

Gender Representation and Symbolic Meaning of Male Characters in Chinese Comic Strips from the Perspective of Cultural Studies

Jing Tao Cui¹ and Supath Kookiattikoon²

Abstract

From the perspective of cultural studies, this thesis takes Chinese comic strips as the object of study and explores the gender representations and symbolic meanings of male characters in them. The article elaborates on the basic concepts and categories of cultural studies, and clarifies the importance and application of cultural studies in gender studies. The definition and development of Chinese comic strips are briefly described, and their important influence on Chinese culture and social development is introduced. Through the perspective of cultural studies, we analyze the gender representation of male characters in Chinese comic strips, use semiotic methods to reveal their common characteristics and individual differences, and summarize the symbolic meaning of male characters in Chinese comic strips, including their symbolic expressions, symbolic meanings, and their impact on society and culture. Finally, the main findings of this study are summarized, including the diversity of gender expressions of male characters and the socio-cultural significance of symbolic meanings, and the direction of future research and suggestions for improvement are put forward.

Keywords: Chinese Comic Strips, Male Characters, Gender Representation, Symbolic Meaning, Cultural Studies

INTRODUCTION

As an art form with a long history, Chinese comic strips have been widely spread and popular not only in China itself, but also in the world. During the development of Chinese comic strips, male figures appear frequently as protagonists or important characters, and male characters have always been an important part of them, not only carrying the development of the storyline, but also rich in cultural significance and social value, and carrying important research value in terms of gender representation and symbolic meaning. However, despite the existence and importance of male images in Chinese comic strips, systematic research on them has been relatively weak. Past studies have mainly focused on analyses of image depictions and storylines, with less attention paid to the symbolic meanings and cultural values behind these images.

This article analyses the gender presentation and symbolic connotations of male characters in Chinese comic strips from the perspective of cultural studies, and explores the importance and significance of male characters in Chinese comic strips under the multiple perspectives of cultural studies, gender theory, semiotics, and other methods such as textual analysis, case studies, and comparative analysis.

The article points out that male characters in Chinese comic strips not only carry the development of the storyline, but also have rich cultural significance and social value. The study reveals the gender presentation characteristics of male characters in Chinese comic strips, including the influence of traditional social concepts and the diversity of gender expression. The analysis of symbolic connotations highlights the polysemy of male character images and the differences in different cultural contexts. In addition, the study explores the symbolic expressions of male characters, such as the symbolic meanings of visual elements such as colors, lines and costumes. Findings of the study include that the gender presentation and symbolic connotations of male characters in Chinese comic strips are rich and diverse, reflecting social expectations and stereotypes of male values, behavioral norms and gender roles. The study highlights that a deeper understanding of the male image in Chinese comic books is of great practical significance and theoretical value for enriching the understanding of Chinese culture, promoting the cultural industry, and fostering social justice.

¹Ph.D. Candidate, Semiotics and Cultural Studies Program, School of Liberal Arts Shinawatra University E-mail: cjtd681@gmail.com

² Ph.D. (Linguistics) Lecturer & Advisor, Semiotics and Cultural Studies Program, School of Liberal Arts Shinawatra University E-mail: upath.k@mru.ac.th

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research questions of this paper

What are the unique image characteristics of male characters in Chinese comic strips? How to interpret these characteristics in depth?

How are the energy and reference of the gender expression of male characters in the classic works of Chinese comic strips expressed through art?

What are the characteristics of the symbolic meanings of male characters in Chinese comic strips and why?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Male Roles in Chinese Comic Strips

Chinese comic strips are a traditional folk-art form that recounts a storyline in successive images, also known as comic strips and comic books. There is a rich variety of male figures in Chinese comic strips, and they are usually based on history, literature, myths and legends, or real life. Discussing in the rich tradition of Chinese comic strips, a study by (Wei, 2005) points out that the portrayal of male characters has always been one of its central charms. These characters not only reflect the social culture of China from ancient to modern times, but also reflect the different expectations and ideals of male characters. In terms of artistic expression, male characters in comic strips are presented through delicate line drawings and vivid colors, forming a unique visual style. The depiction of these characters focuses on the portrayal of external images and expresses internal emotions and character in greater depth. In terms of narrative function, Shen (2012) concludes that male characters play a central role in comic strips, and that their behavior and experiences form the main thread of the comic strips, enabling the audience to understand the development of the storyline and changes in the social context through their perspectives. For example, from Guan Yu and Zhang Fei in the ancient Romance of the Three Kingdoms to the anti-Japanese heroes in the modern Railway Guerrillas, these characters, with their distinctive personalities and profound social significance, have become typical images in comic strips. The male characters in the comic strips also have educational significance, conveying positive values and moral concepts through their stories to enlighten the audience, especially the youth, and educate them about morality. These characters cover a wide range of subjects from ancient to modern times and from China to foreign countries, showing different cultural characteristics and social styles. With the development of the times, the male figures in modern comic strips have become more three-dimensional and personalized, and have become a bridge connecting the past and modernity, tradition and innovation (Wei, 2005).

