

Visual Culture and Child Development in Laos: Representations of National Identity in Children’s Books after the 1975 Regime Change (1975–2022)

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Cite this paper as: Vilaythong Suwannawong, Niyom Wongpongkham, Kittisan Sriruksa, (2025) Visual Culture and Child Development in Laos: Representations of National Identity in Children’s Books after the 1975 Regime Change (1975–2022). *Advances in Consumer Research*, 2 (4), 3197-3206

KEYWORDS

Laos, Lao
Identity,
Children's Book,
Illustrations,
Regime Change.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of children’s book illustrations in shaping early childhood development and national identity in Laos following the 1975 regime change, spanning the years 1975 to 2022. The research focuses on how visual narratives in Lao school textbooks and extracurricular reading materials contribute to the social, emotional, and cultural education of young children during critical developmental years.

The objective is to examine both individual and collective identities as depicted in illustrations from Lao school textbooks and extracurricular reading materials, created by six Lao illustrators: Kongphat Louanglat, Sisavath Bounmany, Vongsavanh Damlongsouk, Chongkham Phonkeo, Nivong Sangsakun, and Ounla Santi. This qualitative research employs various data collection tools, including structured and unstructured interviews, surveys, and visual analysis of illustrations from children’s textbooks and extracurricular books. The data is analyzed in accordance with the research objectives, drawing on concepts of identity, structural functionalism, cultural theory, developmental psychology, and personality theory. The findings are presented through descriptive analysis. Data collection was conducted from June 2022 to June 2023.

The research found that the individual identities of Lao illustrators are expressed through their distinct visual styles and technical approaches. Kongphat Louanglat’s illustrations align with five curricular domains, using a reductive style with realism levels 3 and 4. His techniques include black-and-white line drawing, a combination of ink and watercolor, and pure watercolor, with realistic forms, actual contour lines, expressive proportions, cool tones, and contrasted light and shadow; spatial depth is created through composition and perspective. Sisavath Bounmany employs a similar reductive style and realism level 4 using line-based techniques without color, emphasizing expressive proportions, line weight, and spatial construction through perspective. Vongsavanh Damlongsouk integrates computer graphics and ink lines, with realistic shapes, actual lines, cool tones, and expressive proportions, achieving tonal contrast and spatial depth through composition and perspective. Chongkham Phonkeo uses digital techniques within a realism level 4 framework, applying cool color palettes, expressive proportions, and compositional balance to create visual weight and spatial perception. Nivong Sangsakun employs a mixed technique of computer graphics and ink lines, with cool tones and similar compositional principles to convey depth and identity. Ounla Santi, also using computer graphics and ink lines, incorporates both warm and cool tones in contrast, applying expressive proportions and strong compositional structures to convey depth and visual impact. Collectively, the illustrators share a focus on representing curricular themes through a realist-reductive style, the use of actual contour lines, expressive proportional systems, predominantly cool color palettes, and the construction of tonal weight and spatial depth through careful compositional arrangement and linear perspective techniques..



1. INTRODUCTION

The study of Lao identity in children's book illustrations reflects the ideological framework of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and the government, which prioritized national development following independence in 1975. Central to this developmental vision was the cultivation of human resources through educational media, particularly textbooks and extracurricular reading materials targeted at children aged 6–10 (Department of Education and Psychology, n.d.). The government strongly believed that education, in conjunction with high-quality learning materials such as children's books, could cultivate well-rounded youth equipped with essential knowledge and skills—serving as a crucial foundation for long-term national development (Kongduan Neththavong, interview, October 27, 2022).

Despite the growing popularity of electronic media and digital technologies, children's books remain a powerful tool in communicating values, ideologies, and social norms in an accessible and profound manner (National Institute of Social Sciences, 2017). A key factor contributing to the effectiveness of these books is the quality of their illustrations. As Ranjawan Intrakamhaeng (1974, cited in Benjamas Saengyaimani, 2006) has observed, illustrations are not merely decorative but are central to knowledge communication. They serve to deepen young readers' understanding by conveying abstract cultural and ideological concepts in concrete, visual forms.

The development of children's book illustrations in Laos has therefore played a vital role in fostering national identity and improving human capital. Since 1975, the Party, government, and international organizations have recognized and actively supported this educational tool. Consequently, a number of Lao illustrators have emerged and continuously developed their craft within a sociocultural framework that aligns with national policy goals. Their work reflects not only artistic creativity but also specific characteristics of Lao art and culture, contributing to the preservation and promotion of national cultural identity (Ounla Santi, interview, March 4, 2022). Songkhoun Chantachone (2010) argued that culture is a behavioral construct shaped by human thought, developed to meet personal and collective needs. When such behaviors are accepted by the majority, they become the cultural norms of a society. Individuals within that society are expected to behave accordingly, resulting in a shared cultural pattern. This cultural framework, rooted in social consensus, fosters unity and a collective sense of belonging—what anthropologists define as identity (Damrong Thandee, 2003). Identity thus encompasses the defining characteristics of individuals, communities, ethnic groups, languages, local cultures, and religions that distinguish them from others (Yurachat Boonsanit, 2004). Similarly, illustrations in Lao children's books are the product of complex creative decisions and must reflect Lao sociocultural identity in line with the Party's ideological direction. Published illustrations are subject to governmental review and approval to ensure that they serve the nation's educational and ideological goals.

