



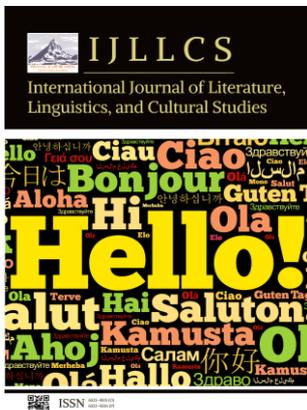
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Singularity of Chinese Buddhism: Influences of Taoism and Confucianism

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Abstract: This paper argues that the distinctiveness of Chinese Buddhism arises from its sustained interaction and gradual synthesis with native cultural traditions, particularly Confucianism and Taoism. By examining two influential narratives—the legend of the unconventional monk Ji Gong and the classical novel *Journey to the West*—the study illustrates how core Buddhist principles were continuously reinterpreted through a Chinese cultural lens. These narratives reveal the localized transformation of ideas such as filial piety, moral reciprocity, and karmic retribution, showing how abstract doctrines were translated into familiar ethical practices and vivid literary characters. Through this process of reinterpretation, Buddhism was not merely introduced to China but reshaped to align with long-standing social values and philosophical orientations. The analysis further highlights how these stories served as accessible vehicles for conveying Buddhist teachings to broader audiences, integrating spiritual ideals with everyday moral concerns. Ultimately, the paper concludes that this deep cultural syncretism produced a uniquely Chinese form of Buddhism—one that retained its foundational spiritual concepts while developing new meanings rooted in indigenous traditions, thereby differentiating it from its Indian origins and contributing to its enduring influence within Chinese cultural history.

Keywords: Chinese Buddhism; cultural syncretism; Confucianism; Taoism; karmic belief; literary interpretation

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1. Introduction

1.1. Cultural Symbolism of Earlobes in the Chinese Context

In Chinese popular culture, large earlobes are widely regarded as a sign of *fu*, meaning being blessed with good fortune. This everyday interpretation offers a valuable starting point for examining how Chinese Buddhism integrated pre-existing cultural concepts into its doctrinal and aesthetic expressions. While the image of "long earlobes" appears in early Indian Buddhist traditions as an auspicious physical mark associated with the Buddha and rooted in ancient Brahmanic symbolism, its reception in China followed a different trajectory.

As Buddhism gradually took root, both artistic forms and public understanding assigned this physical feature a new meaning that aligned with long-standing local aspirations for prosperity, harmony, and stability. In this process, an originally Indian religious symbol was not simply adopted but transformed through cultural reinterpretation. The emphasis on *fu* illustrates how Chinese society absorbed foreign religious symbols and reinfused them with values that resonated more strongly with everyday ethical ideals.

1.2. Localization and Religious Interaction

This reinterpretation reflects a broader pattern in which Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism interacted rather than existed in isolation. Confucian ethics placed strong emphasis on filial devotion, social responsibility, and the maintenance of family order, while Daoism contributed ideas related to longevity, natural balance, and the pursuit of inner harmony. When Buddhism entered China, its doctrines encountered these well-established intellectual traditions, leading to a dynamic process of adaptation and selective re-interpretation.

Instead of replacing local worldviews, Buddhism adjusted and reshaped its teachings in ways that allowed them to be meaningfully absorbed by different groups in society. Over time, Chinese Buddhism developed distinctive characteristics, including a stronger focus on moral obligations within family life and an increased attention to themes such as physical vitality and spiritual longevity. These features collectively differentiated it from the forms of Buddhism that remained closer to Indian or Southeast Asian origins.

1.3. Purpose and Structure of the Discussion

This paper explores these patterns of cultural adaptation by analyzing two well-known narratives that vividly demonstrate how Buddhist ideas evolved within a Chinese intellectual environment. The legend of the unconventional monk Ji Gong and the classical novel *Journey to the West* provide accessible examples of how Buddhist teachings were reshaped through the influences of Confucian family ethics and Daoist understandings of life cultivation.

Through close examination of these stories, the discussion highlights how pre-existing Chinese religious traditions shaped the development of Buddhism and contributed to the emergence of a uniquely localized form. By understanding how these stories reinterpret concepts such as moral duty, virtue, and karmic causality, we gain insight into the broader mechanisms through which Chinese Buddhism diverged from other regional traditions while maintaining its core spiritual foundations.

