Journey to the West

Xīyóu jì 西游记

Xīyóu jì (Journey to the West), a Chinese novel believed to be written by Wu Cheng’en in the sixteenth century, portrays the adventures of a priest, a monkey, and their pilgrim band as they journey to get Buddhist scriptures. The tale, long shared through various media in China, is rich in allegory and instruction from Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian thought.

The novel Xīyóu jì (Journey to the West) is a favorite source adapted in storytelling, opera, theater, puppetry, comics, television, and video games both in China and abroad. It can be interpreted as a fairy tale, a humorous piece of literature, a religious allegory, or an adventure tale.

The beginning of the hundred-chapter novel introduces Sun Wukong (Monkey), born from a stone and nourished by the five elements. He leads a band of monkeys on the Mountains of Flowers and Fruits until he goes in search of a spiritual teacher, finding the Daoist master Subodhi. Given the spiritual name “Aware of Vacuity,” he soon learns the Dao and seventy-two transformations but is forced to return home after showing off his magic skills.

Monkey soon declares himself the “Great Sage Equal to Heaven,” creating havoc by consuming the peaches of immortality, stealing Laozi’s golden elixir pills, and destroying much in Heaven. The Jade Emperor, a rich source of satire in the novel, can’t control Monkey, so Lord Buddha must intercede. Monkey proudly accepts and loses a challenge from the Buddha and thus is imprisoned in a stone mountain.

Chapters 8–12 introduce the priest Xuanzang and tell the tale of his parents’ troubles. Next, at the Buddha’s

In this Suzhou Opera performance commemorating the 30th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China, the Monkey creates havoc in Heaven. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.
request, the bodhisattva Guanyin (a being that refrains from entering nirvana in order to save others, and who is worshipped as a deity in Mahayana Buddhism), selects the priest to bring precious Buddhist scriptures from India. Xuanzang, now called Tripitaka or Sanzang, sets out with the emperor’s blessing. His character on the journey is often that of a fussy, whining man, yet one with a kind heart who will need some help on his quest. Chapters 13–22 describe the protectors and fellow pilgrims whom he meets:

- Sun Wukong (Monkey) is a vibrant, good-hearted creature whom readers have already met in the book’s early chapters. His weapon is the “will-following golden-banded staff,” which can grow to an enormous size or shrink to fit behind his ear. He also obtains a pair of lotus-root cloud-walking shoes, a phoenix-winged purple and gold helmet, and a suit of golden chain mail. The bodhisattva Guanyin gives him three life-saving magic hairs to help him on his travels, as well as a headband, which, when activated by a chant from the sacred scripture Tripitaka, will cause Monkey pain and allow Guanyin to control Monkey’s volatile nature.

- Zhu Bajie (Pigsy) is an immortal who was called “Field Marshall Tianpeng” until he drank too much, flirted with the moon princess, and came to Earth by mistake as a pig-like creature. He is a powerful fighter who uses the nine-tooth iron rake, can do thirty-six transformations, and has a large appetite for sensual pleasures.

- Sha Wujing (Sandy), once the curtain-raising general, was banished to Earth for accidentally breaking a crystal goblet. He knows eighteen transformations, fights well in water (his weapon is the monk’s spade), and is the most polite and obedient of the disciples.

Dragons and Demons

These characters are helped by the Third Prince of the Dragon King, who turns into a white horse so Tripitaka can ride him to escape punishment. A succession of struggles follows, lasting almost to the novel’s end, which take place in a wilderness with flaming mountains, impossibly wide rivers, and a long list of monsters: Green Lion Demon, White Elephant Demon, Dream Demon, and Nine-Headed Bird Demon among many. Often these creatures hope to eat Tripitaka’s flesh to gain immortality. After eighty such episodes, with help at times from Guanyin and Laozi, members of the weary band at last reach Vulture Peak, receiving wordless scriptures that they exchange for others with written words. To make the number of tests an auspicious eighty-one (corresponding to the number of chapters in Laozi’s Daodejing, they undergo one last test and then receive their rewards: Tripitaka and Monkey become Buddhas, Pigsy is named an altar cleanser, Sandy becomes an arhat (spiritual practitioner), and the white horse becomes a heavenly dragon.

Early Versions

Various earlier versions of the story, both oral and written, were inspired by the real-life experiences of the priest...
Xuanzang (602–664), a monk at Jingtu Temple in Chang’an during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) who endured great troubles as he traveled to India to get Buddhist scriptures. He spent seventeen years on his journey and returned with many precious volumes. Praised by Emperor Taizong, he then spent the rest of his life translating the scriptures into Chinese. As his story changed and grew after his death, the other pilgrims were added along with a cast of other-worldly creatures and a long list of struggles.

Importance of the Work
The story, shaped by oral storytellers as well as writers, took its final form as a hundred-chapter novel in the sixteenth century. Although scholars debate the issue, most agree that Wu Chen-en, a writer known for his poetry, humor, and love of the marvelous, was the author of the novel.

As a work both told and read, Journey to the West has long been one of the most popular stories in China, enjoyed for its humor and its use of verse in dialogues, for description, and for commentary. It appeals to all ages because it both entertains and instructs, poking fun at the Chinese court and at religious traditions, while also offering an allegory of the spiritual quest.

The novel includes Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian thought. Alchemy and the art of transformation appear repeatedly, along with teachings of the Dao. Buddhist characters and scriptures play an important role, with the Buddhist Heart sutra (a precept summarizing Vedic teaching) often chanted by the priest Tripitaka to cultivate truth, being included in some editions. The accumulation of merit is a recurring Buddhist theme, with many good deeds done on the journey: restoring kingdoms, freeing the enslaved, helping orphans, and more. The Buddhist need for compassion is stressed, with the necessity for self-cultivation reinforced. Confucian thought is reflected in an emphasis on correct conduct, learning, and order in society.

Various editions of the story have appeared in English over the years, including a popular version translated by Arthur Waley and abridged by Alison Waley, and two complete translations, one by Anthony C. Yu and the other by W. J. F. Jenner. Whether read in these or other editions or seen on television, on film, or in the opera, the story has been beloved by generations.

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Further Reading