

A Study on the Adaptation of Legend of the White Snake in Chinese Feudal Society

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on one of the most famous Chinese folktales, *The Legend of the White Snake*, under the Chinese feudal society. By studying the adaptation of the folktale in different ancient Chinese dynasties, this paper aims to reveal the continuous oppression of women resulting from Confucian values, which is typically reflected by the depiction of the White Snake's image. The paper will also analyze the relation between the story adaptation and different social customs to find out the reason behind the adaptation and the situation of women it indicates.

Keywords: Adaptation; The Legend of the White Snake; Confucian tradition; Feminism

An Introduction to Story Adaptation

The continuous evolution of media in contemporary China has led to the adaptation of traditional folk tales and Chinese opera as they struggle to resonate with modern preferences. This transition reflects a longstanding trend in the shaping of folklore. In ancient times, folk stories primarily circulated orally, making it challenging to trace their historical transformations without recourse to written records. However, during the feudal era, the dissemination of written accounts was subject to official control. Since the Western Han Dynasty, "Bai Guan" has specially recorded folk stories. Rulers recognized the importance of preserving and regulating folk customs as a means of societal education. Yet, this often reinforced the elite's hierarchical control over the masses. As noted by He Xuejun in *"The Four Great Legends of China"* (1989), the development of folk stories reflects a complex interplay between literati literature and oral tradition. While folk narratives may arise from grassroots collaboration, the influence of ruling class ideologies, often laden with feudal remnants, cannot be overlooked.

As the intersection of folk culture and official culture, legends have a constantly rich flexibility. What is the nature of folklore adaptation? How did the widespread legend come into being? This paper will examine one of the four great Chinese folk tales, *The Legend of the White Snake*. I will attempt to interpret it within the context of Feudal China. The four major Chinese folklore are all love stories featuring female characters. As the scholar Dai Jinhua said in *"Emerging from the Surface of History"*: "There is a very close entanglement between the fate of Chinese women and the fate of Chinese history...". Because folklore embodies the evolution of historical concepts, the

process of women "emerging on the surface of history," when women begin to be spoken about and noticed, can also be understood by examining the changes in folklore.

The story of the White Snake first appeared in *"Li Huang Ji"* during the Tang Dynasty and was finalized during the reign of Emperor Qianlong in the Qing Dynasty.

In *The Legend of the White Snake*, the love affair is between a man named Xu Xian and a female snake spirit named Bai Suzhen. The idea of the snake spirit may derive from Buddhism, particularly notions of reincarnation, but the story was first written down in the Tang era, in the early ninth century. In *Boyi zhi* (*"Vast Records of the Strange"*), from the early 9th century, there is a Chuanqi tale about a man named Li Huang who meets an attractive woman clad in white (whose aunt is clothed in blue-green). After having sex with her, he returns home, becomes sick, and his body dissolves into water. His family searches for the woman and discovers she is a giant white snake. The story is at once erotic but also a warning – to men – of the perils of unknown women. It also serves to underscore the threat of an assertive woman who is, in fact, a demon.

The same notion of female threat continues in the Ming Dynasty, in retelling this tale as *"The Three Pagodas of West Lake"*. Around 1547, a collection of early Huaben tales was printed by Hong Pian; in it was *"The Three Pagodas of West Lake"*. In this story, a man named Xi Xuzhan meets a girl, her mother, and her grandmother. He falls in love, not with the girl but with her mother, who is dressed in white. The girl warns him that her mother has killed all of her previous suitors. A Taoist exorcist reveals the mother to be a white snake, her daughter is a black chicken, and the grandmother an otter. The Taoist builds three stone pagodas on West Lake and imprisons the

shape-shifting women beneath them. The story, therefore, continues to emphasize the dangers of female sexuality and the way that such women are not women but animals, particularly snakes.

