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Monkey King: A Chinese Superhero

The Monkey King was a powerful Chinese hero who could fly through the air and defeat armies with his magic staff. A character from one of the classics of Chinese literature, *Journey to the West*, the Monkey King has been a superhero to Chinese children for centuries. Find out why he continues to feature in TV shows, movies, music and other entertainment.

China Showcase Library Learn about China, through its history, people, places, and culture. Supported by original material developed by National Geographic Learning and People's Education Press, the China Showcase Library presents non-fiction reading selections on a variety of fascinating topics.

The audio for this reader is available for download at ELTNGL.com/csl

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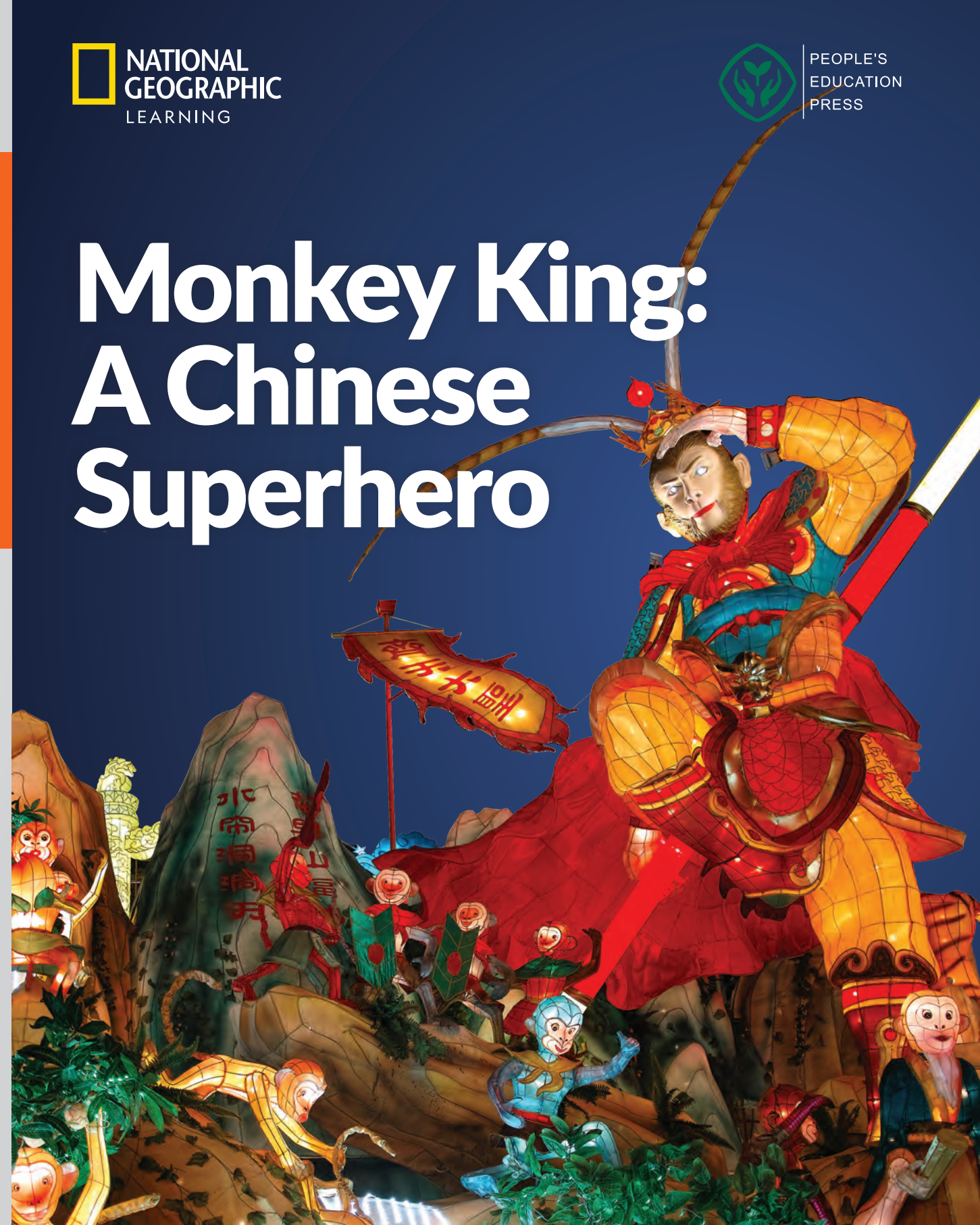
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Monkey King: A Chinese Superhero



Monkey King: A Chinese Superhero

Before You Read

The story begins at the Yulin Grottoes,¹ near Dunhuang, in China's Gansu Province,² and then moves to Xi'an, which was an ancient capital of China. After that, the story travels west, back to the Yulin Grottoes and beyond.

