

Studies on Female Characters from the Perspective of Gender: A Case Study of Female Roles in Journey to the West

Yiting He *

Department of Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, London, The United Kingdom
of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

* Corresponding Author Email: y.he0120201@arts.ac.uk

Abstract. This study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the female characters in *The Journey to the West* and examine their portrayal of social gender, as well as their roles and significance. A mixed-method approach is employed, combining quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis, to comprehensively study the female characters in the novel. Firstly, quantitative analysis is utilized to present the collective characteristics of the female characters through data analysis. Secondly, qualitative analysis is employed to delve into the social gender issues represented by the female characters in *The Journey to the West* by conducting case studies, content analysis of relevant textual discourse, subjectivity, and contextual factors. The research findings demonstrate that the female characters in *The Journey to the West* play significant roles in the narrative and exhibit diversity. The novel portrays both positive and negative female characters, all of whom have a substantial impact on the male protagonists. Based on these results, this study concludes that the appearance, personality, and behavior of the female characters in *The Journey to the West* are constructed through a male perspective, reflecting the societal understanding and expectations of women's status and roles in a male-dominated society.

Keywords: Journey to the West; sociology of gender; feminism.

1. Introduction

The background of *The Journey to the West* can be traced back to the late Ming Dynasty in the 16th century. During this period, society was diverse, and cultural and artistic development flourished. However, the concept of male superiority and female inferiority still dominated, and women had relatively low social status [1]. Against this backdrop, the female characters in *The Journey to the West* exhibit diversity and individuality. The portrayal of these characters not only reflects the societal understanding of women's status and roles in that era but also contains the author's contemplation of women's rights and liberation [2]. Therefore, studying the female characters in this work is of great significance for understanding the social gender of the author's era and exploring the representation of social gender in literary works. This paper elaborates on three aspects. The first part is a case analysis of female characters. All the female characters mentioned in *The Journey to the West* can be classified into three categories: human women, monster women, and immortal women. It will analyze the appearance, identity, and behavior of the main examples of these three categories of female characters in order. Then will summarize their similarities and differences and analyze the roles and status of women in society at that time. The third part is about the significance of gender. It will introduce the development background of gender studies and analyze the significance of applying gender in *The Journey to the West*.

2. Literature Review

The Journey to the West is a Chinese novel written by Wu Cheng'en in the 16th century. The novel follows the legendary story of the Tang Dynasty Buddhist monk Xuanzang's journey to the "Western Regions" - Central Asia and India - to obtain Buddhist scriptures and his return after facing numerous challenges [3]. This study uses the edition of *Journey to the West* written by Wu Cheng'en and published by People's Literature Publishing House in 2019. The citations from *The Journey to the West* in this paper are from this edition. The novel retains the general outline of Xuanzang's own

account, *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*, but incorporates folk tales and elements invented by the author: Gautama Buddha assigns this task to the monk Tang Sanzang and provides him with three disciples who agree to assist him. These disciples are Sun Wukong, Zhu Bajie, Sha Wujing, and a Dragon Prince who serves as Tang Sanzang's steed, a white horse. *The Journey to the West* consists of 100 chapters, featuring a total of 32 significant female characters [4]. These female characters possess distinct characteristics but can still be categorized into three groups based on their race and identity: human females, monster females, and celestial females. The author devotes a considerable amount of text to depict these female characters through their dialogues, appearances, behaviors, and other factors.

In recent years, gender studies have received increasing attention in the field of literary research [5]. Many scholars have conducted in-depth research on gender relations and female characters in literary works from a social gender perspective. According to Wang Yan, these female characters share similar aesthetic features and causes: they are symbolized, humanized, and individualized in terms of aesthetics [6]. This is because they serve male characters in the plot design and are influenced by the social gender positioning of women in the Ming Dynasty.

However, there has been relatively little research on the female characters in *Journey to the West*. Although some scholars have conducted fragmentary analyses of certain characters, there is a lack of a comprehensive and socially significant perspective. For example, Levy analyzed the allegorical narratives in *The Faerie Queene* and *Journey to the West* from a literary perspective by comparing the female reigns in both works [4]. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the female characters in *Journey to the West* in depth from a social gender perspective, building on previous research, and revealing the underlying gender relations and cultural significance.

