

Study of Characterization in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* from the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

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Abstract: *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is one of the most important classical Chinese novels, and its character images have been discussed by scholars for a long time. Existing studies mostly focus on the written text, such as narrative description, dialogue and commentary, while the role of images and other visual signs in shaping characters has not received enough attention. In fact, many character images in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, such as Guan Yu's red face and long beard, Zhuge Liang's feather fan and silk headscarf, and Cao Cao's white-faced image, have become widely recognized cultural symbols. These visual signs are not only supplements to the novel, but also take part in the construction and transmission of character meaning. From the perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis, this paper takes Cao Cao, Guan Yu and Zhuge Liang as the main research objects, and discusses how linguistic and visual modes work together in the characterization of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Based on Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar, the paper analyzes the novel from three aspects: linguistic mode, visual mode and cross-modal interaction. The study finds that the linguistic mode mainly shapes character traits through forms of address, speech styles and narrative evaluation. The visual mode further strengthens these traits through color, posture and spatial arrangement. For example, Guan Yu's image is closely connected with loyalty and righteousness, Zhuge Liang's image is related to wisdom and calmness, while Cao Cao's image is often linked with complexity and treachery. Through the interaction of language, image and later media adaptations, these characters gradually become stable and recognizable cultural signs. This study shows that characterization in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is not completed by language alone, but is produced through the cooperation of different semiotic modes. At the same time, multimodal communication also simplifies some complex character meanings. Therefore, the study of classical literary characters should not only return to the written text, but also pay attention to their visual representation and cross-medial circulation. This paper provides a new perspective for the study of classical Chinese fiction and helps to explain how traditional literary characters are accepted and reconstructed in different media.

Keywords: Multimodal Discourse Analysis, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Characterization, Visual Grammar, Linguistic Mode, Visual Mode.

1. Introduction

As one of the crowning achievements of classical Chinese fiction, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* has long occupied a central place in studies of character representation. From Li Zhi's theory of character in the Ming dynasty to modern scholars' detailed interpretations of figures such as Cao Cao and Zhuge Liang, research on the novel's characterization has produced a substantial body of scholarship. Yet much of this work has remained focused on linguistic narration within the text itself, treating fictional characters primarily as literary constructions while paying comparatively little attention to the multimodal semiotic resources through which their meanings are produced.

This text-centered approach faces a methodological challenge in the digital age. When we look at the contemporary circulation of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, one striking phenomenon becomes clear: visual signs such as Guan Yu's "red face and long beard," Zhuge Liang's "feather fan and silk headscarf," and Cao Cao's "white-faced treacherous minister" have become no less recognizable or influential than the verbal descriptions found in the novel. In some areas of popular culture, they may even possess greater communicative force. These visual patterns are not merely illustrative supplements to the written text; rather, they function as independent systems of meaning that work

alongside, reinforce, and reshape the linguistic narrative. From illustrated editions of the Ming and Qing dynasties to Republican-era picture-story books, and from modern film and television adaptations to video game design, these media have together formed a cross-medial "symbolic archive" of *Three Kingdoms* characters, profoundly shaping how readers and viewers recognize, interpret, and emotionally respond to them.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis offers a theoretical way to move beyond this limitation. Emerging from the tradition of social semiotics and developed systematically by Kress and van Leeuwen, this approach argues that meaning is constructed not only through language, but also through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources, including images, color, spatial arrangement, and sound[4]. Applying this perspective to the study of characterization in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* allows us to address a central question: how are traits such as Liu Bei's "benevolence," Guan Yu's "righteousness," and Zhuge Liang's "wisdom" stabilized and transmitted through the cross-medial cooperation of verbal and visual signs? More specifically, what kinds of relationships exist among different modes of meaning-making? Do they confirm and complement one another, or do they also produce tensions and gaps?

On this basis, this paper takes Cao Cao, Guan Yu, and Zhuge Liang as three major case studies and adopts

Multimodal Discourse Analysis to examine the semiotic mechanisms through which linguistic and visual modes operate in the characterization of Romance of the Three Kingdoms. In doing so, it seeks to open up a new methodological perspective for the study of characters in classical literature, while also offering a theoretical reference for understanding how canonical texts circulate and acquire meaning across different media.