Jonathan Friedman's theory of identity distinguishes between individual identity—which pertains to unique personal or group traits—and collective identity, which arises from shared experiences and symbolic interaction within a community (cited in Prasit Leepreecha, 2004). Therefore, analyzing Lao identity in children's book illustrations requires attention to both dimensions to fully understand how these visual narratives function as tools for child development and national transformation.

Between 1975 and 2022, Lao illustrators have played a significant role in shaping children's book illustrations for readers aged 6–10. With state support, six highly skilled and experienced artists—Kongphat Louanglat, Sisavath Bounmany, Vongsavanh Damlongsouk, Nivong Sangsakun, Ounla Santi, and Chongkham Phonkeo—were selected to create illustrations for nationwide use. Each illustrator possesses a distinct visual style that reflects Lao identity through textbook and extracurricular book illustrations. Their collective contributions are instrumental in building Lao society and reinforcing its cultural values. Given this historical context and cultural significance, this study seeks to investigate representations of Lao identity in children's book illustrations produced after the 1975 regime change through 2022. The goal is to identify and analyze the expressions of Lao identity in these visual materials, thereby contributing to the body of knowledge necessary for the ongoing development of Lao society, culture, and nationhood.

2. OBJECTIVE

To examine representations of Lao identity in children's book illustrations following the 1975 regime change, covering the period from 1975 to 2022.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research examines illustrations in Lao children's textbooks and extracurricular books, with a particular focus on the creative processes involved and the expression of identity within these visual materials. The study draws upon theoretical frameworks related to identity, structural functionalism, culture, and personality theory to frame the analysis. Field research was conducted to gain in-depth insights, targeting three key groups of informants.

The key informants (7 individuals) included professionals from both governmental and private sectors who were directly involved in the production and management of children's educational materials—such as heads of publishing houses, directors of the Institute for Educational Sciences, and heads of departments related to print media and reading promotion within the National Library of Laos. The casual informants (6 individuals) consisted of Lao illustrators officially selected by the government to produce illustrations for primary school textbooks used nationwide from 1975 to 2022. These illustrators



include Kongphat Louanglat, Sisavath Bounmany, Vongsavanh Damlongsouk, Nivong Sangsakun, Ounla Santi, and Chongkham Phonkeo. The general informants (7 individuals) were selected through purposive sampling and included scholars and general library users, such as academic librarians from the National Library, staff responsible for mobile library services, and representatives from the Institute for Educational Sciences.

Data collection involved two main components: (1) documentary research sourced from official institutions, academic theses, books, and online materials, and (2) fieldwork conducted in Vientiane Capital. In-depth interviews were conducted to confirm and elaborate on information regarding the creation of illustrations in Lao children's books. All collected data were synthesized to form a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

The findings are presented through descriptive and analytical reporting, highlighting both the processes of illustration development and their significance in constructing and communicating Lao cultural identity through children's literature.

4. RESULT

The study of Lao identity in children's book illustrations after the 1975 regime change (1975–2022) employs the conceptual framework proposed by Prasit Leepreecha (2004), which classifies identity into two main dimensions: *individual identity* and *collective identity*. The findings reveal that individual identity in Lao illustrations can be observed through various elements of visual art, including content, style, technique, line, shape and form, proportion, color, tonal value, light and shadow, and spatial composition. These elements are analyzed through the works of six Lao illustrators: Kongphat Louanglat, Sisavath Bounmany, Vongsavanh Damlongsouk, Chongkham Phonkeo, Nivong Sangsakun, and Ounla Santi.

Specifically, the illustrations of Kongphat Louanglat in both textbooks and extracurricular materials are designed to reflect curricular content through a reductive visual approach with realism levels 3 and 4. His techniques include black-and-white line drawing as well as a mixed technique combining ink lines with watercolor. His illustrations utilize *actual lines* with clear outlines, realistic shapes and forms, and expressive proportions. A predominance of cool tones characterizes his color palette. Compositional arrangement is carefully employed to create visual depth and weight, while light and shadow are rendered through strong contrast. Spatial depth is achieved through both composition and adherence to principles of perspective.

