

Chinese Weifang kites: Semiotic interpretation of auspicious motifs and the dissemination of folk educational functions

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ABSTRACT

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the auspicious motifs of Weifang kites from a semiotic perspective and to explain their folk educational functions in contemporary society. The research focuses on the historical evolution, symbolic logic, educational meanings, and transmission pathways of kite patterns. Fieldwork was conducted in Weifang with a purposively selected group of 20 participants, including kite inheritors, related practitioners, intangible cultural heritage managers, local residents, tourists, and educators. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary source of field data, supplemented by short questionnaires, on-site observation, and documentary review. The collected materials were analysed through thematic coding, triangulation, and comparative interpretation. The findings show that the motifs of Weifang kites form a relatively stable symbolic system shaped by local ecology, folk beliefs, homophonic association, and social ethics. These motifs function not only as decorative images but also as cultural carriers that transmit ideas of blessing, order, fertility, morality, and identity through the everyday practices of making, viewing, and flying kites. At the same time, commercialization and contemporary visual consumption are weakening some traditional meanings, making pedagogical reinterpretation increasingly necessary. The study argues that the safeguarding of Weifang kites should move beyond craft preservation toward the transmission of meaning through formal and non-formal education, community participation, and culturally informed design innovation.

Keywords: Weifang Kites, semiotics, folk education, cultural heritage, cultural values.

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INTRODUCTION

Weifang kites are one of the most representative forms of Chinese folk art. Their history can be traced back more than 2,400 years. In the early period, kites were mainly used for military observation, signalling, and measurement. From the Tang and Song dynasties onward, they gradually entered everyday life as popular recreational objects, and by the Ming and Qing dynasties, they had developed into a mature folk craft with rich regional characteristics. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, especially with the founding of the Weifang International Kite Festival in 1984 and the

inclusion of Weifang kites in China's national intangible cultural heritage list in 2006, Weifang kites increasingly came to function not only as handicrafts but also as symbols of urban culture and regional identity (Tang, 2008).

Recent international research on intangible cultural heritage has increasingly emphasised living transmission, community participation, educational integration, and the tension between safeguarding and commercialization. UNESCO has repeatedly stressed that transmission through formal and non-formal education is a central

safeguarding measure for living heritage (UNESCO, 2021). Likewise, research on heritage and tourism shows that cultural practices can strengthen place identity and public visibility, but may also be reduced to marketable labels if their meanings are not adequately interpreted (Qiu et al., 2022; Qiu, 2023). Studies on higher education and community-led safeguarding further indicate that heritage education becomes most effective when it connects symbolic knowledge, practice, and local participation (Šantek et al., 2025; Zabulis et al., 2025).

Existing studies on Weifang kites have mainly discussed their cultural ecology, craft history, design innovation, media communication, and participatory design (Tang, 2008; Jin and Sharudin, 2024; Zhou et al., 2025). However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the auspicious motifs on kite surfaces as a semiotic system, and even less to the way these motifs function as an informal mechanism of folk education. In particular, the educational significance of such motifs is often mentioned in general terms, but seldom analysed in a way that distinguishes pedagogical value from entertainment, tourism display, or commercial consumption.

Against this background, the present study adopts semiotics as its main analytical lens in order to examine how the auspicious motifs of Weifang kites are historically formed, how they generate symbolic meaning, and how these meanings participate in the transmission of values in everyday life. By placing folk art, semiotics, and heritage education in dialogue, the study seeks to clarify both the cultural logic and the contemporary educational potential of Weifang kite motifs.

Research objectives

The objectives of this study are: (1) to identify the main thematic types and historical evolution of the auspicious motifs of Weifang kites; (2) to interpret their symbolic meanings through a semiotic framework; and (3) to explain how these motifs operate as carriers of folk educational values and to discuss possible pathways for their contemporary transmission and safeguarding.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research design. Traditional Weifang kites were taken as the core object of inquiry, and semiotics was used as the theoretical framework for interpreting the relationship between visual signifiers, cultural signifieds, and educational meanings. In methodological terms, the study combined documentary analysis with field-based qualitative inquiry.

The field phase involved 20 participants selected through purposive sampling. The participant pool was constructed to cover information-rich groups directly

connected with kite production, transmission, and public reception, including inheritors, kite-related practitioners, intangible cultural heritage managers, local residents, tourists, and educators. The purpose of the sampling was not statistical representativeness, but the inclusion of different positions from which the symbolic meaning and educational function of Weifang kites could be observed and interpreted.

