



The Nine-Toothed Rake

By Xiaoyao Xingzhe

"No, that's not what I said at all!" the fat monk exclaimed. We were sitting in the shade of a hidden grotto, weird-shaped rocks from Lake Taihu surrounding us. We fanned ourselves with big black fans. The sun had passed its peak, but the air was muggy and still. The cicadas were as loud as chainsaws.

IT REALLY WAS too hot to argue, but I just couldn't let it go. Over the previous two weeks I had been listening to a recording of *Xi You Ji*, the *Journey to the West* or, as the kids called it, *Monkey*. The recording was by a traditional storyteller and was quite exciting. At the same time I had been following along in the novel.

The fat monk had remarked that the story was full of inconsistencies, and I said that I did not think it was sloppily written at all, quite the contrary, I thought the novel was very carefully constructed.

"The inconsistencies are quite deliberate," he said with a sniff. "And I agree that the book is constructed with great care. As you know, because we have talked about it before, I consider *Journey to the West* an example of a type of literature that is very complex and layered, with a deeper intent than just entertainment."

He turned a half turn on his stone bench and examined a bit of moss growing within one of the crevices in the rock around us.

I wiped the sweat from my eyes.

We *had* talked about that type of literature before, and after initially resisting the idea,

I had been talked around to the position of allowing the possibility. The problem was that I had trouble seeing all the layers of meaning that the fat monk claimed were there. I would always get caught up in the action and forget to look deeper. I said as much.

He turned back toward me and chuckled. "Lesson number one! Even you should be able to see that this is what we do, all of us, everyday, in our own lives. We get caught up in the action and forget to look deeper at the recurring patterns and what they might mean. At the Design, so to speak."

"Anyway," I said, "what do you mean 'the inconsistencies are quite deliberate'?"

He folded his fan and leaned forward. "Again, layers within layers. If you are mistrustful, you just think the author was sloppy. If you know, or have been told, that there are deeper levels, an inconsistency attracts your attention and makes you think. You can then hold that portion of the story in your mind and mull it over, teasing out the nutrition so to speak."

"How about an example?"

The fat monk stood up. "Yes, OK, but first I'm going to see if Cook is around," he said. "He may have something to cool us down."

He left the grotto and headed toward the kitchen, keeping to the shady areas.

My eyes wandered among the fantastic rocks surrounding me. There was a flat wall towards the back of the grotto, and I noticed an oval space on the wall that seemed to have incised characters. I stood up and went over for a look. It was a poem, in characters running from top to bottom, right to left. I jotted it down in my notepad, along with a quick translation:

	只	有	不	不
	種	人	欺	負
唐	心	問	神	三
呂	田	我	道	光
祖	養	修	不	不
詩	此	行	欺	負
	身	法	貧	人

**Do not abandon the three radiances
Don't turn your back on people.
You are unable to deceive
Transcendent Dao,
And you can't con me.
Some people come asking for a
method of practice:
All you need do is plant a seed
In your heart-mind field,
And nourish that body.**

Along the left side of the poem was a short line attributing the poem to Lǚ Zǔ: Ancestor Lü, Lǚ Dōng-Bīn, the Tang dynasty teacher of the eight sages. Many of his poems were collected in the *Complete Tang Poems*. I paused for a moment at the term "three radiances" but then I remembered the fat monk had once defined them for me.^a

Just at this point, the fat monk returned, followed by Cook bearing a large dish of watermelon slices.

"OK," he said, settling back into his place. "You wanted an example of teasing out the nutrition from traditional literature. Where are you up to in the story?"

"What are you talking about?" Cook asked as he passed around the plate.