Zhang (2019) investigates how masculinity is portrayed and constructed in Chinese media, including television, film, and advertising. The study analyzes a variety of media texts to explore the diverse and often contradictory representations of masculinity in contemporary Chinese society. Zhang's research reveals how media representations of masculinity are shaped by cultural, historical, and political factors, reflecting broader societal attitudes towards gender roles and identities. With the reform and opening up, Chinese comic strips have experienced diversification and marketisation, and the male characters have also presented rich and diverse characteristics. The mingling and collision of Western and traditional Chinese cultures made Chinese comic strips influenced by Western comics and superheroes, and male characters began to show more diverse and varied characteristics. In "Heroism in Comic Book Films: From Silent Guardians to Modern Avatars," Wu (2018) provides a comprehensive exploration of the evolution of heroism in comic book films, tracing its development from early silent films to contemporary blockbusters. Wu's study examines how comic book heroes have been depicted on the silver screen, analyzing their portrayal as symbols of courage, justice, and moral virtue. The creation and performance of these characters not only enriches the artistic connotation of Chinese comic strips, but also promotes the inheritance and development of this art form. Through these characters, we can see how Chinese comic strips record and reflect the changes of Chinese society and people's lives in their unique ways (CCTV, 2021). The gender representation of male characters in Chinese comic strips shows unique symbolic meanings from multiple perspectives, reflecting the perception and shaping of gender roles in the social and cultural environment.

Cultural Research Perspectives, Methods and Approaches

Cultural research is an interdisciplinary research field, which aims at systematically observing, comparing and analyzing human cultural phenomena, and exploring in-depth the connection and mutual influence between cultural elements. Its research scope is wide, including language, art, music, literature, religion, social organization and other fields, showing diverse research perspectives and methods.

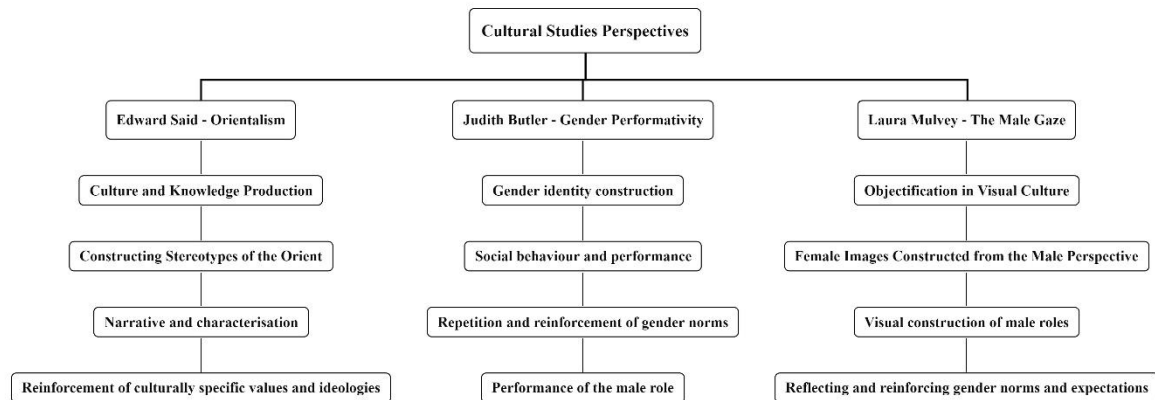


Figure 1: Cultural Studies Perspective Analysis Extrapolation Model

Image Source: Self-drawn by the author

As shown in Figure 1, the analytical derivation model of cultural studies perspectives the definition and scope of cultural studies vary among different schools and researchers, but the common aim is to reveal the impact of culture on individuals and society. By interpreting and analyzing the symbols and meanings behind the elements of culture, cultural studies examine the processes of cultural emergence, evolution and diffusion, and seeks to understand the deeper meanings represented by cultural phenomena. It adopts a multidisciplinary approach, such as anthropology, sociology, and literary studies, to provide a multidimensional perspective and methodology to reveal the shaping and influence of culture on individuals and society.

Cultural research methods and approaches play an important role in the study of Chinese comic book masculinity. Traditional methods include textual analysis, visual analysis and social semantics. Textual analysis focuses on the words, dialogues and plots in the serial paintings to reveal the symbolism and characterization of the male image. Scholars such as Stuart Hall and Edward Said have explored how cultural values and ideologies are embedded in narratives and character portrayals (Hall, 1997; Said, 1978). This perspective helps in understanding how male characters are positioned, their interactions, and the roles they play, revealing underlying cultural values. Visual analysis focuses on images and visual elements, interpreting the styling, dress and expression of the male figure, and exploring its symbolic expression and cultural connotations. Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze can be applied to analyze how male characters are visually constructed and perceived in comic strips (Mulvey, 1975). These perspectives complement the existing framework and offer a more comprehensive analysis of male character portrayal in Chinese comic strips.

Socio-semantics combines sociology and linguistics to explore the social contexts and word usage of masculinity and to analyze its socio-cultural background and cognitive patterns. Stuart Hall's concept of encoding and decoding provides a framework for understanding how cultural values and ideologies are embedded in media texts and how they are interpreted by audiences (Hall, 1973). In the context of analyzing male characters in Chinese comic strips, this concept can be applied to explore how visual elements such as clothing, hairstyle, and body language convey cultural meanings.

In recent years, emerging research methods such as discourse analysis, semantic network analysis, and digital humanities have provided new perspectives for understanding Chinese comic book masculinity. Discourse analysis focuses on linguistic phenomena and textual structure, revealing the discourse power and discourse

strategies of male figures. Semantic network analysis establishes associative networks to explore the position and role of male images in the cultural system. In the process of specific research, these methods and approaches not only enrich the understanding of male image in Chinese comic strips, but also provide important references and lessons for the development and deepening of the field of cultural studies.

Cultural Studies and Gender Performance

Cultural studies play an important role in gender studies. Through the lens of cultural studies, the process of gender generation, evolution and change can be analyzed and understood in depth. Cultural studies provide a theoretical framework and research methodology for examining the interactive relationship between gender and culture, and for delving into the social construction, cultural expression and power relations of gender.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity is particularly relevant, as it emphasizes how gender identity is not inherent but rather constructed through repeated performances of gender norms (Butler, 1990). In her seminal work "Gender Trouble," Butler argues that gender is performative, meaning that it is produced and reproduced through a series of stylized acts that conform to societal norms and expectations (Butler, 1990). Central to Butler's theory of gender performativity is the idea that gender is a product of cultural and social norms rather than a natural or essential characteristic. Butler challenges the idea that there are fixed or stable categories of gender, arguing instead that gender is a fluid and contingent phenomenon that is open to interpretation and change. According to Butler, individuals perform gender in ways that are intelligible and recognizable within a given cultural context, conforming to certain norms and expectations in order to be recognized as belonging to a particular gender category.

