

# Character Identity as a Key to Unlock the Four Classical Novels of Ancient China

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**Abstract** In the most representative ancient Chinese novels, *A Dream in Red Mansions*, *Pilgrimage to the West*, *Heroes of the Marsh* and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the main characters all possessed inherent special identities, or other, the special identity which couldn't be acquired through endeavor and effort. What embodied this kind of identities were mainly such symbols as distinctive object, exclusive power and exceptional appearance. There exists an obvious inclination in the narrative ethic in the Four Classical Novels: Concerning the same thing, one with special identity can do but others can't. If the latter did, they would be punished whereas if the former did, they would be taken for the arrangement by destiny. What caused such inclination lies in "differential sequence pattern" brought forth by Fei Xiaotong in *Rural China*. Due to lacking "universal criterion" or "general moral concept," what rural society used to measure morality was a retractile ruler varied with different relationships. Even to this day, indifference to the fate of nobody has still been the normality in our lives, and the fates of the weak and the losers have always been placed in the back of macro narrative, few people introspecting their "ethical positioning" in this respect. In a word, the consciousness of "destiny" is the origin of many unfair phenomena of all ages, and the Four Classical Novels have unconsciously become the transmitters of this kind of consciousness. We should have a sober realization on it.

**Key words** identity; narrative; differential sequence pattern

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Identity indicates one's family background and social status. In a worldly society, identity makes a difference in being close or distant, superior or inferior, noble or humble. Human beings ought to be born equal but in ancient Chinese society particular about distinction, everyone was particularly sensitive to his own and others' identities, and their actions would be dominated by identity consciousness. The characters in traditional Chinese narratives have a variety of identities, their actions can also reflect identity influence, and thus the discussion from the perspective of identity will undoubtedly deepen our knowledge on correlative literary works and their authors' purposes. It goes without doubt that character identity is also an important object of study in foreign narratives. But what we need to notice is that in the most representative ancient Chinese novels, *A Dream in Red Mansions*, *Pilgrimage to the West*, *Heroes of the Marsh*, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the identities of main characters are really unusual. They all possess inherent special identity, or other, the special identity which can't be acquired through endeavor and effort. Jia Baoyu was not only a childe but also a holy jade attendant coming to ask for payment of tear debt. Tang Monk was a pilgrim for Buddhist scriptures as well as reincarnation from Presbyter Golden Cicada, the second disciple of Rulai Buddha. Song Jiang was headman of rebels and a constellation in the sky descending to the world. Besides being a folk hero, Liu Bei had royal blood lineage. Such identity arrangement, which can't be explained with coincidence, reveals the narrative ethic in the Four Classical Novels was originally a scale slant for those who had special identities. What caused such slant lies in "differential sequence pattern" strongly criticized by Fei Xiaotong in *Rural China*. It is maybe because "differential sequence pattern" in China having been a long rooted but imperceptible existence that the narrative ethic influenced by character identity has been ignored hitherto. Therefore, this issue is particularly worth raising for discussion.

### **I. Special Identity of Main Character**

The main characters in the Four Classical Novels all have their own previous and present lives: the story worlds in *A Dream in Red Mansions*, *Pilgrimage to the West* and *Heroes of the Marsh* are tinged with fantasy, consequently the main characters' previous lives refer to the ones before reincarnation or enduring and surviving demon and disaster. Under the constraint of "historical novel," time and space travel is not suitable to be narrated in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* so "previous life" is manifested as the origin of main character's blood lineage. In the following we might as well identify main characters' identities in four works one

by one.

### **1. *A Dream in Red Mansions***

Jia Baoyu was the second son of Jia Zheng and madam Wang in Rongguo Mansion, the grandson of lineal descent belonging to jade generation in Jia family, and his previous life had been holy jade attendant in Red Cloud Palace. Holy jade attendant had had favor of watering Crimson Pearl Herb beside Karma Stone in those years. In order to pay a debt of gratitude, the latter incarnated into Lin Daiyu lodging in Jia Mansion, the way of rewarding gratitude was to use tears to repay the debt. Concerning the symbol of identity, Jia Baoyu held a piece of “mystic jade” in his mouth when he was born. This jade had originally been a hard stone unused by Nuwa, a goddess in Chinese mythology, when She tempered stones to repair the heaven. After being directed by a Taoist priest, the jade followed Jia Baoyu to travel in human world. Lin Daiyu’s “a pair of seemingly knitted hung deep gray brows, a couple of seemingly sobbing eyes with tears” (Chapter 3) were also symbols, implying the owner of this pair of eyes came to human world to “repay tears.”

