

# A Systematic Review of Lu Xun's Cover Design Research Over The Last Two Decades

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**Abstract:** *Lu Xun, the founder of modern Chinese literature, designed many self-published books. He merged Western art techniques with Eastern aesthetic traditions, laying the foundation for the modernisation of Chinese book design. However, comprehensive studies on this topic are rare in current research. The aim of this study is to investigate the research trends on Lu Xun's book cover design. We systematically analysed the data from 2004 to 2023 using VOSviewer and Excel software based on the CNKI database. The results of the performance analysis show that there is an overall upward trend in the research on Lu Xun's book cover design. We identified six themes by analysing co-occurring keywords: Lu In recent years, research has shifted from discussing traditional culture to exploring the aesthetic qualities of Lu Xun's book covers. This study may serve as a valuable resource to inspire future researchers.*

**Keywords:** Lu Xun, Cover Design, Research Trend, Systematic Analysis

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## 1. Introduction

Lu Xun (1881–1936) was not only one of the most influential writers of modern China, but also a pioneer of modern Chinese book design. During his prolific career, Lu Xun published almost 60 works, including writings, translations, anthologies and periodicals. At the same time, Lu Xun designed or participated in the design of the covers of more than 100 books, 68 of which he designed entirely himself (Zhang, 2022). Lu Xun's unique style set his works apart from other Chinese works and reached a very high artistic level. In a way, he promoted the development of modern Chinese book design from traditional to contemporary design and marked the beginning of modern book design in China (Gao, 2010).

Lu Xun's book covers were only researched in the 1970s, much later than his literary works. In 1978, Zhang Daoyi, a scholar of Chinese art history, carried out the first analysis of Lu Xun's book covers, examining illustrations, binding techniques and layout compositions (Zhang, 1978). Subsequently, Qiu (1979) analysed the binding techniques in Lu Xun's books, and Lin (1979) discussed the stylistic features of his book covers. Since the 1980s, mainland China has experienced a boom in the study of Lu Xun cover studies initiated by these renowned scholars. Scholars have analysed Lu Xun's cover designs from different perspectives. First, scholars have analysed the visual elements of typography, images, colours and layout on Lu Xun's book covers (Gao, 2010; Gou, 2021; Zhang, 2018). Second, scholars have looked at the cover design from a narrative perspective to explore cultural connotations and implications (Guo et al., 2022;

He, 2014). Third, scholars have analysed the relationship between Lu Xun's literary works and their cover designs from a literary perspective, viewing them as visual representations (Wang, 2011; Wang, 2023). Fourth, scholars have discussed the combination of traditional and modern features in Lu Xun's cover designs (Li & Zhou, 2020; Lv, 2019; Tao, 2019). Finally, scholars have presented a detailed analysis of several covers by Lu Xun, such as "Stories from Other Lands" (Ye, 2022), "Worker Suihuilov" (Li, 2023), "The Trend of Modern Art History" (Wen, 2020) and "The Pink Cloud" (Huang, 2011).

However, in the current research, there has been no systematic investigation of Lu Xun's study on cover design to analyse the research trends, which prevents a deeper understanding of this topic. Therefore, this article aims to fill this gap by examining the research on Lu Xun's cover design over the past 20 years. The research questions (RQs) are summarised as follows:

RQ1 - What are the current research trends on Lu Xun's book covers?

RQ2 - What topics do Lu Xun's book covers cover?

RQ3 - What are the future research directions in the field of Lu Xun's book covers?

## 2. Research Method

### Systematic Review

The systematic literature review is valuable for identifying, evaluating and interpreting existing research findings in relation to specific research questions (Kitchenham et al., 2009). This method is characterised by its systematic and reproducible nature. It involves a comprehensive search of all published literature relevant to a particular topic, integration of the search results and a critical evaluation of the scope and quality of the evidence in relation to the research question (Siddaway et al., 2019).

