

Folktales from the Cathryn Fairlee Collection: Japanese, Korean, Thai, Vietnamese

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The Ugly Son – Yolen

(Teach listeners to say “Hai!” at your signal.)

Long, long ago in old Japan there was born to a family of gamblers a son. Now, there is no polite way to say this: this son was born ugly. Even from the time he was a baby, it looked as if someone had squished his eyes and nose together and smeared his face all around. His family loved him very much, but the children in the village were cruel and made his life miserable, teasing and throwing things at him constantly. Finally he did not want to go out any longer, and asked his mother if he could be taught at home. His family understood and said “**Hai!**” which means yes in Japanese.

His mother had a good education and the ugly son learned well. He read and painted and wrote poetry and was not lonely because his huge family gathered every night at their home to gamble. They were used to his face, and treated him as a favorite cousin, which he was. The only thing his mother and father worried about was that nobody would ever marry him. That was sad.

When the ugly son was 16, he looked out his window as a beautiful girl walked by on her way to market. She wore a pink flowered kimono and had black hair that shined like a raven’s wings. Ugly Son’s eyes followed her until she disappeared. The next day he waited and watched for her. This time she wore a yellow kimono with a yellow flower in her hair. She was so lovely! He waited by his window and saw her nearly every day after that. Do you think he fell in love with her? “**Hai!**” He sighed and looked after her sadly. He grew pale and thin for love of her.

Finally his mother asked what was wrong, and he said, “Mother, wait with me at the window.” When the beautiful girl walked by, he told his mother that he was in love with her and knew she could never love someone with a face like his.

His mother said, “I recognize her. She is the daughter of a rick merchant. I have heard they are looking for a handsome husband for her. Our family will talk about it tonight to see if there is anything we can do.”

That night the problem was discussed, and the family came up with a good idea. Everyone loaned their best clothes and jewelry to the mother and in this finery she went to visit the merchant and his family. She told them, “My son has seen your daughter and begs permission to visit her. We have heard you are looking for a handsome husband for your daughter, and my son is known as the fairest youth in all the land.”

The merchant and his wife were impressed with her clothes and her fine manners, and they said, “**Hai!**”

She said, “May my son come at night? It is a custom in our family to court a lady after dark because it is so romantic.” And they said “**Hai!**” and invited the Fairest Youth in All the Land to come visit their daughter the next night.

The family loaned their best clothes to the ugly son and warned him to keep his face in the shadows. When he arrived at the merchant's house, he suggested to the daughter that they take a walk in the shadowy garden. She said, "**Hai!**"

Among the flowers, he quoted poetry to her and told her she was as lovely as the peony flowers. They talked for hours and when he asked permission to return the next night, she said, "**Hai!**" He came back every night for a month and finally his parents came to the house of the merchant to ask if their son could marry his daughter. The answer was "**Hai!** Your polite and kind son will make our daughter happy. But we have a custom: before the final ceremony, the bridegroom must stay with the bride overnight and share a wedding breakfast with the family in the morning." The parents of the ugly son had to say, "**Hai!**" What else could they do?

The gambling family discussed the problem. If the bride's family saw the ugly son's face before the wedding was final, it would be all over. The next night the ugly son was bathed and perfumed and dressed in the finest blue silk kimono. He went to the merchant's house and was shown to his bride's room. Dinner that she had cooked was waiting for him. They ate by candlelight and he carefully hid his face in the shadows. They blew out the candle and laughed and talked in the dark.

About midnight, the ugly son's uncle and two cousins climbed onto the roof and made all sorts of strange noises. EEEe! GRRR! They banged on pans and moaned and shrieked and stomped. Then the uncle cried out in his most frightening voice, "Fairest youth in all the land!"

The bridegroom answered, "I am the one they call the fairest youth. What do you want of me?"

"For years I have lived over this room and I have been planning to take this girl to the spirit world to be my wife."

"I didn't know," said the ugly bridegroom.

"If I can't have her, I will destroy her and all in this house!"

"No, please! I will do anything you ask. Just spare my bride and her family!" The parents were listening in terror outside the door.

"The only thing that would make me happy is to make you the UGLIEST youth in all the land!"

The mother and father called out in panic, "**Hai! Hai!** Tell him it is all right. Anything is better than dying!"

So the bridegroom said, "You may destroy my looks if it will save the family of my bride."

There was a horrible sucking noise, and the bridegroom fell to the floor with his hands over his face. The uncle and cousins silently jumped off the roof and ran home.

The merchant and his wife unlocked the bedroom door and held a lantern to the face of their daughter's brave bridegroom. "How tragic," the ugly son sobbed, "that it is my karma to love a girl who was claimed by a jealous spirit! Now you will never see how handsome I was!" But the bride was impressed by her husband's kindness and courage. And the family were grateful to him for saving their lives. They insisted that they didn't mind his looks at all. There was a fine wedding breakfast that morning with many compliments for the ugly son.

The merchant built a fine new home for the bride and groom way across town and continued the tradition of visiting only at night. The merchant and his wife claimed it was to stay away from that spirit, but perhaps it was not to have to look at that face of their new son-in-law. The pretty bride was proud of her heroic ugly husband. Luckily, their children took after their mother. So do you think they lived long and happy lives together? **Hai!** They did.

Three Strong Women

Many years ago in a small village in Japan, a huge baby was born. He was so big that everyone called him Baby Mountain. By the time he was twelve, he was the biggest, strongest boy in school, and the wrestling champion of the village. The villagers were proud of him and called him Mighty Mountain.

One warm autumn day, Mighty Mountain decided it was time to leave the village. He would go to the capital and become a wrestler. Every year the emperor held a grand wrestling match to find the strongest man in all Japan. Mighty Mountain was sure that he could win.

