
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Visualization of Wu Chinese and Classical Poetry: A Case Study of the “Wu Chinese Reference Book”

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| ABSTRACT

Wu Chinese is a typical regional Chinese dialect. A deep connection exists between its phonological system and classical poetry, but this connection has been gradually weakened in the context of Mandarin. In this study, the Ningbo Wu Chinese is used as a representative example. Issues of Wu Chinese endangerment and knowledge gaps are taken as starting points. On-site fieldwork, interviews, and questionnaires were conducted. The translation of the Wu Chinese phonological system in a visual communication context was examined. A visual design perspective is adopted in this study. Because Wu Chinese is complex and fragmented, the design practice of a “Wu Chinese Reference Book” was chosen as the main approach. The initials, finals, and tones of Wu Chinese are systematically visualized using symbol and layout design methods. The relationship between reading Wu Chinese and the prosody of Tang poems and Song lyrics was also investigated. It was indicated by audience feedback that the reference book is effective in facilitating the learning of Wu Chinese phonological knowledge. It is also effective in reconstructing the prosodic connections between Wu Chinese and classical poetry. It has shown significant effectiveness and potential for dissemination in these aspects.

| KEYWORDS

Ningbo Wu Chinese; phonological aesthetics; symbol design; symbol design; layout design

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Introduction

Wu Chinese has a long history. In literary history, many Tang poems and Song lyrics originally rhymed according to the Wu Chinese phonological system used in the Jiangsu–Zhejiang region. However, with the spread of Mandarin, Mandarin has come to dominate most social contexts. As a result, the use of Wu Chinese among the younger generation has declined. This replacement of phonological systems has caused many classical poems to lose part of their authentic phonological beauty. The public either does not understand Wu Chinese or lacks a medium to directly recognize and perceive Wu Chinese phonologies. The beauty of spoken language needs to be reinterpreted and cognitively reestablished in modern ways. Ningbo is one of the important core regions of Wu Chinese and is highly representative. Therefore, this study uses the Ningbo Wu Chinese as an example. An approach is taken to reconstruct the phonological–prosodic connections between Wu Chinese and traditional poetry by building a visual symbol system for the Wu Chinese phonological system combined with examples of classical poetry. Wu Chinese pronunciation is made more accessible and perceivable by this approach. Aesthetic interest in dialect and traditional poetry among young people can be stimulated. It can enhance cultural identity in the younger generation with respect to dialect and poetry.

1. Research Background and Significance

1.1 Research Background

Wu Chinese is a long-standing dialect and one of the most structurally complex branches of Chinese dialects. Its variable tones and rich initial-final system have long formed the foundation of classical poetry creation and recitation. Many rhyming patterns and tonal meters—ping-ze¹ in Tang and Song poetry were based on the phonological system of the Wu Chinese region. Ningbo, as an important core area of Wu Chinese, has a highly complete and representative dialect system. Research conducted on this basis has practical significance and representative value. However, with the continued expansion of Mandarin in education, media, and public domains, the use of Wu Chinese among the younger generation has rapidly declined. Mandarin's relatively monotonous phonological structure has replaced the original rhythmic cadence of Wu Chinese. This has caused classical poetry to lose part of its authentic phonological beauty in contemporary recitations.

This replacement of phonological systems has caused a two-fold cultural rupture. First, the younger generation finds it difficult to intuitively understand the rhyming logic of Wu Chinese. Wu Chinese itself faces the risk of being lost. Second, the original prosody of classical poetry is altered in Mandarin recitation. The connection between poetry and dialect is thereby weakened.

The dilemma of Wu Chinese dissemination urgently needs solving, and protecting dialects has gradually become a cultural consensus. An increasing number of scholars and cultural institutions have turned attention to dialect cultural protection. It has been pointed out that a dialect is not only a language structure but also carries local oral culture, folklore, regional identity, and social memory. Dialect protection is no longer merely an academic curiosity. It carries responsibility for protecting intangible cultural heritage and the diversity of national and regional cultures.^[1]

Existing Wu Chinese learning resources are mainly aimed at linguistic professionals. For non-expert readers, the threshold is high and they are often unengaged. Visual forms have strong communicative power and broad appeal. They are well-liked by the public.^[2] They can make the Wu Chinese phonological system “visible,” “readable,” and “audible.” This lowers the linguistic barrier and expands the audience. This study attempts to build a bridge between linguistics and visual communication. It seeks to enable Wu Chinese to be understood in a more intuitive and easily disseminated way. Reference books have an overall simplicity and clarity. Thus, a reference book is chosen as the specific design format for propagating Wu Chinese.

