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The Re-creation of the Father of the Monkey King: Contemporary Transformation of Character Aesthetics in *The Monkey King* and the Possibilities of IP Derivation

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Abstract

Zhang Guangyu created all classic figures for the animated film *The Monkey King: Havoc in Heaven*. Yet for a very long time, his personal contributions were ignored, as most people only recognized the whole team behind the animation. This paper explores the source of his unique design style and defines his core creative logic as "integrated innovation"—he blended various cultural art elements and reshaped them into an original visual system. His design language draws strength from three sources: Chinese folk arts, Western modern art, and his decades-long cross-media design experience. The combination forms a complete visual system full of symbolic meaning, balanced composition, and decorative beauty. All characters in the animation, especially Sun Wukong, perfectly demonstrate how to transform traditional aesthetics into visuals suitable for modern animation works. Based on Zhang's mature design ideas, this paper puts forward the "Zhang Guangyu Creative Model", including three actionable steps: locking core cultural values, reinterpreting traditional visual elements, and building a unified visual world. This model offers clear guidance for creators developing animation IPs rooted in traditional culture nowadays.

Keywords

Zhang Guangyu; *The Monkey King: Havoc in Heaven*; character aesthetics; integrated innovation; modern transformation of cultural IP

Introduction

Released in 1961, *The Monkey King: Havoc in Heaven* is a landmark piece in China's animation history. Sun Wukong's look—peach-shaped face, yellow robe, green silk scarf, and red trousers—has become a well-known national cultural symbol. Still, Zhang Guangyu, the designer of this iconic Monkey King, never received enough recognition. The key reason is that previous historical records and studies focused more on collective creation rather than individual designers' unique artistic output.

Zhang Guangyu (1900-1965) was a pioneer of modern Chinese design, good at mixing local folk aesthetics and Western modern artistic concepts. In recent years, more scholars have begun to study his works, but few have fully explained why his character designs remain vivid and timeless.

This paper holds that Zhang's greatest achievement lies in integrated innovation. He combined traditional cultural

symbols, modern design rules, and personal practical experience to build a brand-new visual framework. Earlier research mentioned his combination of tradition and modern art (Gu & Zheng, 2015), while other papers analyzed his modern design skills (Zhao & Cui, 2022). This study goes further: it sorts out his specific creative process and discusses how this method can help us upgrade traditional cultural IPs for contemporary audiences.

1. The Visual Origins of Zhang Guangyu's Character Design Style

Zhang's artistic style did not come from a single source. It is a fusion of folk art heritage, Western modern art forms, and his rich cross-media design career. His whole design system shows how he organically integrated diverse cultural resources.

1.1 Folk Art as the Core Visual Foundation

Zhang grew up in Wuxi, Jiangsu, where local folk art deeply influenced his creation. Huishan clay figurines, paper-cut art, and New Year paintings left deep marks on his aesthetic taste. He also learned traditional Chinese painting, calligraphy, and Peking Opera at an early age, which helped him grasp the core logic of Chinese figure expression.

Among all folk influences, Peking Opera facial masks mattered most. Opera masks do not pursue realistic effects; they use colors, lines, and outlines to directly show each character's personality. Zhang borrowed this design logic and applied it to animation character creation.

This idea is clearly reflected in Sun Wukong's design. The peach-shaped face and bright green eyebrows are not simple copies of opera masks; he adjusted these features to fit animated frames. He converted ancient cultural symbols into animation-friendly visual language, making traditional cultural memories accessible to modern viewers.

1.2 Western Modern Art as Formal Design Tools

Zhang extensively studied Western modern art schools, including Bauhaus, Cubism, Expressionism, and decorative art movements. These styles reshaped his understanding of form simplification, structural layout, and proportional design.

He never chased realistic drawing effects. Instead, he preferred simplifying outlines and reconstructing character forms. When designing Sun Wukong, he exaggerated partial features and streamlined complex structures. The final image is easy to identify while retaining the unique charm of Chinese art.

In short, he did not blindly copy Western art trends. He absorbed their formal techniques as practical tools for original creation.

1.3 Cross-Media Experience for Visual Integration

Before engaging in animation design, Zhang worked in many creative industries: comics, advertising, book layout, stage design, and film art. This diverse experience trained him to extract simple, expressive core elements from complicated pictures.

The character designs in Havoc in Heaven are the perfect result of his multi-field practice. Sun Wukong combines mythological images, opera visual characteristics, folk art styles, and modern animation design. The final figure carries strong Chinese cultural identity and is easy for audiences to understand. Simply put, Zhang's core method is translating profound traditional cultural connotations into concise modern visuals.

2. Integrated Innovation Reflected in Havoc in Heaven

Zhang's core creative idea is more than just stacking separate art elements. Integrated innovation means reorganizing traditional symbols and modern design rules to create something totally new.

The Monkey King: Havoc in Heaven is a typical representative of this idea. Zhang did not mechanically copy original myths from Journey to the West. Instead, he reconstructed long-standing cultural memories into an exclusive visual language for animation.

2.1 Visual Construction of Sun Wukong

Designing the Monkey King was a tough task. The figure needed to look like a mythical stone monkey, carry a heroic temperament, and match the narrative rhythm of animated films.

Zhang abandoned realistic styles and chose symbolic, streamlined forms. The peach-shaped face is his most

representative design detail—adapted from opera masks and modified for smooth animation performance. It keeps the monkey's agile temperament and creates a youthful, heroic image.

