



A Brief Discussion on the Different Adaptations of “The Legend of the White Snake” in Eastern and Western Countries

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Abstract. As one of China’s most influential folk tales, the Legend of White Snake has inspired numerous domestic and international literary works over the centuries, highlighting its significant impact and wide dissemination. These adaptations have localized the story based on their own historical and social contexts, imbuing each version with distinctive national characteristics. This paper will discuss adaptations of The Legend of White Snake in China, Japan, Korea, and Western countries, exploring the underlying ideological content.

Keywords: The Legend of White Snake, Adaptation, Eastern and Western cultures, Localization

1 Introduction

As one of the most well-known Chinese folktales, “The legend of the White Snake” is not only popular in China, but also has been adapted into several foreign language versions. However, few scholars have compared these stories in a systematic study. Based on the prototype of the Chinese legend "The Legend of the White Snake", this paper examines its rewriting in Japanese, Korean, English, and German, and also explores the unique national aesthetics and cultural values behind these adaptations.

2 Adaptations of the White Snake Story in the Eastern World

Japan and Korea are geographically close to China, and thus countries have stories similar to "The Legend of the White Snake". Despite their geographical proximity, the rewritings of the "The Legend of the White Snake" in these three countries differ, reflecting unique national cultures and value pursuits.

2.1 Chinese drama “The Green Snake”

The drama “Green Snake” is adapted from Li Bihua’s novel of the same name. For the first time in six centuries, the focus of this story shifts from Madame White Snake to the character of Xiao Qing. She is no longer just a shadow following Madame White Snake, nor merely a backdrop to the romance between White Snake and Xu Xian. Instead, she emerges as an independent soul with her own desires and understanding of the world.

The theme of the drama “Green Snake” is prominently the exploration of “desire and emotion.” The characters of Green Snake and White Snake are contrasted sharply: Green Snake is naive and ignorant of worldly matters, unconcerned with secular vision. Her understanding of love is entangled with desire, experiencing the joy of being human through sexual desire. In contrast, White Snake declares her aspiration to be a good housewife, living in a home with rising smoke and lit windows. After meeting Xu Xian, she adheres to traditional female virtues, putting her husband above all. Even in the face of Xu Xian’s betrayal, she finds excuses for him, persuades herself, and ultimately chooses to forgive. For Xu Xian, she sacrifices her thousand years of cultivation and self, hoping that after having a child, Xu Xian will reconcile with her. She embodies the traditional female ideal under feudal morality, constantly compromising to gain her husband’s love, engaging in self-deception and self-exploitation. If Green Snake represents human nature, White Snake symbolizes the human nature shaped by social discipline. In the drama, Green Snake is as free-spirited as strong liquor, while White Snake is as gentle as sweet spring water. One finds true love through self-identity, and the other dedicates everything to the vow of love. These two vastly different female images reflect the emotional manifestation of modern concepts versus traditional morals. Both Green Snake and White Snake inevitably face tragedy from “desire” to “love,” but Green Snake’s tragedy is one of resolute persistence without regret, while White Snake’s is one of letting go after disappointment¹.

In this drama, the portrayal of Fahai is radically different from previous versions. He is depicted as a young, handsome monk and a central figure in Green Snake’s love story. While Green Snake is active, Fahai remains passive. Despite Green Snake’s persistent advances and declarations of love, Fahai remains unmoved. However, Fahai has his own emotions and doubts, resembling an ordinary monk on a spiritual journey. He advocates for White Snake and condemns Xu Xian’s betrayal. He is no longer an unfeeling, cold, and rigid “Buddha,” but a “human” with thoughts, emotional fluctuations, and warmth. His internal struggle adds a deeper Zen spirit to this version.

Xu Xian’s portrayal remains as weak and vacillating as ever, even more detestable. He is portrayed as a thorough hypocrite, showcasing the worst of human nature, which starkly contrasts with the purity and goodness of demon.