### **2. *Pilgrimage to the West***

The previous lives of Tang Monk, Zhu Bajie, Sha Monk, and white horse had respectively been Presbyter Golden Cicada, the second disciple of Rulai Buddha, Marshal of the Heavenly Canopy, General Roller Shutters and the third prince of dragon. Sun Wukong was not only the chief disciple of Tang Monk, before he was pressed under Five Elements Mountain he had been Great Sage Equaling Heaven in the welkin and Handsome Monkey King in Mountain of Flowers and Fruits. That was the reason why he was addressed as “mahatma” on the pilgrimage for Buddhist scriptures. As for identity symbol, although Tang Monk had no special skills for subduing demons and monsters, he could use the incantation of the golden hoop imparted by the Goddess of Mercy to suppress Sun Wukong. This alone could show his status was superior to Sun Wukong. That the Goddess of Mercy presented him cassock and Buddhist Monk’s staff via the hand of Li Shimin was the “legality” for his pilgrimage for Buddhist scripture. Sun Wukong possessed that invincible golden cudgel all the way. After he converted to Buddhism, the Goddess of Mercy conjured up three pieces of soft hair for help at his back head. This physical sign marked that he has already entered into orthodox rank from aliens.

### **3. *Heroes of the Marsh***

Song Jiang had merely been a humble beadle in Yuncheng county government Shandong Province before he joined in Mount Liang. But in chapter 71 “Receiving Heavenly Message on a Vaulted Stele in the Hall of Loyalty,” his name was

connected with constellation in the heaven, ranked first in the first square array of “thirty-six Big Dippers” so he fully deserved to be the great chief in Liangshan Moor. As far as identity symbol was concerned, Song Jiang was repeatedly assisted by various immortals at critical time. In chapter 42, two lads in black clothes invited Song Jiang into the audience hall, there the Goddess of the Empyrean allowed him to drink three cups of celestial wine and to eat three celestial jujubes, then she solemnly conferred him three volumes of heavenly books. Till then Song Jiang realized he possessed the identity of “star master.”

#### **4. *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms***

Although Liu Bei “was born of poor family, lived on mongering straw sandals and weaving matting,” in fact he was “a descendant of Liu Sheng, Prince Jin of Zhongshan in Han Dynasty, a great-great-grandson of His Majesty Emperor Jing of Han Dynasty.” In chapter 20 of the novel, when Emperor Xian summoned Liu Bei, his Majesty commanded one “to fetch the book of family genealogy to check up,” and found “Xuande was uncle of Emperor Xian,” then “invited Liu Bei into the side palace hall to renew etiquette between uncle and nephew,” such narration was as good as a notarization for Liu Bei’s identity as royal uncle. When it comes to identity symbol, his royal ancestry corresponded with his appearance features, “his earlobes droop above his should, his hands dangle below his knees, and his eye can see his own ears” (chapter 1). It was testified by Ji Xianlin that the emperors described in the history books during the Northern and Southern Dynasties all had this type of Buddha appearance (Ji Xianli, 156; Fu Xiuyan, 230-233). Therefore people can make out Liu Bei’s noble family origin only with their bare eyes. In *Elegy to Noble and Royal Descendants*, Du Fu had such appearance description, “The descendants of Emperor Gao of Han Dynasty are all high nose, Royal offspring are naturally from common people different.” This means royal descendants were branded with special marks different from unimportant people in appearance.

The above examples tell us that the main characters in the Four Classical Novels all had distinctive family ancestries or origins from others’ just as the verse in chapter 21 of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* describes: “Laying heroes bare will startle audience.” In Hollywood series movie *The Matrix*, the hero’s name is “Neo,” actually means “The One.” When he discovered he turned out to be talented “The one,” his amazement was not second to that of Song Jiang when he was addressed as “star master” by the lads in black clothes subordinate to the Goddess of the Empyrean. In another American series movie winning universal praise *Terminator*, the hero John Connor later learned that he, among the most

ordinary, unexpectedly undertook the leader's mission of rescue human destiny. Having a comparative reading of such kind of Chinese and foreign stories, it is observed that identity is closely related to mission, and not any character in the stories can act as "The One." "God will confer a great mission on the one" is always the business of a very few with special identities.

