

Parallel Session D

Digital-Media & Information Technology for Creative Communities

On Technoculture: A Paradigm Shift in Creativity?

Ruly DARMAWAN D-002

**Building Creative Community Online:
Placemaking on the Web**

Dyah DYANITA D-008

**The Cycle of Culture and Visual Media in
*Aang, The Legend of Avatar***

Rianti HIDAYAT & Alvanov ZPALANZANI D-016

From Here and Now: Notes from Common Room

Gustaff H. ISKANDAR D-021

LifeScape

Thanasis KANAKIS, Alexander KITOV, Efi KONTOGEORGOU

& Selin OZCELIK D-029

THE CYCLE OF CULTURE AND VISUAL MEDIA IN AANG, THE LEGEND OF AVATAR

Rianti HIDAYAT

Post-graduate Student - Game Design Study, Faculty of Art and Design,
Institute of Technology Bandung - INDONESIA
kiha_sal_valeth@yahoo.com

Alvanov ZPALANZANI

Lecturer - Faculty of Art and Design, Visual Communication & Multimedia
Research Division, Comics & Sequential Media Study Center
Institute of Technology Bandung - INDONESIA
alvanov@dkv.itb.ac.id, pazzlavainne@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The four elements in Nickelodeon's 'Aang, The Legend of Avatar' animated TV series describes the basic nature of everything in our world. Everything from every elements and every lifeforms that God creates, will incite a full circle of life. The immerse story of Aang enveloped in Chinese cultural representation which could fully emphasize the cycle of life concept although the original concept of four elements comes from Ancient Greek mythology. The cycle of nature in the story occurs in the real world and exists in the cycle of (visual) media.

The vast development of visual media in Information & Communication Technology inflicts new concept of visual media business & management. Animation works as initial media that incites visual media transformation and translation that keeps revolving until the creativity runs out. To apply a full circle, one must carefully choose the right ingredients.

In the end, it will creating virtual culture that co-exists with real-world visual culture and influence each other simultaneously. Through qualitative research on 'Aang, The Legend of Avatar' and other products alike, we depict various aspects that could maintain the longevity in brand awareness and also product life cycle.

The journey of Aang in 'Aang, The Legend of Avatar' is just started, but how long it will lasts? The answers are relying on the aspects that creators of Aang have to generate to expand the lifecycle of the essence of 'Aang, The Legend of Avatar.' We know the answers.

Keywords: *cycle of culture, cycle of media, virtual culture, visual culture, visual media*

ABRIEF AND PLACE OF AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER

Ever since it's first broadcasted in 2005 on nickelodeon channel, Avatar: The last Air bender has been succeeded in earning place in its fan hearts, both in America and Asia. Its creator admitted that Avatar success exceeds their first demographic target.

Avatar: The last Airbender is about Aang's adventure, accompanied by his friend Sokka, Katara, and Toph (in the mid-episodes) to save the world from Fire Nation regime which try to conquer the world. As simple as it seems, the world in Avatar divided based on 4 elements, Water tribe, Fire nation, Air Nomad, and Earth Kingdom. One of its creative content which makes Avatar popular is the Asian elements that widely

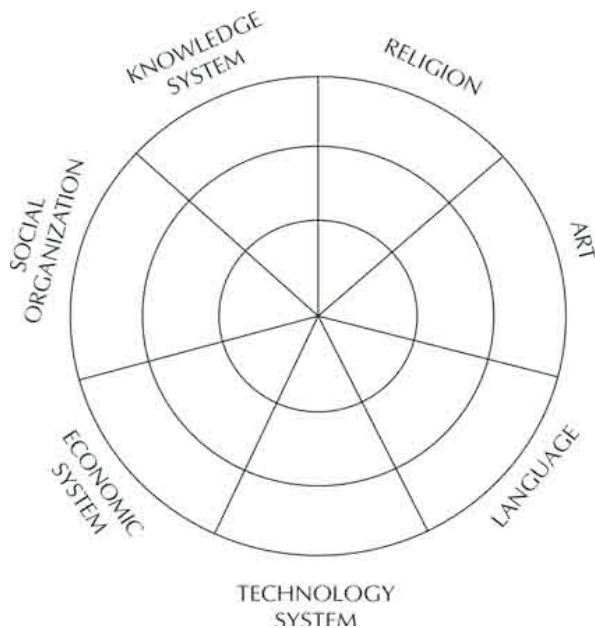
used in each animation aspect; from kung-fu moves, Calligraphy, visual language in animation intro, to Japanese-influenced animation style. Those Asian elements are authentically adapted which makes audiences often think that Avatar is made in Asia, not America. Even 'Avatar' title was also adapted from Ancient Hindu language means 'temporary manifestation of continued entity'; a concept adapted directly to the 'Avatar' in the story. Avatar in fact uses Asian philosophy from 'West' point-of view. This can be seen from the plot style to west-styled logic/humor in each Avatar episodes.

