The Complex Mix of Chinese Folk Religion and Mythology with Daoist and Buddhist Beliefs in *The Journey to the West*

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The 16th century fictional Chinese tale *The Journey to the West* represents many aspects in Chinese culture including Chinese folk religion and mythology, along with Daoist and Buddhist beliefs. Using the characters and their adventures, *The Journey to the West* provides an entertaining look into the mixed ideologies of the Chinese people, over the last three millennia and of today.

Monk Xuanzang, or Tripitaka, is an historical figure from 7th century China. “He did write a brief record of his experience during his travels,” (Puchner 171). His travels entail a journey from China to India in order to bring back sacred scriptures of Buddhism. It was a perilous but successful journey that took seventeen years to complete. Quoting Anthony Yu, “Xuanzang’s journey, you could imagination, would be like someone trying to walk about from Portland, ME to Los Angeles, but the Rockies are not as tall as the Himalayas,” ([learner](http://www.learner.org/courses/worldlit/journey-to-the-west/watch/)). Once returned to China, he spent his life translating the scriptures from Sanskrit into Chinese and was heralded by the elite. His journey also got the attention of the common people. The story of Monk Xuanzang was handed down over centuries, either told orally or done as a drama. Around 900 years after the monk’s journey, a one hundred-chapter novel was published, using the monk’s story as a loose guide while combining and adding to the 900 years worth of retelling. The essentials of the monk’s story stay similar to history, but that’s about where the non-fiction ends.

The one hundred-chapter novel is attributed to Wu Cheng’en. “Scholars are not entirely certain whether Wu Cheng’en did indeed give final shape to the story and was the author of the 1592 edition of *The Journey to the West*. But a local gazetteer of his home prefecture connects this title to his name. This piece of evidence is supported by the fact that Wu had a reputation for being a versatile poet (there are over 1,700 poems in the novel), and for writing on mythical and supernatural subjects in a satirical style,” (Puchner 170). Englishman Arthur Waley translated the story into English in 1942, but it was an abridged version and did not contain any of the poems. Anthony Yu’s translated volumes (1977-1983) contain the full one hundred chapters along with the poems, translated for the first time into English. Our *Norton Anthology* contains ten chapters from Yu’s translation.

*The Journey to the West* combines religion, culture, adventure, and magical mischievous fun for the reader. It is a story to be loved by adults and children alike, as told by Anthony Yu, (again, translator of *The Journey to the West* found in our *Norton Anthology World Literature* textbook). In an interview he gave with the Chinese National Language Conference in Washington, Yu describes how he first fell for the stories in the Wu Cheng’en classic. It was during the wars when he was very young. His grandfather would tell him the stories of the Monkey King at nighttime when the Japanese were dropping bombs in nightly raids. From early on, Yu loved the stories of the magical and mischievous Monkey King([AsiaSociety](http://asiasociety.org/video/education/anthony-yu-journey-west)). In the ten chapters we have in our textbook, Yu translates Wu Cheng’en’s tale from 1592 into English so that all ages, from children to adults can enjoy…maybe not the language, but definitely the stories. It also gives the West a chance to better experience the East, so that we can find commonalities and overlaps, seek better understanding of each other just as Tripitaka sought better understanding of the Way and Buddhism, and so made his journey west to India.

From its whimsical and magical adventures in the myth like tales to its deep and at times satirical look into folk religion, and Daoist and Buddhist beliefs, *The Journey to the West* is a tale to make us be amazed, laugh out loud and take our own journey in thought at the same time. This essay will explore the mixture of Chinese folk religion with mythology, Daoist and Buddhist beliefs in this Chinese fiction classic by using the main characters and their adventures. First, however, we must find an understanding of Chinese folk religion.

**Chinese Folk Religion**

This is not a simple task. For one thing, it is a debatable and relatively new topic. What is Chinese folk religion? In China, myths and folk religion go hand in hand, along with Daoism and Buddhism. In *Chinese Mythology A to Z*, Jeremy Roberts says, “In studying Chinese myths, scholars sometimes use the term folk religion to separate ancient beliefs practiced in local areas from the “state” traditions, such as Buddhism and Daoism. However, the line between them is not very neat and should not be seen as anything more than a useful guide,” (Roberts 45). In a 2011 article called “Defining Chinese Folk Religion: A Methodological Interpretation”, Wai Yip Wong begins by saying, “The major dilemma of defining Chinese folk religion was that it could be defined neither by its belief contents nor characteristics, as these might also be found in other religious traditions,” (Wong 153). Herein lies the issue, Chinese folk religion, while being the beliefs of the largest population of Chinese, is not a singular thing. It combines elements of Chinese mythology, Buddhism, Daoism, among other beliefs. Wong uses Chinese scholars L.Q. Chen (2008), Lin (2008), and Zhu (2009) to point this out. “According to their studies, most of the religious believers in China are actually followers of Chinese folk religion rather than Buddhism or Taoism. In other words, the number of ‘true’ Buddhists and Taoists in China is extremely low,” (Wong 154).

