

# Visual Narrative Design for Gen Z in China: A Conceptual Framework for Integrating Traditional Aesthetics into Interactive Short Videos

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**Abstract:** *Short video platforms have become central spaces of visual expression and cultural participation for Generation Z in China. While these platforms facilitate the rapid circulation of interactive visual narratives, representations of traditional Chinese aesthetics within short-form video content often remain fragmented or confined to surface-level visual references. This limitation raises an important question concerning how traditional aesthetic principles can be meaningfully translated into contemporary interactive narratives rather than merely reproduced as symbolic decoration. In response, this study proposes a conceptual framework for integrating traditional Chinese aesthetics into the visual narrative design of interactive short videos. Drawing on visual narrative theory, traditional aesthetic philosophy, and recent scholarship on platform-based youth culture, the framework reinterprets key aesthetic concepts—such as Yi Jing, Liu Bai, symbolic imagery, and rhythmic visual organization—as operative narrative logic within interactive media systems. Adopting a qualitative and theoretical approach, the study develops an analytical model consisting of four interrelated dimensions: Aesthetic Foundation, Narrative Structure, Interaction Mechanism, and Cultural Resonance. By positioning traditional aesthetics as a dynamic and generative resource rather than a static cultural reference, this research contributes to ongoing discussions on culturally grounded digital design and visual storytelling in contemporary Asian contexts. The framework is intended to support both scholarly inquiry and creative practice concerned with the relationship between cultural tradition and emerging visual media forms.*

**Keywords:** Visual Narrative Design; Interactive Short Videos; Traditional Chinese Aesthetics; Platform Culture; Generation Z

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## 1. Introduction

Short video platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou, and Bilibili have become integral to everyday visual culture in China. For Generation Z, these platforms function not merely as channels of entertainment but as important spaces for cultural participation, identity negotiation, and aesthetic experience. The brevity, visual intensity, and interactive affordances of short-form video have reshaped how narratives are produced, circulated, and interpreted within digital environments (Lei et al., 2024; Sun & Zhang, 2023).

Despite their popularity, much short video content is shaped by algorithmic recommendation systems and globally circulating visual trends. As a result, traditional cultural expressions are often simplified into recognizable symbols or stylistic references. Traditional Chinese aesthetics, rooted in philosophical traditions such as Confucianism and Daoism, emphasize balance, restraint, symbolic resonance, and poetic atmosphere. These principles contrast with the immediacy and spectacle-oriented logic that characterizes much contemporary digital media.

This tension reflects a broader cultural issue rather than a purely technical or stylistic one. The question is not whether traditional aesthetics can appear in short videos, but how they can be translated into visual narrative structures that remain meaningful within interactive, platform-driven contexts. Research on short video use suggests that platform-based visual engagement plays a role in shaping users' perceptions and forms of participation, particularly among younger generations (Qin, 2023).

Rather than approaching traditional aesthetics as decorative elements or nostalgic references, this study argues that they can be understood as an underlying narrative logic applicable to contemporary digital media. Through a theoretical and interdisciplinary lens, the paper proposes a conceptual framework that situates visual narrative design at the intersection of digital arts, youth culture, and cultural communication within the Asian context.

## **2. Theoretical Background and Related Studies**

### **2.1 Visual Narrative in Digital and Interactive Media**

Recent narrative scholarship increasingly emphasizes interactivity, modularity, and visual organization as defining features of digital storytelling. Contemporary narrative theory highlights how meaning in platform-based media is produced not only through linear sequencing but also through visual composition, rhythm, and user engagement (Ryan, 2023; Manovich, 2023). From the perspective of visual communication, representational choices and compositional design play a crucial role in shaping interpretation within digital environments (Kress, 2023).

Within short video platforms, visual narratives are frequently constructed through discrete segments that function both independently and relationally. Narrative engagement emerges through repetition, affective recognition, and visual continuity rather than through closure. Such structures align closely with Generation Z's habitual media practices, which are shaped by scrolling, looping, and algorithmic circulation.

### **2.2 Traditional Chinese Aesthetics as Narrative Logic**

Traditional Chinese aesthetics privilege implication, balance, and emotional resonance over explicit depiction. Recent scholarship has explored how concepts such as artistic conception (Yi Jing) and the use of empty space (Liu Bai) can be reinterpreted within interactive and digitally mediated visual forms (Chen & Li, 2023; Li & Wang, 2023). Rather than functioning as stylistic features, these principles form a narrative logic characterized by openness and interpretive flexibility.

