

Design Regeneration of Southern Song Urban Folk Culture Memory from the Perspective of the Aestheticization of Everyday Life

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Abstract: This study aims to delve into the intrinsic coupling between the aestheticization of everyday life and the cultural memory of urban folk life during the Southern Song Dynasty, with the goal of realizing the design regeneration of this cultural heritage in contemporary Hangzhou and ultimately shaping and promoting the aesthetics of “Hangzhou-style life.” By constructing a three-dimensional communication framework of “cultural symbols – consumer scenarios – exhibition experiences,” the study first establishes memory anchors for Southern Song urban folk culture. On this basis, it elevates consumer behavior into aesthetic experience and further dismantles the binary opposition between creator and viewer through interactive exhibitions, thereby promoting both the democratization of individual aesthetic experience and the popularization of collective aesthetic consciousness.

Keywords: the aestheticization of everyday life, urban folk culture, design regeneration

1. Introduction

The Southern Song Dynasty witnessed economic prosperity and a wealthy society, nurturing a luxurious yet refined aesthetic of everyday life. This aesthetic was reflected not only in literati works but also deeply embedded in the daily scenes of urban life. The Song people's pursuit of “elegance” stemmed from their emphasis on quality of life and spiritual depth, embodying a profound cultural self-confidence. In recent years, the “Southern Song Charm Cultural Heritage Project” has focused on excavating, preserving, and studying this cultural heritage, striving to integrate the aesthetic ideals of Southern Song life into contemporary Hangzhou living. Its core lies in transcending the boundaries between art and the everyday, reactivating the historical memory condensed in urban folk culture, and revitalizing traditional aesthetics with contemporary vitality. A deeper exploration of Southern Song urban folk culture not only contributes to enhancing Hangzhou's cultural identity but also infuses contemporary life with historical depth and spiritual substance, thereby achieving an organic integration of tradition and modernity.

The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs once insightfully observed that “the past is not preserved but reconstructed on the basis of the present” [1]. This view reveals the essential nature of memory: our understanding of history is not a simple process of preservation and reproduction, but a dynamic reconstruction grounded in contemporary contexts and future aspirations. In this reconstructive process, historical content is endowed with new meanings and values. Today, amid economic development and evolving public aesthetics, re-examining the cultural memory of Southern

Song urban life offers a return to authentic roots. This reflection not only deepens the inheritance of traditional Chinese culture but also significantly contributes to the aesthetic development of contemporary everyday life.

2. The aesthetic of Southern Song urban folk life and its cultural memory

2.1. The features of Southern Song urban life

The term “urban folk life” first appeared in the *Guo Yu·Qi Yu*, where the expression "dealing with official duties in government offices and conducting business in the marketplace" revealed the locations where artisans and merchants gathered in ancient urban life [2]. During the Han and Tang Dynasties, cities were governed by a strict system of wards and markets, with "wards" designated for residential areas and "markets" for commercial activities, and the spaces for the two were clearly separated. By the Northern Song Dynasty, this structure was disrupted, with wards and markets becoming mixed, walls demolished, and commercial activities thriving, which led to the rise of a consumer culture primarily driven by the urban middle class. As material living standards improved, citizens began to pursue a higher level of spiritual life, with the aesthetic tastes of the Southern Song literati becoming their model. This shift in social trends gradually moved from being dominated by aristocratic elites to a more urban, secular orientation. As a result, a unique aesthetic style emerged during the Southern Song: “the fusion of the elegant and the popular, where both can be appreciated.” Whether among ordinary citizens or merchants, there was a conscious pursuit of beauty. This aesthetic awareness manifested not only in daily objects like food, clothing, housing, and transportation but also permeated commercial exchanges and social interactions. From the bustling marketplaces to refined handicrafts, from literary creations to the details of daily life, everything reflected a lifestyle blending both elegance and popular appeal. Therefore, urban folk culture transcended its mere economic function and became an important carrier of the era’s memory and cultural emotions. It not only sustained the social landscape of a particular historical period but also laid the foundation for the interaction between the refined and the popular in traditional Chinese aesthetics, having a profound impact on future generations. This transformation not only reflects the robust development of urban economies but also marks a critical shift in Chinese social aesthetics, from the elite to the masses.

