

Binary Opposition and Anthropomorphism in Three Southeast Asian Folktales involving Animals

Bella Valencia Bawondes^{1,*}

Universitas Sanata Dharma

*Corresponding author. Email: bellavalenciab@gmail.com

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Abstract. In folktales, the act of labeling certain animals with certain traits is normal. However does it completely the truth? This paper then aims to examine the binary opposition and anthropomorphism within the three Asian folktales, *The Quarrel of the Monkey and the Crab*, *The Turtle*, and *The Lizard*, and *Sang Kancil counts The Crocodile* as the characters within the story are labeled as opposite from each other and people commonly agree with that kind of labeling. In analyzing these three stories, this paper will use a qualitative method to gather the materials that are needed along with Strauss's concept to examine the exclusive binary oppositions and their correlations with each other using syntagmatically and paradigmatically diagrams. For the anthropomorphism, it will use journals and websites that correlate with it. The result of this paper will uncover how binary oppositions and their relationship can create meaning and the possible reason why anthropomorphism happens and is often used within literature.

Keywords: *Binary opposition; folktales; Asian; anthropomorphism*

Abstrak. Dalam dongeng, tindakan memberi label pada hewan tertentu dengan sifat tertentu adalah hal yang normal. Namun, apakah itu benar-benar mencerminkan kebenaran? Makalah ini bertujuan untuk menguji oposisi biner dan antropomorfisme yang terdapat dalam tiga dongeng Asia, berjudul "The Quarrel of the Monkey and the Crab", "The Turtle", dan "The Lizard", serta "Sang Kancil counts The Crocodile", karena karakter-karakter dalam cerita tersebut diberi label sebagai lawan satu sama lain, dan orang umumnya setuju dengan jenis labeling tersebut. Dalam menganalisis ketiga cerita ini, penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif untuk mengumpulkan materi yang diperlukan bersama konsep Strauss untuk memeriksa oposisi biner eksklusif dan korelasinya satu sama lain menggunakan diagram sintagmatik dan paradigmatis. Untuk antropomorfisme, akan menggunakan jurnal dan situs web yang berkaitan dengannya. Hasil dari penelitian bagaimana oposisi biner dan hubungannya dapat menciptakan makna, dan alasan mungkin mengapa antropomorfisme terjadi dan sering digunakan dalam sastra.

Kata Kunci: *Oposisi biner; dongeng; Asia; antropomorfisme*

Introduction

Folktales are continuously used in modern society. These stories reveal human experiences, social values, and contemplation commonly passed down orally through generations (Nnyagu & Umezinwa, 2018). Folktales are used in humanity and literature studies as a way to expose pupils to a variety of cultures (Kim, Song, Lee, & Bach, 2018). These stories give social studies teachers a means of communicating instructions on good citizenship and appropriate social conduct. They make allusions to the values of societies, including; what people laugh at, what they respect, what they are disappointed with,

emotions, and how they view themselves (Dahal & Bhatta, 2021). One could say that they function as points of reference to interpret the ever-complicated social world. Culturally they also have been used to continue a heritage down the bloodline. On occasions, they not only involve reading, but instruments, dances, and songs are incorporated to enhance the absorbability of the narrative. In the digital world, folktales integrate with technology through video and audio, creating movies that excite the minds of children and adults (Saad, Subri, and Zolkifli, 2023).

In Asia, the same phenomenon of using folktales as the material to teach heritage and moral values is also thought (Vuong et al., 2020). In many types of folktales in Asia, one is inseparable is the use of animals. The folktale narrative would use them along with nature to portray a society, address an issue, or remind readers regarding certain cultural duties. Commonly portrayed in the narratives are the intimate relationship between the different animals, and with nature. The general message often revolves around pastoral, long-lasting symbiosis, and greenness (Nakawake & Sato, 2019)

