
The Taming of the White Snake: The Oppression of Female Sexuality in the *Legend of the White Snake*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ancient mythological origins of the legend of the White Snake. The snake woman's sensuality, longevity, fertility, and capability in healing are archetypal qualities common to snake goddesses in many early matrifocal mythologies around the world: the snake woman represents matrifocal sensibility in contrast to and in conflict with the patriarchal world order. The ultimate destruction of the marriage between the weak husband Xu Xuan (or Xu Xian) and the powerful snake wife shows the intolerance of female-centered households in a patriarchal society. The evolution of the White Snake stories across time shows a consistent trend toward characterizing the snake woman as progressively less threatening, until finally she is transformed into an idealized Confucian wife and mother. Using comparative mythology as an analytical framework, I argue that the White Snake is a vestige of an ancient snake creator goddess venerated for her power of fertility. Her defeat in the legend can be interpreted as symbolic of the triumph of patriarchy in its regulation and control of women's fertility. The enduring allure of the legend lies in its ability to reveal the latent discontents in patriarchal societies.

KEYWORDS comparative mythology, the White Snake, patriarchy, matriarchy, female sexuality, marriage

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Baishhezhuān (*The Legend of the White Snake*) is one of the most enduring folk tales in China. Although the basic structure of the story was formed in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), her origin can be traced back to Nüwa, the ancient Chinese creator goddess. Indeed, the snake woman in the legend shows archetypal qualities common to snake goddesses in many early matrifocal mythologies around the world. There is evidence that the snake woman represents matrifocal sensibility in contrast to and in conflict with patriarchal order. There are numerous versions of the story in Chinese opera, folklore, and novels, and the consistent pattern uniting these various versions indicates that an essential theme of the legend is male anxiety toward female sexuality. The evolution of the White Snake legend across the centuries shows a consistent trend of transforming the snake woman into a less and less threatening figure until she becomes an idealized Confucian wife and mother.

Using comparative mythology as an analytical framework, this article first examines the many similarities that the White Snake has in common with snake goddess myths around the world. I argue that the powerful White Snake is a vestige of an earlier, goddess worshiping culture that venerated a mother goddess for her power of fertility. The mother goddess was later replaced by the father god who values transcendence and denies the temptations of earthly pleasures represented by the mother goddess. The article then examines the evolution of the White Snake legend and traces the continuously diminishing power of the White Snake from its earliest Tang Dynasty version to the Qing Dynasty version. This transformation of the snake from lethal seductress to wife is an indication of patriarchal anxiety toward the necessity of mastery and control of female fertility. Finally, I present a new interpretation of the central conflicts in the legend and point out that the story's enduring allure lies in its ability to capture the latent discontents that exist in patriarchal societies, such as prioritizing universal principles over interpersonal relationships, and conceptualizing marriage as primarily an economic institution rather than a union of natural attraction. The trapping of the White Snake under the phallic-like pagoda is a symbolic expression of the patriarchal social order controlling the power of fertility traditionally assigned to the primordial snake mother goddess.

The White Snake and Snake Goddesses

The legend of the White Snake is rich in its mythological symbolism. The White Snake is said to have lived a thousand years and have the power of healing. She is also endowed with the power to conjure rainstorms and floods. She has irresistible

charm and gives birth to a scholar son. She can revive her dead husband with a life-restoring herb stolen from a Taoist sage. She is crafty in concealing her identity and succeeds in deceiving her husband time and again. Many scholars have pointed out that the snake is commonly deemed a symbol of evil in the Judeo-Christian influenced West, and that veneration of the snake is unique to Chinese culture, helping to explain the White Snake legend's enduring popularity in China (Yuan 80; Sheng 83; Tang 189; X. Li 149). I argue that the worship of the serpent is not unique to Chinese culture but is a characteristic common to many ancient cultures; the demonization of the serpent is not limited to the West but can be observed in a number of myths around the world. This universal pattern of the degradation of the snake from a symbol of the sacred to an emblem of evil likely marks an ancient cultural transformation from matrilineal to patrilineal societies.

As a symbol of fertility and rejuvenation, the serpent represents the sacred in many ancient cultures around the world and is very often venerated as the creator goddess. In her book *The Serpent and the Swan* (1998), Boria Sax argues that snake-inspired cult worship exists in many regions because of its form. "A snake, by virtue of the absolute simplicity of its form, suggests something primeval, perhaps one of the first beings to have emerged from Chaos" (59). The archeologist Marija Gimbutas has shown in her book *The Language of the Goddess* (1989) that the archeological findings of ancient female figurines around the world suggest that the earliest human religion was one of the Great Goddess. She asserts that "[t]hese systematic associations in the Near East, southeastern Europe, the Mediterranean area, and in central, Western, and Northern Europe indicate the extension of the same Goddess religion to all of these regions as a cohesive and persistent ideological system" (Gimbutas, *Language* xv). Furthermore, as Sax notes, "Many goddesses of love and fertility of the ancient Near East were intimately associated with serpents: the Sumerian Nammu, the Sumerian Inanna, the Sumerian Nintu, the Assyro-Babylonian Ishtar, and the West-Semitic Astarte. The last of these assumed, in the Canaanite temples of Beth-Shan, the unequivocal form of a snake. . . . In addition, they were known to take lovers that were human or only partially divine" (62). The close connection between the snake and the goddess in mythologies around the world indicates that the legend of the White Snake may not be unique to the Chinese cultural context, but rather is a story that captures the discomfort and anxiety derived from the rise of patriarchy.

The Chinese snake woman's magical capabilities, including longevity, fertility, healing, and rejuvenation, are shared with serpent deity myths throughout the world. As Gimbutas suggests,

The snake is a transfunctional symbol. . . . Its vital influence was felt not only in life creation, but also in fertility and increase, and particularly in the regeneration of dying life energy. Combined with magic plants, the snake's powers were potent in healing and creating life anew. (121)

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The connection between the snake and the power of rejuvenation was perhaps first recorded in the ancient Sumerian poem *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, where the serpent steals the plant of life from Gilgamesh and gains the power of rejuvenation for herself, forcing Gilgamesh to accept his own mortality (Tablet XI, George 99).

