

VOICES FROM THE FIELD: AN EXPLORATORY SURVEY OF IMITATION AND FORMALISM IN NEO-CHINESE INTERIOR DESIGN

VOZES DO CAMPO: UM LEVANTAMENTO EXPLORATÓRIO DA IMITAÇÃO E FORMALISMO NO DESIGN DE INTERIORES NEO-CHINÊS

Article received on: 12/19/2025

Article accepted on: 12/22/2025

Xu Kewei*

*School of Arts, Qingdao University, Qingdao, China

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1901-9149>

viki2008@126.com

Arniatul Aiza Binti Mustapha**

**College of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Shah Alam, Malaysia

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5656-6672>

arnia836@uitm.edu.my

Azlaini Bin Haji Abdul Aziz**

**College of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Shah Alam, Malaysia

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-6849-2697>

azlaini824@uitm.edu.my

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

Abstract

In recent years, Neo-Chinese Interior Design (NCID) has become a distinctive stylistic movement in China, reconceptualizing traditional Chinese cultural motifs through the lens of contemporary design. However, its rise has been accompanied by academic concerns regarding widespread imitation and formalism that may hinder its authentic evolution and cultural depth. This study investigates practicing designers' critical perspectives on these phenomena. Using a structured questionnaire, data were collected from 70 interior designers in Qingdao, a major city in Eastern China. Quantitative analysis revealed that over half of the respondents acknowledge imitation and formalism as prevalent issues. Qualitative analysis of the data underscores a need for more theoretical and methodological guidance to move beyond imitation and achieve genuine innovation in NCID. The study concludes that the widespread imitation and formalism in contemporary NCID pose significant challenges to its sustainable development. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, including developing effective methods for integrating traditional culture with modern innovation through design education and bridging the education-market gap through practical verification. These findings not only

Resumo

Nos últimos anos, o Design de Interiores Neo-Chinês (DINCh) tornou-se um movimento estilístico distinto na China, reconceituando os motivos culturais chineses tradicionais através da ótica do design contemporâneo. No entanto, seu surgimento tem sido acompanhado de preocupações acadêmicas em relação à imitação generalizada e ao formalismo que podem impedir sua evolução autêntica e profundidade cultural. Este estudo investiga as perspectivas críticas de designers em atividade sobre esses fenômenos. Usando um questionário estruturado, foram coletados dados de 70 designers de interiores em Qingdao, uma cidade importante no leste da China. A análise quantitativa revelou que mais da metade dos respondentes reconhece a imitação e o formalismo como questões prevalentes. A análise qualitativa dos dados enfatiza a necessidade de mais orientação teórica e metodológica para ultrapassar a imitação e alcançar a inovação genuína no DINCh. O estudo conclui que a imitação generalizada e o formalismo no DINCh contemporâneo representam desafios significativos para seu desenvolvimento sustentável. Abordar esses problemas requer uma abordagem multifacetada, incluindo o desenvolvimento de métodos eficazes para integrar a cultura



provide essential references for the education and practice research of NCID but also offer valuable insights into the reinterpretation of traditional culture in contemporary interior design across other cultural contexts.

Keywords: Neo-Chinese Interior Design. Imitation. Formalism. Innovation.

tradicional à inovação moderna por meio da educação em design e a redução da lacuna entre educação e mercado por meio de verificação prática. Essas descobertas não apenas fornecem referências essenciais para a educação e a pesquisa prática do DINCh, mas também oferecem insights valiosos para a reinterpretação da cultura tradicional no design de interiores contemporâneo em outros contextos culturais.

Palavras-chave: Design de Interiores Neo-Chinês. Imitação. Formalismo. Inovação.

1 INTRODUCTION

The revival of traditional Chinese aesthetics, particularly the “Neo-Chinese Style,” has become a significant cultural phenomenon in interior design since it was officially named at China’s First Interior Designers Summit in October 2004 (Zhou, 2012). In response to China’s growing cultural confidence and global interest in Eastern design concepts, Neo-Chinese Interior Design (NCID) combines traditional Chinese design elements with modern aesthetics, aiming to reinterpret cultural symbols, spatial concepts, and craftsmanship in contemporary living spaces. Although this movement has sparked widespread enthusiasm among designers, the growing issues of imitation and formalism that followed have gradually raised doubts among the academic community in Chinese interior design. In their papers, Chinese interior scholars criticized the practice of merely copying traditional symbols superficially, without deeper cultural integration, which could hinder the innovation and development of NCID.

Meanwhile, in the field of design practice, finding a way to express traditional Chinese culture in modern architectural spaces through innovative design language has been a common challenge for contemporary Chinese interior designers. Due to the intuitive and understandable appeal of imitating and replicating traditional cultural elements in visual form, many Chinese designers tend to draw on conventional styles, reproducing patterns, colors, and shapes. Although these design techniques directly convey the “Chinese flavor” of the interior design style to viewers, they often give the space an impression of formalism and pretentiousness, failing to express the profound, implicit aesthetic sense of traditional Chinese culture. Furthermore, the lack of systematic research on designers' cognition and practice has exacerbated the ambiguity regarding the degree and nature of imitation and formalism in this field. This research aims to address

this gap by surveying frontline interior designers, assessing the prevalence of imitation and formalism, and exploring their perspectives on the future directions and innovation challenges in NCID.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Early in 2006, the famous Chinese architect, winner of the 2012 Pritzker Prize, Wang Shu, pointed out the wrong paths contemporary Chinese designers take in exploring the development of Neo-Chinese architecture. He criticized the designs that rigidly borrowed traditional Chinese elements: *“I think what we need to avoid is the set pattern that when we think of Chinese housing, we only think of traditional Chinese housing and how to express it by using the styles of traditional spaces, courtyards, or gardens”* (Wang, 2006). However, more than a decade after Mr. Wang pointed out the problem in Neo-Chinese architecture design, the phenomenon still exists in the field of NCID. In the paper titled *An Analysis of the Aesthetic Orientation of Literati in Song Dynasty in Contemporary Neo-Chinese Interior Design*, Zhang (2019) notes: *“When some Chinese designers try to reinterpret traditional Chinese style with modern design language, the disadvantages of expressionism appear.”* The author points out that the problem lies in designers’ limited understanding of traditional Chinese culture, which is confined to fragmented ancient elements, and that they merely adopt these forms as decorative symbols in design, thereby failing to recreate the aesthetic atmosphere of traditional Chinese style. In the paper titled *Study on Cultural Consideration and Social Context of Neo-Chinese Interior Design*, Yang (2022) puts forward: *“Nowadays, many Neo-Chinese designs treat traditional Chinese artistic image elements with direct replication or indirect imitation. However, there is no traditional cultural core in them, and the expression is too straightforward.”* This paper argues that if the cultural foundation is not sufficiently explored, the design will merely superficially beautify traditions, failing to achieve true cultural resonance in the Neo-Chinese interior spaces.

