

The Symbol of "Snake" in Chinese Culture and Its Significance of Ecosemiotics

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Abstract: This paper starts with the snake symbol in Chinese culture, and explains its significance of ecosemiotics. The snake symbol in the image of "human head and snake body" in Chinese Nvwa and Fuxi's myths is a kind of body index, which shows the integration of symbolic activities between ancient people and non-human animals, and is a combination of natural signs and cultural symbols. The symbol of the snake has a close relationship with local culture and national memory. The symbolic relationship between the snake symbol and the local entity nature constitutes a "nature-text" and has an impact on the natural environment, which reflects the contextual characteristics of ecosemiotics. The thesis also reflects on the artistic creation of the snake symbol in a postmodern context. Although the creation of snake symbols in China embodies postmodern artistic gestures of breaking dualism and pluralism, the artistic modeling of snake symbols gradually distances itself from the real experience of human beings on the natural environment, and does not reflect the side of ecological ethics.

Keywords: Snake symbol, Chinese mythology, Local culture, Postmodern, Ecosemiotics.

1. Introduction

Culture and ecological system are closely linked. As one of the important forms of culture, mythology highlights the relationship between cultural symbols and natural signs. There are many animal symbols in Chinese mythology. For example, there are many myths and legends about "snake" in Chinese culture, and various primitive peoples use it as their own tribe's totem. As a cultural symbol, snake totem has an intimate relationship with natural signs. In Chinese culture, the snake is a very spiritual animal. In Chinese culture, the snake sometimes symbolizes the gods with supernatural powers, and sometimes it is the representative of natural phenomena such as wind, electricity, and rain. It combines natural signs with cultural symbols.

Ecosemiotics is a discipline that explores the relationship between culture symbol and natural signs. Kalevi Kull demarcates ecosemiotics as a whole in the category of culture, but also distinguishes it from cultural semiotics. The research object of cultural semiotics is culture, while ecosemiotics focuses on the relationship between culture and external nature. In fact, there are many intersections between ecosemiotics and cultural semiotics. Some forms of culture include human understanding of natural structures and how human beings create their own civilization in the natural environment. That is, it means the interaction of symbolic activities and the functional circle behind human beings and nature.

2. The Structure of the "Human Face and Snake Body": The Combination of Cultural Symbol and Natural Signs in Chinese Mythology

Myths contain human beings' first experience of life in the world. Mythology presents how humans and animals communicate, and includes animal semiotics. Almost all myths have the heroic image of the "other" and have non-human spiritual connections, which reflect the relationship between human life and the natural world, showing a certain

kind of ecological thinking. The "snake" symbol in ancient Chinese mythology connects culture and ecosystem, showing the connotation of ecosemiotics.

The presentation of non-human and even natural signs in mythology contains the understanding of nature, and at the same time shapes the symbols about snakes in human culture. The ancient Chinese book "The Classic of Mountains and Rivers" records countless images of human faces and snake bodies. For example, "Northern Second Classics" records that the mountain gods of the seventeen mountain systems in the north are all images of snake bodies and human faces. In addition, "Chiyou" and "Shennong", the guardian gods of the Huaxia tribes in "The north within the four seas", both have human faces and snake bodies. "The Classic of North within the four seas" records the gods with human faces and snake bodies - "Candle Yin", It is considered as day, dark as night, blown as winter, and exhaled as summer. Don't drink, don't eat, don't rest, and breathe as wind." Here the deity of the symbol of the snake becomes a representation of the natural world itself.

The most typical images of "human head and snake body" are the Chinese Myth of Nvwa and Fuxi. As the earliest written records of human civilization and even human creation in Chinese culture, they show the intimacy with nature, showing the relationship between natural signs and cultural symbols. Ernst Cassirer believes that mythology is fundamentally a spontaneous tracing of thought. In fact, he believes that human beings trace their own culture not by humans themselves, but by "cultural heroes" in the form of gods or animals. As he said: "But while logical reflection tends, in this wise, to resolve all receptivity into spontaneity, mythic conception shows exactly the opposite tendency, namely, to regard all spontaneous action as receptive, and all human achievement as something merely bestowed". [2] This actually reveals the generation and origin of cultural symbols. Culture is not a product of human society, and it is difficult to separate and connect with natural symbols. As we know, Myths are the product of primitive people's interpretation of natural and social phenomena, Kangqiong believes that the images of animals giving birth to humans and half-human,

half-beast gods in Chinese mythology reflect the relationship between human beings, nature, and non-human beings: "On the one hand, it reveals the essence of harmony between humans and animals, and it is revealed through the visualization of mythological ecological ethics images; On the other hand, it is also an opportunity. The transformation of the relationship between expressive power is an opportunity for humans and animals to be inseparable and mutually transform in the ecological activities of evolutionary life." [7].