In the realm of folktales, the theme of binary opposition often manifests in the animals creating a symbolic framework that reflects cultural values and norms (Naumovska, Rudakova, & Naumovska, 2021). Animals frequently serve as metaphors for human qualities embodying virtues and malevolence. In many folktales, the binary opposition is evident in the dichotomy between predator and prey. The cunning fox, often depicted as sly and deceitful, stands in stark contrast to the noble and brave lion. This dichotomy mirrors human traits, with animals becoming allegorical representations of human virtues and flaws (Ben-Amos, 2020). Furthermore, the juxtaposition of domesticated and wild animals in folktales highlights the tension between civilization and nature. The loyal dog, a companion to humans, symbolizes loyalty, while the untamed wolf embodies the primal, untamed aspects of existence. Binary opposition in animal symbolism also extends to the celestial and earthly realms. Birds are often symbols of freedom. While snakes and other animals that slither or crawl on the earth represent hell.

Further and more problematic, is the binary opposition between animals and humans themselves. The animal is depicted as tuned with nature, fitted perfectly in the natural order, and kind. While humans are often portrayed as corrupt, colonizing, and destructive. Throughout various folk traditions worldwide, one can find stories where animals represent virtues such as wisdom, kindness, and natural harmony, contrasting with human characters who symbolize flaws, greed, and the disruptive influence of civilization. This theme has its roots in cultural perceptions of the relationship between humanity and the natural world, often exploring the consequences of human actions on the environment (Porselvi, 2023). While the specific animals and characteristics attributed to them may vary across cultures, the overarching theme of the binary opposition between animals and humans is a recurrent motif. It reflects a universal concern about the impact of human behavior on the delicate balance of nature and serves as a means to impart cultural values and ethical considerations through the medium of storytelling. While the use of folktales itself may not be inherently problematic, the frequent anthropomorphism that follows it may cause problems.

The anthropomorphic approach in literature, wherein human characteristics are attributed to non-human entities, gives rise to a paradox (You, 2021). On one hand, this literary device serves as a powerful narrative tool, in the form of parody and folktales, for criticism and cultural proliferation as mentioned above (Andrianova, 2021). Ecocritical or “zoo critical” literature also functions by giving a “voice” to the non-human, allowing readers to empathize with the characters or elements in the narrative. On the other hand,

blurring the lines between the human and non-human realms is prone to create inaccuracies.

Animals do not have a “real” voice. Firstly, they possess little to no sophistication of grammar that acts as a gate towards making sense of the world. Unlike human language, which relies on intricate syntax and grammar to construct elaborate sentences conveying nuanced meanings, animal communication tends to be more straightforward. In the absence of a sophisticated grammatical framework, animals face constraints in their ability to articulate abstract concepts (Dunn, 2011). While animals can convey basic needs, emotions, and immediate concerns through vocalizations and body language, their communication is largely anchored in the present moment with rare exceptions of cetaceans, corvids, and elephants. Even the exceptions fall short in complexity to humans. This contrasts sharply with the human ability to delve into the past, contemplate the future, and engage in discussions about theoretical concepts. Yet anthropomorphism is prevalent in literature across cultures and epochs, manifesting in various forms, from talking animals to personified objects.

The attribution of human thought patterns to animals has been proven to have detrimental effects or, at the very least, be misleading (Lundblad, 2017). Inaccuracies in interpreting animal behavior can range from harmless individual misconceptions about the natural world to the widespread perpetuation of anthropomorphism in society, which can even lead to questionable notions about creating an equal society. One example of such misconceptions is the belief that animals live in beautiful harmony and are not cruel (McHugh, 2009). However, a closer examination of how predatory animals hunt quickly dispels this notion. For instance, chimpanzees engage in lethal aggression and even consume infants, independent of human presence (Geggel, 2014). Similarly, African wild dogs, due to their small stature, are unable to instantly kill medium-sized prey. As a result, they resort to group hunting and feeding on their prey while it is still alive (Knight, 2023). Unfortunately, popular documentaries often fail to depict the true reality of nature to the public. Struggling to meet the high expectations of their audience, these documentaries resort to manipulating the recorded footage. This creative freedom given to directors allows for the creation of a more easily digestible narrative. While this does not completely diverge from nature, it does create small but influential misconceptions.