Kongphat Louanglat's illustrations play a formative role in shaping young children's cognitive and emotional development in post-1975 Laos. His realistic yet reductive style presents curricular content in a visually accessible manner that aids comprehension and memory retention for early learners. By using clear outlines, expressive proportions, and emotionally neutral or comforting cool tones, his work fosters visual clarity and psychological safety—important conditions for children's learning and emotional regulation. The strong contrasts in light and shadow and the spatial organization help young readers develop visual literacy, spatial awareness, and symbolic understanding. Furthermore, his consistent alignment with the five curricular domains supports the integration of moral values, national identity, and basic life skills into children's early education. These visual materials do more than accompany text; they function as cognitive scaffolding that encourages recognition, empathy, and cultural familiarity—critical foundations for psychosocial development during the perinatal and early childhood stages.

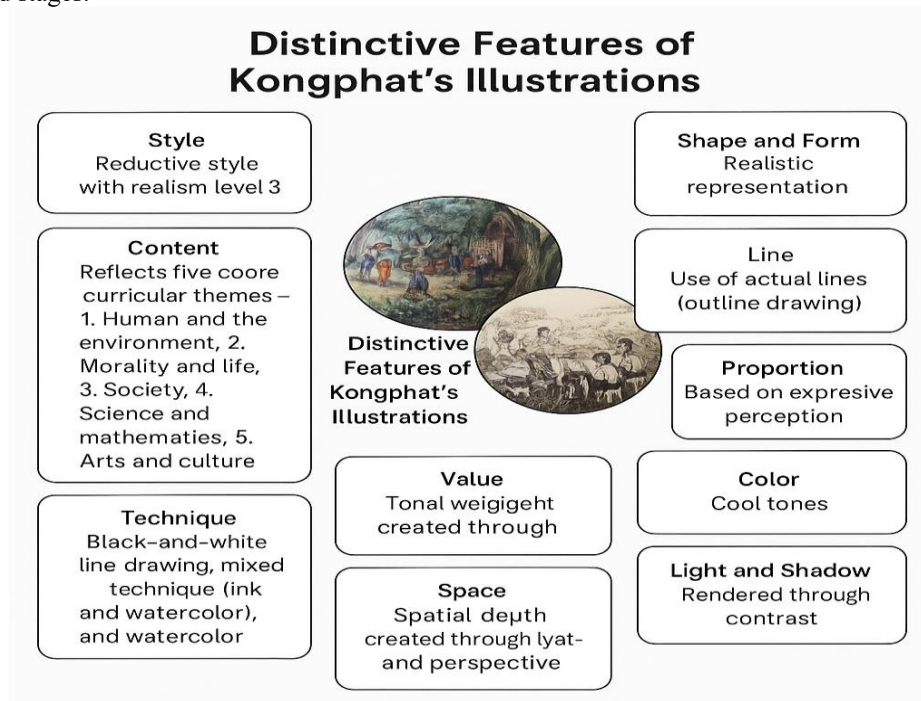


Fig 1. Distinctive Features of Kongphat Loanglat's Illustration

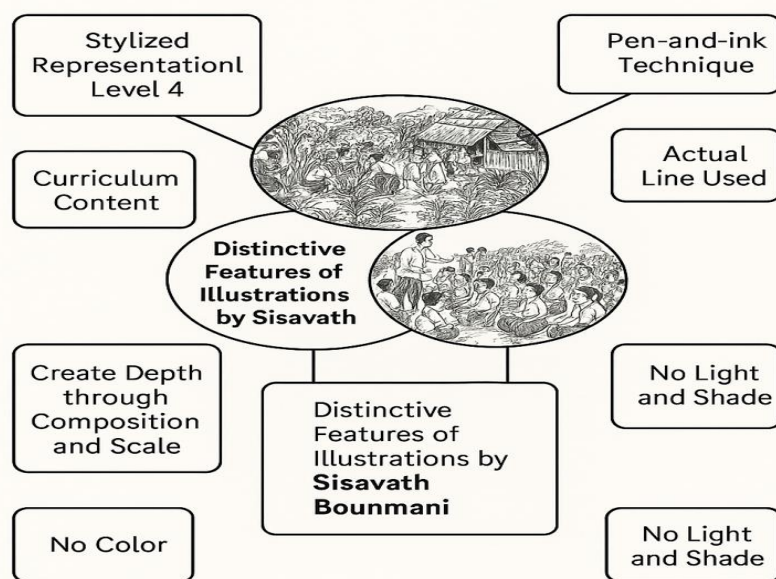


The illustrations of Sisavath Bounmany reflect six core curricular themes: moral education, intellectual development, ethical behavior, physical education, and arts education. Additional embedded content includes knowledge about ASEAN, children's rights, human rights, environmental conservation, social order and discipline, literacy promotion, anti-corruption, and other topics relevant to Lao society and culture. His illustrative style employs a reductive approach at realism level 4, using pen line drawing as the primary technique. The lines are rendered with fine detail and heavier strokes in the foreground. Forms and shapes are realistically depicted, with proportions guided by expressive intuition. Tonal weight and spatial depth are achieved through the arrangement of compositional elements and object sizing. The illustrations do not employ color or light and shadow.

