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From a Mystery to a Myth: How the Panda Was Established as a Symbol of China

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Abstract: In recent decades, the panda has been established as a national “sign of China”. However, the panda was seldom ever mentioned in the historic records from ancient to recent times. The very few possibly relevant descriptions of panda-like animals seem to portray ambiguous mythic creatures. The naming, re-naming, symbolisation and re-symbolisation of the panda has involved several stages of semiosis. An exploration of this process reveals the ways in which historical contexts and the aesthetics of popular culture have combined to reinterpret the panda from a little-known, seemingly magical creature to an animal of great symbolic importance for the nation. This detailed examination of the great panda explores how a wild creature in nature became established as a symbol with multiple cultural connotations.

Keywords: panda, naming, symbolisation, semiosis

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Panda has become a sign that is immediately identified as China itself when the country engages with the wider world. This fact is evidenced by a business phenomenon: Since the 1970s, panda mania has been sweeping across the globe, incentivizing Chinese companies to market a whole range of products including cups, cigarettes and gold nib fountain pens under a brand of panda. This marketing strategy is such a success that in 1978, just one year alone, Yangzhou Toy Corporation exported several million panda toys to European and North American

markets where consumers gave this animal-shaped gift to their children as a daily companion (Huang, 1979). The 21st century witnessed enormous enthusiasm to represent the panda in much more diversified forms. Animation movie *Kung Fu Panda* premiered in the United States in 2008, performing much better than anyone had been expecting. The film topped the box office in its opening weekend, instantly sparking a new panda mania around the world. It grossed a worldwide total of \$631.7 million and broke a number of records as one of the most profitable movies (Box Office Mojo, 2021). The film's financial success has drawn people's attention to China's Sichuan province, the world's largest habitat with the most robust ecosystem for the panda. In 2006, under a joint initiative coordinated by the provincial government, these areas were included in the World Heritage List (The Sichuan Panda Sanctuaries). In the same year, for the first time the government made the implementing of "Panda Brand Strategy" as one of major strategies that help drive economic and social development. This decision ensures that the panda, as a concept-based brand in alignment with China's Scientific Outlook on Development, will be identified as an enduring mission statement of Sichuan in its efforts to protect the environment, pursue harmony, and promote openness (Jian & Wang, 2013). In 2018, Chengdu, capital city of Sichuan, launched a program to design the city into a "Capital of Panda". The idea behind such initiative is that a friendly city has two dimensions: human-friendly and animal-friendly. The organic participation between the two aspects makes sustainable development possible.

Panda is a sign of tenderness and cuteness. From the biological perspective, however, such a symbolic meaning is misleading. Chunky and meat-eating, the panda can be as dangerous as any other wild animals. In fact, it has the strongest molars among carnivores. In its early history of evolution, panda choosed meat as staple diet. These facts make us wonder how come the stark contrast between human perception and biological reality. How were biological traits obliterated during the process of symbolization? How are new features explored, symbolized and ultimately constructed into a mythology?

I . Panda and Panda Diplomacy: A Bone of Contention

Panda diplomacy can be traced back to 1941 during China's Republican Era

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(1912 - 1949). After the People's Republic of China was founded, panda diplomacy has become a hallmark of how China deals with foreign countries. To be more specific, panda diplomacy has undergone three phases. The latest one is clear proof that China stands ready to forge relationships built on trust, integrity and reciprocity (Buckingham, David & Jepson, 2013). Given its unusual traits in animal world and symbolic role in the Chinese culture, the panda has become an important cultural icon and a valuable resource for China to shape its soft power (Lee & An, 2017). Deep meanings carried by this animal have been explored by scholars like Zhang Zheng and Liu Yutan who delved into reports in China's foremost newspaper *People's Daily* running for seven decades and reached a conclusion that changes in panda's media image strikingly parallel stages of Chinese growth. Such close similarity signifies a shift from a biological entity to a set of meanings and concepts, creating a productive interplay between media and society. Meanwhile, as China's national sign, the panda not only helps the country present its image as a peace-loving nation, but also promotes cooperation between China and international organizations, and coordinates efforts from all stakeholders in fields like animal protection (Wang, 2016).

