

An Anatomy of the Political Satire in *Hsi Yu-chi*

Sherman Han

Despite the effort of many Ch'ing scholars to interpret *The Journey to the West* (西遊記) as a text of Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism, several important modern Chinese critics, such as Hu Shih 胡適, Lu Shun 魯迅 and Cheng Chen-to 鄭振鐸, tend to regard it mainly as a comic satire.¹ As Hu explicitly points out in his introduction to Arthur Waley's translation of the novel, "Freed from all kinds of allegorical interpretations by Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucianist commentators, *Monkey* is simply a book of humor, profound non-sense, good-natured satire and delightful entertainment."² While a few modern critics, including C. T. Hsia, Andrew H. Plaks and Anthony C. Yu are still trying to give religious, philosophical or allegorical explications to the novel, Hu's view has been generally accepted by most contemporary readers and scholars of Chinese literature.³

There are basically two main satirical themes in *The Journey to the West*: politics and religion. The former deals with the incapable rulers, bureaucratic government officials, and the ineffective government systems in Chinese history; the latter deals with the hypocritical practices of the three dominant religious and philosophical schools, especially Taoism and Buddhism, in Chinese society. The first theme is mostly expressed in the author's narrations of the imaginary happenings at the heavenly courts as well as at the courts of the various small countries west of China wherein the pilgrims encounter numerous calamities. The second theme is revealed through his widely admired characterization of the three major heroes in the story—Tripitaka (三藏), Monkey (悟空), and Pigsy (八戒)—and also through his humorous descriptions of the Buddhist and Taoist immortals, their divine world and their teachings as understood by the earthly people. The primary concern of this paper, however, is to analyze his satire on politics.

The Chinese people in Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) suffered bitterly from the ruling of the injudicious and irresponsible emperors, the corruptive and incompetent governments, and most of all, the mercilessly power-greedy eunuchs.⁴ Starting with Shih-tsung 世宗 (1521), the reigns of some emperors were close to the degree of absurdity.⁵ As Charles O. Hucker briefly narrates the situation in his *The Ming Dynasty: Its Origin and Evolving Institutions*:

Shih-tsung (1521–1566) supported a retinue of Taoist alchemists in a prolonged search for an elixir of immortality and for twenty years withdrew almost entirely from governmental cares, leaving all decisions to an unpopular grand secretary. Shen-tsung 神宗 (1572–1620) was even more inattentive. . . . For twenty-five years he conducted no general audiences at all, and he once went for ten years without even consulting in person with a grand secretary. One grand secretary, finally meeting the emperor for the first time, became so agitated that he emptied his bladder on the palace floor and fell into a coma that lasted for several days. What was most disruptive of all was that Shen-tsung, petulantly determined not to be harassed by the officialdom, pigeon-holed memorials in the palace and refused to make decisions even on appointments, so that large numbers of offices fell permanently vacant and much governmental business could not be carried on at all.⁶

Since *Journey to the West* was written and published under such politically agitated circumstances, its author certainly would have a strong motive to satirize the malfunctioning Chinese courts.⁷

But the Ming emperors, like some early Ch'ing emperors, were notorious for their persecution of the dissident scholars. Very few people dared to directly criticize the sovereigns in writing. In order to avoid any possible accusation, the author of *Hsi Yu-chi* describes the T'ang 唐 court with particular respect, and has to put the settings of social criticism either at the heavenly courts, at the underworld courts or at the dragon courts. Furthermore, he tactfully makes his political satire so general and obscure that it can be applied to any other courts before Ming. In other words, with few exceptions, the satire on bureaucracy in the novel does not specifically refer to the abhorrent political situations in the Ming Dynasty alone, but to those of all the dynasties in Chinese history.

The impotency of the governments, both central and local, is the first subject that is satirized in *Hsi Yu-chi*. Before Monkey is even known to the

world, he goes to the Water-Crystal Palace (水晶宮) of the Dragon King of the Eastern Ocean (東海龍王), insisting on having an outfit:

"I really don't have one," said the Dragon King, "for if I did, I would have presented it to you." "Is that so?" said Wu-k'ung. "Let me try the iron on you!" "High immortal," the Dragon King said nervously, "don't ever raise your hand! Don't ever raise your hand! Let me see whether my brothers have any and we'll try to give you one."⁸ (I, p. 106)

The Dragon King does not summon his three brothers to defend the honor of the Draon Court with their marine force, he simply succumbs to Monkey's blackmail. A similar cowardice of the Ten Underworld Kings (十代冥王) allows Monkey to be able to easily cross his name off the Book of Births and Deaths (生死簿子) and enjoy eternal life (Chapter 3).