Particularly influential is the coverage of animal rights rallies in the popular media. This can lead to well-intentioned but misguided protests, where activists anthropomorphize animals to the point of equating their experiences with those of humans. However, this oversimplification may overlook the nuanced realities of wildlife management, conservation, and the need for ecological balance to ensure the well-being of both animal and human populations (Garret, 2023). In extreme cases, which we observe more frequently today, anthropomorphism can result in campaigns that prioritize individual animal welfare without considering broader ecological and economic concerns. This narrow focus may unintentionally jeopardize conservation efforts, disrupt ecosystems, and undermine the delicate balance between human activities and wildlife conservation. This is particularly concerning if protesters suggest extreme measures, such as the Malthusian solution, which involves limiting or reducing the global population to ensure subsistence.

This paper explores the reading strategies employed by individuals, particularly children, when engaging with animal folktales. It acknowledges the effectiveness of folktales as narrative tools, while also raising concerns about the tendency to ascribe certain attributes to the animals depicted in these tales, both before and after their creation

and consumption. This issue is particularly apparent in the representation of protagonists and antagonists within animal folktales, where stereotypes often dictate the categorization of animals. For instance, historical influences such as ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics and biblical texts have shaped the perception of snakes as dangerous, despite their ecological role in pest control (Clinton, 2023). It is essential to recognize that these stereotypes primarily serve the purpose of advancing the storyline, and should not be interpreted as innate or characteristic of these animals. Consequently, this text aims to draw attention to problematic binary oppositions and anthropomorphism prevalent in the folktales entitled “The Turtle and the Lizard,” “Sang Kancil counts the Crocodiles,” and “The Quarrel of the Monkey and the Crab.”

Methods

This paper utilized the qualitative method for conducting the analysis. This method involves analyzing data and gathering additional information from various sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of Asian folktales (Highnett & McDermott, 2015; Walliman, 2011). By incorporating input from multiple sources, this paper aims to provide a thorough analysis. As a qualitative study, this paper will rely on both primary and secondary data. The primary data consists of three folktales from different Asian countries: “The Quarrel of the Monkey and The Crab,” “The Turtle and The Lizard,” and “Sang Kancil counts The Crocodiles.” Additionally, the paper will employ Claude Levi de Strauss's concept of binary opposition as the theoretical framework. Besides the primary data, secondary sources such as journals, books, and relevant websites will also be utilized to support the discussed topic.

The first story is “The Quarrel of the Monkey and the Crab.” In a Japanese folktale set in autumn, a monkey and a crab, once friends, encounter a deceitful exchange initiated by the monkey’s greed. The monkey trades a persimmon seed for the crab’s rice dumpling, convincing the crab with promises of future benefits. Years later, when the seed grows into a fruit-bearing tree, the crab, unable to reach the fruits, seeks the monkey’s help. However, the monkey betrays him again, consuming all the ripe fruits and injuring the crab fatally with the remaining unripe ones. The crab’s son, seeking vengeance for his father’s death, invites the monkey to a supposed farewell ceremony, where the monkey meets his own tragic end. (*The Quarrel of the Monkey and the Crab - A Japanese Folktale*, n.d.).

The second story, “The Turtle and the Lizard” is a Filipino folktale about a turtle and a big lizard conspiring to steal ginger and agreeing to be silent and cautious. The lizard, overcome by excitement, loudly praises the ginger, alerting the farmer who comes to investigate. While the turtle remains undetected by staying quiet, the lizard panics and flees, drawing the farmer’s attention but ultimately escaping. Later, when they find honey, the turtle advises caution, but the lizard, failing to learn from his earlier mistake, indulges noisily, attracting bees. Suffering from the bees’ stings, the lizard falls into a trap and dies, while the turtle proceeds alone on his journey. (*T-A Filipino Folktale*, n.d.).

