Front. Lit. Stud. China 2026, 20 (3): 293–313
DOI 10.3868/s010-021-026-0013-4

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Pre-Texts and Narrative Strategies of Journey to the West Drama in the Qing Dynasty

Abstract The narrative strategies employed in Journey to the West drama of the Qing Dynasty were shaped by three types of pre-texts. In a narrow sense, the one-hundred-chapter version of the *Journey to the West* served as the primary combination-aggregation pre-text. It not only provided dramatists with a reference framework for selecting and arranging events but also established the narrative norms for deity-and-demon stories. Moreover, its original text could be directly combined into scripts as entrance verses or character dialogues. Early scripts functioned as more direct combination pre-texts. Given its song-centered artistic nature, Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama frequently borrowed and integrated previous song texts, and the arrangement of song suites had a direct influence on the narrative flow. In a broad sense, the public image of *Journey to the West* in the minds of the general public at the time—that is, the basic understanding of the novel's import shaped by multimedia storytelling—also profoundly influenced the dramatists' narrative strategies. Even literati-authored Journey to the West drama had to cater to public expectations. Consequently, a distinct narrative trend emerged: framing the narrative as "a book of immortals," thereby giving the story a manifest and discernible meaning. In essence, the narrative remained "a playful book."

Keywords pre-text; Journey to the West drama; *Journey to the West*; narrative strategies; narrative purport

1 Introduction

In recent years, a new scholarly approach has gained traction in the historical study of the *Journey to the West* 西游记. This approach attempts to break free from the constraints of the "formation-and-influence" framework centered on the one-hundred-chapter version 百回本. Instead, it shifts its focus toward taking the Journey to the West story as its primary object of study, offering a reconfigured historical description that reorganizes diverse documents and texts while incorporating a broader range of materials.

Fundamentally, the emergence of this approach stems from an expanded research

Translated from 北京社会科学 (*Social Sciences of Beijing*), 2024 (12): 14–24

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perspective, which has brought a wealth of previously ignored or avoided documents and texts back into the historical spotlight. When these "new" materials are examined from within the traditional "formation-and-influence" framework, their value seems limited. On the one hand, the existing chronology of the definitive, widely-cited masterwork is already sufficient to map out the formation history of the one-hundred-chapter version, while reflecting the far-reaching influence of its page-based experience across various channels, media, and genres. On the other hand, most of these "new" materials (especially the texts) lack clear historical dates, making them a poor fit for the established chronology. Even if they do fit, their literary quality is unremarkable, and they show little to no direct connection to the novel's page-based experience. As a result, forcing them into the established chronology not only seems redundant, but also threatens to deconstruct the historical image of the one-hundred-chapter novel and dissolve its artistic aura.

Yet, these "new" materials restore the original ecology in which the Journey to the West story evolved and circulated. They reveal a different universe of the Journey to the West story—one that had long been obscured by the aura of the one-hundred-chapter version. Guided by this new perspective, some scholars are rethinking the historical image and status of the novel, moving forward to rebuild the historical links among the diverse storytelling practices found across the Journey to the West story in its various channels, media, and genres.

Of all the genres that participate in the narration of the Journey to the West story, drama has always held a privileged place in scholarship. Journey to the West dramas 西游戏 did more than just propel the story's evolution and circulation; they served as a primary catalyst that helped the one-hundred-chapter version take shape and achieve its classical status. Today, the literary merit and value of these dramas are drawing more attention than ever. The majority of surviving Journey to the West dramas were created during the Qing Dynasty, except Yang Jingxian's 杨景贤 *Zaju of Journey to the West* 西游记杂剧, which has already been the focus of intense scholarly attention. It is fair to say that Qing-dynasty Journey to the West dramas provided a vital body of texts that drove both the dissemination of the Journey to the West story and the canonization of the one-hundred-chapter version.

Early scholarship on Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama remained constrained by the conventional logic of "influence theory" 影响论, viewing it as a spin-off or adaptation of the one-hundred-chapter version of the *Journey to the West*. This tendency is clear in works like "Journey to the West Drama and the *Journey to the West*" "西游戏" 和《西游记》by Luo Zheng 骆正 (1997), "Journey to the West Drama and the Dissemination of the *Journey to the West*" "西游戏" 与《西游记》的传播 by Wang Ping 王平 (2006), "The Adaptation and Performance of Journey to the West Drama in the Qing Court: A Case Study Based on the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World*" 清宫 "西游戏" 的改编与演出——以《升平宝筏》为核心 by Hu Chunyan 胡淳艳 (2006), and "On the Inspiration of Journey to the West Drama to the Artistic Spirit of the *Journey to the West*" 谈 "西游戏" 对《西游记》艺术精神的引发 by Wang Guangchao 王广超 (2007). Insightful as they are, these studies overlook

the independent literary merit of Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama. More recent studies focused on these dramas mostly lean toward document-collation, textual criticism of bibliography, and performance history—such as *A Critical Study of Qing-Dynasty Journey to the West Drama* 清代西游戏考论 by Zhang Jingqiu 张净秋 (2012, 25–107), "A Study of Journey to the West Dramas and Their Performances in the Imperial Court during the Daoguang Reign" 道光朝内廷"西游戏"演剧考论 by Zhao Yulong 赵毓龙 and Hu Haiyang 胡海洋 (2022), and "On the Stage Directions of Journey to the West Drama and the Significance of Their Stage Performance: A Case Study Based on the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World*" 论西游戏的科介设置及其场上表演的意义——以《升平宝筏》为例 by Zhou Gucheng 周固成 (2022). Even individual case studies, including "One 'Mountain,' One World: Differences between Court and Folk Journey to the West Drama through Two Versions of *Flat-Top Mountain*" 一"山"一世界——由两种《平顶山》剧本看宫廷与民间"西游戏"的差异 and "A Study of the Rare Plays *Lotus Gathering* and *Subjugation of the Eight Spirits*" 论稀见戏《莲花会》与《收八怪》by Hu Sheng 胡胜 (2016; 2017), fail to systematically analyze how the narrative strategies of the Qing-dynasty Journey to the West dramas were generated and transmitted from a perspective of pre-text.

On the surface, the introduction of a pre-textual approach may appear to be nothing more than a new guise for conventional "influence theory." Admittedly, given the time of formation, it is easy to mistake Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama for a product deeply influenced by the one-hundred-chapter version. Even if we move past this stereotyping, we cannot bypass the direct and indirect ties these dramas share with the narrative experience of the novel; after all, the one-hundred-chapter version remains the ultimate pre-text for all Qing-dynasty Journey to the West texts. Yet, it is not the only pre-text. Considering the very nature of traditional Chinese drama as an independent art form, Qing dramatists—even those who were simply adapters—likely found the narrative experience of earlier drama texts far more "ready-to-use" than that of a novel's page-based narrative once transformed into a stage-based narrative.

