

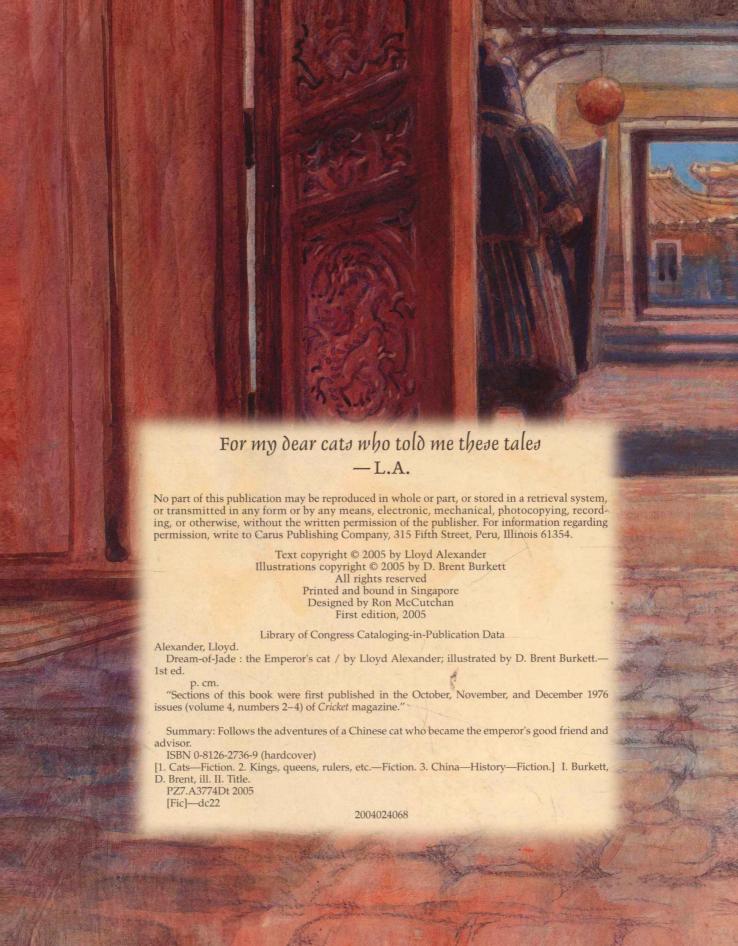


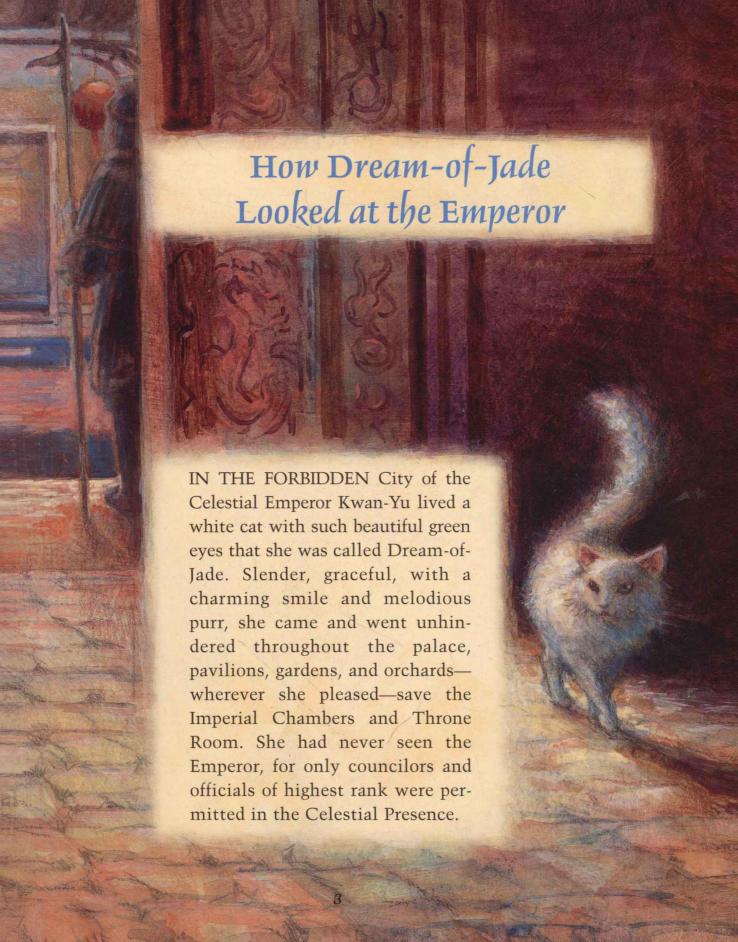
Lloyd Alexander

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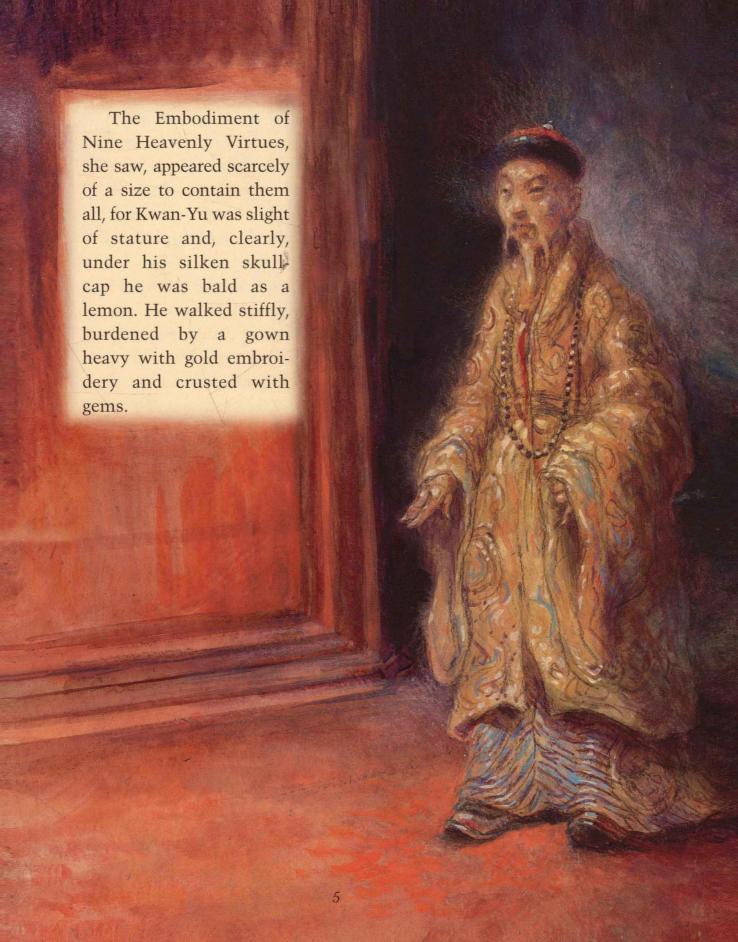
Kwan-Yu, no doubt, is a grand personage, thought Dream-of-Jade. Lord of the Middle Kingdom, Embodiment of Nine Heavenly Virtues, Tranquil Carp in the Pool of Crystal Wisdom, and so on. But how difficult to admire an Emperor for the most part invisible.

