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THE RELIGIOUS UNDERTONES IN THE ZAJU “JOURNEY TO THE WEST”: TO THE PROBLEM OF THE MANIFESTATION OF BUDDHIST, DAOIST, AND CONFUCIAN THOUGHTS

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Annotation

The Yuan Dynasty, established by the Mongols, was the first unified national regime in Chinese history led by a minority and marked a period of cultural diversity. This era saw a fusion of various religious thoughts influencing the literati's works, embedding Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian elements. Yang Jingxian's zaju adaptation of "Journey to the West" as an important literary piece from the late Yuan and early Ming periods, vividly reflects the religious and cultural backdrop of its time. This paper analyzes the manifestation of Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian thoughts in Yang Jingxian's zaju to explore its religious undertones.

Key words

Zaju "Journey to the West", Buddhism, Daoism, Confucian Thought, Philosophies.

INTRODUCTION

Yang Jingxian's zaju adaptation of "Journey to the West" is a significant theatrical work from the Yuan Dynasty, based on the story of Tang Sanzang's pilgrimage to obtain scriptures. Comprising six books with twenty-four acts, this play holds a crucial artistic status. It not only enriched the dramatic stage with its characters but also provided essential material and inspiration for later literary works, especially Wu Cheng'en's Ming Dynasty novel "Journey to the West". In the late Yuan period, Yang Jingxian's zaju played an essential role in the development of literary forms, reflecting the religious and cultural context of the time and showcasing the author's innovations and deepening of traditional themes. By mythologizing and grounding the pilgrimage story, Yang Jingxian reduced its religious colors and emphasized a sense of reality and spirit, laying the foundation for the secularization and realism of the later novel "Journey to the West".

BUDDHIST ELEMENTS

1.1. Buddhist Thought and Connotations

In Yang Jingxian's zaju adaptation of "Journey to the West", Buddhist thought is rich and pervasive throughout the plot, mainly encompassing the following concepts: The idea of compassion is one of the core tenets of Buddhism, reflecting a profound understanding and care for life and its existence. Compassion involves treating all living beings with a compassionate heart, including humans, animals, and all forms of life. In Buddhism, compassion is viewed as a crucial quality on the path to enlightenment. "Compassion" denotes selfless love and goodwill toward all beings, wishing them happiness and peace; "Pity" entails deep empathy for all suffering beings and the willingness to help alleviate their pain. This compassion is not just an emotion but an action, requiring Buddhists to act for the benefit of others, even those who harm them. The concept of emptiness, a profound Buddhist philosophical idea, is also present in the zaju. Emptiness refers to the absence of inherent nature in all things, meaning they do not possess an independent, fixed, eternal entity. The law of cause and effect is another Buddhist principle that runs throughout the play. It posits that all experiences are the natural results of one's actions, applying to individuals and the universe. Buddhist causality is a complex process of conditions and interactions, emphasizing that current outcomes are determined by past actions, while present actions will influence future results. This encourages good deeds and responsibility, offering an explanation and psychological comfort for life's misfortunes.

1.2. Relationship between Characterization and Buddhism

Yang Jingxian's zaju "Journey to the West" integrates rich Buddhist elements into its characterizations. The protagonist, Sun Wukong, is derived from the Buddhist legend of the Monkey King, Sun Xingzhe, and exhibits strong Buddhist influences. Sun Wukong demonstrates his devotion to Buddhism multiple times in the story, such as when he seeks help from Guanyin after being defeated by Princess Iron Fan. After becoming Tang Sanzang's disciple, Sun Wukong remains loyal and protects Tang Sanzang on the pilgrimage to the West, embodying the Buddhist spirit of dharma protection.

Tang Sanzang's character is directly inspired by the Buddhist monk Xuanzang from the Buddhist classic "Great Tang Records on the Western Regions". He represents Buddhist wisdom and compassion. In the play, Tang Sanzang consistently maintains a compassionate and calm demeanor in the face of difficulties and challenges, reflecting the Buddhist teachings of patience and compassion.

Sha Wujing and Zhu Bajie's characters also have clear Buddhist backgrounds. Sha Wujing was originally a Curtain-Lifting General in Heaven who was banished to the mortal world for violating heavenly rules and later became a monk in the Flowing Sand River, embodying the Buddhist concepts of karma and spiritual cultivation. Zhu Bajie, based on the Buddhist legend of Zhu Wuneng, is initially gluttonous and lazy but eventually reforms under Buddhist influence and becomes Tang Sanzang's disciple.