1.2 Research Significance

1.2.1 Theoretical Significance

One important significance of this study lies in filling a gap in dialect visual design research. Historically, research on Chinese dialects has lacked visualization practice. It has focused on professional linguistic dimensions, such as specific grammar and language distribution. Visual design aimed at the general public has been relatively scarce. The practice of translating dialect into symbols is quite rare.

In recent years, a few scholars have begun to focus on the visualization of dialects or local culture. Dialects are being integrated as regional cultural symbols into modern life and brand communication.^[3] However, research on systematic visual design and cultural dissemination for phonological system of specific dialect is still in its early stages.^[4] Dialects have lacked systematic visualization practice. Cases combining dialects with traditional literature (such as classical poetry) are even rarer. The connection between them has been obscured.

Therefore, this project transforms the Ningbo Wu Chinese phonological system into visual symbols. It combines these symbols with the rhythms of classical poetry. They are integrated into a visual reference book. This approach not only contributes to documenting and disseminating Wu Chinese, but also provides a systematic and practical new approach to dialect visual design. This interdisciplinary method expands the application of semiotics and design in language and culture. It provides a reference path for the dissemination and revitalization of other Chinese dialects or endangered languages.

¹ *Ping -ze*, the tonal alternation system governing classical Chinese verse. *Ping* means the level tones and *ze* means the oblique tones

1.2.2 Practical Significance

This project designs and produces a “Wu Chinese reference book” aimed at a young audience. The initials, finals, and tones of the Ningbo Wu Chinese dialect are presented through a visual symbol and layout system. The direct and simple nature of a reference book is intended to make Wu Chinese learning easier. This aims to reduce obstacles to the dissemination of Wu Chinese and empower the revival of Wu Chinese and dialects in general. At the same time, this study combines Wu Chinese with classical poetry. It helps young readers perceive the restoration of poetic tonal beauty through Wu Chinese. This is intended to enhance public attention to and love for Wu Chinese and poetry culture. The following three research objectives are thus achieved.

1.3 Research Objectives

1.3.1 Promote Wu Chinese phonological Preservation

The initials, finals, and tones of the Ningbo Wu Chinese dialect are organized into a visual symbol and layout structure. This makes it a “knowledge product” that is accessible to general readers. This reference book lowers the threshold for linguistics. It makes it possible for more people to understand, learn, and use Wu Chinese. Meanwhile, this reference book has a complete system that is broad but not deep in knowledge. It is well-suited to the entry-level needs of the general public.

1.3.2 Restore Aesthetic of Classical Poetry’s Prosody

Additionally, this study combines reading in Wu Chinese with classical poetry. This allows readers to perceive the rhythm and phonological beauty of poetry. It helps readers understand the connection between Wu Chinese and poetry. This is a reconstruction of the traditional literary experience. It not only helps restore the original prosody of poetry, but also provides a more intimate and modern entry point for the dissemination of classical poetry in contemporary times.

1.3.3 Interdisciplinary Practice Inspiration

Language preservation is not only reliant on academic research, but also requires public participation, community involvement, and methods suitable for modern media dissemination.^[5] Through visual design, this study combines linguistics and design. New paths for language visualization and dialect cultural dissemination are explored. Such interdisciplinary practice provides a methodological reference not only for Wu Chinese but also for the protection and dissemination of other languages.

2. Design Process

2.1 Design Positioning and Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Target Users and Design Principles

This project is mainly aimed at the contemporary young demographic. They have strong aesthetic abilities and cultural curiosity. They exhibit high receptivity to printed media culture and strong dissemination capability. They form the main driving force in Wu Chinese cultural revival. In a context of highly developed digital culture, this group tends to acquire knowledge through visual and mediated approaches. They are also adept at using more powerful dissemination means, such as online discussions. Selecting this group as the target users aligns with the project’s cultural preservation goals. It can expand the project’s dissemination effectiveness.