When considered as a system of meaning-making, traditional aesthetics show strong conceptual compatibility with interactive media. Both emphasize viewer participation, non-linear engagement, and experiential interpretation. This compatibility suggests that traditional aesthetics can be reconfigured as narrative strategies rather than historical references.

### **2.3 Generation Z, Platform Culture, and Visual Consumption in China**

Short video platforms play a central role in shaping contemporary youth culture in China. Studies indicate that these platforms function as spaces of cultural participation and meaning-making, where algorithmic systems influence visibility, aesthetic preference, and engagement patterns (Gillespie, 2024; Wang & Chen, 2024). At the same time, young users demonstrate an interest in culturally grounded content when it aligns with platform-specific media practices (Lei et al., 2024).

Understanding this tension between algorithmic standardization and cultural specificity is essential for examining how traditional aesthetics may function within short video narratives. In this context, visual narrative design becomes a site of cultural negotiation between heritage and digital innovation.

## **3. Research Design and Methodology**

This study adopts a conceptual and theoretical research design aimed at developing an analytical framework for understanding how traditional Chinese aesthetics can be integrated into the visual narrative design of interactive short videos. Rather than pursuing empirical measurement or hypothesis testing, the research focuses on conceptual synthesis and interpretive analysis.

### **3.1 Research Design**

The research design of this study is qualitative and conceptual in nature. It does not involve data collection through surveys, experiments, or content analysis. Instead, the study constructs a theoretical model by synthesizing insights from three interconnected domains: visual narrative theory, traditional Chinese aesthetic philosophy, and contemporary studies of platform-based digital media.

This design is particularly suited to addressing questions of aesthetic meaning and narrative logic, which often resist direct quantification. By adopting a conceptual approach, the study explores how aesthetic principles function as organizing structures within interactive media, rather than as isolated visual elements.

### **3.2 Analytical Approach**

The analytical approach is based on integrative theoretical analysis. Relevant literature from visual narrative studies, digital media theory, and Chinese aesthetic thought is examined to identify recurring concepts, thematic patterns, and points of conceptual convergence.

Key aesthetic principles such as Yi Jing, Liu Bai, and symbolic representation are reinterpreted in relation to digital interaction and narrative structure. The analysis does not seek definitive conclusions but articulates possible pathways through which traditional aesthetics can inform contemporary visual storytelling.

### **3.3 Conceptual Positioning and Scope of the Framework**

The proposed framework is positioned within art and cultural studies rather than communication effects research or computational media analysis. Its primary focus lies in how aesthetic meaning is structured, experienced, and interpreted within interactive short video environments.

The framework is intended for visually driven, interaction-oriented media formats and does not attempt to account for all dimensions of platform governance or algorithmic optimization. Culturally, it is grounded in traditional Chinese aesthetics and does not claim universal applicability, instead emphasizing culturally situated approaches to digital media design.

#### **4. Expanded Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework proposed in this study consists of four interrelated dimensions: Aesthetic Foundation, Narrative Structure, Interaction Mechanism, and Cultural Resonance. These dimensions are not conceived as isolated components but as mutually constitutive elements that collectively shape the visual narrative experience of interactive short videos. Together, they articulate how traditional Chinese aesthetics can be translated into contemporary digital media practices at the level of narrative logic rather than surface representation.

##### **4.1 Aesthetic Foundation**

The aesthetic foundation of the framework foregrounds emotional atmosphere, symbolic suggestion, and visual restraint as core principles of narrative construction. Unlike spectacle-oriented visual strategies that rely on sensory intensity or rapid visual stimulation, traditional Chinese aesthetics emphasize implication, balance, and the evocation of mood. Within the temporal constraints of short video formats, such principles offer an alternative approach to generating affective depth without narrative excess.

In interactive short videos, aesthetic restraint may be expressed through minimalist imagery, controlled color palettes, and the selective use of symbolic cues. Rather than presenting complete visual information, these elements invite viewers to engage imaginatively with what is suggested but not fully shown. This mode of aesthetic expression aligns with the concept of *Yi Jing*, where meaning arises through the interplay between visual form and emotional resonance. As a result, aesthetic experience becomes a process of interpretation rather than immediate consumption, allowing short videos to sustain expressive richness despite their brevity.

##### **4.2 Narrative Structure**

At the level of narrative structure, the framework departs from linear storytelling models that prioritize resolution and closure. Traditional Chinese narrative logic often values resonance over narrative completeness, allowing stories to remain open-ended and suggestive. This orientation aligns closely with the modular and episodic nature of short video platforms, where content is consumed in fragments rather than as a continuous narrative whole.

