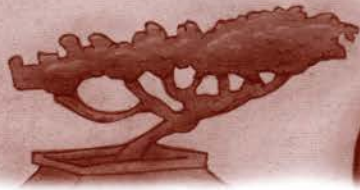


LI AND THE EMPEROR'S SEEDS

Adapted from a Chinese folktale



In ancient China, there lived a wise and kind emperor. He was growing old and had no child to lead the people after his passing. So he invited all the youth in the land to come to his palace.

That day, the courtyard was packed with excited children. Among them was a boy named Li. He came from a small farming village and led a simple life.

The emperor smiled at the thousands who had gathered. He said, "Leading a kingdom is like tending a garden. It takes a great deal of patience and care. I will give each of you some seeds. Plant them and tend to them. When autumn comes, return to me. The child who presents the best results from the seeds I've given will be the heir to my kingdom."

When Li got home, he filled a pot with rich earth. He gently planted the seeds and put the pot in the sun.

Day after day, Li watered his seeds and said prayers for their growth. But nothing happened, even as summer ended. How could he bring this empty pot to the emperor? His failure made him think about staying home. But Li was curious to see the kingdom's next ruler.

Li made the long trek back to the palace. When he got there, all of the children held pots of growing plants. Li swallowed hard when he saw the many lush green plants and flowers.

The emperor beckoned, "Children, please come forward and show me your work."

Li looked at his pot of barren soil. With tears

stinging his eyes, he turned to leave. Then the emperor said, "I wish to see *every* child here today."

Li obeyed and joined the line. Each child filed past the throne, holding a pot of lilies or radishes or bean plants. The emperor nodded and thanked them. Last of all was Li, who held his empty pot.

"What's this?" cried the emperor. "Is this all you have for me?"

"I am sorry, Your Majesty," said Li. "I cared for the seeds, but nothing grew. Still, I thank you for the chance to try."

The emperor looked sternly into Li's troubled

face. Then he smiled. "Young man," he said, "You will be our kingdom's next emperor."

So great was Li's shock, he nearly dropped his empty pot. "But—Your Majesty—I—"

The crowd grumbled angrily. Then the emperor announced, "This young man has the

honesty and courage that a leader needs. You all worked hard, but you did not use the seeds I asked you to care for." He eyed the children, and many hung their heads. "You see, all of the seeds I gave out had been cooked thoroughly, and could never grow. Only this boy had the courage to face me with the truth."

Through the years, Li spent many hours in the palace gardens, learning from the emperor. On a table next to his bed in the palace stood the empty pot, reminding him about his first and most important lesson from his wise teacher.

