

Monkey King

by Wu Cheng'en



A #DISRUPTTEXTS EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

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WHAT IS #DISRUPTTEXTS?

#DisruptTexts is a crowdsourced, grassroots effort by teachers for teachers to challenge the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve. Cofounded by Tricia Ebarvia, Lorena Germán, Dr. Kimberly N. Parker, and Julia E. Torres, #DisruptTexts' mission to aid and develop teachers committed to antiracist/antibias teaching pedagogy and practices.

There are four core principles to #DisruptTexts:

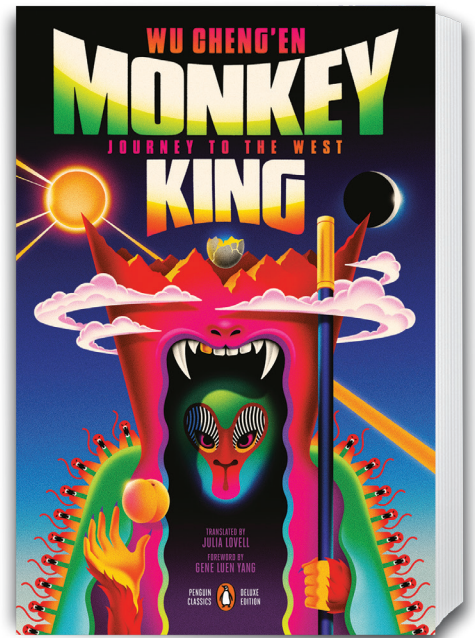
- 1. Continuously interrogate our own biases and how they inform our thinking.** As teachers, we have been socialized in certain values, attitudes, and beliefs that inform the way we read, interpret, and teach texts, and the way we interact with our students. Ask: How are my own biases affecting the way I'm teaching this text and engaging with my students?
- 2. Center Black, Indigenous, and voices of color in literature.** Literature study in U.S. classrooms has largely focused on the experiences of white (and male) dominated society, as perpetuated through a traditional, Eurocentric canon. Ask: What voices—authors or characters—are marginalized or missing in our study? How are these perspectives authentic to the lived experiences of communities of color?
- 3. Apply a critical literacy lens to our teaching practices.** While text-dependent analysis and close reading are important skills for students to develop, teachers should also support students in asking questions about the way that such texts are constructed. Ask: How does this text support or challenge issues of representation, fairness, or justice? How does this text perpetuate or subvert dominant power dynamics and ideologies? And how can we ask students to wrestle with these tensions?
- 4. Work in community with other antiracist educators, especially Black, Indigenous, and other educators of color.** To disrupt and transform curriculum and instruction requires working with other educators who can challenge and work with us as antiracist educators. Ask: How can we collaborate to identify, revise, or create instructional resources (like this guide) that can center and do justice to the experiences of historically marginalized communities?

Each principle stands for actions that are culturally sustaining and antiracist. Through each principle, teachers aim to offer a curriculum that is restorative, inclusive, and therefore works toward healing identities and communities. As you read this guide, you'll see how each of these principles informs the approach recommended to teach Wu Cheng'en's *Monkey King: Journey to the West*.

ABOUT THE BOOK

A shape-shifting trickster on a kung-fu quest for eternal life, Sun Wukong, or Monkey King, is one of the most memorable superheroes in world literature, known to legions of fans of the most popular anime of all time, *Dragon Ball*, and the world's largest e-sport, the video game *League of Legends*. High-spirited and omni-talented, he amasses dazzling weapons and skills on his journey to immortality, whether it's a gold-hooped staff that can grow as tall as the sky and shrink to the size of a needle or the ability to travel 108,000 miles in a single somersault. A master of subterfuge, he can transform himself into whomever or whatever he chooses and turn each of his body's 84,000 hairs into an army of clones. But his penchant for mischief repeatedly gets him into trouble, and when he raids Heaven's Orchard of Immortal Peaches and gorges himself on the elixirs of the gods, the Buddha pins him beneath a mountain, freeing him only five hundred years later for a chance to redeem himself: He is to protect the pious monk Tripitaka on his fourteen-year journey to India in search of precious Buddhist sutras that will bring enlightenment to the Chinese empire.

