

Research Note

Religious Dissonance and Cultural Projection in the Russian Reception of *Journey to the West*

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Abstract

This research note examines how Kirill Batygin (publicly available sources do not provide precise information about his year of birth. He graduated in 2014 from the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University) in Moscow, a major Russian higher-education institution historically oriented toward international and area studies, including Asian languages and cultures), a contemporary Russian sinologist and literary critic, interprets *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji*, 西遊記) in a series of public commentaries published his social media posts on the platform Telegram in 2024–2025. Rather than treating the novel primarily as a Buddhist allegory, Batygin approaches it from a post-Soviet secular perspective shaped by Enlightenment rationalism, liberal moral expectations, and residual Christian cultural frameworks. Focusing on two recurrent patterns in Batygin's reading, the article analyzes his reaction to Buddhist ideas of emptiness and form, especially in the climactic verses of the novel, and the role of *dvoeverie* ("dual belief")—the coexistence of incompatible religious and ideological frameworks—in structuring his moral judgments. Batygin's commentary repeatedly reframes Buddhist cosmology in terms of fairness, psychological realism, and narrative efficiency, producing a moral inversion of the novel's soteriological logic. By treating Batygin's social media posts as primary material, this study contributes to reception studies by showing how a modern Russian intellectual context mediates the reading of a premodern Chinese Buddhist narrative. The analysis suggests that Batygin's interpretation is not an individual misunderstanding, but a culturally revealing mode of reception shaped by post-Soviet secular-Christian hybridity.

1. Introduction

This research note focuses on the reception of *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji*, 西遊記) in the contemporary commentaries of Kirill Batygin, a Russian sinologist, translator, and literary critic. In 2024–2025, Batygin undertook a public, chapter-by-chapter

rereading of the novel on his social media platform Telegram channel *Muzyka perevoda* (“Music of Translation”), offering informal yet analytically engaged reflections addressed to a general readership. These posts form the primary corpus of the present study.

The central concern of this article is not the interpretation of *Journey to the West* as such, but the way Batygin’s reading reveals the cultural and moral assumptions of a post-Soviet Russian intellectual encountering a Buddhist narrative. Batygin approaches the novel neither as a religious text nor as a historical artifact, but as a literary work subject to modern expectations of narrative coherence, moral transparency, and psychological plausibility. Notably, even as a professionally trained translator of Chinese, Batygin does not consistently draw on specialized sinological or historical knowledge in his retelling and interpretation of the novel; instead, he privileges immediate moral, yet such tension, in my view, becomes governed by intuition and contemporary narrative judgment. As a result, his reading frequently enters into tension with the Buddhist cosmology that structures the novel.

Journey to the West is a Chinese novel composed in the sixteenth century during the Ming dynasty and traditionally attributed to Wu Cheng’en. It narrates the pilgrimage of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang (Tripitaka), a historical figure from the Tang dynasty, who travels to India to obtain sacred scriptures, accompanied by supernatural disciples such as Sun Wukong, the Monkey King and other fantastical companions. In its classical interpretive tradition, the novel is commonly read as a Buddhist didactic narrative in allegorical form, in which the protagonists simultaneously function as individual characters and as embodiments of mental states or moral dispositions, and their adventure is a Buddhist allegory of the quest for enlightenment¹. From this perspective, divine intervention, punishment, and suffering are governed not by juridical fairness but by karmic causality and soteriological necessity. Beneath its comic episodes and fantastical trials lies a spiritual journey: the pilgrims’ hardships symbolize tests of virtue and understanding on the path to transcendence². Scholars have noted that the novel layers multiple religious worldviews – Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist – in sometimes unresolved tension³, yet such tension, in my view, becomes governed by Buddhist cosmology ultimately framing the narrative’s resolution. Thus, *Journey to the West* is not simply a picaresque fantasy but is a Buddhist didactic narrative in allegorical form. As a Buddhist allegory, the protagonists can be read simultaneously as individual characters and as personifications of mental states: Sun Wukong as the turbulent, powerful mind; Zhu Bajie as desire and gluttony; Sha Wujing as passive endurance; the White Dragon Horse as karmic retribution harnessed to the path⁴.

The celestial bureaucracy, grounded in Buddhist value, ultimately enacts karmic logic rather than modern legal rationality. Buddhas and bodhisattvas intervene not to produce fairness in a human-rights sense, but to guide beings through cycles of ignorance, punishment and eventual liberation. From this perspective, the famous golden headband that constrains Sun Wukong is not a “torture device” in the modern juridical sense; it is a symbol of discipline imposed on the mind—painful, but soteriologically necessary.

In such a cosmos, suffering is not primarily injustice but the medium through which delusion is burned away. The novel delights in describing arbitrary-seeming violence, grotesque demons and capricious gods, yet from a Buddhist standpoint these episodes stage the unfolding of karma and the gradual taming of consciousness⁵.

In Russia, *Journey to the West* has been known since the late 1950s, when a complete Russian translation was published in four volumes (1959) as part of the Sino-Soviet cultural exchange⁶. Soviet-era editions included scholarly prefaces and footnotes to explain Buddhist and Taoist concepts to readers living under official atheism. Despite this contextualization, popular reception in Russia has often reflected the readers’ own cultural lens⁷ more than a deep grasp of Eastern religion⁷.

