

An Analysis of the Application of Beast Elements of the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* in Modern Cultural and Creative Design

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Abstract. All-encompassing Chinese traditional culture, with its time-honored civilization lasting for over 5,000 years, has created a myriad of glorious stories. Modern cultural aesthetics, in particular, allows for the collision and fusion of cultures over time and space. Of all the traditional cultures, the legendary culture of beasts has been passed down along with the development of Chinese culture. The inheritance of traditional culture in modern society is manifested in all aspects, and interpreting and depicting traditional culture from a modern perspective is tantamount to re-creating traditional culture, where innovation and inheritance are the vanes of the times. From the perspective of beast elements, this paper analyzes the beast culture and its artistic expression in modern cultural and creative design, taking the Catalogue “The Classic of Mountains and Rivers” by Chinese artist VIKI LEE and his creative works.

1 The Mythical World of Beasts Created by the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*

The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* is an encyclopedia that records the gorgeous mythical world of ancient society and culture. The 18-volume set contains more than 31,000 words of accounts. It covers five volumes of the *Classic of Mountains*, four volumes of the *Classic of Areas Overseas*, four volumes of the *Classic of Inland Areas*, four volumes of the *Classic of the Great Wilderness*, and one volume of the *Classic of Inland Areas*. The *Classic of Mountains* records the geomorphic deposits, rare and exotic animals, and the rituals of the mountain gods of the major mountain systems throughout the earth; the *Classic of Seas* records all varieties of aliens; and the *Classic of the Great Wilderness* narrates diverse myths and legends, strange and unusual events. “The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* is an ancient work with rich contents and unique features, including history, geography, nationality, mythology, religion, biology, water conservancy minerals medicine, other aspects.”[7] The *Classic of the Mountains and Seas* adds to Chinese mythology with the element of beasts, and the mythological ideas and references involved in it touch more than a dozen disciplines from a scientific point of view, representing valuable resources for the study of ancient culture, thought, geography, in many ways.

1.1 Mythological Consciousness and Its Origin in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*

The mythological consciousness and mythological thinking presented in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, as a work describing the mythical world of beasts, is the initial perception and quadrant of the mythical world by ancient people, and the whimsical ideas of mountains, rivers, animals and plants, and natural beings. The emergence of mythological thinking has been gradually formed through the changes in the way of life of early human beings. Before the emergence of the initial human production methods and production consciousness, the myth did not have the conditions for its existence. As people have acquired a certain survival ability and group and tribal consciousness of gathering in the period of clan society, the concept of myth gradually emerged out of life; whereas the beast is materialized by the ancient ancestors who injected all kinds of imagination into the natural creatures. “The myth of the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* is a product of the concept that everything has a soul. The early Chinese people believed that everything in the world has a life and a soul, based on which they created the myth of the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*.” [2] The myths in the *Classic of the Mountains and Seas* are natural and primitive. During this ancient period with a limited perception of the living environment, when their ability to survive was insufficient or they needed to rely on the outside to achieve their needs, they would independently imagine all kinds of great creatures beyond the state of reality. The ancestors believed that everything had a spirit and that there were gods and

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spirits ruling the world, so gods, devils and demons emerged.

Faith and religion are one of the major foundations of mythology. For the ancestors in the distant past, their productivity and thought were in a backward state, revealing a state of ignorance and obscurity, which led to the emergence of primitive beliefs. As cognition gradually deepened and subjective consciousness gradually awakened, people resorted to their imagination to give the power to pray and wish. The primitive religion promoted the development of mythology. People rely on this most primitive imagination and the reality of living beings to visualize, and a world of beasts was thus created. The advent of beasts all reflects the innermost aspirations of the ancestors, and the beasts have thus served as a vehicle to reflect their emotions.

2 The Inheritance and Export of Traditional Culture under the Beast Culture

2.1 To make beasts as innovative cultural symbols

Cultural symbols are the external manifestation of cultural connotation, the generalization and expression of a culture. It is gradually formed according to the regional culture and social concept after thousands of years, representing the cultural concept under different periods and different social thoughts. Any well-known national culture has its respective cultural symbols. Cultural symbols are the identity of a country or a nation, which expresses the uniqueness and cultural specificity of the nation, and is also the initial source of cognition of a country or its culture.

