

Classical Reconstruction in Visual Narration: An Aesthetic Analysis of the Reception of Sun Wukong's Image

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ABSTRACT

Sun Wukong, as the iconic hero image in Chinese traditional culture, has various forms of expression in visual narration, which is deeply loved by audiences of all ages. With the progress of technology and aesthetic changes, the visual image of Sun Wukong has undergone a transformation from sacred to secular, and then to personalized. This paper aims to explore the remodeling process of Sun Wukong in different visual media from the perspective of reception aesthetics, analyze how audiences accept and interpret these images, and how these changes reflect the evolution of social culture.

KEYWORDS

Sun Wukong; Visual Narrative; Image Reshaping; Reception Aesthetics; Cultural Evolution.

1. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of the Sun Wukong image is an important phenomenon in the history of Chinese visual arts. From ancient times to the present, Sun Wukong's image has been continuously reinterpreted and innovated. This paper will explore the process of reshaping Sun Wukong in visual narratives and how audiences accept and interpret these images through their own horizons of expectation.

2. RECEPTION AESTHETICS THEORY AND ITS MAIN POINTS

Reception aesthetics is an aesthetic school and critical method proposed by German literary scholar Hans Robert Jauss, emphasizing the activity and creativity of readers or viewers in the process of literary work acceptance. Jauss believes that the meaning of a literary work is not unilaterally determined by the author but is generated in the process of the reader's reading and acceptance; the meaning of a literary work is not fixed but is constantly generated and changed in the interaction between the reader's horizon of expectation and the work. Jauss's theory mainly includes the horizon of expectation, the distinction between text and work, the triple nature of aesthetic experience, and the reception perspective of literary history, among other aspects.

Applying Jauss's theory of reception aesthetics to the field of visual art, we can find that visual art works are not independent objects, their meaning is also generated in the audience's viewing and interpretation. The audience's horizon of expectation, influenced by personal experience, cultural background and historical period, determines how they understand and evaluate works of art. The interaction between the visual art work and the audience, including the individual's emotional response and cognitive process, gives the work multiple meanings and possibilities of interpretation. The value of a work of art lies in its ability to inspire the audience to think beyond their horizon of

expectation, resulting in aesthetic distance and deep emotional experience. In addition, the social function of visual art works cannot be ignored. They not only reflect the artist's creative intention, but also participate in the social and cultural dialogue, influencing and shaping the audience's world view and values. In the corner, we can explore more deeply the dynamic relationship between the work of art and the audience, and how art is perceived and understood in different sociocultural contexts.

2.1. Origin of Classic Hero Images: *Princess Iron Fan, The Monkey King, Journey to the West*

In 1941, the Wan brothers created the first Asian animated feature film *Princess Iron Fan*, which was also the starting point of the adaptation of *Journey to the West* in the field of animation, and also the Wan brothers carried out anti-Japanese propaganda activities with animation as a weapon during the Anti-Japanese War. During this period, classic animated films such as *Snow White* created by the United States Disney Company were sweeping the Shanghai market. As the pioneers of Chinese animation, the Wan Brothers were deeply shocked and began to prepare animated films with Chinese characteristics. The main plot of *Princess Iron Fan* is derived from the plot of Sun Wukong borrows a banana fan three times in *Journey to the West*. It tells the story of the four Tang monks, masters and disciples, uniting together to defeat the bull demon King and extinguished the flames of the Flaming Mountains with the help of everyone. Although there are classic story texts as the basis for the adaptation, but limited by relevant experience and animation technology, the character design of the film clearly draws on the style of Disney's early animation. In addition, the film has adjusted the original story in terms of plot, among which the biggest change is that the plot of three borrowings of the plantain fan with Sun Wukong as the center is assigned to the three master brothers, and the task of visiting the banana cave for the first time is given to Sha Sheng, and after Sun Wukong borrowings the fake fan, the plot of changing into the bull demon king to obtain the real plantain fan is completed by Pig Bajie. The film also deliberately weakens the supernatural power of Sun Wukong, so that the skills of the three master brothers are at the same level, and the role of Tang monk is no longer passive, but becomes the key figure in the development of the plot, he can understand the situation, and guide the master brothers to succeed only by uniting. In addition, the film also shows the scene where Tang called on the villagers to unite against the bull Demon King, and through their joint efforts, they finally defeated the bull demon King and solved the problem of the Flaming Mountain.

