

## An Encounter of the Chinese Monkey and the Japanese Robot: The Product Tenet in Cultural Transduction

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### ABSTRACT

When more than one source material is used for an adaptation, how do these texts work together coherently in the new production? This article applies the product tenet in the cultural transduction framework to multi-sourced film adaptations to analyze the coexistence of the classical Chinese novel *Journey to the West* and the iconic Japanese anime *Doraemon* in the Japanese animated film *Doraemon: The Record of Nobita's Parallel Visit to the West* (1988). We find that to integrate these two works that take the lead in their respective cultural contexts, Japanese adapters enhance the cultural shareability by highlighting content universals, audience-created universals, and company-generated universals, and reduce the cultural discount by filling in the content lacuna, the capital lacuna, and the production lacuna.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study applies the product tenet of the cultural transduction framework to the analysis of a transcultural film adaptation of the classical Chinese novel *Journey to the West* in Japan and explores the coexistence of source texts in a multi-sourced adaptation, contributing new knowledge to the adaptation field.

## 1. Introduction

When adapting classic literature into films, it appears that only some adaptation scholars and cinema critics are constrained by the fidelity standard. As early studies promoted fidelity-based criteria, they devoted considerable effort to scrutinizing text-screen comparisons and then praising/denouncing individual films for fitting in with or departing from the source material (Stam, 2005), thus justifying the success of the film. By contrast with careful academics, the practice circle has demonstrated boldness from the outset. Adapters aspire to use borrowed literature to produce quality films while striving to incorporate their personal style into the adaptation, especially for ambitious directors such as Georges Méliès, Alfred Hitchcock, and Akira Kurosawa. These

filmmakers courageously disassembled well-structured masterpieces, altered the setting, plot, and characters, and added new cultural elements and symbols to align with contemporary economic, political, social, and cultural needs. It also led to an increase in cinema's status at the cultural level (Spence, 2024).

There are also practitioners who are already exploring multi-sourced rewriting activities instead of just settling for conventional adaptations based on a single piece of literature. A typical example is the Chinese movie *Lost in the Stars* (Cui & Liu, 2023), which brings together the Soviet film *Trap for a Lonely Man* (1990, adapted from Robert Thomas's play) and a Chinese real-life incident about wife-killing to defraud insurance. Also, Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* was included in the film storyline. It raked in \$486.2 million at the box office, yet its word-of-mouth has not been proportional to its high financial earnings, with criticism that it is a simple pastiche of socially hot-button and well-known film clips. It therefore raises a topic that has long existed in the practical arena and has lacked attention in scholarship: when there is more than one source text for a film, how do these sources coexist harmoniously.

*Doraemon: The Record of Nobita's Parallel Visit to the West (DJW)* is a good example of exploring the coexistence of source texts in multi-source film adaptations. It is the ninth episode of the Doraemon animated film series and is about a team of figures from the Doraemon series, including Doraemon, Nobita, Sue, Gian, and Suneo, who travel to the Tang dynasty in China and save both the Tang Monk and modern Japan by defeating the Bull Demon King, the Princess Iron Fan, the Golden-Horned King, and the Silver-Horned King, all of which are characters from *Journey to the West (JW)*. Motohira Ryō followed Fujiko F. Fujio's adaptation that combines the Doraemon story and *JW* to compose the film script, which was completed from screenplay to movie by Tsutomu Shibayama, a renowned Japanese animation director. The 90-minute film was released in Japan in 1988 and collected \$21.1 million at the box office.

*DJW* contains two source texts, and both these texts are of equal importance. As one of Japan's most iconic anime, the Doraemon series covers manga, TV series, and films, and follows a cat-shaped robot from the 22nd-century who travels to 20th-century Japan and uses a variety of magical props in his pockets to help a Japanese boy, Nobita, solve the difficulties he encounters as he grows up. Another source text is the Chinese masterpiece *JW*. It is commonly referred to as a late Ming novel about a team of Tang monks (a mortal), monkey-shaped Sun Wukong, pig-shaped Zhu Wuneng, and Sha Wujing (a water monster) who set out from the capital city of the Tang dynasty in search of the sacred scriptures in the West. The novel is adapted from the pilgrimage of a Chinese monk named Xuanzang who travelled to India in the 7th century.

