

## **The Trickster across the Pacific: Inspiration and Influence of the Chinese Monkey Story in Contemporary Asian-American Literature**

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### **Abstract**

Wu Cheng'en (1500-1583) wrote about Xuanzang's journey of searching for classic teachings of Buddhism in Tian Zhu (present day India) in the form of a romance and fantasy titled *Journey to the West*. The book idolized the Monkey King, who then became the hero among people, young and old, in China. Plenty of Asian-American writers introduced the Monkey King in their writings; this research seeks to find the influence of the Monkey King story on these writings. It starts with Arthur Waley's translation of Wu Cheng'en's book and looks at the Monkey King's symbolization and importance, which inspired works including Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1990), Patricia Chao's *Monkey King* (1998), and Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel *American Born Chinese* (2006). From there, the focus of this research moves on to finding connections and inspirations the Monkey story has on Asian-Americans works. All these pieces shared the common idea of identity, belonging, fitting in, and seeking the self -- like the Monkey King did throughout his journey. The search for the self is an ongoing theme for Asian-Americans, who are relocated in a new environment with new people; from time to time they keep their own heritage and accept the new culture. Sun Wukong shared the same struggles at the beginning, yet his story tells the audience that the self lies on the path people choose. The Chinese Monkey has become an iconic character, as he is commonly referenced in contemporary Asian-American literature, and his influence will continue as long as Asian-American writers are inspired by his legacy.

**Keywords:** Monkey King, Trickster, Asian-American Literature

### **1. Introduction**

It was during the Tang Dynasty, in the years from 628 A.D. to 645 A.D., that the Chinese monk Xuanzang (or Xuan Zhuang, 玄奘) traveled all the way westward to Tian Zhu (天竺, present day India) to search for and dive into the classic teachings of Buddhism. Centuries later, Wu Cheng'en (吴承恩, 1500-1583) wrote about Xuanzang's journey in the form of a romance and fantasy novel titled *Journey to the West* (《西游记》). This book is widely acknowledged as one of the four masterworks in classical Chinese literature, along with *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (《三国演义》), *Outlaws of the Marsh* (《水浒传》), and *Dream of the Red Mansion* (《红楼梦》).

Various English translations and adaptations have been published, and among the best-known are Arthur Waley's abridged version *Monkey: Folk Novel of China* (1942) and Anthony Yu's complete annotated version *Journey to the West* in four volumes (1977-1983). In 2012, Yu published an abridged version with the title of *The Monkey and the Monk*. The book also idolized one of the protagonists, the Monkey King Sun Wukong (孙悟空), who was the first disciple of the monk Tripitaka (三藏). Plenty of research has been done on the masterwork itself and the disciple Sun Wukong, including Glen Dudbridge's influential study *The His-yu Chi: A Study of Antecedents to the Sixteenth-*

*Century Chinese Novel*.<sup>1</sup> Dudbridge's thorough examination about the origins and backgrounds of the book has benefitted and inspired a number of scholars who were interested in this classical Chinese work. However, few studies have looked into the intertextual links between the Monkey story and other literary works, especially in Asian-American literature. The purpose of this research is to study the Monkey King as a trickster figure and to examine the connections between the Monkey King and some works by Asian-American authors.

This research starts with an examination of Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West* and the abridged translation *Monkey: Folk Novel of China* by Arthur Waley. Waley, arguably one of the earliest translators, only translated around thirty-three chapters out of the original one-hundred-chapter novel. With Waley's translated work as primary material, the research then moves onto scholarship and critical perspectives on the novel, which mainly focus on two different readings of the novel. Then, the trickster archetype comes into play as a framework for interpreting the Monkey King. The trickster archetype's traits will be applied to the Monkey King in this research. What follows are three literary works by contemporary Asian-American authors who integrate the Monkey character into their works. These works include Patricia Chao's *Monkey King* (1998), Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989), and Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* (2006). This research will provide critical perspectives and seek the influence and inspiration of the Monkey story from these works. Last, there is a conclusion of this research and a short discussion of possible directions for further study.

The influence and inspiration of the trickster figure lie deep within the "journey" people undertake while navigating through life. This is reflected through the "awareness of vacuity" in which they are expected to reach. Maintaining a mindset that lacks desires leads toward the path of contentedness. This is what this researcher sees as the core message of enlightenment that the Monkey story embodies.

## 2. The Conversations around *Journey to the West*

The book *Journey to the West* tells the story of Tripitaka's travel to Tian Zhu to fetch scriptures of Buddhist classics and spread their teachings to China. Before the part about the "Journey," there is the part of the "Monkey," where we learn about Monkey King's birth, how he acquired his abilities, the havoc he caused in Heaven, and how he was sealed under the mountain of the Five Elements by the Buddha as punishment. The book then tells the background of Tripitaka, which eventually leads on to his quest. During his journey, he had to go through eighty-one challenges, but luckily he was also assigned with three disciples by the Buddha for his protection. No doubt, these disciples became the saints we know today: Sun Wukong (孙悟空), Zhu Bajie (猪八戒), and Sha Seng (沙僧). In addition, Tripitaka rode a Dragon Horse, which was transformed from a dragon prince of the Western Ocean who ate Tripitaka's first horse early in the novel. In the end, the crew reached Tian Zhu and brought back scriptures, and all of them were ordained with Buddhist titles in the Western paradise for their deeds.