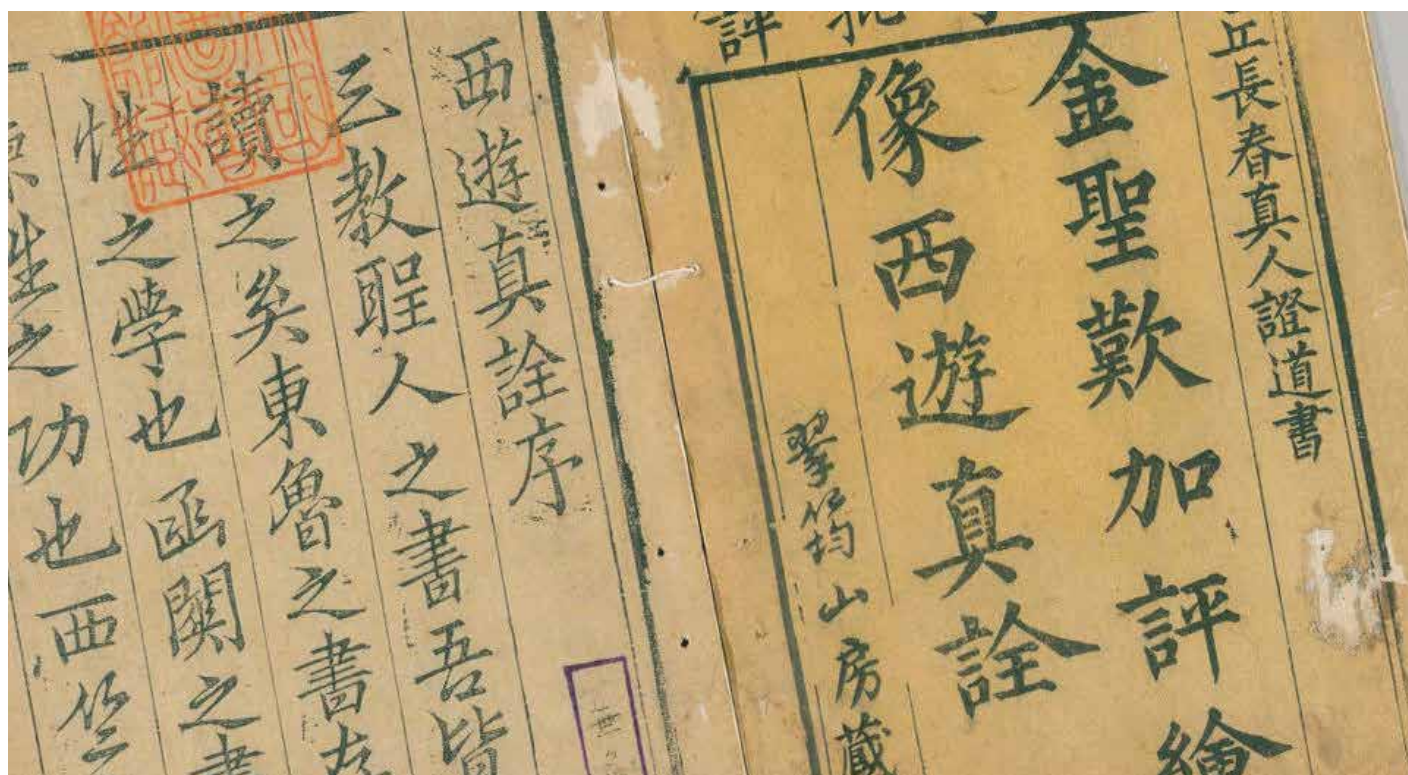
"*Journey to the West*," I said, selecting a moist yellow slice. Holding my hand under it to catch the drips of cold juice, I took a large bite and let it melt in my mouth. Delicious coolness spread throughout my body.

"I love that book," said Cook. "I don't know how many times I've read it."

"Actually, it's a good thing you're here, Cook," the fat monk said. "You are a *Book of Changes* expert, and the *Yi Jing* plays a big role in understanding the deeper layers of the story of Monkey."

