

Sunthar Visuvalingam

The Legend of the White Snake

Sinicization of Buddhism in Popular Culture

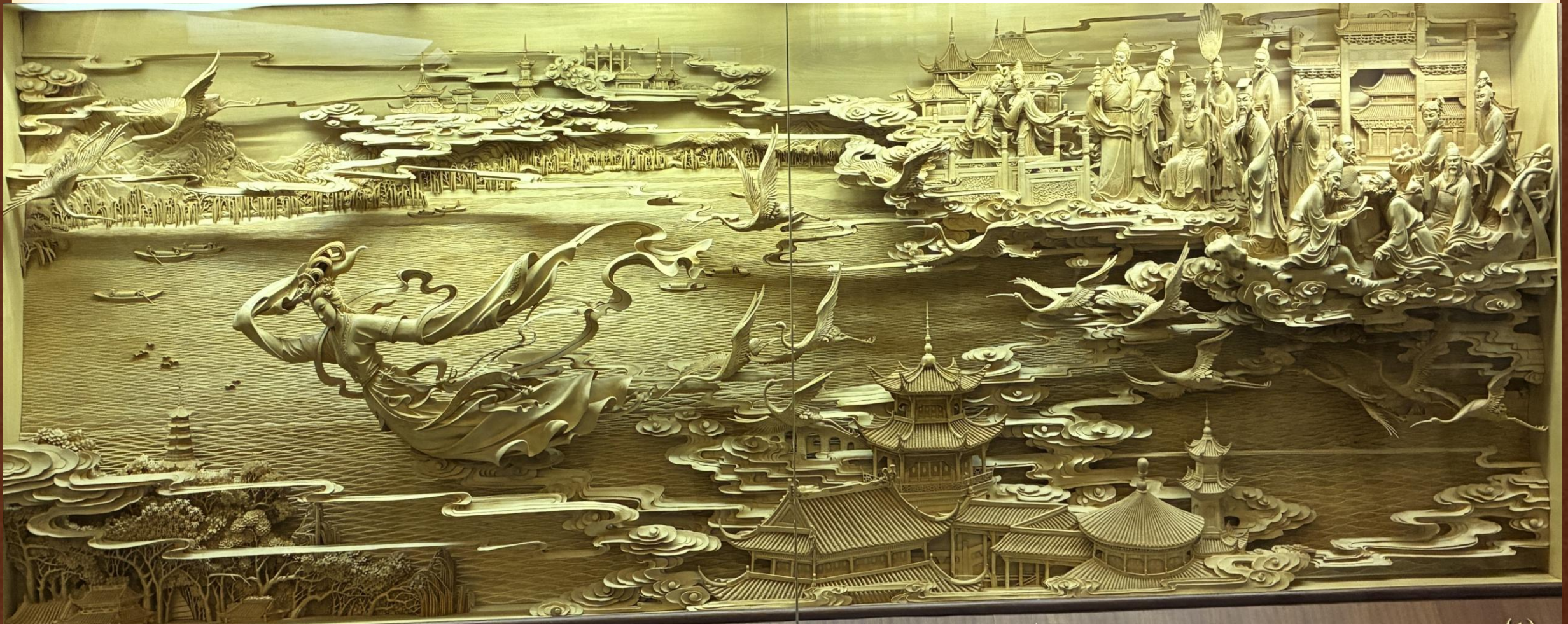
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Introduction to White Snake: preliminary conversation

- How many of you do **not** know the legend of White Snake?
- How many of you **know its narrative details very well**?
- Have you noticed anything **strange** about the story & **thought about it**?
- Can you point out some of the legend's **obvious inconsistencies**?
- How has it exercised so **powerful a hold over Chinese collective psyche**?
- **Deeper hidden meaning** that explains why it was promoted so widely?
- To **reconcile the Three Teachings**: Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism?

But why is an Indian so much in love with a Chinese folktale?



盛會思凡 Bai Suzhen longs for the world of mortals during the gathering of immortals.

(1)



al.

(3)

雨中借伞

In the rain, Bai Suzhen borrows an umbrella from Xu Xian.

(2)



端午显形 Bai Suzhen reverts to her original form of snake on Dragon Boat Festival.



昆 命 盜 草 *Bai Suzhen steals the magic herb from kunlun mountain.*

(4)



水漫金山

Bai Suzhen launches a flood battle against Fa Hai on Jinshan Temple.

(5)



断桥相會

After the flood battle, Bai Suzhen meets Xu Xian on the Broken Bridge.

(6)



囚禁塔内

Bai Suzhen is imprisoned in the Leifeng Pagoda by Fa Hai

(7)



破塔團圓 The Leifeng Pagoda crumbles and the family reunites.

(8)

Core oppositional structure of White Snake legend

- WS revolves around implacable conflict between a Buddhist monk Fahai and a snake turned beautiful woman who marries an unsuspecting Daoist healer.
- Audiences have taken sides either with abbot, who seeks to dissolve this unnatural union, or with the virtuous wife willing to sacrifice her life for her beloved.
- This unidimensional focus has retained the interest of popular audiences, and both Chinese and modern Western scholar, and accounts for its abiding appeal,
- This narrow focus obscures too many insistent details & overlooks inconsistencies in character that render the plot enigmatic. Something else is going on between Fahai & WS.
- Key religious notations are taken for granted and left unexplained, especially the claim that WS reconciles the three traditional teachings that Chinese have lived by.
- I want to make sense of all the details & show how divergent cognitive perspectives are deliberately superposed onto a layered narrative to generate telltale irregularities.

