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Journey to the west the demons strike back review

REVIEW / FANTASY JOURNEY TO THE WEST: THE DEMONS STRIKE BACK (PG) 109 minutes/Now showing/3/5 stars
The story: The monk Tang Sanzang (Kris Wu) is on a journey to India to obtain sutras. He is accompanied by three disciples - Monkey (Lin Gengxin), Piggy (Yang Yiwei) and Sandy (Mengke Bateer). Along the way, they encounter a nest of vicious spider demons, a petulant king (Bao Bei-er) and his minister (Yao Chen), who has a dangerous belief in doing as he pleases. This is billed as the sequel to Journey To The West: Conquering The Demons (2013), but there are actually quite a few changes from the earlier film. Hong Kong's Stephen Chow only writes and produces here, and leaves the directing to Tsui Hark (Detective Dee And The Mystery Of The Phantom Flame, 2010) instead. The tone of the film is a tad less silly, but there are still comic elements that are signature Chow, such as the exaggeratedly drooly Piggy and old women who are supposed to be exhausted 16-year-olds. More jarring is the overhauled cast. Idol singer-actor Kris Wu makes for a better-looking Tang, but Wen Zhang was more affecting in the earlier film. Monkey, Piggy and Sandy are also played by different actors, though the impact is less marked in their case as their faces are hidden under heavy make-up. The source material - the classic Chinese novel Journey To The West - merely serves as inspiration here and the film-makers take lots of liberty with the story. That is not necessarily a bad thing, though Tang behaves in a rather inconsistent manner, particularly in his relationship with Monkey. What makes the film entertaining is the inventive use of computer-generated imagery (CGI). Tsui piles on the effects and, more importantly, lets his imagination run riot in conjuring up landscapes, creatures and battles. There is a forest of deformed and menacing trees, a crazily colourful kingdom run by a child-like monarch and an epic showdown involving four buddhas, a giant Monkey and a demon who looks like a mechanical toy. Oh, and a poisoned Sandy gets transformed into a giant fish the gang have to lug around and keep wet. There is a wild and joyous abandon to the film-making that calls to mind Tsui's early work, Zu Warriors From The Magic Mountain (1983), which memorably featured flying stone elephants. He has not lost his touch when it comes to making fantasy take flight. Lin Gengxin (centre) as the Monkey King and Kris Wu (right) as his master, Xuan Zang, in the film Journey to the West: The Demons Strike Back (category IIA) (Cantonese), directed by Tsui Hark. Richard Gray January 29, 2017 Film, Film Reviews Summary
A collection of beautiful set pieces and frenetic action celebrate insanity, colour and spectacle. In other words, a perfect celebratory film for the Lunar New Year. The much-hyped first collaboration between the legendary director Tsui Hark and "King of Comedy" Stephen Chow doesn't change the game, but it is unapologetically joyful in its outlook. Chow's 2013 epic Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons was the highest grossing film in China at the time of release. Based loosely on the 16th century tale that many westerners know as Monkey, it highlighted the comedy/faction capering that Chow is known for, but on such an epic scale that it eclipsed similar stories in its vicinity. In an almost completely recast sequel, monk Tang Sanzang (Kris Wu) has tamed the Monkey King (Kenny Lin) following the death of Miss Duan, but their conflict has now become one of bitter squabbling and destructive infighting. Continuing their journey west in search of the Buddhist sutras, together with Pigsy and Sandy (Mengke Bateer), they encounter a variety of demons along the way and must put aside their differences to achieve victory. JOURNEY TO THE WEST: THE DEMONS STRIKE BACK (西游记妖篇) is a monumentally silly film, and that's kind of the point. From the rubber-faced CG, that gives various characters over-the-top cartoon reactions, to the musical number about a naughty Monkey, everything is designed to be a festival of colourful visuals, showcasing Chow's comedy chops and Hark's mastery of large-scale action pieces. The