

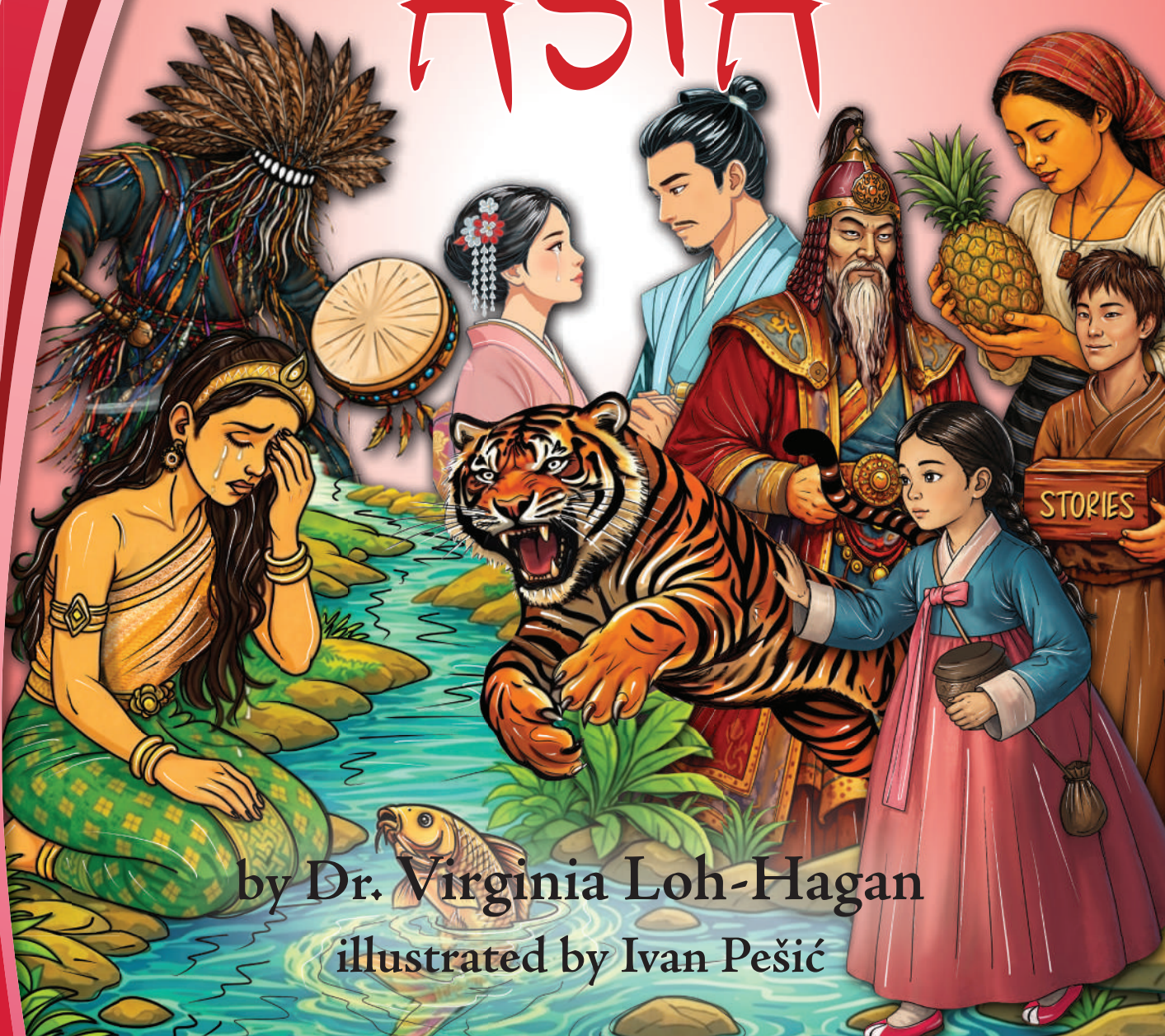


Core Knowledge®



Collection of Tales

FROM
ASIA



by Dr. Virginia Loh-Hagan

illustrated by Ivan Pešić

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TALES FROM ASIA

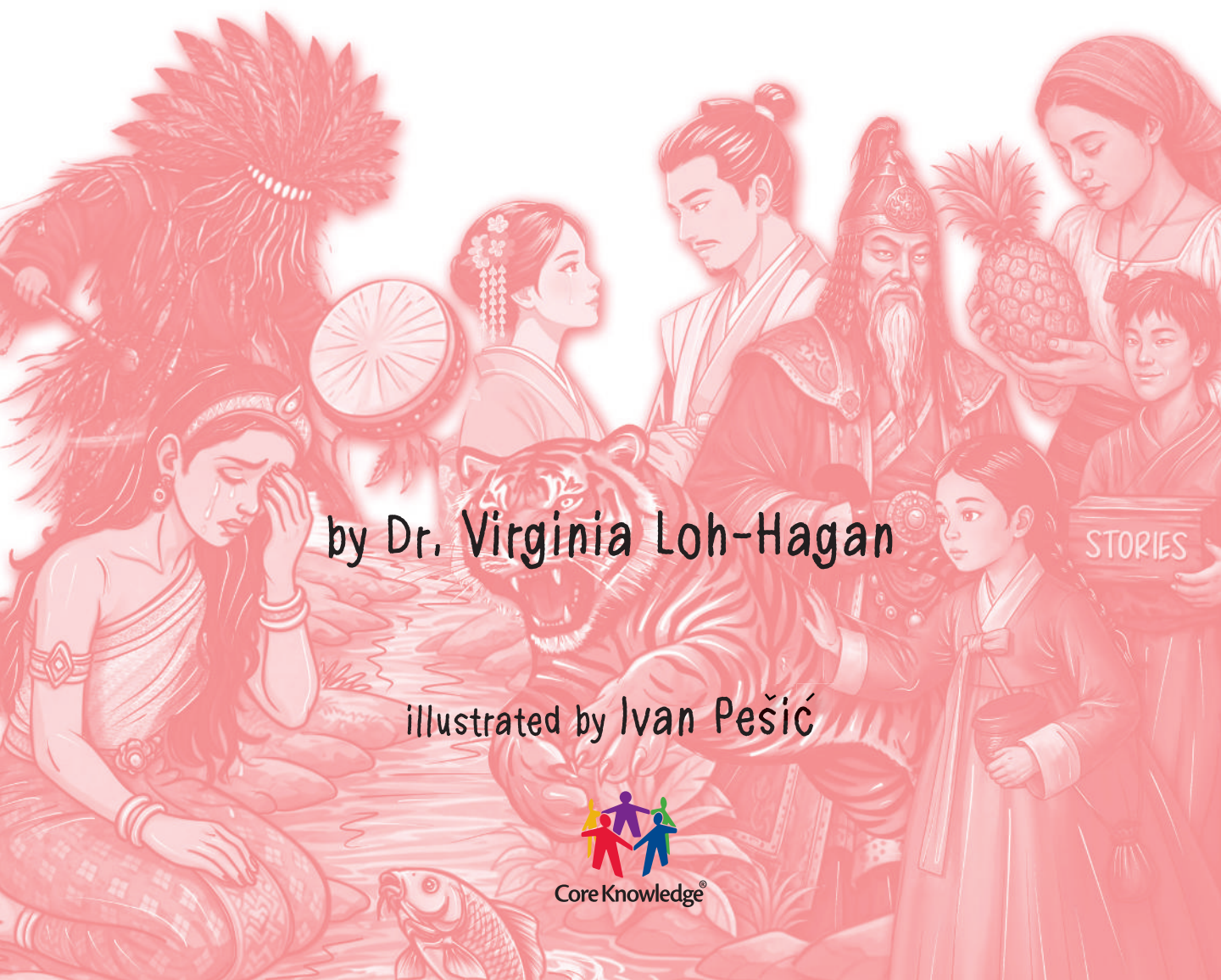


by Dr. Virginia Loh-Hagan

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INTRODUCTION

It is perhaps true to say that creating and controlling fire was the most important human discovery. Humans first learned to control fire more than four hundred thousand years ago. This changed the course of human existence. Humans could use fire to protect themselves from predators. They could use it to cook food. Perhaps most importantly, they could extend their day into the night, and they began using this time to socialize and tell stories while gathered around a fire. This practice of storytelling expanded minds, established communities, and preserved histories.

All cultures have stories. Stories serve many purposes. They entertain. They explain. They comfort. They provide records of past lives, and they offer proof of and connection to our ancestors. Today, stories continue to be passed on from generation to generation and culture to culture.

Early humans created stories, often known today as myths and legends, to make sense of the world. The ten stories featured in this book are “pourquoi” stories. *Pourquoi* means “why” in French.

Pourquoi stories reveal how people attempted to explain what they didn't understand about the natural world or about society. Some pourquoi stories even tried to explain the origin of life itself.

The ten stories in this book are from different parts of Asia. Asia is the largest continent in the world, consisting of many distinct countries, languages, and peoples—yet they all share a love of stories.

Ancient India and ancient China are among the world's oldest civilizations. They expanded their borders and spread their cultures. As such, they greatly influenced nearby regions through trade and conquest. Their influences can still be seen today.

From the second century BCE to the fifteenth century CE, the Silk Road was in operation. This was a network of trade routes between East Asia and Europe. Goods, ideas, and stories were exchanged along these routes. And as people migrated to different regions, they took their stories with them.

Stories were originally shared through oral traditions. They first began to be written down in Mesopotamia in the late third or early second millennium BCE, when the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was inscribed in clay tablets. The invention of paper by the ancient Chinese in the second century BCE, followed by their development of a woodblock printing process in the seventh century CE, meant that stories could be recorded more easily and shared more widely.

A story may change every single time it is told. This is because storytellers often add or change details. In writing the ten stories

in this book, I changed and retold them in little ways: I added dialogue. I added background information. I made changes that would make it easier for modern readers to understand. In some cases, I drew new connections between ideas. However, I always aimed to preserve each story's meaning and message.

As you read the stories in this book, pay attention to what they reveal about the cultures. Stories—especially folktales, myths, and legends—are often reflections of a culture's values and beliefs. They are links to our histories and heritages. Today, we use science to explain how things work, but we still use stories to understand how people act, think, and feel. They can offer us truths about the human experience.





MONGOLIA

Mongolia is one of the world's highest countries. It is located between Russia and China. It has tall mountains, vast plateaus, and harsh temperatures—all of which have shaped its landscape and culture. Mongolians are known for their skills with horses. In the thirteenth century, the Mongol empire was feared for its fierce warriors on horseback. During this time, it dominated much of Asia and eastern Europe.

Just as they have done for centuries, many Mongolians raise livestock for survival. They move across the land with the seasons in search of water and grass for their herds. These nomadic Mongolians live in portable yurts.

Because nomadic Mongolians move often, they can only carry with them the most important necessities. And as they cannot carry vast libraries filled with books, they have maintained the art and practice of storytelling. The Mongolian word *tuuli* refers to the rich cultural practice of sharing heroic epic tales. These tales are often sung by professional singers or storytellers who possess remarkable performance skills and amazing memories. They memorize numerous lengthy tales. During their travels, and by way of these stories, they share Mongolian historical knowledge and values. This tradition of storytelling is so important that many

Mongolians believe telling and listening to stories is a spiritual experience.

Sadly, the number of these Mongolian epic singers is decreasing. Historians are working to record Mongolian stories before they are lost. One such story is the legend of Blind Tarvaa. It is the story of a boy who suffered from the bubonic plague. This plague swept across Asia and Europe in the fourteenth century in a pandemic now known as the Black Death. It most likely started in Central Asia and was spread by Mongol conquest, traders, or both as they traveled along the Silk Road.

This story explains how storytelling began among the nomadic Mongolians. It shares the origin of the Mongolian tuuli tradition. Tarvaa, the main character, is a young, poor boy. He is not a rich prince, noble, or merchant. Instead he is a humble villager. This demonstrates the Mongolian belief that stories can be about anyone and they belong to everyone.

Mongolian words found in this story:

Deel [dell]: traditional Mongolian clothing or armor that looks like a large overcoat

Ger [gair]: literally, “home”; a portable round tent covered with felt or skins that is used as a dwelling, also called a yurt

Khan [hahn]: a title given to rulers in Central Asia



BLIND TARVAA

“The plague is among us,” announced the shaman, the village’s healer and spiritual guide. “We must chase out the evil spirits. We must seek guidance from the good spirits.”

Boom. Boom. Boom. The shaman hit his drum in a steady beat. He chanted in low, deep grunts. He danced, kicking up the dust around his feet. His repeated movements and sounds lulled him into a trance. It was in this trance that he would be able to communicate with the spirit world.

Villagers gathered around him. They held hands and looked to the skies, hoping for some answers. They begged the spirits to save their loved ones. They begged for their village to be released from the sickness.

One mother’s voice was the loudest. She begged, “Please save my son, Tarvaa! I know we are poor, and we do not have much to give you. But Tarvaa is only fifteen years old. He deserves a long life.”

The shaman wore a hat of feathers that masked his face. He spun around, whipping his colorful, thick deel in all directions. Hot, tired, and sweating, the shaman finally collapsed. He looked like a big heap of clothes.



Several minutes passed before he slowly rose from the pile. He announced, "I have heard from the spirits. The Black Death has already descended upon many of the people in our village. It is too late for them. The few of us who still have our health must leave. We must escape this sickness. It is the only way. The spirits have spoken."

Tarvaa's mother wailed, "I cannot leave my Tarvaa behind. He is all I have!"

The shaman took her hand. "Let us go to your boy."

Tarvaa's mother took the shaman to the small ger she shared with her son. There, they found him barely breathing. His body was still, too weak to move from fighting the sickness for days.

When Tarvaa saw his mother, he said, "You must go. Leave me to my fate."

Each word he uttered felt like a dagger in his ribs.

