

Constructing Knowledge about China and Chinese Americans with Young Adult Literature

In the context of multiculturalism and globalization, schools in the U.S. are increasingly characterized by students from diverse backgrounds who communicate in a multitude of languages, claim multiple identities, and often have connections that extend beyond national borders (Campano & Ghiso, 2011).

Asian Americans constitute the fastest growing minority in the United States. Among them, the number of Chinese immigrants has been growing exponentially in recent years. Chinese immigrants and their descendants have made substantial contributions to American society and culture, such as constructing the Transcontinental Railroad and mining in the West during Reconstruction. Therefore, Chinese American narratives should be “an integral part of the multilayered tapestry of the American experience” (de Manuel & Davis, 2006, p. vii).

Globalization is another important factor that is making cultural awareness of other people an indispensable part of education. As globalization has sped up through increasing technology, the understanding, respect, and appreciation of each other’s cultures becomes essential for us to live harmoniously and productively as global citizens. Particularly with the rapidly growing relationship between the U. S. and China, in terms of bilateral trade and business as well as cultural and educational exchanges, the two countries are becoming closer than ever. China has the world’s largest population, the third largest land area, and the second largest economy after the U. S. China’s spheres of cultural and social influence have extended beyond its national borders. Cooperation, communication, and mutual understandings based on reciprocity between the U. S. and China are critical to maintaining the balance of power, world peace, and stability. Therefore, it is critical for people, especially young people, in both countries to better understand each other in order to ensure future friendly and mutually beneficial relationships. There has been a perceptible influence of American culture on China, as shown by the popularity of Hollywood blockbusters, fast food chains, pop songs, and the enthusiasm for learning American English. On the part of the U. S., multicultural literature featuring China and Chinese culture can serve as a window, helping American people develop a more profound understanding of Chinese people and their culture. For students who are of Chinese ancestry, such literature can also reinforce their cultural identity and build their self-esteem. Hence, both the growing diversity of the American society and increasing global integration make it necessary that multicultural young adult literature portraying China and Chinese culture should receive more critical attention from educators and researchers.

The purpose of this article is to help teachers learn about Chinese culture, identify high-quality children’s literature about

Chinese and Chinese Americans, and see examples of teaching ideas that can be used in secondary classrooms to foster the cultural identity of Chinese students and promote their self-esteem. When teachers use high-quality Chinese adolescent literature in secondary classrooms, Chinese American students have an opportunity to explore, share, and express pride in their culture and the literature of their people. By introducing this literature in all classrooms, educators validate the importance of this cultural group within society, offer an opportunity for non-Chinese students to experience a new culture, dispel stereotypes and misconceptions, and help students develop a broader and deeper understanding of people of the world.

LEARNING ABOUT CHINA AND CHINESE AMERICANS

China is a sovereign state located in East Asia. It is the world’s most populous country, with a population of over 1.35 billion. China has fifty-six ethnic groups with Han as the majority. China is a single-party state governed by the Communist Party. The capital city is located in Beijing. China is also the world’s second largest country, covering approximately 9.6 million square kilometers.

Chinese civilization is one of the world’s earliest and it flourished in the fertile basin of the Yellow River in the North China Plain. For thousands of years, China’s political system was based on dynasties. The Qin Dynasty conquered several states to form a united Chinese empire in 221 BCE. Since then, China has expanded, fractured, and been reformed numerous times. The last dynasty was overthrown in 1911 by the Republic of China. After the anti-Japanese war, the Communist Party defeated the nationalist Kuomintang and established the People’s Republic of China in Beijing in 1949.

China was the world’s largest and most advanced economy for a large part of the last two thousand years. Since the implementation of economic reform in 1978, China has become one of the world’s fastest growing major economies. As of 2013, it is the world’s second-largest economy after the U. S. China is now a regional power within Asia and has been hailed as a potential new superpower due to its rapid economic progress, growing military might, and increasing international influence.

