

三十

We travelled up north
to a place called Quanzhou
climbed a statue of Laozi
in a green bamboo grove
took a smoky black steam train
through hills of Wuyi
saw the king's water curtain
Sun Wu Kong, the monkey



Chapter 30 – Monkey King – The Origin Story

Every Chinese child knows the story of the Monkey King (孫悟空 Sūn Wùkōng). The story this character came from was from a book called 西遊記 Xīyóujì, Journey to the West which was written in the 16th century during the Ming Dynasty. Actually, the first name that Monkey King was known as (before he became a king) was 石猴 Shí Hóu (lit. Stone Monkey) since he was hatched from a magical rock. Shi Hou grew up on Flower Fruit mountain (花果山 Huāguǒ Shān.) At the base of the mountain flowed a stream, where one day the young monkey convinced his wandering friends to follow the stream to its source. There, they discovered a beautiful waterfall. The young monkey, on a dare, jumped into the waterfall to see what would happen. To his dismay, he found himself inside a giant cave. He quickly jumped back through the water curtain and invited his friends in. Monkey and his friends had found their new home in the magical Water Curtain Cave a.k.a. 水帘洞 Shuǐlián Dòng. To reward him for his resourcefulness, the other monkeys and his many animal friends decided that the monkey born from stone would be their king.



For a while, the Monkey king was happy in his new role, and romped and frolicked and ate and drank and played. After many years of this kind of living, however, the Monkey King became despondent. He had concluded that he was mortal and was going to turn

old and die. He went looking for a master who could teach him how to live forever. After spending years looking for immortals, sages, and Buddhas, he finally happened upon an enlightened master who was impressed by the stone monkey's cleverness and agreed to take him on as a student. He then gave him a new name, 孫悟空 Sūn Wùkōng, which means "Sun, who is awakened to emptiness." Sun Wu Kong happily took to the life of a disciple and years passed. When the master delivered his teachings though, Sun Wukong found it very difficult to sit and listen. He explained to his master that he found the teachings so exciting he could not contain himself and needed to jump about. Sun Wukong was clever and very quickly learned spells and transformations which amazed his teachers. He also acquired his only weapon. It looked like a walking stick with gold bands on either end and he could vary the size to his wishes. It was perfect. He could somersault 60,000 miles in one full loop, and by taking one hair out of his body and blowing on it, he could create an army of monkeys just like him. After Sun Wu Kong acquired the ability to make 72 transformations, he decided to return to his kingdom at Flower Fruit Mountain.

As his powers increased, however, his ego became ever larger. With every victory, Sun Wukong became more aggressive and proud and he was beginning to upset the immortals who wondered how he had ever achieved such great powers. To appease him, the immortals finally agreed to award him the title, "Great Sage, Equal to Heaven" (齊天大聖 Qí Tiān Dà Shèng.) Sun Wu Kong loved his new name and he aspired to sit on the throne of Heaven.

The Buddha of Western Paradise then offered Monkey King a challenge. If he succeeded, he would be awarded the title he so desired. Picking Sun Wu Kong up in his right hand, he challenged the Monkey King to jump off the palm of his hand. If he failed, he would have to return to the earth and do penance for a long period of time.

Monkey laughed as he accepted the "simple" challenge and leapt off the hand somersaulting many times before landing at the base of five pink pillars. Thinking these five pillars were the end of the universe, Sun Wu Kong first wrote "Great Sage, Equal to None" on one of the pillars as proof that he had made it there, and then peed on the pillar to show his contempt. Returning to the Buddha, Sun Wu Kong with a smile on his face, laughed. "Not only did I leave your palm, I wrote my name on one of the pillars and the end of the universe." The Buddha then smiled and held Sun's nose close to the base of one finger where Sun not only smelled his own urine, but saw the words he had written there. Sun Wu Kong knew he had lost and was sealed under the Mountain of the Five Elements where he would stay for five hundred years. After centuries of penance, trapped under the weight of the mountain and his ego, Sun Wu Kong was finally released and became an heroic disciple of the Buddha. Along with a pig, a horse, and the monk, Tang Zhen (Tripitaka), Sun Wu Kong undertook the perilous journey of transporting the teachings of Buddha from India to China.

In 1981, transportation options were limited in Fujian. There were trains, but they were like something out of the 19th century. Riding on narrow gauge tracks, their coal fire engines belched out black billowing smoke. We were warned not to wear anything light colored because the windows were wide open the whole way from Quanzhou to Wu Yi Shan (武夷山 Wǔyí Shān). Wu Yi Shan is a mountain range where immortal beings lived during the Sung Dynasty. There are steep crags and demon shaped rocks said to have been placed there by the Gods. In the past there were hundreds of temples and “boat coffins” on the faces of the cliffs which was home to a large Daoist community. We hiked along a trail to a water fall they had named the Water Curtain Cave (水帘洞 Shuǐlián Dòng) and were told that some people believe it to be the Water Curtain Cave. But the cave we saw behind the water did not have quite the splendor or the drama I would have expected.



“Journey to the West” (西游记 [Xī Yóu Jì](#)) was most probably written by 吳承恩 Wú Chéng’ēn, a Chinese writer and poet who lived in 17th century late Ming and early Qing Dynasties. The translation I’m most familiar with is one simply called “Monkey” by Arthur Waley. Although not the complete work, it does offer a fantastic first look at the Monkey King.