Tarvaa's mother cried. She reached out to touch her son, but the shaman stopped her. "Your son is lost to us now," he said. "He is no longer in this world. You must save yourself."

Tarvaa heard no more. His eyes slid shut, and he drifted into a deep sleep.

When he awoke, he was a spirit, no longer bound to his immovable body. His spirit rose, only to find his mother gone and his village deserted. Not a sound was to be heard. Then he remembered the shaman's words: *Your son is lost to us now.*

He is no longer in this world.

Ready to accept his fate, Tarvaa's spirit left his village behind and made his way to the underworld. At last, he found himself in front of the Great Khan of the Underworld.

The Great Khan was shocked to see Tarvaa's spirit. He said, "Why have you left your body? It is not your time. You must return to your body on Earth."

Confused, Tarvaa said, "Mother and the shaman stood over me and said I was lost."

The Great Khan responded, "No one comes here unless I summon them. I did not summon you. And yet here you are. Why?"

"I did not want to be a burden or danger to my mother," Tarvaa explained. "I thought it would be best if I made my way to you, Great Khan."

The Great Khan smiled. "Your selflessness impresses me."

Tarvaa bowed before the Great Khan, honored by the praise.

"Before you go, I will grant you one gift of your choosing to take back with you." The Great Khan signaled for Tarvaa to follow him.

The Great Khan took Tarvaa to a large hall filled with great big piles of loose gold, gems, and other treasures. He led him toward the back of the hall to a locked door.



“This is my special vault.” The Great Khan opened the door by waving his fingers in the air. “I hold all the earthly joys and talents here. As people cross into the underworld, they leave behind their special gifts. I only share these gifts with those who will use them well.”

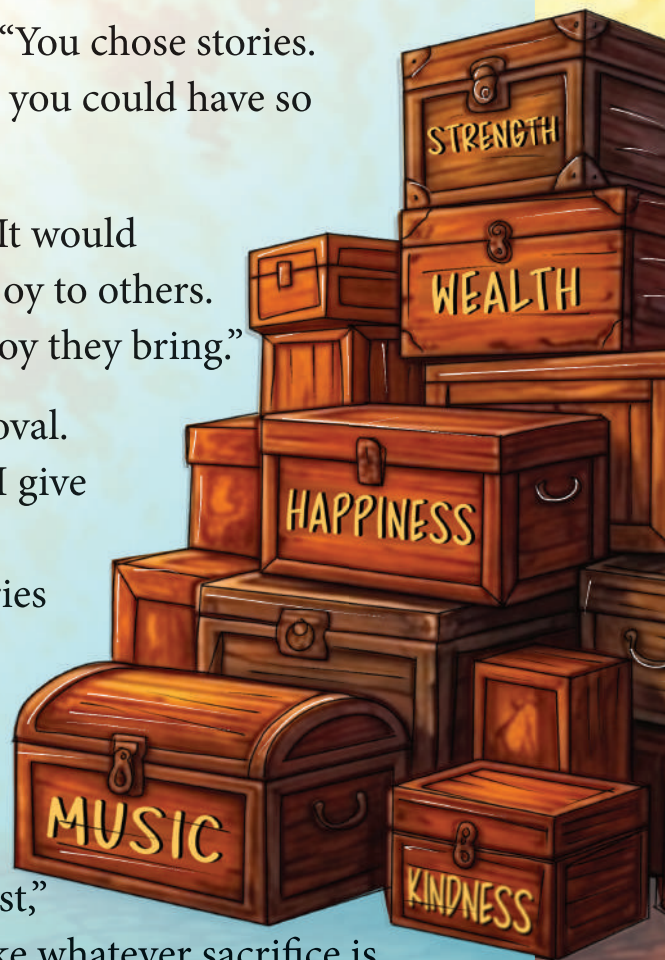
Through the open door, Tarvaa saw piles and piles of boxes—boxes with labels like *Wealth*, *Happiness*, and *Music*. His eyes fell upon the plainest box in the room. He pointed to it. “I will take that one.”

The Great Khan looked pleased. “You chose stories. Why did you choose that one when you could have so many other riches?”

“Stories bring joy,” Tarvaa said. “It would bring me much happiness to bring joy to others. Stories live forever, and so will the joy they bring.”

The Great Khan nodded in approval. He gave Tarvaa the box of stories. “I give you this gift as a reward for your selflessness and obedience. The stories have been bestowed upon your spirit and now live in you. But every gift has a price. Are you willing to pay that price?”

“Yes, I trust you know what is best,” Tarvaa replied. “I am willing to make whatever sacrifice is expected. I am your loyal servant.”



The Great Khan smiled. “Then the deal has been made. Go back to Earth. Use this gift well. Do not come back until you are summoned.”

So Tarvaa’s spirit journeyed back to Earth. There, he found his body, pale and cold. Tarvaa was saddened by what had happened to his body; it no longer had eyes to see, for the crows had taken them. But he knew this must be the price the Great Khan had warned him of. He accepted his fate.

Tarvaa’s spirit returned to his sightless body. First, he felt his fingers come back to life. Next, he felt his toes. Finally, he felt the rest of his body. Fully recovered from the sickness, he began to live as a blind man.

Tarvaa understood that every great gift requires great sacrifice. He may have lost his sight, but he had gained the knowledge of many stories, the talent to tell them well, and the skill to learn new ones. He felt blessed. Over time, he realized he could use his other senses to learn so much more about the world around him. He learned the rippling sounds of a river full of fish. He learned the feel of damp soil after rain. He learned the smell of an apple ready to be plucked from its tree.

Tarvaa traveled from town to town in search of his mother. Along the way, he became known as Blind Tarvaa, the teller of marvelous stories about Mongolian heroes and history. He learned new stories from people he met during his travels. Because he couldn’t write down or read the stories, his mind absorbed them.

He listened carefully, asked many questions, and captured every detail in thousands of stories.

Blind Tarvaa shared his gift of telling stories with the people, ensuring that they would be retold for generations to come.

He was beloved and respected by all. Many considered him to be a great Mongolian hero—proof that people from humble beginnings could achieve greatness.

After many, many years, Blind Tarvaa became an old man. He began to train other storytellers to take his place. The storytellers Tarvaa trained would collect and preserve Mongolian culture, history, beliefs, and values.

After a full life of sharing his gift of stories with others, Tarvaa was finally summoned to the underworld. There, he was at last reunited with his mother.

It is because of Blind Tarvaa, the first great Mongolian storyteller, that Mongolia has a rich oral storytelling tradition. As for Blind Tarvaa, he will live on forever in stories like this one.

2



CHINA

China is in the eastern part of Asia, bordering the Pacific Ocean and fourteen other countries. It is one of the largest countries in the world and has more than four thousand years of recorded history. Throughout its long history, China has provided the world with new innovations and inventions. The four great inventions of ancient China are paper, gunpowder, printing, and the compass. China is also known for introducing tea, silk, and rockets to other parts of the world.

Chinese people have many cultural traditions that embrace luck, fortune, respecting elders, and honoring the dead. These traditions are incorporated into people's daily lives and beliefs. Many Chinese people practice traditions that chase out bad luck and bring in good luck. These practices are especially important during Chinese New Year.

Chinese New Year is a major celebration. It is a fifteen-day festival that marks the beginning of a new lunar year. During Chinese New Year celebrations, people follow a number of traditions believed to bring good fortune and prosperity. They set off firecrackers, perform lion dances, give out red envelopes, and wear red, a color considered to be lucky in Chinese culture.

The origins of Chinese New Year and its traditions are rooted in legends. Many Chinese New Year legends tell of Nian, a beast who raids villages on New Year's Eve. In the legends, villagers ward off the beast with loud noises, bright lights, and the color red.

There are different versions of the Nian legend. For example, in some stories, Nian lives in the sea, and in others, he lives in a forest. What Nian is and what he looks like also varies from story to story. Other characters vary too. As stories spread, details may change. However, all the versions explain why and how people celebrate Chinese New Year.

Chinese words found in this story:

Nian [nyen]: year

Guo Nian [gwaw nyen]: literally, “passing over Nian”
or “crossing into the new year”;

Chinese New Year



THE LEGEND OF NIAN

There once was a village by the sea. For most of the year, the villagers were happy. They grew the most bountiful of crops. They always had fresh water to drink. They had much to trade, and many villagers became rich. The land gave them more than they needed. But there was a price they had to pay for their good fortune.

For one day each year, the villagers were not happy. In fact, they were terrified. A beast named Nian lurked beneath the sea. For most of the year, Nian hibernated in an underwater cave. But on the last day of the lunar year, Nian came out of his hiding spot to feed.

He descended upon the village. He ate crops. He ate farm animals. He ate people. He destroyed everything in his path. And then he returned to the sea, not to be seen again until the end of the next lunar year.

The villagers marked each new moon. They counted down the days to when Nian would awaken once more. As the last day of the lunar year approached, they hid away as best they could. But Nian always found them, for he had a keen sense of smell.

One year, some of the villagers decided they were tired of hiding. They wanted to fight back. "This is the last year we run away," declared one young man. "We must change our fate."

“This is the way it has always been,” said another villager. “How can we defeat the beast?”

“I know what you must do.” The villagers jumped, for the words had come from an old man who had appeared from nowhere, as if by magic.

The villagers crowded around the old man. They leaned in. They wanted to hear more. “Nian fears loud noises, bright lights, and the color red,” he said. Then he vanished into thin air.

The young man who had decided to fight back stepped forward. “We have much to do. Nian will be here in four days.”

The villagers gasped, for they knew that the number four was an unlucky number. “This is not a good omen,” an old woman declared.

“Well then,” the young man responded, “we will need all the luck we can get if we are to defeat the beast. Rest tonight. We will start our preparations in the morning.”

The next morning, three days before the arrival of Nian, the villagers sprang into action. “We need to make loud noises. Make firecrackers. Make drums. Collect all of the gongs. Gather anything that makes a ruckus,” the young man instructed.

One villager spoke up with another idea: “We could also scare the beast by pretending to be beasts ourselves. We can disguise ourselves as dragons and lions. Then we can dance around to make it look like the beasts are strong and agile. We can make noises that sound like roars.”

Two days before the arrival of Nian, the young man announced, “Now we need to make bright lights. The bright lights will cast out the darkness and usher in a hopeful new era, one without the beast.”

“We can hang our lanterns! We can get our candles ready!” a few villagers eagerly volunteered.

“We can also light up the sky with fireworks!” another villager suggested.

The young man nodded in agreement. “Fireworks are both loud and bright. They will surely scare away Nian.”

With just one day to go before the arrival of Nian, the young man addressed the crowd of villagers. “The beast fears red, the brightest, boldest color—the color of fire and the sun. Collect everything you have that is red.”

The villagers chimed in with ideas.

“I will wear red clothes.”

“I will hang red banners on my door.”

“I do not have a banner, but I will cut designs into red paper and hang those.”

At last, they were ready.

The day finally came. The villagers heard loud rumbles. They felt the ground shake. Nian arrived right on schedule.

But this time, the villagers didn’t hide.



The villagers set off firecrackers. They played their drums and gongs. They made the loudest noises they could.

Blast! Bang! Boom!

Nian covered his ears.

The villagers' fireworks shimmered in the night sky. They lit their lanterns. They performed dances imitating lions and dragons.

Their doors were red; their clothes were red. The village was a sea of red.

Nian covered his eyes. He fled from the village and returned to the sea.

The villagers jumped for joy. Their luck had turned around. They had finally chased away the terrible beast. They were excited about the year to come. They celebrated with food, games, songs, and more.

The young man made a toast. "Guo Nian!" he shouted above the celebrations. "Hurray for us! We have crossed into a new life, one without the beast!"



But they agreed to not test fate.
Each year, people follow the
tradition of celebrating
the new year with
loud
noises,
bright lights,
and the color red
to ensure Nian,
the feared beast,
does not return.



KOREA

Korea is a peninsula, a landmass surrounded by water on three sides, that lies between China and Japan. Today, it is divided into two countries: North Korea and South Korea.

Many Koreans follow a religious philosophy called Confucianism, which emphasizes social harmony and good conduct. Within Confucianism, respecting elders and showing obedience to parents are thought to be very important. The eldest male is considered to be the most important person in the family.

Another common belief system in Korea is shamanism. In shamanism, the world is believed to be full of spirits. People known as shamans act as guides between the worlds of humans and spirits. Shamans use meditation, trances, and rituals to heal others or to divine hidden messages from the spirit world. Most Korean shamans are women.

Korean Confucianism emphasizes the power and importance of men, and Korean shamanism emphasizes the role of women.

Korean female shamans are known as *mudang* (Korean male shamans are called *baksu*). According to legend, Princess Bari was the first mudang. She is honored by modern-day shamans. There are many stories about her. Her story is often told during a traditional Korean ritual called *gut*. One of the purposes of this ritual is to seek blessings from spirits, ancestors, or gods. People seek blessings for such things as the healing of the sick and injured.

Bari is also known as the healer of souls. Shamans ask Bari to help guide spirits into the afterlife. During *gut*, people dance, sing, tell stories, and offer food to gods and spirits.

The Princess Bari story explains the origins of female shamans. She represents the powers and abilities of women. Her story also explains why it is important to obey and respect elders. Princess Bari is honored for her selflessness. She is viewed as the ideal child.

Korean words found in this story:

Bari [bah-ree]: the one who was thrown away

Mudang [moo-dahng]: a female shaman

Baksu [bahk-soo]: a male shaman



PRINCESS BARI

It was a big day for the king. His seventh child was about to enter the world.

The king paced the floor and wrung his hands. He mumbled prayers to the gods, pleading for a boy. He and his kingdom were growing impatient.

The king already had six beautiful, healthy daughters. He loved each one, but he needed an heir—a prince to take over his rule. Only a prince would ensure peace and stability throughout the land. A kingdom without a king would lead to war.

The king had even hired a male shaman to ensure the birth of a male. The baksu now waited by his side, anxious to hear the news.