A. The Life of Xuanzang. Read the paragraph. Then match each word with the correct definition.

Xuanzang (602-664) was a Buddhist monk³ in China. The Buddhist scriptures⁴ that were available in China at that time were poor translations of the originals, and so—unhappy with this situation—in 627 Xuanzang left for India, determined to study Buddhism where it started. Such a journey was not easy as it went through deserts and mountains, and Xuanzang had to overcome many struggles along the way. After arriving in India, he spent many years traveling and studying. He then returned to Xi'an in 645, carrying with him classic Buddhist scriptures. He also kept a detailed record of his journey, and some of the legends in the popular novel *Journey to the West* are based upon these.



1. classic

2. determined

3. legend

4. overcome

5. popular

6. struggle
- a. having a strong will

b. something that requires much effort or energy

c. liked by many people

d. a work that has been regarded as important for a long time

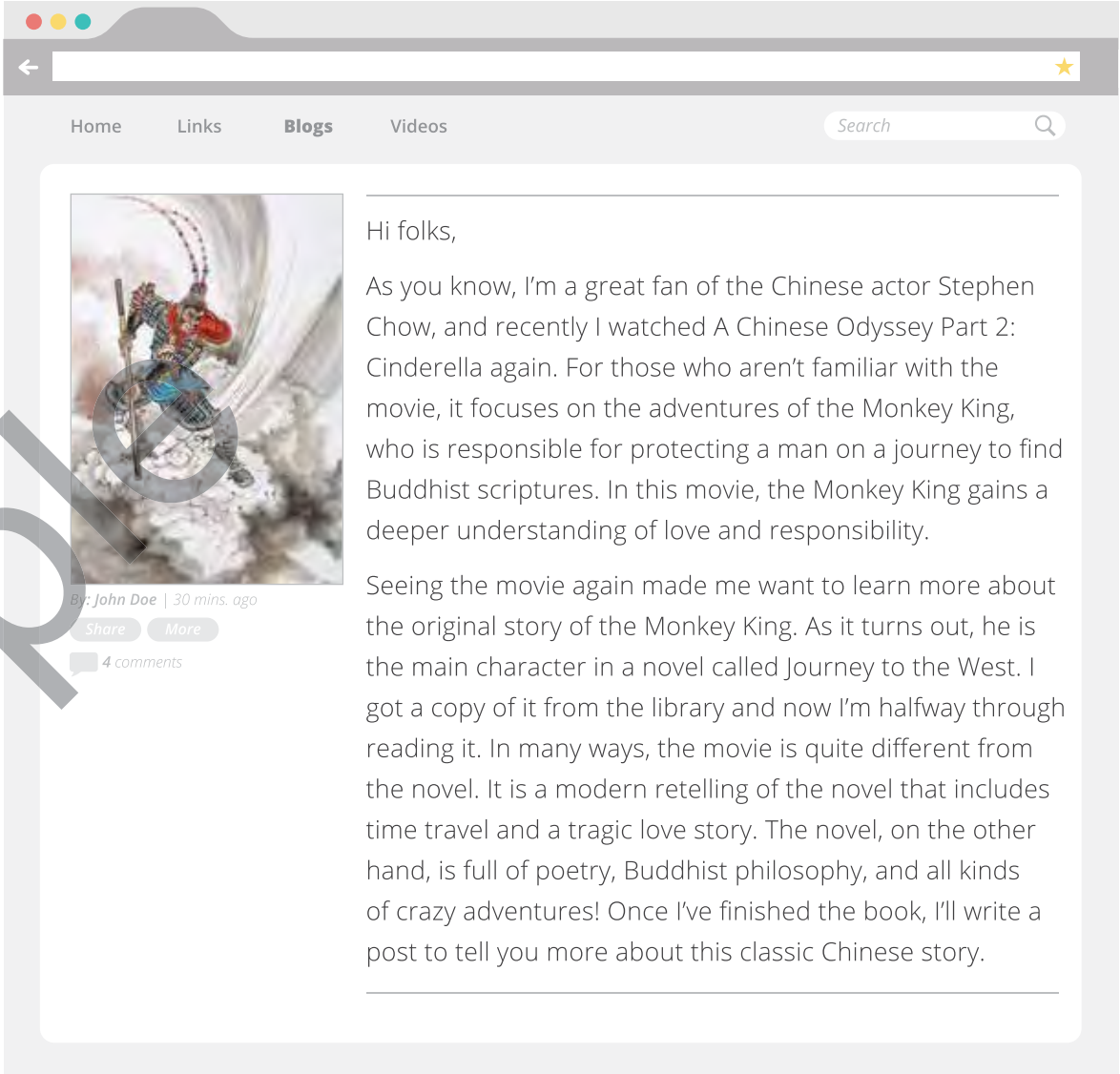
e. to fight and win

f. a story about the distant past that may or may not be true

¹**grotto**: a cave, especially one made by people
²**province**: a large district of a country
³**monk**: a male member of a religious group where the members often live together
⁴**scripture**: holy writings of a religion

