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The Center Cannot Hold: Ambiguous Narrative Voices in Wuís  
The Journey to the West and Conrad's Heart of Darkness

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## The Center Cannot Hold

### *Ambiguous Narrative Voices in Wu's The Journey to the West and Conrad's Heart of Darkness*

American readers of literature are in general more familiar with Joseph Conrad and his modernist novel *Heart of Darkness* than with the Chinese author Wu Cheng-en (1500–1582) and his classical novel *The Journey to the West*. Readers' uneven acquaintance with the two authors makes it necessary to begin this essay with a short account of the background of Wu's novel and with a brief plot summary. Published in 1592, *The Journey to the West* is one of the four monumental novels of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), the other three being *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Water Margin*, and *The Golden Lotus*. For over three hundred years, the author of *The Journey to the West* was thought to be a Taoist patriarch who lived during the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), until the Chinese scholar Hu Shih confirmed Wu Cheng-en's authorship in 1923 (Yeh 17). Loosely based on the true story of Hsuan-tsang (596–664), a Chinese Buddhist monk who took seventeen years to travel to India and fetch Buddhist scriptures for his people, *The Journey to the West* depicts the fictional monk Tripitaka's journey to India to obtain Mahayana scriptures for the Tang Emperor.<sup>1</sup>

In Sanskrit, the name Tripitaka, consisting of *tri*, which means three, and *pitaka*, which means basket, alludes to *The Three Baskets*, the title of the “most basic and possibly earliest body of sacred [Buddhist] writings” (Nigosian 142), made up of three collections or principles: the Vinayana, the Sutta, and the Abhidhamma. The Buddhism represented in the novel is largely Mahayana Buddhism, which teaches crossing over to the other shore of salvation (Plaks 279).<sup>2</sup> The journey begins with Tripitaka and his first disciple Monkey, who, taking the shape of a monkey but bearing many humanlike and Godlike attributes, serves as Tripitaka's protector. As the journey progresses, more characters are converted and join it, and the pilgrims encounter all kinds of monsters, fiends, demons, and perils. Assisted by Monkey and various deities, however, notably Bodhisattva Kuan Yin, the pilgrims heroically overcome the obstacles, reach their destination, and fulfill their holy mission.

At first glance, *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and *The Journey to the West* seem to have little in common. The former narrates an early twentieth-century English sailor's adventures in Africa on the Congo River; the latter delineates a seventh-

century Chinese Buddhist monk's pilgrimage to India. One has been assimilated into the canon of modern narrative; the other belongs to the subgenre of the so-called Chinese "literati novel." One involves a sailor-hero who serves the "great cause" of the British Empire; the other portrays a monk-hero acting as the messenger for an emperor of the Tang dynasty (618–907). Yet a close examination of both novels suggests that despite their apparent disparity, they share a remarkable textual affinity. Both authors employ narrative strategies to diffuse narrative centers (usually constituted by coherent and sometimes monolithic themes) and appeal to narrative voices that create ambiguous epistemological, religious, and ideological points of view. In *Heart of Darkness*, narrative ambiguity is deployed chiefly by Conrad's play with the textual symbol of "darkness," which is simultaneously aligned with conflicting epistemological and moral points of view; that is, darkness simultaneously evokes the moral decadence of imperialism and the inhuman abjection of primitive Africa. In *The Journey to the West*, narrative ambiguity is enacted by Wu's play with intricate, multilayered narrative episodes that simultaneously affirm and undercut multiple themes: Buddhist quest, romantic heroism, and indigenous Taoism and Confucianism. For this reason, Anthony Yu is right to caution that "the work [the novel] itself makes constant demand of its readers to heed the many levels of nonliteral meaning structured therein" ("Religion and Literature" 133). While narrative ambiguity in *Heart of Darkness* remains unresolved in the end, with such famously ambiguous words as "the horror, the horror" (68) and with such ambiguous references to Africa as "the uttermost ends of the earth . . . [and as] the heart of an immense darkness" (76), narrative ambiguity in *The Journey to the West* seems to be cleared up when the novel's multiple voices seem to become unified in the last chapter, where the people, whether saints or laymen, gather to learn Buddhist scriptures. The narrative closure in *The Journey to the West*, however, does not undercut the narrative ambiguity present in previous chapters; rather it builds upon that ambiguity because the successful introduction of Buddhism to China is made possible precisely by the country's syncretic cultural milieu, brought out by the novel's multiple narrative voices.

Because *The Journey to the West* is so much longer than *Heart of Darkness*, my analysis of narrative ambiguity focuses on three chapters from the former work, which depict an early phase in the journey. The narrative ambiguity that I identify in those chapters, however, also exists in the other ninety-six, even in the ones near the novel's end, where we see at least four comic, ironic, and syncretic twists and turns surrounding the final closure. The first twist concerns the manner in which the pilgrims discover that they have reached their goal; it is Monkey, rather than Tripitaka, who recognizes that they have arrived at the destination and who urges his companion to dismount and bow to the Buddha. The second lies in the Buddha's reward for the pilgrims: he grants them longevity, health, and immortality, in

addition to sainthood. Behind this conflation of rewards stands a strong suggestion of syncretism, since attaining longevity, health, and immortality through alchemy is a characteristically Taoist goal. The third relates to the pilgrims' belated awareness of the significance of their spiritual quest; only after they are on the way back home do they recognize fully what their journey means for them: an everlasting life. The last concerns the fake and wordless Buddhist scriptures that the pilgrims obtain before they are given the real ones. Since the novel is based on the historical journey of Hsuan-tsang, Wu probably did not have much choice but to give the novel closure by respecting the historical outcome of Hsuan-tsang's journey. In both cases, therefore, whether narrative ambiguity is achieved through symbolism or multilayered narrative episodes, Conrad and Wu produced works in which narrative centers dissolve and, accordingly, the authors' identification with their heroes becomes unstable and complex.