Years before the publication of *Journey to the West*, Xuanzang, the Tang Dynasty monk, undertook the journey from China to Tian Zhu to fetch Buddhist scriptures. According to Anthony Yu, Xuanzang was not the first, nor the last, monk who made such a trip, and, interestingly, the last of these pilgrims was called Wukong (悟空), who stayed in India for forty years before returning to China in 789.<sup>2</sup> Xuanzang was a well-read man since a young age, and in his youth, he had studied multiple classics within the Buddhism realm. During his travel, Xuanzang himself took records of his journey, and he wrote one of his renowned works called *The Record of the Great Tang's Western Territories* (《大唐西域记》). Works including this one showcased Xuanzang's life and experience, using facts as well as imaginations, narrating history accompanied with myths. Centuries later, having based his character, Tripitaka, on the legendary monk, Xuanzang, Wu Cheng'en created his own fantasies during the Ming Dynasty (1368 A.D.–1644 A.D.), adding supernatural elements and aspects from Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. Hence the novel *Journey to the West* became what it is today.

Due to the mythical and fantasy aspects, alongside the integration of religious ideologies within the novel, scholars have debated about the interpretation of this work. Hu Shih, a Chinese philosopher and author from the late-19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, wrote the introduction for Arthur Waley's 1942 translation *Monkey: Folk Novel of China*. He claims that Wu's book was "a book of ... profound nonsense".<sup>3</sup> His reading of the book was also brought up in Yu's introduction. According to Yu, Hu's essay in 1923 declared "the author intended neither subtle language nor profound meaning... simply to air his satiric view of life and the world".<sup>2</sup> Hu's argument was trying to criticize the various didactic and ideological interpretations of the book. Back in the Han Dynasty (221 B.C.–206 B.C.), Buddhism was passing on from India to the Eastern countries, with China being one of the largest receivers of the religion. At the same time, Confucianism and Daoism served as leading ideologies of the nation. During the time of the Tang Dynasty

(618 A.D.–907 A.D.), when the novel was based on, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism thrived in China and remained influential. Thus, believers in these different faiths interpreted the book in copious perspectives: Daoists would treat it as the golden elixir, Buddhists would call it the practice of Chan (禪); and Confucianists would take it as cultivation of the mind. In Hu Shih's perspective, this was very problematic, and he would call these interpretations "the great adversaries of *Xiyouji*".<sup>2</sup>

In opposing this argument, scholars find that the three ideologies share some commonalities, thus their common ideals can be allegorical. C. T. Hsia challenges Hu while acknowledging the satirical aspect of the book. He validates "philosophical and allegorical interpretation" of the book.<sup>4</sup> His argument has triggered many other scholars who approve Hsia's idea, including Andrew H. Plaks. In his chapter from *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, he provides his allegorical interpretation with the Five Elements (五行), the heavenly stems and earthly branches (天干地支), etc. He also proposes similar teachings between all three ideologies. These include the Buddhist notion of "the illumination of the mind to perceive the true nature" (明心见性), the Daoist idea of "cultivating the mind to refine the true nature" (修身练性), and the Confucian concept of "preserving the mind to nourish the true nature" (存心养性).<sup>5</sup> Plaks' observation shows a phenomenon of the time period, which is the emergence of the three ideologies. All three notions propose to nurture the mind of an individual in order to embrace their nature. This makes sense of Hsia's allegorical interpretation of *Journey to the West*, because it shows the co-existence of the three philosophies and indicates that the commonality of the ideologies would not cause adversary to people's own understanding.

Thus, between this profound nonsense and profound allegory, there is a middle ground. For instance, it surely sounds absurd that Tripitaka and Zhu Bajie, a male mortal and a male pig, became pregnant after drinking water from a river in the Land of Women (女儿国). The land was full of women without a single man, not even for the purpose of procreation, but this is also where profound ideas lie, in terms of the thoughts over gender and sexuality as early as Wu's time. This gender-flipped section of the novel does share the complication of gender dynamics such as men and women's perceived spheres and roles, and at the same time, it shows Tripitaka's reality of being a mortal and his inability to entirely extract himself from desires, as much as he would like to. Hence, the teaching of cultivating the mind became relevant through the reading and would not be nonsense. Other examples of the combination of satire and allegory exist as well. The Six-Eared Monkey (六耳猕猴), who looked exactly like Sun Wukong, tapped into the readers' nerves, for the idea of false identity or doppelganger was exotic and had comical effects. But again, there is philosophical meaning behind the scheme, which is the notion of double-mindedness (二心). An individual could manifest within himself different personas, and these personas may conflict with each other. Hence, the battle of Sun Wukong and the Six-Eared Monkey is in fact a materialized conflict between a person's different minds.

