

# Develop Understanding and Appreciation of Chinese Culture Through Children's Literature

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## Abstract

As today's schools are comprised of more culturally and linguistically diverse students, it is increasingly critical to meet these students' social, emotional, and academic needs. Multicultural literature has proven to be compelling material that should be implemented in modern classrooms. Multicultural literature exposes students to different cultures, raising learners' cultural awareness and promoting cross-cultural empathy, tolerance, and insights. Furthermore, multicultural literature deepens students' understanding of their own cultures, fostering renewed sense of pride and respect about the cultures that have shaped their own character. Chinese culture is profound and the number of students with Chinese background is growing. Thus, understanding and appreciating Chinese culture has become increasingly necessary. To accomplish our mission of helping students to truly understand and appreciate Chinese culture, this paper focuses on developing students' understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture through children's picture books. This paper begins with discussions of culture, cultural identity, and multicultural children's literature. Then the author discusses reasons why students should know Chinese culture. As it is desirable to develop students' understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture through children's literature, this paper recommended children's literature that characterizes Chinese culture for educators.

## Keywords

Chinese Culture, Culture Understanding, Culture Appreciation, Children's Picture Books, Multicultural Children's Literature

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Statement of the Problem

The National Center for Educational Statistics [22] reports that the number of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds will make up 55% of the elementary and secondary public school populations by 2023. The changing cultural and ethnic backgrounds in today's classrooms have given rise to classroom diversity. Such diverse classroom environments signal the need for cross-cultural understanding and appreciation among different ethnic groups. Teachers may struggle to facilitate the development of all students' cross-cultural awareness.

The number of Asian immigrants and Asians around the world is growing rapidly. Instead of reading Asian literature for pleasure, students need to develop an understanding and appreciation of Asian literature and cultures [25]. Being one of many Asian cultures, Chinese culture "encompasses the rich and diverse cultural and ethnic heritage" [25]. Moreover, the Chinese became one of the most populated ethnic groups in the world. Chinese students need to establish their cultural identity and promote the love of their heritage culture. Additionally, the number of learners studying Chinese as a foreign language is growing at a surprising speed throughout the world. These students need to develop cross-cultural understanding and appreciation towards Chinese culture.

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Thus, understanding and appreciating Chinese culture has become necessary.

### 1.2. The Aim of the Study

As today's schools are becoming more culturally and linguistically diverse, "literature plays a considerable role in the development of understanding across cultures" [25]. Being one part of literature, "the need for multicultural literature becomes more apparent" [13]. Research showed that multicultural literature "presents powerful teaching pedagogies for multicultural education" [14]. Multicultural literature plays an important part in "help(ing) readers gain insight into and appreciation for the social groups reflected in the literature" [2]. Multicultural literature not only promotes students' sense of the world but also develops an understanding of other cultures and beliefs [12]. Moreover, multicultural literature is a dominant tool of building students' various views on their own cultures and positions in society and fostering "cultural pride, familiarity, a sense of belonging, and cultural self-respect" [12]. To accomplish our mission of educating children to truly understand and appreciate Chinese culture, this paper aims to develop students' understanding and appreciation towards Chinese culture through children's picture books that portray Chinese culture.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Culture

#### 2.1.1. The Definition of Culture

The earliest definition of culture was made by Kroeber and Kluckhohn [16], who claimed that "[c]ulture... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as member of society". However, this definition is too broad [4]. A less segmented and more conceptually complex definition of culture is proposed by Geertz [9], who suggested "turning culture into folklore and collecting it, turning it into traits and counting it, turning it into institutions and classifying it, turning it into structures and toying with it". Hall [11] defined culture from an anthropological view and deems culture as learned; and shared, with its various aspects interconnected. Conversely, Armour-Thomas and Gopaul-McNicol's [1] definition of culture is quite different, asserting that culture is what people should neglect and its various aspects are not linked. Donna and Philip [4] maintained that culture "defines who we are. It influences our knowledge, beliefs, and values. It provides the blueprint that determines the way we think, feel, and behave".

#### 2.1.2. The Importance of Teaching Culture in Classrooms

Tomalin and Stempleski [32] stated that it is important to teach culture in classrooms. Culture can develop students' understanding of the fact that all people show culturally-conditioned behaviors and understanding of social variables that influence how people speak and behave, including age, sex, social class, and place of residence. Tomalin and Stempleski maintain that learning culture helps students become aware of conventional behavior in common situations in the target culture and increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.

