

Analysis of the Artistic Style of the Manga Dragon Ball

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Abstract. Dragon Ball is a manga series created by Akira Toriyama during his career as a manga artist. Since its debut, the work has been translated and published in many countries, and its derivative products are countless. It is fair to say that the influence of Dragon Ball is immense. In China, many manga artists have openly or privately stated that they were influenced by Toriyama's Dragon Ball to pursue a career in manga. I myself was also influenced by Toriyama's Dragon Ball to enter the anime and manga industry. A look at Toriyama's manga career reveals that both his early long-running series Dr. Slump and his later work Dragon Ball had a huge impact. For most manga artists, their most influential work is often their breakout hit, and subsequent works rarely manage to move readers as much. However, Toriyama broke this pattern. His breakout manga was Dr. Slump, which introduced him to the world. But Toriyama did not fade into obscurity after Dr. Slump; the manga he created, Dragon Ball, became even more popular with readers, elevating his reputation to a new level. This achievement fully demonstrates Toriyama's excellent drawing ability and masterful storytelling. The formation and evolution of Toriyama's artistic style are inseparable from the environment he grew up in, the era he lived in, and his personal experiences. This article will provide an in-depth analysis of the style and characteristics of Toriyama's manga Dragon Ball, exploring the reasons for the formation of his style and the unique features of his art. It is hoped that this will provide some insights for your own artistic journey.

Keywords: Manga; Derivative Products; Artistic Style.

1. Introduction

After World War II, Japan, with its devastated land, began to rebuild its homeland. As victims of the war, the Japanese people longed for a new life. At the same time, with the rapid post-war economic recovery, people's demand for spiritual enrichment also grew after their material needs were met. Against this backdrop, a large number of manga artists, led by Osamu Tezuka, emerged. Among them, Akira Toriyama is one we must mention. His manga, Dragon Ball, with its light-hearted and humorous tone, was widely loved by readers and had an enormous influence.

2. The Influence of Akira Toriyama's Upbringing on the Artistic Style of Dragon Ball

To analyze the artistic style of Toriyama's Dragon Ball, we must first understand his personal background.

Born in 1955, Akira Toriyama spent his childhood and most of his life in Nishimura, Aichi Prefecture, his birthplace [1]. His hometown was a rural area with vast farmlands and a beautiful natural environment. This allowed Toriyama to have direct contact with nature and appreciate its beauty, providing him with rich imagination and a wealth of material for his future manga creations. Although his family was not wealthy, his parents' optimistic and cheerful personalities deeply influenced him. This is reflected in his later manga works, which are always full of sunshine, positivity, and a spirit of never giving up.

After entering high school, Toriyama specialized in design, which laid a solid foundation for his drawing and composition skills. This is why his manga characters are always accurately drawn, the pages are visually rich, and the compositions are well-balanced. While other manga artists sometimes struggle with inaccurate character anatomy, this is rarely seen in Toriyama's work. Furthermore, while studying design, Toriyama also actively participated in doujinshi (fan-made manga) groups and was even elected president of a group called the Manga Research Club. These experiences subtly nurtured

him to become a manga artist. It's not to say that having such experiences guarantees success, but having a rich imagination, rigorous drawing skills, and a passion for the craft lays the groundwork and potential for a young person to become a manga artist.

3. The Necessity of Akira Toriyama's Professional Training for the Formation of Dragon Ball's Artistic Style

After having the potential to become a manga artist, extensive professional training is indispensable. Only through a great deal of professional training can a doujinshi enthusiast be reborn as a true manga artist. This period of professional training is accompanied by pain, confusion, and various life pressures. This "hellish" period varies in length for different individuals, but as long as you get through it, a bright future awaits.

Toriyama also went through such a difficult period. After graduation, he worked at a design company for only three years. The reasons were that he was always late, and the job limited his creativity and prevented him from fully dedicating himself to his beloved manga creation. So, on his twenty-third birthday, he resolutely quit and began to focus entirely on drawing manga[2]. Toriyama's choice was the right one. After much effort, he stood out and published his own manga, embarking on the path of a professional manga artist.