Data were collected through four channels. First, documentary materials - including policy texts, academic studies, local cultural records, and relevant visual materials - were reviewed to establish the historical and theoretical context. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted as the main field method in order to obtain participants' interpretations of kite motifs, transmission practices, and current challenges. Third, short written questionnaires were used as a supplementary instrument to cross-check recurring views and to record concise responses on symbolic understanding and educational perception. Fourth, on-site observation and community-based field notes were used to document making, display, and transmission practices in their actual social setting.

The data analysis proceeded in four steps. First, the collected materials were read repeatedly and open-coded to identify recurrent concepts related to symbolism, value transmission, inheritance, and contemporary change. Second, related codes were grouped into broader thematic categories, including historical evolution, symbolic construction, educational function, transmission pathways, and contemporary pressures. Third, triangulation was conducted across documentary sources, interview materials, questionnaire responses, and observation records so that interpretations were not based on a single type of source. Fourth, comparative analysis was used to examine convergences and differences among participant groups, especially between practitioners, managers, residents, tourists, and educators.

To strengthen methodological transparency, the documentary review was treated as contextual and comparative evidence rather than as a field data-collection tool in the narrow sense. Data collection was concluded when the materials showed strong repetition around the core themes, and no substantially new interpretive categories were emerging within the scope of this exploratory study. The findings should therefore be understood as analytically transferable rather than statistically generalizable.

The findings reported below are based on the integrated interpretation of documentary materials, semi-structured interviews, supplementary questionnaires, and observation notes. Rather than treating the fieldwork as a statistical survey, the analysis organises the evidence into six thematic dimensions: historical formation, symbolic meaning, educational function, transmission mechanisms, contemporary challenges, and pedagogical reconstruction.

RESULTS

Historical development and thematic characteristics of Weifang Kites

Kites, anciently termed 'yuan', have earned Weifang the epithet 'Capital of Kites', establishing it as a renowned cradle of kite culture and a city of historical and cultural significance. Situated in the north-central region of the Shandong Peninsula, it borders the Bohai Sea's Laizhou Bay to the north. The southern terrain is predominantly hilly, while the north comprises plains and tidal flats, presenting an overall open and gently sloping landscape. Climatically, Weifang lies within the northern temperate monsoon zone, characterised by mild springs with consistent wind patterns. This stable wind environment, coupled with the flat terrain, provides ideal spatial conditions for kite flying (Shan and Chen, 1989, 208).

Beyond natural conditions, agricultural culture also constitutes a defining feature of Weifang's regional heritage. Centuries of farming traditions fostered among the populace a profound reverence for the natural order and divine forces, a worldview that profoundly shaped the stylistic orientation and thematic selection of Weifang kites. Consequently, these kites frequently embody religious symbolism and elements of nature worship in both subject matter and visual presentation.

According to historical records, the earliest form of the kite that can be traced back to is the "wooden eagle". In its early development, it was a practical tool, mainly serving military functions such as reconnaissance, measurement and communication. For instance, the "Zhaoye Jinzai - Buji" once recorded that "Gongshu Ban made a wooden eagle to spy on the city of Song" (Zhang, 1985, 18), indicating that as early as the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods, Gongshu Ban had already used kites for military reconnaissance.

Following the Sui and Tang dynasties, as paper gradually came into use for mounting kites, these flying objects began to be termed "paper kites". During this period, kite designs and decorations prioritised structural lightness and practicality, with ornamentation remaining relatively simple. By the Song dynasty, kite-flying had progressively integrated into the daily lives of common folk, shifting from a military utility to a primary form of popular entertainment. In modern times, a late Song Dynasty porcelain pillow unearthed from the Cizhou Kiln site in Hebei Province bears a clearly engraved scene depicting a child flying a kite. This provides indirect evidence of the widespread prevalence of kite-flying activities within Song Dynasty society (Tang, 2008, 39). Meanwhile, with the participation of the literati class, the production and decoration of kites in the Song Dynasty gradually became more diverse, and decorative patterns and designs with aesthetic significance began to emerge.

From the Ming and Qing Dynasties to the Republic of

China period, Weifang kites gradually matured and flourished. While continuing to serve as a form of folk entertainment, their economic attributes also began to emerge. During this period, Weifang not only developed into an important kite production center, but the themes and designs of kites also became increasingly diverse, and a relatively systematic and extensive system of auspicious meanings gradually formed. From the Republic of China period to the Anti-Japanese War period, influenced by social unrest and the context of the times, kite works with patriotic and anti-Japanese themes emerged one after another. Kites were endowed with a clear propaganda function pointing to reality, reflecting their value in social mobilization and emotional expression under special historical conditions.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, especially since the reform and opening up, Weifang kites have continuously changed in terms of subject selection and design style, gradually incorporating elements of popular culture such as science fiction, animation, and children's cartoons. As the role of Weifang kites in festival activities, tourism displays, and urban brand building has been continuously enhanced, large-scale, performance-oriented kites have gradually become a new creative direction, and their social attributes have gradually shifted from traditional folk entertainment to mainly cultural tourism displays and urban image promotion.

