

VISUALIZING CULTURAL MEANING: A STUDY OF CARTOON IMAGERY IN CULTURAL-CREATIVE PRODUCTS AND BRAND COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of China's cultural and creative industries, digital media, and the intellectual property economy has transformed cartoon imagery from an entertainment-oriented visual form into a strategic medium for cultural translation and brand communication. This study examines the characteristics, forms, and symbolic meanings of cartoon imagery used in cultural-creative products and brand communication. A qualitative research design was adopted, integrating literature review, comparative case analysis, field observation, and visual-semantic analysis. Representative cases from international character branding and Chinese cultural-creative practice were compared with the Henan Houjiaguan clay monkey toy, a folk object combining auspicious symbolism, theatrical facial-mask imagery, clay and textile materiality, and a movable string-controlled mechanism. The findings identify six core characteristics of effective cartoon imagery: recognizability, formal simplification, emotional expressiveness, narrative capacity, cultural relevance, and cross-media adaptability. Five recurring forms are distinguished: entertainment-derived characters, institutional mascots, character-based intellectual property systems, culturally reinterpreted characters, and product-embedded folk-toy characters. Symbolic meaning is produced through four linked mechanisms: cultural representation, emotional mediation, identity construction, and brand-value communication. Based on these findings, the study proposes a culture-character-product-brand framework and a three-level feature hierarchy for heritage-oriented cartoon redesign. The study concludes that culturally grounded cartoon imagery can enhance contemporary relevance only when visual innovation is coordinated with cultural authenticity, material logic, product experience, and systematic brand communication.

Keywords: Cartoon Imagery, Cultural Symbolism, Cultural-Creative Product, Brand Communication, Houjiaguan, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Design Translation, Social Sustainability

CITATION INFORMATION: Li, J., Inkuer, A., Mayusoh, C., & Puntien, P. (2026). Visualizing Cultural Meaning: A Study of Cartoon Imagery in Cultural-Creative Products and Brand Communication. *Procedia of Multidisciplinary Research*, 4(8), 3.

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of cultural and creative industries has changed the criteria by which products are designed, interpreted, and consumed. In addition to utility and price, consumers increasingly respond to symbolic meaning, emotional experience, narrative value, and cultural identity. Cultural-creative products therefore operate simultaneously as commodities, communication media, and carriers of cultural memory. Within this transformation, cartoon imagery has become one of the most visible and flexible visual strategies. It appears in toys, packaging, tourism souvenirs, museum products, exhibitions, advertising, mobile interfaces, social media, and cross-brand collaborations.

Cartoon imagery is effective because it can condense complex information into recognizable visual units. Simplified silhouettes, exaggerated proportions, distinctive color schemes, and expressive gestures allow audiences to identify a character rapidly and recall it across different media. These formal qualities also make cartoon imagery suitable for product extension. A stable character can be translated into a three-dimensional toy, a logo, a package illustration, a digital sticker, an exhibition graphic, or a short-form video without losing its basic identity. From a branding perspective, this continuity transforms a character from a single image into a long-term communication asset.

The contemporary Chinese context has given this phenomenon additional significance. The growth of Guochao culture, museum cultural products, animation derivatives, digital consumption, and the intellectual property economy has created strong demand for visual forms that combine Chinese cultural resources with contemporary aesthetics. Traditional myths, regional symbols, historic artifacts, and folk crafts are increasingly reorganized into mascots, collectible figures, digital characters, and brand collaborations. These practices can improve cultural visibility and make traditional content more accessible to younger consumers. However, they also produce problems of visual homogenization, superficial symbol extraction, and excessive emphasis on market novelty.

The key issue is therefore not whether traditional culture should be cartoonized, but how cultural meaning can be translated into a contemporary character system without being reduced to decorative signs. A traditional motif may be visually attractive but culturally weak when separated from its narrative, material, ritual, or functional context. Likewise, a cute character may generate immediate attention but remain replaceable if it lacks cultural specificity and a stable brand position. A rigorous approach must distinguish between surface appearance and structural meaning.

