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

2015-2016 Great World Texts Program of the Center for the Humanities

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OBJECTIVE: To comprehend the many dimensions of “the journey” in *Journey to the West*: spiritual, geographic, narrative; also, to examine the uneasy relationship of *Journey* with the generic conventions and tropes of travel writing.

HANDOUT  James S. Fu, “A Synopsis of His-ju chi”

PREPARATORY & RECOMMENDED READING
- Xuanzang Pilgrimage route
  https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=zTypxqy6ae6g.kqpYk3KQPppk&hl=en_US

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
PRIMARY SOURCES
  Where it all started. Reading a few isolated chapters of Xuanzang’s record of his nineteen-year trip to India, one already notices the huge disparities between his original trip, conducted in clandestine fashion, and the one in *Journey*, which the Emperor himself commissions.
  The standard edition of this influential travelogue. The Venetian explorer travels around China around 1271. Because he pursued commercial and diplomatic rather than spiritual interests, his impressions provide an interesting contrast with Xuanzang’s Report.

WU CHENG’EN & TRAVEL WRITING
  Hsia’s general commentary on *Journey* focuses on the relationship between the geographical information contained in Xuanzang’s work and Wu Cheng’en’s imaginative reworking and allegorical appropriation.
  In the first section of this essay, Yu delivers key information regarding the historical and mythical origins of the scripture-seeker Tripitaka.
- ..., “Two Literary Examples of Religious Pilgrimage: The Commedia and The Journey to the West” *Comparative Journeys*, 129-57.
  Another useful analysis of *Journey* for those unfamiliar with Chinese history and religion.
  Influential study of ancient narrative and mythology. Some of its claims (i.e. those excessively heavily influenced by psychoanalysis, the in full vogue) have not aged well, but Campbell’s theory of “quest” narratives and his cross-cultural analysis of heroic figures still offer a relevant paradigm to keep in mind when reading Journey.
  A philosophical fable around the figure of Shih Huang Ti (260-210 BC), who built the Great Wall of China and ordered the burning of all the books so that “history began with him.” Despite the erudite tone, this brief tale invites questions and discussion about the role of memory and the transmission of knowledge in Ancient China.

THE SILK ROAD
• “Silk Roads: the Routes Network of Chang’an-Tianshan Corridor”
  http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1442/
  From the UNESCO official site. This link includes a short, informative description of those sections of the Silk Road more relevant for Journey and for Xuanzang’s Report. Lovely photographs.
• Silk Road Atlas, Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities, University of Washington.
  http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/maps/maps.html
  Collection of maps and images of the Silk Road throughout history. It also includes interactive exercises and links to other online maps collections.
• Expedition Silk Road: Journey to the West. Hermitage Amsterdam (2014).
  Based on the museum exhibit of the same name, this book compiles relevant artwork and essays for visualizing some of the objects and landscapes in Journey.
• Luce Boulnois, Monks, Warriors, & Merchants on the Silk Road (Odyssey, 2012)
  A readable and well researched account of the Silk Road in Ancient history.

FILMS
• Silk Road Filmography. https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/guides/srtchvideo.html
  Also from the University of Washington. The list includes videos and CD-ROM. The main documentaries listed here can be found in DVD. Some episodes are also available full-length in YouTube.
• Dir. Sean Penn. Into the Wild (2007). DVD
  Both the film and the original non-fiction bestseller by Jon Krakauer have resonated with young audiences. It narrates a contemporary “quest” that invites analogies with the spiritual quest of Journey, albeit in a context more familiar to US audiences.
• Dir. Jean-Marc Vallée. Wild (2014). DVD
  A tale of personal redemption structured as a long hike along the west coast. Like Into the Wild, it’s also based on a literary text: Cheryl Strayed’s memoir Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail (2012). Useful to discuss the notion of “pilgrimage” from a contemporary perspective. Furthermore, the theme of personal redemption from past mistakes also echoes the circumstances in which Monkey, Sandy, and Pigsy join Tripitaka’s trail.
UNIT ORGANIZATION
This unit is divided into three sub-sections: an introductory discussion on “Quest, Pilgrimage, Travelogue”; “Points for Discussion”; and “Assignments, Activities & Project Ideas.”

QUEST, PILGRIMAGE, TRAVELOGUE

*Journey to the West* is a quest. A quest is a long journey motivated by the need to accomplish a major goal. From *The Odyssey* to *Lord of the Rings*, world literature abounds in quests, as they offer many narrative possibilities: the evolution of individual characters and group dynamics, the depiction of exotic and fantastic lands, and the promise of an epic, larger-than-life accomplishment waiting at the end. *Journey* embodies and mocks this tradition. The return of the pilgrims with the longed for scriptures signals a major triumph and the beginning of a new era for China. Conversely, once the festivities are over, Tripitaka needs to sit down and translate an endless number of scrolls for the teaching of the Buddha to become available to Chinese citizens. The laborious task of translating the scriptures lacks the narrative appeal of the journey, and yet it is every bit as important!

