



The Monkey King drills his army on the Flower-Fruit Mountain.
New Year wood-block print from T'ao-hua Wu, Soochow.

The Monkey Epic

Anyone familiar with Western fiction reading the Chinese text of the *Hsi-yu chi* [The Journey to the West] will be struck at once by one of its prominent characteristics. Unlike any typical Western work of prose fiction written since the Renaissance, the Chinese novel is made up of prose heavily interlaced with verse of many varieties and lengths. Not only are the poems used frequently for descriptive purposes; in certain episodes they also serve to advance the action or function as dramatic dialogues between the characters. The historical basis of this form of Chinese writing is well known since the discovery of the *pien-wen* 變文 texts in the cave of Tun-huang in 1899. Dating from the eighth and ninth century, many of these texts took as their subjects the *Leben und Treiben* of Buddhist saints and heroes, though many other secular stories dealt with persons and events from Chinese legend or history. . . .

The popularity and success of the Buddhist *pien-wen* may be seen in the widespread emulation of its form by subsequent authors of secular topics drawn from both history and folklore. Though it has been an established mode of composition in India, the mixture of prose and poetry in narration was clearly new to China, and it made its mark permanently on Chinese literary history by exerting enormous influence on the development of popular drama and the practice of storytelling in the subsequent Sung and Yuan Dynasties. The indebtedness of Chinese colloquial fiction to these art forms has been a familiar theme of modern scholarship, for such rhetoric features as the *Hua-shuo* 話說 and *Ch'ueh-shuo* 卻說 (we were speaking of . . .) and the stock formula (if you want to know what follows, listen to the next round's unravelment), which open and close each chapter of the classic novel, reflect unmistakably the expressions characteristic of an oral tradition. . . .

Unlike the *pien-wen* texts of Tun-huang, the *Hsi-yu chi* abounds with verse of far greater variety. At every opportunity, the author seems almost eager to display his poetic skills by weaving into the fabric of his narration a poem on the style of the *Chueh Chü* 絕句 (a quatrain of five- or seven-syllabic line with fixed tonal pattern), the *Lu-shih* 律詩 (an eight-line poem of five- or seven-syllabic line with fixed tonal pattern), the *Tz'u* 詞 (generally a short lyrical poem of irregular meters), or the *P'ai Lü* 排律 (a long poem with the middle couplets of the *Lü-shih* serially extended), each of which also has a specific rhyme scheme. Running the length of the first chapter alone, which recounts the birth of Monkey to his acquiring the name "Wu-k'ung", are no less than nineteen poems exemplifying all the forms just mentioned. Though it is not at all apparent in Waley's translation, there is a poem depicting the monkey's frolic "under the shade of some pine-trees", and another *Lu-shih* sketches the curtain-like waterfall immediately after its discovery by the monkeys. . . .

Taken as a whole, the poems in the *Hsi-yu chi* are used for two main purposes: that of presenting dramatic dialogues and that of describing scenery, battles, and living beings both human or non-human. In the latter category, the poems are distinguished by their extraordinary realism and vivid delineation. . . .

[The] subject may be a bee (chapter 55), a bat (chapter 65), a moth (chapter 84), an ant (chapter 86), a rabbit (chapter 95), or one of the numerous monsters with whom Tripitaka's disciples must engage in combat, or the battle itself, or the scenery of the different regions through which the pilgrims must journey. But what the reader encounters again and again in these poems is an enthralling spectacle of exquisite details. Indeed, if judged by such a critical norm as that proposed by the thirteenth century theorist, Yen Yu 嚴羽, that great poetry ought to have "limited words but unlimited meaning", most of the poems of the *Hsi-yu chi* would suffer from a strong proclivity to being considered inferior products because of their graphic, and occasionally, unadorned diction. The language is often too explicit, too direct, too bold, to be evocative or suggestive—that quality of metaphorical elusiveness which most Chinese lyric poets cherish and seek to inculcate in their verse.

What is scorned by tradition, however, may turn out to be a poetic trait of special merit in the *Hsi-yu chi*. For what the author of the novel has sought to express in the poems is hardly the kind of lyricism suffused with symbolic imageries so characteristic of the earlier poetry of reclusion, or even of much of the poetry in the high T'ang and Sung periods. Rather, what he seeks to evoke for us frequently seems to be the overpowering immediacy of the experience of nature, with all its fullness and richly contrasting variety. . . .

—ANTHONY C. YU

The above paragraphs are excerpted from an article, "Heroic Verse and Heroic Mission: Dimensions of the Epic in the Hsi-yu chi", published in The Journal of Asian Studies, August 1972. Professor Yu is working on a complete translation of the Hsi-yu chi, which will be published in two volumes by the University of Chicago Press. Beginning on the next page we present the opening chapter in this new rendition of the classic novel, nineteen poems and all.