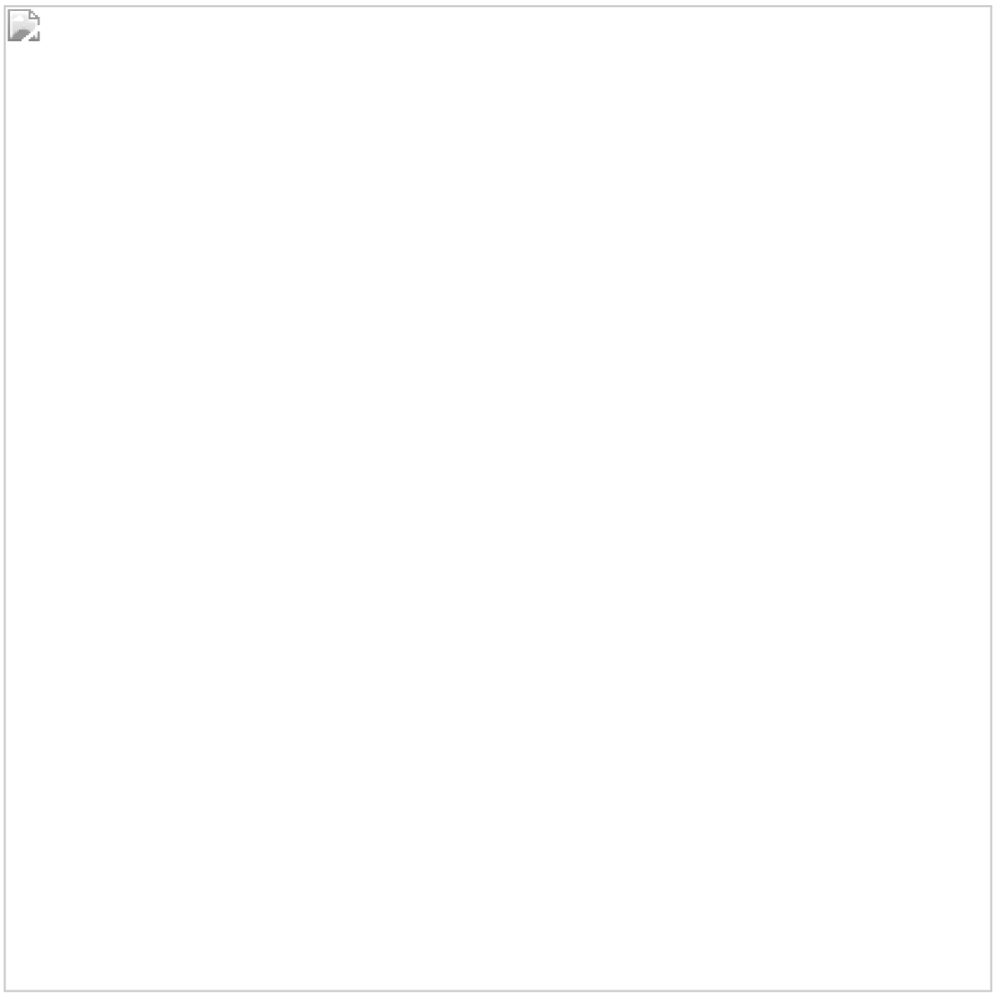
COLORING THE CLASSICS

The Talking Fish

A Tale from China



Long, long before your great-grandfather was born, two men called Li and Sing lived together in the village of Everlasting Happiness. They had been high officials for more than twenty years and had often treated the people very harshly, so that everybody disliked and hated them.

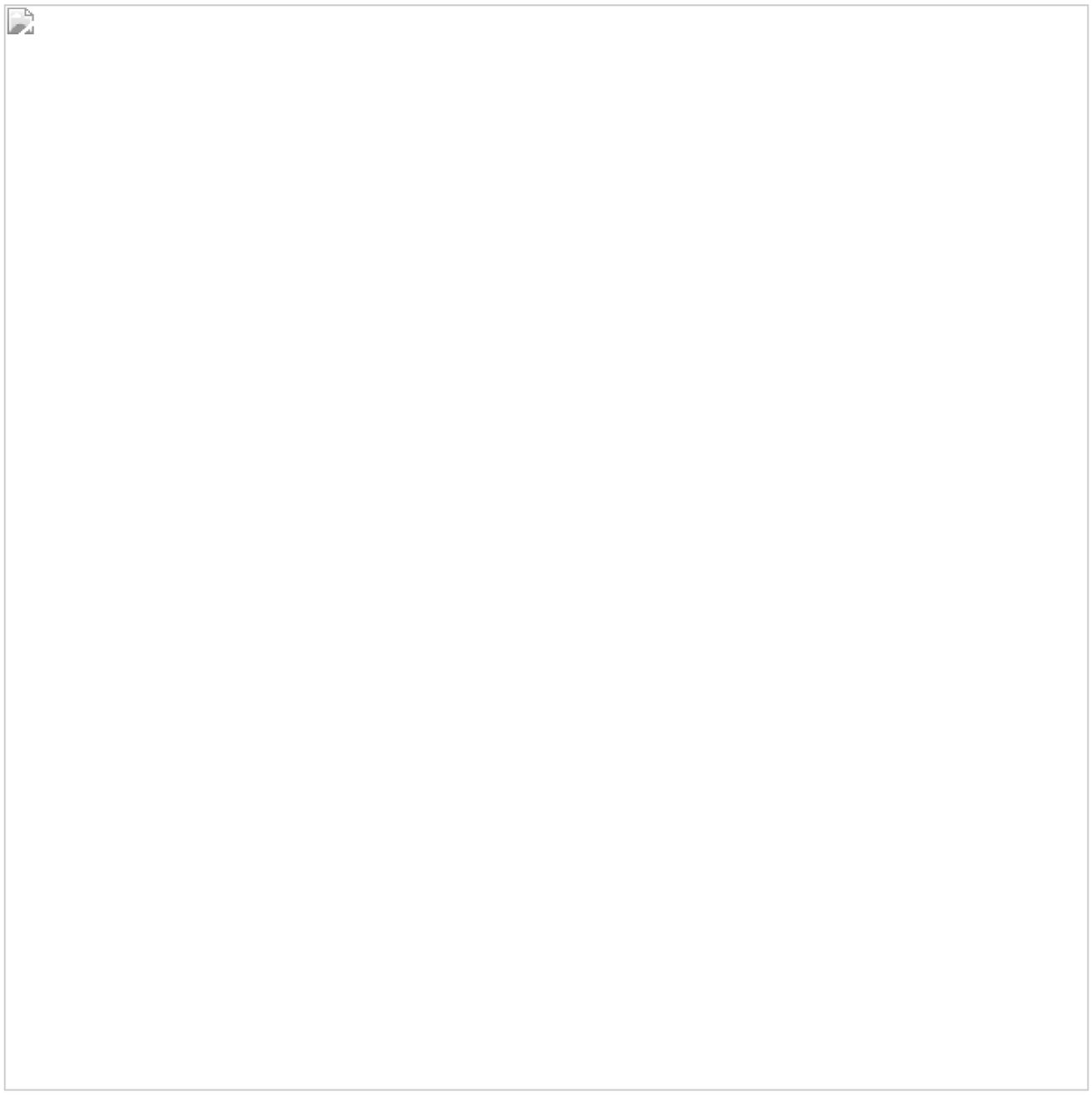
By robbing the wealthy merchants and cheating the poor, they had become rich. “For here,” said they, “we can surely find that joy which has been denied us in every other place.”

TALK ABOUT IT

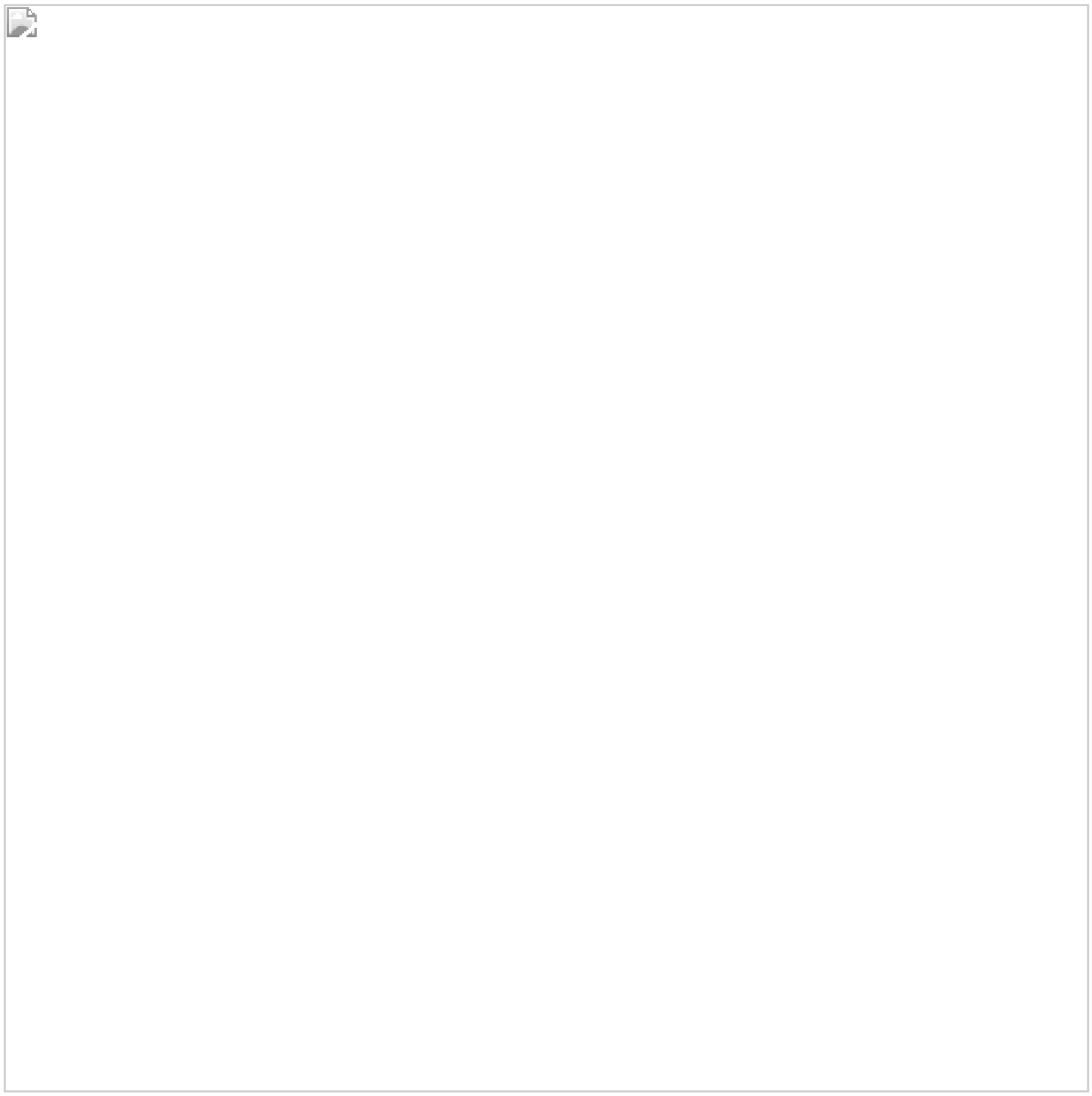
Li and Sing hoped to find joy by moving to a new village. Where do you think joy comes from?

This book belongs to _____

The Talking Fish · another picture



The Finest House



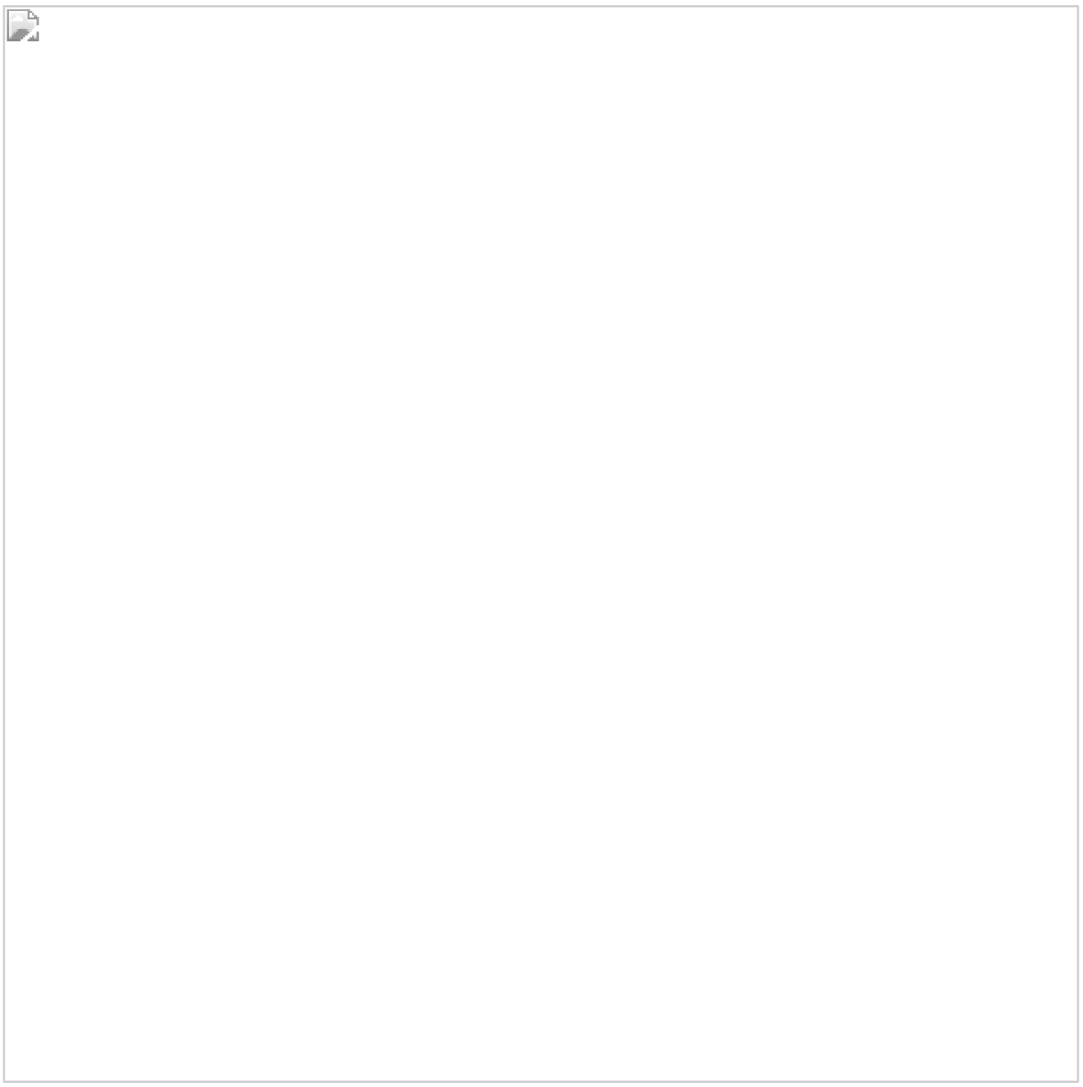
Li and Sing bought the finest house in the village. Around it were lovely gardens full of flowers and birds, with trees grown into the shapes of tigers and other wild animals.

