Purdue English Big Read Podcast: "Adapting Monkey King: *American Born Chinese* in Print and on Disney+"

[Introductory music]

ALEX ANDERSON: Hello, everyone, and welcome to the first episode of the 2023 Big Read podcast, the podcast series all about this year's Purdue English Big Read selection, Julia Lovell's 2021 adaptation of *Monkey King: Journey to the West*. I'm Alex Anderson, PhD candidate and Assistant Director of the Big Read at Purdue, and today I'm joined by three wonderful guests: Jianfen Chen, Fiona Wang, and Devan Lindey. Today's episode is entitled "Adapting *Monkey King*: *American Born Chinese* in Print and on Disney+," and we'll be discussing Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel *American Born Chinese* and its recent adaptation as a series on the streaming service Disney+. Let's get started by allowing our guests to introduce themselves. Jianfen, would you like to get us started with introductions?

JIANFEN CHEN: Yeah, for sure. Hi, everyone, I'm Jianfen Chen. I am currently an Assistant Professor in Technical Communication with the English department at Towson University.

FIONA WANG: Hi everyone. My name is Fiona. I'm currently a lecturer at NC [North Carolina] State University's English Department, and I do teach Business Communications, but my research interests are in Second Language Education, bilingual literature, and teacher education programs.

DEVAN LINDEY: Hi, everybody, I'm Devan. I am currently an adjunct lecturer at Purdue in the History Department, and I also picked up a little side gig as an adjunct lecturer in the History Department at IUPUI [Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis]. My interests include how we use popular culture to teach history, but also my specialties are in legal history, political history, and education history.

ALEX: Thanks for introducing yourselves. I'm excited that y'all are here to join us today. To begin our conversation, I'd like to provide a bit of context for the two texts that we'll be discussing today. For those who may not be familiar, *American Born Chinese* is a 2006 graphic novel authored by Gene Luen Yang and colored by Lark Pien. Yang is a cartoonist, teacher, and MacArthur Fellow who's published quite a bit with Marvel Comics, DC Comics, Dark Horse Comics, and First Second Books. *American Born Chinese* was a finalist for the 2006 National Book Awards in the category of Young People's Literature and has won multiple awards including a 2007 Eisner Award, the Publishers Weekly Comics Week Best Comic of the Year, the *San Francisco Chronicle* Best Book of the Year, the 2006/2007 Best Book Award from the Chinese American Librarians Association, and has been listed as Amazon.com's Best Graphic Novel/Comic of the Year for 2006. It's also made the *Booklist* Top 10 Graphic Novel for Youth, the NPR Holiday Pick, and the *Time* Top 10 Comic of the Year. *American Born Chinese* was adapted into an 8-episode series for Disney+ in Spring 2023 by Kelvin Yu who—and I love

this—is perhaps most famous for being a producer and writer for the show *Bob's Burgers*, which has been a popular favorite since its premiere in 2011. Both the graphic novel and the adapted series center around protagonist Jin Wang, an average teenager attempting to balance the social politics of his high school and his home life. This balancing act becomes even more fraught when he meets a new student, Wei-Chen, on the first day of school. Jin's budding friendship with Wei-Chen (who is actually the son of Sun Wukong) throws him into a whirlwind adventure, introducing him to worlds and characters that he never before knew existed. So, for our guests, what was your introduction to *Journey to the West*, the source text for both of these adaptations. What did you think of it the first time that you read *Journey to the West*, and what do you think of it now?

JIANFEN: *Journey to the West* was one of my favorite fictions or novels when I was a little girl, and—at that time, you know—for the traditional Chinese, you were supposed to be very obedient to your parents and be a good girl when you were at school. So for me, the main character—Monkey King, Sun Wukong—he's the idol for me. So, at that time I thought, okay, if I would be as powerful as he is, and if I would, you know, say "no" to some sort of things I don't want to do, or if I could be, you know, as he is—resistant, naughty? And then—but still—I'm so powerful, no one can control me, then I can be true of myself. Kind of like I have a monkey, you know, at the bottom of my heart. So I wanted to let it out. At that time, that was a dream for a little girl. The stereotyping for girls in a traditional Chinese family is a little bit different from the type for the boys. For girls, you are more supposed to be, you know, obedient and listen to others. So for now, especially when I read the introduction to the *Journey to the West* to the translated version, and, with my background and education and life experience, I can see more how this is actually related to the social problems. And, especially, it's like a mirror of the injustice and inequities and some sort of things that we see and we don't think that is good for people. So yeah, that is my journey. [laughs]

ALEX: I'm so touched by that notion of a little monkey at the bottom of my heart. And especially in that potentially restrictive environment, for you to have seen a trouble-making model—it can be kind of cool to admire, "Oh, this is someone who does what they want," as opposed to trying to live up to expectations other people have.

