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The Concepts of "Corpse Demon" and "Lady White Bone"

— On How the Imagery of "Skeleton" Enters the Context of the Quanzhen Taoism in "Journey to the West"

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Abstract: The imagery of "skeleton" within the context of Quanzhen Taoism carries Taoist connotations on one hand and, on the other hand, enters the novel text accompanied by complex religious thought, integrating elements of Buddhism. In "Journey to the West," "skeleton" transforms into "corpse demon" and "Lady White Bone," symbolizing secular desires as perceived by Quanzhen Taoism, concretely manifesting as lust related to female figures or gender relationships, thus embodying a negation of such desires. Simultaneously, the abstract implications represented by the "skeleton" become integrated into the plot through the contemplation of reality and illusion, transitioning between the understanding of the essence of life and the dichotomy of truth and falsehood. This juxtaposition of truth and falsehood essentially reflects the illusionary unfolding of the essence of human existence.

Keywords: Quanzhen Taoism, skeleton, "Journey to the West"

1. Introduction

As early as in the "Zhuangzi: Ultimate Happiness," Zhuangzi introduced the imagery of the "skull." Unlike "skeleton," the former specifically refers to the skull, while the latter signifies the skeletal structure. In Ming and Qing dynasty novels, the appearance of "skeleton" is prevalent, often portraying figures of monsters and spiritual practices. With the increasing popularity of Buddhism and Taoism among the common people, a unique genre of fiction emerged during the Ming and Qing periods, rooted in religious stories and cultural foundations, featuring gods and demons. Among them, "skeletons" appeared with diverse roles within the plot. In the masterpiece of god and demon fiction, "Journey to the West," numerous elements related to skeletons can be found, such as the description of Sand Monk with "nine dangling skulls" [1]. Additionally, "Jing Shi Tong Yan" mentions a skeleton god in armor transforming into a mischief-causing demon, "Xu Jin Ping Mei" uses the Daoist sentiment in "Zhuang Sheng's Sigh at the Skeleton" as an admonition for monasticism, and in "Ji Gong Quan Zhuan," a demonic practitioner controls skeletons to commit evil deeds using spells. Interestingly, each appearance of a "skeleton" seems to be accompanied by the cultural backdrop of Taoism and Buddhism or by specific roles such as Taoist priests and monks.

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In the 27th chapter of "Journey to the West," titled "Corpse Demon's Three Encounters with Tang Sanzang, Holy Monk's Annoyance at Chasing the Monkey King," the portrayal of the "skeleton" presents various forms and questions. For instance, why is the demon referred to as both "Corpse Demon" and "Lady White Bone"? Why is this demon attributed with a "female" identity? Why is this monster called the "Powdered Skeleton"? And why is there seemingly repetitive killing thrice in the text? These questions delve into how "skeletons" or "white bones" specifically enter the narrative of the novel and carry profound significance. Since "Journey to the West" is derived from classical Buddhist stories and during the Ming dynasty, Quanzhen Taoism dominated for a considerable period, profoundly influencing various aspects of folk culture. Therefore, the fusion of religion and literature is an aspect that cannot be overlooked.

The main body of this research is divided into three parts. The first part, considering the positioning of Taoism and Buddhism in novel creation, traces the origins of the concept and imagery of "skeletons" within the context of Quanzhen Taoism. The second part, based on the core beliefs of Quanzhen Taoism, explores how "skeletons" are concretely manifested in "Journey to the West" and symbolize worldly desires. The third part, starting from the contemplative and meditative practices of Quanzhen Taoism, analyzes how the imagery of "skeletons" reflects contemplation on the essence of human beings. This study extracts the religious implications of "skeletons" and integrates them with the classic literary work "Journey to the West," aiming to explore and anticipate possibilities for future research in the direction of Quanzhen Taoism and ancient Chinese literary creation.

2. The Religious Origins of the "Skeleton" Imagery

Before delving into text analysis, this article needs to clarify the significance of "skeletons" within the context of Quanzhen Taoism. In the Daoist classic "Zhuangzi: The Supreme Joy," Zhuangzi narrates the story of the "Dream of a Skeleton." In this text, it is mentioned that to a skeleton, the burdens and sufferings of human life, such as the attachment to survival, the horrors of war, and the hardships of hunger and old age, all appear as the troubles of the living. However, in the afterlife, the skeleton does not grieve or rejoice over life and death, thereby transcending the duality of existence and non-existence. This story was later incorporated into literary works in subsequent generations, gradually giving rise to the imagery of the "skeleton." During the Southern Song Dynasty, a new Daoist sect known as Quanzhen Taoism developed the concept of the "skeleton" into a unique method of spiritual cultivation, greatly influencing the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties. Wang Zhe, the founder of Quanzhen Taoism, conveyed his enlightenment regarding life and death through a poem titled "Painting a Skeleton as a Warning to Ma Yu":

