

The Chinese Statue

by Jeffrey Archer

1. (a) In the story "The Chinese Statue" the mandarin reminded Sir Alexander of a Chinese tradition. What was it and why?

Answer: In the short story "The Chinese Statue, Sir Alexander Heathcote, was a minister serving under the British Crown in the Chinese Kingdom. Sir Alexander had been appointed to serve as the minister for a short period of three months. He is loyal to the Queen, never took any holidays and instead spent his time travelling in the outlying districts of the province understanding the people and the culture of the place. During one such visit, while he was travelling to the village of Ha Li Chuan, fifty miles from Peking, Sir Alexander happened to chance upon an old craftsman's working place. Sir Alexander was an admirer of the Ming dynasty and its art forms. He had a keen eye for art. The old craftsman's work was appreciated by his experienced eye and he wished to carry a memento of his journey back home.

Sir Alexander's keen enthusiasm for art was appreciated by the craftsman who warmly welcomed him in his humble hut. Sir Alexander had lost himself to the display of ivory figurines made by the craftsman. Both of them communicated with the help of the mandarin who had travelled with Sir Alexander as a guide and translator on his trip.

During the conversation between the two, the craftsman revealed that he possessed a statue of the Ming Dynasty himself, a piece of inheritance handed down to him over generations. It was a six inch Kung Emperor, undoubtedly the work of the great artist Penas deduced by Sir Alexander. Sir Alexander, wished to own this piece of art and regretfully uttered it aloud. The craftsman, true to the Chinese tradition, handed over the figurine to Sir Alexander. According to the Chinese tradition, "if an honored guest requests something the giver will grow in the eyes of his fellow men by parting with it." The craftsman respectfully handed over the figurine. Sir Alexander was overcome by guilt of taking away a prized possession from a humble man. He was sorry to have uttered these words which resulted in outright dismay for the craftsman. The Mandarin who accompanied Sir Alexander saw his torn state and apprised him of the Chinese tradition "that when a stranger has been generous, you must return the kindness within the calendar year." Thus, helping Sir Alexander to repay the act of sheer kindness of the craftsman.

(b) How did Sir Alexander repay the kindness of the Chinese man?

Answer: Sir Alexander was helped by the Mandarin with his knowledge of the Chinese custom that "when a stranger has been generous, you must return the kindness within the calendar year." Sir Alexander wanted to repay the kindness of the old craftsman genuinely

and began his work as soon as he was back in Peking. He found out the value of the Kung Emperor figurine and requested his bank in London to send him the amount as soon as possible in Peking. The true worth of the figurine equalled three years of Sir Alexander's salary. However, true to his word Sir Alexander parted with his savings to gift the old craftsman something he truly desired.

The old craftsman wished to retire in the village where his ancestors died. However, he was too humble to afford a luxury like that. Sir Alexander used his savings to repay the kindness of the craftsman by buying him a small house in the village of Ma Tien. The Chinese craftsmen were restricted from accepting gifts from foreigners for their work of art. Sir Alexander was considerate enough to get the necessary permits from the Chinese Emperor to ensure a smooth process for the craftsman. Thus, Sir Alexander ensured everyone's happiness.

(c) The emperor was 200 to 250 years old, yet fake. How?

Answer: Sir Alexander Heathcote considered the Ming statue as a prized possession, and it had been duly handed over to generations with strict instructions that stated that it should only be put up on display for others to admire, but it should never be sold except when the family honour was at stake. Sir Alexander's sons had been true to his word, except for the selfish, spoilt little brat of his great-great-grandson who had given himself up to the pleasures of easy life and making a living out of an amazing system of roulette.

The great-grandson got himself in trouble very soon as he found his advanced system of roulette failing him at every step. When the debtors threatened him, Alex was left with no choice but to sell the exquisite Ming Emperor in the false hope of saving his family's honour.

The Ming Emperor was put to value and found out to be a copy of the original. It was very common for artists to create a fake and a look-alike of the art. However, much to the surprise of Alex the base that held no importance in the eyes of the admirers turned out to be a true piece of the fifteenth-century genius.

Long Questions and Answers

1. Trace the circumstances in which the Chinese statue found its way from the artisan's workshop to an auctioneer's table.

