

Comparative Analysis of Chinese and Western Black Cat Cultures from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Communication

Rongrui Ren

School of Chinese Language and Literature, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710128, China

Abstract

With the further cross-cultural communication of universal culture and the spread of Western culture, the image of black cat in China has been changing to some extent. Nonetheless, before that, both Chinese and Western culture had different cognitions upon black cats. This thesis intends to analyze the historical evolution of black cat culture among China and Western countries from the perspective of cross-cultural communication in three aspects: the analysis of cultural image on black cat in Chinese culture, the analysis of the cultural image on black cat in Western culture, and the transformation of the cultural image on black cat in both China and the West under the background of cross-cultural communication.

Keywords

Black cat culture; Cross-cultural communication; Cultural studies; Chinese culture; Folk culture.

1. Introduction

Throughout the long live river of human history, whether as a "tool" of catching mice, assisting to maintain granaries or just serving as a close little friend, cats have been keeping company with human race all over the world for a long time, with only about a tenth of human's lifespan. According to the specific characteristics of cats, contrasted them with the dogs, which are also domestic pets of human, people always push the image of "mysterious" and "indifferent" onto cats when referring to them, and which consequently provided a wide creatable space for human's imagination upon cats, no matter in literature creation, or in the deeper level, the prosperous cultural connotation. This, in turn, affected the way we think about cat, especially black cat.

2. Analysis on the Cultural Image of Black Cat from The Perspective of Chinese Culture

2.1. The Color Associations of Black Cat

The color black in ancient China is a color of royalty, which represents "justice" and "noble". Black in Chinese culture is not completely the same as which in the western culture, so does the color of black cat.

The cultural concept of "darkness" and "dreadful" in western "black" differs from which in ancient China. Black, also known as "xuan color", is not entirely limited to the negative meanings of "unfair" and "unkindness" occupied by such modern phrase as "black heart" and "black boss" in contemporary Spoken Chinese. Instead, in original ancient China, the "black" as a "dark color" is also a black of "justice" and "noble".

On the first hand, since the original ancient Qin Dynasty, "xuan color" was identified as the royal orthodox color. Since then, black color has been covered with a layer of "noble" and

"prominent" cultural connotation in the Chinese cultural context. On the other hand, there are two well-known figures as typical examples in Chinese culture: "black face" ZHANG Yide (also known as ZHANG Fei) and "black face" Bao Qingtian. It is not difficult to see that the two are famous images that have been enjoying good reputation due to their personalities for a long time. In Chinese culture, they two both represent excellent qualities such as "loyalty", "honesty", and "justice". Especially, the image of ZHANG Yide's facial mask in Chinese opera—the "black face Zhang Fei", also solidified this special cultural reflection of black.

Therefore, whether it is called "black cat" or "xuan cat", in Chinese characters, the meaning of "black" had been preceding the word "cat". Due to the cultural concept of regarding black as the noble, the word "black" has a subtle influence on the homogeneity of the word "black cat". By then, the symbolic significance of black cat in Chinese culture has been basically positive, and due to the particularity of "black"(also called "xuan color") in the historical and cultural status of original ancient dynasty of China, to a certain extent, the black cat is also stained with noble and prominent characteristic.

Black cat is originally black, and its extension can symbolize justice and loyalty. This color has had an indelible impact on the positive status of black cat in Chinese culture.

2.2. The Agricultural Function of Cats

In ancient China, cat is an agricultural animal helping human to protect food, especially cereals from the mice. A black cat is a cat, which has the ability to help farmers on agricultural production in the past of China, under the background of agricultural society.

Cats share a high degree of common interest with human beings in China's both ancient and modern agricultural civilization. Differs from the Marine civilization symbolized by the Western countries subsisted on the surface of the sea, the civilization womed from the Yellow River and Yangtze River gives birth to the ancient Chinese agricultural society, which was self-sufficient family-by-family for a long time. What proceeds the agricultural society to sustain their own, to develop the production, and to continuously provide the foundation of reproduction material is the growth of the food income, especially cereals. Therefore, creatures that goes against this trend is the "harmful enemy", and goes along with this trend is the "beneficial friend". Obviously, as the beneficiary of cats' catching mice, which prevent the cereal from the mice, cats are treated as the "friend" side. This trend is best illustrated by the perfect match between cat and mouse. No matter for food or others entertainment reasons, cats are usually thought to have a good skill at killing mice and hence play an important role in Chinese agricultural production and human everyday life. This phenomenon can also be illustrated by western culture—the perfect match between the cat and the mouse in Tom and Jerry (animation series produced by Metro-Gold-Mayer in 1939).

