

The Monkey King is an Avatar of the Chinese Cultural Spirit

DOI: 10.14746/fp.2026.43.11

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Introduction

Oxford dictionary explains that the term “avatar,” In Hindu belief, derived from the Sanskrit “avatāra” (descent, incarnation), is a manifestation of a deity or released soul in bodily form on earth, an incarnate divine teacher. An avatar is a bridge between the transcendent and the immanent, the divine and the worldly, carrying the full essence and power of its source into a particular historical and cultural context to perform a transformative function.¹ However, this idea does not have to stay limited to its religious roots. When we look at it across different cultures, an “avatar” can be seen as a powerful symbol - a story idea that comes from beliefs (whether religious, philosophical, or mythical) and becomes part of real stories, carrying and showing the deepest values and morals of a society. This paper posits that the Monkey King, Sun Wukong, is precisely such an avatar for the Chinese cultural spirit. His journey from a rebellious stone monkey to an enlightened Buddha mirrors the dialectical tensions within Chinese thought: between rebellion and order, individuality and collectivity, earthly desire and spiritual transcendence. Through the origin of the image of Sunwukong and the story that happened to him, we can observe that Sunwukong reflects the Chinese cultural spirit of self-growth and courage to struggle.

¹ 雷会生, and 李克臣. “超凡入圣路迢迢——孙悟空与中华民族文化精神论纲(上). A long way to the Holy Land -- Sunwukong and the cultural spirit of the Chinese nation” 辽东学院学报(社会科学版) Journal of Liaodong University (SOCIAL SCIENCES EDITION) 20.05(2018):12-24. doi:10.14168/j.issn.1672-8572.2018.05.03.

In Chinese traditional culture, the spirit of struggle is not a simple confrontation or conflict, but contains profound philosophical wisdom. It includes not only the thought of “separation between man and nature” in the struggle between man and nature, but also the idea of “reform and innovation” in social change. From the enterprising spirit of the book of changes that “Heaven moves healthily and gentlemen constantly strive for self-improvement”, to the people-oriented thought of the book of history that “the people are the foundation of the country and the foundation of the country is solid and peaceful”, and to the personality ideal of Mencius that “wealth and honour cannot be lewd, poverty and baseness cannot be moved, and power and force cannot be surrendered”, all reflect the struggle philosophy formed by the Chinese nation in the long-term practice.²

About *Journey to the West*

The Monkey King is the protagonist of the Chinese novel 西游记 *Xi You Ji* (*Journey to the West*). This work, also known in English as *Monkey* or *The Monkey King*, is one of the great classical novels of Chinese literature. Written by 吴承恩 Wu Cheng'en³, it is a classic work that dates back to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) in the 16th century. The novel is a mix of adventure, fantasy, and religious allegory, and it has become one of the most well-known and enduring pieces of Chinese literature (袁世硕 Yuan Shishuo, 2016: 113-128). “The story itself was already a part of Chinese folk and literary tradition in the form of colloquial stories, a poetic novelette, and a six-part drama when Wu Cheng'en formed it into his long and richly humorous novel.”⁴

Journey to the West is the first long novel about a godlike evil spirit in classic China (陈代湘 Chen Daixiang, 2017: 266). The earliest version of *Journey to the West* is the “Newly engraved as official board with large characters *Journey to the West*”⁵ by Shide Hall in Jinling in the 20th year of the Wanli reign of the Ming Dynasty [i.e. 1592–G.M.], without the author's name (潘文年 Pan Wennian, 2018: 120). On the occasion of the May Fourth Movement, 鲁迅 Lu Xun⁶ and 董作宾 Dong Zuobin⁷, among others searched for historical materials based on the clues provided by the Qing people, and, after comprehensive examination and repeated arguments, ultimately recognized the *Journey to the West* as “Wu Cheng'en's original work” based on the record of the *Journey to the West* of Wu Cheng'en in the Huai'an Prefecture Journal.⁸

² 王磊. 回首千年. 2016.

³ Wu Cheng'en (born c. 1500, Shanyang, Huai'an [now in Jiangsu province], China—died c. 1582, Huai'an) novelist and poet of the Ming dynasty, generally acknowledged as the author of the Chinese folk novel *XiYouJi* (国志刚 Guo Zhigang, 2016: 147).

⁴ Retrieved from: Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. “Journey to the West.” Encyclopædia Britannica, June 30, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Journey-to-the-West>.

⁵ The earliest existing version of *Journey to the West*.