Furthermore, some scholars also noted that Chinese designers often exhibit formalism in their Neo-Chinese furniture designs. In the paper titled *The Characteristics and Innovation of Neo-Chinese Furniture Design*, Liu (2019) puts forward: *“At present, although many Neo-Chinese furniture designs are inheriting the traditional culture of our country, there are still many designers who do not really understand the connotation of*

the traditional culture, just for the sake of retro.” The author criticized the stiff copy of the pattern and the complex carvings in these designers’ works, which affect the artistic conception pursued by the NCID. Another scholar also observed a prevalence of direct imitation and a lack of innovation in Neo-Chinese furniture design. In the paper titled *The Application of Traditional Pattern of Ming Furniture in Neo-Chinese Interior Design*, the author states that *“In the contemporary home market, much furniture has the problem of direct copying and imitating, and its design themes lack of innovation, so that some traditional patterns are difficult to meet the needs of contemporary people, and the traditional cultural connotation is missing”* (Zhang, 2021). Furniture is an essential element in the composition of indoor spaces. Scholars’ concerns about imitation and formalism in Neo-Chinese furniture design suggest that similar problems may exist in NCID.

Thankfully, over the past five years, some Chinese designers have recognized the importance of innovation in NCID and have tried to combine traditional Chinese forms and elements with modern art and techniques to make their works appear more innovative (Zhang, 2021; Huang, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2024; Li *et al.*, 2025). However, these designers mainly focused on interpreting and manipulating the physical form while neglecting the reinterpretation of profound cultural connotations and meanings, leaving their designs unsatisfactory in conveying the connotations of traditional culture.

Based on the theoretical analysis and discussion by the scholars above, it can be inferred that there may be issues of widespread imitation and formalism in the current field of NCID. However, this conclusion has not yet been confirmed by feedback from those actively engaged in NCID practice. This study aims to investigate the views of interior design practitioners, assess the prevalence of imitation and formalism in practice, and obtain designers’ insights into the challenges and innovative directions facing the future development of NCID. This empirical feedback from frontline designers will fill the gap in systematic data support from practitioners’ viewpoints and attitudes in the field of NCID.

3 METHODOLOGY

This study does not involve any experimental research related to clinical trials, animals, human tissues, or biological samples. In this study, human participation is

limited to questionnaire surveys. Human participants were recruited in accordance with the principle of voluntary participation. Before the start of the study, the researchers introduced the research purpose, the investigation process, the use of collected data, and the participants' rights to all participants, and obtained their consent. All participants signed the informed consent form. The questionnaire distribution period was from November 21st to November 28th, 2025. This study does not involve any discussions of personal religious beliefs, racial identity, political views, sexual orientation, financial information, or any other private matters. All data and information are collected, recorded, and stored anonymously and confidentially, and no behavior infringes upon the privacy, dignity, health, or human rights of the participants. We confirm that all methods and procedures in this paper were carried out in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations, and that ethical oversight requirements were adhered to. The results presented in this study are original and have not been published or submitted elsewhere. This study has been reviewed and is hereby granted approval for implementation by the Jawatankuasa Etika Penyelidikan Pusat Pengurusan Penyelidikan Universiti Teknologi MARA, UiTM Research Ethics Committee. Ethics Approval Number: REC/04/2025 (PG/MR/213).

This research conducted a questionnaire survey of practicing interior designers in Qingdao, a major city in Eastern China, to assess their perceptions of current NCID practices. The questionnaire was designed based on existing literature (Ham, 1998; Liu & Li, 2016; Wang & Gu, 2025) using scales commonly employed in NCID studies, particularly for assessing attitudes toward originality and innovation. Given its relevance and prior validation, the instrument was deemed appropriate for this research. This study employed an online survey distributed via Wenjuanxing (www.wjx.cn) – a certified survey platform embedded within WeChat, China's dominant social media application. The procedure encompassed: (1) Disseminating encrypted questionnaire links through the research team's official accounts, partner organizations, and targeted community groups; (2) Allowing participants to access the survey directly within the WeChat environment without additional downloads; (3) Implementing quality controls including mandatory item response, IP address deduplication, and time-based screening (responses <50 seconds were invalidated); (4) Automatically synchronizing anonymized data to password-protected cloud servers. This approach aligns with China's mobile internet ecosystem, ensuring operational efficiency and real-time data integrity (Xi & Liu, 2017;

Gao *et al.*, 2017). Respondents primarily included designers, experts, and practitioners of NCID, all of whom represent suitable and informed sources of data for the study's objectives.

We gathered evaluation data on Neo-Chinese style design in the research domain by employing questionnaire surveys and subjective evaluation scales. In this questionnaire, we also conducted in-depth research and data collection on design forms, design techniques, and traditional cultural connotations and elements. The latter is generally used for the feel and experience of interviewees, including the improvement of aesthetic ambit, recovery of emotion, and other dimensions (Shi & Zhao, 2005; Cai, 2007; Li, 2021; Jennifer, 2022; Jie & Zakaria, 2024), which is suitable for our research. Additionally, we collected baseline information on respondents' professional social competencies and accolades, including years of professional experience, occupational category, and aesthetic literacy (Shan *et al.*, 2022; Rui & Firzan, 2025). A total of 72 questionnaire responses were collected. After excluding non-diligent and incomplete responses, 70 valid samples were retained. Table 1 illustrates the descriptive statistics of the sample data. A dataset containing basic attribute information was subsequently established.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Sample Demographics (N=70)

VARIABLE	CATEGORIE	N	%
1. Years of Work Experience	Under 5 years	26	37.14
	5~10 years	13	18.57
	10~15 years	9	12.86
	Over 15 years	22	31.43
2. Occupation	Chief Designer	20	28.57
	Designer	19	27.14
	Design Assistant	16	22.86
	Construction Supervisor	5	7.14
	Other	10	14.29
3. Number of NCID projects	None	4	5.71
	Less than 3 projects	17	24.29
	3~5 projects	12	17.14
	More than 5 projects	37	52.86
4. Whether received awards for design works	Yes	34	48.57
	No	36	51.43
Total sample		70	100

*Note:

Details for the 10 respondents who selected "Other" for their occupations: University faculty (2), Chief creative officer (2), Company owner/CEO (2), Independent designer (1), Brand agent (1), and Unspecified (3).

