Abstract

This thesis paper aims to study the pilgrimage to Mount Wudang (武当山) situated in the Hubei (湖北) province of China. Mount Wudang is a popular Daoist mountain and pilgrims come in droves to worship Zhen Wu (真武), who is believed to be the god of Mount Wudang. The association of the cult Zhen Wu and Mount Wudang can be traced back to the Song Dynasty. Zhen Wu originated from Xuan Wu (玄武), a divine animal in the form of a tortoise and snake. Previous studies have shown that people had long worshiped Xuan Wu, but it is not known exactly when Xuan Wu became a god in human form. It is believed that Daoism had brought the belief of Xuan Wu into the Daoist Immortal Series during the Song dynasty. It was during this period that Xuan Wu became a god in human form. No historical record of Zhen Wu as a god in human form was found before the Song period. The Song emperors emphasized on the worshipping of Zhen Wu and claimed that the god had protected the Song Empire from harm and invasion by the Northern threats, especially the Mongolians. Temples and monasteries were built on the mountain and rituals were also performed regularly. Pilgrims came and Mount Wudang became a Daoist mountain connected with the cult of Zhen Wu. When the Mongolians ruled China, they also worshipped Zhen Wu based on the belief that Zhen Wu had assisted them in seizing power. The Ming dynasty was the period when the cult of Zhen Wu and pilgrimage to Mount Wudang reached its peak.

There are many records of pilgrimage to Mount Wudang. These sources are mainly the inscriptions erected inside the temples or embedded in the mountain and the temple walls of Mount Wudang.
Those that are still legible carry the names, the reasons, and words of thanks to the gods and sometimes the stories of ordinary pilgrims. From these accounts, it is found that most pilgrims came in groups, either from a neighbourhood, village, temple organizations or family.

The religious culture of Mount Wudang is a combination of the Daoist and the popular religion. Besides the Daoism explanation of the story of Zhen Wu, many legends on Zhen Wu were spread among the people as well. This will be discussed in the study.

This study will first uncover the history of Mount Wudang before the Song dynasty. Thereafter, the pre-history of the Zhen Wu cult will be looked into. Next, the various contributions of the Song, Yuan and Ming rulers to Mount Wudang and its religious culture will be discussed. Lastly, this study will talk about the pilgrimage to Mount Wudang, including the formation of group pilgrims and the pilgrimage activities involved.