"It's lamentable, within every person's worries lies sorrow,
Today, I must paint a skeleton.
During life, we only grasp at grievances and karma,
Not until it's like this will we cease to strive." [2]

What Wang Zhe conveyed is that all worldly pursuits are ultimately empty, and everything in life is illusory. Clinging to the superficialities and resentments of the material world only leads to fleeting pleasures. Ultimately, every person becomes nothing more than a skeleton, rendering all earthly endeavors futile. Therefore, Ma Yu left behind his family to pursue spiritual practice. Wang Zhe also elevated the concept of the "skeleton" to a method of Quanzhen Taoist cultivation, incorporating the "Skeleton Visualization" into his poetry, such as:

"To keep your mind from wavering, shatter every thought.
At the hours of Zi, Wu, Mao, and You, practice the Skeleton Visualization."
"Ask about the true path, listen as I sever it.
Don't cling to the mortal body; ponder all things as transient.
Shatter every mundane attachment.

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In stillness or action, in movement or rest, practice the Skeleton Visualization." [2]

It's evident that the "skeleton" embodies a particular perspective on life and spiritual practice within Quanzhen Taoism. As everyone ultimately becomes a skeleton, all worldly wealth and status are transient. Thus, one should abandon the attachments and entanglements of worldly life in order to attain spiritual enlightenment. Viewing oneself as a skeleton is a means of comprehending the ephemeral nature of human existence and the falseness of the physical body, enabling individuals to break free from the distractions of the mundane world and engage in the pursuit of eternal truth. Consequently, the Quanzhen Taoist interpretation of the "skeleton" also influences the metaphorical representations of spiritual cultivation and life and death in literature.

However, this does not imply that Quanzhen Taoism is the sole context for interpreting this text. From the Northern Song to the Ming and Qing Dynasties, various religions in the Central Plains region existed in complex and tumultuous interactions. Lu Xun, in his "A Brief History of Chinese Fiction," wrote, "And throughout history, the disputes among the three religions have never been resolved. They tolerate each other, and it is said they share a common source. What is called right and wrong, good and evil, true and false, all mix and yet differentiate, subsuming them under the duality of gods and demons, without names, but generally called gods and demons; this suffices to describe them." [3] The gradual convergence and fusion of Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian thoughts significantly influenced the creation and development of novels during the Ming dynasty. Consequently, various types of god and demon fiction emerged. "The Evolution of Chinese Novels" further states, "At that time, the thinking was extremely vague, and what was written in the novels about right and wrong was not only about Confucianism and Buddhism or Daoism and Buddhism, or Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and White Lotus sect. It was nothing more than the conflicts of various schools of thought against each other, and I comprehensively give them a name, called god and demon fiction." [3] As a representative of classic god and demon fiction, "Journey to the West" is situated in such a creative environment. This diversity of thought fusion necessitates an analysis of any imagery or character within the context of multiple religions. Therefore, the interpretation of the "skeleton" requires an exploration of the relationships between different religious contexts.

First and foremost, it is crucial to recognize the merging tendencies within religions. "Journey to the West," primarily a Buddhist story of the pilgrimage to the Western Heaven, incorporates numerous expressions derived from Daoism. In particular, the term "Corpse Demon" used in the title of the 27th chapter is a typical term from the inner alchemy of Quanzhen Taoism. When understood within the context of Quanzhen Taoism, the monsters in the text should consistently be referred to as "Corpse Demons" or symbolize the "skeleton" related to spiritual practice. However, towards the end of the text, the "Corpse Demon" is referred to as "Lady White Bone." In fact, the term "White Bone" rarely appears in Quanzhen Taoist texts, but in Buddhism, there is a unique practice called "White Bone Contemplation." As one of the Five Gates of Zen in Buddhism, "White Bone Contemplation" advocates the elimination of desires within one's heart to transcend the suffering of human life. "The Essentials of Zen and Secret Teachings" documents the steps for practicing "White Bone Contemplation," starting with visualizing one's toe bones as "extremely pure," "splitting away the flesh," and ultimately visualizing oneself as a set of white bones, thus breaking down appearances, desires, and gaining insight into the essence of human beings.