2.2. The aesthetic connection to everyday life in Southern Song urban folk culture

With the global economic transformation, the cultural industry has become a new growth engine. The upgrade in consumption has driven cultural demands to shift from material to spiritual realms, awakening public aesthetic consciousness. The trend of the “aestheticization of everyday life” has become increasingly evident, with aesthetic value now being a core dimension of modern consumer culture. The aestheticization of everyday life refers to the expansion of aesthetic activities from traditional art forms to all aspects of daily life, turning everyday life itself into both an aesthetic object and an aesthetic experience. As Mike Featherstone pointed out in *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, the emergence of the aestheticization of everyday life cannot be separated from the development of consumer culture [3]. The Southern Song citizen class's pursuit of a high quality of life and cultural experience has an essential continuity with contemporary consumer culture. Both reflect the upgrading of people's spiritual needs and personalized consumption following economic development, showcasing the historical adaptability of consumer culture. The aesthetics of Southern Song life closely align with contemporary theories of the “aestheticization of everyday life”: both advocate for aesthetics emerging from and integrating with life, expanding aesthetics from high art to everyday domains. This democratization of aesthetics gives urban folk culture the characteristic of “blending elegance and popularity,” where both Southern Song urban scenes and modern consumer

environments reflect the public's conscious pursuit of life aesthetics. In the modern consumer society, the memory of Southern Song urban folk culture is being carried forward in new forms. By combining the “elegant” life attitude of the Southern Song with contemporary life symbols, it becomes possible to break the boundaries between art and everyday life. This cross-temporal aesthetic dialogue not only activates the genetic core of traditional culture but also injects historical depth into modern life, forming a consumption aesthetic paradigm that incorporates both cultural heritage and contemporary innovation.

2.3. The cultural memory of Southern Song urban life

Although the urban life of the Southern Song Dynasty has long passed, it still carries the wisdom and aesthetic consciousness of the people of that historical period, becoming an important cultural symbol that links local emotions. This collective cultural memory not only records the lifestyles of the time but also encapsulates the values of an era. As a significant component of traditional Chinese cultural memory, Southern Song urban folk culture provides abundant creative inspiration for contemporary design practice. Through excavating and reconstructing these cultural memories, traditional elements can be reactivated in modern contexts, continuing historical narratives and offering unique aesthetic references for innovative design, thus achieving the creative transformation of cultural memory.

Southern Song urban folk culture has built a complete cultural memory system through classical texts (such as *Meng Liang Lu* and *Wu Lin Old Matters*) and surviving paintings (like *The Gathering of Scholars* and *The Boiling of Wine*). Entertainment spaces such as tea houses and inns nurtured the elegant customs of tea ceremonies and incense burning, while folk crafts such as sugar figurine blowing and dough figurine molding preserved the raw authenticity of urban life. Specialty shops like the Chen Family Silk Shop and the Shu Family Paper Craft Shop merged commerce with the arts of living, forming a cultural ecosystem that integrated spatial places, life skills, and business forms, vividly reflecting the “elegant and popular” qualities of Southern Song urban life. In recent years, classic paintings like *The Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival* and *The Peddler* have enjoyed renewed popularity, and their cultural elements have been creatively reinterpreted in modern cultural products such as CGTN's *A Millennium of Elegance: Song Dynasty Portraits* and the Hangzhou branch of the National Library of China. This creative transformation, centered on the Southern Song's aesthetic, explores the urban folk charm of tea houses and inns, refines the elegant atmosphere of tea and wine culture, and integrates traditional aesthetic symbols into contemporary cultural products. This not only shapes the “Hangzhou-style life” brand but also promotes the aesthetic education of citizens. Such cultural regeneration not only strengthens contemporary cultural identity but also enhances urban sophistication. Through the extension of the cultural and creative industry chain, it achieves a dual increase in cultural and economic value, ultimately forming a virtuous interaction between traditional and modern aesthetics.

3. Contemporary regeneration pathways for the cultural memory of Southern Song urban folk life

The contemporary regeneration of the cultural memory of Southern Song urban folk life is essentially a dynamic transformation process from symbolic decoding to collective co-creation. The core of this process lies in constructing a three-dimensional communication system of “cultural symbols - consumption scenes - exhibition experiences,” forming a revitalization loop for cultural memory. This system first extracts key cultural symbols, such as the architecture of tea houses and the rituals of tea ceremonies and incense burning, and transforms them into modern visual identifiers and functional carriers, establishing memory anchors for urban folk culture. Then, it transforms commercial spaces into immersive cultural realms, elevating consumer behavior into an aesthetic experience. Finally,

through interactive exhibitions, the binary opposition between creators and spectators is broken, promoting "collective aesthetic co-creation." This progressive mechanism of "memory decoding - scene empowerment - participatory co-creation" not only achieves the infiltration of individual aesthetic enlightenment into collective cultural identity but also reconstructs the expression of traditional urban aesthetics using contemporary design languages, making cultural memory truly integrate into the fabric of modern life. Ultimately, it forms a cultural reproduction ecosystem with sustainable innovation capabilities.

