

Culture Notes

A Thousand Beginnings and Endings edited by Ellen Oh and Elise Chapman

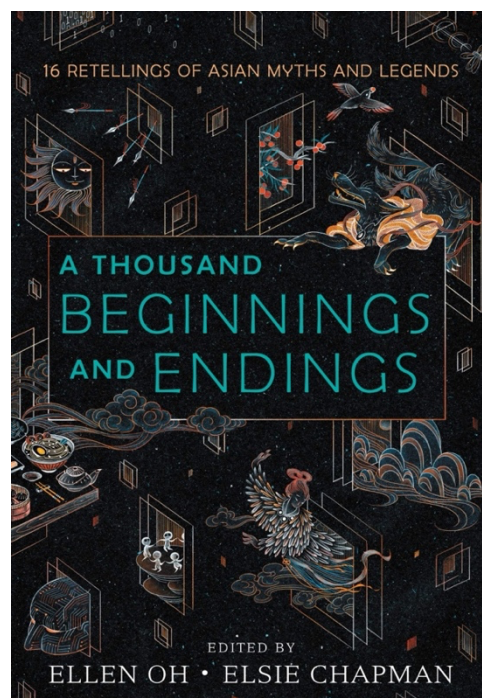
HarperCollins Publishers, 2018

Fiction, set in Asia

2018 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

A Thousand Beginnings and Endings is an anthology of sixteen original stories that imaginatively reinterpret folklore, myths, and religious texts from East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, often with teenage Asian American protagonists. As Matthew Williams notes in his Curriculum Connections for this book, teachers should be aware that some of the stories have adult content that may or may not be suitable for all students.

The notes at the end of each story often include some cultural information about the myths or cultural practices on which the author has drawn. It can be helpful to read these notes before reading the story. My goal here is to provide some historical background and/or cultural context. Teachers could also refer to the Curriculum Connections for this title.



Ask your students: "What is the food that is mentioned in many of these stories?" Hint: It is a common staple of many parts of Asia. (Answer: rice)

Forbidden Fruit

Maria Makiling is a *diwata* in Philippine mythology, variously conceived of as a nature spirit, fairy, forest nymph, or divine being that, in this case, oversees Mount Makiling in Laguna, Philippines. The mountain itself rises from Laguna de Bay and appears to be leaning. According to the Aswang Project website, the Tagalog word for leaning is "Makiling." As the author Roshanti Chokshi notes, the uneven shape of the mountain looks like a reclining woman from certain angles.



(Mount Makiling; Wikimedia Commons)

Resource: <https://www.aswangproject.com/diwata/>



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Olivia's Table

Chinese immigrants, most of whom came from Guangdong province in the south of China, began to arrive in the United States in 1850 seeking work in the gold fields of California. Primarily men to begin with, they eventually immigrated to other parts of North America, providing most of the labor that built the railroads across the West as well as starting businesses that provided goods and services to mining camps and new towns. Chinese first arrived in Arizona in 1860, with their numbers growing rapidly in the 1870s. They worked in the mines and served as cooks and launderers. In the late 1800s, they expanded into growing vegetables, starting grocery stores and restaurants, serving as domestic servants and gardeners. Chinatown communities were established in Prescott, Tucson, and elsewhere. Chinese immigrants faced often severe racial discrimination, but merchants were eventually allowed to bring wives and children to the U.S., resulting in a growing number of women arriving after 1900.

Work in the mines or on the railroads would have been hard labor for low pay. The author Alyssa Wong's ghosts in her story are men and women who have been injured or killed in work accidents. In reality, most if not all workers in these hazardous jobs were men. The National Park Service (see URL below) provides a good overview of Chinese involvement in the construction of the railroads.

With the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the U.S. refused to recognize the Communist government. Chinese in the U.S. could no longer return to visit family or retire to their homeland, resulting in communities that slowly began to identify as Chinese American. (For forty years, from 1949 to 1979, the U.S. did not recognize the PRC.)

Resources: https://www.azhistory.net/aahps/f_chinese.pdf
<https://www.tucsonchinese.org/history>
<https://www.nps.gov/gosp/learn/historyculture/chinese-labor-and-the-iron-road.htm>

Steel Skin

The author drew upon a Hmong folktale for this science fiction story, using the idea of the tiger that disguises itself as a man and wreaks havoc on a Hmong family. The Hmong people are an ethnic group from southwestern China and Southeast Asia,

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particularly Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. There are sizable Hmong communities in the U.S., including in Minnesota, the home of gymnast Sunisa ("Suni") Lee, who was the first Hmong American Olympian and all-around gold medalist in the 2020 Olympics; she also helped the U.S. women's team to win the overall team medal in the 2024 games.



