

Cross-Cultural Analysis of Postwar Adaptations of *The Legend of the White Snake*: A Comparison Between Japanese and Hong Kong Cinematic Representations

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Abstract

This paper explores the cinematic interpretations of the traditional Chinese folk tale *The Legend of the White Snake* in two postwar films: *The Bewitched Love of Madame White* (Japan, 1956) and *Madam White Snake* (Hong Kong, 1962). While both adaptations draw from Feng Menglong's 1624 version of the legend, the Japanese adaptation, influenced by Hayashi Fusao's novel *The Witchcraft of Madame White* (1948), emphasizes Bai Niang's intense and lustful love, symbolized through unique motifs such as a red scarf. In contrast, the Hong Kong version adheres more closely to the traditional tale, depicting Bai Niang as a virtuous, moral figure who symbolizes idealized love and loyalty, represented metaphorically by a twin-lotus flower. Through comparative analysis of character representation, cultural symbolism, and thematic variations, this study reveals the cultural and societal influences shaping these divergent portrayals of the white snake character.

Keywords

The Legend of the White Snake, Postwar Cinema, Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Character Representation, Chinese Folklore.

1. Introduction

"The Legend of the White Snake" is well-known in China. Originating during the Southern Song period (1127-1279), this folkloric tradition has undergone numerous modifications over the centuries, evolving into both textual and non-textual forms across oral, fictional, and theatrical genres. As part of an oral tradition, the established structure of the story primarily relies on the version by the late Ming literati Feng Menglong, titled *Madam White is Kept Forever under the Leifeng Pagoda*, which appears in his collected short stories, *Stories to Caution the World* (1624). This version serves as the foundational narrative upon which later adaptations are based. In modern times, with the advancement of cinematic techniques, the folk tale has been frequently adapted into films and television series.

As a folk tale with a history spanning centuries, a considerable amount of literature has been published on the legend. These studies primarily focus on textual materials, such as the origins of the tradition, the evolution of its structure and characters, and the comparative analysis of the original story and its adaptations. Although numerous films have been made, few studies have attempted to investigate the evolution of the folk tale in its cinematic form.

This essay focuses on the representation of the female character, Bai Niang (the White Snake), by comparing Japanese and Hong Kong films based on the traditional Chinese legend. The films to be compared are *The Bewitched Love of Madame White* (Japan, 1956) and *Madam White Snake* (Hong Kong, 1962). The former was produced by Toho (Japan) in collaboration with the Shaw Brothers (Hong Kong), while the latter was made independently by Shaw Brothers. This paper will analyze scenes from both films and examine the differences in the representation of

the White Snake. The primary aim of this study is to investigate the differences in the portrayal of femininity between Japanese and Hong Kong versions of *The Legend of the White Snake*. Through a comparison of the two films, this paper will explore the significance and impact of the differences in post-war adaptations between them from a cross-cultural perspective.

2. Background on the Two *White Snake* Theme Films

The two films to be examined, *The Bewitched Love of Madam White* and *Madame White Snake*, were produced in the 1950s and 1960s during the golden era of Japan-Hong Kong cinematic interactions (Yau, 2010: 73). *The Bewitched Love of Madam White*, a cinematic adaptation of the *White Snake* theme, is a Chinese costume drama co-produced by Toho Company (Japan) and Shaw Brothers (Hong Kong) in 1956. Although the co-produced film was adapted from Chinese folklore, the script was in Japanese, and the production staff were entirely Japanese. Since Toho took the lead in the collaboration, the film was primarily aimed at Japanese audiences. The director of the film was Shiro Toyoda, and the main actors were Yoshiko Yamaguti, Ryo Ikebe, and Kaoru Yachigusa. It is notable as the first color film produced by Toho with special effects, created by Eiji Tsuburaya, best known for *Godzilla*. The film also won the Honorable Mention Award in Color at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1956.