Kirill Batygin – a young Russian Sinologist and literary translator – offers a vivid case of such cross-cultural reception. In 2024–2025, Batygin undertook a public re-reading of *Journey to the West*, posting chapter-by-chapter commentary on his Telegram channel “Музыка перевода” (“Music of Translation”)⁸. What is important is that Batygin approaches the text not as a religious scholar but as a secular liberal intellectual, reading a 16th-century Buddhist-Taoist fantasy through the eyes of a modern Russian skeptic. His running commentary, laced with humor and personal reflections, provides new insight into how a post-Soviet mind grapples with the novel’s spiritual themes. Two patterns stand out in Batygin’s readings that merit further investigation: religious dissonance, meaning the tension between the novel’s Buddhist worldview and the reader’s own implicit beliefs, and cultural projection, meaning the way Batygin projects familiar Western (often Christian-derived) ideas onto the Eastern source material. In this article, examining deeper implications of Batygin’s readings, I focus on two core aspects that underlie his response to the novel: (1) Batygin’s interpretation of the Buddhist concept of emptiness versus form in the story’s climax, and (2) the role of *dvoeverie* (dual belief) – the long-standing Russian habit of accommodating contradictory belief systems – in shaping his response to the novel. These angles will illustrate how Batygin’s secular yet culturally Orthodox mindset negotiates the cosmological paradoxes

of *Journey to the West*, often in ways that reveal as much about Russian intellectual culture as about the Chinese text.

2. Literature Review: Interpretations and Reception of *Journey to the West*

Scholarly interpretations of *Journey to the West* have long emphasized its multilayered religious and allegorical structure. In traditional Chinese scholarship, the novel has been read primarily as a Buddhist didactic narrative, in which the pilgrimage motif serves as an allegory of spiritual cultivation and enlightenment. Influential commentators such as Hu Shih⁹ and Lu Xun¹⁰ already highlighted the tension between the novel's comic surface and its religious depth, noting that satire and grotesque exaggeration coexist with a serious soteriological framework. Later studies further elaborated this view by reading the main characters as symbolic representations of mental faculties and moral dispositions, with Sun Wukong embodying the unruly mind in need of discipline and transformation¹¹.

Modern Western scholarship has largely reinforced this allegorical approach, while also drawing attention to the syncretic nature of the novel. Researchers have emphasized that *Journey to the West* integrates Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian elements without fully resolving their contradictions. Anthony C. Yu's influential English translation and commentary, in particular, framed the novel as a Buddhist pilgrimage narrative structured by karmic causality and gradual moral refinement, even where Daoist or folkloric motifs appear to dominate individual episodes¹². From this perspective, the apparent arbitrariness of divine punishment and celestial intervention is not a narrative flaw but a function of Buddhist cosmology, in which suffering operates as a necessary instrument of awakening rather than as an injustice to be corrected.

Alongside allegorical readings, a second strand of scholarship has approached *Journey to the West* as a picaresque or proto-novelistic work, emphasizing its episodic structure, comic violence, and popular storytelling techniques¹³. While such studies have highlighted the text's entertainment value and narrative dynamism, they generally retain the assumption that its deeper logic remains religious rather than psychological or juridical in a modern sense. Even when the novel is treated as parody or satire, the target of that satire is typically understood to be worldly attachment or false spiritual authority, not the Buddhist path itself.

In the Russian context, reception of *Journey to the West* has followed a somewhat different trajectory. The complete Russian translation, published in four volumes in

1959 during the period of Sino-Soviet cultural exchange, was accompanied by extensive scholarly apparatus intended to explain Buddhist and Daoist concepts to readers living under official atheism. Soviet-era commentaries tended to frame the novel as a monument of world literature and folk imagination, while downplaying its religious dimension or recoding it in terms of ethics, satire, and social critique. Subsequent Russian studies have acknowledged the novel's Buddhist framework more explicitly, yet popular reception has often remained shaped by secular moral expectations and Christian-derived narrative intuitions¹⁴.

Despite this body of scholarship, relatively little attention has been paid to contemporary, non-academic receptions of *Journey to the West*, especially in digital and social media environments. Reception studies have increasingly emphasized that modern readers approach classical texts not only through scholarly mediation but also through personal, affective, and culturally embedded reading practices. However, most existing research on *Journey to the West* continues to focus on textual analysis or historical interpretation rather than on how present-day readers actively negotiate its religious logic.

Kirill Batygin's commentary represents a distinctive contribution to this underexplored field. As a trained sinologist and translator addressing a broad, non-specialist audience through social media, Batygin occupies a liminal position between academic expertise and popular criticism. His reading neither reproduces traditional allegorical interpretations nor rejects them outright. Instead, it repeatedly reframes the novel's events in terms of fairness, proportional punishment, narrative efficiency, and psychological realism—criteria rooted in modern secular and liberal discourse. While Batygin occasionally acknowledges Buddhist concepts such as emptiness or karmic retribution, these are often treated ironically or as provocations rather than as organizing principles of the narrative.

