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Kung Fu Panda - A Good Story Well Done

James E. Bruner

Southeastern University - Lakeland, jebruner@seu.edu

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James Elijah Bruner

Professor Dr. Grace Veach

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Kung Fu Panda - A Good Story Well Done

Life is a collection of stories. The stories we live through, the stories we create, the stories we share with others, the stories we tend to hide – storytelling is incredibly important in the everyday lives of humans. Over the course of history, the methods of storytelling have advanced much in the same way society has advanced. From paintings on cave walls, books, shanties in taverns, full-fledged theater productions in the Globe to incredible motion pictures, the means of storytelling have noticeably progressed. However, the constant components of a good story have never changed: enticing plots, courageous heroes, and narrative beauty.

According to Harry Lee Poe, a Professor of Faith and Culture at Union University, “the ability to tell a story involves the ability to weave the incidents together in a meaningful way” (Poe 40). In our modern age, we can choose any medium to both partake in and create stories with. The most popular of these mediums in the modern day is the miracle of the moving picture, also called a movie. One of the most popular genres of movies for both young and old alike is the animated motion picture.

The *Kung Fu Panda* movies are a series of animated children’s movies created by Dreamworks Animation studios that have witnessed great success in box offices worldwide. The first movie, *Kung Fu Panda* had a worldwide box office profit of \$631,910,531. The second

movie, *Kung Fu Panda 2* is arguably the most popular of the three movies and its earnings certainly show that. It made over \$664,837,547 in box offices worldwide. The third movie, *Kung Fu Panda 3* made only \$521,170,825 in box offices. When looking at their production budgets, it is quite impressive how much these movies made. Adding the profits altogether, the *Kung Fu Panda* franchise has made over 1 billion dollars worldwide (the Numbers).

Kung Fu Panda was released in 2008. The story of the movie was written by Ethan Reiff and Cyrus Voris. It was directed by John Stevenson and Mark Osborn. *Kung Fu Panda* is a story of a young panda named Po, who dreams of being an incredible Kung Fu master. To his surprise, he is chosen to be the Dragon Warrior, the highest rank among the Kung Fu masters. Po must master the art of Kung Fu and eventually save the Valley of Peace from a coming evil.

Kung Fu Panda 2 was released in 2011. The story of this movie was written by Jonathon Abiel and Glenn Berger and was directed by Jennifer Yuh Nelson, who was involved in the creation of the first movie. *Kung Fu Panda 2* continues the story of Po the panda, who is now revered as the Dragon Warrior, protecting the Valley of Peace alongside his fellow Kung Fu Masters. However, a dangerous new villain arises and threatens to wipe out Kung Fu with a powerful technological weapon. Po finds he must recall his unknown past and unlock the secrets of his origins; only then will he find the strength to defeat this foe.

Kung Fu Panda 3 was released in 2016. The story of the movie was again written by Jonathon Abiel and Glenn Berger and directed by Jennifer Yuh Nelson. *Kung Fu Panda 3* again continues the story of Po, who is faced once more with a dangerous enemy to the world of kung fu as well as the daunting prospect of becoming a teacher. Po must now embark on a journey alongside his long-lost father to find a hidden village of pandas and rediscover the lost art of Chi in order to defend against this new foe.

Based on its box office profits, everyone can agree that the *Kung Fu Panda* franchise has been a commercial success. However, is it a good story that is well done? The *Kung Fu Panda* franchise is a modern, animated interpretation of a story with a classic foundation. The classic storytelling is demonstrated by Po's traditional journey as a hero, the consistent and cohesive adherence to plot structure and familiar story arcs and beautiful depictions of Asian martial art culture and symbolism.

Journey of a Panda

The Hero with a Thousand Faces, written by Joseph Campbell in 1949, is a respected and revered book that intricately elaborates upon the many steps of a fictitious hero's journey. Campbell outlines the journey of a hero and how that journey is a constant in mythology and storytelling throughout human history. There are approximately seventeen steps that Campbell has discovered and describes in the book: "Call to Action," "Refusal of Call," "Supernatural Aid," "Crossing the Threshold," "Belly of the Whale," "The Road of Trials," "Meeting the Goddess," "Temptation," "Atonement with the Father," "Apotheosis," "The Ultimate Boon," "Refusal of Return," "Magic Flight," "Rescue from Without," "Crossing the Return Threshold," "Master of Two Worlds," and "Freedom to Live" (Matos 4, Campbell 41-205). Not all the steps described are necessary for a complete hero's journey and certain steps can stand in the place of others depending on the story (Matos 4). Based on a comparison of Po with Campbell's journey of a hero, Po exemplifies a classical Campbellian hero throughout *Kung Fu Panda*, *Kung Fu Panda 2*, and *Kung Fu Panda 3* with some notable differences.

