Teaching *Journey to the West* in Wisconsin:
A Guide for Educators

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Teaching Wu Cheng’en’s *Journey to the West* in Wisconsin
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UNIT 2 • AN AMALGAM OF FAITHS: RELIGION IN JOURNEY TO THE WEST

OBJECTIVE: To grapple with Journey to the West’s complex, multilayered religious background, identifying and discussing the present of Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian elements in the text.

HANDOUTS
“Table of Chinese Religious History,” Chinese Religion
“The Heart Sutra,” Journey to the West (W.J.F Jenner translation)

PREPARATORY & RECOMMENDED READING

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
RELIGION & WU CHENG’EN’S JOURNEY TO THE WEST
  Yu berates translator Arthur Waley and scholar Hu Shi for neglecting the religious theme in Journey. The second half of the essay lists as evidence several Buddhist and Daoist winks in the text.
  Where does the idea of a Monkey King come from? This essay links Journey’s central figure to “a body of monkey lore” growing out of the foundational legends of the Lingyin si monastery. Despite its obvious interest for literary historians, Sahar’s essay confirms the impact that localized folk religions had in the final tapestry of Journey. Despite its Buddhist cosmology and Daoist underpinnings, it is a hero from a relatively obscure cult who becomes the book’s most memorable figure.
  The title says it. Despite Wu Cheng’en’s syncretic use of religions, Buddhism prevails in that the structure and form of the book illustrate certain principles of Mahayana Buddhism (karma, compassion, emptiness). This reading not only unearths some of the text’s hidden religious underpinnings, it also celebrates its “technical virtuosity” (513).
  Ping Shao disagrees with those who, like Bantly, see Buddhism as the dominant religious influence in *Journey*. Even if Buddhist allusions outnumber those of other religions, Shao argues that it is Subhūti’s (Subodhi in Waley’s *Monkey*) tutelage of Monkey in the early chapters that makes the narrative possible. From Subhūti, Monkey learns skills and principles that Shao identifies with the Daoist doctrine of “internal alchemy.” Reading the last two essays against each other, one notices the open-endedness of the religious theme in *Journey*.

**BUDDHISM**

  A true gem. Books in this collection are written by experts quite adept at simplifying vast topics without being simplistic.

• http://www.buddhanet.net/
  An online repository of all things Buddhist. Hosted by the Buddha Dharma Education Association.

  Not the most user-friendly interface, yet a useful and comprehensive tool to track down names of places, scriptural terms, and illustrious Buddhists as they appear in *Journey*.

  Probably the most comprehensive timeline of Chinese religion and history on the web. It includes maps for each dynasty and many links to documents and visual samples of Chinese art. Emphasis on the introduction and proliferation of Mahayana Buddhism in China.

  For a bit of humor. This episode mocks the Western appropriation of uncomplicated, feel-good versions of Buddhism. The plot: Lisa breaks with Christianity and embraces Buddhism... after reading a pamphlet! The episode includes the line: “Richard Gere? The world’s most famous Buddhist.”

**DAOISM (TAOISM)**

• Tolbert McCarroll (ed.), *The Tao. The Sacred Way*.
  Despite their cryptic tone, most of the aphoristic poems compiled here constitute the best possible introduction to Taoism, a doctrine that values free interpretation and individual path-finding over dogma and systematicity.

  Slightly dated, but accessible comparative study of the two main religious traditions behind *Journey*.
• Derek Lin, “What is Tao” http://taoism.net/tao/what-is-tao/
A bullet-point explanation for the newly initiated. The main website includes links and images of interest.
An account of the political entanglements of Daoism throughout a six-century period that includes the Tang and Ming dynasties.

CONFUCIANISM
• Confucius (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/confucius/) and Mencius
• Meredith Sprunger, “An Introduction to Confucianism.”
http://www.urantiabook.org/archive/readers/confucianism-introduction.htm
A wiki bilingual version of the foundational text of Confucianism. Like The Tao, perhaps with a less oracular tone, the Analects’ concise, pithy mode of expression make them quite apt for generating classroom discussion.
• http://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/index.htm
Site with downloadable files of the major Confucian texts.

