

The Role of the Guide in Catabatic Journeys:  
Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Lo Mou-teng's  
*The Voyage to the Western Sea of the Chief Eunuch San-pao*

By

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ABSTRACT

Across language, time and culture, man's vision of the underworld has been remarkably consistent. Though the catabatic journeys in Virgil's and Dante's works have often been examined, they have never been compared with the Chinese journey to the Underworld Kingdom Feng-tu. The latter is described from Chapter eighty-six to ninety-three of Lo Mou-teng's book *The Voyage*.

My paper is a comparative study of the role of the guide in the above works. It is remarkable that each of the three authors has created a guide in their imaginary journeys to the underworld. In addition, the role of each of the three guides as they have created in these classical works in question, are surprisingly identical. Besides the physical guidance to the unknown underworld, the guide plays an important role in the trip as a Divine messenger and spiritual leader.

Similar to Sibyl in the *Aeneid* and Virgil in Dante's work, the Chinese guide, P'an-kuan, knows the purpose of the catabatic journey and leads the travellers through an education by viewing the placement of ghosts in this underworld set up by Confucian moral codes. Despite the differences in philosophies, religions and beliefs, the basic principle of rewarding the good and punishing the evil amazingly resembles its western counterparts. I will argue that it is the archetype from the collective unconsciousness that determines the parallel creation of the guide in each of these three divergent works.

KEY WORDS

Catabatic journey  
Feng-tu  
Guide  
Divine messenger  
Sibyl

P'an-kuan  
archetypal image  
voyage

Catabatic (underworld) journeys are familiar to Western readers from such classics as the *Aeneid* and the *Divine Comedy*. Having inherited the Homeric epic device, Virgil in Book Six lets Aeneas go through the underworld to learn his destiny. Following Virgil's poetic and mythical traditions, Dante created his own journey into the Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso in the *Divine Comedy* which represents an exploration of one's path in life. Almost totally unknown to Western readers, however, is the sixteenth century Chinese account of an underworld journey in 三寶太監下西洋 (*The Voyage to the Western Sea of the Chief Eunuch San-pao*) (hereafter referred to as *Voyage*) which was written in 1597.<sup>1</sup> The book is about the sea expeditions in which the adventurers aim to "conquer the invaders and find back the Nation Treasure 國寶."<sup>2</sup> Like the journeys in Virgil's Sixth Book in the *Aeneid* and in the *Divine Comedy*, in this Chinese text the journey to the Demons' country of Feng-tu 酆都鬼城, which is the last of the adventure stories in Lo Mou-teng's 羅懋登 *Voyage*, also provides the adventurers with a view of the human after-life, as well as the instructions for their behavior. This narrative reflects conceptions of the Underworld based on a fusion of Buddhistic beliefs, Taoist elements, and Confucian ethical laws. As to the comparisons between these literary works, there are many topics which need to be examined, such as the similar moral systems of the three underworlds, the structural resemblances in the journey, analogous philosophies on human life and after-life, and the conventional roles and devices employed. In this paper I shall only discuss the roles of the guides in three catabatic journeys. The guides play three quite similar roles in the catabatic journeys: they serve as of physical guidance, Divine messengers, and spiritual leader.

Virgil starts this section of his story with Aeneas' dream of his father, who instructs him to turn to the Sibyl for help in order to see him in the Elysian Fields of Hades. Guided by Divine will, Aeneas has a clear purpose for his trip and directly goes to the Sibyl. From the very beginning, Virgil has demonstrated the first two roles of the Sibyl as guide and messenger. Entering the Underworld, Aeneas encounters frightful figures such as ghosts of "Grief," "avenging Cares," "Dread," "Hunger."<sup>3</sup> This physical difficulty explains the necessity for Aeneas to have a guide. On the other hand, in the temple of Apollo, she calls forth the Divine will. The gods speak through her to give Aeneas consent for his trip. Brooks Otis points out that with the help of the Sibyl, in the temple of Apollo Aeneas "heard the very word of fate: he has obtained all he asked--direct confirmation of his destiny by Apollo himself."<sup>4</sup> Before descending to Hades, the Sibyl has fulfilled the function of linking Aeneas with the gods.

