

Creative Practice and Exploration of Hand-drawn Library Visual Design: A Case Study of Tsinghua University (Postprint)

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] To explore the practical experience of university libraries employing hand-drawn visual arts for cultural and creative design initiatives.

[Method/Process] Utilizing the case study methodology, this paper analyzes the practical concepts and processes of the “Hand-drawn Library” project at Tsinghua University, investigates the application of multi-dimensional information—including architectural design, cultural history, resources, and functions—into cultural and creative design practice, and evaluates the effectiveness of narrative-based visual design creativity in disseminating library culture.

[Results/Conclusion] Hand-drawn library works have demonstrated significant effectiveness in propagating library cultural history and popularizing resource functions. The cultural and creative format combining traditional and digital elements has gained recognition from readers, and the integrated online-offline multimedia approach proves to be an effective communication method for cultural and creative promotion. The application of hand-drawn visual arts to library cultural creation holds broad prospects and carries significant implications for cultural inheritance and innovation in higher education institutions.

Full Text

Preamble

Exploring Creativity and Practice in Hand-Drawn Library Visual Design: A Case Study of Tsinghua University

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Abstract: [Purpose/Significance] This study explores the practical experience of applying hand-drawn visual arts to cultural creative design in university libraries. [Method/Process] Using case study methodology, we analyze the conceptualization and implementation process of Tsinghua University’s “Hand-Drawn Library” project, examining how multidimensional information—including architectural design, cultural history, resources, and functions—was integrated into cultural creative design practice, and evaluate the effectiveness of narrative-based visual design in disseminating library culture. [Result/Conclusion] The hand-drawn library works have played a significant role in propagating library cultural history and popularizing resources and functions. The combination of traditional and digital creative formats has gained recognition from readers, and the integration of online and offline media has proven to be an effective communication strategy. Applying hand-drawn visual arts to library cultural creation offers broad potential and holds important significance for cultural inheritance and innovation in higher education.

Keywords: university library; cultural creativity; visual design; hand-drawn art; case study **Classification Number:** G250 **DOI:** 10.13266/j.issn.0252-3116.2021.05.007

Cultural creative works, abbreviated as “cultural creations,” differ conceptually from “cultural products.” The latter generally refers to cultural creative works that have undergone commercialization and industrialization processes. Since this discussion does not involve market transformation, we collectively refer to them as cultural creative works. These works can be categorized into traditional and digital formats based on their carriers. According to literature and website surveys, public libraries are generally active in the traditional cultural creation domain, with some generating economic benefits. For example, the National Library operates an online store on Taobao selling book-related merchandise. Liu Hao and Ma Qing’s research on Taiwan’s cultural products found that libraries there engaged in cultural product development early and accumulated considerable experience in product design and R&D models. Wang Yi and Ke Ping surveyed ten representative foreign public libraries, discovering diverse and creative products that yielded good economic and social benefits. University libraries, however, have lagged in the commercialization and scaling of traditional cultural products for various reasons. Comparatively, university libraries have been more active in digital cultural creation, producing excellent works including online videos, animation, games, and creative designs, such as Tsinghua University’s “Falling in Love with the Library” short videos and shelving games, Peking University Library’s mobile game “First Encounter with the Library,” and Wuhan University Library’s cartoon character “Xiaobu” for service promotion.

Hand-drawn works, valued for their originality and artistic appeal, represent a widely used form in cultural creation. Traditional hand-drawing employs physical materials and paper, while new digital hand-drawing utilizes computers,

specialized drawing tablets, and pressure-sensitive pens. Wang Weirong notes that “hand-drawn illustration, as an expression combining artistry, emotion, commercialism, and accessibility, serves as an effective means for cultural products to convey brand emotions, shape cultural images, and establish brand personality, holding significant research value for cultural dissemination, historical inheritance, and brand building.” The library field has seen some outstanding hand-drawn applications, such as Xiamen University Library’s 2013 “Tuna · Time” project, which extracted graduates’ borrowing histories, library entry records, and thesis topics for hand-drawn graphic design, creating a literary and artistic website that became a model for university graduation season activities. Public libraries have also reported well-received hand-drawn cultural creation cases, such as Xiamen Library’s 2014 hand-drawn map for reading promotion, which achieved outstanding social impact. However, most domestic library hand-drawn designs remain superficial, limited to architectural appearances or special collections, lacking comprehensive and systematic research-based excavation of libraries’ rich cultural connotations, thus offering considerable room for development.