It is evident that Quanzhen Taoism's "Skeleton Contemplation" and Buddhism's "White Bone Contemplation" share striking similarities. The core tenet of Quanzhen Taoism is the unity of the Three Teachings, emphasizing the compatibility between Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Patriarch Wang Chongyang advocated the idea that "Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Dao are all connected; the three teachings have a common origin." [2] ("Master Sun Asks About the Three Teachings") and "We integrate the three teachings into one family." [2] ("Instructions to Students of the Way"). In reality, Quanzhen Taoist concepts draw extensively from Buddhist ideas, as evident in

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Wang Chongyang's poems, which embody typical Zen viewpoints and terminology. Perhaps the "Skeleton Contemplation" was inspired by the "White Bone Contemplation." In this view, when the abstract concept of the "skeleton" gradually solidified into one of the important literary symbols in Ming and Qing dynasty novels, it was no longer merely a symbol of Quanzhen Taoism but also pointed towards the roots of Buddhism.

Secondly, the creation of the novel cannot be divorced from the overall societal environment. From the old and new "Book of Tang" to "Great Tang Records on the Western Regions" and the "Biography of the Tripitaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery in the Great Tang," Xuanzang's encounters with natural phenomena and Buddhist stories along his journey are deeply imbued with Buddhist colors. By the Song and Yuan periods, the art of "shuoshu" or oral storytelling became popular among urban residents, and the stories of Xuanzang began to enter popular literature, as seen in works such as "Poetic Narratives of the Journey of the Great Tang's Tripitaka" and various adaptations of "Journey to the West."

During the process of the publication of "Journey to the West," the Ming dynasty's reverence for Daoism played a significant role. Daoism, especially Quanzhen Taoism, was highly esteemed by the common people and had a profound influence on the literati class. "Journey to the West" was born from the pens of literati in the context of this strong Quanzhen Taoist atmosphere. This is why the mythological world in the book constructs a fairly complete and complex Taoist celestial hierarchy, occupying a significant portion of the narrative. To some extent, the dominance of Quanzhen Taoism in the novel even eclipsed the role of Buddhism in "Journey to the West." Mr. Liu Cunren proposed the idea of a "Quanzhen Taoism-oriented 'Journey to the West'" in the section "Quanzhen Taoism and the Novel 'Journey to the West'" in his "Collected Works of the He Feng Tang," suggesting the existence of a Quanzhen Taoism-infused version of "Journey to the West" during the late Yuan and early Ming periods. Additionally, Qing dynasty scholars Chen Shibin in "The True Interpretation of Journey to the West" and Liu Yiming in the preface to "The Original Intent of Journey to the West" firmly believed that "Journey to the West" is a "book of enlightenment."

So, returning to the initial question of where the "skeleton" originated. "Corpse Demon" represents both "a pile of skeletons" and "white bones." The overlapping meanings of Quanzhen Taoism's "Skeleton Contemplation" and Buddhism's "White Bone Contemplation" imply that the imagery of the "skeleton" simultaneously points to both religions. In essence, the "skeleton" originated from the core beliefs of Daoism and Buddhism and the eventual result of their fusion. Subsequently, this imagery was conveyed into the text of "Journey to the West" through the broader societal creative environment and folk culture.

3. The Role and Significance Attributed to "Skeleton"

The term "skeleton" not only enters the novel as a skeletal framework but also plays a unique role. In the 27th chapter of "Journey to the West," there are hardly any descriptions of the identity of this skeleton demon throughout the chapter. However, towards the end, it is mentioned, "On her spine, there was a line of words that read 'Lady White Bone.'" [1]. This associates the "skeleton" with a female identity. Previously, the skeleton demon first transformed into a maiden described as follows:

"A good demon, stopping the gloomy wind, in that mountain hollow, transformed herself into a daughter with moon-like beauty and flower-like appearance. Words cannot describe her clear brows, bright eyes, white teeth, and red lips... Her emerald sleeves lightly swayed, encircling jade-like bamboo shoots; her Xiang dress was draped diagonally, revealing golden lotuses. Sweat trickled down her powdered face, dew-kissed like flowers; dust brushed her graceful willow brows, shrouded in mist... From afar, she seemed unreal, but up close, she was vivid. The lady was born with ice-cold skin and jade-like bones; her neckline revealed a creamy bosom. Her willow eyebrows collected jade-green daizis, and her apricot eyes sparkled like silver stars." [1]

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The first transformation of the demon involves a significant amount of description, highlighting the temptation of sensuality as the primary challenge faced by the master and his disciples. When looking at the entire novel, whether it's the Spider Demon's Web-Hanging Cave, the Kingdom of Women, or the Jade Hare Demon recruiting husbands, many female characters are associated with the issue of sensuality temptation on the path of cultivation. In the 27th chapter, the reason why the demon intersects with Tang Sanzang is also because Zhu Bajie "found him handsome," became enamored by his beauty, "stirred with secular desires," and subsequently encountered challenges related to desires such as food. After Sun Wukong kills the demon, the text describes, "But when everyone looked closely, there were a pile of pink skeletons there." [1] This use of "pink skeletons" also implies a female identity.