2. The Theoretical Applicability of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

2.1. Theoretical Origins and Core Arguments

Multimodal Discourse Analysis emerged from the social semiotic turn of the 1990s, although its theoretical foundations can be traced back to Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. Halliday regarded language as a social semiotic system and emphasized that meaning arises from the selection and use of semiotic resources within specific context[2]. Building on this foundation, Kress and van Leeuwen moved beyond linguistic centralism and developed the theory of Visual Grammar, arguing that images, like language, possess a full capacity for meaning-making. In their view, both language and images operate through comparable metafunctional principles, simultaneously realizing ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions[5,6]. Classical Chinese fiction, moreover, already had a long-standing tradition of illustrated printing. The "fully illustrated" editions produced by Jianyang publishers in the Ming dynasty, as well as the embroidered-portrait illustrations in Qing-dynasty editions associated with Mao Zonggang's commentary, were not merely decorative additions. Rather, they functioned as independent semiotic systems that actively participated in the construction of meaning[1,7,9]. Multimodal Discourse Analysis therefore provides a useful analytical framework for understanding this mechanism of interaction between image and text.

2.2. Visual Grammar: Three Analytical Dimensions

This paper mainly draws on Kress and van Leeuwen's theory of Visual Grammar and develops its analysis from three dimensions[5,6]:

Representational meaning concerns the ways in which images construct a character's identity, attributes, and processes of action. In the embroidered-portrait illustrations of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, facial expressions, bodily posture, clothing, and props serve as key resources of narrative representation. Guan Yu's upright stance with his blade and his slightly lowered phoenix-shaped eyes, for instance, encode both actional and reactional processes. Through these visual forms, his identity as the "Martial Sage" and his defining quality of profound righteousness are made visible.

Interactive meaning examines the power relations and emotional distance established between the image and its viewer. This dimension is realized through four main parameters: "contact," namely whether the represented figure looks directly at the viewer; "social distance," which is shaped by the choice of shot distance; "perspective," such as frontal, low-angle, or high-angle viewpoints; and "modality," including the saturation of color and the degree of visual detail. Zhuge Liang offers a useful example. In many Ming and Qing illustrated editions, he is presented in a medium shot

and from an eye-level perspective, with a relatively high degree of visual detail. This combination constructs him as a form of "approachable authority": it highlights the intellectual stature associated with his role as military adviser, while his scholar-like appearance, marked by the feather fan and silk headscarf, also reduces the psychological distance between the figure and the viewer.

Compositional meaning focuses on the spatial arrangement of elements within an image and the ideological implications carried by that arrangement. Kress and van Leeuwen's theory of "information value" suggests that the upper part of an image is usually associated with idealized meanings, while the lower part corresponds to more practical or factual information. The left side tends to present what is already given or familiar, whereas the right side introduces what is new. The distinction between center and margin, meanwhile, helps mark the difference between what is central and what is subordinate[5]. This framework is particularly useful for explaining the visual patterns found in illustrations of Three Kingdoms characters: the main figure is often placed in the upper central area of the composition, while supporting generals or attendants appear lower down or toward the margins, thereby producing a clear visual hierarchy of power.

2.3. Corpus Selection and Analytical Method

The corpus used in this study consists of three layers. For the linguistic text, the Mao Zonggang commentary edition is taken as the primary textual basis, since it is both highly influential in literary history and marked by a developed system of commentary as metadiscourse[8]. For the visual materials, the study selects representative illustrated editions from the Ming and Qing dynasties, including the Wanli-period edition published by Zhou Yuejiao[7] and the Kangxi-period *Zuigengtang* edition[1] together with modern screen adaptations, especially the 1994 television series *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The cross-medial comparison focuses on how the same character undergoes semiotic variation and meaning negotiation across different modes.

3. Linguistic Mode: The Discursive Encoding of Character Traits

The written text forms the foundational mode through which characters are represented in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. In the Mao Zonggang commentary edition, character traits are encoded into recognizable discursive types through carefully regulated forms of address, differentiated speech styles, and the intervention of narrative evaluation[8]. This mechanism of encoding is by no means a neutral description. Rather, it carries a clear ideological stance and provides the semantic anchor for the later transformation of these characters into visual patterns.

