

Research on the Traditional Image Shaping and Communication Strategy of Sun Wukong under the Perspective of Cross Media

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Abstract. As a significant symbol of traditional Chinese culture, the image of Sun Wukong has been continuously reconstructed across various media forms such as literature, theater, film, animation, and video games, resulting in a transmedia and multidimensional narrative identity. This paper draws upon theories of transmedia storytelling and digital communication to analyze the visual transformation and communication strategies of Sun Wukong's image in digital animation and interactive games. It identifies current challenges such as the weakening of cultural connotation, difficulties in media adaptation, and the dominance of technology over narrative. Based on representative case studies, the paper further explores the renewal pathways of the Sun Wukong image in digital environments, and summarizes practical and expressive strategies suitable for today's media ecology.

Keywords: Sun Wukong; Transmedia Narrative; Cultural Symbol; Digital Communication.

1. Introduction

In the context of the rapid development of contemporary digital culture, how traditional cultural symbols can be effectively communicated and innovatively expressed within a diverse media environment has become a key issue in the field of cultural communication. Sun Wukong is not only a classic figure in traditional literature, but has also evolved through long-term reinterpretation into a transmedia symbol with strong cultural resonance and high media adaptability. Centered on the transmedia construction of the traditional image of Sun Wukong, this study traces its evolutionary path across literature, theater, film, animation, and video games, with a particular focus on expression strategies and dissemination mechanisms in the context of digital media. The paper aims to clarify the processes through which traditional cultural symbols are reconstructed, re-encoded, and diffused across multiple platforms in the modern media landscape. Through the analysis of representative case studies, this paper identifies three major challenges—namely, the weakening of cultural connotation, media adaptation disparities, and the limitations of technologically driven expression—and on this basis proposes innovative communication pathways and integrated dissemination strategies.

2. The Evolution and Transmedia Representation of Sun Wukong

Sun Wukong, the central figure of the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, has evolved into a powerful cultural symbol since his characterization in the Ming dynasty. His image is rooted in a blend of ancient mythology, folklore, Daoist and Buddhist traditions. Early references, such as the monkey-like deity Wuzhiqi in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, and the “scripture-listening monkey” in Daoist texts, reflect traits of supernatural power and spiritual wisdom. The Hindu-Buddhist figure Hanuman also served as a trans-cultural prototype. [1] In *Journey to the West*, Sun Wukong's powers—including his 72 transformations and the somersault cloud—symbolize rebellion, freedom, and a moral journey from chaos to enlightenment.

With the rise of multiple media forms, his image has continuously evolved. In theater, starting with Yuan dynasty plays by Yang Jingxian, Sun Wukong became a stage icon with stylized martial arts and comedic traits. He later became a staple in Peking, Kunqu, and Cantonese opera, with performers like Yang Xiaolou and Li Wanchun shaping him into a “national character” through standardized stage conventions.

Film and television further visualized his persona. From *Princess Iron Fan* (1958) to the 1986 *Journey to the West* series and films like *A Chinese Odyssey*, Sun Wukong was reinterpreted to suit contemporary tastes. [2] In *A Chinese Odyssey*, he is portrayed not just as a hero but as a tragic figure, reflecting postmodern irony and emotional complexity.

In the digital age, works like the 3D animation *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* and the game *Black Myth: Wukong* reimagine him for younger audiences. These adaptations blend high-tech visuals and emotional depth, turning Sun Wukong into a powerful avatar for merging traditional culture with digital entertainment.

Each medium—literature, theater, film, animation, and gaming—offers a unique narrative lens. Their combined efforts continually reconstruct Sun Wukong’s symbolic meaning, allowing him to embody rebellion, spiritual growth, and individual identity. His adaptability across platforms demonstrates the resilience and global potential of Chinese cultural heritage in the digital age.

