

# The Absence of Rituals in Shoujie: Wang Zengqi's Interpretation of Buddhism

Yanyu Chang

Lauralton Hall, Connecticut, the United States

**Abstract.** In one of the most representative short story of Wang Zengqi, Wang depicts a image of temple life with bold mundane features, and uses a monk's love story as the main character and story development in an deeply admiring way. This story with the title meaning "The lay Buddhist ordination" under the Buddhist background proactively breaks Buddhist disciplines without guilt---It embodies Wang's distinct interpretation of Buddhism which combines with a love on human nature that reaches the same end despite the seemingly violation of Buddhist doctrine.

**Keywords:** Wang Zengqi; Shoujie; The Love Story of a Young Monk; Modern Chinese Literature; Modern Chinese short story; Buddhism; Buddhist doctrines.

## 1. Introduction

Wang Zengqi was a fairly distinctive writer who represented fairly typical attitude of contemporary Chinese scholars. Wang born in a scholar family in Gaoyou, Jiangsu province on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1920. His grandfather and father who were both traditional Confucian scholars provided him with both traditional education at home and modern school education. Those experience fostered his knowledge on traditional Chinese culture, extensive interests in common life, and charming temperament. In 1939, he left home and studied in Southwest United University, where he met his teacher, who influenced him a lot, Shen Congwen. After he graduated, the authority required those graduated students to be the translators for The U.S. army. Unlike many other students who longed for the opportunity, viewing the politics in a negative way, Wang rejected, although the payback was his certification. [1] On 1946, he lost his job in Shanghai and plan to suicide. On 1958, Wang encountered a vital grievance that he was recognized as a righty, ironically because his unit can't find enough righties for political quorum. It had long-lasting effect on him: setback in his career, labor transformation, and politic investigation on him for nearly 20 years after the Chinese Culture Revolution starting. Until 1980, when 60-year-old Wang published *The Love Story of a Young Monk*, he was known for his literature accomplishment. On the following year, Wang returned his hometown for the first time. On 1997, Wang passed away in Beijing of gastrointestinal hemorrhage. About Wang's works, Mo Luo believed that he always searched for a role as his patriarch, for sense of security from those authorities and for kinship affections from the kind familiar people. He depicted scene and stories of childhood and used the perspective of children in the most of his best works, which indicated his mental tendency towards indiginity with fairly cosy mood. Last, facing chaos, although Wang preferred realms of beauty and pureness, he still revealed some characteristics of cruel reality, and poured the fear out in his works. [2] In another her article, she concentrated on the emotion of grief and the consciousness of tragedy---that is light in Wang's works. Mo Luo argued they actually surpass reality: his tragedy consciousness emphasizes the solace and compassion to the weak, instead of the tough fight to the fate. [3] Wang called himself "a Chinese style of lyric humanitarian". Wang Yongbing interpreted it as the the deny of the parts that subdue the human nature of traditional Chinese culture, the respect and admiration of the natural beauty of human life, and the ethical education function. [4] Agreeing with Wang Yongbing, Li Qianqian accounted the goal of telling the story of Shoujie is to achieve the harmony of human nature with both the society and nature [5] About the classical thinking's influence on him, Ji Hongzhen summarized Confucianism, Taoism, and Budddhism all affected him, in different extent, as a whole. Wang opposed the Confucian part of feudal dross like confucian ritualism and the Taoist part of nihility in Ontology, but his aesthetic ideal and ethic system are built on the independent personality ideal of both two. His attitude towards

Buddhism is more simple: opposing the denying of human nature of religious system, and appreciate the secular and natural beauty. Guo Zhantao also criticized Wang that he distorted Buddhism by ignoring *maitrī*. [6] *Shoujie* describes, in serene tone, the experience of Minghai, a young monk in a countryside in southern China, including his going forth for living at thirteen years old, his life in the temple, and the love story between him and his friend Yingzi, a girl who lives near the temple. Although *Shoujie* is a story happening under a Buddhism background and uses Buddhist rituals as pushers to the story development, monk is simply recognized as a mean to make a living: they in never obey the Buddhist doctrines, while the title of this short story is exactly the name of the ritual of official identical acknowledgment for monks that comes with more and stricter specific doctrines applying to them. Therefore, the presented beauty of the life of the group of rebellious monks seems not related doctrine or Buddhist value at all. It incurs the blame from monks on Wang that he has little knowledge about Buddhism and distorts it. Guo Min regarded the world in it a utopia with no Buddhism characteristics, but the utter beauty from a secular community, traits of primitive communism which is common for Chinese scholars, and the awareness of this nonexistent utopia: the ideal stories never happen to people like himself. [7] However, Wang's attitude may be not just ignoring and negating. By permeating Buddhist rituals in daily life, Wang shows his unique approach to Buddhism that has the identical end of beauty in human nature.

