

Exploring Cross-Cultural Integration Paths of Traditional Art and Modern Character Design

Zhengyang Yu, Xinghan Tian *

School of Digital Technology and Innovation Design, Jiangnan University, Wuxi 214401, China

* Corresponding Author Email: tiankonglan@jiangnan.edu.cn

Abstract. In the context of the globalization of the digital cultural and creative industry, modern character design, as a core carrier of cultural IP, has become an important path for the cross-cultural dissemination of traditional art. Current academic and industry practices largely remain at the level of superficial appropriation of traditional art elements, generally suffering from problems such as symbolic accumulation, loss of cultural core voice, lack of cross-cultural empathy, and imbalance of cultural subjectivity. This paper, based on cultural translation theory and the encoding and decoding theory of cross-cultural communication, breaks through the traditional single research dimension of "element application" and constructs a three-tiered progressive cross-cultural integration path of "symbolic translation - narrative translation - value translation." Through the construction of a visual model and case verification, a feasible and replicable integration system is formed, providing new ideas for the innovative development of modern character design and a practical path for the global dissemination of traditional art and equal dialogue between different civilizations.

Keywords: Traditional art, modern character design, cross-cultural integration, cultural translation, IP dissemination.

1. Introduction

With the rapid iteration of digital technology, digital cultural and creative industries such as games, animation, film and television, and virtual idols have become the core battleground for global cultural dissemination. Modern character design, as the core personalized carrier of cultural and creative IP, is a crucial bridge connecting cultural connotations and audience emotions. Traditional Chinese art offers more than a repertoire of motifs: its formal vocabulary, storytelling conventions, and aesthetic principles can all inform the design of contemporary characters. The international reception of Ne Zha, Genshin Impact, and Black Myth: Wukong shows how these resources can travel when they are woven into a coherent character world. Yet many projects still treat tradition as surface decoration. Some reproduce recognizable motifs without conveying the ideas that give them meaning, so domestic viewers find the result culturally thin and international viewers lack the context needed to interpret it. Others reshape the material to fit assumed Western tastes and, in doing so, weaken the cultural position from which the work speaks. The problem, therefore, is not whether a traditional reference is visible, but whether audiences can follow the relationship among image, story, and value. Neither approach produces genuine intercultural exchange [1]. Responding to these problems, the present study develops a structured route for bringing traditional art into modern character design. Its purpose is to provide a usable basis for contemporary reinterpretation and for communicating traditional art across cultural settings.

2. Definition of Core Concepts and Review of Current Research Status

2.1. Definition of Core Concepts

For this study, "traditional art" denotes the parts of a broader cultural system that can directly shape a character. They are organized into three working groups. The first contains visual forms, including painting, sculpture, dress, ornament, calligraphy, and related systems of signs. The second consists of narrative material, including myths, legends, opera plots, folk stories, and historical personages. The third concerns aesthetic judgment and value: ideas such as "vibrant spirit" and the "interplay of

reality and illusion," together with "harmony between humanity and nature," "harmony in diversity," and patriotism. Treating these groups separately is an analytical convenience; in practice, a convincing character may draw on all three at once.

Modern character design means the personalized image design for cultural and creative products like games, animation, film and television, and virtual idols in the digital age [2], whose core is not just creating images but building up a full personality system including character settings, narratives background, and core values – a composite carrier of cultural symbols and emotional connections.

The cross-cultural integration does not involve just a patchwork of various cultures or one-way export of a single culture; rather, it involves a two-way communication process with an equal dialogue among different civilizations that can be accomplished by cultural translation but uphold the subjectivity of local culture, realize shared meaning and emotional empathy across different cultural context, and uphold the core values of local culture [3].

2.2. Review of Current Research Status

Domestic academic research about applying traditional art into modern character design primarily concentrates on analyzing applications of individual traditional elements (the application of Dunhuang murals, opera masks, and traditional costumes in animation and game character design) [4], with limited research on the cultural core and cross-cultural communication; some researchers began paying attention to character design from the perspective of cross-cultural communication, which was mostly based on single cases without forming a complete and practical cross-cultural integration pathway system.

Outside China, scholarship tends to approach this topic from a reception angle by examining how Western audiences react to Eastern-coded characters in films like Kung Fu Panda, or Mulan. These studies are largely rooted in the perspective of Western audiences with an "othering" imagination of the core of traditional Chinese art; they fail to delve into the core logic of upholding the subjectivity of traditional Chinese art and its cross-cultural translation.