UNIT ORGANIZATION
This unit is divided into four informative sections—“Religion in Journey to the West,” “Buddhism,” “Daoism,” and “Confucianism”—that contain extensive notes on possible topics and passages with which to structure a discussion of Journey to the West’s religious contexts. The final set of sections—“Points for Discussion” and “Assignments, Activities & Project Ideas”—include some relevant questions and assignments with which to start and/or complement these discussions.

RELIGION IN JOURNEY TO THE WEST
Let us begin with an important caveat: The edition of Journey you’re reading presents an obstacle in our attempt to clarify the meaning of religion, given that Arthur Waley eliminated most of the religious material in his translation. This excised material includes mainly the obscure Daoist poetry embedded in the action as well as many allegorical chapters and characters. Consequently, we are forced to discuss religion as an absence rather than a presence in Monkey and to trace such presence in the unabridged translations by W. J. F. Jenner and Anthony C. Yu. Nonetheless, the absence of religion from this modern, “novelized” edition is in itself worthy of discussion. Why does the original Journey need to be “[f]reed from all kinds of allegorical interpretations by Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian commentators”? According to prologist Hu Shih, the riddance of religion turns this version into “simply a book of good humor [...] and delightful entertainment” (5). Why the assumption that religion and humor have to exist as eternal opposites? Isn’t Wu Cheng’en articulating a religious vision precisely through the use of humor? Does Journey use religion as a source of comedy? And comedy as a source of religion? What is lost and what is gained by bowdlerizing the religious theme?
Every religion promotes a worldview and its accordant lifestyle. To study religion in *Journey* entails looking at matters beyond the merely spiritual: history, the art of government, class conflict, literacy, the supernatural, death, ethics, family life, etc. The very premise of the book rests upon a religious theme: a pilgrimage to find and translate Buddhist scriptures that would enable the inhabitants of “the Southern Continent” to “change their hearts” by embracing religious and civic virtue (78). Thus, from its inception, the journey that gives the book its title spurs personal growth toward holiness as well as social reform toward a more virtuous community. Characters in the novel often struggle to reconcile individual spirituality with the common good.

For the purposes of reading and teaching *Journey*, it is also important to keep in mind that the text does not offer a coherent set of religious beliefs. Rather it mirrors the cacophony of deities, rituals, and beliefs of the era. The frictions between these competing faiths are nowhere best seen than in Chapters 22 and 23, in which Buddhist and Daoist monks fight each other over control of the country of Cart Slow. Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and several folk religions in China have never existed in watertight compartments. Chinese people throughout the ages have combined and recombined elements from the three teachings (plus popular practice) in their daily life to the point that expert scholars find it very difficult to disentangle their overlaps and mutual influences (of course, non-experts have it much harder). In Wu Cheng’en’s lifetime the same person could study the Confucian classics hoping to have a public career, make offerings to his ancestors in a Confucian sense, have Buddhist ceremonies performed for those same departed dead, commission Daoist rites at different times, and follow the practices of popular religion and hire a spirit medium to deal with a family member’s illness. This tendency to hybridize rather than to distill religions shocks us in a contemporary Western context where members of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism insist on their respective differences.

Another key difference from our Western context is that, concerning Chinese religious history, we know less than what we ignore. Even if numerous written sources help us understand religious traditions such as Buddhism and Daoism, their highly localized nature frustrate any systematic attempt to comprehend them at large. According to Barret, “even if we were able to retrieve all the Buddhist and Taoist texts that have disappeared over the centuries, there would still be many aspects of these religions—ranging from ineffable religious experiences to trivial gestures of etiquette observed in monastic life—that we would be powerless to understand because they were never written down.” (161). Likewise, *Journey* poses as many enigmas as answers regarding Chinese folk religions. Even if its spiritual framing derives from Buddhism and Daoism, its undisputed protagonist belongs to a folk religion: the cult of the Monkey King (Scholar Meir Shahar has linked Sun Wukong to the “body of monkey lore” in the monastery of Lingyin si, c 330 AD).