FIONA: So growing up in China, I do have, like, similar stories because, like, my parents also wanted me to read it when I was a child. But I do see, like, it's almost like educational because this book is divided into small stories, right? And every story has, like, different plots and maybe teach you one specific lesson—for example, do not get distracted, do not be greedy. It's almost like you have to be true to yourself and focus on what your end goal is. And then there's a section that the Monkey King killed three people, but they were actually demons. They were bad people. And then Tang Sanzang blamed Sun Wukong for making those mistakes. But, actually, Sun Wukong ran away from Tang Sanzang and then came back, teaching us how we need to

always respect the shi fu, the older generation. So I feel, at the beginning, my parents gave this book to me more for, like, educational purposes. Like, you can make this mistake, but if you are willing to correct yourself this way, you can be a good person. That's what I see from the past. But right now, when I read it as an adult, I do see there is, like, a lot of self-discovery, like, to understand who I am as this Monkey King—like, what do I want to become as a human in this society? And also a lot of teaching about redemptions, like, how I can make this better, how I can really achieve my goals. It's also the Path of Enlightenment—like, they say, "Well, we are going to the West to get the sutras," so it's also the Path of Enlightenment. So we are going to the West to get the sutras, but, in terms of understanding it right now, I think it's the Path of Enlightenment.

ALEX: Yeah, in stories like *Journey to the West*, we can see that sometimes the Path to Enlightenment is full of ups and downs. It's full of shenanigans. I mean, especially if Sun Wukong is involved. [laughs]

DEVAN: Yeah, so this is my first time reading *Journey to the West*. I'd heard about it before, and going through it this first time for the Big Read, I was a little bit more analytical with it. Because I'd always heard about how it influenced all this other media that I absorbed growing up—you know, *Dragon Ball*. I really like *The Forbidden Kingdom* movie, which has Jet Li and Jackie Chan, I think. And, I mean, Sun Wukong is in it, and he's, like, one of the key figures in that movie. So, going through, I was sort of trying to pick out, like, seeing where all these influences from *Journey to the West* have influenced things that I have absorbed today. But in hindsight now—it's almost like it was a relaxing sort of read. Like, the journey is not relaxing at all. And, I mean, there's a lot of craziness, as we've discussed. But there's something sort of relaxing about just sitting back as the reader and going on that journey with Tripitaka, Sun Wukong, Sandy, Pigsy, and everybody. I don't know what made it so relaxing for me exactly, but there's just that idea of kind of traveling to find the sutras and everything—all these different journeys that they're on. To me, it was very cathartic in a sense.

ALEX: I think maybe that sense of catharsis is one of the keys to *Journey to the West*'s ultimate longevity, right? And especially, maybe, in the Lovell translation that emphasizes those really short, oftentimes action-packed sections.

DEVAN: Whenever I was reading it that first time through, I didn't want to put it down. I kept on wanting to read and read and read and try to find out, you know, what's going to happen next.

ALEX: Yeah, the first chapter ends with the line, something like, "And if you want to find out what happens to Sun Wukong, you have to keep reading." I was like, "You don't have to tell me twice; I'm already there. I'm turning that page!"

FIONA: Also, I feel the short stories of, you know, where they encounter different people also helps. It's almost like it's perfect for anything, like when you want to read it before bed, or you want to take a break during your working hours—this book is perfect to everyone.

ALEX: Absolutely. I love that you've brought up that it would make it an excellent bedtime story because I think that definitely reflects Gene Luen Yang's experience, and he mentions in, I think, the forward to Lovell's adaptation that he has all of these fond memories of his mother telling him stories throughout his childhood, but especially stories that were either taken directly from or were explicitly inspired by *Journey to the West*, which gives us a great opportunity to start talking about Yang's graphic novel, *American Born Chinese*. Had any of you read *American Born Chinese* before? Do you think *Journey to the West* lends itself well to the medium of the graphic novel?

