

# MAHOUT BOY

by  
Douglas W. Evans



CHAN KNEW the old elephant was still asleep. Her head was bent, and her trunk drooped to the ground. The boy looked across the park where he had spent the night. Bangkok, the bustling capital of Thailand, spread all around him. "Sawàtdee, Boonchu," Chan said, tapping the elephant's wrinkled side with his mahout stick. "Time to wake up. Time to see what work we can find in this city."

When the elephant's eyes opened and her floppy ears flapped, Chan tapped her front leg.

"Up, Boonchu," he ordered. "Up. Up."

Boonchu raised her leg, and the boy climbed onto it. He grabbed the elephant's ear and pulled himself up onto her thick neck.

"Let's go, old friend," Chan said, prodding the elephant behind her ear with his toe.

The boy rode the elephant out of the park and along a sidewalk that followed a busy boulevard. Roaring motorcycles, rattling trucks, honking cars, and buses belching out black diesel fumes streamed past them.

Chan had not ridden far before he spotted a *tuk-tuk* sitting in the ditch by the side of the road. Apparently the three-wheeled taxi cart had skidded off the pavement. The tuk-tuk driver stood outside his vehicle, rubbing the back of his neck.

"This could be fortunate for us, Boonchu," Chan said. The boy swung his leg over the elephant's neck and slid to the ground.

In front of the tuk-tuk driver, he made the *wai* gesture—the Thai sign of greeting—by placing his hands palm to palm with the tips of his fingers almost touching his nose.

"Sawàtdee," he said. "Boonchu and I can help you."

The driver looked perturbed. "How could a boy help me?" he asked. "And what is an elephant doing in this city?"

"Boonchu was trained to log in the teak forests of the northeast provinces," Chan answered. "But since most of the forests are gone now, she is no longer needed. We've come to Bangkok to look for work. Boonchu can pull large teak logs, so surely she can get your tuk-tuk out of that ditch."

"A logging elephant?" said the driver. "And were you the trainer?"

THAILAND IS A KINGDOM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA.  
SAY SAWÀTDEE: SAH-WAH-DEE. IT'S AN  
ALL-PURPOSE THAI GREETING THAT MEANS  
HI, GOOD MORNING, GOOD EVENING!

A MAHOUT IS THE KEEPER OR  
DRIVER OF AN ELEPHANT.

WAI! SOUNDS LIKE "WHY."



Illustrated by K. Dyle Thompson

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Chan shook his head. "Boonchu is fifty-nine years old, and I am twelve," he explained. "She was working for my father long before I was born." He motioned toward the tuk-tuk. "Thirty baht is our charge for pulling your vehicle back on the road."

"A fair price," said the driver. "And I have a strong rope under the backseat that we can use."

With a rope harness around her chest, Boonchu had no problem pulling out the tuk-tuk. Soon Chan had thirty baht in his pocket and was riding his elephant down the sidewalk again.

"That was lucky, Boonchu!" he called out, waving his mahout stick in the air. "But what other work could there be in this city for us?"

No sooner had he said this than a woman inside a fruit stall called out, "Sawàtdee, mahout boy. Come here, please."

**BAHT** IS THE MONETARY UNIT OF THAILAND.  
25 BAHT EQUAL 1 DOLLAR.



THESE ARE ALL FRUITS!  
RAMBUTANS ARE BRIGHT RED  
AND SLIGHTLY SOUR; MANGOSTEENS  
ARE JUICY; POMELOS ARE  
CITRUS FRUITS, EITHER YELLOW  
OR ORANGE; AND FLAVORFUL  
DURIANS HAVE HARD, PRICKLY  
RINDS AND A BAD SMELL!  
SAY THEM: RAM-BOOT'NG,  
MANG-UH-STEENS,  
POM'UH-LOES, AND  
DUR-EE-VINS!



Chan climbed off the elephant and made the wai gesture before the woman. He noticed her large, round belly.

"My baby will be born in a few weeks," she said. "May I walk under your elephant? I will give you twenty baht for this service. And you both may feast on the unsold fruit I have in the back of my shop."

Chan smiled. He whispered into Boonchu's ear, "More good fortune for us, old friend. As long as some Thai people believe it is lucky for a pregnant woman to pass underneath an elephant, we will have work."

