



The Bending of Blending: World-building in Avatar: The Last Airbender and Legend of Korra



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Introduction

Ever since their first release in 2005, Nickelodeon's two animated television series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (ATLA) and *Avatar: Legend of Korra* (LOK) have made a considerable impact on their target audience and attained cult status with the fans.

One of the most fascinating elements of this popular series is the world in which the stories are set. This paper delves deeper into the world-building of the 'Avatarverse' and finds three elaborate blends (Fauconnier 1994; Fauconnier & Turner 2003) that greatly influence the fictional setting:

1. A blend between Eastern and Western elements that manifests itself in a big correlative network.
2. A continued blend between the first series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and its sequel *Legend of Korra*, set some 70 years later, where modern elements are blended into the world as it was created before.
3. The hybrid animals or hybrid creatures that live in the Avatarverse.

This paper is a qualitative study of the anime series and further shows that many cultural artifacts are built up through conceptual blending and later can blend themselves back into popular culture.



Apart from the intriguing characters that make Aang's quest to stop the Fire Nation within one year — he has to become a fully realized Avatar, who can wield all bending arts — the repeated visual clues blend (or weave) a rich world with elements from Western culture, as well as Asian cultures, for instance:

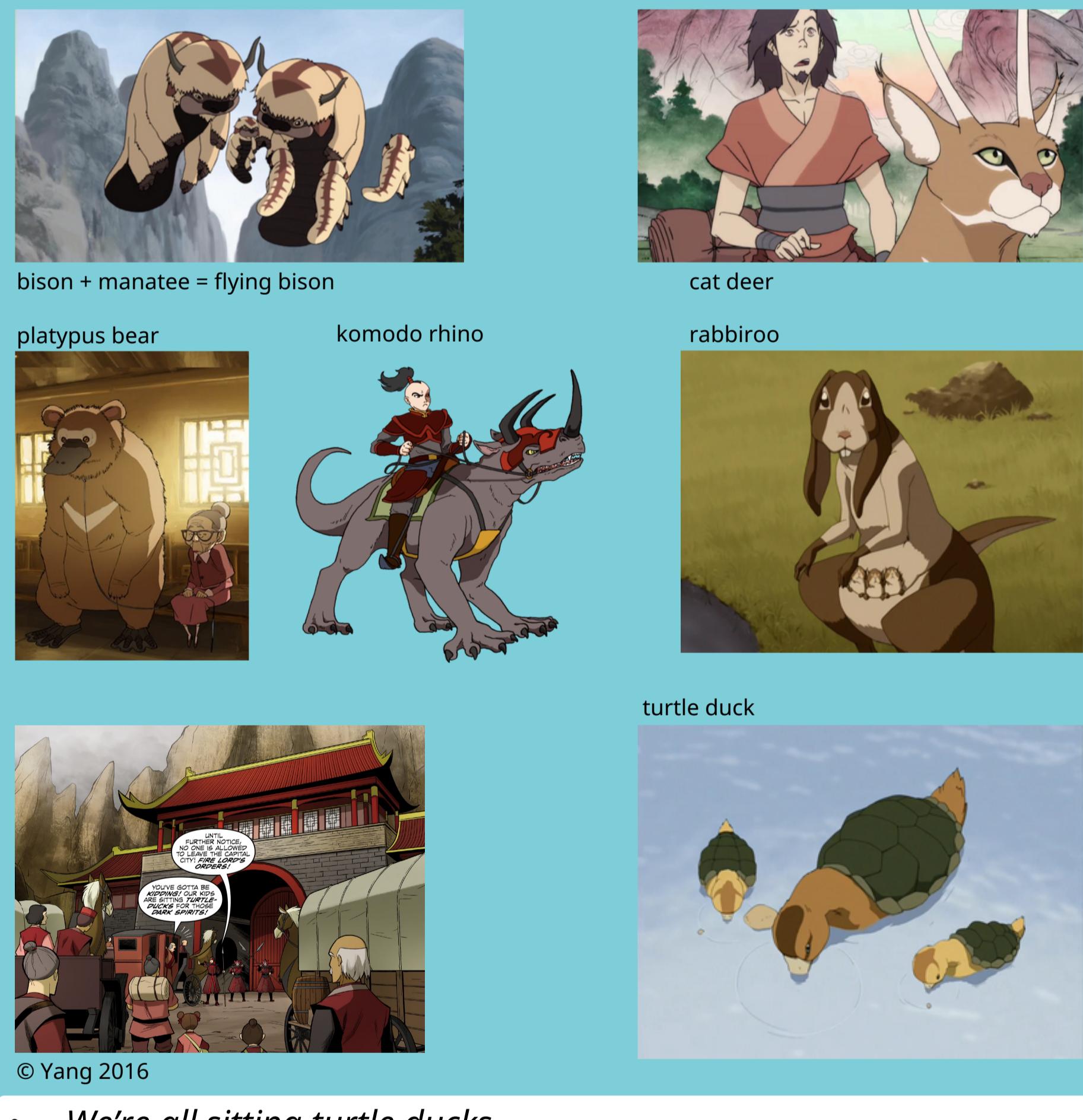
- **Correlative thinking** (Yu 2009 for Chinese; Geeraerts & Grondelaers 1995 for Western humourism)
- **Four elements** (Ancient Greek philosophy; as opposed to Five-elemental theory from Chinese traditions)