We see that these mythological prototypes of "human head and snake body" are fundamentally about semiotics. Eco-semiotics believes that culture is exclusive and self-sufficient, but has contextual characteristics. This means that culture and natural environment are not two completely different categories, they are inherently blended at the symbolic level. Timo Maran believes that the concept of eco-semiotics is: "A central claim of this Element is that semiotic systems in culture—language, literary works, figurative art, myths, customs—are not closed into themselves, but include semiotic connections with the environment. In other words, there exist semiotic modalities that pass the representation—object divide." [8] The myth of the snake is also a consequence of the representation of the symbolic relationship between man and nature.

The field of human head and snake body involves the hidden relationship between culture and body symbols, which is also one of the important contents of eco-semiotics. Cultural symbol and natural signs are always connected in the body of an individual entity, and individuals such as Nvwa and Fuxi are typical individuals beyond human cognition. The perception structure of the body of "Human Head and Snake Body" as a whole breaks the dual relationship between nature and culture. The human head and the snake tail are typical binary combination structures, and their natural bodies pass through mythology, more precisely, mythology crosses the species gap between humans and animals in a cultural way. Nvwa's "human head and snake body" structure can be both the god of the snake species and the ancestor of the human species. The snake-like and human-like body bridges the difference between species. Index is based on the similarity of symbols. To a certain extent, "human head and snake body" is an index of the body. "From an eco-semiotic viewpoint, icons could be said to map the diversity of the things that are there in the ecosystem, while indexes would map the patterns and linkages between these things." [8] On the one hand, the snake tail is the indicator of the snake, and on the other hand, the human head is the indicator of the human being. They have identified in their respective species, thus breaking the dualistic relationship between human beings and non-human beings.

As a cultural model, the symbol of "human head and snake body" makes full use of the animal symbol model of "snake". The modeling process of symbols in mythology can better show how to integrate natural signs and cultural symbols into a cohesive model system. According to the Thomas Albert Sebeok, myths belong to secondary modeling. The myth of the human head and snake body is a simulation of human perception of nature in ancient China, and it is the result of symbolic coding based on the similarity between humans and animals. Mythology creates a supernatural knowledge system to explain the origin and behavior of human beings. Human beings hope to understand the unknown natural phenomena and the world through gods such as "Nvwa" as a

medium. There must be a compound of linguistic and nonlinguistic structures in human symbolic modeling activities. Language means the cultural part of human self-cognition, and non-language is the part of the non-human natural world. In the combination of these two symbolic processes, the awesome sacred creature with a human head and a snake body can become the earliest prototype of human beings (Such as Nvwa, Fuxi).

The mythical protagonist with a "human head and a snake body" has become a symbol of access to nature and culture, and is the most direct expression of the relationship between heaven and man in Chinese culture. Nvwa, as a typical image in mythology, reveals ancient China's understanding of nature. Although the statues of Nvwa unearthed in the later period have the meaning of conquering nature in the continuous evolution of Chinese culture and history, the structure of "the human head and snake body" itself and the original structure do reflect the natural and cultural thoughts of the ancient ancestors who respected nature, and in terms of the integration of human and non-human inner symbols, it shows the meaning of ecological symbols.

3. The Locality of the "Snake" Symbol and The Composition of Nature-text

Culture is also intimately related to the ecosystem we live in. On the one hand, the formation of culture contains the mechanism of the natural environment. On the other hand, culture changes our understanding of the world we live in, and is constantly shaped by the evolution of the place. The snake symbol in Chinese culture has a close relationship with the local surrounding environment. It has a symbolic structure of resident knowledge and affects the relationship between man and nature in the local environment. In the evolution of locality, natural signs and cultural symbols in the sign process are more indistinguishable, and cultural texts are more closely integrated with the local ecological environment.