3. Reinvention of Sun Wukong’s Image and Innovative Communication Mechanisms in Digital Media

3.1 Visual Reconstruction and Interactive Expression in Digital Media

With the rapid advancement of digital media, Sun Wukong has undergone unprecedented visual and narrative transformation through both animation and gaming. These mediums have evolved from 2D to 3D, from static to dynamic, and have shifted from one-way storytelling to immersive, participatory experiences.

For example, the animated film *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* used high-precision 3D modeling, motion capture, and real-time rendering to transition from stylized 2D to realistic and emotional 3D expression. Sun Wukong is reimagined not just as a powerful hero, but as a psychologically complex character, resonating more deeply with younger audiences.[3]

Meanwhile, in games like *Black Myth: Wukong*, players are not only able to control the character but also experience the story from a first-person perspective. Built using Unreal Engine and branching narratives, the game enables emotional identification and active cultural engagement. The game also explores varied interpretations of Wukong—bestial, demonic, realistic, or supernatural—demonstrating the flexibility of the character as a cultural IP.

Together, digital animation and games have modernized Sun Wukong by renewing his visual form, enhancing user interaction, and enriching symbolic meaning—making him a powerful vehicle for reimagining traditional culture in contemporary digital contexts.

3.2 Full-Chain Communication Mechanisms on Integrated Media Platforms

Driven by social media, short-video platforms, and virtual reality environments, digital communication has entered a stage of convergence characterized by multiple platforms and interconnected nodes. Platforms such as Bilibili, TikTok (Douyin), and Xiaohongshu (RED) host a wide array of Sun Wukong-related content—including short video edits, fan creations, memes, and virtual idol performances—thereby forming a user-generated content (UGC)-oriented digital cultural ecosystem.

This user-centered model of content production and distribution represents a shift from the traditional “institution-to-audience” model to a dynamic “platform-user-community” interaction. In this process, Sun Wukong is no longer simply “viewed” as a cultural symbol but is also “used,” “remixed,” and “shared” by users. These participatory behaviors become acts of cultural redefinition, decentralizing and democratizing cultural communication in the process.

3.3 From Communication Object to Communication Medium: Redefining Sun Wukong as a Platform-Based Cultural Symbol

In the digital media era, Sun Wukong has evolved from a passive cultural icon to an active driver of cultural engagement. In games like *Honor of Kings* and *League of Legends*, Sun Wukong-themed skins have become more than just character features—they function as virtual commodities that encourage user participation, consumption, and sharing. His image now possesses cross-platform, reproducible, and marketable attributes, reflecting new cultural roles within the digital economy.

This shift marks a transition from content-driven to platform-driven cultural dissemination. Cultural symbols like Sun Wukong are now embedded in algorithms, data flows, and user behaviors, enabling them to act as emotional anchors, marketing tools, and identity markers.

Through animation, games, and social media, Sun Wukong has moved from linear storytelling to interactive, user-centered narratives. His redefinition is not only driven by technological innovation but also by strategic communication and audience co-creation. With immersive experiences, symbolic reinvention, and platform distribution, Sun Wukong exemplifies how traditional culture can be revitalized and globally reinterpreted in the digital age.

3.4 Cultural Challenges and Structural Dilemmas in the Transmedia Communication of Sun Wukong

In the process of transmedia communication of the Sun Wukong image, although emerging technologies and multi-platform environments have provided unprecedented expressive space and audience engagement potential, a series of structural issues have also surfaced. These challenges not only affect the sustainable dissemination of cultural symbols but also directly influence the depth and effectiveness of their expression across different media.

3.5 Cultural Dilution: Spiritual Depletion Under Commercialized Expression

In the contemporary media ecosystem, traditional cultural symbols are increasingly subsumed into consumerist logic. Sun Wukong, as a figure of immense popularity and “IP heat,” frequently appears in advertisements, game skins, short videos, and social media content. His image is repeatedly extracted, simplified, and labeled to attract attention and boost click-through rates. While this phenomenon enhances communication efficiency, it inevitably leads to the dilution of deeper cultural connotations.

