ABSTRACT

The Pilgrimage to the West (西游记) is considered to be one of the greatest fictional works in Chinese literature. The novel originated from a real pilgrimage of a monk, Xuanzang 玄奘 (602-664), to India for Buddhist scriptures. Over many hundred of years, the public entertainers, such as singers, actors, or storytellers, developed the story and its characters continually in response to audience demand. It was only until the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) that the author of the Pilgrimage, based on the previous materials, re-organised and re-wrote the story. The novel has enjoyed a large readership because of its fantasy and humour. Unlike other great novels in Ming and Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), the Pilgrimage gives readers a wild and imaginative world which transcends the limits of time and space. Through personification of the beasts, the characters of the novel are made lively and lovely, and are able to reflect the weaknesses of human nature. It is an enjoyable book because readers can always relate the episodes or characters of the imaginative world to the real world.

Many scholars classified the Pilgrimage as a mythic novel or comedy which was good for entertainment only. Yet, was this the sole intention of the author? Was there any hidden message that the author was trying to convey? This dissertation attempts to answer this question by examining the novel from its probable tragic nature.

Xuanzang was the main character of the pilgrimage. However, his importance in the Pilgrimage was replaced by his eldest disciple, Sun Wukong 孙悟空. Most of the episodes on the journey fell into two categories: in the wilderness and in the cities
or civilised places where Xuanzang and his disciples had to encounter specific crises and disasters. These crises and disasters, mostly caused by monsters, reflect the social illnesses in reality. Usually, Sun Wukong was the one who saved either his master from the monsters or a country from disasters. Through Sun Wukong’s persistence in antagonising the monsters, the author outlined his Utopia in which evil would finally be subdued and people would be saved.

The Pilgrimage was classified as a comedy because it contains comic and humorous episodes. In fact, the author tried to expose the tragic reality of the Ming society as well as the traditional Chinese society behind the laughter. Through these comic and humorous episodes, he criticised corruptness of the politics, ignorance of the rulers at that time, hypocrisy of religions, ugliness of human nature, and unchangeableness of fate.

The Pilgrimage has reflected the tragic nature of reality in many different areas. However, the author of this dissertation can only focus on the study of life, politics, religion and family ethics. The in-depth examination and analysis of the tragic nature of these four areas gives readers a new perspective regarding the Pilgrimage to the West, that it is not just a novel of fantasy and comedy, but also a novel of reality and tragedy.