

RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF WU CHENG'EN'S NOVEL «JOURNEY TO THE WEST»

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Abstract

"Journey to the West" is a great Chinese work of fiction written presumably by Wu Cheng'en in the XVI century describing a pilgrimage from China to India of a devoted Buddhist monk and his supernatural disciples. The novel derives its material from folk tales and myths, but structures it into a narration both deep and brilliant.

The time when the work was written, imperial China of the late Ming Dynasty, saw co-existence and even syncretism of Neo-Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. The three teachings penetrated and influenced each other, sometimes even blending into a kind of syncretical philosophy. Different concepts and categories of different religions were artificially "harmonized" to prove the popular idiom that "Three Religions are One".

Like many other writings of the period "Journey to the West" employs ideas and concepts of three major religious schools of the period. The author of the novel deliberately uses mutually interpretative terms which allow different experts, scholars and religious practitioners interpret the novel as an allegory of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, ecology etc. All of these interpretations are based on the spirit and letter of the great novel, emphasizing its various sides. So the novel is in all probability an example of Chinese religious syncretism with hidden hints and allusions, an enormous medieval hypertext with references and quotations from different religious texts.

What the majority of commentators do agree upon is that "Journey to the West" tells a story of spiritual transformation. While the meaning of religious symbolism can be understood in different ways, depending on the interpreter's own beliefs, the basic ascetic and soteriological truths of this story are understood by all interpreters in the same way. "Journey to the West" is a story of a soul seeking truth and salvation. This search leads it through trials, temptations and internal conflicts, but at the same time harmonizes the whole personality of a human, strengthens them in mercy and courage, and ultimately leads to self-awareness and immortality.

Keywords

Journey to the West; Wu Cheng'en; Buddhism; Chan-Buddhism; Taoism; interpretation; text; Sun Wukong; Monkey King; nirvana; Taoist alchemy; Christianity; enlightenment; Buddhist scriptures; sutra; Tang Xuanzang



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РЕЛИГИОЗНЫЕ ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИИ РОМАНА У ЧЭН-ЭНЯ «ПУТЕШЕСТВИЕ НА ЗАПАД»

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Аннотация

«Путешествие на Запад» - это Великое китайское художественное произведение, написанное предположительно У Чэн-энем в XVI веке и описывающее паломничество из Китая в Индию буддийского монаха и его сверхъестественных учеников. Роман черпает свой материал из народных сказок и мифов, но структурирует его в повествование одновременно глубокое и блестящее.

Время, когда работа была написана, императорский Китай конца династии Мин, видел сосуществование и даже синкретизм неоконфуцианства, даосизма и буддизма. Эти три учения проникали и влияли друг на друга, иногда даже сливаясь в, своего рода, синкретическую философию. Различные концепции и категории различных религий были искусственно "гармонизированы", чтобы доказать популярную идиому, что "три религии суть одно".

Как и многие другие сочинения того периода «Путешествие на Запад» использует идеи и концепции трех основных религиозных школ. Автор романа сознательно использует амбивалентные термины, которые позволяют различным экспертам, ученым и религиозным практикам интерпретировать роман как аллегорию буддизма, даосизма, конфуцианства, христианства, экологизма и др. Все эти интерпретации основаны на духе и букве великого романа, подчеркивая его различные стороны. Так что роман, по всей вероятности, является примером китайского религиозного синкретизма со скрытыми намеками и аллюзиями, огромным средневековым гипертекстом со ссылками и цитатами из разных религиозных текстов.

Большинство комментаторов сходятся во мнении, что «Путешествие на Запад» – это история духовного преображения. Хотя значение религиозной символики может быть понято по-разному, в зависимости от собственных убеждений интерпретатора, основные аскетические и сотериологические истины этой истории понимаются всеми интерпретаторами одинаково. «Путешествие на Запад» - это история души, ищущей истину и спасение. Этот поиск ведет через испытания, искушения и внутренние конфликты, но в то же время гармонизирует личность человека, укрепляет его в милосердии и мужестве, и в конечном итоге ведет к самосознанию и бессмертию.

Ключевые слова

Путешествие на Запад; У Чэн-энь; буддизм; Чань-буддизм; даосизм; интерпретация; текст; Сунь Укун; Царь Обезьян; нирвана; даосская алхимия; христианство; просвещение; буддийский канон; сутры; Танский монах Сюаньцзан



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*The myriad things have ever been one body;
 Each body, too, contains a cosmos.
 I dare open a clear eye on the world,
 And strive to root anew its hills and streams.*
 “The Tower of Myriad Mirrors” (Tang Yue)

The XVI century Chinese novel 西游记“Journey to the West” written presumably by a minor official 吴承恩Wu Chengen during the Ming Dynasty period is very loosely based on the real events: the journey of a VII century Buddhist monk Xuanzang through western regions of China to Kashgar and then to India, where he spent some years learning the language and studying doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism. The XVI century “Journey to the West” although keeping Xuanzang as one of the main characters supplements a human character with magical creatures and tells a story of a different odyssey, one with epic battles against monsters and demons, a narration at the same time heroic, realistic and satirical. It is considered one of the best pieces of fiction in China and has enjoyed ever-growing popularity since the days of its publication.

The novel begins with the story of a Stone Monkey, a creature born by Heaven and Earth who was destined to wonderful deeds from his birth. First the Stone Monkey becomes the king of monkey tribes on the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit. Then, shocked by realization that all creatures are due to die he strives for immortality and goes on a search through land and sea for the way to get it. He learns magic from a Taoist patriarch and becomes a shape-shifter and an invincible warrior. Returning to his mountain the hero – whose human name by now is 孙悟空Sun Wukong (Aware of the Emptiness)–boasts of his skills and defies Heaven.

In order to placate him the heavenly ruler Jade emperor summons the monkey to the palace and gives him a minor office – that of a stall boy, but when the monkey realizes how humiliatingly humble his new position is he returns back to his kingdom and wouldn’t be placated until he gets a title 齐天大圣Great Sage Equal to Heaven. This time he is put in charge of heavenly peach gardens, but enraged for not being invited to the feast he eats the peaches and other delicacies of the immortals, drinks the festive wine and runs back to his Mountain of Flowers and Fruit. The enraged Jade emperor sends troops after heavenly troops to subdue Monkey King, but the hero’s enormous magic power and courage makes him invincible. Even after taken prisoner and subjected to tortures and executions Monkey King is able to survive and escape. In his hubris he begins to think he really is



equal to Heaven and demands the throne of the Emperor to himself – half seriously though.

When all the saints and immortals run in fear, Buddha comes to the rescue and subdues the rebellious monkey. Monkey King is thrown under a Mountain of Five Elements where he has to suffer hunger and thirst for five hundred years until he repents and expresses his readiness to help a human pilgrim in search for Buddhist scriptures.

Then the novel turns to this human character, a monk from the Chinese Tang Dynasty Empire whose monastic name is 玄奘 Xuanzang and who is called 唐僧 Tang monk throughout the narration. Born to a noble family he is raised in a Buddhist cloister and becomes an erudite and an ascetic of high spiritual standing. The young monk helps the emperor in a serious mystical predicament and becomes the monarch's sworn brother. Then Buddha sends bodhisattva Guanyin to China to choose a true and devoted monk to undertake a pilgrimage to India. The pilgrim must get true untarnished religious texts in order to help ignorant people of China to get salvation. The salvation must be deserved; therefore the pilgrimage must be hard and dangerous.