### 3. Monkey King and the Trickster Archetype

Besides conversations and debates around the novel, scholars have been researching and arguing about the most notable figure in *Journey to the West*, which is the monkey character and its origin. Since the focus is on the Monkey King, this character will be referred to using the gender pronoun "he, him, his". These male gender pronouns will also be used when addressing the trickster archetype. Due to the elements of multiple ideologies in the book, the Monkey was also thought to have multiple origins. Starting off with his mythical background, the Monkey was interpreted as either a Hindu deity or a Chinese one. Hu Shih asserts that the Monkey derives from an Indian figure, a monkey warrior named Hanuman from *The Ramayana*.<sup>4</sup> However, he did not attempt to prove his proposition, so subsequent scholars based off Hu's assertion to seek an explanation about how *The Ramayana* story was passed to China.

Other scholars speculated that the Monkey has a Chinese identity. These scholars argue that Indian missionaries were very petty on the stories that did not promote the Buddhist cause when they came to China. Thus, Chinese readers could not have "much of these synopses and names in the absence of a Chinese translation of *The Ramayana*".<sup>4</sup> Hence, studies have turned to examine Chinese myths and legends which bear Monkey's earlier existence. In Whalen Lai's article "From Protean Ape to Handsome Saint: The Monkey King", he attempts to identify the background of the Monkey by examining different myths. He summarizes three antecedents of the Monkey: the White Ape; the monkey subdued by the deity Erlang; and the water monster defeated by Da Yu. However, two of the antecedents did not quite apply to the Monkey King, and thus this research also rules out these two based upon evidence. As for The White Ape, he is known as a seducer of women, but the Monkey King in *Journey to the West* is a monk with no interest in sex. This myth does not go along with the Monkey King characterization; thus, it is unlikely that this serves as Monkey's

origin. For similar reasons, the water monster antecedent also does not fit. This has something to do with the Five Elements. Each character can be assigned with an element, and Monkey is sometimes referred to as Jin Gong (金公, Jin means metal) in some chapter titles in the novel, which shows that his corresponding element is metal. Lai concludes that “Monkey is not known to have been a water spirit”,<sup>6</sup> and, in fact, there are many places in the novel where Monkey admits that he is not as proficient in water compared to Bajie. Therefore, this puts two of the three antecedents into tenuous situations, since our monkey is not as sexual as the White Ape, nor as efficient in water as the water monster. Thus, the one remaining antecedent was the monkey subdued by Erlang. As we learn in the novel, there is no one that could capture the Monkey King after he caused havoc in Heaven, until the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin (观音) referred Erlang to the Jade Emperor. The battle between the two lasted more than a whole day, and after many transformations they undertook, such as fish and shrines, the Monkey was defeated. Below is an excerpt of the final stages of the epic battle.

Erh-lang raised his three-pronged, two-bladed magic lance and struck at Monkey’s cheek. Monkey dodged, and the two of them, cursing and fighting, edged towards the shrine-gate and out into the mists and clouds, struggling as they went, till at last Monkey was driven to the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit, where the kings of the Four Quarters were keeping strait guard. The brothers came to meet Erh-lang and surrounded Monkey, pressing about him on every side.<sup>3</sup>

This battle among many others demonstrate the Monkey King’s abilities to change forms and survive from adversities, which puts him under the interest and speculation of the focus of this research and allows the research to study him as the trickster archetype. With both Jung’s theory and Hynes and Doty’s study, this research now presents some major characteristics of a trickster and associates them with the Monkey King.

The underlying rule is that the trickster is entertaining, but also instructive. To begin with, a trickster is ambiguous and anomalous. In Hynes and Doty’s words, a trickster is not “fully delimited by one side or the other of a binary distinction, nor by both sides at once, nor by a series of oppositions”.<sup>7</sup> He is known to exist on the edge or borders, an outsider among the normality. The Monkey King is seen as an outsider in the beginning of the novel, as the deities in Heaven did not acknowledge him as their equals. He is in touch with multiple worlds, such as Heaven, the Underworld, the mortal world, and of course, his home world in Flower and Fruit Mountain (花果山). His ambiguity and anomaly are most exemplified early on when he was seeking for masters to teach him immortality. When he found the Daoist Patriarch who later taught him the Secret of Long Life, the Patriarch asked for his family name, but the Monkey King misunderstood him. In Chinese, the pronunciation of “xing” or “hsing” (姓, 性) can refer to two corresponding characters that mean “surname” or “nature, temper”. Mistaking the word as “nature”, Monkey responded “I never show hsing. If I am abused, I am not at all annoyed. If I am hit, I am not angry; but on the contrary, twice more polite than before. All my life I have never shown hsing”.<sup>3</sup> After knowing the Patriarch’s intention, Monkey revealed that he had no father, nor mother; he had no family and was born out of a stone. This instance illustrates the first trait of a trickster; the Monkey King was ambiguous enough to not have a family, and even more anomalously, he was given birth by a stone, instead of by monkeys. Not having a name from birth grants him more freedom and little identity, making his first venture from the monkey world to the human world with less resistance. It is also at this time that Monkey was given a proper name by the Patriarch, which is “Aware-of-Vacuity” or Wukong (悟空).

