

A Moe-Inspired Method for Translating Regional Culture into Scenic-Area Character IP Design

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Abstract: *Objective:* Scenic-area character IPs often rely on a conventional cute aesthetic while providing little evidence that their forms, personalities, and applications are grounded in the destinations they represent. Using the Changbai Mountain Friends project, this article examines a culturally constrained alternative. Moe-inspired translation is defined as the selective transformation of documented regional prototypes into approachable characters while preserving recognizable links among source, morphology, role, and conditions of use. *Methods:* Archived design materials were re-examined through four connected stages: semantic encoding, morphological compression, affective construction, and touchpoint review. The two authors reconstructed the resource-selection process using centrality, distinctiveness, visualizability, and scenario relevance. A retrospective audit examined source traceability, ensemble consistency, character differentiation, and cross-media continuity. *Results:* The Amur tiger, rime, the peaks surrounding Tianchi, and the sable were retained as the four principal prototypes. Forest vegetation, tourism activities, selected colors, and mask-like symmetry were used as supporting resources rather than as separate characters. The review also led to simplification for small-scale applications, clearer packaging zones, and an explicit distinction between documented cultural sources and subsequent design interpretation. *Conclusion:* The case demonstrates how a cute visual language can remain regionally specific when design decisions are tied to verifiable sources and reassessed at the point of application. The evidence concerns internal design coherence rather than visitor response or market performance.

Keywords: Scenic-area character IP; Moe culture; Regional culture; Cultural translation; Character design

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1. Introduction

Scenic-area character IPs have evolved from simple identifying symbols into narrative media that connect destination image, visitor emotion, and cultural-creative consumption. Destination mascots can make local culture more accessible and provide consistent recognition cues across wayfinding, events, social media, and products ^[1]. Characters may also support destination image recovery through approachable narratives ^[2]. Cute mascots can influence travel intention through perceived healing qualities and destination intimacy ^[3],

while residents' engagement depends partly on whether they regard a mascot as a credible representation of local culture ^[4]. The central issue is therefore not simply whether a character appears cute, but whether that cuteness conveys intelligible relationships with the locality.

Two tendencies recur in current practice. Some projects begin with a generic cute-character template and vary only the colors or accessories, making characters from unrelated places visually interchangeable. Others attach buildings, animals, costume details, or folk motifs to a generic figure without explaining how those signs shape personality or behavior. In the first case, regional difference disappears; in the second, local culture is reduced to surface decoration. The problem is therefore not cuteness itself, but the absence of a method that connects cultural evidence with character form and subsequent use.

This article uses the term *moe*-inspired translation to describe a process in which documented regional materials are simplified into approachable characters while identifiable features, narrative roles, and conditions of use constrain that simplification. A general mascot may be designed first and localized afterward. The approach proposed here reverses that sequence: the source material determines what may be simplified, what must remain visible, and how the character can act within tourism scenarios. The Changbai Mountain Friends project is reconsidered from this methodological perspective.

In this article, character IP is used as a design and communication term rather than solely as a legal category. It refers to a character-based asset that can be recognized, narrated, licensed, and adapted over time. A single illustration becomes an operable character IP only when its name, appearance, personality, story, and application rules remain sufficiently stable across print, packaging, objects, spatial displays, and social media.

2. Theoretical background and problem definition

2.1. Visual psychology of *moe* and its role as an affective interface

Anthropomorphism attributes human intentions and emotions to nonhuman entities and is shaped by the accessibility of human-centered knowledge, effectance motivation, and sociality motivation ^[5]. Large heads, low centers of gravity, rounded contours, and simplified faces can activate baby-schema responses and increase perceived approachability ^[6]. Cute images may narrow attentional focus ^[7], and both children and adults attend to baby-schema facial cues ^[8]. These findings help explain how *moe*-style forms can reduce the initial cognitive distance between visitors and regional culture.

Moe does not, however, guarantee effective communication. The effects of cute brand marks vary with consumers' emotional expectations ^[9], and standardized forms may produce immediate liking without durable recognition. Here, *moe* functions as an affective interface: it invites approach, while regional culture explains who the character is, why it exists, and what it can plausibly do.

2.2. Core tensions in scenic-area character IP design

Studies of tourism mascots have considered distinctiveness, anthropomorphism, intimacy, visual consistency, and cultural expression ^[10]. Related work suggests that character attractiveness also depends on perceived closeness and identification, not on formal appeal alone ^[11]. Animated mascot displays can also influence product and brand evaluations in digital settings ^[12]. These findings point to three practical tensions: a shared *moe* vocabulary can obscure regional differences; ensemble consistency can weaken individual recognition; and a static character sheet may not support repeated use across scenarios and media.