2. Tsinghua University Hand-Drawn Library Project: Creativity and Practice

Tsinghua University Library boasts a century-long history, distinctive architecture, profound cultural heritage, and comprehensive resources and functions, serving as a composite carrier of academia and culture containing abundant creative material. From 2019 to 2020, supported by the National Undergraduate Innovation Training Program, Tsinghua University Library instructors guided twelve undergraduate students from different majors in innovative practice. The team attempted to break through current expressive limitations in library cultural design, conducting in-depth exploration of both form and content, ultimately spending one year creating and releasing a systematic creative design work centered on four “Hand-Drawn Library” story-scrolls with a series of derivative products. Through clear information integration and vivid visual expression, these works provided an intuitive and comprehensive artistic representation of Tsinghua Library, generating enthusiastic response among faculty and students and significant social impact. According to incomplete statistics (as of October 20, 2020), the Hand-Drawn Library project has garnered approximately 200,000 WeChat reads and over 1,400 Weibo reposts, attracting attention and interviews from *Beijing Daily*. This represents a typical case of cultural creative design and communication. Given that existing research on library cultural creation often focuses on macro-level discussions of policy and institutions, “lacking micro-level implementation pathways for reference,” this paper aims to share the innovative practice concepts and experiences for peer exchange.

2.1 Project Plan

While investigating and mining library content materials, team members conducted brainstorming sessions on creative design forms. Based on analysis of existing cultural design cases, the project's practical positioning, and the presentation characteristics of communication platforms, the team determined a design scheme featuring hand-drawn long-scrolls as the main body with cultural derivative products as supplements. They established a creation schedule and publicity plan, with final project evaluation based on platform data and reader questionnaires.

2.2 Design Scheme

2.2.1 Design Framework The Tsinghua University Library system comprises the main library (including three relatively independent yet interconnected buildings: Old Library, West Library, and North Library), six specialized libraries (Economics and Management, Architecture, Law, Humanities, Fine Arts, and Finance), and an increasingly important digital library distinct from physical libraries. The hand-drawn project therefore adopted story-scrolls as its visual carrier, divided into four sections: Old Library, West and North Libraries, Specialized Libraries, and Digital Library, accompanied by supporting promotional products.

The long-scroll narrative format was chosen because Tsinghua Library reflects an enormous volume of information spatially, temporally, and functionally. Long-scroll storytelling can present substantial information gradually, visualizing and concretizing complex textual content with strong readability and appeal. From a communication perspective, vertical long-scrolls are ideal for mobile reading through scrolling, offering powerful dissemination and penetration.

Derivative products included: four designs for canvas bags and pencil cases with patterns extracted and redesigned from the scrolls to strengthen series cohesion and brand integrity, and a gold-plated envelope set (including envelope shell, wax seal, letter paper, and bookmark) that aligns with the library's humanistic temperament.

2.2.2 Story Copy Development The Hand-Drawn Library project aimed to present Tsinghua Library's architectural features, historical culture, and functional characteristics comprehensively and in-depth using youthful visual language and communication formats. The final works integrated practicality and artistry, serving both as an illustrated library instruction manual helping faculty and students discover and utilize library resources and services, and as a documentary reflecting Tsinghua's humanistic spirit, revealing overlooked historical narratives and disseminating distinctive campus culture to deepen understanding of Tsinghua among internal and external readers.

To prepare and collect creative materials, team members first conducted in-depth learning and research under instructor guidance, including studying li-

brary history documents, reviewing alumni memoirs, training in key knowledge points of literature retrieval courses, and conducting field observations, photography, and staff interviews to obtain first-hand information.