Sisavath Bounmany's illustrations serve as a critical pedagogical tool that supports holistic child development across intellectual, physical, and aesthetic domains. His work, primarily featured in Lao textbooks, addresses six essential curricular areas: moral education, cognitive development, physical education, arts education, ethical behavior, and social values. Notably, his illustrations incorporate broader educational themes such as ASEAN awareness, children's and human rights, environmental responsibility, and anti-corruption advocacy, reinforcing both local and global citizenship from an early age.

Bounmany's reductive realism (level 4) is executed using fine pen line techniques, without the use of color or chiaroscuro. His detailed foreground lines, realistic shapes, and intuitive proportions guide learners in developing visual analysis, attention to detail, and symbolic interpretation. While devoid of color, the illustrations effectively create tonal weight and spatial depth through the spatial arrangement and relative sizing of objects. This monochromatic, structured style supports literacy and logical reasoning by minimizing distraction and focusing the child's attention on narrative and moral content. Additionally, his depictions of physical activities, group cooperation, and creative expression promote healthy development in motor skills, emotional intelligence, and social cognition. These illustrations not only transmit curricular knowledge but also foster an integrated model of education, where intellectual growth is supported through culturally grounded visual storytelling.

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF ILLUSTRATIONS BY SISAVATH BOUNMANI



Create Depth through Composition and Scale

Fig 2. Distinctive Features of Sisavath Bounmani's Illustration

The illustrations of Vongsavanh Damlongsouk in both textbooks and extracurricular reading materials reflect core curricular content and traditional Lao folktales, respectively. His work employs a reductive style with realism level 4, primarily utilizing mixed media techniques and cool color palettes. The lines used are actual drawn lines, with a preference for contour outlines. Proportions are based on expressive intuition, allowing for dynamic visual construction. Composition is carefully arranged to enhance clarity and dimensionality, thereby creating tonal weight in the images. Light and shadow are rendered through contrasting techniques, while spatial depth is adjusted according to compositional needs, employing principles of perspective to define the visual space.

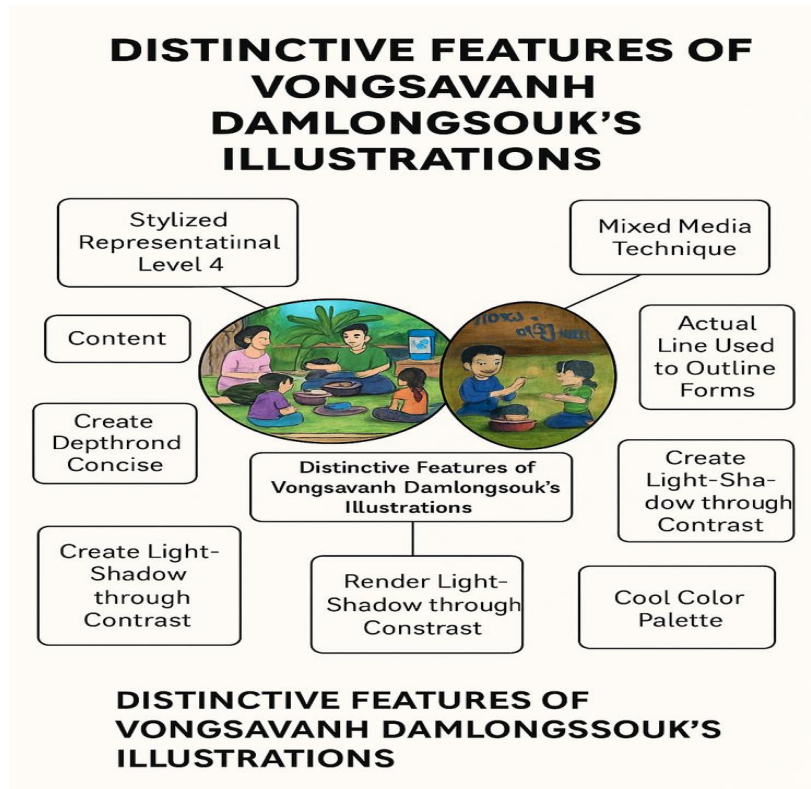


Fig 3. Distinctive Features of Vongsavanh Damlongsouk's Illustration

The illustrations by Chongkham Phonkeo in both textbooks and extracurricular reading materials reflect key themes such as cultural values, health, and technology. His works are executed using computer graphic techniques in a reductive style at realism level 4. The illustrations employ actual contour lines to define the forms, which are realistically rendered with expressive proportions. A vibrant color palette is used, predominantly featuring cool tones, along with strategic use of color contrast and clearly defined light and shadow. Visual weight is achieved through compositional arrangement, utilizing size and color to enhance dimensionality and harmony. Spatial depth is created through thoughtful composition and the application of perspective principles.