Answer: The story The Chinese Statue tells how a small figure of art travelled a long way and became a part of a legacy. The story begins with the auction of the little Chinese statue, quaintly described as the property of a gentleman'. The statue actually belonged to Sir Alexander Heathcote. He was a British diplomat whose final stint was to represent the government in China. Sir Alexander was deeply interested in the art of the Ming dynasty.

While in China, Sir Alexander had the opportunity to visit a small workshop which had a collection of delicate pieces of ivory and jade. They were executed by a master craftsman. Sir Alexander was enthralled by the craftsmanship and praised the little shy man who was showing off his work to the minister who had a lot of knowledge of Ming art. The workman proudly showed him a small Ming statue that had been in his family for over seven generations. Sir Alexander's mouth opened wide at the sight of the statue which was little more than six inches. The only blemish of the statue was that its base was missing but the minister did not mind it. He said to himself, 'how I wish the piece was mine' and suddenly remembered that the Chinese believed that if an honoured guest expressed some wish, the giver will grow in the eyes of his fellowmen by parting with it. The craftsman was unhappy to part with it but insisted that the minister should take it. He found a base for it from his collection. The Mandarin who was with the minister reminded him that according to the Chinese custom when a stranger has been generous, the kindness must be returned within the calendar year.

After reaching home, he found out the true worth of the statue, which was tantamount to three years' emolument for a servant of the crown. Months later, he went to the workshop again and told the old Chinese that he had come to repay the debt. He took the craftsman to the side of a hill and in the valley, stood a newly completed small white house of great beauty. The craftsman fell on his knees and said that it was forbidden for an artisan to accept gift from a foreigner, but when the Mandarin told him that the Empress herself had sanctioned the gift, a smile of joy came over his face.

After retirement, Sir Alexander spent his final years in the home of his late father, with his wife and the little Ming emperor. The statue occupied the centre of the mantelpiece. He wrote in his will that the statue would go to the eldest son or a daughter of the family. Thus the Emperor was passed down the generations till it came to Alex Heathcote who was a selfish and spoiled person. He lost all his wealth by gambling and even had to borrow money. When there was no other option, he took the statue to be auctioned. When the value was assessed, he was told that the Emperor was unfortunately fake, probably two hundred and fifty years old but a copy of the original. On the other hand, the base was a magnificent fifteenth-century piece, undoubtedly a work of genius. In the auction, the Emperor brought only seven hundred and twenty guineas but the base brought twenty-two thousand guineas and it went to an American gentleman of unknown parentage.

2. Delineate the character sketch of Sir Alexander Heathcote.

Answer: Sir Alexander Heathcote was a gentleman and an exact man. He was a tall and impressive figure. He rose at 7 o'clock in the morning, joined his wife at breakfast to eat one boiled egg cooked for precisely 4 minutes, two pieces of toast with marmalade and drink one cup of china tea. He would go to his office and come back at a fixed time.

Sir Alexander was the son of a general but he chose to serve his queen in the diplomatic

service. As years passed, he occupied several prestigious positions and finally he was invited to represent the Government in China. He was delighted as not only this was a crowning appointment in his distinguished career but it also gave him an opportunity to observe some of the great Ming statues, paintings and drawings in their natural habitat.

Sir Alexander was an inquisitive man interested in things outside his office. He would often travel on horseback into the outlying districts to learn more about the country and its people. On one such journey, he chanced to enter an old craftsman's working place. At a glance, he understood the worth of the delicately carved ivory and jade pieces. He spent over an hour examining, admiring and complementing the little craftsman. The minister's love and knowledge of the Ming dynasty made the craftsman show a statue that has been in his family for over seven generations. The minister humbly accepted the craftsman's offer and fell in love with the six-inch statue of Emperor Kung. He thought that the statue belonged to the fifteenth century and expressed his wish to own the piece. Later, he regretted voicing his thoughts because the Chinese man was forced to offer him the object of his wish as per the tradition. But the Mandarin accompanying him convinced him that he could return the kindness within the calendar year.

Sir Alexander proved to be a man of his words. As soon as he reached his home, he found out the true worth of the statue and decided to use his three years' salary to build a house for the poor Chinese craftsman. Ever since then, the statue took the pride of place in his house. He bequeathed the statue to his successors, making clear that it can be sold only when the family's name was at stake.

Thus Sir Alexander comes across as a learned, sensitive, and a kind gentleman who has a heart of gold and who can appreciate art and artisans.