Cross-cultural Variation: Chinese Monkey King Legend as a Trickster in America

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ABSTRACT

The Chinese stories on Monkey King have offered a popular theme in American literature, but are also transformed in the American cultural context through cross-cultural communication. The Chinese character Monkey King is one of the most representative legends in Chinese culture, representing resistance, longing for freedom, and a somewhat individualistic heroism, and is also the protagonist in the Chinese classical novel Journey to the West written by Wu Chengen in the Ming Dynasty. When stories about Monkey King travel to the heterogeneous cultural context, variations of such cultural images inescapability occur. This article will compare aspects of the novel with the Monkey King in Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston's novel Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book (1990) and in Native American writer Gerald Vizenor's novel Grievery: An American Monkey King in China (1987). Supported by concepts from the variation theory of comparative literature, which focuses on changes, or variations, in the cross-cultural literary transfer processes, this article shows how and why variations between the Chinese cultural legend and the American re-writings is determined by cross-cultural variation by changing the cultural context, which can be seen as a framework for the study of cross-cultural communication.

KEYWORDS

Monkey King; trickster; variation theory; cross-cultural variation; Gerald Vizenor; Maxine Hong Kingston

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Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book set in San Francisco in the 1960s, Maxine Hong Kingston depicts the protagonist Ah Sing as a Monkey King. In contrast, Gerald Vizenor sets his story of the Monkey King in Tianjing, China, which is an American Monkey King story in China. Yet the images of Monkey King in both novels are different from the Monkey King in the Chinese cultural context whether it appears in classical novels, dramas, or other presentations. Such variation from the original cultural code embedded in cultural image is one of the representations of an author’s cultural demands. Thus this article seeks to observe how the Chinese cultural symbol of the Monkey King varies in America based on the comparative analysis of Monkey King in Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book and Griever: An American Monkey King in China from the perspective of the variation theory of comparative literature. This article argues that it is the cross-cultural variation caused by the changing cultural contexts based on writers’ cultural selections and demands that makes Monkey King, such a Chinese legend, Americanized, which becomes an American legend, signifying the cultural identity aspirations of ethnic minorities by alienating themselves with such a non-human metaphor.

1. The changes of Monkey King in China

When we say there is a variation process in cross-cultural dissemination and exchanges, then there must be an origin from which these variants vary. Such origin is embedded in the original culture, featuring the originally cultural and national factors even if it might have gone through changes in the original cultural context or foreignization when encountering and interacting with heterogeneous cultures. In fact, the image of the Monkey King in China is not fixed but changing dynamically, which has changed from generation to generation, from one medium to another, from pre-modern to modern, as Mulan varies in China (Yang), based on the different historical needs and artistic practices. And different authors absorb the story about Monkey King from different presentations via different media. Thus it is necessary to probe into the changing process of Monkey King in China first before it travels to heterogeneous cultures.

Besides the well-known classical novel Journey to the West that includes stories about Tang Sanzang with his three apprentices and their journey to the West in search of Buddhist scriptures, there are various versions about Tang Sanzang’s or Tripiṭaka’s quest in the history of Chinese literature. For example, Datang Sanzang Qujing Shihua (<大藏取经诗话>) emerged in the Late Tang Dynasty; in the Yuan Dynasty, Xiyouji Pinghua (<西游记平话>) and Xiyouji Zaju (<西游记杂剧>) were created. Not until the middle period of the Ming Dynasty, Journey to the West turned up, which has transformed the legend from plain folklore into a classical novel representing the climax of artistic creation (Wang 122). The transformation shows that there are plenty of stories in the oral tradition and folklore in China before the occurrence of Journey to the West. Even the novel has been re-written several times; many versions of this story develop from generations to generations partly integrating earlier versions.

