

# Chinese Stories in Chinese Animation: A Semiotic Interpretation of *Chinese Folktales—Goose Mountain*

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**Abstract**—*Goose Mountain* is the second episode in the Chinese animation Chinese folktales. Rooted in traditional Chinese culture, this short film deconstructs Chinese stories into Chinese landscapes, Chinese legends and Chinese allusions. Although there is not a single line of dialogue in the whole film, it still presents a strong sense of Chinese style. Peirce's study focuses on the role of representament in personal perception. Based on Peirce's semiotic theory, this study adopted the definition of representament and trichotomy as theoretical framework to explore the important role of cultural representaments in the process of telling Chinese stories in Chinese animation.

**Keywords**—Chinese culture, Chinese story, Peirce, trichotomy

## I. INTRODUCTION

Telling China's stories well and spreading the Chinese voice are related to the shaping of China's national image, the cultivation and enhancement of the Chinese national spirit, and the embodiment of a country's overall strength [1]. Numerous studies have shown that the practice of telling China's stories should grasp the three important issues of "view of China", "view of story" and "view of communication" [2], which requires the integration of cultural signs with Chinese characteristics and connotations into the communication medium. In 2023, a collection of short Chinese animation stories, *Chinese folktales*, generated huge attention on the Internet and is described as an exemplary piece of good Chinese storytelling. The collection consists of eight separate stories rooted in traditional Chinese culture, and of these eight stories, the second episode of the series, *Goose Mountain*, has received a great deal of discussion for its unique presentation and storytelling connotations. Using the goose cage as the narrative backdrop, the Fox spirit as the main character, and Chinese ink painting as the presentation technique, the short film presents Chinese literary allusions, Chinese legends, and Chinese landscapes through the forms of concrete signs, presenting the audience with a world of meaning with very Chinese characteristics.

As a renowned semiotician, Peirce's semiotic ideas have had an irreplaceable influence on the study of semiotics in Russia, the United States, China and other countries. Peirce's research focuses on the role of signs in individual cognition, and he argues that signs are both the result of human cognition of the objective world and a way of knowing it, as well as a condition on which human cultural development depends [3]. In *Goose Mountain*, the beauty of traditional Chinese culture is transmitted by signs, through their referential meaning and connotative meaning. In addition,

icon, index and sign, as an aspect of Peirce's semiotic triad, also fit the typical cultural signs that appear in the Chinese animation *Goose Mountain*. Based on Peirce's semiotic theory, this current study analyses the expression of Chinese cultural signs in *Goose Mountain* from the perspective of the definition of signs and the semiotic trichotomy, and explores the important role of cultural signs in the process of telling China's stories in Chinese animation.

## II. PEIRCE'S SEMIOTIC THEORY

In *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic*, Peirce stated that the sign represents something to someone in a certain way or capacity [4]. This definition shows that in Peirce's semiotic theory, a sign consists of the sign itself, the object to which the sign referred and the interpretative term of the sign (in Fig. 1). Peirce referred to the sign itself as "representament". "Representament" is a self-constructed word with the root "present", which means "to represent, to refer" in English. From this perspective, we could find that signs must be interpretative. The referential object of a sign is also known as the "referential object sign", which is the main content of the sign [5]. The referential object could be a physical object (e.g., a concrete thing) or a fictional concept (e.g., a literary image), and it does not have a unique correspondence with the sign itself. The interpretative term is a sign that becomes more explicit in meaning or significance, or is the result of some natural continuation of a sign. In Peirce's semiotic theory, an interpretative term encompasses a logical meaning and belongs to a broad concept. At the same time, the direction of reference of interpretative terms is fixed; they always point to the referential object.