Guanyin chooses Xuanzang for the mission, he also receives the direct order of the emperor to bring scriptures to China and thus to promote true religion. The monk starts on a journey but his human companions very soon die or run away. Then he comes to the Mountain of Five Elements where Monkey King is imprisoned, releases him with a prayer and takes him as his first disciple. The second disciple would join them later – he is a former Taoist saint who committed a crime and was banished on earth in an ugly shape of a pig monster. His Buddhist name is 悟能 (Aware of the Abilities) or 猪八戒 Zhu Bajie, or literally Pig of Eight Commandments. The third disciple, 沙和尚 Sha Heshang is a sand monster, a former cannibal who, like other two, joined the group to atone for his crimes. The horse that the monk rides is also a magic creature, a White Dragon who was sentenced to death for filial impiety but allowed to atone by joining the quest for the sutras. The small group travels through different countries conquering demons and helping all people in need on their way.

As for the demons there is no lack of them, in fact all the demons big and small try to capture the monk and eat him. It turns out the monk Xuanzang used to be an arahant, the second disciple of Buddha in his previous life, so eating his flesh can make one immortal. The other way to become immortal is to have sex with this monk, so all female demons and witches do their best to capture and seduce him. Monkey King and his brother pilgrims fight against these demons while Taoist and Buddhist saints and spirits help them in need if they fail to deal with a demon

themselves. So the rest of the story depicts fights against demons and evil humans until the journey is over and the holy scriptures are granted to the pilgrims. They bring the scriptures to China and then, free from the bounds of mortal flesh, they once more return to Buddha's abode and attain nirvana.

Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, the Great Sage Equal to Heaven is the main hero and the focus of the novel. His loyalty, intelligence and strong will carry the narration – and his fellow-travelers – through all the hardships of the journey. He is the central force that leads the mission to success. His personal growth is immense: from willfulness, childish rebellions and self-aggrandizement he develops into an impeccable character whose kindness matches his courage, a “knight without fear or reproach” – though still a trickster, eager to laugh and make jokes. As a reward he earns the title Victorious Buddha, or Buddha Victorious in Strife (斗战胜佛) – the title that perfectly matches his achievements and his bellicose nature.

It is to his charismatic personality that the novel owns its centuries-long popularity among the Chinese people and those who live in the Chinese cultural areal and/or affected by the Chinese culture. The immense popularity of Monkey King's image only grows and expands with the development of mass media. In the medieval times he was the character of Beijing drama performances (See Photo 1), the subject of fine and applied arts (See Photo 2-3) and a toy for children (See Photo 4). Now he is literally everywhere – on the screen of computers and cell phones as a wallpaper image (See Photo 5-6), as a logotype of commercial companies (See Photo 7), as leading character of educational programs and APPs (See Photo 8). His story is made into new books, films, computer games (See Photos 9-10), animated cartoons, TV-serials, new songs and pieces of music (See Attachments No 1-3). He stands for everything that the Chinese deem important as an embodiment of the nation, as its never-dying spirit (See Photos 11-12).



Photo 1



Photo 2 and 3

Dr. Hu Shi, one of the most influential advocates of Chinese language reform and popularization of Chinese literature in the West, viewed the novel in terms of folk tradition. In his introduction to the first American edition of the novel, Hu wrote: "Freed from all kinds of allegorical interpretations by Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian commentators, *Monkey* is simply a book of good humor, profound nonsense, good-natured satire and delightful entertainment" (胡 Hu 1986, 66-67).

Other scholars believe this statement to be ultimately wrong. Like so many works of art worldwide, “*Journey to the West*” derives its material from folk tales and myths, but structures it into a narration both deep and brilliant. Quoting Liu Xiaolian’s insightful remark: “The image of a pilgrim embarking on a journey to a successful goal provides the most appropriate means for an author to depict the human experience of spiritual transformation and enlightenment. The plot of an allegorical journey may vary in terms of pilgrims’ religious background, their destinations and their objectives, but the fictional content necessarily operates on two levels: the literal dimension of the protagonists’ movements and actions, and the symbolic or figurative aspect revealed through their physical progress” (Liu 1991, 34)

That “*Journey to the West*” is an allegory of certain philosophical and religious ideas – apart from being an exotic travelogue and an adventure novel – this is a kind of axiom generally agreed upon by scholars from East and West, from imperial times up to nowadays. Yes, an allegory, but an allegory of what precisely?



Photo 4

Anyone who has read the text at least once can perceive that it deals with Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, three major brunches of Chinese religious thought. But what prevails, what does the novel stand for? To some of the scholars and philosophers the book contains hidden or not-so-hidden recipes of Taoist enlightenment and self-cultivation (See for ex. Wang and Xu 2016, 程Cheng 2010, 陈 Chen 2015). To others the text supported – or subverted - traditional Confucian bases of the society. To some others the text is a purely Buddhist instruction packed in colorful clothing (See for ex. Hui 2015, Bantly 2013, Schulz 2000). Yet to many others it is all of the above – a mixture of ideas drawn from all three major religions (See for ex. Yu 1983, 1989, 2014; Ronan 1992).

Late imperial China saw co-existence and even syncretism of Neo-Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. The three teachings penetrated and influenced each other, sometimes even blending into a kind of syncretical philosophy, which Chinese literati were eager to follow. Even their courtesy names (the names which men of letters gave themselves to reflect their ideological ideas) show this merging. Thus, suffixes like 道人 *daoren* (Taoist) and 居士 *jushi* (lay Buddhist) became popular names, moreover, a professed Buddhist could call himself *daoren* while an adept of Taoism or rigorous follower of Confucius would choose *jushi* as his courtesy name. As Zhou Zuyan notices “Among the most renowned men of letters from the late Ming to mid-Qing one can find few without such a suffix attached to their courtesy names” (Zhou 2013, 15). The scholar believes that the prevalence of such courtesy names testifies to the influence of Taoism and Buddhism on the outlooks of Confucian scholars.



Photo 5 and 6



It is noticeable that the kind of Buddhism that appealed to Chinese intellectuals most of all was Chan (or Zen) Buddhism, the kind which by late imperial period incorporated many ideas and terms of Taoism, to the extent that to many Chinese scholars it was “hardly distinguished from Taoism” or even “no more than Taoism in Buddhist garb” (Zhou 2013, 101).



Photo 7

The author of the story broadly uses religious terminology; moreover, one and the same term that he employs can have similar or entirely different meanings in different religious traditions. This was a general tendency of the late Ming and early Qing literature: Chinese writers, highly educated and well versed in different religions, deliberately wrote texts that contained mutually interpretative terms (Yu 2014). This is exactly what Monkey Kings’s first teacher does:

*“For a while he lectured on Dao;
For a while he spoke on Chan—
To harmonize the Three Parties is a natural thing” (JtW 2012 Vol. 1,
45).*

Different concepts and categories of different religions were artificially “harmonized” to prove the popular idiom that “Three Religions are One”. A Neo-Confucian scholar 王守仁 Wang Shouren wrote an exemplary passage on this approach claiming that “the lessons of Chan Buddhism and of the Sages are all about cultivating to the limit of one’s heart-and-mind”, “Confucianism differs from Chan Buddhism only by a hair’s breadth” (王 Wang 1992, Vol. 1, 257)

So, what we possibly have here is a religious syncretism with hidden hints and allusions, an enormous medieval hypertext with references and quotations from Taoist, Buddhist and Confucian essays. But is “Journey to the West” really such a peaceful blend of doctrines, a religious ragout? Or does the author have any preferences, at least on the surface level?