As for the communication channels of Journey to the West, popular stories in the oral tradition (“jiangchang wenxue” 讲唱文学) passed on, along with the publication of the novel and drama (Chen 60–69). Today, with the development of new media, the circulation of the Monkey King story has been updated through TV series, film, and
video games, and so on, which has gained other connotations varying from the original image. No matter how the story about Tang Sanzang’s journey to the West circulates, the most bewitching image is undoubtedly Sun Wukong, Monkey King. Albeit this story has developed from the experience of Tang Sanzang, Monkey King has become a household hero and legend in China. The reason is the idea represented by Monkey King.

As a stone monkey without parents, Monkey King is born with a brave heart and a spirit with hatred of restraint as well as a longing for freedom. He holds the idea of counter-authority and almighty power reflected by his comic behaviors and tricks; he even makes chaos in the Jade Emperor’s Heavenly Palace when he fights against the divine troops descending from Heaven to capture him. Even when Monkey King protects Tang Sanzang during the journey to the West, he sweeps out evils and demons, and helps people in danger. Thus, Monkey King’s brave fighting, longing for freedom, and his dedication to defeat the devils are, as one scholar summarized, “the reflection of character and essence of beauty of human’s conquering nature and fighting for liberation. Because Monkey King represents the oppressed poor and hardworking people’s hopes to get rid of darkness and evil as well as to embrace a bright and happy life, Monkey King becomes a well-known hero, which is also the root cause of the successful dissemination of Journey to the West in hundreds of years.” (Wang 126)

What happens with the story when Monkey King is passed on from generation to generation? In fact, the rewritings of the Monkey King legend are quite frequent today both in China and in other countries. Data shows that there are at least eighty films about Journey to the West throughout the world since Sunxingzhe Dazhan Jinqianbao (<孙行者大战金钱豹>); the first film was released in 1926 (Dalian Xinwenwang). 2016 in China was the year of the monkey, when nine films were released like Xiyoujì Zhì Sàndà Bái Gǔjīng (<西游记之三打白骨精>), Xiyou Xiàngmòpiān 2 (<西游降魔篇2>), Datang Xuānzàng (<大唐玄奘>), Wukong (<悟空>), Wukong Zhuan (<悟空传>), Dahua Xiyou 3 (<大话西游3>) and so on.

Yet, film is just one medium. There are other media that contribute to the circulation of the Monkey King legend and Journey to the West. For instance, a TV series like Journey to the West released in 1986 by CCTV (China Central Television) has become a classical adaptation of the novel. A drama like the Havoc in Heaven of Beijing Opera is well-known in China as well. In spite of the strength of the above artistic forms, the power of cyber games cannot be underestimated. Cyber games like “King Glory” and “LOL” (League of Legends) produced by American Riot Games with Sun Wukong as an eminent hero has enjoyed great popularity among young people across the world.

The Monkey King legend changes over the years when it travels through different media due to the role of cultural consumption. Take the appearance of Monkey King in cyber game LOL for example. Monkey King in this game is also called the Great Sage Equaling Heaven (齐天大圣), a brave hero who is quite good at fighting in the War Academy. Obviously, Monkey King in LOL is cast as a warrior. In order to serve the needs of the game, the cultural and historical background of the hero has been omitted. Another example of the variations happening during the process of dissemination might be the debatable rewriting of Monkey King in movies like Dahua Xiyou (<大话西游>), in which the focus is not on Monkey King’s braveness or fighting but on his love and emotions. The playwright has turned Monkey King – a hero, a legend, and a myth – into a mortal who is also influenced by love like ordinary people.
Besides the above specific media contexts, another domain that should not be ignored is pop music in China. There are several songs related to Monkey King such as Wukong by the singer Dai Quan, Great Sage Equaling Heaven by Ren He, Douzhan God by Eason Chan, and Qi Tian by Hua Chenyu, to name a few. Take Hua Chenyu’s Qi Tian for example. This song is composed and song by Hua Chenyu, a very young singer who won the championship in Super Boy 2013. As the theme song of the film Wukong Zhuan released in 2017, the theme of this song echoes that of the film. The main motif is to convey the tragic destiny of Monkey King who never surrenders and has to valiantly fight against the destiny defined by Heaven.

