RECONTEXTUALIZATION OF SUN WUKONG’S HEROISM IN THE MONKEY KING FILM TRILOGY 2014–2018

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From the 14th to the 18th centuries AD, classical Chinese literature reached a golden age marked by the emergence of Four Great Classics of China - Si Da Mingzhu, A Dream of the Red Mansions-Hong Lou Meng by Cao Xueqin (1715–1764); The Romance of the Three Kingdoms-Sanguo Yanyi by Luo Guanzhong (1280–1360); Water Margin-Shuihu Zhuan by Shi Nai'An (1296–1372); and the work analyzed in this article, The Journey to the West-Xi You Ji, written by Wu Cheng'en (1500-1582) (Hendrix, 2014:68).
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IN THE MONKEY KING FILM TRILOGY 2014–2018

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DOI 10.17510/paradigma.v13i3.1163
Received: October 9, 2022; Reviewed: November, 24 2022; Accepted: April 2, 2023

ABSTRACT
The classic Chinese novel, Journey to the West, written by Wú Chéng’ēn in the 16th century of the Ming Dynasty, is an influential work in Chinese culture. The main character of the novel, the Monkey King Sun Wukong, has become a highly popular character and been adapted into various cultural products. Sun Wukong’s popularity was adapted into three films directed by Cheang Pou-soi, namely Monkey King 1 (2014), Monkey King 2 (2016), and Monkey King 3 (2018). This article analyzes the reconfiguration of Sun Wukong in the films based on the monomyth schemes by Joseph Campbell, focusing on the construction of Sun Wukong’s heroic journey and his hybridity visualization that is closely related to his transformation from an archetypal hero who represents the principle of the “Three Teachings in One” to a modern superhero who represents social and individual values in the “Twelve Core Values of Chinese Socialism”. Through the archetypal theme of the journey, hybridity visualization, and a set of values associated with Sun Wukong, this article tries to analyze the transformation of his heroism from a classic hero into a modern superhero. The re-contextualization of this transformation to the contemporary China’s situation reflects the spirit of China today and its long journey from traditionalism to modernity.

KEYWORDS
Sun Wukong, Journey to the West, Monkey King Films, Monomyth Hero’s Journey, Core Values of Chinese Socialism.

1. INTRODUCTION
In the trend of Chinese adaptation film production, the “Four Great Classics of China - Sì Dà Míngzhù,”1 have become a major source of inspiration. The current trend in movie production, adapting classical literary

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1 From the 14th to the 18th centuries AD, classical Chinese literature reached a golden age marked by the emergence of Four Great Classics of China -Sì Dà Míngzhù, A Dream of the Red Mansions-Hónglòu Měng by Cao Xueqin (1715–1764); The Romance of the Three Kingdoms-Sānguó Yănyì by Shī Nài’ān

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works, has brought about a number of interesting issues. First of all, this trend shows that a new type of cultural conservation in the form of adaptation gives a new breath of life to the classics, which otherwise may have been frozen as canons. Secondly, from economic perspective, this trend potentially could help cut production cost, as certain sections of the production process of the story are already available and free from copyright ownership as far as the classics are concerned. Thirdly, the adaptation of classical literary works into movies also attracts a wider public interest, because the public has already been familiar with the story from the beginning, which is in line with the proverb quoted by Liu Diandian (2011, 69), "The predecessors planted trees, the present generation enjoys the coolness-qián rén zhǒng shù hòu rén chéngliáng."

One of the “Four Great Classics of China is the novel A Journey to the West (Xī Yóu Ji, Ji-hereinafter abbreviated as XYJ), which has become an influential work within the Chinese society. The classical novel XYJ was written by Wú Chéng’ēn during the Ming Dynasty in the 16th century and published around 1592 AD. Any discussion about the novel XYJ cannot be separated from the legendary story’s characters, Monk Táng Sānzàng (hereinafter referred to as Tang Monk or Monk Sanzang) and his disciples, consisting of the monkey Sūn Wūkōng (hereinafter abbreviated as SWK), the pig Zhū Bājiè, and the water demon Shā Wūjìng. Of the four characters, SWK is the most popular and has been adapted into various popular cultural products, such as movies, television series, animation, comics, music, dance, mobile games, web movies, and so on.

Since the early 2000s, there have been around 16 feature films and animated adaptations of XYJ, and the period between 2013 and 2018 was a golden period because there were seven movies that managed to achieve the box office above USD 100 million. Three Monkey King movies became some of the highest-grossing films with SWK as the main character. The Monkey King films, Journey to the West: Havoc in the Heavenly Palace- Xī Yóu Ji zhī Dà Nào Tiān Gōng, 2014 (hereinafter referred to as Monkey King 1 ); Journey to the West-Monkey King 2: Beats up White Bone Spirit- Xi Yóu Ji Zhī Sūn Wǔ Kōng Sān Dǎ Bái Gǔ Jīng, 2016 (hereinafter referred to as Monkey King 2 ); and 2018’s Journey to the West: The Queen of Women’s Kingdom- Xi Yóu Ji zhī Nǚ’ér Guó (hereinafter referred to as Monkey King 3 ), all directed by Hong Kong director, Cheang Pou-soi/Zhèng Băoruì.