DEVAN: I've never read it before, and I—honestly, I did not realize it even came out in 2006 until you said it today, Alex. It lends itself to the medium of the graphic novel, for sure. You have a wider audience through a graphic novel. I mean, you can see, I think pretty easily, high school classes reading this, maybe even middle school, potentially. But with, like, a full-on novel to deal with these complex issues, and how a novel might go about doing that—it'd be much longer, maybe harder to read.

ALEX: Yeah, I do think the graphic novel medium lends itself some accessibility, perhaps, to younger generations who might be [laughs] a little put off by the length of all of *Journey to the West*. I mean, Lovell's adaptation is only a small portion of the entire text.

JIANFEN: Before, I didn't even notice that there is a book *American Born Chinese*, and when I told my friend back in China that I am going to do this podcast, she referred this book to me, you know, kind of, like, coincidentally. And—she's a literature person—she said that you should read the *Journey to the West* and *American Born Chinese* hand by hand, so that you can see that they have a lot of good connections, and I agree with Devan about the accessibility of the book. And, since I am now in the United States, I try to think about how this book would reach out to the audience in America. So I found that the graphic style—really helps to reach a bigger and wider audience, and, especially, I like how Gene Luen Yang interweaves some episodes from the *Journey to the West* into this comic book. So that really helps readers see how Jin Wang is growing and trying to discover his true identity along his journey.

ALEX: I think for me, *American Born Chinese* does so much work, and this kind of echoes what I think all of you have said about how it updates this centuries-old story and kind of redirects it towards this generation of children who are born to immigrant parents, and it kind of relocates it for them. So maybe it gives them kind of, like, a lifeline to a culture that might not be as easily accessible to them as it had been for previous generations.

DEVAN: And to kind of build on what you said there, Alex, the graphic novel also shows that the story of *Journey to the West* is adaptable and timeless.

FIONA: When you think about those two pieces, I feel there are also a lot of similarities. For example, Wukong in *Journey to the West* Sun Wukong tries to figure out who he is through self-discovery, and, here, Jin tries to figure out what his identity is and have this self-acceptance of, "I know who we are, and this is what I'm going to do about it"—that's also like the monkey king in their travels to the west. And, also, you can see when the monkey came first to join Zhu Bajie (the pig) and Tang Sanzang (the zen monk)—when they joined together, he was the unique one. He was the rebel. So it's almost like Jin, like this cultural assimilation, how he can connect his identity and culture to a broader audience and to relate to their parents. It's almost like those key elements are still here, and the teachings are very similar, too.

ALEX: Yeah, certain details might be different, but the heart of the message stays the same. Are there any particular scenes from the graphic novel that stand out to you?

JIANFEN: Well, I just wanted to share a little bit about his cousin. Every time Chin-Kee comes up and visits his school, Chin-Kee is very naughty. I think that it's the idolization of the Sun Wukong, or it's like how Sun Wukong becomes the human and comes into this real world. But every time, when Chin-Kee comes up, and Jin was very much, like, annoyed—and sometimes terrified—and he was afraid that if Chin-Kee is so naughty, it's going to make some mess in his environment. He is trying to refrain from, you know, having any connection with Chin-Kee. So I feel this could be, like, his own repression of his real identity. As a Chinese, for the first time when I came here, I wanted to be, like, I wanted to speak like American, and I wanted to sort of remove my accent, but I found that I was not able to do that since I am a Chinese, and I carry my Chinese accent. And later when I found that you've got to accept yourself, and you are unique, and your identity is unique. It's just about you. So accent is no problem, especially when I was working as a tutor in Purdue Writing Lab, and we learned about second language acquisition, and what we learned about, you know, all of these theories about how people grow and how people—I mean, immigrants—they accept their, the languages, their language heritage, and their identity. I found that it is something you should be proud of. So I think this sort of, you know, growth journey really touches me a little bit.

ALEX: I think Jin feels some anxiety about being associated with Chin-Kee, almost like, "If I'm too nice to him and public, if I seem too supportive of him, if I take care of him a little too well, people will start to equate me with him," and it's like he's kind of trying to distance himself.

