

Contemporary Rewriting of the Legend of the White Snake: A Narratological Study of Geling Yan's *White Snake*

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Abstract

The Legend of the White Snake is one of the Four Great Folk Legends of China. Owing to its extensive translation and dissemination and diverse narrative forms, it has achieved widespread circulation in the English-speaking world. Geling Yan's *White Snake* is a paradigmatic example of contemporary cross-cultural rewriting. Drawing on the imagery of the ancient Legend of the White Snake, the novella tells a lesbian love story set during the Cultural Revolution. Based on structuralist narratology, this study argues that Geling Yan's rewriting enables an Eastern story to achieve effective circulation in Western contexts through the contemporary reconstruction of its cultural core and the cross-cultural adaptation of narrative strategies. The study confirms that the Legend of the White Snake is characterized by a narrative pattern driven by fate and ethical imperatives, in which characters function primarily as narrative roles and the narrative adopts an omniscient point of view. Conversely, in Geling Yan's *White Snake*, individual desire becomes the primary driving force behind plot development, characters emerge as psychologically complex subjects, and the narrative shifts to a limited point of view. As the narrative gradually discloses tensions between the two works in terms of emotion and social rules, it reflects the texts' profound engagement with human nature and tabooed feelings.

Keywords

The Legend of the White Snake; *White Snake*; Contemporary Rewriting; Narrative Strategies; Cross-cultural Dissemination of Folk Legend; Rewriting Strategies

1. Introduction

The Legend of the White Snake is a brilliant pearl of Chinese folk literature. It was included, in the very first batch, in the National Intangible Cultural Heritage list. Originating from popular oral storytelling, The Legend of the White Snake is acclaimed as one of the four major Chinese folk legends for its "extension of time and space, openness of structure, multiplicity of meanings, the people-oriented

thought, and the national spirit embodied in its bearing.” [1]It has not only become canonical within its own tradition, but has also gradually crossed barriers of language, cognition, and aesthetics to develop into a world text. Since *The Legend of the White Snake* first entered the English-speaking world through translation in 1834, it has been repeatedly reimagined in the course of collisions and exchanges with other cultures. Beyond literary translation and stage and film adaptations, the legend has also been adapted into other forms, such as children’s literature and long—and medium-length popular novels.

In the process of internationalizing the Legend of the White Snake, overseas Chinese-language writers play an important role. Living between two heterogeneous cultures, they cannot discard the spiritual imprint of Chinese culture; meanwhile, Western culture also permeates their everyday lives. With their distinctive dual identities and perspectives, age-old Chinese legends shine with striking brilliance in their rewritings. Among these overseas Chinese-language writers, Geling Yan stands out as a particularly prominent figure. Geling Yan is a Chinese-American writer and screenwriter with substantial international influence. Since the 1990s, she has published a large number of novels and short stories. She has won multiple literary awards across regions, and many of her novels have been adapted into films that have received numerous international film awards. *White Snake* is Geling Yan’s novella. It was first published in 1998, and its English translation was published the following year by Aunt Lute Books. With the ancient imagery of *The Legend of the White Snake* and narrated through three different perspectives, the novel tells a lesbian love story set during the Cultural Revolution. Upon its publication, it received wide praise, including from professional English-language media such as *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus Reviews*.

Current scholarship on the novel mostly focuses on its Cultural Revolution background, its distinctive narrative mode, or the gender issues involved,[2] but lacks a systematic analysis of how the author rewrites the Legend of the White Snake in contemporary terms. Therefore, this article takes Geling Yan’s novella *White Snake* as its research object, and—by drawing on structuralist narratology—examines what exactly changes in the ancient Chinese myth the Legend of the White Snake in the contemporary context, what rewriting strategies the author adopts, and what positive significance such strategies carry.

2. Plot-Driven Mechanics: From “Fatalistic Ethics” to “Individual Desire”

2.1. The Legend of the White Snake: Plot Progression Driven by “Fatalistic Ethics”

First, the progression of the plot in the Legend of the White Snake does not rely on characters’ autonomous choices or accidental events. Rather, it is propelled throughout by a fate-ethics framework that overlays the causal logic of repaying

kindness with the unbridgeable ethical prohibition of different destinies for human and demon.