These adaptations not only convey the spirit of national resistance and unity but also imply the expectation of the Kuomintang and the Communist Party of China to unite against Japan and face outward. The Flaming Mountains in the film are personified, and their image is similar to the Japanese samurai mask, symbolizing the Japanese army invading China, and Princess Iron Fan symbolizes the well-equipped Kuomintang, and the four disciples symbolize the Communist Party. The film expresses through these metaphors that only through joint efforts can difficulties be overcome and peace be restored. *Princess Iron Fan* shows a unique era characteristic in screenwriting, production, and emotional expression under the influence of special historical culture, political change, and the dilemma of the times. Sun Wukong's image not only carries the political significance of inspiring people and uniting the resistance but also meets the aesthetic needs of the public at the time, providing spiritual support and encouragement for the audience.

From the early days after the founding of New China to 1966, China's animation industry ushered in a period of prosperity and development. Shanghai Art Film Studio takes the promotion of Chinese national style as its own responsibility, integrates the essence of national culture into animation creation, and forms the internationally renowned *Chinese School*. During this period, the Wan brothers abandoned the simple imitation of foreign animation, turned to the rich soil of traditional Chinese culture and national art, and created China's first landmark color between 1961 and 1964 Animated feature film *The Monkey King*. The image of Sun Wukong in the film shows distinct national characteristics in facial features, color application, clothing design and action design, which has become the inspiration source of the image design of Sun Wukong in later generations, and is

also one of the most representative and successful characters in the history of Chinese animation. The film uses bold and powerful colors, with bright red and yellow colors as the main color, creating a grand and warm atmosphere, which complements Sun Wukong's defiant and fearless character.

In terms of the plot, the film chooses to recreate the episode of Sun Wukong causing havoc in heaven from *Journey to the West*, which is not only a concentrated display of Sun Wukong's heroic image but also carries the spiritual core of the Chinese nation's unyielding and courageous struggle. Compared with the early *Princess Iron Fan*, the contradiction setting in *The Monkey King* is more complex and profound, placing Sun Wukong in a direct confrontation with the heavenly forces and endowing him with absolute justice. Through a series of thrilling struggle scenes, it comprehensively displays Sun Wukong's vast powers and indomitable will. The innovative handling of the film's ending, which omits the tragic ending of Sun Wukong being suppressed under the Five Elements Mountain and instead depicts him enjoying a happy life in the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit, not only fits the positive atmosphere of the society at the time, but also expresses the longing and confidence for the bright future of New China.

The image of Sun Wukong and his struggle in *The Monkey King* also contains rich social and historical implications. On the one hand, it is a profound critique and ruthless exposure of feudal rulers, reflecting the hardships and victories of the proletarian revolutionary struggle through the struggle between Sun Wukong and the heavenly forces such as the Jade Emperor. On the other hand, it also maps the complex situation of China on the international stage in the 1960s and its stance of independence and self-reliance. In the context of the Cold War, facing the hegemonic threats of the two major camps of the United States and the Soviet Union, China, like Sun Wukong, never gives up the belief in struggle and self-improvement despite being in a difficult situation.

With the advancement of reform and opening up and the arrival of a new era, the role of television has changed, from being a tool for class struggle in the past to becoming an important platform for ideological enlightenment and cultural education. Against this backdrop, the literary and art circles began to re-examine and shape characters that conform to the spirit of the times to adapt to the development needs of society. In the 1980s, the classic character of Sun Wukong once again underwent artistic remolding, and the 1986 version of the *Journey to the West* TV series became a representative of this transformation.