3.1. Systems of Address: The Naming Politics of Identity

Forms of address serve as linguistic markers of a character's social identity, and the choice of a particular form already implies a judgment of value. In the Mao Zonggang commentary edition, the use of address terms for major characters is highly strategic[8]:

The system of address surrounding Cao Cao is the most complex, reflecting the ambiguity of his identity as a "treacherous hero." The narrator's way of naming him shifts sharply according to context. In courtly scenes, he is referred

to as “Prime Minister Cao” or “Duke of Wei,” terms that preserve the surface order of ritual and hierarchy. In more private or morally charged contexts, however, he is called directly “Cao Cao” or even “the traitor Cao,” exposing an underlying evaluative disparagement. The commentary system further strengthens this negative stance through dismissive names such as “Cao” and “Aman.” This instability of address corresponds precisely to Cao Cao’s double character as “an able minister in times of order and a treacherous hero in times of chaos.” It also anticipates the later stabilization of his visual image as the “white-faced” villain: through a simplified color sign, the visual mode reduces the complexity originally preserved in the linguistic mode.

By contrast, the forms of address applied to Guan Yu follow a clear trajectory of elevation. In the earlier parts of the narrative, he is often referred to as “Guan” or “Yunchang,” forms that suggest the modesty associated with his identity as a military commander. After he slays Yan Liang, he is increasingly called “General Guan,” and after being ranked among the Five Tiger Generals, he is honored as “Lord Guan.” After his death, he is further granted the deified title “Sage Emperor Guan.” This progressive chain of honorific naming reinforces the commentary’s characterization of him as the embodiment of supreme righteousness and forms the linguistic foundation for his later deification.

The forms of address associated with Zhuge Liang consistently revolve around the central idea of wisdom. When he first appears, Xu Shu recommends him as the “Sleeping Dragon,” thereby creating an aura of mystery and anticipation. Liu Bei addresses him as “sir” or “military adviser,” emphasizing both his gratitude for Zhuge Liang’s recognition and his dependence on Zhuge Liang’s strategic function. In the commentary, the names “Kongming” and “Marquis Wu” are used side by side: the former conveys familiarity, while the latter expresses reverence. It is also worth noting that Zhuge Liang usually refers to himself simply as “Liang” rather than “Kongming.” This modest strategy of self-reference forms a subtle contrast with the calm authority conveyed by his visual image of the feather fan.

3.2. Speech Style: Register as a Marker of Character

The register choices in characters’ dialogue—including style, sentence structure, and rhetorical patterning—serve as important clues for identifying their personalities:

Cao Cao’s pragmatic mode of speech is characterized by short sentences, colloquial expression, and rhetorical questioning. In the famous episode of “discussing heroes over warmed wine,” his speech is often abrupt and discontinuous. The sudden conclusion, “Among the heroes of the present age, only you and I may be counted,” together with the dramatic moment in which Liu Bei drops his chopsticks at the sound of thunder, brings Cao Cao’s deep political calculation into sharp contrast with Liu Bei’s restrained self-concealment. Cao Cao’s rhetoric often relies on metaphor and historical allusion, yet these devices usually express a practical intelligence comparable to the episode of “quenching thirst by imagining plums,” rather than any form of moral reasoning.

Zhuce Liang’s argumentative speech, by contrast, is marked by parallelism, antithesis, and gradual progression. In scenes such as the debate with the Confucian scholars and the episode of borrowing arrows with straw boats, his language displays a high degree of logical order and rhythmic control.

For example, the series of negations in the statement, “A general who does not understand astronomy, does not know geography, is ignorant of the Eight Gates, knows nothing of yin and yang, cannot read battle formations, and does not grasp military momentum is merely a mediocre man,” creates an auditory image of intellectual authority. This form of “verbal wisdom” corresponds closely to the visual motif of the gently waving feather fan. Both function as signifiers of calm mastery.

Guan Yu’s restrained speech offers a distinctive case. Compared with Cao Cao and Zhuge Liang, he speaks far less, and his utterances are often brief declarative judgments, such as “In my eyes, Yan Liang is no more than a man marked for sale.” This economy of speech is interpreted in the commentary tradition as a sign of solemn dignity. It also echoes the visual image of Guan Yu with lowered or half-closed eyes, as if quietly preserving his inner spirit. Together, these verbal and visual features create the symbolic effect of authority without overt anger.