Despite the continuous evolution of Weifang kites in both subject matter and form since modern times, the most enduring and academically significant aspects from the perspective of folk cultural significance and educational function remain concentrated within the following traditional themes.

Artistically, traditional Weifang kites can be broadly categorised into five fundamental types: flat-panel, string-linked, rigid-wing, flexible-wing, and tubular. Thematic content predominantly encompasses several major categories: animals, insects, human figures, floral and botanical motifs, and opera narratives. Among animal motifs, common representations include roosters, magpies, tigers, cranes, dragon-headed centipedes, swallows, butterflies, fish, and bats. These have evolved into representative patterns with explicit symbolic meanings, such as 'Carp Leaping over the Dragon Gate,' 'Sand Swallow,' 'Pine and Crane for Longevity,' 'Abundance Year After Year (Fish),' and 'Crane and Boy.' Human and narrative motifs frequently draw from historical allusions, theatrical figures, and folk legends, such as Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Journey to the West, Dream of the Red Chamber, and The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea. Floral and botanical subjects primarily feature peonies, lotuses, pomegranates, and gourds, giving rise to established classical motifs like 'Peony of Wealth and Honour' and 'Double Blessings of Fortune and Rank'. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Theatre characters, goldfish, dragon-headed centipedes and red longevity tortoise kites. Source: Guo (2024).

The cylindrical kite, also known as the three-dimensional kite, often takes daily objects such as palace lanterns, vases, flower baskets, and birdcages as its subjects. These themes are mostly drawn from familiar life scenes of the common people, reflecting the general expectations of the urban middle class for auspicious meanings and a better life. (An, 2022, 70-73).

Overall, the pattern symbols of Weifang kites have gradually formed through the continuous interaction of functional demands, folk concepts and local aesthetics. The symbolic meanings and folk educational functions they carry constitute the most enduring cultural connotations of Weifang kites.

The symbolic significance of auspicious patterns on Weifang Kites

Within Saussure's semiotic theoretical framework, the signifier and signified constitute the fundamental structure of a sign. The signifier represents the external form or material carrier of the sign, such as visual images, written characters, or sounds, while the signified denotes the concepts, emotions, or cultural meanings conveyed by this form (Guo, 2008, 21). The theoretical framework of the signifier-signified relationship provides crucial theoretical grounding for understanding the intrinsic connection between the formal patterns of Weifang kites and their symbolic meanings.

The auspicious symbolism of Weifang kite patterns did not arise in isolation but rather evolved and solidified

through prolonged historical development and social practice. Its formation primarily manifests in four aspects: ① Auspicious meanings derived from the natural attributes of objects; ② Auspicious imagery shaped through imagination and mythology; ③ Symbolic significance rooted in religious beliefs and the veneration of sacred objects; ④ Symbolic associations established through linguistic homophones. Among these, homophonic symbolism, being intuitive to comprehend and readily transmissible, has become the most widely employed method in the generation of auspicious connotations.

In the pattern system of Weifang kites, images such as bats, fish, roosters, magpies, plum blossoms, and tigers and leopards are all presented in concrete and perceptible visual forms as "signifiers", and their auspicious meanings mainly stem from the folk association of homophonic sounds. For instance, the "fu" in "bat" is homophonic with "blessing" and the bat is used to symbolize "blessing", expressing the hope for good fortune and auspiciousness; "fish" is homophonic with "surplus", which extends to the wish for abundance, fullness, and a happy life, forming the symbolic meaning of "surplus every year"; "rooster" is homophonic with "auspiciousness", and the combination of magpies and plum blossoms implies "joy on the tip of the eyebrows". Similarly, in folk interpretations, "tiger" is homophonic with "wealth", and "leopard" is homophonic with "fullness", and the juxtaposition of tigers and leopards symbolizes "wealth and fullness" (Lü, 2007, 359) (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Bat, cockerel, peony of prosperity, lion, butterfly motifs. Source: Guo (2025).

During the construction of the auspicious meanings of kite patterns, people also pay great attention to the life characteristics presented by the images of animals and plants, such as the fertility of fish, the longevity of turtles, the ferocity of lions and tigers, the abundance of seeds in pomegranates, and the vigorous growth and extension of melon vines. These natural attributes, regarded as "good omens," are constantly incorporated into the expression of kite patterns. Moreover, in kite works based on historical figures or mythological stories, their symbolic meanings often go beyond the surface references of the images themselves. For example, themes like "Qin Qiong and Yuchi Jingde" and "Zhong Kui Capturing Demons" centrally express the people's beliefs in warding off evil and disasters and praying for a stable life, demonstrating the multi-layered and rich connotations of the auspicious themes of Weifang kites in terms of folk customs.