The creation of cultural texts such as myths and legends is based on locality. As the main subject of text creation, local aborigines encode the surrounding world into cultural texts and preserve them in national memory through language and non-language forms. "one's native place and its elements support the self-definition of an individual, and language becomes the means of denoting environmental objects and phenomena; the memories and experiences that the individual associates with his/her identity are also specific to the place." [10] The origin of the myth is based on the locality. In ancient times in southern China, there were lush hills and forests, and the terrain was more complex. The pictures of many tribes were snake symbols, as recorded in "Origin of Chinese Characters" (Volume Thirteen, Part 1): "southern barbarians, snake species, Words follow insects", "Fujian, Southeast Vietnam, snake species, Words follow insects". Li, Miao, Dong and other local aborigines all have their own unique snake culture. The Li people believe that they are the descendants of snakes. Depending on the legend of "Snake man", snakes and humans gave birth to their ancestors. Meng Wentong believes that the Chinese characters Man and Fujian are related to worms. In ancient times, worms refer to snakes, and Sichuan Basin is also a big snake. Nvwa's human head and snake body are derived from the legend of the southern Chinese people. [4] The "snake" symbol is deeply embedded in their national memory, so among the aborigines, there are more and more cultural legends related to the snake symbol. In

view of the contextual characteristics of symbolic activities, Timo Maran believes that locality is a basic concept in ecosemiotics. He sees the close relationship between local culture and the natural environment and the rationality of thinking about cultural texts in local contexts. Maran said: "Regarding cultural texts about nature, that is, nature writing, nature documentaries, or environmental art, we may often discover that it is not possible to interpret them without including in the interpretation the patterns and processes of the environment itself, or the results of semiotic or communicative activities of nonhuman animals." [11]

The cultural representation of natural symbolic activities pointed to by ecosemiotics. Much of the snake symbolic culture in China refers to the natural world, including the dual parts of natural structure and national cultural memory. Ecosemiotician Maran believes that nature is basically experienced by human beings, or that nature can be textualized. The natural and cultural landscape of a place and the natural structure in culture are a kind of "nature-text", which he defines as a unit formed in the meaning relationship between two counterparts. [9] Undoubtedly, the entire system of the relationship between a cultural text and its natural environment is a nature-text. The nature-text about the snake symbol is open, and it includes both the evolutionary part of the national memory, the local indigenous subject of text creation and dissemination, and the part of the natural part of the entity and the part of the perceived natural environment. The local aborigines integrated the iconic natural landscape and animal symbols into cultural texts, and continuously formed natural texts about the "snake" symbol in the interaction between cultural symbols and natural signs. The nature-text of the snake symbol exists in various places in the north and south of China, and the worship of "Nvwa" is everywhere. Nvwa's "snake" symbol worship is mainly concentrated in the Qinling Mountains of China. In addition, in the north: for example, there are many Nvwa temples in places such as Gansu and Shaanxi. In addition, in Hubei, Henan, Yunnan and other provinces, there are local worships about the snake symbol. The Yi people in Yunnan, China, retain their worship of the snake totem. Men wear snake-shaped headdresses on their heads, and many handicrafts have snake patterns. Residents of Nanping City, Fujian Province hold a magnificent snake worship ceremony every year on the first lunar month and the Qiqiao Festival. During the snake worship ceremony, the Dong people also make their own snakeskin clothes and wear them to dance the "snake dance".

The formation of the snake symbol in culture requires continuous evolution in local ethnography and human memory. The diachronic evolution of the snake symbol can be understood as a landscape text, which is the result of the construction of the collective memory of the local residents. Eco-semiotics includes the transience and memory of symbolic activities between humans and nature. Kalevi Kull believes that eco-semiotics "includes the role of memory and the relationships between different types of (short-term, long-term, etc.) memory in culture. Due to considering the evolutionary aspect, ecosemiotics also extends to non-human systems." [5] The cultural symbol of snake has spawned numerous myths and stories in China. For example, the famous love legend "The Legend of the White Snake" is also a story about a snake transforming into a beautiful woman, and even reproduces with humans, presenting an intimate relationship with humans living together. In addition, the

snake symbol has also evolved into the symbol of Jackie Chan, which can call wind and rain, and has an important position in Chinese culture. At the same time, in the Chinese zodiac, "snake" also implies wisdom and vitality.

