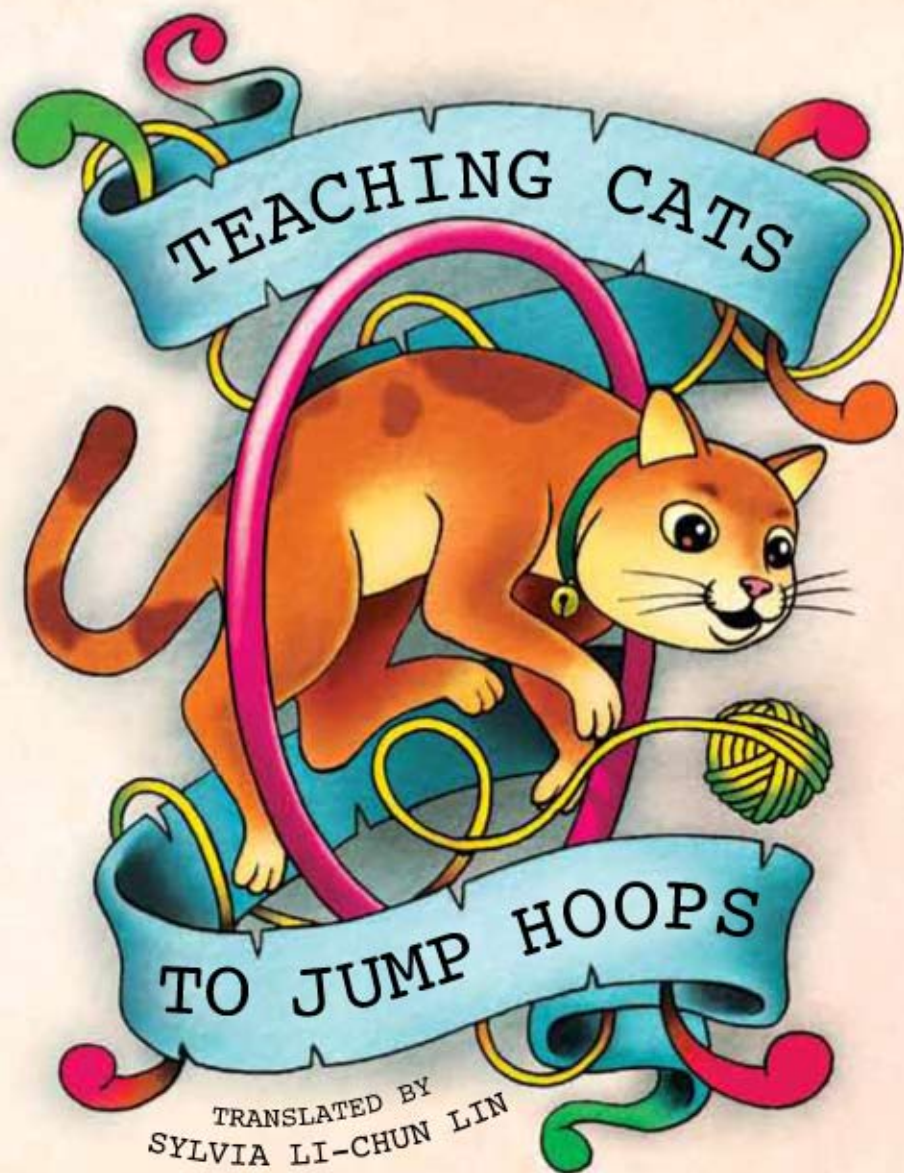


Winner of
the Cultural
Medallion

YOU JIN



TRANSLATED BY
SYLVIA LI-CHUN LIN

Stories

Teaching Cats to Jump Hoops

Stories

YOU JIN

TEACHING
CATS TO
JUMP HOOPS

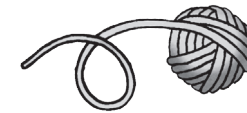
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Translated from the Chinese by Sylvia Li-chun Lin



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www.epigrambooks.sg

Originally published in 2004 by Lingzi Media as *Ting, Qing Chun Zai Ku Qi*

Cover illustration © 2012 by Esther Lim
Cover design by Stefany

Consulting Editor: Chua Chee Lay
Series Editor: Ruth Wan
Editor: Woo Wei-Ling

Published with the support of



National Library Board Singapore
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

You, Jin, 1950-
Teaching cats to jump hoops / You Jin ;
translated from the Chinese by Sylvia Li-chun Lin.
– Singapore : Epigram Books, 2012.
p. cm. – (Cultural medallion)