Episodic organization, repetition, and variation enable meaning to accumulate gradually across multiple viewing experiences. Instead of delivering a singular narrative message, short videos may construct narrative coherence through thematic consistency, visual rhythm, or symbolic recurrence. In this sense, narrative structure is distributed across time and interaction rather than contained within a single video. Such an approach accommodates the non-linear viewing practices of platform users and supports a form of narrative engagement that unfolds through ongoing exposure rather than immediate resolution.

##### **4.3 Interaction Mechanism**

Within the framework, interaction is understood not merely as a technical feature but as an interpretive mechanism that shapes narrative meaning. Interactive functions—such as

commenting, sharing, remixing, or algorithmic recommendation—extend the narrative beyond the boundaries of the video itself, allowing users to participate in the construction and circulation of meaning.

From this perspective, user engagement is not limited to choice-based interaction or interface navigation. Instead, interaction operates at the level of interpretation, where viewers actively negotiate symbolic meanings, emotional atmospheres, and cultural references. Through repeated engagement, users contribute to the stabilization or transformation of narrative significance, effectively becoming co-creators of the aesthetic experience. This interpretive dimension of interaction resonates with traditional aesthetic thought, which emphasizes the participatory role of the audience in completing the work’s meaning.

#### 4.4 Cultural Resonance

Cultural resonance emerges when traditional aesthetics are embedded within narrative logic rather than presented as surface-level decoration or isolated cultural symbols. In the context of interactive short videos, cultural meaning is not transmitted in a fixed or didactic manner. Instead, it develops dynamically through repetition, reinterpretation, and user engagement across platform environments. As the emergent dimension illustrated at the integrative level of Figure 1, cultural resonance is not positioned as a predefined outcome but as a cumulative effect arising from the sustained interaction of aesthetic foundation, narrative structure, and user engagement over time.

By integrating traditional aesthetic principles into visual rhythm, narrative pacing, and interactional structure, short videos may foster a sustained sense of cultural familiarity and emotional recognition. Cultural resonance, in this framework, is understood as an emergent quality that arises over time rather than an immediate communicative outcome. Interactive short videos thus function as cultural spaces where tradition is continually reactivated and recontextualized, enabling traditional aesthetics to remain meaningful within contemporary youth-oriented media cultures.

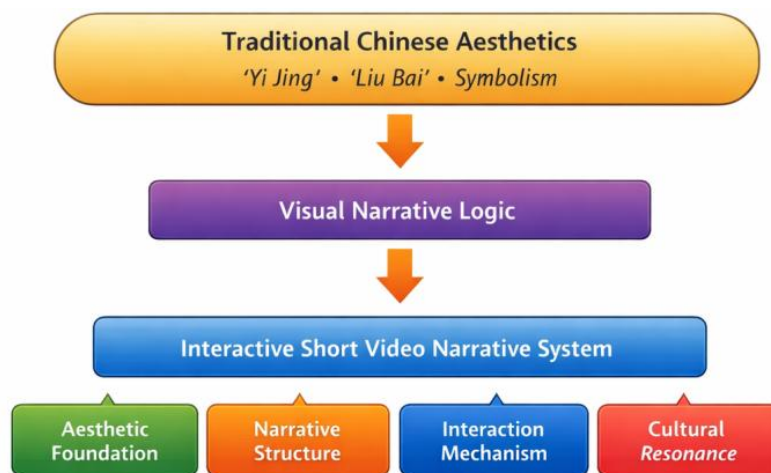


Figure 1: A conceptual framework for integrating traditional Chinese aesthetics into interactive short video narrative design.

### 5. Implications and Extended Discussion

The proposed framework offers several implications for research and practice in the fields of digital arts, cultural communication, and creative industries. By foregrounding aesthetic restraint, symbolic coherence, and atmospheric expression, the framework challenges

spectacle-driven and efficiency-oriented design approaches that dominate many contemporary short video platforms. Rather than privileging visual intensity or rapid narrative resolution, it emphasizes subtle narrative rhythm and interpretive openness as alternative design logics.

From the perspective of digital arts and visual design, this framework suggests that traditional aesthetic principles can function as structural guidance rather than stylistic embellishment. Design elements such as visual pacing, compositional balance, and the strategic use of negative space may be mobilized to shape narrative experience and user engagement. This approach encourages designers and creators to move beyond surface-level cultural symbols and toward more integrated forms of visual storytelling that align aesthetic form with narrative meaning.