The association between snakes and the power of healing can also be observed from depictions of the Egyptian goddess of healing, Isis, who resurrects her husband Osiris and is often portrayed as wearing a cobra headdress in Egyptian iconography. Similarly, in Greek myth, the serpentine blood of Medusa is said to be a magical cure. To this day, the rod of Asclepius, depicted as a snake entwined on a staff, is still recognized as the symbol for medical practice in North America.

In addition, because the serpent is frequently associated with fertility, it is consistently identified with the feminine. Mythologies of the serpent around the world recognize the serpent as having sacred powers both benevolent and hostile to men. A serpent erect is benign whereas a crawling serpent is a symbol of evil (Condren 9). The duality of the mythological serpent is reflected in the legend of the White Snake as she nurtures and elevates her husband's status (benevolent) but also poses a constant threat to his life (hostile).

Another familiar pattern that can be found in serpent myths in various regions of the world is that the serpent is often depicted as an adversary of a patriarchal authority. As mentioned earlier, the serpent steals the sacred plant from Gilgamesh, ruining his attempt to attain immortality. The serpent similarly thwarts the authority of Yahweh in the Garden of Eden, enabling man to know good and evil (Condren 11-15). The serpent is a rival that Krishna needs to tame (Zimmer and Campbell 62), and snake-haired Medusa's beheading made Perseus king. The serpent in the legend of the White Snake is likewise the adversary of male authority, as she tricks Xu Xuan into marriage, and challenges the authority of Monk Fa Hai with a flood.

The demonization of the serpent is not unique to the Judeo-Christian West but is common to many world myths involving serpent goddesses. For example, in ancient Babylonian myth, the goddess Tiamat was a serpent woman who generated all life on earth. She was defeated by her grandson Marduk who became the king of all gods. Similarly, Medusa was believed to be a Libyan serpent goddess whose snake hair was an ancient symbol of wisdom. The story of Perseus beheading a monstrous Medusa was a later invention (Walker 629). This trajectory of

diminishing the importance of serpent goddesses by elevating male heroes or gods can be observed in ancient Chinese myths as well. Scholars have pointed out that there is a connection between the White Snake and the snake mother goddess Nüwa in ancient Chinese myths (Yuan 80; Sheng 83; Luo 34; Tang 189; X. Li 150). According to *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, Nüwa is a woman with a snake body. Believed to be the creator of mankind, she made human beings out of mud and taught them necessary survival skills. In Han-Dynasty (202-220 BC) *Buqianqi* tomb paintings, Nüwa was depicted together with her brother and husband Fuxi as two deities with entwined snake tails (Yuan 80; X. Li 150). Together the two are considered as *Renzhu*, the ancestors of humans. The myth of creation has evolved from a mother goddess who single-handedly generates human beings, into male and female deities joined together in reproduction. This change indicates an evolving understanding of male and female roles in procreation. The earliest Chinese myths only recognized the mother as creator, and the role of the father was acknowledged later in the Han Dynasty.

The evolution of myths is concomitant with cultural and historical changes. The demonization of serpent goddesses worldwide can be seen as an indication of ancient human societies transitioning from matrifocal tribes into patriarchal states. In *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991), Gimbutas shows that archeological findings from the sixth to fourth millennia BC indicate that goddess worship was a universal practice in the earliest human civilizations. “The primordial deity for our Paleolithic and Neolithic ancestors was female, reflecting the sovereignty of motherhood. In fact, there are no images that have been found of a Father God throughout the prehistoric record” (x). The veneration of motherhood and the importance of the goddess indicate that prehistoric human societies were matrilineal. Gimbutas states that the goddess civilization lasted for thousands of years and its most striking feature is the conspicuous lack of weapons or signs of warfare. Though the family structure was centered on the mother, the burial rites indicate that male and female members enjoyed equal status. She suggests that the subjugation of women and the centrality of war in recorded history are features distinct to patriarchal civilizations (xi).

Joseph Campbell’s theory about pre-history differs from that of Gimbutas. In *Goddesses* (2013), Campbell maintains that the settled, agrarian, goddess-worshipping societies developed simultaneously with nomadic god-fearing tribes. The myths of goddesses defeated or dominated by male deities around the world indicate the change of social order when nomadic tribes conquered agrarian peoples. He argues that the invention of horse-pulled war chariots gave some tribes a distinct advantage in territorial expansion:

Around 1800 B.C. the Indo-Europeans from the north mastered the horse and invented the war Chariot. At that point, they were absolutely invincible, and the war chariot then appeared everywhere in Europe, Egypt, Persia, and India, and then in shang-dynasty [sic] China at about 1523 B.C. (62)

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This change shifted the key determinant of tribal survival from food production to warcraft. Since men are physically stronger, the increasing frequency of war changed the social status of men and women from relative equality to male domination. Thus, a patriarchal warrior culture that valued physical prowess and weapon innovation replaced the old matrifocal ethics that respected the fertility of the land and its peoples.

