

# Research on the Inheritance of Chinese Traditional Culture in Classics——Take *Journey to the West* as an Example

Niu Zhen

Qingdao Binhai University, Qingdao, Shandong, 266555, China

**Abstract:** *Journey to the West* is a masterpiece of classical magic realism in China, which has created many colorful characters. These characters contain rich traditional cultural factors, which is a comprehensive reflection of society, politics, culture, etc. and also expresses the author's attitude towards reality. Sun Wukong is the most typical character in *Journey to the West*. The image of the Monkey King also reflects the attitude of the work towards the whole feudal traditional culture.

**Keywords:** classics; traditional culture; cultural inheritance

## 1. Introduction

*Journey to the West* is the first romantic novel in the history of Chinese literature. It is also the most outstanding god and demon novel full of whimsies. Based on the historical story of the Tang monk, the book describes that the master and apprentices subdue all kinds of demons during the journey and endure a rough and dangerous passage to eventually bring back the scriptures.<sup>[1]</sup> The author boldly uses romantic writing methods and unrestrained imagination, build a colorful, magnificent and magical fantasy world in the book, and create a series of interesting and fascinating mythical stories. Wu Cheng'en vaguely and tortuously reflected the humanistic world and secular feelings in reality in the fantasy literary world, and showed vivid human wisdom. So the whole book is full of a strong sense of life with reality. *Journey to the West* brings readers into the beautiful art hall with its unique literary and artistic charm.

However, the deep reason why *Journey to the West* has been passed down for thousands of years is the power of culture. In the process of creating, the work not only shows ingeniously linguistic and artistic charm, reflect the contradictions of the real world in the fantasy world, but is also rooted in the fertile soil of traditional Chinese culture. The inheritance and development of Chinese traditional excellent culture makes the work have strong appeal and empathy. In particular, the absorption of the universal beliefs of Chinese people and the full reference of Taoism and Buddhism have created a broad mass base in the secular world for the work. The reference and development of Confucianism in the work also makes middle and upper-class intellectuals and managers in society also have a sense of identity. Absorbing the culture of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, the work has become a universal literary work suitable for all ages, regardless of class.

## 2. Confucian culture in *Journey to the West*

Since Confucius started Confucian school, it has had a great impact on China's feudal society for more than 2,000 years. Whether in terms of political system, cultural thought, moral norms and code of conduct, the influence of Confucian culture on the country, society, family and individuals is very long-standing. Although *Journey to the West* seems to be a fantasy world about demons and immortals on the surface, the practical significance it reflects is Confucian culture.

### 2.1. Thought of benevolence

Grace and kindness are the ideal personality regarded by Confucius, and it continues to enrich its connotation in the process of the continuous development of Confucianism. First of all, individuals should be kind and be able to love others." Confucianism believes that it is a quality rooted in human nature and is the beginning of human moral behavior.<sup>[2]</sup> In *Journey to the West*, Tang monk is a typical

representative of personal kindness. On his way to get the scriptures, he tried to convince the thieves who rob houses. When his apprentice killed the human-shaped demons, he criticized and taught his apprentice with the righteous and strict words. Passing by anywhere, he was very friendly, humble and polite to every stranger. Especially, when he encounters people who are suffering, he dares to do everything he can to help them. These behaviors are concrete manifestations of his benevolent character. Next, individuals should learn to be self-loving. Self-love includes cherishing the body, as well as cherishing the mind and spirit. Confucianism emphasizes that benevolence should start with self-love and continue to expand from self-love. Tang monk cherished his body very much. He was a beautiful man with red lips, white teeth and magnificent appearance in the book, which is very much in line with the appearance of a Confucian gentleman. The formation of this appearance has a lot to do with his attention to physical maintenance and health. We're from parents. Therefore, we should cherish our bodies. This is an important viewpoint of Confucianism. His faith and piety in Buddhism are his love for the spiritual world. Then, love all. Confucius promoted it on the basis of family love, requiring people to be full of love.<sup>[3]</sup> Whether it is a monk, an apprentice, an emperor or a minister, including a stranger, Tang monk always maintained a heart of kindness. Even for the demons in the cloak of man, he couldn't bear to hurt and tried to affect them. His love is extensive and universal. It can even be said that his kindness has gone beyond human kindness. Finally, love everything. Confucianism also pushed the heart of benevolence to everything in heaven and earth, reaching the realm of the benevolent and everything in heaven and earth, and full of compassion for life in nature. It is the greatest love in the world. The purpose of Tang monk to fetch scriptures is to universalize all living creatures and save them. In order to achieve his goal, Tang Seng led three apprentices thousands of miles away and worked hard to fetch the scriptures. During the journey, his life has been threatened many times. He even implicated the lives of others. But he is consistent. This power comes from the heart of benevolence. It was his love for the world and the universe that gave him the great power.