⁶ Lu Xun (1881-1936), the real name is Zhou Shuren, Chinese writer, commonly considered the greatest in 20th-century Chinese literature, who was also an important critic known for his sharp and unique essays on the historical traditions and modern conditions of China. His main publications include *Diary of a Madman*, *The Scream*, and *The True Story of Ah Q*. Retrieved from: Xiaoming, W.. “Lu Xun.” Asia for educators, October 15, 2023. http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1900_luxun.htm

⁷ Dong Zuobin (1895-1963), Character YanTang, nickname PingLu. Chinese oracle bone scientist and ancient historian. Main works include *Dong Zuobin Academic Essays* and *PingLu WenCun*. Retrieved from: “Dong Zuobin”, Shandong University Museum, February 2, 2024. <http://museum.sdu.edu.cn/info/1031/2385.htm>.

⁸ Zhu Hongbo, “Is the author of *Journey to the West* really Wu Cheng'en?” *Liberation Daily*. February 2, 2024. <http://m.people.cn/n4/2017/0317/c677-8587642.html>.

The story is set in the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and revolves around 玄奘 Xuanzang's (Tang Monk)⁹ journey to the "Western Regions" (Central Asia and India) to obtain Buddhist scriptures. This journey is filled with danger; the Monk and his disciples need to face various demons and other challenges. After 孙悟空 Sun Wukong (The Monkey, born from an immortal stone and possessed of magical powers, known for his bravery and wisdom, loyalty and kindness, protecting the Tang Monk in his *Journey to the West*) came out of the world, he followed his master Bodhi¹⁰ to learn supernatural arts. Due to the conflict with the Heavenly Court¹¹, he uses the magic arts to haunt the Heavenly Palace. Then he encountered the Tang Monk, 猪八戒 Pigsy¹², 沙悟净 Sha Monk¹³ and 白龙马 White Dragon Horse¹⁴, and travelled West to get the scriptures. To complete the task arranged by the emperor at that time, and Xuanzang himself wanted to get the scriptures for spreading Buddhism in China better, so they went to the West to get the scriptures. They went all the way through the hardships and dangers, subdued the demons and eliminated the devils, went through eighty-one difficulties, and finally reached the Western Paradise to meet Buddha, got the scriptures successfully, and finally became five saints of Buddhism. The novel is based on the historical event of "Xuanzang's journey to the scriptures", and the author's artistic processing profoundly depicts the social life of the people in the Ming Dynasty. After the "Opium Wars" (1839-42; 1856-60), a large number of classical Chinese literary works were translated into other languages, and *Journey to the West* also spread to Europe and the United States, and was translated into English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and other languages (滕雯 Teng Wen, 2015: 6-10, 27-28).

The main theme of *Journey to the West* is in the celebration of justice, courage, intelligence and perseverance. By describing the fantastical journey of Tang Monk and his disciples to get scriptures in the West, the author Wu Cheng'en shows how they overcame many difficulties and finally achieved self-transcendence and growth.

The author reflects the real society through the struggle between Sun Wukong and various demons, thus praising the spirit of resistance of the people, and showing the people's strong confidence in overcoming difficulties and their greatness in conquering nature (吴承恩 Wu Cheng'en, 2020: 3).

The theme of this work is profound, not only promoting traditional Chinese morality but also having strong practical significance. It tells us that only by possessing strong beliefs, facing difficulties bravely, and applying intelligence and perseverance, we can overcome all challenges in our lives and achieve personal and social development in a harmonious way.¹⁵

⁹ Xuanzang (602-664) Also known as: Tang Monk, Chen Yi, Hsüan-tsang, Mokshadeva, Muchatipo, San-tsang, Xüan-zang, Yuanzang. Buddhist monk and Chinese pilgrim to India who translated the sacred scriptures of Buddhism from Sanskrit into Chinese and founded in China the Buddhist Consciousness Only school. His fame rests mainly on the volume and diversity of his translations of the Buddhist sutras and on the record of his travels in Central Asia and India. Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Xuanzang." Encyclopedia Britannica, January 1, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Xuanzang>.

¹⁰ Bodhi: was the first master of the Monkey King and taught him various magical arts such as the 72 transformations and the somersault cloud.

¹¹ Heavenly Court: refers to the palace where the emperor of heaven and the gods reside; the heavenly palace.

¹² Pigsy: Tang Monk's second disciple.

¹³ Sha Monk: Tang Monk's third disciple.

¹⁴ White Dragon Horse: The saddle horse of Tang Monk.

