

# Using *Monkey* to Teach Religions of China

By Ryan Bradeen and Jean Johnson



**L**ike most classics of literature, *Journey to the West* (also known as *Monkey*, after its main character, the wondrous Monkey King) can be read on many levels. Besides being a tale of epic adventure on the scale of *Star Wars* or the *Lord of the Rings*, *Monkey* has been read as political and religious satire, as allegory, and as fantastical historical fiction. In this essay we will undertake a journey to discover what *Monkey* can reveal about Chinese religion. First, we will show how, in the early chapters of the novel, *Monkey* depicts Daoist, Confucian, and Buddhist deities living side-by-side in an amalgamated but coherent cosmology, rather than existing as distinct and contradicting visions of the spiritual world. We will ask how this unified cosmology matches with the reality of the Chinese religious experience. Secondly, we will investigate how the later chapters of the novel can be read both as a quest story following the four main characters, Monkey, the monk Xuanzang, Pigsy, and Sandy, on their pilgrimage to India, as well as an allegorical quest for inner enlightenment.

## THE ORIGINS OF THE STORY

The *Journey to the West* that comes down to us today was written in the late Ming Dynasty (circa 1580 CE) by the scholar Wu Cheng'en. In many respects, Wu Cheng'en's role was more that of compiler of an extensive story cycle dating back as far as the mid-Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), rather than as original author. Nonetheless, since its publication, Wu Cheng'en's version has assumed the position of definitive text, and all versions published after 1592 CE derive from the Wu Cheng'en text.<sup>1</sup>

The earliest threads of the *Journey to the West* story cycle are based on a historical journey. In 640 CE, a Chinese Buddhist monk named Xuanzang (Shwan-zang) traveled across the deserts and mountains of Inner Asia to reach India.<sup>2</sup> He went in search of Buddhist scriptures, spent many years in India studying, and finally returned to China seventeen years after his departure. This famous pilgrimage became the subject for myriad fanciful retellings. The rough outlines of *Journey to the West*, complete with Monkey, Pigsy, and Sandy, the three disciples who accompany Xuanzang (now called Tripitaka) on his fictionalized journey, existed as folk tales, short stories, and plays as early as the tenth century CE.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to being one of China's most loved classic novels, *Monkey* remains a vibrant part of Chinese popular culture today. At bookstores in China, *Journey to the West* is available by the bushel in every imaginable format, from children's stories to comics to elaborate multi-volume rare editions illustrated with woodblock prints. Tripitaka and his companions decorate walls in temples and palaces; they are perennial favorites at Peking Opera; and a recent television version of the story was watched by millions of Chinese. Most importantly, *Monkey* is in people's conversations. Old men, young boys, women of all ages—most Chinese have a favorite character, many a favorite episode. To the modern Chinese reader, *Journey to the West* is a fundamental piece of cultural mythology in the popular imagination that transcends the historical context of its story and authorship as well as its religious content. *Monkey* has maintained its place in the popular imagination even through the Communist era when religious practice and classical literature were both disparaged. Additionally, the novel's themes of self-cultivation and its satire of a corrupt bureaucracy have continued to resonate with contemporary Chinese audiences.

### PART I MONKEY AND THE CHINESE RELIGIOUS PATTERN

One of the most intriguing aspects of *Monkey* is its presentation of Chinese religious life. From Heaven to Hell, from the inner chambers of temples to the caves of mountain recluses, from lecherous false priests to devout laymen, *Journey to the West* depicts the full spectrum of the Chinese religious experience during the late imperial period. In this section we will examine the place of China's three main religious traditions (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism) in the cosmology depicted in *Journey to the West*. What we suggest is that in the vision of the Chinese Heaven portrayed in *Monkey*, the three traditions are deeply intertwined in the same cosmology. There are no clear distinctions between them, and the three philosophies work well together. This depiction accurately represents the lived religious experience of everyday Chinese, and provides a healthy antidote to the common perception of Chinese religious traditions as distinct, sometime competing, often contradictory teachings.

Not surprisingly the character Monkey has a central role in the novel. The first seven chapters introduce Monkey and describe how he gained his amazing powers. While the general plot of *Journey to the West* is ostensibly quite Buddhist in orientation, following the pilgrimage of the monk Xuanzang to India to gather Buddhist scriptures, the story begins with the birth of a stone monkey from a stone egg perched high on a mountaintop where, "Ever since Creation began it had been receiving the truth of Heaven, the beauty of Earth, the essence of Sun and the splendor of the Moon."<sup>4</sup> This naturalistic opening is a very Daoist start to the tale.