Suddenly the queen's nurse ran into the king's chambers. Out of breath, she announced, "Your Majesty, the baby has arrived."

"Is it a boy?" the king asked, with much hope.

The nurse lowered her eyes. "You have a healthy girl. She appears to be the most beautiful of your daughters."

The king sighed. "Another beautiful daughter is of no use to me." His heart filled with pain and disappointment. Then he turned to the shaman and yelled, "You promised me a son! I gave you lands and my prized horses!"

“My king,” stammered the shaman. “It appears the spirits require a bigger sacrifice from you. That is the only explanation that makes sense.”

The king held back tears, for he knew what he must do. He said to the nurse, “Take the baby to the mountains, and leave her there to meet her fate. May she be blessed by the mountain spirits. She will be my offering, my great sacrifice, so that the next child may be a male heir.”

“Yes, my king.”

The nurse swaddled the baby in a blanket and carried her to the mountains. But when she looked into the baby’s eyes, she decided she could not abandon her. She prayed for hours, using her body to keep the baby warm. She begged for the baby’s life and asked the mountain spirits to look after her.

A heavenly spirit answered the nurse’s prayers. The spirit touched the nurse’s shoulders and signaled for her to leave the baby and go. The nurse did as she was told, thanking the spirit for the help.

The spirit named the baby Bari. The spirit brought Bari to a wild mother goat who was still caring for her newborn kids. The mother goat adopted Bari and kept her fed and warm.

Bari grew up in the mountains. The mountain creatures and the land took care of her. In time, she learned how to care for all the creatures and the land in return. The mountains were all Bari knew. She was happy.

On Bari's twelfth birthday, the spirit reappeared.

"Who are you?" asked Bari.

"I am your guardian. I have been protecting you your whole life," said the spirit. "It is time you learned who you truly are."

This shocked Bari. "What do you mean? I am a child of nature. I always have been. The mountains are my home."

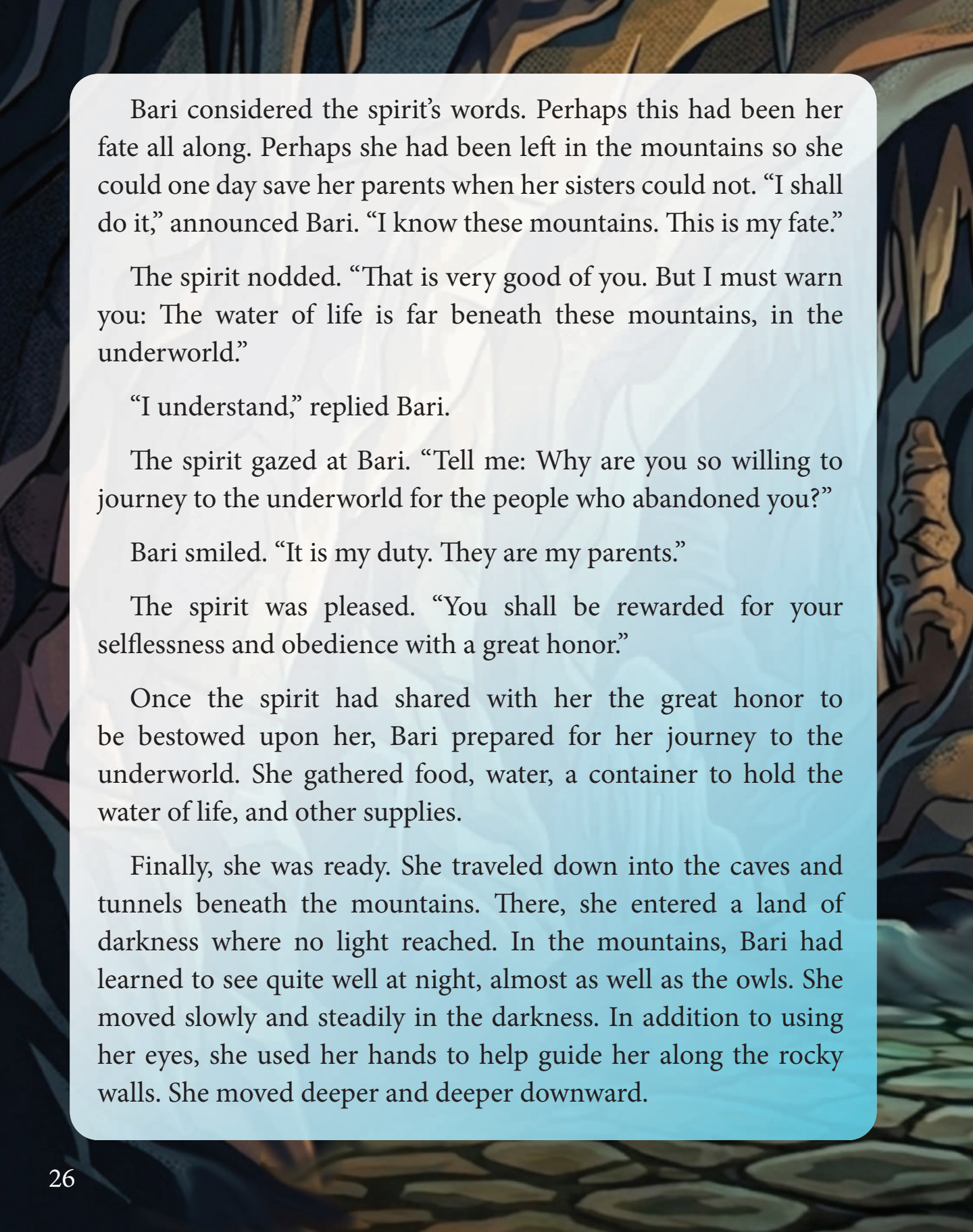
The spirit said, "That is true, but it is not the whole story. You are also a child of the kingdom, born to the king and queen of this land. You were their great sacrifice, for they desired a male heir to ensure peace in the land."

"The king and queen left me here by myself?"

"You have never been by yourself. The mountains and their creatures have always been with you. I have always been with you." The spirit laid a hand on Bari's shoulder. "We have cared for you since the day you were born."

Bari loved her life in the mountains. She loved her childhood. She wouldn't trade her life for any other. But she was curious. "Why are you telling me this now?" she asked.

"The king and queen are growing old and will likely die soon. They need someone to retrieve the water of life for them. Their daughters, your sisters, are unable to accomplish this task. They would not survive in the wilderness. You are the only one who can do this."



Bari considered the spirit's words. Perhaps this had been her fate all along. Perhaps she had been left in the mountains so she could one day save her parents when her sisters could not. "I shall do it," announced Bari. "I know these mountains. This is my fate."

The spirit nodded. "That is very good of you. But I must warn you: The water of life is far beneath these mountains, in the underworld."

"I understand," replied Bari.

The spirit gazed at Bari. "Tell me: Why are you so willing to journey to the underworld for the people who abandoned you?"

Bari smiled. "It is my duty. They are my parents."

The spirit was pleased. "You shall be rewarded for your selflessness and obedience with a great honor."

Once the spirit had shared with her the great honor to be bestowed upon her, Bari prepared for her journey to the underworld. She gathered food, water, a container to hold the water of life, and other supplies.

Finally, she was ready. She traveled down into the caves and tunnels beneath the mountains. There, she entered a land of darkness where no light reached. In the mountains, Bari had learned to see quite well at night, almost as well as the owls. She moved slowly and steadily in the darkness. In addition to using her eyes, she used her hands to help guide her along the rocky walls. She moved deeper and deeper downward.



She heard the slithering of snakes and the fluttering of bat wings. She felt the touch of spider legs. None of this scared her, for she had always lived in harmony with animals. She knew all animals served a purpose, just as she was serving hers. And like her, animals would protect their families at any cost. So with each step she took, she asked permission to continue.

Down, down Bari went, until she finally reached the underworld, where she was greeted by the sound of trickling water. She had found the water of life!

Before taking the water, she addressed the spirits. "Spirits of the underworld, I beseech you for permission to take this water for my dying parents."

The spirits whispered to Bari and guided her hands to fill her container with water. Bari thanked the spirits and set out on her journey home.

She arrived at the imperial palace and asked to see the king and queen. The guards only laughed in her face. As she tried to explain that she was indeed their daughter, the royal nurse passed by. Her ears perked up at the familiar story the girl was telling. *Could it be?* she wondered. The nurse had cared for many babies, but she never forgot a single child's eyes. Sure enough, when she looked into Bari's eyes, she knew this was the child she had carried into the mountains all those years ago. She shooed the guards away, wasting no time in delivering Bari to the royal chambers. The king and queen were both lying in bed. "Mother! Father!" cried Bari, rushing to their side.

The king gasped in disbelief. "How can this be? Is it really you, my seventh child?"

“Yes, I am here to do my duty.” Bari brought the water of life to their lips. “Please drink this.”

Bari’s parents sipped from the container and immediately felt life returning to their weak bodies.

“Seventh daughter,” said the king. “You have saved us. Please forgive me for what I have done. It was a great mistake to leave you. We never had any children after you. You were supposed to be my great sacrifice. Instead, you became my great regret. I feel so much shame.”

Bari took her parents’ hands in her own. “I have already forgiven you. My heart holds no ill will. That is why the underworld spirits allowed me to take the water of life.”

“You have shown great love and respect for us. You must stay here. I shall name you my heir,” said the king.

Bari smiled. “Father, I am grateful, but I must return to the underworld. In exchange for the water of life, I have been honored with a greater fate: I am to be the spirit of healing. I shall also oversee death and rebirth and help guide souls peacefully to the underworld.”

The king smiled with pride. “You are the ideal daughter. I hope every parent is fortunate enough to have a dutiful and selfless child like you. In your honor, I will allow women to become shamans.”

This is how an abandoned princess became the ideal child, the spirit of healing, the goddess of souls and shadows, and the first mudang, guiding other women to follow in her footsteps.

4



JAPAN

Japan is in East Asia. It is an archipelago, or group of islands, located in the North Pacific Ocean. There are four main islands and nearly four thousand smaller islands. The islands of Japan are located in the Ring of Fire, a region that has frequent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions caused by huge slabs, or plates, of Earth's crust moving and colliding. As plates collide, they lift up and form mountains. More than 80 percent of Japan is covered in mountains. It's hardly surprising that mountains, volcanoes, and rocks are an important part of Japanese culture. Mount Fuji, Japan's highest peak, is especially important.

Japanese people have a deep love for nature. They especially love cherry blossoms, or *sakura*. Sakura are beautiful, but they only bloom for two weeks or less in spring. After blooming, they become fragile and fall. In Japanese culture, sakura are a symbol of spring, renewal, the fleeting nature of life, and the importance of appreciating life itself. *Hanami* is the Japanese custom of enjoying the beauty of flowers, especially cherry blossoms. People gather in parks and gardens to admire the beautiful blossoms.

Japan's love of sakura has inspired many stories. The folktale of the Blossom Princess is one such tale. The Blossom Princess symbolizes the cherry blossom. Her father is the god of mountains. Her elder sister is the Rock Princess.

The story of the Blossom Princess appears in the oldest existing Japanese text, dating from the early eighth century CE. Since then, various versions have been told. In a popular version, which is retold here, a god named Ninigi-no-Mikoto comes between the two sisters. In addition to being a tragic love story, this story explains why sakura bloom for such a short time. The story's message is that life is beautiful but fleeting like a blossom, rather than permanent like a rock.

Japanese words found in this story:

Hitomebore [hee-toh-meh-boh-reh]: love at first sight

Sakura [sah-koo-rah]: cherry blossoms



ROCK AND BLOSSOM

Oho-Yama, the mountain god, sat on his great throne on Mount Fuji, the highest peak in all of Japan. There was peace in the land. The sakura were in full bloom, as they always were. All was well in the realm of the immortals.

Oho-Yama's daughters, the Rock Princess and the Blossom Princess, were his pride and joy. The Rock Princess, as the older child, was practical and logical. She loved reading and meditating. Her younger sister, the Blossom Princess, was fun and playful. She enjoyed playing games and being active. And though the Rock Princess was very beautiful, the Blossom Princess was more beautiful. Despite their differences, the two sisters loved each other very much.

The playful Blossom Princess could often be found climbing trees or swimming in the sea. One day, while she was swimming, another god, named Ninigi, spotted her. Ninigi waited by the seashore for the Blossom Princess to return to land.

The Blossom Princess swam back and made her way onto the shore, wiping the sea salt from her skin. When she reached Ninigi, she greeted him. "Ninigi, to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?"

"I saw you swimming. I admired how carefree and happy you looked. Would you kindly allow me to sit and talk to you for a while?"

The Blossom Princess consented. She and Ninigi talked for hours. Ninigi was struck by her beauty and easy laughter. The Blossom Princess was struck by his intelligence and generosity. And just like that, they fell in love.

"I would like to speak with your father and ask his permission to marry you." Ninigi placed his hands over hers. "Would that be alright with you?"

“Yes, a thousand times!” exclaimed the Blossom Princess, embracing him.

They held hands and walked up to Oho-Yama’s mountain throne.

“Ninigi! I welcome you to my home,” greeted Oho-Yama. “My daughters, did you know that Ninigi is the grandson of the sun goddess? And that he is the great-grandfather of Japan’s first emperor? He brought three celestial gifts to the emperor: the divine sword, the divine mirror, and the divine jewel.”

Indeed, the Rock Princess knew all about Ninigi. She had read about Ninigi’s many deeds and had secretly grown to admire him.

“Yes, Father,” the Rock Princess replied. “It was with those three sacred gifts that Ninigi established the Japanese imperial family. Because of this, the emperor is believed to be a descendant of the gods.”

“Very good, my daughter. You honor me with your knowledge,” Oho-Yama replied. To Ninigi he said, “And you honor me with this visit. What can I do for you?”

