

The Legend of the Lady White Snake; An Analysis of Daoist, Buddhist and Confucian Themes

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Chinese 350

The legendary Chinese story of the Lady White Snake is a dynamic romance that includes elements of magic, action, and betrayal. This story is more than meets the eye, as it also reveals the interplay of the three most prevalent ideologies in China; Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. While every telling of the story has some variations in detail, the basic plot always remains the same. These variations often skew the story in favor of one ideology or another. The three different endings especially are an indicator of which teaching is favored by the teller, or from which time period that version emerged. In order to fully appreciate the ideological connotations of the story, it is helpful to have a general understanding of the religious and philosophical history of China. It is no easy task to summarize this in brevity, but it must be done for the purpose of this discussion of the legend of Lady White Snake.

During the Spring and Autumn Period of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, Confucius and Lao Tzu [Laozi], the founder of Taoism [Daoism], were contemporaries (Fayuan et al. 88). That is, if either of them was ever a real living person. Some sources assert that both men were real, while others merely suppose that they might have lived. Both Daoism and Confucianism originate in China, and therefore Chinese culture is essential to both of these ideologies. Daoism has even deeper roots than Confucianism, being traced back to the pre-Qin period's Hundred Schools of Thought (Fayuan et al. 235). This makes Daoism the oldest prevailing ideology in China.

Buddhism, on the other hand, was developed in India and arrived in China by way of the Silk Road as early as the first century BCE, then spread to most regions of China during the following centuries (Fuyuan et al. 237). Being a foreign belief system that originated from a different culture, Buddhism was not intrinsic to Chinese culture. In some manners, it was contrary to the Chinese way

of life. For example, Buddhist monks made vows to be celibate and sometimes even changed their surname to that of their teacher, which could be seen as cutting off the family line, a significant social transgression in Chinese culture (Barret 147). This was especially an affront to Confucians. Mencius, one of the best-known Confucian philosophers, declared that failure to have children is the worst of unfilial acts (Ebrey 201). Any man who became a Buddhist monk could have been subject to harsh social condemnation. Despite cultural contrasts, Buddhist monks persevered and managed to create a place for their religion to take root in China.

The resulting competition between Daoism and Buddhism is best told by Horst J. Hella in his book titled *China: Promise or Threat*. Summarily, Mr. Hella explains that since its arrival in China, Buddhism competed with Daoism for patronage. Up until the 8th century CE, Daoism remained the traditional form of religion. Then a new wave of Buddhist missionaries arrived, and their efforts to overtake Daoism burgeoned. Those who wished to advance Buddhism spoke of Daoist priests as being evil magicians who used power to create fear among the people. They implied that Daoist knowledge of plants could be used for malice in the hands of an evil priest (Hella 80). This propaganda was designed to make people convert from Daoism to Buddhism, and it strikes a familiar tune with the conversion of pagans to Christianity in Europe throughout the ages. With the collapse of the Tang Dynasty and onset of the Song Dynasty, religious institutions weakened, and prevailing Confucian theorists took a turn towards secularism (Barrett 154).

There is much more that can be said about the interrelationship of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism spanning centuries of Chinese history. Other more nuanced aspects will be discussed in the following pages, but for the sake of brevity, this summary will have to suffice as a foundation from which these ideologies can be examined in the Legend of Lady White Snake.

The story of the Lady White Snake is thought to originate in the Tang dynasty, though it underwent radical changes during the Southern Song Dynasty (Strassberg 21). For the duration of this discussion, the stage version found in *The Red*

Pear Garden will be primarily relied upon for all major plot points (Packard 49-120). Any variations from this version will be indicated as such. The Lady White Snake meditated for a long time to cultivate energy and become powerful. Nearly every version of the story agrees that after 1,000 years of meditation, she took human form. Lady White Snake is always accompanied by her sidekick Little Green (or Blue) Snake, a lesser snake spirit who also takes human form. The concept of meditation as a means to gain longevity, magical power, and even immortality is Daoist, as is the notion of spiritual beings crossing a veil to enter the human world (Barrett 150).

Lady White Snake and Little Green Snake transformed into humans and traveled to West Lake in Hangzhou. They gave themselves the ordinary names Bai Suzhen and Xiao Qing, respectively. There they met the scholar Xu Xian. It is reasonable to assume that Xu Xian was of a Confucian mindset, given that the Song Confucian revival had a significant influence on education and literature (Wei-Ming 129). Furthermore, Xu Xian had just been praying at his mother's grave when he met Bai Suzhen. This respect for his deceased mother was an act of filial piety, which in Confucian thought is deemed the most virtuous of the eight concepts to live by (Fuyuan et al. 57). Upon meeting at West Lake, Bai Suzhen, the snake spirit, and Xu Xian, the scholar, quickly fell in love and got married. Because of her great power, Bai was able to conjure money and a home for her family to get started. Xiao Qing made up a story about her late master leaving a fortune to Bai Suzhen when he passed away. This clever lie explained Bai's wealth and the absence of a male figure in her life before meeting Xu Xian.

