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The Girl Who Wore Too Much

A Folktale from Thailand

Retold by Margaret Read MacDonald
with Thai text by Supaporn Vathanaprida
Illustrated by Yvonne Lebrun Davis

LITTLE ROCK, AR: AUGUST HOUSE LITTLEFOLK, 1998
32 PAGES

HARDCOVER: ISBN 0-87483-503-8

The Cat That Lived a Million Times

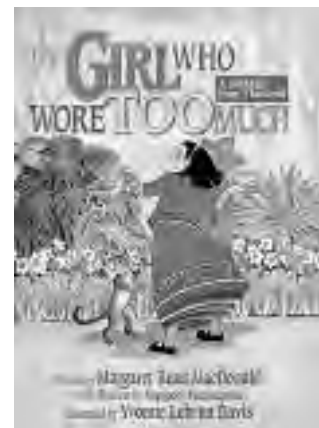
By Sano Yoko (Illustrator)
Translated by Judith Carol Huffman
Introduction by James L. Huffman

HONOLULU: UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII, 1998
VI + 34 PAGES

HARDCOVER: ISBN 0-8248-2098-3

These are two gently moralizing storybooks aimed at young children and new readers. *The Girl Who Wore Too Much* is a cautionary tale told by the Pu-Thai of northeastern Thailand, in which a spoiled girl is so taken with the beauty of her clothes that she wears them all at once, is left behind by her friends when she collapses in the heat, and misses the dance. In the original she dies (shades of Hans Christian Andersen), but in this retelling she survives to learn to appreciate the company of her forgiving friends and to take pleasure in one set of clothes at a time. The story deals with universal themes of vanity and friendship, but the narrative relies on the cultural context of monsoon Asia: it is the heat of Thailand that makes the girl's collapse utterly believable. While obviously peddling a moral, this is conveyed with a light touch and considerable humor.

The illustrations contribute enormously to the story. Their bright colors convey the beauty of Thai silks such that we can understand the girl's difficulty in choosing and so cannot help feeling some sympathy for her. In fact, the pictures tell us more about Thailand itself than the story does. They consciously depict modern Thailand, showing, for



instance, the variety of Western and traditional clothes worn by contemporary Thais on different occasions, as well as the distinctive dress of the Pu-Thai. They also incorporate significant aspects of contemporary Thai society such as Chinese shopkeepers (again, distinguished by dress) and spirit houses. Thus, within the confines of a storybook, we are given an authentic picture of twenty-first-century Thailand, and not some exoticized version. A teacher could draw attention to these details and use them to start discussions on similarity and difference, and (with older children) historical development (Why are there Chinese people in Thailand? Why do Thai men dress that way? And so on). The Thai text is a great boon for introducing the idea that there are many different ways of writing, and it is a shame that there was not space to put it alongside the English instead of confining it to the bottom of the page. The youngest readers might enjoy following the cat from page to page.

The Cat That Lived a Million Times is a Japanese Buddhist tale about the repeated reincarnation of a self-centered feline, ending only when the cat stops being selfish and gives his love to another. Like *The Girl Who Wore Too Much*, this story has universal elements—love is better than selfishness—but here the reader really does need at least a basic understanding of Buddhist ideas for the full weight of the moral to become apparent (and it is interesting that the conclusion is distinctly Mahayana, rather than Theravada). The Introduction provides a brief outline, but most U.S. or European students would need further explanations of reincarnation and nirvana, so that the story might fit better in the middle of a curriculum unit than at the beginning. The watercolor illustrations are effective enough, but not culturally specific; this story is only coincidentally Japanese. The dust jacket, however, is a lovely example of the (Japanese?) papermaker's art, and could prompt a discussion of its own.

Both books include useful explanations of the cultural context and point of the story, although the lay reader might appreciate more still, and teachers would need to supplement the information provided. Do these books educate about Asia, then? To get the most out of them, American or European children would undoubtedly need an informed adult to explain and to draw out the meanings and cultural specifics. Hence the books would probably be best used as part of a deeper exploration. The universal aspects of the stories could be seen as detracting from the project of understanding cultural specifics, but in fact the universals provide essential points of comparison for children to start relating what they read to their own lives. When children understand the ways in which they are similar to others, they are then in a much better position to enjoy their differences. ■

NAOMI STANDEN is Lecturer in Chinese History at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where she teaches courses on Imperial China (from a gendered perspective) and modern East and Southeast Asia. She has written a Ph.D. thesis and several papers on tenth-century North China frontier history, and coedited a book of comparative essays: *Frontiers in Question* (Macmillan, 1999). She has two small children who helped her to write this review.

BOOKS RECEIVED

Books listed here were recently received by the editors. Normally, we do not plan reviews of titles on this list.

Asia General

Dimmock, Clive and Allan Walker, editors. *Future School Administration: Western and Asian Perspectives*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2000.

McLeod, Ross H. and Ross Garnaut, editors. *East Asia in Crisis: From Being a Miracle to Needing One?* New York: Routledge, 1998.

China

Alagappa, Muthiah, editor. *Taiwan's Presidential Politics: Democratization and Cross-Strait Relations in the Twenty-first Century*. Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2001.

Liu, Judith, Heidi A. Ross and Donald P. Kelly, editors. *The Ethnographic Eye: An Interpretive Study of Education in China*. New York: Falmer Press, 2000.

Rhoads, Edward J. M. *Manchus & Han: Ethnic Relations and Political Power in Late Qing and Early Republican China, 1861–1928*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000.

Shapiro, Judith. *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Slack, Edward R., Jr. *Opium, State, and Society: China's Narco-Economy and the Guomindang, 1924–1937*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001.

Tang, Wenfang and William L. Parish. *Chinese Urban Life Under Reform: The Changing Social Contract*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Zhenman, Zheng. *Family Lineage Organization and Social Change in Ming and Qing Fujian*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001.

Japan

Low, Morris, Shigeru Nakayama and Hitoshi Yoshioka. *Science, Technology and Society in Contemporary Japan*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

McCreery, John. *Japanese Consumer Behavior: From Worker Bees to Wary Shoppers*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000.

Snyder, Stephen and Philip Gabriel, editors. *Ōe and Beyond: Fiction in Contemporary Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999.

Rozman, Gilbert, editor. *Japan and Russia: The Tortuous Path to Normalization, 1949–1999*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

Winther-Tamaki, Bert. *Art in the Encounter of Nations: Japanese and American Artists in the Early Postwar Years*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001.

South Asia

Hart, George L. and Hank Heifetz, editors and translators. *The Four Hundred Songs of War and Wisdom, An Anthology of Poems from Classical Tamil: The Purānāñūru*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Southeast Asia

Sinh, Vinh and Nicholas Wickenden, translators. *Overtaken Charriot: The Autobiography of Phan-Bội-Châu*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999.