

INTRODUCTION

The East Asian Monkey King narrative of the 16th century offers a remarkably fitting and timely metaphor and entryway for illuminating and theorizing cross-cultural theatre and humanity. This dissertation treats as a starting point these two contrapuntal parallels: one, the disavowal of the Monkey King's triune nature in the US and the exclusion of the Monkey King from Heaven in the Chinese trope; and two, the dehumanization of the Monkey King and the racialization and rejection of Asian Americans and other minorities by the US dominant culture. Wukongism, or shapeshifter consciousness, draws upon the Monkey King's shapeshifting nature, and builds on his given name Wukong, which may be translated as "awakened to emptiness" or "enlightened to void." From the vantage point of theatre, performance, and cultural studies, Wukongism conceptualizes the capacity exhibited by a minoritized entity—individual or collective—to shapeshift, or traverse between modes of distinguishing and obscuring socio-political, racial, artistic, and cultural boundaries to produce knowledge of the self, complicate power dynamics, generate new art forms, and advance socio-cultural transformation. Wukongism as a theoretical system desists from an essentializing dichotomy and considers the culturally subordinate (or minoritized) and cultural superordinate (or dominant) as porous, inconclusive, and open-ended terms that tend to shift and interchange under different socio-temporal circumstances.

The boundaries explored in this dissertation project observe the levels of complexity boundary constructs exhibit. I start with the ones most commonly associated with geographical regions: national boundaries. Then I progress to examine the more intricate socio-political, racial, and cultural boundaries within a nation that separate the minoritized entities from the dominant culture. Finally I consider the highly indistinct, indefinite, but hyper-visible boundaries in the

human face dictated by racial and ethnic difference in the global socio-historical context. The following questions guide my research: How do Asian theatre and performance artists shapeshift when performing for a US audience after crossing the Pacific Ocean from East Asia? How do Asian American theatre and performance artists shapeshift when writing and performing in the US? What constitutes an “Asian” face, and how are “Asian” faces performed historically on the global stage? How do Asian faces shapeshift on and off stage in ways other than plastic surgery? What are the most productive ways of shapeshifting across nations, cultures, and races? What are the outcomes of shapeshifting?

The three chapters of my dissertation explore Asian performance, Asian American cultural production, and the performing of Asian face respectively. The first case of each chapter examines a performance of the Monkey King narrative, which then “transforms”—in the spirit of Wukongism—into the second case study. The second case of each chapter explores a performance that transcends the boundaries of the Monkey King narrative and introduces a new art form or practice. Thus, this dissertation conscientiously *performs* Wukongism, not only structurally, but interdisciplinarily as it traverses fields such as theatre and performance studies, critical race, gender and sexuality studies, musicology, sociology, Asian and Asian American studies, and visual studies.

My research is built on extensive archival research and personal interviews. I have conducted research at the following institutions and archives: UC Berkeley Ethnic Studies Library Special Collections, UCLA Library Special Collections, UCSB Library Special Research Collections, Chinese Historical Society in San Francisco, San Francisco Museum of Performance and Design, University of Connecticut Libraries Archives and Special Collections, East Side Freedom Library in St Paul, New York Performing Arts Library, and Chicago Public Library Harold Washington

Center Special Collections. I have traveled to the Shaoshi mountains to have in-depth conversations with kungfu monks in the Shaolin Temple, and have interviewed many Asian American artists, including friends and students of Asian American jazz composer and theatre artist Fred Ho, artists from National Asian Artists Project, and Asian American faculty members at NYU's Musical Theatre Writing Program.

In the rest of the Introduction, I will offer rationale for the key terms in this dissertation project—Monkey King, Asian/American, Kungfu/Jazz, and then set forth the structure of the dissertation with a brief chapter breakdown. Finally I will summarize the larger outcome of this project and what I hope it achieves.

Monkey King and Monkey Metaphor

The Monkey King is the starting point of this dissertation project, and the shapeshifting abilities of the Monkey King the central metaphor for Wukongism. The concept of “Monkey King” illuminates the paradox faced by minoritized entities: “Monkey” denotes sub-human appearance and qualities, whereas “King” suggests unmatched powers and capacities. This paradox not only makes the Monkey King a most popular character in China and many other Asian countries, but offers a unique lens through which to view the simianization of minoritized entities in dominantly white cultures, and promises of endless possibilities that the practice of shapeshifting may yield.