But in the next retelling of the story, the female snake is seen sympathetically. In Feng Menglong's 1624 collection titled *Stories to Caution the World*, the tale of "Madam White Is Kept Forever Under the Thunder Peak Tower", Xi Xuanzan had become Xu Xuan, while the Taoist exorcist had become a Buddhist monk named Fahai. The White Snake now has a maid-servant (clothed in blue-green) named Qingqing, a fish spirit. In the story, the White Snake tries to make money for her husband but unwittingly turns him into a crime suspect, and when he leaves her, she threatens a flood. In conclusion, the Buddhist monk traps the demons under the Leifeng Pagoda. Again, then, demons are contained by religion (and trapped under a pagoda). But the White Snake is now a woman who attempts to help her husband and only endangers him when he threatens to leave her. The early story plot is relatively brief, portraying the White Snake as a hateful, daunting female image. After several evolutions, in "Madam White Is Kept Forever Under the Thunder Peak Tower" (1624), the White Snake gradually becomes a kind, bold, and brave pursuer of human happiness, a positive image. Therefore, the story of the White Snake has evolved from the magical story of the snake demon confusing and harming people into the story of people and demon love with certain social connotations.

Although Bai Suzhen's actions are explicable in terms of her love and devotion, the fundamental narrative of female threat remains unchanged. During the Qing Dynasty, the folktale entered into Chinese opera and, therefore, into what we might call a powerful cultural presence. Chinese opera was popular with elites and lower classes in feudal society, who were often illiterate. Huang Tubi's 1738 Chuanqi play *Leifeng Pagoda* is considered similar to Feng Menglong's version. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, three long- or medium-length works from this period dealt with the legend: Fang Chengpei's Chuanqi play *Leifeng Pagoda* (1777); a thirteen-chapter novel (also *Leifeng Pagoda*, 1806) by Yushan Zhuren ("Master of the Jade Mountain"), and *The Righteous Demons* (preface dated 1809), a transcribed Tanci text by Chen Yuqian. In all of them, the White Snake is presented as charming and devoted to the hero. Let us consider the plot in greater detail.

The Connotation of the Story Adaptation

The stories of the White Snake in both the Tang and Ming dynasties show the White Snake increasing its power by having sex with men. This symbolizes that men become

the "means of production" in the growth of the White Snake. It implies a female-centered matriarchal society, which is why the White Snake must be suppressed; otherwise, it will disobey the male-dominated paternal society. With the emergence of capitalism in the Ming Dynasty and the expansion of the civic class, the civic class urgently needed literary works that mainly reflected themselves. So, the protagonists were no longer officials or heroes. This change in literary interest is the awakening of citizens' self-consciousness. Although Bai Suzhen's behavior can be explained by her love and loyalty, the basic narrative of female threat remains unchanged. In "Madam White Is Kept Forever Under the Thunder Peak Tower," the White Snake helps Xu Xian accumulate capital, which aligns with the ideal of the citizen class to become a businessman. However, the White Snake's main means of accumulating capital is through magical theft. This improper means of wealth-seeking reflects the low level of female social recognition and the lack of social resources in the early stage of capitalist society. Moreover, as an attractive woman, the White Snake is not a woman but a dangerous serpent whose devotion to her lover is dependent on his love for her. Should that love be taken away, she can be struck out just as a serpent and must be contained by Buddhist or Confucian traditions.

From the perspective of the Confucian tradition, Bai Suzhen is a woman who has transformed from a monster and possesses potential resistance. Even if she is kind-hearted, she should still be seen as a curse, let alone a companion to humanity. This concept is a requirement of Confucian tradition for women to have a gentle personality and a good family background, with the meaning of oppressing women.

The identity of the White Snake exists in love because of Xu Xian's love, and her theft of property is also for Xu Xian. Therefore, it can be said that Xu Xian is a prerequisite for establishing the human identity and behavior of the White Snake. Without Xu Xian, the existence and actions of the White Snake would be meaningless. However, to conceal this fact, the legendary story strives to portray Xu Xian as a weak figure, seemingly powerless and indecisive, but directly affects the portrayal of the White Snake as a "virtuous wife and mother". The weaker Xu Xian is, the more he highlights the strength and shrewdness of the White Snake.