When they felt lonely, they invited rich neighbours to dine, and afterward they sometimes rowed out on their little lake.

One day the sun beat down fiercely on the bald heads of everyone in the boat, for this was long before hats were worn, at least in the village of Everlasting Happiness. Mr. Li grew giddy, and soon he was in a burning fever.

TALK ABOUT IT

Li and Sing invited people when they felt lonely. What do you do when you feel lonely?

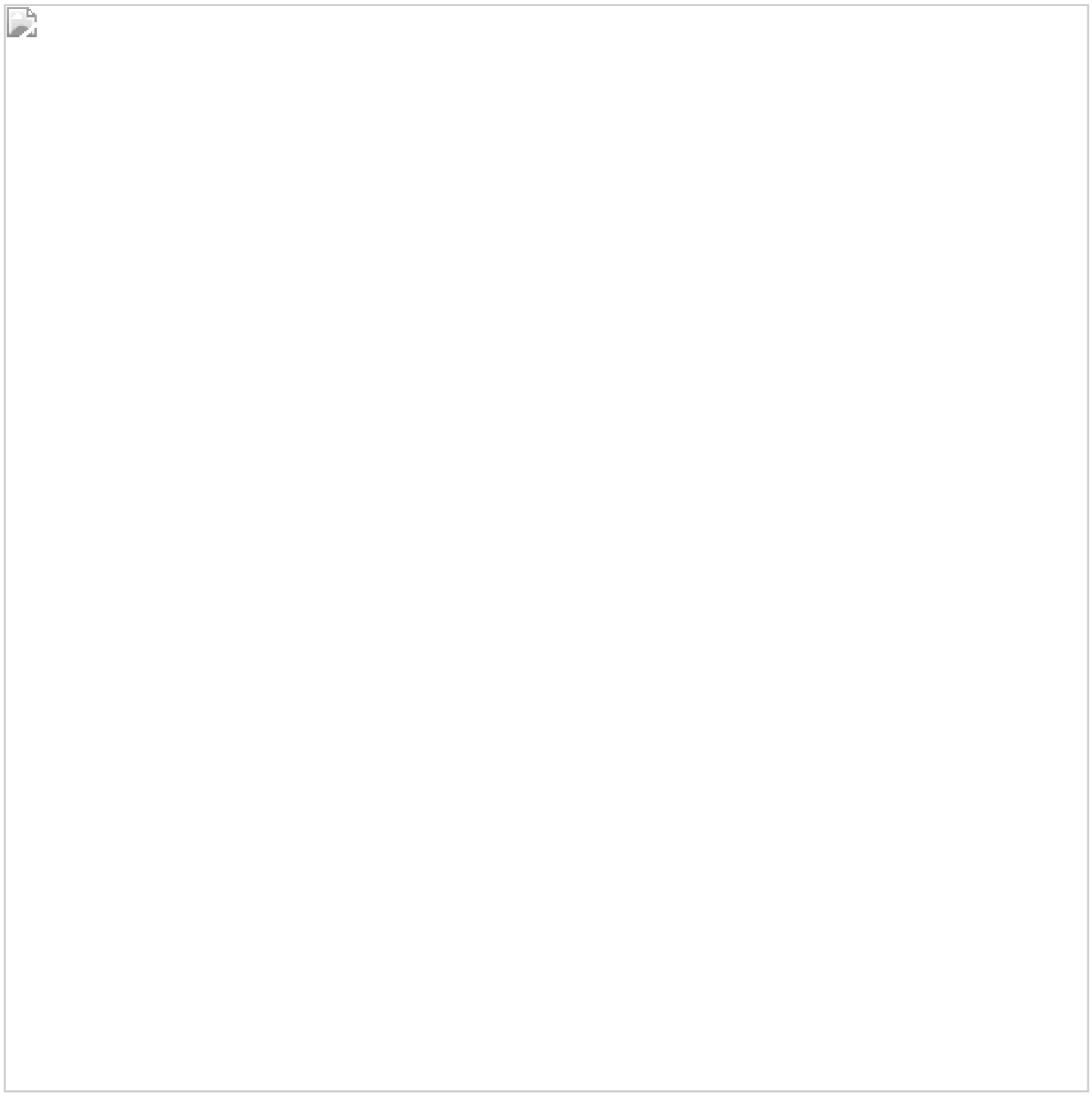


Think about it

1. What was the name of the village?

- ○ Everlasting Happiness
- ○ Golden Lake
- ○ Ten Thousand Trees

Water, Water!



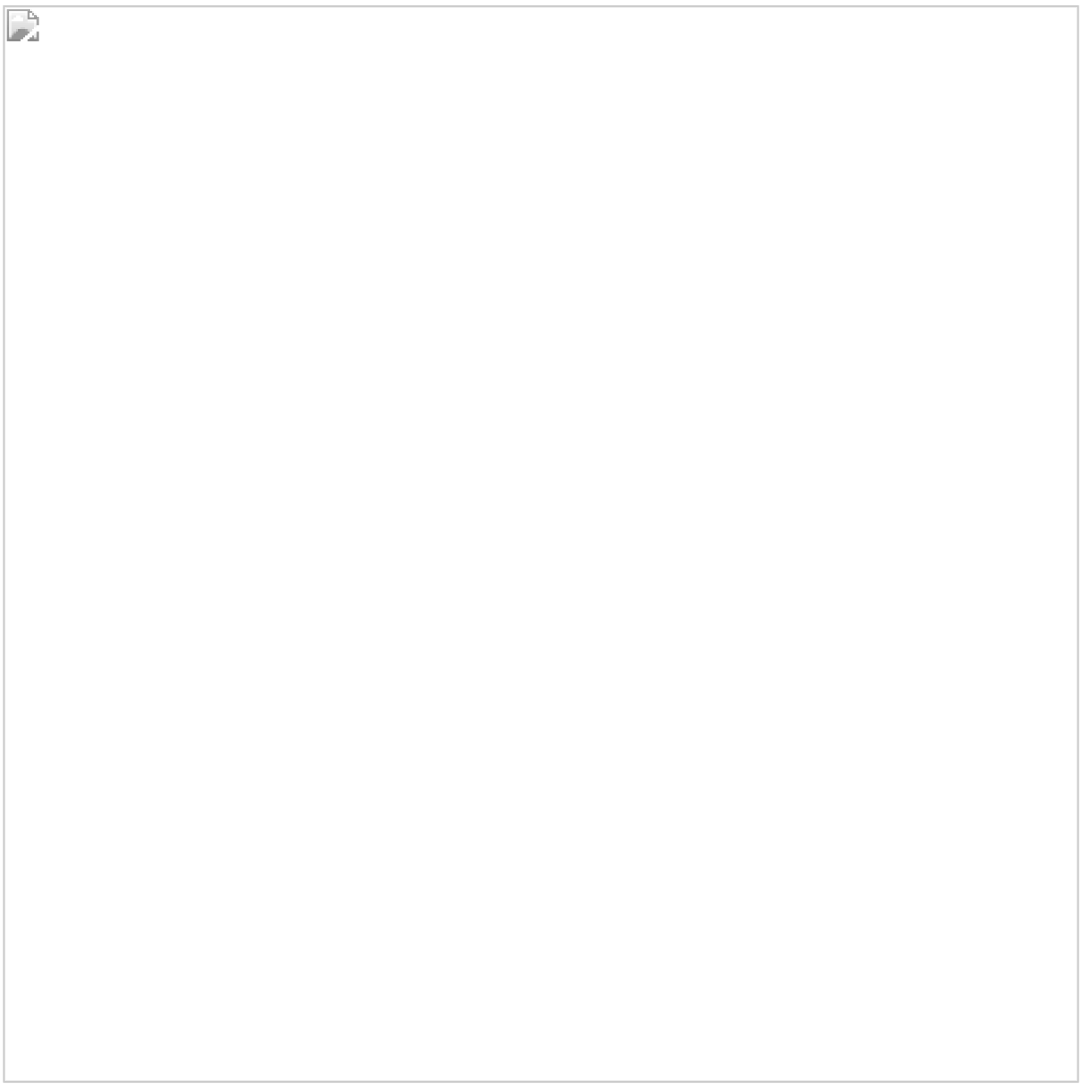
A wise-looking doctor peered through his huge glasses. “Snake's blood mixed with powdered deer-horn is the thing for him,” he said. “Be sure, above all, not to leave him alone.”

But as soon as Li fell asleep, his servant rushed off to join the others at their mid-day meal. Li soon woke. “Water, water,” he moaned. “Air, air.” He clapped his hands and called, “Wang, Wang!” But no Wang came.

At last Li staggered out of bed and down to the lake garden. “What do they care for a man when he is sick?” he muttered.

TALK ABOUT IT

Li felt that nobody cared about him. Have you ever felt that? What helped?

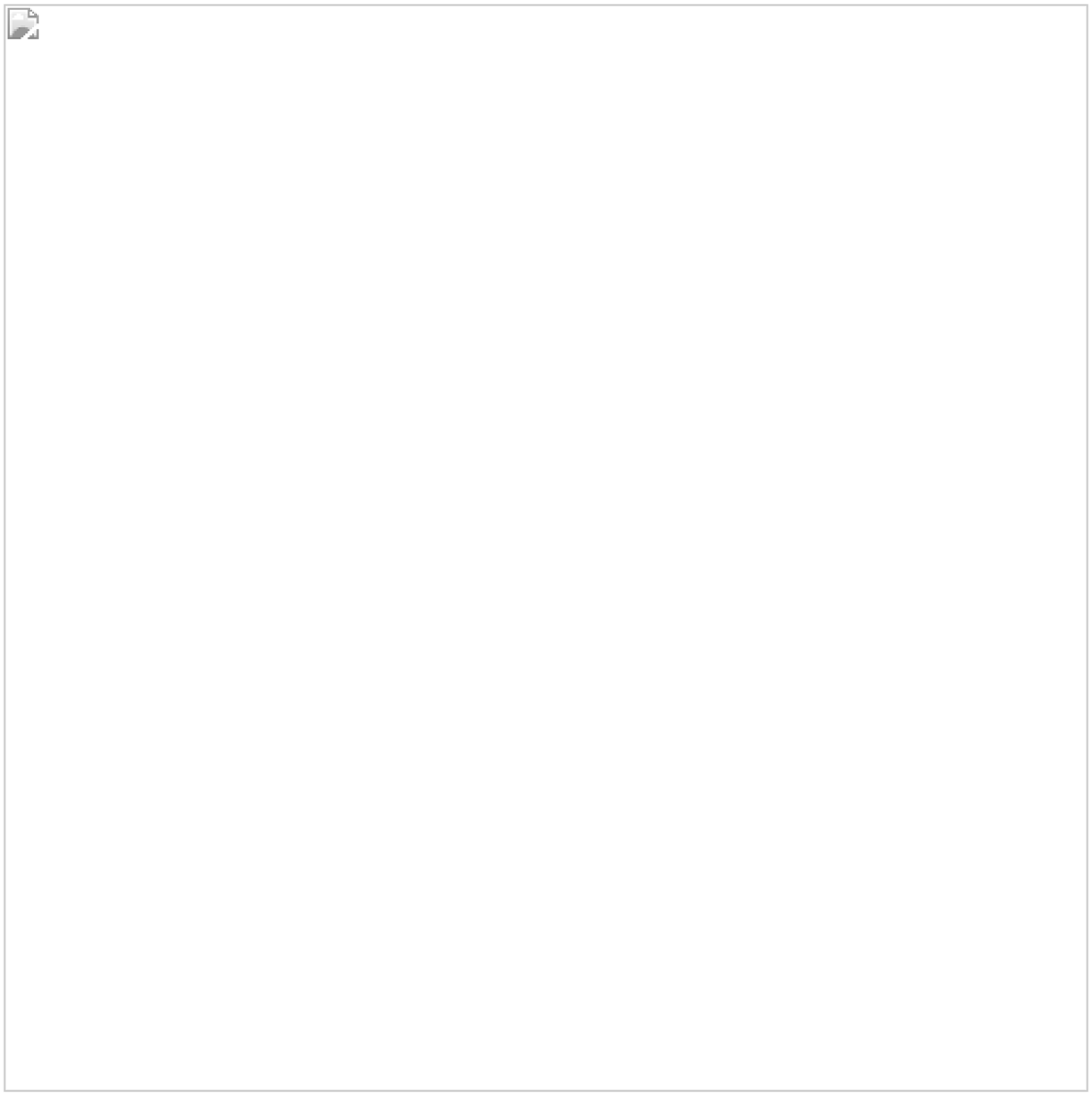


Think about it

1. Why was Li alone?

- ○ His servant had gone to eat with the others
- ○ He sent everyone away
- ○ The doctor took them all

