

BOOKTALK

Yeh-Shen

A Cinderella Story From China

retold by Ai-Ling Louie / illustrated by Ed Young









Caldecott Book Winner Ed Young researched the story of Yeh-Shen in two trips to China—the country of his birth. His dreamlike illustrations capture the story beautifully. On each page is a symbol or an illustration of the carp fish who befriends and helps Yeh-Shen. The author, Ai-Ling Louie, remembers hearing the story from her grandmother and discovered that the tale has been told in China for over a thousand years. A block-printed page from a Chinese edition is included in this book and the Chinese writing is something that could be researched through books and the Internet.

A cave chief of southern China by the name of Wu has two wives who each give birth to a baby girl. One of the wives grows sick and dies. Soon Wu also dies. Their small daughter is left orphaned and in the care of her stepmother and soon her beauty, goodness, and intelligence create feelings of jealousy as Yeh-Shen's stepsister has none of these gifts. The young girl befriends an enormous fish and often gives it food, but when her stepmother discovers this small pleasure, she tricks the fish, and then kills and cooks it for dinner. A wise old man (a sage) reveals to Yeh-Shen how the fish has disappeared but tells her not to dwell on the past, but to appreciate that the fish has a powerful spirit which will know her heart's desire and give her gifts. Yeh-Shen is helped by the fish bone's spirit and eventually attends a festival dressed in an azure blue gown, a cloak of kingfisher feathers, and tiny golden slippers. She attracts much attention, but loses one of the shoes as she flees when it appears that her stepsister might recognize her.

The lovely slipper eventually reaches the king who is determined to find its owner. Many of the countryside cave women try on the shoe and fail to prove it is theirs. It is not until the king sees Yeh-Shen slipping into the pavilion in the darkness of night, that he finds the lovely and good owner of the shoe. The end of the story tells of marriage and happiness for Yeh-Shen, but also reveals that fate deals harshly with her stepmother and stepsister when they are crushed in a shower of stones.

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MOTIFS AND IDEAS

-  the oldest known Cinderella story; from the T'ang dynasty (618-907 A.D.)
-  Yeh-Shen's father had two wives and two daughters
-  parents die and Yeh-Shen is raised by her cruel stepmother
-  her helper is a fish who is killed by the stepmother
-  an older man (a sage) gives Yeh-Shen advice
-  there is a festival and Yeh-Shen loses her slipper
-  the king marries the owner of the slipper
-  "fate" punishes at the end

CONNECTIONS

The wise old man (called a "sage" in the story) gives Yeh-Shen this advice as he tells her that her stepmother has killed the girl's fish-friend: "Let us not dwell on things that are past" Think about why sometimes it's best to put aside past evils or problems. Write about a time when you decided to leave the past behind:

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VOCABULARY WORDS

azure	dynasty	herald	sage
collapse(d)	enormous	marvel(ed)	sweetmeats
crafty	filthy	pavilion	transformed
dread	heaved	predates	vigil

Choose the word that matches its meaning:

- | | |
|---|-------------|
| 1. a building or tent used for festivals | a. vigil |
| 2. an official messenger | b. azure |
| 3. blue color of a clear sky | c. predates |
| 4. a period of watching or wakefulness | d. pavilion |
| 5. "before" the date | e. dynasty |
| 6. a powerful group or family | f. herald |

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- 1. After reading or listening to Yeh-Shen, complete the information below.
- 2. The "I thought ..." section should be written in complete sentences and you should use every line.
- 3. In the area at the bottom of the page, draw an illustration with a caption (words explaining the picture) of something that interested you from the story.