More importantly, focusing exclusively on building a historical link between Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama and the one-hundred-chapter version does more than drag us back into the conventional framework of "influence theory." It also risks oversimplifying the concept of pre-texts by reducing them to mere raw source materials. This narrow perspective would hinder a comprehensive and clear analysis of the actual textual context in which these Qing-dynasty dramas developed their narrative strategies.

The concept of "pre-text" goes far beyond merely meaning "an earlier text." From the perspective of narratology, pre-texts can be broadly or narrowly defined. In a broad sense, a pre-text represents the "influence that earlier texts within a culture exert on the creation of a new work" (Zhao 2012, 147). It serves, essentially, as a narrative environment. Narrowly speaking, the concept refers to the specific earlier texts that a text producer references or borrows. These texts fall into two types: combination texts, which are integrated into later texts in the form of quotations or allusions, directly becoming a component part of them;

and aggregation texts, which have an indirect influence on later texts by offering background knowledge, sources of quotation, or objects of reference (Tan 2019, 353).

For Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama, the one-hundred-chapter version of the *Journey to the West* primarily functions as a narrow pre-text. It serves not only as a combination pre-text that provides dramatists with raw materials for direct borrowing and adoption but also as an aggregation pre-text that offers them the original purport of the story. However, the one-hundred-chapter version is by no means the sole—and often not even the primary—combination pre-text. In fact, earlier Journey to the West drama was more readily and directly integrated into the dramatists' narrative practices.

Meanwhile, the pre-text in its broad sense constitutes a presence that cannot be ignored. This text might be referred to as Accounts of Journey to the West. It is not one single, tangible text; rather, it is a collective public image of the *Journey to the West* shaped by the intertextual storytelling of diverse media, such as novels, dramas, *shuochang* 说唱 (China's orally performed narrative arts), and images. From the perspective of story, this public image refers to an "ideal story"—a "model that rises above any individual telling" (Shi 2021, 28). From the perspective of purport, it embodies the public's basic grasp of the story's core meaning. To put it simply: What is the fundamental nature of the story told in the *Journey to the West*? Accounts of Journey to the West, as a broad pre-text, primarily point to the latter.

The combined interplay of these three types of pre-texts collectively shapes the narrative strategies of Qing-dynasty dramatists.

2 The One-Hundred-Chapter Version: The Combination-Aggregation Pre-Text for Qing-Dynasty Journey to the West Drama

Historically, when examining how Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama relates to the one-hundred-chapter version of the *Journey to the West*, scholars typically divide the former into two broad categories. The first includes works that treat the one-hundred-chapter version as an absolute "blueprint," striving to follow the novel's characterization and plotlines in moving the story from the "page" to the "stage." The second involves broader adaptations of the Journey to the West story. Based on the Journey to the West story that had stabilized by the mid-Ming era and with reference to the one-hundred-chapter version's own integration, additions and deletions, and adjustments of the story, the dramatists adapted the story for live performance by reorganizing plots, reshaping characters, crafting stage spectacles, and highlighting themes. In any case, the image and narrative experience of the one-hundred-chapter version serve as an important, even pivotal, pre-text that they cannot bypass.

Admittedly, there is no need to intentionally bypass the one-hundred-chapter version; what can be adjusted is the standpoint and angle of inquiry. Regardless of whether the novel was used as a "blueprint," conventional scholarship remains anchored in the paradigm of "influence theory." It centers on how much of the novel's narrative experience—especially event selection and organization—was carried over into Qing-dynasty Journey to the West

drama. This approach continues to reduce the one-hundred-chapter version to a basic "earlier text," rather than a genuine pre-text. For example, when Su Xing 苏兴 examined how the drama *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World* related to the one-hundred-chapter version, he argued that the court drama reshaped the novel mainly for performance purposes. In his opinion, the various creative choices—adding, cutting, merging, or altering scenes—were merely moving storylines back and forth with no clear or meaningful rationale behind them (Su 1999). While this critique is quite fair, it stays overly fixated on event selection and organization. Consequently, it cannot fully capture the multi-dimensional intervention that the one-hundred-chapter version exerted on Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama.

In fact, the intervention of the one-hundred-chapter version in the narrative strategies of Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama is multi-dimensional. From the perspective of pre-text, the one-hundred-chapter version exists as a combination-aggregation pre-text.

As a combination pre-text, the one-hundred-chapter version provides more than guidance for the selection and organization of events; it also offers dramatists textual materials that can be directly borrowed and repurposed. For instance, many stage-based texts in the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World* were directly borrowed from the page-based texts in the one-hundred-chapter version. In Scene 20 of Act 3, "Presenting Grass-Returning Cinnabar to the Golden Cicada" 仙款金蝉献草还, the entrance poem recited by Pure Wind 清风 and Bright Moon 明月 features the lines: "Flowers bloomed and faded beneath the moon in the sky, / Clouds came and went above the peaks on the ridge" 花开花谢天中月,云去云来岭上峰 (Hu & Zhao 2018, 834). This couplet originates from a rhymed passage in Chapter 24 of the one-hundred-chapter version, with the only modification being the replacement of the original "on the mountain top" with "the moon in the sky." Similarly, the characters' entrance poems in Scene 13 of Act 4, Scene 23 of Act 6, and Scene 13 of Act 7 are also borrowed, to varying degrees, from the one-hundred-chapter version.

Beyond the entrance poems, characters' spoken passages in the drama are also frequently drawn from the one-hundred-chapter version. For instance, Zen Master Wuchao's 乌巢禅师 description of the scenery on Futu Mountain in Scene 11 of Act 3, and Gibbon's description of Huaguo Mountain in Scene 13 of Act 4, appropriate the rhymed passages from Chapter 19 and Chapter 30 of the novel, respectively. Similarly, in Scene 6 of Act 4, "The Matchmaker Agrees to the Three Rules" 媒人约法守三章, Lady White Bone 白骨夫人 describes the pristine beauty of Hua Xiangjie 花香洁 to the Yellow Robe Demon 黄袍郎 with the following passage:

> [She] had a beautiful face so soft and charming, a bewitching countenance so fair. But her raven-black hair hung uncombed, piled untidily on her head. She did not want to dress up and wore no hair ornaments or rings. Her face was unpowdered, and she wore no rouge. Her hair was not oiled but all in a tangle. She pouted her cherry lips, ground her silver teeth, frowned with her brows like moth antennae, and let her eyes sparkle with tears. (Hu & Zhao 2018, 872)

While this plot is absent from the one-hundred-chapter version, its actual wording is lifted directly from a rhymed passage in Chapter 70, which depicts the Golden Queen 金圣宫娘娘 through Sun Wukong's 孙悟空 eyes. If scholarship remains overly fixated on how events are selected and organized, this subtle combination link is bound to be missed.