Photo 8

On the surface level – yes, definitely. One can't fail to notice that all the Taoist saints and spirits are shown inferior to the Buddhist saints. All of them, from the nameless heavenly soldiers to the Jade Emperor, the Supreme Deity of Taoist pantheon, fail more often than not in their battles with adversaries. Be it a rebellious monkey or demons inhabiting the road to the West, the Taoist saints and spirits are simply not strong enough, and then they have to either beat retreat and admit their defeat or resort to the help of bodhisattvas or Buddha himself.

Monkey King, the main character of the novel, shows very little respect to any of them – and why should he, considering the fact that he has defeated them all and they are in awe - if not to say fear - of him even five hundred years later. He comes and goes to their palaces most unceremoniously, makes jokes, demands help and makes jokes again: “I’m Sun Wukong, the Great Sage, Equal to Heaven,” replied the Great Sage, “and I’d like to have an audience with the patriarch.” After the spirit-ministers went inside to make the report, the patriarch left the main hall to escort his visitor into the Palace of Grand Harmony. Pilgrim saluted the patriarch and said, “I must trouble you with a matter” (JtW 2012, Vol.3, 231).

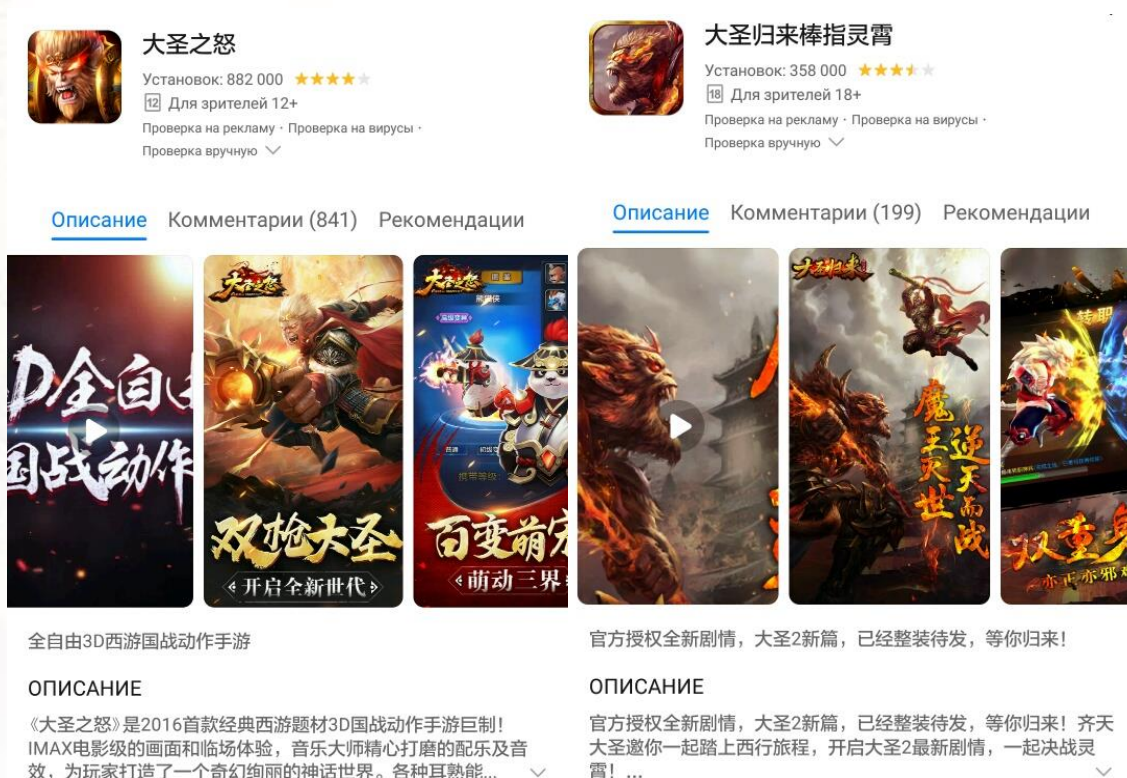


Photo 9 and 10



Photo 11

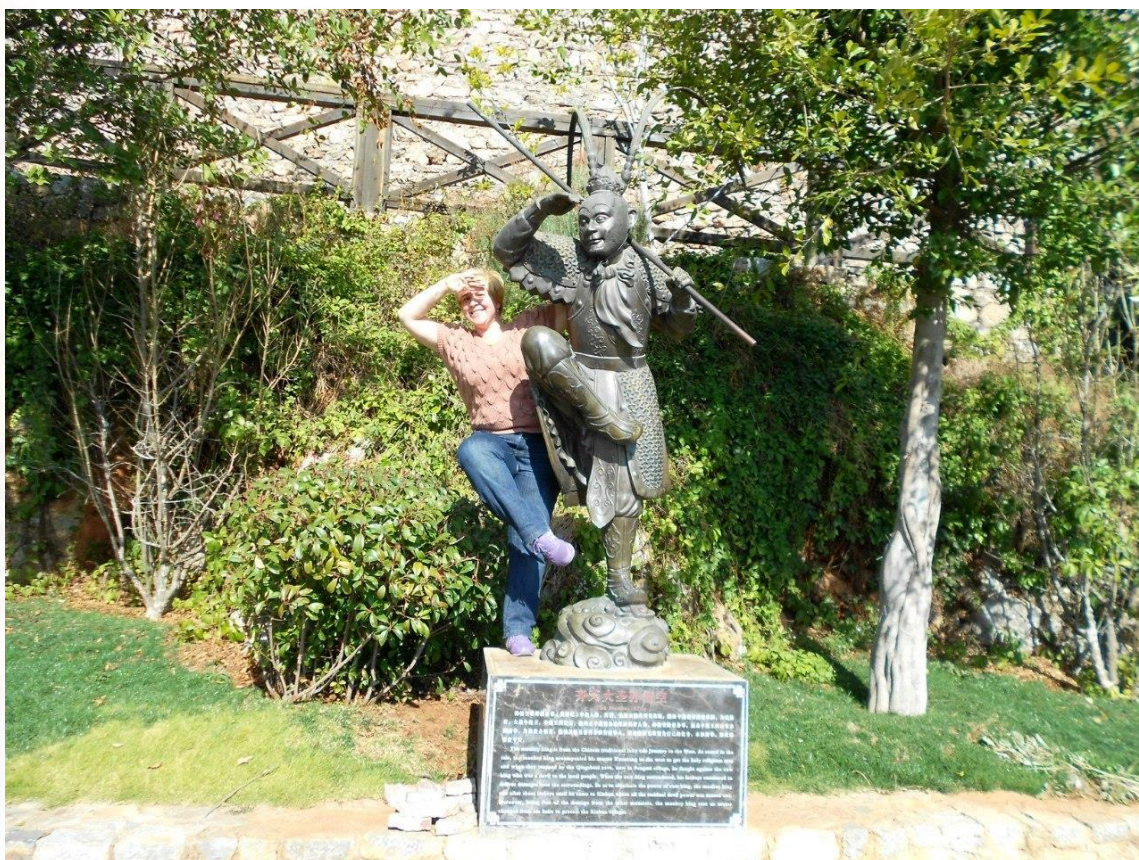


Photo 12



After he does get help he thanks Taoist spirits casually and is off without further delay. Even when standing at the foot of the Jade Emperor's throne the hero would at most bow to him or, as a token of gratitude, pronounce a greeting (ten thousand years) that is obligatory at the presence of a monarch.