The 1986 version of *Journey to the West* not only accompanied the growth of several generations but is also considered one of the most successful versions among the many adaptations. In the series, Sun Wukong, dressed in golden armor, wearing a golden rooster feather, and wielding the Golden Cudgel, coupled with the exquisite performance of the actor Liuxiaolingtong, vividly displays Sun Wukong's bravery, wit, and agility, making him the eternal Handsome Monkey King in the hearts of hundreds of millions of viewers.

In the 86 version of *Journey to the West* TV series, we often see Sun Wukong carrying the golden stick, palm on the forehead, with a groping posture in front of the way, and Tang monk, Pig Bajie, Sha monk followed behind. It is also this TV series, Sun Wukong for the first time in the real sense of the construction of the *Sun Walker* this image. He is no longer a simple protector of the pilgrimage but has become the spiritual leader of the team. With firm eyes and full of expectations, he led the three Tang monks and disciples through numerous difficulties with a fearless attitude. This image design deeply reflected the idealism and enterprising spirit commonly pursued by society in the 1980s. From an aesthetic perspective, the image of Sun Wukong in the 1986 version of *Journey to the West* has to some extent achieved sublimation, but its core charm lies in its close fit with the social mentality of the time. In that era full of change and hope, Sun Wukong's firm faith and optimistic attitude inspired generation after generation. He was not only a role in literary works, but also a miniature of firm progress in the wave of reform, carrying people's infinite longing and pursuit for a better future. Therefore, the image of Sun Wukong in the 86th edition of *Journey to the West* is not only a successful model of artistic creation, but also a vivid portrayal of the spirit of The Times.

2.2. Popularization of Heroes: *A Chinese Odyssey*

With the release of the *A Chinese Odyssey* series of films, the image of Sun Wukong underwent a significant transformation, shifting from the traditional divine hero image to a more secular one, emphasizing the diversity of human nature. In the film, Sun Wukong is no longer an omnipotent hero but displays more character traits of ordinary people, such as being in love, fearing, and shirking responsibility. His image becomes more down-to-earth and even has some traits of a commoner. Sun Wukong is no longer a traditional hero standing tall but has become a flesh-and-blood existence that ordinary viewers can resonate with. Although this transformation is far from the traditional positive image, it endows the character with a unique charm. It is precisely this character setting that allows Zhizunbao to gradually complete the transformation from a rascal to a hero in the confusion and struggle of identity recognition. This process deeply reflects the profound discussion of identity, destiny, and self-worth in the spirit of postmodernism.

Zhizunbao's transition from initial confusion and resistance to self-identity to finally accepting and undertaking the mission of Sun Wukong, with his complex inner world delicately portrayed, reflects the pain of personal growth and mirrors the helplessness and struggle of small figures in society facing the uncertainty of fate. In the climax of the film, Sun Wukong compares himself to a dog in a self-mocking manner. Behind this joking metaphor, there is a profound insight into the various aspects of life, as well as a profound reflection on the values of love, family and friendship, which touches the hearts of the audience in the form of black humor.

2.3. Multiple Interpretations of Heroes: *Journey to the West: Conquering Demons, Monkey King: Hero Is Back*

In *Journey to the West: Conquering Demons* the image of Sun Wukong is significantly different from the traditional heroic image, and he is portrayed as a completely demonic figure, which also forms a sharp contrast with the humanized Sun Wukong in *A Chinese Odyssey*. Through the image of Sun Wukong, the film explores the boundaries between demons and human nature, as well as the moral choices of individuals in extreme situations. The Sun Wukong in the film is a subversion and reinterpretation of the traditional *Journey to the West* story, challenging the audience's established perception of the character and providing new interpretive perspectives for this classic literary work.

