

**On having “class” in a sea of circumstances**  
**The Monkey-king Sun Wu-Kong’s role in The Journey to the West**

This essay is based on a public presentation given at the research seminar in Sinology at the University of Stockholm on November 28th, 1984, and an earlier version of it was published in the November 1988 issue of the Swedish Journal of Oriental Studies.

**Introduction**

The Journey to the West was written in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Wu Cheng-En, the story clearly having been based on numerous previous accounts of how the protagonist, the Monkey-king Sun Wu-Kong (Sun “who perceives emptiness”) assisted the monk Tripitaka in traveling to India, in fetching the Buddhist Holy Scriptures there and in bringing them back to China; the manner in which the story is presented, on the other hand, is original, ambitious, and pleasantly “far out”.

The main bulk of the novel (chapters 8 and 9 and 13-99 out of 100) consists of a series of adventures and strange escapades, involving all sorts of supernatural creatures. These adventures constitute the 81 “ordeals”<sup>1</sup> that had been pre-ordained for Tripitaka and his party, of which some are, chosen at random, Ordeal 25: “Being hung high at Lotus-flower cave”, Ordeal 47: “The road blocked at the Mountain of flames” and Ordeal 70: “The problem of leaving the Dharma-destroying kingdom”.

---

<sup>1</sup> nán

Now in his famous translation, Arthur Waley left out a large portion of the 81 ordeals, which is to some extent understandable since one can detect no development of character or plot in the entire sequence (with a notable exception which will be discussed later); according to A.C. Yu, Hu Shi once said of the *Journey to the West* that “it is a book...of profound nonsense”<sup>2</sup>, and he mentions that Lu Xun and others have been of a similar opinion.

At this point one naturally begins to wonder if one hasn't missed some more subtle connection between all these events, and not least because the 81 ordeals consist of strange situations arising seemingly out of nowhere I believe that the thesis that they can be interpreted as representing “circumstances” is a tenable one. I'm not suggesting that Wu Cheng-En had any such explicit intention, but in general it seems to me that the concept of circumstances has a very important place in the Chinese soul: it sums up nothing less than the flow and momentum of events, in other words both the “logic” and real power in all the changes and fluctuations in fortune and influence (a subject very close to the Chinese mind and heart!), and in phenomena in general, that give life its fascinating variety.

There is, however, a more sinister aspect to all of this, namely that the “fascinating variety” (above) very often takes the form of excruciatingly unfair and unjust configurations of circumstances characterized by refined and gratuitous cruelty: circumstances thus more or less define what wrongness is—and rightness, except that this configuration of circumstances occurs much less often—in a far more powerful way than our abstractions can; instead of facing up to this, however, in a great many cases we seem to prefer, for all sorts of reasons, to nit-pick, split

---

<sup>2</sup> Introduction to The Journey to the West, Chicago: Chicago University Press,

hairs and play useless mind games. All this plays right into the hands of the “creep” (one of no “class”) whose “contribution” to the world is to exacerbate an already bad situation and whose modus operandi is to sabotage the proper and authentic interpretation of circumstances.

### **Part 1: The Power of Circumstances**

By definition, circumstances are “events”, “factors” or “details” surrounding other events with respect to which the circumstances have a secondary and subordinate status, despite having some sort of deciding or conditioning power over the other, primary, events. The first problem, therefore, is to determine the nature of this “influence”<sup>3</sup>, which in Chinese terminology also means circumstances, momentum (see introduction!) and the power of circumstances. It seems clear that circumstances mean something more than mere “context”, but can hardly mean “cause”, at least not in any usual sense; very tentatively, one could say that “influence” refers to something in between context and cause (here I should perhaps reiterate that “circumstances” and “influences” are more or less interchangeable, as shown by the Chinese terminology).

Now since the 81 ordeals were pre-ordained, and since, furthermore, “there is not one sup nor bite that is not pre-ordained”<sup>4</sup>, it might seem that here we have the “subtle connection” that was sought after above (see introduction). Unfortunately, however, the idea that every little detail would have to be fixed to make the 81 ordeals what they are, or indeed

---

1977-79, p.35

<sup>3</sup> shì

<sup>4</sup> A phrase used a few times in the Journey to the West, for example Yu, Vol. 2, p.228

exist at all, is not very subtle, and needs to be considerably improved upon if we are to understand what influences are all about. To start out with, one can observe that the system of influences is in a constant flux, so that a change in one circumstance might very well change some or all of the others, and vice-versa, in other words the system of influences is “complex” (a word that I almost hesitate to use!), but above and beyond this it seems that we often can’t tell which is the primary event and which are the influences, and that these sometimes even seem to shift back and forth.

