

# *On the Secular Female Images in Journey to the West*

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**Abstract**—*Journey to the West*, as a famous supernatural novel in ancient China, has created a series of popular characters, especially the image of the group in pilgrimage. But it is undeniable that in the process of pilgrimage, in the ups and downs of the novel plot, in portraying the characters, in this novel with male image as the main narrative carrier, a large number of female images spring onto the paper vividly, leaving a deep impression on the readers. Their appearance adds color to the narrative of the novel and is an indispensable part of the plot of the novel. In view of the secular female image in *Journey to the West*, the author mainly studies it from the following aspects. On the one hand, based on the text of the novel, the female images involved in the novel are explored and the characteristics of the female images are analyzed and studied; On the other hand, from the perspective of creation, the significance and means of portraying such images are interpreted and the deep connotation of female images is expounded, so as to have a more three-dimensional interpretation on female images in the work. In addition, from the perspective of the social significance of the novel, this paper discusses the social factors of the emergence of female images in the novel and the social reality it reflects.

**Keywords**—*Journey to the West, female, secular, significance*

## I. OVERVIEW OF SECULAR FEMALE IMAGES IN *JOURNEY TO THE WEST*

In *Journey to the West*, there are a total of 44 female characters (including those with names and without names). Among them, whether the Guanyin Bodhisattva who appeared for as many as 16 times and helped the sutra-seeker turn the situation into a good one for many times, or the old lady who only appeared once and said one word, all played an indispensable role in the development of the whole story plot, which was the result of the author's careful design.

These female images can be divided into three categories: secular female images, goddess images and enchantress images, among which secular female images are relatively more involved. The author of *Journey to the West* portrays the female images with the complex and contradictory mindset. On the one hand, influenced by Buddhism, Taoism and the idea of men being superior to women, the author rejects women. On the other hand, the author also creates a series of secular female images from the royal family to the common people and has some sympathy and appreciation for them. This series of women mainly are divided into two categories: one is secular women; one is the earthly woman reincarnated from heaven.

The secular women in *Journey to the West* basically have the following two characteristics. First, they account for the

largest proportion of all female images in terms of number, and they are involved in a wide range of group with all walks of life. Second, compared with other female images, some of them are good women who appear in group images.

## II. THE CLASSIFICATION OF THE SECULAR WOMEN IN *JOURNEY TO THE WEST*

In *Journey to the West*, there are as many as 24 secular female images described by the author, involving all walks of life.

### A. *The most revered queen of Womanland of Western Liang, the queen of Wuji state, Golden Queen of the Land of Purpuria, etc.*

Although this kind of women is from the royal family, the author highlights their characteristics: bold pursuit of true affection between men and women, craving for conjugal love and happy marriage life, and making unremitting efforts for this.

In the chapter 38 of the novel, the queen of Wuji state is aware of the suspicious status of the king through the indifference of a loving couple. [3] In the chapter 69 and 70, in order to return to the palace and reuniting with her husband, Golden Queen of the Land of Purpuria risks her life to steal the devil's golden bell.

Among such women as boldly pursue their happy marriages; the author emphasizes the queen of the Womanland of Western Liang who is willing to be an ordinary wife in order to get the desired happy marriage at the cost of the wealth of her country. The queen's deep affection for Tang Priest is fundamentally different from rude and attempted affection of enchantresses. What the queen embodies is the secular women's desire and pursuit for marriage. [2]

As the king of a country, the queen of Womanland of Western Liang courted love boldly without losing her grace and dignity. In order to pursue her love, she proposes to Tang Priest without relying on her queen's identity and extortion. She commissions the royal tutor to act as a matchmaker, takes the initiative to propose to Tang Priest and emphasizes its pleading twice. Bowing again, the queen's tutor said, "This is Womanland of Western Liang, and no man has ever come here before. As Your Excellency the emperor's brother has graced us with your presence I am here on the orders of Her Majesty the queen to propose marriage!" "The superintendent of the post station said: 'and our queen was very, very happy. She said that last night she had an auspicious dream in which a

golden screen shone with many colors, and a jade mirror was full of light. When she learned that Your Excellency the emperor's brother was a man from the great land of Tang she decided to offer you all the wealth of our country to persuade you to stay here as her husband and sit on the throne. Her Majesty would become queen consort. The royal tutor was commissioned to act as matchmaker and I was made mistress of ceremonies. We are here to ask for your hand." After Tang Priest pretends to marry her, she is elated and meets her husband smilingly. "When the queen heard this she ordered the office that dealt with foreign relations to lay on a banquet. She also had the state carriage prepared to take her out of the city to welcome her lord and husband." And she happily let Tang Priest as the king and is willing to be a queen, putting a happy marriage in a more important position than the throne. "The queen's tutor said to the queen, 'if it pleases Your Majesty, will you come to the Eastern hall for the banquet? Today is an auspicious day, and a lucky hour tonight you may marry the emperor's brother". "The queen was delighted by this suggestion. Descending from the coach hand-in-hand with Sanzang she went in through the palace's main gate." [1]