episodic nature of the legendary 'journey' lends itself to the style, and the thin script and audiences alike have no choice but to go along with it. It's almost inconsequential that the original cast hasn't returned for the second entry, as the actors are subservient to the spectacle. The one exception is the absence of Bo Huang's wonderful turn as the Monkey King in the first entry, and it's a shock to the system seeing someone 14 years his junior playing the same role several years later, especially when the focus is more squarely on Monkey this time around. Kris Wu's Tang Sanzang is every bit the straight man his predecessor established. Mengke Bateer's limits are acknowledged by reworking his character into a giant CG fish demon, an amusing prop to be carried throughout the film. As the umpteenth ancient structure comes tumbling down around Monkey and the gang, you'd be forgiven for feeling a sense of repetition to proceedings, even if it is in the stunningly beautiful photography of some India-inspired sets. Yet all cynicism disappears with the last act of the film, an unabashedly bombastic action sequence that features a giant rock monkey, multiple Buddhas and a immortal Gold Vulture. If you can't find some fun in that, you really must be trippy (taka). Arriving with zero fanfare in the U.S., Journey to the West: The Demons Strike Back continues comedian Stephen Chow's interpretation of one of Chinese culture's most famous stories. A sequel to 2013's Conquering the Demons, this effects-laden adventure handily won the battle for the Lunar New Year box office in China, earning over \$105 million in three days. Chow wrote and directed the first installment, but here the legendary Tsui Hark takes the reins, expanding on his CG work in films like Taking of Tiger Mountain and the Detective Dee franchise. The result? A lot of action, considerably less comedy and heart. And a new cast, featuring pop sensation Kris Wu as Monk Tang and Lin Gengxin as the Monkey King. The Monkey King is usually the central figure in the narrative, but Chow focuses on Tang, an imperfect monk on his way to India to find enlightenment. In the first episode he took Monkey, pig demon Pigsy (played by several actors) and fish demon Sandy (Mengke Bateer) prisoner, but at the expense of the life of his first love, Duan (Shu Qi). Now the demons are appearing in a circus sideshow exhibit, where they are sullen and uncooperative until goaded into revealing their true natures. Destroying the circus and everything around it in exhilarating blasts of energy, the demons then trail after Tang on a series of increasingly chaotic encounters. The script, written by Chow, Hark and Kelvin Li Sizhen, draws from famous episodes in the original story. Tang rests in a mansion filled with alluring women, only to discover that they are demon spiders intent on devouring him. The ensuing fight is a marvel of FX and choreography, enhanced by silly 3D effects and nods to everything from Ray Harryhausen stop-motion animation to Japanese anime. The next stop is the kingdom of Bi Qui, where a white-robed minister (the glamorous but clearly untrustworthy Yao Chen) gives advice about dealing with a spoiled big king (Bao Bei'er) who throws tantrums much like Lewis Carroll's Red Queen. The Tim Burton allusions grow more obvious when the king is revealed as Red Boy, a bouncing ball of a demon with Transformer capabilities. Hark directs the action scenes with skill, giving full play to a panoply of effects. Composer Raymond Wong accentuates scenes with everything from familiar Peking Opera themes to chestnuts from the Warner Bros. cartoon library. The production design is like a child's picture book brought to life, filled with bright colors, dreamlike buildings, and intricate designs hidden in every corner. Largely missing is Chow's humor and heart. Every now and then some of his insane logic slips out, as when Yao Chen pretends to stage patently fake magic tricks. Tang's scenes with Felicity (Jelly Lin, star of Chow's The Mermaid), who could be an innocent songstress or a deadly demon, cut to the heart of the monk's dilemma as a Buddhist searching for enlightenment. But overall, The Demons Strike Back is more exhausting than fun, an extravaganza