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Author(s): Anthony C. Yu

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# Heroic Verse and Heroic Mission: Dimensions of the Epic in the *Hsi-yu chi*

ANTHONY C. YU

THOUGH the process has been fairly continuous for the last three and a half centuries, it is well-known that the study of the popular Chinese novel, *Hsi-yu chi* ("The Monkey," or literally, "The Journey to the West"), has been undertaken in several stages. Following the hundred-chapter novel's first publication in 1592, editors and commentators of both the abridged and unabridged versions published during the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644-1912) were mostly engaged in allegorical interpretations of the text. Impressed by the basic plot of the novel, which concerns the pilgrimage to India by the seventh-century monk Hsüan-tsang for the acquisition of Buddhist scriptures, and by its extensive and elaborate use of popular Taoist and Buddhist terminologies, these editors wanted to explain the novel as a didactic manual for the cultivation of either Buddhist or Taoist sainthood.<sup>1</sup>

Modern criticism of the novel, begun by the late Hu Shih in 1923, has been in the main preoccupied with historical investigations. The important studies by Lu Hsün, Chêng Chen-to, and more recently, by Liu Ts'un-yan and Glen Dudbridge, represent the continuous scholarly efforts to determine the novel's origins, sources, textual history, formative influences and authorship.<sup>2</sup> This growing body of secondary literature has advanced enormously our historical knowledge,<sup>3</sup> but it has not yet in turn brought about any significant corpus of critical writings that are focused specifically on the literary aspects of the novel.

The dearth of discerning criticism of the *Hsi-yu chi* undoubtedly may be traced in part to the fact that many of the Chinese scholars writing earlier in this century, despite their growing allegiance to the study and use of the vernacular, were still very much under the scholastic influence of the former Dynasty. The authentication of ancient texts and exacting philological inquiries were the staples of this tradition, and there was little concern, indeed in the history of Chinese literary criticism, to discuss form and structure, plot and character, in the Western sense of

Anthony C. Yu is Assistant Professor of Religion and Literature at the University of Chicago.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Huang T'ai-hung and Wang Hsiang-hsü, ed., *Hsi-yu cheng-tao shu*; Ch'en Shih-pin, *Hsi-yu chen-ch'üan* (with a preface by Yu T'ung dated 1696); Liu I-ming, *Hsi-yu yüan-chih* (Original Preface dated 1758); Han-ching-tzu, *Hsi-yu chi p'ing-chu* (Original Preface dated 1891); Chang Shu-shen, *Hsin-shu Hsi-yu chi* (Original Preface dated 1749); Chu Ting-ch'en, *T'ang Sant'sang Hsi-yu Shih-o chuan*.

<sup>2</sup> See Hu Shih, "Hsi-yu chi k'ao-cheng," reprinted in *Hu Shih wen-ts'un* (4 vols.; Hong Kong, 1962), II, 354-99; Lu Hsün, "Chung-kuo hsiao-shuo shih-lüeh," reprinted in *Lu Hsün ch'üan-chi* (20 vols.; Peking, 1948), IX, 295-311; Chêng Chen-to, "Hsi-yu chi ti yen-hua," reprinted in *Chung-kuo*

*wen-hsüeh yen-chiu* (3 vols.; Peking, 1957), I, 263-99; Liu Ts'un-yan, "Szu-yu chi ti Ming k'e-pen," *Hsin-ya hsüeh-pao*, V (1963), 323-75; Liu Ts'un-yan, "The Prototypes of Monkey," *T'oung Pao*, LI (1964), 55-71; Liu Ts'un-yan, "Wu Ch'êng-ên: His Life and Career," *T'oung Pao*, LIII (1967), 1-97 (also distributed as a separate monograph); Glen Dudbridge, "Hsi-yu chi tsu-pen k'ao ti tsai-shang-chüeh," *Hsin-ya hsüeh-pao*, VI (1964), 497-519; Glen Dudbridge, "The hundred-chapter *Hsi-yu chi* and its early versions," *Asia Major*, n.s., XIV (1969), 141-91; Glen Dudbridge, *The Hsi-yu chi: A Study of Antecedents to the Sixteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive bibliography of relevant materials, see Dudbridge, *Antecedents*, pp. 201-210.

those terms. Even when China began to feel the impact of Western culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the attention of the *littérateurs* was captured more frequently by the ideological than by the aesthetic dimension of the arts.<sup>4</sup> Such a critical emphasis, in fact, finds little cause for alteration after the events of 1948-49, albeit the reigning perspective, with which the novel is often scrutinized, has changed considerably. This may be gathered from the volume of essays published by the mainland critics in the fifties devoted to the study of the *Hsi-yu chi*.<sup>5</sup> Though their analyses provided many fresh insights into various portions of the novel, their interpretations as a whole suffered from an excessive zeal in trying to read the work as an allegory of Marxist dialectic. It is ironic that those critics most eager to reject the older form of criticism show little hesitancy in detecting all kinds of political meaning in the text. The Monkey in such a view often emerges as the courageous champion of the weak and oppressed proletariat in the protracted conflict of the classes.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the lack of a developed method of criticism, literary study of the *Hsi-yu chi* is faced with more particular limitations. "The aim at defining the achievement and recognizing the art of the sixteenth century author," as Dudbridge points out in the beginning of his book, "cannot be seriously attempted . . . until we have a clear idea of what materials lay at the author's disposal—in his study, in his memory, or in the society around him—as he sat down to prepare this hundred-chapter version of an already famous story."<sup>7</sup> But in spite of the hegemony this hypothesis has enjoyed, Wu Chêng-ên's authorship of the *Hsi-yu chi* remains open to question.<sup>8</sup> And, despite the scrupulous inspection of sources conducted by Dudbridge himself, we still lack the kind of certainty, comparable to what we know of Shakespeare's inventive transformation of the *Hecatomithi* or North's *Plutarch*, that will enable us to measure in depth the author's creative genius.

It is in the face of difficulties such as these that C. T. Hsia's recent chapter on the *Hsi-yu chi*, which forms part of his *The Chinese Novel: A Critical Introduction*, achieves its greatest significance.<sup>9</sup> Not only is he the first to offer us an imaginative and lengthy account of this particular novel in terms of its aesthetic attributes; he is also the first to attempt a systematic analysis of the classic Chinese novel's technical features as well as the religious, philosophical, and ethical values informing the

<sup>4</sup> For example, what excited Hu Shih and led him to pen his own "Quintessence of Ibsenism" (Hu Shih, "I-Pu-Shen chu-i," in *Wen-t's'un*, I, 629-47) were the dramatist's trenchant critique of the social order and his championship of feminine rights, not the formal excellence or the dramatic innovations of the plays.

<sup>5</sup> See *Hsi-yu chi yen-chiu lun-wen-chi* (Peking, 1959).

<sup>6</sup> For example, Shen Jen-k'ang, "Hsi-yu chi shih-lun," in *ibid.*, pp. 39-55.

<sup>7</sup> Dudbridge, *Antecedents*, p. ix.

<sup>8</sup> The most skeptical case has been argued by Tanaka Iwao in "Siyuki no sakusha," *Shibun*, n.s., VIII (1953), 32-39, and his contention has been quoted with approbation by Dudbridge in "Versions," 187. Of the five reasons that the Japanese author advanced for discrediting the widely held view of Wu's authorship, the strongest (p. 38) one

seems to me to be the fact that a commentary of the *Hsi-yu chi* written by the critic Li Cho-wu,<sup>a</sup> which could not have been more than twenty years after Wu's death, had made no mention of the author's name. Li did praise the literary skill of the author by citing numerous examples from the text. However, if Wu Chêng-ên prided himself in being part of a literary circle largely famous for upholding and imitating the classical writings, as Liu Ts'un-yan's study seems to indicate, he might well have wished to remain anonymous as far as his authorship of a popular novel is concerned. I do not read Japanese and I am indebted to Professor William la Fleur of Princeton University for translating the essay for me.

