

Understanding the Novel *Xi-You-Ji* (Journey to the West) In The Context of Politics and Religions

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ABSTRACT

Journey to the West is a novel known to almost all in China and overseas Chinese. Boys and girls are enchanted by the stories in which the Monkey subdued the demons when he kept company to Master Xuan Zang (玄奘 600? – 664) with Pigsy and Sha Monk on their journey to western regions to obtain authentic Buddhist scriptures.

Since 1920s, Dr. Hu Shi (胡適 1891 – 1962) and many other scholars have made researches into this novel. Most of the scholarships have focused on literature. My paper discusses the innuendoes that Wu Cheng'en (吴承恩) used to criticize Emperor Ming Shizong (明世宗 r. 1522 – 1566). The emperor was addicted to Daoist practices for longevity by making elixir, a medicine which was believed to lead to immortality in ancient China. The emperor followed the Daoist advice to stay away from state affairs – he met ministers in the court four times in these forty-two years on his throne. He put his treacherous ministers in charge of state affairs. As a result, the Ming gradually moved towards its doom.

The paper aims to discuss the novel and its characters in the perspective of history, court politics and religion. It offers textual analysis on how Wu Cheng'en criticized both Daoism and Emperor Ming Shizong (1522 – 1566 CE) by using innuendoes and irony.

Introduction

The Journey to the West (*Xi You Ji* 《西遊記》) is a novel known to almost everyone in China, her neighboring countries and many overseas Chinese. Almost all boys and girls remember the story of Master Xuan Zang 玄奘(600? – 664 CE¹), a famous monk in the Tang dynasty (618 – 907), went to India to obtain Buddhist scriptures with Pigsy, Monkey and Sha Monk. They particularly remember the story of how the Monkey subdued the demons on the way to the western regions.

A number of chapters in the novel were devoted to the Second Emperor of the Tang – Tang Taizong (唐太宗 r. 626 – 649). The stories of Emperor Tang Taizong in these chapters in the novel demonstrate a sharp discrepancy between the historical records both from the court and Buddhist biographies and the plots and characters in the novel. Novel is defined as stories in which characters and events are imaginary. It is true that novel does not have to follow exactly what happened in the past. The author, who was a very intelligent person, should have clear knowledge of history of the Tang dynasty, especially the legendary stories about Master Xuan Zang. Basing on the historical records, Wu Cheng'en (吴承恩), the author, developed the plots and wrote his novel with bountiful imagination and creations.

Reading the novel, we can find many innuendoes in it. The word “Ming” (明) in its collocation of the Ming Dynasty, means “bright.” In fact, the Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644) was one of the darkest periods in Chinese history. The first

Emperor was a peasant who starved and begged as a boy, got his literacy from Buddhist priest, and joined an anti-Mongol religious sect. Ugly to look at, Hongwu Emperor (1368 – 1398) was fiercely energetic, had violent fits of temper, and became paranoically suspicious of conspiracies against himself.² He was notorious for making literary inquisitions – by giving wrong interpretations of the speeches and memorials of the ministers, he accused them of criticizing him and attacking his policies. He massacred more than 45,000 people whom he regarded as potential enemies, competitors for the throne of his grandson, and conspirators to topple his reign. In fact, he terrorized the country by organizing a special police institution to supervise both officials and civilians and by false accusations against innocent people or people with minor errors. With such a terrorized approach, the country was brought into peace.

The second emperor, a grandson of the this hot-tempered First Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang, was soon dethroned by his uncle Zhu Di (朱棣 r.1403 – 1424) He was on the throne for three years only. When the third emperor “usurped” the throne, he massacred the ministers, their family members, relatives and even friends whom he considered accomplices of the second Emperor. He further developed secret police to supervise the actions and speeches of officials and civilians alike. The country enjoyed further prosperity under such terrorized rule. When the successive emperors inherited the policies and secret police supervising system, they did not have to worry about state affairs. From the ninth emperor Zhu Jianshen (朱見深 r. 1465 – 1487) to the fourteenth emperor Zhu Yijun (朱翊鈞 1573 – 1620), six emperors met government officials once in a decade when they were on the throne. They put their trusted eunuchs in charge of *Jinyiwei* (錦衣衛 Imperial Bodyguards), and other secret police institutions and the daily routine work of the court.³ Thus, it was a miracle that the dynasty still lasted more than one hundred years without emperors’ efforts. It should be pointed out that all these were made possible due to eunuchs, the secret police system, and the terror the previous emperors imposed upon the nation. Certainly, this abnormal administration of the court slowly moved towards doom in 1644 when the peasant rebellions swept into Beijing and overthrew the dynasty.

It was in this environment that Wu Cheng’en skillfully reminded us of the earlier emperors and court institutions in the Tang and Ming dynasties. He told us how vicious demons in Daoist disguise deceived emperors and brought disasters to the court and the country. He also tactfully referred to the notorious secret police named *Jinyiwei* (The Imperial Bodyguards).

The present paper examines the author, the historical background of this novel, and analyzes how Wu Cheng’en criticized Daoists and emperors.

