GARBAGE

Ch'i-teng-sheng

A simple pack on my back, I walked along the only road that led into Tung-p’u Township, a road bordered on both sides by what seemed to be a perfectly peaceful and picturesque landscape of paddy fields and stands of black pine. Suddenly my eyes lit upon a small, dark purplish pile of something on the side of the road up ahead. I went a little nearer – it was as if it had been waiting there to greet me. Pausing in front of it, I peered at it closely. It was about a half-dustpan worth of something that seemed like dirt but wasn’t and which had been left, either deliberately or heedlessly, abandoned on the ground. Kneeling down, I broke off a small piece of it with my fingers so I could see what exactly it was made of – I was sure what had happened was that several different kinds of rubbish had combined with mud and then undergone a prolonged period of decomposition. Some farmer had assumed that it was a clump of fertilizer, and when it was jolted out and fell to the road as it was being hauled to the fields, no one paid any attention to it lying there. “If you have life and consciousness, then we can understand each other,” I thought. It was already dusk by the time I reached the town, and, since there was no
choice, I checked into a modest-looking hotel. In order not to have to mingle with the crowd of people in the main dining room, I asked the woman attending me to send my dinner up to my room.

When I woke up at dawn the next day and opened the window, outside everything was wrapped in gray, hazy fog. The scenery directly in front was as opaque as paper, and anything further away was difficult to make out. I went downstairs. The lobby dining room was quiet and there was as yet no sign of life. I stood stock still for a minute; then suddenly the head of a woman with dishevelled hair and dirty face poked out from behind the counter. She gazed at me irritably with sleepy eyes.

"Could you open the door so I can go out for a walk?" I asked.

"What time is it?" she asked in reply. Since I wasn't wearing a watch, I didn't answer. She turned her glance towards the clock hanging on the wall and then, as if speaking to herself, said "It's barely five o'clock. Our guests never get up this early."

She didn't budge: obviously she had only raised the upper part of her body and was still sitting on the bed located behind the counter. I couldn't figure out why she just stared at me instead of quickly getting up to open the door. Without addressing her further, I simply paced back and forth within the confines of the lobby. Then, twisting her
body, insalubriously fleshy inside her loose nightgown, she lifted up a section of the wooden counter and come out. She shuffled by me just as I turned around, and headed for the main door where, exerting all of her strength, she pulled open one side of the door with a tremendous screech. She stuck her head out and then, drawing it back in, said:

"There's nothing out there."

"Thank you."

She left the door half open, and as she turned around and headed back to the bed behind the counter, I went out.

In fact, there were a few people on the street. Walking along the streets of town, I could see that a number of plastic bins and bags had been placed near the rain gutters on the sidewalks that crisscrossed the town in chessboard fashion in front of the tightly closed shops and houses. They had been picked through and scattered by wandering dogs during the night and damp, smelly garbage and bits of paper had spilled out from the bins – some of it into the dark rain gutters. Just then an elderly street-cleaner appeared from who knows where out of the fog, and with a tool fashioned from a long bamboo pole, started scraping the black muck out of the gutter and onto the street. The new, soft sludge dripped over the old, hardened stuff like chocolate over the top of a cookie. Placed at regular intervals along the street and on the corners were iron trash bins made in the shape of penguins, with the heads painted white and the back parts
black. I could gauge the topographical position of the town from how deep the gutters were and from the age of the houses along the street. Slowly, I left the town center and headed towards the outskirts.

A pedicab came up noiselessly from behind and drove past in front of me. I saw only the yellow-shirted back of the man pedaling, but as the wheels turned by my feet, a stray piece fell out from the load of countless cut-out leather loops he was carrying and caught on the pocket of my half-open coat. The vehicle continued on in the same direction I was heading and gradually faded and disappeared into the mist. Rubbing the leather object with my fingers, I saw that it was the kind of imitation leather used to make shoes. I had by now arrived at a concrete bridge, and observing the landscape along the misty river, I saw that on either side of the river were dense growths of tall bamboo and large trees, and a slender stream of water that twisted and turned down the middle of the riverbed. I bent over to see if there was anything underneath the bridge – piles of clear plastic bags stuffed to the point of bursting had been carelessly tossed among the clumps of grass growing on the broad, dry riverbed. I moved away with the intention of continuing across the bridge. As I raised my head and gazed in front of me, the pedicab that had passed me a little earlier slowly emerged once again from the mist; it was now parked at the foot of the bridge. The skinny man had already dismounted,
and with a flip of his wrists, was removing the discarded bits he had brought in his pedicab and tossing them into the riverbed. I stood and leaned against the railing of the bridge; separated by a space of swirling mist, the cut-out circles spinning out looked like a net of umbrellas being flung one after the other into the river. Then the man mounted and began pedaling the empty vehicle towards me; when he was in front of me and we could see each other clearly, I noticed the rather empty, emotionless and greyish cast to his face. I turned around to look at him, and again saw his back straining forward as he disappeared into the mist. I arrived at the foot of the bridge, and gazed at the garbage that had been dumped there year after year, month after month, and which now formed a pile which rose like a hill from the riverbed to the level of the road. A sign had been posted there, but it was surrounded with garbage. On a white background was written in imposing black characters "DUMPING PROHIBITED, VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED."

As the sun came up and slowly melted away the morning mist covering the town, I returned to the hotel. I lay on the bed smoking a cigarette, and decided to take my time about meeting with the mayor about the plan for an incinerator I had proposed earlier. I would need to study one more time the questions of population, geographical terrain, and regional scope, as well as the complex nature of the waste products, before I would be able to fully present my plan. I
was an engineer and had come here at my own expense, expecting that the town would surely be delighted to allow me to make a long-lasting contribution to the cause of environmental hygiene. Before human beings inhabited the earth, there had been no need at all to worry about the problem of pollution; but now that people lived in such dense conditions, it was necessary to control or change how waste products were disposed of - only in this way could we avoid harming Nature and humankind itself. We had to take into overall consideration humankind's own social history, its living environment, morality, and philosophy of life.

II

I wrote a letter to the mayor of the town explaining why I had not yet paid him a visit. I had already moved from the hotel to the upper floor of a house inhabited only by an elderly couple, and in that quiet room I had plenty of time to pursue my research and my plans without all kinds of distractions. I started out by doing a little estimating and overall planning. There were about a thousand households in this town and each household produced about a half a bin of garbage each day. Along the old street, there were several factories which produced paper cartons, and every morning (on the street named Scenic Avenue) there was an open-air market where everyday old vegetable leaves, rotten fruit and
her discarded items would be carelessly tossed on the ground. Along the new street - there were a number of factories that made plastic shoes and so there was the surplus rubbish (like those things that that three-wheeled pedicab had carted to the foot of the bridge to dump in the early hours) left behind by the more than a hundred employees of a wood-product factory, as well as the home wood-carving industries: instead of being used as kindling for household fires, these were carted off to an empty lot outside of town where they were carelessly dumped and scattered. There were no major industries in the town apart from a new thermal power plant that had recently been built along the coast – its particular waste water was funneled by a big pipe into the sea.

I followed a garbage truck to see what the garbage-collection situation was like. It was one of those old-fashioned trucks that required that the garbagemen stand in back of the truck and empty in each trashbin by hand; the men wore high rubber boots and were constantly jumping up and down from the truck – it looked pretty exhausting. Their faces were completely ashen, and all of them looked anemic. They had rather nasty temperaments and were not particularly careful about how they dumped the garbage; often some of the slimy stuff would still be dripping from the mouth of the bin, but they would just toss it on the ground for someone else to pick up. Every couple of feet along the truck’s route one
could see garbage that had spilled and scattered on the ground. Finally the garbagemen stood on top of the pile of garbage and the truck drove out of town. I was quite a few feet behind them, and because the truck went so fast, I fell further and further behind. However, I could already tell which direction it was going. After leaving town, it would pass through a flat area and then it would head towards the banks of the river.