This magical stone monkey soon becomes king of a tribe of monkeys. The monkeys lived carefree and happily in the mountains until one day the stone Monkey King became sad: "The time will come when we are old and weak. . . . When the time comes for us to die we won't be able to go on living among the Blessed, and our lives will have been in vain." All of the monkeys covered their faces and wept, thinking about death.<sup>5</sup> This Buddhist meditation on the nature of life and death sparks the Monkey King to act.

The Monkey King leaves his tribe and travels the world searching for a way to escape death. Initially, Monkey sets out in search of immortality, a Daoist goal, rather than enlightenment, the Buddhist goal. Soon Monkey finds a Daoist master who teaches him the secrets of immortality, cloud-leaping, the seventy-two transformations, and many other magic powers.

The Jade Emperor, ruler of the Heavenly Empire, hearing of Monkey's mighty powers, offers him a place in the ranks of the Celestial Bureaucracy. The Jade Emperor tricks Monkey into accepting a lowly position as Keeper of the Stables. Nonetheless, Monkey is initially thoroughly satisfied to be part of the celestial apparatus for governing the universe.

This term "Celestial Bureaucracy" may sound oxymoronic, but the fact is, when we examine the Chinese vision of Heaven, the image we are presented with is exactly that of a bureaucracy. Not just any bureaucracy; the Chinese have, since at least 1000 CE, depicted Heaven as an elaborate replica of the imperial bureaucracy that governed on earth. The Jade Emperor who rules in Heaven is commonly depicted wearing the same clothes as a Chinese emperor. He is served by officials who keep accounts, issue decrees, and file papers, just as their counterparts on earth do. Their jobs include everything from soldiers to stable boys to advisors to the Jade Emperor himself. Officials in Heaven can be promoted or demoted, and, like their earthly counterparts, it is often necessary to bribe them to get their help.

In outward appearance, the Chinese pantheon would appear to be arranged in a highly stratified Confucian order, with ranks and proper etiquette structuring the Heavenly Bureaucracy. In reality that is only partially the case. Like Monkey, many of the gods occupying posts in the Heavenly Bureaucracy are believed to have been people (or, in Monkey's case, an ape) who have achieved immortality. Many of these immortals are believed to have once been historical persons. The whole process by which humans ascend to godhood puts us squarely in the realm of Daoism, where one of the primary goals is achieving immortality. Additionally, many of the deities who occupy the highest posts in the Chinese Heaven are anthropomorphized versions of early Daoist deities such as the God of the Pole Star. For example, the God of the City Walls acts as the spiritual district magistrate for a particular geographic region, overseeing lower gods within his jurisdiction. The God of the City Walls was originally an abstract earth god (read Daoist) with power over wild

