The Monkey King

Wu Ch’êng-ên

About the author

Wu Ch’êng-ên was born in 1506 in China, during the Ming Dynasty, a few years before the first Europeans arrived in China from Portugal in 1514. In the East at that time, as in Europe, there was a great interest in looking back to past traditions and ancient culture. Story-telling was very popular and Wu was particularly gifted at turning a good tale into an art form. He retells a classic Chinese legend with plenty of jokes and serious comments about human nature and our time on this earth. Wu Ch’êng-ên was a scholar-official, but we know little more about his life. He died in 1582. Arthur Waley (1889–1966) taught himself Chinese and Japanese while he worked at the British Museum in the early 1900s. He went on to translate numerous Eastern books of literature and poetry, many of which are considered to be an art form in their own right. He translated Monkey, an abridged version of what the Chinese call Journey to the West in 1942.

Summary

This is a story of a priest’s journey to India to collect the Scriptures and take them back to China. He is accompanied by three pilgrims and they face great adversity on the way. It is overflowing with magic, demons, gods, immortals, action and adventure.

Chapter 1: Monkey is born from a rock in the small country of Ao-lai. When he grows up, the other monkeys make him their king because of his bravery. Several hundred years pass until one day the Monkey King becomes worried about his mortality. He begins a long journey to find the Immortals and learn the Way of Long Life and the art of transforming himself into other things and flying. When he returns again to his land, he has many powers. He fights and beats the Destroying Demon, who has been terrorising the other monkeys and attacks a city, stealing the soldiers’ weapons so that the monkeys can defend themselves. He then goes to see the Dragon King to find a special weapon for himself. He receives a cudgel, but asks for more things and the Dragon King gets angry and complains to the Jade Emperor, who gives Monkey a job in Heaven looking after some power-giving apples. Monkey greedily eats many of the apples and the Jade Emperor arrives and buries Monkey under a mountain. Some years later, the Goddess Kuan-yin agrees to look for a pilgrim who is willing to take the Scriptures to China. She begins her journey and meets two ugly creatures that have been punished for crimes in heaven. She persuades them to help her and calls them ‘Sandy priest’ and ‘Pigsy’. She then turns a dragon into a white horse and tells Monkey to wait under his mountain for the pilgrim with the Scriptures.

Chapter 2: Ch’en O, the new governor of Chiang-chou, is killed and his wife kidnapped by a boatman called Liu. Ch’ên’s body is taken to the Dragon King, who brings him back to life. Liu takes Mrs Ch’en to Chiang-chou and pretends to be the new governor. There, Mrs Ch’ên has a baby. Afraid that Liu will harm him, she puts him in a river tied to a piece of wood. The child is found by the Holy Master, who years later makes him a priest and calls him Hsüan Tsang. Tsang, hearing of the wrongs done to his parents, goes to find his mother. She sends Tsang with a letter to her father, the Emperor’s minister, and the truth is revealed. Liu is killed by the Emperor’s army and Ch’en returns from the world of the Dragon King. Tsang is chosen as the holiest priest and is asked to go to India to fetch the Scriptures. He takes the new name of Tripitaka and sets off. On his journey, he finds the mountain where Monkey is trapped. He frees Monkey, who promises to protect him. When Monkey begins to behave badly, the Goddess Kuan-yin gives Tripitaka a magic cap. Monkey puts it on and when Tripitaka recites some magic words, it causes Monkey pain. Monkey now has to obey him.

Chapter 3: Tripitaka and Monkey continue their journey. They reach a river and a dragon appears and eats Tripitaka’s horse. Monkey fights the dragon, but unable to win, asks the Goddess Kuan-yin for help. She explains that the dragon is there to help and transforms it into the
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horse it has just eaten. They go on until they come to a farm. Here, an old man tells them that his daughter has been held captive by a pig-like creature. Monkey promises to fight the creature and rescue the girl. He does this, but the creature escapes into its cave. The fight continues until Monkey tells the creature that he is going with Tripitaka to find the Scriptures. The creature, Pigsy, then tells Monkey that the Goddess Kuan-yin had put him there to wait for them. So Pigsy joins the pilgrims on their journey. Next, they reach the River of Sands where Pigsy fights a creature that comes up out of the water. The creature turns out to be Sandy and with the help of the Goddess Kuan-yin, he too becomes a priest and joins the pilgrims.

Chapter 4: One night Tripitaka dreams about a king. The king tells him that he was tricked by a magician who pushed him into hole and then took on his own form and pretended to be the real king. The king asks Tripitaka to tell this to his son. With the help of Monkey, he convinces the king’s son of the real story and Pigsy recovers the real king’s body from the hole. He is brought back to life and restored to his kingdom. Next, the pilgrims come across a city where the religion of Buddha has been destroyed and the king is under the influence of three Taoist Immortals. The pilgrims take part in a rain-making contest with the Immortals. With the help of the rain-dragons, Monkey and Tripitaka win and Buddhism becomes the religion of the city again.