Joined by two other fallen immortals—Piggy, a rice-loving pig able to fly with its ears, and Sandy, a depressive man-eating river-sand monster—Monkey King undergoes eighty-one trials, doing battle with Red Boy, Princess Jade-Face, the Monstress Dowager, and all manner of dragons, ogres, wizards, and *femmes fatales*, navigating the perils of Fire-Cloud Cave, the River of Flowing Sand, the Water-Crystal Palace, and Casserole Mountain, and being serially captured, lacquered, sautéed, steamed, and liquefied, but always hatching an ingenious plan to get himself and his fellow pilgrims out of their latest jam.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Monkey King: Journey to the West is a masterpiece that brings the reader into a travelogue filled with mysteries, challenges, and Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist thought, while revealing the expansive geographical and cultural extent of ancient China, which is still relevant today. The big idea for readers to contemplate is humanity's pride, which inhibits the development and progression of individuals whose main goal is to reach their highest potential in the service of mankind. Though it isn't necessary for teachers to teach all Buddhist, Daoist, and Taoist principles, it may be helpful for readers to have basic ideas of what these schools of thought entail.

The characters, both humans and anthropomorphized (human-like) animals, are an example of interweaving fact and fiction, enabling the reader to dream and to interpret for themselves the morals and ethics of this timeless story. The story's significance crosses and conflates historical, religious, and literary traditions. Animals as characters are not a common characteristic in Chinese classics, so *Monkey King* stands out in this way. Additionally, the animal characters, with human-like characteristics, are more symbolic than literal. In some ways, the animal form is like a facade, intended to remind readers of human foils, foibles, and, foremost, humanity's responsibility to each other and the natural world.

The theme of friendship is one worth noting and contemplating. In many ways, Monkey and his companions' journey mirrors the reader's journey, as we navigate the trials and triumphs of our lives. Victory is the reward for those that are honest, humble, and hardworking. However, rather than framing the story as a morality tale or heroic story, it is perhaps best to think of it as an opportunity for readers to reflect on what it might mean to live up to one's highest potential. What barriers exist to humans discovering and achieving their highest purpose? Who, if given extraordinary tasks or in the company of extraordinary companions, chooses to use their talents for the betterment of others? How and why do they choose and what is the outcome?

Along with the more esoteric aspects of this tale, readers should consider the many modern-day parallels found in manga and anime. Some of the Eastern world's most beloved characters, storylines, themes, and even supernatural beings have their foundations in this story. They are as recognizable for the

Eastern world as Medusa and tales of the Golden Fleece are to those from the West. From its beginnings in sixteenth-century China, *Monkey King: Journey to the West* has endured, being made and remade in various forms for generations of people. Readers should take the time to read this edition's foreword by Eugene Yang and consider other authors whose works might be read to expand knowledge of Chinese classics.

A few of these are:

Cao Xueqin (<https://prhlink.com/caoxueqin>)

Luo Guanzhong (<https://prhlink.com/luoguanzhong>)

Shi Nai'an (<https://prhlink.com/shinaian>)

Consider the following resources:

The Big Myth - Chinese Creation Myth and Cultural Resources (<https://prhlink.com/2chinesefull>)

Daoism | Asia Society (<https://prhlink.com/daoism>)

Websites & Links - The National Consortium for Teaching About Asia (<https://prhlink.com/nctasiareources>)

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

1. What does the interaction between Buddhist, Taoist, and Daoist principles reveal about human nature and the human condition?
2. What information does the Monkey King's journey give us about the individual's responsibility to society?
3. How does power and pride corrupt the individual and the community?
4. What aspects of the natural world do we see in human societies?
5. What must happen for an individual to live up to their highest potential?
6. How does the novel's structure enhance/detract from the narrative?
7. How do triumphs and challenges build character?
8. How does *Monkey King* serve as political satire and religious allegory?
9. How might your view on life change if you were omnipotent and immortal?

