

CHINESE LITERATURE

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CHINESE LITERATURE

QUARTERLY

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UIGHUR FOLK TALES

Folk tales about Nasrdin Avanti, some of which are printed below, are peculiar to the Uighur people. Through the interesting adventures of Avanti, an imaginary character full of good sense, we see the humour and intelligence of the Uighurs, their hatred of injustice and their support for righteousness. The other three short stories given here are also very popular among the Uighurs. The reader can perhaps notice with interest that in some respects they resemble European folk tales.

STORIES ABOUT NASRDIN AVANTI

HEAVEN HAS EYES TO SEE

One day, when Avanti's wife had washed his shirt, she hung it up to dry on a log in the yard.

Avanti came home in the evening, so exhausted that he walked through the yard and into his room without as much as a glance around. The moment he lay down on his bed, he was fast asleep. He woke up in the middle of the night and went out into the yard. In the dim light, the shirt on the log looked like a thief to him. He quietly crept back into his room to get his gun. Then he came out again, took aim and fired. In the cold night, the shirt was frozen stiff, so that it fell from the log with a clatter.

The shot woke his wife. Avanti said to her: "There was a thief in the yard but I shot him. He won't be any more trouble. Go to sleep again now, we'll remove the corpse in the morning."

Next day, getting up early, Avanti found that it was his own shirt that had been shot. He was in ecstasy. Clapping his hands and slapping his thighs, he said to his wife:

"Heaven has eyes to see! Just think—if I'd been inside that shirt when the shot was fired, wouldn't you be a widow by now?"

I'M WRONG

One night, Avanti was passing by a graveyard. Some horsemen galloping in the same direction made him suspicious that they might not be up to anything good. So he lowered himself into a freshly dug grave and hid there. But the horsemen had seen him slip down and were wondering in turn what he was up to. So they came up and shouted at him: "Who are you?"

Avanti put his head out of the grave and answered them:

"Oh, I'm one of the dead men buried in this graveyard."

"And what does a dead man want to be up for at this time of night?"

"Just to get some fresh air."

"Does a dead man need fresh air too?"

"Ah yes, yes. . . . You're right, and I'm wrong!"

So saying, Avanti crept back into the grave again.

EARLY START

Avanti had a donkey that was so lazy it took a long time to make it budge even an inch. One day, a friend of Avanti's met him riding this donkey and asked him where he was going.

"I'm going to the mosque for the Friday Service."

"But it's only Thursday today, isn't it?"

"My dear friend—look at the way my donkey goes! How slow and stubborn it is! I shall consider myself lucky if I can reach the mosque in time for the service tomorrow!"

SELLING A COW

Avanti's wife wanted to sell their cow which was bad-tempered and barren, so Avanti took the animal to market.

Customers came and looked at the cow, but all walked away again without buying her, because Avanti kept saying: "You may not be able to get any milk from this cow, but she's quite capable of horning you!" Why should anybody have wanted to buy the cow after such a recommendation?

A cattle-dealer who had listened for a while was greatly amused by Avanti's naivety and said to him:

"You better let me sell this cow for you."

"You are very kind," Avanti said. "May you prosper! Take charge of her then." With this, Avanti handed him the rope by which he held the cow.

As soon as the cattle-dealer had taken over, he began his spiel.

"Look at this cow—how gentle she is! And not only that—she'll give you fifteen bowls of milk every day. You won't be sorry to have bought her!"

At that, Avanti took the cow's rope out of the cattle-dealer's hand again and said: "If she is gentler than a lamb and gives fifteen bowls of milk every day, why should I sell her?"

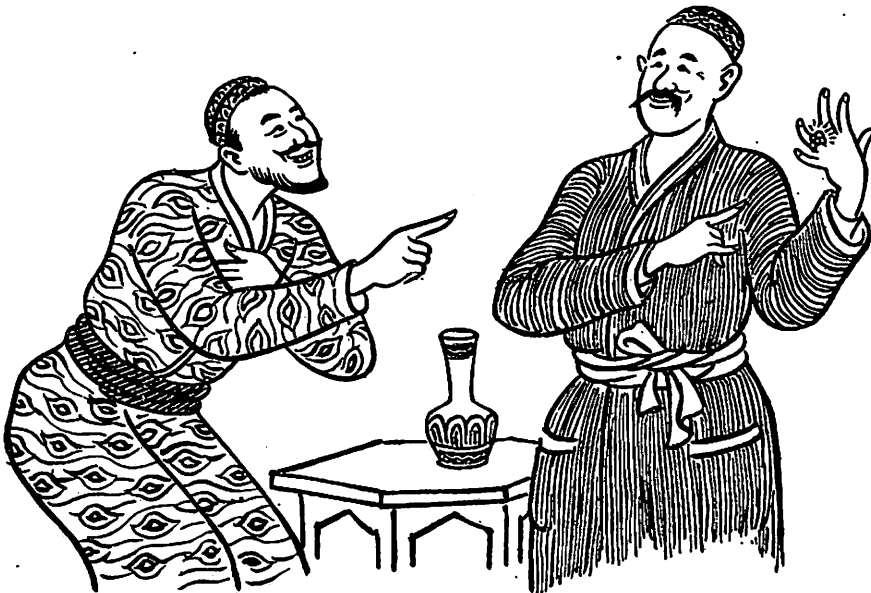
THE RING

One of Avanti's friends was a businessman who came to say good-bye one day, on the eve of a long journey. He saw Avanti wearing a golden ring and schemed to get it. So he said:

