Reflections on Multiple Layers of the Master-Disciple Bond Between Sun Wukong and Tang Monk From the Perspective of Pilgrimage

Tianyu Sun

School of Chinese Language and Literature, Shandong Normal University, Jinan, 250200, China

Abstract. Based on the concept of pilgrimage, this paper studies the relationship between Master Sun Wukong and Tang Monk in Journey to the West. Do not see the two as conflicts between rebellion and authority; rather, this paper proposes that the pilgrimage narrative constructs a multi-level system of discipline, protection, religious aspiration, moral examination and mutual transformation. Based on research related to novels, the Chinese narrative system and the concept of pilgrimage, this paper examines the connections at four levels: narrative system, hierarchy and interdependence, moral education, and symbolic richness. Therefore, Tang Monk and Sun Wukong are not fixed symbols but rather dynamic entities that motivate the pursuit of the scripture in the work. Their connection has a purpose because each is aware of the other's deficiencies. Thus, a master-disciple relationship can be used as the basis for narrative and provide emotional support to enrich the literary content of the work.

Keywords: Journey to the West, Sun Wukong, Tang Monk, pilgrimage narrative, master-disciple bond, Chinese classical fiction.

1. Introduction

Journey to the West is still one of the most famous works of classical Chinese fiction, and the relationship between Sun Wukong and Tang Monk is one of the well-known connections in the work. The above relationships are generally expressed in terms of well-known oppositions: freedom vs. restriction, power vs. gentleness, instinct vs. discipline, etc. Although these summaries are convenient, they may not be able to express the rich story and symbolism in their connection.

The connection between the two figures in the entire system of the pilgrimage is no longer that of conflict and obedience. Therefore, the journey itself has come to possess moral, emotional and spiritual meaning dynamically. Monsters, misunderstandings, temptations, punishments and repeated crises of trust are all tests of the master-disciple relationship, but they have also strengthened it by necessity, a shared fate and gradual change. Thus, the pilgrimage is not only the setting for their relationship. It creates its own tensions and opportunities proactively.

Therefore, this paper will study the connection between Sun Wukong and Tang Monk in terms of pilgrimage narratives. At the same time, they are also linked in several ways: as a hierarchy of religion, as a practical alliance between unequal but interdependent companions, as a place of moral education, and as a symbol system for the main characters' journey in the novel. Based on the above, this paper will explore the narrative foundations of the bond, its core conflicts, its spiritual meanings, and its literary value in the changed world of the journey.

2. Pilgrimage as the Narrative Framework of the Bond

Any study of the connection between Sun Wukong and Tang Monk should start with the pilgrimage system of Journey to the West. Anthony C.G. Yu's translation and commentary show that the novel is a rich work that combines religion, comedy and allegory in its exploration of scripture, rather than being solely about travel [1]. This is because the master-disciple relationship is associated with a sense of the sacred. Their meetings, conflicts and reconciliations are character introductions and also steps in the search for the sublime.

Scholars have also proposed that "Journey to the West" belongs to a broader system of Chinese novels that integrates entertainment, morality and symbolism. Hsia thinks that the new work is a blend of fantasy, satire, religious ideas and structural order, so its characters are neither simple figures from the people's side nor merely funny characters [2]. Therefore, the relationship between Sun Wukong and Tang Monk cannot be explained solely by the idea of "temperamental opposition". The novel has shown us the characters, ideals and plots repeatedly; thus, we have become more familiar with them.

The pilgrimage frame also has a history and generalities. Dudbridge's study of antecedents shows that the scripture-seeking cycle developed through earlier popular, dramatic and vernacular traditions before being expressed in the sixteenth-century novel [3]. Fu also believes that the quest narrative integrates the power of myth with the design of comedy to form a patterned system of literature rather than a loose series of adventures [4]. Read thus; the relationship between master and student is not only temporary. It is a typical place for the story to present the main events and conflicts.

The multiple meanings of the quest have also been mentioned in the later studies. Yu thinks that the pilgrimage in the work should be regarded as both a literary and a religious experience, not just a trip [5]. Levy also points out that the work has many registers at the same time, such as comedy, spirituality and symbolism [6]. These interpretations help explain why the relationship between Sun Wukong and the Tang Monk has been so widely praised in criticism; it is neither solely personal nor solely doctrinal. It is a story link that continues to expand at many levels of meaning in the pilgrimage.

Based on the above framework, the master-disciple relationship can be understood as being closely linked to the logic of change. In the future, there will be several emotional downturns and short separations followed by cooperation. Thus, pilgrimage serves as a narrative mode that makes the protagonists confront questions of authority, trust and purpose through repeated trials. The road continuously tests what kind of bond can withstand the demands of sacred travel; therefore, it is profound.

3. Hierarchy, Conflict, and Practical Interdependence

Tang Monk and Sun Wukong are in a relationship of hierarchy at the most obvious level. Tang Monk is the ordained pilgrim and formal master, and Sun Wukong takes on the role of disciple under the conditions of discipline, redemption and control. However, the story immediately reverses this order by showing that the master lacks moral authority in practice, and the disciple has actual power but is also out of control. Therefore, the bond starts with a structural problem rather than harmony.