The present study situates Batygin's reading within this broader history of interpretation while arguing that his response cannot be adequately understood without reference to the Russian concept of *dvoeverie* ("dual belief"). Traditionally used to describe the coexistence of Orthodox Christianity and pre-Christian practices, *dvoeverie* has also been applied more broadly to Russian cultural patterns characterized by the simultaneous presence of incompatible belief systems. By extending this concept to a post-Soviet, secular intellectual context, this article proposes that Batygin's reception exemplifies a modern form of cognitive and moral duality, in which Enlightenment rationalism and inherited Christian moral frameworks jointly shape the encounter with

a Buddhist text.

3. Emptiness and Form: The Paradox of the Journey

One of the most striking moments in *Journey to the West* comes late in the pilgrimage, when a verse proclaims that “all that has form is in truth formless; the empty place is never truly empty”¹⁵. In Buddhist philosophy, this statement encapsulates the doctrine of emptiness (*sūnyatā*) – the idea that all phenomena are insubstantial and interdependent, and that ultimate reality transcends form¹⁶. Within the novel, this line (appearing as the pilgrims reach their goal) can be read as a reminder that the sacred scriptures and the arduous journey itself are ultimately expedient means rather than ends in themselves. The highest truth cannot be captured in words or physical form – hence the legend that Tripitaka at first receives “wordless” scrolls of scripture as a test of his understanding. For a devout reader, such paradoxes affirm the profundity of the Buddhist message: enlightenment lies in recognizing the emptiness of all things, even the pilgrimage narrative one has just read.

Batygin, however, reacts to this climax with a mix of bemusement and skepticism. As a rational-minded reader, he cannot help but note the self-negating implication of the line. If everything with form is truly formless – if even the journey’s goal is “empty” – Batygin jests that perhaps the novel itself facetiously suggests it need not have been written at all. In his commentary on this chapter, he wryly observed that the Buddha’s ultimate lesson could be interpreted as a tongue-in-cheek invitation not to undertake the pilgrimage or write 100 chapters about it in the first place. This reaction highlights what we might call a utilitarian strain in modern reading: Batygin instinctively looks for the narrative “point” or a concrete payoff, and he is momentarily struck by the idea that *Journey to the West* concludes by voiding or invalidating its own storyline. The result is a kind of humorous cognitive dissonance. Rather than receiving the line as a profound koan, Batygin treats it as if it were a logical paradox – almost a prank by the author or the Buddha figure. His secular sensibility leads him to ask, in effect, “*Why go through all these adventures if, in the end, form is emptiness and nothing ever needed doing?*”

This question echoes a broader trend where modern readers apply pragmatic logic to mythic or religious narratives. In online fan discussions, for example, it has become a meme to ask why Frodo and Sam did not simply fly on giant eagles to Mount Doom in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*¹⁷, rather than undertaking a long, perilous journey. Such critiques treat the story as a problem to be optimized, judging the characters’ choices (or the author’s plot devices) by utilitarian efficiency. Of course, this mode of reading misses

the *symbolic* and experiential value of the journey in myth. The eagles could physically transport the ring to its destination, but that shortcut would undermine the narrative's purpose – the moral and spiritual growth that occurs through the quest. In a similar vein, Batygin's quip about the *Journey to the West* "not needing to be written" reveals a momentary *collision between narrative mythos and modern logos*¹⁸. He approaches the pilgrimage as if it were a literal task that an efficient planner might avoid or abbreviate. The Buddhist perspective, by contrast, would argue that "the journey *is* the destination" – the trials and transformations along the way are precisely the point, and the emptiness of the goal does not nullify the journey but validates its spiritual lessons¹⁹.

4. From Pilgrimage to Logistics: Modern Readers and the Optimization of Myth

Batygin's reaction exemplifies how a contemporary secular reader may oscillate between immersion in a myth and external critique of its logic. On one hand, he is engaged enough to be "exasperated" at the story's twists, yet on the other hand he steps back and questions the logic of the divine plan. At times he explicitly frames divine interventions in the novel as arbitrary plot mechanics. For instance, when the Monkey King Sun Wukong is finally subdued by the Buddha (imprisoned under a mountain early in the story), Batygin jokingly labels it "a *deus ex machina* by the Ultimate Authority figure" – effectively casting the Buddha's action as a contrived authorial trick rather than a morally justified punishment²⁰. This facetious tone shows Batygin wearing the hat of a modern critic who expects narratives to play fair and who feels free to call out *Journey to the West* when it violates his sense of narrative justice or efficiency. Similarly, throughout his commentary Batygin often asks why powerful benevolent beings (like the Bodhisattva Guanyin) do not intervene earlier to spare the pilgrims needless suffering – "Why must the monk endure so many trials if the Bodhisattva could save him sooner?" he laments in one post²¹. This question, much like the *Lord of the Rings* eagle meme, arises from a mindset that values outcome over process: if the compassionate Bodhisattva ultimately wants Tripitaka to succeed, a logical mind wonders why she didn't simply eliminate the demons and obstacles from the start.