On his journey, he saw a beautiful young woman. He crept up behind her and poked her in the side. She grabbed his hand and smiled at him.

Mighty Mountain was delighted. "Playful as well as pretty," he thought. He tried to pull his hand away, but it wouldn't budge. He pulled harder. "Let me go," he laughed. "You're very strong for a girl, but I don't want to..."

"Oh, don't worry about that," giggled the girl. "I love strong men. Try pulling harder." She smiled sweetly at him.

But the harder he pulled and tugged, the tighter the girl's grip seemed to get. She walked on, dragging the wrestler with her.

“Let me go,” he begged. “I’m Mighty Mountain, the strongest and bravest of all wrestlers, and I’m on my way to take part in the emperor’s wrestling match.”

“Oh, you must come and meet Grandma, then. You seem tired. Let me carry you to our house. You’ve got three months before the match. I know, because Grandma thought of taking part. If you come with me now, we can make you into the strongest man in all Japan. Otherwise, you will only spend your time in bad company and lose what little strength you’ve got.”

“I don’t need help from you, or Grandma, or anyone else,” roared Mighty Mountain, but a tiny shadow of doubt had begun to creep into his mind. He was tired and his knees had gone weak. If he refused to go with the girl, she might easily break his arm or throw him down the steep mountainside. He nodded wearily. The girl let go. He peered down at his red, swollen hand and wondered what he had let himself in for.

They came at last to a small thatched hut high in the mountains. The girl pointed to two feet in the doorway. Grandma was having her afternoon nap.

Round the corner came a woman carrying a cow on one shoulder. It was the girl’s mother, back from working in the fields. When she caught sight of them, she put the cow down and hurriedly brushed the cowhair off her clothes. “The poor cow gets sore feet if I let her walk on the stony paths,” she explained to the astonished Mighty Mountain. “Who is this nice young man, Kuniko?”

Kuniko told her and the two women walked around the wrestler, looking him up and down. Mighty Mountain nervously puffed out his chest and arms to show his huge muscles.

“Hmmm,” said Mother. “He looks delicate. He needs some proper food.”

Kuniko called Grandma, shouting loudly because Grandma was a little deaf. The feet started to kick furiously. “All right, all right! I’m coming!”

A wrinkled, toothless old lady shuffled out, leaning heavily on a stick. She stumbled over the roots of the great tree in the yard. “My eyes aren’t what they used to be. That’s the third time I’ve stumbled over that silly tree.” She put her arms around the trunk and pulled it out of the ground. “Throw it away, dear,” she said to her daughter. “I don’t think my poor old back could manage it. Mind it doesn’t get in anyone’s way. You know how clumsy you are.”

Kuniko’s mother threw the tree through the air like a rocket, getting smaller and smaller until it landed on the far mountainside.

Mighty Mountain could stand no more. His face went pale, his eyes glazed over, and his massive legs trembled. Tumbling to the ground, he fainted. Grandma noticed him for the first time as he crashed at her feet.

“Who’s this?”

Kuniko gently cradled Mighty Mountain in her arms. “He’s a poor, weak man,” she whispered. “Do you think we could get him ready for the ring in only three months?”

Grandma sighed, “Well, it’s not long, and he’s a feeble-looking fellow.” She bent down and flung him over her shoulder. Leaning heavily on her stick, she hobbled into the hut and threw him onto the bed.

The next day, the three women went to work. Very early every morning, Kuniko dragged Mighty Mountain out of bed and made him bathe in the icy stream. Mother boiled his rice in less water each day, until he could eat food no ordinary man could chew. Grandma made him work harder and harder, carrying heavier and heavier loads. Every evening, Mighty Mountain practiced wrestling with Grandma. She was so old and frail that she couldn’t do him much harm, and the exercise was good for her rheumatism.

As the days grew colder and autumn turned to winter, Mighty Mountain got stronger, almost without noticing. Soon he could pull up trees almost as easily as Grandma could. He could even throw them, but not very far. Before practice, he stomped his foot on the ground. The villagers down below looked up at the winter sky and wondered why the thunder was rumbling around the mountain.

One evening, Mighty Mountain managed to hold Grandma down for half a minute. Her face broke into a thousand wrinkles as she cackled loudly. Kuniko shrieked with excitement and hugged him, almost breaking his ribs. Mother slapped him on the back, making his eyes water.

They all agreed that Mighty Mountain was ready to take part in the emperor’s wrestling match. “We want you to take the cow,” said Mother. “Sell her and buy yourself a belt of silk, the thickest and heaviest you can find. If you wear it when you greet the emperor, it will remind you of us and bring you luck.”

Mighty Mountain looked worried. “I can’t take the cow. How will you plow the fields?”

Grandma almost fell over laughing. Kuniko giggled. “We don’t use the cow for work. Grandma is five times stronger than any cow. We keep the cow because she’s got such beautiful brown eyes.”

“Besides,” said Mother. “It’s a lot of work to carry her back and forth to pasture.”

“If I earn any money wrestling,” said Mighty Mountain, “you shall have it.”

Mother said, “Oh, no! We can’t take money from a stranger.”

Mighty Mountain grinned and bowed low. He asked if he could marry Kuniko and thus become one of the family. Mother clapped her hands with joy. Grandma pretended to give the matter deep consideration, then said, “We’ll even let you beat us sometimes.”

The very next morning, Mighty Mountain tied his hair in a topknot, thanked Mother, threw Grandma in the air just for fun, and ran down the mountain carrying the cow. He waved until he could no longer see the three women. At the first town he came to, he sold the cow. She was strong and fat, and fetched a high price. With the money, he bought the thickest, heaviest belt he could find, and headed for the city. He hardly noticed the cold as he crunched through the snow in his bare feet. He was thinking of Kuniko and Mother and Grandma.