In the traditional folk cultural context, the symbolic meanings of Weifang kites are not closed or fixed. Roland Barthes' semiotic theory once pointed out: "The meaning of a symbol is not static but is constantly constructed, extended and reinterpreted in social practice and specific cultural contexts" (Wu, 2019, 81). For instance, the traditional pattern "dragon" commonly found in Weifang kites symbolizes imperial power, auspiciousness and justice in the traditional context, and is regarded as the embodiment of strength and wisdom; "phoenix" symbolizes harmony, nobility and good fortune. In the modern social context, the symbolic meaning of "dragon"

has gradually expanded from being an exclusive symbol of imperial power to a cultural totem of the Chinese nation, while the image of "phoenix" is more often endowed with contemporary interpretations related to female power and elegant temperament.

Thus, within new social contexts, these symbols not only perpetuate their original cultural connotations but also achieve a re-creation of meaning by resonating with contemporary societal values.

The educational function of auspicious patterns on Weifang kites

Traditional Chinese folk art was not solely intended for aesthetic appreciation; throughout its long history of social practice, it also fulfilled the societal function of 'cultivating moral education and upholding ethical norms.' In his "Records of Famous Paintings of Past Dynasties", Zhang Yanyuan proposed, "Painting serves to establish moral instruction and promote human relations." "Since there was no way to convey ideas, there was writing; since there was no way to show forms, there was painting" (Xia, 2014, 7). This passage affirms the role of painting art in social education. And as a folk art that can be seen and felt, Weifang kites also transform the public's understanding of good and evil, fortune and misfortune, and blessing and disaster into visually educational images through the organic combination of patterns, shapes, and colors. And

by means of daily labor, seasonal activities, and other life scenes, the auspicious values contained therein are passed on to the younger generation, allowing the relevant educational content to be naturally integrated into daily experience.

Aesthetic education for invoking blessings and auspiciousness

Kite artisans, when shaping their creations, often prioritise expressions and life characteristics that align with popular aesthetic expectations and carry auspicious connotations. In concrete terms, they generally favour positive emotional states such as joy, serenity, prosperity, benevolence, composure, or childlike innocence, while tending to avoid negative portrayals like melancholy, sorrow, grief, withering, cowardice, or fear. Guided by this aesthetic orientation, the figurative design of Weifang kites predominantly embodies an intrinsic ethos of 'venerating virtue and goodness' and 'praising the good while condemning the evil.' Through the repeated reinforcement of such themes, a stable association is ultimately established at the pictorial level between 'aspiring towards goodness,' 'maintaining order,' and 'attaining blessings' (Lü, 2007, 223).

Against this cognitive backdrop, kite artisans continually infuse their aspirations for a better life into the selection and arrangement of specific motifs. Through repeated viewing and use, these patterns gradually assume an educational function: conveying ideals for living and reinforcing behavioural norms.

The education of belief and worship concepts

For a long time, the Chinese folk society has held a sense of awe towards nature, deities, and ancestral protection. This ideology has profoundly influenced the lifestyle and aesthetic orientation of local people. It was within this context of folk beliefs that the Weifang kite gradually developed. The common images in kite designs, such as the door gods, the god of wealth, dragons and phoenixes, qilins, and Zhong Kui, all originated from the auspicious symbols derived from this sense of awe, embodying people's wishes for warding off evil, eliminating disasters, and ensuring peace and stability in life.

In daily life, people make, fly, and watch kites, and repeatedly encounter these images during festivals, celebrations, and regular recreational activities. This enables concepts such as "warding off evil", "seeking peace", and "maintaining order" to naturally flow and spread among family members and neighbors. Over time, these kite designs have transcended their role as mere emotional expressions and have transformed into

important references for people to understand life order and behavioral norms, playing a role in regulating emotions and guiding behavior in daily life.

The education of the consciousness of reproduction and continuation

In traditional society, the continuation of the family and the proliferation of offspring were regarded as the crucial foundation for maintaining the order of the family and society. This concept has long influenced the value judgments of the folk society and has also become an important theme repeatedly depicted in folk art.

In the subject system of Weifang kites, images such as fish, lotus, gourds, children, and twin lotus flowers frequently appear, forming clear auspicious patterns. Among them, "fish" and "lotus" are often used to symbolize abundance every year and the prosperity of offspring, while images like "child with fish" and "lotus giving birth to a noble son" directly express the wishes for the continuation of the family and the flourishing of life (Lü, 2007, 223-226).