Instead of the idea that “there is not one sup nor bite that is not pre-ordained” I would like to propose a “solution” based on the following analogy: just as emptiness<sup>5</sup> is a condition for causality and change, so is the contingency of circumstances a condition for the so-called sufficient reason for a certain situation (for every statement or state of affairs there must be a sufficient reason why it should be so and not otherwise: sufficient reason is normally postulated as a principle applicable to contingent truths). Now in the same way as the first statement (on emptiness) may seem strange, since one wonders: if everything is empty, then what is it that changes what to what?, so may the analogy seem strange, since one wonders: if everything is contingent, how can there be a “reason” at all for anything?, but both these objections are invalid, and for the same reasons.

If we recall what was said “very tentatively” about influences being something in between context and cause, it is extremely important to observe that in Buddhist philosophy it is the (supposedly) secondary cause<sup>6</sup> which, if anything, has priority over the (supposedly) primary

---

<sup>5</sup> kōng; Sanskrit s’ūnyatā

<sup>6</sup> yuán; Sanskrit pratyaya

cause<sup>7</sup>. A.C. Yu defines the secondary cause (sometimes rendered as “affinity” in English) as the “the conditional or circumstantial causality that gives rise to all the phenomena in the world”<sup>8</sup>. The double term yīn-yuán is the Chinese rendering of the Sanskrit “pratitya-samutpada”, which is translated to English as “dependent arising” or “dependent co-origination”. In Buddhist philosophy, a thing “arises” when all the right conditions are in place; in this connection it is interesting to note that “conditions” are defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “circumstances, especially those necessary for a thing’s existence”.

If we now try to relate the 81 ordeals to the analogy that was proposed above, we could say that both the 81 ordeals and circumstances are indeed “profound nonsense” (see introduction!) and that the sufficient reason of the 81 ordeals is that they arose at all, seeing that everything could have been different. Now this may seem trivial or even like nonsense since one thinks: once one can observe that something exists, then anyone can see that the alternatives disappeared along the way, the question remains for what reason, if any, did things turn out as they did? One of the profound points of Buddhist philosophy, however, is that there is a very high level of ontological equivalence between the virtual and the actual, which is what I was getting at above when I mentioned the apparent shifting back and forth of primary events and influences. Bluntly put—and the following is my interpretation, by the way—one could say that everything, the possibilities which arise as well as the possibilities that don’t, exists virtually, except that the former do so with more power, encompass more possibilities, essentially, and it will be recognized that this implies that the notions of possibilities “from” the past and possibilities “for” the future are collapsed together.

---

<sup>7</sup> yīn

<sup>8</sup> Journey to the West, Yu, Vol. 4, note p.434

Now the definition of “virtual” is “which exists in a state of possibility, which contains within itself all the necessary conditions for its existence” (Oxford English Dictionary), and it seems that we might have a contradiction between this and the idea of emptiness, which is of central importance in Buddhism and which means more or less that nothing exists in itself, even the highest reality of “The Unconditioned” or “Suchness”<sup>9</sup>. The truth is that we do indeed have here a form of “existential contradiction” (for lack of a better term!), but that it is one which is essential to the system.

### **Part 2: The interpretation of circumstances**

Given the nature of existence as described above, as an ocean of shifting “influences”, one can see that it might not be that easy to orientate oneself in it, and to take any kind of sensible, let alone correct, action. It is unfortunately also a fact that this state of affairs offers untold opportunities to those who would abuse its (supposed) unclearness for their own base purposes. The situation also offers untold possibilities for self-deception, especially with regard to one’s own place in the scheme of things, the latter being, on the other hand, not without finesse: according to the laws of Karma (on deeds and their causally bound effects), wrong actions will return to the perpetrator in equally untold ways!

