

Reflections on Human Ethics and Research Directions in the Classical Chinese Novel Complete Legend of the White Snake

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Abstract

As a pivotal narrative within the “Legend of the White Snake” tradition, *The Complete Tale of the White Snake* (Bai She Quanzhuan) embodies multiple layers of Chinese cultural imagination concerning morality, emotion, humanity, and the supernatural. This paper examines its textual characteristics and historical evolution by comparing it with other narrative variants from the Ming and Qing dynasties. Further, it explores the underlying moral views, religious beliefs, and narrative logic embedded in folk traditions. The study highlights how this tale has been continuously adapted and reinterpreted in contemporary media—from Tian Han’s theatrical adaptations in the mid-20th century to recent animated films—demonstrating a dynamic process of cross-media transformation and cultural revitalization. Through comparative literature analysis and multimodal case studies, this paper argues that the White Snake narrative serves as a medium of cultural identity and emotional resonance, whose fluid structure enables renewed vitality in modern contexts. The research contributes to a deeper understanding of how traditional Chinese narratives are recontextualized and transmitted within contemporary media systems.

Keywords

The Complete Tale of the White Snake; Folk narrative; Cross-media adaptation; Cultural reappropriation; Tradition and modernity.

1. Introduction

Complete Legend of the White Snake (Baishe Quanzhuan), published by Yuelu Publishing House on June 1, 2004, was authored by a late-Qing literatus known by the pseudonym “Menghua Guanzhu” (Master of the Dream-Flower Pavilion). This novel is a reimagining of the well-known folk legend of Madam White Snake (Bai Suzhen), incorporating both oral traditions and written sources. Through literary embellishment and narrative expansion, Menghua Guanzhu reshaped the tale into a structured chaptered novel. Later adaptations in Chinese opera and modern film and television often took this version as their foundational text.

Earlier literary iterations of the tale include *The Marvelous Tale of Leifeng Pagoda* (Leifengta Qizhuan), first published in the eleventh year of the Jiaqing reign (1806) and attributed to “Yushan Zhuren”; and *Madam White Snake Forever Subdued beneath Leifeng Pagoda* (Bainiangzi Yongzhen Leifengta), which appeared in Feng Menglong’s *Stories to Caution the World* (Jingshi Tongyan). These three novels represent various stages in the evolution of the White Snake narrative. By compiling and editing them—with punctuation, paragraphing, and correction of evident errors—the compiler unified the texts under the title *Complete Legend of the White Snake*.

Menghua Guanzhu, whose real name was Jiang Yinxian, was born circa 1877, with his death year unknown. He also used the courtesy name Bosi and the sobriquet Dongli Zhuren. “Menghua Guanzhu” was his primary pen name, although he also wrote under aliases such as Bianxiang Shizhu and Pinghua Zhuren. As a prolific writer active during the late Qing and early Republican periods, his works include *The Nine-Tailed Fox*, *Essays from the Dream-Flower Pavilion*, *The Legend of the Flying Sword Hero*, *The Romance of the Peach Blossom Fan*, *Illustrated Romance of the Ming History*, and *A Treasury of Couplets*.

2. Content Overview

Complete Legend of the White Snake centers on the romantic relationship between Bai Suzhen, a white snake spirit, and the mortal scholar Xu Xian. Interwoven into this narrative are encounters with various deities and demons drawn from mythology and folklore, creating a world that straddles fantasy and reality.

The “First Legend of the White Snake” consists of 48 chapters. It tells the tale of Bai Suzhen who, after centuries of cultivation, descends to the mortal world by the order of the Queen Mother of the West to repay a karmic debt to Xu Xian, her savior in a past life. Their love, however, is tested by the monk Fahai from Jinshan Temple, as well as by a series of misunderstandings, divine interventions, and demonic threats. Key plot points include the “theft of silver” incident, Xu Xian’s banishment to Suzhou, Bai Suzhen’s transformation into her snake form after drinking realgar wine (which frightens Xu Xian to death), and her daring journey to steal a sacred herb to revive him. In her desperation to save him, Bai Suzhen floods Jinshan Temple and is ultimately imprisoned beneath Leifeng Pagoda by Fahai. Xu Xian becomes a monk, and Bai’s loyal companion Xiaoqing returns to the mountains to cultivate. Twenty years later, Xiaoqing’s attempt at revenge fails, and she is captured by Guanyin. However, Bai Suzhen’s son, Xu Mengjiao, excels in the imperial examination and brings honor to the family. Upon the expiration of Bai’s karmic sentence, she ascends to paradise with Xiaoqing.

