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Article

A Study on Construction Paths of Cultural Identity for National-Style Animation IPsUnder the Vision of Generation-Z Aesthetics

Yiwen Ai[1], Chunhong Lu[1,*], Ruowen Yang[1], Yifei Ge[1], Yuying Pan[1] and Yiyao Cheng[1]

[1] Dalian University of Engineering, Dalian, China
* Correspondence: Chunhong Lu, Dalian University of Engineering, Dalian, China

Abstract: D digital technology has fueled the sustained development of Chinese-style animation. As the primary audience for Chinese-style content and trendy cultural-and-creative products, Generation Z has formed a unique aesthetic system characterized by a preference for lightweight visuals, complete character narratives and participatory co-creation. Nevertheless, most current Chinese-style animation productions suffer from the excessive stacking of cultural symbols and polarization of visual styles. Retro-styled and heavy-weighted character designs are out of touch with youth aesthetics, while blind imitation of foreign designs weakens the core of local culture. Furthermore, the lack of mechanisms for user-led co-creation and long-term derivative operation makes it difficult for Generation Z to develop a stable sense of cultural belonging. Based on a complete practical project covering character image design inspired by traditional Tang-dynasty aesthetics, trendy cultural-and-creative product development, iteration through public surveys and AIGC-assisted creation, this paper explores effective paths for Chinese-style animation IPs to construct youth cultural identity from the aesthetic perspective of Generation Z.

Keywords: Chinese-style animation; IP design; cultural identity; construction path; Generation Z

1. Definition and Application Scenarios of Chinese-style Animation IP Design

1.1. Principles and Basic Requirements of Chinese-Style Animation IP Design

The core element of the Chinese-style animation IP design studied in this project lies in abandoning simple retro reproduction and carrying out contemporary reconstruction. Instead of copying existing images from ancient murals, cultural relics and painted patterns, IP development extracts excellent traditional visual designs and national cultural symbols from relevant records of cultural relics and images, followed by deconstruction, simplification and reorganization. These elements are redesigned by integrating aesthetic elements of contemporary Generation Z and features of modern culture. In the practical design process, the project follows two major principles. The first is the streamlined optimization of complex elements in ancient costumes and traditional patterns to adapt them to animation creation and derivative IP-related product design. The second is the principle of emotional empathy transformation, which introduces a public co-creation mechanism. Elements familiar to or resonating with the public are incorporated into the design to break the barrier between a single IP character and the current era and realize the modern expression of traditional culture.

1.2. Application Scenarios and Cases of Chinese-Style Animation IPs

Chinese-style animation IPs should support diversified application scenarios and serve multiple functions including cultural-tourism promotion, activity-related feedback and city-image building. Design entry points for different regions or scenarios need to be determined through field investigation. Different scenarios impose differentiated design constraints on the modeling complexity, visual recognizability and extension adaptability

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of IP images. Taking the IP design of "Dinosaur Sister" for Changzhou Jiangsu Super League studied in this project as an example, the image of "Dinosaur Sister" originates from the public-participated Jiangsu Super League. Changzhou is well-known nationwide for China Dinosaur Park; therefore, the "Dinosaur Sister" character can act as a carrier for cultural-tourism promotion of Changzhou's city image.

1.3. Empowerment of Character Design Optimization with AIGC Assistance

AIGC-aided design can efficiently complete complex design tasks that are difficult for manual work at the present stage. Given the imperfect development of relevant technologies, line drawings, pattern design and basic coloring in this project are finished manually by the research team. Nevertheless, AIGC can rapidly retrieve complete Chinese-style colour libraries such as traditional five-element colours, Dunhuang mineral pigments and ink-wash greyscales. It can generate batches of colour schemes suitable for animation, cultural-and-creative products, cultural-tourism and other scenarios, and automatically unify colour values and calibrate colours across different materials, greatly improving the iteration efficiency of multi-version IP colour schemes [1]. Since AIGC technology cannot interpret the cultural connotations behind colours, manual guidance on initial colour application is required.

2. Design Concept of the Animated-ip Character "Dinosaur Sister"

2.1. Visual Dimension: Lightweight Trans-Interpretation Design of Traditional Costume Symbols

The character wears a modified Tang-style chest-high skirt paired with a front-opening wide-sleeve coat, which draws on the free-flowing aesthetic characteristics of women's costumes in the prosperous Tang Dynasty.

