



The Stone Horse

Shui People – China

Once upon a time, in Lasuo, in the Sandu region, there was a stone horse. And they say that the horse was not only exceedingly intelligent, but seemed even wiser than the wisest men in China at that time.

The horse would not let anyone ride him unless he was asked permission from his heart, and then, if he felt that the rider was pure of heart, he would take him to see places in the mountains of an extraordinary beauty, places where no one else had ever gone before, except on the back of this strange being.

This made the stone horse highly prized by the people of Lasuo, who considered him a community treasure, to the point of calling him the Stone Horse Treasure. But there was another reason why the people of the area loved their stone horse dearly, and that was because no other horse could enter their domain without his permission. As soon as the foreign horse reached the limits of their territory, it knelt on the ground and was unable to go any further.

This meant that any malicious intruders or criminal gangs attempting to enter the area had to do so without horses, and were therefore at the mercy of Lasuo's defenders, who could pursue and attack them from the superiority provided by their mounts.

This was especially true for the horses of riders who were not sufficiently 'clean' at heart, such as mandarins. The mandarins, the emperor's bureaucrats and officials who came to Lasuo to collect taxes and even to order forced labour, had to travel the entire region on foot.

And, being a mountainous region with steep slopes, the mandarins often preferred to bypass Lasuo and go wherever they could enforce the emperor's arbitrariness more comfortably.

But those merchants who came from the capital to take away the natural riches of the subjugated peoples were also prevented from riding. They cut down swathes of trees for their wood which was highly valued in the construction of houses and furniture. Worse still, they extracted mercury, an industry that fatally poisoned the streams and rivers in some valleys.

It was said that the emperor, seeing that old age was approaching, was trying to attain immortality, and he had surrounded himself with a group of alchemists – false ones, according to the most respected voices – who urged him to ingest a mixture of mercury and jade powder. According to them, this concoction, if taken in tiny doses, would give him eternal life. But the mercury had to be special, and only the mercury from the Lasuo region had the necessary properties to achieve this prodigious marvel.

So the emperor thought that the best thing he could do was to possess the treasured stone horse of the Shui people of Lasuo, for in this way he would kill three birds with one stone. He could have the mercury that the false alchemists advised him to use to attain immortality; his mandarins could ride their mounts into the area to tax the villagers; and last but not least, he himself would have the power that the Stone Horse Treasure would give him.

'What other empire or power would dare to stand against me, if its cavalry were forced to kneel before me on the back of my stone horse,' thought the emperor in his fantasy.

His Imperial Majesty therefore ordered his mandarins to go to Lasuo and bring him this wondrous being.

But things were not going to be as easy as the emperor had expected. As soon as the mandarins arrived in Lasuo and the stone horse learned of their hearts' intentions, he hid in the deepest recesses of the mountains, where no one could find him. The mandarins spent months searching for him in vain until, in their helplessness, they decided to return to the capital to report their failure to the emperor.

‘*Bixià*, your Imperial Majesty, we have trodden all the paths and traversed the mountains on foot, so that our footsteps have transformed the green mountains into red dust, and the blue waters into mud, all for our utmost loyalty to you, but we have not succeeded in finding the stone horse. Could it be, *Bixià*, that the will of heaven is not that you possess that horse, perhaps because it might bring you some evil?’

The emperor reddened with anger; how dare they suggest that his orders could contravene the will of heaven?

‘You fools!’ he shouted, rising from his throne, ‘How could you not find something that is supposedly as big as a horse and so easy to identify because it is made of stone?’

And, without another word to them, as they lay prostrate with their foreheads on the ground in terror, the emperor ordered his personal guard to execute them.

Not a week had passed when the emperor sent a second group of mandarins. These, having been warned of what had happened to the first group, knew that they could not return from Lasuo without the stone horse.

But the horse did the same as the previous time, hiding in those places in the mountains that only he knew and to which only he alone could find his way. Months passed, and the panic-stricken mandarins ended up going from home to home in Lasuo, pleading:

‘Do you know where the Stone Horse Treasure is to be found?’

To which no one could give an answer, since no one knew where he was. Even because the stone horse had been so generous to the poorest of the poor, the latter did nothing but give the intruders false hints and clues, to drive them further into despair and force them to give up the quest. Even the children, when the mandarins asked them if they had seen the stone horse, told them mockingly:

‘Yeah, we’ve seen a lot of them – they’re everywhere!’

Finally, in their distress, the mandarins hatched a plan: since the emperor did not know that the Stone Horse Treasure was literally a horse, they would collect the strangest and most unusually shaped

stones they could find and present them to the emperor, telling him that this was the long-sought treasure.

And so they did.

When they returned to the capital, they beat drums and played *suonas* all the way to the palace, shouting to the four winds, to make their voice heard by the emperor:

‘The Stone Horse Treasure is here!’

