REPRESENTATION OF HULI JING (FEMALE FOX SPIRIT) IN CHINESE LITERARY TEXTS

Nirmala Khairunnisa Budi

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/irhs

Recommended Citation
Budi, Nirmala Khairunnisa (2023) "REPRESENTATION OF HULI JING (FEMALE FOX SPIRIT) IN CHINESE LITERARY TEXTS," International Review of Humanities Studies: Vol. 7: No. 1, Article 20.
Available at: https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/irhs/vol7/iss1/20
ABSTRACT

Chinese women are often depicted in mythological texts as supernatural beings, such as ghosts and spirits. Female supernatural beings are also described as having bad behavior and bringing disaster to men. One of the bad female supernatural creatures is the fox spirit (Huli Jing). The life of fox spirit can be found in literary texts from imperial to modern times, such as Fox Enchantment (1766) by Pu Songling and Dragon Springs Road (2017) by Janie Chang. This study tries to compare the representation of Huli Jing in imperial and modern texts. In analysing the problem of women’s representation through fox spirit, this study uses a descriptive analysis method combined with the semiotic concept of Roland Barthes. This study aims to reveal the transformation of Huli Jing’s representation, as well as the construction of women in Chinese mythology.

KEYWORDS: fox spirit; representation; mythology

INTRODUCTION

In Chinese culture, the fox has become a symbol with different meanings. During the imperial Zhou Dynasty, the fox was interpreted as a symbol of great and wise government (Kang, 1893). This interpretation led to the capture of the fox as a divine sign of the destiny of the ruling dynasty. The phenomenon of catching foxes as a symbol of the success and prosperity of the government continued until the Tang Dynasty. When Emperor Taizong wanted to take the throne, he brought several foxes into his imperial courtroom (Kang, 1893). The presence of the fox in his palace indicated that Emperor Taizong’s reign would be successful. Emperor Taizong used the fox to strengthen the people’s loyalty to his rule. Although the fox has been considered a good symbol in the empire, the fox symbol has different meanings in people’s lives. Foxes are believed to be able to change their form into humans and deceive humans.

In changing its form into human, the fox needs a human skull. A human skull will be placed on top of his head, like wearing a hat. The fox will move its head left and right. This movement is
done to find the right skull. If the skull falls, the fox will find another skull and move it back. The fox has to find a skull that does not fall off, when it moved. After finding the right skull, the fox will use leaf and flower petals to cover its body. The skull worn by the fox will turn into a human body, while the leaf and flower petals will turn into clothes (Kang, 1893). The use of the human skull can be related to the Yin and Yang dichotomy. Yin is something negative, ghostly, evil, dirty, and female, while Yang is something positive, heavenly, virtuous, pure, and male (Kang, 1893). Foxes can turn into male or female humans. The male fox spirit is described as a handsome man who has more knowledge than human scholars, while the female fox spirit is described as a very beautiful woman who arouses male human desires (Kang, 1893). The story of female fox spirit is the same as the story of male fox spirit. They married a human and bring prosperity to her partner’s family. A male fox spirit who marries a human will have the status of a husband, while a female fox spirit only has the status of a concubine. Fox spirits also have the ability to bewitch. The ability of a fox is strongly influenced by age. When a fox is fifty years old, he is believed to be able to transform himself into a woman. When a fox is a hundred years old, he is believed to be able to transform himself into a beautiful woman, a psychic, or a handsome man. A hundred-year-fox is believed to be able to know anything over a thousand miles, bewitch humans, and trick human memories. When a fox is a thousand years old, the fox can ascend to heaven and transform itself into a great fox (Kang, 1893). In bewitching humans, foxes are believed to be able to create illusory visions, make humans lose their minds, and regulate the human mind. The magical practices of foxes can be found in Philip Kuhn’s 1768 records. Kuhn explained that the Chinese people believe in the connection between hair and the soul (Kang, 1893). People who lose hair are believed to lose their minds and die. People also believe that shamans and foxes deliberately steal hair, especially men’s hair. This belief makes people look for fox nests to take the stolen hair.