In general, current research has problems such as "emphasizing symbols, neglecting narrative, and lacking value" that fail to break out of the limitation of applying elements on a superficial level or solving the problem of balancing local cultural subjectivity with cross-cultural communication [5], which is exactly our core innovation.

3. The Real Dilemma of Cross-Cultural Integration of Traditional Art and Modern Character Design

3.1. Symbolic Level: Surface-Level Elements Piling Up, Cultural Core Lost Voice

Most current integration practices only remain at the level of direct appropriation and splicing of traditional visual elements, directly attaching traditional patterns, clothing styles, and color systems to modern characters, without understanding the cultural connotations and aesthetic logic behind these elements [6]. For example, some designs arbitrarily use the Taotie motif from Shang and Zhou bronzes on character costumes, ignoring the Taotie motif's sacrificial connotations and symbolism of power as a ritual object decoration, ultimately resulting in a complete disconnect between the element and the character's personality. Such "labeling" produces two different failures of interpretation. A domestic viewer may identify the borrowed motif yet sense that it has little relation to the character, whereas an overseas viewer encounters an unfamiliar sign with no narrative or cultural cues for reading it. In both cases, recognition stops at the surface: the design neither communicates the motif's cultural force nor helps the audience connect it to the character. The result is a pronounced cultural discount.

3.2. Narrative Level: When Local Stories Do Not Travel Across Cultures

A character becomes memorable through what happens to it, yet many adaptations keep their narrative logic sealed within the original cultural setting. They repeat myths or historical episodes without first identifying an emotional question that another audience can enter [7]. A designer may, for instance, reproduce the full ethical framework of a mythological figure while leaving unarticulated the experiences of growing up, protecting others, or confronting injustice that make the figure legible beyond that framework. Viewers unfamiliar with the source then face a chain of names, obligations, and moral assumptions they cannot readily decode. Emotional attachment is difficult under those conditions. The work may still satisfy an audience already versed in the tradition, but it functions as an inward-looking retelling rather than as a cross-cultural narrative.

3.3. Value Level: Imbalance of Cultural Subjectivity and Prominent Binary Thinking

Current integration practices commonly exhibit a binary problem of imbalanced cultural subjectivity: one is the tendency towards "complete Westernization" to blindly cater to the Western market [8]. To lower the threshold for cross-cultural communication, the appearance, narrative, and core values of traditional characters are completely modified according to Western aesthetics and the narrative logic of individual heroism, ultimately losing the cultural roots of traditional art and becoming "Eastern Others" from a Western perspective. The other is an extreme tendency towards localism, completely ignoring the cognitive habits and acceptance logic of cross-cultural audiences, creating works in isolation, ultimately preventing the works from going abroad and hindering the global dissemination of traditional art. Neither of these approaches has struck a balance between "locality" and "globality," failing to achieve true cross-cultural integration.

4. Innovative Path Construction for Cross-Cultural Integration of Traditional Art and Modern Character Design

4.1. First-Level Path: Cross-Contextual Translation of Symbols – From "Element Appropriation" to "Aesthetic Paradigm Reconstruction"

Symbols are the visual foundation of character design. The first step in cross-cultural integration is to break free from the misconception of "direct element appropriation" and achieve cross-contextual translation of traditional art symbols [9]. The needed move is not another copy of the element but a reconstruction of the aesthetic principle that organizes it. Designers first ask what cultural associations and formal logic the symbol carries. They then recast those qualities through contemporary form-making and adjust them for a different cultural context. The intended outcome is a visual language that remains identifiable as traditional without requiring an international audience to possess specialist knowledge. Figure 1 translates this sequence into an operational model: it traces the symbol from cultural reading, through reconstruction and contextual adjustment, to its use in a character design.