After the Japan-Hong Kong co-production, Shaw Brothers produced their own film *Madame White Snake* in 1962. The Hong Kong version sought to incorporate the Huangmei Opera style, a musical genre based on traditional opera featuring both “singing” and “speaking”. Shaw Brothers merged this style into the film as part of a new commercial venture in the late 1950s, further consolidating its impact with *Madame White Snake* in 1962. The film was directed by Yue Feng, with the glamorous actress Lin Dai in the title role. She is recognized as the only actress in history who has won the Best Actress Award at the Asian Film Festival four times. Shaw Brothers' version was produced without Japanese co-production and presented a story much closer to the version most commonly known by Chinese audiences.

As the opening credits show, *The Bewitched Love of Madam White* incorporates two original stories. The first is the Chinese legend of the White Snake, which is derived from Feng Menglong's seventeenth-century version of the tale. The second is Fusao Hayashi's novel *The Witchcraft of Madam White* (1948), a modern adaptation of Feng's version. However, the film offers a distinctively Japanese interpretation of the legend, departing from both Feng's and Fusao's stories. It focuses on portraying how the White Snake uses various means to win the heart of the hero, even resorting to ruthless actions to make him happy. In contrast, *Madame White Snake*, which adheres more closely to the traditional plot of the legend, depicts the heroine as a devoted wife who is virtuous and moral.

The protagonist is surnamed “Bai”, which means the color white. In the written texts and films, she is referred to by various names, including Bai Niangzi, Bai Niang, and Bai Suzhen. For the purposes of this paper, I will adopt the name Bai Niang. Similarly, her servant, named Qing (meaning 'Green'), is referred to by various names, such as Xiaoqing, Qingqing, and Qing Er. I will adopt the term Xiao Qing in this paper. As for her husband, who is also known as Xu Xian, Xu Xuan, and Xu Hanwen, I will adopt Xu Xian in this paper.

3. Bai Niang's Characterization in Her First Encounter with Xu Xian

In this section, the paper will analyze Bai Niang's characterization in the two films through several sequences depicting her affection for the male protagonist, Xu Xian, and explore the differences between the Japanese and Hong Kong versions.

3.1. The Lustful and Proactive Seductress in *The Bewitched Love of Madame White* (Japan, 1956)

The Japanese version begins with the young pharmacy assistant Xu Xian meeting Bai Niang and her servant, Xiao Qing, during a heavy rain. At their request, he agrees to take both women aboard the boat he had hired to return home. The film opens with an establishing shot of West Lake. Figure 1 shows three small stone pagodas on the water, which are among the most famous sights at West Lake. The credits "Song Dynasty" and "West Lake" indicate that the story is set around the middle of the twelfth century in China.



Figure 1. Stone pagodas at West Lake with credits "Song Dynasty"

In Fig.2, a young woman dressed in white (Bai Niang) takes shelter from the rain under a tree. Her maid, dressed in dark green (Xiao Qing), leads her down the stairs to board the boat that Xu Xian had hired. Bai Niang then sits in the center, with her back to both Xu Xian and the audience, taking out a red scarf to wipe away the rainwater (Fig.3). In contrast to the dark-colored background, Bai Niang is dressed in white and positioned at the center of the frame. This composition suggests that she is the heroine of the film. It is notable that her face is not clearly shown for a long time during her first appearance. However, in the next scene, when Bai Niang turns toward Xu Xian, the background shifts from dark to light, and her face is finally revealed to both Xu Xian and the audience.



Figure 2. Bai Niang shielded her face during her first appearance



Figure 3. Shift from dark to light background as Bai Niang turns toward Xu Xian

Bai Niang's extraordinary beauty is emphasized through changes in lighting and the fleeting concealment of her face. This concealment is also effective in evoking the audience's empathy for Xu Xian, as it allows the audience to share his experience of caring about Bai Niang's appearance but being unable to see her clearly. When Xu Xian makes eye contact with Bai Niang, both he and the audience are drawn further into her allure.