**BUDDHISM**

Buddhism originates in eastern India with the teachings and sermons of Gautama Buddha (c. 480-400 BCE). Its central premise is that life is full of death and suffering. To cope with it, men should accept change as inevitable, hence the belief in reincarnation. But accepting change as life’s eternal principle is no easy task; it sends Buddhists into a search for wisdom that involves self-cultivation and the elimination of the desire for a different, idealized life. The goal of this search materializes in The Noble Eightfold Path, a series of wholesome individual and communal life habits.
In the late Third Century BCE, as Gautama Buddha’s lessons proliferated throughout East Asia (mainly China), a pivotal split occurred between two main branches of Buddhism: Mahayana—the one that influenced Journey and the one that the historical Xuanzang imported from India—and Theravada. Whereas Theravada Buddhism tends to preserve the original teachings of Gautama Buddha, Mahayana Buddhism claims that the original Buddha was but a manifestation of an eternal Buddha whose life lessons emanate from manifold sources and manifestations in the natural world. A Theravada Buddhist aspires to become an arhat and to reach Nirvana (enlightenment) through self-cultivation; a Mahayana Buddhist’s maximum goal is to become a bodhisattva, an enlightened being devoted to assist others in the same path. Thus, Mahayana Buddhism has a less individualistic projection. Notice that, at the end of Journey, both Tripitaka and Monkey become Buddhas, while Pigsy cannot achieve this status because his “appetite is still too large” (303). For an excellent summary of the defining features of Mahayana vs. Theravada Buddhism, see Koller’s table (http://www.columbia.edu/cu/weai/exeas/resources/ foundations-text-4.html).

Western nations are more familiar with Buddhism than with any other religion portrayed in Journey. A great deal of our western fascination with Buddhism rests nonetheless on distortions and stereotypes. We lightly use the terms “Nirvana,” “sutra,” and “karma” in our everyday lingo; we strain our muscles in order to achieve a full lotus position and the peace of mind that apparently comes with it; we have perpetuated a view of the Buddhist monk—often Dalai Lama—as the world’s quintessential pacifist. Stephen Batchelor has criticized this reductive vision:

By overlooking the enormous social, political and cultural contributions it has made throughout Asia over the past 2,500 years, a one-dimensional image of the Dharma is formed: Buddhism is at best a harmless mystical preoccupation, at worst a socially irresponsible indulgence. One can rest assured that it has nothing to do with toppling governments or seriously upsetting the status quo” (The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture 276).

Journey portrays Buddhist monks and deities in many different shades, helping us set the record straight.

**DAOISM**

Buddhism has been present in China since the First century AD. There, it originally competed with Daoism, although both traditions also had massive mutual influence. A more disorganized religion than Buddhism, Daoism ceded its influence on Chinese society to the new religion, whose monastic orders were strictly organized and benefited from financial donors among the elite. In fact, competition over patronage was a huge point of conflict (Barrett 149). Ironically, both faiths have obvious overlaps (e.g. doctrine of “non-being”); however, Daoists resented the introduction of this foreign dogma, which, in their opinion, minimized the legacy of the Chinese sage Lao-Tzu, the luminary of Daoism. Despite this nationalist opposition, the first to ninth centuries AD are often labeled the “Buddhist centuries” (Yu, “Religion and Literature in China” 158).

Daoism is premised on the key concepts of wu (“nonbeing”) and wu-wei (“non-action”). Man has no palpable influence in the workings of the universe. Thus, the best ethical conduct is that which yields to
superior forces through the embrace of the Three Treasures: compassion, frugality, and humility (notice the parallel with Mahayana Buddhism’s Three Jewels: Buddha, or enlightenment; Dharma, or teachings; and Sangha, or community). The concept of “dao” 道 encapsulates this fundamental attitude to life. An elusive term, “dao” is often translated as “way.” It signals both a “way” of life for individuals to hone their skills and achieve wisdom and a reference to the “way” the universe works. “Dao” is thus prescriptive and descriptive. In the latter sense, it does not designate a particular object or set of objects as much as an underlying order of things. For that reason, we cannot grasp its ultimate essence nor pin it down through a static definition. Consider if not the conundrum with which the Tao Te Ching begins:

The Tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.


