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Research Article

The concept of Chinese Zodiac Signs and their relation to the characters in the Japanese anime series 'Fruits Basket'. A semiotic perspective

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Abstract

A unique feature of anime series is that it connects both children and adults in a way that live-action films often miss out on. The visually rich narrative structures in these series allow diverse interpretations and understandings of the messages. By understanding the main characters of the Sohma family, the study seeks to understand the visual meanings of the Chinese Zodiac Signs in this anime. It also seeks to understand how they relate to the characters. Fruits Basket's Sohma family suffers from the Zodiac Curse, a strange curse that causes certain members of the family to be possessed by the thirteen spirits of the Chinese zodiac. The research will analyze all the characters' personalities and their relationships in the series' narration. By Using indicator, indicative, and indicated structures, few scenes will be selected for semiotics analysis in the in the study. In different scientific studies, semiotics also refers to how people make meaning and convey it. Historically, it has been rooted in the study of how visual and verbal signs and signals convey meaning. This is a way of analyzing the environment and understanding how our society and landscape influence our unconscious behavior. The study of semiotics plays an essential role in ensuring that the interpretations desired by the sender are correctly understood by the recipient. The main purpose of this study is to analyze the semiotic information shown in this Japanese anime series. In addition to being visually appealing, the anime uses symbols, indexes, and signs to connect the story



and characters to both young and adult viewers. Semiotic elements will be discussed to understand how colors, visuals, cultural, social, and psychological elements contributed to the new world of the characters.

1. Introduction

A movie or anime series can have a tremendous impact on its audience because they are unique art forms. It is extremely entertaining to watch since it combines art, music, writing, drama, and technology. Our lives, the lives of others around us, and even the workings of society and culture may be improved by it. Messages and information can be delivered most effectively to a large group of people assembled at a single location through these mediums. Cultural learning can also be achieved through animation and movies. It is through anime series that audiences are able to learn a lot about culture, both the culture of their civilization and the culture of other nations. Sobur (2003) argues that audiences can easily learn about other cultures in their spare time for little or no cost. Due to this, anime holds an essential place in cultural representation. Based on the discrepancy discussed in the background, the purpose of the study is to understand the visual meanings of Chinese Zodiac Signs in fruit basket anime. As a result, the study's research questions are as follows: 1. What are the visual meanings reflected in the anime through the zodiac signs? 2. How are the meanings of the denotations, connotations, and myths of each zodiac sign reflected in the 'Fruits basket' anime?

1.1 Semiotic

Signs are studied through semiotics, which is an analytical science. Historically, semiotics comes from the Greek semeion, which means sign, or seme, which means interpreter of signs. Hence, semiotics is the study of how signs live within society, according to Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Symbols are anything that represents something, according to Charles Sanders Peirce. According to Barthes, semiotics is the study of how humans use things. Semiotics, on the other hand, pertains to signs and markings, according to Lechte. Using the definitions above, the writer concludes that semiotics is a branch of linguistics that studies signs and learns everything about their meaning. Pateda (2011) describes nine types of semiotics: analytic semiotic, description semiotic, zoo semiotic, cultural semiotic, social semiotic, narrative semiotic, natural semiotic, normative semiotic, and structural semiotic. As the target of this study is a social-themed movie, it is intended to use cultural semiotics. Ferdinand de Saussure was a teacher or follower of Roland Barthes. Therefore, Barthes' model of semiotics is the development of Saussure's thinking about semiology. In his work, Barthes sought to implement semiotics into the concept of culture. Barthes proposes three stages of meanings, namely denotation, connotation, and myth.

The original sign in the first level is referred to as denotation, whereas the sign in the second level is referred to as connotation. According to Barthes, a denotation is obvious, like common sense. While the term connotation defines one of the three ways that signals function in the second order of signification. The denotation of a sign evolves into a connotation, and the connotation becomes a myth of the connotation. After converting



denotation into connotation, the meaning of myth is revealed. Denotation, as described above, is the categorical, 'literal,' 'obvious,' or 'common sense' meaning of a sign, while connotation is the secondary cultural meaning of that sign. As part of the second sign system, sign users connect with gender, emotional, psychological, religious, and cultural connotations. The function of myth is to conceal or mask contradictions within a society, and its role can be viewed as ideological in some way. By categorizing the sign into two parts, Barthes aims to enlighten viewers about movies' misinterpretation. There are both verbal and visual signs.