The success of the three films can be seen in the following box office rate table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie Title</th>
<th>Release</th>
<th>Worldwide Total Gross</th>
<th>Domestic Box Office</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Monkey King 1</strong></td>
<td>January 30, 2014</td>
<td>US$176 million</td>
<td>RMB 10.45 million = US$ 164.2 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>US$181.9 million</td>
<td>90% of total worldwide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Source: <a href="https://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=xyj_1_2014.htm">Box Office Mojo</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>IMDB: 90% of total worldwide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Monkey King 2</strong></td>
<td>January 30, 2016</td>
<td>US$192 million</td>
<td>RMB 12 million = US$188.6 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 February 2016 (Indonesia)</td>
<td>US$194 million</td>
<td>97% of total worldwide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Source: <a href="https://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=xyj_2_2016.htm">Box Office Mojo</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>IMDB: 97% of total worldwide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Monkey King 3</strong></td>
<td>15 February 2018</td>
<td>US$115 million</td>
<td>RMB 6 million = US$ 94.2 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16 February 2018 (Indonesia)</td>
<td>US$116 million</td>
<td>81% of total worldwide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Source: <a href="https://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=xyj_3_2018.htm">Box Office Mojo</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>IMDB: 81% of total worldwide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1296–1372); and the work analyzed in this article, The Journey to the West-Xī Yóu Ji, written by Wu Cheng’en (1500–1582) (Hendrix 2014, 68).
The success of the *Monkey King* films is inseparable from the creativity of the filmmakers in adapting the two main aspects of SWK from the novels, the archetypal theme of the journey and SWK’s hybrid prototype. The exploration of the two aspects through the characterization of SWK becomes more interesting and meaningful because they are intertwined both narratively and cinematically, representing a Chinese belief principle, the Three-Teachings-in-One (Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism) or 三教合一. As stated by Anthony Yu (2006, xi–xii), the theme of the journey adapted from the novel XYJ is a syncretism of the Three Teachings. The Three Teachings are not only important as the underlying foundation of the novel but also uniquely manifested in the work. During the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties, the setting of the emergence of the novel XYJ, this syncretism discourse was a blend of the different concepts of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, which were deliberately harmonized and unified. Based on Yu’s statement, this article views that the syncretism of the Three Teachings influences not only the theme of the journey but also the cinematic visualization of SWK’s hybridity, constructing SWK as a Chinese character hero in the *Monkey King* films.

The analysis of the archetypal theme of the journey and SWK’s hybrid prototype in the *Monkey King* films cannot be separated from the previous studies related to the reconfiguration and transformation of SWK’s character, the aesthetic and narrative aspects of the movie, and the monomyth concept. Liang Lisi’s article titled “Reconfiguring a Chinese Superhero through the Dubbed” (2022), portrayed SWK in the animated film *Monkey King Hero is Back* (2015) as a Western superhero and Chinese archetypal hero through the practice of dubbing Mandarin into English. The dubbing reconfigures Chinese superhero in the Western landscape using translation that both naturalizes and introduces Chinese cultural roots, which may be unfamiliar to most Western audience. The reconfiguration of SWK in modern audio-visual media, as stated by Liang Lisi, is related to the transformation of SWK based on semiotic perspective. Yang Lei and Thawascha Dechsubha’s article titled “The Transformation of Monkey King: A Semiotic Perspective” (2022), highlights the cross-media transformation of the Monkey King character in the novel XYJ. Entering the 21st century, with the rapid development of digital technology, the image of Monkey King is constructed through an extraordinary, diverse visual style that contributes to the construction of the Monkey King as a persistent protagonist warrior. From semiotic perspective, the study of the transformation of the Monkey King image in modern audio-visual media provides a new perspective for the dissemination of other Chinese classical culture’s icons as well.

The reconfiguration and transformation of SWK’s visual image cannot be separated from modern aesthetics, too, while at the same time reinforcing the significance of SWK as an archetypal hero in the Chinese cultural industry. Wen Qing’s dissertation titled “Look from the Contemporary Aesthetic Taste in Film Adaptation—Cong dianying gaibian kan dangdai daizhong shenmei quwei” (2017) emphasizes the contemporary aesthetic aspects in the production of film adaptations of the journey to the west, which were released in 2000 to 2016. The aesthetic aspects of the free adaptation/ziyou shi gaibian regarding the parody/xi fang and story collage/pin tie elements in the films were deemed to be responsible for the audience’s enthusiasm, although SWK’s character and the main plot have been repeatedly adapted to many films. Meanwhile, Sean MacDonald, in his article titled “It all started with a Monkey” (2016), explains that, behind SWK’s characterization as a trickster, there is a heroic value that confirms the significance of his character as a distinctive hero in the development of Chinese animated films.

This article is inspired by and also seeks to modify Zhang Kai’s opinion in his dissertation titled “Archetype and Allegory in Journey to the West” (2008). Zhang Kai uses the concept of monomyth to discuss the heroic adventures of XYJ in the narrative structure as a Buddhist allegory. Meanwhile, this article sees that the monomyth concept can construct a broad meaning rooted in the convergence of the 三教合一 principle through SWK’s visual hybridity and the theme of his heroic journey in the *Monkey King* films.
Reconfiguration, transformation, aesthetics, significance, and monomyth as the five keywords from previous research form the basis of this article to reveal the significance of SWK’s characterization behind the success of the Monkey King films. This article analyzes the reconfiguration of SWK in films based on the monomyth schemes, focusing on the construction of SWK’s heroic journey and his hybridity visualization. The Monkey King films succeeds in modernizing SWK’s archetypal journey motive and hybridity through the visualization of his physical image and final battle scenes. This is closely related to how SWK transforms from an archetypal hero who represents the principle of Sān jiào hé yī to a modern superhero who represents social and individual values in the “Twelve Core Values of Socialism” that have been promoted since the 18th National Congress of the CCP in 2012 (Brown 2018, 65).

Through an analysis of the archetypal theme of the journey, hybridity visualization, and a set of specific values associated with SWK, this article tries to obtain a better understanding of the transformation of SWK’s heroism from a classic hero into a modern superhero. The re-contextualization of this transformation in contemporary China’s situation reflects the spirit of China today and the historical awareness about China’s long journey from traditionalism to modernity.

2. METHODOLOGY

To analyze the recontextualization of SWK’s transformation from a classic hero to a modern superhero based on Chinese principles, the concept of adaptation is the main underpinning concept of this article. The significance of the concept of adaptation is based on the fact that the Monkey King films have succeeded in proving what Linda Hutcheon (2013, 5) stated about financial appeal as the main intention of producing adaptation works. The main intention of adaptation is, of course, profit-making and production cost efficiency, since the basic idea of the story has actually been well understood by the public. Moreover, the concept of adaptation is an attempt to concretize the changing mode of telling into a showing mode of the SWK character and the story of the journey to the west, as well as reading its meaning in the context of today’s China. Therefore, the endeavor for SWK’s concretization and recontextualization in this article is analyzed based on two aspects, the narrative and the cinematic.