### Data Source

The literature data for this study were obtained from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the most important platform for searching academic literature in China. The reason for this is the limited number of irrelevant documents retrieved from international academic platforms such as Scopus and Web of Science. We proceeded as follows in the literature search and selection: First, we conducted a professional search on CNKI using the main subject terms "SU=鲁迅 AND (书籍设计 OR 书籍装帧 OR 设计 OR 封面)" The time span was set from 1 January 2004 to 25 December 2023, resulting in an initial retrieval of 54,457 documents. Secondly, we made a selection by discipline and only included articles from the fields of visual arts (2,847), art theory (2,106) and publishing (964), resulting in a total of 7,124 articles. Third, we further refined the selection by choosing only articles published in academic journals (3,596), theses and dissertations (1,035) and conference proceedings (131), resulting in a final selection of 5,077 articles. Finally, we carefully reviewed the titles, abstracts and keywords of the literature to determine their relevance to Lu Xun's cover design and finally selected 157 articles as the analytical sample.

### Data Analysis

The data was analysed and visualised using Microsoft Excel and VOSviewer. First, we exported 157 CNKI literature datasets in RefWorks format. We then imported the exported data into VOSviewer to visually analyse it using keywords, authors and research topics. This analysis allowed us to obtain key information, such as leading scholars, keywords and keyword clusters in the research field. To facilitate the retrieval of relevant information, we compiled the literature information, including authors, titles, keywords, abstracts, years, journals, and research methods, in a spreadsheet using Excel.

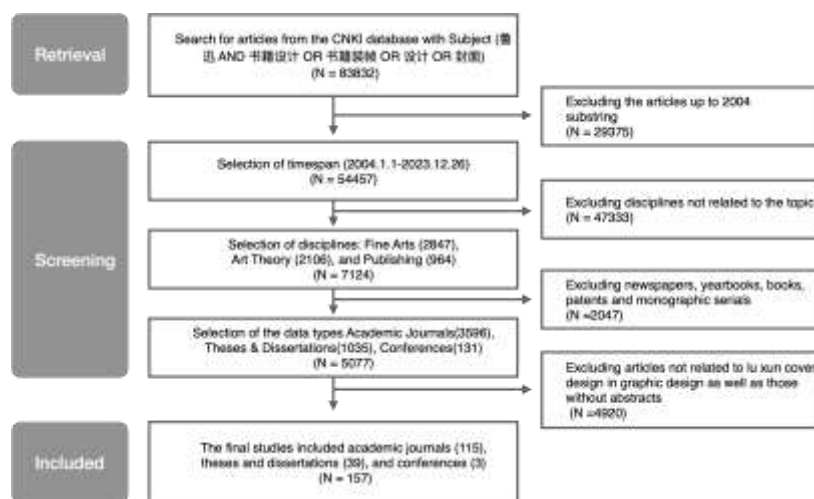


Figure 1: Article selection process for systematic review

### 3. Result and Discussion

#### Yearly Publishing Trend

We sorted Lu Xun's design research publications by year from 2004 to 2023 using Excel statistics, as shown in Figure 2. Lu Xun's design research publications fluctuated between 1 and 7 articles per year from 2004 to 2011. Since 2012, the number has increased rapidly, with the annual publication volume consistently exceeding nine articles and peaking at 19 articles in 2016. After 2018, however, the number of publications began to decline. In the last five years, the volume of annual publications has fluctuated considerably, ranging from 3 to 14 articles. Specifically, 14 and 12 articles were published in 2021 and 2022 respectively. To summarise, although the research interest in Lu Xun's cover design has been maintained at a certain level over the past 20 years, there is still a certain instability, as evidenced by the fluctuating publication figures.

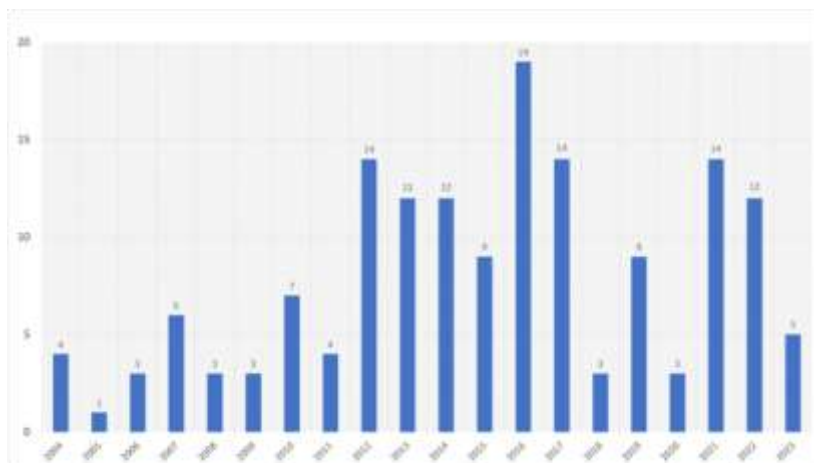


Figure 2: Number of publications on Lu Xun's book cover research

#### Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis

To better understand this topic, we carried out a keyword co-occurrence analysis for 157 articles in VOSviewer. The top 10 keywords of the 525 extracted keywords are listed in Table 1. These high-frequency keywords indicate that the research is about Lu Xun's book cover design, such as "Lu Xun", "book cover", "design", "book design" and "cover design". These keywords occur most frequently and have the strongest connections in the research. The second most frequent keywords are related to the cultural background of his era, such as "Republican

