

Glocalizing Metamorphosis: A Post-Humanist Critique of Hybrid Romance in *The Legend of White Snake* and *The Little Mermaid*

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Abstract

As a transcultural archetype in both Eastern and Western mythology, metamorphosis is the main clue in *The Little Mermaid* by Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen and *The Legend of the White Snake* rewritten by Feng Menglong, which both demonstrate a cross-species romance between human beings and half-human-half-animal entities. Thus, by paralleling the story of metamorphosis in Eastern and Western cultural contexts, this paper attempts to investigate the “sharedness” rather than “sameness” between the metamorphosis tradition by creating a glocal heterotopia, revealing a possible post-humanistic potential for disrupting the differential human-animal categorization, while the tragic ending of both romances also indicates a shared pessimistic view on the establishment of nature-culture continuum and the underlying anthropocentric conception in the 17th century China and 19th century Europe.

Keywords: metamorphosis, glocal heterotopia, *The Legend of the White Snake*, *The Little Mermaid*

From ancient *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (《山海经》) and Pu Songling’s *Strange Tales from A Chinese Studio* (《聊斋志异》) to Greek mythology and Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, Metamorphosis becomes a ubiquitous archetype in Eastern and Western culture. Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen’s (1805—1875) fairy tale *The Little Mermaid* (Den lille Havfrue, 1837) in *Fairy Tales Told for Children*, and Feng Menglong’s (1574–1646) version of *The Legend of the White Snake* (《白蛇传》) or *Madame Bai Is Imprisoned Forever under Thunder Peak Pagoda* (《白娘子永镇雷峰塔》) (1624) in his *Stories to Caution the World* (《警世通言》) are exemplified as a transcultural tale type of love story between human beings and half-human-half-animal entities, with the process of metamorphosis involved. By breaking the form and blurring the border, such metamorphosis preserves a post-humanist potential to transgress the binary opposition between human being and animal, and also highlights the dynamic formation of subjectivity as an eternal becoming process. Instead of interpreting these two stories under the Western hegemonic “white mythology” tradition, this paper attempts to investigate the “sharedness” rather than “sameness” between the metamorphosis tradition by creating a glocal heterotopia.

1. Glocal Heterotopia: Transcultural Human-Animal Folklore

The impact of globalization and the shifts in global culture heralds a new era of transcultural study, whereas the comparative analysis of Western and non-Western texts can easily fall into the trap of homogeneous discourse. As Xie Shaobo (1999) comments, “the promotion of such an ideology of reassurance represses the distinct qualities of the Other in favor of an “imperialism of the same,” wherein hegemonic “white mythology” dictates what is globally valued. Such tendency of searching for sameness, according to Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, is “an automatic cognitive process used to make sense of the world” (qtd. in Gutierrez, 2009) who contend that the mind is made up of a network of conceptual spaces (called input spaces) connected by similar elements.

Encountering the threat of global homogenization and the fear of local isolation, glocal heterotopia is proposed as a middle ground. The fear that global connectivity might result in global homogeneity is counterchecked by glocalization, “a blending process that occurs when the resurgence of the local culture disrupts the tendency of global culture toward homogeneity” (Robertson, 1997; Gutierrez, 2009). It indicates a process of “penetration-integration of the global with the local, or glocalization”, allowing “global and local spaces to interact with and enrich one another through the blending of shared elements and vital relations” (Gutierrez, 2009). More significantly, this glocal space does not encourage “sameness” which focuses on a notion of universal value, but “sharedness,” a term that Strauss and Quinn (1997) use to explain the timeless quality of

elements that are similarly valued by several cultures. In this sense, the metamorphosis archetype within Western and Eastern mythology should not hinge on identifying likeness between the Other and the Self, or transforming the Other into another “Self”, but foreground the differences and particularity within, which can open to a possibility of intercultural dialogue and exchange.

