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From Folklore to Literate Theater: Unpacking *Madame White Snake*

Abstract

The story of Madame White Snake began as a tale of demonic seduction that occurred by a lake. But it can be traced back to myths of man-god romances in the *Songs of the South* and to cults of yearly human sacrifice to He Bo, the river god. These evolved, in time, into two distinct genres of “encounter with female immortals” and “run-in with demons.” Medieval Buddhism further polarized them. As mountains became the home of ascetics, the lakes, which used to be the abode of nymphs, became the lair of she-demons. Madame White Snake was originally one such succubus, but she took on the virtues of the female immortal—as a good wife and mother. This Janus of a figure gives the story a new depth. The essay unpacks the symbols as well as the structural dynamics of this evolving tale.

Key words: White Snake — demons — sexual attitudes — man-god romance
— female immortals

THE Story of Madame White Snake (Baishe zhuan 白蛇伝) is one of the best-known stories in China, and, as a beautiful if chilling ghost story, it has even been passed on to Japan. There have already been several monograph-length studies on it (Hsu 1973; Wu 1969; YEN 1970). Of these, Hsu has painstakingly traced the development of the tale, from a local, Ur-myth found in a Song collection all the way to the popular-theater version of it. The latter is frequently referred to as the drama of "The Flooding of the Golden Mountain." Hsu includes in his coverage its Japanese fate and even the PRC idealization of the serpent-turned-woman into a revolutionary feminist (Hsu 1973).

The present essay will not try to cover the same ground. Instead it will unpack this "man-demon romance" and look at how, in broad historical outlines, China dealt with such intercourse between the human and the supernatural in the form of myth, or folklore, or popular theater. By using this one example, we hope to document certain epochal changes in Chinese sensitivity toward the otherworld. The philosophical post-script may be somewhat unscientific. Those who hold generalizations suspect can ignore it.

THE SKELETON OF AN UR-MYTH

Before Madame White Snake changed from being a villain to being a heroine, the local legend of her story was about the seduction of a young man by a she-demon. The bare bones of the story are as follows:

A young man encountered a beautiful maiden attended by a maid during a festive outing near a lake.

He followed her and was invited to her fine mansion outside the city, where he dined and stayed overnight.

After that one-night stand, the young man became visibly emasculated, his vital essence being slowly drained.

The suspicion that he had been bewitched was confirmed by a

revisit to the mansion—in reality, a graveyard.

A Taoist was called in to perform an exorcism, and, sure enough, a white snake and an otter were driven out.

Upon this skeleton, though, other elements were soon added to give it flesh and substance.

In one later version, the she-demon was so powerful that the Taoist priest was easily routed. A Buddhist monk, deemed more charismatic, was called in. Even that was not enough to subdue the demon, so, in still more embellished versions, Bodhisattva Guanyin 觀音 (*Avalokiteśvara*, *Kannon*) was summoned. The dramatic end has the snake kept forever under the weight of a pagoda built on the isle in the lake. The Taoist is a magician of this world; the Buddhist monk, being celibate, represents a higher calling; and the pagoda, being what houses the Buddha relic (*śarīra*), is the Buddha-body (*Buddha-kāya*) incarnate. Other elements of the Ur-myth were also changed. Nowadays we do not even remember the role of the otter. It has been replaced by a tiny green snake that, in her human form, plays handmaid to her mistress, Madame White. Nicknamed Xiao Qing 小青, or “Little Green,” she now functions as the matchmaker to the central couple.

The most dramatic change comes, however, over Madame White Snake. Though unable to shed totally her demonic persona, Madame White rose from being a heartless beast to being an ideal mate. She was a loving wife, a caring mother, a rescuer of her family from the first flood, and, at that point, a general benefactor of men. She took on the virtues of the traditional Chinese female, especially forbearance, a virtue born of necessity when women had little say in a man's society. That was brought out more so by the fact that Madame White was being hounded by her enemies, the ghostbusters of yore, who simply would not let her be.