period", "Republic of China" and "new cultural movement" "Borrowlism", which was proposed by Lu Xun in response to cultural development and applied to book design, has been much discussed in the past two decades. "Tao Yuanqing", a young artist who painted many book covers for Lu Xun, is frequently mentioned in research on Lu Xun's book covers. From these frequently occurring words, it is clear that research in this field revolves around Lu Xun and his book covers and includes contextual and cultural discussions.

**Table 1: Top 10 highest-frequency keywords**

| No | Keywords     | TC | TLS | No | Keywords             | TC | TLS |
|----|--------------|----|-----|----|----------------------|----|-----|
| 1  | lu xun       | 78 | 130 | 6  | republican period    | 9  | 15  |
| 2  | book design  | 44 | 90  | 7  | design               | 8  | 16  |
| 3  | cover design | 20 | 36  | 8  | republic of china    | 7  | 13  |
| 4  | book cover   | 11 | 25  | 9  | new culture movement | 7  | 12  |
| 5  | tao yuanqing | 9  | 19  | 10 | borrowlism           | 6  | 15  |

TC= total counts, TLS= Total link strength.

### Thematic Clusters

We selected keywords with a frequency of occurrence  $\geq 2$  for cluster analysis using VOSviewer to visualise the research focus areas, as shown in Figure 3. Six cluster directions can be observed in this research area by clustering different colours. The pink cluster, which is centred around Lu Xun and his design, includes keywords such as "design", "cover design" and "design concept" and represents the strongest connection in the whole network. The purple cluster focuses on keywords related to historical context and cultural background, such as "cultural implication", "traditional culture" and "new cultural movement" These two clusters have the closest relationship and form the core of the current research. Based on these core clusters, four other clusters have been formed: The red-coloured cluster explores the application of traditional cultural elements in Lu Xun's book design; the yellow-coloured cluster focuses on the discussion of people and works related to Lu Xun's design; the blue-coloured cluster examines prints and woodcuts related to the cover images; the green-coloured cluster discusses the issue of modernity in Lu Xun's design.

**Pink-colored Cluster: Lu Xun's Book Cover Design.** This cluster contains 15 high-frequency keywords related to Lu Xun's book cover design, such as Lu Xun, book cover design, cover design, graphic design, design concept, and art theory. Gao (2010) investigated the historical background to analyse the graphic elements on Lu Xun's book covers, such as images, typography and colours. Xu Lei (2012) argued that Lu Xun developed an integrated approach to book design, paying attention not only to the cover but also to the layout and printing paper. Dou (2014) explored the reasons and influences behind his design style. Li and An (2020) examined Lu Xun's contribution to modern Chinese book design. In addition, scholars have further explored the specific elements of Lu Xun's book covers. Hou (2015), for example, found that Lu Xun achieved unity between layout and theme through the arrangement of the layout. Zhang (2018) examined the connection between the images of traditional Chinese painting and the content of the books on Lu Xun's covers. Gou (2021) examined the different forms of writing on Lu Xun's covers, while Han and Lin (2021) discussed the relationship between Lu Xun's covers and the Soviet avant-garde movement. This cluster begins with the general analysis of Lu Xun's visual forms and gradually focuses on more specific discussions about the design of the covers.



