

From Homo Economicus to the Rational Practitioner: Reconstructing Rational Choice Through Inner Cultivation in *Journey to the West*

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Abstract: This paper examines the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West* through the lens of rational choice theory, with a particular focus on the logic of cultivation and behavioral decision-making. By incorporating the notion of “inner cultivation” (*xin xing xiulian*) into the analytical framework, we introduce the concept of the “cultivating economic agent,” aiming to explore how rationality is generated, evolved, and transcended throughout the spiritual journey. The study argues that, in the context of Eastern culture, rationality is not merely an innate or static faculty but one that can be cultivated and transformed. Through textual analysis of the behavioral trajectories of Sun Wukong, Zhu Bajie, and Tang Sanzang, we uncover a structured behavioral logic of “goal orientation–institutional discipline–purification of the mind.” The findings suggest that although cultivation behaviors are not utilitarian decisions per se, they exhibit rational characteristics such as goal stability, autonomous will, and embedded incentives.

Keywords: Inner cultivation; Rational choice; Homo economicus; Behavioral economics; *Journey to the West*

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1. Introduction

The homo economicus model assumes individuals are rational, informed, and utility-maximizing. While foundational to economics, it struggles to explain behaviors driven by faith, morality, and spiritual goals. Recent advances in behavioral and institutional economics highlight the limits of this assumption, recognizing that real-world choices are often bounded and shaped by values.

The Chinese classic *Journey to the West* offers an alternative view of rationality through its depiction of cultivation. Characters like Tang Sanzang, Sun Wukong, and Zhu Bajie embody different paths of inner transformation. By interpreting their actions through rational choice theory and the concept of *xin xing xiulian* (heart-mind cultivation), this paper proposes a new behavioral type: the “cultivating economic agent.”

This approach expands rational choice theory into spiritual domains and grounds it in Eastern views of self,

choice, and human development. Rather than rejecting rationality, it reframes it through discipline, belief, and structured cultivation—bridging classical economic models with Eastern cultivation traditions.

2. Theoretical foundations

2.1. Rational choice and the homo economicus assumption

The homo economicus model assumes that individuals are rational agents with stable preferences, complete information, and the cognitive capacity to choose optimal outcomes in pursuit of utility maximization ^[1]. On this basis, rational choice theory has constructed a mature analytical framework widely used in modeling consumer behavior, investment decisions, institutional arrangements, and strategic interactions.

However, since the mid-20th century, the limitations of this model have become increasingly evident. Herbert Simon's theory of bounded rationality emphasized that individuals face cognitive, informational, and computational constraints, leading them to make “satisficing” rather than optimal decisions ^[2]. Institutional economics further contends that rational behavior is shaped by the institutional environment, which not only defines the space of available actions but also influences choices through incentives and constraints ^[3,4].

More recently, behavioral economics has drawn on psychology and neuroscience to account for seemingly “irrational” behaviors. Time inconsistency, loss aversion, cognitive dissonance, and belief perseverance all suggest that rationality is structured in nonlinear and context-dependent ways ^[5,6]. While these theories have enhanced our understanding of suboptimal or boundedly rational behaviors, they still struggle to explain decisions oriented toward “spiritual value”—those characterized by abstract goals, delayed returns, and high immediate costs.

2.2. Philosophical foundations of cultivation in Daoism and Buddhism

In Chinese thought, cultivation (*xiuxing*) is more than a religious act—it is a deep inquiry into human nature, self-transcendence, and existence. Unlike the Western model that sees rationality as calculation and control, Eastern traditions view rationality as something cultivated through *neiguan* (inner observation) and *zijing* (self-purification), centered on the refinement of the heart-mind (*xin xing*).

In Daoism, the aim is to “attain the Dao” through the dual cultivation of essence and life (*xing ming shuang xiu*) and alignment with nature (*shun qi ziran*). Desire is not suppressed but gently transformed. Rationality here emerges from attunement, timing, and non-intervention (*wu wei*), resembling adaptive, context-sensitive judgment rather than optimization.

Buddhism begins with the insight that all things are impermanent and the self is illusory. Through ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom, practitioners eliminate attachment and realize *śūnyatā* (emptiness). This form of rationality is ontological, grounded in direct insight into reality. It transcends instrumental reasoning, allowing action rooted in compassion even after recognizing the emptiness of worldly goals.

3. From homo economicus to the cultivating agent

3.1. The economic logic of cultivation and the “anomaly” of rationality

At first glance, cultivation behavior appears incompatible with the rational choice paradigm. It involves substantial immediate costs—physical austerity, emotional suppression, and intensive willpower training—while its rewards are abstract, non-material, and often indefinitely deferred. According to conventional economic reasoning, such behavior would be classified as irrational.