Narrative Threads: The Old Library section follows a historical timeline, while other sections use spatial layout as their thread. The Digital Library section employs imaginative time-space travel as its narrative device.

Character Design: The male protagonist, Kai Feng, derives his name from the Kaisheng Humanities and Social Sciences Library; the female protagonist, Yi Fu, phonetically echoes the West Library's name "Yifu." These characters serve as narrative threads throughout the series, connecting the four scrolls and adding youthful vitality through their emotional storyline. The character designs continued the protagonists from the library's 2012 award-winning short video "Falling in Love with the Library," which won the IFLA International Marketing Award, ensuring continuity in the library's cultural creative works.

Content Division: The Old Library section focuses on historical narrative and humanistic spirit; West and North Libraries emphasize functional introduction and daily life depiction; Specialized Libraries highlight disciplinary characteristics and cultural diversity; Digital Library focuses on popularizing online academic resources and envisioning future intelligent library service models. Based on personal interests, team members divided into four groups to extract key elements and cultural symbols, conceive artistic creativity, maintain regular discussions, and support each other to complete the series.

The hand-drawn works aimed for comprehensive information integration while allowing each group to emphasize different aspects and highlight unique features of individual libraries to avoid overall redundancy.

2.2.3 Visual Expression Form Style Tone: As a campus public cultural space and academic institution, university libraries possess unique and diverse cultural temperaments—both solemn and youthful. With youth students as the primary audience and online networks as the main communication medium, the copywriting and hand-drawn style should be dignified yet appropriately lighthearted. The library's inherent color palette was brightened and purified to create an effect that is eye-catching and lively without losing solemnity.

Visual Logic: The overall perspective adopts a bird's-eye global view, not completely replicating actual architectural structures but abstracting a Z-shaped path throughout the canvas to guide readers' downward viewing suitable for mobile reading. Buildings and objects are diagonally interspersed left and right with a consistent upward tilt of 30°-40° from the bottom edge. Special perspectives such as frontal or close-up shots are interspersed to showcase particular spatial structures, highlight environmental characteristics, and add rhythmic variation to avoid visual fatigue.

Unity Principle: The four works maintain unity in visual logic and color

tone, with consistent canvas width, resolution, character size, and font size to ensure series cohesion, while allowing each section to retain distinct visual characteristics based on content. For example, the Old Library section employs Republican-era elements and a one-shot structure, while the Digital Library section, given its special subject matter, incorporates sci-fi elements and adopts a more free-form, modern multi-panel comic format.

2.2.4 Communication Strategy The project primarily utilized online communication through Tsinghua University’s official media, mainly on Weibo and WeChat, with simultaneous release on the Tsinghua University Library’s official WeChat account. Offline physical derivative distribution served as a supplement, with interactive activities like Weibo and WeChat comment lotteries to promote reader engagement and expand reach.

A team logo was designed to enhance brand recognition—a red-background seal script square seal bearing the team name “Hand-Drawn Library” in negative carving, aligning with the library’s temperament and the works’ hand-drawn characteristics. The team icon was also embedded in QR codes accessing the hand-drawn works [Figure 1: see original paper].

2.3 Project Outcomes

2.3.1 Old Library Section: “Day 32 of Old Library’s Closure, Missing Her...” Spanning 1912-1958, this section covers wartime relocation, Premier Zhou’s library visit, and other major historical events, incorporating stories and quotations from famous alumni like Yang Jiang, Cao Yu, and Zhu Yiqing through plot or narration. It portrays Tsinghua Library’s rigorous academic atmosphere, profound humanistic heritage, and the spiritual integrity and historical responsibility of generations of Tsinghua people, reflecting the library’s shared destiny with the university and nation in cultural inheritance. Hand-drawn art brings library history to life beyond alumni memories and historical records. The work was released during Old Library’s one-month maintenance closure, evoking deep nostalgia among faculty and students.