I sat on the embankment along the river. This section of the river had circled the perimeters of the town before coming down this way; in the distance I could see the wide, sandy beach where it flowed into the sea. The truck that had driven over here to dump its load of garbage had completed its mission in the riverbed, turned around, and was heading homewards. From the riverbed came the first signs of fire and smoke as the garbage was burned. Pile after pile of discarded garbage was laid out like a desolate scene of a ruin - the colors and composition made me think of an abstract oil painting. I jumped down from the embankment and walked pensively around the wide, foul-smelling area. I wandered over to the mouth of the river, where bits of rubbish that had been carried down by the water, washed by the tides, and transformed into new shapes, lay stranded among the sand dunes. As I walked back and forth, I saw a single red woman's shoe, a splinter of wood from a broken piece of furniture, a disfigured doll and a beer can. I gathered
together various sorts of weightless, colorless wooden objects that had been scoured clean and rubbed smooth by the sea, the wind and the sun. I don’t know what it is they looked like, but they represented objects that had been transformed by time; although they were completely worthless, I took them back to my room and placed them in a small bamboo basket.

I ran into the mayor on the street before I had had a chance to arrange a formal meeting with him. His companion introduced us – the mayor’s name was Pai – and mentioned as well that they had already noticed me for quite some time. The mayor didn’t say much, just stood there smiling and listening to us as I argued with his companion about the appearance of the penguin trashbins on the streets and the garbage in the riverbed. They bragged about the original planning and implementation of the penguin idea, and didn’t seem to understand what a serious insult it was to that creature living on the other side of the globe. Not only were the penguin trashbins on the streets exposed to the elements, they were not utilized properly: the penguins’ mouths were stuffed with filth, their heads were covered with spit betel juice; and their rounded bellies were cracked open and oozing with the smelly entrails of fish and fowl. It wasn’t that they hadn’t thought about this, but rather that they had long since come to take for granted the superiority of man over beast. The truth about the situation visible everywhere
on the streets left the mayor's companion speechless; but when it came to the dumping and burning of garbage in the riverbed, they remarked with great confidence that a couple hours of rain, and the water would push it all into the sea, leaving everything as clean and tidy as before.

The mayor mentioned that the plan I had proposed had to be first submitted to the higher authorities; if they approved it, then he would be able to officially hire me. Finally, they asked me whether I belonged to the Liu faction or to the Ts'ao faction. I was completely mystified by the question. I thought that perhaps they were asking about my political affiliation, and since I belonged to neither the Liu faction nor the Ts'ao faction, it all seemed very straightforward, and naively, I asked them in return: "What does it matter whether I belong to the Liu faction or the Ts'ao faction?" But they walked off without answering or explaining.

III

My old landlord and landlady succinctly answered my questions; these were the two major political parties of the provincial government that held sway in this area, and any public matter or personal complaint would inevitably be backed by one of the parties and opposed by the other. They wielded about the same amount of power in the legislative
assembly and the house of representatives; however, whenever a matter had to reach some final resolution, it became necessary to secretly buy off those votes that were unaffiliated. I had no way of knowing that my work would one day be mixed up in this kind of situation or what would happen as a result of it, but I had the feeling that it was inevitable. In any case, once I had submitted my proposal, there was nothing to do but wait and see how things developed; now, the most important thing was to find a way to survive in a situation I couldn't leave and had to live with. It was not as if I were a total stranger, as a foreigner might be, to the people of Tung-p'u: maybe this just made it worse. I could only start by frankly explaining my situation to my landlord and landlady and getting them to understand. In fact, I was very fortunate — because of their own enlightened perspective and long experience, they were extremely understanding and concerned. They told me all they remembered about the history of Tung-p'u, and their emotion-laden story afforded me with both new inspiration and new worries. Hearing how the river that encircled the town had changed over the years helped me to further develop and expand my own simplistic ideas about how to deal with the problem of waste disposal. In a mere fifty years time, the river had already been transformed from a navigable channel, through which the ocean water could flow in and out, into a high sand-filled riverbed. In another
fifty years, the river would probably be higher than the level of the town. Furthermore, the population within the city limits was growing and becoming denser. Although this might not be something we would see in our own lifetime, when it came to the survival of humankind, what difference was there between the past, the present and the future? This problem of waste disposal had to take into account the river as well; otherwise, the entire project would be useless, and the consequences would be unimaginably serious.

I began to spend the noon hour in front of the village temple with the other people who had set up stalls there to earn a living; I would make a few toys right there on the spot and sell them to the ladies or to children. Then later I began making them at home while the old couple, in exchange for a share of the profits, took turns minding the stand. I got to know Ch'ien-na. The first time I saw her was when she was giving vaccinations as part of the town's summer immunization program, and I extended my bare wrists to her. The second time was during the holidays, when I went to the seaside to inspect the tides. I found that floating on top of the waves that rushed in from the sea during high tide, were clumps of white foam speckled with various bits of debris. Although I had no interest in swimming, I stood in the water and let the tide cover my feet inch by inch; Ch'ien-na, with a few of her co-workers from the clinic, was just about to wade across the channel to the sandy beach. They smiled at me as
they passed by and I reached out my hand and clutched at Ch’ien-na, wanting to draw her attention to the clumps of foam. They were not at all startled by the foam that floated between their legs – they stole narrow-eyed glances at me, and then transferred their gaze to Ch’ien-na.

“Ch’ien-na, Ch’ien-na, how come you have such a weird friend?” Ch’ien-na’s face immediately turned a deep red.

“No, no, no, he’s no friend of mine.”

“Well, he is now.”

So saying, they went on ahead, leaving her behind. Ch’ien-na called out, “Wait! Wait for me!”

She ran after them. I called out to her. “Ch’ien-na, Ch’ien-na!”

But she ignored me and kept on going.

IV

Since there was a strong northeasterly wind blowing from the north side of the city, I thought I would head towards another of the bridges that spanned the river. I’d heard that a construction company had built so many houses along the bank that they had filled in some of the original river area and so lessened the width of the river. I stood along the railing of the bridge and watched all the large trucks barrelling back and forth along the road bordering the river, stirring up great quantities of dust and sand. Suddenly,
I was taken by surprise when my ears were clipped by some bits of paper and cloth blown my way by the strong wind. Turning around, I caught sight of a woman half-running, half-walking towards the housing area with a plastic bucket clasped tightly in her hand. It would seem that she had come to the bridge to dump her garbage. Some of the stuff sank to the bottom of the river, and some of it floated up into the air only to be blown by the wind back down onto the surface of the bridge where it whirled about. The section of the river south of the bridge had grown narrow because of the embankment built to protect the newly constructed houses along the two banks. The section of the river north of the bridge was slowly expanding into the hillside area and had reached a fairly high level - there was no longer any water flowing along the riverbed since it had been filled with gravel of all sizes. Wanting to see where on the north side of the bridge all the bricks and mud left over from the wreckage of the torn-down houses had been hauled off to, I followed another small path that led from the foot of the bridge down to the river. I continued north along the bumpy path until finally I saw clearly, at the bend of the river ahead of me, pile after pile of debris like so many little pyramids. The spot was located several hundred feet away from the pylons of the bridge, in a bend of the river that was camouflaged by the trees on the hillsides, thus making it difficult to appeal to either the law or to a concern for appearance. The large
trucks had opened up a steep road leading from the highway and down the embankment to the river where they would dump their load of discarded bricks, stones and dirt into the semi-barren riverbed. They would arrive, stirring up a cloud of dust, dump everything, turn around and again leave in a whirl of dust and din. I wandered over to the piles of dirt as if I were simply taking a stroll, but actually trying to estimate visually how many there were, as well as how many more there might be in the future. I looked around at the landscape and the terrain along the two sides of the river: the hillsides were covered with stands of acacia, but there were a few relatively level areas that had been cleared for rice paddies. In the future, the water rushing down from the mountains would be blocked by these solid piles of debris and diverted towards the dirt embankments along the two sides of the river; it would then flood the agricultural area and inundate the local roads. The sight of such heedless dumping kept me there pacing back and forth lost in thought. I happened to catch sight of one of the trucks which had finished discharging its load; it wasn't that I was blocking its way – I jumped out of the way only to realize that yet another truck was moving towards me. Then all of the trucks on the riverbed gathered in a circle around me. I stood on top of a pile of dirt and faced the brutish drivers who had gotten out of their trucks and were advancing towards me step by step. They were clenching their thick
fists, and some were even carrying the iron bars from their automobile jacks.

