

Article

Interpretations of Chinese Aesthetic Modernity: A Case Study of the Multifaceted Construction of the Wukong Image

Tianqi Wu ¹, Jing Cui ¹ and Tianyi Ma ^{1,*}

¹ Department of Philosophy, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Xi'an Jiaotong University, Xi'an, China

* Correspondence: Tianyi Ma, Department of Philosophy, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Xi'an Jiaotong University, Xi'an, China

Abstract: Due to the long-standing and continuously inherited nature of Chinese culture, its philosophical thought inherently possesses the quality of drawing upon the wisdom of ancient sages. The aesthetic modernity within Chinese philosophy distinguishes itself from the Western model of modernity, which centers on temporal progress. Instead, it is rooted in the spatial continuity and cultural persistence, generating its own evolution and transformation within the tension between tradition and modernity. Chinese philosophy of information introduces the concept of symbolic information. Chinese aesthetic modernity primarily manifests itself through the reinterpretation and re-cognition of corresponding symbolic information. The classical Chinese mythological figure, Sun Wukong, is undoubtedly a highly representative cultural symbol of this kind. The spirit, personality, metaphors, and other abstract connotations embodied by Wukong constitute symbolic information; this symbolic information is the core and essence of Wukong. This symbolic information has undergone significant changes across different historical periods, exhibiting a deep evolutionary characteristic shaped by changing times and aesthetic interactions. Wukong stands as a typical example of a figure subjected to multi-dimensional reinterpretation and re-creation within modernity. By activating and reinterpreting traditional symbolic information within a global context, it reconstructs a new and robust cultural subjectivity. Furthermore, this continuous process of cultural adaptation highlights the dynamic resilience of Chinese aesthetic paradigms when confronted with contemporary globalized narratives. Ultimately, the multifaceted construction of the Wukong image serves as a profound theoretical lens through which scholars can better understand the broader mechanisms of cultural modernization and symbolic evolution.

Keywords: modernity; philosophy of information; aesthetics; sun wukong; cultural symbolism; chinese philosophy

Received: 15 March 2026

Revised: 03 May 2026

Accepted: 16 May 2026

Published: 22 May 2026



Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. The Characteristics of Aesthetic Modernity in Chinese Philosophy

Modernity is often understood in philosophy as a phenomenon of modern civilization characterized by reason, enlightenment, individual liberation, upheaval and transformation, and historical progress. The concept of modernity and related studies originated in the West. Some Western scholars believe that Western modernity is more reflective of temporality, contrasting with the concept of antiquity, thus embodying a sense of temporal progression. Distinguishing itself from this Western modernity centered on temporal progress, aesthetic modernity in Chinese philosophy is rooted in spatial continuity and cultural persistence, generating its own evolution and transformation within the tension between tradition and modernity. Rather than priding itself on cultural rupture and overthrow, it takes reinterpretation and re-cognition as its primary modes of expression. This characteristic is evident in Chinese literature, where the modernity of Chinese literature displays distinct spatial and endogenous features. It primarily manifests the modern characteristics of Chinese literature itself through its varied and vivid experiences of spatiality. In the Chinese context, aesthetic modernity

exhibits a dual character of "exogenous trigger" and "endogenous adaptation"—responding to the impact of Western modernity while consistently relying on local cultural resources for self-reconstruction [1].

Owing to the long-standing and continuously inherited nature of Chinese culture, all Chinese thought generally possesses a characteristic of continuity; Chinese philosophical thought naturally has the quality of absorbing and reinterpreting the ideas of ancient sages. For instance, the Hundred Schools of Thought during the Pre-Qin period were profoundly influenced by the I Ching (Book of Changes); Neo-Confucianism in the Song and Ming dynasties and the School of Mind developed by Wang Yangming both originated from Confucianism; the Sinicization of Marxist philosophy integrated traditional Chinese culture with China's unique national conditions and development model. A significant path in the development of Chinese philosophy has been the reinterpretation and re-elaboration of traditional thought in new eras. Taking philosophy of information as an example, Chinese philosophy of information was entirely proposed by Chinese philosophers. Although it utilizes concepts of information from Western information science and complexity science, it still exhibits clear continuity with ancient Chinese philosophy [1, 2]. For example, in the theory of information value, philosophy of information proposes the concepts of "Heavenly Dao value" and "Human Dao value," arguing that Heavenly Dao value is the foundation of value, superior to Human Dao value. Heavenly Dao value can serve as the basis of natural value, thereby breaking the anthropocentric limitations of value philosophy. Clearly, the concepts of Heavenly Dao and Human Dao directly derive from ancient Chinese philosophical thought. Value philosophy has always been one of the foundations of aesthetic research. The theory of information value plays a crucial role in Chinese aesthetic studies.