Though leveraged as an effective means, panda diplomacy also invites some negative views. For example, Rosemary-Claire Collard criticized that such diplomacy shows a disregard for animal life, remarking that “[a]nimals work under capitalism for free, and are predominantly disposable workers in a manner similar to and different from the disposable women who Wright observes are fundamental to the workings of capital and labor in Mexican maquiladoras” (Collard p.230). Lina found that when describing China-Africa relations, Western media inclined to use panda, dragon, beast and other animals as metaphors to symbolize China, while indicating Africa with baby and unsophisticated adult. The image of panda nibbling on bamboo is not a rare occurrence in reports to suggest that China has a steady source of oil supply from Africa (Benabdallah, 2015). Research done by Henry Nicholls shows a neutral tone. The scholar sees the panda as an index for China's diplomatic relations. He constructed a framework to examine how the panda was being gradually politicized in modern China (Nicholls, 2011). But as for how the animal is transformed from a mythological figure to a political sign, and then to a cultural sign that appeals to the popular taste, few scholars have explored the

process of symbolization and changes in symbolic meanings from the perspective of semiotics, which is to be discussed in the following paragraphs.

II. Naming and Description of Panda in Ancient China: A Mysterious Creature

Though hailed as a national treasure in modern China, the panda was not mentioned much in historical records. A handful of accounts show a clear contrast between how the panda had been observed and referred to. Nevertheless, it has been widely acknowledged that terms like *mo* (貘) and *pixiu* (貔貅) are modern equivalents of the panda. The first mention of the panda was made in Sima Qian's masterpiece, *Records of the Grand Historian*. Among its first section "Annals", the first essay "Annals of the Five Emperors" records "Yandi (Flame emperor) wished to oppress the princes, so they turned to Xuanyuan, who practiced virtue, marshalled his men, controlled the five elements, cultivated the five kinds of grain, pacified the nations, and went over all parts of his country. Training black bears, grizzly bears, *pixiu* (貔貅), foxes, panthers, lynxes, and tigers, he, with their aid, fought with Flame Emperor in the desert of Banquan, and, after three battles, realized his wishes." It shows that as early as 4,000 years ago, tribal chiefs and emperors had tamed ferocious beasts like *pixiu* (貔貅), panthers and bears to secure victory. *Book of Historical Documents*, written in the early years of the Western Zhou dynasty (c. 1045 BC - 771 BC), reads: "My brave men, be energetic! Display a martial bearing. Be like tigers and *pi* (貔), like bears and grizzly bears, in the borders of Shang." This is a pep talk delivered by King Wu before a decisive battle against imperial army of the Shang dynasty (c. 1600 BC - 1046 BC). In his speech, King Wu motivated soldiers to be as daring as the above mentioned animals. These records from the dim and distant past suggest that ancient Chinese saw the panda as fierce as panther and bear, which are all symbols of extraordinary strength and deterrence. Other texts that include observations of the panda is the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, a compilation of mythic geography and beasts written during the Warring States Period (475 BC - 221 BC). The second volume "Western Hill Classic" of the book was annotated by Guo Pu (2019, pp. 58 - 59), one of China's foremost commentators on ancient texts during the Eastern Jin period (317 - 420),

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who remarked “A ferocious animal resembles both panther and bear, but is smaller than the two beasts. With a light-colored and glossy coat, this animal eats snake and metal. Its natural habitat is located in central parts of Sichuan. In my opinion, it is more likely to be true that the above-mentioned panther is tiger.” It can be seen that at that point, the panda was not only seen as a ferocious beast, but also be demonized, since no animal can feed on metal. In other words, those historical records tried to represent the panda in a simplistic manner and compared its physical similarity with other wild beasts, leaving readers with a vivid impression that the panda is as mighty and fierce as other forest animals. As a result, when people see characters like *mo* (獠) and *pixiu* (貔貅), they have an instant visualization of the panda, making an immediate co-reference between words and objects.

Do the images captured by the texts equate to the panda we see today? The answer is a no-brainer. Given how limited their knowledge about the world they lived in, ancient Chinese had only second-hand information about the panda whose physical features, body length, coat color and eating habits were shrouded in myths and half-truths. These distorted views explain why pictures about *mobao* (獠豹) drawn in books that were contemporary with the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* is more like the panther (see Figure 1), but clearly different from the panda we see today. Without intimate knowledge about the panda, people were inclined to compare what they imagined with what they already knew, using the same sign for different species. Thus, signifier and signified are not exactly the same thing, but represent an overlapping correlation between similar signifier group and signified group.



