The Kaleidoscope of the Re-Presentations of Yeh-hsien (the Chinese 'Cinderella' Story)

Bin Hu

The story of Cinderella would surprise no-one today, but the number of its analogues—stories of the same pattern—and the variety of the subtle changes in its retellings may indeed astonish readers. As many as 345 similar narratives are listed in Marian Roalfe Cox's *Cinderella* (Cox 1893). The earliest prototype of the Cinderella story, 'Yeh-hsien', the Chinese story originating more than eleven hundred years ago (Duan Chengshi 1980, pp. 172-173), seems to have attracted as much attention from its retellers as from its readers.

Too many changes and re-shapings of the story exist to enable a comprehensive study in a brief article, so I will attempt here to characterise the differences and similarities in re-presentations of the story pattern, culture and ideology by taking a close look at two English-language picture book versions: Ai-Ling Louie's *Yeh-Shen: A Cinderella Story from China* (Louie 1982) and Barbara Ker Wilson's *Wishbones: A Folk Tale from China* (Wilson 1993). For the sake of convenience, Arthur Waley's (1947) translation of the original story is cited in order to compare and contrast these representations, though Waley's translation of the ending of the story is rather inaccurate.[1] From the comparison, it will emerge that both retellings have been produced under the influence of Perrault's *Cinderella*, and of Western folk tale conventions in general, though this is much more evident in Wilson's version than in Louie's.

The impact of Perrault's version of the Cinderella story is evident both in the verbal texts and the pictorial art (Perrault 1888). In part this re-shaping may be prompted by impulses to make the story more accessible, to eliminate culturally alien elements (such as polygamy), or to enhance the presumed universal qualities of the story. As John Stephens and Robyn McCallum point out, however, such re-versioned stories 'are always already shaped by some kind of metanarrative, and their status makes them a good site on which to impose metanarratives expressing social values and attitudes prevailing in the time and place of the retelling' (Stephens and McCallum 1998). Such changes and re-shaping are evident from a comparison of such aspects as the personality of the characters, the description of the shoe, the transformation of the clothes, the age of the king, the treatment of the supernatural, and the good qualities of the Cinderella character (henceforth referred to by the Chinese name, Yeh-hsien).

When the two recent versions of the story are compared with the original Chinese version, the influence of Perrault's version is evident in the description of the characters of Yeh-hsien and her stepsister(s). In the original Chinese story, no comparison is made between the characters of Yeh-hsien and her stepsister. In his version, however, Perrault makes a point of contrasting the personalities of the step-mother and her daughters with those of Cinderella: the step-mother is 'the most haughty, stuck-up woman you ever saw' and her two daughters are 'just like her in everything'. Cinderella is 'gentle and sweet-natured, taking after her mother, who was the best person in the world'. Feature for feature, 'despite every-thing', Cinderella is 'still a hundred times prettier than her sisters for all their sumptuous clothes'. In Louie's version, Yeh-Shen (sic) is 'a bright child and lovely too, with skin as smooth as ivory and dark pools for eyes', a description in which the terms are also reminiscent of the constitutive descriptors of Snow-White. The stepmother is 'jealous of all this beauty and goodness, for her own daughter was not pretty at all'. Though no comparison is made in the text of Wilson's version, it is strongly evident in Meilo So's illustrations. The haughty and ugly stepmother and stepsister are frequently presented together, the latter being an exact replica of the former.

Such a change in the retelling of the story indicates how it has been reshaped under the influence of Perrault.