Based on the target users, the design principles must balance directness, readability, seriousness, and aesthetics. First, the Wu Chinese phonological system is inherently complex. If traditional linguistic learning methods are used, Wu Chinese will be difficult for non-professional readers to understand. Therefore, visual design and layout arrangements were chosen to make abstracts such as initials, finals, and tones concrete and visual. Second, Wu Chinese’s prosody has vocal beauty and forms an intertextual relationship with classical poetry. It needs to be “heard.” Thus, poetry readings were used in the design to convey the beauty of Wu Chinese, emphasizing their complementary relationship. This allows readers to construct a multidimensional sensory space. Third, as a regional cultural symbol, the visualization of Wu Chinese must avoid being reduced to decorative images. Thus, the design fully respects the cultural characteristics and phonological structure of the dialect. This ensures the symbol system is rational and not an arbitrary visual collage. Fourth, as an interdisciplinary study, the reference book also incorporates aesthetics. Symbols are designed to make the prosodic beauty of Wu Chinese tangible and to evoke emotional resonance. Through audiovisual combinations, it also helps young people actively perceive beauty during reading. This enhances

their aesthetic experience. Younger users are expected to experience pleasure in visual recognition when browsing the design book. They will be able to learn Wu Chinese knowledge more conveniently and deepen cultural identity, thereby actively disseminating Wu Chinese. These goals form the core objectives of the design principles.

2.1.2 Theoretical Support

The design and dissemination approach of this study was inspired by several classic theories. First, Ferdinand de Saussure’s concepts of signifier and signified were transferred into the design context. A linguistic symbol consists of the signifier (such as sound or pronunciation image) and the signified (meaning or concept). These are arbitrarily linked but together form a social language system.^[6]

In this project, the sound symbol system of Wu Chinese is treated as the signifier, and the prosodic beauty it carries and its connection with classical poetry are the signified. Through visual symbol and layout design, this is visualized, establishing new understanding of the relationship between traditional poetic prosody and Wu Chinese phonology.

Second, at the level of visual expression, the project draws on Kress and van Leeuwen’s theory of “Visual Grammar.” Visual Grammar holds that visual information is not arbitrarily stacked but, like language, has hierarchical and compositional relationships. Basic graphic elements can combine into more complex meaningful units and form stable “readable structures” within a system.^[7] Based on this principle, this project first constructs the most basic visual units with points, lines, and arcs, then combines them into consonant and vowel symbols, and finally combines those into Wu Chinese pinyin. This hierarchical structure from basic units to combined units to complete pinyin allows the Wu Chinese phonological system to be presented more systematically, helping readers establish a more comprehensive understanding of Ningbo Wu Chinese.

Finally, Stuart Hall’s “encoding and decoding” communication model is applied. It emphasizes that communication is a dynamic process of production and interpretation, deeply linked with social structures and ideology.^[8] In this project, Wu Chinese phonology and poetry are “encoded” into visual symbols and ultimately combined into a reference book as a medium. Simplified symbols and explanatory graphics are built to help the readers to decode. Because of cultural differences, readers can construct new meanings based on their own linguistic background, promoting multi-layer dissemination of Ningbo Wu Chinese.

In summary, the theory of signifier and signified laid the foundation for translating Wu Chinese phonology into visual form. Visual grammar theory provided concrete methodology for building the reference book. The encoding and decoding model helps ensure the reference book’s impact. Readers are expected to resonate when using the book, thereby enhancing dissemination effectiveness. Together, these theories support the design framework of this study, demonstrating its theoretical depth and practical operability.

2.2 Construction of the Visual Symbol System

2.2.1 Basic Symbols and Combination Logic

In constructing the visual symbol system, a set of basic graphic elements was first established using points, lines, and arcs as simple geometric units. These elements were used to design the 26 basic letters (Figure 1). This approach is intended to reflect the tonal sensibility of Wu Chinese, which is gentle and fluid yet with pronounced inflections. Curves and arcs are employed to simulate the flowing and continuous nature of Wu Chinese pronunciation. Straight lines and points capture the pauses and accents in the sound rhythm. Through the clever combination of these basic graphic elements, the symbols achieve a simple aesthetic that resonates with the language’s rhythm. A unified visual style is provided for further combinations.