The novel itself, of course, provides an internal answer consistent with Buddhist doctrine. The trials are necessary because spiritual progress requires effort and experience; in Buddhist terms, one must accumulate merit and insight through challenges. As Sun Wukong later explains to his master, enlightenment is only attained by completing the journey of hardships, not by circumventing it²². The "inefficiency" that

Batygin perceives is actually a deliberate teaching: emptiness is not a nihilistic void but a realization that dawns after one has exhausted attachment to form²³. From a literary standpoint, Batygin surely recognizes this message on some level – and indeed, by the end of his project he acknowledges the novel’s emphasis on inner change over external victory. Yet his initial impulses reflect a modern intellectual’s habit of probing a story’s internal logic and moral economy. In doing so, Batygin is using *Journey to the West* as a kind of thought experiment, even a mirror, to explore his own expectations of how a story should work. The interplay is often humorous, but it underscores a key point: when a 21st-century secular reader encounters a premodern religious text, moments of mythic paradox (like the form/emptiness dictum) can trigger a reflex of critical “optimization” – a drive to rationalize or poke holes in the story. This reflex does not defeat the text’s purpose so much as create a dialogue between frameworks. Batygin’s commentary becomes a space where ancient wisdom is tested against contemporary common sense, each illuminating the other. His half-serious question “Why write the book if form is emptiness?” is, in a way, the novel doing its job – prompting the reader to confront the limits of conventional thinking. By engaging the *Journey* on these terms, Batygin demonstrates both the challenges and the productive possibilities of modern myth-reading. His logistical critiques ultimately give way to a deeper appreciation of the novel’s spiritual irony: that emptiness itself is rich with meaning, and that the written journey was needed so that the lesson of “formless form” could be experienced rather than merely stated.

5. Dual Belief and “Subsurface Christianity”: *Dvoeverie* in Batygin’s Reading

To fully understand Batygin’s interpretive stance, I must consider the concept of *dvoeverie*, or “dual faith”, in the Russian context. Historically, *dvoeverie* (двоеверие) refers to the coexistence of two belief systems in the Russian people’s religious life. Classic examples include the medieval and early-modern peasants who outwardly practiced Orthodox Christianity while quietly retaining pre-Christian (pagan) folk beliefs and rituals²⁴. Nineteenth-century ethnographers used *dvoeverie* to describe this syncretism – an Orthodox veneer covering an animist or pagan substrate. More broadly, the term can imply any concurrent adherence to contradictory worldviews, whether conscious or unconscious. While scholars debate the extent and nuance of true “dual belief” in history²⁵, the concept remains a useful lens for examining modern Russian intellectual culture. Even after the Soviet era of state atheism, elements of *dvoeverie*

persist: many Russians are simultaneously secular in outlook and yet culturally Orthodox in values, sometimes even superstitious or spiritually curious despite official skepticism. In other words, holding two divergent sets of beliefs – or value frameworks – at once is not uncommon.

Batygin's reading of *Journey to the West* exemplifies a kind of *post-Soviet dvoeverie*. On the one hand, he is an avowed non-believer and rationalist. He approaches the novel "as mythology and literature, not as scripture", making a point to distance himself from any devotional perspective²⁶. He uses scientific or humanistic explanations for supernatural events and maintains a critical, sometimes irreverent tone towards the novel's religious elements. This is the secular side of his dual identity, shaped by the Soviet legacy of rational materialism and by contemporary liberal skepticism of organized religion²⁷. On the other hand, Batygin's commentary reveals that he has internalized many ethical and imaginative tropes from the Christian tradition – the heritage of Russian Orthodoxy and Western literature – which inform his reactions at a deep level. This is apparent in several ways. First, his moral evaluations of the story often rely on absolutist categories of good and evil, sin and punishment, redemption and grace, that are more at home in Christian discourse than in Buddhist thought. For example, when Sun Wukong slaughters a band of robbers who threatened Tripitaka, Batygin's initial impulse is horror at the taking of life, echoing a Christian-like injunction that killing is inherently wrong²⁸. He momentarily views Wukong's act through the biblical commandment lens "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13, King James Version), which is a far more black-and-white standard than the novel's relativistic stance that the act was karmically justified. Only after deliberation does he moderate this view, reasoning that Wukong's violent solution was pragmatically warranted to protect the innocent – a shift towards a consequentialist or "skillful means" perspective that the Buddhist narrative itself endorses²⁹. The very sequence of Batygin's reasoning here – from an instinctive sin/virtue reaction to a calculated acceptance of context – illustrates two belief systems at play. Culturally, his reflex is Christian (violence is sin); intellectually, he adjusts toward a more Buddhist or secular ethic (violence can be acceptable in context). He is, as Russian religious philosophers might put it, carrying an ingrained "subsurface Christianity" even as he consciously espouses secular humanism³⁰. This notion aligns with Father Pavel Florensky's observation that even non-religious Russians often seek absolute moral meaning in life's events, betraying an underlying Orthodox outlook³¹. Batygin's expectation that the story ought to have a clear moral design ("providential justice") is a legacy of this cultural conditioning, and it clashes

at times with the Buddhist ethos of *Journey to the West*, which emphasizes personal enlightenment over universal moral law³².