The construction of SWK’s heroic journey becomes a narrative aspect that will be revealed using the monomyth hero’s journey concept coined by Joseph Campbell. Discussed at length in Campbell’s seminal book, The Hero with the Thousand Faces (2010), the monomyth is a storytelling structure or typical scenario of a hero’s journey in literary texts that explore the nature of actions and truths believed by humans. This narrative structure is divided into three main stages, Departure, Initiation, and Return. These stages are divided into 17 sections, five sections in Departure, six sections in Initiation, and Return consists of six sections. SWK’s heroic journey based on monomyth constructs a cycle of SWK’s journey with a unique physical image to achieve his ideal goal, simultaneously being the basis for his transformation narratively as a superhero with Chinese characteristics.

Furthermore, cinematic aspects are important to discuss to reveal the transformation of SWK’s heroism. As mentioned by Linda Hutcheon (2013, 40), in the move from the novel as a print medium to film as a performance medium, the focus will change from the verbal telling mode in the novel into the showing mode in the film, moving from imagination to actual perception of sight. Thus, the three stages of the monomyth also needed to underlie SWK’s characterization which focuses on visualizing his hybridity, combined with several ways as presented by Boggs and Petrie in The Art of Watching Films (2012, 49–55), such as characterization through external actions, through internal actions, characterization through the reactions of other characters, and characterization through appearances.
The combination of visual characterization with the *monomyth* can reveal an aesthetic adaptation of the theme of journey and SWK’s hybrid image as an iconic Chinese hero. SWK in the *Monkey King* films shows the transformation from a classic hero who carries the principle of *Sān jiào hé yī* into a modern Chinese superhero who represents Chinese social and individual values in the “Twelve Core Values of Chinese Socialism”. The transformation from hero to superhero becomes SWK’s re-contextualization in accordance with the Chinese modern spirit.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Narrative Aspects of Sun Wukong’s Heroic Journey Based on *Monomyth*

To obtain understanding of the typical construction of SWK’s heroic journey, the analysis is grouped according to the three main stages, and 17 sections in the *monomyth* concept. Meanwhile, the discussion of SWK characters in the three films is sorted by titles and years of the release: *Monkey King 1* (2014), *Monkey King 2* (2016), and *Monkey King 3* (2018). This grouping is done to help us see the variations that appear in each period.

3.1.1 Departure

Departure (1) is the opening stage of SWK’s journey. This stage is divided into five sections, The call to adventure (1.1); Refusal of the call (1.2); Supernatural aids (1.3); The crossing of the first threshold (1.4); and The belly of the whale (1.5).

The Call to adventure (1.1) shows that SWK is put in a non-critical situation in which he receives a call to start a journey to an unknown territory. The general storytelling scheme presents a narrative of SWK’s life that begins to be disturbed by problems, threats, or opportunities. In the Refusal of the Call (1.2), SWK has doubt about traveling or getting out of his comfort zone. Entering the Supernatural Aid (1.3), after SWK is committed to starting his journey, he is accompanied by a supernatural guide and assistant throughout the journey. Oftentimes, this mentor/teacher/guide, who represents the Buddha, gives SWK one or more amulet or object that will help him in carrying out his journey safely. The monk Xuanzang as a travel-aid teacher appears in *Monkey King 3*, while Master Subhuti as a travel-aid provider appears in *Monkey King 1*. The combination of Monk Xuanzang and Guanyin Goddess representing the Buddha to provide assistance to SWK appear in *Monkey King 2*. Thereafter, SWK begins his journey towards the crossing of the First Threshold (1.4). This is the point where the hero character truly crosses into the realm of adventure, leaving the boundaries of the world that he knows, venturing into the unknown and dangerous realms with unknown rules and boundaries.

The last section in the series of the Departure is the Belly of the Whale (1.5). The whale’s belly represents the final separation from the world known to SWK. By entering this stage, SWK shows his determination to undergo a metamorphosis. Initially, SWK faces minor dangers or setbacks. Only the *Monkey King 3* movie does not contain this particular section because this film is a sequel of the previous two films.

Based on the description above, the Departure shows the beginning of the narrative of SWK’s journey, carrying out unique tasks and stepping away from his ‘old world’. SWK goes beyond his normal boundaries in order to affirm his existence and expected role. This stage introduces the quality of his character as a unique hero. Interestingly, SWK’s heroic actions also position him as an anti-hero at the same time. His supernatural abilities make him arrogant, stubborn, selfish, and unruly. Only in *Monkey King 3* that these
negative qualities are not clearly visible. SWK appears as an accompanying traveller who is obedient and generally behaves well. He only occasionally shows some minor mischiefs. As the last film in the Monkey King films, the positioning of SWK in Monkey King 3 depicts a different characterization strategy from the previous two movies. Monk Tang as the male protagonist has a relationship and conflict with the Queen of Women’s Kingdom as the female protagonist. At the same time, SWK is the supporter and protector of the two protagonists. Even though he is a supporting character, SWK’s duty is to protect the Tang Monk and the Queen of Women’s Kingdom, still able to depict SWK’s heroic journey.

3.1.2 Initiation

The second stage in the monomyth scheme is Initiation. This stage has six sections, The road of trials (2.1); Meeting of the Goddess (2.2); Women as the temptress (2.3); Atonement with the Father (2.4); Apotheosis (2.5); and The ultimate boon (2.6).

The Road of Trials section (2.1) is a series of tests that SWK must undergo to start his character transformation. Several times SWK fails one or more test, but in the end, SWK is able to overcome all of the trials and move on to the next stage. The Initiation has two sections that bring together SWK and female figures or goddesses of help, that is the sections of Meeting of the Goddess (2.2) and Women as challenges/challengers or Women as the temptress (2.3). The SWK character in section (2.2) meets a goddess, who will help him in the future. Meanwhile, section (2.3) tells about SWK facing various temptations, which are often carnal and pleasurable, thus can make him go astray or deviate from his journey, but they do not refer to feminine qualities only. Women are a metaphor for the physical or material temptations of life because hero characters are often tempted by lust in their spiritual journey. These two sections of the meeting allow SWK to meet those who will help him, as well as those who will hinder his journey. In addition, section (2.3) does not only bring together SWK and female figures, but the female figures are the manifestations of temptation for SWK to abandon or deviate from his journey. Traditionally, this form of temptation is a love interest, but it can also manifest in other forms, including fame, wealth, titles, and position.

