

Exploring the Ideological Value and Narrative Role of Buddhism and Taoism in Dream of the Red Chamber and Journey to the West

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Abstract. Buddhist and Taoist philosophies serve as the value engines of *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Journey to the West*. To investigate their ideological significance and narrative functions in both novels, this study employs close reading and comparative analysis to conduct a cross-work investigation. The findings reveal distinctive yet convergent representations of these philosophies across the two masterpieces. In *Journey to the West*, the celestial bureaucracy headed by the Jade Emperor embodies Taoism, while the pantheon of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas led by Tathagata represents Buddhism—reflecting a paradigm of coexisting yet distinct religious systems. Conversely, *Dream of the Red Chamber* consistently portrays an interwoven fusion of both traditions, epitomized by the inseparable Buddhist Monk and Taoist Priest who function as leitmotifs throughout the narrative. The fundamental commonality lies in how both novels' spiritual cores emerge from the syncretism of Buddhist and Taoist thought. This convergence mirrors the historical integration of both philosophies during the Ming-Qing period, demonstrating how literary works are intrinsically shaped by their Historical and Cultural Contexts.

Keywords: *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Journey to the West*, Buddhism, Taoism, Syncretism

1. Introduction

When readers revisit Sun Wukong's transformation from the "Great Sage Equaling Heaven" to the "Victorious Fighting Buddha" in *Journey to the West*, or contemplate the desolate Zen resonance of "like birds scattering to the woods when food is gone" in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, they touch the spiritual DNA of Chinese civilization. Buddhist and Taoist thought have profoundly shaped the philosophical framework of classical Chinese fiction [1, 2].

Buddhism expounds on the illusory nature of existence and liberation through compassion. It teaches that all phenomena arise through dependent origination and are intrinsically empty. As Vimalakirti Sutra illustrates: "All phenomena are illusions—like dreams, flames, moon reflections in water, or images in mirrors" [3]. Suffering stems from ignorance and attachment; only through ethical discipline, meditation, and wisdom can liberation be attained.

Taoism centers on natural spontaneity and transcendent freedom. It holds that the Dao is the cosmic origin and governing principle, as Tao Te Ching states: "The Dao begets One; One begets

Two; Two begets Three; Three begets all things" [4]. Taoism pursues longevity and absolute spiritual freedom through alignment with nature's rhythms, rejecting artificial constraints.

Taoism originated from Laozi's *Tao Te Ching* (6th century BCE), while Buddhism entered China from India during the late Western Han dynasty (1st century CE). Early Buddhism assimilated Taoist concepts like *wuwei* (non-action), while Taoism incorporated Buddhist precepts and rebirth theories. By the Tang-Song era, syncretism prevailed—Taoists practiced Chan meditation, while monks practiced Taoist medicine.

Dream of the Red Chamber and *Journey to the West* were selected as pinnacles of Chinese classical literature where Buddhist-Taoist thought dictates narrative structure and character destinies. Without this philosophical foundation, neither work could achieve such ideological depth or artistic mastery.

Numerous scholars have investigated the interplay of Buddhism and Taoism in these two literary masterpieces. For instance, scholar Ding Wenkui argues that "the author of *Journey to the West* deliberately integrated Taoism and Buddhism only to sharply contrast them, creating a state of extreme imbalance within the narrative" [5]. Similarly, Yang Jianbo, in his work *Dream of the Red Chamber Within a Buddhist-Taoist Framework*, proposes the concept of a "Buddho-Taoist *Dream of the Red Chamber*," stating that the novel "amalgamates Buddhism and Taoism into a hybrid whole" [6]. While acknowledging the significant intellectual and academic value of these contributions, this paper contends that such studies often lack a cross-comparative perspective. By examining both works side-by-side, this study aims to analyze the individuality and commonality of Buddhist and Taoist thought as manifested in each novel, thereby illuminating their ideological value in literary creation and their inclusive coexistence within Chinese culture.

