
Great Mind Matures Slowly, But Has no Equal in its Time: *Journey to the West* as a Genuine Fairytale Novel

Shu Wei

Books Past, Books Now¹

In order to gain deeper understanding of the laws governing the movement of present-day fairytale narration, this paper investigates the property of the fairytale novel of the Chinese classical work *Journey to the West* in terms of Tolkien's (1966) aesthetics of fantasy (which is based on the treatise, *On Fairy-stories*).

The author of *Journey to the West* is believed to be Wu Chen'en (about 1500-1582) in the Ming Dynasty. As a unique work among the Four Great Classical Chinese Novels, and largely because of its profoundly romantic artistry, rich thematic elements and culturally encyclopedic nature, *Journey to the West* is variously called 'a mythological novel', 'a metaphysical novel', 'a book of celestial beings', 'the work of pure recreation', 'a philosophical novel', 'a political novel', 'a science fiction', 'an allegory novel', 'a religious novel' (being both Buddhistic and Taoistic), as well as 'a fairytale novel'.

My argumentation is a defence of *Journey to the West* as 'a fairytale novel'. I focus on the mythic imagination and the artistic consideration of fairytales as a genre, with the fundamental concern of desirability and the fulfillment of the basic human wishes that are expressed in *Journey to the West*. I conclude that *Journey to the West* has actualized 'the full majestic regalia of its myths and fairy tales', as the very charms of this classic novel are by all means derived from the unique integration of the mythical imagination and the artistry of fairytale.

Willing Belief in the Literature of Fantasy

With the consideration of the 'poetic faith' proposed by Samuel T. Coleridge (willing suspense of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith), Tolkien put forward the idea of the faith of fairy stories. According to him:

Children are capable, of course, of literary belief, when the story-maker's art is good enough to produce it. That state of mind has been called "willing suspension of disbelief." But this does not seem to me a good description of what happens. What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful 'sub-creator.' He makes a Secondary

World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed.
(Tolkien 1966, p.60)

Therefore, people's attitude towards fairy-story is crucial. What Tolkien is driving at is the nature of fairy-story:

a 'fairy-story' is one which touches on or uses Faërie, whatever its own main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, fantasy. Faerie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic—but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician. There is one proviso: if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself. That must in that story be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away.
(Tolkien 1966, p.39)

It could be well argued that *Journey to the West* is by this judgment a fairy-novel, since the magic and fantasy is taken seriously and it certainly touches on Faerie. But *Journey to the West* was drawn into a grand master plot and larger story.

In contrast to the western literary tradition originating from Greek and Roman culture, the Chinese writers of fantastic stories and romances were not totally absorbed in this special artistic world. And historically, under the tradition of Confucian respect and advocating for literary realism, Chinese writers of fiction had long cherished the firm belief of seeking connection with highly respected historical records in order to enhance their own reputations. The fact is that poetry and history writing were highly esteemed as the genuine orthodox schools of writing in the long history of China. From the Ming dynasty to the Qing dynasty in China, the intellectuals and men of letters generally looked down on drama and fiction, especially fiction with fantastic tendency. Anyone who wrote popular fiction would be underrated or even despised. If someone did write a novel, s/he would try hard to keep it a secret. For this reason there are authors of some remarkable works who remain mysteries up to now. And that's why



the appearance of *Journey to the West* is a great wonder in the history of Chinese literature.

Compared with the mythical narration of Homer, the great mind in China matures slowly, but viewed with Tolkien's aesthetics of fairy stories, *Journey to the West* emerges as a real masterpiece of fairytale novel, having no equal in its time. Indeed, it was 'not of an age, but for all time' as a good and complete fairytale novel.

The frame story of *Journey to the West* was based on a real journey across central Asia to the Indian subcontinent by a famous Chinese monk and translator named Xuan Zang (602-664) in the Tang Dynasty. For more than 16 years of trials and tribulations, this brave Buddhist monk travelled on foot to the birthplace of Buddhism, to seek the Sutra, the Buddhist holy scriptures, and take them back to China. After many generations of legendary creations of this travel, the popular story was made into the present classic novel by Wu Chen'en.