10. What role does the passing of time play in shaping the narrative and the characters themselves?

THEMES:

- **Religious harmony:** Buddhist, Taoist, and Daoist thought interacts with one other in a harmonious way for the benefit of the individual and society. Despite promoting distinct pathways and principles, their interaction does not obstruct the development and choice of the individual.
- **Pride:** Pride is a human condition that requires a process of erring, realization, and redemption.
- **Individual and society:** The seeming conflict between self and society could be resolved through personal choices made by the empowered individual.
- **Transformation:** Throughout the course of the novel, Sun Wukong transforms several times. Try to take note of the different emotional and psychological states he embodies and what causes them. What is the connection between his physical state and the tasks he must undertake?
- **Family:** At various times, Sun Wukong develops connections with others that mirror those that individuals in Chinese societies have historically had with family, community, society, and the world. It is important for readers to reflect on the family unit, and units of extended family that may sometimes include friends or “found family,” and the way that they appear in *Monkey King*, as well as in our own lives.
- **Sacrifice:** Throughout the journey, Wukong and others in the story experience loss and have to make sacrifices. As readers consider the physical and emotional losses principal characters make, it is recommended they look for connections between sacrifice and personal growth both in life and along the fictional journey.
- **Heroism:** At various times throughout history, Wukong has been depicted as hero, trickster, romantic icon, and an individual that reflects the spirit and soul of various Chinese ideologies. Readers might analyze heroic traits as they manifest in *Monkey King* and consider ways they appear in modern society, then compare and contrast the two.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How does Monkey's journey compare to that of other epic heroes you may have heard of?
2. How does pride become a human weakness? How could pride become a strength?
3. What responsibilities do individuals have to the social and natural world?
4. What connections can you find between Monkey's physical and spiritual transformations?
5. When Monkey says, "I am the Great Sage Equal to Heaven, you know," "The party won't be the same without me," (p. 51) and other such statements, why do you suppose his character is imbued with such charisma and confidence?
6. What do you think motivates each character to make the choices they make?
7. How are Tripitaka and Monkey alike? How are they different? What makes them perfect companions for one another?
8. Consider collectivism versus individualism as concepts. How does Monkey usually solve problems or get himself out of misadventures? Compare this with tales of heroism in Western society.
9. How does Monkey transform before and after his journey with Tripitaka begins? How might this transformation mirror a Buddhist spiritual enlightenment?
10. Reflect on the idea of "Revenge first, long-term life plans second." (p.191) Do you agree? Why or why not?
11. What parts of the story do you find lighthearted and fun? Why do you think it might be useful to include such elements in a story that is part morality tale, part religious tome, and part political satire?
12. What do you think about the fact that Monkey has omnipotent powers? Is this a true help or a hindrance to the development of his character? How might this affect your spiritual growth?
13. What do you think it means that Monkey and Goku (*Dragon Ball*) are so similar? How is this a reflection of the story's ability to endure and remain fresh at the same time?

14. Do you think the appearance of godlike figures such as Buddha and Laozi detract from or add to the story? What do you think about the blending of spiritualism, historical fiction, and mythology?
15. Does the comedic nature of the story lighten scenes of violence or make them less realistic or believable? Do you think there should be content warnings for the story's modern audiences?
16. Fables are meant to teach lessons and help us reflect on causality between our choices and life events. Keeping that in mind, what do you think of these words about Monkey: "With discipline, he might become a force for supernatural good; without it, he was pure animal—a wrecking ball in Heaven"? (p. 68)
17. What do you think of the stylistic choice to phrase lessons as questions, such as asking, "Can a dried fish serve as a cat's pillow?" (p. 276) in regard to a lesson about resisting temptation. Does language like this work for you as a reader?
18. Much time has passed since the 1590s. Given the fact that you are a twenty-first-century reader, do you think of this version of *Monkey King* as more entertaining or informational? Why?
19. What do you think the quote, "Monkey now produced his staff and the two of them did their best to kill each other, like the affectionate in-laws they were," (p. 284) is communicating about family relationships? Do you agree or disagree?
20. *Monkey King* alternates between very apparent humor and more subtle messaging told through irony and satirical references. Do you think the story is equally enjoyable if you miss the irony and satirical parts? Why or why not?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

1. Make a chart of the three distinct ideologies that are influential in the creation of *Monkey King*—Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Record basic information about each ideology and look for quotes in your reading that connect to each one. You may choose to use the following graphic organizer:

| Ideology | Four central concepts or foundational ideas | Key figure + characteristics (e.g. Buddha) | Quote from <i>Monkey King: Journey to the West</i> | What I think about it |
|---------------------|---|--|--|-----------------------|
| Confucianism | | | | |
| Taoism | | | | |
| Buddhism | | | | |

