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# ...on a Time...



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by **Angela Daley**

**M**y four-year-old son excitedly showed me his new library book and requested that I read it. Unfortunately, it was in Chinese and my knowledge of written Mandarin is pretty much confined to recognizing the character for BBQ. (Crucial information, if you ask me.) I opened the book, planning to simply describe the photos, when I found an English translation tucked into the front cover. Great! What a nice little glimpse into Chinese children's literature! Here's the short version of the story:

There was a little boy who'd inherited his grandfather's bike. It was much too big for him and he struggled to keep up with his friends as they raced through town. One day, he timidly approached his mother with a request, "Mama, will you buy me a new bike if I get all top grades at school?" To his surprise, she agreed! The little boy knew it would be difficult but he immediately started studying. He studied and studied and then studied some more. He was absolutely determined to earn that bike. The day of reckoning came and, amazingly, he had reached his goal. Hurrah! He ran home with his report card and proudly showed his mother, inquiring, "Now may I have my bike?" Without hesitation, his mother answered, "No. A new bike is too expensive."

Crestfallen, the little boy asked why and his mother replied with a story: "When I was a young girl, I didn't have shoes. I felt bad for myself until, one day, I saw a man who had no feet. Then I knew I was lucky." To compensate her son, she gave him some crayons and he used them to give his bike a different color. He almost felt like he'd gotten a new one.

Um, WHAT? The mom lied to her son? He did all that work and he didn't get his new bike! How sad! How unfair!

From my perspective, it was an awful story. But hey... I'm a foreigner in a foreign land. I knew something must've gotten lost in translation. I asked a Chinese friend for her interpretation. She nodded knowingly and explained, "Well, yes, the mother lied but it all worked out in the end, didn't it? The boy got good grades! That's the important thing."

Cultural differences. In our day-to-day lives in China, we encounter a multitude of them; anything from "saving face" to using chopsticks. But cultural differences aren't just confined to the habits of daily life. In any society, who we are, what we think and what we deem to be important are all related through the stories we create and tell. If you're kids are learning Mandarin during your stay in Shanghai, sooner or later, they may come across a story that will leave them (and you) scratching your heads. Hopefully, their education in Putonghua will go beyond learning characters and pronunciation as they delve into the stories of China, allowing them to gain insight into the morals, rules and beliefs of this vast 5,000-year-old culture.

What might they learn? And how might it be different from the fables and fairytales you grew up with? Come along as I tell you a little story about... well... stories.

"I would read to kids in Hong Kong and I could see that they weren't interested. The story was much too Western for them. I was talking about a world totally different from theirs."

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### The East

Chinese-born writer Da Chen, currently in Shanghai for the Shanghai International Literary Festival, helps to explain the moral of my son's library book: "Why would the mother in his book lie to him, if it weren't for a bigger and loftier good of urging her child on? These are the cultural barriers that define each people. What's right there isn't always right here..." Chen is a NY Times best-selling author and he lives and writes in the US. He continues, "One major theme of Chinese children's stories is the importance of education. We believe education helps us to transcend a humble background."

Maggie Chan wants her son to learn these lessons. Chan grew up in Hong Kong but studied in Australia for nine years. Though she likes to read to her four-year-old son in English, she feels strongly about also exposing him to Chinese stories: "He's Chinese. He needs to know the stories of his culture, of who he is." One important idea Chan wants her son to learn is the idea of filial piety or respect for your parents - a notion she finds lacking in Western culture.

Da Chen recounts his own experience with this fundamental element of Chinese culture: "I told my son that I shared a bed with my father until the day I left home for college in Beijing. He thought it was silly. Yes, it was the humble circumstances that drove us to have to share the bed and the quilt, but I cherish that memory. It was perhaps the best gift my father gave me, making me feel safe and protected every night when I was asleep."

Children's book author and Hong Kong resident Sarah Brennan is the author of the Chinese Calendar Tales, featuring stories about animals in the Chinese zodiac. The books proven popular with Chinese and Western kids alike but her first book, A Dirty Story, about a competition between two towns - one neat, the other dirty - didn't click with Chinese children: "I would read to kids in Hong Kong and I could see that they weren't interested. The story was much too Western for them. I was talking about a world totally different from theirs."