¹⁵ 刘勇强 (Liu Yongqiang) "西游记 (Xi Youji)". China Social Sciences Thesaurus, May 17, 2021. https://www.skctk.cn/html/12/12-118765-2.html?is_search=hot_search&t=1711495034

The original *Journey to the West* was written in classical Chinese, typical the 16th century. It is a popular novel with mythological and folklore peculiarities. Its characteristics of language are mainly reflected in musicality, activity, humour and regional phrases (滕雯 Teng Wen, 2015: 26).

The Monkey King: The Genesis and Evolution of a Cultural Hybrid

Another name of Monkey King is Sun Wukong; he is the main character in *Journey to the West*. Born from an immortal stone, he learnt 72 transformations and somersaulting clouds, once made trouble in the Heavenly Palace and named himself the Great Sage of Qi Tian Da Sheng (齐天大圣). He became the disciple of Tang Monk after being suppressed by Buddha Ru Lai for 500 years to protect him in his journey to obtain the scriptures from the Western Heaven (冯一兵 Feng Yibing, 2019: 103). He is brave and resourceful, distinguishes between good and evil, is loyal to his master, subdues demons and eliminates devils, and ultimately obtains the true scriptures. He is a symbol of resistance against oppression and the pursuit of freedom and is one of the most legendary mythological figures in Chinese culture (竺洪波 Zhu Hongbo, 2017: 157).

The origins of Monkey King are a scholarly tapestry woven from multiple threads. The most direct Indian parallel is Hanuman, the monkey god from the *Ramayana*. Both are simian, possess immense strength, can fly, change size, and are devoted servants to a master (Rama, Tripitaka) on a sacred quest. This connection suggests a possible literary or folkloric transmission along the Silk Road. However, Hanuman is a bhakti (devotional) ideal—a perfect, celibate, humble devotee of Lord Rama, an avatar of Vishnu. Sun Wukong begins as his antithesis: an embodiment of unrestrained individual will.

Chinese literary scholar Hu Shi believed that the Monkey King was based on Hanuman, the Indian mythical monkey (张新民 Zhang Xinmin, 2009: 250). In *Ramayana*¹⁶, the oldest epic poem in India, Hu Shi found a magic monkey Hanuman, who protects Prince Rama, conquers the enemies of Lenga, recaptures Siddhartha, and returns to the country of Ayodhya, and after Rama's triumph, Hanuman is thanked for his work and is given immortality and bliss. The experience of Hanuman was similar to that of Monkey King, so Hu Shi thought that Hanuman could be the basis of Monkey King. Some scholars also believe that the image of Monkey King originated directly or indirectly from the Buddhist stories typical of the Six Degrees of Sephiroth Sutra¹⁷, and that the macaque monkey in the Six Degrees of Sephiroth Sutra has a close relationship with Hanuman, which makes it possible to conclude that Hanuman is the prototype of Monkey King, and that it originated from India, was spread to China, and was transformed and developed into the Monkey King (葛维钧 Ge Weijun, 2002: 04).

The origin of Monkey King is deeply rooted in Chinese thought. Born on a stone nourished by the Cosmic Essence of heaven and earth, he is a primitive, pre-cosmic energy existence,

¹⁶Ramayana (Sanskrit, Rāmāyaṇa, it means “the adventures of Rāma”), an ancient Indian epic. Originally a folk oral composition, it has been enriched over a long period of time, and is said to have been written and finalized by the Indian poet 蚁垤 (Valmiki), and ranks with the Mahabharata as one of the two great epics of India (彭端智 Peng Duanzhi, 1990.12: 198).

¹⁷Is a Buddhist scripture composed by the monk 康僧会 (Kang Sang-hui) during the Three Kingdoms period (220-280). Baidu Baike. “六度集经” (Six Degrees of Sephiroth Sutra) Accessed May 25, 2024. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/六度集经/2445696>

echoing the Taoist concept of primitive chaos and natural, uncut block. His early narrative is to master magic, break the bureaucratic system of China, and claim that he is “a great sage with 天平 Tianping”. This is a classic Chinese folk theme: the rebellion of the marginal and smart liars against the established and often rigid order.

It is this synthesis - the Indian ape form and servant role grafted on the rebellious, and Taoist-influenced spirit of China - that makes him a unique “Avatar”. He has become a key narrative container of spiritual negotiation in Chinese culture: how to integrate the unmanaged, individualistic and exploratory self (a powerful value in Taoist and Folk Imagination) into the collective, disciplined and ethically strict salvation Road (emphasized by the Confucian social structure and Buddhist temple ideals).