His lack of any reverence to the Taoists is shown especially vividly in the episode when he comes to a temple where the Taoist Trinity is worshiped. When Monkey King sees a lot of good food at the altar of the Taoist Trinity, he decides to play a joke - he calls in two other disciples of Tang monk, his younger brothers and subordinates, with their help he pushes the statues off their pedestals (one of the statues is thrown into the latrine pit), then they all climb on the altar and eat the food. This Rabelaisian scene is but a prelude to one more adventure, when Monkey King saves a country from draught – and from Taoist frauds. By the way, there are too many Taoist frauds and impersonators in the novel to say that all religions and all religious adepts are equal in the eye of the author. On the way to the West the pilgrims meet only one greedy Buddhist monk – but all the human Taoists are either cruel hypocrites or imposters, and all the inhuman enemies would originate from Taoist schools or possess this or that Taoist magic.

Monkey King is not so with the Buddhist deities. When he meets a bodhisattva -most often it is Guanyin, his protector and benefactor, but sometimes he would turn to other bodhisattvas for help- he prostrates himself at their feet and speaks most humbly: “Buddhist Patriarch coming from the East, where are you going? Your disciple has improperly barred your way! I’m guilty of ten thousand crimes!” “I came,” replied the Buddhist patriarch, “especially on account of the fiend in the Little Thunderclap.” “I’m grateful for the profound grace and virtue of the holy father,” said Pilgrim. “May I ask from what region did that fiend originate? What sort of treasure is that wrap of his? I beg the holy father to reveal it to me.” (JtW 2012, Vol.3, 278)

Which doesn't mean he wouldn't make jokes at the first opportunity, but that is his jovial character, that is his idiosyncrasy: Monkey King makes jokes even at the edge of death, even when the tears on his face have not dried yet. But jokes or no jokes, he carries himself with Buddhist saints much more reverently, and when facing Buddha he kowtows many times and observes all becoming ceremonies, not the way he behaves in the halls of the Jade Emperor.

The Jade Emperor whom Monkey King defies stands not only for Taoism. His image stands even more for political power, for the whole social and structural hierarchy cemented for centuries by Confucianism or

rather Confucians in the service of the System. It is against the System that Monkey King raises his voice, against the System he sends his scornful laughter – and for this daring revolt his rebellious figure has been loved for centuries by common people of China. The heavenly emperor and his heavenly bureaucrats were not able to appreciate Monkey King’s sharp intelligence and his talents, either giving him minor rank or empty title or sending armies against him and his innocent subjects the monkeys – and the readers can’t but sympathize with the hero’s resistance and wish him what seems impossible – to win over the System.

So the novel is an allegory of some religious significance. What the majority of commentators do agree upon is that it tells the story of spiritual transformation. Monkey King who is often referred to as Monkey of the Mind stands for the mind, the second disciple, the Demon-Pig, ever hungry and ever lustful, stands for the physical body, the horse symbolizes the will, the Tang monk is the soul or, since the Chinese language doesn’t have this notion in a European sense of the word, the Mind-Heart. The five pilgrims are regarded as “different aspects of a single personality, different constitutive elements of an interior journey in quest of self-cultivation or as different kinds of individuals in society” (Yu 2014, 35). The conflicts and quarrels between the members of the group symbolize the inner conflicts that a human has to overcome on the way to salvation. This salvation or spiritual transformation is only possible if all the members of the group – the mind, the soul (heart), the will and the body work together and merge together in a harmonious unity. The demons therefore stand for passions that are to be pacified and subdued – it is but natural that Monkey King is the first to start fighting with these demon-passions, but when the strength of the mind is not enough the celestial help is called upon. All these allegories must be fundamentally true, agreed upon by all the experts on the novel and are basically on the surface.

But what is there beneath the surface?

“JOURNEY TO THE WEST” AS A BUDDHIST ALLEGORY

A deep and lasting influence Buddhism had upon the Chinese culture can be traced on different levels – not only in religious and ceremonious practices (which can be expected) or in architecture and fine arts. Even the Chinese language was affected – a vast lay of thesaurus that is still in use originates from Buddhist texts. Liang Qichao found no less than 35 thousand words of the modern Chinese language to originate from Buddhist scriptures (梁Liang, 2008, 27). Evidently, a peculiarity of introduction of Buddhism in China lay in the fact that “it came as the



religion of the books, as an invasion of a powerful alien textual tradition into a civilization with no less powerful a textual tradition of its own” (Yu 1989, 57). From the beginning Buddhism was a religion of books, a treasure of intellectuals, and it is the obtaining of correct books (and later – correct translations and interpretations) that occupied religious minds.

This preoccupation with true teaching and correct translation made monk Xuanzang, a religious zealot and a talented linguist to travel to India in quest for true untarnished sutras and on bringing them back to China to undertake a tremendous job of translation them into the Chinese language. This feat of religious devotion was imprinted deeply in the memory of generations and generations. The legend of Xuanzang’s travel through Central Asia to far away India was transmitted first through oral and then through written traditions, was fixed in drama and prose, enriched by miraculous adventures and fantastic descriptions until it reached its culmination in Wu Chengen’s one hundred-chapter novel “Journey to the West” – a true masterpiece of Chinese and world fiction.

Buddhist allusions and allegories in the novel are galore. One can write volumes about each of them. For instance, the enigmatic episode when after travelling through thousands miles and overcoming all sorts of hazards and temptations the pilgrims finally reach Buddha and get the long desired scriptures from him – only to find out that the books are empty, wordless sheets! A Buddhist interpretation of the episode views it as an illustration to the Heart Sūtra, which is mentioned so often in the novel. As Andrew Hui explains: “The metaphysics of the empty scriptures and the materiality of the fragmented scriptures deliberately correspond to the Heart Sūtra’s duality of emptiness and form, a duality that is ultimately dissolved in the Buddhist paradox of expressing non-duality through linguistic means” (Hui 2015, 1).

As Buddhism sees all texts as instruments that can be thrown away when the enlightenment is reached, so the pilgrims strive to get the texts, worry when they find out that the texts are not suitable for their purposes – but at the very end of the novel they calmly put the texts down and leave Chinese capital with fragrant wind to face Buddha and receive their reward. Words and texts in Buddhist teaching are necessary yet insufficient tools in search of ultimate truth. Once the Enlightenment is reached, the words become superfluous.

Besides, the text of the novel is abundant with various terms of Buddhism teachings and their visual illustrations. The work of the karmic causation laws, for instance, can be illustrated by the episode when Monkey King returns to his homeland to see it burnt down and devastated. Standing on a rock and looking down on the ruins he sheds tears and

realizes the present disaster is a result of his own actions – his fight against Heaven:

“Our Great Sage became more grief stricken than ever, and he composed the following poem in ancient style. The poem says:

I view this divine mountain and tears fall;

I face it and my sorrows multiply.