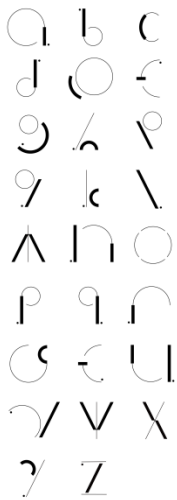


Figure 1. Basic letters

In designing the consonant symbols, voicing contrast was used as the entry point. Voiced consonants were taken as the standard symbols to construct each consonant's shape (Figure 2). The symbols for voiceless consonants (unvoiced or aspirated) and voiced consonants share the same base shape. They are differentiated only by color transparency. A transparency of 30% is used for voiceless consonant symbols to simulate their clear, tenuous sound, distinguishing them from the voiced symbols. This makes the distinction between voiceless and voiced consonants immediately clear.

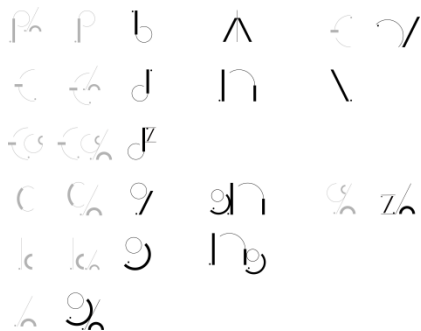


Figure 2. Consonant symbols

The vowel symbols are divided into three categories, each with an appropriate form to reflect its phonological features. The open-vowel (kaiping yun)² are smooth and stable, and they were used as standardized symbols (Figure 3). Nasalized vowels(bihua yun)³ have pronunciations that are delicate, soft, and short. In their visual design, short arcs and circles are used as the main shapes to convey a soft sound texture (Figure 4). For the stop-final vowels(seyin yun)⁴, a straight-line truncation is used to represent the sudden closure at the end of the syllable, making the symbol shapes relatively compact with an obvious sense of closure, simulating the abruptness of the sound (Figure 5). These three categories of vowel symbols have distinct styles and systematic features. Open-vowel symbols are calm and expansive. Nasal vowel symbols are round and reserved. Stop-final symbols are concise and compact. The different styles highlight the pronunciation differences of each category while ensuring consistency within the same category. This achieves both visual aesthetic harmony and conveys information about the Wu Chinese phonological system.

² In Ningbo Wu, kai-ping rhyme refers to syllables that belong to the open-mouth (kai) articulation type and the level (ping) tonal category, typically characterized by an unrounded vowel nucleus and a historically non-obstructed final.

³ In Ningbo Wu, nasalized rhymes refer to syllables whose vowel nuclei are phonemically nasalized, either due to historical nasal codas or as a result of systematic vowel nasalization in the modern dialect.

⁴ In Ningbo Wu, stop-final rhymes refer to syllables that historically end in unreleased oral stops (-p, -t, -k), typically associated with the checked (ru) tonal category, and realized with abrupt syllable closure rather than an audible final consonant release.

