

Paper No. 68

2007

Metamorphosis and Mediality: An Interart Approach to the Reception of Stephen Chow's *A Chinese Odyssey* in Mainland China

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Citation

Yan, Feng. *Metamorphosis and Mediality: An Interart Approach to the Reception of Stephen Chow's A Chinese Odyssey in Mainland China*. Hong Kong: David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies, 2007. LEWI Working Paper Series no 68.

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林思齊東西學術交流研究所
David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies (LEWI)

Working Paper Series 研究報告系列

Paper Number: 68
October 2007

**Metamorphosis and Mediality:
An Interart Approach to the Reception of Stephen Chow's
A Chinese Odyssey in Mainland China**

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Abstract

This paper analyzes from an interart perspective the cultural impact of Steven Chow's cult movie *A Chinese Odyssey*, which is very much a postmodern "translation" of the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*. The deconstructive power of this movie lies in the spatialization of the visual, the nonlinearized dialogue, and the juxtaposition of both to a greater effect. Ironically the seemingly decanonizing process turned into a glorifying recanonization, shaping *A Chinese Odyssey* into a new classic which is followed and imitated extensively through intermedial practice. It is no coincidence that Chow's rise to fame synchronizes with the boom of the net culture of China. I will take the example of Jin Hezai's famous online novel *The story of Monkey King*, which is deeply influenced by *A Chinese Odyssey*, to show how the internet provides an ahistorical space for the Chinese who are desperately breaking out of all kinds of confinement while seeking a new spirituality, and how they readily have recourse to Chow's boundary crossing movies. In so doing, I hope to develop a theoretical basis on which the correlation between media transformation and its political, historical, and cultural implication could be further explored.

One of the most striking phenomena of the late 1990s was the smashing popularity of Stephen Chow's *A Chinese Odyssey* (hereafter, ACO) among Chinese youths. Suddenly everybody was talking about the Monkey King, singing Longevity Monk's version of "Only You", and talking in a "wu li tou" (mo lei tau) fashion. The fever reached a symbolic climax on the eve of the May 4th anniversary of 2001, when Chow was fanatically hailed by the students of Beijing University in their historic auditorium. Chow is also awarded with Honorary Professor by several prestigious Chinese universities, an honor rarely enjoyed by the actors from Hong Kong or Mainland China. Much has been said about the cultural, ideological, and social significances about Chow's quick rise to cult status in China. It is regarded as a "pink revolution", as the embracing of a coming petty bourgeois culture, and as

a postmodern longing for pastiche in a post-totalitarian void of spirituality.¹ I would lay my emphasis on the reception, in an effort to put ACO in a broader context of media transformation that is quickly changing the cultural landscape of China.

ACO is a bold reinvention of the classic *A Journey to the West*, combining romance with slapstick humor, time travel, parody of Hong Kong movies, and other elements which modernize/postmodernize the original novel. The movie was a box office failure in Hong Kong when released in 1994. It was introduced into China in 1995, originally encountering almost the same fate as in Hong Kong, with a box office of only two hundred thousand RMB in Beijing Area.² No one could foresee the great success it would enjoy in the years to come. The popularity of ACO was actually kindled and boosted by the advent of new media of arts and entertainments, with their Chinese characteristics in both production and dissemination. The illegally copied VCD (video cd disk), which emerged along with ACO in roughly the same period, played a very important role here. VCD is cheap, loanable, portable, and unlimitedly rewatchable, a heaven-sent gift for the financially pressed students. But it was the boom of the Internet that ultimately forged the cult status of ACO and crowned Stephen Chow the king of a new cultural comedy. Above hundreds of fan based homepages, there is a general and profound identification with ACO by the young netizens, who copy, quote, and appropriate it under any circumstance, making it “a pass of discourse for the entrance into the new millennium.”³ The net has also seen numerous adaptations of ACO, the most famous of which is the online fiction *The story of the Monkey King (Wu Kong Zhuan)* by Jin Hezai, which is further adapted into comic books and a film to be shot, and is even further imitated by other online fictions such as *Diary of Ba Jie (Ba Jie Ri Ji)*, *Diary of Sha Seng (Sha Seng Ri Ji)*, etc. It is an endless chain of unlimited multiplication and transformation.