ISBN : 978-981-07-3657-6 (pbk.)
ISBN : 978-981-07-3658-3 (epub)

I. Lin, Sylvia Li-chun. II. Title. III. Series: Cultural medallion.
PL2908.N35893
895.13 -- dc23 OCN810344882

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First Edition

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For teachers, parents and students

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PART ONE

Family Can Hurt You Too

The Shadow in Shackles

1

WHEN MRS. SEETOH walked into the staff room, her long face was a clear sign that a brewing storm was about to fill the building with wind. Sitting down heavily in the chair in front of my desk, she took out the notice I had distributed to the students the day before in relation to an upcoming camping trip and thrust it at me.

“My Zhuang Jing can’t participate in this activity,” she blurted out anxiously.

The three-day camping trip was an annual outing that the school had organised for its secondary three students. It was meant to bolster the students’ interest in outdoor activities and give them a chance to exercise while fostering team spirit. Parents were generally supportive of the event, all except for Mrs. Seetoh, whose unhappy expression would have one thinking that we were forcing her daughter into doing something illegal.

“Zhuang Jing is a girl,” she continued to sputter. “I can’t allow her to spend a night away from home. Besides, with all those boys and girls mingling like that, who will take responsibility if something happens?”

“If something happens? What could happen?” I asked calmly.

Glaring fiercely at me, she retorted as if scolding a child, “With boys and girls sharing a room, how can you say they won’t mess around?”

Mess around? How could she say something so distasteful?

“Mrs. Seetoh,” I said sternly, “this activity has been organised by the school and the teachers will take full responsibility for student safety. Besides, boys and girls do not sleep in the same room, so there’s no need for you to worry.”

“That’s enough!” she interrupted, and announced with a note of finality, “I will not allow my daughter to spend a night away from home.”

That was my first encounter with Mrs. Seetoh. It was very unpleasant, to say the least. Our second meeting, however, was even worse.

2

Seetoh Zhuang Jing was a girl who left an indelible impression at first meeting. Although not an exceptional beauty, she had qualities uncharacteristic of girls her age: poise and quiet. Straight, lustrous, black hair, glossy as if glazed, framed an oval face that was unusually fair and clean. Her complexion was completely flawless. When she smiled, a tiny dimple danced subtly at the corner of her mouth, and light sparkled tantalisingly in her almond-shaped eyes which turned into crescent moons. This was why someone once teased that when Seetoh Zhuang Jing smiled, she toppled the whole class; and when she smiled again, the whole school crumpled. But she was stingy with her smile, and equally miserly with her words.

A loner who spoke little, Zhuang Jing was like an alien in the eyes of her classmates. Her baggy uniform blouse and calf-length skirt made her a campus laughingstock. Whenever the students had to form groups for team activities in class, she was always the odd girl out, which made for an awkward situation. More than once, I had asked the class monitor, Seow Chang Qing, to get the class to show

some team spirit and include her in one of their groups, thinking that this might change her behaviour too. But each time, he simply scratched his head and rubbed his chin.

“She never says anything,” he once replied helplessly. “She’s like a block of wood, making it hard on everyone. And, and—” He laughed, looking hapless.

“And what?” I asked.

He scratched his head as he continued, “Sometimes we need to get together on a Sunday to discuss or gather materials for a project. Whenever we’ve rung her at home, her mother has treated us like criminals, interrogating us over and over as if she would only be satisfied if we told her our family history over eighteen generations. But that’s not the worst part. What’s terrible is, even after all the questions, she won’t let Zhuang Jing out of the house. So to avoid trouble with her mother, no one wants Zhuang Jing in their group.”

I sighed to myself. A problem mother was tougher to deal with than a problem student.

An only child and a loner on campus, Zhuang Jing was used to being alone, and was not at all bothered by the passive discrimination from others in the class. She drifted silently like a ghost on campus, with her shadow as her only company. She was an excellent student who consistently out-performed her class in school exams, although this was probably because she was so focused in class, with no leisure activities to distract her. Whenever her name was mentioned, her teachers would praise her unequivocally, all except me. I had a feeling that this girl, who had a youthful body but displayed no visible sign of youthfulness, lived like a shadow in shackles.

Once, I mentioned my impressions to a colleague, Li Hong, who shook her head like a rattle drum. “As the philosopher Zhuangzi

once said, you're not a fish, so how do you know if a fish is happy?" she asked. "Even a shadow has its sorrows and joys. You think she's sad being a loner, but in my opinion, she enjoys being alone."