<sup>9</sup> C. T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel: A Critical Introduction* (New York and London, 1968), pp. 115-64.

various fictive worlds. His identification, for example, of the Confucian hero, his likenesses and dissimilarities to his Western counterpart, provides a highly provocative comparison of literary cultures. With his immense erudition in things Chinese, Hsia brings to the discussion also an impressive knowledge of Western literature and poetics.

The merit of this comparative approach to Chinese fiction lies in its adoption of a more universal literary perspective and bringing that to bear on the study of a particular kind of national literature. The procedure, of course, is not without certain risks and perils. As Dudbridge observes in a perceptive review of Hsia's book, the latter's rejection of traditional Chinese critical norms (i.e., the comparison with historical writings) and his putting to use another criterion (i.e., the modern "realistic" novel of the West) impose "different but no less real limitations."<sup>10</sup> Whether Dudbridge has been entirely accurate in representing Hsia is subject to debate. The important question here, it seems to me, is not whether one should eschew the comparative method and concentrate solely on the exposition of the distinctive characteristics and idioms of this literature, but rather what kind of writings in other cultures may provide the most appropriate and illuminating analogues. In his stimulating comments on the *Hsi-yu chi*, Hsia has in fact referred to Cervantes, Chaucer, and Rabelais for significant points of comparison. But his preference for the *Hung-lou mêng* as the most developed of the six novels studied in the book is explicitly based on its approximation to the nineteenth and twentieth-century Western "realistic" fiction. One wonders, therefore, if a critical position which relies so emphatically on Flaubert, James, and Joyce may be the only possible one which can assist us in understanding an individual work like the *Hsi-yu chi*. With its heroic theme and grandiloquent rhetoric, does it not appear more likely that the *Hsi-yu chi* may well have more in common with Homer than with Hugo?<sup>11</sup> We cannot begin to answer this question without taking a closer look at the literary milieu from which the work arose, its language, its mythology, and its intended effect, all of which must also be related to certain other kinds of heroic tales and narratives. Space prohibits me from considering this essay in any way other than as a provisional and exploratory one, and the absence of any settled criteria for defining the epic increases the hazards in such an undertaking. Modern criticisms of Western epics have ranged from the succinct definition given by A. B. Lord—that it is a "narrative song, . . . a tale which is sung"<sup>12</sup>—to the enumeration of certain commonly recognized attributes and the use of prominent models for generic identification.<sup>13</sup> Since the discussions of "primary" and "secondary" epics,<sup>14</sup> of "oral" and "literary" compositions, are not irrelevant for studying the Chinese literary

<sup>10</sup> Glen Dudbridge, "C. T. Hsia: *The Classic Chinese Novel, A Critical Introduction*—A Review," *Asia Major*, n.s., XV (1970), 251.

<sup>11</sup> The only essay, to my knowledge, which attempts a specific comparison of the *Hsi-yu chi* and Western epics is a brief and rather cursory one by Harriet Dye. See her "Notes for a Comparison of The Odyssey and Monkey," *Literature East and West*, VIII (1964), 14-18.

<sup>12</sup> A. B. Lord, "Homer and Other Epic Poetry," in *A Companion to Homer*, ed. by Alan J. B. Wace and Frank H. Stubbings (London, 1962), p. 180.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. E. M. W. Tillyard, *The English Epic and Its Background* (New York, 1966), pp. 1-13; Thomas Greene, *The Descent From Heaven: A Study in Epic Continuity* (New Haven and London, 1963), pp. 8-25; Brian Wilkie, *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition* (Madison and Milwaukee, 1965), pp. 3-29.

<sup>14</sup> The distinctions maintained by C. S. Lewis in *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (London, 1942), pp. 13-61, and by C. M. Bowra in *From Virgil to Milton* (London, 1945), pp. 1-32.

tradition, I have not rigidly followed here any single definition of the epic. Rather, I shall draw on some of the findings made available by current research and apply them *in situ* to the examination of the *Hsi-yu chi*. My hope is that even a heuristic reading of it as an "epic" will gain us further insight into its peculiar meaning and artistic power.

## II

Anyone familiar with Western fiction reading the Chinese text of the *Hsi-yu chi* will be struck at once by one of its prominent characteristics. Unlike any typical Western work of prose fiction written since the Renaissance, the Chinese novel is made up of prose heavily interlaced with verse of many varieties and lengths. Not only are the poems used frequently for descriptive purposes; in certain episodes they also serve to advance the action or function as dramatic dialogues between the characters. The historical basis of this form of Chinese writing is well known since the discovery of the *pien-wen* texts in the cave of Tun-huang in 1899.<sup>15</sup> Dating from the eighth and ninth century, many of these texts took as their subjects the *Leben und Treiben* of Buddhist saints and heroes, though many other secular stories dealt with persons and events from Chinese legend or history.

The origin of the religious *pien-wen* has been traced to the evangelistic efforts of Buddhist monks, who sought to accommodate their more abstruse doctrines to a popular audience through storytelling. Not incomparable to some of the patristic and medieval epic paraphrases of biblical themes (e.g., the *Evangeliorum* of Juvencus, the *Carmen Paschale* of Sedulius, the anonymous but massive Old Saxon *Heliand*, and the *De Vita et Gestis Christi* of Jacobus Bonus), the *pien-wen* consisted of imaginative elaborations and expansions of individual episodes in a Buddhist sutra, with events and persons freely altered or added. Alternating between short sections of semi-literary prose and lengthier sections composed mainly of the five or seven-syllabic poetic line, these *pien-wen* may amplify a relatively short unit (about one or two hundred characters) of the *Saddharma-Pundarīka Sūtra* or the *Vimalakīrti-nirdēsa Sūtra* into a narrative of several thousand characters in length.<sup>16</sup> In all probability, these stories were first sung or chanted during temple festivals, and judging from observations made in the *Kao-Seng Chuan* (The Chronicle of Illustrious Monks), popular reaction to the presentations, especially those describing the agonies of hell, could be extremely emotional.<sup>17</sup>

The popularity and success of the Buddhist *pien-wen* may be seen in the widespread emulation of its form by subsequent authors of secular topics drawn from both history and folklore. Though it has been an established mode of composition in India, the mixture of prose and poetry in narration was clearly new to China, and it made its mark permanently on Chinese literary history by exerting enormous influence on the development of popular drama and the practice of storytelling in the subsequent Sung and Yuan Dynasties. The indebtedness of Chinese colloquial fiction to these art forms has been a familiar theme of modern scholarship,<sup>18</sup> for

<sup>15</sup> The standard edition of these texts in Chinese is *Tun-huang pien-wen chi*, ed. by Wang Chung-min, et al. (2 vols.; Peking, 1957).

<sup>16</sup> See "Miao-fa lien-hua ching Chiang-wen" and "Wei-mo-chieh ching Chiang-wen"<sup>b</sup> in *ibid.*, II, 501-645.

<sup>17</sup> Hu Shih, *Pai-hua wen-hsüeh shih* (Shanghai, 1928; repr. Taipei, 1957), I, 204-210.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Hu Shih, "Sung-jen hua-pen pa-chung hsü," in *Wen-t's'un*, III, 555-73; Ch'eng chen-to, "Ming Ch'ing erh-tai ti p'ing-hua chi," in *Wen-hsüeh yen-chiu*, I, 360-474; Lu Hsün, *Ku-hsiao-*

such rhetorical features as the *Hua-shuo* and *Ch'üeh-shuo*<sup>6</sup> (we were speaking of . . .) and the stock formula (if you want to know what follows, listen to the next round's unravelment), which open and close each chapter of the classic novel, reflect unmistakably the expressions characteristic of an oral tradition.

