

## **Buddhism and Taoism in The White Snake**

by Jerry James

*“In the end, only three things matter: how much you loved, how gently you lived,  
and how gracefully you let go of things not meant for you.”*

This is a Buddhist saying, even though the Buddha never said it. But it does resonate with Mary Zimmerman’s version of the Tale of the White Snake. Echoing the religious practices of China itself, Zimmerman draws on various traditions to tell the story in her own way.

In a similar manner, even though many of us had never heard of the White Snake before The Rogue announced its production, the milieu in which the story originated and continues to live has resonated with Western culture for over 500 years, sometimes in surprising ways, as we shall see.

This tale was first fixed in tangible form in 1624, when Feng Menglong collected it in his book of Chinese folk tales, *Stories to Caution the World*, as “The White Maiden Locked for Eternity in the Leifeng Pagoda.”

To place this in Western time, 1624 is eight years after the death of Shakespeare. The folk tale is, of course, much older. Although we cannot know when the folk tale originated, we do know that Buddhism, an essential ingredient in the story, came to China 1100 years before this written version—at about the same time Christianity came to Britain.

The Chinese combined Buddhism with elements drawn from Chinese Folk Religion and Taoism to produce their own distinctive way of following the teachings of the Buddha.

If he existed, Siddhartha Gautama—the Buddha—was born in Northern India

sometime between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. He was a scion of the royal family of the warrior caste and was raised as a prince. Edward Conze relates:

At the age of 29, Siddhartha left his palace to meet his subjects. Despite his father’s efforts to hide from him the sick, aged and suffering, Siddhartha was said to have seen an old man. When his charioteer explained to him that all people grew old, the prince went on further trips beyond the palace. On these he encountered a diseased man, a decaying corpse, and an ascetic. These depressed him, and he initially strove to overcome aging, sickness, and death by living the life of an ascetic.

Eventually, Siddhartha realized that meditation, a middle way between self-indulgence and self-mortification, might prove the wisest path to becoming an Enlightened one. Six years after his self-exile, he finally sat for a long while under the Bodhi Tree, and achieved his goal.



It is said that when Buddha was first Enlightened, he was asked if he was a God, or perhaps a saint. He denied that he was either.

“Then what are you?” he was asked.

And he answered, “I’m awake.”

The Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths — and he taught them to everyone, placing himself in direct opposition to the caste system of the Hinduism in which he had been raised:

1. Life is suffering.
2. The cause of suffering is “birth sin,” or craving and desire.
3. Suffering can only be ended by Nirvana, the extinguishment of desire.
4. This can be accomplished by the Eightfold Path to righteousness: right views, right intentions, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right mediation.

Dharma is the law of Buddha, the basic doctrine of the Four Noble Truths. Karma, taken from Hinduism, is the principle of causality, based on ethical merit, in the doctrine of reincarnation. Whatever one does in this life will have its consequences in another.

Side by side with karma is samsara, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, the nature of which being determined by karma. Only by achieving Enlightenment can the cycle be broken.

Chinese Buddhism developed along the lines of Mahayana Buddhism, which emphasizes the Enlightenment of all beings. In Mahayana Buddhism, Bodhisattvas exist and live here on earth. Bodhisattvas have attained the status of a Buddha, but have put off their entry into Buddhahood in order to assist others in their search. It is one of these beings, Guan Yin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, who appears in a dream to White Snake.



For 1700 years, White Snake has been assiduously studying a sacred text in her search for Enlightenment. But the scroll she is studying is not Buddhist but the Tao Te Ching, “The Book of the Way of Virtue,” the basic text of Taoism. Its first lines state:

The Way that can be told of is not an unvarying way;  
The names that can be named are not unvarying names.  
It was from the Nameless that Heaven and Earth sprang;  
The named is but the mother that rears the ten thousand creatures, each after its kind.

No wonder it’s taken White Snake 1700 years to get this far!

The Tao Te Ching was written by Lao-Tsu, if he existed. Lao-Tsu was a contemporary of Confucius (b. 551 BCE).



The Tao translates as “The Way.” Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden explain its tenets thus:

The Tao Te Ching . . . describes the Dao as the source and ideal of all existence: it is unseen, but not transcendent, immensely powerful yet supremely humble, being the root of all things. People have desires and free will (and thus are able to alter their own nature). Many act “unnaturally”, upsetting the natural balance of the Dao. The Tao Te Ching intends to lead students to a “return” to their natural state, in harmony with Dao.

One lives in harmony with the Dao through effortless action, properly utilizing the Three Treasures: physical energy, emotional energy and spiritual energy. Taoism is directly opposed to the rigid rituals and social order of Confucianism — as is the Tale of the White Snake.

As might be expected, many of the principals of Taoism come from Chinese Folk Religion, with those aspects that display a particular affinity for Buddhist thought crossing over into Chinese Buddhism as well. Lizhu Fan and Na Chen write:

Chinese religions have a common core that can be summarized as four theological, cosmological, and moral concepts: Tian, Heaven, the transcendent source of moral meaning; Qi, the breath or energy that animates the universe; Jingzu, the veneration of ancestors; and Bao Ying, moral reciprocity

In Mary Zimmerman’s play, *White Snake* first meets Xu Xian when he is returning from honoring Jingzu, having paid his respects at the graves of his parents. And although she does not remember, *White Snake* is honoring Bao Ying, moral reciprocity, according to the story told to her by the Bodhisattva. And surely *Green Snake*, who urges *White Snake* to

take on human form and leave her mountain, embodies Qi, the animating energy.

As for Tian, the transcendent source of moral meaning...well, you will have to wait and see the play.

Zimmerman’s use of the common core of Chinese religions aligns elegantly with the evolution of the tale since 1624. The Buddhist monk Fa Hai is the hero of Feng Menglong’s original story, saving the protagonist’s soul from the White Snake Demon. But while this version is still extant, many who have written versions of the tale in later years have seen Fa Hai’s actions as unnatural, “upsetting the natural balance of the Dao,” and have chosen to tell the story in another way.

Mary Zimmerman stands with them, using the elements of Chinese Folk Religion and Taoism to reshape the original Buddhist tale, “The White Maiden Locked for Eternity in the Leifeng Pagoda,” just as these religions reshaped Buddhism in China.

It is no accident that Chinese tradition features a laughing Buddha, fat and happy...



\*\*\*\*\*

Although many of us were ignorant of the Tale of the White Snake, it has been available in one medium or another for about as long as the Complete Works of William Shakespeare. The First Folio was published in 1623; Feng Menglong’s, *Stories to Caution the World*, in 1624.

Had you been in London last October, you would have been able to see a Chinese Opera version:



*Green Snake* (2003), the sidekick-oriented version, stars Maggie Cheung, and is directed by Tsui Hark:



The Tale of the White Snake is available as a book for children:

Films of the White Snake story date back to 1939. Three more current ones are available from Amazon.com. The first is also available from Netflix (CD only). All have English subtitles. *The Sorcerer and the White Snake* (2011), with Jet Li, hews more closely to the original 1624 version:



If you wish to explore the literature further, Aaron Shepard has curated “A Lady White Snake Bookshelf” here: <http://www.aaronshp.com/bookshelves/WhiteSnake.html>

*Lady White Snake: A Tale From Chinese Opera* (2008), is an animated film whose plot appears to be more in line with Mary Zimmerman’s take on the story:

And if you are particularly taken with the tale, Swatch will sell you The Legend of White Snake Watch. But like Nirvana, these are not always easy to find.