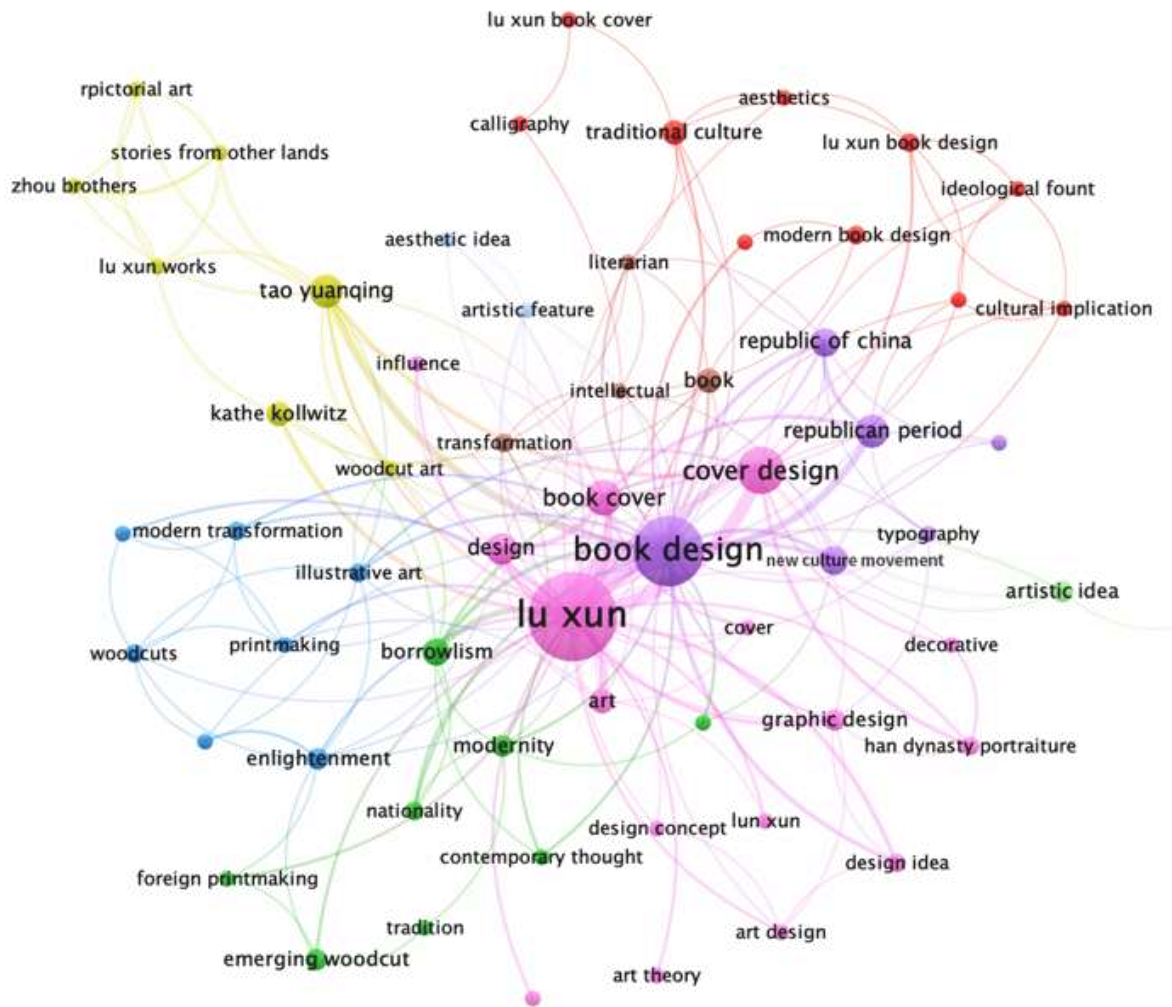


Figure 3: Keyword co-occurrence network

**Purple-colored Cluster: Context of Republican China.** The purple cluster contains six high-frequency keywords: book design, cover design, new cultural movement and republican period. It emphasises the influence of the cultural and historical context of the Republic of China on Lu Xun's design. Ling (2010) pointed out that Lu Xun, as one of the leading figures of the May Fourth New Cultural Movement, advocated the study of Western literature and art and effectively employed local cultural heritage to promote modern book cover reform in China. Li (2017) and Tao (2019) proposed that Lu Xun's concept of "Borrowlism" emerged against the backdrop of the increasing spread of Western influences during the Republican era. Lu Xun also implemented this concept in book design, laying the foundation for modern Chinese design. Yang and Lu (2020) emphasised that Lu Xun highlighted nationality amidst the diverse cultural influences during the Fourth of May New Culture Movement. Gou (2021) pointed out that under the background of economic development in the Republic of China, Lu Xun combined traditional Chinese character styles with Western design approaches to create Chinese typography in his book covers. It indicates that Lu Xun's book design successfully combined Western culture with local culture in the historical context of the Republic of China paving the way for the development of modern Chinese design.