The Legend of White Snake and *The Little Mermaid*, as one of the most widespread folklore or fairy tales in Eastern and Western cultures respectively, share a global tale type of human-animal metamorphosis, which contains a series of images and symbols that are shared by a considerable number of cultures. In folklore, mythology, fairy tales or allegories, animal always takes a prominent position in the narrative and cultural totem. Different from the wicked image in Western biblical culture, the snake in ancient Chinese culture, as an alternative form of the dragon, is imbued with a sense of divinity. Fu Xi (伏羲) and Nü Wa (女娲), the legendary ancestors of Chinese civilization, are said to have human heads and serpent bodies, which can be traced back to the records in the Eastern Han dynasty (Chao, 1979). Since the spread of Buddhism during the Han dynasty, the belief that human and animal are essential homogeneous was widely accepted. Its animistic thinking further facilitated the development of “strange stories on animal and ghost” (“精怪故事”) in the Wei and Jin Period, which was established on a collective cognitive foundation that human beings and animals can transform with each other. Such tradition thus becomes a forerunner of the early version of *The Legend of White Snake*.

In the meantime, Western civilization shares a similar tradition of human-animal hybridity. The mermaid stories are significantly influenced by the Sirens of Greek mythology, which were originally half-birdlike, but came to be depicted as half-fishlike in the Christian era. As an aquatic creature, the mermaid has a female head and upper body with the tail of a fish. Similar to the empowered gods in ancient China, mermaids are also endowed with magical power which is imbricated with a sense of awe of ancestors. They are sometimes associated with perilous events such as floods, storms, shipwrecks, and drownings, while sometimes they can be benevolent or beneficent, bestowing boons or falling in love with humans.

In this sense, these two stories coincide in a glocal heterotopia with shared connections including “connections of identity or transformation or representation, analogical connections, metaphoric connections” (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). Both nourished with a long history and located with particular folk religions, the images of serpent and mermaid represent a transcultural human-animal hybridity type and reflect the human-nature relationship rooted in different cultural soil.

2. Becoming Human: Post-humanistic Metamorphosis of Lady Bai and The Little Mermaid

Both *The Legend of White Snake* and *The Little Mermaid* involves the motif of metamorphosis, with the crossed boundaries between human and animal. Such a pattern of the blurred boundary between humans and other species echoes some of the post-humanist doctrines, which pose a suspicion on the historical notion of the human in traditional humanism and anthropocentrism. These ideas usually fix “man” at the central place and create a series of “others—woman, non-white, queer, animal, inanimate” (Ferrando, 2019). By disrupting the rigid division between human Self and Other, post-humanists generally agree that a strict binary division between nature and culture is no longer tenable and instead regard the world in a “nature–culture continuum” (Massumi, 2002) or as composed of “naturecultures” (Haraway, 2003).

The transformation of Lady Bai between a woman and a white snake affirms such post-humanistic disruption between human and animal categorization. “Madame Bai is Imprisoned Forever under Thunder Peak Pagoda” (Bai niangzi yongzhen Leifengta), as the number twenty-eight among forty stories of Feng Menglong’s *Stories to Caution the World*, is the earliest full-length version of this vernacular story. Taking place around the middle of the twelfth century, this vernacular story opens on the banks of West Lake in Hangzhou, where the young pharmacy assistant Xu Xian (许仙) during a drenching rain meets with Lady Bai (or Lady White, 白娘子), a beautiful young widow, and her servant Little Blue (小青). Lady Bai is later revealed as a big white snake that has the magic power to transform herself into a beautiful woman. Such transformative capacity of Lady Bai transcends the strict boundary between human being and animal, and successfully deceives Xu Xian at the beginning of the story and initiates a romance with him.

In Anderson’s *The Little Mermaid*, the human-fish hybrid body of the Little Mermaid and the later conversion of her tail into legs also implies resistance against human-nature opposition. Described as a “strange child, quiet and thoughtful (Anderson, 2003)”, the Little Mermaid princess is “the most beautiful of them all, her skin was as clear and delicate as a rose petal, her eyes as blue as the deepest sea, but like the rest of them she had no feet, her body ended in a fish’s tail” (ibid.). The existence of the mermaid, therefore, symbolizes the hybridization of “human nature” and the non-human world, and destabilizes the central position of human beings. In this vein, both Lady Bai and Little Mermaid also manifest an alternative world where human beings and animals are

integrated and homogenized, thus fostering a rethinking of human being from an onto-epistemological perspective.