Secondly, a trickster is a deceiver and trick-player; obviously, he plays tricks on other people, but sometimes his tricks would backfire onto himself, showing certain degrees of stupidity of the figure as well. It is in the Monkey King’s nature to trick people and other monsters in the novel. A good example is when he first encountered Bajie. Bajie was once a general in Heaven, but he was punished to live in the human world as a pig spirit for his escapade with the Moon Goddess. He was about to marry the daughter of Mr. Kao when Monkey transformed himself into the girl and had Jajie carry him before he eventually showed his true form. In another example, Monkey tricked the three immortals of the Cart-Slow Kingdom (车迟国) to drink his urine by turning into a statue of their deity and fooling them that the deity has come to life and granted them holy water. However, a trick can also backfire when it gains “momentum as to exceed any control exercised by its originator”.<sup>7</sup> Wukong is sometimes punished by a headband given by Kuan-yin, who taught Tripitaka a spell that will cause Wukong’s headache whenever the spell is uttered.

The next two traits of a trickster are being a shape-shifter and a situation-inverter. Even though these two traits are separate entities, they can also appear together. Shape-shifting helps the trickster with his tricks and deceptions by altering his forms or appearances. This aspect also acknowledges that not only physical forms can be changed, but also gender and sexuality may also change. The Monkey King can change into a female; for instance, he changed into

Bajie's fiancé, as mentioned above. By being a situation-inverter, the trickster overturns what is against him, thus, "tranquility can become disaster and vice versa".<sup>7</sup> There is liminality between good and bad, too much or too little, safety and danger that the trickster exists in, granting him with an opportunity to turn things around easily. The Monkey King, in this case, is an appropriate example. He is known to have more than seventy-two transformations; he can enlarge or shrink himself; when he pulls off some of his hair and gives it a blow, the hair will become his duplicates. Throughout the novel, he is the most powerful disciple of Tripitaka; thus, it makes sense that most of the time he is needed to rescue his master and the other two disciples if necessary. The following example showcases his ability to change his form and rise from adversity. In the chapters on the Cart-Slow Kingdom, the king was mentally under the control of three self-asserted immortals: the Tiger Strength Immortal, the Deer Strength Immortal, and the Ram Strength Immortal. In order to help restore order for the nation, the Pilgrims took on the immortals through different contests including one which Tripitaka and the immortals competed in to determine who was better at guessing items in boxes. In the process, Monkey changed into a fly and snuck inside the box each time, turning the item into something else, and flew back to whisper into Tripitaka's ears about what he saw. For instance, he changed a royal garment into a cracked kitchen dish. Not only is the Monkey King proficient in shape-shifting, but he can also change the shape or form of other things at his will. When they put a peach in the box, Monkey ate it and told his master to guess that it was a peach stone while the Ram Strength Immortal guessed peach. Unwilling to admit defeat, the immortals challenged Monkey by putting him in a pot of boiling oil, ripping out his guts, and cutting off his head. He survived all these conditions, for he could not feel the heat of the oil, he could reinstall his guts the right way, and from where his head was cut off, "a new head shot up from inside him and replaced the old one".<sup>3</sup> The immortals were not as lucky: the Tiger Strength Immortal died headless, the Deer Strength Immortal had his guts ripped out and was unable to reassemble them, and the Ram Strength Immortal turned into ram soup in the boiling oil. All these instances provide evidence about the Monkey King's ability and the trickster's characteristics of shape-shifting and inverting situations.

A trickster figure is often seen as the imitator and messenger of the gods and deities. He can easily transit between borders of the normal and the divine, passing down messages from the deities to man or creatures of his world. As Hynes stated, "the trickster's position midway between the gods and humans allows him to function as a cultural transformer".<sup>7</sup> There are multiple references in *Journey to the West* where the Monkey King serves this role as a messenger and interpreter to enlighten Tripitaka. For example, even early on in the novel when Tripitaka released Monkey from the mountain, he has been reminding Tripitaka about Buddhist teachings. He slayed six robbers who tried to kill Tripitaka when they first met. These robbers also represent the "Six Thieves" (六贼) in the *Heart Sutra*

(心经), a classical sutra crucial to Buddhism and to Tripitaka in the novel. These six, including "Eyes that Sees and Delights, Ears that Hears and Angers, Nose that Smells and Covets, Tongue that Tastes and Desires, Body that Supports and Suffers, Mind that Conceives and Lusts", must be eliminated before one reaches enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while Tripitaka blamed the Monkey King for killing these robbers, he was at the same time reminded by his disciple that they needed to be killed or else they would devour him on his path in reaching illumination. The Monkey King is both a student and a teacher to Tripitaka and the fellow disciples; his message was clear and subtle in assisting his master and the others to reach illumination through the elimination of sins and through deeds that benefit one another.

