

# *Study on the Narrative Characteristics of Chinese Traditional Comic Books*

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**Keywords:** Chinese comic books, Art forms, Narrative characteristics, Traditional culture, Continuous story

**Abstract:** Chinese comic books, with a development history of thousands of years, have formed their own unique art forms. The works mainly use a combination of pictures and text to present easily understandable picture content, using an artistic style of presenting the picture above the text or the text beside the picture, which has gradually stabilized during its continuous development, forming a high degree of recognition. Works can be found on murals, paper-printing, woodcarving and other mediums, with various ways of expression and rich artistic value. At the same time, the interesting artistic effect of comic books is widely loved by the people, and has a deep mass foundation. This article mainly analyzes the narrative characteristics of Chinese traditional comic books from four aspects: the interaction between picture and text, the emphasis on complete plot to form story, the continuity between frames, and the easily understandable picture content. It provides a certain reference value for the in-depth study of Chinese comic books.

## **1. Introduction**

Comic books, also known as "Xiaorensu" in Chinese [1], whose full name is "Lianhuan Tuhua" in Chinese, was first used to describe this type of artistic works in 1927 in a children's book called "Lianhuan Tushu San Guo Zhi" published by Shanghai World Bookstore [2]. Afterwards, the terminology was gradually unified throughout the country and given an exclusive name. Later, it was simplified and called "Lianhuan Hua" directly. As for the origin of Chinese comic books, art historians generally believe that the history of Chinese comic books can be traced back to the continuous patterns carved on statues in Han Dynasty or even earlier patterns carved on bronze ware. During this period, the artistic works had already formed the prototype of today's comic books. Therefore, this article will start from the continuous patterns on ancient sculptures and murals to discuss the development history of comic books.

### **1.1. The Emergence and Development of Chinese Comic Books**

Chinese sequential art originated in the feudal society period. During this time, emperors and kings constructed tombs to display their supreme status. The Han dynasty royal family favored wall paintings in tombs to showcase their authority after death, and different styles were used for

decoration. At the same time, Buddhism was introduced during the Han dynasty, and to better spread religious beliefs and ideas, Buddhist organizations excavated a large number of grottoes, where sculptures and murals were created. Therefore, wall paintings became popular, and sequential art emerged as one type of art form along with the development and application of wall paintings. For example, the Han tomb mural "Kill Three Valiants by Offering Them Two Peaches as Reward" at Shao Gou No. 61 in Luoyang, Henan Province presented a complete and continuous storyline, while the Northern Wei dynasty mural "The Nine-Colored Deer's Birth" at Cave 257 of the Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes depicted the story in a long scroll format with different episodes separated by architecture, plants, and mountains. During the prosperous Tang dynasty, the mural story "The Unborn Grudge" on the north wall of Cave 171 of the Mogao Grottoes possessed the typical characteristics of mature sequential art [3], with the combination of pictures being segmented, creating independent spaces between stories based on their time and content sequence. By the Ming dynasty, the stone-carved sequential art "Drawings of Confucius Saint Deeds" in the Saint Worship Palace of the Confucius Temple in Qufu, Shandong Province, depicted the life story of Confucius in a one-picture-one-text format [4], forming a complete style for sequential art and laying the foundation for the current genre. In addition to sculpture and wall painting, works such as the silk-scroll painting "Luoshen Appraisal Painting" from the Wei and Jin dynasties, the paper-painting "Han Xizai Evening Banquet" and "On the Riverside Scene of Pure Brightness" from the Song dynasty, and the woodcut illustration "Nine Odes" by Chen Hongshou from the Ming and Qing dynasties all possess characteristics of sequential art. It can be said that a series of sequential natured works of art during the feudal society period laid the foundation for the development and formation of sequential art styles, making indelible contributions to the art's prosperity in the future.

