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## The Image of the Child in Chinese Folktales

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### **In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

The Image of the Child in Chinese Folktales The image of the child in picture books is created by two different media, which ideally support and complement one another. In searching for an image of the East Asian child that young readers elsewhere can draw from, I looked at picture books which had been published in the United States, but are set in China, Japan, Korea, or Vietnam. It came as little surprise that the great majority of the stories are set either in China or in Japan. What was surprising was how difficult it is to get a clear image of the East Asian child from picture books; children seldom play a significant or even a minor role in these books. The vast majority of the picture books with Asian settings, whether or not written by Asian-Americans, are either retellings or adaptations of folktales, or are works of fiction based on folkloric material. So, perhaps it is not so surprising that the protagonists are seldom children. Naturalistic portrayals do exist, such as Uchida's *Sumi and the Goat* and the *Tokyo Express*, and Say's *Bicycle Man*, both set in Japan, and Lee's *Ba-Nam*, set in Vietnam. The children in these stories are curious, playful, shy, or boastful. Both text and illustrations reflect these qualities. But, there are not enough works of fiction in

picture book format, set in East Asia, to draw general conclusions about the image of the child. When we look at folktales with a child as protagonist, however, two motifs seem to emerge. One image is of the child as a savior or protector of his people, whose success depends on his purity of heart as much as on his steadfastness of purpose. His family is the village. In fact, he belongs to the poor wherever he goes. The second image is of the loyal child within the family, whose loyalty, ingenuity and sometimes self-sacrifice save a member of the family, usually a parent. Because these themes were most apparent in the Chinese folktales, I have limited myself to stories that are either retellings or close adaptations of Chinese folktales. I have omitted, with regret, such fine books as Yolen's *Emperor and the Kite* and Lattimore's *The Dragon's Robe*, because though based on folkloric material, these are literary fairy tales. This should in some measure remove the difficulty of deciding whose image of the Chinese child we are to examine. By selecting folktales we limit ourselves to the views of the Chinese storytellers, though subject to the inevitable distortions of the translator/reteller. The distortion is compounded when the work is an adaptation. Nevertheless, for the sake of comparison between treatments of the same title, I have included some adaptations.<sup>174</sup> The illustrations create another layer of complexity. The image created by the illustrations may reinforce the image in the narrative or may create an independent image that is more powerful, especially for preliterate children, than that of the narrative. In folktales the illustrations also serve to make the abstract concrete, to create a context for the images presented by the narrative. The child as hero emerges most distinctly in the folktale of the magic brush, retold in three picture books: *The Magic Brush* adapted by Goodman and Spicer, illustrated by Y. T. Mui; *Liang and the Magic Paint Brush* retold and illustrated by Demi, and *Tye May and the Magic Brush*, adapted and illustrated by Molly Bang. The theme of the loyal child emerges most clearly and poignantly in *The Voice of the Great Bell*, retold by Hodges based on Lafcadio Hearn's earlier collection/translation, illustrated by Young, and in *The Cricket Boy*, retold by Ziner, illustrated by Young. Family loyalty takes on a comic, happy tone in the various versions of the five (six, seven) Chinese Brothers, the latest of which is Mahy's *Seven Chinese Brothers*, illustrated by Jean and Mousien Tseng. Still another picture of family loyalty emerges in Young's *Lon Po Po*. The story of the magic brush endows the child with the typical characteristics of a hero. It presents a child who through his own perseverance and love of..

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