Last but not least, a trickster is an instructive figure that represents a psychological consciousness. According to C. G. Jung's *Four Archetypes*, the trickster "is a faithful reflection of an absolutely undifferentiated human consciousness, corresponding to a psyche that has hardly left the animal level".<sup>8</sup> The Monkey King remained a monkey throughout the book, yet his mindset has crossed the line of his monkey nature, turning him from an ape to a saint. This consciousness is much inferred from his name Wukong or "Aware-of-Vacuity". The journey to fetch scriptures is also a journey for Wukong to realize the emptiness and balance of his surroundings, to stand aloof from the world. When he first became a disciple, he was ill-tempered and quick to respond negatively when disagreements surfaced between his master and himself. He had frequent outbursts of emotions which disrupted him to make fair judgements. From killing imps or small monsters irrationally to seeking assistance from different deities, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to bring these monsters into illumination, Wukong has grown to become aware of the temptations and desires, embracing an inner peace of emptiness as his name suggests. As a result of his transition, Wukong became a faithful disciple for a mortal human without any regrets and discontentment, rather than staying as a defiant monkey whose greatest desire was to be a deity revered by others. It turns out that he eventually ascends to Buddha-hood and becomes the Buddha Victorious in Strife (斗战胜佛). Hence, the name "Aware-of-Vacuity" means not only to recognize the emptiness of the self, but also to act upon a deed for the deed itself without desires attached. This is the Monkey King's consciousness, and it is a consciousness that aims to resonate with readers' fulfillment and self-contentment.

## 4. Monkey King in Contemporary Asian-American Literature

The Monkey King is a popular fictional character who is even referred to in some contemporary Asian-American literary works. These works include Patricia Chao's *Monkey King*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, and Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*.

### 4.1 Monkey King by Patricia Chao

Having been molested by her own father as a young girl, the protagonist, Sally Wang, referred to him as the "Monkey King." She would call him "father" most of the time, but when he assaulted her, he became the fictional character in her words. Sally was an art director before she attempted suicide, shortly after the death of her father, and she was sent to a mental institution for recovery. Keeping silent is an overarching tone that Sally adopted in the novel, for she could not and was forbidden to talk about the violence imposed on her. Her mother and sister Marty chose to discredit her even though they knew what happened. Incest is rare in China and to the ears of Chinese people. Since incest is a cultural taboo in China (as in most cultures), it is a disgrace if anyone talks about the negative things like that happened within the family to outsiders. And in fact, according to the Chinese tradition, family shames are forbidden to speak of outside the family (家丑不可外扬). On that aspect, Sally was not allowed to tell. In their conversation with the mental health worker during family therapy, her mother exemplified total submission to the corrupted "family shame" mindset.

'He was a good father,' she repeated. 'Look what he sacrificed for you.'

That word again. 'What? What did he sacrifice?'

'Work so hard to pay for your education. Then what happens. No-good daughter. You disappoint him so much, he can't say.'

'Your father is dead,' she hissed. 'He is an ancestor. You must have respect for your ancestors.'<sup>9</sup>

As ironic as it sounds, her mother was a professor at Yale, who received high education when she immigrated. Yet, she chose to believe that it was all her daughter's imagination and condemned her for disrespecting her father because he was her ancestor and he had done so much for the family. It was a submission to the tradition, but also served as her obedience to her late husband, because she would fail as a wife if she did not back him up.

Her aunt and uncle were the ones that believed and supported her, and she developed a romantic relationship with another patient, Mel, whom she later compared to her separated husband, Carey. Besides Mel, other patients including Lilith, who believed herself to be Joan of Arc, Douglas, who attempted suicide multiple times, and Rachel, who always needed her teddy bear, became friends with Sally; their bonds helped Sally to be more open to her past. Between the little open community within the mental institution and her feudal household, Sally came into conflict with being both an American and a person with Chinese heritage. In coping with binary identities, she kept silent but at the same she was outspoken; her stand against the traumatic experience was through drawing during at the institution.

To be clearer, Sally's fight was far more than just walking out of her mental illness, at the same time she offers reflection toward Monkey King as a character. It is undeniable that he is a heroic figure and a legend to a significant number of people, but his story to the west is heavily gravitated around male characters while most of the female ones are either monsters that want to harm the pilgrims or to have sexual relationships with them. Chao brings forth this question for readers to ponder: What does this cost women? J. Stephen Pearson inserts that the Monkey King stands for patriarchy, "a patriarchy that has not only become impractical in the modern world, but has also been a weapon against Chinese women".<sup>10</sup> The Monkey King has an iron cudgel that can change its length and thickness by his will, it is used to injury enemies along the journey; yet in Chao's story the iron cudgel also transformed into the body part that her father used to penetrate her. This image of the Monkey King portrays male dominance and female powerlessness within Chinese culture, granting this cultural icon an evil identity, one that brings harm to his own family and suppresses his daughter into attempts of suicide. Just like the shape-shifting ability the Monkey King has, Sally's father also changes himself in front of her. When he was not sexually assaulting her, he was "father" to her; but when he was sexually assaulting her, he became the Monkey King. This disempowerment of women is also reflected in language, for even when her father passed away, he became a constant reminder for Sally that she was a "USELESS GIRL. WALKING PIECE OF MEAT".<sup>9</sup> It is a problematic part in the Chinese familial bond, which believes that part of the children's identity belong to the parents. Sally finally came to the realization that she would never be able to break through this tie,

Family was fatal but they created you after all. Who would I be if it hadn't been for Monkey King, if I didn't have his breadth and bones and blood, if he hadn't made his mark on me? It was useless to try to imagine how things would have turned out had I been born to another family, not only useless but impossible. I was what I had come from.<sup>9</sup>

By saying "fatal", Sally expresses her lack of support from her mother and sister, but even under the condition of their denial of the traumatic experience, they were still the family she had to live with. Without her parents, she would not have been born, nor inherit both her father and mother's traits, and she would not become who she is now. Chao brings criticism to the concept of family and family bonds, yet at same time reminds the audience that family is our root and where we come from. She begins to develop a sense of contentedness and gradually accepts herself, knowing that she cannot rewrite her past but only to embrace it and regard it as a part of herself.

