

Designing a Mobile Museum Exhibition for the Chinese Spring Festival: A Cross-Cultural Communication Perspective

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Abstract

The inscription of the Spring Festival on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity has brought traditional Chinese festive practices into a broader international heritage discourse. However, overseas presentations of the Spring Festival often emphasize visual symbols and festive atmosphere, while offering limited interpretation of the ritual contexts and social values embedded in these practices. This paper proposes the mobile museum as a supplementary medium for the cross-cultural interpretation of the Spring Festival. Drawing on semiotic theory, it classifies Spring Festival cultural symbols into three levels of cross-cultural accessibility: sensory recognition, contextual interpretation, and value translation. These levels are then translated into a spatial design strategy composed of three corresponding zones: the Perception Zone, the Interpretation Zone, and the Exploration Zone. The proposed design positions the mobile museum as an intermediary between urban festival events and fixed-site museums, extending public access while providing layered cultural interpretation. The study offers a design-oriented pathway from cultural symbol analysis to spatial translation, providing a reference for the cross-cultural exhibition of the Chinese Spring Festival and related forms of intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Cross-cultural Communication; Mobile Museum; Spring Festival; Cultural Translation

1 Introduction

In December 2024, “The Spring Festival—Social Practices of the Chinese People in Celebrating the Traditional New Year” was inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity[1]. This inscription marked the repositioning of the Chinese Spring Festival from a national celebration to a constituent element of international heritage discourse. Accordingly, the overseas presentation of the Spring Festival can no longer be limited to enhancing its visibility; rather, it must address how its social practices can be interpreted across cultural contexts.

Structured around seasonal transition, the Spring Festival encompasses a range of practices, including ancestor veneration and prayers for blessings, family reunion and festive banquets, New Year greetings and social exchange, and public celebrations. These practices sustain family ethics, kinship relations, and community order, forming the cultural framework that distinguishes the Spring Festival from ordinary festive events[2].

At present, the overseas offline presentation of the Spring Festival mainly relies on museum exhibitions, urban festivals, and official cultural exchange programs[4]. Although these approaches have provided an important foundation, they often struggle to reconcile geographical reach, interpretive depth, and sustained public engagement. The international presentation of the Spring Festival therefore needs to move beyond the display of cultural symbols and toward the translation of cultural meanings, transforming concepts such as reunion, renewal, ethics, and blessings into spatial narratives that are intelligible, participatory, and experiential.

Characterized by mobile deployment, resource integration, and modular exhibition design, the mobile museum can transcend the temporal and spatial limitations of fixed venues and improve the accessibility of public cultural services[5]. Grounded in semiotics, this paper examines the hierarchical recognition of Spring Festival cultural symbols and translates these symbolic levels into spatial design strategies for mobile museums. On this basis, it proposes a design scheme for a Spring Festival-themed mobile museum. By establishing a systematic pathway from the identification of cultural symbols to their spatial translation, the study provides a methodological framework for the cross-cultural exhibition of the Chinese Spring Festival.

2 Research Background

A. Current Forms of Communication and Their Limitations

At present, the overseas presentation of the Spring Festival has developed around three main formats: fixed museum exhibitions, urban festivals, and official cultural exchange programs. Fixed museum exhibitions offer a relatively stable capacity for cultural interpretation, but their reach across diverse audiences remains limited[7]. Urban festivals provide high levels of public participation and spatial visibility; however, in the process of festival branding, the cultural meanings of the Spring Festival are often reduced to symbols of urban image-making and cultural tourism consumption, thereby constraining deeper intercultural understanding[8]. Official cultural exchange programs have strong organizational and mobilization capacities, yet they are often confined to short-term performances and passive spectatorship, making

it difficult to communicate the deeper cultural values of the Spring Festival in a sustained manner[9].

The central tension in the cross-cultural communication of the Chinese Spring Festival lies in the fact that its cultural practices are frequently confined to specific spaces, temporal occasions, or institutional frameworks. As a result, there remains a lack of communicative models capable of integrating sustained engagement, participatory experience, and cultural interpretation within everyday public settings.

B. Examples of International Mobile Cultural Facilities

The core value of mobile museums lies in redefining the spatial relationship between cultural institutions and the public: rather than requiring the public to visit cultural institutions, they enable cultural content to enter everyday life (Table 1).

