



# *SMALL WINDOWS*

*Folktales of Old China*

*Collected and Written by  
Fang Yuan*

*Edited by  
Timothy D. Liebermann  
and David L.E. Watt*

*Illustrated by  
Xie Lun He*

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Fang Yuan, 1958-

**Small Windows: Folktales of Old China**

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185 pages, 10 illustrations

*Small Windows* is a powerful collection of original Chinese folk literature, written especially for an English-speaking audience. It contains 15 traditional folktales and 3 festival tales. These thought-provoking short stories provide windows of understanding into the character and culture of the Chinese people.

1. Folktales—China    2. Ethnic Stories    3. Chinese Festivals  
4. China—National Minorities    5. China—Ethnic Groups

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## EDITORS' NOTE

Around the world, people like to tell stories—stories about bravery, loyalty, cunning, friendship, the ways of the world, and the unexpected turns of life. For millennia, story-telling has been both a pastime and a way of explaining life's mysteries. To know and love folk stories is to cherish the human spirit.

As any storyteller knows, a story is a living thing. It changes with each telling; it shapes itself to its listeners; and it blends with the remembered fragments of other stories and experiences.

This collection of stories is a labor of love from the heart of Fang Yuan. He offers them to you in the hope that you will see their inner beauty and cherish the universal spirit that they have distilled. He hopes that his efforts will become like the old Chinese proverb “pao zhuan yin yu” [cast a brick to attract jade], that is, like a small offering that attracts others to make greater ones.

Fang Yuan was born in 1958. In primary school he learned quotations from the Little Red Book and danced the loyalty dance to Chairman Mao. His class often stood on the streets of Xiangtan to welcome the leaders of African countries as they passed on their way to visit Mao's birthplace in Shaoshan, 45 kilometers away. After Richard Nixon visited China in 1972 and shook hands with Premier Zhou Enlai, Fang Yuan began to learn English by listening to the Voice of America's English-900 radio program.

## EDITORS' NOTE

In the latter stages of the chaotic time known as the Cultural Revolution, Fang Yuan attended high school and spent several days a week digging tunnels and making bricks for underground shelters. He passed his graduation test by successfully driving a hand tractor around the school grounds. At that time the universities were closed. He was moved to the countryside, where he planted rice, collected manure, and looked after cows.

When those years had passed, Fang Yuan washed the mud from his feet and threw away his straw hat—the symbol of the “educated” youth. He entered college, graduated from Hunan University, and became a teacher of English there. In his free time he traveled around China, visiting museums and exhibits, talking with ethnic groups and national minorities, and listening to their stories. He has since worked in international banking in Hainan province and currently resides in Hunan province, where he researches Chinese culture and folklore.

The original pen-and-ink drawings were created especially for this book by Xie Lun He, esteemed professor of art at Hunan Normal University.

We hope that you enjoy this collection of folktales. Some may see these stories as merely pleasant diversions, as quaint relics from a simpler age. We hope that you also will see them as vibrant reflections of the human spirit and as windows into the remote antiquity that was old China.

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## INTRODUCTION

My purpose in producing this book has been to present to the English-speaking world an enjoyable and thought-provoking collection of the best of China's folk literature.

The folktales and festivals collected in this book are glimpses into the past, into ethnic cultures, and into the collective Chinese soul. Each short story is like a small window into another world, providing a fresh look into ancient China and the Chinese mind.

These small windows were collected from over a dozen Chinese ethnic groups and national minorities. They cannot, however, be presented in their native form, in the way you might hope to hear them firsthand from a master storyteller in some remote village. Some of the stories simply were too strange or fantastic to be intelligible to a Western ear, and had to be modified significantly. In addition, the mere act of writing down the stories in the English language has introduced innumerable alterations in meaning and expression. Finally, the editors have further shaped the words and phrases into a modern English style. One might say that the stories are about seventy-percent traditional and thirty-percent modern. I have tried to retain the folk narrative style and the intellectual integrity of the original stories.

The Chinese people are like one big family, and each of its ethnic groups is an important member. Without one or more of those members, China would not have become the China we know today. It was the combined wisdom and re-

## INTRODUCTION

sourcefulness of these ethnic groups that made China's early civilization possible.

China began to open its doors to the modern world in 1978, and today it is opening them still wider. Not many westerners have explored Chinese culture or history, and of those who have, not many have gotten beyond the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, and the clay soldiers of Xi'an. Most westerners have little understanding of what lies behind the Chinese face.

This book is one humble attempt to assist the western reader to understand the Chinese character and the 4,000-year history that shaped it. It is my hope that these small windows will help us see beyond the old walls of separation and bring us all closer together.

