

Journey to the West

西遊記

In the early Tang dynasty a Chinese monk, Xuan Zang, travelled from 629-645 on a pilgrimage to India in order to bring home the original scriptures of the sacred Buddhist canon for translation into Chinese. The expedition was extraordinarily difficult in those times, and upon his return Xuan Zang was given much attention by the Chinese emperor who bestowed on him the honorary name San Zang or Three Treasuries of the Buddhist canon, usually rendered in its Indian form: Tripitaka. The journey gave rise to a multitude of folk tales, drama as well as the fantasy novel *Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng'en (1506-1582).

Master Tripitaka is in folklore and fiction joined on his mission by three disciples, two of them of superhuman character—half man, half animal—the Monkey King or Sun Wukong, and Pigsy or Zhu Bajie. The third, Friar Sand or Sha Heshang, is a somewhat shady figure.

The River of Heaven

Tongtianhe

◆ 通天河

In the following story the Chinese monk, Tripitaka, and his little flock of disciples have been on their way to the West for a long time, meeting an unending series of misfits and obstacles caused by nature, man and demon. This time they encounter an evil river demon that bullies the good farmers of a village close by the River of Heaven.

The River of Heaven

Told by

Dai Buzhang 戴步章

The master Tripitaka from Tang and his disciples—four people, along with the horse, altogether five living creatures—were on their way to the Western Regions, following the imperial edict of the Tang sovereign, in order to worship Buddha and fetch the Sacred Scriptures. Along the road they had dined on the wind and slept on the dew, put on the moon as their hat and wrapped themselves in the stars, climbed mountains and crossed rivers, stopping at dusk and starting at dawn.

They had been on their way not only for one day, no, for several years. Today it was about the time of dusk and it was late autumn. In front of them a large stream, eight hundred *li* wide, was obstructing their way. In the first place, there was no ferry. In the second place, there was no bridge. The sky was darkening and it was difficult to continue towards the West. They had better try to find a place near the river to spend the night.

Suddenly they discovered a village with some hundred households and proceeded to ask for shelter for the night in one of the houses. The family head of this house was called Chen Qing, or landlord Chen Second Brother. His elder brother was Chen Cheng, or landlord Chen Older Brother. The two landlords invited them to stay in their house. Very good! In this

family they must have a predestined relationship to Buddhism, they seemed to find pleasure in doing good deeds and giving alms, helping the distressed and succouring those in peril. Now when travelling monks were coming from afar, asking for shelter, they would treat them well and invite them to sit down in the hall.

Tripitaka was well aware that his three disciples had rather unpleasant looks, but the day was growing late, they would probably not scare anybody. In the eastern wing of the hall there was a dark corner with no daylight, so he told his three disciples to sit down there, while he himself was seated together with landlord Second Brother in the upper hall and chatting. Landlord Second Brother ordered his cooks to serve a vegetarian meal: cook the raw food and warm up the cold food. That would take a short while. So they would have to wait a bit. They would have a cup of tea while waiting. This was an awkward moment. Tripitaka had to find a few sentences on the ways of the world. He must find something to say to make conversation. If you are together with old friends, that's an easy matter. Then you have a lot to speak about. But if you are with somebody you have just met, you may ask his honourable surname and his great given name and then, perhaps, you have nothing more to say! If you have nothing more to say, you have to find something to say!

“Ahem, our venerable host!”

“Well, Honoured Father!”

“We poor monks are coming here to seek shelter for the night, we are very grateful for your kindness. But I can see that you, our venerable host, carry a

worried look. Your eyes are full of tears. May I ask what burdens your heart?”

“Woe is me!”

If Tripitaka had not asked this question, well, still the man’s face would carry a worried look. His eyes would be full of tears. But when Tripitaka *did* ask him, he stirred up his feelings. The poor man could no longer prevent his tears from flowing profusely.

“Sniff, sniff... Honourable Father, you come from another country and do not know about our place. The local people don’t have to ask, they know already. If you, Father, had not put this question, I wouldn’t have mentioned it. But since you have already asked me, let me tell you about it.”

“Oh, our venerable host, our benefactor, please, favour us with your instruction.”

“Our place is called River of Heaven.”