The next Initiation is the section of Atonement with the Father (2.4), in which SWK must face and come to terms with whatever holds the highest power in his life. In many myths and stories, this is the father or father figure, who possesses the power of life and death. This is the central point of the journey. All the previous stages are bound to this point, whereas everything that will happen also starts from this point. Encounters that occur in this section are more commonly with male entities but can also be against someone or something with extraordinary powers. In this section, SWK confronts the motive of his journey, his doubt and fear, and the forces that govern his life. This is a major turning point in the story because every previous step has brought SWK to this stage, and every step forward begins at this stage.

An important turning point in (2.4) leads SWK to enter the next section, Apotheosis (2.5). As a result of the confrontations in section (2.4), SWK has gained a better understanding of his goals and skills. Armed with this new realization and ability, he prepares himself for the hardest section of the adventure. The last section of the Initiation is the Ultimate Boon (2.6), in which the highest boon is the goal of the hero’s journey. In many myths, grace is something transcendent like the elixir of life itself, or a plant that supplies immortality, or the holy grail (Campbell 2010,128). For SWK, grace is the ultimate power of his sustaining substance, it’s the Budha. Therefore, section (2.6) of the three films represents the achievement of the highest grace or power that inspired his journey.

Based on the description above, the Initiation depicts SWK entering a ‘different world’ where he has to face a series of tasks until he reaches the climax of the story, meeting the main obstacle or enemy. At this
stage, SWK has to put everything he has learned into practice in order to overcome all of the obstacles, as presented by Campbell. All the previous steps serve to prepare and purify the hero for this step to get the ultimate boon (Campbell 2010, 128).

3.1.3 Return

The Return is the final stage of SWK's journey. Having found happiness and enlightenment in another world, the hero may not want to return to the ordinary world to bestow blessings on his fellow men. This stage has six sections, Refusal of the Return (3.1); The Magic Flight (3.2); Rescue from Without (3.3); The Crossing of the Return Threshold (3.4); Masters of the Two Worlds (3.5); and Freedom to Live (3.6).

The Refusal of the Return (3.1) shows that SWK, after finding happiness and enlightenment in another world, does not want to return to the ordinary world. In the Magic Flight (3.2), SWK sometimes has to escape with the grace of being supported by the gods. In Monkey King 1, the conversation between SWK and Emperor can be read as a phase of SWK's awareness of his behavior in the previous stages. Achieving the kind of consciousness SWK experienced may require phases of violence and destruction, with the aim of creating a new order.

The next section in this Returning is Rescue from Without (3.3). Just as in the previous stages, where the hero needed a guide and assistant to start a quest. Meanwhile, the crossing of the Return Threshold (3.4) Campbell states that “the returning hero, in order to complete his adventure, must survive the impact of the world (2010, 158). The way to return to it is to retain the wisdom gained in the quest, to integrate that wisdom into human life, and then to figure out how to share that wisdom with the rest of the world.

The next section of the Returning stage is Masters of the Two Worlds (3.5). For SWK, this section is when he has to achieve a balance between the material and the spiritual, as well as a balance between who he was before the journey and who he is near the end of his journey. SWK has reached a point of balance between self-limitation, hope, and fear of the process of destruction as a prerequisite for rebirth. The balance achieved by SWK transforms him into a mature personality.

In the last section, Freedom to Live (3.6), SWK has proven himself to be a hero. SWK comes out a victor of the entire journey not because of everything that has happened all along, but because of his very existence. This section shows that SWK has been liberated from fear to start the next stage or cycle of the journey. The next cycle of travel, therefore, becomes possible to take place.

All of the stages of SWK's journey can be read as a battlefield. The battlefield is a symbol of the arena of life, in which every creature lives upon the death of another. In this stage, the realization of life's inevitable mistakes may be so hurtful that some refuse to continue on their journey. On the other hand, figures such as SWK can sometimes create a false self-image, which cannot be justified, as an extraordinary unique phenomenon in the world, but it cannot be either blamed on him or be justified, even though the motive represents goodness. SWK's self-righteousness eventually leads to misunderstanding, not only about himself but also about human nature and the universe in general.

The narratives of SWK's journey in the three films show a metaphor which represents the notion that “the journey is not over”. The ending contains scenes with an open plot, always opening the possibility to be continued in another episode. In the Monkey King films, section (3.6) also features an “unfinished journey” as an open ending story. In Monkey King 2 and Monkey King 3, section (3.6) both show SWK with a group of monks continuing their journey. Whereas, in Monkey King 1, the ending scene shows the Epilogue: Monk Sanzang walking with a stick and leading a white horse. The camera angle shoots from behind the monk's body. This epilogue scene tells that one day, after 500 years of punishment, SWK will be released by Monk Sanzang, and
start a new destiny, the holy journey of searching for Buddhist scriptures with the monk. The sequence of the release period of the *Monkey King* films also shows that, after the ending scene in *Monkey King 1*, the opening scene in *Monkey King 2* shows the continuation of the story of the next *Monkey King* film. Continuity occurs between the ending scene of the film before it and the opening scene of the film afterwards. *Monkey King 2* begins with SWK’s meeting with Monk Sanzang, who frees him from the Wuxing mountain prison and ends at the ending in which the statue of Monk Sanzang is carried by SWK as he continues his journey. The journey continues to the next sequel, *Monkey King 3*, that shows a group of monks stranded in the West Liang Women’s Kingdom. At the end of the story, there is a closing scene in which the monks continue their boating trip down the river, which opens up the possibility for the next series of *Monkey King* films.

Thus, narratively, SWK’s heroic journey based on monomyth constructs a cycle of SWK’s journey with a unique physical image to achieve his ideal goal, covering three main themes, (1) Carrying out the call of duty (in *Departure*); (2) Internal and external temptation (in *Initiation-Return*); and (3) Manifestation of achieving ideal goals (in *Return*).