Thus, to some extent, the cultural codes behind Monkey King vary following different needs of various media communication as well as altered changing historical background, and gradually changing from legend to a mortal like everyone else, which is a process of de-divinization. When Monkey King has been de-divinized, then it is not a deiform legend but can be anyone else, paving the way to various rewritings. This is also true when it travels to other cultural contexts. Such changes have various representations; however, the core of this image still stays with the spirit of defying restraints and oppression, cleverness, and braveness, which has become one of the cultural symbols in China.

2. Monkey King as a trickster in America

When the Monkey King legend travels to foreign cultures, the original images and cultural codes are subject to change. Such changes have been called variations according to Cao Shunqing, depending on transfer between media determined contexts, and more importantly between diverse cultural contexts, inside or outside the same larger cultural contexts.

One such rewriting of the Chinese stories is Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston’s Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book published in 1990. Another novel, Griever: An American Monkey King in China (1987), which won the 1986 New York Fiction Collective Award and the 1988 American Book Award, probably less known to Chinese readers, was written by the Native American writer Gerald Vizenor. These two novels make an interesting case study of concrete variations of Monkey King. Both Maxine Hong Kingston and Gerald Vizenor have turned to the Chinese novel Journey to the West and transplanted Monkey King to their own works in unique ways; and both authors rely on the spirit and actions of Monkey King to convey their own vision of minorities in America in novels.

In his article “The Monkey King in the American Canon: Parricia Chao and Gerald Vizenor’s Use of An Iconic Chinese Character,” J. Stephen Pearson has already analyzed the dissimilar ways of adopting the Monkey King tradition in three American authors’ works including Gerald Vizenor’s Griever: An American Monkey King in China, Maxine Hong Kingston’s Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book, and Patricia Chao’s Monkey King (355–374), based on close reading and comparative studies; however, the particular variations following the transfer of Monkey King into American culture and literature have not been scrutinized, let alone the evaluation of its effects and the reasons why the Monkey King story show variations in different cultural contexts.

Interestingly, both Maxine Hong Kingston and Gerald Vizenor have transformed Chinese Monkey King into a trickster, “an elf with abnormal birth, deformable, liar and trickery […] which contains both trickster spirits in myth and indicates the mental state of American minorities who usually wander on the edge of mainstream society.
and defy the authority” (Fang 58). In other words, trickster is the specific representation of the variant of Chinese Monkey King in America transferred by Maxine Hong Kingston and Gerald Vizenor.

### 2.1. Monkey King as a trickster in *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*

In *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, Maxine Hong Kingston relates the protagonist Ah Sing to Monkey King in *Journey to the West*. Ah Sing feels confused by his identity: whether he should be Chinese American or American has confused him all the time, a problem that also points to the general question about minority identity in America and larger issues of culture and nationhood. Ah Sing chooses to wander on the street, wearing long hair and a long beard, as a hippie in the 1960s in America. By doing so, Ah Sing regards himself as Monkey King via imitating some behaviors of Monkey King like jumping up and down like a monkey. In other words, Kingston has shaped the hippie-like protagonist as a Monkey King in his longing for freedom realized through a decadent, playful, and rebellious way of life.

There are some connections between the characteristics of Ah Sing and Monkey King. Kingston once explained in an interview that “I work with the Monkey stories and I show that the Monkey has come to America and that there are many Monkey images. I connect King Kong with the Chinese Monkey. He has the spirit of the trickster and he wants to continue the Chinese-American theater tradition there has been a long one.” (Kingston & Carabí 141) In other words, Monkey King, as far as Kingston is concerned, is a trickster combined with King Kong and a Chinese Monkey.

