processes but also provides robust data support for the integration of traditional cultural elements with contemporary design. Once the thematic elements and symbolic meanings of Qiqiao culture are clearly defined, designers are better equipped to develop creative directions for IP imagery that remain rooted in cultural authenticity while resonating with contemporary aesthetic sensibilities.

Constructing an AIGC-Based Image Generation Model

In the image generation process of AIGC, the design of prompts is not only crucial for controlling visual quality but also serves as a key mechanism for encoding and regenerating cultural semantics. The structural composition of prompts—typically framed as “subject + setting + style + modifiers”—embodies a form of “instructional processing of cultural simulacra,” wherein embedded keywords such as “Weaver Girl,” “moonlit night,” “Guofeng style,” and “Qixi Festival” are computationally recognized as semantic modules. These modules collectively construct a digital representation of specific cultural aesthetics. This mechanism reflects the theory of “the mediated construction of reality” proposed by Couldry and Hepp, which posits that technology does not merely reproduce culture, but selectively amplifies particular cultural logics, thereby actively participating in the construction of social reality.

At the same time, prompts also carry the latent risk of “semantic disciplining.” When prompt inputs lean toward superficial descriptors—such as “chibi-style girl,” “ethereal aesthetics,” or “classical Chinese filters”—the resulting images may exhibit aesthetic homogenization, thereby diminishing the complexity and historical depth of the associated cultural symbolism. To mitigate this risk, designers should adopt a principle of “semantic sensitivity” in prompt engineering, enhancing the system’s capacity to articulate cultural nuances. For instance, by incorporating concrete terms such as “Qiqiao needle-threading,” “balsam blossom prints,” or “female craftsmanship,” the generated images can maintain a playful visual appeal while embodying the polysemy and ritualistic significance of Qiqiao culture. This culturally attuned technological synergy is essential to achieving nuanced and meaningful digital representations of intangible cultural heritage.

The Generative Design and Dissemination of IP Visual Identity

In terms of dissemination strategies, AIGC-generated Qiqiao IP images exhibit not only strong cross-platform adaptability but also demonstrate a reconfiguration of perceptual modes within contemporary media environments. Forms such as virtual idols, animated graphics, and emoji stickers constitute the primary channels through which digital natives engage with and perceive culture. These media forms construct what can be termed

a "mediated reality," wherein cultural memory and identity are shaped through symbolic representations within media ecosystems (Song et al., 2024). Within this context, Qiqiao cultural IP becomes embedded in everyday life; its mythological and ritualistic attributes are restructured through the fragmented logic of social media, thereby reaching users in ways that are more interactive and affectively resonant.

However, caution must be exercised, as the anthropomorphized dissemination of cultural IPs may risk reducing cultural content to mere entertainment or consumer products, thereby diminishing the original emotional resonance and socio-ritual functions of traditional festivals (Gao, 2021). Consequently, strategies for cultural IP dissemination must seek a balance between popular accessibility and cultural gravitas—leveraging media appeal to enhance user engagement, while simultaneously reinforcing cultural depth through narrative frameworks, character construction, and symbolic integration (Wang, 2023). The technical affordances of

AIGC offer new possibilities for achieving this balance. For instance, algorithmically generated interactive narratives such as “The Qixi Legend Story” or experiential modules like the “Weaver Girl DIY Workshop” can embed narrative structures within cultural contexts, thereby enabling cultural transmission to return to its essential function of meaning-making.

AIGC-Based Practice in IP Image Design for Qiqiao Festival Culture

Conducting Preliminary Analysis and Demand Research

This study takes the Cantonese Qiqiao (Double Seventh) culture as its design entry point. Recognized as a national-level Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of China, the Cantonese Qiqiao tradition encapsulates the everyday wisdom and aesthetic sensibilities of women in agrarian society, while its core values—such as reverence for craftsmanship and aspiration for a better life—resonate with contemporary ideals of female inde-

Table 1 | Descriptive statistical analysis

Category	Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage(%)
Gender	Male	46	36.22%	36.22%
	Female	81	63.78%	100.00%
Age Group	Under 18	15	11.81%	11.81%
	18–30	101	79.53%	91.34%
	30–50	9	7.09%	98.43%
	Above 50	2	1.57%	100.00%
How well do you understand the Qiqiao Festival?	Well-informed; able to clearly articulate customs and cultural meanings	8	6.30%	6.30%
	Somewhat familiar, but unable to explain systematically	32	25.20%	31.50%
	Have heard of the festival, but do not know specific details	75	59.06%	90.55%
	Completely unfamiliar	12	9.45%	100.00%
Are you willing to learn about the Qiqiao Festival through new media formats?	Very willing; find it interesting and easier to understand	75	59.06%	59.06%
	Somewhat willing; open to new media formats	31	24.41%	83.46%
	Neutral; depends on content quality	14	11.02%	94.49%
	Unwilling; believe traditional festivals should not be entertainment-oriented	5	3.94%	98.43%
	Not interested	2	1.57%	100.00%
Total		127	100	100

pendence and artisan spirit. To ensure that the proposed design aligns with the expectations of modern audiences, this research conducted a multi-dimensional preliminary investigation comprising the following components:

Questionnaire Survey A total of 127 valid responses were collected from young individuals aged 18–30. Results revealed that 93.71% of respondents exhibited limited understanding of the cultural essence of the Qiqiao Festival, yet 83.47% expressed a willingness to learn about the tradition through new media channels. This indicates a latent interest among younger demographics, constrained by insufficient content supply (**Table 1**).

Competitive Analysis A review was conducted of existing IP cases related to Qixi (Chinese Valentine's Day) and other traditional festivals. Outstanding IPs tend to exhibit characteristics such as symbolic simplification, rich character development, and high adaptability across various narrative or media contexts. In contrast, existing Qiqiao-themed IPs often suffer from stylistic redundancy and lack of distinctive features.

Field Research On-site observations were conducted at Qiqiao cultural events in locations such as Zhucun, Tianhe District, Guangzhou. Findings indicated that offline events are constrained by temporal and geographic limitations, resulting in restricted audience reach. Moreover, many young participants had minimal familiarity with traditional rituals associated with the festival ([Wang & Bi, 2023](#)).

Based on the integrated findings, three core design requirements were distilled:

- **Youthful and Playful Visual Style:** Employ a cute and vibrant aesthetic to appeal to the primary target audience aged 18–30;
- **Full-Time Digital Dissemination:** Develop a digital-native IP image capable of overcoming temporal (festival-specific) and spatial (regional) constraints, enabling continuous and wide-reaching cultural transmission;
- **Deep Integration of Cultural Symbols:** Root the character design in the traditional archetype of the “Qiaoniang” (skilled woman), and incorporate symbolic elements such as magpies, auspicious clouds, the moon, and balsam flowers, thereby ensuring both high recognizability and profound cultural connotation.

In response to these design imperatives, the study proposes the creation of a culturally rich, aesthetically pleasing “Qiaoniang” IP image in a cute Chinese-style visual form—one that conveys

traditional notions of feminine ingenuity while aligning with the tastes and preferences of today's younger generations.

Selection and Application of AIGC Tools

To fulfill the design specifications, “Visionary Art” was selected as the primary AI-generated content (AIGC) illustration tool. This browser-accessible platform eliminates local installation requirements, significantly reducing technical barriers while facilitating collaborative workflows and rapid design iterations. Its integrated repository of pre-trained models and assets supports multi-style generative capabilities across diverse scenarios, rendering it particularly suitable for intangible cultural heritage (ICH) thematic innovation. Crucially, Visionary Art demonstrates superior Chinese semantic comprehension compared to alternative AI art tools, enabling precise visualization of culturally nuanced Qiqiao Festival iconography.

A curated dataset of Qiqiao cultural elements was imported into the platform, with subsequent fine-tuning of its Chinese-style illustration model via transfer learning. The operational workflow comprised: **1)** Utilizing hand-drawn conceptual sketches as base inputs (image-to-image mode); **2)** Crafting textual prompts to define character attributes and contextual elements; **3)** Iteratively calibrating generative parameters (style weight, detail density, sampling steps) through systematic test runs. This methodology yielded preliminary IP character proposals that informed subsequent design phases.

Following the validation of the overall conceptual design, we employed localized regeneration (local redraw) and other functionalities to refine details such as facial expressions and costume patterns, ultimately generating high-fidelity Qiqiao-themed IP image assets. Experimental results demonstrate that Visionary Art's AI-powered generative engine significantly enhanced design efficiency: the development cycle for a complete IP image solution was reduced from weeks under traditional manual rendering to mere days. Furthermore, the platform's capability for rapid derivative asset generation enabled the efficient creation of emoticon sticker sets and dynamic character poses within compressed timelines, thereby laying the groundwork for downstream product development ([Tang et al., 2024](#)).