In addition to the comparison of the characters' personalities, the treatment of clothing, and especially of the lost shoe, also demonstrate how the story has been re-shaped. All versions pivot on the incident of the lost shoe, but the change occurs in the description of the shoe and the choice of signifiers referring to it. In the original Chinese story, the lost shoe is described in detail. It is unusual not only in size (being so small that in the kingdom of T'o-han there is no-one that it fits), but also in substance (being made of gold), and in function—it was 'light as down and made no noise even when treading on stone'. It is referred to throughout simply as 'xie'—a 'shoe' or 'shoes'. In Perrault's story the place of the gold shoe is taken by a little glass slipper. The description is relatively brief—'the prettiest in the world'. In Louie's version the material of the shoe is preserved—'a tiny golden shoe'; so is its size—'impossibly small'; and so is its special function—making 'no sound when touched to stone'. The signifiers which designate it, however, disclose a flexibility or propensity for change in Louie's version: 'one of her golden slippers', 'a tiny golden shoe' and 'sandal' are used interchangeably. The hesitation grows into a certainty in Wilson's version where the golden shoe becomes 'a silken slipper'. The description of the slipper is even briefer than that in Perrault's story. The various descriptors in the two versions again reflect Perrault's influence in the re-shaping of the story.

As with the shoe, the transformation of Yeh-hsien's shabby clothes also displays how the story has been reoriented in its re-presentations. In the original Chinese story there is no transformation of the clothes. By praying to the fish's bones Yeh-hsien is able to obtain her splendid dresses, which she then keeps in her special place. Even at the climax of the story where the king has found her, Yeh-hsien comes forward 'wearing her cloak spun from halcyon feathers and her shoes', which, instead of being transformed, have been kept hidden by her. Perrault's story has the recurrent motif whereby Cinderella's clothes are touched by her Godmother's magic wand and consequently 'changed into garments of gold and silver cloth, embroidered all over with jewels'. At the conclusion, Cinderella's clothes are turned into 'garments even more stunning than all the others'. While Wilson's version makes no mention of any transformation of Yeh Hsien's clothes, the transformation motif has been borrowed into Louie's version where Yeh-hsien's clothes are 'transformed once more into the feathered cloak and beautiful azure gown' when the king asks her to try the golden slippers on her feet. This bears a striking resemblance to the typical description in Perrault's story.

Other elements of the story which seem to be re-shaped under Perrault's influence are the ages of the characters and the nature of the supernatural. The age of the king, in particular, appears to be determined by the contemporary assumption that romantic, same-age, companionate marriages are a cultural norm. For a discussion of this principle in relation to fairy tale, with reference to *Beauty and the Beast*, see Warner (1994, Chapter 17, especially pp.278-79). In the original Chinese story no definite age is attributed to the king, though his soldiers 'had subdued twenty or thirty other islands' and his country 'had a coastline of several thousand leagues'. Judging from this fact, the king's age may be estimated at something over 40, allowing for one battle in each year for 'twenty or thirty' continuous years after he comes to the throne. In Perrault's story the role of the king in the original Chinese story is played by a prince. This accords with the Western fairytale pattern based on an outcome which pairs a

beautiful princess and a brave, young and handsome prince. In Louie's version there is likewise no information about the king's age. However, the king is not presented as being especially old in that he is able to continue 'his vigil into the night' when he is bent on finding out the owner of the lost slipper. When the story is retold in Wilson's version the matter of the king's age is directly addressed: he is a 'young king', in accordance with Wilson's pervasive tendency to mould her story on the pattern of Perrault's.

The representation of supernatural elements and magic powers in folk tales is handled differently within different cultural traditions. In the original Chinese story no such word as 'magic' or its equivalent appears in the description of the supernatural power of the fishbone. In Perrault's story the magic power of Cinderella's godmother is elaborated vividly and thoroughly. In Louie's version the bones of the fish are described as having 'wondrous powers', and Wilson takes this a stage further with the information, 'But those bones are magic'. Here the word 'magic' assimilates the supernatural element to a motif typical in Western fairytales. In the original Chinese story the man from the sky gives plain instructions to Yeh-hsien: 'You go back, take the fish's bones and hide them in your room. Whatever you want, you have only to pray to them for it. It is bound to be granted'. No such words as 'magic' or 'spiritual' are used. Further, in Louie's version the man from the sky is presented as 'a very old man' (again apparently in conformity with conventional association of old age and power in Western fairy tales and evident in the fairy godmother of *Cinderella).* In the instructions given to Yeh-Shen by the sky man, the key supernatural term is *spirit*: 'The bones of your fish are filled with a powerful spirit'. In Wilson's version the word 'spirit' is replaced by the word 'magic': 'But those bones are magic. Hide them and whatever you wish for will be granted'. Again the man from the sky is presented as being 'an old man'. The gradual emergence of the word 'magic' and the old age of the man from the sky indicate the reorientation of the story in its retellings.