Animal blending

The fauna that inhabits the Avatarverse is also of a special nature: most animals are *literally* blends of two (or more) animals from our world. The blend is realized in two ways:

- In various adventures, the heroes have to face off against these hybrid creatures, who sometimes side with allies, but more often with antagonists.
- In clever language jokes: ordinary English idioms are adapted to fit the world of *Avatar*.



- We're all sitting turtle ducks.
- I hate to mention the elephant-rhino in the room.
- I think Bolin has worked his way out of the polar-bear doghouse.

Discussion, conclusion

A big part of why the Avatarverse appeals to its target audience (boys 6-11 yo) and attained cult status is due to the blends shown in this poster. That the show has left its mark can be seen in:

- A live-action adaptation (dir. M. Night Shyamalan) which greatly disappointed fans and has become the butt of many jokes online.
- Other media: comics, games
- Intertextual references to the series in other media, e.g. *The Simpsons*
- Popularity among cosplayers (Lamerichs 2010)
- Memes (Dancygier & Vandelenotte 2017)
- *Avatar.wikia.com* (> 12,000 pages!), vibrant community

So in this way it is possible to conclude that *Avatar* and *Korra* were built up out of blends, and form a seamless blend with current pop culture.

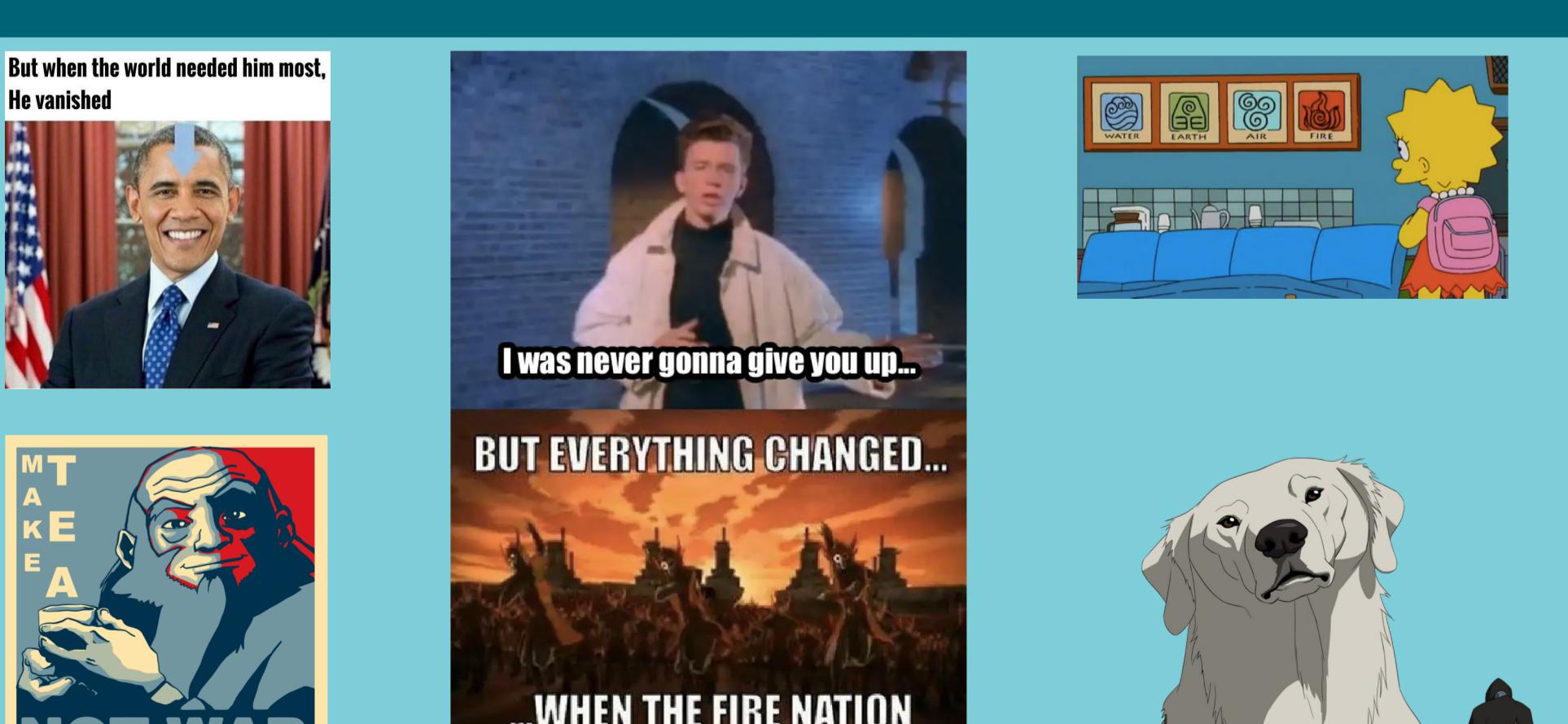
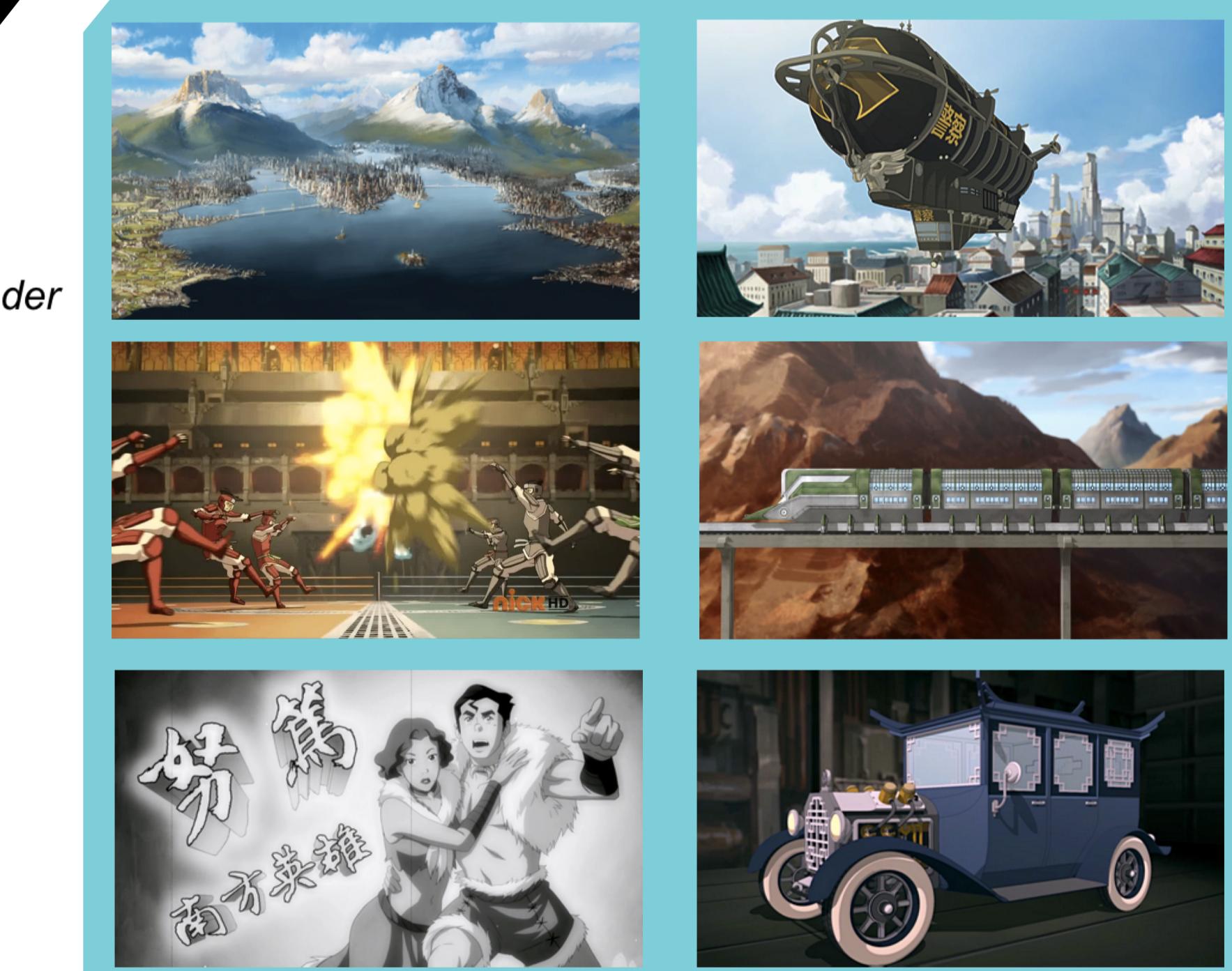
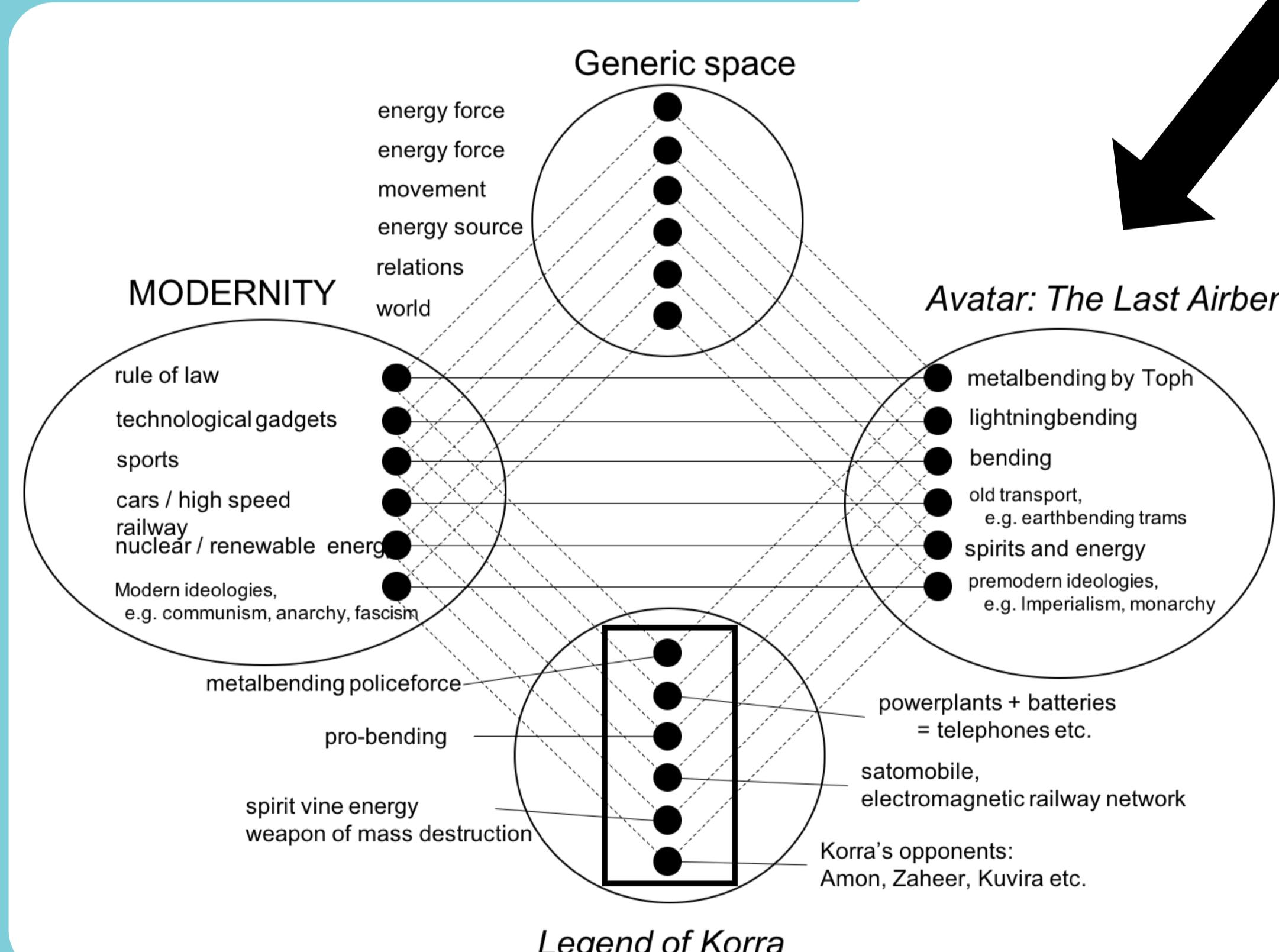
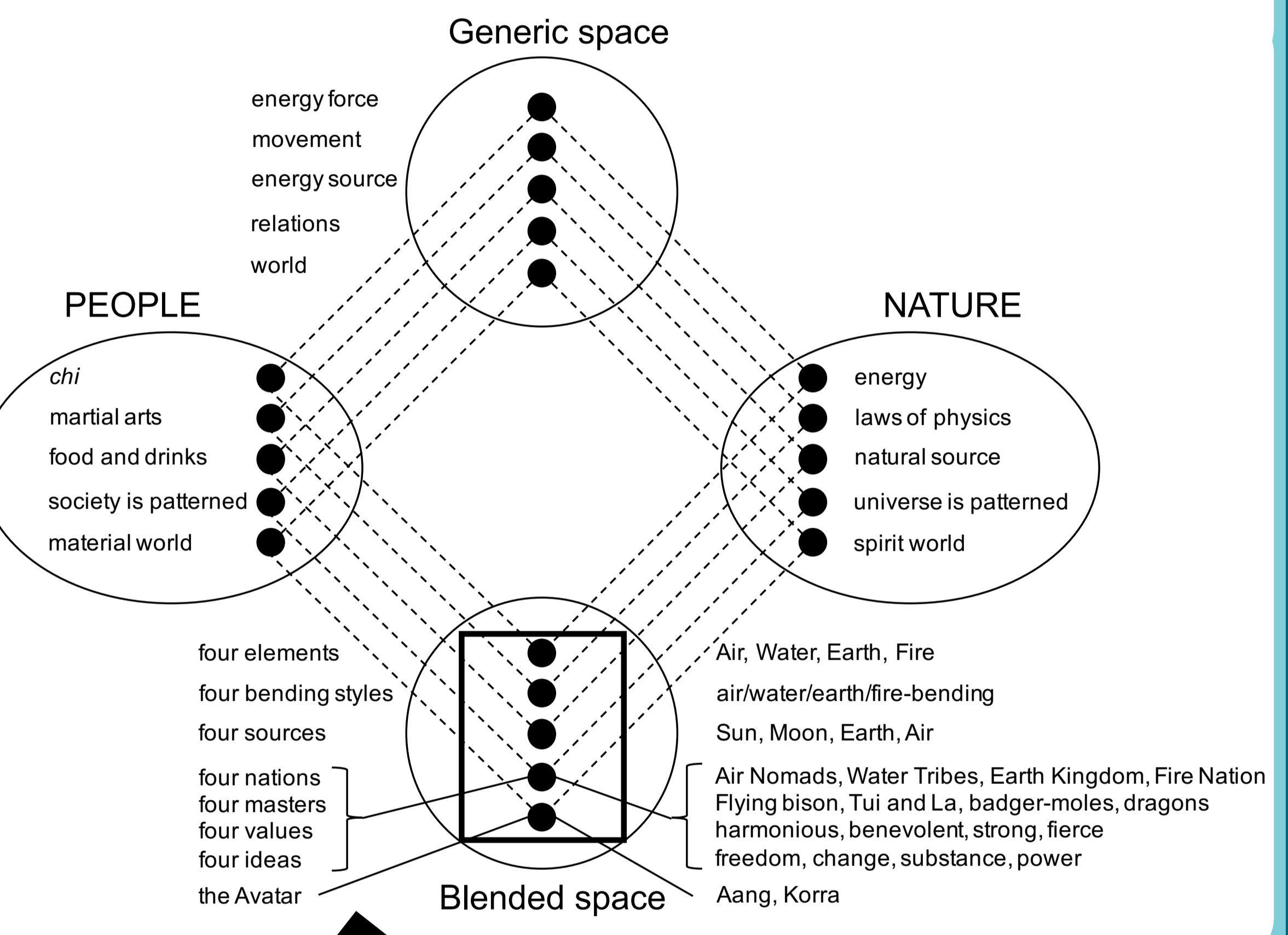
Building the four nations