The behavior of Bai Niang gazing at Xu Xian is reiterated in the next sequence. In Fig.4, Bai Niang maintains the same posture, gazing at Xu Xian with affection. In the medium close-up shot, her facial expression is clearly visible, indicating her growing interest in him. Faced with her enchanting beauty, Xu Xian feels embarrassed and moves to the bow of the boat. However, Bai Niang continues to gaze at him, as seen. Xu Xian looks down, attempting to avoid her gaze again. This sequence of their first encounter emphasizes a lustful and proactive image of the female protagonist.



Figure 4. Bai Niang gazing affectionately at Xu Xian, while Xu Xian avoids her gaze

The "gazing" scene in the film is not found in the original novel by Fusao Hayashi, but it is similar to the Chinese original text (Feng Menglong's version, 1624). In Fusao's novel, a single sentence

expresses Bai Niang's "gazing" activity: "Xu Xian stiffens himself, trying hard to avoid the ladies' gaze." The term "ladies' gaze" is an unspecified expression, meaning not only that Bai Niang looks at Xu Xian but also that Xiao Qing does. In the Chinese original text, there is a description: "Madame is constantly giving Xu Xian the glad eye." It is possible that the "gazing" scene in the film is based on the Chinese original text. Bai Niang's gaze at Xu Xian is repeated in this sequence, clearly showing her affection for him. Throughout the sequence, she is depicted as extraordinarily bold and fascinating, unlike an ordinary woman.

An analysis of the sequences featuring Bai Niang's first appearance highlights two key aspects of her characterization. First, her extraordinary and glamorous beauty is emphasized through the fleeting concealment of her face. Second, her proactive image as a woman pursuing the man she desires is created through her repeated act of "gazing" during their first encounter. Bai Niang is portrayed as beautiful, alluring, seductive, and assertive in her pursuit of Xu Xian. The portrayal of Bai Niang in the Hong Kong film, however, presents a different aspect compared to the Japanese version.

3.2. The Virtuous and Ideal Woman in *Madame White Snake* (Hong Kong, 1962)

The representation of Bai Niang in the Hong Kong version differs significantly from the Japanese adaptation. Before the opening credits of the Hong Kong version, an unrelated episode is inserted, telling the story of a snake being saved by an old man. The scene begins with Fig.5, showing a white snake lying weakly on the ground in a close-up shot. The first image of the film features a snake, not a human being, which can be interpreted as suggesting that the snake is the heroine. Following this shot, a medium close-up of an old man watching over the snake appears. This shot implies that the close-up of the white snake is, in fact, a point-of-view (POV) shot from the perspective of the old man.



Figure 5. White snake and the old man

Additionally, although not explicitly shown here, there are some children watching the old man from a distance to the left. The old man lifts the white snake by a branch and sets it free in the pond. From this, we can infer that the white snake was bullied by the children and that the old man helped her. This 30-second scene before the commencement of the movie serves to foreshadow the emotional development of the white snake and the old man's reincarnation. Subsequently, the white snake, who transforms into a woman, meets Xu Xian, the old man's reincarnation, and finally they fall in love. Their encounter is depicted in the following scene.

As Xu Xian is returning from visiting a grave and enjoying the beautiful scenery of West Lake, he passes Bai Niang and Xiao Qing. They notice each other at the same time, and Bai Niang, recognizing Xu Xian, gazes at him for an extended period, wondering if he is the one who saved her life a thousand years ago.

In Fig.6, When Bai Niang confirms her recognition, the camera work transitions from the long shot to a medium close-up. After Bai Niang confirms that Xu Xian is her benefactor, the POV shot of her gazing at him follows, leading to a close-up shot where her facial expression is clearly visible.