3. Analysis of Female Roles

In *Journey to the West*, there are a total of 12 human female characters. Among them, the characters that the author focused on the most are Tang Sanzang's mother, Yin Wenjiao, and the Queen of the Land of Women.

The human female characters in *Journey to the West* are closest to the dictionary definition of women [7]. In the world of *Journey to the West*, they rely on society and are also limited by societal rules. They lack the special powers possessed by monster females and celestial females, as they are subject to social power. They are also constrained by social morality, unlike demon females who often disregard morality and lack the high moral sense and self-control of celestial females. As a result, these human female characters become contradictory symbols and direct representations of social gender. They engage in direct dialogue with feudal ethics.

3.1. Symbol of Morality

Women's adherence to moral rules is the most basic requirement of the Cheng-Zhu school, the mainstream philosophical school of the Ming Dynasty that centered on men and their ethical system. Women who adhere to moral rules are also one of the main female images in *The Journey to the West*. According to this standard, the typical representative of these women should be Tang Sanzang's mother, Yin Wenjiao. She, as the daughter of a Chancellor, married Chen Guangrui, who had achieved the top rank in the imperial examination and was respectful and filial. On their wedding day, Chen Guangrui was unfortunately murdered by bandits, and Yin Wenjiao was forcibly taken by the bandits as their wife. For the sake of her unborn child, she could only reluctantly obey the bandits. Later, Yin Wenjiao gave birth to a son and, to protect him from being harmed, threw him into the river. Eighteen years later, her son grew up and her husband returned to life to seek revenge for them, and the family was reunited. However, Yin Wenjiao was ultimately harmed by the morality shaped by society because she violated the moral requirement of "a wife can only follow one husband." In the end, her male relatives continued their lives: her son became a monk, her husband was promoted,

and Yin Wenjiao committed suicide. Among the main positive characters mentioned in this chapter, she is the only one who meets a tragic end.

Such a result is not surprising, as Yin Wenjiao attempted suicide a total of three times. The first time was when her father, the Chancellor, led an army to seek revenge, and she planned to hang herself with a rope. Yin Wenjiao, due to her own weakness and inability to seek revenge through her own strength, did not dare to face her capable father. She believed that she could only contribute to avenging her husband through death. The second time occurred during Yin Wenjiao's mourning for her husband. Although her motivations for this action are not directly described, one of the female moral values revered in Ming Dynasty society was martyrdom for a deceased husband. The third time is described more simply, with the last paragraph stating that Yin Wenjiao calmly committed suicide. The author gradually shortens the description of Yin Wenjiao's suicide attempts, while correspondingly, the text that prevents Yin Wenjiao from committing suicide also becomes shorter each time. The first time, Yin Wenjiao was persuaded by Xuanzang and her father, and the second time, she was stopped by Xuanzang. Yin Wenjiao's third suicide attempt was successful, and the book does not describe anyone intervening or the reactions of others to this event. Yin Wenjiao, an important character who played a role in motivating Xuanzang to embark on the path of seeking Buddhist scriptures, confirms death in a single sentence. Yin Wenjiao's image lacks agency and is a symbol of female morality in a male-dominated society. Her identity is closely related to male characters, only described as the daughter of a Chancellor, the wife of a scholar, and the mother of Xuanzang. Her context is always related to morality: her reason for suicide is that she violated the absolute morality that society requires women to adhere to.

3.2. Symbol of Gender Relations

The female characters in *The Journey to the West* are also often portrayed in the context of gender relations. Chapters 53 to 54 describe a special country called the "Kingdom of Women in the Western Liang." The citizens of this kingdom are all women, and their reproductive methods have a fantastical element. In addition to normal male-female mating, they can also become pregnant and have abortions through the use of a spring. The Kingdom of Women is not significantly different from any other country mentioned in *The Journey to the West*, except for the gender-based differences. However, even in a female-dominated society that can exist physiologically and politically independent of men, there are still gender concepts influenced by the patriarchal social system.

