

The Constructive Role of Visual Narrative in Oral History of Kunming Old Street: An Empirical Exploration Based on Participatory Reader Design

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Abstract

Historic cultural districts serve as vital carriers of urban cultural memory and local identity. During rapid urbanization, while material heritage preservation receives attention, the risk of losing intangible community memories persists. This study aims to establish a methodological framework for participatory visual narrative design of oral history materials and examine its effectiveness in transforming archived memories into accessible cultural resources. Specific objectives include: (1) developing design principles for visual layout based on temporal, spatial, and character narrative structures; (2) exploring strategies for translating memory fragments into appropriate visual symbols and imagery; (3) evaluating readability and accessibility among target audiences; and (4) analyzing the method applicability for similar cultural heritage projects. Using the Kunming Old Street Cultural Reader project as a case study, this research employed participatory design methodology involving 108 oral history interviews with local residents, merchants, craftspeople, and scholars conducted between 2018–2024. The research utilized a qualitative–dominant mixed–methods approach through three iterative design cycles: (1) content selection and narrative structure development through collaborative workshops, (2) visual element creation and layout design integrating typography, imagery, and composition, and (3) prototype testing and refinement. Reader evaluation involved 150 participants across three demographic groups using structured interviews, focus group discussions, and readability assessments.

The research successfully established a three dimensional narrative framework (temporal–spatial–character) that effectively integrates oral history materials into accessible visual formats. Evaluation results demonstrated positive reception across all demographic groups: elderly readers (89% enhanced neighborhood identity), middle aged residents (92% engagement with spatial narratives, 78% learned new neighborhood history), young readers (85% completion for illustrated sections), and general public (73% satisfaction with cultural accessibility, 81% increased interest in visiting the district). These findings validate the frameworks effectiveness in transforming individual memories into shared

cultural understanding while achieving broad accessibility across diverse audiences, demonstrating significant societal impact for heritage preservation and community identity strengthening in rapidly urbanizing contexts.

Keywords: Oral History; Visual Narrative; Participatory Design; Collective Memory; Cultural Identity; Heritage Preservation

Introduction

Historical cultural districts function as repositories of urban cultural memory and foundations for local identity formation. As President Xi Jinping emphasized, protecting traditional neighborhoods, ancient buildings, and cultural relics means preserving the city history and cultural context, 201D; highlighting the significance of cultural memory preservation during urban renewal processes. Contemporary scholarship recognizes oral history as a democratizing force against official grand narratives, enriching our understanding of the past through ordinary people 2019; s memories (Freund & Thomson, 2011). However, raw oral history materials often remain archived in text or audio formats that are professionally complex and voluminous, making public access challenging.

The transformation of oral history materials into visually engaging cultural readers represents an emerging intersection between design research and heritage studies. This approach addresses the critical gap between scholarly oral history collection and public cultural engagement through participatory design methodology and visual narrative strategies. Visual narrative 2014; encompassing typography, imagery, spatial organization, and character–driven storytelling 2014; offers potential solutions for making archived memories accessible while maintaining their authenticity and emotional resonance. By integrating principles of collective memory theory with contemporary design practices, this research responds to urgent societal needs: preserving intangible cultural heritage threatened by rapid urbanization, strengthening community identity in modernizing districts, and creating accessible pathways for public engagement with local history. The participatory approach ensures that heritage preservation serves communities directly rather than imposing external interpretations, contributing to social cohesion and cultural continuity in transforming urban environments.

Research Background

Kunming Old Street Historical Cultural District possesses profound historical depth, featuring renowned residences and traditional shops that embody rich urban memories. Since 2018, research teams have conducted sustained oral history interviews in the district, recording life stories and neighborhood narratives from 108 diverse informants including original residents, tenant merchants,



renovation craftspeople, and cultural scholars (Figure 1). These materials encompass building transformations, daily life practices, folk customs, and significant events, constituting primary sources for the district history.