However, Toriyama's initial hit was not Dragon Ball, but Dr. Slump[3]. This manga tells the story of an eccentric, lecherous doctor and his robot daughter, creating a light-hearted and humorous atmosphere. Many characters in the manga are modified versions of real people. For example, the main villain, the evil doctor, is based on Toriyama's editor, Kazuhiko Torishima. Torishima, a new editor at the time, had a keen eye and discovered Toriyama, who was also a newcomer. Toriyama's success is inseparable from Torishima, but the editor was also ruthless with him, rejecting his manuscripts multiple times. In total, over a thousand pages were returned, which was a huge headache for Toriyama. In a fit of anger, Toriyama drew Torishima into the manga, personifying him as a wicked doctor who wanted to rule the world[4]. This shows how much Torishima's relentless critiques impacted Toriyama.

The character designs in Dr. Slump followed Osamu Tezuka's style, which leans towards exaggeration. The specific design feature is to alter normal human proportions, shorten the body, and focus the drawing on the head, giving it detailed attention. However, Toriyama's character designs went a step further, making the characters more complex and detailed, resulting in a more visually appealing aesthetic. Even though Toriyama's characters were designed decades ago, their designs are still strong and don't feel outdated by today's design standards. This is a testament to his design prowess.

Five years into the serialization of Dr. Slump, with the popularity of Tetsuo Hara's Fist of the North Star, fighting manga began to gain traction. Torishima asked Toriyama to start a new serialized manga. Toriyama decided to draw a new adventure story, borrowing from the classic Chinese novel Journey to the West[5]. This was the beginning of the famous Dragon Ball.

The story of Dragon Ball revolves around the protagonist, Son Goku, with his quest for the Dragon Balls as the main plot. However, Dragon Ball was not very popular with readers at first. At Torishima's suggestion, Toriyama made a timely adjustment, adding the Tenkaichi Budokai (World Martial Arts Tournament) element to the manga, which made it a huge success. Under Toriyama's initial plan, the story was supposed to end after the defeat of King Piccolo. However, by that time, Dragon Ball had become so influential that ending it would have affected the stock prices of a series of companies related to the franchise. Therefore, whether Dragon Ball would end was no longer up to Toriyama. He had no choice but to continue drawing, which led to the subsequent arcs involving Frieza, the Androids, Cell, and Majin Buu. Although these later stories are also very exciting, they are still a bit inferior to the early plots Toriyama designed. Moreover, the long-term serialization consumed most of Toriyama's energy. Even though he was only forty years old when Dragon Ball

ended, he never started another long-running manga series afterward, only drawing short or medium-length stories. This is a significant loss for the manga industry and its readers.

4. The Specific Manifestations of the Dragon Ball Artistic Style

4.1 Long Story Development Timeline

Looking at the overall artistic style of Dragon Ball, the first thing that stands out is the very long time span of the entire manga. The story begins when Son Goku is less than ten years old, but by the end, he has a granddaughter. Despite such a long time span, readers do not feel bored; on the contrary, they have a sense of growing up with Son Goku. After reading all forty-two volumes of Dragon Ball, I couldn't help but sigh with a feeling of having experienced it all with Goku, and looking back, I felt a little wistful.

We can divide the manga into three time periods. First is Son Goku's youth, which was Toriyama's most passionate creative period. The stories are tight and the plots are the most engaging. During this period, Goku went on a journey with Bulma to find the Dragon Balls, trained in martial arts with Master Roshi and participated in the Tenkaichi Budokai, fought the evil Red Ribbon Army, participated in the Budokai again, avenged Krillin's death by fighting King Piccolo, and then fought and defeated King Piccolo Jr. Toriyama originally wanted to end the series here, but for various reasons, the manga had to continue. The stories that followed were not as spectacular as the original ones.

Next is Son Goku's adulthood to middle age. During this period, he fought Vegeta, battled on Planet Namek, faced the Androids, defeated Cell, participated in the Budokai again where Buu appeared, and finally defeated Buu. The villains in these arcs become progressively stronger. Although many characters are introduced, the story design is basically a "level-up" style, and the plot is relatively simple. This shows that Toriyama was running out of creative steam.

Finally, we have Son Goku's old age, where he participates in the Tenkaichi Budokai again, meets Uub (the reincarnation of Buu), and leaves to train with him. This is where Dragon Ball officially concluded. The company didn't want the series to end at this point, but the long-term overwork made Toriyama seriously ill and he was hospitalized. It is said that the final few chapters were ghostwritten by his assistants. Toriyama insisted that Dragon Ball had to end, and that's why it finally did.

