
Folk Beliefs and the Composition of Notebook Novels in the Tang Dynasty

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Abstract: Folk beliefs in the Tang Dynasty had a profound influence on the creation of novels in the Tang Dynasty, while novels as a special literary genre profoundly and systematically show the specific content of folk beliefs, and the two contribute to each other, becoming important documents for the study of each other. The specific tiger stories in the notebook novels reflect the characteristics of folk beliefs in the Tang Dynasty, such as divine characteristics and the idea of destiny, and the prosperity of folk beliefs in the Tang Dynasty provides rich choices for the subjects, themes, and styles of the notebook novels, and the two corroborate with each other, demonstrating the situation that folk beliefs and novel themes present after choosing each other in the process of creation.

Keywords: Folk beliefs; Tang Dynasty; Notebook fiction; Creative writing

Online publication: March 26, 2025

1. Introduction

Folk beliefs belong to the field of religion and culture, and Tang Dynasty novels belong to the field of literature; the two seem to be independent of each other, but in fact, they are inextricably linked. As Fu Xuanzhong said, “If we look at the Tang society from a cultural point of view and the various groups of people in the Tang society, then the novels of the Tang Dynasty should be a treasure trove of materials, a treasure trove of cultural relics to be explored”^[1]. It is true that the novels of the Tang Dynasty, as a part of classical literature, could not be separated from the ancient social and cultural environment, and naturally, they could not fail to be connected with and even influenced by the folk beliefs that have a history of thousands of years in China. Novels were influenced by different factors in different historical periods, the most important of which was the constraints or impetus of ideology and culture on novels. As the soil for the growth of Tang novels, the role played by folk beliefs in the background of Tang novels

has certain significance for us to grasp the ideological connotation of Tang novels.

2. Folk beliefs and Tang Dynasty novels

2.1. Folk beliefs

In ancient China, the concept of faith was very complex, and folk beliefs were one of its most important aspects. The so-called folk beliefs, as opposed to formal religions or officially recognized beliefs, were concepts that were spread among the people or believed in by the majority of the lower strata of society. Although folk beliefs do not have a strong status like those official religions and are directed at the lower classes who make up the majority of society, the concepts of beliefs cannot be divided into hierarchies like status and position, which leads to the fact that even the concepts of beliefs in the lower classes of society will spread to other classes of society, thus continuously transforming into a common concept of beliefs. Therefore, folk beliefs seem to have a limited audience, but in fact, the impact is not less than other widely respected religions; its long-term existence, called the humanities landscape of our national cultural tradition, is extremely rich in characteristics. China's ancient folk beliefs have strong characteristics, such as diversity: that is, the worship of many kinds of gods, with a strong primitive color; multi-utilitarian: as a social group without any resistance in the face of disaster or power, the lower people seek gods and worship, many times to seek the interests of the demand, not simply for faith, which also leads to folk beliefs in the different purposes of the promotion of the emergence of different deities; and mystical and spontaneity, uncertainty, and so on. These different influences have provided the impetus for the tenacious survival of folk beliefs in the long course of Chinese history. Therefore, even though Confucius put forward the idea of "not to speak of strange powers and gods" and advocated "respecting ghosts and gods and staying away from them," ghosts and gods have not disappeared because of this, but have continued to develop tenaciously up to the present day. To this day, in the era of rapid development of science and technology, for ghosts and gods, not only are there many temples and other humanistic landscapes on display, but there are also depictions of ancient books and oral traditions, ubiquitous in the form of concepts deep into people's minds. Therefore, it is easy to imagine the deep-rooted influence of folk beliefs with the traditional Chinese view of ghosts and gods as their basic content.