In terms of linguistic and visual features, Dyer (1986) contends that people communicated both verbally and visually through language. Verbal and visual signs are heavily used in anime. In communication, signs include both spoken and written language, such as dialogue and narration. A visual signal, on the other hand, is an image that describes a gesture or expression. Verbal and visual communication semantics are related, although there are significant variances. Verbal communication is a language in which letters, words, or phrases are used to communicate a thought. While visual communication is contrary to verbal communication. It is one of the most crucial information exchange methods. Symbols and pictures are used to convey ideas and thoughts.¹⁹ Visual communication is divided into five categories. There are four appearance categories: age, gender, nationality and racial, hair, body, and size, and appearance; manner categories include expressions, eye contact, poses, and clothes; activity categories include touch, body movement, and positional communication; props and settings are divided into focus and depth of vision, close-ups, lighting and color, cropping, camera angle, and special effects or montage.

1.2 Chinese Zodiac

For centuries, language and culture have been important topics. Panther (2014: 2) noted that “the lexico-grammatical structure of a language can indeed be affected by cultural or folk models.” Gumpertz and Levinson (1996:2) believed that culture, thought, and language are deeply intertwined. There is also a connection between rhetorical constructions and culture. Li (1999: 15) claims that “culture can influence the choice of simile connectives and produce some culture-specific tropes.” In this study, we will examine a culture-specific construction derived from the traditional Chinese zodiac. Chinese zodiac culture indicates people's birth years by using a 12-year cycle (with each year corresponding to an animal such as the mouse, the ox, the tiger, the rabbit, the loong, the snake, the horse, the sheep, the monkey, the Rooster, the dog, and the pig). According to Chinese folkways, a person's personality is determined by the characteristics of their zodiac animal. It is said that those born in the year of the Dog are loyal and faithful, while those born in the year of the Ox are hard-working but stubborn.

There is a myth that the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac were chosen by race. The purpose of this race is to create a time measurement for people. Only twelve animals could win, and to win, they had to cross a rapid river current and reach the finish line on the shore. In contrast to the Greek and Roman zodiacs, the Chinese zodiac follows the moon instead of constellations. A cat and a rat originally hated each other intensely. The thought of them once being friends seems impossible. They were both the worst swimmers in the animal kingdom,



but they were both intelligent. Their discovery was that jumping on top of the ox was the fastest way to the river. It was a generous ox that offered to carry them across the river. However, the rat was so eager to win that he threw the cat into the water, so the cat never forgave him and was not allowed to participate. As another variation of the story goes, the cat never heard about the race and the rat never even participated. Eventually, the ox and rat reached the shore. When the race began, the rat jumped in front of the ox and won. The ox came in second and the tiger finished in third. The rabbit suddenly thumped loudly: it was the rabbit. It jumped from one stone to another and was doing well until it slipped.

Fortunately, a log floated by and it grabbed hold of that log and floated to the finish line, earning fourth place. There was a dragon in fifth place, but everyone expected it to come in first since it could fly. A couple of times, it had to stop to help some villagers, it told the Jade Emperor. When it saw a small rabbit on a log, it decided to give it a puff of air to help it reach the shore. The horse galloped to the finish line after the dragon. Behind the horse's foot was the sneaky snake. A sudden appearance scared the horse. This resulted in the snake landing in sixth place, and the horse in seventh. As soon as the monkey, rooster, and sheep arrived on shore, the rooster cried out in pain. This three were actually helping each other to reach the finish line, unlike some of the previous animals. The rooster found a raft, and the monkey and sheep hopped on. Working hard together through the water currents and the weeds, they reached shore: the sheep came in eighth place, the monkey in ninth place, and the rooster in tenth place. In eleventh place was the dog. Despite being a great swimmer, it was late. It told the emperor that it needed a bath, and the fresh water from the river was too tempting. Right when the emperor was going to close the race, an "oink" sound was heard: it was the pig. "Lazy little pig" originated from this story. The pig felt hungry in the middle of the race, so it stopped, ate something, and then fell asleep. After it awoke, it finished the race in twelfth place and became the last animal to arrive.

Throughout China, Taiwan, and Singapore, every child knows the Chinese zodiac story, which is divided into a 12-year cycle. It's something they learn from birth," Sometimes zodiac signs become shorthand. The individual you're speaking to could begin to generate ideas about your personality after you divulge your zodiac sign. They could also begin figuring out your age. "I'm a pig" or "I'm a horse" are frequently used at universities in place of the phrase "I'm a freshman," according to ShaoLan. "We are aware of the social hierarchy in the group right away." The Chinese believe that some animals get along with people better than others, as ShaoLan points out in her discussion. Therefore, parents chose particular years to have children because they think that the perfect mix of animals working together may make families prosperous. These little decisions made by each household separately, she claims, "might seem small-scale, but it actually causes a fluctuation in consumer demand and impacts the economy."