However, if forbearance was the virtue of submissive womanhood, Madame White, being no common woman, would show an independence of will that would endear her to the feminist. Indeed, in the glare of her indomitable will, her mate appears all too spineless a male. Indecisive and moved this way or that by the tides of changing circumstance, he was the forgettable character who never rose above his situation. At first, he was visibly seduced by her beauty. Then he did much of her bidding when she saved the family from the first flood. He was the passive one. When the tide turns against the she-demon, the man seems to forget the love and children they shared, as he does the bidding of her enemies. It is true that they saved him from her, but during the humanizing rewrite of her character, it was never sug-

gested that she wished her family any harm. Theoretically, the couple could have “lived happily ever after,” had not her enemies forced her hand. The modern feminist would even see in her an advocate of the individual’s freedom to love, an advocate who, by boldly defying the feudal, patriarchal authorities, brought the whole system of their sexist injustice down upon her.

I shall, however, leave the literary and political readings of this tale to others and look instead to other texts and contexts in order to peel off the various layers of this tale, to find certain internal dynamics that can just as well account for the tale’s transformations in time. Although my investigation into myth and folklore types can be accused of ending up with bare bones and no flesh, folklore types (and mythic structures too) are ultimately “intended as a tool and not a terminus” of research (EBERHARD 1965, xiv).¹ And even as we unpack the story, we shall also put the pieces back together, adding thereby, as it were, muscle and sinews that will “flesh out” the developing character and plot. By overlaying folklore upon folklore, myth upon myth, we might see how the literate theater of “The Flooding of the Golden Mountain” came about. Not individual authorship, but some shared imagination, is responsible for that dramatic script.

EARLY MYTHS OF MAN-GOD ENCOUNTERS

Let us begin with a paraphrase of another “Story of the Serpent” that is recognizably a variant of the tale of Madame White Snake (EBERHARD 1965, 173–75). It concerns a giant serpent that resided underground in an isle on a lake. With its mouth masquerading as a giant lotus blossom, it devoured alive all those who mistook the flower as a gateway to Amitābha’s Pure Land. The pious threw themselves into the flower and were eaten alive by the chthonic monster. That is, until a righteous official saw through its deception. Pouring gunpowder and quicklime into its gaping mouth, the official exposed—literally exploded—the demonic treachery. The first half of this story resonates with the Ur-myth of Madame White Snake as a man-eating monster located at a lake.

Eberhard’s notation to the tale points to a common source for both tales, one involving

the periodic sacrifice of a maiden to a river deity; the sacrifice takes the form of a marriage of the girl to the deity. In this form, the tale was known before the Christian era. . . . The gunpowder and quicklime in our tale are innovations. Early texts have the official either personally enter the water and fight the spirit or send the

priests into the river to announce the sacrifice. By so doing, the official abolished the heretic cult. (EBERHARD 1965, 237)

Two famous early stories come to mind. The “official who entered the water” refers best to the exploits of Erlang 二郎, sometimes called Erlang Shen 神 (god). Erlang is a river god. He is to China as Krishna is to India. Krishna also killed a multi-headed Hydra at a lake. But if Erlang was a river god, that would mean that he was not simply a hero who battled the river and stemmed its killing flood. In his other persona as the river, he was the author of the flood. This explains the two faces of Madame White Snake. As a heroine, she saved her family from a flood—the first flood. As a demon, she called up the same flood in her battle with Guanyin to help drown the golden mountain and its temple. A cousin to both Erlang and Madame White is known in Chinese history as the Sage-King Yu 禹. Yu was the dragon who stemmed the Great Flood by digging deep the channels of the river bed. However, Yu also chased away those other dragons, the “dragons of chaos,” that infested China when the flood covered the land. More on this Janus of a god later.