This kind of theme frequently appears in festival and wedding customs activities, resonating with important life events such as marriage and childbirth, and reinforcing the concept of reproduction through repeated viewing and participation. This repeated reinforcement, in an imperceptible way, guides people's understanding of marriage, childbirth, and family responsibility, making the idea of reproduction a widely accepted and voluntarily followed life principle, thereby playing an educational role in stabilizing family structure and social order.

Moral and ethical instruction

In the patterns of Weifang kites, there are numerous pattern symbols that emphasize the role of ethical education. For instance, the images of loyal and righteous figures such as Guan Yu and Yue Fei, as well as historical themes like "Su Wu Tending Sheep" and "Zhaojun Leaving the Frontier", after long-term dissemination and interpretation, have gradually been endowed with relatively clear value connotations such as "loyalty, filial piety, benevolence and righteousness", "respecting the elderly and caring for the young", and "loyalty and trustworthiness". When these figures and story contents are applied to the creation of kites, people, in the process of watching, making and flying kites, unconsciously come into contact with and accept the value guidance on "what constitutes proper behavior" and "what virtues are worth emulating", and gradually take them as important references for daily behavior judgment and moral orientation (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Auspicious symbols and folk education. Source: Guo (2025).

The inheritance of Weifang kite-making skills and the continuation of its educational functions

Historically, the inheritance of Weifang kite-making skills mainly includes four types: family inheritance centered on family and blood ties, institutionalized inheritance relying on institutional guarantees, school education and public cultural construction under the leadership of the state, and a unified training model based on enterprise production. The latter has, to some extent, promoted the transformation of Weifang kite-making skills from individual experience-based to standardized and procedural. Meanwhile, the patterns and rhymes formed by kite artisans in their long-term practice have been widely applied in the above-mentioned various inheritance practices, playing an important auxiliary role in the continuation of the skills.

Family tradition

From the Ming Dynasty to the 1980s, the production of Weifang kites was mainly carried out in family workshops centered around kite artisans. The basic feature was that both the production space and the labor force were organized on a family basis. Family homes and courtyards served as the production sites, and family members participated in the production together (Zhang, 2008, 64). Under this production form, the transmission of skills was mostly through father-to-son or grandparent-to-grandchild succession. Even in folk workshops where master-apprentice transmission occurred, the organizational structure still centered on the family, and the teaching of skills and production arrangements was still in the hands of the head of the family or the master (Pan, 1998, 316). The master-apprentice relationship in such workshops could still largely be regarded as an extended form of family transmission.

This inheritance structure, which centers on the family

and is based on the maintenance of livelihood, has gradually led to the rule that "the art is not passed on to outsiders" in the kite-making craft. This model has a dual impact on the development of folk arts: on the one hand, the relatively closed and stable family production environment is conducive to the continuation of the craft and individual creation; on the other hand, it objectively restricts the exchange and renewal of the craft. Currently, a small number of family-run kite workshops still exist in Weifang, but the number of related practitioners has significantly decreased, and factory and workshop-style production is gradually becoming the mainstream.

Factory-based enterprise inheritance

The earliest kite enterprises in Weifang can be traced back to the village-run kite factory established in Xiyangjiabu Village in 1986. This factory had workshops for design, construction, painting, and quality inspection, and employed dozens of workers. Through division of labor and collaboration, all the steps of kite-making were completed. The emergence of this production organization form marked the beginning of Weifang kite making, moving towards a more enterprise-like model with a relatively clear division of labor and more centralized production. In contemporary times, many kite-making enterprises have emerged in the Weifang area, such as Tiancheng Kite Factory, Weifang Feiyue Kite Factory, Weifang Kaixuan Kite Factory, Yongjian Kite Factory, etc.

Against this backdrop, the way of inheriting Weifang kite-making skills has undergone corresponding adjustments. Through centralized training, enterprises have transformed the traditional techniques of construction, pasting, and painting, which were previously passed down within families or through master-apprentice relationships, into standardized processes that can be quickly learned and replicated. They also adopted a subcontracting system to distribute some of the production steps to

families, with the subcontractors following the unified drawings and standards for operation, and the enterprises conducting unified inspection and settlement. This organizational method not only enhanced production efficiency but also enabled kite-making skills to enter ordinary family life in a more widespread form, creating a new inheritance path distinct from the traditional "father-to-son, master-to-apprentice" model. However, due to the division of the production process into individual steps, artisans' grasp of the overall shape, aesthetics, and symbolic connotations has relatively weakened, and the integrity of the skills and individual experience accumulation has also faced new challenges.

