



The Traditional "Three Cardinal Guides" Ethics in *Journey to the West*

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Abstract. This paper takes the power structure in the text of *Journey to the West* as the research object, aiming to compare the differences between the fundamental power discursive practice in the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty (the period when the novel was completed) — namely the "Three Cardinal Guides" — and the relationships defined by the Three Cardinal Guides presented in the book. Through close reading of the text, this paper adopts the analytical method of Structuralist Narratology to analyze the ethics of the Three Cardinal Guides in the novel, namely the ruler-minister, father-son, and husband-wife relationships. It argues that the ethics of the "Three Cardinal Guides" in *Journey to the West* show a reversed trend compared to the social reality of the time: the "guiding authority" (the dominant subject in the power relationship) is often weaker than the subordinate object, and is thus subject to the control of the "minister", "son", and "wife". This paper takes the three hierarchical relationships defined by the Three Cardinal Guides in the novel as the starting point, to demonstrate the "un-orthodox" nature of the textual structure and the textual discursive practice of "the weakness of the guiding authority".

Keywords: *Journey to the West*; Three Cardinal Guides; power structure; structuralist narratology; power discursive practice.

1 Introduction

The Three Cardinal Guides proposed in China's feudal society refer to the ethical norms governing the ruler-minister, father-son, and husband-wife relationships, which contain a "declaration of ownership" over the individual. The ruler-minister relationship is the discursive practice of the power structure in ancient feudal society, manifested in the minister's subordination of his own "existence" to the monarch, who becomes the "subject" of the relationship. In addition, "patriarchal power" and "conjugal authority" can both be regarded as variants of "monarchical power". However, in the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty, a trend of subverting the "Three Cardinal Guides" emerged in society. Many literary works were keen to "depart from the classics and rebel against orthodoxy", rather than becoming constative texts of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism [1]. *Journey to the West* is precisely such a rebellious work.

In *Journey to the West*, the well-established ethics of the "Three Cardinal Guides" are deconstructed. The implied author downplays the agency and authority of the monarch, father, and husband, while conversely amplifying the power of ministers, sons, and women. This paper argues that the ethical relationships presented in the novel are narrated in a state where the "subject" is in decline and the "object" is on the rise, presenting a pattern of "the weakness of the guiding authority". Such a narrative technique embodies the text's subversion and mockery of traditional authority and universal truth.

Among the relevant studies on this topic, Huang Jinkui (2018) argues that Wu Cheng'en deliberately blurred the boundary between the "sacred" and the "secular", hoping to express a kind of "meta-justice" through the novel [2]. The so-called "meta-justice" refers to the universal axiom that is not influenced by any political force or authority. However, no such ideology or theory existed in the era when Wu Cheng'en lived, so he used mythology to express his pursuit of an ideal society [2]. Huang's viewpoint inspires this paper: the blurring of the boundary between the sacred and the secular is precisely the method by which the Three Cardinal Guides are deconstructed in *Journey to the West*.

Chen Zhexun (2012) points out that the novel reflects the oppression of figures like Sun Wukong by the Confucian norms of hierarchy and asceticism in real society [3]. Chen writes: "The rigid and strict hierarchical norms of Confucianism were so repressive that they could not harness this primal desire for the benefit of the people, which led to Sun Wukong's havoc at the Peach Banquet and his rebellion against the Heavenly Court." The ruler-minister relationship was rationalized by Confucian ideology, and in the era when *Journey to the West* was written, Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism was promoting hierarchical Ritual Propriety in the name of the "Heavenly Principle". This paper argues that the reversal of the power dynamic between ruler and minister in the text precisely constitutes the text's rebellion against authority.

Similarly, Zhang Weihong (2019) holds that the Golden Hoop is a means to maintain the power structure, endowed with legitimacy by authority and used to restrict behaviors that pursue individuality [4]. She writes: "This established social order is embodied in the Golden Hoop, which hangs over Sun Wukong's head like a shadow all the time." However, from beginning to end, Tang Sanzang never "tames" Sun Wukong; on the contrary, it is through Sun Wukong that he attains Buddhist enlightenment. Undeniably, the symbolic meaning of the Golden Hoop extends beyond social order; in the text, it also embodies the "master's" fear of his "disciple". This paper argues that the master-disciple relationship between the two also presents the unique pattern of "the weakness of the guiding authority" in *Journey to the West*.

