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Article

The Journey to the West - Metaphors and Exaggerations for the Realities of a Tragic Society

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Abstract: Journey to the West is widely recognized for its mythological imagination, comic episodes, and adventure-oriented narrative, yet these features coexist with recurrent representations of suffering, unequal authority, and restricted freedom. This paper examines the tragic undertone of the novel by connecting its historical context, literary techniques, and characterization. The analysis first considers the fiscal and social pressures of sixteenth-century Ming society and the precariousness of ordinary people as an important background to the novel's representation of power. It then examines how metaphor, exaggeration, contrast, and irony transform social frictions into a mythological world structured by celestial authority, punishment, cannibalism, and unequal access to protection. Particular attention is given to the contrast between divine institutions and ordinary communities, as well as to the unstable moral boundary between gods and demons. Character analysis further shows that Sun Wukong embodies an individual tragedy shaped by resistance, repression, and the gradual restriction of freedom, whereas ordinary people represent widespread hardships. Ultimately, the paper argues that the novel's profound tragic meaning arises from the complex interaction of individual loss, social suffering, and structural inequality. Its comic and fantastic surface therefore does not eliminate tragedy but rather intensifies the stark contrast between narrative entertainment and underlying social criticism, revealing a deeply critical perspective on historical realities.

Keywords: chinese literature; tragic society; metaphor; social inequality; characterization

1. Introduction

Journey to the West occupies an unusual position in classical Chinese literature because its comic energy, fantastic adventures, religious symbolism, and social observation operate simultaneously. The novel is commonly read as a shenmo narrative centered on pilgrimage and supernatural phenomena, yet its mythological surface has long invited interpretations that extend beyond entertainment. Previous studies have examined its Buddhist allegorical structure and the religious significance embedded in the pilgrimage narrative [1]. Other research emphasizes the role of carnivalization and fictional festivity in bringing different cultural voices into dynamic interaction. Studies of the novel's supernatural hierarchy further show that demons, gods, and pilgrims operate within an organized system of authority rather than as isolated fantastic figures. More recent scholarship has also demonstrated that the reception of the novel has involved interactions between literary fiction and religious interpretation. Together, these studies suggest that the fantastic form of Journey to the West should not be separated from the ideological and social meanings produced by that form.

This paper focuses on a related but more specific problem: the tragic undertone concealed beneath the novel's lively and often humorous narrative. In the interpretation

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developed here, “sorrow” is not treated as a feeling belonging only to Sun Wukong or another major character. Instead, it extends across the fictional world, especially where ordinary people experience hardship due to decisions made by rulers, deities, or powerful supernatural beings [1]. The contrast is therefore structural. The journey repeatedly produces comic dialogue, magical encounters, and eventual resolutions, yet the worlds through which the pilgrims travel also contain drought, hardship, ritual transgressions, arbitrary consequences, and unequal access to power.

The central argument is that this tragic dimension can be understood through a sequence linking historical experience to literary representation. Social conditions associated with Ming governance and taxation provide an important historical context, while experiences traditionally associated with the novel’s attributed author provide a biographical context [2]. These conditions are transformed through metaphor, exaggeration, irony, and characterization. Historical and biographical conditions are therefore treated as sources of the tragic undertone, while literary devices mediate their transformation into a mythological world characterized by hierarchical structures and recurrent hardship. Rather than claiming that every supernatural episode directly represents a specific historical event, the framework treats the mythological world as a literary transformation of recognizable dynamics between authority and social roles. The following discussion therefore begins with the historical and biographical origins of this tragic undertone before examining how social hardship is converted into mythological narrative.

2. Historical Origins of the Tragic Undertone

2.1. Social Conditions and Ordinary People’s Suffering

The tragic atmosphere identified in *Journey to the West* becomes clearer when the novel is placed against the fiscal and social conditions of sixteenth-century Ming society [2]. During this period, military defense requirements and administrative operations placed substantial demands on state resources. Research on fiscal supply indicates that these pressures prompted the government to adopt supplementary revenue mechanisms. Studies of climate and state finance further show that military expenditures rose significantly during the mid-sixteenth century, while traditional financing methods gradually lost effectiveness. Taxation emerged as a primary channel through which state financial needs were transmitted to local communities, and evidence from the later Ming period reveals a correlation between heightened tax burdens and growing rural social tensions.

