ABSTRACT

Was the beautiful lady in white a monster? Was she a loner or with an accomplice? And was the young man of her choice really a victim? Was the saintly monk a saviour, a meddling old fool, or simply a malicious, vengeful enemy consumed with jealousy and rage? Was it at the dreamlike shore of the West Lake where the story first unfolded? When did it happen? Was it history, a legend, a myth, or just the fertile imagination of some novelists?

This academic exercise attempts to seek answers to these questions, by comparing, and analysing the various accounts, written as early as the pre-Tang period, up to the Qing dynasty, describing the same story. This academic exercise also attempts to examine and analyse the four main characters of this story by a detailed study of one of the novels, written after the Qing dynasty: "白蛇传前集" by 梦花馆主. The study provides clues to the formation, development and portrayal of the characters throughout the centuries.