But where does Kingston get the story of Monkey King from? As Kingston explains “I’ve read *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Monkey King or Journey to the West* in many versions too” (Zhang 21). So Kingston is undoubtedly the “indirect audience” (Sheng 60) of Chinese Monkey King, by receiving Monkey King indirectly through translation as the medium.

Are Kingston’s interpretations of Monkey King identical with that of the Monkey King in a Chinese cultural context? In fact, Kingston has misread Monkey King. In an interview, Kingston has illustrated her strategies of writing and transplanting Monkey King in *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*,

The Monkey King was always mischievous, and he was always looking for the Elixir of life. And the gods in heaven put him through so many trials. But he always bounced back; no matter how the evil prince and his army chased after him and so forth, he always bounced back. He ended up a very important figure in Chinese literature and unforgettable […] His bouncing back has to do with irrepressible joy and his spirit of fun. Somehow we are going to solve the world’s problems with fun and theater. And with laughter. The reason this is all set in the Sixties, too, is that the monkey was here, in the Sixties. Abby Hoffman, Allen Ginsberg, you know? They were monkey spirits, trying to change the world with costumes and street theater (Chin and Kingston 60–61).

It is noticeable that Kingston treats Monkey King as a trickster with monkey spirits and regards his bouncing back as a way of releasing irrepressible joy and his spirit of fun. However, read in this way Kingston has misunderstood Monkey King. Shaping Ah Sing as a hippie because, as Kingston states, “The monkey’s task was to bring chaos to established order. So Whitman has that also.” (65), is not identical with the
meaning of Monkey King in the Chinese cultural context. In reality, the reason why Monkey King always bounces back when encountering evils, is not because he intends to create a playful chaos. Monkey King fights, not for the sake of fighting or bouncing back itself, but to protect against the evil and restore safety in difficult situations.

The reason for such misreading might be complicated. But one point is obvious: it is partly because the story about Monkey King has already varied during the process of being filtered through different media like the translation that Kingston has read, which is the typical cross-linguistic variation or the folktale told by her parents in America due to cultural filtering, “the selection, transplantation, transformation, and reconstruction of communicating information by receivers” brought by “their cultural tradition, realistic context, value standard, and aesthetic habits” (*Variation Theory* 160). Thus, one of the reasons of such misreading is the need for freedom in the author’s own artistic creativity based on the author’s own cultural background, individual selection and subjectivity, resulting in cross-cultural variation. As analyzed earlier, the background in *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* is set in the 1960s America, a period where the ideas of the Beat Generation became popular in American society. No wonder Kingston has portrayed Monkey King, Ah Sing, as a hippie, who is the product of the historical situation and the proclamation of love and happiness for all among the hippies. The mission of Monkey King in *Journey to the West* is to protect Tang Sanzang, while Ah Sing is “on a mission of self-definition and is out to subvert the dominant society’s attempts to stereotype him and his ethnic community” (*Maini* 244). Thus, Kingston has made Ah Sing a character somewhat different from Monkey King and turned the story into a story about ethnic identity. Ah Sing, a Chinese American hippie with some features of Monkey King, tries to resist the dominant discourse of white Americans and establish a minority identity of the Chinese American community.

