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Reading the Monkey King: A Peircean Semiotic Analysis of Visual Motifs in Ming Dynasty Journey to the West Prints

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Abstract: *This study considers the visual signification of the woodblock prints of Journey to the West, published by the Ming dynasty, paying attention to the role of such chosen motives as cloud swirls, magical staffs, and lotus thrones as the carrier of the meaning in narrative and religious grounds of late imperial China. Based on the triadic model of the sign discussed by Charles Sanders Peirce (icon, index, symbol), the analysis of three crucial prints about the figures of Sun Wukong and Guanyin decodes the functioning of the visual attributes through several semiotic registers. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship from visual culture studies, Chinese religious art, and print history, the research argues that Ming illustrators were not passive copyists but active visual narrators who embedded cosmological and moral meanings into their work. Through qualitative, interpretive analysis, the study demonstrates that these images offered more than aesthetic value; they were semiotic systems through which readers accessed theological narratives, ethical teachings, and cultural memory. By situating visual motifs within both historical context and Peircean theory, the research also traces the enduring legacy of these motifs in modern visual adaptations. This project contributes to the broader fields of visual semiotics and Chinese literary studies by offering a framework for reading illustrated fiction as dynamic, multilayered cultural texts.*

Keywords: Journey to The West; Ming Dynasty; Woodblock Prints; Peirce; Semiotics

1. Introduction

One of the most archetypal compositions of Chinese vernacular fiction is "Journey to the West." Traditionally attributed to Wu Cheng'en, the novel was initially published during the Ming Dynasty in the 16th century (Wu, 2012). Being one of the four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature, the story incorporates elements of Taoist, Buddhist, and Confucian ideologies into an immensely creative, allegorical fantasy tale of a quest for enlightenment (Bantly, 1989). Although today's audiences may most likely experience the novel through worded versions, the early woodblock-printed versions of the late Ming period were accompanied by illustrations that were so sumptuously detailed they were indispensable in bridging the interpretation of the story to an ever-growing literate and semi-literate reading community. Such visual supplements were not only decorative but also served as a means of understanding, an antidote to beauty, and a transmitter of the symbolic textures inherent in the cosmological and cultural structures of late imperial China.

The plate-printing boom in commercial printing technology during the late 16th-century Ming period led to the spectacular expansion of woodblock illustrated narrative fiction. Vernacular novels similar to Journey to the West, such as Water Margin, were reproduced in illustrated

formats that aligned with the burgeoning consumer culture of the Jiangnan region (Hill, 2013). In that regard, visual literacy has become an essential part of the reading experience. Prints, particularly those depicting magical transformations, the intervention of gods, or military adventures, served as semiotic pins onto which complex theological and moral meanings could be condensed in the form of representational images. However, although literary critics have been analyzing aspects of these novels, such as textual constructions, the visual semiotics of Chinese Ming illustrations have not been explored in this way so far.

To address this gap, this paper applies Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of the sign, comprising the icon, index, and symbol, to analyze selected prints from Journey to the West. Peirce's semiotic theory, initially developed in the context of 19th-century logic and epistemology, has gained increasing traction in visual cultural analysis due to its capacity to differentiate between signs based on resemblance (icon), existential linkage (index), and social convention (symbol) that are potentially general (Hoopes, 2014). Unlike Saussure's dyadic signifier-signified model, Peirce's triad allows for a more flexible analytical framework, particularly suitable for cross-cultural visual interpretation. In terms of the representations of the Journey to the West, the model proposed by Peirce allows for an exact deciphering of the operations of visual motives (such as the cloud somersaults of Sun Wukong, the lotus throne of Guanyin, or Sun Wukong Wielding His Staff by a Riverbank). As a simultaneously aesthetic and cultural mark, the model proposed by Peirce offers to be rigorously applied.

The argument claims that the visual language of woodblock prints from the Ming Dynasty activates all three types of signs proposed by Peirce to convey narrative, religious, and ethical meaning. This study illustrates Shuangshi Taninn's most intimate readings of 2-3 of the best examples of prints that include core characters (Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, the Bodhisattva Guanyin, and the monk Xuanzang and his companions) to show that the repetition of motifs is not just a technique, but also an essential active meaning-making agent. For example, the repeatedly recurring motif of swirling clouds tends to start as an iconic representation of the sky. Still, it quickly shifts the locative indexing to the presence of God, ultimately serving as a representation of heavenly intervention within the interpretative horizon of the viewing audience.

Placing these visual readings in the larger context of Ming print culture and artistic traditions, the paper demonstrates that Ming illustrators were not mere copyists but visual narrators whose pictures conveyed spiritual and philosophical information to the reader. Due to the profound religious placements of syncretism and art vocabularies during the time, as well as the illustrated material, the presented semiotic enrichment in those illustrations presented the reader with a multilateral experience that made the reader not only pursue the narrative but to digest and internalize the narrative's conceptual reasoning of the comic book. Additionally, this analysis suggests that the legacy of such visual forms, which have endured to this day, is reflected in the reimagining of Journey to the West in modern cinematic, animatronic, and online storytelling.

