

# An Etymological and Controversial Examination of Sun Wukong in *Journey to the West*

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## Abstract

Since the debate between Lu Xun's "indigenous theory" and Hu Shi's "exotic theory" on the origin of the image of Sun Wukong, there has been nearly a hundred years of academic discussion. Scholars from various schools have conducted a large number of beneficial studies and reached well-founded conclusions. However, due to the unique nature of *Journey to the West* as a work that has been accumulated across generations and carries a distinct historical sediment, the controversy surrounding it has always been at an impasse, with no consensus reached. Based on previous studies, this paper will provide an overview of the mainstream theories within the academic community. It will then conduct etymological and dialectical analysis of the character of Sun Wukong from the perspective of the "indigenous theory", thus demonstrating the high plausibility of the indigenous viewpoint.

## Keywords

Sun Wukong, Character Origins, *Journey to the West*, academic debate

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## 1. Introduction

Sun Wukong is one of the most famous and significant characters in *Journey to the West*, the first Chinese ancient mythological novel. As the escort of the four pilgrims on their journey to the west for Buddhist scriptures, he is not only immensely powerful and capable of perceiving human nature and turning dangers into safety, but also possesses a rebellious spirit that dares to fight and disdains authority, along with a distinct sense of self. This classic character image integrates both domestic and foreign cultures and religious traditions, exerting a broad and profound influence. Regarding the origin of Sun Wukong's image, there has been a subject of academic debate since the "indigenous" versus "exogenous" arguments proposed by Lu Xun and Hu Shi, and later evolved into perspectives such as the "hybrid theory." In response to this long-standing controversy, this paper will provide a comprehensive and objective discussion of the mainstream theories, trace the origins of Sun Wukong's image, and analyze the characteristics of his portrayal in the original work, while also presenting its own stance.

## 2. Body of paper

### 2.1. Overview of mainstream theories

It is generally believed that the prototype of Sun Wukong originates from the Monkey Pilgrim in the narrative scripture *The Poetic Dialogues on the Journey to the West of the Great Tang Dynasty* during the Song and Yuan dynasties. The Monkey Pilgrim in the scripture is portrayed as a refined scholar in white robes, who assists the Tripitaka Master on his journey, demonstrating extraordinary powers. Although the character's amalgamation of

human, demon, and monkey traits already bears a resemblance to the nascent form of Sun Wukong in *Journey to the West*, it still significantly differs from the familiar "monkey spirit" image we know today, with considerable differences in personality. Therefore, many scholars argue that the prototype of Sun Wukong must have already existed before *The Poetic Dialogues on the Journey to the West of the Great Tang Dynasty*, and the Monkey Pilgrim in the scripture may also be influenced by this earlier prototype. As for the earlier source of Sun Wukong's image, the academic community has formed the following three mainstream perspectives, with other numerous theories generally converging on or belonging to these three schools of thought, which will not be elaborated upon here.

### 2.1.1. "Indigenous theory"

The "Indigenous Theory" traces back to Mr. Lu Xun(2016), who in *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, proposed that the image of Sun Wukong in *Journey to the West* is derived from the water monster Wuzhiqi in *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers*. In the volume of *Li Tang in Taiping Guangji*, Wuzhiqi is described as resembling an ape with fiery golden eyes, capable of swift and agile movement, which is similar to Sun Wukong's appearance and abilities. When Yu the Great was controlling the Huai River, he captured the mischievous Wuzhiqi and suppressed him under the Turtle Mountain in Huaiyin, a plot that mirrors Sun Wukong's suppression under the Five Elements Mountain. Zhu Xi also mentioned in *Chuci Bianzheng* the folklore of Sengqia subduing Wuzhiqi in the Huai and Si regions. Furthermore, in Wu Changling's Yuan Dynasty drama *Journey to the West*, Sun Wukong once stated, "Wu Zhiqi is his sister", leading some scholars of the "Indigenous Theory" to suggest that Sun Wukong's lack of interest in female desires in the original work might be related to Wuzhiqi being female. The "indigenous theory" aims to demonstrate that Sun Wukong's image is rooted in the soil of Chinese national traditional culture, with its essence being the spirit of China's indigenous traditional culture. It primarily questions the "Exogenous Theory" that posits Sun Wukong's origins in India by examining the timing and pathways of the *Ramayana*'s introduction to China, as seen in works such as Wu Xiaoling's *Journey to the West and the Ramayana* and Liu Yuchun's *Debate and Analysis on the "Nationality" Issue of Sun Wukong*.