Into the Fish-Pond



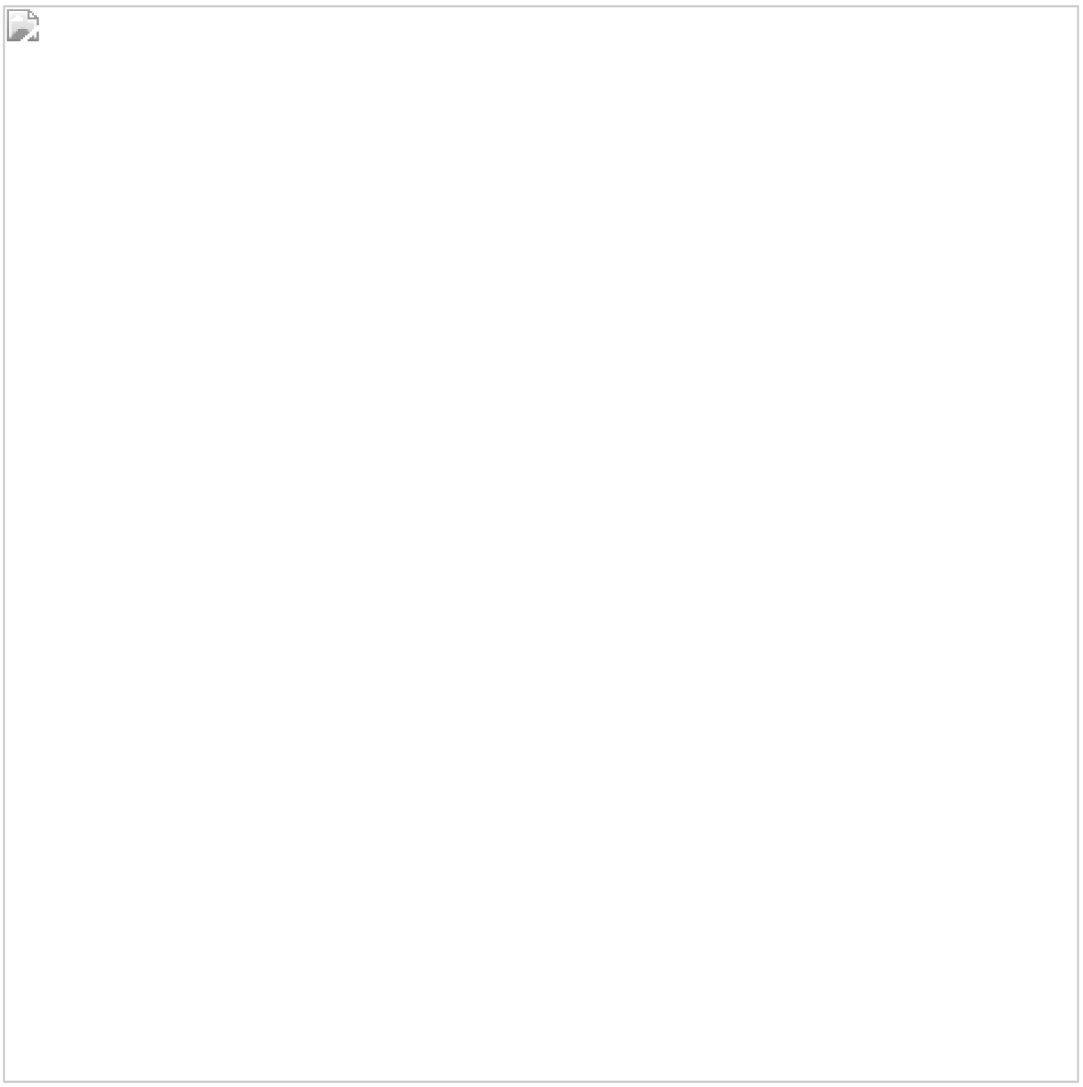
Li reached a little brook that flowed into the big fish-pond, and bathed his hands in the cool water. “How delightful!” If only it were deep enough to cover his whole body!

“I will cast myself head first into the fish-pond,” he said. Near the shore it was too shallow to drown him, and Li had grown up by the sea and could swim well. He flung himself in, clothes and all.

“It takes me back to my boyhood,” he cried. “I'd give anything to stay here for ever.”

“You would, eh?” chuckled a hoarse voice just under him.

TALK ABOUT IT
Li found something that felt wonderful. What feels wonderful to you on a hot day?

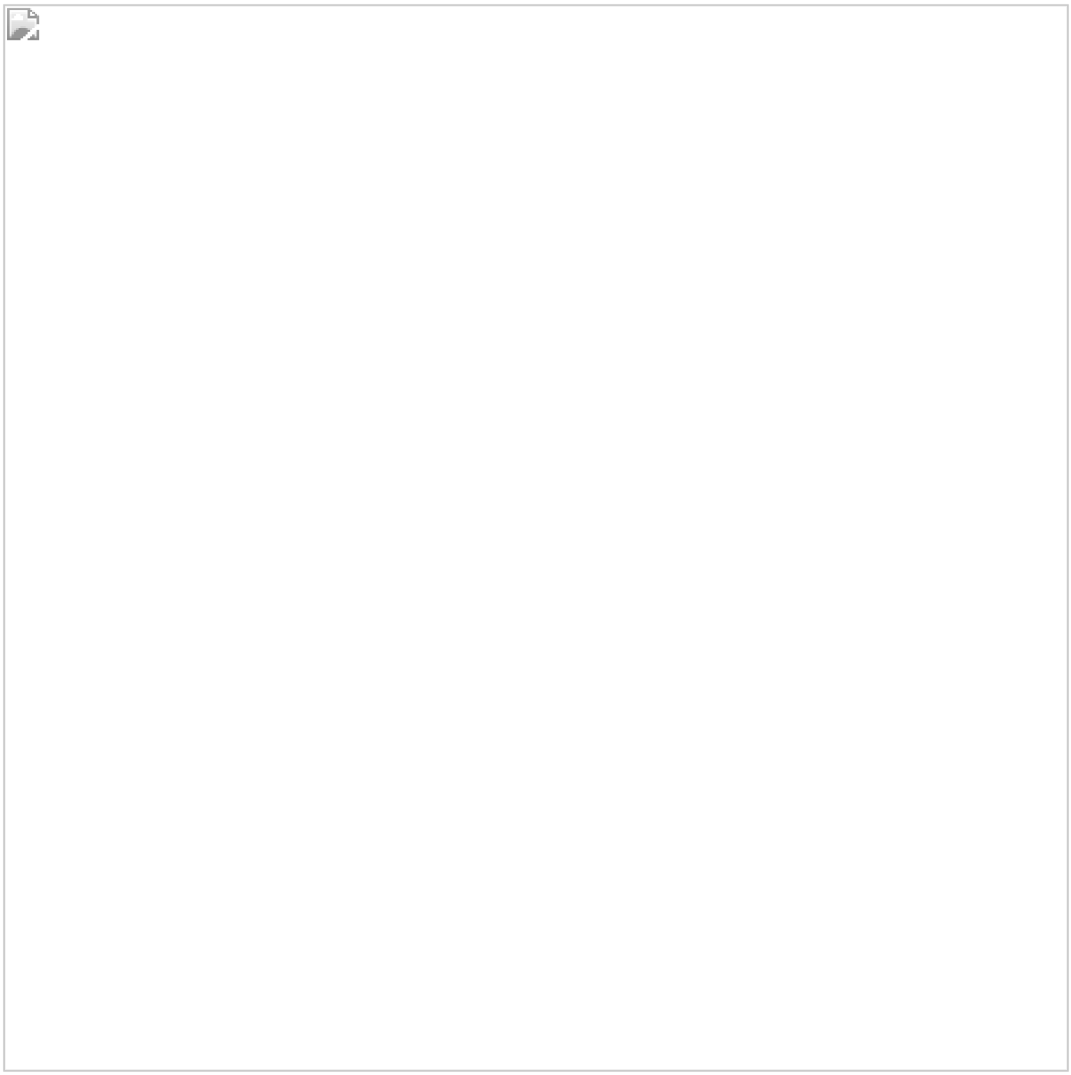


Think about it

1. What did Li do when he found the pond?

- ○ He threw in a stone
- ○ He jumped in, clothes and all
- ○ He walked away

The Giant Fish



Below Li was a fat, ugly giant fish, laughing. “Look here, what do you mean by giving a fellow such a start! “Don't you know what the Classics say about such rudeness?”

“What time do you suppose I have for Classics? You make me laugh till I cry!”

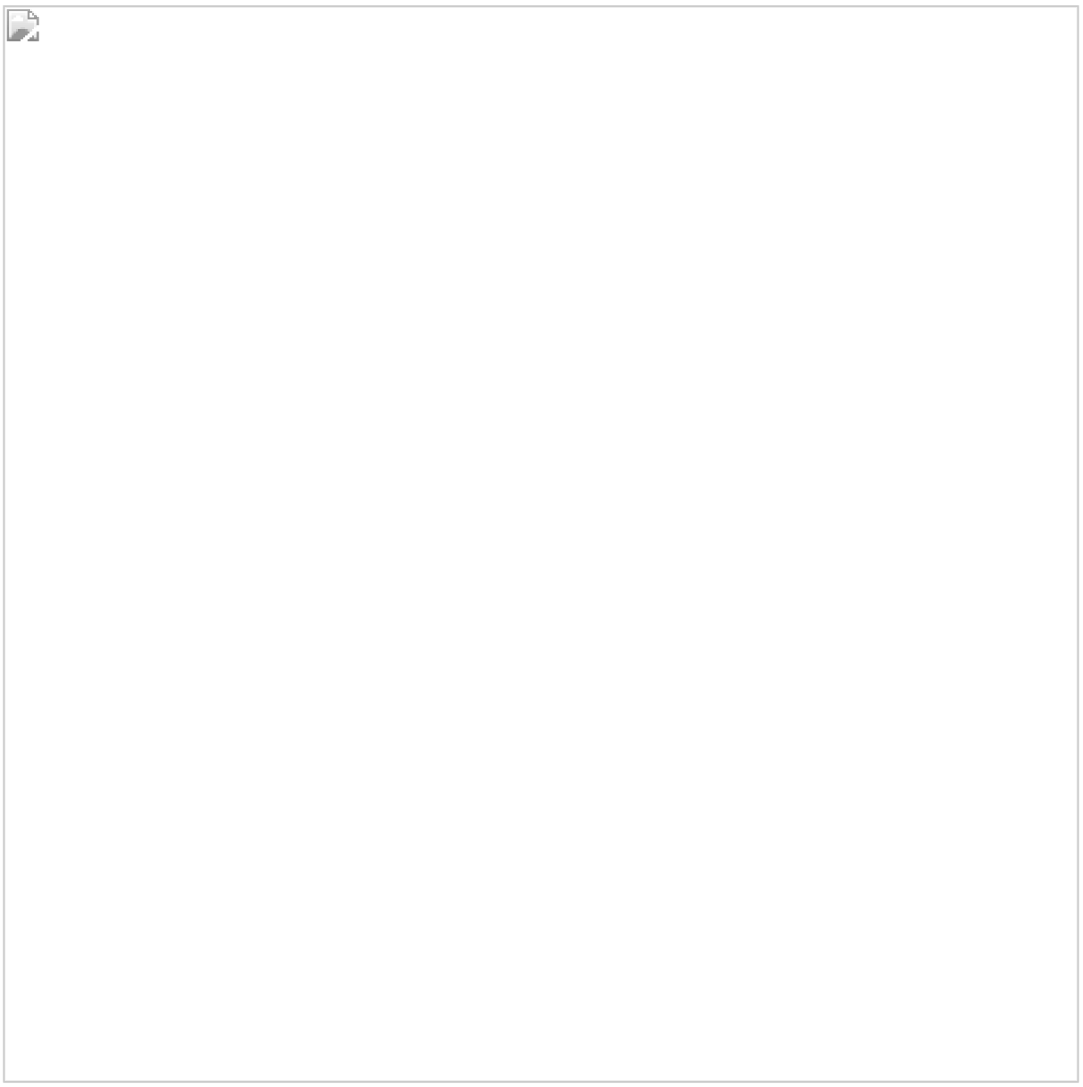
“Why did you laugh? Speak out at once, fellow!” cried Li, as if he were still in court.

