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BOOK REVIEW: TALES FROM THE PADDY FIELDS: SOUTHEAST ASIAN FOLKTALES ON RICE CULTURE

Title	: Tales from the Paddy Fields: Southeast Asian Folktales on Rice Culture
ISBN	: 978-616-7961-18-7 (e-book); 978-616-7961-36-1 (print)
Author	: Margaret R. McDonald et al. (editors)
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Material selection is a fascinating yet complex part in Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL). Teachers should select effective and motivating materials with which young learners develop not only their linguistic skills, but also psychological, social and cultural competences. Picture books with stories about the origin of rice may be of particular interest for EFL learners in Asia, especially for the young mind. But, to begin with, why rice? Rice being the main staple food is a sensitive matter in many Asian countries: The success of the government can be measured, among other things, by the availability of food and the fluctuation of rice prices. While rice is a food source for more than half of the world's population, Asian people produce and consume more than 90% of rice. With rice consumption of approximately 100 kg per person per year in this region, rice sufficiency is closely related to sustainability, food security and political stability. That is why not only is rice central to the economy and nutrition of the society, but in many ways, it is a sacred plant. Rice is a plant that is culturally privileged. Therefore, rice and culture are inseparable in Asia. In almost all Asian languages, separate terms are used describe each phase of rice cultivation, types of rice harvested, processing, cooking and serving it at the dining table. There are literally thousands of locally adapted rice varieties in Asia that have been painstakingly treated by farmers according to the specific, climatic and altitude of the soil. In short, rice has a deep meaning for the nations of Asia as it has its own story.

Having said that, rice story is a prized possession for Southeast Asian people to tell from one generation to the next. Indeed, introducing children to diverse cultural heritages through folktales is important in order to appreciate and broaden knowledge of their own culture and that of others. Tales from the Paddy Fields: Southeast Asian Folktales on Rice Culture (henceforth TPF) is first published in September 2018 in digital format by SEAMEO Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SEAMEO SPAFA). Preservation of cultural heritage is the aim of

this Bangkok-based organization while fostering co-operation in education, science and culture in Southeast Asia. The genesis of the book is the collection of stories about rice recounted at an event organized by SEAMEO SPAFA called "The Spiritual Dimensions of Rice Culture in Southeast Asia" in 2015 with which some shared cultural identities and values are too important to ignore especially for story enthusiasts of all ages. TPF's editor is Dr. Margaret R. McDonald, the American expert storyteller who brought together 11 writers-storytellers from SEA countries. They include Chom Sonnag (Cambodia), Mochamad Ariya Faridh Zidni (Indonesia), Made Taro (Indonesia), Gede Tarmada (Indonesia), Kongdeuane Nettavong (Lao PDR), Ng Kok Keong (Malaysia), Thanzin Soe (Myanmar), Richard D. Vilar (Philippines), Prasong Saihong (Thailand), Wajuppa Tossa (Thailand) and Nguyen Anh Dan (Vietnam) Colourful illustration by Vassana Kerdsupap dan Patsri Tippayaprapai coupled with the brevity of each tale make the book delightful to read by children.

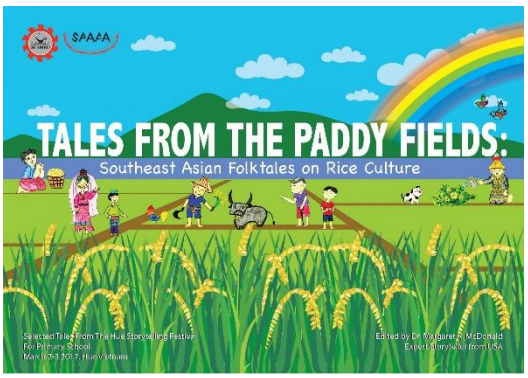


Figure 1. Cover of the book

The book consists of nine parts that correspond with the countries where the tales come from. One single folktale from Brunei Darussalam opens the book, followed by two rice stories from Cambodia in Part 2. The third part has four folktales from three different islands of Indonesia: Java, Sumatra and Bali. Myanmar, like Brunei Darussalam, also contributes one story about paddy-field in the next chapter. Part 5 and 6 have two stories from, respectively, Malaysia and Lao PDR. The Philippines becomes the third country which presents only one story about rice in Part 7. Four folktales about paddy from Thailand can be found in Part 8. The book concludes with four rice stories from Vietnam.