The official “who sent the priests into the river to announce the sacrifice” reminds us of Ximen Bao 西門豹. Ximen Bao had just taken up office at Ye 鄴 when he came upon a local cult wherein a maiden was sacrificed yearly as a bride for the god of the Yellow River. Bao ended that licentious cult by throwing the female shamans into the waters to announce a temporary delay in the marriage. Upon inspection, though, we can see how the river god, He Bo 河伯, is really just another Krishna. He Bo frolicked with the nymphs of the rivers, all of whom were routinely counted as his consorts. Krishna made the same claim. In a well-known episode loved by Hindu votaries, Krishna bathed in the river with the *gopīs* and mated with every one of them. But the god’s love was so individually tailored that each *gopī* had the pleasure of thinking she had the lord all to herself and herself alone. That a lake has many streams feeding it and a river many tributaries can, in part, account for the physiology of this licentiously polygamous Hydra-Krishna-He Bo.

If we look closer, then, as I have demonstrated (LAI 1990), Ximen Bao did not exactly save a maiden fair from some Dracula. What are now remembered, in the Confucian redaction of the tale, as “ugly, old hags” whom Bao merrily threw into the river, were, in the same script, none other than the brides. The shamans were the lovers of He Bo during the spring festival. The Ximen Bao story only conflates the orgy of a Maypole festival in spring with the sacrificial rite of fall. The

two events make up the cycle of Eros and Thanatos. The Eros half celebrates a man-god romance; the Thanatos half remembers the cannibalistic death and rebirth of the victims. Cast into that larger drama, the seduction of the young man by Madame White at lake side, foreshadowing immanent death, only tells half of that story.

Love and sex are a natural part of these fertility myths turned tales. Love can transport mortal man to immortal heaven; sex can be a rendezvous in hell. Since sexual intercourse is yin meeting yang, it is a play of cosmic forces, a “peak experience,” sometimes compared to a battle—a war of the sexes—but more often seen as a harmony of opposites leading to general health and long life. As such, it is worthy of being described as a dalliance with *xian* 仙 immortals (GULIK 1974). Death and immortality are mixed in the “Story of the Serpent” above. The serpent’s mouth is a gateway to the netherworld as well as the door to Pure Land. It has the same function as the mouth of the old *taotie* 饕餮. The realm of the Taoist immortals had just been upgraded, in this medieval tale, to being the Buddhist paradise of Amitābha. As sex is divine, sex can also be demonic. And in medieval times, we will find the classic nymphs of the Lo River (*Luoshui shenxian* 洛水神仙) demonized into this life-draining succubus of a Madame White Snake. More on that later.

ENCOUNTER WITH IMMORTALS, RUN-IN WITH GHOSTS

Before the medieval demonization, the Han 漢 Chinese already separated the encounter with gods from the encounter with demons. They produced two separate genres with very different structures. It is hard to say when the split occurred. In the *Songs of the South*, we have only the man-god romances (HAWKES 1962). By Han, the Confucian condemnation of shamanic and licentious cults had effectively turned He Bo, the river god, from being Prince Charming to being a Dirty Old Man in the tale of Ximen Bao now found in the *Historical Records* 史記 of Sima Qian 司馬遷.

So perhaps it is fitting that by Han, the romance of “fortuitous encounter” with immortals was set apart from the horror of “unfortunate run-in” with the devil. Encounter is *hui*, as in *hui shenming* 會神明 (meeting the gods). *Hui* tells originally of a rite whereby the gods are invited to come down to the altar—this is still done at Shinto shrines in Japan—so that men and gods can “get together.” We find remnants of this cult told in the psychic chapters of the *Guanzi* 管子. When such encounters were secularized, the meeting was no longer ritually planned; it was simply 遇, “fortuitous.” Such a chance meeting is called *yu*, the same word that is used nowadays to describe a brief,

erotic affair. That change from *hui* to *yu* results from taking a once-prescribed “rite of passage” out of context. The predictable is now just the fortuitous.