“There are many places in this world, especially in the deep recesses of human nature, where there are still many corners where ghosts and spirits lurk that the light of science cannot illuminate.” [3] Like Deities and Buddhas, beasts are originally part of mythology and legends, but they are rarely mentioned. In the long history of myths and legends, beasts are always associated with disasters. People have expectations and prayers for the Deities and Buddhas, whereas the beasts are always fearsome to be avoided. The image of the beast that remains alive with the cultural concept is not an integral part of the mythology, but also a cultural belief that people have acquired over the centuries in their production lives, as well as the cultural concept of distinguishing between good and evil, right and wrong. The world is changing and so is the world culture, so how to develop and promote the national culture is a question that the design industry needs to think about. Given the cultural environment of innovation and inheritance, we shall allow the beast to jump out from the traditional vision, inject new vitality in line with modern aesthetics and cultural thought, and promote the formation of new cultural symbols with the support of traditional cultural heritage.

2.2 Allegory of the beast being reinterpreted

Looking at beasts in a mainstream modern way and assigning new symbolic meanings to them is what is being practiced by modern designers and artists in the present cultural perspective. In the past, beasts were mysterious and scary monsters that were feared. But now, some of them are being quietly transformed into lovable auspicious animals that meet modern aesthetics.

VIKI LEE, a Chinese artist, has created five auspicious greeting pictures based on Chinese zodiac animals in the series “Zodiac Little Fairy Official” until 2023. In each year, there is an auspicious animal that brings people good wishes, such as “Blessing - Match-rest” (Figure1) in the Year of the Pig, “Fire Rat - Luck” (Figure2) in the Year of the Rat, “Little Ox Fairy” (Figure3) in the Year of the Ox, “Little Tiger Fairy” (Figure4) in the Year of the Tiger, and “Little Rabbit Fairy” (Figure5) in the Year of the Rabbit. Match-rest is a beast from the *Classic of the Mountains: East of the Classic of Mountains and Seas*, being described that “As soon as it appears, the world will get a great harvest”. As a lucky piggy, the highly popular match-rest is included in the greeting picture of the Chinese zodiac, signifying the auspicious days in the Year of the Pig with a great harvest. The fire rat is also a beast in the *Classic of Deities and Spirits of the Classic of Mountains and Seas*, being described as “It appears reddish in the fire, and white as snow when it comes out of the fire, which symbolizes the revolution and rebirth.”[6] In 2020, the world was plagued by the COVID-19, and the symbolism of the revolution and rebirth was expected by all. Little Ox Fairy, Little Tiger Fairy, and Little Rabbit Fairy are in charge of the New Year wishes. When people make their wishes, all little fairies will send their blessings. Not only the deities but also the little fairies are blessing everyone.



Figure 1. Blessing Match rest VIKILEE Weibo(2019)



Figure 2. Fire Rat - Luck -VIKILEE-Weibo(2020)



Figure 3. Little Tiger Fairy -VIKILEE-Weibo(2021)



Figure 4. Little Ox fairy Fairy -VIKILEE-Weibo(2022)



Figure 5. Little Rabbit Fairy -VIKILEE-Weibo(2023)

VIKI LEE’s illustration “Zodiac Little Fairy Official” series gives the zodiac beast the “post” of a little fairy officer. The Chinese zodiac is a cultural symbol in Chinese culture, and by giving it a new meaning, the beast turns into a guardian spirit, transforming the formerly appalling beast into a patron saint. This traditional yet novel object of prayer with its distinction has led to the rekindling of beast culture in cultural innovation.

3 Application of Beast Elements in Cultural and Creative Design

3.1 The source of beast images

The image of beasts in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* originates from the textual descriptions in the original text, and is presented by the interpretation of each myth and story. “These images are typical Chinese in shape, imagination, form of expression. These images express the understanding of the relationship between man and nature animals and plants heaven and earth.”[8] The stories describe the habits, appearance, and skills of the beast, and then we get to know how it exists from three dimensions through the description.

3.1.1 Geographical Environment

Descriptions of beasts in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* start with a statement of geographical location and natural appearance, either in the mountains, waters, or forests. For example, as Wen Wen (a small beast shaped like a wasp, with two branches on its tail and a backward tongue, which likes to chirp) described in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* that “Fanggao Mountain is the birthplace of Ming River, and the mountain is forested with Meng wood,”[1] which has leaves similar to acacia trees and produces yellow flowers, but does not bear fruit. Ming River is injected into Yi River to the south, and in this water, there is a large amount of green jade, where Wen Wen resides.” A meticulous description of the environment is given in the introduction to Wen Wen. This beast lives in this beautiful landscape, and even if we have no idea what it looks like, we can get a general idea of its habits from the description of the environment, where it grows and the conditions it lives in, which also enables the readers to gradually imagine these beautiful scenes in their minds.