In addition to rhymed passages, the prose dialogues from the one-hundred-chapter version were heavily adopted as stage lines in the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World*. Examples include the comedic routines of Zhu Bajie 猪八戒 returning from his mountain patrol in Scene 20 of Act 4, and his humorous banter with Sha Wujing 沙悟净 in Scene 18 of Act 5; these lines were lifted directly from Chapters 32 and 53 of the novel. Though Zhang Zhao 张照 might seem to be "taking the easy way out" through this direct borrowing, it actually proves just how witty and accessible the version's original text is. In traditional drama, comic relief depends heavily on this blend of wit and vernacular appeal. As Li Yu 李渔 put it: "Comic gags are minor skills in lyric writing; however, if you want to bridge the gap between elegance and vulgarity so that all may rejoice alike, this is exactly where you must focus your mind" (Li 2014, 156). He further added, "The beauty of comic gags lies in being close to the common vernacular, but what must be avoided at all costs is becoming overly vulgar. Without the common touch, it sounds like the dull talk of a pedantic scholar; yet if it is too vulgar, it loses the touch of a scholar's writing" (Li 2014, 159). Clearly, dramatists should embrace the playful spirit of comedy while carefully managing its stylistic boundaries, ensuring the performance is popular without becoming crude. The prose dialogues of the one-hundred-chapter version offer a stellar example of this balance—so much so that a clever dramatist could easily lift them for immediate use.

As an aggregation pre-text, the one-hundred-chapter version shapes Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama in a far deeper way. It offers a crowning masterwork for subsequent works to look back on, extend, or allude to. It may not be directly borrowed by these subsequent works; instead, it wields an all-encompassing, "absent" force of intervention. Scholars have observed that Journey to the West dramas crafted after this masterpiece were "composed and performed almost strictly based on the novel," yet they "could rarely capture or convey its deep philosophical insights" (Wang 2006, 73). When measured against the intellectual and artistic pinnacle of the one-hundred-chapter version, all extant texts of the post-one-hundred-chapter era that participate in narrating the Journey to the West story—whether they are dramas or novels, not to mention folk *shuochang*—have failed to convey the original masterwork's deep philosophical insights.

Viewed from the independent position of these subsequent texts, this "awkward" dilemma is actually a natural result of art production. Texts created after the one-hundred-chapter version did not necessarily use the version as a "blueprint," and most of them did not intend to serve as its "footnotes." In other words, expressing and conveying the philosophical import of the novel was not their narrative purport. Furthermore, due to the inherent differences between storytelling media, genres like drama and *shuochang* could rarely translate the novel's complex philosophy onto their own platforms. Yet, re-examining this view through

the lens of aggregation pre-text can help us rediscover the true pre-textual value of the one-hundred-chapter version. The notion that texts were "composed and performed almost strictly based on the novel" does not mean they directly copied its text in a combined way; rather, it means they could not escape its overarching intervention. While they could "rarely capture or convey its deep philosophical insights," these texts created in the post-one-hundred-chapter era invariably took the one-hundred-chapter version as their narrative lodestar. Though these texts were unable to match the original in thought and artistry, their narrative strategies constantly looked back to the legacy it left behind. This is most visible in how the one-hundred-chapter version structures its storytelling: Rooted in "the fusion of the Three Teachings," it weaves the plot into a "macro-closure and micro-closure" framework. Within each micro-closure, the narrative relies on the "emergence, maintenance, and resolution" of conflicts between deities and demons as its spine, focusing primarily on their contests of magic power. This constitutes the basic narrative norm of the "deity-and-demon" story.

Viewed through the framework of narrative, the one-hundred-chapter version—as a generational accumulation text—brought a high degree of integration to earlier tales by channeling them into a "macro-closure and micro-closure" framework. The "macro-closure" unfolds around the two major blocks—"Havoc in Heaven" 大闹天宫 and "Journey to the West for Scriptures" 西天取经 —and coalesces them into a seamless, self-contained story via the transitional links of "Wei Zheng Slaying the Loong" 魏徵斩龙, "Emperor Taizong of Tang Journeying to the Underworld" 唐王游冥, and "Liu Quan Presenting Pumpkins" 刘全进瓜. Meanwhile, the "micro-closure" ensures that each episodic story within this grand architecture remains internally coherent. Taken on its own, "Havoc in Heaven" is a fully realized narrative; similarly, each minor encounter during the journey to the west functions as an independent, complete narrative.

From the perspective of narrative flow, what makes each episodic story so smooth, coherent, and captivating is that the protagonist stays perpetually in motion across the cycle of "emergence, maintenance, and resolution" inherent in these conflicts between deities and demons. This ensures that character actions are backed by an unbroken stream of motivation. The main storyline is clean, free of unnecessary offshoots, and focuses on contests of magic power. Furthermore, through the creative molding by its finalizer, these stories exhibit a remarkable cohesiveness while remaining effortlessly "detachable." They achieve a unique balance of being structurally self-contained yet conceptually open-ended. If storytelling is likened to the craft of "weaving," the one-hundred-chapter version handed down a highly sophisticated, reproducible "weaving" formula to later texts—one that aligns perfectly with the "weaving" characteristic of writing for the stage.

The narrative of play scripts differs from that of the novel, as dramatists—even those who write solely to vent feelings or express aspirations by borrowing from the page-based texts—will naturally craft their stories around an "on-stage assumption." In the craft of "weaving," this forces them to follow structural rules like establishing a central spine, cutting down side-plots, and tightening the storylines. At its core, this framework is still a "piece-

linked" 缀段 narrative structure. Although the piece-linked design of a drama cannot be directly equated with that of a novel due to deep genre differences, narrative experience can be easily transplanted from one literary format to another as long as the storytelling stays within an episodic mold. Under these conditions, a pre-text—especially the definitive edition of a classic—can exert a much stronger, more direct gravitational pull on subsequent texts' narrative strategies. This dynamic is clearly seen in how the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 三国演义, *Outlaws of the Marsh* 水浒传, and *Journey to the West* shaped subsequent dramas. On the flip side, masterpieces like the *Plum in the Golden Vase* 金瓶梅 and *Dream of the Red Chamber* 红楼梦 feature a "network" structure. While this marks a more advanced page-based narrative experience, it is incredibly hard to translate onto the live stage. The fact that fewer dramas were adapted from them—and with much less impact—is likely not just a matter of theme limitations; rather, the incredibly high cost of migrating such complex narrative strategies is a crucial factor to consider.