As well as the outward appearance of characters, directions in the re-presentations of the story are also evident in Yeh-hsien's moral qualities and behaviour. In the original Chinese story, she begins to 'render service to the king' and is brought back to his country. Nothing is said about the future relations between Yeh-hsien and her stepsister or stepmother, and all that is related is the fact that the stepmother and stepsister are 'shortly afterwards struck by flying stones' and die. In Perrault's story, however, Cinderella is so virtuous that she forgives her stepsisters 'with all her heart', and on her wedding day takes them to live in the palace and marries them 'the same day to two great lords of the court'. Louie introduces this motif, but in a kind of cultural compromise: 'Since they [the stepmother and stepsister] had been unkind to his beloved, the king would not permit Yeh-Shen to bring them to his palace'. Obviously Yeh-Shen forgives her stepmother and stepsister, but the king remains inexorable. Wilson does not draw on this motif, but instead endows Yeh-hsien with a different virtue—she chides her husband-king for his avarice. The effect of this change is to accentuate the moral implication of the narrative once the fish-bones cease responding to the king's demands for material goods. Either way, the attempt to enhance Yeh-hsien's virtues is a further indication of how the story is reshaped under the influence of Western metanarratives.

The juxtaposition of the original Chinese Cinderella story with its later versions not only shows how the same story is reshaped, but also provides insight into diverse cultures. This is evident in the depiction

of family structure, the description of magic power, the way the search for the owner of the little slipper is carried out, the king's attitude to the girl, and the concept of retribution.

Family structures change in different versions. In the original Chinese story Yeh-hsien's family is polygamous, which was a common practice in China at the time. The father has two wives, each of whom has a daughter. When both Yeh-hsien's parents have died and she has thus become an orphan, she is helplessly exposed to the maltreatment of her jealous step-mother. In Perrault's story the structure of the family is monogamous and the conflict is produced by serial marriage, as Cinderella's father takes as his second wife 'the most haughty, stuck-up woman you ever saw'. In Louie's version the family structure is the same as in the original Chinese story, whereas in Wilson's version the family structure is re-shaped on the model of Perrault's, so that the story is more easily accepted by the Western reader.

The reflection of different cultures can also be found in the way the search for Yeh-hsien is carried out. In the original Chinese story the king of T'o-han is bent on finding the young woman who has lost the gold shoe:

> *So he [the king] threw it down at the wayside. Then they went everywhere through all the people's houses and arrested them. If there was a woman's shoe, they arrested them and told the king of T'o-han. He thought it strange, searched the inner-rooms and found Yeh-hsien. He made her put on the shoe, and it was true.*

(A more accurate translation of the last sentence would read, 'and he was convinced [that Yeh-hsien was indeed the owner of the lost shoe]' rather than 'and it was true'.) Here readers are shown rough arrests, forced searches and stern orders, all of which were common under the regime of a king or emperor in ancient China.

In Perrault's story the search is carried out without any arrest. Rather, the whole activity has the atmosphere of celebrating something happy or at least of holding a fair and open competition, as 'the Prince had it cried to the sound of trumpets that he would marry the girl whose foot fitted the slipper'.