The crosscultural textual affinity establishes a precise commonality for the comparative examination proposed in this essay. Critics such as Marian Galik have succinctly argued the value of studying "structural-typological affinities . . . [or] literary parallels [between] different literatures of the same period, or of different epochs, and sometimes spatially very remote from each other" (99). Such study, Galik asserts, not only "suppl[ies] us with new knowledge and leads to a deeper understanding in various areas of literature, its history, theory, and criticism," but it also means a "deeper penetration into the study of interliterary process" or what he calls "inter-literariness" (99). Galik further stresses that it is "new knowledge within the framework of literature outside the Euro-American cultural area [that] is needed now" (99).<sup>3</sup> Surely, Galik is not alone in drawing our attention to what might roughly be called non-Western literature and culture. Walter Cohen, for example, displays a similar awareness of Westerners' lack of knowledge about the non-Western world when, in considering the rise of American comparative literature, he deplores the fact that even its "anti-provincialism," ushered in by "rising internationalism," has "in fact meant an emphasis on Western European literature" (5). Such an emphasis, according to John Burt Foster, Jr., is "misleading, a hollow myth that obscures a broader, implicitly global network of motifs and aspirations" (1). The need to expand Westerners' knowledge of non-Western literature and culture has led such critics as Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek to propose what he calls a "theoretical, methodological [. . .] ideological and political approach of inclusion, [which] extends to all Others, all marginal, minority, and peripheral literatures" (15).

In light of the theoretical insights of such critics, this essay offers a comparative analysis of Conrad's and Wu's use of ambiguous narrative voices. I will first illuminate the ways in which Conrad and Wu deploy narrative ambiguity. I will then link that textual affinity to the larger cultural milieux of both authors, which have

a clear bearing on the interpretation of both novels. In doing so this essay will shed new light on the formal and cultural significance of Conrad's and Wu's narrative strategies by revealing 1) the connection between *Heart of Darkness* and modernist epistemological skepticism and 2) the connection between *The Journey to the West* and the syncretic reception of Buddhism in China.

As my initial plot summary indicated, *The Journey to the West* has at its center a Buddhist quest theme that is serious and sublime. Interestingly, though, Wu employs narrative strategies that undercut the seriousness of his theme and in so doing prevents it from dominating the narrative center. Tripitaka's lofty mission is constantly on the verge of being foiled because its sacredness is often debased by episodes that paradoxically cast doubts on his role as leader of the pilgrimage, his very ability to fulfill the mission, and ultimately the value of Buddhism itself. One of Wu's strategies is to postpone the pilgrimage theme until chapter 12 by devoting the previous eleven chapters mainly to Monkey, including how he becomes the Monkey King and how he decides to search for immortality, and to Bodhisattva Kuan Yin's visit to earth and the reasons for Tripitaka's journey. The belated appearance of the actual Buddhist pilgrimage gives the reader the initial impression that Monkey is the hero. That impression is probably why Arthur Waley chose *Monkey* as the title for his abridged translation of the novel (1943), an idea also implied by the title of Maxine Hong Kingston's novel *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989). Similarly, the casual manner in which the Buddhist quest enters the novel suggests a lack of seriousness. Obviously, the Tang Emperor knew very little about Buddhism before learning about it from Kuan Yin, yet he does not consult his councilors before deciding to send Tripitaka to India, nor does he ask Kuan Yin for a fuller explanation of the holy scriptures. The Emperor simply makes the decision on the spur of the moment (256–281).

The delay in introducing the Buddhist theme allows Wu to push into the foreground Monkey's identity as a Taoist disciple within a hybrid cultural milieu in which Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism coexist and cofunction. Such foregrounding requires Wu to perform an innovative surgery on the history of Hsuan-tsang's pilgrimage to India. As recorded by his disciples, the historical Hsuan-tsang journeyed westward along the Silk Route virtually by himself and singlehandedly overcame all the appalling hardships on the way (Yu, "Religion and Literature" 119). In the novel, however, Wu turns the journey into a group expedition, and among the newly added characters, Monkey assumes special significance, in part by embodying the transcultural tenets of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. The process begins with Monkey's search for immortality and his subsequent apprenticeship at the Cave of the Slanting Moon and Three Stars, where he learns Taoist alchemy and magic from his master, a Taoist Immortal called the Patriarch. Monkey's new name, "wake-to-vacuity," given by his Master, is suggestive of the

Taoist belief in cultivating the mind until it attains a state of emptiness. Similarly, Monkey's use of alchemy to achieve physical longevity stands out as a distinctly Taoist practice (Yu, "Religion and Literature" 127). Monkey's Confucian and Buddhist aspects, for their parts, become apparent through their fusion into the Master's Taoist teachings, which stress how important it is "to *harmonize* the three schools" (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism)" because "One word's elucidation in conformity to truth / Would lead to a life birthless and knowledge most profound" (Wu 83, emphasis added). Here the fact that the Taoist master gives his instructions in verse resonates with Taoist teachings, since the Taoist scripture *Tao te-ching* was itself written in verse. The master's teachings also reflect a creative expansion of Taoism on his part, since the original scripture does not advocate syncretism or a fusion of religions. The master's syncretic approach here shows further how well he understands Buddhism, since he implies that the Buddhist goal of liberation from reincarnation should also be a goal for the Chinese. The goal can be achieved if one sees the truths of the three religions as one and unites them to form a single Word. Thus, when Monkey is officially admitted into the company of pilgrims, he truly becomes a hybrid emblem, in the sense of following the teachings of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism all at once. The hybrid cultural milieu against which Monkey's polyphonic identity is dramatized is sustained throughout the novel, and Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, even appears as a character who enjoys as much prestige as the Jade Emperor (150). Later in the novel, when Monkey abandons his Master in a fit of anger after being chastised by Tripitaka for killing some robbers, he is admonished by the Dragon King of the Eastern Ocean, who tells him the story of how Chang Liang patiently serves his Immortal Master Huang Shih Kung. The moral behind that story is Confucian, specifically affirming a servant's loyalty and obedience to a master (311).