"It's probably not a choice she made willingly," I countered.

"If she really wanted a friend at school, her mother would be too far away to stop her," said Li Hong with a smile.

Nothing Li Hong said put my mind at ease. But I had no idea how to help the girl. As she was a good student with no disciplinary issues, her problems gradually receded to the back of my mind. That is, until after the midterm exams.

Surprisingly, Zhuang Jing's exam results in every subject were poorer than before. Her history teacher, Koo De Chen, told me that she had begun to show troubling signs a month before the exams. In the past her homework had always been neat and on time, but in the weeks leading up to the exams, she was late handing in her homework, which was sloppily done and clearly the result of perfunctory efforts. When Mr. Koo asked for a reason for her poor performance, she simply said that she was focusing on her weaker subjects, an explanation he'd accepted at the time. When all the students' results were in, however, he realised that she had done poorly not only in history, but in every other subject as well. Something was clearly amiss.

As her form and Chinese language teacher, I felt guilty for not noticing the change in Zhuang Jing—an obvious slip-up in my duty to the students. Before I even had a chance to talk to her, however, I was bowled over by a shocking event which soon occurred.

The period after the exams was always a tough time for teachers. We all wished that we could grow an extra pair of eyes or hands and that the hours in the day would double so that we could finish the mountains of work piled upon us. Just when we were all buried

in paper and fighting for each extra second to finish our work, Chang Qing, the class monitor, ran breathlessly into the office and exclaimed anxiously, "Madam Tham, someone has taken my handphone from my bag!"

The students had all left for their physical education class, leaving the classroom empty and giving the thief the perfect opportunity. I immediately went to the classroom with Mr. Teo Yao Jin, our discipline master. All forty students were sitting like statues, their faces taut as drawn bows.

"Search their bags," Mr. Teo commanded sternly.

We searched the first row and found nothing. The second row also revealed nothing. When we got to the third row, I spotted a suspicious-looking face, a deathly pale face where the redness of the lips was swallowed by fear. It looked like a sheet of waterlogged paper, devoid of glow or lustre. Oh, it was Seetoh Zhuang Jing! My heart sank like a boat that had taken on water. Could this girl, who lived in a bungalow with her rich parents who drove a BMW, be a thief? As Mr. Teo and I stood next to her, her slender body shook uncontrollably, like a butterfly struggling to keep flight in a gale. Meanwhile, her hands clutched her expensive-looking cotton book bag so tightly that her knuckles turned white. The other students soon noticed her unusual behaviour, and the atmosphere quickly turned icy. She looked up at me, but it seemed as if she was staring down the barrel of a gun pointed at her heart. With a frightened and unfocused look in her eyes, she opened her mouth to say something, but whatever she wanted to say seemed stuck to her teeth and no sound came out. Although we had yet to search her bag, Mr. Teo and I were almost certain she was the culprit.

I softened my voice as I said, "Move your hands, Zhuang Jing. We need to search everyone's bag."

Instead of releasing her grip, she hugged the bag to her chest as if protecting a family heirloom. Tears streamed forlornly down her cheeks.

Mr. Teo signalled to me with his eyes. "Take her to the office," he whispered. "I'll join you when I finish here."

I took Zhuang Jing to the small room set aside in our staff room for consultations and sat her down on the sofa. Then I made her a cup of hot tea before sitting down myself.

"Zhuang Jing, the bag search is routine. There's nothing to worry about."

In a pained voice laden with anxiety, she spoke up suddenly, "Madam Tham, I didn't steal anything, I swear. If I did, I ought to be run over by a car the minute I walk out of school."

"Then will you let me look at your bag? You can return to class if I don't find something that shouldn't be there."

She clutched her bag even more tightly when she heard that, which upset me so much that I said, "If you keep this up, I think we'll have to call the police and have them search your bag!"

The same terror-stricken expression, as if a gun were being pointed at her heart, appeared on her face again, but this time she let go and placed her bag on the desk.

"Please, Madam Tham, I beg you. Please don't tell my mother."

I sighed silently as I opened her bag. Inside were neatly arranged textbooks and notebooks for each subject, but no handphone. I turned the bag inside out—still nothing. Then I noticed a secret compartment that had escaped my attention. Unzipping it, I slipped my hand inside and touched something that felt like a book. I took it out and one look gave me such a shock that I nearly jumped. It was a magazine of pornographic photos, with a cover showing a man and

woman having sex, and page after page of them in various lewd sexual positions. I sucked in cold air and looked over at the girl. She was biting her bloodless lower lip, looking like a criminal awaiting a death sentence.