In China, gods are orderly and predictable; ghosts are not. A “run-in” with ghosts is just as accidental, or fortuitous (in the bad sense of *misfortune*). The Chinese colloquial expression describing the worst of all luck is “seeing a ghost in broad daylight.” The Cantonese in their less refined language simply call it *tsong guai* 撞鬼, now used as a regular cuss word for anything unbecoming. We shall look first at a case of a “fortuitous encounter with an immortal” before we do a run-in with a devil.²

The classic story of a good encounter, known to all Chinese, is that of “Dong Yong 董永 Fortuitously Encountering a Female Immortal.” The poor but hard-working Dong won, somehow, the heart of a female immortal, who came down to earth to be his wife. Upon their first meeting by chance, Dong was such a Confucian prude that he was not sure whether or not it was right for him to talk to this beautiful stranger. After all, they had not been properly introduced. So she had to make the first move. Even the proposal of marriage had to come from her. Even then, she had to call on a *huai* 槐 tree—a tree of fertility—to be their go-between and witness. She became, as expected, a model wife. With all the felicity of offspring and wealth she brought him, Dong remained a model breadwinner, hard-working and frugal, to the end. The tale ends when her time on earth has come to an end. After revealing her true identity, she takes her leave. And Dong takes her departure rather well.

Thus everything is kosher and morally proper in this story. Dong was a gentleman from beginning to end. He was not out looking for a brief romance; juicy sex is not a part of this tale. He persisted in being a hard worker; indulgence in love, as happened to the Oxherd and the Weaver, who became lazybones,³ was not his style. When she left—all good things must end—he took it with stoic gratitude. He did not foolishly pine and chase after her as Archer Yi 羿 would. (Archer Yi [of the east], in an exercise of futility went after his wife, Heng E 嫦娥, after she, the goddess of the moon, fled to the west [where the moon rises].)

This tale of a “prim and proper” Dong Yong, codified in Han by moralistic Confucianism, is a marked departure from the freer sexual mores of the older *Songs of the South*. The south was the home of shamans, sufficiently far away from Lu, the home of Confucius. In the southern lakes and streams, female shamans mated with He Bo just as readily as male shamans would woo the beautiful Lady of the Lake.

Love affairs between man and god were frequent (seasonal) happenings and not labelled as “confusing the distinctions of names and ranks,” as Confucians would be prone to do. Confucius, following the Zhou Enlightenment, had accepted the transcendence of Heaven. But back in the days of the Shang 商 that preceded the Zhou, the supreme deity, or Shangdi 上帝, probably fathered the house of Shang. This Lord on High probably came down in the form of the “dark bird” (Japan’s *yatagarasu* 八咫鳥) and impregnated the ancestress of the royal house. That was a classic *hui shenming* scene before Confucian historians rewrote it into a “fortuitous encounter” in which the Shang ancestress is stepping on a giant bird’s footprint or swallowing a bird’s egg “by chance” on some outing “in the fields or woods.”

Patriarchy had, by the Han, redacted many of these early myths. By then it was deemed improper for single women to go walking alone in the woods (site of the old suburban rite) and get themselves pregnant (by strangers). Female immortals, however, could still come down from Heaven and grace such lucky fellows as Dong Yong with their favors. These are often known as banished immortals “on temporary exile from Heaven.” Male immortals in Confucian China lost that freedom. They rarely came down to marry some lucky women. Zeus they were not. Men could have affairs with heavenly maidens, but to have women sleeping around with gods and producing offspring would create havoc with the standard, patrilineal genealogies!

If the Han tale of Dong Yong represents “fortuitous encounter,” then the Wei-Jin 魏晉 *zhiguai* 誌怪 (records of strange happenings) would be our ghost stories about “run-ins with the devil.” The former spoke up for Confucian mores; the latter for Taoist fascination with the unknown. Unlike the former, which is so on the up-and-up as never to titillate the reader’s baser instincts, the latter has more entertainment value. Actually, though, the Wei-Jin tales are so matter-of-fact (they were counted as “history” and not as “story”), short, and unembellished that they are more strange incidents than truly horrifying, Gothic tales. Ghosts appeared and then disappeared, with seemingly little rationale. Anyone, just or unjust, could be met with such visitations. There is no karmic theodicy to make sure that the just were blessed and the unjust cursed. Sex was neither particularly glamorized nor condemned. There was no subgenre of “man-ghost romance” as such.