Country or Ethnic Group:

Hero or Heroine:

Description of family:

A conflict or hardship:

Event helper:

Test of worthiness:

Use of magic:

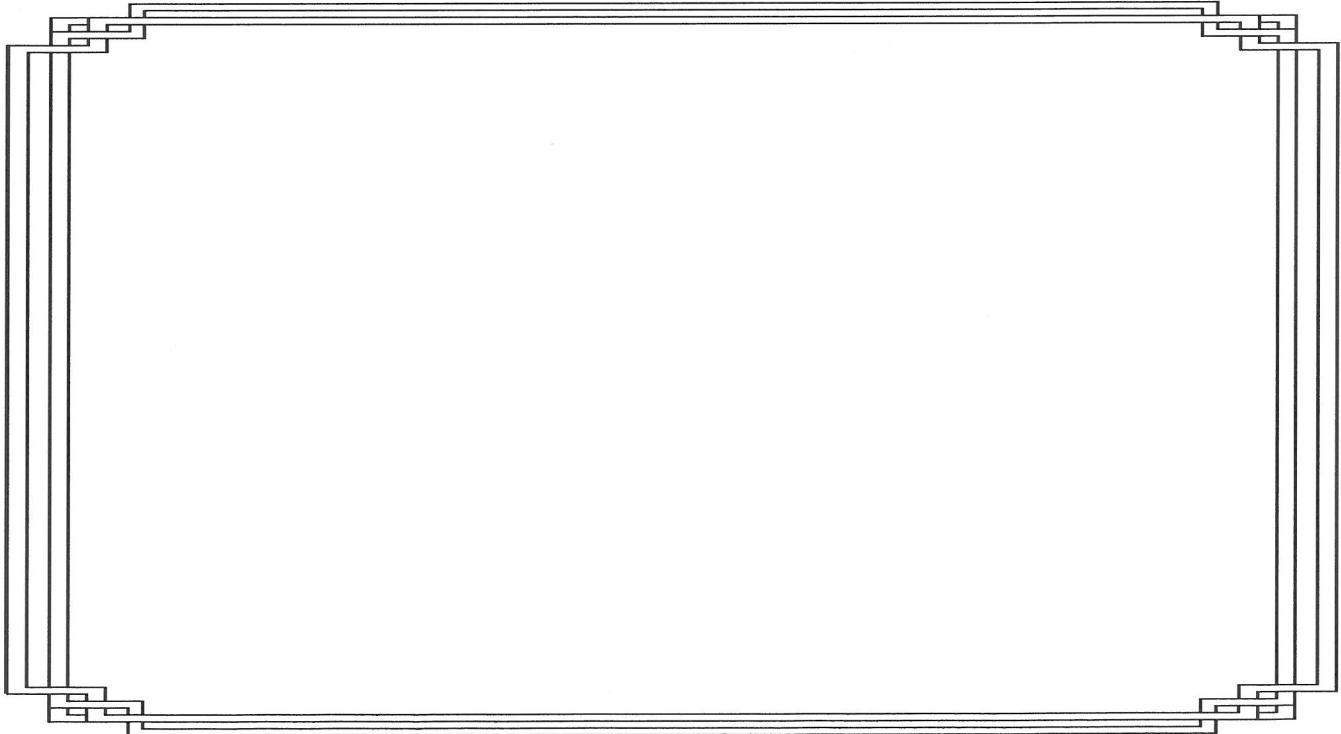
Resolution:

I thought this story:

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In the olden days in China it was considered very desirable for a woman to have small feet. In many of the Cinderella stories, one of the things that is noticeable about the sandal, slipper or shoe that the central character loses is that it is very tiny. Chinese American poet Janet S. Wong tells a story of how her grandmother grew tired of her granddaughter's fussiness and complaints when they went to the mall looking for new athletic shoes. Grandmother (Popo) told Janet about the suffering that small girls in China used to endure and later Janet reflected on the incident and wrote a poem about it:

Bound Feet

Smoothing her fingers,
Popo shows how, back in China, long ago
they used to roll young girls' feet,
soaked in salt for softer bones,
rolled and rolled and rolled and tied
in packages of tender meat.

Hearing that, I like my feet.

Beside each word or phrase, write a comment or a sentence or two about how, even today, people often value appearances more than they should.

name brand clothes

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popularity

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shoes that are uncomfortable

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sagging

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color of skin

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