

FOLK TALES
FROM CHINA



THE MAGIC BIRD

The Magic Bird

Folk Tales from China

(Seventh Series)

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

BEIJING

First Edition 1985

Edited by Ellen Hertz

ISBN 0-8351-1315-9

**Published by the Foreign Languages Press
24 Baiwanzhuang Road, Beijing, China**

**Printed by the Foreign Languages Printing House
19 West Chegongzhuang Road, Beijing, China**

**Distributed by China International Book Trading Corporation
(Guoji Shudian), P.O. Box 399, Beijing, China**

Printed in the People's Republic of China

神 鸟

——中国民间故事选

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外文出版社出版
(中国北京百万庄路24号)

外文印刷厂印刷
中国国际图书贸易总公司
(中国国际书店)发行
北京399信箱

1985年(大32开)第一版
编号: (英)10050—1162

00300

10—E—1769 P

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Li Bao and Cui Cui

(*Han Nationality*)

Once upon a time there lived a little boy named Li Bao. When Li Bao was very young his mother died and his father remarried. His step-mother was a wicked woman who had her greedy eyes fixed on the family property. As the days passed and Li Bao grew older, she devised a plan to get rid of him so that her own son could inherit all for himself.

One day the vicious step-mother, pretending to be deeply concerned for Li Bao, said to him:

"Little Bao! You're almost a grown man, and you'll need to get yourself a wife soon. But our family is so poor, who would be willing to marry into this life of toil and hardship? We have to think of a way to save up some money to get you a bride!" And, before Li Bao could catch his breath she added:

"Today, I will give you two head of cattle, a cow and a bull. Go to the mountains and take good care of them, and when you have one hundred calves, you may return home. We can use the money from the calves to get you a

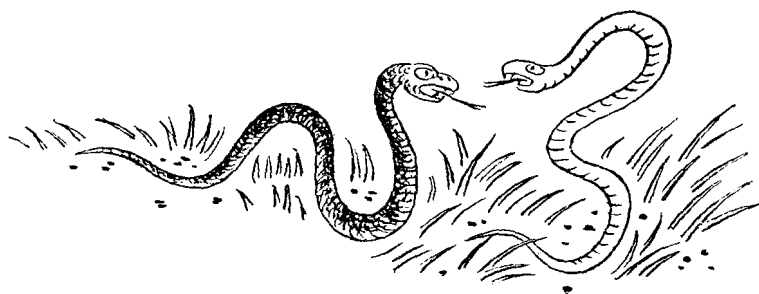
wife. . . . If you're a man at all, don't come back with even one less than one hundred calves. Don't expect me to bring up a son who does not keep his promises!"

These words hurt Li Bao deeply, and he burst into tears. He thought to himself, "how long will it take for two cows to produce one hundred calves! The mountains are full of wild beasts, and there's no telling — maybe they'll eat my cattle and me up in one bite!" The more he thought, the more apparent it became to him that his step-mother meant to kill him! "Even if I am eaten by wolves," he wondered, "it's still better than living in the same house with my step-mother." And so, he gritted his teeth and set off for the mountains.

Driving the cattle with his whip in one hand, the other hand steadying his shoulder pole hung with his pot and spoon and an old quilt, he walked until he came to the mountains. Over hill and dale he wandered, finally coming upon a hillside covered with green grass and exposed to the sun. A clear stream trickled out from a crack in the stone, and beside the stream flourished a grove of pine and cypress trees. Nestled within this grove, Li Bao found a mountain shrine built out of rock from the hillside, intact but completely deserted. Li Bao picked some wild grasses, tied them into a broom, and swept the place clean. Then he collected some more grass and leaves and arranged them into a pallet against the wall. He found three large stones and piled them up to form an oven. On the west wall stood a cowshed which would protect his cattle from wild an-

imals at night. With this comfortable new home, Li Bao settled down happily to pass his life.

One day after breakfast Li Bao took up his whip and led the cattle out to the slope to graze. He lay down on his



side to watch them, but it did not take long for the soft "crunch, crunch" of their chewing to put him fast asleep. When he woke up it was almost noon. He stretched lazily, and was just picking up his whip to drive the cattle home for lunch when he saw two snakes, one green and one white, fighting as if for their lives down the hillside. They were locked in struggle, each with its teeth in the other's neck, and it seemed neither would escape with its life. In one stride, Li Bao rushed over to where the snakes were fighting and gave a sharp crack of his whip just in between the struggling snakes. The stunned beasts loosened their grip on each others' necks and slithered away, the green snake towards the southwest, the white snake towards the northeast, and in an instant they had vanished from sight.