Figure 6. Camera work of the first meeting scene between Bai Niang and Xu Xian

This scene emphasizes Xu Xian's act of "seeing" visually. While Fig.6 shows a medium close-up of Xu Xian, Fig.6 presents a long shot of Bai Niang. At the moment Bai Niang confirms Xu Xian as her benefactor, the medium close-up and close-up shot of her appear for the first time in this sequence. Two points are revealed through this camera work. First, Xu Xian does not passively accept Bai Niang's feelings, as seen in the Japanese version; instead, he himself longs for Bai Niang. Second, the transition from the long shot to the close-up shot clearly conveys Bai Niang's joy at meeting her benefactor, as well as the beginnings of their love, allowing the audience to understand these emotions.

After encountering Xu Xian, Bai Niang has already decided to marry him. She explains to her companion, Xiao Qing, "I want to marry him to repay his kindness for saving my life a thousand years ago." In short, the most important reason why Bai Niang decides to marry Xu Xian is that he is the old man who helped her in a previous life. Despite her nature as a snake, Bai Niang has a deep affection for humans.

4. Symbolism of the Couple's Affection

Both films use a prop to symbolize the couple's love. The symbolic meanings of these props highlight the most significant differences between the two films.

4.1. Red Scarf — A Metaphor for Bai Niang's "Bewitched Love"

Director Toyoda changed the Japanese film's title from its original novel's "Witchcraft" to *Bewitched Love*, a term that does not exist in the Japanese dictionary. "Bewitched" refers to enchanting someone's mind or eye, especially through beauty or charm. Therefore, *Bewitched Love* can be interpreted as Bai Niang's love for Xu Xian, which is largely based on her glamorous beauty and sexually attractive behavior.

In the sequences depicting Bai Niang's first appearance in the Japanese film, another noteworthy element is the use of a red scarf as an erotic symbol. When Xu Xian moves away from Bai Niang to avoid her passionate gaze, a red scarf is blown by the wind and comes to rest on his face. Fig.7 shows him removing the scarf from his face and immediately holding it close to his nose, inhaling its scent in an enchanted manner. Imaizumi (2015, p. 50) points out that "the red scarf is a unique motif in this film, consistently appearing with erotic undertones." The properties of the scarf also carry significant meaning: its red color symbolizes passion and lust, while its light material suggests that it can easily entangle. Following Imaizumi's interpretation, the red scarf can be seen as a metaphor for Bai Niang's "Bewitched Love."



Figure 7. Xu Xian inhaling the red scarf's scent

As Imaizumi indicates, the red scarf appears frequently in the film, playing a particularly important role at the turning point in Bai Niang and Xu Xian's relationship, becoming an indispensable prop. For instance, when Xu Xian later visits Bai Niang's house, she proposes to him, and he accepts some silver to cover the expenses of their marriage. This silver is later revealed to be part of a sum stolen from the government's vault. Xu Xian is arrested, but when police officers attempt to arrest Bai Niang at her house, she disappears in a flash, leaving the stolen silver on her bed. Bai Niang is then identified as a demon who stole the silver. Xu Xian is banished to Suzhou, where he works as an assistant in an inn. There, he is visited by Bai Niang and Xiao Qing. Despite Xiao Qing's convincing explanations, Xu Xian, who was still distrustful of Bai Niang's identity, refuses to accept her. To persuade him, Xiao Qing points out that the red scarf is protruding from his bosom (Fig.8), the most persuasive evidence of his love for Bai Niang. However, Xu Xian recoils from the red scarf, throwing it away firmly. In Fig.8, we see his visceral revulsion and fear of the scarf.

Although Bai Niang begs piteously, Xu Xian continues to refuse to accept her. Eventually, Bai Niang runs away sorrowfully, leaving the red scarf on the floor, as shown in the long shot in Fig.8. The next shot shows a medium close-up of the red scarf. From this, it can be inferred that the red scarf will play an important role in reconciling Xu Xian and Bai Niang. In the following scene, Xu Xian picks up the scarf again, appearing discomposd. Ultimately, his infatuation for Bai Niang overcomes his fear, and he chases after her, embracing her in his arms. A bed scene follows, and they get married.