The third story is “Sang Kancil counts The Crocodile.” In a Malaysian folktale, Kancil the mouse deer desires fruits from a tree across a river but remembers a conflict with a crocodile living there. Ingeniously, Kancil tells the crocodile that King Solomon seeks a count of all crocodiles in the river for a reward. Eager for the prize, the crocodile agrees to help Kancil, who quickly counts the crocodiles under the guise of this task. Upon completing the count, Kancil rewards them with fruit, disappointing the crocodile

who expected meat from the King. Despite his disillusionment, the crocodile accepts the gift, and Kancil joyfully eats the fruits. (*Sang Kancil counts the Crocodiles - Malaysian Folktale*, n.d.).

In the theoretical framework, this paper references Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism. In his work, *The Structure of Myth* (1955), Lévi-Strauss explains that folktales exhibit shared characteristics in terms of specific elements, parts, or episodes. According to Lévi-Strauss, these similarities are not merely coincidental, but rather require substantiation. In his examination of folktales, Lévi-Strauss incorporates his knowledge of language studies, particularly structural linguistics. Through this, he endeavors to illustrate that at its core, diverse folktales or narratives can be assimilated into a singular pattern, akin to the workings of linguistics. Furthermore, he incorporates other concepts, such as Jakobson's notion of sound in language. By considering this, Lévi-Strauss expands his argument, asserting that the distinctive elements of a language form oppositions that ultimately generate a collection of paired contrasts. These contrasts, referred to as binary oppositions, can uncover the manner in which humans reason, generate significance, and comprehend reality.

This paper will focus specifically on exclusive binary oppositions, which are primarily observed in concepts such as good and evil, sacred and sinful, and others. In the realm of narrative, binary oppositions play a crucial role in uncovering the underlying meaning and logic within stories. According to Lévi-Strauss, the process of identifying binary oppositions in a narrative consists of three stages. The first stage involves the exploration of mythemes, which can take the form of sentences, scenes, sequences of sentences, and so forth. The second stage entails establishing relationships among the identified mythemes. Lastly, the third stage involves organizing these mythemes in both syntagmatic and paradigmatic manners to extract meaning from the story (Lévi-Strauss, 1955).

Findings and Discussion

There are three folktales entitled “The Quarrel of the Monkey and the Crab,” “The Turtle and the Lizard,” and “Sang Kancil Counts the Crocodiles.” These three folktales exhibit similarities in their overarching narratives. Firstly, they all originate from Asia, and secondly, they utilize animals as characters. Lastly, these tales primarily serve as pedagogical tools to impart moral lessons to young children. The presence of these shared elements can be observed throughout the narrative, in which the animals are consistently depicted as opposing forces. As such, conducting a comprehensive analysis is imperative in order to fully comprehend the portrayal of these animals.

1. Exclusive Binary Opposition: Good vs. Bad

Throughout the three folktales, there are six animals, namely the monkey, the crab, the lizard, the turtle, Kancil, and the crocodile. Among these characters, the first crab, the turtle, and Kancil prominently exemplify virtues. For instance, the first crab is portrayed as both naive and patient, while the turtle and Kancil are depicted as intelligent beings who thoroughly analyze situations before taking action. On the other hand, the monkey, the big lizard, and the crocodile predominantly exhibit negative attributes. The monkey is notorious for its deceitfulness, whereas the lizard and the crocodile are portrayed as

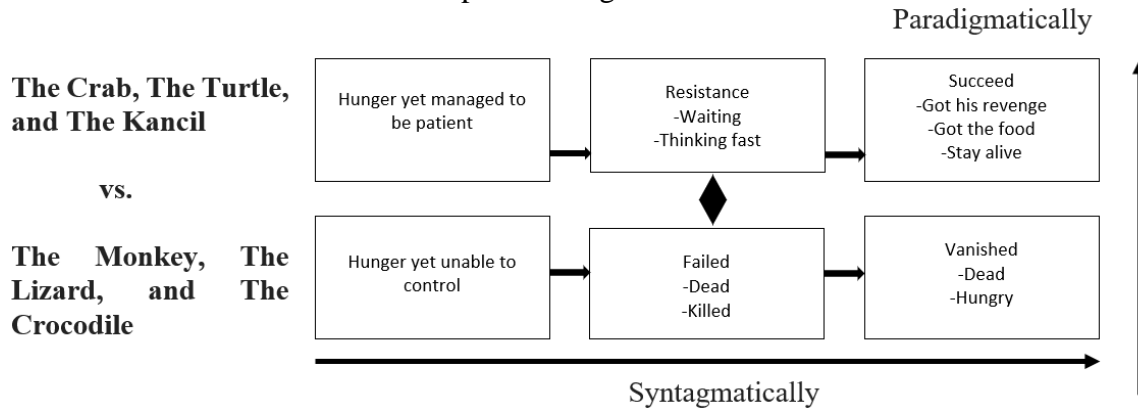
lacking in intelligence. This contrast between positive and negative qualities is clearly illustrated in the table provided below.