Retelling the White Snake from an esoteric perspective: **Prequel**

- Immortal Lü Dongbin disguises himself as a seller of *tangyuan* (sticky rice balls) at the Broken Bridge on West Lake in Hangzhou.
- Having unawares bought and consumed some of these immortality pills, a boy called Xu Xian does not feel hungry for the next three days.
- When he goes back to ask why, Lü Dongbin **laughingly** flips him **upside down** at the Bridge, causing him to vomit the tangyuan into the lake,
- WS, who has been practicing Daoist magical arts for millennia, in the lake. She consumes the pills to gain 500 years' worth of spiritual power.
- Unable to consume any, a terrapin (tortoise-turtle), also training in the lake, becomes deeply jealous of her success – reincarnates as Fa Hai

Prequel reveals that WS is about **Daoist quest for immortality**

Retelling the White Snake from an esoteric perspective - 1

- Having performed austerities at Mount Emei (Sichuan), Bai Suzhen (WS) is instructed by Goddess of Mercy (Guan Yin) to be **reborn human as the precondition for liberation**.
- The beauty & her intimate companion (“younger sister”) & servant **Green (or Blue) Snake (Xiaoqing)**, descend upon West Lake in Southern Song capital Lin'an (Hangzhou).
- **On this Tomb-Sweeping Day**, they encounter on its Broken Bridge a poor pharmacist, Xu Xian, returning from having performed his filial duties at the graves of his ancestors.
- He shelters them from the sudden pouring rain (that she magically conjures up) and lends them his umbrella. Love-stricken, they marry at White's behest.
- **Even as they are consummating their union**, intermediary Green is **stealing silver** the same night from the municipal treasury on her **alter ego's** order.
- Such ill-gotten gains serve to open an independent pharmacy that thrives largely due to Bai's uncanny knowledge of herbs and remedies.
- When the theft is discovered, the authorities put the innocent husband in prison.

After millennia of austerities, why is WS **immediately** entangled in human passions?

Retelling the White Snake from an esoteric perspective - 2

- Despite her unswerving love & devotion, their unnatural union gradually but inexorably saps his vital energy. WS never reveals her original nature & **lies repeatedly** to save her marriage.
- Fahai, abbot of Golden Mountain (Jinshan) monastery in Zhenjiang comes to investigate. He realizes, just by observing the husband, that the latter is under the spell of a demonic entity.
- He persuades the reluctant and incredulous Xian to ply his wife with realgar wine commonly drunk during the **Dragon Boat Festival** to ward off noxious creatures.
- The obliging wife is thereby forced to revert to her original snake form at whose sight the **husband dies of shock**.
- Mortally distressed, Bai speeds to Kunlun Mountain to **steal the elixir of immortality** from its guardians. The resurrected Xian remains buffeted by doubts that she fails to fully allay.

Why does Xu Xian have to **die** before he can consume the elixir of immortality?

Retelling the White Snake from an esoteric perspective - 3

- Fahai then kidnaps unwilling Xian to Jinshan where he is pressured into undergoing the ordination rituals to become a monk-disciple in his own image.
- The two snakes attempt to free the captive husband by unleashing a calamitous flood that engulfs Golden Mountain and drowns many of its residents.
- However, the now pregnant Bai is no longer a match for the powerful abbot, himself endowed with ascetic magical powers invested especially in his staff and bowl.
- Desperate Bai retreats to the Broken Bridge for a final reunion with escapee Xian on **'Valentine's Day' (Qixi), also a tale of tragic & impossible love**, favored by Chinese couples to register their marriage.
- She undergoes labor pains to give birth at midnight at the **Year-End Full Moon festival (15th day of the 12th month)** to a child prodigy whom Xian names **'Dream Dragon' (Xu Mengjiao)** after the green dragon he supposedly saw when Bai had reverted to her serpent form during the Dragon Boat festival.
- **By New Year's Day**, she has recovered & is looking forward to a happy domestic life. But the unrelenting Fahai, in hot pursuit, magically overpowers her **with his golden begging bowl** to be banished for good beneath the basement of Hangzhou's famous 'Thunder-Peak' (Leifeng) Pagoda.

Why must Xu Xian receive **Buddhist ordination** before reuniting with Bai Suzhen?

Retelling the White Snake from an esoteric perspective - **Sequel**

- After many years, their filial son Mengjiao, having topped the imperial civil service exams, arrives at Leifeng to plead for his mother's release.
- Such is the power of his Confucian virtue and character that the very elements respond to his sincere call.
- Reinvigorated by her austerities at Mount Emei, Green reappears as **fire-breathing dragon** to burn down the pagoda, freeing the now luminous Bai to acknowledge her son and rise to heaven.
- Deliberately staged again on **Tomb Sweeping Day**, her emancipation **closes the ritual calendar set rolling by their initial encounter**.
- Fahai, the 'hypocrite', finds refuge in the belly of a crab whose yellow 'mustard' still betrays his saffron robes.

Is this sequel simply a **happy afterthought** to compensate for the tragic ending?

Esoteric decoding of WS subtext – Kuṇḍalinī

- Our tragic heroine is the ‘coiled snake’ (*kuṇḍalinī*) dormant at the base of the spine (=pagoda), the repository of our phylogenetic ‘memory’ accessible through an anamnesis shared by Indic tantrism and Daoist esotericism.
- Fahai defeats Bai by placing his magic bowl over her head, thereby transforming her back into a tiny, coiled serpent to be buried beneath the pagoda. Hence, the couple’s initial encounter and final ‘reunion’ is on Tomb-Sweeping Day.
- Prequel frames narrative as an initiatic journey: Xian, the boy, who has a foretaste of immortality (*xian*), eventually achieves enlightenment through outer sexual union that mirrors the inner awakening of the ancestral serpent power that ascends to unite with cerebral awareness to transcend the finite human condition.