Given their established plot structures, loyal fan bases, and cultural significance in their respective countries, how do Doraemon and *JW* coexist in one piece? To answer this question, we will use the product tenet in the cultural transduction framework to conduct a textual and cultural analysis of this Japanese anime, the Chinese novel, and their relationship in *DJW* from the perspectives of theme, plot, and character.

## 2. Cultural Transduction Framework

In entering Adaptation Studies 3.0, as defined by Leitch (2017) and Scholz (2013) found that scholarly approaches to the relationship between literature and cinema, ranging from a focus on fidelity to intertextuality, had a clear blind spot: a lack of theoretical and

methodological attention to adaptation as a historical and transnational phenomenon. Previously, [Hutcheon \(2006\)](#) has been concerned with the phenomenon of adaptation that moves beyond cultural and national boundaries and labelled it transcultural adaptation, which addresses the context (when and where) of the adaptation. However, compared to conventional film adaptation, i.e., adaptation activities that exist only in one country or region, transcultural film adaptation studies are more involved and complex, intersecting the fields of literature, film, performing arts, economics, political science, cross-cultural communication, etc. The cultural transduction framework proposed by [Uribe-Jongbloed and Espinosa-Medina \(2014\)](#) can provide a clear picture for academics in adaptation studies surrounded by a myriad of concepts.

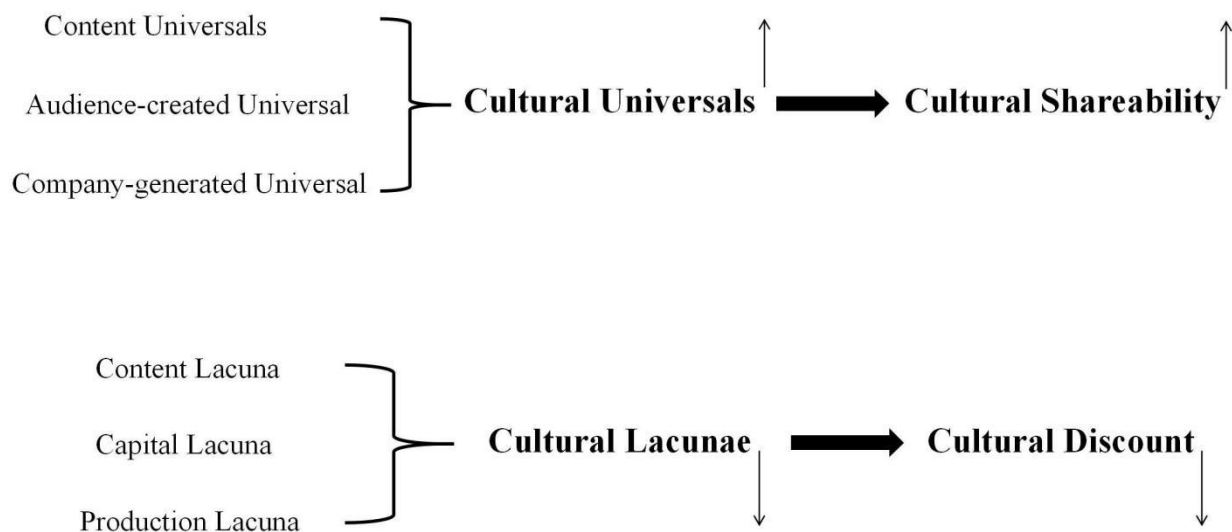
The cultural transduction framework is used to analyze the flow of audiovisual products, such as films and TV series, between different cultural markets; however, we observed that it can also be applied to transnational and transcultural adaptation activities. It has four tenets or guidelines: market, product, people, and process or place ([Table 1](#)). The market tenet focuses on the market in which a source text is produced, the market for the production and distribution of its adaptation product, and the relationship between these markets. [Uribe-Jongbloed and Espinosa-Medina \(2014\)](#) summarized four types of market flows: flows between core markets, flows from core to peripheral markets, flows from peripheral to core markets, and flows between peripheral markets. Their so-called 'core markets' and 'peripheral markets' correspond to 'developed countries' and 'developing countries'. Put differently, they categorize core and peripheral markets according to their level of economic development. *DJW* then falls into the flow from the peripheral market (China) to the core market (Japan). The product tenet spotlights the qualities of the product itself, which have a universal appeal and favour transnational adaptation and distribution ([Uribe-Jongbloed, 2023](#)). The third tenet is people. Those involved in cultural transduction are called cultural transducers, who encompass scouts, merchants, and alchemists. Their responsibility is to find a product that can be flowed transnationally, assess its value, and then transform it locally, comparable to filmmakers and adapters. The fourth tenet is process. Transduction covers three stages: deculturalization, acculturalization, and reculturalization. These three stages can occur in one of two places: hybridity or convergence. Hybridity takes place in established cultural audiovisual institutions, while convergence appears in dynamic social networks and participatory activities.