"Really?" said Cook. "Sounds great. Where are you up to?"

a. 三光: Depending upon who asks, Daoists will identify the three radiances as the sun, the moon, and the stars, Spirit, energy and vitality, or as the two eyes and the heart. In the latter case, these are the three things brought together in the practice of turning the light around. So the poem is saying "do your practice, but be sure to bring the fruits of that practice out into the world to help others. You might think that you can pretend to be enlightened, but God will not be mocked and those who really know will see through you in an instant. If you still need to ask 'what should I do?' just turn the light around, direct your attention into your heart, and gently nourish what grows there."



"I have just got to the point where they run into Piggy."

I told them the story so far: Monkey and the Tang monk had not been travelling long when they came across a remote but prosperous village called Gao Lao Zhuang.

"Stop right there!" cried the fat monk. "So what did you think when you saw the name?"

"What name?"

"The name of the village."

"Gao Lao Zhuang? Nothing. It is just a common name of a village."

"Really? What do the characters mean?"

"Nothing special. Just *high old village* (高老莊) or *ancient village of the Gao's*. Probably lots of people named Gao lived there over the years."

Cook and the fat monk exchanged smiles.

"Nothing jumps out at you?" Cook said, pursing his lips.

I shook my head.

"You need to pay attention to double meanings, puns if you like, when you are reading this type of literature," the fat monk said. "Often it is something jarring. Here, I will admit it could well be the name for a common village. But 'Lǎo Zhuāng' is hard to miss as the names of our two most famous exponents, Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi. And even

you should know that the term *Lǎo Zhuāng* is so often used as an alternative name for 'Daoism'."

I thought for a second. True, I'd seen this pretty often. "But what is the point?"

The fat monk nodded. "Exactly. The first intention is to make you sit up and ask just that. The second is to signal that something particularly related to Daoism is contained in the passage you are reading."

"Like what?"

"Let's continue the story and see. What happened next?"

I was just about to go on with the story when a smaller figure came into the shaded grotto where we had all taken refuge from the heat. It was Little Fang, the young librarian who had taken over from the fat monk a year or two earlier, and who had been so unpleasant to me on the few occasions I had seen him since. But he looked different, somehow.

He bowed to the two older monks and, after a slight hesitation, to me. Then he found a corner and sat down. He had not said a word. Cook looked at me and winked.

"Little Fang has been working on himself since you were here last," he said in a stage whisper.

"Go on with the story," the fat monk said. I continued.

▲ Frontpiece to the *Xi You Zhen Quan* (True Explanation of the Journey to the West, 1696) by Chen Shi-Bin (aka Wu Yi Zi: Master Awakened to Unity).

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Pig can be improved, but it won't be as easy as just doing work around the village and getting a beautiful prize after a few months. It will take a long, long journey with many monsters to confront, being shown to himself again and again.

When Monkey and the Tang monk arrived in the village they found it in uproar. The rich mayor of the village had inadvertently given his daughter in marriage to a monster, who had appeared to be a strong and hard-working human who was unfortunately a bit ugly. But at the wedding feast the monster ate and drank so much that, being drunk, his disguise slipped and the groom was revealed as a giant pig.

Refusing to disavow the marriage, the pig had locked the mayor's daughter in the house he had built and protected it with a spell.

“OK, so there we have one section of the book,” said the fat monk. “It is like a scene in a play, it can both stand alone but also relates both to what came before and what comes after.”

Little Fang stirred. He hesitantly raised a hand. The fat monk nodded.

“Why is that important?” Little Fang asked. “Good question. When you are reading a book like this for its deeper meaning, a single scene will have its message, often a very complex set of relationships that would be almost impossible to express directly in words, so the expression is through a dramatic scene.”

“Is it always like this, a chapter in a book?” Little Fang asked.

The fat monk looked at me to answer. I was surprised, and stammered until I remembered the Boatman. “No... no, sometimes it can even be in jokes,” I said.

“Tell one!” said Cook in delight.

“Yes, go on,” said the fat monk.

