

The Current Situation of China's Comics Industry and the Essence of Comics Creation

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Abstract: *After more than a hundred years of development and evolution, narrative comics have now become a literary form comparable to novels. With the development of China's Internet, comics have gradually evolved from paper media to digital media that is more suitable for reading on mobile devices, and a number of comics platforms have emerged. After more than ten years of market competition, these comic platforms are now facing a series of severe challenges. The lack of higher education in comics, the profit model of comics platforms, and the living conditions of comics creators are all factors that affect the future of China's comics industry. This study uses the case analysis method of qualitative research, taking the phenomenal comics in Japan and the United States as examples, and conducts comparative analysis of pictures and texts, sales data analysis, etc. to analysis the current situation and problems of the Chinese comics industry and explore the essence of comics creation.*

Keywords: comics industry, comics platforms, story comics, essence of comics, comics creation

1. Introduction

At the global level, narrative comics have developed over a hundred years and have become the most widely used and popular content medium (Hatfield & Beaty, 2020; Lo et al., 2019). Lianhuanhua - widely considered a Chinese-style comic art form that never really flourished. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Japanese animation began to be broadcast in China, which increased the export of Japanese comics in China. Influenced by Japanese comics, a large number of creators began to try to imitate the creative style of Japanese comics. Due to the efforts of these creators, China experienced a brief period of publishing glory.

The comic magazine "Manyou" founded in 1997, and subsequent comic magazines such as "Comics World" and "Black and White Comic Culture" opened up a new situation in China's original comic market. The achievement was pushed to the top by the comics magazine Longman Youth Sunday, which was founded in 2006. The magazine represented the highest level of original Chinese comics at that time in terms of creators, work quality, and reader reputation. However, the emergence of the Internet and mobile terminals has changed the reading habits of Chinese readers. The medium of comics has quickly shifted from books and magazines to online publication to adapt to the reading of mobile devices. This change has

promoted digital creation and online publishing business, laying the foundation for the subsequent online comics platform.

The Chinese government also realized the huge potential of the comics industry. Since 2005, the government has introduced a series of national policies to support the development of the animation industry. With the support of national policies, the total value of China's animation industry soared from RMB 11.7 billion (USD 1.6 billion) in 2005 to RMB 88.2 billion (USD 12.3 billion) in 2013. This huge market potential quickly attracted the attention of investors. With the influx of capital, several large-scale comics platforms emerged in China around 2010. These include China's first original comics platform "Youyaoqi Comics", the female-oriented comics app "Kuaikan Comics", and the well-capitalized "Tencent Comics". "Bilibili Comics", which merged with "NetEase Comics" in 2019, also made a high-profile intervention in the layout of the comics market. By 2023, the animation industry will reach an impressive milestone with a total value of more than RMB 300 billion (USD 41.3 billion).