In sum, as the most critical, even pivotal, pre-text, the one-hundred-chapter version exerts a powerful influence on the narrative strategies of Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama through both combination and aggregation avenues. The masterpiece should not be mistaken for mere "source material" or "blueprint" for subsequent dramas, just as subsequent dramas are not automatically its adaptations, let alone its footnotes. Yet, the underlying intertextual bond between them is beyond question.

3 Early Scripts of Drama: Direct Combination Pre-Texts for Qing-Dynasty Journey to the West Drama

While the one-hundred-chapter version is the most critical, even pivotals, pre-text for Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama, it is not the most direct one. Although its text can be directly adopted and combined into subsequent texts, this is not a common practice and accounts for only a minor fraction. Its intervention through aggregation avenues is indeed universal, but this operates chiefly at the level of selecting and organizing events. Admittedly, this arrangement forms the spine of any narrative strategy, yet it merely builds a "chronological and causal" connection among core events. This amounts to what Forster (2009) described as "the naked worm of time," an element he called both unlovely and dull. Crucially, in the realm of drama, the selection and organization of events serve only as a script's "skeleton," not its living "fabric."

Traditional Chinese drama is fundamentally a song-centered art, a classic form of poetic drama whose script structure is organized around song suites. This suite arrangement defines the actual fabric of its narrative strategy, a deeper layer that the narrative technique of the one-hundred-chapter version could rarely reach or alter. In contrast, the narrative experience of earlier scripts can be woven more directly into subsequent works as a combination element, forming an integral part of their fabric. Ultimately, it is these earlier scripts that serve as the more direct pre-texts.

A prime example is the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World*. Renowned for its sweeping length and grand architecture, this work represents a pinnacle of Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama; its massive scale was achieved chiefly by absorbing earlier scripts. The court's involvement in composing Journey to the West drama dates back to the early Qing period; according to the "Imperial Edict of Emperor Kangxi" 圣祖谕旨 originally housed in the Maoqin Hall, the court already held several ready-to-use Journey to the West drama scripts at that time (DHA PM 1990, 21). Unfortunately, most of these older archival copies were lost over time or woven directly into the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World* as combination materials. Because the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World* itself went through numerous rounds of revision, the exact lineage of its development is hard to trace, even though we can sketch out a rough historical profile of its connection to earlier works. However, by cross-referencing it with manuscripts of some *chuanqi* 传奇 (lit. transmitting the marvelous) dramas from private collections—some of which likely predate the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World*—we can begin to reconstruct how the narrative experience actually traveled.

One such example is the *chuanqi Yellow Robe Demon* 黄袍郎 from the Biqu Library. Its song texts show striking overlaps with the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World*. Specifically, Scene 3 "Destroying the Demon and Banishing the Disciple" 除妖•赶逐 of the former is almost identical to Scene 10 "Annihilating Lady White Bone and Driving the Disciple Away" 歼白骨徒弟来驱 in Act 4 of the latter:

[To the tune of *Shoujiangnan* 收江南]
Alas! I, the ordained, must keep my ascetic vows. How could I shrink from hardship and toil? How could I dread the boundless mountains and rivers or the wearying miles ahead? [Sun Wukong speaks:] Master, there are many spirits and demons on the way. Please let me protect you on the journey ahead! [Tang Priest 唐僧 sings:] Ugh! Speak no more of mountain fiends, wild beasts, or water demons! Protected by the Buddha himself, I have no cause for anxiety. Save your trouble, for you weep and wail in vain with a hollow, deceitful heart.
呀,出家人心持苦行,敢辞劳?又岂惮山长水远路遥迢?(孙白)师父,路上妖魔甚多,还是弟子保护前行的好!(唐)咳!(唱)说甚么山精野怪水中妖,俺自有佛护佑,不须焦。漫劳你,虚心假意任嚎啕。

(From the *Yellow Robe Demon*; Hu & Zhao 2018, 254)

[To the tune of *Shoujiangnan*]
Alas! Ordained, I keep my ascetic vows and would not shrink from hardship and toil. I would not dread the boundless mountains and rivers or the wearying miles ahead. Speak no more of mountain fiends, wild beasts, or water demons—I rely on the power of the Buddha to protect me. Save your trouble, for you weep and wail in vain with a hollow, deceitful heart.

呀，出家人心持苦行敢辞劳，又岂惮山长水远路迢遥。说甚么山魈野怪水中妖，俺自仗佛力护保，慢劳你虚心假意哭嚎啕。
(From the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World*; Hu & Zhao 2018, 889)

It is obvious that the song texts of the two dramas were directly carried over from one to the other, with only minor tweaks in phrasing. The *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World* features a two-pronged storytelling structure—inserting the romantic trials and tribulations of the scholar Wen Ren 闻仁 and his wife Hua Xiangjie alongside the main clash between Sun Wukong and the Yellow Robe Demon. In terms of textual operation, the *Yellow Robe Demon* (or its original script) should have come before the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World*. It might well have been one of the "vernacular" plays referenced in the "Imperial Edict of Emperor Kangxi." The *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World* simply lifted the "deities and demons" sequences from the older script and interwove them with a newly added "worldly" (*shiqing* 世情) plotline.

Another case in point is the *chuanqi Presenting Pumpkins* 进瓜记, now held in the Shanghai Library. This play also has a direct pre-text: the *Fishing Boat* 钓鱼船 by Zhang Dafu 张大复. The copy of *Presenting Pumpkins* we see today is a fine five-colored manuscript from the imperial palace during the Qianlong 乾隆 era. Previously, most researchers regarded it as the work included in Qi Biaojia's 祁彪佳 *Classification of Songs from Yuanshan Studio* 远山堂曲品 (Li 1997, 349). However, Guo Yingde's 郭英德 textual investigation revealed that the drama is actually a Qing-dynasty *chuanqi*, with roughly one-third of its lines lifted directly from the *Fishing Boat* (Guo 1997, 1018; Zhao 2011). The *Fishing Boat* centers on the fisherman Lü Quan 吕全 and his wife Lady Tao 陶氏, telling a romantic story around their personal separations and reunions. The *Presenting Pumpkins* overhauled this pre-text by adding, cutting, and shifting elements. It downplayed the fisherman and brought Emperor Taizong of Tang 唐太宗 into the spotlight to concentrate on his "Journey to the Underworld." Even so, a great wealth of song texts and spoken parts were combined into it. In short, the former stands as the most direct combination pre-text for the latter. Meanwhile, the *Presenting Pumpkins* served as a combination pre-text for the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World*. In fact, Scenes 8 to 11 of Act 2 in the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World* were fundamentally pruned and reworked from the former. The only major difference was that the dramatist of the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World* deliberately omitted the plot of the Emperor's "fake death" for the consideration of performance in front of the throne. Instead, the dramatist patched in new scenes designed to cater to imperial favor. For instance, the dramatist inserted the song to the tune of *Qingjiangyin* 清江引 in Scene 9 to show the common folk's gratitude for the Emperor's grace. Nevertheless, both in its event selection and organization and in its song texts and spoken parts, the entire sequence of the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World* was meticulously built upon the *Presenting Pumpkins*.