At first glance, Xu Xian's character appears very clearly Confucian, but upon closer examination, the picture gets blurred. Xu Xian was easily lured away from his Daoist wife by the Buddhist monk Fa Hai. His own name has a Daoist connotation, 'xiān' translating to adept or immortal (Little and Eichman 337). This is perhaps a bit of dramatic irony, considering he is the only character who does not possess any magical or spiritual powers. Xu Xian's character is representative of a Confucian scholar who is caught in the tug-of-war between Daoism and Buddhism.

Confusing things further, Xu Xian was poor when he met Bai Suzhen, who possessed a fortune and was therefore presumably of a higher social class. He was living with his family and earning meager wages in a medicine shop. Even if they had both been ordinary humans, this marriage would have been subversive to the social constraint of marrying within your own social class. A fundamental aspect of Confucianism is to harness one's desire and abide by social norms to be a good and moral person (Wei-Ming 121). Xu Xian defied Confucian ideals by marrying the wealthy widow Bai Suzhen. When he inevitably discovered that she was not really human, the taboo of relations between immortal and human exacerbated his breaking of social conventions.

Most modern versions of the story emphasize real and true love as the basis for Bai Suzhen and Xu Xian's marriage. However, older versions portray Lady White Snake as a demonic femme fatale who seduced and preyed upon Xu Xian until he repented and converted to Buddhism (McLaren 12). This older version is indicative of a time when Buddhist thought prevailed, with the obvious purpose of scaring people into burning incense with the monks for spiritual protection.

Though her character evolved over time from evil succubus to benevolent wife and medicine maker, the Lady White Snake retained an aspect of the femme fatale. Bai Suzhen was more powerful than her husband, and not subordinate to him. This is very fitting for a Daoist heroine who rose up against the patriarchal constructs of Buddhism and Confucianism.

Patricia Ebrey explains in her essay about family structures in Chinese culture that since Han times, the yin-yang cosmology was used to differentiate the roles of men and women within the family. Yang is the male aspect, associated with strength and action. Yin is the female counterpart associated with gentleness and endurance. The two were thought to be complimentary, but not always equal. Confucian writers especially considered yang to be superior to yin, thus justifying the social hierarchy of men above women (Ebrey 204). Xu Xian and Bai Suzhen totally reversed these roles. He was gentle and easily led, while she was strong and took action when their life got turned upside down by the monk Fa Hai.

This story was radically feminist for its time, and very subversive to the social order prescribed by Confucian ideals.

Daoism does not rank one gender as superior to the other as initiation was not reserved for men alone. Women could become ordained into the Taoist [Daoist] clergy, and in religious Taoism [Daoism], there were many female saints (Little and Eichman 275). The inclusion of women in positions of spiritual authority indicates that women were not subjugated to the will of men. The following excerpt from the *Dao de Jing* (I. 6.) highlights the inclusivity and equality of the feminine (yin) principle:

The Valley Spirit never dies.
It is named the Mysterious Female.
And the doorway of the Mysterious Female
Is the base from which Heaven and Earth
sprang.
It is there within us all the while;
Draw upon it as you will, it never runs dry.

This imagery of an infinite feminine source as a doorway can be likened to women giving birth. It shows a significant amount of respect and appreciation for the yin force both spiritually and in a human sense.

While early Buddhist Mahayana texts did also have female deities, a patriarchal tone crept into medieval Chinese Buddhism, which led to a strange association between women and demonic snakes (Chen 21). Huaiyu Chen wrote an entire article about medieval Chinese Buddhists killing snakes. In the article, he has much to say about the link between snakes, evil women, and competition with Daoism. The overall basis Chen claims for these correlations is that snakes were long associated with yin energy, and therefore with women. The Chinese Buddhist Mahayana tradition had rituals for killing snakes including justifications for doing so, despite the fact that Buddhism strictly forbade the killing of any sentient animals. Apparently, at that time, there were a lot of poisonous snakes in China, which were weaponized by Daoist priests when Buddhists were competing for property and resources. While poisonous snakes also posed a threat to Daoist communities, medieval texts indicate they had ritual techniques for

taming snakes. The snakes were then seen as protectors of Daoist temples. Stories started to appear in Buddhist literature about demonic female snake creatures that preyed on monks (Chen 3,10-13). It is difficult to discern how many of these texts were metaphorical and which were not. However, the association of snakes with yin energy and Daoism created fertile ground for the legend of Lady White Snake to arise from. This context explains why the Buddhist monk was determined to defeat her.