The drama’s exploration of “desire and emotion” resonates with contemporary issues: in modern society, where material desires are rampant, fleeting pleasure is easily attained, but lasting affection is hard to find. Director Tian Qinxin’s brilliant conception and approach bring a new perspective and exploration to this ancient story that has been told in China for over six centuries, imbuing it with contemporary significance.

2.2 Japan's "The Serpent's Lust"

The Legend of the White Snake has not only had a long and widespread influence in China but also left a deep impact in Japan. The representative Japanese writer Ueda Akinari adapted this tale into "The Serpent's Lust" during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, drawing on Feng Menglong's "Eternal Prisoner under the Thunder Peak Pagoda." He absorbed the essence of the Chinese legend while incorporating many elements of Japanese culture, modifying the story's background, character settings, and plot to provide a unique cultural perspective. For example, he replaced the original gifts of silver and clothing with a gift of a samurai sword. This alteration avoided redundancy and highlighted Japan's cultural reverence for chrysanthemums and swords². Furthermore, the character of Toyo, who is disqualified from inheriting the family fortune, is depicted as going to shrines and temples for learning, which sets the stage for his encounter with the true daughter and guidance from a priest. This setting aligns with the social customs of the time in Japan, making the story more culturally distinctive.

In this version, influenced by Feng Menglong's "Eternal Prisoner under the Thunder Peak Pagoda," the snake demon's character remains complex, embodying both good and evil. While serpent daughter, like Bai Suzhen, is courageous and dedicated in love, she exhibits cruelty toward Xu Xian's new love, Fuko, and the snake-catcher. This adaptation introduces a third character, exploring the snake demon's reaction to a rival in love. Serpent daughter's jealousy and resentment toward Fuko and Xu Xian's shifting affections reveal her darker human traits. Her torment of Xu Xian and Fuko's eventual death underscore her own victimhood and human-like nature, showing how she, too, suffers from being pursued and abandoned.

In "The Serpent's Lust," the character of Toyo differs significantly from Xu Xian. Xu Xian is often indecisive and chooses to become a monk after assisting Fahai in suppressing Bai Suzhen, which can be seen as a form of escapism, reflecting his timid and cowardly nature. In contrast, Toyo displays a decisive and courageous character. Upon discovering that serpent daughter is a snake demon, he resolutely abandons her and shifts his affection to someone else. This decisiveness aligns with the Japanese cultural trait of pragmatic realism. This also reveals the spiritual messages promoted by these two similar stories: "Eternal Prisoner under the Thunder Peak Pagoda" emphasizes resisting indulgence in desires and advises men to avoid greed and lust; "The Serpent's Lust" not only highlights the horror of sexual desire but also suggests that with strong willpower, one can overcome such desires.

Overall, the adaptation of "The Serpent's Lust" is quite successful. It retains the essence of the original story while infusing it with unique cultural elements, breaking away from the traditional two-person romance model of the Legend of the White Snake. By introducing a third character and incorporating a subplot of shifting affections, it offers a refreshing new perspective.

2.3 "The White Snake Lady" on the Korean Peninsula

"The White Snake Lady" is a film that premiered in South Korea in 1960. Although its plot and character portrayals differ from the Chinese version, the profound influence of

the Chinese “Legend of the White Snake” is still evident. The most notable aspect of “The White Snake Lady” is the reimagining of Xu Xian’s character. For the first time, Xu Xian firmly stands by the White Snake, and despite learning that his wife is a demon, he does not flee in fear or compromise due to moral conventions. Instead, he leaps into the deep sea to try and rescue his wife, leading to their mutual drowning. This portrayal of Xu Xian transforms the White Snake story from a tragic love tale into a romantic comedy. The White Snake’s sacrifices are deemed worthwhile, as their love is unwavering. In the end, Guanyin is moved by their steadfast and sincere love, resurrecting them. The story concludes with the couple sailing away together in a small boat, embarking on a journey toward the horizon. The White Snake ultimately finds a love that is free of doubts and wavering, steadfast until death.