Another strategy that Wu adopts is to create narrative situations that show Buddhism's limitations in dealing with real life. After the journey begins, Tripitaka is repeatedly shown to be incapable of continuing the journey without Monkey's assistance, and whenever the pilgrims encounter a crisis, Tripitaka, the central character, acts like a coward. It is Monkey, the very figure whom Tripitaka is supposed to enlighten, who steps forward, displays valor, and clears away the obstacles. Because, except for the last chapter, this pattern of episodic design is consistent throughout the novel and also because of limitations of space, I will use three episodes from the early stage of the journey to illustrate my point. The first occurs when Tripitaka and Monkey encounter "a fierce tiger [...] growling and waving its tail" (301). Tripitaka, who is sitting on the horse, becomes "alarmed" while Monkey is "delighted," telling his Master, "Don't be afraid [...] for he [the tiger] is here to present me with some clothes" (301). Pulling from his hair a tiny needle, which magically turns into an iron rod, Monkey strikes the head of the crouching tiger. Witnessing

the scene, Tripitaka falls off his horse, crying, "O God! O God!" while "biting his fingers" (301).

The second instance is found a few pages later, when Tripitaka and Monkey are harassed by six robbers holding "long spears and short swords, sharp blades and strong bows" (306). The robbers order the pilgrims to leave their horse and bag if they want to escape alive. This time, Tripitaka is so frightened that "his soul left him and his spirit fled; he fell from his horse, unable to utter a word" (306). Not in the least afraid, Monkey lifts Tripitaka up from the ground and tells him, "Don't be alarmed, Master. It's nothing really, just some people coming to give us clothes and a travel allowance" (306). With those words, Monkey charges into the villains with his iron rod and "round[s] all of them up. He beat every one of them to death" and even "stripped them of their clothes and seized their valuables" (307).

This episode is followed by a debate between Tripitaka and Monkey on whether Monkey should have killed the robbers. For Tripitaka, Monkey should have just chased the robbers away instead of killing them all, since taking a life is forbidden to believers in Buddhism. Monkey defends himself by saying that if he had not killed the robbers they would have killed the two of them. Insisting that a Buddhist monk would rather die than commit an act of violence, Tripitaka deems Monkey unworthy of being a monk and of accompanying him to the Western Heaven. Feeling wronged and misunderstood, Monkey abandons Tripitaka but soon returns, after being counseled by the Dragon King of Eastern Ocean.

In both instances, Tripitaka, the leader of the pilgrimage, becomes flustered when the pilgrims face a crisis. Tripitaka's tendency to panic, his inability to protect himself and others, and his dependence upon Monkey raise doubts about his leadership skills, his competence to undertake a mission of great importance, and ultimately the value of Buddhism. According to Bodhisattva Kuan Yin, the holy scriptures in the Western Heaven hold the keys to a blissful state of life, to be achieved by means of enlightenment and salvation. If so, if Buddhism promises liberation from suffering, then what is its use if it fails when put into practice in real life? By adhering to the Buddhist creeds of passivity, tenderness, compassion, and nonviolence, Tripitaka would have been either devoured by the tiger or slaughtered by the robbers. Either way, he would have failed to complete the journey and to fulfill his lofty mission and, accordingly, would have disappointed Emperor Tang and his people. Either way, he would have shown his inadequacy in dealing with a complex and hazardous real world.

The inadequacy of Buddhism to deal with life's complexity is further revealed in the episode involving the conversion of Chu Pa-chien, or Pigsy. In this episode, Master and Disciple have to face ordeals of greater subtlety and intricacy than those they have faced before, each of them being equally subject to illusion in taking mere appearance for reality. Master, the alleged impartor of wisdom, will be no

less ignorant than disciple about Pigsy's true identity. Pigsy's conversion occurs in chapter 18, in which the two pilgrims come to lodge in the house of a farmer, Mr. Kao, who pleads for their help when he learns of Monkey's ability to "catch monsters" (372). The monster in question is Mr. Kao's son-in-law Pigsy, who went to work on Kao's farm and married Kao's daughter three years ago because Kao wanted to keep his youngest daughter at home through the marriage. In the beginning, Pigsy "worked hard and behaved well," and Mr. Kao was "quite happy with him" (373). The trouble began when Pigsy gradually changed into an ugly hog with huge ears and loud snout, who ate enormous meals. In addition, Pigsy disturbed the peace of the neighborhood by "kicking up stones and dirt" (373). Worse still, he locked up his wife, Mr. Kao's daughter, in the back building a half-year ago, and the father has become deeply worried, not knowing whether she is dead or alive. Tripitaka and Monkey are convinced by Mr. Kao that Pigsy is a monster of great harm who must be subdued. Leaving Tripitaka in the care of Mr. Kao's relatives, Monkey sets off to combat the monster alone. The rest of chapter 18 and part of chapter 19 detail the many rounds of fierce battle between Monkey and Pigsy; both characters demonstrate great strength, valor, and skill. The sequence takes an unexpected turn when Monkey reveals that he is a pilgrim accompanying Tripitaka to the Western Heaven. At that point, Pigsy surprisingly discloses his true identity: he is none other than a convert of Bodhisattva Kuan Yin, who has arranged for Pigsy to wait for Tripitaka and to accompany the monk to the Western Heaven as well. Both sides realize that they have mistaken one another's identity and have been fighting for nothing. Tripitaka gladly welcomes Pigsy into the fold of Buddhism and accepts him as his disciple.

