



Learn English Through Stories

B2 Stories

Intermediate Plus level

**Adapted and modified by
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Happy
New Year

Kathy Burke

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By Kathy Burke

Six hundred years ago, on a cold winter's night, Mrs Yeh sat alone in her living room, waiting for her husband, Mr Yeh, to return. He had been gone for almost a year, teaching in a private school about seventy kilometers away. Mrs Yeh was looking forward to seeing him. She also needed the salary he had earned for his year of work. All the money he had left her was now gone and New Year's Eve was approaching, a very special but expensive holiday.

New Year's Eve dinner was the most important meal of the year, even more important than New Year's Day. The Chinese believed that a New Year's Eve dinner with plenty of delicious, healthy food would start the year well and bring them happiness and wealth. A typical New Year's Eve meal included four "wholes" - a whole chicken, a whole duck, a whole fish, and a whole leg of pork - and four kinds of cold meat. Then there was also a sweet rice dish with eight different things in it, and the "eight specials," which is made of eight different kinds of vegetables and beans.

The New Year's holiday lasted for fifteen days, and if people could afford it they cooked enough food for the whole two weeks. This allowed them to relax and visit relatives and friends without having to think about cooking. But more importantly, it showed other people that they were wealthy enough to buy all this food. So this time of year was important for everyone's pride.

Mrs Yeh began to worry, as she had expected her husband home hours ago. She tried not to think about possible disasters that could happen on a winter's night like this, with the terrible snow and ice. At last she heard footsteps coming along the path. She hurried to open the door and there, shaking the snow off his cap, was her husband, Mr Yeh.

Mrs Yeh gave her husband a bowl of hot soup to drink by the fire. Later, when he finally felt his body warming from the fire and the soup, she asked him about his salary.

"Well, was it a good year?"

"Yes, it was. I earned a silver yuan-pao," he answered.

"Oh! Thank Buddha. Now we can enjoy our New Year's Eve dinner. So where is this silver yuan-pao? Let's put it in the money pot and I'll make some tea."

Mr Yeh hesitated and then said quietly, "Well, there's one small problem."

"What problem?" his wife asked.

"I gave it away," he answered.

"What! Oh, old man. Don't joke with a poor old woman after a hard year. Where is the yuan-pao? Give it to me."

"I'm afraid I'm not joking," Mr Yeh said in a serious voice. "Please bring me some hot tea and I'll tell you what happened." He then sat there warming his hands on his teacup. "It all started when I was walking along the road. I was feeling very happy that I was coming home..." And so he began his story.

It was freezing cold and he had to pull his old coat up around his face to help keep out the cold wind. But he was happy too because in his bag he had his silver yuan-pao. He was sure that his wife had used all the money she had and was "waiting for rice to put into the pot," as they say in China. He couldn't wait to get home and see the joy in her eyes when he gave her the silver yuan-pao. He was also happy because it was almost New Year's Eve, his favorite holiday. As he walked along, he started to plan the menu for the New Year's Eve dinner. He knew that they would probably not be able to buy four "wholes." But at least his wife could get some pork and cook his favorite meal, pork with red wine and red beans. He would get out his favorite rice wine to have with it.

Suddenly, as he was walking along thinking these happy thoughts, he saw a woman running toward the river. He was sure she was going to throw herself in. As he struggled to see better through the falling snow, he realized it was A-ken Sao, the wife of the carpenter A-ken. He rushed forward to stop her and just managed to catch her in his arms before she got to the water.

"Let me go! Please!" she cried.

But he refused. "You can't end your life like this! What is it? What's wrong?"

"Let me die, please," cried A-ken Sao. "I haven't heard from A-ken for a whole year. He's either died or left me, but I must pay the rent by tomorrow. If I don't, the owner of the building is going to sell our daughter, Yeng-hua! But I have no money! I can't pay the rent! There's nothing I can do!"

"No! You're wrong. A-ken did write to you," said Mr Yeh. He was thinking hard.

A-ken Sao stopped struggling. "Oh, do you have a letter for me then?"

"Um... well... I..." said Mr Yeh. He let go of her and pretended to search in his pockets. After a minute, he smiled and apologized. "Sorry, I thought I had a letter. I'm sure there was a letter."

"Oh!" cried A-ken Sao, and she started to run toward the river again.

Mr Yeh shouted, "No! Wait! I was confused. I made a mistake. A-ken didn't give me a letter but he did send some money for you."

He took his silver yuan-pao out of his bag, looked at it one last time, and gave it to A-ken Sao.