3.3. Narrative Evaluation: Metadiscourse and the Fixing of Character Types

The distinctive value of Mao Zonggang’s commentary lies in its metadiscursive function. Through markers such as “readers, listen closely,” the commentator intervenes directly in the narrative and assigns fixed moral identities to the characters. After Guan Yu’s death, for example, the commentary states that “Yunchang’s faithfulness and righteousness were so manifest that all wicked and treacherous men feared him,” thereby abstracting his concrete actions in the narrative into the essential quality of “faithfulness and righteousness.” In the case of Cao Cao, whenever he performs a seemingly virtuous act, the commentary tends to neutralize it with explanations such as “this is merely the false appearance of a treacherous hero,” thus producing a closed circuit of pre-interpretation.

This metadiscursive mechanism has a profound influence on the direction taken by visual encoding. When image-makers encounter a comment such as “this is merely the false appearance of a treacherous hero,” their visual solution is often to intensify the signs of hidden calculation in Cao Cao’s facial expression, such as narrowed eyes or a curled lip, rather than to represent the complexity of the action itself. In this way, the linguistic mode’s function of moral classification is transformed into the visual mode’s effect of typological fixation.

Through the three-layered encoding of address, speech, and evaluation, the linguistic mode extracts character traits and turns them into recognizable signs. This process is highly selective. Cao Cao’s complexity is reduced to the essence of treachery; Guan Yu’s martial courage is elevated into a symbol of righteousness; and Zhuge Liang’s intelligence is solidified into the myth of flawless strategic foresight. Such simplification should not be understood simply as a weakness. Rather, it is a necessary condition of multimodal circulation, since it provides a clear semantic interface through which the visual mode can transform character traits into stable visual patterns.

4. Visual Mode: The Schematic Stabilization of Character Images

The character encoding completed by the linguistic mode is transformed, in the visual mode, into perceptible pictorial

signs. From the illustrated editions of Romance of the Three Kingdoms produced since the Ming and Qing periods to contemporary film and television adaptations, visual resources such as color, posture, and spatial arrangement have been systematically used to stabilize textual character traits into recognizable visual patterns. This process is not a transparent act of “translation” from word to image. Rather, it is a mechanism of re-encoding that involves selection, intensification, and simplification.

4.1. Color Signs: The Moral Fixing of a Chromatic Code

Color is one of the visual mode’s most culturally shared resources for meaning-making[3]. In the illustrated portraits of Three Kingdoms characters, the use of color displays a marked tendency toward “moral differentiation through color.”

Guan Yu’s red color coding provides the most representative example. In the Wanli-period edition published by Zhou Yuejiao, Guan Yu is already depicted with a green robe and a red face[7]. By the time of the Qing-dynasty Zuigengtang edition, the use of red had become even more saturated, extending across both his face and the main areas of his battle robe[1]. This visual coding forms an intertextual relationship with the verbal description of his face as being “like a heavy red date.” Yet by intensifying the purity of the color, the visual mode transforms a physical description into a moral sign. In the Chinese chromatic imagination, red is associated with loyalty, righteousness, celebration, and moral uprightness, thereby forming a binary opposition with the white associated with Cao Cao. It is also worth noting that modern screen adaptations, such as the 1994 television series, further strengthen this color contrast: scenes featuring Guan Yu often use warm-toned lighting and a reddish treatment of the face, whereas scenes involving Cao Cao tend to rely on cooler gray tones.

Cao Cao’s coding through white and bluish-green tones likewise underwent a process of semantic stabilization. In earlier illustrated editions, the colors of Cao Cao’s clothing were still relatively varied. From the Qing dynasty onward, however, they gradually became unified around a cooler palette of white, bluish-green, and black. In traditional Chinese opera facial makeup, white is associated with treachery, and this code was absorbed and reinforced by the illustrated editions of the novel[10]. In the 1994 television adaptation, Cao Cao, played by Bao Guoan, is not given the exaggerated white face of opera makeup. Nevertheless, the lighting design deliberately emphasizes the shadows around his cheekbones and the depth of his eye sockets, creating a visual metaphor of gloom, calculation, and hidden menace.