4 RESULTS

The basic characteristics of the sample demographic information (as measured by Questions 1~4 in the questionnaire) have been detailed in Chapter 3 (see Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Sample Demographics). For brevity, this chapter will focus on analyzing the results of the remaining questions (Questions 5~13), which directly address the research questions of this study.

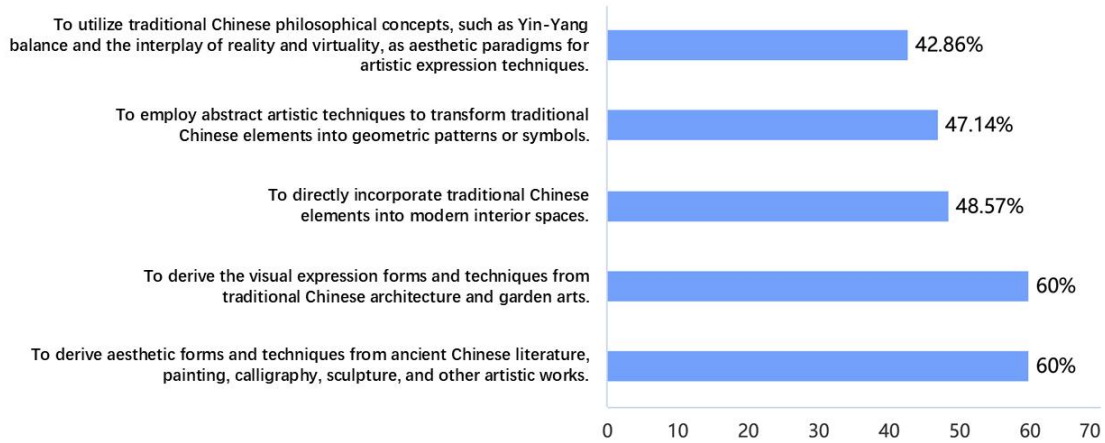
4.1 Question 5: approaches employed in NCID

Figure 1 illustrates the design methods commonly employed by respondents in NCID. Data indicate that designers most frequently (60%) directly draw visual expression forms, aesthetic principles, and creative techniques from traditional Chinese architecture parks, ancient literature, graphics, sculptures, and other artistic works, which are the most abundant and direct inspiration sources for Neo-Chinese design. When dealing with specific traditional elements, “direct integration” (48.57%) and “abstract transformation/symbolization” (47.14%) are two methods that are almost equally important and widely adopted, showing that NCID not only accommodates direct homage to traditional forms but also encourages innovative interpretation through modern design language. When it comes to applying traditional philosophical concepts, such as the balance of Yin and Yang and the interplay of Virtual and Real, 42.86% of respondents choose this approach, reflecting their aim to go beyond superficial forms and touch the core of cultural spirit. The results show that NCID is not a single fixed pattern. Designers flexibly apply various methods based on project requirements, their personal understanding, and desired effects. The most common approach is to combine the borrowing of concrete artistic carriers (architecture, gardens, calligraphy, painting, literature) with specific methods for handling traditional elements (direct integration or abstract transformation). The proportion of designers who choose to apply traditional Chinese philosophical concepts is the lowest, showing that the depth and abstract nature of the core philosophy of traditional Chinese culture make its application more challenging in NCID practice.

Figure 1

The responses of the respondents to Question 5

Question 5: What approach do you employ when dealing with Neo-Chinese Interior design? (MCQ)



Source: elaborated by the author

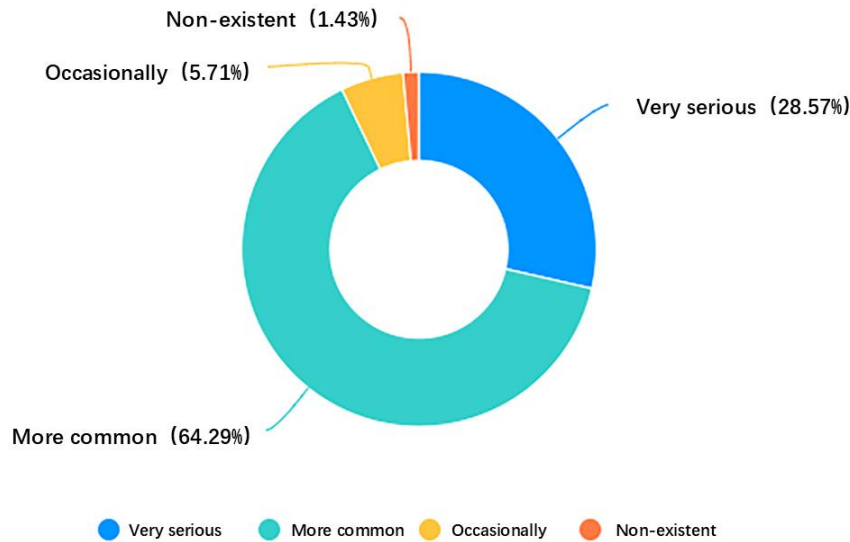
4.2 Question 6: perception of the imitation phenomenon in NCID

Figure 2 illustrates the respondents' responses to the question of whether a widespread imitation phenomenon exists in the current NCID field. The data indicate that over 90% of respondents have clearly observed this phenomenon (64.29% believe it is "fairly common" and 28.57% consider it "very serious"), suggesting that the innovation capacity in the current NCID field may be facing the challenge of homogenization.