"I cannot live in peace, Avanti, to be separated from you for a long time. For the sake of our friendship, let me have your ring. Whenever I look at it, it'll be like seeing you near me, and it'll be a great comfort and solace."

But the ring was the only property Avanti had ever had in his life and he didn't like to part with it.

"I'm deeply grateful for your kind sentiments," he replied. "But I too cannot live in peace if I have to miss you for a long time. So be merciful to me! Let me keep the ring. Whenever I look at it I'll think that I didn't give it to my friend when he asked me for it, and so I'll be constantly reminded of you."



ALL RIGHT, NINE YUAN!

Once Avanti dreamt that he was selling a hen, making his customer feel how big and fat his hen was and how much it weighed.

"I'll sell it only for a good price!"

"How much do you want?"

"Twelve yuan."

"Seven."

"No."

"Well, eight then."

And so they kept bargaining. When they got to nine yuan, Avanti woke up. When he opened his eyes, there was no hen and no customer. It had only been a dream! Avanti quickly closed his eyes again and stretched out his hand, saying: "Let it be nine yuan then!"

EXPIATION

Once, Avanti found a stray sheep. He took it home, killed and ate it. A friend of his heard of this sin with which Avanti had burdened himself and asked him:

"What will you say to our Lord about this affair when he calls you before him after your death?"

"I shall say that I haven't eaten the sheep."

"But that won't do. What if the sheep appears to give witness?"

"If the sheep appears? Let it do so, then! I'll take it back to its owner and settle the whole business."

THE POT THAT BEARS YOUNG

One day Avanti borrowed a pot from a neighbour. A week later, he returned it to the owner together with a smaller pot inside it. Astonished, the owner asked him why he had put the smaller pot there.

"Your pot was with young when I borrowed it," Avanti said. "It gave birth to this smaller pot the second day after I brought it to my house."

"That is strange! But, whenever you need a pot again, just come and borrow mine!" The owner happily took both the bigger and the smaller pot from Avanti and went back into his house.

A few days later, Avanti borrowed the pot again.

One week, two weeks, a month passed. Avanti still didn't return the pot. Its owner became worried and went to demand it back.

Avanti met the owner with tears in his eyes and said:

"This must be the wish of the Almighty. Your pot died on the second day after I brought it into my house. I meant to break the news to you forty days after its death, so that you could hold a service for the salvation of its soul."

Hearing this, the neighbour became angry.

"Come now, Avanti! Don't act like an idiot! Is there a pot in the world that dies? Give me back my pot!"

"Ah, it is sad to see how unreasonable you are!" Avanti sighed. "If you believed that your pot could bear young, why don't you believe that it can die?"

THE ONLY REMEDY

A mischievous neighbour intended to make fun of Avanti and told him: "A mouse crept into my stomach while I was asleep last night. What can I do about that?"

"What you must do is to catch yourself a live cat at once and swallow it. There is no other remedy for you," was Avanti's immediate rejoinder.

HIDING FROM THE THIEF

One day a thief broke into Avanti's house. Avanti saw him and hid in a chest.

The thief ransacked the house without finding anything worth taking. In the end he opened the chest and saw Avanti. "Aha!" he said, "and what are you doing inside the chest?"

"I was ashamed that there was nothing in my house that would appeal to your taste. That's why I hid here," Avanti confessed.

WHAT DID THE OWL SAY?

Once Avanti bragged about his talents, and that he also understood the language of the birds.

The king heard about this and took him along on a hunt. On their way they saw a wall in ruins and an owl hooting above it. So the king asked Avanti: "What does the owl say?"

"It said this:" Avanti answered. "If the king doesn't stop ill-treating his people, his kingdom, like my nest, will soon be in ruins too, very soon."

BAGGAGE OF TWO ASSES

King Tomur and his favourite courtier went hunting and took Avanti along. On the way, Tomur and the courtier felt hot. They took off their coats and put them on Avanti's back. When Tomur saw how hot Avanti then was, he laughed at him.

"Avanti, you're carrying as much baggage as that of an ass!"

But Avanti retorted: "No, my Lord, I'm carrying the baggage of two asses."