Currently, it is generally agreed that the semiotic system created by Peirce could be summarized into: icon, index, and symbol, representamen, interpretant, and object [6]. The "icon, index, and symbol" in above semiotic system are related to the classification of symbols. In *Letter to Mrs. Welby* in 1908, Peirce summarized the principles of symbol classification as follows: 1. according to the way in which the sign itself is understood; 2. according to the way in which the immediate object of the sign is presented; 3. according to the way in which the dynamic object of the sign exists; 4. according to the relationship between the sign and the dynamic object; 5. according to the way in which the immediate interpretative item is presented; 6. according to the way in which the dynamic interpretative item exists; 7. according to the nature of the standard interpretative item; 9. according to the relationship between the sign and the dynamic interpretative term; 8. according to the nature of the standard interpretative term; 9. according to the relationship

between the sign and the standard interpretative term; 10. according to the relationship between the sign and the dynamic object and the three standard interpretative terms. Subsequently, Peirce modified the above ten principles by changing the term “standard interpretative term” to “final interpretative term” [7]. The aforementioned trichotomy of “icon, index, and symbol”: was Peirce’s classification of signs from the perspective of the relationship between the sign (the reproduction) and the object.

Peirce summarized the relationship between a sign and the object it refers to in three situations; the first is where there is some similarity between the two; the second is where the latter causes the former to exist; and the last is where the relationship between the two is conventional. Icon corresponds to the first type of relationship, which is that the symbol is related to the referent object through the existence of some nature of identity with the referent object. In other words, a sign is an icon if it shares some properties with its referent. For example, a cartoon watermelon bears a resemblance to a real-world watermelon. The index is the symbol that has a direct connection (causal, spatial, etc.) with its referent. For example, in the case of a weathervane, there is a physical causal relationship between the direction the weathervane is pointing and the direction the wind is blowing. In this case, the vane is the index and the wind is the object it refers to. Similar situations are common for thermometers, knocks on doors, symptoms of illness, proper nouns, pronouns, etc. Finally, if there is an artificially added quality between a sign and its referent, then the sign is a symbol. In other words, a sign is created by humans because it is conventional, reflecting the customs of a cultural community. In terms of language and writing, from the smallest word units to the books, all of which are symbols.

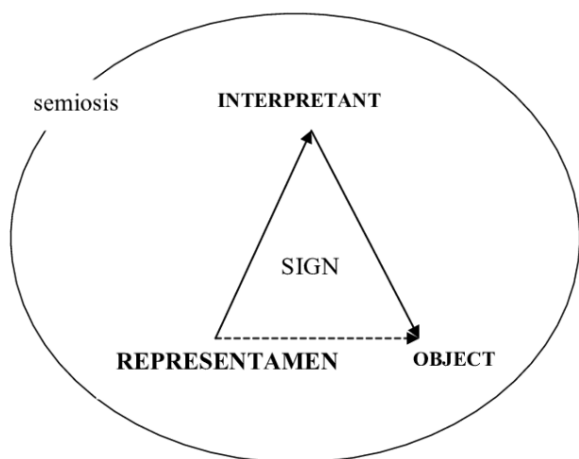


Fig. 1. Peirce’s semiotic model (triadic model) [8].

### III. ANALYSIS OF “CHINESE STORY” FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PEIRCE’S SEMIOTICS

Based on the Chinese masterwork *Xu Qi Xie Zhi*, *Goose Mountain* told the story of a goose delivery man who met a wounded scholar in the mountains and witnessed the scholar’s miraculous performance of spitting out a living man. This short animation deconstructs Chinese stories into Chinese landscapes, Chinese legends and Chinese tales, and although there is not a single line of dialogue in the whole film, it presents a strong sense of Chinese style.

#### 1) Chinese landscapes: Chinese ink painting as an icon

Similarity exists between likeness symbols and the referent objects. The essence of such symbols is visual relevance, such as resemblance or similarity between the symbol and the object [6]. In Peirce’s symbolic trichotomy perspective, Chinese ink and landscape paintings of mountains and water are able to replace natural landscapes by their visual similarity.



Fig. 2. Chinese ink painting in *Goose Mountain*.



Fig. 3. Chinese ink painting in *Goose Mountain*.

The basic technique of traditional Chinese ink painting is to use only water and black ink, whose color is only black and white. Later on, other colored traditional Chinese ink paintings were developed. The short film *Goose Mountain* follows the traditional ink painting technique (dots and dyes) from beginning to end (in Figs. 2 and 3). It uses the ink painting technique of white space while adopting black and white as dominant hues, which has the virtue of simplicity and realism to bring the Chinese landscapes to the audience. *Goose Mountain* depicts the main story of the cargo man transporting his goods over Goose Hill. Whether it is a rugged winding road, a flight of steps or a small bridge, it is a realistic reproduction of the rugged mountain path that leads to the village, the forest or the valley and the mountains. The icon is not only related to the object, but also related to the concept of the object. Through the artistic technique of ink painting, the image of *Goose Mountain* not only reproduces an actual mountain path, but also refers to the general concept of a mountain path, the direct aim of Chinese artists depicting mountain paths in landscape painting is to show the natural order, to search for the ultimate principle of the universe, which is also in line with the philosophical thinking of *Goose Mountain*.

