

The Ethical Dilemma in *The Uniting of Human and Divine*

Qin Xuan & Wang Yongqiang

Abstract: *The Uniting of Human and Divine* is a companion volume of the author Chen Zhongyi previous work, *As I've Heard It*. This novel exposes and condemns the evil deeds of “Master”: Cuihua who is deceitful, manipulative, and commits all kinds of atrocities. The story tells about professor Chen under the support of the government, the ideal world she stretched her mind to build was destroyed and she was ultimately brought to justice. In *The Uniting of Human and Divine*, the two prevalent ethical dilemmas presented are “old age” dilemma and “intergenerational” dilemma, which are interconnected and intertwined. This study delves into the ethical reconstruction predicament in *The Uniting of Human and Divine* and its underlying causes. Ultimately, it criticizes the ethical choices and sinful actions of “Cuihua” from the perspective of ethical literary criticism.

Keywords: *The Uniting of Human and Divine*; ethical literary criticism; ethical choice; ethical dilemmas; ethical reconstruction

Authors: **Qin Xuan** is Associate Professor in School of International Communication, Communication University of Zhejiang (Hangzhou 310018, China). Her primary research areas include ethical literary criticism, English and American literature, and Cross-cultural drama (Email: 20210054@cuz.edu.cn). **Wang Yongqiang** is a Ph.D. candidate at Department of Dramatic Literature, Shanghai Theatre Academy (Shanghai 200040, China). Her primary research areas include Western Drama and Performance Studies (Email: 19946225919@163.com).

标题：《冥合天人》中的伦理困境书写

内容摘要：《冥合天人》是陈众议笔下《如是我闻》的姊妹篇。小说对大师“翠花”装神弄鬼、蛊惑人心的罪恶行径进行了批判和揭露。最终，“陈教授”在政府的支持下捣毁了“翠花”处心积虑营造的世外桃源，并将其绳之以法。在《冥合天人》中呈现出两个典型的伦理困境：“暮年”困境和“代际”困境，这两种困境互相影响、互相嵌套。本文运用文学伦理学批评的方法，通过分析《冥合天人》中的伦理困境及其成因，分析“翠花”的伦理选择，揭露她的罪恶行径。

关键词：《冥合天人》；文学伦理学批评；伦理选择；伦理困境；伦理重构

作者简介：秦璇，浙江传媒学院国际文化传播学院副教授，研究方向为文学

伦理学批评、英美文学、跨文化戏剧；王咏蔷，上海戏剧学院戏文系博士生，研究领域为西方戏剧、表演学。本文为教育部国别与区域研究备案中心—浙江传媒学院英国研究中心资助的重点项目“英国戏剧跨文化传播对中国戏曲改编的影响力研究”【项目批号：23ZCYY04ZDI】和浙江省教育厅资助的一般科研项目“‘互联网+’时代越剧的数字化传承与创新”【项目批号：Y202352669】的阶段性成果。

Introduction

The novel *The Uniting of Human and Divine* is a companion volume of the author's previous work *As I've Heard It*. Both novels revolve around the complex relationship between Professor Chen and Cuihua and interweave metaphorical ghost stories from various times and cultures to complement the main plot. These two novels serve as the author's tools to shatter the "illusions" clouding people's minds by employing the strategy of "fighting fire with fire." The author Chen Zhongyi, being both a scholar and a translator, aims to emulate the ancient sages' ideal of "Only by observing and studying the civilized customs and etiquette created by human society can one achieve the goal of enlightening the world" (Zhu 95). His writing style is both engaging and insightful, striking a balance between profundity and accessibility. While some scholars have attributed the author's literary style to the long-standing influence of his research subjects, Latin American literature and Magical Realism, the author Chen Zhongyi's works more closely align with the essence of classical Chinese literature, especially the allegorical stories of the pre-Qin era, which embody both aesthetic charm and profound meaning. The term "allegory" combines "li" (principle) with "yan" (narrative) and refers to stories that contain philosophical truths. The two fundamental requirements for allegorical stories are: having a storyline and imparting moral lessons, which relate to ethics. The construction of ethical dilemmas in the core situations of *The Uniting of Human and Divine* and provide an interpretation from the perspective of ethical literary criticism.