This paper is structured in four parts. The first section examines Buddhism and Taoism in *Journey to the West*, and the second explores their role in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The third section identifies the commonalities between Buddhist and Taoist thought across both works. Finally, the study places the two novels within China's broader historical and cultural context, analyzing how the fusion of these philosophies profoundly influenced both ordinary people and intellectuals, thereby becoming an integral part of the spiritual foundation of Chinese culture.

2. The role and significance of Buddhist-Taoist thought in *Journey to the West*

In *Journey to the West*, the narrative centers on the Buddhist mission of "retrieving scriptures", employing a trials paradigm to unfold a mythical realm structured by Buddhist-Taoist cosmology. While Buddhism operates as the manifest narrative thread, Taoism functions as its latent framework and backdrop. Both traditions converge to serve the ultimate purpose of spiritual cultivation and enlightenment, achieving profound ideological syncretism.

The scripture-retrieval quest—a fundamentally Buddhist endeavor—aims to obtain sacred texts for universal salvation. The Buddha and Guanyin Bodhisattva act as supreme authority and guardian throughout this journey, with the protagonists' eventual Buddhahood symbolizing the consummation of Buddhist practice. Consequently, Buddhism maintains explicit textual dominance within the narrative fabric.

Scholars diverge in interpreting the Buddhist-Taoist hierarchy in *Journey to the West*. Wu Jiale argues in *On the Buddhist-Supremacist Tendency Beneath the "Dao Debt Repaid by Buddhists" Narrative* that "the text systematically elevates Buddhism while suppressing Taoism" [7]. Illustratively, when the White Dragon Horse (a Taoist deity) faces execution for burning the celestial pearl, Guanyin Bodhisattva—a Buddhist figure—intervenes to spare his life, symbolizing Buddhist salvation overpowering Taoist justice.

Conversely, Ding Wenkui contends in *The Disequilibrium Within Buddhist-Taoist Balance in Journey to the West* that "Wu Chengen depicts a colossal imbalance between both traditions" [5]. This is epitomized when Sun Wukong's rebellion paralyzes the Taoist celestial bureaucracy: despite deploying heavenly legions, the Jade Emperor proves powerless and must seek Buddha's intervention. The Buddha effortlessly subdues the monkey—whom Taoist forces failed to contain—under Five Elements Mountain, demonstrating Buddhist supremacy through narrative humiliation of Taoist authority.

While Wu emphasizes Buddhist favoritism and Ding highlights systemic imbalance, both scholars fundamentally affirm Buddhism's textual dominance and implied Taoist denigration. This study, however, posits that such apparent disequilibrium constitutes a surface manifestation; the narrative's core remains rooted in Buddhist-Taoist syncretism, where strategic asymmetry serves their ultimate philosophical integration.

Composed during the Ming dynasty, *Journey to the West* reflects the religious politics of Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang—who had been a Buddhist monk before founding the dynasty. His reign actively promoted Buddhism while suppressing Taoism, creating a significant religious imbalance that permeates the novel's asymmetrical portrayal of both traditions [1].

While an imbalance exists in the depiction of Buddhism and Taoism in *Journey to the West*, the two religions remain fundamentally synthesized throughout the narrative. The novel never separates Buddhist and Taoist elements. Its central characters originate exclusively from these two traditions: Buddhist figures like Buddha and Guanyin of the Southern Sea, and Taoist deities such as the Jade Emperor and Lord Laozi. Moreover, the pilgrimage to obtain Buddhist scriptures from the Western Heaven inherently embodies a collaborative endeavor between both traditions—a shared spiritual journey where Buddhist and Taoist forces jointly enable the pilgrims' ultimate triumph.