2.2. Folk beliefs and notebook novels in the Tang Dynasty

As a highly prosperous period in Chinese history, the folk beliefs of the Tang Dynasty were as typical and representative as the heyday of its social development. As we all know, the Tang Dynasty was another unprecedentedly powerful era after the Qin and Han Dynasties. The traditional Central Plains culture since the Shang and Zhou Dynasties was highly inherited and strengthened at this time, and it became an important stage in the development and maturity of the traditional ideology of the Chinese nation. Especially after a long period of foreign rule by the Five Hu and Sixteen Kingdoms, the original spiritual style of the Central Plains rituals and laws took on a new face after integrating the influence of the nomadic peoples of the north. Therefore, in the Tang Dynasty, there

was naturally an unprecedented development in various ideological aspects, including folk beliefs, and many folk concepts were stereotyped in that era. However, due to the lack of systematic documentation, it is difficult to draw a complete picture of the influence of folk beliefs as the ideological background of the era from a particular genre. This was, of course, before the emergence of the novel. In the Tang Dynasty, notebook novels developed many different genres on the basis of inheriting the old forms, forming a prosperous situation, and therefore, novels naturally became a source for peeping into the ideological background of the times. The prosperity and diversity of social thought in the Tang Dynasty provided a broad background for the formation of the notebook novels, while the notebook novels, as an important literary genre, reveal to us the profound ideological concepts of the era, either explicitly or implicitly, and the two interact with and influence each other. Therefore, the author chooses to explore the profound beliefs and ideological connotations shown in the novels under the influence of the cultural background of folk beliefs in Tang Dynasty through the specific contents of Tang Dynasty notebook novels. Of course, the Tang Dynasty's complicated religious ideas provide the material for the creation of the novels, and the reason the author chooses to start with the folk beliefs is that the folk beliefs and the novels have a greater similarity:

Firstly, both folk beliefs and novels are oriented towards the real society of human beings and are closely connected to the lives of ordinary people. Like folk beliefs, although there are surreal factors like other religions, but more around the people of daily life, such as the occurrence of many ghosts and monsters, are on earth, based on people's daily life, folk beliefs can be said to be a real life as a material carrier. This is especially true of novels, which have been closely related to the lives of ordinary people since they first appeared, and are about their joys and sorrows. Therefore, the combination of folk beliefs and novels is more profound than that of poetry and other literary genres. Secondly, both folk beliefs and novels are expressed through certain images. For example, folk beliefs need images of worship, and novels need images of characters, which leads folk beliefs into novels, and novels use folk beliefs as materials. Thirdly, both folk beliefs and novels need emotional needs and expressions. People release some fears or express their wishes and demands through folk beliefs, while novels express the inner feelings of the authors through writing, so the emotions of the two are interchangeable at some levels.

However, the folk beliefs of the Tang Dynasty were very extensive, including ghost beliefs, deity beliefs, spirit beliefs and monster beliefs, and so on, with a complicated system. Therefore, the author chooses to discuss the phenomenon of "tiger" worship in the novels and notes, and specifically discusses the connotation of the beliefs therein.

3. Folk beliefs from "tiger" stories in notebooks and fiction

"The number of tiger stories in Tang Dynasty novels is relatively high, especially in works such as *Guang Yi Ji*, *You Yang Miscellany Chop*, which actually proves that tiger worship still had a certain status in the Tang Dynasty. Wang Fenling, in "Chinese Tiger Culture Research," divides tiger culture into three periods: the tiger as a totem, the tiger as

a symbol, and tiger protection [2]. However, if we directly apply this classification to examine the “tiger” worship depicted in Tang Dynasty novels, we find that the beliefs surrounding spirits and monsters during this period are far more complex than initially imagined. It is obviously not true to say that the tiger was completely worshipped in the Tang Dynasty, because, for example, in the late Tang Dynasty Huangfu Mei’s story of Zhang Jun, Zhang Jun killed five tigers in one breath in order to avenge his wife’s death, which obviously contains the affirmation of the heroism of not being afraid of tigers and daring to fight against them. This kind of story is also shown in *Guang Yi Ji – Qin Zi Li*, in which the main character also kills four tigers. Therefore, the tiger story, as a folk belief in the category of elves and monsters, needs to be analyzed specifically in order to arrive at the connotation of belief, which is an important factor influencing the novel.