## 1.2. The Prosperity and Decline of Chinese Comic Books

After the establishment of the Republic of China, Chinese comic books entered a period of diversified development and golden age, which can be divided into several stages. This period was influenced by internal and external environments, and social openness and strong demands for democracy and freedom provided ample space for comic art development. The comic books published by Shanghai World Book Company in the 1920s, such as "San Guo Zhi" (Figure 1), "Journey to the West", and "Water Margin", represent the achievements of comic art in this period [5]. At the same time, a group of outstanding comic artists emerged, such as Zhu Runzhai, Shen Manyun, and Liu Boliang. Meanwhile, comic books also played the role of spreading education and revolutionary ideas in the Communist revolutionary areas. The revolutionary subject matter in "Iron Buddha Temple", created by woodcut artists in Yan'an, highlighted the artistic characteristics of comic books. From the beginning of the establishment of the People's Republic of China to the mid-1960s, was the second historical stage. In the early days of the People's Republic of China, the government used comic books as a propaganda tool and undertook the task of educating people, vigorously supporting the creation of comic art works and publishing a large number of art works. Comic books were everywhere in society, with a rich variety of themes and types. Representative works of this period include Wang Shuhui's "The Romance of the Western Chamber" (Figure 2), Zhu Xuanxian's "Great Friendship", and He Youzhi's "Great Changes in the Mountain Village"[6]. A comic book magazine called "Comic Book Report" was also established, which can be described as a time of many flowers blossoming and many voices contending. During the Cultural Revolution, comic books became tools for serving politics, and class struggle became the core of works creation. The direction of artistic creation was influenced, but there were also representative works of art such as "Norman Bethune in China" (Figure 3) and "Little Eighth Route Army". With the end of the

Cultural Revolution, people's repressed emotions began to erupt, and comic books truly entered their heyday. Data statistics show that the number of comic books published in this period was the highest in history[7]. With the intervention of photography and animation, comic books became more vivid, and the atmosphere became more intense, and the selection of themes became more freedom. Some art works directly targeted the Cultural Revolution, accusing it of causing social trauma. In 1979, "Comic Book Report" published art works such as "Maple" (Figure 4) and "Scar", which accurately revealed the ugly face of the "Gang of Four". Once published, these works had a huge social impact. After 1985, with the rapid development of economy and technology, foreign cultural and artistic works entered China. New media such as computers and television immediately occupied the market. The promotion of movies and comics works, combined with vicious competition within the comic book industry, led to a rapid decline in comic art, falling into a valley. In recent years, under the organization of the China Artists Association, there have been calls for innovative thinking and academic exploration of comic art in the current environment, with the aim of promoting the further development of comic art.

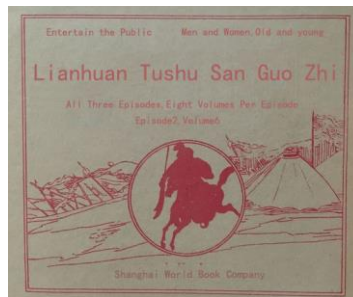


Figure 1: Shanghai World Book Company "San Guo Zhi".

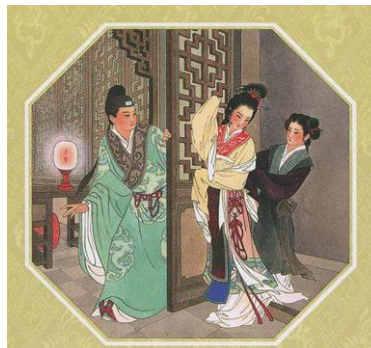


Figure 2: Wang Shuhui's "The Romance of the Western Chamber".



Figure 3: Norman Bethune in China.



Figure 4: Comic Book Report "Maple".

## 2. The Narrative Characteristics of Traditional Chinese Comic Books

### 2.1. The Coordination between Image and Text in Traditional Chinese Comic Books

Comic books present an artistic form of fusion between literature and painting arts by combining images and text. However, they are different from traditional works of pictorial art in that they rely on the coordination and interaction between images and texts to narrate a complete story, rather than being a combination for expressing sentiments or aiming for aesthetic effect. In comic book art, images and texts each have their own strengths and closely relate to and constrain each other. Each artwork is created with a focus on static, momentary, representative, or climactic content, as the details cannot be shown in the process. Literature has a strong narrative function and can describe the mental dynamic of the portrayed characters, dialogues, and atmosphere, exhibiting the whole process inside the subject. The two arts interact, complement each other's strengths and weaknesses, and constitute a complete narrative art piece. They constrain each other mainly in two aspects. First, before the creation of the comic book, the story needs to be written in words, which then guides the creation of pictorial art. During the writing process, the characteristics of comic book art need to be taken into account, especially with regards to the overall layout structure of the image. Thus, the painting art constrains the literary art to some extent. Second, after the creation of the pictorial art, individual words need to be adjusted according to the presented content to ensure consistency between images and text and the refinement and delicacy of the work. Therefore, the coordination of images and text in comic book art is very sophisticated [8].