The governmental impotency is even more conspicuous at the heavenly court. Monkey can enter and leave the court without resistance; he orally insults the Jade Emperor (玉帝) and his high deity officials, carelessly quits his appointed positions and asks to be named the Great Sage, Equal to Heaven (齊天大聖), unruly transfixes the immortal maidens of the Lady Queen (王母娘娘), and even steals the immortal peaches (蟠桃) and the longevity elixirs (九轉金丹) (Chapters 4-6). Twice the Jade Emperor accepts the advice of Gold Star of the Venus (太白金星) to appease Monkey, offering him new positions and ranks. The Prince (哪吒太子), four Devarajas (四大天王), numerous divine generals and marshalls, and a hundred thousand divine soldiers are not able to subdue him. The entire heavenly court is not strong enough to deal with a single ruthless rebel.

The situation of the local governments is not any better. The mountain gods (山神), local spirits (土地) and the Guardians of the Five Quarters (五方揭諦) are helplessly subject to threats, ridicules and summoning by Monkey, Pigsy and the demons. They seem to be so impotent and so easily intimidated by the demons that they constantly live in a state of fearfulness. They have to take orders from any supernatural beings who know the spells. Demons such as Gold Horn (金角大王) and Silver Horn (銀角大王) can summon at their will the local gods of Sumeru Mountain (須彌山), O-mei Mountain (峨眉山) and T'ai Mountain (泰山). They even order the mountain gods and local spirits to serve on duty in their dens (Chapter 33). This is such a humiliation to the local

deities that even Monkey, who himself makes fun of them all along, furiously asks Heaven: "How could they [demons] be so arrogant as to make the mountain god and the local spirit their servants, forcing them to take turns to be on duty?" (II, p. 125)

The injustice of law is the second object of the author's satire on bureaucracy in courts. There seems to be double legal standards in their enforcement of law. The penalty varies, not according to the gravity of the crime, but the background and capability of the offender. A slight wrongdoing by someone who does not have an influential supporter may result in an extremely harsh punishment. Thus the old Dragon King of the River of Ching (涇河龍王) is beheaded simply because he postponed the scheduled time to rain by one hour and increased the decreed water amount by three inches and eight drops (Chapter 10). Pigsy, originally a divine marshal, is sentenced to five thousand stripes and banished from the heavenly court on account of his flirting with a goddess while he was drunk. The case of Sandy is even more pathetic. The punishment for his unintentionally breaking a cup in a divine party includes eight hundred strokes, a sword stabbing his chest a hundred times every seven days, and permanent banishment (Chapter 8).

Monkey, on the other hand, has committed various crimes including theft, robbery, blackmail, fraud, dereliction and even treason. But when the heavenly law enforcers find that he is difficult to deal with, they simply make the law more lenient for him. Compared with the condemnation and torture inflicted upon Pigsy and Sandy for their trivial wrongdoings, five hundred years' imprisonment underneath the Five-Phases Mountain for Monkey's crimes is unjustly lenient. The same comment can be made on Wood-Wolf Star (奎木狼). As celestial warrior, he runs away from his post and becomes a cannibal demon on the Casserole Mountain (碗子山) on earth. His behavior at the party in his father-in-law's palace clearly reveals his vicious crime:

Leaping up all of a sudden, he laughed hysterically for a moment and changed back into his original form. He grew violent then and grabbed one of the girls playing the p'i-p'a with that big window-like hand of his. With a crunch, he bit off her head. . . . After draining a glass, he would haul the bloody corpse near him and take a couple of bites. (II, pp. 70-71)

However, he is not physically punished for this evildoing; nor is he expelled

from heaven. The Jade Emperor only "banished him to the Tushita Palace (兜率宮) to be a paid fire-tender for Lao Tzu (太上老君) with the stipulation that he would be restored to his rank if he made merit" (II, p. 95).