Returning to the issue of philosophical modernity, like philosophy itself, Chinese aesthetic modernity places greater emphasis on unfolding within locality and cultural fields, manifested as alienation from, resistance to, and rewriting of homogenization, instrumental rationality, and traditional concepts. Chinese aesthetic modernity should be understood as a cultural force that reflects upon, critiques, and corrects instrumental rationality, grand narratives, and singular notions of progress. It does not simply follow in the footsteps of Enlightenment modernity; rather, by foregrounding the perceptual symbols of historical figures, individual awakening, and the creative transformation of tradition, it constructs a unique Chinese path to modernity. This process of reconstruction and integration requires a symbolic sign as its operational object, a fact particularly evident in literary and artistic works. Many modern Chinese literary and artistic works do not simply turn inward towards modern content; instead, they transform classical emotional symbols into multi-dimensional, profound depictions of modern individual emotions and life experiences, creating a form of "affective" modernity. This extends and transforms China's unique tradition of lyrical expression into modern temporal and spatial contexts, facilitating cross-temporal dialogue and empathy with predecessors.

Therefore, aesthetic modernity with Chinese characteristics does not create a rupture with history and tradition. Instead, through tracing, re-narrating, and deconstructing traditional symbols, narrative themes, and information forms, it seeks a future-oriented cultural subjectivity within this retrospective process. This leads to the integration of traditional creations, the reconstruction of cultural subjectivity, and the emergence of modern characteristics with multiple effects at the philosophical level, such as inheritance, pluralism, holography, and deepening. Holography refers to the informational interconnectedness of all things; the universal interconnection of all phenomena is precisely manifested through holography. Prior studies in the philosophy of information have noted that holography in social culture mainly takes two forms: horizontal and vertical. Horizontal holography refers to the holographic relationships among things within the same historical period, while vertical holography refers to the holographic relationships among things as they evolve over historical time [3]. Chinese culture exhibits stronger vertical holography, which naturally stems from the continuity and longevity of Chinese culture, as well as its emphasis on history and the tradition of ancestor veneration.

This series of factors endows Chinese culture with strong resilience, making it adept at excavating symbolic information with potential from history and culture for reinterpretation and re-creation. From this perspective, the vertical holography of Chinese culture is precisely embodied in the holographic evolutionary characteristics of a vast amount of conceptual information and symbolic information within the culture.

2. The Concepts of Conceptual Information and Symbolic Information in Philosophy of Information

Chinese philosophy of information categorizes the basic forms of information into three types: self-existent information, self-conscious information, and regenerated information. Self-existent information is the mark of objective indirect existence, representing the primitive form of information not yet recognized by a subject. Information fields, and information assimilation and dissimilation, are two basic forms of self-existent information. Self-conscious information is the primary form of subjective indirect existence, grasped intuitively by the subject. It includes two basic forms: intuitive identification (perception) of information and retrievable storage (sensory memory) of information.