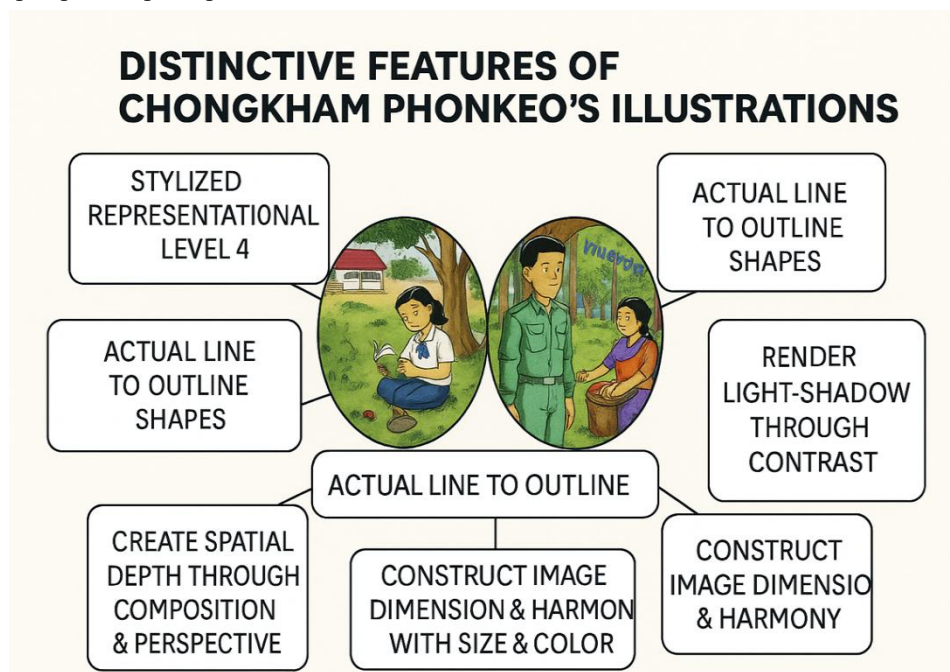


Fig 4. Distinctive Features of Vongsavanh Damlongsouk's Illustration



The illustrations by Nivong Sangsakun in both textbooks and extracurricular reading materials follow a stylized representational approach at realism level 4. The textbook content emphasizes themes of morality and environmental awareness, while extracurricular books highlight personal development and character education. The illustrations are primarily created using computer graphics and mixed media techniques. Lines are rendered as actual drawn lines, often employing contour outlines. Shapes and forms are depicted realistically, with proportions guided by expressive interpretation. A vibrant color scheme is used, with a preference for cool tones. Tonal weight is achieved through the arrangement and sizing of elements as well as variations in color density. Light and shadow are presented with strong contrast, and spatial depth is constructed through compositional layout and the application of perspective principles.