Fang Yuan  
December 2000

## CONTENTS

Editors' Note	iii
Introduction	v

### Part 1

<b>FOLKTALES</b>	1
The Red String	3
Freedom or Penalty	13
The First Song of the Dong Bu La	17
The Story of Nothing	31
Zhi's Day on the Mountain	37
The Princess and the Impostor	55
The Ringing Sword	73
The Shining Stone	83
A Priceless Skin	91
The Magic Fountain	95
The Rainbow Lake	109
The Tale of the Eagles	123
The Story of Mei Mei and Dong Ba	131
A Great Scholar	145
The Golden Lark	149

### Part 2

<b>FESTIVALS</b>	163
The Festival of Qing Ming	165
Water-Splashing Festival	171
Torch Festival	175

## ILLUSTRATIONS

<i>The minister lodged a false accusation with the ruler.</i>	15
<i>The Old Wise lifted the instrument and began to play.</i>	29
<i>An officer told the king he could separate the two-headed bird.</i>	33
<i>“Let’s look and see who is prettier,” the maidservant said.</i>	61
<i>Kun said goodbye to his friends and relatives. Then he set out for the Misty Island to meet the ogre.</i>	77
<i>Today he just sat on a rock and watched the tide go out.</i>	85
<i>Tun and Hua came to a fountain in the woods. Hua scooped the sparkling water to her lips.</i>	99
<i>His restless spirit prompted him to seek out new hunting grounds.</i>	127
<i>The couple met secretly after sunset. She crossed on a wooden log and they walked hand in hand.</i>	135
<i>The girl kindly helped the butterfly out of trouble.</i>	157

## Part 1

## FOLKTALES

Folktales, like Chinese festivals, provide an important link to the past and offer a natural way to remember our cultural heritage. In order to retain a sense of who we are and where we came from, it is important to keep these traditions alive. Just as each traditional musical instrument has its own special sound that carries us back hundreds or even thousands of years, so each folktale gives us a unique perspective into a different world.

Folktales are a natural expression of culture. Stories evolve as they are told and retold, absorbing the flavors of each generation and the personality of each storyteller. Yet, they always retain an unmistakable trace of their origin.

Folktales preserve a record of the cultures that spawn and nurture them. They deal with universal themes of love and conflict, of virtue and villainy. They are based on everyday experiences of hardship and survival, of challenge and growth. They often include supernatural events and beings as embodiments of forces beyond our control. All of them carry the subtle marks of the customs, lifestyles, attitudes, religious beliefs, and values of ancient society.

Like other fine arts, the art of storytelling deserves to be fostered and preserved. The Chinese people treasure their

oral tradition of folktales as an integral part of their cultural identity.



## THE RED STRING

In a small town in northeast China, there dwelt a young man named Chen. From early childhood, misfortune seemed to follow him. Both of his parents died when he was still too young to remember them. Later one of Chen's uncles took him in as his own child and made sure that he got an education.

Chen never liked the lonely life of an orphan. When he reached manhood, he wanted to find a wife and have many children; but he had bad luck in finding a good wife. Despite the well-meaning efforts of the warmhearted matchmakers in his neighborhood, he suffered one failure after another.

One day he took a trip to another town. Hungry and travel weary, the young man stopped for a night's lodging at a wayside inn.

In the dining room of the inn Chen met an old man, whom he remembered as a friend of one of his uncles. Chen invited the old man to dine with him. As they began to talk together in confidence, Chen poured out his sorrows. The kindly old man offered to help him and promised to do what he could for him.

"The retired local magistrate has a daughter. She will be a good match for you," the old man said. "I can arrange it."

Chen's heart rejoiced when he heard the offer. The old man also promised that he would arrange a meeting with a

man who gave excellent advice on marriage matters. He even hinted that the man had some ability as a fortuneteller. "Be at the gate of the local temple early tomorrow morning, before dawn," he told Chen as they parted.

In his bed that evening, Chen lay drifting into and out of sleep as he wondered about the possible change in his fortunes. Not long after midnight he awoke from a dream. He could recall children laughing as he lifted them in the air and swung them onto his shoulders.

The young man got up impatiently and left for the rendezvous. The velvet sky, alive with moonbeams and the faint twinkle of stars, further buoyed his spirits. A few minutes' walk brought the youth within sight of the temple.

Approaching the gate Chen saw an old man lounging against a big bundle on the stone steps and reading a book in the bright moonlight. The old man held the book close to his eyes and seemed unaware of the youth. Looking over the old man's shoulder, Chen was surprised to realize that he could not read a single word. The writing did not look like anything he had ever seen before.