Therefore, in the application of gender research, based on the cultural research perspective, researchers can delve into the gender performance and symbolic meaning of male roles by analyzing the specific art form of Chinese comic strips. At the same time, the gender symbols and meanings behind the male characters can also be explored, such as the symbol of male power, the pressure of male social roles, and the change of male family roles.

Semiotics and the Male Role in Chinese Comic Strips

In the field of cultural studies, a symbol can be a concrete object, a symbolic unit in a symbolic system, a symbolic act or a combination of symbols in a symbolic language. The core view of semiotics is that symbols are the basic units of meaning in society and culture, and that people work together to understand and convey information through the use and communication of symbols.

METHODOLOGY

The current trend in mainstream research on micro-enterprises is that there have been a few studies on saving literacy and how well they work in micro-enterprises.

Filling a gap in the literature and adding empirical evidence from a developing country are the main goals of this study. It will test three hypotheses about how saving literacy and knowledge transfer as a mediator affect small businesses ability to pay their debts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Therefore, this study expects the following hypotheses:

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between saving literacy and micro enterprises ability to repay debt.

H2: There is a significant positive relationship between saving literacy and knowledge transfer.

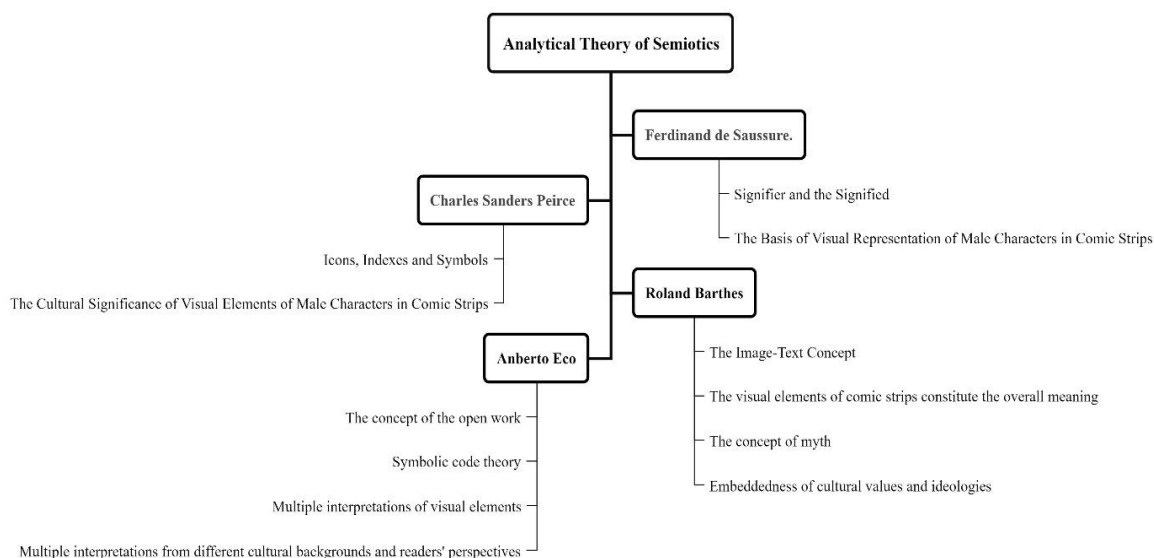


Image credit: Self-drawn by the author

As shown in the above model of the theoretical derivation of semiotic analysis: Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce are seminal figures in the field of semiotics, whose theories have greatly influenced the analysis of signs and symbols in various cultural contexts. Saussure's work, particularly his seminal work "Course in General Linguistics," laid the foundation for structural linguistics and semiotics (Saussure, 1916).

Saussure introduced the concepts of the Signifier and the Signified, emphasizing the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign. This concept has been widely applied in the analysis of visual signs and symbols, including the visual representation of male characters in Chinese comic strips. Saussure's emphasis on the relationship between the signifier and the signified is particularly relevant to the study's objective of interpreting the unique image characteristics and cultural values associated with male characters.

On the other hand, Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, often referred to as "semiotics of communication," offers a more nuanced understanding of signs and their meanings (Peirce, 1931). Peirce introduced the concept of the Sign, which he divided into three categories: Icon, Index, and Symbol. This framework provides a more comprehensive view of how signs function in communication, allowing for a deeper analysis of the visual elements used in the portrayal of male characters in Chinese comic strips. Peirce's semiotic theory can help in understanding how the visual elements in comic strips, such as clothing, facial expressions, and body language, contribute to the overall meaning and cultural significance of male characters.

Roland Barthes, a prominent figure in semiotics and cultural theory, introduced the concept of the "image-text" in his work "Image-Music-Text" (Barthes, 1977). He argued that images in visual texts, such as comic strips, are not merely illustrations of the text but are autonomous elements that contribute to the overall meaning. This concept is particularly relevant to the analysis of male characters in Chinese comic strips, as it suggests that visual elements, such as physical attributes and clothing, are integral to understanding the cultural values and personality traits conveyed by these characters.