The next day Li Bao ate his breakfast as usual, and then took the cattle out to pasture. Just as he had found himself a comfortable rock to sit on and was settling down for his morning nap, he heard a voice calling his name:

"Li Bao! Li Bao!"

He lifted his head, but saw no one. Who would venture into these mountains only to be eaten by wolves, he thought to himself. My ears must be playing tricks on me. He listened for a moment, and sure enough, the voice came again. Li Bao stood up and said loudly:

"Whoever you are, come out, please! Don't play tricks on a poor man like me." No sooner had these words left his mouth than there was a tap on his shoulder and a voice behind him said: "Over here,"

Li Bao turned to find a young man dressed all in green wearing a green hat and smiling at him. Li Bao stood stunned. He had never in his stay in these deserted mountains seen a single person. Now here was someone he could talk to! He couldn't believe his good fortune.

"Li Bao, don't you recognize me? My name is Little Green. Yesterday I got into a fight with Little White right over there. If you hadn't saved me, I would have had my head bitten off. When I got home yesterday I told my father and mother about you, and they want you to come to our house for a visit. Will you follow me?"

But Li Bao declined. "If I go, there will be no one to look after my cattle and I'm afraid they will run away or get eaten by wolves or tigers."

But Little Green answered in all seriousness, "If your cattle aren't here when you get back, I promise to pay you back with one hundred donkeys."

So, Li Bao tied his cattle securely and followed Little Green to the southwest, finally arriving at the entrance to a mountain cave. Little Green stopped, and pointed to the cave, saying:

"Li Bao. This is our home. Tonight after dinner my father is going to offer you a gift. Let me give you my advice. Up here in the mountains, gold and silver are useless. Ask for the date-wood stick that hangs behind the door. It is a magic stick, our family treasure, and has been handed down from generation to generation. If you meet wild beasts or bandits, all you have to do is to throw

the stick up into the air and say: 'Magic stick! Magic stick! Show your power and protect Li Bao!' and it will beat your enemies to death."

Li Bao followed Little Green into the cave, which became wider and wider, and lighter and lighter, until finally they came upon a great walled compound of even green brick. To the left and right of the huge stone archway which was the front gate sat two stone lions. As they approached, the great black front door opened wide with a groan and out came an old man with a long white beard and an old woman with snow-white hair, who smiled broadly and said:

"Li Bao! Welcome! How can we thank you for saving our child's life?" And they gestured Li Bao to go ahead into their reception room.

Water was brought for Li Bao to wash his face, and tea was brought for his thirst, and then they all sat down to table. Out came one steaming-hot dish after another, each more delicious than the last. Li Bao had never in his life seen such a sumptuous repast, and he ate and drank until he could eat and drink no more. After the feast was over just as Li Bao was about to say goodbye the old host called a servant to bring out a platter full of silver and a platter full of gold. The old man said to Li Bao:

"You have saved our son's life, and though we have nothing much to offer you, please accept these tokens of our respect and thanks."

"As for saving people when they are in difficulty, it

is my duty." Li Bao began. "I have already been so magnificently entertained, so how can I accept these gifts as well?"

"That will never do! You had the compassion to save my son, so may I not repay part of this kindness?"

And so they argued back and forth, until finally the old man had no choice but to say:

"I have a proposal. You may take from our house anything you particularly like. In this way, perhaps you will accept our expression of thanks!"

Li Bao looked all around the room, and finally caught sight of the date-wood stick hanging behind the door. He brightened up, and said a little embarrassedly:

". . . I would like that date-wood stick! If I run into wild animals in the mountains, it will help me protect myself."

The old man hesitated for a moment and then said: "Very well! You may take it. But use it carefully. You may use it to protect yourself, but you mustn't use it to hurt others. Little Green, see our guest to the door!"

Little Green saw Li Bao as far as the little path out of the cave, hesitating a moment before saying: "Brother Li Bao, I will be frank with you. Yesterday, I fought with Little White because I wanted the fragrant lily which is their family treasure. He would not give it to me and instead called me an evil spirit. That is why we began to fight. I am sure that Little White will invite you to his house to thank you for saving his life. When his family offers you gifts, don't accept anything but that lily. This

lily. . . . Well, you will know soon enough. For heaven's sake, don't forget. Goodbye." And, in the blink of an eye, Little Green turned into a little green snake and slithered away to the south.