The fox symbol can also related to the issue of racial identity in China. Chinese society categorizes Chinese people as insiders, while non-Chinese people as outsiders or foreigners. Non-Chinese people are believed to be uncivilized (hu). The mention of an uncivilized person (hu) has something in common with the word fox (hu) (Kang, 1893). During the imperial Tang Dynasty, the term hu (uncivilized person) referred to Western and Central Asia peoples, especially Sogdians. The term is also used for non-Chinese people form the north. Non-Chinese people came and traded in China. They sell spices, perfumes, and medicines. These three merchandise are items used by fox spirits to hide their scent. People believe that foxes have a very strong body odor (Kang, 1893). The depiction of the relationship between the term fox and strangers can show people's feelings of dislike for strangers.

The fox is also a supernatural creature worshiped by the Chinese people. People’s worship of foxes has been going on for thousands of years. This worship practice was centered in northern China and Manchuria, because foxes lived in both areas (Kang, 1893). The worship of the fox spirit has spread to various regions in China, even the people of Taiwan also worship the fox. The worship of the fox is a private spiritual activity. It does not take place in a public space and uses simple offerings. Fox worshipers build altars made of wooden boxes or haystacks in the corner of the room or bedroom. The condition of this worship altar shows a worship that is simple, easy to set up, and easy to tear down. Altars to worship of foxes can also be found in public spaces, such as in the temples of famous god and goddesses (Kang, 1893). The altar of worship of the fox spirit was placed in a corner of the room that was unknown to visitors to the shrine. This condition
indicates that the worship of the fox is considered something inappropriate. The worship of foxes is mostly practiced by marginal groups, such as daughter-in-law, prostitute, concubines, psychics, and migrants. This is in line with fox spirit’s status which is considered marginal. Fox spirits are in between gods and spirits (Kang, 1893).

Fox spirits are often depicted in Chinese literature. Stories about fox spirits can be found in various periods of Chinese literature, such as during the imperial Qing Dynasty and modern times. During the imperial Qing Dynasty, one of the famous fox stories was written by Pu Songling. Pu Songling is a male Chinese writer. He likes stories about Chinese supernatural beings, such as spirits and ghosts. This interest prompted Pu Songling to write Chinese horror stories. One of them is *Fox Enchantment* which was published in 1766. *Fox Enchantment* tells the story of two young men who meet the same beautiful woman. The first young man was Dong Xiasi. He met the beautiful woman in the blanket of his bed. The woman’s beauty makes Dong fall in love and always spend the night together. This regular intercourse made Dong’s body weak. This sexual relationship also led to Dong’s death. After Dong’s death, the woman left Dong’s house and met Dong’s best friend (Wang). The woman’s beauty has made Wang fall in love. Wang can not be separated from her. Wang also had regular intercourse with the woman. In some of Wang’s dreams, Dong said that the beautiful woman was a fox spirit. This woman will make Wang die, just like what happened to him. Based on the dream, Wang became worried and began to look for ways to distance himself from the beautiful woman.

Another story that also deals with the life of a fox spirit was written by Janie Chang. Janie Chang is a Chinese female writer who also has a passion for Chinese supernatural beings. Janie Chang learned the story of this supernatural creature through her father and her older brother. In 2017, Janie Chang published the novel *Dragon Springs Road*. *Dragon Springs Road* tells the story of a female fox spirit who has lived in a traditional Chinese houses for hundreds of years. This fox spirit befriend women who have bad luck in the house, such as unmarried daughter, concubine, and concubine’s child. The fox spirit’s first friend in the house was an unmarried daughter. The fox spirit also has a close relationship with the girl’s older brother, because the fox spirit has successfully helped the older brother in the state civil exam. The girl’s older brother loved the fox spirit very much. He even made the fox as his concubine. The fox spirit’s second companion was a concubine who lived several hundred years later. The concubine had a daughter who would become the fox spirit’s last companion. When the concubine left the house, she left her daughter to the fox spirit. This condition makes the fox spirit act as a mother and good friend to the girl. The fox spirit guides the girl to a better life.