DEVAN: I'll say real quick: It's not a favorite scene by any means—it'd be strange if it was—but whenever you first see the caricature of Chin-Kee. It's on page 48 where they first introduce

them, and then it's, like, page 110–121 where he goes to school that day. And just seeing the caricature of him and the extreme that it's pushed to. I think that whenever I saw that initially I did, like, a nervous laugh of sorts because it's one of those things where it makes you uncomfortable. But that's a good thing, I think, in this context because it makes you confront—you know, I do history, so in my history brain, like, I go back, and I think, yeah, this was something that people legitimately believed. Some people still, unfortunately, believe that today, hopefully not as much, but you still have these sort of microaggressions today. But this is, like, that extreme of it that you see in history. Like, early 1900s to mid-1900s or so. And it's not something that I expected initially in the graphic novel. I actually handed it to my brother when I got it in the mail. He was thumbing through it, and he happened to just stop on one of those pages, and he showed me. He's like, "Hey, look," and I was like, "Whoa, this is what's happening in this?" But, like I said, I think that's a good thing because it makes you confront this horrible history. You know, history and graphic novels—it's not all, you know, happy go lucky. You deal with powerful issues in it. And the graphic novel does a good job at that, I believe.

ALEX: I think that's a good point about how the medium of the graphic novel lends itself to this two-pronged critique. Because we can get one message that's being portrayed through the illustrations and through the coloring of the panels, and then we can have, like, the narrative story that's being relayed to us through dialogue and narration and other components, too. Like you, Devan, my brain just immediately went to those really heinous World War 2 anti-Japanese propaganda that was circulated. For folks who are not familiar with the graphic novel, the character of Chin-Kee is depicted as just those awful stereotypes. He has slits for eyes; his eyes are often not even drawn, and when they are open, they're yellow and pupil-less so that he looks more monstrous than human. Chin-Kee is constantly making comments to Danny, who's later revealed to be this alternative version of Jin, that he wants an American girl, and he wants to, like, bind her feet and make her have his children—just these really heinous caricatures. It is shocking, definitely. So as is perhaps to be expected, there are many differences between Yang's graphic novel and the televised adaptation for Disney+. Were there any specific differences that stood out to you? I know that the adapted series has gotten a lot of mixed reviews, and I understand the critique that it's only loosely adapted from the graphic novel, of course, but I think the message is still similar. What do y'all think?

DEVAN: Kind of building on what you said there, Alex, I think in a way the TV series adheres a little bit more to *Journey to the West* than what the graphic novel does. I also liked the TV series a lot. Episodes are closer to half an hour, and there are some moments in it which you could tell it's a Disney show—not as much as, like, other shows. It wasn't anything like *Hannah Montana*, for example, back in the day. But there are a couple of moments where you can tell that it has, like, a bit of a Disney influence to it, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. But overall I enjoyed the TV series a lot. I am very curious to see if a season two is green-lit, with that cliffhanger we

get at the very end. I'm curious to see what happens and, you know, how are they going to sort of engage with the rest of the material that they have.

ALEX: Fiona, what did you think?

FIONA: Yeah, I believe that *Journey to the West* has been adapted into, like, different forms for popular culture. For example, in video games, like *League of Legends*, you have a Wukong and, you know, other different video games and short talk shows and even, like, whatever forms, to popular culture. So I definitely think the Disney+ episodes are catered toward their population, whose background culture will be how I can be this second-generation Asian American here, understanding myself. I do believe, of course, it's connected to *Journey to the West*, but there are some things that might be a little bit different than what I expected. For example, at the beginning, they portrayed Niú Mówáng, the Bull Demon King, you know, as a bad person. But in fact, he is described as a powerful and honest character sometimes in *Journey to the West* and also in Asian and Chinese Buddhist culture. Apparently he's The Great Sage Who Pacifies Heaven. So, you know, when we see those characters, so there definitely are some differences. So I do see those connections over there. It is a little bit corny, to be honest, but it definitely reached the audience that they want to reach. And it is pretty interesting—the scenes and the shots are pretty cool, and all those are fighting scenes—those supernatural power things are well-produced.

