

## **Journey to the West: Film Analysis**

Seventh-century Buddhist monk Xuan Zang's legendary pilgrimage to India for sacred scriptures aimed to illuminate the path to enlightenment for his homeland. In addition to personal spiritual growth through visiting sacred sites, Xuan Zang sought to fix discrepancies in existing Chinese translations, ultimately contributing to the spread of Buddhism within China as well as pioneering future China-India expeditions. Xuan Zang's journey has been reinterpreted across various media, with contrasting portrayals evident in the fantastical narrative of the 16th-century novel *Journey to the West* and the emotionally driven portrayal in the 2016 film *Xuan Zang*. While *Journey to the West* utilizes fantastical elements to represent spiritual struggles, *Xuan Zang* emphasizes realistic emotions to showcase the human dimension and the challenges Xuan Zang faced. This essay argues that both approaches – the fantastical and the realistic – offer valuable insights into understanding Buddhist history and philosophy.

The 16th century novel *Journey to the West*, written by Wu Cheng'en and based on Xuan Zang's journey, is regarded as one of the best Chinese classics and is arguably the most popular literary work in East Asia. The novel tells the story of "the magnificent journey of a monk and his three companions to go from China to India to seek sacred scriptures" (Films Media Group). However, this is where the similarities with Xuan Zang's journey end. The novel contains fantastical elements that the monk and his three companions must deal with in their journey, including demons that Tang Sanzang (Xuan Zang) must bypass, and powerful deities that aid him in his quest. One of Tang Sanzang's companions, and arguably the most popular character in the novel, is the Monkey King, whose powers include transforming into 72 different animals, control of the elements, and superhuman physical abilities. These fantastical elements help make

the story more exciting and relatable to a wider audience. According to the documentary about the novel, "...[one] can look at it from the spiritual point of view, and [one] can draw all sorts of lessons about...living and our relationship to the temporal world from it. And then on the other side of the spectrum, it's a really good adventure story." (Films Media Group). Wu's inclusion of these elements had an immense effect on the novel's popularity and helped spread the account of Xuan Zang's journey to many more people than if he had simply written a biography. However, these elements also likely obscured the historical context and hardships that Xuan Zang faced. By representing Xuan Zang's challenges as purely fictional monsters and demons, the actual dangers of his journey – treacherous mountain passes, unforgiving deserts, and political intrigue – are lost. We don't get a sense of the physical and mental fortitude required to undertake such a pilgrimage in the real world.

Although the fantastical elements in *Journey to the West* may not be historically accurate, Wu uses them for more than just simple entertainment. Each creature in *Journey to the West* corresponds to a metaphor for a central theme in Buddhist philosophy. Tang Sanzang's encounters with demons are both obstacles that he has to surpass and representations of his internal struggle on his path to enlightenment. For example, the seductive allure of the Seven Spider Demons is a metaphor for the dangers of earthly desires and attachments, testing Tang Sanzang's commitment to his spiritual pursuit. Likewise, the Bull Demon King symbolizes the destructive power of anger, a challenge Tang Sanzang must overcome to achieve true inner peace. By employing these fantastical elements, Wu not only broadens the novel's appeal, but allows readers to connect with these complex Buddhist themes on a personal level. Therefore,

the fantastical elements in *Journey to the West* can become an easy-to-use framework in which one can work through their internal struggles.

While *Journey to the West* depicts Tang Sanzang confronting the physical manifestations of his inner demons, the 2016 film *Xuan Zang* offers a more nuanced perspective of the eponymous character's emotional landscape. *Xuan Zang* paints its character as someone who thirsts for knowledge, enough to embark on a cross-country trek to learn more about himself and his religion. When asked by his disciple if he knows where India is, Xuan Zang replies that it is "in [his] heart...Except for the road ahead [he] knows nothing and sees nothing." (Xuan Zang). Desire is the only thing that drives him forward on his pilgrimage. At times, he has to resort to eating cold gruel on the side of the road. When asked how he does not give up, Xuan Zang replies, "I think only of Buddha and of the texts I'll find in Sidhu."

However, *Xuan Zang* also illustrates the disadvantages of having desire -- potential impatience or attachment to a specific outcome can lead to suffering. An example is when Xuan Zang is talking to a monk at the "temple of his dreams" in Sidhu, India. When the monk is talking to Xuan Zang, he says that, "When the good person faces death they are freed from torment and desire. When the bad face death they are haunted by what awaits them." (Xuan Zang). This line encapsulates one of the film's central messages: one can only achieve true peace when they let go of all earthly desires. Xuan Zang's journey is also a metaphor for this message: not only must he overcome external challenges, he must also inhibit his own desires for instant gratification to achieve his goal of getting the scriptures from India. This emphasis of having no worldly desires is central to the Buddhist concept of the Middle Way -- by letting go of

attachment, individuals can better avoid the extremes of indulgence and denial, which can lead to suffering in the future.

It's important to note that Xuan Zang's journey in the film is not only about conquering external desires -- *Xuan Zang* also portrays the crippling nature of fear and how it can block one's path to enlightenment. One of the more powerful scenes in this film exemplifies this struggle -- Xuan Zang's near-death experience in the Gobi Desert. As he is slowly dying of thirst, physical manifestations of his fear start to appear around him -- the "invisible demons". However, Xuan Zang escapes certain death thanks to his previous good deeds; he gave the rest of his meager water supply to his horse, and the horse repays him by bringing him to an oasis where he can quench his thirst.

This selfless act displays a core tenet of Buddhist philosophy -- acceptance in the impermanence of all things. Through giving the rest of his water to his horse and hastening his own demise, Xuan Zang accepts the impermanence of his own life and conquers his own fear. This is a crucial step towards achieving true inner peace.

The contrasting portrayals of Xuan Zang's journey in *Journey to the West* and *Xuan Zang* both offer valuable insights into understanding Buddhist history and philosophy. *Journey to the West's* use of fantastical creatures to portray internal struggles brings Xuan Zang's story and Buddhist teachings to a wider audience, while *Xuan Zang's* emphasis on the emotional toll of such a journey makes it more relatable. Through their contrasting approaches, both works remind

people of the importance of non-attachment, facing challenges with courage, and accepting life's impermanence.

### Works Cited

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