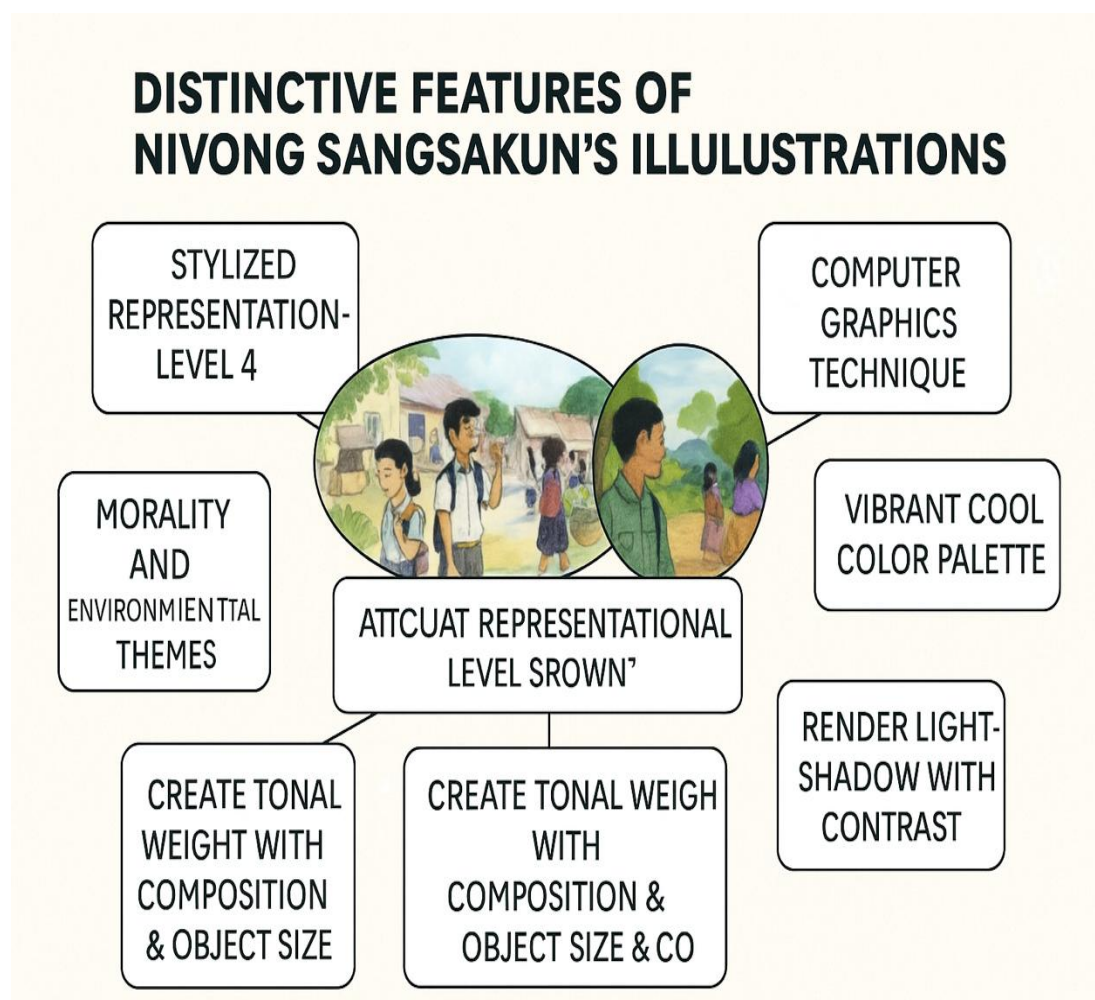


Fig 5. Distinctive Features of Nivong Sangsakun's Illustration

The illustrations by Ounla Santi in both textbooks and extracurricular reading materials reflect themes related to moral and character development. These works are rendered in a stylized representational form, with realism levels ranging from 4 to 5. The primary technique employed is computer graphics. The illustrations feature actual lines, often using contour outlines to define forms. Shapes and forms are depicted realistically, with proportions guided by expressive interpretation. The color palette is vivid, predominantly combining warm and cool hues in contrasting arrangements. Tonal weight is constructed through the strategic arrangement of visual elements, variations in size, and the use of color intensity. Spatial depth is achieved through compositional layout and the application of perspective principles.