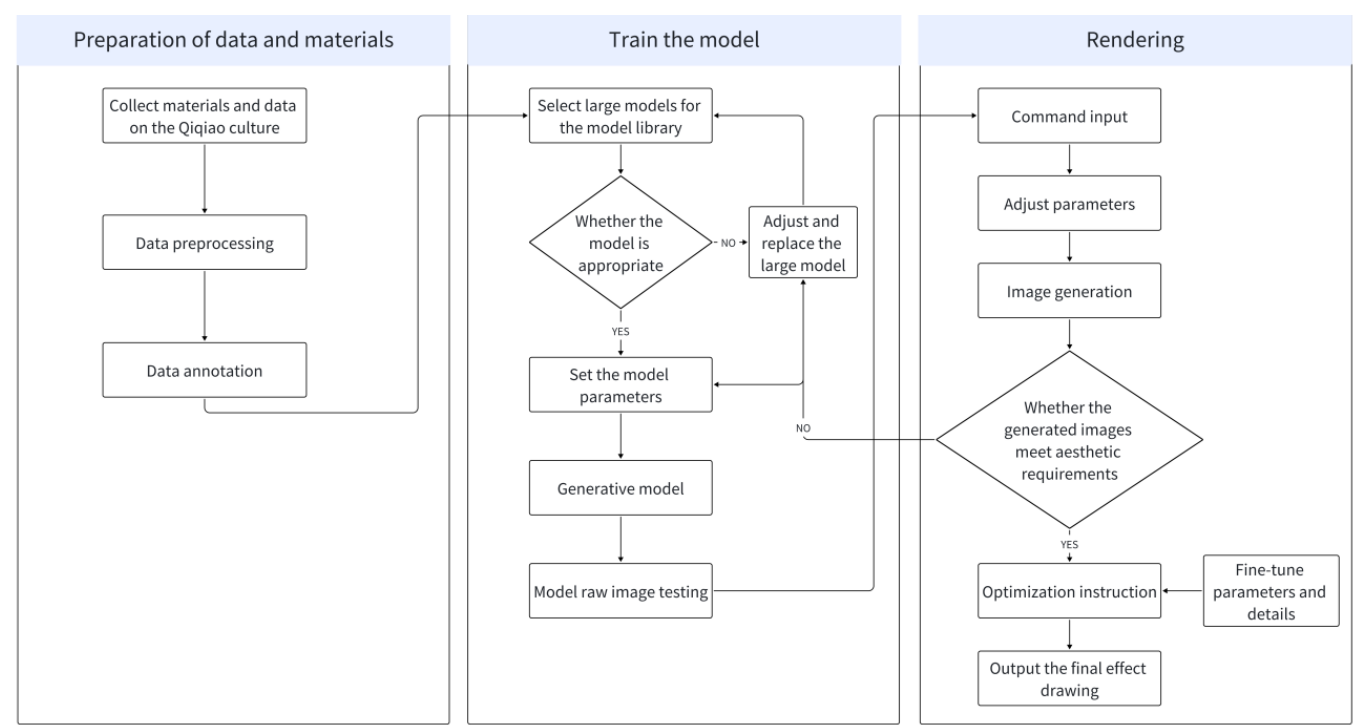


Figure 2 | Flowchart of the image generation model for Qiqiao Culture IP design based on AIGC

Construction Process and Design Practice of IP Image Design

This design practice takes elements of Qixi Culture as an example, combines AIGC tools to conduct IP image design for Qixi Culture, and proposes a methodological framework for AIGC-assisted IP image generation. It lays the foundation for integrating IP image design with AIGC technology (Figure 2). The design practice process is as follows:

Data Preparation and Sketch Creation To construct the Qixi Culture IP, we first extracted research-based elements to manually sketch preliminary drafts. These encompassed character designs, costume color schemes, and signature accessories (e.g., balsam flower hairpins, magpies) to accentuate the identity of the "Skillful Maiden." The hand-drawn sketches were subsequently scanned, simplified, and underwent contour extraction to generate AI-recognizable training images. Concurrently, we prepared PNG-format icons depicting motifs such as the Weaver Girl threading a needle and magpie bridges under moonlight. All assets were standardized in size with transparent backgrounds to ensure material quality and semantic clarity (Xu et al., 2022). Sketch-to-Image" technical workflow, whereby visual semantics extracted from sketches serve as input to provide high-quality prior information for subsequent image generation models (Zhang et al., 2023).

Model Training and Testing On the JiMeng platform, we loaded the aforementioned custom assets and selected its pre-trained large model as the foundation. Training parameters were configured—including generating 20 candidate images per iteration across 8 epochs. Initial small-sample testing evaluated the model's feature recognition performance regarding Weaver Girl imagery. We then employed standardized descriptive prompts (e.g., "A young Skillful Maiden in Tang-style attire with a gentle smile") for batch image generation. By comparing multiple outputs, we assessed: Facial fidelity to design expectations, Edge definition clarity, Accurate representation of Qixi cultural elements. Test results indicated that most images excelled in facial and costume details, successfully conveying the maiden's lively personality. However, certain outputs inadequately rendered background elements (e.g., starry skies, magpie bridges). To address this, we increased token weights for keywords like "magpie bridge" and "Qixi pastries" in prompts, ultimately achieving optimized model outputs (Sultan et al., 2024).

Effect Optimization and Finalization After selecting the optimal IP image, we performed final refinements in Photoshop. Key adjustments included: Modifying color balance and brightness/contrast to enhance layer differentiation between character and background; Enhancing ocular details and facial lighting to improve visual expressiveness. The finalized Skillful Maiden em-



Figure 3 | IP Image Design of Qiqiao Culture



Figure 4 | Three-view view of the IP image of Qiqiao Culture

bodies a chibi-style cartoon aesthetic: Wearing floral hairpins shaped like Qixi pastries, Dressed in orange Hanfu attire Adorned with magpie hair ornaments. This design balances approachable cuteness with cultural authenticity (**Figure 3**). Concurrently, orthographic projections (front/side/rear views) of the IP were generated through prompt-based iteration (**Figure 4**).

Extended Design Upon finalizing the core IP image, we leveraged the AIGC model's variant generation capability to rapidly produce diversified expressions and poses of the Skillful Maiden. These included:

- Expressions: joy, sorrow, blessing, prayer, shyness;
- Actions: playing embroidered balls, waving gestures (**Figure 5**).

All derivative assets maintain stylistic consistency for cross-platform applications in social media dissemination and offline merchandise design. This concludes our design practice from conceptualization to serialized assets, effectively validating AIGC's efficiency and creative potential in culturally-rooted IP development.

Marketization and Communication Strategies for AIGC-Based Qiqiao Cultural IP Imagery

With the deepening application of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AIGC) in the field of creative design, the pathways for digitally expressing traditional culture have expanded considerably. As an important component of China's intangible cultural heritage, Qiqiao culture carries profound historical significance and symbolic meaning. Supported by

AIGC technologies, the visual reconstruction of cultural symbols such as the "Weaving Maiden" and "skillful craftsmanship" enables the symbolic regeneration of Qiqiao traditions and their integration into contemporary visual narratives. In the domain of cultural and creative product design, designers can leverage AIGC-driven mechanisms in tandem with insights into modern user aesthetics and consumer psychology to develop a diverse range of products—including backpacks, toys, and digital assets (**Figure 6**) (Liang, 2024). This approach facilitates the entry of traditional cultural symbols into the consumer market in increasingly diversified forms. Such a technology-enabled mode of cultural translation not only enhances the visual appeal of intangible heritage IP imagery but also expands its reach and influence among younger audiences. By aligning traditional symbolism with contemporary market demands, AIGC empowers a new paradigm of cultural dissemination that is both innovative and commercially viable.

In terms of communication strategy development, AIGC-generated IP imagery exhibits high media plasticity, enabling cross-platform and multi-channel distribution across various media formats. The integration of emerging media technologies—such as social media, e-commerce platforms, virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR)—offers Qiqiao culture new possibilities for immersive engagement and global reach within virtual spaces. Designers can leverage AIGC to automatically



Figure 5 | Design of Qiqiao Culture IP Emoticons

generate lightweight content formats such as emojis, short videos, and interactive characters, thereby stimulating user-driven content co-creation and promoting a shift toward participatory cultural dissemination. On the offline front, collaborations with museums, cultural and creative industry parks, and branded commercial venues can support the construction of AIGC-driven immersive exhibitions, further strengthening emotional resonance and cultural identity among audiences. Additionally, the implementation of cross-industry co-branding strategies enhances the market visibility of Qiqiao IP. Joint development initiatives with fashion brands, animation studios, and game developers not only increase public exposure but also unlock new opportunities for industrial transformation—ultimately expanding both the cultural value and commercial potential of Qiqiao cultural IP.

For practical promotion, precise market positioning and data-driven decision-making serve as key driving forces. Through behavioral profiling and interest-based analytics, designers can identify the preferences of target audiences, enabling the cre-

ation of personalized communication content and its strategic dissemination. This approach significantly enhances both the efficiency and depth of cultural transmission. Moreover, by leveraging influencer partnerships, community engagement strategies, and platform-specific distribution mechanisms, it is possible to strengthen brand loyalty and user participation—while preserving the cultural richness embedded in the IP image. In summary, the AIGC-empowered design of Qiqiao cultural IP imagery not only demonstrates a sustainable innovation pathway for intangible cultural heritage, but also offers a viable model for the market-oriented transformation of traditional culture within the digital media environment.

CONCLUSION AND PROSPECT

This study focuses on the symbolic system and digital transformation logic of Qiqiao culture, and proposes a generative artificial intelligence (AIGC)-driven design framework for cultural IP development. It systematically explores the full



Figure 6 | Application of cultural and creative products derived from the Qiqiao Culture IP

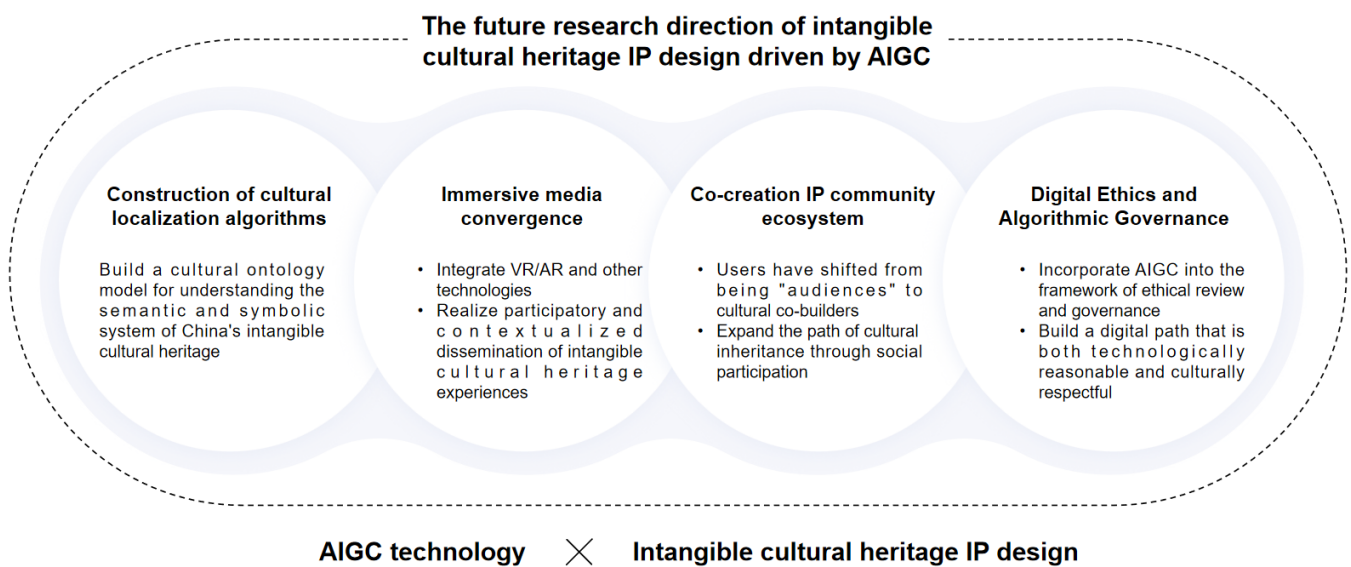


Figure 7 | The future research direction of intangible cultural heritage IP design driven by AIGC

process from data acquisition and semantic extraction to image generation and product dissemination. On the practical level, image-generation experiments conducted via platforms such as Mid-Journey and Stable Diffusion demonstrate the real-world effectiveness of AIGC in enhancing the creative efficiency and communicative expressiveness of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) IPs. Previous studies have shown that domain-specific customization methods based on diffusion models can significantly improve the quality of image generation and provide technical support for culturally distinctive visual representations (Zhu et al., 2023). On the theoretical level, AIGC is positioned not merely as a design tool but as a cultural encoder and reconfigurator. The mechanisms of prompt engineering and image synthesis serve as a form of "cultural translation within a technological

context," embedding a latent process of cultural value reconstruction and normative reconfiguration. This generative logic encapsulates both the designer's expressive intentions and the algorithmic structure, thereby redefining authorship and modes of representation in the context of AI-driven design. Consequently, it provokes critical discourse around intention formation, content ownership, and aesthetic sovereignty in the domain of computational creativity (McCormack et al., 2025).