Chinese Americans are Americans of full or partial Chinese descent. They comprise 25.9 percent of the Asian American population as of 2010 and constitute 1.2 percent of the total

U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Chinese Americans made noteworthy historical contributions to the U. S., including the western part of the Transcontinental Railroad, levees in the Sacramento River Delta, technological innovation and entrepreneurship, as well as the popularization of Chinese food and culture. Many traditional values and morals continue to influence the later generations, such as Confucian respect for elders, filial piety, and emphasis on education. Chinese Americans have been in North America for over one hundred forty years, but even today, they are still seen as newcomers and foreigners (Takaki, 1993). This perpetuated foreign status partially results from their physical features. Younger generations still suffer from cultural and ethnic prejudice and even racism in modern American society.

To help teachers acquire a basic understanding of China, there are a number of useful books on the market. Table 1 provides a list of some additional resources to help teachers learn about Chinese and Chinese Americans.

SELECTING LITERATURE

When students transact with a text, they bring not only their cognitive differences but also their emotional and cultural differences (Green & Oldendori, 2005). Literature is a means of freedom, enlightenment, and imagination. Descriptions of divergent realities, multifaceted social relations, and alternative identities challenge students' assumptions, and as a result, their understandings and worldviews may be transformed. Ann Nolen Clark (1993) identified an enlightened set of five qualities of good books:

Honesty: The author conveys sincerity in what is said and truth is written as the writer believes it, based on experience.

Accuracy: The author must look and listen, check and recheck, and flawlessly portray representative viewpoints inherent to that culture.

Reality: The author depicts laughter and tears, joys and sorrows, and the peace of all the humdrum hours that are a natural part of human experiences.

Imagination: The writer with imagination makes his own portraits with the words he writes.

Appreciation: Books should foster appreciation of beauty . . . of

joy and sorrow and the knowledge that one could not be as great without contrast with the other.

Teachers must look for high-quality literature for instruction in classrooms. Unfortunately, young people's books often contain the same stereotypes and biases of other media, and because young people are interested in a story's plot and characters, it is unlikely that they will know or consider whether a book includes racist or sexist messages or other stereotypes. If young people are repeatedly exposed to biased representations through words and pictures, there is a danger that such distortions will be ingrained as a part of their thinking. It is, therefore, the responsibility of teachers and parents to help young people select literature that is both entertaining and provides children with authentic and positive representations of the many cultural groups that make up the community, the society, and the world in which they live.

Chinese Americans have a rich history, yet many of their stories remain untold. Literature for young people about China tends to focus on celebrating the Chinese New Year and exotic Chinese food. However, the overrepresentation of these kinds of celebrations and traditions makes less visible the histories of this diverse people group. Further, my personal experiences have caused me to be concerned with the lack of respect and understanding of Chinese culture often afforded through the lack of appropriate instruction in schools throughout the United States. I attempt to provide students with a broader view of Chinese American cultures and traditions from my experiences and understandings. I have felt the constant battle of trying to help students conceptually understand the lives of Chinese and Chinese Americans without the constant reference to the Chinese New Year; dragons and kites; stereotypes of model minority; misrepresentations of Chinese dress and conduct.

IDENTIFYING QUALITY LITERATURE ABOUT CHINA AND CHINESE AMERICANS

The best way to identify quality literature about Chinese and Chinese Americans is for teachers to read a wide variety of adult books to develop their background knowledge and then to read the materials that are written for young people. Unfortunately, few individuals have the time and energy to undertake such a mas-