Male adept attains immortality by ‘marrying’ his inner serpent

Esoteric decoding of WS subtext – West Lake & Broken Bridge

- This 'tantric' union is a **conscious regression to an embryonic state** with the snake assuming the role of the maternal psyche and West Lake the nourishing womb.
- The '**Broken**' Bridge represents the **severed umbilical cord** and serves to bridge the traumatic separation of birth through reunion with that blissful state.
- Qixi, preferred day to register for marriage, is likewise based on a myth of tragic love. As stars on opposite sides of the Milky Way, Cowherd & Weaver Girl barely succeed in reuniting annually for a day across the ephemeral but auspicious bridge of magpies.
- The impossible object of their tabooed love remains deep below within the lake of our unconscious to be substituted in real life by the quest for the ideal wife. This **cosmic dimension is missing but latent in the initiatic schema of WS.**

Daoist & Tantric esoteric practice aims to **rejuvenate by returning to womb**

Esoteric decoding of WS subtext – male adept split in three

- Descent is encapsulated in water battle at Zhenjiang when Yangzi is summoned to deluge the Golden Temple—with the **master-disciple merged into one within**—to transform it into the **primordial mound surrounded by the amniotic waters**.
- In 2019 web-series, Xu Xian is scorched in a cauldron **to exorcize his ‘Mind-Demon’** when the fire is thus extinguished. Fire water scenarios are common in Hindu mythology, such as Indra raining on Khāṇḍava forest to extinguish conflagration caused by Fire-God (Agni), during which a mother-serpent swallows her son to save him from the flames.
- During the especially holy Fish-Wombed conjunction (*matsyodarī-yoga*) ancient Vārāṇasī was likewise transformed by the Gaṅgā into the cosmogonic mound. All these scenarios are charged with erotic symbolism as when embattled Fahai hurls his magic staff at Bai Suzhen.
- Initial encounter amidst rain & thunder on Broken Bridge with raised phallic umbrella as ‘protection’ was already the harbinger of night to follow. The **‘demon’ here is the ego-ridden mind** sustained by our instinctual energies to be destroyed by the awakened snake.

Male adept is already split into **celibate monk & married householder**

Esoteric decoding of subtext – Embryogony through sexual union

- In anachronistic eagerness to ‘rehabilitate’ Bai as the antinomian champion of popular values, free love, feminism, equality of species, etc., interpreters, especially modern, have systematically refrained from confronting the pervasive doctrinal issues, religious symbolism, and explicit spiritual agenda of this folktale.
- Transgressive sacrality, on the contrary, **presupposes an ‘ascending’ realization** based on the avoidance of women, the suppression of animal instincts, renunciation of the lure of the senses, and self-mastery through constant meditation.
- Abbot Fahai embodies the danger of sinking below the human condition; modern ‘antifeudal’ sentiments overlook his genuine concern for Xian, who is being gradually poisoned by the unmastered ‘dark side’ of his serpent power. **Xian succeeds in his transgressive ‘descending’ realization only after being ordained as monk-disciple in Fahai’s image.**
- Ultimately, there is only a single male adept split into three **to set the stage for enacting doctrinal conflicts before presenting their hidden and paradoxical resolution.**

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Esoteric decoding of subtext – White Snake and her Dark Shadow

- Inherent tension between White and Green snakes has given rise to variations and interpretations exploring Xiaoqing's defiance versus Bai's submissiveness, competition for Xian's sexual favors, & homoeroticism.
- This dark shadow has been introduced primarily to underline that virtuous White, the exemplar of self-sacrificing wifely fidelity, has never abandoned her intrinsic animal and hence demonic essence.
- Servant Green, who undertakes all of White's dirty work, is also the latter's recalcitrant impetuous self that would not hesitate to kill her unworthy husband.
- While 'elder sister' is consummating her wedding night with Xian, 'younger sister' is looting the municipal treasury, thereby underlining the transgressive nature of the union. The ambrosia, soma, elixir is always stolen because it can be accessed only through the violation of internalized taboos,
- This is 'stated' at the outset by the *laughing* Lü Dongbin holding Xian *upside down* over the maternal lake.
- Perfected Green returns not as snake but as dragon, to redeem her alter ego trapped beneath pagoda. Division of roles corresponds to depiction of left & right breaths as twin snakes which transcend duality by piercing as one through median channel to ascend spinal column to unite 'sexually' with cerebral awareness.

Snake is itself split between original 'demonic' & humanized spiritual self

Esoteric decoding of subtext – initiatic death

- Tantric union is predicated on the ‘death’ of the ‘mind-demon’ as limited self.
- While Green repeatedly threatens to kill Xian for his spineless irresolution, White terrifies her beloved to death before resuscitating him.
- Chinese development of the Indian funerary relic-bearing *stūpa*, the pagoda is assimilated to a graveyard on that final Tomb-Sweeping Day. In *kuṇḍalinī-yoga* the central channel (*suṣumnā*) through which the serpent ascends is equated to a cremation-ground (*śmaśāna*).
- Kāpālika, who practiced sexual congress amidst burning corpses, begged with a skull-bowl that transformed alms into elixir. His staff (*khaṭvāṅga*) topped with three stacked skulls in different degrees of putrefaction was likewise the external projection of the spinal column.
- Despite being rendered innocuous as standard Buddhist paraphernalia, Fahai’s staff and (snake-trapping) bowl still retain these magical properties (they also have indigenous Daoist correspondences in the *ruyi* scepter and alchemical crucible).