The early part of the first period, Son Goku's youth, is the most exciting. It is full of ingenious ideas, such as cars that can travel without wheels, capsules that can store any object, and a rabbit that can turn you into a carrot just by touching you. During this period, Toriyama's art style continued from Dr. Slump but was not a complete imitation; he made a breakthrough on that foundation. His most impressive skill is taking existing concepts, breaking them apart, and reassembling them to create something fresh and new. For example, the clothing of Master Shen, Tien Shinhan, and Chiaotzu in Dragon Ball is a nod to the official robes of the Qing Dynasty in China, but without a careful comparison, it is difficult to see the connection. Another example is the character of the Ox-King, who breaks the traditional perception of this character and becomes a loving father in Dragon Ball. Additionally, Android 8 is a tribute to Frankenstein's monster, and Sergeant Metallic is inspired by Arnold Schwarzenegger in *The Terminator*. All these characters were remade and given new life by Toriyama.

4.2 Manga Character Designs Draw from Reality, Making Them Vivid

In Dragon Ball, Toriyama primarily uses a Q-style for character design, a popular style during that era. But as a design professional, Toriyama's character drawing is more refined. He uses a method similar to early Disney character design, making the characters as rounded as possible. The use of curved lines gives the characters a fuller appearance[6]. Furthermore, Toriyama devotes a lot of effort to the characters' heads, subjectively enlarging them while shrinking the body proportions to make the characters more endearing and appealing to readers. Although Toriyama's characters are mostly Q-style, their fundamental anatomy is remarkably accurate. It's very difficult to find anatomical errors

in his manga. On one hand, this shows Toriyama's strict self-discipline, and on the other, it's a testament to his rigorous training in design and drawing.

Another major feature of Toriyama's character design is that he draws inspiration from reality, either from real people or from photographs. Many of the female characters in his manga are drawn from magazine posters of beautiful celebrities. His process is to first draw the celebrity from a poster, then refine that drawing into a manga character, and then re-create that manga character to design his own unique character. Toriyama also drew people from his own life into his manga, such as his editor Kazuhiko Torishima and his assistants, none of whom were spared. Toriyama's manga world is full of imagination, and the characters are not just humans; there are also many animals. Toriyama anthropomorphizes a large number of animals and places them among humans, so that the animals and people live and interact with each other as if they were meant to coexist in the same world.

Not only does Toriyama draw his characters from reality, but the machines he draws are also based on the real world. Toriyama purchased a large number of machines, including cars, motorcycles, and engines, and piled them up in his garage, either whole or in parts. Whenever he had time, he would disassemble or reassemble these machines to study their structure in detail, and then draw countless sketches of them. This is why we see so many beautifully drawn machines in his manga, and it is inseparable from his consistent self-training.

4.3 Manga Scene Drawing Blends Tradition and Imagination

Let's talk about Toriyama's scenery. The scenes he draws, especially the early outdoor ones, are a re-creation of the real world. The images reflect reality, but you can't find the real-world prototypes of the mountains and rivers he draws. Toriyama's mountains and rivers are closer in style to traditional Chinese landscape paintings, with rounded mountains in the distance and trees in the foreground, creating a feel of a Chinese landscape painting[7]. He also has a very childlike spirit, often drawing little cartoon animals in the scenes. These animals complement the scenery, creating a whimsical and innocent world. This world is full of unexpected things, and Toriyama gives our imagination wings, allowing us to see almost all the wonderful fantasies we had as children.

Toriyama also doesn't particularly like drawing cityscapes; his main settings have always been centered around nature. Trees, rocks, and rivers are recurring themes for him. He re-organizes these common natural objects to construct a dreamlike world that is uniquely his. He doesn't feel constrained by reality and boldly incorporates his own imagination into the scenes, such as towering mushroom trees, buildings floating in the sky, and totem-pole-like towers reaching the heavens. These objects are all a testament to Toriyama's rich imagination.

5. Summary

In summary, the artistic style of Akira Toriyama's Dragon Ball can be broken down into a few key points: First, the story has an incredibly long time span, covering the protagonist's entire life. Second, the characters are primarily designed in a Q-style, with a focus on curved lines to give them a full and rounded appearance. Third, the designs are largely inspired by real life but are not mere repetitions of reality; they are presented to the audience after being re-created by Toriyama. Fourth, the work draws on traditional elements from other cultures, with a particular emphasis on Chinese traditional elements. Fifth, the story is generally well-paced, with strong character conflicts, and is very engaging overall, especially in the early arcs.

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