Figure 1 *Mobao*(獠豹) illustrated in *Detailed Annotations of the Classic of Mountains and Seas* (2019, p. 58)

If we consult the *Explaining and Analyzing Characters*, the oldest comprehensive Chinese character dictionary compiled in the Eastern Han dynasty (25 – 220), we know what the term *mo*(貊) means: A yellow-and-black animal resembles bear and lives in central parts of Sichuan. The term *pi*(貔) has a different meaning: A ferocious animal belongs to panther family, and resembles raccoon dog (Xu, 2003, p. 257). These two definitions show that ancient Chinese began to understand that *mo*(貊) and *pi*(貔) were two different animals, noticed the uniqueness in the panda and designated a clear sign for it. It is not hard to see that the definition of *mo*(貊) is more like what we know about the panda. During Emperor Qianlong's reign (1735 – 1796), accounts about panda were made in places like Hunan and Chongqing. As in Hunan, Lizhou Chorography reads, “A strong animal, *mo*(貊) is a bamboo eater, distinguished by its rough hair and yellow and black coat which can be made into a rug. When one sleeps on it, the hair will stand erect when emergency happens. This is reported in Yongding.” As in Chongqing, Youyang Chorography comments, “*Mo*(貊) eats metal. In the early years of this dynasty, someone noticed this unusual eating habit in places like Xiaoba in northern Zhili Prefecture.” (Hu, 2001, p. 4) At this point, names and physical features of the panda are more or less uniform in historical records. Ancient Chinese had developed a deeper understanding of the panda, but it was still perceived as a mysterious creature. It is also worth noting that characters like *mo*(貊), *mo*(貊) and *pi*(貔) share the same radical “豸”, a symbol of beast defined by Chinese writing system, indicating the biological classification of the panda. As naming as an initial stage of semiosis indicating classification, although the panda had no precise name at that time, the vague signifier highlights its biological traits as a ferocious animal.

III. Naming of Panda in Modern China: A Taxonomy Puzzle

Western naming method of animals was invented by Carl Linnaeus. In his book *Systema Naturae* (1758), Linnaeus named animals in two parts, a capitalized genus name followed by a lowercase specific name, with both names in Latin. In fact, this binomial nomenclature was first adopted in botany. Two words are adequate to name any species, with the former indicating classification and the latter for description. Thus a standardized system is ready to maintain the order of nature. As the panda

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was a new specie discovered by Western scientists, it was identified and named according to the rules set by Carl Linnaeus.

In the spring of 1869, French naturalist Armand David first saw panda during his scientific expedition in Sichuan. He named it “*Ursus melanoleucus*” by following the rules for binomial nomenclature (Barua, 2020). “*Ursus*” is a Latin word for bear, and “*melanoleucus*” is derived from an ancient Greek compound for black and white. This naming method classifies the panda as bear, as the two animals share physical similarity. But when he reported the discovery to zoologist Alphonse Milne-Edwards who conducted orthopedic and dental identification of the specimen, Milne-Edwards pointed out that the creature shares more traits with the raccoon family. Thus another name was given: *Ailurus melanoleuca*, with *Ailurus* meaning the raccoon family (Schaller, 1985, p. 225). His insight was shared by a growing number of scholars who believed that unlike other bears, the panda has a mysterious thumb, or enlarged radial sesamoid, in its forefoot. This thumb enables the panda to climb trees and manipulate bamboo stalks with surprising dexterity (Gould, 2008, p. 3 – 5). This compelling evidence ensures the panda was removed from the *Ursidae* (the bear family) and placed in the *Procyonidae* (the raccoon family). Both bears and raccoons are meat eaters. But the latter are smaller, have mottled facial hair, can either live up in trees or on ground, and are more omnivorous. These features can also be found in the black-and-white panda, necessitating the renaming effort. A finer line was drawn between the panda and its relative living in the Himalayas, with the former being identified as panda or cat bear, and the latter as little panda or red panda (Hu, Liu & He, 1990, p. 6). The differentiating process indicates that Western scientists adopt a rigorous system that not only takes into account whether signs resemble and indicate things, but also aims to express natural world in a clear and logical way (Peng, 2018).