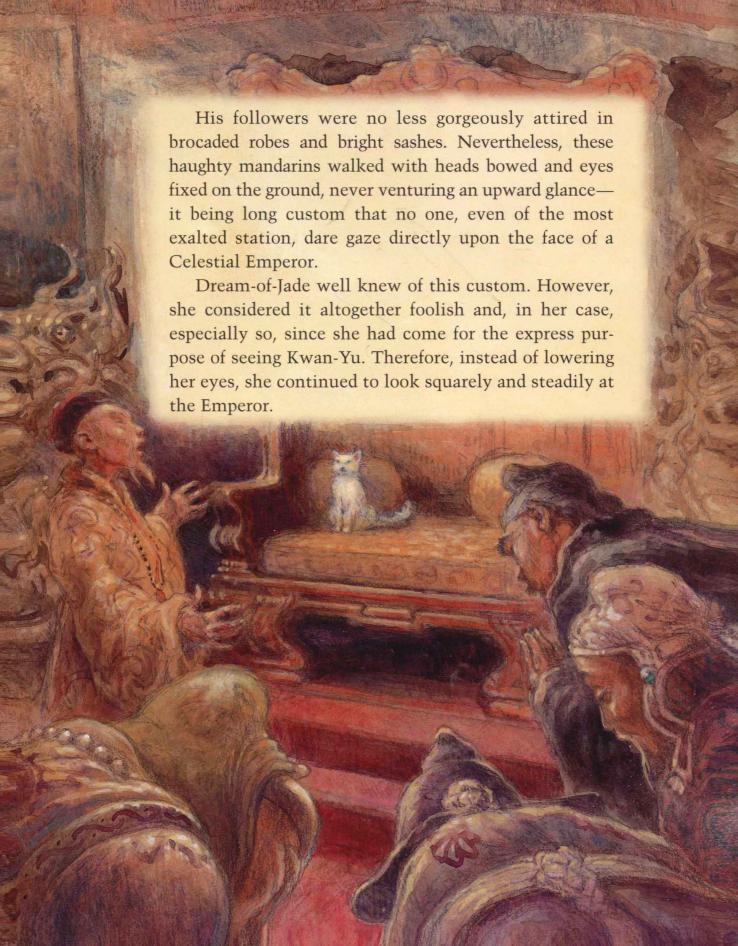
As curious as she was beautiful, and as determined as she was curious, Dream-of-Jade resolved to see the Emperor for herself. Quick and light on her paws, she slipped easily past the men-at-arms guarding the portals of the Throne Room and made her way inside. Finding it empty, she set about exploring the galleries, balconies, and alcoves. She padded over the flagstones and observed that while the floor had been scrubbed until it gleamed, the tiled ceiling was in serious disrepair.

Dream-of-Jade continued her inspection, climbing atop the bronze dragons crouching beside Kwan-Yu's throne of gold, ebony, and ivory until, at last, she jumped onto the great throne itself.

"Poor fellow," said Dream-of-Jade. "What a draft from the ceiling! How uncomfortable Kwan-Yu must be if he is obliged to sit here any length of time."

A moment later the huge doors of carved teakwood were flung open. Amid the crashing of gongs and trillings of flutes, the Celestial Kwan-Yu and his retainers entered the hall in solemn procession. Dream-of-Jade made no attempt to hide. From her seat on the throne she could not have had a better view, so there she remained.





Kwan-Yu, for his part, had been withdrawn into his own thoughts. Not until he drew closer to his throne did he notice Dream-of-Jade. He then halted abruptly, frowned, drew his hands from the sleeves of his gown, and clapped thrice to summon his Chief Minister.

"Most Honorable Yin-Chuan," said the Emperor, "there would appear to be a cat sitting on my throne. Moreover, it would seem this cat is looking at me."

Bowing deeply, at great pains to keep his eyes from the Emperor, the Chief Minister peered at Dream-of-Jade, puffed out his cheeks, then cautiously replied, "Son of Heaven, your observation is highly illuminating. There does, in fact, appear to be a feline creature so situated and performing the ocular activity you have so graciously called to my unworthy attention. Allow me to withdraw and prepare a full report on this extremely disturbing event."

"Yin-Chuan," declared the Emperor, while Dream-of-Jade continued undisturbed to study him, "I desire this matter corrected without delay."

"Celestial Highness," answered the Chief Minister, "my investigation will begin immediately, and my preliminary findings will be made within three weeks after the third quarter of the moon."

"What are you telling me?" retorted the Emperor.
"That I must wait until autumn before I can sit on my throne? And be stared at in the meanwhile by this cat?"