Table 1: Cultural Transduction Framework

Tenets	Focus Areas	Core Concepts
Markets	The similarities and differences between the place where the original product were made, and the market where the product was released.	Cultural proximity Cultural distance Cultural tolerance
Product	The specific qualities of a work that might make it more appealing or likely to be adapted or selected elsewhere for distribution.	Cultural shareability Cultural universal Cultural discount Cultural lacunae
People	The jobs making products travel between markets.	Cultural transductor
Process	The three stages of de-, a-, and reculturalization.	Hybridity and convergence
(Place)	The actual places where those processes take place.	Transduction laboratory

In this specific case about *JW* and *Doraemon*, the significance of the product tenet will be emphasized, as this study intends to explore how two works from different cultural contexts can be united in a film with the qualities of the source texts playing the decisive roles. Cultural shareability and cultural discount are both product qualities in the product tenet. The former is used to describe the components of a product that make it accessible to audiences from different cultural backgrounds (Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994); the latter denotes the loss of value suffered when a product is adapted or transferred to a new cultural context (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988). According to Lee (2006), if there is high cultural shareability between a product and a market, then the value of that product in that particular market will be subject to a lesser cultural discount than a product with lower shareability. For a classic to survive and even thrive in a different cultural context, one of the missions of transcultural adapters is to seek out and retain elements of the original that can be shared with the new market, thereby enhancing the cultural shareability of the adapted product and reducing the cultural discount. High or low cultural shareability and cultural discount could be judged by the cultural universals (content universals, audience-created universals, and company-generated universals) and cultural lacunae (content lacuna, capital lacuna, and production lacuna) developed by Rohn (2011). In general, cultural universality leads to high shareability and reduces cultural lacunae; cultural lacunae decrease the shareability of a product and increase cultural discounts (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Product Tenet in Cultural Transduction Framework



Considering this, we go on to analyze, based on the product tenet, how *DJW*'s adapters dealt with cultural shareability and cultural discounts in the Chinese novel and the Japanese anime and achieved *JW*'s transcultural adaptation.

### 3. Enhancing Cultural Shareability

It is well known that the United States has long been the most influential producer of popular culture; nevertheless, according to Goodale (2005), the Japanese anime art form has achieved what no other indigenous cultural expression has been able to do: spread widely enough to challenge the American stranglehold on the entertainment industry. In East Asia, Zahlten (2019) confirmed that Japanese animation has played an absolutely

central role in the larger history of shared media systems since the end of the Korean War, and [Natsume \(2004\)](#) offered an explanation that Japanese anime and manga both include many Japanese features and generously embrace foreign cultures, as in *DJW*, created by Japanese anime artists, which combines the classical Chinese novel *JW* with the local classic anime.