“I see!”

“We have a river god.”

“Amitabha Buddha!”

“He protects both people and livestock of this region against calamities and secures a bumper grain harvest.”

“Very good.”

“This god, most gratified by a temple erected to him in this place, protects our common people with his mighty spirit and power. Year after year he bestows our fields with sweet dew, season after season he lets a rich rain fall over our village.”

“Amitabha Buddha! Very good!”

“Honourable Father! It is not good! If everything was so good, I would certainly not shed tears! What I told you all belongs to the past. In recent years it is different!”

“Does this Buddha not protect and bless you any more?”

“This is not the problem. Year after year he still bestows our fields with sweet dew, season after season he lets a rich rain fall over our village. He still protects both people and livestock against calamities and secures a bumper grain harvest every year.”

“I see!”

“But this Buddha wants compensation.”

“Well!”

“We also have to conduct ceremonies.”

“There is nothing wrong with holding ceremonies to welcome the god.”

“We have to sacrifice fragrant flowers and fruit offerings. We must offer pigs and sheep, oxen and wine.”

“All of this seems reasonable.”

“Whether there is nothing wrong with this, or whether it all seems reasonable, there is still a catch. Every year in spring and autumn, on the third of the third month, and now on the third of the ninth month, that is twice a year in spring and autumn, we must

“All of this seems reasonable.”

arrange a ceremony and sacrifice a young boy and a young girl to the Almighty King.”

“I see!”

“So although he bestows us with favours, he also strikes us with calamity. Even if he is benevolent, he is also harmful to us. Exactly because he likes to eat young boys and girls, it seems not abundantly clear that he is a fair-minded god.”

“Well, my dear benefactor, whether it seems abundantly clear how fair-minded he is, this is for sure a monster who loves to eat people!”

“Oh, Honourable Father, this word is taboo! Don’t speak about it!”

“Why! You are a decent person, my dear benefactor!”

“I’m afraid I’m not impeccable.”

“How many lads do you have, my dear benefactor?”

“Below my knees it is very scarce, I only have a single son, seven years old this year.”

There is a pun on the three homophonous expressions:

No harm

bu fang

◆ 不妨

No contraception

bu fang

◆ 不防

“No harm in that [*bu fang*]!”

“No contraceptive [*bu fang*]! If square [*fang*], it couldn’t get round!”

Square

fang

◆ 方

“It’s your luck we monks have arrived, and we shall save your boy!”

“I only have a single son...”

“Oh, Honourable Father, your mercy is deeper than the sea and the power of Buddha is without boundary.”

“Monkey! Wukong!” shouted Tripitaka, while looking for the others. Monkey answered:

“Hey!”

“Have you heard what I was talking about with our venerable benefactor here? Have you heard what our benefactor said?”

“We are not completely deaf, and this place is not so far away. And you were speaking in a very loud voice, so we heard everything very clearly and

understood every word.”

“This must be a monster who eats people.”

“Right!”

“You have to save the boy!”

“Well!”

“Saving the life of one person equals building a seven-storied stupa.”

“It is good to build a pagoda.”

“We travelling monks consider mercy and benevolence to be the essential, we go out of our way to help others.”

“These words are indeed familiar to the worm in my ear. Ever since I became your disciple, for these several years, the words ‘mercy’ and ‘benevolence’ have been on your tongue from morning till evening. At first we didn’t quite understand. Later you explained for us: ‘mercy’ means ‘to bestow joy on manhood’, to let people be happy; ‘benevolence’ means ‘to ease the pain of manhood’, to remove the sorrows from people’s lives. Well, we are ready to take orders!”

“Now this man has a sorrow: He is about to take leave with his own blood and flesh. You must save the boy!”

“OK! May thunder strike me, if I don’t follow the order of my master!”

“Our dear benefactor!”

“Yes.”

“Please, step down. Among my three disciples here, the fiercest is for sure this monkey. Don’t look at the big fellow over there with the blue face and the red whiskers, who has such strong arms and is so tall. He is no use. He is an honest fellow. Your eyes go to Pigsy with the long snout and the big ears. Do you see how ferocious and staunch he looks! But he is a bit

thick-headed, he won't do either, he is not so terrific. No, the most important person, that is him, the one who not even looks thirty per cent human, but seventy per cent like a monkey. If you go and ask him, he only has to pat himself on his bosom and then he can save not only your whole family, but all the people of your village."