It must be for evil deeds in former times

That I should this day suffer so much pain” (JtW 2012, Vol. 2, 79).

But the karmic laws in the novel go beyond simple rewards and punishments. The very journey to the west is undertaken as atonement of sins committed in this or previous lives. On their way the pilgrims come in contact with other humans and inhuman creatures and their fates become intertwined. They save whom they can and the journey, in its tangle of karmic redemptions and ordeals, turns into a real path of salvation.

Monkey King being a disciple of Tang monk and at the same time often serving as his instructor (he is the mind after all) often reminds the human pilgrim about the fundamental truths of Buddhist teachings: "Seek not afar for Buddha on Spirit Mount; Mount Spirit lives only in your mind"; "Maintain your vigilance with the utmost sincerity, and Thunderclap will be right before your eyes. But when you afflict yourself like that with fears and troubled thoughts, then the Great Way and, indeed, Thunderclap seem far away" (JtW 2012, Vol. 4, 79). Tang monk being but a human besieged by illusions of the surrounding world needs to be reminded of the lofty doctrines of his religion professed by the Heart Sūtra: "The Mind is the Buddha and the Buddha is Mind", and this reminding comes naturally from the mind.

The text of the novel can be interpreted as a lecture on Buddhist soteriology. Salvation doesn't lie beyond or above, it is merely obscured in the surrounding world. Thus, Tang monk who faithfully chants sutras, worships Buddha and bodhisattvas and shows religious piety is at the beginning of the journey very far from true realization. He is blinded by external pleasant forms and doesn't see the inner essence. He takes humans for demons and demons for humans; he fails to recognize in six robbers attacking him the manifestations of six senses and is even mad at Monkey King for exterminating them – but what else a Buddhist adept should have done with the illusions of the senses?

The novel should be recognized as a text in which the form and the meaning intermesh: the form being one of the popular Buddhist miracle stories about clever and holy monks saving humans from evil forces while the inner meaning being a faithful reflection of Mahayana ideas (Bantly 2012). The brilliance of the novel, according to this vision lies in the fact



that it takes familiar concepts of karma, emptiness and skillfulness and turns them into literary figures within the plot structure. Francisca Bantly even suggests that “Journey to the West” is not only a piece of fiction with Buddhist allegories – it should be looked upon as a religious text, in fact a real textbook of Mahayana Buddhism in a form of an adventure story.

And not Mahayana only – other interpretations point out that “Journey” is a text on Chan Buddhism with its focus on spontaneous enlightenment as opposed to routine religious practices. When ardent Buddhists failed to notice this deep religious symbolism of the novel they would sometimes try to re-write or supplement it with allegoric stories of more distinct and easily decipherable messages. Thus an anonymous Buddhist author of the late Ming period wrote “The Later Journey to the West” describing another journey of a human monk and inhuman disciples in search of true interpretations of the sutras (Cai 2016 (ed.)). Tung Yue at the beginning of Qing Dynasty wrote “The Tower of Myriad Mirrors” (Tung 2000), a religious phantasmagoria in a form of a built-in extract from the original “Journey”. Discontent with the fact that Monkey King visually defeats his enemies by physical force, this author makes him get entangled into the virtual Green-Green World, a world of passions and illusions, to break out of which the hero needs to attain true spiritual enlightenment.

“JOURNEY TO THE WEST” AS A TAOIST ALLEGORY

“Journey to the West” has been interpreted by many scholars, ancient and modern, as a Taoist allegory because its basic idea is spiritual transformation, which is a core of Taoism, even though the text of the novel “is overlain with Buddhist themes and interspersed with Confucian ideals” (Burton 2002, 150). This core theme of the novel, transformation, is shown through the life course of the main character, Monkey King. The name he gets from his Taoist teacher – 孙悟空 Sun Wukong, “Awareness of Emptiness” or, to be more precise, “A child aware of Emptiness” can be interpreted in Taoist sense as the name of one who uses internal alchemy to designate the maturation of the holy embryo in one's body in order to reach immortality - a process prescribed by the Taoist “Doctrine of the Baby”.

In Taoism, at least in its popular folk-version, there are three spiritual states that a person can obtain. The adept on the second, advanced stage is supposed to be able to fly or float in the sky, to appear and disappear at will in different places, to work miracles – he is freed from all matter of nature and is called the Immortal. The one who ascends to the third stage, that of a Saint, has become a being of extraordinary intelligence and virtue.

Our Monkey King is evidently on the second stage – he possesses powerful magic, he can fly and spring through the air, he is immortal. And yet he “does not transcend his monkey-ness, despite his prodigious abilities and his acquired immortal status. He may be a great and magical monkey; he may perceive himself as equal to Heaven; he may challenge Buddha himself, but ultimately, he is but a base form” (Burton 2002, 142). Monkey King needs to undertake the arduous Journey to attain enlightenment and spiritual liberation. And the quarrels between Monkey King and other disciples of the Tang monk externalize the internal struggles faced by one who seeks enlightenment (Benkert 2014, 15).

Quite in accordance with Taoist traditions, special significance in the text is attached to the numbers. Thus, there are episodes where Buddhism-related number 8 is mentioned and also episodes where number 9, significant to Taoism, is at work. These numbers are also multiplied by themselves and each other – there are 81 ordeals that the pilgrims must endure on their way, 108000 leagues to go etc.

But the main reason to see the text as a Taoist allegory is the language of the novel that yields to Taoist interpretations and is supposed to contain different Taoist formulas and recipes of attaining immortality. For example, three Taoist priests that challenge Monkey King to a competition of magic powers are in fact the spirits of a tiger, a white deer and a mountain goat. Their names, as Anthony Yu points out, “may have come directly from the writings of physiological alchemy found in Taoist cannon” (Yu 2014, 38). In order to attain immortality an adept must learn to reverse bodily flows of sperm, spirit and pneumatic vitality up the spinal region to reach the top of one’s head – the process that is visualized by the images of carts dragged by an ox, a deer and a goat.

Richard Wang and Dongfeng Xu go further and claim that the novel is no Buddhist text at all, and the “three religions” that are so often mentioned on the pages of the book should be read not in a traditional way as Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism but rather as three Taoist entities (spermal essence, pneumatic vitality, and spirit) that must be cultivated in search of longevity and spiritual enlightenment. A colloquial Chinese expression “to talk about cold and warm” used by one of the characters in Chapter (JtW 2012, Vol. 1, 290) which means “to keep a social conversation, to chat about trifles” would be interpreted within this approach as “to discuss Elements of Frost and Heat in Taoist context”, i.e. alluding to “chemical processes external to the body and physiological activities as developed in later theories of internal alchemy” etc (Wang, Xu 2016, 111).



Sometimes Taoist formulas are mouthed in the novel directly. Thus, Monkey King's first teacher reveals to him that "All power resides in the semen, the breath and the spirit" (JtW 2012, Vol. 1, 89). The nickname by which the author often calls Monkey King – the Monkey of the Mind – is an allegory often used not only in Buddhism, but in Taoist schools, especially by 全真Quanzhen sect of Taoism known as Perfected Authenticity. This school emphasizes that the mind, quick and unbalanced as a monkey, must be subdued and controlled – and then released again. Therefore Monkey Kings experience as the disciple of Tang monk is a series of imprisonments and releases, integration and dissolution, in accordance with the idiom 收放心猴 "to subdue or release the Monkey of the Mind".