At a glance, Avatar is only one animation title that stands out with its popularity all around the world. Even so, every aspect in Avatar describes the paradigm of changes in contemporary



Figure 1. Avatar : The Last Airbender
Source : <http://awm.com> ; <http://wikipedia.com>

society in real world. There is tolerance shown by western society as a producer to eastern culture and education methods, primarily on advanced country such China, Japan, and Korea. This is very contradictive with their previous concept in imperialism which ended up with colonialism and industrial revolution in world history. Avatar is a form of postmodernism between western and eastern philosophy.



	PHYSICAL CULTURE	SOCIAL SYSTEM	CULTURE SYSTEM
Knowledge System	Spreading verbally. Each territory has their own specialization.	Elders becomes teacher for their wisdom.	Knowledge earned from nature and life itself.
Religion	Believe in mythical and figures in the past; There's a lot of temple and offering statue.	Constructed from spoken language (verbally) and folklore.	Everything in Avatar hold the concept of balance.
Art	Art and dance is done by group; except for the strict character of Fire Nation.	Expressive medium, relatively, creating harmony and beauty.	There is a concept that expressionist in Art need to be pressured for keeping the order in place.
Language	Verbal : English (with translation to other language) Written :Classic Chinese	Verbal Language : Main medium of expression.	Calligraphy hold concept of decision making in identity. Language is crucial for naming.
Technology System	Fire : Weaponry Earth : City System Water : City System & Transportation Wind : not focused on technology	Fire : Productive but Destructive Earth:Productive for prosperity Water : maximize nature potential Wind : use nature as it is	Productive comes from Gospel concept that cherish the 'creation of the world'. Elements attribute related to all aspect in life.
Economic System	Earth kingdom has the strongest economic system. Fire is the representation of industry revolution; water more into hunting living; Wind into monastery	Earth : economy is the most important aspect Fire :Usage of colony resources; Water : so-so economy system Wind : try not too over-consuming by hold out desire	Each residents in Avatar hold responsibility of their own role in one big economic system.
Social Organization	Fire depends on position and skills; Wind depends on spiritual level	Fire : Absolute; Earth : kingdom; Water : Elders; Wind relative, everyone still learning from nature	Elements characteristic related to organization system such as phlegmatic in water.

Figure 2. Culture Framework & Cultural Typology in Aang, The Legend of Avatar
Source : Koentjaraningrat - PENGANTAR ILMU ANTROPOLOGI

THE JUXTAPOSITION OF MYTH AND PHILOSOPHY IN AVATAR WORLD

a. Culture Elements in Avatar

The word 'Culture' comes from Latin word 'Cultura' that means take care of, process, and doing something. That's why culture has broad meanings because its origin based on organic system of humanity. According to Koentjaraningrat, culture can be described with diagram below.

Three concentric circle above consist of 'cultural system' in the most inner circle, 'social system' in the second circle, 'physical culture' in the outer circle; and the seven sector that describes seven elements of universal culture.[1]

b. Eastern Culture in Avatar

Eastern and Western philosophy is considered divided on the base of three big cultures. Western philosophy influenced by European philosophy with Judaism and Christian religion. Eastern philosophy consists of India with its Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as China with Tao, Chan, and Confucius. [2]