Ninigi bowed. He paused. Then he asked the mountain god, “May I make the Blossom Princess my wife?”

Oho-Yama was quite surprised. “The Blossom Princess is too young to marry,” he replied. “But you may marry the Rock Princess. She is older. She is also beautiful, intelligent, and practical. She can always be counted on. She will never leave you.”

Ninigi replied, “The Rock Princess would be a wonderful wife.”

The Rock Princess’s heart fluttered at the thought of marrying Ninigi. She had never dared to dream of such a fate.

“But,” Ninigi continued, “my heart belongs to the Blossom Princess. I will marry no other.”

The Rock Princess’s heart dropped.

Oho-Yama exclaimed, “You dare defy *me*, the mountain god! You dare insult my older daughter, the Rock Princess!”

The Blossom Princess pleaded, “Father, we love each other. We want to be together forever. There is no other person for me except for Ninigi. It is hitomebore.”

At her sister’s words, the Rock Princess’s heart shattered into a thousand little pieces. She felt sick to her stomach. For the first time in her happy life, she sobbed. As her tears hit the ground, they turned into little pebbles, rattling the earth ever so slightly.

But the Rock Princess loved her sister. More than anything, she wanted the Blossom Princess to be happy.

“Father, I know you mean well, but I am strong,” the Rock Princess said, holding back her tears. “I can weather all storms.” The Rock Princess swallowed her feelings and urged her father to listen. “Perhaps Ninigi is not my fate. His heart belongs to my dear younger sister. And her heart belongs to him. I do not want to stand in the way of true love.”



Oho-Yama refused to listen. “No one disobeys me,” he declared loudly, brushing the Rock Princess’s words aside. He pointed at Ninigi and the Blossom Princess. “I curse you both. You shall no longer live forever as gods. From this day forth, you and your descendants shall live as mortals.”

Through tears, the Blossom Princess replied, “If this is the cost of true love, I accept it. I would rather live a brief, beautiful life with Ninigi by my side than live forever without him.”

At that moment, as the Blossom Princess became mortal, all the sakura across the land began to wilt and fall from their branches. Pink petals covered the ground.

That is the story of why mortal lives are beautiful but fleeting, like sakura, and not everlasting, like stones.



VIETNAM

Vietnam is in Southeast Asia. It is bordered by China to the north, Laos and Cambodia to the west, and the South China Sea to the south and east. Vietnam has towering mountains and lush forests. It also has wetlands and a long, beautiful coastline. Vietnam is home to a large variety of animals.

The Indochinese tiger was native to Vietnam and other parts of Southeast Asia. It can now only be found in Thailand and Myanmar. Sadly, today, fewer than 250 of these tigers remain in the wild.

The tiger is important to the Vietnamese people. It is a sacred animal considered to be the “king of the forest.” The tiger represents strength, courage, and protection. It is believed to bring good fortune. During Tết, the Vietnamese lunar new year, people hang tiger amulets on their front gates. This is done to ward off evil spirits. There are more than one thousand sayings and songs about the tiger, as well as many stories.

Many pourquoi stories are about animals. These stories explain certain animal traits or characteristics. For example, perhaps the most recognizable feature of a tiger is its stripes. Tiger stripes are

a form of camouflage, making them more difficult to spot in their natural habitat. Because tigers have a natural disguise, they can creep up on their prey and surprise them. Several cultures have stories about how tigers got their stripes. The Vietnamese people also have their own version, which is retold here.

Vietnamese words found in this story:

Chúa tể sơn lâm [choo-ah teh sun lum]: literally, “king of the forest”; tiger



THE TIGER'S STRIPES

One hot and humid day, Tiger was lounging in a field in the shade of a tree trying to stay cool. With his sharp teeth and claws and his golden orange coat, he was always a majestic sight to behold. Both feared and respected, Tiger always did exactly as he pleased.

From his place in the shade, Tiger watched Farmer and Water Buffalo working in the rice paddies. He called over to Water Buffalo, "Come and rest with me. You are working too hard."

Water Buffalo replied, "Not today. I am busy."

Tiger yawned, placing his head on his paws. He observed how Water Buffalo did everything Farmer asked him to do. Water Buffalo pulled, pushed, and carried heavy loads. Tiger thought this was odd. Water Buffalo was much bigger. He had sharp horns, large teeth, and strong hooves. He could easily overpower Farmer, who was small and skinny. Yet it was obvious that Farmer was the master of Water Buffalo.

Tiger thought to himself, *I want to be a master. I want Farmer's power.*

Around midday, when the sun was at its hottest, Farmer stopped to take a rest. He lay down in the shade of his cart. He put his hat over his face. Soon, he was snoozing away.

Water Buffalo grazed nearby. He chewed grass, chasing away flies with swishes of his tail.

Tiger sprang up in front of Water Buffalo. Water Buffalo jumped back. He lowered his horns. He dug his hooves into the ground, ready to fight.

“I’m not here to attack you,” Tiger said as he backed up. He raised his paws one at a time, showing no claws. “I just want to ask you a question.”

Water Buffalo hesitated. When he noticed how calm and relaxed Tiger was, he went back to eating.

Tiger continued. “I’m curious about you and Farmer. You’re ten times stronger. You’re ten times heavier. Yet you do all his work. How does he control you? Does he have magic?”

Water Buffalo guffawed.

At that moment, Farmer woke up. When he saw Tiger, he jumped back in fright. Grabbing his sickle knife, he yelled, “Chúa tể sơn lâm! Go away!”

“Not to worry, Farmer,” Water Buffalo reassured him. “Tiger just wants to know how you are able to control me. He thinks you have magic. That is why he won’t harm us.”

Farmer let down his guard a little, but he held tight to his sickle knife, just in case. “I have something better than magic. I have wisdom,” he said.

Tiger thought about how much more power he would have if he also had Farmer's wisdom. He wouldn't have to hide and chase his prey. He could just order them to stay still. That would give him more time to lie in the sun and relax.

As Tiger always did when he wanted something, he bared his teeth and flexed his claws. "Give me your wisdom," he demanded of Farmer.

Farmer raised his sickle knife, which was good for harvesting rice grains but not good for fighting tigers. Tiger pounced and swiped the knife out of Farmer's hand.

"Wait!" Farmer yelled. "I have plenty of wisdom! But I only took what I needed for today. I would have to go back to my house to get some for you."

Tiger smiled, showing all his sharp teeth. "Then I will come with you."

"Oh Tiger, you can't come to town. There are tiger hunters there. I know you could overtake them, but I'm sure you don't want the trouble. Also, you know how greedy humans can be. If they find out I have more wisdom at my house, they'll steal it from me before I can give it to you."

Tiger reflected for a moment. "Yes, Farmer, that sounds wise. I will wait here with Water Buffalo, and you can return with more wisdom for me."

“I can’t leave you alone with Water Buffalo,” said Farmer. “I know you love to eat other animals. If you hurt Water Buffalo, then I will lose my job and all my wisdom.”

Tiger responded, “I am no fool. If I let you take Water Buffalo, you might not come back.”

“Of course, you are right,” Farmer said. He pretended to think very hard, then clapped in excitement as he announced, “I have an idea! I will leave Water Buffalo here so that you know I will come back. But I need to know you won’t eat him. I have some rope. I will tie you to this tree so you’re not tempted. When I return, I will release you.”

Tiger shook his head. “I do not want to be tied up.”

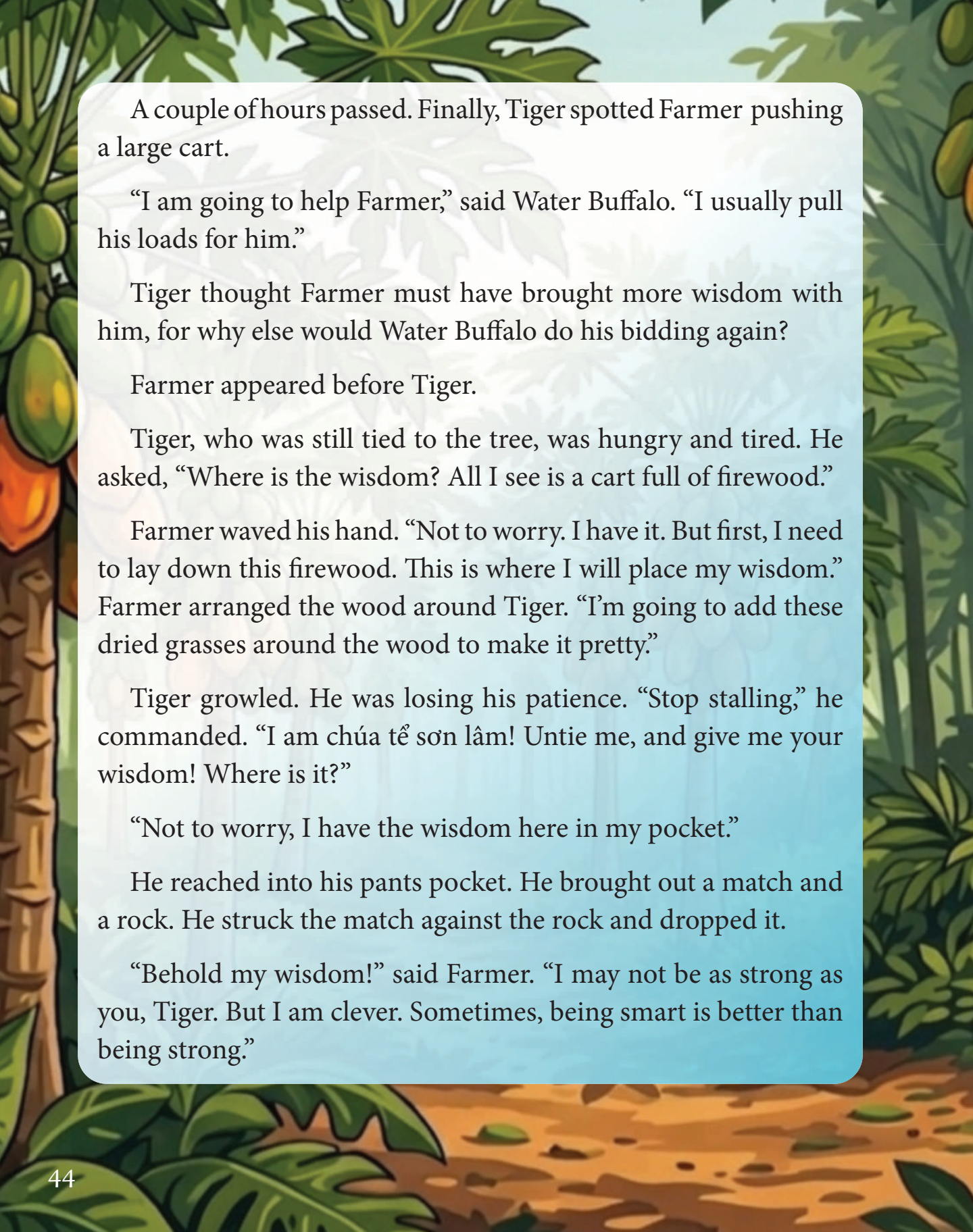
“If you want some of my wisdom, then you need to let me tie you up,” said Farmer, grabbing the rope from his cart. “That is the deal.”

Tiger thought about it and then said, “I really do want wisdom. So I will let you tie me to the tree.”

Farmer wrapped ropes all around Tiger’s body. He tied him to the trunk of the tree. He patted Water Buffalo and whispered something into his ear.

“Farmer!” Tiger called. “What are you saying to Water Buffalo?”

Farmer called back, “I just told him I will be back as fast as I can.” Then he left.



A couple of hours passed. Finally, Tiger spotted Farmer pushing a large cart.

“I am going to help Farmer,” said Water Buffalo. “I usually pull his loads for him.”

Tiger thought Farmer must have brought more wisdom with him, for why else would Water Buffalo do his bidding again?

Farmer appeared before Tiger.

Tiger, who was still tied to the tree, was hungry and tired. He asked, “Where is the wisdom? All I see is a cart full of firewood.”

Farmer waved his hand. “Not to worry. I have it. But first, I need to lay down this firewood. This is where I will place my wisdom.” Farmer arranged the wood around Tiger. “I’m going to add these dried grasses around the wood to make it pretty.”

Tiger growled. He was losing his patience. “Stop stalling,” he commanded. “I am chúa tể sơn lâm! Untie me, and give me your wisdom! Where is it?”

“Not to worry, I have the wisdom here in my pocket.”

He reached into his pants pocket. He brought out a match and a rock. He struck the match against the rock and dropped it.

“Behold my wisdom!” said Farmer. “I may not be as strong as you, Tiger. But I am clever. Sometimes, being smart is better than being strong.”

Farmer stepped back as flames danced all around Tiger, burning along the ropes.

Tiger roared. He wiggled. His claws and teeth ripped through the burning ropes. He broke free. He leapt through the flames and escaped into the nearby jungle.



Tiger's ego was more injured than his body. He felt foolish for letting Farmer trick him. He would stay away from fires and humans from now on.

But the ropes had left their mark, too. Though his coat was still a beautiful golden orange, dark streaks remained where the burning ropes had charred his fur.

And that's how tigers got their stripes.



CAMBODIA

Cambodia is in Southeast Asia. It is a land of large plains and winding rivers. It was once an important part of the trade networks between China, India, and other Southeast Asian countries. The vast majority of Cambodian people belong to the Khmer ethnic group. Khmer is also the name of the Cambodian language.

Once ruled by France, Cambodia gained its independence in 1953. However, in the second half of the twentieth century, Cambodia experienced many years of war, hardships, and harsh government control. The survival of its rich culture, its stories and songs, was threatened. Today, Cambodian communities are working to preserve their history and culture. One way to ensure that Cambodian culture survives is to share its rich traditional tales.