"The characters in the play include refined civil officials, loyal and brave generals, various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, high monks, celestial beings, and Daoist immortals. The characters in the play reflect the cultural integration of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, each embodying aspects of the other two traditions, collectively imparting the cultural essence of harmonious integration and mutual beauty among the three traditions" (Yan Min, 2021). The "refined civil officials and loyal and brave generals" represent the traditional values of Confucianism and Mohism. Confucianism emphasizes civil and military virtues, focusing on moral principles such as propriety, righteousness, benevolence, wisdom, and trust, while Mohism advocates for universal love, non-aggression, and meritocracy.

1.3. Plot and Buddhist Teachings

Zaju "Journey to the West" closely aligns with Buddhist teachings. The story centers on Tang Sanzang and his disciples' pilgrimage to the West to obtain scriptures, illustrating and interpreting Buddhist doctrines. "The story of Tang Sanzang's pilgrimage to the West" was recorded in many official documents and folklore during the Tang Dynasty. Since the story inherently carries religious and superstitious elements, Yang Jingxian's choice of this subject inevitably imbues the play with religious undertones, reflecting Buddhist teachings" (Zhang Hongwang, 2012). The narrative begins with the origin of Tang Sanzang, whose father, Chen Guangrui, is thrown into a river by Liu Hong, who then abducts Chen's wife and impersonates him as an official. Chen's wife is forced to abandon their child in the river, but eighteen years later, Xuanzang avenges his family upon learning his true identity. The text states, «Sir, how did you survive after Liu Hong pushed you into the river? (Chen says) I once saved a blinking fish and released it into the river; hence the Dragon King saved me and kept me in the Crystal Palace for eighteen years. Guanyin decreed that I return to the mortal world.» Chen Guangrui's past act of saving a fish leads to his rescue by the Dragon King when thrown into the river, and Liu Hong's nefarious deeds are repaid eighteen years later, conveying the Buddhist principle of karma. This storyline communicates a profound reverence and devotion to the Buddha, highlighting the belief in karmic retribution and the protection and blessings of devout faith in Buddhism. The zaju's plot, interwoven with Buddhist teachings, uses symbolic stories to convey core Buddhist concepts, guiding the audience toward faith.

DAOIST ELEMENTS

2.1. Daoist Thought and Connotations

Besides Buddhist ideas, Daoist thought significantly influences Yang Jingxian's zaju 'Journey to the West'. Typical Daoist concepts include Daoist cosmology and view of life. Daoism, as a traditional Chinese religion, incorporates Chinese philosophy and culture. In Daoist cosmology, the universe is an endless, eternal process of creation and destruction. Daoism believes that all things in the universe are generated by the Dao; the Dao is the origin of the universe and the source of all creation. In Daoist views on life, people should conform to nature and the Dao's laws to achieve a state of harmony and balance. People should cultivate themselves, eliminate inner distractions and desires, and attain inner peace and tranquility.

Daoism advocates that people should conform to nature and avoid excessive interference and changes to achieve a harmonious state. Daoist cosmology and views on life emphasize conforming to nature and self-cultivation. Daoist cultivation methods and moral concepts stress longevity, compassion, and karma. In the zaju, Daoist values are conveyed in various ways, helping people better understand and accept Daoist ideas.

2.2. Characters and Their Daoist Connections

Daoist deities such as Taishang Laojun and the Jade Emperor appear in the zaju, embodying Daoist characteristics. Taishang Laojun, the supreme deity in Daoism, represents ultimate power, while the Jade Emperor, the celestial ruler, symbolizes supreme authority and strength. These characters enhance the Daoist elements in the play. In Zaju 'Journey to the West' the eighteenth act, «Misleading Immortals to the Right Path,» features the Herbalist Immortal, a typical Daoist figure, described as follows: "[The Herbalist Immortal enters with a fishing drum and bamboo clappers, singing] The mountain is high, the water is deep; the mountain reaches the world, the water flows through ancient times. Only mountains and waters endure a hundred years; where are the heroes? The knife is the knife, do not destroy it; fame is fame, but hard to articulate. If you can abandon wine, sex, wealth, and anger, you can become a celestial being in the mortal world". The Herbalist Immortal, with his fishing drum and clappers — tools used by itinerant Daoists to spread Daoist teachings — presents a classic image of a Daoist recluse guiding Tang Sanzang and his disciples. "Regarding religion, the zaju's approach is pragmatic, affirming Buddhism without demeaning Daoism. The pilgrimage's success is attributed to the help of deities from both Buddhism and Daoism" (Xing Jie, 2014) revealing a balanced attitude toward religious themes in the zaju, using religious elements to enrich the plot and convey realistic ideas. Through the collaboration of both religions, the play demonstrates harmony and cooperation between different religious traditions.