When he reached the emperor’s palace, he found other wrestlers already there. They were lazing about, preening themselves, eating large bowls of soft rice, telling fantastic stories, comparing their enormous weights and huge stomachs. No one took any notice of Mighty Mountain.

In the palace yard, the ladies in waiting and courtiers waited for the wrestling to begin. They wore layers of clothes so heavy with gold and embroidery that they could hardly move. The ladies wore thick white makeup and false eyebrows painted on their foreheads made them look surprised all the time.

The emperor sat still as a statue, alone behind a screen. He was far too dignified to be seen by ordinary people. Wrestling bored him. He preferred reading and writing poetry, and hoped the wrestling would soon be over.

The first match was between Mighty Mountain and Balloon Belly, who was famous for his enormous stomach. With great ceremony, the two wrestlers threw a little salt into the ring to drive away evil spirits. Then they stood, legs apart, facing each other.

Balloon Belly rippled his enormous stomach and stamped the ground with a terrific crash. He glared at Mighty Mountain as if to say, “Beat that, weakling!” Mighty Mountain glared back, thought of Grandma and stamped his foot. It sounded like a clap of thunder. The ground shook, and Balloon Belly floated out of the ring like a giant soap bubble. He landed with a thud in front of the emperor’s screen.

“The earth god is angry,” Balloon Belly stammered, bowing low to the screen. “I think there is something wrong with the salt. I had better not wrestle again this year.”

Five other wrestlers thought the earth god might be angry with them, too, and decided not to wrestle. When the next competitor was ready, Mighty Mountain was careful not to stamp his foot too hard. He just picked his opponent up and carried him out of the ring. With a polite bow, he placed the wrestler in front of the emperor's screen. One by one, he did exactly the same with all the other wrestlers.

The ladies in waiting looked more surprised than ever, and giggled behind their fans. The emperor's shoulders heaved with silent laughter and the plume on his head dress wobbled in an undignified manner. He hadn't seen anything so funny for years. He put one royal finger through the screen and wagged it at the wrestlers who were sitting on the ground blubbing. He gave orders for Mighty Mountain to receive all the prize money. He congratulated Mighty Mountain and said "I don't think you had better take part again. We don't want to upset these poor babies anymore."

Mighty Mountain agreed happily. He had decided he would rather be a farmer and go back to Kuniko.

Kuniko saw him coming from a long way off and ran to meet him. She hugged him, then picked him up and carried him and the heavy bag of money halfway up the mountain. Then she put him down and let him carry her the rest of the way home.

The name of Mighty Mountain was never forgotten in the capital. The emperor never really enjoyed another wrestling match and was always glad when it was over and he could get back to his poetry. Now and again the people in the village feel the earth shake and thunder rumbling round the mountains. But it's only Mighty Mountain and Grandma practicing their wrestling.

Yi Chang and the Haunted House – Jewett, Korea

Long ago in Korea there lived a lazy, but friendly, man called Yi Chang. He had been raised in the country with his brothers, Hu and Ha, but found country life required too much work. He moved to Seoul, the capital of Korea. Because he was lazy, he was poor and often had no place to sleep, but in a doorway or a park. Because he was friendly, people liked him and would tell him where to get free food or a cheap place to stay. But Yi Chang was always dreaming of finding a real home that would cost him nothing.

One day he told a friend of his foolish dream. The friend laughed and said, "Perhaps it is not impossible. Are you willing to live in a haunted house?"

Yi Chang certainly was! "Why not? A ghost or two on a lonely winter's evening would be friendly company!" Both of them laughed and the friend led Chang to a lonely area of Seoul called Ink

Town. From there, his friend gave him directions, for he was not willing to go closer to the haunted house.

Yi Chang easily found the house and stood across the street looking at it. It had been a fine house at one time, with wooden walls and a tile roof tipped at the ends to keep evil spirits away. But it had obviously not been lived in for many years. Chang opened the gate in the wall. The yard was full of tall weeds. He waded through them to a covered porch with a clay floor. Inside the house were layers of dust undisturbed by human feet. The kitchen shelves were covered with cobwebs. But the furnace looked in working condition, with pipes going under the floor to warm the house. Chang thought that with a lot of cleaning and fixing, the house would be a wonderful free home.

Lazy as he was, he wanted help with the cleaning, so he invited his two brothers from the country to share his home. Hu and Ha were very strong, but not as clever as Chang. He did not tell them that the house was haunted. He got them to do most of the work of cleaning and fixing the house. They found nothing unusual in the rooms. There was no furniture, but the paper walls were in good shape, and the doors slid smoothly open. Except one.

One door in the men's section of the house would not open. Hu said, "I can break the door down!" Chang objected. "No, we have plenty of rooms without this one." He considered this his house now.

Hu said, "Let me use my knife to make a peep hole in the paper wall."

Chang said, "All right, but only a small one."

Inside the room they could see an old moon guitar with broken strings, a pair of worn shoes, some sticks, an old kettle, and a broken wire sieve. Chang said, "Let's leave this room alone."

So Ha and Ha continued cleaning as Chang encouraged and entertained them with jokes and stories. At the end of the day, Yi Chang was tired, so the two brothers put away their cleaning rags and they all went onto the porch to eat the food the brothers had brought from the country. They were surprised to see two hunting dogs sleeping at either end of the matang porch. Ha frowned, "How did they get inside the wall? I closed the gate behind me."

"It does seem strange, but they look harmless," said Chang. "Let's leave them alone."

It had been a warm day and the evening breeze felt good on the porch. After they ate, they soon fell asleep. Much later, Chang woke to a sound: click, click, click. In the bright light of the moon, he saw the dogs pacing up and down on the clay floor, their paws going click, click, click.

A gong sounded from a temple and Chang knew it was midnight. Both dogs began baying at the moon. Hu and Ha jumped up, ready to run. Yi Chang grabbed them by the arms. “Are you two big fellows afraid of dogs baying at the moon? Let’s hide in the shadows and watch.”