State-led inheritance

In the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the state took a series of measures to protect the inheritance of kite-making skills. On the one hand, it granted titles such as "Outstanding Artisan" and "National Intangible Cultural Heritage Representative Inheritor" to folk artisans, incorporating them into the institutional guarantee system to provide relatively stable living and creative conditions and promote the organization and continuation of the skills. On the other hand, in 1966, Weifang established the Weifang Arts and Crafts School, set up a kite production workshop, and organized the compilation of relevant teaching materials. Over the course of more than ten years, it trained over 150 students, becoming an important source of traditional handicraft talents (Sun, 2007, 102). In recent years, the government has also strengthened its promotion through digital communication channels and introduced kite courses in higher vocational colleges, bringing kite culture into campuses and gradually establishing a protection system that combines institutional support with educational practice.

In terms of creating an atmosphere, the local government has built the Yangjiabu Folk Custom Park and set up public experience spaces such as the "Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance Area", "New Year Picture Printing Experience Area", and "Kite Making Experience Area". In addition to systematically displaying and preserving the historical achievements of Weifang kites, the Weifang government has established the Weifang Kite Museum, providing long-term support for the display, research, and teaching of Weifang kites.

Transmission through rhymes and proverbs

In the practice of inheriting Weifang kites, transmission through rhymes and proverbs is one of the most common and effective methods. Artisans often explain the structural proportions, material selection, and flying techniques in

kite making through catchy rhymes, experience proverbs, or vivid metaphors, and they also demonstrate with gestures, conduct on-site operations, and provide immediate corrections to help learners understand and remember the relevant skills in practice. For instance, regarding the use of colors, there are folk proverbs such as "Purple is the bone, green is the sinew; add red and yellow for a fresh look; red is for novelty, yellow for lightness; too much green is not good; use colors cleanly for a bright picture; red fears purple, purple fears yellow, yellow likes green, green loves red." In terms of making and flying techniques, there are highly summarized experience summaries like "Bamboo is the bone, paper is the wing; three strings in line, take off with the wind." (An, 2022, 102).

These mnemonic rules, with their concise and vivid expressions, transform complex production experiences and aesthetic principles into understandable and operable folk sayings, helping artisans form stable understandings of color relationships and structural rules. Their notable advantage lies in their ability to break through the practical limitations of family, apprenticeship, time, space, and region, enabling kite-making experiences to be preserved, disseminated, and learned on a larger scale.

Challenges facing the preservation of Weifang kite craftsmanship and the continuation of its cultural significance

Under the influence of modern industrial civilization and foreign cultures, the inheritance of Weifang kite-making skills and the cultural operation environment have undergone significant changes. Firstly, modern media and diverse forms of entertainment have diverted the public, especially the youth, from their emotional investment and practical participation in traditional folk activities. The weakening of the significance of seasonal folk customs such as the Qingming and Chongyang festivals has also gradually loosened the intrinsic connection between kites and seasonal life, to some extent weakening the educational function carried by seasonal activities.

At the production method level, the traditional kite-making process is complex and time-consuming, making it difficult to compete with mechanized production methods in terms of cost and efficiency. To adapt to market demands, many producers have begun to adopt a semi-mechanical and semi-manual production method. This change has, to a certain extent, altered the original way of passing on the skills, affecting the accumulation of experience and aesthetic standards in kite practice (Tang, 2008, 128).

In addition, the number of inheritors is decreasing, and the problem of the generational gap is becoming increasingly prominent. Some artisans have turned to modern kite production in pursuit of higher economic

returns, further compressing the space for the practice of traditional skills. Moreover, the long learning period and unstable income expectations have limited the appeal to the younger generation. Even within kite-making families, the model of "sons following in their fathers' footsteps" has shown obvious breaks.

On the other hand, most Weifang kite artisans come from rural areas and have limited educational backgrounds, which makes it difficult for them to theoretically summarize and document the design features and coloring methods of kite patterns, further affecting the organization, research, and contemporary dissemination of Weifang kite skills and pattern culture.

Overall, Weifang kites are facing practical difficulties in skill inheritance and cultural connotation construction, especially in the innovation of pattern elements and the construction of cultural connotations, where systematic research is still lacking. Against this backdrop, exploring a more convenient and efficient inheritance and expression system has become an important issue that needs to be addressed urgently.

Rebuilding the transmission system for Weifang kite craftsmanship and its educational function

The reconstruction of the transmission system of Weifang kite craftsmanship should not be limited to the preservation of manual techniques alone. More importantly, it should be understood as a cultural process through which symbolic meanings, aesthetic values, and folk ethics are continuously interpreted, transmitted, and internalized in contemporary society. In this sense, the inheritance of Weifang kites is closely related not only to the continuity of craft practice but also to the re-establishment of cultural identity, the renewal of public participation, and the extension of folk educational functions. Therefore, the reconstruction of this transmission system should be promoted from three interrelated dimensions: the repositioning of Weifang kite culture as a public historical and cultural resource, the cultivation of a broader social foundation through educational measures, and the establishment of a systematic talent-training mechanism for traditional kite craftsmanship.