It is not my intention at this juncture to suggest that the *Hsi-yu chi* as such could have been an "oral composition" in the same sense as the Homeric poems are so considered by modern classical scholars. For one thing, the research into the social and cultural conditions of oral performance in medieval China is still in its early stage, and a good deal more original data and historical information need to be gathered before we can arrive at a more accurate picture of how this tradition operates. The prose and poetry of Chinese fiction, and indeed of all the short stories and popular dramas, also display a different set of linguistic phenomena. There are no "ornamental epithets" and kennings such as we have in *The Iliad* or *Beowulf*, and although there are numerous repetitions of stock phrases and expressions, the prosodic texture of the Chinese narrative lacks the metrical uniformity that would validate the kind of statistical investigations pioneered by Milman Parry. Moreover, one wonders if the relatively early invention of printing in China and the spread of it during the Sung Dynasty might not have affected the conditions of literacy amidst the popular performers in medieval China, and whether the standard of complete illiteracy of the oral artist maintained by Parry and Lord can be strictly applied to the Chinese context.<sup>19</sup>

These reservations notwithstanding, it is interesting to note that the narrative form of prose mixed with poetry is not confined only to a work like the *Hsi-yu chi*, for Victor Zhirmunsky has reported that such a combination is also to be found in the oral epics of Central Asia.<sup>20</sup> And, though the Indian prototype of the Monkey

*shuo kou-ch'en* (repr. in the 1948 edition of his complete works, Vol. 8); Lu Hsün, *Chung-kuo hsiao-shuo ti li-shih pien-chien* (repr. Hong Kong, 1957); Li Chia-jui, "Yu shuo-shu pien-ch'êng hsi-chü ti hên-chih," *Li-shih yü-yen yen-chiu-so chi-k'an*, VII (1936), 405-18; Jaroslav Průšek, *Chinese History and Literature* (Dordrecht, Holland, 1970), pp. 214-448; Arthur Waley, "Notes on History of Chinese Popular Literature," *T'oung Pao*, XXVIII (1949), 346-54; P. Demiéville, *Les débuts de la littérature en Chinois vulgaire* (Paris, 1952); W. Eberhard, *Die chinesische Novelle des 17.-19. Jahrhunderts, eine soziologische Untersuchung* (Ascona, 1948); John L. Bishop, *The Colloquial Short Story in China: A Study of the San-Yen Collections*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Studies, XIV (Cambridge, 1956), chapters 1-2; C. Birch, "Some Formal Characteristics of the Hua-pen Story," *Bull. of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, XVII (1955), 346-64; Ch'en Ju-hêng, *Shuo-shu shih-hua* (Peking, 1958); Yeh Te-chün, *Sung Yüan Ming ch'iang-ch'ang wen-hsüeh* (Peking, 1959); P. D. Hanan, "A Landmark of the Chinese Novel," *Toronto Quarterly*, XXX (1961), 325-335; V. Hrdličková, "Some Observations on the Chinese Art of Storytelling," *Acta Univ. Carolinae, Philologica*, III, 53-78; V. Hrdličková, "The First Translations of Buddhist Sutras in Chinese Literature and

Their Place in the Development of Storytelling," *Archiv Orientalní*, XXVI (1958), 114-44; V. Hrdličková, "The Professional Training of Chinese Storytellers and the Storytellers' Guild," *ArOr*, XXXIII (1965), 225-48; Sun K'ai-ti, *Ts'ang-chou chi* (2 vols.; Peking, 1965), I, 1-60; 72-77; 78-91; 92-96.

<sup>19</sup> Milman Parry's writings have now been collected into a one-volume edition by his son, the late Professor Adam Parry. See *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, ed. by Adam Parry (Oxford and New York, 1971), and A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, 1960). The literature on the "Homeric Question" and the Oral Tradition is vast and complex; see the introduction to my forthcoming anthology, *Parnassus Revisited: Modern Criticism and the Epic Tradition*. On Chinese storytellers and oral entertainers working with written materials, see Ch'en Ju-hêng and Sun K'ai-ti cited in the previous footnote and more recently, W. Eberhard, "Notes on Chinese Story Tellers," *Fabula*, XI (1970), 1-33. Cf. also my review of Dudbridge's *Antecedents* in a forthcoming issue of *History of Religions*.

<sup>20</sup> Nora K. Chadwick and Victor Zhirmunsky, *Oral Epics of Central Asia* (Cambridge, England, 1969), pp. 319-339.

has been hotly contested, such recurrent motifs of the *Hsi-yu chi* as the attack of one's enemy from within his belly and the epic hero's assumption of animalistic disguises may be traced to the *Rāmāyana* and the *Gesar* epic of Tibet.<sup>21</sup> Even without affirming direct derivation, I think that these formal and thematic features may suggest a basic affinity of the novel to other heroic tales or poems, and I would like to enlarge on that affinity through first examining the function of verse in the novel.

Unlike the *pien-wen* texts of Tun-huang, the *Hsi-yu chi* abounds with verse of far greater variety. At every opportunity, the author seems almost eager to display his poetic skills by weaving into the fabric of his narration a poem on the style of the *Chüeh Chü* (a quatrain of five or seven-syllabic line with fixed tonal pattern), the *Lü-shih* (an eight-line poem of five or seven-syllabic line with fixed tonal pattern), the *Tz'u* (generally a short lyrical poem of irregular meters), or the *P'ai Lü* (a long poem with the middle couplets of the *Lü-shih* serially extended), each of which also has a specific rhyme scheme. Running the length of the first chapter alone, which recounts the birth of Monkey to his acquiring the name "Wu-k'ung," are no less than seventeen poems exemplifying all the forms just mentioned. Though it is not at all apparent in the Waley's translation, there is a poem depicting the monkeys' frolic "under the shade of some pine-trees," and another *Lü shih* sketches the curtain-like waterfall immediately after its discovery by the monkeys.

To make a comprehensive study of the novel's poetry would require a monograph many times the length of this essay. My concern here is to emphasize what seems to me to be its overall effect within the narrative situation. Taken as a whole, the poems in the *Hsi-yu chi* are used for two main purposes: that of presenting dramatic dialogues and that of describing scenery, battles, and living beings both human and non-human. In the latter category, the poems are distinguished by their extraordinary realism and vivid delineation. Though it is impossible to duplicate the terse rhythm of the three-syllabic line with end rhymes used in the poem portraying the play of the monkeys (chapter 1), I attempt a translation here to illustrate its characteristic vigor.

Swinging from branches to branches,  
Searching for flowers and fruits,  
They played two games or three  
With pebbles and with pellets;  
They circled the sandy pits;  
They built some treasured pagodas;  
They chased the dragon flies;  
They ran down small lizards;

<sup>21</sup> After Hu Shih's article of 1923, the question of the Indian prototype of Monkey was taken up again in Ch'en Yin-ke, "Hsi-yu chi hsüan-tsang ti-tzu ku-shih chih yien-pien," *Li-shih yü-yien yen-chiu-so chi-k'an*, II (1930), 157-60, which supported Hu's speculations. The theory came under the most skeptical scrutiny in Wu Hsiao-ling, "Hsi-yu chi yü Lo-mo-yen shu," *Wen-hsüeh yen-chiu*, II (1958), 163-69. On the motifs mentioned, see R. A. Stein, *Recherches sur l'épopée et le barde au Tibet* (Paris, 1959), pp. 362-89; J. K. Balbir, *L'histoire de Rāma en tibétain d'après des manuscrits de Touenhouang* (Paris, 1963), and Dud-

bridge, *Antecedents*, p. 36. Dudbridge is properly cautious about suggesting influence of or derivation from alien literary sources, but he has also demonstrated that the earliest Chinese version of the *Hsi-yu chi* story, the *Ta-T'ang San-tsang ch'ü-ching shih-hua*, reflects not only "traces of scriptural fable and pious legend, but also motifs shared with the epic literature of Central Asia, as well as with the world of popular entertainment in China of the thirteenth century and before. It is towards an environment which encompasses these elements that any search for the roots of the *Hsi-yu chi* monkey must be directed" (*Antecedents*, p. 164).

