Stories Are Not Frills: Literature about Asia in the Elementary Classroom

by Mary Hammond Bernson

Elementary teachers often ask our resource center for advice in choosing books about Asia. They know that their decisions about book purchases have a potentially lifelong impact on students' attitudes, for as Katherine Paterson so aptly points out in *The Spying Heart*, "stories are not frills in the curriculum of life." Paterson is an author with a rare gift for creating compelling children's fiction, including five books about China and Japan, and is deeply aware of the profound power of stories. For many children, their first window on Asia comes from storybooks. Those books can entice, delight, inspire further study, and offer glimpses of worlds previously unknown. They can foster open-mindedness and an awareness of the existence of other ways of thinking and leading one's life. They can help a child understand that a classmate came from a place which was more than just the site of a war.

Since both pedagogical innovations and inadequate school budgets have contributed to a decrease in the use of elementary school textbooks, teachers also must consider the historical accuracy of the books they choose. Innovations such as a "whole language" approach to reading, new methods of assessing student learning, the encouragement of diverse and multicultural perspectives, the application of theories of multiple intelligences, and the integration of teaching across the curriculum often mean that a student in the primary grades hears a folk tale from another country, does an art activity based on that culture, uses the metric system in the art project, finds out a bit about the flora and fauna now living there, and writes a letter to a pretend pen-pal. This kind of integration across the curriculum is the opposite of closing a reading text at the stroke of 10:00 and opening up a totally unrelated social studies text. Integration puts a teacher's choices of fiction at the crossroads of the whole curriculum.

Imbedded in this curriculum is the basic fact that elementary teachers are teaching citizenship. While scholars may ponder questions about the development of civil society in Asia, elementary teachers wrestle with citizenship issues, including the relationship of the individual to the group, every single day. A school district such as the one in which my children are enrolled teaches citizenship to children who speak 212 different languages and dialects. A book choice can send the message that "those kids" come from a weird place, or that those kids have a heritage about which we should know more. Books can stimulate empathy, compassion, and a search for solutions to problems we all face. They can teach us that contacts with others generate both conflict and cooperation. Books provide a safe place to explore life's troubling issues.

The illustrations make potent contributions to a book's spell. Anyone who is sensitive to the exquisite interplay of word and picture in some Asian art forms, as well as anyone whose clearest memory of 4th grade is a travel poster near the window, can appreciate the power of pictures. Sometimes those pictures are nothing but clichés—coolie hats and kimono, often wrapped right over left. Yet the best illustrations can offer a visual record of another place or time, introduce an Asian art style, or simply reinforce the power of the story.

Teachers choose from an avalanche of literature, including pre-packaged multicultural or world region collections, some of them including 60-year-old classics. Wonderful books about Asia do exist, including some of the 60-year-old classics, yet there are vast topics for which no suitable books can be found. A teacher must wade through these options, picking out the best, and then compensate for the near-total lack of good stories about people living in contemporary Asia by using other materials.

Many sources of book recommendations are readily available, including rosters of winners of prestigious awards and the list of "Notable Children's Trade Books" produced annually since 1972 by the National Council for the Social Studies and the Children's Book Council. Reflecting the trend toward using fiction to teach or reinforce content once reserved for the social studies, the list now includes annotations about the social studies themes to which each book most closely pertains. The committee evaluates over 200 books per year, weeding out those not meeting high standards for quality and accuracy in both text and illustrations.

©1993, illustration by Allen Say from *Grandfather's Journey*, published by Houghton Mifflin.

Here is a list of questions I find useful when searching for the best books:

1. Is the book compelling? Adults expect books to have literary qualities, or to be a "good read," and children deserve those qualities, too.

2. Is the book a folk tale, a retelling of a folk tale, "an original tale set in the ancient Orient," or something else altogether? You may want to use any of these, and find supplementary materials to reinforce the message that those whose stories took place long ago and far away have descendants about whom we should learn.

MARY HAMMOND BERNSON is Associate Director of the East Asia Center at the University of Washington, where she has directed outreach projects for more than a decade. Her main interest is education about Asia in elementary and secondary schools, for which she has written and edited numerous curriculum publications.

3. Do some of the books in a school or library collection allow Asians to speak for themselves, or is every voice American? Do the books avoid the assumption that Asians and Asian Americans all speak with one voice?

4. A particularly difficult aspect for busy teachers to research—is the book accurate?

5. Is the book free of misconceptions and stereotypes? In addition, if it is one of few books children will ever see about a country, does it contribute to a broad understanding of that country when used with other available books?