ALEX: Yeah, the series is definitely action packed, and it definitely takes a realist slant to the *Journey to the West* and, by extension, the *American Born Chinese* story, but, of course, that realism is stylistically and, like, narratorially interrupted by these supernatural entities so that it kind of places the audience in the same position as Jin, who's kind of like, "What do you mean there's, like, Chinese mythology all around us? Who are these guys? Who are these demons? Who is good? Who is bad?"

DEVAN: I could kind of build on that. Like I said, and Fiona just said, Alex, you said, you can tell it's a bit of a Disney series. It's episode four whenever it gives, like, a bit of a flashback between Bull Demon and Wukong himself, whenever they go and he, you know, becomes the Great Sage. I thought that that was—like, stylistically—that was a very interesting episode. It gave me that feeling—and I've not seen a lot of Chinese or Japanese films and everything—but it felt like it was shot in similar ways to what those films would've been like, at least the bits that I have seen. I even thought for a moment that it had a bit of a *Kill Bill* sort of look to it, in a way. I think that was Quentin Tarantino. The cinematography in that was really well done, I thought. And it sort of has, like, a multi-level play to it, I guess, because the entire series is dealing with, you know, being born Chinese in America. But then it also has that episode itself, which is like an entire—I mean, can we say like it's a meta-commentary, maybe, on, like, the film industry in a way?

ALEX: Yeah, that fourth episode is interesting because the rest of the episodes are presumed to take place in the fictive presence, which is Jin's experience at the high school, but that fourth episode is a flashback that, like Devan is saying, is very much shot in that style of the Shaw brothers' Hong Kong epic—there's, like, text rolling across the screen, and the special effects are practical. So King Bull Demon, for example, has obvious prosthetics. He has this, like, incredible wig; he has this huge bull ring as a septum piercing. And it's supposed to be a little cheesy. I think for, like, American watchers, it definitely has a little bit of that Quentin Tarantino vibe, just in the brazen practical effects. But that's really the only scene that seems to be taken explicitly from *Journey to the West*, because that episode covers when Sun Wukong and King Bull Demon are trying to enter the Feast of Immortal Peaches, and they're barred from entry because Sun Wukong is not wearing any shoes. And, obvious to say, shenanigans ensue, and eventually they make their way into the party. But, stylistically, it's very different from the other episodes.

FIONA: Yeah, it is, quite interesting because I always like to look at those background information about how those you know, different stuff is produced, you know, *Journey to the West* was, like, first written by Wu'Cheng'en in the sixteenth century, where China was in the Ming dynasty, so there are some things happening in the Ming Dynasty—that is, for example, the Silk Road, where, you know, they connect to different nations around China—like India, like Middle Asia—to the west side. So that's where he produced this work by, you know, understanding those different cultures—culture exchange, almost like business exchange—and produced it into small episodes to understand, hey, here is diversity. I also see, like, in this show, what we are talking about in the United States, is, like, diverse culture, second generation, whether they fit in, whether there are differences, or what their real identities are. So I do think, like, those differences can be attributed because of the background information of the TV series and the background of the original book itself.

ALEX: As we're putting the graphic novel and the adapted series in conversation with each other, it's clear that *Journey to the West* has already been and will continue to be adapted into many other mediums and modalities, potentially only gaining in popularity. So, maybe as *Journey to the West* potentially re-enters—at least in the U.S. context—the cultural imagination, are there any other mediums and modalities that you would like to see *Journey to the West* adapted into? Has reading *American Born Chinese* as a graphic novel or watching it as an adapted series prompted you to think about how else you would like to see this story imagined?

FIONA: I wonder, like, if any of you feel curious about VR—the virtual reality? So, you know in educational settings, we have—like, when you learn Japanese, they put you with these 3D goggles and then explore Japanese. How about, like, if we teach students (maybe teaching Chinese as a second language) to put this VR thing in the education mode. Or, like, to travel as

Monkey King to China? Like, maybe it can be a tour for, you know, adults or for seniors who want to travel. I think that will be interesting.