Regenerated information refers to new information created by the human brain through the analysis, synthesis, processing, and transformation of perceived and remembered information. Wu Kun defines the process of generating this new information as the thinking process, and defines the new information produced by this thinking process, distinct from self-existent and self-conscious information, as regenerated information [4, 5]. Regenerated information is the advanced stage of subjective indirect existence, representing the creative form of information within the subject. Two important components of regenerated information are conceptual information and symbolic information. If, during the thinking process, one utilizes representations from sensory memory to decompose, organize, and integrate them, creating a new image, we call this thinking process imagery thinking, and the newly created image is termed conceptual information. Symbolic information is an information form where the cognizing subject endows an information pattern with a specific form with a meaning defined by human convention. The modes of expression for symbolic information are not limited to language, writing, graphics, or images; they can also include specific body postures. Different modes of expression merely indicate differences in the carriers of symbol information; what is crucial is the referential function of symbol information, which can also be generally called language. With the further abstraction of image thinking, language—and thus symbol information—emerges. Only when symbol information reaches a certain quantity and, more importantly, reveals in its quality the manifold relationships among its elements, can humans engage in abstract thinking.

If we deeply consider the classification of information in information philosophy, we find that both self-conscious information and regenerated information are forms of information existing within consciousness. However, these forms of information, especially regenerated information, after being created through conscious processing, are transferred to carriers for storage to facilitate the preservation and dissemination of subjective information. Regenerated information is first stored in memory, then disseminated in the form of language, expressed through sound, or represented and recorded through images. In this process, the regenerated information created by consciousness is transformed into the form of self-existent information, recorded using carriers such as sound wave vibrations, light and shadow transformations, book pages, graphics, and images, thus forming unique human cultural information that is studied and transmitted across generations. Therefore, the cultural holography mentioned earlier is not directly manifested simply by conceptual information and symbolic information but by the conceptual information and symbolic information recorded after being transferred to carriers [2]. Without reception and reading by consciousness, these forms ontologically belong to self-existent information. Strictly speaking, the symbolic information we refer to in culture is a complex information form, encompassing both the symbolic information

created in consciousness and the symbolic information that exists in the form of self-existent information after being expressed and transferred to carriers.

If we consider the image of Wukong and the symbols it represents from the perspective of information philosophy, the creation of Wukong's image constitutes conceptual information. Wukong's image as a stone monkey embodies the essence of heaven and earth, born from a stone, possessing seventy-two transformations, resulting from a creative synthesis of human and monkey forms. Influenced by the aesthetic characteristics of different eras, it has changed little and remains distinctive. However, the spirit, personality, metaphors, and other abstract connotations it embodies constitute symbolic information. This symbolic information is the core and essence of Wukong [6]. Across different historical periods, this symbolic information is fluid, undergoing significant changes characterized by deep evolution driven by changing times and aesthetic interactions.

One key characteristic of information is that it can be moved, transmitted, and stored by converting it between different carriers, i.e., through various encoded forms of information [6]. By considering the image and personality traits of Wukong as regenerated or symbolic information, we can better understand, from the perspective of information dynamics, how Wukong transcended its original informational patterns and gradually evolved into its current informational form, while being widely reshaped and disseminated within the subjective information spaces of young people. Leveraging cutting-edge information theory enables a more coherent analysis of social phenomena.

3. The Initial Shaping of Wukong as Symbolic Information

The image of Sun Wukong, the classical Chinese mythological figure, has circulated in Chinese history for an extended period, wielding profound influence. Its shaping as symbolic information has been highly successful within the realm of Chinese culture. One can excavate multiple dimensions of aesthetic modernity from this figure. He both resists the absolute authority symbolized by the Jade Emperor and rejects the discursive structure of grand narratives, yet does not descend into passive nihilism. His aspiration to be "equal to Heaven" is rooted in the spiritual soil integrating Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, embodying traditional Chinese life philosophy [4, 7]. His eventual attainment of the "Victorious Fighting Buddha" implicitly contains a comprehensive reflection on and dialectical integration of modern subjectivity and traditional moral order. The image of Wukong precisely exemplifies a figure subjected to multi-dimensional reinterpretation and re-creation within modernity. Spanning centuries of evolution, Wukong's image, with its profound rebelliousness, rich plasticity, and deep folk foundation, serves as an excellent "cultural specimen" for observing the practice of Chinese aesthetic modernity.