Table 1. Background Information for Librarians and Teachers

PRINT

- Carter, Tom. **China: Portrait of a People**. Blacksmith, 2010. 638p. \$24.95 Trade pb. 978-9889979942.
- Fellows, James. **Postcards from Tomorrow Square: Reports from China**. Vintage, 2008. 288p. \$15. Trade pb. 978-0-307-45624-3.
- Fisher, Leonard Everett. **The Great Wall of China**. Aladdin, 1986. 32p. \$7.99 Trade pb. 978-0-689-80178-5.
- Harvey, Miles. **Look What Came from China**. Franklin Watts, 1998. 32p. \$6.95 Trade pb. 978-0-531-15936-1.
- Haskins, James. **Count Your Way through China**. Carolrhoda, 1987. 24p. \$7.95 Trade pb. 978-0-87614-486-2.
- Lindqvist, Cecilia. **China: Empire of Living Symbols**. Da Capo, 2008. 424p. \$25. Trade pb. 978-0-306-81609-3.
- Pan, Philip. P. **Out of Mao's Shadow: The Struggle for the Soul of a New China**. Simon & Schuster, 2009. 368p. \$17. Trade pb. 978-1-4165-3706-9.
- Wasserstrom, J. N. **China in the 21st Century: What Everyone Needs to Know**. Oxford University 2010. 308p. \$16.95 Trade pb. 978-0-19-997496-2.

INTERNET

- Internet Guide for Chinese Studies. <http://www.sino.uniheidelberg.de/igcs/>
- Global Trek—China. <http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/globaltrek/destinations/china.htm>
- Rainbowkids. <http://www.rainbowkids.com/HTMLFiles.aspx?page=ChinaAct>
- National Geographic Kids. <http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/explore/countries/china.html>
- China topic for kids—Activity village. <http://www.activityvillage.co.uk/china>

Table 2. Web Resources for Book Awards, Lists, and Journals

Asian Pacific American Literature Award. <http://www.apalaweb.org/awards/literature/>
Association for Library Service to Children lists, including Growing Up Around the World and Children’s Notable lists. <http://www.ala.org/ala/alsc/alscresources/booklists/booklists.cfm>
Book Links (Search terms: China, Chinese Americans). <http://www.ala.org/ala/productsandpublications/periodicals/booklinks/booklinks.htm>
Children’s Book Council. <http://www.cbcbooks.org/>
Children’s Literature and Reading Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association—Notable Books for a Global Society, K-12. <http://www.csulb.edu/org/children-lit/proj/nbgs/intro-nbgs.html>
International Board on Books for Young People (Search terms: China, Chinese Americans). <http://www.ibby.com>
International Reading Association, including Children’s, Teachers’, and Young Adult’s Choices. <http://www.reading.org/resources/tools/choices.html>
Jane Addams Children’s Book Award. <http://www.janeaddamspeace.org/index.asp>
School Library Journal (Search terms: China, Chinese Americans). <http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com>
Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA). <http://www.voyamagazine.com>

sive project. Thankfully, educators can rely on a variety of other sources, such as book awards and professional journals to help them select quality literature. Finally, they can apply recognized selection criteria to help them make informed decisions.

Teachers can turn to the Asian Pacific American Literature Award (APALA) when identifying books about China and Chinese Americans. Established in 2001, APALA honors books featuring Asian Americans and their heritage that contribute to an authentic portrayal and deeper understanding of the people, place, and cultures of the Asian Pacific area. It has subcategories of Picture Book Winner, Children’s Literature Winner, Young Adult Literature Winner, and Adult Fiction and Nonfiction Winner.

In addition to awards, many review journals provide reviews of books about China and Chinese Americans. Table 2 identifies a few of these that provide information on their websites. Other selection journals that provide information in print format or on the Internet include **Booklist**, **Horn Book Magazine**, and **Multicultural Review**.

APPLYING SELECTION CRITERIA

Relying on awards and reviews is an excellent way for educators to select reading materials on unfamiliar subjects. When there are controversial reviews or no reviews at all, however, educators must rely on their own judgment. In an attempt to provide students with a broader view of Chinese American cultures and traditions from my experiences and understandings, I choose texts that demonstrate Chinese American historical stories, informational texts on Chinese language and culture, as well as contemporary stories set in modern China. In Table 3, I present a set of criteria for use when evaluating literature about Chinese Americans and their culture. My criteria were developed from a variety of sources, including The Council on Interracial Books for Children, Yokota and Bates (2005), and Landt (2006).