The episode's seemingly harmless ending as a result of Bodhisattva Kuan Yin's intervention has ironic implications that further reveal the inadequacy of Buddhism as a guiding principle of life. The ending is ironic because Tripitaka, like Monkey, is susceptible to the illusion of Pigsy's superficial identity. It is also ironic because taking appearance for truth is exactly what Buddhism rejects, since the goal of Buddhist practice is to grasp the true nature of all things, the Buddha Nature. Tripitaka's vulnerability to illusion and deception reveals, on the one hand, a world full of intricate and convoluted phenomena, and on the other hand, the need for an alternative epistemology, one that is less linear and simplistic and instead more scrupulous, in order to understand and explain such phenomena.

It would be mistaken, however, to interpret Wu's deglorification of Tripitaka and his revelation of Buddhism's limitations as tending toward a demotion of Buddhism in favor of Confucianism or Taoism. Anthony Yu has observed that Wu's portrayal of Tripitaka as an easily flustered leader involves his imaginative negotiation with the history of Hsuan-tsang's pilgrimage. The historical Hsuan-tsang was by no means cowardly and obtuse; he was, on the contrary, "a man of prodi-



gious intelligence, courage, endurance, and resolution" (Yu, "Religion and Literature" 123). The fictional Tripitaka, on the other hand, appears to be "the opposite of the historical figure in mind and character [. . .] show[ing] little knowledge of the object of his quest and virtually no understanding of his own experiences" (123). Wu's creative modification of history suggests precisely his awareness of the need to decenter the Buddhist theme, in order to demonstrate the coexistence and co-function of the three leading Chinese religions.

The interplay of ambiguous narrative voices that characterizes *The Journey to the West* is also manifest in *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad's strategy for playing out such ambiguity takes a different form, however, involving an appeal to the symbolic power of language. As I have noted, the prevailing symbol of the novel is darkness, a symbol that in Conrad's handling points to ambiguous referents. On the one hand, Conrad links the symbol of darkness to the blunders of the imperial enterprise; on the other hand, he locates darkness in the primitive jungles of Africa and its uncivilized inhabitants. Thus Marlow's narrative begins with a clear indictment of the Roman conquest of England; here Marlow reminds his listeners that the Romans once invaded England and took its land by force. For Marlow, the Romans' conquest of England was nothing but an act of moral degeneracy, and the conquerors were people who "tackle darkness" (10). Marlow's dissent from such an act of darkness is made clear when he says: "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing" (10).

Marlow's association of moral degeneration with imperial robbery enables him to see the connection between England's history and the ongoing imperial enterprise in Africa, epitomized in the novel by the trade in ivory. From Marlow's own observations, from what people tell him about Kurtz, and from his face-to-face encounter with Kurtz, Marlow comes to see that darkness has worked its way into Kurtz's heart and into the ivory trade in which he engages. On several occasions, Marlow associates Kurtz and his inner station with darkness in order to show that Kurtz's moral consciousness has been completely devoured by avarice, the primary force that drives him to destruction. As the dying Kurtz is being transported out of the inner station, Marlow detects from Kurtz's seemingly "eloquent speech" his "barren heart of darkness" (67). Marlow imagines that the "shadowy images" that still "haunt his weary brain" are images of "wealth and fame" (67). And Marlow comes to see Kurtz's heart as containing the worst darkness possible, the darkness that is "impenetrable" like "the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines" (68). The inner station, where Kurtz has supervised the ivory trade, is inevitably a place of darkness. For Marlow, then, traveling toward the inner station is like plunging further and further into the depths of darkness (21, 37). Even after Kurtz dies, Marlow continues to refer to Kurtz's heart as "the heart of a conquering dark-

ness" (72). Indeed, Marlow's ability to link past and present by extending the darkness of the Roman conquest of England to the darkness of European conquest of Africa makes him sound ahead of most of his contemporaries in trying to break free from imperialism (Sarvan 285). As Frances B. Singh notes, "*Heart of Darkness* is one of the most powerful indictments of colonialism ever written" (268).

Ironically, however, while Marlow connects Kurtz and his ivory business with the symbol of darkness, he also locates darkness in primitive Africa and its inhabitants, whom he calls "savages".<sup>4</sup> For Marlow, Kurtz's inner station, located in the depth of the wilderness, represents the darkness of savagery, deprived of the light of civilization. For Marlow, then, "Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world" (35), and the further he travels, the further away he is from civilization. As Marlow "penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness" (37), he comes closer and closer to the prehistoric world, which utterly defies the comprehension of European rationality and threatens the coherence of language with collapse. Enfolded by such a prehistoric world, everything works to confound Marlow. He cannot tell whether the drums in the trees mean "war, peace, or prayer"; the earth becomes "an unknown planet" (37), and the natives seen on the bank are simply unrelated body parts: "a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage" (37). He cannot tell whether the natives are "cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us" (37). For Marlow, the Europeans' contact with the natives, though made at night, resembles "sane men" entering a "madhouse" (37), where everything is beyond comprehension. Marlow even finds it hard to resist the "suspicion of their [the natives'] not being inhuman" (37). Marlow's suspicion of the humanity of the natives is again brought out by his description of the fireman on the boat. Here Marlow refers to the fireman as a "savage [. . .] an improved specimen," and looking at him is "as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat walking on his hind legs" (38). Although Marlow defines the fireman this way, he nonetheless affirms that the fireman is more human than the natives stamping their feet on the bank, because the fireman has been trained by Europeans to "fire a vertical boiler" (38).

