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A comparative study on the psychological functions of animals in European and Chinese fairy tales

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Abstract. This study takes Freud's personality theory as the analytical framework, selects classic fairy tale texts from Europe and China, and systematically explores the differences and commonalities in the psychological functions of animal images in European and Chinese fairy tales from the dimensions of the psychological mechanism of animal transformation, the deep logic of cultural symbols, and the narrative function of psychological projection. The study finds that European fairy tales demonstrate the conflict and integration between the id and the superego through animal transformation, while Chinese fairy tales realize the projection of emotional comfort and cultural beliefs through animal divinity. This research provides a new academic path for cross - cultural psychology and fairy tale narrative studies, revealing the cultural specificity of animal images as collective psychological mirrors and the universal laws of human psychological activities.

Keywords: European and Chinese fairy tales, animal images, psychological functions, cross-cultural comparison, psychoanalysis

1. Introduction

In the long history of human culture, fairy tales, as a unique narrative genre, carry the collective psychology and cultural memories of different nations [1]. The fairy tale traditions of Europe and China are like two parallel streams, forming distinct animal narrative systems in their long historical development. From the talking animals in the works of the Brothers Grimm to the transformed spirits in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, animal images are not only the key drivers of fairy tale plots but also the concrete expressions of human deep - seated psychological activities [2]. Current academic research on animal images in fairy tales mostly stays at the level of folklore interpretation or literary analysis, lacking in - depth cross - cultural comparisons from the dimension of psychological functions. Based on this, this study takes psychoanalytic theory as the methodological foundation, focuses on the psychological mechanisms of animal transformation, the psychological projection of cultural symbols, and the psychological significance of narrative functions in European and Chinese fairy tales, aiming to reveal the common characteristics and essential differences of human psychological activities in different cultural contexts and provide a new paradigm with both theoretical depth and cross - cultural perspective for fairy tale research.

2. Theoretical construction of fairy tales

2.1. The conceptual definition and essential characteristics of fairy tales

As a literary term, the connotation and extension of "fairy tale" show a complex evolutionary trajectory in different cultural contexts. In 1698, French writer Madame d'Aulnoy first used "contes des fées" in her fairy tale collection, which was translated into English as fairy tales in 1699, marking the term's formalization process for this literary genre. The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines a fairy tale as "a traditional folk story adapted for children's entertainment, containing wonderful events and characters" [3], but this definition ignores the deep - seated value of fairy tales as mirrors of adult psychology. In *On Fairy - Stories*, Tolkien pointed out that the essence of a fairy tale is "the psychological experience of humans encountering magic", with its core lying in the display of humanity's psychological desire to transcend reality through fantasy narration. In the Chinese cultural context, although the term "fairy tale" was introduced from Japan in 1909, stories such as *Ye Xian* and *Zhu Qing* already possess typical fairy tale characteristics - through narrative techniques such as animal transformation and magical elements, they

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achieve metaphorical expressions of the human psychological world. In essence, fairy tales are a type of psychological narrative based on symbolic thinking, and their animal images carry the psychological codes of the collective unconscious.

2.2. The psychological research paradigm of fairy tale animal narrative

Psychoanalytic theory provides a unique methodological perspective for the study of animal images in fairy tales. Freud's personality structure theory (id, ego, superego) offers a theoretical framework for analyzing the psychological mechanisms of animal transformation. On this basis, Bettelheim proposed that "fairy tales are mirrors of children's psychological development", believing that animal images can serve as symbolic carriers of the personality structure. Jung's collective unconscious theory emphasizes the universal existence of animal archetypes in fairy tales, such as the swan as a symbol of the "Anima" archetype and the crow as a projection of the "shadow" archetype. In the study of Chinese fairy tales, Shu Wei's "fairy tale spirit" theory (including elements such as utopian wishes and justice overcoming evil) forms an intertext with the psychological functions of animal images. For example, the divinity of the fish in *Ye Xian* satisfies the psychological expectation of the lower - class people for a reversal of fate [4]. Current research, combining the perspective of cross - cultural psychology, examines the animal narratives in European and Chinese fairy tales under the "cultural - psychological dimension" and finds that European fairy tales focus more on individual psychological integration, while Chinese fairy tales emphasize collective psychological comfort. This difference stems from the different psychological structures of the two cultures [5].

