

## **Who Is the Monkey King? By Gene Yang**

<http://www.humblecomics.com/monkey/mkwho.html>

### **Journey to the West**

Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, is probably the most beloved fictional character in the Eastern world. He's like the Asian Mickey Mouse, only without the squeaky voice and corporate sponsorship. The Monkey King first came into prominence as the star of *Journey to the West*, a classic Chinese folk novel written by Wu Ch'eng-en in the sixteenth century.

The novel chronicles the Monkey King's birth from a rock, his challenge to Heaven, his subsequent punishment and his pilgrimage of redemption. Along the way he vanquishes demons of every size, shape, and color with his celestial cudgel (basically a big stick) and kung-fu skills. With his fellow disciples Pigsy (a pig spirit) and Friar Sand, the Monkey King protects his pilgrimage master Hsuan-tsang, a peace-loving Buddhist monk.

*Journey to the West* is considered one of the Four Great Chinese Novels. Some historians claim it to be a political satire, while others emphasize its spiritual aspects. Still others argue that it's simply one of the greatest adventure stories ever written. Detailed summaries of *Journey to the West* by people who are a lot smarter than me can be found all over the Web. A few are listed in the Missing Links section.

### **Me and the Monkey King**

I first heard about the Monkey King from my mother, a Chinese immigrant with a knack for good story-telling. I listened wide-eyed. I've always been partial to monkeys, probably because my grandmother used to say I looked like one (affectionately, of course... er, I hope... ). Imagining a monkey endowed with magical powers, beating on demons with a magical stick gave me the sort of satisfaction sports fans get when they watch Michael Jordan slam dunk. I was hooked from the start.

Growing up in America, however, deprived me of fuel for my passion. I couldn't watch Monkey King cartoons after school, I couldn't pull my sandwich out of a Monkey King lunch box, and I couldn't roundhouse kick my G.I.Joes with a Monkey King action figure. I tried to get my friends into him, but all they wanted to do was play *Star Wars*. The closest thing to the Monkey King in *Star Wars* was Chewbacca. The big kid always got to be Chewbacca. Eventually, as American culture seeped into every corner of my consciousness, Spider-man, Batman, and their entire spandexed genre overtook the Monkey King's place in my heart.

Years later I rediscovered the Monkey King through a copy of Arthur Waley's translation of *Journey to the West*, which I found between a Miles Davis biography and the Holy Bible on my college roommate's bookshelf. I borrowed it and began hearing my mother's stories again. I had rejoined the Monkey Kingdom. Since then, I've written and drawn several Monkey King stories, one of which serves as a third of my graphic novel *American Born Chinese*.