1.3 Anime details

In Fruits Basket, the Sohma family suffers from the Zodiac Curse, a strange curse that controls certain members of the family with one of the thirteen Chinese zodiac spirits. After the death of a possessed member of the family, the Spirit is reborn in another member of the

family. When certain conditions are met, the possessed family member transforms into their animal form. It is important to note, however, that the possession causes changes that go beyond what is visible. Their corresponding zodiac animals are also present in the possessed members of the Sohma family. A Zodiac spirit affects a person differently depending on the person it possesses. Each of the main characters in this series has so much to offer. Among these factors are their challenging childhoods, their current relationships, and their uncertain futures. It is convenient to begin with the basics when getting to know one another. As far as characters, personalities, and behavior are concerned, Fruits Basket delves deep into psychology. In his new series, Natsuki Takaya explores these topics with such expertise that it seems he is an expert. Truth be told, the mangaka has a deep understanding of the human mind, as well as the effects of trauma on the mind. It is an absolute gold mine for those interested in human psychology to study and analyze Fruits Basket. With the cast's tragic and unfortunate pasts that haunt them and define who they are, the cast perfectly portrays the consequences of trauma, loneliness, and child abuse. The three main characters of Fruits Basket and their mental health woes are described here. One thing Fruits Basket is proficient at (besides characters) is foreshadowing and symbolism. The moments of melancholic anime seem disconnected at first, but they soon make sense.

2.Character Analysis

Each of the characters has two sides, one is the human side or picture and the other is the zodiac sign as an animal picture. These two sides are related to each other and shown clearly in the anima as shown in Figure 1 below:



Figure 1: the two sides of each of characters

According to semiotic analysis, there are different aspects as expressed below:

Indicator: normal human beings

Indicative: each character has a zodiac curse or an animal side

Indicated: Each side is affected by the other, whether in normal or personal life, throughout the anime series.

Straight meaning: normal humans of the same family

Side meaning: each of these human beings is cursed by the zodiac spirit, which affects both his/her life and personality

Normally in Japanese animation, one can notice one side of the characters or the line of their life but in this anime, the writer tries to put more than one side together by referring to the zodiac signs which will be explained by the personality of the main characters. As the Chinese zodiac years are not observed in Japan, but according to the calendar year instead, the first main character is:

A-Yuki Sohma

His name is the unique one from the Zodiacs, as it is pronounced like snow in Japanese, but not written. Yuki's name means 'a reason' and means 'hope'. So the meaning of his name is "a reason to hope".

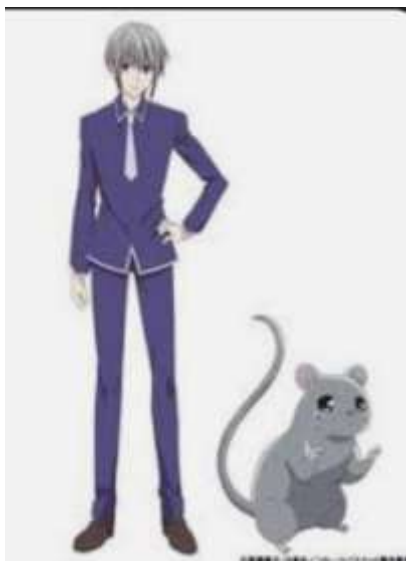


Fig 2: Kyo's both sides

In the Zodiac hierarchy, Yuki is possessed by the Rat, the first Spirit. As a result, the Zodiac considers the children of the Rat to be lucky as well. His effortless popularity at school proves that Yuki is smart, sharp-witted, and charming, like the Rat. Since Yuki is the first Zodiac, he is proficient at almost everything he does, and he can beat Kyo easily whenever they duel. The myth indicates that he and the cat 'Kyo' hated each other and this is evident in both Yuki and Kyo's characters that are affected by their zodiac spirits. Yuki is also very skittish and can easily scare people. As an example, he might have an anxiety attack after

being locked in a dark closet at school. He, along with most of his family, endured emotional abuse throughout his childhood and masks the pain by being friendly and inviting.

As a child, Yuki experienced manipulative treatment that led to low self-esteem. He feels a lot of loneliness even when around others, and still feels he can never truly be accepted by anyone. His friendship with Kyo and their rivalry may be the only thing keeping him from falling deeper into darkness, since they both lack self-esteem and suffered similar childhood abuse. As the common image of someone with low self-esteem is a shy and quiet person lacking confidence, Fruits Basket does an excellent job at portraying characters with low self-esteem. A person may seem confident but lack self-esteem or think lowly of themselves, yet appear to be the most confident person on the planet. One of the remarkable things about Fruits Basket is the tragic pasts of all the characters. Characters' feelings and thoughts regarding their backstories are explored in great detail in the series. Many psychology-related topics are subtly discussed or displayed for those with an interest in psychology.

