

The Monkey King: An Overview

Sun Wukong, also known as the Monkey King, is a mythological figure who features in a body of legends, which can be traced back to the period of the Song dynasty. He appears as a main character in the 16th century Chinese classical novel *Journey to the West* (西游记). Sun Wukong is also found in many later stories and adaptations. In the novel, he is a monkey born from a stone who acquires supernatural powers through Taoist practices. After rebelling against heaven and being imprisoned under a mountain by the Buddha, he later accompanies the monk Xuanzang on a journey to retrieve Buddhist sutras from "the West".

Sun Wukong possesses immense strength; he is able to lift extraordinary weight with his staff with ease. He is also extremely fast, able to travel more than half way around the world in one somersault. Sun knows 72 transformations, which allow him to transform into various animals and objects; however, he is troubled in transforming into other forms, due to the accompanying incomplete transformation of his tail. Sun Wukong is a skilled fighter, capable of defeating the best warriors of heaven. Each of his hairs possess magical properties, capable of being transformed into clones of the Monkey King himself, and/or into various weapons, animals, and other objects. He knows spells to command wind, part water, conjure protective circles against demons, and freeze humans, demons, and gods alike.

One of the most enduring Chinese literary characters, Sun Wukong has a varied background and colorful cultural history. Sun Wukong's origin is from the White Monkey legends from the Chinese Chu kingdom (700–223 BC), who revered gibbons and especially white-colored ones. These legends gave rise to stories and art motifs during the Han dynasty, eventually contributing to the rise of the Sun Wukong figure. Sun Wukong was initially developed as a Taoist immortal before being incorporated into Buddhist myths. He is also considered by some scholars to be influenced by elements of both Chinese folklore and the Hindu deity Hanuman from the *Ramayana*.