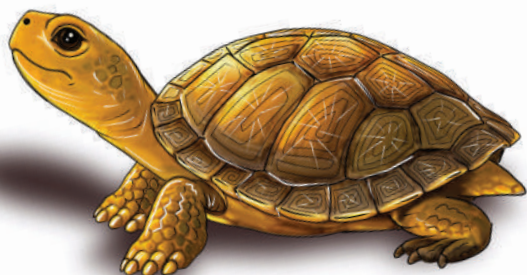
Many Cambodian stories reflect the Khmer people's respect for nature and the spirit world. Many animals are revered as sacred beings for what they symbolize. For example, in Cambodian culture, turtles symbolize long life, power, and fertility. They also represent land and water—both of which are sources of life.

Turtle shells are fascinating. They are covered with scutes. Scutes are hardened plates or scales. This material is similar to human fingernails. As turtles grow, their shells also grow, and new scutes grow beneath the old ones. Many turtles, especially aquatic turtles, shed their old scutes as the new ones grow in. Over time, this growth creates new patterns. Land turtles in the tortoise family don't shed their old scutes. Instead, their scutes simply grow taller.

This Cambodian pourquoi story explains why turtles have designs on their shells. There are many versions of this story. In this version, the turtle survives, but there are other versions in which the turtle does not. Some versions of the story feature ducks or other birds; other versions feature monkeys. Humor is used to teach the story's lesson: the importance of silence.

Cambodian words found in this story:

Susadei [soo-sah-day]: hello
(used in informal settings)



THE TURTLE'S SHELL

Turtle prided himself on having a perfectly polished shell. He enjoyed watching the sun's rays bounce off his shell. He liked telling other creatures to look at themselves in his shell. Even though all turtles had smooth shells, Turtle wanted his to be the smoothest and the shiniest. He loved talking about his shell.

Turtle's favorite hobby was rubbing his smooth shell against a tree. He could do this for hours, and when he was done, his shell would be perfectly polished. But one day, he tired of polishing his shell. He was bored and lonely. He wanted someone to talk to. He wanted friends.

Turtle made his way to a nearby meadow. He saw some mice chasing each other. He yelled, "Susadei! Would you like to know how I keep my shell so polished?"

The mice replied, "We just want to play!"

Turtle said, "I love to tell jokes. I also love to tell stories. Do you want to hear some?"

The mice shook their little heads. "We would rather play tag. Join us. Run as fast as you can, and tag one of us!"

Turtle tried to run, but his short legs could only move so fast. The mice ran off into the distance.

He decided chasing mice was probably not for him, and he moved on to a nearby forest. He saw some snakes napping. "Susadei!" he greeted them, jolting them awake. "Would you like to play?"

The snakes said, "We are sssleeping. You can join usss if you can be sssilent and ssstill."

Turtle hopped up and down. He exclaimed, "Yes, I can do that. But would you like to hear some stories first? I know some really good stories. I can tell a short story. I can tell a long story. I can tell a funny story or a sad story. You let me know . . ."

The snakes slithered away to find a quiet spot, far from Turtle.

Turtle wondered what to do next. He had heard about a pond where animals liked to meet. He thought that might be the perfect place to make new friends.

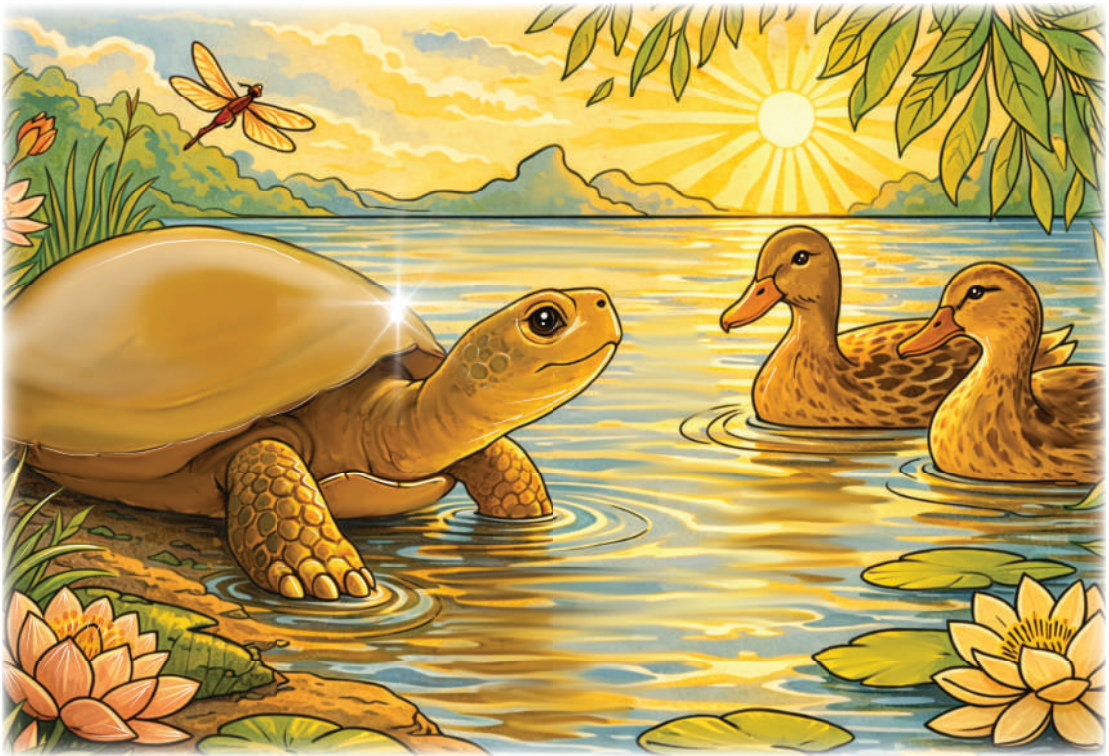
Because he was a turtle, it took him several hours to get there. He traveled slowly and steadily, and finally, he arrived.

At first, Turtle played by himself. He swam in the pond, his smooth shell gliding through the water. He splashed around.

When he was done splashing, Turtle decided to lie in the sun. His polished shell glistened in the light.

After some time, two ducks came to the pond. They also swam, splashed, and lay in the sun.

Turtle approached the ducks. He greeted them. "Susadei!"



The ducks said hello to him as well.

“Would you like to play with me?” asked Turtle.

Duck One said, “We are actually getting ready to go to a party!”

“Can I come?” asked Turtle. “I love parties, and I tell great stories.”

“Of course you can. But . . .” Duck One hesitated. “The party is at the top of the palm trees. How will you get up there? You can’t fly.”

“This is true. I can’t fly,” admitted Turtle.

“Maybe you can ride on my back,” said Duck Two.

“That is a great idea,” Turtle replied. “Let’s try it!”

Turtle tried to get on Duck Two’s back. Every time he got on, his polished shell would slide right off. They tried this several times.

“This isn’t working,” said Duck Two. “Let’s try something else. How high can you jump?”

Turtle hopped up a bit. “Not very high,” he admitted.

Both ducks nodded in agreement.

“I have another idea. How far can you climb?” Duck Two asked.

Turtle began climbing the nearest tree. But he only made it a little way up before he slid back to the ground.

“Not very far,” Turtle said, sighing.

Again, both ducks nodded in agreement.

Then Duck One asked, “How strong is your bite?”

“Oh, it is very strong!” Turtle exclaimed without hesitation. He walked over to a twig and easily bit it in half.

Duck One looked at the broken twig, thinking. “Can you hold on to a stick without breaking it?”

Turtle nodded. “Yes! I actually have a story about that. Do you want to hear it?”

“Not now,” replied Duck One. “We don’t want to be late to the party. I think I have an idea. We need to find a long, sturdy stick.”

So Turtle and his two new duck friends searched for a strong, sturdy stick.

Finally, Turtle found the perfect stick. He presented it to Duck One and Duck Two.

“Wonderful!” Duck One looked at Duck Two. “We’ll each hold an end of the stick in our beaks.” Duck One then looked at Turtle and said, “You will bite the stick in the middle. Then we will fly up to the top of the tree.”

Turtle smiled. “Good thinking. Let’s try it.”

“But, Turtle, this is very important,” Duck Two warned. “You cannot let go of the stick, no matter what. This means you can’t bite down and snap the stick. And you also can’t talk or open your mouth.”

“No problem! I can do that,” Turtle assured them.

The animals put their plan in place. Duck Two said one last time, “Remember: Hang on tight, but don’t bite down too hard. Don’t let go. Don’t open your mouth.”

The ducks grasped each end of the stick in their beaks. Turtle bit down in the middle. The ducks slowly flapped their wings. They rose up into the air. They made sure that Turtle was hanging on tightly. Then they flew faster. They rose higher and higher.

Turtle had never been off the ground before. He had never seen the world from above. He was thrilled to be flying.



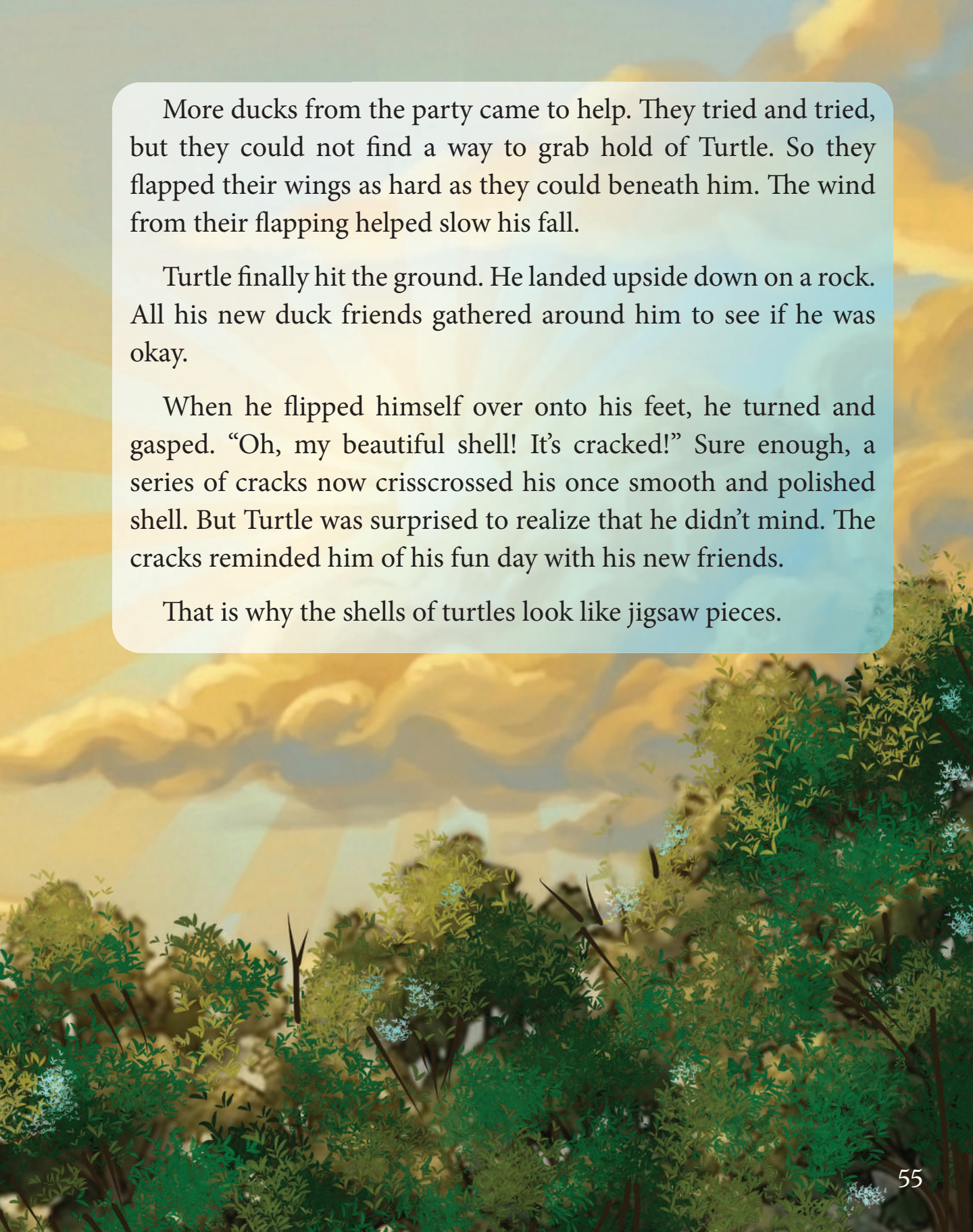
As they neared the treetop, Turtle spotted ducks partying in the branches. They seemed to be having lots of fun. He was so happy to be meeting even more new friends.

One of the ducks in the tree yelled, “Susadei!”

Without hesitation, Turtle replied, “Susadei!”

In a flash, he realized his mistake and quickly bit back down on the stick. But in his panic, he bit too hard. The stick snapped in half. He felt himself falling down to the ground.

Duck One and Duck Two let the stick go. They sped after him, trying to save him. Duck One flew beneath him to catch him, but once again, Turtle’s smooth shell just slid off.



More ducks from the party came to help. They tried and tried, but they could not find a way to grab hold of Turtle. So they flapped their wings as hard as they could beneath him. The wind from their flapping helped slow his fall.

Turtle finally hit the ground. He landed upside down on a rock. All his new duck friends gathered around him to see if he was okay.

When he flipped himself over onto his feet, he turned and gasped. “Oh, my beautiful shell! It’s cracked!” Sure enough, a series of cracks now crisscrossed his once smooth and polished shell. But Turtle was surprised to realize that he didn’t mind. The cracks reminded him of his fun day with his new friends.

That is why the shells of turtles look like jigsaw pieces.



THAILAND

Thailand is a country in Southeast Asia. It was known as Siam until 1939. The name *Thailand* means “land of the free.”

More than 90 percent of Thai people are Buddhist. Buddhists follow the teachings of the Buddha, whom they believe was an enlightened being. Buddhists believe that after death, all living beings are reborn until they, too, reach enlightenment.