Momentarily, I felt the wind-howling scene before me suddenly become deathly quiet. There was no sound whatsoever and I could see only the moving shapes of the dust particles blown through the air by the wind. Slowly the men came closer, all of them with the pale, steely faces of men intent on murder. My soul had long ago fled my unsteady body, and there was no longer any opportunity for a getaway. Just then, the tense silence was shattered by someone calling from over the hill and several men came running down. At their head, yelling "Stop!", was a jacket-clad Mayor Pai.

The next day, Mayor Pai sent someone to ask me to come to his office at the city hall. There I encountered a sofa filled with people, all of whom closely scrutinized me. Mr. Pai said that the higher-ups had already sent word down that a local committee of representatives should be the ones to decide whether or not it was necessary to build an incinerator. Even if it was approved, he added, it would take many years to figure out how to implement it, so for the time being there was no way to go ahead with the proposal I had submitted. Unequivocally but sympathetically, he told me that next year there would be a new mayoral election, and that since he had already served the two terms allowed him by law, he could not run for reelection. Furthermore, their
budget had already been depleted, and, according to regulations, all important items on the agenda would have to be raised anew by the incoming administration. The chairman of the representative committee had indicated that it would be impossible to arrange a special session to discuss something no one was interested in. When I expressed a willingness to stick around until the next administration made its decision, they said they had already made a decision: if in the future, it was decided that this was what was called for, they would choose somebody of their own to do it - they had no intention of relying on an expert from out of town. I told them that my work was not yet completed; that I had seen with my own eyes some things about Tung P'u's disposal problem; that I would have no problem supporting myself; and that I needed to stay on in the area.

It had been raining buckets for almost the entire day; I took an umbrella and went to wait outside the entrance of the clinic for Ch'ien-na to get off work. Ch'ien-na said to me, "I have been warned not to have anything to do with you. Why can't you just mind your own business?" As we walked along the streets, I could see that the rain gutters were already full of water and that floating on the street was all the day's uncollected garbage. We walked to the bridge where I had first stood observing the river on that foggy morning. The garbage tossed from the bridge had been carried away by the water, but I had the feeling that it would
all be washed back again. The swollen river below the bridge roared by, carrying in its muddy waters countless trees and debris of all kinds that had come down from above. Ch'ien-na didn't understand where I was taking her, and I was not in the mood for explanations since she would see it all right in front of her own eyes. After walking a relatively long way we reached the outskirts of town. Pulling her by the hand, I clambered up the hillside; it was rough going but finally we reached a spot from which we could have a bird's-eye view of the entire town of Tung-p'u. "Look, my dearest Ch'ien-na," I said to her. "This rain makes it possible for us to understand the situation even more clearly; it will prove my point." The whole town was being pelted heartlessly by the rain, and the shape of the river had been bloated by the rising waters, that much was all very clear. Perhaps there were some people who at that very moment were joyfully shouting that the rain would wash the ground clean of all the filth, and that the river would carry it all down to the boundless, fathomless sea. But I showed Ch'ien-na where to look - towards the river mouth some distance away. It was fast approaching dusk and I figured that soon the tide would be coming in. If this rain continued to fall, by midnight, when people lay dreaming in their beds, the ocean tide would turn and all the garbage carried away during the day by the river and now floating on the water's surface would be washed right back in again. And since the river was no longer able to flow in
and out of the sea, it would spill out over the banks and
innundate the town. "Ch’ien-na," I cried out, "there is
nothing wrong with luxuriating in water - all of us have at
one time or another gone to the sea or the river to bathe, and
we look upon water as something quite pleasant. But it won’t
be so much fun to soak in a garbage-concoction of dead
animals and foul-smelling things. It will seep through the
doors and windows of our homes, come into our rooms and
innundate our dining-room tables and our beds; the water
will then rise up over our heads and to the ceilings; no one
in the dark night will be able to wake up in time to escape
being buried in garbage." I couldn’t bear to go on describing
the horrible scene I envisioned in my mind. It would not
come to that today. It was still a cozy, peaceful evening and
Tung-p’u would not perish in the filthy waters of disaster.
However, there was no question that one of these days it
would happen. As I spoke these words, Ch’ien-na began to
weep hot tears at my side....

(Published in 1982)
Translated by Beata Grant
Biographical Note—Ch’i-teng-sheng

Ch’i-teng-sheng, the pen-name of Liu Wu-hsiung, was born in T’ung-hsiao, Miao-li, in 1939. He graduated from National Normal University with a Bachelor of Arts degree and now teaches elementary school.

In 1962, he began writing poetry, essays and fiction, and during the 60’s, was one of the most important fiction writers in Taiwan. His published collections of short stories include: The Giant Crab, The Rat I Let Go, The Body Bureau, The Ah-tzu-pieh Who Came to the Village, I Love Dark Eyes, The Hermit, The Skinny Ghost, The Sad Song of Sha River, White Horse, A Stroll to Black Bridge, The Riddle of the City and Leaving the City. In addition, he also has published a collection of poetry and essays, Feeling and Thought, and one critical review, The Art of Jesus.
Not very long ago, the world followed the half-humorous, half-horrifying saga of an American barge heaped high with unwanted garbage sailing from port to port in search of a dumping place. Clearly, the problem of waste and waste disposal is a very real one—especially, of course, for those highly developed nations of the world who are rich enough to indulge in waste, such as the United States, and in the last decades, Japan and Taiwan as well. As Taiwan achieves greater and greater economic success, there have been a few—and it is often the writers and artists who notice these things first—who have begun to point out the dark underside of sometimes indiscriminate development. Ch'i-teng-sheng's short story, written in 1982 and unambiguously entitled "Garbage," is an example of this growing awareness.

The story is set in the nitty-gritty world of small-town Taiwan, with its provincialism, its political infighting, its bureaucratic inertia, and its complacent, garbage-producing inhabitants. Clearly, it could be anywhere in the world, although the overwhelming problems of political factionalism may be especially, although not solely, endemic to Taiwanese society. The narrator of the story, a civil engineer, arrives at the township of Tung-p'u with the intention of designing a much needed waste-disposal plant. However, from the start, he must deal with the inertia and ignorance of the local
population and the short-sightedness of its leadership. He finds it almost impossible to make them see what he himself sees all too clearly—the eventual destruction of the town if the garbage problem is not resolved. In fact, he is a man of vision and it is this near apocalyptic vision which lifts the story above mere muck-raking, and endows it with an almost surrealistic power.

This surrealistic tone is set early in the story with a description of the town before it has even begun to stir—the ubiquitous piles of uncollected garbage of the day before have been overturned by dogs during the night and lie strewn over the streets. Here, and throughout the story, the author provides detailed, almost unrelenting, descriptions of the ways in which people produce garbage—indeed, surround themselves with garbage. In fact, by piling up descriptions of this kinds, he creates a literary equivalent to the accumulation of garbage itself, which is almost painful to read, but is quite effective.

This principle of equivalence can be seen also in the descriptions of the inhabitants of the town—the woman at the motel, the garbagemen, the pedicab driver—they are for the most part described as being unhealthy-looking, lethargic, cheerless, and above all, complacent. They are physical embodiments of the general inertia and complacency that lie behind the refusal to resolve the waste problem. In fact, it is the garbage itself that becomes the real protagonist of this
story, taking on almost human characteristics as human beings themselves fail to exercise the consciousness that makes them human.

The story begins enveloped in mist and this ghostly, somewhat ominous feeling—even a potentially dramatic and violent confrontation scene is frozen into slow-motion—is released only at the end. Ch'ien-na's tears are an expression of horror, but because they show the beginning of an awareness that has finally and painfully broken through a hardened complacency, they are also a symbol of hope.