## 2. Data and Method

The text discussed here is included in *The Compilation of Wang Zengqi* published by Zhongxin Press in August in 2017. And the English translation is *The Love Story of a Young Monk* Published December 31st 2011 by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, which is the only English version of this novel.

I select Buddhist rituals in *The Love Story of a Young Monk* and analyse their narrative perspective and tricks. It reveals a consistent understanding that fit in with the social science understanding of rituals and then Wang's attitude and insight of Buddhism revealed by shaping Buddhist rituals in a distinct way.

## 3. Results

Monks disobeying morality don't means that Wang opposes Buddhism doctrine. The monks in *The Love Story of a Young Monk* never take getting marriage, having complicated relationships, making friends with thieves, or eating meat seriously but even norms. [8] These actions could be counted as unwholesome courses of action like killing and sexual misconduct with no doubt.

Before we try to read Wang's mind from this design, retrospectively his another later story happened on a nun that revealed more obvious attitude may be helpful. In his short novel *Renhui* published in July in 1993, he portrays a bold and social nun who "make the temple a popular vegetarian restaurant" to make money for supporting this temple---another unruly Buddhist. But she ends up insisting in her Buddhism belief in spite of bad political pressure from Agarian Reform. In the work wrote later about ten years than *The Love Story of a Young Monk*, Wang praised the persistence on Buddhist belief, and we may just assume his not negative attitude is consistent to some extent at least. In his other three novels under Buddhist background, *Revenge (1946)*, *The Temple and the Monks (1946)*, *Spring in the Deer Well (1995)*, all revealed a consistent approval on finding beauty of human nature from self-existent mundane life over sanctifying and so alienating people. [9]

Coming back to *The Love Story of a Young Monk*, Wang created the world as his ideal. The story is told in the way that the plots are understated, the linear development is undermined, and the conventional causal logic is challenged---the distinct "quietness" of the story was especially notable.[10] Besides, of imaginary time, location, and characters, set by Wang leads readers to ideal world in his mind. *The Love Story of a Young Monk* doesn't mention specific time period, when yield is substantial and cattles are all healthy. Wang construct the story in a time with little trouble, and

avoids to give reason to support the prosperity. Also, *The Love Story of a Young Monk* only tells the village, Zhaozhuang, is a southern village from dialects used by residents, the temples other monks go to, and description of plants. Standing on no solid background, the dream, as Wang notes in the end of the story, is put in motion. The pastoral settings is not unusual in Wang's works. The tendency of beautifying the countryside life, however, has been claimed by Wang himself that it is the people in the countryside that is beautified, not the life. [11] Wang simply used the pastoral life that he is familiar with and loves as the setting to show his ideal state of human nature with the people in the lower classes.

The characters apparently indicates a typical Wang Zengqi ideal. As many other characters in his works, people in *The Love Story of a Young Monk* have no strong ambition nor dreadful desires [12], and that's ones Wang believes support and deserve the peaceful life. For the young monk Ming Hai, his name is designed to reveal his fate that lives out Wang's Buddhist ideal----in the opposite way of its original meaning. It's coined from the phrase "Ming xin jian xing, ku hai ci hang", which means that to be clear with one's heart and then to see what the characters of one is like originally, to sail on the sea of suffering and with compassion bring mortals across it. However, after getting this name, Minghai's heart is not cleared up but teeming with mundane love and desires, and Ming fails to get across the sea of human life but to step into a temple that has not too much difference from the outside world and actively to engage in the mundane society. When Minghai was a student, Minghai doesn't learn to make his calligraphy having aesthetic value, but learn to write a "copy" to famous calligraphy works, and villagers all praise his handwriting as "great and so dark". Both Minghai and other villagers know little about the art and the practical purpose of becoming an official like students learning "real calligraphy". Minghai who makes efforts on and villagers all embody awkward and sincere kindness to things around them. Without changing his student name to a monk name, Minghai kept working hard in temple----simply with different materials to learn. [13] It turns his whole Sādhanā to a practical Confucian career.