2. Stories of Ji Gong

2.1. Ji Gong's Origins and the Influence of Confucian Family Ethics

The stories of Ji Gong, often referred to as the "Crazy Monk," vividly illustrate how Confucian values shaped the development of Chinese Buddhism. In popular narratives, Ji Gong is understood to be the incarnation of the Arhat Taming Dragon. His birth is linked to a miraculous event in which his parents, unable to conceive, pray in a hall containing 500 Arhat statues. According to the story, the statue of the Taming Dragon Arhat falls before them, signaling divine intervention. This combination of Buddhist symbolism and the theme of a long-awaited child reflects a deeply Confucian appreciation of family continuity and filial expectations.

After losing his parents at the age of eighteen, Ji Gong travels to Lingyin Temple to take monastic vows and receives the name Daoji. Although the depiction of Ji Gong as an arhat may draw from early Buddhist traditions, the way these themes are incorporated into his narrative demonstrates how Buddhist ideas were gradually naturalized within Chinese culture. By emphasizing parent-child relationships and the emotional weight of family, the story highlights values central to Confucian teaching. In this respect, Ji Gong becomes not only a Buddhist figure but also a character shaped by local moral ideals.

2.2. Rule-Breaking, Buddha Nature, and the Flexibility of Zen Practice

Vegetarianism and abstaining from alcohol are important expectations for Chinese Buddhists, and both practices continue long-standing disciplinary rules. The prohibition of alcohol appears among the basic precepts of Indian Buddhism, while abstaining from meat became increasingly emphasized in the Chinese context. Despite these guidelines, stories about Ji Gong consistently portray him breaking such rules. As described in one

narrative, he openly enjoys meat and wine: "Somehow, he developed a penchant for eating meat and drinking wine while his robes were often dirty and tattered due to his constant travelling" [1]. Although many monks are shocked by his behavior and push for his removal, his teacher reminds them that "the gate of Buddhism is vast," meaning that the path to awakening accommodates diverse practitioners and temperaments.

This interpretation aligns closely with Zen Buddhism, which stresses that every individual possesses Buddha nature. Enlightenment, therefore, does not depend exclusively on strict ritual adherence but on direct insight into one's inner nature. Ji Gong embodies this principle by acting freely while remaining committed to compassion and moral intention. Zen thought also resonates with certain Daoist ideas, especially the notion of responding naturally to the needs of the present moment. One famous story recounts how, on a freezing night, Ji Gong dismantles a wooden altar to create a fire, prompting a horrified reaction from his student. Ji Gong replies that the altar is only wood, not the Buddha himself [1]. This episode expresses the Zen view that truth is found in everyday actions and that outward symbols hold meaning only when understood through inner awareness.

2.3. *Everyday Conduct, Compassion, and Ji Gong's Place in Folk Belief*

Another reason Ji Gong remains beloved is that he consistently helps ordinary people. Described as "a dishevelled monk wearing a monk's hat emblazoned with the character for 'Buddha,' carrying a worn-out reed fan and a wine gourd" [1], he appears unconventional yet deeply compassionate. He aids the poor, protects villagers, and responds quickly to those in need. His unorthodox behavior does not diminish his spiritual standing; instead, it renders him more relatable to the public, who see him as a living embodiment of kindness. As a result, he is widely revered as an important figure in Chan Buddhism and is honored in folk religious spaces.

His veneration in both Buddhist and Daoist contexts reflects the way his character bridges multiple traditions. Although drinking alcohol and eating meat conflict with formal Buddhist rules, popular devotion to Ji Gong often centers on his sincerity, moral courage, and willingness to act. This makes him a powerful example of how Chinese Buddhism adapted to local expectations: ethical action and compassion are placed above strict ritual observance. The stories of Ji Gong therefore demonstrate how Chinese Buddhism, especially within Zen traditions, diverged from earlier Indian forms by integrating Confucian family ideals, flexible interpretations of monastic rules, and certain Daoist approaches to daily life.

3. Journey to the West

3.1. *Interwoven Traditions in Journey to the West*

If the stories of Ji Gong highlight affinities between Chan Buddhism and Daoist thought, *Journey to the West* demonstrates an even broader interrelationship among Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. Over time, these three systems came to form the core of Chinese religious and philosophical culture. The 1986 television adaptation of the novel, which removed many bawdy or fantastical details, played a major role in shaping public understanding of the characters. Although the novel and the adaptation differ in many ways, both recount the pilgrimage of the monk Xuanzang (T'ang Sanzang) to acquire Buddhist scriptures from India. Because the series has been aired repeatedly for decades, audiences have grown familiar with its portrayals of Daoist immortals, Buddhist figures, and mythological beings.