The Henan Houjiaguan clay monkey toy provides a particularly valuable case. The object is usually recognized through a monkey figure, an official-hat association, mask-like facial features, folk color, clay sculpture, textile or fur materials, and a movable structure controlled by strings or bamboo rods. Its meaning is also connected with auspicious ideas of promotion and blessing. The toy is therefore not simply a graphic image of a monkey. Its identity emerges from the relationship among form, material, gesture, movement, performance, and cultural narrative.



Figure 1 Traditional Form of the Henan Houjiaguan Clay Monkey Toy

Note: The traditional toy integrates a monkey figure, theatrical mask imagery, folk costume, auspicious symbolism, and a movable string-controlled structure.

This complexity creates a concrete design problem. If the Houjiaguan toy is redesigned only through a generalized “cute” style, it may lose the theatrical, material, and performative features that distinguish it from other monkey characters. If its traditional form is reproduced without adaptation, it may remain difficult to integrate into contemporary product systems and brand communication. The challenge is to identify which characteristics must be preserved, which may be transformed, and which can be replaced according to contemporary use.

Existing research offers valuable insights but remains fragmented. Semiotic and visual communication studies explain how images construct meaning, while brand theory explains recognition, association, and emotional relationship. Cultural economics and creative-industry theory clarify the dual cultural and commercial value of products. Design Thinking and user experience research emphasize functionality, interaction, and iterative development. Studies of intangible cultural heritage stress authenticity and continuity. Nevertheless, these perspectives are often discussed separately, and the link from cultural resource to character, product, and brand is insufficiently articulated.

This study addresses that gap by examining the characteristics, forms, and symbolic meanings of cartoon imagery in cultural-creative products and brand communication. It adopts an interdisciplinary and problem-oriented approach, combining literature review, comparative case analysis, field observation, and visual-semantic analysis. Rather than treating cartoon imagery as an isolated stylistic phenomenon, the study analyzes it as a system linking cultural representation, emotional communication, product experience, and brand construction.

Research Objectives

This research aims to examine the characteristics, forms, and symbolic meanings of cartoon imagery used in cultural-creative products and brand communication. Specifically, the objectives are: (1) to identify the visual, cultural, emotional, product-related, and communication characteristics that contribute to effective cartoon imagery design; (2) to classify different forms and symbolic mechanisms through which cartoon imagery transforms cultural resources into recognizable character systems; (3) to validate the applicability of the identified characteristics through preliminary expert evaluation from heritage and design professionals; (4) to establish a practical design translation approach using the Henan Houjiaguan clay monkey toy as a case study, demonstrating how essential, adaptable, and replaceable features can guide heritage-oriented redesign; (5) to discuss how cartoon-based cultural redesign can contribute to socially responsible branding and sustainable development of intangible cultural heritage. The translation process is further supported by design research perspectives emphasizing reflective design decisions and the transformation of concepts into practical design outcomes (Löwgren & Stolterman, 2004).

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Cartoon Imagery as a Visual Communication System

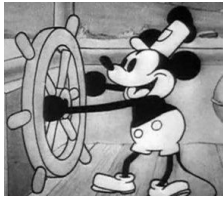
Cartoon imagery developed historically from comics and animation, but its contemporary function extends well beyond entertainment. The spread of character licensing and merchandising transformed popular figures into reproducible assets, while digital media enabled characters to circulate through stickers, short videos, fan communities, games, and social platforms. A character can now exist simultaneously as narrative content, product form, digital identity, and brand interface.

The communicative strength of cartoon imagery is closely related to simplification. McCloud (1993) argues that simplified representation directs attention toward essential features and may strengthen identification. In design practice, simplification improves legibility at different

scales and facilitates translation across materials. Nevertheless, simplification is not equivalent to visual standardization. Effective reduction selects and preserves the features that establish identity, whereas weak reduction removes the cultural and narrative differences that make a character meaningful.

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) emphasize that visual meaning is multimodal. Shape, color, position, scale, gesture, and composition work together rather than independently. For cultural-creative products, material, packaging, typography, and display context also participate in meaning production. Cartoon imagery should therefore be evaluated as an integrated visual system rather than as a detached drawing.