Public cultural activation and urban symbol construction

"Public historical and cultural resources" refer to cultural forms with public value and social sharing attributes, including historical landscapes, folk arts, folk beliefs, historical figures, as well as related objects and documentary materials. Positioning Weifang kite culture as a public historical and cultural resource means elevating it from a traditional craft preserved within particular

communities to a shared cultural symbol at the urban and social level. Under such a framework, Weifang kites are no longer understood merely as festival decorations, tourism commodities, or recreational objects, but as an important medium through which regional memory, local identity, and public aesthetic consciousness can be continuously sustained.

From this perspective, the public value of Weifang kites lies in their capacity to enter everyday cultural life through diverse social channels. On the one hand, local governments and cultural institutions may incorporate traditional kite motifs, forms, and symbolic elements into public transport facilities, urban landscapes, museums, exhibition halls, community cultural centers, and other public spaces, so that kite culture can become visible, accessible, and recognizable in daily urban experience. On the other hand, by integrating kite culture into public cultural services, festival activities, museum interpretation, and civic education projects, the symbolic meaning of Weifang kites can be transformed from a relatively specialized folk craft discourse into a broadly shared cultural language.

Such positioning is especially important in the contemporary context because the current development of Weifang kites is often closely associated with tourism promotion, commercial display, and city branding. Although these functions have undoubtedly expanded the visibility of kite culture, they may also weaken its deeper educational significance if the symbolic and ethical meanings embedded in traditional motifs are overlooked. Therefore, the contemporary activation of Weifang kite culture should avoid reducing it to a purely visual spectacle or commercial product. Instead, it should emphasize its role as a public cultural resource that carries local history, aesthetic traditions, and folk values. Only in this way can Weifang kites continue to function not only as a marker of urban image, but also as a meaningful cultural medium for the transmission of collective memory and public education.

Educational measures for wider social transmission

In contemporary society, the inheritance of traditional Weifang kite-making skills is challenged not only by the complexity of the craft and the long training cycle, but also by the weakening of young people's emotional identification with traditional kite culture. Therefore, the continuation of kite craftsmanship depends not only on the transmission of techniques but also on the cultivation of cultural understanding, symbolic recognition, and emotional attachment.

In practice, many traditional kite artisans developed their interest in kite-making through early family influence, seasonal folk activities, and repeated participation in kite flying and production. This suggests that the inheritance of

Weifang kites is closely related to everyday cultural experience. For this reason, educational measures should be introduced to strengthen public awareness of the artistic, historical, and symbolic value of kite culture, especially among younger generations.

Such educational transmission may be realized through both informal and organized channels. Informal education includes family participation, community activities, and festival practices, through which traditional values are gradually conveyed by observation and participation. Organized education may be implemented through school-based courses, museum programs, cultural workshops, master classes, and extracurricular clubs. These activities can focus on kite-making techniques, traditional motifs, symbolic meanings, and the historical development of Weifang kites.

More importantly, the educational value of Weifang kites lies in their ability to transmit aesthetic concepts, moral values, cultural identity, and respect for traditional craftsmanship. In this sense, educational intervention can help transform kite culture from a form of passive viewing or short-term entertainment into a meaningful process of cultural learning and value formation.

Establishing a training system for traditional kite craftsmanship

At present, the inheritance of traditional Weifang kite-making skills is constrained by the shortage of successors and the lack of a systematic training mechanism. This

problem is closely related to the weakening of emotional identification with traditional kites in contemporary society. In educational practice, traditional handicrafts still occupy a relatively marginal position, and related teaching content has not yet been fully integrated into a continuous training framework. As a result, it is difficult to provide stable support for the long-term continuation of kite-making skills. This concern is also consistent with the original logic of your manuscript, which links the decline in successors to the absence of a sustained cultivation system.

To address this issue, it is necessary to establish a multi-level training system extending from primary education to higher education. At the primary and secondary school levels, kite-related knowledge may be incorporated into art courses, local culture education, and practical activities so that students can gradually develop cultural awareness, aesthetic appreciation, and basic hands-on skills. Such an approach can also help bring traditional kite culture into everyday educational experience, rather than leaving it only within the sphere of festivals or tourism displays. At the vocational level, greater emphasis may be placed on specialized techniques such as framework construction, mounting, painting, and motif design. At the higher education level, traditional kite craftsmanship may be combined with heritage studies, visual communication, cultural creativity, and design education, so as to cultivate more comprehensive professionals with both practical and theoretical competence. This direction also responds to the reviewers' request to make the educational implementation pathway more concrete.