However, if viewed through a dynamic and longitudinal lens, and if spiritual utility is factored into the agent's utility function, cultivation may be interpreted as a form of long-term, high-latency investment. In *Journey to the West*, Sun Wukong endures five centuries of confinement, repeatedly battles demons, and shoulders the burden of guardianship. The short-term costs he incurs far exceed any immediate gains, yet these actions are directed toward the ultimate spiritual return of becoming a Buddha. Once “inner purity” and “fulfilled aspiration” are treated as components of personal utility, the logic of cultivation can be reabsorbed into the domain of rational choice.

This logic aligns with insights from the economics of religion, which interprets religious behavior as a form of consumption of “transcendent goods”—valuable precisely because of their scarcity and symbolic significance^[7]. Yet unlike traditional religious economics, which assumes stable preferences and fixed rationality, *Journey to the West* portrays rationality itself as the product of cultivation, not its precondition.

3.2. *Xin xing* as the generative mechanism of rational evolution

The proverb “the mind is both mountain and cave” captures the dual nature of *xin xing*—the heart-mind is at once stable and chaotic. Cultivation seeks to “restrain the mind and refine the nature,” transforming erratic impulses into consistent, goal-aligned actions. This process can be understood as the endogenization of rationality through inner training.

In behavioral economics, agents often struggle with cognitive biases and time-inconsistent preferences, such as hyperbolic discounting or impulsive decision-making. In *Journey to the West*, Sun Wukong's “monkey mind,” Zhu Bajie's sensuality, and Tang Sanzang's moral rigidity symbolize different destabilizing forces. As the journey progresses through 81 tribulations, these characters gradually develop internal mechanisms of discipline and restraint, reducing impulsiveness and aligning short-term behavior with long-term purpose^[8].

Rationality is no longer a pre-given faculty but a structural outcome generated and refined through *xin xing* cultivation. Behavioral consistency and goal alignment are not products of external incentive design but the result of internal rational development.

3.3. From economic man to cultivating agent: A structural model

Building on the analysis above, we propose a structural model of the “Cultivating Economic Agent” as a theoretical refinement of the classical homo economicus (Table 1). This model captures the unique logic of long-term, spiritually motivated, and institutionally embedded behavior.

Table 1. Comparison between traditional economic man and cultivating agent

Model dimension	Traditional economic man	Cultivating economic agent
Rationality basis	A priori, stable and fixed	Emergent through cultivation, adaptive, and plastic
Behavioral goals	Utility maximization (mostly material)	Spiritual fulfillment, self-transcendence (non-material, delayed)
Temporal structure	Short- to mid-term orientation	High delay tolerance, long-term consistency
Decision drivers	Preferences and external incentives	Aspiration (<i>yuanli</i>), belief, internal moral order
Cost tolerance	Low (seeks to avoid high costs)	High (accepts long-term suffering and discipline)
Choice consistency	Context-sensitive, volatility-prone	Stable, autonomous, marked by <i>dingli</i> (mental firmness)

This model suggests that in specific cultural and institutional settings, rationality is not only modifiable but

also upgradable through deliberate cultivation. Cultivation-oriented behavior is not irrational; rather, it represents a higher-dimensional rationality—a systemic response to life choices grounded in willpower, belief systems, and spiritual clarity.

4. The logic of cultivation and rational pathways

4.1. Sun Wukong: From gifted economic agent to self-disciplined cultivator

Sun Wukong begins as a figure of exceptional natural talent and rare resource endowment. Born from stone and trained by the Patriarch Bodhi, he quickly acquires powerful abilities, fitting the profile of a “gifted economic agent.” Yet his early behavior—marked by defiance and ego—leads to his rebellion against Heaven and eventual punishment under the Five Elements Mountain. This institutional constraint marks the shift from innate ability to disciplined cultivation. As the journey progresses, Sun faces repeated trials—such as recognizing deception, resisting pride, and demonstrating loyalty. These challenges refine his self-control and align his actions with long-term goals. His behavior shifts from impulsive to deliberate, reflecting an evolution from raw power to internalized rationality, grounded in *dingli*—the cultivated steadiness to endure adversity.

4.2. Zhu Bajie: Marginal rationality and cultivation under constraint

Zhu Bajie exemplifies a weak self-regulator. Once the Marshal of the Heavenly Canopy, he is exiled for indulgence in lust and excess. His actions align with the present-biased agent in behavioral economics—seeking immediate rewards and prone to impulsivity. His path, known as *dai ye xiuxing* (cultivating with karmic burden), is marked by moral lapses, yet he never quits the pilgrimage or loses sight of its goal. This suggests a “bounded correction” model: though flawed, he stays on course through institutional pressures and residual aspiration. Bajie’s behavior reflects a dynamic between external discipline and internal inertia. His case shows that rationality can be cultivated even in agents with limited self-control, so long as supportive institutional structures are in place.