Since man has a limited role in the universe, Daoist literature depicts many supernatural entities and their deeds. Like Tripitaka in Journey, man occupies the center of the stage, yet events and outcomes escape his control. Somewhat paradoxically, Daoism also stresses the need for humans to transcend these limitations through certain practices: yoga, meditation, alchemy. This belief in human perfectibility has its roots in Confucianism. Like Confucianism, Daoism is a sponge-like religion in that it absorbs ideas from other philosophical traditions. Localized cults and folk religions left an indelible print in Daoism, one that present-day scholars still struggle to understand.

CONFUCIANISM

Its presence in Journey is residual, since Confucianism reached its apex of influence during the Han dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD). Although it pales in comparison with the presence of Buddhist and Daoist elements, it is important to keep in mind that the latter faiths, as they gained ascendancy in Chinese politics and social organization, had to react against Confucian ideas and rituals that had been in place for centuries. Confucianism became the foil of subsequent religions. In fact, it was so pervasive that is status as a “religion” is vexed, to say the least. Why a religion and not a sociopolitical movement? (The same question could be asked of Daoism and Buddhism). The question arises from Confucianism’s emphasis on public life, positing social and political progress as its ultimate goal. Confucianism’ s flagship text, The Analects (475-221 BC), focuses on education as the means for individuals to socialize and, together, seek a better life on earth. Despite Confucians’ belief in man’s innate goodness, later generations of Confucian leaders will argue the contrary, underlining the need for self-restraint against excessive desires and passions. Monkey’s trajectory in Journey exemplifies this model of personal growth.

From its origins as the discipline of the governing elites, Confucianism has been turned into the state’s official curriculum. During the Han dynasty, students and applicants for jobs in the government or in the public administration had to show their familiarity with the principles of Confucianism. Confucian curricula were also a staple during the Tang and Ming periods. The exam system homogenized Confucian notions across the empire’s vast expanses. As Daniel K. Gardner suggests,

School children, whether they lived in Beijing, Xi’an, or Guangzhou, read the same Confucian primers and the same Four Books and Five Classics; and in reading the Four Books and Five Classics, they all read the commentary declared orthodox by the state.
[...] It was these virtues and ideals they were expected to uphold if they were fortunate enough to win official appointment. This is to say that the examination system served as a powerful integrative force in Chinese history. (95)

After the splendor of Buddhism and Daoism, China underwent a Confucian revival during the Ch’ing dynasty (1644-1912). Its emperors were trained as exemplars of the Confucian, cultivated statesman.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

• Why is Monkey King afraid of dying? Why are we? Is his/our desire for immortality responsible for his embrace of religion? Consider the following passage, which occurs right after Monkey has shared his despair with his monkey subjects: “When the monkeys heard this they covered their faces with their hands and wept, each thinking of his own mortality. But look! From among the ranks there springs out one monkey commoner, who cries in a loud voice ‘If that is what troubles your Majesty, it shows that religion has taken hold upon your heart!’” (14). Linger on this last phrase. What does it mean for religion to “take hold” of somebody’s heart? Why does Waley place “religion” as the grammatical subject of the sentence in his translation? In other words, do people embrace religion or does religion embrace people? Notice that the original version reads 道心开发 (dao xin kai fa) a subject-verb that literally stands for “the way-heart (heart that understands the Way) has opened.” Can you think of an alternative translation? In what ways does language and problems of grammar and translation frame our embrace—or lack thereof—of religion? Last but not least, why does the narrator load Monkey’s discovery of religion with psychological terms: from despondency to “being delighted” with the news that he can procure his own immortality (14)?

SIX ROBBERS

• This episode is an example of religious allegory that Waley could not completely obliterate in his anti-allegorical abridgment of Journey. On the second day of their trip, Tripitaka and Monkey confront six bandits who introduce themselves thus:

“The first of us is called Eye that Sees and Delights; the second, Ear that Hears and is Angry.; the third, Nose that smells and covets; the fourth, Tongue that tastes and Desires; the fifth, Mind that Conceives and Lusts; the sixth, Body that Supports and Suffers” “You’re nothing but six hairy ruffians,” said Monkey, laughing. “We priests, I would have you know, are your lords and masters, yet you dare block our path. Bring out all the stolen goods you have about you and divide them into seven parts. Then, if you leave me one part, I will spare your lives.” (132)

In the confrontation that ensues, Monkey kills the six robbers, much to Tripitaka’s chagrin. For the monk, “[one] has no right to kill robbers, however violent and wicked they may be. The most one may do is to bring them before a magistrate” (132).