### 2.2. Emphasize the Complete Narrative Structure

Narrativity is one of the most significant features of traditional Chinese comic art, setting it apart from other forms of visual art. Each narrative in a comic is meticulously crafted, as stories are composed of multiple plot points, and plot points serve as the primary source for character development and plot progression. The completeness and accuracy of each plot point directly affects the continuation of the story and the characterization of its typical figures. Combining images with text, Chinese comics employ brief textual descriptions to convey the content of each panel, unlike other forms of literature that use longer paragraphs for explanation. Thus, the ability of an editor to accurately summarize and connect plot points between panels is crucial for maintaining the coherence of the story. Similarly, the images in Chinese comics must also relate to one another, creating a focal point for the story's development. The emphasis on the process of things in Chinese comic art leads to the development of narrativity. Through the combination of accessible texts and images, Chinese comics communicate difficult concepts and stories to a broad audience. Their popularity stems from their simplification of life and the extension of education,

particularly in times when illiteracy was widespread. Narrativity is therefore a crucial feature of Chinese comic art, setting it apart from other narrative art forms [9].

### 2.3. Continuity between Images

Lu Xun once said, "The term 'Lianhuan Tuhua' has been commonly used, and there is no need to change it. However, if translated literally, it should be called 'continuous picture'." From this statement, we can feel that the continuity of the artwork is an essential characteristic of Chinese comics. In terms of content, Chinese comics have a beginning, climax, and ending, emphasizing a continuous process to form a complete story. Each story plot in Chinese comics needs to pay attention to its connection with other plots. The connection cannot be too far apart or too closely linked, maintaining clear threads and authentic depictions of character relationships and images, forming a continuous and comprehensive story plot. However, Chinese comics sometimes have repetitive content, which can cause confusion in the narrative. In these cases, we need to review the content of each artwork carefully. If the development of the story requires repetition, and its appearance does not affect the overall continuation of the story or create any bias, readers will naturally understand the artist's intentions and form the integrity of the story. Words are also an essential means of enhancing the continuity of the artwork. As images can only record the momentary actions, words can guide readers to understand the story's content through reading. Therefore, the continuity of Chinese comics is essential for the real portrayal of the story content and the creation of the artwork's artistic appeal.

### 2.4. Easy-to-understand Screen Content

The reason why Chinese comics have been a long-standing art form in painting and continue to hold an important place in the art world while being beloved by the masses lies in their popular nature. First, in terms of content, comic artists typically draw from historical classics, stories of typical figures, local customs, everyday life, social hot topics, and other familiar themes to create works that are accessible to a broad audience, suitable for both young and old, and enjoyed by all. Second, in terms of form, comic works combine both text and images. Regardless of the subject matter, the text and images complement each other, making it easy for readers to understand. Finally, in terms of creative methods, there are various types of comic works, such as Woodcut comics, New Year's print comics, Film and Television comics, and Cartoon comics [10], all of which are well-known among the general public and easy to understand and explain. Furthermore, some comic works are considered classic examples by many artists because the artists have grasped the key points of comic creation and understood the popular artistic charm that comic works should have. In the 1980s, some people argued that comic art should be considered as "high art", but this debate quickly ended.

## 3. Conclusion

Traditional Chinese comic art has weathered through the ups and downs of history, accumulated over time, and given birth to the essence of excellent traditional Chinese art. It showcases beautiful, popular, and distinctly Chinese art that embodies strong traditional culture. Through researching Chinese comic art, analyzing its artistic features, and appreciating the artistic charm of combining images and text, people can recall their memories of comic art, learn and understand more about this form of art, and present it as a reference for current works that combine text and images. Furthermore, it is hoped that such research can inject some hope into the currently sluggish market for comic art.

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