The culmination of the construction of SWK’s heroic journey is an interesting stage. He can be placed either as a winner or a loser. He is the winner in the battle against the antagonists, namely the demons, but he can also be positioned as the loser when faced with the Buddha. Nonetheless, these two positions can still be read as a stage for achieving the ideals of SWK’s heroic journey. SWK’s victory in the fight against the demons was an explicit victory, where SWK actually managed to defeat them in the final battle. This can be seen in *Monkey King 1* and *Monkey King 2*, whereas in *Monkey King 3*, some of SWK’s victories over the demons were achieved with the help of the Buddha. Meanwhile, SWK’s defeat by the Buddha, as shown in *Monkey King 1*, is also an implicit victory. This victory lies in SWK’s success in reaching the stage that brought him together with the Buddha. The Buddha is the last bastion that can control SWK’s aggressive behavior. His defeat of the Buddha is a process of the collapse of SWK’s egoism and arrogance as well as a process of his self-reflection when undergoing punishment from the Buddha.

SWK’s victory, both explicitly and implicitly, all culminated in the Returning stage where SWK achieved the main goal of his heroic journey, that is the achievement of an ideal condition, as he became an enlightened being of Buddhism, explicitly or implicitly. This condition is an ideal condition that is stable, full of balance, and peaceful.

The three main themes in the cycle of SWK’s heroic journey are the efforts of the *Monkey King* films to construct SWK’s heroism narratively. In order to describe the transformation of the storytelling mode, from telling to showing, to prove that SWK’s heroic construction reflects particular Chinese principles, a cinematic analysis of the visualization of SWK’s hybrid prototype is needed.

### 3.2 Visual Cinematic Aspect of Sun Wukong’s Hybrid Image

The construction of SWK’s heroic journey cinematically shows the *Monkey King* films’s effort in elaborating hybridity prototypes based on the stages of image visualization and the visualization of the heroic actions. The culmination of the visualization of SWK’s heroic actions occurs in the battle from the Initiation to the Return stages. SWK’s hybridity is elaborated in such a way through battles against demons, as well as battles against the pressure from the Buddha. This section shows SWK’s transformation from hero to superhero. The final battle is the part that shows the most impressive cinematic effects and is one of the most important selling points of the *Monkey King* films. This section embodies the intention to obtain a maximum financial benefit, as well as to provide a venue for demonstrating the ability of the Chinese film industry to turn classical literature into a cultural commodity in modern packaging.
SWK's hybridity visualization is closely related to his inherent attributes. There are three main attributes that often appear in the film, namely “72 transformations-Qi shi’er bian,” “Ru yi jin gu bang’s magic cudgel,” and “Fiery golden eyes-Huo yan jin jing.” The attribute “72 transformations” allows him to shapeshift into almost any form to disrupt the focus of his opponent’s attention. The Ruyi Jingubang cudgel is a special weapon that can change flexibly according to SWK’s wishes. Meanwhile, the “Fiery golden eyes” is one of SWK’s attributes that allows him to easily recognize demons in disguise.

In the Monkey King films, SWK’s hybridity is cinematically visualized as a monkey-human, in which the image of a monkey is more dominant than that of a human. As a supernatural entity that possesses a deity power, SWK is visualized as having an extraordinary power and being able to transform into a giant gorilla or remain in his normal physical size.

SWK’s visualization as a monkey-human in the Monkey King films shows an almost similar image, as his whole body is covered in brownish-yellow or golden-yellow hair. The similarity of SWK’s image models in these films shows a continuity of storyline. In addition, based on the short title of the film that uses the Monkey King domain, it is clear that the focus of the film’s story is the character of SWK as the monkey king.

Through a visualization that emphasizes the monkey element, SWK in Monkey King 1 becomes a unique character that has different physical characteristics compared to the other Heavenly gods. SWK’s body size is shown to be much smaller than the perfect gods at the standard height. In fact, when compared to the physical appearance of the film’s antagonist, Bull Demon King, the appearance of the king is far more visible as a perfect human compared to that of SWK. The complete SWK visualization is shown in Figure 1:

![Figure 1. Stages of Sun Wukong’s Image Visualization in Monkey King 1.](Source: Screenshots of Film Monkey King 1 2014).

SWK's body, which is covered with golden yellow hair, has a tail, fanged teeth, jaw, and a nose shape that are typical of primates, emphasizes his character as an ugly marginal creature, which will be difficult to match the
perfect human physique. SWK was the king of monkeys, so when he ascended to the Heavenly Palace, he was yet to be seen as equal by the gods of Heaven. *Qi Tian Da Sheng*’s title pinned to SWK in this film only serves as a kind of mockery for his physical imperfection.

This kind of visualization also emphasizes SWK as an intelligent monkey and a determined warrior who fights for his status, love, and self-esteem against the absolute power of Heaven, which is destiny. Heavenly ordained destiny places SWK as a marginalized being. SWK must live his destiny as an animal that does not have a noble status in Heaven, loses his lover, the country, and his monkey people, and is considered to belong to demons. SWK’s physique as an animal, especially when it reaches the emotional peak, in which it can turn into a giant scary gorilla, strengthens SWK’s self-identity that is closer to the demon group.

Concurrently, the visualization of SWK in *Monkey King 2* and *Monkey King 3* has not changed much from *Monkey King 1*. In *Monkey King 2*, SWK’s whole body is covered with brownish yellow hair, has a long tail (in the Departure up to Initiation), walks upright, and speaks like a human, wears pants, a red scarf wrapped around half of his chest, and a yellow gold armor (when fighting the White Bone Demon in the Return), as well as a pair of golden shoes, and always carries his cudgel. SWK visualization details in *Monkey King 2* are illustrated in Figure 2.

![Stage: Departure, section 1.1 up to 1.3](image1)

![Stage: Departure section 1.4 up to Initiation section 2.6](image2)

![Stage: Return, section 3.1 up to 3.3](image3)

![Stage: Return, section 3.4 up to 3.6](image4)

Figure 2. Stages of Sun Wukong’s Image Visualization in *Monkey King 2*.
(Source: Screenshots of Film *Monkey King 2* 2016).