“Well, since you are such a saucy piece,” roared the fish, “I will tell you. Fancy your wishing to stay in the water for ever! What do you know about water?”

“What am I doing now?” spluttered Li. “Floundering,” said the fish.

TALK ABOUT IT

Li spoke to the fish the way he used to speak to people in court. What do you think about how he talked?

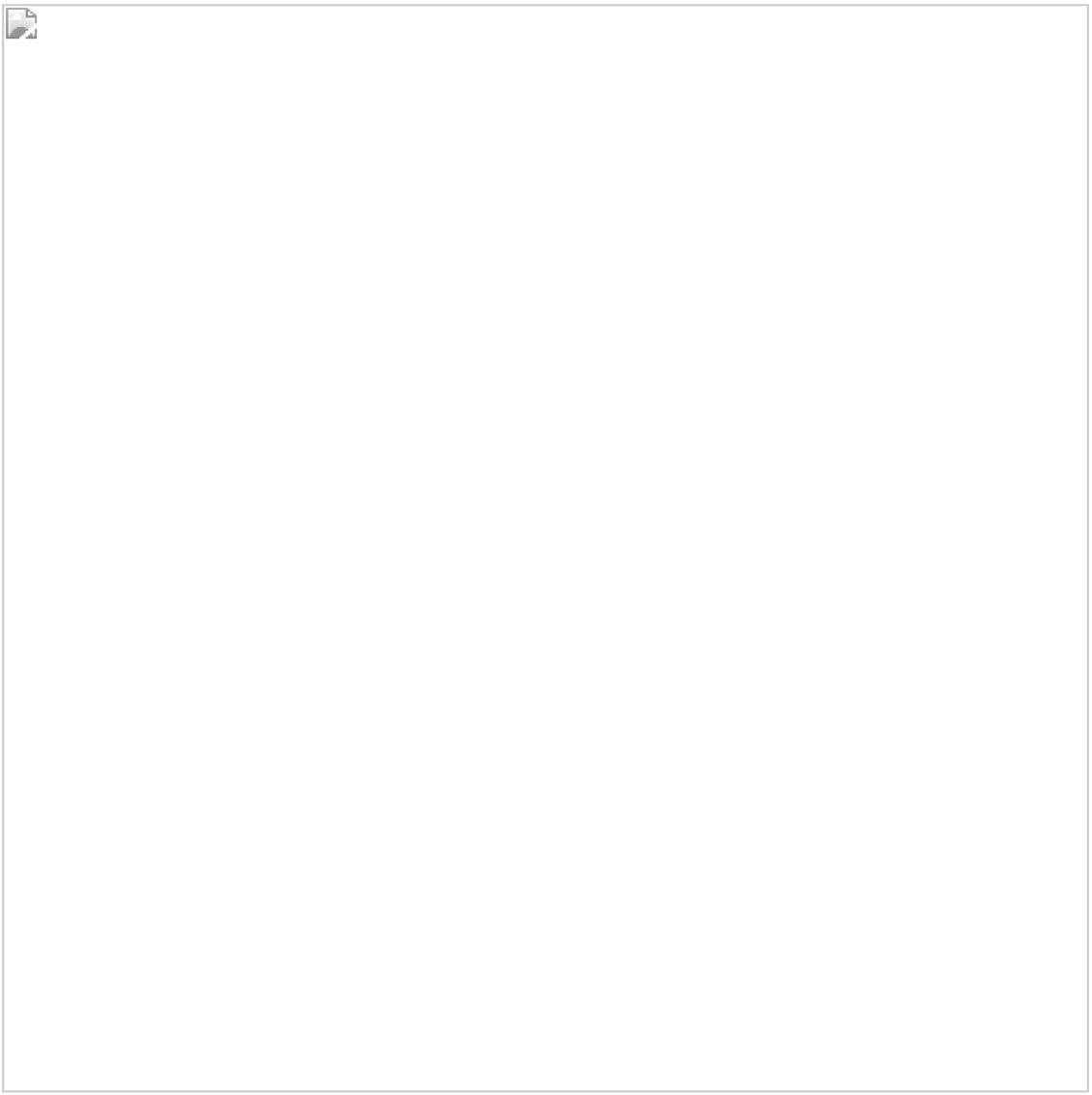


Think about it

1. What did the fish say Li was doing in the water?

- ○ Floating
- ○ Floundering
- ○ Fishing

A Wish to Be a Fish



The fish said Li tumbled about like a water buffalo in a mud puddle. Still, the water had cooled Li's fever away completely.

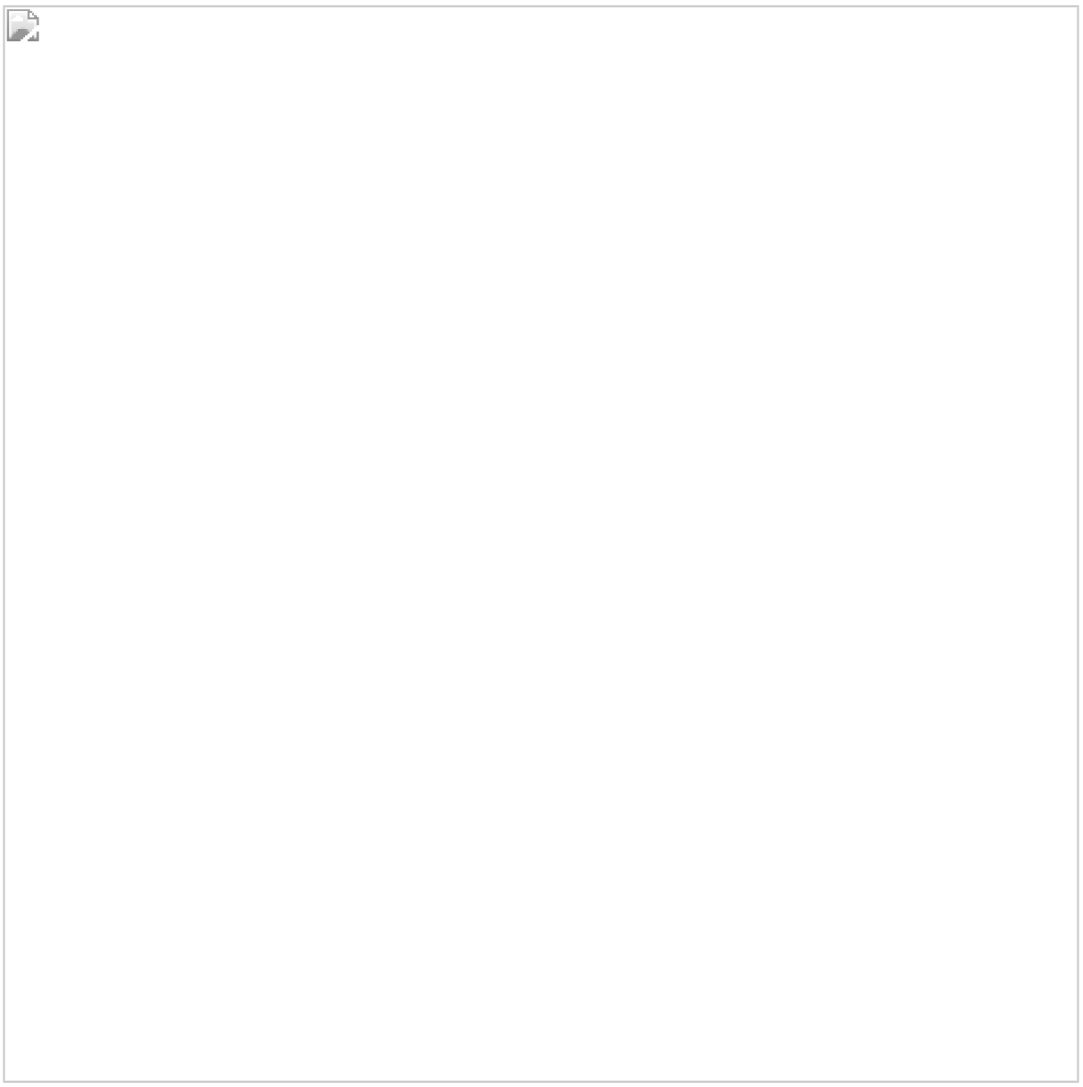
Why not become a fish himself? “Are you indeed contented with your lot?” Li asked. “Are there not moments when you would prefer to be a man?”

“I, a man!” thundered the fish. “How dare you suggest such a disgraceful change! Why, my fellow, you behold in me a favourite nephew of the king!”

“Then, may it please your lordship,” said Li softly, “I should be exceedingly grateful if you would speak a kind word for me to your master.”

TALK ABOUT IT

Li wanted to stop being a man and be a fish. Have you ever wished to be something else? What?

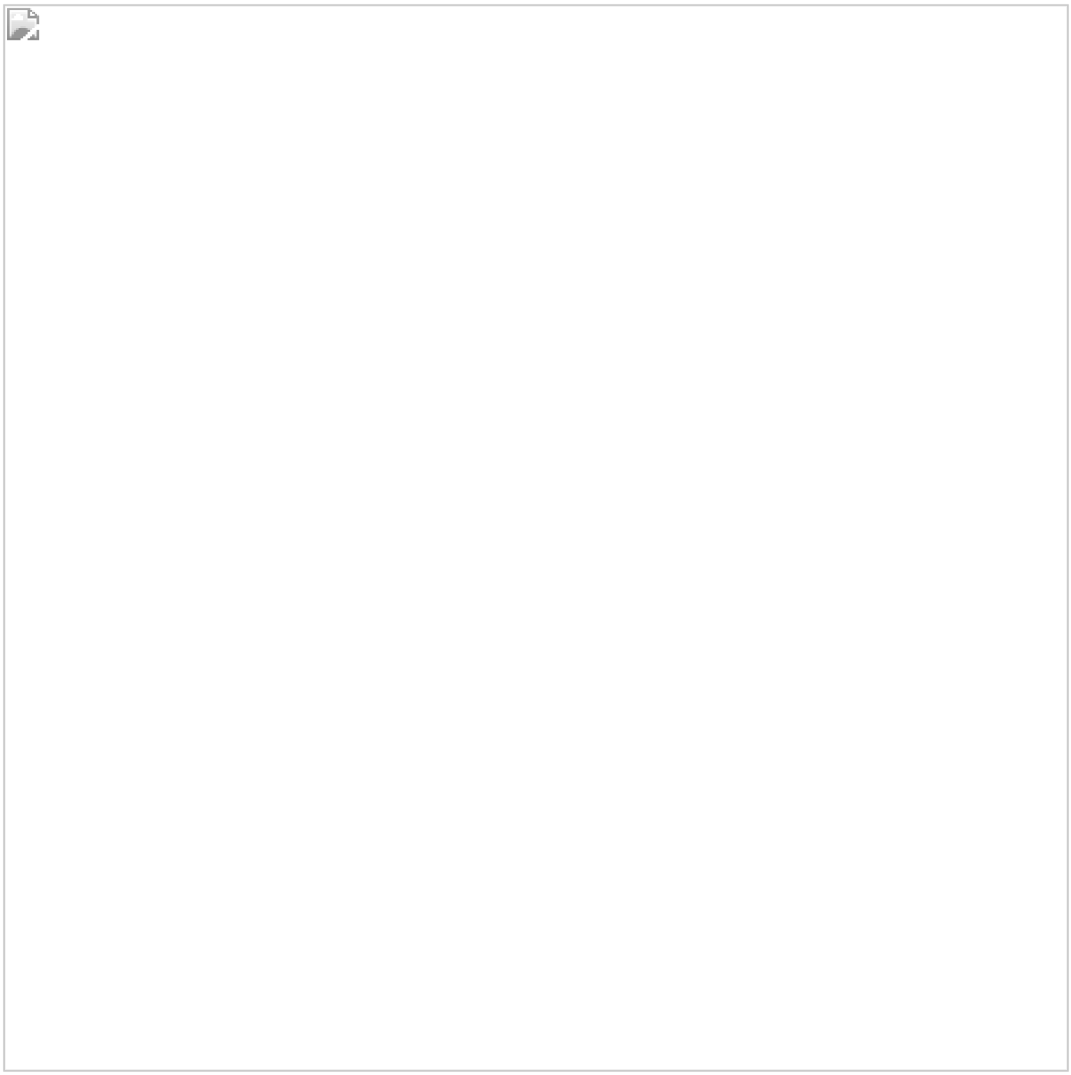


Think about it

1. Who was the giant fish?

- ○ A cook
- ○ A favourite nephew of the king
- ○ A fisherman

King Carp



“Then follow me,” laughed the nephew, and swam off so fast that the water hissed.

In a shallow pool floated a gigantic carp, with his courtiers darting about him. “Whom have you here, my lad?” said the king.