• Roberta Adams encourages us to read this incident as an allegory of Buddhism’s emphasis on nonbeing. The bandits represent the different senses and organs that excite our desires; killing them constitutes a symbolic gesture that heralds the individual’s mastery of nonbeing over the transient cravings of the material, sensual world. To that end, Adams relates this incident with the following lines of poetry, found in the same chapter of the unabridged version:
“Buddha is the mind, the mind is Buddha,  
Mind and Buddha have always needed things.  
When you know that there are not things and no mind  
Then you are a Buddha with a true mind and a Dharma body.”¹

(qtd. in Roberta E. Adams, “Buddhism in the Classic Chinese Novel Journey to the West: Teaching Two Episodes”

• What relationship do you see between the assault of the six robbers and this stanza? What lesson derives from both?
• With your students, tackle some of the contradictions here. For example, Why does Xuanzang, supposedly a wise man, fail to recognize these as forces that had to be overcome? Also, Monkey overcomes the bandits/senses and so, he places himself above desire and appetite. Why then does he cherish the bandits’ “stolen goods”? Why does he try to negotiate with them (“if you leave me one part I will spare your lives”)? Does this seeming contradiction bear any relation to the line “Mind and Buddha have always needed things”?

THE CAP

• What does Monkey’s cap symbolize? A bit of recap (no pun intended): After Monkey kills the six robbers, a horrified Tripitaka scolds him severely. Monkey takes offense and leaves (132-33). The Bodhisattva Kuan-yin then appears and gives Tripitaka a golden “cap” that enacts a powerful spell. When a repentant Monkey returns to Tripitaka, the latter misleads Monkey into putting on the cap, which turns out to be an infallible control mechanism: whenever Monkey goes wild, all Tripitaka has to do is recite some scriptures and Monkey becomes paralyzed by an unbearable headache (135-36). Once Monkey learns that the headband came originally from Kuan-yin, he sees “the logic of this” (136). What is this “logic”? The term seems to carry a lot of weight in the passage. Does the cap symbolize the logic of necessary coercion (for the quest to succeed Tripitaka needs to suppress Monkey’s temperament even through the use of violence)? Or does it symbolize a logic of self-restraint (namely, all of us should do like Monkey and wear a headband that prevents us from indulging in our most primitive drives and desires)? Simply put, does the headband signify violent coercion or Buddhist cultivation? Is it a positive or a negative symbol?
• Part of the cap’s symbolic ambiguity lies in the fact that Tripitaka has to dupe Monkey into putting on the cap and its attendant coat, promising him that “anyone who wears this cap can recite scriptures without having to learn them. Anyone who wears this coat can perform ceremonies without having practiced them” (136-37). A counterfactual analysis is in order: would Monkey have agreed to wear the cap had he known its true, repressive function? Why? Why not? Why does Tripitaka lie to him? Is there an implicit critique of religion here? Do religions lie to their adherents, even when it’s for their own good?
• Have students role-play Tripitaka. They know that the quest can only succeed if they find a way to harness Monkey’s outbursts. How would they try to convince him? Would they try to

¹ Adams sees a pun here between the physical body and the “Dharma,” understood as “the body of the law.”
persuade Monkey by telling him the truth (something like “this might hurt, but it’s also good for you and for us”)? Or would they trick him into putting it on, as Tripitaka does?

• Ironically, by the time Monkey puts on the cap and coat, he might have already learned the lesson that these items are supposed to teach him. Before reuniting with Tripitaka, Monkey listens to the following advice from the Dragon King of the Eastern Ocean: “you must learn to control yourself and submit to the will of others, if you are not to spoil all your chances” (135). Why does Wu Cheng’en arrange the events in this order, so that Monkey is brutally punished for a flaw that he has already started to amend?

• Notice also the power differential that the cap introduces between Monkey and Tripitaka. During their journey Monkey keeps Tripitaka safe from many dangers, and yet Tripitaka has the ultimate power over Monkey. How would you describe their relationship after Monkey puts on the cap? Tyrannical? Mutually beneficial? Is it a good thing that Monkey loses some of his freedom and power? And that Tripitaka gains some leverage over his fidgety disciple?

