

King Solomon Sends Out for Chinese Food

by Ahimaaz, Court Historian



Translated and Annotated by
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Illustrated by Steve Solomon



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Professor Solomon is the author of *How to Find Lost Objects*, *Coney Island*, *Japan in a Nutshell*, etc.

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ENSCONCED IN THE WINDOW SEAT OF THE TOWER OF Learning, King Solomon had dozed off—when Benaiah's voice sounded from the communication tube.

“That ship's captain is here, Sire.”

“Be right down,” said Solomon into the tube.

Awakened from his nap, the king yawned. His study at the top of the Tower was filled with sunlight. A breeze rustled the curtains and fanned a pile of papers. Donning his crown, he descended the spiral stairs.

The ship's captain was chatting with Benaiah. A tall, wiry man, he had shoulder-length hair and a sun-beaten complexion. He wore the flat cap of a sailor, a leather tunic, and a short cape. He was holding a basket, filled with scrolls.

“My greetings and obeisances, Your Majesty,” said the captain, bowing. “I am Zakar, native of Tyre and rover of the sea. It has been my privilege to serve—on loan from Hiram, king of Tyre—as captain of your ship *Leviathan*. Two years ago, with a joint crew of Phoenicians and Israelites, I set sail from Ezion-geber. My cargo was a hundred casks of olive oil. My destination, distant China. My mission, to acquire silk, that rare and shimmering fabric—that it might lend its radiance to your court.

“We stopped at Ophir, to take on a load of gold. Continuing along the Nubian coast, we passed through the Bab el Mandeb and entered the open sea. For many weeks we sailed eastward, until the coast of India loomed on the horizon. At a trading post there we exchanged a portion of our oil and gold for spices. And we sailed on, blessed with favorable winds and a storm-free sea—thanks be unto Baal.” Captain Zakar slapped himself. “Pardon me, Your Highness. Rather, thanks be unto the Lord of the Universe.”

“Go on, go on,” said Solomon, waving impatiently.

“Passing through the Strait of Malacca, we veered north. Many more weeks went by as the *Leviathan* plunged through the deep. Finally we sighted the coast of China. A triumphant cry rose from my men! And we were soon entering a harbor, having reached the city of Wu, capital of the kingdom of Wu. You may imagine our excitement as the *Leviathan* drew alongside a pier and dropped anchor. An official in flowing robes came aboard and welcomed us. He then escorted us to the palace, where King Wu himself accepted our gifts and bid us tarry as his guests.

“All that winter did we tarry, lodged in the palace and provided with every comfort. I have a knack for languages, and was soon speaking and understanding Chinese. Thus, during our stay I was able to learn something of their culture—information I thought might interest you.”

“Absolutely! Let’s hear it.”

“The Chinese worship a long list of nature deities. They also worship their ancestors, who they believe can intercede in their behalf. And they acknowledge a mysterious force called the Tao, with which they seek to harmonize their actions. The stars are both worshiped and studied; and Chinese astronomers, in their knowledge of the heavens, surpass even the Chaldeans. Their medical arts are advanced, and include a bizarre—yet effective—‘puncture treatment.’ The physician sticks pins into his patient! Advanced, too, are the decorative arts in China—we saw the most exquisite jewelry, sculptures, and paintings. Chinese metallurgy is highly sophisticated. And, of course, they produce silk—by a secret process rumored to involve trained insects.

“But the aspect of Chinese civilization that most impressed me was its culinary arts. I have sailed the world, and sampled many cuisines—yet none so delicious and varied as that of China. A daily banquet was held in the palace, to which my men and I were welcomed. Each afternoon we would take our seats and marvel at the steaming platters that were brought to our table. There were savory soups, delectable dumplings, broiled fish in pungent sauces, Aromatic Crispy Chicken, deep-fried egg rolls, Five-Spice Vegetable Delight, braised oxen in garlic sauce, Three Fairy Salad, sesame noodles, lo mein, chow mein, Thousand-Year-

Old Egg, and dishes whose identity we never learned—but nonetheless consumed with gusto! The *variety* of ingredients, tastes, and textures was unbelievable. A meal consisted of sixteen courses; and my men and I—in emulation of our hosts—routinely ate ourselves into a stupor. Verily, Chinese food is one of the wonders of the world. Never shall I forget its delights, nor cease to hunger for it.

“Yet enthralled as I was by Wu’s cuisine and other attractions, I did not forget my mission. And finally the moment seemed right to approach the Minister of Trade. We entered into negotiations. He was a sharp bargainer; but I was able to exchange our oil, gold, and spices for fifty rolls of silk. And when the winds turned favorable, my men and I set sail for home.

“After a series of adventures at sea, the *Leviathan* sailed into port at Ezion-geber. And the silk was conveyed to your palace here in Jerusalem.”

“For which I—in behalf of my wives, whose lithe forms that silk will grace—do thank you, Captain Zakar,” said Solomon.

“My duty and my pleasure, Your Majesty. And there’s something else. Aware of your interest in the learning of other nations, I was able to acquire—as part of our exchange with the Chinese—a number of scrolls. They are here in this basket.”

The captain handed him one of the scrolls. Unrolling it, Solomon frowned at the unfamiliar script.