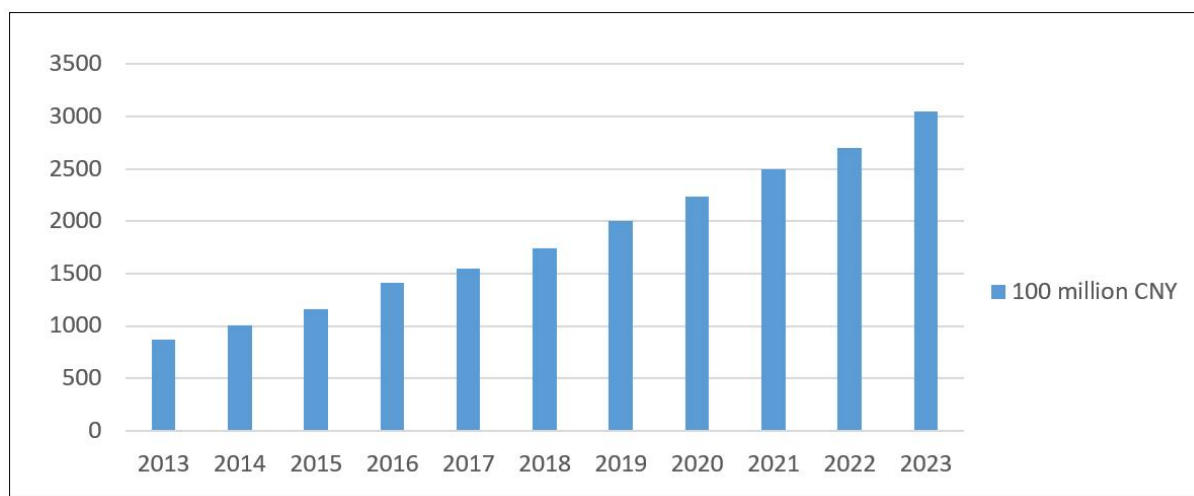


Figure 1: Total market value of China's animation and comics industry from 2013 to 2023

The rapid development in the short term will inevitably lead to various problems, such as the improvement of education, competition between platforms, the situation of creators, etc. This study will explain the current situation of China's comics industry from the above aspects, and analysis the essence of comics creation by taking well-known classic comics as examples.

2. Research Aim

This study aims to explore the current situation of the Chinese comics industry, focusing on the problems of the education system, the relationship between the platform and the market, and the situation of comics creators. A case study of a global phenomenal comics works is conducted to analyze the essence of comics creation. By studying the graphic comparison and sales data of the comics, the shortcomings and gaps of the Chinese comics industry are found, and then the core essence of comics creation is deduced. Suggestions are provided for comics creators who seek to incorporate these methods into their creative process.

3. Research Question

- 1) What problems has the Chinese comics industry exposed in its short-term development?
- 2) What is the essence of comics creation?

4. Literature Review

In recent years, the prosperity of China's comics industry has attracted the attention of many scholars. Many researchers have published research results from the perspectives of education, market, academics, and creative skills.

A. Education

The Chinese government has noticed the huge potential of the comics industry. To meet the demand for professionals in the commercial market, the Ministry of Education of China officially approved the establishment of a bachelor's degree in comics in 2016 (China, 2017). The establishment of the comics discipline is a landmark moment in the development of the comics industry, indicating that the government recognizes the academic prospects of comics and is committed to cultivating academically capable comics talents. In the same year, Beijing Film Academy and Jilin Animation Institute became the first two art colleges approved to offer degrees in comics. Led by these two institutes, as of 2023, a total of 11 undergraduate universities and colleges in China are qualified to offer bachelor's degrees in comics. The Chinese government has also realized that the cultivation of comic talents is closely related to higher education. At the same time, in order to respond to the market demand, some art colleges began to try to offer elective courses in comic creation and explore the training path of comic talents. In addition, commercial comic institutions have emerged in the market, providing professional training and employment docking for students who want to become comic creators. The diversified ways of vocational education show that the comic education has reached a consensus between the Chinese government and the comic industry.

Table 1: Universities in China offering comics degrees - Ministry of Education of China 2023

| Universities | Major | Major Code | Degree | Years | Approval time |
|--|-------|------------|------------|-----------|---------------|
| Beijing Film Academy | Comic | 130410T | Art Degree | 4 - Years | 2016 |
| Jilin Animation Institute | Comic | 130410T | Art Degree | 4 - Years | 2016 |
| Sichuan University of Media and Communications | Comic | 130410T | Art Degree | 4 - Years | 2017 |
| Qingdao Film Academy | Comic | 130410T | Art Degree | 4 - Years | 2017 |
| Hebei Academy of Fine Arts | Comic | 130410T | Art Degree | 4 - Years | 2017 |
| Hebei Institute of Communications | Comic | 130410T | Art Degree | 4 - Years | 2017 |
| Communication University of China, Nanjing | Comic | 130410T | Art Degree | 4 - Years | 2018 |
| Communication University of China | Comic | 130410T | Art Degree | 4 - Years | 2018 |
| Sichuan University Jinjiang College | Comic | 130410T | Art Degree | 4 - Years | 2020 |
| Communication University of Shanxi | Comic | 130410T | Art Degree | 4 - Years | 2021 |
| Sichuan Film and Television University | Comic | 130410T | Art Degree | 4 - Years | 2022 |

