Hanuman in Asian Tradition

In India, Hanuman has countless shrines and temples. Many songs and hymns praise Hanuman and ask for his protection; he is said to cure the singer’s pain and suffering. Indian dancers use heavy makeup for monkey characters to show facial expressions, but Southeast Asians wear wooden or papier-mâché masks for folk, temple and court plays. In Cambodia, Thailand and Laos, the dancers perform acrobatics while wearing masks over their heads like helmets, but in Javanese and Balinese wayang wong, monkey dancers are less acrobatic, and their masks cover only their faces.

In Indian tradition, Hanuman is a bachelor; certain of his Indian devotees remain single, wear costumes, paint their faces, carry clubs, and make monkey sounds and movements. In Southeast Asian tradition, however, Hanuman likes females and fathers children with them. Southern Thai fishing boats are painted with images of Hanuman catching a mermaid that destroyed the causeway to the island where Sita was held captive; fishermen believe these paintings help them catch fish. In Bangkok, some Royal Thai Barges with figures of Hanuman and other monkeys on their prows are rowed in formation on the city’s main river for royal events. Thai kites bear Hanuman images because he flies like the wind. Thai kick-boxers have Hanuman tattoos and wear his figure on their armbands to be swift and powerful like him; some fight moves are named after incidents involving Hanuman. In November at San Phra Kan shrine in Lopburi, north of Bangkok, worshippers offer a feast for monkeys there, who are believed to be