3.1. The story of the tiger transformed into a man: The weakening of the tiger’s divinity

As a totem in folk beliefs in ancient times, the tiger has a strong divine color. When it developed into the Tang Dynasty, it can be seen from the Tang novels that the tiger’s divine characteristics, though still present, took on a human coloring. The inevitable evolution of utilitarian folk beliefs in the wake of mankind’s increased ability to conquer nature can be seen in the stories of the tiger’s incarnation as a human being. For example, in *Guang Yi Ji – Tiger Woman*, a tiger takes an earthly woman as his wife and reveals his original form when he is drunk. Later, while attempting to cross a river, his tail is accidentally exposed. Mocked by his wife, the tiger flees in embarrassment. The story not only highlights the cleverness and strategic thinking of the folk woman but also contrasts it with the tiger’s foolishness, reflecting a psychological sense of human superiority over the animal. In the late Tang Dynasty novels, *Cui Tao* and *Original Chemical Records*, depict the same story of the tiger’s wife, the same tiger transformed into a man, but the style of the story as well as the belief factors have been very different from the early and mid-Tang Dynasty works. For example, in *Cui Tao*, it is written that the tiger’s wife quickly regains her tiger body when she returns to her hometown, eats her son and Tao, and leaves. Such an ending becomes bloody and horrible, the humanization of the tiger gradually fades, and the divinity of the tiger as an object of folk belief disappears without a trace. The root of the story is also related to the social reality of the late Tang Dynasty. The bloody tiger stories written by the authors in this period are like the epitome of the late Tang Dynasty. In the era of chaos and danger, tiger stories lost their naivety and fantasy.

3.2. The story of the man transformed into a tiger: A tool for faith propagation

In the Wei and Jin dynasties, there are many stories of people disguised as tigers in the novels, reflecting the psychological inferiority of people relative to tigers at that time, but of course, more importantly, it is still to promote the concept of karma and religious beliefs, the human eye disguised as a tiger as a punishment for the evil done in life. In the Tang Dynasty, the number of such works increased significantly. For example, in the novel *Xuanchu Zhi-Li Zheng*, Li Zheng is transformed into a tiger, and the reason for his transformation is stated through Li Zheng’s own mouth: “I was so ashamed of my behavior towards the gods that I was transformed into a strange beast in one

day” [3]. According to the book, *Fei Zhong*, Fei Lao of Beicun, who was punished for being a tiger, was waiting for his people because Tian Cao had a calendar ordering him to eat people, and he was going to eat Fei Zhong this night [3]. In the story *Youyang Miscellany Chopping Block – Wang Yu*, Wang Yu was relegated to a tiger in the underworld for killing a black fish; and in the story *Under the Lamp – Monk Had Made a Tiger*, a monk was punished as a tiger for twenty years for stealing and using the money offered to him. In these novels, the tiger can be said to have become a tool for Buddhist karma, and the transformation of a man into a tiger is a retribution for his evil deeds. The tiger, as a propaganda tool of Buddhism, has obviously lost the qualities of tiger worship in ancient times, and its divinity in folk beliefs is slowly diminishing.

3.3. The story of tiger blessing man: Divine characteristics and ideas of destiny

In addition to the story of the tiger’s change, there is also a category of stories in Tang Dynasty novels in which the tiger blesses people. The reason for the emergence of this kind of story is that when people are in a weak position, they will have fantasies about the tiger in a strong position, and people imagine the tiger as a kind and friendly species to seek comfort psychologically. This fantasy of facing the strong is a unique part of folk belief psychology. From a practical point of view, as the people who are relatively weak in the face of power, they are unable to change the status quo of inferiority, and in the situation that the struggle will only be an egg against a stone, they look for ways to compromise and find a space for survival, which is also understandable. For example, the story of *General Li of Fengxiang Province*, who met a tiger but did not die, is a typical reflection of the simple desire of human beings who are physically weaker than tigers. In this story, man is a humble subject in front of the tiger, and General Li calls the old tiger “king” for begging for his life, willingly submitting to it. The tiger in this novel has more of the characteristics of the gods in the world of folk beliefs, only that the tiger here has more humane colors, and is reasonable. It satisfies the illusory psychology of the Tang people and accepts their worship and aspirations, giving them the favor they want, which is an accurate reflection of the psychology and attitude towards the tiger in folk beliefs.

