

Transcript: Nelson Landry, Daoxuan and Chinese Fantasy

Hello, my name is Nelson Landry, I am a DPhil student at the Oriental Institute in Oxford, and this is a short introductory lecture to the works of a figure central to my own research, the seventh century Buddhist scholar-monk Daoxuan, and more broadly, to fantasy in the medieval Chinese context. Daoxuan is best known in East Asia for his works on the monastic codes, known as *Vinaya* in Sanskrit, given that he commented and promoted a set of regulations still applied today in China and Japan. The ties between this monk and the fantasy genre are at first a bit obscure, but today I hope to bring some associations to light. Of interest to us in terms of Chinese Fantasy literature, a genre I will speak more about later, is Daoxuan's late turn to the compilation of narratives related to the fantastic, called Buddhist miracle tales. I will begin with an introduction to Daoxuan and his work, which will in turn allow us to better understand miracle tale authors and their audience. This will lead, perhaps tangentially, to the question of what we mean here by fantasy, ending with examples of later so-called Chinese fantasy literature followed by some concluding remarks.

To begin, a short preamble on the scholar-monk Daoxuan. His life as it is recounted in medieval Buddhist histories presents the modern reader with a Janus-faced figure. He is on the one hand a learned abbot and commentator on the monastic codes, while on the other hand he is a pious pilgrim who converses with celestial beings as well as an unflinching believer in the religious efficacy of cult-objects. He is, in a sense, part religious disciplinarian and part wonder-worker, two categories that according to present day rationalist sensibilities do not marry well. However, this was not an issue in medieval China where miracles were objects of awe—not doubt—so that the people would most likely have taken the miracles associated to Daoxuan as the fruits of his Buddhist practice and piety.

Daoxuan was born in 596 in Chang'an (present day Xi'an in north western China) and died in 667. This period coincides with the Sui and early Tang dynasties, two periods of great literary innovation and development. Daoxuan came from a wealthy family of southerners, was educated in the Classics, and by the age of nine could supposedly compose lyrical verse, called *fu*. At fifteen years old, so his biography claims, he became weary of worldly affairs, took to reading and reciting Buddhist scriptures, finally leaving his family to join a monastic order in Chang'an. The rest of his life would be guided by his drive to promote Buddhism, a creed originally from India, in China, as he sought to reform monastic codes so as to further the purposes of the Buddhist community. He studied under different masters of monastic discipline, travelling the country to learn from them and to visit sacred sites. In the mid-seventh century he even assisted in the translation of scriptures alongside the renowned Chinese pilgrim, Xuanzang, better known as Tripitaka in the popular sixteenth century dramatization of his own travels to the Western Regions, called the "Journey to the West", or "Monkey" as is the title of Arthur Waley's popular 1942 translation. He was both a prominent monk serving as abbot in the Tang capital, as well as a hermit figure, retreating to the Zhongnan mountains, south of Chang'an, to do much of his thinking and editing. Later in life, he resided in an hermitage in the mountains where he compiled Buddhist histories and apologia, as well as recorded his latter-day interviews with celestial beings who revealed to him points of doctrine and history.

He composed a dozen works later in life related to the miraculous. Of interest to us today is a work of his called the *Collected Record of Miracles Relating to the Three Jewels in China* (*Ji shenzhou sanbao gantong lu* 集神州三寶感通), which I will call the *Record of Miracles* for short. It is a compilation of miracle tales drawn from varied sources recounting stories of Buddhism's miraculous efficacy in China from the third to the late-seventh century. The structure of the text is modeled after the Three Jewels of Buddhism (Skt. *triratna*; ch. *sanbao* 三寶), classifying narratives according to how they represent the

Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, that is stories that take place on Chinese soil about the buddhas, the Buddhist Teachings, and the monastic community.