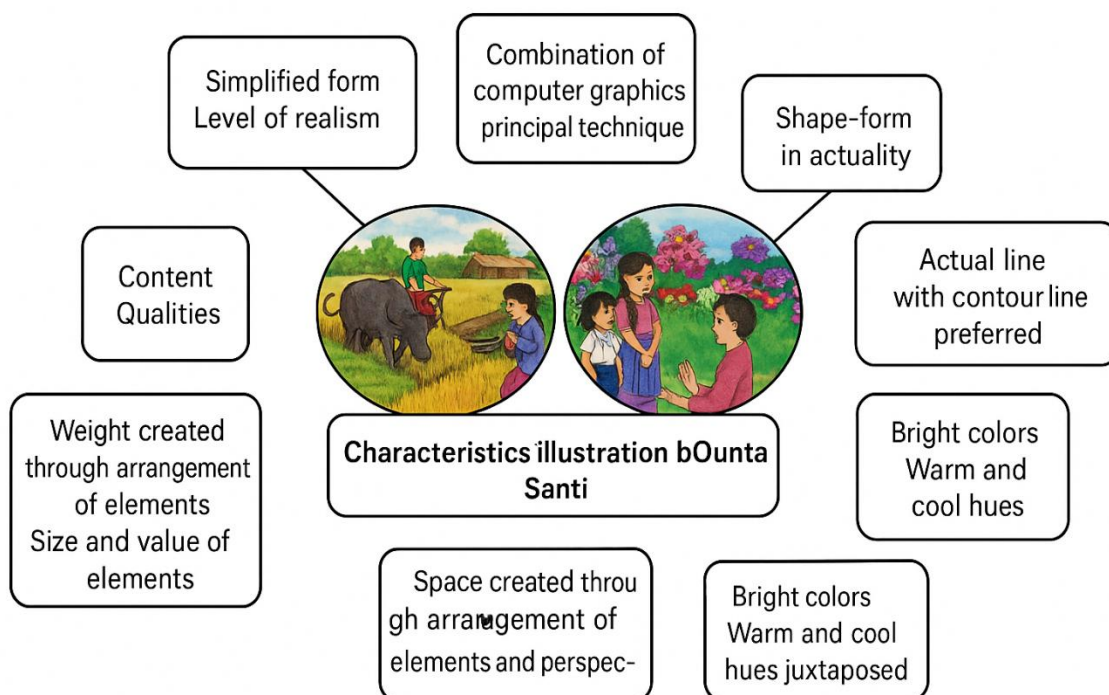


Figure 6 Characteristics of illustrations by Ounla Santi

The collective identity expressed in Lao children's book illustrations—both in textbooks and extracurricular reading materials—can be analyzed through the consistent use of key artistic elements. These include content, stylistic representation, techniques, line, shape and form, proportion, color, light and shadow, and spatial composition.

In terms of **content**, illustrations across all examined materials align closely with the national educational curriculum, particularly addressing five major domains: moral and character development, intellectual education, ethical behavior, physical education, and arts education. These themes are presented through visual storytelling that aims to foster holistic development in young readers.

The **stylistic approach** among Lao illustrators tends to favor stylized representation at realism levels 4 and 5. This reductive style emphasizes communicative clarity over detailed realism, allowing complex ideas to be conveyed in simplified, age-appropriate forms.

Regarding **techniques**, most illustrators utilize mixed media—such as black-and-white line drawing, pen and ink, and increasingly, computer graphics. The shift toward digital tools reflects broader trends in contemporary illustration practices across the region.

Line quality is another shared feature, with a preference for actual, hand-drawn lines that vary in thickness and intensity. Heavier lines are often used to define key elements in the foreground, while softer or expressive lines communicate movement or emotional nuance.

The illustrations generally adopt **realistic shape and form**, particularly in the depiction of human and animal figures. These forms mirror natural characteristics, while objects are typically symmetrical and clearly defined to enhance recognition and meaning.

Proportions are derived from expressive interpretation rather than strict anatomical rules. This allows illustrators to prioritize narrative clarity and emotional tone, adapting scale and size to serve communicative functions within each scene.

Color palettes across works are vibrant and varied, with intentional combinations of warm and cool tones. Extracurricular books tend to employ bold color contrasts to captivate attention, while textbook illustrations use color more strategically to support specific content and maintain engagement.

The use of **light and shadow** varies by illustrator. Some employ contrast to add visual depth and dimension, while others simplify tonal variation to preserve clarity. In all cases, light and shadow serve the purpose of supporting readability and focus.



Finally, **spatial composition** plays a vital role in establishing visual harmony. The thoughtful arrangement of space between characters and objects helps guide the viewer's attention, create depth, and clarify relationships. Effective spatial design enhances the comprehensibility of each scene and reinforces the core messages embedded in the illustrations.

Collectively, these shared artistic strategies not only reflect pedagogical aims but also function as visual embodiments of Lao cultural values and educational ideology.