The migration pathways of the *River-Borne Orphan* 江流记, a *chuanqi* preserved in the same case as the *Presenting Pumpkins*, are much clearer regarding its borrowing of narrative

experience from pre-texts and its subsequent influence on the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World*. The drama consists of 18 scenes, six of which are combined from earlier scripts. Its pre-texts are the *nanxi* 南戏 (lit. southern drama) *Chen Guangrui and the River-Borne Monk* 陈光蕊江流和尚, a drama popular during the Song and Yuan dynasties, and Yang Jingxian's *Zaju of Journey to the West*. While the original *nanxi* script is lost, a collection of 40 surviving songs was compiled by Qian Nanyang 钱南扬. Analysis shows that 11 of these 40 surviving songs were combined into the *River-Borne Orphan*: two in Scene 4, eight in Scene 9, and one in Scene 13. Scene 9 is particularly noteworthy; out of its 14 songs, eight are combined from the *nanxi* version. This accounts for nearly 57 percent, demonstrating an exceptionally high reuse rate of the pre-texts.

By comparison, the *chuanqi River-Borne Orphan* exhibits an even higher reuse rate of the *Zaju of Journey to the West*. 24 songs from Act 1 (which contains four scenes) of the *Zaju* were combined into the *River-Borne Orphan*: six in Scene 6, eight in Scene 7, and 10 in Scene 10. In Scene 6 of the *River-Borne Orphan*, six out of the eight total songs were combined from the *Zaju*, accounting for a staggering 75 percent. Even more striking are Scenes 7 and 10, where combined materials make up a full 100 percent of the pre-text.

Clearly, the *River-Borne Orphan* drew its combination type of pre-texts chiefly from the *Zaju of Journey to the West*, with the *Chen Guangrui and the River-Borne Monk* as a secondary source. These combined pre-texts are woven throughout almost the entire narrative flow of the *River-Borne Orphan*, building to a crescendo in several critical scenes—Scene 6 (Liu Hong's violent assault 刘洪行凶), Scene 7 (The Loong King's return of gratitude 龙王报恩), and Scene 10 (Lady Yin abandoning her baby boy 殷氏撇子), all of which serve as major on-stage theatrical high points. Scene 10 is especially a textbook example of poetic drama; its long, expressive aria sequences dig deep into the characters' inner minds, creating a highly moving experience that has kept the scene alive on stage for long—these combined fragments have become a core part of the play's living narrative texture.

At the same time, we should look closely at the exact form these combined fragments take once woven into subsequent texts, and how they intervene in the surrounding storytelling. They form a core part of the narrative strategies of subsequent texts.

It should be noted that the *River-Borne Orphan* is far more than a routine text of what came before. Looking at it quantitatively, the drama's narrative fabric does not depend on pre-texts alone. It draws only 29 percent of the surviving *nanxi* songs—under three-tenths of the available surviving songs—and uses only 53 percent of the *Zaju of Journey to the West*, just past the halfway mark. Clearly, the dramatist was highly selective when combining these pre-texts. Looking at it qualitatively, the dramatist carefully reshaped this combined content. In Scene 10, for instance, the narrative flow of the original *Zaju* runs like this: The Loong King enters, introduces himself, looks back at previous events, and exits; Liu Hong 刘洪 enters to move the plot along, then exits; the Loong King enters again to bridge the transition and exits; Lady Yin 殷氏 enters and sings a sequence of 10 songs starting with the tune of *Fendie'er* 粉蝶儿. The *River-Borne Orphan* sharpens this layout: Liu Hong enters to move the plot

along, then exits; the Loong King enters to move the plot along, then exits; and Lady Yin enters and sings the 10 songs, starting with the tune of *Fendie'er*. This rearrangement makes the storytelling clean, swift, and punchy. It keeps the plot tightly connected while carving out much more breathing room for the protagonist's on-stage performance.

However, these combined elements inevitably influence the surrounding storytelling. Unlike a purely original work, the subsequent text cannot just combine fragments from a pre-text; it should carefully manage how those combined pieces fit with the rest of the narrative. For instance, Scenes 7 to 10 of the *River-Borne Orphan* build the climax of the play's first half. Of these four scenes, three were created by use of pre-texts, but the combined elements were far from a seamless whole. For one thing, they came from separate pre-texts; for another, they left several missing links in the narrative flow. While Scene 7 features the Loong King looking back at previous events and Scene 9 shows Chen Guangrui 陈光蕊 being murdered, the vital antagonist, Liu Hong, had received no real spotlight up to this point (Scene 6, despite its title "Encountering the Villain, Misfortune Comes" 遇凶棍起难生灾, focuses almost entirely on the private thoughts of Chen Guangrui and his wife, with Liu Hong flashing across the stage only to vanish instantly). To fix this, the dramatist patched in Scene 8, "The Ruthless Bandit Loses His Conscience" 狠强盗丧却良心, forcing Liu Hong to introduce himself, unveil his sinister motives, and demonstrate his cruel, shameless nature. Furthermore, between Scenes 4 and 6, the dramatist inserted a fresh sequence titled "Releasing the Red Carp, Performing Deeds of Benevolence and Virtue" 纵赤鲤施仁积德, showing Bodhisattva Guanyin 观音菩萨 sending the Loong King to rescue Chen Guangrui. This new piece ties up earlier loose ends and aligns perfectly with the Loong King's line in Scene 7 about having "just received Guanyin's decree yesterday," making the plot run much more smoothly. Ultimately, these original additions were all products created through the intervention of combined pre-texts.

On the whole, the *River-Borne Orphan* represents a relatively successful consolidation of its pre-texts. As a result, it became a crucial pre-text for the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World*, with Scenes 21 to 23 of Act 1 being directly combined from the former. While lifting the song texts straight from the *River-Borne Orphan*, the dramatist of the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World* went a step further by cutting and reshuffling the plot to keep the storytelling even more streamlined; after all, the *Precious Raft to a Peaceful World* valued the *River-Borne Orphan* chiefly for its structural function. An examination of the evolution of the river-borne orphan story from a *nanxi* to a *zaju*, to a *chuanqi*, and finally to be part of a grand court drama in the *liantaiben* 连台本 (multi-day serial format) shows that the on-stage narrative trajectory is exceptionally clear. The combination lineage between pre-texts and subsequent texts can be seamlessly reconstructed.