The *Record of Miracles* is a collection of 150 itemised miracle tales. It was written with the purpose of presenting its audience with examples of how normal existence can be turned upside down in an instant. In Chinese traditional belief, normal existence, what is called the seen realm, is only an overlay to an unseen realm, a world inhabited by supernormal beings unrestrained by the limitations of the seen realm. The *Record of Miracles* was therefore a collection of tales recounting how supernormal and extraordinary events were caused by Buddhist agents, be they monks, relics, images, pagodas or scriptures. These narratives include visits to the Buddhist hell realms, usually the result of a premature death, after which the protagonist returns to his body with renewed religious zeal. There are tales of miracles produced by Buddhist images, such as moving, walking and sometimes flying. Pagoda's might emit rainbows that shoot up into the clouds, and monks might receive fortuitous visits from a benevolent spirit, as was the case in Daoxuan's own biography when he was passed on knowledge from the unseen realm. The *Record of Miracles* presents a world where holy monasteries appear out of the mist and wonder-working monks boggle the minds of onlookers with their supernormal powers.

Just as Moses appeased the pharaoh in *Exodus* by turning Aaron's staff into a snake, so the Sogdian monk Kang Senghui pleased Sun Quan, the ruler of Wu, by making a relic appear in a bowl. The story goes that when Sun Quan tested the authenticity this relic by burning and then by hammering it, the relic could not be destroyed. Impressed by this miraculous object, Sun Quan would then have established one of the first monastic communities in southern China at Jianchu Monastery. The story goes that Sun Hao, grandson to Sun Quan and the last tyrannical ruler of Wu, would have also tested Kang Senghui's relic which, as before was left unaffected. Sun Hao, ever the irreverent heretic, would later have taken a holy image of the Buddha to place it in the latrine. On the Buddha's birthday, instead of offering the image the customary ablutions, he wished the Buddha many happy returns and urinated on it. His privates immediately began to swell and burn, so that he became very ill. Only when one of Sun Quan's servants recommended that he clean the image and present it with proper offerings did the swelling stop. In this story we note themes common throughout all miracle tales: the miraculous powers of cult object—that is the indestructible relics—the ties between monastics and royalty (Kang Senghui and his private interviews with the Wu rulers), and karmic retribution (Sun Hao suffering after his improper behavior toward the Buddha image). Daoxuan's selection of texts also represent certain tropes that would later translate to other non-buddhist genres, such as the prosaic tales of anomalies *zhiguai* and the more elaborate Tang dynasty Tales of the strange *chuanqi*. Literary tropes such as visits to Buddhist hells in tandem with return from death stories would become common narratives borrowed by Chinese authors in the Tang and beyond. Karmic retribution is a constant in Chinese literature. Another example is how Buddhist monks or nuns, and their association to wonder working, still appear as wonder workers in Chinese fiction to this day. Just as the Records of the Western regions by Xuanzang that I mentioned before would later become the basis for one of the four great classics of Chinese literature, *Journey to the West*, the *xiyou ji*, so the tales that Daoxuan compiled would become the source of inspiration of fantasy authors for centuries thereafter.

At this point it is essential to note that Daoxuan was not a fantasy author, and that miracle tales were not an early form of fantasy fiction. They were, if anything, proto-fantasy, and that in content only. I mention these tales because his compilations, and the tales themselves, would greatly influence later fictional works. Fantasy did not develop the same in China as it did in the west. In Western literature, the supernatural and the fantastic, as their association with the term fantasy suggests, are conceived mainly from the angle of creative perception—the projection of the authors vision—rather than from that of the

reality represented. According to Tzvetan Todorov, the supernatural and the fantastic may be differentiated according to the reader's perception. Underlying the supernatural is a belief in its reality, and if the reader accepts it as real, then it is based in belief and not considered fantasy. The miracle tale was not trying to entertain or baffle its readers. As Glen Dudbridge, the late Shaw Professor of Chinese at Oxford, said about these tales, it is a "literature of record, not of fantasy and creative fiction". In fact, during the early Tang, the concept of "fiction" did not yet exist, and the act of writing was, to a certain extent, always done for the purpose of recording perceived fact. Unlike other early anomaly accounts, or the Tang Tales of the Strange, which were secular in their outlook, miracle tales were genuinely believed by practitioners to be "records of confirming evidence, proofs, signs, or else of responses" validating their beliefs.