While the world in *Avatar* is quite fleshed out, it is the characters of the narrative that carry many important low-level intertextual elements which help shape the *Avatarverse*.

Protagonists:

Aang	ān'áng 安昂 'peaceful soaring'	airbending monk
Katara	kǎtālā 卡塔拉, lā = 拉 'pull'	waterbending = pushing and pulling
Sokka	suōkā 索卡, -soka (Zulu) 'boyfriend, loverboy'	comic relief and has love interests
Toph	tūfú 拓芙 'stone rubbing + lotus' oxymoron, toff 'upperclass', tough	
Zuko	zūkōu 祖寇 'ancestor invader' / sūkē 蘇科 'revived rank' / shùgāo 豎高 'vertical high'	

	AIR	WATER	EARTH	FIRE
written				
martial	截氣神功	截水神功	運土術	裂火術
jing 劲	baguazhang	taichi chuan	hung gar	northern shaolin
'master'	negative	positive-negative	neutral	positive
source	flying bison	ocean and moon	badger-mole	dragons
nature	air	moon	earth	sun
ideal	harmonious	benevolent	strong	fierce
nation	freedom	change	substance	power
inspiration	Air Nomads	Water Tribes	Earth Kingdom	Fire Nation
character	Tibetan Buddhism	Inuit	Chinese empire	Japan
	Aang	Katara	Toph	Zuko



Key references

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