As the assumed starting point, repaying kindness determines the direction of Bai Suzhen's series of behaviors—her descent, her meeting, and her romance. In the legend, Bai Suzhen is a snake demon who has cultivated for a thousand years. Moved by the scholar Xu Xian's life-saving kindness from a previous life (one version says it was a shepherd boy who saved the snake), she transforms into a human form and descends in search of his reincarnation, treating marriage to him as the way to repay kindness. This key arrangement directly propels the story's beginning—meeting on the Broken Bridge and becoming spouses—thereby sowing foreshadowing for the later human-demon conflict. After their marriage, Bai Suzhen's acts of repaying kindness further become a direct impetus for plot development. Different destinies for human and demon constitutes the second core dimension of fate ethics. Its core semantics refers to the existence of an irreconcilable contradiction between humans and demons. It often further implies that justice and evil cannot coexist, and it also maps onto the premodern social imagination of "a clear distinction between the righteous and the wicked" and "proper social and ethical order." In the Legend of the White Snake, Fa Hai is a firm defender of the ethical order underlying "different destinies for human and demon." He designs to make Bai Suzhen drink arsenic wine, forcing her to reveal her true form. Xu Xian is therefore plunged into extreme fear and vacillation, and the previously harmonious marital relationship develops a crack.

2.2. *White Snake*: Plot Development Driven by Individual Desire

In Geling Yan's *White Snake*, individual desire emerges as an important latent narrative motor force. Rather than manifesting through overt biological impulse, it becomes articulated through Shan-shan's excessive pursuit of "beauty" and Sun Likun's yearning to reconstruct identity recognition. These profound psychological investments function simultaneously as the deep-seated motivations for characters' actions and as the propellant for the story's progressive development within an oppressive historical context.

Shan-shan's obsession with "beauty" transcends the mere aesthetic domain and fundamentally constitutes a latent power desire—the progression from beholding beauty to possessing it. During her adolescent years, her enchantment with Sun Likun's performance in the Legend of the White Snake becomes so intense that within the Cultural Revolution's anti-beauty rhetoric, this infatuation is suppressed into a secret preoccupation. When this obsession reaches its extreme, Shan-shan's pursuit of beauty metamorphoses into an overwhelming desire for control: she simultaneously wishes Sun Likun to maintain this beauty while desiring that this beauty belong exclusively to her. When Sun Likun attempts to establish connections with others and seek new existential possibilities, Shan-shan's jealousy and

controlling impulse erupt violently, her behavior progressively deviating from rationality. This not only jeopardizes the relationship between the two but directly propels the plot toward its climax. Ultimately, this burdensome fixation traps Sun Likun in the paradoxical predicament of simultaneously requiring rescue and suffering confinement, and precipitates the relational rupture that culminates in the narrative's tragic denouement.

Sun Likun's yearning to reconstruct identity recognition constitutes the other cardinal narrative motor force. Transformed from an erstwhile universally acclaimed premier dancer of S Province into a targeted object of denunciation—a "counter-revolutionary beauty demon" subjected to universal vilification—she has been stripped not only of her artistic career but also of personal dignity. Under prolonged collective criticism and psychological oppression, she gradually abandons self-recognition, assuming a numbed stance toward all circumstances. When Shan-shan approaches under the pretext of investigation, Sun Likun exhibits compliance and exploration; at essence, she seeks to reclaim her former identity through cooperation with the investigation process. Sun Likun becomes dissatisfied with merely gaining Shan-shan's individual recognition, increasingly desiring broader social acknowledgment. When she establishes a brief connection with an equally marginalized male actor, this contact becomes an attempt to reconstruct her social identity, making visible to her the possibility of obtaining identity recognition independent of Shan-shan. Yet this behavior directly conflicts with Shan-shan's drive for control, thereby escalating their latent antagonism into overt conflict and propelling the narrative toward its climax. This desire for identity recognition transforms her from numbness toward awakening, functioning as the internal impetus propelling the narrative from repression toward resistance.