I. Character Development: The Dilemma of Choice amid Incomplete Identities

(I) Ethical Choices of Cuihua: Chaos and Loss

The novel *The Uniting of Human and Divine* follows a clear narrative thread, which can be summed up as the story of Professor Chen and my group fighting against the villainous gang led by Cuihua. Professor Chen and Cuihua first met during the

“Down to the Countryside”¹ and became close friends and companions in their youth, and even developed some unspoken romantic feelings for each other. In the blink of an eye, a lifetime passed, and they ultimately became irreconcilable enemies. Cuihua, once a spirited “iron girl” team leader, a symbol of youthful vigor and determination, has transformed into a wealthy “big boss” and a worldly-wise “Master Rushi,” offering guidance to those seeking enlightenment. “Iron girl” Cuihua and Master Rushi are juxtaposed in a parallel “montage” by the author, creating a powerful contrast that shocks the senses. Throughout Cuihua’s life, her journey mirrors the phrase “a riot of blooms begins to dazzle the eye.”² As the tide of the era surged, Cuihua’s choice was to follow the times repeatedly immersing herself in the currents of the times, ultimately devolving into a demon. The defining characteristics of Cuihua’s ethical choices are “chaos” and “loss,” stemming from the incomplete nature of her internal ethical identity.

Cuihua’s life coincided with three waves of the times: the Cultural Revolution, the reform and opening up, and the information explosion. These turbulent waves of history molded her into the “Master Rushi” while simultaneously obliterating the remnants of her former self, “Cuihua.” Cuihua’s life experiences varied greatly, bearing distinct imprints of historical development. She was “iron girl” in the production team, a “businessperson” who ventured into the market during the early stages of reform and opening up, and even became the owner of a nightclub. Eventually, she became a revered and worshipped “enlightened master.” It can be seen that Cuihua underwent multiple significant identity transformations throughout her life, and in the midst of these complex changes, her initial two choices are particularly representative. One was the encounter with the “blind fortune-teller” on the train after Professor Chen left. The other was her handling of the 64 gold bars left by the “blind fortune-teller” after his passing.

In these two “choices,” Cuihua’s character traits can be seen. Firstly, she is driven by strong instincts and possesses a strong sense of action. Secondly, Cuihua is easily swayed by external influences, lacking a stable inner core. This lays the groundwork for her later actions in the story-engaging in money-for-sex deals, misleading others, breaking the law, and disregarding ethics. Ethical identity changes often directly lead to the creation of ethical confusion.³ Therefore, when a

1 It was a political and social campaign in China that lasted from the 1950s to the late 1970s. During this period, millions of educated urban youth were sent to rural areas to live and work with peasants.

2 From an ancient poem by the Chinese poet Bai Juyi, “The Spring Journey of Qiantang Lake,” the original intention is that too many flowers to see the eyes, often used to compare things to dazzle people.

3 See Nie Zhenzhao, “Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory,” *Forum for World Literature Studies* 2 (2021): 189-207; Nie Zhenzhao, “Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection,” *Forum for World Literature Studies* 3 (2021): 383-398.

character in a novel exhibits a lot of chaos and deviation from moral behavior, one can try to find the reasons from their ethical identities.

At the turn of the century, people experienced two World Wars, armed revolutions, the Cultural Revolution, and the economic “revolution” known as reform and opening up. The once-solid and self-consistent value system and ethics centered around “land” underwent a radical change following several profound societal transformations. The dissociation of old ethical identities and the establishment of new ones inevitably require a transitional period of incomplete and blurred identities. Cuihua is a typical figure in this transitional period. Therefore, Cuihua’s actions and choices in the story all demonstrate the characteristics of her incomplete ethical identity—a lot of bad ethical choices. Because of the incomplete ethical identity, Cuihua cannot obtain the answer to “who she is” from the existing social and cultural traditions. When ethical identities are incomplete, neither individuals nor society can locate their identities. In the absence of norms and examples, different people behave differently when faced with the question of “who am I.” Individuals often resort to either reckless behavior or inaction when they are unsure of how to act. Cuihua’s pursuit of personal gain and disregard for ethics clearly falls into the former category, as her incomplete ethical identity drives her to explore a place outside the law.

