

The Legend of the White Snake readapted as a film: A critical analysis of some popular and religious themes

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Abstract

*The Legend of the White Snake is a Chinese legend that has been adapted and presented in major Chinese operas, television series and films. The tale finds its origin at the time of the Tang dynasty, an imperial dynasty of China that ruled from 618 to 907 C.E. This period is considered the highest point in Chinese culture and civilisation. This legend is worth critical study because a serpent spirit that turns into a woman acts as a significant example of revolutionary feminism. The complex relationship between the man and the demon serves as a crucial example in understanding how China dealt with this human and supernatural interaction and how it gets reflected over time in the form of myth, folklore, and popular culture (theatre/cinema). The paper studies the 2011 movie adaptation *The Sorcerer and the White Snake* and examines why there is a renewed interest in the legend and how it gets modified to appeal to a global audience.*

Keywords: Legend, White Snake, readaptation, film, popular, religious

The Legend of the White Snake is an ancient Chinese legend and one of the four great folktales of Chinese origin. The original legend begins with Lü Dongbin, a legendary Chinese Taoist scholar and poet who is believed to have lived for nearly 220 years during the Tang dynasty and was considered almost immortal. Lü Dongbin disguises as a vendor of sweets at a broken bridge near a freshwater lake called the West Lake in Hangzhou. Poets have long celebrated this lake for its remarkable beauty, temples and arched bridges. He sells some sweets to a boy named Xu Xian, which are immortality pills. When Xu Xian does not feel hungry for the next three days, he revisits the bridge to confront the vendor about black magic. Lü Dongbin crackles with laughter, flips Xu Xian upside down and forces him to vomit the immortality pills into the lake. Deep in the lake lives a White Snake spirit who is a practitioner of Taoist meditation. She ingests the pills and is blessed with five hundred years of magical power. She feels indebted to Xu Xian for life. In the deep waters also resides a Tortoise spirit who resents the White Snake for the magical powers she has mistakenly attained and wants it for himself.

Meanwhile, the White Snake spirit spots a beggar catching a green snake to kill and immediately takes a human form and saves the green snake. This results in a lifelong friendship between the two snake spirits, Bai Suzhen (the White Snake) and Xiaoqing (the Green Snake). In human form both meet Xu Xian at the broken bridge in Hangzhou, where Bai Suzhen and Xu Xian fall in love and get married. Soon, the tortoise also takes the human form of a Buddhist monk, Fahai, and wants to end the relationship between the husband and wife. He meets Xu Xian at the Duanwu Festival (the Dragon Boat Festival, which celebrates the start of midsummer) and asks him and his wife to drink realgar wine. Realgar wine, a Chinese alcoholic drink made of a yellow arsenic sulphide mineral, is believed to be a magical tonic to ward off evil spirits and demons. When Bai Suzhen unsuspectingly drinks the wine, the potion compels her to take her true form; when Xu Xian sees her transform into a giant white snake, he dies of shock. Suzhen succeeds in reviving Xu Xian, but a battle occurs between the White Snake and the monk. The snake loses the fight but evokes empathy for the invincible feminine spirit. The figure of Fahai attempts to demonstrate how uncontrolled erotic passion brings death and destruction.

The Sorcerer and the White Snake (2011), a film starring Jet Li (as Fahai), Raymon Lam (as Xu Xian) and Huang Shengyi (as Bai Suzhen) is an adaptation of the age-old legend and is directed by Siu Tung Ching. It begins by showing Fahai as a Buddhist master monk responsible for capturing demons and preventing them from interfering in the human realm. Globally, the audience is more familiar with Buddhist ideology (as compared to Taoism), so we have a Buddhist monk helping to restore order. We are introduced to the two female snake demons, Qingqing and Bai Suzhen, playing on a mountain, and Qingqing (the Green Snake) decides to scare Xu Xian, a physician who is trying to climb the mountain to collect herbs. Xu Xian slips from the cliff and falls into a lake but is saved by Bai Suzhen (the White Snake), who is watching them closely. Bai Suzhen is already a shape shifter because of years of meditation. She takes a human form and dives into the lake to save Xu Xian by kissing him and reviving him with her life essence. After a while Bai Suzhen misses Xu Xian and decides to meet him in the city. At first, Xu Xian fails to recognise her, but once he remembers, they spend the night together. Eventually, Xu Xian and Bai Suzhen get married; Xu Xian remains oblivious to Bai Suzhen's true identity. As the movie proceeds, Fahai pledges to protect a naive Xu Xian from the clutches of a thousand-year-old White Snake demon. This compulsion to destroy the Snake Lady is because Fahai sees her as a demon, not as an immortal spirit seeking human experience.