For stories with sufficient sex and violence, which is what we have in the mature tales of Madame White Snake, one would have to wait nearly a millennium, for works produced in Song and embellished (especially) in Ming. That is not just because the popular press, dated

to Ming, could then better cater to the grosser interests of a larger population. Whether we like it or not, sex and violence—to mimic Freud—do build character, not just in lives but also in stories. These two demons of lust and aggression rise from the depth of the id to provoke the censor from the superego, and in so threatening the ego, also dare it to take better charge of its life. Maturity comes with being slave neither to the id of the instincts nor to the superego of one's society. Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism fostered that.

Like the Puritans of Europe, the Neo-Confucians popularized asceticism in a cult of rational self-control. It worked at building character through self-imposed hardship and by resisting temptations. Like the Puritans, they were not always successful and their plans sometimes backfired. Repression takes its revenge. So by condemning literary fantasy—it runs counter to their rational, sober life-style—the Neo-Confucians helped to promote it. The Ming novel embodied those very “guilty pleasures” denied the parlor readers in their real life. The novels tell of those “forbidden fruits” and then, in the last minute, append their proper punishment. *The Story of Madame White Snake* is one such Gothic romance. Before the final curtain falls on the Wicked Woman who caused it all, we are treated to the delicious breaking of all the social taboos and the pleasures that come with it.

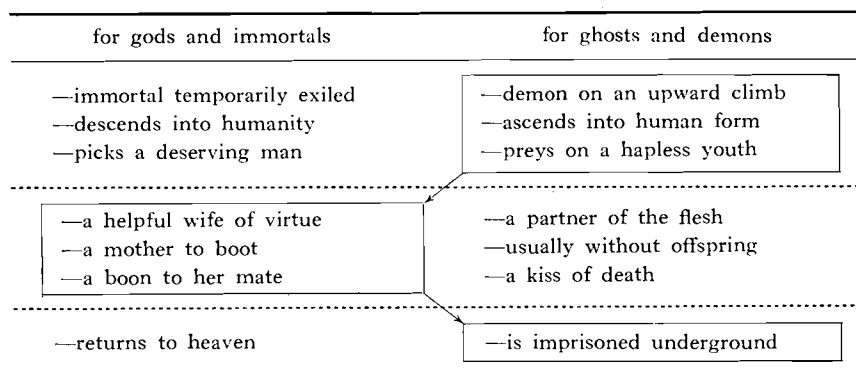
So in this morality tale, the young man was no Dong Yong. He was a listless, lesser literatus, easily aroused to erotic fantasy by the sight of a winsome beauty. He sought her out—with no proper introduction—and she, single and with no chaperone, just as boldly, reciprocated. As if that was not enough, she turned out to live in a gorgeous mansion. In short, wealth and sex, what most men wish for, was his for the asking. That is the escapist half of the tale. Moral censor followed soon enough. The fantasy is too good to be true. There was the crude awakening that the price of sin is death. On that sour note, the tale ends.

Such tales of seduction were very real at one time. Today, thanks to Freud, we call it sexual fantasy. Since it is our sexual fantasy, we are responsible for it. In medieval times, it was known as possession. The evil is not within us; it comes from a source without. When a young man from a good Chinese family falls in love with a village beauty of low social standing, he might pine for her and suffer nightly the “love sickness” that drains his vitality (essence/semen). Since goodness is thought to come from being born into a good family, it is common practice at one time to accuse the “fox lady” with bewitching the lad. His family might seek her out and beat her up for transporting

herself into his wet dreams. The Gothic romance of Madame White Snake is a tale to us, but it was a feasible happening then.

THE MORAL METAPHYSICS OF ASCENT AND DESCENT

A female immortal *descends* to assume human form to marry Dong Yong. A snake spirit *ascends* and masquerades as a beautiful woman to entice men. In either case, the female crosses over into the realm of man. Neither stays in that realm forever. Banished immortals are temporary exiles only. Animal spirits seduce men only at a way-station upward bound. The good among animal spirits who help rather than harm man may graduate to being *xian* immortals; the evil ones attain immortality, but only as *yao* 妖 demons. In time, exiled immortals will fly off. In sleep, when drunk, or during exorcism, animal spirits may revert to their subhuman form. The diagram below shows the typical movements involved in descent and ascent:



The above shows two separate destinies. The power of the mature story of Madame White Snake is due to its mixing of the two.

