


9-9-2008

Monkey King

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Recommended Repository Citation

Yuan, Haiwang, "Monkey King" (2008). *DLPS Faculty Publications*. Paper 21.
http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlps_fac_pub/21

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Monkey King

Monkey King, or known to the Chinese as *Xi You Ji* (Journey to the West), is one of the four renowned classical Chinese novels dating back some four hundred years ago, the other three being *Shui Hu* (*The Water Margins*), *Hong Lou Meng* (*Dream of the Red Mansion*), and *San Guo Yanyi* (*Romance of Three Kingdoms*).

Monkey King is based on a true story of a famous monk of the Chinese Tang Dynasty (602-664), named Xuan Zang. After a decade of trials and tribulations, he arrived on foot to what is today India, the birthplace of Buddhism. He was there to seek the true Buddhist holy books. When he returned, Xuan Zang translated the scripts into Chinese, thus making a great contribution to the spreading of Buddhism in China.

Monkey King is an allegorical rendition of the journey, mingled with Chinese fables, fairy tales, legends, superstitions, popular beliefs, monster stories, and whatever the author could find in the traditions of Taoism, Buddhism, and Chinese popular religions. While average readers are fascinated with the prowess and wisdom of the Monkey King as well as the action-packed episodes of thrills, many reviewers agree that the protagonist embodies what the author tried to convey to his readers: a rebellious spirit against the then untouchable monarchs.

The monkey is indeed rebellious. He was, according to the story, born out of a rock, fertilized by the grace of Heaven and Earth. Being extremely intelligent, he has learned all the magic tricks and martial arts from an immortal Taoist master. Now he can transform himself into seventy-two different images such as a tree, a bird, a beast of prey, or an insect that can sneak into an enemy's belly to fight him or her inside out. Using clouds as a vehicle, he can travel several thousand miles with a single somersault.

He claims to be The King in defiance of the only authority over the heavenly, marine, terrestrial, and subterranean worlds--Yu Huang Da Di (Jade Emperor of Heaven). That act of high treason, coupled with complaints from the dragon kings of the four seas and the god of the netherworld, incurs the relentless scourge of the heavenly army. It turned out that the monkey has fought into the ocean and seized a dragon king's crown treasure: a huge gold-banded iron rod used as a ballast of the waters. Able to expand or shrink at his owner's command, the iron rod becomes the monkey's favorite weapon in his later feats. The first test of its power came when the monkey stormed into hell and threatened the Hadean king into sparing his and his followers mortal life so that they all could enjoy eternity.

After many showdowns with the fearless Monkey King, the heavenly army has suffered numerous humiliating defeats. The celestial monarch has but to give the dove faction a chance to try their appeasement strategy, that is, to offer the monkey an official title in heaven with little authority. Upon hearing that the position brings him nothing but humility, the enraged monkey revolts, fighting all his way back to earth to resume his original claim as Qi Tian Da Sheng (The King as Good as the Heavenly Emperor).

After exhausting all possible measures, the Jade Emperor of Heaven reluctantly asks his estranged nephew, a god of three eyes that is almost as capable

as the Monkey King to help out. The two gods fight while switching to different animal forms, trying to get the upper hand over the other. Eventually, with the help of a star god who attacked the monkey from behind with his magic ring as well as his magic dog, the triple-eyed god captures the barely invincible monkey. The heavenly king sentenced the monkey to capital punishment. However, all methods of execution fail. Having a bronze head and iron shoulders, the monkey dulls many a sword inflicted upon him. As the last resort, the emperor commands that he be incinerated in the furnace where Tai Shang Lao Jun (The Supreme Taoist God) refines his pills of immortality. Instead of killing the monkey, the fire and smoke in the furnace sharpened his eyes so that he now can see through things that others can not. He fights his way back to earth again.

At his wit's end, the celestial emperor asks Buddha for help. Buddha challenges Monkey King to get away from the palm of his hand, which the monkey tried but failed. Buddha then turned over his palm and imprisons the monkey under a mountain known as Wu Zhi Shan (The Mount of Five Fingers). The tenacious monkey survives the enormous weight and pressure. Five hundred years later, there comes to his rescue the Tang Monk, Xuan Zang, mentioned at the beginning of the story.

To make sure that the monk can make for the West to get the holy scripts, Buddha has arranged for Monkey King to become the monk's escort in the capacity of his disciple. Then Goddess of Mercy, or Avalokitesvara, in the form of a granny, appears to Xuan Zang and teaches him a trick to reign in the intrinsically rebellious monkey in case he becomes disobedient. The trick consists of a magic hat and an incantation. Once the monkey put on the hat, he can never get it off. When Xuan Zang chants the incantation, the hat will become a tightening ring that causes excruciating headache to its wearer.

Soon on their way to the west, two more disciples, also arranged by Buddha, join their company. One is the humorously greedy and yet courageous pig transgressed from an inebriant celestial general for his sin of sexual harassment against a goddess; the other, condemned to the form of a sea monster for his own misdemeanor.

The party of four was further reinforced by a horse, an incarnation of a dragon's son, and start their stormy journey to the West—a journey full of actions and adventures that brought into full play the puissance of Monkey King and his fellow disciples.