The Doraemon series, like *Crayon Shin-chan* and *Chibi Maruko-chan*, is a kind of anime about day-to-day life, focusing on Japanese family and society relationships. Although the blue cat-like robot is popular in Japan and even in Asia, it is little known to Western anime fans ([Richmond, 2009](#)). But other anime productions such as *Dragon Ball*, *Naruto*, and *Sailor Moon* were able to gain attention and critical acclaim in the world-scale market. These works are filled with adventure, fighting, and righteous elements, similar to the superhero film and television series in the American culture industry, and the values it carries are universal. As such, the incorporation of *JW* into Doraemon's story both enriches the anime narrative and has the significance of exploring the global market.

In *DJW*, there is a virtual reality (VR) game called Journey to the West. It is with the VR machine, one of Doraemon's pocket treasures, that the Japanese anime characters relate to this Chinese novel and its characters, which fits into the conventional anime framework while retaining the identity of *JW*. In the product tenet, the higher the cultural shareability of a work, the more favourable it is for distribution in new environments, and a high level of cultural shareability depends on a high level of cultural universals. Cultural universals are specified as content universals, audience-created universals, and company-generated universals ([Rohn, 2011](#)).

The first is the content universals, underlining the content's relevance to different cultures. *DJW* narrates the story of Nobita, who forgets to turn off VR machine in a gaming experience about *JW*. This oversight leads to demons crossing over from the game world to the actual world, posing a threat to reality. To save modern-day Japan, the protagonists need to reclaim the demons into the game machine. Then Nobita and his friends travelled by time machine to China's Tang dynasty, where *JW* takes place, to catch the demons and save the Tang Monk, who was trapped by the demons. This animated film is constructed within the narrative framework of Doraemon, following the line from the generation of the problem (caused by Nobita) to the teamwork to solve the problem, imbued with adventure and fantasy elements, and with the fairy tale ending of 'good triumphing over evil'. This storytelling approach aligns with the fundamental plot structure of *JW*. As a full-length novel, it tells through 100 chapters the story of a monk who, helped by three disciples with magical powers, travelled to the Great Thunderbolt Temple in Western Heaven (India) to seek the Buddhist scriptures and complete the mission given to them by Tathāgata (Buddha) and the Tang emperor. Throughout their journey to get the scriptures, they confront a number of obstacles, all of which are eventually addressed. In addition to gaining experience and maturing as a result of the resolution of these issues, those who seek the scriptures also achieve enlightenment.

The second is the audience-created universals, the meaning that people in a particular market assign to a product. In *DJW*, Xuanzang is the connection between the Japanese audience and *JW*. Before the renowned 16th-century novel was written, the pilgrimage of Xuanzang to India was widely spread in Japan. A painting of Xuanzang's group passing through the Tianshan Mountain ([Figure 2](#)) dates from the Kamakura period and is in the Fujita Museum of Art ([Saunders, 2012](#)) which mirrors a film scene of the Tang Monk walking on horseback through the mountain ([Figure 3](#)). Xuanzang, the prototype of the

fictional Tang Monk, made a 17-year journey from China to India to learn about true Buddhism and is known as the personification of the symbiosis of Asian cultures (Tanner, 2006). Even in the West, he had considerable influence, and Wriggins (1996) considers him one of the greatest travelers of all time. Waley (1952), one of the translators of the English version of *JW*, commented on the epic nature of the true figure:

His kindred, in the world of our imagination are not the great travelers, not Marco Polo or Vamberry, nor the great theologians such as Saint Augustine or Saint Thomas, but rather Aeneas, King Arthur, Cuchulain. He is the hero of a sort of spiritual epic (Waley, 1952, p. 130).

Figure 2: Xuanzang in the Japanese Painting



From scroll three, episode three, *the Genjō Sanzō scrolls* (see Saunders, 2012)

Figure 3: Xuanzang in *DJW*



From the Screenshot of *DJW*, 46:33 (Shibayama, 1988)

*DJW*'s adapters repeatedly used dialogue between the anime characters: Sue, Gian and Suneo to express their admiration for Xuanzang as he completed a 50,000-mile journey

without the help of modern transport such as planes and trains. Their reverence for the Chinese figure stems from Japanese society's esteem for *makoto*. *Makoto*, analogous to the English term sincerity. [Benedict \(2005\)](#) observed that the Japanese regarded sincerity as the soul of all virtues, representing unselfishness, self-discipline, perseverance, loyalty, and courage, and believed that if only the heart be sincere, anything can be accomplished. Thus the adapters attribute Xuanzang's journey to the guidance of *makoto*, and in the film the Tang Monk is turned around because of *makoto*.