Principle of initiatic death expressed in story through real death and revival

Esoteric decoding of subtext – giving birth to oneself

- Initiatic death at height of sexual union results in spiritual rebirth as one's own son.
- 'Dream-Dragon' (*xu mengjiao*) is endowed with supreme intelligence. Rapidly masters Confucian classics & doctrine to top imperial exams. His appeal at Leifeng for mother to be freed is irresistible.
- Because his moral force and incantation is bolstered by his innate spiritual power, which is that of the Green Dragon that physically performs the destructive deed.
- The external pagoda has become superfluous because its esoteric meaning has already been internalized by the accomplished adept.
- Same dialectic embodied in India by Abhinavagupta, claimed to be 'born of the Yoginī': not that his mother was a spiritual adept but that he had given birth to himself through union with tantric partner.
- This supreme transgressor, who proudly acclaims his inner identity as the brahmanicide Bhairava, was nevertheless supreme didactician in his promotion of aesthetics as the means to inculcating *dharma*.

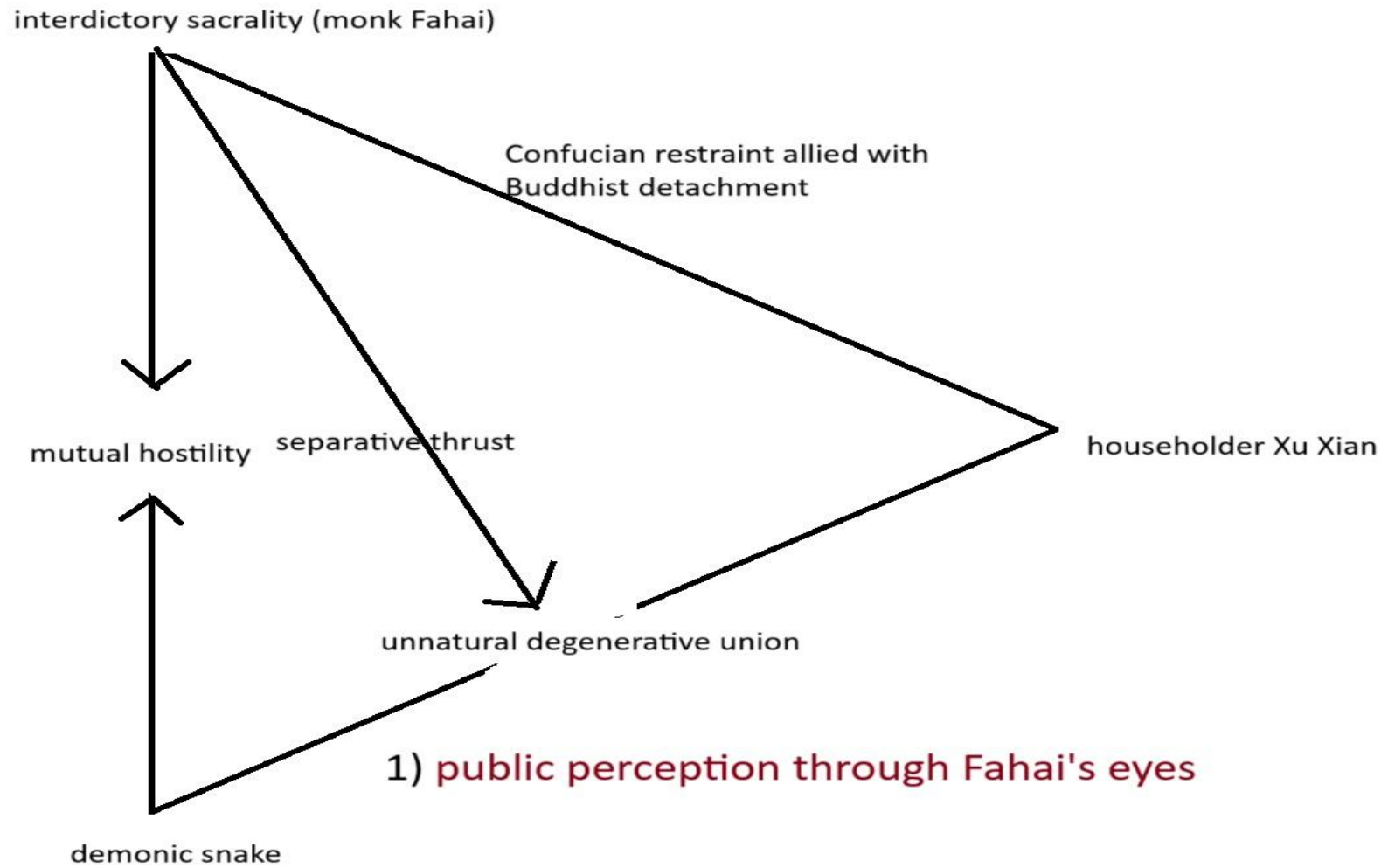
Being reborn through (Vedic) sacrifice or Tantric/Daoist embryogonic practice

