

The Web of Signification in Journey to the West

Yikun Li, North China Electric Power University, China

The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2015
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Journey to the West, one of the ancient Chinese classics, is an imaginative narration of the historical event of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang embarking on an arduous journey to India for Buddhist scriptures in Tang dynasty (618-907 AD). While advocating mainly Buddhist beliefs, such as the concept of karma, as conventionally understood, the novel also encompasses Taoism and Confucianism. Against such an intellectual backdrop, two major signifiers—Xuanzang the pilgrim and the Buddhist scriptures, one personified and one linguistic—signify differently to various social and religious communities -- the Buddhists, the ruling emperor, the ordinary mass, and the pagan devils. A closer reading reveals a web of signification within the novel, which imperceptibly deconstructs each transcendental signified above and behind claimed by each community.

Keywords: Journey to the West; signification; deconstruction

iafor

The International Academic Forum

www.iafor.org

Journey to the West, one of the ancient Chinese classics, is an imaginative narration of the historical event of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang embarking on an arduous journey to India for Buddhist scriptures in Tang dynasty (618-907 AD). While advocating mainly Buddhist beliefs, such as the concept of karma, as conventionally understood, the novel also encompasses Taoism and Confucianism. Against such an intellectual backdrop, two major signifiers—Xuanzang the pilgrim and the Buddhist scriptures, one personified and one linguistic—signify differently to various social and religious communities -- the Buddhists, the ruling emperor, the ordinary mass, and the pagan devils. A closer reading reveals a web of signification within the novel, which imperceptibly deconstructs each transcendental signified above and behind claimed by each community.

The Construction of a Superior World

“I now have Three Stores of True Scriptures with which they (Southern Jambu Continent residents) can be persuaded to be good. One store of the Vinaya, the law, which is about Heaven; one of Sastras, expositions which are concerned with Earth; and one of Sutras, or scriptures, which save ghosts. The Three Stores consist of 15144 scrolls in 35 classes. They are the scriptures for cultivating the truth, and the gate to real goodness.” Thus Tathagata introduced the Scriptures.

For Buddha, the Scriptures clearly signify a gateway for the corrupted Southern Jambu Continent residents to the heaven of truthfulness and righteousness. He accuses the land as “a vicious field of tongues and mouths, an evil sea of disputation”, and the people “greedy and lecherous and delight in the sufferings of others” (Wu, 2003: 239). For Him, the scriptures, a cure-all to these deadly sins, “offer deliverance from suffering and release from disaster” (Wu, 3271).

The scriptures not only have the power of transforming the “corrupted” worldlies, but also the power of delivering the dead to heaven. As Guanyin (Bodhisattva) said to Xuanzang, “the Three Stores of the Buddha’s Law of the Great Vehicle¹ will raise the dead up to Heaven, deliver sufferers from their torments, and free souls from the eternal coming and going” (Wu, 419). Briefly, the scriptures are in possession of the power of delivering the mortals into immortality. Upon the deliverance, one would be free from the cycle of samsara. He would be free from both the panic of being thrown down to hell for his evil doings as well as the coercion to struggle upward in the cycle of fate. He would acquire eternal peace and happiness through the sacred words.

In Brief, for Buddha and his disciples, the Scriptures are empowered to lead mortals into truth and immortality. An adherence to the teachings will direct the mortal beings into the right path in “this life” and will eventually free them from the greatest terror of Death.

Presented in the novel, the Buddhist doctrines were accepted and promulgated by the Tang Emperor Taizong.² As narrated, the emperor called a great assembly with a purpose to “deliver the lonely ghosts” and to preach the doctrine of the three Buddhas of past and future (Wu, 397). As stated in the opening address of the Assembly, “at the sacred command of Taizong, some chosen monks for meditation and preaching have been assembled. He has opened wide the gates of enlightenment and rowed far the boat of mercy, saving all the beings in the sea of suffering....For this wonderful cause they [the ghosts] are invited to see the purple gates of the pure capital, and through the assembly they will escape from the confines of Hell to climb to the World of Bliss and be free, wandering as they please in the Paradise of the West” (Wu, 401). Thus, the heaven is accessible for the lonely ghosts via preaching the scriptures. “The infinite Law is proclaimed, the boundless mercy of Heaven is shown” (Wu, 403) .

Besides the promised immortality signified by the scriptures, divine blessing was also what the emperor wished the scriptures could signify. “We pray to protect our country; May it stay at peace and be blessed” (Wu, 403), thus the opening address of the Great Assembly concluded. For a ruling emperor, divine protection is of primal importance. When Xuanzang offered to fetch the Scriptures of the Great Vehicle from the Western Heaven for the emperor so as to “ensure the eternal security of the empire”, Taizong, overjoyed, named Xuanzang a “holy monk”, “the Imperial Younger Brother” (Wu, 429). Xuanzang, a personified signifier, together with the Buddhist scriptures actually signify a connection between the mortal emperor and the divine world. The signification thus carries a political overtone.