of effects that could use some soul. Fans of Chow's comedy should seek out his earlier version of the story, A Chinese Odyssey. Click here for cast and crew information. Friday, February 3, 2017 PG-13, 1 hr 49 min Action/Adventure Comedy SEE IT IN 35MM Digital 3D IMAX 3D ENTER CITY, STATE OR ZIP CODE Close The percentage of users who made a verified movie ticket purchase and rated this 3.5 stars or higher. Learn more Every day while CFI's Hollywood readers take in the business of the Chinese film industry, the actual movies can sometimes seem exotic or remote. But in major US cities, mainstream Chinese films are increasingly available: thanks to Wanda's purchase of AMC and distributors like China Lion, they get American theatrical releases practically simultaneous to their premieres at home. Though they receive virtually no publicity outside the non-Chinese community, these films are more than worth seeking out by anyone serious about engaging the Chinese industry, understanding the Chinese sensibility and familiarizing themselves with China's talent pool. Periodically, CFI will review and point readers in the direction of noteworthy US releases of contemporary commercial and independent Chinese titles. Journey to the West: The Demons Strike Back (2017), directed by Tsui Hark, written and produced by Stephen Chow. Distributed by Sony Pictures Releasing, opens in the U.S. February 3, 2017 (cinemas here) Grade: B-If you're going to see one of the two current Chinese films inspired by the adventures of China's greatest mythological hero, the Monkey King, make it Journey to the West: The Demons Strike Back.Director Tsui Hark and writer-producer Stephen Chow's fantasy sequel shattered opening day box office records in China (US\$52.5 million) at the start of the lunar new year holiday, seeing it in the US will offer a quick snapshot of what draws Chinese audiences out in droves. Assuming you take an interest in that sort of thing and are up for high-spirited adventure and some cross-cultural anthropology, just don't go to the movies expecting the sort of Hollywood blockbuster that typically sets records in the New York or Los Angeles.Sure, Journey to the West 2: The Demons Strike Back (JTTW2) features plenty of special effects that propel its heroes, Monk Tang (Kris Wu), Sun Wukong (a.k.a. the Monkey King, played by Lin Gengxin), and their buddies Pigsy (Yang Yiwei) and Sandy (former NBA player Mengke Bateer), through a gauntlet of monsters on their journey to India in search of enlightenment—but the effects are inconsistent, in some scenes spectacular and reminiscent of Terry Gilliam, and then cheap or laughable in others.These are not the surreal WETA Workshop-like effects of a Lord of the Rings fantasy realm. Sometimes they leave the human talent hanging, forced to cover for their lacking on-screen environment in what ends up being an enjoyable, if accidental, so-bad-it's-good sort of visual comedy. In one memorable scene, Wu, in monk's robes, almost succeeds in deploying his pop idol smirk to distract the audience from what's clearly a run shot against a green screen. Wu hoots it in slo-mo, away from his alter ego Monkey, across a CGI landscape of gnarled forest. The cartoony, depth-perception-defying jaunt instantly recalled Jimmy Stewart falling out of an upper story in Rear Window in 1954.To the credit of Wu and his co-stars—including his love interest Felicity (Jelly Lin) and his unrequited admirer The Minister (Yao Chen)—they also show heart. Additionally, for those interested in the Chinese classics, they deliver the clearest interpretation in a while of one tale from the 16th century epic novel for which the film, and many more like it in China, is named. (If you think the Star Wars, Star Trek, and Marvel franchises have sequel fever, you've clearly never delved into China's archive of literally hundreds of Monkey King movies.)Despite some wild action sequences that deliver Chinese mythology with Alice in Wonderland-level psychedelia—including sexy maidens turned to man-eating spiders, Sandy morphing into the Biggest Fish Ever, and The King (played with brilliant mischief by Bao Bei-er) turning into a nightmarish, petulant demon-child—director Tsui and producer Chow fall short of