Likewise, Mary Condren in her book *The Serpent and the Goddess* (1989) makes a compelling case that the serpent deity is a vestige from ancient matrifocal mythologies, and that the Garden of Eden myth in the Bible serves to solidify the power of patriarchy. She argues:

[T]here is weighty evidence that the figure of Eve is based on much older stories in Near Eastern mythology and that the original Eve did appear in the form of a serpent. The name Eve, Haw-wah, means “mother of all living” but Haw-wah” also means “serpent” in many Semitic languages. (7)

Condren’s interpretation of Genesis is in line with Barbara Walker’s (1983) findings that “Gnostic accounts of the Eden myth used the Aramaic pun identifying Eve, the Teacher, and the Serpent: *Hawah*, Mother of all Living; *hawa*, to instruct; and *hewwa*, Serpent” (906). Elaine Pagels (1996) similarly shows that some Jewish Gnostics in the early Christian era praised the serpent of Eden for bringing knowledge to men. “When Adam and Eve, enlightened by the feminine spiritual principle who appeared to her in the form of the serpent, defied [god], the rulers cursed the woman and the snake, and expelled Adam and Eve from Paradise” (161). This indicates that Eve and the serpent were intricately linked and may have been the venerated deities of an older religion. When the patriarchal Abrahamic religions became dominant, these older deities were condemned and vilified, blamed for the fall of mankind. The crushing of the serpent marks the triumph and domination of authoritarian patriarchy over the egalitarian goddess religions.

In the same vein, the White Snake’s evolving demonization in Chinese myths suggests a transition from matriarchy to patriarchy. In *Shenhua yu Zhongguo shehui* (*Myths and Chinese Society*, 1998), folklorist Tian Zhaoyuan argues convincingly

that up until the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), which was likely the critical period of transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, Nüwa was regarded as the creator goddess who created the world, deities, and human beings (86). This transition is most clearly marked by a change in marital conventions. Patriarchal marital convention depends on the limitation and regulation of female sexual freedom. This limitation was achieved by physically forcing the female partner to leave her own clan and join the male clan by means of kidnapping and in some cases torture and murder (87-95). This change in culture and social convention may also explain why female reproductive organs were venerated and frequently used as religious symbols in matrifocal societies but became taboo in patriarchal culture.

Similarly, as Chia-ju Chang argues in her dissertation *The Chinese Snake Woman: Mythology, Culture and Female Expression* (2004), the Chinese creator goddess Nüwa is denigrated from a dominant deity in the Xia Dynasty to a snake spirit that survives in folklore as a result of a totemic struggle between the patrilineal dragon clan and the matrilineal snake clan (19-33). The dethroning of the snake goddess in the evolution of the Nüwa myth reflects the ever-advancing patriarchy in early dynastic China. In this light, the White Snake woman in the Chinese legend echoes serpent goddesses of the matrilineal past; her conflict with Fa Hai the monk represents the conflict between matriarchy and patriarchy. The legend of the White Snake therefore can be read as a story revealing the discontents within the patriarchal social order.

The Taming of the White Snake

Many scholars who study the many variations of the White Snake legend categorize the evolution of the story into distinct stages, chiefly based on the progressive development of the key features in the story. For example, early White Snake legends depict a terrifying man-eating monster, whereas later versions make the White Snake more and more benevolent, and eventually she becomes a caring wife and mother. Most scholars consider this process humanizing, but they overlook the progressively dehumanizing aspects of these changes. For example, in *Baishhezhuang gushi xingbian yanjiu* (*The Evolution of The Legend of the White Snake*, 2003), Fan Jinlan carefully compares a wide array of White Snake legends and groups them into four developmental stages based on their content and time of publication. These four stages include Origin (Tang Dynasty to Song Dynasty), Development (Song Dynasty to early Qing Dynasty), Maturity (late Qing Dynasty), and Variation (post-Qing publications). Fan summarizes the transformation of

the White Snake as a process of turning the “greedy, irrational and stubborn” beast into a “truthful, kind and beautiful” deity-like being, arguing that the White Snake is elevated through each transformation from demon spirit to human, to immortal, and to Bodhisattva (371-72). Though this is superficially true, such an interpretation overlooks the fact that the White Snake is also a vestige of the ancient snake deity Nüwa, and through these transformations, her freedom and power is progressively regulated and negated by the White Snake’s consistent conformity and subservience to the patriarchal marital code of conduct. When Fan deems the White Snake in later versions as being “truthful, kind and beautiful,” she unquestioningly takes the patriarchal moral code as the norm, failing to note that the transformation of the White Snake legend gradually erodes her sexual freedom, her justifiable anger and her power to retaliate toward an unfaithful husband. In this section, I will compare the representative versions belonging to the Origin, Development, and Maturity stages¹ and argue that the taming of the White Snake actually places a more and more unachievable burden upon the married woman, and that this process of fashioning the White Snake into a harmless loving wife and mother is actually a reflection of increasing domination of the patriarch both within the household and in society.

One of the earliest written accounts of the White Snake’s metamorphosis into an alluring woman is found in *Taiping guangji* (*Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*)², Chapter 458, “Li Huang” written in the Tang Dynasty (618-917). In the tale, Li Huang meets a beautiful widow dressed in white in the marketplace and follows her home. The two spend three days together and when Li returns home, he falls deathly ill. His body turns into water and only his head remains. When his family members return to the house of the lady in white, they find an abandoned mansion with an old locust tree in the overgrown garden. The neighbors say there is nothing but a giant white serpent that lives there (2211-12). This tale is clearly a stern warning to young men against opportunistic sexual adventures.

In a similar vein, the Song-Dynasty (960-1279) tale “Xihu santa ji” (“Three Pagodas of West Lake”) in *Qingpingshantang huaben* (*Collection of Tales from Mount Qingping*) tells the story of Xi Xuanzan who meets a young girl Maonu at West Lake and brings her home (Hong et al.). The girl’s mother is an enchanting

¹ The final stage identified by Fan consists of a variety of modern interpretations of the legend, which are immensely interesting in the wide array of re-imaginings they represent. But my article is mainly concerned with the evolution of the legend from its origin to its maturity (when the legend evolves into its most well-known form), so the comparison stops at stage three.

² Compiled by Li Fang in the Song Dynasty, the collection includes thousands of fiction and non-fiction stories from the Han Dynasty to the early Song Dynasty.

lady in white. Xi indulges in an affair with the lady only to discover that she is a man-eating monster. The girl helps Xi escape, saving his life. Xi's uncle, a Taoist sage, captures the lady in white (snake), the girl (chicken), and their old maid (otter) and imprisons each "demon spirit" under a pagoda at West Lake (13-20).