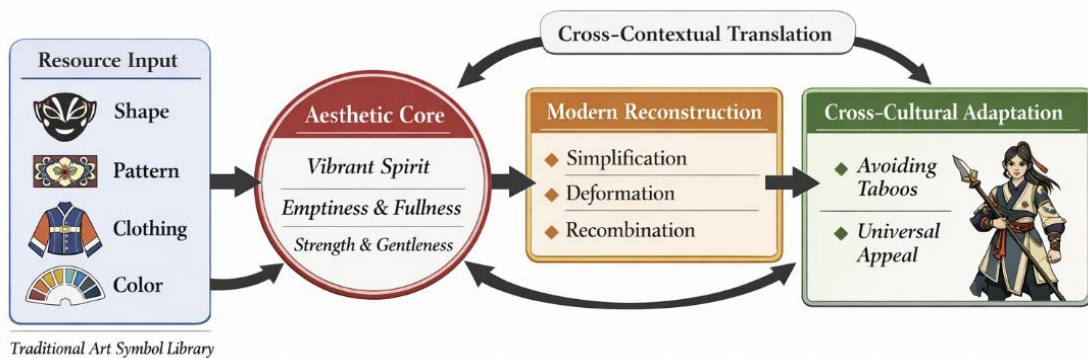


Figure 1. Design Model for the Translation of Traditional Art Symbols

Figure 1 presents translation as a cycle of design decisions rather than a one-step act of borrowing. Traditional resources (shape, pattern, dress, and colour) enter the model as source material [10]. Before any visual treatment is chosen, the designer isolates the aesthetic principle carried by a source, for example "vibrant spirit," the "interplay of emptiness and fullness," or a balance between strength and gentleness. Two related operations follow. Modern reconstruction converts that principle into a current design vocabulary by simplifying, reshaping, or recombining forms. Cross-cultural adaptation checks whether the result conflicts with cultural taboos and whether its visual cues can be read outside the original context. These operations are not independent: a formally elegant reconstruction can still fail if its meaning does not travel, while an easily read symbol can become generic if its aesthetic origin is lost. The output is therefore judged against two conditions at once: traditional recognizability and cross-cultural legibility. In this way, the model preserves the route from source to final character and makes each translation choice open to review.

The value of this process is visible in Zhongli from Genshin Impact. The character is not built by placing an isolated traditional pattern on a modern costume. References to seal-script lines, the cross-collar and right-fastening structure of Han clothing, and the cultivated ideal expressed by "gentle and refined, steadfast as jade" are coordinated across silhouette, proportion, line, clothing construction, and movement. The movement design also recalls the alternation of emptiness and fullness associated with Chinese martial arts [11]. Because these references work as a system, Chinese viewers can recognize a familiar aesthetic temperament without being handed a list of motifs. Viewers elsewhere, even without the same cultural knowledge, can read composure, restraint, and dignity from the economical visual language. The case shows what cross-contextual translation requires: the design retains the logic of its sources while making the resulting character intelligible through form and behavior.

4.2. Second Path: Opening Local Narratives Through a Shared Emotional Core

Visual symbols give a character a recognizable exterior; narrative gives that exterior consequence. Cross-cultural storytelling therefore begins by opening, rather than discarding, the local narrative. A story can remain grounded in its source culture while an emotional concern shared by different audiences provides the point of entry.

Figure 2 sets out this relationship as a dual-loop model for character narrative.



Figure 2. Interlocking Local and Cross-Cultural Loops in Character Narrative

In Figure 2, the local and cross-cultural loops do different work, but neither is subordinate. The inner loop draws on mythology, folk tales, opera, and historical allusion. It secures the character's cultural location and prevents adaptation from erasing its roots. The outer loop organizes material that can be followed across contexts: familiar narrative structures, legible development arcs, and points of emotional recognition. Between them sits an emotional hinge derived from the local story

(growth, redemption, protection, justice, or national sentiment), which viewers can understand without sharing every reference. Movement through the model is reciprocal. Local material gives the wider narrative specificity; the wider narrative gives new audiences a route into that material. The designer may then explore every choice from both directions—accountability to the source or ability to attach beyond the source culture. In place of choosing either "local" or "global," we propose exchanging them without sealing off a local retelling nor creating a universally empty plot.

We take Ne Zha as example. While drawing upon the story of the figure in *Investiture of the Gods*, it did not replicate the older filial-piety episode of "returning flesh to the mother and bones to the father." It instead extracted its universal core of growth – overcoming prejudice and self-realization—to create a character arc that appeals to a global audience: "born a demon child - encountering prejudice - self-struggle - achieving redemption". At the same time, it completely preserved the local narrative background and cultural features of characters such as Ne Zha, Taiyi Zhenren, and Li Jing so that local audiences could enjoy a contemporary rebirth of traditional narratives; at the same time, allowing overseas audiences to feel empathy towards the fate of these characters via universal themes of growth. Eventually, it achieved both box office and critical successes all over the world, which became a benchmark case for cross-cultural narrative translation.

