



An Exploration of Alchemists' Image in the Three Kingdoms and its Historical Record

– Taking Zuo Ci's Image Change as an Example

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Abstract. The images of ancient Chinese alchemists appear frequently in historical writing, and those images originate from historical histories but turn into literary ones eventually. Zuo Ci, a typical representative, experienced the image mentioned above change from Wei Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties to Yuan and Ming Dynasties in all kinds of classics, and finally presented a complete fictional image in the Romance of The Three Kingdoms. Zuo Ci's image change reveals that alchemists in Wei Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties carry the mission of the mandate of heaven, morality, political morality, and people's will in the fictional text.

Keywords: Zuo Ci; Alchemists; the Story of the Three Kingdoms; Supernatural Power.

1 Introduction

In the long history of ancient China, ghosts, gods, and witchcraft have always been an important part from the beginning of ancient mythology to the prevailing mystery novels in the Ming and Qing dynasties, and the plots involving such stories are inevitably involved in a large number of "alchemists". The earliest record appeared in "The Six Strategies Wang Yi", a military book in the Warring States period. Warlocks and alchemists first appeared in this book. In the dialogue between King Wu and Taigong, when Taigong introduced talents with outstanding political abilities to the King Wu, he mentioned: "There [1]are two warlocks who are good at stratagems and confusing people's hearts relying on ghosts and gods, and two alchemists who are adept at using hundreds and capable of curing weapon damage and healing all diseases." In the Qin and Han dynasties, there are many records about the alchemists and warlocks. In the Wei and Jin Dynasties, the culture of alchemists and warlocks developed rapidly. As a result, a large number of alchemists and warlocks were recorded in Ge Hong's Fairy Tales and Bao Pu Zi, as well as Ganbao's Sou Shen Ji. As a representative of the magicians, Zuo Ci was frequently mentioned in the biographies of immortals in the Wei and Jin Dynasties. However, after this period, Zuo Ci's stories were not written in the

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official historical narration until the Ming and Qing Dynasties in which period Zuo Ci, one of the famous alchemists and warlocks in traditional Chinese literature, appeared in *The Romance of The Three Kingdoms*.

It can be seen that Zuo Ci's image has been submerged in the history of the Three Kingdoms, and has always been presented in the writing form which combines both objective history and supernatural powers. The supernatural writing elements, represented by the supernatural power of the warlocks and alchemists in the Wei and Jin dynasties, are involved in the traditional school of Chinese classical history in the form of hidden lines, which is worth studying. Why does supernatural writing appear in the historical stories of *The Three Kingdoms*? What is the relationship between such writing and the relevant history? This thesis focuses on these two questions from the perspective of Zuo Ci's image changes in the story of *The Three Kingdoms*.

2 The Record of Zuo Ci in Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties

Zuo Ci, Fufang as the style name and Mr Wu Jiao as the pseudonym, was born in Lu Jiang (now An Qing, Anhui Province). He was a famous alchemist in the late Eastern Han Dynasty. For the record of Zuo Ci's story, the earliest extant works are Cao Zhi's *Argumentation on Dao* and Cao Pi's *Dian Lun Lunfangshu*. Parts of content from Cao Zhi's *Argumentation on Dao* are quoted in Cao Pi's *Dian Lun Lunfangshu*. Cao Zhi recorded in his *Argumentation on Dao* that [2]there are alchemists and warlocks in the world... Zuo Ci in Lujiang ... knows the art between woman and man." According to Cao Zhi, it can be seen that Zuo Ci was a famous alchemist at that time. Tuo Bie Zhuan quoted from Pei's *Elucidation of San Guo Zhi* has a similar record with Cao Pi and Cao Zhi's books. The above records about Zuo Ci are limited to his life and few stories, while the records of Zuo Ci in later works add a lot of mystery color.

