



Po's Pursuit of Personal Transformation in Tracey West's *Kung Fu Panda 3*

SATRIO WICAKSONO

Universitas 17 Agustus Surabaya, Indonesia

E-mail: satriowicaksono910@gmail.com

DANU WAHYONO

Universitas 17 Agustus Surabaya, Indonesia

E-mail: danuwahyono@untag-sby.ac.id

Abstract. This research explores the multidimensional process of personal transformation experienced by the protagonist, Po, in *Kung Fu Panda 3* by Tracey West. The study aims to examine Po's internal development by focusing on his identity struggle, emotional maturation, and spiritual awakening as he transitions from a self-doubting warrior to a fully realised leader. Employing a qualitative research method, this study conducts a close reading and thematic analysis of the novel to uncover the psychological layers of Po's transformation. The research highlights that Po's evolution is not merely defined by physical prowess or heroic feats, but is deeply rooted in his internal reconciliation and personal growth. The findings reveal that Po's personal transformation unfolds through three primary dimensions: psychological, emotional, and spiritual. Psychologically, Po confronts an identity crisis sparked by his sudden role as a teacher and the discovery of his biological father. His internal struggle between who he thinks he should be and who he authentically is forms the core of his psychological fragmentation. Emotionally, Po grapples with loyalty and guilt as he navigates his relationships with both his adoptive father, Mr. Ping, and his biological father, Li Shan. These emotional challenges push Po toward a deeper sense of empathy, emotional regulation, and maturity. Spiritually, Po's journey culminates in his mastery of chi, a symbolic act of inner harmony and self-acceptance, reflecting his attainment of a fully integrated self.

Keywords: Emotional Growth, Identity Crisis, Personal Transformation, Self-Acceptance, Spiritual Awakening

INTRODUCTION

Personal transformation represents one of the most profound psychological processes an individual can experience. It involves fundamental changes in how we perceive ourselves, our capabilities, and our place in the world. Tracey West's novel of *Kung Fu Panda 3* provides a compelling case study of such transformation through the journey of Po, the

series' beloved panda protagonist. The novel expands on its narrative source by offering deeper psychological insights into Po's struggles with identity, belonging, and self-actualization. Through its introspective narrative, readers witness a character arc that vividly illustrates contemporary theories of personal growth and psychology.

From the beginning, Po is caught between conflicting roles as a warrior, a mentor, a son, and a student. His struggle to internalize these roles reveals a profound sense of identity diffusion, a psychological state characterized by uncertainty about one's direction and sense of belonging (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). When Li Shan unexpectedly returns and claims to be Po's long-lost father, Po is thrown into an identity crisis that intensifies his emotional fragmentation. This crisis escalates with the arrival of Kai, the novel's antagonist, who threatens both of Po's families. Po's need to protect his loved ones compels him to confront unresolved fears and self-doubt, especially regarding whether he truly belongs in either family or possesses the strength to lead. The novel's introspective inner monologues provide rare insight into the intricacies of Po's internal conflict.

This psychological progression aligns with contemporary research on the dynamics of identity development, which highlights identity as a fluid, context-sensitive process shaped by emotional, social, and cognitive factors (Purnamasita & Prasaja, 2016). Branje et al. (2021) emphasize that identity formation during critical life transitions often involves recurring cycles of exploration, commitment, and reconsideration. Po's journey reflects this cyclical process, as he navigates competing familial roles and redefines his sense of self through active exploration and emotional integration.

From a theoretical perspective, Freudian psychoanalysis offers valuable tools for understanding Po's transformation. Central to Lacan's theory is the concept of the symbolic father, which can help explain Po's divided loyalties between his adoptive father, Mr. Ping, and his biological father, Li Shan. The novel also portrays several defense mechanisms identified by Freud, such as repression and displacement, which Po employs when confronted with emotionally threatening truths about his identity.

One element that initially sparked curiosity was the unusual family dynamic between a goose father and a panda son a seemingly humorous detail that, over the course of the story, becomes a gateway into deeper themes of identity and belonging. Observing how Po adapts to his complex emotional experiences and reconciles his dual heritage provides both a compelling narrative and a rich subject for literary-psychological analysis. The novel by Tracey West, with its expanded focus on Po's inner life, offers a unique opportunity to explore these themes in depth, making it an ideal text for this study on emotional struggle and personal transformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Id, Ego, And Super Ego

According to Freud, much of human behavior is influenced by unconscious desires and repressed emotions (Freud, 1961:13). Foundational framework for understanding psychological development and internal conflict. Freud articulates how these three components of the mind are in constant interaction, shaping behavior and identity. Within this framework, personal transformation emerges as the result of the ego's ongoing effort to mediate the conflicting demands of the id and the superego. The psychological tension that arises from this conflict often leads to internal crises, prompting the ego to either employ defense mechanisms or undergo structural adaptation (Freud, 1961:20).