"Excuse me, sir," Chen said to the old man. "Can you tell me the language of the book you are reading? I have studied all the classics, but the book in your hand is so peculiar that I can't understand it at all."

Lifting his eyes from the book, the old man managed a trace of a smile. "This book is not of this world," he answered.

"Not of this world? What other kind of book could it be?" the youth asked skeptically.

"It is a book of the nether world," replied the old man.

"If you are from the nether world, how is it that you are here?" Chen said, more skeptically than before.

"You don't know it, boy, but the officials of the nether world take charge of all the affairs of the world of men," the old man said. "They work by night. How could they come out and go about their business by day, for all to see?"

By now Chen was intrigued and curious. "Let's suppose for a minute that I believe you. Of all the affairs of the world of men, what's in your charge?" he asked.

"I'm not really a big man. I only take care of all the matrimonial files and design the matchmaking."

"Well, then, probably you can help me in some way. For the past several years I've been trying to find a wife, but have always been unlucky. It was only last evening that someone arranged to introduce me to a girl. She is the daughter of the former local magistrate. Do you think that I will be successful this time?"

"Oh, no, I don't think so. There is simply no possibility of success for you right now. You'd better not burden your mind with empty expectations. You know, if a man and a woman are not destined to be joined in marriage, the match will not be successful, even if a family of great wealth and power tries to make it so. Anyhow, I see no hope for you this time."

The old man's words threw Chen into dismay. He was feeling perplexed as to what to say next when the old man spoke again.

"I tell you, young man, your future wife is now only three years old. At the age of seventeen, she will marry you. There is an invisible bond that ties you two together."

Chen did not know how to reply to such a mysterious assertion, but he wanted to keep the conversation going. Seeing the big bundle by the old man, he asked, "Say, can you tell me what's there inside your bag?"

"Red strings."

"Can I have a look?"

"Yes, you can, but you will see nothing."

"Why?"

"Because they are invisible to men of this world."

"Why do you carry around a bag full of red strings?"

"I use the red strings to tie up the foot of a man and of a woman, to link a couple who are fated to be husband and wife. Once they are tied by this invisible red string, the poorest will marry the richest; even hated enemies can become husband and wife. The red string brings together two strangers, though they may be poles apart. Anyhow, once the two feet are tied together, neither person can escape the destined marriage, no matter how improper the match may seem in the eyes of others."

"In your case," the old man went on, "your foot is already tied up with the girl you are destined to marry. All of your other efforts will definitely prove to be fruitless."

"Please, I beg you to tell me where my future wife is, and what kind of family she is from," pleaded Chen.

"Oh, I'll tell you, all right. A little way off, to the north of the inn where you stayed last night, you'll find a big market. There you'll see a woman who makes a living out of peddling vegetables. She has a young girl clinging to her skirts. That little girl will be your future wife."

"The little girl? Can such a thing be possible?" Chen wondered.

"You are fated to marry her. You can depend on it."

"Can I go and see her?" asked Chen. He was seized with a sudden, uncontrollable desire to know who she was.

"As I've told you, she is just a toddler. But if you really want to go and have a look, just follow me. You'll see for yourself in a little while. You must remember, though, that nothing can change your fate once the red string has been tied."

He beckoned with his head for the youth to follow him, and away they went. After a while they turned into a narrow, twisting lane and walked along it for several minutes without speaking. Chen was lost in his thoughts, bewildered by the encounter with this singular old man. He wondered if he were still dreaming.

Before the light of dawn grew strong, the old man from the nether world would have to depart. The dark night was approaching its end. The stars were losing their brightness and already there was a suggestion of color on the leaves of the trees that stood by the lane.

The old man quickened his steps and the young man followed closely behind him. Soon they came in sight of the market. Just then they saw a woman, blind in one eye, walking along. As they got closer, Chen could see the ravages left by a harsh life. Although she was only in her early forties, her teeth had fallen out and her skin was withered like a dead leaf. She was holding a small girl in her arms. The girl, in a dirty and shabby dress, was a miserable-looking child.

"See, that girl over there is your destined wife," said the old man, pointing at the girl with his chin.

Alarmed and still doubtful, the young man exclaimed to himself, "How can this dirty, ugly little thing be my wife?"



Turning to the old man, Chen said, "I don't want her. Can I dispose of her?"

"Oh, no! You can't do that!" cried the old man. "She'll be good for you. How could you be so heartless?"

Leaving the young man standing there quite speechless with amazement and despair, the old man quickly strode away and melted into the early morning fog.

