



Institute of Chinese Studies

# WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Reimagining Feminism in  
Journey to the West: Agency,  
Power, and Gender Dynamics  
in the Chinese Classic*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker :

**Aditya Kumar Pandey**

19 February 2025

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**Speaker:** Dr. Aditya Kumar Pandey, Assistant Professor, Department of Chinese, Sikkim University, Gangtok.

**Chair:** Dr. Usha Chandran, Assistant Professor, Centre for Chinese and Southeast Asian Studies, School of Language, Literature, and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

**Date:** 19 February 2025

**Venue:** Zoom Webinar

- The seminar focused on feminist representations in *Journey to the West*, a 16th-century text by Wu Cheng'en, which narrates the pilgrimage of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang to India in the 7th century. The Chair, Dr. Usha Chandran, highlighted that *Journey to the West* uniquely blends mythology, folklore, religion, satire, and adventure, serving as both an allegory of moral cultivation and a reflection of social realities. Despite being written within a male-dominated literary tradition, the novel features numerous female characters whose representations offer insights into the gender norms and power dynamics during the Ming Dynasty period.
- Dr. Aditya Kumar Pandey, examined female representations in the novel from a feminist perspective, structuring the seminar into three sections: Traditional Gender Roles in the Ming Dynasty, Female Characters in *Journey to the West* and Feminist Reinterpretation: Agency and Power.
- The speaker began with an exploration of Confucian gender norms that shaped the representation of women during the Ming period, describing how women's roles were defined by strict moral codes, such as the Three Obediences and Four Virtues, which emphasised submission to male authority. Literature of the era often reinforced these ideals, portraying women as either virtuous and submissive or as dangerous figures whose ambitions disrupted the patriarchal order. While discussing female characters in the novel, the speaker categorised female characters into three broad archetypes: The Virtuous and Gentle Female, represented by Guanyin and Princess Iron Fan; the Ruthless and Vicious Female, represented by White Bone Demoness, the Scorpion

Demoness, and the Jade Rabbit Spirit; and, the Boldly Romantic Female, represented by the Queen of the Women's Kingdom.

- In conclusion, the speaker offered a critical feminist reinterpretation of *Journey to the West*, challenging the traditional male-centric reading of the novel by drawing attention to the agency of female characters in various forms — spiritual, maternal, political, and rebellious. The speaker argued that despite existing within a patriarchal framework, these depictions represent women as active participants that shape the novel's narrative, rather than playing merely passive supporting roles.

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