2. Opposites often attract and learn a lot from one another. Make a Venn diagram and brainstorm words to describe the two characters, Tripitaka and Monkey. Their characters are deliberately compared and contrasted throughout their journey together. Do you have a best friend or companion in your life like Monkey or Tripitaka? Create a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting your personality traits as well.
3. Map the hierarchical structure of the court of the [Ming government](https://prhlink.com/mingdynasty) (<https://prhlink.com/mingdynasty>) onto that of the Celestial Court in *Monkey King*. What do you notice? What do you wonder?
4. An important part of understanding China's hierarchical social structure includes recognizing traditional emphasis on *self-improvement* through education. Research the educational system in modern China and compare it to the way Monkey attains his knowledge. What do you think about experiential versus traditional learning? Create a short vlog or other social media post explaining your ideas about learning through adventure and experience or traditional structures and how one's educational experience might impact the organization of society.

For more information on social hierarchies in China, check out these additional resources:

Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World on JSTOR (<https://prhlink.com/jstor>)

A Guide to Social Class in Modern China | ChinaFile (<https://prhlink.com/chinasocialclass>)

5. In *Monkey King*, the journey emphasizes the benefit of ending attachment to things like fame and money, which grant social status but also lead to corruption. Considering this idea, collect quotes as you read and create a flip-book or children's picture book illustrating the lessons or moral teachings communicated through the story. You may alternatively create a book trailer using Animoto, choosing images that reveal not only the action that happens in the story but its underlying messages, too. For help creating books, check out bookcreator.com.
6. Trace Monkey's transformation from trickster to hero as you search for and watch various versions of the story. Create annotated images, a Google Slides presentation, or any other form of media to illustrate the change. Try to analyze and explain why it might serve a creator (or the government) to depict him in various ways.
7. Why do you suppose China chose Monkey as the mascot for the 2008 Olympics, sharing his story worldwide with BBC Sport's *Monkey Movie* (<https://prhlink.com/monkeymovie>)? Debate with peers why Monkey may or may not have been the best choice for a national hero story shown to international audiences.
8. Pick a period in Chinese history from [this timeline](https://prhlink.com/chinatimeline) (<https://prhlink.com/chinatimeline>) and after 1600. Research the major events, people, and political or artistic movements that happened during that time. What parallels can you find between the Monkey King's journey and the time period you chose to research? Make an illustrated timeline to present your findings with events from *Monkey King* on one side and historical events on the other.
9. *Monkey King* is an origin story that has spawned so many other stories, including *One Piece*, *Naruto*, *Dragon Ball*, and many others. Find one other story, video, cartoon, manga, movie, or television series, then read or watch it and create a visual representation of your findings using Prezi or another presentation format that you like.

Consider these additional resources:

Watch *The New Legends of Monkey* | Netflix Official Site (<https://prhlink.com/monkeylegends>)

Dragon Ball Wiki (<https://prhlink.com/dragonball>)

Naruto Wiki (<https://prhlink.com/naruto>)

10. Create your own short trailer with music for a part of the tale that you found particularly inspiring. You might choose to include animated clips from anime or other movie versions of the story. There are many examples on YouTube if you need inspiration!

JOURNAL PROMPTS:

1. Put yourself in the shoes of Monkey King: Write in your diary about your journey following the same adventures. Choose just one adventure and rewrite it in the first person, as though you are Wukong.
2. Create a map of Monkey King's journey, or one part of the journey that you find especially impactful. Include direction marks, landscape features, and any other pertinent details. Perhaps draw a dotted line to trace his steps and an "X marks the spot" for where his journey ends in an especially significant encounter. You might use Google Maps if you like.
3. Write a monologue for Monkey King (or another character) depicting one scene. A monologue is a few lines of dialogue written from the first-person perspective of a central character. Make sure to include your understanding of his emotions and thoughts.
4. Write a journal entry infusing your own daily experience with an animal or plant that has magical properties. How might your day change? How would you change if you were omnipotent?

STANDARDS:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2


CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.7

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