Kung Fu Panda:

Po follows the Campbellian journey of a hero in the first movie, *Kung Fu Panda*. In almost every hero's journey, the story begins with an invitation to a journey that carries on for

the rest of the story (Campbell 48). This step, the “Call to Action”, happens to Po when he learns that the Dragon Warrior will be selected to by Master Oogway to join the Furious Five in protecting the Valley of Peace and his curiosity propels him to the event. The “Call to Action” is completed when Po himself is unexpectedly selected to fill the role completely out of the blue. After a humiliating first day of training at the hands of Master Shifu, a dejected Po receives guidance from Master Oogway that inspires him to continue in his training. At first, this gesture seems to echo the “Supernatural Aid” mentioned in Campbell’s writing (Campbell 57) , but it more serves as Po “Crossing the Threshold” (Campbell 64) from ordinary life to beginning his adventures in kung fu. Interestingly there are two scenes that could represent the “Belly of the Whale” in *Kung Fu Panda*. The “Belly of the Whale” is described as a state in which “the hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown” (Campbell 74). The first of these situations is Po’s argument with Shifu towards the middle of the movie. This was a moment of deep emotional turmoil for both characters because Po realized the true weight of his responsibility and Shifu had to learn a new way of teaching in order to train the Dragon Warrior.

Scenes quickly follow this occurrence that represent “Supernatural Aid” (Campbell 57), “The Road of Trials” (Campbell 81), and “Atonement with the Father” (Campbell 105). In these scenes, Shifu takes Po to the spiritual birthplace of Kung Fu to intensively train him, and Po finally acknowledges Shifu to be his master. The second “Belly of the Whale” occurs afterwards when Po misinterprets the message of the Dragon Scroll, which was described throughout the movie as a vessel of knowledge and power that would turn Po into the true Dragon Warrior. When the scroll is revealed to be blank, Po has another crisis of disbelief and Shifu decides that he must face a coming threat alone while the others escape. Po then experiences Campbell’s

“Apotheosis” which is described as a stark point of realization in which a new understanding is achieved (Campbell 127). After Po’s father, Mr. Ping, shares with him the wisdom “to make something special, you just have to believe it is special!” Po realizes the true meaning of the Dragon Scroll.

It is at the climax of the story that “The Ultimate Boon” step (Campbell 128) for Po is revealed. Po finally defeats the great enemy of the story and reveals that there truly is no secret ingredient to kung fu; the only thing needed is yourself. Having conquered his trepidation, Po finally becomes the Dragon Warrior and becomes a “Master of Two Worlds” as described by Campbell (Campbell 196). After analyzing the story of *Kung Fu Panda* closely and comparing it to Campbell’s journey of a classical hero, the journey of Po clearly meets many of Campbell’s criterion for a true hero’s journey.

Kung Fu Panda 2:

In the next installment of the *Kung Fu Panda* franchise, Po again follows the Campbellian journey of a hero in his second movie, *Kung Fu Panda 2*. While this movie features fewer steps in the hero’s journey than the first movie, it is widely regarded as the best movie in the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy. As before, the steps to a hero’s journey that occur in *Kung Fu Panda 2* happen in different order and number than written by Campbell. There are several “Calls to Action” presented in the beginning of this story (Campbell 48). The first comes from Master Shifu as he admonishes Po to learn the secrets of Inner Peace in order to further his training as a Kung Fu master. This call is not one that Po understands initially and shuns it to the side, a first “Refusal of Call” (Campbell 49). The second “Call to Action” in this story comes from the villainous Lord Shen who has engineered a technological threat to the art of Kung Fu in the faraway Gongmen City. After a battle against Lord Shen’s metal-thieving bandits, Po and the

Furious Five must go forward to defeat this threat in order to protect all of China. Even before this, Po receives a third, more mysterious “Call to Action” in the initial battle against the bandits. A marking on the lead bandit’s shoulder invokes an unfamiliar vision of Po’s mother, causing Po to question his identity. Po meets the “Call to Action” to go defeat a faraway villain without hesitation. He suppresses the vision, deeming it less important than the task before him, and this suppression becomes a “Refusal of Call”.

After a long and arduous journey, Po and the Furious Five arrive at Gongmen City. Based on its presentation in the story, the arrival acts as the “Crossing of the First Threshold” (Campbell 64). The city itself is quite unfamiliar to anything presented in the first movie. The setting and situation resonate with danger. The streets are claustrophobic and narrow and the city is infested with dangerous enemies. Kung fu masters are imprisoned and an omnipotent tower stands with intimidation over it all. In entering the city, Po and his fellows are clearly passing a point of no return. After a series of events in which the heroes try to free the imprisoned kung fu masters, Po and his fellow masters find themselves captured by Lord Shen. It is during this encounter that Po learns of Lord Shen’s involvement in his elusive past and visions. This startling realization causes Po to hesitate in attacking and allows Lord Shen to escape. After this failure, Po is now determined to confront Lord Shen and force the truth out of him. At this point in the story, we witness the scene that may represent a type of “Meeting with the Goddess”. Campbell describes this step as the hero meeting something that “represents the totality of what can be known” (Campbell 97). The goddess is someone who lures, guides, and bids the hero to break their shackles. Though this scene suggests a “Meeting with the Goddess” occurs, it does not follow the description as defined by Campbell. Seeing her friend in confusion, ordinarily stern and steadfast Master Tigress offers sympathy to Po’s dilemma. She asks that he stay

behind while the others go to stop Lord Shen. Out of both anger and confusion, Po goes to confront Lord Shen alone without telling his fellow masters. Lord Shen takes the opportunity to plant the seed of deception in Po that his parents did not love him and had abandoned him out of dislike. In a moment of doubt, Po hesitates and is hit by one of Shen's cannons and catapulted miles away from the battle.

