

## A Successful Transformation—Reinvestigation of the Theme of Pilgrimage to the West

Jing Qin

Ba Culture Institute, Sichuan University of Arts and Science, Dazhou 635000, China

Qinjing66@sina.com

### Abstract

There are many studies on the theme of Pilgrimage to the West from different perspectives, among them there is religious theory, political theory, philosophical theory, game theory and multiple-themed theory. However, there is still no final conclusion. This paper is, by investigating the content and structure, the author's life and the characteristics of his times, to indicate that the theme of the book is to transform Monkey King from a liberal and individualistic character into a social person who stresses rules, emphasizes organization and respects authority, so as to make his values consistent with the will of the rulers and the mainstream of the society. The purpose of the book is to contribute to "public security policy" to the stabilization of the feudal ruling order.

### Keywords

Pilgrimage to the West, theme, transformation.

### 1. Introduction

*Pilgrimage to the West* is one of the four famous works in China. Over the past 400 years after its publication, readers and researchers have never stopped their research on its theme. So far, no conclusion has been reached. Generally speaking, there are mainly religious theory, political theory, philosophical theory, game theory and multi-themed theory<sup>①</sup>. The discussion of the theme was especially flourishing in Ming and Qing Dynasties, mainly from the philosophical and religious perspective, including the viewpoints of Buddhism, Confucianism, Zen and Taoism<sup>②</sup>. Since the May 4th Movement, the masters of new literature have introduced western theories and standards to explain the theme, and among them Hu Shi and Lu Xun's "game theory" is the representative. Hu Shi said in *Textual Research on Chinese Chapter Fictions and Pilgrimage to the West* that the novel "is at most a funny novel, a myth novel; it has no subtle meaning, and at most it has only a little cynicism. The cynicism is also very clear, which is not implied, so we do not need to go into it too seriously."<sup>③</sup> Lu Xun also said, "This book is really a game."<sup>④</sup> Since the 1980s, the freedom of thought and academia has brought about the flourishing of literary and artistic research. Researchers have borrowed new theories to put forward different viewpoints, such as the theories of exposing the ugliness of social reality, punishing the evil and promoting the good, resisting autocratic oppression, advocating human nature, advocating Buddhism and restraining Taoism, contending rationality, making merits and redemptions, combining three religions and preaching Buddhism and Confucianism.<sup>⑤</sup> Academic circles have made great achievements in the study of *Pilgrimage to the West*.

For many years, I have been reading *Pilgrimage to the West*, entangled in its theme and purpose. I am always trying to interpret what the author wants to express. Especially some of the plots are puzzling and unreasonable, and I do not understand why the author should arrange them like that. Recently, I have read some articles about the interpretation of the book, which have inspired me a lot. I would like to share and discuss my new understanding of the theme with all the researchers, which might help to explain the mysteries that have not been solved before.

## 2. Organization of the Text

Reading through the whole book, you can find that there are totally 100 chapters, among which seven chapters are devoted to tell Monkey King's life and the havoc of the heavenly palace caused by him, five chapters are used to introduced T ripitaker, two chapters for Pigsy, one for Sandy and White Horse respectively, and one for the success of getting Buddhist scriptures. The other 83 chapters are concentrated to tell about the process of traveling to the west (In fact, the chapters about apprenticing Pigsy, Sandy and White Horse should be included in the process). As far as the content is concerned, it can be roughly divided into two parts: one is the introduction of Monkey King's life and the havoc of the Heavenly Palace; the other is the introduction of T ripitaker's life and the acquisition of the Buddhist classics from Western Heaven. The first part can be summarized as "apprenticing Monkey King", and the second part as "transforming Monkey King". Therefore, the author believes that the theme of *Pilgrimage to the West* is to transform Monkey King, and the theme can be summarized as "theory of transformation".

The answer to this question can also be found in Wu Chengen's life and the characteristics of his times. Wu Chengen lived mainly in the Jiajing period in the middle and late Ming Dynasty. During this period, great changes were taking place both in the ideological and economic fields. With the rise of the capitalist economics, western individualism and liberalism had a strong impact on traditional Chinese ideas. The Song and Ming "Neo-Confucianism" centered on the realization of personal values became rejuvenating through the further interpretation by Wang Yangming. The struggle between the old and the new ideologies must be reflected in the political and social fields. The conflict between tradition and anti-tradition constituted the main theme of social contradictions in the Ming Dynasty. It is easy to see that the two features of Monkey King's personality, individualism and liberalism, which were the most prominent and common features in the economic and ideological fields at that time and which were incompatible with the dominant Confucianism at that time. Therefore, the transformation of his personality is not only the transformation of a person, but also the transformation of a social group, a social trend of thought and a social temperament. Its success or failure was significantly related to the safety and continuity of the ruling class.

Wu Chengen was a feudal scholar deeply influenced by Confucianism. Although he was unlucky, frustrated and cynical, he had the basic responsibility of a feudal scholar. He had the arrogance of "refusing to be pitied for half his life, laughing and playing with a proud sadness and happiness".<sup>⑥</sup> He wanted to transform the world, but he was powerless, which leads to his lamenting "his inability to inhibit all the evil in the world".<sup>⑦</sup> What he could do was to take the pen in his hand and use it as a knife to provide a "governing policy" for the rulers. If we read *Pilgrimage to the West* from this point of view, those puzzling and unreasonable plots can be reasonably explained. For example, in the book, many monsters wanted to eat T ripitaker's meat at the risk of being eliminated, but after catching him, they all just locked him up for the rescue without exception. Another example is that five hundred years ago, Monkey King could turn the heavens and the earth upside down. Five hundred years later, he could hardly fight even with spiders and mice. Now it can be inferred that all the difficulties in eighty-one adversities were deliberately designed to transform Monkey King.