Esoteric decoding – self-regeneration through cycle of festivals

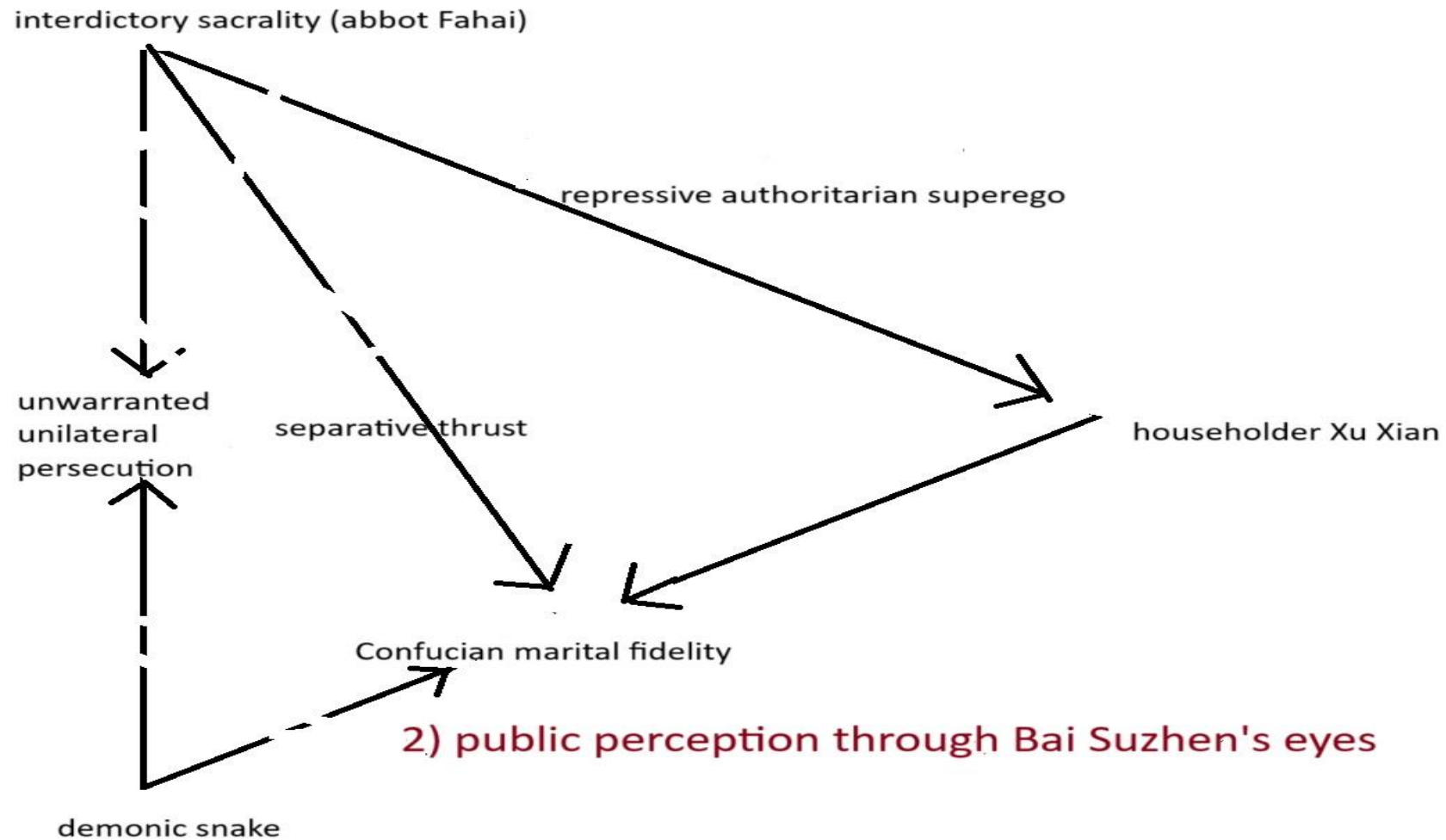
- White Snake's precise synchronization with the major popular festivals as key nodes of its dramatic twists sheds mutual light on their underlying semiotic system as projected onto the canvas of an initiatic calendar.
- This is most evident in her going into labor on the Year-End Full Moon festival, the name I have coined for *Làyuè shíwǔ*, which is not a public celebration and does not have a popular common name (unlike Tomb-Sweeping, Dragon Boat, Qixi festivals).
- Completely overlooked by specialists of mythology and folklore in their interpretations of WS, this calendrical schema is comparable in India to the Vedic depiction of Prajāpati-the-Self as the sacrificial Year, undergoing a cyclical rebirth..