In contrast, ancient Chinese used phonetic naming method to indicate animals and plants. That is, semantic component symbolizes meaning while phonetic component suggests pronunciation. *The Compendium of Materia Medica*, a Chinese herbology volume written by Li Shizhen during the Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644), represents a step forward. In the first part, “An Analysis of the Different Names of Drugs”, the author used the combination of genus and species for biological classification (Lan, 1989). This dichotomy looks like the binomial nomenclature,

but a closer scrutiny reveals a marked difference. The Chinese method reflects what Chinese characters can do. For example, ancient names of the panda, including *mo* (獠), *mo*(貘) and *pi*(貔) have “豸” as radical to indicate large size and ferocity. Such descriptive method is well received in modern China. For example, the panda is commonly referred to as *baixiong* (white bear) or *huaxiong* (spotted or patterned bear), simply because the black-and-white panda looks like bear. In sum, compared to Western method which is based on the scientific classifying codes, Chinese naming practice gives more consideration to physical similarity between the signifier and signified, thus more of the characteristics of icons.

Based on Edward's reclassification, Chinese scientists abandoned popular reference in ancient times, and literally translated Western classification into Chinese to indicate new discovery in modern era. However, due to the differences in Chinese and Western nomenclature and linguistic expression, modern Chinese scholars had been divided on whether the panda is designated as *xionghao* (bear cat) or *maoxiong* (cat bear). Zhang Hequan (2000) asserted that the difference between the two appellations cannot be reduced to the order of the two characters: *xiong* and *mao*. The difficulty arises both because the Chinese terms are ambiguous and because panda's traits fit multiple categories, creating a classification puzzle (Zhang, 2000). To name a thing in Chinese language, researchers have to use modifier morphemes to indicate traits, which is followed by morphemes to represent genus and species. This system means that *xionghao* is bear-like cat, while *maoxiong* is cat-like bear. In other words, the two names suggest biological origin and family relationship. Difficulty in clear distinction also confused Western academics. British and American scientists maintained that the panda belongs to the raccoon family (*Procyonidae*), while researchers on the European continent asserted that the panda is *Ursidae*. Chinese researchers have not reached consensus on biological origin of the animal. In 1993, Huang Wanbo conducted an in-depth analysis of fossils and existing species of panda, red panda and bear by employing electron microscope scanning technology, and reached a conclusion that the panda and its ancestors were different from bears. Therefore, it is necessary to have a separate panda family. (Huang, 1993) In most cases, however, sound scientific analysis does not equate with popular sentiment. Nowadays Chinese people have perceived the panda more like cute cat rather than formidable bear.

Public sentiment has, to some extent, mirrored the lack of definitive conclusion of how to classify the panda among scholars both at home and abroad. In Chinese language, the name is *xionghao*, literally translated as “bear cat”. Similar ambivalence is also shared by Chinese dictionaries. The earliest reference is made by *Comprehensive Chinese Dictionary* which was compiled in 1915 and published in 1935. The panda was illustrated as the red panda. In *Chinese Dictionary and Encyclopedia of Words* published in 1938, the panda was described properly, leaving no room for misunderstanding. The reference change in dictionaries not only reflects the expansion of human knowledge in the taxonomy of the panda, but also affects the process of its symbolization which in turn deepens researchers’ understanding of how to use a rigorous scientific methodology to classify species. In this sense, life and sign are closely intertwined. In the case of the panda, as its representation was being transitioned from a short-lived “primary nature” to a meaning-laden sign, humans have constructed a collection of type descriptors that can be identified with. Since every type descriptor is represented by a typical example, the latter is a “copy” of the former (Peirce, 2014, p. 50). Therefore, when hearing a black-and-white creature is described as being cute and adorable, or words like panda and cat bear, people will intuitively know what object it is based on pre-established rules.

Such spontaneity means that the second phase of the semiosis of panda is complete. The image of the panda is no longer a vague inference, but a clear representation. Put another way, the panda no longer lives in the imaginative realm created by historical records and paintings, but is clearly defined. This is achieved by observing physical traits and adopting general rules for taxonomy. In this way, humans interpret a sign and use it to indicate a certain object (Peirce, 2014, p. 60). The image of the panda is, therefore, arbitrarily associated with its signifier.