Beata Grant
Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout
Would not take the garbage out!
She'd scour the pots and scrape the pans,
Candy the yams and spice the hams,
And though her daddy would scream and shout,
She simply would not take the garbage out.
And so it piled up to the ceilings:
Coffee grounds, potato peelings,
Brown bananas, rotten peas,
Chunks of sour cottage cheese.
It filled the can, it covered the floor,
It cracked the window and blocked the door
With bacon rinds and chicken bones,
Drippy ends of ice cream cones,
Prune pits, peach pits, orange peel,
Gloppy glumps of cold oatmeal,
Pizza crusts and withered greens,
Soggy beans and tangerines,
Crusts of black burned buttered toast,
Gristly bits of beefy roasts . . .
The garbage rolled on down the hall,
It raised the roof, it broke the wall . . .
Greasy napkins, cookie crumbs,
Globs of gooey bubble gum,
Cellophane from green baloney,
Rubbery blubbery macaroni,
Peanut butter, caked and dry,
Curdled milk and crusts of pie,
Moldy melons, dried-up mustard,
Eggshells mixed with lemon custard,
Cold french fries and rancid meat,
Yellow lumps of Cream of Wheat.
At last the garbage reached so high
That finally it touched the sky.
And all the neighbors moved away,
And none of her friends would come to play.
And finally Sarah Cynthia Stout said,
"OK, I'll take the garbage out!"
But then, of course, it was too late . . .
The garbage reached across the state,
From New York to the Golden Gate.
And there, in the garbage she did hate,
Poor Sarah met an awful fate,
That I cannot right now relate
Because the hour is much too late.
But children, remember Sarah Stout
And always take the garbage out!
Readers digest this: a drama in real life

AI-YAH! I heard it again. The “O-word.”

This time it was a Tuesday evening, and I was at the checkout line of the local hardware store. I had just spent a harrowing 20 minutes trying to decide whether to purchase the “soft white” or the “yellow tint” fluorescent light bulb. Needless to say, the cheaper “soft white” won out. With my light bulb tucked under my arm, I approached a particular check-out line attended by a young female clerk. Maybe I stood in her line because she was attractive. But quite possibly I stood in her line because I had noticed out of the corner of my eye that there was another Asian guy in the next line. You know The Rule: Don’t stand behind another Asian person or family or else risk having to explain that you’re not related. It saves everyone from potential grief or embarrassment.

As I discretely observed the other line, I noticed that the Asian guy was an older man. One might have easily assumed that he was my father. I wondered if he knew The Rule. Good thing I chose this line. He quickly and quietly finished his transaction, grabbed a plastic bag and left. Swiiish. Out the automatic sliding doors. Into the darkness.

Meanwhile, my clerk reached out for the fluorescent light bulb. I uttered a curt “hello, that’s all” and handed her the bulb. Just enough words to show that I spoke perfect American English. Sorry, no foreigner here. I quite possibly saved us both from another potentially embarrassing situation. So far so good.

Swiiish. A roaming employee walked through the sliding doors. He was probably in charge of shopping cart retrieval. The clerk in the next aisle casually announced to him, “Oh. He forgot one of his bags. He might still be in the parking lot... an Oriental guy.” Oooo! The sound of that word sent chills down my spine as images of mystic Fu Manchus and subservient geishas flashed before me. I suppressed the urge to bow and glanced over to the guilty clerk. Yeah, my suspicions were confirmed; he was a young “soft white” male. An Occidental man.

The usual protests ran through my mind: “Did he know what he just said? Could he actually define for me the boundaries of his ‘O-place?’ Did he even know the history of that word? Did he realize that I was standing right here, an aisle away? Me, the self-proclaimed Asian American activist and a former president of the Asian American Association?” Oh, I’m shocked and infuriated, but no one can tell through my calm collected exterior and expressionless face. I closed my eyes and imagined myself exclaiming in dubbed voice-over, “You have insulted my father’s honor, and now you must pay!”

“Your total is $3.27,” announced my clerk. My attention returned to her. Though still in shock, I managed to hand over my crumpled $5 bill. I stared at her intently while she picked out change from the cash register. My Asian American training had prepared me for moments as these, and I knew my concentrated gaze would prevent any further contribution to such a freely spoken “O-word.” “Here’s your change, sir.” “Thank you,” I replied. Clearly I had an effect.

Swiiish. As I left the hardware store, I wondered what more I should do. Maybe I should go back in and return the light bulb. There was no reason for me to shop at a store where I would be subjected to such insensitivity. Even if it was unintentional. Heck, if I wanted to hear the “O-word,” I could have easily gone over to the carpet
store across the street! With the deceptive skill of Charlie Chan, I could have probed the salespeople about the origins of their fantastic and exotic-looking red, yellow, and green rugs. Then, one of them would be caught off guard and surely let the “O-word” slip out. And I would exclaim, “Ah-hah! I don’t want to buy your magic flying rugs!” And my power as an Asian American consumer would be known and my father’s honor restored. I paused in the parking lot to decide on my actions. Hmmm... I really did need this light bulb...

Days later, the hardware store experience was still clear in mind, but I’ve had time to cool off. The fluorescent bulb was working adequately although I can’t help but think that “yellow tint” might have been better. I really did need this light bulb...

Who knows? Maybe if I was unaware of our issues or if I hadn’t developed such a concern for the community, I wouldn’t be so sensitive. Or maybe I would. I don’t know for sure.

All I know is that I will hear the “O-word” again. And maybe next time, I’ll really do or say something about it. Or maybe I won’t.

Ho Che Tsai was 92-93 Co-president of AAA at UIUC. He is currently working in Chicago and also serves as the Director of University Relations for the Asian American Alumni Association. “Though the article is based on actual events, the views represented above do not necessarily belong in my mind. But they’re there. Ai-yeah.”

1. In other Asian languages, Ai-ya-eh, Ai-eh, or simply Ai-eh.
2. Not that there was any chance she’d ask me out. But Asian male sexuality and psychology is a whole other essay for another day.
3. But in the event she says, “Your English is really good,” I’m prepared with my response: “Ah-so, sank-yu, sank-yu, yo English very good too!”
4. Because all of us know that the O-word was originally used by academics to refer to the Middle East. And the movies show us that Aladdin lives there.
5. And the little voices in my head whispers, “Very good boy, study hard, be doctor, no make waves.”
6. “Can’t we all just get along?”
a perspective...

Sometimes when I walk down the quad I wonder what people think I am. That is, what ethnicity people think I am.

When I was growing up in Lincoln, Nebraska all my friends were white. My mom made my sister and me go to Chinese School every Sunday afternoon. Just like everyone else there, we hated it and we wanted to do other things instead, but every week she still made us go. At home she even made us speak Chinese. All of this has instilled a great deal of Asian culture within me.

I went to a school which was 98% white, so everyone there knew I was Asian. I was the one who did class presentations on the Lunar New Year and other similar holidays. When I got to college, that was the first time that race was ever an issue, because it was the first time that people didn’t automatically know that I was Asian.

You see, my father is of German-Norwegian descent, although he can read, write and speak Chinese. Even though his skin is white, he never seemed different than my mother’s Asian friends. It always seemed so normal to me, there was never a big question—I was Asian American.

Because I am mixed I do not look Asian. Sometimes when I go to Asian functions people will stare at me, wondering what I am doing there or what ethnicity I am. Some people can tell right away that I am of Asian descent, but I have been mistaken for Mexican, White, even Native American. I am starting to get used to it. It no longer phases me when people ask me “What are you?” or “What nationality are you?”. I just answer that I am American like them, but that my mother is Chinese and my father is White.

When people ask why I identify with my Asian side more that my White side, I answer, “Because it is what I know.” My Asian culture is still left within me, although I feel little or no connection with my European heritage, so it becomes White rather than German-Norwegian.

Now when I look back, freshman year was the time I struggled the most with who I was. I didn’t know who I was and I didn’t feel comfortable with the stares and the questions. That was the time that I was forced to define myself. That was when I decided who I was and became comfortable with my identity as an Asian American. Now I can say that I am happy—content with who I am.
crisis

Did you see where I put my forehead dot?
I don't see very well without thick glasses, you know.
I checked every fold in my kimono.
And the wrappings on my feet have come loose.
Maybe it fell into my eggroll, curry, and kimchee lunch,
Or between the pages of the Cherry Blossom catalog.
I called my friend Charlie Chan
to see if I'd left it on his futon
Suzie Wong said it wasn't in her Honda
I checked my pocket protectors too
I took off my veil to make sure
The laundromat said they didn't have it
Maybe I should put out
an ad for it
In the same paper I sought correspondence
with a tall American boy
It wasn't in my box of makeup
Yellow paint and tape to make up
for my epicanthic fold
Oh, wait
Ah so
I remember now
I put it in a box
and labeled it "myths"
and threw it away.

[jessica chen]
reprinted from the
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like a home away from home

The jagged edges of a limestone greying
Red cracks and indentions mark the aging
And beauty of this personable canyon.
The clear flowing water reflecting the tabletop
Stone covering and casting a shadow above and
Around her small grey figure.