So, what do they relate to? What other themes might your kids come across as they explore Chinese children's books? Da Chen says that one of the most important ideas in Chinese culture is sacrifice for your family. "This is a big one, overpowering one, aiming to diminish the importance of an individual need. For example, it's common in China for a husband to go off, working in a distant city, leaving his family behind. But in America, it would be considered as jeopardizing his bond with his wife, making the father seem less loving or caring."



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### The History

You might think stories for kids would be a normal thing, something that’s been around since words were first put down on paper. Not so. Though it’s hard to define exactly what constitutes “children’s literature” when considering the history of books for kids (for instance, many fables, legends and fairytales were enjoyed by both adults and children), it wasn’t until the 17th century when stories meant solely for children appeared. And believe it or not, we have the Puritans to thank for it.

If you were a Puritan in the late 1600s, it was your job to get yourself to Heaven. Puritans

believed that everyone was responsible for their own salvation, children included. Young souls, in particular, needed to be saved from eternal hellfire. Therefore, the Puritans directed a good deal of their literature at kids in the hope of saving them from the torments of Hell. Authors wrote stories aimed at educating youngsters about death and admonishing them not to sin.

At the same time, the philosopher John Locke was asserting his idea of the tabula rasa, or blank slate and the concept of childhood gradually changed. The early years of life came to be considered as a time of instruction and learning, a time to mold





young minds, and books were an important part of that process. This philosophical shift in the perception of childhood opened the door for true children's literature - fun stories, not just brimstone and hellfire meant to scare the sin out of your 10-year-old.

### The West

"While children's literature in China would be heavily influenced by Confucianism, Anglophone children's literature (i.e. Britain, America, Australia, etc.) has been more traditionally based on Freud's ideas of the individual," explains Dr. Kimberley Reynolds, a professor of children's literature at Newcastle University. "Instead of children owing their parents, books meant for older children promote the idea that the family is the root of your problems and that it's better for you to go out and find a group of friends that will become like a family to you. These are the people who really know who you are. They value you because they chose

you. You don't have to pretend to be someone you're not." Didn't Harry leave behind his horrid relatives, the Dursleys, in order to discover his "real" family of wizards?

Of course, in children's books meant for young kids this idea isn't yet present. Young children are still meant to be connected to their parents, siblings, grandparents and other family members. Young children's literature in the West is often about affection and a loving connection between kids and adults, illustrated by well-known titles such as *Guess How Much I Love You?* and *Love you Forever*.

We have the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, and Hans Christian Andersen to thank for some of the most enduring children's stories of the West. The fairytales collected and edited by these authors have been told and retold countless times and are by far the most influential stories of many Western cultures. What life lessons do we learn from tales such as *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Rapunzel*, *Cinderella*, and *The Little Mermaid*? According to Dr. Reynolds, "(these fairytales) have been the most important stories that we tell ourselves. They are our cultural DNA. They tell us how to survive. They promise young people that they'll triumph over adversity. If you conform to the values of your society and be true to yourself, you'll be rewarded."

Let's take *Little Red Riding Hood* as our example. *Little Red's* mother tells her to take some food to her sick grandmother. She warns her to stay on the path and beware of strangers. What does Red do? She ignores her mother's warning and has a chat with the big, bad wolf which then, in less sanitized versions of the story, heads off and





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eats her grandmother. He then lies in wait for Little Red to come along and gobbles her up as well. Sure, the story ends well (the grandma and Red are eventually cut from the wolf’s belly) but none of this would have happened if Red had just listened to her mother, right? Next time, follow the rules!

Because many of Sarah Brennan’s stories are influenced by Chinese children’s folk tales, she’s familiar with the differing ideas in the stories she grew up with and what Chinese kids have traditionally read. Brennan notes another East/West divide in children’s literature. “In the West, it’s okay for the kid to outsmart the adults. In fact, they’re often portrayed as smarter than their teachers or parents. And children can have their own adventures. I don’t think you would find that as much in China.” Good examples are *Where the Wild Things Are* (in which a little boy goes on an adventure to a land of monsters) and Roald Dahl’s *James and the Giant Peach* (where James

takes an adventure on a flying peach and is himself much smarter and nicer than his horrible aunts.)

So, whether your kids are jumping into Chinese stories during their Mandarin studies or sitting snuggled up to you at bedtime for a retelling of *Cinderella*, it’s good to remember that the stories we tell our children are not just stories. They are bits of our culture, telling us how life works “out there” and instructing our kids in recognizing right from wrong and good from bad. Now, just imagine how lucky your kids will be to learn that in two places. 🍵