"Where did you get this?"

She was silent.

"Tell me, Zhuang Jing!"

It was a moment before she could manage an answer.

"From a friend."

"Which friend?"

She went quiet again, and remained that way no matter what I said.

3

Sitting in the principal's office, Mrs. Seetoh was the personification of a cold, glinting dagger. "It's a total fabrication to say that this filthy thing came from my Zhuang Jing," she said with a sneer. "When she came home, she told me that someone in her class had put it in her bag to get her into trouble."

"Zhuang Jing!" I looked at the girl with mounting anger. "Yesterday you told me it came from a friend of yours."

She didn't say a word, clamping her lips tightly and giving rise to an innocent-looking dimple. Mrs. Seetoh glared at me with her sleet-like eyes.

"My daughter would never have such disgusting friends! Use your head. I drive her to and from school every day. And once she's home, I seldom allow her out again, so where would she have gotten a chance to meet these so-called friends?"

But I had found the book in her bag. I should have taped her confession the day before, but it was too late for regrets now. An incident with ironclad evidence was now an unsolved mystery. Most disconcerting was the possible secret that lay behind it all: if Zhuang Jing was indeed a nice girl who was never let out of her mother's sight, then who could have given her the porn magazine? And why had her performance in school suffered so much that semester?

To get to the bottom of the matter, the school decided not to punish Zhuang Jing, and mother and daughter were led to believe that their explanation had been accepted. In the meantime, however, every effort was taken to find the answer.

First, I conducted meetings with individual students in the class. Several of them shared their impression that Zhuang Jing had been acting differently over the past month or two. In class, she was often absent-minded and sometimes even smiled into space. Several times when the teacher called on her, she had been so startled that she shot out of her chair. Woo Zhen Zhen, who sat next to Zhuang Jing, revealed that often when others were diligently taking notes in class, Zhuang Jing would be writing someone's name over and over in her notebook. She would write the same name repeatedly, all over her notebook until it was filled.

There was no doubt in my mind that she had fallen in love, but with whom?

While we were at the height of our investigation, something more startling than an 8.0 magnitude earthquake occurred.

One day during recess, I arrived at the staff room from my class to see Zhuang Jing waiting for me by the door, a dazed look on her face. One look made me cry out, "What's wrong?"

Her ashen face was overcome with utter dejection and her eyes

had swelled up like plump peaches. "Can I talk to you alone, Madam Tham?" she asked.

We had just sat down in the side room when she began to wail. She cried herself hoarse, as if she were trying to cry her heart out, and blood seemed to drip from her voice. I kept quiet and let her weep. She cried for a very long time before I finally handed her a moist hand towel. After wiping her face, she looked up at me and said in a determined voice, "I want to die." Then she began to sob again. "Madam Tham, I don't want to live any more. I want to die."

I was shocked but reassured. Although she said she wanted to end her life, I knew that she wanted to live more than anything else. Someone who was ready to die was more likely to look for a tall building than to seek out her teacher.

I waited for her to calm down before saying, "Tell me what's going on. I'll do what I can to help you."

She went on to relate a story that was so unexpected, it seemed as if it had come straight out of *Arabian Nights*.

After years of being strictly controlled by her mother, Zhuang Jing felt like the walking dead. On the surface, she did everything her mother wanted and gave others the impression of poise, ease and contentment. Deep down, however, her resentment grew each day and her anger towards her mother surged like a stormy sea. Since her mother would not allow her to make friends at school, Zhuang Jing sought out other ways to meet people. A few months earlier, she had met an American boy in an Internet chat room. After a month of exchanging messages and photos, they had fallen madly in love. The young man then flew to Singapore to meet Zhuang Jing, and they agreed on an unusual way to see each other. At one o'clock each morning, she would unlock the door to her house and leave

it ajar so that he could slip in. After enjoying a romp on the living room sofa, she would open the door to let him sneak out again. They spent two whole weeks this way without anyone finding out. The magazine found in her bag had been a parting gift from her boyfriend, Mike, before he returned to the United States.

Now the girl who had tasted the forbidden fruit discovered that a new life was growing inside her. Feeling helpless and alone, she came to tell me everything.