Figure 2 shows that, in the final battle in the Return stage against the White Bone Demon, SWK’s visualization does not change significantly. His body size remains small in contrast to his opponent, the White Bone Demon, who transforms into a gigantic Skeleton Demon.
Meanwhile, SWK's visualization in *Monkey King 3* is not too much different from the previous two films, as shown in Figure 3 below:

Figure 3. Stages of Sun Wukong’s Image Visualization in *Monkey King 3*.  
(Source: Screenshots of Film *Monkey King 3* 2018).

SWK’s visualization in *Monkey King 3* looks simpler, with not too many ornaments and significant changes from the previous two films. SWK is still dominant in his monkey-man image. This is indicated by the physical characteristics of the brownish-yellow hair all over his body, his ability to walk upright like a human, with a gold headband, a body armor, and a yellow cloth sash on his chest. SWK also has footwear in the form of a pair of black boots. SWK’s visualization in the early Departure stage shows his long tail because he is not wearing pants, while in the other stages, SWK’s visualization is shown wearing maroon trousers. SWK is also often shown carrying his flagship weapon, the Ruyi Jingubang cudgel.

Henceforth, according to the original title of the film *Monkey King 1, Journey to the West: Havoc in the Heavenly Palace-Xīyóu jì zhī dà nào tiāngōng*, the final battle involving SWK takes place in the Heavenly Palace. The story of chaos in the Heavenly Palace appears in the classic novel XYJ chapters V-VII and is still a favorite episode to be adapted.

The climactic battle involving SWK in the Heavenly Palace is divided into two parts, both of which take place at the Initiation. Firstly, SWK’s fight against the Heavenly gods and, secondly, SWK’s fight against the Buffalo Demon King. The first fight occurs in the Atonement with the Father section (2.4), which occurs due to SWK’s anger because he was deceived by the Buffalo Demon King. The second part of the fight occurs in the Ultimate Boon section (2.6). SWK realizes that the culprit is the Buffalo Demon King, who uses his supernatural power to avenge the demons against the Heavenly Emperor.

Figure 4 below shows the first part of the footage of the battle scene between SWK and the Heavenly gods. Even the Heavenly Emperor has to step in to deal with SWK. The shades of the fight are predominantly golden yellow.
Figure 4a. Sun Wukong Ascends to the Heavens to Fight Against the Heavenly Soldiers.

Visuals: long shots.
Color: dominant yellow and golden-brown.
Sound (diegetic and non-diegetic): monologue; monkey screeching; battle scene sound effects; music scoring.

Figure 4b. Sun Wukong Fight Against the Heavenly Emperor that incarnated as White Dragon.

Visuals: extreme long shots.
Color: dominant yellow and golden-brown.
Sound (diegetic and non-diegetic): dialogue; battle scene sound effects; music scoring.

Figure 4c. Sun Wukong Uses His Self-Cloning Ability.

Visuals: long shots; very long shots
Color: dominant yellow and golden-brown.
Sound (diegetic and non-diegetic): monologue; monkey screeching; battle scene sound effects; music scoring.

Figure 4. Sun Wukong Create Chaos in the Heavenly Palace in *Monkey King 1*.
(Source: Screenshots of Film *Monkey King 1* 2014, 01:26:23-01:38:14).

Figure 4a shows SWK, who had been influenced by the Buffalo Demon King’s instigation to take revenge for the death of the White Fox Demon, rushing up and causing chaos in the Heavenly Palace. To picture a colossal battle atmosphere and show SWK’s ability to fight alone against the Heavenly soldiers, SWK’s visualization is mostly displayed in the long shot to very long shot modes. Meanwhile, in Figure 4b, SWK’s visualization is shown in the extreme long-shot mode when facing the Heavenly Emperor that incarnates as the White Dragon. The stark contrast of SWK’s visual in the extreme long shot and the Heavenly Emperor’s dragon in the medium close-up shows an extreme difference as well as accentuates the difference in their body size and status. Henceforth, Figure 4c, which shows SWK cloning himself in the long shot and very long shot modes, confirms SWK’s ability to handle a large number of Heavenly soldiers in an instant. SWK’s self-cloning visualization adds to the colossal effect of the battle, while at the same time showing that SWK does not need to bring troops with him, since he can flexibly fight either individually or in groups.

In the meantime, the second part of the climactic battle takes place in the Ultimate Boon section (2.6), containing SWK’s battle against the Buffalo Demon King. The visualization of SWK in the second half of the battle scene footage is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5 shows, that in the second part of the battle, SWK’s image of SWK and that of the Buffalo Demon King undergo a transformation. They both become a giant Buffalo Demon and a giant gorilla respectively. The medium close-up mode is shown when SWK breaks the Buffalo Demon’s right horn, while the long shot mode that positions the two fighters in the center surrounded by white clouds creates the effect of the enormity of the fight and the vast battle arena.
Visuals: long shots; very long shots.
Color: dominant yellow and golden-brown; black.
Sound (diegetic and non-diegetic): dialogue; gorilla roar sound; battle scene sound effects; music scoring.

Figure 5. Visualization of Sun Wukong’s Battle Against the Buffalo Demon King in *Monkey King 1*.

The series of scene footages in Figure 4 and 5 shows that the visualization of SWK’s image in the *Monkey King 1* is more dominated by SWK’s balanced positioning with his fighting opponent. SWK’s ability to fight individually, self-clone ability, and change shape into a giant gorilla, shows that SWK is very flexible and easily adaptable to any situations, including whom he fights against. The specific positioning is shown in Figure 4b, in which SWK is positioned within the same frame as the Heavenly Emperor that incarnates as the White Dragon. The significant difference in shot and body size emphasizes the meaning that the Heavenly Emperor is still the most highly respected Figure in Heaven. Respect for the highest status of the Heavenly Emperor is also emphasized by another scene that avoids a direct conflict between SWK and the Heavenly Emperor, as what finally makes the Heavenly Emperor faint for a moment is not SWK but the Buffalo Demon King.