Contemplating the sky,  
 They worshiped the Bodhisattvas;  
 They pulled the creeping vines;  
 They wove some mats with grass;  
 Searching to catch the louse,  
 They kept on biting and pinching;  
 They dressed their furry coats;  
 They scraped their finger nails;  
 Leaning and leaning,  
 Brushing and brushing,  
 Pushing and pushing,  
 Pressing and pressing, . . .<sup>22</sup>

Another example of this type of poetic sketches may be taken from chapter 89, where we have the following poem on a butterfly.

A pair of gossamer wings,  
 Twin feelers of silvery shade:  
 It flies so swiftly in the wind,  
 And dances slowly in the sun.  
 With nimble speed passing over walls and streams,  
 It blithely with the fragrant catkins flirts;  
 Its airy frame loves most the scent of flowers fresh,  
 Where its graceful form unfolds with greatest ease.

These two poems are but two brief illustrations of the author's superb poetic eye and his uncanny ability in capturing within a few lines the essential qualities of his subject. That subject may be a bee (chapter 55), a bat (chapter 65), a moth (chapter 84), an ant (chapter 86), a rabbit (chapter 95), or one of the numerous monsters with whom Tripitaka's disciples must engage in combat, or the battle itself, or the scenery of the different regions through which the pilgrims must journey. But what the reader encounters again and again in these poems is an enthralling spectacle of exquisite details. Indeed, if judged by such a critical norm as that proposed by the thirteenth century theorist, Yen Yü, that great poetry ought to have "limited words but unlimited meaning," most of the poems of the *Hsi-yu chi* would suffer from a strong proclivity to being considered inferior products because of their graphic, and occasionally, unadorned diction. The language is often too explicit, too direct, too bold, to be evocative or suggestive—that quality of metaphorical elusiveness which most Chinese lyric poets cherish and seek to inculcate in their verse.

What is scorned by tradition, however, may turn out to be a poetic trait of special merit in the *Hsi-yu chi*. For what the author of the novel has sought to express in the poems is hardly the kind of lyricism suffused with symbolic imageries so characteristic of the earlier poetry of reclusion, or even of much of the poetry in the high T'ang and Sung periods. Rather, what he seeks to evoke for us frequently seems to be the overpowering immediacy of the experience of nature, with all its fullness and richly contrasting variety. To give us this sense of munificence in the natural order, the verse often makes use of what may be called the technique of delayed amplification. In the first chapter where the Flower-Fruit Mountain (*Hua-*

<sup>22</sup> All quotations are taken from the *Hsi-yu chi* (2 vols.; Peking, 1954); all translations are my own.



*kuo shan*, the birth place of Monkey) is first introduced, part of the testimonial *Fu* poem reads:

Its presence commands the wide ocean;  
 Its splendor rules the jasper sea.  
 Its presence commands the wide ocean,  
 When, like silver mountains, the tide sweeps fishes into caves;  
 Its splendor rules the jasper sea,  
 When, billowing snow-like, the waves send forth sea-serpents  
 from the deep.

. . .  
 Here are sandy cliffs and fantastic rocks;  
 Here are precipices and prodigious peaks.  
 Atop the sandy cliffs phoenixes sing in pairs;  
 Before the precipice the unicorn singly rests.

When the monkeys later enjoy a feast, the spread of the table, among other delicacies, consists of

Golden balls and pearly pellets,  
 Ruby ripeness and yellow plumpness.  
 Golden balls and pearly pellets comprise the cherries,  
 Their colors truly seductive;  
 Ruby ripeness and yellow plumpness bespeak the plums,  
 Their taste—a fragrant tartness.

Again, the setting we are made to see of the abode of Monkey's teacher is one surrounded by

A thousand old cypresses,  
 Ten thousand tall bamboos.  
 A thousand old cypresses  
 Draped in rain will fill the air with tender green;  
 Ten thousand tall bamboos  
 Held in smoke will paint the glen chartreuse.

In these lines of poetry, the use of repetition is the apparent means by which the poet partially overcomes the limitations inherent in his medium: the extreme economy of construction and the tendency toward traditional diction in literary Chinese. One does not need to read a great deal of classic Chinese verse before he recognizes that phrases such as the "jasper sea,"<sup>d</sup> the "snow-like waves,"<sup>e</sup> the "tall bamboos,"<sup>f</sup> "draped in rain,"<sup>g</sup> and "held in smoke"<sup>h</sup> have been used so regularly that they may almost be characterized as "formulaic." In his compositions, the author of the *Hsi-yu chi* has shown little interest in moving beyond traditional vocabularies and metaphors. His extensive employment of popular Taoist terminologies in many of the poems may be considered an exceptional practice, though even there, his practice has numerous precedents in some of the minor Sung and Ming poets. What he has done in the narrative that merits our study is how he breaks up into separate lines the phrases that would be ordinarily joined together. Instead of simply stating "A thousand old cypresses/Draped in rain will fill the air with tender green," he first mentions the cypresses and the bamboos before proceeding to a full rehearsal of their particular appearances and conditions. The im-

mediate result of this procedure is to retard the movement of the poetic line by giving a more leisurely pace to a metrical rhythm that is normally terse and rapid. The repetitions compel our attention and serve to enhance the amplitude of the poetic utterance. The cumulative effect of the total poem thus impresses us with the encyclopedic range of the poet's interests and the piercing fineness of his vision. There is hardly anything that is too mundane or too exotic for his scrutiny. Food-stuff of all kinds, household utensils, birds, animals, and insects, plants and flowers of sundry varieties, the beings of heaven and hell—all process unhurriedly before us in their colorful and manifold plenitude, and in the *Hsi-yu chi* we, too, are given a profound sense of "God's plenty." In this manner also, the language of the poems attains a peculiar function that is not unworthy of comparison with that of Homeric verse, for the traditional Chinese diction, with its strict tonal, metrical, and stylistic consistency, is so utilized that it inevitably, as one modern scholar has said of the Homeric epithets, calls attention to "the special excellence of all things."<sup>23</sup>

There is, however, a further characteristic to be noticed about the poems. For their compelling descriptive power notwithstanding, the poems sometimes can be paradoxically devoid of local color and impression. This is especially true of those designed to depict the scenic setting of a place. Invariably, the verse alludes to precipitous cliffs and exotic flowers, to carved-beam buildings and verdant forests of pines and bamboos, to the cries of cranes and phoenixes, and to the congregation of rare and mythic animals. There are, to be sure, variations in the contents and in the syntax, but without explicit authorial identification, it would be difficult solely from the poetic descriptions to distinguish between the Monkey's birth place (*Hua-kuo Shan*) of chapter 1, the Black Wind Mountain (*Héh-fung Shan*) of chapter 17, the Spirit Mountain (*Ling Shan*) of chapters 52 and 98 which is Buddha's abode, or the counterfeit *Ling Shan* of chapter 65, where the pilgrims met one of their most formidable opponents.