Now just as the terms nobility and baseness are preferable to good and evil, since they are more subtle as well as more informative, so are the terms classiness and creepiness superior to nobility and baseness for the same reasons. The terms classiness and creepiness are thus more refined and more sophisticated than nobility and baseness even if they

---

<sup>9</sup> zhēn rú

may appear to be somewhat, let's say, vivid, and indeed they have been deliberately selected for their power, damn it! It would be missing the point completely and utterly to "object" that moral judgements need to be "nuanced": if there were, in theory, any individuals entertaining this "objection" (since I don't for one moment imagine that there actually are any such individuals among my esteemed readers) they would immediately have to return to the last paragraph of the introduction.

This having been said, anyone who has any class one will "take the plunge" and try to "interpret circumstances correctly", by which I mean something active, in other words to try and make the best of every situation and do something constructive. The creep's behaviour, on the other hand, is highly destructive, and I deliberately use the term "creep" because it is outrageous to see the atrocities that are the consequence of shorter or longer series of self-deceptions (for which there is therefore no excuse). Now it's bad enough that the creep is deluding himself, but since he is obviously trying to delude everyone else as well, I thought I might expose the mechanism behind the bluff, since the way to deal with a creep is, precisely, to call his bluff, and fortunately it should always be possible to do this.

It seems to me most strange that the term "interpretation" should itself be consistently misinterpreted to imply that 1) to interpret something one must have an "interpreting key" or yardstick to serve as a "basis for judgement", that 2) there is no such key available, or at least not an absolute one, and that 3) since the opposite cannot be proved, then any interpreting-key one cares to choose is as good as any other! Now it may very well be that there is no absolute yardstick, and it follows from what was said earlier that it is hard if not impossible to find one anywhere, but to reject in principle the existence of such a yardstick just in order to be

able to invent one's own—and also for no good reason attribute it to the world!<sup>10</sup>—is characteristic of what could be called “not science, not art, just bad metaphysics”, besides being plain hypocritical.

Furthermore, it isn't even true that one needs any yardstick or interpreting-key to start out with: one can actually define “class” as a combination of bigness and elegance that in practice manifests itself as the ability to manage and handle a situation without having to hide behind an interpreting-key! This is achieved through style (often confused with class), which is the operative principle in class-- and an active principle! It's the ability to combine any action at all with the reasons for doing it (in other words the answer “Why just this action?” is answered), and is therefore clearly related to sufficient reason and by definition must bear witness of itself.

Now even a creep can do things in such a way that the reasons for him so doing are plain—but in a perverse sense: the creep is obviously not trying to say anything or to exert a positive influence, rather he is exhibiting a kind of shamelessness whereby he thinks he can manipulate a situation by avoiding its point or cutting edge, and the unfortunate fact of the matter is that he can temporarily get away with it. Ultimately, however, his endeavour must fail because he is grossly deluding himself regarding his own position in the situation, often with utterly ridiculous results! It is for these reasons that a person with “class” is both generous, solid and able to handle transitions with ease, while a “creep” is rigid and obstinate yet shifting and twisting in a capricious and opportunistic manner.

---

<sup>10</sup> For example, in the form of some sickeningly hypocritical justification of the disgusting practice of “female circumcision” based on some crackpot theory that women don't know what they “really need” to be/remain “pure”...



To “interpret” a situation or set of circumstances thus requires that one perceive the influences properly and position oneself properly in them and influence the system in a positive direction, all this with a certain stylistic power. The “problem” when it comes to judging interpretations is not at all that we can never “prove” which interpretation is better...in reality it’s the person with bad style who adopts an interpreting-key--and not even a very good one!--thereby perverting the opportunities presented by the lack of an absolute interpreting-key. A “powerful style” is the only “proof” there is or that is necessary! Essentially what the creep is doing is cheating: it is vital to see that “wrong” in this system means essentially gratuitous or unearned, and this is a major issue because it must be recognized that ultimately the root of all evil is to try and get something for nothing.

### **Part 3: Sun Wu-Kong’s remarkable “career”**

As A.C. Yu explains<sup>11</sup>, the origin of the Monkey-king figure is still a matter of controversy, as is, presumably, his role in The Journey to the West; now I mentioned in the introduction that there was a “notable exception” to the apparent lack of any development of character or plot in the entire work, and it was the Monkey-king’s “career” with its different phases that I was alluding to, and which makes his role highly interesting.