These conditions should not be interpreted as direct causes of specific narrative episodes. Rather, they illuminate a structural relationship: policy decisions and resource constraints at higher administrative levels often resulted in tangible impacts on households with limited capacity to influence such decisions [3]. This provides a historical context for the paper’s focus on ordinary people. When characters in the fictional world endure drought, social disruption, or interventions by superior beings, their experiences resonate with broader historical patterns in which everyday lives were shaped by forces beyond individual control.

2.2. The Attributed Author’s Personal Experience

The biographical dimension strengthens this interpretation, although it must be handled cautiously because the authorship of *Journey to the West* has historically been debated [3]. The traditional attribution remains influential, and biographical research has connected the attributed author’s movements, examination experience, and official service with possible contexts for the novel’s formation. Within this interpretive tradition, repeated examination frustrations, a limited official career, and difficult material circumstances are relevant not because they prove a direct autobiographical meaning, but because they help explain why themes of personal aspiration and institutional expectations recur as significant motifs in the narrative. Prior scholarship has similarly

linked such experiences with the portrayal of figures who embody ideals of freedom and question established conventions.

Biography is therefore used here as contextual evidence rather than as a deterministic key. Sun Wukong should not simply be treated as a direct representation of the novel's attributed author [4]. More cautiously, these biographical circumstances provide one possible route for understanding why questions of talent recognition, hierarchical structure, and individual agency recur as meaningful thematic elements in the narrative.

2.3. From Historical Reality to Mythological Narrative

The crucial transition is from historical reality to literary form. *Journey to the West* does not reproduce Ming institutions as a historical chronicle. Instead, it transforms social relations into a fantastic order composed of celestial courts, local deities, demons, kings, ritual punishments, and vulnerable human communities. Scholarly analysis has indicated that playful narration may serve as a surface-level discourse, beneath which operates a layered literary commentary on taxation practices, local governance structures, elite social roles, and institutional authority. Related studies have further observed that the novel's imagined foreign spaces—including depictions of ritual transgression and flawed rulership—can function as indirect reflections on administrative challenges and the lived experiences of ordinary people.

This transformation is central to Figure 1. Historical pressure and personal experience are treated as sources of the tragic undertone; metaphor, exaggeration, irony, and contrast function as mechanisms of literary transformation; and the resulting mythological world renders asymmetrical power relations perceptible through representations of suffering [5]. The framework therefore prepares the next stage of the analysis: how fantasy transfigures observable societal dynamics into tragic literary experience.