Important yet elusively definable, here goes. Chinese religious philosophy began pre-Confucian with the Oracle Bones, a way for the Chinese to communicate with their ancestors and be given answers to questions they would ask. Ancestor worship has been around in China for a long time, about 12th century BCE. Confucius came in between 551-479 BC and heralded tradition and social hierarchy. We studied *The Analects* early on in this ENG 563 class. Daoism joined in the mix around the 4th century BC, bringing to the Chinese the Great Way, immortals and deities or shens, Yin-yang, the concept of the five elements, and much more. Ancestral and ancient philosophies, Confucianism, Daoism all mixed together. Then, Buddhism arrives from the West. In his book *CHINESE GODS An Introduction to Chinese Folk Religion*, Jonathon Chamberlain states, “Buddhism-the *other* religion of the Chinese- while having a great effect on China did not in any basic way change the patterns of beliefs. It could only dig itself in by itself changing,” (Chamberlain 71). Chinese folk religion is in essence a combination of some of each of these.

Although it is the largest “religion” in China, Chinese folk religion (also called popular religion, folk beliefs, Chinese Cults) is not in and of itself, a singular kind of religion, to which Westerners are more accustomed. Stephan Feuchtwang writes in his book *Popular Religion in China: The Imperial Metaphor* on page *v*. of the Preface, “This is a book about Chinese popular religion. A sensible reader will ask: What’s that? What is its name? We have come to expect of religions that they can be named like identities of nature or cultures or at least can be understood by doctrines. But in this case, these sensible questions must be given a disconcerting answer, because it has no name. This is not a religion of a book…In fact religion here is simply a category and not a singular thing.”

Chinese folk religion does not rely on a singular text or specific doctrine, nor is it limited to outer structure. It is more of a “diffused religion”. Wong quotes Yung Li as saying in 1967:

“Traditional Chinese religious belief has important characteristics, which make it difficult from the western religions. First of all, it is a form of ‘diffused religion,’ which is different from the ‘institutional religion’ in the West… ‘Diffused religion is referred to the cultural religious belief that does not involve any systematical doctrine, authoritative scripture, or strictly organized institution. The belief contents of diffused religion are mixed with our everyday life with no significant differentiation. For example, the Chinese folk religion has contained traditional concepts such as ancestor worship, deities worship, seasonal ritual, cultural ceremony and etiquette, as well as certain incantation or even worldview. The beliefs of this religion are diffused into our culture and everyday life…. Therefore, the Western concept of religion is inapplicable to this religion of the Chinese people,” (Wong 161).

**Characters**

The idea of Chinese folk religion-a diffused religion- is everywhere in *The Journey to the West*. Beginning with the characters, we see the infusion of interests and beliefs inherent in the story and the Chinese people. The main characters are constructed with a mix of Chinese folk religion, myth, Daoism, and Buddhism. From the very beginning there is the monkey- born in a myth-like manner. The first line of the story begins the myth. “There was on top of that very mountain an immortal stone, which measured thirty-six feet and five inches in height and twenty-four feet in circumference,” (Wu Cheng ‘en 173). The stone gives birth to a stone egg, which becomes a monkey. This mythical birth to a stone monkey is followed by the monkey becoming king of his people for a heroic jump into a waterfall. After this, there is a testimonial poem translated by Anthony Yu:

“When triple spring mated to produce all things,

A divine stone was quickened by the sun and the moon.

The egg changed to a monkey, perfecting the Great Way,” (Wu Cheng ‘en 177).

The divine stone is symbolic of a myth; the triple spring playing a role is a part of Chinese folk religion and Daoism with the 5 elements, and the Great Way is the Dao. Monkey is myth, folk religion and Dao caught up together from the beginning, and he becomes even more.

Journey to the West is about the adventures of this Stone Monkey King with the Buddhist Monk Xuanzang, or Tripitaka. This character is fashioned on that one bit of reality in the story’s origin. “Xuanzang,” of our story, “had no love for glory or wealth, being dedicated wholly to the pursuit of Nirvana…Not one of the thousands of classics and sutras had he failed to master; none of the Buddhist chants and hymns was unknown to him,” (Wu Cheng ‘en 188).