In this version, some of the central conflicts in the White Snake legend have already taken form. Xi Xuanzan is threatened by the man-devouring mother but helped by Maonu, the sympathetic daughter. When making the decision to capture these dangerous women, Xi needs to choose between relationship and principle. If he is to show due gratitude to his lifesaver Maonu, he needs to leave these women alone and allow other victims to fall into their trap. If he is to act on principle and help his fellow men, he must capture these lethal creatures, including Maonu. By leading his Taoist uncle to the lair, Xi betrays the helpful Maonu and brings doom to all three creatures. This pattern of the male protagonist prioritizing principle over relationship is the defining feature of many later versions of the White Snake legend. The significance of this will be discussed in the next section. For now, we should turn our attention to what later became the typical ending of the legend—the three creatures were defeated and trapped under three pagodas. This ending of a powerful patriarch overcoming the threatening matriarch and imprisoning her under a phallic shaped man-made structure unmistakably represents the mastery of culture over nature, the triumph of patriarchy over matriarchy. In later versions, the White Snake's allure increases and her threat decreases, an evolution that indicates the progressive restriction patriarchal society placed on female sexuality, ensuring its benevolence and eliminating its threat.

"Li Huang" and "Three Pagodas of West Lake" both belong to the Origin stage of development. Apart from presenting the White Snake as a formidable foe to the existing social order, these stories are cautionary tales for men, with a consistent subtext that warns them to control their sexual appetite. The protagonists run into trouble because of the sexual allure of a beautiful woman. Li enjoys merely three days of pleasure and his body dissolves after he is sent home. Xi loses weight after half a month and overhears that he is ready to be replaced. The alluring seductress doubtlessly enjoys numerous other victims. These Origin-stage tales convey the moral of sexual abstinence by presenting female-initiated consensual sex as a threat to life; the moral can thus be understood as part of the ideological process that contributed to the emergence of patriarchy, where agency in sexual encounters belonged exclusively to the male.

In order to legalize and sanctify the practice of patriarchal marriages, society needed to simultaneously vilify and condemn sexual encounters initiated by

women by making them a terrifying taboo. Death comes to the young men when they lose their charm and can no longer please their seductresses. This is particularly clear in “Three Pagodas of West Lake” where Xi is in danger of being devoured when Lady White obtains a new lover. This is also likely to be one of the earliest stories that promote the virtue of sexual abstinence, as Xi (after escaping from the murderous Lady White) is said to practice steadfast sexual abstinence and live to a hundred. Sexual freedom leads to death; sexual abstinence equals long life. Note both Li Huang and Xi Xuanzan are passive victims of their seductresses’ unfettered sexual desire. The story clearly warns men to guard their sexual conduct. In contrast, the White Snake in both versions initiates actions that drive the plot; the alluring seductress thrives upon her sexual freedom wherein her power resides.

In the Development stage, the relationship of the couple has changed significantly in that they have now entered formal matrimony. According to Fan, the most representative work of this period is “Bainiangzi yong zhen Leifeng Ta” (“Lady White Forever Trapped under Leifeng Pagoda”) by Feng Menglong, in his Ming-Dynasty collection *Jingshi tongyan* (*Stories to Caution the World*, 1624). In this version, Lady White falls in love with Xu Xuan and steals silver from the local magistrate to finance their wedding. Though Xu rejects her repeatedly for the legal trouble she has brought upon him, she follows him from city to city until he finally captures her and buries her under the pagoda built with his own hands. Fan points out that, on the one hand, this story continues the theme of sexual abstinence, but on the other hand, it has made Lady White more human and less monstrous because she is faithful and compassionate throughout the relationship (78-89). As Fan puts it, “In this story the White Snake completes her transformation from beast to human as she is not drawn to her lover for sexual attraction only, but also performs the duties of the wife which provides the basis for her qualitative leap” (89).

However, this transformation also diminishes the power and freedom of the White Snake. Lady White no longer amuses herself with numerous lovers but conforms to the customs of patriarchal marriage. The subtext of this story clearly suggests that legitimate sexual intercourse can only exist within the framework of marriage, as the type of sensual affair featured in the Origin stories does not have a place in this Ming-Dynasty morality tale. This change can also be understood as an indicator of the triumph of patriarchal marital systems. The domination of women by men through matrimony seems to be complete, to the point that only married women can obtain social respectability. A woman who is not bound by the institution of marriage is marginalized, her status low, like the creatures in

the Origin tales who disguise themselves as women but in their “authentic forms” are sub-human. If Lady White is to assume human identity, she needs to first place herself into wedlock.

Another significant change to note is that though the story continues to advocate sexual abstinence, it is no longer only the male lover Xu, but also Lady White, who needs to be cautious in her conduct. In this tale, Xu’s boss Li Keyong is drawn to the beauty of Lady White and sets a trap to rape her at his birthday party. White turns into her snake form and frightens Li half to death (M. Feng 303). The story is ambiguous as to whether White shows her true form deliberately to fend off the unwanted attention or if she habitually transforms in the bathroom and happens to be spotted by the unwitting Li. In either case, her transformation preserves her marital chastity. Her relationship with Xu is made more respectable and more worthy of preservation because of her discrimination in her sexual partners.

Lady White’s submission to marital subordination and sexual devotion to her husband is nonetheless not enough to win the heart of a mortal man. In the story, Lady White enters matrimony, stays faithful, and helps her husband Xu Xuan with his career by freeing him from his clerk job and opening a medicine shop for him. Yet Xu’s consistent response to all of Lady White’s efforts is avoidance. He rejects and runs away from her repeatedly. In the end, Xu captures Lady White himself with Monk Fa Hai’s sacred bowl and builds a pagoda to trap his snake wife. Compared with later versions, the Xu Xuan in this version is more callous and aggressive. Different from previous versions, where the young man is handsome and wealthy, Xu in this version is an orphan who works as a clerk in a medicine shop. He enters matrimony because of Lady White’s irresistible sexual allure and because she helps to finance it. Yet her supply of money comes from theft and this gets him into legal trouble. Each time Xu gets punished for the crime he didn’t commit; he brings up doubts about her identity. Lady White reassures him of her innocence by telling him the money is inherited from her late husband.