### 2.1.2. "Exogenous Theory"

Hu Shi posits that the prototype of Sun Wukong is the divine monkey Hanuman from the Indian epic *Ramayana*. Taking *The Poetic Dialogues on the Journey to the West of the Great Tang Dynasty* as the origin of *Journey to the West*, he proposed, "I always suspect that this extremely powerful monkey is not a domestic product, but an import from India. Perhaps even the myth of Wu Zhiqi was fabricated under Indian influence (Hu, 1923)." Firstly, *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers* is not a credible ancient text, and the Sengqia myth is merely a folktale. Secondly, in the oldest epic of India, *Ramayana*, Hanuman is depicted as a monkey with boundless powers, protecting Prince Rama, conquering the enemies of Lanka, and after returning to Ayodhya, he is granted the blessing of immortality and happiness. His appearance, abilities, and experiences bear certain similarities to Sun Wukong, and given the long-standing cultural exchanges between China and India at the time, it is likely that the grand story of Hanuman would have reached China; moreover, Hanuman is known as the "ninth grammarian," a figure of profound learning, and the characteristics of the Monkey Pilgrim as a scholar in white might be a transformation of Hanuman. The "Exogenous theory" which originated with Hu Shi, primarily argues that the prototype of Sun Wukong comes from the Indian epic *Ramayana* or Buddhist culture. It attempts to explore various routes through which *Ramayana* was introduced to China to prove its existence in the country well before the maturation of *Journey to the West*. It also compares the personality traits and plotlines of Hanuman and Sun Wukong, asserting that this school of thought is more authentic and credible than the "Indigenous Theory." Works such as Li He's *A Comprehensive Review of the Theory that Sun Wukong's Image Originates from Ramayana* and Zhu Lei's *On the Origins of the Character Image of Sun Wukong* support this perspective.

### 2.1.3. "Hybrid theory"

The "hybrid theory" believes that the image of Sun Wukong is an artistic embodiment that has assimilated both indigenous and exogenous multicultural influences. Although it attempts to reconcile the opposing views of the "Indigenous Theory" and the "Exogenous Theory," it has not been widely accepted by the majority of researchers from either faction (Cai, 1989). Ji Xianlin, in his articles such as *Indian Literature in China, A Preliminary Exploration of the Ramayana*, and *The Ramayana in China*, has repeatedly indicated that Sun Wukong is essentially borrowed from the Indian *Ramayana*. However, while advocating for the "Exogenous Theory," he did not completely dismiss the "Indigenous Theory" as Hu Shi did, acknowledging that Sun Wukong still possesses the inherent mythological traditions of China (Ji, 1980). This relatively more objective and comprehensive viewpoint has garnered the approval of many scholars. Scholars adhering to this school maintain the general principle that artistic images absorb and integrate multiple cultures. They acknowledge that Sun Wukong's origins

lie in the Indian mythological figure Hanuman, while also agreeing that his image inevitably carries mythological elements native to China, such as Wuzhiqi. They argue that Sun Wukong is a "hybrid" resulting from the combination of Wuzhiqi and Hanuman. Works such as Cai Guoliang's *The Bloodline of Sun Wukong* and Xiao Bing's *A Comprehensive Examination of Wuzhiqi, Hanuman, and Sun Wukong* support this perspective.

## 2.2. The Etymology of Sun Wukong's Image

The issue of the origin of Sun Wukong's image has been a subject of diverse scholarly opinions. Scholars led by Lu Xun and Hu Shi have engaged in a long-lasting debate on whether the character is indigenous or exogenous. The subsequent "Hybrid Theory" suggests that both perspectives have merit, proposing that Sun Wukong is a synthesis of Chinese and foreign cultures, forming a moderate viewpoint. Although it integrates the research findings of predecessors, the exploration of Sun Wukong's origins must be based on empirical evidence. The arguments of this school are still primarily from the "Indigenous Theory" and the "Exogenous Theory," but they discuss cultural integration in a broad sense, which, in turn, diminishes the academic value of this viewpoint. Moreover, the cultural influences in the "hybrid" concept have primary and secondary distinctions. Some scholars, like Ji Xianlin, who advocate the "Hybrid Theory," actually lean more towards the idea that Sun Wukong's prototype is exogenous, leading to more intense contradictions with the "Indigenous Theory". The author believes that, fundamentally, Sun Wukong remains a product of traditional Chinese society. Therefore, in this section, some viewpoints of the "Exogenous Theory" will be questioned and refuted, and the character image of Sun Wukong will be historically traced and deeply analyzed to support the "Indigenous Theory." This approach aims to provide a more grounded understanding of Sun Wukong's roots within the context of China's cultural and mythological heritage, emphasizing the indigenous origins of this iconic figure.