Worse still, the demons that are associated with the influential deities could sometimes completely get away from the law. Whatever crimes they perpetrate, these demons are unconditionally pardoned as demanded by their masters. For example, Lao Tzu's bull fights maliciously against Davaraja Li (李天王), Thunder God (雷公), Fire God (火德星君) and many other divine forces; he even uses a steel fillet (金鋼琢) which he stole from his master to suck all their weapons, including the Sovereign Buddha's sand pills. But he is exempted from any penalty when Lao Tzu is informed of his absence and comes to subdue him. Supposedly Lao Tzu's shepherd is responsible for the calamities caused by the bull demon because he falls asleep while watching this bull on the Griefless Heaven (離恨天). But he is not penalized for his negligence either (Chapter 52). One can easily find abundant examples of the similar injustice in the heavenly court.

The third subject of the satire on bureaucracy is something commonly seen in the governments of all countries at all times—corruption. Early in the story when T'ai Tsung 太宗 tours the underworld, he is received by Ts'ui Ch'ieh 崔珏, a former official at his court and now a judge in the Capital of Death (酆都). Ts'ui stealthily revises the record on the Book of Births and Deaths, enabling the T'ang emperor to live for twenty more years (Chapter 11). Ironically, Wei Cheng 魏徵, a T'ang official well known for his righteousness and integrity, is also involved in this event when he contributes a letter urging the judge to do so.

In fact, corruption is so common in the world of *Hsi Yu Chi* that the author does not even bother to give details in most of the cases. He probably thinks that a brief narration suffices to reveal this satire to the audience who are familiar with this kind of society. Thus, when Tripitaka asks the ghost of the king of the Crow-Cock Kingdom (烏雞國) why he has not presented his case to the court of the underworld, the latter answers:

His (Lion Demon's) magic powers are great indeed . . . and he's intimate with most of the divine officials. The city's tutelary guardian drinks with him frequently; the ocean's dragon kings are his relatives; Equal to Heaven of the T'ai Mountain is his dear friend, and the Ten Kings of Hell happen to be his bond-brothers. That's why we have no place to go even to file suit (II, p. 183).

A similar reason bars the true god of the Black River (黑水河) from filing suit in the ocean court against an evil dragon who has usurped his ravine. As he complains to Monkey: "I didn't expect that the Dragon King of the Western Ocean was his maternal uncle, who threw out my complaint and told me instead that I should allow the monster to stay in my home" (II, p. 291).

The satire on the corruption in the heavenly world reaches its climax at the end of the story when Ananda (阿難) and Kasyapa (伽葉), two major disciples of the Sovereign Buddha (如來佛), asks for commission from the pilgrims. Since the demand is refused, they deceitfully give blank scrolls to the pilgrims. Such a trick could have nullified all the hardships and calamities which the pilgrims confront. But the Supreme Buddha seems to regard their behavior as justified. He says:

I quite expect that those two would ask for their commission. As a matter of fact, scriptures ought not to be given on too easy terms or received gratis. On one occasion some of my monks went down the mountain to Sravasti (舍衛國) with some scriptures and let Chao, the Man of Substance, read them out loud. The result was that all the live members of his household were protected from all calamity and the dead were saved from perdition. For this they only charged gold to the weight of three pecks and three pints of rice. I told them they had sold far too cheap.⁹
(Waley, p. 287)

While the speech can be interpreted as the Buddha's humorous preaching, it also clearly illustrates the author's mockery of an extremely corrupt society wherein bribery is required on all occasions.