What began as a tale of demonic possession (upper-right box) turns halfway into the demon taking over the good qualities of an exiled immortal (middle-left box) before returning to the original ending (lower-right box). Madame White Snake grew into the faithful wife, the loving mother, the benefactor of men. What Hsu documented as the successive humanization of the White Snake is simply this shift in the axis of her conduct. Her tragedy is that her demonic past would not let her be. Or, even if she was ready to forgo it, those hounding her would not let her.

We can almost pinpoint her transformation from malevolent to benevolent spirit: it came with motherhood. Full family life, the foundation of Confucian virtues, changed her. It appears that Chinese

demonology does not encourage a cult of "Rosemary's Baby." Christianity believes in divine and demonic progeny, but Buddhist karma disallows a biological inheritance of good or evil. As for Taoist immortals, they apparently do not father immortal offsprings, just normal, healthy, human babies. Maybe that is because gods in China were originally men (ALLEN 1979). Man-demon encounters seem to involve good sex for its own sake without producing children of darkness, though folk belief does entertain possibilities such as the operatic one of an empress said to have given birth to a fox or a bobcat.

We may be unnecessarily specific here. Chinese folklore, like folklore all over the world, has no trouble with "grateful animals" marrying men and producing families. Swan Lady and Snow Woman never disqualified themselves from childbearing, either. It is the moral metaphysics of developed cultures that set up such unreasonable paternity requirements. In the Chinese variant of Swan Lake, called "The Bank of the Celestial Stream" (EBERHARD 1965, 43-44), morality was never an issue. Virtue might be assumed in the Weaver and the Oxherd, but the tale is equally a tale of guile: his stealing of her clothes and her retrieving of her magical feathered gown.

THE DEMONIZATION OF THE RIVER NYMPH

Put the Swan Lady at a river inlet and we see a nymph of the waters. Transport Madame White Snake back in time and her seduction of men would just be another innocent dalliance with such nymphs at lake side. The difference is that during the medieval fascination with ascetics, the nymph saw herself turned into and hunted as the much feared witch.

That had yet to happen during the Han. The yin-yang of sex was then deemed healthy and Taoist bedchamber books endorsed the mutual gratification of male and female during intercourse. China did have a misconception. Whatever Laozi had said of the inexhaustible Mystic Female notwithstanding, the medical opinion was that the male had a greater supply of yang than the female had of yin, for menopause seems to terminate her fertility. She needed to draw on the male to become fertile. With that came a fear of the female "stealing" the yang from the male. Medieval ascetics fueled that fear. And the promiscuous nymph became a succubus who visits men at night to suck dry their vital forces. There were mythic *femmes fatales* before: the Great Earth Mother who dines on her children appeared in China as a motherly tigress and the *taotie* on Shang bronzes. But the succubus was a medieval creation.

As sex haunted the Buddha and St. Anthony, water nymphs fell from grace. Just as their male counterparts, the fertile satyrs, would

reappear as aspects of the Devil in the West and “cow-head” and “horse-face” messengers from Buddhist hells in the East, river goddesses became Mara’s (the Devil’s) daughters. Because in China sexual intercourse was a matter of mixing “cloud and rain,” seduction by Eros regularly took place at aquatic sites. It is not that the virile mountain, home of the clouds (the male fluid), has no role. Wushan 巫山 was not called “shamanic hills” for no reason. Nonetheless, water is the preferred haunt. This went back to the Lady of the Lake in the *Songs of the South*, what Edward Schafer has traced to the poetics of Tang as the tradition of the Divine Woman: Dragon Ladies and Rain Maidens (SCHAFFER 1980).