**Red-colored Cluster: Traditional Culture and Aesthetics.** The red cluster contains ten high-frequency keywords such as traditional culture, cultural implication, calligraphy, Lu Xun book design, modern book design and aesthetics. This indicates that scholars are interested in

discussing the traditional design style of Lu Xun book cover design. As early as 1997, Yang Yongde pointed out that the style of Lu Xun's cover design is concise but sophisticated in meaning and has an oriental aesthetic (Yang, 1997). Zhu (2013) further stated that Lu Xun's works successfully combined Chinese aesthetics with modern styles and opened a new path for modern Chinese book design. Ding (2022) argued that this characteristic is closely related to Lu Xun's engagement with traditional Chinese culture and his openness in absorbing foreign artistic expressions, which led to Lu Xun creating his modern Eastern style. In addition, scholars have explored Chinese elements in Lu Xun's cover design. For example, Yang (2021) analysed Lu Xun's Chinese title label layout in detail, while Zhang (2017) discussed the calligraphy on Lu Xun's covers. Miao (2022) looked at the use of Han dynasty portraits in Lu Xun's cover design, demonstrating his emphasis on traditional cultural heritage and its integration into practical cover design.

**Green-colored Cluster: Borrowlism and Modernity.** The green cluster contains eight high-frequency keywords, such as borrowlism, modernity, contemporary thought, nationality and foreign printmaking. This cluster emphasises Lu Xun's skill at transforming traditional cultural heritage and foreign arts into cover designs using the concept of Borrowlism. Li and Lei (2008) argued that Lu Xun's concept of Borrowlism not only exemplifies the preservation of China's cultural heritage, but also boldly integrates Western art into design, paving the way for modern book design. Tao (2019) further demonstrated this philosophy of Borrowlism by showing Lu Xun's selection of Western prints together with portraits from the Han dynasty portraiture as cover images. Zhang (2022) argued that Lu Xun created a distinctive design style that advanced modern Chinese book design by blending national characteristics with foreign influences. Ren (2022) claimed that Lu Xun sought to preserve Chinese aesthetics and incorporate advanced Western arts. Consequently, his book covers exhibit both heritage and innovation and a harmonious blend of the national and the international.

**Blue-colored Cluster: Printmaking and Woodcuts.** The blue cluster contains six high-frequency keywords, such as modern transformation, illustrative art, printmaking, woodcuts and enlightenment. In this cluster, Lu Xun's book covers are discussed from the perspective of printmaking and the influences of Western art on his design are analysed. Lu Xun collected numerous modern printmaking works from countries such as Germany, the Soviet Union, the United States and Japan, totalling over 2000 pieces (Xia, 2021). He not only organised printmaking exhibitions and published various foreign printmaking collections, but also used these works for his cover design. Li and Lei (2008) stated that Lu Xun's bold integration of Western art forms into Chinese design contributed to the development of modern Chinese book design. Li (2017) claimed that Lu Xun integrated foreign art into local design while promoting Chinese design worldwide. Lian (2022) emphasised that Lu Xun chose the corresponding print graphic images as visual elements for the covers to convey the theme of the book and his thoughts.

**Yellow-colored Cluster: Figures Related to Lu Xun Cover.** The yellow cluster contains seven high-frequency keywords, such as Tao Yuanqing, the Zhou brothers, stories from other lands, Kathe Kollwitz and woodcut art. This group focuses on people and their works that are associated with Lu Xun's design. Among them, the most notable is Tao Yuanqing. Lu Xun greatly admired Tao Yuanqing's paintings and often invited him to draw paintings for his book covers (Song, 2009). Tong (2016) explained that Lu Yuanqing appreciated Tao Xun not only because of their similar thoughts, but also because Tao Yuanqing captured the emotional connotations of Lu Xun's works. Yang and Wu (2022) pointed out that Tao Yuanqing's drawings conveyed his understanding of the spirit and meaning of Lu Xun's books. The second

keyword is the Zhou brothers (Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren) who collaborated in the translation and publishing the "Stories from Other Lands" Zhao (2021) pointed out that the book not only represents one of the early literary achievements of the Zhou brothers, but is also highly innovative in terms of the articles selected and translated. Ye (2022) claimed that the significance of "Stories from Other Lands" lies in the fact that the book design deviates from the traditional paradigm of the late Qing and illustrates the transition from tradition to modernity. The third person is the German left-wing printmaker, Kathe Kollwitz. Lu Xun collected many of her prints and praised her in the foreword of "Kaethe Kollwitz Print Collection" (Xia, 2021) as an artist who shook the art world. Chen (2019) further explained that Lu Xun's promotion of her works reflected his ideology of "Borrowlism", an endeavour to develop local art by drawing inspiration from Western artworks.