The Monkey King as the embodied Chinese spirit

In the story of *Journey to the West*, Monkey King experiences numerous adventures, and the most significant among them is the Birth of the Monkey King, Learn from the master, Treasure hunt in the Dragon Palace, and The Monkey King made a scene in the Heavenly Palace. These storylines are important in portraying the character of the Monkey King, and the author reflects his personality characteristics through these stories of his growth.

From the original text, we can see that the birth of the Monkey King is full of mythological colour. He was born from a piece of immortal stone which was nurtured by the spiritual energy of heaven and earth, located on the top of the Mountain of Flowers and Fruits in the country of Aolai in the Eastern Continent of Superior Body. The magic Stone burst apart after absorbing the essence of heaven and earth, and the Monkey King popped out of it and was born into the world. As soon as he was born, Sun Wukong had the extraordinary ability to walk and jump, not like a normal monkey, and was soon elected by the monkeys as the “Monkey King”.

The original text told in detail the story of Monkey King’s quest for immortality and higher wisdom, and his quest to learn from the master. He left the Mountain of Flowers and Fruits and travelled across the sea to the Western Niuga Continent in search of a master who could teach him the art of immortality. He eventually meets Ancestor Patriarch and begs to be accepted as his disciple. Impressed by Sun Wukong’s sincerity, he accepts him as his disciple and gives him the name “Sun Wukong”. Under the master’s teaching, Sun Wukong learnt 72 transformations, somersault clouds and other magical skills. These techniques enabled him to change into various forms and leap 108,000 miles at a time. After completing his studies, Sun Wukong bid farewell to his master and returned to the Mountain of Flowers and Fruits, then began his legendary life. These descriptions are useful for answering the reader’s questions about where the name “Sun Wukong” came from, why the Monkey King knows so many magic powers, and where he learns them.

The Monkey King felt that he needed a handy weapon, so he decided to go to the Dragon Palace in the East China Sea to look for treasures. He came to the East Sea and asked the Dragon King for a powerful weapon. At first, the Dragon King brought out all kinds of ordinary weapons, but none of them could satisfy Sun Wukong’s request. In the end, the Dragon King

took out the Sea Defining Needle - As-You-Will Golden Banded Cudgel, a piece of divine iron that could be made bigger or smaller at will and was originally used as a treasure to suppress the sea. Sun Wukong tries to lift it and finds that it fits perfectly, so he takes the Golden Banded Cudgel. Sun Wukong also obtained equipment from the Dragon King, such as the lotus-root cloud-walking shoes, a suit of golden chain mail, and the phoenix-winged purple gold helmet, which made him much more powerful in battle. Thereafter, with these treasures, Sun Wukong returned to the Mountain of Flowers and Fruits and became more powerful.

Monkey King made a scene in the Heavenly Palace is a classic episode in *Journey to the West*, which is told in Chapters 3-7 in the original version. In the story, Sun Wukong snatched the Golden Banded Cudgel from the Dragon King of the East China Sea and went to hell to cancel the book of life and death by force. Afterwards, Sun Wukong was dissatisfied with the low official position of “弼马温 Bi Ma Wen” (the Protector of the Horses) given to him by the Jade Emperor, and he was not invited to the Queen Mother’s Peach Party. These two events made Sun Wukong angry and disrupted the party; he also stole the Golden Elixir of the Supreme Lord and went down to the heavenly realm. He lost to Erlang Shen in a fight with the heavenly soldiers and generals and was taken to the Eight Trigrams Furnace by Lord Taishang to try to practise his Golden Elixir again. However, Sun Wukong not only did not get burnt to death, but also developed a pair of fiery eyes. He once again wreaked havoc in the Heavenly Palace, where 100,000 heavenly soldiers were unbeatable. The Jade Emperor had no choice but to invite Buddha to press him under the Five Finger Mountain for 500 years until the Tang Monk saved him. Through the storyline of Sun Wukong’s havoc in the Palace of Heaven, the author shows the readers the personality traits of Monkey King’s rebelliousness, fearlessness, wisdom and self-confidence; he is an avatar of the spirit of Chinese culture.

The Monkey King, as the Chinese cultural avatar, embodies the dynamic and often paradoxical core of the Chinese cultural spirit, manifested in the Spirit of Syncretic Assimilation, the Dialectic of Rebellion and Integration, the Cultivation of Transformative Ingenuity (Bian) and the Journey as Redemptive Process.