2.3. The theory of narrative function stratification of animal images

Animal images in fairy tales are not single narrative symbols but symbolic systems with multi - level psychological functions. According to different narrative functions, they can be divided into surface - level plot functions, middle - level psychological projection functions, and deep - level cultural coding functions. At the surface level, animals act as plot hubs to promote narrative development. For example, in *Cinderella*, the mouse is transformed into a carriage, enabling the protagonist to attend the ball. At the middle level, animal images are the projection carriers of human subconsciousness. For example, in *The Six Swans*, the swan symbolizes the repressed superego needs. At the deep level, animals carry the collective psychological memories of a specific culture. For example, in *Zhu Qing*, there is a cultural connection between the crow and sun worship. This functional stratification theory provides a clear analytical framework for the comparative study of European and Chinese fairy tales, making it possible to carry out cross - cultural comparisons from the three dimensions of "transformation mechanism - psychological projection - cultural coding". It is worth noting that there are significant differences in the functional hierarchy of animal images in different cultures: European fairy tales pay more attention to the expression of middle - level psychological projection functions, while Chinese fairy tales strengthen the presentation of deep - level cultural coding functions.

3. In - depth analysis of the psychological functions of animals in European fairy tales

3.1. The concrete narrative of the personality structure: integration from the id to the superego

The core narrative logic of animal transformation in European fairy tales is to achieve the concrete expression of the personality structure through animal images. In the Brothers Grimm's *The Six Swans*, the princes are turned into swans by the stepmother's magic, which can be seen as a psychological metaphor for "superego repression". According to Freud's theory, the superego represents moral ideals, and the transformation of the princes symbolizes that moral ideals are suppressed by real evil (the stepmother). The heroine's act of sewing star - flower shirts in silence for six years is actually a process of the "ego" pursuing the "superego" - silence represents forbearance towards reality, and sewing symbolizes the construction of ideals. When the shirt is completed and the swans return to human form, the integration of the id (survival instinct), ego (reality adaptation), and superego (moral ideal) is achieved. When analyzing this story, Bettelheim pointed out that the "monogamy" characteristic of swans makes them a symbol of "superego loyalty", and the residual wings caused by the unfinished shirt cuffs metaphorize the imperfection of personality integration, reflecting the European cultural psychological acceptance of "imperfect integration".

3.2. The metaphorical expression of psychological conflicts: the narrative paradigm of anxiety coping

European fairy tales often use animal images to construct metaphorical scenes of psychological conflicts, providing readers with a narrative paradigm for coping with psychological dilemmas. In *The Six Swans*, seven children who have lost their mother face the psychological crisis of "separation anxiety". The plot of the stepmother turning the princes into swans is essentially a narrative strategy of "anxiety concretization". Bettelheim believes that the flying ability of swans symbolizes the psychological tendency of "escaping anxiety", while the heroine's silence and actions represent the coping style of "facing anxiety". The story guides readers to understand the psychological mechanism that "only by facing anxiety can healing be achieved" through the

comparison of the two coping styles. This narrative paradigm is similar in principle to the "exposure therapy" in European psychology, which reduces the impedance of psychological defense mechanisms by transforming abstract anxiety into specific animal images.

3.3. The symbolic realization of wish fulfillment: the narrative transformation of the subconscious

The animal transformation in European fairy tales is often used as a symbolic means of "wish fulfillment", and its narrative logic conforms to Freud's principle of "dream work". In *Cinderella*, the plot of the mouse turning into a carriage and the lizard turning into a servant is essentially the symbolic realization of Cinderella's repressed wish to "attend the ball". In reality, the stepmother's abuse makes it impossible for her wish to be directly satisfied, while the fairy tale realizes the subconscious expression of the wish through the "condensation" and "displacement" mechanisms of animal transformation, transforming humble animals (mice) into noble symbols (carriages). This narrative transformation not only satisfies the reader's psychological expectations but also provides a psychological compensation mechanism of "realizing wishes through imagination".