B. Journey to the West. Read the blog post and look at the photos in this reader. Then answer the questions below.

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1. Have you ever heard of the Monkey King or *Journey to the West*? What do you know about them?
2. What do you think the point of the novel is?
3. Are there any other stories that you know of like *Journey to the West*? How are they the same or different?

Deep in the Gobi Desert in Gansu Province, western China, there are two low cliffs on either side of a river. Dug into the base of these cliffs there is a system of caves—some more than 1,300 years old—filled with Buddhist statues and wall paintings. These are the Yulin Grottoes, sister caves to the more famous Mogao Grottoes, over 100 kilometers to the west. Entering Cave 3, which was built in the Western Xia Dynasty⁵ (1038-1227), you can see Buddhist **sculptures**⁶ in front of you. But if you look at the colorful paintings that cover the wall, you see in one corner the curious picture of a monk with a white horse behind him. Standing beside the horse is a monkey wearing clothes.

 Track 1

The monk in the picture is Xuanzang, who traveled from the then capital of China, Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an) on a 19-year journey through Central Asia and India in search of Buddhist scriptures, some of which he then brought back to China. His journey was the stuff of legend, and many stories were created about him and his adventures. As his journey took on this legendary quality, traveling companions were soon added—a white horse, another monk with a large red beard, a man-pig, and a monkey.



⁵**dynasty**: a period of time when members of the same family rule a country

⁶**sculpture**: an artwork shaped from stone, metal, or other hard materials

During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), many of these stories were put together in what became one of the great classics of Chinese literature, *Journey to the West*. In this novel, Xuanzang is given the title Tang Sanzang and he makes a journey through western China to Xitian—Western Heaven—accompanied by his white horse, Monk Sha, Pigsy, and the Monkey King.

Tang Sanzang is serious and determined, in a sense like the real-life Xuanzang. But while Tang Sanzang is grounded in real life, the other main characters are all based on flights of fancy. For example, in the story the white horse is really a **dragon**⁷ who has changed himself to a white horse in order to carry Tang Sanzang to Xitian. Though loyal and good, for the most part the white horse never speaks. Monk Sha and Pigsy are both bodyguards for Tang Sanzang. Though Monk Sha is a little slow and does not speak much, he has a kind heart. Pigsy, on the other hand, is lazy, and a lover of food and women, and he sometimes gets himself—and the rest of the group—into trouble. However, the main character in the book is the Monkey King.

⁷**dragon:** a large, imaginary creature that can fly and is quite powerful

Monkey King, Pigsy, Tang Sanzang, the white horse and Monk Sha go to Xitian



Fact Check

1. How old are the oldest Yulin Grottoes?
2. How long did Xuanzang's journey take?
3. When was *Journey to the West* written?

It is not known when the legends of the Monkey King first began, but as the painting in the Yulin Grottoes shows, it had to have been centuries before *Journey to the West* was written. Indeed, some researchers think that the Monkey King is actually based on a real-life student of Xuanzang's, which would make some of the stories about him more than 1,300 years old. Whatever the case, the Monkey King is one of the oldest and best-loved fictional characters in China, and is in many ways considered a **superhero**.⁸

According to the legend, a monkey was born from a magic stone on the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit. Clever and brave, he soon became the Monkey King. Yet, after several hundred years, he became unhappy, because he knew that he and all the other monkeys would at some point die, so he decided to search the world to discover how to become an **immortal**⁹ and a **sage**.¹⁰ During his journey, he gained the Buddhist name, Sun Wukong, and became powerful. After he returned home, the dragons of the seas gave him a staff with gold bands on either end, which he could make into any size and use as a powerful weapon. When not in use, he could shrink it to the size of a needle, and hide it in his ear.