The greatest charm of this dynamic nature-text formed by the interaction between cultural symbol and natural signs lies in its openness and differences in local cultures, and at the same time, it can maintain a stable ideology in national memory. If we regard the nature-texts about the snake symbol as a landscape of travel, then we can see that the openness of human cultural symbols leaves the greatest space for natural entities. Simon Schama believes that landscape myths and national memories are isomorphic, it is clear that inherited landscape myths and memories share two common characteristics: their surprising endurance through the centuries and their power to shape institutions that we still live with. [6] It is precisely because of the cultural construction of mysterious nature in national culture that national identity shows great power. In this way, not only is the animal "snake" not standing in opposition to human beings, but at the same time, culture is not completely separate from nature. The influence of this cultural symbol on the ecological environment cannot be underestimated. In the local environment, the native indigenous people know how to get along with non-human beings better and how to better protect the natural environment in which they live. Based on the influence of the cultural symbol of snake, the first reaction of the local aborigines when encountering a snake is not to drive away, but to associate it with "good luck". They believe that snakes have spirituality, and encountering snakes may ward off evil spirits and avoid bad luck. Among nations with snake worship, they forbid catching and killing snakes and eating snake meat, and culture is all intertwined with factual nature. Therefore, we can understand why nature can be textualized, and all natural entities are affected by human experience and symbolic activities. The Qiang people in China worship the god who has a gorgeous snake body. If the local people meet a snake on the road, they think it is an auspicious sign. The inheritance of this culture directly affects the activities between humans and non-humans, showing the intimacy of the relationship with non-humans.

We see that in the local context, the relationship between the subject and the environment is closer, and the symbolic interpretation of snake is also richer. Subject, environment, snake symbol and many other aspects constitute a dynamic natural text. The snake text is associated with local symbolic activities, creating semiotic adaptability in the interaction between culture and physical nature. Ecosemiotics has had a certain impact on anthropology. More and more anthropologists are concerned that ethnographic detailed description should not only stand on the standpoint of human experience, they pay attention to the hidden part of life symbols in human culture. Ecosemiotics provides a methodology for the study of the semiotic part of anthropology. Eduardo Kohn uses the methods of biosemiotics and ecosemiotics to study the symbolic relationship between human and non-human in endemicity. He believes that ethnographic research should not study humans or animals to understand human activities, but should focus on the relationship between humans and animals. He let us see a different kind of anthropological research, he said: "In turning my ethnographic attention to something potentially ephemeral and fleeting—the reality of a particularly dense ecology of selves, one that is both all too

human and lies well beyond the human—I am not doing salvation anthropology.”[3]To a certain extent, the research on the relationship between local culture and natural signs in ecosemiotics is a kind of environmental anthropology.

4. Reflection on the "Snake" Symbol in Postmodern Art Texts

The animal symbol model has influenced the artistic model, and the snake symbol is to a large extent related to symbolism and belongs to the third level of symbol modeling by humans. The snake symbol provides creators with a way of perception, which has influenced the artistic creation of Chinese painting, calligraphy, paper-cutting and so on. These artistic symbols not only existed in ancient art, but also influenced postmodern art creation.

A large number of artistic creations of snake symbols have been unearthed in China, forming a unique aesthetic paradigm. The unearthed bronze wares from the Shang and Zhou Dynasties often have snake-circling patterns, most of which are symmetrically distributed and combined in artworks. The serpentine curve pattern in Mawangdui in the Western Han Dynasty is extremely feminine. Wu Daozi's "Eighty-seven Immortals Picture Scroll" wears snake hair buns, which represent the aesthetics of ancient Chinese women. The serpentine dragons are tactful, adding a bit of charm to women. In addition to painting, the snake symbol has also influenced the art form of Chinese calligraphy. The application of "snake-like" steps in calligraphy embodies a natural and unrestrained art. This image art is also imprinted in other parts of the Chinese nation. For example, the Li people in Hainan Island, China, like tattoos with S-shaped curves. They have inherited the cultural memory of the snake symbol. The moving curves radiate vitality and constitute their perception of beauty. In the book "Spiritual Snake Image: Complex and Symbol", Duan Shouhong believes that the beauty of this artistic representation of the evolution of the spirit snake lies in the "rhythmic lines contained in the sense of movement". [1]The snake symbol has been deeply drawn in Chinese culture and artistic creation.

Animal symbol models reflect the interaction between humans and non-humans at the symbolic level, on which artistic models can express humans' natural concepts. If the animal symbol model of the snake is a reflection of the original human experience of nature, then does the creation of art also have the significance of ecological ethics and ecosemiotics? Under the image evolution of Fuxi and Nvwa with human heads and snake bodies, in the later image texts, they hold the sun and the moon in their hands, which gradually evolved into the power and control of nature, expressing the desire of human beings to conquer nature. In some hunting sculptures and images, there are images of tigers and snakes, humans fighting non-human animals, and humans stand in opposition to nature. Ancient Chinese snakes and dragons are largely the same concept. In the end, the symbol of the snake evolved into a symbol of power. The symbol of the snake completely refers to the human cultural world, and gradually loses its close relationship with natural entities.