TEACHING WITH BOOKS ABOUT CHINA AND CHINESE AMERICANS

After identifying books about the Chinese culture and Chinese Americans, the next step for educators is to incorporate these books

Table 3. Considerations for Evaluating Literature about Chinese Americans and Their Culture

Literary quality
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The text is original with an appealing and realistic plot as well as fully developed characters.• The subject matter is interesting and valuable to young adults.
Accuracy and authenticity
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The historical background is appropriate for the time period represented.• The facts are presented accurately with cultural details integrated.• The book is written from multiple perspectives.
Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The theme is diverse, enhancing the reader’s understanding of China or Chinese American culture.• The theme fosters identification with China or Chinese characters.• The story encourages readers to engage critically in a discussion wherein personal insights may be gained.
Style
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The language is used authentically for the time period and for the Chinese culture.• The author offers genuine insights into the lives of Chinese or Chinese Americans.• The author presents the Chinese culture in a positive way.• The work retains the characteristics of the Chinese language in translation.
Illustrations
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The visual representations are accurate, with cultural details, and free from stereotypes, essentializing, minimization, and distortions.
Perspective
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The author/illustrator is qualified to write about the Chinese culture from the insider’s perspective.• The author/illustrator is able to portray the Chinese culture multidimensionally and accurately present the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of Chinese or Chinese Americans.

Figure 1. Data Comparison Cube

<p>DESCRIBE THE CHARACTERS Chinese Cinderella Adeline is a very talented young girl. Her family does not like her. She has positive attitudes towards life and achieves great success. Throwaway Daughter Grace was adopted by her loving Canadian parents from a Chinese orphanage. She embarks on a journey to discover the real reasons for her abandonment and accepts her Chinese cultural heritage.</p>	
<p>COMPARE THE CHARACTERS Adeline receives discriminating treatment from her birth family and at schools. Grace is discriminated against and abandoned by her birth family.</p>	<p>ASSOCIATE THE CHARACTERS They are both very independent and, although they are discriminated against, they are resilient and would like to succeed against the odds.</p>
<p>ARGUE FOR OR AGAINST CHARACTERS I agree with Adeline’s decision to leave her family and pursue education to become independent. I realize that Grace would prefer to be the same as her white adoptive family and her peers, but I was surprised that she rejects her Chinese cultural heritage and identity.</p>	<p>ANALYZE THE CHARACTERS I think that both Adeline and Grace are strong female characters who are trying to reconcile with their past. Both of them are discriminated against for social and political reasons. They fight against fate to achieve success and get what they want.</p>
	<p>APPLY WHAT YOU KNOW ABOUT THE CHARACTERS If both Adeline and Grace lived in their country today, I believe they would be activists for women’s rights and would be advocates for children’s interests. They might serve in government positions or they might be in social organizations for homeless children.</p>

into the curriculum if they hope to nurture cultural appreciation, eliminate stereotyped thinking, and help foster cultural identity. In the following section, I present one example of strategies that secondary teachers can use with literature about the Chinese culture to transcend cultural borders, to promote students' understanding of the literature they read, to make meaningful connections with the stories, to boost self-esteem, and to inspire a love of reading.

Prior to formal instruction, teachers can ask students to use the library, the Internet, and any books as references. Write a short report and share with the class. The report may include a brief description of the country, traditions and major holidays, a typical day for a child living in the country, places of interest, animals found in the land, and cultural-specific and interesting facts.

