

“Roo coo coo, roo coo coo,  
no blood in the shoe:  
the shoe’s not tight,  
the real bride’s here tonight.”

After they had called out these words, the doves both came flying down and perched on Cinderella’s shoulders, one on the right, the other on the left, and there they stayed.

On the day of the wedding to the prince, the two false sisters came and tried to ingratiate themselves and share in Cinderella’s good fortune. When the couple went to church, the elder sister was on the right, the younger on the left side: the doves pecked one eye from each one. Later, when they left the church, the elder sister was on the left, the younger on the right. The doves pecked the other eye from each one. And so they were punished for their wickedness and malice with blindness for the rest of their lives.

Most readers familiar with the Disney version of *Cinderella* will probably be struck by how different the German version is. Though we know, for instance, that the Disney Cinderella’s mother has died and that her father has remarried, in the German version we see more vividly the young girl’s grief and her ultimate rejection by her father, for whom she seems only an afterthought. There are other differences as well; the German heroine is much more active and resourceful than the more passive and demure American Cinderella: she calls the birds to her aid, and she runs from the prince and returns to her place in the ashes. She also apparently receives help from her dead mother, rather than from a magical fairy godmother appearing from nowhere. Most obvious, however, are the differences in the atmospheres of the two stories. Nowhere in the Disney version is there the suggestion of violence that permeates the German version, with its broken promises, bloody feet, and blinded eyes.

A comparison of the German and Disney versions may, then, reveal much about the two cultures’ ideas of ideal womanhood, justice, magic, and spirituality. It will reveal as well something about each culture’s way of looking at childhood. Although the Grimm version was available for telling, most American parents of the mid-twentieth century were more drawn than their earlier German counterparts to images of a sentimental happily-ever-after world in which romance, rather than punishment, dominates. That was the world in which they wanted their children to live.

Perhaps even more interesting, though, is a comparison of these Western versions of the Cinderella story to the Chinese story of Yeh-hsien, which was written over one thousand years ago and is the first known version of “Cinderella.” As you read the tale, think about how it compares with the other Cinderella stories printed here.

### *Yeh-hsien*

Among the people of the south there is a tradition that before the Ch’in and Han dynasties there was a cave-master called Wu. The aborigines called the place the Wu cave. He married two wives. One wife died. She had a daughter called Yeh-hsien, who from childhood was intelligent and good at making pottery on the wheel. Her father loved her. After some years the father died, and she was ill-treated by her step-

mother, who always made her collect firewood in dangerous places and draw water from deep pools. She once got a fish about two inches long, with red fins and golden eyes. She put it into a bowl of water. It grew bigger every day, and after she had changed the bowl several times she could find no bowl big enough for it, so she threw it into the back pond. Whatever food was left over from meals she put into the water to feed it. When she came to the pond, the fish always exposed its head and pillowed it on the bank; but when anyone else came, it did not come out. The step-mother knew about this, but when she watched for it, it did not once appear. So she tricked the girl, saying, "Haven't you worked hard! I am going to give you a new dress." She then made the girl change out of her tattered clothing. Afterwards she sent her to get water from another spring and reckoning that it was several hundred leagues, the step-mother at her leisure put on her daughter's clothes, hid a sharp blade up her sleeve, and went to the pond. She called to the fish. The fish at once put its head out, and she chopped it off and killed it. The fish was now more than ten feet long. She served it up and it tasted twice as good as an ordinary fish. She hid the bones under the dung-hill. Next day, when the girl came to the pond, no fish appeared. She howled with grief in the open countryside, and suddenly there appeared a man with his hair loose over his shoulders and coarse clothes. He came down from the sky. He consoled her saying, "Don't howl! Your step-mother has killed the fish and its bones are under the dung. 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." The girl followed his advice, and was able to provide herself with gold, pearls, dresses and food whenever she wanted them.

When the time came for the cave-festival, the step-mother went, leaving the girl to keep watch over the fruit-trees in the garden. She waited till the step-mother was some way off, and then went herself, wearing a cloak of stuff spun from kingfisher feathers and shoes of gold. Her step-sister recognized her and said to the step-mother, "That's very like my sister." The step-mother suspected the same thing. The girl was aware of this and went away in such a hurry that she lost one shoe. It was picked up by one of the people of the cave. When the step-mother got home, she found the girl asleep, with her arms round one of the trees in the garden, and thought no more about it.

This cave was near to an island in the sea. On this island was a kingdom called T'o-han. Its soldiers had subdued twenty or thirty other islands and it had a coast-line of several thousand leagues. The cave-man sold the shoe in T'o-han, and the ruler of T'o-han got it. He told those about him to put it on; but it was an inch too small even for the one among them that had the smallest foot. He ordered all the women in his kingdom to try it on; but there was not one that it fitted. It was light as down and made no noise even when treading on stone. The king of T'o-han thought the cave-man had got it unlawfully. He put him in prison and tortured him; but did not end by finding out where it had come from. So he 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.

Yeh-hsien then came forward, wearing her cloak spun from halcyon feathers and her shoes. She was as beautiful as a heavenly being. She now began to render

service to the king, and he took the fish-bones and Yeh-hsien, and brought them back to his country.

The step-mother and step-sister were shortly afterwards struck by flying stones, and died. The cave people were sorry for them and buried them in a stone-pit, which was called the Tomb of the Distressed Women. The men of the cave made mating-offerings there; any girl they prayed for there, they got. The king of T'o-han, when he got back to his kingdom made Yeh-hsien his chief wife. The first year the king was very greedy and by his prayers to the fish-bones got treasures and jade without limit. Next year, there was no response, so the king buried the fish-bones on the sea-shore. He covered them with a hundred bushels of pearls and bordered them with gold. 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.

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### EXERCISE: TRYING IT OUT

If you had not been told that this was a "Chinese Cinderella," would you have recognized it as a Cinderella story? Why or why not? Write down the elements of the story that seem most like the Cinderella tale you know and the ones least like it.

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You might have noticed some similarities between the Chinese "Cinderella" and the Western ones. For example, all the Cinderellas have an unusually small foot, a characteristic that probably comes from the Chinese original. For the Chinese, a small foot was a sign of femininity, a cultural value supported by the practice of foot binding. We also see in the Chinese tale the wicked stepmother and a hint of the wicked stepsister familiar to those who know the Western versions of "Cinderella."

At the same time, the tale of Yeh-hsien is very different from the two later stories, and we may well wonder if those differences are the result of cultural differences. Most notably, Yeh-hsien seems less central to the story than do the American and German Cinderellas. Is that, perhaps, the result of a culture that valued the communal more than the individual? In the Chinese version, there is also less emphasis on the labor performed by the heroine: most modern readers are used to seeing a Cinderella among the cinders, sweeping the hearth and doing the hardest, dirtiest tasks of the household. Did nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western culture perhaps place a different value on domestic labor than did the China of a thousand years ago? Did the long-ago Chinese storyteller view work differently than do Western Europeans and Americans? Or did the ancient Chinese simply assume that life was difficult for everyone and so find no need to mention the heroine's daily routine?

Other elements emphasized in the two modern versions are also less important in the Chinese original. For example, the stepsister in the Chinese story plays a surprisingly minor role. Is sibling rivalry perhaps a modern invention, something we become more aware of only as life becomes easier? In addition, though Yeh-hsien becomes the "chief wife" of the king, he does not seem a Prince Charming; there is no sense that he provides the completion of the story, the "happily ever after" of the