Tomalin and Stempleski also claim that learning culture promotes students' ability in

assessing and improving the generalizations of the target culture. Learning culture develops students' requisite skills in locating and organizing information about the target culture. Moreover, a deeper understanding of culture inspires students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture and encourages their empathy to its people. Culture "plays an essential role in language teaching with the goal of promoting communicative competence for learners" [23].

### 2.2. Cultural Identity

#### 2.2.1. The Definition of Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is the identification of a group, a culture, or an individual. Ovando and Combs [27] contended that cultural identity has the potential to connect or separate us by "ethnicity, geographical region, national origin, social class, level of education, types of contact with other cultural groups, religion, gender, and age". For students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, they "build their cultural identity within the multiple contexts of their home environment, the school environment, and the larger dominant sociocultural environment" [27].

#### 2.2.2. The Process in the Development of Cultural Identities

Mead [20] developed a model to illustrate the process in the development of cultural identities, which was the cultural transmission model. Mead asserts that children, especially language minority children, build their cultural identity within various contexts. They also go through the following processes: cultural transmission, biculturalism, acculturation, and assimilation. The first process, cultural transmission, includes three subtypes of cultural transmission processes, which are postfigurative transmission, cofigurative transmission, and prefigurative transmission. In postfigurative transmission, adults pass on cultural patterns (such as values, beliefs, and behaviors) to children without

making any changes. Children rarely ask questions about these new cultural patterns. Old cultural role model and current cultural role model occur in the next process: cofigurative transmission. In cofigurative transmission, new cultural traits emerge as a result of sharing between children and parents while the influence of traditional cultural pattern becomes smaller. In prefigurative transmission, children create cultural change to a large extent. Biculturalism, the second process, is recognized when students can communicate within two different cultural systems effectively. In acculturation, one cultural group undertakes and integrates one or more cultural traits of another group, forming new or mixed cultural patterns [26]. However, acculturation does not mean losing the original cultural identity. It may result in bicultural or multicultural identities. The last process is assimilation. Different from acculturation, assimilation is a process that an individual or group fully incorporates the traits of another culture and losing the original cultural identity.

### **2.3. Multicultural Children's Literature**

#### **2.3.1. The Definition of Multicultural Children's Literature**

Multicultural children's literature "features children of differing racial characteristics, ethnic backgrounds and home circumstances" [3]. Kruse [17] narrowed the definition of multicultural children's literature as "books by and about people of color". However, the former two definitions fail to define multicultural children's literature in terms of cultural differences, such as language, religion, and geographic region [28]. Sleeter and Grant [31] deemed multicultural children's literature as material that "recognizes, accepts, and affirms human differences and similarities related to gender, race, handicap, and class". Madigan [19] pointed out that multicultural children's literature "emphasizes respect for the different historical perspectives and cultures in human society".

#### **2.3.2. The Importance of incorporating Multicultural Children's Literature into the curriculum**

Multicultural children's literature presents powerful teaching materials in today's diverse classrooms. The importance of multicultural children's literature has been emphasized by research.

##### **(i). Multicultural Children's Literature's Contribution to Cognitive Development**

Accepting and respecting cultural and ethnic diversity and understanding differences has become more and more essential to students in our current multilingual and multicultural world. Introducing multicultural literature to

children is a way to bridge cultural gaps that lead to misunderstandings, prejudice, discrimination, and bias. Norton [25] asserted that "positive multicultural literature has been used effectively to help readers identify cultural heritages, understand sociological change, respect the values of minority groups, raise aspirations, and expand imagination and creativity". Multicultural literature not only enhances children's awareness of the diversity of the world, but also ensures a sense of belonging when children of diverse cultural and language backgrounds see themselves represented in the school curriculum [29-30]. Norton [24] listed the benefits for children when they read and are exposed to multicultural literature. Children learn to understand and appreciate diverse literary heritages, and they discover values and beliefs of people from folktales, fables, myths and legends. Multicultural literature enables young learners to show understanding towards different beliefs and values and realize the co-existence of similarities and differences. Furthermore, they learn to understand and respect the artistic contributions to diverse culture, and multicultural literature provides opportunity for learners to enhance skills in reading, writing, and thinking. Lowery and Sabis-Burns [18] affirmed that multicultural literature "cultivates an educated awareness to other cultural customs and values, promotes communication with people from other countries, and enhances experiences involving theirs and others' cultures. Through literature, readers explore lands and cultural mores that they would otherwise not experience". Tway [33] posited that multicultural literature helps students understand both themselves and others.