Its dominant colour palette consists of peach pink, moon-white and bright yellow, coordinating with the overall tone of the character. The soft pink hue covering the figure not only shapes her gentle and graceful temperament, but also strengthens the visual memorability of the design. Cloud patterns are decorated on the wide sleeves and skirt hem, delivering antique charm and spiritual vitality while symbolizing good fortune, which matches her ethereal image. The whole image adopts a pink-white-gold colour scheme. Pink reflects the character's personality and takes inspiration from cherry blossoms and plum blossoms in full bloom in Changzhou. White is derived from the waves of the Grand Canal and the bright moon, creating a tranquil and serene atmosphere. Gold is used to interpret the dragon element. Both gold and the dragon carry sacred connotations, symbolizing light and vitality and inheriting the everlasting spiritual essence of Dragon City (Changzhou).

At the final colouring stage, the research team adopted AIGC-assisted colour design to balance the overall colour matching of the character and ensure colouring accuracy and visual harmony (As shown in Figure 1).



Figure 1. Three-view Orthographic Drawing of the "Dinosaur Sister" IP

2.2. Content Dimension: Narrative-Oriented Character-Building for the Foundation of Emotional Identity

"Dinosaur Sister" originates from the self-deprecating internet meme "Thirteenth Sister" for Changzhou among netizens of the Jiangsu Super League. China Dinosaur Park of Changzhou quickly transformed this viral meme into a complete IP symbol. Instead of simply producing a two-dimensional visual image, the project constructed a multi-layered character profile through four-dimensional narratives: event-based narrative, personality-based narrative, scenario-based narrative and co-creation-oriented narrative. It thus realizes the transformation from an internet meme to a personalized IP.

2.3. Communication Dimension: Public Co-Creation Mechanism for Deepened Identity Recognition

In the current digital age, IP products are developing at a rapid pace, which inevitably triggers problems including IP homogenization, insufficient cultural connotation and aesthetic fatigue. To upgrade IP design and strengthen its market competitiveness, it is necessary to address core pain points such as insufficient creative resources, rigid cultural integration and narrow audience coverage.

From the aesthetic perspective, as a large number of IP characters enter the public view, designers need to break away from fixed stereotypes and pursue active innovation. It is vital to improve the aesthetic quality and recognizability of characters, leave deep impressions on audiences and enhance memorability. Blind stacking of diverse design elements should be avoided so as to create soft, eye-catching character images.

From the perspective of creation and design, the user co-creation model can be adopted and popularized to involve audiences in the IP character design process. This strategy can enhance the character's affinity and audiences' sense of belonging, diversify character images and enrich multi-dimensional expressions, so as to meet the aesthetic demands of different groups and expand the age range of target audiences. This model can effectively avoid drawbacks brought by one-way designer output, such as stereotyped images, fixed art styles and single-group audiences. In terms of competitiveness, the user co-creation model can expand the communication scope and influence of the IP and fundamentally lift its competitive ceiling [2].

3. Optimization Paths for Ip-image Design and Future Industrial Development Directions

3.1. Adhere to the Creative Transformation of Traditional Culture and Balance Authenticity and Youth-orientation

Traditional culture constitutes the core of developing Chinese-style animation IPs. Statistical data show that a total of 1477 domestic animated-feature-film projects were filed for record-approval from 2015 to 2025. Among animation IPs adapted from traditional culture, mythological figures stand out prominently. Well-known characters such as Sun Wukong, Nezha, the White Snake and Yang Jian (Erlang God) have become mainstream adaptation materials in the industry. Nevertheless, this phenomenon also reflects severe homogenization among currently adapted animation IPs. While respecting and inheriting traditional culture, creators should put forward distinctive and innovative perspectives during adaptation. It is inadvisable to arbitrarily distort the cultural core of traditional works merely to chase online popularity, nor should creators mechanically copy the adaptation logic of other hit animations, which would lead to a loss of recognizability .

In terms of inheriting cultural heritage, Chang-An showcases the prosperity of the High-Tang Dynasty, narrates the life stories of poets including Li Bai and Du Fu, and enables audiences to connect literary figures with their historical deeds. The Legend of the Condor inherits Chinese stories based on the folk tale of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl. It has been screened in 40 countries and regions worldwide and won the Gold Award for Best Animated Feature Film at the 21st China Animation Golden Dragon Awards.