(II) Ethical Choices: Search and Avoidance

Cuihua and Professor Chen are two typical representatives of generation. In the tide of time, Professor Chen’s ethical identity, along with hers, has been repeatedly deconstructed and reconstructed. The dissolution of societal hierarchies marked by traditional identities, such as the scholar, farmer, artisan and merchant, along with the influence of capital and the explosion of information, have distorted and fragmented our existing ethical identities. When a person cannot obtain an accurate role positioning from the external society and internal self, his behavioral choices are inevitably affected. This disorder stems from the lack of clarity in one’s role positioning. Cuihua is an extension of the traditional “farmer” archetype, while Professor Chen represents the condensed image of the traditional social class of scholars. Compared to Cuihua’s carefree and fearless approach of doing whatever she pleases, Professor Chen’s choices are filled with contradictions and pain. The rift between old ethical morals and social development underlies Professor Chen’s actions and choices.

The advancements in society and scientific progress have significantly extended human lifespan. The traditional Chinese proverb “it’s rare to live to seventy since olden day” reflects the brevity of old age in ancient times. If we

apply this outdated perspective to contemporary society, the elderly would face an exceptionally protracted period of old age. In the span of several decades of this life spanning, each individual faces the choice of how to spend their old age. Both the elderly Cuihua and Professor Chen have emotional and physiological needs. From the perspective of traditional ethical values, Cuihua's choices can be seen as incestuous and immoral. Elderly Cuihua, through her alluring words and financial power, entices young men to engage in physical relationships with her. As for the feelings that developed between Professor Chen and the young girl Lu, and her direct and sincere gestures of affection, Professor Chen selected let it happens in nature, and ends because of moral etiquette. Professor Chen's attitude towards the "May-December romance" with Lu represents a spiritual yearning and an act of avoidance. This contradiction between knowledge and action is a typical characteristic of his behavior.

Throughout the book, Professor Chen selected sacrifice personal interests and shoulder social responsibility by exposing Cuihua's crimes. This is a task that rightfully belonged to the police, not a retired old man like Professor Chen. The "pursuit" in his heart is not something that can be acknowledged by mainstream values. Professor Chen's actions may be objectively perceived as those of an outsider, an amateur, a busybody or even a disturber of public order. However, it is the embodiment of his ethical view of "pursuit" and ultimately helps the police bring Cuihua to justice. From an individual perspective, this may be seen as the heroic act of a "Don Quixote," but when Professor Chen existed as a reflection of the collective, it becomes a painful scar hidden beneath the grand narrative of the era. The ethical choices driven by his ethical beliefs fail to satisfy the true needs of the subject, resulting in the underlying anguish and struggle of the individual behind his choices. These contradictions reflect the incompleteness of Professor Chen ethical identity and its mismatch with the current social realities.

II. Narrative Method: Ethical Dilemmas in Perplexing Choices

The protagonist's incomplete ethical identity leads to confusion in their ethical choices, creating a narrative filled with complex ethical dilemmas. A "dilemma" refers to a situation that forces individuals to make difficult decisions, often with tragic consequences. Throughout history, classic stories have often revolved around such ethical dilemmas. The choices made by Cuihua and the Professor Chen lead us down different paths, while also exposing the ethical dilemmas we face.

(I) An Ideal World or A Place of No Attachment

In the article *The Uniting of Human and Divine*, Cuihua establishes a self-

sufficient “ideal world” far away from the city. This “ideal world” stands in sharp contrast to the reality of the outside society, highlighting the prominent ethical dilemma of our current society - the dilemma of old age. In Cuihua’s “ideal world,” Cuihua is the “rule,” actually the embodiment of the inner desires of Professor Chen and Cuihua.