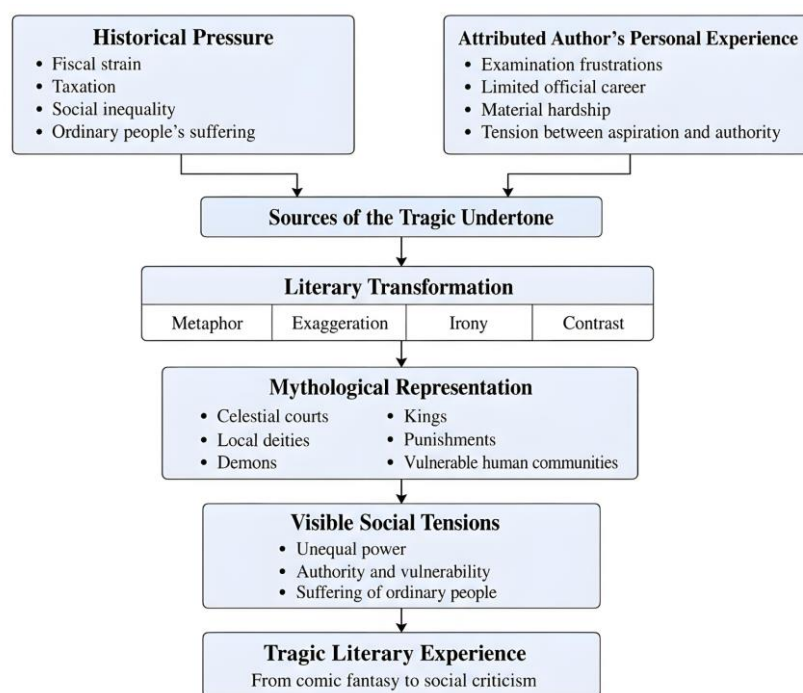


Figure 1. Analytical Framework of the Tragic Dimension in *Journey to the West*

3. Metaphor and Exaggeration as Representations of Social Reality

The tragic undertone of *Journey to the West* is not expressed primarily through direct descriptions of sorrow. Instead, the novel embeds recognizable social structures and hierarchical relationships within an ostensibly fantastic world [6]. Such indirect representation is significant because the supernatural setting permits social dynamics to

manifest in heightened and occasionally comic forms. It has been observed that figures such as demons and fairies may reflect broader cultural and institutional patterns of the Ming period, while humorous and fantastical narratives can simultaneously convey layered meanings. Likewise, seemingly incongruous episodes have been interpreted as vehicles for both ethical reflection and doctrinal exploration. Metaphor and exaggeration thus serve as interpretive conduits between the mythological surface of the novel and the underlying human experiences it portrays.

3.1. Heavenly Court and Spirit Mountain as Metaphors of Power

The Heavenly Court and Spirit Mountain constitute the two most important centers of supernatural authority in the novel. They possess the power to appoint, discipline, intervene, and determine the position of beings within the mythological hierarchy [7]. Their importance is therefore not limited to religious symbolism. They can also be read as literary representations of institutional power. The novel repeatedly connects demons and supernatural figures with larger structures of authority, while some apparently independent monsters are eventually revealed to have affiliations with celestial authorities. This structure resembles a social order in which access to authority determines security and status.

This interpretation does not require the Heavenly Court to be treated as a direct substitute for a particular Ming institution. Rather, its hierarchical structure makes visible the unequal relationship between those who exercise power and those who must endure its effects. The religious imagination of *Journey to the West* also reflects features of Ming social and political organization. The supernatural hierarchy can thus be read simultaneously as fantasy and as a reflection on earthly authority [8].

3.2. The Wuji Kingdom and Fengxian County

The episodes of the Wuji Kingdom and Fengxian County illustrate this inequality more concretely. In both cases, hardship extends beyond the individual who has unintentionally violated or failed to observe supernatural protocols. In the Wuji episode, consequences arising from a matter involving the ruler affect the broader community. In Fengxian County, the Jade Emperor withholds rain after the local marquis accidentally overturns an offering, resulting in prolonged drought endured by ordinary people [1].

The tragic dimension of these episodes lies in the disproportionate allocation of responsibility and hardship. Those bearing the most severe consequences are not necessarily those whose actions initiated the situation. Ordinary people possess minimal agency over decisions made at higher levels, yet their livelihoods hinge upon those decisions. This pattern reflects the novel's broader use of fantastical scenarios to illuminate political and social structures [9]. Scholarly analysis has similarly shown how ostensibly imaginative or allegorical narratives can reveal underlying issues in governance and social cohesion.

3.3. Cannibalism as Exaggerated Exploitation

Cannibalism provides an even stronger example of this transformation. Throughout the novel, humans are repeatedly threatened with being eaten by demons and other supernatural beings. At the literal level, such scenes belong to the conventions of a mythological adventure. At the figurative level, however, they represent human beings as resources subject to appropriation by more powerful forces.