The bluish-green and white coding of Zhuge Liang, by contrast, conveys a sense of detachment and transcendence. Bluish-green is associated with the scholar and the recluse, while white points to wisdom and an almost immortal-like refinement. In illustrated portraits, Zhuge Liang’s feather fan is often rendered in white or pale bluish-green. This creates a visual contrast with Guan Yu’s intense red and corresponds to the typological distinction between “wisdom” and “martial courage.”

4.2. Postural Signs: The Bodily Inscription of Character

Character posture is a central parameter of narrative representation in visual grammar. Through actional and reactional processes, bodily posture helps construct

recognizable patterns of character.

Guan Yu is most often represented through a posture of “quiet majesty.” In Ming and Qing illustrated portraits, he is rarely shown in violent or highly dynamic action. Instead, three fixed postural types recur: standing with his blade, stroking his beard, and lowering or closing his eyes. In the blade-standing posture, the Green Dragon Crescent Blade is held vertically against the ground, while Guan Yu’s body remains steady and centered, producing a visual metaphor of unshakable authority. The gesture of stroking his beard emphasizes the “beautiful beard” as a gendered and status-bearing marker, transforming the textual description of Guan Yu as the “Lord of the Beautiful Beard” into an immediately recognizable bodily sign. The lowered-eye posture is especially distinctive. In scenes such as “reading the *Spring and Autumn Annals* at night,” Guan Yu’s eyes are slightly closed or cast downward, suggesting a state of inward concentration. At the same time, this posture creates a form of authority that does not depend on direct visual exchange: the viewer is placed in the position of being judged or watched, while the figure himself appears almost unwilling to return the gaze. This posture of “quiet majesty” forms a cross-modal echo with the linguistic feature of Guan Yu’s restrained speech.

Cao Cao, by contrast, is often represented through postures of adaptability and calculation. Unlike Guan Yu’s visual stability, illustrated portraits of Cao Cao tend to place him in dynamic scenes: turning sideways to listen, as in the episode of “discussing heroes over warmed wine”; looking back intently, as in “cutting off his beard and abandoning his robe”; or bending forward in a gesture of greeting, as in his reception of Xu You. What these postures share is a sense of bodily instability: the center of gravity shifts, the head turns, and the limbs are arranged asymmetrically. Such bodily forms visually express the fluidity and unreliability associated with his identity as a “treacherous hero.” In the 1994 television adaptation, Bao Guoan’s performance further intensifies this bodily restlessness. His frequent hand gestures, rapid turns of the head, and sideward movements of the eyes together form a body language in which hidden calculation seems to surface visibly.

Zhuge Liang’s posture is marked above all by composure. In illustrated portraits, he is almost always shown either seated or moving slowly, while the gentle rhythm of the feather fan functions as a visual anchor. This “slow” posture forms a threefold contrast with Cao Cao’s restlessness and Guan Yu’s stillness, and it corresponds to the typological feature of wisdom. Wisdom is thus imagined as a temporal experience of calm control. Significantly, even in moments of crisis such as the “Empty Fort Strategy,” Zhuge Liang’s posture remains stable. The tension between his bodily stillness and the dramatic instability of the situation visually realizes the meaning of remaining unshaken in the face of danger.

4.3. Spatial Arrangement: The Visual Hierarchy of Power

Compositional meaning constructs informational value and power relations through the spatial positioning of visual elements:

The first pattern is the center-margin structure. In single-character illustrated portraits, the main figure usually occupies the geometric center of the image, while background elements such as rocks, clouds, mist, or banners recede

toward the margins. This arrangement creates a clear hierarchy between character and environment. It strengthens the subjectivity of the character and reduces the surrounding environment to a supporting function. In doing so, it reinforces the ideological assumption, also present in the verbal narrative, that heroes are not merely shaped by historical circumstances but actively shape them.