Furthermore, Barthes' concept of "mythologies" provides a framework for understanding how cultural values and ideologies are embedded in visual images (Barthes, 1972). He argued that images convey not only their literal meaning but also a set of cultural myths and narratives. This concept is relevant to the analysis of male characters in Chinese comic strips, as it suggests that the visual representation of these characters carries with it a range of cultural assumptions and stereotypes. By analyzing these myths and narratives, researchers can uncover the underlying cultural values encoded in the visual elements of comic strips.

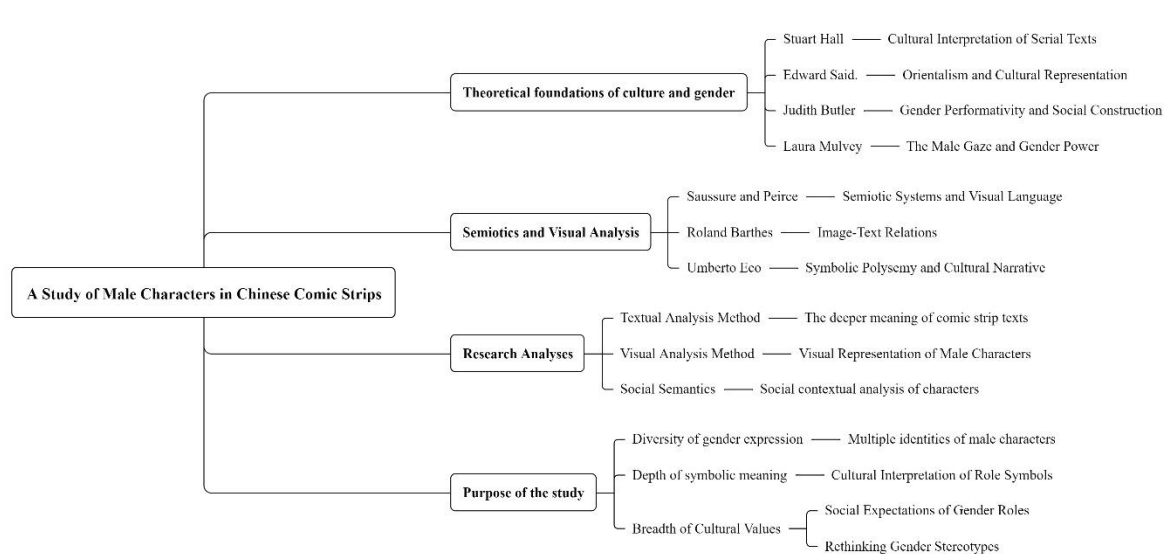
Umberto Eco, another influential semiotician, explored the concept of the "open work" in his book "The Role of the Reader" (Eco, 1976). He argued that artworks, including visual texts, are open to multiple interpretations and meanings. This concept can be applied to the analysis of male characters in Chinese comic strips, as it suggests that the visual elements of these characters can be interpreted in various ways depending on the cultural context and the reader's perspective. For example, the depiction of a male character wearing traditional Chinese clothing may be interpreted differently by audiences from different cultural backgrounds.

In line with the above, in the perspective of cultural studies, symbolic meaning refers to the implicit meaning and symbolic connotations conveyed by symbols. As a symbol, a sign has both abstract and concrete characteristics and can be expressed through language, images, colors, gestures and other forms. Therefore, analyzing the symbolic meaning of male images, the application of semiotics can also help us understand the relationship between male images and other cultural elements. In comic strips, male characters serve as a kind of symbols to express specific messages through the symbolic meanings conveyed by their images and behaviors, and connotations are the specific meanings and symbolic connotations implied by the symbols. Connotation is a complex, polysemous and ambiguous concept; different symbols may convey different meanings, and even the same symbol may have different meanings in different contexts. Therefore, the definition of symbolic meaning includes not only the meaning of the symbol itself, but also the connection and influence between the symbol and its related cultural, social and historical background.

RESEARCH METHODS

This paper adopts a comprehensive research method to conduct an in-depth analysis of the gender representations and symbolic meanings of male characters in Chinese comic strips. Firstly, a wide range of comic-strip works from different periods and styles were collected and compared through the literature research method, and then the textual analysis method was used to explore in-depth the texts, dialogues and plots of the works in order to reveal the symbolic meanings and characterization of the male characters. The case study method was used to interpret the visual styling, costumes and expressions of the characters to further explore the symbolic expressions and cultural connotations behind them. Comparative analyses were also employed to explore the position and role of male characters in the cultural system. In terms of cultural research methodology, the theories of Stuart Hall and Edward Said are drawn upon to analyze how cultural values and ideologies are embedded in narratives and character portrayals. Visual analysis focuses on images and visual elements, while socio-semantics combines sociology and linguistics to analyze the social contexts and language use of masculinities. Semiotic analysis utilizes the theories of Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce to decipher the cultural connotations of signs and symbols.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK



pth

Figure 3: Framework diagram for the study of male characters in Chinese comic strips









Image source: Self-drawn by the author

As shown in Figure 3 above, the framework for the study of male characters in Chinese comic strips takes the theoretical foundations as a starting point, covering Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and decoding, Edward Said's analyses of cultural values and ideology, Judith Butler's concept of gendered performativity, Saussure's and Peirce's semiotics foundations, Roland Barthes's concepts of image-text and myth, Amber to Icke's theory of the open work and the semiotic code theory, and Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. These theories provide rich perspectives and analytical tools for the study, helping the author to reveal the symbolism, characterization, social context, language use and cultural connotations of male characters from different angles.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Shaping Male Role Gender Representation in Chinese comic strips Symbolic Artistic Techniques

In Chinese comic strips, the gender expression of male characters is often conveyed through symbolic artistic techniques. This symbolic artistic expression not only reflects the social and cultural background of a particular historical period, but also embodies the artist's understanding and interpretation of gender roles. The symbolic expression of male roles covers a number of aspects. Table 1: Examples of symbolic elements in the artistic techniques of male characters in Chinese comic strips, organized as follows