This representation functions as a heightened metaphor for systemic imbalance [10]. While socioeconomic and institutional dynamics may appear abstract, the imagery of bodily consumption renders relational asymmetry into tangible, perceptible form. Exaggeration is integral to the narrative architecture of *Journey to the West*, operating consistently across its rhetorical design. In this interpretation, cannibalism serves a parallel purpose: it intensifies the perception of relational disparity until the underlying structural features become unmistakably evident. The resulting sense of unease reinforces—rather than undermines—the novel's imaginative framework.

3.4. Contrast and Irony between Gods and Demons

The distinction between gods and demons in *Journey to the West* is less stable than their conventional moral labels suggest. Gods are generally expected to protect human beings and maintain order, whereas demons conventionally represent danger and disorder. However, the novel repeatedly complicates this binary framing. Divine authorities may overlook human suffering, administer broad disciplinary measures, or sustain associations with supernatural beings that pose risks to ordinary people. Some demons are also affiliated with influential celestial figures and may ultimately be reinstated under those figures' guidance rather than face consequences typically assigned to autonomous disruptive entities.

This produces a fundamental irony: moral identity does not always align with institutional affiliation. A being classified as a god is not necessarily benevolent, while a demon's outcome may depend less on its conduct than on its connection to higher celestial structures. Many demons and supernatural figures remain integrated within Buddhist or Daoist cosmological frameworks rather than existing outside the established order. The resulting contrast therefore softens any rigid dichotomy between divine benevolence and demonic malevolence.

More importantly, this irony supports the novel's broader social perspective. For ordinary people, hardship arises not only from forces labeled as harmful; it may also stem from institutions entrusted with safeguarding well-being and fairness. The fluid boundary between gods and demons thus transforms the supernatural hierarchy into a symbolic representation of authority, status, and societal positioning. As summarized in Table 1, metaphor, exaggeration, contrast, irony, and characterization work together to render unequal power relations as tangible experiences of adversity, constraint, and diminishment. These literary devices do not operate in isolation; jointly, they articulate the sober implications underlying the novel's imaginative and often humorous surface.

Table 1. Literary Devices and Their Tragic Implications

Literary Device	Example in the Novel	Social Implication	Tragic Meaning
Metaphor / Allegory	Heavenly Court and Spirit Mountain	Reflect institutional and political hierarchy	Ordinary people remain subordinate to superior powers
Exaggeration	Gods and demons consuming humans	Makes exploitation visible through physical violence	Human beings become expendable under stronger forces
Contrast	Sun Wukong is shocked by extreme suffering	Highlights the severity of social violence	Strengthens the tragic atmosphere
Irony	Gods expected to protect humans instead cause suffering	Questions the moral legitimacy of authority	Power itself becomes a source of suffering
Characterization	Sun Wukong changes from rebel to disciplined pilgrim	Reflects conflict between freedom and institutional order	Recognition is accompanied by loss of individuality

4. Characterization and the Tragic Experience

The tragic dimension of *Journey to the West* is expressed not only through its social environment and supernatural hierarchy but also through the experiences of its characters. Sun Wukong embodies a prominent manifestation of individual engagement with authority, while ordinary people reflect a more subdued and widespread form of human experience. Their distinct positions within the mythological world illustrate how personal

agency, institutional structures, and societal conditions collectively shape the novel's tragic undertone.

4.1. Sun Wukong as a Rebel

Sun Wukong initially appears as an unusually independent figure. His extraordinary abilities foster a strong sense of self-determination, prompting him to question conventional hierarchical arrangements. He places high value on personal freedom and does not automatically defer to institutional authority [11]. This distinctive stance sets him apart from characters who readily conform to established social structures.

His stance also situates him at a distance from the prevailing cosmic order. Although his formidable capabilities render him resistant to conventional regulation, they do not enable him to reconstitute the foundational framework he engages with. The dynamic between Sun Wukong and the celestial administration thus reflects more than a demonstration of supernatural capacity—it illustrates an interplay between individual agency and systemic coherence.

