



Extracting Formative Principles of Expressive Forms in Nuo Masks: A Gestalt Psychology Approach

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Abstract. Research on the emotional encoding in indigenous visual culture remains limited. This study employs Gestalt psychology to extract the formative principles of Jiangxi Nanfeng Nuo masks, transcending cultural specifics to uncover universal visual-perceptual logic. An analytical framework integrating “Gestalt laws of organization” and “visual forces” is constructed and applied to deconstruct the masks, revealing core patterns. These are defined by three visual force structures—expansion, contraction, composite—and organized through “Gestalt” integration and “pattern-breaking” contrast. The patterns are summarized as “Gestalt Complete-Form Symbols.” This provides a pathway for extracting universal visual principles from intangible cultural artifacts, offering methodological reference for creating and researching emotional visual symbols.

Keywords: Nuo masks; Gestalt psychology; Formative principles; Visual forces; Emotional expression

1 Introduction

Expression serves as the most direct vehicle for conveying emotion, and the study of its formative principles holds significant importance for gaining a deeper understanding of the construction of visual emotional symbols. Currently, discourse within relevant domestic fields predominantly focuses on introducing external stylistic elements, lacking sufficient extraction and synthesis of the deep-seated formative logic inherent in indigenous cultural visual systems. China's rich intangible cultural heritage harbors unique aesthetic wisdom. As the quintessence of Nuo culture, Nuo masks employ highly generalized and exaggerated distortion techniques to fuse character personality, fate, and collective consciousness into a unified whole, achieving the integration of "form," "essence," and "meaning." They serve as condensed visual symbols for emotional expression. Their capacity to distill complex information into static imagery embodies a highly typified characteristic of visual encoding. Therefore, the study of Nuo mask design focuses on deciphering the underlying logic of "encoding emotion through form" and systematically refining its inherent principles.

Naturally, a challenge of transformation exists between the static, symbolic nature of Nuo mask forms and the demands of dynamic, narrative visual expression. Gestalt

psychology provides an effective theoretical perspective for this endeavor: its "laws of perceptual organization" reveal how visual elements are structured into meaningful wholes, while the theory of "visual forces" explains how static graphics generate dynamic emotional tension. This provides a solid foundation for deconstructing the visual principles of Nuo masks and constructing a universal framework for formal analysis.

Against the backdrop where visual culture studies require deeper theoretical support rooted in local traditions, this paper proposes an analytical pathway for examining formative principles based on traditional artifacts. Specifically, it utilizes Gestalt psychology as its theoretical basis to conduct a visual-perceptual deconstruction of Nuo masks from Nanfeng, Jiangxi. The goal is to extract their fundamental "form-emotion" mapping patterns and subsequently summarize these traditional principles into a set of "expressive-form principles" with universal reference value. This aims to provide a rational analytical perspective, derived from an indigenous cultural system, for the creation of visual emotional symbols.

2 Construction of a Gestalt Visual Perception Framework for Expression Analysis

Gestalt psychology posits that in human cognitive processes, the holistic perception formed by the brain is not merely the sum of its individual parts but a creative combination where "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." [1] The human mind consistently employs certain methods to organize interrelated elements from experiential materials into a more comprehensible whole. This fundamental principle provides a scientific basis for explaining how visual art can transcend specific objects to convey emotions and artistic conception. Within the extensive framework of Gestalt psychology, the series of principles regarding "perceptual organization" (i.e., the "laws of perceptual organization") and the discourse on "visual force fields" and "dynamic potential" are most directly relevant to the analysis of highly symbolic facial expression designs. This offers a theoretical foundation for constructing an analytical framework to deconstruct the design principles of facial expressions.

2.1 Laws of Perceptual Organization: The "Visual Grammar" Rules of Facial Design Elements

The Laws of Perceptual Organization describe the fundamental principles followed by the human brain in visual perceptual activities when combining fragmented visual elements into meaningful wholes. These include the Law of Closure, Law of Proximity, Law of Similarity, Law of Continuity, Law of Common Fate, and others. These principles function like the "grammar" of visual cognition, governing how a complex image is "read." Through the combined activity of the eyes and the brain, the perceptual image is continuously organized, simplified, and unified in the mind until it forms an easily comprehensible and harmonious whole.[2] Facial design, composed of multiple elements such as eyebrows, eyes, nose, mouth, and facial contour, is profoundly influenced by these laws.

According to the Law of Proximity and the Law of Similarity, visual units that are close to each other in space, or that share similarities in form, size, direction, color, or texture, tend to be perceived as a single whole. Therefore, in facial design, designers often arrange facial features that express the same emotional tendency closer together in space or endow them with similar sharp or slanted forms. This creates a visually reinforced "emotional cluster," making the emotional expression more distinct and integrated—for example, furrowed brows, flared nostrils, and downturned corners of the mouth in anger.