*Journey to the West* is also a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is a two-fold journey: internal (spiritual) and physical (geographical). Common destinations include important religious sites: temples, tombs, cathedrals (e.g. Mecca, Lourdes, Santiago). The literary tradition also abounds in pilgrimages. Some texts explore the spiritual growth brought about by the pilgrimage, whereas others reach the same life lessons by depicting on-the-road vicissitudes in a realistic fashion. Thus, a classic such as *Pilgrim’s Progress* unfolds in purely allegorical landscapes named after the different stages of the human soul on its way toward salvation (e.g. Valley of the Shadow of Death, Pond of Despair). Another famous pilgrimage in the Christian tradition, the one shown in *The Canterbury Tales*, provides a clever narrative device to create a repository of tales that often edge on the scatological and the licentious. The trip’s goal might be redemption, but the road is paved with dirty jokes. In *Journey*, the pilgrims’ lofty mission of achieving Enlightenment works as the perfect excuse to depict a series of scuffles against demons, sexual temptations by monsters in disguise, and lots of comical bantering. As in analogous literary pilgrimages, the journey in *Journey* is more interesting than the destination.

Last but not least, *Journey to the West* is not a travelogue, but is based on one. A travelogue takes the form of a navigation or a scientific report. It aims to capture and preserve a foreign reality: distant lands, unknown species, and other civilizations. In *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions* (c. 646 AD), Xuanzang left a comprehensive record of his travels to India, crossing a number of today’s nations in the process: China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and India. His meanderings often overlapped with the Silk Road, one of the most important trade routes in human history. More specifically, Xuanzang travelled through the impressive Chang’an-Tianshan Corridor, whose abrupt geography help us visualize the fantastic, hyperbolic locales described in *Journey*. Although *Journey* reproduces the genre of the travelogue at times, Wu Cheng’en seems more concerned with discrediting its claims to authority. For starters, the journey to the west intersects with other quests and subplots (Monkey’s quest for immortality, Hsuan Tang’s mission to avenge his family). Even if they travel together, each pilgrim follows a different motivation. Also, as the names of different landmarks indicate, the geographical landscapes and natural accidents encountered by the pilgrim err on an allegorical rather than realistic mode of description. Caves, rivers, mountains, and river basins
symbolize the obstacles that the pilgrim’s soul must face in its way to enlightenment. In this trip the soul gets more blisters than the feet.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

IMPERIAL SPONSORSHIP

Whereas the historical pilgrim [Xuanzang], upon his successful return to China with scriptures, felt compelled to seek imperial pardon for ‘braving to transgress the authoritative statutes and departing for India on one’s own authority’ through both written memorial and direct oral petition, the fictive priest [Tripitaka] would be welcomed by a faithful and expectant ruler who had even built a Scripture-Anticipation Tower to wait anxiously for his envoy’ for eleven more years. This portrait of the pilgrimage’s imperial sponsorship, intervention (most notable in the travel rescript bearing the imperial seal administered by the emperor himself), and reception helps explain why the fictive priest would consider his religious mission to be, in fact, his obligated service to his lord and state, and that the mission’s success must enact not merely the fulfillment of a vow to Buddha but equally one to a human emperor.


• Why does Wu Cheng’ en depart from his official source in making Tripitaka’s trip to India an official rather than a clandestine enterprise? Why is it necessary that the Emperor sign “a rescript authorizing Hsüan Tsang’s quest” and stamp “it with the seal of free passage” (117)?
• Acting as an imperial emissary and a monk pilgrim, Tripitaka often has a conflicted agenda. Are there any moments in the text where Tripitaka is confused by this double status? Also, consider the promise he makes upon departure to “promote the security of your Majesty’s streams and hills” (117)? Is Tripitaka an imperial agent as well? Once again, we are left to wonder whether these “streams and hills” stand for real physical locations or for different states of the soul. What do you make of this ambiguity?
• Why does Tripitaka envision his quest as all or nothing? Keep in mind his parting words to the Emperor and his court: “may I fall into the nethermost pit of Hell, rather than return empty-handed to China” (117). As Rania Huntington states in the prologue, Tripitaka’s quest does not originate in the fact that “forces of darkness” might be “about to conquer the world” (XX). There is no immediate threat to the kingdom. How do we explain, then, Tripitaka’s dramatic vow? What does he think is at stake?

CROSSING BOUNDARIES

• Despite the journey’s allegorical dimension, the pilgrims run into some of the logistical obstacles that any traveler is likely to encounter. For one, there is the question of territorial jurisdictions. These are man-made, not natural, hurdles that divide the land between different states. The Mountain of Two Frontiers, where Monkey joins Tripitaka’s party, “is the border of the Tang. Symbolically, climbing this mountain signifies for Tripitaka venturing into new territories, other lands and the visionary landscape of wilderness. [...] It stands for his new life, his renunciation of Daoism to embrace Buddhism, a division in his life, too” (Li, Fictions of Enlightenment 63). A non-symbolic reading of the same landmark yields productive questions for students (125): what
is the role of national borders? What historical circumstances lie behind the artificial lines on a map? Can a nation-state be really contained by these? What happens to those who trespass them without authorization? Note: An interesting activity/project to grapple with these questions would be for students to find out what documents they would require in order to complete one of the stages in Xuanzang’s pilgrimage (Link: https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=zTypxqy6ae6g.kqpYk3KQPppk&hl=en_US).