However, AIGC-driven cultural expression is not without risks. While it revitalizes intangible heritage imagery, algorithmic generation may also lead to visual homogenization, superficial aesthetics, and the entertainment-driven simplification of symbolic content. In some cases, it may even unconsciously reinforce cultural stereotypes or dilute the deeper structural dimensions of heritage traditions. Exist-

ing research suggests that, in the absence of ethical safeguards, such algorithmic processes can undermine cultural subjectivity and destabilize established systems of value during emotional representation and cultural encoding (FU et al., 2025). Therefore, future design practices must be grounded in principles of cultural sensitivity and ethical reflexivity, remaining vigilant against excessive technological intervention that might override traditional values. Instead, efforts should actively explore the tension between technological empowerment and cultural sovereignty. On this basis, computational approaches that account for temporality and symbolic spatiality may further expand AIGC's application in narrative imaging, contextual cultural adaptation, and the construction of deep symbolic systems (Li et al., 2025).

Based on these reflections, future research can proceed along several key trajectories: **1)** advancing the cultural localization of AIGC algorithms by constructing ontology models capable of interpreting the semantics and symbolic systems of Chinese intangible heritage; **2)** integrating immersive technologies such as VR/AR to enable participatory and contextualized forms of experiential heritage communication; **3)** developing co-creative IP community ecosystems that transform users from passive audiences into active cultural contributors, thereby strengthening the social foundations for heritage transmission. Most critically, AIGC should be situated within broader discourses on digital ethics and algorithmic governance, in order to construct a heritage digitization pathway that balances technological rationality with cultural reverence (Figure 7).

The AIGC-driven design of Qiqiao cultural IPs not only demonstrates the potential for dynamic innovation within traditional cultural frameworks, but also signals a profound shift in modes of cultural expression in the age of artificial intelligence. Within the interactive co-construction of technology, culture, and users, we are witnessing a pivotal moment in the integration of heritage traditions with algorithmic environments. Only by approaching technology with reverence for tradition can we ensure that intangible cultural heritage is not merely digitized, but also meaningfully seen, understood, and transmitted amid the currents of the digital era.

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"*The Children of Heaven*" as a Cultural Mirror: Reflecting Ethnic Narratives in Iranian Children's Film

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KEYWORDS

Iranian Children's Films;
National Characteristics;
Narrative Techniques;
Artistic Expression

ABSTRACT

Following the Iranian New Wave and the Islamic Revolution, Iranian filmmakers established a distinct tradition of children's film. Iranian films began to gain international recognition, being screened at prestigious film festivals and winning various awards. This article explores the emergence of children's film in Iran post-New Wave, examining its unique characteristics. It also delves into how Iranian children's films address ethnicity through themes, narratives, and filmic language, using *The Children of Heaven* as a case study. The rise of Iranian children's film has highlighted a key observation: what is national can also be global. In the context of globalization and the dominance of Western aesthetics as the standard, Iranian filmmakers have successfully crafted films that preserve national identity while appealing to a broader audience. This approach offers valuable insights for contemporary Chinese film.

INTRODUCTION

Iranian film has long been a vital and distinctive part of the Asian film landscape, with its origins dating back to the early 20th century. The story of Iranian film begins in 1900, when Prince Mozafferdin of Iran, during a journey through Europe, developed a personal interest in film. On his travels, he purchased a set of photographic equipment, a decision that marked the first step in the establishment of Iranian film (Naficy, H, 1979). This small act of curiosity and passion would later spark a vibrant film culture in Iran, which has continued to evolve and thrive over the years. Iranian film grew and developed by merging elements of Iranian culture, religious beliefs, art, and nationalism, while simultaneously creating connections with

other countries as globalization began to shape the cultural landscape of the 20th century.

However, Iran's status as an Islamic country posed unique challenges to its film industry, especially regarding content and form. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 was a turning point, marking a period of both restrictions and renaissance. While the revolution initially created an atmosphere of stagnation, it eventually gave rise to a flourishing film industry that garnered international acclaim (Karbassian, A, 2000). During this period, Iranian films began to gain widespread recognition, earning numerous awards at prestigious international film festivals. Directors like Abbas Kiarostami, Majid Majidi, and others became the vanguard of this filmic renaissance, with many focusing their lens

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on the world of children (Sadr, H, R, 2006). By the late 20th century, a new wave of Iranian children's films emerged, offering a fresh perspective on childhood, struggle, and innocence (Nojournian, A, A, 2019). This wave of children's films captivated global audiences, filling a noticeable gap in the international children's film market and offering narratives that were deeply rooted in Iranian society, yet universally relatable. These films not only elevated the visibility of Iranian film but also demonstrated the power of film as a global storytelling medium, proving that powerful, authentic narratives could resonate beyond borders.

CHARACTERISTICS OF IRANIAN CHILDREN'S FILMS

Iranian children's films typically focus on ordinary children in everyday life, using their perspectives to reveal the spiritual world of the marginalized members of Iranian society. These films often highlight the warmth of human connections and the beauty of interpersonal relationships. Unlike Hollywood children's films, which are characterized by high budgets and elaborate productions, Iranian children's film eschews flashy, computer-generated special effects. Instead, it relies on simple, rustic storytelling and visual language to convey the purity and goodness inherent in children. The defining features of these films can be categorized into three key aspects: the universality of their themes, the simplicity of their narratives, and the authenticity of their visual expression.

Universality of Theme

Universal themes possess a timeless appeal, resonating not only with people in the present moment but also with all of humanity across generations. In Iranian children's films, there is a notable absence of grand narratives. Instead, directors focus on the lived reality of society's marginalized individuals and the personal, sensory experiences of everyday life. The camera often turns to the tangible, concrete struggles of these people, conveying the director's deep concern for their essence through these intimate observations.

Iranian children's films often evoke a strong sense of realism, and it is this authenticity that moves audiences. This emotional connection transcends national borders and cultural differences, tapping into the universal truths of human nature—truth, goodness, and beauty. These films are not designed to provoke curiosity, nor do they aim to

educate children in a didactic or utilitarian manner. They don't issue moral condemnations or preach about social issues. Instead, they quietly depict children's struggles in difficult circumstances and their unwavering determination to cling to their ideals. With a tone that balances melancholy and hope, these films reveal the warmth and beauty found in the children's world.

Films such as *Where Is the Friend's Home?*, *The Children of Heaven*, and *The Colour of Paradise* have garnered international acclaim, receiving praise from audiences around the world. These films, which shine a light on both the broader Iranian experience and the specific challenges of children's education, have not only captivated international audiences but also enjoyed significant commercial success in global markets.

Narrative Simplicity

Simplicity is another defining feature of Iranian children's film, particularly in terms of storytelling. However, this simplicity does not imply a lack of complexity; rather, it reflects an underlying tension within a concise narrative structure. In contrast to the industrialized nature of Chinese film and the global dominance of Hollywood blockbusters, Iranian filmmakers continue to adhere to their own creative principles and maintain a distinct aesthetic, which is evident in their storytelling techniques. Iranian directors strictly follow the "three laws" of scriptwriting, typically employing linear narratives that align with these guidelines.

Storytelling in short stories, novels, plays, or films often hinges on a strong dramatic structure, where the plot elements are carefully organized to achieve the desired emotional, intellectual, or dramatic impact. Many Iranian children's films feature simple plot structures with a clear beginning and end, while maintaining a prominent inner tension that elevates the beauty of simplicity. While most of these films follow single-line narratives, they avoid becoming monotonous or predictable. Instead, the storylines progress with fresh developments, maintaining an inherent tension that captivates the audience.

Additionally, Iranian children's filmmakers are skilled in using open endings. Rarely do their films conclude with a neatly wrapped-up, happy ending. Instead, they often leave the outcome unresolved, offering space for the audience to reflect and imagine what might lie beyond the screen. This approach encourages viewers to engage with the

story on a deeper level and construct their own interpretation of the film's reality.

Authenticity of Image Expression

Iranian filmmakers have inherited the artistic traditions of documentary realism, yet they have seamlessly integrated these elements into their own cultural context, creating films that are deeply personal and reflective of their unique filmmaking style. However, the artistic reality portrayed in their films is not a mere reproduction of life as it is. Instead, these directors infuse their work with humanistic concerns, transforming reality into a compelling and emotionally resonant artistic experience.

Bazin, the founder of the long shot theory, argued that the objectivity of photography gives the image a convincing power that no painting can have (Morgan, D, 2006). Unlike the flashy stunts and complex editing typical of Hollywood film, Iranian films make extensive use of documentary techniques, non-professional actors, and long shots of nature. These techniques highlight realistic life situations and capture the raw beauty of untouched landscapes.

Films like *The Children of Heaven* and *The Colour of Paradise* showcase urban, rural, and desert scenes enveloped in a thin layer of black and grey, with the muted tones and somber narratives complementing each other. Iranian children's filmmakers excel at working with non-professional actors, whose innocent and unpolished performances have a raw, emotional impact on the audience. Their simple, genuine portrayals of life deepen the viewer's sense of immersion, enabling them to connect with the characters and emotions on a more personal level.