TPF is a collection of pourquoi tales across the Southeast Asian countries that explain the origin of paddy, myths of rice, miscellanies of rice culture, rice rituals, etc. Pourquoi tales encapsulate the beauty and diversity of nature while explaining the reasons why human and non-human look and behave as they do (Foster et al., 2008) The paddy stories here have all the necessary elements of pourquoi tales, i.e., (1) changing the state of the world; (2) telling a problem that requires a solution; and (3) providing a just ending. One Cambodian tale, for example, tells us that long time ago, rice grew and flew by itself to people's barn until a woman scared the rice off and hid in a deep cleft of the rock. A bronze featherback fish volunteered to coax the rice to return. The fish's mission was successful at the expense of its flattened body as it advanced into the tight gap of the rock. The rice agreed to provide for people on condition that they should plant and harvest the rice. That is

why in rice ritual ceremonies, smoked bronze featherback are often served as offerings. While "a wicked woman" (McDonald, 2018, p. 114) is the culprit in this story, the following tale from Aceh, Indonesia depicts a neglectful woman.

Suwiti always cherished the young rice that her father brought her as a gift for having looked after her baby sister when her parents left to toil the rice field. Suwiti's father fell ill and died leaving his wife working all by herself. She forgot to bring her daughter a gift of young rice although Suwiti had asked for it three times and had fulfilled her usual chores. For the fourth time around, Suwiti's mother nearly forgot and quickly rushed home with the gift only to find that Suwiti had suddenly vanished and turned into a bird. The story closes with a message: "Please remind all parents that a small thing to them might be a big thing for their child." (McDonald, 2018, p. 27).

Suwiti's mother shares the mother in "Tilin, The Rice Bird" her being, to some extent, inattentive to her little daughter. She was so busy pounding out rice and winnowing it to remove the chaff that she petulantly shouted at her nagging daughter, Tilin, who wanted some raw rice to eat. As the mother left the house to fetch some water, Tilin stayed at home and stealthily took a handful of rice grain from the basket of rice covered by a winnower. Being uncareful, she fell and was covered up inside the basket. Upon returning to the house, the mother found that Tilin had turned into a little brown rice bird. At the bottom of the illustration to this tale from the Philippines there is a rather patronizing message box that reads "The lesson of the story: Uncooked rice is for birds not for little girls. Always listen to your mother, for mother knows best." (McDonald, 2018, p. 59)

Unfavourable portrayals of female characters are thus evident in the three examples above although they all have roles to play. These women despite their flaws are cast differently from the passive, docile and dependent women in contemporary writings. In preindustrial culture, depiction of women in folktales is modelled on helpers of men in agriculture and home industries who have important roles although they are no equal to their men (Kaufman, 2008).

Gender stereotyping in children literature is nothing new (e.g., Ragan, 2009; Rice, 2000; Streiff & Dundes, 2017), but it is interesting to see how gender intersects with class in stories about paddy in TPF. The Goddess of Rice, Dewi Sri and May Pasop are women of noble standing, unlike the ordinary women who happen to be depicted somewhat unfavourably in some folktales. Meanwhile, the accounts of men in TPF are generally good. To mention but one, the Balinese story "Father Poleng" is a story about an old farmer who willingly gave away his lunch of rice to animals and other living beings in the field. God Indra heard about his selflessness and good actions and took him as a heaven's servant.

Depiction of nature is another important aspect. Given that kids today grow up in a world of ecological crisis, tales about paddy should be gauged as to what extent each narrative is pro-nature or pro-people. As a collection of pourquoi tales, TPF is resourceful in teaching young learners about the wonder of non-human creature alias paddy and what it does to human beings. Folktales on rice culture in this region are rich in environmental messages, although, as previously explained, they are not immune to gender bias. Believing in the transformative power of tales to touch children's heart, we can argue that children's literature should call for both gender equity and ecojustice. It is precisely at this point that Tales from the Paddy

Fields: Southeast Asian Folktales on Rice Culture is an important book for teaching language, culture and ecology for young learners.

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