

# *A Study on Visual Elements of Mo Yan's Book Covers: A Cross-Cultural Comparative Analysis of Chinese and Korean Versions from the Z-Generation Perspective*

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**Abstract:** The global spread of Mo Yan's works has made their book cover design an important sample for cross-cultural visual communication research. From the perspective of Z-generation readers, this paper conducts a visual analysis of Mo Yan's book covers published in China and South Korea, focusing on four dimensions: color system, image symbols, typographic language and overall style. The study finds that Chinese editions tend to use traditional ink-wash imagery and folk symbols to strengthen cultural roots, while Korean editions adopt a modern minimalist style and emotional visual narration to cater to the aesthetic preferences of the local Z-generation. Such differences reflect deep divergences in audience positioning, cultural translation strategies and visual communication logic in the publishing markets of the two countries. Essentially, cover design in a cross-cultural context is an active process of cultural reproduction.

## 1. Introduction

A book cover is the first interface through which a text enters readers' vision, carrying cultural information beyond the scope of binding aesthetics. Since Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012, his works have formed a considerable publishing ecosystem in both China and South Korea. Existing research on Mo Yan's works has mostly focused on narratology and comparative literature, while systematic research on the visual elements of book covers remains weak. Taking Mo Yan's book covers published in China and South Korea as research objects, this paper conducts a comparative analysis with the theories of visual semiotics and cross-cultural communication, hoping to provide a new analytical path for the transnational visual communication research of literary works.

## 2. Theoretical Construction of Visual Elements of Mo Yan's Book Covers

### 2.1 Meaning-Generating Mechanism of Book Covers from the Perspective of Visual Semiotics

A book cover is not merely a decorative form but a visual symbol system with an inherent logical structure. Saussure regarded a sign as an arbitrary combination of signifier and signified,

while Peirce divided it into three categories: iconic, indexical and symbolic signs. These theories lay an analytical foundation for interpreting cover visual elements. In *\*Rhetoric of the Image\**, Roland Barthes emphasized that visual signs have both denotative and connotative meanings. Colors, images and typography on covers can deeply evoke readers' cultural accumulation and emotional resonance. Elements such as sorghum, ink-wash style and font selection on Mo Yan's covers are symbolic combinations meaningful only within a specific cultural context. The designer's creative intention, the influence of cultural environment and the audience's understanding experience jointly form the theoretical framework for cover visual research.

## **2.2 Cultural Coding Logic in Cross-Cultural Visual Communication**

Cultural coding is a core issue in cross-cultural visual communication research. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory proposes that the meaning of media texts is encoded by producers within a specific ideological framework and then decoded by audiences based on their own cultural positions, with structural inequality in this process. Book cover design is essentially a cultural coding activity. When designers transform literary content into visual language, they are inevitably influenced by multiple factors such as national cultural traditions, market demands and aesthetic standards. Hofstede's cultural dimension theory shows that differences between cultures in individualism vs. collectivism, tolerance for uncertainty and other dimensions significantly determine the stylistic choices of visual design. Although both China and South Korea belong to the Confucian cultural circle, they have developed distinctive visual cultural systems. Such differences precisely confirm that cultural coding is the embodiment and continuation of specific cultural power relations in the visual field.

## **2.3 Definition of Research Dimensions on Z-Generation Visual Aesthetic Preferences**

The Z-generation refers to people born between 1995 and 2009. Raised in a highly digital media environment, they have long been exposed to a visual information environment constructed by short videos, social media and graphical interfaces, thus preferring aesthetics with high-saturation colors, strong visual impact and emotional resonance. Research on visual literacy by Wilenski and Collier indicates that the Z-generation excels at rapid browsing and intuitive aesthetic judgment, which directly affects their first impression of book covers. Notably, aesthetic preferences of the Z-generation in China and South Korea differ. Influenced by K-pop visual culture, South Korean Gen Z is more receptive to minimalist design. In contrast, Chinese Gen Z, nurtured by the national trend culture, identifies with visual styles integrating traditional elements and modern design techniques. These differences constitute a non-negligible audience background in the comparative study of Chinese and Korean cover visuals.