Figure 2

The responses of the respondents to Question 6

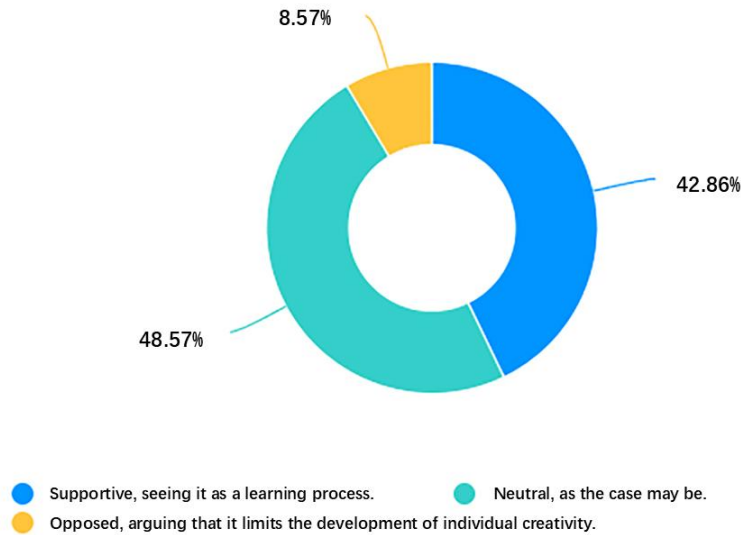
Question 6: What do you think about the phenomenon of imitation in Neo-Chinese interior design? (SCQ)



Source: elaborated by the author

4.3 Question 7: attitude towards imitating famous designers’ NCID works

Figure 3 illustrates respondents’ opinions on imitating the designs of renowned designers. The data indicate that 42.86% of the respondents chose to support this act of imitating design, regarding it as a learning process. 48.57% of respondents chose to be neutral (the highest proportion), suggesting that nearly half believe that the rationality of imitation behavior should be comprehensively evaluated based on its purpose, extent, and transformation effect. Only 8.57% of respondents (the lowest proportion) opposed imitation, expressing concerns that it would suppress originality. Overall, 91.43% of respondents supported or were neutral toward designer imitation, indicating a high degree of tolerance for such imitation in the current NCID field. This result also implies that the current industry’s high tolerance for imitation behavior is a double-edged sword. This tolerance not only reflects recognition of the learning process but also reveals the industry’s general mindset, which ultimately expects imitation behavior to lead to originality. Establishing an effective mechanism to promote a shift from imitation to innovation while maintaining this beneficial tolerance is crucial to fostering the healthy development of NCID.

Figure 3*The responses of the respondents to Question 7***Question 7: What is your response towards imitating the famous designers' Neo-Chinese interior works? (SCQ)**

Source: elaborated by the author

4.4 Question 8: development path of NCID

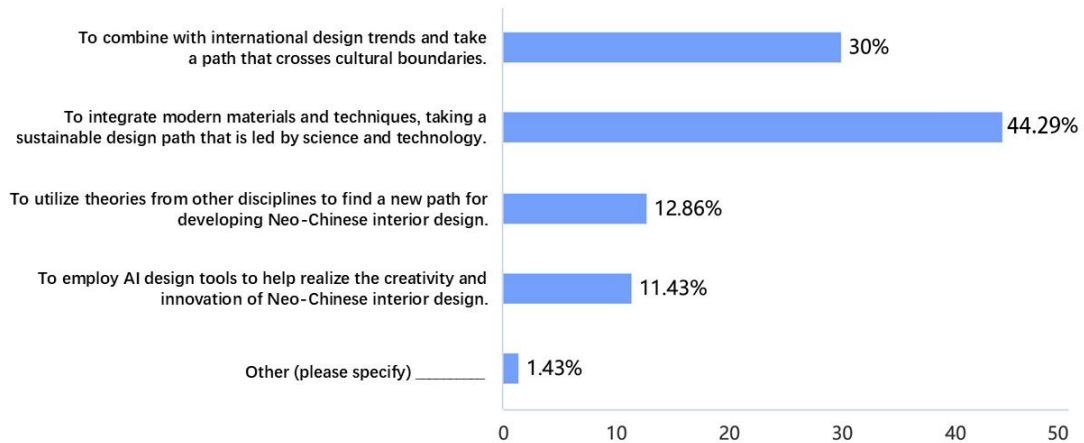
Figure 4 shows the respondents' responses to the question of which development path NCID should take. Data indicate that 44.29% (the highest percentage) believe that NCID should integrate modern materials and technologies, suggesting that current Chinese interior designers are most concerned with solving practical problems through technological means. 30% of respondents believe that NCID should incorporate international design trends, suggesting that some Chinese interior designers hope NCID can avoid cultural isolation and enhance its universality and modernity through cross-cultural dialogue. Only 12.86% of the respondents believe that NCID should borrow theories from other disciplines, suggesting that most contemporary Chinese interior designers pay little attention to the transformation and application of interdisciplinary theories. The reason might be that the majority of respondents are frontline interior designers engaging in practice, and they are more concerned with directly applicable elements such as materials, techniques, and spatial functions. The proportion of those who choose to use AI design tools to help realize the creativity and innovation of NCID is only 11.43%, indicating that Chinese interior designers currently regard AI as an auxiliary tool rather than the primary tool for design creativity and innovation. The only

person who chose the “Other” option provided a supplementary answer that deviated from the question requirements and is out of consideration.

Figure 4

The responses of the respondents to Question 8

Question 8: Which developing path do you think Neo-Chinese interior design should take? (SCQ)



Source: elaborated by the author

4.5 Question 9: abilities needing improvement in NCID practice

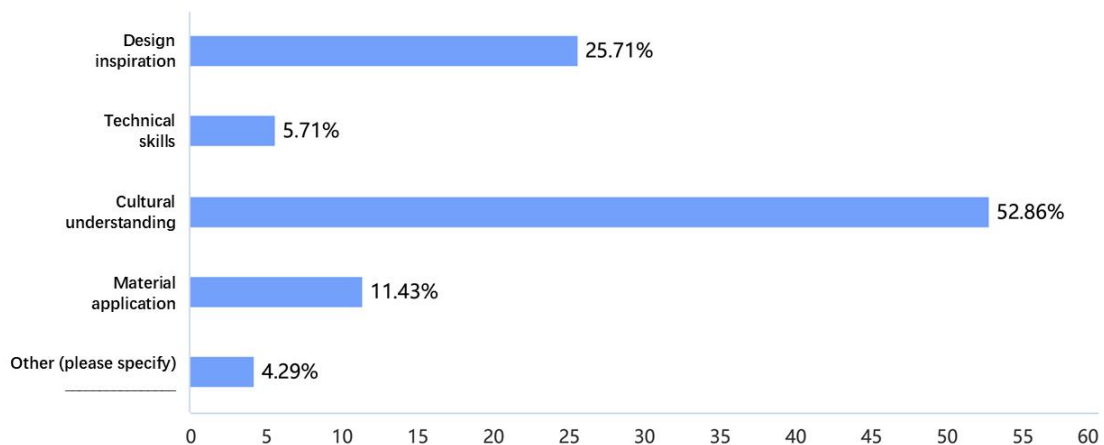
Figure 5 illustrates the respondents’ responses to the question of which ability they most need to enhance in their NCID practices. The data indicates that over half (52.86%) of the designers list “cultural understanding” as the top ability to be enhanced. This result reveals the core contradiction in the current field of NCID, namely, “form is easy to imitate, but essence is hard to convey.” The proportion choosing “design creativity” is 25.71%, suggesting that, although many designers may not face difficulties with cultural understanding, they still encounter challenges in translating traditional culture into modern design language. These two options are, in fact, two sides of the same coin in terms of NCID’s core goal: the contemporary translation of traditional Chinese culture into modern interior spaces. “Cultural understanding” represents the connotation level, while “design creativity” represents the denotation level. The total proportion of these two options reaches 78.57%, indicating that the core difficulty faced by Chinese interior

designers is the lack of a practical contemporary translation approach for Chinese traditional culture, especially in cultural understanding and expression.