That the fireman's improved humanity has to do with his ability to operate machinery provides Marlow with the basis for classifying humanity along an evolutionary scale, where the Europeans represent civilization and the untrained or uncivilized African natives represent savagery. In between the two categories are natives like the fireman, who has been somewhat westernized or at least trained to collaborate with Europeans. Marlow's organization of Europeans and African natives across a spectrum of humanity/sanity, improved humanity, and inhumanity/insanity has led such critics as James Johnson to attribute this scheme to the "evolutionary anthropology" (117) prevalent in the nineteenth century. As Johnson writes:

“Non-Europeans traditionally occupied an inferior position in the European view of the world, and this was especially so in the middle of the nineteenth century” (115). According to Johnson, such evolutionary anthropology was strongly influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution, in which Darwin clearly associates non-Europeans such as the Fuegians with lowly organized forms of life and with barbarians. As Darwin wrote in *The Descent of Man* (1871),

But there can hardly be any doubt that we are descended from barbarians. The astonishment which I felt on first seeing a party of Fuegians on a wild and broken shore will never be forgotten by me, for the reflection at once rushed into my mind—such were our ancestors. These men were absolutely naked and bedaubed with paint, their long hair was tangled, their mouths frothed with excitement, and their expression was wild, startled, and distasteful. They possessed hardly any arts, and like wild animals lived on what they could catch; they had no government, and were merciless to every one not of their own tribe. He who has seen a savage in his native land will not feel much shame, if forced to acknowledge that the blood of some more humble creature flows in his veins (quoted in Johnson 114).

Clearly burdened with racial and anthropological bias, Marlow’s perception of the African natives as inferior to the Europeans bears a remarkable resemblance to Darwin’s perception of the Fuegians. Like Darwin, Marlow could not imagine an alternative way of organizing humanity; nor could he conceive of a shared universal humanity. Trapped by such evolutionary bias, Marlow can only see African natives as savages, whether they are workmen on the boat, chained laborers in the camps, yelling crowds on the bank, or Kurtz’s woman. Marlow has simply lumped them all into one master category of inhumanity.<sup>5</sup>

From the vantage point of evolutionary anthropology, the darkness that surrounds Kurtz’s inner station and eventually invades his heart takes on another level of meaning. Before meeting Kurtz, Marlow has heard a great deal about the chief of the inner station, and most of the gossip portrays him as a man of great achievement. Prior to his arrival at the central station, Marlow has heard from the Manager that Kurtz is “a first-class agent [. . .] a very remarkable man” because he “[s]ends in as much ivory as all the others put together” (22). Kurtz is even “adored” (56) by the natives, who willingly join him in the ivory hunt. But how does a remarkable man like Kurtz meet his doom? As Marlow suggests, the savagery of the wilderness plays a large part in finishing Kurtz off, turning him from a hero to a shadow, a voice, and a corpse: “But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion” (57). The wilderness has awakened in Kurtz a capacity that he did not know about, and the wilderness has instilled in his hollow mind all sorts of dreadfully fascinating things: “I think it [the wilder-

ness] has whispered to him things about himself he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core” (57–58). As Johnson perceptively notes, Marlow’s recognition of Kurtz’s destruction by the wilderness is set up to reinforce evolutionary anthropology. As Johnson notes, the Africa where Kurtz unleashes his brutal instincts, where Kurtz regresses to “crawl” (58), is the Africa Marlow describes as a prehistoric madhouse. In short, the vengeance of the primitive wilderness has doomed Kurtz both spiritually and physically.

The suggestion that a first-rate agent and a remarkable man like Kurtz perishes due to the alluring whisper of primitive Africa is further brought out at the novel’s end. Here Marlow repeats his fractured perception of world geography, which divides the globe into the civilized center represented by Europe and the barbarian periphery, which includes the African nations located on “the uttermost ends of the earth” (76). For Marlow, those remote margins can be epitomized, metaphorically, by “the heart of an immense darkness” (76) eclipsed by the light of modern civilization. Seen in this light, the popular critical opinion that interprets Kurtz’s last words “The horror! The horror!” as a redemptive recognition of the moral horror of colonialism no longer has full credibility, since darkness as a symbol points simultaneously to ambiguous referents. At best, Kurtz’s last words occupy an indeterminate space between moral repentance at what he has done to African natives and a derogatory description of Africa as a place of horror, a place of darkness.<sup>6</sup>

As we have seen, the narrative centers in both novels can hardly hold, as a result of the interplay of ambiguous and even conflicting narrative voices. Since literary texts do not exist in a vacuum, however, a contextualization of both novels is needed to shed light on the cultural significance of Wu’s and Conrad’s narrative strategies. The impact of cultural studies on literary studies has led many comparatists to welcome a new view of literature as an artifact shaped by the combined determinants of history, culture, and ideology, among other things. Manuela Mourno, for example, has favored allowing comparative literature to branch out into cultural studies, because such a methodological refocusing can “offer relevant points of departure for the comparative analysis of literature and culture and for an understanding of the multiple aspects of human experience as represented by literary texts” (170). While recognizing the multiple extraliterary forces that influence the composition of literature, however, Mourno insists that attention to nonliterary forces should not mean an utter neglect of formal analysis; for her, aesthetic and cultural readings need not exclude each other. She writes that cultural studies “needs not pose a threat to more traditional, exclusively textual studies: granted, literary texts can tell us much more beyond the purely aesthetic, but a discussion

of their political and cultural implications does not necessitate a disregard for their literariness" (170). Other comparatists, such as Tötösy, also strongly promote an integration of literary studies with cultural studies; that is, they advocate studying literature "within the context of culture" (15), but focusing on literature, not on "aspects of culture where literature is not a primary focus" (15).