The following paper is divided into three parts: 1) The textual practice of the "powerful minister"; 2) The subversion of the feudal power structure in the text; and 3) The deconstruction of metaphysical "truth" in the text. It will elaborate on the characteristics of the ruler-minister relationship in *Journey to the West*, and explore the significance endowed to the text by this relational structure.

2 The Textual Practice of the "Powerful Minister"

Journey to the West contains numerous depictions of monarchs. In the era when the novel was printed, the maxim "Under the whole heaven, every spot is the sovereign's ground [5]; across the entire land, every person is the sovereign's subject" was an unquestionable feudal discursive practice. Yet in the text, ministers often take the dominant position by mastering the "dominant hegemonic principle" [6]. This paper therefore argues that *Journey to the West* practices the dissolution of monarchical power in its narrative structure, and the implied author creates a plot pattern of the powerful minister and the weak monarch through the relationships between characters.

First, the supreme ruler of the Heavenly Court, the Jade Emperor, appears utterly embarrassed when facing Sun Wukong, a stone monkey born on the mortal earth. The Jade Emperor is revered as the "Supreme High God of the Purple Tenuity, Great Compassionate and Benevolent Jade Emperor of the Highest Heaven" [7]. In the first chapter of the novel, Thousand-Mile Eye and Wind-Accompanying Ear, ordered by the Jade Emperor to observe the newborn Sun Wukong, report to him: "Your ministers, in accordance with your imperial decree, have observed and listened to the source of the golden light, which lies in the border of the small Aolai Country in the East China Sea of Dongshengshenzhou...[8]" The two refer to themselves as "ministers" and the Jade Emperor's order as an "imperial decree", confirming the Jade Emperor's status as monarch and the Heavenly Court as the "authority" governing all things in the world. In contrast, Sun Wukong is merely a subject under the Son of Heaven [9]-[13]. In addition to Erlang Shen, the other figure credited with capturing Sun Wukong is Supreme Lord Lao. He is the founder of Taoism, one of the Three Pure Ones along with Yuanshi Tianzun and Lingbao Tianzun. In *Journey to the West*, Supreme Lord Lao resides in the Tushita Palace in the Heaven of Supreme Bliss beyond the Thirty-Three Heavens. When he enters the Lingxiao Hall, "the Jade Emperor immediately comes out to greet him with the Queen Mother", a detail that reveals his exalted status. In Chapters 5 and 7 of *Journey to the West*, it is written: "After Supreme Lord Lao finished his ritual salutation, he said: 'In this old Taoist's palace, I have refined some Nine-Turn Golden Elixir to prepare for Your Majesty's Pellet Primordial Assembly. Unexpectedly, it was stolen by a thief. I have come especially to inform Your Majesty of this.'" It also states: "Supreme Lord Lao presented his memorial... and departed after receiving the imperial decree." In the dialogue between Supreme Lord Lao and the Jade Emperor, the narrator uses terms such as "Your Majesty", "I have come especially to inform", "presented his memorial", and "received the imperial decree" from Supreme Lord Lao's perspective, which clearly defines the Taoist founder's status as a "minister".

3 The Subversion of the Feudal Power Structure in the Text

"The ruler guides the minister, the father guides the son, and the husband guides the wife" (original note: *Ritual Apocrypha: Hanwen Jia*, written by an anonymous author in the Han Dynasty) is the definition of the Three Cardinal Guides in Confucian culture, representing the power structure of ancient Chinese feudal society. These norms were regarded as the "Heavenly Principle" in the era when *Journey to the West* was written, yet they are deliberately dissolved by the implied author in the novel. Among the Three Cardinal Guides, the father-son and husband-wife relationships are variants of the ruler-minister relationship. It is easy to find a large number of "anti-patriarchal" and "uxorilocal marriage" plots in *Journey to the West*, which can be seen as the subversion of "patriarchal power" and "conjugal authority". On the whole, therefore, the implied author completes a subversion of the power structure through the text of *Journey to the West* [14].