The essay is divided into four parts:

1. The author
2. Emperor Shizong’s addiction to Daoism in the Ming Dynasty (r. 1522 – 1566)
3. Wu Cheng’en’s Criticisms of Daoists and the Ming Emperors by Innuendo
4. Conclusion

The Author

After many years of research, scholars now generally agree that it was Wu Cheng'en (吴承恩) who wrote *Journey to the West* (*Xi You Ji* 《西遊記》). There had been confusion about the authorship of this novel. The earliest Ming edition did not give the author's name when it was published. Many people took Qiu Changchun (邱長春 1148 – 1227 or Qiu Chuji 邱處機, a famous Daoist leader of Complete Perfect Daoism, as its writer, for Qiu, summoned by Genghis Khan, traveled a long distance to Samarkand to meet the Great Conquer in the twelfth century. Qiu's disciple Li Zhichang (李志常)

wrote a book recording what they experienced in this long journey entitled *Xi-You-Ji* (《西遊記》 Journey to the West).⁴ This book has been an important book in geography. Scholars in the Qing dynasty and 20th century challenged the authorship of Qiu Changchun and offered convincing sources.

The earliest edition of this novel was probably published by the Shidetang (世德堂) of Nanjing in the twenty to forty years of Wanli Period (萬曆 1592 – 1612). However, the editions in the Ming and Qing dynasties did not bear the name of Wu Cheng'en. Instead, the penname of Huayang Dongtian Zhuren (華陽洞天主人 This sounds a Daoist hermit.) was carved in the front page. Scholars have made investigations into the authorship of *Xi You Ji* or Journey to the West in the last 150 years. They generally agreed that Wu Cheng'en should be the author of this great novel of the Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644).⁵ He was probably born in 1500 and died in 1581. According to Wu Guorong's "Preface to Collections of Essays Written by Mr. Sheyang 射陽先生," Wu Cheng'en passed the imperial examination at the county level, conferring the title of *Xiucai* (秀才) in the year 1521.⁶ He probably went to Nanjing eight times in the following decades until he was over fifty years old. Unfortunately, he did not succeed in obtaining the title of successful candidate in these examinations. Later he wrote inscriptions on the stone for Ge Mu 葛木 who had been an influential person to him. He said, "I failed to live up to your expectations." Ge Mu, the local magistrate, often persuaded Wu Cheng'en to make preparation for the imperial examinations as he saw Wu's talent in literature. A local gazetteer described that Wu, being an unparalleled genius, "insisted on having his own way and refused to seek connections with those in power. He continued to sit for the examinations, and eventually he was selected as a Tribute Student (*suigongsheng* 歲貢生) in 1544, but he achieved a certain reputation as a poet and humorous writer.⁷ At the age of fifty-three, he half completed his studies at the National Academy in Nanjing. At the age of fifty-four, his good friend Shen Kun organized soldiers to resist the invasions by Japanese pirates along the coastal areas. Shen often invited Wu to discuss matters concerning military affairs and strategy. He even wanted to cast aside the pen and join the army but his mother's illness prevented him from doing so. In his sixties, he went to Beijing hoping to obtain an official post. He was appointed assistant to the county magistrate, which was a very low-ranking official in charge of grain, horses and security. Being a small officer, he offended the local tyrant when he was implementing his work to impose grain levies. The local tyrant made false accusations against him. Thus Wu was dismissed and arrested. When he was exonerated, he

resigned his official post and returned to his hometown. From then on, Wu became addicted to wine and spent much time writing poems. He died in hermitage.

Wu Cheng'en was good at poetry and painting. He wrote many poems and literary works. When he died, being poor and having no children, many of his works got lost. His relatives and friends made efforts to collect these literary works and publish them posthumously. His monumental work *Xi You Ji* (Journey to the West) was published under a penname of Huayang Dongtian Zhuren (華陽洞天主人) with the help of his friend Li Chunfang (李春芳) ten years after his death. Li Chufang, who obtained the high post of senior grand secretary (宰輔) in the Ming court, did not give enough information when he helped to publish the book, thus making it more difficult for people to identify the authorship of the novel.

Wu Cheng'en was not able to obtain any high official posts, yet, he enjoyed longevity through the reigns of five emperors: Emperor Xiaozong (明孝宗 1488 – 1505), Emperor Wuzong (1506 – 1521), Emperor Shizong (明世宗 1522 – 1566), Emperor Muzong (明穆宗 1567 – 1572) and Emperor Shenzong (明神宗 1573 – 1619). The Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644) was notorious for its darkness. The word “Ming” 明 means “bright” in Chinese language. In fact, the period in which Wu Cheng'en lived may be regarded as the darkest period of the Ming dynasty. The Ming emperors lived in debauchery and corruption. Treacherous persons held high official posts in the court during the reigns of these emperors. It was a period full of power struggles between ministers and eunuchs. Some of the notorious prime ministers and eunuchs were worst in the stage of Chinese court politics.

Emperor Shizong's Indulgence In Daoism In The Ming Dynasty

Emperor Ming Shizong (Zhu Houcong 朱厚熹) reigned the Jiajing period 嘉靖 1522 – 1566) was tremendously influenced by Daoism. His father was conferred the title of Prince Ningxian in Anlu Prefecture in Hubei Province. A Daoist monk named Chunyi became a close friend of Prince Ningxian. On the tenth day of the eighth month in the second year of Zhengde (正德 1507), Prince Ningxian (寧獻王) had a dream in which he met this Daoist monk Chunyi. When he woke up, he could not see Chunyi. At this moment, his servant came to report the birth of his son whom he had expected for years. He owed the birth of this son to the magic of Daoist monk Chunyi (純一道人). Prince Ningxian named the boy Zhu Houcong 朱厚熹. When Zhu Houcong grew up, he came to know more about his family. He often visited a Daoist temple named Xuanmiao Guan to show respect and worship Daoist gods with his parents.⁸

Since Emperor Wuzong (Zhu Houzhao 明武宗 朱厚照 r. 1506 – 1521) did not have any sons, the court decided that the son of Prince Ningxian, Zhu Houcong 朱厚熹, should become the emperor. Thus, Zhu Houcong ascended the throne and reigned China from 1522 to 1566.

