

A Preliminary Exploration of Buddhist Culture in Tang Legends

Jiaqi Wu^{1,a,*}

¹Department of Chinese Language and literature, Shaoxing University, Shaoxing, Zhejiang, 312000, China

a. jackiewu777@163.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: The chuanqi (legendary stories) of Tang Dynasty are widely recognized as a milestone that marks a new stage in the history of Chinese fiction. During this period, the Tang Dynasty adopted a religious policy that allowed Buddhism and Daoism to coexist, leading both religions to reach their historical peaks of prosperity. In the texts of Tang chuanqi, Buddhist thought is also endowed with profound meaning. This paper aims to conduct a detailed analysis of the stylistic features, literary themes, and character outcomes in five classic Tang Legends from *the Anthology of Tang and Song Tales*, including *The World Inside a Pillow*, *The Governor of Nanke* (or *An Account of the Governor of the Southern Branch*), *An Account of Xie Xiao'e*, *The Tale of Li Zhangwu*, and *The Tale of Miss Liu*. Through this analysis, the study preliminarily explores the Buddhist cultural connotations contained within these works. The significance of this research lies in revealing the profound influence of Buddhist culture in Tang Dynasty literature, promoting a deeper understanding of the stylistic features, literary motifs, and character outcomes of Tang chuanqi, providing valuable insights for contemporary literary creation.

Keywords: Tang Legends, Buddhist thoughts, literary techniques, motif, ultimate fate.

1. Introduction

The evolution of Tang chuanqi (Tang Legends) marks the emergence of Chinese fiction as an independent literary genre, with many stories becoming motifs for imitation and adaptation in later novels and operas. The scholar Hong Mai of Song Dynasty once said, “One cannot but be familiar with Tang stories. These brief tales of emotion are so poignantly moving that they seem to capture a divine encounter, though the writer himself might not be aware of it. They are comparable to the poetry of the era in their wonder [1].” Hong Mai placed Tang fiction alongside its poetry, highly praising its extraordinary artistic achievements.

From the late Eastern Han Dynasty (9 AD to 25 AD), Buddhism was introduced into Zhongyuan (the Central Plains of China). Supported by rulers and popularized among the people over the centuries, Buddhist thought became deeply integrated into the fabric of Zhongyuan culture. During the Tang Dynasty, in order to widely disseminate Buddha’s teachings and attract followers, the art of “popular sermons” cleverly combined Buddhist doctrines with the Chinese tradition of narrative and sung literature, transforming esoteric scriptures into accessible and narrative forms. This fusion, along with the widespread dissemination of popular sermons and transformation texts, had a

profound impact on ancient Chinese literary creation. As a significant component of Tang Dynasty literature, Tang Legends was also deeply influenced by Buddhist culture.

This study primarily employs the literature research method and utilizes text analysis and literary criticism methods. It conducts a detailed analysis of the stylistic features, literary themes, and character outcomes of five representative Tang chuanqi works from *the Anthology of Tang and Song Tales*, including *The World Inside a Pillow*, *The Governor of Nanke* (or *An Account of the Governor of the Southern Branch*), *An Account of Xie Xiao'e*, *The Tale of Li Zhangwu*, and *The Story of Liu Yi*, exploring the Buddhist cultural connotations within them. The content of the research mainly includes exploring the relationship between the stylistic forms of Tang Legends and Buddhist transformation texts, the manifestation and inheritance of literary motifs (such as the motif of "Daughter of Dragon King Repays Her Savior" and the "dream" motif) in Tang chuanqi, and the alignment of character outcomes in the chuanqi with Buddhist thought. Through analysis from these three perspectives, the study reveals the significant influence of Buddhist culture on the literary creation of the Tang Dynasty. The significance of this study lies in uncovering the profound influence of Buddhist culture on Tang Dynasty literature, advancing academic research in the intersecting fields of Tang chuanqi and Buddhist culture.

2. Stylistic forms and Buddhism

The dissemination of Buddhism among the society during the Tang Dynasty can be clearly divided into two forms: monk sermons and popular sermons. Monk sermons focused on the transmission of doctrines among monks, while popular sermons aimed at spreading Buddhist thoughts among the general populace. Originally, the base text for monk sermons was referred to as "sermon texts," whereas the base text for popular sermons was known as "transformation texts." Popular sermons, with their unique performance style, narrated stories through a combination of spoken and sung elements, with transformation texts providing the content foundation for these performances. As the dissemination evolved and developed among the public, sermon texts and transformation texts gradually merged through their interplay, and eventually, both came to be collectively referred to as transformation texts in practice. Transformation texts utilizes a combination of spoken and sung, as well as prose and verse. There are mainly two specific forms: the first involves narrating a story in prose and then retelling and supplementing it with verse; the second uses prose for narrative, especially in describing key scenes or dialogues, while verse is employed to present the dialogue content of characters.