4.2. Repression and the Loss of Freedom

Sun Wukong's defiance of celestial authority culminates in containment. After confronting the heavenly order, he is sealed beneath the Five Elements Mountain for five hundred years. This period marks a pivotal transformation in his character development. The formerly unbounded figure regains mobility only upon embracing a disciplined role within the sacred pilgrimage.

Throughout the journey, Sun Wukong retains formidable abilities and occasional impulsiveness, yet his conduct becomes increasingly guided by spiritual commitments and shared purpose. He assumes responsibility for protecting Tang Sanzang, adheres to the pilgrimage's sacred direction, and observes behavioral boundaries. His eventual attainment of Buddhahood thus carries dual significance: on one level, it signifies accomplishment, affirmation, and the fulfillment of the spiritual quest; on another, it reflects the progressive integration of individual capacity into a harmonious, purposeful framework. His concluding status embodies a resolution that affirms both personal cultivation and alignment with transcendent ideals [6].

4.3. Sun Wukong and Wu Cheng'en

The original characterization of Sun Wukong can also be considered alongside Wu Cheng'en's experiences of frustration in examinations and official life. Both reflect the interplay between personal aspiration and established institutional frameworks. Sun Wukong challenges celestial hierarchy, while Wu Cheng'en's life reflects the difficulties encountered by an individual seeking a suitable role within a structured social order.

This parallel should not require Sun Wukong to be treated as a direct autobiographical representation of Wu Cheng'en. Rather, the character provides a literary form through which themes of talent, recognition, authority, and self-realization can be explored. The resonance strengthens the connection between individual experience and the broader narrative structure of the novel.

4.4. Ordinary People as Silent Victims

The experience of ordinary people is less conspicuous but more widespread. Unlike Sun Wukong, they typically lack the capacity to influence the forces shaping their daily lives. They often appear as peripheral figures encountering supernatural phenomena, natural calamities, administrative measures, and other external conditions.

Their quiet presence carries interpretive weight. Sun Wukong may engage with authority through dialogue and action—even when outcomes are constrained—whereas ordinary people generally operate within established frameworks without recourse to formal channels of redress. When celestial phenomena trigger drought or mythic entities interact with human communities, the resulting effects fall upon populations who neither initiated such conditions nor possess means to alter them. Their situatedness situates individual episodes within broader patterns of social life [12].

4.5. From Individual Tragedy to Social Tragedy

The experiences of Sun Wukong and ordinary people reflect two interrelated dimensions of tragic representation. Sun Wukong exemplifies individual tragic resonance, particularly the tension between personal autonomy and integration into established systems. Ordinary people illustrate broader societal dimensions, marked by limited agency in the face of forces beyond individual influence [13].

These dimensions are linked through the hierarchical organization of the novel's cosmological framework. Individuals at lower levels frequently experience outcomes shaped by decisions made at higher levels, while those who question structural arrangements may undergo transformation or assimilation rather than exclusion. Thus, the tragic resonance of *Journey to the West* transcends individual narrative arcs. Sun Wukong's bounded autonomy, the constrained circumstances of ordinary people, and the asymmetrical distribution of authority collectively shape a literary portrayal that reflects wider social patterns.

5. The Meaning of the Novel's Tragic Society

The tragic dimension of *Journey to the West* emerges most clearly from the interplay between its engaging narrative form and the hierarchical social structure it portrays. The novel does not convey tragedy through sustained sorrow or predetermined failure. Rather, its tragic resonance arises from the simultaneous presence of humor, fantasy, ritual constraint, and human limitation. This integration sustains the allure of a mythological adventure while revealing a world in which personal autonomy and everyday existence remain subject to transcendent authority.

5.1. Comic Surface and Tragic Core

At the surface level, *Journey to the West* exhibits many features associated with comedy and entertainment. Sun Wukong's transformations, lighthearted exchanges among the pilgrims, encounters with fantastical beings, and repeated triumphs over supernatural challenges create a vibrant narrative rhythm [14]. The successful completion of the pilgrimage further lends the story an uplifting and harmonious conclusion.