Based on the explanation above, the hypothesis proposed in this study is the fox spirit represents the gender construction desired by Chinese society. In support of this hypothesis, this study examines previous research related to the research corpus and research issues. Previous research on the research corpus has not been found, while research on research issues has been carried out by Stevens (2013), Zheng (2014), and Wang (2019). Stevens (2013) analysed various kinds of folklore and Western missionary accounts of fox spirits. Stevens also highlighted the worship of the fox spirit that has been practiced for thousands of years. Zheng (2014) focuses more on the image of female ghosts in Western and Chinese stories. The two female ghosts are considered to need male body parts to survive, such as blood. Zheng only mentions the fox spirit as a very beautiful female ghost and drives many men crazy. Wang (2019) analyses the image of
women as strange creatures in children’s fantasy novels. The female characters are described as ghosts, fairies, and demons. Based on the research gap, this study will discuss the problem of the representation of Huli Jing (female fox spirit) depicted in imperial literary texts with modern literary text. Therefore, this research can be a new research that deserves to be studied.

In discussing the problem of Huli Jing’s representation in the two research corpus, this study will use qualitative research methods combined with semiotic concept of Roland Barthes. Barthes (1968) states that the meaning of a form of expression, such as a word, can be obtained in two ways. First, denotative meaning. This meaning is obtained by looking at the expression, content, and the relationship between the two in a narrow and specific way. In other words, denotative meaning is the result of literal reading of a word in accordance with applicable conventions. On the other hand, connotation is a meaning that looks at the relationship between expression and content more broadly. Connotation as a system consists of three forming aspects, such as signifier, signified, and the process that unites the two (signification). Through all three types, the meaning of connotation is a series of several denotations. Therefore, it is also said that the connotative meaning tends to represent certain ideological fragments. Connotative meaning is always adapted to the culture, environment, or community that interprets it. The connotative meaning that develops into a belief is called a myth.

ANALYSIS

Huli Jing in Fox Enchantment

Fox Enchantment describes a romantic relationship that occurs between humans and supernatural beings. The humans shown in this story are represented by Dong Xiaosi and Wang, while the supernatural beings are represented by Huli Jing. Dong, Wang, and female fox spirit are the main characters in this story. The positioning of the two main male characters can show the position of the male being more dominant than the female character. This position is also supported by the role of male characters as humans. It shows that Fox Enchantment raises gender issues in Chinese culture. The following are quotes that describe the problems between women and men in Fox Enchantment:

“Both my parents-in-law passed away, and then my husband died, leaving me a widow and quite alone in the world. I thought of you, my childhood friend, and came here to seek you out. When I arrived it was already evening, and a moment later your friend called and invited you out, so I looked for a place where I could hide and wait for you to return. You were such as very long time, and I was beginning to shiver with cold, so I crept under your quilt to keep myself warm. You don’t mind, do you?’

Ecstatically Dong stripped off his clothes and climbed under the quilt with her. His subsequent joy can well be imagined.”

The quote above shows the interaction between Dong and Huli Jing. They meet for the first time in Dong’s bed. The fox spirit hid under Dong’s bed covers, as he felt tired and sleepy while waiting for Dong’s arrival. In this quote, the bedroom is chosen as the first meeting place between the two
main characters. The main male character meets the female main character in the bedroom. The choice of the bedroom can show the intimate meaning between the two main characters. The bedroom is a room that is used to rest the body and mind from all activities. The bedroom can have a connotation meaning as a place that is private and intimate. This meaning is associated with the use of the bedroom by husband and wife. Married couples can use the bedroom to have sex, as well as a place to discuss personal problems. The meaning of the bedroom is also supported by the story quoted above. The beauty of Huli Jing’s body has fascinated Dong. Dong could not resist his lust for the fox spirit. Dong had sex with the female fox spirit in Dong’s bedroom.

The quote above also shows the encounter between Dong and Huli Jing in Dong’s bed blanket. Blankets are objects made of materials that can warm the body, such as cloth or animal fur. Blankets are used to protect the body from cold temperatures at night. The use of blankets can also be associated with a personal relationship. In the quote above, Dong and the fox spirit meet and are captivated by each other in a blanket. Dong and the fox spirit also had sex in the blanket.