2.3. Plot and Daoist Thought

The plot of the zaju "Journey to the West" is deeply influenced by Daoist thought. "Although both Buddhism and Daoism aim at transcendence, their precepts share similarities. Daoism emphasizes the "Five Precepts": no killing, no alcohol consumption, no deceit, no theft, and no adultery. Similarly, Buddhism has the "Five Precepts": no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, and no intoxicants" (Zhao Yanhua, 2010).

The pilgrimage itself is an embodiment of Daoist practice. Daoism stresses inner cultivation and the quest for immortality, reflected in the pilgrimage's rigorous journey. In the seventeenth act, "Queen's Forced Marriage" it is written: "She holds the square vessel and pours the jade wine, revealing her delicate hands as she presents the jade cup". (Tang Sanzang says) "Your Majesty, diligently cultivate the Way, for impermanence is boundless". (The Queen sings) "As long as there is mutual affection, let impermanence last for just one day. Even if the celestial demon woman uses her cunning tricks, not even your Shakyamuni Buddha can calm my heart".

Tang Sanzang is tested by the Queen with temptations of wine and delicacies, compelling him to marry her. However, Tang Sanzang's unwavering adherence to the "Five Precepts" and his resolve to complete the pilgrimage, eventually saved by the Jade Emperor and Guanyin, underscore his Daoist moral integrity. Tang Sanzang's steadfastness exemplifies the Daoist virtues of self-cultivation and non-intervention, emphasizing inner peace and balance. Additionally, Daoist stories often feature themes of supernatural intervention and divine retribution, adding mystery and depth to the plot and captivating the audience.

CONFUCIAN ELEMENTS

3.1. Confucian Thought and Connotations

Yang Jingxian's zaju adaptation of "Journey to the West" not only deeply embodies Buddhist and Daoist thought but also permeates Confucian ideals. The core of Confucian thought is benevolence, which requires people to care for others and empathize with the people's conditions, valuing harmony. Loyalty and filial piety are specific manifestations of benevolence. Loyalty refers to loyalty to the country and the monarch, while filial piety refers to respect and love for one's parents. These values played a crucial role in regulating individual behavior and social order in ancient Chinese society.

Confucianism holds that education is fundamental to the nation and society, and saving others is the responsibility of a Confucian scholar. Education is not merely about imparting knowledge but also about influencing and guiding people to consciously follow social moral norms. Saving others refers to morally and behaviorally rescuing others, thereby achieving social harmony and stability. Therefore, a Confucian scholar should take education as their duty and saving others as their goal.

Confucianism also advocates the idea of the noble person (junzi) striving constantly for self-improvement. The noble person represents the ideal moral character in Confucianism, and striving constantly for self-improvement is the requirement for the spiritual realm of the noble person, meaning the continuous pursuit of progress and self-perfection. This series of thoughts forms the Confucian ideal blueprint for individual, family, national, and even world order.

3.2. Character Images and Confucian Morality

Yang Jingxian's zaju adaptation of "Journey to the West" is profoundly influenced by Confucian morality in its character portrayal. "Regarding the actual development of Confucianism during the Yuan Dynasty, it was a process in which Central Plains intellectuals used Confucian principles to assimilate the Mongol rulers. Therefore, the development of the Journey to the West story in the Yuan Dynasty was primarily influenced

by the transmission of Confucianism” (Yang Chao, 2018). “Loyalty to the sovereign and patriotism” is an important Confucian principle. As the protagonist of the pilgrimage, Tang Sanzang’s image perfectly embodies the Confucian virtues of “benevolence” and “loyalty”. Before setting off on the pilgrimage, he admonished the officials with a teaching: “Be loyal as ministers, be filial as sons, fulfill both loyalty and filial piety, and there is nothing more to repay”. This emphasizes that his journey to obtain scriptures was a mission assigned by Emperor Taizong, which he accepted without hesitation. Despite the long, uncertain, and dangerous journey to the Western Heaven, Tang Sanzang accepted the task unwaveringly. Throughout the pilgrimage, he consistently remembered his mission, committed to retrieving the true scriptures, demonstrating loyalty and respect to his sovereign.