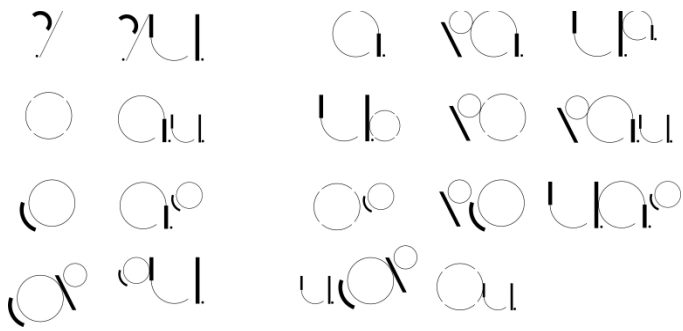


Figure 3. *kaiping yun*

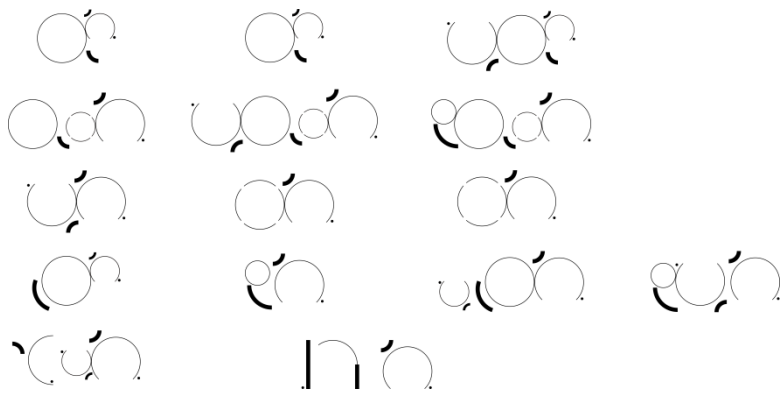


Figure 4. *bihua yun*

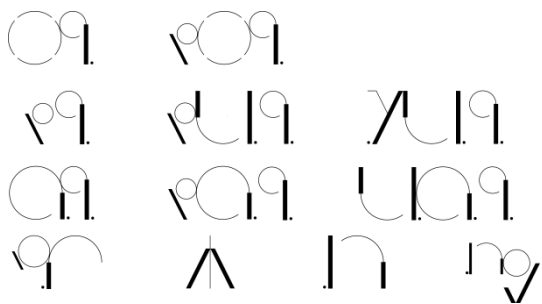


Figure 5. *seyin yun*

Based on the above consonant and vowel systems, each Wu Chinese pinyin can be formed by combining the corresponding consonant symbol and vowel symbol. The unified basic symbols of points, lines, and arcs allow the overall symbol forms to be consistent and easily readable. They achieve visual harmony and convey information about the Wu Chinese phonological system through the phonological symbols.

2.2.2 Hierarchical Design Strategy

This project adopts a three-layer hierarchical design strategy to ensure the logic of the visual symbol system is clear and the style is unified. (Figure 6)

Wu Chinese Phonetic System

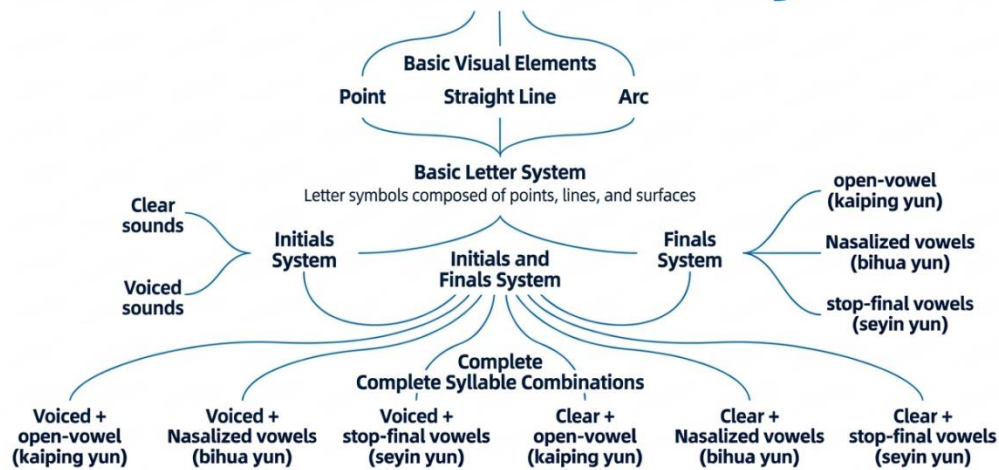


Figure 6

The first layer is the basic letters. Points, lines, arcs, and other basic visual elements form the 26 basic letters. Their style is consistent, and their shapes are simple and flexible. They provide the visual foundation for the entire pinyin system.

The second layer consists of consonant and vowel components. Basic Latin letters are arranged and combined into consonant and vowel shapes. These components directly derive from the basic letters, but are not simple combinations of them. Variations in density and size of the basic letters are used to coordinate the visual aesthetics of these secondary symbols. At the same time, subtle structural deformations differentiate between voiceless and voiced consonants and among open, nasal, and stop vowels. Through these deformations reflecting the sounds of consonants and vowels, the second layer gives each phonological element distinguishable features while maintaining visual unity. The third layer is the complete syllable. This layer combines one consonant component and one vowel component to form a complete single-character pinyin symbol.

The relationships between the layers are progressive and closely connected. The first layer provides a unified visual foundation. The second layer performs functional differentiation on this basis. The third layer integrates elements from the first two layers into complete pinyin symbols with color decoration. Through this step-by-step design, the symbol system progresses from simple to complex in an orderly structure, making it easy to understand. The basic letter layer ensures a consistent aesthetic. The consonant and vowel layer gives the *pinyin* symbols not only decorative form but also symbolic meaning. The complete pinyin layer makes the visual design directly correspond to actual text, helping the design to be implemented. The entire system has strong logic, making the design recognizable and easy to understand.