It is not just Minghai as an individual being involved in the mundane world, the temple, Biqi An is already a part comprising the mundane society. In *Shoujie*, experiencing changes over time, the name of Biqi An itself name is a consensus formed by the villagers. "As to the word an, that was easy to understand for there was a nunnery in this village, which was originally named Bodhi Nunnery. Later it was wrongly called Biqi (Water Chestnut) Nunnery, and even those living within had called it that. "Monks in the monasteries and nuns in nunneries," so the saying goes, but that nunnery was occupied by monks. Because it was so small it was probably called a nunnery and not a monastery." [14] It doesn't follow the norms that classifying by gender to name it as An, which demonstrates the emphasis on another factor: the size. It swiftly turns naming of a temple from a strictly religious matter to a more understandable measurement to the public and brought a sense of business institution. Then, through the time of being miscalled by villagers, the monks readily accept to be stood by a produce replacing a sacred symbol----which witnesses the huge impact cast on religion by the mundane world. Now, under the mentioned context, Buddhist rituals are performed in numbers of occasions.

The first ritual is getting new clothes and kowtow to parents when 13-year-old Minghai has grown up to the time for leaving home to his monk career. He wears his uncle's monk shirt mended by mom, his old purple trousers, and a pair of new shoes as his outfit for leaving and going forth. It symbolizes the interaction of secular and sacred. His kinship connection isn't cut off, but intervene in religious life by his mom's sewing. The old purple trousers make half of his body look like that he was still home and come to new life along with him. Besides the reason that Minghai's uncle doesn't care details too much, Minghai's outfit that he brings to his novice career is a combination of marks of past life and new sacred life. Minghai then kowtows as a goodbye.

Releasing the burning mouths is a first formal Buddhist ritual mentioned, and it (along with Rendu's "Flowery" services) starts a consistent emphasis on practical, aesthetic, and entertaining value of Buddhist ritual, rather than its spiritual meanings. The purpose of Releasing the burning mouths of feeding the hungry ghosts is never even mentioned in *The Love Story of a Young Monk*.

This ritual is brought into the narration for its practical value for monks that they practice hard to play important roles in the ritual and so earn money from it. Then as the encouragement to Mingzi, Renshan vividly describes the astonishing musical beauty of one Releasing the burning mouths played by Shiqiao, the abbot of Shanyin Temple. As introductions to Rendu, the process of the “Flowery” services in Releasing the burning mouth is portrayed with immense details. Wang comments on it: “This was a display of dexterity, and it was said that Buddha Ksitigarbha was fond of watching it. Actually the most pleased were the women and kids.” and “some young girls or even married women would disappear — having eloped with the monks”. This ritual has a high performance standard and pleases the mass the most.

The novel is titled as “Shou Jie”, which means received restraints and at the same time upasampada, the name of burning incense scars ritual, but surprisingly there is not even direct and detailed narration of the ritual by Mingzi. Audience see all of the ritual from Yingzi’s perspective. On the boat they meet for the first time, Yingzi asks Mingzi the question whether he is afraid of burning incense scars after introductions. A local girl has even more knowledge of being a monk and Buddhist traditions, demonstrating the permeating impact of Buddhism. Then time has come to real reception of burning incense scars, on the way Yingzi sends Mingzi to Shanyin temple, Mingzi explains the true reason why monks all go burn their head: the practical purpose that the scars is the “certificate” for monks. Yingzi tells the process as a child and outsider from Buddhism who firstly see it by her own. She is astonished by the sophisticated and splendid Shanyin temple, the biggest temple in the town and strict quiet rules to numerous monks having porridge. Yingzi recalls the procedure of burning incense scars that Mingzi told her before, with simple description. What Yingzi sees is monks inflaming scars in joy. Yingzi asks Mingzi if it hurts and makes sure the time she picks him up. On the way home, Yingzi curiously asks about the life condition of Shiqiao, which is luxurious in gossips, and learns that Mingzi may be chosen as a tail-Samir who is capable of becoming an abbot and “in charge of” Shanyin Temple. Yingzi don’t him to be tail-samir and marry her. Mingzi agrees in a mild and shy way. Not only the spiritual meaning of it is never unfolded, the whole narration of this burning incense scars ritual is even the same as a kid’s journey diary and mainly reflect the ritual’s influence on practical social status and benefits. After the ritual of getting acknowledge as a monk, neither Mingzi nor Yingzi feels under Buddhist restraints on their mind. They instead admit their love and gives promise, which definitely violates the Buddhist morality, but, meanwhile, it is exactly the purest true wish in their heart.