3.4. The expression of psychological defense mechanisms in animal behavior patterns

The behavior patterns of animals in European fairy tales often serve as concrete expressions of psychological defense mechanisms, reflecting the subconscious coping strategies of individuals when facing psychological conflicts. In *Little Red Riding Hood*, the wolf's camouflage behavior is essentially a narrative metaphor for the defense mechanism of "repression" - the wolf suppresses the aggressive instinct (id) under the "mild" appearance (superego) by disguising as the grandmother. This behavior pattern is in line with Freud's theory that "repression is the most basic defense mechanism". Bettelheim analyzed and pointed out that the wolf's failed camouflage (being seen through by the hunter) symbolizes the "vulnerability of the repression mechanism", suggesting that excessive repression of the id may lead to the collapse of psychological defense, providing readers with the psychological enlightenment that "healthy psychology requires moderate release of instincts".

The fox's deceptive behavior in *The Story of Renart the Fox* reflects the psychological logic of the defense mechanism of "rationalization". Renart the Fox obtains benefits by deceiving other animals but can always find "reasonable" excuses for his behavior (such as survival needs). This narrative treatment metaphorizes the psychological rationalization process of individuals for "immoral behaviors" in reality. From a psychological perspective, the fox's behavior pattern reflects the compromise mechanism of the "ego" between the id's desires and the superego's morality, that is, rationalizing the expression of instinctive desires through cognitive restructuring. Zipes emphasized that this story presents readers with the "double - edged effect of psychological defense mechanisms" through the fox's behavior - rationalization can alleviate psychological conflicts, but excessive use may lead to the distortion of moral cognition.

4. Cultural decoding of the psychological functions of animals in Chinese fairy tales

4.1. The psychological projection of cultural beliefs: the narrative presentation of natural outlook and religious outlook

Animal images in Chinese fairy tales are deeply rooted in traditional cultural beliefs, and the expression of their psychological functions is closely related to natural outlooks and religious outlooks. The magic fish in *Ye Xian* is not only a plot element but also a psychological projection of China's "fish culture". In the ancient Zhuang culture in southern China, fish were an important resource for survival, forming the folk belief of "divine fish bestowing blessings", which was transformed into the narrative that the fish bones still had magic after the fish died in the story. From a psychological perspective, this narrative reflects the psychological identification (认同) of the ancestors for the "divinity of natural objects" and realizes the psychological construction of "personifying natural forces" through the magic function of the fish. Hu Mei's research shows that the Zhuang "divine fish" legend is essentially a psychological compensation for "survival anxiety" - by endowing the fish with divinity, the fear of the uncertainty of the natural environment is alleviated.

4.2. The symbolic satisfaction of emotional needs: psychological compensation under the ethical order

Animal images in Chinese fairy tales often serve as symbolic means to satisfy emotional needs, and the realization of their psychological functions is closely related to the ethical order. In *Ye Xian*, after being abused by her stepmother, Ye Xian establishes an emotional connection with the magic fish, and the fish's unique response to her ("only when Xian comes, the fish comes out") satisfies her desire for family affection. This emotional connection is essentially a psychological compensation for "ethical lack" - in the patriarchal family, Ye Xian's emotional needs are ignored, and the fish's "emotional response" fills this psychological gap. From a psychological perspective, the fish's "human - like" characteristics are the result of Ye Xian's

"emotional projection", reflecting the emotional compensation mechanism under the concept of "all things have spirits" in Chinese culture.