The case was therefore reviewed against four requirements. Each character needed a traceable regional prototype. The ensemble had to follow shared rules for proportions, linework, facial treatment, and color without eliminating silhouette differences. Individual roles also had to remain distinguishable through behavior, not only appearance. Finally, the core link among source, form, and role had to remain visible when the characters were transferred to tourism scenes and product applications. Named-source records, shared specifications, reduced-size exports, silhouette checks, and defined touchpoint functions provided the evidence for this review.

These requirements address different stages of the same design problem. Traceability explains why a character belongs to Changbai Mountain. Shared rules make the four figures legible as a coherent ensemble. Morphological and behavioral differences justify the use of several characters rather than one. Cross-media continuity then shows whether the system can extend beyond its initial presentation without losing its regional logic.

3. Research method

3.1. Research materials and units of analysis

The initial inventory comprised ecological resources, cultural references, and tourism activities. Ecological materials included the peaks surrounding Tianchi, rime, the Amur tiger, the sable, and coniferous forests. Tourism activities included hot springs, skiing, rime viewing, and rafting. Cultural references included colors documented in Manchu dress, the frontal organization of shamanic masks, sacred-geography narratives associated with Changbai Mountain, and protective themes. Historical and oral-tradition studies support the importance of the mountain in Manchu ancestral and shamanic traditions ^[13,14]. Research on Manchu dress records the recurrent use of blue, white, and red, particularly the cultural significance of white ^[15]. Shamanic masks have documented ritual and symbolic functions ^[16], although the present design does not reproduce a specific sacred mask. Cultural-translation research informed the distinction between principal prototypes and supporting attributes ^[17].

Because the original project was a graduation design, the selection procedure was reconstructed from archived files. The first author rated each resource from 0 to 2 for centrality, distinctiveness, visualizability, and scenario relevance. The corresponding author then reviewed the ratings and proposed roles. When an item fell near the boundary between a principal prototype and a supporting resource, the authors considered whether it could function as a recognizable agent and whether it added a role not already represented by another character. Separate rating sheets were not preserved; therefore, no inter-rater reliability statistic is reported. The inventory was checked against an earlier study of Changbai Mountain character IPs ^[18], and the use of tourism activities as scenarios was informed by participatory scenic-area design practice ^[19].

3.2. Four-stage research model

The method is organized into four connected stages. Semantic encoding identifies a resource's provenance, meaning, recognition features, and potential actions. Morphological compression translates that information into rules for silhouette, proportion, components, and color. Affective construction gives the figures distinct personalities and relationships. Touchpoint review then examines whether the same link among source, form, and role remains intact across scenarios and products. In this article, review refers to a prototype-level audit rather than an experiment involving visitors ^[20, 21].

The stages were not treated as a fixed pipeline. When simplification weakened a prototype's identity, the design returned to the source material. When personality and form contradicted each other, proportions, actions, or accessories were revised. Details that failed at product scale were removed or reorganized around a stronger silhouette. This feedback process allowed production constraints to inform earlier cultural and formal decisions.

3.3. Prototype-level validation procedure and research boundaries

The two authors audited the archived source records, prototype mappings, turnaround sheets, color specifications, 30-mm exports, monochrome and silhouette versions, scenario illustrations, and product mock-ups. A character passed the traceability check when its principal form and role could be linked to a named regional source; unsupported associations had to be labeled as design interpretations. Ensemble consistency required common rules for proportions, linework, facial treatment, and color. Character differentiation required at least two morphological cues independent of color and one distinct role cue. Cross-media extensibility required the signature form, color, and role to remain stable while each touchpoint performed a different communicative function. Borderline decisions were returned to the source record and entered in a revision log. The audit addresses internal coherence only; it does not measure recognition, participation, purchase intention, or market performance.

4. Construction of the Moe-inspired regional-cultural translation method

4.1. Semantic encoding: From resource inventory to character prototypes

The inventory was narrowed to four prototypes that could sustain both meaning and action. The Amur tiger offered a distinctive silhouette, ecological relevance, and a plausible protective role. Rime provided a radial structure and a direct connection to seasonal viewing. The peaks surrounding Tianchi supplied the most central landscape form and the greatest visual mass. The sable introduced a mobile, exploratory role associated with the forest that was not duplicated by the other three characters.