- Why do the pilgrims need passports? And why do they need to seal them everywhere they go before handing them over to the Buddha at the Holy Mountain (283)? Remember that they are retained in the country of the Slow Cart because they don’t have their passports, forced thus to win the rain-making competition against the Immortals (Chapter 23. See also 204, 216, 226, and 267).

- Along with these bureaucratic procedures, travelling is a practice fraught with rituals and omens. For instance, the Emperor grabs a handful of dust, mixes it with water and asks Tripitaka to swallow it before departing to unknown lands. The Emperor explains this gesture rather enigmatically: “for are we not told that a handful of one’s country’s soil is worth more than ten thousand pounds of foreign gold?” (118). What does he mean by this? Is this is true, why bother to travel at all? Why it is so important then to pick up those scriptures from India? Why do you travel? Do you think people travel to discover new cultures or to be reassured of their own cultural superiority? What is the difference between travel and tourism? Do you see yourself as a traveler or a tourist? What kinds of records do you produce when you travel: photographs, journals, souvenirs, postcards?

THE END OF THE JOURNEY?

- A favorite topic among writers has always been the bored quester without a quest, the aged hero who only finds solace in the memory of his former deeds and adventures. Poems such as Alfred Tennyson’s “Ulysses” and Elizabeth Bishop’s “Crusoe in England” represent two lucid explorations of this theme. According to James S. Fu, a similar fate awaits Monkey and the other pilgrims.

  Monkey prefers the process of the quest to the paradise lost and regained. As his alter ego, Pigsy, has told us, nothing can be sweeter to Monkey than to evoke and to subdue the monsters. When all songs and stories end, the rest is silence; and a paradise tends to become a prison when it loses the support of the constant questing spirit. The basic paradox of the quest is that it can transform its perpetual process into its unattainable goal. (Fu 92)

Based on the following quote, and the events described in Monkey’s last chapter, do you think that becoming “Buddha Victorious in Strife” is a happy ending for Monkey? His personal transformation culminates when the constraining “Fillet” is removed from his head, but notice also that he wants to “get it off and smash into bits” (304). Is Monkey being sincere? Has he really embraced a new, calmer self? Based on what you know about the importance of cyclical time in Chinese history and narrative (see Unit 1), do you dare make any prediction about what’s next for Monkey?
THE MEANING OF THE JOURNEY

• What is the ultimate meaning of the journey for Tripitaka? We know that Monkey can get to the other end of the universe in a single leap, so why doesn’t he help Tripitaka get to India faster?
• Is this really an adventure? Early in Chapter 8, Buddha and Kuan-yin examine the terrain across which Tripitaka is going to travel, not wanting to leave any loose end: “Keep an eye on the mountains and rivers, and make careful note of the distances and travelling-stages, so that you may assist the scripture-seeker” (79). Why does this “scripture-seeker” have to be “a man of common mortal birth”? Once again, why don’t the divinities choose a supernatural being who can guarantee the success of the enterprise? How is this “success” being redefined by choosing, instead, a fallible and vulnerable mortal?

ASSIGNMENTS, ACTIVITIES & PROJECT IDEAS

• Invite your students to explore the Google Maps rendition of Xuanzang’s original itinerary, organized by stages. Ask them to concentrate on one or two stages/locations and research them in detail. They should begin by reading the correspondent selections in Xuanzang’s Report. Using the Google Earth application, students can examine the actual location and investigate it in detail (country, jurisdiction, population, language, customs). Their project might also include online interviews with locals regarding their perception of Journey to the West.
• Ask students to write an essay and/or prepare a short presentation arguing whether or not Monkey fits the standard outlined here by Joseph Campbell:
  The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation—initiation—return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth. [...] A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (The Hero with a Thousand Faces 28).
• Narrate the most important trip of your life. What made this trip so important? Did it have any transformative effect? Did it contribute in any meaningful to shape who you are? How? This work of composition can be the jump-start for a final project in another medium (video, dance, visual arts).
• Conduct a comparative analysis of Journey to the West and another work of fiction you know that depicts a long, eventful journey, either a quest or a pilgrimage (book series, film franchises, TV shows). Focus on very specific points of analogy and dissonance with Journey.
• Draw a narrative map of the pilgrim’s journey. Use as a map of Asia as a template and try to chart their itinerary. Given the novel’s fantastic landscape, you will have to place different landmarks in this realistic template. Make educated guesses based on Xuanzang’s itinerary and the book’s descriptions. Also, make your map as narrative as possible. Including notes or images that gives us a sense of the order and relevance of the different events in Monkey.

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