The ruling class' indulgence in pleasure-seeking and their indifference to the welfare of the earthly people are another subject of the author's satire on the bureaucratic Chinese courts. According to the principal teachings of Buddhism, all the Buddhists should "eliminate pleasure in anything . . . make moderate in desires . . . make easy to be fed . . . and keep from requiring luxuries."¹⁰ But the Buddhist deities themselves and other heavenly officials in *Hsi Yu-chi* certainly do not abide by this teaching. There are numerous extravagantly lavish banquets held at the heavenly court. Take for example the Grand Festival of the Immortal Peaches (蟠桃大會) which is sponsored by the Lady Queen, Mother of the Western Heaven (西天王母娘娘). As a poem describes the daintiness of this banquet:

A jade terrace decked with ornaments,
 A chamber full of the life force,
 Ethereal shapes of the phoenix soaring and the arugus rising,
 And undulant forms of gold blossoms with stems of jade.
 Set upon there were the Screen of Nine Phoenixes in Twilight,
 The Beacon Mound of Eight Treasures and Purple Mist,
 A table inlaid with five-color gold,
 And a green jade pot of a thousand flowers.
 On the tables were dragon livers and phoenix marrow,
 Bear paws and the lips of apes.
 Most tempting was every item of the hundred delicacies,
 And most succulent the color of every kind of fruit and food.
 (I, p. 140)

The guest list of this party consists of most Buddhist deities, including "the Buddha, the Bodhisattvas, the holy monks (聖僧), and the arhats of the Western Heaven (羅漢); Kuan-yin(觀音). . . Holy Emperor of Great Mercy (東方崇恩聖帝) . . . the Star Spirits (五斗星君) . . . gods and devas, both great and small, of every palace and mansion" (I, p. 138). These extremely sumptuous delicacies even make Monkey, who is supposedly one of the least gluttonous characters in the novel, yield to his appetite and consequently cause his decision to revolt against the heavenly court.

In contrast to the deities' great zeal to pleasure is their lack of concern with the lives of their human subjects. The Jade Emperor, especially, shows no feeling toward the people on earth. Once an earl of Feng Hsien Chün (鳳仙郡) accidentally knocks a sacrificial vegetarian dish off the desk when he is having a fight with his wife. The heavenly emperor is immensely irritated by this unpurposed transgression. As a result, he orders that no rain be brought to this place until a rice mountain which is one hundred feet high has been eaten up by a small chicken, a flour mountain which is two hundred feet high has been consumed by a puppy, and a gold lock which is about one foot and three or four inches long has been melted by a candle light (Chapter 87). This drought has continued on for three years till the pilgrims arrive. Its consequence, as indicated by the government bulletin, is pathetic:

One picul of cereal was paid for one hundred ounces of gold,
 One bunch of firewood was sold for five taels of silver;

A ten-year-old girl was to be exchanged for three quarts
of rice,
A five-year-old boy was to be taken away by anyone with food;
In the city where law enforcement was strict, people had to
pawn their properties to keep themselves alive,
In the country where law was lenient, people killed and ate
one another for survival.¹¹

The Jade Emperor, however, pays no attention to this pitiable tragedy. Had not Monkey taken part in this event, the good earl and all his citizens would have been extinct without even knowing the cause of their fatal conviction.

Many other deities share the Jade Emperor's indifferent attitude toward the welfare of the common people. None of them apologize for the catastrophes in the human world which result either from their negligence in keeping their own pets in heaven or from their intention to evaluate the determination of the pilgrims. Bodhisattva Kuan-Yin is a typical example. She asks Lao Tzu to transform two youthful brazier attendants into cannibal demons in order that she can lay a snare to test the will power of the pilgrims. She does this without regard to the thousands of human lives that will be victimized by the trap. Kuan-Yin's own gold carp escapes from the heavenly pond and forces the earthly villagers to sacrifice their boys and girls to him (Chapter 49). Another one of the goddess' pets, Golden-haired Wolf (金毛狻), descends on earth, raping and murdering several palace girls (Chapter 71). Worst of all, the Lion (青獅), Elephant (白象) and Garuda (大鵬) demons from the Buddhist territory ferociously butcher countless human beings. When Monkey enters their cave, he sees:

A mound of skeletons,
A forest of dead bones;
Human hair packed together as blankets,
And human flesh trodden as dirt and dust.
Human tendons knotted on the trees
Were dried, parched, and shiny like silver.
In truth there were mountains of corpses and seas of blood;
Indeed the putrid stench was terrible!
The little fiends on the east
Gouged out flesh from living persons;

The brazen demons on the west
Boiled and cooked fresh human meat.
Only the Handsome Monkey King had such heroic gall;
No other mortal would dare enter this door. (III, p. 411)

But when the Sovereign Buddha eventually shows up to subdue these animal demons, he makes no apology at all about the malignant crimes they have committed on earth. He as well as all the other heavenly deities accepts constant sacrifices and urges intense worship from the earthly people, but when their human subjects are in need of help, they, like the corrupt and irresponsible court officials on earth, would do nothing to improve the welfare of their subjects.