“That night, Dong took his medicine and slept alone, but the moment he closed his eyes in sleep, he dreamed he was making love to the girl again, and when he awoke he found that he had ejaculated in his bed. He grew more afraid them ever, and went in to sleep with his wife, who lit a lamp and kept a close watch over him. Still the dream continued, and yet every time he awoke the girl was nowhere to be seen. A few days later, he began to cough up large quantities of blood, and before long he was dead.”

This quote shows the condition of Dong’s body at the end of his life. Dong began to experience sleep disturbances and illnesses in her body. Dong’s deteriorating condition made him spend more time with his wife, including sleeping with her. Dong also reduces the intensity of encounters and intercourse with Huli Jing. This sleep arrangement is done to restore Dong’s body strength. Dong also used medicine to speed up his recovery process. The depiction of medicine in this quote has a strong meaning, namely an antidote to disaster. In the quote above, medicine is used to cure illness and restore Dong’s body strength. The medicine can also be associated with the bad influence of fox spirit. Fox spirit are believed to bring disaster to Chinese society, especially to men. Based on this popular belief, medicine is used to stop the catastrophe brought by the fox spirit. The termination of this catastrophe is also reinforced by the absence of sexual activity between Dong and Huli Jing.

Huli Jing in Dragon Springs Road

Dragon Springs Road also gives an important role to the Huli Jing character. The fox spirit character has a role that greatly influences the character development and life of the main character, because the fox spirit acts as the mother of a human child. This female fox spirit also does not have problems with men, as experienced by the fox spirit character in Fox Enchantment. The fox spirit character in Dragon Springs Road is often shown along with other female characters, such as daughters, concubines, and wives.
“A woman’s figure by the door of the main house made my heart jump, but it wasn’t my mother. Her clothing was strange to my eyes, not the long tunic and trousers my mother wore, but a short jacket with loose sleeves and a softly pleated skirt of light silk that barely touched the ground. She floated toward me, a slender figure in autumn colors, swaying on tiny feet encased in gold satin. The shadow she cast was that of a Fox.

As she came closer, I saw that she was beautiful, her chin small and pointed, her forehead wide. Although her skin was as pale and unblemished as a newly opened lotus, she gave the impression of being much older. Her eyes gleamed amber, a dark glow with green lights in their depths.”

The quote above describes the beauty of Huli Jing. Huli Jing is described as a beautiful Chinese woman. Every part of the body of the fox spirit is described so beautifully. The beauty of Huli Jing’s physical features is enhanced by the beautiful Chinese clothes. This depiction of the beauty of Huli Jing’s body can be interpreted as female beauty that is desired by Chinese society. The beauty of this woman can also be related to the beliefs of the Chinese people. Chinese society associates female beauty with a sign of disasters. This connection is marked by the myth of the fox spirit which is considered to bring catastrophe.

“It won’t be long now, a voice behind me said. People are coming. I can hear them up the road. The voice was high pitched, the words pronounced precisely.

I swung around. An animal with tawny red fur yawned, showing a pink tongue and sharp white teeth. It looked like one of the stray dogs that sometimes came into Dragon Springs Road, but it was sleek, not mangy, with a plume of a tail. A fox.”

The quote above shows the first encounter between a fox and a girl character. The fox character does not show his form at the beginning of the meeting, but he makes his voice to the girls. The presence of the fox symbol can be interpreted according to Chinese culture. In Chinese culture, the fox is believed to be a combination of gods and demons. The combination of the fox spirit’s position greatly influenced the public’s response. There are people who worship him as the god of wealth, while there are also people who avoid him. People who avoid fox spirits are people who believe foxes bring disaster, especially for men. Men are considered to be seduced by the beauty of the fox spirit which leads to death.

The Comparison of Huli Jing in Imperial and Modern Literary Text

In examining the transformation of Huli Jing’s representation depicted through imperial literary texts with modern literary texts, this study will first analyse the difference in the representation of Huli Jing in the two literary texts of different ages. The imperial text depicted through Fox Enchantment will be compared to the modern text depicted through Dragon Springs Road. The two fox spirit characters will be analysed regarding the character, position, and their life stories.
“When he reached home, the girl greeted him with sweet smiles and wanted him in bed with her at once.”

