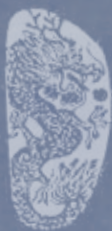


The Emperor & the Teapot



皇帝和茶壺的神話

一個寶貴
的價值
超過黃金



They say the great emperor Qianlong treasured tea enough that he brewed it in secret with his own august hands, though the son of the gods was forbidden such mundane activities. He also loved to leave the Forbidden City in secret, basking in the glory of ordinariness. He enjoyed the mystery and danger of being amongst his people. He would often disguise himself to walk the streets, visit teahouses and watch shows, admiring the everyday lives of his subjects. One evening, he was strolling home from a show, his bodyguards walking several paces behind to remain anonymous. The emperor suddenly stopped dead in his tracks, uplifted to Heaven by the deep and lasting fragrance of a very fine tea, as fine as the tribute teas shared only with the palace. It smelled of nutty, fruity plums and the best of Chinese herbs, filling the whole of his mind with nostalgia. "What wonderful tea!" he thought. And yet, the only dwelling nearby belonged to a simple farmer. The emperor was curious beyond containment, walking to the open door and with courtesy exclaiming, "Excuse me?" into the dark, lamplit interior, which was so simply adorned with a small shrine to the local land god, a table and two chairs, one of which was occupied by a very old man whose wrinkles were as telling as the crags of distant Yellow Mountain. "Hello, old friend," the emperor began. "Might I come in?"

"Sure. 'Tis a fine night for a guest," the old man replied with a sweet smile. "Have a seat and share some tea, if you will."

The emperor went inside, signaling to his guards to wait for him, full of joy that he lived in a world so civilized and prosperous that even a simple farmer understood the Way of Tea. The two drank cup after cup of one of the darkest, most delectable aged teas the emperor had ever tasted. Each cup transported him further and further into the mountains, like discovering a partially hidden path

leading up—the kind so seldom used that it is covered with brush, and only discernible to the true mountain man. He lost himself in its splendor, and lost touch with time as well. After some indeterminate number of cups, he looked into the old man's eyes and realized that there was a great and deep wisdom twinkling through the years of life they had observed, many more passing seasons than he. "What is this magical tea?" wondered the emperor. To which the old man giggled in an embarrassed way. "Oh no, noble sir, though I usually do trade for some leaves as I can each year, this year the drought made that impossible. Fortunately, the gods and the wisdom of my ancestors left me this amazing teapot from Jiangsu, used by my father and his father before him, back more than a hundred years. It has seen so much tea, friend, that it brews such liquor with a bit of boiled spring water poured through it."

The emperor was awestruck. He spent half an hour admiring the old pot, holding it up to the light with precious grace and gentle strokes befitting imperial jade. The old man answered all his questions, telling him all he knew of the pot and its origins. A man of tea is changed by such encounters, and the emperor was as pure a Chajin as any. He knew that he had made a lifelong friend tonight, both in the old man and his pot.

Very soon after, the emperor arranged for the old man to come into some fortunate circumstances that increased his family's holdings greatly, without revealing that the newfound abundance was a gift from anyone, let alone the throne. As far as the old man knew, his family was blessed. He also sent envoys to Yixing to bring back the best pots they could find, like the old man's. The craftsmen there were also to be honored. Over the years, the emperor and the old man shared many more wonderful tea sessions together, though those are other tea tales for other times...