Table 1 Evolution of Cartoon Imagery from Entertainment Characters to Cultural Brand Systems

	Sun Wukong	Mickey Mouse	Hello Kitty	LINE FRIENDS
Project Image				
Category	Cultural reinterpretation	Entertainment media	Licensing and merchandise	Digital character ecosystem

Semiotics, Representation, and Cultural Translation

Semiotics explains how visual elements acquire cultural meaning. Saussure (1983) argues that signs operate through socially established relationships between signifier and signified. The meaning of a monkey, a mask, a red costume, or an official hat is not universal; it depends on cultural convention and historical context. Hall (1997) similarly treats representation as an active process through which meaning is produced and circulated.

Cultural translation in design therefore requires interpretation rather than direct copying. Designers must identify the cultural logic behind a symbol, including its narrative role, ritual use, emotional association, and social function. When only the outer shape is extracted, the resulting design may retain recognizability but lose cultural depth. When the underlying relationships are understood, traditional elements can be reorganized into contemporary forms without severing their cultural continuity.

Cultural-Creative Products and Cultural Value

Cultural-creative products combine cultural resources with design, production, communication, and consumption. Throsby (2001) emphasizes that cultural goods possess both economic and cultural value, while Hesmondhalgh (2002) explains how cultural content is organized within systems of production and distribution. These perspectives indicate that cultural-creative design should not separate cultural meaning from market feasibility.

The design of cultural-creative products can be interpreted through three interrelated levels. The external level concerns shape, color, pattern, texture, and packaging. The behavioral level concerns function, structure, movement, and interaction. The psychological level concerns memory, identity, symbolism, and emotional attachment. Weak products often remain at the external level, whereas stronger products coordinate all three. Cartoon imagery can provide this coordination by linking visible form with product behavior and cultural narrative.

Brand Image, Association, and Anthropomorphism

Brand image is constructed through the associations that audiences retain in memory. Aaker (1991, 1996) identifies awareness, association, perceived quality, and loyalty as central dimensions of brand equity. Keller (1993) likewise argues that favorable and distinctive associations support customer-based brand value. Cartoon imagery can strengthen these processes by providing a stable visual anchor for abstract values.

Character anthropomorphism adds an emotional dimension. Fournier (1998) demonstrates that consumers may form relationship-like connections with brands. A socially expressive character encourages audiences to attribute personality, intention, and emotion to a product or organization. Expression, posture, voice, behavior, and narrative continuity can therefore strengthen emotional engagement. However, anthropomorphism is effective only when personality is consistent with cultural content and brand positioning.

In the context of emotional consumption and the intellectual property economy, characters also support collectability and cross-m

edia extension. Yet Research Findings commercial extension can weaken meaning when visual consistency is not supported by cultural depth. A sustainable character system requires both a recognizable grammar and a clear symbolic foundation.

Design Thinking, User Experience, and Adaptability

Design Thinking provides a user-centered method for transforming cultural resources into products. Brown (2008) emphasizes empathy, problem definition, ideation, prototyping, and testing. Norman (2004) explains that product experience includes visceral appearance, behavioral performance, and reflective meaning. These concepts are directly relevant to character-based cultural products because audiences do not merely view them; they touch, operate, collect, display, share, and interpret them.

Folk Toys and Intangible Cultural Heritage Revitalization

Traditional folk toys are material carriers of craft knowledge, local belief, play, performance, and collective memory. Their cultural identity may be embedded in texture, movement, production method, sound, or use. Redesign should therefore begin from the object's material and behavioral logic rather than from surface pattern alone.

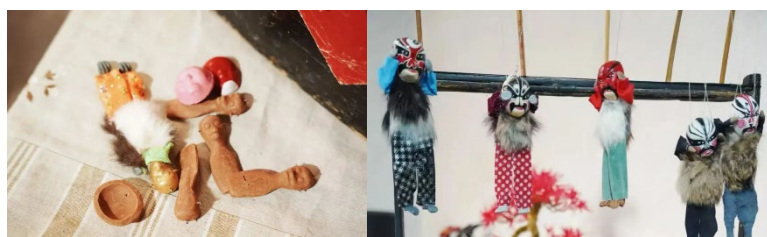


Figure 2 Material and Structural Components of the Houjiaguan Clay Monkey Toy

Note: The toy combines clay, painted mask elements, textile or fur materials, bamboo controls, and suspended strings, forming an integrated visual and performative system.