The second pattern is the upper-lower structure. In multi-figure scenes, power relations are often encoded through vertical positioning. In illustrations of the “Three Visits to the Thatched Cottage,” for instance, Liu Bei is shown bowing in the lower part of the image, while Zhuge Liang sits upright above him. This arrangement visually presents a reversal of power between the one who seeks assistance and the one who responds to that request. The layout confirms Liu Bei’s humble language in the written text, yet the visual mode, through the fixity of spatial arrangement, transforms a temporary narrative situation into a seemingly permanent hierarchy.

The third pattern is the left-right structure. Kress and van Leeuwen point out that the left side of an image tends to carry the value of the “given,” while the right side presents the “new”[5]. In illustrated portraits of Guan Yu, his face often turns toward the left side of the composition, which appears as the viewer’s right, while the Green Dragon Crescent Blade is placed on the opposite side. This creates a given-new structure between “character” and “weapon”: the identity of the figure is already established, while the weapon appears as an extension of his function. This composition also interacts in complex ways with the traditional Chinese direction of reading from right to left, further strengthening the sense of Guan Yu’s prior presence and unshakable authority.

4.4. Image-Text Relations: Intertextuality, Complementarity, and Tension

The relationship between image and text in illustrated editions is not one of simple correspondence. Instead, it can be understood through three main patterns[9]:

The first pattern is intertextuality. In this case, the image directly represents key scenes described in the text, such as the “Oath of the Peach Garden” or “Riding Alone for a Thousand Miles.” Under this pattern, the visual mode confirms and strengthens the authority of the linguistic mode, creating a circular logic in which the presence of an image appears to guarantee the truth of the narrative.

The second pattern is complementarity. Here, the image presents scenes that are not directly described in detail by the written text, such as Guan Yu “reading the *Spring and Autumn Annals* at night.” In the Mao Zonggang commentary edition, this scene is only briefly suggested through the phrase “standing outside with a candle.” The illustration, however, expands it into a complete visual narrative through candlelight, bamboo slips, and a posture of contemplation. In this way, the visual mode fills a gap left by the linguistic text. It turns the act of “reading the *Spring and Autumn Annals*” into a symbolic gesture and makes it visual evidence of Guan Yu’s dual identity as both righteous warrior and cultivated man.

The third pattern is tension. In a small number of cases, a semantic gap appears between image and text. For example, in some editions, Cao Cao is depicted in formal court attire, and the ritual propriety of his clothing conflicts with his textual characterization as a “treacherous hero.” The visual presentation of institutional legitimacy is thus placed

alongside the linguistic mode’s moral disparagement, revealing the complexity involved in encoding his character. From the Qing dynasty onward, however, this tension gradually weakened in illustrated portraits, as the visual mode increasingly came to conform to the moral classifications established by the linguistic mode.

Through the systematic encoding of color, posture, and space, the visual mode transforms the character traits expressed in the written text into visual patterns that can be recognized quickly. This transformation is accompanied by simplification and stabilization. Cao Cao’s complexity is compressed into the single sign of the “white face”; Guan Yu’s martial courage is abstracted into the fixed image of the “red face and long beard”; and Zhuge Liang’s wisdom is condensed into the icon of the “feather fan and silk headscarf.” This kind of “flattening” should not be treated simply as a weakness of the visual mode. On the contrary, it is one of its communicative strengths, since the immediate recognizability of visual signs depends precisely on the reduction of complexity. At the same time, however, this also means that the “character” in multimodal circulation gradually moves away from the richness of the original text and becomes a “pure sign” capable of circulating independently of its narrative context.

5. Cross-Modal Interaction: The Coordination and Tension of Character Meaning

The linguistic and visual modes do not operate in isolation. Rather, they interact continuously in the cross-medial circulation of the novel. This interaction involves both mechanisms of mutual reinforcement and moments of tension or rupture. Over time, it leads to the “mythologization” of character signs, a process through which characters are transformed from concrete literary figures into cultural icons that can function independently of their original narrative contexts.

5.1. Mechanisms of Coordination: The Cross-Modal Accumulation of Meaning

Multimodal coordination follows a principle of “semiotic resonance”: different modes select and encode similar semantic features, thereby producing an accumulative effect of meaning reinforcement.