The Monkey trickster manifests himself into a role of predator for other characters such as Carey and Mel. These two characters are predators of sex but on opposite sides of the spectrum. Sally's husband and her father were not positive male figures in her life. While the latter one assaulted her early on in life, she treated the former one as a parent figure, where she was submissive to Carey, put up with his coldness toward her yet still attended to his sexual pleasures. On the other hand, Mel was more of a tender predator who would always ask for consent during their sexual activities. He would ask her things like "do you want me to go on", whereas Carey would only find out that she disliked it after he was done. The Monkey King is split up into multiple personas, but there is, in fact, a lack of his presence; for instance, her father passed away and Carey left her. Thus, there is an absence of positive male characters in general, except for her uncle Richard, who was like Buddha and helped his niece to recover by spending "quality time" with her on betting on horse races. From the absence of female roles in *Journey to the West* to the absence of male roles in *Monkey King*, Chao averted the original novel for her own purpose to address her theme of recovering from incest trauma.

Chao's book also takes a role in the Asian-American literature canon, as this book exemplifies the issue of struggling with identities as well as surviving from a traumatic sexual assault. As Rodi-Risberg proposes that "authorship such as Chao's can thus be seen as a type of call for action, an urgent political and cultural struggle with the possibility of forcefully influencing social change". She also points out that Chao adds "Asian American consciousness" in terms of writing about incest compared to Western writers.<sup>11</sup> Chao provides us with an image of a constraint by heritage in conflict with rape culture, it is a mental journey that her character undertakes to recover. It is a sort of hope that Chao inserts and a space she backs into to allow the audience to reflect on the issues of both Chinese and American culture. J. Stephen Pearson adds further that "the sixteenth-century Chinese novel is useful not only to critique American culture, but also to heal it".<sup>10</sup> In that sense, the trickster Monkey King is still a device of instruction, urging the readers to reach for their consciousness about these cultural flaws. Sally's experience allows her to take on both an American perspective and a Chinese perspective in regards to her personal identity, only to find herself caught between both. She has to develop a mechanism for such fluidity. Her being silenced, yet still expressing herself through art - a woman who could not speak - demonstrates her ability to accept who she turns out to become. Sally reminds the audience "I think you hold everything, pain and pleasure, in your heart, and that memory only deepens the next experience".<sup>9</sup> Sally finds her sense of contentment, which is to embrace and let go. It is a lesson for the audience as well, of embracing the past and live with what made one who they are today.

#### 4.2 Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book by Maxine Hong Kingston

With the influence of the Beat Generation of the 1950s, the protagonist Wittman Ah Sing, is constantly on a journey, from the West to the East and back and forth in the States. As a student who graduated from Yale, Wittman could not find a job that matched his education level, so he wrote poems and plays on his own while working for a store in the toy department. Throughout the story, Wittman thinks highly of himself and does everything he can to prove his worth. To do so, he reconnected with his best friend, Lance Kamiyama, and Lance's fiancé, Sunny, his parents who were separated, and his aunts. At the same time, he becomes friends with other Asian-Americans and white people he met in his journey, including his college mate, Nanci Lee and his wife, Tana De Weese, who has only met him for a day at a party before their marriage. All of them represented the Asian-American community under Wittman's leadership. They put on a show based on a chapter from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* where the three protagonists met and became sworn brothers. Their act also integrated bits and pieces from *Journey to the West* and *Outlaws of the Marsh* as well.

With significant amounts of complexity, Kingston's book attempts to address multiple issues of the social background, and their relations to Asian-Americans. Some of these include race and ethnicity, war and peace, the Beat

Generation and culture, and so on. To begin with, it is not difficult to detect the uniqueness of the protagonist's name. In fact, his name, Wittman Ah Sing, represents two individuals. As Jennie Wang states in her journal, Wittman comes from Walt Whitman, "the poet who once created our national identity with the language of 'en masse'"; and Ah Sing comes from Norman Asing, "a naturalized US citizen, who, as early as 1855, served as a spokesman of his people... claiming his identity as an American and protesting against racism and the exclusion of the Chinese in America".<sup>12</sup> The protagonist in Kingston's book demonstrates a high level of self-affirmation and believes himself as a voice of his people. Wang also points out that the trickster, who manifests himself as Wittman, wishes to be "an authentic American, but America won't let him".<sup>12</sup> This social and political denial of Asians reflects a certain limitation of the American society that predominantly sees race as white and black. Even Wittman himself realizes this, "they want us to go back to China where we belong. They think that Americans are either white or Black. I can't wear that civil-rights button with the Black hand and the white hand shaking each other".<sup>13</sup> Wittman suggests that Asians in America are caught between the dichotomy of the white and black, yet they should be their own minorities instead of joining one side or the other. Jonathan Shaw inserts his interpretation that Wittman wants to "position himself in the American scene", but "the difficulty inheres in the attempt to designate a position on the public space of the street that renders the Asian American definitively visible by opening an I".<sup>14</sup> This "I" represents both Wittman Ah Sing and Kingston's voice of bringing Asian Americans forth onto the American stage. The diversity of the American society is a circle, where the giant white circle encloses all the other races and ethnicities. What Kingston proposes is to extract the Asian circle out, as well as other ones, so that all the circles can stand side by side rather than one in another; and at same time, the people within these circles are all American. Her term "Asian American" is one without the hyphen, which indicates her intention of creating her characters as Americans at core and the word "Asian" serves as an adjective. This breaks traditional notions which defines Asian-Americans as both Asians and Americans.