Table 1. Examples of Internationally Renowned Mobile Cultural Facilities

Case	Illustration	Core Operational Logic	Spatial Characteristics	Primary Audiences
Finnish Mobile Library		Community embeddedness and equitable access to knowledge	Bus-based structure with a modular interior	Residents of remote communities
Japanese Container-Based Promotional Vehicle		Pop-up deployment and commercial penetration	Container chassis with hydraulically expandable side panels	Pedestrians in urban commercial districts
Japanese Container-Based Promotional Vehicle		Artistic equity and the decentralization of high art	A three-stage progressive spatial sequence	Residents of culturally marginalized areas
Liaoning Provincial Museum Wing-Expansion Vehicle, China		Delivery of cultural relics and digital exhibition	Shock-resistant display cases and low-reflective glass	Rural and grassroots audiences

The above cases do not offer direct templates for Spring Festival exhibitions. Rather, they reveal three key mechanisms of mobile cultural facilities. The first is spatial outreach, through which cultural services are brought into communities, schools, and underserved areas by means of vehicles, containers, or deployable structures[10]. The second is low-threshold participation, which reduces the barriers to public engagement through open access, short-term visits, and modular exhibits[11]. The third is interpretive compensation, whereby lightweight and mobile spaces provide cultural interpretation beyond fixed institutions[13]. For the cross-cultural presentation of the Chinese Spring Festival, what is most relevant is not the specific form of the vehicle itself, but the communicative logic of active outreach, rapid entry, and layered interpretation.

3 A Layered Analysis of Spring Festival Cultural Symbols and Their Spatial Translation Mechanisms

The challenge of the cross-cultural communication of the Chinese Spring Festival lies not in the visibility of its symbols, but in whether audiences from different cultural backgrounds can understand the cultural contexts and value systems embedded within them. Visual elements such as lanterns, the color red, and dragon and lion dances are highly recognizable, yet they often produce only an initial impression of the festival. Symbols such as the Chinese character Fu, Spring Festival couplets, red envelopes, and New Year prints depend on language, customs, and everyday cultural experience for their interpretation. Ritual practices such as the New Year's Eve vigil, New Year visits, and the New Year's Eve dinner further involve family ethics, temporal renewal, and intergenerational relationships. Spring Festival exhibitions should therefore establish a layered mechanism of interpretive translation that corresponds to different levels of audience understanding.

A. The Layered Structure of Spring Festival Symbols from a Semiotic Perspective

Drawing on Roland Barthes' semiotic framework of denotation, connotation, and myth, this paper classifies Spring Festival cultural symbols into three levels according to their cognitive accessibility for cross-cultural audiences[14].

- At the sensory recognition level, or denotative level, highly visible elements such as lanterns, red decorations, images of fireworks, drum music, and dragon and lion dances can quickly create a festive atmosphere and lower the psychological threshold for visitors entering the exhibition. However, if presented without further interpretation, these elements may easily be perceived merely as visual spectacles associated with the East.

- At the contextual interpretation level, or connotative level, symbols such as the Chinese character Fu (good fortune), Spring Festival couplets, red envelopes, New Year prints, and paper cuttings do not communicate their meanings through visual form alone. Their interpretation depends on linguistic structures, ritual conventions, and everyday life contexts. Without such contextualization, they may be misunderstood as decorative motifs or ordinary gifts.

- At the value translation level, or mythic level, ritual practices such as the New Year's Eve dinner, the New Year's Eve vigil, New Year visits, and the giving of lucky money embody deeper cultural values, including family reunion, temporal renewal, blessings for younger generations, and social connectedness. These abstract values need to be translated into life experiences and emotional relations that cross-cultural audiences can understand (Fig. 1).

Framework of Translation Mechanisms

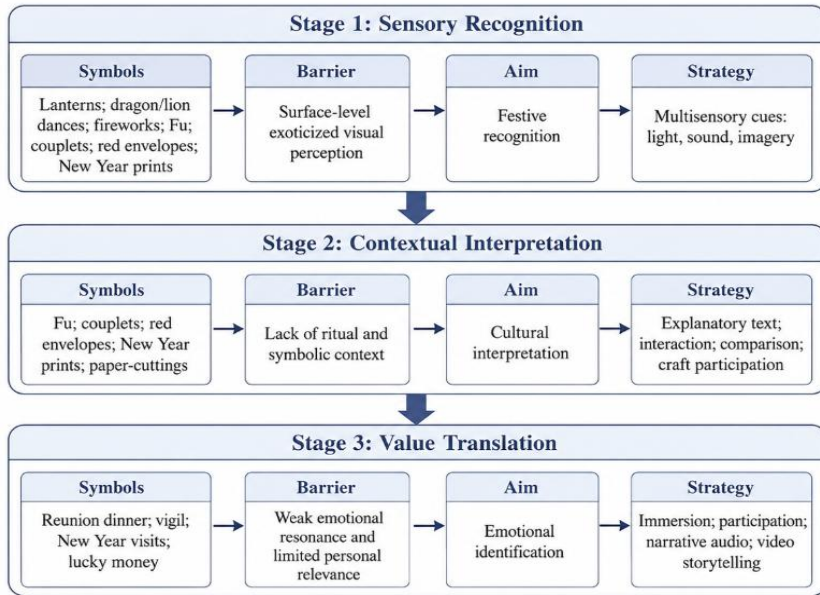


Fig. 1 Layered Structure and Spatial Translation Mechanisms of Spring Festival Cultural Symbols