Another manifestation of Batygin's dual belief framework is his frequent use of Christian and Western analogies to interpret the novel's characters and symbols. He effectively maps unfamiliar Buddhist concepts onto familiar Judeo-Christian ones. For instance, when trying to make sense of the magical headband that the Bodhisattva Guanyin uses to tame Sun Wukong (a band that tightens painfully when a spell is recited, keeping the rebellious Monkey in check), Batygin compares it to a "crown of thorns of obedience". In his August 2024 post, he writes that Wukong's enchanted headband is like a humiliating burden forcing the proud Monkey to submit, much as the Crown of Thorns forced humility upon Christ – an involuntary yoke of suffering³³. This vivid analogy is telling: the *crown of thorns* is a Christian symbol of redemptive suffering and humility before God, utterly alien to the Chinese Buddhist context. Yet Batygin reaches for it because it conveys the emotional truth he perceives in Wukong's situation (the proud hero humbled by a higher power). In doing so, Batygin Christianizes the narrative logic of *Journey to the West*, casting Wukong in a quasi-Christological light (or perhaps as a sinner in need of grace). Similarly, he repeatedly likens Sun Wukong to Lucifer or Prometheus – Western figures who rebel against heaven's authority³⁴. He even jokes that Wukong has a "Miltonian streak – the audacity to say 'Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven'"³⁵, directly quoting John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. To Batygin, the Monkey King's irreverence and defiance of the Jade Emperor resonate with the romanticized rebellion of Satan in Milton or the defiance of the gods by Prometheus. This is a cultural projection par excellence: the Chinese trickster deity, originally a playful figure within a Buddhist moral universe, is reimaged as a *tragic anti-hero* challenging a tyrannical Heaven in the style of Western literary heroes. The effect is double-edged. On one hand, these analogies allow Batygin to celebrate Wukong in terms he and his readers find compelling – as a freedom-loving iconoclast – thus bridging the cultural gap. On the other hand, they introduce a distinct religious dissonance: the *Journey* is not fundamentally a story of overthrowing divine tyranny, and framing it that way can only go so far before the Buddhist framework reasserts itself (after all, Wukong is ultimately subdued and must attain enlightenment through discipline). Batygin's dual-belief perspective leads him at times to chafe against the resolution of the novel, precisely because the story vindicates the Buddhist order that his inner rebel (and inner Russian liberal) instinctively questions. He praises Sun Wukong's rebellion and mocks "celestial bureaucracy" with a very Russian disdain for pompous authority, yet he must come to

terms with the fact that *Journey to the West* ends not with a revolution in Heaven but with personal transformation and harmonious submission to the cosmic law.

The concept of *dvoeverie* helps illuminate this inner tension. Batygin is simultaneously operating within two ideological matrices: a secular-reasoned critique and a culturally Christian moral imagination. This duality is not something he explicitly acknowledges, but it surfaces in the way he oscillates between different interpretive modes. At times, he assumes an almost preacher-like tone about the novel's "lessons" in morality and truth (echoing the didactic style of a Christian sermon), while elsewhere he reminds his audience he is "just analyzing literature" in a detached, scholarly fashion. The *dvoeverie* is visible in his mixed rhetoric and allusions. Crucially, this is not portrayed here as a flaw in Batygin's reading, but rather as an illustrative feature of post-Soviet Russian intellectual life. After the collapse of official Marxist-Leninist ideology, many educated Russians revived an interest in Orthodox thought and literature, even as they maintained secular rationalism in public life. The result is a mindset comfortable with quoting the Bible one moment and Darwin the next – or in Batygin's case, with invoking both Buddha and Milton, Jungian psychology and Orthodox ethics, in the space of a single interpretive journey. His commentary, therefore, becomes a palimpsest of beliefs. We see layered in his responses the trace of Orthodox Christian culture (e.g. concern for sin and redemption), the influence of Soviet skepticism (e.g. ridicule of "feudal" hierarchies and charlatan holy men), and the contemporary global liberal values (e.g. championing individual freedom against authority) – all coexisting as he engages with a Chinese religious text. This complex *dvoeverie* shapes not only what Batygin sees in *Journey to the West* but also what might bother or delight him. He is delighted when Sun Wukong's individual agency and cleverness win out (reflecting his liberal individualism), and he is bothered when blind faith or divine fiat seems to trump reason (reflecting both his secular skepticism and his ethical demand for justifiable authority). Each of these reactions can be traced to one side of his dual belief structure.

In sum, analyzing Batygin's reception of *Journey to the West* through the lens of emptiness/form paradox and through *dvoeverie* reveals the intricate dialogue between text and reader. His case demonstrates that reading a foreign spiritual classic is never a one-way absorption of content; it is a negotiation between the world of the text and the world of the reader. Batygin's modern, dual-minded perspective leads him to sometimes misconstrue or playfully subvert the novel's intent, but it also leads him to fresh insights and creative cross-cultural parallels. In the process, he illuminates how *dvoeverie*

remains active in new forms: instead of pagan gods and Christian God, the duality is now Buddhist mysticism and Russian secular-humanist moralism living uneasily in the same interpretive space. The fact that Batygin can earnestly admire the wisdom of the Buddha's teachings at the end of the novel, while still quipping about "foolish monk Xuanzang needing common sense", epitomizes the two-minded nature of his engagement. It is a testimony to the richness of cross-cultural reading that, by wrestling with the text's paradoxes and projecting his own cultural archetypes onto it, Batygin ends up learning not only about *Journey to the West* but also about the contours of his own belief systems.

