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## The Transformation of Monkey King: A Semiotic Perspective

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**Abstract.** *The Journey to the West*, based on the story of Chen Xuanzang's learning from the scriptures in the Tang Dynasty, was finally written by Wu Cheng'en in the Ming Dynasty, which deeply reflected the social reality at that time. It was not only the first romantic novel about ghosts and gods in ancient China, but also a masterpiece of romanticism in the history of world literature. The hero of the story, Monkey King, has been constantly mythologized in the process of China's folk communication, becoming a household name hero and a cultural sign. Taking the Monkey King as the research object, this paper discusses its cross-media transformation from the perspective of semiotics, in order to provide some reference for China's excellent traditional literature to go out.

**Keywords.** *The Journey to the West*, Monkey King, Cross-media communication, Cultural signs

### Introduction

*The Journey to the West*, a masterpiece created by Chinese writer Wu Cheng'en in the 16th century, which is translated into *Monkey* by the English world, is a precious and magical China novel. With the changes of the times, *The Journey to the West's* communication texts, forms and platforms have been greatly enriched, but there is little research on the Monkey King's cross-media transformation from the perspective of semiotics. Literary works mostly reflect the social reality and express the theme of works through the description of characters and their activities and their relationship. The figure is one of the important factors in literary and artistic works, and it is the main body of the image. The figure, especially the protagonist, occupies a prominent position in literary works, so the study of figure image has become an important part of literary research. Among the many characters in many famous works, as far as the diversity, richness and universality of characters are concerned, the characters in any famous work can hardly be compared with the sign image of the Monkey King in *The Journey to the West*, a famous Chinese classical literature. The cultural significance of the Monkey King's image has far surpassed the book, *The Journey to the West*, itself. As a well-deserved protagonist in *The Journey to the West*, Monkey King changed from a stone monkey to the Great Sage, with his own growth law and social factors. Because of *The Journey to the West's* extensive text and cross-media communication, Monkey King, the protagonist, has become a kind of psychological worship object of people. The author discusses the internal law of its evolution process from *The Journey to the West's* text image and film image as the sign image.

### **The Transformation of the Monkey King's Sign Images in Literature**

Literature is the art of language and signs, and culture, in a broad semiotic sense, can be understood as a system that determines various relationships between people and the world, which is a single language or a comprehensive system of multiple languages. The structure, meaning, essence and development law of its all-encompassing signs construct the unique literary characteristics, cultural attributes and humanistic spirit of all ethnic groups, and influence people's thinking and actions(Zhang, 2000).

"The whole world is filled with signs." (Peirce CP 5.441) It can be seen that the conversion of literary texts between different cultures strictly depends on signs, and the expressions of various cultural signs converge into a complex network of relationships and form a set of texts, so that they can collide and talk with other different-level, asymmetric sign systems, and finally cause the linkage reaction, change and development of culture and signs. In this sense, once cultural signs are missing, it will have a fundamental negative impact on text exchange and cultural development. *The Journey to the West's* complete Chinese version depicts the individual's living relationship between Buddha's Land, Heaven, Earth, and Hell, showing the customs of ancient China for food, clothing, housing and transportation, and representing the concrete and visual cultural signs of China society at that time, many of which have been preserved to this day.

These signs constitute the encyclopedic sign system and cultural mechanism of this classical literary work. In other words, China's classical culture is vividly reflected through the information flow of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism in *The Journey to the West* and the cultural signs around the development of food, clothing, housing and daily activities. Their meaning transformation will directly affect the operation and adaptation of the culture regarded as collective intelligence.

From the perspective of semiotics, language is not only a medium for spreading information, but also a sign of cultural significance. Similar to language signs, literary signs are the complex of signifier and signified, and their sign meanings are more complicated. Literary signs can only embody meaning in concrete texts, and texts are composed of various elements. Narrative texts usually include character elements, background elements and emotional elements, which together form the deep connotation of literary signs, and each element can be regarded as the functional unit of the text (Liu & Yang, 2001) . The analysis of the three elements of the text is a comprehensive analysis of the signifier and the signified, which is helpful to accurately grasp the meaning of the functional units in the text. The uncertainty and pluralism of the meaning of signs have become the common knowledge of academic circles, and they change with time(Yan & Zhang, 2010). In *The Journey to the West's* text, the Monkey King's image has experienced the changes of stone monkey, demon monkey and divine monkey, and at the same time, it embodies his sign view of animality, humanity and divinity.