THE THIRSTY POUCH

One day Avanti attended a wedding. One of the guests not only ate a lot of the sweetmeats offered, but stuffed his pouch with them. When Avanti saw what he was doing, he picked up a tea pot and quietly, from behind, poured some tea into the guest's pouch. When the guest discovered what Avanti had done, he was not at all abashed but reproached Avanti.

"What's my pouch got to do with you that you come and pour tea into it?"

"I meant no harm," was Avanti's defence. "When I saw how many sweets your pouch had tucked away, I was afraid it would get thirsty. That's why I gave it a drink."



DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

Three tradesmen came once to a certain kingdom and were entertained by the king in his palace. After a few days' stay, they said that each of them had a difficult question to ask of the king. The king listened with great attention to their questions, but not one of them could he answer. He summoned his counsellors, his orators and magicians, but they were of no help either.

Ashamed and annoyed, the king grumbled: "Isn't there a single wise man in my kingdom to answer the questions of our guests?"

Thereupon one man stood up and said: "There is no one who can answer their questions except Avanti. If it pleases Your Majesty, I suggest that he be summoned."

The king immediately issued a summons for Avanti. Stick in hand, Avanti rode straight up to the king on his donkey and dismounted.

"How do you do, Your Majesty! What can I do for you?"

"Answer the questions our guests put forth!" said the king. Avanti readily lent his ear to the questions.

One of the guests asked: "The earth has a navel. Where is it?"

Without hesitation, Avanti pointed with his stick: "Right there, on the piece of ground under my donkey's right front leg."

"How do you know it's right there?" The guest's manner changed with his amazement over the prompt reply.

"If you don't believe me, go and measure it for yourself! If it's even a hair's breadth out of place, you can come back to ask me again!" was Avanti's reply. The guest had nothing more to say, so he stepped quietly aside.

Avanti then asked the second guest to come forth with his question, which was: "How many stars are there in the sky?"

"Count the hairs on my donkey's back and you'll know how many stars there are in the sky," Avanti answered.

"How can you prove that?" the guest asked, trying to confound him.

"If you don't believe me, you can go and count the hairs of my donkey one by one. If there's one hair more or one hair less, come and ask again!"

"How can you possibly count the hairs on your donkey's back?"

"Now you are smartening up a bit!" Avanti said. "How can you possibly know how many stars there are in the sky!"

At this, the second guest also lapsed into silence. Avanti waited for the third guest to ask his question.

"You see the beard I have—tell me the number of hairs in it!"

"If you tell me how many hairs there are in my donkey's tail, I'll tell you how many hairs there are in your beard!" Avanti replied.

Thus, the third guest also had to give up and admit defeat.

THE MOON

Someone asked Nasrdin Avanti: "What becomes of the old moon every time the new moon comes up?"

Avanti replied: "When the crescent moon comes up, Allah cuts up the old moon into little pieces and makes stars of them."

IN ALL DIRECTIONS

One day Avanti's friends asked him: "Why do people go hither and thither in all directions as soon as it dawns?"

"Aiya, isn't it a pity to see how foolish you are!" was Avanti's rejoinder. "Isn't it quite clear? If all the people went in the same direction, wouldn't the earth list on that side and turn over?"

THE SEA

Someone asked Avanti why the sea water was salty.

He replied: "The water in the sea always stays in one place and never flows anywhere else. Our ancestors were afraid that it might turn putrid, so they salted it up to preserve it."

GOOD ADVICE

One day Avanti thought of earning some money. So he took a length of rope, about twenty or thirty feet, and went to the market-place. Just as he got there and stopped among a group of porters, a man came up and said:

"I've a crate full of bowls and cups here. Whoever carries it home for me shall get three pieces of good advice as his pay."

"That's a fine lot of rot!" said the porters and didn't pay any attention to him. Avanti, however, bethought himself: "A thing like money can be obtained any time, but good advice is difficult to get. I better hear what advice he has to give, in order to learn something." So he agreed to carry the crate for the man.

As they were walking along, Avanti said to the owner of the crate: "How about telling me now what good advice you have to give?"

The owner of the crate said:

"Don't believe anybody who tells you that it is better to go hungry than to eat your fill."

“That’s very good advice!” Avanti agreed.

They walked on a further while, then Avanti said: “Well, let’s have the second piece of advice now!”

“Don’t believe anybody who tells you that it is better to go on foot than to ride on horseback.”

“Aiya! That really is excellent advice!” Avanti exclaimed.

After they had gone on for another distance, Avanti demanded to hear the third piece of advice.

“Don’t believe anyone who tells you that other porters are even more foolish than you,” the man said. But hardly had he finished, when Avanti suddenly let go of the rope in his hand and said:

“And don’t you believe anyone, either, who tells you that the bowls and cups in this crate aren’t broken!”