However, this comic surface coexists with deeper thematic layers that reflect enduring human concerns. Many of the regions traversed by the pilgrims are marked by environmental hardship, social instability, moral ambiguity, unjust governance, and structural inequities. The contrast becomes especially significant when institutions or figures traditionally entrusted with safeguarding the people instead inadvertently exacerbate their difficulties. Humor and fantasy thus do not diminish the novel's gravity; rather, in certain episodes, they heighten the distinction between outward appearance and underlying reality, thereby sharpening its reflective dimension on societal conditions.

Sun Wukong's attainment of Buddhahood exemplifies this duality. While it signifies spiritual fulfillment within the narrative's religious framework, it also follows his evolution from a free-spirited figure to a disciplined member of a venerable tradition. Likewise, although the pilgrims consistently resolve specific trials, the broader institutional arrangements that shape everyday life remain intact. Thus, the resolution of individual episodes does not imply transformation of the foundational conditions influencing human experience.

5.2. Tragedy and the Destruction of Valuable Things

Tragedy, as conceptualized in this paper, centers on the erosion or loss of elements that hold profound significance in human life. This perspective offers a productive lens for examining the interplay between personal experience and collective conditions in *Journey to the West*. The novel's tragic resonance does not hinge primarily on mortality; rather, it emerges when foundational human capacities—such as autonomy, safety, self-respect, and agency over one's life course—are diminished or compromised [15].

For Sun Wukong, the central tension involves the gradual realignment of his autonomous nature within structured spiritual and institutional frameworks. For ordinary characters, the primary concerns are material well-being and the capacity to live securely—free from harm caused by supernatural forces, administrative decisions, or

disparities in power. Their experiences of hardship frequently arise independently of direct involvement in the broader dynamics that shape those outcomes.

The societal landscape portrayed in *Journey to the West* may thus be characterized as one in which essential dimensions of human flourishing are persistently challenged by asymmetries of influence [3]. Individual initiative may be harmonized with communal purpose, communities may bear consequences linked to decisions made at higher levels, and ethical standing does not invariably align with practical fairness. The novel's tragic quality resides not in the absence of uplifting or redemptive episodes, but in the enduring presence of irreversible change beneath them. Its imaginative register renders these tensions perceptible, elevating mythological narrative into a contemplation of agency, resilience, and the structural implications of authority.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the tragic dimension of *Journey to the West* by connecting its historical background, rhetorical strategies, and characterization. Although the novel is widely recognized for its mythological imagination, comic episodes, and adventurous structure, these features coexist with repeated representations of hardship, hierarchical authority, and constrained agency. The tragic undertone therefore does not depend on continuous sadness. Instead, it emerges from the contrast between an entertaining narrative surface and a fictional world in which individuals and ordinary communities remain subject to forces beyond their control.

The historical conditions associated with Ming society provide an important context for this interpretation. Fiscal pressure, social inequality, and the difficulties faced by ordinary people help explain why questions of power and individual agency are significant to the novel. The attributed experiences of examination frustration and official life further provide a biographical context for understanding the relationship between personal aspiration and institutional roles. These conditions are not reproduced directly in the novel but are transformed into a mythological order through metaphor, exaggeration, contrast, and irony.

Within this order, the Heavenly Court and Spirit Mountain represent hierarchical structures of authority, while episodes involving drought, punishment, and cannibalism make disparities in power visible in concrete forms. Sun Wukong embodies the individual dimension of tragedy: his movement from initial defiance to formal integration involves both achievement and the gradual limitation of his earlier autonomy. Ordinary people represent a broader societal dimension of tragedy because they frequently experience hardship without possessing comparable avenues for redress or transformation.

The tragic society represented in *Journey to the West* therefore consists of more than isolated misfortune. It is shaped by the interplay of individual loss, societal exposure to adverse conditions, and systemic inequities. The novel's comic and fantastic form does not diminish this tragic meaning; rather, the contrast between surface entertainment and underlying hardship reinforces its critical representation of power, agency, and human condition.

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