4.3. The Third Path: Cross-Civilizational Consensus on Values – From “Cultural Export” to “Civilizational Dialogue”

Cross-cultural integration aims at equal dialogue and value consensus among different civilizations instead of exporting only one culture in one direction; the highest degree of cross-cultural integration between traditional art and modern character design lies in the cross-civilizational translation of values—extracting value concepts from traditional art resonating with global civilizations, achieving value resonance between different civilizations under the condition of preserving the subjectivity of local culture. In this paper we integrate and construct a comprehensive system for the cross-cultural integration of traditional art and modern character design (Figure 3).

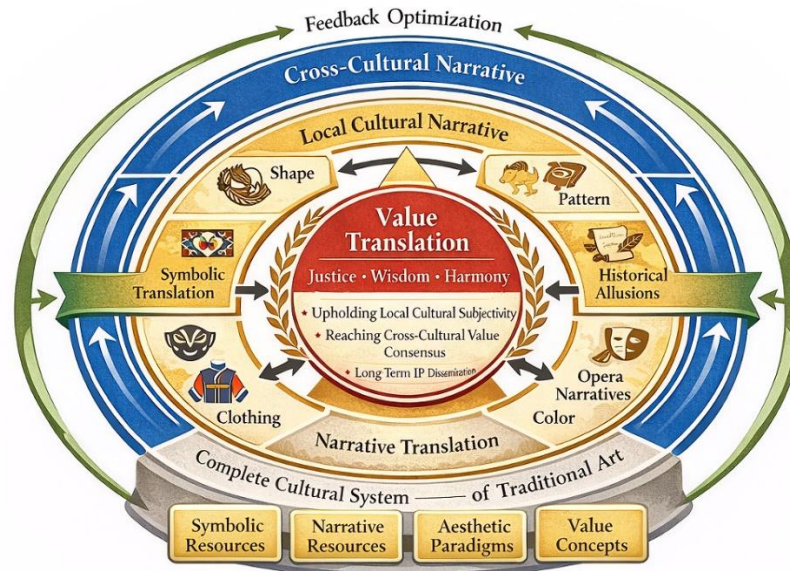


Figure 3. A Comprehensive System for Cross-Cultural Integration of Traditional Art and Modern Character Design

The model combines these two primary paths of symbolic translation and narrative translation above, augmented by a top-level design for value translation; it forms a full, closed-loop system for cross-cultural integration. It rests upon the complete cultural system of traditional art which includes four dimensions – symbolic resources, narrative resources, aesthetic paradigms, and value concepts. At the heart are three tiers of progressive translation path – "symbolic translation - narrative translation - value translation". Together, the three paths take cultural translation through visible form towards narrative and value, where all levels inform one another. The system measures itself against

three outcomes – preserving a local cultural standpoint, creating value agreement between cultures, and ensuring the durable circulation of the IP. Audience response is not considered an after-the-fact metric. Feedback from various cultural settings feeds back to the translation process and informs revisions to the route and design outputs. This feedback loop makes this framework a working method that can be applied within a project, modified over time, and adapted to other character-design contexts.

Value translation can be seen in *The Wandering Earth*. Its principal characters draw on recognizable images of Chinese soldiers and families, while the plot frames planetary rescue as a concern that audiences can grasp irrespective of nationality. The film then brings several Chinese ideas, including "harmony between humanity and nature," collectivism, and the linkage of family with nation, into conversation with the idea of a "community with a shared future." The result differs from the individual-hero template common in Western science fiction. Responsibility for survival is distributed across families, crews, and societies; solidarity rather than the exceptional individual becomes the ethical center. International audiences can therefore enter through the common danger and the imperative to cooperate, while the characters continue to carry a specifically Chinese account of collective responsibility. At this level, translation does more than make a character acceptable abroad. It invites viewers to encounter the civilizational assumptions behind the design and thus shifts the relationship from cultural export toward dialogue.