The “ideal world” is like the “Castle in the Clouds” in *Les Misérables*. The more beautiful the castle in the clouds appears, the more it emphasizes Cosette’s difficult situation. In other words, the fear held within Cuihua’s and Professor Chen’s hearts manifests in the real world as a situation of the elderly having no one to rely on. Professor Chen and Cuihua become two senior citizens stripped of social standing. This underlying fear is subtly expressed by the author through the concept of “the ideal world.” Outside of “the ideal world,” Professor Chen is a retired professor who can pass as someone else with a wig on, an “expert” often scoffed at on the internet, and a sleepless widower. Cuihua is a transcendent being who has achieved “Dao” and no longer indulges in worldly affairs, described by Lu as a monster who is like an old and dried-up poplar or plum tree. Despite the seemingly opposite lifestyles of Professor Chen and Cuihua, they both belong to the elderly population over the age of seventy. Society blurs the gender boundaries of this group and overlooks their needs, thus largely diminishing their social value and authority. Although human lifespan is increasing, this physical and mental suffering is also invisibly prolonged.

(II) The Paradox of the “Self” in Nested Spaces

The novel *The Uniting of Human and Divine* employs a captivating tapestry of multilayered narratives, also known as multiple narrative threads. There are two prominent contrasting narratives: one is parallel storytelling between ghost stories and the main plotline, and the other is the parallel storytelling between the present Professor Chen and the past Professor Chen from his youth. The former is similar to Chinese “zhiguai” (tales of the strange) fiction, which seems to be about ghosts and monsters but actually criticizes corruption and cruelty. In *The Uniting of Human and Divine*, ghost stories from across time and cultures are employed as an antidote to their own mystique, laid bare on the page to dispel their supernatural allure. This narrative technique is a common method used in psychology and sociology—the secret lies in the secrecy itself. “Audiences can feel the mystery and power behind the performance, while the performers are well aware that their main secrets are nothing more than insignificant tricks. As numerous folktales and initiation ceremonies have shown, the true secret behind mysterious things is that there are actually no secrets at all; the real issue is how to prevent the audience from knowing this” (Goffman 56).

Imposing restrictions on contact, such as maintaining social distance, can create and maintain a sense of awe. However, the author breaks this social distance in order to demystify the supernatural. Cuihua, elevated to a divine status due to this very “mystique,” is ultimately stripped of her divinity by Lu after close contact, revealing Cuihua’s true nature as “a hunched old woman, like a dried-up poplar or plum tree” (307)¹.

The parallel narrative between the present and the past is a form of montage in terms of narrative space. In the linear progression of time and space in reality, individuals are unable to simultaneously see their own past, present, and future, resulting in an inability to intuitively grasp cause and effect. However, in literary works such as novels, plays, and movies, the timelines and spatial dimensions can be freely rearranged, giving rise to spatial storytelling. Taking the novel as an example, through the use of words, a narrative space is constructed, within which the author can freely organize the relationships of time, space, and characters, achieving contemplation and observation that are difficult to attain in real life. In the novel *The Uniting of Human and Divine* the most prominent function of spatial storytelling is to achieve “self-inspect” that is difficult to attain in real life. Through parallel narration, the author juxtaposes the past Professor Chen and Cuihua with the present Professor Chen and the present Cuihua, allowing the reader to perceive the simultaneous occurrence of cause and effect, which would otherwise follow a linear sequence. The result is a vivid portrayal of the moment when the bullet from someone youth hits the heart of the present character.

Every person experiences the roles of “parent” and “child,” and only through mutual recognition can young and old individuals attain a complete sense of self, thereby bridging the ethical gap. Otherwise, intergenerational conflicts will create divisions within each individual at every stage of their life, perpetuating like genes. This intergenerational dilemma is cleverly externalized in the novel *The Uniting of Human and Divine*. Generally, intergenerational conflicts often manifest between two opposing individuals. However, in the case of Professor Chen and Cuihua, both have aspects of “parent” and “child.” Intergenerational conflicts exist within a single independent entity, resulting in a confrontation and mutual non-recognition between “him” and “him self.” The intergenerational conflict between Professor Chen and Cuihua reveals a sharp contradiction, vividly showcasing the causal patterns of social development during a specific historical period: during youth, the subversion of old, established traditional ethics and morals within society. In old age, catalyzed by rapid social development, the flaws of a deteriorating, comprehensive ethical

1 Quotation from the author’s translation.

order gradually become apparent. This leads to a conflict between the older Professor Chen and Cuihua, transitioning from the role of “child” to that of “parent.” Cuihua is destroyed by the chaos resulting from the loss of ethical norms, while Professor Chen is trapped in his own awkward existence.