2.3.2 West and North Libraries Section: “Favorite Tsinghua Library, No Rebuttal Accepted” Focusing on the main library’s two wings and students’ daily lives, this section covers major spatial facilities, resources, and services, depicting various learning and research activities (“Tsinghua Admissions” WeChat reposted this piece with the title “A Long Scroll Takes You into Daily Life at Tsinghua Library”). The library serves not only as a knowledge repository but also as a vital venue for daily learning and academic activities, with everyday details adding vivid life and reflecting the ubiquitous active academic atmosphere on campus.

2.3.3 Digital Library Section: “My Tsinghua Digital Library, Always Online” Employing a “time-travel” narrative device, this section personifies

the virtual electronic library, cleverly embedding important academic databases and retrieval tools while outlining an ideal intelligent library future from the reader's perspective.

2.3.4 Specialized Libraries Section: “World Book Day: Tsinghua Library, I Miss You!” During the COVID-19 pandemic when libraries remained closed for an extended period, this work was released on World Book Day and Tsinghua's 109th anniversary, depicting six distinctive specialized libraries and scenes of students studying and preparing for exams, evoking longing for campus and library life and hopes for global recovery.

The four WeChat post covers are shown in [Figure 2: see original paper], and main information from the four long-scrolls is summarized in [Figure 3: see original paper].

3. Analysis of Hand-Drawn Library Project Communication Effect

3.1 Traffic Statistics

The original Hand-Drawn Library series works, like scrolls depicting Tsinghua Library's past, present, and future, attracted widespread attention and praise upon release. After publication on Tsinghua's WeChat and Weibo platforms, the works were reposted by multiple official accounts including Tsinghua Admissions, Tsinghua MBA, Tsinghua Alumni (Tongfang Department), and Tsinghua Lifelong Learning. Overall data demonstrates the project's success.

Table 1 Statistics of Hand-Drawn Works

Section	WeChat Reads	WeChat Reposts	Weibo Reposts	Comments	Likes
Old Library	16,570	1,400+	1,400+	-	-
West & North Libraries	-	-	-	-	-
Digital Library	-	-	-	-	-
Specialized Libraries	-	-	-	-	-

Note: Table 1 includes data from Tsinghua and library official platforms plus major reposting accounts like Tsinghua Admissions and Alumni. Data as of October 20, 2020.

3.2 Reader Survey Analysis

Each WeChat post included interactive comment topics, attracting substantial reader participation. The four interactive themes were: “Old Library and Me,” “My Life at the Library,” “My Favorite Electronic Resource,” and “Stories with Specialized Libraries.”

After all works were released, the team designed a survey questionnaire using Wenjuanxing, receiving 152 reader responses. Results are shown in Tables 2 and 3:

Table 2 Question: “What Impressed You Most After Viewing the Scrolls? (Select up to three)”

Option	Percentage
Tsinghua Library’s humanistic history	65.13%
Practical Tsinghua Library guide	36.84%
Relatable daily study life	59.21%
Visual expression form	61.18%
Love story of Yi Fu and Kai Feng	38.78%
Other (please specify)	27.21%

Table 3 Question: “Through the Hand-Drawn Library Series, Have You Enhanced Your Understanding in the Following Areas? (Multiple choice)”

Option	Percentage
Better understanding of library history and culture	98%
Better understanding of Tsinghua campus culture	83.67%
Inspired love for library and Tsinghua	68.71%
Better understanding of library functions (spaces, facilities, services)	64.63%
Better understanding of electronic resources importance	64.63%
Inspired to explore the library	53.74%
Inspired to study hard and become top student	27.21%

Open-ended questions generated active feedback. One reader wrote: “I’ve been following the hand-drawn library series—the expression is very delicate, and after viewing, I feel ‘Wow, I really want to go to the library!’ What I love most is the introduction to different library areas, which isn’t 突兀 but lets readers discover unexplored parts of the library—that’s truly exciting. Adding narrative elements does make it more engaging, and understanding the library through a Tsinghua student’s life is quite interesting~” Many readers hoped for more

derivative products: “I especially love this series—it’s cultural, profound, and creative. I just hope there can be more cultural products, and that I can get a set.”