This paradoxical fusion of the real and the typical is what enables the verse to impregnate the entire narrative with a kind of "epic" grandeur, energy, and expansiveness. In his thoughtful essay on "The Realistic and Lyric Elements in the Chinese Mediaeval Story," Professor Jaroslav Průšek has suggested that the prose and poetic portions of the *pien-wen* and the *hua-pen* seem to indicate two levels of representing reality. Recalling how Balzac found it praiseworthy that Sir Walter Scott "imbued (the novel) with the spirit of olden times, combined in it drama and dialogue, portrait, landscape and description, introduced into it fantasy and truth—elements typical of the epic—and placed poetry in closest intimacy with the most ordinary speech," Průšek thinks that the lyrical poetical insertions into the realistic prose segments of the Chinese story "form—possibly quite unintentionally—a kind of second plane to the actual story, raise it—even though it be unconsciously—to the demonstrations of a certain philosophical conception of the world."<sup>24</sup>

While this characteristic is true also of the *Hsi-yu chi* to some extent, Průšek's observation does not succeed entirely in isolating its particular virtue. For the poetic insertions in the *Hsi-yu chi* are neither "interludes" nor "interruptions"; they are,

<sup>23</sup> W. Whallon, "Old Testament Poetry and Homeric Epic," *Comparative Literature*, XVIII (1966), 113-31; cf. also his *Formula, Character and Context: Studies in Homeric, Old English and*

*Old Testament Poetry* (Cambridge and Washington, D. C., 1969), pp. 68-70.

<sup>24</sup> Průšek, *op. cit.*, pp. 386 and 393.

rather, integral parts of the total narrative. Not unlike some of the great landscape paintings of the T'ang and Sung Periods, in which a thousand details subsist in a delicate union of concreteness and ideality, the poetry here at once heightens and elevates by pointing simultaneously to the peculiar quality of a certain site and to its mysterious and elemental character. Furthermore, the lyric impulse is always placed at the service of the epic; the descriptions do not invite attention to themselves as poetic entities in their own right, but rather, are called upon constantly to strengthen the élan and verve of the story itself. In this way, the mountains, the monasteries, the monsters, and the deities acquire a significance not of their own, but only in relation to the fate of the pilgrims. The appearance of any locality can be either menacing or tutelary precisely because it can forebode danger or shelter for Tripitaka and his companions. Similarly, the accounts of the glorious epiphany of Kuan-yin (Avalokitésvara) in chapter 12 and of the fearful visages of the Green-haired Lion, the Yellow-tusk Elephant, and the Roc Monster of chapter 75 achieve their greatest impact only when these are understood as forces which can assist or impede the pilgrims' progress.

To stress the central importance of the pilgrims' experience and its determinative influence on the quality of the poetic insertions is not to overlook the element of verbal humor, another aspect of the novel which has often been praised. One of the best examples of narrative realism masterfully blended with comic irony may be found in chapter 67, where an elder of a village was seeking the Monkey's aid to rid the people of a Python monster.

Hsing-chê said, "Old man, it's easy to catch the monster. There is difficulty only because the families here are not united in their efforts." The elder asked, "How did you reach this conclusion?" Hsing-chê replied, "For three years this monster has been a menace, hurting countless creatures. I should think that if each family would contribute one ounce of silver, five hundred families would fetch five hundred ounces. You could find an exorcist anywhere to get rid of this monster. Why did you permit this outrage to last for three years?" The elder said, "Speaking of spending money would be an utterly shameful thing! Which one of our families did not disburse three or five ounces of silver! The year before last we found from the south side of this mountain a monk and invited him to come. But he didn't win." Hsing-chê asked, "How did that monk go about catching the monster?" The elder said:

O, that *Sêng-gha*,  
 He wore a *Kasāya*,  
 He expounded first the *Peacock*;  
 He then recited the *Lotus*.  
 With the urn burning incense,  
 His hand took up the bell;  
 With all this commotion,  
 He disturbed the monster.  
 The wind rose and the clouds gathered,  
 And he arrived at this village.  
 The monk engaged the monster;  
 What a battle to relate:  
 One stroke delivered a punch,  
 One stroke delivered a scratch.

The monk tried hard to win,  
 But he possessed no hair.  
 In a moment the monster triumphed,  
 Gone back to smoke and mist.  
 (It's like sunning a dried scab!)  
 We moved more closely to look:  
 The bald head was beaten like a rotten watermelon!

Hsing-chê laughingly said, "Well, he really lost out." The elder said, "He only paid with his life; we were the true victims. We had to pay for his coffin and his funeral, and we gave some money to his disciple. The disciple still hasn't given up and wants even now to sue us. It's a mess!"

Hsing-chê said, "Did you request any other person to catch him?" The elder answered, "Last year we also located a Taoist." Hsing-chê asked, "How did the Taoist catch him?" The elder said, "That Taoist:

Wearing on his head a gold cap,  
 He put on an exorcist robe.  
 He banged aloud his placard;  
 He waved his charms and water.  
 He sent for gods and spirits;  
 He only brought on the ogre!  
 Wild wind was howling and churning;  
 Black fog dimmed both sky and sight;  
 The monster met the Taoist;  
 They fought a lengthy battle.  
 When twilight at last set in,  
 The monster left for his home.  
 The cosmos was bright and fair,  
 And we were all assembled.  
 Going to hunt for the Taoist,  
 We found him drowned in a brook;  
 We fished him out for a better look:  
 He looked like a chicken poached in soup!

The language of this passage may certainly bring to mind such works in the West as the Homeric *Batrachomyomachia* (Battle of the Frogs and Mice) and Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. But what prevents even this section of the *Hsi-yu chi* from being merely an episode of the mock heroic is its serious context. Despite the scene's relaxed, comic tone, the ordeal facing Hsing-chê and his companion, Pa-chieh (Piggy), is no illusion. Shortly thereafter, they will have to battle again a real and potentially dangerous opponent in the figure of the monster, which is another part of the ordained experience of the pilgrimage.

This deliberate harnessing of the poetic elements to augment the narrative force may be detected also in many of the poetic speeches of the novel. The technique of advancing the action through poetic dialogues is no doubt inherited directly from the colloquial short stories and popular dramas of earlier periods, but it has now become a highly flexible and effective device. Most of these speeches are spoken as challenges to battle or descriptions of some weapon, for which the author of the *Hsi-yu chi* exploits the longer form of the *P'ai Lü* with utmost virtuosity. The challenges to battle are usually delivered immediately before the character engages in

actual combat. They provide occasions for the speaker not only to indulge in polemical humor and verbal provocation of his adversary, but also frequently to reminisce, to recount the prior history of his own person (see, for example, the speeches in chapters 19, 22, 52, 70, 85, 86). Though none of these speeches are in any length comparable to, say, the tales of Odysseus, they serve a similar function, common to most heroic poetry, of filling in the background of a hero's life, just as "Homer makes Nestor boast of his lost youth or Phoenix tell of his lurid past."<sup>25</sup>

The panegyric on one's weapon, another familiar convention in many heroic poems or tales,<sup>26</sup> also occupies an important place in the poetic insertions. Since nearly every fighter of any note in the *Hsi-yu chi*, whether he is an enemy or an ally of the pilgrims, possesses some kind of weaponry charged with distinctive power, the claims made by Monkey, Pigsy, and Sandy about the superiority of their weapons (e.g., chapters 19, 22, and 88) by virtue of their heavenly origins take on a significance akin to that associated with the shields of Achilles and Aeneas. The iron cudgel of Monkey, for instance, was traced to its first use by the legendary King Yü, who, when conquering the Flood in China, employed it to fix the depths of the rivers and the oceans (cf. chapters 3 and 88). Hence its name, The Divine Needle for Regulating the Oceans,<sup>1</sup> and its mythic origin thus accounts for its magical capacity to be lengthened or shortened at will. Moreover, in the eulogistic *P'ai Lü* spoken by its master, the cudgel is transformed, through the insistent rhythm and rhyme and the dazzling constructions of the antithetical couplets, into a fitting symbolic extension of Monkey's responsibility to subdue all forces hostile to the monk Tripitaka and his sacred mission. That mission, in fact, is the all-encompassing principle organizing both language and theme, plot and characterization, and we need to turn to it briefly to discover further dimensions of the epic in the *Hsi-yu chi*.