Understanding of the novel as a textbook of Taoism hidden from profane eyes behind exotic adventures, funny dialogues and heroic combats is offered in Liu Yiming's commentary on "Journey". The revered Taoist Master of the XIX century praised the author of the novel for daring to say aloud what other knowledgeable ones didn't dare say – "revealing the celestial mechanisms". The real message of the text is to be deciphered by reading between the lines: "Sometimes it is hidden in vulgar or ordinary language, sometimes it is conveyed through the description of the terrain and the characters. Sometimes the real is made manifest through the false, sometimes truth is upheld in order to vanquish perversity" (Liu 2017, 5).

The convenience of such reading is that it allows interpreting absolutely everything in a desirable – in this case Taoist – way. Every word is a hidden code and the whole novel can be read as an esoteric encyclopedia of Taoism. If read properly, it gives a method of overturning life and death, of prefiguring Heaven and taking over Creation. Liu concludes very passage of his work with "Only he who knows this is ready to read "Journey to the West" (Liu 2017). Here is one example of Liu Yiming's interpretations: in one chapter, making fun of a demon, Monkey King made him call himself (孙)外公 – maternal grandfather. Liu reads this word as "emptiness without". The havoc in Heaven that Monkey King committed five hundred years ago and of which he often boasts Liu interprets as "anterior to Heaven". If putting these two signs together they would mean that emptiness is prior to creation, therefore one can reach immortality not within oneself but from an external source. "This is the most extraordinary Taoist book of all time!" –concludes the Taoist Master (ibid.).

Taoist reading of "Journey" is a time-honored tradition which is still alive in the works of modern researches and in popular simplified explanations that the Chinese exchange when discussing literature (See

Attachment 4). It even gave rise to modern attempts at connecting “Journey to the West” to *fengshui*, a commercialized version of Taoism that offers advice how to get life success through certain household magic (See Attachment 5).

“JOURNEY TO THE WEST” AS A CONFUCIAN ALLEGORY

The interpretation of the novel as an illustration to the dogmas of Confucianism or Neo-Confucian teachings is known since Ming Dynasty. It is based first of all on the fact that the author of the novel, Wu Chengen, was a learned Confucian scholar who used in his writing all sorts of quotations and allusions to a vast corpus of Confucian texts. The Confucians thus would believe that the novel propagandises “one of the principles of rectifying the mind and rendering sincere the will” (胡Hu, 1986, 390).

One of the basic notions of Confucian teachings is restoration of the harmonious order – the state equally important to both an individual and a country. The order presupposes the hierarchy of things, the ladder of duties and responsibilities epitomized by the “six types of human relations” (between ruler and subject, teacher and student, parents and children, husband and wife, elder and junior siblings). Thus the plot of “Journey” is about the breach of natural and social order – and the processes of its restoration.

Unlike European fiction, the stories about fighting demons in China, as pointed out by Laurie Cozad, depict adversaries not as ontological, immanent evil – the evil forces here are something that for this or that reason fell out of their places in a universal system. As a Confucian scholar would put it “to say that something is evil does not mean that it is inherently so. It is merely because it goes too far or not far enough” (Cozad 1998, 119). The necessity to belong, to be written into the system is reflected in the ambiguous status of Monkey King in the beginning of the novel. It is explicitly described in Chapter 2, where he descends to the realm of the dead and crosses his name out of the list of the mortals:

“The judge hastened into a side room and brought out the ledgers on the ten species of living beings. He (*Monkey King – ES*) went through them one by one—shorthaired creatures, furry creatures, winged creatures, crawling creatures, and scaly creatures—but he did not find his name. He then proceeded to the file on monkeys. You see, though this monkey resembled a human being, he was not listed under the names of men; though he resembled the short-haired creatures, he did not dwell in their kingdoms; though he resembled other animals, he was not subject to the



unicorn; and though he resembled flying creatures, he was not governed by the phoenix” (JtW 2012, Vol. 1, 134)

Monkey King is somebody that doesn’t belong, a challenge to a cosmological system. He is not bad – but he is rebellious and egotistic, he is therefore very dangerous for the order of things. So to save the universe from the chaos that he is able to bring about Monkey King must be subdued and subjected to control – then his enormous powers can be used for positive transformations. Thus Monkey King is overcome by Buddha and after a 500-year punishment he vows to protect and bodyguard the Tang monk on his way to India. From now on Monkey King is not an uncontrollable destructive force, he acquires a sociably acceptable status – he becomes a Buddhist monk on an important mission authorized by Buddha and by the Chinese emperor.

On the way to the west the pilgrims would meet an endless stream of demons that became evil after they have fallen out of the cosmological system. These creatures originally used to be inhabitants of Heaven or servants to the immortals, or even their pet animals – but, striving after independence, they ran away and immediately turned into evil inferior beings that live in the caves and the desserts and harm people. To subdue these creatures Monkey King has to do one thing first – find out their names and true origins. Then he could figure out what measures to take against his foes: he would ask an immortal Roster to help him against evil spirits of insects; against spirits of fire he would summon gods of water and so on. Thus the disorder would be counter-balanced through embodiments of natural forces and the right order restored. The former destructive powers of the Monkey King are used for positive transformation (Benkert 2014, 11).

Sometimes Monkey King would fight against the disrupt of social order brought about not by demonic forces but by erroneous behavior of human rulers – he would correct these too and teach the rulers how to maintain balance and order: “I hope you will revere the monks, revere also the Taoists and take care to nurture the talented people. Your kingdom, I assure you, will be secure forever” (JtW Vol.2, 605).

The necessity of maintaining “six human relations” is professed by many characters of the novel, and Monkey King here is an exemplary disciple always loyal and true even when his teacher punishes him or wrongfully accuses him. Thus, in an episode when the teacher drives him away for a minor misdeed and then gets captured by a demon, Monkey King comes to the rescue immediately. The demon mocks him: “If you were banished by your master, how could you have the gumption to face people here?” Monkey King angrily replies: “You impudent creature! You

wouldn't know about the sentiment of 'Once a teacher, always a father,' nor would you know that 'Between father and son, there's no overnight enmity' (JtW 2012, Vol.2, 345). Here Monkey King professes Confucian ideas with utmost clarity.

The Confucian message of the novel is nowhere as vivid as in the image of Tang Xuanzang, the human pilgrim, especially if contrasted with his historical prototype, the VII century monk of the same name who really undertook a long journey through Central Asia to India in search of real Buddhist teachings. The historical Xuanzang came from the South of China; from his youth he was interested in Buddhism. He entered a Buddhist cloister at his own volition and was a zealous adept. Dissatisfied with the poor translation of Buddhist texts and general lack of canon books on Buddhism in China, he undertook on his own accord a long arduous journey to the West against the permission of the imperial court. According to his own words he “braving the transgression of the articles of law, departed for India on his own authority” (光中Guangzhong 1988, 126). On his return Xuanzang had to ask imperial pardon for his daring adventure.