The Unconscious and Spiritual Awakening

A central concept in Freudian psychoanalysis is the unconscious mind, which houses repressed memories, unresolved conflicts, and instinctual desires that remain inaccessible to conscious awareness (Freud, 1915:166). According to Freud, these unconscious contents exert significant influence over thoughts, behaviors, and emotional responses, often manifesting indirectly through dreams, slips of the tongue, or symbolic actions. Personal transformation, from this perspective, begins when the individual becomes aware of these hidden psychic forces and integrates them into conscious understanding (Freud, 1914:151).

Defense Mechanism

In Freudian psychoanalysis, defense mechanisms are unconscious psychological strategies employed by the ego to manage anxiety, conflict, and internal tension (Freud, 1937:80). As outlined in psychoanalysis, these mechanisms serve to protect the conscious mind from distressing thoughts and impulses by distorting, denying, or redirecting reality (Freud, 1926:163). Among the most common mechanisms are repression, denial, displacement, projection, and sublimation, each revealing how the psyche copes with internal conflict and preserves psychological (Freud, 1926:165).

Symbolic Father and Paternal Authority

Jacques Lacan reinterprets the father figure through the concept of the Name of the Father, a symbolic function that mediates the subject's entry into the laws of language and desire (Lacan, 2006:229). This Lacanian framework illuminates the psychological tension in Kung Fu Panda 3, where Po navigates two paternal figures: Mr. Ping, his adoptive father, and Li Shan, his biological one. Mr. Ping embodies the Imaginary Father a figure of pre-symbolic attachment who provides nurturing care but lacks the symbolic authority to disrupt Po's psychic stasis. His love, though comforting, remains bound to the familiar, resisting the transformative demands of the Symbolic Order.

Implications of Personal Transformation

Within Freudian psychoanalysis, personal transformation is viewed as a complex psychological process driven by the interplay of unconscious desires, internal conflicts, and the gradual development of a stable self (Freud, 1923:18). Transformation implies more than behavioral change; it involves a restructuring of the psyche, particularly the ego's capacity to mediate between the primitive urges of the id, the prohibitions of the superego, and the demands of reality (Freud, 1923:25). When an individual undergoes such a transformation, it reflects a successful negotiation of these internal forces, often accompanied by emotional resolution and identity consolidation (Freud, 1937:243).

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore Po's pursuit of personal transformation in Tracey West's Kung Fu Panda 3. Holland said that qualitative research is ideal for analysing human experiences, behaviours, and perspectives as expressed in natural or narrative forms (Nurhadi, 2019). It emphasizes depth over breadth, aiming to

understand phenomena through detailed observation, interpretation, and contextualization (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design, which is suitable for analysing literary texts that emphasise interpretation, meaning, and depth rather than measurement. Qualitative research focuses on the richness of the data and seeks to understand phenomena from the subject's perspective, in this case, Po's transformation in Kung Fu Panda 3. The descriptive nature allows the researcher to present the data in the form of narrative analysis, focusing on the character's psychological, emotional, and spiritual development. Psychoanalytic criticism is well-suited for exploring character development by uncovering unconscious motivations, repressed conflicts, and emotional transformations that drive behavior (Tyson, 2006).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Transformation Stage

This novel is analyzed in the context of personal transformation, consists of three stages: Psychological transformation, Emotional transformation, and Spiritual Transformation.

Psychological transformation

Rooted in a profound crisis of identity, Po's early conflict in Kung Fu Panda 3 is shaped not by external threats but by internal uncertainty. Despite holding the prestigious title of Dragon Warrior, a symbol of ultimate achievement within his community, he is riddled with self-doubt and lingering insecurity. His heroic status, rather than empowering him, becomes a source of anxiety. He continuously questions his worth, unsure whether he truly earns the role or merely stumbles into it by accident or fate. This internal conflict reflects a fractured ego structure: a self-image shaped more by external validation than by authentic self-understanding.