IV. Symbolisation of the Panda: A Political Icon

During the Western Jin dynasty (265 – 317), the bamboo-eating panda had been known as *zouyu*, serving as a symbol of peace. That means when one warring party holds high a *zouyu*-patterned banner, the other party is expected to recognize such move as overtures and stop fighting (Hu, Liu & He, 1990, p. 4). This is

clear proof that an animal as gentle and lovable as the panda has long been recognized as a symbol of peace and amity. This symbol is acknowledged by China's close neighbor Japan whose *Annals of Imperial Family* records that on October 22, 685, during the reign of Empress Wu Zetian (the sole female monarch in Chinese history), China sent two live pandas and 70 panda pelts to Emperor Tenmu (Hu, Liu, & He, 1990, p.6). This is the earliest record about state-gift pandas. It shows that this animal assumes both biological traits and a social sign, becoming a political symbol that can help both sides expand common ground.

But panda as a political icon of peace in the international arena is not recognized until 1941 when China's National Government appointed Mme. Jiang and Mme. Kong as representatives to present two pandas as "valuable state gifts that are intrinsically Chinese" to the United States to express gratitude for the United China Relief which supported China during the Second World War with medical equipment, medicine, food, cash and other much-needed supplies (Zhao & Zheng, 2017). This gifting event ushered in an era of Panda Diplomacy in modern China. The event grabbed headlines in the United States. *The New York Times* made a series of reports. One of them said: "In a fifteen-minute ceremony today Mme. Chiang Kai-shek and Mme. H. H. Kung presented two pandas, the thirteenth and fourteenth ever reported captured, one each to the United China Relief Organization in the United States and the Bronx Zoo of New York City." (*The New York Times*, 1941, November 10) *Washington Post* noticed a "maniac" attitude shown by America's general public towards the panda which was portrayed as being one side of China: lovely but not pedantic, kind, gentle and approachable. On its issue of December 31, 1941, *The New York Times* commented: "Two lovable bundles of black and white fur were deposited at Bronx Zoo yesterday, a gift from the Chinese people to the children of America in appreciation for their gifts to the Chinese war relief. Mme." (*The New York Times*, 1941, December 31) When it becomes the companion of the children of America, panda is fully recognized as being tender, cuddly and innocent. Accordingly, China is further perceived as being friendly and peace-loving.

From the standpoint of biology, the panda is a ferocious carnivore. This attribute can also be seen from the nomenclature. Then why did the National Government offer panda gift as a gesture of thanks? There are two reasons. First,

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because of its rarity, the panda is seen as a mysterious creature that arouses people's enthusiasm to learn more about the East. If such creature is chosen as a state gift and designated as a sign to forge diplomatic ties, it speaks volume about the Government's eagerness to repay the kindness of the United China Relief during the Second World War. Second, during the war, the panda had become a symbolic representation of China's nationhood. Though in fact a carnivore, the panda simply eats bamboo. The vegetarian diet and cuddly appearance inspire affection in people, and the creature is slow-moving and procreates little. Therefore, it was once identified as an endangered species. In the meantime, contemporary Chinese culture had been received by Westerners as being graceful, gentle or even vulnerable. Similarly, precarious situation was encountered by Chinese people during the Second World War when the country was plunged into the darkness of domestic turmoil and Chinese people were taken advantage of by Japanese aggressors for vulnerability. By borrowing the image of the panda as both being adorable and vulnerable, the National Government attracted attention of the international community to notice the difficult situation China was in and to show China's willingness to align with the Allied powers. As Barthes (2016, p. 139) believed that myth is a type of speech defined by its intention much more than by its literal sense, here the myth and speech about the panda provides a metaphorical framework to reframe the following narratives. Panda is gentle and lovable, and Chinese culture resonates with Westerners. Ming the panda enjoyed a life of ease at London Zoo, while China and Britain were undaunted by the German Blitz. This cohesive framework serves as an "intended interpretation" for Westerners to interpret panda sign and its symbolic meanings.