We meet Monkey King in chapter 1. At the end of chapter 1, Monkey King learns from a Daoist Immortal and becomes an immortal himself. He is given great and mythical powers, and even granted a surname, Sun Wukong (Wake-to Vacuity). We meet the Buddhist monk Xuanzang in chapter 12. Other characters in this beginning also show the mix of Daoism and Buddhism. For example, there is the Daoist Immortal who trains Monkey King in chapter 1 known as the Patriarch, as well as the ever-important Bodhisattva Guanyin in chapter 12. Bodhisattvas are those who have reached full Buddhahood but stay around on earth in order to help those with suffering. According to Jeremy Roberts, “Some bodhisattvas are historical figures, though their stories have been embroidered with legend. Others seem to have been based on or confused with older gods, either from India or China. Important bodhisattvas in Chinese Buddhism include Milo Fo, Guanyin (also known as Avalokite¯avara or Kannon), and xukongzang (Akasagarbha),” (Roberts 11). Guanyin is the one Wu Cheng’en chose for this tale. Anthony Yu compares Guanyin to Glenda, the good fairy in *The Wizard of Oz*, which happens to be a similar tale of one mortal traveling with three “others” in a strange land towards an important goal. ([learner](http://www.learner.org/courses/worldlit/journey-to-the-west/watch/)). Bodhisattva Guanyin is the one who explains the Little Vehicle and Great Vehicle of Buddhism. She says, “In my possession is the Tripitaka, the Great Vehicle Law of Buddha, which is able to save the damned, deliver the afflicted, and fashion the indestructible body,” (Wu Cheng’en 194). She explains the Tripitaka (sacred Buddhist scriptures) are located in India, to which the Tang Emperor asks for a volunteer. He asks, “Who is willing to accept our commission to seek scriptures from the Buddha in the Western Heaven?” (Wu Cheng’en 195). Xuanzang volunteers. The abridged version doesn’t tell us, but Monkey King gets assigned to escort Xuanzang, now Tripitaka, to India. So now we have a Buddhist monk traveling with a mythically magical Monkey King Daoist Master born from a stone egg.

The anthology version then skips to chapter 44, where Monkey King (now called Pilgrim) and Monk Xuanzang are joined by the other companions. The first is the comical character- Bajie, or Pigsy (usually called Idiot). Puchner describes him as “a Daoist immortal who was banned to the human world for flirting with a goddess,” (Puchner 171). Again, we see the mix of Chinese folk religion, mythology, and Daoist deities. The fourth member of the journey is Sha monk, “a former marshal of the hosts of Heaven who was sent to the bottom of a river to expiate the sin of having broken the crystal cup of the Jade Emperor, a powerful Daoist Deity,” (Puchner 171). The Jade Emperor, of course, is often present, in beginning and end. He is a main *shen* who lives on the mythological Jade Mountain. Buddha is ever present in the story, as the head god of the West. The intertwining of Chinese folk religion, mythology, Daoist and Buddhist beliefs are ever present in the characters.

**Adventures**

The adventures in this story not only entertain the young and old, as stated early on, they also shed more light into the complex mixture of Chinese folk religion, Chinese mythology, and Daoist and Buddhist beliefs. Early modern Chinese vernacular literature like this of Wu Cheng’en could infuse these beliefs and speak to the culture of its people. In the introduction to the unit, Puchner states, “This literature was much more adept at handling themes and topics that had been outside the purview of classical literature, such as sex, violence, corruption, social satire, and slapstick humor,” (Puchner 165). *The Journey to the West* uses all of these as Xuanzang and his three disciples make their way west, to obtain the sacred Buddhist texts.

In chapter 44, the Daoist and Buddhist beliefs are set apart. Pilgrim says, “I have heard someone say that there is a place on the road to the West where Daoism is revered and Buddhism is set for destruction,” (Wu Cheng’en 197). We are introduced to three Daoist Immortals who have commands over the elements, and even the power to trick a king into possession of all the Buddhist monks to be used as slaves. I thought it was interesting how the monk slaves had to beware of escaping. In this place on the road West, every town had a picture of the monks displayed. “It bears on top the royal inscription that any official who catches a monk will be elevated three grades, and any private citizen who does so will receive a reward of fifty taels of white silver,” (Wu Cheng’en 201). This shows a complex mix of the social hierarchy inherent in Chinese folk culture, stemming back to Confucius.