At this, Dream-of-Jade rose gracefully to her feet and bowed most charmingly to Kwan-Yu. "Celestial Highness," she said, "one could, no doubt, pass many days in contemplation of Your Radiant Countenance." "Many days?" replied Kwan-Yu, not at all displeased by Dream-of-Jade's answer. "Ah—yes, very likely to gain the full effect would require a certain amount of time."

"Highness," put in the Chief Minister, glaring at Dream-of-Jade, "need I remind you the presence of this feline is strictly forbidden? In addition, this audacious animal has compounded one unpardonable offense with yet another—namely, looking at you."

"Alas," Dream-of-Jade sighed, "I know the offenses are very grave. Nevertheless, the opportunity to observe the magnificent Embodiment of all Nine Heavenly Virtues was irresistible."

"Yes, there you have the explanation," said Kwan-Yu to the Chief Minister. "As there is no harm done, we shall forgive this highly intelligent and perceptive cat and grant her our Celestial Permission to depart."

"Quite impossible, Your Highness," declared Yin-Chuan. "The matter has gone too far. The case must be adjudicated according to regulation and protocol. There is, of course, no question regarding the essential jurisprudence. The punishment is predetermined: immediate execution. Once that small detail is concluded, we shall have ample time to consider the case in the calm wisdom of retrospect."

Kwan-Yu, meanwhile, was finding himself with an overwhelming desire to stroke the silky fur of Dream-of-Jade. At the words of Yin-Chuan, however, he drew back

his hand and turned to the Chief Minister. "Execution? This delightful creature? The penalty seems to me rather excessive, when her only fault was a perfectly understandable inability to resist gazing upon her Emperor."

"Without questioning the judgment of the Honorable Yin-Chuan," put in Dream-of-Jade, "allow me to suggest that my crime may be outweighed by the merit gained in saving the Emperor's life."

"This cat speaks nonsense," declared Yin-Chuan. "Save the Emperor's life? From what? Your Highness is guarded, protected, sustained in every way. No ill can possibly befall you."

"Lord of the Middle Kingdom," said Dream-of-Jade, "how fortunate your mandarins keep their eyes firmly on the ground. Thus they will be spared the unhappy prospect of observing the serious, and very likely fatal, damage to Your Celestial Person. Directly above Your Celestial Head, the tiles of the Imperial Ceiling are loose and may fall at any moment."

"Ridiculous! Impossible!" sputtered Yin-Chuan.
"A miserable cat dares to insult the Imperial
Ceiling—and, by extension, Your Imperial Self!"

"As it is written in the *Chronicles of Perfumed Zephyrs*," said Kwan-Yu, "a small insult is preferable to a broken head.

Look into the matter immediately."

"As you command," answered Yin-Chuan. "I shall summon the Imperial Architect, the Imperial Surveyor, and the Imperial Geometrician. We shall give the question our undivided attention, and Your Highness will receive a memorandum of our transactions within six months."

During this exchange, Dream-of-Jade's sharp ears detected a faint crackling and grating sound from overhead. Instantly, she sprang from the throne into the arms of the astonished Emperor, who stumbled backward and nearly found himself in a heap on the Imperial Floor.

At the same moment, the loose tiles that Dream-of-Jade had observed when first she entered the Throne Room gave way and plummeted from the ceiling. The heavy fragments went crashing down upon the throne exactly as Dream-of-Jade had warned.

Tranquil Carp though he was, Kwan-Yu started in alarm, but he was wise enough to see how narrowly he had escaped with a whole skin. Still keeping Dream-of-Jade in his arms, he turned angrily to his terrified mandarins, who kowtowed and struck their heads against the flagstones.

"This cat has served me better today than any of you," declared the Emperor. "I hereby grant to her and all her descendants the unique privilege of looking upon me and all my descendants whenever and as often as they desire."

"Celestial Highness," replied Dream-of-Jade, "your favor honors me and, should I ever have descendants, I am sure they will be every bit as impressed as I am. But I suggest that all your subjects be granted the same privilege."