JIANFEN: Yeah, to build on that idea, I really like the innovation Fiona has just made. I'm thinking about, you know, for *Journey to the West* and also for the graphic novel *American Born Chinese*, they share something in common—like, it's always about a mission. For example, in *Journey to the West*, you know, they are tasked with the mission to find the scriptures and to get the scriptures back to China. I think Jin is also on his own mission. Maybe he's not aware of that, but he's also on a mission to find himself, to build himself, and to, you know, identify with his true self. So, building on what Fiona just said, I think maybe every time when we get students into the VR, the virtual reality, we could do something as an instructor to give them a mission to do something and to discover either themselves or either the beauty of the language or maybe the cultural value or something different from their own value or change their stereotype or ethnocentrism. So I think this is really a pretty good idea since I just taught a unit about intercultural business communication, and we talked a lot about how you should avoid stereotyping and ethnocentrism and embrace diversity and inclusivity. So I appreciate that Fiona pointed out that—that's really cool.

DEVAN: This would probably be a little bit ambitious, but to see a play of *Journey to the West*—maybe that's already a thing. But, I mean, you could see, like, the costume design and how much effort would go into that based on the one episode, at least, we saw in the TV series and sort of the creativity that you would get out of that. And then the ambitious part would be, while that play's on tour, to have each city that the play goes to or is taking place in have different parts of *Journey to the West*. Because, obviously, you can't do every single adventure, but, you know, different cities have different adventures. So it would be like a big marketing campaign, perhaps. And then, the other idea I thought about, it would be neat to see a video game of sorts. So I looked it up—and I completely forgot—there's actually a game coming out next year called *Black Myth Wukong*. It's an action RPG. There's not too much information out about it right now, I think. And then, it completely skipped my mind, but there's this one video game that I used to play a lot. It's called *Warframe*. But there's a character you can play, and his name is Wukong, and you have different powers. So you can make the clone of yourself like he does; you can do the cloud walking; you have his staff. So that's already been done, in a sense, but, again, it shows sort of the relevance and the influence of *Journey to the West* today.

ALEX: Who knows? Maybe we'll see Sun Wukong in the Marvel Cinematic Universe now that Sun Wukong has, like, kind of entered Disney's imagination. I'm not really sure how that could work, but that could be interesting.

JIANFEN: I sort of think about how—I don't know how to express this. It's like—it's a little bit, you know, shocking to me since, you know, in the *Journey to the West*, Sun Wukong, they were

born and his master, Tripitaka, Pigsy, and Sandy, his colleagues—I don't know if I could call them colleagues, but anyway. [laughs] You know, they went to the West to seek for inspiration and enlightenment from the scripture, you know, from India. So they called it "West," though it's west to China, of course. At that time, that is the farthest way they can go. And when we go back to this graphic novel, you know, Gene is already in the West to Chinese because America is regarded as the western world, part of the western world. But when he is already in the West and, you know, he still has a connection with the East, back in China. And then the power and the imagination and maybe the inspiration sometimes—even the anxiety—at the bottom of his heart from the East is the driving force for him to reconsider himself, to reconsider his identity. This is really fascinating to me. So no matter where you are and what you are doing and how far you want to go, either to the west or to the east, you are always on the journey to examine, identify, and discover yourself. This is so fascinating to me.

ALEX: And maybe that's at the heart of *Journey to the West*'s consistent popularity across so many cultural contexts and mediums. Maybe it's that message of, self-discovery, learning to find ways to connect the past with the present, learning to foster intercultural communication—maybe that is what is consistently needed and refreshing for audiences.

FIONA: Yes, and, again, I think it's linked back to the background at that time in China. The Silk Road, which started where different cultures just, you know, flowed into China and people see different stuff. So I believe, like, you know, self-discovery is always an on-going topic in human society, no matter whether you are in sixteenth centuries or at this modern society.

ALEX: That kind of brings us full circle to what Jianfen was saying at the very beginning about how *Journey to the West* offers, you know, models of being while still giving you flexibility to map your own desires onto those potential models and acknowledge their flaws—maybe learn not to roundhouse kick all your enemies to the face, even when you want to. [laughs]

FIONA: Yeah, and also learning from mistakes: Don't be afraid of fixing your mistakes; always become a better version of yourself.