The emperor invited a Daoist adept from Jiangxi Province named Shao Yuanjie (邵元節 1459 – 1539) to court. By 1526, Shao had won the emperor's favor

with his prayers for rain and for an end to calamities. When Shao was serious ill, he recommended Tao Zhongwen (陶仲文 1481 - 1560) to replace him. Since Emperor Shizong was notorious for his indulgence in both women and in Daoism in the court, and Tao was skillful at compounding aphrodisiacs and at divination, he immediately became a favorite of the emperor and was put in charge of Daoist affairs.

One of the Daoist theories was the so-called “inner chamber techniques,” which offered information about sexuality. Under Tao’s guidance, the emperor began to explore these facets of Daoism in some detail. The aphrodisiacs were generally made of red lead (lead tetroxide) and white arsenic (naturally occurring arsenic trioxide), compounded with other substances and formed into pills or granules. These “elixirs of immortality” were said to make one feel light and strong, to increase all the appetites, and to lead to intense sexual arousal. In September 1540 the emperor informed the court that he intended to seclude himself for several years to pursue immortality. When a court official protested that this was nonsense and that aphrodisiacs were dangerous, he was arrested and tortured to death.⁹

The emperor wanted Daoists to make elixirs which he believed could enable him to enjoy longevity. One way to make “red lead” was to collect the first menses of young girls. Thus about one thousand young girls under fourteen years old were forced to gather at the court for this purpose. Then he forced young boys who had not yet come to puberty to gather their morning urine and boil it to make an outer elixir. He believed that taking all these things as tonics could make him strong enough to enjoy an everlasting life. Then he could build up vital energy to indulge in sexual life.

Daoists were summoned to come to the capital to build magnificent altars for him. They came to the altars, using all the best phrases and praying before the image of the Jade Emperor. They believed that the Jade Emperor would be deeply moved by their utter devotions and therefore protect the land by dispelling all the evil spirits. More importantly, immortality would be brought to the emperor.

Duan Chaoyong (段朝用), a Daoist, recommended that if the emperor could stay away from ministers. He could concentrate his mind on the cultivation of inner elixir – another kind of medicine which could enable him to enjoy immortality. He called for the prince to act on behalf of him in the court business. When his plan met with strong opposition, he never mentioned the affairs of his successor, nor kept any contact with officials.¹⁰

Thus, Emperor Shizong was addicted to the prayers and practices of Daoists and he neglected his responsibilities to the routine work of the court. In twenty years, Zhu received his ministers only four times. He spent the rest of time as a hermit in the court, holding Daoist rituals in altars. Totally devoted to the practice for longevity, the emperor was indifferent to his relatives and much colder to ministers.¹¹

The emperor did not only show his favor to Daoist priests, but also promoted them to high official posts. Shao Yuanjie, Tao Zhongwen, and others were highly honored in the court. He supported many construction projects for Daoist temples and

squandered a great deal of money on Daoist ceremonial prayers (齋醮). In order to achieve his goal of immortality, he also established many ceremonies for divination. It was reported that the court exhausted tons of beeswax, white wax and incense each year for the rituals of the royal family.

Instigated by Daoists, Emperor Shizong decided to ban Buddhist temples in the capital. He renovated all Buddhist temples in the court. He is considered to be the last emperor who bore strong animosity against Buddhism.

Wu Cheng'en's Criticisms of Daoists and The Ming Emperors by Innuendoes

As mentioned before, the Ming rulers were paranoid about any criticism. They were responsible for a number of literary inquisitions and false accusations of conspiracy. Under such conditions, scholars found themselves silenced. The reign of terror was effective. It was said that even officials often had hard times. They would bid farewell to their wives and family members in the morning before going to the court. When they returned home from the court, they would congratulate their safe return by saying, "I have survived one more day."¹²

Having gained an understanding of such a historical background, we may understand why the author would deliberately use historical events to allude to the present dynasty. Thus the author was processing legendary stories and creating his own work by putting his views quietly into the plots of the novel.

Chapter 10 is devoted to Emperor Tang Taizong (r. 627 – 649) in the court. When Wei Zheng (魏徵 580-643), his trusted subject, was in asleep, he executed the Dragon King in his dream. The emperor promised to pardon Dragon King's disobeying the decree of Heaven by refusing to rain on time. The emperor realized that he failed to keep his words. That night, Taizong returned to his palace in deep depression. He kept remembering the dragon in the dream crying and begging for his life.He was sleeping fitfully when he saw our Dragon King of the Jing River holding his head dripping with blood in his hand and crying in a loud voice: "Tang Taizong! Give me back my life! Give me back my life! Last night you were full of promises to save me. Why did you order a human judge in the daytime to have me executed? Come out, come out! I am going to argue this case with you before the King of the Underworld." He seized Taizong and would neither let go nor desist from his protestation. Taizong could not say a word; he could only struggle until perspiration covered his entire body.¹³

Taizong began to have nightmares from then on. In his dream, as he and the judge "walked along, they saw at the side of the street the emperor's predecessor Li Yuan (李淵 618 – 626), his elder brother Jiancheng (李建成), and his deceased brother Yuanji (李元吉), who came toward them, shouting, "Here comes Shi-min! Here comes Shi-min!" The brothers clutched at Taizong and began beating him and threatening vengeance."¹⁴

Li Shimin (later became Emperor Tang Taizong) planned and carried out the assassination of his brothers Li Jiancheng and Li Yuanji in the famous incident of the Xuanwu Gate. Then he became briefly crown prince and shortly thereafter forced his father to abdicate.¹⁵ Chinese history books record how Li Shimin ascended the throne by killing his brothers, although they tend to convince readers that Li Jiancheng and Li Yuanji plotted conspiracies before the event.