In the opening chapter of *Journey to the West* - 'The Divine Root Conceive, the Source Emerges; Heart-Nature Cultivates the Great Dao' - Sun Wukong's birth manifests quintessential Taoist cosmology [1]. The text states: 'When celestial qi descended and terrestrial qi ascended, heaven and earth converged, generating all beings' [1]. The stone monkey embodies this cosmic synergy, formed through the numinous communion of heaven-earth energies: 'Standing 3 zhang 6 chi 5 cun high (symbolizing the 365 degrees of the celestial sphere), with a girth of 2 zhang 4 chi (representing the 24 solar terms), its body bore nine orifices aligned with the Nine Palaces and Eight Trigrams. Since primordial chaos, it absorbed the essence of heaven-earth and radiance of sun-moon; through prolonged infusion with numinous qi, a divine embryo gestated within' [1].

This directly echoes the *Book of Changes*: 'Great is the Qian Origin! All things originate through obedience to Heaven' - a foundational Taoist principle of cosmic generation through heaven-earth union [8].

Later, Sun Wukong's quest for immortality under Patriarch Subodhi reflects Taoist longevity cultivation. Conversely, his journey with Tang Monk through eighty-one tribulations - conquering inner demons while transforming from the defiant 'Great Sage Equalling Heaven' to the enlightened 'Buddha of Victorious Strife' - epitomizes Buddhist spiritual transcendence.

Wu Cheng'en avoids unequivocally elevating Buddhism over Taoism in depicting the pilgrimage. Consider the Lion Monster - originally Manjusri Bodhisattva's mount - who swallowed Sun Wukong before being subdued by his Buddhist master. Similarly, the White Elephant Monster, Guanyin Bodhisattva's steed, descended as a demon to obstruct the pilgrims until reclaimed by Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. These demons emerging from Buddhist ranks demonstrate the tradition's internal ambiguities.

More crucially, Chapter 47 ('Holy Monk Blocked at Tongtian River; Metal and Wood Show Mercy Saving a Child') presents explicit syncretism. Sun Wukong declares to officials and clergy: 'Unify the Three Teachings: honor monks, honor Taoists, and nurture talents. Thus, I shall secure your realm forever.' The phrase 'honor monks, honor Taoists' constitutes direct advocacy for Buddhist-Taoist coexistence [1].

Therefore, this study contends that although *Journey to the West* centers on Buddhism through its scripture-seeking narrative, both characters and plot developments are fundamentally driven by the synergistic integration of Buddhist and Taoist frameworks. Together, they overcome trials, conquer inner demons, and cultivate spiritual transcendence.

This synthesis directly reflects the pre-existing fusion of Buddhism and Taoism prior to the novel's Ming-era compilation. As dual pillars of Chinese religious culture, both traditions had become deeply embedded in the cultural psyche - collectively forging the cosmological and ethical foundations that enable the pilgrims' transformative journey.

3. The role and significance of Buddhist-Taoist thought in *Dream of the Red Chamber*

The myth of 'the stone left over from Goddess Nuwa's mending of the heavens' alongside 'the Fairy-in-waiting Shen Ying and the Crimson Pearl Fairy Grass,' together with Buddhist and Taoist concepts such as 'karmic retribution' and 'awakening and liberation,' form the underlying cultural foundation permeating the narrative structure and character destinies in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The fusion of Buddhism and Taoism is a distinctive feature of the novel.

Dream of the Red Chamber opens with a Buddhist monk and a Taoist priest walking together. As described in Chapter One, the Taoist named Vanitas (Kongkong Daoren) copied the Story of the Stone and renamed it *The Tale of the Passion Monk* (Qing Seng Lu). This monk and priest represent Buddhism and Taoism respectively, yet the Taoist-copied Story of the Stone is renamed using a Buddhist term ('Passion Monk').

Spatially, the journey traverses from the Taoist realm of the Land of Illusion, through the earthly Great View Garden, to the Buddhist site of Greensickness Peak. This spatial transition of the stone descending into the mortal world to undergo its tribulations blurs the boundaries between Buddhism and Taoism, demonstrating their interconnectedness and complementarity.