3.1.2 Appearance and Form

The description of the appearance and form of each beast is essential to the future image design by telling us more details about the beast. For example, as flying fish described in the *Classic of the Mountains: West of the Classic of Mountains and Seas*, “Its fish body is like a carp, but has the wings of a bird, with green spots on its body, white head and red beak.” [1] This is a clearer description of its form, color, and call. The reader can roughly imagine its appearance and shape, and understand the general classification of the species.

3.1.3 Skills

Each beast will have its respective skills, and the depiction of its skills is an essential part that largely determines whether it is positive or evil. For example, as Qing Geng and Qi Zhong described by Guo Pu, a literary scholar of the Jin Dynasties, in the *Eulogistic Picture of Classic of Mountains and Seas · Qi Zhong of the Classic of Mountains and Seas · Central Highlands*, [1]Qing Gen helps to protect people from epidemics, but Qi Zhong brings plagues, both being birds, but with opposite effects, since they appear in different seasons. Their different skills will determine how they are judged. People praise A for being able to resist the plague, but avoid the Qi Zhong. The skills of beasts are often a division of good and evil; some can benefit the world, and some can bring disasters. “Most of the gods and monsters shaped by the ancients can contain each other there are gods and monsters that bring disasters, there are gods and monsters that predict good luck. People visualize disasters and give some inexplicable phenomena and disasters in nature to the gods and monsters to explain. To find ways to solve disasters, they create some auspicious beasts with which to overcome the fear and doubt in their hearts.”[9]

3.1.4 Anecdotal Legends

Many beasts are known for their legends and stories. Take Jing Wei, The legend of the Bird Jingwei Trying to Fill the Sea has been known to most people since childhood. It was described in the *Classic of the Mountains: North of the Classic of Mountains and Seas* that “The youngest daughter of Emperor Yan was named Nu Wa, who drowned in the East China Sea while playing there, and later became Jing Wei, who took wood and stones from the western mountains, day and night, hoping to fill the East China Sea by her endeavors.”[1] Later generations also compared Jingwei as a symbol of perseverance and hard work.

3.2 Extraction and Creation of Beast Images

The extraction of visual images is the basic foothold for the re-creation of the image design of beasts. Throughout the ages, the depiction of the image of beasts in each period and dynasty is a record of cultural symbols from different cultural periods, bearing the knowledge of beasts from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* by painters of all generations. The portrayal of beasts is the result of hard work. With the change of generations, the image of beasts today and the depiction approach applying modern aesthetics and painting techniques is an overriding reference for the creation of the image of beasts. The ancient fierce beast heavenly series of illustrations by Chinese artist VIKI LEE is a re-creation of the extracted image of the beast, incorporating the modern comic cute painting technique.

“In ancient times, due to the restriction of painting tools and cultural background, people pursued "form and God" coupled with the inconvenience of cultural communication. the development of illustration has not changed too much. Modern information exchange is convenient, there is many painting tool sand people's pursuit of beauty makes illustration design develop rapidly.”[10] Most of the modern techniques for the representation of the beasts are a combination of both Chinese and Western painting styles, and the structure of the beast is clearly and delicately shaped. In terms of movement, dynamism is the main way of expression, with the use of limbs or exaggerated expressions to show the vividness of the beasts. The innovation lies in the addition of many decorations to the external shape, as well as some patterns and accessories, some of which are already there in the beast, and some are worn on its body. The depiction technique is also mostly with a brush to sketch the outline and its details. With modern painting techniques, the beasts are not so scary as to be frightening, but turn into moralistic and poetic. The majority of the colors apply Chinese ink, decorated with a strong national flavor. “These images highlight the characteristics of the magnificent beasts in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* itself while meeting the aesthetic expectations of the Chinese for demons.” [4]These strange-looking beasts with different shapes have been transformed into souls with mysterious and fantastical stories.