As mentioned, the lonely ghosts would be redeemed and delivered into heaven with the recitation of the Scriptures. The redeeming power was also manifest in the case of Xuanzang and his four divine disciples -- Wukong, Wuneng, Wujing, and the young dragon. For them, the journey is a spiritual one actualizing religious justification, sanctification, and glorification. Xuanzang, the master, was Tathagata’s second disciple Master Golden Cicada in his former life and was punished for a transgression. Because he would not listen to Tathagata’s sermon on the Dharma and had no respect for his teaching, Tathagata demoted his soul to be reborn in the East (Wu, 3345). Upon accomplishing the journey, he was promoted to Candanapunya Buddha. The pursuit for the genuine scriptures signifies a return to his former glory.

As for the four disciples, all heavily penalized for their wrongdoings, were redeemed by Guanyin and ordained to escort Xuanzang. “Because of the store of karmic demerits built up by the past transgressions of each pilgrim, all must undertake the journey to atone for their sins and wipe heir karmic slates clean” (Bantly, 1989: 517). Wukong (“awakened to emptiness”), the once fearless Monkey King from the lower world demanded a position in the ruling divine world, but was belittled and mocked, and thus wrecked a havoc on the paradise. He was ultimately subdued by Tathagata, and was kept in captivity underneath a mountain. Wuneng (“awakened to power”), once Marshal Tian Peng in the Milky Way, was expelled into the mortal world for

having attempted to seduce the moon maiden. Wujing (“awakened to Purity”), once the Curtain Raising General in the divine world, was exiled and became a river demon for having accidentally broken a crystal wine cup at a divine Peach Banquet. The young dragon princess (Xuanzang’s horse) was flogged and ousted from the palace of dragon for having burned up the bright pearls. By the instruction of Guanyin (Bodhisattva), the four of them eventually gained entry into divinity, promoted to be the Victorious Fighting Buddha, the Altar Cleanser, the Golden Arhat, and a Heavenly Dragon of the Eight Classes of Being respectively. For them, their master Xuanzang and the scriptures pursued signify a gateway to the “Great Way” of Buddha, a delivery from the punishment, and a rise in status -- from the marginalized-demonized position to the centralized-worshipped rank.

The ordinary mortal believers also lay trust in the redeeming power of the Scriptures. Xuanzang, in return for being saved from a tiger by the hunter Boqin, recited the Sutra to Deliver the Dead and other sutras in honor of Boqin’s deceased father. As narrated, the soul of Boqin’s father told his family in a dream that “now that the saintly monk has wiped out my sins by reading some scriptures. King Yama has had me sent back to the rich land of China to be reborn in an important family” (Wu, 459). The Scriptures, extolled as “the majestic Law”, can “save the dead from suffering and the morass” (Wu, 459). The very basic mortal wishes of the ordinary mortal – security and fortune – are also surely achievable by worshiping Tathagata and the scriptures. In the great mass performed in the house of Lord Kou who accommodated Xuanzang and his disciples, the monks recited Peacock Sutra and Avatamsaka Sutra with a wish for disasters and slanders being swept away (Wu, 3201).

For the pagan devils who crave for immortality and an increase in their power, the Buddhist Scriptures surely means nothing. In their world, Xuanzang was comically turned into elixir, signifying immortality and an increase of superpower. Basically, the monsters “straddle two distinct spheres of signification: that of the dominant structure and that of their structure of origin” (Cozad, 1998: 126). Governed neither by Confucian ethics nor by Buddhist doctrines, those cannibals resorted to the primitive means. Upon hearing of the approach of Xuanzang to their territory, their first reaction was always that here came the Tang Monk, a reincarnation of Golden Cicada. “He had an Original Body that has been purified through ten lives. Anyone who eats a piece of his flesh will live for ever” (Chapter 27), thus demons like the Corpse Fiend plotted killing. Such a plot would inevitably be subdued as those demons neither possessed unquenchable power over the divinities nor were patronized by some honorable deity. When defeated, they encountered either destruction or coerced conversion.

In short, for each community, Buddhas, the mortal emperor, the ordinary mass, and the pagan devil, there exists a better world signified either in the scriptures or the pilgrim Xuanzang. Besides immortality, the signified universally accepted, the significations of the scriptures also inevitably bear the mark of various social and religious standings. It can be argued that the significations are of double nature –

universality and particularity. The paradise, actually a subjective entity, reflects the believers' religious and social beings, rather than being a claimed objective entity. The paradise is as socially constructed as the mortal world.