Scholar Yang Jianbo, in his work *Dream of the Red Chamber Within a Buddhist-Taoist Framework*, proposed the idea of "a *Dream of the Red Chamber* that is both Buddhist and Taoist," suggesting that the novel blends Buddhism and Taoism [6]. Scholar Yue Shimeng, in her article *Both Monk and Taoist, a Unique Entity—Interpreting the Buddhist and Taoist Figures in Dream of the Red Chamber*, also argues that "Buddhism and Taoism in *Dream of the Red Chamber* are distinct yet indistinguishable; the two cultures integrate and interconnect." The perspectives of these two scholars complement each other, both emphasizing the fusion and mutual influence of Buddhism and Taoism in *Dream of the Red Chamber* [9]. The author acknowledges the observation made by these two scholars regarding the blending of Buddhism and Taoism, but further contends that *Dream of the Red Chamber* deliberately employs the fusion of Buddhism and Taoism to create an overarching sense of illusion in the novel, thereby successfully establishing the tragic tone of the entire story.

In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Buddhism and Taoism embody profound philosophical reflections and dialectical wisdom. A prime example is the dialectical thinking in the "Song of Goodness": "All good things in the world must end, and to end is good. If it does not end, it is not good; to be good, it must end" [2]. However, Cao Xueqin does not place his hope in obtaining complete redemption through Buddhism or Taoism. Instead, the novel portrays the contradictions and limitations within

the practices of Buddhist and Taoist adherents. For instance, Baoyu's eventual monastic retreat appears to be an enlightenment and liberation, yet it is also an escape born of despair towards the mortal world.

The contradictions are even more pronounced in the character of Miaoyu. As a practitioner, she came from an official family and was originally a young lady like Daiyu and Baochai. However, she was forced to become a nun due to chronic illness since childhood. Her reluctant entry into monastic life leaves her deeply conflicted. In Chapter 41, when Grandmother Jia brings Granny Liu and others to her door, Miaoyu meticulously prepares "Old Man's Eyebrow" tea for Grandmother Jia. After Grandmother Jia drinks half and hands the cup to Granny Liu, Miaoyu refuses to take the cup back simply because Granny Liu used it, insisting it be left outside. She says, "Luckily, it was a cup I hadn't used myself. If I had, I would have smashed it rather than let her use it." Such harsh words hardly seem fitting for a spiritual practitioner—how can tea drinking be so hierarchical? If the tea set was acceptable for Grandmother Jia, why is it deemed unclean after being used by Granny Liu? This truly reflects the verdict in her fate poem: "She would be clean, but never clean; she claimed to be void, yet was never void" [2].

That said, Cao Xueqin's critique is not aimed at the core tenets of Buddhism or Taoism themselves. Rather, by depicting the worldly, utilitarian, and hypocritical aspects among some followers of these religions, he intensifies the novel's tragic and illusory atmosphere. This also foreshadows the unpredictability of the characters' fates and the inexorable workings of karma.

4. The commonalities between Buddhism and Taoism in the two literary works

Buddhism and Taoism demonstrate the following commonalities in the two literary works, *Journey to the West* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*:

4.1. Buddhism and Taoism serve as the spiritual foundation for both works

Both *Journey to the West* and *Dream of the Red Chamber* transcend their fictional narratives and acquire profound philosophical significance and spiritual value through the underpinning of Buddhist and Taoist thought.

For instance, in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, concepts such as "predestination" and "karma" form the spiritual and emotional tone of illusion and impermanence that permeates the entire work. In *Journey to the West*, themes like "undertaking the journey to obtain sacred scriptures", "delivering all sentient beings from suffering", and "cultivating compassion to aid the world"—along with enduring countless trials to "subdue the monkey of the mind" and "refine away demons to return to righteousness"—reflect the Buddhist and Taoist pursuit of overcoming inner demons and cultivating one's nature.

These religious and philosophical ideas elevate both works beyond mere masterpieces of classical fiction; they also serve as vital channels for understanding Buddhist and Taoist thought and traditional Chinese culture.