• With your students, analyze the material features of the cap and coat. Notice that these items have been designed to catch Monkey’s attention and titillate his desire. At first, Monkey’s “eye was caught by something bright” (135). Then, Tripitaka declares the cap and coat his (“I used to wear them when I was young,” 135). Once the cap’s spell becomes effective, a convulsive Monkey “felt his head. The cap seemed to have taken root upon it” (136). The sentence presents us with a paradox: a plant has “roots” in a fixed place but it can also be transplanted to a different soil. Likewise, we know the cap tames Monkey, but does it change who he really is? Is it really rooted in him? Consider the following line: “So he [Monkey] said, but in his heart there was still lurking a very evil intent” (136). Once again, is Wu Cheng’en criticizing the fear factor through which many religions operate? Fear of damnation or pain might make us embrace virtue, but is that change genuine enough? What happens if, as with Monkey, one still harbors an “evil intent”?

• Which Monkey do students like better, the one who upsets the order of heaven or the one who is under control? Where does sympathy lie?

THE HEART SUTRA (PRAJNA-PARAMITA)

• What changes about our understanding of religion in Journey once we factor in the Heart Sutra? Waley excised this sutra, a favorite of Tripitaka, leaving only an enigmatic mention in Chapter 23. During the rain-making competition against the Immortals, Tripitaka places himself on top of an altar and “composing his mind silently [begins] to recite the Heart Sutra” (231). The text of the actual sutra, also known as prajna-paramita, can be found in the unabridged version. It goes like this:

  ... matter is not different from voidness and voidness is not different from matter: matter is voidness and voidness is matter [form is emptiness and emptiness is form]. Such is also the case with sensation, perception, discrimination and consciousness. Sariputra, all these things are void in nature, having neither beginning nor end, being neither pure nor impure, and having neither increase nor decrease. Therefore, in voidness there is no matter, no sensation, no perception, no discrimination and no consciousness; there is no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body and no mind; there is no sight, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch and no mental process; there is no category of eye nor is there a category of consciousness; no ignorance nor the cessation of ignorance; no old age and death, nor the cessation of old age and death; there is no suffering, no
causes of suffering, no cessation of suffering, and no way leading to the cessation of suffering; and there is no wisdom, nor anything to be gained. As nothing is to be gained, a Bodhisattva depending on prajna-paramita becomes free in his mind, and as he is free in his mind he has no fear and is rid of dreamlike thoughts of unreality and enjoys ultimate Nirvana. (http://www.exeas.org/resources/buddhism-journey-heartsutra.html)

- What is the meaning of “voidness” and “matter” in this sutra? Before answering, be aware that “voidness” here relates to the same original word (“kong” 坤) found in Monkey’s name—Sun WuKong.
- Anthony Yu reminds us that the historical Xuanzang brought the Heart Sutra from India and translated it into Chinese. Wu Cheng’en introduces it as the cornerstone of Tripitaka’s Buddhist faith. In an episode also missing from Waley’s version, an old sage teaches it to Tripitaka and tells him to recite these words whenever he is in danger. The Heart Sutra will dissolve any threat. Why? Notice how the mantra of the Heart Sutra rests on the repetition of the negative particle “no.” Why is the road to freedom and Nirvana paved with this insistent negation of everything that seems worldly or subjective? How does the Heart Sutra refine our interpretation of key episodes such as Monkey’s murder of the Six Robbers and the discovery of the wordless scriptures (no-scriptures)?

The profound paradox emerging from the narrative appears to be thus: that the pilgrim, who has been given the sacred words (Heart Sutra) and magic talisman (golden fillet and Tight Fillet Spell) wherewithal to control the mind (“Mind is Monkey—this, the truth profound” [Journey 1:168]), must be aided at all times by the mind if he is to succeed.