In *Bo Wu Zhi*, there is a record of Zuoci, [3]describing Zuoci and other alchemists and warlocks in the world who can survive without food, become invisible, and enter the house not by the door or the window", and focusing on "Zuoci can transform, confuse people, and defeat ghosts." The record of Zuo Ci in *Bo Wu Zhi* is also relatively brief, but from the record of Zuo Ci in *Bao Pu Zi* by Ge Hong in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, Zuo Ci's character image began to become clear and concrete[4].

In *Bao Pu Zi Lun Xian*,⁴ it is recorded that Zuo Ci hasn't eaten for nearly a month, but his health and strength have not decreased, and always says he doesn't need to eat within 50 years. In *Bao Pu Zi Bian Wen*, [5]it is recorded that Zuo Ci suffered an autopsy but still stayed alive. In *Bao Pu Zi Zhili*, Zuo Ci's ability was recorded in more detail. [6]It is said when Zuo Ci and Zhao Ming fought with enemies, the swords of the government and the army could not be drawn and the arrows of the crossbow were also directed, which would often cause disadvantages to the enemies. The records of *Bao Pu Zi* are obviously different from those of previous generations. They reveal Zuo Ci's magic ability from the text and add the storyline for the first time, which not only makes Zuo Ci's image more vivid but also provides a source for the further portrayal of Zuo Ci in later works.

Different from the rough record of Zuo Ci's story in the past, the story of Zuo Ci is recorded in detail for the first time in the Fairy Biography, and the historical image of Zuo Ci has been roughly shaped in the Fairy Biography since the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties. Most of the subsequent literary works are based on the Fairy Biography, and on this basis, more abundant literary modeling is carried out. In the Fairy Biography, Ge Hong set up a special chapter about Zuoci, in which the plot is richer and the character image of Zuo Ci is more touchable. The record of Zuo Ci in the Fairy Biography is mainly presented in his magic and supernatural power in the confrontation with secular forces such as political power. The general types and plots of magic in the Fairy Biography are summarized as follows(table 1):

Table 1. A structuralist illustration of the Zuo Ci image and the confrontation between "surreal magic and secular forces" in the Fairy Biography

Type	Plot			
Self-preservation magic (Passive confrontation)	Being healthy without food	Perceiving death	Walking fast with wooden shoes	
transformation magic (Passive confrontation)	Turning into a sheep	doppelganger	Thatched head	
Control items (Active confrontation)	Turning a cup into a bird by throwing	Breaking the cup by the pin	Unlimited wine and meat	Tricking Xu Sui

In the face of radical secular forces such as power, armaments, and war, Zuo Ci displayed three different types of magic. The first is the self-preservation magic. According to the Fairy Biography, Cao Cao imprisoned Zuo Ci without food, and Zuo Ci was safe and sound a year later. When Cao Cao wanted to execute Zuo Ci, Zuo Ci perceived him in advance. When Sun Ce hunted Zuoci, he found that Zuoci walked slowly, but no matter how fast the horse ran, they could not catch up with him. Zuo Ci can always turn danger into nothing through his own cultivation, or the use of camouflage. The second type is transformation magic. When Zuo Ci was hunted by Cao Cao, Zuo Ci disguised himself as a sheep and mingled with the flock to avoid Cao Cao's pursuit. After Zuo Ci fled, Cao Cao tried to arrest him according to Zuo Ci's appearance, but Zuo Ci turned into a doppelganger to confuse Cao Cao. Someone presented Zuo Ci's head to Cao Cao, who saw it as a bunch of thatch. This kind of magic is also performed by Zuo Ci in the face of danger, mainly in the form of transformation to disguise or double his body to protect himself. The above two magics belong to Zuo Ci's passive antagonistic strategies in the face of the oppression of secular forces, and the main purpose is to save oneself from danger. The third type is active antagonistic magic, which mainly shows Zuoci's ability to control objects. At Cao Cao's banquet, Zuo Ci threw his wine cup into the air and turned it into a bird; when sharing wine with Cao Cao, Zuo Ci pulled the pin and broke the glass. In Liu