III. Artistic Self-Awareness in the Creation of *The Uniting of Human and Divine*

(I). The Aim of *The Uniting of Human and Divine*: Advocating Ethical Reconstruction
The reason why the novel *The Uniting of Human and Divine* presents aging and intergenerational conflicts as dilemmas is because there has been a change in societal structure. In addition, the revolution of thought has shattered and dissolved the old ethics, and the subsequent technological revolution has ushered in the information age, rapidly accelerating the pace of social development and transformation, making it difficult to establish a new ethics. Consequently, propositions that had previously been compatible with the ethical order, such as those related to aging and intergenerational issues, became increasingly acute and transformed into intractable dilemmas. The core of explicit and intertwined ethical dilemmas such as the dilemma of older years or intergenerational dilemmas is the dilemma of ethical reconstruction. It is the dilemma between the inapplicability of the old ethics and the emergence of new ethics. In such a situation, the characters of Cuihua and Professor Chen in the novel make different ethical choices. Cuihua represents an extreme choice of self-demonization, while the choice of Professor Chen is a contradictory mixture of retreat, avoidance, and desperate pursuit.

Why construct an ethical reconstruction dilemma with the scope of a novel? The writing of the ethical reconstruction dilemma in *The Uniting of Human and Divine* is essentially a call for ethical reconstruction. At the heart of *The Uniting of Human and Divine* lies a reflection of a reality lacking ethics, a call for ethical reconstruction, and an urgent plea for the reawakening of ethical morality. This exemplifies the values embodied in the novel *The Uniting of Human and Divine*, and represents the author’s commitment to the concept of “cultivation through culture.” The creation of *The Uniting of Human and Divine* is imbued with a strong consciousness of questioning issues, critical awareness, and a sense of social responsibility.

(II). Social consciousness of Creation and Criticism in *The Uniting of Human and Divine*

Social values and literary creation are in a mutually supportive relationship. They promote and complement each other, but they also thrive or decline together. Literary creations that lack a sense of social responsibility and become disconnected

from society are not conducive to the vitality of strong literary creations. As a means of education and enlightenment, literary works serve as the forefront of conveying revolutionary ideology, a carrier of ideology, and a gospel that saves people from fire and water. Likewise, they are also invisible weapons that kill enemies. The functionality and effects of literary works are diverse. However, throughout Chinese history, literary creations have often emphasized their role and value in the real society. The thoughts of “literature as a means to elucidate the way” and “literature carrying the way” have been passed down from ancient China to the present day, and their core idea is that literature or articles are used to illustrate and uphold justice and morality. In fact, the close connection between Chinese literature and social reality is the result of a positive choice of literary works. As a tool for conveying and shaping ethical concepts, it is a result of the efforts, spontaneity, and initiative of literary creations in China. It is one of the ways to closely link literary creation with social reality.

Therefore, the establishment of ethical order and moral education, as a long-standing literary principle, is not only the embodiment of its inner nature but also a necessary approach for its own development. The sense of social responsibility and mission of intellectuals drives literary creation and literary theory to voluntarily participate in society, politics, economy, and culture. Moreover, for their own development, literary creation and theory should participate more actively in these domains. The ethical literary criticism theory as well as the building and dissemination of ethical order in literary works, as a form of literary self-awareness passed down for thousands of years, have promoted the development of literature. One of the sources of the vigorous vitality of Chinese literature lies precisely in this.

Works Cited

- Chen Zhongyi. *The Uniting of Human and Divine*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2023.
- 欧文·戈夫曼：《日常生活中的自我呈现》，冯刚译。北京：北京大学出版社，2022年。
- [Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, translated by Feng Gang. Beijing: Peking UP, 2022.]
- Nie Zhenzhao, “Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory.” *Forum for World Literature Studies* 2 (2021): 189-207.
- . “Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection.” *Forum for World Literature Studies* 3 (2021): 383-398.
- 朱熹：《朱子全书》第1册。上海：上海古籍出版社，2002年。
- [Zhu Xi. *The Complete Works of Zhu Xi* Vol. 1. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2002.]