## A Schematic Metaphor for the Chinese Religious Pattern

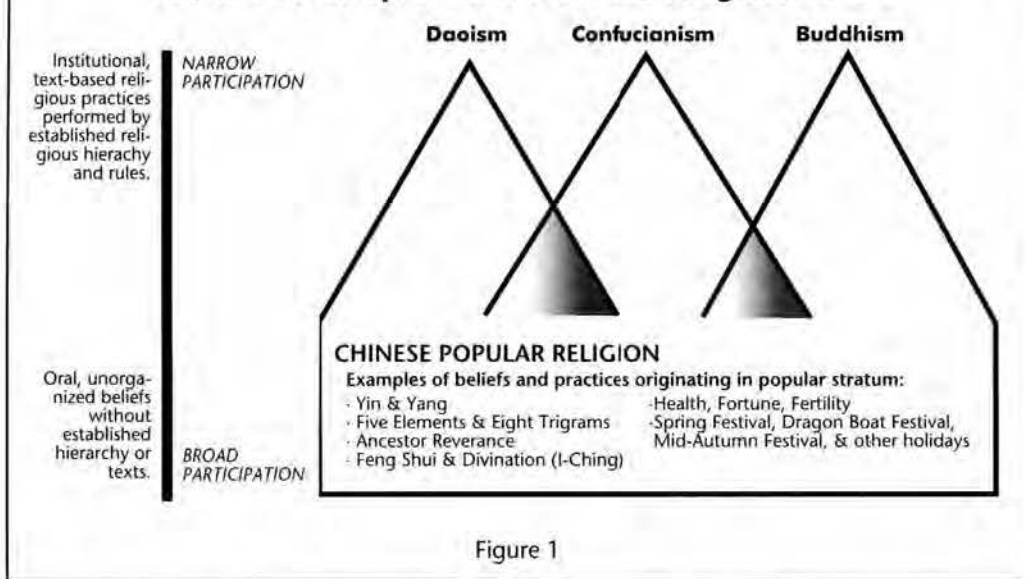


Figure 1

Daoist deities often pop up in Buddhist temples, or in Confucian shrines (and vice versa); why Confucian officials go to their gardens to write Daoist-inspired poetry; and why funerals, even of Confucian scholars or Daoist priests, are often officiated by Buddhist monks. In place of three isolated traditions operating independently within a single culture, we see a broad, decentralized, and internally coherent Chinese religious pattern, the sum of which is greater than Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism taken individually.

The best description of this broadly defined Chinese religious pattern comes from Patricia Ebrey and Peter Gregory's *Religion and Society in Tang and Sung China* (1993).

beasts, disease, and floods who gradually came to resemble in appearance and function an imperial district magistrate. In many regions, the God of the City Walls has been anthropomorphized as the benevolent spirit of a deceased magistrate who selflessly served in the district.<sup>6</sup> This is beginning to get strange. Here we have Confucian bureaucrats becoming Daoist immortals, and Daoist deities parading around Heaven in the uniforms of Confucian bureaucrats, administering over a Celestial Empire.

But back to our story. The ever-mischievous Monkey soon uncovers the trick played on him by Jade Emperor, and so begins Monkey's "Havoc in Heaven." Monkey dupes high-ranking Heavenly officials, steals elixirs of immortality from Laozi himself, and crashes a feast to which the Buddha, the bodhisattva Guanyin, and the many gods of the planets and oceans had been invited. This outrage brings the Monkey King into war with Heaven. Fortified by Laozi's elixirs, Monkey defeats legions of Heavenly soldiers sent to bring him to justice. Even the joint intervention of Guanyin and Laozi is of no avail. Finally the Jade Emperor calls on the Buddha himself for assistance, who is at last able to bring Monkey to heel. For his many misdeeds, the Buddha imprisons Monkey under a mountain, where he is held for 500 years until released by Guanyin to serve as protector of the monk Tripitika on his pilgrimage to India.

In the vision of Heaven portrayed in *Monkey*, Laozi, the Jade Emperor, and the Buddha all operate within a single coherent cosmology. They share feasts together, they counsel one another, and come together to solve common problems. Not only do the three traditions cooperate in Heaven, but on earth too, Monkey calls for peaceful cooperation between the traditions. In Chapter 47 Monkey says: "I hope that you will combine the three teachings by honoring both the Buddhist clergy and the Way of Daoism, and by also educating men of talent in the Confucian tradition. I can guarantee that this will make your kingdom secure forever."<sup>7</sup>

Being a classic of Chinese literature, *Monkey* clearly reflects the lived reality of the Chinese religious experience. The novel would not have endured if its vision of the world and Heaven was fundamentally at odds with everyday Chinese sensibilities. This view of Chinese religious life, in which Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism are seen as complementary practices, helps explain why

*Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism can be pictured as three pyramid-shaped peaks sharing a common mountain base. As the peaks rise out of the same mass of undifferentiated "popular" practice and belief, they begin to take form as discernible traditions. This metaphor should not be construed to mean that the high traditions developed out of the popular tradition—the vertical integration was complex and went both up and down. The higher the peaks rise, the more clearly they were differentiated from the other peaks and the more their ranks narrowed into a professional, literate elite. Conversely as one descends the peaks, the more they merge into the area of popular religious practice that cannot clearly be labeled Buddhist, Daoist, or Confucian.*<sup>8</sup>

With the schematic map of the Chinese religious pattern (see Figure 1), we begin to see a match between the cosmology depicted in *Journey to the West* and the lived religious experience of everyday Chinese.

Many popular practices predate and inform the major traditions. For example, ancestor reverence is typically associated with Confucianism, but in fact, we have evidence of ancestor reverence nearly a thousand years before Confucius lived. The concept of Yin-Yang is generally associated with Daoism, but it too predates Laozi by many hundred years.

Ideas from the peaks can also move downward to inform the popular tradition. For example, karma, reincarnation, and the Chinese image of Hell have washed down from the Buddhist peak, and have become widely accepted across the popular stratum.

Also, we have seen how ideas and practices can move laterally between traditions. The way in which Daoist and Buddhist deities have assumed the trappings of Confucian officials demonstrates this intermingling of traditions.