Ultimately, this study positions Ming woodblock illustrations of Journey to the West as complex visual texts that warrant scholarly attention, not just for their artistic merit but also for their function as dynamic semiotic systems. By engaging Peircean semiotics in the service of visual literary analysis, this paper contributes to interdisciplinary dialogues across visual studies, semiotics, and Chinese literature, offering new insights into how narrative meaning is mediated through images as much as through text.

2. Literature Review

Journey to the West and Visual Culture in the Ming Dynasty

The novel Journey to the West occupies a central position in the Chinese literary canon. While Wu Cheng'en is traditionally credited with authorship, the novel, which was completed and published during the late Ming Dynasty (16th century), is the culmination of a cumulative oral and literary tradition that blends Taoist, Buddhist, and Confucian influences (Bantly, 1989). The novel's allegorical and fantastical narrative lent itself to visual representation, coinciding with a moment of flourishing visual print culture made possible by advancements in woodblock technology and commercial printing. The Ming Dynasty marked a period of cultural efflorescence, during which vernacular fiction and visual art converged, particularly in Jiangnan's commercial centers. According to Park (2015), the increase in woodblock-printed art books increased rapidly during the eighteenth and nineteenth Centuries, with illustrations reflecting a democratization of both reading and viewing practices. These prints were not only decorative but interpretive, offering readers a visual narrative parallel to the textual one. In this context, Journey to the West was often accompanied by detailed woodblock illustrations, particularly in the 1592 and 1605 editions. These visuals became integral to the novel's cultural transmission and interpretation. Daqiao (2016) observes that Sun Wukong's visual iconography, including his magical staff, cloud-riding form, and martial stance, was stabilized and canonized through these prints. The interplay between text and image created a hybrid narrative experience where illustration helped shape character identity and plot interpretation. This intersection of narrative, illustration, and religious meaning laid fertile ground for visual semiotic analysis.

Peirce's Triadic Semiotics in Visual Analysis

Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic sign model, comprising the icon, index, and symbol, has been widely applied in semiotics, visual studies, and art history for its capacity to account for different modes of signification (Kilstrup, 2015). Unlike Saussure's dyadic signifier-signified model, Peirce's theory allows for a broader spectrum of interpretation. In Peirce's terms, an icon is not a sign but a sign that resembles its referent; an index signifies, through causal or spatial connection, a conclusion similar to one concerning the icon; and a symbol represents its object through conventional or learned association (Greenlee, 2018). This model proves particularly useful when analyzing historical visual culture, where meanings are layered across resemblance, context, and convention. Kress (2009) has demonstrated how visual signs can simultaneously function in multiple semiotic modes; what is iconically a cloud might be indexically associated with a storm and symbolically connotative of divine agency. Mittelberg (2019) emphasizes that Peircean categories are not mutually exclusive but hierarchical and interpenetrating, thus offering flexibility in interpreting rich, symbolic imagery, such as Ming woodblock prints. Art historians and semioticians have increasingly drawn on Peirce to interpret visual materials in cross-cultural contexts. In Chinese visual traditions, particularly those of the late imperial period, symbolic codes were informed by religious cosmology and social hierarchies. A Peircean reading of Ming illustrations, then, allows one to decode both formal resemblance (icon) and culturally embedded symbolism (symbol) while being attentive to spatial and causal associations (index).

Semiotics and Chinese Art History

Despite the promise of semiotics, its uptake in Chinese art history has been uneven. Early studies tended to favor iconographic or formalist approaches, focusing on subject matter or

brushwork rather than systems of meaning. However, recent scholarship has begun to adopt semiotic frameworks to articulate better how Chinese images function as communicative acts. Wu and Tsiang (2020) pioneered the concept of visuality in Chinese culture, arguing that images in Chinese art often convey temporal and spatial metaphors that serve as visual arguments. Shen et al. (2024) have emphasized the importance of contextual semiotics in Chinese visual traditions. For example, in Buddhist painting, a lotus might be an icon (it resembles a flower), an index (it grows in muddy water, representing spiritual purity), and a symbol (of enlightenment). The Taoist symbols can represent clouds as a symbol of divinity (index), mimic spatial weather patterns (icon), and serve as a sign of heavenly favor (symbol). The examples demonstrate that Chinese motifs contain polysemous connotations that can be unraveled in Peircean terms.

Additionally, the inclusion of images and text in various forms of Chinese media, such as scrolls, religious imagery, or illustrations in a novel, provides another reason why a semiotic approach is necessary to address multimodality. He (2020) notes that Ming prints often featured textual inscriptions that were dialogic with imagery, producing a script-image complex that required the reader to interpret at a cross-modal level. The theory of Peirce, which arose from logic and linguistic thought concerning the correspondence of visual culture, is the only one that fits in unpacking such relationships.