### Research Trends Analysis

In order to better observe the development trends in Lu Xun's research, we have used the keyword maps displayed in VOSviewer to visualise the development of keywords from 2010 to 2020: The colour changes from purple to yellow, showing the evolution of the entire research direction, as shown in Figure 4. Before 2010, the purple labels represented the early part of the study with keywords such as "Lu Xun book design", "modern book design", "tradition", "transformation" and others. In the early stage, research on Lu Xun's book cover designs focused on national characteristics and their relationship to modern transformation. Between 2012 and 2016, the blue labels represent the centre of the study with keywords such as "cultural implication", "modernity", "woodblock art", "emerging woodblock" and "pictorial art" The scholars expanded their discussions from national characteristics to cultural connotations during this period. They also investigated how woodcut images influenced the expression of the cover. Between 2016 and 2020, the green markers represent the late stages of the study with keywords such as "Lu Xun", "book design", "book cover", "Borrowlism", "Tao Yuanqing", "graphic design", "influence", "new culture movement" and "contemporary thought" During this period, the scholars paid more attention to the visual forms of Lu Xun's cover designs. They also investigated the influence of the social background. As of 2020, the yellow labels mark the latest research directions with keywords such as "artistic feature", "aesthetic idea", "typography", "calligraphy" and "printmaking" Researchers have studied Lu Xun's covers more comprehensively, analysing typography, image and layout. In addition, the research has highlighted various developments and analysed the aesthetic characteristics and ideological connotations of his cover designs. In the past twenty years, studies have gradually shifted from examining the transformation of modernity to analysing the visual elements and artistic characteristics. In this process, research has become more comprehensive and in-depth and shows a varied development trend.

## 4. Conclusion

### Findings

This study investigated the development trends of Lu Xun's book cover design research through a systematic analysis. The results show that despite the fluctuations in the past two decades, there is an overall upward trend, especially with significant progress from 2012 to 2017. We then used VOSviewer to examine the high-frequency keywords and thematic clusters in Lu Xun's design research across different time periods. The keywords with the highest frequency include "Lu Xun", "book cover", "design" and "cover design", which are central to the research topic. In addition, the cultural and historical context is represented by keywords such as "the Republican period" and "the new culture movement". Furthermore, the cultural concept of "Borrowlism" and the painter Tao Yuanqing, who are closely associated with Lu

Xun's cover designs, were discussed. Based on these keywords, we identified six thematic clusters in Lu Xun's book cover design: 1) Lu Xun's book cover design; 2) Context of Republican China; 3) Traditional culture and aesthetics; 4) Borrowlism and modernity; 5) Printmaking and woodblocks; 6) Figures related to Lu Xun's book cover. These clusters show that the researchers have not only studied the traditional culture in the covers, but also the integration of Western art into design under the concept of Borrowlism during the Republican era. Our final step was to identify the evolution of the research using the different colour coding in the VOSviewer keyword map. There were four phases in the research of Lu Xun's cover design: 1) before 2010, research focused on exploring its national characteristics and its relationship with modern design; 2) between 2012 and 2016, discussions began to address the cultural connotations and the influence of woodblock prints on the expression of the envelopes; 3) between 2016 and 2020, the analysis of visual forms was strengthened through the study of historical context; 4) since 2020, research has delved deeper into the various visual elements and aesthetic characteristics of the covers, indicating the research trend towards diversity.