Many legends of the Tang Dynasty were clearly influenced by transformation texts. One extensively studied example in academic circles is *You Xian Ku* (also called *the Journey to the Fairy Grotto*) by Zhang Wencheng, from the early period of Tang legend. This work employs parallel prose as the overall writing style. However, in its details, the author skillfully blends elements of verse and prose, inheriting the tradition of prose narration found in Buddhist scriptures. This approach provided new perspectives and sources of inspiration for later literary creations.

Apart from *You Xian Ku*, the mid-Tang chuanqi novel *The Tale of Li Zhangwu* also reflects the influence of transformation texts. Written by Li Jingliang, this work narrates in detail the deep love between Li Zhangwu and the beauty Ms. Wang, a love that transcends the boundary between life and death, showcasing a unique romance between human and ghost. The story begins with Li Zhangwu, a well-educated and talented man, embarking from Chang'an to visit his close friend Cui Xin in Huazhou. Along the way, he encounters Ms. Wang, and they fall in love at the first sight, forming a deep bond [2].

When their love reaches its peak, Li is forced to return to Chang'an to deal with some affairs. Before parting, they exchange gifts and reluctantly bid farewell. Eight or nine years later, Li returns to Huazhou to seek Wang, only to know that she has passed away, which deeply affects him,

making him realize how profound Wang's feelings for him were. He then conducts a soul-summoning ritual at Wang's old residence, allowing them to reunite. Before parting again, they once more exchange tokens and poetry to express their feelings. Li did not recognize the precious object Wang's soul had gifted him, but later, a jade craftsman from Daliang roughly identified it as a leaf-shaped piece of jade. A Hu monk later sought to see the object.

In crafting this story, the overall narrative structure follows prose to ensure the flow and coherence of the plot. However, in key scenes, such as the characters' dialogues, the author cleverly uses verse to enhance the rhythmic quality and expressiveness of the text. For example, when Li Zhangwu bids farewell to Ms. Wang and returns to Chang'an, Wang gives him a white jade ring and a poem: Twisting the ring reminds me of you, seeing the ring, thoughts of you return. I hope you always hold and cherish it, in a cycle without end.

When Li and Wang, as human and ghost, meet again before their final parting, they once again exchange poetry and gifts, expressing their deep feelings by poems [2]:

“The Milky Way has tilted, my soul longs to transcend. I wish you'd embrace me once more, but from now, we must part in the sky.” “We are forever separated by life and death, who would have thought there could be another meeting? How could I decline this parting, but what path will you take now?” “When we parted before, I held onto hope of a future meeting, now, this farewell feels like the end. New sorrow mingles with old grief, in eternal stillness, in the dark spring.” “There's no promise of another meeting, old sorrows already haunt us. Parting leaves no further messages, how can I send my heart to you?”

The two partings with the lover are not just physical separations but also profound emotional suffering on a spiritual level. They choose to convey their longing and affection through poetry, making the expression of these emotions more profound and punchy. This unique mode of expression is clearly inspired by Buddhist transformation texts, giving the narrative both emotional depth and deeper intellectual reflection. The influence of Buddhist transformation texts extends beyond the form of dialogue, deeply permeating the content of the text itself.

In summary, the influence of Buddhist transformation texts in this piece of work is comprehensive, manifesting not only in the artistic techniques of dialogue but also in the deeper meanings of the story. This influence makes the narrative more poetic, more profound, and enhances its intellectual value.

3. Literary Motifs and Buddhist Culture

3.1. The motif of “Daughter of Dragon King Repays Her Savior”

The story of “Daughter of Dragon King Repays Her Savior” is widely found in ancient Chinese folktales and oral traditions, and it is also an important motif in ancient Chinese literary creation. The Dragon King and the Dragon Girl appear in Chinese-translated Buddhist scriptures [3]. In the 32nd volume of *Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya*, translated jointly by Buddhapālita and Faxian during the 14th year of the Yixi period of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (AD 418), the story of the Dragon Girl repaying a favor is mentioned. *The Story of Liu Yi*, written by Li Chaowei in the mid-Tang Dynasty (AD 785 - AD 805), is a widely circulated fantasy that later became the source material for literary and dramatic creations.