In contrast, Xuanzang the fictional character became a monk not of his own volition. His father Chen Guangrui was a Confucian scholar who won the State Examination and married a daughter of a high ranking official. On his way to the place where he was to serve as an official he was killed by a pirate, his wife abducted, his newly born son rescued and raised by a Buddhist abbot. Thus the hero can't be rebuked for lack of filial piety – a kind of rebuke that Confucians often addressed to Buddhists, who gave up “six types of human relations” to become monks. The fictional Xuanzang didn't give up his inborn duty to serve his parents and procreate to prolong family lineage – he simply didn't have any choice. Growing up in a cloister he naturally became a monk, but then he learnt the true story of his family and avenged their wrongs. He managed to bring the murderer to justice and honored the memory of his deceased father – the course of actions that wouldn't be expected from a monk but would be natural for a Confucian adept. So the character, though a known even a renown Buddhist, acts according to the standards of Confucian patriarchal society.

His journey to the West is by no means a secret transgression – it is authorized by Buddha, by bodhisattva Guanyin, and then, publicly and explicitly, by the Chinese emperor. This monk is not a religious zealot who runs away in search of truth - he is rather an official envoy of China on an imperial mission, who started off in the capital of the Empire, 长安 Changan (now 西安 Xian city, see Photos 13-15), and travelled through many countries producing his diplomatic papers at every royal court and

having them stamped by the official seals. He enjoys close personal relations with the emperor Tang Taizong – he even became the emperor’s sworn brother. For the emperor the hero is not just some monk – the monarch enquires after Xuanzang’s origin: “he (the emperor) thought silently for a long time and said: “Can Xuanzang be the son of grand secretary Chen Guangrui?” (JtW, Vol. 1, 147) This passage proves that the enterprise of seeking scriptures is not only originally initiated by the supreme ruler of the country – the implementer of the mission is also carefully chosen by the same ruler, to be the person of right origin (son of an official), right relations (brother of the emperor) and right understanding of his obligations.



Photos 13



Photos 14



Photos 15

In fact, the attentive reader of the novel can't fail to notice how important for the monk his loyalty to the emperor is. His mission is first and foremost the execution of the royal order; his devotion is facilitated by the magnitude of royal favor bestowed on him. "Your Majesty, - says this character, - what ability and what virtue does your poor monk possess that he should merit such affection from Your Heavenly Grace? I shall not spare myself in this journey, but I shall proceed with all diligence until I reach the western Heaven. If I didn't attain my goal or the true scriptures, I wouldn't dare return to our land even if I were to die" (JtW, Vol. 1,158). Throughout the whole journey Xuanzang thinks constantly about his responsibility to the emperor, considering his religious mission as a service to land and ruler. As a built-in poem clarifies: "The powerful Tang ruler issued a decree/ deputing Xuanzang to seek the source of Buddhism" (JtW, Vol. 1,160).

The very self-identity of the monk is seriously affected by the fact that he is sent to India on an imperial mission. Unlike the historical Xuanzang who "dared not show himself in public but rested during the day and journeyed only at night" the fictional character announces to every person on his way that he is "an imperial envoy of Great Tang Empire to India, to seek scriptures from Buddha in Western heaven" (JtW, Vol. 1, 165). When endangered by demons or evil humans or facing natural obstacles on the way the fictional Xuanzang worries first about failing the trust of his human lord: "If I lose my life here, would that not have dashed the expectation of the emperor and the high hopes of his ministers?" (JtW, Vol. 2,178). When the monk thinks that his death is unavoidable he asks Monkey King to go to China and give the Emperor a letter informing about his death and asking to send someone else with the same mission.

But perhaps the most straight-line declaration of Confucian ideology can be found in the episode where the monk is imprisoned by a demon together with a wood-cutter. The latter is a filial man who is afraid of death not because his own life is dear to him, but because he is the only supporter of his widowed mother. Touched by the similarity of their fates Tang monk exclaims: "How pitiful! How pitiful! Has not this poor priest chanted sutras in vain? To serve the ruler or to serve one's parents follows the same principle. You live by the kindness of your parents and I live by the kindness of my ruler" (JtW, Vol. 3,128). This depiction of main character of the novel prompted Anthon Yu's sarcastic remark: "Is not such a person dwelling in the religiously syncretic world of the full-length novel a fit representative of Confucianism, at least as known and imagined by the vast populace?" (Yu 2014, 26)



“JOURNEY TO THE WEST” FROM ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Modern anthropologist F.D. Burton tries to analyze the image of Monkey King from anthropological perspective, as a manifestation of Chinese nation's consciousness. Then of a sudden the image of Monkey Kings becomes to him a symbol of complex relations – no, not within a human society, but relations between humans and monkeys. Humans after all perceive themselves as part of Nature, so Monkey King tells people what it means to be a human within and out of the realm of Nature. Burton says: “Nature has been a deity and nature has been construed a matrix - the mother in which all else resides. Nature has been interpreted as friendly, wild, the original, unadorned state; the true essence within all beings, honest, naïve, ingenuous. Humans in the natural state are sometimes pure, and guileless. Conversely, humans in the natural state are unprincipled, devious, disobedient - without laws” (Burton 2002, 140)

Placing his subject as both human and animal figure firmly inside the world of Nature, Burton even tries to figure out what species of monkeys Sun Wukong belonged to, and in all seriousness compares the description of the hero's appearance with the features of different species. Monkey King had red soft hair, long limbs and a long tail. Was he a gibbon? A macaque? And which exactly: a Tibetan macaque or a rhesus? Or did he change his monkey identity as his mythological image travelled from India to South China? The scholar finds Monkey King an embodiment of human-nature relations: both an anthropomorphic and zoomorphic deity, who serves as a model of human spiritual development from wildness to culture. A wild and uncontrolled force at the beginning of the novel, he becomes “the monkey of the mind” by the middle of it.

Both Taoism and Confucian writers used the image of a monkey – now a beast now a human – to convey the idea of positive transformation. Both teachings profess principals of holistic unity and organic balance (Cheng 1976, 18), therefore the Monkey King can teach people reverence for life. Hence the conclusion Burton comes to: since the image of Monkey King is so dear to the Chinese people it can and should be used as a tool of conservation or protection of Asian monkeys – aren't they the descendants and minions of Monkey King, his “monkey children monkey grandchildren” (猴子猴孙) he cares so deep about?

The remarkable qualities of Monkey King, according to Burton, “seem eminently suited to become the basis to evoke conservation” (Burton 2002, 162). Actually the whole article is written with ecological purposes – to analyze what makes Monkey King so special in Chinese culture – “an

ancient theme profoundly attached to core values, opinions, and assumptions on how the world works” (Burton 2002, 162) - and how to use it for animal protection.

Though this approach seems very odd, it is perhaps based on the text of the novel too. The characters of the medieval Chinese novel are certainly not ecologically minded in the modern sense of the word, yet they are keenly aware of nature. There are many episodes in the novel where the characters pause on their way simply to admire the beautiful scenery. They exchange remarks about the beauty of landscapes. In one episode monk Tang, this stern nonchalant adept of Buddhism who never allows himself to be carried away by beauty of women, good tastes of food or temptations of wealth is so lost in the admiration of nature and poetry eulogizing the scenery, that spirits of trees and bushes literally carry him away and his disciples rescue him not without a little admonition (Chapter 64).