In Louie's version the savage actions are replaced by more dramatic and more romantic arrangements. The king first has all the ladies of his own kingdom try on the little sandal, and all fail. Undaunted, the king orders the search widened 'to include the cave women from the countryside where the slipper had been found...'. In order to find the girl, the king uses the slipper as a bait and has it placed by the side of the road, announcing that it is to be returned to its original owner. He even goes so far as to keep vigil himself. When he finds out the owner of the shoe, he lets her go away without arresting her, instead ordering his men to follow her home quietly. The search is more like courtship.

In Wilson's version the search process is accommodated even further to the events of Perrault's story:

> *The young king commanded all the women of his household to try on the slipper, but it proved too small for even the tiniest foot.... He sent out messengers with the precious slipper to search the countryside. At last they came to Wu's cave. First Yeh-Hsien's stepmother tried on the slipper: it was far too small for her. Next her daughter thrust it on her foot, but it was too small for her too. Last of all, Yeh Hsien tried the slipper. It fitted her tiny foot perfectly.*

Again there are no barbarous arrests. Nor are there harsh commands. The culture is re-shaped to that of the western world when the same story is re-presented in English (see Plate 1).

The difference in culture is also reflected in the description of

the king's attitude to Yeh-hsien in different versions of the story. In the original Chinese story the king of T'o-han takes 'the fish-bones and Yeh-hsien...to his country', and eventually makes Yeh-hsien his chief wife. Polygamy is maintained and the profit-producing fish-bones are mentioned before Yeh-hsien. Readers are not told how much more, or if, the king loves Yeh-hsien than her fish-bones. In Perrault's story the prince is head over heels in love with Cinderella and becomes 'so wrapped up' in her that he 'couldn't eat a thing'. In Louie's version the king's attitude to Yeh-Shen is also marked with love: 'Her loveliness made her seem a heavenly being, and the king suddenly knew in his heart that he had found his true love. Not long after this, Yeh-Shen was married to the king'. In Wilson's version Yeh Hsien is taken back to 'the young King of T'o Huan', who makes her 'his wife and queen of all the land'. In all the English versions monogamous marriage replaces polygamous marriage and love is emphasised.

The issue of retribution also reveals cultural difference. In the original Chinese story the stepmother and stepsister are 'shortly afterwards struck by flying stones' and die. Such poetic justice is typical of most Chinese fairy tales. In Charles Perrault's story, however, the two stepsisters, having '[thrown] themselves at [Cinderella's] feet and asked forgiveness for all the harsh treatment they had made her suffer', are married to two great lords of the court. This is characteristic of the biblical principle of forgiveness. Though in Louie's version poetic justice is preserved, what is stressed is the hinted forgiveness from Yeh-Shen and an inevitable arrangement of fate: 'But fate was not so gentle with her stepmother and stepsister...they were crushed to death in a shower of flying stones'. In Wilson's version no retribution is mentioned at all, and this helps shape the retelling of the story into a culture where forgiveness is valued above retribution.

Just as the verbal text expresses significant cultural differences, so the pictorial discourse also presents cultural information. As cultural discourses, the two picture books vary greatly in their effectiveness. Through his illustrations for Louie's version, Ed Young incorporates a significant cultural belief: it is traditional in Chinese folklore that the spirit of a murder victim haunts the murderer, and here the picture book enhances the supernatural power of the magic fishbone by incorporating the haunting fish into almost every page. The artist does it in such a subtle way that sometimes the image of the fish escapes the reader's eyes if a picture is looked at in a cursory way.

On the contrary, however, the more carefully readers look at the pictures, the more they will observe of the hidden image and implication embedded in the book. For instance, when the picture juxtaposes how Yeh-Shen's stepmother embraces her own daughter with great love and how Yeh-Shen has to toil alone, the background image of the fish seems to be weeping. When Yeh-Shen loses one of her golden slippers, the background image of the fish appears to be shouting in great surprise. When the owner of the slipper is being sought, all who try it on are subject to the fish's control (see Plate 2). The haunting fish remains active throughout the book until the story comes to an end, where the muted background image of the fish seems to be resting contentedly beside the tomb of the stepmother and her daughter. With such a strong background image, the book effectively presents the significance of the magic fish.