making a movie that will sprout legs in the West.American audiences will feel let down if they expect a seamless depiction of an extravagant fantasy world. Chow excels in a kind of kitchen-sink absurdism, juxtaposing ridiculous premises and jokes against one another, and frequently breaking the fourth wall—an approach that mitigates some of the pleasures to be gained from sinking into a large-scale, mythical action-adventure. At the same time, the antics of Monk Tang, Monkey, and company, each of whose strengths complements the others' weaknesses, possess brio and often inspired silliness that manages to deliver some sincere Buddhist teachings.So yes, the movie now topping the box office in the PRC, where religion is tightly controlled by its one-party state, has a spiritual message. The message is that we are all subordinate to a greater power called Buddha, and only through surrender to that notion and a practice of cooperation with one's fellow man (or monkey), may inner peace be attained.Tsui and Chow, filmmakers formed in the freewheeling crucible of Hong Kong in the 1980s and early 90s, have recently hit their commercial stride in China, spending big budgets and grossing big yuan. Chow's The Mermaid became the highest-grossing picture of all time in China upon its release at the same time last year.But as with The Mermaid, American audiences may find the storyline in this latest Monkey King tale too convoluted. Its takeaways—Monkey fiercely battling demons to help his monk master reach enlightenment—sometimes feels akin to a super-loud music video for Beijing's much-touted campaign to promote Chinese soft power throughout Asia.As an official co-production that guarantees a greater share of the film's profits to partners from South Korea, the latest Journey To The West appears to be another attempt at cementing China as the inviolable birthplace of Asia's most dominant action hero, and a none-too-subtle reminder that said hero, a Chinese monkey, is capable of great things across Asia—from South Korea to India, say. Slapstick subversiveness notwithstanding, it still amounts to a Sino-centric power play that diminishes the appeal of the enterprise. Despite enjoying its great moments of wackiness, my teenage American daughter, who lived the first two-thirds of her life in Beijing speaking Mandarin—came out of a recent screening and said, "They just can't seem to move past the Monkey King. But they can't seem to get it right either."Here are some recent & modern-era vintage Chinese and Hong Kong films for comparisonA+PLATFORM (2000, dir. Jia Zhangke)THE WORLD (2004, dir. Jia Zhangke)DRUNKEN MASTER 2 (1994, dir. Lau Kar Leung & Jackie Chan)KUNG FU HUSTLE (2004, dir. Stephen Chow)ALET THE BULLETS FLY (2010, dir. Jiang Wen)THE MERMAID (2016, dir. Stephen Chow)A TOUCH OF SIN (2013, dir. Jia Zhangke)STILL LIFE (2006, dir. Jia Zhangke)MOUNTAINS MAY DEPART (2015, dir. Jia Zhangke)LITTLE BIG SOLDIER (2010, dir. Ding Sheng)EXTRAORDINARY MISSION (2017, dir. Alan Mak & Anthony Pun)MR SIX (2015, dir. Guan Hu)A WORLD WITHOUT THIEVES (2004, dir. Feng Xiaogang)SUZHOU RIVER (1999, dir. Lou Ye)HOUSE OF FLYING DAGGERS (2004, dir. Zhang Yimou)RAISE THE RED LANTERN (1991, dir. Zhang Yimou)A-DUCKWEED (2017, dir. Han Han)BELONGED TO YOU (2016, dir. Zhang Yibai)C+BUDDIES IN INDIA (2017, dir. Wang Baoqiang)C-THE DEVOTION OF SUSPECT X (2017, dir. Alec Su)D-TINY TIMES (2013, dir. Guo Jingming) About the author Jonathan Landreth was the founding editor of China Film Insider in July 2015, and helped build CFI in its first year. He currently is Content Strategist for the Asia Society Policy Institute. From 2013-2016 he was managing editor of ChinaFile, the online magazine of the Center on U.S. China Relations at Asia Society. From 2004-12, Landreth lived in Beijing, where he opened the first Asia bureau of The Hollywood Reporter and was its first Asia editor. His work also has appeared in The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Los Angeles Times, The Christian Science Monitor, Forbes, The China Economic Quarterly, Wallpaper, Reuters, and Agence France Presse—often with a focus on how the media and entertainment industries shape perceptions of China.

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