The Story of Liu Yi tells the story of the Confucian scholar Liu Yi, who encounters the Dragon Princess of Dongting Lake on the way back home after failed in an imperial examination and learns that she had been married off to Ching River, where she was mistreated by her husband, the Lord of Jingyang, and his parents, to the point of being driven out of the household. Deeply moved by the Dragon Daughter's tragic experience, Liu, filled with righteous indignation, helps her by delivering a letter to the Dragon King of Dongting Lake, asking for assistance. After successfully rescuing the

Dragon Princess, Liu Yi earns the admiration of both the Dragon King of Dongting Lake, as well as the Dragon King of Qiantang River, who commands that Liu Yi marry the Dragon Princess. Dissatisfied with the Dragon King's high-handedness and arrogance, Liu sternly refuses and strongly criticizes them before leaving the dragon palace. Returning to the human world with gifts from the Dragon King of Dongting Lake, Liu Yi becomes a wealthy man and marries two wives. However, the Dragon Daughter remains deeply in love with Liu Yi. After many twists and turns, she transforms into a mortal woman named Ms. Lu, and they lived happily ever after.

The Story of Liu Yi takes “The Dragon Daughter Repaying a Favor” as its main motif, incorporating a romance plot. It portrays Liu Yi as a kind, brave scholar who seeks equality and fears no authority, and the Dragon Princess as a character who is loyal, emotional, and bravely resists injustice. The stories of “Daughter of Dragon King Repays Her Savior” first appeared in Chinese-translated Buddhist texts. The flourishing of Buddhism during the Tang Dynasty allowed Buddhist cultural motifs like that to be widely disseminated and adapted, promoting the deep integration of Buddhist and Zhongyuan culture.

3.2. The motif of dream

“Dream” can be considered a common literary motif across cultures and times, and the origin of the dream motif can also be traced back to Buddhist scriptures. During the Northern Wei period (AD 386 - AD 534), the Volume Two of *Zabao Zang Jing* (also called *Miscellaneous Treasure Sutra*), translated by Jijiaye and Tan Yao, contains the story *The Monk Shalona's Suffering at the Hands of King Ashoka*, which is currently recognized as a source of such tales. It tells the story of Prince Udayana (Shalona), who, having a love for the Buddhist teachings, renounced the world to become a monk and study the path [4]. While meditating, he was harassed and beaten by King Ashoka, causing him to develop resentment and a desire to return to secular life to seek revenge. When he requested to leave the monkhood, the head monk advised him to rest before making the decision. That night, while sleeping in the temple, the Venerable Katyayana led Shalona into a dream. In the dream, Shalona returned to his kingdom after leaving the monkhood and took revenge on King Ashoka. In the final part of the dream, Shalona remembered the monk's words: “In the struggle of life and death, there is no true victory.” He realized that revenge would only lead to devastation and suffering [5]. Shalona attained enlightenment, let go of his hatred, abandoned his thoughts of returning to secular life, and eventually achieved the fruit of arhatship. The pattern of experiencing worldly challenges in a dream, attaining sudden enlightenment, and thus arriving at the truth is the creative model of the dream motif in the story.

The Tang Dynasty novelists Shen Jiji's *The World Inside a Pillow*, and Li Gongzuo's *The Governor of Nanke* both continue and develop the creative model of the dream motif. *The World Inside a Pillow* and *The Governor of Nanke* both use dreams as their central theme. The former tells the story of the frustrated scholar Lu Sheng, who, with the help of the Taoist Lü Weng, dreams of a life with wealth, success, and a happy family. But upon waking, he finds that even the yellow millet porridge has not finished cooking. The latter tells the story of the protagonist Chunyu Fen, who, after drinking heavily, passes out beneath an old locust tree and dreams that he becomes the son-in-law of the King of Locust-Ant Kingdom, serving as Governor of Nanke for twenty years, achieving high office and having a happy family. However, after losing a battle to the Tanluo-Ant Kingdom, the princess dies, and the emperor, believing slander, banishes him back to his hometown. Along the way, his broken carriage jolts him awake, and he realizes that both the Kingdom of Locust and the Kingdom of Tanluo are nothing more than anthills. In both of these legends, the idea that life is like a dream is conveyed. This aligns with the Buddhist teaching: “All things contrived are like dream, illusion, bubble, shadow, and as dewdrop or lightning. They should be regarded as such [6].”

4. Character Endings and Buddhist Culture

The endings of those characters in novels often contain profound moral lessons. The endings of the four Tang legendary stories mentioned in this paper can perhaps be summarized into two types: “all is emptiness” or “living in seclusion,” and “good being rewarded with good” endings. Both of these types of conclusions are deeply imbued with Buddhist thought.