She stopped and looked down for a quiet moment at the silver yuan-pao in her hand. A wide smile appeared on her face and then she began to laugh.

"Oh! My husband is alive and hasn't forgotten us! And our daughter has been saved! Thank Buddha!" she cried happily. "And thank you too, Mr Yeh. I must go to my daughter. Thank you! Thank you so much!" She was crying again now, but with happiness, as she ran away down the road.

"Watching her, I knew I'd just given our New Year's Eve dinner away," Mr Yeh told his wife, who was sitting opposite him at their table. "But what could I do?" Mr Yeh was very depressed.

"But why did you give A-ken Sao all your money?" Mrs Yeh asked. "Why didn't you save some for us?"

"I had only one yuan-pao. I'd told her that this yuan-pao was A-ken's salary, which he'd asked me to give her."

Mrs Yeh became angry. "But what's going to happen to us now? Do we have to die of hunger because of your kindness? You must do something. We need food. I want you to ask our friends and neighbors for the same kindness. Go and borrow some money for our New Year's food."

Mr Yeh knew he couldn't refuse his wife, so he did as she asked. The next morning, he went out to ask their neighbors if he could borrow some money. He knew that New Year's Eve was the worst time to do this. People were busy cooking dinner, and they believed that people who borrowed money could bring them bad luck in the New Year. Almost every door was shut in his face. Finally one man gave him a small package, but when he opened it he discovered that it was only stones wrapped in some paper.

Tired and disappointed, Mr Yeh went home and told his wife he had failed. "I'm exhausted," he said. "Let's go to bed and not think about dinner. We have nothing to eat anyway. I'll try to think of something in the morning."

But his wife was too hungry to sleep. "No, you have to do something," she told him. "I have an idea. The fields are full of big sweet potatoes at the moment. Why don't you get some of those?"

"But those potatoes don't belong to us. Those aren't our fields," Mr Yeh replied.

"So?"

"What? You want me to steal!"

"Well, let's say 'borrow.' I want you to 'borrow' some potatoes from the fields."

"But dear, I can't do this," Mr Yeh replied.

"Oh! But you can let us die of hunger!" his wife shouted.

Then she started to cry as she had never cried before.

And so finally Mr Yeh agreed to "borrow" some sweet potatoes.

The next evening he took a basket and walked toward the fields. These sweet potato fields belonged to a widow, Liu Sao, and her only son, young Hsiao-pao. Liu Sao knew that New Year's Eve was a good time for people to steal sweet potatoes because she would be busy cooking and couldn't watch her fields. So this year she decided to take her son to the fields to guard the potatoes. She put up a tent for Hsiao-pao to sit in, left him, and went home to continue her work. Hsiao-pao sat silently in the darkness, waiting and listening. He had brought a big stick to beat any thieves with and he felt very serious and brave and strong.

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He sat there for hours trying not to fall asleep. Just as his eyes were closing, he heard a small noise. He looked out into the dark night and saw a person walking very quietly along the edge of the field. He couldn't see if it was a man or a woman. He watched and waited. This person then went into the small temple at the edge of the field, where people came to pray to the Buddha of earth. Hsiao-pao went quickly to the temple and hid inside. He saw the person, a man, kneeling in front of the Buddha and whispering. In the darkness Hsiao-pao recognized his old teacher, Mr Yeh. He was curious to know what Mr Yeh was saying but he couldn't quite hear, so he moved very quietly nearer to the Buddha.

He heard Mr Yeh asking, "Buddha, what should I do?" Then Mr Yeh told the Buddha what had happened to him and how his wife now wanted him to "borrow" some sweet potatoes. He asked if the Buddha thought it was all right to do this "just once" because of their money problems. "If you think this is all right, please show me," he prayed.

Then he stood up, took some chi'en out of their box near the Buddha, threw them on the ground, closed his eyes and prayed. Chi'en are sticks that show your future. People use them to ask the gods for advice when they don't know what to do. The chi'en have long and short lines cut into each side. You throw the sticks on the ground and read the pattern they make. Different patterns have different meanings. One of the patterns means "yes."

Hsiao-pao laughed to himself when he heard what Mr Yeh was praying about.

"I think I'll pretend to be Buddha tonight and have some fun," he thought.

So while Mr Yeh was praying, Hsiao-pao moved closer and looked at the sticks. They didn't make the "yes" pattern, but he quickly changed the pattern so that they did.

Mr Yeh opened his eyes, looked at the sticks and smiled.

"Oh, thank you, Buddha," he cried. "I promise to live well and pay Liu Sao and her son back as soon as I get some money."