"What a preposterous old man!" Chen mumbled to himself. "I'm a man of learning; how could I take such a girl for a wife? How could I endure being connected with that boorish woman of a mother? How could a little red string possibly spoil my prospects with the magistrate's daughter? Can this really be my fate?"

Chen went back to his inn, miserably dejected. For a whole day he stayed in his room, downcast and brooding. By and by a plan took shape in his desperate mind. He gave no thought to the consequences; he saw it simply as a convenient solution to his predicament. That night, in a dark corner of the inn, he hired a ruffian who was willing to take the life of the small girl for money.

"I'm putting the whole matter in your hands," Chen said to the ruffian.

"Leave it to me. I'll take care of everything," the man assured him.

Under the cover of darkness, before daybreak the next morning, the ruffian stole into the market with a knife concealed in his long sleeve.

Soon the woman showed up as usual with the young girl. The killer waited, motionless in the shadows. As she walked past him, he drew his knife and lunged. The woman screamed and turned sharply away, shielding the girl in her arms. The

thug could not adjust his blow quickly enough, and the flashing knife missed its mark. The tip of the blade merely grazed her forehead, just between the eyebrows.

A shrieking cry of "Murder!" was raised. All the other vegetable peddlers dropped their work, but before anyone could give chase, the mysterious attacker had vanished down a dark alley.

When the ruffian reached the inn, Chen asked him eagerly, "Is it finished?"

"I don't know," said the man, struggling to catch his breath.

"What do you mean?"

"I was too nervous. I caught her in the forehead. Look, there are a few drops of blood on my knife, nothing more. I just don't know."

Chen's heart went cold as he saw the blood and realized what he had done. He moaned softly and then paid off the killer, who quickly disappeared.

Months and years went by, and Chen gradually forgot all about the unfortunate incident. It seemed no more real than a bad dream. Ten years or more passed, but still he had no luck in finding a wife. Even so, his life was not without happiness. Because of his ancestor's contributions to the country, the provincial administrator happened to take notice of him and offered him a job. He began to work as a clerk at the local law court.

Some time later the administrator, finding Chen a capable man, promised to give him his daughter for a wife. Everything went smoothly, and nothing arose to spoil his changed fortunes. In time, Chen and the administrator's daughter got married.

The bride was about seventeen, a pretty girl in the full bloom of youth. Chen felt especially satisfied with her, and he developed a sweet affection. "It is great pity that Destiny could not bring us together sooner," the man sighed in his heart. The only thing that puzzled Chen was his new wife's insistence on wearing a small piece of colorfully decorated paper on her forehead. While it was then the fashion for young women often to wear such adornment in public, Chen had never seen her without it.

One day as his wife came out of the bath, Chen asked her why she never took off the decoration. At the mention of it, the bride's eyes brimmed with tears.

"The truth is that I'm the niece, not the daughter, of your benefactor," the girl said. After a short pause she continued, "My lot was indeed a hard one. My real father was also a high-ranking official, but he died at his post. My mother went so far into her grief that two years later she just wandered off and left me behind."

She began to cry harder as she continued. "My neighbor, a most kind woman, took me in as her own daughter and took care of me for several years, until my uncle came back from the frontier. The good woman made her living by selling vegetables at the market. Seeing that I was too small, she took me in her arms to the market every morning. At the age of three, a most unexpected disaster struck me. One early morning at the market, a thug attacked us with a knife. No one has ever been able to explain why he wanted to kill me."

"Is there still a scar on your forehead?"

"Yes, there is," the girl answered. Her voice had become a sob, a sob that echoed itself in her husband's breast. Though the knife he had hired so many years before had not

struck true, now this innocent sob pierced straight to the depths of Chen's heart.

"Was the vegetable seller blind in one eye?" asked Chen, his memory going back to that day.

The girl turned to her husband in surprise. "Yes, she was, but how do you know that?"

Chen hung his head to avoid her gaze. "How time brings its changes!" he thought to himself.

"It seems that you know my story," the girl said. Her eyes searched the face of her husband.

"The murderer was—was sent by me," Chen stammered. His voice conveyed the anguish of an unspeakable shame.

"But, why did you want to cut my throat? I was only a baby. I was no possible threat to you; I could hardly have pronounced your name."

"I didn't want to cut your throat," he muttered.

"If you didn't want to cut my throat, what *did* you want to cut?"

"I wanted to cut the red string."

"What red string?" asked the girl.

"The red string that binds us together."

Then Chen told her the story from the very beginning. Thanks to the strength of the red string, she was moved by his remorse. She didn't blame him for what he had done in his heedlessness, so long ago. Their love grew and deepened over the years. The red string bound itself tighter between them and was never broken as long as they lived.