It is evident that Xu Xian's feelings toward the red scarf, a symbol of Bai Niang's love, reflect both resistance and affection. This ambivalent attitude toward the scarf mirrors Xu Xian's conflicted feelings toward Bai Niang. His inconsistent attitude is a recurring theme throughout the film.



Figure 8. Xu Xian's complex feelings towards the red scarf

4.2. Twin Lotus in the Hong Kong Film — A Metaphor for the Couple's Mutual Love

Just as the red scarf is used as a metaphor in the Japanese film, the Hong Kong version also employs symbolism. A close-up shot of a twin lotus appears before Bai Niang and Xu Xian's marriage (Fig.9), serving as a metaphor for their relationship. In Chinese culture, the lotus has long been regarded as an omen of auspiciousness and happiness, as well as a symbol of kindness and beauty. Moreover, the twin lotus is widely seen as a symbol of unity—representing one heart, one root, shared fortune, and a shared life. It signifies happiness and is commonly used as a metaphor for an affectionate couple. In this context, the twin lotus symbolizes the deep bond between Bai Niang and Xu Xian.

In Fig.9, the image of the twin lotus gradually dissolves into the wedding decorations. With a symmetrical composition in the background, the lotus is positioned at the center of the frame in Fig.9, partially covering the Chinese traditional ornament "XI" (Double Happiness), a symbol commonly associated with marriage. The overlap of the twin lotus with the "XI" character visually reinforces the idea that the harmonious relationship between Bai Niang and Xu Xian is being symbolized.



Figure 9. Twin lotus gradually dissolves into wedding decorations

5. Cultural Factors Behind the Differences in Female Representation in the Two Films

As analyzed above, Bai Niang's characterization differs significantly in the two films. The symbolism used in the films, which can be interpreted as a depiction of lust between man and woman, is more aggressive in the Japanese version than in the Hong Kong version. This section will discuss the cultural and contextual factors contributing to these differences.

Known as a master director of "literary films," that is, films based on famous novels, Toyoda was renowned for his emphasis on subtle and nuanced acting, grounded in his keen observation of human nature. Regarding the production of *The Bewitched Love of Madam White*, Toyoda clearly articulates his intentions as follows:

"In this work, I aim to highlight the genuine emotions through which human beings find happiness in love by depicting Bai Niang's intense and passionate love. In other words, by portraying a woman consumed by passion for love, the director's intent is to explore the nature of human happiness. My goal is to deeply examine the essence of human nature and the capacity for love." (Toyoda, 1956)

In short, Toyoda seeks to explore human nature through Bai Niang's strong and intense love. Therefore, in her first appearance, Bai Niang is characterized by her lustful beauty and her proactive desire for the man she loves. This may also explain why Toyoda creates the original metaphor of the red scarf to symbolize Bai Niang's "bewitched love". Toyoda focuses on what "love" truly means, stripping away the didactic elements of the traditional Chinese legend, which emphasizes loyalty, filial piety, humanity, and righteousness. He removes the parts of the legend in which Bai Niang is saved by Xu Xian in a previous life, and where Bai Niang gives birth to their son. Toyoda also changes the ending, where Xu Xian commits suicide for the sake of love and follows Bai Niang, disappearing behind the clouds.

One noteworthy point is that *The Bewitched Love of Madam White* can be related to two films produced a year earlier, *Meoto Zenzai* (Marital Relations, 1955, Shiro Toyoda) and *Ukigumo* (Floating Clouds, 1955, Mikio Naruse). All these films focus on depicting how a love-blinded woman is abandoned by society but continues to try to win the heart of an unreliable man.