### 2.2.1. Critique of the " Exogenous theory"

In response to Hu Shi's "Hanuman" hypothesis, Lu Xun, in *The Historical Changes of Chinese Novels*, argues for the "Indigenous Theory" based on three reasons: The author of *Journey to the West* had not read Buddhist scriptures; the Indian scriptures translated into Chinese do not contain content similar to Hanuman; Wu Cheng'en was well-versed in Tang Dynasty novels, with *Journey to the West* being significantly influenced by them. Setting aside the issue of the authorship, I concur with the point regarding the translation of Indian Buddhist scriptures. *Ramayana* was introduced to China relatively late, with formal Chinese translations only being published in the last century. Although the title *Ramayana* had been circulating, its content was first translated into Chinese in the 3rd-century Buddhist text *Sutra of the Six Perfections*. The main cultural exchange between ancient China and India was through Buddhism, and the story of Hanuman in the *Ramayana* was translated into Buddhist scriptures without mentioning its name and only retaining half of the original plot, which differs from the plot of *Journey to the West*. The story roughly tells of a king who, after being robbed of his kingdom by his uncle and then having his queen stolen by an evil dragon, encounters a large macaque. The macaque gathers an army of monkeys and helps the king slay the dragon and restore his kingdom (Lexicographical, 1980). Such a fantastic and dramatic plot is not borrowed at all in the novel *Journey to the West*, from which we can infer that the likelihood of *Journey to the West* referring to *Sutra of the Six Perfections* is small. If this is the case, it is even less likely that the author would have drawn upon *Ramayana*, which had not yet been introduced to China at that time. The earliest known Chinese translation of *Ramayana* is the Tibetan version found in Dunhuang (Wang, 2015), dating back to the 8th to 9th centuries, a translation from the Tubo period, indicating that the Tibetan region had early contact with Indian Buddhist culture. Additionally, ancient language fragments discovered in Xinjiang include *Ramayana* in Khotanese, and there are also stories of *Ramayana* in Tocharian. These findings only show that the Rama legend had been circulating among ethnic minorities and in Central Asia, but the "Exogenous Theory's" inference that it entered China through the ancient Silk Road, the maritime Silk Road, and the Sichuan-Yunnan-Burma corridor still lacks empirical evidence (Zhu, 2014). Furthermore, the "Exogenous Theory" argues that the Wuzhiqi hypothesis is based on the unreliable *Taiping Guangji* and folk tales, which do not conform to academic reasoning. However, Sun Wukong is inherently mythological, and so-called "unreliable" folk tales such as Nuwa mending the sky and Kuafu chasing the sun are treasures of traditional Chinese culture. Therefore, even if the evidence is unreliable, it is entirely possible that Sun Wukong originated from Wuzhiqi, making this counterargument invalid. As for Hu Shi's statement that "perhaps even the myth of Wuzhiqi was fabricated under Indian influence," it is even more absurd. Wuzhiqi is a water deity in the legends of the Huai and Si rivers in China, a strange demon causing trouble during the times of Yao, Shun, and Yu. Ye Dejun's *A Study on the Legend of Wuzhiqi* has also confirmed that Wuzhiqi is a product of traditional Chinese culture and has no connection with Hanuman.