In Chapter 54, when the Queen of the Kingdom of Women learns that Xuanzang is the younger brother of the prince of the Tang Dynasty, she wants to marry him under the pretense of finding it difficult to find a good man. She offers to give up her position as queen in exchange for Xuanzang's agreement, hoping to bear children with him to continue the royal lineage, and she is willing to become Xuanzang's queen. This decision is unanimously praised by the officials, and their only concern is the marriage customs and procedures, such as the matchmaker. The matchmaker system in China is an ancient way of arranging marriages. In the Ming Dynasty, marriage was often not just a private matter between the man and woman but was seen as a family and social affair, even involving factors such as politics, wealth, and status. Due to the hierarchical family relationship of "the husband as the head of the wife," this system is often centered around men. Scholars have different interpretations of the queen's marriage purpose, but based on the original text and the perspective of gains and losses, the queen's marriage is also primarily a sacrifice: she gains a union of genders but loses the position and power of the king, and the future of the country faces unknown risks. From another perspective, in terms of the plot's purpose, Xuanzang is single-mindedly focused on his journey to the West to obtain the true scriptures, and his marriage to the queen hinders this goal. The queen's marriage becomes a test of Xuanzang's desires and power. The Kingdom of Women, as a microcosm of a matrilineal society, still serves men and becomes a test of their desires.

4. Villain Female Character

In *The Journey to the West*, there are a total of 12 female monsters [8]. The female monsters in *The Journey to the West* are intentionally portrayed as a group of ugly women by the author [6]. They possess great abilities but often become symbols of evil. They are detached from human society but still subject to moral constraints and condemnation from the author and the characters in the book. They always serve as obstacles on *The Journey to the West* in the battles between the pilgrims and the female demons, the monsters always end up being defeated. The portrayal of female monsters is closely related to the social gender of women in the Ming Dynasty, and two representative characters are Lady White Bone and Iron Fan Princess. They respectively symbolize the sinfulness of women and the redemption of women.

4.1. Symbols of Sinfulness

Among the monsters in *The Journey to the West*, there are significant differences in the group characteristics between female and male monsters, such as in appearance and evil methods. Male monsters typically have terrifying appearances, resembling beasts, while female monsters are often beautiful, closer to humans. However, the beauty of female monsters serves their evil purposes [2]. One evil method of female monsters that cannot be replaced by male demons is the destruction of male social relationships [5]. She believes that the author devoted a lot of effort to describing the beautiful appearance of female monsters because it is a key factor that drives the plot. For example, the first female monster introduced in the story is Lady White Bone, appearing in Chapter 27 [9]. Her character establishes the foundation of the female monster image. The most distinctive feature of Lady White Bone is her seductiveness. In order to eat Tang Sanzang's flesh, she changes her appearance three times to deceive Tang Sanzang and his disciples, and the first transformation plays a crucial role [10]. She initially transforms into a beautiful woman. This is an effective strategy based on the social gender of women, successfully disrupting the trust relationship between Tang Sanzang and his disciples. The logic behind this is that women are usually the disadvantaged party in a male-dominated society, and their appearance conceals the aggressiveness of monsters [11]. The beautiful appearance conforms to societal expectations of women, triggering male objectification desires. Males are prone to fall into male-centric thinking and overlook women's inner qualities [12]. As wives in patriarchal families, women are subordinate to their husbands, further diminishing their subjectivity. Therefore, in line with their evil methods, Lady White Bone gains the trust of Xuanzang and Zhu Bajie in the pilgrimage team, leading to a crisis of trust within the team. White Bone Woman symbolizes female evil from a male perspective, embodying the male panic towards women in social gender relationships - women can disrupt a male-dominated society. Women not only harm individual males but also threaten male social relationships.

4.2. Symbols of Redemption

The differences in the outcomes of male and female monsters in *The Journey to the West* also reflect the image of female monsters. Among the major monsters, there are a total of 50 outcomes, with 27 deaths and 23 surviving. Among them, 33 male monsters died, while 13 survived, and 12 female monsters died, while 9 survived. The death rate of male monsters is close to 40%, while the death rate of female monsters reaches 75%, significantly higher than that of male monsters. The Rakshasi is a typical example of a female monster who survives. In contrast to other monster female demons who die, her outcome signifies the correct way of life for women from a male perspective. Chapters 59 to 61 of *Journey to the West* tell the story of the Bull Demon King's family, with a focus on Rakshasi, the Iron Fan Princess [10]. Rakshasi is an exception among female monsters and has three major differences compared to other female demons: first, she possesses higher qualities; second, she values family; and third, her appearance is downplayed.