"Oh, so it is!"

"Yes, but you should not call him Monkey! If you call him Monkey, you do not show him respect. That is not very polite. His surname is Sun, you may call him Santa Sun, or The Great Saint Equal to Heaven, The Living Buddha Sun! Well, you had better call him The Great Saint Equal to Heaven, that's the name he likes best."

"I see."

The old man stepped down, and with him a mouthful of tongue twisters. What does that mean? Well, as much as when you scald your tongue on a hot turnip: ‘Pr-r-r...pr-r-r...’ Going downstairs he was repeating to himself all the words Tripitaka had just taught him:

“The Living Buddha Sun, The Venerable Living Buddha Sun, Santa Sun, The Great Saint Equal to Heaven, The Venerable Living Buddha Sun, The Great Saint Equal to Heaven...”

He hurried downstairs and knelt: bang! He knelt and knocked his head on the floor. Did he knock his head? Yes, he actually knocked his head on a stone so that it gave a loud echo. He knocked his head again and again, just like chicken picking rice.

“Oh, Venerable Living Buddha Sun! Oh, Great Saint Equal to Heaven!”

“Please, get up! Get up! Get up! Please, don’t pay attention to our Old Master’s words. No need to beg to me! Please, get up!”

“Oh!”

“You’ll knock a hole in your head! What is on your mind? Does it hurt?”

“No, it doesn’t hurt! I only wish you could save my little son.”

“Just by the looks of you, your family doesn’t seem to be bad off.”

“My family is not bad off at all, moreover not only is my family fairly well off, but all the families of Chen Family Village are comfortably off. Neither people nor livestock are struck by calamity and the five grains grow willingly. We have doctors and hospitals, and we guarantee food for beggars, nobody suffers from illness and even the cattle have no illness.”

“Never mind the food, what about clothes? And never mind the clothes, what about housing? Apart from yourself, how many are you actually?”

“If only Your Honour can save my son, I’ll give you all the money you want, everything my family owns!”

“I was only looking for a pretext, pretending to want your money. We pilgrims do not want your money, I do not want your money. But you mentioned that your son was going to be sacrificed to the monster, served as enjoyment for the Almighty King. Why have you been so unlucky that you must give away your son? Since there are five hundred families here, why could not somebody else provide a son?”

“We have drawn lots!”

“Oh, I see, you have drawn lots, a kind of lottery!”

“Yes. On March 1 this year we called a meeting and drew lots. Whatever family among our five hundred households happens to have a young son or daughter must draw lots. Whoever has bad luck, must deliver a child after half a year. Today, for example, if nothing happens all night until daybreak, then we can start over again and wait until March 1 next year, when we must draw lots again.”

“Accordingly you have known for six months that you would have to sacrifice your son to the

monster?”

“Yes!”

“Can’t believe it! You are a wealthy family, and you only have one son?”

“Yes. If we had three or five, so what? But we only have one.”

“You are rich, but you only have one child. Poor people most often have more than one.”

“No one is poor here.”

“So nobody is poor at this place! But you might just travel thirty or fifty *li*, or say eighty or a hundred *li*, or maybe a thousand *li*, and arrive at a poor region in the remote countryside. The poor families over there have no money, but they have lots of children. They don’t want any, no, they don’t want any, but there you are: the first child! They don’t want any, don’t want any, and then you are: the second arrives! They don’t want any, sure, they don’t, but in spring they get one and in fall the next one! They don’t want any, don’t want any, but there you are: twins! They have to bring up a crowd of wailing ghosts. It is just heartbreaking! Poor as they are, and with all those children, it’s disastrous! But you - you don’t care if you have to spend a thousand *yuan* or so to buy a child and bring home with you! Then, when the time for the sacrifice comes, you just keep your own son at home and send off the child you have bought. Wouldn’t that be fine? The other family would get some money and be able to bring up the rest of the children. If they are farmers they may buy land for the money, or if they are in business, they may invest their capital. In this way they may turn their life for the better! It’s good for all parties, why not go ahead and do it?”