Although the cultural significance of narrative ambiguity in *The Journey to the West* is not readily accessible within the novel itself, it does emerge when we relate the novel to the cultural context of its time. Making the connection will show that Wu's handling of the Buddhist theme does not indicate irreverence toward Buddhism nor final doubts about its usefulness. Rather, the handling suggests the author's awareness of and respect for the general Chinese response to Buddhism as "a foreign religion" (Wright 32), a response characterized by flexibility and syncretism. Ever since Buddhism was introduced to China in the first century, there had been an ongoing effort to integrate this exotic religion into indigenous Chinese religions and cultures, and in many instances such integration succeeded in invigorating both Buddhism and its Chinese counterparts.<sup>7</sup> The Chinese creative appropriation of Buddhism is evident in the development of various schools of Chinese Buddhism during the Tang Dynasty, which include Ch'an, Pure Land, the T'ien-t'ai, and Hua-yen. As Kenneth K. S. Ch'en suggests, those schools were results of "the Chinese response to Buddhism and indicated how the Chinese mind took over certain basic Buddhist principles and reshaped them to suit the Chinese temperament, so that the schools were no longer Indian systems introduced into China, but were really schools of Chinese Buddhism" (297). The effacement of Buddhism's Indian origins and the religion's adaptation to native Chinese culture finds a good example in Ch'an Buddhism (the counterpart to Zen Buddhism in Japan), with its belief in the immanence of the Buddha Nature and its reliance on meditation and introspection as means to achieve "release from illusion" (Wright 78). The emphasis of Ch'an on a direct, person-to-person, and often wordless communication of insight; on the belief that people may, in their lifetimes, achieve enlightenment; and on the philosophy of intuition are all strongly colored by Taoism and Confucianism and by a "reaction against the verbosity, the scholasticism, the tediously logical demonstrations, of the Indian Buddhist texts" (Wright 78).

The syncretic formation of the T'ien-t'ai offers another example. Troubled by "the multiplicity of Buddhist doctrines and by the contradictory teachings found in Buddhist texts of diverse periods and origins," its founder, Chih-I, developed "a syncretism on historical principles" by setting up "a doctrine of the levels of Buddhist teachings, with each level corresponding to a phase in the life of the Buddha and to the sort of clientele he was speaking to in that phase" (Wright 79). As Wright perceptively notes, Chih-I's flexible appropriation of Buddhism to suit the Chinese context "reflects the *perennial* Chinese effort to reconcile divergent views,

itself perhaps a reflection of the high valuation assigned by the Chinese to *harmony* in human affairs” (80, emphasis added).

Still another example of Chinese syncretism can be seen in the Chinese feminization of Kuan Yin, though Westerners unfamiliar with Buddhism in China may take Kuan Yin’s female identity for granted in the novel. According to classical Indian writings, the earliest Kuan Yin was a pony, which later was made into a Buddha with the head of a horse; still later, Kuan Yin was made into a male Buddha of compassion (Song 54). Of the several popular accounts of how the male Indian Buddha turned into a Chinese goddess of compassion, one is traced to Empress Wu Zetian (625–705). Being receptive to Buddhism and yet feminist-minded, the Empress liked Kuan Yin for his all-encompassing benevolence; she felt that since women were as compassionate as men if not more so, there was no reason for Kuan Yin to be male. Therefore, Empress Wu ordered all Kuan Yins to be changed into goddesses.

The Sinicization of Kuan Yin is supplemented by turning her into a goddess with a thousand hands and eyes. Of the popular Chinese accounts of how Kuan Yin obtained her additional hands and eyes, one describes her as the youngest daughter of an ancient Chinese emperor who once contracted a deadly disease, and the only medication to save his life was an eye and a hand from one of his three daughters. When the news was announced, the two elder daughters were unwilling to make such a donation. It was Kuan Yin, the least favored of all, who generously gave her eye and hand to cure her father. Deeply moved by this selfless compassion, Shang Ti, or the Lord on High, decided to reward her kindness by giving her a thousand eyes, which represent boundless wisdom, and a thousand hands, which represent boundless magical power to help the poor and alleviate suffering (Song 25).