Table 1. Comparison of depictions between good and evil animal characters

GOOD	BAD
<p>1. The Crab <i>You can imagine the feelings of the poor crab after waiting patiently, for so long as he had done, for the tree to grow and the fruit to ripen, when he saw the monkey devouring all the good persimmons.</i></p> <p>2. The Turtle <i>The turtle could not run fast, so he lay very still, and the man did not see him.</i></p> <p>3. The Kancil <i>Sang Kancil who knew he cannot go any much faster with his injured leg started to think. An idea struck his small but quick brain.</i></p>	<p>1. The Monkey <i>When the wicked monkey saw that he had killed the crab he ran away from the spot as fast as he could, in fear and trembling, like a coward as he was.</i></p> <p>2. The Big Lizard <i>The lizard would not wait, but ran ahead, and when he seized the honey, the bees came out and stung him.</i></p> <p>3. The Crocodile <i>Sang Buaya, who was not among the brightest animals, believed what Sang Kancil had just said, and immediately released the 'twig' and prepared to take another good snap.</i></p>

The relationship of each characteristic above can be seen in the table below, as follows.

Table 2. The relationship between good and evil animal characters



Based on the aforementioned tables, Strauss's analysis can be further developed by discerning binary oppositions and comprehending the interrelationships present in the narratives. Consequently, the initial phase involves the identification of the mytheme, denoting recurrent motifs. In this instance, the mythemes can be observed in the “resistance” and “failure” exhibited by the characters. Once these mythemes are identified, they are categorized and presented in both a syntagmatic and paradigmatic table. The syntagmatic component of the table encapsulates the essence of the narratives, while the paradigmatic aspect illustrates the underlying structural significance within this relationship.

As we can see from Table 1, the author has proposed the concept of good and bad in describing the binary opposition of the six animals. The author uses explicit language to explain the characteristics of each animal. For example, the crab is described as acting 'patiently', while the monkey is referred to as 'wicked'. The same goes for the kancil and the crocodile. The kancil is described as having a 'quick brain', while the crocodile is portrayed as 'not the brightest animal'. In terms of implicit language, we can observe the actions of the turtle and the big lizard. Both animals engage in similar actions, indicated by the use of the word 'not'. However, the outcomes leave them in different situations.

In Table 2, the analysis of the animals' ability to manage the problems on both sides reveals discernible patterns. It becomes evident that favorable traits contribute to resistance against the problems, whereas unfavorable traits tend to have the opposite effect. As the narrative of the three folktales unfolds, the characters possessing positive traits consistently achieve favorable outcomes, while those displaying negative traits experience negative consequences. The case of the first crab may appear distinct, as its demise is attributed to its naivety. However, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that the first crab ultimately attains justice in the narrative's denouement. It is important to note that this does not imply that the monkey's death is inherently beneficial; rather, it underscores the notion that actions in the past can yield unforeseen repercussions.