This difference is typical of the refined character pairing in the well-known Ming Novels. Plaks shows that the great Ming novels take inherited materials and create an organised literary system where the relationships among characters also have themes and morals beyond the plot [7]. Thus, it can be seen that the master-disciple relationship in Journey to the West is not merely for show. It is an artificial extension of relations that demonstrates the instability of authority and ability, and legitimacy is based on force.

The conflict of the two figures also reflects a deeper cultural logic of pilgrimage. Mair's study of the transformation texts of the Tang and five dynasties shows how Buddhist narrative materials helped develop later Chinese popular literature [8]. Among these general narrative traditions, the teacher-student relationship serves to regulate the distribution of power and vulnerability. Thus, the master-disciple relationship serves to regulate the distribution of power and vulnerability. Tang Monk's weakness is not a defect; Sun Wukong's strength is also not inherently good or bad. Only in combination are the qualities of all things revealed.

Jenner slows down the speed of the scenes in which Tang Monk questions Sun Wukong's choices, expresses his fear of violence, or falls for an illusion, and Sun Wukong becomes increasingly frustrated with his teacher's innocence and vulnerability [9]. These scenes are not random offshoots. They show that the two sources of power are not either-or choices. Tang Monk cannot go on the pilgrimage without protection, and Sun Wukong cannot walk on the road without a master whose right to command is lawful.

Therefore, conflict and interdependence have continued to exist simultaneously. Sun Wukong is generally the protagonist of the story, and he fights demons, drives away illusions, and solves other problems in the story. However, if the novel were organised solely around his victorious agency, it would lose the character of a pilgrimage. Tang Monk also puts forward another idea: patience, the destination, ritual authority, and the idea that action should still be aimed at a spiritual goal. Thus, the bond is hierarchical and unstable, yet also inherently cooperative.

The cooperation is also not convenient. The work has repeatedly demonstrated that this person is unfit for the requirements of travel. Tang Monk can seem passive and dull; Sun Wukong can seem violent and impatient. But the story shows this lack in form. Each character reveals a deficiency in others, and the progression of the story is only possible because none of them can be the sole focus. Thus, the master-disciple relationship is best understood as a dynamic system of necessary incompleteness rather than a fixed arrangement.

4. Moral Cultivation and Mutual Transformation

Tang Monk and Sun Wukong have also been involved in a process of moral education through their association. One of the first is that a large number of conflicts in the novel are no longer repetitive but have changed. Sun Wukong does not just protect Tang Monk; at the same time, he is frequently corrected by the pilgrimage and is forced to learn restraint through such means. Tang Monk does not simply order obedience; he is gradually made to realize the deficiencies of naive compassion in the face of life's trials.

All of the above are lovely stories that add to the spiritual and moral quality of this time. Research by the company on anomaly accounts in Chinese tradition shows that extraordinary beings and uncanny encounters often carry moral and interpretive connotations rather than being spectacle-oriented [10]. Journey to the West is a grand world of wonders, but it is also organised as a pilgrimage. Sun Wukong's supernatural powers are never allowed to remain pure wonders. It should align with the path of morality and spirit, and have an uplifting effect.

It can be used to explain why the teacher-student relationship often feels like a cooperative learning process. Sun Wukong learns endurance, measured action and a more disciplined relationship with goals; Tang Monk, though imperfectly, also learns that moral aspiration without discernment can harm the cause. Thus, the characters' repeated quarrels have an extra teaching effect. The trip is not to make the student learn obedience. It can help the teacher see the complexities of life through which the will to live must pass.

At the same time, the link should not be regarded as smooth moral progress. Frustration, misrecognition and asymmetry all occur in the work. That is why the bond has not been broken. The two figures do not have the same attitude towards life, but the pilgrimage repeatedly forces both to live within the boundaries set by the other. Correction, suffering, dependence and loyalty gradually acquire spiritual connotations because they are all on the way to enlightenment.

Thus, the moral education in the work is relational rather than individual. Neither Tang Monk's virtue nor Sun Wukong's strength is adequate alone. What changes them is the repeated need to live together under a holy vow. Therefore, the master-disciple relationship is a type of discipline that also has elements of companionship, disillusionment, rescue and renewed obedience. It is also suitable for teaching as the change stems from a problem.

5. Symbolic Density in the Pilgrimage Narrative

The connection between Sun Wukong and Tang Monk is also symbolic of something else. One reason the relationship has remained a subject of discussion is that the novel makes us regard the pilgrimage party not only as storytellers but also as individuals in the broader system of religion and morality. Wang studied the Ming princely Daoist patronage and found that the religious culture during this time was shaped by multiple institutional and elite networks, not a single school of thought [11].

Given the above, the relationship between the teacher and the student can be regarded as a reflection of wider problems in coordinating charismatic power, religious legitimacy and moral order without full reconciliation.