In this version, the supreme Buddhist power is represented not by Fahai, but by Guanyin. Guanyin is portrayed with a compassionate and humanly gentle demeanor. She first gives the divine herb to the White Snake, allowing her to save the townspeople and promises to let her leave Xu Xian on the seventh day of the seventh month. Guanyin shows great trust and tolerance towards the White Snake. After the drowning of the White Snake and Xu Xian, Guanyin is moved by their sincere love and intervenes to save them, leading to their resurrection. This act signifies the recognition of their love by the heavenly principles and is a key source of the story’s comedic ending.

The story of “The White Snake Lady” is generally more gentle, with much of the conflict greatly reduced, resulting in a satisfying and joyful ending. This reflects the historical context of the time. Between 1950 and 1960, during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, the characters of the White Snake and Xu Xian were symbolic of the opposing ideologies of the two superpowers. People used this story to express their hope for the end of the Cold War and a return to normalcy³.

In contrast, traditional Chinese versions of the White Snake story often emphasize the harshness of Taoist principles, aiming to separate Xu Xian and Bai Suzhen to warn people that “human and demon are destined to be apart, and one should not be enticed by desire or go astray.” Xu Xian is often depicted as weak and ineffectual, which contrasts with Bai Suzhen’s courageous struggles, highlighting that sometimes demons can be more loving and righteous than humans. “The White Snake Lady” breaks away from these traditional portrayals, presenting Xu Xian as equally brave and loyal, and Guanyin as possessing human emotions. Ultimately, the couple sails away together, achieving a true happy ending.

3 Western Adaptations of the White Snake Story

Over the past century, the story of “The Legend of White Snake” has not only become well-known in China but has also crossed oceans, gradually gaining fame in the English-speaking world through various translations and adaptations. For instance, there are the 1834 English summaries in the Royal Asiatic Society Journal of the French translation by Sinologist Stanislas Julien, the 1864 serialized translation “The Leifeng

Pagoda, Han Literature, and the Story of the White Snake” in the “China-Japan Library,” and the 1896 translation by American missionary Samuel I. Woodbridge titled “The White Snake Story: The Leifeng Pagoda Legend”⁴.

3.1 The White Snake Story: The Leifeng Pagoda legend in the English-speaking world

Samuel I. Woodbridge was a missionary sent to China by the American Presbyterian Church in 1882. His adaptation and translation of “The White Snake Story: The Leifeng Pagoda Legend” was serialized in 1896 in the “North China Herald and Supreme Court and Consular Gazette,” making it one of the early English versions of the White Snake story.

Samuel I. Woodbridge based his translation on the “Legend of Leifeng Pagoda” by the Qing Dynasty author Yu Shan, focusing on highlighting the religious and traditional elements within the story. In Woodbridge’s view, elements like drinking realgar wine during the Dragon Boat Festival, the white snake seeking herbs, and the confrontation between the white snake and Fa Hai were merely manifestations of “superstition” inherent in Chinese Buddhist culture. Thus, the Buddhist themes of “karma,” “fate,” and “supernatural beings” were seen by Martin as key components of what he perceived as China’s “dark and backward” state⁵. He believed that while Chinese people did not believe in a creator god, they worshiped animal spirits created by God, which he considered a sign of ignorance and superstition. In his translation and annotations, Woodbridge repeatedly emphasized the prevalence of ghost and deity worship in Chinese culture, stressing concepts like ghosts, gods, and the King of Hell, to portray a society overrun by superstitious practices. Through these highly subjective modifications and annotations, along with his omission and selective presentation of the original story’s details, and his reference to “the gospel of Jesus Christ” in the preface, it is clear that Martin’s intention was more about missionary work than conveying the ancient tale’s narrative and thematic richness. Consequently, the story in “The White Snake Story” deviates significantly from the original Chinese version.

It is worth noting that while Woodbridge was strongly critical of the Chinese worship of animal spirits, his depiction of Bai Suzhen (Madame White Snake) did not carry derogatory connotations. On the contrary, he used many positive and sympathetic terms. Additionally, he removed many elements unfavorable to Bai Suzhen’s positive image, even transferring negative aspects to the character of Xiao Qing. These modifications reflect his favorable attitude towards Bai Suzhen.