The state-gift panda is essentially a tie-sign that connects countries. China used this sign to express its willingness to engage with other countries. In other words, panda sign becomes an effective means to forge ties. This sign had been well received by Western countries where a panda mania reached such a pitch that the Chinese government sent its ambassador of peace to these countries on multiple occasions. In this way, panda had fully become a national icon to aid the country's political endeavor. Between 1957 and 1982, twenty-three pandas were offered as gifts to nine countries, namely, the Soviet Union, Korea, the United States, Japan, France, the United Kingdom, Mexico, Spain, and Germany. Later, out of the

concern for species conservation, in 1982, China decided to stop panda gifting overseas for deepening political ties. The approaches of “loaning” and “cooperative research” were adopted to continue panda diplomacy. As Zhao Yiheng put it, symbolization can be achieved through “collective reuse”. The accumulation of meanings creates the panda sign as political friendship (Zhao, 2011, p. 208).

In 1961, panda’s rarity, tenderness and cuteness convince the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) to designate the panda as the featured animal on the logo of the organization, a symbol that can fully express oneself and overcome all linguistic barriers. WWF’s choice suggests that the panda has “nonhuman charisma” (Lorimer, 2007) which renders its biological meaning being gradually marginalized. In the meantime, the interpretant of the creature enters into semiosis as the “Ambassador of Peace”, “National Icon”, and other deeper political connotations. Panda’s affability and gentleness is congruent with traditional Chinese philosophy that emphasizes the value of the golden mean. That is the very reason why, during panda’s symbolization process, the imagination of “lovely” and “benign” is being exaggerated while the fact of carnivore and aggressiveness ignored. From this point of view, we can see that sign generation is a process of constant partialization and directional collection of related meanings (Zhao, 2011, p. 38). Throughout this process, panda as symbol of political friendship has been well received by most countries. BBC even called panda “China’s cutest peacemakers”. This process also produces a metonymy: By connecting panda with other signs of Chinese culture, sign constructors ensure Chinese culture reaches more foreign audiences. For example, one of five mascots for Beijing 2008 Olympic Games is Jingjing the panda (see Figure 2). This image is a creative fusion of lotus pattern in Song dynasty porcelain, Olympic rings and mountains, rivers and seas represented in Chinese art. Jingjing is a symbol of happiness and harmony, making it more approachable to foreign audiences.

This is the third phase of the construction of panda sign. In special historical context, this process represents the interaction between the shaping of panda sign and the interpreting of Chinese culture as being peace-loving and non-aggressive. When the process was complete, panda sign is increasingly being influenced by business campaigns and aesthetics of cuteness, thus becoming an important symbol for popular culture.



Figure 2 Jingjing the Panda, One of Five Mascots for Beijing 2008 Olympic Games

V. Re-symbolization of the Panda: A Myth of Cuteness

As early as in the 1980s, the panda had become a sign that leads to instant association with all aspects of China including politics, economy, society and culture. Since September 15, 1982, the People's Bank of China has successively issued Gold Panda coins in Hong Kong and overseas (see Figure 3). The obverse is the depiction of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests in the Temple of Heaven, while the reverse bears a pattern of panda and green bamboo. *Jingjing and the Panda Patrol* (see Figure 4) is a 1996 animated TV series created by Beijing Golden Panda Animation Company and dubbed by Saban Entertainment (an American-Israeli television production company, with current legal name as BVS Entertainment, Inc.). The naturalistic panda on the gold coin and the anthropomorphic one in the TV series have one thing in common. Panda sign is represented by cubs on most occasions, providing a visual feast influenced by the aesthetics of cuteness which has gained enormous popularity in recent years. The definition of "cute" in *Oxford English Dictionaries* is "Used of things in same way as cunning a. 6. Now in general colloq. use, applied to people as well as things, with the sense 'attractive, pretty, charming'; also, 'attractive in a mannered way'." (Simpson & Weiner, 2009, Vol. 4, p.179) The aesthetics of cuteness employs beautiful or likable elements that can achieve powerful visual effects to arouse recipients' positive emotions. These elements include round face, baby-like or childlike body, and simple, weak and clumsy behaviors. This concept originated

from a Japanese term “kawaii”, whose early manifestations include anime character Hello Kitty and game character Pokemon. Both of them are small, cute, childlike, clumsy and shy, evoking sympathy and affection in viewers. Such characters mirror the development of Japan’s teenage-oriented anime industry (Gn, 2006, p. 192).