Although the ways of comic education are gradually enriched, the number of professional comic creators is still relatively low. The main reason for this phenomenon is that Chinese comic education is still in its early stages, requires more time to growth and need more resources to meet market demand. Therefore, many aspiring comic creators may find that their career lacks systematic and comprehensive guidance and professional training. It is crucial to address the current issues in comic education in order to establish a pathway for cultivating comic creators. These issues involve establishing a professional understanding of comic creation, developing standardized curriculum, hiring experienced creators from the industry as teachers, and establishing practical and collaborative relationships to provide students with creative experience that meets industry demands. By continuous investment and construction

in comic education, China can gradually cultivate a new generation of talented creators and contribute to the thriving comic industry.

- 1) Practitioners. In the early stages of the development of the comic discipline, most of the comic teachers in universities were not comic scholars or practitioners. Professional comic creators, on the other hand, were all busy creating comics on the front lines of the market and did not have time to participate in the development and implementation of university courses (Xiang, 2020). In order to cope with the sudden expansion of teaching needs, the college hired teachers from related majors such as oil painting, animation, and art design to fill the gaps in comics courses.
- 2) Positioning. Before the establishment of comics, most colleges and universities defined comics as a branch of mainstream majors such as animation or art and design. This inertial thinking is still serious today, resulting in the long-term marginalization of comic. As a result, many aspiring comics artists find it difficult to get formal education in this area from higher education, or find that their education is far from their career ideals (Sijie, 2021).
- 3) Textbooks. As a marginalized subject, comics has only experienced a few decades of development on international level. In the current publishing market of China, professional comics textbooks are very rare, and the focus is often on software operation and painting skills. Due to insufficient understanding of comics creation in China, most creators tend to focus on illustrate skills, and pay less attention to conception design, character creation and narrative skills. The content of the few imported textbooks is often obscure and difficult to adapt to the Chinese market (Guixiu, Xiaozhe, & Xuejiao, 2022).
- 4) Academic. At present, the problem of lack of academic resources in the field of comics in China is still serious. Although all provinces have established comic associations of varying sizes in the past decade, valuable academic resources are still lacking seriously. The wrong positioning of the discipline has also led to a serious lack of investment in comics discipline in colleges and universities. Comics scholars engaged in this field often have to struggle alone (Jourdan, 2021).

B. Platforms

Since 2010, many comic platforms have emerged in China, such as Tencent Anime, Kuaikan Comics, and NetEase Comics. In the following years, dozens of such platforms have experienced fierce market competition. Through financing, the data of registered users, the data of creators, and the data of copyrights have expanded the scale of the platform. Taking Kuaikan Comics, the platform with the highest MAU (monthly active users) of Chinese comics platforms in 2021, as an example, Kuaikan Comics completed 8 rounds of financing between 2015 and 2021, with a total financing amount of approximately USD 681 million.

Table 2: Financing History of Kuaikan Comics 2015-2017

| No. | Date | Rounds | Financing Amount | Investment institution |
|-----|------------|----------------------|------------------|--|
| 1 | 2021-08-19 | Strategic investment | 240 million USD | CCB International, One store, Tencent, Coatue, Tiantu Capital |
| 2 | 2021-06-09 | Strategic investment | 90 million USD | One Store |
| 3 | 2019-08-27 | E+ | 125 million USD | Tencent |
| 4 | 2017-12-01 | D | 177 million USD | Coatue, Xiang He Capital, ISAI,CMC Capital |
| 5 | 2017-02-10 | C+ | - | Qianhai FOF |
| 6 | 2017-01-10 | C | 250 million RMB | Chilian Capital, Tiantu Capital, Hongshan capital, Guangxin Capital, ByteDance |

| | | | | |
|---|------------|---|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| 7 | 2015-12-11 | B | 100 million RMB | Hongshan capital, ByteDance |
| 8 | 2015-04-06 | A | 3 million USD | Hongshan capital |

C. Platform data

Driven by intense capital pressure, Chinese comic platforms have repeatedly been embroiled in data falsification scandals. Public data reveals that among the 150 comic series slated for release on Kuaikan Comics, 80 are adaptations of novels, with original comics accounting for only about one-third of the adaptations. Despite its origins in original comics, Kuaikan Comics, after a decade of development, has seen two-thirds of its original content derived from adaptations of web novels, while its own original comics remain largely absent. Truly influential original comics in China are as rare as phoenix feathers.