The dogs ignored them, jumping and squealing with delight. There on the center of the matang was a strange figure. His long white hands patted the dogs on the head. It was an old man in ancient ceremonial costume of fine white silk with long flower sleeves. He smoked a long white clay pipe. Chang noticed that neither the man nor the dogs cast any shadow.

The old man went inside and the dogs went back to their places. Yi Chang got his brothers to go inside with him to see what the old man would do. The only light inside was moonlight through the windows. It was dark, and every shadow looked dangerous. The brothers tiptoed from room to room, but there was no sound, and no sign of the old man until they came to the locked room.

The brothers topped breathing to listen. Through the paper wall came – not exactly a light, but a thinner kind of darkness. The brothers held onto each other for courage, and shivered. A glow began inside the room and got brighter and brighter. Suddenly there was music – weird, exciting dance music. And the shuffling of shoes, laughter, and happy voices. Sticks could be heard beating on the kettle, and most wonderful of all was the sweet sound of the moon guitar.

Chang just had to look through the peep hole in the paper wall, but just before his eye was at the hole, a blue steel knife came shooting out. Chang barely jumped out of the way, and the three of them ran through the house and out the front door. They didn’t stop running until they were safely in the street. And there, under a tree, they finally slept.

The next morning Hu and Ha were ready to go back to the country. But Yi Chang said, “Look how ordinary everything looks in daylight. At least come back inside with me to see if the ghosts left anything interesting.”

So they went inside with Chang and looked into every room. Everything looked the same. Peeking through the hole into the locked room, Chang saw that even the moon guitar was unmoved, still covered with layers of dust.

Hu and Ha knew that they had not dreamed the dance party, and no encouragement from Chang could persuade them to stay. They said they would not go through another night like that even for such a fine house. “Chang, come with us. Ghosts like that are known to hang folk upside down in trees, or leave them trapped inside old tombs to rot.”

But could they persuade Yi Chang to leave? Chang explained, “I have come to think of this as my home. But they were here first. If they will let me stay, I will stay. They sound like a friendly group.”

The brothers left, rolling their eyes, and Chang went back inside the house. He covered the hole in the wall so that he would not be tempted to peek again. He settled his few belongings in the house. A week passed, a month, and then a year. The brothers had not heard from Yi Chang. They were worried and curious, so they hiked back to Seoul.

They found their way to Ink Town and asked if anyone had seen their brother. “Oh, yes,” people told them. “He is still living in the haunted house.”

“So it is no longer haunted?”

“Oh, it is still haunted, no doubt about that. But your brother seems very happy. He is friendly, but he is an odd one to live like that.”

The brothers waited in the street in front of the house to see if anything unusual would happen at night. About midnight they heard the gong, and then the dogs squealing in welcome. Hu and Ha climbed a tree to peek over the wall. The house was in darkness, but then a light began to glow from the locked room. There was laughter and voices, and exciting dance music, and the lovely sounds of the moon guitar.

Yi Chang appeared on the porch in a fine silk robe and called to his brothers, “You have come to visit me! Come and meet my friends.” Hu and Ha saw the two great dogs greet Chang. He petted them and talked to them. The brothers’ eyes nearly popped out of their heads. They jumped out of the tree and ran as fast as they could from Ink Town. When they could run no farther and stopped to catch their breath, Ha said, panting, “Our brother was always odd!”

Hu agreed. “Yes, odd. But very friendly!”

Why the Mynah Bird Mimics Man – Thailand, Danny Kaye

Long ago, parakeets were kept as pets because a parakeet could be taught the language of man. It could even express its own thoughts, and only had to hear a word to be able to repeat it.

Once a man who owned a parakeet stole a buffalo from his neighbor. He killed it, cooked part, ate it, and hid other parts in the rice bin and all around the rice house. The parakeet observed his actions. The neighbor came seeking his buffalo, and the man denied knowing anything. The bird yelled out two secret hiding places. The man denied it, but the neighbor took him to court because of the bird’s repeated yelling.

The night before the trial, the man put the parakeet into a large pot with a heavy lid. He banged on the pot, dripped water on the lid, and made storm noises all night long on the pot. The parakeet was called as a witness during the trial. People in court believed the bird. Then the man asked the bird what the weather was like the night before, and the bird describes a bad storm.

Now people are convinced that the parakeet cannot be trusted to tell the truth. The weather the night before had been calm and dry. The man goes free, and chases the bird into the forest to fend for itself.

The parakeet was befriended by Crow and Owl. A new bird comes to the forest with beautiful plumage. The new bird can speak human language. Parakeet tries to warn the new bird, "I was once cherished and cared for by man because I spoke his words. But I also spoke my own thoughts, and this made man angry. I was cruelly driven from his house. Therefore I warn you that when man hears you speaking his words, he will capture you and keep you in his home. Yet if you speak any words besides the ones he teaches you, if you utter your own thoughts, he will drive you out. Man cares not for truth, nor for the wisdom of other creatures. He only loves to hear his own thoughts repeated."

Men soon heard the speaking tongue of the mynah bird, and they captured it and cherished it in their homes. But the mynah, having been warned by the parakeet, never uttered his own thoughts, but only echoed the words of man.

Daughter Sun – Vietnam

In the old days in Vietnam, when tigers and dragons were still brothers, there lived a poor couple with one child, a clever nine-year-old daughter named Sun. Yes, a daughter named Sun, and she was as bright as the sun too. Sun wanted to become a teacher, and that made her parents proud. The parents worked hard to support Sun and send her to school, for no one in their family had ever gotten a real education. The problem was that school was not free. Even as hard as they worked, they had to borrow money from the richest man in town, Old Money Bags. This man had become rich by lending money at such high rates that no one could ever pay off the loan. Sun's parents were several months behind in paying on their loan and Old Money Bags was threatening to take them to court for all they had and throw the out on the street.