In summary, when it comes to Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama, earlier drama scripts provide the direct combination pre-texts. The song suites that are combined into a subsequent text not only provide a handy, ready-made narrative structure but also intervene in the surrounding storytelling, ultimately dictating the narrative strategies of the drama as

a whole. Moreover, the bond between a pre-text and a subsequent text is entirely relative. A subsequent text that has thoroughly absorbed and consolidated the narrative experience of its pre-text can seamlessly transform into a fresh pre-text for yet another text down the line.

4 Accounts of Journey to the West: A Broadly Defined Pre-Text for Qing-Dynasty Journey to the West Drama

To date, most scholarly attention on the pre-texts of Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama has remained confined to a narrow scope, centering almost exclusively on combination pre-texts. This limitation applies not only to studies of Journey to the West drama but also to the analysis of Journey to the West *shuochang* and images. More broadly, when researchers discuss the "accompanying relationships" between different narrative genres (like novels, dramas, *shuochang*, and images)—particularly when one definitive "master text" exists as a central reference point—they routinely fixate on combination borrowings by tracing pre-texts. Even when they tap into aggregation frameworks through thematic studies, they still fail to move beyond this narrow perspective. Consequently, the role of the broad pre-text has been largely left in the dark.

4.1 Accounts of Journey to the West: A Public Stereotype Born Out of Multimedia Intertextual Narrative

In reality, when it comes to how popular literature is produced and spread, the intervention of broad pre-texts is usually much stronger and more far-reaching. The *Journey to the West* serves as a quintessential case in point. Even today, the general public engages with its story through multimedia channels—like film and television dramas, graphic novels, or video games—rather than by sitting down to read the original texts. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, this was even more pronounced. Given the low literacy rates and the prohibitive purchasing and rental costs of massive novels, the actual readership of the one-hundred-chapter version of the *Journey to the West* constituted a tiny sliver of the literate population, remaining largely "concentrated among scholar-officials and affluent merchants" (Oki 1988, 199–211). The common folk, meanwhile, came to know the story mainly through the "secondary dissemination" offered by narrative genres like dramas and *shuochang* (Pan 2001).

This line of reasoning is anchored in the contrast between a novel's "page-based narrative" and the "stage-based narrative" of drama and *shuochang*, alongside their actual channels and impacts of transmission. Yet, it serves as a powerful prompt for us to rethink the accompanying relationships between different genres. Given that the narrative experiences of the one-hundred-chapter version never directly or widely reached the common folk, how exactly did the public's impression of the *Journey to the West* story take shape? What kind of impression is it? And indeed, was there only one image? The "secondary dissemination" through drama and *shuochang* did not just pass down the story; it directly shaped the image

itself. However, these performance genres were obviously not the original architects of that primary "impression." Rather, the pre-existing image of the *Journey to the West* in the public consciousness formed a collective expectation, a powerful force that more immediately steered the narrative strategies of drama and *shuochang*. Do these diverse strategies share a common trajectory? While these interconnected inquiries are "inextricably tangled like a ball of raw silk," approaching them through the lens of the broad pre-text may offer a clearer path forward.

On the whole, for the wide array of texts that were involved in the Journey to the West story during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the common pre-text they all had to reckon with was not the novel *Journey to the West*, but the cultural concept of Accounts of Journey to the West. The former refers strictly to tangible versions (like the Shidetang 世德堂 version or the version with Li Zhuowu's 李卓吾 commentary) or their wider version system (including the full-length and excerpted versions of the Ming Dynasty, as well as the abridged versions of the Qing Dynasty). The latter, by contrast, represents the common impression or collective public image of the Western Journey story. This image was gradually forged across time by multimedia intertextual narrative—primarily through novels, dramas, *shuochang*, and images—and ultimately came to life under the powerful cultural shadow of the one-hundred-chapter version. While the public knew of the one-hundred-chapter version of the *Journey to the West*, they had not necessarily read the book. The Journey to the West stories they traded in daily conversation—though constantly claiming to originate from the novel—were actually drawn from a preconception etched into their minds through multimedia intertextual narratives (Zhao 2020). Their understanding of this series of stereotyped characters and events, in turn, formed their understanding of the import of the *Journey to the West*. This dynamic is the very definition of a broad pre-text. It acted as the basic context when the stories traveled into various media during the Ming and Qing dynasties, having a bearing on nearly every single work produced. As the mainstay of this storytelling tradition, Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama was naturally subject to this intervention.

What kind of image, then, did Accounts of Journey to the West present in the minds of the general public? The "historical scene" reconstructed by Master Yeyun 野云主人 in his "Preface to the *Marvelous Book of Realizing the Way on the Journey to the West with Expanded Commentaries*" 增评西游证道奇书序 provides a vivid answer to this question.

> Back in my childhood, I happened to read the *Journey to the West*. Confronted by its wild and eerie marvels, I was at first taken aback, considering the whole thing a piece of fabulation. But then it struck me that within the boundless earth and sky, perhaps such wondrous people and astonishing happenings actually existed, and it was only because of my own shut-in vision and shallow knowledge that I had never heard of them ... When I turned to my elders for answers, they all told me: "The book is playful, and it's not worth delving deeply." (Ding 1996, 1354)

While this scene may be a literary invention, it captures the real attitude of the public toward the *Journey to the West* back then. Even though Daoist advocates went to great lengths to champion the novel's theme as realizing the Way, the common folk had a very loose grasp of this philosophy, let alone the intricate methods and details of their interpretations. True, as commentary editions like *The Book of Realizing the Way on the Journey to the West* 西游证道书, *The Original Purport of the Journey to the West* 西游原旨, and *The True Interpretation of the Journey to the West* 西游真诠 gained wide currency, the critical "voice" of these Daoists established a continuous trajectory that grew louder as it was passed down. Their efforts to establish the novel as "a book of immortals" 神仙之书 of self-cultivation did play a vital role in helping the novel achieve its canonical status. Yet, in the public consciousness, the *Journey to the West* was, first and foremost, celebrated as "a playful book" 游戏之书.