B. The Spatial Translation Mechanisms of Spring Festival Cultural Symbols

The exhibition and interpretation of Spring Festival cultural symbols should follow a three-stage process that moves from surface recognition to deeper cultural understanding. At the stage of sensory presentation, color, lighting, sound, and moving images are used to establish a festive identity, enabling visitors to enter the cultural context of the Spring Festival without requiring complex prior knowledge. At the stage of contextual explanation, multilingual texts, digital interaction, object display, and hands-on activities reveal the linguistic logic, ritual conventions, and craftsmanship embedded in these symbols. At the stage of value-based translation, the family ethics, temporal concepts, and social relationships embodied in Spring Festival rituals are transformed into emotionally intelligible experiences, thereby reducing cultural misinterpretation and symbolic oversimplification.

Accordingly, the Sensory Recognition Level corresponds to the Perception Zone, which attracts and guides visitors; the Contextual Interpretation Level corresponds to the Interpretation Zone, which provides explanation and supports interaction; and the Value Translation Level corresponds to the Exploration Zone, which develops narrative engagement and empathy. Together, these three levels form an exhibition pathway of “Recognition—Interpretation—Empathy.”

4 Spatial Design Proposal for a Spring Festival-Themed Mobile Museum

A. Design Positioning and Overall Strategy

The primary target audience of this project is the general public in the host country, particularly non-Chinese communities, suburban families, and rural

youth. Unlike traditional museums, which mainly serve self-motivated cultural consumers, this mobile museum aims to extend the communication of Spring Festival culture beyond existing cultural circles and reach broader public audiences.

The design adopts a 15-meter heavy-duty box semi-trailer equipped with a drawer-type hydraulic side-extension system. During transit, the exhibition compartment remains fully enclosed, and the overall vehicle width complies with European road traffic requirements. Upon arrival, the compartments on both sides extend outward, substantially enlarging the interior exhibition space. The exterior walls are fitted with interchangeable modular cladding, allowing the visual theme to be adjusted for tours in different countries and regions. A low-gradient ramp and lift platform are installed on the side of the vehicle to ensure barrier-free access in accordance with international accessibility standards (Fig. 2).

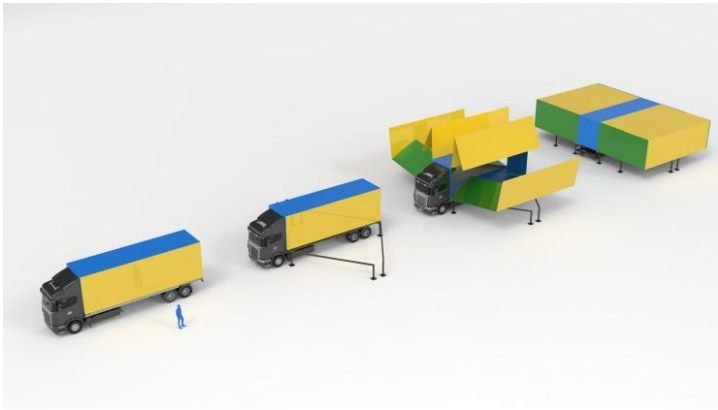


Fig. 2 Vehicle Folding and Deployment

B. Spatial Zoning and Exhibition Logic

Based on the cognitive levels of communication, the vehicle interior is organized into three zones: the Perception Zone, the Interpretation Zone, and the Exploration Zone (Fig. 3). These zones form a progressive spatial sequence from recognition to deeper understanding (Table 2).

Table 2. Spatial Design Strategies for the Three Exhibition Zones

Spatial Zone	Corresponding Level	Main Exhibition Methods	Intended Audience Response
Perception Zone	Sensory Recognition Level	Sensor-activated lighting installations and ambient sound	Reduce psychological distance and stimulate interest in entering
Interpretation Zone	Contextual Interpretation Level	Digital in teractive tables, object-comparison displays, and a paper-cutting activity area	Build cultural context and encourage cognitive understanding
Exploration Zone	Value Translation Level	VR immersive experience and multilingual audio narratives	Foster emotional resonance and enable deeper cultural connection

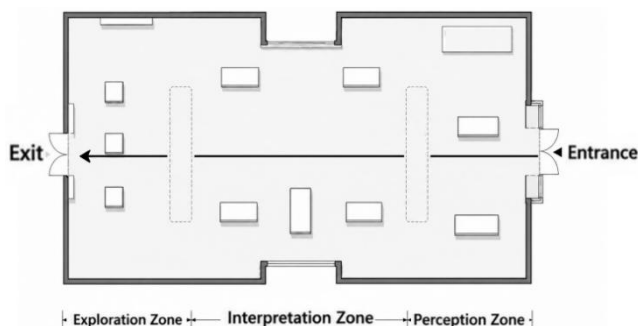


Fig. 3 Floor Plan

- The Perception Zone is located at the entrance, where the vehicle body unfolds. Through a matrix of lanterns, red flooring, and rhythmic ambient sound, it creates a low-cognitive-load sensory experience that allows visitors to perceive the festive atmosphere of the Spring Festival without relying on textual explanation. The design is intended to attract visitors, encourage them to pause, and guide them into the exhibition.