She stands looking, observing the water and rock
Unchanging, and yet so different after what seems like
Only a few years
Her dried-dyed hair whips around; her flowing eyes
Reflect the years spent away.
Remember a time when her hair was full and dark
As a night in the desert
When her full figured face didn't need
Oil of Olay and Pond's Cold Cream.

She smiles and weeps together in a smirk
And dips her Pink Adidas shoes into the rocky waters
And says in her broken english,
"I used to play here everyday after school."
She creakily kneels down and splashes the pure water
Onto her face, her mascara and base running, exposing
The lines, indentions, and cracks; her lips without color
But her cheeks still rosy. She smiles.

And as I look up from her and into the canyon
Staring up and down, left and right
I wonder in amazement at the beauty, the
Majesty of this place: my place.
Nothing in the states can compare to this.

I can only ponder, how I would've loved to live here.
Here in Taiwan.
How I could've appreciated this nature.
How I could've met so many different kinds of people.
How I could've loved all the natural beauties
On this Formosa.

My mother looks up and starts climbing
The limestone like someone half her age.
Her figure blends with the greying rock
And for a second, I think she can climb the Grand Canyon.
But she jumps off and holds her back
Smiling, she says, "Ah, I'm getting too old now. But
I used to climb these rocks all the time."

And I forget about all the people I didn't get to meet
All the beautiful places I never saw.
And all the friends I never befriended.
For this is my vacation, my one month away from home
This is her one month return.
One month out of hundreds of months.
For this is my mother's home.
ONCE long ago before the Jade Emperor put people on the earth, China was a great sleeping father dragon lying in the shape of a perfect circle with only the tip of his tail sticking out into the sea.

In the China Sea the young dragons played about, splashing the water into little storms, breathing wispy clouds, and fighting each other to make tiny typhoons for the annoyance of the world.

The young dragons finally tired of this sport.

"I want Father to wake up and make us a great storm," said the first little dragon.

"I want Father to wake up and breathe fearful black clouds," said the second little dragon.

"I want Father to wake up and make a fierce typhoon," said the third little dragon.

But the father dragon continued to sleep. The little dragons became more restless.

"Let's wake our father. He has been sleeping too long," said the little dragons.
So the first little dragon made a rush through the sea and nipped at the big dragon who was still coiled in a circle. He made a small dent in the circle.

Then the second little dragon took a bite, and the third little dragon followed the example. The father dragon stirred but he did not awaken.

Nip, nip—the young dragons grew bolder, taking out great bits and pieces of their father's scaly back, eating into the perfect circle, spitting bites into the water.

Finally the father dragon woke up with a roar that made the earth tremble. He lashed his tail so hard that the tip, weakened by so many bites, broke off and fell into the sea with a crashing splash. A little dragon was trapped underneath.

The father dragon was so angry that he turned over to the south of China and stretched out with his head to the west and his cut-off tail to the east and went back to sleep.

On the map today you can see the lashed-off tail tip. It is the Island of Taiwan. The mountain range down the middle of the island is the little dragon underneath. The ragged seacoast of China shows where the bites came out, and to the south of China lies the forbidding father dragon himself, sleeping away his anger. They call him the Himalaya Mountains on the map.

But not shown on the map are the naughty young dragons who play about in the Taiwan Straits and the China Sea causing typhoons, storms, or just wispy clouds.
A New Year’s Story

LONG ago, before there was any New Year’s celebration in Taiwan, there was an unhappy fishing village facing onto the Taiwan Straits.

Unhappy and unlucky, for there was a fearful menace that kept the village in perpetual sorrow and fear. Out in the sea someone had killed a dragon, a dreadfully unlucky thing to do, and the ghost of the dragon came back to terrify the town.

Once a year in the cold bitter moon of winter the ghostly dragon would steal up on the shore, and, in a bellow too terrible for this world, he would demand a first-born son for his lagging appetite.

If anyone resisted, the dragon would then come closer to the town and breathe his hot stinking breath on the humans who would fall sick, and then the dragon would threaten to destroy the entire town. Each time this happened, a crowd would gather at the temple and decide that it was best to sacrifice one person and save the town, hoping that the monster would never come back. But the monster always did come, in the bitter cold month of midwinter, when the moon was dim
and frozen and the people shivered as they huddled around their charcoal pots. Family after family was required to sacrifice its first-born son.

One year when it was time for the dragon to appear, the young Widow Teng was next on the list to supply the human sacrifice. The old Taoist priest came around to tell her that in four days she must have her only son, a beautiful boy of five, ready for the hungry dragon ghost.

The people in the village were accustomed to the sounds of wild wailing when the unlucky person was told the ill tidings.

But to the surprise of her neighbors the Widow Teng did not wail.

"I have no time to wail," she said tersely. "I am going to think of a way to outwit the dragon. He shall not have my son."

Mrs. Teng had four days and nights to think. For three days and nights she paced the floor, prayed to her ancestors, prayed to Matsu and Kuan Yin and all the gods whose names she knew. Meantime her beautiful son played innocently under the banyan tree in the dooryard, never suspecting that he was soon to be fed to the dragon ghost. She consulted the fortune teller and the priests but all in vain. Nobody knew how to avoid the death by the ghostly dragon. Dragon ghosts can't be killed or locked out. What remained?

Finally, on the afternoon before the dragon ghost was due to arrive, the poor woman was so exhausted that she fell down on the floor before the family altar and dropped into a deep sleep. Her little son, tiptoeing into the room in order not to wake her, was careful not to walk between his mother and the altar, which was a lucky thing or he would have cut off her dreams.

For she was dreaming. Since she had stayed awake for the past three nights, all the dreams that should have come to her night by night crowded into her head in her deep sleep. There were dragons and ghosts and fright and fear and anger and innocent children and blood and great noises and joy and sorrow all mixed
together in one great phantasmagoria of a dream.

When Mrs. Teng awoke at about three o'clock in the morning, she was cold and stiff. She gave her head a great shake and the dream fell into a pattern.

Dragons, the dream told her, are afraid of two things. They are afraid of the sight of blood and they are afraid of loud noises. If a body is afraid of something, he is likely to run from it. So the widow, who had courage, determination, and wit, made a plan.

She would cover her door with blood, and she would make so much noise that she would frighten the dragon away.

But how? She was so poor that she did not even own a chicken that she could kill for its blood. But Mrs. Teng loved her child too much to hesitate. And she had courage. Taking her sharp knife, she cut her own vein and smeared a cloth with her own blood to terrify the dragon. This she hung over the door to her house.

Now the Widow Teng knew that firecrackers make the best noise of all, but how could she, as poor as she was, afford firecrackers? And if she could afford them, how would she find them at this hour? It was now four o'clock in the morning. She must think of something. In one more hour the dragon would be stalking to her door. But Mrs. Teng had wit.

Out into the biting, scary night she crept with her sharp knife. By the ghostly light of the dim bitter moon she hacked at the bamboo in her yard, choosing a dozen heavy joints. She knew that when bamboo is burned the joints split and give off a tremendous racket.

If she could time the fire so that the bamboo would burst at just the right moment of dawn, her prayers might be answered and there was a chance that the dragon ghost would be scared away.

She stacked the bamboo just so into a pyramid that would burn quickly and powerfully and explode at precisely the right moment. Then, because she had determination, she crouched in the doorway, torch in hand, shivering with cold and fright while waiting for the dragon ghost to return.

*Thump, thump.* The world was so quiet that nothing could be heard except the wild beating of her heart. Her little son slept without stirring. Dawn was so slow to come that the sun seemed to be frozen below the horizon. The lighted faggot shook in her trembling fingers. Suppose the bamboo failed. Suppose, suppose.

And then she heard it, a rattling and a groan, a swishing with a hot evil smell. Her flesh crawled and her hair stood up. There was light in the sky, or was it the fire from the dragon ghost's foaming mouth? The earth floor shook as he drew nearer to her miserable little house with its fearful edging of blood on the door. Mrs. Teng lit her bamboo pyramid.

Every house in town was bolted tightly against the dragon, and all the occupants were deep in the family beds with covers piled over their heads. But they were awake. Who could sleep, knowing the agony of Widow Teng?