In an attempt to kill her, Fahai gives Xu Xian a magical dagger that can kill monsters. Fahai and his disciples attack Xu Xian's house, which forces Bai Suzhen to transform into the snake spirit. Bai Suzhen wins the battle with Fahai, but Xu Xian stabs her with the magical dagger, causing a fatal injury before she escapes. This instance is an essential shift in the narrative, as Bai Suzhen is lethally wounded by the magical dagger and not by drinking realgar wine, demonstrating the supremacy of Buddhist spells that could extinguish demonic power. When Xu Xian realises what he has done, he tries to save Bai Suzhen by getting the Spirit Root, an enchanted root that restores magical powers. In the process of retrieving the Spirit Root, Xu Xian gets possessed by many demonic beings that were trapped in the Lei Feng Pagoda. Xu Xian succeeds in the getting magical root to Bai Suzhen before he is taken prisoner at the Lei Feng Pagoda. When Bai Suzhen recovers, she tries to release Xu Xian, who is being held captive in the pagoda along with the other demonic spirits. Thus ensues a fierce battle between Bai Suzhen and Fahai, in which she drowns the Great Mountain monastery in a lake and manages to rescue Xu Xian from the submerged pagoda. Finally, Fahai, empowered by his steadfast faith in Buddha, is able to capture the White Snake Spirit in the pagoda. Bai Suzhen repents the crime of killing many innocent people and pleads with Buddha to let her see Xu Xian for one last time. Xu Xian, who is now exorcised, fails to recognise Bai Suzhen, but they manage to steal one last kiss before Bai Suzhen is eternally trapped in the pagoda. Eventually Xu Xian regains his memory and vows to be by the side of his beloved for years to come. The movie ends on a note of repentance and the power of true love.

The Western belief system views snakes as evil, but Chinese culture deems snakes as a symbol of good luck and prosperity. It is tragic to see how Fahai relentlessly tries to persecute the White Snake Lady, even though across cultures, snakes symbolise eternity, time and fertility, and are a dominant symbol in all primitive totemic tribes (Denise Chao 1979: 196). The Legend of the White Snake was first recorded in writing and made famous during the Song dynasty. The Song rulers rejected Buddhism as a foreign religion, which was developed in India and introduced to China by way of the Silk Route. Instead, they promoted Taoist and Confucian scholarship, which originated in China and is essential to Chinese culture. Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism are the three predominant religious persuasions of China, in which Confucianism and Taoism share an age-old symbiotic relationship.

Confucianism was founded by a philosopher and political figure named Confucius, who lived from 551 to 479 BCE. Confucianism was a philosophy about leading a better life based on

proper social ethics, human conduct and the observance of rituals. It was the dominant political philosophy during the Han dynasty from 206 BCE to 220 CE. and helped establish the status quo from that time onwards. Taoism developed a little after Confucianism and focused mainly on the spiritual elements of life. If Confucianism was about situating the self within a social order, Taoism aimed to liberate the self from society and align it within a natural order. Taoism focusses on 'the way of life' and its inner meaning and emphasizes on natural ways to deal with it. Buddhism was founded in India by Gautama, who lived in India around the 6th century BCE. Later, Buddhism spread to China and Buddhist monks used Taoist concepts to explain it to the Chinese. Hence, we see a similarity between the two religious faiths. But Buddhism, in contrast to the two, focusses on liberating the self from all orders, social or natural. According to Lindsay Emerson, the Taoist concept of meditation is to attain longevity, magical powers and even immortality, whereas the Buddhist texts emit a patriarchal tone that associated women with seduction and devilry (Emerson 2020: 47).