### III

Inasmuch as the novel is fundamentally concerned with the pilgrimage of Hsüan-tsang (Tripitaka) to India in order to obtain Buddhist scriptures, its plot is constructed on the experience of one of China's most illustrious and beloved monks. The historical Hsüan-tsang (ca. 596-664 A.D.) seemed to have been a man of extraordinary courage and intelligence. At the risk of defying an imperial edict banning foreign travel after his own petition to leave was turned down, he began his westward journey in 629 by joining in secret a merchant caravan. His trip took him through Turfan, Darashar, Tashkent, Samarkand, Bactria, Kapisa, and Kashmir, finally reaching India around 633. He traveled widely in the land of his faith, visited many sacred places, and won the respect of Indian scholastics during numerous debates. After an absence of sixteen years, he returned to China in 645 bearing some 657 items of Buddhist scriptures and receiving royal as well as tumultuous welcome. He was installed in the prestigious monasteries of the capital where for the next nineteen years, he devoted himself to translation until his death in 664. Although his biography, the *Ta-T'ang Ta Tz'u-en-szu San-Tsang Fa-shih Chuan*, written by Hui-li and Yen-ts'ung must be considered a work of religious

<sup>25</sup> C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London, 1952), p. 31. For a recent study of the literary device of digression in Homer, see Norman Austin, "The Function of Digressions in the Iliad," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, VII (1966), 295-312.

<sup>26</sup> Bowra, *Heroic Poetry*, pp. 149-57; cf. also H. Munro Chadwick and N. Kershaw Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature* (3 vols.; Cambridge, England, 1940; reprinted, 1968), III, 72 ff.

hagiography, it is acknowledged to have contained a good deal of valid historical information.<sup>27</sup> In this and in his own writings (the *Ta-T'ang Hsi-yü chi*, The Great T'ang Records of the Western Territories, the *Ch'eng-wei-shih lun* or *Vijñapti-mātratāsiddhi*, the Establishment of the Consciousness-Only System), Hsüan-tsang undeniably appeared as a brilliant philosopher and perceptive cleric, capable also of enduring tremendous hardship.

How the experience of this historical figure differs from the fictive one must be quickly apparent to any reader of the *Hsi-yu chi*. In sharp contrast to the clandestine departure of the historical Hsüan-tsang, the entire mission in the novel was conceived to have begun under imperial auspices and divine sanction. Following the thematic emphasis of several popular accounts, the author of the novel had the Emperor T'ai-tsung converted to popular Buddhism after returning from a Dantean trip to the underworld. Having been granted twenty more years of life, T'ai-tsung promised to sponsor a mass for the dead as an expression of gratitude. It was during the ceremony that the epiphany of Kuan-yin took place, revealing Buddha's request for someone from the Eastern continent to travel to *Ling-shan* for the scriptures and leading to the selection of Hsüan-tsang as the candidate. Because of the goal of his journey was to obtain the threefold Buddhist canon of the *Vinaya*, the *Sastra*, and the *Sutra*, he was given the additional name (*Hao*) Santang or Tripitaka by the Emperor, and he embarked on his mission as the brother of the Emperor by decree, protected by imperial documents and gifts from the Buddha himself.

The import of this mission is to be seen not only in terms of its final destination, but also in terms of how it determines the shape of the narrative. That such scriptures which will bring to mankind salvation and liberation cannot be easily acquired is a theme which has been repeatedly emphasized in the novel. When Śākyamuni first declares his intent to bestow the sacred gifts, he says that the believer must endure "the bitter experience of traversing a thousand hills and ten thousand waters" before he can reach the authentic sutras (chapter 8). This condition receives continuous development as the action unfolds, so that Tripitaka's pilgrimage also becomes gradually transformed into his personal journey toward the attainment of Buddhahood. The interpretation reaches its definitive form near the end of the story when it is stated by Kuan-yin in chapter 99 that Tripitaka must undergo eighty-one trials (*Nan*) before his prescribed ordeal of suffering can be terminated. The teleology of this sacred number (9 times 9) thus explains the length of the narrative and all the trying episodes in Tripitaka's experience, for they are, from the divine point of view, parts of his *necessary* experience which must be dramatized. At the same time, it underscores the fact that many of the monsters and demons who sought to devour Tripitaka were renegades from the heavenly pantheon, and they have been sent "providentially" and specifically to earth for the testing of the pilgrim. The cycles of assault, captivity, and release by monsters may seem repetitious and tedious to some readers, but their sheer frequency of occurrence accentuates the cumulative weight of Tripitaka's tribulation.<sup>28</sup> And the structural

<sup>27</sup> See Arthur Waley, *The Real Tripitaka and Other Stories* (London, 1952), pp. 280-81.

<sup>28</sup> Hu Shih, in "*Hsi-yu chi* k'ao-cheng," 386, has suggested that the numerology here may reflect some influence by the *Hua-yen ching* (the Avatah-

saka-sūtra). In the last section of that sutra, it is recorded that a certain youth in search of Buddhahood has had to traverse 110 cities and experience 110 lessons of moral virtue before attaining enlightenment.

contour of the action, which traces the movement of the protagonist to a distant but destined goal through various obstacles and dangers, invites comparison of the *Hsi-yu chi* with such other epics making use of the Quest motif as the *Gilgamesh*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid*.<sup>29</sup>

It is to be remembered, of course, that Tripitaka's journey is not one of blind wanderings such as some of those undergone by Enkidu or Odysseus. Nor is there in the *Hsi-yu chi* any pattern of the hero's withdrawal, his subsequent return in disguise, and the climatic experiences of recognition and reunion with loved ones which constitutes the common themes of many Western heroic songs ancient and modern.<sup>30</sup> The pilgrimage of Hsüan-tsang, by contrast, is from the outset distinguished by its auspicious beginning and its hallowed end. The journey to acquire the sacred texts, though fraught with dire perils, is instigated by Śākyamuni himself in the celestial assembly, and the master pilgrim is blessed with his supernal gifts. For this reason also, his disciple Monkey, in moments of crisis, can repeatedly appeal to, and depend on, the various tutelary spirits of any region to protect Tripitaka, while Monkey himself enlists the assistance from deities of greater distance and power. Insofar then as the story of the novel resembles the epic of search, it is one which has more in common with the action of the *Aeneid*, for the hero is not only commissioned to reach a distant and difficult goal, but the certainty of his arriving there is also guaranteed by powers greater than any of his own abilities. The high drama of the *Hsi-yu chi*, to paraphrase Virgil, solicits precisely our acknowledgement that mighty was the struggle to obtain scriptures from the West.<sup>31</sup>

If the mission of Tripitaka thus approximates the kind of greatness of subject or theme with which Western literary theorists since Horace have tended to associate with the epic, the same can hardly be said of its central character. For anyone familiar with the work has not failed to notice to what marked degree this Hsüan-tsang differs from the heroic figure drawn from history and hagiography. With studied irony, the author seems to delight in demeaning the stature of the popular religious hero. Joyless and humorless, the fictive Tripitaka is dull of mind and peevish in spirit, his muddle-headedness matched only by his moral pusillanimity. As someone who is supposedly committed to the life of *pabbajjā* (*Ch'u-chia*), he is singularly attached to bodily comforts, complaining more than once about the cold and hunger inflicted by the journey. The slightest foreboding of ill or danger terrifies him; the most groundless kind of slander at once shatters his confidence in his most trustworthy follower, Monkey, who has never failed to come to his rescue. Though he did win the admiration from Monkey in a few occasions by his dogged resistance to sexual temptation, most of his encounters with evil, whether in human or supernatural form, found him impotent and paralyzed by fear, never revealing, even at the journey's end, that he has gained any moral or spiritual insight from his experience. It is this characteristic in Tripitaka that elicits an interesting observation from Hsia, who writes:

From the viewpoint of popular Buddhism, Tripitaka has on all occasions fol-

<sup>29</sup> For an informative discussion of this motif in these epics, see G. R. Levy, *The Sword from the Rock: An Investigation into the Origins of Epic Literature and the Development of the Hero* (London, 1953), pp. 120-73.