“Ideograms,” explained Zakar. “They’re nonalphabetical—each character is a word. And one final item have I brought you.” He reached into the basket and brought out a bottle. “This contains ‘soy sauce’—a fermented condiment that the Chinese pour liberally upon their food. Enjoy it, Sire.”

Placing the basket on a table, Zakar bowed and exited the Tower.

Solomon sat down and examined the scroll. Running his finger over the ideograms, he sighed and said: “Alas, Benaiah, that we are unable to read these manuscripts. What arcane knowledge—what unique wisdom—they may contain.”

Turning his attention to the soy sauce. Solomon poured some into his palm and tasted it. “Mmm!” he said. “If only

we had a serving of that Chinese food, on which to pour this. Captain Zakar's description of it roused in me a craving. How I'd like to sample those deep-fried egg rolls. That Aromatic Spicy Chicken. That—" He halted mid-sentence. A glint had come into his eye. "But perhaps we *could* have Chinese food."

"Sire?" said Benaiah.

"Perhaps we could *send out* for it."

"How do you mean?"

"I'll show you." Solomon stood up and raised his ring. "O Wind, come!" he commanded.

The Wind came rushing in the window and swirled about them. "You called, O Solomon?" it said.

"I did. Are you available for an errand?"

"I am at your beck."

"I want you to go to China and bring back Chinese food. I'd like a complete, sixteen-course meal."

"Cantonese or Szechwan?"

"What's the difference?"

"Szechwan is hot-and-spicy."

"Szechwan."

"I'm on my way. Expect me back tomorrow evening."

With a whoosh the Wind flew out the window, rose into the sky, and headed east.

It gusted along at full speed. A changing landscape—hills, desert, the Jordan River, the Mountains of Bashan—unfolded below.

Soon the Wind was passing over the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. And the Zagros Mountains. Nightfall found it cruising the Persian plateau. It dozed off. It was still dozing when the moonlit mountains of Afghanistan appeared on the horizon. Over the Punjab it was awake by the rising sun. The Wind yawned and wondered where it was. It flew past the snowy peaks of the Himalayas. And passing over Tibet, it was startled to see a monk fly by.

It followed the Yangtze as the river wound through mountain gorges. And upon reaching Szechwan, it swooped down—toward the estate of a prosperous landowner.

At an outdoor pavilion a banquet was about to begin. Servants were loading the table with platters of food.

Clutching cups of wine, the guests were leaving a pond and ambling towards the dining pavilion.

The Wind came roaring into the pavilion. It whirled about the table, snatched up the contents, and carried them off.

The head servant shouted and shook his fist, as the food disappeared into the sky.



Solomon, meanwhile, was busy with affairs of state. Perched on the throne, he received a steady stream of litigants, suppliants, emissaries, and bureaucrats. But as he performed his duties—pronouncing judgments, granting boons, accepting gifts, putting his seal on documents—Solomon's thoughts were elsewhere. For he was eagerly anticipating the meal he had ordered.

At sunset he dismissed his aides and hastened to the Tower of Learning. Waiting there was Benaiah, along with Captain Zakar, who had been invited to join them in the feast. They cleared off a table and sat down to wait. To pass the time, Zakar recounted one of his adventures at sea.

Suddenly the Wind came rushing through the window, swirled about the table, and deposited upon it a meal from afar.

The three men gazed wide-eyed at the steaming platters before them. Zakar lifted a lid. "You weren't kidding," he said. "Chinese food—this is it!"

Captain Zakar served as a guide. He identified dishes—explained the role of rice—demonstrated the use of chopsticks—poured cups of tea. And the three dined with gusto. Repeatedly they filled their bowls—dousing everything with soy sauce and murmuring with satisfaction as they gorged themselves.

Finally the platters were empty. All the food had been devoured—except for a bowlful of confections that Zakar had saved for last.

"Fortune cookies," the captain explained, taking one from the bowl. "Traditionally, they conclude the meal." He

snapped the cookie in two and withdrew a slip of paper. "My fortune is inscribed on this slip."

"What does it say?" asked Solomon.

"I have no idea. I can speak Chinese, but cannot read these ideograms."

Solomon took a cookie and snapped it open. He withdrew the slip of paper and eyed the unreadable fortune.

"Perhaps you could summon the Info Imp," said Benaiah, "or one of the other jinn, to decipher what it says."

"I suppose I could," said Solomon. "But do we really want to know our fortunes?"

"Why not?"

Solomon raised a finger didactically and said:

"As through life's labyrinth we go
'Tis best our fortune not to know.
If it be good, let it surprise
As when, across the starry skies,
A meteor doth effloresce
With a thrilling suddenness.
Or, if ill, why wait in dread
And worry over—years ahead—
Some augured grief that when it's o'er
May seem a nuisance, nothing more?
The present day, in any case,
Has bitter pills enough to face.
But also treats! So let's dig in.
To down these sweets, we need no jinn."

And the three of them finished off the bowl of fortune cookies—tossing away the slips of paper as they went.*

* 3000 years after King Solomon introduced it, Chinese food remains popular among Jews—particularly in the U.S. Indeed, some Chinese restaurants close on Jewish holidays, for lack of business. The owner of Chin's, a restaurant in Cleveland, keeps a Jewish calendar on the wall, for determining when to close.