In “The White Snake Story,” Xu Xian’s character is notably distinctive. His portrayal is rich and multidimensional, with a deeply nuanced psychological landscape. Xu Xian oscillates between love and fear, and many of his actions reflect his internal struggle and hesitation. For example, even though he has long harbored doubts about Bai Suzhen’s true identity, he still feels guilt and unease when he returns home with the talismans given by the Taoist priest. Throughout the story, his feelings for Bai Suzhen are neither simplistic nor flat but are complex and fraught with difficult choices.

It is precisely his reluctance to part with his beloved and his indecision between love and the dictates of fate that endear him to readers. This depth of character makes him

worthy of the sacrifices and passionate love Bai Suzhen has given him. The portrayal of Xu Xian's complexity ultimately serves to elevate and beautify Bai Suzhen's character, acknowledging and praising the depth of her love⁶.

3.2 Herman Grimm and the narrative poem *The Snake*

Not only in the English-speaking world but also in Germany, works based on the Legend of the White Snake have been produced. In 1856, a narrative poem titled "The Snake" was published by Hermann Grimm.

Herman Grimm did not understand Chinese, so his knowledge of the White Snake story must have come from the French translation by sinologist Julien, titled "Blanc ou Bleu; ou Les Deux Déeses Serpents." Julien's version was also based on the Qing dynasty's "Legend of Leifeng Pagoda," so it can be said that Grimm's poem "The Snake" is similarly based on "Legend of Leifeng Pagoda."

However, Grimm made a series of significant changes in his adaptation. First, he erased all Chinese elements and replaced them with German localized versions. He Westernized the characters and transformed the Chinese mythological significance into Western fantasy elements. Although this narrative poem lacks Chinese elements, its plot framework is very similar to the Chinese White Snake legend. While Grimm retained the original story's framework, he localized it in terms of form, content, and values, transplanting the story's Chinese essence into German literary soil, thereby endowing it with new artistic value and cultural significance⁶.

Additionally, he made selective and significant cuts to the story's plot, discarding elements such as pregnancy, childbirth, and transcendence. He also revised the character of the serpent demon: during the young man's ardent pursuit, she explicitly tells him she is a serpent demon and warns that unless he throws her off her horse, he will never be able to rid himself of her. However, the infatuated young man disregards this and insists on marrying her. When he becomes weary, he seeks help from others to get rid of his wife, even callously pushing her into a bread oven to burn her alive. Before her death, the serpent demon curses her husband for his betrayal and unkindness, setting a curse. This portrayal presents the serpent demon not as a submissive wife but as a passionate woman who dares to love and hate. Her honesty starkly contrasts with the man's inconsistency, adding dramatic intensity to the story and highlighting the man's unfaithfulness and the serpent demon's misplaced trust. In the "Legend of Leifeng Pagoda," after being subdued by Fahai, Bai Suzhen does not blame Xu Xian but takes full responsibility to emphasize her noble character of repaying kindness with virtue, aligning with the Qing Dynasty's value orientation of integrating Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism and societal expectations of a virtuous wife. In contrast, in the Grimms' narrative poem, although the serpent demon is also a virtuous wife, she exhibits strong possessiveness and exclusivity towards her husband, and her final accusations reflect a vengeful resolve⁶ These changes reflect the different aesthetic tastes of China and Germany, showcasing local characteristics.

4 Conclusion

From the Song Dynasty to today, and from Asia to Europe, many influential artistic works have been inspired by the ancient legend of “The Legend of the White Snake.” These works, adapted by authors from different countries, carry unique national aesthetics and artistic value. Through these artistic creations, we can appreciate cultural differences, promote Sino-Western cultural exchange and dissemination, and place this classic theme within a broader cultural context, providing new perspectives and approaches for re-examining and interpreting this timeless story.

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