4.3. The divine carrier of destiny intervention: psychological comfort under the view of the unity of heaven and man

Animal images in Chinese fairy tales often serve as divine carriers of destiny intervention, and the exertion of their psychological functions is based on the philosophical concept of "the unity of heaven and man". The plot that the fish bones still had magic after the fish died in *Ye Xian* can be understood from the perspective of the integration of the Buddhist concept of "reincarnation" and the Taoist thought of "qi transformation" - the soul of the fish is transformed into magic power, reflecting the psychological cognition of "the form perishes but the spirit remains". This narrative provides individuals in difficult situations with the psychological comfort that "destiny can be intervened by divinity", alleviating the sense of powerlessness in the face of real injustice. When collecting the story of *Ye Xian*, Duan Chengshi especially emphasized the detail that the "person who obtained heaven" guided Ye Xian, shifting the subject of destiny intervention from the animal itself to "heaven's will", reflecting the psychological tendency of "heaven's will dominating" in Chinese culture.

4.4. The psychological space metaphor of animal habitats

The habitats of animals in Chinese fairy tales often serve as symbolic metaphors of psychological spaces, reflecting the psychological situation of individuals in reality and cultural psychological needs. In *Lian Xiang from Strange Tales* from a Chinese Studio, the fox girl Lian Xiang and the ghost girl, the daughter of Magistrate Li, live in "wild graves" and "ancient temples" respectively, and these two environments form a psychological contrast between the "desire space" and the "repression space". The wild grave, as the residence of the fox girl, symbolizes the instinctive desire (id) free from ethical constraints; the ancient temple, as the habitat of the ghost girl, represents the moral repression (superego) of the feudal ethical code. The protagonist Sang Sheng's psychological swing between the two is actually the concrete expression of the psychological conflict between "desire and repression" in space.

The "Huaguo Mountain" of Sun Wukong in *Journey to the West* is the symbolic construction of an "ideal psychological space". As a "fairyland on earth", Huaguo Mountain has the free attribute of "not subject to the jurisdiction of the unicorn or the phoenix", and this habitat is the psychological projection of Sun Wukong's "rebellious spirit", reflecting the collective desire for a "free psychological space" in Chinese culture. From a psychological perspective, the "isolation" (overseas fairy mountain) and "self - sufficiency" (abundant products in the mountain) characteristics of Huaguo Mountain constitute a psychological metaphor of the "ideal self" - a psychological space that is not bound by real rules and completely satisfies instinctive needs. Shu Wei pointed out that the construction of this habitat is closely related to the psychological needs of China's traditional "hermit culture", reflecting the spatial expression of the "seclusion" psychology in fairy tale narration.

5. Comparative dimensions of the psychological functions of animals in European and Chinese fairy tales

5.1. Differences in the psychological logic of transformation mechanisms

European and Chinese fairy tales demonstrate fundamental differences in the psychological logic of animal transformation. The transformation mechanism in European fairy tales adheres to the psychological logic of "personality integration," where the transformation process symbolically embodies the conflict and integration of the id, ego, and superego. For instance, the process of princes transforming into swans and then reverting to human form in *The Six Swans* corresponds to the psychological developmental trajectory of "superego repression—ego construction—personality integration." The transformation of mice into horses in *Cinderella* exemplifies the psychological mechanism of "id sublimation." This transformation logic emphasizes "individual psychological participation," as protagonists (such as Cinderella) trigger transformation through their own actions, reflecting the value orientation of "individual initiative in shaping psychology" in European culture.

In contrast, the transformation mechanism in Chinese fairy tales follows the psychological logic of "divine compensation," with most transformations relying on the intervention of external divine forces. For example, the magic of fish bones after the fish's death in *Ye Xian* and the transformative function of the black robe in *Zhu Qing* both derive from supernatural divinity rather than the protagonists' own efforts. This transformation logic reflects the Chinese cultural psychological cognition of "destiny as dominator," where protagonists often remain passive recipients in the transformation process (e.g., Ye Xian accepting fish bones, Yu Qüe accepting the black robe), embodying the psychological tendency of "complying with the will of heaven." Psychological analysis indicates that this difference stems from the distinct psychological defense mechanisms of the two cultures: European culture tends toward "active coping," while Chinese culture inclines toward "passive compensation."