Vietnam 2017, photo by author

"Steel Skin" is set somewhere in Southeast Asia, as the setting is a village within a jungle like the type you might encounter in Vietnam or Cambodia (see photo above). Students may be able to imagine the setting better if they can see some photos from those parts of the world.



Suni Lee at the 2021 U.S. National Championships, Wikimedia Commons

Still Star-Crossed

Scattered throughout this story are terms that are specific to the Indian diaspora, particularly those Indian Americans in the U.S. who were originally from Punjab. These terms will appear in other stories in this book. Some are listed below:

- 1. Punjabi:** Punjabi refers to the Punjab region of northwestern India and eastern Pakistan.
- 2. Holi:** a Hindu festival that celebrates the start of spring and is often referred to as the "Festival of Colors."
- 3. Krishna:** a major deity in Hinduism, with qualities such as love, compassion, and protection.
- 4. Bhang:** an edible made from the cannabis plant, traditionally distributed at festivals such as Holi.
- 5. Nagini:** a semi-divine female snake.

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6. Lengha: a type of Indian ankle-length skirt. Different patterns and embroidery are used to decorate the skirt. A choli is worn with the lengha and is a fitted, cropped blouse or top that sits above the waist, leaving the midriff bare. It also is referred to in the story as a “corseted blouse.”

7. Payal: a silver anklet or ankle chain worn by women.

8. Chole bhature: a Punjabi dish of chickpea curry paired with deep-fried bread.

Students can be encouraged to look up other words on their own and learn more about the culture of Indian Americans originally from Punjab.



Actress Anjana Sukhani in a
bridal lengha, Wikimedi
Commons

The Counting of Vermillion Beads

The abacus has been used for centuries, from Japan and China to Russia and Europe. Users calculate equations by sliding beads within a frame. Very skilled users can calculate faster than handheld calculators. Some countries such as China and Japan still use abacus today to teach the fundamentals of arithmetic to children.



Wikimedia Commons

Vermillion is a word for the pigment made from the mineral cinnabar. This strong red color has been used across the globe for all sorts of uses from burial rituals to triumphal processions. It could be a symbol of power or wealth or even divinity. In Vietnam, it is associated with life force, prosperity, joy. (Yellow was the color historically limited to the Vietnamese royalty.)

The Vietnamese have their own writing system but also used Chinese characters in the past. Thus, when on page 97 the story says that an arch was “carved with characters for longevity and good fortune,” that refers to Chinese writing.

Above is a contemporary version of the Áo dài, which may be similar to the clothing that Cam wears on page 103.

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The Land of the Morning Calm

The nine-tailed fox appears not only in Korean lore but also in China, Vietnam, and Japan. They are shape-shifters, sometimes acting for good, sometimes for evil.

Soju is a distilled alcoholic drink that is clear and colorless, traditionally made from rice (p. 109).

Gwisin, as the author notes, are spirits or ghosts that usually appear wearing a white Korean hanbok, with long disheveled hair, and floating just above the ground. Japanese *yūrei* have the same visual characteristics, including the white robe (a kimono in Japan).

Page 134 mentions the Bible. Christians are not in the majority in South Korea but there are substantial populations of both Protestants (20% of the population) and Catholics (8%).

A good resource for the history of Christians in South Korea is this article in the journal *Education About Asia*:

<https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/christianity-in-modern-korea/>

The Smile

In this story we encounter a historical period in South Asia: the Mughal Empire of the 1500s. The image on the right is a modern version of the type of dress worn by the dancer Yasmine in this story.

Girls Who Twirl and Other Dancers

The Navrātri festival provides the inspiration for this story. Some terms that are useful to know:

Brahmā: god of creation and knowledge; one of the Hindu trinity of supreme divinities that includes Vishnu and Shivā.

Vishnu: god of protection and preservation.



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Shivā: god of destruction, time, meditation; benevolent as well as fearsome.

Langha and choli: see "Still Star Crossed."

Sari: woman's garment consisting of several yards of cloth draped so that one end creates a skirt and the other a head or shoulder covering.

Dupatte: plural for dupatta; a long scarf or shawl wore by women.

Garbā: a type of Indian dance originating in Gujarāt.

Raas: this dance also originates in Gujarāt; it is associated with agricultural activities and is one of the most popular folk dances from this area of India.



