



# Míng Lí's Eyes

By Jennifer Hsiao

**L**ong ago, in a time long before the days of your great-great-grandfathers, when dragons bathed in crystal waters and phoenixes soared past imperial cascades, there lived an affluent emperor and his empress of reigning beauty. Her skin was a tone of ivory satin, her features soft and graceful, and her body delicate and slender. It was said that the couple sat propped on sedan chairs embroidered with gold, and that they wore nothing but brocade robes and flowing gowns made only of the finest silks.

The empress was expecting her first child when a gnarled messenger came forth to bow before the emperor, bearing a letter from the king of a fierce neighboring kingdom named Pao Tzu. He usually wrote of hostility toward the empire and its inhabitants. For decades, the king had terrorized the emperor's kingdom with his soldiers of great bulk. Year after year he demanded that the emperor turn his lands over into Pao Tzu's hands, and every one of these times, the royal court refused. To their surprise, the silk paper bore no warning this year, no threat, but rather a peace offering.

"Your Highness The Emperor,

Your land is not my ultimate intention now, but, in return for peace, I ask that you provide a princess for my son, the prince. I expect that she shall be no less than perfect, and that she shall serve, honor, and fulfill all my son's needs all the days of her life. It is known that the empress is presently expecting. If this child is any less than the maiden I require, my army will fight you and your proven scrawny warriors to the death. My ambassadors will personally reside at your castle and, on the day of the blessed or disappointing event, will summon me to approve of the child."

The emperor's face drained white. "There must be some other way! I have land, riches, anything—but not my child!" Yet his pleas were not heard.

Following the arrival of this message, the empress spent hours with oracles and miracle workers to predict the baby's gender, beauty, and health, and to alter any negative outcome if the baby were to be less than Pao Tzu's requirements. Soon the empress became inexplicably ill. Her

Jennifer Hsiao wrote this story in seventh grade at Charlotte Wood Middle School in her hometown of Danville, California. Some of her hobbies include playing the piano, traveling, swimming, and reading Shakespeare. "Above all," she reports, "I would describe myself as a lover of history and of all cultures of the world."

face was pale and foreboding, her body riddled with pain, and, not long after this, her birth pains came. The labor was tormenting, but the baby girl was born in ideal health. Unfortunately, though, the child would never see the face of her mother, for the empress's eyes closed to an inviting eternal sleep.

King Pao Tzu sailed to the castle and was presented with the baby Ming-Li, a vision of her lost mother. Her skin was snowy, her hair and eyes raven black. The emperor sorrowfully agreed to the king's offer, and all the necessary papers and agreements were signed and approved to turn over his daughter on her eighteenth birthday. The emperor was swept with a bittersweet joy; peace was at last at hand. But then the midwife secretly told him troubling news: the baby girl was blind.

The emperor was enraged! "There must be some way to cure her! The entire fate of this empire rests in her hands now!" he bellowed, but there was no hope. She would never once in her days on earth see the knobby trees, the gushing falls, or the looming fog.

He immediately consulted the miracle men at his court. The oldest and wisest one knew of the cure: "You must give your daughter the most valuable gift you have, though you are not yet rich enough to do so," he said.

With this challenge before him, the emperor left his daughter Ming-Li behind at the palace and sailed off with his armada in search of the greatest gift in all the world. Their ships docked in India, Japan, Arabia. They sailed through the raging waters of the Yellow River and marched through the deserts in Egypt. They spoke with mermaids and trolls, yet none of them seemed to know where to find the gift.

One day in the northern deserts, they came upon an old woman, dressed in tattered rags. Her mother had told her stories of a great seafaring dragon who

lived deep beneath the waves, guarding his chest of enchanted jewels. The emperor was relieved and set out to find this creature and its treasure.

After searching for many years, the emperor had grown older, and the sailors were ill and starving.

The emperor hadn't much time left. Soon King Pao Tzu would call for Ming-Li to marry his son.

One windy night, after a tempest had just breathed its last into the Lost Seas, a mystical light beamed forth from fathoms below the surface of black. The crew peered over the planks of their decks

to catch a glimpse of the miraculous sight, blinding them with its luminescence. Suddenly emerging from the deepest shadows, there came a burst of light and then a dragon, shimmering with colors of sunset. His talons were bright orange, his eyes fiery red. His fangs were quite flagrantly presented, protruding from his mouth. Waves of heat rippled around his body as he heaved a breath of fire into the darkness.

He was old; scales of emerald were missing in spots where claws of ravenous dragons had ripped. The emperor was not at all afraid, and he hollered from his ship, "I have heard from an old woman that you guard a chest of enchanted jewels. At what price may I buy them from your possession?"