4.3. Tang Sanzang: Faith-driven rationality and the embodiment of teleological commitment

Tang Sanzang embodies faith-based rationality. His choices consistently serve the ultimate goal of retrieving the scriptures, guided by his unchanging original intention (*chuxin bu gai*), even amid deception, suffering, and doubt. His steadiness stems not from calculation but from value rationality rooted in religious conviction. From an institutional perspective, his behavior is anchored by three forces: religious doctrine, belief commitment, and emotional stability. Together, these form an internal framework that sustains action without immediate reward. Though lacking in flexibility or strategy, Tang’s moral clarity unifies the group and offers direction. His example shows that belief systems can provide enduring behavioral consistency, where rationality is covenantal rather than instrumental. This case illustrates that spiritual rationality is not fixed, but shaped by disposition, institutional context, and belief structure—ultimately oriented toward transformation and transcendence.

5. Modeling the cultivating economic agent

5.1. Core elements of the model

This section introduces the Cultivating Economic Agent as a refinement of the classical homo economicus, designed to explain long-term, high-cost, and non-material decision-making. The model incorporates spiritual goals, internal discipline, and institutional context into a unified behavioral logic. It rests on three key dimensions:

- (1) Behavioral goals:
 - Immaterial: Oriented toward symbolic or transcendental aims.
 - Delayed: Outcomes emerge only after sustained effort.
 - Hard to measure: Benefits are not easily quantified or compared.
- (2) Motivational sources:
 - Aspiration (*yuanli*): A conscious spiritual vow.
 - Faith structure: A stable belief system guiding long-term behavior.
 - Institutional scaffolding: External mechanisms—rules, roles, trials—that reinforce internal goals.
- (3) Type of rationality: Focused attention and goal stability; tolerance for delay and discomfort; coherence over time in thought and behavior.

This higher-order rationality emerges through self-cultivation, not innate traits. It evolves through iterative feedback between intention, action, and outcome.

5.2. Comparative structure: Traditional vs. cultivating agent

To clearly demarcate the distinctions between the traditional and cultivating models of the economic agent, we present a comparative framework across six analytical dimensions (**Table 2**):

Table 2. Behavioral structure of traditional vs. cultivating economic agent

Analytical dimension	Traditional economic agent	Cultivating economic agent
Rationality type	Fixed, instrumental, calculative	Evolving, moralized, introspective
Temporal orientation	Prioritizes short- to mid-term gains	Oriented toward delayed fulfillment and ultimate goals
Utility structure	Material, quantifiable, consumption-focused	Spiritual, symbolic, non-quantifiable
Motivational drivers	Self-interest, external incentives	Faith, aspiration, and institutional coordination
Cost tolerance	Low (avoids pain and defers cost)	High (accepts hardship and long-term sacrifice)
Rational adjustment mechanism	External signals and punitive feedback	Internal reflection and self-monitoring

This model reveals that the cultivating agent corresponds more closely to the realistic agent explored in behavioral economics, while extending the framework to include cultural, spiritual, and institutional dimensions. It transcends the limits of rational choice theory without abandoning its structural strengths—by repositioning rationality as an emergent property of long-term inner cultivation.

6. Conclusion and theoretical implications

Our findings show that cultivation behavior in *Journey to the West* follows a coherent triadic logic: purpose orientation, willful discipline, and institutional feedback. While these behaviors exceed the scope of utilitarian calculation, they are by no means irrational or arbitrary. Instead, they are grounded in a form of evolved rationality that integrates internal volition, external structure, and spiritual coherence.

The study challenges the mainstream assumption that rationality is a fixed cognitive endowment. Instead, it proposes that rationality can be cultivated through repeated moral practice, intentional reflection,

and institutionalized constraint. The characters in *Journey to the West* demonstrate how inner obstacles—impulsiveness, desire, egoism—can be overcome not through suppression but through transformation. This highlights a developmental trajectory in which agents transition from desire-driven action to goal-aligned rational conduct.

More broadly, this research responds to the contemporary challenge of rational reconstruction in an era of fragmented belief and unstable values. In modern societies, individuals are often torn between external institutional demands and internal emotional impulses, leading to a fractured sense of rational agency. The Cultivating Economic Agent offers a model for reintegrating purpose, belief, and discipline—showing that rationality is not merely a matter of efficient choice, but a product of spiritual alignment and ethical commitment.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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