In structure, *Journey to the West* is composed of 100 chapters which fall into three parts. The first seven chapters form the first part as a remarkable prologue starting from the birth of the stone monkey to the failure of the monkey's unrivalled rebellions against the Heavenly Palace. From chapter 8 to chapter 12, the second part, is a transition of the whole story with Xuan Zang the Tang priest as the focus of narration, leading to the cause of the journey of seeking the Sutra in the West. The third part is the main body of the whole story, comprising eighty-eight chapters which tell about the journey's adventures concerning the Fellowship of the Sutra.

There are some striking mythic similarities between Homer's *Odyssey* and *Journey to the West*. The authorship of both works remains controversial. Furthermore, the mythical parallels between the two incarnate the universal continuity of human consciousness. In *Journey to the West*, the Fellowship of Sutra's journey of fourteen years takes the place of Odysseus' ten-year marine adventures in the *Odyssey*. There are similarities between the two in the physical setting of the human actions, the mythological elements, and the environmental elements. Both concern a long journey outward into transcendence of the human condition to confront so many unimaginable ordeals, and

an inward journey in a reflection of what it means to be human; all the monstrous creatures symbolically represent the alien powers of life and inner enticements. And in each work, the hero with mental wisdom and physical strength must overcome these dual ordeals before he can safely return home.

***Journey to the West* as a Fairytale Novel**

On Fairy-Stories as a treatise is originally based on J. R. R. Tolkien's Andrew Lang lecture delivered in St Andrews University in Scotland. It was first published in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (Lewis 1947/1966). It was subsequently included with 'Leaf by Niggle' in *Tree and Life* (Tolkien 1964). The essay is significant because it contains Tolkien's explanation of his philosophy on fantasy, on mythologies and his thoughts on the artistry of fairy-stories. J.R.R. Tolkien's aesthetics of fantasy include the mythic imagination and the artistic consideration of fairytales as a genre, and the concern of desirability and the particular values of Fantasy, Recovery, Escape and Consolation in good and complete fairy stories.

The Mythical Characters in the Wonderland of Fairytale

On the whole, all the characters from Chinese mythology have gained vigor and vitality by the art of fairytale narration in *Journey to the West*. The ultimate ruler of Heaven and Earth is Jade Emperor whose full name is the Greatly Compassionate Jade Emperor of the Azure Vault of Heaven. The Jade Emperor has cultivated his conduct by great Ways ever since his childhood; he suffered hardships and ordeals for one thousand, seven hundred and forty kalpas, with each kalpa containing 129,600 years. That's why he is able to enjoy this great and infinite Way. And this long span of time also reflects the satisfaction of one of the certain primordial human desires: to survey the depths of space and time. Another remarkable phenomenon in the novel is that Jade Emperor is regarded by both Buddhists and Taoists as the highest god to rule the Heaven, the Earth and the people on Earth. The Jade Emperor lives in the Heavenly Palace, and he usually meets his Heavenly generals and ministers to manage the affairs of the Heaven and of the World in the Hall of Miraculous Mist. The Queen Mother lives in the Jade Pool where she regularly holds a grand

Peach Banquet to entertain the heavenly noble people and the distinguished immortals.

In Buddhist myth, Gautama or Sakyamuni became the Buddha through an extraordinary process of being awakened. He had attained the ultimate goal of Nirvana, with perfect peace and enlightenment, freed from any desire and suffering. In the mythical world of *Journey to the West*, Buddha the Tathagata as the Buddhist leader lives in the Thunder Monastery at the foot of the Vulture Peak in India.

In Chinese history, the founder of Taoism is the philosopher Lao Zi whose name is Li Erh. In *Journey to the West*, Lord Lao Zi, as the Great Monad, has his residence in the Tushita Palace in the highest of the thirty-three heavens. He often rides on a green water-buffalo to go somewhere. It is remarkable to note that as one of the ten disciples of Buddha, the Patriarch Subhuti in *Journey to the West* is half Buddhist and half Taoist. He lives in the Cave of the Setting Moon and the Three Stars in the Mountain of the Spiritual Tower (meaning 'Heart' in Chinese culture) which is located in the Western Continent of Cattlegift. He plays an important role in *Journey to the West* as the master of Monkey King.