<sup>30</sup> Lord, *Singer*, pp. 158-97; cf. also his "Tradi-

tion and the Oral Poet: Homer, Huso and Avdo Medjedovic," in *La poesia epica e la sua formazione, Problemi attuali di scienza e di cultura, quaderno n. 139* (Roma, 1970), pp. 13-28.

<sup>31</sup> The line I have in mind is I, 33: *tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem*.

lowed the command not to kill, but because the novel inculcates the king of Buddhist wisdom which excludes even the finest human sentiments as a guide to salvation, he is seen as a victim of perpetual delusion and can never make the same kind of spiritual progress as the hero of a Christian allegory. The novel, however, ultimately demonstrates the paradoxical character of this wisdom in that its nominal hero is granted Buddhahood at the end precisely because he has done nothing to earn it. To consciously strive for Buddhahood would again have placed him under bondage.<sup>32</sup>

As far as Tripitaka is concerned, Hsia's point is indeed well taken, for Tripitaka's achievement does little to merit his final exaltation. However, the weakness of his character, it may be argued, does not necessarily imply that "the finest human sentiments" are not desirable, or that they have little values in the religious vision of the work. On the contrary, Tripitaka's frail and fallible character is deliberately magnified by the author in order to stress his absolute need for his supernatural companions, and most especially, for the protective guidance of the Monkey. For this reason, both the narrator and Monkey on several occasions have emphasized the fact that the Master is of "fleshy eyes and mortal stock."<sup>3</sup> When the pilgrims were stranded along the eastern shore of the Flowing-Sand River in chapter 22, Monkey debated with Pigsy on the means of getting Tripitaka across the river.

Hsing-chê said, "You don't know the ability of my Cloud-Somersault, which with one leap, can cover one hundred and eight thousand leagues. For the five or seven thousand here, it requires only a nod of the head and a stretch of the waist to make a round trip. What is there that is so difficult?" Pa-chieh said, "Elder brother, if it's so easy, all you need to do is to put Master on your back—nod your head, stretch your waist, and jump across. Why is it necessary to fight on with the monster?" Hsing-chê said, "Don't you know how to ride the clouds? Can't you carry him on your back?" "Pa-chieh answered, "The mortal nature and fleshy bones of Master are heavy as the *T'ai* Mountain. How can my Cloud-Soaring bear him up? It's got to be your somersault." Hsing-chê replied, "My somersault is in actuality Cloud-Soaring, except that I can cover greater distances. If you can't carry him, what makes you think I can? There's an old saying: 'The *T'ai* Mountain to be moved may be as light as the mustard seed; but to transport a mortal away from the red dust is exceedingly difficult.' Take this monster here—he can use spells and call upon the wind, pushing and pulling a little, but he can't carry [him] into the air. If it is this kind of magic, yours truly knows all the tricks well, including becoming invisible and shortening the ground. But it is required of Master to cover exhaustively these strange territories before he can find deliverance from the sea of sorrows; hence even a step turns out to be difficult. You and I are only his protective companions, guarding his body and life, but we cannot exempt him from these woes, nor can we fetch the scriptures. Even if we had the ability to go and see Buddha first, he would not bestow the scriptures to you and me. Remember the adage: "What's easily gotten, is soon forgotten."

These remarks by Monkey and Pigsy point up the fundamental truth concerning Tripitaka's pilgrimage: for all the supernatural forces coming to aid or harm him,

<sup>32</sup> Hsia, *op. cit.*, p. 130.



Tripitaka must journey to the West as a human mortal. Just as he is conditioned by his physical limitations and the thousand hills and ten thousand waters cannot be circumvented, so he is also subject to intellectual errors and moral shortcomings. His dependence on his followers, especially Monkey, is therefore utterly necessary, but what Monkey offers him, however, is not simply the help of a *deus ex machina*. Though strictly speaking, Monkey is not a "human" character as such, but what he brings to the pilgrimage and to their relationship are precisely many of the finer human qualities which Tripitaka himself lacks: courage, perseverance, strength, a lively sense of humor, and a prodigious intelligence. It is not without reason that he has been often considered the hero proper of the narrative. Hsia, moreover, has written perceptively on how Monkey's superior understanding of the Heart Sutra (the *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*) provided constant spiritual illumination for Tripitaka as well as moral admonition for his failure to live up to this sutra's idea of total detachment from the bondage of the senses.<sup>33</sup> The fact that Monkey had to remind Tripitaka time and time again of the sutra's true meaning is itself a situation of immense irony, for the historical Hsüan-tsang was reputedly one of the sutra's most persuasive interpreters and its most able translator because he had derived enormous comfort from it during his hazardous sojourn through the rugged terrain of Central Asia.

It should be remembered, however, that the relationship of Tripitaka and Monkey is not a one-sided affair, for once released by Tripitaka from the *Wu-hsing Shan* (Mountain of the Five elements) under which he was imprisoned for being a celestial delinquent, Monkey has served the master pilgrim with unswerving loyalty and devotion as his follower and protector. That the defenseless monk has need of his powerful companion is, of course, self-evident, but the identification of Monkey with the cause of this lack-luster cleric ostensibly has little justification, especially when Monkey's continual submission to Tripitaka, from the latter's point of view, is often guaranteed only by unbearable pain inflicted by the irremovable golden fillet worn on Monkey's head. That fillet was one of Buddha's original gifts to Tripitaka, who received it from Kuan-yin with the secret incantation which could cause the fillet to tighten around Monkey's head once recalcitrant behavior is detected. This unmerciful means of control has in fact led contemporary critics on the Chinese mainland to view such an ordeal for Monkey as symbolic of the superstitious shackles of religion placed on the popular hero by a feudalistic society. They assert that the true greatness of Monkey lies in his Promethean defiance of all

<sup>33</sup> A portion of this sutra reads:

O Sariputra, form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, nor does form differ from emptiness; whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form. The same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses and consciousness. Here, O Sariputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness, they are neither produced nor stopped, neither defiled nor immaculate, neither deficient nor complete. Therefore, O Sariputra, where there is emptiness there is neither form, nor feeling, nor perception, nor impulse, nor consciousness; no eye, nor ear, nor nose, nor tongue, nor body, nor

mind; no form, nor sound, nor smell, nor taste, nor touchable, nor object of mind; no sight-organ element, and so forth, until we come to: no mind-consciousness element; there is no ignorance, nor extinction of ignorance, and so forth, until we come to; there is no decay and death, no extinction of decay and death; there is no suffering, nor origination, nor stopping, nor path; there is no cognition, no attainment and no non-attainment.