5.2. Divergence in the psychological foundations of cultural symbols

The cultural symbolism of animal images in European and Chinese fairy tales is rooted in different psychological foundations. Animal symbolism in European fairy tales is based on the "individual psychological structure," with its cultural meaning deeply intertwined with personality theories. For example, the swan symbolizes the superego in *The Six Swans*, deriving from the theoretical construction of "moral ideals" in European psychology; the mouse represents the id in *Cinderella*, based on Freud's theoretical analysis of "instinctual desires." This symbolic system features "theoretical precedence," with its psychological functions serving the narrative needs of individual psychological development.

Conversely, animal symbolism in Chinese fairy tales is grounded in "collective cultural memory," with its cultural meaning deeply bound to traditional beliefs. For instance, the fish symbolizes wealth in *Ye Xian*, originating from the "divine fish" worship of southern ethnic minorities; the crow symbolizes divinity in *Zhu Qing*, directly related to the ancient "sun-crow" belief. This symbolic system exhibits the characteristic of "cultural inheritance," with its psychological functions serving the construction of collective psychological identity. Cross-cultural psychological studies reveal that this difference reflects the distinct psychological representation modes under "individualistic" and "collectivistic" cultures: European culture emphasizes "individual psychological narrative," while Chinese culture highlights "collective psychological inheritance."

5.3. Differences in the narrative functions of psychological projection

European and Chinese fairy tales exhibit significant differences in the narrative functions of animal psychological projection. The psychological projection function in European fairy tales centers on "individual psychological growth," using animal transformation to depict the developmental process from "psychological conflict" to "personality integration." For example, the heroine in *The Six Swans* achieves self-growth by rescuing her brothers, and the protagonist in Cinderella achieves social identity by accepting the id. This narrative function emphasizes the independence of "individual psychological development," with projection objects being specific personality structures (id, superego, etc.).

In contrast, the psychological projection function in Chinese fairy tales focuses on "collective psychological comfort," realizing symbolic transcendence of real-life dilemmas through animal divinity. For instance, the magic of the fish in *Ye Xian* satisfies the collective desire of the lower class for a reversal of fate, and the crow's transformation in *Zhu Qing* reflects the common pursuit of intellectuals to escape worldly concerns. This narrative function emphasizes "collective psychological resonance," with projection objects being universal cultural psychology (e.g., yearning for wealth, worship of divinity). Psychological analysis shows that this difference stems from the distinct "self-construction" models of the two cultures: European culture tends toward an "independent self," while Chinese culture prefers an "interdependent self."

5.4. Cultural differences in the realization paths of psychological functions

European and Chinese fairy tales display different cultural characteristics in the realization paths of animal psychological functions. European fairy tales emphasize the realization path of "individual psychological effort," where the psychological functions of animal images are activated through the protagonist's proactive actions. For example, in *Cinderella*, the protagonist must personally give the mice to the Fairy Godmother to trigger the transformation. This narrative logic of "active participation" reflects the psychological value orientation of "individual agency" in European culture. Bettelheim pointed out that this realization path provides children with a narrative paradigm of "changing psychological states through personal effort," contributing to the cultivation of independent psychological qualities.

Chinese fairy tales, conversely, focus on the realization path of "divine opportunity," where the psychological functions of animal images are mostly triggered passively by external divine forces when protagonists encounter difficulties. In *Ye Xian*, the fish's magic is revealed by a "heaven-favored person" after the protagonist loses her father and suffers abuse. This narrative logic of "passive acceptance" reflects the Chinese cultural psychological cognition of "destiny and opportunity." Shu Wei's research indicates that this realization path is closely related to the traditional Chinese philosophical concept of "the unity of heaven and man," where the psychological functions of animals are perceived as a response of "heaven's will" to individual dilemmas rather than the result of active individual striving. This difference fundamentally reflects the two cultures' distinct understandings of "psychological intervention": European culture believes in "individual psychological construction," while Chinese culture relies on "divine psychological compensation."