After Japan's defeat in World War II, one aspect of the post-war reconstruction ideals was the liberation of women and the supremacy of love. Sato (1995, p. 269) argues that both *Meoto Zenzai* and *Ukigumo* reject the Western tradition of sublimating love, instead regarding love as a kind of mental illness, which reflects traditional Japanese views on love. Therefore, *The Bewitched Love of Madam White* can be interpreted as a work that critiques the notion of love supremacy promoted in Japanese society at that time. There is no high ideal of "love" in the film; rather, it offers a deeper exploration of humanity and compassionate feeling.

On the other hand, the depiction of love in Toyoda's film may not resonate with the tastes of audiences within the Chinese cultural sphere. Hong Kong film researcher Gu Cangwu comments:

"In comparison with the Chinese adaptations of *The Legend of the White Snake*, the heroine portrayed by Li Xianglan in Toyoda's version is consumed not only by love but also by hatred. Although some versions of the Chinese opera depict Madame White Snake as having a rather ruthless image, it is likely that Chinese audiences would not have responded positively to this portrayal. As a result, the character of Madame White Snake in contemporary versions was softened, glorified, and imbued with moral qualities. While Li Xianglan's portrayal differs from the version most familiar to Chinese audiences, it is undeniably more complex and tragic." (Yau, 2010: 84)

In contemporary Chinese culture, audiences are familiar with the story of *Madame White Snake*, which has been "softened, glorified, and imbued with moral qualities." Therefore, it can be inferred that cultural factors were considered when the Hong Kong version of *Madame White Snake* was produced. The Hong Kong version incorporates the didactic elements of the traditional Chinese folk tale, while the plot of returning a life-saving favor, and Bai Niang's giving birth are absent in the Japanese version. The symbolism of the couple's affection, which suggests a harmonious relationship, contrasts with the portrayal in the Japanese version.

Another noteworthy point is that *Madame White Snake* also emphasizes the theme of human love. The official trailer notes that:

"To be joyful, one should go to the mortal world. It is certainly warmer there. Snake spirits in the mortal world rather yearn for love than for magical powers."

The first two sentences are quoted from Bai Niang's dialogue when she is persuading Xiao Qing to experience the joys of the human world. The next two sentences are part of the story's narration. "To be joyful" and "yearn for love" can be interpreted as the central themes of the film. The pursuit of joy and love in the human world parallels the pursuit of sensual enjoyment in modern life in 1960s Hong Kong. The image of the White Snake in the film shares deep emotional connections with humanity.

6. Conclusion

This paper has compared the Japanese film with the Hong Kong version, both based on the *Legend of the White Snake*. Through the examination of selected scenes, several discrepancies in the representation of the White Snake between the two films have been identified.

The Japanese film emphasizes Bai Niang's characterization as a lustful and proactive seductress. Her extraordinary beauty is highlighted, and her proactive pursuit of the man she desires is evident in the sequences of her first appearance. The red scarf, used as an indispensable prop, can be interpreted as a metaphor for Bai Niang's "Bewitched Love." The film's portrayal of Bai Niang emphasizes her strong, intense love, and critiques the notion of "love supremacy" that

was advocated in Japanese society at the time. This contrasts with the strong moral standards commonly found in the traditional Chinese folk tale.

In contrast, the Hong Kong version depicts Bai Niang as a virtuous and ideal woman. She is deeply in love with Xu Xian because he is the old man who helped her in a previous life. The mutual love between Bai Niang and Xu Xian is illustrated in their first encounter. A twin-lotus symbolizes that her pure love is reciprocated by Xu Xian, and they are shown leading a happy married life. Compared with Bai Niang's portrayal in the Japanese version, the Hong Kong version incorporates cultural factors that align with Chinese audience expectations. It adds the didactic elements of the traditional Chinese legend, portraying Bai Niang as a glorified, moral, and humanized character.

The depiction of Bai Niang and the metaphor for the couple's love in the first half of the film foreshadows the subsequent developments. As the two films unfold, Bai Niang's characterization and her relationship with Xu Xian differ significantly in each version.

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