

## BOOKTALK

### *Jouanah*

#### *A Hmong Cinderella*

adapted by Jewell Reinhart Coburn with Tzexa Cherta Lee

illustrated by Anne Sibley O'Brien

**D**r. Jewell Reinhart Coburn has adapted this centuries-old Hmong folktale from a story entitled "The Poor Girl" introduced by Blong Xiong as well as from oral traditions from Tzexa Cherta Lee's family. She first met some of the Hmong people when visiting Southeast Asia in the 1960's. Tzexa Cherta Lee is of Hmong ancestry, has worked as a writer and translator, and is now residing in St. Paul, Minnesota. The illustrator of this book is well-known for her two *Talking Walls* books and was introduced to the Hmong people when her parents worked at Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand. Anne Sibley O'Brien's authentic illustrations reveal the lovely, dramatic, and vibrant colors and patterns that are highly esteemed by these hard-working Hmong people who treasure things of beauty as well as the values of loyalty, kindness and freedom. The story of Jouanah comes to us from Southeast Asia where the Hmong people have lived in the high mountains of Laos since fleeing the Hunan province of China in the 1800's. In the 1970's, again they fled their homes as communists sought revenge for the help these peoples gave to the Americans in the Vietnamese conflict.









After Jouanah's father is tricked at the market where he has gone to buy a much-needed cow and fails to come home with one, her mother offers to turn herself into a cow to assist the family. With the help of the cow, the farm prospers but the farmer, instead of returning his wife to her former self, takes a new wife who has an unpleasant daughter by the name of Ding. The new wife finds that the cow is helping Jouanah by spinning silk thread on her horns and pretends to be a tree spirit who requires that the silk be destroyed. The cow dies of sadness before her husband can follow the new wife's commands to kill her, but her spirit stays in a piece of cowhide stored in a sewing basket. She helps her daughter obtain a lovely skirt, blouse, purse, necklace, and tiny shoes to go to the New Year festivities. Jouanah's beauty and lovely clothes attract the attention of Shee-Nang who later finds her lost shoe and begins the traditional search for its owner.

The story ends with the stepmother trying to trick the young man into paying attention to her daughter instead of her stepdaughter, but Jouanah and Shee-Nang know their own hearts and leave together taking only the magic sewing basket. They marry and live long and joyful lives while the stepmother and Ding continue to create their own miseries. The magic cowhide awaits the births of the couple's descendants and will continue to protect and help those children.

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**MOTIFS AND IDEAS**

-  a magic cow helps Jouanah
-  Jouanah's father is easily tricked and eventually dies
-  a piece of soft cowhide helps Jouanah and a bull's tail helps Becan
-  there is a cruel stepmother and one lazy stepsister
-  a magic sewing basket helps her dress for the festival
-  needlework, music, and dancing are important
-  a search for the owner of a lost shoe
-  Jouanah marries a good young man

**CONNECTIONS**

Using atlases, encyclopedias, and/or Internet websites, research the following:

- ★ story cloth
- ★ animism
- ★ Hmong people ("free people")
- ★ qeng
- ★ shaman
- ★ countries of Southeast Asia
- ★ list the countries
- ★ refugee camps
- ★ put the names on a blank map
- ★ Miao (Hunan province)

**VOCABULARY WORDS**

- |           |           |             |         |
|-----------|-----------|-------------|---------|
| ancestors | exquisite | joss sticks | schemes |
| clutched  | fretted   | maiden      | sulked  |
| cowhide   | incense   | pebbles     | vibrant |

Choose the word that completes the sentence:

1. The shaman lit the ..... and the smell of ..... filled the air.
2. A synonym for worried is.....
3. .... are the people from whom a person is descended.
4. In many folktales, a young unmarried woman is called a .....
5. Something (a person, a color, music) that is full of life is called .....

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**STORY CLOTH** — Thousands of Hmong people fled Hunan province in China in the 1800's and came to the mountains of Laos to remain a "free people." Since the Hmong had no written language until the 1950's, they preserved their history and culture through large embroidered pieces of material called *story cloths*. The people, places, and actions shown on these story cloths helped to keep the history of the Hmong people alive. Anne Sibley O'Brien frames each written page of *Jouanah* with an oval illustration at the top and a colorful pattern design from traditional Hmong textile artwork at the bottom.

Your teacher will assign you to work with your classmates to create a story cloth that tells the tale of *Jouanah* in picture form. When the pictures are finished, label them so that they can be taped together into quilt form in the order of the story's plot. Hmong textile designs and mazes can be used to make a border around the cloth. Although, a true *story cloth* has no written words, to make this classroom *story cloth* easier to follow, write a short description beneath each drawing.

Some of the places and incidents that can be illustrated are listed below:

1. the mountain village
2. the soup-drinking contest
3. winding the vines
4. wife becomes cow
5. cow magically spins silk
6. Jouanah is given all the hard work
7. new wife hides in tree and tricks the farmer
8. silken thread is thrown into the fire
9. cow dies of broken heart
10. Jouanah is ordered to clean rice
11. magic sewing basket produces skirt, blouse, purses, necklace, and shoes
12. Jouanah arrives at the festival
13. Shee-Nang plays the qeng for the lovely young maiden
14. Jouanah loses a shoe to hurry home before her stepmother and stepsister
15. Shee-Nang finds the dainty shoe and Jouanah is afraid to try it on
16. Jouanah and Shee-Nang's eyes meet and hearts touch, and soon wed
17. Jouanah and Shee-Nang visit where the cow is buried
18. Jouanah and Shee-Nang live a long and joyful life together

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Each arm of the star shown below is labeled with different parts of speech. Sort the words listed below by putting each of them into or around the arm where the word belongs.

- |            |            |            |            |          |               |
|------------|------------|------------|------------|----------|---------------|
| radiant    | deceitful  | exquisite  | ancestors  | tree     | strutted      |
| pebbles    | pressed    | incense    | sulked     | basket   | sun-splashed  |
| Jouanah    | slyly      | farmer     | Ding       | new      | forest's edge |
| sit        | shoes      | muddy      | village    | searched | kicked        |
| mysterious | stepmother | mournfully | wife       | sadly    | joyously      |
| rock       | Shee-Nang  | sweetly    | loving     | care     | eyes          |
| jungle     | sadness    | cow        | the market |          |               |

**action words (verbs)**

**characters or things**  
(nouns)

**descriptions**  
(adjectives or adverbs)

**feelings**  
(verbs, adverbs, adjectives)

**places (nouns)**