### 2.2.2. Historical Etymology

Some scholars of the "Exogenous Theory" point out that Wu Zhiqi, being a water monster that brings disasters, contrasts greatly with Sun Wukong's heroic spirit and sense of justice, thus concluding that there is no connection between them (Cai, 1989). However, the "indigenous theory" argues that Wuzhiqi is considered the prototype of Sun Wukong not merely due to their similar appearances and abilities. In fact, this school of thought believes that Sun Wukong originates from the divine monkey figures in ancient myths and literary works, with the "Wuzhiqi Theory" becoming its main viewpoint because of the verifiable kinship between them. As previously mentioned, Wuzhiqi's characteristics such as "resembling an ape" and "golden eyes" are believed to have influenced Sun Wukong's appearance. Sun Wukong's Ruyi Jingu Bang (Golden Cudgel) might be the "divine treasure iron" from the time when Yu the Great controlled the floods, and the plot of his suppression under a mountain is adopted in works such as Yang Jingxian's Yuan Dynasty drama *Journey to the West* and the hundred-chapter novel *Journey to the West*. Furthermore, the legend of Yu the Great subduing Wuzhiqi, which belongs to the Huai and Si regions, gradually merged with the legend of "Sizhou Dasheng" Sengjia during the Song Dynasty. According to records in Luo Bi's *Lushi* and Wang Xiangzhi's *Yudi Jisheng*, Wuzhiqi was already mistakenly transmitted as the water mother subdued by Sengjia (Liu, 2007). This misinterpretation combined the image of Wuzhiqi with that of the water mother, which can be seen in various versions of *Journey to the West* where Wuzhiqi often appears as a supporting character. In the Yuan drama *Journey to the West*, Wuzhiqi is feminized into Sun Wukong's second sister, the Holy Mother of Wuzhiqi; *Erlang Shen Suo Qitian Dasheng* also follows the feminized setting, evolving Wuzhiqi into the turtle mountain water mother who flooded Sizhou; in the hundred-chapter *Journey to the West*, Wuzhiqi appears in two identities: the feminized water mother and the water ape great sage, which is closer to the original prototype. Most ancient Chinese legends about apes and monkeys indulge in beauty, often capturing beautiful women, as seen in the Eastern Jin *Sou Shen Ji*, the Tang legend *Bu Jiang Zong Bai Yuan Chuan*, and the Song novel *Chen Xunjian Mei Ling Shi Qi Ji*. Sun Wukong's lack of interest in female beauty is precisely because his prototype is the feminized Wuzhiqi, and the two are very close in blood relations, so that Sun Wukong has also influenced the literary image of Wuzhiqi in later generations.

In addition, Sun Wukong is a complex figure with multiple facets, representing a combination of human nature, animalistic traits, and demonic qualities. While we can indeed perceive the warm and kind aspects of humanity in him, he was initially a mischievous and bold "troublemaker" who defied conventions. Without the guidance of figures such as Bodhi Patriarch and Guanyin Bodhisattva, and the constraint of the Tightening Fillet spell, Sun Wukong might have followed his primal self, "not subject to the control of the Qilin or the Phoenix," dominating the Huaguo Mount and causing trouble. This rebellious temperament is something the Indian divine monkey Hanuman does not possess. The imagery of the Five Elements Mountain and the Tightening Fillet represent obstacles in Sun Wukong's pursuit of self, symbolizing the constraints of traditional morals in society. At the beginning of his creation, Sun Wukong did share similarities with Wuzhiqi in terms of temperament and demonic nature. However, the creation of a character in a novel inevitably integrates the author's thoughts and writing intentions and is also influenced by the social environment of the time. The author did not intend to create a malevolent water monkey but rather a folk hero who aligns with Confucian values, strives for goodness, and is courageous in resistance. Thus, the transformation of this monkey in the novel from "the troublemaking water monster Wuzhiqi" to "the great hero Sun Wukong" is actually a reflection of the process under the constraints of traditional Chinese morality, where a person suppresses their primal self, conforms to reality, endures hardships, and achieves self-actualization. This transformation is traceable and not without connection.

### 2.2.3. Cultural and Intellectual Etymology

Another compelling evidence that Sun Wukong is a "domestic product" is that he is a character with strong Confucian and Daoist hues. In the novel, Sun Wukong right wrongs and punishes the evil, making significant contributions to subduing demons on the journey to the West to obtain sacred scriptures, and ultimately becoming the "Victorious Fighting Buddha", achieving enlightenment. His overall image prominently displays the proactive, benevolent, and righteous characteristics of Confucian thought. Furthermore, Sun Wukong's personality traits are also influenced by Wang Yangming's School of Mind, emphasizing individual subjectivity and initiative. His actions, such as seizing the Sea-Stabilizing Treasure (the Ruyi Jingu Bang), altering the Book of Life and Death, and causing chaos in the Heavenly Palace, are daring moves that follow his heart and break conventions, aligning with Wang Yangming's ontological views. His transformation from a mischievous to a reliable character later in the story is the result of inner cultivation, embodying the principle "To know good and evil is the knowledge of the good, and to practice good and eliminate evil is the investigation of things (Zhu, 2009)." Sun Wukong's journey to the West, subduing demons and monsters, is not merely a series of external actions but also a spiritual journey of deepening understanding and practicing the "knowledge of the good," achieving the unity of knowledge and action. It is worth mentioning that Wang Yangming's School of Mind is also a result of the

integration of Confucianism and Daoism. He believed that the human mind, tainted by worldly habits, could have its innate knowledge obscured by unreasonable desires, thus emphasizing the cultivation of inner knowledge. *Journey to the West* also involves many plots about characters whose hearts are clouded by greed and the importance of inner cultivation, such as Sun Wukong's dissatisfaction and subsequent rebellion when he discovers his lowly position as the Stable Hand of the Heavenly Horses, which is consistent with the principles of the School of Mind.