Figure 5

The responses of the respondents to Question 9

Question 9: What ability do you think you need to improve most regarding Neo-Chinese interior design? (SCQ)



Source: elaborated by the author

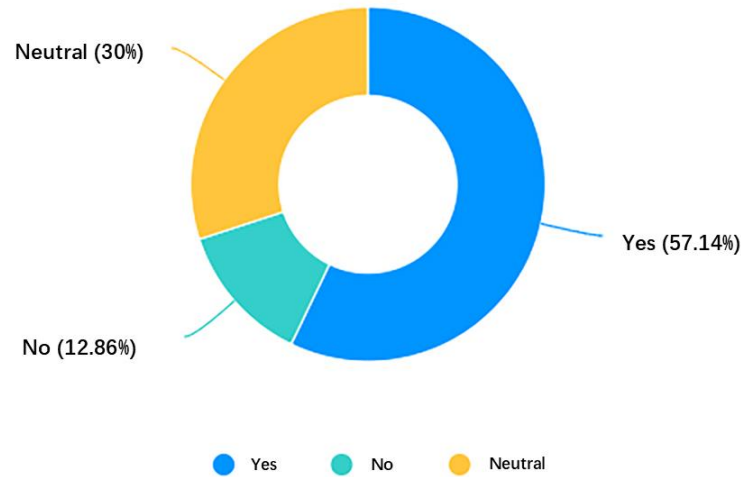
4.6 Question 10: prevalence of formalism in the current field of NCID

Figure 6 shows respondents' responses to the question of whether there is a prevalence of formalism in the current field of NCID. The data indicates that over half (57.14%) chose "Yes", 30% chose "Neutral", and only 12.86% chose "No". This result indicates a significant likelihood that formalism will prevail in the current field of NCID.

Figure 6

The responses of the respondents to Question 10

Question 10: Do you think formalism is rampant in Neo-Chinese interior design? (SCQ)



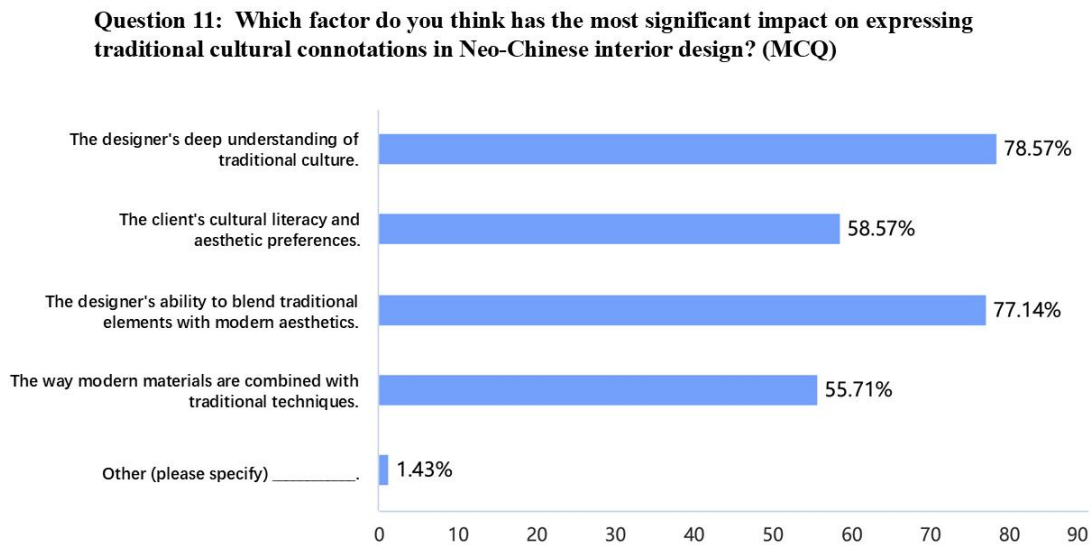
Source: elaborated by the author

4.7 Question 11: factors influencing cultural expression in NCID

Figure 7 illustrates the respondents’ responses to the question regarding the factors considered important for conveying the cultural connotations of traditional Chinese culture in NCID. Data indicate that the options “the depth of designers’ understanding of traditional culture” and “designers’ abilities to integrate traditional elements with modern aesthetics” have the highest proportions, at 78.57% and 77.14%, far exceeding the other two options’ proportions of 58.57% and 55.71%. This result aligns with the respondents’ previous responses to question 9. It also confirms that current Chinese interior designers feel a lack of cultural foundation (78.57%) and a weak ability to innovate (77.14%) when engaging in NCID practice. The result leads to the conclusion that exploring a practical, contemporary translation approach to Chinese traditional culture is one of the most important topics in the current NCID development.

Figure 7

The responses of the respondents to Question 11



Source: elaborated by the author

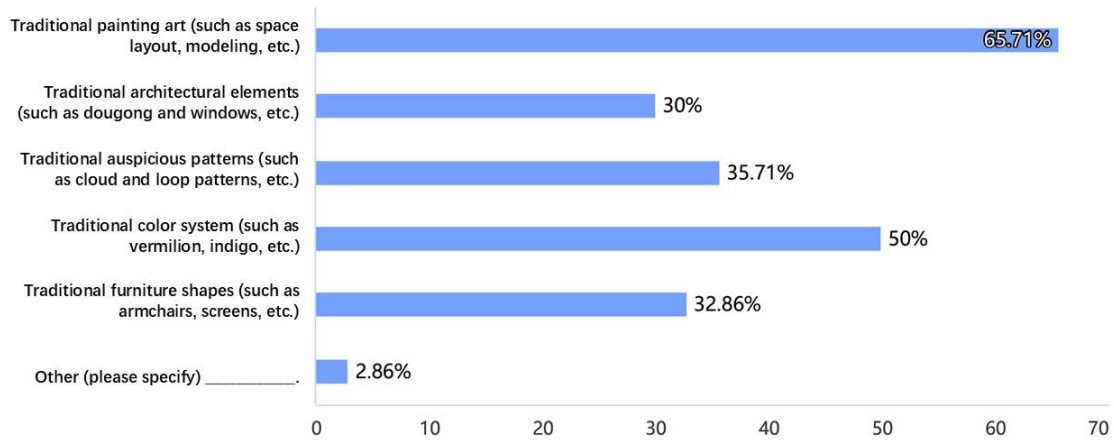
4.8 Question 12: traditional cultural elements that are difficult to grasp