D. Current situation of creators

The initial period of intense competition among platforms for creators and comics works was followed by a recent trend of removing low-quality works in an attempt to improve the quality. This has led to a precipitous decline in the income of comic creators. Amidst ongoing copyright disputes between creators and platforms, most major platforms have gone so far as to demand that all creators relinquish their copyright, straining the trust relationship between creators and platforms. Moreover, with platforms increasingly favoring the lower-cost approach of experimenting with web novels, China has seemingly entered an era where comic creators are relegated to mere "painting or illustration machines" for novels and web literature, resulting in an increasingly harsh environment for original comic creation. These combined factors have led to low incomes and diminished creative enthusiasm for most creators.

5. Methodology

In response to the research questions, this study mainly adopts qualitative research. Taking global phenomenal comics as case studies for comparative analysis.

The research data is collected through the Internet, which includes images and text information. The image data of these comics are classified and analyzed, and compared with the image data of Chinese comics, and organized into comparable data to find clues. A detailed case description is given for each case, and then the cases are compared. After an in-depth analysis of the case data, the differences between the cases are found. Subsequently, the specific creative techniques of each key point are sorted and analyzed, and finally the essence of comic creation is obtained, and suggestions are provided to comic creators seeking solutions.

6. Findings

By analysing comics from developed countries such as Japan, the United States, and France, a common thread is discovered: the enduring impact of well-crafted characters. When individuals mention Marvel comics, the first images that emerge are iconic superheroes like Captain America, Iron Man, the Hulk, Thor, and Black Widow. Similarly, references to DC comics conjure up the legendary figures of Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and the Joker. These distinct personalities take precedence over the intricate storylines, as readers form unique impressions and connections with the characters' narratives. Japanese comics further exemplify this phenomenon. When readers hear the name of One Piece, images of characters such as Luffy, Zoro, Sanji, and Nami immediately come to mind. Similarly, Doraemon reminds readers of the cute blue robot Doraemon, Nobita, Shizuka, and other characters. Compared to the storyline brought to readers by these characters, readers will have a vivid character in their

minds first, and even based on their understanding of the character, readers can deduce a series of performances that will happen to this character.

Long-running serials are characterized by long production cycles and gradual plot progression, often spanning years or even decades. The lengthy nature of serialization presents a unique challenge to readers. Unlike the movie experience, readers cannot experience the full storyline over the course of a serial. Therefore, long-running serials must rely heavily on characterization to engage readers and draw them into the story. The success of a long-running serial lies in the creation of memorable and unique characters. Readers must develop a deep connection with these characters, viewing them as individuals with distinct personalities, mannerisms, and speech patterns, akin to real-world figures. This sense of authenticity and relatability is crucial for sustaining reader engagement over the extended serialization period.

How to create a comic character with a distinct personality has become an important part of the creator's work and creative direction. By summarizing the character characteristics of excellent comic works and communicating with comic editors in the Japanese market, it is found that to create a memorable comic character, the following three points should be achieved: first, a firm goal and belief; second, an ability that is most different from ordinary people; and third, a cute and harmless weakness. And these three characteristics must be achieved to the "best" and to the extreme.

A. Unique appearance

A unique character appearance is the first step to success. By analyzing the appearance of characters in famous comic works such as Dragon Ball and Doraemon, it is not difficult to find that successful comic characters have a very high recognizability of appearance.



Figure 2: Comics characters' silhouettes of Dragon Ball and Doraemon

The study also selected the characters of the very influential comic works in China, including "The King's Avatar", "The outcast", "The Chosen One", and "Doula Continent", and turned them into silhouettes, and found that the recognition of the appearance of Chinese comic characters is relatively low.



Figure 3: Comics characters' silhouettes of famous Chinese comics

By comparing these characters after silhouette, the conclusion is clear at a glance. Unique appearance features are easy for readers to identify and remember.