It was so sad and pitiful that a girl who had been shackled by her mother would rebel in such a way. With no one to guide her, she had fallen prey to an Internet con who called himself Mike. After swimming naked in the pool of desire for two weeks, he had disappeared in a puff of smoke. Only sixteen, she felt that she couldn't possibly spend the rest of her life dragged down by a fatherless child, and so abortion seemed like the only way out.

"Could you take me to have the procedure done, Madam Tham?" she asked in a quivering voice. "My mother will surely beat me to death if she were to find out."

The law in Singapore stipulated that parental consent was not required for abortions performed on girls who were above the age of thirteen. In recent years, defenders of traditional values had demanded amendments to the law, but the government had remained steadfast in its position, mainly out of concern that there would be a heightened rate of suicide and illegal abortions if the law were changed.

I wasn't sure what to say, and she began to cry again.

"If you don't help me, Madam Tham, I'll have to kill myself."

Thinking fast, I knew I had to agree to her request first and find a solution later.

I took her to the sick bay, where I asked a colleague on duty to watch over her. I told Zhuang Jing I was going to make arrangements at the hospital, but in reality I raced to report the matter to the school administration. An emergency meeting was convened and a consensus was reached: her mother had to be notified before we could even contemplate our next step.

I called Mrs. Seetoh and asked her to wait for us at her house.

"Has anything happened to my daughter?" she asked with palpable anxiety.

"We'll talk about it when we get there."

I put down the phone, jumped into the car, and rushed to their house with Mr. Teo.

"What's happened?" Mrs. Seetoh demanded the moment she saw us. "Why are people at school always picking on my daughter?" Then she became nervous when she noticed that her daughter was not with us. "What's happened to Zhuang Jing? Why isn't she with you?"

We told her everything. Her initial reaction was one of disbelief. She even loudly accused us of slandering her daughter, and threatened to sue us. When she finally believed us, however, she turned wooden from the shock.

"Mrs. Seetoh, you'd be driving her straight to her grave if you said anything critical right now. She's your only daughter, and you must do everything you can to help her get past this major obstacle in her life."

Mrs. Seetoh personally made the arrangements for her daughter's abortion.

I believed that it would be in Zhuang Jing's best interests to leave her rumour-rife environment and move to a different school where she could make new friends, continue her studies and have a fresh start. Zhuang Jing and her mother agreed with me, and with the school's recommendation, she made a smooth transfer to another secondary school.

The day before she left, I took Zhuang Jing to a fast food restaurant near our school for lunch. I ordered barbecued chicken for her. She had a good appetite and polished off three large pieces of chicken in no time. Sunlight streaming in through the windows landed on her fair, flawless face. As Zhuang Jing smiled shyly at me, her dimple danced quietly. She seemed to be brimming with dreams for the future. She had gone through a terrible ordeal, but with the help of people around her, she had been given a second chance. Of course there would be a scar, but it would fade with time and might even disappear one day. Most importantly, Mrs. Seetoh had learned a lesson she would never forget as long as she lived, and had changed the way she treated her child.

Shortly after Zhuang Jing's transfer, I read an exciting report in the newspaper: The Singaporean government was adopting multimedia sex education materials for lower secondary school students, who could begin to learn the correct approach to sexual relationships through innovative pedagogy. I approved this preventive approach.

A card from Zhuang Jing arrived around New Year's Day. In it, she had written, "Madam Tham, I really like my new school. I've made many friends, so please don't worry. I'll take good care of myself."

Sunlight remained quietly outside my window, but inside I could smell its sweet fragrance.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Taiwan's *Living Psychology* magazine for publishing the original collection of short stories reflecting the issues facing Singapore's youth.

My gratitude also goes to Edmund Wee, the founder of Epigram Books, for publishing *Teaching Cats to Jump Hoops* and for allowing these short stories to take on a different voice in a different language, to Dr. Chua Chee Lay for his valuable insights and opinions, and finally to my daughter, Jacinta Lim Ke Jun, for her time and effort spent on reading and suggesting improvements to the manuscript.

A chain-smoking student with a violent past. A girl with a weakness for rare turtles. A boy who sees a raging fire each time he opens his exam booklet. In this collection of funny and heartwarming stories by You Jin, a teacher finds herself confronted with misfits and loners, rebellious dropouts and overbearing, even abusive parents. Yet she remains determined to reach out to her students. Combining an assured style with sensitive portrayals, *Teaching Cats to Jump Hoops* is the first translation into English of a popular voice in Chinese literature.

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ISBN-13: 978-981-07-3657-6



9 789810 736576

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