It is in this area of the story that Po experiences the "Belly of the Whale" once more (Campbell 74). He wakes up in an unfamiliar ruined village, revived by a soothsayer that Lord Shen had held captive. The soothsayer reveals to him that this is the village where he was born and implores him to delve into his repressed memories to find the truth of his past. In the fog of his memories, Po learns that his parents had sacrificed themselves so he could escape. It is in this moment of Po's vulnerability that the soothsayer states: "Your story may not have such a happy beginning, but that does not make you who you are. It is the rest of your story. Who you choose to be." These words echo something Po's father had stated at the beginning of the story. In this scene, "Supernatural Aid" (Campbell 57) and "Apotheosis" (Campbell 127) occur all at the same time when Po obtains Inner Peace; the goal that was introduced at the beginning of the story. Anger and confusion over his beginnings do not hold Po back any longer; he can go forward to defeat Lord Shen and rescue his friends without being held back by his former uncertainty. In the final battle against Shen, Po manages to free his friends and rally the other captive kung fu masters to attack Lord Shen's fleet. Out of fearful desperation to kill Po, Shen turns the largest of the cannons upon his attackers, completely disregarding the safety of his soldiers and his fleet. Lord Shen fires the cannon, destroying many of the boats and injuring several masters in the process. Po is utterly alone to face the oncoming army led by Lord Shen.

At the climax of this story, “Apotheosis” occurs once more as Po channels true inner peace to face the army. Channeling this inner peace, Po catches and returns the cannonballs fired, destroying the remaining ships and their cannons. Victoriously, Po destroys Shen’s largest cannon and his ship along with it. It is at the end of this battle that Po finds “The Ultimate Boon” (Campbell 128). When Shen is most vulnerable, Po does not try to take revenge and offers Lord Shen a chance at redemption. Shen refuses this and perishes in attempting to kill Po one last time. At the end of the story, Po returns home to Mr. Ping and states that despite everything he has seen, he is still Mr. Ping’s son. This represents the “Master of Two Worlds” (Campbell 196) and the “Freedom to Live” steps of the story. Po has found peace with the turmoil of his past, peace with threats far away, and peace within himself. After thorough research, Po’s journey in *Kung Fu Panda 2* does indeed follow many of the steps of Campbell’s hero’s journey. In fact, it fulfills several more journey steps than the first movie which makes it a far more appealing hero story.

Kung Fu Panda 3:

In the third installment of the *Kung Fu Panda* franchise, Po once more follows the Campbellian journey of a hero in *Kung Fu Panda 3*. Fans of the *Kung Fu Panda* franchise do not regard this story as highly as the first two, but the steps of the Campbellian journey can be recognized, nonetheless. Similar to *Kung Fu Panda 2*, there are four specific “Calls to Action” (Campbell 48) that initiate the narrative of the story. The first “Call to Action” in this story occurs in an unfamiliar place referred to as the Spirit Realm, a place where kung fu masters ascend to at the time of their death. Master Oogway peacefully exists in the Spirit Realm many years after his ascension, calmly meditating upon his own inner peace. His calm is interrupted when a ghost from his past known as Kai attacks him. Kai reveals that he has stolen the chi of

every kung fu master in the Spirit Realm and has now come to take Oogway's. After a devastating battle, Oogway's chi is stolen as well. This grants Kai enough power to leave the Spirit Realm and continue his mission to steal all chi.

This initial "Call to Action" is different to *Kung Fu Panda* and *Kung Fu Panda 2* because it happens outside of Po's presence. However, it ultimately is a call to him because his title and role as the Dragon Warrior means he will have to answer the coming threat eventually. Since the conclusion of *Kung Fu Panda 2*, Po and the Furious Five have protected the Valley of Peace together for years and Po could not be more content. That is until a meeting with Master Shifu reveals the second "Call to Action". Master Shifu states he will no longer act as a teacher of kung fu and plans to leave the responsibility to Po. This revelation disturbs Po greatly since he is not a teacher. This is made dreadfully apparent after his first training session to be a teacher, which is presented as nothing short of a disaster. Discouraged by his first lesson, Po walks through a garden of statues outside the Jade Palace pondering his choices. Shifu reveals a third "Call to Action" by stating that he had set up Po to fail in order to show him he had still more to learn. Shifu states that "If you only do what you can do, you will never be more than you are." Implying that Po still has many things to learn, Shifu then demonstrates the power of chi, the life force that moves throughout all things in existence. The fourth and final "Call to Action" occurs when his biological father, Lee Shan, arrives unexpectedly at Mr. Ping's restaurant and reunites with Po.