At the beginning of the film, Sun Wukong's debut shocked the audience with extreme ugliness and horror. His appearance is deliberately designed to be small and ferocious, and his personality is shown as extreme cruelty and narrow heart, and he will wantonly kill if he is slightly dissatisfied. This setting is undoubtedly a bold subversion of the traditional image of Sun Wukong. Sun Wukong is no longer the hero full of wisdom and courage, but has transformed into the biggest antagonist force in the film. Even though a glimmer of humanity can still be detected in him, his essence has been thoroughly demonized. This is undoubtedly a reinforcement and return to the divine and demonic elements of the original *Journey to the West*.

In the film, the scene of Sun Wukong biting the throat of the exorcist is particularly shocking, and the bloody picture not only has a strong visual impact, but also deeply reveals the brutality and ruthlessness of the character's heart. The successful presentation of this scene cannot be separated from the rapid development and exquisite application of modern digital technology. Through post-processing, the film was able to show such realistic and shocking visual effects, making the demon image of Sun Wukong more full and three-dimensional, bringing the audience an unprecedented viewing experience.

At the same time, the animation film industry is also undergoing digital transformation, and three-dimensional animation technology and visual effects have brought unprecedented movie-watching experience to the audience, satisfying the pursuit of visual impact and novel experience of the new era audience. In this context, *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* not only keenly captures the development

opportunity of Chinese animation, but also dares to explore a new path of animation nationalization. While inheriting the essence of traditional culture, the film boldly adopts non-traditional narrative structure and character design, which not only retains the artistic value of the original work, but also endows the work with distinct characteristics of The Times.

Monkey King: Hero Is Back subverted the classic story framework of the original story, instead using the encounter between Tang Seng's previous life, Jiang Liu'er, and Sun Wukong in his previous life as the narrative clue, and the change of Sun Wukong's inner emotion as the key to promote the development of the plot. In the film, Sun Wukong is portrayed as a middle-aged warrior who has experienced the vicissitudes of time and his image vividly reflects the mood and challenges faced by contemporary middle-aged people in their post-adolescence. Accompanied by Jiang Luer, Sun Wukong goes through the double baptism of emotion and spirit, gradually realizes the true meaning of love and freedom, confidence and responsibility, realizes the all-round growth and self-redemption from psychology to spirit, and finally realizes the Monkey King Returns.

It is worth noting that *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* explores the self-identity and redemption issues in the heart of modern people by deeply exploring the role of Sun Wukong. In the film, Sun Wukong is not only a symbol of heroes, but also a mirror image of the inner confusion and struggle of modern people, especially middle-aged people. The chaos he is fighting is actually a metaphor for the lack of self-cognition and the confusion of human life direction. The film tells the story of Sun Wukong's journey of self-redemption, and also provides the audience with a profound revelation about self-discovery and growth.

3. REASONS FOR SUN WUKONG'S IMAGE RECONSTRUCTION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ACCEPTANCE AESTHETICS

3.1. Changes in the Social Communication Context

In the turbulent years of the Anti-Japanese War and the Liberation War, Chinese society was shrouded in a strong atmosphere of national salvation. During this period, the attention of the audience was highly focused on the survival of the nation and national independence. Therefore, the core value of literary and artistic works was to inspire the patriotic feelings and resistance spirit of the people. *Princess Iron Fan* as a representative work of this period, not only attracted the audience with its vivid characters and compact plot but, more importantly, accurately met the psychological needs of the society at that time for resisting foreign aggression and pursuing national liberation by telling a story of unity against the enemy. This high degree of resonance with the times made *Princess Iron Fan* not only an entertainment work but also a spiritual force that inspired people.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the country entered a stage of many things to be done, followed by a series of political movements and social changes. During this period, the psychological needs of the audience fluctuated with the adjustment of national policies, and literary and artistic works naturally assumed the task of reflecting the spirit of The Times and propagating national policies. Works such as *The Monkey King* came into being under this background. The success of these works lies not only in their artistic attainments, but also in their ability to accurately grasp the pulse of The Times and meet the spiritual needs of the people in a specific historical period.