Figure 8 shows the respondents' responses to the question of "Which traditional cultural elements do you think are difficult to grasp and apply in the process of Neo-Chinese interior design?" The option with the highest selection rate was "Traditional painting art (such as form, conception, etc.)", reaching 65.71%, far exceeding the second-highest option "Traditional color system (such as vermilion, indigo, etc.)" (50%); the selection rates of other options (such as auspicious patterns, furniture arrangement, architectural elements) were all below 36%. The data indicate that the core difficulties in current NCID are mainly related to the transformation and application of abstract cultural elements, such as the expression of concepts in traditional Chinese painting and the symbolic meanings of the traditional color system. In contrast, the selection rates of concrete elements (such as traditional furniture or architectural components) were significantly lower, reflecting that their operability in design practice is relatively higher. Therefore, current research on NCID should prioritize exploring modern translation approaches for traditional painting arts and color systems, so that traditional Chinese culture can be more naturally integrated into contemporary spaces while preserving its cultural connotations and meeting modern aesthetic demands.

Figure 8

The responses of the respondents to Question 12

Question 12: Which traditional cultural elements do you think are difficult to grasp in the process of Neo-Chinese interior design? (MCQ)



Source: elaborated by the author

4.9 Question 13: measures for enhancing designers’ creative and innovative capabilities

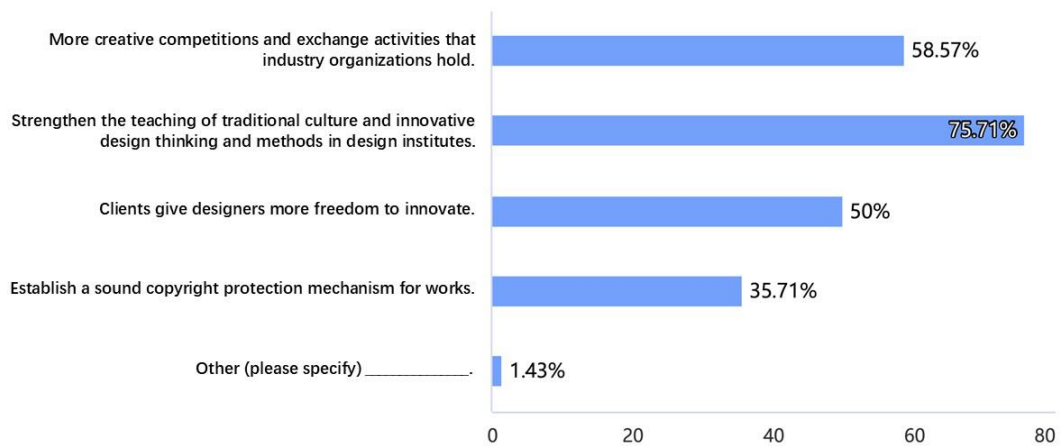
Figure 9 shows the respondents’ responses to the question “Which measures do you think are most beneficial for enhancing the creative innovation ability of designers in Neo-Chinese interior design?” The option with the highest selection rate was “Strengthen the teaching of design thinking and methods in design colleges regarding traditional culture creative innovation,” which reached 75.71%, indicating that there are obvious shortcomings in current design education in integrating traditional culture and modern innovation. A systematic curriculum reconstruction is urgently needed. The second-highest selection rate option was “More creative innovation competitions and exchange activities organized by industry organizations” (58.57%), indicating that the industry organizations need to provide more opportunities to stimulate cross-border collisions and practical verification to fill the gap between education and market transformation. The third-highest selection rate was “Customers giving designers more creative freedom” (50%), suggesting that the client-side constraints may be one factor restricting innovation in NCID practice. Only 35.71% of respondents paid attention to copyright protection, indicating that Chinese interior designers are currently more focused on the creative

process than on ownership confirmation. This result aligns with the analysis of question 7 and confirms the widespread tolerance for imitation behavior in the current field of NCID.

Figure 9

The responses of the respondents to Question 13

Question 13: Which measures are most conducive to enhancing designers' creative and innovative ability in Neo-Chinese interior design? (MCQ)



Source: elaborated by the author

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 The respondents' views on imitation and formalism in the current field of NCID

The survey data (Question 6) shows that the majority of respondents observed that imitating the works of renowned designers is a common practice in the current NCID field, and most respondents hold a neutral or supportive attitude towards this practice (Question 7). At the same time, designers themselves tend to adopt strategies of imitation or borrowing visual forms in their practices (Question 5), mainly focusing on the interpretation of visual forms of Chinese traditional cultural elements, while paying insufficient attention to the profound aesthetic logic and philosophical thought that underpin these forms. However, in sharp contrast, the vast majority of respondents (Question 10) explicitly criticized the problem of “formalism prevailing” in this field. The above results reveal a core contradiction: designers generally rely on the imitation

behavior of visual forms in their practices, and there is a significant tension between their highly consistent critical stance against “formalism” and this behavior. This contradiction reflects the fundamental dilemma of NCID’s development. Although designers recognize that merely relying on the collage and appropriation of visual symbols (i.e., formalism) cannot carry the essence of traditional culture, they are constrained by practical factors such as the depth of their understanding of traditional aesthetics and philosophy and the lack of effective modern translation methodologies, and often have to adopt relatively superficial forms of borrowing. This separation between practice and cognition undoubtedly constitutes a key obstacle that restricts the breakthrough of NCID in terms of cultural depth and innovation vitality.