In an age under the all conquering power of the Internet, the net compatibility of a cultural product largely preconditions its success. What makes ACO so net friendly? The

¹ See Zhu, Dake. “Da Hua Revolution and Bourgeois Reviviscence”. *Twenty-First Century* Dec. 2001: 111.

² Zhang, Lixian ed. *Bible of A Chinese Odyssey*. Beijing: Modern, 2000. 91.

³ Zhang, Hong. “The Guerilla Strategy of Da Hua Culture”. *Twenty-First Century* (Dec.2001): 120.

most easily discernable is their common nature of pastiche, collage, and repeatability. ACO is a parody of a classic, a transformation of a story about rebirth and metamorphosis, and its transformation from text to visual makes a special sense here.

“You can't make a good film out of a good book”.⁴ Such is a general consensus towards the difficulty in adapting a literary classic into a film. In the past, mainland China invested heavily to adapt the “Four Great Classics” (Si Da Ming Zhu) into films and TV series, only to harvest great controversies. This rule of adaptation failure also applies to lesser classics as Jin Yong's martial-arts novels. The difficulty largely lies in the discrepancy between the expectation of the audience, who have long established the image of the beloved hero or heroine in their mind, and inevitably transformed image appearing on the screen. Now ACO takes a completely different direction. Instead of trying desperately to minimize the gap between the original text and its visual translation, the film plays with the discrepancy, foregrounding it to enhance the whole effect.

At the beginning of the movie *Joker* (the Monkey King) is a cockeyed gang leader who was banished to mortal form by Guan Yin (Bodhisattva), and his appearance shifts between raggedness, bizarreness, and unattractiveness, suggesting nothing of a traditional image of the Monkey King. The imagery is a hybrid of Japanese Samurai, cartoonish caricature, and Stephen Chow's past makeup as appeared in his other movies. Unacceptable and disgusting to the eyes of the elder audience, this new image of the Monkey King nevertheless greatly appeals to the younger generations. We will see a meaningful logic at work here if we further explore the “true” image of the “real” Monkey King in the original novel. Isn't it the Monkey (King)'s nature to be capricious, always changing, and unlimitedly morphable? This is another instance that evokes Rey Chow's deconstructive treatment of translation when she points out that “translation is primarily a process of putting together. This process demonstrates that the ‘original’, too, is something that has been put together.”⁵

⁴ Elliott, Kamilla. *Rethinking the Novel/ Film Debate*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 12.

⁵ Chow, Rey. *Primitive Passions*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. 185.

When we say that the vision/re-vision on the screen is inherently both the betrayal and return to the original text, we are doomed to enter the troubled water of media demarcation brought forward by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who observes that Laokoon, as represented in the celebrated statue in the Vatican, does not open his mouth wide enough to raise a shriek, such as he utters in Virgil, but only wide enough to let a suppressed sigh pass from his lips. Why are there two different approaches in different art forms? Lessing's answer is straight and simple: "The wide naked opening of the mouth - leaving aside how violently and disgustingly it distorts and shoves aside the rest of the face - becomes in painting a spot and in sculpture a hollow, making the most repulsive effect."⁶ With this statement, he illustrates the boundary between painting and poetry from the angle of media. Lessing believes that in compliance with the Law of Beauty the artist must carefully take into account the limitation of the medium (stone in Laokoon's case), and it will be wise for him to work within the boundary instead of transgressing it. Painting is a spatial art form and it should be aimed at representing objects in space, while poetry is a temporal art form and it is good at depicting events in time.

Lessing's demarcation is open to challenges in the following centuries. A Chinese response worthy of mentioning is put forward by Qian Zhongshu, who argues that the artist could go beyond the border to borrow means from other art forms. For example, the "pregnant moment", a preferable device in painting termed by Lessing to designate the moment just before the climax, can find its counterpart in classic Chinese novels: "Chapter Seven of the *Water Margin* depicts how the banished Lin Chong was badly tortured along the way. Upon entering Hog Forests, Xue Ba tied him to a tree, and raised his big stick. 'If you want to know whether Lin Chong will be dead or alive, please read the next chapter.' This conforms to the principle of 'the pregnant moment'."⁷ For Lessing, literature is progressive and continuous. It can represent the action from beginning to end without the limitation of painting which can only depict some scenes of the event, yet in literature there are cases that

⁶ Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. *Laokoon*. Ed. A. Hamann. Oxford: Clarendon, 1901. 21.