The Houjiaguan clay monkey toy illustrates this point. Its cultural identity is formed through the combined presence of monkey imagery, official-hat symbolism, theatrical facial-mask features, folk color, clay and textile materials, the act of holding or presenting a mask, and string-controlled movement. The toy's performative quality is not secondary decoration; it is part of the meaning. A contemporary redesign must therefore preserve the relationship among symbolism, materiality, and interaction.

Table 2 Analytical dimensions for the study of cartoon imagery

Dimension	Core indicators	Theoretical basis	Analytical purpose
Visual form	Silhouette, proportion, simplification, color, expression, gesture	Visual communication; comics theory	Identify the basis of recognition and reproducibility
Cultural content	Symbol, costume, narrative, regional reference, auspicious meaning	Semiotics; representation; cultural capital	Determine cultural specificity and interpretive depth
Emotional experience	Personality, affinity, humor, empathy, memory	Brand relationship; emotional design	Explain audience attachment and emotional response
Product behavior	Material, structure, movement, function, interaction	Design Thinking; user experience	Connect character identity with use and experience
Brand communication	Consistency, differentiation, narrative extension, cross-media application	Brand equity; integrated communication	Explain how imagery becomes a sustainable brand asset

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was employed to investigate how cartoon imagery constructs cultural and brand meaning. The study combined four methods: literature review, comparative case analysis, field observation, and visual-semantic analysis. The methods were organized sequentially so that theoretical concepts informed case selection, case comparison informed the analytical categories, and the categories were then applied to the Houjiaguan clay monkey toy.

In addition to the four analytical methods, a pilot qualitative validation stage was incorporated to examine the practical applicability of the analytical framework. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten participants, including intangible cultural heritage practitioners, cultural-creative designers, visual communication researchers, and design professionals. The collected feedback was analyzed through thematic coding to identify expert perceptions regarding cultural preservation, visual transformation, and communication potential.

The literature review covered visual communication and semiotics, cultural economics and creative industries, brand image and brand relationships, Design Thinking and user experience, and intangible cultural heritage revitalization. Sources were selected according to direct relevance to the research objective. The review was not used merely to summarize previous studies; it was used to construct a set of analytical dimensions: visual form, cultural content, emotional experience, product behavior, and brand communication.

Comparative case analysis was conducted through purposive selection. Cases were chosen because they represent different operational forms of cartoon imagery. International cases included entertainment-derived and licensing-oriented characters such as Mickey Mouse and Hello Kitty, as well as digitally circulated systems such as LINE FRIENDS. Chinese cases included culturally reinterpreted characters derived from museum resources, traditional symbols, and local cultural themes. The cases were compared according to origin, visual strategy, symbolic function, product extension, and communication channel.

Field observation focused on the Houjiaguan clay monkey toy and its visual, material, and performative properties. Observational records considered the monkey figure, official-hat association, mask or facial painting, hand gesture, clay head, textile or fur body, bamboo or string-control structure, and movement. Attention was given to how these elements function

together rather than how they appear separately. This object-centered approach was necessary because the cultural identity of a folk toy is embedded in material and interaction as well as image.

Visual-semantic analysis was then used to interpret the relation between visible features and cultural meaning. Each feature was examined in four steps: descriptive identification, cultural interpretation, functional analysis, and redesign relevance. For example, the mask-holding gesture was not coded only as a pose; it was interpreted as a theatrical and performative sign, analyzed in relation to interaction, and assessed as a feature that should remain visible in a contemporary character system.

Thematic coding was carried out in two stages. Initial coding generated descriptive categories such as silhouette, color, expression, gesture, symbolism, material, movement, narrative, emotional affinity, and extension. Axial coding then grouped these categories into broader themes: recognizability, simplification, emotional expressiveness, narrative capacity, cultural relevance, adaptability, cultural representation, identity construction, and brand communication. The coding process produced the six characteristics, five forms, and four symbolic functions presented in the findings.

To improve analytical validity, the study used methodological triangulation. Theoretical statements were compared with evidence from multiple case types and with direct observation of the Houjiaguan toy. Categories were retained only when they could explain more than one case or clarify a distinctive feature of the folk-toy object. A transparent boundary was also maintained between conceptual findings and later empirical testing; no uncompleted questionnaire or expert-evaluation result was presented as evidence.

