

# Chinese Myths



# Monkey

## Story One

## Introduction

By the first century A.D., a philosophy called Taoism dominated Chinese thought. Taoism was based on the *Tao Te Ching* [dow deh jing], a collection of eighty-one verses written by the philosopher Lao-tzu. The *Tao Te Ching* puts forth the idea of following the Tao, usually translated as “the Way,” the natural creative life force of the universe. It also speaks of noninterference, or *wu-wei*, with living creatures and forces. From a philosophy, Taoism gradually grew into a religion. Temples were built, and monks were given the task of overseeing these places of worship. The Taoist heaven was soon populated with a ruler, the Jade Emperor, who was assisted by eighty gods and goddesses. Likewise, hell was also ruled by an emperor, Yen-lo, with a host of demons to oversee its functions. Taoists became fascinated with immortality, spells, elixirs, alchemy, and magical powers such as flying and transformation (from one shape to another). Fifteen centuries later, a government official named Wu Ch’eng-en wrote a popular novel entitled *Journey to the West*. The following myth retells the first part of that novel. It features the most well-known character in Chinese folklore, the Monkey King. His exploits demonstrate Monkey’s Taoist training and powers. He is vain, rude, and greedy, but Monkey’s magic tricks and saucy personality make him a beloved character.

# Monkey

On the Mountain of Fruit and Flowers, a magic rock gave birth to a stone egg. From this stone egg merged a monkey whose first act was to jump up and bow to the four directions. His eyes flashed like lightning, and his teeth glinted like the stars at night. He played with other monkeys and with wolves, tigers, and deer, but he had an enormous appetite and often gobbled up their share of grass, leaves, berries, and fruit. Still, his joyful personality and curious nature made him the most popular animal on the mountain. One day, Monkey jumped through the waters of a cascading waterfall and discovered behind it a cave furnished with stone bowls, cups, and chairs. Delighted, Monkey called all the other monkeys to come see the novelties he had found. When they arrived, the other monkeys grabbed the utensils, made themselves comfortable in the cave, and proclaimed Monkey their king. Amidst the wild orchids and aromatic herbs growing in the mountains, the monkeys lived in perfect happiness for centuries.

But one day, the Monkey King burst out in tears. He realized that soon he might face Yen-lo, the King of Death. In response to his fear, he stole some clothes and sandals and went out to search for the secret of immortality. Everywhere he went, he imitated human speech and manners, but people just laughed at his strange costume: a red dress, a yellow sash, and black shoes. For ten years, he wandered from village to village until finally he found the cave of an immortal. After much pestering, Monkey was accepted as a disciple of this holy man. From the immortal, Monkey learned to study the Taoist teachings, and to write and speak properly. He had to sweep the cave floor, gather firewood, fetch water, and tend the garden. After a while, Monkey learned many tricks from the immortal. Now he could transform himself into seventy-two different trees, animals, and rocks. After much persuasion, the immortal also taught him how to fly, by soaring on the clouds. Once he mastered these skills, Monkey loved to show off in front of the other disciples. One day, the immortal caught him changing into a pine tree. Angered that Monkey would squander his valuable magic by showing off, the immortal promptly banished Monkey from the cave.

## ***The First Return Home***

So the Monkey King returned to his home on the Mountain of Fruit and Flowers. His subjects greeted him noisily, reporting that a demon was robbing their cave. Catching this demon had proven futile. Each time the demon had appeared, he had grabbed a few of their monkey children and held them prisoner until he was ready to eat them. Immediately, the Monkey King issued a challenge to the demon. When the demon heard his cries, he laughed at the bellowing monkey. He put away his sword, and hurled himself at the skinny creature. The demon and Monkey fought for hours, dealing each other glancing blows, great jabs, and swift kicks. Finally, Monkey remembered one of the tricks he had learned from the immortal. Quickly, he pulled out a clump of hair from his head, bit the hairs into small pieces, spat them out in the air, and shouted "Change!" At once, the bits of hair turned into several hundred little monkeys, all of whom startled the demon with their piercing screams. The little monkeys pummeled the demon until they knocked him out. Then Monkey changed the little monkeys back into hair. He

freed the imprisoned children and returned them to their parents. To celebrate their king's return, the cave monkeys feasted on dates, fruit, and grape wine.

### ***The Visit to the Dragon King***

Monkey decided that the demon was right to have laughed at him. He was king of his monkeys, but he did not have any clothes or weapons worthy of a king. So Monkey recited a spell and dove into the sea to meet with the Dragon King of the Eastern Sea. When he demanded a suitable weapon, the Dragon King showed Monkey a heavy iron pillar weighing several tons. No one in the sea could lift it; many feared its strange, glowing light. Monkey grabbed the stick, recited a spell, and changed it into a weapon-sized iron rod. Making thrusts and parries, Monkey jabbed and swung the stick in the air so ferociously that the tortoises drew in their heads, and the crab, shrimp, and lobster soldiers all scuttled out of his way. But Monkey was not satisfied with the wonderful iron stick. Next, he demanded suitable clothing from the Dragon King. The Dragon King summoned his dragon brothers by beating on gongs and drums. From their treasuries, the dragons gave Monkey a pair of cloud stepping shoes made of lotus fiber, a cap made of phoenix feathers, and a chain mail vest made of yellow gold. Without so much as a nod of thanks, Monkey left. The Dragon King and his brothers were angry at Monkey's poor manners and complained to the gods in heaven about the Monkey King's rude behavior. When Monkey returned to his mountain home, he showed off his new clothes. He preened this way and that, and twirled around and around in front of the admiring monkeys. Then Monkey pulled out his iron staff. First he changed it into a long bridge that arched over the widest river; then he transformed it into a tall tower that touched the clouds. Finally, he shrank the iron staff into a tiny embroidery needle and tucked it behind his ear, grinning at his astonished subjects. With his fine clothes and new weapon, Monkey proclaimed himself the equal of any god in heaven.