The Wonderland of Faërie

In Tolkien's view, the most important property of fairy-stories is the wonderland of Faërie:

for fairy-stories are not in normal English usage stories about fairies or elves, but stories about Fairy, that is Faërie, the realm or state in which fairies have their being..... Most good "fairy-stories" are about the adventures of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches.
(Tolkien 1966, p.38)

The Mountain of Flowers and Fruits is the first Faërie in *Journey to the West*. The dragon's palace with so many treasure troves under the sea, the jade Pool, the Underworld of Darkness, the Heavenly Palace, the Purple Bamboo Thunder Monastery in West Paradise, all these are strangely wonderful locations of Faërie in the second place. If the Mountain of Flowers and Fruits can be taken for Shire in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, then the long

journey to the West must have brought the travellers into the 'Middle Earth'. Then this 'Middle Earth' turns to be another kind of Faërie.

In *Journey to the West*, the larger category of happenings is of episodes in which monsters who occupy the mountains, rivers, caves and mountain ridges in the wilds, capture the Tang Monk by various means, and are eventually subdued by Monkey King, sometimes with the necessary help either from Buddha the Tathagata, Guan Yin the Goddess of Mercy, or from Lao Zi the Great Monad. The other category is of the episodes set in cities or some other settled and civilized places. In these places, the Fellowship of Sutra itself is not endangered, but the human society in which they stay is troubled by misgovernment that generally results from the fiendish influences of monsters or evil spirits. In all these places teeming with murderous dangers and various enticements, the Tang Priest is never afflicted with factual harms, each time he is rescued safely. This is true of the operation of good and complete fairy stories. As Tolkien put it, the magic of Faërie is not an end in itself; its virtue is in its operations. And here comes the conception of 'happy ending', another element of Faërie. According to Tolkien:

the 'consolation' of fairy-tales has another aspect than the imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires. Far more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending. Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it. At least I would say that Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairy-story. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite—I will call it Eucatastrophe. The eucatastrophic tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function.
(Tolkien 1966, p.85)

The Satisfaction of Primordial Desirability

Brian Aldiss poses the question in his *Trillion Year Spree*:

Are there really worlds where humans communicate with dragons and fly them like animated Boeings? Perhaps our answers depend on what Lasswitz called 'our sense of veracity', and how many feet we have planted firmly on the ground.
(Aldiss & Wingrove 2001, p.160)

This question can also be asked of the happenings in fairy stories and science fiction.

With the consideration of science fiction and fantasy in general, Tolkien considered that ‘Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability’ (1966, p.63).

Indeed, human beings are not the only living creatures in this world. How did human life come to this world, what’s the significance of life? People have never stopped in asking themselves such questions. There is a persistent search in the dark for a clue to help understand the relationship among the living creatures in the world. In the hard struggle for survival, human beings have to make great efforts in distinguishing their enemies from their friends. Is the alien always to be feared? Should we not regard ourselves as some kind of aliens?

In Tolkien’s words, ‘The beast-fable has, of course, a connexion with fairy-stories. Beasts and birds and other creatures often talk like men in real fairy-stories. In some part (often small) this marvel derives from one of the primal “desires” that lie near the heart of Faerie: the desire of men to hold communion with other living things.’ (1966, p.43). The communion of human beings with other living things in the world is perfectly realized in the wonderland of *Journey to the West*. Almost all the humanoid monsters and evil spirits are changed from different animals, for example, cow, buffalo, elephant, deer. Amazingly, they all think, talk exactly in the same way human beings themselves would do, and when they are finally subdued, they all change back to their original animal forms. Most of the animal spirits came down on earth after they made escapes from their masters such as Guanyin, Lao Zi the Great Monad of Taoism, or even the Tathagata Buddha, and the objects they took with them became very powerful magic weapons. All these monsters and animal spirits, male or female, are impressively portrayed, and are extremely lifelike.