The initial "Call to Action" comes full circle to Po when he and his fellow masters are summoned to fight a threat to the valley. The threat, created by Kai, is a group of long-deceased kung fu masters clad completely in jade that have come to capture Po and the Furious Five. Kai drained these kung fu masters of chi in the Spirit Realm and they are now enslaved to do his

bidding. Shifu's research in the Jade Palace archives reveals the former connections between Oogway, Kai, and the pandas who were masters of chi and that only a true master of chi can stop the wrath of Kai. Hearing this, Lee Shan tells Po that he can take him to the secret village and teach him the ways of chi by teaching him to be a true panda. This acts as the story's "Crossing of the First Threshold" (Campbell 64) because Po enthusiastically agrees to go learn the ways of chi in the faraway village. In doing this, Po is answering the calls to learn the ways of chi, find his people, and to defeat the wrath of Kai. However, by leaving, Po rejects his new duty to teach kung fu, thus resulting in a "Refusal of the Call" (Campbell 49). Unbeknownst to Po, Mr. Ping stowed away in his bag on the journey to the panda village. Upon their arrival in the mountainous village of pandas, Po engages in many of the day-to-day habits and antics of the pandas. He hopes that embracing the ways of pandas will make him a master of chi as Lee Shan stated. Far away at the Jade Palace, Kai defeats four members of the Furious Five and steals the chi of Master Shifu. Only Master Tigress escapes in order to warn Po. This marks the beginning of this movie's "Belly of the Whale" (Campbell 74). Even after truly integrating into the panda's society, Po doubts he has mastered chi. Master Tigress then arrives in shambles to deliver the distressing news about the attack upon the Jade Palace and states that Kai is coming to take the panda village. At this point, Po questions his father, Lee Shan, as to why he has not mastered chi. Lee Shan confesses that he has never known the ways of chi and brought Po to the village out of concern for his safety, hoping that he could hide Po from the vengeance of Kai. Finding Lee in a depressive state, Mr. Ping goes to him in a scene reminiscent of "Atonement with the Father" (Campbell 105) and offers guidance in being a parent to Po while seeking forgiveness for his unkindness towards Lee. Feeling betrayed, Po distances himself from Lee in order to train for the arrival of Kai. Tigress seeks to help Po in this time of need in another scene that echoes "The

Meeting with the Goddess” (Campbell 97). She states that they need a new plan in order to defeat Kai and his current course of action will fail if he continues. In another scene reminiscent of “Atonement with the Father” Lee Shan approaches Po alongside the rest of the villagers asking him for guidance.

At this point in the story Po has an “Apotheosis” moment (Campbell 127). He realizes that the key to defeating Kai lies in teaching, the first call he rejected. He must train the pandas of the village to use their diverse talents to their fullest potential in order to vanquish the coming threat of Kai and his Jade Warriors. It is interesting to remark upon how Po has progressed throughout the *Kung Fu Panda* movies. He goes from being trained and refined into his full potential to training others into their own full potential. He trains the panda villagers in the same manner that Master Shifu trained him, utilizing something meaningful to them to motivate their training. A series of battles occur between Po and Kai including a journey to the Spirit Realm with the pandas desperately channeling the forgotten power of chi to save Po. “Apotheosis” and “The Ultimate Boon” (Campbell 128) occur simultaneously as Po transforms into a true kung fu master of chi with the help of the pandas.

After an extensive battle in the Spirit Realm, Po defeats Kai, thus restoring the chi of the living and dead Kung Fu masters and releasing Master Oogway. Oogway talks to Po and states he is proud of how far he has come; he states that Po has truly become a Kung Fu master and can return home from the Spirit Realm. Po becomes “Master of the Two Worlds” (Campbell 196), as he has answered every “Call to Action” that was presented at the beginning of the story. The movie ends in a celebration. Po has taught everyone to be a wielder of chi and he now has the “Freedom to Live”. It is interesting to note how the quality of a Hero’s Journey often revolves around how many of Campbell’s steps it successfully fulfills. The story arc in *Kung Fu Panda 3*

meets fewer of the steps required to make it a satisfying Hero's Journey and the audience's reception of the movie mirrored that. While it is not the favorite of the trilogy, *Kung Fu Panda 3* still echoes several of the steps of the Hero's Journey and teaches important lessons.

In conclusion, Po is indeed depicted as a classic Campbellian hero in his journey through *Kung Fu Panda*, *Kung Fu Panda 2*, and *Kung Fu Panda 3* with some notable differences. It is interesting to note how different Po is from the typical heroes Joseph Campbell generally writes about. Instead of being a masculine, mythological hero descended from a long line of noble kings, Po is simply an ordinary, clumsy panda who is unexpectedly called to an extraordinary action. Analyzing his story with Campbell's Journey of a Hero gives tremendous insight into how one can be both an untraditional hero and still stand alongside the great icons of old. His story has the potential to also reach individuals who are not considered normal or athletic and inspire them to push farther. One of many reasons audiences have come to love the *Kung Fu Panda* franchise is the rich storytelling in Po's unique hero's journey throughout the movies, which makes his story special to so many.