Widow Teng sat tight lipped and tense, watching her fire. Finally, with a bellow that shook the ancestor
tablets on the family altar, the dragon ghost stopped at her door.

BANG! BANG! BANG! The burning bamboo exploded just as the first ray of dawn lit the sky, giving enough light for the dragon ghost to see the ghastly blood-smeared cloth over the door.

The Widow Teng held her breath for one long minute and let it out in a sigh that left her too weak to move.

The monster turned and ran from the town, terrified by the exploding bamboo and the sight of human blood!

How the firecrackers did pop in the town that day! Bells rang, gongs bonged, people shouted. They had found how to keep the dragon ghost away.

And that is why there is a New Year's celebration in Taiwan, a celebration with blood red papers on the doors and noisy firecrackers that crash in every house just as the light of day comes over the horizon.

For the people remember that the ghosts of dragons run with fright at crashing noises and the sight of blood. And who knows, the ghost of the dragon may come back if they forget to scare him away at dawn on the first day of the Lunar New Year!
In a graceful willow tree beside a clear stream lived a proud wood pigeon and an humble ant. They watched each other warily, hesitating to be friends. After all, what would a proud wood pigeon have to say to an humble ant? Or an humble ant to a proud wood pigeon?

When spring came, flecks of warm sunshine played in and out of the slender willow leaves. The pigeon flew joyfully back and forth, building his nest. The ant climbed busily up and down the trunk carrying bits of food to his children as he listened to the pigeon's lilting spring song.

One day the ant ventured farther up the tree and out onto a tender swaying limb, the better to hear the wood pigeon's love song. A sudden gust of wind whipped the limb against the tree trunk and caused the ant to lose his balance.

Down, down, down, he fell, struggling against the nothingness of air. With a tiny splash he hit the clear stream.
Straining vainly against the current, he splashed as hard as an ant can splash, which isn’t much of a splash, and cried as loudly as an ant can cry, which isn’t much of a cry.

But the wood pigeon swaying back and forth on the swinging limb saw the ant and, in a rush of compassion caused by the joy of the spring day, threw the struggling ant a leaf.

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The ant labored onto the leaf which finally landed on the edge of the stream. Gratefully and wearily he crawled home, where he thanked the pigeon with all his heart.

“I shall do the same for you,” he promised. “I shall save your life.”

The pigeon laughed indulgently. “Thank you, little ant,” he said, “but how could you who are so small save the life of one who is so big?”

The next day a hunter came with a gun on his shoulder and stood under the tree. He looked up at the fat wood pigeon and aimed his gun. He smiled, for the proud wood pigeon was sleeping. But the humble ant was watching.

The ant experienced a chill of horror. How could he save his neighbor from certain death? Unhesitatingly, he braced his tiny body and dived, landing on the ear of the hunter. He dug his stinger deep into the tender center of the hunter’s ear.

The hunter cried out with pain and dropped his gun which went off with a bang that woke the pigeon.

The pigeon flew high into the sky while the ant jumped from the hunter’s ear. While the hunter stamped angrily away, the ant crawled as fast as he could back to the willow tree.

The proud pigeon was waiting for him.

“Thank you, Neighbor Ant,” he said humbly. “You have saved my life.”

“Don’t mention it, Neighbor Pigeon,” replied the ant proudly.
A fisherman named Jingi from the west coast of Taiwan became lost in a fierce storm. Hour after hour, the killing winds and tides hurled him about in the water of the Taiwan Straits. He prayed to the Goddess Matsu, the merciful mother of distressed seamen.

"Please, Matsu, save me and my humble boat. Calm the dragons so that the storm may abate. Take me to safe harbor and bring me good fortune, undeserving as I am."

Matsu took pity on the fisherman, for he was a good man, filial to his ancestors, generous to his relatives, and fair to his neighbors. She entreated the dragons that were causing the disturbance in the Straits to cease their fighting and let the waters be calm again.

Jingi held onto the mast of his boat until it came to safe haven. He stepped ashore expecting to be at home in his native village, but instead he found himself in a large port on the Mainland of China.

Oh, cried Jingi to himself, beating his chest in self-punishment. I forgot to ask Matsu to take me home. I only asked for a safe harbor. Oh, well, he consoled...
himself, now that I am here I shall see the king’s palace.

Jingi tied up his boat and fastened onto the bow a pair of baqua eyes, painted symbols that made the boat itself appear to have eyes that could detect and scare away thieves and evil spirits. He took out the last pieces of dried fish from his watertight box under the bow, wrapped them inside a banana leaf, stuffed the bundle in his shirt, and set out for the palace.

Being only a simple villager, Jingi walked wide eyed through the city looking this way and that, not daring to speak to anyone. But he noticed that the people were all sad. Nowhere was there any laughter or light-hearted play as there was in Taiwan.

Finally he came to the king’s palace, where he found the guards with long faces and silent voices. Jingi walked three times around the palace walls to see what he could see of the magnificent building. The palace and the grounds were as beautiful as the hand of man could make them, but there was no sound of joy. Jingi began to feel his face grow long and sorrowful too, like those of the people around him.

With a deep sigh he sat down beneath a mulberry tree near a guard post and, reaching inside his shirt, pulled out his dried fish.

The minute he spread his fish on the ground before him, a voice shouted in his ears. “Fish, fish, DRIED fish,” cried the guard. “Give it to me.”

“Why should I give you my fish?” asked Jingi, protecting his food from the greedy guard who was snatching and pulling to get it.

“Because the king wants it,” said the guard. “We have had no dried fish for many months, and the king has declared that he will not speak until he has a plate-
ful of dried fish to season his rice."

"Very well then," said Jingi. "Take me to the king and I will give him the fish."

"Oh, no," replied the guard. "Just give the fish to me. I will take it to the king for you."

"No, thank you," said Jingi, protecting the fish from the grasping hands that continued to grab.

"Then I shall buy it from you," said the exasperated guard. "I will give you a good price."

"No, I think not," said Jingi coolly. "I am beginning to suspect that there might be a reward for my fish since the king is so eager for it. Take me to the king."

"Do you think the king would let a simple fellow like you come into his presence? Give me the fish and I will bring you the reward if there is one," said the guard. "Otherwise you cannot see the king."

Jingi thought for a moment. "Take me to the king," he said, "and I will divide the reward with you."

"Give me half of it," demanded the greedy guard.

"Oh, more than half," said Jingi generously.

"You are a good fellow," said the guard jubilantly as he led Jingi through the palace grounds.

They found the king in his inner courtyard, sitting sadly under a willow tree. Jingi knelt before the ruler and presented the dried fish in both hands.

The king was overjoyed. He opened his mouth and spoke for the first time in weeks as he ordered his servants to prepare him a dish of dried fish and rice.

"Now," said the king, "name your reward."

"Oh, Honorable Ruler, I would like to have a thousand lashes with a whip," said Jingi modestly.

"What?" cried the ruler laughing. "Is this man an idiot?"

"Perhaps," said Jingi, "but I still want that for my reward. Please give me the first 499 with a velvet ribbon and the last 501 with a leather whip."

Jingi took off his shirt and knelt before the laughing ruler while a servant tickled his back with a velvet ribbon. After 499 tickles, Jingi stood up.

"In order to bring this fish to your majesty I had to promise this guard that I would give him over half of my reward. So the next 501 pieces of reward are for him."

The king was so angry with the greedy and dishonest guard that he ordered the leather lashes laid on heavily, after which he dismissed the guard from the palace staff.

But the king was so amused with Jingi's cleverness that he rewarded him further with 501 pieces of gold. Jingi took the money back to his poor family in Taiwan where they lived happily ever after.
How To Become a Dragon

Under the Taiwan Straits, the corridor that divides Taiwan from Mainland China, there is a mythical gate guarded by five-toed dragons.

Day and night the dragons patrol this gate, swishing their tails and cavorting in the water to make waves, snorting out clouds to make rain, and roaring thunder to scare the fish.

And no wonder, because if a fish slips through the Dragon Gate, he becomes a dragon, too. If all the fish become dragons, then what is the distinction in being a dragon?

The fish come in schools, anti in groups, in scores, and in pairs to try to jump over, run around, or slide through the Dragon Gate. But the dragons are ready, lying in wait to stop ambitious fish.