The turning point in his journey begins with the uncovering of his panda heritage. This long-buried truth becomes a psychological mirror, forcing him to confront the parts of himself he has never fully understood. The revelation that he is not the last of his kind and that his biological father, Li Shan, is alive triggers a fundamental re-evaluation of his identity. This confrontation with his origins often reveals aspects of the self that are denied. By reuniting with his heritage, he is challenged to integrate his past with his present. To reconcile the image of who he thought he was with who he truly is. This integration is essential to his psychological development. Through accepting his fragmented history, he can begin to stabilize his sense of self. It can be seen in the following quotes:

“No, there’s a whole bunch of us,” Li told him. “Where?” Po asked, excitement rising in his voice. Li bent down and whispered. “A secret Panda Village in the mountains.” “Whoa,” said Po. “But how did you know where I was?” “I received a message that led me here,” Li replied. (West, 2015:11)

His failure as a teacher is not merely a practical misstep but a psychological rupture. Though he has previously succeeded in battle and earned admiration, his inner world remains unsettled. The challenge of leading others and becoming a master is far more threatening than facing a physical enemy.

Emotional Stage

Po's emotional transformation in Kung Fu Panda 3 is most clearly expressed through his evolving relationships with his adoptive father, Mr. Ping, and his biological father, Li Shan. These two paternal figures represent different emotional needs and sides of his identity. Mr. Ping embodies comfort, security, and the nurturing love of Po's early life,

while Li Shan introduces him to his ancestral roots and encourages him to connect with a legacy he had never explored. Po initially feels conflicted between the father who raised him and the father who shares his blood. This emotional tension gives rise to a new kind of identity crisis, as Po struggles with feelings of guilt, loyalty, and confusion. Unlike in earlier stages of his journey, where he masked emotions with humour, he now begins to confront these complex feelings more openly.

The turning point comes when Mr. Ping and Li Shan choose to support Po. They put aside their differences for his sake. Their unity mirrors the internal reconciliation he experiences as he learns that love for one father does not diminish his bond with the other. He doesn't split his feelings between two worlds. He begins to embrace both as equally valuable parts of himself. This emotional integration reflects his growing maturity and emotional intelligence that is his ability to hold multiple truths and navigate them with empathy. He no longer feels the need to choose between his past and present, or between blood ties and chosen family. He achieves emotional harmony by recognising that identity is not about choosing one path, but embracing the fullness of his experiences. This growth allows him to become a more grounded individual, capable of leading with compassion, understanding, and a deep sense of self. It can be seen in the following quotes:

Po turned to Mr. Ping. "Hey, Dad! Come say hi to . . ." He stopped. Mr. Ping was his dad, but Li was his dad too, right? He turned to Li. "Um," Po began, "I don't know what I'm supposed to call you." (West, 2015:10)

At the moment he meets Li Shan, he is thrust into a profound emotional disorientation that challenges his existing identity. This encounter triggers a series of reactions such as: shock, denial, hesitation, and emotional loyalty that reflect the complexity of his struggle between his forgotten past and the life he has always known. The signs of this emotional conflict, between his confused behavior and Mr. Ping's silent distress, mark a pivotal stage in his journey of self-discovery. This reaction shows his emotional disorientation. He believed he was the only panda. This discovery shook his sense of identity. He doesn't immediately connect the dots. This shows hesitation and emotional resistance, because accepting Li as his father will mean reopening a past he's buried. He doesn't reject Li, but he clings to the name and life given to him by Mr. Ping, which suggests emotional loyalty to his adoptive father. His silence and the falling of his action figure symbolize that Mr. Ping feels like he is losing Po. At the same time Po probably feels this tension, too.

Spiritual transformation

His spiritual transformation embodied through his journey to master chi. It is more than an energy source. It is a representation of balance, inner peace, and interconnectedness. He struggles to control chi not because he lacks skill, but because he has not fully embraced his inner truth. His spiritual growth requires him to let go of fear, ego, and confusion, and instead draw strength from self-acceptance. When he ultimately succeeds in using chi, it is not just a display of power but it is a moment of transcendence. His inability to control chi reveals his unresolved inner conflict. Though he is the Dragon Warrior by name, he still lacks a full understanding of what that identity truly means.

His struggle with chi indicates his internal battle: He cannot move forward until he stops trying to be someone else and starts embracing the totality of who he is. A turning point occurs when he stops relying on external guidance and begins to trust his instincts and his life experiences. In doing so, he transcends traditional definitions of mastery and reaches a new level of awareness. His individuation occurs when he stops seeking validation and begins to see his own path as valuable and complete. By drawing from his relationships, his heritage, his pain, and his joy, he creates a unique version of power that is rooted in

authenticity. His use of chi is therefore not just a technique, but a spiritual expression of a fully integrated identity. It can be seen in the following quotes:

Kai stared in awe. "Who are you?" he asked. "I've been asking the same question. Am I the son of a panda? The son of a goose? A student? A teacher? Turns out I'm all of them. I am the Dragon Warrior!" Po said. Then the golden chi shapes came together to become a huge, glowing dragon of chi! Po was part of the dragon, at its very heart, as the golden light swirled around him. (West, 2015:47-48)

Po's spiritual transformation allows him not only to defeat Kai, the antagonist, but also to bring harmony to the world around him. He shares chi with others most notably with the pandas proving that his power is not one of domination, but of connection and restoration. He shows that he has moved beyond self-centered notions of greatness. He becomes a guide and a unifier; someone whose strength lies in his ability to inspire others and foster unity.