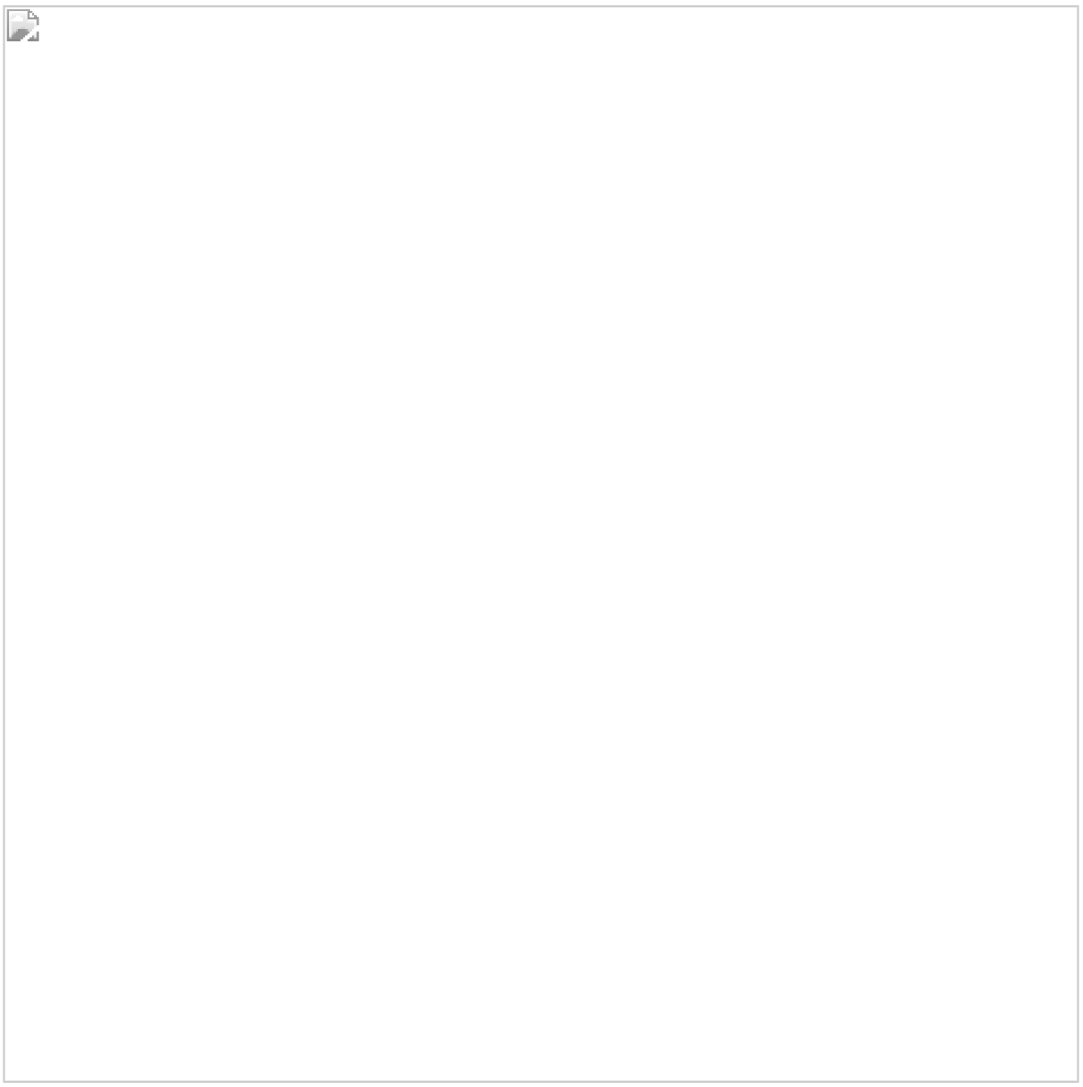
Li knelt and bowed three times, his face daubed with mud. “Indeed, your Majesty, I am only a poor mortal who seeks your kindly grace,” he said, and he begged to be made a fish.

“Have the goodness first to cease your bowing,” said the king. “You are stirring up enough mud to plaster the royal palace of a shark. Very well, so be it. Your wish is granted.”

TALK ABOUT IT

Li bowed to a fish king. When is it good to be humble, and when is it not?

King Carp · another picture

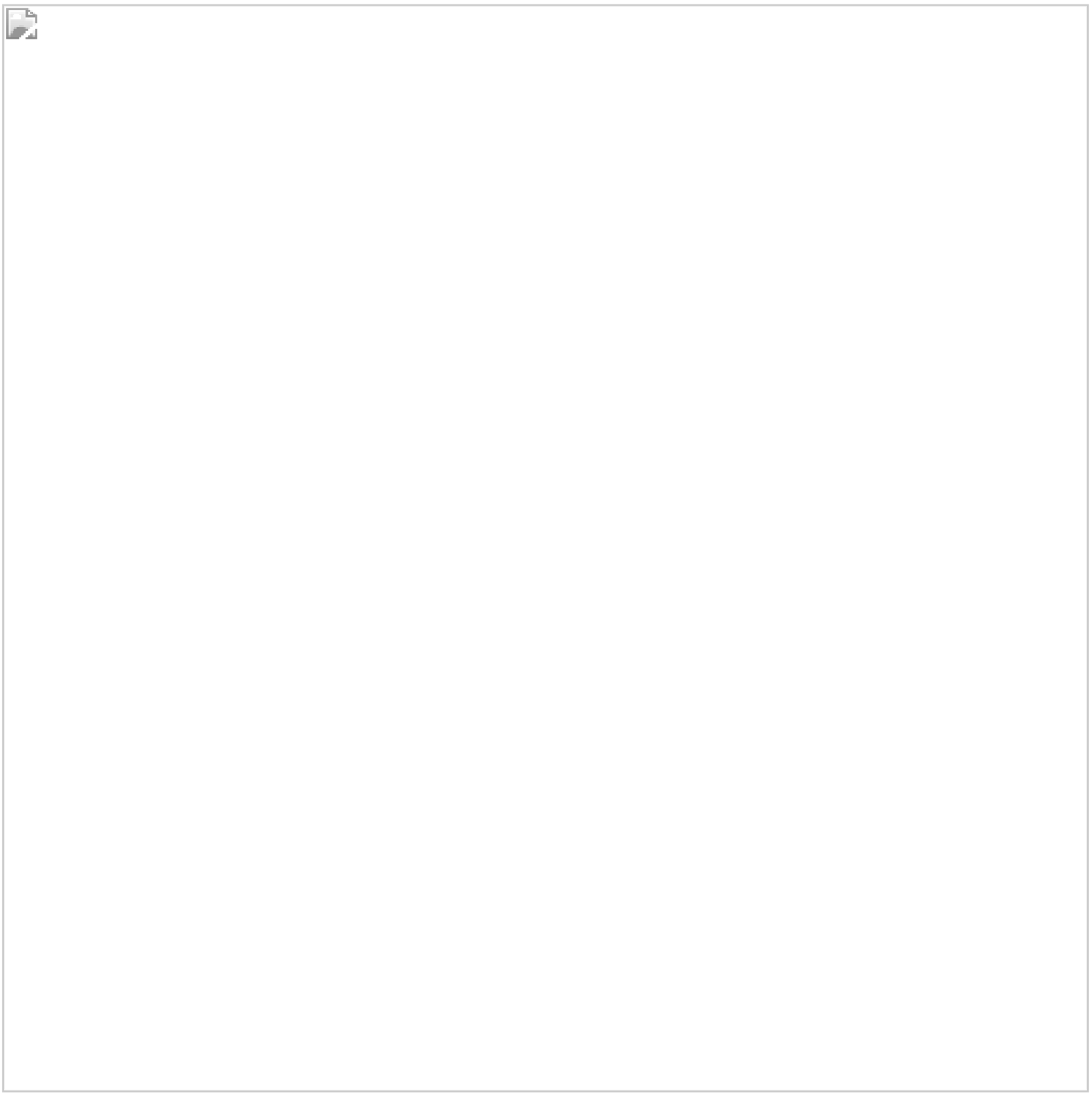


Think about it

1. What did the king say about Li's bowing?

- ○ It made him laugh
- ○ It was stirring up too much mud
- ○ It was done perfectly

The Fish-Skin



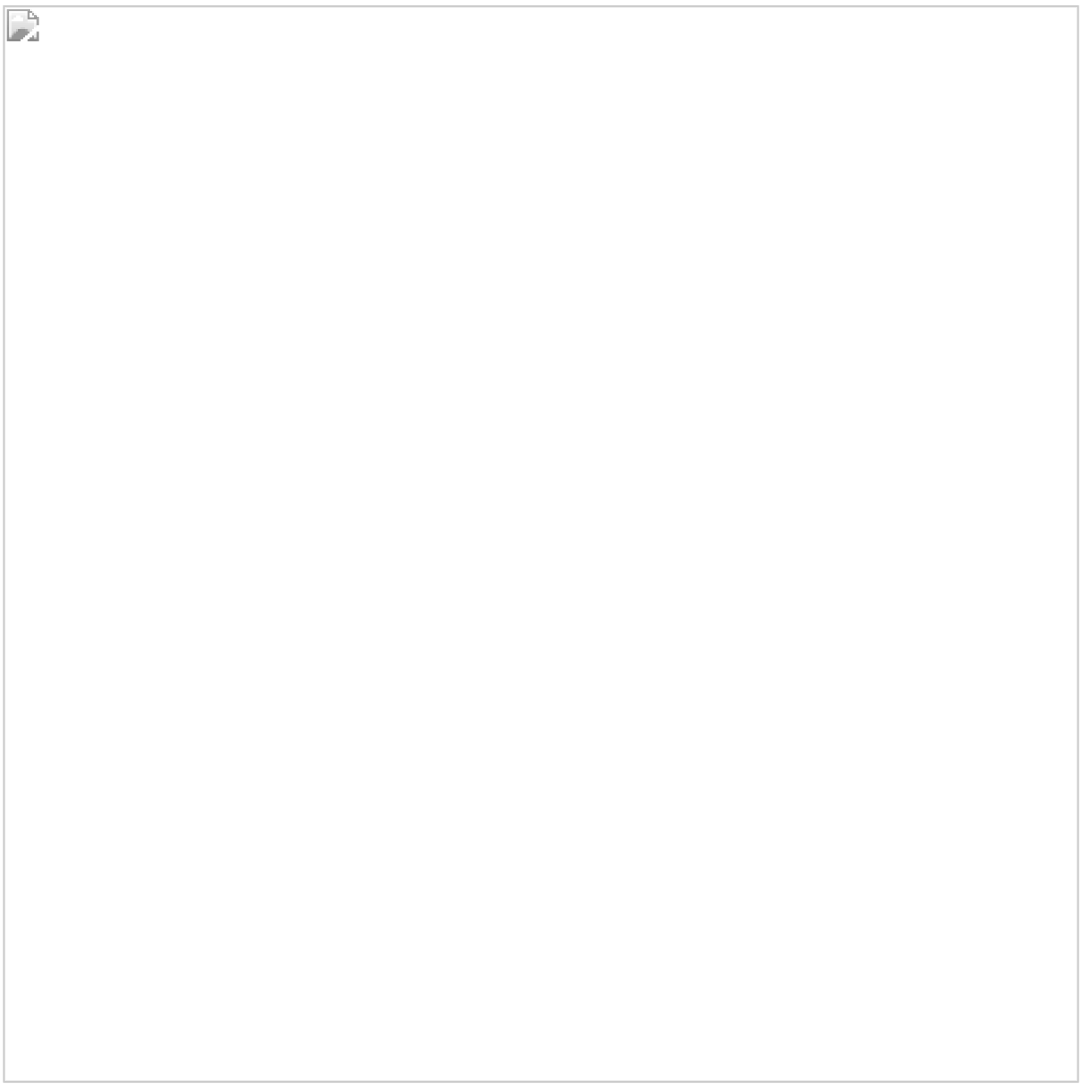
“Sir Trout,” said the king, “bring hither a fish-skin of proper size for this ambitious fellow.” The skin was slipped over Li's head. His arms became fins, and his legs stuck together into a tail.

“Not so fast,” said the king. “There are two cautions I would impress upon you. One is, never, never, eat a dangling worm; no matter how tempting it looks there are sure to be horrible hooks inside. Secondly, always swim like lightning if you see a net, but in the opposite direction.”

After one meal from the royal pantry, Li must hunt for himself, like every other citizen of the watery world.

TALK ABOUT IT

King Carp gave Li good advice. Who gives you good advice? Do you always listen?