Examples of Symbolic Elements in the Artistic Approach to Male Characters in Chinese Comic Strips					
Comic Strip Works	Male Characters	Image	Facial symbolism	Symbolization of clothing	Personality Symbolism
Great Changes in the Hill Country	Ting.Mian Hu		Eyes not large and thin Cheeks square facial roundness	Rough patchwork clothes, turban Zhongshan clothes, duckbill liberation cap	Simple, humorous, optimistic Honest, Kind
	Li Yue Hui		Hair parted in the middle, beard, country face	Dark colored suit, military insignia	Honest, open-minded
The Railway Guerrillas	Wang Qiang		Clean face, neat hairstyle	Dark-colored uniform, boots	Bold, reckless
	Liu Hong		Thick eyebrows, slim face	Black blouse and trousers, black cloth shoes, leggings, yarmulke	Rigid, calm and collected
The Poor Stickman Turns the Tide	Wang Guo Fan		Eyebrows are locked, eyes are flexible	Chinese lapel coat, large crotch trousers, cloth shoes, octagonal hat	Cynical
	Du Kui		Neat beard, firm gaze	Traditional Qing Dynasty Official Uniform, Warm Hat without Brim	Just, patriotic
The Battle of the First Sino-Japanese War	Ding Ru Chang		Beard disheveled, features out of proportion, hunchbacked	Traditional official uniform with lapel, warm hat without brim, rounded reverse collar	Selfish, cowardly, greedy
	Fang Ren qi		Beard disheveled, features out of proportion, hunchbacked	Traditional official uniform with lapel, warm hat without brim, rounded reverse collar	Selfish, cowardly, greedy

(Source of table: author's own)

To sum up, as shown in the sample examples in the table above, the gender representation of male characters is conveyed through a series of symbolic artistic techniques, which not only reflect the socio-cultural background of a particular historical period, but also embody the artist's deep understanding and unique interpretation of gender roles. Through the symbolization of figurative features, such as worn-out hats, square cheeks and middle-parted hair, comic strips shape the social identity and personality of the characters. Symbolization of character descriptions, such as uprightness, simplicity, and having a sense of justice, is reflected through the characters' behavior and decision-making, and becomes a visual symbol for evaluating the characters' moral standards. Symbolization of facial expressions, such as smiling, frowning, and resolute gaze, conveys the character's inner emotions and psychological state. Symbolization of clothing features, such as rough clothes, Zhongshan suits and dark suits, not only matches the social status of the characters, but also conveys their living and working environments. The deeper expression of symbolic meanings, such as coordinated features and upright posture, reflects the confidence and integrity of the positive characters, while reinforcing the moral attributes and social evaluation of the characters by contrasting them with the negative ones.

These symbolic artistic techniques not only constitute a powerful visual language that conveys the individual characteristics of the characters, but also reflect broader socio-cultural meanings and values. Through the symbolic expression of male characters, artists demonstrate their individual understanding of gender roles, an expression that includes both the reinforcement of traditional gender roles and the challenge and reflection of gender stereotypes. Overall, the artistic expression of male roles in Chinese comic strips is a complex and rich visual art form that combines aesthetic, cultural, moral and social meanings.

According to Hall (1997), cultural studies emphasize the importance of understanding cultural symbols and practices within their broader social and historical contexts. In this context, the use of visual symbols in Chinese comic strips, such as facial expressions, movements, and dialogues, serves as a form of cultural communication that conveys character traits and emotions. Characters like Liu Hong and Wang Qiang in "Railway Guerrillas" and Ting Mian Hu and Li Yue Hui in "The Mountain Village Great Changes" utilize these visual symbols to visualize their characters' traits and emotions, enhancing reader resonance and recognition.

From a semiotic perspective, male characters in comic strips communicate their social roles and personal traits through these symbols. Analyzing these symbols allows for a deeper understanding and interpretation of the male roles portrayed in the comic strips. For instance, a character's posture or facial expression may indicate their bravery or determination, contributing to the overall characterization and storytelling of the comic. This process aligns with Barthes' concept of mythology, where everyday objects or actions are imbued with symbolic meaning, creating a cultural narrative (Barthes, 1972). The analysis of male images in Chinese comic strips through a semiotic lens, as suggested by Saussure (1916) and Barthes (1972) reveals layers of cultural and social significance. Barthes' concept of mythology can directly be applied here, where these images become mythic, representing broader cultural narratives (Barthes, 1972).

In addition, the role position of male characters in comic strips and their connection with the plot also give them specific symbolic significance. The social groups, occupational identities or cultural symbols of the role-players convey the values, ideologies and behaviors of these groups through their presentation in the comic strips (Shen, 2012). The shaping of these symbolic symbolisms is influenced by social and cultural factors, and different symbolic symbol systems may exist in different periods and regions of comic strips, whose changes and evolutions contribute to our understanding of the complexity and diversity of male role-playing images in Chinese comic strips.

Characteristics of Symbolic Meanings of Male Characters in Chinese Comic Strips

The portrayal of male figures in Chinese comic strips through their image characteristics can be understood as a form of visual communication that conveys meaning beyond just their physical appearance. According to Barthes (1977), images in media are not just representations of reality but are constructed and encoded with

cultural meanings.

The symbolic meaning of male characters in Chinese comic strips is no single and fixed, but shows the diversity of symbolic meaning, the complexity of social semantics, and the polysemy of cultural value connotations with the changes of society and culture.

Diversity of Symbolic Meanings

The symbolic meanings of male characters in Chinese comic strips show rich diversity, and the diversity of male character images is reflected in their appearance, personality, behavior and close connection with the social and cultural background.