Finally, his satire on politics singles out certain state leaders whose ignorance and incompetence invite the political interventions of and persecutions among the Buddhists and Taoists. Such incidents occurred repetitively in Chinese history. In 446 A.D., a Taoist court official of the Northern Wei Dynasty (北魏) formed a plot against the Buddhists which resulted in the emperor's biased decree ordering that "all the [Buddhist] temples, sutras, and paintings were to be destroyed, and all the monks to be executed."¹² A similar persecution took place in the late T'ang Dynasty. As Professor Kenneth K. S. Chen explains:

Economic considerations against Buddhism were reinforced during the early years of the ninth century by an ideological struggle between the Taoists and Buddhists, and some Taoist priests were urging the emperor to take strong repressive measures against Buddhism. Factional strife within the imperial court also fanned the anti-Buddhist sentiments, with the scholar-bureaucrats allied with the emperor on one side opposed to Buddhism, and the eunuchs on the other favoring it. These considerations finally led to the suppression of 845, undoubtedly the most widespread of its kind in China. According to the imperial edict summing up the effects of the suppression, more than 4,600 monasteries and 40,000 temples and shrines were destroyed, over 260,000 monks and nuns were returned to the laity, all temple lands confiscated, and all images made of gold, silver, jade, and bronze turned over to the government.¹³

The Buddhist persecution in the Chia-Ching 嘉靖 court (1521-1566 A.D.) of the Ming Dynasty was equally astringent; the Taoists allied with the court eunuchs to instigate another large-scale purge of the Buddhists. On the one hand, they confiscated the Buddhists' properties and destroyed

the Buddha images and temples in the palace; on the other hand, they widely built Taoist "thunder temples" and executed the officials who opposed their proposal.¹⁴ Since *san-chiao kwei-i* (三教歸一) was the dominant religious teaching in this time, this event became especially ironical to the Ming people.¹⁵ The author readily caught the irony and revealed it in the novel.

In the Sacrifice Kingdom (祭賽國), for instance, the court officials make the Buddhist monks of the Golden Light Monastery (金光寺) the scapegoats for the disappearance of the hallowed mists and auspicious clouds around a treasure pagoda which consequently keeps the neighboring barbaric tribes from paying their annual tribute to the king (Chapter 62). These officials simply lay all the blame on the helpless monks in order to protect their own safety. The king's punishment is harsh, as a monk complains to Tripitaka:

Those venal officials had us monks arrested and inflicted on us endless tortures and interrogations. There were altogether three generations of monks in this monastery; two of them, unable to withstand such terrible treatments died. The rest of us are now locked up in cangues and locks, still accused of this crime. (III, p. 190)

Fortunately the pilgrims look into this matter, find the criminal demons who stole the treasure in the pagoda and accordingly persuade the king to release these innocent monks and thus save them from the false accusation.

The satire on the Taoists' persecutions of the Buddhists is especially explicit in the case of Cart Slow Kingdom (車遲國). The naive king of this nation, being completely fooled by the Taoists' magic tricks and their promise of eternal youthfulness, orders that all the Buddhist monasteries be torn down and the Buddhist monks be slaves of the Taoist households. These miserable monks are not allowed to take any other work but hard-labor; nor are they permitted to return to their hometowns. As a result of this cruelty, out of two thousand monks retained by Taoists, six or seven hundred of them die of torture, seven or eight hundred commit suicide, only five hundred or so reluctantly survive. In contrast to the extreme humiliation of the Buddhists is the extraordinary respect the Taoists enjoy in the kingdom. One of them narrates the circumstance to Monkey:

In this city of ours, not only the civil and military officials are fond of the Tao, the rich merchants and men of prominence devoted to piety, but

even the ordinary citizens, young and old, will bow to present us food once they see us. It is, in fact, a trivial matter, hardly worth mentioning. What's most important about our city is that His Majesty, the king, is also fond of the Tao. . . . (II, p. 303)