Figure 3 Gold Panda Coin



Figure 4 A Frame in *Jingjing*

There is a causal relationship between the aesthetics of cuteness and business culture. The former mass-produces characters to satisfy consumers’ emotional expectations. “One of the most distinguishing features of symbolic consumption is consumers’ emotional satisfaction.” (Han, 2019, p. 101) Keenly aware of the aesthetics of cuteness and viewers’ emotional expectations, practitioners of films, advertisements and other creative industries present the panda as a clumsy and adorable child. Since the beginning of the 21st century, this aesthetic principle has been embraced by worldwide producers who integrate panda sign into popular culture. For example, *Kung Fu Panda* series (see Figure 5), *We Bare Bears* series, and *Shirokuma Cafe*. Special mention should be made to *Kung Fu Panda* series, an unexpected combination of clumsy panda with agile Kung Fu. These two Chinese signs are integrated into a Hollywood narrative centered on the metaphor of the hero’s journey. This ingenious approach incorporates two contradictory meanings, generating new signs that blend a new version of cuteness aesthetics with the mystique surrounding Chinese Kung Fu. As cuteness aesthetics fuels business success, it comes as no surprise that cultural and creative products inspired by *Kung Fu Panda* provide fresh impetus to cultural consumption (see Figure 6). Panda-inspired products have distinguished themselves from other signs, creating a niche market of cuteness and amusement.



Figure 5 *Kung Fu Panda 3* Poster



Figure 6 Cultural and Creative Products
Inspired by *Kung Fu Panda*

With business acumen, cultural enterprises in Sichuan blend panda sign in urban spaces, attracting worldwide panda lovers to visit. Thus the commercial value of panda is fully realized. Programs initiated by local government add a new impetus to cultural industry. “Strategy of Building Chengdu into an Idyllic Cosmopolitan” was formulated. In 2010, the initiative of “Searching Guardians Worldwide to Protect Panda” was launched in Chengdu. In October 2013, the world’s first Panda Post was unveiled in the city. This post office aims to let more people know why Chengdu is steeped in culture, why panda has enduring appeal, and what postal service customers can enjoy. In other words, this space ensures visitors resonate with the city that holds unique appeal for modern tastes. By combining the image of affable panda and local cultural elements, decision makers in Chengdu enable the city to reach international audiences who become more conscious of the fact that Chengdu is the only place where one can fully appreciate the unique charm of the panda. A panda-themed urban green space was redeveloped to make the city a better place. The previous space was added with groves of bamboo, a wide variety of trees and flowers, landscapes that are both ornamental and functional, fitness facilities and open-air museums. This space is interspersed with all kinds of panda sign to ensure visitors instantly recognize Sichuan as the hometown of panda. This practice of using panda as a local cultural sign and achieving space re-sematization is clear proof that space can be created by following the logic of sign construction. Such construction can be seen and criticized as a manifestation of the capitalist business logic that was criticized by Henri Lefebvre, yet, as any cultural phenomenon could be an appropriation of the manipulating logic, a new cultural identity could be possibly established as the panda is accepted and embraced as a beloved pet by both the national and local community.

VI. Conclusion

Globalization accelerates the dissemination and exchange of cultures. The panda, as China's national symbol and manifestation of cuteness aesthetics, has built momentum for new forms of business. Through the lens of sign construction, we can see that panda symbolization is a dynamic process consisting of four phases: a mystical creature, a scientific classification, a political icon and a symbol of cuteness. During this process, panda has been transformed from a biological entity to a cultural sign. Western nomenclature is prone to partialization. That is, people tend to perceive panda as a cute cat, rather than a ferocious beast. Such favorable impression is further enhanced by a special context in which panda had become an icon of political friendship as China allied with other countries to secure victory over Japanese aggressors. Under the influence of cuteness aesthetics, panda assumes more childlike attributes which are synthesized with other elements in traditional Chinese culture. As a result, panda sign is renewed as a cultural symbol embraced by people around the world. The process of panda symbolization sheds revelatory light on how original features of a biological entity are obliterated and added with other characteristics step by step. As a sign is constantly partialized, intended interpretation exerts its influence, meanings are enhanced, and new symbolic meanings are generated out of newly superimposed words.

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