Table 2: Analysis of the symbolic meanings of gender representations of male characters in Chinese comic strips, collated as follows

Analysis of the Diversity of Symbolic Meanings of Male Characters in Chinese Comic Strips Table of Analysis		
Type	Male Role Characterization	Symbolism
Physical Characteristics	Masculine and powerful appearance	Representing strength and valour
Personality traits	Mild and gentle	Embodies knowledge, wisdom and cultivation
	Courageous and bold	Challenging, representing justice
Behavior	Loves to communicate and think	Representing wisdom and inner charisma
	Energetic and adventurous	Pursuing freedom
Emotional Expression	Participate in fights	Courage and determination
	Reads and plays the zither	Educational and cultural aspirations
Social Roles	affectionate and caring	Possesses qualities of tenderness and delicacy
Values	Soldiers, policemen, businessmen, farmers, etc.	Behavioral norms
	Positive and negative images	As archetypes of virtue and heroism

(Source of table: author's own)

To summarize the above table, male characters in comic strips display a wide range of gender characteristics and temperaments from masculine and powerful martial arts heroes to gentle and refined literati scholars to deeply emotional characters with both masculine and feminine qualities. These characters not only provide readers with a rich experience visually, but also demonstrate a wide range of differences in personality and behavior from brave and bold, representatives of justice, to energetic individuals who pursue freedom and adventure. This diversity not only reflects the differences of individual males in society, but also demonstrates the richness of comic strip creation itself.

The symbolism conveyed by male characters in comic strips through their appearance and behavior is influenced by social and cultural factors, and there are differences in times, regions and cultural backgrounds. For example, traditional societies may be more inclined to emphasize male masculinity, bravery and leadership, while modern societies may focus more on the diversity and complexity of male roles. The way these roles are portrayed and the types of roles played not only influence the stereotypes and ways of perceiving male roles, but also shape male behavioral patterns and social roles to a certain extent. As a vehicle for cultural transmission, comic strips, through compelling narratives, not only entertain and engage readers, but also provide a nuanced understanding of morality and ethics, enabling readers to gain insight into the cultural values, beliefs and norms of Chinese society.

In addition, positive male images in comic strips, such as the archetypes of bravery and selflessness, understood through cultural studies and semiotic theories, serve as cultural symbols that convey

deeper meanings and values of Chinese society. These idealized images of masculinity are recognized and revered in society and culture, exerting influence and pressure on young males, as well as reflecting society's expectations and idealization of male roles. Thus, the diversity of male roles in Chinese comic strips is not only a richness of artistic expression, but also a reflection of social and cult

Socio-Semantic Complexity

The complexity of the symbolic meaning of male characters in Chinese comic strips is jointly constituted by occupational identity, class status, traditional concepts, gender role critique, richness of cultural meanings, multi-layered symbolic meanings, and social expectations and identifications. These factors interact with each other to form a multi-dimensional symbolic system, which makes the image of male characters in comic strips both individually unique and carrying rich social and cultural meanings.

Table 3: Socio-semantic analyses of gender representations of male characters in Chinese comic strips, organized as follows.

A Socio-Semantic Analysis of Gender Representation of Male Characters in Chinese Comic Strips		
Social Semantics	Male Role Gender Representation	Male Character Symbols
Occupational Identity Diversity	Roles with different professional identities such as martial artists, leaders, and ordinary people.	Through different occupational characteristics, the characters show different attitudes and spiritual outlooks on life, such as striving, leadership and mediocrity.
Class status reflection	The characters' behavior and social interactions reflect social structures and class relationships.	Different occupational identities of the characters imply different social classes and statuses, reflecting the differences in social classes.
Influence of traditional concepts	Characters display qualities such as strength, bravery and determination, reflecting men's sense of family and social responsibility.	The characters emphasize strength, bravery and other qualities, reflecting the responsibility and status of men in the family and society.
Gender role critique and reflection	Satire and irony are used to challenge the stereotypical framework of gender roles. Character images and behaviors are interpreted differently in different socio-cultural contexts.	Roles challenge the inherent framework of gender roles through critical reflection, adding depth and richness to the role image. Character images and behaviors are interpreted differently in different cultural contexts, demonstrating the multiple meanings of character images.
Multi-layered symbolic meanings	Characterization and performance reflect social expectations of male roles.	Role portrayal and performance reflect social expectations of male roles and shape people's idealized perceptions of male roles.

(Source of table: author's own)





The above table briefly describes the symbolic meanings of male characters in Chinese comic strips, highlighting the diversity of occupations and the influence of social perceptions. Characters such as martial artists, leaders, and people show the richness and diversity of social roles through their respective characteristics. These roles not only portray different images, but also reflect social class. Traditional concepts portray men as brave, strong, and responsible, but comic strips also contain critiques of gender stereotypes that add depth to the characters. The professional identities of the characters reveal social diversity and values, while reflecting social class and status. The comic strip demonstrates a deep insight into social reality through critical reflection.

Through these visual and narrative techniques, comic strips are able to convey rich and nuanced portrayals of male characters, adding depth and complexity to the storytelling process (Hall, 1997). Male characters in comic strips are a multi-dimensional symbolic system, and the complexity of their symbolic meanings is a combination of professional identity, class status, traditional concepts, gender role critique, cultural significance, and the multi-layered nature of symbolic meanings.