The cross-modal construction of Guan Yu as the supreme embodiment of righteousness is the most representative example. In the linguistic mode, the commentary system defines him as the model of “absolute righteousness,” while the narrative accumulates the meaning of righteousness through a chain of episodes such as “surrendering to the Han but not to Cao Cao,” “riding alone for a thousand miles,” and “releasing Cao Cao at Huarong Pass out of righteousness.” In the visual mode, similar meanings are encoded through signs such as red, the color of loyalty and righteousness; the long beard, a symbol of masculine commitment; and lowered or closed eyes, which suggest inward concentration. The semiotic choices of the two modes are highly consistent, and together they point to the core meaning of absolute loyalty beyond personal interest. This coordination produces an effect greater than the sum of its parts: neither textual narration nor visual representation alone would be sufficient to construct such a stable myth of righteousness. It is the repeated reinforcement across modes that turns Guan Yu into

the ultimate signifier of righteousness in Chinese culture.

The cross-modal construction of Zhuge Liang as a “sage of wisdom” operates in a somewhat different way. In the linguistic mode, the emphasis falls on narrative demonstrations of flawless strategic foresight, as seen in episodes such as borrowing arrows with straw boats, the Empty Fort Strategy, and borrowing the east wind. The visual mode, by contrast, focuses more on creating an atmosphere of composure through images such as the gently waving feather fan or Zhuge Liang seated calmly on the city tower. Here, coordination does not depend on a direct correspondence of content. Rather, it works through the alignment of emotional tone. The “wisdom” expressed in language is visually transformed into a bodily experience of calm control, and viewers come to perceive the ease and mastery of wisdom through the “slow rhythm” of the image. This kind of affective coordination is in some ways more penetrating than coordination at the level of content, because it bypasses purely rational interpretation and acts directly on bodily perception.

5.2. Mechanisms of Tension: The Modal Reduction of Complexity

Coordination, however, is not the only form of cross-modal relationship. When the complexity of the linguistic text encounters the relative singularity of visual signs, tensions and gaps inevitably emerge.

The modal conflict surrounding Cao Cao is a typical example. In the linguistic mode, although the Mao Zonggang commentary edition defines him as a “treacherous hero,” the narrative still preserves his great talent, political vision, and complex charisma. His poetic ability, strategic insight, and willingness to employ capable people are all presented in relatively positive terms, producing a tension between the “treacherous” and the “heroic.” The visual mode, however, especially in Qing-dynasty illustrated editions and traditional opera facial makeup, tends to encode him in the more singular form of the “white-faced treacherous minister.” Color choices such as white and bluish-green, restless and adaptive postures, and gloomy or calculating facial expressions all point toward a fixed judgment of untrustworthiness. This tension leads to a split in the history of reception: specialist readers may still perceive the complexity preserved in the linguistic text, while in popular circulation Cao Cao becomes increasingly fixed as an icon of villainy. In the end, the simplifying force of the visual mode comes to outweigh the semantic richness of the written text.

The modal displacement surrounding Liu Bei is equally worth noting. In the linguistic mode, Liu Bei’s “benevolence” is strategically called into question by the narrative, as seen, for example, in debates over the sincerity of his decision to lead the people across the river. The commentary system also acknowledges an underlying element of ambition and political calculation in his character. The visual mode, however, especially in film and television adaptations, tends to encode Liu Bei as a positive protagonist. His costumes often employ warm yellow tones, his posture is stable and centrally positioned, and his facial expression is marked by compassion and sorrow. This visual coding of Liu Bei as an upright hero does not fully align with the complexity of the written text. As a result, modern reception continues to be shaped by debates over whether he is a hypocritical moralist or a genuinely benevolent ruler. The persistence of this debate itself reveals the continuing force of multimodal tension in the

cognition of readers and viewers.

5.3. Mechanisms of Stabilization: From Character to Myth

The long-term effect of cross-modal interaction is the decontextualization and re-mythologization of character signs.

Decontextualization means that characters gradually detach from the specific situations of the original narrative and become “pure signs” capable of circulating on their own. Guan Yu’s “red face and long beard” can be recognized without reference to the narrative of “passing five passes and slaying six generals,” just as Zhuge Liang’s “feather fan and silk headscarf” can still signify wisdom even when separated from the scene of the Empty Fort Strategy. This decontextualization is one of the strengths of the visual mode, since the immediate recognizability of an image depends precisely on reducing its reliance on narrative context.