5.2 The respondents’ views on the future development path of NCID

The 8th question of the survey aims to identify which trends in the current field of NCID are overlooked by the majority of interior designers. The survey results show that the choices of “borrowing theories from other disciplines” and “using artificial intelligence design tools” have the lowest rates. This result indicates that, at the practical level, few designers explore the development issues of NCID by drawing on interdisciplinary theories, and the adoption of emerging artificial intelligence design tools is lagging. This finding aligns highly with the industry status revealed by other questions in this survey and further highlights the crux of the underlying problems. The neglect of interdisciplinary theories weakens designers’ methodological ability to transform “deep cultural cognition” into “innovative design practices,” leading them to rely on “visual symbol collage” as a superficial operation. It is also an important factor that makes design practice prone to sliding towards formalism. Ignoring the application of advanced tools such as AI means actively giving up key opportunities to leverage technological levers to break through existing paradigms, explore new boundaries, and improve the efficiency with which complex problems are solved. This further solidifies the gap between ideals and reality. These two shortcomings together constitute a systematic obstacle to innovation, restricting the development of NCID towards a more culturally profound, thought-provoking, and futuristic direction.

5.3 The difficulties faced by respondents in the practice of NCID

The survey data (Question 9) indicate that the majority of respondents consider enhancing their cultural understanding ability as their most urgent need in the practice of new Chinese-style interior design. It highlights the central challenge of deeply interpreting traditional culture in this field. The survey data (Question 12) also reveal that the majority of respondents believe that traditional cultural elements (such as traditional Chinese paintings) with profound aesthetic connotations and rich inner meanings are difficult to fully understand and apply in NCID. This feedback provides an important cognitive-level explanation for why, when attempting to represent elements with profound aesthetic connotations and rich inner meanings, such as traditional Chinese paintings, many designs tend to adopt the approach of directly displaying the original works or reproducing derivative products in interior spaces. That is, designers perceive significant difficulties in achieving a deep understanding and application of these elements.

5.4 The respondents' views on the ways to enhance design innovation capabilities

The survey data (Question 11) indicate that the majority of respondents believe that "the depth of designers' understanding of traditional culture" and "the ability of designers to integrate traditional elements with modern aesthetics" have the most significant impact on conveying the connotation of traditional culture. This result is highly consistent with the findings of Question 9, indicating that the designer group generally recognizes that insufficient depth of cultural understanding and inadequate integration and application skills constitute the core challenges for achieving creative breakthroughs and innovations in NCID. Correspondingly, the survey data (Question 13) in the suggestions for enhancing the innovation ability of NCID show that the interviewed designers generally recommend improving design education to enhance the understanding and application ability of traditional culture for future designers (students). Moreover, the data for this question item also indicate that the majority of respondents suggest that competitions and exchanges organized by the industry should focus more on evaluating creativity and innovation to promote the vitality of innovation and the healthy development of this field.

5.5 Limitations and prospects

Although this study has initially revealed the widespread prevalence of imitation and formalism in the field of NCID and identified the core predicament designers face in understanding traditional culture and modern translation, it still faces several limitations. Firstly, the sample size is relatively small, based solely on questionnaire data from 70 frontline interior designers in Qingdao. The regional concentration is relatively high, which may affect the universality and representativeness of the conclusion and make it difficult to comprehensively reflect differences in design practices across the country. Secondly, the research method mainly relies on questionnaire surveys, lacks in-depth interviews or qualitative analysis of actual cases, and provides insufficient exploration of the deep motivations underlying designers' cognitive mechanisms and creative processes.

Based on the above limitations and research findings, future research can be advanced in the following directions: It is suggested to introduce interdisciplinary theories such as semiotics, phenomenology or cultural studies to deeply analyze the expressive mechanisms of traditional culture in NCID, and construct a systematic and operational design methodology model to help designers make the leap from “formal borrowing” to “artistic conception transmission”. Meanwhile, it is possible to explore the application of artificial intelligence to semantic recognition and the generation of styles for traditional cultural elements, assisting designers in innovative translation while preserving the authenticity of the culture. We also suggest that subsequent research expand the sample coverage, combine case analysis with practical research, and enhance the practical applicability and theoretical explanatory power of the design methodology model.

6 CONCLUSION

Based on a survey of frontline interior designers' viewpoints, this study confirms the academic views of the widespread phenomenon of imitation and formalism in the current field of NCID. Superficial imitation and formalism have hindered the true evolution and cultural depth of NCID, posing challenges to the sustainable inheritance and innovative reinterpretation of traditional culture. Based on the survey results, we have come to the following two conclusions:

- Chinese interior designers generally aspire to enhance their understanding, translation, and expression ability of traditional culture, and explicitly call for strengthening teaching in this aspect in the design education field.
- The theoretical research field of NCID urgently needs to conduct methodological research on the interpretation of traditional culture and its modern translation, and then quickly incorporate the findings into the training system for interior designers in China.

Just as the diversity of species on Earth requires protection, the diversity of human cultures also needs protection to ensure the recognition of identity and the creative sources of different cultural groups. Developing interior designs that are rich in regional ethnic characteristics and based on in-depth cultural understanding, rather than superficial symbol imitation, is one of the important ways to achieve effective cultural inheritance and maintain cultural diversity. The findings of this study reveal the challenges currently faced in developing NCID, namely the need to explore methodologies for interpreting traditional culture and for conducting creative transformation. This finding also has important implications and reference value for exploring the inheritance and innovative application of traditional culture in modern interior design in other cultural contexts.

REFERENCES

- Cai, S.X. Furniture Style Designing Effect on Interior Environment. *Journal of Jiangnan University (Humanities & Social Sciences)*, 2007, 5, 123–125. https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=zE0--Q1IihQc_s8XWuYk3J0L-2g3m_5NuGMtI2qaBaemOTH02eHcjb6y0o-InOZRkKb15b0kcVXyIr53E9e4leeZQei2emKQdntx5RakLLWhE0YsK-JuAi8FiI_qJ4oPKgCYzvUDNIYd5V9FzkRVKJ1a3KUdtRcEB2qzmzuKuZDXfGixNiGomg==&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS
- Gao H.; Jin, X.Q.; Tao, J. The Application of the Questionnaire Star in the Survey of Nurses' Satisfaction with Nursing Management. *The Medical Forum*, 2017, 21, 5131–5132. <https://doi.org/10.19435/j.1672-1721.2017.36.057>
- Ham, T. Y. (1998). A cross-cultural comparison of preference for visual attributes in interior environments: America and China (Order No. 9909734). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global A&I: The Humanities and Social Sciences Collection. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-1668.2004.tb00398.x>
- Huang, M. Research on the Fusion and Application of Traditional Blank Artistic Conception in Modern Neo-Chinese Interior Design. *Interior Architecture of China*, 2023, 24, 113–115. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1672-2167.2023.24.020>