B. Goals and beliefs

A hallmark of a well-crafted comics character is the presence of a clearly defined and unwavering goal or belief. This overarching objective, established at the outset of the narrative, serves as the compass that guides the character's actions and decisions throughout the story, aligning with the work's central theme. Usually, the goals of characters may seem simple and direct, but achieving them often requires long-term and unwavering determination and sustained effort.

In the classic Japanese comic series "Doraemon", Doraemon's steadfast goal is to promote Nobita's happiness and growth. This straightforward and steadfast goal runs through the whole story, providing sustained support for Doraemon's actions and motivations. Throughout the whole series, Doraemon has remained steadfast in its commitment to this goal, never wavering in the face of challenges or setbacks. The character's relentless pursuit of their goals is demonstrated through countless touching anecdotes, each of which is a step towards their ultimate mission.

The goals and beliefs of a character are the guidance for their actions, giving them a sense of purpose and direction. By using the process of characters achieving their goals as the basic logic of the plot, comic creators could effectively establish the central plot of their comic works.

C. Superpowers

The protagonist is the core of the story, and impressive characters often have unique personalities, playing key roles in the story. In addition to having a steadfast goal, the protagonist also needs unique superpowers to drive the development of the story. Creators need to use extraordinary imagination and creativity to endow the character with unique superpower. Again, taking the classic Japanese manga "Doraemon" as an example, the growth of Nobita cannot be separated from the magical tools of Doraemon. Doraemon is a robot from the future, whose superpower come from various tools from the future, allowing him to provide necessary support and guidance to Nobita. These superpowers, combined with Doraemon's goal of helping Nobita grow healthy, have left an indelible impression on readers.

Similarly, in the sports comic "Slam Dunk", the protagonist Sakuragi's exceptional athletic talent and pursuit of victory make him a unique comic character. It is these abilities and goals that have enabled him to learn and grow step by step, ultimately becoming an indispensable backbone of the team, leading the team to complete unprecedented challenges.

The superpowers of protagonists must be designed carefully to make the story unique. The progress of a story usually requires the protagonist's superpower to drive. These superpowers should have strong originality to distinguish the protagonist from ordinary characters and will add fun to the story.

D. Weaknesses

A well-designed comic character should not be flawless, as having weaknesses could increase the drama of the story and enhance their affinity with readers, making them more beloved by readers. However, these weaknesses should not be ordinary or commonplace. Instead, they should be exaggerated to the extreme, so that the characters will have unique recognizability. Doraemon's fear of mice is a typical example of this concept. Doraemon, as a technologically advanced cat-shaped robot, is portrayed as extremely afraid of mice and even willing to destroy the Earth in order to kill them. This technique of exaggerating weaknesses to the extreme sets him apart from other characters who are equally afraid of mice, leaving a deep impression on readers. Meanwhile, Doraemon's cat-shaped appearance contrasts strongly with his fear of mice, further reinforcing his unique character symbol.

Strategically assigning weaknesses to characters during character design could achieve various effects:

- Resonance between characters and readers: By exposing the weaknesses of characters, comic creators could make their characters more realistic, allowing readers to emotionally resonate with them in more dimensions.
- Set humorous plot: Weakness could become a source of humor, providing easy moments for the story and bringing different reading rhythms to readers.
- Enhance the uniqueness of characters: Exaggerated or unique weaknesses can make characters stand out in the crowd, making them easier to remember and recognize.
- Provide growth room for characters: Weakness could serve as a driving power for character growth, providing opportunities for characters to overcome it and grow up.

7. Conclusion

The trajectory of the Chinese comic industry is completely different from other countries in the world. The industry is also striving to explore a path that is suitable for China's national conditions. The lag in higher education, the imperfection of platform systems, the scarcity of academic resources, and the protection of creators' copyrights are all issues that need to be addressed. In addition, both the market and the creator should put aside their obsession and prejudice with painting skills, and then focus more on the essence of comics creation, and use literary skills such as concept design and narrative skills to create vivid characters that readers will never forget.

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