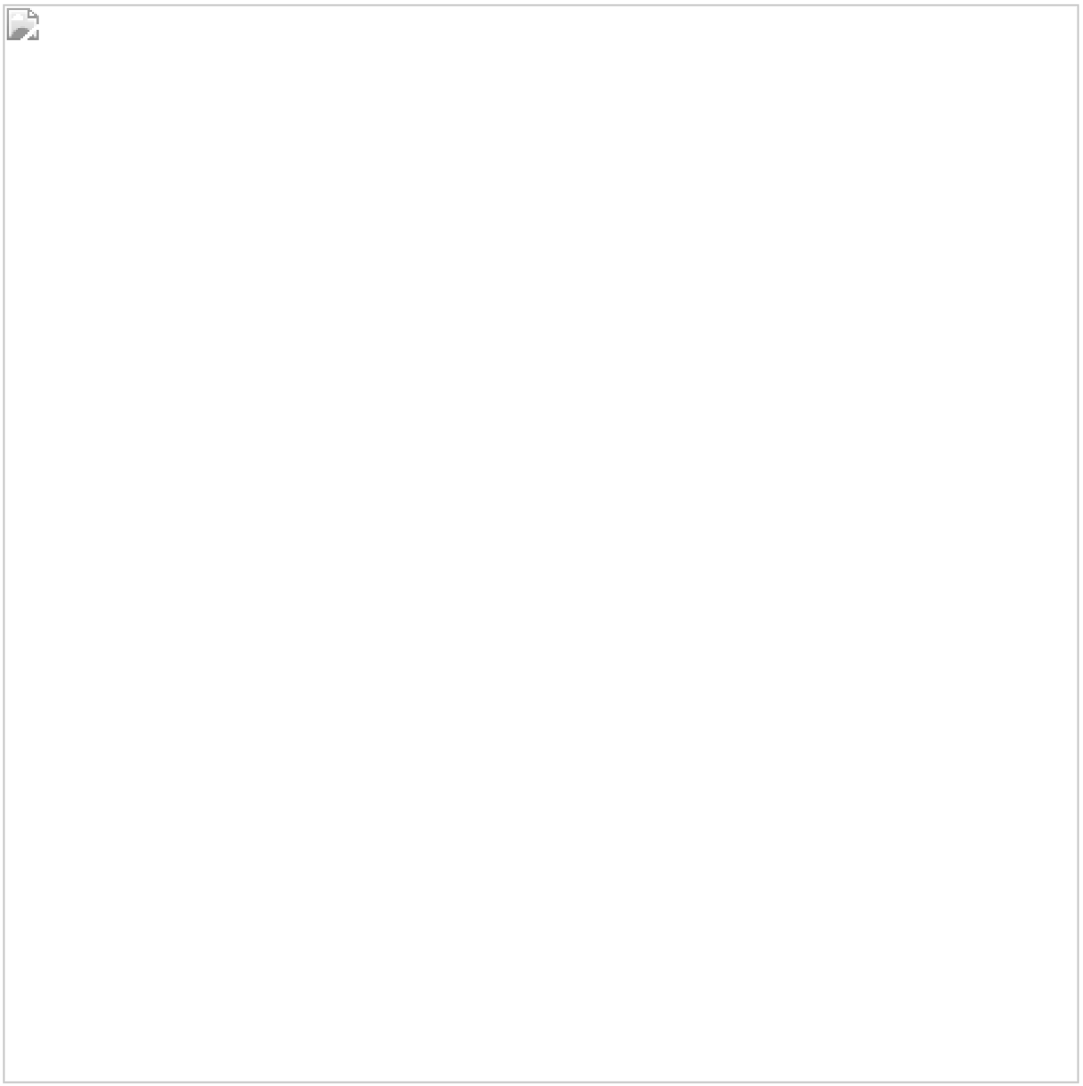


Think about it

1. What were the king's two cautions?

- ○ Never eat a dangling worm, and swim away from a net
- ○ Never leave the pond, and never swim at night
- ○ Never swim alone, and never speak

The Red Worm



It took Li hours to learn to use his tail and fins, but then the cool water was delightful.

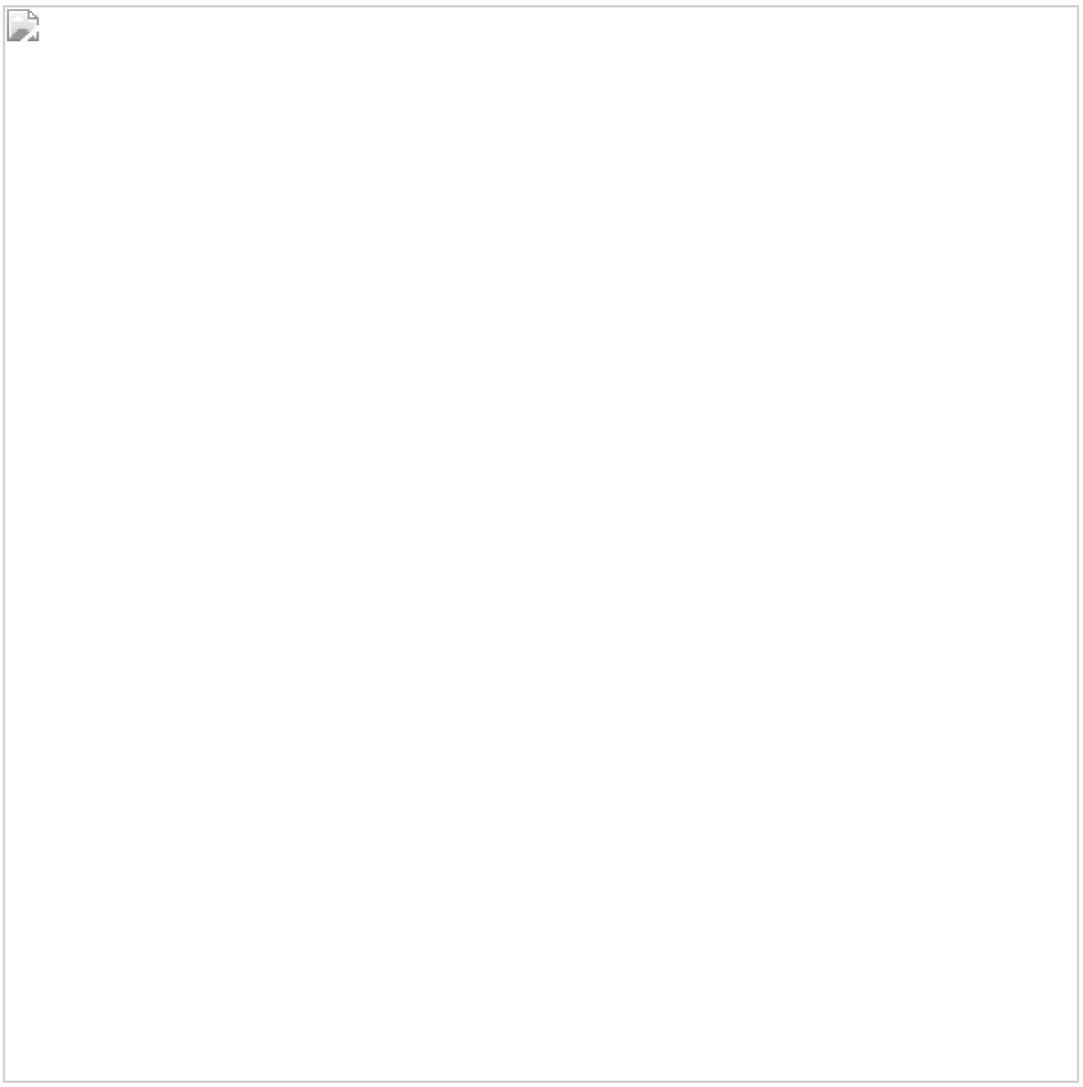
Many more hours passed, and Li grew hungrier and hungrier. Hither and thither he swam, looking for a worm.

At last he saw a delicious red worm dangling just above his nose. He remembered the king's advice: “No matter how tempting it looks, there are sure to be horrible hooks inside.” For an instant Li hesitated. “After all, what was a hook to a fish when he was dying?”

Pop! He had it in his mouth. Ouch! it was the fatal hook!

TALK ABOUT IT

Li knew what the king had said, and still he took the worm. Why do you think it was hard to wait?



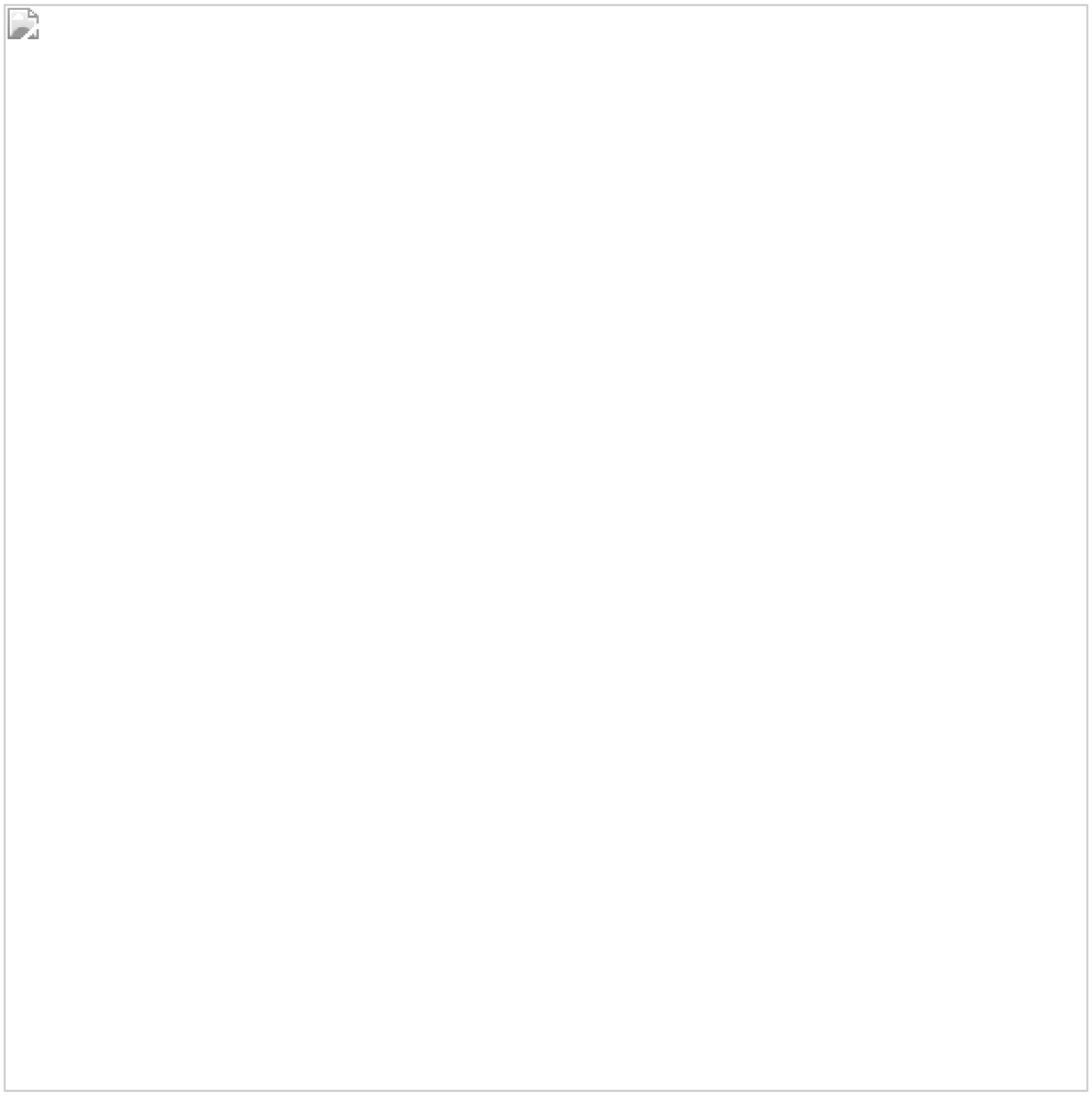
Think about it

1. What went wrong?

- ○ He ate a worm with a hook inside
- ○ He swam into a net
- ○ He lost his fins

2. Have you ever done something you were told not to do because you were really hungry or tired?

Old Chang



Li pulled and twisted, but the hook stuck fast. Up he flew on the end of a long line, and down he fell into a flat-bottomed boat.

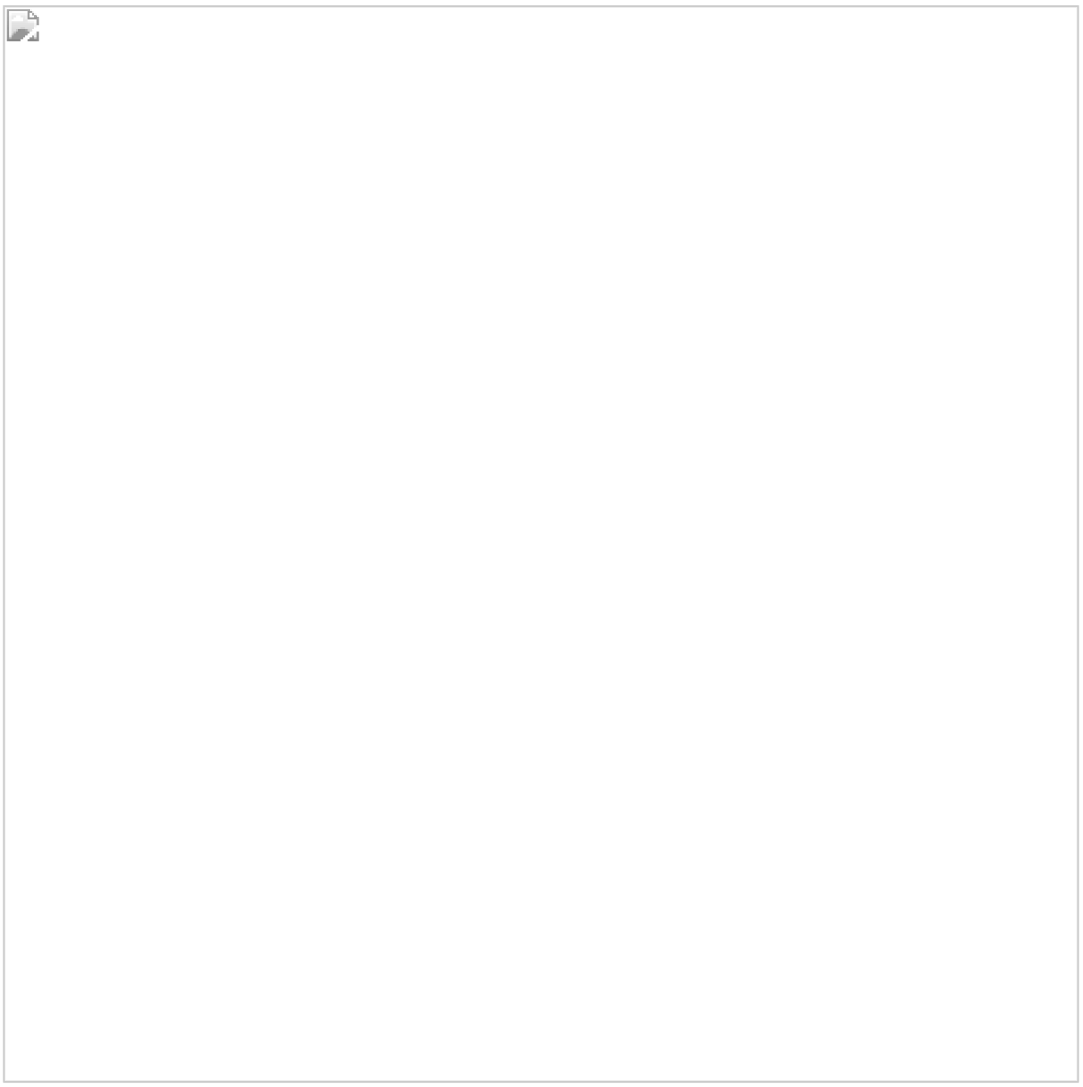
“Ah, a carp!” shouted a well-known voice. “The biggest fish I've caught these three moons!” It was old Chang, the fisherman who brought fish to Mr. Li's table.