“Honourable Father! I do see your point.”

“If you see the point, why not take action? You should not be stingy with your money, it won’t do, it is high time!”

“There are many families in our village who have bought children, this has been done for years and years. I have thought about it, but I can’t!”

“You can’t what?”

“My feelings are no different from other people’s feelings. If I buy a child and bring it home as a pawn, I may use it as a slave or servant, well and good! But, you see, if I bring it home in order to sacrifice it to the Bodhisatva, so that I, coming from a rich family, can save my own child, while the child from the poor family is for ever taken away from its own flesh and blood, that is mean! I cannot do it. Then I’d rather sacrifice my own flesh and blood. Tomorrow I may buy a child to bring home and adopt as my own child.”

“Dear me! Dear me! Old father, you are indeed a good man.”

“Man is born unto this world to discipline and educate himself, regulate his family, rule his country and pacify the world.”

“Sure!”

“To rule the country and pacify the world is not the fate of everyone, but to discipline and educate oneself and regulate ones family is possible for everybody.”

“Very well! Please, call your son, so that I can have a look at him.”

“Why? Why do you want to have a look at him?”

“Please, call him!”

“Well.”

Landlord Second Brother asked somebody outside to call his son.

The child was seven years old this year. Since his infancy he had been pampered, and half a year ago since he was chosen to be the victim, people spoiled him more than ever. As it was plain that the child must die after six months, the boy was allowed to eat whatever he wanted and to play whenever he felt like

it. If he wanted to put up a ladder and climb to heaven, so let him do it! Whenever the child took a fancy to something, everyone at home thought it was great fun.

“Come here, come here!”

“Yes, daddy!”

“Come here, my darling! This is the Honourable Father, your saviour and benefactor, Living Buddha, hurry up and knock your head on the floor to him!”

“I can only see a monkey!”

“Don’t say such nonsense! This is the Living Buddha, the Great Saint Equal to Heaven!”

“Come on! Old father, please, do not scold him! A monkey is a monkey! Don’t listen to the Old Master! I’m not offended if I’m called a monkey. A monkey is a monkey and there is nothing wrong in that. If I put on a tiger’s fur from head to foot, does that make me a tiger? Oh, no! Don’t make a fuss, it is not the outwardly that matters! Is it he that you must sacrifice this midnight to the monster?”

“So it is!”

“Look!”

“Why?”

The moment Santa Sun told them to look, he rolled himself on the ground, shook his body and transformed himself. He changed into the form of the child Chen Guanbao. The old man stared at him: ‘Oh, my! Just now the monkey monk disappeared, and all of a sudden I have two sons!’ Then Sun Wukong changed back again:

“There you are, old father!”

“I see, Honourable Father, but why do you do this?”

“Don’t bother! What do you think about my transformation into the shape of your son just now? Did I look like him?”

“Absolutely!”

“That’s it! Fine! Then we do as follows: You bring your son back into the house and see to it that he is diligent with his homework! I wait here until midnight, when I’ll change into the shape of your son to be sent off, and no discussion about it!”

“Honourable Father! Please, Your Honour, this is...”

“Me! I’ll sacrifice myself!”

“But this is... Let me at least donate a sum of money to your master!”

“Don’t try to argue! We don’t want money! If it was for money, we would never have come and we wouldn’t do this for you. To sacrifice oneself is a good deed, it’s mercy, to save the life of one person is worth more than building a seven-storied stupa, or a sacred pagoda! Ha, ha, ha, ha!”

“Oh, Your Honour, I’ll erect a bronze statue of you in my home! In the morning we’ll burn incense and in the evening we’ll pour fresh water.”

“That’s up to you! Nothing doing with me! A bronze statue or a painting, it’s all the same! And you can never say for sure that there won’t be malicious persons around. As soon as the matter is solved, they start talking behind your back: ‘That little imp!’ or ‘That little busybody!’ And they call me names like ‘stupid blockhead’, ‘busybody’, ‘stupid bookworm’ - whatever you have!”

“Well, well.”

In the middle of their conversation a sound of crying was heard behind them.