## **2.2. The thought of loyalty and filial piety**

Confucius advocates "loyalty and filial piety", which is based on profound thinking about human nature, human ethics and society. Loyalty and filial piety are important moral norms advocated by Confucianism, which have a complementary relationship. The idea of loyalty is external and for superiors, and filial piety to parents and brothers is both internal and for the elders. Confucius believes that everyone has different social responsibilities in different positions. People with different identities have different social responsibilities and obligations. Everyone should do his job well and make his personal behavior conform to his own identity. First of all, Tang Monk's thought of loyalty to his emperor. Tang monk is indeed a monk. However, his trip this time is to show loyalty to the emperor. He was loyal to the Tang Dynasty and the emperor Li Shimin. Tang monk waded mountains and rivers regardless of life and death. He survived 81 calamities to complete the mission given by Li Shimin. Although Li Shimin just appear several times in the whole book and did not take up much space, his appearance at the beginning and the end of the book shows that Tang Monk's trip has a political mission. Then, the filial piety of the Monkey King. Although Sun Wukong has no parents. But in Confucian culture, masters are just like their parents. Sun Wukong was originally a monkey with free spirit. When saying goodbye to his master Subhuti after gaining seventy-two Metamorphoses, he couldn't hold back his tears. His reluctance and upbringingness to his master are so much like a departing child saying goodbye to his parents. He is using the name given to him by his master all the time. He also did not forget what his master told him, even after the journey. It fully illustrates his respect, gratitude and love for his master. Tang Monk is the second master of the Monkey King. When studying with Tang Monk, Sun Wukong's personality and temper have changed significantly. He changed from an unrestrained and wayward monkey to an apprentice who followed his mission and rules. Even he was drove away and still secretly protected his master Tang Monk. He stood by his master all the time with a sense of responsibility and mission. Even when his younger brothers persuaded to dissolve the team many times, he still united everyone and rescue the master. That is where the charm of Confucian ethics is showed. It makes people aware of the missions and responsibilities that they should undertake in different social networks, so as to realize their self-worth in family and country. While using his skills and loyalty to help Tang Monk complete his mission, Sun Wukong also realized his life value and improved his personality.

## **3. Taoist culture and Journey to the West**

The classical fiction *Journey to the West* has been immersed by various ideas and cultures in the

long-term circulation process, containing rich cultural heritage. The book, full of Taoist ideas, describes a large number of Taoist figures and introduces the basic beliefs and main characteristics of Taoism.<sup>[4]</sup> These are all important manifestations of Taoist culture.