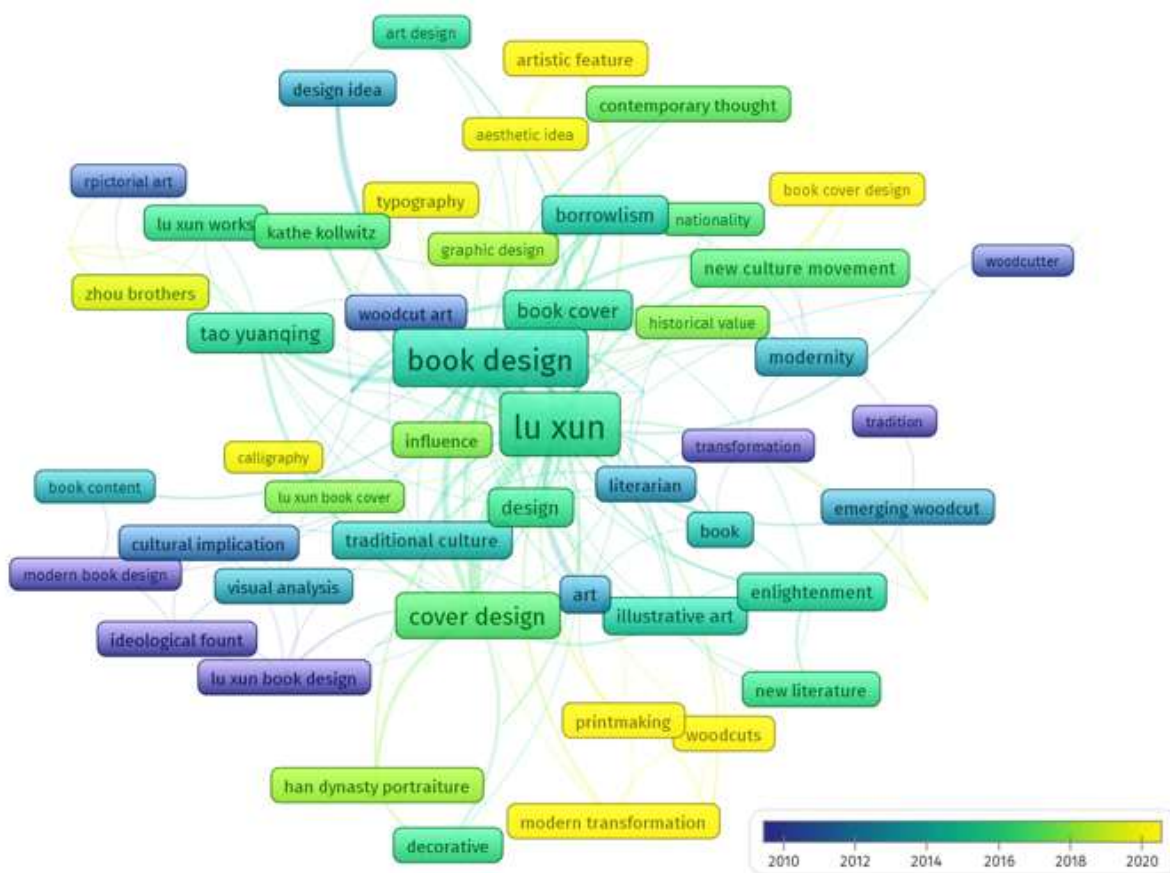


Figure 4: Co-occurrence clustering keyword network

### Future Research

In the last twenty years, research on the title pages of Lu Xun's works has made significant progress, moving from a general assessment to an in-depth discussion of the visual elements in their historical context. However, there are still aspects that need to be further explored. While researchers have paid attention to the influence of the historical context of the Republic on the covers, they have not sufficiently considered the influence of Lu Xun's personal experiences, such as his literary creations, his art collections and his publishing activities. While a limited number of studies have discussed the connections between cover meaning and content using theories of semiotics and intertextuality, especially in relation to Lu Xun's literary works such



as Call to Arms, Wandering and Wild Grass, the majority of research has not systematically examined Lu Xun's covers using related analytical frameworks and methods. To address these limitations, future research should consider Lu Xun's life experiences when analysing the visual expression of his covers. It may be crucial to apply relevant theories and methods of analysis to better examine Lu Xun's covers and assess their cultural, artistic and design value.

### **Limitation and outlook**

The main limitations of this study are that the data in the literature are exclusively from the CNKI database and relevant studies from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao and other languages were excluded. Therefore, the results may not fully capture the development trends in research on Lu Xun's cover design. Future research should consider the inclusion of literature from different regional databases. In addition, the interpretation of the thematic information might have been influenced by subjective judgements, although a systematic review method was used to analyse it in this study. Further research could refine the keywords in this area to increase persuasiveness. Despite these limitations, we believe that this study provides valuable insights into recent development trends in research on Lu Xun book design.

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