According to the Law of Continuity and the Law of Closure, visual perception also tends to perceive elements aligned along a smooth, continuous straight or curved line as part of the same whole. It may also automatically complete interrupted or incomplete contours in the mind, forming a closed, familiar shape. In facial design, this applies not only to the smoothness of physical contour lines such as the hairline, cheekbone line, and jawline but, more importantly, to the virtual "expression lines" formed by key points like the brows, eyes, and mouth. For instance, the continuity of a line connecting the eyebrows and the corners of the mouth: an upward, continuously curved "expression line" is typically associated with joy and openness, whereas a downward, interrupted, or twisted line tends to be linked to sadness or inner conflict. The Law of Closure enables us to automatically complete simplified or obscured facial features, thereby achieving a holistic perception of the face.

2.2 Visual Force and Dynamic Tendency: The Source of Emotional "Tension" in Static Forms

Rudolf Arnheim, in his work *Art and Visual Perception*, further develops the concept of visual force, arguing that even in static images, observers can perceive an inherent "tension" or "dynamic tendency." This perception of "force" serves as the direct psychophysiological basis for aesthetic experience and emotional response, and is also a key to analyzing the emotional orientation of expressive forms.[3]

Typically, an outwardly expanded and full form (such as a sphere or puffed cheeks) naturally conveys a sense of expansive, abundant, positive, and outwardly bursting visual force. Conversely, an inwardly contracted or concave form (like a funnel or tightly furrowed brows) transmits a sense of shrinking, suppressed, tense, and inwardly negative force. Meanwhile, any line or form deviating from the vertical or horizontal direction generates a distinct sense of motion and directionality. In facial expressions, the rising or falling of eyebrows and the upturning or downturn of eye corners and mouth corners not only define specific emotional categories (such as joy or anger) but also determine the intensity and subtle variations of emotions (such as quiet amusement versus ecstatic joy) through their angles and curvature.

Furthermore, symmetrical structures generally evoke a sense of stability, solemnity, or even rigid balance. In contrast, asymmetrical structures deliberately break this balance, creating dynamic and unstable tension, which more easily attracts attention and is often used to convey complex, contradictory, or highly dramatic emotional states. The presence of sharp angles interrupts the continuity of contour lines, forming visual forces with sharp directional qualities that appear "aggressive," "penetrative," or

"dangerous." The use of sharp angles in design—such as triangular eyes, jagged teeth, or sharply angled brows—can instantly heighten visual tension and swiftly associate with emotions like threat, pain, anger, or cunning.

2.3 Integration of the Analytical Framework and Its Application

The core of the Gestalt visual perception analytical framework constructed above lies in utilizing the Laws of Perceptual Organization to analyze how the components of an expression symbol are structurally organized into a cohesive whole that effectively conveys information. At the same time, it employs the theory of Visual Force and Dynamics to interpret the sources of emotional energy and psychological tension embedded within that overall form. Applying this framework to traditional Nuo masks allows us to move beyond their specific deity identities and decorative patterns, and instead examine how their facial features are accentuated, whether their contours trend toward expansion or contraction, and whether slants or sharp angles are used to generate tension. Through this, we can capture the underlying “emotion-form” coding logic based on universal human visual perception. This process of demystification and refinement is the crucial first step in transforming traditional experiential knowledge into transferable, operable design principles.

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3.1 Emotional Archetypes and Visual Tonalities in Nuo Mask Design

The design of Nuo masks from Nanfeng can be categorized, from the perspective of expression semiotics, into three main emotional archetypes, each distinguished by clear visual tonalities.

The first is the fierce and intimidating type, commonly seen in roles such as Kaishan (the Mountain Opener) and Zhong Kui, who exorcise evil and suppress demons. Its visual characteristics include a broad face structure, horizontally stretched musculature,

often accentuated by glaring eyes, bared fangs, flame-like eyebrows, and strong contrasting colors such as black, red, and cyan. Collectively, these elements create an effect of expansive force and tension that conveys deterrence. It should be noted that this “ferocious” appearance serves as an external manifestation of the function to “combat evil with evil,” while its core often represents an upright guardian deity.

The second is the kindly and dignified type, represented by figures such as Nuo Gong and Nuo Po (the male and female Nuo deities) or elder characters. Their features include delicate facial contours, balanced and regular facial features, and a serene demeanor. The design approach tends toward realism, with soft and flowing lines, and a color palette dominated by mild flesh tones and white. This conveys an aura of benevolent approachability coupled with solemn authority.

The third is the humorous and whimsical type, primarily depicting clownish or comical characters such as Zhu Bajie (Pigsy) from *Journey to the West*. Their visual traits are highly theatrical, employing exaggerated distortions like crooked mouths, slanted eyes, and expressive winks, often breaking symmetry to project an overtly animated expression. Functionally focused on “entertaining the people,” this type embodies the lively and playful dimension of folk art.