3.3 Creative Design after Integration with Modern Mainstream Culture

“The focus of cultural and creative products is on ‘creation’, and only innovative ideas enjoy popular support.” [5]“Under the popularity of ‘taking over doctrine’ and the criticism of foreign cultural forces,the National tide culture, which is produced by the collision of Chinese traditional culture and the popular culture of The Times comes into being along with the trend,which brings opportunities for the application and development of *Classic of Mountains and Seas* in the cultural and creative industry.”[11] The key to the success of the transformation of the painted beasts is to inject culture into their images, and to integrate them with modern mainstream culture. “As IP, the commercial value of ‘The book of Mountains and Seas’ is very consider able recorded in the book a lot of mysterious strange beasts, in the cultural industry presented a hundred flowers blooming ‘beast creation’ has injected new vitality into our cultural market.”[12] VIKI LEE has formed the “Four Little Bullies” series of figures from Taowu, Hundun, Taotie and Qiongqi (legendary fierce beasts). Taowu and Hundun form an introverted couple(Figure6); with Taowu being as a foodie, and Hundun being cute. Hunan is self-indulgent all day long, while the Tao likes to sleep; both introverted beasts share the same aura. Taotie and Qiongqi constitute a foodie couple(Figure7); Taotie is adorkable while Qionqi is impulsive. They are like-minded and like to eat, and often travel together. These two couples are just mapped to the life of most people today. The little beast is cute and adorable, and its innovative symbolic meaning is relevant to life, which not only shows the state of living of people but also promotes the culture of the beast.



Figure 6. Introvert Couple--CS-BOOKY-Taobao(2023)



Figure 7. Foodie Couple-CS-BOOKY-Taobao (2023)

The culture and creative figures of Luwu and Yingzhao, authorized by VIKI LEE in 2021 in *Kunlun Heavenly Troupe*, not only reinterpret the symbolic meaning of the two beasts but also integrate with modern mainstream culture. *The Classic of the Mountains: West of the Classic of Mountains and Seas* records that “According to legend, Kunlun (Figure8)Mountain is the capital of the Heavenly Emperor on earth, and Luwu is the god in charge of Kunlun Mountain, which has a human face but a tiger-like body and nine tails. It is a deity with real power under the emperor, in charge of the various seasons, but also the management of the emperor’s garden of rare treasures.”[1] The persona given to the Luwu is “the guardian of money”. In the traditional sense, people pray for money, worship the deity of wealth, praying for the daily advancement of gold and wealth not to escape, while Lu Wu helps you guard your money. It can guard the vault of the emperor of heaven, and will certainly be able to guard your treasury well.

The Classic of the Mountains: West of the Classic of Mountains and Seas also records that “The heavenly deity Ying Zhao(Figure9) manages the garden of the emperor, with a horse body but a human face. Its body pattern is like a tiger. In its free time, it likes to tour the four seas, and conquer the world’s evil spirits and ghosts, to protect the peace of the world.” [1]The persona given to Yingzhao is “the guardian of peace”. It can guard the garden of the emperor of heaven and remove evil from the world, and will definitely be able to be our guardian of peace. Their cute image hides a righteous temperament besides the mysterious and unique sense of a divine beast.



Figure 8. Luwu (the Guardian of Money)-VIKI LEE-Weibo(2021)



Figure 9. Yingzhao (the Guardian of Peace)-VIKI LEE-Weibo(2021)

The beast is a part of ancient Chinese folk culture for thousands of years in miniature, also serving as the most primitive imagination of thousands of living creatures in the world by the ancestors. Nowadays, we can still see the fantastical and magnificent deities and monsters in Chinese mythology from the description of beasts in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. The beast is not only a myth and legend, but it represents more of a cultural symbol. With the gradual development of modern design, we need to innovate and design our respective unique elements of beasts to be new cultural symbols to enrich the discipline of Chinese mythology and oriental fantasy to the world.

4 Conclusion

The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* has crafted a truly magnificent and fantastical world inhabited by demons and beasts from the mythological consciousness of our ancestors that perceived all things as spiritual to the present-day system of myths and legends. It encompasses written descriptions of demons and beasts and the creation of vivid images that imbue them with new meanings, within which context, we witness a profound reflection of both innovation and cultural inheritance. In our contemporary era, the manner in which we transmit the cultural essence of demons and beasts is arguably more crucial than simply reiterating ancient texts. As designers, it is our responsibility to thoroughly explore the cultural connotations embedded within these beings and breathe new life into them, enabling them to serve as conduits for Chinese culture on a global stage.

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