⁸**superhero**: a hero with powers that normal people do not have

⁹**immortal**: to live forever; a person who lives forever

¹⁰**sage**: wise; a wise man



A monkey was born from a magic stone on the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit



He got a magic staff

Sometime later, Sun Wukong was **summoned**¹¹ by Death and taken down into the World of Darkness. Once he realized where he was, Sun Wukong pulled his staff from his ear and began terrorizing the **demons**¹² there. Claiming that a mistake had been made, he forced the Ten Kings of the World of Darkness to open up the Book of Life and Death so that he could find his name. When he saw that he was only supposed to live for 342 years, he got angry and crossed his name out of the book. Then for good measure, he crossed out all the monkey names. This made him and his friends immortal. Then he fought his way out of the World of Darkness.



The Monkey King crossed out the monkeys' names in the Book of Life and Death

¹¹**summon**: to send for

¹²**demon**: an evil spirit

A. Multiple Choice. Answer the questions below by choosing **A, B, C, or D.**

- What does the phrase “flights of fancy” mean on page 6?
 - stories and legends that were common at the time
 - real people that have been changed to have a legendary quality
 - an idea which is quite creative, but not likely to be true
 - ideas that the author thought might be popular
- On page 9, in the sentence, “This made him and his friends immortal,” what does “this” refer to?
 - being made immortal
 - the Book of Life and Death
 - finding the Book of Life and Death
 - removing their names from the Book of Life and Death
- Why did the Jade Emperor make Sun Wukong a god in Heaven?
 - The Jade Emperor wanted to gain power over him.
 - The Jade Emperor wanted to reward him.
 - The Jade Emperor needed a new Keeper of the Horses.
 - The Jade Emperor wanted to kill him.
- On page 15, when it says “the novel has many fantastic elements,” what does “fantastic” mean?
 - wonderful
 - very large
 - strange
 - not real
- According to the passage, what does the novel show about the human condition?
 - People are weak and need to be protected.
 - People can only be understood by what is in their hearts.
 - Everyone wants to be a hero.
 - Struggle is important for human growth.

B. Character Profiles. Complete the character profiles below with words from the passage.



Tang Sanzang

- based on Xuanzang
- serious and (1) _____



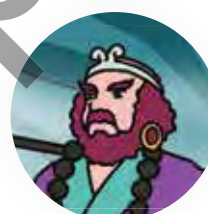
Sun Wukong

- nicknames: The Monkey King; the (2) _____, Heaven’s Equal
- has a magic staff, and a gold band (3) _____
- brave, loyal, good-hearted, and righteous



Pigsy

- a man-pig
- is (4) _____, and a lover of (5) _____, and he is sometimes getting himself—and the rest of the group—into trouble



Monk Sha

- has a large (6) _____
- a little slow and doesn’t speak much, but has a kind heart



White horse

- really a (7) _____ that has changed itself into a horse to carry Tang Sanzang
- loyal and good; almost never (8) _____

C. Answer the questions. Use information from the passage to answer the questions below.

- Why do you think the Monkey King was included in the painting at the cave?
- What does the fact that the Monkey King is an icon tell you about Chinese culture?
- Do you have a favorite superhero? How is your superhero different from or similar to the Monkey King? What is a hero to you?

China's Four Great Literary Classics



The Romance of the Three Kingdoms (14th century)
by Luo Guanzhong

Covering over 110 years—from 169 to 280—this historical novel is full of war and adventure. As the Han Dynasty falls and is divided into many separate parts, three main kingdoms rise up to take its place. But which kingdom will finally succeed in ending the years of war and unite the country in peace? This 120-chapter book is the source of many of China's most popular stories from history and legend.



Water Margin (14th century)
by Shi Nai'an

In the 12th century, 108 outlaws rebel against the Song Dynasty (960-1279). The novel explains how the group comes together to help the weak and fight against injustice, how it defeats the Song army in battle, and how the Song emperor then gets it to fight against his enemies. Based on a true story, this novel tells about these brave men and women as they win fame throughout China for their exploits.



Journey to the West (16th century)
by Wu Cheng'en

It is seventh-century China, and a Buddhist monk named Tang Sanzang decides to go on a journey of faith. But who should join him and help him on his mission? A dragon that turns into a white horse, another monk with a flaming red beard, a man-pig, and a monkey with a magic staff. Part adventure story and part philosophical journey, this novel—which focuses on the exploits of the Monkey King, as he fights monsters and protects Tang Sanzang—is a delight for both children and adults.



Dream of The Red Mansions
(18th century)
by Cao Xueqin

The novel contains the story of four large wealthy families. While focusing on a love triangle between three cousins, the novel is a psychological journey through the lives of some forty-odd main characters and hundreds of minor ones, providing a close study of their struggles as the family gradually falls into decline. With so many characters, the novel helps us understand how life was for people of different classes at that time and offers a social panorama of ancient China. It is perhaps the greatest of all Chinese novels.

Track 2

Word Count: 360
Time: _____