The “Later Legend of the White Snake,” consisting of 16 chapters, depicts Xu Xian returning to secular life. A thousand-year-old fox spirit named Hu Meiniang from Mount Kunlun descends to the mortal realm, disguises herself as Bai Suzhen, and deceives Xu Xian into marriage. Bai Suzhen intervenes with divine authority and ends the deceptive union. After a series of dramatic events, Bai Suzhen, Xu Xian, and Xiaoqing ascend together in a joyous and fulfilled ending.

3. Ethical Reflections in the Novel

3.1. Love Beyond Boundaries and the Spirit of Sacrifice

The enduring love between Bai Suzhen and Xu Xian forms the emotional core of the novel. Bai Suzhen, a millennia-old snake spirit, transforms into a woman to repay Xu Xian for saving her life in a previous incarnation. Their love transcends species, social status, and societal prejudice, embodying the purity and intensity of genuine human emotion. Bai’s selfless sacrifices—including the potential loss of her spiritual cultivation and even her life—illustrate the power of true love. Her bravery in pursuing love, despite social constraints and moral persecution, conveys an implicit resistance to feudal values. Xu Xian, although initially frightened and confused upon learning Bai’s true identity, ultimately chooses acceptance and protection. This union across boundaries speaks to the luminous possibilities of human nature and affirms love’s transformative power.

3.2. The Complexity of Human Nature

The characters in *Complete Legend of the White Snake* are portrayed with rich complexity. Fahai, the story's nominal antagonist, is not merely a rigid villain; his actions reflect an unwavering commitment to Buddhist doctrine and societal order, suggesting a nuanced moral struggle within him. Xiaoqing, Bai Suzhen's loyal sister-figure, undergoes significant development throughout the narrative, grappling with issues of loyalty, love, and self-discovery. The dichotomy between humans and spirits, which earlier traditions often cast as a clear opposition between good and evil, is reconsidered in this novel. In Ming and Qing versions of the tale, humans are not always noble, and spirits such as Bai Suzhen are often more virtuous. This inversion highlights moral ambiguity and suggests a more pluralistic view of good and evil.

3.3. Evolving Representations of Bai Suzhen

The portrayal of Bai Suzhen has evolved significantly across different historical periods. In the Song dynasty version *Three Pagodas of the West Lake*, the white snake is depicted as a heartless and brutal creature, devoid of human emotion or virtue. In Feng Menglong's *Stories to Caution the World*, the character retains her beauty and charm but is reimagined as a determined and loving woman. In Qing playwright Fang Chengpei's Kunqu opera *Leifeng Pagoda*, Bai Suzhen is further humanized into an idealized image of the virtuous, gentle, and industrious traditional Chinese woman. This characterization closely aligns with her portrayal in *Complete Legend of the White Snake*.

3.4. Religious and Philosophical Dimensions

The novel reflects the coexistence of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, a common feature of religious thought in the late imperial period. Buddhist elements are especially prominent, with Fahai serving as a vehicle for Buddhist discipline. Daoist themes appear in the collaborative suppression of Bai Suzhen by Buddhist and Daoist forces. Confucian ideals, embodied by Xu Xian, are evident in his literati identity, his poetic expressions during exile, and his ultimate deference to moral propriety. The narrative also explores philosophical questions such as karmic retribution and the cyclical nature of good and evil, prompting readers to reflect on moral causality and personal growth.

3.5. A Harmonious and Fortunate Ending

The novel's conclusion exemplifies the traditional Chinese ideal of a "grand reunion" or *da tuanyuan*. Bai Suzhen and Xu Xian, along with Xiaoqing, ascend to paradise, achieving transcendence and unity. This ending embodies a moral resolution rooted in Chinese cultural values: that virtue is rewarded and wrongdoing punished. Bai Suzhen's perseverance, Xu Xian's forgiveness, Fahai's steadfastness, and Xiaoqing's maturation all converge to underscore a cosmic justice informed by Buddhist karmic principles. The evolution of these characters mirrors shifting social ideals and aligns with the public's yearning for a redemptive closure.

4. Research Plan

Future studies on *Complete Tale of the White Snake* (*Baishe Quanzhuan*) can be developed along the following four major trajectories, each corresponding to different textual versions, performance traditions, and contemporary cultural reinterpretations.