Since its solidification in Yuan dynasty *zaju* (variety plays) and the Ming dynasty novel *Journey to the West*, the image has undergone centuries of transformation. From the dreamlike musings in *A Supplement to Journey to the West*, to the modern popular interpretation in Director Yang Jie's television series *Journey to the West*, the postmodern deconstruction in *A Chinese Odyssey*, the existentialist cries in *Legend of Wukong* and *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, and the philosophical reconstruction in the contemporary phenomenon, the video game *Black Myth: Wukong*, it has consistently maintained vigorous vitality and ample interpretive space. The evolutionary lineage of this image cannot be simply encapsulated by a passive "challenge-response" model; rather, it represents "a process of creative transformation." However, the modernity fostered by this transformation is less merely imposed by external shocks than the result of the recombination of internal factors. Sun Wukong's evolution from a "rebel" within the classical order to a "Destined One" in modern and postmodern contexts, constantly questioning the meaning of existence and pursuing individual freedom, clearly maps the emergence, deepening, and maturation of Chinese aesthetic modernity [1].

As the most crucial figure throughout *Journey to the West*, Sun Wukong became the iconic image of the entire story. Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West* was originally titled

The Story of Removing Obstructions in Journey to the West, which likely intended to narrate how the protagonist, Wukong, overcomes inner demons through the journey westward [8]. Therefore, compared to the lost original work *The Plain Tale of Journey to the West*, *The Story of Removing Obstructions* probably enriched and strengthened the characterization of Wukong, highlighting his charismatic personality. As a "rebel within the order," his complex experiences, numerous opportunities, and transformations ultimately forged his unruly character, creating rich space for future diversified and multi-dimensional interpretations and laying crucial groundwork.

Wukong did not initially emerge as a heroic figure with a rebellious spirit. The formation and development of his image underwent three stages—Guardian Monk, Demon, and Social Hero—respectively in *The Story of Tripitaka of the Great Tang's Acquisition of Scriptures* from the Song dynasty, *zaju* (variety plays) of the Yuan dynasty (such as Yang Jingxian's *Journey to the West*), and Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West*.

The Sun Wukong in Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West* initially lacked a pronounced rebellious spirit. When Wukong sought immortal arts on the Immortal Mountain, Patriarch Bodhi questioned him, asking for his "original surname." Wukong, mistaking this for a query about his "nature," replied, "I have no nature. If people scold me, I am not angry; if they hit me, I am not offended, I simply apologize. I have always been without nature." Born from a primordial stone, absorbing the essence of heaven and earth and the radiance of the sun and moon, he was initially of pure, innate nature—carefree, without desires or ambitions, at ease and without contention. His purpose in learning immortal arts was solely to achieve immortality. The name "Wukong" (Awakening to Emptiness) corresponds to his original essence of emptiness and non-being.

This pure, empty, and natureless Wukong, however, became polluted by entering the complex political system encompassing Heaven, deities, demons, and mortals. He seized the Dinghai Shenzen (Golden Cudgel), erased his name from the Book of Life and Death in the underworld, joined the political system of Heaven seeking an official position, and eventually aspired to the belief that the strong should rule, suggesting that positions of power should rotate, aiming to seize the fruits of high authority. He underwent phases of venerating force, experiencing insatiable desires and seizing by force. Witnessing and experiencing firsthand the bloody, cannibalistic world of *Journey to the West*, a world defined by political hierarchy and oppression, he began to truly resist the oppression of power and fight for his fate. The original *Journey to the West* also utilizes Wukong's perspective to observe the powerlessness, helplessness, and resignation of mortals. Especially after being imprisoned under Five Elements Mountain for 500 years, Wukong was forced to submit to power itself. Ultimately, he became an idealist: having perceived the hopelessness of the world and his own limitations, he nonetheless maintained his enthusiasm for it. When encountering subduable demons, savable people, and just causes, he would still offer his help to the best of his ability [9].

However, Wukong's characterization during this phase primarily served the overall narrative needs; individual emotions and desires were not extensively considered [10]. His portrayal tended towards being stereotypical, with significant changes in personality and abilities before and after the pilgrimage lacking continuity and development; his individuality was not fully fleshed out.