Undoubtedly, there are traces of animal symbol models and language models in the artistic symbol models in postmodern art creation, and the snake symbol still exists. In China, there are endless versions of the text of the legend of "White Snake". The movie "Green Snake", "The Legend of the White Snake"

adapted in 1995, the TV series "White Snake and the Green Snake" in 2001, the TV series "The Legend of the White Snake" in 2006, the movie "Legend of the White Snake" produced in 2011, and released in 2018 "The Legend of the White Snake" and so on, it can be seen that the symbolic model of the snake has directly influenced the post-modern film and television art. In postmodern art, the artistic text of the snake symbol presents multiple inclusiveness, and the text no longer completely relies on the original myths and folklore. This kind of postmodern art also has certain criticisms, and this kind of postmodern art does not represent an ecological culture. Despite the fact that in many artistic texts, the animal symbol of the snake is still a revelation of the indicative relationship between human beings and nature, but it is far from the expression of human perception of creatures and the natural environment. The snake symbol in "The Legend of the White Snake" reflects how to break through anthropocentrism and the acceptance of non-humans in the human community through the conflict between humans and demons. However, the disclosure of the relationship between humans and non-humans, and between humans and nature is very limited. Viewers or readers are often coerced by the illusion of the natural environment created by technology. Those illusory simulacra on the Internet have caused people to pay less and less attention to the actual nature.

In the creation of snake symbols, this kind of creation based on animal symbols has departed from the original symbol foundation to a certain extent. Maran believes that language models and even artistic models may also deviate in the expression of natural concepts. "In a similar way, the over-dominance of artistic modeling threatens to turn the environment in a text into a mere decoration, a stylistic ornament, thereby shutting off the possibility of interference from nonhuman voices and agencies." [8]The snake symbol recognizes that human culture is gradually moving towards closure, away from the real nature. Zhu Ling believes that the evolution of the symbol of the snake, from the totem to the literature, reflects the process of human beings from being divorced from nature to being in harmony with nature. [12]In fact, this is not the case. In the post-modern era, human beings do retain a large number of aesthetic elements of the "snake" symbol, but this does not mean that modern human beings are still close to non-human beings and nature. In the context of postmodernism, the cultural symbols of snakes are in fact the complete opposite of humans and non-humans such as snakes, and cultural symbols are becoming more and more concentrated, breaking away from the relationship with nature or the influence on people.

If it is said that what postmodernism presents is not a relationship of binary opposition, and that artistic creation subverts the antagonism between human beings and non-human beings, and presents the characteristics of pluralistic coexistence, then postmodern art still has a lot of room for further development. Here, I think how to integrate the aesthetics of animal symbols (such as snake symbols) in the landscape of postmodernism, and express a perspective that transcends anthropocentrism, while conveying the relationship between humans and nature and at the same time Expressing an ecological ethics is what needs to be considered in the creation of artistic texts.

5. Conclusion

We have seen that the snake symbol plays an important role

in Chinese culture, especially in ancient mythology and local culture. In the mythology of the Nvwa series, the snake symbol is a witness of human beings' reverence for nature, not only based on the iconicity of the symbols but also as an Index. Among them, the structure of the human head and the snake body is a structural reconstruction of the relationship between the body and nature, which expresses the idea of the blending relationship between culture and nature in ecosemiotics. In addition, the snake symbol constitutes a kind of nature-text in the encoding of national memory and local culture, which has an isomorphic relationship with the physical nature, which also presents the symbolic contextual characteristics of ecosemiotics. In the end, I found that the symbol of the snake had the greatest influence in ancient China. Although the snake symbol shows the characteristics of postmodern pluralism in contemporary art texts, it moves toward the modeling of modeling in the revealing of the relationship between human and non-human, that is, nature is largely "absent" and art is in technology. The subject is plunged into nothingness under the influence.

The multiple modeling of symbols in artistic texts reflects the human encoding process, in which human experience in natural environments should not be absent. The snake symbol is just a case in our culture. Human beings have accumulated a lot of natural and cultural symbols in their long-term experience in nature. These symbols were originally modeling symbols for humans to adapt to the natural environment and deal with environmental crises. Therefore, we are obliged to further reflect on the symbolic relationship between human beings and nature on the basis of these symbols.

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