Similar to Aeneas' encounter, Dante at the opening of the Inferno awakens from a dream to confront three dreadful animals--a leopard, a hungry lion and a she-wolf. This scene also implies Dante's immediate need of a guide to overcome the physical difficulties of the trip. Virgil appears to rescue him and tells him "best for you [Dante] to follow me, and I shall guide you, taking you from this place through an eternal place, where another guide will take you over."<sup>5</sup> Just the same as in the *Aeneid*, the catabatic journey in *Divine Comedy* is also arranged by Divine will. The difference is that the protagonist does not have a clear idea of the purpose of his journey at the beginning. Dante emphasizes the narrator's wandering state. The guide Virgil knows where to lead Dante without the narrator Dante's own realization. Given the confusion of the traveler, it is even more imperative for the protagonist to have a guide. The function of the guide Virgil to help Dante through his trip to Hell as well as in leading him to carry out the Divine plan of examining the condition of the soul after death, has been evident from the start. As Erich Auerbach states, the guide Virgil "is elected to point out and interpret for him [Dante] the true earthly order, whose laws are carried out and whose essence is fulfilled in the other world, and at the same time to direct him toward its goal, the heavenly community of the blessed."<sup>6</sup>

Very different in structure from both the *Aeneid* and *Divine Comedy*, the underworld story in the Chinese text begins at the end of a trip, in this case to "T'ien-fang 天方," the Celestial Country. Even after going through many kinds of adventures and battles, the three commanders who are the main characters decide to continue exploring, looking for the "Nation Treasure." They do not know where to go next, except having a vague idea that their trip might take them to the Underworld. After a month's aimless sailing, their ships reach a mysteriously dark coast.

At this time, as it says, it was so cloudy that one could hardly tell if it was morning or night; the road was so indistinct that one could scarcely find one's way as if in deep snow. After a while, the dark clouds gathered and the steep cliff stood forth in a frightful way (Chap. 86, p. 1116).

The darkness, frightfulness, and desolation of the setting of the Underworld entrance presented in the Chinese *Voyage* resemble those of Virgil and Dante. The impressionistic language suggests the general situations and the basic conditions in which catabatic journeys take place. The mysteriously dangerous atmosphere prepares the reader to enter into a world of ghosts and presents the need for the

protagonist to have a guide. In this tale Wang Ming, an official, who has been sent by his General to explore this strange territory, first meets his wife who died ten years ago. When he sees her by a river he realizes to his horror, that he is now in the realm of the dead. His wife's infernal husband P'an-kuan, a judge known as the Chief Assistant of the Underworld Kings, persuades Wang Ming to take a trip through the Demons' Country of Feng-tu and offers himself to show Wang Ming around. Unlike Virgil, but similar to Dante, Lo Mou-teng presents his protagonist as entering into the Underworld without his knowledge; the trip is imposed on him without his own intention. Like the guide Virgil in the *Divine Comedy*, P'an-kuan 判官 knows the purpose of the journey which the traveler is not aware of. At the entrance of Feng-tu, Wang Ming also encounters frightful demon guards who forbid him to enter. Only with the help of his guide can he physically enter the underworld.

Another striking resemblance to the Sibyl in the *Aeneid* and to the guide Virgil in the *Divine Comedy* lies in P'an-kuan's role in revealing the Divine will. After Wang Ming tells P'an-kuan's role in revealing the Divine will. After Wang Ming tells P'an-kuan who he is, P'an-kuan says"

The Celestial Country is at the end of the Western Sea, and here is called The Demons' Country of Feng-tu which is at the end of the Western Heaven. Where else can you turn to since you got here? Besides, there are many ghosts in the court who have brought lawsuits against some people who declared to conquer the invaders and find back the Nation Treasure. . . . Every of the ghosts claim a life for a life. In that case nobody of you will be able to return home." (Chapter 87, p. 1123)

P'an-kuan here warns Wang Ming again about the problems that adventurers have caused in their earlier expeditions: they have killed too many people, even though their main cause to fight for peace of the country and recovering its treasure has been glorified. In Chinese myth, the underworld kings as well as their assistant P'an-kuan are sympathetic with the gods' will. In the *Voyage* there is no direct participation of the deities and mankind as in the *Aeneid*, yet the gods' will always obscurely determines the adventurers' fate. It is the Divine will that intends to let them examine what they have done so far. Like the Sibyl and Dante's guide Virgil, P'an-kuan too is guided by Divine to point out human problems. He, too, embodies the roles of a physical guide and of messenger of the gods' will. He will give Wang Ming a tour to the Underworld Country of Feng-tu and, at the same time, will execute the gods' intention of offering the catabatic journey as a way to help

the adventurers examine their past as well as realize their destiny. Only through such guides, can the Divine guidance be expressed. Without the mythical powers of the guides to deliver Gods' instructions, the catabatic journeys would not possibly take place in the myth-dominated works of these three traditions. In each, the role of the guide expresses the same essential mediation between the heroes and the gods in three books.