The Monkey King is animal. In *The Journey to the West*, the Monkey King didn't break away from his nature, mainly because he didn't break away from the animal world, and he showed his characteristics as an animal flexibly and vividly. The cattle, sheep, tigers, deer and other animals described in the book also constitute a natural animal kingdom. The Monkey King's monkey nature is mainly reflected in the following aspects: 1) The appearance is a monkey image. The book describes his appearance as a real monkey many times. At the same time, although the Monkey King learned seventy-two changes, he still maintained his animal nature. When fighting with Erlang God, he turned into a small temple, his mouth into a temple gate, his tongue into a bodhisattva, his eyes into windows, but his tail could only become a flagpole. The Monkey King's animality is also manifested in his monkey instinct. First, he likes

to eat peaches. Second, while listening to the Subodhi's sermon, the Monkey King scratched his ears and gills beside him, and couldn't help dancing, all of which showed his monkey's nature to the fullest.

The Monkey King is human. The Monkey King portrayed in the book has human personality and psychological characteristics, while the Monkey King pursues freedom, is fearless and brave, and dares to resist various forces. The Monkey King experienced thousands of hardships during the journey of protecting Tang monk to the Buddhist scriptures, and yearned for a free life. First of all, in *The Journey to the West*, in order to avoid the control of the King of Hell, the Monkey King broke into hell to ask for the *Book of Life and Death* and tick off the names of monkeys. At the same time, he also made a fight in the Heavenly Palace and called himself the Great Sage, hoping to be a mountain king who lived with heaven and earth. Secondly, the Monkey King has a proud personality. In the face of Buddha Tathagata, he thinks that 100,000 heavenly soldiers and generals can't do anything about him, let alone Buddha Tathagata, but he doesn't know that his skills are just petty tricks in the eyes of Buddha. Thirdly, the Monkey King also has the characteristics of intelligence and wit. In the process of dealing with monsters, he usually adopts very flexible methods to defeat monsters, which can vividly show the Monkey King's agility and flexibility, and also reflect the Monkey King's mischievous characteristics of human beings. The Monkey King also pays attention to gratitude. In the story, once Subodhi asked the Monkey King to leave the place of spiritual practice, the Monkey King immediately refused to leave because he didn't thank his master for teaching him skills. At the same time, the Monkey King's friendship is also reflected in his trust and concern for his master and his partners. On the surface, the Monkey King of scolded Zhu Bajie, but in fact, this is one of the manifestations of their profound friendship.

The Monkey King is divine. The Monkey King's divinity is manifested in overcoming difficulties and accomplishing tasks that ordinary people can't accomplish. In the process of confronting the enemy, he usually relies on seventy-two changes, a golden hoop and a somersault cloud that can fly for a hundred and eight thousand miles. He ignored the rules of heaven, and eventually turned into a war in heaven. And he can see through all kinds of monsters he meets on the way to learn from the scriptures. Among them, Monkey King Three Times' Beating Monster story is the most wonderful. The monster has become a young woman, an old lady and an old man, and she tried to deceive Tang's monk many times, but every time he was able to be seen through by the Monkey King and get back to his original shape, which is beyond the reach of ordinary people. It is because of the Monkey King's miraculous powers that he can really defeat the demons, protect his master and retrieve the true scriptures.

Viewing a thing from the outside, considering its relations of action and reaction with other things, it appears as matter. Viewing it from the inside, looking at its immediate character as feeling, it appears as consciousness. These two views are combined when we remember that mechanical laws are nothing but acquired habits, like all the regularities of mind, including the tendency to take habits, itself; and that this action of habit is nothing but generalisation, and generalisation is nothing but the spreading of feelings. (Peirce, 1892)

It can be seen from this that the Monkey King combined the different characteristics of monkey, man and god, and created a classic sign image which is widely loved by people. The monkey shows his animality, the humanity nature is reflected in his social aspect, and his divinity shows his legendary side, fully showing his idealized heroic characteristics. On the way to learn from the scriptures, the Monkey King not only relied on his vast magical skills, but also his alertness and intelligence, which truly reflected the beautiful ideal and strong desire of the

working people at that time to eradicate all evil forces in the world, and also reflected the wisdom and courage of the broad masses of the people.

### **The Transformation of the Monkey King's Sign Images in Film and Television**

Morris defines: “Semiosis is a sign-process” (Morris, 1971). As for another kind of cross-cultural communication text of *The Journey to the West*—film adaptation works, it is less concerned by researchers, which to some extent stems from the fact that film adaptation activities in *The Journey to the West* mainly exist in the domestic market of China. No matter before 1949, *Pigsy Takes a Wife* (China Film Company) and *Princess Iron Fan* (Xinhua Film Company), or after 1949, *The Monkey King* (Shanghai Fine Arts Film Studio) and the 1986 TV series *The Journey to the West* (CCTV) have become popular cultural classics of different times, and have produced strong cultural influences. In contrast, the film and television works of *The Journey to the West*, which are adapted and filmed by overseas companies and mainly aimed at overseas audiences, are few in number and have limited influence. The few commercially successful works have limited influence in Hong Kong, Southeast Asian countries and Chinese communities in Europe and America, and their cultural significance is limited.