In the 1980s, as Chinese society entered a new era of reform and opening up, the image of Sun Wukong in the TV series *Journey to the West* was endowed with new colors of the times. He is not only a hero in traditional mythology but also becomes a pioneer who dares to explore the unknown in the reform tide, with his spirit of *Daring to Ask Where the Road Is* inspiring countless Chinese. At the same time, the humanistic brilliance in Sun Wukong's image was fully displayed, breaking the gloomy atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution, leading the audience to regain their belief in the

beauty of humanity, and stimulating people's positive imagination and practice towards the future of the country, injecting strong spiritual vitality into Chinese society at the time.

Entering the 1990s, with the continuous development of the economy, Chinese society gradually entered a consumer society. Against this backdrop, people began to relieve the pressure brought by industrialized production through consumption and paid more attention to personal emotions and needs. This shift profoundly affected the direction of cultural trends, with collective discourse gradually giving way to individual values, giving birth to a new fashion dominated by mass culture. In the field of film and television art, this shift is manifested in film and television works beginning to break free from the constraints of collective thought and political discourse, focusing on the artistry of the work itself and the individualized shaping of characters, showing a trend of deheroization and democratization.

In this context, works such as *A Chinese Odyssey*, *Journey to the West: Conquering Demons* and *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* are the attempts and explorations of the creators of this period to reconstruct the film and television image of Sun Wukong. These works not only retain Sun Wukong's original spirit of wit, courage and rebellion, but also dig deeply into his human brilliance and emotional world as an individual, making his image more close to the aesthetic and psychological needs of contemporary audiences. Through these works, the creators not only show the various faces of Sun Wukong in different cultural contexts, but also reflect the profound impact of mass culture on personal values, emotional experience and cultural identity in the consumer society.

With the comprehensive arrival of the Internet era, the shaping and dissemination of the classic film and television image of Sun Wukong ushered in unprecedented new opportunities. The psychological needs of the public are no longer limited to the single interpretation of political symbols, but increasingly show the trend of multi-dimension and individuation. This change comes from the general improvement of the audience's cultural level, the diversification of lifestyle and the increasingly rich concept of value. Therefore, in the construction of the film and television image of Sun Wukong, creators are facing a broader and more complex audience group and diversified aesthetic preferences.

3.2. Transformation of Audience's aesthetic

Preference In the evolution of Sun Wukong's visual image, we have witnessed a subtle shift from aesthetic appreciation to ugliness appreciation, which profoundly reflects the diversified development of audience's aesthetic psychology, that is, from the single pursuit of the beauty of traditional art to the acceptance and appreciation of ugliness elements. Traditionally, ugliness is often regarded as a complement or accessory to beauty, but since the end of the 18th century, the discussion on beauty and ugliness has been gradually enriched and diversified. In the 20th century, with the acceleration of social stability, commercialization process and the improvement of ideological freedom, people began to re-examine and challenge the inherent prejudice against ugliness and gradually break away from the shackles of beauty. Become an independent and important concept in academic research. In the new era, the deepening of commercialization and the diversification of media means have further blurred the boundary between beauty and ugliness, and promoted the aesthetic activities to show a new trend of coexistence of beauty and ugliness. In this context, the discussion of the essence of beauty and ugliness is no longer the core issue of aesthetic activities, but is replaced by the individual preferences and spiritual needs of aesthetic subjects. For the contemporary aesthetic subject, whether it is beautiful or ugly, the key lies in whether the work can touch its soul and meet its expectation of examining beauty, which is the real value of the work of art. Therefore, the transformation of Sun Wukong's animation visual image is not only an innovation in artistic expression forms, but also a vivid portrayal of the changes in aesthetic concepts of The Times.