2. Having disadvantages vs. advantages in physical features

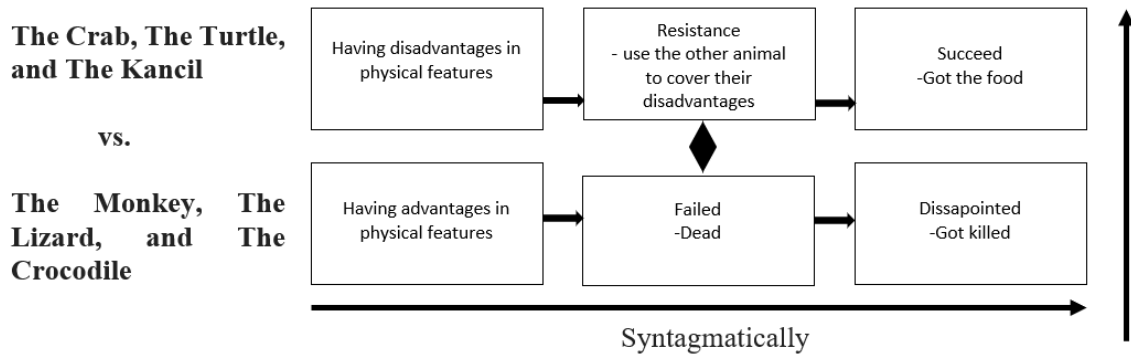
Besides the dichotomy between good and bad, animals also possess both disadvantages and advantages in terms of physical characteristics. The Crab, Turtle, and Kancil encounter challenges in attaining their objectives due to their physical limitations. Conversely, the Monkey, large Lizard, and Crocodile possess physical attributes that can provide benefits for themselves and, potentially, others. The disparities in their physical features can be observed in the following table:

Table 3. Comparison of physical depictions between animal characters

DISADVANTAGES	ADVANTAGES
<p>1. The Crab <i>He made several attempts to climb the tree; in the vain hope of reaching one of the beautiful persimmons hanging above him; but he failed each time; for a crab's legs are not made for climbing trees ...</i></p> <p>2. The Turtle <i>The turtle could not run fast, so he lay very still, and the man did not see him.</i></p> <p>3. Kancil <i>He could do nothing but haplessly watch the floating red ripening fruits being carried away by the slow current of the river he could not cross. Although the current was slow, the water was very deep and the river just too wide for him to swim, the next shore.</i></p>	<p>1. The Monkey <i>He quickly climbed the tree and began to pluck and eat, as fast as he could, one persimmon after another.</i></p> <p>2. The Big Lizard <i>The lizard ran and the man chased him...The man ran after the lizard for a long distance, but he could not catch him.</i></p> <p>3. The Crocodile <i>Without losing much of his precious time, Sang Buaya quickly dived into the river to inform his leader.</i></p>

The relationship between these traits of having disadvantages and advantages in terms of physical features can be spotted in the table below,

Table 4. Relationship between animal with superior and inferior physique Paradigmatically



As in previous analyses, we can employ Strauss's analysis to discern binary oppositions and comprehend their significance in the narratives by utilizing the furnished tables. The initial step involves identifying pivotal themes or sentences that underscore the characters' "resistance" and "failure." Subsequently, these themes are arranged in syntagmatic and paradigmatic tables. The syntagmatic table serves to present the core essence of the narratives, while the paradigmatic table concentrates on the structural meanings inherent in the character relationships.

Table 3 analyzes the dichotomy of physical characteristics, elucidating the associated drawbacks and benefits. This is exemplified through narrative accounts that depict the capacities and limitations of diverse animal species. To illustrate, the crab is incapable of ascending trees, whereas the monkey can effortlessly perform this feat. This pattern is reiterated in the remaining two narratives, where the turtle is portrayed as a sluggish runner, in stark contrast to the fleet-footed lizard that eludes the farmer's pursuit. Additionally, the kancil is constrained in its swimming abilities, thus distinguishing it from the crocodile.

As illustrated in Table 4, the correlation among the animals, their physical attributes, and their narrative roles is apparent. The aforementioned trio of stories distinctly demonstrates that, despite possessing inherent physical advantages, these animals ultimately encounter disillusionment and demise. Conversely, characters confronting inherent disadvantages succeed in attaining sustenance and rectitude.