Visual Motifs in Ming-Era Journey to the West Prints

The repetitive iconographical elements of the Ming-era illustration of Journey to the West, the staff (Ruyi Jingu Bang) of Sun Wukong, the tumbling clouds, the lotus on which Guanyin sits, and Sun Wukong Wielding His Staff by a Riverbank. The process through which the image of Sun Wukong was crystallized in prints and eventually in theatrical representation showed how the comic involvement of the character was transformed into moral and metaphysical striving (Sun, 2018). This metamorphosis was brought not only by narration but also by iconography. Commenting on research on religious prints, Shih (2014) notes that religious conventions, such as those depicting Guanyin on a lotus throne or holding a water jar, served as forms of cultural abbreviations that represented the deity's authority and compassion (Rösch, 2007). These themes were revisited through devotional and secular permutations, and the distinction between religious worship and literary fiction was blurred. The visual framing of Guanyin in Journey to the West prints typically adheres to the parameters of Buddhist iconographic conventions, suggesting that readers of the prints would decode her presence in anticipation of spiritual salvation (Tsiang, 2010). This is because the semiotic shift between the icon and symbol occurs when viewers are taught to perceive the lotus as more than a mere flower but as an intercessory dwelling of sacred status. In addition, the spatial structure of the prints, which was usually divided into sets of narratives or organized to highlight divine hierarchies and values, created a semiotic field that guided interpretation. The positioning of Sun Wukong at the top or bottom of Guanyin, as well as the repetition of motifs of clouds around deities, served as a means of objectifying the symbolic values. According to Cohn (2013), these visual strategies provided a sense of coherence to the complex plot structure, enabling the reader to navigate the narrative changes with the aid of familiar semiotic markers.

Intersections of Visual Narrative and Religious Symbolism

Religious cosmology, which forms the basis of Journey to the West, is a syncretic combination of Buddhist karmic law, Daoist alchemy, and Confucian morality, permeating the text and its illustrations. By studying essential concepts like reality, Ming readers would have embarked upon the narrative of the story with a preconceived notion about how reality is constructed, as moral behavior, divine intervention, and reincarnation are interconnected. This cosmology was

not merely a narration but a picture as well. Drawings did not simply dismiss illustrations as aesthetics but represented invisible actions such as karma, divine judgment, and magical transformation (Murray, 2007). To take one instance, the pattern of swirling clouds, so frequently noticeable in the accounts of Sun Wukong's travels, is iconically an illustration of meteorological phenomena, indexically denotes a sense of motion, and symbolically indicates the presence of the god everywhere. Equally, such visual details as halo, water patterns, or other supernatural creatures (e.g., dragons, phoenixes) contain a theological message that will fall on deaf ears among the viewers who lack the religious literacy to receive it. Ritual and iconography have been attributed to influencing scholars, such as Murray (2007), in the development of Chinese religious imaginaries. These visual conventions serve as a semiotic medium between belief and fiction, as they make the divine presence and moral meanings visible in the illustrations of Journey to the West. With the involvement of Peirce's model, the current line of movement across levels of signification could be better situated; that is, how the image of a lotus, among others, evolves beyond being a botanical detail yet remains a narrative signal and a spiritual icon.

Contemporary Applications and Legacy

The role of Ming imagery in contemporary media, particularly in terms of visual motifs, has also been a subject of study to which scholars have directed their work. To discuss the use of traditional iconography in animated adaptations, Zhang and Zhou (2025) consider Havoc in Heaven (1961) and Monkey King: Hero Is Back (2015) as examples of adaptations that recontextualize classical motifs within contemporary visual narratives. These expansions demonstrate the semiotic persistence of Ming-period signs, such as the cloud of Sun Wukong, the robes of Guanyin, or the beads of Xuanzang, which endure over time and across forms. Assmann (2011) argues that the endurance of these motifs speaks to a cultural memory system rooted in visual repetition and transformation. When analyzed through a Peircean lens, these visual signs not only survive but also adapt, shifting from symbolic systems embedded in Confucian-Buddhist values to symbols of nationalism, identity, and nostalgia. Thus, understanding Ming prints through semiotics is not merely a historical exercise but a way to trace the longue durée of cultural meaning-making in Chinese visual culture.

Despite the growing body of research on Ming visual culture and semiotics, relatively few studies have focused on the systematic semiotic coding of illustrated vernacular fiction using Peirce's model. Much of the existing work either emphasizes textual hermeneutics or treats the illustrations as stylistic supplements rather than semiotic structures. Additionally, scholarship on Journey to the West illustration tends to focus on the evolution of character design or its reception in modern media without sufficiently unpacking how specific motifs function across Peirce's tripartite sign categories. This study aims to fill that gap by providing a detailed, theoretically grounded analysis of how visual motifs in Journey to the West prints, particularly those of Sun Wukong and Guanyin, perform complex, layered semiotic functions. The application of Peirce's triadic framework to case studies from Ming-era prints, makes three key contributions to the field: it enriches the semiotic analysis of Chinese visual culture, repositions Ming illustrations as active narrative agents, and demonstrates the longevity and adaptability of traditional signs in contemporary cultural memory. This approach also opens the possibility for comparative studies of image-text relationships in other Asian illustrated classics.