There are also many practices that do not belong to any of the major traditions, but rather exist only on the popular level. The Chinese New Year and many of its festivities, such as the hanging of door gods and spring couplets, are not Daoist, Confucian, or Buddhist. Yet the New Year is the most important festival of the Chinese calendar.

At the tip of each peak, there are a few people who consider themselves Buddhist, Daoists, or Confucianists. These people are

devoted to the religious institutions and core texts of the faith, such as Buddhist sutras or Confucian classics. The bulk of the population, however, would traditionally participate in activities from across the stratum of Chinese religious life and would not identify themselves exclusively with any of the formal religious institutions: they celebrate births by calling on Daoist priests; honor their parents according to the teachings of Confucius; celebrate the New Year by hanging spring couplets; and are buried by Buddhist monks.

## PART II THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

By far the longest section of the novel focuses on the journey of Tripitaka (Xuanzang) and his companions to India to retrieve Buddhist scriptures. In this journey the author expands the concept of three interacting religious traditions and celebrates aspects of Neo-Confucianism, which dominated the intellectual scene during the Ming Dynasty.

Having released Monkey from imprisonment, the goddess Guanyin assigns him to community service work, helping Tripitaka on his journey to the land of the Buddha's birth. Also aiding Tripitaka—a fretful monk concerned about his own safety and comfort—are Pigsy and Sandy. Pigsy is a slow-witted but lovable pig on the lookout for food and romance when not complaining about being hungry, sleepy, or tired from carrying the party's luggage; Sandy, for his part, is a patient, compassionate fellow monk.

Eighty-one irreverent, satirical, and often hilarious adventures follow. As each chapter unfolds, the pilgrims are happily traveling along with Monkey and Pigsy bantering back and forth, when an obstacle impedes their progress. A fire, a mountain, or a raging river may block their path; often a demon disguised as a beautiful lady bearing goodies lures the travelers off the path. Sometimes the pilgrims are careless, ignore warnings, or argue among themselves. Often a spell traps them, leaving no visible means of escape. Unlike the intrepid historical Xuanzang, the fictional Tripitaka's typical response to difficulties is to break down in tears, lamenting the failure of his quest. He is generally clueless about the dangers they really face. Monkey, who can "see" through most demons' disguises and has a bad reputation for showboating and overzealous cudgeling of anything that gets in his way, often fails to convince his companions how to avoid disaster. Unable to free his companions by himself, Monkey sets off to seek help, often from Guanyin. Thanks to her aid, Monkey's insight, and Pigsy's strength, the pilgrims eventually escape. After a few slaps on the back, the travelers head out on their way again.

Many of the *Monkey* episodes were originally developed for street theater, competing with performances in the next alley. Like episodes in a TV series such as *Friends* or *Seinfeld*, each chapter features the same cast with their familiar quirks; half the fun is seeing what trouble the pilgrims get into this time. Come look, Monkey and Pigsy imitate Daoist immortals and give their urine as an excelsior of immortality. Come see if the White Bone Demon will eat the unfortunate pilgrims. Each episode is presented in high-spirited fun. In fact, as one critic has observed, "Humor is the book's only true god. The book is a temple dedicated to humor."<sup>9</sup>

In this work that is "part history, romantic entertainment, religious meditation, philosophical lucubration, ecclesiastical satire, and, in very large part, hilarious humor,"<sup>10</sup> Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism are all satirized, as is the governing bureaucracy. Selfish monks, too interested in their own pleasures, act foolishly or

sadistically; inept heavenly bureaucrats mix up their files and are easily bribed or intimidated. No one seems too anxious to get to Heaven, and heavenly deities are slow to respond to their devotees' prayers. Outwitting all who stand in their way, the four pilgrims continue on their journey.

*Journey to the West* can be compared to other quest stories such as *Gilgamesh*, the *Aeneid*, or the Arthurian legends. In Western quests, however, the "hero with a thousand faces" is often a single individual who follows an untrod path alone. Rather than accept help, he must break away from dependence on others and achieve self-realization, what psychologists call individuation. By comparison, the quest in *Journey* is a communal affair that requires the pilgrims' cooperation: each one's special talents are essential for the group's success. Although Tripitaka is constantly criticizing his disciples, and Monkey and Pigsy ceaselessly taunt one another, by the end of the journey Monkey admits, "Every one of us is equally indebted to the other."<sup>11</sup> Tripitaka, when asked how he traversed the deserts of Inner Asia, states, "I have three disciples who have helped me over mountains and across rivers, and constantly mounted guard over me. Otherwise I should never have got here."<sup>12</sup>

It is possible to think of the pilgrims' quest as an allegory, with each of the pilgrims representing different aspects of human nature. Tripitaka, the average dim-witted "everyman," is constantly worried about his personal survival. Monkey represents the irrepressible mind that must be controlled. Pigsy stands for the mundane human desires for food, sex, and other pleasures, while Sandy personifies quiet compassion. Combining all these qualities would create a superior, well-balanced person.