4.2. The unflattering portrayal and mundane concerns of Buddhist and Taoist followers

Buddhism and Taoism served as the faith of the common people during the Ming and Qing dynasties. However, neither of the two literary works expresses absolute reverence toward these religions. While promoting Buddhist and Taoist ideals, the books also expose the hypocrisy and

worldly flaws among their practitioners, revealing how even deities and buddhas are portrayed with deeply human and secular traits.

In his *Outline of Chinese Fiction* in the section on Ming-Dynasty tales of gods and demons, Lu Xun remarked on *Journey to the West* that “even spirits and monsters have human traits, and demons understand worldly affairs.” A prime example is the character of the Taibai Jinxing (Venus) in the novel, who exemplifies worldly wisdom [10].

During the first heavenly campaign against Sun Wukong, Taibai Jinxing proposed offering him an official post instead of using outright force. This not only provided Sun Wukong with a path for upward mobility but also served the stability of the celestial court. When Sun Wukong caused trouble again, Venus suggested conferring on him the hollow title of “Great Sage Equalling Heaven”—a position “with rank but no salary.” This clever move satisfied the monkey’s vanity while preserving the dignity of the heavens, making it a masterclass in social shrewdness.

Similarly, *Dream of the Red Chamber* offers vivid depictions of interpersonal tact. For instance, when Lin Daiyu first enters the Rongguo Mansion, Wang Xifeng meets her and exclaims: “What a beauty! I’ve never seen anyone so graceful before... And such noble elegance—she doesn’t look like your maternal granddaughter, Old Ancestress, but more like a granddaughter by your own son!”

With one remark, Xifeng compliments Daiyu, flatters her own sisters-in-law (Yingchun, Tanchun, and Xichun), and implicitly praises Grandmother Jia. This refined and multi-layered praise reflects a deep understanding of human relations and social nuance [2].

Beyond worldly social tact, both works also jointly depict the evil within Buddhist and Taoist adherents. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, for example, Mother Ma uses the name of the Bodhisattva to amass wealth. In Chapter 25, she tells Grandmother Jia:

“The Princess of the Southern Peace Manor makes much bigger vows—forty-eight pounds of oil a day and one pound of wicks...”

By exploiting the devoutness of believers and the vanity of the rich, Mother Ma deceitfully extracts money, revealing a truly repulsive character. What’s more, she even accepts Concubine Zhao’s money to practice witchcraft in an attempt to harm Baoyu and Xifeng—these acts represent the deeply malicious aspects of human nature [2].

Similarly, in *Journey to the West*, the mounts of bodhisattvas often descend to the human world as demons wreaking havoc. Yet, when these evil spirits are finally subdued by a Buddha or bodhisattva, they are allowed to become immortals or even achieve buddhahood. This echoes the moral complexity seen among characters in *Dream of the Red Chamber*: Xifeng acts with ruthless greed for money, yet she shows kindness to the impoverished Granny Liu when she visits.

These examples illustrate that both deities and humans possess the capacity for both evil and vulgarity—a single thought can be wicked, another can be good. Such portrayals of moral shifting serve as a warning to spiritual practitioners to guard against inner desires. Ultimately, the path to buddhahood or immortality boils down to mastering one’s own heart.

4.3. The nothingness after spiritual cultivation

Dream of the Red Chamber is underpinned by a profoundly tragic nature. As its worldly splendor dissolves into nothingness, the story concludes with Baoyu leaving behind the secular world to follow a Buddhist monk and a Taoist priest—and only then is his spirit finally liberated.

Baoyu’s monastic retreat closely aligns with the Buddhist ethos of radical denial of the world’s inherent substance and the ultimate act of renunciation. All loves and hatreds, all glamour and grandeur, ultimately culminate in a void—a vast, pristine whiteness of a great earth, truly clean [2].

In contrast to the tragic conclusion of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the ending of *Journey to the West* appears inspirational. The quest to obtain the scriptures is characterized by action and constructive effort—through enduring eighty-one tribulations, the pilgrims ultimately achieve spiritual fulfillment, representing a form of Buddhist completeness attained through proactive practice.