In terms of the communion with other living things in the world, Monkey King and Pig Zhu Bajie are the most successful cases. Both of them have become the eternal images of fairy story characters teeming with Chinese cultural characteristics. While the Monkey King is powerful enough to earn himself the title of the ‘Great Sage Equalling

the Heaven’, he is by nature a naughty boy like Peter Pan. The Monkey was conceived in a magic rock, in the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit, which is located in the Aolai Country in the Eastern Continent of Holy Land. This extremely smart monkey learned the language of humans and made himself familiar with all modes of life in human society, and what’s more, he learned so many magic tricks and capabilities from a master Taoist, the Patriarch Subhuti. He earned an immortal body with divine powers able to have magic transformations, and having mastered the Ways he could change each of the eighty-four thousand hairs on his body into anything he wanted. And all these prepared the Monkey to perform miraculous deeds, whether in rebelling against the Jade Emperor in Heavenly Palace or in subduing various monsters and evil spirits who attempted to capture the Tang Priest and eat his flesh throughout the whole journey to the West.

He began a life of unbelievable mischief in his never-land, the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit. He bullied the Dragon Kings of the Oceans into giving him a Magic Wishing Staff, the Golden Cudgel, and the clothes to match it. He crossed off his name and the names of all his monkey subjects from the ‘Monkey File’ in the ‘Register of Life and Death in the Land of Darkness’, thus rendering all his original subjects immortal as well. This action expertly reflects one of the ‘oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death. Fairy-stories provide many examples and modes of this — which might be called the genuine escapist, or (I would say) fugitive spirit’ (Tolkien 1966, p85).

When the Jade Emperor in the Heaven sent down large armies of celestial war generals and soldiers to punish Monkey King for these escapades he defeated them. Emboldened by this success, he accepted the title ‘Great Sage Equalling the Heaven’ for himself and even tried to grab the throne of Jade Emperor. He was almost successful in achieving this goal when the Tathagata Buddha intervened. And in a fairy-story manner, the Monkey King was subdued by Buddha who turned his five fingers into a mountain of five elements (Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth) and locked the Monkey under it.

From a free and happy life in the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit to the havoc in the Heaven, Monkey King had spent his childhood in full realization of most primordial wishes and desirability of humans. His failure in challenging the ultimate authority of Heaven only resulted in the closure of a period of happy childhood. However, when he set his foot on the journey to the West, we come to see the independence and growth of a naughty boy. The fourteen years long journey is as supernatural and adventurous as Homer's *Odyssey*, only giving him more chances to fully display his prowess and smartness. And this long journey also gives him the chance of meeting his ideal foil the Pig Zhu Bajie.

In *Journey to the West*, Zhu Bajie, the Pig Spirit, is the other most successful fairytale character. Punished by the Jade Emperor to descend to the world of human society because he had taken liberties with the Goddess of the Moon in Jade Palace, he was reincarnated as a pig. On Earth he once maintained the form of human being and located a village called Gao Jia Zhuang (the Village of Gao Family) where he married the rich landlord's daughter. However, he reappears as a pig after drinking too much at the wedding banquet, and then his piggy nature soon took him over, terrifying the whole family in the village. The Pig Spirit was defeated by Money King and when he was offered a way of earning his way back into Heaven, he became the second disciple of Tripitaka and was given the name Zhu Bajie. And ever since then he turns to be the indispensable character in this Fellowship of Sutra.

All the natural properties of a pig are dramatized in the novel, showing the archetypal man of appetites: greedy, vain, jealous, boastful, and lecherous. Yet we may fail to see the implicit fact that Pig's deeper archetype is soil and land in the farming life of China. As much as we know the pig is one of the most important elements in a farmer's life. That's why Pig is always keen on returning to the countryside, to Gao Village, and to go back to his wife in Gao Village for a farmer's family life.

For many centuries, *Journey to the West* remains one of the most popular classic novels in China and has delighted millions of Chinese children and adults from generation to generation. As this discussion has demonstrated, *Journey to the West* has actualized 'the full majestic regalia of its

myths and fairy tales', the very charms of this classic novel are by all means derived from the unique integration of the mythical imagination and the artistry of fairytale.



NOTES

1. This title is adapted from a recent exhibition ('Books Past, Book Now') held at Dromkeen Museum in July 2006. Dromkeen is an historic homestead in rural Victoria, which houses a unique collection of original art works and manuscripts of Australian picture books past and present.



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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Shu Wei is Professor of English and director of the Institute of Foreign Children's Literature Study at Tianjin University of Technology. He has a Master of English Literature from Southwest China University (1987), a Master of Education from the University of Exeter, UK (1997) and a PhD in Children's Literature from Beijing Normal University (2005).