I thought back. “OK...

One day a fool was walking along at night, and came across a well. For no reason at all, he decided to look into the well and saw, floating there at the bottom, the crescent moon.

“Hold your horses, and don't worry!” he shouted and ran home for some rope to save the moon.

When he got back to the well he quickly tied a loop at one end, and threw it into the well, trying to catch the end of the crescent. In fact, the loop caught on a rock at the bottom. The fool tugged and tugged, until the loop slipped off the rock and he was thrown onto his back. Above him, riding in the night sky, was the crescent moon in all its glory.

The fool waved, and called up “No need to thank me!” Then he got up and went on his way.

Cook and the fat monk laughed and clapped. Little Fang's mouth twitched slightly.

“Turning the light around,” said Cook. “Looking within, finding celestial truth.”

“Yes,” said the fat monk, “there you have a fine example, simple but clear, of the complex relationship between misunderstanding, effort, and achievement.”

“He was stupid,” said Little Fang under his breath. But due to a trick of the rock formation around us, the words echoed large.

Cook smiled. “Stupid like we all are. But can't you see that he arrived at the truth only because he sincerely wished to help another, and was willing to exert effort to do so?”

Little Fang shrugged. “I don't see what it has to do with me.”

“Not much, at this stage,” the fat monk agreed. “Unless there is a little bit of experience, and to one who lacks a basic familiarity with the stages of the Path, that story remains what it appears to be on the surface—just a joke.”

Back to Pig and Monkey

“Forget the joke,” said Little Fang. “What about *Journey to the West*?”

“Right. Where were we?” asked the fat monk.

“Pig has trapped the mayor's daughter, his promised bride,” I said, “in a house that Pig built himself and held her there by a spell.”

Cook and the fat monk looked at each other. The fat monk lifted his chin slightly at Cook, and Cook said “Remember that when Pig first appears in the village, he seems human and works hard, very hard, for the mayor, building, clearing land, planting crops and so on. This is like a person when they first approach a spiritual school, they will do their very best and put forward their best side. They can even be accepted on that basis, just as the mayor promised his own daughter in marriage to this apparently strong and honest man.”

“But then his true nature is revealed,” said Little Fang.

“No, not his true nature, but his unregenerate nature,” said the fat monk. “Pig can be improved, but it won't be as

easy as just doing work around the village and getting a beautiful prize after a few months. It will take a long, long journey with many monsters to confront, being shown to himself again and again, in conjunction with a group of like-minded wayfarers.”

“A journey that seems to Pig as if it will never end, with near-despair at every stage,” said Cook.

“I know just how he feels,” said Little Fang.

Metal Monkey, Wood Pig

The fat monk looked at me and said, “What happened next? We had left the Tang monk and Monkey faced with the mayor, who had this big problem. His prospective son-in-law had kidnapped his daughter and locked her in the house he had built, and kept her trapped with a spell. Then what?” I thought for a second, then went on with the story.

Monkey was able to reverse the spell and free the daughter, and he then assumed the bride's appearance and waited for the pig to come back. Of course Monkey in bride's guise uses the opportunity to tease the pig mercilessly, first inviting the amorous pig to bed, then jumping up to use the chamber pot and stinking out the room. Over the course of this marital give and take, Monkey discovers the true name and origin of Pig, vital information that will allow Pig to be captured even if he runs.

Monkey then reveals himself and they fight, Pig using his nine-pronged rake and Monkey his golden staff. Subdued, it turns out that Pig, like Monkey, had been selected by Guanyin to be a disciple of the Tang monk.

“So what does this all mean?” I asked.

“Ah, this bit is much more complex, I am afraid,” said the fat monk. “You are going to have to remember the *He Tu*, the River Diagram.”

I groaned to myself. I could only vaguely picture it, despite the repeated emphasis the fat monk had placed upon it.

