FEATURE

Seeking Accurate Cultural Representation

Mahjong, World War II, and Ethnic Chinese in Multicultural Youth Literature, Part I

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Juvenile books about China and ethnic Chinese serve several purposes. They cater to young people's need for information about China—whether that "need" is spontaneous or imposed (at school, for example). They expose young readers to the culture and experiences of ethnic Chinese people in order to promote cross-cultural understanding.

The sheer amount of American children's and young adult literature, boasting an outpouring of 5,000 titles every year, often amazes a person who is new to this field. Not only is a large proportion of these books of high printing and binding quality, but, at a quick glance, among them is also a pleasant diversity of genre, format, targeted age level, topic, and style.

When I first approached juvenile books published in the United States five years ago (many of them manufactured and shipped over from the People's Republic of China notwithstanding), I was excited to see ethnic Chinese and their culture portrayed in juvenile fiction, informational books, and exquisitely illustrated Chinese folktales conveying an aura of age-oldness and elegancy. Through these sources, young readers in the U.S., including those of Chinese ancestry, can learn about Chinese language, Chinese dragons, Chinese New Year customs, Emperor Qin Shihuang's silent terra-cotta army, and many other topics of Chinese heritage.

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Juvenile books about China and ethnic Chinese serve several purposes. They cater to young people's need for information about China—whether that "need" is spontaneous or imposed (at school, for example). They expose readers to the culture and experiences of ethnic Chinese people in order to promote cross-cultural understanding. In these books, youth of Chinese descent, including new immigrants and native-born Chinese Americans, are also supposed to find the culture, experiences, and history which they share at varying levels and to see people of their own ethnic group portrayed in images and text.

Non-authentic Reflections

Given these purposes, and another reason I will discuss below, a central concern among researchers of youth literature about Chinese as well as Chinese Americans has been a non-stereotypical portrayal of characters and an accurate and authentic reflection of Chinese culture. In two sophisticated

studies by Liu (1993) and Liu (1998), both authors selected facets considered significant to Chinese culture—examples of such facets include food, clothes, ritual customs, festivals, religious beliefs, philosophy, and values—and analyzed how those factors were reflected in youth literature about Chinese and Chinese Americans.

Liu (1998) also examined the written and pictorial physical descriptions of Chinese characters, and paid particular attention to slanted eyes and a non-differential depiction of different characters. These two symptoms, together with bright yellow skin, found in Kurt Wiese's illustration of *The Five Chinese Brothers* and widely criticized, have become a quick detector for stereotypes and racism in books about Chinese, even as ethnic Chinese authors and illustrators can be exempt from such scrutinies.[1]

Confusing and Mixing Asian Cultures

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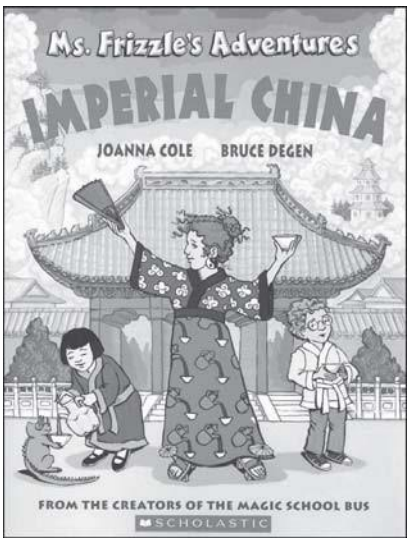
Blair Lent's *Tikki Tikki Tembo* (1968), a folktale originating from Japan, was touted as a pourquoi tale about Chinese naming tradition, and librarians and researchers pointed out the dubious cultural representation as early as 1974 (Cai, 1994; Scott, 1974). In 1998, a heated debate erupted on the Child_Lit listserv concerning the cultural issue of this "Chinese" folktale, and a few ethnic Chinese expressed clear unhappiness with the misleading information about Chinese culture in the book (Child_Lit, 2004). Despite a simple correction required in the original, the misnomer remains in a paperback edition released by Square Fish Books in 2007.