6. What claims are made for the book by those who write the dust jacket or the publicity materials? Many "authentic tales" are full of eccentric projections of the fertile imaginations of American authors, particularly when the topics touch on religion.

7. Where does the book fit into the political trends and mass interests of the era in which it was published, and what are the implications for its continuing usefulness? Books about plucky Chinese children won Caldecott and Newbery awards in the 1920s and '30s, and continue in print today.

8. Is it developmentally appropriate for the grade level at which it is used? This question covers anything from the use of *Sadako* with very young children (some do, some do not) to reading primary grade picture books out loud to junior high students, a teaching technique used by many outstanding teachers.

9. Is the language well-chosen, well-written, standard English? Some translated materials, as well as some original stories, create false exoticism by word choice, such as describing someone Chinese as "ten parts perplexed" rather than fully translating the Chinese description.

10. Are the pictures interesting, attractive to children, and relevant to the story? Do the pictures live up to their potential, by adding layers of meaning and pleasure to the experience of reading the book?

11. On a continuum from exotic to blandly homogenized, where does this book fall? Does it emphasize the atypical or the aspects of a country which are most different from the United States? Or does it err in the other direction, treating all peoples and their cultures as being just like us? Pictures often reinforce the extremes, ranging from scary depictions of Asians amidst gratuitous exotic details, to series in which all people are painted in the same round-eyed dreamy style, with a generic universal skin tone which looks as if it were chosen by committee.

12. Does the book, particularly when used in conjunction with other books or an entire unit of study, avoid the pitfalls of equating "western" with "modern?" Does it avoid the assumption that traditions are something others have, something that they will give up when they "progress" toward being just like us?

13. If the book conveys a moral, is it appropriate to the culture in which the story is set? Think twice about using a book about a little girl, set in long-ago China, which conveys a contemporary American self-esteem message in the best tradition of the little engine that could. "I think I can, I think I can" would not have made that little girl a government official. Books which set contemporary American values in Asian settings lead students to assume that everyone shares those values.

Book List

No one book can excel in every way, but the eclectic list below includes personal favorites which lend themselves to effective classroom use, and each of these references leads to other good books in the same series, or by the same author or illustrator.

Adventures of Rāma. Retold by Milo Cleveland Beach. Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1983. Stories from the *Rāmāyana*, one of the oldest and greatest of Indian epics, with illustrations from a sixteenth-century Mughal manuscript.

Adventures of the Monkey God. Translated by Arthur Waley. Retold by Alison Waley. Illustrated by Georgette Boner. Singapore: Graham Brash, 1988. One of the many possible translations or adaptations to use in introducing students to the Chinese classic, *The Journey to the West.*

Chinese Mother Goose Rhymes. Retold by Robert Wyndham. Illustrated by Ed Young. New York: Philomel Books, 1989. A collection of traditional Chinese rhymes with whimsical illustrations.

Coerr, Eleanor. *Sadako.* Illustrated by Ed Young. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1993. For younger readers, an illustrated adaptation of the Hiroshima story of *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes.*

Cricket, vol. 23, no. 7 (March 1996). An issue of this wide-ranging children's literary magazine which features dragon stories, particularly Korean ones.

The Greedy Crows: A Tale from Northern India. Retold by Cathy Spagnoli. Illustrated by Omar Rayyan. Bothell, Washington: Wright Group, 1995. From a series about Asian tricksters and tall tales, a story from Rajasthan with notes about storytelling.

Herdboy and Weaver. Story edited by Edward Adams. Illustrated by Dong Ho Choi. Seoul: Seoul International Publishing House, 1986. A Korean version of the story of the herd boy and the weaving princess, whose reunion on the seventh day of the seventh month is marked by a holiday in many Asian countries.

Lon Po Po: A Red-Riding Hood Story from China. Retold by Ed Young. New York: PaperStar, 1996. One of the books which can bring Asian tales into the classroom alongside the European ones.

The Loyal Cat. Retold by Lensey Namioka. Illustrated by Aki Sogabe. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1995. Papercut illustrations embellish a Japanese folk tale with a moral to convey.

The Moon Princess. Retold by Ralph F. McCarthy. Illustrated by Kancho Oda. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1993. An ancient Japanese story with illustrations first published more than 50 years ago.

Nine-In-One GRR! GRR!: A Folktale from the Hmong People of Laos. Told by Blia Xiong. Retold by Cathy Spagnoli. Illustrated by Nancy Hom. San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 1989. Illustrations inspired by Hmong embroidery embellish a story about animals both wise and foolish.