Despite its popularity, both Daoist and Buddhist practitioners sometimes express concern that the story fictionalizes their traditions. The novel blends imaginative elements with religious concepts in ways that may oversimplify or dramatize spiritual teachings. Nevertheless, *Journey to the West* plays a significant cultural role by illustrating how the three traditions coexist, overlap, and at times compete within the broader fabric of Chinese thought. The narrative's appeal lies in its ability to integrate these traditions into a

single dramatic structure—one that is accessible to general readers while conveying deep symbolic meaning.

3.2. *Rebirth, Discipline, and Confucian Moral Order*

In the story, T'ang Sanzang—whose name means "three baskets" of Buddhist teachings—is presented as the tenth reincarnation of the "Golden Cicada," a disciple of the Buddha. According to the narrative, he was sent into the human world "for the crime of slighting the Buddha Law" [2], and his pilgrimage becomes an act of atonement. He must complete 81 trials before bringing sacred scriptures back to China. Interestingly, his three disciples—Sun Wukong, Zhu Wuneng, and Sha Wujing—each carry traces of Daoist or immortal origins, reflecting a blending of traditions within the novel's spiritual hierarchy.

Although Confucianism has no explicit representative in the plot, its influence is deeply embedded in the story's moral structure. Confucianism had long served as the guiding political philosophy in China, and its values naturally permeate the narrative. For example, imperial authority remains unquestioned in many episodes, echoing the Confucian belief in hierarchical order and the responsibility of rulers. Sun Wukong, who emerges from stone and therefore lacks parents, still must obey his master completely. Sanzang's authority over his disciples, even when his decisions expose them to danger, reflects Confucian expectations of loyalty, obedience, and proper conduct within teacher-disciple relationships. Although *Journey to the West* is not a Confucian work, it displays how Confucian social norms were deeply ingrained in Chinese literary culture.

3.3. *Karmic Ordeals and the Symbolism of the 81 Trials*

The Buddhist virtues of endurance, karmic redemption, and moral cultivation are also emphasized in the pilgrimage narrative. As explained in a Buddhist allegorical reading of the novel, Zhu Wuneng initially complains that Sun Wukong should simply carry their master to the destination, avoiding all conflict with monsters. However, Sun Wukong explains that Sanzang must personally undergo the 81 trials; the disciples cannot substitute for him or obtain the scriptures on his behalf [3]. This reflects the Buddhist principle that individuals must face the consequences of their own past actions and cultivate merit through direct experience. The journey is therefore not merely a physical expedition but a structured process of moral refinement [4].

Some interpretations suggest that *Journey to the West* is, symbolically, a story about Sanzang alone, with his disciples representing qualities he must acquire. Their monastic names—Wukong (awakening to emptiness), Wuneng (awakening to capability), and Wujing (awakening to purity)—correspond to virtues essential for spiritual attainment. This symbolic structure reinforces the Buddhist teaching that enlightenment requires developing inner qualities rather than relying on external power. By presenting karmic trials as a series of narrative challenges, the novel helps embed Buddhist ideas into broader Chinese cultural consciousness [5]. The emphasis on moral action, accumulated merit, and overcoming adversity illustrates how Buddhist concepts such as karma reshaped Chinese ethical thinking and influenced common religious practices [6].

4. Discussion

4.1. *Cultural Adaptation and Religious Transformation*

The narratives of Ji Gong and *Journey to the West* together illustrate a broader cultural mechanism through which foreign religious ideas were gradually reshaped within the Chinese intellectual landscape. Rather than simply adopting Buddhist teachings in their original form, Chinese society reinterpreted and localized these teachings to align with long-standing cultural expectations. This was not a passive process; instead, it involved continuous negotiation among religious practice, social norms, and literary imagination.

Through stories circulated among ordinary people, abstract concepts such as enlightenment, karmic cycles, and spiritual cultivation became relatable and grounded in everyday life.