Another shared factor between the two characters is their persistent effort of becoming human. Lady Bai painstakingly maintains her appearance as a beautiful lady in order to win the heart of Xu, while the Little Mermaid is fascinated with the human world and determinedly transforms her fishtail into human legs, even though “each step [she] takes will be like treading on a sharp knife that made your blood flow” (Anderson, 2003), and even lose her loveliest voice. The transformative process in these two stories also echoes post-anthropocentric perspective that centers on “becoming” rather than “being”, thus introducing the notion of transversal subjectivity. Such work-in-progress subjectivity, according to Rosi Braidotti (2019), also indicates a “relational capacity” to “extend towards and in proximity with others”. Lady Bai and the Little Mermaid’s desire of becoming human is mostly motivated by the relational interaction with human beings, that is their romance with Xu Xian and the young prince. Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of “haecceity” (“thisness” or particularity) “consist[s] entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected”. Thus, during the dynamic process of becoming human, Lady Bai and the Little Mermaid’s metamorphosis also demonstrates a close interaction and mutual influence between human and nature.

While being is typically associated with stable ontological categories such as “human” and “animal,” becoming considers the porousness of entities and allows one to see how they constitute each other. Lady Bai’s transformation manifests a fluid identity as both the snake and a beautiful lady, while for Little Mermaid, her identity is in itself hybrid as the combination of human upper body and fishtail. Therefore, the dynamic process of metamorphosis of Lady Bai and the Little Mermaid indicates their liminal subjectivity, and problematizes the boundary distinctions and segregation between human beings and the natural world.

3. Cross-Species Communication and Barrier: The Fruitless Love Between Human and Hybrid Creature

Behind the arduous metamorphosis in the story of Lady Bai and the Little Mermaid, the motive for them to become human is their romance with human beings, and their brave pursuit of love regardless of sacrifice. Diverting from the stereotype that woman is usually the passive one being wooed, Lady Bai preemptively builds a connection with Xu by lending him an umbrella and later proposes marriage to him. She also follows and supports him as usual during Xu’s twice banishment to Suzhou and Zhenjiang. When she desperately finds that Xu recognizes her animal form as a giant white snake, her fanatic love is even imbued with a sense of threat: she tells Xu that she will drown the whole city of Hangzhou if he does not love her as before. In the same vein, the Little Mermaid is also a courageous girl who pursues her love at all costs. At the first sight of the prince on her fifteenth birthday, she irretrievably falls in love with the handsome young prince, who she saves from the shipwreck on a stormy night. Dissatisfied with only watching the prince from the sea, she exchanges a pair of human legs with the sea witch, at the price of eternally separating from her family and losing her beautiful voice. Aligning with nature, Lady Bai and the Little Mermaid transcend the traditional image of an obedient and timid female, and exemplify a form of the new “woman”.

In this sense, such process of metamorphosis also indicates an internal transformation first and foremost, the emotional involvement of falling in love, which facilitates the external transformation, when the hybrid lovers attempt to disguise themselves to approach their beloved. Such tradition is widely discussed in the research of Elizabethan romance and comedy, such as Sidney’s *Arcadias*, Spenser’s *Faerie Queen*, and Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour Lost*, following the formula “X was metamorphosed upon falling in love with Y” (White, 1984). Similarly, there are also a great number of Chinese novels that involve romance between human beings and half-human-half-animal/plant entities during Ming and Qing Dynasty, like *Journey to the West* (《西游记》) and *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*. Such parallel de facto forms a cultural heterotopia between the East and the West, with some of the highly coincident literary conventions based on different cultural and religious soil.

Nevertheless, what follows the pattern of human-animal romance is their fruitless love due to the insurmountable barrier between species. The sacrificial love of Lady Bai doesn’t move Xu, instead, he continuously reckons her as a monster that should be caught and controlled. Disgusting Bai’s animal shape, Xu seeks help from the monk Fahai, whose begging bowl shrinks her “from her monstrous size into nothing more than a harmless little snake whom Xu easily traps beneath his bowl” (trans. Idema, 2009). Fahai locks the two creatures in a jug, which he buries at Thunder Peak Monastery (雷峰塔). Xu later collects donations and has a pagoda erected on top of the buried monsters, and then becomes a Buddhist monk himself. Moreover, the twice metamorphoses of Bai in Fen’s version are all conducted out of self-protection in front of repeated threats from males. The first metamorphosis happens when Li Keyong invites the couple over for his birthday party, and conspires to rape

Lady Bai by following her to the toilet. When he peeks inside through a crack in the door, he sees no beautiful woman but instead “a huge white snake”, and he faints at the sight of it. (ibid.). Her second transformation is spotted by Xu’s brother-in-law, who tries to observe lady Bai that night in her room, he sees instead a huge snake (ibid.). Therefore, the unbridgeable estrangement between human and other creatures to some extent culminates in the sufferings of Bai.