The *Monkey King 1* film adopts SWK’s image visualization change in the climax battle scene. When at his emotional peak, SWK transforms into a giant gorilla, in which his whole body is dominated by yellow hair. SWK’s yellow gorilla predominates in *Monkey King 1* because his main fighting opponent is a giant Buffalo Demon, who is shown dominated by black. This contrast also emphasizes the position of the SWK character against his fighting opponent. In *Monkey King 1*’s climactic battle scene, SWK is the protagonist, while the giant Buffalo Demon is the antagonist.

In the meantime, in the climactic battle of *Monkey King 2* and *Monkey King 3*, SWK’s visualization of physical size does not show any change. SWK’s strength in his normal physical size emanates through the visualization of his supernatural power, namely “72 Transformation” and the Ruyi Jingubang cudgel. These are shown in Figures 6 and 7.

Figures 6 show the atmosphere of the battle, which is dominated by a dull gray color, and shooting techniques using long shots. The color contrast is only shown through the attributes of the SWK’s and White Bone Demon’s costumes, which are golden yellow. SWK’s ability to clone as in the *Monkey King 1*, is shown in Figure 6d. The scene is also shown through a very long shot to create the colossal impression that SWK suddenly multiplies into a large number. This cloning moment is a little different as it is not directed against any group of opposing troops but against a Skeleton Demon whose body is filled with small skulls that can attack SWK sporadically.

Even though SWK’s body size has not changed as shown in Figures 6, he still manages to defeat the demon whose body size suddenly turns into a giant. SWK in his standard body size is able to maximize all of his superpower abilities, such as cloud somersault-Jindouyuan to avoid demon’s attack, self-cloning from a strand
of his hair into thousands of fake SWKs, as well as maximizing his flagship weapon, the Ruyi Jingubang cudgel, to split the demon.

Meanwhile, in *Monkey King 3*, the climactic battle that takes place between SWK and the River God is not accompanied by the change of SWK’s physical size to match his opponent’s. The visualization of SWK in Figure 7 shows that SWK is still much smaller than the River God, who transforms into a giant fish monster. SWK manages to drown the River God monster using the Ruyi Jingubang cudgel. At the end of the battle, the Buddha’s right palm appears amidst a wisp of cloud to inflict punishment on the monster.

The shooting modes and coloring of the battle scenes in Figure 7 show similarities to those shown in *Monkey King 2*. In *Monkey King 3*, SWK is positioned in a long shot to a very long shot to contrast his image with the much larger image of the River God. The use of colors, which is dominated by black and gray, provides the background for the gloomy atmosphere of the battle. The excitement of this battle is supported by sound effect and music scoring to support the battle atmosphere.

![Figure 6a-b. Visualization of Sun Wukong’s Fight Against the White Bone Demon. (From Left to Right).](image1)

Visuals: medium close-up; long shots.
Color: the dominance of gloomy gray as a background for the atmosphere of the battle.
Sound (diegetic & non-diegetic): dialogue; battle scene sound effects; music scoring.

![Figure 6c-d. Visualization of Sun Wukong’s Fight Against the Skull Demon. (From Left to Right).](image2)

Visuals: long shots; very long-shots.
Color: the dominance of gloomy gray as a background for the atmosphere of the battle.
Sound (diegetic & non-diegetic): battle scene sound effects; music scoring.

Figure 6. Visualization of Sun Wukong’s Fight Against the White Bone Demon/Skull Demon in *Monkey King 2*. (Source: Screenshots of Film *Monkey King 2* 2016, 01:35:36-01:42:40).
Figure 7a-b. Visualization of Sun Wukong’s Battle Against the River God. (From Left to Right).

Visuals: long shots; very long-shots.
Color: the dominance of gloomy gray as a background for the atmosphere of the battle.
Sound (diegetic & non-diegetic): battle scene sound effects; music scoring.

Figure 7. Visualization of Sun Wukong’s Battle Against the River God in *Monkey King 3*.

Cinematically, the visualization of SWK’s hybrid image as a monkey-human, with SWK’s physical size changing or remaining in a normal size, the splendor of the climactic battle scene, the visibility of various evil demonic shapes, and the visibility of SWK’s attributes, is an attempt by the *Monkey King* films to present what mentioned by Hutcheon (2013, 114), their mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty, both creatively and interpretively, related to SWK’s hybridity prototype. The climactic battle becomes the culmination of transformation of the mode of telling of the novel to the showing mode of the film. The showing mode uses a visual language with sophisticated cinematographic effects, making SWK’s hybrid prototype even more alive, more real, and fantastic.

The collaboration between the narrative aspect and the cinematic aspect results in adaptation aesthetics to achieve a single goal. The narrative aspect that fabulates the journey narrative includes three themes (1) Carrying out the call of duty (in *Departure*); (2) Internal and external exams (in *Initiation-Return*); and (3) Manifestation of achieving ideal goals (in *Return*), ushering in SWK’s transformation from hero to superhero. This transformation is shown cinematically through the maximum exploitation of SWK’s hybridity visualization, which shows SWK’s flexibility and adaptive character in facing all of the internal and external challenges. These two main aspects usher in SWK’s transformation as a superhero. The variation of his visual mode as a monkey-man, in physical size as a giant or in his normal size, shows SWK’s flexibility and adaptive nature in achieving his goals.

### 3.3 Recontextualization of Sun Wukong’s Transformation as a Modern Chinese Superhero

The theme of SWK’s journey and his hybridity visualization mutually present a cycle of heroic journeys that constructs SWK as a hero with Chinese characteristics, who carries the principles of *Sān jiào hé yì* and transforms into a superhero by not only preserving the classical Chinese principles and values but also carrying universal values that are adapted to the characteristics of modern China, namely social and individual values of the “Twelve Core Values of Chinese Socialism”.

Narratively and cinematically, SWK’s heroism, which carries the principle of *Sān jiào hé yì*, can be seen in the narration of the heroic journey and his hybrid visuals. The analysis based on the *monomyth* schemes shows that the *Monkey King* films reproduces the theme of the journey adapted from the novel, which includes three stages, namely carrying out the call of duty in Departure, encounter internal and external temptations
in the Initiation-Return stage, and achieving ideal goals in the Return. SWK’s heroic journey is cinematically linked to his hybrid image as a monkey, human, and a superhuman entity with deity’s superpower, shown in the Monkey King films through a layered and complex visualization, in the monkey-human mode, and through the visual imagery during final battle.