5. Practical Application Strategies of Integration Paths

To move the three-level framework from analysis into production, three industry-oriented measures are proposed:

- 1) Build a working database for transforming traditional art resources. Universities, cultural institutions, and creative enterprises can work together to catalogue symbols, stories, and value concepts; however, this information needs to be accompanied by an explanation of its cultural meaning, how it will be used, as well as potential problems with translations. Common interpretation guidelines and practical design advice would provide designers with a traceable foundation for their decisions and prevent distortions or careless misuses in cross-cultural adaptations.
- 2) Integrate audience research into character development from the beginning. Conduct systematic research on the cultural context of the target market, audience cognitive habits, and cultural taboos in the initial stage of character design so as to prevent cultural offense and cultural discounting; discover common emotional needs among different cultural contexts to give data support to refine universal core values.
- 3) Cultivate a multi-skilled design talent pool. In order for universities' design programs to implement curriculum reform, adding courses like Chinese traditional art history, intercultural communication and anthropology to traditional design courses can cultivate well-rounded talents with knowledge about the connotations of traditional art and culture, modern character design methods, possessing an intercultural communication perspective, which addresses the core pain points in integration practice from a talent perspective.

6. Conclusion and Outlook

In the context of the globalization of the digital cultural and creative industry, the intercultural integration of traditional art and modern character design is not only an important path for the contemporary transformation of traditional art but also a core lever for the global dissemination of Chinese culture. Our paper tackles the fundamental dilemmas of today's integration practice—symbolic accumulation, cultural aphasia, lack of empathy, and imbalance of subjectivity—and based upon theories of cultural translation and intercultural communication, we break through the traditional single research dimension of "element application," constructing a three-tiered progressive

intercultural integration path of "symbolic translation – narrative translation – value translation". We have constructed three visualization models that form a complete and implementable integration system. This provides us with a way out of the supposed choice between cultural particularity and international communication; treating the visual surface, narrative structure, and value position as related translation issues: traditional Chinese art is our starting point but there are shared emotional and ethical concerns which provide access for audiences elsewhere. Our goal is an exchange of dialogue not cultural substitution. Emerging media will challenge this approach under new circumstances. Metaverse environments, generative systems, virtual performers may change the ways in which characters are created, met, and revised. Future research might explore where artificial intelligence supports cultural interpretation and design iteration, and what human judgment is required to avoid flattening cultural difference via automation. These efforts would expand the technical methods and practical routes by which to communicate traditional art internationally.

References

- [1] Dong, T. (2025). An exploration of interdisciplinary educational paths in junior high school film and television textbooks—Taking the Guangdong Education Edition of "Art·Film and Television (Including Digital Media Art)" as an example. *Exploration of Educational Development*, 1(3), 21–26.
- [2] Hu, Y., & Zhu, G. Q. (2022). The contemporary dissemination of online games and excellent traditional Chinese culture. *Nanjing Social Sciences*, 7, 155–162.
- [3] Wu, Y. L., & Li, J. X. (2025). An exploration of the path to modernization of excellent traditional Chinese culture. *Journal of Northeastern University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 27(5), 126.
- [4] Mo, K. Y., & Ding, J. (2024). Reconstruction of cultural symbols: Innovative expression of traditional leather craftsmanship in modern product design. *Leather Science and Engineering*, 35(4), 109–114.
- [5] Xin, W. D. (2025). A study on the path of applying animation art to the dissemination of Chinese tea culture. *Journal of Xinyang Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 45(5), 121–127.
- [6] Wang, X. L., Liu, X. M., & Ding, Z. Q. (2025). The logic, practice and approach of cultural and economic integration in the process of Chinese modernization. *Journal of Xihua University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 44(3), 59–75.
- [7] Sun, P. Y. (2025). Digital empowerment of excellent traditional Chinese culture: "Two innovations": Expression mode, value orientation and practice path. *Journal of Jishou University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 46(6), 80.
- [8] Yuan, G. (2024). The technical path, mechanism and optimization strategy of digital empowerment of international communication of Chinese culture. *Journal of Beijing University of Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, 24(6), 96–107.
- [9] Lin, H. H. (2025). Research on the impact of film and television works on the communication effect under the background of media convergence - taking "Exploring China with Bamboo and Wooden Slips" as an example. *Journal of Journalism and Communication*, 1(1), 7–12.
- [10] Jing, J. X., Wang, H. B., & Jiang, X. L. (2024). Exploration of interdisciplinary professional integration model under the background of new liberal arts: Taking digital media art and digital publishing as examples. *Journal of Anhui University of Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, 41(5), 79–82.
- [11] Sun, J. J. (2025). New quality productivity empowers the whole value chain of art tourism resource development: Connotation, model and mechanism. *Journal of Natural Resources*, 40(4), 901–911.