The Legend of the White Snake takes the fatalistic ethics of human-demon divide as its core, emphasizing moral discipline and collective order. This collective-centered value system stands in fundamental tension with Western individualistic society. Geling Yan, by contrast, redirects the narrative focus toward the existential experience of individuals under temporal oppression. The predicament of identity recognition and the suppression and release of individual desire constitute universal human experience transcending cultural difference, thereby providing the narrative with a universally comprehensible emotional foundation.

3. Character Construction: From "Functional Actants" to "Psychologized Subjects"

3.1. The Legend of the White Snake: Functional Actants

In his 1960s work *Structural Semantics*, Greimas, building upon Propp's research into the functions of characters in folk narratives, further refined the concept of the actantial model (Actants). He contended that narrative characters should not be regarded merely as concrete roles but should rather be abstracted as actants

assuming specific functional roles, whose core significance lies in propelling plot development rather than in the independent presentation of individual psychological characteristics.[3]Greimas simplified Propp's thirty-one narrative functions into three pairs of binary oppositional actantial patterns: Subject and Object, Sender and Receiver, Helper and Opponent. These actants discharge differing functions within the story, collectively advancing narrative development.

In the Legend of the White Snake, character functions strictly conform to the binary oppositional structure of hero versus antagonist, with narrative logic entirely subordinated to the core narrative function of human-demon romance, conflict, and redemption. Taking White Maiden as an example, in the Legend of the White Snake, she primarily assumes the actantial function of Subject, serving as the active agent pursuing core objectives and initiating narrative unfolding. With marital happiness with Xu Xian as her core objective, she actively initiates a series of critical actions propelling the narrative: in repayment of her debt for his rescue in a former life, she voluntarily abandons her millennium-long cultivation on Emei Mountain and descends to the mortal realm rather than passively entering the profane sphere, thereby establishing the narrative's point of departure. Subsequently, she deliberately fabricates an encounter while boating on the lake, strategically acquainting herself with Xu Xian and arranging to return his umbrella, thus proactively orchestrating the initiation of human-demon matrimony. When Xu Xian falls unconscious from inadvertently consuming realgar wine, she disregards the boundary between celestial and mortal realms, actively storming the Kunlun Mountains to steal the divine fungus to save her husband, thereby employing action to resolve the romantic crisis and propelling the narrative into an intensified phase of frequent conflicts. Ultimately, confronted with Monk Fahai's ethical coercion in confining Xu Xian, she leads her aquatic subjects in flooding Gold Mountain, actively mounting direct resistance against the shackles of human-demon divide, thereby propelling the narrative to its climax. From narrative inception to conflict apex, every action undertaken by White Maiden is motivated by her romantic objective, and through her sustained agency, she emerges as the fundamental propulsive force of the entire narrative.

3.2. *White Snake*: Psychologized Subjects

In Geling Yan's *White Snake*, however, characters undergo manifest psychological transformation, ceasing to function as simple goal-driven functional roles and instead becoming psychologized subjects centered upon interior consciousness, thereby achieving an elevation in creative dimensionality from external plot-driven narration to internal psychological motivation. In contrast to the Legend of the White Snake wherein characters serve as instruments for advancing plot, in *White Snake* both Sun Likun (the archetype of White Maiden) and Shan-shan (the

archetype of Xu Xian) direct their actions from deep-seated interior needs rather than from plot or ethical presupposition.

Sun Likun's actions originate from a core necessity for repairing self-identity recognition, manifesting concretely as the reconstruction of the artistic identity and self-worth destroyed by temporal violence. As a dancer, she has been deprived of artistic identity under this particular historical condition, with her artistic value and existential significance denied and negated by external forces. Consequently, she persistently practices her craft, yearning to return to the stage and reclaim her role as *White Snake*.