#### 4. Discussion

The selection of secular characters in *The Love Story of a Young Monk* is not a single case--- people with little knowledge or power is always main characters with happy endings in Wang’s works. And intelligentsia like Wang himself always end up dying miserable, like Gao Beiming in *Xi*, while powerful officials, who seldom occurs in Wang works though, always play a cold and brutal role, representing the fierce political flow at the that time. The real living condition of peasants and workers mustn’t be that charming as what Wang imagined. Enduring a life of chaos, Wang got so deep untrust on the destiny of himself, so he left his hope on people outside of his social class They carry Wang’s desperate hope since they’re the important composition of Wang’s peaceful childhood and the distant group away from Wang’s interactive circle.[15] In *Shou Jie*, it may be better to say that villagers and monks who focus only on making living occurs here because they’re ones who get a pure heart, represent peaceful life, and deserve a good ending in Wang’s system, rather than ones live in a life style opposing Buddhist morality. The characters setting is actually the base for Wang to build a pure beautiful world.

## 5. Conclusion

By above discussion, we can solve the problem to secular and Buddhist's role in Wang Zengqi's mind and works. Bonzes in *Shou Jie* have main purpose to make a living and are constrained little by religion, but live a happy life in fairly natural way. It seems the religious setting is as same as secular ones, but actually the loose religious constraint provide characters with a distinct paradise-like space, to achieve a realm of harmony driven by human nature. Obviously, the Buddhist background has its special meaning, not just as a familiar setting for Wang. This finding worth Chinese modern literature, Chinese modern history, and even Buddhist researchers' attention. The balance between secular and sacred in *Shou Jie* derives from Wang's understanding of Buddhism, urges to escape from reality, and his image of utopia. It projects, to some extent, Chinese scholars' universal ideal and mental statement in that period.

## Acknowledgments

This work would not have been possible without my loving families, Hong, Shuihu, and Fengying, who provide unending inspiration and caring supports. I am grateful for the support from Yiran and Youjia, who have been supportive of my goals and always have faith in me.

## References

- [1] HU Heqing. Lingdi de mianxiang [The Reminiscence of the Past on the Land of Magic]. Academia Press, 1994, 53-58.
- [2] MO Luo. (1996). Moshi de wenxin---Wang Zengqi chuanguozuolun [The Warmth at the End of World---Literary Theory on Wang's works]. Dang Dai Zuo Jia Ping Lun, (5), 33-44.
- [3] MO Luo. Beijvyishi de jiya yu juexing [The Repression and Awakening of Tragic Accumulation--Wang Zengqi's Novel]. Novel review, 1997(5):28-3540
- [4] WANG Yongbing. Zhongguoshi de shuqing de rendaozhuyizhe---Wang Zengqi lun [A Chinese Lyrical Humanist: Wang Zengqi's Essay]. 2008, 27(10), 95-99. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1003-4730.2008.10.023>
- [5] Li, Qianqian. Lun Wang Zengqi "Shoujie" zhong de shengtaimei yiyun [On the Ecological Beauty Implications in Wang Zengqi's "Shoujie"]. 2016, 32(5), 146-148.
- [6] GUO Zhantao. Shilun Wang Zengqi dui fojiaosixiang de wudu [A Trial of Wang Zengqi's Misinterpretation of Buddhist Thought]. 32.12 (2016): 12-14.
- [7] Guo, Min. (2010). Lun Wang Zengqi xiaoshuo de wutuobang qingjie---gouzhu taohuayuan [On the Utopian Complex of Wang Zengqi's Novels: Constructing the Realm of Peach Blossom.]. Liaoning Jing Ji Guan Li Gan Bu Xue Yuan, Liaoning Jing Ji Zhi Ye Ji Shu Xue Yuan, Xue Bao, (3), 122-123. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1672-5646.2010.03.059>
- [8] Wang Zengqi. The Compilation of Wang Zengqi. Zhongxin Press, 2017, 10.
- [9] Zhang, Dahai. Dalishizhong de "Shoujie" [The Precepted in the Great History][J]. 2020(4):197-206
- [10] Wang Benchao. Dushen de shixing: "Shoujie" zuowei 1980 niandai de wenhuayuyan [The Poetry of Blasphemy: The Beatification as a Cultural Allegory of the 1980s][J]. 2012(2):22-25
- [11] Yu, Qiming. Wang Zengqi xiaoshuo beijvyishi jiedu [Interpretation of Tragic Consciousness in Wang Zengqi's Novels][J]. 2005, 12(4):50-53
- [12] Wang, Shuo. (2018). "Shoujie" gushizhong de sandu moshi yu Wang Zengqi derenshengjianwu [The "Three Transitions" Model in the Story of "The Taking of the Precept" and Wang Zengqi's Gradual Enlightenment of Life]. 18(1), 83-86. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1671-4288.2018.01.018>