### ***Monkey Gets a Job in Heaven***

Soon the gods in heaven became irritated with Monkey's behavior and decided to capture the insolent character. The gods convinced two demons from the Underworld to tie up Monkey and take him before the Ten Judges of the Dead. Monkey made a commotion and bitterly protested his capture. He demanded that the judges check the Ledger of the Dead, which recorded the life span of every creature on earth. As he upbraided the judges, Monkey quickly crossed out his name in the Ledger of the Dead with a thick black brush. Without his name in the ledger, the Underworld demons had no choice but to let him go. Since the gods were unsuccessful in sending Monkey to the Underworld, the Jade Emperor decided to keep an eye on Monkey in heaven. He summoned the Monkey King and gave him the job of stable master. Monkey was to feed, groom, and water the thousand horses of heaven. Monkey was so insulted at having been given this menial job that he left in a huff and returned to his mountain cave. When heavenly court officials came to the cave to fetch him, Monkey put up such a fuss that they agreed to give him a more important job.

### ***Monkey Creates a Mess in Heaven***

Next, the Jade Emperor put Monkey in charge of the peach garden. Tiny fruit blossoms ripened into the sweetest peaches in the universe. These peaches would bestow wisdom, strong limbs,

eternal youth, and light bodies to those fortunate enough to eat them. Greedy Monkey told his guards to stand outside his room while he napped. But instead of napping, he took off his bright robes and sneaked into the garden where he gorged himself on the ripe peaches. Then he curled up and fell asleep in the orchard. Unbeknownst to Monkey, a great feast was being prepared for the gods. That afternoon, fairy maidens entered the peach garden to pick the fruit. To their dismay, they found many broken branches, peach pits, and a sleepy Monkey who berated them for disturbing him. When the fairies mentioned the great feast, Monkey suddenly realized that he had not been invited. The thought of rare meats, wine, and more fruit made the greedy monkey hungry again, and he dashed off in search of banquet tidbits. Monkey sneaked into heaven's kitchen and knocked over steaming bamboo baskets as he stuffed himself with luscious meat dumplings. He then tiptoed into the wine cellar and quickly guzzled down several casks of wine, each more fragrant than the one before. In his haste, he accidentally tipped over some wine barrels and broke several casks. Monkey ran out into the night, fearing that the palace cooks would find him. Looking for a place to hide, he stumbled into Tushita Palace, where the great philosopher Lao-tzu lived. Since the wise man was not at home, Monkey peeked at all the rooms in the philosopher's house. In the alchemy lab, Monkey found five gourds full of the elixir of immortality. On the table, almost a hundred pills, rolled out from the cooled elixir, were neatly lined up in rows, ready for the banquet. He scooped up a fistful of pills and gulped them down like toasted soybeans, scattering the rest all over the floor. He dropped to his hands and knees and grabbed the remaining pills, turning over several tables in the philosopher's tidy workroom. Surveying the mess he had made in the alchemy lab, and remembering similar scenes of wreckage in the peach garden, kitchen, and wine cellar, Monkey decided to sneak out of heaven.

When he returned to his mountain home, the monkeys welcomed him with date wine, but having been spoiled by the fine wines of heaven, the Monkey King spat out their local brew. He boasted that he could bring back heaven's most delicious grape wines. Then Monkey quietly tiptoed back into heaven and stole the remaining casks. He brought the precious wine to his waterfall cave and celebrated his return to the Mountain of Fruit and Flowers. When the Jade Emperor discovered the destruction, he sent his heavenly army generals to capture the thief. Monkey fought them with his embroidery needle, which he transformed into a mighty fighting stick. No one could defeat Monkey, not even the hundred thousand heavenly troops who fought him with axes, sticks, and swords. And so it was that the orphan Monkey, born of a stone egg from a magic rock, established his supremacy in the fighting arts.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_

*Q: Where is the story of Monkey taken from?*

*A:*

*Q: How was Monkey created?*

*A:*

*Q: What qualities defined Monkey's personality?*

*A:*

*Q: What made Monkey afraid?*

*A:*

*Q: What did Monkey learn from the immortal?*

*A:*

*Q: How did Monkey defeat the demon who had been robbing his cave?*

*A:*

*Q: What did Monkey seek from the Dragon King?*

*A:*

*Q: What were Monkey's jobs in heaven?*

*A:*

*Q: What did Monkey steal to eat and drink?*

*A*

*Q: Who was Lao-tzu?*

*A:*