In terms of youth-oriented innovation, Ne Zha: The Devil's Birth has achieved breakthrough success and topped the global box-office ranking. Technically, the film developed the world's first dynamic ink-wash rendering engine, realizing the real-time ink-spreading effect of brush strokes on rice paper within 3D animation for the first time [3]. Meanwhile, the self-developed Qian-kun Fluid Engine integrates traditional ink-wash art with fluid mechanics. AI-assisted technology was adopted to rapidly generate textures for mythical beasts recorded in The Classic of Mountains and Seas, achieving deep integration between technology and art [4]. Additional special-effect technologies, including 3D modeling, dynamic aesthetic algorithms and intelligent ocean-wave algorithms, were also applied. In terms of content, the work breaks audiences' stereotyped impressions of traditional mythological IPs. The creative team reshaped Nezha's image from costume design to inner spiritual connotation. The narrative abandons the traditional dualism of good and evil, reveals symbiotic relationships between characters and sublimates themes through multi-layered storytelling. Innovations are realized from three narrative modes: symbolic narrative, story-driven narrative and interactive narrative [5].

3.2. Deeply Engage Generation Z through Participatory Culture

China's pan-two-dimensional user base had reached 526 million by 2025. According to China Two-dimensional Economy Industry Report (2024-2029), 95% of Generation Z in China are pan-ACGN users with high consumption willingness, making Generation Z the main consumer force in the pan-two-dimensional market. Content production can drive IPs to break through niche circles and invite users to participate in co-creation. Audiences thus shift from one-way-receiving "onlookers" to two-way-interactive "participants". Such identity transformation further stimulates secondary creation, community interaction and derivative-product consumption.

As demonstrated by the successful case of One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes, a complete online-offline ecosystem linking official operators and fans has been established in recent years. Multiple large-scale exhibitions and pop-up stores have been held, such as the themed pop-up event "One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes & Mr. Men Little Miss" and the Hong-Kong stop of the national tour project "Mountain-Sea Charm". Cross-border co-branding activities cover catering, games and daily necessities, including cooperative products with Shuyi Herbal Tea, Xiongmao Lai Hotpot and Canban Oral Care. Online fan-interaction campaigns include official topic-check-in activities and offline bookstore-check-in events. Fans have also spontaneously organized cosplay activities, online drawing relay events and offline material-distribution campaigns.

Animation IPs can achieve commercial monetization through "goods economy" and develop into long-term brands. Official data from Taobao indicated that derivative-product turnover of the animated film Ne Zha exceeded 300 million yuan within one month after release, and POP MART pre-sales of co-branded derivatives surpassed 100 000 units. Long-term IP construction requires continuous output of new content, cross-brand cooperation, offline exhibitions and serialized content planning. One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes has launched Chinese-aesthetic-themed derivatives including the "Fairy Mountain and Jade Pavilion" series and the Dunhuang Academy co-branded collection. Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf has grown into a classic long-lived IP through inheritance of early classic images and subsequent innovative transformation.

3.3. Establish a Multi-Dimensional IP Evaluation System

From the perspective of long-term industrial development, constructing a multi-dimensional and three-dimensional IP evaluation system serves as the core path toward standardized and sustainable industrial development. It can overcome the one-sided defect of the "traffic-only evaluation standard" and adapt to the value characteristics of co-creation-oriented IPs [6].

Drawing on the research and evaluation process of the "Dinosaur Sister" project, the evaluation system is divided into eight dimensions with equal total weight values. The weight distribution of each dimension is shown below: (As shown in Figure 2).

"Dinosaur Sister" Multi-dimensional Evaluation System Weight Table

Audience Age	X1 Aesthetic Recognizability	X2 Self-consistency of Modeling Logic	X3 Adaptability of Visual Symbols for Secondary Creation	X4 Diversified Image Design Free from Stereotypes	X5 Consistency Between Illustration and 3D Model	X6 Rigor of Chinese-Style Cultural Interpretation	X7 Age-echelon Design for Characters	X8 Atmosphere of Color and Light-Shadow	Total Weight Sum
15	6	5	8	6	7	6	5	9	60
16	6.29	5.29	8.14	6.29	7.14	6.14	5.14	8.86	60
17	6.57	5.57	8.29	6.57	7.29	6.29	5.29	8.71	60
18	6.86	5.86	8.43	6.86	7.43	6.43	5.43	8.57	60
19	7.14	6.14	8.57	7.14	7.57	6.57	5.57	8.43	60
20	7.43	6.43	8.71	7.43	7.71	6.71	5.71	8.29	60
21	7.71	6.71	8.86	7.71	7.86	6.86	5.86	8.14	60
22	8	7	9	8	8	7	6	8	60
23	8.13	7.25	8.75	8.13	8	7.25	6.25	7.88	60
24	8.25	7.5	8.5	8.25	8	7.5	6.5	7.75	60
25	8.38	7.75	8.25	8.38	8	7.75	6.75	7.63	60
26	8.5	8	8	8.5	8	8	7	7.5	60
27	8.63	8.25	7.75	8.63	8	8.25	7.25	7.38	60
28	8.75	8.5	7.5	8.75	8	8.5	7.5	7.25	60
29	8.88	8.75	7.25	8.88	8	8.75	7.75	7.13	60
30	9	9	7	9	8	9	8	7	60