Over time, the Legend of the White Snake went on to have a Buddhist monk at its centre because it is believed that while a Taoist priest works with natural forces and magical powers, but only a celibate devout Buddhist monk can subdue the mighty demonic spirit. The Buddhist monk seems to have a higher calling, and the pagoda acts as a potent outer limb that can hold the demon captive. In the legend, the figure of White Snake exemplifies a Taoist heroine who challenges patriarchal powers but must be defeated by a Buddhist champion. This moment of retaliation, when she disregards Fahai's advice to depart from the human realm, can be read as the development of female consciousness as she chooses to experience marital bliss and sexual pleasures rather than living a lonely life. The legend is based on Chinese ethics as the snake was transformed into a woman who accepted her familial duties and performed them rigorously. But the critical point of the emergence of female consciousness is in tandem with the expression and acceptance of one's gender and sexuality and marks the start of subversive dissension. The woman asserts her sexual freedom, which liberates her from the patriarchal dictates of disciplining female sexual desire. This assertion gives her control over her body and life. The White Snake chooses to take matters into her own hands after the monk's repeated attempts to end her marriage, showing herself to not only be a sensitive figure but also a rebellious and courageous fighter. She transforms into a character who yearns for both love and personal freedom. The White Snake is an awakened feminine consciousness who fights

patriarchal marginalisation of women and questions societal differentiation and hierarchy between man and animal spirit.

It is not clear how and why, but medieval Buddhism is held responsible for polarising the tale of the White Snake Spirit into two distinct categories: an encounter with ‘a female immortal’ or ‘a female demonic seductress’ (Whalen Lai 1992: 52). According to Lai, the current reading of the Legend of the White Snake and her seduction of men can be seen back in time as an ‘innocent dalliance’ with nymphs at the lake, which later transforms into a story of ‘gothic romance’ (Lai: 61). These changes and transformations in the original tale are examples of cultural influences on folk tales and how these tales evolve to have different endings over time. Since antiquity, Chinese people have struggled against nature and to appease natural forces they began to conceive of gods as half man and half animal. This legend is also connected to the revitalisation of the creation myth of the goddess Nuwa, who was half woman and half snake and her husband Fuxi (Chie Lee 2007: 235). The first recorded history of Nuwa and Fuxi dates from 400 BCE when they visited Kunlun Mountain and offered prayers to the heavens to be made man and wife. The gods blessed the two with the heads of a man and a woman but intertwined at the end with the bodies of snakes. Hence, the Legend of the White Snake is vital to the Chinese idea of creation and human civilisation. Nuwa is the Chinese goddess associated with marriage and fertility and is considered as the repairer of the universe. The Chinese people from the early Han to the Tang dynasties worshipped Nuwa and Fuxi for marital harmony (Chao, p. 195). Just like Adam and Eve, Nuwa and Fuxi are honoured as the human race’s primogenitors because they represent procreation through marriage. The Legend of the White Snake, which tells the tale of how she went from being a monster to becoming a representation of female purity against the backdrop of the Nuwa saga is another illustration of the persistence of traditional folklore of animal–human love.

For some scholars, the Legend of the White Snake can be associated with feminism and ecocriticism because ‘the “body without organs” of Mazu, Nu Wa and White Snake embody a radical Deleuzian subjectivity that lies outside of the body as “the body” speaks for obsolete policing and constructions of subjectivity and individuality, yet inside “the body” as it points to material feminist and ecocritical arguments that express that humans are always and already a composition of embodied nonhuman and human matter’ (Chen 2022: 2861). The story revolves around gender and sexuality issues and a woman’s ability to use her superpower for the good of her family. The female animal spirit integrates the animalistic instinct of love with

the social order of marriage. She is considerably stronger than Xu Xian in true animal form. Still, she chooses to forego both her physical prowess and her spiritual potential in order to win a man's love. This instance exposes the unequal social class system that requires the subjection of women to men.