#### B. Good wife and kind mother: Yin Wenjiao, the mother of Tang Priest, the mother and wife of Liu Boqin, etc.

The author portrays the Tang Priest's mother as a woman who is tolerant, generous and obedient. Tang Priest's mother, Yin Wenjiao, is the daughter of prime minister. She went with her husband Chen Guangrui to Jiangzhou after marriage. In Hongjiang Estuary, she encountered two boatmen Liu Hong and Li Biao who killed her husband Chen Guangrui. And Liu Hongqiang took her by force as his wife, and pretended as Chen Guangrui to Jiangzhou to take office. Miss Yin's hatred for the villainous Liu Hong was such that she wished she could eat his flesh and spread his flayed hide on her bed, but as she was pregnant and the child had not yet been born she had to force herself to go with him. After giving birth to Jiangliu for 18 years, the son grows up into an adult. His father took revenge with soldiers and the husband is born again. And the whole family reunites. At this time, Yin Wenjiao "calmly commits suicide" because she is ashamed of seeing her father and her husband." Tang Priest's mother believed in the traditional moral concept of "a woman should follow her heart". [4]

Liu Boqin's mother is another traditional woman image with rich life experience created by the author. The first difficulty Tang Priest experienced after he first came out of Chang'an described in the chapter 13 in the *Journey to the West* is that his two companions were all cut into pieces and eaten by the devil and after being rescued, Tang Priest led the white horse on his own to continue his journey, only to encounter a tiger and a few long snakes. At this time, Tang Priest was alone without anyone's protection. Luckily, he was rescued by Liu Boqin, warden of the mountain, who would sent Tang Priest to Double Boundary Mountain next day.

When Tang Priest encountered the first difficulty, his savior's wife and mother are created in the novel, especially Liu Boqin's mother. Sanzang returned to Liu Boqin's home, requesting to see his mother. "You are a guest from afar, venerable monk, so let us each preserve our dignity and neither

bow to the other," the old woman replied. 'Mother,' said Liu Boqin, 'he has been sent by His Majesty the Tang Emperor to go to the Western Heaven to see the Buddha and fetch the scripture. I met him on the mountain, and I thought that as we were fellow-countrymen I should invite him home to rest before I take him on his way tomorrow.' The old woman was delighted. 'Good, good,' she said." While in their dinner, "Sanzang replied, This is wonderful, but I must tell you frankly that I have been a monk ever since I left my mother's womb, so I am quite unable to eat meat.' Boqin thought for a while before replying, 'Venerable monk, our family has not eaten vegetarian food for generations. When we cut bamboo shoots, pick fungus, gather wild vegetables for drying, or make bean-curd we always cook them in the fat of roebuck, deer, tiger or leopard, so even they aren't really vegetarian; and our two cooking pots are steeped in fat, so what are we to do? I'm afraid it was wrong of me to ask you here.' There's no need to worry,' Sanzang answered. 'Please go ahead and eat. I'd go without food for four or five days or even starve, rather than break the monastic rule about vegetarian food.' But we can't have you starving to death,' protested Liu Boqiu. Thanks to your great kindness, High Warden, I was saved from the packs of tigers and wolves. Even if I were to starve to death, it would be better than providing a meal for tigers.' Liu Boqin's mother, who had been listening to their conversation, said, 'Don't talk nonsense, son. I've got some vegetarian things that we can offer to him.' 'Where did you get them from?' Liu Boqin asked, to which mother replied, 'Never you mind how, but I've got them.' She told her daughter-in-law to take down the little cooking-pot, burn the fat out of it, scrub it and wash it several times over, then put it back on the stove. Then they half filled it with boiling water that they threw away. Next she poured boiling water on mountain-elm leaves to make tea, boiled up some millet, and cooked some dried vegetables. This was then all put into two bowls and set on the table. Then the old woman said to Sanzang, 'Please eat, venerable monk. This is completely pure tea and food that I and my daughter-in-law have prepared.' [1]

Liu Boqin's mother not only has rich life experience, but also respects for the Tang Priest and his faith. Additionally, she does not regard her as superior to Tang Priest as his savior. Therefore, this is another virtuous and kind-hearted ordinary woman created by the author.

#### C. A worldly woman reincarnated from heaven

The third daughter of the king of Elephantia was snatched away by Yellow-robed Monster, which is described in chapter 29 in the novel. And her childhood name is Prettier-than-a-flower. This is a special female image. She is both the earthly princess and the heavenly daughter. As an earthly princess, she is a filial daughter; as the heavenly daughter, she is not only the woman who is loyal to the love, but also the holy believer who reveres the heaven. She wants to follow her heart and pursues a beautiful love, but she is afraid of polluting the heavenly palace. Thus, she takes the risk to descend to the world to pursue her dream of beautiful marriage life.