Such obviously religious discrimination would naturally irritate the short-tempered Monkey. He kills two Taoist masters, releases the Buddhist slaves held by them, and then admonishes the king and the citizens of the Cart Slow Kingdom:

You should realize that the true way is the gate of Zen (禪門). 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 Taoists, and take care to nurture the talented. Your kingdom, I assure you, will be secure forever. (II, p. 354)

Monkey is a spokesman for the author on this occasion. The "false doctrines" (胡爲亂信) imply religious domination and its consequent political persecutions that recurrently took place in Chinese history, especially around the Chia Ching years of Ming Dynasty when the author was composing this novel. Probably his own witness of the purge motivated his satire on this subject matter.

In conclusion, *Hsi Yu-chi* satirically illustrates a scholar's deep dissatisfaction with the bureaucratic Chinese governments, and his suspicion of the false Buddhist and Taoist practices that have influenced the common people in China for centuries. He resentfully saw in history as well as in his own time people suffer from the fatuous rulers, the corruptive officials, the unjust laws, and the impotent and inefficient governments. As an intellectual, he regretted that millions of illiterate people and sometimes, even the rulers and elite classes, were fooled by the foul practices of certain Buddhists and Taoists who cared more for their own interests than for the other people's spiritual welfare. It is based on these subjects that he used his tremendous imagination and humorous expressions to create one of the greatest satires in Chinese literature.

Notes

1. For additional commentary see Hu Shih 胡適, *Chung-kuo Chang-hui Hsiao-shuo K'ao-cheng* 中國傳奇小說考證(1943; rpt. Taipei: Yun Feng, 1976), pp. 356-62; Lu Shun 魯迅, *Chung-kuo Hsiao-shuo ti Li-shih Pian-ch'ian* 中國小說的歷史變遷 (Hong Kong: Chung-Liu, 1958), pp. 19, 29-30; Lu Shün, *Hsiao-shuo Chiu-wen ts'ao* 小說舊聞鈔 (Shanghai, 1935), p. 57; Chao Ts'ung 趙聰, *Chung-kuo Wu-ta Hsiao-shuo chih Yen-chiu* 中國五大小說之研究 (Taipei: China Times, 1980), pp. 153-67; and C. T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), pp. 125-64.
2. Arthur Waley, trans., *Monkey* (New York: Grove, 1958), p. 5.
3. See Andrew H. Plaks, "Allegory in *Hsi Yu-chi* and *Hung-lo Meng*," in *Chinese Narrative*, ed. Andrew H. Plaks (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977); and Anthony C. Yu, *The Journey to the West* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 54-62.
4. Kuang-pi Li 李光璧, *Ming-ts'ao Shih-lueh* 明朝史略 (Hubei: Ren Min, 1957), pp. 123-39.
5. Ch'ai-hua Huang 黃開華, *Ming-shih Lun-chi* 明史論集 (Hong Kong: Ch'eng Ming, 1971), pp. 421-23.
6. Charles O. Hucker, *The Ming Dynasty: Its Origin and Evolving Institutions* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1978), p. 97.
7. For more information see Glen Dubridge, "Hsi Yu-chi Tsu-pen K'ao ti Tsai-shang-chueh," *The New Asia Journal*, VI. No. 2 (1964).
8. The English translations of the first seventy-five chapters in *Hsi Yu Chi* cited in the paper are from Anthony C. Yu's *The Journey to the West*; the Chinese text is the Shih-te-t'ang 世德堂 version published by Shang Wu Books 商務 in Hong Kong, 1961.
9. Waley, p. 287.
10. Kenneth W. Morgan, *The Path of the Buddha* (New York: Ronald Press, 1956), p. 127.
11. Translated by Sherman Han.
12. Kenneth K. S. Ch'en, *Buddhism* (Woodbury, New York: Barron's Educational Series, 1968), p. 146.
13. Ch'en, p. 156.
14. Shuang Yih 雙翼, *Shuo Hsi Yu-chi* 說西遊記 (Hong Kong: Shanghai, 1975), pp. 30-31.
15. Henry W. Wells, *Traditional Chinese Humor* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 177.