In addition to such legends and historical accounts, Chinese syncretism finds its expression in such cultural artifacts as rock carvings such as those in Dazu County, Sichuan Province, China. One site consists of a group of carvings from the Song Dynasty (960–1279), arranged on three levels (Song 30). The highest level contains seven Buddhas, representing those who have achieved Buddhahood or final enlightenment. The middle level displays a group of stories showing parents’ kindness toward their children. One of the carvings on the middle level portrays a pregnant mother enduring the pains of childbirth (Song 30); another carving represents a mother who gives her child a dry place to sleep while she takes a spot wet with urine (Song 31). The stories show that the seven Buddhas on the highest level owe gratitude to their selfless parents. The lowest level represents Hell, with all kinds of tortures, showing that ingratitude toward one’s parents leads to damnation and painful punishment. Taken together, the group of carvings vividly illustrates the emphasis on harmonious integration in the Chinese imagination, in this case as it combines the Buddhist belief in cause and effect with the Confucian doc-

trine of filiality. As Arthur Wright perceptively notes, because “Buddhist, Taoist, and folk-religious elements were fused into an almost undifferentiated popular religion” (98), Buddhism was “so completely appropriated that [its Indian] provenance [was] forgotten” (108).<sup>8</sup>

Given the cultural context, Wu’s decentering of the Buddhist theme in his novel is congruent with the larger Chinese effort to integrate Buddhism with indigenous Chinese cultures and religions. Such integration makes it necessary to downplay the centrality of Buddhism in the novel, so that the teachings of Taoism and Confucianism can be recognized. Thus, as Yu perceptively notes, the “intricate network of religious significance [in the novel] is woven out of echoes, allusions, and symbolisms that refer not merely to a single religious tradition like Buddhism but also to the other two dominant traditions of Confucianism and Taoism” (120). For Yu, accordingly, “the understanding of the journey [. . .] is elaborated in terms of not one but all three religious traditions in China: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism” (124).

Attention to the flexible Chinese reception of Buddhism calls into question previous interpretations of *The Journey to the West*. Francisca C. Bantly, for example, has argued for a purely Buddhist reading of the novel: “[D]espite the concrete presence and reflection of a syncretic culture in the novel, the most compelling reading of the *Journey* is an explicitly Buddhist one” (512). As we have seen, a Buddhist reading, which sees the journey simply as a Buddhist quest, will not do justice to the novel’s multiple narrative themes; it will, so to speak, suppress “the multiplicity of meanings” (Yeh 18). Furthermore, a Buddhist reading of the novel that fails to allow for a syncretic Chinese context, which has fused Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, misses the point of literary interpretation, especially of a critical approach that has taken insights from cultural studies. Andrew H. Plaks’s more recent reading of the novel, in contrast, does take the syncretism of Chinese culture into account. In usefully suggesting that the novel should be “reinterpreted within the broader context of late-Ming syncretic philosophy” (274), however, Plaks (who is writing here for a general academic audience) misleadingly gives the impression that Chinese syncretic philosophy and culture are characteristic only of the late-Ming period, rather than marking the entire history of Buddhism in China.<sup>9</sup>

In Conrad’s case, the ambiguous ramifications of the darkness symbol must be understood within the larger context of modernist epistemological skepticism, because the importance of the epistemology is made clear by Conrad himself from the novel’s beginning.<sup>10</sup> Here Conrad displays his modernist anxiety about the contingent and elusive nature of truth, an anxiety that can be seen from his innovative use of the paranarrator, or what Michael Levenson calls “the frame narrator” (9), an unnamed seaman whose description of the *Nellie* and the sea opens the novel before Marlow takes over. The seaman returns to intervene in Marlow’s nar-

rative several times and finally concludes Marlow's tale with a brief description of Marlow's fictional audience and the sea. Conrad's creation of the paranarrator, in conjunction with Marlow, reveals the author's recognition of the difficulty in conveying truth. Recognizing such difficulty and wanting to overcome it, Conrad creates the seaman as an additional narrator, whose primary function is to provide information about Marlow: his appearance, his background, and the manner in which Marlow tells his story (7, 9, 30, 48, 76). By having the seaman's paranarrative to supplement Marlow's direct tale, Conrad hopes to give Marlow's tale more credibility. Like Conrad, Marlow displays a distinctly modernist doubt about an immutable and fixed truth. For Marlow, as the seaman tells us, "the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine" (9).

Here Marlow's notion of truth as "haze" and "halos" resonates with a series of revolutionary breakthroughs that shaped the epistemological contours of modernism at the turn of the twentieth century. One of them is the Second Revolution in physics marked by Einstein's Theory of Relativity and by quantum mechanics, which undermined classical physics in such a way that scientists became aware that physical theory gave them only shadows and symbols of reality rather than reality itself. In the area of mathematics, the authority of Euclidean geometry was formidably challenged by the French mathematician Henri Poincaré, whose theory of deterministic chaos led him to believe that the movement of the universe was not predictable. At about the same time, philosophers were eager to expose what Nietzsche called "the anthropomorphic error" that identifies intellectual constructs with reality itself. In order to do so, philosophers posited a sharp opposition between conceptual abstraction and the flux of concrete sensations. In the field of psychology, the turn of the century marked a global shift from the developmental paradigm of the nineteenth century to the surface-and-depth paradigm of the twentieth century. The achievement of Freud's psychology, particularly his theory of the unconscious, vastly expanded self-knowledge. For Freud, the psyche is not one fixed identity but many identities grouped about many centers.<sup>11</sup>

Marlow's anxiety about the elusive nature of truth or reality is congruent with similar insights in Einstein, Poincaré, Nietzsche, and Freud, except that Marlow expresses his anxiety in a language familiar to him — the language of symbol. That truth is beyond our grasp is a dilemma that Marlow identifies and struggles against: "[I]t is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence — that which makes its truth, its meaning — its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream — alone" (30). Marlow's frustration with his inability to convey the truth of life experience is symbolically reinforced by the "pitch dark[ness]" that surrounds his listeners. A little later, Marlow speaks of his



journey up the river “amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants and water and silence” (36). Here Marlow expresses a similar frustration about his inability to get to the truth: “When you have to attend to things of that sort [. . .] the reality [. . .] fades. The inner truth is hidden [. . .]” (36).