Lu Xun once said that Sun Wukong was influenced by traditional Chinese culture, especially Daoist culture. In ancient Chinese Daoist legends, monkeys were considered symbols of longevity and immortality, possessing divinity and extraordinary abilities. As a monkey with human wisdom, Sun Wukong, with his unparalleled martial arts and versatile magical powers, embodies Daoist mythological elements. The name Sun Wukong also carries Daoist connotations. When the Patriarch Bodhi named him, he changed "Sai" (monkey) to "Sun" to remove the beastly nature, and "Hu" was transformed into "Sun", with "old" and "moon" implying yin, which was too heavy and not adopted. The surname "Sun" is associated with male children and infants, and using "Sun" not only preserves the original yin energy but also allows the yang energy to rise, achieving the Daoist balance of yin and yang. Moreover, the Daoist belief in the "stone-born" from the *Huainanzi* during the Western Han Dynasty and the stone monkey faith in Daoism also support the idea that Sun Wukong's birth from a stone is derived from Daoist culture, which is not mentioned in Indian culture. The author of *Journey to the West* is generally believed to be Wu Cheng'en, who was also deeply influenced by Daoism at the time. Therefore, the plot settings of cultivating immortality and becoming an immortal in the original work have a very strong Daoist flavor, and Sun Wukong is no exception. There are many more pieces of evidence in the original work, but this is not an exhaustive list. In summary, the author believes that such a character, integrated with Confucianism and Daoism and rich in traditional Chinese cultural characteristics, is indeed a product of China's indigenous culture.

### 3. Conclusion

Based on the detailed exploration and dialectical analysis of the mainstream theories on the origin of Sun Wukong's image in the academic community, the author finds the "Indigenous Theory" to be the most credible, as Sun Wukong is essentially a product of the indigenous culture of the Chinese nation. While the "Indigenous Theory" is largely accepted, it is also necessary to acknowledge its flaws and limitations. Different schools hold different views on the prototype of Sun Wukong, and the diversified academic debates provide a rich array of perspectives and imaginative possibilities for this well-known and beloved character. These debates serve as the creative soil and valuable wealth for the creation of derivative works of *Journey to the West*. However, the exclusivity of some scholars advocating the "Indigenous Theory" tends to isolate this flourishing phenomenon. Some scholars argue that the author of *Journey to the West* entirely created Sun Wukong within the context of traditional Chinese culture. This view not only leads to self-isolation but also absolutely excludes any influence from foreign cultures, losing the possibility of exploring cultural exchanges between China and other countries and the integration of traditional culture with foreign essences, which is unreasonable.

Cultural exchanges between China and other countries have a long history. Many foreign ideas and cultures, after being introduced to China, have been subtly integrated into Chinese traditional culture through a long historical accumulation and localization process. For instance, as mentioned earlier, Sun Wukong is a character embodying Confucian and Daoist thoughts, and to a considerable extent, his image has also been influenced by Buddhist culture. Monkey deities in Buddhist stories also possess extraordinary abilities and wisdom, similar to Sun Wukong, thus it is possible that they have influenced the creation of the character. However, the ancient and profound Chinese culture does not change its original national style and literary tone due to the influence of foreign Buddhist culture. Buddhism was introduced to China during the Han Dynasty and, after a long period of translation and evolution, has already merged with Chinese indigenous culture, becoming a school with distinctive Chinese national characteristics. Scholars who hold the "Indigenous Theory" should not worry that acknowledging its influence will be detrimental to their argument, nor should they completely deny foreign cultures. In conclusion, the origin and textual research of Sun Wukong's image is a complex and diverse issue. Scholars of the "Indigenous Theory" should, while insisting on arguing their own points of view, dialectically consider other viewpoints, and maintain an open, inclusive, and flexible innovative mindset.

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