It was only with the deconstructive novel *A Supplement to Journey to the West* by Dong Yue in the Ming dynasty that ordinary human emotions began to be endowed upon the character Wukong. Through experiences induced by demonic illusions, Wukong underwent multiple human experiences, traversing time and space, experiencing past and future, even transforming into a beauty or becoming a King of Hell. The novel depicts Tang Sanzang marrying and becoming a general, and Wukong also marrying, having children, and becoming a prime minister. Through this deconstructive and creative form of storytelling, Wukong, previously far removed from ordinary mortals, gained tangible experiences of human life, sampling the myriad flavors and emotions of existence. The introduction of human relationships and romantic love endowed Wukong with greater humanity, restoring the full spectrum of human emotions, thereby enabling more diverse

developmental possibilities for *Journey to the West* and *Wukong* as iconic symbolic information.

4. Lyrical Aesthetic Modernity and the Reshaping of Wukong

As video games have grown increasingly popular among young people, the image of Wukong has also begun to appear in games. As early as 1988, the Japanese company NAMCO released an ARPG titled *FC Version of Journey to the West* for the Nintendo Famicom (the red-and-white console). In the game, players control Wukong as they defeat demons and monsters, ultimately rescuing everyone. Many similar games followed. Notably, after the release of the film *A Chinese Odyssey*, Wukong's emotional dimension came to the fore and became more widely accepted by young audiences. The online game of the same name, *A Chinese Odyssey 2*, launched in 2002; *New A Chinese Odyssey 3* followed in 2007; and the mobile game *A Chinese Odyssey* was released in 2015. As a pioneer of domestic online games in China, the *A Chinese Odyssey* series continues to operate steadily and attract a large number of players. Then, in 2015, the MOBA mobile game *Honor of Kings*, which had repeatedly topped global mobile game revenue charts, introduced Wukong as a playable character classified as an assassin/warrior, along with the character Zixia Fairy from *A Chinese Odyssey*. It is evident that the mutual reference, cross-penetration, and linkage of symbolic information between games and films deeply reflect the horizontal holography of social culture.

In 1986, Director Yang Jie's television series *Journey to the West* was broadcast. Filmed over six years, this adaptation is considered an immortal masterpiece, a classic cherished by generations in China. It conducted a "modern popular interpretation" of the original *Journey to the West*, which had become relatively obscure and even frightening for modern audiences, thereby giving it new life, resonating more deeply, and connecting the past with the present. The images and personalities of the main characters were largely reshaped. For instance, Sha Seng, described in the original text as having "a head of flaming red, disheveled hair, two round eyes bright like lamps, a face neither black nor green but indigo, a voice like thunder and tigers and dragons," and who remained mostly silent throughout the journey, was portrayed as the most ordinary character among the group. The overt and covert conflicts between Wukong and Tang Sanzang, and their mutual accusations, were almost entirely removed, emphasizing instead understanding, warmth, and affection between the disciples and master. The song "Love of a Daughter" created a subtle, modern romantic feeling between Tang Sanzang and the Queen of Women's Kingdom. The rebellious spirit of Wukong was particularly emphasized, clearly influenced by the 1964 Shanghai Animation Film Studio's *Uproar in Heaven*. It can be said that this version crafted an emotional and relatable portrayal of the four pilgrims, allowing the audience to appreciate their heroic qualities while also feeling they had stepped down from mythology to become real, flesh-and-blood individuals beside us, bringing the world of demons closer to reality.

Subsequent works like *A Chinese Odyssey*, *Legend of Wukong*, *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, and *Black Myth: Wukong* further accentuated Wukong's rebellious spirit. From questioning grand narratives and conformism to establishing individual subjectivity; from resisting authority to resisting "destiny"—the shift of the object of resistance from the concrete "Heavenly Court" to the abstract "destiny" or "fate"—all carry an aesthetic nuance of "Enlightenment rationality." This also signifies the awakening of Wukong's modern individual subjectivity [11]. For instance, in *A Chinese Odyssey*, *Legend of Wukong*, and *Black Myth: Wukong*, the grand narrative of the "pilgrimage" is questioned, influenced, or even subverted by emotional forces like love or free will.