In another picture book I examined, *Ms. Frizzle's Adventures: Imperial China* (Cole & Degen, 2005), the illustrator freely blends motifs and features from Japanese and Chinese cultures, so that the section on Chinese kung fu actually shows two barefooted men practicing martial arts in karate uniforms. As my discussion will show, beneath these apparently innocuous oversights or "artistic liberties" are some larger issues: a lack of real concern about the distinctions between Japanese and Chinese cultures and a lack of understanding of the historical legacies which contributed to the delicate relations between people from Japan and China.

Mostly Set in Ancient China

Another discovery made by researchers was that juvenile literature (excluding informational books) featuring Chinese characters tends to be folktales and stories set in ancient China. For example, Cai (1994) surveyed 73 picture story books that feature Chinese and Chinese American characters and found 51 of them to be folktales. He pointed out that the high ratio of folktales was not unique to his survey, but "consistent with the ratio of the folktales in the publication of picture books about Chinese and Chinese culture in general" (p. 170).



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Liu's (1998) statistics of story books, published from 1980 to 1997 and portraying ethnic Chinese, provided us with a more nuanced picture. Whereas folktales were rare among story books about Chinese Americans, in which the majority was historical fiction and modern realistic fiction, folktale constituted the most common genre for story books about Chinese people in China (22 out of 35 in her sample) (p. 67). Among contemporary realistic fiction and historical fiction set in China, Liu (1993) did identify more titles set in 20th century modern China than in ancient China, but this tiny body of juvenile fiction casting Chinese people in China was dwarfed by a much larger number of Chinese folktales.

In addition, as Cai's (1994) analysis showed, picture books, even those set in contemporary mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, tended to address topics concerning cultural traditions and to present a tourists' view of Chinese everyday life.

The nature of youth literature featuring ethnic Chinese, with its heavy emphasis upon stories from the remote past, partly explains why earlier studies of this body of literature paid meticulous attention to whether the illustrator had presented the right shape of the Chinese dragon and whether the description of a wedding ceremony rings true to Chinese culture. Well-received autobiographies and personal narratives such as *Red Scarf Girl* by Ji-li Jiang (HarperTrophy, 1997), *Chinese Cinderella* by Adeline Yen Mah (Delacorte, 1999), *Red Land, Yellow River* by Ange Zhang (Groundwood, 2004), *Little Green: Growing up in the Cultural Revolution* by Chun Yu (Simon & Schuster, 2005), and *Diary of Ma Yan* by Yan Ma (HarperCollins, 2005), all providing a closer and more realistic look at the 20th century and contemporary China, are only recent additions to juvenile literature about Chinese.

If researchers such as Cai (1994) expressed composed discomfort with publishers' effort to portray ethnic Chinese through folktales (p. 188), the irritation was voiced blatantly by a female Taiwanese who joined the Child_Lit listserv thread on cultural misrepresentation in *Tikki Tikki Tembo*:

I will be quite offended if ALL children are learning in school about China is through [f]olktales... [M]any think that to plan a "multicultural" curriculum is to introduce FIVE different folk stories from five different cultures. This, quite frankly, disgusts me! (Child_Lit, 2004, original capitalized words)

The woman, without giving her real name to the listserv,[2] proceeded to volunteer a long list of topics which she considered better vehicles for conveying Chinese culture and Chinese experiences to young people in the U.S. Her suggestions ranged from classical Chinese poetry to significant events in modern Chinese history to contemporary Chinese society under the influence of Western cultural import (Child_Lit, 2004).

Plainly or Subtly

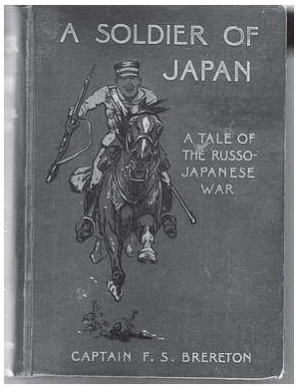
Chinese folktales and stories from ancient times can speak for Chinese culture plainly or subtly. Tales well-known among contemporary Chinese are part of their shared knowledge and the shaping force of their perspectives and ideas. Many Chinese may still find the story of "The Lost Horse," first recorded more than 2000 years ago in a Taoist book Huai Nan Zi, now taught in Chinese junior high school and adapted by Ed Young into a picture book for young American children, a source of peace and hope in the ups and downs of unpredictable life.