THE EMBODIMENT OF ETHNICITY IN IRANIAN CHILDREN'S FILMS

According to the French philosopher Hippolyte Adolphe Taine, race, age, and environment are the three fundamental elements that shape art (Taine, H, 2024). The influence of race on art manifests not only in content and form but also in profound aesthetic rhythms. It is precisely because each race has its own unique art that different racial groups often produce distinct spiritual connotations and artistic temperaments. As an ancient civilization, Iran takes great pride in its Persian heritage, having preserved both the Persian language and its cultural identity. Despite the Arab cultural influ-

ence that led the Persians to abandon the Zoroastrian faith, they never relinquished their Persian culture and language. For the Iranian people, Islam, as a comprehensive system of beliefs and teachings, has deeply shaped their individual and collective consciousness, becoming central to their culture and way of life. The history of Iran is rooted in Islamic civilization, which has merged with Persian culture, creating a unique blend that defines Iranian identity. It is this combination of ancient Persian glory and Islamic faith that gives Iranians their national identity, characterized by persistence, sincerity, and kindness.

Majid Majidi is one of the most renowned contemporary Iranian filmmakers, whose works have been nominated for and received awards at international film festivals. In 1998, his film *The Children of Heaven* was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film and grossed nearly ten million dollars at the U.S. box office. This marked a historic moment as the first Iranian film ever nominated for an Oscar, while also setting a new box office record for Iranian film at the time. The film tells the story of a poor Iranian brother and sister and a pair of small shoes, exploring the complexities of family bonds and the emotional weight of kinship. It highlights the inherent goodwill of humanity found in the lives of the impoverished, reflecting the struggles and resilience of ordinary people.

Multi-Layered Presentation of Iranian Culture

Any art form loses its vitality, or even its essence, when detached from the historical and cultural context that nourishes it. As a medium of storytelling and documentation, film is particularly inseparable from the humanistic soil that fosters its growth. In *The Children of Heaven*, there is a pivotal moment where Ali, initially aiming for third place to win sneakers, unexpectedly wins the championship. In a moment of sadness and despair, he removes his worn-out sneakers and dips his bruised and bloodied feet into a pond. As he does so, a group of red goldfish swims over and gently brushes against his feet. This scene is a deliberate choice by the director, who used it to showcase Iranian culture. In an interview, Majid Majidi explained, Goldfish are an important element in Iranian culture, symbolizing life and vitality. During the Iranian New Year celebrations, we always set up a *sofreh haft-seen* table, which includes a goldfish. Including it in the film conveys this positive wish (Dönmez-Colin, G, 2002).

Religion is a cultural phenomenon and a reflection of human culture. Iran, a nation-state with a secular government, holds Islam in the highest regard, and this faith is clearly reflected in Majidi's films. Islam emphasizes the "Middle Way," advocating for balance in all aspects of life, and calls for a society grounded in justice, equality, harmony, and tolerance. In *The Children of Heaven*, these values are subtly woven into the narrative. For instance, the younger sister swaps shoes with her brother to get to school faster, but the shoes don't fit and end up falling into a small ditch. A man from a roadside shop doesn't just watch the children struggle; he grabs a tool and helps retrieve the shoes for the sister, showing a quiet but profound example of tolerance and care, aligned with his religious principles.

Another scene illustrates this commitment to Islamic teachings. When the father of a family asks his daughter to bring sugar, she responds by saying that her father should take it in his hand. The father's righteous reply, "It belongs to the mosque, and we are only temporarily managing it," reveals the deep loyalty the Iranian people have to Islam and their unwavering belief in the sacredness of shared resources. In these small but meaningful details, the Iranian commitment to Islam and God is made clear, not through overt sermonizing but through simple, everyday actions.

The Portrayal of Human Nature With Truthfulness and Kindness

"Authenticity" refers to a fundamental requirement in artistic creation. The truth in art is not a mere replication of real social life but rather a distilled and refined version of certain aspects of reality, presented in a way that is often more compelling and persuasive than a direct representation of life (Newman, G. E., & Bloom, P., 2012). The *Children of Heaven* places a strong emphasis on the sincerity of human emotions, using its narrative to express the genuine and heartfelt connections between people, highlighting the purity of human nature. The film explores profound, deeply felt relationships, such as the sibling bond between Ali and his sister, the deep familial love they share with their parents, and the true sense of solidarity between Ali's family and their neighbors.

"Goodness," on the other hand, represents the highest ethical standard in artistic creation. While art strives to truthfully depict life, it also carries with it an inherent moral judgment—an evaluation of the world, life, and humanity, with "goodness" serv-

ing as the primary measure. Thus, exceptional works of art often embody humanity's aspiration toward virtue and noble qualities. In *The Children of Heaven*, we see this goodness reflected in the way the two siblings, kind and innocent, discover the girl who "took" the shoes. Despite her impoverished circumstances, they feel compassion for her rather than seeking retribution. Instead of demanding the shoes back, they forge a friendship with the girl.

Through the lens of these children's experiences, the director illustrates the Islamic values of compassion and empathy for the vulnerable. These beliefs are subtly woven into the everyday lives of Iranian children in a fairy-tale-like manner, while also reflecting the optimism and open-mindedness that Iranians aspire to through the children's actions.

Audio-Visual Expression of National Style

The proud legacy of Persia has instilled in Iranians a sense of cultural confidence and self-sufficiency, while the Islamic faith encourages self-discipline and respect. This unique blend of historical pride and religious guidance is one of the reasons Iranian filmmakers are drawn to the documentary style and long-shot filming techniques. These techniques not only capture the true essence of Iran, highlighting the aesthetic richness of Persian culture, but also help establish the distinctive tone and style of Iranian film (Sheibani, K., 2011).

Iranian directors frequently employ non-professional actors and use subjective handheld shots to create a natural, raw acting style that emphasizes realism. Additionally, many Iranian filmmakers believe that long shots offer a more complete depiction of time and space, making them a better fit for the film's narrative and reflecting modern filmic principles. In *The Children of Heaven*, the repeated long shots of the siblings running, and the alternating shots of them running through the streets, serve both as a narrative necessity and as a deliberate stylistic choice by the director. These long takes also introduce a sense of ritualized pacing, reinforcing the film's thematic depth.

In pursuit of authenticity, Iranian directors often use real natural settings and incorporate contemporary sound design to create an immersive time and space for the audience, drawing them into familiar life scenarios. This attention to realism fosters an emotional connection, allowing viewers to resonate with the characters' experiences. This

authenticity is a key factor in the smooth international acceptance of Iranian film.

Sound has become increasingly vital in modern film, with a film's realism deeply influenced by its sound, dialogue, and soundtrack. These elements add significant layers to the storytelling, providing both sensory and emotional impact that greatly enhances the audience's experience. The *Children of Heaven* uses lyrical soundtracks to express the characters' inner emotions. In a particularly poignant scene, as Ali participates in the long-distance race, his labored breathing overtakes the ambient sound, while a string composition underscores the tension. This combination of sound and image not only emphasizes Ali's physical struggle but also highlights his resilient character, showcasing his unwavering determination.

THE INSPIRATION OF IRANIAN CHILDREN'S FILMS TO CHINESE FILM

The rise of Iranian children's films has shown the world that, beyond Hollywood's industrially produced blockbusters, national film can still make a significant impact on the global film stage. At the same time, it has reinforced the idea that what is national can also be universal. Amidst the wave of globalization and the growing trend of cultural homogenization, Iranian filmmakers have managed to carve out a distinctive path, creating films that retain their national identity while appealing to global audiences. This approach offers valuable insights for the future of Chinese film, illustrating how filmmakers can maintain their unique cultural characteristics while engaging with broader aesthetic trends.

Focus on the Aesthetics and Creative Principles of Realism

By examining the development of Iranian children's films, it becomes clear that a documentary aesthetic rooted in reality has consistently been a core principle upheld by Iranian filmmakers. Drawing from Iran's deep religious culture and the national psyche shaped over centuries, these films present a unique visual temperament that is both introspective and resilient, pious yet full of life. The documentary style, in this context, has evolved beyond a mere technical choice and has become a central aesthetic feature that Iranian children's films advocate and embody.

This aesthetic not only imparts a distinct identity to Iranian children's films, making them easily rec-

ognizable in the global film landscape, but also sets them apart from Hollywood's industrialized filmmaking and genre-driven narratives. It opens up a distinct and thought-provoking artistic realm in the bustling film industry.

The success of Iranian children's films provides invaluable lessons for global film, especially for Chinese filmmakers who are in search of their own filmic identity. By embracing and deeply exploring the aesthetic and creative principles of realism, filmmakers can focus on the breadth of real-life experiences, strengthen the creation of realistic themes, and capture authentic moments that resonate on a deep emotional level. By developing a form of realism with Chinese characteristics, there is potential to carve out a new avenue for branding and communication in Chinese film. This approach could help elevate Chinese stories into a globally recognized Chinese film brand, which would not only enhance the international influence of Chinese film but also contribute to the transformation of China from a big film country into a strong film country (Tan, Z., & Zhang, Y., 2024).

Telling Stories With Nationality and Universal Beauty

When looking at the broader landscape of Asian and global film, it's evident that Iranian film has not been engulfed or diluted by the dominant commercial forces of Hollywood. Instead, it stands confidently within the global film industry, offering a unique perspective and distinct voice. The vitality of Iranian film can be traced to its deep-rooted local consciousness and creative vision. Like a meandering river, it continuously draws strength and sustenance from the rich cultural soil of its nation. This driving force, originating from the core of Iranian identity, flows subtly yet powerfully through every aspect of the film, creating an emotional connection with the audience.

Iranian filmmakers have consistently chosen to tell their own stories, using the most familiar and intimate methods of expression to convey their joys, sorrows, and moral dilemmas. This rootedness in cultural soil gives Iranian films a sincerity and depth that is nearly impossible to replicate.

In recent years, Chinese film has made significant strides, with impressive films emerging and box-office records being shattered, showcasing a newfound vibrancy. At this critical juncture, Chinese filmmakers are tasked with creating more exceptional films that not only celebrate Chinese national culture but also explore universal human

values. This is not only an artistic goal but also a cultural responsibility. We look forward to Chinese filmmakers continuing to contribute to the high-quality development of Chinese film, helping to build its brand and enhance its international reach.