Pilot Validation of Cartoon Imagery Characteristics

To strengthen the reliability of the six identified characteristics of effective cartoon imagery, a pilot qualitative validation was conducted through semi-structured expert interviews. The purpose of this validation was to examine whether the proposed characteristics corresponded with practical design considerations, cultural interpretation requirements, and communication strategies in cultural-creative product development.

A total of ten experts participated in the pilot validation, including three intangible cultural heritage practitioners, three cultural-creative designers, two visual communication and branding researchers, and two design professionals. The participants were selected based on their experience in traditional craft preservation, cultural product development, character design, and visual communication. Each participant evaluated the importance and applicability of six characteristics: recognizability, formal simplification, emotional expressiveness, narrative capacity, cultural relevance, and cross-media adaptability.

The interview data were analyzed through thematic coding. The findings were organized into three major themes: cultural identity preservation, visual transformation effectiveness, and communication extension potential.

Visual Transformation Effectiveness. Design experts indicated that formal simplification and emotional expressiveness are necessary for improving accessibility among contemporary audiences. However, they emphasized that simplification should maintain recognizable cultural symbols. The feedback suggested preserving the traditional costume structure, mask-related visual characteristics, and handcrafted material impression while refining proportions, expressions, and visual details to improve communication efficiency.

Communication Extension Potential. The experts further evaluated the potential of cartoon imagery in cultural communication and branding applications. The results indicated that narrative capacity and cross-media adaptability are important for extending traditional craft into modern cultural-creative industries. Participants suggested that Houjiaguan should be developed beyond a single physical object through packaging, cultural cards, exhibition displays, posters, and digital media applications. The stick-and-string mechanism was also

recognized as a distinctive interactive feature that differentiates Houjiaguan from static character products.

The pilot validation confirmed that the six characteristics proposed in this study are consistent with practical requirements for cartoon imagery development. Recognizability and cultural relevance were identified as fundamental conditions for maintaining cultural identity, while emotional expressiveness and cross-media adaptability were considered important for audience engagement and contemporary communication. Based on these findings, the characteristics were further applied as design criteria in the subsequent Houjiaguan redesign process.

Table 3 Preliminary Expert Validation of Cartoon Imagery Characteristics for Houjiaguan Redesign

Characteristic	Mean Evaluation Score (1-5)	Key Expert Feedback
Recognizability	4.8	Essential for maintaining character identity and audience recognition
Cultural relevance	4.7	Determines authenticity and connection with heritage meaning
Cross-media adaptability	4.6	Supports packaging, exhibition, and digital communication extension
Emotional expressiveness	4.5	Improves audience affinity and character appeal
Formal simplification	4.4	Effective when cultural signs remain recognizable
Narrative capacity	4.3	Supports storytelling and long-term IP development
Overall Mean	4.55	The framework was considered applicable for cultural-creative redesign

RESEARCH RESULTS

Characteristics of Effective Cartoon Imagery

For Houjiaguan, this means that the toy prototype should remain the primary cultural carrier. Packaging and brand identity should emerge from the toy's cultural and visual logic rather than substitute for it. A coherent system may include standard colors, silhouette rules, expression guidelines, auxiliary graphics, cultural explanation cards, exhibition displays, and social-media visuals.

The findings support a four-part framework: culture, character, product, and brand. Culture provides symbolic resources, narratives, values, and material memories. Character design translates these resources into a recognizable and emotionally accessible form. Product design embodies the character through structure, material, function, and interaction. Brand communication extends the resulting system through packaging, logo, posters, exhibitions, and digital media.

Forms of Cartoon Imagery in Cultural-Creative Practice

These characteristics are interdependent. A visually appealing character may remain generic when cultural relevance is weak. A culturally rich image may be difficult to disseminate when simplification and adaptability are insufficient. A highly expressive character may fail to build long-term value when narrative and brand consistency are absent. Effective cartoon imagery therefore depends on balance rather than the maximization of a single attribute.

Emotional expressiveness enables the character to communicate through face, posture, gesture, and interaction. Narrative capacity gives the character a role, personality, and context, allowing it to support product series and communication content. Cultural relevance links the character

to specific values, traditions, places, or memories. Cross-media adaptability enables the design to remain coherent across physical products and digital platforms.