3. Framework and Methodology

This study examines the visual motifs embedded in illustrated editions of Journey to the West (JTTW) produced during the Ming Dynasty through the lens of Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic semiotic model. By analyzing a selection of woodblock prints from the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the study aims to uncover how illustrators used visual cues to construct meaning beyond the textual narrative. The framework is interdisciplinary, combining semiotic theory, visual culture analysis, and Sinological approaches to the study of religious symbolism. The methodology applies a qualitative, interpretive design, using a multimodal visual analysis grounded in Peircean semiotics to decode illustrations. In this section, the conceptual context is described, the operationalization of the categories of the three branches of semiotics proposed by Peirce is explained, and the method of selecting and analyzing images, as well as the interpretive approach towards contextual meaning, is justified.

Conceptual Framework: Peirce's Triadic Model in Visual Semiotics

The key concept of this study is the semiotic theory provided by Charles Sanders Peirce; according to that theory, the signs should be viewed as the processes of activity between three mutually connected elements: the representamen (the form of the sign), the object (what the sign represents) and the interpretant (the meaning or the effect created in the mind of the observer) (Hoopes, 2014). Peirce categorizes signs into three categories with degrees of overlap depending on the type of relation they have with their referents:

- **Icon:** A representation of an object that gives an impression of the object. Visually, this may involve descriptions that share a formal resemblance, which in this case may include the anthropomorphic appearance of Sun Wukong, painted with simian features.
- **Index:** A physically or causally related sign to its object. An example is the swirl of a cloud's pattern, which may indicate movement or the presence of the divine.
- **Symbol:** A sign that is connected with the object arbitrarily or by social convention, such as the lotus flower used in Chinese Buddhist imagery because of its association with spiritual purity.

The model offered by Peirce is not considered fixed in terms of typology; however, signs can often perform in several modes simultaneously. The same image can be both iconic and index a phenomenon, symbolizing an abstract concept, depending on the viewer's cultural competence. This versatility renders the theory introduced by Peirce very useful in analyzing illustrations from the Ming Dynasty, which are overall deeply embedded with religious symbolism, pictorial conventions, and meaning within a narrative context. The triad model allows for consideration of the layers of reading in the prints, which presuppose their religious, aesthetic, and narrative levels. It also facilitates an analysis of how visual signs contribute to the storytelling mechanisms in Journey to the West, particularly in a cultural context where image and text often engage in a dialogic relationship.

Theoretical Integration: Semiotics, Visual Culture, and Ming Religious Art

To ground Peirce's model within the specific cultural and historical context of Ming China, the study integrates insights from the fields of Chinese visual culture, Buddhist and Daoist iconography, and print history. As Murray (2007) has demonstrated, visual media in late imperial China were not passive representations but actively engaged viewers in moral, spiritual, and aesthetic interpretation. Chinese visual traditions often depended on culturally inscribed reading practices, in which specific motifs, such as clouds, weapons, or flora, carried recognizable symbolic or cosmological meanings. This study positions the Journey to the West prints not only as artistic artifacts but also as cultural texts that encode cosmological narratives through visual language. Religious scholars such as Stephen Teiser (2006) and Robert Campany (2002) emphasize the pervasiveness of visuality in Chinese religious practice,

particularly the use of icons and illustrations to communicate spiritual truths to lay audiences (Huang, 2020). These frameworks underscore the suitability of semiotics for analyzing visual motifs that straddle narrative, theology, and aesthetics. This integration enables the study to locate individual signs, e.g., Sun Wukong's staff, Guanyin's halo, or the flames surrounding demons, within broader visual and symbolic systems that would have been accessible to Ming readers.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design with a focus on semiotic image analysis. The purpose is not to generalize findings across all Ming illustrations of Journey to the West but to offer a detailed, theory-informed reading of selected images. The research design reflects the following principles:

- **Contextualism:** Analysis is rooted in historical, religious, and cultural specificity. Images are not read in isolation but within the framework of Ming aesthetics, cosmology, and book culture.
- **Multimodality:** The illustrations are examined as components of a multimodal artifact (the novel), where image and text interact to produce meaning.
- **Semiotic Layering**: Each visual motif is analyzed for its iconic, indexical, and symbolic functions, acknowledging that a single motif may operate across multiple sign categories.

This design allows for the simultaneous analysis of formal visual qualities (e.g., line, composition), narrative function (e.g., depiction of plot scenes), and symbolic significance (e.g., cultural or religious meanings).

Selection Criteria for Prints

The study draws on high-resolution digital and scanned reproductions of Ming woodblock-printed editions of Journey to the West, especially the 1592 and 1605 editions attributed to commercial publishers in Nanjing and Hangzhou. These editions are known for their elaborate illustrations. Three illustrations were selected for case study analysis based on the following criteria:

- **Narrative significance:** The scene depicted must represent a pivotal moment in the novel, such as a moment of divine intervention, a battle, or a transformation.
- **Character focus:** At least one illustration must prominently feature Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, whose visual motif is central to the novel's visual legacy.
- **Motif density:** The illustration must include multiple recognizable motifs (e.g., clouds, weapons, clothing, animals) that facilitate layered semiotic interpretation.
- **Reproducibility and clarity:** The image must be of sufficient quality to allow detailed visual analysis, including line style, gesture, and spatial arrangement.