The Correlation Between the Story Adaptation and the Social Customs

These folk legends come into contact with Confucian teachings and their insistence on participating rather than rejecting social conventions. The folk legend becomes a means of testing social conventions in a warning tale of a woman who is, in her true nature, non-human and dan-

gerous. As the story evolves and enters wider circulation in opera, we see how notions of conformity are presented through the idea of an attractive woman who is not what she seems. Scholar Xie Yanqing, borrowing the concept of “big tradition” and “small tradition” proposed by American anthropologist Robert Redfield, divides the story of the White Snake into three stages: traditional society, revolutionary discourse, and modernity. The “Big Tradition” refers to a culture centered on the city, with the rulers and the gentry as inventors and supporting forces. The “small tradition” refers to the culture of the general people in township society, especially the farmers. The evolution of the story of the White Snake reflects the relationship between the “big tradition” and the “small tradition” in different eras. The successful adaptation of the story is in line with the suppression or loss of control of the “small tradition” by the “big tradition” in the era.

The capital of the Southern Song Dynasty was Hangzhou. The curious Emperor Song Gaozong first drove the combination of the “Chuanqi” story about Li Huang of the Tang Dynasty and Hangzhou folklore. The resulting “Tales of the Three Pagodas of West Lake” treated charming women as temptresses and emphasized the patriarchal rulers of feudal society; also, the subjugation and suppression of women, such as imprisonment under a pagoda, is an assertion of patriarchal control. During the Ming Dynasty, Feng Menglong was a local magistrate and novelist. His work “Madam White Is Kept Forever Under the Thunder Peak Tower” established the white snake story with the theme of Xuxian and White snake’s sinful love and subjugation of demons, which was in line with the traditional social oppression of capable women. The role of “The White Snake’s Forever Town at Leifeng Pagoda” is equivalent to an official text, laying down the basic narrative elements and structure of the White Snake story, making the White Snake story its system and entering written documents. During Qianlong’s southern tour in the Qing Dynasty, he promoted two new folklore versions, which Huang Tujue and Fang Chengpei wrote.

Huang adheres to Feng Menglong’s theme of subduing demons and strongly opposes the popular belief that “the white snake will give birth to a son and turn into a person”. The “big tradition” it represents emphasizes that the white snake is a demon and educates the people to keep themselves clean and not to think inappropriately. However, this also reflects that the story of the White Snake has changed from the early horror story of snake women harming people to the dreamy fairy tale of a fairy marrying a poor man. Feng repeatedly suppressed the people’s interests, and Huang’s works were eventually wiped out due to the wealth and beauty obtained by Xu Xuan. There-

fore, these two books, to a certain extent, reflect the upper class’s spiritual take of the lower society. However, Fang Chengpei accepted the plot of the White Snake giving birth to a son, which symbolizes that she became a human being, subverting the theme of subduing the demon. So, the question changed to how to redeem the White Snake. Under traditional culture, Xu Xian and the White Snake’s emotions are equal to sinful emotions no matter how they develop. Only when the White Snake becomes pregnant with the son of Man can her humanity be finally established and give her the possibility of redemption. This fully reflects that the ethics of mother and child is the bottom line of folk values. Fang’s White Snake story constructs a classic text acceptable to both major and minor traditions based on filial piety values, transforming it from Feng Menglong’s Buddhist cautionary literature into a happy ending with Confucian values as the main line.

Epilogue

During the transformation process of China’s feudal society for over two thousand years, the overall center of social life shifted from political ideology to the economy, and the social focus gradually shifted to economic construction, while culture was also subtly influenced. However, due to the immaturity of the economic system and people’s ideological concepts, people’s values have temporarily become chaotic. Undoubtedly, the social transformation of the Qing Dynasty was not only at the economic level but also included the transformation of industries and social structures. The opposition between new and old values, structures, and other aspects during the transformation process has opened a crack in the narrative. As one of the four major folk legends, the story of the White Snake in traditional society fully reflects the paradox of Chinese women’s transition from gender discrimination of “beauty brings disaster” to seemingly “virtuous wife and good mother”. In China’s feudal society, capable women - the White Snake - were seen as negative images. Although their human nature continued to strengthen, they still could not escape the oppression of patriarchal society, which fully symbolized the low status and lack of discourse power of Chinese women in traditional society.

References

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