Dressel [5] studied middle school students' perceptions of different cultures by having them write multicultural literature reflections. In this study, 123 white eighth-grade students were assigned multicultural novels that had settings in the present and the past. They also had settings in the US, which included the US citizens, and they characters and non-US citizens, and they had settings from other countries. Students worked with their partners on dialogue journals. The partners read different books and students used the voice of a character in the novels to write letters and used their voices to give feedback to their partners' letters. As Dressel indicated in this study "many readers liked their books and participated in a virtual experience, they didn't increase in their understanding of others" [5]. Through writing about literature, two-thirds of the—students reported that they perceived what a non-dominant group was experiencing through their writings. Also, 73% of students recognized that the decisions, actions, and reactions of the characters that came from non-dominant cultures were affected by their cultural backgrounds. This study indicated that multicultural literature helps students develop cultural understanding.

## (ii). Multicultural Children's Literature's Contribution to Language Development

Learning a new language requires socio-linguistic knowledge and strategic competencies [10]. Socio-linguistic knowledge and strategic competencies encourage language learners to be familiar with the new language's cultural context [10]. As cultures are differed from each ethnic group, to appropriately acquire socio-linguistic competencies, language learners are encouraged to know diverse cultures [10]. Multicultural literature provides language learners with knowledge about diverse cultures and assists language learners in their new language acquisition through activities such as reading aloud, discussing relevant stories in the target language, creating a supportive environment for encouraging thinking and speaking in the target language, and studying new vocabulary [28].

## (iii). Multicultural Children's Literature's Contribution to Academic Development

Dressel [5] conducted a study on middle school students' responses to reading multicultural literature during a multicultural literature unit. Before the unit, students were assigned multicultural novels to read. Some novels had US characters, and some were from other countries other than the United States. Twenty-one eighth grade students were asked about their feelings on reading the assigned novel. All of the students expressed their dislike to read materials required by the school. After the unit, 13 of 21 students indicated that they liked reading books and reading materials required by the school. This study showed that students like to read multicultural novels and enjoyed reading books. In addition, the study documented that multicultural literature developed students' positive feelings about reading.

## 2.4. The Needs of Knowing Chinese Culture

Chinese culture is one of the most charming cultures in the world. When the Chinese settled near the Yellow River over five thousand years ago, they developed a unique language and culture. Their method of writing, social system, and philosophies influenced many surrounding countries. Nowadays, China is playing an increasingly important role in the world. The world has realized that China possesses great economic strength, purchasing power, huge production potential, and consumption power.

The effects of motivation in the study of the second language have been proved by experts like Gardner and Lambert [6-8]. Chinese culture classes do play an important role in achieving high motivation. The reason is that learners like culturally based activities, such as role-playing, doing research on country and peoples, and participating in cultural

related events. The study of Chinese culture not only increases learners' curiosity about and interest in China, but also motivation.

## 3. Recommended Children's Picture Books

"Although the possibilities of using good multicultural literature in the classroom can be exciting, teachers can feel overwhelmed by the prospect of finding and evaluating the books. They do not want to offend anyone, nor do they want to harm any of the children they teach, but they worry they might inadvertently select and share inappropriate books. Typically, teachers' days are already busy and even fragmented; any new task, however worthwhile, can appear monumental" [21]. The authors provide children's picture books that portray Chinese culture for educators.

Two types of children's picture books that characterize Chinese culture are included: English children's picture books and English/Chinese bilingual children's picture books. English/Chinese bilingual children's picture books are selected because "bilingual children's picture books present a special opportunity for readers to expand their horizons and knowledge of other cultures" [15].

### 3.1. English Children's Picture Books

*The Journey of Meng* (Rappaport, 1991) retells a classical Chinese legend. A faithful wife named Meng begins perilous journeys to the north with warm clothing for her husband, a scholar who has been forced to be a laborer on the Great Wall for a cruel king. When she finally makes it to the Wall, Meng is told that her husband died while working and was buried in the wall by the sea. The Emperor, seeing her beauty, commands Meng to marry him, or he will behead her. After burying her husband, Meng refuses the Emperor's offer of marriage by jumping into the sea to her death.

*The story of chopsticks* (Compestine, 2001) tells a story of how three creative brothers (Pan, Ting, and Kùai Kang) accidentally invent one of the four famous Chinese inventions-- chopsticks. At school or home, these brothers encounter a problem, which is that their food is too hot to grab with their hands. Kùai comes up with a simple and practical solution which is using sticks to grab food quickly. When the whole family attends a wedding banquet, Kùai brings his chopsticks, giving everyone a great surprise.