In terms of cultural communication, the framework highlights the potential of interactive short videos to operate as sites of cultural reinterpretation rather than simple transmission. Traditional aesthetics are not presented as fixed cultural content to be preserved or replicated, but as dynamic resources that can be rearticulated through contemporary media practices. Such an approach supports culturally grounded creative practices that resonate with younger audiences while avoiding reductive or folklorized representations of tradition (Zeng, 2025).

At the level of creative industries, the framework contributes to ongoing discussions about how cultural value can be generated within platform-based production environments. By integrating traditional aesthetics into narrative logic, short video content may differentiate itself from algorithmically homogenized formats and foster distinctive cultural identities. This has implications for cultural sustainability and the development of creative economies that balance market visibility with cultural specificity (Zhu & Keane, 2023).

More broadly, the framework invites reconsideration of how youth-oriented media practices engage with cultural heritage in digital contexts. Rather than positioning Generation Z as passive recipients of tradition, the model emphasizes their role as active interpreters and co-creators of cultural meaning. In this sense, interactive short videos may serve as participatory spaces where aesthetic experience, cultural identity, and media technology intersect in evolving ways.

## **6. Limitations and Methodological Reflections**

As a conceptual study, this research is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. The most significant limitation concerns the absence of empirical validation. The framework proposed in this paper is derived from theoretical synthesis rather than audience studies, experimental design, or content analysis. While this approach allows for in-depth conceptual exploration, it does not provide direct evidence of how audiences perceive or engage with interactive short videos informed by traditional Chinese aesthetics.

This limitation, however, reflects a deliberate methodological choice rather than an oversight. Conceptual research plays a distinct role within art and cultural studies by offering interpretive frameworks that precede or inform empirical inquiry. In rapidly evolving media environments, such frameworks are particularly valuable for identifying emerging patterns, articulating design logics, and framing research questions that empirical studies may later address. The present study thus prioritizes theoretical clarity and cultural interpretation over empirical generalizability.

Another limitation lies in the platform specificity of the discussion. Although the framework is informed by the characteristics of short video platforms in China, such as Douyin and Bilibili, it does not systematically analyze platform algorithms or governance structures. These factors undoubtedly influence content visibility, interaction patterns, and aesthetic trends. Future research may integrate the proposed framework with platform studies approaches to examine how aesthetic logic interacts with algorithmic systems in shaping narrative circulation.

Cultural context also represents an important boundary. The framework is rooted in traditional Chinese aesthetic philosophy, and its concepts may not translate seamlessly into other cultural traditions. While certain principles—such as non-linearity or participatory interpretation may resonate across contexts, their meanings and implications are culturally contingent. Comparative studies could explore how different aesthetic traditions inform interactive narrative design in diverse cultural settings, thereby testing the adaptability of culturally grounded frameworks.

Finally, the conceptual nature of the framework means that its application depends heavily on interpretation. Designers, scholars, and creators may operationalize its dimensions in different ways, leading to varied outcomes. This openness should be understood as a strength rather than a weakness, as it encourages creative experimentation and theoretical dialogue rather than standardized replication.

By reflecting on these limitations, the study underscores the need for future research that combines conceptual analysis with empirical investigation. Such work may further illuminate how traditional aesthetics function within contemporary digital media practices and how conceptual frameworks can inform both scholarly inquiry and creative production.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study has proposed a conceptual framework for integrating traditional Chinese aesthetics into the visual narrative design of interactive short videos oriented toward Generation Z audiences in China. Rather than approaching traditional aesthetics as decorative motifs or symbolic quotations, the framework reconceptualizes aesthetic principles such as Yi Jing, Liu Bai, and symbolic suggestion as underlying narrative logic that can inform visual structure, interaction, and meaning-making within platform-based media environments.

By bringing together perspectives from visual narrative theory, traditional aesthetic philosophy, and contemporary platform studies, the framework highlights the compatibility between culturally rooted aesthetic thinking and the non-linear, participatory nature of interactive short video formats. In this sense, traditional aesthetics are not positioned in opposition to digital media logic, but are understood as offering alternative modes of narrative organization and experiential engagement that resonate with contemporary youth visual culture.

As a conceptual study, this research does not aim to provide empirical validation but instead seeks to establish an analytical foundation for future investigations. Subsequent research may empirically examine audience reception, compare cross-cultural applications of the framework, or explore how emerging technologies—such as algorithmic curation and generative artificial intelligence—further reshape aesthetic experience and narrative practice. Ultimately, interactive short videos may serve as productive sites for the reinterpretation of

cultural tradition, enabling traditional aesthetics to remain relevant within evolving visual and media landscapes.

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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