For weeks she had been secretly groping her way out of bed in the middle of the night and practicing dance. Now from the shadow projection she could see that dance had completely returned to her body. All of the surplus fat had been trimmed off, and her knifelike will had repeatedly sculpted her form. She slowly reviewed her dance movements, taking a few tentative "snake steps." On the whitewashed stage backdrop a spring snake was reviving after a long hibernation, limbering up to freshness and new life.[4]

Meanwhile, Shan-shan's actions originate from anxiety concerning gender identity and the exploration of self-recognition. For an extended period, she presents as Shan-shan the revolutionary with a masculinized identity, yet beneath the surface her core conceals profound confusion regarding gender positioning. This contradiction stems from a cognitive void concerning female identity. Yet when she witnesses Sun Likun embodying the White Snake—"the supple fluidity of the waist, the expressive dance of the eyes"—she becomes consciously aware for the first time that a woman can manifest such power. This impact impels her to explore her own gender characteristics and existential value through the act of intervening in Sun Likun's life.

Mama tells me I'm not a very normal child. She says it in a way that makes it sound like she's praising me. I do so hope that I'm normal, that I'm just like everyone else, otherwise I'll be so isolated! I'm so scared!

When I look at my body now that I've started puberty, I think of White Snake's. My body is so pitiful. Someday can I grow up to look like her?[5]

In synthesis, at the level of character construction, figures in the traditional "Legend of the White Snake" predominantly function as flat, functional actants serving plot advancement and ethical allegory, exhibiting minimal interior psychological depth. Geling Yan, through refined, nuanced psychological portraiture, has reshaped characters from symbolized images into psychologized subjects simultaneously possessing human profundity and emotional richness. This simultaneously shatters the stereotyped perception of Oriental characters within Western contexts as symbolized and flat-constructed figures while infusing this ancient legend with renewed artistic vitality within contemporary frameworks. Geling Yan's rewriting strategy in character construction furnishes profoundly valuable practical insights

for the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese folk literature: as the cardinal emotional medium of cross-cultural dissemination, only by elevating characters from functional symbols serving plot advancement to psychologized subjects bearing complex human nature can one effectively dissolve the alienation engendered by cultural difference, enabling Chinese narratives to genuinely transcend cultural boundaries and evoke universally resonant emotional response among global readerships.

4. Narrative Perspective: From "Omniscient Spectacle" to "Autonomous Voice"

4.1. The Legend of the White Snake: Omniscient Perspective

The Legend of the White Snake conventionally employs a third-person omniscient narrative perspective wherein the narrator commands absolute authority. Its essential nature constitutes an omniscient narration wherein the narrator exceeds the characters in authority, exhibiting core characteristics of omniscience and authoritarianism.

Omniscience manifests through the narrator's absolute command of three-dimensional information—temporal, spatial, and psychological dimensions. On the temporal dimension, the narrator freely traverses past, present, and future, prematurely disclosing character fates. For instance, the opening immediately illuminates White Snake's thousand-year cultivation background at Emei Mountain. Likewise, when Monk Fahai enters the narrative, the narrator directly discloses his motivation to capture demons by divine commission, whereas both Xu Xian and White Maiden remain ignorant, creating dramatic tension where readers possess foreknowledge the characters lack. On the spatial dimension, the narrator transcends physical spatial constraint, capable of simultaneously presenting parallel events across different locales. For instance, while White Maiden steals the divine fungus in Hangzhou, the narrator simultaneously conveys Xu Xian's anxiety at Gold Mountain Temple and Fahai's defensive preparations within the temple, achieving synchronized parallel narration across multiple threads. On the psychological dimension, the narrator can directly penetrate any character's interior consciousness, even disclosing the demonic thought processes of non-human characters.

