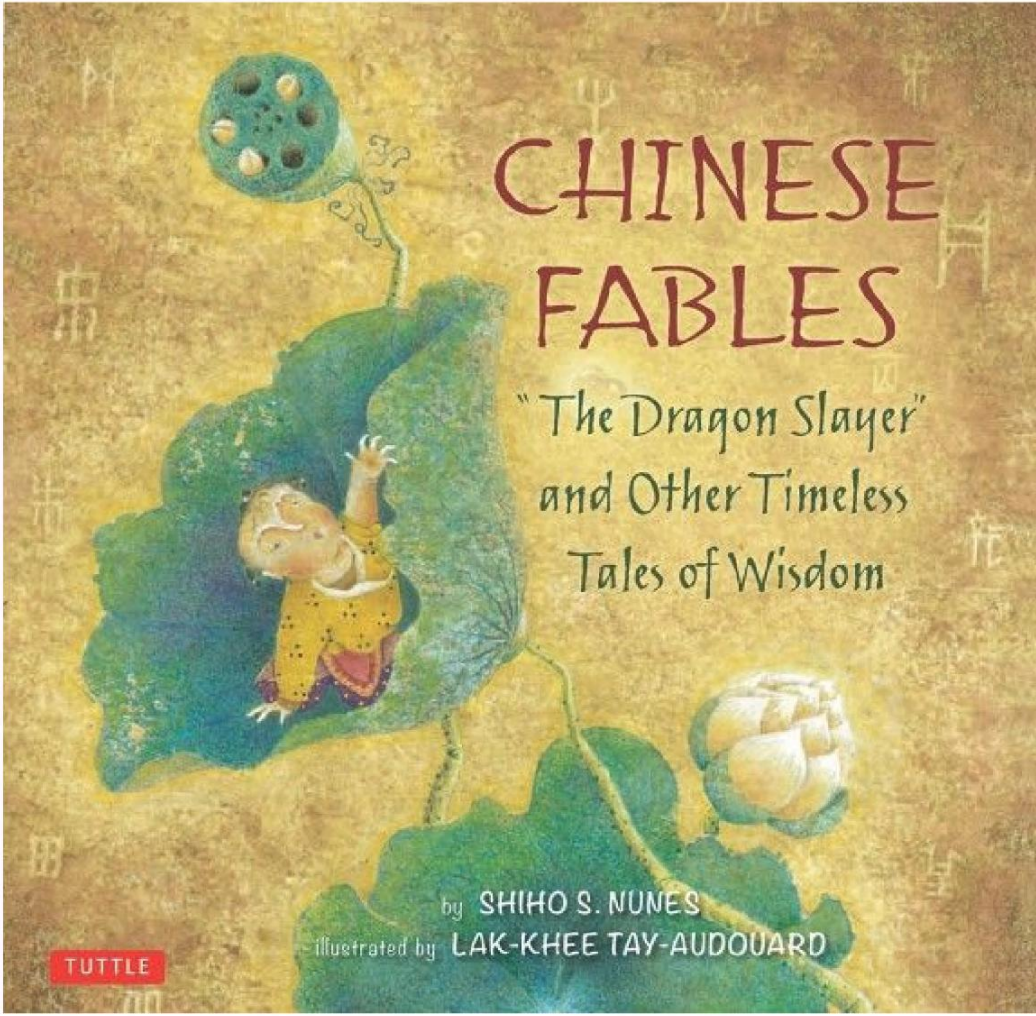

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A Change of Fashion

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—Shiho S. Nunes

To Father, omniscient and omnipresent, for whom nothing is impossible.

—Lak-Khee Tay-Audouard

Preface

Who doesn't remember "The Tortoise and the Hare" or "The Lion and the Mouse" or "Belling the Cat," and recall the lessons these simple stories teach? Fables are among the stories we hear first and remember longest.

If you went to Sunday school, you will have heard the "Parable of the Server" and the "Parable of the Talents." A parable, like the fable, conveys some truth or moral lesson, but it does so indirectly by using a comparison of some kind. The New Testament of the Bible teaches many lessons through the use of such comparisons.

Wherever they came from, whatever their source—Greek, Hindu, European, Asian—these tales, with their moral teachings and ageless wisdom, are an important part of our literary heritage.

In China, cautionary tales, like fables and parables, have a long and illustrious history. They are part of a class of works called yu-yen, writings with an underlying—a second—meaning. Yu-yen also include allegories, metaphors and anecdotes. These works are very old. China's golden age of fable was in the fourth and third centuries BCE, but some yu-yen go back even further. The more recent ones were written between 1644 and 1911. These writings were not accessible, however, until

Chinese and European scholars and folklorists collected, translated and published them in modern form.

From three such collections Wolfram Eberhard, an American folklorist, abstracted and cataloged five hundred tales in his Chinese Fables and Parables, a monograph on Asian folklore and social life. The cataloged entries are brief, giving only the story line in two or three sentences, rarely more. An unmistakable thread of humor runs through many of them. Devoid of detail, the entries cry for invention.

And invent I did with the nineteen entries I selected to expand into stories. I have taken liberties, I'm sure, but tried to remain true to each story's original intent as nearly as I could interpret it. As fables and parables the world over have always done, these Chinese tales illustrate both the wisdom and foolishness of ordinary folk.

The Practical Bride

A bride was being borne in a sedan chair from her father's house to herbridegroom's home in the next village. Four porters in jackets of identical color and design carried the gaily decorated chair. Small bells tied to the corners of the canopy kept merry time with the porters' gait as they jogged along. The tapestry hangings over the canopy roof and sides concealed the passenger within, but everyone knew that a bride was being taken to her new home. The villagers stood outside their doors, waving and calling out well-wishes and farewells as the chair passed by.

Midway to the next village, a loud rrriiippp!!! interrupted the merry tinkling of the bells. CRASH! THUD! The chair fell to the road, taking with it the silken cushion and the bride, and leaving

the porters holding a pair of poles with an empty canopy and dangling shreds of rotten rope. The bride picked herself up carefully. Not a single ornament of her elaborate headdress was out of place. She moved to the side of the road to await repairs. But no repairs began, only a chorus of complaints and blame.

“Did you check the chair before we started?”

“Nobody told me to!”

“It was bound to break! See how cheaply it’s put together!”

“Master should have bought a better chair!”

“And he should have sent two chairs as a precaution!”

“Well, what can we do? We have no tools; we have no cord.”

“You run and tell Master to send another chair. We’ll wait here.”

“But it will be dark by the time I get back!”

“And if it rains, where can we go for shelter?”

“Oh! What’s to be done!?”

Out of patience, the bride took charge. She stepped between the poles where the chair had been and ordered the porters to take their places. “Start jogging!” she said firmly. Hidden under the canopy hangings, she kept pace with them. The bells resumed their merry tinkling.

In this fashion the bride jogged to her new home, arriving in

state and on time, with every hair ornament in place, and none of the guests the wiser.

The Wrong Audience

Kung-Ming I was an accomplished musician on the ch'in, the seven-string zither, the Chinese scholar's instrument. Excellent though he was, he had one great failing: he didn't care a snapped string about his audience and paid no attention to the response of the audience who came to hear him play.

Kung-Ming had studied the instrument in the old-school belief that it is the way to purity and harmony with the universe. To Kung-Ming playing the ch'in was meditation: he withdrew into himself, thought only lofty thoughts, and cared nothing about the effects of his music on his listeners. To enhance his purity, he often played the ch'in in a secluded pavilion or on the banks of an icy mountain stream. He best liked playing alone under a full moon on a hillside overlooking the town.

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