### 2.2. Monkey King as a trickster in *Griever: An American Monkey King in China*

Native American writer Gerald Vizenor has also turned to the Monkey King legend. It happens in his novel *Griever: An American Monkey King in China* where he shapes the protagonist Griever de Hocus as an American Monkey King. One important plot point is with the protagonist Griever’s decision, after having heard about the story of Monkey King, to become a Monkey King, a Monkey in the mind, via external face-painting with red, white, and gold in an imitation of the Monkey King image in Beijing Opera. For instance, when making his photo ID, the name on his ID card is Sun Wukong (孙悟空), the Chinese name of Monkey King. The significant detail is that the author Vizenor sees Monkey King as a veritable Chinese trickster as he says in an interview (*McCaffery & Marshall* 51), which is similar to Kingston’s view. For example, when teaching in Tianjin, a city in China, the protagonist Griever always makes trouble: at a certain point Griever liberates chickens in a marketplace in order to give the birds their freedom; he even sets a carload of criminals free; when some students approach him to practice their English, he teaches them “obscene words, the language of lust and sex” (*Trickster of Liberty* 37). All of these mischievous and comic acts come out of Griever’s trickster activities, all of which are thought by Vizenor to be echoed by Monkey King in China.
However, this is the most significant deviation from the Chinese Monkey King Legend. Throughout *Griever: An American Monkey King in China*, it can be noticed that Griever’s behavior in Tianjin consists of farcical activities rather than heroic deeds in contrast to Monkey King in *Journey to the West*, through which Monkey King has been through de-heroism and becomes a trickster who is wild about mischief to convey his ideas.

And these farces are full of dramatic conflicts inspired by Chinese opera as Vizenor states, “What happened instead was that in the fall, a month into teaching over there, I was invited to see a production of some of the scenes from the Monkey King opera. That experience changed everything for me.” (McCaffery & Marshall 52) In this sense, Vizenor is a “direct audience” (Sheng 60), who has a direct reception of the legend as performed in the homegrown Chinese tradition compared with Maxine Hong Kingston’s indirect reception. Even if Chinese opera, in the strict sense, is also a variation of the original text, Vizenor, as a Native American writer without a Chinese cultural background, directly received the Monkey King legend in China. This is different from that of Kingston, who has some Chinese cultural background, indirectly received the legend outside China through translation of the Ming Dynasty novel. Yet, in both cases, intercultural communication has opened up for an integration of the Monkey King legend in American culture, a suggestion as a particular contribution to the legend as a whole to see Monkey King as a trickster in America.

Indeed, there is plenty of evidence in Vizenor’s novel that can reflect the influences from Chinese opera. Take the way that Vizenor names characters as an example. In *Griever: An American Monkey King in China*, the gatekeeper at Griever’s school is named as Wu Chou (武丑), which means “warrior clown” (23), a comical character in Chinese drama. Another character’s name is also worthy of attention. There is a blind woman in the novel whose name is Hua Lian (花脸), which is a name from Beijing opera. In this way, she incorporates the character type called “jing” (净), normally a forceful male character with a painted mask. However, different media produce different understandings of characters, also with regard to gender, as Chen Hong says, “*Journey to the West* in the form of novel is about the story of the gods and demons featuring eccentric imagination and attractive story plots while *Journey to the West* in the form of drama would always protrude these characteristics due to the features of drama […] but lack the philosophy embedded in the story” (63). Here, the female Hua Lian has a strong dramatic impact, while the male version in the Chinese context can show a philosophical dimension. Thus *Griever: An American Monkey King in China* is full of dramatic conflicts leaving space for Griever’s trickster activities.

But why does Vizenor adopt Monkey King as the archetype of the trickster? Why is it Monkey King instead of somebody else? Apparently, Vizenor has found inspiration from the Monkey King legend as well as the connection between the legend and the traditional value of Native American culture due to Vizenor’s own cultural background. Vizenor once explained his inspiration to shape Monkey King in his novel:

Of course, what’s going on is also revolutionary, but not in this case revisionist or social realism, the way most theatrical productions were in China. In other words, this Monkey King material hadn’t been converted to serve the state. The revolutionary state accepted these not as bourgeois spiritual pollution, but as folk culture, original literature that represented the Chinese consciousness. They accepted it for what it was because it was in their soul – and the soul in this case was not dangerous to the Communist Party. This was on-the-street stuff, a bit like puppet theater, not an elitist-Communist Party performance. So
there it is. This probably sounds naive on my part, but it’s true. And these wonderful distractions with the audience – I started paying attention to the play, and of course it was only then that I began to recognize all the stuff I had read about the Monkey King. Then, in one of those occasional strokes of insight you get, I suddenly saw the trickster figure. When I saw this stuff performed in this other context, there it was, suddenly alive, and I was thrilled. I knew immediately that I had a book. I didn’t know what it was going to be exactly, but I knew I had a book somewhere. When I got back, I still didn’t have a book, although I did have a powerful theme – the idea that the only figure in a story who could confront the oppressive bureaucracy and contradictions existing in the People’s Republic of China would have to be a mind monkey or trickster. The trickster Griever bashed at habits and rules in an established historical context. (McCaffery & Marshall 52–53)