The Monkey King is the process of syncretism made flesh. His very being is a composite of Indian and Chinese elements. He learns Daoist longevity techniques, employs Buddhist insights, and navigates a Confucian-style celestial bureaucracy with a mix of defiance and cunning. He demonstrates that the Chinese cultural spirit is not about purity but about pragmatic, creative absorption. Foreign ideas, like Buddhism, like the simian deity, are not rejected but are taken in, adapted, and transformed into something new and distinctly Chinese. Moreover, the Dialectic of Rebellion and Integration is perhaps his most defining characteristic. The Chinese tradition deeply values harmony and order (Confucianism), yet it also holds a profound respect for the natural, spontaneous, and non-conformist (Daoism). Monkey King embodies the tense, productive dialogue between these poles; his glorious rebellion affirms the vitality of the individual spirit and serves as a cathartic critique of corrupt or inflexible authority. Yet, his subsequent subjugation and guided redemption affirm that individual talent must ultimately be channelled for the greater good and within a cosmic moral framework. He represents not the triumph of rebellion, nor its utter defeat, but its maturation into responsible power.

The Monkey King's 72 polymorphic transformations and his “筋斗云 somersault cloud” symbolize limitless adaptability and ingenious problem-solving. This reflects a key Chinese cultural trait: pragmatic ingenuity and the ability to “go with the flow” while strategically shaping outcomes. He overcomes obstacles not just through brute force, but more often through trickery, disguise, and clever investigation. This is the spirit of 变 *bian*—strategic flexibility and intellectual resourcefulness, highly prized in Chinese philosophical and statecraft traditions. At the same time, unlike a Hindu avatar who is inherently divine and perfect in mission, The Monkey King starts as a flawed, rebellious being. His status as an “avatar” is earned, not preordained. His journey westward is a long education, a gradual polishing of the rough stone. This mirrors the Chinese Buddhist and Neo-Confucian emphasis on self-cultivation through practice and endurance. The spirit is not about instantaneous grace but relentless effort, learning from mistakes, and progressing step-by-step on the path. Sun Wukong's final title, “Victorious Fighting Buddha”, is a hard-won achievement, embodying the belief that enlightenment is accessible to all through persevering effort, even to a lowly stone monkey.

Conclusion: The Avatar of the Chinese cultural spirit

In my opinion, The Monkey King is one of world literature's most vibrant and enduring cultural avatars; he is the narrative “descent” of the multifaceted Chinese cultural spirit into a singular, unforgettable form. While his lineage may trace back to Indian archetypes like Hanuman, and his story is framed by a Buddhist pilgrimage, he transcends these origins to become something entirely his own.

The Monkey King embodies the spirit of Chinese culture, encapsulating the nation's profound pursuit of freedom, courage, wisdom, and self-transcendence. Born from stone, he defies fate; his rebellion against heaven with the defiant cry, “The throne of heaven rotates; next year it will be mine,” symbolizes a collective resistance to oppression and unjust hierarchy — a voice of the people rejecting rigid social order. His seventy-two transformations and cloud-somersault are not merely magical feats, but metaphors for breaking through natural and cognitive boundaries, reflecting the Chinese philosophical tradition that “wisdom triumphs over brute force.” His journey from a mischievous stone monkey to the Buddha of Victorious Struggle is a complete path of spiritual cultivation: five centuries beneath the Five Elements Mountain echo Confucian self-discipline; the golden headband represents the Buddhist practice of taming the restless mind; his unwavering loyalty to his master on the pilgrimage to the West embodies Confucian ideals of duty above self.

Therefore, the Monkey King is not an avatar of a god, but an avatar of a civilization's evolving consciousness. He encapsulates the resilience, adaptability, pragmatism, and profound spiritual striving that characterize the Chinese cultural spirit. His journey from the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit, through the chaos of heaven, across the trials of the road west, to the serenity of Buddhahood, maps the very path of a culture that continuously re-invents itself while staying true to an inner core—a spirit forever questing, forever transforming, yet eternally recognizable. In Monkey King, the stone that came to life, we see the living embodiment of that spirit: unyielding, clever, transformative, and ultimately, indomitably free.

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KEYWORDS

Journey to the West

AVATAR

ABSTRACT:

The Monkey King is a character in the Chinese classic novel *Journey to the West* and the embodiment of the spirit of Chinese culture. By analyzing the origin of The Monkey King and the story that happened to him, we can see how this protagonist embodies the core values, contradictions and identity of Chinese culture. The concept of “Avatar” is used in the broadest sense here, as an expression and embodiment, constantly adapting to express the collective psychology of a civilization.

Chinese cultural spirit

Monkey King

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