



Legacy

Jing People – Jing Islands, China

There was a time when the ocean was in chaos, a place of fear, and the weaker, softer-fleshed ocean creatures lived with their souls in turmoil. Sharks and whales, in their voracious appetite, swallowed and gobbled up massive quantities of those softer creatures, and threatened to exterminate them once and for all.

It was then that the Sea Dragon King decided to take matters into his own hands and summoned all the beings of the ocean to the Crystal Palace.

When they had all arrived, the Sea Dragon King sat on his throne and looked out over the crowd, raising an eyebrow and gently stretching his beard.

‘How is it that there are so many big fish and so few small fish and creatures?’ he asked, looking around the assembly.

Whales and sharks shuddered. They knew well what the Sea Dragon King was capable of in his anger, and they were aware of their own rampage, both in the waves and in the depths. They were also very fat, and that betrayed them.

‘And well?’ said the Sea Dragon King, waiting for an answer.

Suddenly, the weaker sea creatures – shrimps, octopuses, crabs, squids and horseshoe crabs – emerged from the crowd and presented themselves to the king. And, one by one, they told the ruler of the seas of the fear and anguish in which they lived, and the sadness that

covered their hearts, knowing that their fate would soon lead them to extinction.

'I spend my days crying in the deep holes of the reefs,' said a squid with tender white flesh, 'hiding from whales and sharks, who have devoured my whole family already. And meanwhile, hunger torments me ... but I dare not come out of my hiding place in search of food, for I know that those savages would devour me too before I even realised it.'

The Sea Dragon King looked up and glared harshly at the sharks and whales, who, still trembling, stared at the ceiling and walls of the Crystal Palace, trying to hide their guilt.

'Is this true?' the king's voice thundered.

Silence. The gluttons were now staring at the ground, trying to remain unnoticed, not daring to meet the gaze of the great lord of the seas. A bubble burst involuntarily from one of the shark's gills, and the shark, feeling betrayed by drawing attention to himself, thought his fate was sealed.

But the lord of the seas was not an evil being; otherwise, the sea creatures would not have chosen him as king when the oceans were founded.

'From now on,' the Sea Dragon King spoke again, this time in a calm tone, 'whales and sharks are going to stop feeding on these small, soft creatures which have so much difficulty swimming ...'

'But, sir,' interrupted the squid who had spoken last, 'if you're not there to keep an eye on them, they're going to gobble us up anyway ... and no one will dare tell you!'

The Sea Dragon King raised his eyebrow again as he lowered his head in thought. What that squishy squid was saying was true: How to control the vastness of the ocean before it was too late and one of these species would have to be mourned as extinct?

'Well...' said the king, raising his head again and beckoning the weaker creatures of the ocean to come to him.

And, speaking quietly, he said:

‘To each of you, by species, I am going to grant you some defences.’

The helpless creatures looked at each other without understanding what the king could be talking about.

‘To you squids,’ continued the Sea Dragon King, ‘I grant you a bag of ink. You are to hide it in your belly and, in case of danger, you are to shoot that ink into the eyes of your attacker. This will blind them momentarily and, in the meantime, you can escape.’

The squid were filled with glee, while the rest of the creatures looked at the king with hopeful faces, longing to know what their defence would be.

‘To you crabs,’ continued the lord of the sea, ‘I grant you a pair of claws. You shall wear them on your forelegs, and with them you shall drive back your aggressors.’

And the crabs hopped and somersaulted for joy.

‘To you horseshoe crabs, who do not see well, I grant you a sword, which you shall carry concealed in your backs. With it, those gluttons will not dare to gobble you up.’

The horseshoe crabs could not do a somersault, but their exhilaration led them to rise from the seabed to gently descend again.

‘To you octopuses, who, like squids, have a soft and tender body, I grant eight long legs, with which you will be able to intimidate your pursuers, and with which you will acquire great speed in flight.’

And the octopuses rolled in the sand with glee.

Finally, the Sea Dragon King looked at the shrimps with sad eyes and said tenderly:

‘And I have a favour to ask of you shrimps. It is only fair that sharks and whales survive too, for they too play an important role in the oceans. And if it is now much more difficult for them to gobble up all the other weak creatures, what will they feed on?’

Shrimps lowered their heads in sorrow, knowing what the Sea Dragon King was going to ask of them.

‘I ask you to be the main food for many species in the seas,’ he said sorrowfully. ‘But in return, I grant you to have more than a million eggs in each breeding, so that you may not only sustain many of your brethren of other species in the seas, but preserve your seed and not perish.’

And the shrimps, grim-faced, accepted their mission responsibly for the sake of all life in the oceans.

And, to finish, the Sea Dragon King said solemnly to those creatures gathered around him:

‘All the defences I have bestowed upon you will be your legacy, an heirloom to be passed down from generation to generation until the end of time, for your sake and for the sake of your descendants ... as well as for the righteous flow of the living ocean.’ □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda and Xueping Luo (2023).

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Comments

Such a traditional tale could only be born in a people with a rich fishing culture, such as the Jing People of southern China.

Their population is barely 30,000, but they have a distinct culture. Firstly, because of their origins: they are Vietnamese who moved to the Guangxi coast of southern China, near the Vietnamese border, in the 16th century, although, according to tradition, they had already existed as a people for around 500 years. And secondly, because of their language, basically Vietnamese, but with many words borrowed from Cantonese, Zhuang and Mandarin. However, according to genetic studies, this linguistic difference appears not to be ‘a cultural phenomenon but has involved demic diffusion’ (Huang, Zhou *et al.*, 2018, p. 638). This would suggest that linguistic differences are not so much a product of the interrelationship between cultures as of interracial marriages that have taken place over five centuries, given

that, ‘compared with Vietnamese, they show significant evidence of gene flow from surrounding East Asians’ (ibid.).

The Jing People live mostly on three small islands in the Gulf of Tonkin, the islands of Wutou, Wanwei and Shanxin, in Fangchenggang Prefecture, a subtropical region with a lush marine life of more than 700 species of fish. The fishermen of the Jing People take advantage of this, spending much of their time fishing for oysters and seahorses – the latter for their medicinal value in the traditions of this part of the world.

In terms of their beliefs and spiritual outlook, the Jing are mostly Taoist practitioners, albeit with elements of Buddhism, but they still retain a strong ancestor worship and perform rituals to various nature spirits, such as the God of the Sea.

Sources

- Facts & Details (2019). Jing minority. Available on <https://factsanddetails.com/china/cat5/sub30/entry-4364.html>
- Huang, X.; Zhou, Q. *et al.* (2018). The genetic assimilation in language borrowing inferred from Jing People. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 166(3), 638-648.
- Yao, B. (ed.). (2014). *中国各民族神话 (Myths of Chinese Ethnic Groups)*. Shuhai Publishing House.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 8c: Ensure that information of vital importance to human health and environmental protection, including genetic information, remains available in the public domain.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 4b: Transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities.

Principle 5c: Promote the recovery of endangered species and ecosystems.

Principle 5e: Manage the use of renewable resources such as water, soil, forest products, and marine life in ways that do not exceed rates of regeneration and that protect the health of ecosystems.

Principle 9c: Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

