

REVIEW

BARBARA WALL. *THE DYNAMIC ESSENCE OF TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING: A GRAPHICAL APPROACH TO THE JOURNEY TO THE WEST IN KOREA*. LEIDEN: BRILL, 2024. 250 PP. ISBN: 9789004690202.

The Dynamic Essence of Transmedia Storytelling: A Graphical Approach to The Journey to the West in Korea, written by Copenhagen-based multilingual scholar Barbara Wall, makes a welcome contribution to East Asian narrative studies and media studies. The book studies one of the most popular cultural texts in East Asia, *The Journey to the West* (Xiyou ji 西遊記, referred to as *The Journey* in the monograph), treating the family of various Korean versions of *The Journey* as a “story world” (or a story universe, as the author alternately uses different terms), a term often seen in transmedia studies. The author maintains that instead of considering the Shidetang 世德堂 version of *The Journey* as the “original” and Wu Cheng’en 吳承恩 (1506–1582) as the author, we should take the sixteenth-century book as “one variation out of many that all contribute to the overall story world,” and *The Journey* as a dynamic story world is “as variable and multicultural as it is multi-temporal.” (p. 2) The book experiments with digital tools to analyze the differences and shared common elements of each variation in a database that includes a comprehensive list of sixty Korean variations of *The Journey*, comprising thirteen translations, eighteen adaptations, and twenty-nine intertexts, ranging from the fourteenth century to the twenty-first century. This structuralist approach treats authors of each variation as “bricoleurs,” drawing from Claude Lévi-Strauss, and the work of creating any new variation is understood as a “creative recombination” of integral elements of *The Journey*. Based on Linda Hutcheon’s theory of adaptation and utilizing the actant-relationship model that computational folklorist Tim Tangherlini developed,¹ Wall created a “PIET” (Pool of Integral Elements of *The Journey*). This pool includes a total of sixty-seven integral elements, comprising twenty-nine actants and thirty-eight episodes (p. 21–25). The

¹ Tim Tangherlini, “Toward a Generative Model of Legend: Pizzas, Bridges, Vaccines, and Witches,” *Humanities*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2018): 1–19.

actants include twelve characters (Monkey, Monk, Pig, Sand Monster, Horse, Jade Emperor, Subhuti, Buddha, Taizong, Guanyin, Bull Demon King, Laozi), three objects (Compliant Weapon, Headband, Scriptures), six places (Flower-Fruit Mountain, Five Phases Mountain, Heaven, West, Thunderclap Monastery, Tang), six motifs (Transformation, Cloud soaring, Magic of Shortening the Ground, Supernatural Abilities, Travel, Monsters & Hindrances), and author and title of *The Journey*.

To visualize *The Journey* as a dynamic story world, Wall organizes the variations into five chapters and studies them in groups. Each chapter includes graphs that illustrate which PIET elements are used in each adaptation or variation. The combinations of actants and episodes of each text are compared both within and between groups, as the author believes that these combinations may hold the key to the story's success (p. 7). This quantitative approach is further complemented with qualitative analyses that provide context and explanations, accompanied by ample amounts of photos and illustrations.

Chapter One analyzes three groups of Korean translations dated from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century, questions the idea of "the original," and proposes to use "*The Journey*" as "a brand name that unites variations of the dynamic story world" instead of the title of one static original text (p. 28). Wall points out that many translations are the products of "a long process of translating, editing, copying, creating, and combining that took place in Korea and mostly in Korean," and such a translation history indicates that "*The Journey* played an important role as Korean literature" (p. 45).

Chapter Two examines a group of seven didactic adaptations that Wall identifies as having an educational purpose while Chapter Three compares three other groups of adaptations: three satirical texts, two comical, and six entertaining. Wall's detailed introduction of the oldest Korean variation of *The Journey* in Chapter Two is particularly intriguing. This variation, the pagoda of Kyongch'on Temple (1348), predates the Shidetang version of *Journey to the West* by two and a half centuries and is now preserved in the National Museum of Korea. Wall aims to identify the most frequently used actants and episodes, as these should indicate the dynamic core of the story world of *The Journey*. She discovers a stronger consensus among groups regarding the selection of actants, but a notable divergence in the selection of episodes. Despite the challenges, these two chapters find a few actants to be the relative core of *The Journey* based on the eighteen adaptations: the actants of Monkey, Monk, Pig, Sand Monster, Compliant Weapon, and Monsters & Hindrances.