1. Elements In Avatar (Fire, Water, Earth, Wind). Although the 4 elements popular in Greece, it is suspected that 4 elements come from Buddhism with its sending 60 Arahats worldwide. Even so, China is more popular with its 5 elements.
2. Transcendent Concept. Eastern philosophy; including Indonesia always belief in the mid-world between real world and spirit world. That's where Avatar role lays.
3. Kung-fu. Kung-fu moves in Avatar similar to the original.
4. Yin-yang Philosophy. Avatar story is all about maintaining balance; Yin and Yang.
5. Bahasa Rupa' and mountain perspective. Ancient way of storytelling described in opening similar to ancient painting of traditional native, not western scientific perspective. [3]
6. Clothes, Equipments, and Attributes. There a lot of application of Asian elements from Japanese plain villager clother, Chinese sword, to Terracotta armor.
7. Calligraphy and Chinese Painting strokes
8. Outline and Color. Different from usual western animation with thick outline and contrast color; Avatar uses thin outline that immerse with background and natural color.
9. Name Concept. 'Ozai' and 'Zuko' name of Fire nation have grand image, while 'Aang' name of Air Nomad sounds flowing.
10. Misc. There are also Yoga teachings about chakra, ad any other Asian elements applied in Avatar story.

c. Western Culture In Avatar

1. Elements in Avatar (Fire, Water, Earth, Air)
2. Fulfilling concept and logic. Eastern philosophies represented in Avatar interpreted and



WEST

Logic
Satisfy /Result
Personal
Face
Context

EAST

Feel
Balance
Holistic
Gesture
Content

Figure 3. Various Visual Culture Adaptation in Aang, The Legend of Avatar & Generalization of Paradigm in Eastern & Western Culture
Source : <http://awm.com> ; <http://wikipedia.com>

solved by western logic. This can be seen from few episodes where Sokka; as a representative of western logical thinking in solving calligraphy tasks.

3. Lack of details. Western design famous of its effective and minimalist design although there were also renaissance movements. Despite of Asian adapted clothes and equipment; its design lacks of pattern, motifs and more into minimalist.
4. Order and Technology.
5. Hierarchy. Hierarchy is the concept strongly applied in western colonialism.
6. Productive
7. Colonialism
8. Miscellaneous. There also Western elements introduced in Avatar such as football game and western-look-pirates.

d. West vs. East in Avatar

Avatar: The last Airbender is an application of combination between Western and Eastern philosophy. Shortly, Avatar is an application on contents in contexts. That's why there's a lot scenes where western logic is used to interpret eastern philosophy. Although at some point it looks awkward, society can still accept them. Sometimes the unity of two philosophies needs reduction in each so it can be accepted worldwide.

CULTURE PARADIGM IN AVATAR

A culture formed from the diagram above. For example, the popularity of hand phone culture starts with consumption; followed by regulation after there're so many users. Finally, hand phone nowadays become an identity and representation of the society and keep circled around as described in the diagram.

Real world and virtual world influenced each other. Electronic Culture theory describes that a language in media can be an icon that represents both reality and abstract things like idea of the creator. From that concept, the circuit culture can be developed and forms juxtaposition of two realm, reality culture and virtual culture in Avatar. Then the reality culture can be divided into western and eastern culture that influenced each other.