4.1. Narrative Evolution and Versional Comparison

The origins of the Legend of the White Snake remain ambiguous, with no scholarly consensus on a single authoritative version. The narrative exists in multiple iterations—from the Ming and Qing periods to various localized folk accounts—each presenting distinct stylistic characteristics. Comparative textual analysis of versions such as *Jingshi Tongyan*, *Leifengta Qichuan*, and *Baishe Quanzhuan* is vital for understanding the transformations in plot structure, character development, and thematic emphasis. Special attention should be paid to how the portrayals of Madam White Snake and Xu Xian differ across versions, revealing shifting moral, gender, and metaphysical concerns within the broader Chinese literary tradition.

Footnote 1: Dream-of-Flowers Studio (Menghua Guanzhu), *Complete Tale of the White Snake* (Changsha: Yuelu Shushe, 2019; repr. 2021).

4.2. Cultural Significance and Ideological Dimensions

The tale encapsulates complex moral, religious, and aesthetic systems deeply rooted in Chinese tradition. For instance, Madam White Snake's cultivation and benevolence offer alternative perspectives on moral virtue that challenge patriarchal orthodoxy. Her identity as a supernatural being—both revered and feared—symbolizes Daoist spiritual transcendence and Buddhist karmic cycles. Through an interdisciplinary lens, researchers can examine how the story's values intersect with Confucian ethics, Daoist metaphysics, and Buddhist compassion. Moreover, placing these ideologies in the context of China's ongoing cultural transformation invites discussion of how such narratives inform modern discourses on gender, agency, and morality.

4.3. Folk Belief and Daoist Cosmology

Rooted in oral storytelling traditions, *Complete Tale of the White Snake* also reflects the intimate interplay between folklore and religious praxis. It serves as a cultural site where Daoist deities, local beliefs, and popular mythologies converge. Characters such as Fahai, the monk who opposes the lovers' union, often embody institutional religious authority, while the snake spirit represents marginalized supernatural entities linked to feminine power and folk devotion. Examining these dynamics contributes to the understanding of regional identity, ritual performance, and cultural memory in late imperial China. As scholars note, "folk culture bears the emotional essence of Chinese spiritual life."

Footnote 2: Ma Yimin, "The Transformation of the Communication Themes of the Legend of the White Snake and Its Cultural Connotations" (MA diss., East China Jiaotong University, 2018).

4.4. Media Adaptations and Reception Studies

The adaptability of the White Snake narrative across genres and media is another promising research avenue. The story has inspired operas, modern plays, TV series, and animated films. For example, the playwright Tian Han reimaged the tale in the 1940s and 50s, infusing it with socialist ideals and anti-feudal sentiment. His adaptation reflects an attempt to create new cultural myths aligned with national identity and social progress. More recently, the animation studio Light Chaser has developed the White Snake film series (e.g., *White Snake: Origin*, *White Snake: Love and Rebirth*), in which director Li Jiakai reinterprets the central relationship with a modern lens, emphasizing mutual emotional agency and gender equality. This suggests that traditional narratives continue to evolve through media innovation while retaining their thematic core.

Footnote 3: Chen Jianxi, Li Jiakai, Cao Xiaohui, et al., "Modern Animation and Traditional Narrative: An Interview on White Snake: Love and Rebirth," *Film Art* 5 (2024): 80–87.

Furthermore, the digital media ecology has transformed the dissemination of folklore, fostering a transmedia storytelling environment characterized by multi-platform participation and aesthetic hybridization. The tale's intertextual adaptations in online fiction, video games, and fan culture attest to its enduring cultural resonance and narrative elasticity.

5. Conclusion

The Legend of the White Snake stands as a timeless narrative in Chinese cultural heritage and a literary masterpiece that continues to shape collective imagination. The Complete Tale of the White Snake, with its vivid imagery and fantastical episodes, offers a window into the ontological tension between humans and spirits, duty and desire, tradition and transformation. Its integration of folk belief, Daoist philosophy, Confucian ethics, and Buddhist thought renders it a unique locus for interdisciplinary inquiry. At the same time, the narrative's constant reinvention—through performance, media, and popular reinterpretation—ensures its relevance in the contemporary cultural sphere.

As such, this story is not only a "treasure of Chinese culture" but also a valuable case study for global comparative literature. It offers critical insights into the formation of cultural identity, ethical subjectivity, and narrative resilience in premodern and postmodern contexts alike.

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