⁷ Qian, Zhongshu. *Seven Essays*. Shanghai: Classics, 1994. 51.

avoid the linearity in favour of a device more intrinsically “graphic” in Lessing’s view. But for Qian Zhongshu, this border crossing is still temporary and unidirectional. It is from painting to literature, from space to time, not vice versa. Qian's arguments lie more with his endeavor to prove the priority of literature (time) over painting (space) than an effort to destroy the boundary. In this sense he is more Lessing than Lessing in their mutual preoccupation with time over space. “Lessing admits that poetry and painting both have their advantages, with the horizon of poetry “broader” than that of painting. If the two points I mentioned above stand the test of reason, then the horizon of poetry is even broader than Lessing has imagined.”⁸

Qian Zhongshu digs out many examples from western and eastern art history to show the scenes ineffable for painting while wonderfully achievable in poetry. “Diderot says that the poetry can describe a man shot by Cupid, but it can only be painted as Cupid aiming at the man with his arrow, otherwise he will look like physically wounded, since Cupid's arrow is only a metaphor.”⁹ Here we see the link between the demarcation of spatial/temporal art and the traditional opposition of material/spiritual, body/soul, visible/invisible, etc. Traditional arts would try strenuously to hide their materiality to enhance the spirituality. This preference or even hegemony of the “unseen” is disintegrating in many ways in a world more ready to be seen and to be seen. With the coming of new media which have broken boundaries in accelerated paces, we are now more than familiarized with various forms of “gaping mouth” in a more and more visualized culture of ours. For fans of ACO, a new classic imagery has been established in the acclaimed scene of the “heart”, where Purple Clouds, Joker's lover, in her quest to make out his true heart, enters Zhi Zunbao’s body to observe his huge throbbing heart surrounded by membranes, tissues, and arteries. This is a scene where Lessing and Qian Zhongshu will surely turn their heads and close their eyes in disgust. The spiritual and metaphoric heart, which is so sacred as to be kept away from vision

⁸ Qian, Zhongshu. *Seven Essays*. Shanghai: Classics, 1994. 55.

⁹ Qian, Zhongshu. *Seven Essays*. Shanghai: Classics, 1994. 46

as far as possible, now concretizes in its full frightening visual glory before the audience with the help of the advanced film SFX.

This scene should otherwise be a moment of truth in modernist writings, such as in *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, when Yossarian tries to treat a dying Snowden wounded in an air battle, only to discover Snowden's insides pouring out. The moment traumatizes Yossarian and reveals to him a secret vital to the whole novel: "Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. Drop him out a window and he'll fall. Set fire to him and he'll burn. Bury him and he'll rot, like other kinds.... The Spirit gone, man is garbage."¹⁰ The detailed and graphic description of human innards also becomes a fashion in Chinese avant-garde literature of the late 1980s.¹¹ What intrigues me here is a transition or translation from the moribund post-humanist tenet of "the death of man" to the visualizing playfulness of pop culture, with the mediation of the new media. The shocking realization does not necessarily lead to the existential sense of absurdity, but it can also harvest relieving laughter, just as Joker says, "I spit, and I spit, and I spit, and I am likely to grow used to it."

We might call Lessing and Qian Zhongshu back to have a second look at the gigantic heart in ACO, which is after all not so much like a real heart than a coconut. It is personified with its own voice. The cartoonish appearance and comic voice make it less organic and disturbing:

(Purple Clouds) Wow, your heart looks like a coconut!

(Heart) Miss, I'm ugly, but I am a gentleman. And I never lie.

(Purple Clouds) Tell me honestly, does he love his wife?