The Plot (and Panda) Thickens

Gustav Freytag was an esteemed German writer who lived in the 1800s. While he was known for his realistic novels about the merits of the middle-class, his most influential creation comes in the form of Freytag's Pyramid (Britannica). His interpretation of the pyramid is based off the writings of Aristotle in his book *Poetics* and the three-act structure Aristotle engineered. Essentially, the parts of a Freytag's Pyramid are Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Denouement (Harun 1). Freytag insisted that these aspects can be drawn in a diagram resembling a pyramid. In general, Freytag's Pyramid offers a technique which allows researchers to visually analyze narratives and recognize what occurs in the plot (Harun 1). It can

be noted that Freytag's Pyramid is somewhat similar to Joseph Campbell's Journey of a Hero in that Freytag's Pyramid is used to analyze the structure of plots in general while Campbell's Journey of a Hero is used to classify the parts of a heroic adventure. The plots of the *Kung Fu Panda* movies demonstrate consistent and cohesive plot structures compared to Freytag's Pyramid.

Kung Fu Panda

The plot of the first *Kung Fu Panda* movie demonstrates a consistent and cohesive plot structure compared to Freytag's Pyramid. The Exposition area of the pyramid comes first from Po's dream and the jarring jolt back to his ordinary reality. It helps to emphasize both his Kung Fu fantasy and the humongous gap between his life and the life of a Kung Fu master. More Exposition comes in the introduction of the Furious Five, Master Shifu, and the wise Master Oogway. The exposition of these characters helps the audience to understand the environment Po will soon encounter and the sternness of character Master Shifu. When Master Oogway reveals to Shifu that a Dragon Warrior must be chosen to stop a coming threat, it marks the beginning of Rising Action. After a sequence of failed attempts to see the festival that would select the Dragon Warrior, Po finds himself unintentionally selected to fill the part. The Rising Action continues when Shifu is angered by Po being selected. Shifu intends to discourage Po and make him quit. The first day of training with Shifu discourages Po, but Po then receives wisdom from Master Oogway that thoroughly inspires him to push forward. The story's Rising Action persists when Tai Lung, a fierce and disgraced Kung Fu master, breaks out of imprisonment to destroy the Dragon Warrior. Master Shifu learns of this and appeals to Oogway for help. Believing this to be Shifu's own journey to take, Oogway leaves so that Shifu may overcome his trepidation towards Po and train him like a true master should. The Furious Five goes behind Shifu's back to

intercept Tai Lung and are defeated. After coming to terms with who Po is as an individual, Shifu trains Po for real, utilizing food to motivate his training.

It is at this point in the story that the Climax begins. The Furious Five arrive back to inform Shifu of their failure to defeat Tai Lung. Startled by this, Shifu states that Po is not yet prepared to fight and that he will confront Tai Lung alone. Po and the other masters go to evacuate the villagers and Po sees his father again for the first time since the beginning of the movie. His father offers the necessary inspiration for him to go defeat Tai Lung. At the true Climax of the movie, Po battles Tai Lung, using techniques that are unashamedly indicative of himself to fight. The Furious Five see Po after his defeat of Tai Lung and finally respect him as an equal, signifying the Falling Action of the story. Po goes back to Master Shifu, who fought Tai Lung first and tells him that he has been defeated. Shifu is grateful for this and acknowledges Po as the Dragon Warrior, prompting the Denouement area of the story.

As stated before, the story of *Kung Fu Panda* demonstrates a consistent and cohesive plot structure as compared to Freytag's Pyramid. The story progresses through each stage of the pyramid resulting in an effective and engaging story. The following two movies, *Kung Fu Panda 2* and *Kung Fu Panda 3*, progress through the levels of Freytag's pyramid in a similar fashion. Each individual story forms its own Exposition, Rising Actions, Climaxes, Falling Action, and Denouement demonstrating consistent and cohesive plot structures.

Panda in a Hole

Interestingly, people are fundamentally driven to create and tell stories. Stories can be recognized in art, language, and even the practices of mathematics and physics. It is often the simplest stories that people are most willing to trust and find value in. Individuals prefer stories that are familiar and reject narratives that do not align with shared experiences. The study of such

things is called “narratology”, the study of society and culture through literary analysis (Reagan 1). In present ideology, the plot is the backbone of all sequential events that occur in a story. Within the intricate plot of a story occurs the emotional arc. While the plot of a story is often layered and complicated, the emotional arc is written to be clearly visible within the narrative itself. A study conducted by Andrew Reagan and others at the University of Vermont using over 1,737 books in Project Gutenberg’s fiction collection discovered six core emotional arcs (Reagan 2). Interestingly, these arcs were given names that are reminiscent of well-known stories that illustrate their emotional rise and fall. These arcs are “Rags to Riches” (a consistent rise throughout the story), “Tragedy” (a consistent fall through the story), “Man in a Hole” (a story that starts with a fall and gradually rises back), “Icarus” (a story that begins at a risen state, goes higher and then falls dramatically), “Cinderella” (stories that begin in a lower state, experience a rise followed by a fall towards the middle, and end at a risen state again), and “Oedipus” (a story that starts at the bottom, rises in the middle, and falls again). In the same study, research showed “Icarus”, “Oedipus”, and “Man in a Hole” are by far the most popular emotional story arcs (Reagan 5-6). It is no surprise then that when looking at the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy, the emotional arcs within the movies echo some of the well-renowned story arcs documented in the study. Specifically, the story arc of *Kung Fu Panda* follows an emotional “Cinderella” arc while *Kung Fu Panda 2* and *Kung Fu Panda 3* consecutively follow the emotional “Man in a Hole” arc.