## 3. Literature References

This transformation movement was jointly initiated by Buddhist circles headed by Tathagata and Taoist circles headed by Jade Emperor. The transformation is mainly focused on two aspects: one is to make Monkey King frustrated in fighting against demons, by creating troubles for him, setting obstacles, and letting T ripitaker recite the curse of tightening the hoop from time to time. The purpose is to make Monkey King respect authority, obey leadership, and to eliminate the defects of liberalism; the other is to make him not win over demons, so that his abilities can be outshined in front of demons and must be aided by others. Only with help can he win, in order to make him understand the importance of human relations and organizational relations, and to overcome the shortcomings of individualism. For the first purpose, the reformers arranged monsters with no background and weak

abilities, such as Black Wind Monster, White Bone Demon, Tiger Demon, Deer Demon, Sheep Demon, Spider Demon, Scorpion Demon, Nine-headed Monster, etc. These monsters were made of animals and belonged to local forces. The reformers had also carefully considered bringing these monsters into the reform team: If Monkey King lost, the goal of transformation would be naturally achieved; if the monsters lost, the local forces would be just swept away, which is to kill two birds with one stone. Of course, given Monkey King's name of "Great Sage Equaling Heaven" and the lack of generous returns, these monsters would not risk their lives to participate in the transformation action. The reward was T ripitaker's meat and an immortal life, which was tempting. However, what is special about T ripitaker's meat? Why can one live forever after eating it? There is no explanation in *Pilgrimage to the West*. And it is doubtful how the monsters knew this. With the main idea of the book, I think the information is intentionally disseminated by the reformers, in order to lure the monsters to participate in the transformation movement. It is said that the life span of the demon is only 500 years. If one could eat T ripitaker's meat, there would be no problem of just a immortal life. It was too valuable. For this kind of monsters, Monkey King was able enough to deal with them. But according to the reform plan, this kind of monsters could not be easily defeated by Monkey King, otherwise the purpose of transformation would not be achieved. This resistance mainly came from the inside of the delegation formed by T ripitaker and his other apprentices. Why? Let's check the details of these members: T ripitaker, the leader of the delegation, was the reincarnation of the second disciple of Tathagata. When he appeared in the book, he was introduced as the Golden Cicada, and only because he listened to the Buddha's teachings carelessly, he was turned to the suffering of the world. He was punished by the Buddha for his disrespect for the Buddha to reflect in the mortal world. In fact, in terms of the transformation plan, he should also come with special tasks, so his incompetence, folly, stubbornness and inability to discriminate loyalty and treachery are all disguise to cause trouble to Monkey King. Pigsy, Sandy and White Horse originally were the ruling class personnel, and they were all figures with strength. In fact, they took part in the mission group to be undercovers, especially Pigsy. He cheated and gossiped, repeatedly exposing their targets in the rescue process, which wasted Monkey King a lot of energy, and he was typical of a you-can't-do-anything-right person. As for Sandy, he was an honest man on the surface, but in fact he made himself concealed. He did not show all his strength in every struggle and pretended to be incapable. Ordinarily he was quiet, and acted as a peacemaker, but in fact, he was observing and recording the performance of the members of the group, so as to report to his master.

In such a context, it was not easy for Monkey King to defeat monsters. It is not difficult to explain why Monkey King, who made a havoc in the Heavenly Palace, was so different from the one who was on the way to the Confucian classics.

For the second purpose, the reformers arranged another kind of monsters. Such monsters were inextricably linked with various factions of Buddhism and Taoism. They were either followers or child servants, such as Golden Horn King and Silver Horn King of Pingding Mountain, who were the child servants to guard the Golden Furnace and Silver Furnace for Taishang Laojun; Yellow Eyebrow King of Little Leiyin Temple was the yellow-eyebrowed servant of Maitreya, responsible for the bell; the emperor's father-in-law of Biqu was the white deer of the Antarctic Longevity Star; the oldest and the second oldest monsters among the three monsters of Shituo Mountain were respectively Wenshu's green lion and Puxian's white elephant, and the third is the relative of Tathagata Buddha, a gold-winged eagle; Sai Taisui of Kirin Mountain was the Guanyin's lion for riding; the rat spirit trapped in the bottomless cave of Xiankong Mountain was the goddaughter of Heavenly King with a Pagoda in Hand. These monsters were not all meant to eat T ripitaker, but on behalf of their masters, to harass Monkey King. They usually carried their masters' magic weapons and could easily subdue Monkey King. However, in order to ensure the effect of the transformation, it is necessary to let the group win the final victory. From the perspective of the plot arrangement, it could be inferred that these monsters had been given a promise of "zero risk" by the reformers, because whenever the monsters were about to die under the golden hoop of Monkey King, their masters would arrive in time, and with the excuse of "It is difficult for spirits to go down to and survive the mortal world" as

a protective umbrella, they took them away safe and sound. In short, Monkey King had to receive assistance from all sides if he wanted to win. This is what the reformers wanted to achieve: on the one hand, they wanted to make him understand the truth that there were abler people outside the world, and to get rid of his arrogance; on the other hand, they intended to make him aware of the necessity and importance of good relations with all parties.

#### 4. Conclusion

From *Pilgrimage to the West*, the transformation movement was quite successful: through the trials of the eighty-one disasters, Monkey King finally understood the importance of collectivism, organization, authority and relationship. Individualism and liberalism were well reformed, and values were increasingly in line with the mainstream society. Of course, he also received a generous reward. When he returned, Buddha gave him the title of “Warring and Winning Buddha”, a member in the Buddha rank, becoming a member of the ruling class, and enjoying endless glory and wealth.

From then on, the world is peaceful!

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