2.2.3 Design Challenges and Solutions

The challenge of this project was how to reflect the characteristics of different consonant and vowel symbols while maintaining visual consistency. After a series of trials, the "direct deformation" design approach was finally settled upon. To address the difficulties during this process, solutions were proposed at different stages. (Figure 7)



(Figure 7)

First, an "explanatory symbol" strategy was attempted. Considering that direct deformation based on consonant or vowel features might lead to visual confusion, an exploration was made into using explanatory symbols to represent sound features (Figure 8). Initially, a series of markers was attached to main symbols to systematically express differences such as voicing, nasality, and stops. However, during implementation it was found that when each syllable symbol was broken into a main symbol and several modifiers, the visual elements increased and the symbols became cluttered. It was realized that although this method was theoretically systematic, it was not effective in practice. Users would need to expend extra effort to understand the annotation relationships of the symbols. The symbols appeared somewhat redundant and did not improve the efficiency of understanding Wu Chinese.

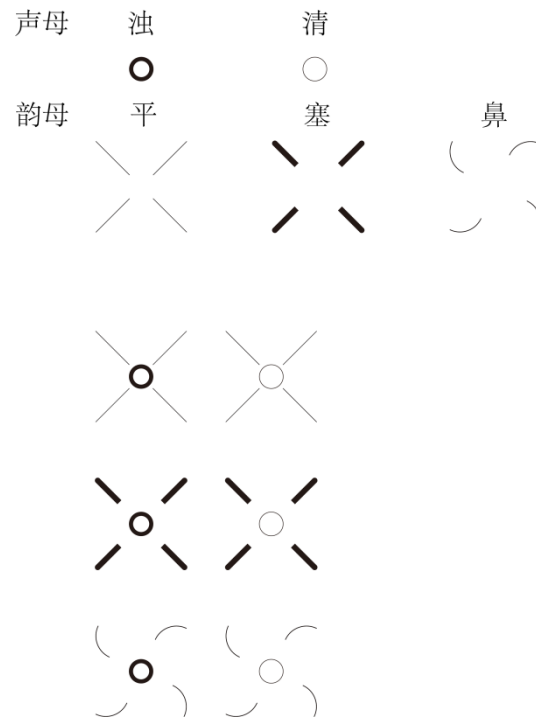


Figure 8

Based on this, an attempt was made to return to basic shapes. Faced with the limitations of the modifier scheme, basic shapes were used to reconstruct the consonant and vowel symbols. However, this again led to the initial concern — direct deformation could weaken visual consistency. The underlying reason was that the designer had mistakenly equated the visual basic symbols with Wu Chinese’s basic symbols. The 26 letters were just a basic component in the design system, whereas Wu Chinese’s basic symbols are consonants and vowels. Variation in the features of different consonants and vowels causes changes in the letters themselves. As shown by the difference between the two forms of “n” in Figure 9, the basic symbols generated multiple forms, leading to visual confusion. If the basic symbols are instead taken as consonants and vowels, the dependence on Latin letter shapes is solved, and focus can shift to recombining points, lines, and arcs.

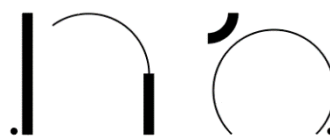


Figure 9. Two variants of “n”

Based on this, the designer conducted an in-depth study of the phonological structure and rhythmic features of Wu Chinese. Symbols were directly deformed according to these characteristics (Figures 2–5). For example, soft continuous curves represent the softness of nasal rhymes. Rhythmic zigzag and bold straight-line elements represent the abruptness of stop rhymes. This phase produced a series of entirely new consonant and vowel symbols. They simultaneously embody phonological characteristics and a unified design logic. Under this approach, the symbol system achieves self-sufficient information expression without the need for external markers. For readers, once a few deformation rules are mastered, many symbols can be understood by analogy. This greatly reduces the difficulty of reading the reference book.

3. Conclusions and Reflection

3.1 Research Summary and Main Contributions

This study takes the connection between Ningbo Wu Chinese and classical poetry prosody as its starting point. It reconstructs the association between the Wu Chinese phonological system and the sound beauty of classical poetry through reference book

design. Street interviews, in-depth personal interviews, and questionnaires were used to clarify the learning pain points of the target users. The research results were used to optimize the design of the reference book. The reference book focuses on visual design practice. It translates the initials, finals, and tones of Ningbo Wu Chinese into a systematic visual symbol system. A set of Wu Chinese reference books was designed, incorporating Tang poems and Song lyrics. Audience feedback shows that this reference book has significant effects and dissemination potential in promoting Wu Chinese phonological learning and restoring the prosodic aesthetics of classical poetry. According to questionnaire feedback, most readers' understanding of the Wu Chinese phonological system increased by 40% after reading. Their understanding of the level and meter of poetry increased by nearly 50%.