In addition to the strong background image of the fish, Louie's version successfully brings the haunting fish to the foreground in the careful reader's mind by the high frequency of the appearance of the fish image. Compared with Yeh-Shen's stepmother and

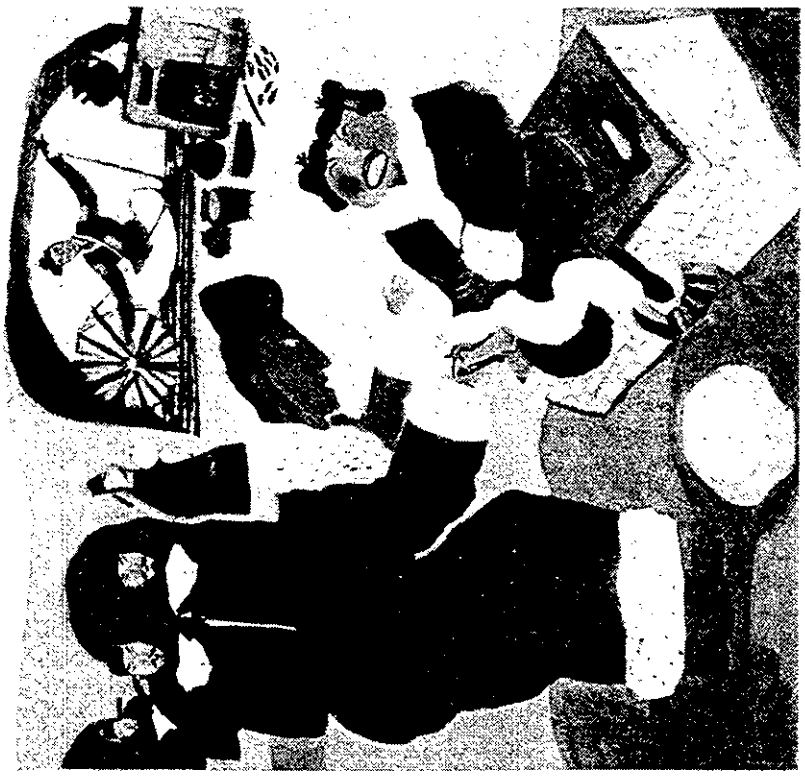

Plate 1

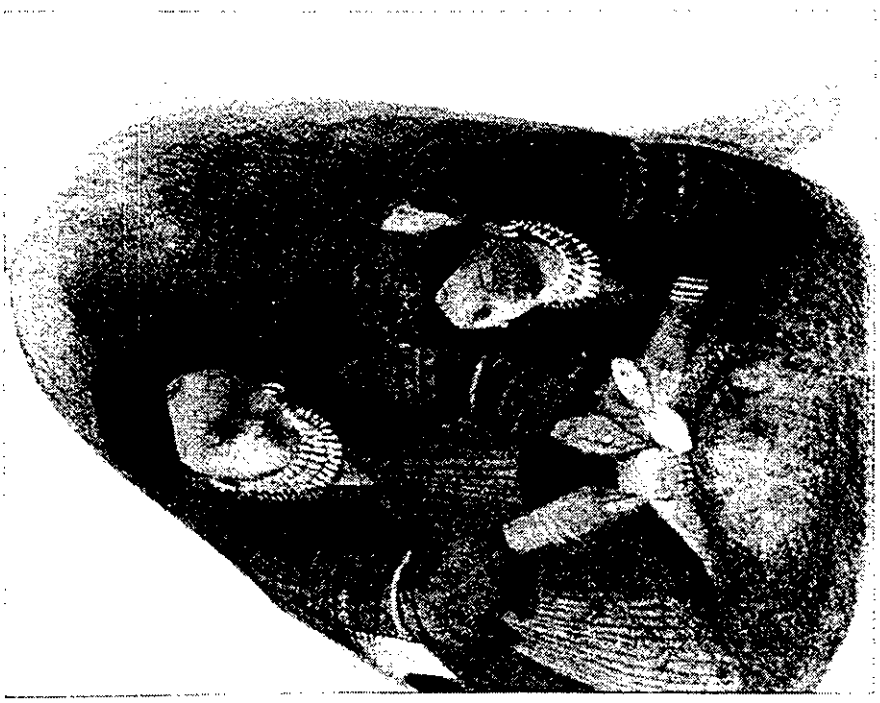

Plate 2

Plate 3

Plate 4

stepsister, who appear on only three out of twenty-nine pages, the image of the fish is presented on every doublespread, so focussing readers' attention on this image.

Another pictorial strategy in the Louie/Young version deserves comment. While some pictures are contained within their frames, most break the frame and 'bleed' so much that they intensify the power of the magic fish and draw viewers into the story, making them participants rather than mere spectators. As Jane Doonan remarks when explaining the effect of a bleeding picture, 'the effect suggests a life going on beyond the confines of the page so that the beholder becomes more of a participant in than a spectator of the pictured events' (Doonan 1993, p.81). For example, when Yeh-Shen is getting water from a deep and dangerous place, which is one of the 'heaviest and most unpleasant chores' imposed on her by her stepmother, the picture bleeds on the bottom edge, where the girl is depicted bending low pulling the bucket in such a prominent foreground position that beholders are apt to be drawn into strong empathy with Yeh-hsien in her difficult and dangerous situation (see Plate 3). The bleeding effect is most powerful when the image of the fish goes beyond the frame of the layout, and accentuates the supernatural power of the fish.

A careful look at the pictures also enables readers to learn more about family structure and other aspects of everyday life, which have also been subject to variation in the process of re-presentation. In Meilo So's illustrations for Wilson's version, for example, the stepmother and the stepsister of Yeh-hsien are depicted isomorphically. They both look harsh, cruel and ugly and each of them has a black mole on her left cheek. The stepsister's behaviour is