This rift was reflected again and again in the continuous complaints from Daoist critics, who chided the public for reading the novel yet remaining blind to its original purport. As Liang Liandi 梁联第 observed in his "Preface to *The Original Purport of the Journey to the West*" 西游原旨序: "The book *Journey to the West* ... is something everyone loves to talk about ... yet they treat the book as little more than a historical romance or a *chuanqi*" (Ding 1996, 1366). Yang Chunhe 杨春和 echoed this grievance in his "Preface to *The Original Purport of the Journey to the West*" 西游原旨序: "The language [of the book] is so playful and unbridled; it is no wonder that readers consider it as just another piece of *chuanqi*" (Ding 1996, 1368). Whether called "a historical romance or a *chuanqi*," or "a piece of *chuanqi*," these labels clearly revealed that the novel was just for entertainment and had nothing to do with the purport of realizing the Way. Hanjingzi 含晶子 directly called it "a playful book" in his "Author's Preface to the *Commentaries on the Journey to the West*" 西游记评注自叙: "While this book is widely read, it is universally mistaken for a mere playful book; readers generally glance through it superficially, unaware of the profound mysteries hidden within" (Ding 1996, 1384–1385). True, these critiques are partly rooted in standard rhetorical conventions found in prefaces, especially when coupled with the common practice of responding to challenges. However, they also expose the interpretive anxiety of Daoist commentators, whose power to sway the general public was quite limited. This very anxiety proves just how entrenched the public's preconceptions were. Although ordinary readers loved trading Journey to the West stories and drove the canonization of the novel, they never saw it as a gateway to immortality and the Way. What truly hooked the masses was the fantasy within the book—content praised as "bizarre, spectacular, and utterly mind-bending" (Ding 1996, 1369)—rather than a roadmap of self-cultivation built to "ferry disciples out of the crashing waves of life and onto the shores of the Way" (Ding 1996, 1374). This duality of "a book of immortals" alongside "a playful book"—with the latter widely accepted by the general public—defined the actual public image of the *Journey to the West* during that era. This image had a deep influence on the narrative strategies of Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama.

To clarify, Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama discussed in this study excludes

ritual drama from the scope of investigation, chiefly due to three factors. First, the texts of ritual drama boast a long history of independent development and are rarely subject to the intervention of the one-hundred-chapter version. Second, narratives in ritual drama are strictly bound by specific ceremonial protocols, suggesting that the narrative strategies are dictated directly by the ritual format itself rather than other influences. Third, when ritual drama absorbs Journey to the West stories, it prioritizes the functional value of the story itself—specifically, it delivers a mythological foundation that explains or legitimizes the ritual's own authority and validity. At the same time, the story helps anchor and spread local knowledge. This highly pragmatic storytelling approach makes it nearly impossible for narrative strategies from other media to travel directly into the ritual space. Therefore, this study centers mainly on non-ritual drama texts.

4.2 "A Playful Book" under the Guise of "a Book of Immortals"

Whether crafted by literati or by folk artists, and whether page-based pieces written for self-entertainment or for expression, or texts intended for stage-based performance, these dramas share a fundamental commonality in their narrative strategies. That is, they utilize "a book of immortals" as their guise, while remaining "a playful book of entertainment" at their core.

Regarding the external framework, most dramatists acknowledge or even highlight the "immortal" nature of Accounts of Journey to the West. This serves to wrap the storytelling in an external, obvious, and readily visible coat of meaning. It also acts as an outer shell to frame the entire narrative. In actual drama production, these dramas highlight the theme of realizing the Way either through a closing resolution or an opening-and-closing echo. This is clearly seen in the *Full Scripts of the Flaming Mountain* 火焰山总讲. Its entrance scene, "Ascending the Throne" 升座, shows the Buddha explaining cause and effect. Through the song to the tune of *Weifanxu* 尾犯序, the dramatist further highlights the theme. The lyrics read, "Obsessed and deluded, you mistake the illusion for the true self—how deeply regrettable. Yet, when you realize the ultimate state of unborn [non-arising], all worldly attachments are cast away at once. I must urge you to constantly contemplate and practice the Way; why not take refuge in it early on?" (Hu & Zhao 2018, 210). In the closing scene, "The Illusion of the Dharma" 法幻, the characters sing together, "Throughout my life, I've made thousands of karmic obstacles and myriad tribulations. When misfortune falls, I beg in terror for my life to be spared. It is only by the boundless mercy of the Buddha that my life is saved and sustained" (Hu & Zhao 2018, 244). Through the echoing between the beginning and the end, the dramatist provides a framework around the story's theme and an easily found or discernible meaning for the main body of the narrative. Yet, this meaning is entirely empty. The dramatists show no real interest in using the actual storytelling to prove this meaning.

This is more evident in Jin Zhaoyan's 金兆燕 *The Illusory Infant* 婴儿幻. The dramatist immediately highlights the theme in the opening with the *mo* 末 (an older male role) actor singing to the tune of *Yujia'ao* 渔家傲:

> The thought-horse and mind-ape are hard to tame, conjuring up demons and monsters out of nothing. Amidst perils and demonic traps, one must look within for the Master; Only by remaining uncorrupted does one realize the Buddha's might is as boundless as the sea. This drama sums up the essence of the *Journey to the West*, where the playful antics appear utterly rogue-like. When the fire of Samadhi rages, who shall break the spell? Sweet dew is sprinkled to reverse the wheel of fate, as all enter the Realm of Sublime Purity. (Hu & Zhao 2018, 278)
> 意马心猿难自在,凭空幻出真幽怪。遇厄入魔观主宰,能不坏,方知佛力洪如海。一部《西游》综大概,其中儿戏尤无赖。三昧火烧谁得解,甘露洒回轮,共入清凉界。

Admittedly, this is a standard theatrical routine—where the *mo* actor expounds upon the story's theme in advance—but it nevertheless endows the subsequent narrative body from the very outset with an easily found or discernible meaning directed toward realizing the Way, thereby providing a pre-positioned component for framing the narrative. At the final scene, "Ultimate Fulfillment" 证圆, the dramatist deliberately employs somewhat redundant scenes to conclude the story and echo the opening, thus providing the post-positioned component for framing the narrative. From the perspective of storytelling, Scene 9 "Refuge" 皈依 represents a successful conclusion. The song to the tune of *Beishawei* 北煞尾 reads, "From now on, the candle of wisdom shall illuminate the dark path; / By the lotus throne, I shall roam freely over boundless seas" 从今慧烛把昏途照,侍莲台海上逍遥 (Hu & Zhao 2018, 349). This line serves as a perfect conclusion to the story. Yet at the end of this scene, the dramatist adds a plea from the Red Boy 红孩儿 to introduce the next scene, "Ultimate Fulfillment." Here, Guanyin explains the laws of karma and reveals the Red Boy's background, leading to his enlightenment. This masterfully ties up the main storyline and echoes the opening. By doing so, the dramatist creates a tightly woven and harmonious framework around the entire plot, deeply enriching the story's theme of realizing the Way.

In his preface, Jin Zhaoyan reinforced this theme, arguing that "while the Three Teachings diverge, they share the goal of nurturing the infant." He cautioned audiences "not to take the work as mere childish play" (Hu & Zhao 2018, 352). It seems that he tended to consider the *Journey to the West* as a "book of immortals" rather than "a playful book." In his opinion, the book provides a profound guide to cultivation in which "deep meaning resides." By extension, the Flaming Mountain episode serves to elucidate and elaborate on the Daoist cultivation concept of "nurturing the infant." However, a dramatist's proclaimed intent rarely aligns perfectly with their creative practice. An external thematic frame may shape a narrative, but it seldom penetrates the text deeply enough to alter its core internal structure.