“I say, Chang,” Li gasped, “you must chuck me overboard at once, for, don't you see, I am Mr. Li, your old master.”

But Chang had been deaf since childhood, and heard nothing. Li was thrown into a wicker basket with only a little water, and could hardly breathe.

TALK ABOUT IT
Li could talk, but nobody could hear him. How do you feel when no one listens?

Old Chang · another picture

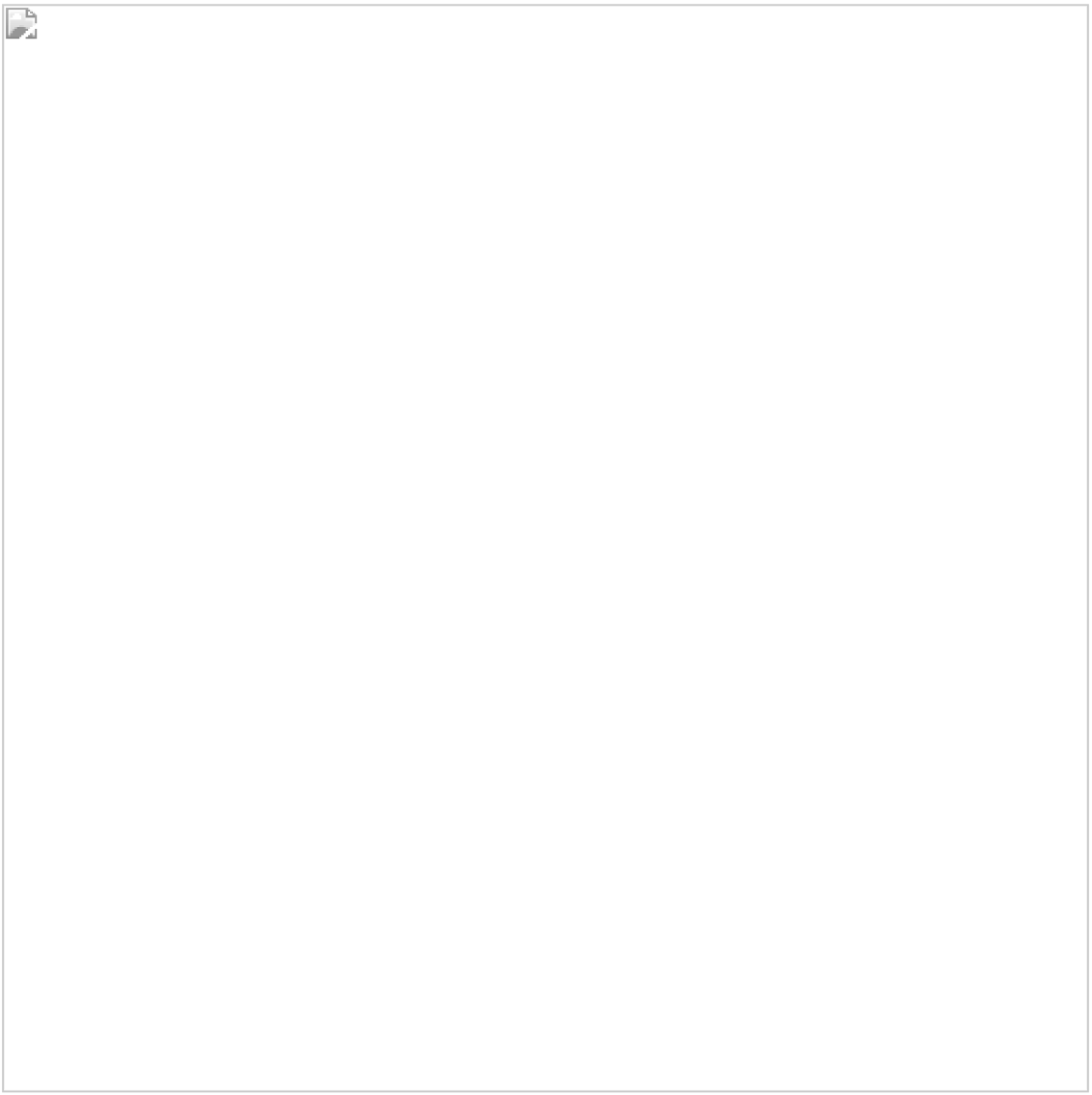


Think about it

1. Why didn't Chang answer Li?

- ○ He was angry
- ○ He had been deaf since childhood
- ○ He did not believe in fish

A Talking Fish?



At the door stood his friend Sing. “Hey, Sing,” he shouted, “help, help! Kindly order him to take me to the lake and throw me in.” But no one answered.

“Carp is his favourite delicacy,” Chang told Sing. “I fear poor Mr. Li will not eat fish for some time,” said Sing. “He has a bad attack of fever.”

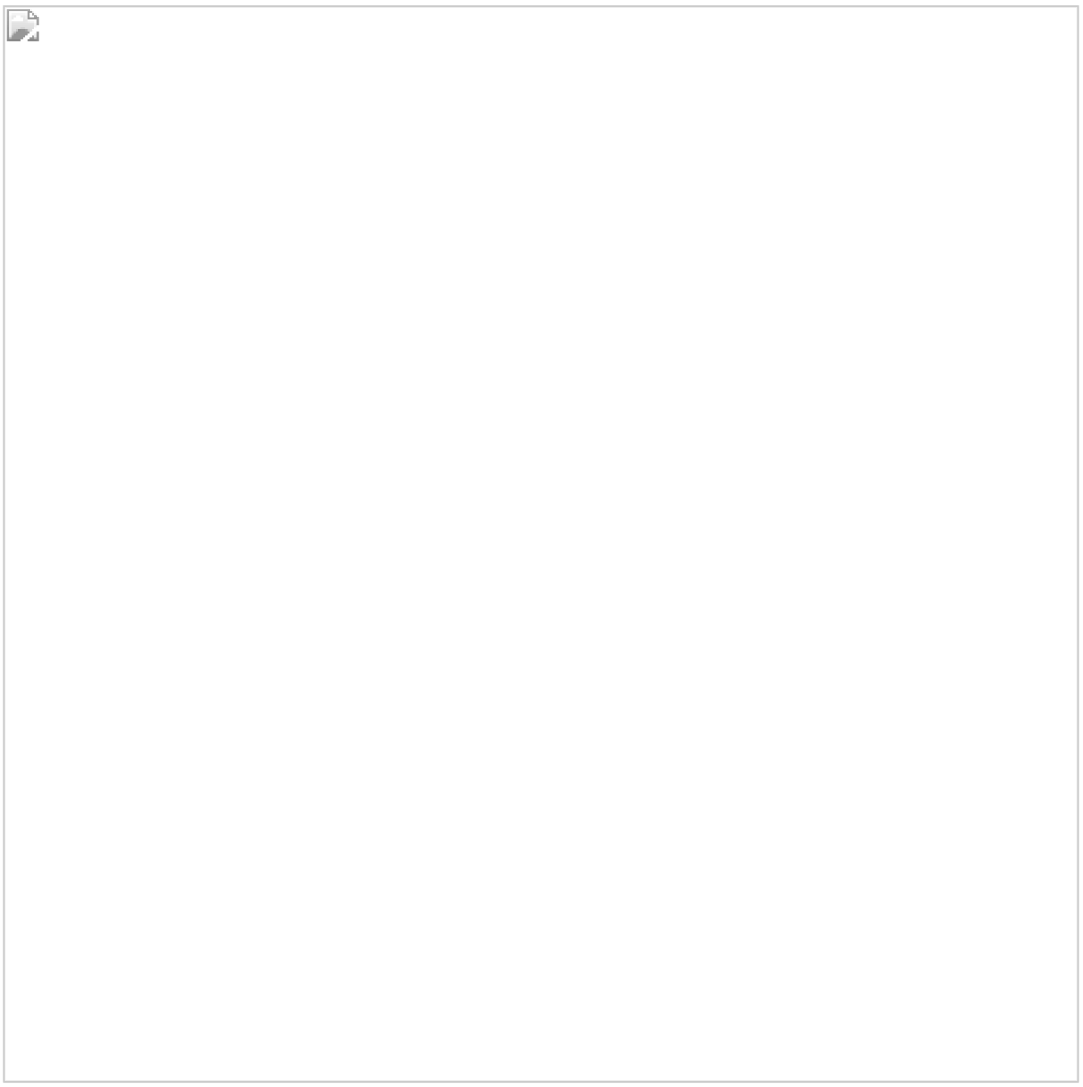
Li shouted that Sing could have all his money if he would help. “Hey, what's that!” said Sing, attracted, as usual, by the word money. “Shades of Confucius! It sounds as if the carp were talking.”

“What, a talking fish,” laughed Chang. “Who ever heard of such a wonder?”

TALK ABOUT IT

Sing perked up when he heard the word “money.” What do you think that tells you about Sing?

A Talking Fish? · another picture

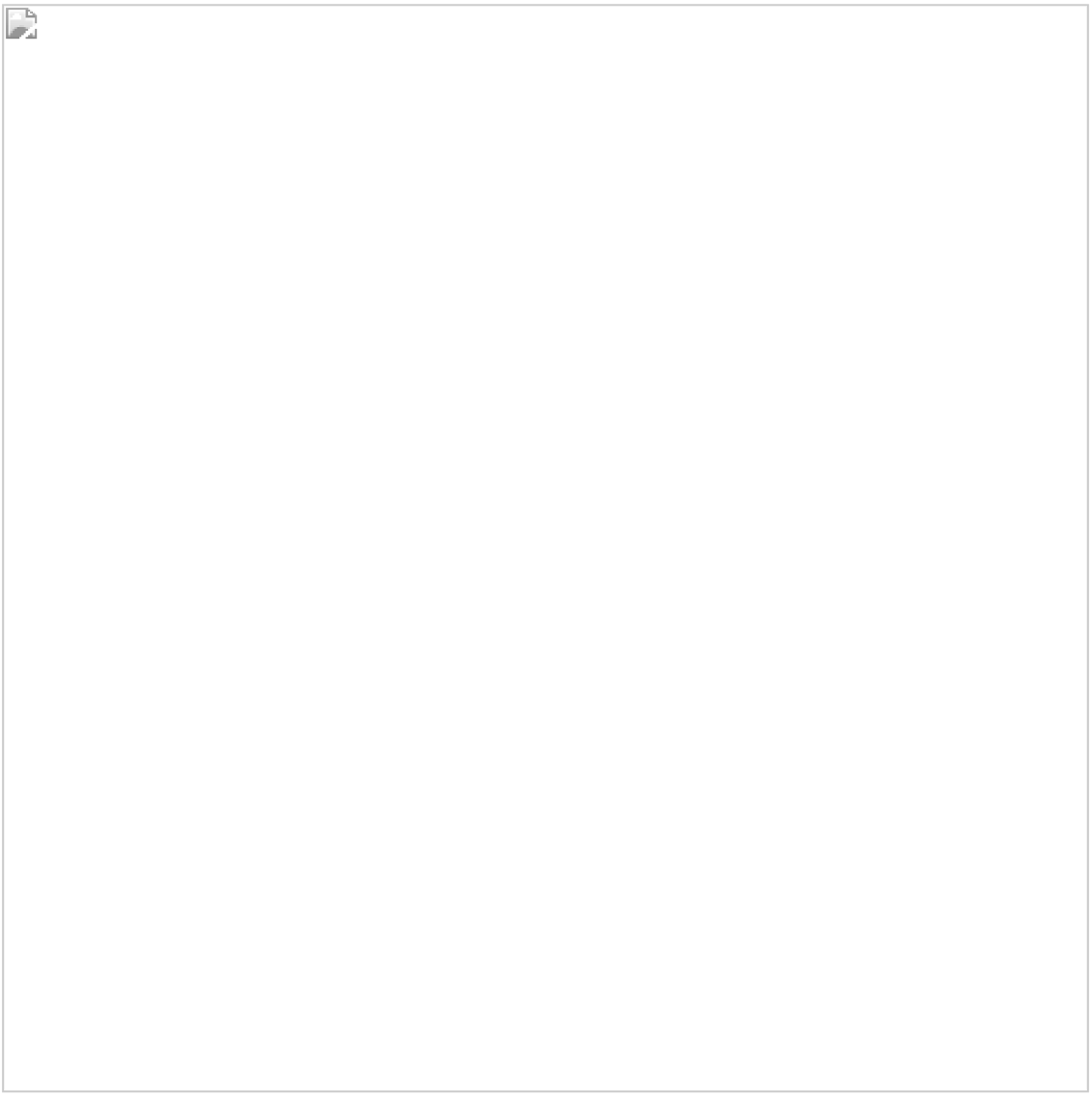


Think about it

1. What made Sing stop and listen?

- ○ The word “money”
- ○ A loud splash
- ○ A knock at the gate

In the Kitchen



Chang held Li up by the tail for the cook. Li jerked free and fell at the cook's feet. “Save me, save me! Only take me back to the pond and set me free.”