Deconstruction of the Paradise

A superior other world was thus constructed, and widely revered by both mortals and immortals, both the royalty and the ordinary. Yet a closer reading reveals that the boundary of the corrupted mortal world and impeccable heaven was actually blurry and broken by their similarities. The binaries actually overlap each other. Treachery and corruption have found their way into the paradise. When Xuanzang and his disciples finally reached the Thunder Monastery where Buddha and his divine disciples dwell, they were blackmailed blatantly by two deities Ananda and Kasyapa who demanded a gift in exchange for the Scriptures. Rejected, they gave them wordless scriptures. Only after their greed was sated (they received the begging bowl of purple gold given to Xuanzang by the Tang Emperor), the two deities handed the pilgrims the authentic scriptures. The two deities were no less greedy than the "corrupted Southern Jambu residents".

Another interesting observation is that quite a number of demons the pilgrims encountered on their way were surprisingly the servants of deities or even the deity himself. Two servant boys of Lord Lao, the "Honored Lord of the Origin" were actually summoned by Guanyin to be monsters in the mortal world to test the will of the team (Wu, 1168). When the test was over, the monsters were subdued and brought back to their heaven abode by their master, ironically getting away with whatever havoc they wrecked in the human world. A servant of Maitreya Buddha slipped out of the heaven down to the Earth and inflicted disasters upon the local residents. And just like the two servant boys of Lord Lao, he was captured by his master and recalled back to paradise (Wu, 2191). Even the deity "Strider the Wooden Wolf" did likewise (Wu, 1030). Destined to fulfill a former romance destiny with a Jade Maiden in Heaven, he imprisoned the princess of a nearby kingdom, the maiden's new identity in this life, for 13 years.³ The worst that happens to these demons of divine origin is simply being "deprived" of the evil freedom down in the mortal world and brought back to Heaven.

As for the corrupted human world, it is basically presented as one of benevolence. As mentioned before, Xuanzang was once saved by the hunter Boqing, well received by Lord Lao, and warned against the monsters by many locals. Ironically, the only mortal depicted vain and greedy was the abbot of Chan Monastery of Guanyin. The abbot coveted Xuanzang's precious cassock given by Guanyin so much so that he even attempted to murder them. The Buddhist scriptures did not seem to function well enough to lead him onto the righteous path.

Not only the boundary between the human world and the divine world gets blurry, overlapping can even be seen between the devil and the divine, as reflected in the bountiful transformations throughout the novel. The magic power to transform suggests the intersection of diverse identities, demon, human, or divine. The devil Red Boy deceived and caught Wuneng by playing Guanyin. Such an unforgivable “success” was a great irritation to the female divinity, but also proved a sort of assimilation of the two contradictions. In another case, Guanyin played the snake devil to subdue the black bear monster, who stole Xuanzang’s precious cassock. And the deception of the devil six-eared macaque was so successful that only Tathagata could distinguish the devil from Wukong, not even the mighty Guanyin. It can be argued that at one instant, it is hard to distinguish the conceptually contradicted beings. Appearance is considered deceptive, yet it is also one significant aspect of Buddhist divinity. The multiple appearances of Guanyin are all sublime and awe-striking; so are all the deities in the Thunder Monastery, full of grandeur and sublimity – appearance does help the construction of divinity. The Buddhist perception of appearance is actually rather paradoxical, denying it as well as emphasizing it. A structural observation of the two worlds – devil and divine would be inadequate. The two worlds are actually interwoven with each other.

Readable Scriptures vs wordless Scriptures

As mentioned above, Xuanzang and his disciples were deceived by Ananda and Kasyapa and given first blank Buddhist Scriptures. Irritated, Wukong accused Tathagata of bad governance of the paradise, silently allowing such a deception. In response, Tathagata answered that the blank scriptures are indeed superior to the readable ones, yet beyond the comprehension of the mortal beings. Such a trick, though meant to advocate the value of the scriptures, also tells that mortals will not have access to a superior truth.

One interpretation of the blank scriptures is that the blank text symbolizes wordless divine presence. As said in *The Diamond Sutra*, one of the scriptures granted to Xuanzang, Tathagata said Truth is uncontainable and inexpressible (*The Diamond Sutra*, Section 7). “Who sees Me by form, Who seeks Me in sound, Perverted are his footsteps upon the Way, For he cannot perceive the Tathagata” (Section 26). “Words cannot explain the real nature of a cosmos. Only common people fettered with desire make use of this arbitrary method” (Section 30). Divinity is above and beyond any tangible means – form and sound. Anything governed by form and sound would be governed by time and space, and therefore will not be omnipresent but temporary. Divinity is advocated as omnipresent, and therefore transcends form and sound, and thus language is rendered futile. Such an assertion somewhat makes a mockery of the pilgrimage. Even with the hard won cure-all scriptures, Truth is still unattainable to the common people, at least not via the means of words.⁴