The garbā dance during Navarāri

Wikimedia Commons

Nothing into All

Jeoguri: the basic upper garment of the Korean hanbok.



Jeoguri, Wikimedia Commons

Doshirak tins: a type of plastic or thermos-steel lunchbox.

Doshirak: a packed meal, often lunch.

Gaeran mari: a type of Korean omelet using beaten eggs mixed with chopped vegetables and sometimes ham or cheese, cooked in thin layers and then rolled up.

Gochujang: spicy, sweet Korean fermented chili paste.

Mugunghwa: *Hibiscus syriacus* (Rose of Sharon), Korea's national flower.

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Spear Carrier

Krishna: see "Still Star Crossed"

***Mahabharata*:** one of two major Sanskrit epic poems, along with the *Ramayana*. The author notes that it is the longest poem ever written. The longest version is over 100,000 verses and is around seven times the length of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined. It appeared in its present form around 400 CE.

Code of Honor

Aswang: this is an umbrella term for various evil creatures in the Philippines. The author writes about them being pictured as banshee-like beings. They are also likened to vampires, witches, and shape-shifting human-to-beast hybrids like dogs, cats, or pigs.

Bullet Butterfly

The author's notes on page 257 provide good background information for the story.

Daughter of the Sun

This story draws on the same epic as "Spear Carrier," the *Mahabharata*. See "Still Star Crossed" for terms such as choli and Holi.

Lord Ganesh: is one of the gods of the Hindu pantheon and appears with an elephant head and four arms.

Surya: the Sun deity in Hinduism.

Apsara: a type of celestial being in both Hinduism and Buddhism, often depicted as beautiful women.

Rambha: one of the apsaras known for her beauty and skills in dancing and music.



Men wearing sherwani (except for man in white on left); Wikimedia Commons



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Chandra: the Hindu Moon God, associated with plants, vegetation, and night.

Deepavali: also known as Dipavali or Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights.

Sherwani: a long, fitted outer coat that has buttons and a stand-up collar.

The Crimson Cloak

The author's notes explain the legend of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl in China. A variation of this legend is also known in Japan.

Eyes Like Candlelight

Kitsune (fox) and tanuki (raccoon-dog) are the tricksters of Japan, with the ability to shape-shift into human form (or inanimate objects like tea kettles in the case of tanuki), sometimes for good, sometimes for evil. Both animals are found in the wild in Japan and have played a role in Japanese folklore for centuries.

The story takes place during the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), when lords called daimyo ruled over domains throughout Japan and demanded large percentages of the rice crop from the farmers who were tied to their lands.

The Inari kami is the Shinto deity of agriculture and fertility. The storyline in which Takeo starves himself for three days by not eating rice is not historically accurate. Japanese farmers in this period did not eat rice, as rice was reserved for the elite. They ate grains like barley or millet, supplemented with vegetables, and grew rice for the required tax payments. Koku (p. 315) is a unit of rice that was a primary form of currency in the Tokugawa period. One koku was defined as the amount of rice to feed one adult for a year, and daimyo income was measured in koku. Daimyo were required by the Tokugawa shogunate to move back and forth between their home regions and the city of Edo on a regular basis at great cost, and had to support their entourage of samurai, their families, and servants. Thus, they needed the rice they demanded in taxes, but it was a great hardship for the farmers.

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Shoji are room dividers made of wooden latticework and white paper, which lets light into a room. They are not painted. Room dividers that are painted are *fusuma*; these are sliding doors or walls that are also surfaced with heavy paper and decorated with

paintings. It seems strange to compare Yuki to a *yūrei* (see p. 313) because they are sad or vindictive ghosts with long unkept hair, wearing white robes, who float above the ground.

What is historically accurate in this story is the fact that farmers were treated poorly by their overlords, and entire villages might be punished for the inability to produce the required rice tax. The act of one person had an impact on the fate of everyone else in a social culture that even today prioritizes the welfare of the group over the individual. The daimyo's samurai had the right to kill anyone with impunity. Thus, Takeo's willingness to give his life for his village in the beginning of the story reflects premodern reality; for example, there are numerous historical records of villagers rebelling against their overlords to force better conditions for their fellow villagers, knowing full well that these actions would result in their deaths.



Inari fox at the Fushimi Inari Jinja (shrine)
in Kyoto; photo by author

A resource for teachers reading about the archetypal Tricksters in Japan: <https://www.educationaboutasia.org/article/id/1160/>

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