Improving International Communication and Helping Films Go Global

Film, as a powerful medium of cultural communication, has long transcended mere entertainment. It now serves as a prism, reflecting the spiritual identity of a nation and has become an essential symbol on the global map of human civilization. One of the core elements that sets Iranian children's films apart, contributing to their international success and widespread acclaim, lies in the unique cultural and religious context from which they arise. Iran, a nation both familiar and foreign to many global audiences, naturally stirs curiosity and deep anticipation from viewers around the world.

On one hand, Iranian filmmakers have consistently upheld their national identity in terms of formal language and aesthetic style, ensuring their works bear a distinctively Iranian mark. On the other hand, the themes and deeper meanings often transcend geographical and cultural boundaries, tapping into universal human emotions and values, which grants these films their broad international appeal.

The remarkable international success of Iranian children's films offers valuable lessons for the global film industry, particularly for Chinese filmmakers. We should not be content with merely skimming the surface; instead, we must dive deep into the texture of life, understand the pulse of our times, and find innovative ways to tell China's story. By doing so, we can create exceptional works rooted in rich national cultural heritage that resonate on an international scale. In this way, we can confidently and calmly share China's story with the world, ensuring that the voice of Chinese film is heard, understood, and appreciated by a global audience.

CONCLUSION

Since the late 19th century, Iranian children's films have been profoundly shaped by various factors, including the country's rich social culture, religious beliefs, and the strong currents of nationalism that have defined its identity. The trajectory of Iranian film, particularly after the Islamic Revolution,

is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of its filmmakers, who transformed a struggling film industry into a thriving force. By capturing the essence of Iranian life and values, while also grappling with global cultural shifts, Iranian children's films have gained significant international recognition, winning prestigious awards at major film festivals and helping to elevate Iran's filmic reputation on the world stage.

In the face of globalization, Iranian filmmakers have managed to strike a remarkable balance between staying true to their national identity and creating films that resonate with global audiences. This ability to craft universally appealing stories without sacrificing cultural authenticity offers invaluable lessons for filmmakers worldwide. For Chinese filmmakers, particularly, Iranian film provides a concrete example of how to navigate the complexities of balancing artistic integrity with commercial success. Iranian children's films, with their poignant storytelling and humanistic themes, offer practical insights into how to create films that honor local traditions while appealing to universal human emotions.

By examining the successes and challenges faced by Iranian filmmakers, Chinese film can find a way to cultivate its own unique voice within the global film landscape. Embracing a dual approach that recognizes the importance of both artistic expression and industry standards will enable Chinese filmmakers to preserve and promote their national culture on the world stage. In doing so, Chinese film can carve out a distinctive space in the international film market, contributing not only to the preservation of cultural identity but also to the development of a filmic language that speaks to audiences globally. This vision for Chinese film aligns with the broader goal of enhancing its influence and recognition, moving it beyond the realm of a "film country" to that of a "film powerhouse." The path forward lies in embracing this challenge with creativity, cultural pride, and an open-minded approach to global collaboration.

Conflicts of Interest The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Research on the High-Skilled Labor and Identity Construction of Video Creative Workers

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KEYWORDS

*Mid-Video Platform;
Creative Labor Process;
Highly Skilled;
Identity;
Game Labor Consent*

ABSTRACT

Why are mid-video creative workers willing to produce content on Bilibili even if the earnings are not high? This is the starting point of research thinking. This paper takes the cultural production practice of UP hosts as an example and finds that the platform attempts to eliminate the instability of labor through control strategies such as interface design, creation incentives, algorithmic streaming, and incubating accounts. The "high skill" of creative work and the non-standardization of the production model explain both the endogenous logic of the platform's "income does not cover income" and the premise of creators' "consent" for generating "love". The high threshold of users' consumption of video forces creators to "compete" in skills, highlighting the subjectivity of workers while forming "identity games", a form of labor control that is different from the previous "de-skillization". The labor-capital conflict conceals the "symbiotic relationship" of checks and dependencies among platforms, creators and users, which not only weakens the degree of labor control of platform capital, but also provides implications for understanding the diversified platform ecosystem and expanding the theory of the labor process.

INTRODUCTION

With the development of information and communication technology, China's online screen industry has shifted from "streaming media" dominated by iQIYI, Youku and Tencent Video to short-video platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou. bilibili (B Station) focuses on high-quality horizontal medium videos within 1 to 30 minutes and uses a composite production model (PUGC) that combines user and professional attributes, while enriching the types of platform economy, compared

with the "short, flat and fast" fast food videos, It promotes the emergence of new labor fields, production methods, and labor organization forms.^[1] Xiao Zhang, the interviewee, is a full-time platform content creator who is paid for his creativity and is regarded as a "creative class" that is good at expressing self-worth. However,^[2] the "80/20 rule" of uneven resource distribution has led to poor earnings for some creators, Xiao Zhang said:

Bilibili has cut its incentives for creation, and I missed the golden period of making money. A video with three million views actually earned

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around 3,000 yuan, far lower than the amount before it was "cut". My strength lies in my hand-drawn skills. Since I can only produce one video a month, getting over 10,000 views depends entirely on luck. (A5)

The author conducted months of participatory observations on Bilibili and found that the majority of creators did not abandon the platform because of salary mismatch. Bilibili remains the main camp for their video creation. The collective pay cuts have disrupted the balance of income and expenditure, and the platform's capital has occupied the surplus value generated by the production of videos without compensation, which can't help but make one think about the reasons and processes behind the creation of "consent".

Marx's theory of the labor process holds that capitalists must have control over the labor process of workers in order to exert labor potential, and thus labor control becomes a fundamental issue^[3] in the study of the labor process. Unlike the direct control of capital, Brovey in "Manufacturing Consent" points out that capitalists should use the "rush game" to subdue and neutralize workers' resistance^[4], and by participating in the game to compete for more material rewards, make them voluntarily participate in the exploited workplace in order to achieve labor consent. Labor control on Internet platforms encompasses ideological control, time control, flow control, and social relationship control^[5], but most studies anchor workers as victims of exploitation, overemphasizing the negative effects of digital labor, and the absence of worker subjectivity leads to biased criticism of labor-capital relations. In addition, the increasing commercialization of user-generated content and the concept of a "creator economy" built around the creation, distribution, and monetization of digital content have become new perspectives for analyzing digital labor,^[6] with creators and users being two key actors.^[7]

This paper follows the basic thread of the labor process theory and, in light of the current situation of Bilibili's platform economy development under the flexible employment model, explores the basic methods of labor control on the mid-video platform and the individual experience of workers. By examining the power game among the platform, creators and users in the creative labor process, it is hoped to explain the internal logic of "willing to work despite spending more than one's income"

and provide possibilities for enriching labor relations on Internet platforms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empowerment and Exploitation: Platformization of Cultural Content Production

Platform-based companies develop their own businesses and markets^[8] by configuring infrastructure to provide customers with a range of tools and services and products and services can be modified, recreated and redistributed^[9] based on platform technology, that is, "platformization". Creators are moving from traditional streaming to emerging creative forms^[10] such as short videos and live streaming, as they encourage users to actively engage in content production and allow them to earn money through low-cost means like replicating styles or content transfer. Some scholars affirm the empowerment advantage of platforms in breaking down the discourse barriers of traditional media, arguing that content creators have gone beyond the passive "production-consumer" model. Douyin, for example, turned grassroots people living outside the city center into "unlikely" creative workers^[11], enhanced their sense^[12] of well-being and fulfillment in life and work, and pushed the platformization process^[13] by building "hope labour". This shows that user-friendly platform infrastructure and business models do bring hope and opportunity to the mobile youth.^[14] In addition to catering to the nation's "entrepreneurial solutionism" proposition, creators^[15] can also play a consultative role in platform governance, highlighting the positive impact of platform technology in creating social value.

Critical scholars, however, point out that the relationship between platform giants and creators is highly disproportionate^[16], using the superficial features of participatory culture to mask the essence of "exploitation" and complete the primitive accumulation^[17] of platform capitalism while seizing the labor value of creators and users. Although Kuaishou has created an entrepreneurial fantasy of upward mobility, the hope labor practiced by rural migrant youth on the platform remains uncertain. Not only is it difficult to realize the "boss dream" of the creative class, but it also accelerates the homogenization^[18] of content production on the platform. To eliminate the uneven distribution caused by the platform economy, a mutually beneficial and win-win YPP (Youtube Partner Program)

was developed to distinguish YouTube from other social media platforms. The scheme challenges the platform's status as a free labor exploiter,^[19] but YPP members will be deprived of the right to monetize their content as long as there are enough creators willing to do free labor,^[20] indicating that the platform still holds the authority to limit the range of action of creators. The exploitation of Internet platforms is not as blatant as in traditional industries. Even if the value they create is not proportional to their actual income, users have difficulty recognizing the exploitation they have suffered, and some may even "not know that his or her activities have created wealth for a small number of people."^[21] Why are creators willing to upload their content for free? How their labor is controlled by the platform is a question worthy of further exploration.

Labor Control and "Consent" Manufacturing in the Internet Entertainment Industry

Technology and labor constitute two major aspects of the study of platforms in the field of journalism and communication, among which three paths involving digital labor are: platform employment models, labor processes, and digital supervision^[22]. The platform economy has shifted the employment model from the traditional direct employment by signing labor contracts to the informal employment form of "on-demand employment" and has permeated the leisure and entertainment industry, resulting in greater uncertainty^[23] in the labor process and the labor market. Compared with new forms of workers in the gig economy of the service industry such as couriers, food delivery riders, ride-hailing drivers and domestic service workers, workers who carry out creative production of cultural content through digital platforms have a higher level of mental skills, and the flexible and elastic working mechanism gives these entities the title of "[24]digital smart workers".

The trading of labor force is a characteristic of capitalist production. How do capitalists transform the purchased labor force into actual and effective labor? Marx's theory of the labor process provides the answer of "control," by obtaining coercive control rights to eliminate labor instability and thereby establish an unjust labor order. Bloey, however, believes it is necessary to break the generality and one-sidedness perspective beyond history in industrial sociology and organizational theory, and to abandon the binary opposition of "potential harmony" and "social control". He incorporated worker

subjectivity into the analysis of labor control, using the concept of the "rush game" to refer to the "soft control mechanism" by which capital occupies the workers' surplus value, in order to explain the workers' motivation to work hard. The gamification of the labor process gives a competitive element to work, and workers gain respect, self-satisfaction and self-control by completing excess production tasks, thus ignoring concern about the poor working environment, "not only reproducing 'spontaneous enslavement', but also generating more material wealth"^[25]. After that, concepts such as "gender games", "transparency games", "chair-snatching games", "boss games"^[26], and "ideal games"^[27] have emerged.