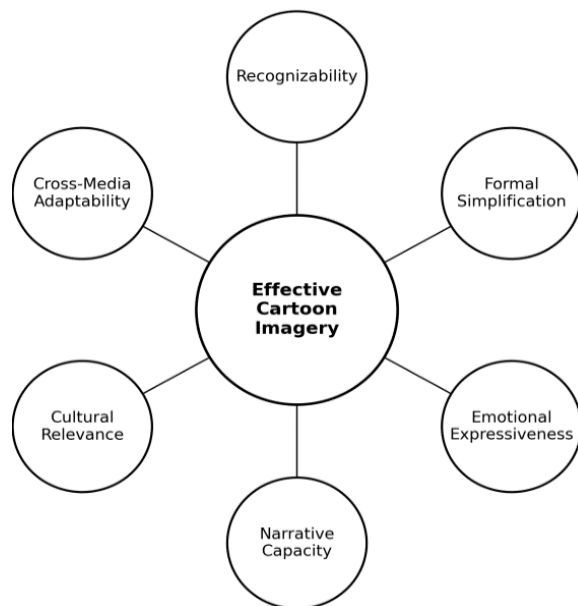


Figure 3 Six Core Characteristics of Effective Cartoon Imagery

The six characteristics represent different but interconnected dimensions of effective cartoon imagery. Recognizability and formal simplification support visual identification and reproduction, while emotional expressiveness and narrative capacity enhance audience engagement. Cultural relevance ensures symbolic authenticity, and cross-media adaptability enables continuous application across products and communication platforms.

Forms and Symbolic Mechanisms of Cartoon Imagery

The distinction among these forms is important because they require different design strategies. An entertainment character depends on narrative continuity, while a mascot depends on institutional positioning. A cultural character depends on symbolic legitimacy, and a folk-toy character additionally depends on material and functional continuity. Applying a single commercial mascot model to all forms would therefore produce analytical and practical errors. The fourth form is the culturally reinterpreted character, created through the contemporary transformation of historical figures, myths, museum objects, regional symbols, or traditional motifs. The fifth is the product-embedded folk-toy character, in which image, material, movement, and use are inseparable. The Houjiaguan clay monkey toy belongs primarily to this fifth form.

Five recurring forms were identified. The first is the entertainment-derived character, originating in comics, animation, film, or games and later extended through licensing. The second is the institutional mascot, designed to personify a brand, event, museum, city, or public organization. The third is the character-based intellectual property system, which combines a stable cast, personality structure, visual standards, and multiple product lines.

Houjiaguan as a Product-Embedded Cultural Character

Brand-value communication stabilizes these associations through repeated and coherent application. The four mechanisms form a progressive chain. Cultural representation supplies content; emotional mediation improves accessibility; identity construction deepens relevance; and brand communication consolidates memory. Weakness at any stage reduces the character's long-term value.

The symbolic meanings of cartoon imagery operate through four linked mechanisms: cultural representation, emotional mediation, identity construction, and brand-value communication.

Cultural representation selects and reorganizes traditions, stories, and regional signs. Emotional mediation translates these meanings into approachable expressions and experiences. Identity construction occurs when audiences connect the character with cultural belonging, personal taste, generational memory, or community membership.

Design Translation and Pilot Redesign Application

To demonstrate the practical application of the three-level feature hierarchy, a pilot redesign process of the Henan Houjiaguan clay monkey toy was conducted. The essential features retained include the monkey identity, official-hat symbolism, theatrical facial-mask expression, auspicious meaning, and movable interaction mechanism. Adaptable features, such as traditional costume details, color combinations, and surface decoration, were simplified and reorganized into a contemporary cartoon character language. Replaceable features, including certain proportions, decorative patterns, and presentation formats, were redesigned according to modern product requirements. This before-and-after transformation demonstrates how cultural authenticity can be maintained while improving visual recognition, emotional appeal, and product adaptability.

The translation process was further guided by the expert feedback obtained from the pilot validation. Rather than treating all visual elements of Houjiaguan as equally adjustable, the redesign process classified cultural components according to their functional and symbolic importance. The essential features were identified as the non-negotiable cultural foundation of the character, including the monkey identity, official-hat symbolism, theatrical mask expression, auspicious meaning, and stick-and-string controlled puppet mechanism. These elements were preserved to maintain cultural recognizability and historical continuity.