WS is wholly integrated (= Sinicized) into cycle of major Chinese festivals

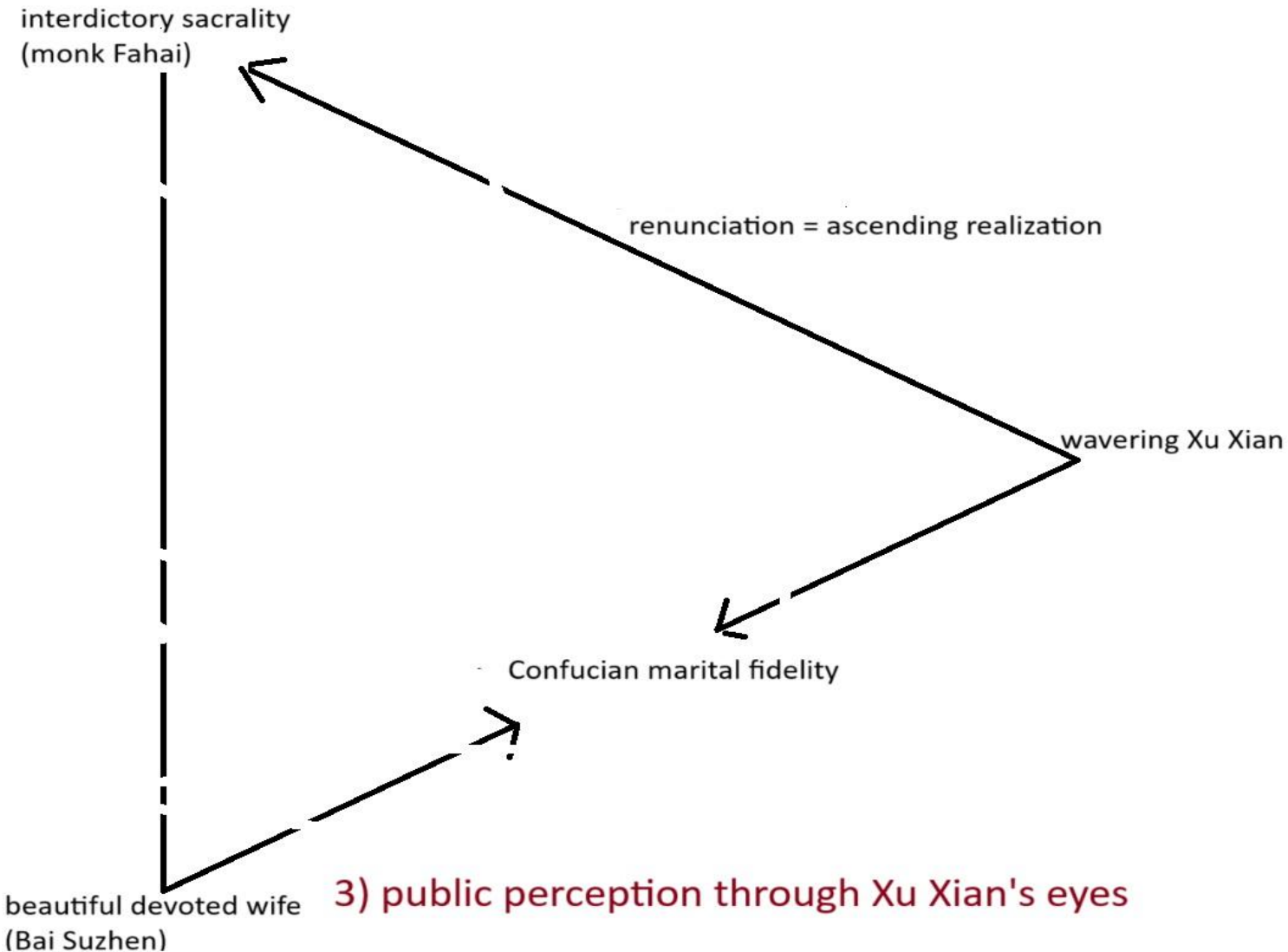
Public understandings through eyes of three protagonists: Fahai



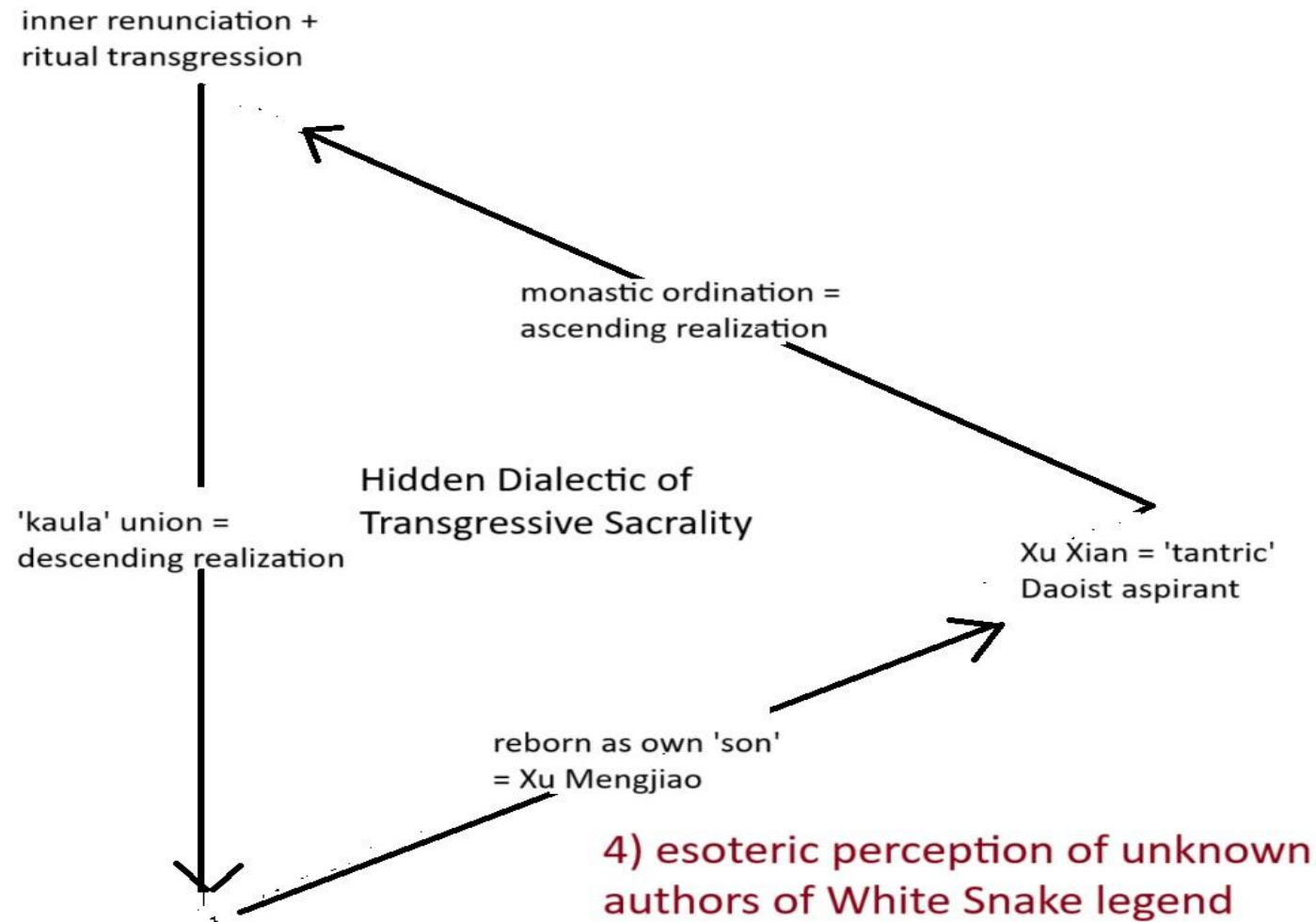
Public understandings through eyes of three protagonists: Bai Suzhen