3.1. Focus on core symbols

According to Saussure's theory of semiotics, the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified provides theoretical support for the innovative translation of regional cultural symbols, opening up pathways for the contemporary regeneration of Southern Song urban folk culture memory. This arbitrariness allows the cultural symbols of Southern Song urban folk life to break free from historical constraints and engage with modern consumers' perceptions in new forms. On the level of cultural symbol association, these symbols serve as "memory anchors" in the minds of consumers, triggering cultural association networks. Therefore, symbols, as the smallest units of cultural memory, are the foundation for the contemporary regeneration of cultural memory [4]. Take the example of the white walls and black tiles of the Jiangnan region; their color and form, as regional cultural symbols, once cultivated traditional aesthetic consciousness. In contemporary times, these symbols are integrated into modern architecture and objects through design translation, retaining the original aesthetic genes while developing new aesthetic paradigms—without deliberately seeking retro styles, yet deeply rooted in the nation's aesthetic core. This process achieves the continuation and regeneration of cultural memory from history to the present, infusing traditional aesthetics with new vitality in modern life.

As a key medium for the regeneration of cultural memory, contemporary design decodes, reorganizes, and regenerates the symbols of Southern Song urban folk culture, transforming abstract aesthetics into perceivable visual languages and creating "material containers" for traditional aesthetic genes. For example, incorporating elements from storefronts and objects into modern cultural design preserves elements like curved eaves, while using minimalist lines to express them in modern aesthetic terms. This translation is not a simple replication; it extends the symbolic meaning of the symbols across time—from the "traditional meaning" of black tiles (functional use) to the "contemporary meaning" (symbolizing Eastern aesthetic spirit), allowing cultural memory to find new interpretive spaces in consumer contexts. In the consumption process, these translated cultural symbols become touchpoints for activating memories. Consumers trigger cultural associations with the Southern Song urban life through multi-sensory experiences such as the modern reinterpretation of object shapes, innovative applications of traditional colors, and contemporary narratives of urban folk stories. This "memory resonance" not only meets modern functional demands but also subtly continues historical cultural memory. Through constructing a virtuous cycle of symbol innovation, memory activation, and cultural regeneration, the cultural memory of Southern Song urban folk life can be actively passed down in contemporary society, providing a practical path for the sustainable development of traditional culture.

3.2. Reconstruction of consumption contexts

Baudrillard's consumption theory reveals the essence of consumption behavior as symbolic operation, where products not only meet material needs but also serve as carriers of cultural memory and emotional experience [5]. Contemporary brands transform cultural connotations into aesthetic experiences through product design, establishing emotional connections while meeting functional

needs. For example, Shiseido integrates Japanese aesthetics into its commercial practices, making the consumption process a vehicle for cultural cultivation. When constructing consumption contexts based on Southern Song urban folk culture, it is necessary to guide consumers to deeply decode symbolic meanings through background narratives and interactive experiences. When consumers understand the historical context and humanistic spirit, cultural memory transcends superficial perception and forms a contemporary cognitive framework. This resonance allows the aesthetic tastes of the Southern Song to naturally integrate into modern life, realizing the creative transformation of cultural memory—both continuing historical genes and activating contemporary value, ultimately achieving the dual empowerment of cultural inheritance and consumption upgrade.

Design plays a key role in integrating cultural memory into modern life scenarios by reconstructing traditional aesthetic symbols. For example, the ice-crack pattern of the Southern Song "Ding Kiln Plate" has evolved into the "Song-style open-crack pattern" on Starbucks cup sleeves. When a programmer holds a coffee cup, tradition and modernity merge at that moment. This translation is not a simple cultural transplant but rather brings the patterns of blue bricks into community pavement tiles and infuses urban aesthetics into daily goods, forming a unique "new urban aesthetic." Modern design provides cultural symbols with new temporal positioning, guiding consumers to immerse themselves in the cultural context of the Southern Song through diversified cultural products. When historical memory is awakened, traditional aesthetics naturally transform into contemporary lifestyles. This upgrade from "functional consumption" to "aesthetic experience" not only continues cultural genes but also satisfies modern needs, ultimately achieving the creative regeneration of cultural memory—breathing new life into dormant history in modern life.