One instructional strategy is using a data comparison cube to explore a piece of literature (Richardson, Morgan, and Fleener, 2006; Al-Hazza and Bucher, 2008). By comparing characters from different stories, teachers can help students develop a better understanding of the story and the ways characters from different time periods may encounter similar struggles. These cubes can be assigned as classroom projects and displayed in the hallways. Figure 1 demonstrates a data comparison cube with one of six focus questions on each side of the cube. The sides of the cube are labeled to (1) describe, (2) compare, (3) associate, (4) analyze, (5) argue for or against, and (6) apply knowledge about the characters.

The questions on the cube explore characters from the stories **Chinese Cinderella** by Adeline Yen Mah (2010) and **Throwaway Daughter** by Tingxing Ye and William Bell (2004). Northern China in the early 1900s is the setting for **Chinese Cinderella**. Although Adeline is very talented and versatile, she is deemed bad luck in the family because her mother died soon after her birth. All family members, except her aunt and grandfather, blame her and dislike her. The story describes Adeline's loneliness and discriminating treatment at school in Tianjin and in Hong Kong. Ultimately, her positive attitudes and optimism help her achieve great success. In addition to discussing the unwanted daughter's hurt feelings and personal thoughts towards life as well as society during that period, the story reveals intriguing nuances of the Chinese culture and traditions that transport the reader into a distant place and time. Although the story gives young readers a historical perspective of Chinese society in the early 1900s, it is important that students understand that great changes have taken place in Chinese society since then. Therefore, I recommend contrasting Adeline with Grace in the story **Throwaway Daughter** set in contemporary China. Grace Dong-mei Parker was adopted by her loving Canadian parents from a Chinese orphanage as a six-month-old baby girl. She studies Chinese and travels back to China to track down her birth mother. Grace finds that thousands of infant girls were abandoned in China due to the stringent enforcement of the one-child policy by the Communist government. This story also provides a panoramic perspective on the historical and political reasons for Grace's abandonment. By exploring the life situations and emotional dimensions of these two characters, students can compare, better understand, and empathize with characters from the Chinese culture.

There are a number of ways that teachers can use data comparison cubes to promote cross-cultural understanding of China and Chinese Americans with mainstream students and to help boost the sense of self-worth of Chinese students by validating their culture through literature. For example, a teacher can use a K-W-L (know, want to know, and learn) to help students identify what they already know about China and to help them to learn more information. Some other useful teaching activities include Socratic discussion, role-playing, fishbowls, literature circles, and reciprocal teaching sessions.

CONCLUSION

Classrooms are miniature representations of today's multicultural and global society with a multitude of races, ethnicities, religions, languages, and cultures embodied in them. The question persists: How do teachers help students broaden experiences and learn to accept and honor other cultures? Introducing quality multicultural literature is a first step toward eliminating misconceptions and prejudices and helping students to vicariously interact with people from a wide variety of cultures. As students encounter a rich array of characters, experience a variety of life situations, and explore diverse settings in the literature that they read, they begin to develop empathic understandings and gain insights into their lives and cultures as well as the lives and the cultures of other students.

It is hoped that teachers will pause, reflect, and act to incorporate a wide variety of multicultural literature representing the mosaic nature of America, including literature about China and Chinese Americans. By using high-quality multicultural literature and engaging teaching ideas, teachers can help students begin to develop enlarged horizons and respect toward people in a pluralistic society. It is enriching that students of Chinese ancestry have healthy self-esteem and are proud of their cultural heritage and that others learn to appreciate the richness of the Chinese culture. ■

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The content of the tables in this article are also online at <http://www.voyamagazine.com/?p=7622>

Lina Sun got her Ph.D. in C & I (concentration in Literacy Education) from Saint Louis University. She is now working at the School of Foreign Languages of China University of Petroleum (Beijing). Her research interests include children's and young adult literature, critical literacy, and ESL academic writing. This paper is supported by the Science Foundation of CUP (Beijing) (2462015YJRC006).

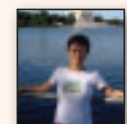


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