Such a deemphasis on form was also present in Heart Sutra, given by Crow's Nest Zen Master to Xuanzang. According to the sutra, all phenomena -- form, feeling, volitions, perceptions, and consciousness -- are empty. Only when engaged in deep meditation, can one approach the heart of the perfection of understanding. When the Zen Master passed the sutra to Xuanzang, he said, "if you recite it when you encounter evil influences you will come to no harm" (Chapter 19). The sutra is the kernel of the cultivation of the truth, and it is the gateway to becoming a Buddha. Such a view is actually rather paradoxical. It is rather intriguing that the sutra, whose existence relies on sound and form, undervalues these means.

Diamond Sutra and Heart Sutra, two Scriptures endowed with supreme value, deconstruct the supermacy of words. As advocated, words (linguistic signifiers) lose their function to denote the signified -- a higher other world. Even truth is structurally constructed, a higher one achievable by meditation, and a lower one by words.

What Xuanzang and the Scriptures signify for various communities actually reflects the sway of a web of values and beliefs. Tang dynasty saw a flourish of three major ideologies: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. In essence, Confucianism is chiefly concerned with the present mortal world, the relationship between humans -- emperor and subject, father and son, husband and wife, etc; Buddhism addresses the relationship between mortals and immortals, and the relationship of an individual's former, present, and future life. Taoism rather advocates a harmony between human and nature. Emperor Taizong's wish for divine blessing upon the kingdom reflects Confucianism's doctrine upon rulers -- devotion to the people and the regime. Xuanzang's willingness to embark on such an audacious journey partly comes from his loyalty to the emperor, a value instilled on him by Confucianism. Wukong's filialty to Xuanzang also reflects Confucian teachings. For the four disciples, their master Xuanzang was a father-like image to whom, according to Confucianism, they must pay respect and show absolute obedience even though he was only a powerless mortal. Even after Wukong was banished by Xuanzang, once the master was in peril, Wukong never failed to rush back promptly to rescue him. As Wukong said, "even if a man has been your teacher for a single day, he deserves to be treated as your father for a life long" (Wu, 1026). What Xuanzang signifies for his disciples convey both Buddhist and Confucian senses. A mixture of ideologies produce multiple significations.

In conclusion, a surface reading of the novel would reveal a superior marvelous paradise as signified in the invaluable Scriptures, the ultimate purpose of the awe-inspiring journey undertaken by Xuanzang. Immortality, righteousness, and divinity are finally within human reach via these sacred words. Tathagata declared the redeeming power stored in the Scriptures; mortals lay faith in them; devils endeavor to acquire the pilgrim as they also desire immortality. Yet such a simple binary construction was decomposed under a closer reading. Boundaries between varied worlds are broken, identities misplaced. Heaven can be corrupted; deities can be

devilish; the pursued Scriptures will not guarantee an access to truth. More than an advocate for Buddhism, Journey to the West actually serves as a kaleidoscope of Chinese ethics and religions.

Notes:

1. Before Xuanzang's pilgrim, Hinayana buddhism was practised in the Tang Dynasty. One mission of Xuanzang was to bring Great-vehicle buddhism to Tang dynasty.
2. Historically, there were both campaigns against and for preaching Buddhism in Tang Dynasty. Emperor Taizong, chiefly out of the political necessity, advocated and rejected Buddhism in his regime. His subjects include both Buddhism advocates and opponents.
3. According to the Buddhist belief of samsara, a soul would experience various existence in his past, present, and future lives. Unfortunately, the present mortal being normally have no memory of his /her former identity. Hence the princess didn't recognize the deity who, however, got to fulfill the fate, had to imprison her.
4. Some critics interprets the novel as an advocate of Zen Buddhism, which advocates the enlightenment comes not through conceptualization but through direct insight. Zen Buddhism emphasizes not the learning of sutras and doctrines, but meditation and insight.

References:

Bantly, F. Cho (1989) Buddhist Allegory in the Journey to the West. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 3, pp. 512-524

Cozad, Laurie (1998) Reeling in the Demon: An Exploration into the Category of the Demonized Other as Portrayed in "The Journey to the West". *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 66, No. 1, pp. 117-145

Wu, Cheng'en (2003) *Journey to the West*. Jenner, W. J. F. Trans. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.

The Diamond Sutra (translated by A.F.Price and Wong Mou-Lam).

http://wenku.baidu.com/link?url=ke1x7slny7fU0X8HdWxvQEOG5wiYNB9624LQpNceceWP82riSqEkoV1_eDEiQHAeMThLSK8JYgM7EUt5MGJJBq2Xd2HaZrRS6yPdcy2hbd3

Contact Email: hilyk@163.com