Despite the dramatist's claims, the play fundamentally remains a piece of childish play. Its most striking feature is how the dramatist inflates the Moyun Cave episode into the main dramatic attraction. Act 1 of the drama features 10 scenes, seven of which unfold around this plotline (including "Banquet of Immortals" 仙宴, "Meeting in Spring" 春姤, "The Betrothal" 许婚, "Matrilocal Marriage" 赘魔, "Wedding Revels" 神哄, "Yearning for the Husband" 忆

夫, and “Favoring the Mistress” 庇娇). The narrative dwells extensively on the marriage of the Bull Demon King 牛魔王 and the Jade-Faced Princess 玉面公主, carving out dedicated comic situations that grant *chou* 丑 (a clown role) actors ample stage time. The scene “Wedding Revels,” in particular, is a piece of pure farce, staging a chaotic uproar by four earth deities 土地.

This expansion of the Moyun Cave episode was by no means unique to the *Illusory Infant*. The *Full Scripts of the Flaming Mountain* similarly seized upon it as a major dramatic centerpiece. The latter features 18 scenes, six of which dwell on the Moyun Cave storyline (including “Yearning for Love” 思春, “Matchmaking” 说亲, “Matrilocal Marriage” 入赘, “Bridal Chamber” 洞房, “Longing for the Son” 忆子, and “The Demon’s Jealousy” 妖醋), accounting for a full third of the work. Clearly, Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama tended to supplement and amplify the worldly elements of the original story when staging the stories of the Bull Demon King’s family. This thematic shift had nothing to do with realizing the Way; rather, it was driven entirely by a preference for playfulness.

This pattern holds true for other Qing-dynasty Journey to the West dramas, which generally foregrounded the worldly elements for their theatrical playful value. These adapted elements frequently grew into major subplots, as seen in the *chuanqi Yellow Robe Demon* and *Lotus Gathering* 莲花会. In the latter, worldly elements take up such a significant portion of the text that they effectively supplant the main plot; consequently, the iconic contest of magic power at the Kingdom of Chechi serves merely as a prelude to the romance between Wei Xuan 卫宣 and Wuxia 无瑕.

As for the *Subjugation of the Eight Demons* 收八怪, its focus degenerates entirely from the worldly into the amorous. Although the drama borrows the framework of a contest of magic power, its sole narrative purport is entertainment. The dramatist pushes amorous content to the forefront, “making amorous intrigue the driving force of the plot” (Hu 2017). Its deliberate display of romantic and sexual feelings heavily exaggerated in flavor compared to other dramas, while the *Illusory Infant* and *Full Scripts of the Flaming Mountain* keep things subtle when touching upon romantic ambiguities. The *Subjugation of the Eight Demons* is an outlier among Qing-dynasty Journey to the West dramas, yet it shares the same fundamental narrative strategy: expanding the playful value by using supernatural elements as a shell to wrap around worldly content. What makes it different is that it drifts too far from the artistic canon of “gentleness and sincerity,” falling instead into obscenity.

Ultimately, this shift in narrative focus stems from the intervention of the broad pre-texts of Accounts of Journey to the West. The public’s understanding of the *Journey to the West* is not based on reading the original novel, but rather on a general impression formed by intertextual narratives across various media. This impression was partly influenced by Qing-dynasty Daoist commentators, so it did not entirely reject the notion of “a book of immortals.” However, at its core, it viewed the novel as “a playful book.” Contests of magic power between deities and demons did provide the playful value—as illustrated in Chapter 19 of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* 红楼梦, where Jia Zhen 贾珍 and others watched the

staging of "Sun Wukong's Havoc in Heaven" on a festive occasion. However, the sensory spectacle of roaring deities and ghosts and clashing gongs and drums ultimately paled beside the broader appeal of romantic intrigue and comic relief. Consequently, Journey to the West drama had to cultivate a different dramatic centerpiece. Although dramatists were influenced by the Daoist commentators' claim that the core message of the *Journey to the West* was realizing the Way and framed the novel as "a book of immortals," this was not out of genuine belief, but rather to elevate the cultural status and intellectual depth of their own work. Like novelists of their time, these dramatists harbored the aspiration of securing fame and expressing emotions through their works (Deng 2024). They had to bow to the collective expectations of the public by using "immortals" as their guise while remaining "playful" at their core. To maximize entertainment value, they integrated numerous childish playthings into the core narrative. They skillfully utilized the stage environment and visual effects not only to magnify the spectacle of contests of magic power, but also to fill the performance with worldly and amorous revelry. The volume of these additions, the scale of amplification, and the extent of textual deviation ultimately varied among different dramatists.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the narrative of Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama is neither a simplistic adaptation of the original work nor a mechanical migration of source materials and experience. Instead, it represents a concrete strategy forged under the intervention of three distinct pre-texts. Specifically, the one-hundred-chapter version of the *Journey to the West* serves as a critical combination-aggregation pre-text; it not only provides Qing-dynasty dramatists with a framework for selecting and organizing events, but also establishes a mature, stable convention for "deity-and-demon" storytelling—a paradigm for weaving the primary structure into which original textual content could be combined. Earlier scripts function as more direct combination pre-texts; under the influence of a continuous artistic tradition and relatively stable narrative rules, the narrative fabric of Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama invariably bears the imprint of these pre-texts and subsequent texts. Meanwhile, Accounts of Journey to the West, as a public image, provides the foundational narrative environment, operating as a broad pre-text. Recognizing this multi-layered intervention allows us to reconstruct the historical ecology of playwriting and performance in Qing-dynasty Journey to the West drama with greater authenticity and vividness.

This phenomenon extends beyond Journey to the West drama, as a similar narrative strategy may well be found within Journey to the West *shuochang*. More broadly, the intervention of these three pre-texts can serve as a foundational analytical touchstone for the multimedia intertextual narratives of the entire Journey to the West story. By extension, the manifestations of these three pre-texts are observable not only in the multimedia intertextual narratives of the Journey to the West story, but also in the multimedia intertextual narratives of other generationally accumulated story cycles—such as the "Three Kingdoms"

and the "Water Margin" story cycles—as well as various folklore traditions where their interventionist power remains equally palpable. Compared with studies that narrow their focus to the influence of a singular "ultimate text," an approach introducing the perspective of pre-text—with a particular emphasis on distinguishing among various types of pre-texts and deciphering their intricate, overlapping modes of intervention—can yield far more illuminating insights.

Acknowledgments This study is funded by the general project of the National Social Science Fund of China, "Research on the Cross-Regional Evolution of the Western Journey Narrative among Various Ethnicities" (No. 23BZW0079).

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