Biao's army, Zuo Ci rewarded Liu Biao's army with endless wine and meat. In the face of Xu Sui's rejection, Zuo Ci tricked Xu Sui with the magic of controlling objects. Whether at Cao Cao's banquets or in Liu Biao's army, or in the face of Xu Sui's rejection, Zuo Ci fought with them by casting magic to trick them. This is the direct confrontation between natural forces and secular forces. To sum up, in the Fairy Biography, Zuo Ci's magics cover negative and positive magics on the one hand and soft and strong strength in confrontation against secular forces.

In the same period, Zuo Ci was also recorded in *Sou Shen Ji* by Gan Bao, whose plot was slightly different from that in the Fairy Biography. In the story of *Sou Shen Ji*, Zuo Ci fished a non-local Songjiang bass at Cao Cao's banquet and also recorded that Zuo Ci sent word to Cao Cao's envoy to fetch ginger from the Shu Kingdom, all of which were adapted in the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*. Zuo Ci is also partially recorded in Fan Ye's *Hou Han Shu Fang Shu Lie Zhuan*. The stories of Zuo Ci recorded in *Hou Han Shu* are mostly from the Fairy Biography and *Sou Shen Ji*.

It can be seen from the above that the image of Zuoci has appeared in the historical books since the Wei and Jin dynasties. The original image of Zuo Ci is a simple image of an alchemist. Since then, the image of Zuo Ci entered the literary works from the traditional historical biography, and this historical biography entered the writing mode of literary works, increasing the part of Zuo Ci's supernatural ability. Along with the process of transferring from history to literature, Zuo Ci's image also entered the process of war history. The history of change shows that Zuo Ci's power continues to be literalized and exaggerated, and its image is constantly written into history and compiled into the grand narrative of war and politics, making Zuo Ci a direct participant in history. The encounter between the supernatural expression and the historical description of Zuo Ci creates the diversity of his magical powers

3 Re-narration of Zuo Ci's Image in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms

At the time of the Yuan and Ming dynasties, Zuo Ci was also recorded in detail in Luo Guanzhong's *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*. Zuo Ci's story lies in the 68th edition of Ganning's *Hundred Horses Rob Wei Camp* and Zuo Ci throws a cup to trick Cao Cao. In the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*, Zuo Ci's plot is also mostly derived from Fairy Biography and *Sou Shen Ji*, but the details of the content are changed. In the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*, Zuo Ci, as Liu Bei's follower, is inevitably conflicted in his interaction with Cao Cao, and the plot of the novel is also based on this conflict. In the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*, Zuo Ci's image has a new change, which is directly reflected in the change of the confrontation mode with the power.

The new change of the confrontation form is first reflected as invisible dissolution. The *Romance of The Three Kingdoms* gives a detailed description of Zuo Ci's powers, which were briefly described in former artworks. Cao Cao treated Zuo Ci as Liu Bei's spy and tortured Zuo Ci, but no matter how hard the jailers tortured him with nails and iron locks, Zuo Ci was able to survive the danger and be safe. Different

from the previous narration of Zuo Ci's ability, the Romance of The Three Kingdoms enlarges the description of details, further strengthens the meticulous writing, and directly confronts Zuo Ci's natural power with Cao Cao's power in the same scene. Cao Cao's power is manifested in his anger, as well as in the power-symbolic methods such as torture, shackles, iron nails, and prison, while Zuo Ci's natural power is to resist these methods with the physical body. In this kind of direct writing and direct confrontation, Zuo Ci's power can be vividly highlighted.