Several important resources remained in the system without becoming independent characters. Coniferous forests did not provide a sufficiently discrete agent, so they were translated into Zidiao's scarf and environmental motifs. Hot springs, skiing, rime viewing, and rafting became settings for action. The blue, white, and red palette and frontal, mask-like symmetry were used as attributes of Aowu. Sources support the cultural importance of Changbai Mountain, ritual associations with animals and natural forces, mask symbolism, and the selected colors. Aowu's guardian personality, however, remains a contemporary design interpretation rather than a direct transcription of a canonical tiger legend.

4.2. Morphological compression: Controlling difference within a unified grammar

Morphological compression did not mean giving every prototype the same cartoonized body. The task was to identify which structures carried recognition and which details could be removed. The ensemble shares large heads, compact bodies, low centers of gravity, rounded contours, and a limited number of high-contrast features. Within that shared vocabulary, Aowu has a broad head and bilateral facial organization; Songsong has a radial snowflake outline and the lightest visual mass; Changbai uses an inverted-V mountain body and the greatest visual mass; and an elongated body distinguishes Zidiao, pointed ears, and a long tail. Unity comes from the shared rules, while recognition depends on silhouette and implied movement.

The palette combines documented regional references with character-specific decisions. Aowu's blue, white, and red palette draws on colors recorded in Manchu dress, but the exact distribution of these colors is contemporary rather than a fixed traditional code. Changbai uses Tianchi blue and ice white, Songsong uses white and pale gray, and Zidiao uses soft violet with a green scarf that evokes coniferous vegetation. The shamanic-mask reference is restricted to bilateral symmetry and frontal organization; it does not reproduce a ritual object.

Small-scale applications required a clearer information hierarchy. Silhouette and dominant color carried primary recognition and were reviewed at a printed height of 30 mm. Facial motifs, scarves, tails, and mountain contours served as secondary cues. Story text, attraction names, and decorative motifs were reserved for larger formats. This hierarchy prevented character imagery from displacing product names and other functional information.

4.3. Affective construction: From isolated signs to character relationships

The four figures were assigned complementary roles rather than variations of the same generic friendly personality. Aowu serves as guardian and leader; Songsong is a curious companion; Changbai provides stability and care; and Zidiao serves as an explorer and narrative catalyst. Their forms support these roles without determining them mechanically: Aowu's broad frontal body suggests protection, Songsong's light radial shape suggests delicacy, Changbai's visual mass conveys stability, and Zidiao's elongated form implies movement.

Tourism scenarios were used to examine whether those roles remained plausible in action. Changbai was placed in a hot-spring scene, Zidiao in a skiing scene, Songsong in a rime-viewing scene, and Aowu in a rafting scene. The scenes were not treated as decorative backgrounds; instead, they revealed mismatches when a character's prototype, personality, and assigned activity did not support one another.

4.4. Touchpoint validation: From visual extension to semantic continuity

Touchpoints were differentiated by the actions they invited. Posters introduced the destination and the ensemble; themed scenes enacted tourism activities; charms and badges supported wearing and collecting; and stickers and tote bags supported everyday use and social circulation. Composition and material could change, but principal silhouettes, signature colors, and role-linked actions had to remain stable.

The number of products was not treated as evidence of participation. Instead, the audit considered whether each new touchpoint added a distinct communicative function and whether the character remained traceable within the system. Repeating the same frontal image on several objects would constitute media duplication rather than extension. Cross-media applicability therefore depended on both functional differentiation and continuity among source, form, and role.

Packaging required a further distinction between series unity and functional product information. Applications share the destination name, mountain motif, and supporting palette, while individual characters may identify seasons, routes, or product themes. The review introduced separate zones for character imagery, product information, and narrative content, together with minimum-size, monochrome, and reversed-use specifications. These changes prevented the character system from overcrowding functional content.

5. Conclusion

This article presents a four-stage method for translating regional culture into scenic-area character IP design: semantic encoding, morphological compression, affective construction, and touchpoint review. Its central argument is that a cute visual language becomes regionally meaningful only when the path from source to form, role, scenario, and media can be explained. In Changbai Mountain Friends, the Amur tiger, rime, the peaks surrounding Tianchi, and the sable became the principal prototypes, while forests, tourism activities, colors, and mask references remained supporting materials.

The author-led audit found internal coherence with respect to source traceability, ensemble rules, character differentiation, and cross-media extension. It did not test visitor recognition, resident acceptance, purchase intention, or sustained operation. Those questions require independent assessors, resident participation, controlled recognition tasks, and longitudinal evidence. Within the limits of a retrospective design case, the method offers a more accountable alternative to generic mascot styling.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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