The same effort is carried forward in the next two chapters. Drawing on discussions

of "snack culture" by media studies scholars Michael Newman and Dal Yong Jin, Chapter Four and Chapter Five deal with what Wall calls "abbreviated storytelling" or "intertexts," or variations that offer "snacks" of *The Journey* (p. 129). Wall further defines "abbreviation" or "snacks" not by the length of the text or the speed of consumption, but by the number of integral elements being enacted by the adaptations. In Chapter Four, Wall focuses on a group of intertexts that contain only a small number of episodes from the novel in addition to actants, and Chapter Five examines intertexts that contain only actants, but no explicit references to any episodes. For instance, the 2017–18 TV series *Hwayugi* 花遊記 (*A Korean Odyssey*) is included in Chapter Four as a "snack" because it engages only four episodes of *The Journey*, even though it has twenty installments and activated twenty-one integral elements of the story world. The travel-reality show *Sin Söyugi* 新西遊記 (*New Journey to the West*), which has aired for eight seasons from 2015 to 2020, is included in Chapter Five as an example of "extremely abbreviated storytelling" because it does not activate any episodes, only sixteen actants. Another variation that contains only actants but no episode is the Seoul Lantern Festival in 2017, which showcases a few *The Journey* characters including Sun Wukong 孫悟空 (i.e., Monkey) and Zhu Bajie 豬八戒 (i.e., Pig). Against the common association of "snack culture" with superficial consumption, Wall argues that these "snacks" are actually complex and sophisticated.

Overall, the book is a resourceful and inspiring text for scholars and students interested in Korean and East Asian cultures and transmedia studies. It demonstrates Wall's outstanding ability to work across linguistic and disciplinary borders. Applying quantitative digital humanities research methods to variations of literary texts across time is an innovative experiment. However, as insightful as discussions throughout the book can be, the book also leaves room for issues that deserve further attention.

A major contribution of the book is the visualization of the internal elements activated by each variation and the "core" of the dynamic story world of *The Journey*: the most frequently used actant, Sun Wukong, and the most popular episode "Havoc in Heaven," appear to be closest to the "absolute core" of *The Journey*, while Wall also points out that "*The Journey* has no absolutely essential actants" because "there is not one specific element that a variation must use to become part of *The Journey*" story world (p. 200). The database and methodology of this study show promise but could yield stronger results with a larger corpus that includes more texts of Korean variations and potentially variations in other languages. For the current project, especially for small groups of two or three texts, the results are indeterminate due to

insufficient data.

The transmedia storytelling approach could benefit from taking into consideration the important factor of time. Although the variations of *The Journey* as one body of work could be compared to a modern transmedia brand name, and it is in its own sense a product of collective authorship, it is the uniqueness of the construction of such a collective body of work, crossing cultural and more importantly temporal borders, that deserves more attention. I think that investigations of exactly how the story world of *The Journey* has been built would be more fruitful – but that approach would require additional qualitative studies. Wall did provide discussion about the context of each variation, but these passages feel rushed, possibly due to the framework's specific focus on *what* is told rather than *how* it is told, and as a result may miss other contexts that would lead to different conclusions. For instance, Wall treats the three Chinese poems of *Gushi huapu* 顧氏畫譜 (*Inscriptions on Mr. Gu's Painting Manual*) as references to *The Journey* and concludes that “the combination of monkey and monk alone can serve as a code that initializes *The Journey*” (p. 169–73). A closer look at the poems and the connections between the poems and their references, however, may reveal an alternative conclusion: three Korean scholars each wrote a poem in Chinese about a painting of a monk and a monkey, but each used different literary references. I suggest that while the one poem with the name of the monkey as “Sun Wukong” is clearly a reference to *The Journey*, the other two are not. The term *yuhuan* 玉環 (jade ring) in Yu Suk's 柳瀟 (1564–1636) poem, for instance, should be a reference to a different monkey legend, a *chuanqi* tale of the Tang dynasty titled “Sun Ke” 孫恪, included in the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (*Extensive Record of the Taiping Era*), an influential compendium of short stories compiled in the tenth century, and also referenced by many, including the famous Song dynasty poet Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) in his poem “Xiashan Monastery” 峽山寺. Additionally, this example also showcases the challenges of working across languages and cultures.

As a reader, I found myself needing more explanations from time to time. For instance, an explanation about how the PIET was constructed would be beneficial, as it is central to the book's structure: why is the PIET seemingly constructed using the Ming variations despite Wall clearly standing against considering them as the original? Why are some actants selected and privileged, and some are not? I am curious as to whether the prominence of some actants are influenced and magnified by contemporary adaptations, and whether a Korean PIET is different from, or applicable to a Chinese PIET. For us to truly work comparatively and cross-culturally, should we not make the model of PIET more open and amendable to the

addition of new adaptations in order to think of the story world as a “mutually constitutive feedback loop,” as quoted repeatedly in the book? The reader might also benefit from a clearer explanation of why the chapters group the texts as they currently do. As a fan of *A Korean Odyssey*, who appreciates its deep engagement with the stories of *The Journey* in its new form, I would need more convincing evidence as to why such adaptations should be considered mere “snacking” on *The Journey*.

Notwithstanding these lingering questions, the book's contributions are noteworthy. It serves as a valuable archive of Korean *Journey to the West* and a useful textbook, complete with visual aids that make complex cultural texts more accessible for students. Additionally, it participates in debates about the relationship of adaptation and transmedia storytelling, enriching the discourse in these fields. At a time when greater attention is being paid to the global connections between Asian cultures and the West, as well as regions within Asia, we need more works like this that challenge the established boundaries.

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