At the beginning of his career, during the very first trials, up to his famous “show-down” with the Buddha in Chapter 12, Sun Wu-Kong goes around making a lot of noise, creates a lot of “negative stress” for all those around him, and in general acts in an idiotic manner. He is, on the other hand, completely unaware of what a pain he is, on the contrary he

---

<sup>11</sup> Yu, introduction, pp.8-11

has great pretensions and thinks himself to be extremely capable and wonderful! At the beginning of his career, one could probably say that Sun Wu-Kong is a “creep”, but he isn’t a real bastard, and can probably still be “saved”. It is very important not to misinterpret this as somehow implying that “bastardness” is more basic than, or has “precedence of depravity” over, “creepiness”: it is the latter that eventually leads to the former, through a series of degenerative self-delusions. If one wants to see smallness and inelegance at work (as opposed to the bigness and elegance which were previously said to be characteristic of “class”), then one need look no further than at the career of every inflated tyrant and fanatic in the history of the world, anyone, actually, who imagines that they have special rights, including also such people as corrupt corporate “Fat Cats”, all deluded by their own bizarre little world-view! (the “bad metaphysics” referred to earlier). As to the question of whether this is inborn, there certainly are greater and lesser fates--and the fates of the tyrants and fanatics (and Fat Cats...) are certainly of the lesser sort! (no matter what their brute impact on history might be)--but this doesn’t mean that they couldn’t have chosen to make the best of their small potential in some constructive way...

Anyway, one can, I think, regard Sun Wu-Kong’s very first trials in The Journey to the West as “trial” trials in “preparation” for the great shock that awaits him when he meets the Buddha in the “show-down”! Briefly, what happens there is that Sun Wu-Kong boasts shamelessly that he can jump to the end of the universe and back as quickly as lightning, while the Buddha answers that he can’t even jump off his (the Buddha’s) hand; Not one to refuse a challenge, Sun Wu-Kong zooms off to the “Five Pink Pillars” at the end of the universe...and urinates on them, in order to leave conclusive “proof” of his having been there; this important business having been taken care of, he then zooms back to the Buddha, in

triumph, but once back he discovers to his consternation a distinctly un-roselike odour coming from somewhere down at the base of the Buddha's fingers...!

With his far more powerful style, beautifully expressed in the imagery of his hand—which in a crucial sense “had always been enormous”—the Buddha calls Sun Wu-Kong's bluff, quite simply, while Sun Wu-Kong demonstrates in an utterly ridiculous manner that he has seriously misinterpreted his position in the scheme of things, and literally (and “dramatically”) bears witness of, or rather against, himself! His agitated comment: “Could it be that he is using the magic power of foreknowledge without divination?!” is just one big platitude that shows that he has learned nothing and understood nothing and that he is still totally “clueless”; it is the sort of insight that could suitably be referred to as a “Wallowing in the mire-insight”!, or more technically as an “Original State Monkey-King insight”...(another example of this sort of cluelessness is the Moral judgements need to be nuanced-“objection” discussed earlier !!) (page 33 top)

Sun Wu-Kong then gets to meditate over what has happened for 500 years (during which time he was pinned under a mountain) and the showdown and the subsequent 500 years could be said to constitute the second and third phases of his career. During the fourth phase, the remaining, large block of trials (Chapters 13-99), there is no doubt that it is now Sun Wu-Kong who has the “class”, while it is the monk Tripitaka who is the “creep”. One could even conceive of a fifth phase, that of Sun Wu-Kong's final enlightenment, even though no mention of this is made in The Journey to the West.

### **Rounding Off**

What “sufficient reason” can there be for the gross injustices that “arise” in the world from circumstances?—and such injustices undoubtedly do arise and in a vast number of cases without anyone being to blame (either in this life or in any other life), lest anyone assume otherwise. Perhaps, if one is optimistic, one can conceive of some sort of compensation in the long run, further than we can see, for those subjected to it, although I certainly don’t believe the crackpot notion that pain and suffering are in some secret way beneficial to the soul, or at least not if they are beyond reason.

Maybe one has to attain enlightenment to see the answer to these questions, and it is a law of nature, and a very “reasonable” one, that anyone intending to and/or is pre-ordained to attain enlightenment will be subjected to very tough trials, because no one can cheat their way to enlightenment for free. The elegantly simple yet impossibly difficult truth at the heart of any spiritual discipline is that if one doesn’t really do what it takes to reach a high enough position to see reality-- the whole point being that reality is big—then how can one possibly see it?!!

\*\*\*\*\*