In 1995, Stephen Chow's two-part film *A Chinese Odyssey* presented a kind of nonsensical deconstruction of *Journey to the West*. Character-wise, Sun Wukong was portrayed more with mortal emotions and struggles, a transformation from hero to ordinary person. He was attached to worldly desires, cynical, and only after enduring hardships did he don the golden headband and embark on the pilgrimage. The classic episode "Uproar in Heaven" served merely as background, with love becoming the main

storyline. Legend of Wukong, published in 2000, inherited the deconstructive spirit of A Chinese Odyssey. Sun Wukong rebels throughout, striving for true freedom. His love for Zixia brings him and struggle while rebelling against the Heavenly Court. He transforms from a divine monkey into a flesh-and-blood individual capable of confusion and hurt [12]. Simultaneously, the "Uproar in Heaven" becomes Wukong's rebellion upon seeing through the hypocrisy of the Heavenly Court and his conflicts with the deities' ideologies; the journey westward is no longer passively accepted but undertaken with regret, helplessness, doubt, and a spirit of resistance.

If A Chinese Odyssey uses the emotional force of love to counter the rational mission of the "pilgrimage," highlighting individual emotional value and achieving an aesthetic redemption of Enlightenment modernity, then Legend of Wukong elevates the object of resistance from concrete authority to abstract fate and existence itself, issuing a modern reevaluation of values and an existentialist cry [13, 14].

The novel Legend of Wukong borrows plot elements from Journey to the West, continues the love story between Wukong and Zixia from A Chinese Odyssey, and adds narratives of devotion like Xiao Bailong's affection for Tang Sanzang, and the romantic entanglements of Marshal Tianpeng and the Moon Fairy [4]. It boldly deconstructs and redefines the journey westward using personal love, or rather, constructs a new dimension of lyrical modernity using the characters and narrative information of Journey to the West.

In 2015, the animated film *Monkey King: Hero is Back* was released. The Wukong in this animation appears more ordinary and tender compared to previous works. The predicament of losing his original divine powers paradoxically infused him with greater humanity and space for reflection. While the family-friendly plot narrowed the distance with the audience, its sense of resistance was inevitably diminished, and its emotional impact weakened. Unlike A Chinese Odyssey and Legend of Wukong, which utilized the dimension of romantic love, *Monkey King: Hero is Back* emphasized familial elements. The film portrayed the Tang Monk as a child and introduced a new character, an "Old Monk," as a parental figure. Thus, the journey became Wukong taking the child to find his family, creating a unique dimension of paternal affection. The oppressive pilgrimage mission was removed, allowing Wukong to embark on a lyrical journey of returning to humanity, experiencing familial love, reflecting on the world, and finding himself. This film demonstrates the complexity, multi-dimensionality, and diversity in the creative expression of Wukong's lyrical aesthetic modernity.

Returning to the novel Legend of Wukong, in stark contrast to *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, the story's ending for Wukong's defiant struggle against the destiny ordained by the Heavenly Court and Buddha is tragic. The "Six-Eared Macaque" he ultimately kills is none other than his former self, imbued with a rebellious spirit. Losing that rebellious spirit meant losing his existential justification. When Wukong submits to Buddha's arrangement to protect Tang Sanzang on the pilgrimage, he distances himself from the heroic persona Zixia admired—one who fights against everything—loses love, and simultaneously negates his earlier acts of rebellion, imbued with the tragic aesthetic sense of "the death of a hero." Wukong in A Chinese Odyssey ultimately returns and embarks on the westward journey, while Wukong and Zixia in the novel Legend of Wukong perish together in heavenly fire.