The quote above shows Huli Jing who is always at home and waiting for her partner to come home. When the Huli Jing’s partner returned home, she would greet him warmly. This reception is also done along with the desire for sexual desire. Huli Jing’s depiction of friendliness and sexuality can be related to the role of the wife in the house. In Chinese culture, women have an obligation to obey and fulfill all the wishes of men. This obligation of women affects the position and character of women, such as women must be in the house and dependent on men.

“A moment later I was no longer in the courtyard. There were leaves overheard and I was looking out through a tangle of shrubs, two black paws stretched in front of me. Were those my feet?

**Do you really want to know what it’s like to be a Fox?** Her voice echoed in my head, amused. And I settled inside this memory, seeing what Fox wanted to show me. I was myself and I was also Fox.”

The quote above shows the transformation of a girl’s form into a fox. This girl is not a fox spirit child, but a human child entrusted by the child’s biological mother. Huli Jing played a role in guiding the girl. Huli Jing in Dragon Springs Road does not have the same interests and problems as Huli Jing in Fox Enchantment. Huli Jing in Dragon Springs Road has problems related to childcare. In this parenting process, Huli Jing tries to pass on her abilities and status to the child. One of her effort is to change form and provide the experience of being a fox spirit. Fox spirits have a bad meaning in Chinese culture, such as bewitch men. This quote also shows one of the mother’s roles. Mother are considered to have a role in educating and passing on important family values.

“I have been before the court of the Nether World,’ said the fox. ‘Judgement was given against your friend Dong, whose death was reckoned to have been the consequence of his own lust. But I was still found guilty of enchantment. They took away my Golden Elixir, the fruit of all my years of toil. They have sent me back to be reborn. Where is my body?’

‘My servant knew no better and skinned it.’

The fox was greatly distressed. ‘It is true that I drove many men to their death. I deserved to die long ago. But nonetheless, what a heartless man you are!’

She took her leave, sadly, bitterly.”

The quote above shows Huli Jing’s relationship with men. Huli Jing is described as always in need of a partner. When her partner dies, she will immediately look for another man. This depiction shows that Huli Jing is very dependent on the male. Huli Jing’s desire to always be in pairs can also show that men are always needed by women.
“Can the mission school give you work? I shook my head. I knew how much effort Miss Morris put into finding work for all of us, the obstacles she faced each day. Fox cocked her head. With their right patron, it’s possible to live a good life for a while. “What happens after ‘for a while’?” If a woman is frugal, she can put aside enough money to buy a house or a small business after her patron sets her aside. If a woman is clever and a credit to her patron, he will give her money when they apart.”

The quote above shows a different image of Huli Jing from Huli Jing in Fox Enchantment. Huli Jing in Dragon Springs Road is depicted as a woman who is not dependent on men. She does not really need a man in her life. This depiction causes men to be unable to control the fate of women, as happened to Fox Enchantment. In this quote, Huli Jing actually uses men for her personal matter. Huli Jing’s thoughts were also passed on to his foster children.

CONCLUSION

Based on the description above, it can be concluded that the two Huli Jing represent the image of women desired by Chinese society. In Fox Enchantment, society wants women who are always at home, dependent, and fulfil all the needs of men. This condition makes women to fulfil men’s personal interest. In Dragon Springs Road, society wants the image of an independent women. Women are describes as someone who can negotiate their position with men. One of these negotiation efforts was shown through Huli Jing’s advice to find rich men and get money. Women can use men’s sexual desires to fulfil her interests. Huli Jing in Dragon Springs Road also passed on the position and characteristics of the fox spirit to her foster children. This shows an effort to perpetuate the values of fox spirit in Chinese society. In addition, the man who became Huli Jing’s partner also experienced a change. In imperial text, Huli Jing is paired with a young nobleman who will work in the empire. In modern text, Huli Jing is paired with a young entrepreneur. This job change was greatly influenced by the changing in Chinese government system.

REFERENCE