Sun Wukong, the main character in *Journey to the West*, was born in the stones of Huaguo Mountain. Because of being the first to enter the water curtain cave, he was elected king by the monkeys. Although he lived a happy life in Huaguo Mountain, he was still worried that he would get sick and dead like other monkeys. Therefore, he had to leave Huaguo Mountain to find a way to live forever. After some twists and turns, he finally learned the method of immortality. It is an important embodiment of the idea of prolonging life and becoming immortals in Taoist culture. Taoism not only believes immortals who live forever, but also believes that immortals have various spells. These spells can predict prophets, foresee happiness and misfortune, and even change their bodies and ride over a cloud. The demons and immortals in *Journey to the West* can have these spells. The most basic belief of Taoism is the belief of immortal, so the immortals that appear in *Journey to the West* are basically immortals in the Taoist immortal system. These immortals are distributed in heaven, earth and hell, and each performs his own duties. In addition, apart from many fierce demons in the book, there are also some beautiful banshees. They tried to have sex with Tang monk to pick up for yang and yin, and improve their power and cultivation. This method of practice is also unique to Taoist culture. Similarly, there are also ways to improve personal cultivation by taking elixirs and fairy peaches. This is also an important method of Taoist practice. Finally, *Journey to the West* also uses a large number of Taoist terms for alchemy, which is also an important manifestation of Taoist culture.

However, *Journey to the West* also shows the secularization of Taoist culture. On the one hand, the book shows a large number of Taoist culture, and on the other hand, it is very ironic and mixed with the content of Confucianism, which mainly embodies the secular Taoist idealism, that is, Taoism that absorbs folk beliefs.

#### **4. Buddhist culture and Journey to the West**

Buddhist culture is the most obvious of all the cultures in the fiction. Because the fiction itself is about the arduous journey of the master and three apprentices going to meet Sakyamuni and asking for scriptures, Buddhist culture can be found everywhere in the fiction. First of all, Tang Monk, the protagonist of the fiction, is a monk. He fetched scriptures with three apprentices. In the journey, the master not only taught the apprentices how to cultivate themselves, but also strictly disciplined and supervised them. In the end, the three demons were successfully converted into Buddhists by Tang Monk and became immortals. Tang Monk's experience along the way also gave himself a deeper understanding and perception of Buddhism, which improved his cultivation. Therefore, their arduous journey is for seeking enlightenment through Buddhist practices. And it was also in line with Buddhism's idea of helping others and helping oneself. Secondly, when the master and apprentices encountered difficulties along the way, they turned to Buddhism for help in most cases. In particular, they asked Guanyin Bodhisattva for help the most times. Of course, she was also the guide for Tang Monk to fetch the scriptures. The two most important moments in the book were also about the moments of asking for Sakyamuni's help. The first time was that the Monkey King caused havoc in Heaven. The Jade Emperor asked Sakyamuni to subdue the Monkey King. The second time is that Sun Wukong met the impostor. They went to meet many immortals to distinguish who the true Monkey King was, but nobody can answer it. In the end, he could only turn to Sakyamuni for help. It was a clear propaganda of Buddhist cultural thoughts from the term of the supreme Dharma. When these Buddhist figures appeared, they would also take the opportunity to publicize Buddhist beliefs. Finally, the fiction also has obvious Buddhist cultural ideas through the description of the daily life of the master and apprentices. They always abide by the clear rules and precepts of Buddhism such as no killing, no meat, no stealing, no lewdness, no lies, and no drinking. Eventually, they successfully arrived at the site of Sakyamuni. The Monkey King overcame the defect of killing, Pigsy overcame the defects of lewdness and delusion, Monk Sha overcame the defects of killing and eating meat, and the white dragon horse got atonement through the journey, and all of them became immortals. The protagonist of the fiction Tang Monk concentrated, and greatly improved his cultivation. In addition, many environmental descriptions in the fiction also promoted Buddhist culture. The use of Buddhist terms was everywhere in the text and the table of contents, which revealed the export of Buddhist ideology and culture.