From *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*, trans. and ed. by Edward Conze, et al. (New York, 1964), p. 152.

authority exploiting the weak and oppressed, and that Monkey's submission to Buddha in chapter 7 and later to Tripitaka was an involuntary change of character.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, the older form of criticism represented by the editorial interpretations from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries tends to see Monkey's subjugation as a painful necessity, for it is a manifestation of Buddha's unfathomable power to subdue any inordinate flight of the mind or desire. The basis of this interpretation is that Monkey has been repeatedly referred to as Hsin-yüan (Monkey of the mind) in both the prose sections of the narrative and the antithetical couplets serving as chapter titles. This name is part of a familiar Chinese idiom on the necessity of keeping bridled the Monkey of the Heart and the Horse of the Will, and the sources for this symbolic expression have been traced to Kumarajiva's translation of the *Vimalakīrti sūtra*, the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*,<sup>k</sup> the Sanghabara's translation of the *Manjuśrīpariprcchā*,<sup>l</sup> and the *An-lo Chi* by Tao-ch'ao.<sup>35</sup> In this view, Monkey becomes the allegorical projection of the human intelligence or spirit, of which the wayward and restless tendencies, so aptly symbolized by the animal's active nature, must be tamed and brought to submission.

Though Dudbridge believes that "the Monkey-Horse metaphor cannot be seen as an urgent or spontaneous force" in the work,<sup>36</sup> the linguistic and literary evidence cannot be so easily dismissed. In many instances, Monkey's impetuous self-assertiveness has been deliberately dramatized by the author as a potential cause of trouble, and at least on one occasion, it almost becomes a dangerous liability.<sup>37</sup> This characteristic of Monkey certainly does not permit him to be so conceived that he appears as a Chinese embodiment of the Greek *menos* or Vedic *manas*, the battle-frenzy that has destroyed many an epic hero and warrior of other cultures.<sup>38</sup> What is made abundantly clear throughout the novel is rather that the kind of hubristic compulsion of Monkey, which drives him to seek even the Jade Emperor's throne, is patently too foolish, and too dangerous if uncurbed. The important thing to notice here, however, is the transformation of the destiny of Monkey, whose character and behavior in the first seven chapters render him almost a perfect candidate for tragic self-annihilation. The wonder is that he is not destroyed. In the author's ultimately comic vision of the universe, it seems that even a lawless and insolent rebel like Monkey is capable of redemption, a redemption which, in this case, takes on the form of converting his mighty and hardwon talents to work for a less self-centered and self-serving purpose. It is thus that the closing poetic commentary of chapter 7 speaks of the "unfailing root of goodness,"<sup>m</sup> for the compassionate wisdom of Buddha manifests itself not merely in subduing an audacious insurgent, but also in preserving him for a task of far greater utility and nobility. The completion of that task will exercise to the utmost Monkey's stamina, intelligence, and will.

To point this out, however, is not necessarily yielding to the temptation of making the whole character and experience of Monkey a triumph of Buddhist wis-

<sup>34</sup> *Hsi-yu chi lun-wen chi*, passim.

<sup>35</sup> Dudbridge, *Antecedents*, pp. 168-69.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>37</sup> The incident occurred during the episode of the Cart-Slow Kingdom, where Monkey engaged in a magic contest with his Taoist opponents. When at one point the Tiger Strength Immortal proposed a duel in meditation to see who could sit perfectly still for the longest period, Monkey was quite de-

feated at once. See pp. 234-35 in the translation by Arthur Waley (New York, 1943), pp. 234-35 for a humorous account.

<sup>38</sup> For a brilliant discussion of the subject of *menos* and *manas*, see Georges Dumézil, *Horace et les curiaces* (Paris, 1942), pp. 11-33; cf. also Charles Autran, *L'épopée indoue* (Paris, 1946), pp. 246-87.

dom over the human spirit. For it is undeniable that what endears Monkey most to his readers, is that ineradicable streak of heroism in his character—his martial skill, his superb prowess, and his passionate commitment to his master's mission. The fact that his given Buddhist name is Wu-k'ung (he who intuits vacuity or formlessness) does not imply that he is a detached person, indifferent to all concerns. On the contrary, his undaunted devotion to the mission and his willingness to take appalling risks and suffer bruising humiliation in order to rescue Tripitaka or some else from danger both indicate the depth of his involvement and magnify his heroic stature to epic proportions.

Perhaps it is in the action of Monkey and what it accomplishes that we may most readily perceive the profound and pervasive humanism that characterizes the author's vision in the *Hsi-yu chi*. Though the action of the narrative takes place in a mythological universe that rivals Homer's or Dante's in vastness and complexity, the implied norm for measuring one's finest achievement, ironically, is not to be found in the religious sphere. It is not the union with Buddha or the attainment of solitary redemption that holds alone the deepest and most enduring significance; what seems equally important emerging from the action is how one's behavior may affect the social and familial orders, levels of reality that are unmistakably human. The massive religious structure thus may be only a foil against which certain values are sifted and tested. Critics have not failed to notice the biting satire directed against popular Taoism in many episodes, and it may be added that Buddhism itself has not been spared from some of the author's wittiest barbs.<sup>39</sup> Graft and bribery, for example, are shown to exist even in the midst of Buddha's most intimate circle of followers, and it is the wrath of an Ananda thwarted in "getting his take" that completes Tripitaka's eightieth tribulation (chapter 98).

Seen from this perspective, the greatness of Monkey takes on a different shade of meaning. His relentless and heroic striving not only helps Tripitaka to reach his goal, but in that very process Monkey has been able to perform countless good deeds which concretely affect the welfare of the human inhabitants along the way. It is remarkable how many episodes of encounter with ogres and demons end, not only in their defeat or in Tripitaka's deliverance, but also in a kingdom restored, a lost child recovered, an estranged family reunited, and a Flame-throwing Mountain extinguished so that travel and agriculture may resume. The conquest of the monsters is thus not simply a victory for the heavenly powers; the restoration and reestablishment of human social order is just as crucial because it comes as a result of the defeat of the chthonic, antinomian forces resident in the demonic world. Even in the climax of the novel when the pilgrims finally received the scriptures from Buddha, this theme is consistently developed. When Śākyamuni explains the use of the scriptures, his understanding is characteristically an ethical rather than a philosophical or metaphysical one.

To grasp this aspect of the *Hsi-yu chi* is also to see more clearly the fundamental paradox that underlies the relationship between Tripitaka and Monkey. As a human

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Kao Hsi-ts'ung, "Hsi-yu chi-li ti tao-chiao ho tao-shih," and P'eng Hai, "Hsi-yu chi-chung tui fo-chiao p'i-p'an t'ai-tu," in *Lun-wen chi*, pp. 153-57, and 158-71. The satiric accounts of the Taoists and the Buddhists have been regarded as possibly a veiled form of criticism aiming at the

Ming Emperors, several of whom were known to have elevated clerics to high places. See Yang Chi-ts'iao, "Ming-tai chu-ti chih ts'ung-shang fang-shu chich ch'i ying-hsiang," in *Ming-tai chung-chiao*, ed. by Pao Tsun-p'eng (Taipei, 1968), pp. 203-97.

mortal, Tripitaka is, of course, dependent on his supernatural companions, but his person and his mission provide an occasion for Monkey, and even for the slothful and sensual Pigsy, to utilize their heroic energies, their excesses, and their representative individualism for a more noble purpose. In his former role as a heaven-storming delinquent, Sun Wu-k'ung displays nearly all the attributes of a tragic hero because his self-conception and self-assertion can only isolate him from society. When he joins Tripitaka on the pilgrimage to the West, his conversion is also a comic reversal, not only because he now can laugh and help us laugh at the absurdities of existence, but also because his heroic vitality is now directed toward a goal that is both personal and communal in its ultimate concerns.

## GLOSSARY

- a 李卓吾  
 b 妙法蓮華經講文, 維摩詰經講文  
 c 話說, 却說  
 d 瑤海  
 e 雪浪  
 f 修篁  
 g 帶雨  
 h 含烟  
 i 定海神針  
 j 肉眼凡胎  
 k 大智度論  
 l 文殊師利問經  
 m 善根不減