Emperor Taizong has been considered the best ruler in Chinese history. He was courageous to take responsibilities, astute and capable, and full of bold wisdom and strategy. In his campaigns to conquer his opponents, he killed many people. As a person who believed in the concept of cause and effect, Taizong naturally had a sense of worry and fear. In an edict issued in the eleventh month in the third year of Zhenguan (629), he said:

At the end of the Sui dynasty, I rose for justice. I was determined to save the weak. We started expeditions in the north and east. Now the country is in peace. However, we do not know how many were wounded and killed with these weapons. I have a heavy heart recalling these people with sadness. Quiet, I felt deep regret and could not sleep.¹⁶

Taizong was sympathetic towards those who died in the battlefields. He felt that those who died in the battlefields seemed to be buried there as life imprisonment. On the one hand, he felt the need to use war to fight wars and on the other hand, he regretted that he had accumulated many karmas of killing. Such sad feeling of regret made him fearful, worried and sleepless. Under such pressure, he built more temples and offered more ceremonies to relieve his troubled heart.

Politically, Emperor Taizong made use of three schools of thoughts: Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. Confucianism dealt with essential problems. However, Taizong probably had a strong memory of the one thousand people he killed. The Buddhist doctrines of no-killing, and causality added to his fear and anxiety. Thus, he made efforts to provide free meals to monks for the purpose of eliminating grievances. His killing of his own brothers in a bloody coup d'état at the Xuanwu Gate must have left a sad memory in his heart.¹⁷

This reminds us of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*:

I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more;
Macbeth does murder sleep' – the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast. Act II, Scene II.

Here we can find the same mental fear and anxiety in *Macbeth*. The difference between them lies in the fact that Emperor Tang Taizong has been regarded as the paragon of Chinese rulers.

Emperor Taizong's fear of karma demonstrated his sense of sins. When he became old and weak, such a feeling would frequently occur. In his last three years of

life, the emperor often summoned Master Xuan Zang to keep him company at his summer retreats in Yuhua Palace and Cuiwei Palace. The master was kept in the palace until the emperor's death. Such close ties between Xuan Zang and Emperor Tang Taizong illustrated the religious needs of the latter.¹⁸ As Arthur Wright analyzes, the last years of Taizong was full of personal sorrow, illness and perhaps premature aging, 645 – 649. This explains why the emperor took actions relating to Buddhism.¹⁹

Ming Chengzu (明成祖朱棣 1403 – 1424), the third emperor of the Ming dynasty, came to the throne by bloodshed. He was the fourth son of the First Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang.²⁰ Before Zhu Yuanzhang's death, he chose his grandson Zhu Yunwen (朱允炆 1399 – 1402) as his successor. Emperor Huidi (惠帝朱允炆 Zhu Yunwen, who reigned in the Jianwen period 建文 1399 – 1402) wanted to reduce the princes' power. These princes were his uncles. This angered Zhu Di, Prince Yan. He launched military offensives against Emperor Huidi in the pretext of chastising treacherous court officials. This marked the beginning of a bloody, three-year military struggle between the court and the prince. When Zhudi overthrew his nephew and declared himself the emperor, he cruelly executed many officials under Emperor Huidi as he labeled them as wicked ministers who misguided the emperor. It was a bloody effort to intimidate China's independently-minded intellectuals. In due course, tens of thousands of innocent people related to these former imperial officials were either executed, incarcerated, or banished; the violence of these bloody purges was equaled in its ferocity only by those carried out by the dynastic founder.²¹

These historical facts may throw light into the story of *Xiyouji* (Journey to the West) by Wu Cheng'en. It was not allowed to criticize the emperors of the present dynasty. However, Wu skillfully reminded readers of the fratricide that Emperor Tang Taizong committed eight hundred years ago. Careful readers with knowledge of the Ming dynasty may also recall how Emperor Chengzu overthrew his nephew's throne and carried out the massacre against those who followed the previous emperor.

The author showed his aversion to Daoists in many places. In Chapter 19, the Monkey, the key character in the novel, told Pigsy, "It's old Monkey who turned from wrong to right, who left the Taoist to follow the Buddhist. I am now accompanying the royal brother of the Great Tang Emperor in the Land of the East."²²

Most of the demons, monsters, and devils in the novel are Daoist monsters. Chapter 25 was entitled "The Chen-yuan Immortal gives chase to catch the scripture monk; Pilgrim Sun causes great disturbance at the Temple of Five Villages." When the pilgrims arrived at a Daoist temple, they saw a huge stone tablet, on which the following inscription was written in large letters:

The Blessed Land of the Mountain of Longevity.
The Cave Heave of the Temple of Five Villages

..... On both sides of the second gate they saw this New Year couplet"

Long-living and ever young, this immortal house.
Of the same age as heaven, this Daoist home.