- Jennifer Altehenger. Modelling Modular Living: Furniture and Life Magazine and Interior Design in 1980s China. *Journal of Design History*, June 2022, 35, Issue 2, 51–167. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epab043>
- Jie, M.; Zakaria, S.A.B. Incorporating Environmental Sustainability and Supply Chain Management in Contemporary Interior Design: A Study on Chinese Landscape Paintings. *Buildings*, 2024, 14, 4071. <https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings14124071>
- Li, C.; Suhaily, S.S. & Zhou, Y. The influence of traditional regional architectural culture on Neo-Chinese style furniture design: a case study of the lingnan region in China. *Scientific Reports*, 2025, 15: 38002. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-21950-2>
- Li, D.H. Research on the Application of Neo-Chinese Style in Modern Interior Design. *Art Panorama*, 2021, 20, 75–76. https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=zE0--Q1IihSBM37j9x7KAsBCjINp6cGxJ6OY4ta2fcP5rdqUTE4DNzgzdpRqzE9Rk742rPP_H9kc9rRNraJziniy9I9K_VxX4JoeSiqaJ1uetYJVra78zw6drbowIwgWov6m2xC3b6QLC66YcZh3_IshJAvQEuCHOndD29bfty_4snQWIE0xw==&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS
- Liu, J.P. The Characteristics and Innovation of Neo-Chinese Furniture Designs. *Designs*, 2019, 12, 45–47. <https://doi.org/10.16129/j.cnki.mysds.2019.12.016>
- Liu, Y.; Li, B. Research on traditional cultural elements penetrating into interior design. In *2016 International Conference on Education, Sports, Arts and Management Engineering*. Atlantis Press, March 2016, 1106-1111. <https://doi.org/10.2991/icesame-16.2016.239>
- Rui, L.; Firzan, M. Emotional Design of Interior Spaces: Exploring Challenges and Opportunities. *Buildings*, 2025, 15, 153. <https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings15020153>
- Shan, W.L.; Jin, R.M.; Ding, X.Y. Chinese Decorative Color Based on Improved AlexNet in Interior Decoration Design. *Mathematical Problems in Engineering*, 2022, 1, 2358905. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2022/2358905>
- Shi, R.; Zhao, Y.M. How to Inherit Tradition in Chinese Interior Design. *Gansu Science and Technology Information*, 2005, 5, 153. https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=zE0--Q1IihTb9vNGfoie1qdEe1BMajXf9yDEHnd0S0XS1TQ_P4CcJexI7G110qRND8Z3zYhz0NTDcgtJaeFbMoSGiebtRCHAlrDGXhMYDzvDDsUZqc4eVUPkqP3_PfGtW4vY0E316SR3YIyE8W07pWavSTJ0XyyZYkIdTRhcEYPyvgIIFWbZxA==&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS
- Wang, J.P.; Gu, Y. Application of Solid Wood Furniture in Neo-Chinese Interior Design. *Interior Architecture of China*, 2025, 13, 57–59. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1672-2167.2025.13.002>
- Wang, S. The Possibility of Chinese Housing. *Time + Architecture*, 2006, 3, 36–41. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1005-684X.2006.03.005>.
- Wang, Y.; Xi, Y.; Liu, X.; Gan, Y. Exploring the Dual Potential of Artificial Intelligence-Generated Content in the Esthetic Reproduction and Sustainable Innovative Design

of Ming-Style Furniture. *Sustainability*. 2024, 16, 5173.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su16125173>

Xi, X.L.; Liu, Y.F. The application of WeChat platform plus questionnaire Star in the fall cognitive training of psychiatric nurses, cleaning staff and patients. *Nursing Practice and Research*, 2017, 14, 114–116. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1672-9676.2017.21.046>

Yang, Z.X. Study on Cultural Consideration and Social Context of Neo-Chinese Interior Design, *JU SHE*, 2022, 10, 30–32.
https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=zE0--Q1IihR3QuCqCNod-xSkFzAmZhMRG7mU2E6zJOx_ezu7gASUW3A-ky_EYrR-axTnKEH6EqZpJzERaT9VEXyOK6qJT6ldGOhRaS5qsZk8HreSwKpLNGYMT-SwZtD9Rq_z2JXxy8z7AJpgt9iugOr2XbTfibNeKxnnBLtMbmeIcF78k-Fe6w==&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS

Zhang, S.Q. The Aesthetic Orientation of Song Dynasty Literati Embodied in Contemporary Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design. *Art Education Research*, 2019, 18, 50–54.
https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=zE0--Q1IihSy4HFPG96CJRCp50EACgz0-Bcusg3rOvqILNpFliev0j_uHXeDDEMYIxH3ijjtWaWkBofIFLiCsoVhK40YsHAANGjon4FEhWe9Y4N3XIJUx7qBBCh3Tv5hwFE4pPAZwopOYBa30hrtkHfq6lUTwtKAOe_BT0jeS-noilaym4KA==&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS

Zhang, C.Y. The Application of Traditional Pattern of Ming Furniture in Neo-Chinese Interior Design. *Industrial Design*, 2021, 5, 131–132.
https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=zE0--Q1IihR9aJOOWXHA47MLW5viNpYGFotGFekYvaftTzMw2VnBDg2E69Ob40pt6SCq1BJz83LbXOsnQ-w2sf_cnfKbvXWsoGRHH1tYf7tPZXCK0xqgiKQ-gRTTaiSegsxYXi4gZ2-2xKNC_clnIpbIl6GBmw7bOc0tJL4NxuSDSh0DVGn4Ow==&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS

Zhang, W.Y. The Integration and Innovation of Chinese Painting Elements in Interior Design. *West Leather*, 2021, 23, 91–92.
https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=zE0--Q1IihQUj8JsMS_2SQyd-ZS6vPI6ZDn9F3JkD68cB-sqo05kUteXB6yePB9e7OEcQZ53ZAOjatbrvwGIhLA_xGFKpp5yoZjW56KyMtL oBpH9hATsVCjLmX49QpBSwI8GsST87NYUgk5KssEwcMhbwnO2QRtKQqME eXVRNACe08nkFPsevw==&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS

Zhou, L. Research on Neo-Chinese Style in Architecture. *Decoration*, 2012, 1, 90–91.
<https://doi.org/10.16272/j.cnki.cn11-1392/j.2012.01.012>

Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

How to cite this article (APA)

Kewei, X., Mustapha, A. A. B., & Aziz, A. B. H. A. VOICES FROM THE FIELD: AN EXPLORATORY SURVEY OF IMITATION AND FORMALISM IN NEO-CHINESE INTERIOR DESIGN. *Veredas Do Direito*, e234070.

<https://doi.org/10.18623/rvd.v23.n1.4070>