One aspect concerns the historical context in which the opera on Monkey King has influenced Vizenor. When he visited China, theatrical productions were in the way of revisionist or social realism with the aim of serving the state, which matches the political climate at that time. But people still loved watching the Monkey King story, being a representation of traditional folk culture. Although Vizenor does not mention it, it might be assumed that the performance of Monkey King, his behavior itself, reflects a sort of resistance. In addition to that, Monkey King, as figure which plays a similar role to that of a trickster, is a “communal sign” (“Trickster Discourse” 282, 285) rooted in cultural tradition, the cultural unconsciousness, as it were. Thus he becomes what Vizenor calls a “mind monkey.”

Another aspect of Vizenor’s use of Monkey King as a Chinese trickster concerns the relation to trickster culture in Native American tradition, between Chinese opera and Native American ideas: “Like Chinese opera, Chinese art too holds an assumption allied to native American thinking” (Brindha 105). In Vizenor’s eyes, Monkey King is a trickster who is longing for freedom and who is not afraid of challenging authority. More importantly, the trickster behavior is a mark of rebellion. Thus, Vizenor’s novel “takes on the character of an adventure story while also embodying trickster resistance” (93). Here two cultures echo each other on the basis of transformation and transfiguration of the Chinese Monkey King legend combined with a trickster in an American cultural context.

The “trickster discourse” established by Vizenor claims that “The trickster, then, is a sign, a comic and communal sign,” as Viznenor illustrates, “and a discourse in a narrative with no hope or tragic promises” (“Trickster Discourse” 285). According to Vizenor, this claim is substantiated by “Serious attention to cultural hyperrealities”; thus, “trickster discourse” is “an imaginative liberation in comic narratives; the trickster is postmodern” (281). Because of that, the trickster is not a man or a specific thing, but a semiotic sign, which “... is imagined in narrative voices, a communal rein to the unconscious, which is comic liberation...”; the “agonistic imagination and aggressive liberation” (285). In other words, there are at least three layers of the indications of trickster: first, trickster is a semiotic sign, which is communal; second, it is a complex semantic unit with “agonistic imagination and aggressive liberation” as its features; third, it is a discursive power. In this sense, the trickster is a figure that features a hybrid identity; in this capacity the trickster can act as a go-between, bridging two identity positions and two cultural worlds, or even the material and a spiritual world, as Kerstin Schmidt claims, “The trickster is in-between, mediates in this location, and heals the pain caused by these restrictions and stringent oppositional thinking” (73). This indication echoes the trickster, both of which feature the characteristics of liberation and comic elements.
As a Native American of mixed blood in America, Vizenor is in both a marginalized and in-between position, which has been reflected by the protagonist Griever in the novel: “Griever’s power emerges from his liminal existence. Marginalized as he is as a mixed-blood and an outsider, he occupies the spaces between different ethnic groups. He effaces all spatial boundaries and lives beyond all bounded communities […] He lives in between two races and two worlds, belonging to neither and yet to both, which endows him with a superior power of evaluation” (Brindha 111). In order to resist the dominance of white America as well as of capitalism, Vizenor has to shape such a trickster to convey his thoughts. In other words, it is the author’s misreading and transformation that cause the productive variation of Monkey King in *Griever: An American Monkey King in China* and connect the Chinese Monkey King with foreign cultures as claimed by J. Stephen Pearson:

It is through this conjunction of Chinese and Western references that the Chinese stories are becoming part of the American literary canon, taking their place beside the African and indigenous American narratives currently stretching the edges of America’s literary heritage and making it more representative of the actual ethnic makeup of the nation (358).