The Monkey said with a laugh, “This Daoist is mouthing big words just to intimidate people!”²³

When the two disciples of the Daoist master found that two ginseng fruits in the orchard were lost, “they came directly back to the main hall. Pointing their fingers at the Tang monk, they berated him with all kinds of foul and abusive language, accusing him of being a larcenous bald-head and a thievish rat.” They even would not stop swearing at the Tang monk when he said, “If they can’t buy them with money, they can at least offer you an apology, for as the proverb says, ‘Righteousness is worth a thousand piece of gold.’ When the immortal lads found the truth, they became even more abusive in their language.”²⁴

Thus, the two Daoist disciples, narrow-minded, showed their rudeness in using all the foul words. In order to get revenge, the Great Immortal decided to fill the pan with clear oil and boil it. Then he ordered twenty disciples to dump the Monkey into the pan and fry him. He deemed that to be the payment for his missing ginseng tree.²⁵

Another demon disguised himself as an aged Daoist. The novel describes his image:

A shining star-patterned cap,
And tousled whitish hair;
A bird-feathered gown wrapped by sash of silk,
And Taoist shoes woven from yellow coir;
Refined features and bright eyes like a man divine;
A light, healthy frame as the Age Star’s
Why speak of the Taoist of the green buffalo?
He’s as strong as the master of the white tablet –
A specious form disguised as the true form,
Falsehood feigning to be the honest truth!²⁶

According to the local spirit, the demons loved the firing of elixir and the refinements of herbs and were delighted with the Daoists of the Complete Truth Sect.²⁷

Chapter 73 tells the story of how a Daoist and female fiends plotted to poison the Tang Monk, the Monkey Pilgrim, Pigsy and Sha Monk.²⁸

Chapter 37 describes how the ghost king visited the Tang Monk at night and told him how he invited a Daoist monk who was capable of making rain when the country needed. The Daoist monk, moved to treachery all at once, pushed the king into the well which he then covered with a slab of stone. He sealed off the entire well with mud and dirt. After killing the king, the demon with his mastery of the Daoist abilities shook his body once in the garden and transformed himself into an exact image of the king. He took over the empire and usurped the kingdom.²⁹

Another paragraph in Chapter 44 tells us the following story about Daoists and the king in the Cart Slow Kingdom:

The monks told the Monkey Pilgrim that the ruler of the country was wicked and partial. He hated Buddhists. He wanted to create wind and rain. Three immortal elders came and deceived him. They persuaded the king to tear down the Buddhist monasteries and force Buddhist monks to be slaves in the household of those immortal elders.The monks went on, the Daoists “know how to manipulate cinnabar and refine lead, to sit in meditation in order to nourish their spirits. They point to water and it changes into oil; they touch stones and transform them into pieces of gold. Now they are in the process of building a huge temple for the Three Pure Ones, in which they can perform rites to Heaven and Earth and read scriptures night and day, to the end that the king will remain youthful for ten thousand years. Such enterprise undoubtedly pleases the king.”³⁰

In the end of chapter 46, we find the following words uttered by the giddy king.

The king clutched at the imperial table before him and sobbed uncontrollably, crying:

The human form is hard, hard indeed, to get!
Make no elixir when there's no true guide.
You have the charms and water to send for gods,
But not the pill to lengthen, protect your life.
If perfection's undone,
Could Nirvana be won?
If you knew before such hardships you'd meet,
Why not abstain, stay safely in the mount?
Truly
To touch gold, to refine lead – of what use are they?
To summon wind, to call for rain – still all is vain!

Then Chapter 47 continues:

The Pilgrim went to him and shouted:” How could you be so dim-witted? Look at the corpses of those Taoists: one happens to be that of a tiger and the other, a deer. Goat-Strength was, in fact, an antelope. If you don't believe me, ask them to fish out his bones for you to see. How could humans have skeletons like that? They were all mountain beasts which had become spirits, united in their efforts to come here and plot against you. When they saw that your ascendancy was still strong, they dared not harm you as yet; but after two or more years when your ascendancy would be in decline, they would have taken your life and your entire kingdom would have been theirs. It was fortunate that we came in time to exterminate these deviates and save your life. And you are still weeping? What for? Bring us our rescript at once and send us on our way.”³¹

When the Monkey Pilgrim fought the demon, he found that the demon was released due to the “negligence” of Lao Zi, sometimes. In Chapter 52, the Monkey was pursuing the demon king. He finally realized that the demon was a green buffalo. The buffalo escaped because the boy, who was assigned to take care of it by Lao Zi, fell asleep. The boy admitted that he ate one pellet of elixir of Seven Returns to the Fire. Thus, he fell in sound sleep for seven days. The buffalo transformed itself into a demon and went to the Region Below to make enormous troubles. The Monkey scolded Lao Zi for his negligence by saying:

When someone like you, Venerable Sir, lets loose a fiendish creature to rob and harm people, with what kind of crime should we charge him?"³²

Finally, Lao Zi subdued the demon who had to change back into his original form, which was that of a green buffalo. Lao Zi climbed onto the back of the green buffalo.

Having mounted colored clouds,
He went back to Tushita Palace;
Having bound the fiend,
He ascended to the Griefless Heaven.³³

Here the author implies that Lao Zi was guilty of his inappropriate making of the elixirs which caused troubles. Finally, Lao Zi was converted to Buddhism as he went back to the Tushita Palace. We can easily see the author's preference to Buddhism when he wrote this poem describing the conversion of Lao Zi to Buddhism.

Let us read the following poem in Chapter 53:

The poem says:
For smelting true lead you need water true;
True water mixes well with mercury dried.
True mercury and lead have no maternal breath;
Divine drugs and cinnabar are elixir.
In vain there is the form of child conceived;
Earth Mother with ease has merit achieved.
Heresy pushed down, right faith held up,
The lord of the mind, all smiles now returns.³⁴

The Daoist practice of making elixirs was considered heresy and should be repressed, as implied by the poet. The author certainly knew that the contemporary emperor was intoxicated in Daoist practices of making elixir at the court. He was using the innuendo to criticize the contemporary emperor for his perverse behavior and practices.