4.1. All is emptiness and living in seclusion

In *The World Inside a Pillow*, the protagonist Lu Sheng, through his fanciful dream of wealth and rank, realizes the way of honor and disgrace, the fate of success and failure, the principle of gain and loss, and the emotions of life and death. His desire for fame and fortune thus vanishes [2]. Some may interpret this as the Daoist concept of “withdrawal from the world,” but upon deeper analysis, it is actually rooted in the Buddhist principle of “life is like a dream.” The seventh analogy in the Mahayana’s Ten Parables is the “dream analogy,” which, like the Buddha’s teaching, holds all dharmas have the nature of emptiness. Buddhism believes that the root of human suffering lies in desire, and to escape the sea of suffering, one must extinguish desire. This aligns with Lu Sheng’s ultimate conclusion: letting go of his attachment to fame and fortune.

In *The Governor of Nanke*, the protagonist Chunyu Fen wakes from his dream to discover that the Locust-Ant Kingdom and the Tanluo-Ant Kingdom from his dream are, in reality, merely two anthills. The high-ranking officials and nobles he encountered in the dream were actually ants, symbolizing how, in the vast universe, humans are as insignificant as ants, and the so-called “major events” in life are trivial. Life is but a dream, and fame and fortune ultimately amount to nothing. Chunyu Fen, realizing the emptiness of his experience in Nanke, comes to understand the fleeting nature of life and consequently, finds peace in the Dao, forsaking wine and women [2]. In many studies related to *The Governor of Nanke*, because Chunyu Fen finds peace in the Dao at the end, scholars often conclude that this story is deeply imbued with Daoist thought [2]. However, this “Dao” does not necessarily refer to Daoism. In *The Story of Bhikkhu Sāriputta’s Struggle with Evil*, it is mentioned that Prince Uttara (Sāriputta), who found joy in the Buddha’s teachings, renounced the world and became a monk. Given the deeper analysis of the novel’s conclusion, as well as the well-known Buddhist precept of abstaining from wine and women, it is more accurate to say that Chunyu Fen’s “peace in the Dao” actually refers to the path of Buddhism.

Apart from *The Governor of Nanke*, another example of a character seeking refuge in Buddhism is found in *An Account of Xie Xiao’e*, a revenge tale by Li Gongzuo. This novel tells the story of Xie Xiao’e avenging her father and husband. Notably, after she successfully takes her revenge, she cuts her hair, dons a simple robe, and seeks the Dao on Niutou Mountain. From then on, she remains true to her heart and devotes herself to spiritual cultivation. Xiao’e’s refuge in Buddhism differs from the Daoist ideals of “seclusion” or “transcendence from worldly affairs.” Her retreat is a departure from the world of secularism and hatred. While gaining forgiveness and avoiding disaster, she maintains her pursuit of inner self-discipline and Buddhist meditation, which aligns closely with Buddhist teachings.

4.2. Good being rewarded with good

Buddhism believes in “karma,” and the concept of “good is rewarded with good,” frequently appears as the conclusion of stories in Tang legends. This highlights the significant influence of Buddhist culture on Tang fantasies.

For instance, *The Story of Liu Yi* and *The Tale of Li Wa* both feature that good is rewarded with good. In *The Story of Liu Yi*, after helping the dragon princess return home, the scholar Liu Yi is not only rewarded with treasures from the Dragon King but also receives the deep affection of the

princess. In the end, Liu Yi not only becomes a wealthy man but also marries the dragon daughter, achieving a happy and fulfilling union, which is a typical ending that illustrates “good is rewarded.”

In addition, Bai Xingjian's *The Tale of Li Wa* also portrays the virtuous character of Li Wa. This story tells the fictional tale of a courtesan, Li Wa, and a nobleman from Yingyang who endure numerous hardships but ultimately achieve a happy ending, with the nobleman succeeding in the imperial exams and receiving an official title. Despite Li Wa's low status as a courtesan, her kindness and unwavering love for the nobleman during his period of misfortune, as well as her careful care for him, eventually lead to his success. After passing the exams, the nobleman even bestows upon her an official title. It is precisely her good deeds that allow her to attain the best result in that era.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this paper provides an in-depth exploration of five representative Tang legends from *the Anthology of Tang and Song Tales*. It preliminarily reveals the profound impact of Buddhist culture on Tang Dynasty literature and ancient Chinese novel writing. As a crucial phase in the development of Chinese ancient novels, Tang Dynasty tales are permeated with the essence of Buddhist thought in their stylistic features, literary themes, and character conclusions.

Furthermore, the diversity of character endings and their alignment with Buddhist thought highlight the crucial role of Buddhist culture in shaping characters and arranging plots in Tang chuanqi. As research on the legends continues to advance, the influence of Buddhism will be interpreted more comprehensively and intricately. This not only helps people better understand the historical context and cultural connotations of Tang literature but also offers valuable insights and inspiration for contemporary literary creation.

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