Fiction, however, became an acceptable literary practice during the Tang dynasty. As a matter of fact, one of the earliest examples of Chinese fiction is the "Linked Verse on the Stone Tripod" by Han Yu, a ninth century high official who famously petitioned against the Imperial support of Buddhism. The highly traditionalist "Ancient Text" or *guwen* movement of the Tang also, contrary to what one might expect from a conservative literary movement, pushed away from the literature of fact, and began to touch on fiction and fantasy. This continued throughout the Tang, as many of these Buddhist miracle tales were weaved into longer more elaborate narratives. These were no longer the histories recorded by pious monks, but the whimsical jottings of literati and retired officials.

Jumping ahead over one thousand years, perhaps the best-known example of this interweaving of narratives is the *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio Liaozhai Zhiyi* by the seventeenth century literatus Pu Songling, a collection of about five hundred stories of the strange which were first published posthumously in 1766. This large collection, written in highly elliptical classical language, recounts the stories of sexual encounters with fox-spirits, possession stories, supernormal encounters with demons, a development on the aforementioned Tang dynasty miracle tales, anomaly accounts and tales of the strange. However, Pu Songling writes in his preface that these were stories that he fabricated, inspired by what he himself had seen or heard, and what tales his friends might have passed on to him. To give one example of the many tales related to Buddhism in the *Liaozhai Zhiyi*, I will mention the "Purple Lotus Buddhist", the story of Ding Xiucui who was ill and died. He then travelled down to the Buddhist hells only to return from death claiming that he was enlightened. He then called on a monk to debate with him about scriptures, correcting the monk on different points of doctrine. However, Ding was still ill, and so he called for Dong Shangshu, a scholar of broad learning, to come and cure him. On his way, Dong Shangshu was chastised by a celestial figure in the form of an old lady who said that she has bad blood with Ding Xiucui, whom she addresses as the "Purple Lotus Buddhist", and that he should not be cured. When Dong Shangshu recounts this to Ding Xiucui, Ding accepts that this is his fate, his *karma*, and he dies on the spot. These narratives related to the Buddhist hells and to karma, so popular in miracle tale collections such as Daoxuan's Record of Miracles are repeated throughout the *Liaozhai Zhiyi* and we can see how by the seventeenth century, the miracle tale genre had certainly left its imprint on the Chinese psyche.

In contemporary literature, the closest, and certainly the most popular fantasy sub-genre would be the romantic tales of the knights-errant *wuxia*. These are romance tales of warriors who gain supernormal powers by their mastery of the martial arts. These stories have made it to the big screen, with iconic scenes of fighters flying through bamboo groves in King Hu's *A Touch of Zen*, or the gravity defying acrobatics in the year 2000 production of Wang Dulu's *wuxia* novel, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Miracle tale tropes are diffused through out these stories, so much so that they have simply become part of the fabric that make up Chinese fantasy literature.

While the fantasy genre, and its many genres, have developed in China, genuine recounting of fantastic tales have not necessarily gone away. For example, the Chinese-language press, both in the Mainland and in Hong Kong, regularly recount extraordinary phenomena, sometimes human, sometimes not. To mention only one instance, in August 2004 the Hong Kong press provided a description of a man discovered in a remote part of the Chinese countryside, whose entire body was densely covered in hair. Today, stories like these abound and reveal to us, if anything, that the line between fantasy and accounts of the supernatural such as miracle tales is perhaps the line drawn between belief and disbelief.

To conclude, today I have spoken of the scholar monk Daoxuan, whose own biography reads more like a legend than a history. I have also mentioned the miracle tale genre, as well as the Fantasy genre and some of its subgenres. We have looked at what constitutes Fantasy in the Chinese context, and how intent is central to the process. Finally, today I have shown how Buddhist themes are a constant in Chinese fantasy, and that by the influence of Daoxuan's compilations of miracle tales, he and others like him have helped shaped the ever-changing landscape of fantasy literature in China.