It is worth noting that the answer of the heart is purposely suspended, creating exactly a "pregnant moment" as purported by Lessing. A similar scene happens later when Skeleton

¹⁰ Heller, Joseph. *Catch-22*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1962. 429-30.

¹¹ For example, Yu, Hua. *One Kind of Reality*; Mo, Yan. *Red Sorghum*; Yang, Zhengguang. *Black Landscape*, etc.

Demon (the Monkey King's old flame) gets inside Joker to ask the heart the same question. The answer is also suspended, and we get to know still later from the dialogues that Skeleton Demon finds a drop of tear on the heart, thus knowing where it really belongs. Before he is killed by Spider Demon, Joker requests her to rip his chest apart as fast as possible so that he can check if there is indeed a drop of tear there. Of course the ripping process is also bypassed for the audience who are yet to be developed for a more advanced stage of visuality, and they never have the luck to witness the drop of tear which has been so much talked about. Here we see a complex mixture of the defiance and submission to the Law of Laokoon at the same time, a practice of boundary crossing with boundary still in mind.

Film is the contemporary representative of the media of presence, of immediately, and of transparent representation, achieved through vivid and lifelike visualization. This growing anxiety for the immediacy of media is a symptom of the post-industrial culture which manifests itself at different levels. It is a more and more entangled obsession with the real in a world losing the sense of reality. The heart scene in ACO is precisely a symbol of modern people's quest for truth in a graphic and supposedly "immediate" way. The visual starts and takes over where the verbal fails and ends, and the visual squeezes the verbal to greater inability, forming a vicious circle. The dialogues in ACO also support this visual logic of immediacy. Purple Clouds falls in love with Joker immediately, not because he is handsome or whatever, but simply because he pulls her sword, a fulfillment of her vow that whoever pulls her sword will become her love. And then comes the classic love confession of the new millennium:

(Purple Clouds) Let's start this affair immediately!

The directness and frankness in this appeal absolutely win the hearts of the young generation, just as the heart scene. As the opposite of this directness, Longevity Monk is adapted as an extremely garrulous person. In fact it is his wordiness that drives the Monkey King so mad as to kill him. It is easy to symbolize Longevity Monk as the authoritative voice and the

tradition of oppression, with the means of words. It is as convenient to categorize Joker and Purple Clouds as the younger generation who grow up in a visual culture and want to cut the crap and go into each other's heart directly. Yet it is the very nature of the verbal to clone itself and to play with itself, just as in another extremely popular dialogue between Joker and the immortal Bodhi:

(Bodhi) Does it need a reason to love someone?

(Joker) Doesn't it?

(Bodhi) Does it?

(Joker) Doesn't it?

.....

(Bodhi) Does it?

The dialogue has a paradoxical nature of both brevity and wordiness, and it grows more and more like a koan. It is just as paradoxical that the graphic heart scene turns out not to be self-content enough and has to be complemented by narration, the verbal, and the (in)visible.

As a film, ACO goes into fashion at the same time as Chinese literature is witnessing its marginalization in the cultural market under the pressure of other media of art, yet ACO harvests a new wave of text production movement, under the help of a new medium, the Internet, which in turn pushes the ACO fanatic to extremes. It is not much an exaggeration to say that ACO set the basic tone and rule of discourse for the Chinese net. The Chinese netizens nickname ACO *Da Hua Xi You*, with “da hua” meaning nonsense, about the same meaning as “wu li tou”. Just as the ancient Chinese have to use *Shi Jing (The Book of Songs)* in their social communication, the Chinese netizens exercise ACO in the same way, making it their cultural dictionary, phrase book, and bible. Of all the gibberishes, babbles, and nonsensical writings of the Internet catalysed by ACO, *The story of the Monkey King (Wu Kong Zhuan)* by Jin Hezai is a most clearly and beautifully written online fiction which looks

the closest to traditional literature, yet it retains many of the “da hua” characteristics. The fiction begins with a dialogue between Longevity Monk and the Monkey King:

“Wu Kong, I’m hungry. Find me something to eat”

“I’m busy. Can’t you look for it yourself? You have your own legs.”

“You busy? What for ?”

“Don’t you find the evening clouds colorful? I have to look at the clouds to keep myself going west.”