As stated before, the first *Kung Fu Panda* movie appears to follow the emotional “Cinderella” story arc. The story begins with Po living in an emotional state of failure, wanting to join the colorful and exciting world of kung fu. He catapults into the heights of achievement when he is nominated to be the Dragon Warrior, but dejectedly plummets back into failure when

he is not up to the task. It is only when Master Shifu chooses to properly train him that he begins to slowly rise into achievement once more. Po meets his peak of achievement at the end of the story when he finally defeats the threat of Tai Lung and saves his home. The “Cinderella” arc begins a story at a low value, brings the story to a high emotional value, drops back into the low value towards the middle of the story, and finally elevates back into the high value for a happy ending to the story. Knowing this, it is obvious that the emotional arc of *Kung Fu Panda* echoes the “Cinderella” arc.

Secondly, the emotional arc of *Kung Fu Panda 2* follows the “Man in a Hole” arc. The “Man in a Hole” arc begins the story at an emotional high and falls gradually into the emotional low point of the story. It is after this low point that the story rises again back to the high point, giving the story a happy ending. In *Kung Fu Panda 2*, Po begins the story at an emotional state of peace. He is quite literally at the top of his game and living a very emotionally fulfilling life. He inevitably falls from this state of peace and continues to fall into despair for a large portion of the movie as he questions more and more about his past. Po inevitably reaches the bottom of his emotional hole and finds peace with the past that has eluded him throughout the story. His rise out of the emotional hole is very quick as he defeats the outstanding threat with the aid of his newfound inner peace and gives the story a happy ending once more.

Lastly, the aforementioned “Man in a Hole” arc applies to *Kung Fu Panda 3* as well. In this story, Po’s emotional arc fluctuates between his need to become a mature teacher and him remaining a student. The story again begins with Po living as a true master of kung fu. He has been a master fighting alongside his friends for years and would not have it any other way. This contented state begins to decline when he is told by Master Shifu that he must become a teacher. The decline continues when he shrugs this responsibility in order to go with his biological father

to the secret panda village. Po meets the bottom of this story's hole when he realizes his actions and naivety have caused the capture of all his friends. He only begins to rise out of the hole when he realizes that he needs to teach others in order to succeed. Po meets the peak of the story when he vanquishes the story's fearsome foe with help from his students, thus constituting a full "Man in a Hole" arc.

It is interesting to note when looking at the franchise all the stories combined form a complete and familiar emotional arc. The trilogy's overall arc forms a sequential combination starting with a "Cinderella" arc and followed by a double "Man in a Hole" arc. The "Cinderella" portion of the overall emotional arc occurs in *Kung Fu Panda*, where Po becomes the Dragon Warrior and saves the Valley of Peace from the antagonist of the story. The first "Man in the Hole" fall of the overall emotional arc occurs throughout *Kung Fu Panda 2*, where Po reaches arguably the most severe emotional low of the entire story. He spends the rest of *Kung Fu Panda 2* rising back up from that low and arriving at a positive peak. The decline of the second "Man in the Hole" begins in *Kung Fu Panda 3* when Po falls into an emotional low point as he avoids his call to be a teacher and then rises again for a happy ending for the entire trilogy. Much like the legendary franchises of *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*, the *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy forms a sequential "Man in a Hole" emotional story arc (Bunting).

As mentioned before, storytelling as an art form is incredibly important. Maintaining an effective and simple arc can give a story both emotional tangibility and integrity. Research has shown that humans respond very well to stories that are familiar and *Kung Fu Panda* is a very familiar story done well. It is the story of a panda trying to achieve peace and ultimately that is what all humans wrestle with as well.

Was Everyone Kung Fu Fighting..?

In old Hollywood media, foreign nationalities have often been depicted in unkind and inaccurate ways. The people of China are no stranger to this unfair stereotype concerning Chinese people have riddled Hollywood movies for many years. There were three prevalent Chinese stereotypes throughout the first half of the 20th century. The first of which can be found in a character named Fu ManChu, a Chinese criminal genius written by a British novelist. This character had a “crafty yellow face twisted by a thin-lipped grin” and had a desire to destroy the entirety of white society (Wang 4). This character existed as an unkind expression of the Western fears of Asia’s influence. Fu and characters much like him have prevalently been portrayed as villains and crooks in Hollywood media throughout the 1920s. The second popular portrayal is that of a tenacious martial arts master. There has been an extensive number of movies that have a central theme of Chinese martial arts. Movies like *Rush Hour* (1998), *The Way of the Dragon* (1972), *Enter the Dragon* (1973), *Police Story* (1985), *The Last Dragon* (1985), *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* (1993), and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) perpetuate the idea throughout the 70s, 80s, and 90s of every other Chinese individual being a Kung Fu master (Wang 4). While this stereotype is not necessarily negative, it is not truthful in nature. The third stereotype simply depicts Chinese people to be non-masculine, inferior, and generally subordinate (Wang 4). This depiction in movies and other extended media may have contributed to a resentment of the Chinese people. In a 2015 survey done by the Pew Research center, it was discovered that Americans and Chinese do not have particularly positive views of one another. The survey stated that only 38% of all Americans have a favorable view on China and only a slightly higher percentage of the Chinese public, 44%, give the United States a positive rating (Wike 2). It was also stated in the same article that most Chinese think that the United States is

attempting to hold their nation back. 54% of the Chinese population believe the U.S is trying to hold their country back as a world power (Wike 4). When comparing these facts to the general depiction of the Chinese people in American media, it is no surprise that there is negative feeling. In contrast, the depictions of martial arts culture and symbolism in the *Kung Fu Panda* franchise is respectful, interesting, and consistent with Asian culture as well as adding important deeper meaning to the storytelling.