## **3. Comparative Investigation of Visual Elements of Mo Yan's Book Covers in China and South Korea**

### **3.1 Cultural Differences Reflected in Color Systems**

Color is the most intuitively impactful element on a cover, and its application logic is deeply rooted in a specific cultural symbol system. Covers of Mo Yan's works published in China generally feature rich and heavy colors, with extensive use of colors closely related to traditional Chinese five-color theory such as ochre red, earthy yellow and ink black, which visually echo the local Gaomi culture in Shandong where Mo Yan's works are rooted. In Chinese cultural context, red symbolizes vitality, revolutionary spirit and folk festivity. Its extensive use on the cover of *\*Red*

Sorghum Family\* is not only a direct visual presentation of the core image but also a coding method to evoke local readers' cultural memory. In comparison, Korean covers generally adopt low-saturation Morandi colors or high-contrast color matching, reinterpreting the emotional connotations of Mo Yan's works with a restrained and alienated color language, reflecting the Korean publishing market's active adaptation to international aesthetic standards under the dual influence of Nordic minimalism and K-beauty visual aesthetics. Differences between the two color systems mainly stem from distinct understandings and applications of color symbolic functions in respective cultures. Notably, color systems show obvious generational differences in visual attraction to Z-generation readers. Gen Z relies more on emotional association rather than cultural symbolic accumulation for color aesthetic judgment. The traditional color coding of Chinese covers may cause cognitive deviation among young readers, while the modern color language of Korean covers forms a more direct visual resonance with the digital aesthetic experience of the Z-generation.

### **3.2 Cultural Translation Paths in Image Symbol Selection**

Selection of cover images fully reflects the core intention of cultural translation. Covers of Mo Yan's works published in China extensively use distinctive folk visual elements with local characteristics, such as sorghum fields, red lanterns, paper-cut patterns and opera facial masks. These frequently occurring images jointly construct a visual expression system highlighting "Chinese characteristics". These image symbols are both realistic and symbolic, directly connecting traditional culture and deeply activating readers' collective memory of specific historical backgrounds and geographical spaces. In contrast, Korean published covers show obvious deterritorialization and abstraction. Specific folk images are replaced by abstract graphics, human silhouettes or surreal expressions, intentionally weakening Chinese local colors and extracting human themes and emotional expressions with cross-cultural resonance. The essential difference between these two paths is that the Chinese version strengthens the regional and historical foundation of the text through dense local symbols, while the Korean version re chooses visual language based on emotional universality.

### **3.3 Visual Rhetoric Logic Presented by Typographic Language**

As a basic component of the cover visual system, typographic language indirectly reflects the designer's arrangement of information transmission order and application of visual expression techniques. Chinese covers of Mo Yan's works often feature complex information layers and dense layout of visual elements, with relatively tight spatial arrangement among author names, book titles and graphic components. In font application, calligraphic brush characters or creatively designed variants of Song and Hei fonts are mostly selected. These fonts participate in the overall meaning formation as visual elements, with the brush effect of book titles echoing the cultural atmosphere of the cover. In contrast, the Korean version follows more modernist design principles, constructing the main visual language through large areas of blank space, regular grid layout, and minimalist sans serif fonts, with extremely restrained information expression. Korean fonts generally adopt modern shapes with geometric beauty, pursuing obvious "breathing space" in letters and line spacing. This layout method is highly consistent with the digital interface visual mode familiar to the Korean Z-generation.

### **3.4 Divergence in Publishing Positioning Reflected by Overall Cover Style**

From the perspective of overall design style, visual differences between Mo Yan's book covers

in China and South Korea reflect significant distinctions in reader group positioning and literary value communication strategies in the publishing industries of the two countries. Chinese covers establish visual authority by creating a strong historical heritage and distinct cultural atmosphere, shaping Mo Yan's works as classic literary works rooted in Chinese historical context and carrying national cultural memory. Cover design becomes a visual communication means to consolidate the cultural status of the works. Korean covers reshape the market positioning of Mo Yan's works with emotional and personalized visual expressions, actively transforming them from "foreign cultural works" into "emotional carriers transcending cultural barriers". The essential difference between the two positionings originates from the differentiated value judgments assigned to the literary symbol "Mo Yan" by respective publishing systems based on the cultural psychology of local readers, providing a practical basis for further analyzing its formation mechanism.

#### **4. In-Depth Interpretation of Visual Differences between Chinese and Korean Covers from the Z-Generation Perspective**

##### **4.1 Visual Strategy Adjustment of Publishing Markets for Z-Generation Audience**

As the fastest-growing reader group in the global publishing market, the Z-generation's media consumption habits and aesthetic standards are profoundly reshaping publishers' cover design thinking. When adjusting visual strategies for the Z-generation, Chinese and Korean publishing markets both actively respond to the group's visual preferences but adopt different methods. The recent rise of "national trend aesthetics" in the Chinese publishing market has deeply influenced the design of new editions of Mo Yan's books. The integration of traditional cultural elements and modern design techniques has become the main visual strategy for young readers, whose core is to transform traditional visual symbols into contemporary design languages conforming to trends, shortening the aesthetic distance with young readers while retaining cultural roots. The Korean publishing market focuses more on precise target audience positioning. Long exposed to a highly refined visual environment shaped by K-culture, the Korean Z-generation has higher aesthetic requirements for cover professionalism and emotional expression. Therefore, Korean publishers tend to invite professional illustrators or visual artists with modern design backgrounds to participate in cover creation, meeting Gen Z's demand for differentiated aesthetics through unique visual narration, resulting in generally high design standards for Korean editions of Mo Yan's books. The fundamental difference between these two adjustment paths lies in the structural differences in cultural identity and media aesthetic experience of the Z-generation in the two countries.