"You roused me from my sleep to buy these priceless gems? My, you are a reckless man, and so I shall punish you all! Ha, ha, ha!" he roared, the water trembling with fright.

"Please forgive me, Oh Honorable One, for I have plumbed every fathom of the seas, searching for you! I must give my blind daughter, the princess, the most valuable gift of all, so that it may restore her sight and bring peace to our land. I believe you possess this gift. I will give you anything in return."

"Hmmm. You say that your daughter is a princess . . . which would make you an emperor?"

"Yes, dragon."

"Then I will give you my treasure for your kingdom and riches, and nothing less."

"Certainly not! I would never give my kingdom up to a coward of a dragon like you!"

The dragon became terribly angry and spewed from his mouth a jagged line of flames right into the emperor's face. The emperor screamed with pain as he clutched his face and fell to the deck. "Perhaps my country will be safe in your hands," he moaned in deep shame.

The dragon was content and, with his giant tail, scooped the glowing chest from the water and rested it carefully upon the ship. The fleet began their journey home to the kingdom. Day by day the emperor's vision deteriorated, his eyes burning for days with the sting of the dragon's breath. The sun now appeared as a mass of light; the sea could not be differentiated from the sky. The day finally came when the emperor awoke and could see nothing but blackness.

Upon returning home, he was surprised to find that the tiny baby he had left behind was now a

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graceful girl. "Father, have you my present? Will I be able to see, Father?"

"My dear, I have brought you a spectacular gift. I have bought it from an old sea dragon who sleeps in the Lost Seas, but I will never be able to see the look on your face when you can see me, and the sun, and the sky . . ."

"Why, Father? Will you die?"

"No, my child, it is that I cannot see. I too am blind."

He summoned his servants, and it took nearly six dozen men to haul the great trunk, which took up most of the main portico. He held a ruby the size of his hand to his daughter's eyes, but nothing seemed to work. He pulled out a pearl—nothing. He brought forth a diamond, emerald, sapphire, a carving of jade—nothing. It was hopeless. He had given up his kingdom and his sight, and now neither of them could see.

In a fit of rage, the emperor threw every gem up into the blackness of the night. Soon all were gone, yet in the sky there peeped slits of dancing light . . .

Together, with their most faithful servants, the two packed their belongings

and moved into a cot-

tage in the coun-

tryside by a river.

And there, in the

humblest and sim-

plest of dwellings, they

lived in utter happiness. The emperor had never been so fulfilled in all his life! Their days were spent roaming the fields together, singing, and working in their garden. In the evening, Ming-Li would lay entranced upon her cot, listening to stories of her father's adventures mingling with the sound of crickets. Gone were the worries of court life; in fact, they had no worries at all. They could act freely and be themselves with no one there for them to please. While neither could see with eyes, both saw clearly with their hearts. They could feel the primal power of love as no other has ever experienced it through the filter of eyes.

By and by, King Pao Tzu summoned the princess. When the remaining officials at the palace told him what had happened, he was infuriated. The king assembled an army of nearly 10,000 and immediately set sail for the Lost Seas to battle the dragon. Their spears, stones, and arrows did not kill him, however, and, though weakened, with one great fiery breath the dragon swept every man from the decks, dropping them to their knees, to their death. Yet the dragon was himself old and wounded, and so he too slowly sank to the bottom of the sea.

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Ming-Li and her father were overjoyed to hear the news! Feeling still responsible to their subjects, they promptly moved back into the palace where together they ruled the most powerful and dynamic empire known to man. Because they could see with more than their eyes, they saw truly and could not be deceived. They became one with their people, and, because they couldn't see, they listened and they touched. They listened, helped, comforted, advised.

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After living in exile as everyday farmers, Ming-Li and her father understood the hardships that the peasants and townsfolk faced. When they made decisions, they were made for the well-being and overall best interests of the people, not for themselves. They each had so much happiness within their hearts that they could not help but share it with their subjects, and, for as long as they lived, everyone was happy.

After many joyous years, the emperor became old and frail, and he died, leaving his kingdom in the hands of his daughter. Ming-Li was revered by everyone who knew her, and even by those who did not. Her beauty and great wisdom were known throughout the land. In fishing villages, bustling marketplaces, and tranquil rice paddies, people spoke of her. When she died, a vast kingdom mourned. The one person who had truly understood the people had died, but her spirit lived on.

From the stars in the sky that her father created with his jewels, Ming-Li watches us from her palace in heaven. She looks down and sees the happiness, trouble, joy, and grief that we all endure, and blesses us with pleasant dreams at night. To this day, she is known as the Goddess of Sight, one who sees not with her eyes, but with her heart. ★