In many countries, certain foods are very important. Rice is an essential part of the Thai diet. In fact, almost half of all farmland in Thailand is used to grow rice. Ceremonies are held to honor rice. Thai people say *kin khao*, which means “let’s eat,” but the literal translation is “eat rice.”

Many rice-growing countries in Asia have a rice goddess. Thailand’s rice goddess is Mae Phosop, or the Rice Mother. Thai people have been worshipping Mae Phosop for thousands of years. Mae Phosop is believed to be the spirit or soul of rice. She is called “Mother” (Mae) because she feeds her children, who are all of humanity.

There are many different regional versions of the Mae Phosop stories. Some of the stories tell of gift giving as well as rituals or festivals that honor or celebrate rice. Other stories highlight the importance of expressing gratitude with kind and respectful words. It is through these stories that we truly come to understand the importance of rice in Thai culture.

In central Thailand, people tell a story in which an old woman, who lives in a humble home, grows tired and does not take care of her rice. The old woman's neglect hurts the rice goddess, Mae Phosop. Mae Phosop disappears into the forest. Over time, rice stops growing, and people become hungry. They need Mae Phosop to return.

This is a story about the importance of gratitude.

Thai words found in this story:

Khop khun [kope kunn]: a phrase that expresses thanks

Sawatdee [sah-waht-dee]: a greeting that means hello and goodbye and offers a blessing of goodness, fairness, and prosperity

Wai [why]: (n.) a gesture of respect made by raising two hands joined together ; (v.) to raise two hands joined together in a gesture of respect



THE RICE GODDESS

A long time ago, far from the city, an old woman lived alone on a farm near a village. She was known as Old Woman. She had to do everything for herself, including growing and cooking rice. She was weak and poor, but she did the best she could.

Old Woman was often tired and sometimes did not have time to properly take care of her rice. Sometimes, she beat the rice instead of gently washing it. Other times, she left rice out instead of storing it correctly. She forgot to be grateful and respectful.

Mae Phosop, the beautiful goddess of rice, watched Old Woman. She felt sad because Old Woman did not treat rice well. In fact, Mae Phosop felt the whole village was forgetting to honor her. Nobody thanked her for giving them rice. Nobody thanked her for providing healthy soil. Nobody thanked her for bringing the rain.

Feeling hurt, Mae Phosop ran away into the forest. She sat next to a river and cried many tears. Her tears dropped into the water and summoned up a magic fish.

“Sawatdee!” Fish said. “Blessed Rice Goddess, what makes you sad?”

“The people dishonor me,” Mae Phosop replied. “They don’t appreciate the gift of rice I give them. I want to escape these ungrateful humans.”



“Yes, humans have lost their respect for nature. They don’t appreciate the offerings of the sea either,” agreed Fish. “Follow me. I will take you to where no humans can reach you.”

Mae Phosop stopped crying. She stood up and walked along the riverbank. She followed Fish as he swam downstream, leading her deep into the forest.

Fish stopped swimming. “Mae Phosop, you are safe here. The forest will give you everything you need.”

And so it did. The forest trees provided shelter. The forest creatures kept her company. The forest plants fed her when she was hungry. Mae Phosop was very happy. She showed her gratitude by blessing the forest with rich soil and plenty of rain.

But the people now struggled. Without Mae Phosop, there was a drought. Rice stopped growing. Everyone in the nearby villages became hungry. People’s empty stomachs rumbled. They remembered Mae Phosop. They begged her to return. They sang songs and said prayers.

Old Woman, too, felt bad. She called to Mae Phosop. She sang, “Mae Phosop, Enlightened Goddess of Prosperity. Bring back thy glorious blessings!”

Mae Phosop was so well hidden that she couldn’t hear any of the humans’ songs and prayers.

But Fish heard the pleas. He swam to Mae Phosop’s hiding spot. He called out for her.

Mae Phosop walked to the riverbank to greet Fish.

“You must return to the humans. They are hungry, and they are calling for you. They are all singing your praises,” Fish said. “The reincarnation of the next Lord Buddha will soon be announced. He will need your help. He will not be able to lead people to spiritual enlightenment without you. People need rice to live. They can’t follow Buddha’s teachings if they are hungry. Would you consider giving humankind another chance?”

Mae Phosop agreed to return to the village. As she made her way back, she heard her name, carried by the wind, from all the prayers and songs. This pleased her very much.

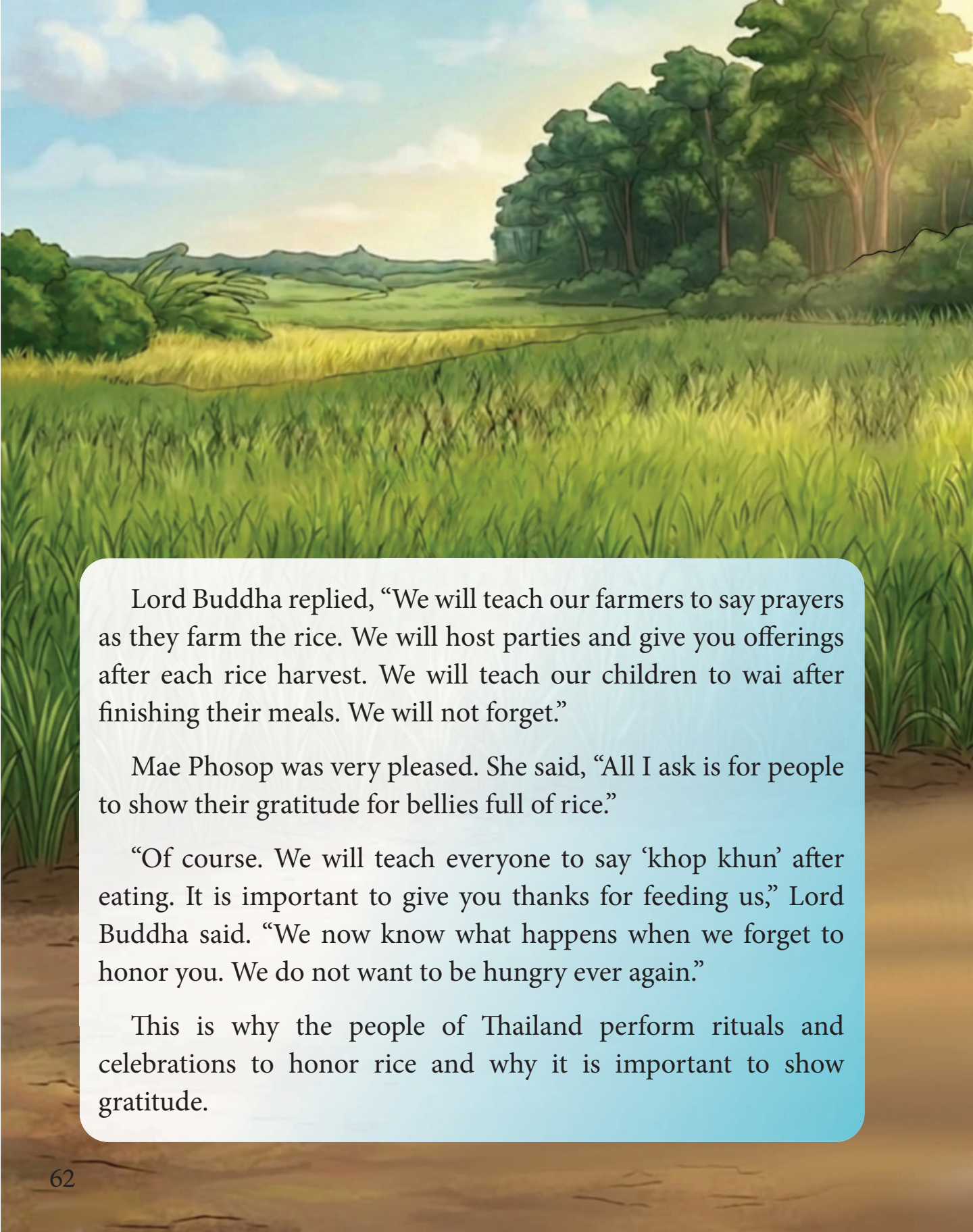
As she emerged from the forest, the first person she saw was the next Lord Buddha.

“Sawatdee!” Lord Buddha said. He pressed his palms together with his elbows out. He bent his body in a slight bow.

Mae Phosop returned his wai. She smiled. She was pleased that the Lord Buddha showed her respect.

Then Lord Buddha spoke. “Oh, blessed Rice Mother! I speak for the people. I am sorry you were not honored or respected. We beg you to come back.”

Mae Phosop said softly, “I will agree to come back, but you must never forget all that I do for the people.”



Lord Buddha replied, “We will teach our farmers to say prayers as they farm the rice. We will host parties and give you offerings after each rice harvest. We will teach our children to wai after finishing their meals. We will not forget.”

Mae Phosop was very pleased. She said, “All I ask is for people to show their gratitude for bellies full of rice.”

“Of course. We will teach everyone to say ‘khop khun’ after eating. It is important to give you thanks for feeding us,” Lord Buddha said. “We now know what happens when we forget to honor you. We do not want to be hungry ever again.”

This is why the people of Thailand perform rituals and celebrations to honor rice and why it is important to show gratitude.





PHILIPPINES

The Philippines is an archipelago of more than seven thousand islands located in Southeast Asia. This string of islands lies between the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean. People from the Philippines are called Filipinos.

Within the Philippines, there are many different Indigenous ethnic groups. From 1521 to 1898, Spain ruled over the Philippines. In fact, it was named after the Spanish king Philip II. The United States of America ruled over it, too, for a while. As a result, its culture, food, and languages have many Indigenous, Spanish, and American influences.

Pineapples are part of Filipino food culture. The Spanish first brought them from South America to the Philippines in the sixteenth century. Before that, Filipinos had never seen a pineapple. Today, the Philippines is the world's second-largest pineapple exporter. Pineapples are also part of Filipino fashion, as their leaves are used as clothing fibers.

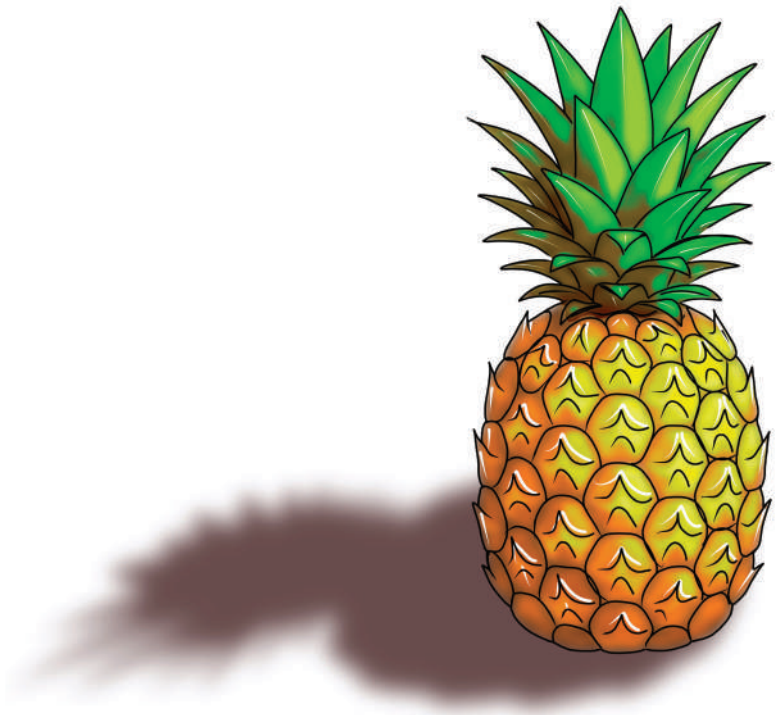
Pineapple plants have long, sword-shaped leaves. They produce light purple flowers that grow in thick, bushy clusters. As they grow, the flowers in each cluster fuse together, forming a fruit with a tough outer peel. Each flower ends up looking a little like an eye. This makes pineapples look like they are covered in eyes!

This *pourquoi* story explains why pineapples have eyes. It teaches a lesson about the importance of respecting one's parents.

Filipino words found in this story:

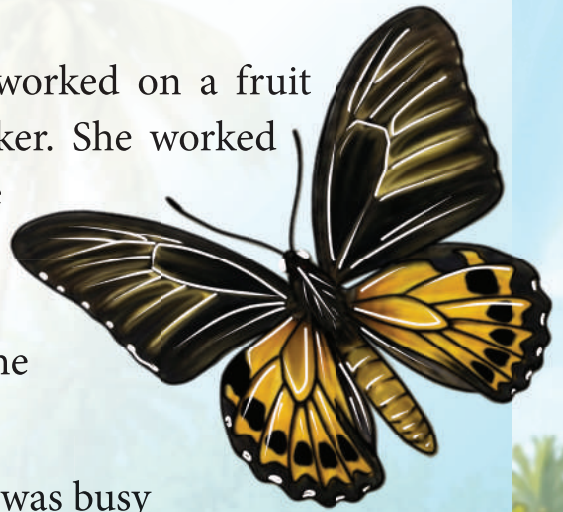
Piña [pee-nyah]: a traditional Philippine fiber made from the leaves of the pineapple plant; pineapple

Pinya [pin-yah]: pineapple



THE LEGEND OF THE PINEAPPLE

Pina and her mother lived and worked on a fruit plantation. Mother was a hard worker. She worked all the time. In the morning, she cooked and cleaned. In the middle of the day, she worked in the fields, planting seeds and picking fruit. In the evening, she sewed and mended.



Pina's days were also busy. But she was busy playing, not working. In the morning, she swam in the river. In the middle of the day, she took naps. In the evening, she climbed trees.

Mother was always pleading with Pina to help with the house chores. She asked Pina to make her life a little easier. But Pina always had an excuse.