“You can look for food while looking at the clouds, just don’t bump into trees.”

“I never do anything when I do clouds gazing!”¹²

Such dialogues go nowhere and they appear everywhere throughout the whole book. Just as the dialogues in ACO and other ACO affected online textual practices, they are nonlinear, nondiscursive, and non-dialogic. They grow on linguistically paradigmatic planes instead of syntagmatic ones. It is not only the language, but also the structure of this fiction that manifests a nonlinear fragmentation, which comes natural for an online fiction that is not planned out beforehand, but more an act of writing of improvisation.¹³ Just as ACO, *Story of the Monkey King* plays heavily with the game of time travel. The Monkey King travels frequently back to his past, witnessing his former self wrestling with fate. At a certain point of the story he splits into two incarnations, one past and one present, and the two fights against each other for the true identity of himself. This shocking coexistence of the past and present in the same space for a synthesis of moments of time strongly suggests Joseph Frank’s idea of the spatialization of fiction in his influential essay “Spatial Form in Modern Literature”, which proposes that modern fictions are evolving towards a more “spatial form” and tend to “undermine the inherent consecutiveness of language, frustrating the reader’s normal expectation of a sequence and forcing him to perceive the elements of the poems as

¹² Jin, Hezai. *The Story of the Monkey King*. Beijing: Guangming Daily, 2001. 5.

¹³ Jin, Hezai. “My Version of Journey to the West”. *Beijing Youth Daily* Nov. 19, 2001.

juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time”.¹⁴ Of course Frank's insight can be regarded as a modern variation of Lessing's demarcation, and the priority has now shifted more and more towards spatiality in an age of total visibility. The iron chain forged by causality and history has now been broken and replaced by fragmented private space penetrated by joyful, voyeuristic gaze of the public. It is no coincidence that ACO starts and ends with the symbolic scenes of the crowds gathering around to watch the hero venture, suffer, and kiss. Joker complains to Bodhi about his awareness of the omnipresence of the invisible eyes peeping at him erotically. The collective voyeurism, largely initiated by the advent of film per se, is further promoted by the Internet. What happens in ACO is a foreshow of a greater scale of voyeurism in a interactive level perfectly realized in BBS, discussion boards, and Blogs, in which ACO, along with its clones, becomes the center of the vision.

The spatial turn is also a transition of power towards readers/spectators, with the spatialized structure providing them with spaces to be filled with their subjectivity. This process could be seen from the dissemination of the most quoted line from ACO, a love confession from Joker: “There was a true love before me that I did not cherish until I lost it. Nothing is more pathetic than this....” It is a parody of another classic line from Wang Jiawei's “Chunking Express”, and it is parodied to death on the net, providing a formula to be expanded at all occasions: “There was a XXX before me that I did not XXX until I....” It is a never tiring crossword filling game in which the reader becomes the writer and the gamer.

There is a slapstick dialogue between the Jade Emperor and the immortal Venus in *The Story of the Monkey King*. When asked how the Monkey King should be punished, Venus answers in a da hua way: “Collusion with demons can be punished lightly or heavily. He can get promoted, absolved, exiled, beheaded.”¹⁵ We can further explore this language game from another cultural angle. In the heat of the Chinese avant-garde literature movement in 1987, mainstream Chinese writer Wang Meng published an experimental short story

¹⁴ Frank, Joseph. “Spatial Form in Modern Literature”. Michael McKeon ed. *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000. 788.

¹⁵ Jin, Hezai. *The Story of the Monkey King*. Beijing: Guangming Daily, 2001. 112.

entitled “In High Spirits” (“Lai Jin”). The story is an mind bending paradigmatic word game with endless choices for readers: “You could call our hero Xiang Ming, or Xiang Ming, Xiang Ming, Xiang Ming, Xiang Ming, Xiang Ming or Xiang Ming Xiang Ming Xiang Ming Xiang Ming Xiang Ming Xiang Ming....etc. one days ago, that is five days ago, one year ago two months later, he, she, it got spondylitis, that is decayed tooth, diarrhea, vitiligo, breast cancer, so he is healthy, lives a prolonged life with no illness at all.”¹⁶ The story is viewed as an allegory of the equivocality of both the discourse and reality of China’s reform, and now we can see it as the forerunner and ground of reception for ACO and the da hua style. “In High Spirits” was criticized for going too far in its literary experiment at the time of its publication, but it foretells the coming of an age of reader orientation. The author can no longer maintain his authority and he is giving away the choices to readers.