He kissed the ground at the Buddha's feet three times and left the temple.

Hsiao-pao quietly followed him, laughing to himself and thinking about how his old teacher, Mr Yeh, had always told his students never to steal. He hid behind some bushes at the edge of the field and watched Mr Yeh fill his basket with sweet potatoes that he dug from the earth. As Hsiao-pao watched, he thought, "Mr Yeh was an excellent teacher but he's terrible at digging!"

Mr Yeh was so inexperienced and afraid of being discovered that he dug very slowly. He finally cried out, "This is hopeless! Please help me, Buddha!"

Hsiao-pao felt very sympathetic about poor Mr Yeh's situation. "You want some help?" he thought. "I'll help and have some more fun at the same time."

He took out his knife and started digging up sweet potatoes. He could do this very quickly because he was so experienced. As soon as he had gathered several potatoes on the ground around him, he threw a handful at Mr Yeh.

"Ouch!" Mr Yeh, said, as one hit his head. "Oh, Buddha, thank you!"

The potatoes continued to rain down all around him as Hsiao-pao threw them from behind the bushes. Mr Yeh was amazed. He thanked Buddha again but asked him to slow down a little. When Hsiao-pao, the little Buddha, thought that Mr Yeh had enough, he stopped. Mr Yeh then finished filling his basket and walked slowly home.

Liu Sao finished her cooking and came to get her son. She was very angry when she found the tent empty, holes everywhere and many of her sweet potatoes gone.

"Look at this mess!" she shouted. "Did you fall asleep? Where are my sweet potatoes?"

"Mr Yeh stole them, Mother!" Hsiao-pao told her with excitement.

"Hsiao-pao! Don't say such things about your old teacher, who is such a good man and has helped so many people!"

Hsiao-pao cried, "But it's true, mother, and I helped him!"

Then he told her the whole story. Liu Sao felt sorry for Mr Yeh and realized that he must be having a difficult time. So she decided that the next morning she and Hsiao-pao would go and wish Mr Yeh and his wife a happy New Year, and take them some of the delicious New Year's food that she had cooked.

The next morning, as Liu Sao and Hsiao-pao were walking up to Mr Yeh's house, they heard Mr and Mrs Yeh talking happily to each other. They stood under the window to listen and were very surprised to hear what they were saying.

"Old woman, help yourself, eat some lovely pork with red wine."

"Old man, don't be shy, have some nice cold sliced pork."

Hsiao-pao was very upset. "He lied! He's a thief! He stole our sweet potatoes but all the time he had money to buy pork!"

"Quiet, son," his mother said, and she looked through the window to see what was happening. She saw Mr Yeh putting a piece of red-skinned sweet potato into his wife's bowl as she was putting a piece of white-skinned sweet potato into his bowl. They were both pretending that they were eating real pork!

"It's all right, son," she said.

Then she lifted Hsiao-pao up so he could see. He immediately jumped down, banged on Mr Yeh's door and shouted for him to come.

When Mr Yeh heard Hsiao-pao, he jumped up from his chair, frightened, and whispered to his wife, "Oh no! Hsiao-pao's here! Quick! Hide these!"

Mrs Yeh quickly took away the rest of the potatoes while Mr Yeh looked for a place to hide the skins of the potatoes they had already eaten. He rushed to the fire, put them in a pot and put the lid on. Then he opened the door for Hsiao-pao and his mother.

"Happy New Year, Mr Yeh," said Liu Sao, as she gave him his New Year's Eve food.

Mr Yeh was very embarrassed, but before he could say anything A-ken Sao came through the door with her daughter, Ying-hua.

"Mr Yeh," A-ken Sao called. "We've just come to thank you again for giving us A-ken's money and making our New Year such a happy one. Happy New Year to you and your good wife."

While all this was happening, no one noticed that A-ken had appeared and was standing in the door listening. So they all jumped when he quietly asked, "What's this about my money?"

"My darling!" cried A-ken Sao, and she rushed into his arms, saying, "I'm just thanking Mr Yeh for giving me..."

"I know, I heard," he answered. "But I didn't give Mr Yeh anything. I'm completely confused."

Hsiao-Pao suddenly interrupted. "I know everything! Sit down and let me tell you!" And he told them the whole story.

When he had finished, both A-ken and his wife fell down on their knees in front of Mr Yeh, crying, "Oh, Mr Yeh, how can we thank you?"

Hsiao-pao laughed loudly then for the first time. He ran over to the pot where Mr Yeh had hidden the sweet potato skins. He took them out, threw them up in the air and shouted, "Happy New Year!"

- THE END -