"Pina, please hang the laundry today," Mother pleaded.

Pina responded, "I think it might rain today. I will do it tomorrow."

The rain never came. But Pina did not want to waste a beautiful, sunny day. She spent the day chasing butterflies in the meadow next to Mother as she worked.

Mother asked, "Pina, please prepare the fish for dinner tonight."

“I don’t know how to do that,” Pina claimed. “I would if I could.”

Mother said, “Let me teach you. I can teach you today so you can do it another day.”

Pina was already running away. “Next time, Mother! I have to go do something very important.”



Pina ran out into the forest. Mother's voice grew faint. Pina spent the afternoon collecting flowers and weaving them into crowns.

In the evening, she came home in time to eat the fish dinner Mother had made.

Mother sighed and went back to her work. She wondered what she had done to have such a lazy daughter. She begged the gods to help her.

One morning, Mother asked, "Pina, I am late for work. Would you please look for my shoes while I finish making breakfast? I think the dog might have hidden them under the hut."

To her surprise, Pina agreed to help. Mother felt happy. Perhaps the gods had listened to her prayers. Perhaps Pina was changing her lazy ways.

Pina ran outside and crawled under the hut. But she got distracted. Instead of finding Mother's shoes, she found an old doll of hers that she thought had been lost forever. She stopped searching and played with the doll.

When Pina did not reappear from under the hut, Mother called, "Pina! Did you find my shoes yet?"

Pina called back, "I don't see them yet. But I am working hard searching for them! I will keep looking."

But Pina did not keep looking. She continued to play with her doll.

A little while later, Mother called again, “Pina! Did you find my shoes yet?”

Once again, Pina called back, “Not yet! I still don’t see them!”

Pina went back to playing with her doll. After a while, she grew tired. She fell asleep under the hut.

Before long, she was woken up by Mother’s voice.

“Pina!” Mother was peering in at her under the hut. “Come out here right now,” she commanded. “I need my shoes. I told you: I am in a hurry.”

Pina crawled out. “Mother, I could not find your shoes. I did not see them anywhere.”

Mother scanned the ground under the hut. “I can see my shoes from here. How could you not see them? Are your two eyes not enough?” she exclaimed crossly.

Pina shrugged. Usually, Mother forgave her quite quickly. Pina would simply wait until Mother calmed down.

But this time was different. Mother was the angriest she had ever been.

“I have had enough! How did I raise such a lazy, useless daughter? May you grow dozens of eyes to see better” she cried out in her anger. Then she retrieved her shoes and left.

Pina didn’t think much of Mother’s curse. She spent the rest of the day playing with her dog, chasing it all around the village.

When she grew tired, she lay down to nap in a nearby field.

Pina awoke to the sound of Mother and other villagers calling for her. “Pina! Where are you? Come home!”

Pina tried to reply, but to her astonishment, she found she could not speak. She realized with horror that she no longer had a mouth. She knew she still had eyes, for she could see. In fact, she could see everything. She was able to see things from all directions all at once.

She could see Mother walking through the field, looking for her. She waited for Mother to get closer. At last, Mother was right in front of her, staring down at her. Mother reached down . . . and picked Pina up.

But instead of looking happy, Mother looked confused. “How curious,” she said. “This must be a new plant. It has dozens of eyes . . .”

Pina suddenly remembered Mother’s curse.

Mother trembled, for she also remembered her curse. “Could this be my Pina?” And somehow, she knew that it was.

“Oh, my daughter!” she cried, cradling Pina in her arms. “I shall take good care of you. I shall call you Pinya.” She carried Pina home in her arms.

As it turned out, Pina did not mind being a pineapple. She could lie around all day while her fruit fed people and piña from her leaves clothed people. At last, Pina could be helpful without ever having to lift a finger.

Mother was proud. Finally, she had a useful daughter.

And that is why pineapples have eyes—and why it's important to help with chores!





INDONESIA

Indonesia is the largest country in Southeast Asia. It lies between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It is part of the Malay Archipelago, the world's largest archipelago by area, and accounts for about 17,500 of the archipelago's more than 25,000 islands. Mountains and tropical forests cover most of the Indonesian islands.

Indonesian stories, like many Asian stories, originated as part of an oral tradition. They are often used to teach lessons. Told as children's bedtime stories, they are beloved. Many are also performed.

You may know the story of Cinderella. The earliest recorded version of Cinderella can be found in ancient Greek literature. Aspects of Cinderella's tale can also be traced back to ninth-century Chinese literature. The story told here is an Indonesian version of the Cinderella folktale. Versions of the Cinderella story differ across cultures. But at its core, it is about a girl who overcomes hardships and is rewarded for her kindness.

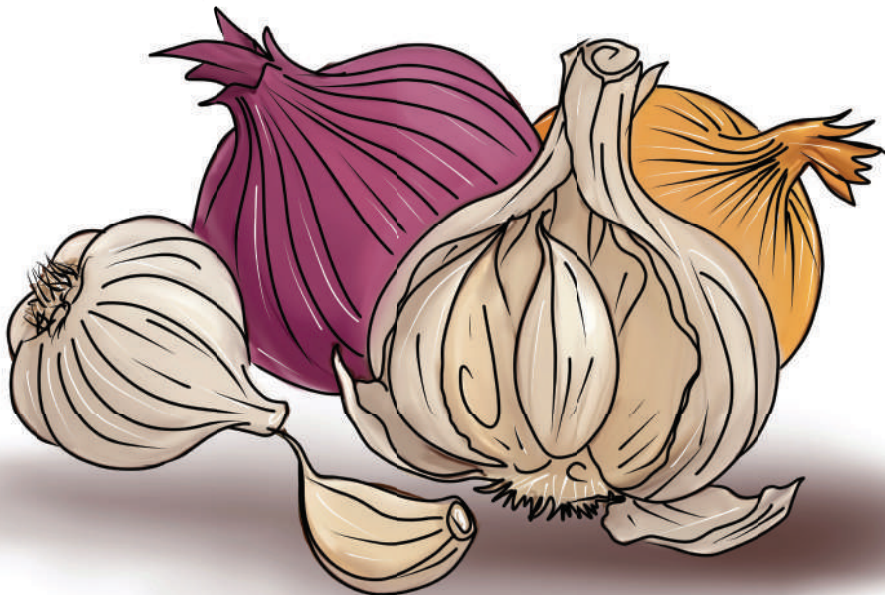
The main characters in this folktale are named “Onion” and “Garlic” in Indonesian. Although onions and garlic are related, they are also different. This Indonesian version of Cinderella explains why onions and garlic are different. It also explains why you should always treat your elders with kindness and respect.

Indonesian words found in this story:

Bawang merah [bah-wahng meh-rah]: literally, “red onion”; onion or shallot

Bawang putih [bah-wahng poo-tih]: literally, “white onion”; garlic

Terima kasih [teh-ree-mah kah-sih]: literally, “it is accepted with love”; a phrase to express thanks



GARLIC AND ONION

Bawang Putih was a beautiful young girl. She lived with her mother and father. They were very close, like garlic cloves in a bulb. There was always love and laughter in their big house. She was very happy.

One day, the happiness ended when Bawang Putih's mother passed away. Both Bawang Putih and Father were very, very sad.

Bawang Putih had a friend named Bawang Merah. They were the same age. They were both beautiful. But they had different personalities. Bawang Putih was calm, kind, and steadfast. Bawang Merah, on the other hand, had many layers. Sometimes, she was sweet and fun. Other times, she would fall into a mood, becoming bitter and aloof.

Bawang Merah and her mother came to visit Bawang Putih and Father every day. They offered their condolences. They brought food and gifts. They kept them company.

Father noticed Bawang Putih seemed a little less sad when Bawang Merah and her mother came to visit. Father wanted Bawang Putih to be happy, so he decided to marry Bawang Merah's mother.

Bawang Merah and Stepmother moved in.

Bawang Putih was so excited. She had always wanted a sister to play with, cook with, and go on walks with. "I am so glad we

are stepsisters now,” she said to Bawang Merah. “We can share everything.”

Bawang Merah shrugged her shoulders. She mumbled something under her breath and walked away.

Bawang Putih thought that was strange. *What happened to the sweet girl I knew? Maybe this bitter mood will pass.*

When Father was around, all was well. Bawang Merah and Stepmother were kind and loving. They ate family meals together. They played games. They sang songs.

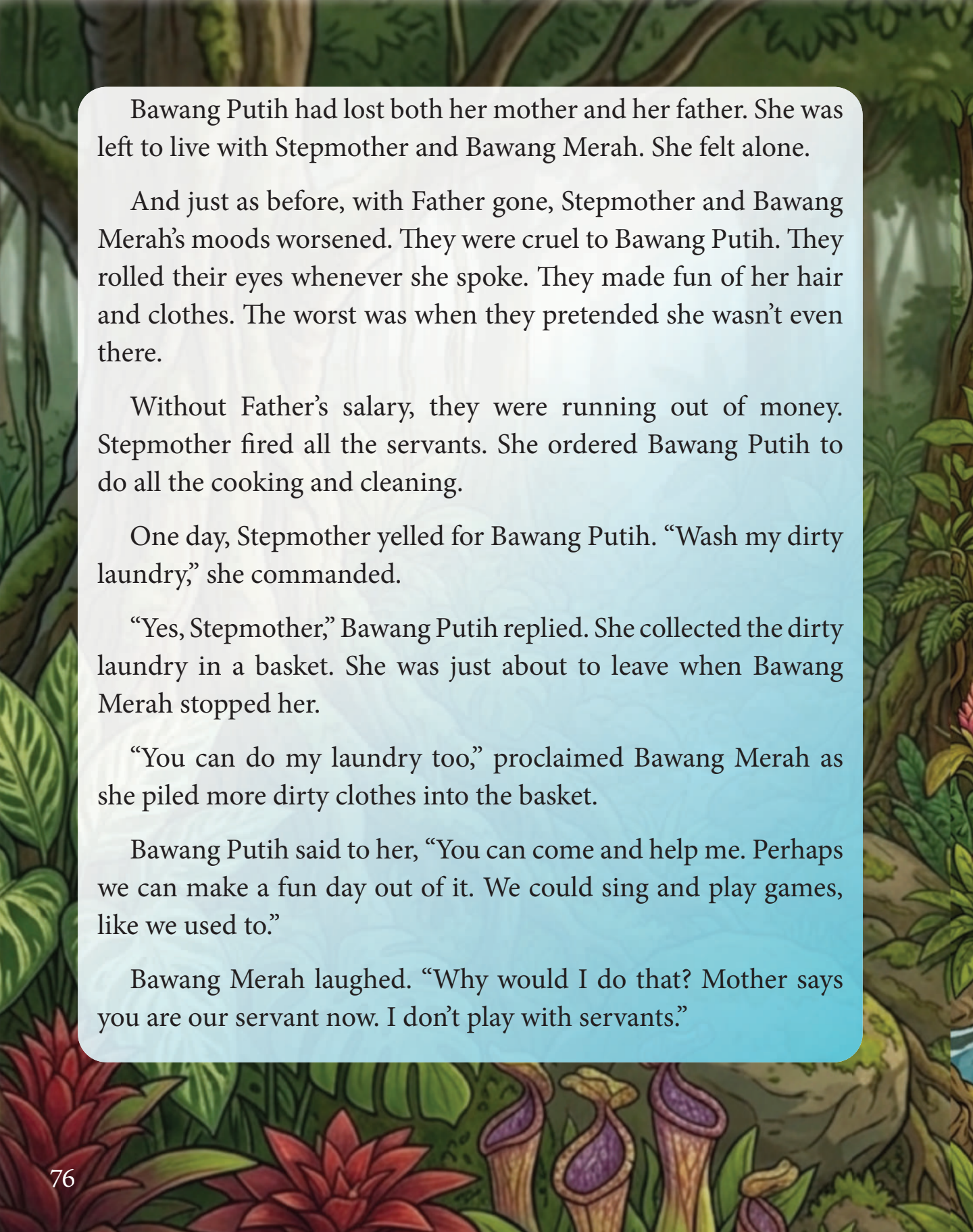
But when Father wasn’t around, things changed. Bawang Merah and Stepmother showed their layers. They both had foul moods in which they became bitter and aloof. When they were in those moods, they would take their meals in the garden and leave Bawang Putih to eat in the kitchen by herself. They went on walks without her. They left a mess all over the house. Bawang Putih found herself constantly cleaning up after them.

One day, Bawang Putih mustered all her bravery to ask Father, “Are you happy?”

Father said what he thought she wanted to hear. “Of course I am happy. It must be nice for you to have a sister and mother.”

Bawang Putih smiled. Something didn’t feel right. But she decided not to tell Father the truth. Father’s happiness meant everything to her.

Then an awful thing happened. Father passed away.



Bawang Putih had lost both her mother and her father. She was left to live with Stepmother and Bawang Merah. She felt alone.

And just as before, with Father gone, Stepmother and Bawang Merah's moods worsened. They were cruel to Bawang Putih. They rolled their eyes whenever she spoke. They made fun of her hair and clothes. The worst was when they pretended she wasn't even there.

Without Father's salary, they were running out of money. Stepmother fired all the servants. She ordered Bawang Putih to do all the cooking and cleaning.

One day, Stepmother yelled for Bawang Putih. "Wash my dirty laundry," she commanded.

"Yes, Stepmother," Bawang Putih replied. She collected the dirty laundry in a basket. She was just about to leave when Bawang Merah stopped her.

"You can do my laundry too," proclaimed Bawang Merah as she piled more dirty clothes into the basket.

Bawang Putih said to her, "You can come and help me. Perhaps we can make a fun day out of it. We could sing and play games, like we used to."

Bawang Merah laughed. "Why would I do that? Mother says you are our servant now. I don't play with servants."

Bawang Putih sighed, resigned to her fate. She went to the river and spent all day cleaning and scrubbing. Toward the end of the day, a wind rose up and carried off one of Stepmother's dresses. Bawang Putih tried to chase it, but it drifted out of her sight.