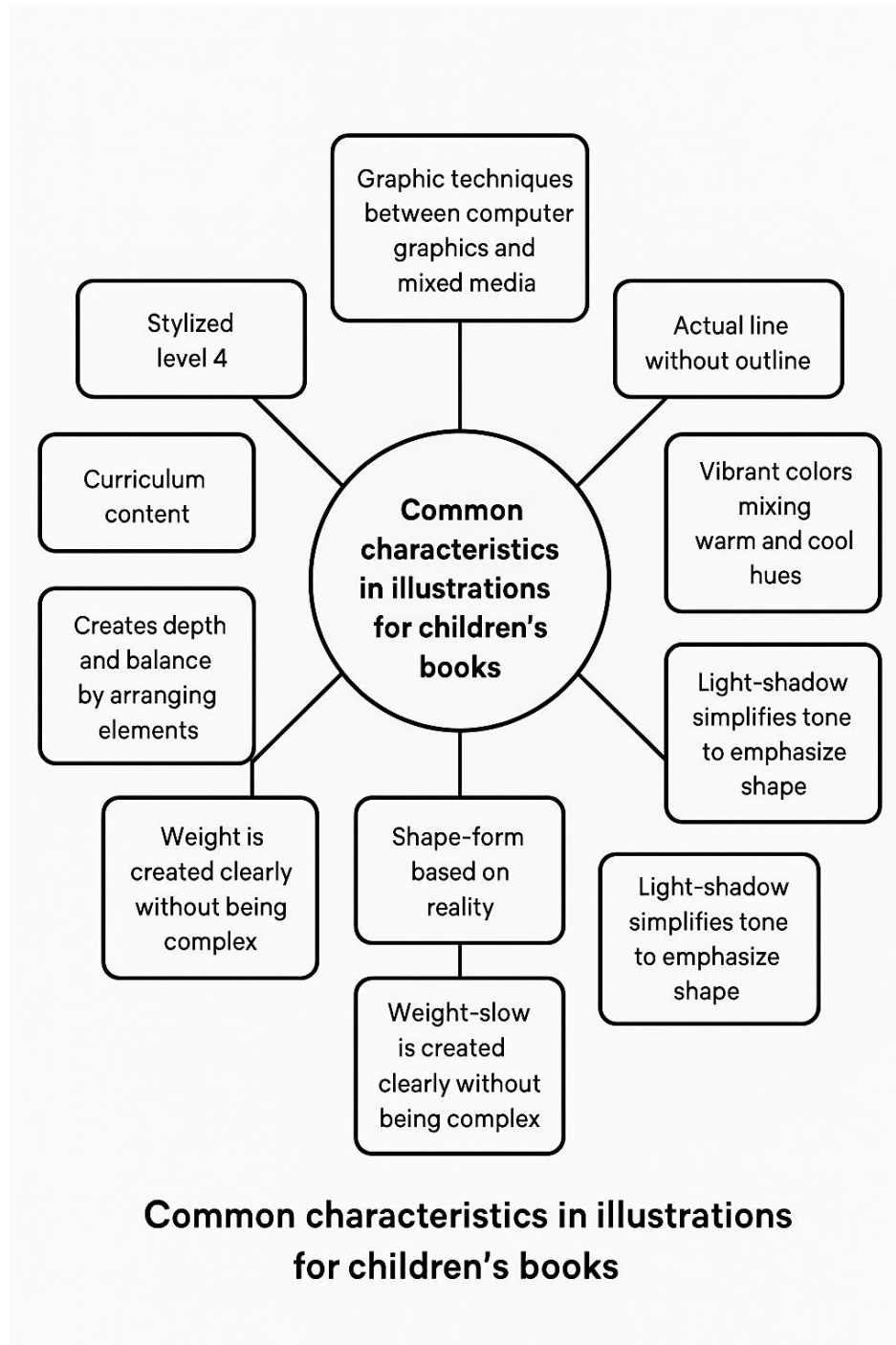


Figure 7: Collective Identity in Illustrations for Children's Books



5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study on representations of Lao identity in children's book illustrations following the regime change from 1975 to 2022 can be discussed in relation to the research objectives as follows.

Through the examination of Lao identity as reflected in children's book illustrations, it is evident that the content aligns closely with the national curriculum, and that such alignment is reinforced through deliberate use of artistic elements. These include stylized forms with reduced realism, the use of simple or fine pen lines, mixed techniques such as watercolor combined with monochromatic ink drawing, and a compositional strategy that creates visual weight and depth without relying on full-scale light-shadow rendering. This reduction in realism represents not only a visual style but also an adaptive strategy aligned with modern educational aims in Laos, which prioritize clarity and accessibility over complexity, particularly for young learners.

This visual adaptation resonates with the **structural functionalist theory** of Talcott Parsons (1940–1965), particularly his concept of *adaptation*, which refers to a system's ability to adjust to environmental demands. In this context, Lao illustrations serve as mechanisms that allow the educational system to adapt to its developmental and cultural needs. When existing visual norms no longer meet systemic requirements, adaptations—such as simplified artistic forms—are introduced to ensure functional continuity and social coherence.

Furthermore, many Lao illustrators tend to limit their use of color, focusing instead on primary tones and relying on composition and linework to convey depth and emphasis. This minimalist yet effective use of visual elements contributes to clarity and communicative power. It reflects a shared approach across Lao illustrators—one that privileges content delivery and cultural resonance over ornate or hyper-stylized aesthetics.

In addition, the illustrations reflect the shifting educational paradigm following the 1975 regime change. As Laos restructured its national curriculum to better reflect the realities of Lao society, there arose a need for illustrations that could effectively communicate content and instill cultural values in young learners. This transformation supports **Ruth Benedict's theory of culture and personality** (as cited in Songkhoun Chantachone, 2010), which posits that culture is constructed through behavioral patterns shaped by individual needs. Individuals born into a society internalize its cultural norms through education, and this enculturation is visually reinforced through the imagery they are repeatedly exposed to. Thus, illustrations become part of a cultural cycle that continuously molds personal identity in line with collective cultural values.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies should compare representations of identity in Lao children's book illustrations with those from neighboring countries, to better understand similarities and differences in the use of visual elements and identity construction in children's literature.

Further research should explore the perceptions and experiences of children and parents who use these illustrated books, in order to assess the impact such imagery has on identity formation and cultural understanding.

Future studies should investigate the influence of post-1975 social and political transitions in Laos on the development and transformation of children's book illustrations and their role in representing national identity.

Research should also explore the evolution of artistic styles in Lao children's book illustrations across different time periods to identify long-term trends and artistic development in the field

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