*Ruby's Wish* (Bridges, 2002) is a tale about a young Chinese girl named Ruby. Unlike most young girls in old China, Ruby is full of ambition. Rather than being eager to get

married, Ruby would like to attend university when she grows up, just like the boys in her family. She works double-time doing 'girls' and 'boys' work and becomes one of the firsts in the generation to attend college.

*The Lost Horse; a Chinese folktale* (Young & Adams, 2004) retells an ancient famous Chinese folktale regarding the twists and turns of fate. This story is about a wise man named Sai who lives in Northern China. Although he has few properties, Sai will accept things as they happen, for better or for worse. When his valued horse gets lost, he does not believe it is a bad thing. A few days later, the horse returns with another strong and fast horse. When people congratulate Sai, he does not believe it is a good thing. The next month Sai's son rides the new horse and is thrown off. His leg breaks, and people try to comfort Sai. Sai does not believe it is a bad thing. Later in the year, China is invaded and all able-bodied men have to fight. Many die in battle, but Sai's son did not have to go to war due to his injury. Sai's son learns from his father that life is full of twists and turns. Things may not always be as good or as bad as they may seem.

*The Magic Horse of Han Gan* (Hong, 2006) is a legend of the ancient Chinese painter Han Gan. Though Han Gan's family is too poor to indulge in his love of drawing, a wealthy artist discovers his talent and brings him paper, inks, and brushes. Han Gan gains wide recognition for his original style and for his sole subject: horses that are always tethered. One night, a great warrior challenges his painting style by asking him to paint a valiant and spirited warhorse for him to ride into battle. Han Gan meets the challenge. The great horse does not need to eat, drink, or sleep, and is invincible in many battles until it took pity on its vanquished foes. The steed threw off its rider and returns to be part of a painting on the wall of Han Gan's home.

*Red Butterfly: how a Princess smuggled the secret of silk out of China* (Noyes, 2007) is a folktale of a young ancient Chinese princess smuggles the secret of silk out of China (an act is strictly forbidden in China). The princess has to leave her beloved homeland to marry the King of a far-off land. She feels sad because she has to leave all that she loves and is familiar with, heading toward an uncertain future. To ensure her cherished home is always with her, the princess decides to take a little bit of a living reminder of her native land with her on her long journey: tiny silkworms.

*The Silk Princess* (Santore, 2011) is based on the legend of the discovery of silk in China. Princess Hsi-Ling Chi has heard tales of a sleeping dragon and ancient gods living in the Holy Mountains beyond her father's palace. One day, she sees a cocoon drop into a cup of tea and then ties the silken

strand around her waist. Her string gradually loosens as when she bravely travels to the Holy Mountains. She is afraid of losing her way when a magnificent dragon breaks her string. Her adventure takes her to an old man who helps her to discover the secrets of silk. In the end, her father is delighted with his daughter's discovery and declares that all royal garments be made of silk. From then on, Hsi-Ling Chi is known as "the Silk Princess".

*Brush of the Gods* (Look, 2013) introduces China's great painter during the Tang Dynasty, Wu Daozi (689-758), to children. When an old monk attempts to teach young Daozi about the ancient art of calligraphy, his brush doesn't want to cooperate. Wu Daozi begins to paint on walls in temples, tea houses, and the great walls around the city. People admire his unbelievable creations and one day his art comes to life. The emperor asks Daozi if he could create a masterpiece on a wall of the palace and Daozi's artwork brings to life ancient China. This book renders Daozi's paintings with brilliance and serves as an inspiring story of a boy who follows his dreams.

*Noodles Magic* (Thong, 2014) is a Chinese folk story. As the emperor's birthday approaches, Grandpa Tu, who is famous for making special noodles, teaches his granddaughter, Mei, the family trade. Mei works hard to find the magic needed to make noodles. Ultimately, she finds the magic and the ability to succeed.

*The Magic Paintbrush* (Donaldson, 2017) is a traditional tale of a girl who is given a magic paintbrush. Anything the girl paints becomes real with her magic paintbrush and the girl always helps hungry people in her village with her paintbrush. The greedy emperor finds out about her gift and commands her to paint gold for him. The girl decides to keep her promise to paint only for the poor and challenges power and greed with her integrity.

*The Great Race: The Story of the Chinese Zodiac* (Hiles, 2018) is an ancient folktale that has been passed from generation to generation. It tells a story of the Chinese Zodiac. As the Chinese New Year approaches, each animal wants to earn its place in the Chinese zodiac, but no one can agree. The Jade Emperor decides there should be a race to decide the animal's place in the Chinese zodiac. This book helps children find out the order of twelve animals in the Chinese zodiac and why a cat will never forgive his friend rat. It is a great book to study Chinese New Year, Lunar New Year, and cultural celebrations.