The story of Monkey King's odyssey, enthusiastically retold in English by several Chinese American as well as non-Chinese authors/illustrators for a young audience, has nurtured the imagination of Chinese children for at least five centuries. Some of these children would grow up to become successful writers and artists, such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Patricia Chao, and Gene Luen Yang,[3] and would appropriate this magical monkey for their own literary creations.

While we can not discredit stories as illegitimate bearers of Chinese culture simply by their temporal distance, the Taiwanese posting prompts us to investigate what is missing in American youth literature which has been used to help understand Chinese and their culture and to tell people of Chinese ancestry who they are.

Case Study: The Sino-Japanese War

The next section of this article will focus on an event in modern history—the Sino-Japanese War (1937-45)—and its representation in American youth literature. In an almost offended tone the Taiwanese woman wrote, "If you want to learn about Chinese culture— talk about the Dynasties, talk about the wars,… talk about WWII when the Japanese invaded China and massacred millions of Chinese..." (Child_Lit, 2004).



What is the significance of this war, fought 70 years ago between Imperial Japan and China with U.S. military aid, to modern China, to contemporary Chinese, and to ethnic Chinese people in the United States? How have youth growing up in America, including those of Chinese ancestry, been informed of ethnic Chinese experiences during World War II through juvenile literature?

Two years before Nazis invaded Poland, marking the start of World War II in the European theatre, the full-scale war between Imperial Japan and China broke out in 1937. Initially, the United States maintained its neutral position between the invader and the invaded, but as Japan's military advance increasingly threatened America's interests in China and in the Asia Pacific, President Roosevelt adopted a series of policies and moves to aid China, and then the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941 launched full-scale U.S. involvement in the Pacific War.

Thus, the Sino-Japanese conflict became merged into a world war. It ended with the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, in 1945. Foot stated that "[World War II] ranks, with population pressure and climate change, among the principal factors that shape our everyday lives" (2005, p. v).

Impact on Mainland Chinese

For Chinese people, the far-reaching impact of the Sino-Japanese War is beyond measurement. In terms of casualties, China lost soldiers and civilians through battles, air raids, and mass atrocities in the millions. War crimes committed by the Japanese army in China as well as in other Asian countries— currently the best-publicized of these crimes are the Nanking massacre, "comfort women" (the euphemism for sex slaves for Japanese troops), and Japanese biological warfare (1932-45)—not only wiped out a large but highly contested number of POWs and civilians, but also left survivors dealing with physical pain, emotional trauma, poverty, and social discrimination for the rest of their lives.

The haunting effect of the Sino-Japanese War was given a fresh and tangible form by an incident in August 2003, when 44 Chinese residents were killed or injured by mustard-gas bombs abandoned by the Japanese army in Qiqihar, Heilongjiang Province of China (Lam, 2003). In the political arena, the legacy of the Pacific War repeatedly disturbs international relationships between Japan and other Asian countries, occasionally triggering protests and escalating into diplomatic crises.

In terms of cultural impact, aside from countless war-inflicted losses such as library collections destroyed by the Japanese bombardments and arsons (Lin, 1998), the war against Imperial Japan has inspired the creation of novels, poetry, paintings, comic strips, movies, television dramas, operas, music, songs, and other cultural artifacts in mainland China. Youth growing up in China are not short of opportunities to encounter the Sino-Japanese War in literature suitable for their reading level.

My incomplete search found well over 600 titles of Chinese-language illustrated story books set during World War II in China, a body of literature not without its problem of imbalanced, biased, and shallow representation of the war. Nonetheless, the war against Japan and some of the most popular works on this topic have remained in Chinese public conscience and become their frame of reference.

Impact on Chinese Immigrants to U.S.

The Sino-Japanese War was significant to Chinese immigrants residing in the U.S. at the time. It brought changes to race relations in the U.S. and "opened the door to expectations of further improvements in the status of the Chinese in America" (Lai, 1997). Until World War II, Chinese immigrants in America had been subjected to not only violent racist attacks but also a series of punitive laws and regulations. The Naturalization Act passed in 1870 limited American citizenship to "White persons and persons of African descent," barring Asians from U.S. citizenship. The infamous Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 suspended immigration of Chinese laborers, making Chinese people the target of "the first legislative act to single out a race of people as undesirable immigrants" (Krenn, 2006, p. 55).