In short video or live streaming platforms, factors such as ideology, organization and technology^[28], wage^[29] systems and emotional labor^[30] are all means of criticizing capital for controlling labor. Interest and freedom have obscured the essence of labor alienation, neoliberal work ethics have rationalized self-exploitation, and have captured the subject consciousness and conspired^[31] with capital. YouTube, a foreign mid-video platform, has been pointed out by researchers that creative workers attempt to transform into "non-alienated labor," and ultimately cannot escape being incorporated^[32] into capital. However, the workers' "consent" to the platform's control is not absolute. The practice of resistance is the workers' voice^[33] against the injustice of their working conditions. Existing studies have clearly ignored the shaping of workers' subjectivity and the observation of their identity recognition. The emotional labor of workers in digital media practice may also be a process of self-satisfaction and self-enjoyment of the labor subject,^[34] although the presentation and elevation of subjectivity are limited.

In the context of platform-based cultural production, the institutional structure is embedded with the social experiences of producers and consumers, and the construction of the subjectivity of digital labor needs to be discussed^[35] in the grand "socio-cultural" context. In addition, the unique attributes of the platform itself should also be considered as elements of the employment model and platform operation mechanism, and the technical devices, dissemination effects and monetization channels of videos in Bilibili are worthy of discussion. The author believes that the existing theory cannot explain the labor process of mid-video creative workers. We need to reflect on the extent to which the traditional "control/resistance" frame-

Table 1 | Information of the interviewed UP hosts

Number	Gender	Form of work	Number of fans	Video genre	Occupation	Interview duration
A1	male	Full-time	263,000	Random Talk on Animation	Freelancing	100 minutes
A2	male	Full-time	118,000	Comic Chat	Freelancing	80 minutes
A3	female	Full-time	61,000	Female character mix-up	Freelancing	80 minutes
A4	male	Full-time	47,000	Anime remix	Freelancing	70 minutes
A5	male	Full-time	25,000	Song Hand-drawn	Freelancing	90 minutes
A6	male	Part-time	595,000	Game Appreciation	Students	100 minutes
A7	male	Part-time	14,000	Biography Commentary	Students	90 minutes
A8	female	Part-time	11,000	Work Analysis	Employees of private enterprises	80 minutes
A9	male	Part-time	7765	Comic book of Anime Boys	Freelancer	90 minutes
A10	female	Part-time	7074	TV or film characters or couples	Students	100 minutes
A11	female	Part-time	5296	Film and television makeup and styling commentary	Students	90 minutes
A12	female	Part-time	2198	Chinese comic couple	Employees of state-owned enterprises	70 minutes
A13	female	Part-time	820	TV or film characters or couples	Students	90 minutes
A14	female	Part-time	733	Chinese comic songs	Employees of private enterprises	80 minutes
A15	male	Part-time	519	Childhood works collection	Government agencies	80 minutes

work is suitable for digital labor at this stage and expand the theory based on new empirical phenomena. Focusing on the labor process within the content production field, this paper attempts to respond to the question: How do mid-video platforms create labor "consent" in the absence of guaranteed economic benefits? How do creative workers understand the role expectations as "UP hosts"? What impact will the production methods and employment patterns of mid-video platforms have on shaping labor relations?

RESEARCH METHODS

This paper draws on a number of publicly available data sources, including corporate official websites and business analysis reports. Fifteen UP hosts^[36] (codes A1-A15, see **Table 1**) were recruited online for in-depth interviews about their behind-the-scenes creative experience and salary status. Additionally, three senior users (codes B1-B3) and two Bilibili employees (codes C1-C2) were interviewed to assist with their viewpoints. The in-

terviews took place from March to July 2023. Subsequently, about hundreds of thousands of words of written materials were sorted out to extract core topics and concepts for analyzing phenomena and conducting theoretical generalizations.

CREATIVE "RUSHING WORK": ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR LABOR CONTROL IN PLATFORM LAYOUT

Interface Design for the "Private Domain Reach" of Mid-Video

The platform is regarded as a complex "social-technology" combination,^[37] and mid-video is the result of labor as an artifact, which is reflected in Bilibili's product design rules. The platform's recommendation page and partitioned video display is a "double-column waterfall flow", where users have to click into the private domain to watch the video, unlike the single-column auto-play of browsing up and down on short-video platforms. The former has the opportunity to direct users to the

private domain traffic pool of UP hosts, promoting interaction between the two and reflecting the community attribute in the design concept, while the latter is more inclined to bring public domain traffic to the platform.

The private domain reach of mid-video forces creators to work hard on visual elements such as video covers, titles, and tags to increase the likelihood of their videos being clicked by more users within the public domain traffic pool. Secondly, "the first 15 seconds of the video" is also an important indicator of quality mid-length videos. UP owners need to ensure that they can quickly capture the audience's preferences within the limited time, otherwise they will lose the best video completion effect and significantly reduce the video revenue. However, when Posting videos, creators are also subject to specification restrictions. The product's "part" upload feature forces them to break down a long narrative video into several mid-length videos, making the user viewing experience fragmented. This not only affects the fans' viewing experience but also reduces the popularity of the video push.

Incentives for creation that cede labor supervision powers

Bilibili has established a relatively mature incentive mechanism and algorithmic push system. Through data analysis,^[38] it screens out high-quality video content and effectively delivers it to target consumers. To apply for the "bilibili Creation Incentive Program", UP owners need to meet the conditions of having a creativity or influence score^[39] of 55 electromagnetic force and a credit score of no less than 80. ^[40] The platform will calculate the incentive earnings ^[41] based on factors such as content popularity, user preference, and content verticality. The daily earnings generated by the articles will be calculated and displayed by the system two days later. It is understood that the video incentive consists of two parts: the basic subsidy (the data performance of the article) and the activity subsidy (items such as the small target of the hit, the fan growth challenge, etc.). Although the platform did not explicitly state the calculation rules for the incentive amount, many UP owners inferred that it was closely related to indicators such as likes, coins, collections, views and completion rates, and increasing the data volume of "triple click" became an important basis for increasing revenue.

By using clickbait tactics to boost play counts, the number of likes and collections failed to keep up, and the income was not high. The

likes and collections need to account for 40% of the views, and the views of passers-by in the completion rate should be higher than those of fans in order to increase the overall revenue of the video. (A2)

Seeing users as customers who "buy" goods, any trace they leave on the interface is converted into a bargaining chip for the platform to evaluate the value of the video, which gives users the right to negotiate independently in the buying and selling market. For example, coin insertion means giving "B coins" to the UP owner. Non-members can only get one coin a day, and each triple insertion consumes two coins. Therefore, coin insertion is an affirmation of "the best video seen in two days" by the audience. Coins cannot be exchanged for RMB, but when it comes to creative incentives, they have to "compete" for creativity just to win users' voluntary coin insertion.

Viewers are not too averse to the UP's "eating", but your eating style can't be too ugly. Do not imitate fast food culture when making mid-length videos. If you choose to make money at the expense of quality, it will be very difficult for this person to survive on Bilibili. After all, no viewer is willing to "pay". (A9)

Bilibili has not followed the "traffic is king" operation approach of short-video platforms, valuing user likes far more than clicks, indicating that unique creativity and excellent skills are the only rules for creators to attract viewers and establish themselves on the platform. The multi-element coupled creation incentive system is so complex that it has transformed users from entertainment "viewers" to "supervisors" who can review the value of videos, making them unintentionally "accomplices" in the platform's capital control of labor. The direct link of "triple click" to creative incentives ostensibly gives users the right to judge quality content, but in reality, it builds a reputation-oriented "consumer rating mechanism" that conceals the intention of supervising creators' labor and strengthening "liquid control" of creative skills.

Algorithmic manipulation of the "black box" of traffic push

The platform's technical unconsciousness features contribute to the ability^[42] to collect metadata on user preferences, topic choices, interaction patterns, etc. Algorithms are considered to be at the core ^[43] of the technical unconsciousness, helping to connect and interpret user metadata and reveal

user behavior patterns. Most users are manipulated by algorithms to converge on a certain video, and creators try to increase exposure in the public domain traffic pool, but a large number of respondents, through long-term research, still found that whether a video appears in the recommended column of the audience is rather random, and fans may also be blocked by the platform for update prompts of the subscription channel. Given the risk of traffic limits and fan stickiness, many UP owners have to consistently produce videos of the same type, leading to a stereotyped style.

Provide operational strategies for incubating accounts

Bilibili is similar to a large MCN agency that nurses influencers and has the ability to incubate personality ips. Creators rely on the platform's operational strategies to incubate their accounts into recognizable influencer personas. In terms of operations, Bilibili has built the "Huahuo" commercial platform that links UP hosts with advertisers for resource transactions, and uses big data to provide creators with system quotation references, order process management, platform security settlement and other functions^[44]. Because both the entry threshold and the commercial order price are positively correlated with the number of followers, the actual earnings of UP owners are not high.

To help new accounts gain followers quickly, Bilibili has launched the "Takeoff Plan"^[45], a content promotion heating tool that precisely promotes native content to the target user group and increases exposure. The increase in traffic does not drive the simultaneous increase in the data volume of "triple click", and the benefits of purchasing traffic are not as significant as those of short-video platforms. For creators with a small fan base, private deals with advertising agencies were originally an alternative option, but such videos are often restricted by platforms, reducing their monetization value.

SKILL IS KING: THE INHERENT LOGIC OF MAKING VIDEOS WITH TWICE THE EFFORT FOR HALF THE RESULT

The "High Skill" of Creative Work Increases Production Costs

Due to the lack of a systematic commercial infrastructure, Bilibili has repeatedly hit a wall in its exploration of a ^[46]"de-2D" commercial path, with a persistently low return on investment (ROI) and still incurring losses since its listing. The platform's

control strategy, which prioritizes originality and creativity, has undoubtedly raised the threshold for video creation, forcing a "high-skilled" trend in the content production process of mid-video and making it difficult for the platform to make profits. The "high skill" of creative work has a negative impact on the platform economy. On the one hand, mid-length videos have higher production costs in collecting materials, writing scripts, shooting and editing than short videos, and the advertising unit price is also relatively higher, greatly reducing advertisers' willingness to invest; On the other hand, it raises the threshold for users to consume high-quality video content, and they are averse to copying and following the trend. To stabilize the user base, the platform knew that increasing production costs would reduce advertising investment, but still had to ask UP hosts to improve their skills.