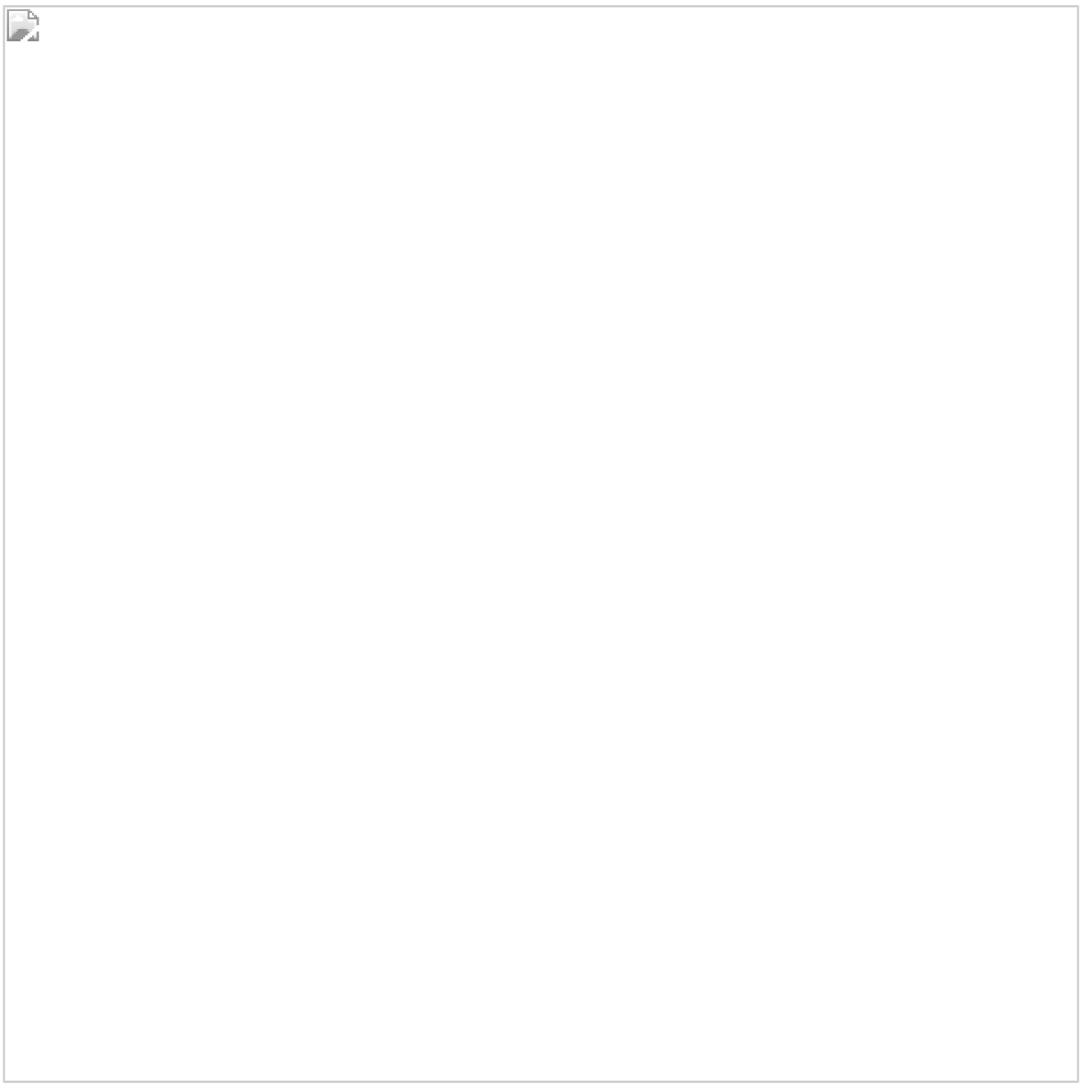
“The thing seems to be talking,” muttered the cook, “but such wonders cannot be. Only ignorant old women or foreigners would believe that a fish could talk.” He swung Li onto a table and began to sharpen a knife.

“You will murder your old master!” screamed Li. “Well, you won't talk much longer,” growled the cook. “I'll show you a trick or two with the blade.”

With a shrill cry, Mr. Li awoke.

TALK ABOUT IT

Even the cook did not believe the fish could talk. Do you think the cook should have listened? Why or why not?

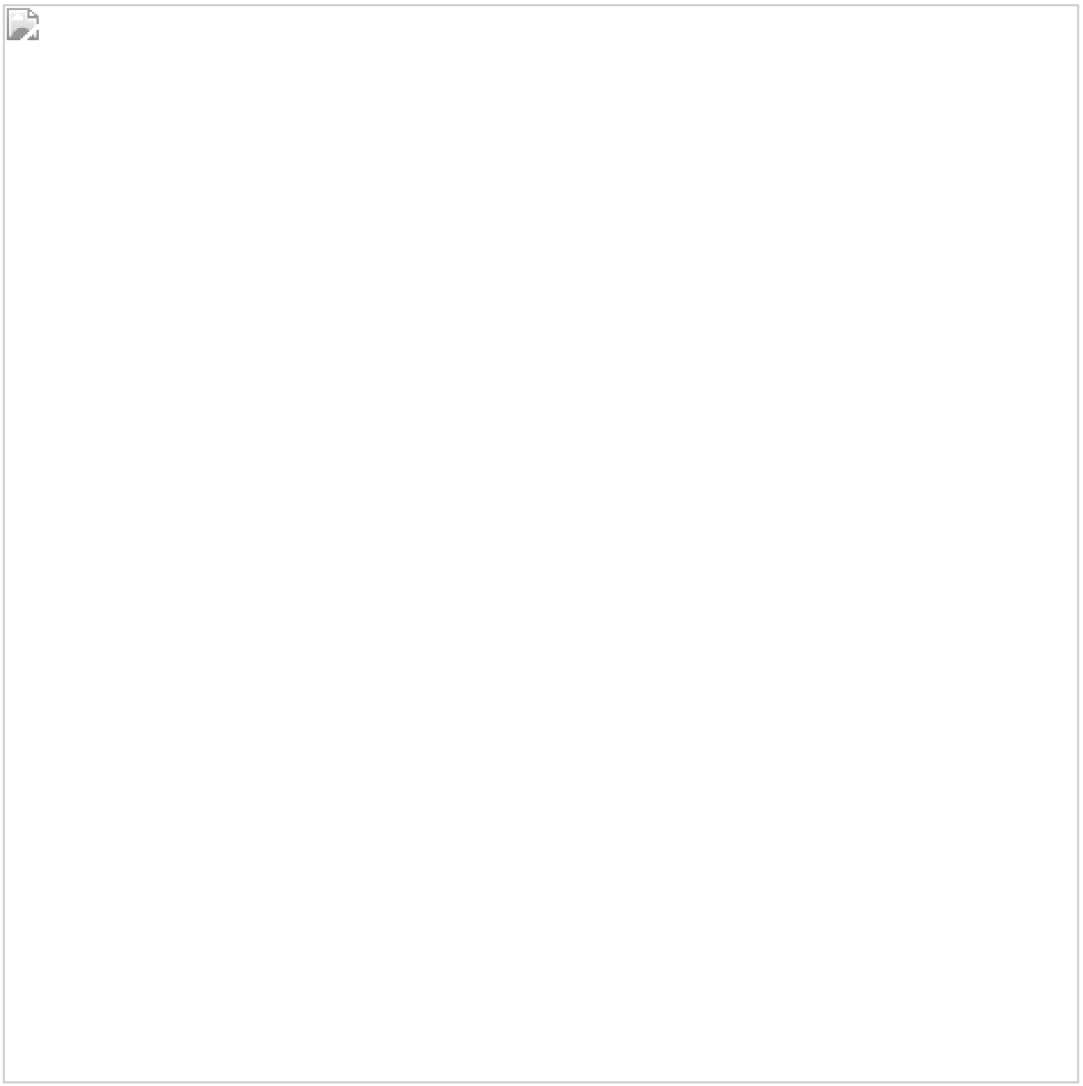


Think about it

1. What did the cook say about talking fish?

- ○ That only ignorant old women or foreigners would believe in them
- ○ That they brought good luck
- ○ That he had cooked one before

It Was a Dream



It had all been a dream. His fever was gone, but he was trembling with fear at the terrible thing that had happened to him in dreamland.

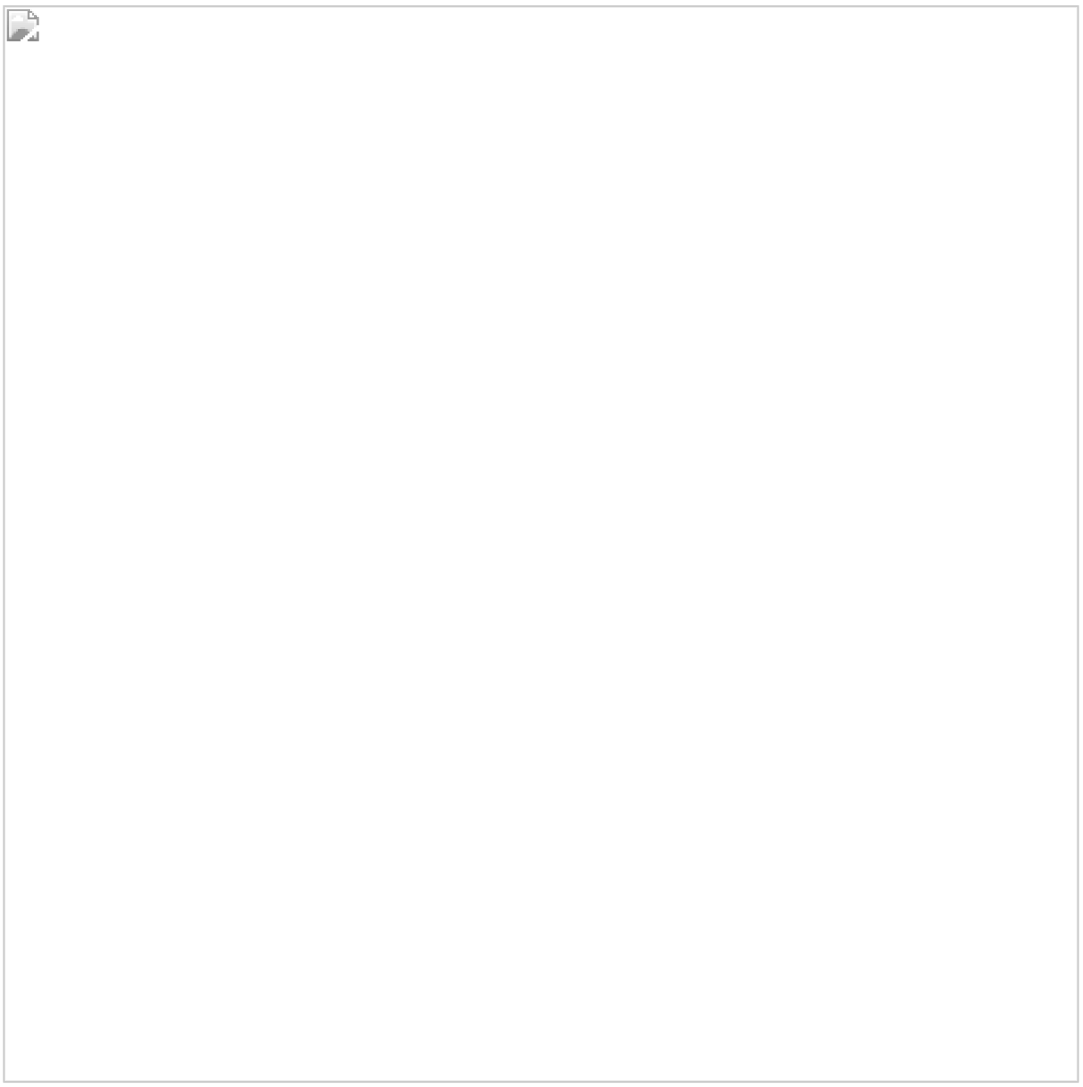
“Thanks be to Buddha, I am not a fish!” he cried out joyfully. “And now I shall be well enough to enjoy the feast to which Mr. Sing has bidden guests for to-morrow.”

“But alas, now that I can eat the old fisherman's prize carp, it has changed back into myself.”

“If only the good of our dreams came true, / I shouldn't mind dreaming the whole day through.”

TALK ABOUT IT

Li wished to be a fish, then was glad to be a man again. What do you think he learned, if anything?



Think about it

1. How did Li's adventure end?

- ○ He woke up and it had been a dream
- ○ He stayed a fish forever
- ○ Chang let him go

2. What part of the dream would you have liked to come true? What part not?

“There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

— Yeshua HaMashiach

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