While the parents were still working and Sun had just returned from school, Old Money Bags came by. "Where are your parents? They owe me a lot of money and I cannot wait any longer."

Sun smiled and sang, "Oh, my father kills live trees and plants dead ones. My mother sells the wind to buy the moon."

“What?”

“My father kills live trees and plants dead ones. My mother sells the wind to buy the moon. It’s a riddle. Don’t you get it?”

“Don’t waste my time with silly games, little one. Tell me where they are and when they will get home.”

“They won’t be home until after dark because my father kills live trees and plants the dead ones. My mother sells the wind to buy the moon. Do you want to know what that means?”

“Yes.”

“If I tell you, will you forgive my parents the money they owe you?”

“Certainly. Just tell me where they are.”

“But this is an important promise, Mr. Bags. We need a witness.” Sun looked around. “There is a witness for us – that fly on the house pole. Now, ‘My father kills live trees and plants the dead ones,’ means my father cuts down bamboo and builds fences. ‘My mother sells the wind to buy the moon,’ means my mother makes paper fans. She sells the wind to buy oil for our lamps to light the night like the moon. Get it?”

“Very clever. Tell them I will be back later tonight.”

“I will tell them. Don’t forget your promise.”

That night after Sun had gone to bed and the sun in the sky had also gone to bed, Old Money Bags came back. “You are three months behind on your loan. If you don’t pay me by tomorrow, I will take you to court. I do not run a charity.”

When Sun heard Old Money Bags’ voice, she came running. “But Mr. Bags, you promised that if I gave you the answer to my riddle you would forgive the loan.”

“I never said any such thing.”

Sun looked at her parents. “He really did make that promise, earlier today.”

The mother said, “Honorable Mr. Bags, my daughter does not lie.”

The father said, “We will go to the mandarin tomorrow to have him decide what is fair.”

The next day they all came to see the mandarin. Old Money Bags looked very dignified in his silk jacket and Sun and her parents were dressed simply but cleanly, and they also looked dignified. Sun's parents told the case to the mandarin, and he wanted to hear the riddle. Sun stood very bravely and chanted to the court. "My father kills live trees and plants the dead ones. My mother sells the wind to buy the moon."

The mandarin asked what the riddle meant, and when Sun told him, he tried not to smile. He wanted to look serious, as a judge should.

Then Old Money Bags told his side of the case. "Your honor, that little girl is lying. I have never spoken to her before. Who are you going to believe, a respected businessman or a child who talks in riddles?"

The mandarin turned to Sun. "My child, this is a serious case, and you need a witness to prove what you say is true."

"Oh, your honor, I did have a witness. It was a little fly who heard the whole conversation. The fly was sitting right on Mr. Bags' nose!"

Old Money Bags' face turned red and he bellowed, "That is a lie! I told you she is a liar! That fly was sitting on the housepole!"

There was a moment of silence, then Sun laughed. Her parents laughed. The mandarin began laughing, and soon the whole courtroom was laughing. Old Money Bags had been outsmarted by a nine-year-old girl. When things quieted, the mandarin said, "Miss Sun, you have won your case. It is clear the promise was made. Mister Money Bags, I hope you have learned your lesson. Never underestimate a girl as bright as the sun. This family is forgiven the loan owed to you."

And so Sun's family was able to pay for Sun's education. She went on to become a beloved teacher. She shone as brightly as the sun in the classroom, and kept her students laughing and learning.

Dragon Watching in Japan – Suzanne Rahn

Are you a dragon watcher? Do you look for huge claw prints on muddy cavern floors, or scan the skies for long, flaming shapes appearing and disappearing through the clouds. If so, you should visit Japan – one of the best countries in the world for dragon watching.

In the western world, dragons are few and hard to find, even in the desolate regions where they make their homes. But in Japan a dragon may pop up almost anywhere, especially near water. You may find

dragons in streams and springs and rivers, high in the midst-covered mountains or the clouds, or far beneath the sea.

In western lands, dragons are evil creatures, and a careless dragon watcher does not last long. Japanese dragons, however, are noble, generous and wise – though sometimes hasty. As rulers of the waters, they bring many benefits to humans. They keep rivers running and springs flowing. Their great feet trample rain down from the clouds. Even the tides of the Pacific rise and fall at the will of Ryujin, supreme Dragon King of Japan.

Ryujin's palace lies hidden in the depths of the sea, but the place is marked by a little island that glows bright red, day and night. Sailors fear the island and steer clear of it. But a brave pair of women sea divers once swam down and found the city of the dragon king. When they returned, they described with wonder its walls of shining gold, arched gates of pearl, and trees bearing clusters of precious jewels.

Ryujin himself is kindly, but quick-tempered. When something annoys him, he roars like thunder and lashes the sea into a storm. If he becomes really upset, he may cause a tidal wave.

The Japanese name for dragon is *tatsu*. You are sure to recognize a *tatsu* if you see one. For he looks like no other animal on earth.

His head is grotesque, with round, bulging eyes and shaggy eyebrows, a bewhiskered chin and long, toothy jaws. Two wiggly feelers dangle from his snout, and horns sprout from his head. At times he breathes fire, at other times thick clouds of fog.

A *tatsu's* long scaly body can be red, green, purple, black, or rainbow-colored. His legs are shaped like a tiger's and decorated with tufts of bristly hair. Each foot has three sharp claws. This is one of the few ways a dragon watcher can tell a *tatsu* from his cousin the Chinese dragon, which has either four or five claws on each foot. The female *tatsu* lays a clutch of nine eggs, and each of her nine young ones is different.