##### **4.2 Othering Imagination Mechanism in Cultural Identity Construction**

The essence of cross-cultural cover design practice touches a core issue at the cultural and political level: when literary works of one country enter a foreign cultural market, how do publishers of the receiving country shape perceptions of "heterogeneous cultures" through cover visual language and transform them into visual expressions understandable to local readers. Said's Orientalism theory indicates that cultural cognition is often presented through fixed visual stereotypes, and such an unequal cognitive mechanism of power also exists in intra-East Asian cultural exchanges. The visual approach of Korean publishers in handling Mo Yan's covers reflects their unique cognitive mode of "Chinese characteristics". Some Korean covers replace specific cultural signs with universal emotional symbols to predict and avoid cultural barriers for local readers accepting Chinese literature. Chinese covers show a different path of cultural identity construction, visually expressing cultural subjectivity by increasing the number of local cultural

symbols on Mo Yan's covers and integrating his literary achievements into the narrative of cultural confidence. The former weakens cultural uniqueness through a "heterogenizing" visual strategy, while the latter enhances cultural subject consciousness through a "homogenizing" visual strategy. The fundamental difference in identity construction mechanisms between the two reveals the law of cultural power operation carried by visual language in cross-cultural publishing practices.

#### **4.3 Examination of Communication Efficiency of Cover Visual Elements in Cross-Cultural Context**

To analyze the communication effect of cover visual elements, a comprehensive evaluation should be conducted from three dimensions: cultural fit, information transmission efficiency and emotional arousal intensity. From the perspective of cultural fit, the visual symbol system of Chinese covers shows high cultural consistency in the local market. Visual elements such as integrated folk patterns, traditional colors and calligraphic fonts are highly correlated with the target audience's cultural memory, effectively evoking readers' emotional resonance with the historical background and local culture underlying Mo Yan's works. However, such a localization strategy inevitably encounters cultural discount in international communication. As Gregory White Smith proposed, the specific cultural connotations contained in cultural products often lead to information attenuation in cross-cultural communication due to differences in audience cultures. By reducing the use of special cultural symbols and enhancing universal emotional resonance in visual expression, Korean covers effectively alleviate the problem of cultural discount, enabling relatively smooth visual communication of Mo Yan's works among young Korean readers. Nevertheless, the cost of this strategy is that the cultural correspondence between cover visual language and text content is weakened, and readers' reading expectations established through covers may deviate from actual reading experience. Such potential meaning deviation constitutes an inherent defect that must be considered in the communication effect evaluation of Korean covers.

#### **4.4 Differentiated Impact of Z-Generation Aesthetic Preferences on the Trend of Chinese and Korean Cover Designs**

The impact of Z-generation aesthetic tendencies on the design trend of Mo Yan's book covers in China and South Korea does not simply drive convergence toward international design, but forms distinct development trajectories constrained by respective cultural roots, showing significant academic differentiation. In the Chinese publishing field, Gen Z's emotional resonance with the narrative of cultural rejuvenation has become the core driving force for the evolution of cover design. Designers are starting to reshape traditional cultural symbols with more modern compositions, simpler visual elements, and more coordinated overall layouts, replacing the previous folk visual overlays. This evolution reflects the ongoing dynamic balance between tradition and the present. In the Korean publishing market, the mature visual appreciation ability of Generation Z and their pursuit of personalized narrative experience continue to drive cover design towards higher artistic standards and stronger emotional expression. Diverse creative techniques such as illustration, contemporary photography and digital vision are integrated into cover design, giving Korean editions of Mo Yan's works an increasingly strong contemporary artistic character. These two differentiated development paths jointly reveal a deep law: the influence of Z-generation aesthetics on cover design must be realized through the filtering and refraction of specific cultural contexts. The tension between audience aesthetic needs and cultural identity is the core perspective for interpreting the evolution logic of contemporary cross-cultural publishing visual practices.

## 5. Conclusion

A systematic comparison of visual elements of Mo Yan's book covers in China and South Korea reveals two distinct logics of cross-cultural visual communication. Chinese covers construct cultural roots with traditional cultural symbols, while Korean covers actively approach the aesthetic preferences of the Z-generation with modern visual language. The essential reason for the divergence between the two strategies lies in the differentiated judgments of the target readers' cultural psychology in respective publishing markets and the different directions of cultural recoding of the literary symbol "Mo Yan". The value of cover visual research lies in providing a microscopic window to observe cultural negotiation and meaning reconstruction in the transnational flow of literature.

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