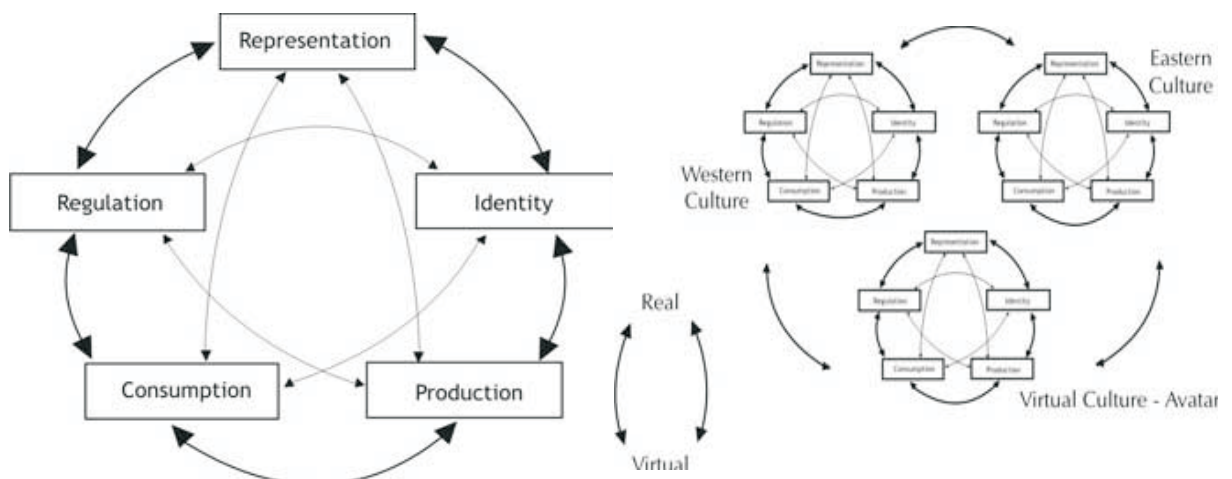


Figure 4. The Circuit of Culture & Juxtaposition of among Circuits of Culture.

That diagram always circled around in the society triggered by circuit of media [9]. Each media related to the other connected by merchandise. For example, Avatar popularity followed by the launching or print media such as comic, then video-games (interactive media); connected with the bonus material such as action figure of Avatar character. This cycle is followed by the launching of new audio visual media; an Avatar live-action planned to be directed by Mr. Night Shyamalan.

THE CULTURAL REPRESENTATION CIRCLE IN AVATAR

One culture can be absorbed when it already becomes identity. China and India is considered having strong identity so they always assumed as representatives of Eastern culture. India not strongly described in Avatar because they already immerse in American society. China, on the contrary, looks very contrast wherever its society lives. China also can be described as a wriggling dragon in all aspect of development nowadays. But of course we need further research about American view on China as a factor of Avatar animation. How about Indonesia? Indonesia is claimed not having strong identity so it isn't prominent enough as eastern culture representative. Indonesian local culture isn't developed well because it doesn't rotate in the circuit of culture.

Circuit of Culture in Avatar case is still on the stage of consumption. Avatar consumption with its contradictive but immersive philosophy content will give impact on society; triggered by the circuit of media such as the launching of comic and any other supportive media. The effect of Avatar will be seen in the future when the generation of Avatar consumer becomes dominant in the society.

Will this animation becomes benchmark of how society thinks about western and eastern philosophy in the future?

The effect of this animation is similar to those snowballing effect that becomes bigger and bigger. However, culture is dynamic.

Notes

- [1] Koentjaraningrat. ,1990, *Pengantar Ilmu Antropologi*, Rineka Cipta, Jakarta
- [2] Takwin. Bagus. ,2003, *Filsafat Timur: Sebuah Pengantar ke Pemikiran -Pemikiran Timur*, Jalasutra, Yogyakarta.
- [3] Tabrani, Primadi, 2005, *Bahasa Rupa*, Kelir publishing, Bandung, Indonesia

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Danandjaja. James, 2007, *Folklor Indonesia, Ilmu Gosip, Dengeng dan Lain-Lain*, Grafiti, Jakarta
- Druckrey, Timothy.,1996, *Electronic Culture, Technology & Visual Representation*, Aperture Foundation.
- Endraswara, Suwardi., 2003, *Metode Penelitian Kebudayaan*, Gadjah Mada University Press, Yogyakarta.
- Hall, Stuart. *Representation, Cultural Representation & Signifying Practices*, SAGE Publishing, London
- J.Bahim, Archie. 2003, *Filsafat Perbandingan, Filsafat Barat, India, Cina dalam Perbandingan*, Kanisius, Yogyakarta.
- Koentjaraningrat. ,1990, *Pengantar Ilmu Antropologi*, Rineka Cipta, Jakarta
- Tabrani, Primadi, 2005, *Bahasa Rupa*, Kelir publishing, Bandung, Indonesia
- Takwin. Bagus. ,2003, *Filsafat Timur, Sebuah Pengantar ke Pemikiran-Pemikiran Timur*, Jalasutra, Yogyakarta.
- Zpalanzani, Alvanov, 2005, *Analysis of Ragnarok phenomenon A Case Study of Culture Involvement and its role in Service Marketing on Ragnarok Massive Multi-Player Online Role Playing Game in Indonesia*. Unpublished Thesis, Institute Management of TELKOM (IM TELKOM).