6. The Russian Reader's Horizon of Expectations

6.1. A "Just God" and the politics of fairness

Throughout his Telegram chronicle Batygin returns to a recurrent complaint: the heavenly powers treat Sun Wukong and his companions unjustly. He notes, for example, how minor celestial figures repeatedly receive protection and indulgence despite grave misdeeds, while Wukong—whose early rebellion certainly included violence—continues to bear a disproportionate burden of punishment even after centuries of faithful service.

Behind this complaint stands a particular utopian model of just order. The reader expects a supreme authority—whether called God, Heaven, or Buddha—to be consistent and non-arbitrary, transparent in the allocation of reward and punishment, inclined to mercy once repentance and loyal service are demonstrated, and equally harsh or equally lenient toward all, regardless of status.

This expectation is not uniquely Christian, but it does echo post-Enlightenment Western and Russian discourse on the rule of law, the moral equality of persons and the ideal of a rational, benevolent sovereign. Russian religious philosophers such as Nikolai Berdyaev and Pavel Florensky repeatedly dramatized the tension between the freedom of the person and the authority of Church and State, insisting that any real authority must ultimately rest on love and respect for personality. These debates have seeped into the cultural unconscious: even secular readers, who explicitly deny Christian belief, often retain a Christian-moral script of what "true" authority should be like.

When Batygin confronts the Buddhist heaven of *Journey to the West*, he instinctively measures it against this script. The result is a sense of scandal. Buddha and bodhisattvas appear as unfair bureaucrats, protecting "their own" protégés while outsourcing violence and humiliation to expendable others. The golden headband becomes not a pedagogical tool, but a symbol of abusive power.

6.2. The legacy of Russian *dvoeverie*

This moral expectation is complicated by the specifically Russian configuration of belief. In Batygin's comments, as in much of contemporary Russian discourse, we can sense the residues of folk Orthodoxy (with its intense attention to personal suffering and the figure of the Tsar/Bog (=King/God) as "batyushka" (a father)), Soviet egalitarianism and suspicion of privilege, liberal-democratic critiques of opaque power, rationalist disdain for "superstition".

This is a textbook case of *dvoeverie* in the extended sense: multiple, partly incompatible value systems coexist and shape judgments. Batygin explicitly denies being a Christian believer, yet the very structure of his indignation—"if there is a God (or Buddha), he must be just in such-and-such ways, otherwise he is morally unacceptable"—is deeply Christian-Enlightenment.

At the same time, his ironic remarks about bureaucratic gods and their "nepotism" resonate with Soviet and post-Soviet experiences of arbitrary power, where access to protection depended less on justice than on personal connections. *Journey to the West* is thus involuntarily read as a satire of "our" reality: heaven is a caricature of any empire's administrative elite, and Wukong becomes an archetypal rebellious subordinate whom the system exploits but never fully trusts.

In Jungian terms, one could say that the shadow of Russian historical experience is projected onto the Buddhist cosmology: what should function as a symbolic drama of mind and karma becomes a realistic allegory of empire, bureaucracy and abuse.

6.3. Literalising the allegory: Sun Wukong as "real person"

A second major source of dissonance lies in Batygin's tendency to literalise the narrative. Nowhere in his posts does he seriously engage with the long-standing allegorical interpretations of *Journey to the West*—for example, those that read Sun Wukong as the "monkey mind" (心猿), the group of disciples as aspects of the psyche, and the journey as the path of meditation³⁶. Instead, he approaches Wukong as a psychologically coherent character: charismatic, cunning, capable of loyalty, and demonstrably capable of moral growth.

This mode of reading is, again, culturally shaped. Modern Russian literary education—especially as it is structured around the nineteenth-century realist canon (A. Pushkin, I. Turgenev, L. Tolstoy, F. Dostoevsky)—trains readers to approach protagonists as morally significant individuals whose inner freedom is defined in tension with external authority. In this tradition, ethical value is frequently produced through

resistance: the hero's dignity emerges not from obedience to a higher order, but from his capacity to oppose it. The state, the law, or an abstract moral system is often positioned above the individual in the social hierarchy, and the literary hero acquires symbolic weight precisely by challenging this vertical structure.

Within this framework, Russian readers are habituated to recognize a Promethean pattern: the morally "higher" figure is not the one who embodies order, but the one who suffers under it or rebels against it. This pattern was not only inherited from nineteenth-century literature, but actively reinforced through Soviet secondary education, where pre-revolutionary classics were taught extensively in grades eight to ten, before the final exam-oriented curriculum narrowed students' focus. Emphasis was often placed on themes of oppression, moral courage, and the individual's confrontation with an unjust or dehumanizing system—an interpretive lens that could be safely applied to canonical authors of the pre-Soviet period.

Against this background, the Buddhist logic of *Journey to the West*—where Sun Wukong's "individuality" is progressively subordinated to his function as an embodiment of the unruly mind to be disciplined—appears alien and ethically troubling. When the narrative continues to instrumentalize Wukong, deploying him as a weapon against demons, restraining him through the magical headband, and repeatedly withholding full recognition, Batygin does not read this as a necessary stage in an allegorical process of spiritual training. Instead, he interprets it through a familiar moral grammar: as the exploitation of a conscious, suffering individual by a distant and unaccountable authority.