The 2017 film Legend of Wukong altered this tragic ending, allowing Wukong to be reborn from the heavenly fire and engage in an unending battle against the Heavenly Court, creating an aesthetic nuance of the hero's rebirth, the indomitability of spirit, and unceasing resistance. This continuity of resistance is also reflected in the game *Black Myth: Wukong*. The spirit of resistance in these three works intensifies progressively, emotions grow more vehement, each manifested through the eruption of lyrical individual emotions.

Journey to the West's dominant theme of "concern for the times and the nation" returns, through the introduction of love in A Chinese Odyssey and Legend of Wukong, to sentiments of "concern for the times and the self." The reshaping of Wukong's image

redirected the traditional Chinese literary concerns for family, nation, and society towards a deep exploration of the individual's inner world, emotional trauma, and existential dilemmas. The tragic romances in these works, by creating lyrical atmospheres, express the desolation and vitality of modernity.

5. The Creative Transformation of Wukong's Symbolic Information in the Contemporary Era

In 2024, the first domestic AAA game, *Black Myth: Wukong*, presented Wukong in a revolutionary image to the world [15]. Through narrative openness, lyrical atmosphere, and quintessential Chinese aesthetics, *Black Myth: Wukong* achieved a creative transformation of tradition, constructing an aesthetic world driven by cultural impetus, representing a mature form of Chinese aesthetic modernity in the contemporary era.

The success of *Black Myth: Wukong* lies in its creative transformation of traditional symbolic information, which unfolds across three dimensions.

First, it involves the in-depth exploration and technological representation of traditional Chinese symbolic information. The game meticulously and masterfully portrays and reproduces traditional aesthetic symbolic elements such as Tang and Song dynasty architecture, religious sculptures, Chinese miniature garden landscapes, unique flora and utensils, distinctive shapes and attire, strange creatures, the three realms and nine continents, China's diverse natural environments, and a wealth of ancient poetry and lyrics. Through complex, diverse, and stunning character design supported by advanced technology, demons are depicted with multifaceted forms and distinct personalities. Deities, Buddhas, demons, and humans are characterized in multi-dimensions, embodying complex shades of good and evil, such as the beautiful snake demon, the hand bug, and the short, stout Bajie [16, 17]. These imaginative symbolic portrayals are realized by leveraging cutting-edge computer information technology, using comprehensive motion capture, sound, and lighting to create a realistic and breathtaking aesthetic feast. By seeking symbolic information resources within China's vast and enduring history and culture, the game constructs a unique modern aesthetic experience through dialogue with the past.

Second, traditional symbolic information mentioned in the game, such as the "Golden Headband," the "Six Senses," and "Heavenly Mandate," is imbued with new, distinctly modern philosophical connotations, such as modern discipline, self-identity, free will, and personal growth. The circumstances facing contemporary youth are unprecedented; they confront a novel philosophical and spiritual crisis. With the flourishing of the information society, the information each individual acquires grows exponentially, yet our human capacity for information processing has not truly increased. Young people access vast and diverse information through various channels but lack the foundation and ability to judge, weigh, evaluate, and select from this multiplicity. The sheer volume of viewpoints, perspectives, theories, thoughts, beliefs, and events presented to them directly leads to severe cognitive dissonance and decision-making paralysis. Their parents' generation possesses far inferior adaptability to online information and cannot provide corresponding guidance or assistance; the concern from elders can even intensify their feelings of alienation and rejection. While seeking solace in peer groups, young people cannot fundamentally resolve their disparate individual problems. Their perception of the world is novel, complex, and chaotic; their views and beliefs are diverse, contradictory, and conflicting; their outlook on the future is wavering, helpless, and confused. Many young people even immerse themselves in virtual worlds, neglecting or avoiding the real world. They can resonate with the bewildered Wukong in the game, indirectly gaining encouragement and confidence from the protagonist. Wukong's story mirrors that of every confused young person today. Thus, the Destined One's journey of seeking roots becomes a journey of self-discovery for each player.