## II. Distinctive Mark of Special Identity

Special identity also needs distinctive mark. Otherwise it can't draw others' attention. It is the reason why the discussion in the above part listed out main characters' identity marks. To summarize, these identity marks are nothing more than distinctive object, exclusive power and exceptional appearance, and the like.

### 1. Distinctive Object

The best representative of distinctive object should be that piece of mystic jade of Jia Baoyu. The main feature of that piece of mystic jade is its indispensability, in other words, once the lifeblood was lost, Jia Baoyu would fall ill or muddleheaded, no longer that previous person. Except this, we can't see it has other functions. What can be mentioned in the same breath with mystic jade in *A Dream in Red Mansions* is the gold lock of Xue Baochai. But it was said that the gold lock was bestowed by a monk, it is not on the same level as the distinctive object that Jia Baoyu brought with him from his mother's womb. Hereby speaking, "the good match between gold and jade" originally had the nature of forceful kneading. The three volumes of heavenly books, conferred by the Goddess of the Empyrean to Song Jiang in *Heroes of the Marsh*, seems not the magic weapon to help him to be invincible. Adopting "the scheme of returning air to stir up fire to defeat tactical deployment of troops" in volume three of heavenly book, Song Jiang coped with Gao Lian's witchcraft, but was finally defeated (Chapter 52). Just as the golden cudgel used by Song Wukong, Zhu Bajie's rake and Sha Monk's mord are also distinctive objects, chapter 19 and chapter 20 in *Pilgrimage to the West* had particular introduction about their origins respectively. What's more, in chapter 88 the three princes of Yuhua Kingdom expressed their worship for three masters' weapons. But just like the saying "Deep rivers move in silence," the distinctive object representing identity shouldn't be excessively shown off in public, because of being driven by vanity, Sun Wukong and his two junior fellow allowed the craftsmen in Yuhua Kingdom to counterfeit their weapons, only to let the three precious weapons be pillaged by demons outside the city, which caused another fight on the way to the Western Paradise.

## 2. Exotic Power

Exotic power can even more embody character's identity than distinctive object. Tang Monk's exotic power lies that he can read incantation of the golden hoop imparted by the Goddess of Mercy so Sun Wukong who ever created a tremendous uproar in the heavenly palace would be totally obedient to him. Much the same as Tang Monk, some main characters in three other novels seem to be powerless. Jia Baoyu was almost a good-for-nothing person in Jia family but on account of the great void dreamland only accessible to him and Fairy Disenchantment letting him see the book implying the fates of Twelve Ladies of Jinling, he was made to be in a prophetic position of "the public all drunk while I awake alone." The civil and military skills of Song Jiang was not striking at all among the heroes in Mount Liang, but every time he could get the blessings of deities and head off the dangers. In this respect, his good luck was exclusive, and nature's mysteries revealed to him by immortals helped him to have more self-conscious understanding of destiny. There were no such protectors as the Goddess of Mercy, Fairy Disenchantment and the Goddess of the Empyrean in the story world where Liu Bei lived but some plots still let readers feel that everything is doomed by destiny. For instance, in chapter 21 of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Cao Cao invited Liu Bei to "discuss heroes while eating green plum and stewing wine," what Cao Cao said "the heroes in the world today worthy of mentioning are Your Grace and Cao" really startled Liu Bei. It was at the very moment that the thunder blasted, which provided the most appropriate excuse for Lei Bei's dropping spoon and chopsticks from his hands, otherwise suspicious Cao Cao was bound not to let him off. Take chapter 30 as an example, Liu Bei was chased by Cai Mao to Tan Brook, at the critical point of nearly being captured, "that horse rose suddenly from water, took a leap of thirty-foot high and flied onto the west bank of the brook." This type of fantastic incidents recurred on Liu Bei and let him believe he was chosen by God's will. As for exotic power, Zhu Geliang's ability of predicting with miraculous accuracy couldn't be matched by others so much so that Lu Xun drew a conclusion about him of being "approximating demon" (Lu Xun, 129). After he died, Sima Yi "saw a big star, red, brilliant and angular, moved from the northeast to the southwest, and fell down in Shu barracks" (Chapter 140), such description also placed him in the position of "being connected with constellation" like Song Jiang.