Firstly, she achieves enlightenment through self-cultivation and, as a female demon, does good deeds instead of being driven by desire. Secondly, as a female monster, she strictly adheres to human

moral principles [6]. She is willing to sacrifice herself for her son and husband, and there is no apparent difference between her and the image of a human mother and wife in society. Finally, her appearance is not as beautiful as other female monsters. This also conforms to the requirements of a patriarchal society for women in the family: women should prioritize chastity, restrain their desires, and not emphasize their appearance. From a male perspective, women should be seen as possessions and should not provoke possessiveness in other men, like White Bone Woman and other female monsters. It is precisely because Rakshasi conforms to societal gender norms that the author designs a positive outcome for her. Through Rakshasi's story, the author points out a feasible path of redemption for female monsters and what he perceives as sinful women.

5. Female Immortals

There are approximately 7 female immortals mentioned in *The Journey to the West*, with a focus on Guanyin Bodhisattva, so this section will mainly use Guanyin Bodhisattva as the primary example. Compared to human women and female monsters in the book, female immortals present three main characteristics: first, they possess inviolable sanctity; second, they restrain evil; and third, they lead morality. As one of the important figures in Buddhist belief, the portrayal of Guanyin Bodhisattva in *The Journey to the West* is stable and emphasizes divinity. Her appearance highlights solemnity and sanctity, with little gendered gaze [13]. She is also depicted as powerful, often assisting in solving problems that the Tang monk and his disciples find difficult to overcome [8]. In the story of *Journey to the West*, Guanyin Bodhisattva plays the role of a moral guide. She is compassionate and repeatedly guides evil monsters toward goodness while leading the Tang monk and his disciples to achieve enlightenment. At the same time, Guanyin Bodhisattva still retains a humanized aspect. She transcends desires but maintains emotions, and she is not bound by social norms but does not exceed them. Based on textual analysis can conclude that the female image represented by Guanyin Bodhisattva is affirmed. In the book, Guanyin Bodhisattva is portrayed as an ideal female figure, guiding men to pursue morality. However, some female immortals are still consumed by male objectification due to societal gender concepts. For example, Chang'e exists within the objectifying gaze of Zhu Bajie, and readers never learn about Chang'e's subjective thoughts throughout the story. Overall, the image of female immortals symbolizes ideal morality and transcends traditional societal gender norms, although some aspects are still influenced by gender concepts.

6. The Significance of Social Gender

Contemporary social gender theory emerged in the Western feminist movement after the 1960s. Scholars involved in the feminist movement began to question the Western knowledge system that produced gender inequality in society. This is because there are overlooked social gender power relations in knowledge production, leading to the marginalization and devaluation of women [7]. This has resulted in biases and fallacies in many theories that are commonly accepted as common sense. In 1976, American medieval historian Joan Kelly published an article advocating for viewing social gender as a fundamental category for analyzing social systems, just like class and race [3]. Feminist scholars then introduced the concept of social gender into various fields of practice and theory, producing profound effects. The concept of social gender also has significant development potential in the field of literature, as literary works are important sites for constructing social gender discourse. As French existentialist writer Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex*, every male writer projects his ethical principles and unique ideas when depicting women [1]. By reexamining the female images in *Journey to the West* through the lens of social gender can uncover the hidden dynamics of gender relations embedded in discourse and outline a more complete picture of the social system.

7. Conclusion

The social gender of female characters in *Journey to the West* reflects the understanding and expectations of women's status and roles in a patriarchal society at that time. Among the three main types of female characters, female immortals and female monsters represent beings with supernatural powers, and the differences between them and ordinary women reflect the moral expectations and physical desires that men have towards women in social gender relations. Some female characteristics are elevated to transcend social gender, such as being free from desire and higher than morality. Some female characteristics are devalued and become the opposite of social gender, closely tied to male desire in gender relations, such as being physically attractive and focused on sexual desire. Meanwhile, human female characters conform to the moral order of the patriarchal society and serve as foils to male characters in the plot. In conclusion, the female characters in *Journey to the West* are constructed from a male perspective and do not reflect the actual living conditions of women at that time. They are products of a male-centered consciousness.

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