## 5. Other Cultures in Journey to the West

In addition to the embodiment of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, there are also many shades of secular culture in *Journey to the West*. The master and three apprentices encountered many hardships and dangers along the way. Among them, many demons are inextricably linked with Buddhism and Taoism. It is under the shield of those powerful characters, the demons in can have the opportunity to do evil on the master and disciples' way to the west. In this regard, the world of the immortals and the human world is actually very similar. The immortals are very indulgent and permissive to the demons, while they are extremely strict with ordinary people. Because the son of the governor of Fengxian County committed a crime, the Heaven actually punished all the local people. There has been no rain for three years in a row, and many people was exposed to hunger, injury and death. People here would eventually starve to death or flee if the master and three apprentices did not pass by to rescue them. It is reminiscent of many tyrants in Chinese history, and it does not take much to make them to kill, implicate the nine clans, and suppress the peasant uprising. However, the emperors turned a blind eye to the heinous sins committed by the ministers around them, harboring or even inciting them. All these show that the secularization of Buddhism and Taoism in the society of Ming dynasty was already very serious.

The counterpart is the demons under the immortals. For ordinary people, they have powerful abilities, they can take up a piece of land and do anything. As long as the immortals do not punish them, they can run anything on their own in the local. It is a typical secular depiction of power. Many county officials in the local is a hegemon, and they commit any outrages regardless of the livelihood of the people. And the senior level leaders only enrich themselves, not restraining their subordinate officers . On the way to the west, the master and disciples will encounter various demons, either coveting the beauty of Tang Monk, or coveting the deliciousness of the four, while more demons are thinking of eating Tang Monk, so that they can live forever. It reflects the secular pursuit of beauty, food and material by many people, and the eternal pursuit of eternal life. This kind of secularized depiction has never been broken in Chinese society for thousands of years. Although the history is constantly moving forward, the society is constantly developing, and human beings are constantly progressing, secular desires are like the stars in the sky, seeing the world change in seasons but never changing. Perhaps this is the nature of man, and also the nature of the personified demon.

## 6. Conclusion

*Journey to the West* is like a mirror, which not only reflects the religious thoughts of Chinese people in the Ming Dynasty, but also reflects the overall appearance of Chinese religious culture. At first, the fiction is like a big dyeing tank of culture, which accommodates traditional Chinese culture dominated by Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Moreover, these cultures can coexist in peace, which fully reflects the pluralistic social phenomenon of the thoughts of religion and culture. And it is also clearly reflected in *Water Margin* which is close to the era of the fiction. Second, the fiction reflects the confluence of thoughts of religion and culture. The relationship between Buddhism and Taoism has been influenced by the integration of the three religions since Song and Yuan Dynasties. In the immortal system, it is characterized by the unity of immortals and Buddhas.<sup>[5]</sup> Bodhisattva is also regarded as part of the immortals of heaven and has various characteristics of immortals. When Sun Wukong's master taught spells, he also said the concept of "the unity of three religions". Third, the fiction also reflects the indifference of the world to religious and cultural thoughts. Although the work was based on religion, many plots showed sarcasms, teases and ridicules about religion. It indicated that believers' faith was not devout due to the secularization of religion. Of course, the emergence of these ideological forms of religion is closely related to the social environment of the Ming Dynasty. The prosperity and development of urban handicrafts and commerce, the public expansion, the awakening of market culture, the high degree of political centralization, and the symbiotic development of ideology and culture are all important reasons for the diversification, secularization and integration of traditional culture in *Journey to the West*.

Among Chinese classical novels, *Journey to the West* is the most complicated. The fiction integrates the thoughts and contents of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. It not only makes the immortals of Buddhism and Taoism appear at the same time, but also mixes the real world of human with the world of immortals and Buddhas. Sometimes a few Confucian sayings are inserted to make it look dignified and harmonious. And the conversations sparking with wit attracts people at various cultural levels to read.<sup>[6]</sup> Generally speaking, *Journey to the West* has mainly absorbed the excellent traditional Chinese

culture dominated by Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, and it also has innovated and developed on the basis of inheritance. It is the affirmation and inheritance of traditional Chinese culture. Meanwhile, it has also taken in the secular morality and beliefs of the public. On this basis, the novel has formed a form of cultural diversity.

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