Given that "skeletons" are often associated with female characters and sensual temptations in the novel, it can be inferred, in the context of Quanzhen Taoism, that they must undergo a certain form of cultivation to achieve the goal of eliminating sensual desires. Overcoming desire is indeed a crucial part of Quanzhen Taoist practice. One could argue that the "skeleton" image in Quanzhen Taoism primarily signifies the renunciation of worldly desires and enters the novel with this purpose in mind.

Wang Chongyang advocated the harmonization of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, believing that "the purpose of the three religions is to cultivate noble character and guide people away from worldly confusion, essentially the same." [4] These three philosophical schools, although different in many ways, converge in the study of human nature. Quanzhen Taoism emphasizes introspection and the cultivation of the "mind." As a school of inner alchemy, Quanzhen Taoism does not seek physical immortality but establishes a systematic and rigorous method of inner alchemy. Inner alchemy begins with the refinement of the "heart." It involves refining both the body and mind, with the dual goal of achieving physical health and spiritual transcendence. [5] Perhaps influenced by profound Buddhism at its inception, Quanzhen Taoism uses strict rules and precepts as a means of inner cultivation. It emphasizes negating the physical body through the process of "skeletonization," which negates the representation of desire in the flesh. Wang Chongyang required his disciples to renounce the secular world, abandon worldly desires, and enter a pure cultivation environment to access their inner essence. He wrote in the "Collection of Teachings," "For those who wish to cultivate the Tao, they must first adhere to these twelve words: abstain from alcohol, sex, wealth, anger, and attachment, and eliminate worries, thoughts, and anxieties." [2] Quanzhen Taoism believes that the seven emotions and six desires obstruct the path of cultivation. Only by leading a simple lifestyle that eliminates all desires can one attain true enlightenment. The Taoists are required to "abstain from alcohol and abstain from sex, not coveting wealth, honor, and glory, and not indulging in desires." [6] As a form of inner alchemy, one method of Quanzhen Taoist cultivation is "cutting off the Three Corpses." It is mentioned in the "Preface to the Five Talisman Seals of the Supreme Cavern of Profound Spirit," "The Three Corpses are born with humans. The upper corpse likes treasure and riches in the billions; the middle corpse likes the Five Flavors; the lower corpse likes the Five Colors; they constantly wish to cause humans to die." The "Three Corpses" represent desires for food, sexual pleasure, and material wealth. These desires can lead to various illnesses and, in severe cases, even death. Only by cutting off the "Three Corpses" can practitioners achieve boundless enlightenment.

Firstly, the appearance of the "Corpse Demon" comes at a time when the group is hungry, representing a test of their appetite. The demon had a "green sand jar" in her left hand and a "green ceramic bottle" in her right hand, providing "fragrant rice" and "fried gluten" that fulfilled the worldly desires of Tang Sanzang and Zhu Bajie. [1] The two disciples were tempted by their appetites, signifying the need to cut off the "corpse" related to appetite. Secondly, the "Corpse Demon" transforms into a beautiful woman, tempting Zhu Bajie with sensual desires. This indicates the need to cut off the "corpse" related to sensual desires. In other words, beautiful women and delicious food

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represent the worldly temptations that obstruct Tang Sanzang's path of cultivation, desires that should be discarded as worldly needs.

"The True Interpretation of Journey to the West" states: "Therefore, those who study the Tao must have the discernment to kill the Three Corpses and control the Three Pengs. With the bright discernment of severing, there is the three-fold power of cutting hair and washing the marrow. If one cherishes the body and does not understand that it is white bones, then when the invasion of yin energy comes, when will one be able to leave the body?" [7] If a person only knows how to maintain the existence of the physical body but cannot see that the essence of this body is nothing but white bones and skeletons, they will never be able to break free from the shackles of the secular world. To obtain the true scriptures, one must first eliminate the "Three Corpses," symbolizing the source of desire. Sun Wukong's three killings are symbolic of the "cutting off of the Three Corpses." At this moment, "skeleton," "Corpse Demon," and "Lady White Bone" are essentially one entity, but they represent three levels: "Lady White Bone" symbolizes the existence of a female character; "skeleton" represents the concrete form hidden beneath external beauty, and "Corpse Demon" points to the sensual desires and appetites encountered on the path of Quanzhen Taoist cultivation, suggesting the protagonist is on the verge of entering a new stage of cultivation after "cutting off the Three Corpses." Therefore, in the context of Quanzhen Taoism, the appearance of the "skeleton" as a female character carries a hidden meaning of worldly desires and burdens, embodying admonition and warning in the novel.