These criteria ensure that the selected prints provide a representative sample of visual strategies used by Ming illustrators while allowing for a manageable depth of analysis.

Method of Analysis

The analysis unfolds in four stages, moving from surface description to interpretive depth:

Descriptive Analysis

Each illustration is first described in terms of visual elements: character poses, background elements, motifs, composition, and line work. Particular attention is paid to gestures, gaze, spatial hierarchy, and relationships between figures and the environment.

Semiotic Coding (Peirce's Model)

Each motif within the illustration is coded using Peirce's three sign types:

- **Iconic Signs:** Motifs that resemble their referents—e.g., flames surrounding a demon to resemble fire visually.
- **Indexical Signs**: Motifs that point to causal relationships—e.g., rising dust indicating motion.
- **Symbolic Signs:** Motifs whose meaning is culturally constructed—e.g., a lotus symbolizing spiritual purity.

Some motifs may be coded in more than one category. For instance, Sun Wukong's cloud-riding form may be an icon (resembling clouds), an index (indicating flight), and a symbol (of divine movement or enlightenment).

Contextual Interpretation

Each motif is interpreted within its historical and religious context. Secondary sources on Chinese religious iconography, Ming book culture, and symbolic convention are used to understand how a Ming viewer might interpret the image. This step draws on intertextual references, temple art, and imagery from religious rituals.

Narrative Function Mapping

Finally, the illustration is mapped onto the novel's plot to determine its narrative function. This includes:

- Does the image anticipate, reflect, or expand on the text?
- Does it offer moral, emotional, or cosmological cues?
- How does the visual composition direct the reader's attention?

This step explores how visual motifs not only represent but also participate in narrative construction.

Limitations and Scope

This study acknowledges several limitations:

- **Scope:** Only three illustrations are analyzed in detail, which limits generalisability. The purpose, however, is depth over breadth.
- **Translation and interpretation bias:** As the project requires interpreting 16th-century Chinese motifs through a modern semiotic lens, there is a risk of anachronism or over-interpretation. To mitigate this, the cultural context is carefully cross-referenced with scholarly sources.
- **Availability of prints:** Not all illustrated editions are digitized or accessible. The analysis is restricted to high-resolution images from known repositories.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a model for applying Peircean semiotics to historical visual culture and invites future research on comparative illustrated texts.

Ethical Considerations

This project involves no human participants and, therefore, does not require institutional ethics approval. All images used are from public domain sources or digital archives permitting scholarly use. All cultural interpretations are supported with secondary references to avoid misrepresentation.

However, ethical sensitivity is applied in interpreting religious symbols, particularly Buddhist and Taoist iconography, within the framework of cultural respect and scholarly neutrality. Interpretive claims are always situated within cited academic discourse to avoid imposing Western frameworks uncritically.

Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

As a researcher engaging with visual material from a non-Western historical context, I remain reflexively aware of the epistemic risks of cultural misreading and the imposition of external theoretical lenses. While Peirce's semiotics provides a powerful tool for visual analysis, I treat it not as a universalizing framework but as an adaptable method used in dialogue with indigenous visual literacy. I draw on English to ensure interpretation and aim to amplify Ming-era visual logic rather than subsume it under modern analytical categories. This commitment to reflexivity supports the study's methodological integrity. The methodological approach adopted in this study, qualitative visual semiotic analysis grounded in Peirce's triadic model, offers a robust framework for interpreting the richly symbolic illustrations of Journey to the West. By integrating semiotics with visual cultural studies and religious iconography, the study unveils the complex processes through which Ming illustrators transformed narrative scenes into layered semiotic texts. Instead, each motif is regarded as a sign that finds place in a network of meanings, which is culturally contextualized, indicating the significance of illustrations in acting as narrators as well as spiritual mentors. This methodology decode the images itself, and it also points to how historical visual literacy worked in Ming society. Ming prints in this view are not ornamental trash, but deep vehicles of cosmological and moral insight, which readers perceive and experience.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Visual Semiotic Analysis of Selected Ming Dynasty Prints

Peircean semiotic approach has been applied to three chosen illustrations of the Ming Dynasty Journey to the West decryption of icon, index, and symbol functions of each image. It also frames these visuals in the larger context of religion, narrative, and aesthetics that the literature review has already discussed, thus showing how visual motifs in the use of Ming prints should be seen not only as decoration but as whole systems of meaning.