For instance, in some games or films, Sun Wukong is portrayed merely as a “monster-fighting hero” or “violent warrior,” while his underlying symbolic values—such as rebellious spirit, spiritual cultivation, and moral growth—are marginalized or entirely omitted. This trend of “symbol instrumentalization” transforms Sun Wukong from a bearer of traditional Chinese philosophical and spiritual ideals into a commodified figure shaped by market logic. Such symbolic weakening reminds us that while promoting the digital transformation of traditional culture, we must remain alert to the risks of excessive entertainment and superficialization that can result in cultural rupture. [4]

3.6 Media Adaptation Challenges: Tensions in Narrative Structure and Stylistic Expression

The allure of transmedia storytelling lies in the ability of a single cultural symbol to extend across diverse media. However, this process faces technical and structural challenges. Each medium has its own narrative logic: theater emphasizes live performance and stylization, film focuses on visual impact and cinematic language, animation favors exaggeration and visual consistency, while games stress interactivity and player immersion.

These differences lead to two key issues: first, a disjointed narrative rhythm—Sun Wukong may appear differently paced or structured across formats, weakening consistency; second, tonal shifts—he may be portrayed humorously in one medium and solemnly in another, risking a loss of symbolic coherence.

Thus, maintaining the “spiritual integrity” of Sun Wukong across media while adjusting narrative depth and stylistic choices remains a central challenge in transmedia adaptation.

3.7 Technological Limitations: The Pitfall of Form Over Substance

While digital media expands the expressive toolkit for traditional culture, overreliance on technology can reduce cultural depth. Emerging formats like the metaverse and VR often prioritize visual spectacle over meaningful storytelling.

For example, some VR experiences present elaborate visuals and high-fidelity modeling but lack narrative substance or philosophical depth, resulting in shallow cultural connections. Excessive focus on tech may increase production costs, shorten content lifespans, and cause audience fatigue.

To avoid this, technology should serve cultural narrative—not overshadow it—ensuring traditional symbols like Sun Wukong remain emotionally resonant and meaningfully engaging in new media environments.

3.8 Innovative Pathways and Integrated Communication Strategies for Cultural Transmission

As an iconic symbol of traditional Chinese culture, Sun Wukong has achieved wide transmedia dissemination. Yet challenges such as symbolic fragmentation and cultural dilution persist. To address these, this section proposes strategic paths for enhancing cultural communication in the digital age.

3.9 A Dual-Model Strategy: Core Symbol + Media Adaptation

To ensure cultural continuity, a two-layer approach should be adopted. First, the core values of Sun Wukong—freedom, rebellion, and spiritual cultivation—must remain consistent across media. Second, expressive techniques should adapt to specific platforms: animation can highlight emotional depth, games can focus on interactivity, and short videos can emphasize visual impact. This approach ensures that while the essence remains, the forms evolve.

3.10 Immersive Interactivity for Emotional Engagement

With technologies like VR, AR, and AI, storytelling can shift from passive to participatory. Games like *Black Myth: Wukong* demonstrate this through immersive design, real-time interaction, and nonlinear narratives. Future formats could include AI dialogues, AR tours, or virtual performances—blending game, theater, and real-life experiences to create richer cultural immersion.

3.11 A Fusion Model: Creative Narrative + Digital Platforms + Network Amplification

Traditional culture should evolve from static reproduction to dynamic recreation. Sun Wukong’s journey can be reimaged through modern emotional and psychological lenses. Platforms like Bilibili and Douyin can drive user-generated content, while network tools like hashtags and algorithms can enhance reach. This integrated model supports decentralized, participatory cultural communication.

3.12 Bridging Art and Society through Cross-Media Collaboration

Modernizing Sun Wukong is not just artistic—it’s cultural reinvention. Initiatives like immersive plays and new media installations blend tradition with innovation. Future collaborations among cultural institutions, tech firms, and academic teams can facilitate “cultural translation,” making Sun Wukong a resonant symbol across contexts.

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