Internal and External Conflict

His internal conflict begins when Shifu assigns him the role of teacher, sparking intense self-doubt. This sense of unworthiness forces him to confront his fears and reevaluate his self-image. At the same time, the emotional tension of reconnecting with his biological father while remaining loyal to his adoptive father creates confusion and insecurity. These experiences drive him toward emotional maturity. Ultimately, his desire to discover who he truly is and to accept every part of himself fuels his spiritual journey. These internal factors together form the foundation of his internal conflict. Po's journey of

transformation is not only driven by internal conflict, but also by significant external forces that challenge and shape him. These external conflicts form of people, conflicts, and environments that push him to confront his limitations and evolve. From Shifu's unexpected decision to retire, the reappearance of both his fathers and the threat of Kai serve as the sources for his external conflict. These external factors provide the necessary pressure for him becoming a true Dragon Warrior.

The primary internal struggle he faces is the conflict between how he sees himself and how others see him. When Shifu asks him to become a teacher, he feels unworthy and unprepared, which triggers a deep psychological conflict. This internal doubt is a major Conflict. He must first confront his fear of inadequacy before he can transform. It is described the following quotation:

The cries of the Furious Five rang through the palace as Po's directions kept causing them to crash into obstacles and into one another. Exhausted and beaten up, the Furious Five fell into a tangled heap on the training room floor. "Good job, Po," Viper groaned, trying to be encouraging. "Did you at least learn a little something?" Po asked, wincing. "Yes," Tigress said. "I learned that you can't teach." (West, 2015:5)

Po's internal conflict becomes increasingly complicated as he reunites with his biological father while still being emotionally tied to his adoptive father. His internal conflict stems from his desire to make both fathers proud, while also trying to understand where he truly belongs. His emotional vulnerability pushes him toward maturity and empathy.

Emotional Challenge

His transformation is deeply influence on his emotional challenges. He struggles with emotional vulnerability, identity confusion, and familial loyalty all highlight the complexity of his internal world. Although he is often described as humorous and light hearted, this outward persona masks a deep-rooted emotional uncertainty. The unexpected

reunion with his biological father, Li Shan and his adoptive father, Mr. Ping, triggers a strong emotional dissonance. He experiences guilt for embracing his biological heritage, fearing that doing so may appear disloyal to the one who raised him.

Po's ultimate confrontation with Kai marks the peak of his personal transformation. Po's decision to bring Kai into the Spirit Realm carries risks to his own existence. This indicates his psychological shift from self-centeredness to self-actualization. His personal desires are transcended in favor of collective well-being.

A significant emotional breakthrough occurs when Mr. Ping and Li Shan express their mutual support for Po. Their willingness to come together for his sake allows Po to release his internal tension and realize that love is not a limited resource. This realization helps Po begin the process of emotional integration. He learns that it is possible to love

and be loved by both fathers without having to choose between them. Emotional resilience becomes one of his most defining traits, emerging not from suppressing his emotions but from acknowledging and working through them. It can be seen in the following quotes:

Li's orders to evacuate the village had sent the pandas into a panic. They scurried back and forth, not sure of what to pack or where to go. Po walked through them, determined. Mr. Ping trailed after him. "Po, I'm so worried for you that I can't even enjoy being right about everything," Mr. Ping said. "Now run, run, run, as fast as those chubby legs can go!" "Run?" Po snorted. "There's nowhere to run." Mr. Ping knew that stubborn look in his son's eyes. "What're you gonna do?" "I'm gonna stay. And fight that monster." "Po, he may be a monster, but he's still your father," Mr. Ping said. (West, 2015:37)

Po's ultimate confrontation with Kai marks the peak of his personal transformation. Po's decision to bring Kai into the Spirit Realm carries risks to his own existence. This indicates his psychological shift from self-centeredness to self-actualization.

Psychological Growth and Self-Acceptance

Po's personal transformation is essential not only for his development as the Dragon Warrior but also for his psychological evolution. His critical change is when Master

Shifu announces his retirement and entrusts Po with becoming a teacher. This unexpected shift triggers an internal crisis within Po. He forces him to confront his own perceived inadequacies. His childlike desire to remain a student, his realistic self-image, and the idealistic expectations placed upon him by Shifu leaves him psychologically unbalanced and in need of internal reorganization.