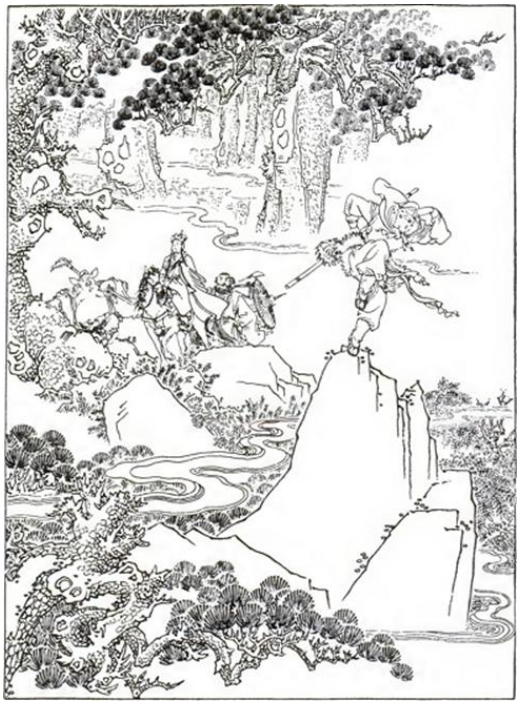

Figure 1: Sun Wukong Battles the White Bone Spirit

Figure 1
Title: Sun Wukong Battles the White Bone Spirit
Source: https://journeytothewestresearch.com/tag/sun-wukong-beats-the-white-bone-demon-three-times/

Description: This scene illustrates Chapter 27, where the Monkey King confronts the White Bone Spirit. The composition features dynamic motion, with Sun Wukong's posture showing readiness to strike. The swirling clouds above index his supernatural speed and symbolically signal divine or magical intervention. His staff, the Ruyi Jingu Bang, appears as an icon of strength and an index of imminent attack, while the skeletal form of the demon functions as a symbol of deception.

Figure 1.1
Title: Close-up of Cloud Motif from Figure 1
Crop Description: Highlights the ornate cloud swirl recurring in supernatural episodes.
Purpose in Data: Supports semiotic coding—examining icon (weather resemblance), index (movement), and symbol (divinity).

In this drawing, you can see that Sun Wukong is in the process of striking the White Bone Spirit. The print composition is done with heavy diagonal and active lines, which direct the eye of the viewer to the place of any conflict. The spinning cloud pattern, which serves as the backdrop over and behind Wukon, is used in several types of semiotic contexts. As an icon, it is comparable to the clouds of the atmosphere; as an index, it is a reference to sharp movements and supernatural system of actions; as a symbol, it means the divine intervention code encrypted to the readers informing about the empowerment of the Monkey King in heaven. It corresponds to Kress (2009) and Mittelberg (2019), who also State that a singular visual object may serve as the means to act in the three categories in the triad of Peirce at once.

Sun Wukong's staff, the Ruyi Jingu Bang, is rendered with exaggerated linearity and occupies the visual center. The staff is an icon of martial prowess due to its clear depiction as a weapon. It is also an index of Wukong's agency, his choice to defend the Tang Monk, and a symbol of his divine legitimacy, bestowed upon him by the Dragon King. As noted by Daqiao (2016), such repeated visual elements contributed to the stabilization of Wukong's iconography in popular imagination.

Meanwhile, the skeletal form of the White Bone Spirit is stylistically exaggerated, with pronounced cheekbones and angular limbs. While iconically resembling a corpse, the figure symbolizes spiritual deception, moral ambiguity, and karmic obstruction, themes central to the novel's cosmological framework. According to Murray (2007), such imagery conveyed invisible moral truths like reincarnation or karmic debt, a function realized here through the representation of the demonic antagonist.

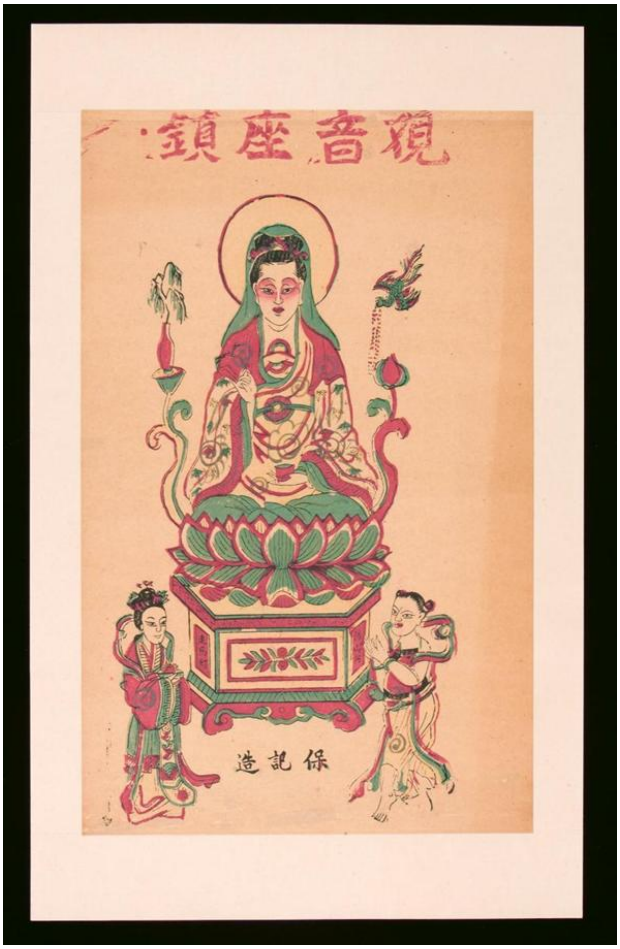

Figure 2: Guanyin Descends on Lotus Throne

Figure 2
Title: Guanyin Descends on Lotus Throne
Source: https://www.roots.gov.sg/Collection-Landing/listing/1249340
Description:Depicts Guanyin intervening to pacify Sun Wukong. She stands on a stylized lotus, framed by an aura. The lotus is iconic as a flower, indexes sacred space, and symbolizes enlightenment and compassion.