The use of ink as a proxy for Chinese landscapes is not pioneered by *Goose Mountain*. Zhang Yimou’s *Shadow* can be considered a representative film using Chinese ink and wash. From the setting and environment to the characters’ costumes, it exhibits everything in the flat colors of ink and washes and the artistic conception of the landscape paintings.

In *Hero*, on the other hand, the long battle in the sky between Wu Ming, Can Jian and Fei Xue is accompanied in the background of the ultramarine mountain and stream. The swords of the Qin warrior Wu Ming and Can Jian slash across the water in a grand manner, which becomes the trails of brushes gliding across ink and wash. However, in *Goose Mountain*, the animation could be seen as moving traditional ink paintings, which allows the natural landscapes of China to leap onto the screen in the most visual way. Such a presentation is also a reflection of the national style. The spirits that are embodied in Chinese landscapes and ink paintings can also be conveyed through the images when traditional art is infused into the animation that is popular with the younger generation. The spirit that is embodied in ink and wash shows a deep love of the people for the great Chinese landscapes, giving a response to traditional Chinese ink paintings, and is also a call for national works.

### 2) Chinese legends: Fox as an index

There is a direct link between the indicative symbol and the referent object. The Fox spirit, one of the most widely known Chinese traditional ghosts, is derived from the fox, and there is a direct causal relationship between the two that is not dependent on human will. The Fox spirit (in Figs. 4 and 5) disguised as a scholar, one of the main characters in *Goose Mountain*, differs from the slightly exaggerated demons of traditional dramas, which is instead indistinguishable from the fox as an animal. However, the seemingly ordinary fox seduces the cargo man step by step, from initially entering the cargo man's goose cage to rest his feet, to inviting him to drink with him, and finally conjuring up several images of beautiful women from his belly to lure him into a state of ecstasy, which inevitably evokes the audience's memories of the Fox spirit image in traditional Chinese stories.



Fig. 4. Image of "fox" in *Goose Mountain*.

The image of the fox has always held an important place in Chinese cultural tradition. There are both male and female figures, sometimes predominantly male and sometimes female, and with mixed reviews. From ancient times to the present day, the complex nature of the image of the fox is as inscrutable as the fox's own suspicious and changeable characters. In ancient China, when the Tushan clan came into contact with the fox during their fishing and hunting activities, they worshiped the animal and worshiped the fox as a totem god, giving the image of the fox a divine character. However, since the beginning of the Wei and Jin Dynasties and the Northern and Southern Dynasties, when mystery novels became popular and everything could become gods and spirits, the Chinese image of the fox slipped from divinity to demonic nature, completing the transformation from god to demon. It is generally agreed that the most typical novels depicting foxes are Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a*

*Chinese Studio* and Ji Yun's *Notes of the Yuewei Hermitage*. The secularization and personification of the fox spirit in Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* have been completed, and it is a concentrated display of the development of fox culture to its zenith. The fox spirits in this work are not as homogeneous as they were in the Song and Yuan dynasties, and their personalities are even multifaceted, but in a word, they are depicted on a human basis, with human qualities. The fox stories in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* are shorter and more satirical than those in *Notes of the Yuewei Hermitage*, and from the point of view of social criticism, the fox stories in *Notes of the Yuewei Hermitage* have their own unique value. While the fox stories in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* are mainly about love, the fox stories in *Notes of the Yuewei Hermitage* are richer in themes, touching on all aspects of human nature.



Fig. 5. Image of "fox" in *Goose Mountain*.

Liu [9] argues that the fox immortals in *Notes of the Yuewei Hermitage* can be divided into three categories: the cunning and joking fox; the elegant fox who understands the principles of human nature; and the chivalrous fox who can help the poor. The fox in *Goose Mountain* fits into the Chinese tradition of the cunning and joking fox, but at the same time has a symbol of humanity. Through the interactions between the fox and the cargo man, the complexities and darkness of human nature are reflected, giving the film a more satirical dimension.