The adaptable features were interpreted as elements that could be modified while maintaining cultural association. Based on expert suggestions, costume patterns, embroidery details, color systems, and facial proportions were refined to improve visual clarity and contemporary aesthetic compatibility. The purpose of this adjustment was not to replace traditional characteristics but to enhance their accessibility for modern audiences.

The replaceable features were considered presentation-oriented components that could be redesigned more flexibly according to product and communication requirements. These included packaging structure, graphic application methods, display scenarios, and digital communication formats. Through this transformation, the traditional puppet was extended from an individual craft object into a broader cultural-creative design system including product prototypes, packaging, exhibition applications, and digital media communication.

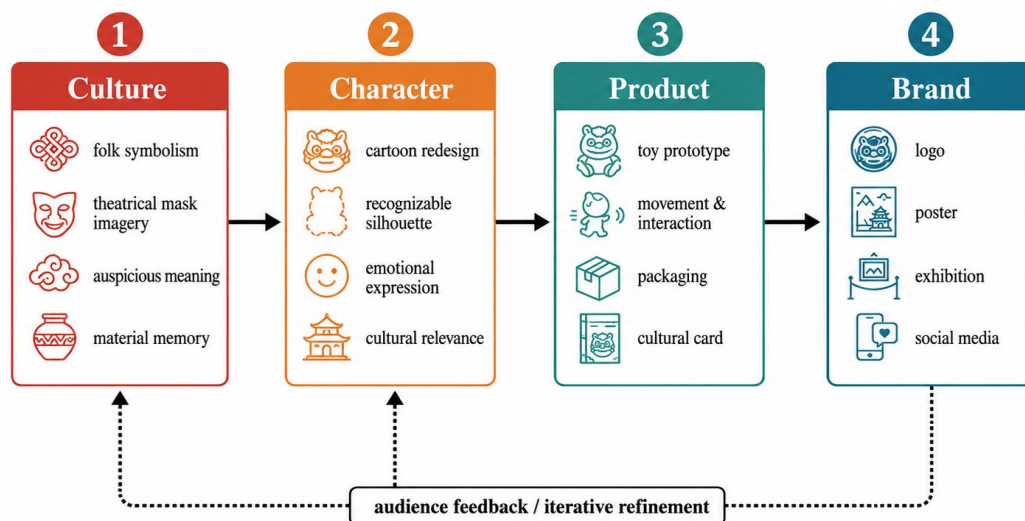


Figure 4 Pilot Redesign Translation of the Houjiaguan Clay Monkey Toy

Table 4 Feature translation matrix for the Houjiaguan pilot redesign

Feature level	Original feature	Translation strategy	Redesign result
Essential	Monkey figure and official-hat symbolism	Retained as the core cultural identity	A recognizable cartoon monkey wearing an official hat
Essential	Mask-holding gesture	Preserved as the signature theatrical action	The redesigned character consistently holds a facial mask
Essential	Movable / string-controlled logic	Maintained as an interaction concept	Toy application emphasizes performative movement and play
Adaptable	Costume details and decorative patterns	Refined and simplified for visual clarity	Cleaner costume structure with retained cultural references
Adaptable	Color system and facial proportion	Adjusted for contemporary aesthetics	More coherent palette and friendlier proportion
Replaceable	Rendering style and graphic language	Transformed into a cartoon-oriented visual system	Rounder, softer, and more approachable character design
Replaceable	Packaging form and media application	Expanded for contemporary cultural-creative use	Packaging, poster, and social-media applications

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study examined the characteristics, forms, and symbolic meanings of cartoon imagery in cultural-creative products and brand communication. The findings demonstrate that cartoon imagery is not adequately understood as decorative illustration. It is a visual-cultural system in which cultural content, emotional expression, product experience, and brand communication operate together.

The study contributes to contemporary cultural-creative design research by establishing an integrated framework that connects cultural interpretation, character development, product experience, brand communication, and social sustainability. Different from approaches that treat cartoon imagery as a surface-level visual transformation, this study demonstrates that effective cultural character design requires systematic translation from cultural meaning to visual identity and product application.