According to Chie Lee, the Song period saw a clash of ideologies: Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, which implied a conflict of nature and earth consciousness (*yin/yang*) with solar and heaven consciousness (*yang/spirit*) (Lee: 241). The conflict of these archetypal forces also gets embodied in the mythic love story of Xu Xian and Bai Suzhen, which affects the position and perception of women in society. The concept of a female mystic in Chinese culture suggests that women have only a limited supply of *yin*, which after menopause (*yin*) is essentially lost and leads to infertility. In contrast, men have an unlimited supply of *yang*, which can be satiated with their illicit encounters with river nymphs or other female supernatural beings. On the other hand, this *yang* could also be sucked by human females to improve their chances of age-long fertility, which led to the fear of *femme fatales* or *witches* sucking the vitality of men for their selfish use. This fear was fuelled by medieval ascetics who sought to instil moral codes in common men, declaring any sexual encounters outside of marriage to be evil acts of sexual deviance with serious karmic consequences. According to Whalen Lai, in China, sexual intercourse was projected as a mingling of 'cloud and rain' and any illicit acts of seduction were usually performed at aquatic sites; thus, the first intimate exchange in the film takes place in the lake with Bai Suzhen injecting her vital essence into Xu Xian's mouth, an initiation of a love ritual. As water came to be seen as the preferred haunt of water serpents or she-demons, mountains became the chosen places of lodging for Buddhist monks and celibates. With this lake incident, Bai Suzhen rose from a heartless demon to an ideal mate. Xu Xian also undergoes a different kind of transformation: from being a passive scholar who embodied values of filial piety and social behaviour, he is challenged when he sees Bai Suzhen in her proper animal form. He becomes even more perplexed when he sees the opposing matriarchal and patriarchal forces in the form of Bai Suzhen and Fahai.

Bai Suzhen plans to drown the Great Mountain monastery in a massive flood to take revenge on Fahai after being chased because of her demonic past and being forced to leave her beloved in the human realm. The story's moral, however, is that despite Bai Suzhen's birth as a demon, she can overcome her inherent evilness through perseverance in meditation, acts of kindness and love for humanity. In a flash of wrath, she unleashes the big flood, but is forced to confess

her sin and abuse of authority. In the greater scheme of karma, neither a demon nor a mortal escapes punishment. According to Tarryn Chun, the movie *The Sorcerer and the White Snake* transforms the Legend of the White Snake from a cautionary tale to one that celebrates the great human/nonhuman hybridity because, through the medium of film and use of multimedia technologies, the nonhuman elements take on a more spectacular vision (Chun 2019: 55). The fantasy aspects are so vital that they give an old story a new interpretation. Dragons and snakes have both been associated with yin/feminine energies since antiquity, and the White Snake, who took on human form as Bai Suzhen, embodies all three qualities of these energies: the divine (as an immortal), the human (as a loving woman) and the instinctual (as an animal spirit). She transcends the narrative by incorporating these qualities as she admits her error and makes amends.

She longed for love and descended into the human realm, challenging the human hierarchies represented by Fahai. She was benevolent, loving, kind and compassionate as a goddess figure, yet she could be cunning, beguiling and aggressive because of her animal instincts. The movie showcases derivative supernatural action with fantastic visuals, monks flying around displaying martial arts and great computer-generated special effects. The story is focused on the quest of Fahai to restore order and his enlightenment in love, which he is entirely unaware of. Towards the end, there appears a moment of doubt where he questions his dead-set standards and stubbornness to see all spirits as demonic, not realising that the true essence of any being is compassion, clearly portrayed in the figure of the White Snake Spirit. Because the benevolent and lovely Bai Suzhen is revealed to be capable of demonstrating unwavering courage even when Fahai impeaches her, the legend continues to be popular. She bravely confronts the monk, who represents evil feudal power, for severing her marriage ties and obstinately disobeys laws that impair women's rights and dignity. She challenges the mistreatment of women in society and embodies women's empowerment. Both Fahai, who was initially unaware of the concept of love, however platonic, and Bai Suzhen, who discovers that enormous power comes with a sense of much greater responsibility, gain clarity in the film's ending scenes. Thus, the myth and the movie are celebrated expressions of breaking gender binaries and finding love and compassion in unconventional (human–animal) relationships.

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