

The Serene Dragon

Xiao Sheng and the Dragon's Pearl

This happened long ago during the great drought when the boy first of all found a patch of lush grass that never diminished, no matter how often he cut it to sell in the market as cattle feed. One day it occurred to Xiao Sheng that instead of traveling all the way to the patch each day to cut grass, he could dig it up and replant it at home. So he dug up the turf by the roots and beneath it found a wonderful pearl. Thinking himself doubly lucky, the boy put it in his pocket and went home, where he planted the grass beside the hut he shared with his widowed mother and then hid the pearl in an almost empty rice jar where no burglar would think of looking.

Next morning they woke to find that the grass had withered and died, but the rice jar was brimming over. That was when they realized they had found a dragon's pearl, because it is a virtue of these gems to multiply whatever they are kept with, be it rice, money or the patch of grass where this one had been found. From that day Xiao Sheng and his mother lacked for nothing, but because they were generous to their neighbors, rumors soon spread as to the source of their new-found prosperity. In time these tales reached the ears of the local landlord who soon turned up with soldiers to demand the pearl, claiming that it must have been found on his property (since he owned all the land in that region) and so rightfully belonged to him.

Rather than hand it over, Xiao Sheng swallowed the pearl. Immediately his stomach felt filled with a raging fire so he ran to the muddy trickled nearby which was all that remained of the drought-stricken river and drank and drank till it seemed he would drain it dry. And as he drank, he grew larger and larger and his form changed until the onlookers saw not a boy, but a mighty dragon who finally stopped drinking and turned to look around him with a certain wonder in his eyes. The landlord and his soldiers fled but the dragon flew swiftly after them and unleashed a flood which both drowned them and brought blessed relief to the parched land, so that the paddy fields filled and the river flowed strong and full again.

Finally, the dragon that had been Xiao Sheng took sad leave of his mother and swam away down river. To this day that stretch of it is called "Wang Niang Tan", which means the "looking back at mother bends" because the twenty-four snakelike bends in the river are said to have been formed by Xiao Sheng who did just that as he departed.

Robber version

This version follows much the same path as Version 1, except that it is robbers that come to steal the pearl, not the landlord. The boy swallows it and his insides start burning so he runs to the well. No relief comes, however, and his skins turns to scales and wings come from his back.