Chapter 78 tells a story about what happened when Master Tripitaka and his disciples arrived in a country where they heard a story. Three year ago, an old man disguised as a Taoist arrived with a young girl, barely sixteen..... He presented her as a tribute to the King, who became so infatuated with her that he gave her the title of Queen Beauty. The king would not even look at any of the royal consorts dwelling in the six chambers and three palaces. Night and day the King cared only to indulge in amorous dalliance with this one girl until he is reduced to a physical wreck. Constantly fatigued, emaciated, and unable to eat or drink, he had not long to live. The royal hospital tried all its prescriptions, but no cure was found. However, that Daoist, who was appointed the royal father-in-law, claimed to possess a secret formula from beyond the ocean which can lengthen the king's life. He went to the Ten Islets and the Three Isles to gather herbs. After his return and the preparation of all the medications, he still required that the terrible medical supplement of one thousand one hundred and eleven hearts of young boys. When the medicine was taken with soup made from boiling these boys' hearts, the king, soothe Daoist claimed, would live to a thousand years without aging. Those little boys whom the Tripitaka Master and his

followers saw in the geese coops were the selected ones, who were being fed and nurtured before they were slaughtered. Hearing the law of the king the parents dared not even weep.

When Master Tripitaka heard this, he was scared, tears rolling down his cheeks, he blurted out: "Ah, befuddled king! So you grew ill on account of your incontinence and debauchery. But how could you take the lives of so many innocent boys? O misery! O misery! This pain kills me!"³⁵

When Master Tripitaka handed his letter to the king, he noticed that the king followed what his father-in-law said. His father-in-law, who was a demon in Daoist disguise, bore grudges against Buddhism and even told the king to eat Master Tripitaka. Believing such a perverse suggestion, the befuddled ruler called up his Embroidered uniform Guards (錦衣官 similar word to refer to the secret imperial police -- Imperial Guards in the Ming Court) to arrest the Master. The Monkey Pilgrim, capable to realize the tricks of the Daoist demon, fought with the Daoist with his rod. They fought a marvelous battle in midair. Finally, the Monkey Pilgrim overwhelmed the demon in Chapter 79.³⁶

In Chapter 62, the Tang Monk and his entourage came to a Sacrifice Kingdom. Monks told the Tang Monk, "Neither our civil officers are worthy, nor our military officers noble. And the king is not upright either." "The dim-witted ruler never gave the matter another thought, at once those venal officials had us monks arrested and inflicted on us endless tortures and interrogations."

When the Tang Monk heard this, he nodded his head and sighed, saying, "There are certainly hidden aspects to this matter that have not yet come to light. For one thing, the Court has been remiss in its rule, and for another, all of you may be faced with a fated calamity....."³⁷

The author reveals his criticism of Emperor Ming Shizong in Chapter 62. When the Tang Monk asked if the king of the Scarlet Purple State was still in the main hall, the steward replied, "His Majesty has not held court for a long time."³⁸ Checking the history of the Ming Dynasty, we found that Emperor Ming Shizong (r. 1522 – 1566) in his forty years rule went to court only four times to meet his ministers to discuss the state affairs. Also the state name "Scarlet" is the surname of the Emperor Zhu. Then the author made efforts to smooth things over by quoting the words of the King, "We have been ill for a long time and we have not ascended our throne. What a happy coincidence this is that the moment we appear in the main hall with the intent to find a good physician through the promulgation of a special proclamation, a noble priest immediately appears."³⁹ On hearing what happened in the court of Emperor Tang Taizong, the king sighed, "Truly yours is a nation and a Heavenly Court! We have been ill for a long time, but not one minister is able to assist us."⁴⁰

Wu Cheng'en further criticized the emperor by Monkey's words:

"That man at the moment is a sick ruler. After he dies, he'll be a sick ghost. Even in the next incarnation, he will still be a sick man."⁴¹

Taking the contemporary events into consideration, the reader can reach a conclusion that the description of the king in this Scarlet Purple State is not a coincidence at all. Wu Cheng'en was referring to the Ming dynasty.

Wu offered a medicine for the emperor:

To secure a state one must first cure the king's disease;
To safeguard the Way one must purge the evil-loving heart.⁴²

These words remind us of teachings of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. *The Great Learning* (《大學》) says,

The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the empire, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons, wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts.

Thus, we understand that Wu was a Confucian scholar first. He did not object to Daoism, but disliked the ways that Emperor Shizong ruled. In Chapter 47, after eliminating two perverse Daoists who made disasters in the Cart Slow Kingdom, the Monkey advised the King:

You should realize that the true way is the gate of Zen. Hereafter you should never believe in false doctrines. I hope that you will honor the unity of the Three Religions: revere the monks, revere also the Daoists, and take care to nurture the talented. Your kingdom, I assure you, will be secure forever.⁴³

In chapters 78 and 79, *Jin Yi Guan* (錦衣官 Imperial Bodyguard) appeared in the scene. In the Ming Dynasty, imperial bodyguards were notorious for their extraordinary power, brutal interrogations of political prisoners, terror and surveillance. The secret police department imposed terror on the land. The novel describes how an imperial bodyguard officer pulled Wukong by the sleeve to the court to meet the King.