3.3. Promoting public participation

Design regeneration, through the creation of scenes and cultural experiences, transforms citizens into active constructors of cultural memory. This process forms a progressive communication chain of "appreciating beauty - using beauty - experiencing beauty": static symbols evoke aesthetic perception, cultural consumption achieves functional transformation, and immersive participation turns individuals into organic components of aesthetic communication. Through dynamic interpretations of historical contexts, everyday life spaces are reconstructed as living exhibition domains of Southern Song aesthetics. In a "experience-first" consumer context, the path to realizing the value of cultural consumption extends from the material level to the symbolic spiritual level. Deep experiences stimulate individual interpretations of cultural connotations through three dimensions: tactile perception, situational interaction, and meaning reconstruction. This embodied cognitive approach satisfies the spiritual needs for emotional resonance and identity recognition among consumers, and forms a feedback loop of "individual practice - collective memory," upgrading cultural communication from one-way output to a co-creation and sharing ecosystem, ultimately achieving the organic integration of historical aesthetics and modern life. This process aligns with the experiential learning theory proposed by American educator David Kolb in the 1970s [6]. Through repeated exposure and deep engagement, Southern Song urban folk culture gradually becomes internalized into the public's cognitive system. Each instance of cultural consumption and interaction serves as immersive learning, subtly establishing emotional connections and cultural identity. This continuous cultural immersion drives the transformation of historical memory into contemporary life practices, forming a cultural expression that combines traditional depth and modern traits, achieving the living inheritance of historical memory.

The Gongchen Bridge Lantern Festival, through its four-dimensional spatial narrative, breaks through the flat expression of traditional historical symbols: citizens walk through the restored Southern Song streets and alleys, enthusiasts of Hanfu carry lanterns while touring the park, recreating the bustling urban life atmosphere with the sounds of street vendors selling various goods.

This immersive scene not only dissolves the boundaries of time and space between the past and present but also transforms historical memory into a tangible aesthetic of daily life through bodily practices. This model achieves twofold innovation: first, using public spaces as a medium, it establishes an "aesthetic co-creation" mechanism through mass participation, elevating Gongchen Bridge from a physical landmark to a cultural spiritual carrier; second, through interactive engagement, such as role-playing and object use, citizens absorb the essence of traditional aesthetics while injecting contemporary creativity, forming a "cultural stem cell" ecosystem capable of self-renewal. This bottom-up aesthetic growth allows Southern Song life wisdom to rejuvenate in a modern context, while nurturing a new paradigm of urban spirit that merges historical depth with innovative vitality. This ultimately completes the loop from cultural consumption to value reproduction.

4. Conclusion

The logical chain from the regeneration of Southern Song urban folk culture memory to the aestheticization of daily life encompasses two major aspects: "cultural reconstruction" and "aesthetic practice," ultimately serving the cyclical system of "Hangzhou-style life creation." In the realm of cultural reconstruction, urban folk culture memory, as the source, carries the local history and life wisdom of the city. In the realm of aesthetic practice, through integrating Southern Song urban life aesthetics into contemporary aesthetic expressions, the goal of aestheticizing the public's daily life can be achieved. Moreover, the practical outcomes of "aestheticizing daily life," such as citizens' recognition of Hangzhou-style life, will, in turn, feed back into urban folk culture, forming a virtuous cycle. Citizens generate new cultural demands and creative expressions through their aestheticized lives, and these demands and expressions become the fresh blood for the development of urban folk culture today, continuously driving the iterative upgrade of Hangzhou-style life and forming the current cultural memory of urban folk life. This symbiotic mechanism between cultural memory and life aesthetics not only realizes the creative transformation of historical resources into modern values but also, through the "decoding - reconstruction - feedback" cycle, ensures the living inheritance of Southern Song urban folk culture in contemporary society. Ultimately, it forms a self-renewing cultural ecosystem for the city of Hangzhou, providing an aesthetic solution that blends historical depth with innovative vitality for modern urban life.

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