

# The Patch of Lamb's Skin

By P'ou Song-lin

In the twenty-fourth year K'ang-hsi lived in a remote district of the western provinces, a man who could remember his former lives. He was now a "tsin-shi," "entered-among-the-learned," renowned, and much considered by his friends.

When speaking of the existences he had gone through, he used to say:

"As far as I remember, I was first a soldier—it was in the last days of the Ming dynasty; my regiment was encamped at The-Divided-roads on the Ten-thousand-miles-great-wall. My remembrances are not very clear as to whom we fought with, but I remember the joy of striking the enemy, the hissing of the arrows, the yelling of the charging troops.

"I was still young when I was killed. After death, of course I was called before the tribunal of The-King-of-shadows. Closing my eyes, I can still see the big caldrons full of boiling oil for the trying of criminals; the Judge in embroidered dress seated behind a red table; the satellites everywhere, ready to act on the first word,—in fact, everything exactly the same as in the worldly tribunals, excepting that, in the eastern part of the hall, there were huge wooden stands from which hung skins of every description—horse-skins, lambs' skins, dogs' skins, and human skins of every age and condition; skins of old men, of fat and important people, of lean and shrivelled men, of boys and girls.

"The trial began; the souls, according to their deeds, were condemned to put on one of the skins and to come up again to the Lighted World in this new shape.

"When my turn came I was sentenced to put a dog's skin on; and in this low shape I was thrown again in the stream of life. But as I had not forgotten my former condition, I was so ashamed, that the first day I came on earth I threw myself under the wheels of a heavy carriage and died.

"The-King-of-shadows was extremely surprised to see me again so soon; the dogs, as a rule, having no conscience, he could not suppose I had killed myself, and did not hold me responsible for it.

"This time, I was born again as a pig. Pigs are valuable, and there are always people to look after them; so I could not kill myself. I tried to starve myself to death, but hunger was the strongest, and I had to endure such a life. Happily, the butcher soon put a speedy end to it.

"When my name was called to the tribunal of Darkness, the King-of-shadows looked over the pages of the Book and said:

" 'He must be a lamb now.'

"The runners took a white lamb's skin, brought it, and began putting it over my body. While this was going on, the secretary, who was writing the sentence in the Book, started and said to the Judge:

" 'Your Honour, there is a mistake. Please Your Honour read over again; this soul has to be a man now.'

"You know that, on the Big Book of Shadows, all our past deeds are recorded as well as our future destiny.

"The Judge looked at it over again and said:

" 'True! Happily, you saw the mistake.'

“Then, turning to the runners, he ordered them to take off the skin, which already covered more than half my body. They had to exert all their strength, and even so, they tore it off into pieces. It hurt me so much that I thought I could not stand it and I should die; but I was dead, and I could not die more than that.

“At last they left me bleeding and panting, and I was born again in my present condition. But they had forgotten a piece of lamb’s skin on my right shoulder, and I still have it now.”

And he uncovered his arm and shoulder to show a piece of white woollen hair on his right shoulder.