Data statistics, interactive comments, and reader surveys demonstrate that Hand-Drawn Library works have significantly contributed to cultural-historical dissemination and resource-function popularization, proving that narrative visual expression can facilitate widespread information propagation and reader acceptance. Derivative products were also warmly welcomed, with the hand-drawn series generating more reposts and comments. Undoubtedly, the combination of traditional and digital cultural creation has gained reader recognition, and integrated online-offline media has proven effective for cultural creation publicity.

The project’s outcomes resonated emotionally among Tsinghua faculty and students, enhancing their sense of identity and pride in the library while generating strong online response. Notably, the works also inspired many high school students to aspire to Tsinghua, creating positive social impact. Professional designers also expressed affirmation: Professor Cheng from Tsinghua Architecture School’s Guan Zhaoye team (who participated in library building design) highly praised and reposted the work on WeChat Moments; Professor Gu from the Academy of Arts & Design offered professional evaluation: “Young designers have bridged the gap between readers and the library through vivid, interesting illustrations and intuitive visual language, injecting a relaxed atmosphere into heavy study and adding vibrant color to campus life. I hope they can incorporate more creative painting and design languages, make bolder artistic attempts, and draw inspiration from Chinese art masters like Feng Zikai and Zhang Guangyu to explore richer visual expression.” While receiving widespread praise, the team also noted reasonable criticism and higher expectations from some readers regarding artistic appeal and aesthetics, providing references for future improvement.

3.3 News Media Coverage

After the first two works were released, social news media took notice. On December 18, 2019, *Beijing Daily*’s client published an interview with the creative team titled “Hand-Drawn Depictions of Library’s Past and Present Lives,” detailing the creation process and works. It disclosed for the first time the scroll statistics: the first Old Library section measured 3.5 meters long with over 60 figures, with “every scene and sentence in the drawing having documented sources.” The second scroll reached 4.3 meters with over 120 figures, while previewing subsequent works to sustain reader interest.

4. Summary and Reflection

University libraries evolve alongside their institutions, possessing irreplaceable historical origins and cultural traditions that serve as important sources for cam-

pus cultural creation. The Tsinghua University Hand-Drawn Library project team actively explored this complex proposition with profound cultural heritage through multidimensional, comprehensive research and design practice, breaking through the expressive limitations of most hand-drawn works that are either “aesthetic but not profound” or “profound but not comprehensive.” Through visual art, the project systematically and comprehensively presented library culture, history, resources, services, and functions while conveying humanistic sentiment. Particularly, integrating the digital library into library cultural creation themes and achieving perfect fusion with physical libraries represents a first in China’s library cultural creation field.

Practice demonstrates that combining traditional and digital cultural creation formats more easily gains reader recognition, and integrated online-offline media has proven effective for cultural creation publicity. In summary, as important carriers of university culture and academic resources with rich cultural and academic connotations, university libraries offer vast space for applying hand-drawn visual arts to cultural creation, holding important significance for university cultural inheritance, innovation, and education itself.

From a practical pathway perspective, the Tsinghua Hand-Drawn Library project represents a successful case of student deep participation in library service innovation. Tian Shaojun notes: “If we attract the youthful, energetic, and intellectually active university student population to participate, university library cultural creation will have great potential.” Involving students in university library cultural creation practice helps maintain continuous innovation vitality and enhance cultural influence, while generations of students develop and gain achievements through this process. Most project members were freshmen and sophomores participating in an innovation training program for the first time. Through research and creation, they developed systematic, comprehensive, and profound understanding of Tsinghua University Library, improved their information literacy and autonomous learning capabilities, and enhanced comprehensive skills in professional practice, academic research, innovative thinking, and teamwork—demonstrating the important value of library participation in cultivating innovative talents.

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