The first is always a fine singer. Japanese artists often model the tops of temple bells in the shape of a first-born *tatsu*, hoping that this will give the bells more sweetness of tone.

The second-born enjoys listening to music, and Japanese harps and drums bear his picture.

The third is fond of drinking. His likeness appears on goblets and drinking cups.

The fourth is a reckless *tatsu* who likes steep, risky places. Sculptors carve models of him for the tower tops of temples and palaces.

The fifth-born is an evil one who loves to destroy and kill. Japanese swords are decorated with this bloodthirsty dragon.

The sixth, on the other hand, spends most of his time reading. His picture appears on book covers.

The seventh tatsu has very good hearing. Artists have never known what to use him for, so his image is never portrayed anywhere.

The eighth is lazy and likes to sit around. His portrait, as you might guess, is found on easy chairs.

The ninth is a strong, patient tatsu who likes to hold up heavy weights. The feet of tables and hibachi stoves are shaped like the feet of this dragon.

Japanese dragons, except for the fifth-born, are friendly and helpful. If you should meet one face to face, simply bow politely and be respectful. Chances are good –eight to one, in fact –that you have nothing to fear.

A tatsu may take on human or animal form. Tatsu watchers should look especially hard at any large, ugly snakes or turtles they come across in Japan, for this are popular tatsu disguises.

In the eleventh century, a warrior named Hidesato was crossing a bridge over Lake Biwa. Suddenly he saw an enormous serpent lying stretched across his path. Most warriors would have attacked the serpent or looked for another bridge, but Hidesato calmly stepped over it and walked on.

A moment later he heard someone call, “Hidesato!” He turned. There, instead of the serpent, stood an ugly man with bright red hair, wearing a crown shaped like a dragon.

“I am the dragon king of Lake Biwa,” the man explained. “I took the shape of a serpent to find a man brave enough to help me. A monstrous centipede has invaded my kingdom, killing my subjects. It can be slain only by a mortal man. Will you try?”

“Certainly,” said Hidesato.

Hidesato and the dragon king were eating and drinking sake together when the centipede appeared. It was long as a mountain range, jet black, with great eyes like globes of fire. Hidesato snatched up his bow and aimed for those eyes – once, twice. The arrows struck but fell back harmlessly, and the loathsome creature crawled on.

Then the warrior remembered the king’s words “It can be slain only by a mortal man.” How could that be? Hidesato thought feverishly. He had once heard that human saliva can have magical power. As the

pincers of the centipede reached down for him, he licked the head of a third arrow and took aim. The arrow struck and held. The twin fires went out, and the monster lay dead before him.

The overjoyed dragon king showered Hidesato with gifts – a pot that cooked without fire, an endless roll of silk, a sweet-singing temple bell, and a bottomless sack of rice. Hidesato became a rich man, known as Tawara Toda, “Lord Rice Bag.”

But such good fortune does not always befall people who meet Japanese dragons. Urashima, a poor young fisherman, caught a great sea turtle in his net one day. It looked at him so sorrowfully that he untangled it from the net and let it go free. A few moments later, the turtle swam back to thank him, and before his eyes it transformed itself into a lovely girl, one of the daughters of the dragon king.

“Come with me,” she said. “I will show you my father’s home.”

Urashima agreed, for he was already in love with her. They traveled through the gray green water, down to the city of gold and pearls. There Ryujim himself married them, and they lived very happily. But after some time had passed, Urashima began to feel guilty. He had not told his parents where he was going, and they must think he had drowned. He was now richer than any king on earth, so he told his wife that he would like to visit his old home just for one hour, to end his parents’ grief, and to bring them some jewels.

“Of course,” said the dragon king’s daughter. She filled a bag with jewels for her husband and also gave him a small box tied with a silken cord. “This is for you,” she said. “But do not open it.” Urashima promised that he would not open the box. She led him up through the ocean depths to the shore and left him. Urashima walked quickly to his village, but everything had changed. He could not recognize a single face. Even his parents’ house had disappeared. Finally he encountered an old man who remembered the name Urashima. “Ah, yes! Said the old man. “He was a fisherman who drowned at sea. But that was nearly four hundred years ago.”

Urashima walked back to the beach, weeping. His wife had not returned. He wondered if the box she had given him might hold the explanation of this terrible mystery. Forgetting his promise, he untied the silken cord and lifted the lid. A thin gray column of smoke spiraled out. It was the lost years. Urashima’s hair turned white; deep lines drew themselves on to his face. His body shriveled, and in an instant he lay lifeless on the sand.

Frog Cakes

Once upon a time there lived a stingy and ill-tempered old woman. She was so mean that she ate all the tastiest food herself. She would not share with her son's wife, and she made her daughter-in-law do all the hard work without any help.

One day when this greedy grandma was getting ready to go out for an errand, a neighbor visited and gave her a box full of delicious botamochi – her favorite sweet rice balls. She loved botamochi.

But she had a problem. If she ate them now, she would be late for the errand. If she left them behind, her daughter-in-law might eat them. She thought about what to do, and had an idea. She untied the carrying cloth, lifted the lid, and said something to the botamochi.

The son's wife passed by the room, and hearing her mother-in-law's voice through the thin wall, she stopped to listen. She heard the mother-in-law's voice say, "If my daughter-in-law tries to eat you while I'm gone, you must change into frogs. But when I open the box, turn back into botamochi."

The old woman repeated this instruction many times. She closed the lid, wrapped the box in the carrying cloth, and put the box on the family altar. "I'm going," she said.

The son's wife said "Bye,bye!" politely, but she was really angry. "Very well, if Grandma wants to change the botamochi into frogs, I will do that."

She ate all the botamochi in the box and went to the rice field to catch frogs. She put the frogs into the box, tied it up, and returned it to the family altar.