Chapter 46 opens with the line, “We were telling you that when the kind saw Pilgrim Sun’s ability to summon dragons and command sages, he immediately applied his treasure seal to the travel rescript,” (203). The dragon is one of the greatest symbols in Chinese mythology. The chapter then moves onto into another adventure where the journeymen are being blocked in their way by deities. Here again we have the three Daoist Immortals. The king is going to grant the travelers a pass to move along, but the Daoists insist that they wage another contest with the travelers before he lets them leave. The Daoists place a Daoist boy in a chest, questioning the monk’s ability to use magic for object removal (to know what’s inside). Pilgrim uses invisibility to get into the chest and convince the boy to come out clanking a stick on a wooden fish and chanting the name of Buddha when given the signal. When the Daoists question the monk and ask what’s inside, “Pressing his palms together, Tripitaka replied, ‘It’s a monk in the chest.’ All at once the youth kicked open the chest and walked out, striking the wooden fish and chanting the name of Buddha. So delighted were the two rows of civil and military officials that they shouted bravos repeatedly; so astonished were the three Daoists that they could not utter a sound,” (Wu Cheng’en 205). This angers the Daoist Immortals who challenge the travellers yet again. When this time it’s a head cutting off competition, Pilgrim wins again and allows the monk and his disciples to escape with their lives once again.

This is a recurring theme in the story. Tripitaka gets in trouble; Pilgrim has to save him. Tripitaka is fearful, holy, but weak and dependent; Pilgrim is powerful, fun, and arrogant. The Yin-yang of Chinese folk religion and Daoism is very apparent in the actions of these characters like in chapter 46. The complex mix of the mythical magic, the elements of Chinese folk religion and Daoist and Buddhist beliefs find depth and comedy in these chapters. Like in chapter 46, Tripitaka gets in trouble as well in chapters 53, 54, and 55. If only one chapter of the story is read, make it 53. This is where the monk and Idiot drink the water that makes them pregnant, which of course Monkey has to battle a Bull Demon King to remedy.

In 54 the characters get almost attacked by a town full of females (not that Pigsy minds). The land’s queen says that the one man, the Buddhist monk, must marry her. Tripitaka seeks the Daoist Monkey’s advice. Tripitaka asks his disciples, “How could I consent to lose my original *yang* and destroy the virtue of Buddhism, to leak my true sperm and fall from the humanity of our faith?" (Wu Cheng’en 217). Pilgrim, of course, comes up with a plot to free the monk from an order to marry the queen of the land, but this doesn’t happen until chapter 55, where Pilgrim battles and defeats a scorpion spirit, with help from Bodhisattva Guanyin. The victory insures again safe travels for the four, until the next chapter, which if we want to read, we have to get the unabridged version.

Our anthology version now goes to the conclusion, the final three chapters. In chapter 98, Pilgrim, Pigsy, and sha monk deliver the Tripitaka to the gates of Buddha. The four travel inside, up to the Spirit Mountain where a disguised Buddha in a bottomless boat meets them. As they question the validity of the boat, the Buddha replies in a poem:

“This boat of mine…upon the wind and the wave it’s still secure,

with no end or beginning its joy is sure.

It can return to One, completely clean,

Through ten thousand kalpas a sail serene.

Though bottomless boats may ne’er cross the sea,

This ferries all souls through eternity,” (Wu Cheng’en 225).

As the monk gets into the boat, his soul transcends the mortal world. The fellow travelers recognize his corpse floating in the water, yet he is still beside them in the boat. Even the Buddha as boatman congratulates the monk on his transcendence as “they crossed the Divine Cloud-Transcending Stream all safe and sound,” (Wu Cheng’en 225). The four travelers receive the holy scrolls of scriptures, but when they have nothing with which to bribe the two Honored Ones, the scrolls that they receive are blank. They get a little ways away before realizing this trick. Upon bringing them back to the Buddha and requesting new ones, the Buddha says, “But these blank texts are actually true, wordless scriptures, and they are just as good as those with words,” (Wu Cheng’en 229). Here we get a glimpse into the Daoist idea that once you speak the Dao, you have negated it. The Great Dao is not definable.

Chapters 99 and 100 wrap up the epic. In chapter 99, the Chinese folk religion’s symbolic 9, or even more symbolic 9 times 9 or 81 enters in with the Buddhist belief when the Buddha commands the 81st tribulation to come to fruition for the monk to receive full Buddhahood. Number 81 happens as the travelers return to the Land of the East, arriving safely at the start of chapter 100. Xuanzang reaches full Buddhahood, as he was unable to do in his previous life as the Buddha’s disciple. He is given a new name- Buddha of Candana Merit. Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, also is granted Buddhahood and the name Buddha Victorious in Strife. However, Pigsy simply gets a little promotion, “Because (he is) still talkative and lazy,” (Wu Cheng’en 242).

There is indeed a complex mix in the ideologies of Chinese folk religion. It combines elements of Buddhism, Daoism, Chinese Mythology plus the cultural rituals from ancestors past. Therefore it makes sense that a wonderful tale could infuse them together, in an amusing way, for the Chinese people to enjoy. Thankfully, post 20th century Westerners can begin to delve into this mix as well, and perhaps take our own journey- to the East.

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