In the story of Lady White Snake, Xu Xian struggled to come to terms with his wife's power when he learned her true identity. The monk Fa Hai cast fear into Xu Xian's heart with warnings that Bai Suzhen is dangerous and evil. Xu Xian's faith in his wife faltered and led to his imprisonment in the monastery. He ultimately escaped from Fa Hai's monastery and returned to his wife because he loved her, even after she had violently unleashed her power in a battle against the monk. This is arguably the point where Xu Xian first showed real strength of character. He did more than break away from social convention and defy religious authority. The thought of being married to a very powerful immortal snake spirit would probably terrify most people. However, Xu Xian did not cower away from her, which revealed his true nature of courage and devotion.

The monk Fa Hai challenged the marriage of Xu Xian and Bai Suzhen based on his belief that she is a dangerous and evil snake spirit. He sought to destroy the Lady White Snake as a religious duty, yet one could argue the monk himself was the villain in the story. He acted as a reckless vigilante who caused pain in his efforts to ruin a loving marriage.

In the play script in *The Red Pear Garden*, the monk Fa Hai stood guard of his monastery where Xu Xian was imprisoned, and he told Bai Suzhen, "...you cannot have your husband. / Holy priests cannot let these demons stand, / this is the Buddhas' most solemn command." She defended herself by saying, "Thousands of sick have been healed by my hand, / Lady White is well known throughout the land. / You speak of demons- you should understand, / since you came between me and my husband" (Packard 99). A great battle between the Daoist snake spirit and the Buddhist monk ensued.

Throughout the story, the monk Fa Hai accused Bai Suzhen of being an evil demon many times. Interestingly, she only once insinuated that he was the evil one. This raises the question of what evil really means. Taoism [Daoism] identifies causal evil as any willful human action which causes suffering, and the assertive use of will is only evil if it goes against the nature of the Tao [Dao] (Elmi and Zarvani 40-41). Fa Hai had willfully interfered in Bai Suzhen and Xu Xian's marriage, causing them both great emotional suffering. He honestly believed that it was his moral duty to defeat Bai Suzhen, and so it is difficult to condemn him as he meant to do good. It is difficult to determine which characters are the heroes and which are the villains in the case of two opposing religious doctrines. In a variant version of the story, Fa Hai was actually not a pious monk, but a malicious imposter who learned magic by listening to Buddha's recitation of sutras (West Lake 56). In that version, it is impossible to sympathize with him, for he is clearly cast as a villain.

There are many details of the story which have been left out of this work, which can be summarized as a series of separations and reunions between Bai Suzhen and Xu Xian. The separations were caused by the monk. The reunions were testaments to their deep love and devotion for each other. Taoism [Daoism] teaches that in all things exists the seed of its opposite, and anything to the extreme, will lead to its opposite (Ropp 313). This theme can be observed throughout the legend of Lady White Snake. For example, the extremely pious monk who was determined to overcome the 'demon snake' ended up causing suffering, or the weak-willed Xu Xian, who found his courage and returned to his powerful wife. Even the good fortune of Bai Suzhen and Xu Xian to experience such deep love led to the pain of separation.

The monk Fa Hai eventually succeeded in defeating Lady White Snake, by trapping her underneath the Leifeng Tower at West Lake, but not until after she gave birth to a son. This is where the legends diverge. One variation is that Lady White Snake remains trapped under the tower until 'the lake dries up or the pagoda falls' (Lee 239). This entire version was overwhelmingly sympathetic to the Buddhist monk and cast Lady White Snake as a cunning and evil spirit. Another variant

ending is much happier: The son of Bai Suzhen and Xu Xian grew up to be a renowned scholar who achieved the highest score on the imperial examination. After completing the exam, he paid a visit to the Leifeng Tower to offer a sacrifice for his mother. By virtue of his filial piety, the tower crumbled, and his mother was reunited with the family (Fayuan et al. 45). The ending that is related in *The Red Pear Garden* is the most popular. Xiao Qing (Little Green Snake) meditated for centuries to gather energy and cultivate more power. When she was ready, she returned to the Leifeng tower to fight Fa Hai. She struck the tower with her sword and it crumbled, setting Lady White Snake free (Packard 119-20).

Each of the three endings favors one of the three primary ideologies of China. All versions of the story have small differences in detail throughout that show preference to one school of thought or the other. What remains constant is the battle between the Buddhist monk and the Daoist snake spirit over a Confucian scholar. This is likely an allegory in itself, revealing the relationship of religious doctrines to each other and to secularism in Chinese culture.

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