Authoritarianism concentrates in the direct guidance of reader comprehension through value judgment. Its moral position takes celestial law as its absolute measure, imposing clear approbation or condemnation upon character action, thereby constraining the reader's independent interpretive space. For instance, the narrator consistently defines White Maiden as "demon," emphasizing her inherent attribute of "human-demon divide" such that, despite charitable deeds such as the Dragon Boat rescue and charitable medical practice, her actions remain classified as improper seduction of mortals. Conversely, Fahai's capture of demons receives endowment with justificatory righteousness as a divinely-mandated mission, his obstinacy and

coldness transmuted into the sacred calling of demon-slaying and Dharma-protection. Simultaneously, the narrator embeds Buddhist karmic retribution and Daoist cosmological cycling throughout the narrative framework, thereby reinforcing its authority.

4.2. White Snake: Multi-Vocal Perspective

In her novella *White Snake*, Geling Yan transcends the traditional single-perspective narrative mode, creatively employing a multi-vocal collage narrative technique. Through "official account—popular account—untold story," three distinct versions differing in memory and voice, she constructs a multi-dimensional textual space.

The novella opens with a quintessential official account—a letter to Premier Zhou Enlai, textual genre wherein bureaucratic documentation (letters, investigation reports) serves as the vehicle for presenting an official perspective on Sun Likun's case, emphasizing event documentation and conclusive determination while eschewing personal emotion and psychological description. Within this version, the individual exists in complete vocalization loss, with the protagonists' personal experience and authentic emotion rendered negligible and occluded. The language proves glacial, replete with political formulae, reconstructing dancer Sun Likun as a reeducated bourgeois arts worker, stressing ideological problems and moral deficiency, thereby profoundly embodying the regulatory and alienating effects of power discourse upon the individual.

In contrast to the canonical and authoritarian character of official accounts, the popular account foregrounds the legendary quality of third-party narration. Primarily unfolding through surrounding populace's hearsay, speculation, and observation, it presents Sun Likun's image deterioration from celebrated dancer to deranged woman. The content brims with sensationalism, gossip, and moral judgment, simultaneously propagating stigmatized interpretation of her misconduct while obliquely harboring unconscious mockery of the era's absurdity, reflecting the multifaceted humanity within collective unconsciousness.

The novella's centerpiece comprises the female protagonists' own consciousness—the untold story, comprising seven sections interspersed among official and popular accounts. Centering upon character interior perspective, it delves profoundly into Sun Likun's identity struggle and Shan-shan's gender confusion, filling the psychological voids within official and popular versions.

In synthesis, at the level of narrative perspective, the *Legend of the White Snake* predominantly employs omniscient third-person narration (such as the storyteller's perspective), implicitly harboring cultural authority's control over the narrative. By contrast, Geling Yan's *White Snake*, through multi-vocal collage of official account—popular account—untold story supplemented by character interior disclosure, thoroughly decentralizes the authority of omniscient narration, transforming characters from observed spectacle into psychologized subjects

actively asserting voice, thereby achieving fundamental breakthrough from heterodiegetic to homodiegetic narration and becoming an exemplary model of psychologized characters in cross-cultural dissemination. The essential nature of this transformation constitutes a redistribution of narrative authority, from hegemonic culture's definition of subaltern culture toward subaltern culture's self-articulation, from singular-perspective dominance to dialogue among multiple perspectives, ultimately dissolving power inequalities within cultural narration by establishing cross-cultural comprehension upon empathy rather than condescension.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, Geling Yan's rewriting of the Legend of the White Snake is, at its core, a process of reconstructing cultural cores in modern terms and adapting narrative strategies across cultures—so as to realize the effective transmission of an Eastern story in Western contexts. By replacing collective ethics with individual experience, the story acquires a universal emotional basis. By replacing functional symbols with psychological subjects, it breaks the othering imagination of Eastern characters. By replacing omniscient other-narration with limited first-person accounts, it dissolves the power inequalities within cultural narrative. This strategy not only preserves distinctive Eastern experiences embedded in the texture of Chinese storytelling (such as the tacit writing of restraint and freedom), but also uses psychological realism and individual narrative techniques familiar to Western readers as a bridge, allowing White Snake to become, in a genuine sense, a literary work of cross-cultural dialogue. It therefore provides a highly instructive model for the modern adaptation of traditional stories.

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