4. Presentation of the "Skeleton" in the Text

By visualizing the "skeleton" image as a representation of worldly desires, it signifies that the worldly is a false appearance while the "skeleton" represents the true essence. In essence, the "skeleton" image in the novel presents itself on two levels: one is the "skeleton" itself, and the other is the illusion that mirrors human desires onto the "skeleton." To manifest the true nature of the "skeleton," there must necessarily be a relative falsehood.

The demon's transformation into a young woman is false, while the original "skeleton" that Sun Wukong kills is true. "Fragrant rice" and "fried gluten" are false, whereas maggots, frogs, and toads are true. Beautiful women and delicious food are appearances, they are desires, they are false; the "skeleton" and the insects are essence, they are the elimination of desires, they are true. "The Original Intent of Journey to the West" states: "If scholars do not first recognize and break the Corpse Demon, in every aspect, in every step, in every action, they will see Corpse Demons everywhere. They will inevitably take falsehood as truth, use truth as falsehood, and allow the evil to dominate while the righteous retreat, and I don't know where it will stop." [8] In this sense, recognizing both truth and falsehood, taking falsehood as truth and using truth as falsehood, signifies that the "skeleton" and desires are interwoven, perpetually presenting a duality.

As seen in "Dream of the Red Chamber," Chapter 12, "Wang Xifeng Sets Up a Love Trap; Jia Tianxiang Examines the Mirror of Romance." Jia Rui falls in love with Wang Xifeng, becomes lovesick, and is subsequently deceived, making his illness worse. A Taoist priest gives Jia Rui a mirror inscribed with the words "Mirror of Romance." On one side of the mirror is an image of Fengjie, while the other side has a standing "skeleton." The two sides of the mirror reveal the duality of desires. The Taoist priest emphasizes, "Never look at the front side, only at the back, this is crucial!" [9] The backside "skeleton," while seemingly terrifying, is the true aspect, forcing people to confront death and the purity of the inner self. The front side, "Fengjie," appears to be a real person but is an illusory appearance leading to death. Despite the "skeleton" being the true essence of a person, this essence is concealed beneath the enticing facade of the world. Jia Rui, bewitched by lust, becomes fixated on the superficial and false desires, considering the "skeleton" as false and "Fengjie" as real.

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Thus, Jia Rui, through the simple act of turning the mirror, is led from the surface illusion of the world to the reality of death hidden beneath it.

Whether in the "Mirror of Romance" or the constant transformations of demons in "Journey to the West," readers are presented with the duality of human nature. In the opposition between body and mind, the mind should be the subject. However, the "skeleton" allows the body to exist in a physical form. At this point, human existence takes on a dual nature. In the novel, it often seems that the author, with their unique imagination, finds a magical beauty and allure in the "skeleton," enticing others to indulge in it. However, the "skeleton" ultimately represents nakedness, fear, and awakening, conflicting with the beautiful illusion. The artistic portrayal of the "skeleton" first depicts the true image of a pile of bones as seductive falsehood and then delves deeper into the inner layers of the novel through surface text, exploring and questioning the true nature of humanity.

5. Conclusion

Since the Song and Yuan Dynasties, Buddhism and Daoism have entered into secular life and artistic creations in novels. In the context of the Complete Reality School, the "skeleton" symbol not only carries Daoist meanings but also, due to the complex religious background, incorporates elements of Buddhism into the novel's text. This duality further emphasizes the "skeleton's" portrayal in the novel as a negation and warning of the sexual desire inherent in human relationships. From Zhuangzi's "corpse" to the "skeleton" and the later emergence of zombie-like figures, Chinese thought reflects people's introspection on the essence of life and the body. The so-called dual perspective of truth and falsehood also changes based on people's understanding of the essence of life. In existing research on the influence of religions on literature, Daoism holds a prominent position. However, Daoism developed various branches throughout history, providing diverse paths for the textual analysis of novels. As one of the most significant folk religions during the Ming Dynasty, the Complete Reality School has received relatively little attention in literary research. In the future, a deeper exploration of the relationship between the Complete Reality School and Ming-Qing Dynasty novels is urgently needed.

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