Other plots are also recorded in the Fairy Biography, Sou Shen Ji and Hou Han Shu. For example, Zuo Ci turned into a sheep to avoid the hunt. But the plot of Romance of The Three Kingdoms is different. In The Romance of The Three Kingdoms, Zuo Ci did change into a sheep and mixed with the sheep to avoid the pursuing soldiers, but there was no dialogue plot. When Xu Chu saw that Zuo Ci could not find him, he cut off all the heads of the sheep, and then Zuo Ci brought all the sheep back to life. Different from the former stories, the contradiction between nature and power in the story of the Romance of The Three Kingdoms was further intensified. Xu Chu cut off the heads of all the sheep, which was a manifestation of stronger political power, while Zuo Ci used magic to revive all the sheep, which also reflected stronger natural power. In the evolution of Zuo Ci's image, it can be seen that the supernatural power of the alchemists has intervened in the narrative of political history in an increasingly radical way, to intensify the contradiction between power and nature.

The second new form of confrontation, the reverse mockery. In [7] the Romance of The Three Kingdoms, a new storyline was invented. Cao Cao peeled the citrus and found only the outer skin left. At the same time, Zuo Ci also came to visit Cao Cao and showed Cao Cao how to peel the citrus. Zuo Ci peeled the citrus whose pulp was inside and the taste was really nice. But when Cao Cao did that, there was no pulp at all. In this story, Zuo Ci uses the small object of "citrus" to tease a contemporary leader like Cao Cao, which is extremely ironic. Cao Cao cut the citrus with the end of an empty shell, satirizing Cao Cao's vain name. This also expresses the will of the people, hoping that it is daydreaming for Cao Cao to unify the turbulent world. This new story in the Romance of The Three Kingdoms not only uses Zuo Ci's magic to tease the powerful but also uses Zuo Ci as a powerful spokesperson for the will of the people to convey the will of the people. The rest are adapted from the stories of fishing for ginger, cutting the wine cup, sharing the wine with Cao Cao, and throwing the wine cup into the air into a bird. In these stories, Zuo Ci and Cao Cao were relatively harmonious, and there were just small "tricks" between Zuo Ci and Cao Cao, which shows Zuo Ci's contempt for power because he can fight against the power with his own little magic.

The third form of confrontation is direct resistance. After introducing the source of his magic, Zuo Ci urged Cao Cao to give up the throne to Liu Bei and learn magic with him. In this novel story, the author portrays Zuo Ci as Liu Bei's follower to provoke Cao Cao. This action not only reveals Zuo Ci's political stand but also Zuo Ci's direct resistance in the face of Cao Cao's power. The plot of Zuo Ci's display of doppelganger is similar to the content of Fairy Biography and Sou Shen Ji, [8] which only says that when Zuo Ci is seen on the street, Cao Cao orders soldiers to arrest him but suddenly, all people on the street has the same appearance, so soldier don't know

what to do. As Cao Cao's attitude in *Fairy Biography* shows, Cao Gao orders soldiers to arrest Zuo Ci and kill him if they see him. Zuo Ci's magic is carried out to fight with the power softly in *Sou Shen Ji*, but it is totally different in the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*. In the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*, Cao Cao captured all of Zuo Ci's doppelgangers. Cao Cao led 500 soldiers to surround all people on the street and killed them all. A green air from their necks gathered in the air and turned into Zuo Ci. Finally, all the bodies jumped up with their heads in their hands and ran up to assault Cao Cao. The plot in the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms* reflects Zuo Ci's invisible dissolution and reverse mockery of the powerful oppression, and also his direct resistance by describing people all running to fight against Cao Cao. Compared with plots in *Fairy Biography* and *Sou Shen Ji*, this story is an adaptation, expansion, and enrichment of the above two books, and is filled with the author's strong subjective will. Taking Zuo Ci as one of Liu Bei's followers, this plot tells the story of his direct resistance to Cao Cao's powerful oppression, which responds to the emotional tone of admiring Liu Bei and derogating Cao Cao in the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms* and explains the author's understanding of destiny.

In general, Zuo Ci's image in the stories of *The Three Kingdoms* in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties is more diverse, richer, and more vivid than that in the Wei and Jin Dynasties. His powers are closer to the grand narrative of history and politics. And his image carries more implications of political morality, people's will, and destiny.