The images of both Buddhism and Daoism are characterized with human nature. The Jade Emperor shows indecisiveness in Chapter 7. He looked decrepit and muddleheaded. He is incapable of issuing decrees unless someone gives him advice. We see the image of Emperor Shizong in him. The Gold Star of Venus, with his profound knowledge of statecraft, is good with words. He often appears to be a Goody-goody. His image reminds us of the treacherous ministers of the Ming, especially the Senior Grand Secretary Yan Song (嚴嵩 1480 – 1569) in the court.

Conclusion

The novel *Xi You Ji* (Journey to the West) is not simply a novel of mythology. Wu Cheng'en followed the Chinese intellectual tradition – to take social responsibility as one's own. He gave full expression of his criticism of the Ming emperor Shizong who was bewitched by the Daoist ideas of immortality. Obviously, Wu was

disappointed with the irresponsibility of the Emperor, his selfishness, his perverse behavior and the degeneration he brought to the nation.

Unlike the Western tradition, Chinese intellectuals were not able to enjoy the freedom of speech since the unification of China by Emperor Qin Shi Huang (221 – 210 BCE). Even in the Tang dynasty (618 – 907) where literati enjoyed a much freer atmosphere of creative work, poets could criticize the emperors with the allusive or indirect way. Bai Juyi's long poem "The Everlasting Regret" (長恨歌) recorded the tragic love between Emperor Tang Xuanzong (唐玄宗 r. 725 – 768 CE) and his concubine Yang Guifei (楊貴妃 719 – 756 CE). He began the poem by referring to Emperor Han instead of mentioning directly the name of Emperor Xuanzong in the Tang Dynasty.

The First Emperor of the Ming further silenced Chinese literati by an approach called "literary inquisition 文字獄." The emperor, feeling humble for his low family background, was suspicious of certain words which might imply his past history as a beggar, monk and rebel. Being a southerner, he would behead officials whose memorials contained taboo words such as "seng" (僧 monk) "fa (髮 hair)," and so forth. The officials of Rite Department were scared and begged the emperor for a format without his tabooed vocabulary. Thus, the emperors even monopolized the Chinese language and silenced both officials and intellectuals alike with terror. With such knowledge of the Ming dynasty, we may comprehend why the author of *Xi You Ji* (Journey to the West) used many innuendoes and satire to criticize the emperor indirectly.

Daoism has been the indigenous Chinese religion. Different from Daoist philosophy which is supposed to be the words of Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, Chinese Daoists followed the ancient ways by *Fangshi* (方士 magicians) who claimed that they were able to produce elixirs for immortality. Daoists were known as alchemists in the history of Chinese science. They searched for an elixir that might permit physical longevity or even immortality. They also developed ways for cultivation, techniques for healing, breath circulation, meditative exercises and sexual hygiene.

Elixir mixtures frequently contained dangerous compounds derived from mercury, lead, sulphur and the like. Many Chinese emperors, from the First Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi (r. 221 – 210 BCE) to Emperor Ming Shizong (1522 – 1566), were interested in obtaining such a medicine for immortality. At least five emperors in the Tang dynasty died of poisonous medicine. The emperors, who led a debauchery life with too many women, believed that these elixirs could help to strengthen themselves and keep immortality. In spite of the advice of honest ministers, the emperors seldom changed their minds.

Under such conditions, the court became a heart of darkness. The emperors put their trusted sycophants and eunuchs in charge of daily state affairs. Honest ministers were either dismissed, exiled or executed for their honest advice and criticisms. The emperors were flattered as being a sacred ruler, the most intelligent son of Heaven, the superhuman being in the world. They had nothing to worry about what they were doing, taking no consideration of their actions at all. What they had in

mind was their own pleasure. For instance, Wei Zhongxian (魏忠賢 1568 - 1627), one of the evil eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty, used to report state affairs to the emperor when the latter was enjoying himself. The emperor would agree to every suggestion the eunuch made. As a result, the country was declining and going from bad to worse.

It was under such evil environment that Wu Cheng'en wrote this novel. He threw all his energy into the creation of this unprecedented novel. He articulated his message in a way which is beyond ordinary readers who had little knowledge of Daoism and Buddhism. It is by possessing certain knowledge and terms of Daoism and Buddhism that one may comprehend the message that Wu Cheng'en was sending. Then the discourse is clear: the emperor was doing something harmful to the nation. It is necessary to make the correct doctrines known to all so that the evil and harmful trend may be stopped.

By reading between the lines, we can see that the author, on the whole, was a Confucian scholar with a profound knowledge of Daoism and Buddhism. This is not strange because Chinese literati tended to be Confucians when they were young. This was the period when they made endeavors to become successful candidates in the Imperial Examination which was held once in three years. They would spend their lifetime preparing and sitting for the civil examinations. Once they obtained what they had worked for, they could be appointed as officials. Thus they might bring honor to their families. This was considered "filial piety." The officers appointed to their posts after the imperial examination would encounter setbacks in office because the reality was far distant from their ideals. Then they might embrace Daoism in middle age or old age, when they felt frustrated at their failures. They might first accept Daoist philosophy to escape from society. Then they might learn how to prolong their life by picking up the Daoist practice in producing elixirs and other exercises. They might convert to Buddhism, too, depending on their individual factors. Wu Cheng'en's life showed his dedication to Confucian studies at an early age. It is through a thorough understanding of the history of the Ming and the doctrines and practices of Buddhism and Daoism that we reach a better understanding of this monumental novel.

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Endnotes

¹ Regarding the lifespan of Xuan Zang, there are more than three to four records. These records say that Xuan Zang was 61, 65, or 69 years old when he passed away. Professor Yang Tingfu summarized the records of various sources and suggested that Xuan Zang's lifespan was 65 years. See Yang Tingfu 楊廷福. *Xuan Zang Nianpu* 《玄奘年譜》 (The Chronological Life of Xuan Zang). Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1988, pp. 1 – 15.