The new work has a rich system that supports this symbolism. Plaks considers the great Ming novels to be highly self-aware works that transform inherited story materials into systematic designs for figural and thematic resonance [7]. Thus, the reason why the Sun Wukong-Tang Monk bond is extraordinary can be seen. Tang Monk can be seen as sacred aspiration, scriptural destination and normative order; Sun Wukong represents energy, resistance, insight and unruly power that should be directed, not suppressed. The strength of the pair is that neither the ideal nor the opposite is presented as perfect in the work.

The tradition of pilgrimage has also extended the scope of their association. Mair's study of transformation texts shows how Buddhist narrative materials have been adapted and spread in later Chinese popular literature [8]. Journey to the West is a new story that takes inspiration from the past and creates an all-new world. Journey to the West is also using this old structure to create a good texture for the novel. Every time there are demons, false figures and rescue scenes, it adds to the drama of discrimination for the master-disciple relationship. Thus, the road to scriptures is also a path through illusion; thus, the relationship is to serve as the main tool for recognising, misrecognising and overcoming illusion.

Jenner's translation can help modern readers feel how frequently the novel uses this symbolic labour in dialogue and repetition [9]. Tang Monk repeatedly misreads danger because he responds to immediate appearances and ethical impulse, while Sun Wukong often sees through deception because of his sharper perception and martial experience. However, the novel does not reward one way of being at the complete expense of the other. Unrestrained Insight is destructive; Compassion devoid of judgment is ineffective. Therefore, the master-disciple relationship has a conflict of both desirable traits.

The same place can be referred to as a pilgrimage in form. The journey links movement, suffering, ritual authority, comic disruption and the prospect of enlightenment in a single story [1, 5]. At the same time, Sun Wukong and Tang Monk are not merely opposites in repetition. They are coupled structures that explore themes such as power and guidance, freedom and obedience, violence and compassion, and error and enlightenment in the work. The pluralism can also be viewed in terms of pilgrimage; thus, travel is not only movement in space but also the transmission of various meanings across different times.

What makes the connection so rich is that it is also easily understood at several levels simultaneously. It is personal and doctrinal, comic and serious, dramatic and allegorical. The teacher-student relationship continues not because all conflicts have been resolved, but because through these conflicts, a story and spirit have been created. Therefore, the connection between Sun Wukong and Tang Monk serves as a focal point for many readers' discussions of the novel.

6. Conclusion

Sun Wukong and Tang Monk are well-known masters and students in the legendary story of adventure, and they are also connected by the idea of pilgrimage. It is a system that organises the ethical conflicts, narrative pace and spiritual goals of Journey to the West. Hierarchy and dependence, conflict and loyalty, correction and growth all exist in the bond that is neither stable nor fleeting throughout the entire scripture journey.

This paper has proposed that the relationship operates at several interconnected levels: as a formal religious hierarchy, as a practical alliance formed under unequal capacities, as a process of moral cultivation, and as a symbolic structure embedded in the larger literary and religious design of the novel. A well-known hierarchy of masters and students also adds more depth to their relationship in the story of the pilgrimage.

In light of the above, Sun Wukong and Tang Monk are not going to the West together. They provide a form of life in which action serves a spiritual purpose and the purpose of this spirituality can endure the changes of the world. Therefore, the relationship between teachers and students is still one of the most popular and well-known in Chinese classical novels.

References

[1] Wu, C. E. (2012). The journey to the west (Rev. ed., Vol. 1; A. C. Yu, Trans. & Ed.). University of Chicago Press.

[2] Hsia, C. T. (1968). The classic Chinese novel: A critical introduction. Columbia University Press.

[3] Dudbridge, G. (1970). The Hsi-yu chi: A study of antecedents to the sixteenth-century Chinese novel. Cambridge University Press.

[4] Fu, J. S. (1977). Mythic and comic aspects of the quest: Hsi-yu chi as seen through Don Quixote and Huckleberry Finn. Singapore University Press.

[5] Yu, A. C. (1983). Two literary examples of religious pilgrimage: The "Commedia" and "The Journey to the West". History of Religions, 22(3), 202–230. https://doi.org/10.1086/462944

[6] Levy, D. J. (1984). A quest of multiple senses: Anthony C. Yu's The Journey to the West. The Hudson Review, 37(3), 507–515.

[7] Plaks, A. H. (1987). The four masterworks of the Ming novel: Ssu ta ch'i-shu. Princeton University Press.

[8] Mair, V. H. (1989). The contributions of T'ang and Five Dynasties transformation texts (pien-wen) to later Chinese popular literature. Sino-Platonic Papers, 12, 1–71.

[9] Wu, C. E. (1982). Journey to the west (Vol. 1; W. J. F. Jenner, Trans.). Foreign Languages Press.

[10] Campany, R. F. (1996). Strange writing: Anomaly accounts in early medieval China. State University of New York Press.

[11] Wang, R. G. (2012). The Ming prince and Daoism: Institutional patronage of an elite. Oxford University Press.