As a result, Batygin's sympathies consistently align with Wukong—and, at times, even with certain demons—while the celestial order is treated with suspicion. Heaven, which within the novel's Buddhist framework represents a higher level of insight and karmic regulation, is reinterpreted as a rigid, punitive system analogous to an oppressive state apparatus. This produces a moral inversion: figures who occupy elevated positions within the text's religious hierarchy are experienced as ethically inferior by the modern Russian reader, while rebellious or marginal characters are endowed with moral depth and legitimacy. What appears, from a Buddhist perspective, as the gradual pacification of ignorance is thus re-read through a culturally ingrained narrative of resistance, sacrifice, and individual dignity.

6.4. Medieval East as a "safe" space of reflection

A further contextual layer is the status of pre-modern East Asian material in

Russian humanities. Scholars such as A. V. Mescheryakov have noted that medieval Japanese and Chinese studies have often functioned as a kind of intellectual escapism: a way to think about power, violence, ritual and salvation at a safe historical and geographic distance, avoiding the overtly politicized and painful terrain of contemporary Russian reality³⁷. Although Batygin is not an academic medievalist, his choice to spend months publicly reading *Journey to the West* and to speak through it about justice, abuse, and the behaviour of gods can be seen as participating in this tradition.

In this sense, *Journey to the West* becomes a mirror for the Russian intelligentsia's own unresolved tensions: between the desire for a just, loving authority and the lived memory of cruel, hypocritical authorities; between the fascination with "Eastern wisdom" and the frustration when it does not correspond to Western or Russian moral scripts.

7. Christianity, Buddhism and Misaligned Soteriologies

Finally, the dissonance is intensified by a deep mismatch of soteriological models—that is, models of salvation and ultimate good.

In Christianity (especially in its Russian Orthodox and popular forms), salvation is closely linked to the personal love of God for each human person, the defeat of death through Christ's resurrection, the idea that "everyone can be saved" through repentance, regardless of prior karmic baggage, the radical ontological affirmation of the person: the human being is real, unique, eternally significant.

The dominant tone of the New Testament is good news, even when judgment is emphasised: God desires that all be saved. From this perspective, as I noted in the preparatory discussion, Christianity is in a certain deep sense "close" to Buddhism: both proclaim a form of liberation from death and suffering. But the means and the ontological assumptions differ radically.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, while compassion is central, the ultimate problem is not "injustice" but ignorance and attachment. The person, as an enduring autonomous entity, is precisely what is put into question: dependent origination reveals the "self" as compounded and empty. Salvation (nirvāṇa, awakening) entails seeing through the illusion of substantial selfhood, not guaranteeing its eternal preservation.

When a Russian reader whose cultural default is the Christian–Enlightenment affirmation of the person encounters a narrative universe where gods and bodhisattvas seem indifferent to the integrity of individual psychological selves, the result is shock.

Batygin reacts to Buddhist transcendence of the person as if it were moral callousness. When the Russian writer Viktor Pelevin, who frequently draws on Buddhist concepts in his fiction, plays with the idea of “emptiness” and the unreality of the self, some Russian critics (such as the writer and essayist N. Ignatova) read this as a lack of love or respect for ordinary people, rather than as a philosophical exploration of Buddhist *śūnyatā*.

The same misalignment operates in Batygin’s reading of *Journey to the West*. The Buddhist cosmos does not “respect” Sun Wukong’s psychological individuality in the sense the Russian reader expects—not because it is cruel, but because, from its point of view, no individual self is ultimately real in the way Christianity assumes. Yet for Batygin, raised in a culture where literature has long cultivated tenderness towards concrete, suffering persons, this stance appears as a betrayal.