With the waters given over to being the erotic playgrounds of Rain Maidens and She-Demons, the mountains became associated more with the abode of the ascetic, usually male and celibate. But what Raoul Birnbaum sees as a pattern in the vision quest on China’s sacred mountains appears as a mirror image of what happens in an erotic quest at the enchantress’s watery lair (BIRNBAUM 1988).

The vision quest of the ascetic involves a rite of passage. Guided by a psychopomp, he crosses over to a different reality, usually by crossing a bridge, a river, or a gate. To his surprise, he finds there a gorgeous mansion or palace. Wined and dined, he stays there awhile before he makes the return trip. Once he crosses that bridge or gate, though, he turns around to find the mansion or palace gone. That vision of a mandalic mansion or palace (the sacred *axis mundi*) is central to the mystical experience. In China, these are associated with the *hetu* 河圖 and the *luoshu* 洛書 [river diagram and writing] or with the maps of heavens and grottos in the Shangqing 上清 cosmography.

We find nearly identical episodes in our story of seduction. Instead of the mountain, it is the water. Instead of asceticism, it is eroticism. The young man also remembered passing through a gate when he visited her home. Beyond the gate stood a grand mansion. He was wined and dined. He stayed overnight. He left only to find on return that, instead of a mansion, there was this abandoned graveyard. Look more closely and the tale is told with a powerful set of symbols drawn from some remote memory.

A man and a woman met—where else, but where land and water, yang and yin, met. When? During a festival to view the seasonal rise of the tide. This is, in ancient times, the Merrie Month of May, when “male and female mingled all too freely together” to celebrate the fertility of life. The stolen glances at a public place led to the secret rendezvous, with Little Green the snake playing the psychopomp. The man left the city limit (order) for the suburb (chaos), crossed to the

other side of life (death: graveyard). The pleasure of the night, with intimation of immortality, turned, in the light of day, to have been an affair with a demon. Exorcism was performed by a Taoist, a “man of the mountain” in pursuit of the flight (dance) of birds (immortals). He subdued the nymph of the waters.

Let us not forget the meal. In a tradition where there is not a sharp dichotomy of body and soul, ingestion of material is tantamount to a flight of the spirit. In the vision quest, food amounts to access to immortality—like the peaches of the Queen Mother of the West. In demonic possession, the diner is actually the one being dined upon. Either way, the meal goes back to the cannibalistic feast of He Bo, the River God, who married fair maidens and/or dined on them as Dracula would his brides. Here is a simple but chilling tale of the same, told in the *Luoyang qielan ji* 洛陽伽藍記, a record of the temples found in this city on the sunny side of the River Lo:

(My paraphrase) A certain soldier visited an old comrade-in-arms on a trip. He stayed over at the latter’s beautiful home, having been well wined and dined. He woke up on the bank of the Yellow River (near Luoyang). Next to him was the wine goblet of the night before—the skull of a man who had drowned the previous day [and whose blood he had drunk].

Ancient gods like He Bo used to depend on blood sacrifice to stay alive. Madame White Snake did only what any good enchantress living on her sacred isle would do: made a meal of her mates as Circe did.

THE FORGOTTEN OTTER AND THE PRIMAL UNITY

The following diagram summarizes the layers of the story we have unpacked so far:

Universal		Folklore	
	fairies		animals
China		The Yellow River	
	nymphs		He Bo
Xia-Shang		Gun-Yu Myth	chthonic
	dragon		tortoise totems
Zhou		Cult of Heaven	
	licentious cult		official sacrifice
Chu			<i>Songs of the South</i>
	shamanic romance		

		Ximen Bao foils shamans	—and its critics
Han	encounter with Immortals		Confucian moralism
Wei-Jin		Run-in with demons	Neo-Taoist mystery
Age of Disunity	trips to Pure Land	descent to hell	Buddhist worldview
	virgin Guanyin	Dragon Lady as succubus	and input
Tang	ascetic mountains	erotic waters	vision quests
Song	Puritanic morality	[Legend of Snake]	Neo- Confucianism
Ming		Gothic horror	popular press
Qing		tragic heroine	nascent individualism

Only one item remains to be explained: the otter. The Black Otter is the proper companion of the White Snake. The substitution for it of Little Green the snake—based on the later East-West icon of “Green Dragon, White Tiger”—forgets that, as an agent of death, the White Snake is better served by the Black Otter, at one point the icon of the wintry north and of death.