In Chinese folklore and literature, Sun Wukong (see Figures 1 and 2), like the creators of the world, is hatched from a divine stone egg—the result of the coupling of Heaven and Earth—on top of the Flower Fruit Mountain. Soon after his birth, he is welcomed and regarded as the “Monkey King” by the monkeys on the Flower Fruit Mountain. With superpowers and high martial art skills that no one can match, he is able to shapeshift at will, travel 108,000 li (54,000 km) in

one somersault, and shrink his 13,500 jin (14881 lb) magic staff to the size of a needle so he can carry it around behind his ear. He names himself *Qi Tian Da Sheng* (the “Great Sage Equal to Heaven,” by which he always introduces himself), in defiance of the Heavenly Kingdom. Upon learning that he has been rejected from the Peach Banquet—the biggest event in Heaven to which all the celestial gods are invited—Sun Wukong wreaks havoc among celestial gods. He defies and mocks divine authorities, defeats and humiliates anyone or anything the authorities send his way, and only the Buddha can subdue him. He is later sent on a dangerous and distressful journey to India to collect Buddhist scriptures with the monk Tripitaka and his two other disciples. This is known as the Journey to the West. During the journey, the Monkey King relies on his special power of “72 Transformations” (in which he shapeshifts into anything or anyone—72 indicates “infinity” in ancient Chinese culture) to save the lives of his companions. He is eventually granted Buddhahood.¹

Sun Wukong is the protagonist of the novel *Xiyouji* by Wu Cheng'en (1506-1582), which is commonly divided into four parts. Part One—the beginning (Chapters 1 to 7)—recounts the creation of the world and the birth of the divine monkey from an immortal stone, his formative years, his rebellions against Heaven, and his subsequent entrapment by Buddha under a mountain for five hundred years. Part Two—the development (Chapters 8 to 22)—introduces Tripitaka Tang, a derivation of the historical Buddhist monk Tang Sanzang, or Xuanzang (602-664), known for his pilgrimage from China to India in the seventh century. This part treats of Tripitaka's early life, his encounter with Sun Wukong and two other disciples (Pigsy and Sha Monk), and the beginning of their 81 tribulations as they are sent to a precarious pilgrimage by Tang Emperor Taizong to take the Buddhist scriptures back to the East. Part Three—the progress (Chapters 22 to

¹ See Wu Cheng'en, *Journey to the West* (Changsha: Yuelu Press, 1987).

99)—consists of the rest of the 81 tribulations the four travelers experience in order to bring back Buddhist scriptures, including stories of defeating the Skeleton Demon, crossing the Flame Mountain, and encounters in an all-female matriarchal land called Women of Western Liang. Part four—the climactic ending (Chapter 100)—depicts their return journey to the Tang Empire and the reward each traveler receives. An imaginative blend of historical facts, folklore, fantasy, and Daoist and Buddhist philosophies, the novel is held together by the figure of Sun Wukong.

Though the novel and its subsequent texts use male gender pronoun to describe Sun Wukong, I propose, Sun Wukong does not belong to either sex and is gender-neutral because of his transformative abilities. I will continue to use “he” in my dissertation to observe a literary tradition, but “he” when referred to Sun Wukong denotes gender neutrality.

Sun Wukong is well known not only in Sinophone regions, but throughout East and Southeast Asia. A very popular stage narrative in traditional Chinese theatre on the Sinophone stage of China and Southeast Asian countries, *Xiyouji* has also been frequently adapted in other forms of media throughout East Asia. Japan’s 1978 adaptation, *Saiyūki*, (also known by its English title *Monkey*, or *Monkey Magic*), starring Masaaki Sakai and Masako Natsume, was subtitled by the BBC and shown on UK television, attracting a cult following in Japan and UK. China’s 1986 TV-series *Xiyouji*, directed by Yang Jie, set a historical record of 86.4% ratings in China and has since then aired more than 3,000 reruns.² Sun Wukong also made his appearance as a strong but naive boy named Songokū (Japanese equivalent of Sun Wukong) in *Dragon Ball*, a widely known

² “Farewell to Yang Jie, 86’ *Xiyouji* Remains a Classic,” *Xinhua Daily Telegraph*, April 18, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mrdx/2017-04/18/c_136216813.htm, accessed April 2, 2018.