## 3. Exotic Appearance

Exotic appearance is also the symbol to show identity because appearance sometimes is clearer to show one's situation than his clothes. Let's begin with

the “good-looking” among exotic appearances, which imitates the images of the Buddha and Gods in people’s minds. Liu Bei’s “ears are long, the lobes touching his shoulders, and his hands hang down below his knees.” His features are quite similar to the emperors of the Northern and Southern Dynasties who worshipped Buddhism. Implied by the Physiognomy, common people regard the persons who have features similar to emperors would generally have the similar blessing. Tang Monk’s looks originally like “an Arhat comes down to the earth, or a living Bodhisattva descends to the mortal.” After he put on the cassock and took the nine-ringed staff, the monks in the Huasheng Temple “all said that King Ksitigarbha was coming” (Chapter 12). Zhuge Liang has “height above the average with a refined face, wearing a head-wrap and a long crane-white gown,” his bearing and breeding “with the air of the immortal” shows that he is absolutely not a mere ordinary mortal (Chapter 38). Then, we’ll move to talk about “evil-looking” or “odd-looking” which are opposite to “good-looking.” These looks are close to animals, even demons. Mount Liang Gallants have nicknames relate to animals, such as “a head like a leopard,” “blue-faced beast,” “heaven soaring eagle,” and so on. Moreover, the author frequently gets reference from the carnivorous animals to describe those gallants’ bodies, for example, Song Jiang has “the likeness to a tiger when he sits, and takes after a wolf when he walks”<sup>1</sup> (Chapter 18), Li Kui has “a body of thick flesh just like a black bear, as well as it is covered with rough skin like an wild ox’s” (Chapter 38). Such description in fact does not contain derogatory meanings because being a bandit is extremely akin to participating in a society with the law of the jungle. Within this sphere, only the beast and raptor with sturdy body and ferocious appearance can occupy the top position of food chain. On the way to the Western Paradise to fetch Buddhist scriptures, Sun Wukong repeatedly demanded Zhu Bajie to cover his long snout when they asked for lodging. In fact, his own hairy monkey face has also scared too many people (Chapter 56). Anyhow, these terrifying looks can be considered as scoring factors during the fighting, such appearances with animal features as Guan Yu’s phoenix-like eyes and fine bushy eyebrows like silkworms, and Zhang Fei’s head like a leopard’s, large eyes, a swallow pointed chin, and whiskers like a tiger’s, and so forth.

No matter how peculiar the exotic appearances are, they all transform from normal ones. The transformations are no more than the following three categories: the first category is to increase or decrease the parts or organs of a body (Sun Wukong has one more tail than ordinary people, and Wei Yan in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* has one more back bone on his head); the second category is to transform the size and shape of some parts (Liu Bei’s arms and ears are lengthened

or enlarged); the third category is to confuse the boundaries between human beings and other species or immortals (Sun Wukong and Zhu Bajie are something consubstantial with human and animal, while Zhuge Liang has sage-like type). In ancient China, the saying “sages have exotic appearances” has long been known, that means great figures are bound to have looks out of the ordinary. In his book *On Balance· Bone and Looks*, Wang Chong said, “Shun has eyes with double pupils, Yu has ears with three holes, Tang has two double-elbows, Emperor Wen has four breasts.” We can find that these looks derive from the first category which adopts increasing as the method. “Double pupils,” “three holes,” “double-elbow,” and “four breasts” all refer to the number of body parts or organs larger than those of ordinary people. The method of increasing number is repeatedly used here perhaps because the thought of “the more, the better” does work here. Xu Shen explained “Emperor Wen having four breasts equals great benevolence” as “the breast is used to breed people, so it equals great benevolence.” What he meant was that “breast” had the same significance with the “benevolence” of breeding. With this understanding, as Emperor Wen’s breasts were twice as many as common people, his “great benevolence” attracted “the whole world to yield, the populace to befriend.”<sup>2</sup> The “more” of other body parts or organs can also bring corresponding advantages, such as the persons with “double pupils” or “four eyes” should be more observative than others, the person with one more hole in his ears (ears with three holes) should have more sensitive listening than others, and the person with one more elbow (double-elbow) should be far better at working.