What about the goal of the quest? If the goal is really to get Buddhist scriptures, how do we explain why, after all their efforts, the scriptures the Buddha gives them are blank? Thinking perhaps they did not bribe the keeper of the scriptures enough, and angry at the Buddha for allowing his servants to trick them, the pilgrims return to the Buddha and demand the real scriptures. The Buddha replies: "As a matter of fact, it is such blank scrolls as these that are the true scriptures. But I see that the people of China are too foolish and ignorant to believe this," and he instructs his officers to give them copies with some writing on them.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to a pilgrimage for Buddhist scriptures, we can read *Journey* as a quest for self-transformation. As they travel, the pilgrims gradually learn to control both their thoughts and actions, and to let go of their fears, desires, and egos. Initially, Monkey was so irrepressible that Guanyin put a golden band around his head, which Tripitaka could tighten whenever Monkey got too rambunctious. By the time they reach the Buddha's palace, the band had fallen off of its own accord. Not only can Monkey control himself now, he no longer has such a swelled head. By the end, even Pigsy is able to let some goodies pass him by. Furthermore, the pilgrims begin to realize that their troubles are coming from within themselves: their carelessness, their egos, and their desires for earthly pleasures and comforts. As Tripitaka states: "When the mind is active, all kinds of mara (demons) come into existence; when the mind is extinguished, all kinds of mara will be extinguished."<sup>14</sup>

Neo-Confucianism, which flourished during the Ming, identified the effort to transcend attachment to the world and to such things as fame and pleasure as an ongoing process of self-cultivation.<sup>15</sup> *Journey to the West* can help students understand this important aspect of Neo-Confucianism, as well as the way it attempted to blend together the major strains of Chinese philosophical thought

discussed earlier. "Neo-Confucianism," John Fairbank explained, "was drawn from all the major philosophies of the day. It incorporated into the mainstream of Confucianism many ideas of Daoism and Buddhism."<sup>16</sup> All three faiths support the central theme of self-cultivation: Confucianism's emphasis on self-improvement, the Buddhist teaching about stopping desire and the non-self, and understanding the concept of the Dao, all depend on controlling the mind, which the Neo-Confucianist believed comes through the continuous process of self-cultivation.

*Journey to the West* can be read as an allegorical pilgrimage of self-cultivation, a life-long process that leads to changing how one thinks and acts.<sup>17</sup> That explains why Monkey, who had learned how to spring 108,000 leagues in a single somersault, did not just leap to India and bring the scriptures back. The quest itself was key, not simply retrieving the scriptures. Think of *The Wizard of Oz*, another allegorical quest story with similar characters: an intelligent Scarecrow, a compassionate Tin Man, and a courageous Cowardly Lion who conspired to get Dorothy back to Kansas. After Dorothy anxiously watched the balloon leave Oz without her, the Good Witch tells her she has always had the power to go home. All she has to do is click her heels together and say, "There's no place like home." Amazed, Scarecrow asks, "But that's so simple. Why didn't you tell her that before?" "She had to find it out for herself," the Good Witch replies. It was her quest along the Yellow Brick Road that enabled Dorothy to see Kansas and Auntie Em in a new light, maybe even in Technicolor. Like the Chinese pilgrims, Dorothy's quest resulted in a transformation of consciousness.