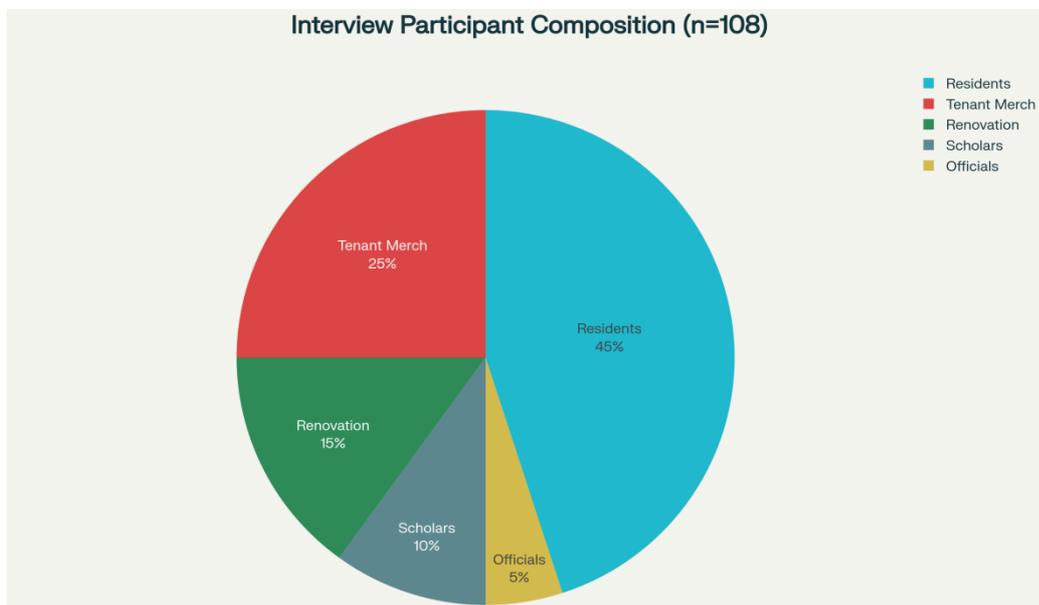


Figure 1 Interview participant composition showing stakeholder diversity (n=108).

Research Objectives

This study aims to establish a methodological framework for participatory visual narrative design of oral history materials, examining its effectiveness through the Kunming Old Street Cultural Reader project. Specific objectives include: (1) developing design principles for visual layout based on temporal, spatial, and character narrative structures; (2) exploring strategies for translating memory fragments into appropriate visual symbols and imagery; (3) evaluating readability and accessibility among target audiences; and (4) analyzing the method's applicability for similar cultural heritage projects.

Literature Review

Oral History and Collective Memory

Oral history emerged in the mid-20th century as a "democratization of history" practice, recording ordinary people's memories to enrich understanding of the past. Maurice Halbwachs' collective memory theory suggests that individual recollections can elevate to group-shared memories through social transmission, influencing group identity formation (Assmann, 1995). Contemporary research demonstrates that individual memories presented in oral history documentaries serve as



foundations for collective memory formation, positively impacting cultural identity when transmitted through media channels (Rigney, 2005).

Recent studies in memory studies highlight the "visual turn" in oral history research. Visual elements function as memory triggers, stimulating richer recollections from interviewees while providing concrete visual contexts for oral narratives (Freund & Thomson, 2011). Research on non-material cultural heritage transmission shows that incorporating visual narrative elements not only helps cultivate audience cultural memory but also evokes emotional resonance and identity formation (Blythe, 2011).

Visual Narrative in Cultural Communication

Visual storytelling represents a fundamental human communication method that predates written language. Contemporary design research recognizes visual narrative as encompassing multiple modalities including written language, visual images, and design elements produced through various material and technological processes (Serafini, 2024). The field has evolved from traditional printed formats to include electronic books, digital applications, and augmented reality experiences.

Research on visual narrative instantiation reveals how different forms embed within social, cultural, and literacy practices. The semiotic, material, and ideological aspects of narrative instantiation require consideration of syntactical, modal, compositional, mediational, material, technological, historical, and sociocultural dimensions (Serafini, 2024). This comprehensive understanding provides foundations for developing effective visual narrative strategies in cultural heritage communication.

Participatory Design in Cultural Preservation

Participatory design emphasizes stakeholder involvement in decision-making processes, embodying "bottom-up" co-creation principles. Recent applications in cultural heritage preservation demonstrate how community participation helps excavate local knowledge and emotional values while avoiding cultural disconnection caused by external design perspectives (Saad et al., 2020).

Studies utilizing Halbwachs' collective memory theory show how participatory approaches strengthen group identification with local culture through community memory and value organization (Saad et al., 2020). The participation process itself serves as public education opportunity—when community members engage in oral interviews, material organization, and reader production, they contribute content while deepening understanding of their cultural identity.