Figure 2. Weight Table of the Multi-dimensional Evaluation System for "Dinosaur Sister"

The target respondents of this project are young people from Generation Z, with an effective surveyed age range from 15 to 30 years old. Since most respondents under 22 years old are still in education and their evaluation criteria for IPs may change during their studies, the samples are split into two independent age groups: 15-22 years old and 23-30 years old. Fixed weight values are set for the age nodes of 15, 22 and 30. The calculation formula for age-related dimension weights in the weight table is listed as follows:

$$w_i(\text{Age}) = \begin{cases} w_{i,15} + \frac{w_{i,22} - w_{i,15}}{22-15}(\text{Age} - 15), & 15 \le \text{Age} \le 22 \\ w_{i,22} + \frac{w_{i,30} - w_{i,22}}{30-22}(\text{Age} - 22), & 22 < \text{Age} \le 30 \end{cases}$$

This evaluation model adopts a dynamic-weighted arithmetic-average framework. Audiences of different ages are assigned independent weight combinations, which realizes automatic shifts in aesthetic evaluation priorities with age growth and accommodates internal aesthetic diversities within Generation Z. The comprehensive evaluation score is calculated via the dynamic weighted-average model. In this model, X_i stands for the single-indicator score of the eight dimensions above, while $w_i(\text{Age})$ represents dynamic weights changing with respondents' age.

$$\text{Score}(\text{Age}) = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{8} w_i(\text{Age}) \cdot X_i}{\sum_{i=1}^{8} w_i(\text{Age})}, \quad \text{Score} \in [0,10]$$

Given that this model is only tested in the "Dinosaur Sister" project, researchers shall recalculate evaluation dimensions and corresponding weights based on project realities and online survey data when evaluating other IPs. Direct replication of this model is not allowed.

4. Research Analysis and Summary

From the aesthetic perspective of Generation Z, this paper proposes optimization schemes centered on the reconstruction of cultural connotations to address the prevalent problems of current Chinese-style animation IPs, including insufficient expression of cultural core, lack of symbolic innovation, and inadequate operational co-creation mechanisms.

In terms of core design concepts, this study emphasizes contemporary reconstruction. Traditional elements such as ancient murals and traditional patterns are deconstructed and restructured to fit the aesthetic preferences of Generation Z and adapt to diversified application scenarios including cultural and tourism promotion and urban image shaping.

Taking the "Dinosaur Sister" IP in this project as a typical case, the original image derives from the public-participated Jiangsu Super League and is innovatively combined with the regional characteristics of Changzhou China Dinosaur Park. In terms of technical empowerment, AIGC technology is adopted to realize basic color calibration. Nevertheless, since artificial intelligence cannot interpret the profound cultural implications behind color matching, manual color guidance and artistic conception control are still indispensable in practical design operations.

The entire IP design process organically integrates visual presentation and contextual narration. On the one hand, the optimized Tang-style costumes adopt a color palette of peach pink, moon white and bright yellow, incorporating typical local elements of Changzhou such as cherry blossoms, canal scenery and dragon culture, endowing the character with both serene temperament and vivid vitality. On the other hand, through a

four-layer narrative logic covering event narration, personality narration, scenario narration and co-creation narration, the grassroots internet meme is successfully transformed into a complete and personalized IP image. The public co-creation mechanism further strengthens users' emotional identity and sense of participation, and enhances the affinity and sustainable vitality of the IP character.

In terms of the optimization and future development of Chinese-style animation IP design, the core development path lies in adhering to the creative transformation of traditional culture, deeply bonding with participatory culture, and relying on online and offline public co-creation as well as serialized operational strategies. Ultimately, it aims to build a complete IP ecosystem with long-term vitality and sustainable commercial value.

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