Nomura, Takaaki. *Grandpa's Town.* Translated by Amanda Mayer Stinchecum. Brooklyn: Kane/Miller Book Publishers, 1991. A bilingual book illustrated by the author follows a young Japanese boy from the city as he visits the town where his grandfather lives.

Paterson, Katherine. *The Master Puppeteer.* New York: Harper Collins, 1989. A novel about an apprentice puppeteer swept up in tumultuous events in Tokugawa-era Ōsaka.

Paterson, Katherine. *The Spying Heart: More Thoughts on Reading and Writing Books for Children.* New York: Lodestar Books, 1989. Collected essays on children's

literature, out of print but worth finding in a library.

Say, Allen. *Grandfather's Journey*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993. In pictures and prose, reflections on the emigration of the author's grandfather from Japan to the U. S., and then his return to Japan.

The Seventh Sister. Retold by Cindy Chang. Illustrated by Charles Reasoner. Troll Associates, 1994. A Chinese version of the tale of the cowherd and the weaving maiden, particularly useful when paired with versions from other countries.

Shea, Pegi Deitz. *The Whispering Cloth*. Illustrated by Anita Riggio. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press, 1995. A Hmong refugee girl in Thailand comes to the U. S. in a story illustrated with drawings and photographs of her story cloth.

Social Education, "1996 Notable Children's Trade Books," special supplement to volume 60, number 4 (April/May 1996). Updated annually, an annotated bibliography keyed to social studies themes.

A Song of Stars. Retold by Tom Birdseye. Illustrated by Ju-Hong Chen. New York: Holiday House, 1990. Another Chinese version of the herdsman and weaving maiden story.

Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education. *Cooperation in Japan*. Stanford: Stanford Institute for International Studies, n.d. A teaching unit which demonstrates how fiction, in this case a Japanese children's story, can be used to teach an important concept about a country.

Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education. *Rabbit in the Moon: Folktales from China and Japan*. Stanford: Stanford Institute for International Studies, n.d. Folk tales and guidance for the teacher concerning ways to use them to deepen students' understanding.

Staples, Suzanne F. *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989. A novel exploring the options available to the second daughter of a family in Pakistan.

Sun & Moon: Fairy Tales From Korea. Retold by Kathleen Seros. Illustrated by Norman Sibley and Robert Krause. Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym International, 1993. Seven fairy tales from Korea with bright folk-art inspired illustrations.

Thai Tales: Folktales of Thailand. Retold by Supaporn Vathanaprida. Edited by Margaret Read MacDonald. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1994. Many folk tales organized in categories and supported by extensive background notes, but no illustrations.

The Woodcutter and the Heavenly Maiden/The Firedogs. Retold by Duance Vorhees and Mark Mueller. Illustrated by Pak-Mi-son. Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym International, 1990. Two Korean folk tales paired in a bilingual edition. ■

Kamishibai, Japanese Storytelling The Return of An Imaginative Art

by Elaine Vukov

Many older Japanese have pleasant memories of the neighborhood storyteller whose tales of adventure and noble deeds brightened the lives of children everywhere in Japan. American children can now enjoy this imaginative activity. *Kamishibai* (paper drama) is a traditional form of Japanese storytelling that uses large color pictures to accompany a dramatic narration. This type of storytelling is enjoying a renaissance in Japan and has recently become available in English for use in schools and at home. The narratives are written in both Japanese (hiragana) and English.

Each *kamishibai* story consists of twelve to sixteen beautifully colored cardboard illustrations, a teacher's guide, and instructions on how to use the story boards. The boards measure 10 1/2" x 15", allowing even a large group of children gathered around a teacher or parent to easily see the pictures. The teacher's guides are particularly helpful, giving a story summary, themes, ideas for initial activities, discussion questions, the cultural background to each story and follow-up activities. Each story is illustrated by a different artist. Although machine printed on cardboard, the illustrations look like bold watercolors, woodblock prints, or even brush and ink paintings.

The twenty-three stories currently available include an excellent sampling of ancient and contemporary tales appropriate for children two years old and up. For the youngest audience, there are stories such as *Nya-on the Kitten*, a story of a kitten so fascinated by the moon she tries to catch it. *Tadpole Number 101* is a contemporary *kamishibai*

A *kamishibai* man telling stories in postwar Japan.

ELAINE VUKOV is currently the Director of Educational Outreach at the Japan Society in New York City.