Chinese religion, with its unique combination of Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhist, Neo-Confucianism, and popular practices, is a challenging topic to teach. Yet given the appeal of *Journey to the West*, making the effort to offer an accurate understanding of the Chinese religious experience need not overwhelm students. The novel provides an engaging way for students to understand the three major traditions and the concept of self-cultivation, and with them, essential insights about Chinese religion and values. Indeed, such a journey into Chinese literature, religion, and culture can be quite enjoyable in the company of Monkey and his fellow pilgrims. This is especially true given the number of versions and formats of the story available for use with students. Refer to the endnotes for excellent materials for bringing *Journey to the West* to your students at a variety of reading levels and in several formats. ■

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Boston Children's Museum "Chinese Shadow Puppets" Kit. This kit provides educators with hands-on material with which to explore Chinese shadow puppets through the story of the Monkey King. A one-act play of one episode of *Journey to the West* is included, as well as fabulous puppets to use in acting out the play.  
[http://www.bostonkids.org/educators/social\\_studies.html#as6](http://www.bostonkids.org/educators/social_studies.html#as6)

Holmes, Meg. *Journey to the West: A Silk Road Play for Grades 4–12*. Watertown, MA: Primary Source, 2001. [www.primarysource.org/library/publications.htm](http://www.primarysource.org/library/publications.htm). This very student-friendly play has been widely used. It depicts one of the more famous episodes of the story in an entertaining manner.

Jenner, W. J. F. (translator). *Journey to the West*. Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2003, volumes 1–3. This is the standard unabridged text, the most complete of versions available in English currently in print, but it is also the most challenging to read. Nonetheless, much of the story can only be read in the Jenner translation.

Jiang, Ji-Li. *The Magical Monkey King: Mischief in Heaven*. Fremont, CA: Shen's Books, 2004. This edition is suitable for upper elementary and lower middle school. This book presents the first seven chapters of *Journey to the West*, in which Monkey gains his magical powers and ascends to Heaven.

Kherdian, David. *Monkey: A Journey to the West*. Boston: Shambala, 2000. An excellent introductory edition of the story for advanced middle school readers or lower level high school readers. Fast-paced style with high comedy value.

Waley, Arthur (translator). *Monkey: A Folk Novel of China*. New York: Grove, 1970. Waley's translation is probably the most literary of the translations, and would be an appropriate choice for advanced level readers. Waley's version preserves accurate and complete translations of a smaller number of episodes than is contained in most other editions. Waley also has a keen ear for the language and humor of the story.

Wang Hsing-pei. *Monkey Subdues the White-Bone Demon*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Fredonia Books, 2001. This is a single episode of the story produced with gorgeous line drawing illustrations. An excellent supplement to any study of *Monkey*.

Yu, Anthony C. *Journey to the West*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977, volumes 1–4. A complete four-volume edition of the text.

## NOTES

1. W. J. F. Jenner (translator). *Journey to the West* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2003), 16.
2. Sally Wiggins. *The Silk Road Journey with Xuanzang* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2003). Sally Wiggins retelling of Xuanzang's journey is an excellent document to use with 7–12 grade students since it contains manageable chunks of the primary source material combined with easier to read prose, good maps, and interesting illustrations.
3. Arthur Waley (translator). *Monkey: A Folk Novel of China* (New York: Grove, 1970), 8.
4. Jenner, 4.
5. Jenner, 14.
6. Anthony Christie, *Chinese Mythology* (New York: Hamlyn Publishing, 1968), 111.
7. Jenner, 283.
8. Patricia Ebrey and Peter Gregory, "The Religious and Historical Landscape" in *Religion and Society in Tang and Sung China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 12.
9. Henry W. Wells, *Traditional Chinese Humor: A Study in Art and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), 177.
10. Wells, 170.
11. Waley, 282.
12. Waley, 250.
13. Waley, 287.
14. Jenner, 283.
15. Tu Wei-ming, review of *Journey to the West*, *History of Religions* 19, no. 2 (November 1979): 183.
16. John K. Fairbank and Edwin O. Reishauer, *East Asia The Great Tradition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), 237.
17. Quoted in *History of Religions* 19, no. 2 (1979): 178.

**RYAN BRADEEN**, Associate Director at Primary Source ([www.primarysource.org](http://www.primarysource.org)) develops professional development programs about East Asia, Africa, and the Middle East for New England educators. Working with the Five College Center for East Asian Studies ([www.smith.edu/fceas/](http://www.smith.edu/fceas/)), Bradeen organizes a National Consortium for Teaching About Asia seminar in Maine. He has created a Web site of educational materials for the study of East Asia at the following Web site: [www.monkeytree.org](http://www.monkeytree.org). Bradeen lives and works in Bangor, Maine.

**JEAN JOHNSON** taught World History for many years at Friends Seminary in New York City. She is co-author of *The Human Drama: A World History, Through Indian Eyes* and the forthcoming *The Spread of Universal Religions: Buddhism, Christianity and Islam*. Johnson has also worked extensively with teachers and school systems around the country to promote Asian Studies.