To ease the economic pressure, Bilibili launched Story-Mode vertical short videos, a way to replicate Douyin's creative style, which was seen as losing the point and was resisted by users and creators who believed that only by focusing on vertical content could the platform leverage its advantages. Embarrassingly, Bilibili's share of the lower-tier market is not large enough to monopolize all mid-video resources and has to compromise with users' demand for creative skills. In order not to break its promise of never adding pre-roll ads, Bilibili relies on value-added services (including live streaming, premium membership and other value-added services) to generate revenue, which is just a drop in the bucket to cover the company's expenses, let alone share the profits of creators and the platform. The short-video industry has now turned to a competition for user base, but Bilibili still seeks to increase its user base to expand its market share and brand value, which may be a compromise for the company that neither wants to lose a large number of users nor go bankrupt.

The Non-Standardized Production Model Reduces Production Efficiency

Machines have replaced manual tools, and workers are required to be concentrated in factories for mass production labor. This monotonous and repetitive work has reduced workers' initiative and creativity, and "de-skillization" has deprived them of control^[47] over the labor process, forcing them to be alienated ^[48]from the products of labor. When workers are removed from the assembly line, they do not have complete skills to achieve mass production, which intensifies the alienated

feeling of being exploited by capital and further leads to the result of "labor degradation".

When enterprises monopolize core technologies, they no longer need to rely on individual uniqueness to create value. The addiction to short videos reveals the control logic of platforms over creators and users. At its core, it is because the substitutability of creativity is too strong^[49]. Douyin simplifies the operations of shooting, editing and uploading videos, which can easily breed forms such as hitching on hot topics, copying and collage, and the production scale leads to uneven quality of video content. In contrast, Bilibili's production process must be personalized according to user demands. The emphasis on the non-standardization of content production has led the platform to form a production model similar to a workshop, resulting in low production efficiency, and the reduction in corporate profits is bound to affect the income of creators.

LABORER SUBJECTIVITY: "CONSENTING" MANUFACTURING FOR "LOVE"

Individual Desires Induce Self-Discipline

The platform, as the entity implementing labor control, has adopted a series of covert strategies aimed at stabilizing the high technical level of mid-video content production, but has fallen into the predicament of high cost and low yield. Even so, there are still a large number of UP owners willing to stay on Bilibili. What makes their "consent"? Generally speaking, the "rush game" holds that the consent of workers is equally important in explaining the question of "why work hard",^[50] and Blovey believes that what stimulates workers is not only the external temptation of money, but also the internal incentives such as prestige.^[51]

Autonomy of Destiny

Internet platforms, with their flexibility and autonomy in working hours, locations, and methods, attract a large number of digital workers who are eager to find a free job on the platform and avoid boss scolding and performance tasks while earning a decent income. As they are not bound by company labor contracts, creators do not have to "give way" to annoying immediate bosses or coordinate relationships with colleagues they do not want to associate with. They become masters of their own destiny, and their status has risen from employee to boss. The pursuit of the "boss dream"

of "my life is in my own hands, not theirs" constitutes the idea that creators "agree" that wages do not match labor costs.

Pursuit of honor

The two-way interaction among community members creates emotional connections, allowing the emotional labor of creators to unlock the potential^[52] of laborer subjectivity from the "gift economy" to a great extent. Fans who follow the account are generally more loyal, and in addition to watching updated videos on a daily basis, fans also maintain the image and reputation of their favorite UPS. In the event of someone copying or plagiarizing the creator's ideas, the public relations crisis is dealt with collectively by arguing, reporting and blacklisting.

Rise to a higher class

"Generating electricity for love" requires "feeding oneself", so it is important^[53] to assess the risks of "investing" in desired labor. Take part-time UP hosts as an example. They are mostly students who choose to learn and practice video editing skills on Bilibili out of interest, and this self-media experience can enrich the job application resume and increase the social capital of the applied position. This kind of labor motivated by improving employment competitiveness is endowed with the expectation of class mobility.

Resistance and Compromise Collude To Weave the "Identity Game"

Some UP owners say they can resist the platform's control, such as using cross-platform advertising to increase their income, then not signing a contract with Bilibili, and even directly turning off the creation incentive function without deliberately pursuing data and traffic monetization. To reconcile the mental imbalance caused by creative work, some creators separate online from real life and hide their identities as platform workers on social networks to avoid others' comments on the labor process of self-media. Opening a secondary account on Bilibili not only helps you get rid of the burden of being an idol, but also avoids the "black history" controversy caused by random comments on public accounts. In fact, the above-mentioned resistance actions are just scratching the surface for exploitation. When creators examine the impact of exploitation on themselves, they directly say that the positive effects of the platform far outweigh the negative ones. Although the rules set by Bilibili have exploited their surplus value and they

have complained about the platform's injustice, they still hope that Bilibili will have better development in the future.

I think I'm being "monopolized" by Bilibili, and the essence is that there's no choice. Because I know that if I leave Bilibili, the content I create won't be able to find the right nurturing soil, so why leave? It is Bilibili that gives us a stage to showcase our talents, and it is a challenge to win applause here. (A9)

This mechanism that inadvertently creates "consent" can be summarized as an "acceptance game," as a psychological balancing mechanism that couples resistance and compromise emotions. Creators' reliance on the platform stems from the affirmation of their identity and self-worth, deepening their professional identity by uniting the "imagined community", and the support of fans and users makes them hope to receive more praise, recognition and appreciation. Once UP owners start to do things by pleasing others' expectations, they will develop a "endorsing" mentality of "vouching for others" and subconsciously view the platform as a sanctuary to showcase their talents. "Identity game" is not a utilitarian rush. It refers to a state where creators voluntarily carry character expectations and do their best to produce quality content to give back to users. In order to earn revenue and gain recognition at the same time, they will carry the dream of pursuing what they love and practice the cultural production of "generating electricity for love" on the platform.

"Identity games" mask the pay inequality caused by platform control in the labor process and are labor consent created by workers in the race where skills are king. Bilibili adheres to a non-standardized production model and a "high-skilled" creative principle, which makes it impossible for mid-video to mass-standardize and replicate styles and content, and the high cost of video has led to a deadlock in the platform economy. The fact that UP owners are willing to stay on the platform knowing they are being exploited is the result of seeking recognition. They attract users' appreciation and pursuit by improving their skills, a spiritual value that other video platforms do not have, and the reason why the "recognition game" is created.

AFTERTHOUGHT: THE "SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP" HIDDEN BENEATH THE LABOR-CAPITAL CONFLICT

Labor-capital conflicts constitute conflicts of interest in the content production process, which are reflected in the unbalanced power relationship between content creators and enterprises providing platform infrastructure. Businesses rely on the output of content creators to add value to their products or services and attract other businesses to advertise on the platform to earn fees, but monetization schemes stop creators from providing free labor for social media services. The pursuit of high skills in mid-video leads to high costs. The platform still needs high-quality creative content to attract more users to increase the base of revenue, and creators also need to use the platform to gain user recognition. Thus, the existence of "identity games" enables creators to be willing to "generate electricity for love".

Fox believes that social media services are places to exploit free labor, creating tensions^[54] of empowerment and dependence among various subjects, and if creators refuse to upload content, business operations may come to a ^[55]standstill. The "dead end" of mid-video profits forces platforms, creators and users to maintain a state of mutual restraint and shared fate, where each subject is empowered and dependent, shaping a "symbiotic relationship" like that of a crocodile and a toothpick bird, in which neither side can have a monopoly position, and the control of platform capital over workers will be greatly weakened. This is different from previous discussions and studies on the "de-skill-ization" of the labor process. The "symbiotic relationship" view reasonably explains the conflict of interests hidden beneath the unstable and unbalanced labor-capital contradiction and expands the conclusion of labor control for creative workers in informal employment.

The research also has limitations, and there is relatively little description of the unstructured "fan-master" relationship formed between UP hosts and users. Bilibili does not have a group chat function. Some creators will mark QQ group numbers and other social media information on their personal homepages with the aim of maintaining the healthy development of the "fan-master" relationship, and community building can be a way to solve this problem. This is because the community is the cornerstone of maintaining the platform's ecosystem, as the slogan "All the videos you're interested

in are on Bilibili" describes, the community, interests and ideals shape the unique spiritual and cultural values that set creators apart from other video platforms. In addition, Chen Rui, chairman and CEO of Bilibili, has set a goal^[56] to break even in 2024, which can then focus on innovative business models in the platform economy and discuss the social media services provided by Internet industry giants through case studies. Further explore the impact of short videos and mid-video on labor control in areas such as flexible employment and enterprise management on the platform, and consider issues such as how to encourage multiple entities to participate in value co-creation through behavioral mechanisms.

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An Interpretation of Aristophanes' Eulogy in Plato's Symposium

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ABSTRACT

Plato's Symposium centers on the praise of the god of love, Eros, bringing together various perspectives on desire from prominent Greek intellectuals. Among them, Aristophanes' encomium stands out for its mythopoetic expression, reflecting the comic poet's profound insight into human nature, society, and politics. Through the allegory of spherical humans split in half by Zeus, Aristophanes suggests that desire originates from humanity's longing for an original state of wholeness. This eros is not merely a response to bodily trauma, but also a yearning for self-identity and the unity of the soul. The article further reveals that Aristophanes attributes higher value to love between men, thereby reflecting the interconnection between political ideals and gender order in ancient Greek society. Moreover, by analyzing rhetorical devices, temporal structure, and the redemptive function of Eros, the paper explores the mechanisms of irony and metaphysical symbolism embedded in Aristophanes' speech. Love, in this view, is not only an expression of emotion and desire, but also a philosophical response to the fractures within the self and the ruptures of history. As a comic poet, Aristophanes deftly employs humor and myth to construct eros as a complex structure that traverses the domains of nature, ontology, society, and power.

