

When I was a kid, I used to read myths and legends all the time. I had books of Greek Mythologies, Norse Legends and Tales, Native American Stories of The Great Spirit. I don't remember if I actively sought out such books or if my parents purposely guided my selections in that direction. It doesn't matter much, I thoroughly enjoyed reading about Pandora and Baron Von Munchausen. I spent much time imagining myself in the presence of Loki and Odin and I can't count the times I pretended to fly over the Arizona desert with Tawa and Mudhead.

One of my favorite books was a collection of Chinese fables about a wise Mandarin Magistrate. I no longer remember his name so I'll just call him Chow Fun.

People from all around the province would bring their cases before Chow Fun. He would listen carefully to the complaints and offer a ruling. Many of these stories have parallels in western literature. One of the cases involved two mothers both

claiming a young child to be theirs. Chow Fun declared that the baby should be cut in twain providing each woman with half of the child. Of course one of the ladies spoke up and said the other was the real mother. Fun then ruled that the "real" mother wouldn't have been able to watch her child killed so chose to give it up instead. He wisely gave the baby to the woman who spoke up and chastised the other for trying to steal a child not rightfully hers.

Obviously this story bears a striking resemblance to the biblical tale of King Solomon doing roughly the same thing. I've often wondered if the Chinese borrowed the story from the Bible, if the Bible's authors borrowed it from the Chinese, or the author of the children's book rewrote the story for her own use.

In any case, not all of the stories included in the book have parallels in western culture. The one that stands out most clearly in my memory is the story of a poor student and the restaurant owner:

The Case of the Flavorful Rice

Chow Fun spent most of his afternoons in quiet reflection, meditating in a small garden behind his offices. One day his solitude was disturbed by loud arguing coming from the magistrate's rooms.

"I demand you throw him in jail," someone demanded loudly.

"But I have taken nothing from you," was the reply.

One of Fun's servants bustled out to the garden, only to find the Mandarin magistrate already rising from his meditation.

"Master Fun..." the servant began, but Chow Fun's raised hand stopped him.

"I know...I am needed inside," was the reply.

When the court convened, and the participants were calmed, Chow Fun began the proceedings.

"This man stole from me," a well dressed man said, pointing an accusing finger at another, much poorer, man, "and I want him to either pay for what he took, or be thrown in prison."

"B-b-but I've taken nothing," the poor man stammered.

"I own a restaurant and you have taken from me. I insist you pay," the rich merchant declared.

Master Fun intervened, realizing that such loud arguing wouldn't accomplish anything. Turning to the younger, poorer man, he asked "What is it that the merchant think you have taken from him?"

"I am a poor student," the man started. "I live in a small apartment directly above this man's restaurant."

"The other day he overheard a conversation between my friend and I. My friend was lamenting that he only had plain white rice to eat and nothing to flavor it with.

"I explained that, I too, had only plain white rice to eat, but that the merchant down stairs always prepared the evening meals just before sundown. The wonderful smells of his food drifted into my apartment so I make it a point to eat my evening meal at the same time. The delicious odors made my plain white rice taste so much better."

"And I demand you pay me for those smells," the restaurant owner exclaimed.

"But I am very poor and I can't pay for them," the student explained.

Magistrate Fun held up his hands, indicating that he'd heard enough. He thought about the case for a short while and declared "The merchant is the rightful owner of his restaurant, his food, and the smell of the food. Since the student is benefiting from the smells, he should pay."

"But, but, but..." the student started.

"No questions, I have made my decision. Show me all the money in your pocket," the judge ordered the student.

The young man slowly reached into his pocket and withdrew its contents.

"Show me," Fun declared.

The student opened his hand and revealed the coins he held.

"Now pour those coins into your other hand," the magistrate instructed.

The bewildered young man did as he was told. The coins jingled from one hand into the other.

"Now put your money away. Next case," the judge said, clapping his hands together.

"But what about my money," the confused merchant asked. "I haven't been paid yet."

"But you have," Chow Fun explained. "The price of the smell of food is the sound of money."

This might be the new Hyphen, but it isn't, it might be the next issue of Void, but it's not, it might be the next best thing to a Lighthouse, but no...this is the very next issue of Ken Forman's Apa-tizer.

I'd like to find a copy of the book that has the Chinese Magistrate stories. No one I've ever asked has ever heard of such a thing, but they say all wisdom can be found in fandom so maybe I'll find it yet.

"I am Pentium of Borg...division is futile...prepare to be approximated."