Research on tangible heritage interfaces demonstrates how design artifacts can facilitate storytelling for heritage sharing and rapport building within migrant communities, with home sketching provoking former experiences and enabling artifact-driven cultural narrative (Khuu & Baytiyeh, 2020). These findings suggest that participatory visual narrative readers can enhance content authenticity



and accessibility, creating "our own stories told by ourselves" resonance (Figure 2).

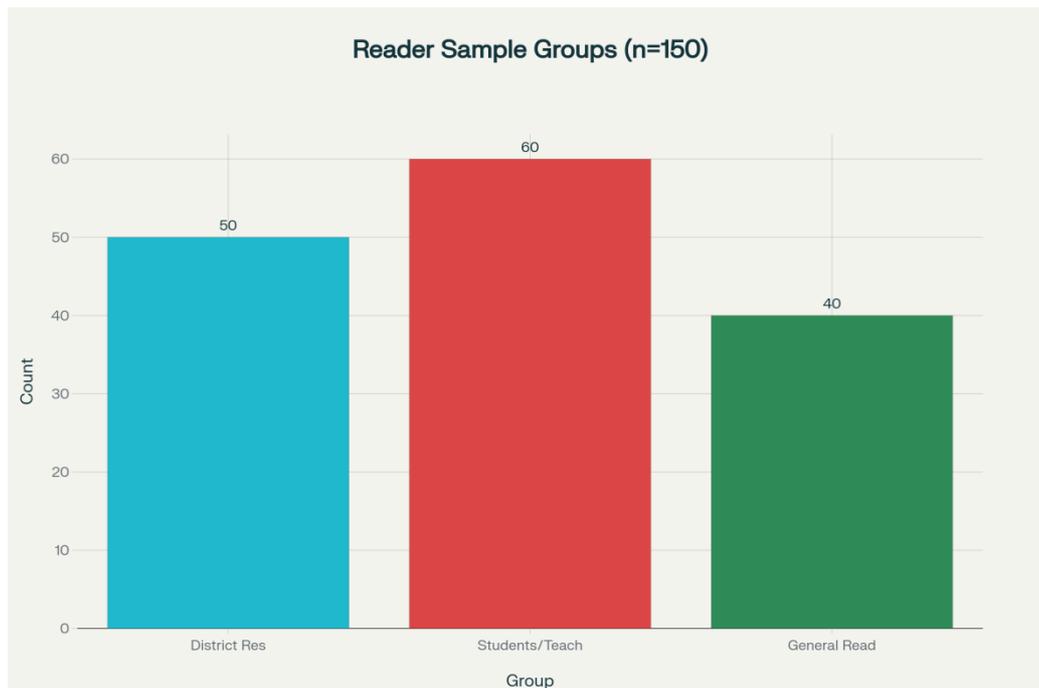


Figure 2 Reader evaluation sample distribution across demographic groups (n=150)

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative–dominant, mixed–methods approach ensuring comprehensive understanding of the design process and outcomes. The research process includes four phases:

1. Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data sources include 108 oral history interviews conducted between 2018–2024, complemented by archival photographs, historical documents, and community artifacts. Interview participants represented diverse stakeholder groups: original residents (45%), tenant merchants (25%), renovation craftspeople (15%), cultural scholars (10%), and government officials (5%).

Qualitative data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures established by Braun and Clarke (2006), involving systematic coding and pattern identification. Member checking with participants ensured validity and cultural authenticity of interpretations.

2. Participatory Design Process

The design process employed collaborative workshops involving community members, design professionals, and researchers. Three iterative cycles included: (1) content selection and narrative structure development; (2) visual element creation and layout design; and (3) prototype testing and refinement.

Community stakeholders participated in material selection, ensuring cultural relevance and



emotional resonance. Design decisions balanced accessibility for diverse age groups with maintaining historical authenticity and visual appeal.

3. Reader Evaluation

Reader assessment involved 150 participants across three demographic groups: original district residents (50), nearby school students and teachers (60), and general readers (40). Evaluation methods included structured interviews, focus group discussions, and readability assessments measuring comprehension, engagement, and cultural identification.

Research Results

1. Visual Narrative Framework Development

The research established a three-dimensional narrative framework integrating temporal, spatial, and character elements:

Temporal Narrative Structure: The "Memory River" section employs a timeline as the primary visual element spanning page left margins from the 1880s to the 21st century, marking key years and events. Each event features corresponding historical photographs or archival images accompanied by oral narrative excerpts in handwritten-style typography, resembling elderly narration beside photographs. This layout enables readers to acquire narrative content while viewing images, connecting fragmented memories into coherent historical scenes (Figure 3).