The story of *Journey to the West* began to attract the attention of European and American film and television industries, and it only started in the 21st century. The first one is *The Monkey King*, a mini-drama produced by NBC in 2001. Then there are some successful cases, such as *The Forbidden Kingdom* starring Jet Li and Jackie Chan in 2008, *Dragonball: Evolution* adapted from the Japanese version of *Journey to the West* in 2009, *Into the Badlands* on AMC TV in 2015, and *The New Legends of Monkey* filmed by Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 2017. However, these works obviously deviate from the original works, including European and American cultural elements and values, and are constantly criticized by China academic circles and critics (Luo, 2007).

Film companies in Chinese mainland and Hong Kong have produced many films about *The Journey to the West*. However, in these films, the heroic attribute of the Monkey King's sign image is not obvious, but all of them have shaped the Monkey King into a sign image of hero. Since then, in 1985, the image of the Monkey King in the film of *The Monkey King Conquers the Demon* has faded from its original demon nature, and gradually has a more human expression. Its romantic rebellious spirit has been replaced by realistic loyalty—from an invincible “passionate hero” to a humanized “secular hero”. The image of the Monkey King in the film of *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons*, released in early 2013, is a typical representative of the reconstruction of classics in the 21st century. Of course, the biggest influence in China should be the image of the Monkey King played by Liuxiao Lingtong in the 1986 edition of *The Journey to the West*, in which the Monkey King prominently shows the indomitable spirit.

However, the Monkey King in the film of *A Chinese Odyssey* lacks the pure divine features in the original and other versions, but has many humanized elements. The Monkey King in *A Chinese Odyssey* is not a positive role in the traditional sense. Although he used to be a powerful and omnipotent Monkey King, he is now really a nonentity—Joker. He doesn't like to follow Tang monk to the West for Buddhist scriptures. He is tired of Tang monk's verbosity and even wants to kill Tang monk. Because of all the sins he committed in his past life, he was reincarnated as a bandit leader—Joker, completely transformed from the Monkey King into a human being, a living nonentity, and completely lost the ability and heroic color of the Monkey King in the original *The Journey to the West*. He is full of human elements of

nonentity, especially the expression of love elements is unprecedented. In the original work, there is no love of ordinary people in the Monkey King. However, Joker has love, which we have never seen before, and it is a brand-new image of the Monkey King.

At the same time, there are exceptions. In the film of *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, the Monkey King has no magic power. Like ordinary human beings, he has nothing but brute force. After losing his magic power, Monkey King wanted to go back to Huaguo Mountain and live a carefree life with his monkey grandson, but he was temporarily diverted because of Jiang Liuer, and encountered a monster calculation along the way. Although Monkey King had already seen through demon's tricks, he lost his magic power, so he still played the role of guardian. In the face of the demon, he was obviously unable to do so, so he made a decision to back down, once again breaking everyone's impression of the Monkey King's "indomitable" image.

In the 21st century, with the rapid development of digital technology, cross-cultural digital communication in *The Journey to the West* is also changing with each passing day. The Monkey King set off a new wave of adaptation with its strong plasticity, and various images of the Monkey King appeared one after another. Throughout this period, the Monkey King's image is basically created by advanced digital technology with extraordinary visual style, and its magic, diversity and fidelity bring different visual experience to the audience. In many movies, animations and games, the Monkey King is the protagonist, and his image is also the indomitable "Monkey King" sign image.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, in *The Journey to the West*, the sign images of the Monkey King have the characteristics of monkey, man and god. He has the personality characteristics of defying hardships and pursuing freedom with wisdom, which shows the author's dissatisfaction with the society at that time, but also his yearning for a better life in the future. By shaping the sign image of the Monkey King, the author expresses his desire of seeking equality and breaking restrictions, and at the same time leaves a precious spiritual wealth for future generations. *The Journey to the West*, one of China's Four Great Classical Novels, is an important part of Chinese culture's "going out". A variety of art forms of cross-media communication have brought high popularity to *The Journey to the West*, which has effectively promoted the spread of Chinese culture. However, its cross-media communication effect still has considerable room for development. In view of this, we should comprehensively analyze the significance of signs in cross-cultural communication. From the perspective of semiotics, the study of the sign transformation of Monkey King in *The Journey to the West* provides a new perspective for the future dissemination of other China cultural classics, and it is expected that scholars can make further research on the dissemination of other China cultural classics.

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