The guides are very carefully depicted by the authors with regard of the multiple roles that they must complete. In addition to mythical power, heroic power is also common to their characterization. Virgil chooses the Sibyl, a goddess, not only because she has access to the gods, but also because she represents human ideals. She is the symbol of many virtues, virtues such as heroism, courage, and piety. Her human qualities enable her to help Aeneas achieve his goals. She educates Aeneas on his journey to Hades. Her long speech about Tartarus is an example. The Sibyl does not let Aeneas visit this frightful area of punishments, but he learns about it through her description, in which she lists several kinds of sins and includes the horrible accounts of torture in Tartarus. Then she emphasizes that the aim of her speech is to "teach all souls / His lesson, thundering out amid the gloom: / 'Be warned and study justice, not to scorn / The immortal gods' (Book VI, Lines 613-616)." Literally, it is the Sibyl who decides what part of the underworld she wants Aeneas to visit, or to skip, in order to reach his father Anchises more quickly. Symbolically, her decision is made on the basis of her didactic purpose. She is not ostensibly a mouthpiece of the gods here, but speaks in her own voice. In order to give Aeneas the spiritual help, the Sibyl seems to act of her own free will, letting him reexamine the past and view the future of Rome to realize his destiny.

Dante presents a keener tie with his guide Virgil in *Divine Comedy*. As a poet and a man, Dante looks up to Virgil as his master for both his life and his epic. Dante assigns the guide Virgil much more important task than Virgil gave to the Sibyl, because the guiding figure in *Divine Comedy* has significance not only for Dante, but also for all humankind. Spiritual lessons stand out as the major concern that Dante has to learn from his catabatic journey, along with lessons in morality, politics, and philosophy. Dante's confrontation with illicit lovers for instance, exemplifies the main pattern of Virgil's teaching. The guide Virgil first leads the narrator Dante to vision the miserable state of the lovers who are tortured by punishments corresponding to their sins. Then he calls Dante's attention to Franscesca and allows to her tell her tragedy. The guide Virgil does not explain anything directly; he simply asks Dante what he is thinking. By this tactic Virgil intends to inspire Dante to use his power of reason and to realize the spiritual implication of Francesca's tale. Struck by suffering of the lovers, Dante

becomes aware, in the circle of carnal lust, that the sinners are forever tossed by winds because they chose self-indulgence rather than obeying God's will. Instead of giving direct instruction, as the Sibyl does to Aeneas, Virgil appeals to Dante's free will and guides him to his self-realization of the truth. He comes to understand that God grants everybody free will and that hell is the place to punish those who choose lower interests over divine goodness. Virgil's guidance leads Dante to achieve a higher spiritual awakening than the Sibyl afforded to Aeneas. As Erich Auerbach points out, "for Dante the historical Virgil embodied this fullness of earthly perfection and was therefore capable of guiding him to the very threshold of insight into the divine and eternal perfection; the historic Virgil was for him a figure of the poet-prophet-guide(p. 60)."

The use of the catabatic journey as a device for teaching is evident in the Chinese book as well. In earlier expeditions Lo Mou-teng emphasizes the adventurers' heroic achievements. Even though gods' will has justified their patriotic cause to gain peace, they have to undergo a spiritual education to learn their limitations and understand their sins, and this is accomplished through the catabatic journey.

P'an-kuan, the infernal judge, is an excellent choice to fulfil this mission. Like the Sibyl in Roman tradition, P'an-kuan is a mythical figure from the ancient Chinese legend. "P'an-kuan" in Chinese means "judging official" or "judge." Like the Sibyl in the *Aeneid* and Virgil in the *Divine Comedy*, he has a mythical power of knowledge of the world throughout time. Indeed, P'an-kuan possesses a "Book of Sins" in which everything, both good and bad, that one has done in the life just ended, and in all previous lives is written. In the chapters describing scenes, he appears as a fair judge who exercises judicial responsibilities in the underworld. The Underworld King Yen-lo supervises him, but depends on him to supply information from the "Book of Sins" about each human's past behavior, and to decide the final sentences for each subsequent life. Similar to both the Sibyl and the guide Virgil, P'an-kuan has the power to help decide the futures and to lead souls forward their assigned destiny.

The first lesson P'an-kuan gives Wang Ming concerns the moral system of justice in human after-life. In the Hell of Wind and Thunder, the first of eighteen hells where wicked souls tortured by eighteen kinds of torments, P'an-kuan explains how the infernal court sentences souls immediately after their death, according to their behavior. Explaining the punishments allotted to the sinners, P'an-kuan says:

" . . . If the result of trial shows that he [a person] is one who has done evil in his life, he will be sentenced through the eighteen hells one by one, suffering the

different kinds of tortures one by one until he is sent to the Hall for Punishments. Also, he will be put into one of eight mansions for evils, according to his sin. After he has done service there for three years, he will be reincarnated as a cow, a sheep, a dog, or a pig. In the world these will be skinned, fried, or beaten and reprimanded by people, or they will have to eat people's shit (Chap. 87, p. 1136).

