

Section: Art History and Literature

SIMPLIFIED SYMBOLS OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS IN THE COMIC CHARACTERS VISUAL DESIGN

Zhao Xiuhua

doctoral student

Department of Graphic Design

Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design, Kyiv, Ukraine

Shaanxi University of Science & Technology, Xi'an, China

Yezhova Olga

Doctor of pedagogical sciences, Professor

Department of Graphic Design

Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design, Kyiv, Ukraine;

Abstract. This study explores how simplified symbols of mythological characters, exemplified by Nezha, impact the visual recognition of comic characters. Through case analysis, it reveals how symbol simplification, while retaining core cultural meanings, enhances character recognition and suits modern comic aesthetics. Drawing on semiotics and visual communication theory, principles and methods like extracting core elements, integrating modern aesthetics, and innovative design are extracted, offering practical guidance for modernizing traditional cultural IP.

Keywords: graphic design, Chinese culture, mythological characters, visual recognition, Nezha, comic character design.

Introduction. As a popular art form, the visual recognition of comic characters is crucial to the success of the work. As an important part of Chinese traditional culture, the traditional symbols of mythological characters often have complex forms and rich cultural connotations. Liu et al. (2018) examine how traditional Chinese cultural elements such as patterns, calligraphy, and color schemes are visually integrated into contemporary logo design, highlighting how simplified traditional symbols can sustain cultural identity while adapting to modern visual communication—a concept that directly informs this study's focus on simplified mythological motifs in comic character design.

Yezhova, Zhao, and Pashkevich (2025) provide a systematic review of online museum design, identifying how visual design strategies support the preservation and reinterpretation of cultural heritage through digital platforms; their emphasis on the role of visual elements in transmitting cultural narratives underlines the relevance of clear, simplified symbols when mythological characters are adapted for modern, accessible formats like comics.

However, in the context of modern comics, these traditional symbols need to be simplified to adapt to new aesthetic needs. As an important character in Chinese mythology, Nezha has a rich symbol system, such as the HunTian Ling, the lotus body, and the QianKun Circle. The simplified processing in comics is of typical significance.

Aim and objectives of the study. This study aims to explore the impact of the simplification of mythological characters' symbols on the visual recognition of comic characters. Taking Nezha as an example, this study conducts an in-depth analysis to explain how the simplification of symbols can enhance the visual recognition of characters while retaining the core cultural connotation of the characters and meet the aesthetic needs of modern comics.

The results of the study and their discussion. As Julia, Caleb, and Diyi (2023) argued, image analysis techniques can help understand the meaning of mythological character symbols, compensating for the shortcomings of existing systems in understanding cultural symbols and customs, and providing a theoretical foundation for symbol simplification. Based on semiotics and visual communication theory, this study explores the principles and methods of symbol simplification of mythological characters. Semiotics focuses on the meaning and transmission method of symbols, while visual communication theory emphasizes the role of visual elements in information dissemination. Wenxuan and Wenhua(2023) showed that simplifying mythical elements from the Shan Hai Jing can create visually impactful designs that resonate culturally, bridging tradition and modernity. In comic character design, symbol simplification is achieved by refining core elements combining modern aesthetics and innovative design, aiming to enhance the visual impact of the characters, improve communication efficiency, and retain their cultural connotations.

In order to deeply analyze the specific practice of symbol simplification, this study adopts a case analysis method. Taking Nezha as an example, this study collects and compares Nezha comic images of different times and styles, including traditional comic strips, animation-style comics, and modern cartoon-style comics. As can be seen from Figure 1, the character design of Nezha in 1955 is realistic, showing the solemnity of traditional mythology with rich colors and delicate lines; as can be seen from Figure 2, the character design of Nezha in 1980 is a simple animation style, realizing the initial integration of tradition and modernity through smooth lines and saturated colors; as can be seen from Figure 3, the 2016 "Non-Humans" is a modern cartoon style, with simpler lines, softer colors, and cuter expressions. Through comparative analysis, it is found that the primary task of symbol simplification is to identify and retain the core cultural symbols of the character. Taking Nezha as an example, from the meticulous and colorful style of "Nezha Conquers the Dragon King" in 1955 to the animation style of "Nezha Conquers the Dragon King" in 1980, and then to the modern cartoon style of "Nezha Conquers the Dragon King" in 2016, Nezha's iconic elements such as double buns, mixed sky silk, and Qiankun circle have always been retained. At the same time, traditional colors such as red, yellow, blue, and black have been reconstructed and simplified to enhance the visual impact of the character.