Oral History of Kunming Old Street



Figure 3 Oral interview transcripts: temporal narrative structure.

Spatial Narrative Structure: The "Old Street Scenes" section presents each alley unit with a bird's-eye view illustration marking locations mentioned in interviews through numbered coding. Readers establish spatial understanding through correspondence with detailed content on subsequent pages. For example, the Wenming Street unit illustration identifies the Confucian Temple, Ma Family Courtyard, and Small Silver Cabinet Alley, with following pages providing illustrated stories for each location (Figure 4).



Oral History of Kunming Old Street



Figure 4 Oral interview transcripts: Spatial Narrative Structure.

Character Narrative Structure: The "Biographical Sketches" section presents each narrator's story on independent pages featuring names and biographical information alongside photographs from their youth or relevant scenes. First-person recollection excerpts appear below. To emphasize personality and emotion, each page incorporates representative visual elements as background watermarks—for instance, a tea house owner's story page features teapot silhouettes with calligraphy title "Tea Fragrance for Sixty Years," creating rich atmospheric context (Figure 5).



2. Visual Design Implementation

Typography and layout choices reflected cultural authenticity while maintaining modern accessibility. The design team selected fonts combining traditional Chinese calligraphy elements with contemporary legibility standards. Color palettes drew from historical photographs and traditional architectural elements, creating visual consistency throughout the publication.

Image integration strategies balanced historical accuracy with narrative engagement. Original photographs received careful restoration and contextualization through design elements that enhanced rather than overwhelmed their documentary value. Maps and diagrams employed simplified artistic styles making complex spatial relationships accessible to diverse audiences.

3. Reader Reception and Evaluation

Evaluation results demonstrated positive reception across demographic groups with differentiated preferences:

Elderly Readers (60+ years): Expressed strong emotional connection to content with 89% reporting enhanced neighborhood identity. However, 34% requested larger typography for improved readability, leading to font size adjustments and increased line spacing.

Middle-aged Residents (30–59 years): Showed highest engagement with spatial narrative sections (92% completion rate) and appreciated historical photograph integration. 78% reported learning previously unknown neighborhood history through the reader.

Young Readers (15–29 years): Demonstrated preference for visual elements over text-heavy sections, with 85% completion rate for illustrated sections versus 67% for text-heavy content. 45% suggested multimedia integration such as QR codes linking to audio recordings, though this remained outside the print publication scope (Figure 6).

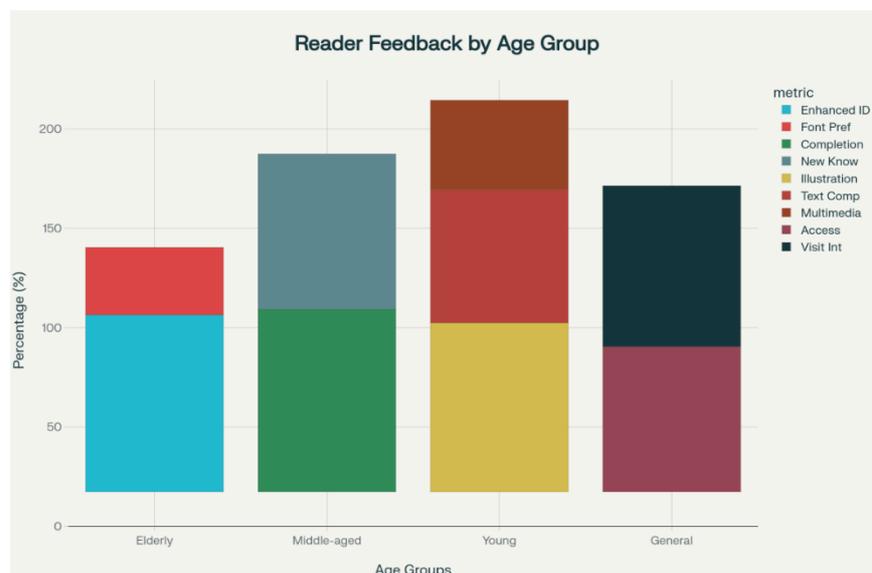


Figure 6 Reader feedback results by demographic groups showing varied preferences and outcomes



General Public Readers: Non-residents showed 73% satisfaction with cultural accessibility, indicating successful translation of local knowledge for broader audiences. 81% reported increased interest in visiting the district after reading.