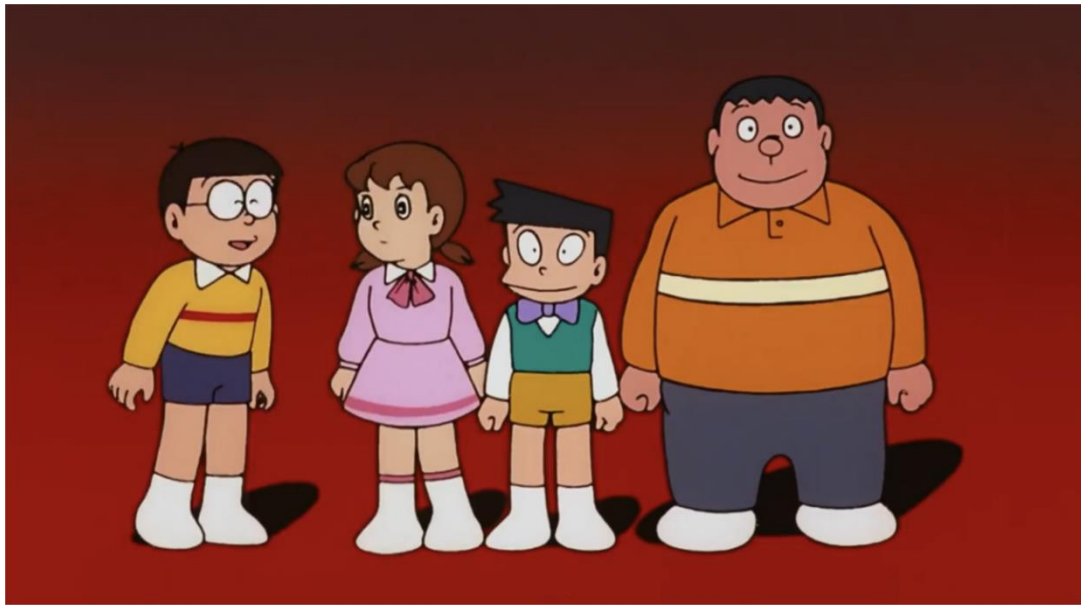
The last is the company-generated universals. [Straubhaar \(2007\)](#) argued that people first prefer local, provincial, or national content because it has at least a minimum standard of production value; regional content comes second; and thirdly, 'foreign' content as it has the appeal of containing new ideas. [Elasmar \(2003\)](#) initially defined these new ideas as exotic and argued that although audiences prefer proximity content, those exotic, non-local programs have an equally strong appeal, which helps explain the Japanese anime producers who combined the Japanese anime brand Doraemon with *JW*, a classical Chinese novel, to satisfy the Japanese audience's need for proximity content while also catering to curiosity about the exotic storyline. It is somewhat resembling a group of producers bringing in a product from the outside and inserting a new discourse in that culture ([Castelló, 2010](#)).

#### 4. Reducing Cultural Discount

Cultural discount is commonly construed as a product developed in a given context that diminishes in value as it is introduced into a market where people lack the cultural capital to understand it. A paradoxical situation arises when a cultural product is circulated transnationally; if it is moved unchanged from one cultural context to another, people in the new context will not be able to understand the work due to a lack of knowledge of the culture from which the work originated, which will result in a loss of value for the cultural product; however, if it is altered this would still be blamed on losses of value. In such a dilemma, *DJW*'s adapters offer an option. Rather than reproducing the novel in its entirety and taking the risk of not being approved by the audience, it would be better to interpret it in a way that is comprehensible and acceptable to the Japanese, i.e., to fill in the cultural lacunae and to thus reduce its cultural discount.