The tension of the couple shows that when patrilineal marriage enters the scene, the couple’s relationship is split into two dimensions, erotic desire and financial obligation. Xu’s dilemma is that his marriage can gratify his desire but repeatedly gets him into financial and legal trouble. In this sense, the story grapples with the role of desire and financial responsibility in matrimony and implies that the latter is more important. Xu’s suffering comes from the fact that he chooses a partner based on desire and before he is financially capable of establishing a family. This story therefore is a cautionary tale that preaches that marriage is first and foremost a financial enterprise. Only men who can fulfill the financial obligations of matrimony can be privileged to a safe and secure union. A marriage

based on the gratification of desire is ill-fated. In addition, the fact that Lady White poses as an attractive widow with means stigmatizes financially independent women, implying that a second marriage is not desirable because the new husband will inevitably live in the shadow of the previous one.

The greatest cause of the failure of this marriage is not widowhood but female domination and aggression. In this story, Lady White dictates Xu's behavior and masters his fate. She sets up rules for him, telling him not to speak to monks or Taoists. She assists him in opening his own medicine shop which he manages under her supervision. If these means of control come in the guise of assistance and protection, and are therefore somewhat tolerable, her direct threat to Xu Xuan becomes the fatal blow of the marital union. Having run into legal trouble twice because of Lady White and having heard his boss Li and monk Fa Hai declare her to be a monster, Xu Xuan begs to be released from her company near the end of the story. Feng Menglong describes Lady White's reaction as follows:

Glaring furiously, Lady White warns, "Puny little man, all I ever want is for us to be a couple, why on earth do you reject me! All these years we've been husband and wife, sharing the same bed under the same roof. Now you dare turn against me for foolish rumors! Let me tell you, if you do my bidding, we can cheerfully continue our lives as if nothing has come between us. If you dare to desert me, I'll drown this entire city in blood, everyone will be destroyed in the mighty waves and muddy waters of my flood!" (306-07)

These words frighten Xu sufficiently that he considers suicide before seeking help from monk Fa Hai. Once help is secured, Xu captures Lady White himself and buries her under a pagoda he has built. Xu's revolt against Lady White is unmistakably a male revolt against female domination. This revolt is triggered by an angry (but ultimately empty) threat, which shows that female anger is an unforgivable crime in the context of marriage. A clear subtext of this version is the indication that marriage should invariably be dominated by man: even a weak man like Xu Xuan can eventually succeed in conquering his powerful snake wife.

To some critics, Lady White's angry words in this version show that she is still monster-like, and thus this anger somewhat justifies Xu's betrayal and eventual conquering of Lady White (Fan 91; P. Feng 102-03). However, this reading assumes the masculine need for domination within marriage as a norm and refuses to recognize the legitimacy of Lady White's disappointment. Xu's repeated rejection and refusal of her despite her best effort to aid him in every dimension of his life can indeed be understood as cold and callous. Lady White's

frustration and anger at his attempt to desert her is understandable. It indicates that a woman in a marriage should not merely be a passive satisfier of male needs but has legitimate expectations of her partner's reciprocal loyalty and affection. The basis of such anger therefore is the assumption that marriage should be mutually gratifying and is not an arrangement where the woman provides for and meets the needs of her husband and yet declares no needs of her own. In this light, the successful revolt of Xu against Lady White implies that patriarchal marriage is based on the domination and control of the female partner by the male. Marriage in patriarchal society is based on hierarchy and is not a mutually satisfying union; the female partner cannot make demands. Anger from the wife is a crime punishable by death.

The transformations made in the Maturity stage of the legend further confine Lady White by making her character more and more clearly the ideal wife in the male imagination instead of an individual with her own needs. According to Fan, the defining work of this stage is Fang Chengpei's *Leifeng Ta* (*Leifeng Pagoda*, 1771). Importantly, in this version, Lady White chooses Xu not chiefly based on her attraction to his good looks, but rather because of their predetermined fate. In Chapter Two, the three main characters, Lady White, Xu Xuan, and the monk Fa Hai, are said to be related in their previous lives. The Buddha bestows a sacred bowl on Fa Hai and tells him to put an end to the marriage between the star-crossed lovers. Lady White is a snake punished for stealing the peach of immortality; Xu Xuan is a bowl-bearer serving the Buddha. The two are destined to be a couple, but once that destiny is fulfilled, both should transcend the base needs of the flesh in order to elevate their spiritual life. Fa Hai is sent to break the illusion and allure of physical love so the two can be brought to the higher life of nirvana (4-6). The legend operates within the framework of a Buddhist moral universe, which completely negates the value of physical life and makes the ultimate spiritual goal a permanent exit from life on earth. Fa Hai, the destroyer of a loving couple, is honored as a liberator that enables two earthly creatures to enter the heavenly realm.

This transformation is perhaps why this version is the first that shifts the center of the conflict from Lady White and Xu Xuan to Lady White and Fa Hai. The symbolism suggests that Lady White, the primordial snake woman, represents nature, and its continuity rests within the regenerative power of the libido. Fa Hai, the monk, represents culture, specifically the moral universe based on Buddhist teachings, the supremacy of which depends on the mastery and ultimate denial of the physical body. The dichotomy of body and soul is well established: the freedom of the soul derives from the freedom gained in corporal desires. The war

between Lady White and monk Fa Hai raises a cosmic flood, which alludes to the image of primordial chaos but also to the life-giving waters that mark the beginnings of every civilization. The subtext of this mature version has shifted from the hierarchy within a marriage to the tension between body and soul, nature and culture. A matriarchal celebration of the pleasures of sexuality has been replaced by a patriarchal control and denial of such pleasures. This dichotomy of body and soul, nature and culture itself is a patriarchal invention that exists uniquely in father-rite belief systems. Mother-rite systems tended to worship and honor nature, and sexuality was not shunned but was at the heart of mother-rite ritual ceremonies (Neumann 98-108). The story is intriguing because it problematizes the foundation of the system of patriarchy, which seeks to control and deny the legitimacy of the yearnings of the flesh and renders marriage a union characterized by financial responsibility and child-rearing.