Re-mythologization refers to the process by which character signs are endowed with values that appear to transcend history. Guan Yu, for instance, is elevated from a famous general of the Three Kingdoms period to the status of “Martial Sage” and “God of Wealth.” In this transformation, visual signs such as temple statues, New Year prints, and paper-cut images play a role far greater than that of textual reading alone. During this process, the narrative complexity of the linguistic mode is almost completely stripped away, while the singular encoding of the visual mode becomes the central resource for myth-making. Multimodal Discourse Analysis helps reveal the mechanism behind this mythologization: it is not the result of any single mode, but of the long-term coordination of multiple modes, including language, image, space, as in temple layout, and ritual, as in acts of worship.

5.4. Contemporary Adaptations: New Variables in Multimodal Reconstruction

Film and television adaptations introduce the auditory mode, including background music, sound effects, and vocal tone, thereby making multimodal interaction even more complex. In the 1994 television adaptation of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Guan Yu’s appearances are often accompanied by the sounds of bronze chimes and the guqin. Their deep, solemn timbre forms a cross-modal correspondence with the visual use of red and the stillness of Guan Yu’s posture, jointly producing an atmosphere of dignity. Scenes involving Cao Cao, by contrast, frequently use rapid sliding tones in the strings. Together with cool visual tones and dynamic editing, these sounds intensify the viewer’s sense of tension and unease. This coordination among three modes—language, image, and sound—further narrows the interpretive flexibility of character representation.

At the same time, contemporary adaptations also reveal the crisis produced by multimodal stabilization. When the 2010 television series *Three Kingdoms* attempted to recode Cao Cao, played by Chen Jianbin, in terms of “human complexity,” a new tension emerged. The visual mode worked to weaken his image as a treacherous hero by reducing shadows and introducing warmer tones, while the linguistic mode, especially the dialogue, still retained traces of the traditional “treacherous hero” characterization. This mismatch created discomfort in audience reception. It suggests that long-term multimodal coordination has produced a deeply rooted horizon of expectations, and that any deviation in a single mode may disturb the overall perception of the character.

Cross-modal interaction follows an evolutionary logic of coordination, stabilization, and mythologization. The linguistic mode provides narrative richness and complexity; the visual mode carries out the simplification and fixation of signs; and the auditory mode, especially in adaptations, strengthens the affective penetration of the overall tone. Through the coordinated operation of these three modes, the characters of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* are ultimately transformed from literary figures into cultural icons. This transformation represents both the success of canonical circulation and a process of semantic loss: the complexity of character gives way to the recognizability of signs, while the specificity of historical context is dissolved into the abstraction of seemingly timeless values. The value of Multimodal Discourse Analysis lies precisely in its ability to reveal this mechanism of transformation.

6. Conclusion

Using Multimodal Discourse Analysis as its method, this paper has systematically examined the semiotic mechanisms through which linguistic and visual modes operate in the characterization of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The study finds that characterization is fundamentally multimodal in nature: the linguistic mode extracts and evaluates character traits through the regulation of forms of address, the differentiation of speech styles, and the intervention of narrative evaluation, while the visual mode transforms these abstract traits into immediately recognizable visual patterns through color signs, postural coding, and spatial arrangement. Each mode performs its own meaning-making function, yet together they constitute the generative mechanism of character meaning. Cross-modal interaction follows an evolutionary logic of coordination and stabilization: coordinating mechanisms allow character traits to acquire stability across media, whereas mechanisms of tension reveal the modal reduction of complexity; over time, sustained cross-modal coordination leads to the decontextualization and mythologization of character signs. Multimodal circulation therefore achieves its communicative effectiveness at the cost of reducing complexity, as the ambiguity of Cao Cao's character and the contested nature of Liu Bei's image in the written text are simplified in visual encoding into relatively singular value signs. These findings offer two implications for the study of classical literature: methodologically, Multimodal Discourse Analysis provides an operational framework for understanding the cross-medial circulation of

canonical texts; in terms of research perspective, the literary "character" should be reconceptualized as a semiotic assemblage, whose meaning does not reside solely within linguistic narration but is produced through the negotiation and competition among different modes.

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