He must mediate between internal desires and external demands to maintain psychological stability. He must now reconcile his fear of failing with the pressure to succeed in a leadership role. He has to constantly struggle to meet the demands. His early resistance to becoming a teacher demonstrates his initial failure to adapt. However, the journey he undertakes can be seen as a process of personal strengthening. He learns to internalize values, regulate emotions, and make conscious, balanced decisions, hallmarks of psychological growth. It can be seen in the following quotes:

"Po," Li said. "You taught us who we were meant to be." Li pushed his right hand forward, and his palm began to glow. "A father," he said. A glowing panda paw print appeared on Po's chest. Tigress pushed her hand forward. "A friend." Bao pushed his hand forward. "A dumpling kicker." Big Fun performed the move. "A hugger." Grandma Panda added her hand. "A lethal fighting machine." Every panda in the village gathered chi and pushed it toward the flower petals. As they did, more and more glowing prints appeared on Po's

jade body. "A kung fu chick," said Mei Mei. "A Stripy Baby," said Lei Lei. Mr. Ping joined in. "A father." (West, 2015:48)

Po's transformation is an embodiment of the process of self-actualisation. His journey is not just about fulfilling others' expectations but about realising his own potential. He lacks congruence between his ideal self as the Dragon Warrior and teacher, and his actual self—such as insecure and unsure, are misaligned. Po gains insight, emotional clarity, and personal strength, aligning these two selves. This congruence is a key indicator of a healthy and fully functioning individual.

CONCLUSION

In Kung Fu Panda 3, Po's transformation is portrayed as a profound journey that encompasses psychological, emotional, and spiritual growth. Rather than simply acquiring physical strength or kung fu mastery, Po's evolution centers on understanding and accepting his true self. A key element of Po's emotional development lies in his

relationships with his two fathers Mr. Ping, his adoptive father, and Li Shan, his biological father. Initially, Po grapples with confusion, guilt, and divided loyalty, fearing that accepting one might mean abandoning the other. However, the unity and mutual support of both fathers allow him to reconcile these emotions and integrate the different aspects of his identity. This emotional resolution contributes significantly to his sense of self and reflects a maturing understanding of love, belonging, and family. Po's transformation is a holistic process involving the reconciliation of internal conflicts, emotional healing, and spiritual awakening. By confronting identity issues, redefining familial relationships, and learning to lead through authenticity, Po emerges as a fully realized individual. His journey reflects a deeper narrative about personal growth emphasizing that true strength comes from emotional resilience, psychological clarity, and self-acceptance.

REFERENCES

Branje, S., de Moor, E. L., Spitzer, J., & Becht, A. I. (2021). *Dynamics of identity development in adolescence: A decade in review*. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 31(4), 908–927.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Freud, S. (1914). *On narcissism: An introduction*. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 14, pp. 73–102). Hogarth Press.

Freud, S. (1937). *Analysis terminable and interminable*. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 23, pp. 209–253). Hogarth Press.

Freud, S. (1961). *The ego and the id*. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 19, pp. 12–66). Hogarth Press.

Kroger, J., & Marcia, J. E. (2011). *The identity statuses: Origins, meanings, and interpretations*. In S. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, & V. L. Vignoles (Eds.), *Handbook of identity theory and research* (pp. 31–53). Springer.

Lacan, J. (2006). *Écrits: The first complete edition in English* (B. Fink, Trans.). W. W. Norton & Company.

Mar, R. A., & Oatley, K. (2008). *The function of fiction is the abstraction and simulation of social experience*. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 3(3), 173–192.

Nurhadi, M. (2019). TRAUMATIC NEUROSIS OF WAR IN COLLIN'S MOCKINGJAY. *Anaphora : Journal of Language, Literary, and Cultural Studies*, 2(1), 49-55. <https://doi.org/10.30996/anaphora.v2i1.2741>

Purnamasita, F., & Prasaja, Y. B. A. (2016). PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS IN ELIZABETH GILBERTâ€™S EAT, PRAY, LOVE. *PARAFRASE : Jurnal Kajian Kebahasaan & Kesastraan*, 15(02). <https://doi.org/10.30996/parafrase.v15i02.570>

Vansteenkiste, M., Ryan, R. M., & Soenens, B. (2020). *Basic psychological need theory: Advancements, critical themes, and future directions*. Motivation and Emotion, 44, 1–31.

West, T. (2015). *Kung Fu Panda 3: The movie novelization*. Simon Spotlight.