The development of the plot in *Leifeng Pagoda* includes some of the most enduring features that continue to define this legend up to today. Among the most important plot developments in this stage of the legend are the following. Lady White is pregnant yet drinks the realgar wine to please Xu. She turns into a giant serpent and Xu is shocked to death. Grief stricken, Lady White risks her life to obtain the revival plant and brings Xu back to life. After recovery, the traumatized Xu runs away to Jinshan Temple where Fa Hai protects him. Lady White floods the temple in an attempt to reclaim her husband. The two meet at the broken bridge and Lady White forgives Xu for his betrayal. Later, the pregnant Lady White and Xu's sister promise each other that their children will marry. This scene inaugurates the snake into the family household.

Note that marriage itself is not enough to earn her legitimate position in the male family; such "honor" is accessible to the wife only when she becomes a mother. After the child is born, Xu refuses to capture Lady White, so Fa Hai does it instead. Sixteen years later, Lady White's son tops the imperial exam and frees his mother from the pagoda. The son's rescue of his mother is the key for Lady White's redemption, further indicating that the status of woman in the patrilineal family depends upon the successful production of a male heir.

Many critics agree that Lady White completely transforms into a lovely woman in this mature version of the legend (Fan 124-27; Wang 104-05; Yuan 84; Tang 190). Yet we can observe from the changes noted above that such transformation is founded on her continuous subordination and self-abnegation in favor of relationship. She becomes the enabler of Xu Xuan's aspirations, but exhibits no desires or needs of her own. Lady White, in this version, is less like a real woman with legitimate yearnings and more like a fantasy of the male imagination.

Also, in this version, her anger is directed toward Fa Hai but not Xu Xuan, completing her image of the ideal wife, one that is capable of only indulgent forgiveness when confronted by betrayal. Such a woman is not fully human, as she is completely alienated from her own needs and has turned into a perfect instrument for fulfilling her husband's career and familial goals. Although the mystical powers of the serpent goddess such as fertility, healing, and rejuvenation are still present in this version, these powers are used purely for the benefit of her husband. The more threatening aspect of her power, such as anger expressed in the form of flood, is safely kept outside of the marriage. Lady White is split into two entities—the angelic, harmless, loving wife within the marriage and the formidable serpent deity, her true form. She needs to keep her authentic self hidden in order to perform the role of the perfect wife. Even so, she is ultimately punished for who she is (not for what she does); her serpent (feminine) self is defeated by the monk (guardian of patriarchal order) and safely locked under the pagoda.

The taming of the White Snake can therefore be read as a reflection of the progressive suppression of female sexuality within the institution of marriage. In this mature version, Lady White preserves her marital chastity by shunning attention from other men. She endures Xu Xuan's sexual rejection with superhuman patience. This lack of anger or frustration in the face of rejection implies that female sexual appetite is non-existent. Her eventual acceptance into the Xu family is only achieved with her pregnancy, suggesting the vital importance of bearing a male heir. Yet shortly after she gives birth, Fa Hai comes and traps her under the pagoda. Such an ending indicates that motherhood legitimizes the status of woman but simultaneously obliterates her existence as an individual, rendering her invisible and irrelevant.

The thorough victory of Fa Hai over Lady White can be understood as a representation of patriarchal culture completely conquering and replacing the agrarian goddess civilizations that preceded it. Many proto-Indo-European mythologies also feature a male god subduing a female serpent goddess. This epic battle is echoed in later founding father myths in the form of the hero slaying the dragon/serpent and rescuing the beautiful virgin to be his bride. Perseus and Andromeda in Greek myth and Saint George the dragon slayer in Anglo myth are two of the best-known examples. In these stories, the threatening aspect of the feminine, women's seemingly exclusive control over fertility, is represented by the dragon/serpent. This aspect of the feminine threatens the position of the male as head of the house allotted to men by the system of patriarchy. In pre-patriarchal societies, kinship was based on the lineage of the mother. The slaying of the dragon/serpent is a mystical symbol of domination of the male by

controlling the woman's fertility. The beauty of the White Snake legend is that it recognizes the fact that the virgin and the serpent are the same being. The serpent, which represents the fertile power of the feminine divine, is the authentic being, whereas the harmless virgin is a mere disguise. The establishment of the patrilineal marriage depends upon the man's ability to conquer the majestic power of the serpentine goddess and turn her into a harmless subservient handmaid.

Sexual Anxiety in the Different Versions of White Snake Legends

In the earliest versions of the White Snake legend, such as "Li Huang" from the Tang Dynasty, and "The Tale of the Three Pagodas of West Lake" from the Southern Song Dynasty, the White Snake is depicted as a beautiful woman who seduces young men and either utterly destroys their bodies or devours them after sexual intimacy. From the mother goddess deity Nüwa to the lethal seductress White Snake, the serpent woman has been transformed from a deity to a demon. Scholars including Sheng Kuang, Tang Weiping, and Li Xia have pointed out that this transformation indicates the conversion of society from matriarchal to patriarchal order. I would add that the depiction of the serpent woman as a man-devouring seductress may also indicate male anxiety toward female sexuality. In his article "Ba she shi xiang" ("The Snake of Ba Eating an Elephant," 2006), Yu Yunhua shows that the word *shi* (eat) and *tun* (swallow) are euphemisms for sexual intercourse in ancient Chinese (102-03). Ancient Chinese myths are full of tales where a woman swallows a totem and gives birth to the ancestor of the tribe. For example, Jiandi swallows a bird egg and gives birth to the ancestor of the Shang Dynasty, Qi; Lady Hsiu eats a swallow's egg and brings forth Daye, the forefather of Qin; Xuyi swallows Adlay seed and bears Yu, the beloved king of Xia; Fekulen eats a red fruit and creates the forbear of Man (101-03). Eating and swallowing is therefore closely linked to sexual intercourse and reproduction. Therefore, a beautiful man-eating woman may refer to a woman with an insatiable sexual appetite. In many versions of the legend, Xu Xuan chooses sexual abstinence for fear of being swallowed by the White Snake. The implication of male fear of female sexual appetite is unambiguous.