Firstly, to fill in the content lacuna by swapping roles. *JW* is a large-scale work that spans the stories of Heaven, Earth, and the Underworld, and covers a wide range of figures including Buddhas, Immortals, Mortals, and Demons. It features a team of four scripture-seeker: Tang Monk (the master), Sun Wukong (the first disciple), Zhu Wuneng (the second disciple), and Sha Wujing (the third disciple), each of whom has their own prototypes and origins in Chinese history, or literary history. It is difficult for those who have not read the original or have only a superficial knowledge of its basic story to distinguish these characters. Thus, Japanese adapters work through the anime protagonists, who act as cultural mediators, to help Japanese audiences come to understand the figures from *JW*. In the film, there is also an adventure crew made up of Doraemon, Nobita, Sue, Gian, and Suneo ([Figure 4](#)), in which, under the VR machine, Nobita turns into Sun Wukong, Sue into Tang Monk, Gian turns into Zhu Wuneng, and Suneo into Sha Wujing ([Figure 5](#)). These transformations are grounded in the similarities between the two works in terms of character's personality or physique, e.g., Nobita and Sun Wukong share goodness, justice, but show-off; Sue and Tang Monk share mercy; Gian and Zhu Wuneng share a huge physique; and Suneo and Sha Wujing share opinion lessness.

Figure 4: Before the Anime Figures Transformed (from left to right is Nobita, Sue, Suneo, and Gian)



From the Screenshot of *DJW*, 31:32 (Shibayama, 1988)

Figure 5: After the Anime Figures Transformed (from left to right is Nobita, Sue, Suneo, and Gian)



From the Screenshot of *DJW*, 31:40 (Shibayama, 1988)

Secondly, to fill in the capital lacuna by introducing Japanese culture. The capital lacuna comes when people realize the value of a work, or even desire to access it, but lack sufficient cultural capital to understand the elements presented in the work. From the source of *JW*, Xuanzang's pilgrimage, to the completion of the novel (16th century), it has been written over a period of at least 900 years, spanning China's Tang, Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties, and carrying the cultural imprints of each of these dynasties as well. Not only does it contain a wealth of Chinese traditional culture, but it is also a representation of Chinese traditional culture per se. It is also difficult for Japanese audiences, who have little knowledge of Chinese culture, to understand such culture-rich literature. As a result,

*DJW*'s adapters added Japanese culture to help viewers make sense of the Chinese novel and to reduce the film's capital lacuna. They gave Japanese contemporary culture, such as cosplay, to Japanese anime characters. Moreover, they endowed Chinese literary characters with traditional Japanese culture, for example, Tang Monk was designed to incorporate the culture of *Makoto*, which has long existed and is highly respected in Japanese society, to show reverence for the figure. They also imported the patriarchy of Japanese feudal society into the family of the Bull Demon King, the Princess Iron Fan, and the Red Boy, and contrasted it with the modern Japanese family represented by Nobita and his parents, which produces both pathos and warmth that also reflect the contradictions of Japanese culture.

Finally, to fill in production lacuna by adopting the genre of anime. *DJW*'s adapters used anime, a film genre familiar to Japanese viewers, to present *JW*; in other words, they approached the cultural distance between this classical Chinese novel and the local market in a way that was generally accepted by the local audience. This anime genre is based, partly on the storytelling style that Japanese artists have mastered, and partly on the mythological culture of the novel, which is embodied in anthropomorphic species, supernatural magics and weapons, and allegorical stories. These are also reflected in conventional Doraemon narratives, such as the fantastic pocket items.

## 5. Conclusion

The cultural transduction framework focusing on the worldwide flow of cultural products can be applied in the field of transcultural adaptation, and its product tenet therein can be used to explain the coexistence of multiple source texts. It can be seen from Japanese filmmakers' adaptation activity about *Journey to the West* that they focus on the similarity or relevance between the Chinese novel and Doraemon's routine narratives and the Japanese market on the one hand, in order to enhance the product's cultural shareability. On the other hand, to reduce the cultural discount of the work, they endeavored to bridge the cultural distance between *Journey to the West* and the Japanese market and fill in the cultural lacunae by adapting this Chinese novel in a way that is understandable and acceptable to Japanese viewers.

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The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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