In addition, there is also the story of *Guang Yi Ji – Wang Tai*, in which the tiger teaches Wang Tai how to escape from the tiger’s calamity: to bring a pig as a substitute to suffer the calamity of tiger’s devouring on behalf of a person, and to climb up a tree to escape when the tiger comes out to devour the person. Obviously, this story is a subconscious reflection of the human being when facing the tiger’s calamity. A number of other stories, such as *Jihu* and *The Taoist at the Gorge*, also tell the story of how the tiger teaches people how to avoid being eaten, and these stories are written in a very supernatural way, and even have an element of absurdity and humor. Although there are religious beliefs in the novels that promote the concepts of karma and destiny, it is not difficult to see that the tiger still maintains part of the majesty of the gods in the Tang common people, which is inviolable and can be used as the object of the Tang people’s appeal and admiration.

In the story of the tiger blessing people, the tiger has more or less shown the divine side since ancient times. In the story of tiger blessing people, there is another kind of tiger playing a role similar to that of a bridegroom in the

marriage of the people in Tang Dynasty, facilitating the men and women on the earth and accomplishing good things, so that the lovers will become lovers in the end, and this is the story of *Tiger as a Matchmaker*. In the story of the tiger as a matchmaker, the image of the tiger has completely lost its ferocious and man-eating side, but has become a friendly friend of human beings. For example, *Jiyi Ji – Pei Yueke* ^[3] is a representative work of the tiger as a matchmaker: the tiger in the story plays the role of upholding the fairness of the earth, and it is an image with divine colors. Pei Yueke and Zhang De Rong, the daughter of Zhang Hao, had a marriage contract, but due to the change of personnel, the marriage was delayed, and it was the tiger with a divine color that delivered Zhang's daughter to Pei Yueke late at night. At the end of the story, it is also written that from then on, shrines of the tiger matchmaker were built everywhere in Qianxia, and the tiger was worshipped as a god. This means that the image of the tiger as a folk god has been confirmed in this place. The series of stories of "Tiger Matchmaking" reveals the Tang people's attitude towards marriage, i.e., the idea of destiny. Though the idea of "fate in a past life and marriage in this life" is a product of the Buddhist idea of karma and the six paths of reincarnation, the Tang Dynasty was a time when Buddhism was prevalent, and Buddhist ideas deeply and universally influenced all levels of society. The concept of "destiny in this life" was facilitated by the folk belief in the tiger god, which also proved that Buddhism was on the way to integrating with folk beliefs.

It is not difficult to see from these tiger stories above that folk beliefs provide an important ideological basis for notebook novels, deeper into the novels, and that this development, over time, is bound to act as a stimulus for the creation of novels.

4. Influence of folk beliefs on novel writing

Firstly, folk beliefs expanded the subject matter of Tang Dynasty novels. The Tang Dynasty was an era of development and prosperity of folk beliefs, and the loose belief environment of the three religions led to a rich and colorful variety of folk beliefs and belief contents. Not only ghosts and gods, but also plants and animals that were in contact with people, objects used by people, and natural phenomena could all enter the world of beliefs. For example, if one reads the *Taiping Guangji*, one can appreciate the many and varied images of spirits and monsters in Tang novels, such as foxes, dragons, and tigers, which even form a separate chapter, which is enough to show the significance of these spirits and monsters in the world of beliefs of the Tang and the enrichment of novels' subject matter.

Secondly, folk beliefs, because of their fantastical character, contributed to the formation of a fictional genre in Tang Dynasty novels. Before the Tang Dynasty, novels had obvious historical colors and were weak in literature, but in the Tang Dynasty, there was a breakthrough in the concept of novels, forming a fictional creative technique. Folk beliefs played an important role in the evolution of the novel from factual record to fiction. For example, the works of human-ghost love in Tang Dynasty novels imagined a complete world of nobility on the basis of ghost beliefs, opening up a wider space for novel scenes to be shaped. This can be seen, for example, in stories such as *Xuanchou Zhi-Zheng De Mao*.

Finally, the way of thinking that folk beliefs have affects the writing of novels. In the novels of the Tang Dynasty, folk beliefs, in addition to the gods, ghosts and monsters, are also mixed with witchcraft, divination, feng shui, fortune-telling, and so on, which, when appearing in the novels, often have the meaning of symbolism and foreshadowing, and not only contribute to the development of the storyline, but also make important judgements of the characters' destiny and the end, which is a way of thinking that is important in the formation and development of the novel's structure.

