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Comics & Graphic Novels

Monkey King: Vol. 1: Birth of the Stone Monkey: Adventures from China Series
Chao Peng, illustrator
JR Comics
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Currently, there are a surprising number of sequential adaptations of prose works, faithful and otherwise, available to readers seeking something other than the super-heroic serial adventures that have dominated the American market for the past half century. One could even argue that we're in the midst of a Renaissance, if not a dawning Golden Age, of graphic novels based upon titles drawn from the Western canon and genre literature. However, the key term—and primary emphasis—in that statement would have to be upon the word "Western," since the majority of these books were inspired by works originally written in English.

Fortunately, there are exceptions to every rule, and the release of JR Comics's *Monkey King Volume 1: Birth of the Stone Monkey* readily proves that the great tales of any culture can be transformed into accessible, entertaining, even enlightening comics intended for a Western audience.

Monkey King is based upon one of China's most famous novels, *The Journey to the West* by Cheng En Wu. Set in a mythic prehistory when men shared their world with gods and demons, *Journey* focuses on the escapades of the Stone Monkey, a creature born in the explosion of a boulder atop Spring Mountain.

Having absorbed the power of both heaven and earth, the Stone Monkey naturally possesses an array of incredible powers, gifts that are augmented by lessons learned as a disciple of Master Puti, one of the ten disciples of Buddha. Unfortunately, no amount of training can teach the Stone Monkey the most important lessons—particularly, the necessity of humility—that Puti has to offer, and soon he's challenging not only the four rulers of the seas and the King of Hell, but also the supreme heavenly ruler, the Jade Emperor. As a result of these and other outrages, the Stone Monkey eventually finds himself on a holy quest, a journey that will test his limits even as it instills in him some hard-won lessons.

This adaptation was created by one of China's most revered comic creators and teachers,

Wei Dong Chen, and illustrated by Chao Peng, one of that worthy's master's more exceptional students. Chen's script flows effortlessly between episodes even while granting each player a distinctive voice, and Peng's energetic art captures both their boldest actions and subtlest expressions. Together, they've created an engrossing, entertaining epic fantasy that mixes widescreen adventure with soul-clarifying introspection and high philosophy with lowbrow humor to great effect.

Bill Baker