mapped on her mother's when the mother and daughter glare at Yeh Hsien. Such a depiction evokes the verbal description of the two in Perrault's story: '[The stepmother] had two daughters of her own type, just like her in everything'. In contrast with this, the original Chinese story does not comment on the character of the stepmother and stepsister. The change in the pictorial expression reveals the tendency to re-shape the characters of the story so as to cater to a different tradition in a different culture.

The pictorial re-shaping of the story indicates a motivation to introduce one culture to another. Again, take Wilson's version for an example. The desire to present a different culture to the English reader is strongly displayed by the pictures. The original Chinese story is set in 'the south' of China, a cave that is 'near to an island in the sea'. In Louie's version the story is set in 'southern China', where the climate is mild. But in Wilson's version readers find in more than one place the depiction of the 'kang'—a brick bed that can be heated by fire from beneath—which is peculiar to the people in North China (see Plate 4). To make this logical, the story in Wilson's version is set 'among the hills of China south of the clouds'—and south of the clouds could be anywhere. Thus the artist is free to create any style that may be regarded as typical Chinese.

Within this generalised setting, So depicts a pastiche of iconically 'Chinese' customs and artefacts: the shoulder-pole, the long bamboo pipe, the cooked rice, the chilli as a dish on the table (which is a well-known favourite dish of most people in such southern provinces of China as Sichuan, Hunan, etc), and fur overcoats, which are peculiar to people in north-east China.

The desire to display an exotic (even outlandish) culture seems so strong in So's illustrations that sometimes the pictorial presentation borders on the bizarre or absurd. For instance, the stepmother is depicted driving a horse-carriage to go to the Cave Festival. Throughout the recorded history of China, however, no woman has

ever been known to have driven a horse-drawn vehicle.