“There are no coincidences in this world.” Master Oogway

The martial arts culture in the *Kung Fu Panda* movies is depicted accurately and in interesting and respectful ways. One of the most interesting aspects of the *Kung Fu Panda* movies is the integration of kung fu itself into the characters and story. According to Britannica, kung fu is a martial art, both a form of exercise with a spiritual dimension stemming from self-discipline and concentration, as well as a primarily unarmed mode of self-defense. Kung fu originated in the Zhou dynasty and was keenly practiced by Daoist monks who studied skeletal and muscular physiology (Britannica). All the characters featured in the Furious Five mimic animal-inspired styles that were originally practiced by Shaolin monks. The original five animal styles are the tiger, snake, leopard, crane, and dragon. The filmmakers depicted the leopard style as the villain and used the dragon style as a statuesque teacher of knowledge. They chose to replace the missing two members with the more recent styles of Monkey kung fu and Praying Mantis kung fu (Reid 1). It is interesting to note the care that the filmmakers took when animating the masters of the Furious Five, each character uses their corresponding styles with precision, regardless of the animal that they are. As stated by Rodolphe Guenoden, an animator who worked on the movie, “Since the five styles of kung fu are human interpretations of the way animals behave, subtle ways of altering that style to fit animal bodies were found.” (Reid 5).

The styles themselves require explanation in order to appreciate their detail. Tiger style, as used by Master Tigress, is known for being fierce and aggressive while also being fluid and flexible. The style heavily utilizes hand techniques. Crane style, obviously used by Master Crane, is characterized by sweeping circular motions with arms. This style is known for its ability to hook and redirect attacks made by opponents. Snake style, utilized by Master Viper, derives power from the coiling of the body and striking with great speed. This style helps to develop the speed and relaxed state of the body (Yin). Mantis style, a more recent style used by Master Mantis, emphasizes hand and arm techniques partnered with low, wide-legged stances. This style capitalizes on speed, footwork, and movement (Southern Praying Mantis). Monkey style, as used by Master Monkey, is recognized by monkey-like movements as a part of its technique. This style often incorporates difficult acrobatic movements and flips (Monkey Kung Fu). All this information was considered when making the characters and choreographing the fight scenes, the animators utilized each character's unique body type to emphasize their unique and vibrant styles. The storytellers obviously demonstrated genuine appreciation and respect for kung fu when integrating these details.

The symbolic nature of both the creatures and the locations featured in the story provide interest and depth to the story. Each character has symbolic importance in Chinese folklore and legend. As stated before, each character has at least one martial arts aspect to their visual presentation and has been presented in kung-fu style postures. Their dress is also kung fu related and sometimes harkens back to important Chinese philosophies. Take the main character of Po for example. While he may appear to be an ordinary tubby cartoon panda to American audiences, Po being depicted as a panda makes him a national treasure in Chinese culture. His name even means "Little Treasure" in Chinese. His clothing appears to be incredibly ordinary

(only one pair of patched-up burlap pants) but the shoes he wears are Shaolin ankle-wraps, traditionally worn by the Shaolin monks during training (Wang 5). Master Oogway, the divine and wise turtle, was given a green cloak with a stylized yin-yang symbol to symbolize balance. The staff he holds was crafted from the wood of the sacred peach tree. His species of Galápagos tortoise symbolizes longevity, immortality, power, and tenacity in Chinese culture. Master Tigress, a South China Tiger, exemplifies a natural-born king of both kung fu and of nature. Even the pattern upon her forehead bears resemblance to a Chinese character for “King” (Wang 6). Master Crane, who is a Black-Necked Crane, symbolizes both beauty and immortality in folklore. There is a close association between the practice of Taoism and the crane. The Chinese mantis, Master Mantis’ species, symbolizes intense meditation and contemplation (Wang 6). He is meant to be a master of both patience and stillness so his portrayal as a praying mantis is quite appropriate. Master Monkey’s species, a Gee’s golden langur, and his nature as a monkey are synonymous with Sun Wukong, a character from the Chinese novel, *Journey to the West*. While not a widely known character, Sun Wukong’s influential characteristics can be seen throughout modern Chinese stories and Japanese anime. Interestingly, the only thing Master Monkey and Sun Wukong share is their species as Wukong is often portrayed as a mischievous and powerful trickster deity. Perhaps Master Monkey’s species was chosen as a tribute to this influential myth. Even Mr. Ping, Po’s adoptive father, has some Chinese symbolism behind his species. He is portrayed as a Chinese goose, a bird sacred to the gods of Chinese mythology (Wang 6).