My analysis of narrative ambiguity in *Heart of Darkness* and *The Journey to the West* clearly reveals the kind of structural–typological affinity that Galik identifies as one area for comparative literary research. Such an affinity suggests that the deployment of ambiguous voices as a narrative strategy of representation is not unique to the Western canon; rather, it would seem to be universal, not just regional. Furthermore, by linking this textual affinity to the cultural contexts of both novels, my analysis not only provides a frame of reference for Wu’s and Conrad’s narrative strategies but also exposes Western readers to Chinese cultural flexibility and religious syncretism and to Buddhism’s role in Chinese history. In both cases, proper contextualization enables us to see the novel as a product shaped in part by the cultural and intellectual forces of its times. In Wu’s case, the correlation between his narrative strategies and the creative Chinese reception of Buddhism explains why he opts for those strategies and why, in retelling a famous journey inspired by Buddhism, he gives the novel a comic tone and closes it with a successful negotiation of multiplicity and ambiguity. In Conrad’s case, contextualization of *Heart of Darkness* reveals the complex complicity between Marlow’s, or for that matter Conrad’s, moral ambivalence toward colonialism and his modernist sensibility, a complicity that substantially contributes to the grave tone of the novel and to the melancholy and ambiguous mood that closes it. Despite the differences in their plots, contexts, and outcomes, Wu and Conrad have produced novels that resemble each other in possessing narrative centers that cannot hold, due to the interplay of ambiguous narrative voices.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Hsuan-tsang was not the only Chinese Buddhist monk who traveled to India; before him fifty-four monks and afterward another fifty made the journey to procure Buddhist scriptures (Yu, “Introduction” 1). Hsuan-tsang, however, remained the “best-known and most revered Buddhist monk” because of his “achievements and personality” (Yu, Introduction” 1). Similarly, *The Journey to the West* was not the only account of Hsuan-tsang’s journey; Yu discusses several sources from which Wu might have taken materials for his novel, as well as Wu’s creative use of historical materials (“Introduction” 5–13).

- 2 Mahayana Buddhism is one of the two major Buddhist schools; within it there are other schools that derive from it, including Madhyamika, T'ien-t'ai / Tendai, Pure Land, and Ch'an / Zen. Another major Buddhist school is Theravada Buddhism. All schools share basic Buddhist beliefs, such as the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. For detailed accounts of the schools, see Nigosian 143–149, Wright 65–128, and Ch'en 297–364.
- 3 In addition to affinities or literary parallels suitable for crosscultural literary study, Galik identifies another kind of interliterariness based on literary relations. He writes: "Interliterariness is most conspicuous in the field of genetic-contact relation (or within the framework of influence and response) comprising all the phenomena in the inter-literary process where contacts between literatures are a *conditio sine qua non* of their development" (98). For Galik, both kinds of interliterariness—genetic-contact relations and affinities—are equally valid for crosscultural literary analysis.
- 4 Edward Said's reading of *Heart of Darkness* also discusses Conrad's pro- and anti-colonial impulses. My own reading supplements Said's by grounding those conflicting impulses in the larger context of modernism and by paying attention to the formal strategies Conrad uses to convey those impulses. See Said 19–31.
- 5 Marlow's racist perceptions of African natives have led such authors as Chinua Achebe to call Conrad "a thoroughgoing racist" (257).
- 6 Frances Singh, for example, states, "the 'horror' refers to what Kurtz has done to the blacks and only secondarily to what he has done to himself, since the latter is only the effect, and not the cause of the former. Consequently the full application of Kurtz's last words would not only be to himself but also to men like Marlow who seemed to hate colonialism but really lived by its values and associated the practices of the blacks with the road to perdition" (277). In a similar observation about Marlow, Michael Levenson compares him to Henry James's Strether in *The Ambassadors*. Like Strether's journey to Paris, Marlow's to Africa leaves him a fractured individual unable to adjust to "the contending values" (77) of primitive Africa and civilized Europe.
- 7 It is also worth noting, however, that the reception of Buddhism in China was interrupted several times by hostile reactions and persecutions. One occurred around 446, when a Turkic emperor "issued a draconian edict calling for the destruction of all Buddhist temples, shrines, paintings, and scriptures, and the summary execution of all monks" (Nigosian 137). Another persecution occurred in 574, "when Emperor Wu sought to advance Confucianism by charging Buddhism with fostering disloyalty and breaking down filial piety. Before [the] Emperor died in 578, tens of thousands of temples were appropriated by the imperial family and the aristocracy and more than 1 million monks and nuns were defrocked" (Nigosian 137). For more on these persecutions, see Nigosian 138.
- 8 For more detailed discussions of the Chinese syncretic appropriation of Buddhism, see Wright 86–107.
- 9 In his essay, Plaks repeatedly asserts that the coexistence of the three religions in the novel is attributable to the Chinese syncretistic philosophy characteristic of late Ming. That observation is less than accurate, since historians like Kenneth K. S. Ch'en have shown that the Chinese effort to integrate Buddhism into indigenous Chinese religions

and cultures existed both before and after Ming; it has been ongoing ever since the "introduction" and "spread" of Buddhism in China. As a result, Buddhism "gradually became more and more Sinicized; that is to say, it adjusted itself to the Chinese environment and, by so doing, ceased to be Indian" (Ch'en 485).

- 10 Sarah Cole argues that Marlow's blurred vision of Kurtz as both a participant in and a victim of imperial enterprise is related to his ironic intimacy with and distance from Kurtz, an irony attributable to "the diminishing power of Victorian conventions of male fellowship" (267).
- 11 For more on the relationship between literary modernism and its larger social and cultural context, see Schwartz.

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