Insomuch, for the interest of cats, they got their food or achieved entertainment by catching mice; and for the interest of human, peoples saved the food, especially cereals, by keeping a cat surrounded. Besides, the bidirectional company between people and cats simultaneously satisfies each other's psychological needs, which leads the two from the simple relationship of benefactor and beneficiary, to become even friends for thousands of years, until today.

"A black cat is a cat", as the start of this part, this illustration analyzes black cats' agricultural function. Because of black cats' cat nature, they have been playing an unreplaceable role in ancient China's agricultural social production, sustainability of economic development and the feasibility of reproduction catching the mice. These functions mentioned gradually proceeds the extension to symbolize wealth and justice. Once received the various extension, cats (including black cats) are abstracted as a totem in Chinese folk, typically tile cats ("wa cats") in the folk of Yunnan Province. The tile cats are not real cats, actually they are instead decoration settled on the rooftop, eave, ridge of folk houses. According to the explanation of the local

residents, the tile cats, especially the black ones, have the functions of expelling ghost and attracting fortune.

To summarize the black color's special extension and agricultural functions mentioned, black cat is "black"(which represent justice and loyalty) and "cat"(which helps human save cereals), the negative extension and evil image of black cat can rarely form in the connotation of Chinese culture. Before the introduction of Western culture, black cats, the "special" category of cat, are not treated with exaggerated emotional image in people's specific communication.

3. Analysis of Black Cat Cultural Image from The Perspective of Western Culture

3.1. Black Cat Is The Incarnation of Satan

In the Middle Ages, people in the Western world used to regard the black cat as a symbol of evil and a messenger of hell.

In the early 13th century, Pope Gregory IV publicly declared that the fallen angel Lucifer is a half-cat, half-man Satan, which casts a strong evil image over the "legitimacy" of the black cats. In the cultural context of Christianity, Satan is the incarnation of evil. And at the same time, during the great plague period, the "Black Death" caused a huge impact on the economy, culture and politics of the western countries. With the anger and fear for the death of the people, and also limited by the development of science and technology, at that time people does not fully understand the principle of the disease and the real cause of the "Black Death". Without any language ability, black cat can speak no words to justify their own. Consequently, black cats are naturally regarded as the object to release people's anger, and then they assume the role of the perpetrator.

As a result, black cats in European society experienced a long period of extensive and extremely widespread psychological repulsion, after which black cat hence put on the mask of disaster, ominous.

3.2. Black Cat Associate With the Witch Culture

Black cat a deemed as the intimate pets of witches or the incarnation of witches, which represents the disposition of ominous, dangerous, and villainous.

In the primitive society, the development of science and technology and human's ability of cognition are still relatively limited. In both east and west, "witch culture" has already had its embryonic form, which originate from human's uncomprehensive cognition of the objective world, and is the most widespread and oldest forms to illustrate natural law. It is believed that the so-called "witch", that is, the occupation of playing song and dance to entertain the god. They are familiar with utility of the herbs and ancient astronomy, and are treated as a group with mysterious power.

With the wide spread of Christian culture and the growing strength of the church, the "witch", the owner of this "mysterious power", became a "heresy" and was persecuted by the authority. As a result, the word "Witch" has assumed a connotation of evil, ominous and uncontrollable in English context. Even in the 17th century, there was the horrific "Salem Witch Trials" in the United States, in which countless innocent people were persecuted violently.

After 20th century these notions can still be found in some popular contemporary cultural creations, such as The Disney film *The Little Mermaid* (1989), in which the unkind and villainous character Ursula, is depicted as an ugly old witch; And Mother Gothel in Disney film *Tangled* (2016)—also with the cognition of villainous witches persecuting beautiful princess. Alike the witches, black cats are said to be the intimate pets of witches, or while others say that black cats are the incarnation of witches. And hence the "nine lives" of cats are the "nine lives" of witches.

A typical example of this saying in recent years has been retained and reflected in the cat-themed film *Nine Lives* (2016).