In conclusion, depictions of martial arts culture and symbolism in the *Kung Fu Panda* franchise is respectful, interesting, and consistent with Asian culture as well as adding important deeper meaning to the storytelling. This should be important to all individuals who intend to

create meaningful stories. The interesting symbolism and detail put into the movie and characters shows genuine care and respect for the culture that inspired the story.

Contrast

The research conducted for this thesis identified some critiques and weaknesses in the stories of the *Kung Fu Panda* franchise. Wang claims in his article, *The Western Gaze in Animation: A Case Study of Kung Fu Panda*, that Po is an exclusively Western character meant to appeal exclusively to Western audiences. Wang points out how Po's visual image is laid back and exhibits a distinctly western sense of humor in contrast to his fellow characters' serious, unsmiling faces (Wang 7). This is only partly true. While Po's sense of humor and portrayal may indicate Western influence, his struggles throughout the story have universal appeal. Po's visual portrayal and sense of humor is only a superficial aspect of his journey.

The same article also states that the consistent use of American voice actors to portray Chinese characters damages the story in terms of diverse performances. Wang correctly identifies that almost every character in the main cast is played by an American actor or actress. This is a valid criticism. Having a full cast of Chinese voice actors would indeed have added authenticity to both the story and performances of the characters.

The third observation involves what appears to be a storytelling weakness of *Kung Fu Panda 3*. The story exhibits four "Calls to Action" throughout the beginning of the story. The complexity of so many "Calls to Action" weighs down the rest of the story. Each "Call to Action" represents an issue that Po must ultimately resolve on his hero's journey. Compared to Campbell's steps of a "Hero's Journey" and compared to the simplicity of the first *Kung Fu Panda*, this is indeed a flaw of the third story. The numerous calls add an unnecessary amount of confusion and complexity to the story of *Kung Fu Panda 3*. Therefore, several of the observed

criticisms are indeed valid. It is important to take these criticisms into account when looking at a story so one can maintain a humble and accurate view of the movies.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the very beginning of this essay, storytelling is important to the human condition. In the 1930s, C.S Lewis became part of a literary circle called the Inklings in the wake of World War I. Unfortunately, the tremendous loss of life during the Great War and resulting despair had led to a great collapse in the treasured traditional art forms of western culture including narrative storytelling (Poe 37). In that time, the nature of philosophy and what someone could meaningfully say had come under severe fire. The value of most every statement was liable to be questioned and the very concept of meaning was somehow losing its value (Poe 37). In this context, the Inklings worked to create stories that had undeniable value. They were a small part of the literary world that stood firm in order to preserve narrative excellence (Poe 37). Thankfully, due to the efforts of the Inklings and others, the human quest for meaning and purpose continues to express itself in the form of storytelling. The existence of narrative and the many forms it takes persists in telling us that life in the universe has meaning (Poe 44). Good storytelling teaches people to notice unique moments in life that break through the dull cycle of repetition and give life meaning (Poe 45). The storytelling of the *Kung Fu Panda* franchise illustrates this when it elevates the unique and important moments with the narrative significance they need to be impactful. Moments such as the unashamed instance of vulnerability and kindness from Tigress to Po in *Kung Fu Panda 2*, the moment Po appears thru the haze after finally gaining the respect of his peers at the end of the first *Kung Fu Panda*, and the significance of Po finally finding inner peace demonstrated by him controlling the path of one single, simple

raindrop. These impactful instances in stories help us pause to recognize and appreciate the unique moments that gives our real lives meaning.

It is also important to note that good stories impact children by teaching them to persevere through difficulties and how they could be a positive change in the world. One can consider that all three *Kung Fu Panda* movies are spiritual iterations of Campbell's Hero's Journey. The movies portray Po effecting a positive change on the world through the choices he makes and the trials he endures (Emerson 9). The story shows how Po deals with very mature problems and overcomes them, improving himself all the while. A young child could look to the self-dislike Po feels and find solace in the fact he overcame that despair. Even the fear, uncertainty, and lack of acceptance Po experiences throughout his story can be relatable to those who have experienced similar emotions. A young child with a physical or learning disability could look at Po's obvious determination and find value in the great challenges he overcomes. After all, "There is no secret ingredient".

The *Kung Fu Panda* franchise is a modern, animated interpretation of classic storytelling. The classic storytelling is demonstrated by Po's inspirational and heroic journey, consistent and cohesive adherence to plot structure and well-known story arcs, and the respect offered to its ancient roots through beautiful depictions of the Asian martial art culture and symbolism. One of the co-directors for the first *Kung Fu Panda* movie, a man named Frank Osborne states that "It was important to all of us, from the start that *Kung Fu Panda* would have a theme, a positive message that we really believed in. We wanted it to be a fun experience loaded with comedy and great action. But we also wanted there to be a takeaway that we all believed was a good one."

Kung Fu Panda illustrates the beauty and heart of narrative storytelling that C.S Lewis and the

Inklings sought to preserve. *Kung Fu Panda* tells a good story and good stories are important in this time to everyone. *Kung Fu Panda* is truly a good story, well done.

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