4 The Alchemists in the Three Kingdoms and Historical Writing

From the above, Zuo Ci's image change from the historical writing in the Wei and Jin Dynasties to the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms* reflects that the image of the alchemist is constantly embedded in historical novels, therefore uncovering the transformation from historical records to fictional literary works. Zuo Ci, the representative of the alchemists is featured with fiction and imagination, implicating the fictional elements in literature.

In addition to Zuo Ci, there were a large number of alchemists in the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*, such as Zhang Jiao and Zhang Bao who led the uprising of the Yellow Turbans, Yu Ji, who could control the wind and rain, as well as Guan Lu, who predicted the future. The *Romance of The Three Kingdoms* is characterized by more mysterious elements and is not limited to a certain type of alchemist like Zuo Ci. The well-known historical figures like Zhuge Liang and Pang Tong, have been written about their casting magic. Alchemists formed a group in the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*. All of them experienced a transformation process from objective historical writing to fictional literary works. So why does this happen apart from the fact that those images fit into the fictional literature? And what role do these historical images play in narration?

The alchemists, a group of Taoists, conform to the view of nature advocated by Taoism in the Wei and Jin dynasties. Both the popular metaphysics of the Wei and Jin Dynasties and the works of Taoism are closely related to nature. For example, in *Ge*

Hong's Fairy Biography, the magics and refining medicines had a connection with nature as they used natural plants or minerals to refine medicines. Magics are also related to nature and are used to punish anti-nature behaviors. Besides these two works, the development of literary thought and social atmosphere in the Wei and Jin dynasties are similar to this. Therefore, alchemists in the Wei and Jin Dynasties began to represent nature and became the executors of nature's power. Fictional elements were gradually added to the alchemist's image changes with their ability developing from natural power to supernatural power. In *The Romance of The Three Kingdoms*, alchemists exert supernatural abilities against politics. Supernatural description also has moral significance. As the most special group in Chinese history, alchemists are most compatible with nature, and their natural forces are able to oppose the oppression of political powers. Most of the plots about alchemists in the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms* are related to politics. Some of the magics are developed from historical stories like Zuo Ci's while other magics are fictional. These alchemists in historical and fictional texts play a part in expressing political preference. Most alchemists in the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms* serve as the incarnation of political justice and represent destiny in the ancient Chinese concept. From this point, alchemists are seen as the spokesmen of destiny against the political power in the novel. Through the alchemists' political position, the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms* conveys its view of justice and destiny to readers by respecting Liu Bei and disrespecting Cao Cao. The image of Zuo Ci in the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms* shows the author's disdain for the power of Cao Cao and his longing for destiny. As the usurper of the Eastern Han Dynasty in the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*, Cao Cao is the main villain in the novel, who is not respected by the author. In Zuo Ci's stories, destiny and nature are connected by natural images such as birds, sheep, and thatch. Zuo Ci, a typical alchemist, acts as an embodiment of nature, a spokesperson for normal people, and a projection of people's will in the stories. The novel uses the alchemists to fight against power politics ingeniously, thus intensifying the contradiction between the will of the people and the power, and also reflecting the trend of using destiny against power to contribute to the development of people's livelihood.

5 Conclusion

The image of Zuo Ci changed from a true and historical figure in the Wei and Jin dynasties to a man with magics and supernatural power, which forms his image transformation between the Wei and Jin Dynasties and the Yuan and Ming Dynasties. Similar to Zuo Ci's image changes, the alchemists in the Wei and Jin Dynasties are the basis of the re-creation of their fictional images in later Chinese classical literature. The fictional re-creation of the alchemists has the narrative function in which they are seen as the representative of political justice, destiny morality, and people's will. This is quite common in the history of ancient Chinese literature and also exerts a great influence on the later Chinese classical fictional novel.

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