In this context, black cats are inevitably associated with cunning and villainous witches. Combined with their inherited evil image and ominous masks mentioned in part 3.1, black cats have lost their "legitimate" status in Western culture.

In the English short story "The Black Cat", published in the 19th century by American writer *Edgar Allan Poe*, the concept of "black cats are often said to be witches" (*Edgar Allan Poe, Collection of Edgar Allan Poe's Short Stories*, 2018) was clearly expressed. In The protagonist's increasingly emerging criminal mind, black cats showed cunning, wicked, and unpredictability. It creates inescapable fear and is believed to be the initiator of the crime who seduces the protagonist to kill.

4. The Changes of Image in Chinese And Western Cultural on Black Cat After the Integration of Cultural Development

4.1. The Transformation of Black Cat Image in Western Culture

The traditional image of black cat, which is evil and dangerous, gradually tends to be weakened. With the development of modern science and technology, and human's cognitive ability, witch culture has gone through the stage of "rectification" in western countries' culture. Associated to the rise of magical fiction, which begins in the 17th century and is most widely read today, such as J.K. Rowling's magical fiction *Harry Potter*, the inherent evil and scary image of witches and their black cats began to weaken, presenting a more various cultural connotation, and the extension and explanation of the two simultaneously becomes more multifaceted. As a result, the repulsed black cat and the negative image carried by it are also unconsciously blurred. Or in other words, it is no longer a single, stereotyped image, but a richer and comprehensive image that is more compatible with the complex human nature.

Black cats, because of its dark appearance and bright eyes, has always been an image with strong contrast in western culture. Although not completely out of the ominous and villainous image—the special kind of theme they used to convey, they are still used in the prominent film as an important element to foil atmosphere. But people would no longer be too sensitive with a specific black cat according to their theme image. Black cats are abstracted to only a sort of cultural representative, among all the cultural representatives of human civilization.

4.2. The Transformation of Black Cat Image in Chinese Culture After the Introduction of Western Culture

Black cat image in Chinese culture tends to transform towards the villainous, dangerous, and ominous side, after the introduction of traditional western black cat image.

Although the images of black cats tend to be diversified in western culture nowadays, the most typical and traditional black cat image still embodies the characteristics of danger, mystery and ominous for the longest time. At the same time, the concept of "friend animal" in Chinese black cat image has gradually weakened. The value estimate on black cat hence gradually becomes blurred in China.

During the 21st century, in many cross-cultural communication activities such as movies, festivals, literature, and other daily communication, traditional western black cat image gradually makes up for the absence of Chinese black cat image, especially the introduction of Halloween culture, specific film, television works and literary works. And in the other hand, after Qing dynasty, black has gradually lost its "royal exclusive" particularity in modern society. And the interpretation of black cat image has become more blurred according to their appearance—creatures with black coat, eyes that shine in the night.

The evolution of black cat culture in China and the Western countries has both undergone complex changes in the long period of cultural development and cross-cultural communication. Perhaps during that period of time when the traditional western black cat image is just introduced to China, the image of Chinese black cat is getting close to the western tradition. But as more and more research, propaganda and popularization for traditional Chinese black cat image appear, people begin to realize that, in the traditional Chinese culture, black cat was once a benevolent friend to ward off bad luck, and the image of "evil" and "danger" then exist after the introduction of western culture. Under such a background of collision between eastern and western cultures, the movie *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989) still tells a story of "the witch and the cat" under the "traditional formula", but the characteristics of love, peace and warmth conveyed in it are obviously very different from the "evil" and "danger" characteristics that have been widely spread. The characteristics of the black cat image in eastern and western culture are reconciled. (Yang Qi, 2021, pp. 163-165)

However, does the traditional Chinese black cat image really disappeared? We can clearly find the answer "no" in Chinese animation works *Black cat Sheriff* in 1984. The series described a black cat with bravery and justice, which inherited the traditional Chinese black cat image.

5. Conclusion

Except black cat, there are also countless images derived from different animals, in the historical and cultural treasure of human civilization. The evolution process of "black cat culture" in China and the West shows that although they are the same animal, in different cultures may have their own explanation and conversions in the different development process, lighting out ever-changing cultural flames. Today, with great cultural integration and prosperity, we can expect that the special image of "Black cat" will continue to be updated and enriched in the future, presenting people with more diversified connotations.

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