And Otter should go with Snake. This odd couple went as far back as Sage-King Yu—the Dragon (Snake) that stopped the flood—and his father Gun 鯀. Gun, who tried building up the river levee, has been identified as the otter. Once upon a time, as father and son, Gun-Yu represented the cycle of the year. When split into two, Gun would be remembered as the proud fool who aggravated the flood while Yu was the diligent hero who tamed it. Together they represent the two faces of the Yellow River, the bed of Chinese culture (LAI 1984).

Rivers have defined the myths of other cultures. The Nile of Egypt is remembered in myth as regular and benevolent; the Twin Rivers of ancient Babylonia are remembered as a perpetual threat. The Yellow River has the character of both: life-giving in its good years, and life-taking when it floods. It is Gun and Yu rolled into one. Even Yu the Dragon only tamed a flood that the dragons of chaos caused. His alias, He Bo the River God, has the same Janus of a face: he is Prince Charming as well as man-eater, auspicious *long* 龍 (dragon) and tempestuous *jiao* 蛟 (kraken). By the same token, the Rain Maiden and the Snake Demon were one.

In other words, the medieval demonization of the nymph might have only radicalized the two faces of the Yellow River. Even as the nymph was vilified for her promiscuity, who else should appear as victor but her alter ego, the virgin goddess Guanyin. Medusa was being tamed by Athena. In the still larger order of things, the story of Madame White Snake is well known in China because it is about a struggle between good and evil—not just between the demon and Guanyin “out there,” not just between a woman warrior and a male-dominated society either—but, in some ultimate sense, between the two halves of the Chinese soul.

That is because in China’s anthropogeny myth, this dragon nature was in Emperor Kongjia 孔甲. As emperor, he was himself a dragon. Heaven graced his reign with a gift of dragons, but unable to “feed” 食 (nurse) this gift, he foolishly “ate” 食 (violated) the trust. For that sin, he died. This dragon nature that Heaven gave us, Mencius (Mengzi 孟子) would find good and Xunzi 荀子 would call evil. Nurse it well and it will serve us. Violate it and it will destroy us. The beauty of the mature story of Madame White Snake is that, being born a demon, she had the cards stacked against her, but, for the greater part of her popular opera, she overcame that indictment by Xunzi of her innate evilness. She nursed well that Mencian mind of compassion for family and kin, behaving more like a banished immortal than a demon on the prowl. Other players in her story are creatures of circumstance, but Madame White Snake rose above her destiny. She was the character that truly moved the plot—not vice versa—and grew in the process.⁴ She managed to stay one step ahead of her pursuers—until, of course, her last confrontation and final capture. Almost in self-defense, she struck back, unleashing all the dark powers in her being. And, in a rather unforgiving world of man and gods, socio-karmic justice took its toll on a soul that tried so hard to do good.

NOTES

1. From the “Foreword” by Richard M. Dorson, who makes this remark while reviewing a controversy over folklore studies in the PRC in the period 1957–63.

2. At the national convention of the American Academy of Religions held at New Orleans in November 1990, where an earlier draft of this paper was read, Russell Kirkland (Stanford University) made the argument that frequently the *zhiqiai* ghost stories were about a cosmic imbalance between this world and the other world that called for a restoration of harmony.

3. The popular version of this tale now has the two lovers so in love as to neglect their work, and therefore, to enforce the Confucian stress on duties, the two were separated. But the *Book of Songs* remembers a Weaver who could not finish weaving

and an Oxherd whose ox could not plough. Such "work never being done" points to their being variants of the Sisyphus myths, telling of constantly changing stars and moon.

4. On a future occasion I hope to use Paul Ricoeur's theory of the "Narrative Self"—dealing with the dialectics of the changing character and changing plot—to analyze the freedom (as well as the limits of freedom) of the individual human will in this and other premodern Chinese stories.

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