*Chinese New Year Wishes: Chinese Spring and Lantern Festival Celebration* (Fun Festivals) (Lin, 2019) tells a story of how Hong and his family prepare for and celebrate the Chinese New Year Festival.

### 3.2. English/Chinese Bilingual Children's Picture Books

*THE SONG OF MU LAN* (Lee, 1995) is a 1500-year-old story celebrating the bravery of a young Chinese woman named Mu Lan. When the emperor calls her ailing father to battle, Mu Lan takes over for her father to participate in the war by dressing up as a male soldier. Her courage and valor during the war draw the Emperor's and Golden Court's attention. When the emperor offers whatever she wants as a reward, she only asks to go home. Once home, she puts on women's clothes, convincing her comrades in arms that courage and fighting skills are not only possessed by men.

*Lao Lao of Dragon Mountain* (Bateson-Hill, Wan & Qu, 1998) is a traditional Chinese folktale about an old woman named Lao Lao. Lao Lao lives near the mountain where the Ice Dragon rules, and she is famous for her paper cuts. When the cruel and greedy emperor hears she can make anything, he imprisons her in a tower with a huge stack of fine white paper and commands her to produce jewels. This is an impossible task from Lao Lao, so she begins to cry and work. The Ice Dragon has seen everything. He turned the emperor and his guards into pillars of ice and takes Lao Lao up into the sky. As Lao Lao rides the dragon's back, her paper cuts swirled around in the night sky and became snowflakes.

*The Ballad of Mulan; English/Chinese* (Zhang, 1998) is a well-known ballad in China. It is about a young woman named Mulan who disguises herself as a man and joins the army to save her ailing father from conscription. For the next ten years, Mulan shows extraordinary skills as a warrior and becomes a famous general. Her true identity remains hidden from her comrades until the end. Mulan is an inspiration to Chinese girls and women as she embodies the belief that women can accomplish the same feats as men whenever they have the opportunity.

*The Making of Monkey King* (Kraus, 2000) is a story of the fantastic beginnings of a hero. A monkey is magically born from a rock. The monkey is crowned Monkey King by his fellow monkeys after finding a shelter for them. The Monkey king begins a journey to find the secret to immortality with a desire to enjoy life and domination forever.

*The Dragon's Tears* (Gregory, 2001) is a moving story about how the twenty-four lakes of the River Min in China get their name.

*The Great Voyages of Zheng He* (Hardcover) (Zhang & Zhang, 2005) is a tale of a great explorer in China's history -- Zheng He. Zheng He led seven major expeditions by sea for 28 years to extend trade and establish relations with foreign governments.

In *Tang Monk Disciplines Monkey King* (Chen, 2005),

Monkey King is exempted from 500 years of imprisonment because he agrees to travel to the West with Tang Monk to secure the sacred scriptures of Buddhism. Although his intentions are good, it doesn't take long for Monkey King's rebelliousness to surface. Tang Monk tries to teach the Monkey King to temper his wildness and resolve the conflict peacefully. Finally, the former adversaries went to adventure further with Tang Monk and Monkey King.

*Yeh-Hsien: A Chinese Cinderella* (Casey, 2006) is a famous Chinese Cinderella story similar to the Disney Cinderella story. Yeh-Hsien was a girl who lived with her stepmother and two stepsisters. A magical red fish grants Yeh-hsien her dearest wish to go to the Spring Festival to dance with the King. When Yeh-hsien loses her slipper, the king searches all over the land looking for the woman who fits the tiny golden shoe. Being recognized by fitting the shoe, Yeh-Hsien finally married the King, and they lived a happy life.

*The First Emperor Of China: The Story Of Qin Shihuang* - in English & Chinese (Heroes Of China Book 1) (Lin, 2017) tells a tale of a famous Chinese figure---Emperor Qin Shihuang, who has built the Great Wall and the terracotta army.

*The Girl Emperor Of China: The Story Of Wu Zetian* - in English & Chinese (Heroes Of China Book 5) (Lin, 2017) tells a story of a famous Chinese figure---Wu Zetian, who is the first and only female Emperor in the history of China.

## 4. Conclusion

Our students live in an increasingly multi-cultural and multi-linguistic world. It is critical important for us to promote their greater understanding of their cultures and other cultures. Children's picture books that portray Chinese culture is a powerful vehicle for developing students' understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture.

## Acknowledgements

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1 English Children's Picture Books

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