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THE IMPACT OF SYMBOL SIMPLIFICATION ON VISUAL RECOGNITION: A CASE STUDY OF THE MONKEY KING IN COMICS DESIGN

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This study explores the impact of symbol simplification on the visual recognition of comic characters, using the Monkey King as a primary case. Through comparative analysis of iconic character designs across different eras, it examines how core mythological symbols are distilled and adapted. The findings reveal that strategic simplification, through the extraction of core iconography, color reconstruction, and modern aesthetic integration, enhances immediate recognizability and communication efficiency while preserving essential cultural meaning, offering a practical framework for modernizing traditional IPs in visual media.

Key words: comic design, visual communication, cultural adaptation, character recognition, symbol simplification, Monkey King.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary visual culture, the instant recognizability of a comic character is a critical factor for audience engagement and narrative success. Mythological figures, such as the Monkey King from the Chinese classic Journey to the West, carry a dense system of traditional visual symbols. In modern comics, these often-intricate symbols undergo a process of simplification to align with current aesthetic preferences and the functional demands of the medium. Research on integrating traditional elements into modern design, such as Liu et al. [1] on logo design, highlights how simplified cultural symbols can maintain identity while adapting to contemporary communication. Similarly, studies on the semiotic transformation of iconic figures, as explored by Yang [2] regarding the Monkey King's cross-media journey, provide a foundational perspective on how characters evolve as cultural signs. The principles of visual adaptation in digital heritage contexts, as reviewed by Yezhova, Zhao, and Pashkevich [3], further underscore the importance of clarity and reinterpretation for accessibility. This study builds upon these insights to investigate the specific visual transformation of the Monkey King in comics. It analyzes how the character's representation has been strategically streamlined across different adaptations. Drawing on semiotics and visual communication theory, the research aims to delineate the principles that guide this



simplification, ensuring the character's iconic status is maintained and enhanced for new audiences and platforms.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to analyze the methodology and impact of visual symbol simplification in the comic adaptation of a traditional mythological character. Specifically, it takes the Monkey King as a central case to: 1) identify the core, immutable visual symbols that define the character; 2) examine how these symbols have been simplified and reinterpreted in key comic representations from different periods; 3) elucidate the design principles that allow such simplification to strengthen immediate visual recognition without eroding the character's fundamental cultural identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A comparative analysis of three key Sun Wukong (Monkey King) images reveals a unified design logic centered on symbolic refinement. The first case is Liu Jihou's 1963 work, which meticulously depicts symbolic elements such as the magnificent golden cudgel and richly textured armor, establishing a traditional tone. The second case is the comic book series published by Tianjin Education Press in 1999 as a companion to CCTV's animation series, showcasing a significant simplification. In this case, the character lines are simpler and clearer, the colors are more vibrant and saturated, and complex details are simplified to basic shapes, creating a more iconic and reproducible cartoon character, more suitable for large-scale printing and animation production. The third case is the modern webcomic *Non-Human*, which pushes simplification to its extreme, employing extremely simple lines, soft tones, and exaggeratedly cute expressions. In *Non-Human*, the core changes to Sun Wukong's weapon system are "de-sanctification" and "functionalization." The Golden Cudgel is no longer a divine weapon for conquering heaven and earth, but a somewhat individualistic personal accessory; the Somersault Cloud is no longer a cloud, but a jealous pet.

The core of this discussion centers on elucidating the precise mechanisms through which the visual evolution of the Monkey King directly enhances immediate recognizability. The evolutionary process is not random but follows a deliberate, tripartite strategy of extraction, reconstruction, and translation.

Firstly, the process begins with the strategic extraction of core iconography. Designers distill the character's visual essence by identifying and isolating its most salient, non-negotiable signifiers, such as the Ruyi Jingu Bang (the compliant golden-hooped rod), and the distinctive simian facial structure with "fiery golden eyes." Concurrently, secondary or overly intricate details, for example, the specific texture of every strand of fur in traditional paintings or the elaborate patterns on ancient armor are systematically stripped away. This purification creates a stronger, more immediate visual silhouette, akin to creating a universally recognizable pictogram from a detailed portrait.

Secondly, color undergoes a purposeful reconstruction. The traditional palette associated with the Monkey King - predominantly gold, red, and black - is not discarded but is strategically amplified and codified. Colors are often intensified



in saturation, applied in larger, flatter areas of high contrast, and standardized across media. This transforms color from a descriptive element into a mnemonic device, creating a memorable and proprietary color scheme that triggers instant character association, much like a brand's signature colors.

Thirdly, complex narrative-based elements are translated into modern visual lexicons. This is where cultural intelligence meets contemporary design. Abstract or anachronistic concepts are re-embodied: the somersault cloud (Jindou Yun) may become a sleek hoverboard or a dynamic speed-line trail, translating magical mobility into a modern idiom of motion. The golden fillet (Jingu) might be stylized into a minimalist headwear accent or a tech-inspired diadem. This functional and geometric translation preserves the element's core idea (constraint, identity) while rendering it legible and relevant to a contemporary audience familiar with different aesthetic and functional paradigms.



Fig. 1. "Nao Tian Gong" in 1956
(https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/_1sUkFbgAggl1aFtvspmkw)



Fig. 2. "Monkey King" in 1999
(<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%A5%BF%E6%B8%B8%E8%AE%B0/4812230>)



Fig. 3. "Non-Humans" in 2016
(<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%AD%99%E6%82%9F%E7%A9%BA/65118041>)

This three-pronged approach significantly reduces cognitive load by presenting cleaner visual cues for faster pattern recognition, enabling instant identification across diverse media - from mobile icons to high-speed animation - while preserving the character's fundamental identity. Crucially, this simplification acts as sophisticated cultural translation rather than erosion: core semantic meanings like rebellion (the rod), transformative power (72 transformations), and



agile cunning (primate visage) are meticulously maintained, merely repackaged within a visual syntax aligned with modern global storytelling's pace, scale, and aesthetic expectations. The result is a Monkey King consciously optimized for clarity, speed, and cross-cultural resonance without sacrificing his essential nature.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that modernizing mythological characters in comics follows strategic symbol simplification. The Monkey King case demonstrates a replicable methodology: identify core visual signifiers through semiotic analysis, distill forms via graphic simplification and geometric reduction, and adapt elements for contemporary contexts. This enhances visual recognition and cross-media adaptability without diluting cultural heritage, offering a clear blueprint for designers working with traditional IPs.

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ВПЛИВ СПРОЩЕННЯ СИМВОЛІВ НА ВІЗУАЛЬНЕ СПРИЙНЯТТЯ: ПРИКЛАД КОРОЛЯ МАВП У ДИЗАЙНІ КОМІКСІВ

В дослідженні розглянуто вплив спрощення символів на візуальне розпізнавання персонажів коміксів, використовуючи Короля Мавп як приклад. Шляхом порівняльного аналізу дизайну культових персонажів різних епох, унаочнено, як дистиллюються та адаптуються основні міфологічні символи. В результаті дослідження виявлено, що спрощення шляхом вилучення основної іконографії, реконструкції кольору та сучасної естетичної інтеграції, підвищує безпосередню впізнаваність та ефективність комунікації, зберігаючи при цьому суттєве культурне значення. Результат дослідження пропонує практичну основу для модернізації традиційних образів персонажів у візуальних медіа.

Ключові слова: дизайн коміксів, візуальна комунікація, культурна адаптація, розпізнавання персонажів, спрощення символів, Король Мавп