She is a filial daughter. After snatching away by Yellow-robed Monster, she worried about her parent. She thanked Friar Sand for writing a letter home for her, thus

taking a risk to save Friar Sand. "Princess," said Monkey with a smile, "do you know what the worst crime on earth you can commit is?" "Yes," she replied. "You're a mere woman, so you don't understand anything," said Monkey. "I was educated by my parents in the palace ever since I was a child," she said, "and I remember what the ancient book said: There are three thousand crimes, and the greatest is unfilial behavior." "But you're unfilial," replied Monkey. "My father begot me, my mother raised me. Alas for my parents. What an effort it was to bring me up. Filial piety is the basis of all conduct and the root of all goodness, so why did you marry an evil spirit and forget your parents? Surely this is the crime of unfilial behavior." At this the princess' face went red as she was overcome with shame. "What you say, sir, is so right, "Of course I haven't forgotten my parents. But the monster forced me to come here, and he is so strict that I can hardly move a step. Besides, it's a long journey and nobody could deliver a message. I was going to kill myself until I thought that my parents would never discover that I hadn't run away deliberately. So I had nothing for it but to drag out my wretched life. I must be the wickedest person on earth." As the spoke the tears gushed out like the waters of a spring.

She is also a bold woman in pursuit of love. "I deserve to die, Your Majesty," the Strider replied. "That daughter of the king of Elephantia was no ordinary mortal. She was a Jade Maiden in the Hall of Incense who wanted to have an affair with me. As we did not want to defile the Heavenly Palace she decided to become a mortal first and was reborn in a king's palace. Then I became an evil monster and occupied a mountain in order not to let her down. I carried her off to my cave, and we were man and wife for thirteen years. Every bit and every sip is preordained,' as the saying goes. And now the Great Sage has succeeded in bringing me here." [1]

Between love and filial piety, she was in a dilemma. Wukong questioned her. She was ashamed to blush for not being filial out of love. Therefore, this is a distinctive female image created by the author.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that there are two opposing values in the group images of women in *Journey to the West*. One is to comply with the code of ethics and the concept of chastity or traditional moral principles at the cost of death; the other is to hope to break down the barriers of etiquette and rite, and even women can, to some extent, dominate in the free marriage. [5]

### III. SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SECULAR FEMALE IMAGE IN *JOURNEY TO THE WEST*

*Journey to the West*, with its rich female images, provides a sample cluster for researchers to examine the social roles and aesthetic styles of women in the Ming dynasty. In female images, we can easily see women's moral commitment to the moral system and their adherence to the traditional social status under the influence of the ritual law. For example, the image of defending chastity and morality composed by a group of women such as Tang Priest's mother, Li Cuilian, the queen of Wuji state, the queen of the Land of Purpura and other women carries the duty of maintaining women's "chastity". The description of their gentle and lovely appearance and personality characteristics throughout the novel also clearly

reflects the social tradition and collective unconscious recognition of typical female gender representation.[6] Many of these female images have obvious duality. For example, the mother of Tang Priest, on the one hand, she endured humiliation and completed revenge who indeed assumed the responsibility of maintaining the family and bringing up and children, which should be affirmed. On the other hand, her suicide also reflects the bad social state of the suppression of women's life by the neo-confucianism and chastity in the Ming dynasty, which is a human tragedy and social tragedy that needs to be criticized and reflected.

We can also read some radical social ideas. The free marriage of the queen of the Womanland of Western Liang, to a certain extent, deconstructed the traditional marriage mode in which parents decide children's marriage. Though it still has the master of the country to courier station to propose marriage with "the words of matchmaker", the queen is bold, unrestrained and straightforward during the contact with Tang Priest in the later, which is in a sharp contract with the reversed and bashful Cui Yingying in the drams of Yuan dynasty *The West Chamber*, the same subject of freedom of marriage. Therefore, it is getting more intense for the queen to overthrow the traditional marriage mode.

### IV. CONCLUSION

*Journey to the West*, with its unique artistic charm, presents a series of female images to readers. In these stories, the female figure is gentle and beautiful, which meets the standard of "beauty" in the typical narrative of "talented scholar and beautiful woman". They are stronger than men, even strong enough to dominate men, but they are polite to men, thus to a certain extent, equality dialogue is carried out between men and women. This model contains, on the one hand, the affirmation of women's power; on the other hand, women consciously follow the dual value trend of the social habits in which men are superior to women. Thus, how to reposition the social role of men and women under the influence of changing time perplexes Wu Cheng'en, the author of this novel, or even the social context in which these legends are passed from generations to generations.

The supernatural-evils in *Journey to the West* are based on the reality and reflect the reality, so its bountiful female images can show the close relationship with the society of Ming dynasty in many aspects. It is precisely this kind of connection that makes *Journey to the West* not only a supernatural novel, but also have a profundity and depth that reflects the era and humanity and integrates Chinese cultural memory since the Ming and Qing dynasties.

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