The social exclusion and racial discrimination they suffered in the U.S. partly explained why Chinese sojourners never "felt at home in America" (Yu, 2001, p. 134) but strongly identified with their ancestral land—China—now under foreign aggression. In Lai's (1997) fascinating account of the many ways in which the Chinese community in the United States supported China's resistance to Japanese aggression, we learn that ethnic Chinese in the U.S. protested the Japanese aggression in China, raised substantial funds for the war and relief effort, and served in World War II.

Indeed, from this "bachelors' society"[4] a much higher proportion of eligible men were inducted than from the general American population. Many Chinese Americans, like the Portland-born fighter pilot Arthur Tin Chin, would serve in the Pacific and China-Burma-India theaters fighting against Japanese. Meanwhile, as Song (2002) argued in his study of the New York Chinese community, Chinese immigrants also took the opportunity to pursue

their dual identity as Chinese Americans during the war years.

In order to combat Japanese war propaganda and accusations of U.S. prejudice against Asians, it became necessary for the American government, after being plunged into the Pacific War, to repeal the Chinese Exclusion laws. The effort of the Chinese community in the repeal movement not only helped bring an end to the discriminatory legislation and hence made Chinese aliens eligible for naturalization, but the process itself was also meaningful in that it comprised Chinese participation in American politics and mainstream activities.

Following the repeal in 1943, and essentially after the landmark 1965 Immigration Act, the previously stagnant flow of immigrants from China moved again. The new influx of Chinese immigrants would be people who had lived through the Sino-Japanese War or children and grandchildren of those who had been part of the turmoil.

Juvenile Fiction Featuring the Sino-Japanese War

My focal point in this article is American juvenile fiction with the Sino-Japanese War as its main setting or subject. Young people have multiple sources to learn about the past: family stories, classroom teaching, museum visits, library materials, newspaper, television, movies, the Internet, and even computer games. Among youth literature, nonfiction[5] is arguably the most direct source providing factual information about any topic, but fiction and imaginative works can speak emotional truth too often hidden in nonfiction by figures and maps.

Armed with artistic captivating power, fiction can sell its carefully or poorly researched information no less aggressively than nonfiction does. With its focus on works of fiction, this article is part of a larger project to study American youth literature about the portion of World War II fought in China

Themes and Patterns

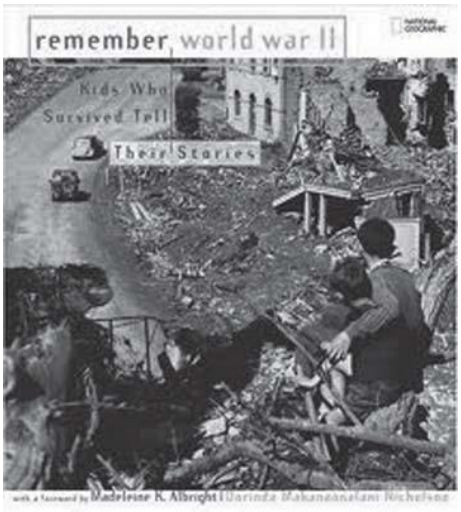
By combing through multiple bibliographies and searching in library catalogs, I located 28 fiction titles specifically written for a young audience and published in the U.S. (including titles published previously or simultaneously in other countries) from 1937 through 2007 about World War II in China.[6] I have also included in my study three adult titles which are suggested by the bibliographies I consulted as suitable reading for older young adults. I will discuss the general patterns of these books within the context of social, political, and cultural dynamics in America.

The first thing noticeable about this search result is that little has been told about ethnic Chinese experience during World War II in American juvenile fiction. The 31 titles, produced over a span of 70 years, is best understood in the context of American youth literature about World War II. Partly as a continuance of the tradition of storying war in American children's and young adult literature (Myers, 2000), and partly due to its unparalleled impact and consequently a heavy emphasis on the subject in the social studies curriculum (Schlene, 1992), the history of World War II has inspired the creation of a huge number of books for young readers in the English world.