She returned home and told Stepmother what had happened. She apologized and promised to be more careful next time.

“That was my favorite dress. You must find it!” yelled Stepmother.

“But it’s getting dark,” said Bawang Putih anxiously.

Stepmother dismissed her. “I don’t care. You must find it. Don’t even think about coming back without that dress.”

Bawang Putih set out in search of the dress. She went back to the river and followed it downstream. She looked everywhere, but the dress was nowhere to be seen. As she searched, she met an old woman.

“I know what you are looking for. I have your dress,” the old woman announced.

“You do?” said a delighted Bawang Putih. She bowed to the old woman. “I am so grateful to you! How can I repay you?”

The old woman said, “I am old and lonely. All I want is your company for a week.”

For a brief moment, Bawang Putih wondered if she should hurry home. But she remembered how Stepmother had ordered her not to return without the dress. She was sure she wouldn’t be missed.

“Of course. It would be an honor,” Bawang Putih replied.

Bawang Putih stayed with the old woman for the next week. She helped with chores. She served tea. She chopped firewood.

She placed blankets over the old woman to keep her warm. She listened to all of the old woman's stories.

The week passed. Finally, the old woman said, "Bawang Putih, you have fulfilled your promise to me. I shall return the dress to you and send you home. But before you go, choose any pumpkin you like from my garden."

Bawang Putih objected. "Oh, I couldn't take one of your pumpkins. All I need is the dress. I don't need anything else."

"You will offend me if you don't take my gift. Please, take one. You deserve it. It's my way of showing my appreciation," insisted the old woman.

"Oh, I do not want to offend you," said Bawang Putih quickly as she looked at all the pumpkins. She picked the smallest pumpkin, which had signs of rot on it. "I shall take this one. Terima kasih."

The old woman hugged Bawang Putih. "Come visit me any time. I will always have pumpkins to share with you," she said.

Bawang Putih returned home with Stepmother's dress and her small pumpkin. She gave Stepmother the dress.

Stepmother noticed the pumpkin and remarked, "That thing looks disgusting. Why didn't you bring a bigger, nicer-looking pumpkin? You can't do anything right."

Bawang Putih responded, "It's a gift from an old woman I met. I didn't want to take advantage of her kindness. It was very generous of her."

Stepmother scoffed. "Silly girl," she spat.

“Well, I will cook it anyway and see how it tastes,” Bawang Putih replied. She sat down and cut open the pumpkin. To her great surprise, a pile of gold coins and precious gems spilled out.

Stepmother and Bawang Merah ran over to the pumpkin. They wasted no time in filling their pockets with the gold and gems.

Stepmother turned to Bawang Putih with a practiced smile on her face. “You must tell me where this old woman lives so I can properly thank her.”

Bawang Putih described where to find the old woman’s house.

Stepmother then turned to Bawang Merah. “Go to the old woman’s house. Offer to stay with her for a week. Then, when she offers you a pumpkin, take the biggest, prettiest pumpkin you can find. If that tiny, ugly pumpkin had all that treasure in it, imagine what a great big pumpkin would have,” she said greedily.

Bawang Merah hurried off. When she found the old woman, she asked if she could stay with her for a week.

The old woman smiled. “If you are Bawang Putih’s stepsister, I would be happy to host you.”

But Bawang Putih and Bawang Merah were very different. Bawang Merah was in one of her moods. She was ungrateful and lazy. Instead of helping the old woman, she lounged around and made the old woman cook and clean for her. Instead of listening to the old woman, she slept much of the day. And when they talked, she talked only about herself.

The old woman was very disappointed. “I see you are nothing like Bawang Putih,” she said.

“I’m glad I’m not like her. She’s so boring,” Bawang Merah replied nastily. “And as my week is over, I want my pumpkin!”

“Of course. My pumpkin patch gives people what they deserve,” said the old woman. She pointed toward her garden. “Choose a pumpkin and return to your home.”

Just as Stepmother had instructed, Bawang Merah picked the biggest pumpkin. She rolled it home, complaining the whole way.

Upon her arrival, Stepmother ran to help her carry the pumpkin inside. She and Bawang Merah couldn’t wait to see what was inside. This pumpkin was much bigger than Bawang Putih’s pumpkin. They imagined filling treasure chests with gold and gems. They imagined all the new dresses they would buy. They imagined all the grand balls they would host.

They took their biggest knife and cut the pumpkin open.

Out came thousands of venomous spiders. Stepmother and Bawang Merah screamed and ran from the house.

Once Stepmother and Bawang Merah were far away, the spiders settled around the border of the house to ensure they did not return.

That is why onions and garlic, though they are in the same family, are very different—and why it is important to always be kind.



10



INDIA

Most of India is a peninsula: It is surrounded by water on three sides. The three bodies of water that surround it are the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Bay of Bengal. The Himalayan mountains lie along the country's northern border. In the northwest, there is a desert. In the south, there is a vast plateau.

People practice various religions in India. The majority of Indians are Hindu. More than 14 percent are Muslim. Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism also began in India and are still practiced there. In all of these belief systems, the respect for animals is important. So are contemplation and meditation.

India sits in an active earthquake region. Almost 60 percent of India's land area is prone to damaging earthquakes. An earthquake happens when a sudden release of energy stored in Earth's crust causes the ground to shake. This release of energy is usually caused by underground plates, or large masses of rock, sliding against each other. Long ago, people in India did not know this. They wondered why the ground shook beneath their feet. As a result, *pourquoi* stories about earthquakes emerged.

In one version of an Indian earthquake story, eight giant elephants hold up the land. When an elephant grows tired of holding up the land, it shakes its head. This shaking causes an earthquake.

The story retold here features Shesha Naga, a divine serpent with many heads. In Hindu mythology, nagas are part human and part snake. The number of heads a naga has may range from five to one thousand. According to this tale, an earthquake is the result of Shesha Naga turning one of his heads.

Hindu words found in this story:

Naga [nah-gah]: a semidivine half-human, half-serpent associated with water, protection, and fertility

Patala [pah-tah-lah]: the Hindu concept of the underworld, which is more beautiful than the heavens



SHESHA NAGA

Shesha Naga was born into a large family. His mother, the granddaughter of the creator god Lord Brahma, had one thousand naga children. Shesha Naga was the oldest of them all. As firstborn, he became the ruler of the nagas.

Shesha Naga was huge. He had one thousand heads, and each head carried a crown that represented a planet in the universe.

With all his heads came a lot of responsibility. It was his job to keep the universe in balance. He often floated in space, controlling gravitational forces that held the universe together. He also controlled time by coiling his serpent body. As he slowly uncoiled, time moved forward. If he coiled back again, the universe would cease to exist.

While many of his siblings were cruel, Shesha Naga was kind. His siblings were bullies. They enjoyed playing pranks. They even enjoyed harming others. They fought each other all the time. They tried to pull Shesha Naga into their arguments, forcing him to take sides.

Shesha Naga did not like the way his siblings behaved at all. He had little patience for his unruly sisters and brothers. Their actions gave him many headaches. When he got a headache, one of his heads would shake. When one of his heads shook, there would be quakes and tremors somewhere in the universe. His siblings

thought this was funny, but Shesha Naga didn't. He always felt bad about the damage caused by his quakes.

With so much responsibility, Shesha Naga became unwell. Something had to change.

One day, Shesha Naga said to his parents, "I cannot stay here. I find the weight of my duties to be very stressful. I find my siblings' behavior to be very troublesome. I need to stop these terrible headaches. I must go to seek peace."

With his parents' blessing, Shesha Naga left. He wandered through the universe and ended up on Earth. He spent countless hours meditating, seeking peace in different places. He found the most peace in India.

Throughout his travels, Shesha Naga ate nothing but air. His skin dried out, his muscles ached, and his bones began to show. But after many years of meditating, he found the peace and calmness he had been seeking. His mind was finally still.

At this time, his great-grandfather, Lord Brahma, appeared before him. "Shesha Naga, I am impressed with your devotion to peace and enlightenment," Lord Brahma said. "I shall grant you a gift of your choosing."

"I am forever grateful to you, Lord Brahma," Shesha Naga replied. "For my gift, I would like to continue my peaceful meditation in order to control my mind and become fully awakened."

"Of all the things you can ask for, why did you choose this?"

Lord Brahma asked. “To be fully awakened will require much work and sacrifice. Are you sure this is what you wish?”

“I am sure,” Shesha Naga said. “I have many worries that cause me to have headaches. I want to stop them and, in so doing, stop the quakes and all the harm they cause. That can only happen if I have full control over all my senses.”

“I am impressed with how selfless you are. You are going to be a great leader of leaders,” said Lord Brahma.

“Oh, I do not want that role. My heads are already so full of duties and responsibilities.”

Lord Brahma explained, “You will exist forever, for your name is Shesha, ‘he who remains.’ Though the gods can make and destroy worlds, you shall remain.”

Shesha Naga felt a headache coming on. “What if I do not want to remain forever?”

“This is not for you to decide. It is your fate,” Lord Brahma said. “Now, I shall grant you your gift. Then I shall ask a favor of you.”

Shesha Naga could not refuse him. “Of course, my lord.”

“Take your newfound sense of calm and go to the underworld of Patala. There is too much chaos down there. Bring them calm,” Lord Brahma commanded.

Shesha Naga did what was asked of him. He brought calm to Patala. He then added a crown to one of his heads to represent Patala. He carried its weight and its burdens, as he did with so many planets in the heavens.

All the while, he continued to meditate. Whenever he felt a headache coming on, he took deep breaths and calmed himself.

To his surprise, Shesha Naga discovered he was more at peace in Patala than he had been in the heavens, as he was far from his siblings. He decided to make Patala his permanent home.

There were, of course, times when Shesha Naga had to leave Patala to calm other parts of the universe or visit his family in the heavens. As always, his siblings would give him headaches, and his heads would shake. When this happened, he would quickly return to Patala to stop the tremors.

Nevertheless, Shesha Naga never ceased seeking a perfect calm to spare the universe from his quakes.





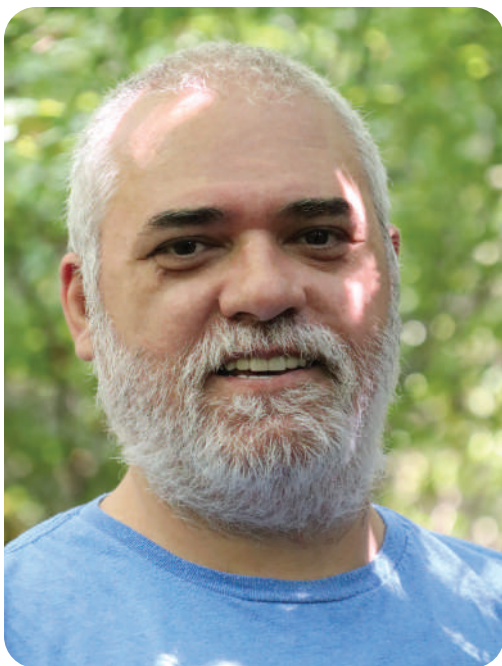
MEET THE AUTHOR



Dr. Virginia Loh-Hagan is an award-winning author, educator, and activist. She has written more than 450 publications, including children's books, academic articles, and more. Most of her work addresses Asian American topics. She is currently serving as the inaugural Executive Director for Asian American Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANHPI) Affairs and the Director of the Asian

Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) Center at San Diego State University. She is also the Co-Executive Director of The Asian American Education Project. Previously, she was a teacher educator, college professor, K–8 classroom teacher, curriculum designer, and more. She is committed to ensuring that all students learn about APIDA histories and narratives. She was born and raised in Fairfax, Virginia, and then graduated from the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. A daughter of Chinese and Cambodian refugees, she was the first person in her family to be born in the United States. As such, she was named after the state in which she was born. She currently lives in sunny San Diego with one obedient husband and two naughty dogs.

MEET THE ILLUSTRATOR



Ivan Pešić was born in Blace, Serbia, in 1975. In 2000, Ivan moved to Belgrade, Serbia, where he studied graphic design in college. Unhappy with the political and economic situation in Serbia, Ivan emigrated to Virginia, USA, in 2005. Ivan and his wife, Alisa, have two children, Tara and Luka. His work can be seen in many galleries in Virginia, Washington D.C., North Carolina, and Georgia.

Ivan has also donated his paintings to public schools and charity organizations. The primary medium Ivan uses is acrylic and oil paints; however, he also likes to experiment with different mediums and techniques.

Aside from painting, Ivan has done pencil drawings, wall murals, mixed media art, photography, graphic design, and more. In his work, he reconstructs dreams, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, and lullabies—the pieces of our lives and memories that are a part of us. Every piece of his artwork tells a story, stories with a hero, a villain, with action, movement, and other elements that give his work life and energy. Ivan's work can be viewed on his website: www.ipartstudio.com.

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TALES FROM ASIA

Hundreds of thousands of years ago, humans learned to control fire. As a result, the course of human existence was forever changed. Humans were able to use fire to cook food. They could use it to protect themselves from predators. And, they could extend their day into the night.

It was during these nights, gathered together around campfires, that humans began to tell stories.

The ten stories in this book are from different parts of Asia, the largest continent in the world. Asia is made up of many countries, peoples, languages, and of course cultures. From the second century BCE to the fifteenth century CE, the Silk Road—an incredible network of trade routes between East Asia and Europe—enabled the exchange of goods, ideas, and stories. As people migrated to different regions, they took their stories with them. Many of these stories continue to pass on from generation to generation and culture to culture.

All cultures on Earth have stories. Pay attention to what these stories reveal about their cultures. Stories—especially folktales, myths, and legends—are often reflections of a culture's values and beliefs. Early humans created stories to make sense of the world. Today, we use science to explain how things work, but we still use stories to understand how people act, think, and feel.

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