### 3) Chinese allusions: Goose cage as a symbol

Symbols are artificially created and their function is to refer to something. To clarify the object to which the statute symbol refers, one needs to have a certain understanding of the culture of a particular nation or ethnic group [5]. In *Goose Mountain*, the goose cage appears several times and is heavily portrayed by the producers (in Fig. 6). At the beginning of the animation, it focuses on the goose cage on the back of the cargo man from far to close. When the story reaches its climax, the injured scholar asks to sit in the goose cage of the cargo man. After the scholar enters the cage, the size and weight of the goose cage remain unchanged, which further arouses the curiosity of the audience. At the end of the story, it focuses on the goose cage again with the caption "This time, there is no goose in your goose cage".

In the Chinese context, "goose cage" refers to a situation in life that is often encountered by people, which can be described as the goose cage situation. In the story of *Goose Mountain*, the scholar (the fox spirit), and other characters seem to trust the cargo man. The scholar is grateful for the kindness of the cargo man for his carrying, and several of the men and women the scholar spits out trust the cargo man will not reveal their secrets. But this also shows the helplessness of people in the face of human nature. People want relationships where two hearts know each other and where

they are attached to each other. We may want relationships where we trust each other, but it is often the case in life that sincerity is hard to come by and often betrayed. The complexity of human nature is reflected in the small goose cage.



Fig. 6. Goose cage in *Goose Mountain*.

The symbol of the goose cage is often found in numerous Chinese literary works. In contemporary literature, the “realm of the goose cage” is often used as a metaphor for the emotional life of contemporary people. *Fortress Besieged* written by Qian Zhongshu echoes his own distillation of the “goose cage situation”, the intertwined courtship of a man and woman in a chain of unrequited love. In ancient literature, the story of the *Goose Cage Scholar* is repeatedly recalled, as Ji Yun mentions in *Notes of the Yüwei Hermitage*: “As I Have Heard I, “But the goose cage in Yangxian is an illusion within an illusion, and it is a tossing and turning of the two, so how do we know that the one who says this is a ghost is not also a ghost?” Wu Qian also writes, “In the past, in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, Xu Yan in Yang Xian, met with a goose cage scholar born under Sui An Mountain. It is a bizarre story, which people still praise.” Pu Songling extended the goose cage situation in love even further when he wrote in *The Mouth of the Short Harvest*, “The world has been exhausted by the fishing ocean, what on earth is not a goose cage.” By now, the “goose cage” in Chinese culture carries with it the Chinese reflection on human relationships and the questioning of human nature.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Cultural signs are a series of condensed, prominent and highly influential symbolic form system which can represent the specific cultural form and its significant characteristics. Such signs bear various cultural meanings, and are important tools for human to exchange and transmit ideas, as well as important carriers for cross-cultural communication. It is the distinct and unique cultural signs that always become to people’s initial cognition of a country or a nation.

Chinese cultural signs have condensed the development history of the Chinese nation for thousands of years, carrying the collective memory and national emotion of the Chinese nation. With film, television, books, newspapers and other communication channels as the main carriers, Chinese cultural signs tell the stories of China at home and abroad.

The artistic attainments, complete play and commercial entertainment of *Chinese folktales—Goose Mountain* have reached an unprecedented height. It is traditional, but also modern. It belongs to the Chinese nation, but also belongs to the world. There are countless splendid cultural relics in

China’s 5000 years of history. Chinese traditional national culture can provide inspiration and material for the creation of Chinese animation. Integrating cultural symbols full of Chinese characteristics into Chinese stories is undoubtedly one of the important ways to let the world hear the voice of China.

By analyzing the narrative logic of *Goose Mountain*’s Chinese storytelling in terms of Peirce’s semiotics, the beauty of Chinese culture is also presented through the interpretation of likeness, indication and statute symbols in Peirce’s semiotics. It is thus clear that the use of Peirce’s semiotics to explore in depth the national culture in literary works is still of great significance.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Zuo completed the draft of the manuscript and Yang was responsible for revising the draft. The two authors cooperated together on a number of works including research design, data collection and data analysis. All authors had approved the final version.

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