Similar to the tragic ending of Lady Bai, the Little Mermaid is also devastated by her lover because of the cross-species barrier. The estrangement between different species is embedded throughout the whole story. When the third sister encounters a whole flock of small human children playing at the bay, her amicable attempt of playing with them is only rewarded with their screams and the intimidatory bark of the dog. The Little Mermaid even situates in a worse plight than Bai as a result of the language barrier. While mermaids are singing and playing at sea, “the sailors were unable to understand the words and thought it was the storm, nor did they ever get to see any of these delights” (Anderson, 2003). What’s worse, she trades her voice with the sea witch, which further eliminates the possibility of communicating with the prince, let alone telling him the truth that she is the one who saved him that night. Unable to fulfill the condition of gaining the love of the prince, and too kind-hearted to kill the groom before the night of the wedding to retrieve her tail, she becomes foam on the next morning.

Rooted in a shared glocal heterotopia, both Lady Bai and the Little Mermaid are frustrated in searching for cross-species communication and understanding. However, their surrounding human beings, including their lovers, take arms against them. Their effort of becoming human and acquiring the qualification of being loved are only rewarded with violence and exclusion. Their fruitless love in cross-species romance implies an unresolvable binary opposition between human and animal, nature and nature in both cultural contexts. In the Western tradition, the tradition of anthropocentrism can trace back to Greek mythology, which portrays their gods as likenesses of human beings, and regards human beings as primary and central in the worldly order. However, in the East, the worship of animal totem as an ethnic folk belief once took a primary place of Chinese culture before the pre-Qin period, as collectively demonstrated in *Classic of Mountains and Rivers*. After the pre-Qin period, especially with the population and authentication of Confucianism, with the promotion of human power, the divinity of animal is greatly reduced, ranked as an inferior category of human beings.

Therefore, such anthropocentric tendency indicates a convergent conception embedded in such a cross-cultural continuum, that is the transformation between human and animal is possible but can be perilous, and the union between human and hybrid is always cursed. Though it seems that the metamorphosis between human and animal as well as the hybrid romance in these stories breaks the rigid boundary between human beings and animals, the anthropocentric conception de facto intentionally, or unconsciously dominates in these narratives.

4. Conclusion

As Irving Massey (1976) pointed out, literary metamorphoses usually “points [to] a moral, assist in structural differentiation, illustrate a theory of transmigration, or simply provide an escape.” The Metamorphosis, as a central motif in Eastern and Western folklore, creates a glocal heterotopia of the human-nature narrative. In this sense, the investigation of Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale *The Little Mermaid* as well as Chinese writer Feng Menglong’s *The Legend of the White Snake* can be recognized as a global metanarrative of human-animal transformation and cross-species romance, which show an ambiguous notion on human-animal relationship. By paralleling the story of metamorphosis in Eastern and Western cultural heterotopia, we can find a shared post-humanistic tendency of disrupting the differential human-animal categorization, a tentative escape from the rigid biological classification, albeit the tragic failure of both romances also indicates a shared conservative anthropocentric view on the establishment of the nature-culture continuum during the 17th century China and 19th century Europe.

This study on the shared metamorphosis motif in the Eastern and Western glocal heterotopia serves as a case study that integrates both transcultural study and romance study in a post-humanistic view, thus providing a compound perspective of rereading the classics. However, the metamorphosis element widely exists in different cultures, in addition to *The Little Mermaid* and *The Legend of the White Snake*, the two samples analyzed in this paper. Therefore, there is a great necessity of conducting more research on this topic, extending the scope of transcultural metamorphosis study into a larger space including more folklores or fairy tales from worldwide.

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