This adaptive process also demonstrates how Buddhism functioned as a dynamic component within the Chinese cultural system. When Buddhist practices encountered established Confucian ethical norms or Daoist cosmology, tension and reconciliation often emerged simultaneously. For instance, Ji Gong's disregard for monastic precepts contrasts with formal Buddhist discipline, yet his compassion for ordinary people reflects the ethical heart of Buddhist teaching. Similarly, the 81 trials in *Journey to the West* follow a Buddhist framework but unfold within a narrative heavily shaped by Chinese storytelling conventions. These examples show how transformation occurs not only through doctrinal reinterpretation but also through the creative energies of popular culture.

4.2. Narrative Strategies and Symbolic Functions

Both sets of stories also make extensive use of symbolic devices to communicate religious ideas in ways accessible to a wide audience. Ji Gong's unconventional behavior serves as a narrative tool to question rigid interpretations of monastic rules, while simultaneously illustrating the Chan Buddhist emphasis on direct insight and spontaneous action. His actions often appear contradictory on the surface, yet they demonstrate a belief that awakening can be found within ordinary circumstances rather than strict ritual observance. Such storytelling strategies help frame Buddhist principles within a familiar cultural vocabulary, allowing them to take root across diverse social groups.

In *Journey to the West*, symbolic storytelling becomes even more elaborate. Characters such as Sun Wukong, Zhu Wuneng, and Sha Wujing embody psychological or moral qualities that the protagonist must cultivate. Their conflicts with demons and spirits create layers of meaning that operate on moral, spiritual, and cultural levels. These narrative structures reveal that religious ideas were not transmitted solely through texts or monastic institutions; instead, they circulated widely through fiction, performance, and oral storytelling. As a result, religious knowledge became integrated into the collective imagination, giving Buddhism a distinctly Chinese form of expression.

4.3. Interreligious Harmony and Social Implications

The stories also underscore an important feature of Chinese religious culture: the tendency to harmonize multiple belief systems rather than prioritize one exclusively. While tensions appear in certain episodes—such as disagreements between deities of different traditions—the overall narrative structure tends toward coexistence and complementary functions. Daoist immortals, Buddhist bodhisattvas, and Confucian moral figures interact within a shared symbolic universe, reflecting the pluralistic yet cohesive religious environment of traditional China. This blending suggests that Chinese society valued ethical harmony and practical morality more than strict doctrinal boundaries.

Such interreligious harmony also had practical social implications. By presenting Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism as mutually supportive, these narratives helped reinforce moral norms and encourage ethical conduct among ordinary people. Concepts such as compassion, discipline, loyalty, and moral self-cultivation became shared values across different traditions. As religious ideas circulated through popular stories, they shaped social expectations and everyday ethical behavior. These processes highlight that the influence of Buddhism in China extended far beyond monasteries; it permeated the cultural imagination, moral education, and the lived experiences of communities.

5. Conclusion

Confucian duties, Taoist modes of thought, and Buddhist teachings on karma gradually intertwined to form a distinctive structure within Chinese folk religion. As Buddhism spread, it not only coexisted with native traditions but also reshaped certain long-

standing practices. For example, Buddhist compassion and the emphasis on protecting living beings encouraged a shift in attitudes toward hunting. Earlier rulers regarded hunting as both a skill and a symbol of status, yet the Buddhist association between taking life and accumulating negative karma led many later figures to reduce or abandon such activities. Similarly, while classical Taoist thought often centered on the pursuit of longevity, the arrival of Buddhist notions of rebirth and moral causality inspired more people to focus on cultivating virtuous actions that might influence their future existence. Through these processes, Buddhism contributed new ethical perspectives that were gradually absorbed into broader religious life.

The narratives of Ji Gong and *Journey to the West* provide clear literary evidence of this cultural integration. Ji Gong illustrates how Zen Buddhist values intersect with Taoist ideals, demonstrating that strict disciplinary rules could be adapted to emphasize compassion, spontaneity, and moral intention. *Journey to the West* further exemplifies the merging of the three traditions by depicting characters who embody Confucian loyalty, Taoist self-cultivation, and Buddhist karmic principles. These stories as a whole reveal how Buddhism in China evolved from its earlier forms and was reinterpreted to align with Chinese social ethics and aesthetic preferences.

Although Buddhism introduced new concepts, core values such as family responsibility and filial piety remained central. Over time, Buddhist teachings were not merely adopted but transformed within the cultural environment, resulting in a unique religious synthesis. This distinctiveness is especially visible in popular literature, where everyday authors embedded Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist elements into a shared narrative world. Ultimately, the convergence of these traditions fostered a multifaceted belief system that differs from other Buddhist cultures and reflects the long-term development of Chinese religious life.

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