In Chapter 7 of *Journey to the West*, the White Dragon Horse is punished by the Heavenly Court, and the narrator uses the term "filial impiety" through the White Dragon Horse's own words. Furthermore, the death sentence against the White Dragon Horse is personally reported to the Jade Emperor by his father, the Dragon King of the West Sea, which speaks volumes about their father-son relationship. As for the Buddha, his sacred life as a Buddha is born from the peacock [15]. The implied author completes the "patricide" at the textual level through the absence of the "father" [16]-[17].

The "anti-patriarchal" narrative reinforces the dissolution of authority. In an era when the father-son relationship was equated with the ruler-minister relationship, disloyalty and filial impiety from a minister or son were regarded as the most heinous crimes. The above plots are essentially the same as Sun Wukong's havoc in the Heavenly Court and the Royal Father-in-Law of the Biqu Kingdom's act of "holding the emperor hostage to command the unruly ministers": all are acts of the subordinate rebelling against the superior. This "anti-patriarchal" discourse is a variant of the "powerful minister and weak monarch" pattern, and a challenge to social authority by the individual [18]-[20].

In addition, the novel contains a large amount of discourse around "uxorilocal marriage", which was not an honorable matter for men in traditional society. The implied author depicts many stories of men marrying into the bride's family. Since the "husband guides the wife" precept is a microcosm of the ruler-minister relationship, the textual practice of "uxorilocal marriage" uses a narrative structure of "weak man, strong woman" to challenge the "conjugal authority" in the traditional patriarchal family, and is likewise a questioning and challenge of the "minister" to the "monarch" [21].

In Chapters 18 and 23 of *Journey to the West*, Zhu Bajie marries into the Gao Family Village and the household of the four women transformed by Bodhisattvas, respectively. Both Ms. Gao Cuilian in Gao Family Village and the four women transformed by the Bodhisattvas are from wealthy families with thousands of acres of fertile land, and they take Zhu Bajie as a husband precisely because of his great strength and ability to do farm work. The woman provides material support, while the man is responsible for labor; behind this balance lies the decline of the husband's conjugal authority, and

the wife no longer takes the husband as her guide. A similar case is Bull Demon King and the Jade-Faced Fox: Bull Demon King even fears the latter so much that he does not return to his home in the Plantain Cave [22]-[24].

4 Conclusion

Journey to the West is a subversive novel. By distorting the conventional ethical relationships of the Three Cardinal Guides, it creates a world where the "subject" is eliminated and the "object" rises. The text embodies the "subject" of the power relationship in gods, monarchs, fathers, and husbands, while the "object" is represented by social roles on the margins of the field of power, such as ministers, mortals, sons, and wives, exemplified by Erlang Shen and Sun Wukong. In the real world, these social roles are usually subject to the "guiding authority", but in the novel, their relationship is completely reversed.

The text of *Journey to the West* seems to deliberately deconstruct the real-world relationships of the Three Cardinal Guides. Through subversive narrative techniques and the heroic and romantic portrayal of figures such as Sun Wukong, the implied author negates traditional Confucian Ritual Propriety. From the text, we can glimpse the ideological changes in the era when the novel was completed: the development of commerce and handicrafts in the Ming Dynasty undermined the production relations of the ancient imperial society to a certain extent, leading to a "discrepancy" between the superstructure and the social system. The emergence of literary critics such as Li Zhi and Feng Menglong clearly illustrates the social impact of these ideological changes.

The completion of *Journey to the West* was by no means accidental. The implied author's betrayal of traditional value practice is the crystallization of the discourse of the times. In an era when the concept of "justice" had not yet been formed, the novel, through its rebellion against the values of the "Three Cardinal Guides", manifests its own "concept of justice", and expresses its yearning for an ideal society through romantic heroic figures.

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