“You must remember the two verses that relate to the Diagram from the *Wu Zhen Pian*. The hermit told me you and he went over and over them.” He picked up a stick and drew them in the dust, just as the hermit had in the little cave.^b

b. He is speaking of the long discussion of “three

*“Three Five One” are just three words,
But clear to few both now and then.
East three, South two together make Five
North one, West four the same again.*

*Wu and Si reside where Five too lives,
There three families can a child conceive.
The Primal One holds true qi, and know
Ten foetal months lay foundation for a sage.*

I stared at the characters. Little Fang saw my uncomprehending look, and smirked. Then he noticed Cook looking at him and straightened his face.

The fat monk went on. “Remember that the Year of the Monkey is the ninth earthly branch (申 *shēn*), belonging to metal which generates water, so that is west and north. You know from the River Diagram that west equals four while north equals one, so that makes five, the first five.”



Cook said “West is metal, north is water—that is all the right hand side of the yin-yang diagram, showing yin as it increases, just as it does in the afternoon.”

“And in the autumn,” said Little Fang.

Cook beamed. “Yes! Very good, Little Fang.”

The librarian almost squirmed with pleasure. It was all he could do to not look at me in triumph.

The fat monk pointed at the character “five” before he continued.

“The Year of the Pig is the 12th earthly branch (亥 *hài*), belonging to Wood which generates Fire, so that is East and South, and East equals two while South equals three, so that makes five, the second five.”

Cook took over, saying “East and south being the left side of the yin-yang diagram, showing the growth of yang, like in the morning...”

“And in the springtime,” Little Fang and Cook said in unison.

fives” that I had had with the Hermit, recorded in the article “River Diagram in the Hermit's Cave” in *The Lantern* Vol. 9-2, which described the two paragraphs shown above, from the *Wu Zhen Pian* (Understanding Reality).



Ante Babic's
**Tips for running
a successful clinic**

Be available to your
patients ... but not
TOO available.



Tease: Monkey tricks the amorous Pig.

I rolled my eyes. The fat monk noticed, and while his eyes frowned the edge of his mouth gave a little twitch upwards.

"In fact, if I remember correctly," said Cook, "throughout the whole book of *Journey to the West* it comes up very frequently that 'metal' is used as a synonym for Monkey, and 'wood' is used to refer to Pig."

Silence fell in the grotto.

Little Fang stirred. "But even when you have metal and wood, that is only two fives. There should be three! The verse said *Three Five One*, didn't it?" He glanced at me, looking insufferably superior.

The fat monk nodded. "Correct. For the third five, you will have to wait for the next chapter, where they meet Sandy in the Yellow Wind Cave. He symbolises Earth, the middle, which is the last five, the harmoniser between wood and metal, the silence of the centre. Did you ever note how Sandy hardly ever says anything?"

"Is that all?" I said. The stillness of the afternoon air, the dampness of the countryside, and the thought of Little Fang were making me irritable.

"Not by half!" the fat monk laughed. "There is yin within yang and vice versa, generating and overcoming and vice versa, host and guest switch and alter, husband

and wife change places. Change! It's all there, staring you in the face." He sat back and fanned himself.

"Just tell me what you mean."

"OK, so you know how Wood and Fire are yang."

"Yes."

"And Metal and Water are yin."

I stayed silent. He ignored me and went on. "Yang is the husband, naturally, and yin is the wife, right?"

I just stared at him.

"But we said before that Pig is Wood and Fire, the yang side, and Monkey is Metal and Water, the yin side. Here in this chapter, Pig is the husband and Monkey the wife."

I could not hold it in any longer. "OK, so what?"

"But when we invert or transpose the five elements, we find that within yang there is true yin—which is to say the wife—and within yin there is true yang—which is the husband. Monkey is much more powerful than Pig, and so Monkey is in fact the true husband in this analogy. Monkey pretended to be the wife, just like true yang is hidden within yin."