Chapter 5: The pilgrims arrive at a village where every year two children are sacrificed to the Great King of Magic. Monkey and Pigsy transform themselves into two children and confront the Great King, but he escapes into the river. Unhappy about what has happened, the Great King freezes the river and when the pilgrims try to cross it, the ice breaks and Tripitaka falls in. With the help of the Goddess Kuan-yin, Tripitaka’s followers rescue him and they cross the river on a turtle’s back. Eventually they reach Buddha’s holy castle. They cross a river to get there in a boat with no bottom. By doing this, Tripitaka loses his earthly body and achieves the highest wisdom possible. Buddha gives them some Scriptures to take back to China and tells his messengers to get the pilgrims back in eight days.

Chapter 6: The Goddess Kuan-yin hears the stories of the eighty fights that the pilgrims had on the way to get the Scriptures and decides they must have one more to reach the holy number of eighty-one. The magic wind that was carrying the pilgrims back to China therefore stops and they fall to the ground. They meet the turtle again and it begins to carry them across a great river. The turtle gets angry, however, as Tripitaka hasn’t kept a promise he had made and drops them in the water. The Scriptures get wet and they have to dry them on a rock. They then visit Mr Ch’en’s house again and eventually get back to the city of Ch’ang-an and give the Scriptures to the Emperor, who organises a banquet. Then they return to Buddha’s Holy Mountain and Tripitaka and Monkey are made into Buddhas. Pigsy is named the Keeper of the Holy Temple, Sandy becomes the Golden-Bodied Soldier and the horse is transformed into one of the eight Heavenly Dragons.

Background and themes

Chinese history and legend: This story is based on the life of a real seventh-century priest who took 17 years to travel from China to India and back. He collected 657 scriptures and, after his return to China, spent the rest of his life translating them. Any fact, however, is also mingled with Chinese fables, fairy tales, legends, superstitions, popular beliefs and monster stories.

Religion: Buddhism was the religion of China during this period and the story has a strong religious message. If we listen to what the gods tell us, we will not be harmed and we will find salvation. The idea of a journey towards enlightenment was central to Chinese beliefs, and pilgrimages were common.

Human nature: The characters in this story clearly reflect different aspects of human nature. Tripitaka often gets depressed and can only see difficulties, but he tries hard to do the right thing. Monkey is brave but he is also rebellious and arrogant and Pigsy is very greedy. They all have to overcome their failings on their journey towards enlightenment.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Discuss and research: Write the following religions on the board: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism. Ask the students to discuss what they know about these religions in small groups. Get feedback and then divide the class into five groups and ask each group to use the Internet to find out some more information about one of these religions. Each group then does a presentation for the rest of the class.
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Chapter 1

After reading
3 Pair work: Write the names of the following characters on the board: Monkey King, Dragon King, Jade Emperor, Goddess Kuan-yin, Buddha, Sandy Priest, Pigsy. Tell students to talk in pairs about what they know about each of the characters without looking back at the book. Get feedback from the whole class.

Chapter 2

Before reading
5 Discuss: Write the title The journey begins on the board. Then put students in groups to discuss the following questions: What's the longest/nicest/most uncomfortable journey you've ever been on? How do you prefer to travel? Have you had any problems when travelling? What problems do you think the pilgrim will have on his journey?

While reading (p. 21, after 'Here, also, is a letter to my father in the capital.')
6 Write: Ask students to discuss in pairs what Mrs Ch'en would have written in the letter and get feedback. Then have the students write the letter individually.

Chapter 3

While reading (p. 39, after 'After hearing Pigsy's story, Tripitaka told Monkey to untie him.')
8 Write: Get students to discuss what Pigsy's story includes in pairs and then ask them to write it down in the first person (as if they were Pigsy) individually. Encourage them to include feelings and impressions.

Chapter 4

Before reading
10 Discuss: Tell students that Tripitaka has a dream in the next chapter and put them in small groups to discuss the following questions: Do you usually remember your dreams? Do you ever have bad dreams? Do you ever have the same dream twice? Do you think dreams have a meaning?

After reading
11 Pair work: Put the students in pairs to make a list of weather vocabulary used in this chapter. Then give them five minutes to add more words to the list. Write all the words on the board and then get them to discuss the following questions: What kinds of weather do you like and dislike? How does the weather affect how you feel? What would be your perfect climate? What do you think the weather is like in England?

Chapter 5

After reading
12 Write and guess: Write The Great King of Magic takes the life of three children every year. on the board. Elicit which word is wrong from the students (two not three). Now students choose another sentence from Chapter 5 and rewrite it changing one word. Students interact, reading out their sentences and the other students have to identify and correct the mistake.

Chapter 6

After reading
14 Discuss: Write the following adjectives on the board: brave, calm, cheerful, clever, confident, cowardly, crazy, daring, emotional, enthusiastic, fair, foolish, generous, greedy, honest, independent, innocent, jealous, nasty, nervous, normal, obedient, patient, positive, religious, selfish, sensible, stupid, violent, wise. Put the students in small groups to discuss the following questions: Which of these adjectives would you use to describe Tripitaka, Monkey, Pigsy and Sandy and why? How do their characters change during their journey? What do they learn? Which of these adjectives would you use to describe yourself? Have you changed since you were a child? What things affect the way a person is? Do you think you will change in the future? What things do we learn as we make our journey through life?