In traditional concepts, beauty is often associated with positive qualities such as nobility, bravery, selflessness and justice. Therefore, in film and television works, the main characters are often

portrayed as the embodiment of these virtues, and they always have the aura of the protagonist, representing the values of justice and authenticity. For example, the earliest images of Sun Wukong we saw were all beautified in character and image. In character, Sun Wukong in *Princess Iron Fan* is united and responsible, in *The Monkey King*, he is fearless of power and dares to struggle, and in *Journey to the West*, he is powerful and loyal; in appearance, Sun Wukong in *Princess Iron Fan* imitates Disney's style but combines with opera characters in details, making Sun Wukong appear clever and lovely, while in *The Monkey King* and *Journey to the West*, Sun Wukong's appearance is the most classic image of the handsome monkey king, full of traditional Chinese cultural colors. However, with the change of social trends, the aesthetic concepts of society are also changing. Ugliness has gradually become a form of expression of modern aesthetics, and the boundary between it and traditional beauty has become blurred. This change reflects the audience's reflection on the unity and seriousness of traditional aesthetic standards, as well as the pursuit of fresh and exciting visual images. Therefore, the image of Sun Wukong also began to become more diverse and rich. For example, in Stephen Chow's movie *A Chinese Odyssey*, Sun Wukong is portrayed as a character who is trapped in love; In *Journey to the West: Conquering Demons*, he presents a rebellious image of monsters, and the 2015 animated film *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* subverts audiences' traditional understanding with a new story and decadent image of Sun Wukong. In this film, Sun Wukong is no longer an omnipotent hero, but a loser who has been repressed for five hundred years and has lost all his powers. However, this new image, which is out of traditional aesthetic taste, has not only not affected the film's reputation, but also won the enthusiasm of countless audiences. This is because the seemingly ugly image actually conforms to the modern audience's pursuit of fresh and exciting visual images. It embodies the pleasure that people in the new era obtain by dismantling the classic power and lofty image, and shows the freedom of thought and the improvement of acceptance of ordinary audiences who have the right to speak in modern society.

4. CONCLUSION

In summary, the evolution of Sun Wukong's image reflects the changes in social aesthetic concepts, from a single traditional aesthetic standard to a more diverse and open modern aesthetic concept. This change not only enriches the connotation of the character of Sun Wukong but also reflects the audience's pursuit of fresh and stimulating visual images, as well as the reflection and transcendence of traditional aesthetic standards.

The reconstruction of Sun Wukong's image is not only a process of artistic creation but also a reflection of social and cultural significance. In different historical periods, the image of Sun Wukong is closely connected with the spirit of the times, reflecting the social values and aesthetic trends. Each reshaping is an interpretation and response to the spirit of the times, conveying the voice of the times and the expectations of the people through the classic character of Sun Wukong.

In the process of change, cultural identity and conflict are inevitable phenomena. As a character with profound cultural heritage, every change of Sun Wukong's image will touch on the problem of cultural identity. On the one hand, it is necessary to respect and inherit the core value of traditional culture and maintain the traditional characteristics of Sun Wukong's image; On the other hand, in order to adapt to the aesthetic needs of modern audiences, reshaping needs to incorporate new cultural elements and innovative thinking. This tension of cultural identity and conflict promotes the continuous development and enrichment of the image of Sun Wukong, making it a living cultural symbol that constantly engages in dialogue and integration between tradition and modernity, local and global.

Looking forward to the future, the development trend of Sun Wukong's image will be diversified and international. With the rapid development of Chinese film and television, animation, games and other cultural industries, the image of Sun Wukong will have more opportunities to go to the world and become a symbol of Chinese culture recognized globally. At the same time, with the progress of

science and technology and the development of new media, the image of Sun Wukong will also be presented in more diverse forms, such as virtual reality, augmented reality, etc., to bring new experiences to the audience. The image of Sun Wukong in the future will continue to carry the spiritual core of Chinese culture, but will also continue to absorb new cultural nutrition, and meet future challenges and opportunities with a more open and inclusive attitude.

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