

Asian Elephants Anthropomorphised: from Parables to Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT

Animals have been anthropomorphised in fables of almost all the cultures of the world since time immemorial. Children often have their first perceptions of the characteristics of animals through these anthropomorphisms - projections of human qualities upon animals - in the various narratives now available through multiple media. Elephants have evoked fascination among humans ever since they might have encountered each other for the first time. It is one of those few animal species that have well-developed mythic symbolism that is shared collectively by most of the Southeast Asian countries owing largely to the Buddhist and Hindu origin.

In the famous parables of the Jatakas and the Panchtantra, elephants have been depicted as gentle giants, guardians, bearers of wisdom, dignity and luck while also as haughty and callous brutes. With numerous representations in multiple media of the popular culture, the elephant is one of most well recognised and loved animals among children and adults alike.

These representations in the ancient and modern texts cast the elephants (and other animals) as personalities with characteristics and emotions that draw the fascination of human viewers and audiences.

This paper analyses the characterisation of anthropomorphised elephants in selected ancient Indian parables from the Panchtantra, the Jatakas, and other mythological stories and in the contemporary popular culture including in animated films, advertisements, soft toys, video games, logos and mascots, tattoos and nursery rhymes among others, to explore the cultural meanings that are embodied in those characters.

In this process it is shown how as a literary device and a cultural practice, anthropomorphism of the elephants speaks much more about us as humans than the animal. It will also probe the evolution that the anthropomorphic representation of Asian elephants has gone through.

Keywords: *Anthropomorphism, Parables, Popular Culture, Representation*

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