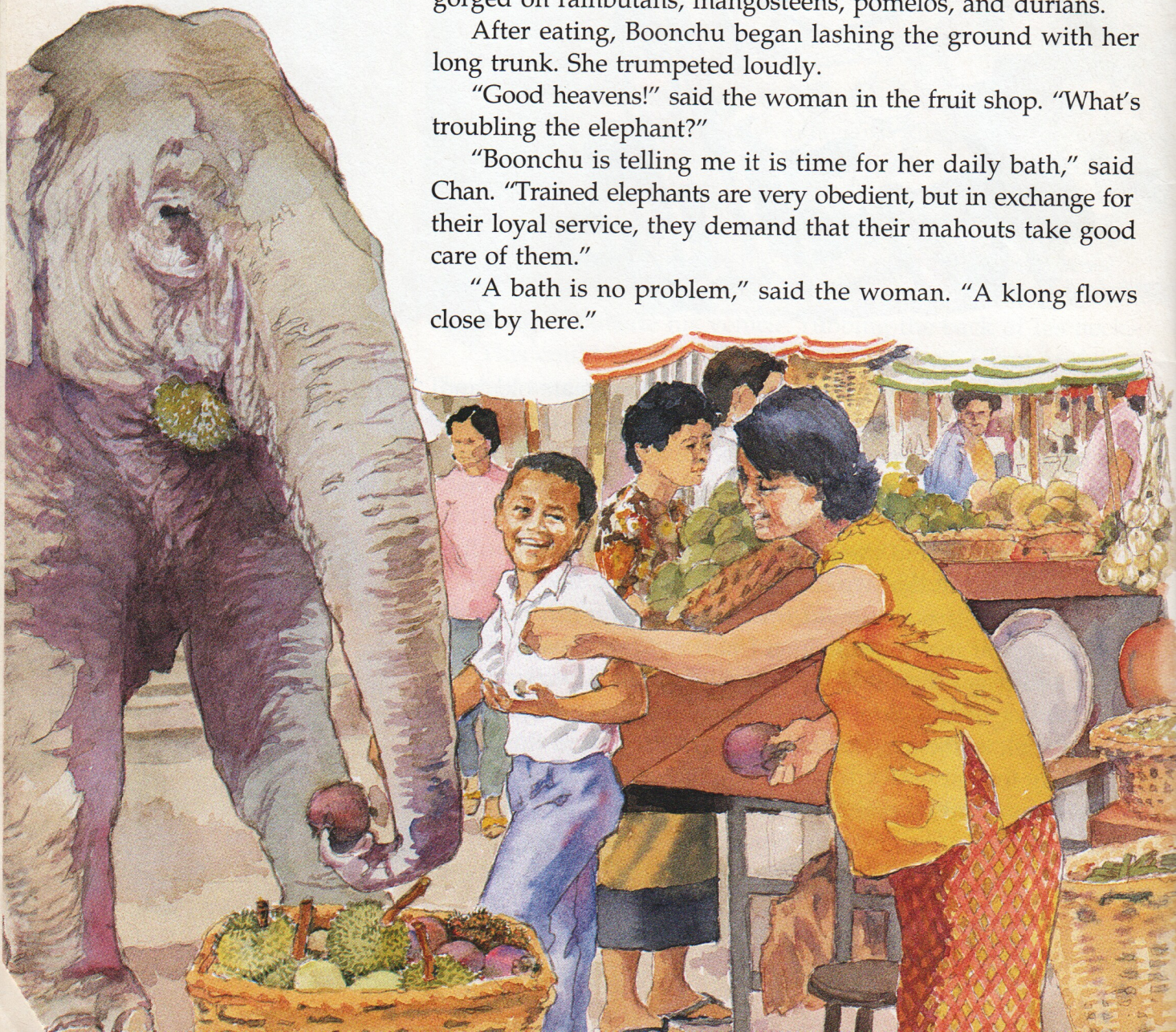
The boy held Boonchu still while the woman walked slowly beneath the elephant's belly. Afterward Chan and Boonchu gorged on rambutans, mangosteens, pomelos, and durians.

After eating, Boonchu began lashing the ground with her long trunk. She trumpeted loudly.

"Good heavens!" said the woman in the fruit shop. "What's troubling the elephant?"

"Boonchu is telling me it is time for her daily bath," said Chan. "Trained elephants are very obedient, but in exchange for their loyal service, they demand that their mahouts take good care of them."

"A bath is no problem," said the woman. "A klong flows close by here."



Chan led Boonchu over to the narrow canal—one of the many klongs that crisscross Bangkok. Immediately the elephant waded into the water. She used her trunk to hose down her back.

“Now you are happy, old friend,” Chan called out. “But hurry up with your bathing. I spy another way we might earn a few baht today.”

On the banks of the klong stood two Western tourists. The man and woman were pointing cameras at Boonchu.

“Sawàtdee,” Chan called to them. He knew very few English words, so he used hand motions to tell them his idea.

“Oh, you’ll let us sit on your elephant,” said the woman. “I’ve never done that before. How exciting! It will make a great picture to show our children.”

Chan flashed his hands open and shut two times.

“Twenty baht you’re asking for, son?” said the man. “It’s a deal.”

Chan made the wai gesture and tapped Boonchu’s front leg with his stick.

“Oh, look,” said the woman. “The elephant is making a step for us to use.”

“Sure beats carrying around a ladder, doesn’t it, son?” said the man.

In no time, twenty baht richer, Chan sat again upon Boonchu’s neck and rode through the streets of Bangkok. They stopped in a lot where men were constructing an office building.

“Sawàtdee,” Chan called to the foreman of the construction crew. “I noticed that pile of bamboo scaffolding poles by the road. You will need them moved closer to your building site. My elephant is trained to do such work.”

The foreman smiled at Boonchu. “You’ve got yourself a job, mahout boy,” he said. “An elephant’s big padded feet will do a lot less damage to this ground than our truck tires would.”

Guiding Boonchu with his mahout stick, the boy instructed the elephant to pick up the poles with her trunk and haul them over to the building.

While they worked, the foreman asked Chan, “What will you do with the money you earn in Bangkok?”

"I will send it to my family," Chan replied, "and when Boonchu and I have made enough money, I'll ride her back to my home province. Thai law says working elephants must retire when they are sixty-one years old. Boonchu can enjoy the remaining years of her life in the forests where she grew up."

Chan and Boonchu found other jobs in the city that day. Three more tourists asked to have their pictures taken atop the elephant, and another pregnant woman wanted to walk under Boonchu's belly.

Chan was surprised when an old man paid him twenty baht so he could crawl underneath the elephant. After rising off his hands and knees, the man explained, "An elephant is the king's animal. I have chased away evil spirits and perhaps even added some years to my life."

By this time the sun was setting. Chan prodded Boonchu behind the ear with his toe and directed her to head for the park.

Chan made a bed for himself in the soft park grass. "Sawàtdee, old friend," he said, lying down next to his elephant. "We have earned many baht today. Soon we can go home. It's good to know there is always work for a well-trained elephant and her mahout boy!" 🐛