“Please, old father...”

“Eh?”

“When we entered the gate of your home, we immediately noticed the sad look on your face: both your eyes were full of tears and you were crying because of your son. However, now your son will be saved, but in your backyard people are crying like a

wailing choir. Has somebody died? What is going on?”

“Honourable Father, I think it must be my elder brother.”

“What has your brother to do with this?”

“Sorry, I have been talking for ages, but only about the little boy.”

“Well?”

“There is also a little girl involved!”

“But you only have a son, below your knees it is scarce, only a single boy was born to you!”

“My elder brother and I have never divided the family. When we had to draw lots, the little girl in my brother’s apartment and the little boy in my apartment were both chosen. Below the knees of my elder brother it is scarce, only a single girl was born to him. She is thirteen this year, her name is Chengjin.”

“I see, each family has a single child.”

“Now they have heard that her cousin will be saved, while she will be sacrificed at midnight, and so they are all in tears.”

“No wonder, no wonder! Truly, it is better not to save any of them and that is that!”

As they were talking, the elder brother entered

and kneeled in front of Sun Wukong. He knocked his head on the floor, meat on stone, so hard that it resounded loudly and his skin was torn: Bang!

“Please, Your Honour, please, save us!”

“Venerable Living Buddha Sun!”

“Please, get up! If you have something on your mind, please, speak up!”

“Please, Your Honour, please, save us!”

“Yes, I’ll sacrifice myself for you. But you and your brother must discuss whom you want me to save: the little boy or the little girl. I am endowed with the ability to sacrifice myself and I can change into the shape of the little boy as well as the little girl. You and your brother just have to decide.”

“Oh, for sure, for sure! Second brother, there is nothing more to talk about. We cannot save my girl. You asked him first, and he can only save one of them. You came first and we came last. Furthermore, a girl will be married off anyway. She will go and live in another family anyway. The boy is the continuation of the Chen line, and he is the one who will burn incense for us later on. - Venerable Living Buddha Sun, forgive us, sorry, sorry to trouble you, thanks a lot!”

The elder brother wanted to retire, but his younger brother held him back:

“Stay where you are! If you had not come, I might not have thought about it, but now you are here, and the Venerable Living Buddha Sun, can only save one, why not your daughter?”

“No, ask him to save your child.”

“These travellers didn’t know me beforehand. They just discovered our house and wanted to ask for lodging for the night. We two brothers have never

divided our family. These people just discovered the house. You are the master of the house and you deserve the benefit.”

“Nonsense! Save the girl!”

“A son comes down from the forefathers and continues the line.”

“You talk about coming down from the forefathers and continuing the line, elder brother, but I have thought about this. Your nephew, my son, is seven this year...”

“Eh?”

“In ten years’ time he can hardly manage to marry and have a son...”

“In ten years, he will be seventeen, no, he can hardly manage.”

“We are both well over fifty now, and in ten years, who knows if we are still alive? I think we should save the girl.”

“Save the girl? But in that case we have no son any more, and what about having grandsons? We won’t have any, not in ten years, not in a hundred years!”

“Nonsense! Save the girl! She is thirteen now. In three or four years you can take a son-in-law into our house and bring up their son. Stepsons exist, but not step-grandsons. So he will continue the Chen line and burn incense for our forefathers. When we grow old, we’ll have somebody to rely on. I think we have better save the girl.”

“No, it is of course better to save the boy!”

“All right, then! Now listen to me: If you do not agree with me, your younger brother, then I’m not going to ask Sun, the Living Buddha, for help. I must

sacrifice both my son and niece.”

“Take it easy, old friends!”

“Oh, Venerable Living Buddha Sun!”

“You two old brothers are awfully loyal to each other.”

“The Three Cardinal Guides and the Five Constant Virtues don’t mention such loyalty.”

“As things are, I’m afraid that you two brothers won’t be able to get along after this.”

“Hem!”

“If we save anybody, we’ll of course save both!”

“So when he has eaten you, he’ll eat me?”

“But Your Honour can only save one of them!”