8. Conclusion

Kirill Batygin’s journey through *Journey to the West* highlights the productive friction that occurs when a secular Russian intellectual encounters an Eastern religious classic. His reaction to the Buddhist emptiness doctrine – treating it as a provocative puzzle – and his *dvoeverie*-driven oscillation between skeptic and moralist roles together create a nuanced portrait of religious dissonance and cultural projection in reception. Batygin reads *Journey to the West* with one foot in a rational-modern mindset and the other in a cultural-religious subconscious, embodying the dual legacy of Russian thought. This yields a “rich tapestry,” to borrow his own humorous tone, in which Sun Wukong can be both a Buddhist pilgrim and a Luciferian or Promethean rebel, and where a line about cosmic emptiness can spark debates about the very purpose of storytelling. Ultimately, Batygin’s commentary – and my analysis of it – suggests that *Journey to the West* serves as a mirror for its reader. In reflecting on an ostensibly foreign tale, Batygin was also reflecting on the contradictions and yearnings of his own culture. The concept of *dvoeverie* proves useful beyond its historical origins, describing the fertile yet tense space of double vision where a modern reader can appreciate an ancient spiritual journey while never fully relinquishing the patterns of thought he brings along. The result is a dialogue across time and tradition: one that enriches our understanding of how great literature is continually reinterpreted through the prism of diverse worldviews.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ V. Y. Kurtseva, *The Genesis of the Image of Sun Wukong in Literary Works of the 14th–20th Centuries* (Bachelor’s thesis, Program 41.03.03 “Oriental and African Studies,” specialization in Chinese Philology, 2023).
- ² S. V. Nikolskaia, “Buddhist Motifs in Wu Cheng’en’s *Journey to the West* (16th Century),” in *Philosophical Questions of Buddhism*, (Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1984), 114–122.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ V. Y. Kurtseva, *The Genesis of the Image of Sun Wukong in Literary Works of the 14th–20th Centuries* (Bachelor’s thesis, Program 41.03.03 “Oriental and African Studies,” specialization in Chinese Philology, 2023).
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ FantLab. *Journey to the West*. Available at: <https://fantlab.ru/work55775> (Accessed 21 November 2025).
- ⁷ Wikipedia. *Journey to the West*. Available at: https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9F%D1%83%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%88%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%B5_%D0%BD%D0%B0_%D0%97%D0%B0%D0%BF%D0%B0%D0%B4 (Accessed 21 November 2025).
- ⁸ Telegram-channel *Music of Translation*: https://t.me/musing_on_translation (Accessed 21 November 2025).
- ⁹ Hu Shih, “Introduction,” in *Monkey*, by Wu Ch’eng-en, trans. Arthur Waley (New York: Grove Press, 1970), 1–5.
- ¹⁰ V. Y. Kurtseva, *The Genesis of the Image of Sun Wukong in Literary Works of the 14th–20th Centuries* (Bachelor’s thesis, Program 41.03.03 “Oriental and African Studies,” specialization in Chinese Philology, 2023), p. 10-11.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Anthony C. Yu, *The Journey to the West*, translated and edited by Anthony C. Yu, revised edition, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
- ¹³ V. Y. Kurtseva, *The Genesis of the Image of Sun Wukong in Literary Works of the 14th–20th Centuries* (Bachelor’s thesis, Program 41.03.03 “Oriental and African Studies,” specialization in Chinese Philology, 2023).
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Wu Cheng’en. *Journey to the West. Vol. 4*. Translated from Chinese by A. P. Rogachev and V. S. Kolokolov. Moscow: Enneagon Press, 2007. 567 p.
- ¹⁶ Terentyev, A. A. “Philosophy of Buddhism.” In *Encyclopedia*, edited by M. T.

- Stepanyants, p. 811. Moscow: Vostochnaya Literatura, 2011. 1021 p.
- ¹⁷ reddit.com. “Why Didn’t Frodo and Sam Fly the Eagles to Mordor?” Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/lotrmemes/comments/zetnxy/why_didnt_frodo_and_sam_fly_the_eagles_to_mordor/ (accessed 21 November 2025).
- ¹⁸ A. Baumeister, “From the Power of Symbols to Magical Politics: A Philosophical Conversation with Pavel Shchelin and Evgeny Golub,” YouTube interview (Andrii Baumeister channel). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQB-V22xHc> (accessed 21 November 2025).
- ¹⁹ S. V. Nikolskaya, “On the Composition of Wu Cheng’en’s *Journey to the West*,” in *Problems of Eastern Philosophy* (Moscow: n.p., 1979), pp. 139–146.
- ²⁰ Telegram-channel *Music of Translation*: https://t.me/musing_on_translation (Accessed 21 November 2025).
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Wu Cheng’en. *Journey to the West. Vol. 4*. Translated from Chinese by A. P. Rogachev and V. S. Kolokolov. Moscow: Enneagon Press, 2007. 551 p.
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- ²⁶ K. Batygin, “We Always Aim to Reveal Our Authors, Not Overshadow Them,” *Literratura*, 1 February 2025. Available at: <https://litteratura.org/perevody/5784-kirill-batygin-my-vse-vsegda-orientiruemsya-na-to-chtoby-raskryt-nashih-avtorov-a-ne-zaslomit-ih-soboy.html> (accessed 21 November 2025).

- ²⁷ A. I. Danilova, “Traditions of ‘Dvoeverie’ in Russian Orthodoxy,” *Vestnik* (2010), available at: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/traditsii-dvoeveriya-v-russkom-pravoslavii> (accessed 21 November 2025); L. Lepeshkina, “The Phenomenon of Dvoeverie in the Volga Region as a Result of Russian Cultural Policy in the 18th–19th Centuries,” *CyberLeninka* (2023), available at: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/fenomen-dvoeveriya-v-povolzhie-kak-rezultat-rossiyskoy-kulturnoy-politiki-v-xviii-xix-xx> (accessed 21 November 2025).
- ²⁸ “Thou shalt not kill,” *The Holy Bible*, Exodus 20:13 (King James Version).
- ²⁹ “Upāya (Skillful Means),” *The Lotus Sutra* (Saddharmapundarīka-sūtra), trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), ch. 2 “Expedient Means.”
- ³⁰ Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea: The Fundamental Problems of Russian Thought in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries*. Moscow: Respublika, 1994.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), ch. 4, 423-505.
- ³³ Telegram-channel *Music of Translation*: https://t.me/musing_on_translation (Accessed 21 November 2025).
- ³⁴ Carol Dougherty, *Prometheus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 40-53.
- ³⁵ *Paradise Lost* (Oxford World’s Classics), edited by Stephen Orgel & Jonathan Goldberg, Oxford University Press, 2008 edition.
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