Unlike matrilineal societies where kinship between mother and children is never in doubt, in patrilineal societies the connection between father and children is not always certain. The legitimacy of father-children lineage depends on the male's restriction of female sexuality. The fact that women's sexual appetite can never be reliably ringed in creates anxiety in men. Female sexuality therefore poses a threat to the patriarch as he may very well be a stranger without blood

relation to the family. Such anxiety is most vividly expressed in *The Arabian Nights*. Upon discovering his wife's infidelity, King Shahryār resolves to slay one bride each night to eliminate any possibility of her betraying him (Burton 3-18). In this story, female sexuality poses a threat even to the most powerful man of the land; it is no wonder if ordinary men find it even more menacing.

Like the mythological serpent, female sexuality has powers both benevolent and hostile to men. On the one hand, it is the source of continued life through blood lineage; on the other, it has the potential of displacing the patriarch from the center of the household to an unrelated stranger. In patrilineal societies where private ownership of material possessions marks a man's status and power in society, a patriarch is metaphorically undone if he unwittingly passes on all that he has to someone else's progeny. Therefore, patriarchy changes the nature of marriage in order to protect the legitimacy of patrilineal inheritance. Marriage becomes a social contract made in public that has more to do with economic considerations than desire and attraction.

Male anxiety toward female sexuality is portrayed in "Li Huang" by the juxtaposition of nature and culture. Nature is portrayed as the realm of danger. When Li dies from a disease that made his body dissolve into water, his family comes searching for his murderer in the mysterious residence of the lady in white. They find the place an abandoned mansion where flora and fauna (nature) have overtaken the house (culture) and there is a giant white serpent in an old tree in the overgrown garden.

Li Huang's body dissolving into water parallels the Greek myth of Semele bursting into flames in front of the full glory of Zeus. The ill-fated mortal being encounters divine power and is obliterated by it. The power of the goddess resides in her sexuality. The earliest goddess figurines such as the Venus of Willendorf are faceless female sculptures with exaggerated reproductive organs (Neumann 96). The majesty of the goddess lies in her body's ability to bring forth new life, the power to connect the past with the future. This ability was held in veneration in the goddess era yet inspires fear in the age of patriarchy.

The white serpent in the tree summons up the image of the serpent and tree of life from ancient Sumerian myths. In ancient Sumer, serpent gods are the dying gods of vegetation and fertility (Wiggermann 47). According to Campbell, the serpent and woman in Sumerian cylindrical seals are symbols of regeneration of life (189). Campbell argues that the regeneration refers to the shedding of physical life and entering of spiritual realm (190). However, the symbolism can also be interpreted in an earthly manner. The dying man can obtain immortality of sorts by producing an heir. Death is defeated by continuous resurrection of

life through procreation. Yet in “Li Huang,” the serpent in the tree is an ominous being that devours life, rather than gives it. Here the veneration of old mother goddess for the miracle of her sexuality is completely inverted. Sex is no longer the consummation of love, and nature is no longer the cradle of life. Both sex and nature represent danger and might best be avoided.

In “Three Pagodas of West Lake,” the young girl Maonu, her mother Lady White, and the old maid in black evoke the image of the triple goddess—she was, she is, and she will be. According to Barbara Walker, in the era of the goddess, the trinity of the divine was represented in the female form: “Anatolian villages in the 7th millennium B.C. worshipped a goddess in three aspects—as a young woman, a birth giving matron, and an old woman” (1018). This Virgin-Mother-Crone motif can also be found in Indian, Irish, Greek, Roman, and Egyptian myths. In this light, this Chinese legend is about a hapless young man confronting the divine female power. The capturing and imprisoning of these three creatures therefore signify the dethronement of female sexuality from the seat of divine life source to a condemned status as a life-threatening temptation that “sensible” men should recognize and actively avoid. Though these stories present nature as a dangerous, untamed place and the goddess as a man-eating monster, the power that belongs to the female divine is nonetheless duly acknowledged. The goddess in her denigrated demon form continues to allure and demand both respect and fear.

This evolution in the story therefore reveals a crisis without a solution in the patriarchal world—the separation of desire from the realm of marriage. Institutionalized marriage emphasizes life-long commitment and economic responsibility to the same partner which necessarily transforms marriage from a private union between two people into an establishment held by contractual agreement. Consensual union driven by desire exists outside of marriage as a constant temptation. These stories help paint such encounters in a negative light, associating desire with wild, uncontrollable nature that threatens to ruin and destroy the hapless man who dares to indulge his desire and abandon his responsibility.

Although the White Snake legend has been told and retold by countless writers and artists and there exist numerous differences between the different versions, one consistent feature across the many versions from the Development stage (Song Dynasty) onwards is the gender role reversal. The protagonist Xu Xuan is an orphan raised by his sister and brother-in-law. He works as a clerk in a pharmacy and does not have a promising economic future. He is physically weak (frightened to death by the White Snake in the most popular versions) and lacks intellect (easily fooled by the White Snake and often manipulated by strangers).