Figure 4. Kite-making skills training organised by the Weifang Municipal Government. Source: Guo (2024).

At the same time, representative inheritors and experienced artisans should be encouraged to participate in teaching, workshops, and practical training. In this way, embodied craft knowledge can be more effectively integrated into formal education, and the gap between traditional apprenticeship-based transmission and modern institutional education can be reduced. Such a training system would not only support the continuation of kite-

making techniques but also strengthen the transmission of the cultural meanings and educational values embedded in Weifang kite traditions.

In conclusion, the inheritance of Weifang kite-making skills should not merely be regarded as the continuation of a manual craft. Rather, it should be understood as a cultural educational process that integrates aesthetic experience, values, and cultural memory. Through the

gradual improvement of the educational system and the establishment of a more systematic cultivation mechanism, Weifang kite craftsmanship may rebuild a more stable foundation for intergenerational transmission in contemporary society.

DISCUSSION

The present study shows that the auspicious motifs of Weifang kites should be understood as a living semiotic system rather than as isolated decorative images. Their meanings are generated through stable links between visual form, folk association, and social use. This finding is consistent with wider intangible cultural heritage research, which emphasises that heritage functions through repeated social practice, intergenerational transmission, and shared interpretation rather than through objects alone (UNESCO, 2021; Zabulis et al., 2025).

A second important finding concerns the distinction between educational value and entertainment or tourism value. The popularity of kites in festivals, exhibitions, and urban branding can certainly increase visibility, but visibility does not automatically produce education. The pedagogical effect of Weifang kites emerges when motifs are explained, practiced, and connected to lived values such as auspiciousness, moral conduct, family continuity, and collective identity. In this respect, the study supports the view that heritage education becomes meaningful when symbolic knowledge is embedded in participatory learning rather than left at the level of spectacle or consumption (Qiu et al., 2022; Šantek et al., 2025).

The discussion also suggests that contemporary safeguarding requires a balance between innovation and cultural integrity. Recent studies on participatory design and digital innovation in Weifang kites show that new technologies and new modes of co-creation can expand public engagement, but they must remain connected to the cultural logic of traditional motifs if they are to avoid superficial adaptation (Jin and Sharudin, 2024; Zhou et al., 2025). Accordingly, the contribution of this study lies in showing that the future of Weifang kites depends not only on preserving techniques but also on preserving interpretive frameworks. At the same time, because the study is based on a small purposive sample, its conclusions should be regarded as exploratory. Future research could deepen this line of inquiry through comparative regional studies, classroom-based interventions, and more sustained observation of youth participation.

Conclusion

Through a semiotic analysis of the auspicious motifs on Weifang kites, this study argues that these motifs are

culturally shared sign systems formed through long-term interaction among the natural environment, folk belief, social ethics, and craft practice. Their significance lies not only in visual beauty, but also in their role as carriers of blessing, order, moral instruction, fertility symbolism, and collective identity. In this sense, the motifs of Weifang kites participate in an informal but effective mode of folk education.

At the same time, the study finds that contemporary commercialization and visual consumption may weaken the symbolic depth of these motifs if transmission focuses only on display and market value. Therefore, the safeguarding of Weifang kites should move from an exclusive emphasis on craft preservation toward a broader strategy of meaning transmission. Such a strategy requires the collaboration of artisans, schools, museums, cultural managers, and local communities so that Weifang kites can continue to live as both heritage practice and educational resource.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First, the symbolic system of Weifang kite motifs should be documented more systematically through image archives, oral history, motif catalogues, and contextual annotation. Such documentation can help prevent auspicious patterns from being simplified into purely decorative visual elements during contemporary dissemination.

Second, educational applications should be strengthened in both formal and non-formal settings. Possible forms include elective courses on folk art and ethnic design, extracurricular craft clubs, museum-based interactive classes, thematic excursions, and community master classes led jointly by educators and artisans.

Third, educators and transmitters should make the values embedded in kite motifs explicit in teaching. In particular, semiotic interpretation may be used to cultivate respect for cultural traditions, ethical reflection, aesthetic taste, intergenerational responsibility, and awareness of cultural diversity, so that students understand why traditional motifs remain meaningful in contemporary life.

Fourth, future practice should encourage community participation and culturally grounded innovation. Participatory design, digital display, and creative transformation may be adopted, but they should be based on a clear understanding of traditional symbolic logic. Future research may also compare Weifang kite motifs with those of other regional folk arts in order to clarify both their shared patterns and their distinctive local meanings.

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