### III. Identity and Privilege

Identity corresponds to right and fate, what kind of identity is doomed to what kind of right and fate. Even nowadays, the green channels in every airport all over the world are just served for the minority with special identities. Narratology mainly studies narrative modes of events, while events are constructed by characters’ actions so we need observe the differences in the rights to act and fates of characters.

The actions in the Four Classical Novels are different from one another. *A Dream of Red Mansions*, *Pilgrimage to the West*, *Heroes of the Marsh* and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* mainly develop with the actions of love, fetching Buddhist scriptures, rebelling and contending for hegemony, all the main characters are involved into these actions. Naturally, the development of events would push main characters to the core position of the stage. Narrators’ frequent mention of them would constantly inspire readers to expect and concern about them. In this

case, the characters that have huge drop in identity from main characters can but sideline onto the edge of the stage, and stay in dispensable and neglected positions. More extremely speaking, it seems that there exists such an action logic in the Four Classical Novels: only Jia Baoyu has the freedom to associate with the girls in the Prospect Garden, only Tang Monk is qualified for going to the Western Paradise to fetch Buddhist scriptures, only Song Jiang can realize to be the “King on the Hill” on Mount Liang, and only Liu Bei is the legitimate heir to Han Dynasty. It was nobody who didn’t dare to stand out to challenge this overbearing action logic. In chapter 57 of *Pilgrimage to the West*, the six-eared macaque (the false Sun Wukong) ever fantasied: “I learn the official document by heart so that I can go to the Western Paradise to worship the Buddha and fetch the scriptures myself, then I shall have all the glory of taking them back to the Eastern Land, make the people in the Jambudvipa Continent worship me as forebear and enjoy the fame all ages.” But Sha Monk refuted him immediately, “Nobody’s ever heard of the saying ‘Monkey King fetching Buddhist scriptures.’” At their first meeting, Jia Baoyu asked Lin Daiyu, “Have you got a jade?” This naive question comes from the point of identity symbol, or represents the secret code between two persons who have predestination from the past. The negative answer sent Baoyu off instantly into a fit of madness, and his action of violently hurling the jade actually revealed his discontent with the arrangement of fate. As a result, this “Devil Incarnate” was perhaps the only one in literary history to make a protest against his identity of “The One.” During the Cultural Revolution, Song Jiang and *Heroes of the Marsh* were criticized together with one of the crimes “shielding Chao Gai from the one hundred and eight gallants.” The fact is that Chao Gai didn’t possess the identity of “leader of the Big Dipper” — even not among the members of the thirty-six Dippers or seventy-two Devils of Hell, what’s more, his name also couldn’t be found among the names of 108 gallants on the stele written in Tadpoles text — instead of Song Jiang deliberately intriguing to be the leader.

Who is more proper for the leader of Mount Liang, Chao Gai or Song Jiang? As to the rebelling qualification and daring of a “King on the Hill,” it seems that Chao Gai was superior to Song Jiang, but Chao Gai’s fate was not so good as that of Song Jiang. Song Jiang was originally a constellation who was degraded into the lower world for the time being, and he would soon ascend to the Heaven. Thus, Chao Gai was doomed to be shot to die, and Song Jiang transferred from a government civil official into the leader of forest outlaws. Not only in *Heroes of the Marsh*, but the other three classical novels have such similar story design favoring the characters with identities. Generally speaking, the narrators could not help

