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**LONDON:** Director Chen Shizheng found the hero of his latest opera while groping in the darkness.

It was the height of the Cultural Revolution in China and when shots rang out in the streets, Chen, then an 8-year-old boy, would often hide under his bed. It was there that he accidentally discovered a lacquer jewelry box stashed beneath the floorboards.

Inside were banned classic Ming and Qing dynasty novels. The pages of one, "Journey to the West," and its hero Monkey, transported Chen away from the harsh realities of Mao's China.

"It was the most inspiring thing as a kid because Monkey was fearless and fighting, defending his own rights in this incredible magical world," Chen said in a telephone interview. "It gave me a lot of strength. It gave my mind somewhere to go."

On Thursday he realizes his lifelong dream of turning the book into an opera — with the help of ex-Blur frontman Damon Albarn and artist Jamie Hewlett, co-creators of cartoon band Gorillaz. The Mandarin-language "Monkey: Journey to the West," which premieres at the Manchester International Festival before traveling to Paris and Berlin, is a unique mix of animation, martial arts and video game elements. The opera is also expected to go to Tokyo and New York.

It tells the story of a Monkey king who gatecrashes heaven hoping he can become immortal. The gods imprison him in a mountain for 500 years as punishment. He is offered a chance to redeem himself by protecting a young monk who must travel west from China to India in search of sacred Buddhist scrolls.

Chen took the book with him when he left China in 1987 on his own journey to the United States and reread it each year during his breaks between

productions such as his 20-hour, 55-act Ming dynasty opera "The Peony Pavilion," which opened in New York in 1999, and his first film "Dark Matter," starring Meryl Streep which was released this year.

"I go back and read it, it's like a spiritual journey or wandering. You feel young again, you feel renewed a sense of wonderment," Chen said.

He told his friend Jean-Luc Choplin, director of Paris' Theatre du Chatelet, his idea of adapting the book into a circus opera and Choplin commissioned the work on the spot.

He was searching for a composer while directing Monteverdi's Orfeo for the English National Opera, when one of the ENO's directors, Alex Poots — now head of the Manchester International Festival — gave Chen a Gorillaz DVD.

"I loved the animation," Chen said. "I loved the combination of the score and the visual images and how it integrated so well."

He met Albarn and Hewlett and discovered they also shared a childhood fondness of the story. The Gorillaz duo knew Monkey from the Japanese cult TV series that was broadcast in Britain in the early 1980s.

Chen wanted the opera to reflect 21st-century China. So he took Albarn and Hewlett to China, showing them not only villages that hadn't changed in 1,000 years but also rapidly expanding cities. Albarn sampled snippets of sound and Hewlett sketched.

Chen hopes the opera will ignite others' imagination and inspire a new generation of Western audiences to explore Chinese classics.

A Mandarin-language opera might seem like an improbable way to engage Westerners. But Chen says the arias will be accompanied by a few short subtitles and most of the storytelling is through the music and visuals.

"It's a proper opera and it's been really hard work but it's not meant to be some highbrow thing," Albarn said in a statement. "It has been a spiritual journey for everyone involved ... And if it works, it could be absolutely

extraordinary."

Chen said he had also long wanted to craft a story for traditional Chinese acrobats, who typically begin training before the age of 5 to do gravity defying stunts and contortions. He made about 10 trips to China to recruit his cast.

The role of Monkey is so intense that two acrobats are needed for each performance.

Chen said the opera tells only part of the story and he hopes to eventually expand it and adapt it into a movie.

"This is, to me, really just the beginning," he said. "There so many incredible colorful stories, it seems endless."

Manchester International Festival,  
<http://www.manchesterinternationalfestival.com>