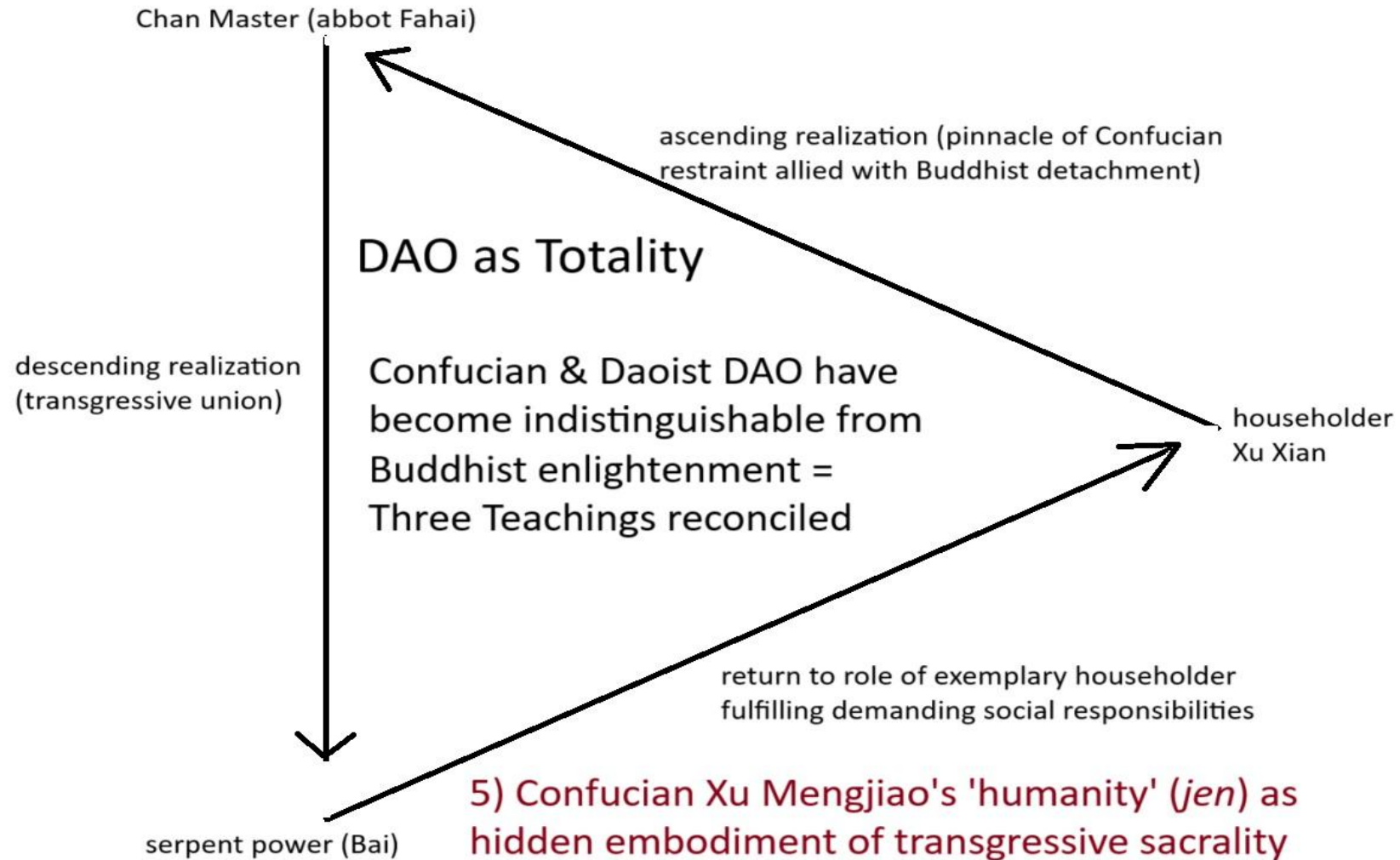
Public understandings through eyes of three protagonists: Xu Xian



Deeper hidden understanding of unknown authors of WS



Deeper hidden understanding of unknown authors of WS



Sinicization of Buddhism during Song – doctrinal conflict

- Chinese reverence toward Indian homeland: during Wuyue Kingdom (907-978 CE) sacred sites associated with Buddha were transposed onto geography of Jingnan region south of Yangzi
- Qian Chu (king Zhongyi, r. 947-978) built Leifeng Pagoda to incorporate two Ashokan stupas containing imported relics (strand of hair).
- The introduction and consolidation of Buddhism in China had repeatedly met with fierce resistance and even persecution. This must have weakened the state and polity at all levels.
- Talented Emperor Huizong (1101–1125), a staunch Daoist, converted many Buddhist temples. Did not spare Jinshan (Golden Mountain) that he renamed "Shenxiao Yuqing Wanshou Palace."
- Only after fall of Northern Song (960–1127) was its name "Longyou Temple" restored as a famed Buddhist sanctuary.
- These doctrinal conflicts that spilled over into such proselytizing campaigns must have occupied the minds of the subsequent Southern Song literati concerned with fostering cultural unity.