concealing their consciousness to “despise the poor and curry favor with the rich” when they pass judgment on characters. One of the core conceptions of narratology is that action determines character, but in ancient Chinese narrative tradition, in addition to the action, the character’s fate was also determined by his identity as well. Considered carefully, there is an obvious inclination in the narrative ethic of the Four Classical Novels. Under the same disorder background, the military mutiny led by Liu Bei was honored to be reviving Han Dynasty while the action such as Yuan Shao’s and Cao Cao’s was depreciated to be separating the country and conspiring to overthrow the regime. On the same way to the West Paradise for Buddhist scriptures, the nine previous pilgrims had already become skulls on Monk Sha’s neck, yet Tang Monk could sit majestically on the magic dinghy made by the skulls to cross the river safely.<sup>3</sup> As for murder and arson, the heroes in Mount Liang received cheers for their gangsterism while people of the kind of Li Gui was portrayed as furtive bandit. What’s more, concerning the impact on the boundary between male and female, Jia Baoyu’s first taste of making love with Xiren obtained “sympathetic understanding” but Jia Huan and Jia Rui were despised even though they didn’t succeed in any love affair. In chapter 20 of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Jia Huan’s words “How dare I hope to compete with Baoyu?” reveals the grief and sorrow of people without identities.

Concerning the injustice to the people without identities, the case in point goes to the arrangement of monsters’ and demons’ fates in *Pilgrimage to the West*. Sun Wukong led his brothers to protect Tang Monk all the way to the Western Paradise to fetch the scriptures, and the monsters tragically killed by him were numerous. Yet Sun Wukong even claimed that he would turn his gold-banded cudgel into a huge grinding base of “over four hundred feet long” and “eighty feet around,” “roll it down the southern slope and kill five thousand of them; roll it down the northern slope and kill another five thousand; roll it along the ridge from east to west, and even if there are forty or fifty thousand of them I’ll squash them all to a bodily pulp”(Chapter 74). Nevertheless, all the way, quite a few opponents came from orthodox side, some of them were absent from duty because of unwilling to be lonely while others were assigned by the Goddess of Mercy or other Gods to be deliberately obstructive on their way to the Western Paradise, which are so-called “Organizational Arrangements.” At the very moment when Sun Wukong was ready to brandish his cudgel to beat the ever-respected characters, some representatives from the orthodox side would stand out to intercede or tell the whole story. At this time, Tang Monk and his disciples could but hopelessly let them get away from punishment. After all, what they did was not different from monsters’. For

example, one of the twenty-eight constellations, the Strider, ran away from the heaven to be a great bully in the mortal world. After getting drunk, he seized a girl who was playing a lute, and “took a bite on her head” (Chapter 30). But finally the Jade Emperor just punished him to tend the fire for Lord Lao Zi, and he still “took an errand with salary” in the Tushita Palace (Chapter 31). Classical Narratorology holds the opinion that the basic structure of a story should be “balanced–unbalanced–balanced” (Tzvetan Todorov, 187-188), but the ending of *Pilgrimage to the West* is that the minority of pedigreed characters got well arranged while thousands of common monsters became wronged souls and plaintive ghosts roaming in the wilderness.

Out of dissatisfaction with the ending of *Pilgrimage to the West*, Hu Shi rewrote the eighty-first ordeal in the story of Tang Monk’s pilgrimage for Buddhist scriptures. He explained like this: “Ten years ago I once told Mr. Lu Xun that the eighty-first ordeal (Chapter 99) in *Pilgrimage to the West* was rather shabby and should be rewritten so as to match such a huge book” (Hu Shi, 338). Hu Shi’s rewrite narrated Tang Monk’s sweeping Buddhist Pagoda and falling into dream after having successfully fetched Buddhist scriptures. In the dream, the souls of those demons and monsters who had been attacked and killed all came to claim what they deserved. The total amounted to 59049 ghosts. So Tang Monk took a knife, cut the flesh from his own body and fed these hungry ghosts piece by piece in order to satisfy their wish of enjoying “Tang Monk Flesh.” Although this inconceivable action only appeared in the dream of the story, the readers can still feel Hu Shi’s moral care about the unidentified characters — those monsters without any background shouldn’t have been attacked or killed all for nothing. They should be compensated in some way and liberated from no end-result situation. This alteration seems to more accord with the “top-level design” of the theme of the story: it was due to “the greed, lechery, delight in the suffering of others, a great deal of killing and quarrelling” in the Hinayana-popular southern Jambudvipa that led to the pilgrimage for Buddhist scriptures. So Rulai Buddha asked the Great Tang Dynasty in the Eastern Lands to send someone in search of Mahayana scriptures in order to achieve the goals of “raising the dead up to Heaven” and “untying the knots of all injustice.” If the pilgrimage caused more unsolved injustice and fault, wouldn’t it be contrary to the supreme arbiter’s intention?