First, the study provides a practical design methodology through the three-level feature hierarchy. By distinguishing essential, adaptable, and replaceable features, designers can preserve cultural identity while allowing appropriate visual innovation.

Second, the study expands the discussion of cultural branding by emphasizing social sustainability. The revitalization of Houjiaguan should not only focus on commercial communication but also support heritage transmission, artisan participation, public education, and regional cultural development. Through responsible branding strategies, cartoon imagery can function as a bridge between traditional craftsmanship and contemporary cultural consumption.

The findings also provide practical implications for designers and cultural institutions. Future development of heritage-based characters should consider not only visual attractiveness but also cultural authenticity, interaction experience, production feasibility, and long-term communication value. The revitalization of Houjiaguan through cartoon imagery demonstrates that heritage-oriented design should balance cultural preservation with contemporary communication needs. Rather than replacing traditional craftsmanship, the redesign provides

new possibilities for heritage transmission through product development, public education, cultural exhibition, and digital communication. By connecting designers, heritage practitioners, cultural institutions, and audiences, cartoon-based cultural products can function as a sustainable bridge between traditional knowledge and contemporary cultural consumption. Further research may apply consumer evaluation, prototype testing, and comparative studies across different cultural contexts to examine how specific design elements influence cultural recognition, emotional attachment, and product acceptance.

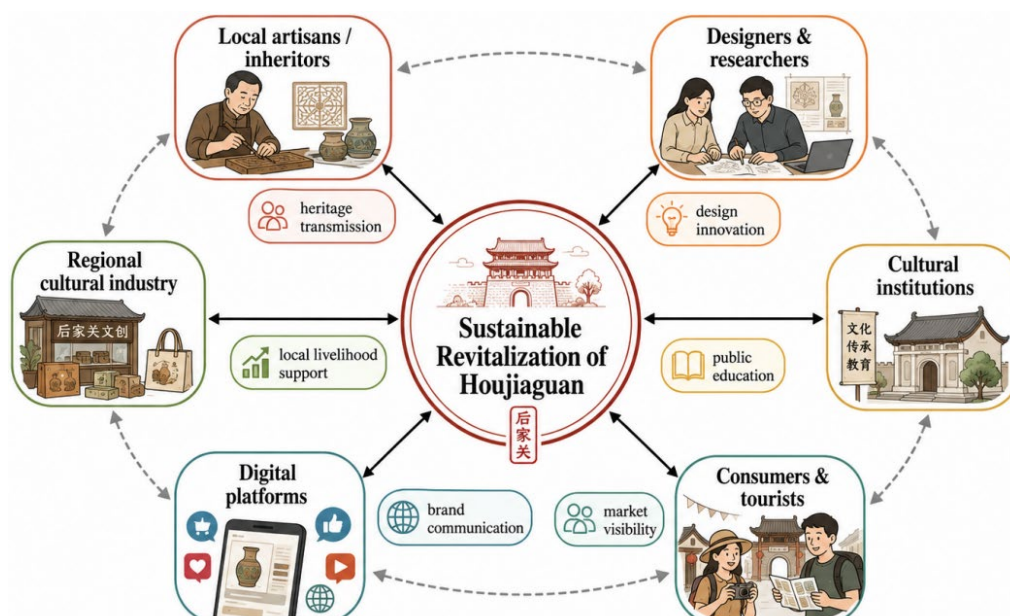


Figure 5 Socially Responsible Branding Ecosystem for Houjiaguan Revitalization

Table 5 Social sustainability implications of the Houjiaguan cartoon redesign

Dimension	Design implication	Expected contribution
Heritage transmission	Retain mask symbolism, auspicious meaning, and craft narrative in the redesign	Strengthens cultural understanding and continuity
Local livelihood	Develop co-branded products and local production opportunities with artisans	Creates new income channels for the craft community
Public education	Use exhibitions, cultural cards, and museum-style interpretation materials	Improves public knowledge of the Houjiaguan tradition
Digital dissemination	Extend the character into posters, social media, and online storytelling	Increases visibility among younger audiences
Regional development	Link the redesign to tourism souvenirs and place-based cultural branding	Supports the local cultural and creative industry
Sustainable branding	Balance market value with cultural responsibility	Builds a long-term ecosystem rather than short-term novelty

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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