On the pilgrimage, he treated his disciples with care and was forgiving of their mistakes, fully displaying the Confucian spirit of “benevolence”. Regarding the pilgrimage task, he remained steadfast in his beliefs, persistently carrying out his duties regardless of the difficulties and challenges encountered, reflecting the Confucian quality of “loyalty”. The character of Sun Wukong embodies Confucian “wisdom” and “courage”. His intelligence and fearless spirit in facing difficulties are qualities advocated by Confucianism. He often used his wisdom to defeat demons and monsters, protecting his master and fellow disciples, exemplifying the Confucian spirit of “courage”. The characters of Zhu Bajie and Sha Wujing embody “loyalty” and “steadfastness” as per Confucian values. They remained loyal to their master and senior brother, steadfastly protecting their master despite any difficulties encountered, becoming important supports for Tang Sanzang on the journey due to their dependable nature.

3.3. Plot and Confucian Ideals

The plot of the zaju adaptation of “Journey to the West” is also deeply influenced by Confucian ideals. “In summary, within the Daoist world of gods and demons, both gods and demons adhere to Confucian ethics and moral standards” (Cui Xueru, Luo Sha, 2021). The entire story revolves around Confucian moral concepts such as “loyalty”, “benevolence”, “wisdom, and “courage”. When facing demons and monsters, they not only use wisdom to overcome them but also employ benevolence to influence them, embodying Confucian ideals.

In the fifteenth act, “Leading the Lady Back to Pei”, Sun Wukong devises a plan to capture Zhu Bajie. The text describes, “Today, I will wait for him at Lord Pei’s manor and set a trap. He will surely come by himself. (Stage directions) (Sun Wukong says) Move your daughter elsewhere, and I will wear her clothes and sit in her room. When the demon army arrives, let him into the room, and I will deal with him”. Sun Wukong disguises himself as a woman to engage in a battle of wits with Zhu Bajie. Later, Zhu Bajie returns to his cave but is surrounded and defeated by the gods led by Erlang Shen, who had come to rescue Tang Sanzang on Guanyin’s orders. However, as a monk, Tang Sanzang is compassionate and seeks to save others. He hopes Erlang Shen will spare Zhu Bajie and make him a protector. Thus, Zhu Bajie becomes part of the team on the pilgrimage to the Western Heaven.

This demonstrates Tang Sanzang’s idea of educating and saving others. He treats everyone with benevolence, a broad-minded spirit advocated by Confucianism. In the conclusion of the zaju, Tang Sanzang and his disciples finally obtain the true scriptures

and achieve their goal. This ending fully reflects the Confucian spirit of “loyalty” and “courage”. They persist in their beliefs despite difficulties and ultimately achieve their objective. “The actions and behaviors of Sun Wukong and others embody the virtue of great love for humanity, reflecting the ultimate social ethics of Confucianism and the pursuit of justice with the aim of achieving supreme goodness” (Sun Bo, 2016).

Yang Jingxian’s zaju adaptation of “Journey to the West” is profoundly influenced by Confucian ideals. The entire story revolves around Confucian moral concepts such as “loyalty”, “benevolence”, “wisdom”, and “courage”. This influence has made the zaju adaptation of “Journey to the West” occupy an important place in ancient Chinese literature and has had a far-reaching impact on the development of literary works.

CONCLUSION

Yang Jingxian’s zaju adaptation of “Journey to the West”, a masterpiece of Yuan Dynasty literature, showcases the integration of Mongolian and Han cultures and presents distinct religious elements. In this play, Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian thoughts are interwoven, creating a unique religious atmosphere. The influence of Buddhism in the zaju adaptation of “Journey to the West” is ubiquitous. Tang Sanzang, as the protagonist of the pilgrimage, is closely linked to Buddhism in both his identity and mission. The characters of Sun Wukong, Sha Wujing, and Zhu Bajie are all influenced by Buddhist thought in their images and personalities.

Simultaneously, Daoism also holds a significant place in the zaju adaptation. The Daoist pursuit of immortality and transcendence from the mundane world has influenced the script’s themes and character portrayals. Although Confucian thought is not as prominently featured as Buddhism and Daoism in the zaju adaptation, it still has a profound impact on the work. Confucian values such as loyalty, filial piety, and benevolence are reflected in the play, exemplified by Sun Wukong’s loyalty to his master and Sha Wujing’s respect for his senior.

Yang Jingxian’s zaju adaptation of “Journey to the West” exhibits a strong religious hue, reflecting the coexistence of diverse religious thoughts in Yuan Dynasty society. This religious coloration not only enriches the script’s content but also endows it with broader cultural influence. By studying the religious elements in the zaju adaptation of “Journey to the West”, we can gain a better understanding of the characteristics of Yuan Dynasty literary art and the religious cultural landscape of the time. This is of significant historical and contemporary importance for recognizing and preserving the excellent culture of the Chinese nation today.

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