#### **IV. Narrative Ethic and “Differential Sequence Pattern”**

Literature reflects reality. Narrative ethic in a novel ultimately is the reflection

of the social ethic at a certain historical period. Fei Xiaotong described the basic structure of Chinese rural society by putting forward the concept of “differential sequence pattern.”

A society with differential sequence pattern is a network based on innumerable private relationships. Every knot in this network is attached to a kind of moral element. Accordingly traditional morality does not find a general moral value. All the values can't be detached from the human relations of differential sequence. (36)

Chinese morality and law can be adjusted according to whom they enforce on and to what extent they are related. I saw quite a few of my friends who criticized corruption severely, whereas instead of condemning he would cover up on the behalf of his father if his father was corrupt. Even worse, he asked his father for the money from corruption and at the same time scolded others' corruption. When he got corrupted, he consoled himself with the word “capable.” This is not contradictory in a differential sequence society, in which universal standards don't work. You can't decide what standard to be adopted until you have asked clearly about whom the object is and his relationship with you.

Due to the lack of “universal standard” or so called “general moral concept”, what rural society uses to measure the morality is a retractable ruler varied with different relationships. That is to say, the same thing that the people inside the “relation circle” can do, but the outsiders can't do it. The outsiders will be punished for doing that whereas the insiders will get away with punishment. In *Mencius — Wan Zhang Part One*, Wan Zhang once questioned such obvious unfair differential sequence pattern. “Xiang is extremely ruthless but is enfeoffed the land of Youbi. What's wrong with the people in Youbi? Should the benevolent person make decision like this? To kill others but enfeoff his younger brother?” Mencius answered this question by quoting the inner morality of the aristocratic circle as: “He is the Son of Heaven, if his younger brother is an ordinary man, can you say that he is close to and cares for his brother?”

Only after knowing this differential sequence pattern and circle mentality, can we further understand the true meaning of the saying why “Monkey King can never go on a pilgrimage for Buddhist scriptures” in *Pilgrimage to the West*. There is also an old saying, “Nothing can separate relations,” and it's natural that Rulai Buddha reserved such a great immortal cause like pursuing Buddhist scriptures from the Western Paradise for his own people. Tang Monk's previous incarnation

was Buddha's second disciple Presbyter Golden Cicada, how could Sun Wukong who was neither his relative nor friend be comparable to this relationship? In *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Zhang Fei obstructed Liu Bei from visiting Zhu Geliang's hut three times (Chapter 37) and Guan Yu was not contented that "the old soldier" Huang Zhong was ranked as Five Tiger-like Generals along with him (Chapter 73). These are differential sequence pattern and circle mentality at work. In *A Dream in Red Mansions*, it was hard for Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu to get married. The underlying reason was the exclusiveness on mutual marriage among the four big families of Jia, Shi, Wang and Xue. In *Heroes of the Marsh*, Mount Liang Gallants became sworn brothers and consciously formed a big circle of more than one hundred people, thus creating the non-equivalence of the life between the insiders and outsiders of the circle. For example, in Chapter 40 "Mount Liang Gallants Raid the Execution Ground," to rescue his "sworn brothers," Li Kui continued consuming lives of many innocent civilians with his indiscriminate battle-axe, like cutting melons and vegetables.<sup>4</sup> However, we can't feel a tiny bit condemn against him in the discourse of the narrator.

Even to this day, indifference to the fate of the people with no status is still the normality in our lives just as it almost occurs to no one that small monkeys on Mountain of Flowers and Fruit are still looking forward to Sun Wukong's return. The unfortunate fate of the weak and the loser is always put at the back of the macro narrative. Few people will reflect on their "ethical positioning" in this respect. We also need to reflect on the attitude of our society towards the people with status. Of course nowadays Chinese people don't regard successful people as the stars descending from the heaven to human world but many people still believe "destiny" above "human endeavor." Success is not up to one's endeavor but to his "destiny." Through the ages, most people hold that the legitimacy should not be achieved by their own struggles but should be granted by the authority of the "above." Those who spare no effort making "background" or "backing" for themselves are in fact taking advantage of this mentality. No one knew this better than Chen Sheng and Wu Guang. They wrote "Chen Sheng will be king!" in vermilion on silk and hid it in the belly of a fish beforehand. At night they cried like a fox, "Great Chu will rise again! Chen Sheng will be king!"<sup>5</sup> Needless to say, "destiny" consciousness is the source of many unfair phenomena. We must have a clear understanding that the Four Classical Novels have virtually become the communicator of this kind of consciousness.