- The Interpretation Zone follows the principle of visual storytelling and embodied interaction. It contains two core exhibits. The first is an interactive display on the evolution of Chinese characters, in which visitors can trace the character Fu and learn, through animation, about its historical transformation and the homophonic association between dao (upside down) and dao (arrival). The second is a physical comparison display titled Creative Logic, which juxtaposes traditional woodblock New Year prints with contemporary design products. This exhibit illustrates the cultural concepts of repetition, order, and continuity in Spring Festival visual culture, and is accompanied by a paper-cutting activity area.

- The Exploration Zone is located at the far end of the vehicle. As shown in Fig. 4, through immersive VR experiences, it translates ritual practices such as the New Year's Eve vigil and New Year visits into shared experiences centered on family reunion, intergenerational blessings, and the renewal of life. This enables visitors to understand the deeper cultural meanings of the Spring Festival through emotional experience rather than conceptual instruction, thereby reducing the risk that these practices are misread as religious or mystical.



Fig. 4 Renderings of the three exhibition zones

C. Collaborative Strategies with Existing Communication Formats

The mobile museum is positioned not as a replacement for the existing cross-cultural communication system of the Chinese Spring Festival, but as its complement and extension. This synergy operates at two levels.

At the level of spatial integration with urban festival gatherings, the mobile museum can be stationed on the periphery of Spring Festival events in overseas Chinatowns. By drawing on the natural visitor flow generated by these

gatherings, it provides a quieter and more structured space for cultural interpretation for audiences seeking a deeper understanding of the Spring Festival. In this way, it forms a complementary pathway from broad cultural exposure to deeper interpretive engagement.

At the level of audience outreach in relation to fixed museums, the mobile museum can operate beyond the Spring Festival period by drawing on the community outreach model of Finnish mobile libraries. It can tour small and medium-sized towns, suburban schools, and community centers on a continuing basis, reaching audiences that fixed museums often find difficult to serve. At the same time, it can provide information on guided tours and reservations for Chinese cultural exhibitions in local fixed museums, thereby establishing a layered communication pathway from mobile outreach to more in-depth institutional learning (Fig.5).



Fig. 5 Diagram of Spatial Linkages

5 Conclusion

This paper examines how the Chinese Spring Festival can be presented in cross-cultural contexts and proposes a layered interpretive approach using the mobile museum as a medium. It argues that the key challenge in the cross-cultural communication of the Spring Festival lies not in further increasing the visibility of festive symbols, but in translating these visible symbols into intelligible ritual contexts and emotionally accessible value experiences.

Drawing on a semiotic framework, the study classifies Spring Festival cultural symbols into three levels according to their cognitive accessibility for cross-cultural audiences: Sensory Recognition, Contextual Interpretation, and Value Translation. These levels are then translated into the spatial organization of the mobile museum, forming an exhibition logic of “Recognition, Interpretation, Empathy”. This logic is embodied in the Perception Zone, Interpretation Zone and Exploration Zone, thereby establishing a coherent link between the theoretical framework and spatial design practice. The proposed approach offers a practical model for the cross-cultural exhibition of the Chinese Spring Festival.

In terms of communication formats, the mobile museum is not intended to replace existing approaches, but to function as a complementary medium within the current communication landscape. During the Spring Festival, it can be positioned on the periphery of festive gatherings in overseas Chinatowns, where it addresses the lack of structured cultural interpretation often found in

such events. Outside the festival period, drawing on the community outreach model of Finnish mobile libraries, it can tour small and medium-sized towns, suburban schools, and community centers on a continuing basis, reaching audiences that fixed museums often find difficult to serve. In this way, the mobile museum can help establish a layered communication pathway and complement the limitations of fixed museums, urban festivals, and official cultural exchange programs by linking broader public reach with deeper cultural interpretation.

This study has not conducted empirical research in specific regional contexts. The ways in which audiences in culturally distant regions receive and interpret Spring Festival culture therefore require further investigation. Future research should advance prototype testing and small-scale touring exhibition evaluations, using real audience feedback to assess the validity of the proposed symbol classification and the effectiveness of the spatial strategies. Such work would help move the Spring Festival-themed mobile museum from a conceptual design proposal toward a verifiable and replicable model for the cross-cultural presentation of intangible cultural heritage.

DECLARATIONS

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