5. The “harmonious interest” of notebook fiction from the story of monsters and spirits

During the Tang Dynasty, the belief in gods and monsters was almost crazy, from believing in gods to believing in ghosts and then believing in monsters, everywhere was full of gods and monsters, so the belief in monsters and spirits was very active in the Tang Dynasty. In the process of the development and evolution of the novels, the creators continued to expand the subject matter and improve the descriptive techniques in the background of the belief in monsters and spirits, so that some of the monsters and spirits in the novels were differently colored with harmonies. Of course, the emergence of this kind of funny stories in the Tang Dynasty was not so much a result of folk beliefs influencing the creation of novels, but rather a result of the novel genre using folk beliefs as a tool for its own emotional expression.

5.1. Old age is strange

Liu Zhongyu mentioned in *Chinese Culture of Spirits and Monsters*: “Spirits and monsters refer to the natural objects that have become essence in old age,” the older the age, the higher the level of Taoism, which is the law of the general objects becoming essence, and the same is true for the monsters and spirits. In the novels of Tang Dynasty, there are a lot of stories about things and monsters, such as old pillows, old wood, etc., which appeared on earth in the form of monsters, and some interesting stories happened. For example, the story of Liu Xuan, a pillow that turned into a monster, “with no seven holes in its head,” “with a face like a party”^[3], is very funny. There is also the story of *Guang Yi Ji – Wei Liang*, which tells of a strange old door fan, jokingly called a “little ghost” in the story, which “hides its face with its lower lip” when it appears^[3]. These kinds of stories of old objects as monsters were more common in Tang Dynasty novels, and they were not very long in length. This kind of story itself does not have much social content, but only expresses a kind of curiosity to satisfy, describes a strange story, and then shows its prototype, and after the thing is old like a monster, it does not do any harm to people.

5.2. Animal repayment

Although there are obvious traces of Buddhist influence in such stories on the theme of repaying kindness, they are

also the product of further development based on a combination of traditional Chinese culture as well as folk beliefs. For example, there is a common story of a tiger repaying a debt of gratitude. Because the tiger has been a god since ancient times, and is relatively fierce, when it changes its wild nature and repays mankind, it invariably gives the story some humor. For example, the story of Zhang Yuzhou, a tiger with a thorn in its paw, came to Zhang Yuzhou's door at night to ask for help, and Zhang Yuzhou helped him to remove the thorn, and then the tiger sent prey to his home every day. There are also stories like *Xiaoxiang Records – Zhou Yi*, which is also a story about a tiger repaying his kindness. Of course, although this kind of story embodies some harmonic flavor, it also emphasizes the idea of repaying kindness in Buddhism, and there is a promotion of Buddhist thought ^[4].

5.3. Literary interest

Whether it is a monster or an animal that repays a debt of gratitude, although it cannot be separated from the harmonic mentality of the creator at the time of creation, it still retains the components of folk beliefs. Some other monster stories, rather than a record of folk beliefs in the monster, it is more like the shell of the monster to express the feelings of the literati, such a monster story, the literati fun, the characteristics of the harmonies are also very obvious, the creator to play the imagination of the literati, revealing their own literary talent, its exaggerated components and brilliant imagination is also a laugh. For example ^[5-9], the representative of the *Xuan Guai Lu – Yuan Wu You*, the story of four well-dressed, witty characters late at night chanting poems and fugues, “handing each other praise,” the author will be the image of the sour literati vividly portrayed, but when the day dawns, the master of the public Yuan Wu You realized that the original deep that the four sour literati is the mortar and pestle, the lampstand, the water bucket, broken bells only ^[10,11].

In short, the harmonic meaning of the Tang Dynasty notebooks and novels in the spirit and monster stories is not the product of the complete influence of folk beliefs, but more of the creator's intentional expression of the novel's emotions, which is also the difference between the novel and the history books—the entertaining qualities ^[12,13].

6. Conclusion

To sum up, the folk beliefs of the Tang Dynasty had far-reaching influence on the creation of novels in the Tang Dynasty, while novels, as a special literary genre, profoundly and systematically showed the specific contents of folk beliefs; and the two contributed to each other, becoming important documents for the study of each other.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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