After a while, the old woman came home and went directly to the family altar. When she lifted the box, she said, "This is heavy enough. All the botamochi are still inside. My daughter-in-law didn't find them. Now I have time to eat them all myself." But when she opened the box, all she saw inside were froggy faces.

"You are very clever," she said. "You remembered my instructions. But this is not my son's wife."

When she opened the box again, the frogs peeked out. She closed the box. "This is not my son's wife. This is me, Grandma!" As she repeatedly opened and closed the box, a small frog jumped out.

"Hey, botamochi, don't go away!" She caught the frog and put it back in the box. But another one jumped out. "Hey, you botamochi! Don't escape!" When she tried to put back one from this side, others came out the other side.

The frogs, tired of being crowded in the small box, jumped out a few at a time. But the greedy grandma, still thinking they were botamochi, cried out, “Don’t hop! If you hop so hard, the sweet topping will fall off, and that’s the best part!” The frogs hopped away in all directions, and the greedy grandma was not able to catch them, and had no botamochi after all.

Note: When Fujita-san tells this story, she uses a lacquer box of the type used to present food gifts or carry your lunch. When she bounces it on her lap, it seems believable that there are frogs inside. She has made frogs from milk cartons. When the box is opened and the frogs spring out, the children are surprised and delighted.

Kenji Moto the Hermit – Japan

There once was a man in Japan named Kenji Moto. Kenji was a hermit y choice, for he had been crippled as a boy and had decided to live alone on the side of a hill rather than stay among people who might pity or scorn him. So, slowly and painfully he tilled a small rice field for food and to trade for fish in the nearby village.

From his humble house on the hill, Kenji could see the village of his birth, nearly an hour’s walk away. And just beyond the village was the ocean, stretching as far as the eye could see.

The villagers were mostly fishermen who hauled their living from the ocean. A few of the men and most of the women and children worked in the rice fields which reached from the edge of the village to the slope just below Kenji’s hut.

One afternoon as Kenji was toiling in his field, he paused for a moments rest and gazed out toward the ocean. His casual glance turned into an intense stare as he saw something strange and frightening on the horizon. The sky above the ocean was threateningly dark, and the ocean itself seemed to be rising to engulf the sky. Kenji looked in wonderment, trying to understand what was happening. Suddenly, he knew what the darkened sky and towering waters meant. Many years ago, long before anyone now living in the village had been born, a tidal wave had come rushing from the sea. Kenji’s grandfather had told how the entire village had been engulfed and swept away.

Desperately, he looked around for some method to signal a warning, but nothing was large enough to be seen that far away. Then an idea came to him. “A fire!” he thought. “A fire would be seen for miles.”

Kenji knew of only one thing large enough to make a fire that bright. In desperation, he lit a match, and with quiet resignation set fire to the rice crop he had cultivated so painfully and that meant life itself to him. Within seconds the field was ablaze. Kenji retreated some distance away. When he turned his

attention to the steadily darkening sky, he saw that the wall of water was closer. He guessed that the impact of the tidal wave would strike within the hour.

Anxiously, Kenji stared down at the village. "They have to see the fire!" he muttered. "They have to!"

Meanwhile, in the village below, many eyes had seen the fire, and a crowd had gathered. "It's Kenji's rice field!" said one man. "Yes," agreed another. "And if the fire spreads it will take all our fields."

"We must hurry to put out the fire or there will be no rice for any of us this year."

Within minutes, all the villagers were hastening toward the top of the hill. Even those who were too young or too old to fight the fire went along to watch. From his position on the hillside, Kenji saw the parade making its way up the slope and compared it to the progress of the oncoming wave. "Why don't they hurry?" he worried aloud. "The big wave is almost here."

As the villagers climbed higher, they were able to see the wall of water for the first time. Swift runners were sent back to the village to gather important records and to make certain that everyone had left. The rest of the group hurried even faster up the hill.

When the villagers arrived at Kenji's house, they gathered around him. "It's fortunate that your rice field caught fire. It brought us here, safe from the giant wave."

"How did the fire get started?" one man asked.

"With this," said Kenji, holding up a charred and smoking torch. Only then did the villagers realize that Kenji had deliberately set fire to his own rice field to warn them. And not even the most eloquent among them could find words to express their gratitude.

Silently everyone turned to watch the huge wave draw nearer. When it struck, it would destroy everything they owned. But thanks to Kenji, they were saved and they could rebuild.

Each of them silently vowed that there would always be a place in his new home for Kenji Moto, the hermit.

Little One Inch

Long ago, there lived a man and his wife who loved one another very much. They had no children, and they wanted one so badly that they said that even a child as small as a finger would be all right.

One day they went to the shrine of Suiyoshi-sama and prayed with all their might. "Sumiyoshi-sama, please give us a child, even if it is only as big as the end of a finger."

It happened that ten months after this, a charming baby boy was born. The baby, however, was so tiny that it was only as large as the end of a finger. They named him Issun Boshi, Little One Inch. They raised him with loving care, but no matter how much time passed, he never grew any bigger at all.

One day they gave him a sewing needle as a sword and sent him into the world to make his way. There was nothing Little One Inch could do so he took the rice bowl and chopsticks his mother gave him, and set off. With the rice bowl as a boat and the chopsticks as oars, he started off for the capital city. After many days he finally arrived at the emperor's capital. He walked about here and there and finally stopped in front of a splendid big house. He went into the entrance hall and called as loudly as he could, "I beg indulgence, I beg indulgence!"

The people of the house thought it a strange-sounding voice and wondering who it was, went to the entrance hall to see. There they found the tiny boy standing under the wooden clogs. "Little boy, was it you who called just now?"

"Yes, it was. I have been sent away from my parents' home. Would you take me into your house?"

They found him interesting, so they decided to take care of him. He was small, but he was very clever. Whatever they asked him, he knew much more and soon everyone was calling for his company because they loved him so much. The daughter of the house became especially fond of him.