And the emperor, pleased, believed the mandarins’ trickery and ordered the pile of rocks to be deposited on the front esplanade of the palace.

After a while, however, the strange stones began to cry out. They were sounds like those of the animals of the region they came from. Some sounded like the cawing of crows, others like owls, others like tigers... But all these sounds together made the foundations of the palace shake. It was then that the emperor realised he had been deceived.

‘What kind of treasure have you brought to my palace?’ he shouted angrily at the mandarins. ‘Get out at once and take that heap of stones away from here!’

But just as the terrified mandarins were about to carry out their master's order, the rocks were transformed into clouds of fire which immediately ignited the steps and walls of the palace, turning everything to ashes.

The emperor barely escaped and, after ordering the execution of the pretender mandarins, he commanded his army to prepare his most fearless horse and prepare to leave at first light. The people of Lasuo would have to tell him, personally, where the Stone Horse Treasure was to be found.

When the emperor and his entire army arrived in the vicinity of Lasuo, they found the stone horse waiting for them on the top of a hill. The impressive animal had no need to hide any longer, especially since he did not want the poor people of the region to suffer because of him. He would confront the emperor.

And so it was, as soon as the horses of the imperial army saw the Stone Horse Treasure, they all fell to their knees, their riders collapsed under their armour, to general bewilderment.

The emperor, who had also been knocked to the ground by his fearless horse, rose up in anger and strode alone to the top of the hill, sword in hand, determined to tame that strange animal by any means.

And, when he reached the top, he leapt upon the back of the Stone Horse Treasure, whom no one had ever ridden without asking his permission and without having a clean heart. And, the moment the insolent one whipped the creature to subdue him, the stone horse reared up, hurling the choleric and conceited tyrant into the air with such impetus that he fell from the top of the hill to the place from which he had begun the climb, before the nostrils of his most fearless horse. And there he lay with a broken neck.

His generals, not knowing what to do in the face of such a calamity, finally decided to take the corpse of their lord and return to the capital with the whole army so that his successor could be named emperor and the funeral services could be held. And as far as this story tells the Stone Horse Treasure guards the people of Lasuo to the present day. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda and Xueping Luo (2024).

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Comments

The version on which this adaptation of the Stone Horse Treasure is based was recorded and edited by MENG Binghua and WANG Zhai, and it was published in 1988 (Yao, 2014).

The Shui People, to whom the old legend of the Stone Horse Treasure belongs, adopted their present name in the late Ming Dynasty, i.e. before 1644 CE. Prior to that, they had been part of the Luoyue People, an early community of tribes living on the southeastern coast of China during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-24 CE).

In Chinese, 'shui' means 'water,' and would in a way denote the 'people of the waters' or 'living by the waters,' as they live mainly by rivers and streams, with most of their customs, worship and folklore being conditioned by water.

The current government of the People's Republic of China highlights a defining moment in the history of the Shui People. It took place in December 1855, when a certain Pan Xijian led a revolt of the Shui People, who objected to the grain taxes levied on them by members of the Qing Dynasty. For 16 years they fought against such injustice, something they would repeat just over twenty years later, in 1909, when Wuchaojun led the Shuis, Bouyeis and Miaos in another revolt against imperialism and feudalism (Hays, 2022).

Finally, it should be noted that the twist given in this adaptation by including the point of mercury and the emperor's desire for eternal life was not a random invention of the adapters. It is based on the finding that, apart from the fact that the Shui People's region is rich in cinnabar, the mineral from which mercury is extracted, in ancient China and Tibet, the use of mercury was recommended as a means of prolonging life. In addition, and curiously significant, the first Chinese emperor, Qin Shi Huang (259-210 BCE), apparently died from drinking a mixture of mercury and jade powder prescribed to him by Qin Dynasty alchemists (Wright, 2001).

Sources

- Hays, J. (2022 Oct). *Shui minority: History, life, religion, culture*. Facts and Details. <https://factsanddetails.com/china/cat5/sub30/entry-4371.html>
- Wright, D. (2001). *The History of China*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Yao, B. (ed.). (2014). *中国各民族神话 (Myths from Chinese Ethnic Groups)*. Shuhai Publishing House.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 12. Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble – Universal Responsibility: To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities.

Preamble – Universal Responsibility: Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

Preamble – Universal Responsibility: The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.

Principle 2b: Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

Principle 6d: Prevent pollution of any part of the environment and allow no build-up of radioactive, toxic, or other hazardous substances.

Principle 7: Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.

Principle 10c: Ensure that all trade supports sustainable resource use, environmental protection, and progressive labour standards.

Principle 12b. Affirm the right of indigenous peoples to their spirituality, knowledge, lands and resources and to their related practice of sustainable livelihoods.