In another episode Monkey King travels to Heaven to find help against demons who have captured his teacher – yet he pauses to admire the beautiful views of mountains in front of him. In the episode where Monkey King temporally returns to his former abode, Mountain of Flowers and Fruit, first thing he does is planting trees and restoring flora and fauna of the place (Chapter 28). In that very chapter Monkey King learns about humans who would often come in his absence to terrorize and hunt monkeys, his subjects. The hero is so enraged that he kills hundreds of them and even laughs looking at the bloody massacre:

“The Great Sage clapped his hands and roared with laughter, saying “Lucky! Lucky! Since I made submission to the Tang Monk and became a monk, he has been giving me this advice:

*‘Do good a thousand days,
 But the good is still insufficient;
 Do evil for one day,
 And that evil is already excessive.’*

Some truth indeed! When I followed him and killed a few monsters, he would blame me for perpetrating violence. Today I came home and it was the merest trifle to finish off all these hunters” (JtW 2012, Vol. 2, 57).

Monkey King gets away with the murder, he is neither punished nor rebuked for the death of a few hundred humans – the reader is left with the impression that the victims totally deserved their death by hunting and killing innocent animals.



“JOURNEY TO THE WEST” AS A CHRISTIAN ALLEGORY

In 1913 Timothy Richard, a highly influential missionary in China, published his abridged translation of “Journey to the West”. Richard was not only a Christian preacher – he published a journal 王博公报 “Wangbo Gongbao” (Imperial Bulletin, in English it had a different name – “A Review of the Times”) that discussed political, cultural and religious matters and had a remarkable influence on Chinese reformers and intelligentsia. Richard, himself a first-rank official at the Chinese imperial court, was not an ordinary preacher – he was a believer in the benevolence of technological progress for China and was also an ecumenist who firmly believed that Christianity, Buddhism and Taoism professed similar truths. He saw basic ideas of Christianity in the philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism and therefore found them in the novel about Monkey King (Wu 2008). In all seriousness this remarkable man asserted that “Journey to the West” is a Christian allegory and even precedes XX century technological progress (he believed certain episodes in the book to be describing telescope, electricity and such).

The variety of Christianity Richard found in the novel was Nestorianism, which, as Borbála Obrusánszky shows in her article in this volume of *Journal of Frontier Studies*, was introduced to China many centuries before the “Journey” was written and it enjoyed patronage of a few Chinese emperors (Obrusánszky 2019). In fact, the very founder of Tang Dynasty Li Shimin (Tang Taizong) who in the novel welcomed monk Xuanzang back to China with his newly obtained sutras and even built a tower for translation and housing of them (See Photos 16-17)– this emperor officially recognized Nestorianism in the year 635.

But apart from Richard, nobody else ever saw any connections between Nestorian Christianity and the story of Monkey King. Richard was criticized for this view by more orthodox priests. Yet despite public criticism Richard insisted that “Mahayana Buddhism was consonant with Christian teaching, and that recognition of this would lead to more rapid evangelization of the millions of Buddhists in China” (Kane 2008, 24). Richard even claimed that the author of the novel, Wu Chengen, was a hidden Christian. But why would anyone seek and find Christian motives in the novel? Is there anything Christian in it?

The answer to this question is not as obvious as one might think, nor Richard’s point of view is so bizarre as to disclaim it on the spot. I dare think the book does have a certain elements that are not inconsistent with Christianity. First of all, the emphasis on mercy and forgiveness, which the author presents not as stages to self-enlightenment as a classical Buddhist

philosophy would have, but a great value in itself. Whereas for traditional Buddhism the restraint from killing leaving creatures is a tool to an end, a stage on the way, the positive personages of the novel, especially monk Tang Xuanzang, attach great importance to mercy as it is, mercy for the sake of mercy, not for the sake of attaining nonchalance. The monk would again and again try to teach his disciples mercy, forgiveness and readiness to help other people. He would often repeat that “Saving a person is more important than building a seven-storey pagoda” and would send his followers on all sorts of rescue missions, like saving children from death, returning captive women to their families, stopping famine and drought etc.

A clear similarity between central motives of “Journey” and a Christian work of fiction, Dante’s “Comedy”, was pointed out by Anthony Yu. Yu, a renowned Chinese scholar and author of the best translation of the “Journey” (the one I chose for citation) notices that the central religious issue of both masterpieces is atonement for sin and personal redemption (Yu 1983, 219). To begin with, both works describe religious pilgrimage. While Dante’s lyrical hero is implicated by birth by original sin – and also he has to cleanse the sins he has committed in his life, the pilgrims of the Chinese novel have to atone for the sins committed in their previous incarnations –and again, the sins of their present lives too.

One more feature that connects “Journey” with Christianity is perhaps the image of Buddha who is described as almighty and all-merciful Deity, in fact, a God, to whom Taoist spirits and Buddhist saints resort for the supreme authority. He punishes and he forgives, he restores order and he actively interferes in the fate of Mankind. He is the one to impose terrible punishment on Monkey King – yet to him would Monkey King come in tears in his hour of despair to get help and consolation. Buddha is supposed to be in the state of nirvana, a state of perfect quietude and cessation of all actions - yet he is a very active agent of the narration, the one who gives impetus to the adventurous mission and keeps it under control. In short, this Buddha resembles much more Christian God than an abstract Buddha-in-the-heart of classical Buddhist philosophy. If not inspired by Christianity, this Buddha is a production of ordinary people’s hope for a merciful, forgiving, benevolent Heavenly Helper.

The ideas of repentance, mercy and forgiveness in their Christian understanding are even more clearly expressed in Hong-Kong TV-adaptations of the novel. Unlike the text of the novel where the characters, if necessary, briefly apologize for their misbehavior, Hong-Kong versions demand clear manifested tokens of repentance. In Hong-Kong series “Monkey King Sun Wukong” for instance, the teacher is ready to forgive Monkey King his cruelty if the latter sheds tears of repentance, for “one



tear would wash all your sins” – the demand which later Monkey King would address to a defeated demon. The tears of repentance would be shed again in the episode when a Snake-demon who has two times attacked the travelers and has been two times defeated and forgiven sacrifices herself to save the monk.

The characters of Hong-Kong TV-series not only atone for their misdeeds as they do in the novel – they contemplate on their sins and ways of remedy. Thus, in one more Hong-Kong series called “Journey to the West” Monkey King, closer to the end of their travel, kneels in front of his teacher and proclaims that he accepts the torture of golden hoop as a rightful punishment and a way of control over his passions. He even says he is willing to carry it on his head forever for the sake of salvation. Such ascetics suggested by Hong-Kong movies, obviously influenced by European Christian culture, are alien to the Monkey King of the novel, a rebel to the end, who instead of wearing the hoop till the end of his days would rather “smash it to pieces, so that Bodhisattva can’t use it anymore on other people” (JtW 2012, Vol. 4, 671).

As we can see, none of these interpretations, including the most exotic ones, can be ignored. All of them, one way or another, are based on the spirit and letter of the great novel, emphasizing its various sides. It shows, first of all, true, profoundly religious and mystical nature of the “Journey to the West”. While the meaning of religious symbolism can be understood in different ways, depending on the interpreter's own beliefs, the basic ascetic and soteriological truths of this story are understood by all readers in the same way. “Journey to the West” is a story of a soul seeking truth and salvation. This search leads it through trials, temptations and internal conflicts, but at the same time harmonizes the whole personality of a human, strengthens them in mercy and courage, and ultimately leads to self-awareness and immortality.

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