I wish I had never brought it all up. Sweat rolled down my forehead. I longed to go lie down, but the guest room I occupied at the monastery would simply be like an alchemical retort. The coolest place was right here in this grotto. I flicked open my fan to engage my manual air-conditioning.

"Surely that is all, right?" I said in desperation.

"Don't forget Pig's rake," Cook said, glancing sideways at me.

I forced myself to think. "Nine-toothed rake. You mean, nine, like in *nine the extreme of yang*? I thought you said that Pig looked yang but was actually yin?"

"Yes, just like yang reaches its peak in the South and turns into yin. Also the nine refers to the nine rotations in the great reverting elixir.^c Did you notice that every time Pig changes shape he twirls his rake?"

Just at that point the old gatekeeper edged his way into the grotto. He looked at each of us in turn, and then pointed to Little Fang.

"There must be someone at the library," Cook said.

c. 九转大还丹 *jiǔ zhuǎn dà huán dān*.

Little Fang stood up to follow the gatekeeper, but before he left he said “So all this fighting here is referring to the interaction of yin and yang. Does it relate to the alchemical terms “harmonising dragon and tiger”, “separating sun and moon” and so on?”

The fat monk nodded. The gatekeeper was tugging at Little Fang’s sleeve as Cook said:

“Also, if I remember correctly, Monkey did not fight Pig into submission, he left him and returned to the village to check on the Tang monk, and then came back and talked Pig into submitting.” Cook raised his voice so Little Fang could hear as the gatekeeper dragged him away. “This shows that we cannot just battle our way to enlightenment, conquering our demons by the exertion of our will, we have to go back to our base and make contact with our fundamental essence, our true inner teacher.”

There was silence for a while after Little Fang left. Then suddenly all three of us looked up and felt the oppression lift slightly. Was that a breeze I felt?

The fat monk stood up. “Looks like it is cooling down a bit,” he said, then looked at me. “Did you have any other questions about *Journey to the West*?”

I frowned. “Yes, just one: why go to the trouble of doing it like that? Writing a novel, with all that work. Why not just tell it straight out?”

As soon as I said it, I remembered how often I had asked this very question, and gotten the same answer: *telling it straight out has little effect.*

The fat monk paced back and forth. “The path of the Golden Elixir is not a variety show,” he said, “even though in this case we can see it being expressed through a popular novel format. But remember that the nature of the world is conditioning, conditioning in the Western sense of training you to be repetitive, and training you through repetition. So saying the same thing in the same way simply conditions the mind to respond to certain stimuli. This is not the path to freedom, but the path to slavery. The variety is quite deliberate, and the effort one has to put in as a reader is needed. Every single new school is useful for a time, and then turns into just another conditioning instrument.” He shook his head. “It is not easy to keep coming up with new formats. It

takes a fully enlightened individual to create such a design, a design that can bypass the conditioned reflexes of the mind and nourish it with insight.”

There was a pause, and a bitter smile formed on his mouth. “It must be frustrating to be such a person, to go to untold effort to create a fresh new teaching instrument, one that works, for a time, and for a few people, and then to watch as the conditioning mechanisms of the world corrupt it.”

“All too soon it becomes,” said Cook, “just another little cult, fringe religion or social group that people can gather around and belong to. But the leaven, the thing that made it live and that could give life, that disappears when people start to use the design of the new school to adorn themselves and puff themselves up.”

“Which is why my own teacher insisted on us learning about brainwashing, cults and conditioning right at the beginning,” the fat monk said. “I remember that my classmate Shijie objected, at first, but she soon saw the value. The value became even more clear as we watched ourselves and our own reactions, as well as the actions of others, and could see the ease with which one can slip into ingrained patterns.”

“Meat buns,” said Cook.

The fat monk’s head swung towards him with interest, saying “Yes?”

“Ultimately,” Cook said, “all these things are just meat buns for the mind.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Yes, what do you mean *for the mind*?” cried the fat monk in anguish.

■ To be continued.

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