"Out of the question!" cried the Chief Minister.
"Since the Reign of the First Emperor, no one has been

permitted to look upon the illustrious features of a Celestial Monarch. Should this be allowed, who knows what will come of it?"

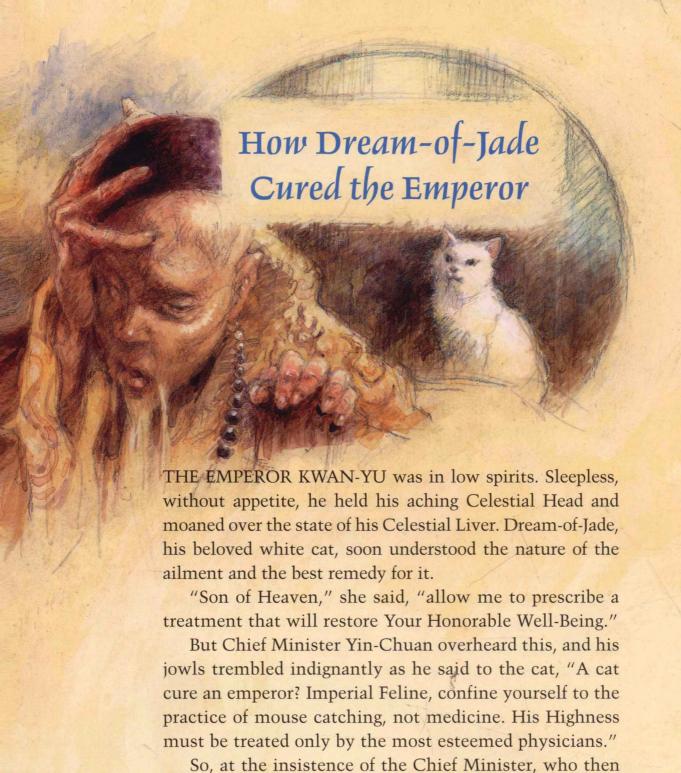
"Honorable Yin-Chuan," replied Dream-of-Jade, "if you and your colleagues had not been constrained to go about with your noses to the ground, you might better have looked around you and seen as clearly as I did."

"It will be as this cat desires," said the Emperor, smiling down at Dream-of-Jade. "What she suggests is not without merit, and I recognize a certain usefulness in it. But, Honorable Cat, tell me this: Might not my subjects find the sight of their Divine Ruler too overwhelming?"

"Highness," Dream-of-Jade replied, "I am quite sure they will grow used to it."

The Emperor then bestowed on Dream-of-Jade the rank of Imperial Cat. From that day on, he kept her always with him. When he held court, she curled on his lap; she shared his meals at the Imperial Table and slept at the foot of the Imperial Couch. The mandarins and ministers, even Yin-Chuan, were required to give her the same respect they gave to the Emperor. Dream-of-Jade accepted all these honors with grace and modesty, though sometimes she wondered what would

have become of her if the tiles had not been loose.



left on urgent state business, the most illustrious practi-

tioners were summoned to the Imperial Chambers.

First came the Venerable Doctor Pang-Fou, carrying scrolls and charts and calculating beads. Pang-Fou kowtowed to the Emperor; then, without a further glance at his patient, he began spreading his charts over the floor.

"Honorable Pang-Fou," Dreamof-Jade courteously asked, "why do you not examine His Celestial Highness or even take his pulse?"

"There is no need for such earthly trifles," intoned Pang-Fou. "I have cast the Imperial Horoscope, and by every cosmological sign, His Highness may look forward to a glorious recovery of strength and health."

"That is excellent news," Dream-of-Jade replied.

"But, Venerable Pang-Fou, how soon may the Emperor expect this happy occurrence?"

"Allowing for the intercalation of equinox and solstice," Pang-Fou declared, "when the Year of the Hare enters the House of the Dragon—in precisely four hundred and twenty-five years and seventeen days."