Anthony C. Yu, “Two Literary Examples of Religious Pilgrimage,” Comparative Journeys (147)

THE BLANK SCRIPTURES

- After many ordeals and mishaps, the pilgrim and his companions leave the Holy Mountain with a bunch of blank scriptures (286-87). It so happens that they didn’t meet the customary obligation of paying guardian Buddhas Ānanda and Kāsyapa for the scriptures. When they return to complain, Buddha tells them: “As a matter of fact, it is such blank scrolls as these that are the true scriptures. But I quite see that the people of China are too foolish and ignorant to believe this, so there is nothing for it but to give them copies with some writing on” (287). What does Buddha mean when he says that only “blank scrolls” constitute “the true scriptures”? Andrew H. Plaks reads the incident with the blank scriptures as “an anti-climactic ending” to the journey (Masterworks, 275). Do you agree? Based on Buddha’s words, can we refer to their trip as a success or a failure? Are the “copies with some writing on” merely a consolation prize? If so, what was the true prize in your opinion?
Here, then, is a dramatization of the tensions between the two competing views of Enlightenment, and the book’s purport. The blank scriptures are a logical outcome of the sudden view, which disregards everything formal. The result is an attempt to reconcile the tensions. It has taken the pilgrims fourteen years to reach their destination, and they have to bring something material back to China. In the final analysis, it would seem, gradual liberation is the structuring principle of this book.

Qiancheng Li, *Fictions of Enlightenment: Journey to the West, Tower of Myriad Mirrors, and Dream of the Red Chamber* (Hawaii, 2004), 80.

• Why does Buddha think that Chinese people remain too foolish to appreciate the true value of the blank scriptures? The question leads to yet another paradox: if the most valuable scriptures are the ones without words in them (no-scriptures), and these teach the lesson that only cultivation from within the self will result in enlightenment, then why are the pilgrims required to make a payment for their scriptures? How can Ānanda and Kāśyapa demand material payment (either gifts or money) when the very scriptures they sell proclaim the need to leave material lusts behind? How do we make sense of their greed? Does Wu-Cheng’en satirize them?

**ASSIGNMENTS, ACTIVITIES & PROJECT IDEAS**

• What do students know about Buddhism and Daoism? A useful way to start the discussion can be to show them the figure of a Buddha and/or the *ying-yang* symbol. Have students seen this before? In what context and under what circumstances? Not that Wisconsin has a big surfer community, but many students might have encountered this symbol on sport gear by famous surf brands such as Quicksilver®. Likewise, Buddhism has a strong iconic presence in the West, often through half-truths and stereotypes. Do students know any celebrities who declare themselves Buddhists? For a great parody of the Hollywood Buddhist type, show sections of *The Simpsons* episode above mentioned, in which Lisa embraces the Buddhist faith and receives life lessons from another famous adherent, Richard Gere. Echoes of the Dao in Western popular culture can be found in the Star Wars saga, in which George Lucas based the Force on the concept of the Dao. Other sci-fi materials in which sensory reality is an illusion include *The Matrix, Blade Runner, and Dark City*. Plato’s Allegory of the Cave might also be useful.

• Have students write their own Sutra after the fashion of the Heart Sutra quoted above. The idea is to compose a text that can protect them by reciting it aloud. Be creative. Share examples of prayers with a similar purpose from different world religions (The Lord’s Prayer, the Fatiha, the Gayatri Mantra). What are the formal properties of a prayer/sutra? What is the role of rhythm and repetition? What is it about the language of the prayer/sutra that makes us feel protected from harm? How do words accomplish this?

• Encourage students to write an essay and participate in a follow-up debate using the following passage as a prompt:

> In *The Journey to the West*, each episode has its own meaning, each chapter has its own meaning, and each word has its own meaning. The Adept [Ch’iu Ch’u-chi] never spoke without purpose or used a superfluous word. The reader must pay attention to every line and every phrase, not even a single word should be permitted to slip by. Only he
who knows this can read *The Journey to the West* (from Anthony C. Yu, “How to read *The Original Intent of The Journey to the West*,” *How to Read the Chinese Novel*, 301).

- In class, listen to this eight-minute audio clip of the Dalai Lama reciting the Heart Sutra: (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvaFdYSD4C0). Exchange your impressions with the class. What is the effect of tone and repetition? Musically talented students can attempt their own variations on this sutra by providing a musical background or quoting it in the lyrics of a song.