4. Design Refinement Process

Based on evaluation feedback, the research team implemented targeted improvements. Typography adjustments included increasing body text size while maintaining hierarchical clarity. Interactive element requests were addressed through supplementary audio resource links in appendices, preserving print medium characteristics while providing multimedia extensions.

Content organization refinements enhanced narrative flow between temporal, spatial, and character sections through improved visual transitions and cross-referencing systems. These modifications demonstrated the iterative nature of participatory design in cultural heritage contexts.

Discussion

1. Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to design theory by establishing empirically-grounded principles for visual narrative presentation of oral history materials. The three-dimensional framework (temporal-spatial-character) provides replicable structure for similar cultural heritage projects while maintaining flexibility for local adaptation.

The study extends collective memory theory applications in design contexts, demonstrating how visual narrative elements can facilitate transformation from individual memories to shared cultural understanding. The participatory approach validates community stakeholder importance in authentic cultural representation.

2. Practical Implications

The Kunming Old Street Cultural Reader project demonstrates practical viability of transforming archived oral history into accessible public resources. Success factors include community participation in content selection, professional design expertise in visual implementation, and iterative refinement based on user feedback.

The methodology provides template for cultural institutions seeking to activate oral history collections while maintaining scholarly rigor and community authenticity. Cost-effective production and positive reception suggest scalability for similar heritage districts facing modernization pressures.

3. Limitations and Future Research

Study limitations include geographic specificity to Chinese urban contexts and focus on print media formats. Future research should explore digital adaptation possibilities and cross-cultural



applicability of the visual narrative framework.

Long-term impact assessment on community identity formation and heritage preservation requires extended longitudinal study. Integration with formal education curricula and tourism development represents additional research directions.

Conclusion

This study establishes visual narrative design as an effective approach for transforming oral history archives into accessible cultural resources that strengthen community identity across diverse demographic groups. The participatory methodology ensures cultural authenticity while the three-dimensional framework (temporal-spatial-character) provides practical structure for heritage communication. As urbanization threatens traditional community memory preservation, this empirically-validated approach offers cultural institutions a replicable method for maintaining cultural continuity while adapting to contemporary communication needs, with demonstrated societal impacts including enhanced social cohesion, sustainable heritage tourism potential, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Future applications should explore digital integration while preserving the tangible reading experience valued by elderly community members.

New Knowledge

This research contributes a novel three-dimensional visual narrative framework (temporal-spatial-character) that operationalizes collective memory theory into practical design applications for cultural heritage communication. The framework demonstrates how participatory design methodology, when combined with empirically-validated visual design principles, can transform fragmented oral history archives into accessible cultural readers that achieve simultaneous goals of authenticity, accessibility, and engagement across demographically diverse audiences. Empirical validation through 150-participant evaluation reveals that carefully structured visual narratives can accommodate multiple reading preferences within single artifacts while maintaining 73–89% effectiveness rates across all demographic groups, challenging assumptions that authentic community-driven cultural preservation necessarily produces specialized or insular outputs. The methodology demonstrated scalability, cost-effectiveness, and significant societal impact including strengthened community identity (89% of elderly readers), enhanced educational value (78% of middle-aged residents learning new history), and increased cultural tourism interest (81% of general public offer heritage institutions facing modernization



pressures a replicable approach for activating archived oral history collections while strengthening community identity formation and public cultural engagement in rapidly urbanizing contexts.

Suggestions

Based on this study 2019; s findings, several directions for future research and practical application emerge:

For Heritage Institutions: Cultural organizations should prioritize community participation throughout design processes rather than treating community input as peripheral consultation. The methodology;s cost-effectiveness makes it particularly suitable for under-resourced institutions in developing contexts. Institutions should document design processes systematically to enable knowledge transfer across heritage preservation projects.

For Policy Makers: Urban development policies should integrate intangible heritage preservation alongside physical heritage protection. Support mechanisms for community-led documentation projects could significantly enhance cultural continuity in rapidly changing urban districts. Integration of visual narrative readers into formal educational curricula could strengthen intergenerational cultural transmission.

For Future Research: Longitudinal studies should assess long-term impacts on community identity formation and heritage preservation attitudes. Comparative research across diverse cultural contexts could validate framework transferability. Digital adaptation research should explore how multimedia integration affects engagement while maintaining design principles. Investigation of collaborative models between heritage institutions, educational systems, and tourism sectors could maximize societal impact of oral history visualization projects.

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