White Snake 'reconciles' the Three Teachings even at the **popular level**

Sinicization during Southern Song – convergence & dialogue

- Before the end of the Southern Song (1129-1279), Neo-Confucian elite who held sway over the imperial court had become well-versed in not only Daoist but also Buddhist lore, an **eclecticism that was reciprocated by their counterparts in these rival traditions**.
- Upon retiring from official social responsibilities, cultured Mandarins often retreated along the established pilgrimage circuit to faraway Mount Emei (Sichuan), where they **devoted themselves to Daoist pursuits of inner harmony & individual self-realization**.
- Exposed to public view & allegiance, renunciatory dimension of Buddhist discipline could be reconciled with Confucian emphasis on social responsibility and moral rectitude.
- But what the WS legend also reveals is the **Daoist assimilation of tantric Buddhism** that brought with it preexisting Indian trans-sectarian techniques and their symbolic mappings.
- The conflict between the patriarch Fahai and the transgressive snake-woman is already **internal to Buddhism**, which explains why he is so readily caricatured in such a satirical and even ridiculous manner designed to appeal to the masses.

Esoteric collaboration was necessary **precondition** for White Snake legend

Sinicization Southern Song – circumstantial evidence

- Role of Hangzhou region in reformulating Indian doctrines into distinct Chan tradition is well documented
- Last record of Indian monks at Lingyin date back to Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368): **Tianzhu Monk Jiliang** was known for his Buddhist scholarship & contributions to the temple, **founded in 326 CE by Huili from India**.
- During Tang (618–907) & Song (960–1279) dynasties, Lingyin was major center for Buddhist exchange, with Indian monks visiting or residing there. Other nearby monasteries have '*tianzhu*' prefixed to their names.
- Jigong, most famous exemplar of TS in Chinese popular religion, underwent training & ordination at Lingyin (~1160–1180), where his memory is still honored.
- Because his behavior clashed with strict monastic rules, Jigong later moved to **Jingci Temple, located opposite Leifeng Pagoda** & also symbolically associated (through its evening bell) with the White Snake romance.
- Physical proximity & spiritual intercourse makes it likely that radical tantric Buddhism from India may have been communicated to receptive Chan masters during Southern Song.
- Chinese interlocutors had by then so thoroughly assimilated such esoteric traditions as to map them onto their own indigenous legacy going back into prehistory, e.g., oblique **assimilations of WS to mother-goddess Nüwa**.

Further research into Chinese archives may offer concrete proof

Questions to be addressed

1. Does **diffusion** from India suffice to explain this “Holy Man & Snake-Woman” (**Lamia**) motif across Eurasia?
2. Is WS popular fantasy derived from our unconscious, or does it have a **deliberate** esoteric spiritual agenda?
3. Does the existence of so many narrative variants imply that they have no **underlying common structure**?
4. Are its **opposed cultural stances**—valorizing the monk (conservative) or the snake (transgressive)—irreconcilable?
5. Reborn as human **to attain enlightenment**, why is WS smitten by handsome Xu Xian upon descending from Mt Emei?
6. Did WS willingly endure so many centuries of austerity on Mt Emei **only to fail** in her arduous quest for liberation?
7. Why did the Goddess of Mercy, having repeatedly indulged her transgressions, **finally abandon WS** to her fate?
8. Why does the lovers’ first & last meeting happen **over West Lake on the ‘Broken Bridge’** that was never broken?
9. **Celebrated on Qixi** (Valentines Day), does the love of Cowherd (Niulang) & Weaver Girl (Zhinü) share its meaning?
10. Why does the lovers’ first encounter occur while Xu Xian is returning from ancestor-worship on **Tomb-Sweeping Day**?
11. What does her inseparable & impetuous ‘younger sister’ **Green Snake** reveal about WS’ real nature & meaning?
12. Is Xu Xian so successful in healing people through his own knowledge or by **harnessing the innate power** of WS?
13. WS reverts to fearsome serpent by unavoidably drinking realgar wine: why specifically during **Dragon Boat festival**?
14. WS steals (even medicinal herbs) behind her lover’s back & eventually the elixir of immortality – why insist on **theft**?

15. Are renouncer Fahai & householder Xu Xian, whom the former ordains as monk, ultimately the **same male aspirant**?
16. Whose spiritual liberation is really at stake here: explicitly WS or the **male adept through the female demon-snake**?
17. Would **Ji Gong**, who practiced (transgressive) Dharma in nearby Lingyin Si, have also persecuted WS like Fahai?
18. The snakes flood Jinshan to save Xian from being scorched by Fahai: what does this **fire-water symbolism** signify?
19. Why is **pregnant** WS exorcized to beneath the **basement** (*mūlādhāra*) of Leifeng? What does this **pagoda** represent?
20. Is their orphaned son, the outstanding (Neo-) **Confucian scholar**, a happy afterthought to an otherwise tragic tale?
21. Many scenes in *Legend of WS* (2019) occur at **Nüwa** temple with explicit references to this **mother-goddess** – why?
22. Did **Indian monks**, still residing at Lingyin Si during Southern Song, collaborate with Taoists & Confucians on WS?
23. Did the Chinese pagoda at the South Indian port of Nagapattinam due to its religious ties with Hangzhou?
24. How do the three teachings converge, clash, and **become reconciled** through the main protagonists of WS?
25. Was the Qianlong Emperor so enamored of WS' aesthetic appeal, or more for its **integration of conflicting traditions**?
26. Does WS epitomize the transformation of Buddhism from an Indian religion to a **Chinese civilizational project**?
27. What accounts for the appeal of WS to **other Far Eastern cultures**: Manchu, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, etc.?
28. How does WS exemplify a uniquely Chinese approach to the universal dialectic of **transgressive sacrality**?