The above mentioned end scene of ACO is also a symbolic act of this reader oriented interactivity. The onlookers below the city wall symbolize the power of the reader/audience, to which the incarnations of the Monkey King and Purple Clouds submit and kiss each other, with the help of the Monkey King. In both the film and the fiction we see a growing desire of the reader/audience to give their voices and to take control. The critical question is: Do traditional art forms such as film and literature offer enough space for this growing anxiety towards interactivity, which seems to find better locus in newer media such as interactive TV, multimedia arts, and computer games? The answer should not be a single ended one, but should be sought in the ever more boundary crossing transmedia practice which is already renewing the outlook of our culture, and the transformation of ACO and *The Story of the Monkey King*, along with their dissemination on the Internet, offers a ready example of this great wave of interactive, reader oriented, collective, and collaborative writing practice of the new century.

With this we come to the politics of metamorphosis. The Monkey King, with his morphing, time traveling, and space shifting ability, the great pre-human, super-human, and post-human, is the new (and old) avatar of the new generation of Chinese youth, who find

¹⁶ Wang, Meng. “In High Spirits”. *Fiction Selection* Apr. 1987: 46.

their growing will to freedom symbolically realized in the boundary crossing practice of the new media. In Jin Hezai's fiction the Monkey King cries out: "I want the Sky no longer cover my eyes. I want the Earth no longer bury my heart. I want all flesh understand my mind. I want all Buddha vaporize as smoke and dust."¹⁷ It is interesting to note in this proclamation a tone of the residue Chinese Enlightenment of the 1980s, or even a trace of the revolutionary trope of the rebellious image of the Monkey King in the pre-reform Mao Era. Yet the ice and fire opposition between the revolutionary the Monkey King and the reactionary Skeleton Demon has now melted away into a sweet, sorrowful, and laughable postmodern love romance, witnessing the classic Chinese novel, which is itself a story about transformation of modern China from anti-humanism to humanism to post-humanism. It is a double fold metamorphosis of both reform in the sense of history and re-form in the sense of media, with both processes interacting with each other.

ACO and *The Story of the Monkey King* can be viewed as the successors of the tide of cultural secularism initiated in the 1980s and manifested in such literary works as by Wang Meng and Wang Shuo, with a greater extent of flexibility as regards identity, human mind, and history. Never before have the Chinese youths felt so unbound like the authority defiant Monkey King and so close to blissful freedom when they swim in the timeless sea of the Internet, which provides them with multiplicity of identities that shelter them from the fast changing (but certainly unchangeable) reality from which they must turn their heads away. Added to this conspiracy of politics and new media is the globalization which promotes "the commodity culture that idealizes itself in a spatialization of time where everything is available, where the totality of desired objects is immediately present,"¹⁸ and we have a picture of the post-totalitarian political conservatism, cultural nihilism, omnipresent commercialism, all linked to the spatializing power of the new media.

¹⁷ Jin, Hezai. *The Story of the Monkey King*. Beijing: Guangming Daily, 2001. 55.

¹⁸ O'Donnell, Patrick. *Latent Destinies: Cultural Paranoia and Contemporary U.S. Narrative*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. 8.

Since the 1990s, people have been talking about the death of literature under the attack of new media, but much to their surprise literature is back with the help of the new media, while being transformed beyond recognition by the latter. Back with literature are the ghosts of the past, which are also transformed and parodied extensively. ACO and *The Story of the Monkey King* lead a new wave of online fantasy literature, which could be seen as the return of the old myth in a medium which is itself the greatest myth of our time. The pre-modern and postmodern coexist in an ahistorical space promised to transcending all boundaries. There remains only one question: Where is the gold ring around the Monkey King's head, and can he jump outside Buddha's palm?

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