## **FREEDOM OR PENALTY**

Long ago there was a ruler who was blessed with many capable officials. They were so clever and brave, however, that he began to worry that one would try to take his place. Though the ruler suspected that some of his officials might indeed be more capable than he was, he was not at all willing to give up his rule. He decided that the best way to keep an eye on his officials would be to encourage them to watch each other and report any suspicious behavior to him.

In return for a report of treachery, the ruler would lavish gifts on the informer or promote him to a higher rank. This practice eventually had a bad influence on the affairs of state, because it was easy to accuse an innocent person in order to gain status.

The ruler, being simple-minded in some affairs, had a simple way to deal with a suspected official. First, he would put the accused man into custody and investigate the facts of the report. Then, after several days of confinement, the suspect would be led to a mysterious wooden box. There were two pieces of folded paper inside, and he would have to choose one of the papers. On one piece was written the word “Freedom,” on the other “Penalty.” In this way, the fate of the suspect would be decided. If the man picked the “Freedom” paper, he would be set free, but the man who picked

“Penalty” wouldn’t be so lucky. He would be punished, whether the ruler had found any evidence or not.

“This is the fairest possible way to judge a suspect, because it is a judgment made by God,” the ruler commented.

One of the ruler’s favorite assistants was his prime minister, whom he trusted entirely. The prime minister, however, was not at all a good man. Sometimes he gave the ruler bad advice or encouraged him to make decisions that benefited the prime minister and his family.

Secretly, the prime minister was jealous of one particularly honest and upright official. He could not bear that anyone else’s prestige should exceed his own. Envy took root like a weed in his heart and grew greater with each passing day. Finally he went to the ruler and lodged a false accusation against the innocent man.

“Have him shut up in my prison,” the ruler ordered. “His guilt or innocence can only be determined by God. I will judge everyone—even my most esteemed officials—in the same way.”

As a result, the good official was locked up. The poor man did not know what he had done to incur the ruler’s wrath. He was confined in a special prison of brass that the ruler had built into the earth.

The prime minister tried to devise a way to ensure that his rival would be punished. If the official picked “Freedom” by luck, he would go free. The man pondered continually until he hit upon an idea.

The prime minister went to see the man in charge of the box, and offered him a large bribe. “Write ‘Penalty’ on both pieces of paper,” he instructed the man.



*The minister lodged a false accusation with the ruler.*

Fortunately a servant who accompanied the prime minister overheard the treacherous scheme. The past actions of the prime minister had not gone unnoticed. His self-serving ways had aroused the resentment of many people at court, and his servant happened to be one of them.

The servant had great respect for the upright official. That night he crept unobserved to the cell and whispered what he had heard to the unhappy prisoner.

Three days later the official was brought to court to receive his “divine” judgment. The unworthy prime minister sat behind the ruler, secretly rejoicing in his belief that the man before him was sure to be punished. The ruler declared that it was time for the suspect to choose a piece of paper from the box and present it to the ruler.

With a calm face the official went up to the box and picked out one piece of paper. Instead of opening it to show the ruler, though, he matter-of-factly put it into his mouth and swallowed it down without so much as glancing at it.

“Three days of confinement *can* make a person behave strangely, sometimes,” the ruler mused. He reached into the box and slowly unfolded the piece of paper that remained. When the ruler read the word “Penalty,” he believed without the slightest doubt that the official had swallowed the piece marked “Freedom.”

The wits of the resourceful official had saved him from certain punishment. He eventually replaced the evil prime minister and brought an end to the ruler’s unfair practice.

## THE FIRST SONG OF THE DONG BU LA

The Dong Bu La has been a favorite musical instrument for the people of Kazak for hundreds of years. Whether on a snowy night or on a lovely summer evening, the Dong Bu La has brought much joy and fun, yet the first song played on it was a tragic one. The sad story behind it will always live in the memory of the Kazak.

Long, long ago on the steppes of the far west of China there ruled a fierce king, whose country had been founded upon the brute strength of the sword.

The king was such an overbearing and cruel tyrant that he was feared by all his people. The king was kind only to his child, a son. Unfortunately, the king had filled the boy’s head with so many stories of his ancestors’ glory that the young prince was quite puffed up with pride. The king assigned a teacher for the prince. Besides training him in the arts and sciences of the time, the old tutor tried to teach the boy wisdom by giving him counsel on daily affairs. Despite the tutor’s training, however, the prince only became more headstrong and incorrigible. So long as he could have his own way, he did not care what became of other people.

The prince had now grown into a handsome youth, very strong and active, and skillful in the use of arms. Whenever the king left his country on a mission, the prince would call