Polysemy of Cultural Value Meaning

The symbolic cultural value connotations of male characters in Chinese comic strips show significant polysemy. Table 4: Analysis of the polysemy of cultural value connotations of the gender representation of the male

character Chen Shi Cheng in the comic strip *White Light*, organized as follows

An Example of Multiple Meanings of Cultural Value Connotations of Gender Representation of Male Characters in Chinese Comic Strips					
Male Character Specimen	Imagery	Characterization	External connotations	Connotation	Symbolic Cultural Value Connotation
Chen Shi Cheng in <i>White Light</i>		Short, grey, messy hair	Age and the hardships of the status quo	Symbols of age and experience	The image of Chen Shi Cheng reflects the living condition and psychological situation of ordinary people in society.
		Grey face	Exhaustion and health problems	Reflections of life's hardships	The characteristics of the character may reflect the conflict between traditional values and modern social changes.
		Strained, red, swollen eyes	Insomnia	Mapping of psychological state	The struggle for survival and psychological changes of individuals in adversity are deeply explored to show the complexity of human nature.
		Thin face with prominent cheekbones and chin	Chronic fatigue	Social Status Indicator	Through the experiences and emotions of the characters, readers can empathize with them on a cultural level and enhance their sense of identification with them.

(Source of table: author's own)

From the above table, it is easy to see that Chen Shi Cheng in He Yuezhi's comic strip *White Light* is a character with profound polysemy, and his image and behavior can be interpreted from many angles, reflecting rich social and cultural values. From the perspective of cultural studies and semiotics, Chen Shi Cheng is not only a reflection of the individual's situation, but also a symbol of social class and personal resistance. If he demonstrates traditional virtues such as kindness, wisdom and bravery, his image echoes Chinese cultural archetypes and becomes an idealized personality revered by society. Through selfless action and dedication, such a character not only inspires, but also reinforces social and cultural values. However, the polysemy of the character also means that he may have more complex connotations. A portrayal of Chen Shi Cheng with negative traits such as selfishness, cunning or laziness becomes a symbol of moral decay and social ills, highlighting the serious consequences of deviating from social norms through the form of a cautionary tale. This multi-dimensional characterization makes Chen Shi Cheng not only a reinforcer of cultural values, but also a possible challenger to the existing cultural value system.

In addition, the image of Chen Shi Cheng embodies the complex interaction between the individual and the social environment, as well as his struggle and resistance under social pressure. His external hardships and internal psychological state map out the individual's situation and self-perception in the social hierarchy. Through in-depth analyses of him, readers are able to sense the challenges faced by the character as well as the socio-cultural context in which he lives. The image of Chen Shi Cheng in *White Light* is multi-layered; he not only carries the story of an individual, but also reflects the diversity of social values. His image and behavior have different interpretations in different socio-cultural contexts, demonstrating the depth and richness of the character's image and providing readers with a multi-dimensional perspective to understand and feel the socio-cultural phenomenon.

Cultural studies emphasize the role of media and popular culture in shaping and reflecting societal values and norms. In this context, the negative archetypes of "Selfish Characterization," "Cunning Characterization," "Cowardly," and "Lazy Characters" serve as cautionary tales, highlighting the consequences of negative behavior and societal expectations of different behaviors (Barthes, 1977). These negative characterizations can

be seen as a form of moral education, reinforcing the idea that selfishness, cunningness, cowardice, and laziness are undesirable traits that lead to personal and social regression (Williams, 1976).

This polysemy stems from the different value interpretations and meanings of the roles in different socio-cultural contexts. Cultural studies and semiotic theories provide us with perspectives to analyze the deeper cultural and social values of these characters. Positive male figures are usually associated with virtues such as kindness, wisdom and bravery, and become cultural archetypes that resonate with traditional Chinese values and symbolize the ideals promoted by Chinese society. The selfless actions and dedication of these characters not only inspire, but also reinforce cultural values. The negative characters, on the other hand, are often characterized by selfishness, cunning and laziness, symbolizing moral decay or social ills, and highlighting the consequences of deviating from social norms through the use of cautionary tales.

In Chinese comic strips, the portrayal of male characters as either positive or negative figures reflects deeper cultural and societal values, as analyzed through the lens of cultural studies and semiotic theories. Positive characters, depicted as embodying virtues like kindness, wisdom, and bravery, serve as cultural archetypes that resonate with traditional Chinese values (Li, 2018). These characters are not just individuals but symbols representing ideals that are admired, upheld, and perpetuated in Chinese society (Barthes, 1977). Their selfless actions and dedication to noble causes not only serve as inspirational role models but also reinforce these cultural values to readers. Conversely, negative characters are depicted as embodying traits that are detrimental to society, such as selfishness, cunning, and laziness (Wu, 2016).

Furthermore, the use of archetypes in Chinese comic strips can be seen as a form of cultural communication, where symbols and images are used to convey cultural values and ideals (Hall, 1997). Through these archetypes, comic strips engage in a dialogue with readers, reinforcing cultural norms and encouraging the preservation of traditional values in modern society (Barthes, 1977). Overall, the portrayal of positive male figures in Chinese comic strips reflects the cultural and societal values of China, using semiotic cues to communicate these values to readers and inspire them to embody these ideals in their own lives.

The symbolic meanings of male characters in Chinese comic strips are multilayered and multifaceted. They not only reflect the values and expectations of Chinese society through the lens of visual arts and cultural studies, but also provide insight into the characters and enhance the understanding of their cultural and social contexts, thus achieving a unity of depth and breadth in artistic expression and cultural communication.

DISCUSSIONS

There are issues that can be further discussed in this paper:

Interpreting The Male Image in Chinese Comic Strips from The Perspective of Male Gaze

In the context of comic strips, the concept of the male gaze can help us understand how male characters are depicted in ways that cater to a presumed male audience. Male characters may be portrayed in idealized or hyper-masculine ways, emphasizing physical strength, power, and dominance, which align with traditional notions of masculinity. This portrayal can reinforce stereotypes about male behavior and appearance, shaping how male characters are perceived by readers. By applying Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, researchers can critically analyze how male characters in comic strips are visually constructed and how their portrayal reflects and reinforces dominant gender norms and expectations.