The link between the theme of SWK’s journey and his hybridity visualization reveals the Sān jiào hé yī principle in SWK’s bodily discourse, which includes his figure and actions in his journey. The monkey element in SWK’s appearance represents Daoism, whereupon the SWK monkey is born from a stone egg that comes from neither a father nor a mother. The Confucian principle is present through the image of SWK walking upright and conversing in human language with the Tang Monk. In addition, Confucianism is present in the dynamics of SWK’s relationship and conflict with the Tang Monk. However aggressive SWK is, no matter how wide the gap is between he and the Tang Monk, in the end SWK still shows his obedience to the Monk as a manifestation of one of the principles of relationship in Confucianism, namely the relationship between the Master and the disciples. The Buddhist teaching is represented by SWK’s transcendental relationship with the Buddha. The Buddha or his representatives (Goddess Guanyin and Master Subhuti) are present in SWK’s contemplation process. This process, and the climactic battle, also contain the theme of Buddhist’s affection. Buddhist principles are explicitly reflected in the manifestation of SWK’s achievement as an enlightened being after he completes the final battle. This shows SWK’s heroism, which is constructed by a syncretism between Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism.

As a modern superhero, SWK is visualized in the monkey-human mode that does not just convey the Sān jiào hé yī principle as a classical principle that has been internalized in Chinese society and culture, but it also also represents the universal values with the Chinese characteristics embedded in the “Twelve Core Values of Socialism”-Shèhuì zhù yì xīn jiàzhìguǎn. These “Core Values of Socialism” are a new set of interpretations of Chinese socialism promoted since the 18th National Congress of the CCP in 2012. “The Core Values of Socialism” include 12 values written in 24 characters, grouped into three categories: The first are National Values- Mínzú jiàzhìguǎn, consisting of Prosperity- fùqián, Democracy- mínzhǔ, Civilization- wénmíng, and Harmony- hexié. Secondly, there are Social Values- Shèhuì jiàzhìguǎn, consisting of Freedom- zìyóu; Equality- píngděng, Justice- gōngzhèng, and the Rule of Law- fǎzhì. Thirdly, there are Individual Values- gèrén jiàzhìguǎn, consisting of Patriotism- àiguó, Dedication- jìngyì, Integrity- chéngxìn, and Friendship- yǒushàn (Brown 2018, 65). This value concept is promoted as a guide into Chinese core values serving as spiritual ties and common ideological and moral foundation (Qi Sheng 2019).

In the Monkey King films, SWK becomes a superhero who fights for social values, freedom, equality, justice, and the rule of law. Adapting around the first seven chapters from the novel, SWK appears in the films as a fighter who demands freedom, equality and justice against the Heaven’s actions that marginalize him. All attempts at restraining SWK spark a continuous resistance from him. He creates destruction using his energy and superhuman potential, wrecking the peacefulness of the Heavenly Palace through a series of actions to ridicule the Heavenly gods. As part of the journey with the Tang Monk, SWK’s actions in fighting for freedom, equality, and justice are shown through his rebellion against the Monk. In fact, SWK actually has good intentions, that is, to protect the Monk. Through his aggressive and destructive actions, SWK implicitly conveys a message so that the tyrants, both the Buddha and his representatives, the Heavenly Emperor, and also the demons, do not underestimate or misunderstand him.

As a modern Chinese superhero, the modernity of hybridity visualization and the theme of SWK’s journey also convey four individual values, that is, patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship. SWK’s devotion and emotional bond to his homeland and monkey nation on Mount Huaguo, as well as his deep physical and mental attachment to the Monk and Pig Zhu Bajie, Fish Demon Sha Wujing, and White Horse Bai
Ma as traveling brothers, influence his character, behavior, and actions throughout the story. Patriotic attitude, dedication, and integrity are shown by SWK when he ascends and riots in the Heaven in *Monkey King 1*, and are also shown through a series of aggressive actions by SWK in facing various forms of disguised demons (in *Monkey King 2* and *Monkey King 3*), and through his willingness to do a contemplation to reflect on the various actions that he has taken. Behind his rude, aggressive and destructive actions, there are implicit values of Patriotism, Dedication and Integrity. Meanwhile, the value of friendship shown through living side by side harmoniously is the final value shown at the Return. SWK, who has reached the culmination of his heroic narrative as a being enlightened by the Buddha, finally coexists in harmony with the Monk and the rest of the entourage. Living side by side harmoniously shows that one cycle of journeys has been completed, but at the same time, it also becomes the starting point of Departure for a new cycle of journeys.

Thus, the theme of journey, the visualization of hybridity, and the set of values assigned upon SWK have shown his heroic transformation from a classic hero to a modern superhero. SWK has transformed from a wild monkey figure to a hero based on his heroic actions, and become a superhero based on his hybridity and adaptive ability that conveys modern universal values blending with centuries-old Chinese principles and values.

4. CONCLUSION

Joseph Campbell’s concept of monomyth is useful for showing how the *Monkey King* films is able to construct SWK as a typical Chinese hero figure, with the construction of a narrative pattern of his heroic journey. This construction, as well as a selling magnet for attracting viewers, as evidenced by the film’s box office rates.

The social and individual values that are promoted by SWK in the context of the modern era represent a superhero with Chinese characteristics. As a superhero, SWK is able to perform individual heroic actions to guarantee the safety and continuation of his journey with Monk Tang. Becoming an enlightened character is not just SWK’s personal ideal. It also means being a character who brings goodness and social benefits to society.

SWK’s heroic transformation as depicted in the *Monkey King* films serves as a kind of reflection on the long journey or evolution of transformation from traditionalism to modernity for China. SWK’s transformation “from hero to superhero,” is in line with China’s journey to realize its dreams and ambition. China, with its abundant resources, is walking confidently, gradually, and firmly on the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics to achieve its dream of becoming a modern socialist country in the East.

The analysis carried out in this article provides an alternative model of character analysis, especially in order to reveal the transformation of a character from hero to superhero, and the recontextualization of the transformation in the current situation.

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