One day she took Little One Inch with her and went to pray. On the way back, two oni met them. They were just about to seize the girl when Little One Inch drew the needle from its scabbard and brandished it, crying as loudly as he could, "I don't know who you think I am. I am Little One Inch who has accompanied the master's daughter on her pilgrimage."

In spite of this, one of the oni took Little One Inch and swallowed him whole. Since Little One Inch was so small, he could move about easily in the oni's stomach. Waving his sword, he danced around and punctured the oni's stomach. The oni was so surprised that he coughed up Little One Inch and spit him out.

The other oni saw his chance and grabbed Little One Inch. But Little One Inch saw his chance and jumped into the oni's eye. The eye hurt so much that the oni screamed loudly, and both the oni ran away.

Little One Inch started home with the girl, who all this time had been standing to one side shaking with fright. Just as they set off, she saw a little hammer that the oni had dropped. She picked it up and Little One Inch asked what it was. The girl said, "This is a magic striking hammer. No matter what you want, you can strike with the hammer and you will get it."

“Then please strike me with it and see if you can make me grow taller.” The girl struck Little One Inch, crying, “Grow taller!” and to their surprise, his body began to grow until he became a splendid samurai.

Momotaro, the Peach Boy

Note: This story has no analog in the European tradition, but is one of the most popular stories in Japan. The peach is a familiar symbol of fertility and springtime. Tying a towel around one’s head is symbolic of preparing to work hard at a task. Calling Momotaro’s foster parents “grandmother” and “grandfather” is a tradition in which all elders are honored with those terms.

This was long ago. In a certain place lived an old man and his wife. One day the old man went to the mountains to cut wood, and the old woman went to the river to do her washing. As she was washing, a peach came floating down the river. The old woman picked it from the water and when she tasted it, found it to be delicious. “This peach is so good, I’d like to take one to the old man, too,” she thought. She called out, “Good peaches come this way, bad peaches go that way.” Soon a large, delicious looking peach floated to where the old woman was. “This one looks good” she cried and, picking it up, she carried it home and put it in a cabinet.

When evening came, the old man returned home from the mountains with a load of wood on his back. “Old woman, old woman, I am home,” he called.

“Old man, old man, I brought you a delicious peach today from the river. I’ve saved it for you to eat.” And she brought the peach from the cabinet.

As they put the peach on the cutting board, it suddenly split apart. Inside was a beautiful baby boy who began crying lustily.

The old man and his wife were overcome with surprise and made a great to-do, crying, “What shall we do?”

The old woman said, “Since he was born from a peach, let’s name him Momotaro, Peach Boy,” they said. And so they did. They raised him very carefully, feeding him rice gruel and fish. He would eat one bowlful and grow that much bigger. If he ate two bowlfuls he would grow that much bigger. If he were taught to count to one, he could remember all the numbers up to ten. He grew to be a strong and intelligent boy. The old man and his wife loved him and took great pleasure in caring for him.

One day Momotaro went to the old man and his wife. He sat on the floor in formal style, with his hands on the floor before him, and said, “Grandfather and Grandmother, I am grown now. I would like to go to the oni island and conquer the oni. Please make some kibi dango – pounded rice and millet dough – for me.”

The old man and his wife replied, “Why do you ask to do this? You are not old enough. You could not defeat the oni.”

Momotaro, however, said, “I will defeat them,” and would not be dissuaded. The old man and the old woman could do nothing but agree. “Then you may go and do it,” they said and made a great number of Japan’s number one kibi dango. They tied a new towel about his head and gave him new hakama – wide trousers. They gave him a sword and a flag upon which was written, “Japan’s Number One Momotaro.” Giving him a bag of the kibi dango to tie at his waist, they said, “Be careful. Go and return. We will wait for you until you have conquered the oni.”

Momotaro went as far as the end of the village when a dog came barking up to him. “Momotaro, where are you going?”

“I am going to the oni island to conquer the oni.”

“Then I shall go with you. Please give me one of those kibi dango.”

“You shall be my retainer. If you eat one of these, you will be as powerful as ten men.” And he took one of the kibi dango from the bag at his waist and gave it to the dog.

Next a pheasant came flying up to them. He was given a kibi dango and became a retainer in the same way as the dog. Next, a monkey came chattering up to them, and he too became a retainer. Momotaro became the general, the dog carried the flag, and they all hurried on to the oni island. When they got to the oni island, they could see a huge black gate. The monkey rapped on the door. From inside, a voice called, “Who is there?” and a red oni came out.

Momotaro said, “I am Japan’s number one Momotaro. I have come to conquer oni island; you had all better get ready,” and pulling out his sword, he made ready to attack. The monkey took his long spear, the dog and the pheasant their swords, and all prepared to attack. The little oni at the gate set up an alarm and fled to the rear of the island, where all the oni were having a drinking party. When they heard that Momotaro was coming, they all shouted, “Who is Momotaro?” and came out to fight.

Since the four had eaten Japan’s number one kibi dango, they had the strength of thousands of men, and so defeated the whole oni force. The black oni general fell in front of Momotaro, his hands on the ground, and with tears falling from his huge eyes, begged forgiveness, crying, “We are no match for you. Please spare our lives. We will never do anything wrong again.”

“Then from now on you must never do evil. If you promise that, I will spare your lives,” said Momotaro.

“We will give you all our treasure,” said the oni general, and surrendered all the treasure they had. Momotaro put the treasure in a cart, and with the dog, monkey and pheasant, heave ho, heave ho, returned with it as a present for his grandfather and grandmother.

The old man and his wife were overjoyed and praised Momotaro greatly. The emperor heard of it, and Momotaro was given a great reward, with which he cared for the old man and his wife the rest of their days.