Figure 2.1
Title: Close-up of Lotus and Aura from Figure 2
Crop Description: Zooms in on the lotus base and halo-like radiance around Guanyin.
Purpose in Data: Illustrates a motif functioning across Peirce's triadic categories.

This image shows Guanyin descending to intervene in one of the pilgrims' moments of crisis. An ornate halo frames her and sits serenely atop a stylized lotus. This composition is rich in religious symbolism and iconographic tradition. The lotus, a recurring Buddhist motif, is a multi-level sign. As an icon, it resembles the flower; as an index, it situates Guanyin within the spiritual realm; and as a symbol, it represents purity, enlightenment, and compassion (Rösch, 2007). The halo-like aura surrounding Guanyin's head serves a similar tripartite function. It iconically resembles light or sun rays, indexically points to divine presence, and symbolically signifies transcendental wisdom and authority. The repetition of such features across Ming prints aligns with Tsiang (2010), who emphasizes that viewers of the time would readily recognize Guanyin through visual cues, thus decoding the image as one of spiritual intervention and salvation.

Furthermore, the spatial placement of Guanyin, typically centered and slightly elevated, visually reinforces divine hierarchy. As Greenlee (2018) points out, spatial positioning is a powerful index in visual narratives, guiding viewers' interpretations through placement alone. In this print, Guanyin's elevation serves as an index of celestial status, symbolically reinforcing her role as a moral and spiritual mediator.

Figure 3: Sun Wukong Wielding His Staff by a Riverbank

Figure 3
Title: Sun Wukong Wielding His Staff by a Riverbank
Source: https://journeytothewestresearch.com/2014/02/23/first-blog-post/
Description:

This image features Sun Wukong standing assertively by a river, gripping his enchanted staff, the Ruyi Jingu Bang. Behind him, stylized water waves and a faint swirl of clouds frame the composition. His upright posture and the central position of the staff emphasize readiness and power. The river indicates boundary-crossing, and the presence of swirling motifs near the water symbolically marks transition and divine connection. The staff operates as a clear icon of martial force, an index of Wukong's identity, and a symbol of celestial authority bestowed upon him.

Figure 3.1
Title: Close-up of Staff and River Motif from Figure 3
Crop Description: This detail highlights the convergence of Wukong's extended staff and the flowing river beneath. The staff's exaggerated verticality draws the viewer's gaze, acting as a

directional line pointing from heaven to earth. The flowing water beneath operates iconically as a river, indexically as a narrative threshold, and symbolically as a liminal space between mortal and divine realms. The motif pairing reinforces Wukong's dual identity as both earthly rebel and heavenly emissary.

Purpose in Data: To support a layered Peircean semiotic reading of the environment around Wukong, emphasizing how landscape and objects communicate narrative and spiritual meaning through icon, index, and symbol.

This illustration presents a quieter yet symbolically dense moment. Sun Wukong stands by a river, staff in hand, gazing outward. The river serves as a multi-functional motif: iconically, it depicts a body of water; indexically, it marks a boundary or transition zone; symbolically, it represents a liminal space between the earthly and the divine. In Daoist thought, water is a symbol of change, transformation, and the Tao itself. Thus, the river can be read as a symbolic representation of spiritual fluidity and potential enlightenment. The staff, again central in the composition, functions in the same triadic fashion as in Figure 1. However, its stillness here contrasts with its dynamism in battle, shifting its indexical function from action to stability or readiness. The cloud motif swirling above the water subtly reinforces this. It may appear decorative at first glance, but following Peirce, it operates iconically (as a cloud), indexically (as a spiritual atmosphere), and symbolically (as a celestial presence) (Hoopes, 2014). Together, the staff and river produce a semiotic dyad of force and flow, a juxtaposition of masculine and feminine energies, perhaps even a nod to the balance of yin and yang. In this way, Figure 3 reveals that even non-action scenes in Ming prints carried dense symbolic content, consistent with Shen et al. (2024) and Wu & Tsiang's (2020) theories of visual metaphoricity in Chinese art.

Discussion: Aligning Visual Motifs with Religious and Narrative Functions

The above visual analyses confirm that Ming illustrators employed sophisticated semiotic strategies to embed cosmological, moral, and narrative meanings within their woodblock prints. Drawing from the literature and methodological framework, this section outlines how these visual motifs align with the religious syncretism and narrative logic of Journey to the West.