However, in Chapter 100, “The Journey Back to the East; the Five Saints Achieve Enlightenment”—the finale of the novel—as Tang Sanzang and his disciples complete their mission and bask in celebratory triumph before Buddha, Tathagata declares:

“Holy monk, in your previous existence, you were my second disciple, named Golden Cicada. But because you failed to listen to my teachings and slighted the great law, I exiled your true spirit to be reborn in the eastern lands...”

This revelation instantly undercuts the readers’ sense of victory with a profound feeling of nihilism [1].

The Western Heaven, often idealized as the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, was the home of Golden Cicada—a disciple of Buddha himself, endowed with immense power and lofty status. Yet, for the “crime” of “disrespecting the great teachings,” he was cast down into the mortal world, forced to undergo ten cycles of reincarnation as penance [1].

It turns out that even after immense suffering and finally reaching the Pure Land, there is no perpetual security—hierarchy exists here too, and one must tread carefully. A misstep can lead to immediate banishment back to the suffering and turmoil of the human world. One can’t help but feel disoriented: where, then, is this so-called blissful paradise?

Yet, although the endpoint of spiritual cultivation in both novels is tinged with emptiness, Buddhism and Taoism still function in a complementary and mutually reinforcing manner throughout the journey toward that end.

4.4. The complementary integration of Buddhism and Taoism

The thought systems of Buddhism and Taoism exhibit an amalgamated presence in *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Journey to the West*, albeit to differing extents.

Throughout the journey to obtain the scriptures in *Journey to the West*, Guanyin Bodhisattva serves as the overall coordinator. Whenever the pilgrimage team led by Tang Sanzang finds themselves in desperate situations, a collaborative effort between Buddhism and Taoism—represented by figures such as Guanyin Bodhisattva, Laozi, the Great White Planet (Taibai Jinxing), and the Five Guardian Deities (Wufang Jiedi)—works together to resolve the crises. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the “Land of Illusion” embodies the ethereal quality of a Taoist paradise, while the “Department of Fond Infatuation” and “Department of Enmity” incorporate Buddhist concepts of karmic retribution. The recurring motif of “a Buddhist monk and a Taoist priest” throughout the novel symbolizes the fusion of Buddhism and Taoism.

Taken together, these two works demonstrate how Buddhist and Taoist ideas function not only as spiritual pillars of the narrative but also as tools to explore the complexities of human nature and worldly contradictions. They shape the ultimate goals of spiritual cultivation while permeating the plots and characters in a complementary and integrated manner. This dual nature—transcendent yet worldly, seemingly oppositional yet harmoniously blended—epitomizes the cultural landscape of Buddhist-Taoist coexistence in classical Chinese literature.

5. Conclusion

The dissemination of culture and religion stems from their inherent appeal, with the common people serving as their most fertile soil. Once they take root and begin to grow, they cannot be entirely eradicated by the preferences or aversions of the ruling class of the time. If Wu Cheng'en deliberately disparaged Taoism and promoted Buddhism in *Journey to the West*, then his portrayal of Buddhists committing errors and becoming demonic obstacles must also have been intentional.

The emergence of Taoism and the introduction of Buddhism demonstrate the Chinese culture's capacity to nurture and develop its native traditions while simultaneously embracing and integrating foreign influences. Throughout their encounter, indigenous Taoism and imported Buddhism experienced both conflict and collision, but more importantly, mutual learning and integration. Ultimately, both merged into the river of Chinese civilization, becoming vital elements that shaped its spiritual ethos and ethical values. To this day, the coexistence of Zen introspection and carefree transcendence remains a defining characteristic of Chinese culture.

The Buddhist concepts of emptiness and compassion, together with the Taoist principles of naturalness and transcendence, jointly forged the immortal soul of both *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Journey to the West*. Buddhist and Taoist thoughts collectively underpin the value systems of these two literary masterpieces, permeating their narratives and plotlines. During the era in which these novels were written, such ideas had already profoundly influenced both the general populace and intellectuals, and they remain integral components of the modern spiritual foundation.

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