5.5. Differences in the psychological significance of animal language functions

The narrative treatment of whether animals possess language abilities in European and Chinese fairy tales implies different psychological significances. Animals in European fairy tales often have language abilities; for example, frogs and swans in *Grimm's Fairy Tales* can communicate with humans. This narrative treatment makes animals the objects of "psychological

dialogue." From a psychological perspective, the language function of animals provides readers with a psychological metaphor of "dialoguing with the subconscious"—by expressing through animals, the repressed desires and conflicts within the individual are revealed. When analyzing *The Frog Prince*, Bettelheim noted that the frog's language ability makes it a "voice of the id," transforming subconscious desires into perceptible linguistic symbols to promote readers' psychological cognition.

Animals in Chinese fairy tales mostly lack language abilities or only speak briefly in specific contexts. For instance, the fish in *Ye Xian* and the crow in *Zhu Qing* do not have sustained language expression. This narrative treatment makes animals silent carriers of "emotional projection," with their psychological functions realized through the protagonist's emotional attribution. From the perspective of cultural psychology, this narrative model of "silent animals" is closely related to the traditional Chinese habit of "implicit and reserved" emotional expression—the silence of animals provides readers with a broader space for emotional projection, conforming to the aesthetic psychology of "endless meaning beyond words." Shu Wei pointed out that the silence of animals in Chinese fairy tales essentially embodies "collective psychological tacit understanding," achieving emotional resonance without language, which reflects the internal consistency between individual and collective psychology in "collectivistic culture."

5.6. Differences in the psychological metaphors of transformation reversibility

The treatment of transformation reversibility in European and Chinese fairy tales contains different psychological metaphors. Animal transformations in European fairy tales are mostly explicitly reversible. For example, the princes in *The Six Swans* return to human form through shirts, and the magic of animal transformations in Cinderella expires at midnight. This narrative of "two-way reversibility" metaphorizes the "solvability of psychological conflicts." According to Freud's theory, this reversibility provides readers with the psychological implication of "curability of psychological problems," strengthening the narrative confidence in "achieving psychological integration through effort." Bettelheim emphasized that the reversibility of transformation is the psychological foundation of the "happy ending" in European fairy tales, satisfying the individual's inner desire for "psychological completeness."

Animal transformations in Chinese fairy tales, however, exhibit characteristics of "one-way irreversibility" or "limited reversibility." For example, the fish in *Ye Xian* cannot be resurrected after death, and only its bones possess magic; in *Zhu Qing*, although Yu Qüe can wear the black robe to become a crow, his real identity has become an official. This transformation narrative metaphorizes the "irreversibility of fate" and the "limitations of divine intervention." From the psychological perspective of Chinese philosophy's "determinism," the irreversibility of transformation reflects the psychological cognition of "the will of heaven is hard to violate"—animal divinity can change an individual's circumstances but cannot completely reverse the trajectory of fate. Shu Wei's research shows that this narrative treatment is related to the psychological adjustment mechanism of "accepting real-life limitations" in Chinese culture. Through the limited reversibility of animal transformation, it provides readers with psychological comfort of "seeking the optimal solution within the established fate."

6. Conclusion

This study, through cross-cultural comparison of the psychological functions of animal images in European and Chinese fairy tales, reveals the commonalities and differences in human psychological activities under different cultural contexts. European fairy tales, guided by Freud's personality theory, use animal transformation to demonstrate the conflict and integration of the id and superego, emphasizing individual psychological growth and active coping mechanisms, with their psychological projection serving the concrete expression of personality structures. Chinese fairy tales, rooted in the philosophical tradition of "the unity of heaven and man," achieve collective psychological comfort and cultural belief projection through animal divinity. The transformation mechanism relies on external divine intervention, embodying the psychological cognition of "destiny as dominator." The differences between the two in transformation logic, cultural symbolism, projection functions, and realization paths essentially reflect the distinct self-construction models under individualistic and collectivistic cultures. This study not only provides a new paradigm of psychological analysis for fairy tale narration but also offers concrete textual evidence for cross-cultural psychological research, confirming the cultural specificity of animal images as collective psychological mirrors and the universal laws of human psychological activities.

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