“Obviously you are more impressed by the martial looks of Buddha’s guardians than by the serene looks of Buddha himself! You only recognize me, Mr. Sun. But over there sits a certain Mr. Pig. Go and say hello to him! You may call him Venerable Living Buddha Pig, or even better: call him Great Master of the Heavenly Tent!”

“Well.”

“Do you know what Great Master of the Heavenly Tent means?”

“No, I have no idea.”

“Great Master of the Heavenly Tent, that means

Imperial Naval Commander of the River of Heaven, or Naval Commander in Chief.”

“I see. How could he change into such a pig?”

“He degenerated. He loved to play around with girls, so he changed into the form of a pig. But you should ask him for help, he’s not bad at all!”

“Stop it, Pigsy!”

“I see! Fine, fine!”

The two brothers turned towards Pigsy.

“Don’t kneel! Please, don’t!”

“Great Master!”

“Yes.”

“You have been highly recommended to us!”

“This has nothing to do with it. To save the life of one person is worth more than building a seven-storied stupa. We pilgrims stick to mercy as the essential, and easing pain is our profession, just like our master said a while ago. That’s what he has taught us. Besides, you would not let us down: when you do something like this for somebody else, they should invite you for a meal at least.”

“Stop it, Pigsy! This has nothing to do with eating. At midnight you change into the shape of the little boy and I change into the girl, and then we go and sacrifice ourselves to the monster!”

“Ahem! As soon as the monster opens its

mouth, I, Pigsy, shall slide down into its pot belly. At

“Never heard about girls first, then boys.”

that moment it would be nice to have had a meal oneself, it's no laughing matter!”

“Oh, you! You are so silly, and that is a laughing matter!”

“How are we to do it, then?”

“How to do it? First we'll let him eat the little boy and then the little girl.”

“So when he has eaten you, he'll eat me?”

“When he has eaten me, he'll have no more guts to eat you!”

“Will he then be full, so that he cannot eat any more?”

“When he eats me, he'll get a free meal he wouldn't want. He'll spit blood, he'll be so scared his heart will jump from his spine, and after that he'll have no more guts to eat you!”

“OK, fine! But wait a bit! What if he decides to eat old Pigsy first, and you afterwards?”

“Nonsense! We've got a little boy and a little girl. He'll eat the boy first and the girl afterwards. Boys and girls, boys and girls, boys first, then girls. Never heard about girls first and then boys.”

“But a monster is a kind of mutation. If he cultivates himself according to some religious practice, maybe he prefers *yin yang* [female and male principles], and then *yin* is first and *yang* afterwards. Women belong to *yin*, so he'll eat the girl first and the boy afterwards.”

“He is just a beast, so he'll stick to the pattern: cock/hen and so on. Male first, female next. There is no such thing as hen/cock.”

“Some animals go like cock/hen, but some go like goose/gander, female first and male next. It is no joking matter.”

“I do not quite understand you! You have me, your big brother, right here at your side! What if I, your brother, had not been here, and the monster had

come to eat our master, had come to eat the meat of our Tang priest, what would you say to that?"

"In that case, well, I should go right out and fight him with my rake, I'd flourish my iron-toothed rake! OK, send me off to him to be sacrificed!"

"Bring your iron-toothed rake! If he wants to eat the boy first and the girl afterwards, you don't have to go into action! If he prefers the *yin yang* order, you fight him with your rake!"

"Well!"

"If he prefers the cock/hen order, you keep cool! If he prefers the goose/gander order, you give him a sound thrashing!"

"Fine! Let's get going! I must not forget my insurance and the iron-toothed rake, then I'm ready to fight against his 'three faults'. Take it easy! Now the two of us are off, and you Old Master stay here and ..."

"There is Third Brother, Friar Sand."

"Sure! You think about everything. The two of us go to the front, and Third Brother, Friar Sand, takes responsibility over the rear-area."

"Hey! That's a deal!"

"OK, OK!"

And so the two brethren changed into a little boy and a little girl and set off to vanquish the monster.

Performed in Copenhagen, 29 August 1996

Translator's note to the text:

This performance of 30 minutes was tape- and video-recorded during the International Workshop on Oral Literature in Modern China, cf. Translator's note to the text by Wang Xiaotang. The photos were taken by Jette Ross during this

performance.