After a few tries most of the fish go away, fearful of the five-toed dragons.

"Suppose you do get through," said one carp fish mother discouragingly one day to her children. "What
Gate. Seconds later the dragon guard was back at his post.

“So you can fly after all,” said the little carp admiringly. He began to feel himself growing larger as he watched his fish scales turning into dragon scales.

The dragon gave a bellow that upset a fishing boat near Tamsui.

But he stopped and let a smile of admiration come over his fierce dragon face.

“I wanted you to be a dragon all the time,” he said. “You have the ambition and the persistence and the wit to be a dragon. So I just let you through because I wanted to.”

And the little carp, who by now had miraculously turned into a haughty dragon himself, gave the dragon guard a cuff with his new five-toed foot.

That’s why it rained in Taiwan that day. The dragons were fighting in the Taiwan Straits.
Near Alishan in Taiwan, there was said to be a woman who was really a Tiger Witch. Some said she lived in a house made of sugar cane and candied sweet oranges, and that she lured little children inside it with gifts of sweet potatoes and such goodies.

Once inside, the children would be dipped in tempura batter and fried a crisp brown. Then the Tiger Witch would eat them and save the bones, which she dropped into her pocket for between meal snacks, crunching them like peanuts. She was said to be especially fond of finger bones.

Everyone knew about her. Dreadful stories of her wicked behavior sifted through the bamboo thicket that surrounded the village where Ah-lee and Ah-bi lived with their mother and father and their baby brother. For safety, every house had a baqua eye painted on wood or paper hanging on the door post to keep witches and demons from crossing the threshold, so the two sisters never worried about the tales of the Tiger Witch.

One day the father of the family went on a journey to the sea with the magistrate of the district. He was gone for many days, and finally the mother, in her concern, decided to go to the temple in the next village to make a sacrifice of pork and chicken to the gods there, who were noted for bringing travelers home safely.

"Shut the door tightly and don't let anyone in the house until I come back," warned the mother. "I shall stay overnight, for I must stop to visit my own mother while I am near my old home. If anything bothers you, run tell the old priest in the temple across the rice paddy."

The mother strapped the baby onto her back, put the pork and chicken into her bag, and set out.

It was a long and lonely day for Ah-bi and Ah-lee,
for they lived in a remote house in the middle of a rice paddy on the edge of the village near the old Taoist temple.

Late in the afternoon the girls sat on the doorstep of the house, listening to the temple bells while they ate their rice and drank their tea. Ah-bi put down her chopsticks and pulled a bit of dried kumquat from the pocket of her dress and offered to share it with her sister. As the girls pulled at the sweetmeat to divide it equally, an old woman came up the path to the house.

"Good evening," said the old woman. "Are you Ah-bi and Ah-lee?"

"Yes," said Ah-bi, who was older.

"Your mother asked me to come and stay the night with you," said the woman, settling down on the steps. "I am your old aunt, and I met your mother on the road as I was coming this way. She said for me to come and sleep with you to protect you from evil spirits and evil people until she returned."

Ah-lee, although she was younger, was responsible beyond her years.

"Our mother told us not to let anyone come in," she said, looking at the old woman carefully.

"Oh, but I am your relative. Do you see how much I look like your mother?" The two girls looked at the old woman, and indeed, she did look like their mother. (Witches can look any way they please). "Besides," she added, reaching inside her dress, "I have brought you some plums from your mother."
Ah-bi and Ah-lee were delighted with the fruit. By the time they had sucked the sweet flesh from the plum seeds, they had forgotten all about their mother's warning. They sat with their guest until the sun set over the rice paddy and the moon rose behind the house. When the moon fingers touched the ginger lilies, they rose to go to bed.

When the guest stood up she brushed against the baqua sign, making it drop to the ground where it rolled under a banana tree. Ah-bi and Ah-lee jumped up to run after it, but the old aunt grabbed them in her strong fingers and stopped them.

“No, no,” she said. “Wait until morning. You might be bitten by a snake if you go chasing after that sign at night. It’s only a painted picture of an eye.”

“But our baqua keeps evil spirits out of the house,” explained Ah-lee.

“Never mind,” said the old woman, stepping over the threshold. “I’m here to look after you so you won’t need the baqua tonight.”

From time to time the old aunt gnawed on something she pulled from her pocket. Soon they all got into bed with the old woman in the middle.

“What are you eating, Aunt?” asked Ah-lee as she snuggled down beside her relative who continued to make loud crunching noises.

“Peanuts,” said the old lady. “Oh, how I love peanuts!” She chuckled to herself as she pinched Ah-bi with one hand and Ah-lee with the other.

“May I have one?” asked Ah-lee. “I love peanuts, too.”

But the old lady only pulled Ah-lee closer to her with one arm. She continued to pinch Ah-bi, who was taller and thinner, with her other hand.

“Peanuts, peanuts,” she chuckled in such a harsh, cracked voice that chills like the winter wind slid down Ah-lee’s spine. She tried to pull away but the old woman only held her tighter, chuckling, “Peanuts, peanuts.”

Peanuts? Ah-lee suddenly remembered the whispered tales she had heard about the Tiger Witch who crunched the finger bones of the little children she caught like peanuts.

From the other side of the old woman, Ah-lee could hear the even, sleep-sodden breathing of Ah-bi. Ah-bi could always fall asleep faster than anyone.

“Ah-bi,” whispered Ah-lee, but the old woman put her bony fingers across Ah-lee’s mouth, and the little girl lay there with only her quick wits for company. There was no doubt in her mind now that their bed-fellow was the wicked old Tiger Witch. She must run for help before it was too late, but the old witch held her close. She must think fast.

Presently, Ah-lee began to turn and twist and pitei about in the bed. “Ohhh,” she moaned, “I need to go outside, Aunt.”

“No,” said the witch, “you must stay here.”

“If I don’t go outside you’ll be sorry,” warned Ah-lee.

“No,” said the witch again, munching on a seemingly endless supply of crunchy fingers.

“Please,” squealed Ah-lee. “Oh, you’ll be sorry.”

“I won’t let you go,” she said in her scratchy witch voice. “I promised your dear mother to take care of
you. A snake or a scorpion might bite you when you go outside."

"But I must go. I have to, I have to," cried Ah-lee, raising her voice in hopes of waking Ah-bi. But Ah-bi slept peacefully. "Why not tie a string to my ankle, Aunt? Then you can hold the string and pull it to see if I'm safe. I have to go. The plums upset me."

"All right," grumbled the witch. "Hand me the string."

The old witch tied the long string to Ah-lee's ankle, and Ah-lee hobbled through the door into the yard. Ah-bi was still sleeping soundly.

Once outside, Ah-lee slipped the string from her foot and tied it to a tree. Oh, she must hurry, hurry, before Ah-bi became a pocketful of crunchy bones.

"I'm all right, Aunt," Ah-lee called. "You can feel the string, can't you?" She could see the string jerk. "Don't worry about me. I'll pull the string when I'm ready to come back to the house."

Ah-lee looked at the moonlit path that led through the rice paddy to the temple. Never had she left her own yard at night, but this was no time for fear. She plunged through the field as fast as her feet would take her. She knew that the old priest could drive the witch from the house, and she beat on the temple door as brazenly as a grown person.

"Old priest!" she cried. "Come quickly. The Tiger Witch is at our house, and Ah-bi is in bed with her!"

The old Taoist priest lit a lamp and came sleepily to the door.

"Hold the light," he said. "I must find my horn and my gong. I can't kill witches with them, but I can drive them away."

Ah-lee lit the path as they hurried across the field. At the edge of Ah-lee's yard, they could hear the old witch calling in her rasping voice.

"Just a minute, Aunt. I'm coming. I only want to stop by the well and get a drink of water," answered Ah-lee.

"When you get into your house, fill a dish with egg, pork, rice, and bean curd and set it on your doorstep," whispered the old priest. "I will slip inside the house. When I begin to blow my horn and beat my gong, fling open the door. The old witch will go outside to taste the food because she is a witch. Then shut the door very fast."

"I understand," whispered Ah-lee. "I'm coming, Aunt," she called. She knocked on the door and the old witch let her in.

"Get back in bed now," ordered the witch.

"I'm very hungry. First I must get myself some food," said Ah-lee, fumbling around the stove. She grabbed up some egg and bean curd with some pork and rice and ran to the door.