Therefore, when cultural context has changed after traveling to American culture, Chinese Monkey King, based on authors’ cultural background and selection, has experienced foreignization, which is “a deeper variation when literature from one country has been culturally filtered, translated and received by another country’s culture, through which cultural rules and literary discourse of the literature from original culture have been domesticated by and become one part of another culture. Or as Edward W. Said describes in his article “Traveling Theory” that there are four phases of any traveling theory or idea, among which the last stage is transformation, “the now full (or partly) accommodated (or incorporated) idea is to some extent transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place” (227). Because of the interaction and the transformation of heterogeneous cultures after the cultural context has changed, Chinese Monkey King has become American Monkey King, a trickster signifying the cultural demands of minorities in America.

3. Conclusion

When the cultural context has changed in the process of cross-cultural communication, the source culture or literature would experience variations when encountering heterogeneous cultures, via confronting or even resisting, exchanging, integrating, or transferring heterogeneous cultural factors. Due to authors’ cultural background and selection, heterogeneous cultural symbols provide a suitable joint point where different cultural factors meet, offering helpful material for authors’ cultural writing and demand. Maxine Hong Kingston has been greatly inspired by the translation of Chinese classical literatures while Gerald Vizenor has been influenced by Chinese opera. Although the extent to which they are affected as well as the media through which their inspiration has passed is different, both of them have misread the Monkey King legend by treating Monkey King as a trickster. However, Kingston’s and Vizenor’s domestication of the Chinese Monkey King in American culture are successful as much as Monkey King has now also become an American image. No matter whether it
happens through direct or indirect transfer, the cross-cultural variation of Monkey King has triggered productive and creative variations.

People would always ask one question when it comes to literature or culture variation, that is, to put it in a simple way, is variation good or bad? So, how should we evaluate the variations in the process of cross-cultural communication? The positive aspect is that the variations enable the creation of new literary content because of receivers’ misreading, selection, and transformation based on their cultural background and cultural demands; however, there is a negative aspect as well. Variations can sometimes produce total distortions of the source literature and culture, which merely reduces the complexity of the legend without adding anything new to it. Or audiences from foreign cultures would only treat Monkey King’s heroic activities such as Havoc In Heaven as a farce of his own. To evaluate the variation phenomenon based on such a simple and dualistic method is not what variation theory mainly focuses. What matters is what variation phenomenon would bring to the development of literature and culture in such dynamic and diversifying cross-cultural interchanges. Yet, variation, positive or negative, is inevitable in cross-cultural communication due to the heterogeneity of cultures, which is an indispensable factor in creative transformation and utilization of heterogeneous cultural factors in such cross-cultural communication.

Note

1. Variation of literatures would always happen when literatures from one country exert influence on literatures from another. In that case, variability and heterogeneity, rather than homology or homogeneity, become key factors. The Variation Theory contains two aspects of comparability: “variability and “heterogeneity,” which was first proposed by Cao Shunqing in his monograph <比较文学学> (The Study of Comparative Literature) written in Chinese. The English monograph, titled The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature was published in 2014. The definition given by Cao Shunqing states the following: “On the basis of crossing and literariness, the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature is the study on variations of the literary phenomena of different countries within or without factual contact as well as the comparative study on the heterogeneity and variability of different literary experiences in the same subject area so as to achieve the goal of exploring the patterns of intrinsic differences and variability.” (“Variation Theory” xxxii) More information can be found in 曹顺庆: 《南橘北枳: 曹顺庆教授讲比较文学变异学》 (Cao, Nan Ju Bei Zhi.); Cao, The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature.

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