Therefore, according to the binary oppositions, two distinct interpretations can be deduced. The initial interpretation posits that one's actions directly determine their gains. This is evident in the behavior of animals that engage in altruistic acts, as they consistently experience favorable consequences in contrast to those who engage in negative behavior. The second interpretation highlights the notion that possessing advantages alone does not guarantee individual success; rather, achieving desired outcomes necessitates supplementary exertion in both cognitive and behavioral domains..

3. The Tendency of Labelling Animals

As mentioned in the introduction, this paper discusses the tendencies in labeling animals in literature, specifically focusing on the three folktales that are examined. Within

these folktales, the labeling tendencies are influenced by two factors: the size and physical features of the animals.

Firstly, the main focus is the concept of size. Upon examining Table 1, it becomes apparent that smaller animals (such as the crab, turtle, and Kancil) are associated with positive impressions, while larger animals (including the monkey, big lizard, and crocodile) are linked to negative impressions. Moreover, Table 3 highlights the protagonists' physical limitations in acquiring food, rendering them more vulnerable in comparison to other animals depicted in the stories. This notion holds true to some extent, as humans often employ animal characteristics to simplify their recollection of various species. Regarding size, research conducted by Loe and Roskaft indicates that larger carnivores are often perceived as threats to human beings and are commonly regarded as dangerous (Löe & Röskaft, 2004). The same rationale applies to physical attributes. The crab, turtle, and Kancil typically possess physical features that are considered to pose low to moderate danger, enabling them to coexist in proximity to humans. Consequently, they are frequently portrayed as pets or sources of sustenance. Conversely, the monkey, big lizard, and crocodile are frequently depicted in media as creatures prone to causing chaos and posing a threat to humans. These animals are typically housed in zoos, suggesting that they are unable to reside near humans. This perception is also reflected in literature, as demonstrated in the three folktales, thereby reinforcing the notion that it is acceptable for humans to adopt such beliefs. Consequently, animals, due to their large size and physical attributes, are commonly perceived as dangerous in literature.

Although large animals with dangerous physical features can pose a threat to humans, it is inaccurate to claim that small animals like crabs, turtles, and kancils have the same impact. While certain types of crabs can indeed be dangerous, as mentioned in *Australian Geographic*, it is essential to note that only half a milligram of toxin from an *L.incisus* crab can be lethal to an average human being (Crew, 2021). Similarly, while turtles may not be as agile in their movements, they can still inflict bites and spread diseases. For instance, the snapping turtle is known to be highly aggressive by nature, with its bite being comparable to that of a crocodile attack. Additionally, a study conducted in 2013 found that turtles with shells measuring less than four inches can carry the harmful virus *Salmonella* (Nadim, 2023). In other words, categorizing animals based on size is not entirely accurate; it is often just a simplification made by humans. Furthermore, it is important to remember that all animals are driven by instinct, unlike humans who rely on logic and emotion when making decisions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, folktales, particularly those originating from Southeast Asia, have always served as a means of communication and moral instruction for children. These folktales commonly employ animal characters, which adds to the allure of the stories. Nevertheless, different Southeast Asian countries depict animals in varying ways, often utilizing concepts of good versus evil or binary opposition. This portrayal has become deeply ingrained in literature, as evidenced by three specific folktales: "The Quarrel of the Monkey and The Crab," "The Turtle and The Lizard," and "Sang Kancil counts The Crocodiles." These tales present animals as representing two distinct sides of a coin. The significance of this binary opposition within the stories is explored in the paper, as is the normalcy of attributing dangerous characteristics to animals through anthropomorphism. Such attributions are influenced by the animals' physical attributes and size.

The author posits that the widespread use of binary opposition in Southeast Asian folktales may stem from a pragmatic need to simplify moral instruction for children. Historically, limited access to formal education necessitated reliance on personal experiences and oral traditions rooted in everyday life. As people frequently interacted with animals in their natural habitats, these experiences likely shaped the development of folktales centered around animal characters. These stories served the dual purpose of cautioning children against dangerous creatures and transmitting clear moral lessons. However, it is important to recognize that animal behavior is primarily driven by instinct, and their perceived “goodness” or “badness” may not necessarily align with human interpretations.

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