J. K. Rowling's popular *Harry Potter* series, by frequently referencing Nazi history—from the downfall of an evil wizard in "1945" (Rowling, 1997, p. 103) to a prison called "Nurmengard" (or should it be spelled "Nuremberg," as Rowling's fans asked knowingly in online forums?) to lock him up (Rowling, 2007, p. 360)—illustrates how World War II history, or, more precisely, World War II fought in the European theatre, has seeped into contemporary Western consciousness.

Even if we do not count literature related to World War II history at such a subtle level, a bibliography shows that, by April 1994, at least 750 fiction titles focusing on World War II had been published for young people in the U.S. (Holsinger, 1995). To find out whether or not

World War II remains a favorite topic in today's youth literature, one only needs to check the latest "Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People," an annual list of juvenile books recommended to social studies teachers who can use them with K-12 students, and browse under the section "World History & Culture" to see how often "world history" actually means "World War II history in Europe."



...The only book which gives some space to the Pacific War, Remember World War II: Kids Who Survived Tell Their Story, *gives a wrong date,* ***1940****, for Japan's invasion of China.*

In the booklist of 2006, for example, six out of 11 books under this section focus on World War II and the Holocaust (four titles). The only book about China deals with Mahjong, "a game that originated in China almost a thousand years ago," as the reviewer noted ("Notable," 2006). The only book which gives some space to the Pacific War, *Remember World War II: Kids Who Survived Tell Their Story*, gives a wrong date, **1940**, for Japan's invasion of China (Nicholson, 2005, p. 31).

Much More Than Mahjong

Four people who experienced the Pacific War as a child—two in Hawaii, one in Manila, Philippines, and one in Tokyo, Japan—recalled their lives during the war. Despite a map showing that China was besieged by the Japanese army (Nicholson, 2005, p. 32), there is no story about Chinese.

What were Chinese doing during World War II? Well, when they were not combating Japan and its collaborators, when they were not preparing war relief for Chinese soldiers, when they were not hiding from air raids, when they were not hungry and weary after fleeing from cities conquered by the enemy, when they were not caught in the terror of a bubonic plague and other endemic diseases spread by the Japanese army, when women were not rounded up as sex slaves for the "comfort" of Imperial Japanese soldiers, and if they kept their lives at all, yes indeed, some Chinese played Mahjong even during the war years.

Footnotes

[1] In Lon Po Po, a Caldecott winner, Ed Young gave one of the three sisters big and slightly exaggerated slanting eyes, as if to respond to criticism targeting *The Five Chinese Brothers* with gentle humor—a certain proportion of the Chinese population were born with eyes looking slanted if not as thin as a thread.

[2] Throughout the discussion, she used the nickname "liTtLe RicE" to identify herself. She introduced herself as being a Chinese raised in Taiwan though now married to a Jewish man.

[3] Chinese American authors of *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989), *Monkey King* (1997), and *American Born Chinese* (2006) respectively.

[4] According to Peffer's (1999) study, the Page Law, a federal statute enacted in 1875, made it difficult for Chinese women to enter the United States, to the satisfaction of American capitalists who could continue keeping Chinese males as the cheapest laborers by saving the payment for family support. The gender imbalance in Chinatown was maintained until the middle of the 20th century.

[5] My preliminary search for juvenile nonfiction works has found fewer titles than fiction for youth: a dozen information books, two autobiographies, and several biographies about Claire Chennault have World War II in China as the central topic or main backdrop.

[6] The geographical scope I am interested in is mainland China; thus stories portraying wartime Hong Kong and Taiwan are not included here. Those two places had distinct histories during World War II and require separate studies. Hong Kong, a British colony since the Qing Empire of China lost the First Opium War in 1842, remained a haven for refugees flooding in from the mainland until the Pacific War broke out. Taiwan became Imperial Japan's colony in 1895, when China lost the first Sino-Japanese War, and was not returned to the Chinese government until the end of World War II.

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Editor's Note: The rest of the article (Part II) will be published in the 2011 April issue.