Theoretically, this study fills a gap in the field of dialect visual design. It expands the application of semiotics and design in language and cultural protection. Dialects are innovatively combined with Tang poetry and Song lyrics, integrating a literary quality into design. This provides a reference for interdisciplinary integration between design and other disciplines. Practically, this study disseminates Wu Chinese and helps young people learn Wu Chinese. It provides a systematic and user-friendly new method for the preservation and innovation of Wu Chinese and other Chinese dialects.

3.2 Limitations and Future Work

Despite these achievements, limitations remain. First, in terms of scope, only the Ningbo Wu Chinese dialect was used as a representative design case, and differences in other Wu dialect regions were not included. The scope of research is relatively limited and lacks universality and comprehensiveness. Second, the sample size for preliminary surveys and audience feedback was limited. It is difficult to fully capture all user experiences. Finally, in terms of final presentation, the current result is primarily a static print reference book with limited interactivity. Its appeal to a young generation accustomed to digital media needs to be improved. Interactive dynamic multi-sensory devices need to be developed.

To address these limitations, future work can further expand the research scope. Comparative analysis of phonological features from other Wu dialect regions can be included to improve the completeness and applicability of the Wu Chinese visual symbol system. Methodologically, user research and evaluation can be enhanced. Collecting usage feedback on a larger scale will allow deeper understanding of user pain points. This will continuously optimize the readability of visual design. In terms of presentation, more digital methods can be introduced. For example, audio QR codes can be added to the reference book, or a supporting app can be developed, or offline interactive installations can be created. These can better combine the symbol system with sound, increasing interactivity and interest in the learning process. These improvements will help refine the research results and improve their dissemination effectiveness across different audiences and media.

3.3 General Significance of Dialect visual design Method

The “dialect visual design method that starts from phonological features and constructs a visual symbol system” proposed by this study has universal significance. It visualizes complex phonological systems into easy-to-recognize visual symbols. This lowers the threshold for dialect learning and provides a reference for other dialect cultural protection projects. The method takes the Wu Chinese phonological system as a base, making abstract phonological features intuitive through visual symbols. This helps user understanding and increases interest during learning. This method is highly transferable. Many dialects have phonological structures that can be visually translated using similar approaches. This systematic method provides new ideas for dialect protection. It converts specialized linguistic and literary knowledge into a visual form that is easy for the public to understand. This evokes more public interest and resonance with dialect culture. It also overcomes the limitations of traditional dialect dissemination. The method is not limited to Wu Chinese; it can be transferred to other Chinese dialects and even endangered languages. It can play a role in broader cultural preservation and dissemination projects.

4. Conclusion

According to UNESCO, about 40% of the nearly 6000 languages worldwide are at risk of extinction. Chinese dialects face similar issues of intergenerational transmission gaps. Dialect preservation is an urgent problem to be solved. Visual methods, being popular with the public, will play an increasingly important role in dialect preservation. Looking to the future, dialect visualization research has broad prospects. On one hand, the approach of this project can be extended to other Wu dialect areas or even different Chinese dialect regions, providing a systematic approach for dialect revitalization. On the other hand, advances in science and technology are injecting new momentum into the protection of Wu Chinese and other dialects. Emerging media such as AI language maps, mobile apps, AR, VR, and audiovisual interactive devices are becoming increasingly advanced. Static

printed resources can be better transformed into vivid digital interactions, greatly increasing user participation and learning interest. In the future, digital reference books or interactive platforms for the public, especially adolescents, can be developed. Combining audio-visual animation, games, and other elements can make dialect learning and experience more approachable. In summary, dialect visualization must balance cultural mission and technological innovation. Various design methods and technical means should be actively employed to empower dialect protection. At the same time, the cultural connotations of dialects should be respected. Innovation should not detach from cultural attributes. Dialect visualization research should be advanced to contribute to the inheritance and sustainable development of traditional languages.

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