² Fairbank, John. *China: A New History*. Cambridge :Harvard University Press, 2001, pp. 128 – 129.

³ Bai Yang. *Zhongguoren Shigang* (《中國人史綱》 Outline for Chinese History), Hong Kong: Tiandi Tushu Youxian Gongsi, 1990, part II, p.758.

⁴ The full name of this book is *Changchun Zhenren Xiyouji* (《長春真人西遊記》 Journey to the West by Qiu Changchun, the Perfect Man). It records what happened to Qiu Changchun

and his disciples on their long journey to Samarkand. The book was written by Li Zhichang 李志常 who was a close follower of Qiu. This book is of high value of geography of Central Asia.

⁵ See Hu Shi. 胡適. *Xiyouji Kaozheng* 《西遊記考證》 (Textual Research *The Journey to the West*), (Taipei: Yuanliu Chuban Gongsi, 1994, pp.39 – 75. For more researches into this novel, see Liu Yinbai 劉蔭柏. *Xiyouji Yanjiu Ziliao* 《西遊記研究資料》 (Research Sources of Journey to the West). Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1990, pp.692 – 785.

⁶ *Xiucai* 秀才 refers to one who passed the imperial examinations at the county level.

⁷ *Suigongsheng* 歲貢生 refers to a regulation practiced in both the Ming and Qing dynasties for selection of *Xiucai* who lived on a government stipend. The selected *xiucai* would further study at the National Academy step by step. When they finish, they could be promoted as minor officials.

⁸ Li Guorong 李國榮. *Foguang Xia De Diwang: Zhongguo Gudai Diwang Foshi Huodong Miwen* (《佛光下的帝王：中國古代帝王佛事活動秘聞》) Beijing: Tuanjie Chubanshe, 1995, p.323.

⁹ Mote, Frederick and Twitchett, Denis. *The Cambridge History of China: The Ming Dynasty, 1368 – 1644*, Part I, Volume 7, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp.479 – 480.

¹⁰ Bai Yang. *Zhongguoren Shigang* (《中國人史綱》 Outline for Chinese History), Hong Kong: Tiandi Tushu Youxian Gongsi, 1990, part II, p.776.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, part II, p. 776.

¹² Chen Jiarong 陳佳榮. *Zhongguo lidai zhi Xingzhi Shengshuai Luanwang* (《中國歷代之興治盛衰亂亡》). Hong Kong: Xuejin Chubanshe, 1989, p.419.

¹³ See Anthony Yu's translation. Volume 1, p.232. In fact, Emperor Tang Taizong killed his two brothers, crown prince Li Jiancheng and younger brother Li Yuanji. Then he forced his father to abdicate the throne for him in 626 CE.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: p.239.

¹⁵ See Wright, Arthur and Twitchett, Denis. *Perspectives on the T'ang*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973, p.244.

¹⁶ *Guanghongming Ji*, 《廣弘明集》 in *Taisho*, 52:329a.

¹⁷ Yunhua Jan 冉雲華. *Zhongguo Fojiao Wenhua Yanjiu Lunji* (《中國佛教文化研究論集》) Taipei: Dongchu Chubanshe, 1990, pp.19 -20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.34.

¹⁹ Wright, Arthur F. and Twitchett, Denis. *Perspectives on the T'ang*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973, p.256.

²⁰ Regarding the mother of Emperor Chengzu (明成祖), scholars suspect that his mother was not Zhu Yuanzhang's first wife Ma but a concubine named Gong, of Mongolian or a Korean nationality. They even suspect he was not related to Zhu Yuanzhang. Tall, Emperor Chengzu looked handsome with moustache while Zhu Yuanzhang, his father, looked ugly. It was said that Emperor Chengzu's mother was a concubine of Emperor Shundi, the last emperor of the Mongol Yuan dynasty. He showed a special atrocity to the followers of his predecessor Emperor Huidi. The dynastic history books usually avoid mentioning his cruelty and violent character. Both Emperor Taizu and Emperor Chengzu used terror to put China in peace.

²¹ Mote, Frederick and Twitchett, Denis. *The Cambridge History of China: The Ming Dynasty, 1368 – 1644*, Part I, Volume 7, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.202.

²² *Journey to the West*, translated by Anthony Yu. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977, volume 1, p.387.

²³ *Ibid.*, Volume 1, p.467.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Volume 1, p.476, p.478.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Volume 1, p.492.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Volume 2, pp. 117 – 118.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Volume 2, p.125.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Volume 3, pp.380 – 393.

- ²⁹ Ibid., Volume 2, p.182.
³⁰ Ibid., Volume 2, p.306.
³¹ Ibid., Volume 2, pp. 352 - 353
³² Ibid., Volume 3, p.33.
³³ Ibid., Volume 3, p. 34.
³⁴ Ibid., Volume 3, p.49 – 50.
³⁵ Ibid., Volume 4, pp. 42 - 43.
³⁶ Ibid., Volume 4, pp. 47 – 63.
³⁷ Ibid., Volume 3, pp. 190 – 191.
³⁸ Ibid., Volume 3, pp. 291.
³⁹ Ibid., Volume 3, p.292.
⁴⁰ Ibid., Volume 3, p.294.
⁴¹ Ibid., Volume 3, p.302.
⁴² Ibid., Volume 3, p.321.
⁴³ Ibid., Volume 2, p.354.

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