The theory of the male gaze points out the characteristics of men in terms of perspective and viewing behavior, and this theory has important application value in the study of male images in Chinese serial paintings. In the male images of Chinese comic strips, the male gaze, as the main way of viewing, demonstrates male-dominated gender power relations and gender bias by examining and evaluating female characters. For example, in *The Story of the Western Chamber*, the male characters' gaze on the female characters mainly focuses on their appearance and physique, and presents a visual construction and symbolic presentation of "male gazing at female". Through the study of the application of the male gaze in Chinese comic strips, the role of the male gaze in shaping and maintaining gender norms and power structures in Chinese society can be explored in

depth.

Research on Male Roles in Chinese Comic Strips from the Perspective of Cross-cultural Studies

Cross-cultural research provides valuable insights into the study of male figures in Chinese lanthanum. By comparing the male images of Chinese comic strips with those of other regions, we can gain a deeper understanding of the uniqueness of the male images of Chinese comic strips. For example, male images in American comic strips place more emphasis on autonomy and personal achievement, while male images in Japanese comic strips are more inclined to explore the heart and emotional expression. Compared with Western male images, male images in Chinese comic strips tend to emphasize family responsibilities and loyalty, reflecting the characteristics of Chinese social and cultural values (Ng Hui, 2023). Cross-cultural studies also show differences in the portrayal and positioning of masculinity in different cultures, which help us better understand and interpret the meanings and symbols of masculinity in Chinese comic strips. These differences reflect the differences in understanding and expectations of male roles in different cultural contexts. Future research can explore in depth the mutual influence and absorption between Chinese comic strip male images and other cultures through further cross-cultural comparisons.

CONCLUSION

This paper discusses the gender representations and symbolic meanings as well as the socio-cultural significance of male characters in Chinese comic strips based on the perspective of cultural studies using semiotic methods, which provides an important reference for understanding and interpreting the gender concepts and cultural factors carried by Chinese comic strips. This study reveals that the imagery and shaping of male images in Chinese culture reflect social expectations and stereotypes of male values, behavioral norms and gender roles. Analyzing the expression and shaping of the male image helps to reveal the power relations between genders and the distribution of social roles, break down gender stereotypes, and promote the fair evaluation and diversified development of individuals in society. In addition, the systematic study of male image helps to understand the current situation and challenges of China's serial painting industry, and provides theoretical support and guidance for the innovative development of serial painting. At the same time, it identifies problems and opportunities in the industry and promotes the improvement of artistic level and market competitiveness.

In conclusion, an in-depth study of male characters in Chinese serial paintings not only helps to enrich the understanding of Chinese culture, but also has important practical significance and theoretical value in promoting the development of the cultural industry and social justice.

REFERENCES

- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. Hill and Wang.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image-Music-Text*. Hill and Wang.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- CCTV programmer. (2021, October 29). *Stories in Comic Strips "Characters - Stories"*[Video file]. Retrieved from <https://tv.cctv.com/2021/10/29/VIDEB9kluw86DEO2Mi56iQQh211029.shtml>
- Chin, W. (2012). *Masculinity in Chinese cinema: Heroism and martial arts*. Routledge.
- Eco, U. (1976). *A theory of semiotics*. Indiana University Press.
- Hall, S. (1973). *Encoding and decoding in the television discourse*. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage.
- Jones, M. (2016). Gender stereotypes in media representations. *Journal of Media Studies*, 20(3), 45-62.
- Li, S. (2018). Chinese comic strip male images: Cultural studies and semiotic perspectives. *Chinese Journal of Popular Culture*, 4(2), 189-204.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6-18.
- Peirce, C. S. (1931-1958). *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Harvard University Press.
- Saussure, F. de. (1916). *Course in general linguistics* (C. Bally & A. Shehade, Trans.; W. Baskin, Ed.). Philosophical Library.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Vintage Books.
- Shen, Q. (2011). *Narrative Research on Chinese Comic Strip Narratives* PhD (Dissertation, Shanghai University). Ph. <https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=IfoZxnPhf0WhNPNwHWUcOAOI0hOHPw615oq5ex5RumFUetyGHcg>

Gender Representation and Symbolic Meaning of Male Characters in Chinese Comic Strips from the Perspective of Cultural Studies

UdUtesrbKoAQkusB_NNsaA93xOakFcbVD2O2WH1rq3R6qDQ0JW3z4MUH1M2ZoZZF5ckDUlj2eF50R-EPskeg1_5uFFREa-BYSo-SGy5EDfEoZ&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS

Smith, J. (2013). The role of gender stereotypes in media representations. *Media Studies Journal*, 25(4), 78-94.

Wei, H. (2005). An overview of research on Chinese comic strips and the art of painting. *Journal of Zhengzhou Institute of Light Industry (Social Science Edition)* (03), 30-37.

Wu H. (2023). A Study on the Changing Image of China in the West under the Perspective of Intercultural Communication (5th to 17th Centuries BC) PhD (Dissertation, Shandong University). Ph. <https://link.cnki.net/doi/10.27272/d.cnki.gshdu.2023.007137> doi:10.27272/d.cnki.gshdu.2023.007137.

Wu, H. (2018). Heroism in comic book films: From silent guardians to modern avatars. *Film Studies Quarterly*, 42(3), 321-339.

Wu, Y. (2016). Negative male characterizations in Chinese comic strips. *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, 2(2), 189-204.

Zhang, Q. (2019). Representations of masculinity in Chinese media. *Chinese Media Studies*, 15(2), 201-218.