Finally, the game's deep engagement, freedom of operation, and potential for multiple endings enable players to immerse themselves more profoundly in this aesthetic experience characterized by personal involvement and embodiment. This aesthetic

experience of games—truly being Wukong, controlling Wukong, leading Wukong, understanding Wukong, and becoming Wukong—is an experience unattainable through other aesthetic forms. Although there were opportunities to play as Wukong in many previous games, the experience in a 3A title is indeed a first. On a global scale, it tells a compelling Chinese story. *Black Myth: Wukong* constructs its main narrative after the events of *Journey to the West*, paving the way for compatibility with the original work while embedding numerous plot threads and mysteries, sparking curiosity and aesthetic desire in all who experience the game, triggering a worldwide phenomenon of Wukong fever, *Journey to the West* fever, and Chinese cultural fever [6, 13]. Through the symbolic information of Wukong, *Black Myth: Wukong* constructs a "palpable" cultural and aesthetic community on a global scale. The game transforms classical Chinese aesthetics into a perceptible, immersive experience. Since a significant portion of gamers are young people, this process channels this experience towards a demographic with the most vitality, spirit of transformation, and modern aesthetic sensibilities, thereby strengthening the recognition and confidence in Chinese culture within the context of global aesthetic modernity.

The evolution of Sun Wukong's image outlines a clear trajectory of Chinese aesthetic modernity, emphasizing its distinctive philosophical nuances and cultural characteristics. Wukong's transformative journey symbolizes the profound exploration, definition, and realization of selfhood within the context of modernity in Chinese culture and philosophy. This ongoing path continues to unfold.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, T.W.; writing—original draft preparation, T.W.; writing—review and editing, J.C. and T.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. T. Wu and H. Zhang, "Holographic Thinking of Social Culture from the Perspective of Lost Book Compilation," in *Proceedings*, vol. 81, no. 1, p. 47, Mar. 2022.
2. H. R. Jauss, "Toward an aesthetic of reception," *International Fiction Review*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 127-129, 1984.
3. L. O. F. Lee, "In Search of Modernity: Some Reflections on a New Mode of Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Chinese History and Literature*", in *Ideas across cultures: Essays on Chinese thought in honor of Benjamin I. Schwartz*, p. 125, 1990.
4. T. Wu, R. Zhang, and P. Wang, "Holographic Thinking of Social Culture from the Perspective of Lost Book Compilation and Calligraphy Inheritance," in *UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION AND ITS ROLE AS A TOOL: In Memory of Mark Burgin*, pp. 503-518, 2025.
5. T. Wu and K. Da, "The Chinese philosophy of information by Kun Wu," *Journal of Documentation*, vol. 77, no. 4, pp. 871-886, 2021.
6. M. Nie and Z. Yao, *An analysis of Chinese literature in the new era: Navigating identity and modernity*. Routledge, 2025.
7. N. Luhmann, *Observations on modernity*. Stanford University Press, 1998.
8. G. Murdock, "Communications and the constitution of modernity," *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 521-539, 1993.
9. R. E. Day, "Martin Heidegger's critique of informational modernity," in *CRITICAL THEORY FOR LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE*, p. 173, 2010.
10. A. Feenberg, *Alternative modernity: The technical turn in philosophy and social theory*. Univ of California Press, 1995.
11. P. Wagner, *Modernity*. Polity, 2012.
12. T. Prufer, "The Logic of Modernity: A Review Discussion," *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 151-157, 1986.
13. R. E. Day, "Totality and representation: A history of knowledge management through European documentation, critical modernity, and post-Fordism," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, vol. 52, no. 9, pp. 725-735, 2001.

14. T. Molnar, "The Essence of Modernity," *Modern Age*, vol. 24, no. 4, p. 379, 1980.
15. I. Szasz, "From Modernity to Postmodernity: A Paradigm Shift," *RAIS Journal for Social Sciences*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 94-101, 2025.
16. J. Bi, "The Transcendence of Information Philosophy to the Crisis of Modernity," in *Proceedings*, vol. 81, no. 1, p. 65, Mar. 2022.
17. A. Mickunas, "Modernity in Postmodernity," *Athena: filosofijos studijos*, no. 3, pp. 9-30, 2008.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of Publisher and/or the editor(s). Publisher and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.