ALEX: Yeah. It's interesting—in conversations that I've had with folks who have read Lovell's adaptation of *Journey to the West*, I feel like we always come back to this question of does Sun Wukong actually change? He attracts so many different monikers—like, some people call him a superhero, some people call him a kung fu master, to some people he's a god, but then the word "trickster" also often comes up. But in the traditional literary definition of a trickster, that kind of archetype doesn't really change throughout their journey. They go on a journey, but they maintain their major driving forces as a character. But I think that Sun Wukong demonstrates how even—not to say that he starts out as the *worst* possible version of his character—but does demonstrate how drastic changes can be made across some kind of journey. So, I'm curious, do

you all think that Sun Wukong actually changes, or is he still that same old self-interested immortal king of the monkeys that we met at the beginning of *Journey to the West*?

FIONA: Sun Wukong definitely changed to become more obedient and following the rules, not only because he wants to change but also, you know, first of all because of this magic band where when the master would say a scripture, it would get tighter on top of his head, and then he would have this severe headache that he could not handle. So, it's almost, like, about the motivation, the extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation, that make him a better version of himself. But I do believe that in the beginning Wukong has a good soul, too. For example, he wants to build his mountain, he wants to serve other monkeys, give them more space and more area. So I think, like, he becomes more obedient.

JIANFEN: I think people might have different interpretations about whether they think that Sun Wukong has changed or not. For me, I agree with you, Fiona, that he does become a little bit more obedient than before because of the external forces. I mean, he has to comply with the rules and regulations. But I agree with you more on his own soul. I mean, he has a beautiful soul. And from the very beginning he wanted to protect his fellow monkeys, and he wanted to be eternal because he wanted to be the source that they can depend on, and he fights for them. So for his master, Tripitaka,he also uses his means and all his powers to protect his master. Even though for some times, for some episodes, the master makes a mistake, right? And the master drove him away and misunderstood him, but his still protects him. So I think he is consistent. I mean, loyalty to his mission is sort of, like, the beauty of his soul. At the same time he hates, you know, injustice, and he hates those wrong-doings, and he's trying his best to fight against them, even though sometimes he failed, and he has to borrow some forces from the Buddha or from, you know, Guanyin. But his intention is always good. So that is the beauty of this character. That is why I, for me, I would interpret that he never changes. And that's why he is the model that motivates me to find the true self in my heart no matter what external environmental changes and no matter what kind of, you know, pressure or something happens around me. Guard your own heart and be kind—I think that is the beauty of himself.

DEVAN: A lot of it depends on the media that you look at and where he is in that. Because a lot of it, like, in *The Forbidden Kingdom*, like I mentioned back at the beginning, he has this playful side. I don't know exactly where he's at in his journey in that movie because he's sort of just a character that's in it. But in the TV series of *American Born Chinese*, you know, Daniel Wu's character is a father figure; he's very stern, he has dignity, he's very proper. But at the same time I could see in the second season, maybe—if it gets green-lit, like we said—that maybe Wei-Chen needs his help and, being proper and having dignity isn't working, and Wei-Chen, you know, being younger, is able to bring out his father's more trickster side and this playful side of him. And you see some sort of character development there, you know? Like, “Being proper and everything doesn't always work for you, Dad!” You know? “You have to be able to have some

fun sometimes.” Time will tell, I guess, but that's definitely something I could see happening, I think.

FIONA: I just feel you’ve really got to read the book because, you know, through those small battles—or epic battles, actually—with demons and gods, Sun Wukong actually becomes this, like, more humble Wukong. Where at the beginning he was like, I can do one hand flip and then I will go this far, but you didn't even go out of the Buddha's palm. And then, through those changes, he is the one seeking enlightenment, seeking the justice, during the entire journey. So this part we definitely can see some changes.

DEVAN: This kind of ties with what Fiona says: In the graphic novel, you see that Sun Wukong still has that trickster side because he disguises himself as, you know, Jin's cousin, Chin-Kee. So he does have that trickster side in the graphic novel.

[Transition music]

ALEX: That concludes our conversation for today. Thank you so much to our fabulous guests, Jianfen, Devan, and Fiona. It's been an absolute pleasure discussing this topic and these texts with you all. And I know our listeners at home will enjoy hearing your thoughts as well.

FIONA: Oh, thank you.

ALEX: Of course. For the folks at home, if you'd like more information about the Big Read, please visit the Big Read section of the Purdue English Department's website, where you'll find an archive of materials about previous Big Read selections as well as the schedule for this fall’s remaining Big Read events. Thanks for joining us, and, until next time, this is Alex Anderson with the Big Read podcast.

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