Kingston's trickster also takes on a relatively different role than the other ones that have been discussed. As manifestation of the Monkey King, Wittman Ah Sing demonstrates Monkey's traits to a variant degree and somehow also alters them. First of all, his physical journey is accompanied by multiple women, and he shares the discontent and rootlessness as other Beat authors do. His trick is his playboy attitude with Nanci, his co-worker, Louise, and Tana before they got married, which he thinks he attracts them all. With the adaptations of myths and stories, the Monkey trickster turns himself into a pacifist, and such is Wittman's shape-shifting. His situation-inverting ability lies within the core message of book: building a community to step forth onto the American racial stage. As learned from experience, wars, such as World War II and the Vietnam War, have shown that fighting would not work. This pacifist parody is embodied in the book when Kingston referenced the protagonists in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* became sworn brothers in the Peach orchard. Williams explains that "instead of a military strategy, the Peach orchard oath is emphasized as a creation of family, a taking of vows".<sup>15</sup> Her interpretation is half correct, because the three characters Liu, Guan, and Zhang became sworn brothers only to charge into the war, which makes up the rest of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. However, it is still important to acknowledge the transition of Wittman, who changed from a discontent and irritable playboy to a community-building pacifist. It serves as a parody of the Monkey King's growth as well, from a desiring ape to a self-content saint.

In the final chapter of the book, Wittman Ah Sing comes clearer and nearer to his self-identity. In Chinese, the word "I" is pronounced as "Wo" and sounded like "War". What this means is that our pacifist trickster Wittman is bringing his battles in his own fashion, and as a poet and writer, his way is to use his pen as his weapon to continue his fight. "To say 'I' was to say 'I fight'".<sup>13</sup> As Jennie Wang elaborates, "writing is power, self-fashioning is warring".<sup>12</sup> With the recognition of the self, our trickster also takes the lead on going through a journey of forming a community of Asian Americans by staging a fake war to reduce tension among his people, as well as the people in the post-war era,

Our monkey, master of change, staged a fake war, which might very well be displacing some real war. .... He was defining a community..... Community is not built once-and-for-all; people have to imagine, practice, and re-create it. His community surrounding him, then, we're going to reward and bless Wittman with listening while he talks to his heart's content.<sup>13</sup>

All the characters long for an opportunity to represent their culture and the Asian American community in the United States. Thus, besides the physical journey of Wittman seeking all these people, it is also a mutual journey of all the Asian-American characters in the novel. It is their journey of coming together, supporting each other with the community bond they established while maintaining their individuality.

The vehicle that achieved such goal of bringing everyone together is none other than initiating a common objective, which in the case is putting up a play that represents their culture in order to make a stand for their "Asianess" among the racial spectrum. Williams concludes that "it is a model of how to build a community based on multiplicity rather than uniformity".<sup>15</sup> To step into the American stage, one person is far not enough, so this demonstrates the importance



of such racial or ethnic community; yet to fit into the social stage, the group needs to adapt to the American pursuit of individuality and highlight everyone, instead of making everyone the same. Wittman Ah Sing finds his content with the people who share similar backgrounds with him. Kingston's Wittman wants the audience to find such a belonging that brings out the best of the whole and values individuality.

### 4.3 American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang

This graphic novel splits into three different plots: the Monkey King, who is immortal, but is not recognized as a real deity by others solely because he is a monkey; Jin Wang who is a Chinese-American and a new student at a new school after moving again with his parents from San Francisco; Danny who is an American high school student that has a Chinese cousin named Chin-Kee who brings him trouble upon his visit to America.

In Monkey King's plot line, he was born out of a stone, and he masters twelve disciplines of Kungfu, but he is denied by other deities to join a heavenly rank. So he causes havoc in Heaven and finally is sealed by Tze-Yo-Tzuh (自有者, the self-possessed one), which is an alteration of Buddha from *Journey to the West*. This plot line ends with Monkey accompanying Wong Lai-tsao, an alteration of Tripitaka, on his pilgrimage. Since in the beginning the deities did not accept the Monkey King due to his monkey form, he began to pretend to be a human by shape-shifting and wearing shoes. He takes them off when Wong Lai-tsao tells him they do not need shoes for their journey.

In the plot line involving Jin Wang, Wang is the only Chinese-American student in the class. He later becomes best friends with a boy Wei-Chen from Taiwan who just moved to the United States. However, Wang wants to become an all-American boy, and he falls in love with an American girl. He tries different ways to make himself look like an American and breaks his friendship with Wei-Chen. In the third plot line, Danny has moved from school to school because every time he starts to fit in, his Chinese cousin Chin-Kee will visit annually and ruin everything for him. He ends up beating up his cousin, but fails and is beaten up by Chin-Kee.