THE NATURAL STATE OF HUMANKIND

The Original Spherical Human

The earliest humans were fundamentally different from humans today. Unlike the current binary of male and female, original humans possessed three sexes: male, female, and androgynous. Their bodily structure also differed completely. In his encomium, Aristophanes offers a detailed portrayal of these primordial beings:

"Each type of person was originally whole and round in form: their back and sides formed a circle, their bodies were spherical, they had four hands and four legs, and on a circular neck were two identical faces facing opposite directions but sharing one head. They had four ears and two sets of genitals, and presumably all their other organs were duplicated as well." (Plato, B. 2019,48)

These original beings were said to be descendants of the sun, the earth, and the moon, symbolizing the divine elements of the cosmos—a pure

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state of nature. They were immensely powerful and complete in themselves. Through this mythic description, Aristophanes implies a view of human nature prior to civilization: a condition of self-sufficiency, independence, and natural wholeness, untouched by social institutions or dependency.

The Hubris of the Spherical Humans

Empowered by their completeness, the spherical humans grew increasingly bold. No longer in need of the Olympian gods' guidance or protection, and facing gods who no longer symbolized natural forces but imposed civilization and law, these beings grew defiant. As Aristophanes narrates, they "began to entertain ambitions of challenging the gods themselves." (Plato, B. 2019, 48)

This moment hints at Aristophanes' veiled political critique: powerful collectives that possess internal wholeness and autonomy may rebel against imposed norms and external authority, echoing the emergence of tyrannical impulses in political life.

Apollo's Severing of the Spherical Humans

"To the gods of the city-state, the existence of these primordial humans posed an existential threat—especially as human power grew unchecked. The gods thus increasingly desired to transform this adversarial relationship." (Wang, 2022)

To preserve divine authority without annihilating humanity (and thereby losing the source of worship and sacrifice), Zeus devised a strategy: he ordered Apollo to split the spherical humans in two. Those originally male or female became homosexuals, while the androgynous beings became heterosexuals.

Zeus also commanded Apollo to rotate their faces toward the severed side and heal the wound, leaving a scar as an eternal reminder. Humanity was thus weakened and multiplied, stripped of the power to challenge the gods.

Aristophanes, through this myth, offers a justification for same-sex love: since all humans originate from an equal, dual-bodied state, love between any genders is a natural yearning for original unity. Love, in this view, is not hierarchical—whether heterosexual, male-male, or female-female, all forms express a shared desire for restoration of lost completeness. Aristophanes' preference for male-male love stems from the belief that the original all-male beings were superior in stature. (Lin, 2017)

Furthermore, the gods represent rulers, while humans represent the ruled. Just as rulers cannot annihilate the people who threaten their power—since their legitimacy depends on the governed—Zeus' weakening of humanity symbolizes sovereign strategies of discipline and control. The Olympians, as Aristophanes depicts them, are not abstract embodiments of divine truth; rather, they are calculative and dependent on human belief to sustain their existence.

Likewise, human civilization needs divine order to prevent the endless escalation of primal desire. Once human nature is curtailed and disciplined, emptiness and yearning emerge. In this void, **eros** arises—not merely as a craving for bodily union, but as a philosophical impulse, directing human longing toward metaphysical, existential, and ethical wholeness.

THE TRAGEDY OF THE HALVED HUMAN

Once cleaved, the spherical humans became "halved beings," who ceaselessly longed for a return to their original wholeness. Each half desperately sought its lost counterpart, and when they finally found one another, they "clung tightly together, entwined, longing to be fused into one. Refusing to be separated, they stopped eating and doing anything else, and eventually died. If one half died, the other, still living, would search again for a partner, clinging desperately whether it encountered a split-off woman (as we now call women) or a split-off man." (Plato, B. 2019, 50)

This overwhelming sense of lack drove the halved beings to grasp any partner they could find, even if it was not their original counterpart. Yet physical union brought no true healing. Out of pity, Zeus moved the genitals to the front, enabling procreation. Through this act, he hoped to prevent humanity's self-destruction and to sever the possibility of returning to absolute wholeness.

This, then, is the tragedy of the halved human: the unending search for unity through sex and intimacy, always striving to return to a natural state that has been permanently locked away. We are left to live in harmony with Eros, revering the god in hopes of receiving healing. As Aristophanes declares: "It is he who now bestows upon us the greatest blessings, who leads us to our own kind, and promises us the highest hope for the future: that if we reverently honor the gods, Eros will restore us to our nature, heal us, and make us whole and happy." (Plato, B. 2019, 53)

Gradually, humanity forgot its former defiance against the gods and accepted the discipline of divine rule. Eros became a measure of human strength, and reverence toward Eros and the gods determined one's happiness. (Nehamas, 2007)

THE COMIC POET'S VIEW OF EROS

The Allegory of Love: A Tragic Pursuit of Wholeness

Aristophanes states: "The only way for humanity to attain happiness is through love, through finding one's partner to heal our split nature." (Plato, B. 2019, 53) His encomium constructs a symbolic philosophical allegory, endowing love with an ontological mission to "repair trauma and restore wholeness." This reflects not only a naturalistic understanding of eros but also a presupposition that humanity is eternally caught in lack and yearning. (Sun, 2019)

From a philosophical-psychological perspective, this obsession with "original wholeness" resonates deeply with Lacan's theory of the mirror stage. Lacan asserts that self-identity is founded on the misrecognition of a unified image—the Ideal-I—which is constantly pursued because the subject is always already split. (Vasseleu, 1991) Similarly, Aristophanes depicts humans as split beings, living with a wound that becomes the very source of desire, marking eros as inherently tragic.

Moreover, because one's "true half" may already be lost or asymmetrical, the pursuit of love is always shadowed by disillusionment. This doomed quest for a natural state that can never be regained distinguishes Aristophanes' eros from Socratic ascent toward the Form of Beauty; it becomes instead an ontological longing destined never to be fulfilled.

Eros and Power: From Hierarchy to the Disciplined Political Body

Aristophanes claims that male-male love is "the noblest," embodying "manliness," and argues that "their conduct is not driven by shamelessness but by courage, strength, and masculinity, attracted by kindred spirits." (Plato, B. 2019, 51) He adds, "only such youths grow up to be statesmen." These remarks reveal that Aristophanes' account of eros remains grounded in the physical—bravery and bodily vigor are key virtues, while the soul and virtue in the Platonic sense are not central concerns. (Lin, 2017)

Viewed differently, Aristophanes places eros within the framework of social hierarchy and power. Love becomes a mirror of civic potential and political aptitude, where the preference for male-male desire reflects ancient Greek valorization of masculine virtue.

Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* argues that "sex" is not a natural fact but a product of discursive regimes and power. (Foucault, 1990) From this angle, Aristophanes constructs a regime of body-politics: only the strong, masculine, male-loving bodies are worthy of political leadership. This represents a real-world extension of a philosophical concept into the realm of lived experience. (Fu et al., 2025) This value chain—"desire—courage—rule"—reveals the deep embedding of eros in ancient gender and power structures.

Yet this hierarchical erotic order also exposes its exclusivity and instrumental rationality. Women are relegated to lower sexual roles, lesbian love is barely acknowledged, and heterosexuality is treated as a fallback compromise. This male-centric erotic ideal not only reflects the gender structure of the polis but also rationalizes male dominance in the public sphere.

The Normativity of Eros and Gendered Order: a Limited Liberation

Though Aristophanes mythologically legitimizes homosexuality, he does not establish gender equality in the modern sense. His endorsement of male-male love is rooted in an ideology of masculine virtue and political utility—it is not about emotional value or equal rights, but about proximity to an idealized warrior-man archetype.

From the lens of contemporary gender critique, Judith Butler has emphasized that gender and sexuality are not natural facts, but performative constructs shaped by repeated acts. (Salih, 2007) In this light, Aristophanes' praise of male homoeroticism is not a challenge to gender or sexual norms but a reproduction of state-sanctioned masculine desire. This triadic structure—body, desire, and politics—conceals deeper gender oppression, universalizing heterosexuality and subordinating femininity.

The Temporality and Redemptive Function of Eros: From Fragmentation to Historical Return

Beyond physicality and politics, Aristophanes' eros contains a unique temporal and historical dimension. Love is not an ephemeral emotion or reproductive function, but a structure stretching

across past trauma, present lack, and future hope. Humans, split by Apollo, carry the loss of original wholeness as a historical scar; eros, in the present, propels them toward reunion; and the promise of return, as Aristophanes says, lies in revering Eros.

In this schema, Eros is not merely an interpersonal mediator but a quasi-religious figure of redemption. Love's essence is not desire satisfaction but remembrance and return to a primordial state. As Plato suggests in *Phaedo*, knowledge is a recollection of the soul's pre-existence. (Plato, 2006) Likewise, Aristophanes' eros is a recollection and restoration of the once-whole self—a temporally structured return.

This ontological tragedy—our inability to become whole again despite the yearning—recalls Nietzsche's idea of the "eternal recurrence": a ceaseless repetition of unattainable desire that paradoxically gives meaning to existence. (Nietzsche & Hollingdale, 2020) Thus, Aristophanes' eros is not merely bodily, political, or comic—it is also historical and redemptive. It channels human hope through an irreparable fracture, elevating love to a metaphysical response to the brokenness of being.

CONCLUSION

Through a close reading of Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium*, this paper has revealed how the comic poet, through mythological allegory, infuses eros with profound and multifaceted philosophical significance. Aristophanes views the human longing for "original wholeness" as the root of love, constructing eros as a mechanism that spans the dimensions of body, politics, and being. Beneath the lighthearted tone of his speech lies a weighty metaphysical and social critique.

On the natural level, love emerges from a primal rupture—it is a compensatory drive following the loss of self. On the social level, love becomes embedded in the structures of the polis and gender hierarchy, reflecting ancient ideals of masculinity, political potential, and bodily normativity. Aristophanes affirms the universality of eros while subtly

exposing the social premises—hierarchy, discipline, and identity—that underlie its discourse.

As a comic poet, Aristophanes narrates a story of why humans fall in love, but he also transcends a mere celebration of desire and flesh. He depicts love as an existential struggle and a quest for selfhood. His speech reminds us that love is not only instinct or emotion, but also a metaphor for the complex relationships between human beings, the divine, power, and the self. Revisiting this speech today not only deepens our understanding of classical theories of love, but also prompts reflection on the entangled relations of love, gender, and power in the modern world.

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