Incidentally, the critical attitude towards the identity consciousness and narrative ethic of the Four Classical Novels doesn't mean that there is a similar

problem in the whole ancient narrative tradition. “Legend of the White Snake,” “Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai,” “Meng Jiangnv Wailing the Great Wall” and “Cowherd and Weaving Fairy” are known as China’s four great legends. They seem to deliberately challenge “differential sequence pattern” preserved by the Four Classical Novels. Buddhism does not allow different species to have any dealings with human but Bai Suzhen insisted on tying the knot with Xu Xian as a loving couple. Confucian publicized that it was improper for man and woman to touch each other but Zhu Yingtai disguised herself and read with other male classmates. Taoists hope enjoying an ever-young carefree and content life but Weaving Fairy just looked forward to human life of men tilling the farm and women weaving at home. Feudal emperor took the construction of the Great Wall as their grand achievement while Meng Jiangnv regarded it as a symbol of evil and oppression.

The four legends reveal a subversive identity consciousness. Those hierarchical and categorical barriers, which maintain existing order, become the lashed hypocritical embankment in narration, regardless of the distinctions between human beings and monsters or the segregation between male and female, regardless of the separation between a fairy and a mortal man or the difference between superiors and inferiors. Such “ethical positioning” of course appears not only in the four legends but also in the past operas, raps, unofficial histories and private notes which contained countless subversive narrative like this. They tell more real historical stories than “imperial history.” The function of this kind of personal narrative lies in making up for the loss of macro narrative and readjusting the ethical scale inclined to people with status. Thus folk groans ignored by official history get attention and are magnified into a thunder-like sound like Meng Jiangnv’s cry. The biggest disadvantage of macro narrative lies in ignoring the pains of ordinary people. There is no reason not to reflect the cost they have taken for the course of history in narratives. Only by combining macro narrative and personal narrative can we understand the panorama of human history.

## Notes

1. Many readers just regarded Song Jiang as a petty civil official who had a way with words. Actually, the author portrayed him as a man has “the likeness to a tiger when he sits, and takes after a wolf when he walks” has already implied that there was a kind of domineering aura which couldn’t be oppressed in his inner heart, and his action of slaying Yan Poxi in a fit of anger was just an evidence to prove his hot blood.
2. “We can explain the ‘More’ of Sages’ looks as follows: ‘Have’ just defaulted to be reasonable,

so it could be 'More'. The origin of the thought 'the more, the better' just comes from here. Even though such 'more' refers to the breast or the black mole on the buttock of male, they are miraculous and reasonable." Zhang Yuan. "32 Looks of the Buddha and Sages with Unusual Looks." *Knowledge of Literature and History*, (3) 2013.

3. "That monster said, 'I am willing to be converted to Buddhism,' then went closer as he continued, 'Bodhisattva, I have lost count of the number of people I have eaten here, and I have even devoured some pilgrims who were trying to fetch scriptures'" (Chapter 8 in *Pilgrimage to the West*). "Sha Monk took the skulls from his neck without delay and tied them into the pattern of the Nine Palaces with the Bodhisattva's gourd in the middle, and then he asked Tang Monk to board it. When he sat on it Tang Monk found that it was as stable as a small dinghy" (Chapter 22 in *Pilgrimage to the West*).

4. "(Li Kui) then went to the crossroad, he slaughtered regardless of soldiers or civilians, thus bodies of soldiers and civilians were sprawled all over the crossroads, and blood flowed in rivulets. Countless more had been felled and wounded. .... This big black fellow slaughtered down to the riverside, his whole body spattered with blood. He went on killing along the riverbank. The people who happened to come across were all cut down into the river" (Chapter 40 in *Heroes of the Marsh*).

5. *Historical Records — Chen She Family*.

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