There is also a mismatch between everlasting summer or autumn environments and never-changing winter clothing. In the illustrations readers see green grass on the pasture, pink blossoms on the trees, and ripe fruit in the orchard; they also see, at the same time, the warm fur overcoats people wear, the fire under the brick bed, and people's self-warming method of putting each hand in the sleeve of the other arm. Typical ancient Han official costumes are worn by the officials of a different nation—the Kingdom of T'o Huan (see Plate 1). Logic is sometimes overlooked owing to a strong desire to present a foreign culture which is other than English.

The same thing happens in the Wilson/So version when chieftain Wu is painted in a background corner, standing servilely while the stepmother and the stepsister of Yeh-hsien sit on the 'kang', commanding Yeh-hsien to go and get water for the family. This is a very strange representation of behaviour in the Chinese tradition where men have been regarded as more important than women and consequently have enjoyed greater privileges than women do, let alone a 'chieftain' in ancient China. This again shows that logic or facts are sometimes overlooked when the intention of presenting a foreign culture becomes overwhelmingly strong.

While the pictures display many cultural differences, the verbal texts exhibit the similarities and dissimilarities of the story pattern and ideology. A marked effect, especially in the Wilson/So version, is that there is an internal contradiction in a process which attempts to combine a pastiche exoticism (in the illustrations) with a narrative shaped by Western metanarratives. In more general terms, an examination of pictorial expression and verbal texts leads to the conclusion that the retellers have shaped their re-presentations of the story of Yeh-hsien in such a way that it becomes more compatible with the values, customs and tradition of the culture into which the story is introduced, and that such changes are sometimes so drastic that the social values or customs of the original may be distorted. The story of Yeh-hsien may be the forerunner of the 'Cinderella' story, arising within a culture utterly different from that of late seventeenth-century France, but in the retellings Yeh-hsien is, to varying degrees, apt to *become* Cinderella. The various re-presentations of the story, along with their techniques, presented to readers' eyes a fascinating kaleidoscope of a wide range of attempts made to introduce the story into a different culture—a kaleidoscope that reflects the different responses of cultures.

Notes

1 The original story ends with an implicit mild punishment for the king's selfishness and an oblique moral about the vanity of avarice, as the rich splendour of wealth dissolves into nothingness:

> *Later a troop sent out by the king to conquer another state mutinied and the king intended to open the hiding-place in order to make better provision for his army (so as to appease or win over the soldiers). One night, however, before the king was able to do that, all the treasures, along with the fish bones, were washed away by the tide.*
>
> (Translated by Bin Hu)

In this context, the archaic Chinese phrase *zheng zu* means 'soldiers or a troop dispatched for a military expedition'. In an isolated case, however, the two separate words may mean 'to conscript soldiers', which is obviously out of context here. Another tricky usage is the Chinese word *jiang*, which may serve as a modal verb (would or intend) when pronounced with the first tone to help form future tense, or as a noun meaning 'a general' when pronounced with the fourth tone. In this context, it is clearly

used as a modal verb, with the subject of the sentence (the king) being consistently omitted. These two tricky archaic Chinese usages, along with the common technique of omitting the subject in archaic Chinese syntax, account for Waley's different translation:

> *Later there was a mutiny of some soldiers who had been conscripted and their general opened [the hiding-place] in order to make better provision for his army. One night they [the bones] were washed away by the tide.*
> (Translated by Arthur Waley)

In this (mis)translation it seems hard to explain how the hiding place the king has secretly chosen is so easily found, how the king has appointed a 'general' who rebels against him if the mutiny is caused by nothing more than 'some soldiers who had been conscripted', and how the tide is able to wash away what has already been given to the soldiers. Fortunately, however, this discrepancy in translation is insignificant in regard to the more important theme and pattern of the story.

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Acknowledgements
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Biographical Note

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