

The Great Deed of Li Ji

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In Fujian, in the ancient state of East Yue, there stands a tall mountain range. Many of its peaks reach several miles in height and seem to disappear among the clouds.

There was once living in the northwest cleft of that mountain range a terrible serpent. This beast was seventy or eighty feet long and wider than the span of ten hands. Officials from nearby towns met to discuss the serpent.

“The beast has eaten some of our soldiers,” said a commandant. “Now my armies will not march through that mountain pass.”

“And it has threatened our tax collectors,” said a magistrate.

“We have tried to give it offerings of cows and sheep,” said an officer, “but it will not be appeased. The serpent demands human beings.”

“Whatever shall we do?” they chorused.

An elderly man with a long gray beard who sat at the back of the room slowly rose. He bowed to the officials. “Honorable gentlemen,” he began, “the serpent has entered my dreams. It has told me what it requires. If you will but give it each year one girl, of twelve or thirteen years of age, it will leave all others alone.”

The officials talked excitedly among themselves.

“There will be no shortage of girls,” said one.

“We may have to beg poor families to sell their daughters,” said another.

“But if this is what the beast demands, then what else can we do?” insisted a third.

So they agreed. Each year, they offered a poor family money in exchange for a daughter. On the first day of the eighth month, they carried a girl up to the northwest cleft of that mountain

range and deposited her at the mouth of the serpent's cave. Then the officials quickly returned to the safety of the village below. After nine years, they assumed that nine girls had been devoured.

In the tenth year, there was living in Jiangle County a man by the name of Li Dan, who had six daughters. In those days, married daughters always went to live with their husbands' families. Li Dan's youngest was a girl by the name of Li Ji. She had heard about the officials' offer to purchase a girl for a sizable sum.

Li Ji went to her father and mother. She bowed to her parents. "Honorable father, honorable mother, I have come to ask you to exchange me for money. You have six daughters and not one single son. When my sisters and I have all married, there will be no one left at home to care for you. If I cannot serve you with my life, then please allow me to serve you with my death. At least you will have the money you need to care for yourselves in your old age."

"Li Ji, we cannot agree to such an arrangement. Each of our daughters is precious to us," said her father.

"We love you far too much, Li Ji," said her mother.

But Li Ji was a determined girl. She went in secret to the officials to give herself to be sacrificed. However, she asked them to agree to three demands.

"First, you must provide me with a snake-hunting dog. Second, you must give me a sharp sword. And finally, you must not tell my family where I am until after you have delivered me to the mouth of the serpent's cave."

The officials considered her offer. "Li Ji," said one of the officials, "you have chosen wisely. We agree to your demands."

So they kept Li Ji in waiting, and then on the first day of the eighth month they carried her up to the northwest cleft of that mountain range and deposited her there in front of the serpent's cave. Then they quickly returned to the safety of the village below.

All night long, Li Ji held her snake-hunting dog and clutched her sharp sword. She could hear the serpent moving about in the cave, but it wasn't until the light broke over the mountains that the beast appeared. Its head was as large as a rice barrel; its eyes were like two huge mirrors reflecting the morning sun.

Li Ji took a deep breath. She lay down her sharp sword and reached into her cloak to remove the riceballs dipped in malt sugar that she had hidden there. She rolled them toward the serpent, and when the beast opened its mouth to taste their sweetness, Li Ji released her snake-hunting dog.

The dog leapt onto the serpent's back and bit hard through its scaly flesh. When the beast turned to meet the dog's attack, Li Ji picked up her sharp sword and plunged it into the serpent's heart. The beast turned again, this time to face her. Its eyes were wide with surprise. Then it staggered forward and collapsed.

When Li Ji was certain that the serpent breathed no more, she stepped over its lifeless body and entered its cave. There she found the nine skulls of the nine previous victims.

She held one of those skulls and spoke to it. "What a pity," she said, "that you did not recognize your own strength—did not know your own power."

Li Ji took off her cloak and laid the nine skulls within it. She carried them back down the mountain and presented them to the officials as proof that she had indeed slain the serpent.

There was great rejoicing in Fujian, and when the king of East Yue learned of Li Ji's victory, he made her his wife. He also made Li Ji's father a magistrate in Jiangle County and

gave her mother and sisters many riches. Each year for as long as she lived, they held a festival in her honor and sang ballads that celebrated the great deed of Li Ji.

And from that time to this, the county has been free of serpents.

Author's Note

To put the world in order, we must first put the nation in order; to put the nation in order, we must put the family in order; to put the family in order, we must cultivate our personal life; and to cultivate our personal life, we must first set our hearts right.

—Confucius

China's recorded history dates back over 3,000 years. Along with Babylon, Egypt, and India, China is considered one of the Four Ancient Civilizations. According to *Wikipedia*, *Fujian*, a mountainous region with a culturally diverse population, has a long history of militarism. *Yue* is often used to refer to the people who inhabited southern China. With its huge geographical area, there are many diverse aspects of ancient Chinese culture in this region, but there are unifying themes as well.

In early Chinese civilization, wealthy families controlled various territories by holding positions in the government and the military. The emperors were from different dynasties, or royal families. Qin Shi Huang, who began building the Great Wall, became emperor in 221 BCE and set out to unify China. The Great Wall was built to protect the country from foreign invaders. This happened around the time this story originated.

There were three major spiritual teachers in ancient China whose influence continues today in modern Chinese culture. Around 600 BCE, Laozi, or Lao-Tsu, described the most ancient Chinese spiritual teachings known as Daoism, sometimes spelled Taoism. This tradition is based on following the "path" to contentment. Confucius (551–479 BCE) taught people about the importance of being loyal, unselfish, and courteous. The teachings of Buddha (563–483 BCE) focused on achieving absolute peace through an "Eightfold Path" including rightness of views, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

The emphasis on acting "in the right way" for one's station in life is central to ancient Chinese culture. Filial piety, or courtesy, love, and respect for parents and ancestors, is an ideal

that comes from the teachings of Confucius. It is a foundation for a good society. Filial piety includes showing respect for family both inside and outside of the home so as to honor the family name. It also means having the financial means to support parents, providing male heirs, and honoring parents after their death through appropriate sacrifices.

In ancient China, family relationships were most important, and everyone in the family had a particular role to play in life. Most families consisted of many relatives living together under one roof. Poor children did not go to school; instead, they worked on their parents' farms. Rich boys went to school, but rich girls did not. When a girl married, she went to live in her husband's household. These married women's lives were ruled by their mothers-in-law, who were entitled to treat their daughters-in-law in any way they pleased.

In China today, festivals are still based on the Chinese lunar calendar. The Moon Festival happens on August 15 in the eighth month of the year. The full moon is a potent symbol of wholeness, peace, and prosperity for Chinese people. Eight is also a popular number in Chinese culture. The first day of the eighth month would be a very auspicious day.

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