The next day after breakfast, just as Little Bao was getting ready to let the cattle out of their shed, he saw far in the distance a young man dressed all in white with a white hat, striding towards him and waving his hand. "Li Bao! Li Bao!" he called. Li Bao thought to himself, this must be Little White. Little Green told me about him, and he called back:

"Who are you? How do you know my name?"

"My name is Little White. The day before yesterday you saved my life, don't you remember? I came looking for you yesterday to invite you to my house, but I found nothing but your cattle grazing in the pasture. Today I have returned. Will you come with me, please?"

"I cannot. If my cattle get eaten by tigers, my mother will beat me."

"Never fear," said Little White. "If you're missing a hair off either of your cattle, I promise to pay you back with a hundred horses."

So, once again Li Bao set off, this time towards the northeast. They walked for a long time, over hill and dale, and finally reached the entrance to a cave. Little White stopped and said: "This is my home."

The two had not gone too far into the cave when there opened out before them an expanse of level ground

covered with mysterious flowers and magical herbs. Rare birds flew in the sky above them, and strange beasts crawled on the ground. Following a path paved with coloured stones, they walked as far as a small pavilion surrounded by a lotus pond. Emerald green gauze covered the beautiful latticework of the windows. They pushed past the pearl curtains hanging before the door and entered the pavilion. Little White poured some cool tea into a crystal glass for Li Bao to drink, and then said:

"Brother Li Bao! Please excuse me for a moment while I go to fetch my father and mother." While Little White was away, Li Bao took a good look around: the floor was inlaid with coloured stones in the patterns of birds; the chairs and benches were made from deep rose-coloured sandalwood; the teapot which sat on the table was remarkably delicate. . . . All the colours and shapes were so natural and alluring.

The sound of footsteps came from outside the door, and the pearl curtain was pushed aside. A stooped, old man, with a long white beard entered the room with his silver-haired wife. They smiled to Li Bao as they said warmly:

"Little White tried twice to invite you. We're so glad he finally succeeded. Please sit down. If it hadn't been for you showing mercy and saving Little White's life, he would have been dead for two days by now. Little White, have the wine and dishes brought in."

In came two maids, who soon had the table ready for

a feast. No sooner had they finished than the most delicious food appeared before the delighted Li Bao.

After they had eaten and drunk their fill, Li Bao announced that he had to return to look after his cattle. But before he could go, Little White called to the servants who brought in tray after tray of gleaming gold and pure white pearls and presented them to Li Bao.

Remembering Little Green's advice, Li Bao refused all of his gold and pearls outright. Instead, he pointed with embarrassment to the fragrant lily and said:

"This flower seems to be healthy and it is very lovely. Could you give me it instead?"

A look of unhappiness flashed across the old man's face, and tears as big as beans slipped down his wife's cheeks. Little White looked at his parents and did not say a word. Li Bao hurriedly said:

"Oh, please don't be sad. I don't want the flower. I will leave now." He made to go. But Little White stopped him and then went over to his father and mother. He whispered with them for a moment, the old couple nodding their heads the whole time, and when they looked up their expressions were cheerful:

"Li Bao! Please do not be angry with us. There is a reason for this, but we cannot tell you just yet. After a few days, you will find out for yourself. Since you like this flower, go ahead and take it. But, please take very good care of it!" Having said this, the parents turned to Little White and said:

“Take the flower and see Li Bao out, would you?” Then they begged Li Bao again: “Whatever you do, do not let this flower get blown by the wind, or pelted by the rain. Do not let it suffer any hardship, please remember!”

Little White carried the flower and led Li Bao out of the cave. Li Bao urged him again and again to turn back, but it was as if Little White could not bear to be separated from Li Bao. He accompanied him the entire way home, all the way to where he had fought with Little Green.

Then, Little White calmly handed the flower over to Li Bao and said: “I hope you will do as my parents have asked. Do not mistreat it. . . .” Then, he pulled out his handkerchief, wiped the tears from his eyes, said a final goodbye and ran off towards the northeast.

Li Bao felt utterly confused. How could this one flower be the cause of such a fight between Little Green and Little White? Why were the old man and woman so willing to give him gold and pearls, and so reluctant to give him this one flower? The more he thought, the less he could understand it. The scenes of the past two days filled his head, and he had no idea how to go about figuring them out.

He walked on carrying the flower, which became heavier with each step. Li Bao was soon exhausted and covered in sweat. Stopping to put down the flower for a moment, he was just going to wipe the sweat from his face when he looked up to notice that the end of the