Xu Xuan is clearly and consistently fashioned as a failure in the patriarchal world where only men with might or intellect are deemed worthy to be heroes (progenitors). In some versions,³ Xu Xuan was destined to be a “bare branch” of the family and unable to marry or produce children. Xu Xuan, therefore, represents economically disadvantaged men who are “losers” in the patriarchal marriage market.

The White Snake is a symbol of primal female sexuality untainted by the patrilineal social order. In a patriarchal marriage, the patriarch needs to be the protector and economic provider of the family; therefore, the patrilineal system naturally privileges men with worldly success. Xu Xuan’s appeal in various versions is his youth and good looks. The White Snake chooses her partner based on sexual appeal rather than economic security, a choice typically reserved for men. Throughout the marriage, Xu Xuan faces many trials and tribulations, and needs to rely on the wit and ability of the White Snake to guarantee his safety and prosperity. For instance, the White Snake frees Xu Xuan from the fate of being a lowly clerk by providing the economic means for him to open his own pharmacy; she saves Xu Xuan from financial ruin by turning spoiled medicine into a magic cure to establish the fame and success of Xu as a medical man. This reverses their gender roles, as the White Snake represents the economic provider, guardian, and protector of the family. The White Snake legend presents an alternative family structure where the matriarch is dominant by virtue of her recognizing and meeting the needs of her partner; her decisions are made based on the demands of the interpersonal relationship rather than abstract moral principles.

The central conflict of the story, the competing priorities of relationship-based decision-making and a principle-based code of conduct, is dramatized in this legend in the form of a matriarchal family existing within a patriarchal society. The story is set in Hangzhou, Suzhou, and Zhenjiang, all of them thriving urban centers. This is an ideal setting for a story that examines the differences and conflicts of patriarchal principle-based social order and matriarchal relationship-based sensibility. Carol Gilligan, in her book *In a Different Voice* (1982), argues that female moral decision-making functions differently from the male one. Gilligan states that a woman’s sense of justice is different from the male normative model as women refuse “blind impartiality” and insist on “a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract” (18-19). This is because women prioritize relationship and responsibility rather than *a priori* principles and rules. Therefore, the rule-governed male logic tends to be more

³ See, for example, *Qian Baishezhuàn (Legend of the White Snake, Part I)* (1989) edited by Lin Siyan.

consistent than the relationship-based female logic. The relationship/kinship-centered female logic is compatible with kinship-based small, tribal communities, but in an urban setting where people from different backgrounds gather to form a large cosmopolitan society, the rule-based, impersonal male logic prevails because of its consistency.

The legend of the White Snake problematizes the domination of the rule-based male logic, revealing its relative indifference toward human relationship and connection. This gender-based difference is consistently found in the behavior of the male and female characters and usually ends with the triumph of male execution of the law. For example, one of the major conflicts in many versions of the legend is the White Snake giving Xu Xuan stolen silver to cover the expenses of their marriage. Xu Xuan's brother-in-law identifies the silver and turns Xu Xuan in to the court. In this conflict, the White Snake breaks the law to solidify the relationship—fulfilling her representation of the archetypal female who values relationship over law. On the other hand, Xu Xuan's brother-in-law places the law before kinship and wants to see Xu Xuan locked up despite their familial ties. This kinship versus law conflict is also imbedded in the key conflict of the drama. The White Snake breaks the law by consummating a marriage between beast and man, whereas the monk Fa Hai breaks apart the marriage to protect the integrity of the law, which forbids interspecies union. Though the story ends with the triumph of the law, it laments the loss of human connection in the face of mindless execution of the law.

The legend of the White Snake may have enjoyed undying popularity partly because it problematizes patriarchal marriage. Patriarchal marriage is presented as first and foremost an economical enterprise with the clear aim of rearing children. This marriage model prioritizes responsibility and parenthood and suppresses the erotic dimension of the couple. It separates marriage from love—an ancient and intoxicating emotion that makes life worth living—and it demotes marriage to a contractual arrangement that provides financial security. Such a system creates winners and losers. The “winners”—successful men with a higher social status and economic means—are often privileged to choose more than one partner, whereas men like Xu Xuan, with natural charm but no financial means or social advantages, are destined to be “bare branches.” The legend of a beautiful wife providing for an impoverished man and satisfying every aspiration of his in life naturally becomes an enduring male fantasy. The beastly form beneath her outward beauty, wisdom, and success preserves the hierarchy of the marriage and allows even a weak man to feel superior to and capable of rejecting and dominating such a wife. Furthermore, the legend creates a viable space for

eros to exist within marriage. Though this union of mutual physical attraction is eventually broken, this legendary marriage offers a glimpse of sexual bliss that few marriages beholden to a more contractual arrangement might enjoy. An enduring attraction of the legend is that it insists on the legitimacy of physical attraction and emotional attachment even when social conventions deny both.

Our investigation of mythologies around the world has revealed that the snake is one of the oldest symbols of the feminine powers of fertility, healing, and rejuvenation. Before humanity began to worship a male sky god, the mother creator goddess of the earth had often been represented as a half-human, half-ophidian being. We propose that the near-universal denigration of this snake woman goddess is a remnant of patriarchal societies replacing matrifocal societies by shifting the object of worship from the physical, material world represented by the snake goddess to the transcendent, spiritual principles represented by a male god inclined to deny earthly pleasures. Within this framework, an examination of the evolution of the legend of the White Snake shows that the changes from early versions to later ones, commonly seen as “humanizing,” can be understood as the increasing denial of a woman’s legitimate needs within a form of marriage that dehumanizes the wife into an instrument to satisfy the husband’s needs. The evolution of this alluring legend captures increasing male anxiety regarding female sexuality. The patriarch’s attempt to control women’s fertility is codified in the institutionalization of marriage. Yet this masculine desire to dominate reproduction can never be fully satisfied through the establishment of laws and regulations; ultimately, the power of fertility remains the dominion of the serpentine goddess.

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