Hearing this, Kwan-Yu groaned wretchedly, but Dream-of-Jade bowed politely and said to Pang-Fou, "We are grateful, Farseeing Astrologer, for the benefit of your astral wisdom. You may take your leave of us."

Pang-Fou hesitated, frowning. "Honorable Cat, there still remains the matter of my fee. This horoscope fore-tells I am to be generously rewarded."

"So you shall be," said Dream-of-Jade, "in the same measure as the value of your services."

"And when," asked Pang-Fou, "may I expect this munificent payment?"

"Consult your own horoscope," said Dream-of-Jade, "and you will see, with absolute confidence, that you will be paid in precisely four hundred and twenty-five years—and seventeen days."

Dream-of-Jade then dismissed the Venerable Pang-Fou, as much out of sorts as he was out of pocket.

Before she could again urge the Emperor to hear her own suggestion, there arrived the Illustrious Doctor Fo, who strode briskly into the chamber.

Unlike the astrologer, Doctor Fo not only took the Celestial Pulse, he pinched and prodded, thumped and tapped so vigorously that Kwan-Yu protested he felt worse than before.

"Your condition is very grave, Son of Heaven," said Doctor Fo. "But, mercifully, I have with me certain rare and marvelous potions to bring about an unfailing cure.

Here is powdered unicorn horn, to be taken thrice daily. And here, extract of hippogriff and ointment of phoenix. These medications are priceless."

"As one might expect," said Dream-of-Jade.
"However, for the Emperor's health there can be no counting of cost."

"How well you understand the requirements of our profession," said Doctor Fo. "Now, as for my reimbursement . . ."

"The amount of your reimbursement is exceeded only by our gratitude," said Dream-of-Jade. "The Emperor will gladly sign an order to the Imperial Treasury, bestowing upon you the sum of one hundred thousand pieces of pure chiang-liang."

"Chiang-liang?" cried the Illustrious Fo. "There is no such substance. It does not exist!"

"It is as rare, marvelous, and priceless as your own medicines," Dream-of-Jade returned, "and it exists just as surely as the creatures that have provided your ingredients."

While servants escorted the sputtering and furious Doctor Fo from the chamber, the Learned Doctor Ming-Tao was announced. So feeble he was—tottering on spindly legs, coughing and snuffling pitifully—that Dream-of-Jade considered Ming-Tao would be well advised to consult a physician himself.

"The Emperor's condition is desperate," wheezed Ming-Tao. "Nevertheless, take heart. I know the cure. The Emperor must henceforth subsist exclusively on lichee nuts. For breakfast: lichee nuts. At noon: lichee nuts. For dinner: lichee nuts."

"That seems a rather limited diet," said Dream-of-Jade. "Are you certain of its benefits?"

"I follow the diet myself," replied Ming-Tao. "Let the Emperor profit by my example."

"You may leave us now. But you will be rewarded with many tokens of our gratitude: a lifetime provision of lichee nuts."

Mumbling and nattering to himself, the Learned Ming-Tao was escorted from the chamber. The Emperor sadly shook his head. "Ah, Dream-of-Jade, I fear there is no cure for me."

"There is mine," said Dream-of-Jade. "My cure, I promise, will brighten your eyes and quicken your pulse. Your Highness has no appetite? The feast I shall have prepared will be the most delicious you have ever tasted. And tonight, you will sleep more soundly than ever before."

Though doubtful, the Emperor agreed to put himself in the care of Dream-of-Jade, who then departed to issue certain instructions to the cooks and household servants. She soon returned, followed by two attendants bearing between them a heavy log of teakwood.

"Son of Heaven," Dream-of-Jade announced to the puzzled Emperor, "this is the beginning of the feast. Your banquet will arrive shortly. But, in preparation, you will require a pair of chopsticks."

"Imperial Cat," said Kwan-Yu, "already I have a thousand pairs, in gold, silver, ivory, ebony—"

"These will be more valuable than any from your treasure house," Dream-of-Jade answered. "They must be