3.2 Interrelation Among Components: Local Design of Nuo Masks and the Laws of Perceptual Organization

Deconstructing these forms through the Gestalt visual perception framework allows us to extract their underlying principles. First, from an overall compositional tendency perspective, the eyebrows, eyes, nose, and mouth can be viewed as a unified figure formed through psychological closure. The outer contour of this figure can be categorized into three basic types: Expansive tendencies, often corresponding to open, warm, or expansive emotions such as cheerfulness or enthusiasm, commonly seen in benevolent and dignified deities. Contractive tendencies, typically associated with constrained emotions like anger or sorrow, frequently found in imposing and fierce deities. Complex tendencies combining expansion and contraction, which often reflect mixed emotions such as awkwardness or amusement, a hallmark of clownish characters. [4] These three tendencies form the structural framework for the emotional expression of Nuo masks.

Building upon this foundational framework, artisans introduce more nuanced personality traits and visual complexity by deliberately breaking certain Gestalt principles—a technique that can be termed “rupturing the pattern.” For instance, inserting sharp angles (such as pointed eye corners or protruding fangs) within an overall rounded contour interrupts continuity and injects hints of danger or cunning. Adopting an asymmetrical layout (such as unevenly raised mouth corners) disrupts balance, generating dynamic tension and a sense of peculiarity—well-suited for expressing mocking or eccentric traits. Furthermore, creating differentiation among components—making a specific facial feature (such as the eyes) distinctly different in shape from others—breaks the Law of Similarity, effectively directing visual focus and endowing the character with a unique expression.



Fig. 1. Classification of Gestalt Complete-Form Symbols derived from Nanfeng Nuo masks. The visual taxonomy comprises five types: (A) Expansion + Rounded, (B) Expansion + Pointed + Asymmetric, (C) Contraction + Rounded, (D) Expansion + Pointed, and (E) Expansion/Contraction + Rounded.

To elevate these patterns into more universal principles, a visual refinement was conducted on five typical character archetypes, abstracting five "Gestalt Perceptual Symbols" (as shown in Figure 1 and Table 1). The essence of these symbols lies in being a collection of "emotion-driven visual organization patterns." Stripped of specific theatrical roles, decorative patterns, and colors, they retain the most fundamental visual force structures (expansion, contraction, complex) and organizational logic (perceptual grouping and pattern disruption). These can be further combined by introducing variables such as whether to break the Law of Continuity, the Law of Similarity, or the Law of Common Fate, or by applying conditions like symmetry based on the Law of Similarity, thereby generating a multitude of image symbols for different Nuo theater role archetypes. Furthermore, the study found that Nuo mask design adheres to certain Gestalt organizational laws, where the structural relationships among the components are crucial for enhancing the overall unity of the design. For instance, visual elements positioned adjacent or close to one another most readily form a coherent whole. When elements are farther apart, principles such as the Law of Closure, Law of Continuity, Law of Similarity, and Law of Common Fate can still be leveraged to strengthen their perceived connection. [5] It is precisely this refinement of underlying principles that endows the design wisdom from ancient Nuo masks with the theoretical possibility and practical potential for translation into other visual creation domains, such as modern animation expression design.

Table 1. Classification of "Gestalt Perceptual Symbols" in Nuo Mask Design from Nanfeng

Type	Trend	Angle Type	Symmetry	Character Archetype	Emotional Impression
A	Expansion	Rounded Angles	None	Kind and Honest (Righteous Deity)	Serene and Dignified
B	Expansion	Sharp Angles	Asymmetric	Deceitful and Mocking (Clown Role)	Peculiar and Comical
C	Contraction	Rounded Angles	None	Simple and Sorrowful (Fierce Deity)	Oppressive and Simple-Minded
D	Expansion	Sharp Angles	None	Dangerous and Aggressive (Smiling Tiger)	Cheerful yet Dangerous
E	Expansion-contraction	Rounded Angles	Symmetric (with eye-specific variation)	Comical and Simple-Minded (Clown Role)	Contradictory and Complex

4 Conclusion

Through Gestalt psychology, this study systematically analyzes the formal system of Nuo masks from Nanfeng, Jiangxi. Moving beyond specific folkloric details, it extracts core formative principles defined by visual force structures (expansion, contraction, composite) and organized via “Gestalt integration and pattern-breaking.” These principles are refined into “Gestalt Complete-Form Symbols,” representing stable mappings between emotion and visual pattern.

This process distills abstract principles from traditional artifacts, revealing that the masks' aesthetic wisdom lies not only in cultural symbolism but also in a formal logic adhering to universal visual perception. The summarized pathway—establishing tone through trends, enhancing nuance through contrast, and generalizing through symbols—provides a methodological reference for creating efficient emotional visual symbols.

As a preliminary exploration, this study invites future validation across broader regional and typological spectra, and investigation into color and materiality. Ultimately, this regularity-based approach aims to contribute cultural depth and rational thinking to visual creation, fostering a visual language paradigm that is both locally rooted and modern.

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