"What are you doing?" grumbled the witch. "Come back here. You can't go outside again."

"I only want a moonbeam of light so I can see if my rice and bean curd have bugs in them," hedged Ah-lee, pushing the dish onto the doorstep. From the corner of her eye, she could see the old priest slipping into the house.

Ah-lee flung the door wide at the precise moment
that the old priest began to beat his sacred gong and
blow his sacred horn with a noise so loud that Ah-bi
woke up with a scream and the old witch, attracted by
the food, ran out of the house.

Ah-lee slammed the door shut and the old witch was
gone.

The priest made sure that the girls were settled back
in bed and returned to his temple.

Just as Ah-bi and Ah-lee were falling asleep, they
heard a great knocking at the door.

"Open up, it's Mother," cried the voice at the door.
It was undoubtedly Mother's voice. (Witches can take
any kind of voice they please.)

Ah-bi flung open the door, and to her horror the old
witch rushed into the room again. "Ah, ha," cried the
witch, "you forgot to put your baqua eye back on the
door!"

Ah-bi gave a shriek and ran behind the stove while
Ah-lee and the witch played a fierce game of chase
around the room. Ah-lee finally got through the door
and up to the top of the banyan tree.

"Come down," yelled the witch.

"All right," said Ah-lee sweetly. "I'll come down
after I rest a minute. I know you are planning to eat us,
but first I think I should tell you that I am very dirty
from running in the muddy rice paddy. If you will
bring me a kettle of boiling peanut oil I will clean
myself with it and jump right into your mouth. I will
taste much better that way."

The witch grumbled, but she agreed.

"Ah-bi, make a pot of very hot oil," called Ah-lee.
"I'm going to fry somebody."

"I understand, sister," called Ah-bi. "I'll put it on to
boil."

The old Tiger Witch stood under the banyan tree
looking up at Ah-lee. "I'm not going to wait any longer.
I'm coming to get you. You're too slow," she com-
plained.

"Boil it faster. Blow up the fire, Ah-bi," called
Ah-lee.

"I'm blowing, sister," called Ah-bi, huffing and
puffing at the charcoal.

"I'm coming up," snapped the old witch.

"Wait one minute," cried Ah-bi. "Here I come with
the oil. I'll take it right up the tree to Ah-lee, and I'll
wash in it, too, while you eat Ah-lee."

Ah-bi climbed the banyan tree with the pot of boil-
ing oil. The girls made believe that they were washing
in the oil while the witch paced below.

"Open your mouth, Aunt," called the girls. "Stand
right below us and open your mouth."

"I'm getting ready to jump," cried Ah-lee.

The greedy old witch stood right below Ah-lee and
opened her ugly mouth. Ah-lee and Ah-bi tipped the
kettle of smoking hot oil so that it fell directly into the
witch's mouth. With a tiger's roar, she fell writhing to
the ground.

The girls watched as her body wilted into a stack of
wet banyan leaves. At the same time, a ghostly tiger rose from the leaves and ran snarling into the bamboo thicket on the hill.

At last they knew that the old Tiger Witch was dead, but nevertheless they looked under the banana tree until they found the *baqua* eye which they hung back on the door post, in case any other witches were prowling.

The next day their mother came back with the baby brother on her back, and one day later Father returned from his trip with the magistrate.

Everyone was so happy that they had a huge *pai-pai* feast. They had a parade and burned paper money to the gods and everyone ate all he could hold.

And no one ever saw the Tiger Witch again.
High in the Taiwan mountains live aborigine people who once were wild headhunters. Because they thought they had to have human heads for sacrifice, and the Chinese heads were easier to get than aborigine tribal heads, they often stole into remote farms, attacking and beheading the unlucky farmers.

They had to have the heads, they argued. How else could they prove their manhood, win tribal wars, and appease the gods of the mountains?

One day long ago, a young Chinese man, Wu-Feng, was made Director of the Mount Ali District by the Emperor in Peking. Wu-Feng had lived in Taiwan all his life, having come there from Fukien Province as a very small child with his father. Wu-Feng was bright and noble, educated in the best of the Confucian classics. He yearned to be a good ruler, but first he had to put a stop to the fearful menace of headhunting so that the Taiwanese farmers could tend their rice fields in safety.
As a child, Wu-Feng had often gone into the mountains with his father, who was a magistrate himself. Wu-Feng had played with the mountain children, and one of his friends, a boy his own age from the Mount Ali tribe, became a chief the year that Wu-Feng took office as a government official. Drawing on his friendship, Wu-Feng tried to persuade the young chief that headhunting was wrong.

Long and serious were their conversations. The chief in his own way was as eager for peace and good government among his people as Wu-Feng was for the Taiwanese people. Peace, Wu-Feng pointed out, was only possible if the headhunting stopped.

“But the people insist on heads,” said the chief. “The custom cannot change overnight.”

Wu-Feng, being wise, agreed to this. “Why not use the heads you already have stored in your sacred places?” he asked, knowing that the warriors saved the heads from past battles. The chief agreed.

So for forty years the Mount Ali mountain people drew on their supply of heads and left the Taiwanese farmers with heads on their shoulders.

But eventually, the heads gave out. Furthermore, a new generation had grown up in the more than forty years that Wu-Feng and the chief had been in office. The new generation of aborigines wanted to go back to the headhunting customs of their ancestors.

The chief came to Wu-Feng and warned him that he could no longer control his young warriors. Wu-Feng warned his Taiwanese people to be alert. Trouble was brewing.

One morning when Wu-Feng went to his office, he was greeted by a group of young aborigine warriors and their chief.

“Wu-Feng,” said the chief, “I have come for the sake of old friendship to warn you that these young people will no longer obey me. They are planning to go headhunting. This is a declaration of war.”
“Thank you for your warning,” said Wu-Feng, bowing his head wearily. He found the burdens of governing were very heavy.

“Can nothing stop you?” he asked the impatient warriors.

“Nothing,” they replied. “We want heads.”

Wu-Feng thought for a few minutes.

“Very well, then if nothing can stop you, I stand warned. But will you let me choose the person whose head you will take?”

The warriors looked at each other and frowned uneasily.

“What difference is it whose head you get?” said Wu-Feng.

“All right,” agreed the leader of the young men. “But how will we know the head of your enemy whom you wish beheaded?” Wu-Feng would of course trick an enemy into being beheaded in this clever trap.

Wu-Feng smiled sadly. “When do you want the head?” he asked.

“In three days,” they said. “We must make preparations for our sacrifice.”

“Then early in the morning three days from now you will see a man in a red cloak and hood walking away from this office. This is your man. You may have his head for your sacrifice,” said Wu-Feng.

The warriors, satisfied with the victory, filed out of the office. Wu-Feng laid a restraining hand on the arm of his lifelong friend, the old chief.

“Good-bye, old friend,” said Wu-Feng. “We may never meet again.”

Three days later, Wu-Feng arose in the morning and put on a red robe with a hood. He reread a letter he had written to his elder son and placed it on the family altar. He affectionately told his wife and children good-bye. They looked up in surprise. Wu-Feng was only going to his office a few yards away.

The morning was misty as mornings often are on
the slopes of Mount Ali. Wu-Feng, tall and red clad, emerged from the fog, walking away from his office. The warriors were waiting, hiding behind rocks.

With a twang of bows, arrows shot at Wu-Feng from every direction. Wu-Feng stumbled, dropped to the ground.

The leader of the young mountain men dashed out with upraised blade and chopped off the head of the man in the red cloak.

The sun opened the mist just as the warriors turned back the cloak of their victim and saw that it was Wu-Feng.

The savages drew back with screams of fear. This was not the head they wanted. Oh, any head but this! Even the savages had respected and feared this wise ruler.

So great was the horror of everyone that Taiwan was not large enough for the grief. The old chief died of a broken heart when he heard what his young people had done. The rebellious warriors were brought to their senses and they saw that no good could come of head-hunting. They made a vow that they would never sacrifice heads again. And they never did.

The people built a temple in memory of Wu-Feng, the leader who loved his people so much that he gave his own life to bring peace between the mountain people and the Taiwanese.

The descendants of Wu-Feng still live near the temple which stands today on the spot where Wu-Feng died, near the city of Chia-yi in Taiwan.

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