The three plot lines are complicated enough on their own, yet all the plots intertwine eventually into one story. The Monkey trickster performs his magical arts subtly to give us his instruction. With Jin Wang's strong desire to become an all-American boy, he wakes up one morning and finds himself becoming Danny. However in Yang's graphic novel, there is a price for shape-shifting. An elderly lady- a Chinese herbalist that Jin Wang's mother visits- asks him what he wants to become in the future, and Jin responds that he wants to become a transformer, the robot in disguise. However she warns him, "It's easy to become anything you wish..... so long as you're willing to forfeit your soul".<sup>16</sup> Her words foreshadow the later part in the story, where Jin transforms into Danny but forgets his Chinese heritage. It makes sense when Danny says that he does not even know how he and Chin-Kee are related. Chin-Kee is in fact a form the Monkey King takes on after Jin's transformation and Wei-Chen's departure from Jin's life. Wei-Chen is the Monkey King's son who promises to take on a journey of testing his virtues and remaining free from human vice in the mortal world. However, he finds humans to be flawed and wants to spend the remaining days in the mortal world for his own good. Thus, the Monkey transforms himself to return to Jin, "as a sign post to your soul".<sup>16</sup>

The presence of the trickster figure is never detached in Yang's work. Instead of manifesting himself as a character in the book, he actually transforms himself into his animalistic nature and goes through self-enlightenment and growth again. He later becomes emissary to instruct people like Jin Wang/ Danny, to remind them who they are and their ancestry. Jacob Stratman inserts his interpretation, which he proposes to be "the primary message of the novel", and that "what matters is not so much who you are as *whose* you are".<sup>17</sup> Although it is important for people to find the self in the journey of life, it is also crucial to find the people that one associates with, such as family, friends, culture and roots. Yang's trickster shows that people are capable of transforming into someone they are not, to explore whole new identities in regards to figuring themselves out. As he says in his interview with NPR, "My characters long for power and belonging because they're figuring out their place in the world, their identities".<sup>17</sup> However, there will be loss of a person's original identity during this process, as Yang reminds us through the elderly herbalist. By taking off his shoes as a symbol of returning back to the self, Yang's Monkey King signifies the importance of being content with their own person. His master, Wong Lai-Tsao, instructs him that the way to free himself from the mountain that traps him, "the form you have taken is not truly your own. Return to your true form and you shall be freed".<sup>16</sup> Wong's words suggests that a number of people are trapped within the barrier they set for themselves because they focus too much on who they pretend to be on the outside, but forget to attend to their true identities within. The Monkey King tells Jin, "you know, Jin, I would have saved myself from five hundred years of imprisonment beneath a mountain of rock had I only realized how good it is to be a monkey".<sup>16</sup> Monkey King finds his contentment with being a monkey and reflects on his association; and it is also what Yang wishes the audience to do, which is to figure out who they are.

## 5. Conclusion and Future Directions

All the works project the word “journey”, whether it is the Monkey King’s journey of fetching scriptures, Sally Wang’s journey of mental recovery, Wittman Ah Sing’s journey of building a community, or Jin Wang’s journey of self-acceptance. However, there is a fundamental difference between them. Compared to the Monkey King’s journey “to” the West, the Asian Americans are taking on their journeys “in” the West since they have already immigrated. Yet, they are still experiencing challenges like the Monkey King did in his own journey. All of them are outsiders entering a whole new and different world than their original ones.

This conflict of identity and sense of belonging marks an overarching element of Asian-American literary works, as well as other minority literary works. The monkey trickster, as most tricksters, is instructive and teaches a lesson, which is the sense of “contentedness” a person should attain as part of their identity. As illustrated by Wukong, he has become aware of the emptiness of his desires, and of being content with his nature of being a monkey through the enlightenment of the Buddhist cause. Sally has become aware of the pains of her past, and of being content with the person she herself and her family made her into through the enlightenment of her art. Wittman has become aware of using his pen to continue the fight as an Asian-American, and of being content with aligning with others in the Asian American community that values him as an individual. Jin has become aware of who he belongs to and who he associates with, and of being content with being who he is instead of pretending who he wants to become.

Yet, there are things that point at new directions for this topic during the process of this research. Since this research touches base on the topic of identity and some works are appropriate to younger audience, it promises new possibilities that further study could be done with the Monkey King and young adult literature, or trickster figures in general and their influence on young adult literature. Another possible direction is to continue on with the current process and involve more texts of such nature. As all the works involved currently are focused on Chinese Americans, it is necessary and appropriate to bring in perspectives from ethnicities among the Asian-American category to gain a more diverse view of the American experience.

Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, instructs his audience to maintain a balance of the self and being empty of desires, and by doing so shall lead people toward the path of contentedness. The Chinese Monkey has become an iconic character that influences and inspires contemporary Asian-American literary works. He has inexhaustible value that is proven through time. As the journey of searching for self goes on, he will continue to influence more works.

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