B.Kyo Sohma

Kyo is the opposite of his cousin and roommate Yuki, who is loud and brash. He takes on the role of the Cat in the Zodiac, making him extra feisty and standoffish. He lost faith in his family and doesn't feel like he is a true part of the Zodiac, being taunted and degraded by his family members in his past. Similarly, the cat's character and life are related to the myth of his exclusion from the twelve zodiac signs.



Fig 3 : Kyo's both sides

As a child, Kyo was subjected to extreme neglect. From birth, Kyo was born, hated and despised for being a cat. His mother secretly thought he was disgusting because of his cat form, and she committed suicide. After this, his father disowned him, and the entire Sohma family hated Kyo for being the reason his mother died. Due to his cat status, he also understands that his destiny is to be the sacrifice for the Sohma -- that his fate is to be locked



up in prison until he dies. Despite his mother's best efforts, neither his mother nor his father cared for him or showed him love when he was a child. Child neglect, also known as child abuse, occurs when someone refuses to care for a child. Neglecting children early in life can cause low self-esteem, anxiety, anger issues, or even oppositional defiant disorder. An individual with ODD consistently displays rebellious and defiant behavior. Never listening to adults or constantly arguing with them are examples of this. Possibly this is why Kyo always acts out and fights with everyone, and struggles to build relationships. Even though Kyo acts unreasonably, knowing he'll be sacrificed to people who won't accept and hate him -- it's clear that this will affect many others' mental health in the same way it affects his.

C. Hatsuharu Sohma

Hatsuharu is possessed by the ox, the second Spirit of the Zodiac. The physical and personality traits of his animal Spirit are fully embodied in him. With his large sad eyes and white hair, he looks like a cow with his strength like an ox. There are two forms of Hatsuharu: White and Black. When he is in his white form, he is patient and kind, but when he is in his black form, he is aggressive and stubborn. Despite being mocked as a child for his intelligence, he is actually a rather mature Zodiac.



Fig 4 : Haru's both sides

D. Shigure

Dog is Shigure's animal Spirit in the Zodiac, and he is playful and carefree like his animal Spirit. In addition to being very generous, Shigure is also a patient schemer, as evidenced by his willingness to open his house to Tohru, Kyo, and Yuki. As shown by his constant mistreatment of his assistant, Mitsuru, he can be kind, but also cruel. Although he is playful and always joking around with other Zodiacs, he is diligently thinking about how to advance his own goals.



Fig 5: Shigure's both sides

E. Momiji

Among the Zodiac animals, Momiji is possessed by the Rabbit, the fourth Spirit. Momiji jumps from one moment to the next, always full of energy and cuteness. He is full of life and vitality, and his appearance is youthful and innocent. Among the most emotionally intelligent members of the Zodiac, he is popular, compassionate, and sincere. Although he can be quite immature at times, he is very perceptive and can see right through problems with ease.



Fig 6: Momiji's both sides

F. Hatori

Hatori is possessed by the Dragon, the fifth Spirit of the Zodiac, and is proud and regal like his Zodiac Spirit. Hatori is a calm and collected individual who takes life seriously at all times. His position as the Sohma family doctor demonstrates his fearlessness, charisma, and kindness. It is hard not to admire Hatori because he exudes confidence and authority, yet he is also incredibly sensitive and introspective. The seahorse's form may look like a dragon's, but deep down his heart is a seahorse's.



Fig 7 : Hatori's both sides

3. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

1. 'Fruits Basket' is a Japanese anime about life's ups and downs and the seemingly insignificant things that make it worth living. This anime provides interesting details about characters and their behaviors. Every scene in the film relates to the major question of existentialism. It can be seen in the anime how these zodiac spirits control the characters' choices and actions.
2. The writer makes a clear similarity between the character in his/her human form and the zodiac spirit animal. This is done by the color of each of the character's hair, so one can distinguish characters.
3. The writer tried to convey the previous idea of how some characters think that the zodiac year in which the characters were born molded the character from what made it a constraint and at the end of the movie they were freed from what conveyed the idea that these years have no effect if the person wants to be free of them and by his will
4. The writer formulated the characters in the form and actions that made the viewer believe that all these characters really have an animal spirit inside them or those zodiac spirits that make them distinct from the rest of the natural characters that are unpossessed. This corresponds to the legend that states that the signs influence the characters that are born each year. This means that every person born in that year is affected in some way by the personality of the zodiac spirit, as the writer emphasizes by focusing on the extent to which the characters in the zodiac signs have influenced their lives, causing them to become cursed in some way.



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