P'an-kuan's speech reveals a moral purpose as is present in the *Aeneid* and *Divine Comedy*. In Chinese tradition, as fused with Buddhist belief, the highest ideal for a human being is to enjoy happiness in the after-life and then be reborn as a nobleman. The worst outcome is to be tortured in several hells in the after-life and then be transmigrated into a series of lower beings who will suffer in future lives. P'an-kuan presents the infernal system of justice in order to inculcate fear of Divine punishments and to lure people to strive for good behavior in this life. Furthermore, the visit to Feng-tu is only the first part of the underworld story in the *Voyage*. The speech cited above occurs near the end of this part of the tour, in which P'an-kuan tries to reveal the Divine purpose of the journey. By examining the infernal system of justice, P'an-kuan prepares the adventurers to go further into the underworld court, where they will realize their misdeeds in the chapters depicting trials, and to meet the underworld King Yen-lo, who will clarify their destiny in chapters about gifts. Their destiny will be to stop their adventuring expeditions and return home to build their own country. P'an-kuan's moral and spiritual guidance has played a decisive role in leading the adventurers to a self-realization of their past and future directions.

In spite of the remarkable similarities among the three guides, each author has his own emphasis. The Sibyl has been portrayed as a supernaturally powerful goddess. The guide Virgil has shown more human qualities. P'an-kuan's heroic qualities are depicted when he fights bravely against the abuses perpetrated by evil souls, revealing their tricks, and protects the good ones at their trials. He is portrayed as an ideal, fair judge, a heroic figure exemplifying such Confucian virtues as righteousness, honesty, truthfulness, sincerity, and filial piety.

Joseph Campbell states that "the comparative study of the mythologies of the world compels us to view the cultural history of mankind as a unit; for we find that such themes as the Fire-theft, Deluge, land of the Dead, Virgin Birth, and Resurrected Hero have a world-wide distribution, appearing everywhere in new combinations, while remaining, like the elements of a kaleidoscope, only a few and always the same."<sup>7</sup> The remarkable resemblances in the catabatic

journeys in these three books accord with Campbell's concept of the universality of myth. Moreover, the parallels in the figure of the guide suggest striking similarities in the writers' minds. It reminds us of the psychoanalysis of literary creativities particularly of Jung's idea about the "collective unconsciousness" with its "archetypal images":

The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work.<sup>8</sup>

It is such archetypes from the collective unconsciousness that seem to have been activated in Virgil, Dante, and Lo Mou-teng. And the same "wish-fulfillment" of social concerns inspires the three writers to turn to similar myths of the underworld. All three guides have shown us an idealized realm where evil is punished and good is rewarded. Virgil, Dante, and Lo Mou-teng have created their literary works and left us valuable sources to study the different civilizations and cultures, as well as the human psyche in general.

## NOTES

1. Mou-teng Lo 羅懋登, *San-pao t'ai-chien hsia hsi-yang chi* 三寶太監下西洋記 reprinted by Shanghai Ancient Letter Publishing House in March, 1985. The book has not been translated into English. The quotes in the text are my own translation along with Dr. Thomas Beebee, an assistant professor in Comparative Literature Department of the State University of Pennsylvania.
2. It is the slogan of the expedition. The invaders here refer to the ancient tribes around the east coast of China who often harassed the Chinese territory at the border. The Nation Treasure passed down from ancestors was believed as the symbol of the nation's power and order. It said it was lost in some war. The whole nation was humiliated because of the loss. So to find back the Nation Treasure meant to gain back the honor of the country. At the end of the novel, the adventurers succeeded only in making peace at the border by conquering the tribes, but could never find the treasure.
3. Virgil, the *Aeneid*, trans. by Robert Fitzgerald (Random House, New York) Book VI, lines 273-179.
4. Brooks Otis, *Virgil: A Study in Civilized Poetry* (Oxford, At the Clarendon Press), p. 286.
5. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by Allen Mandelbaum, (Bantam Books, Toronto. New York. London. Sydney. Auckland), Canto I, lines 112-118.
6. Erich Auerbach, "Figural Art in the Divine Comedy" in *Discussions of the Divine Comedy*, ed. Irma Brandeis (D.C. Heath and Company, Boston), p. 60.
7. Joseph Campbell, "The Historical Development of Mythology" in *Myth and Mythmaking*, ed. Henry A. Murray (Beacon Press, Boston, 1960), p. 19.
8. Carl Gustav Jung, "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry" in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, San Diego, New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., London, Sydney, Toronto, 1971), p. 818.