Repetition and Cultural Memory

Across all three figures, motifs such as swirling clouds, lotus thrones, and Wukong's staff are repeated. According to Assmann (2011), such repetition forms the bedrock of cultural memory. These visual motifs served as memory anchors for Ming readers, enabling them to recall spiritual truths, narrative sequences, and moral lessons. Their recurrence reinforces their symbolic weight, making the clouds not just weather but reminders of divine omnipresence; the lotus, not just a flower but a gateway to compassion; and the staff not just a weapon but a sign of cosmic authority.

Visuals as Agents of Narrative Progression

Cohn (2013) asserts that visual motifs can function as narrative agents, especially in multimodal texts. This is evident in how each print visually anticipates or resolves narrative tension. Figure 1 illustrates a climax, the battle. Figure 2 reflects a moment of divine aid. Figure 3 foreshadows a spiritual threshold. Each image is not just static art but a dynamic story segment, aligned with Peirce's view that symbols evolve through habit and interpretation. Furthermore, the spatial arrangements within each print, such as Guanyin's elevation, Wukong's centrality, or the demon's distortion, index not just literal place but moral hierarchy

and cosmological order, echoing Murray's (2007) observation that visual arrangements in Chinese religious art often mirror metaphysical truths.

Multimodal Interpretation: Image + Text

As He (2020) notes, Ming prints were not meant to be read like modern images but interpreted within a visual-textual system. Many of these prints included inscriptions, chapter titles, or embedded dialogue. Even when isolated, as in this study, the images rely on the viewer's cultural literacy. The cloud is not just a cloud; it must be read as an index of transformation and a symbol of intervention. This corresponds with Peirce's interpretant, which in Ming society was shaped by Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian discourses. The interaction between text and image thus forms a semiotic ecology, a space where multiple sign types interact and reinforce meaning. This multimodal nature validates the Peircean framework, which is particularly suited for decoding complex, overlapping systems of representation.

Historical Visual Literacy and Viewer Participation

Finally, the discussion must return to the Ming-era viewer. As discussed by Park (2015), the readership of Journey to the West during the Ming period was expanding to include semi-literate and newly literate audiences. For them, illustrations were not supplemental but essential; they enabled access to theological narratives and moral instruction. The illustrations functioned as semiotic mediators, bridging sacred cosmology and popular entertainment. Wu and Tsiang (2020) describe this as visuality, the cultural habit of seeing and interpreting signs. The Peircean model, with its attention to the interpretant, aligns naturally with this framework. A cloud swirl may look mundane to the uninitiated, but to a Ming viewer, it invoked specific narratives, spiritual doctrines, and moral stakes.

5. Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the visual semiotics of Ming Dynasty illustrations of Journey to the West through the lens of Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of the sign: icon, index, and symbol. By closely analysing three key prints, Sun Wukong battling the White Bone Spirit, Guanyin descending on a lotus throne, and Sun Wukong standing by a riverbank, the study has demonstrated that these woodblock illustrations are not merely decorative supplements to the text but active narrative and symbolic agents. Each visual element, from cloud swirls to staffs, from halos to rivers, engages the viewer through layered semiotic processes that reflect the religious, philosophical, and aesthetic values of late Ming China. The application of Peirce's semiotic theory provided a rigorous and flexible framework to decode the multiple meanings embedded in these illustrations. The prints iconically bear a similarity with characters and scenes of the novel; indexically, they refer to some unseen actions as the divine movement, spiritual crossing, or karmic fate; to refer to them symbolically, they encrypt culturally understood contents related to Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucian morality. Spelled out both in visual analysis and as part of the literature review, the repetition of motifs and organization in the Ming illustrators was part of an informal repacification which can be seen as an intimation of the visual literacy of the time. These signs operated in a multimodal system in which text and image supported each other and thus enhanced connotation in terms of the narrative and theology. These images have been placed in the broader discourse of cultural memory and historical visuality as well. These repetition patterns, including the staff of Sun Wukong, the lotus of Guanyin, or the billowing cloud patterns, were not only used to depict them but also to solidify an identity of character and themes of cosmology. In this way, the prints contributed to the perception of the text by the readers in the moral and spiritual context. Through this, Ming illustrators turned into visual storytellers, who could enhance complicated

metaphysical concepts in a simple language that literate and semi-literate people could understand through pictures.

Besides, the traces of these images live in modern visual culture. Increasingly, Ming prints have provided motifs which have been reactivated in contemporary adaptations of Journey to the West, in animation and cinema, again evidence of the powerful symbolic currency of motifs associated with the print. Such modifications affirm the cultural survival of Ming-era visual practices, which persist and operate semiotically within the context of new narration; in fact, they lose their place as religious iconography to become nationalist, nostalgic, or trans-culturalist metaphors. Ultimately, this research contributes to the interdisciplinary field of visual studies by demonstrating the value of Peircean semiotics in historical and cross-cultural analysis. It shows how visual signs in early modern China were deeply intertwined with religious doctrine, narrative logic, and reader reception. The study highlights the need to treat illustrated fiction not as a secondary art form but as a sophisticated medium of cultural communication. By reading Ming Dynasty Journey to the West prints as semiotic texts, we gain new insight into the visual construction of meaning, the embodiment of religious syncretism, and the historical function of art in shaping collective understanding.

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Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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