Akai, Yamashita, and Matsushita (2015) emphasized the significance of preserving original culture or expression during the modernization process, while innovating to meet modern needs or aesthetics. Traditional symbols are further transformed into modern design language, such as the Hun Tian Ling being transformed into a red scarf, the QianKun Circle being simplified into earrings, and the Feng Huo Lun being transformed into a skateboard or a light wheel. This not only preserves the cultural connotation, but also meets the modern aesthetic needs. In order to meet the aesthetic needs of modern audiences, Nezha's image design incorporates modern popular elements, such as fashionable school uniforms, vivid expressions, and lifelike movements. At the same time, traditional colors are reinterpreted into modern design languages such as red bows or golden circular logos. This innovative design not only preserves the cultural connotation of traditional symbols, but also combines them with modern design language through geometric and functional translation, which not only improves the visual recognition and communication efficiency of the character, but also enhances its modern sense and vitality, providing a practical example for the modernization of traditional cultural IP.



Figure 1. "Nezha Conquers the Dragon King" in 1955

(Source: <https://www.163.com/dy/article/EOLKPBT005219BJF.html>)



Figure 2. "Nezha Conquers the Dragon King" in 1980

(Source: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1826205253246833011&wfr=spider&for=pc>)



Figure 3. "Non-Humans" in 2016

(Source: <https://www.163.com/dy/article/EDPITG6Q0517D6NC.html>)

Conclusions: Through the analysis of the symbol simplification practice of Nezha in comics, this study extracts a design methodology suitable for the modernization of traditional cultural IP from the two dimensions of color and elements. In terms of color design, the traditional image of Nezha is often dominated by bright colors such as red, yellow, blue, and black, symbolizing divinity and vitality. In modern comics, the visual impact of the character is enhanced through the extraction and reconstruction of colors. In terms of element design, traditional symbols such as double buns, mixed sky silk, and Qiankun circle are retained as core elements, and through geometric and functional translation, they are more in line with modern aesthetics and media characteristics. For example, the wind and fire wheels are simplified to skateboards or light wheels, and the Qiankun circle is designed as a circular logo on clothing, which not only retains the cultural connotation of the symbol, but also improves visual recognition. These

methods not only enhance the visual recognition of characters, but also provide practical guidance for the modernization of traditional cultural IP. Their application in more characters and media can be further explored in the future.

References

1. Akai, Y., Yamashita, R., & Matsushita, M. (2015). Giving emotions to characters using comic symbols. Proceedings of the 12th International Conference on Advances in Computer Entertainment Technology, 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2832932.2832979>
2. Julia, K., Caleb, Z., & Diyi, Y. (2023) Impressions: Visual Semiotics and Aesthetic Impact Understanding., Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing, Proceedings of the 2023 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing: 12273–12291. <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2023.emnlp-main.755>
3. Liu, Jiangxin, Krotova, T., Yezhova, O., & Pashkevich, K. (2018). Traditional elements of Chinese culture in logo design. International Circular of Graphic Education and Research, 11, 66-75. https://www.internationalcircle.net/international_circle/circular/issues/18_02/ICJ_11_2018_07
4. Wenxuan, Y., & Wenhua, S. (2023) Research on Visual Design Based on Chinese Mythological Elements, Journal of Innovation and Development, 3.3: 22-28. <https://doi.org/10.54097/jid.v3i3.9787>
5. Yezhova, O., Zhao, J., & Pashkevich, K. (2025). Exploring design aspects of online museums: from cultural heritage to art, science and fashion. Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture (PDTC), 54 (1), 35-50. <https://doi.org/10.1515/pdte-2024-0044>.