His bright green eyebrows and bold red-yellow-green color matching reflect Zhang's re-interpretation of traditional aesthetics. These color schemes make the character stand out on screen and balance classic Chinese color symbolism with animation's visual demands.

Sun Wukong became an everlasting icon not because of one single design highlight, but because of the perfect combination of cultural symbols, modern artistic concepts, and animation production techniques.

2.2 Complete Character System and Decorative Visual Language

Zhang not only finished Sun Wukong's design; he built a full set of supporting characters. Each role's appearance matches its personality and plot positioning. Figures like the Jade Emperor, Giant Spirit God, and Earth God have distinct body shapes, sizes, and line rhythms, forming a complete and clear visual system for the whole film.

This design logic follows the traditional Chinese artistic concept of "expressing inner spirit through outer forms", yet it is optimized for animation, allowing audiences to capture character traits at a glance.

Besides, decorative aesthetics run through the whole film's visual tone. Character costumes, background architecture, and unified color palettes jointly shape a distinctive national animation style. The movie abandons realistic spatial effects and adopts stylized, symbolic visuals rooted in Chinese art traditions.

As Gu and Zheng (2015) noted, this animation combines traditional artistic spirit and modern animation craft, setting a valuable example for reusing Chinese cultural resources in contemporary visual storytelling.

3. Long-term Influence of Zhang's Aesthetics on Chinese Animation

Zhang's complete visual system exerted far-reaching influence on domestic animation. From the 1960s to the 1980s, Chinese animations formed a unique national style. Classic works including Havoc in Heaven, Nezha Conquers the Dragon King, and The Legend of the Sealed Book all recreated traditional cultural images with their own characteristics.

This creative heritage still exists in today's digital animation field. Modern hits such as Monkey King: Hero Is Back and Ne Zha adopt different production technologies and story frameworks, but they still follow Zhang's core logic: reinterpreting ancient cultural symbols to resonate with modern audiences.

The most lasting value of Zhang's creation lies in his replicable design method. He proved that traditional culture is not outdated relics, but rich visual resources waiting for new interpretations. This point is vital for current IP development. To achieve long-term success, cultural IPs need recognizable visual marks as well as continuously evolving core cultural meanings.

4. The Zhang Guangyu Creative Model: Practical Ways to Transform Traditional Cultural IP

Digital technology and cultural creative industries are booming, yet transforming traditional cultural resources into animation, film, and game IPs still faces many challenges. Lots of IP projects fail for two common reasons: either they simply copy old cultural symbols without innovation, or they over-modernize designs and lose unique Chinese cultural features.

Zhang's creation of Havoc in Heaven provides a perfect solution to avoid these two extremes. He redeveloped traditional cultural materials and struck a balance between cultural inheritance and visual innovation. Summarized from his practical design process, this paper proposes a three-stage "Zhang Guangyu Creative Model": anchoring core cultural values, translating traditional art elements, and building a cohesive visual ecosystem.

4.1 Value Anchoring: Locate the Core Spiritual Connotation of IP

The first step of IP development is to confirm its core cultural values. Creators should not only focus on superficial appearance adjustments.

Journey to the West has remained popular for thousands of years not only because of Sun Wukong's attractive image, but also because of the spirits he represents: resistance against unreasonable authority, pursuit of freedom, and courage to overcome difficulties.

When Zhang designed the Monkey King, he not only depicted monkey-like physical features; he highlighted the character's brave, independent, and rebellious personality. This is why the figure can transcend eras and become a

timeless cultural symbol.

IP designers must figure out the core values carried by each character. Without value anchoring, IP development only stays at superficial visual consumption. Simply copying the golden cudgel or monkey face without capturing inner spirit can never create sustainable IPs. The core competitiveness of an IP comes from its cultural connotation, not stacked symbolic patterns.

4.2 Element Translation: Convert Traditional Resources into Modern Visual Language

Traditional culture contains multi-layered content: visual forms, classic stories, symbolic images, and ancient aesthetic rules. When developing modern IPs, designers need to select and reshape these elements instead of direct mechanical reproduction.

Zhang's design process sets a clear example. He extracted visual features from opera masks, folk handicrafts, and ancient myths, then converted them into animation-appropriate forms. He also matched classic Chinese color theories with modern animation's visual presentation demands.

This is creative transformation rather than simplifying traditional culture. Modern IP designers need to distinguish elements that carry cultural identity and those needing re-interpretation for contemporary viewers.

Only through effective translation of traditional visual elements can ancient cultural resources gain new vitality in today's market.

5. Conclusion

Zhang Guangyu's character design work for *The Monkey King: Havoc in Heaven* fully proves that integrated innovation is the key to creating impressive animated figures. He neither copied ancient art rigidly nor followed Western art trends blindly. Instead, he blended Chinese folk art, Peking Opera aesthetics, and modern Western design skills into an original visual system, which explains why Sun Wukong's design still looks fresh and attractive nowadays.

This paper sorts out the easy-to-operate three-step Zhang Guangyu Creative Model: dig out core cultural values from tradition, convert classic art elements into modern visuals, and build an integrated visual system. This model is not only a summary of art history, but also a practical tool for animation creators. If contemporary animators want to produce authentic and competitive cultural IPs, they can learn from Zhang's design logic. His works tell us that the best way to keep traditional culture alive is to update it with modern visual design language.

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