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Looking Into the Mirror: Chinese Children's Responses to Chinese Children's Books

Meei-Ling Liaw

As educators are learning to relate whole language theory and philosophy to literature-based instruction, children's books are finding their way into reading classrooms (Pace, 1991). Not only has literature-based instruction become a common theme in recent national conferences and journals in the field of reading but the use of literature has also been mandated in some places (English-Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools, 1987). Significantly more classroom teachers are adopting children's books for literacy instruction than previously (Harris, 1993).

The use of children's books has also made an impact on the education of minority children. Educators are exploring ways to integrate children's literature into a multicultural classroom (Martinez and Nash, 1990; Sassar, 1992). Allen (1989) claimed that by acquiring the language of children's books, minority children can gain access to intensive knowledge and language models which facilitate academic success. Spears (1990) examined the cultural dimensions of reader response among poor and working-class African-American students and concluded that the reading of culturally conscious texts can provide a bridge upon which both African-American

and European-American adolescent readers may build and ultimately expand their literacy experiences.

Because of the increasing use of multicultural children's literature, researchers are noticing the cultural elements in the responses toward literary text. Sims (1983) investigated a ten-year-old African-American girl's responses to thirty books with African-American characters. Sims found that her subject responded positively to experiences similar to hers, to distinctly African-American cultural experiences, and to African-American female characters with whom she could identify; unfavorable responses were due to books that she considered boring and to events in which African-American characters were denied human dignity or treated unjustly. Sims suggested that more research should be done on responses to literature for or about African-Americans from African-American and non-African-American youth and from elementary school-age children.

Echoing Sims' (1983) plea for more research on minority children's responses to children's literature, Grice and Vaughn (1992) conducted an interview-based study with thirteen African-American and Anglo third graders to determine whether or not the children appreciated 20 culturally conscious and 4 "melting pot" books. They found that the paucity of knowledge and understanding of African and African-American studies robbed the children of the ability to embrace certain books. They argued that news media and textbooks have created a negative perception of African culture and tradition, and that such misconceptions have prevented children from appreciating books with African cultural themes; merely purchasing these books for a school or public library or even reading and discussing them in class does not ensure that the literature will fulfill its intended purposes.

The study by Mikkelsen (1990) demonstrated how differently non-mainstream children respond to children's books. Mikkelsen examined the storymaking of eight African-American children from working class families. She found that neither were the children simply reciting the stories nor were they merely creating stories of their own; they were making stories out of stories that they had encountered in literature or experienced in life. In other words, through storytelling, non-mainstream children's personal experiences were translated into dramatic form and enriched the literary pictures in the stories. Based on the study results, Mikkelsen suggested that teachers should stop imposing mainstream culture on minority children and listen to them, so the children could grow more as themselves.

Based on the literature reviewed, it seems that many questions remain despite the increased presence of multicultural children's books in the classroom for purposes such as fostering literacy skills, increasing multicultural sensitivity and awareness, and cultivating self-concept and minority pride (Early, 1990; Rasinski and Padak, 1990). We still have a very limited understanding about how minority children respond to these books, what type of multicultural books can be considered as authentic, and what constitutes a quality multicultural book. Evidently, more studies are needed to draw instructional implications. The rationale of this study, therefore, was two-fold. First, it was the purpose of this study to add to the literature of minority children's responses to multicultural children's books. The few studies investigating minority children's responses have been limited to children from African-American backgrounds. Hardly any research has been done on other minority groups. The literary responses of Chinese children, a rapidly growing minority population in the United States, await close examination. The second purpose of this study was to report whether a

group of Chinese children could appreciate some well-known Chinese children's books. The study was intended to provide insight into how a group of Chinese children interpreted well-known Chinese children's stories and whether they drew personal relevance from these stories.

Method

Subjects. The subjects for this study were eleven Chinese children living in a southwest suburban community in the United States, where half of the population was affiliated with a university. This group of children came mainly from families whose parents were graduate students or university faculty members. The children included two six-year-olds, one seven-year-old, four eight-year-olds, and four ten-year-olds. The selection of subjects was based on their proximity to the researcher so consistent interaction with the children could be accomplished. All children attended community Chinese schools on Sundays and spoke both Chinese and English fluently. Three of the children were born in the United States and the other eight children had lived in the States for three to four years. When asked what types of books were their favorites, they gave titles such as *The Berenstain Bears*, *Donald Duck Treasury*, *The Funny Little Woman*, and *The Secret Garden*. All of these books are popular American children's books.

Materials. The books selected were stories written for younger readers and contained protagonists approximating the age of the children in the study. A total of three books was chosen. The titles of the three books were *Lon Po Po* by Ed Young, *Tikki Tikki Tembo* by Arlene Mosel, and *I Hate English* by Ellen Levine. (For synopses of the stories, see the appendix.) *Lon Po Po* was chosen because of its familiar theme to children. It was expected that the children would not have problems understanding the story because of the

similarities between *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Lon Po Po. Tikki Tikki Tembo* distorts the Chinese custom of choosing names for children and depicts Chinese parents treating their children differently according to birth order. It was the researcher's intention to see if the children would pick up the misrepresentation of Chinese culture while reading the book. *I Hate English* was chosen because it describes the difficulty experienced by the protagonist, Mei Mei, in acquiring English; since most of the children were born overseas, the book could provide a scenario of personal relevance for the children.

Procedure. Data were collected in two settings. In the first setting, eight children responded to the stories. The story books were brought into the children's Chinese classrooms, the teacher read to the children, and the children responded to questions in writing. In the second setting, three children were invited to the researcher's house to read these story books on their own and then wrote their responses to the questions. In both settings, the children were informed that the reading was for enjoyment and they could answer the questions freely. Questions asked were to elicit responses regarding the children's comprehension of, involvement with, and evaluation of the stories. They included: What was the book about? Could the story or any of the characters be real? Could you be in this story? Did you like the book — why or why not? The questions were asked in the same order for all children.

Results

Comprehension of the stories. Questions were asked to find out if these children had comprehended the stories or if there were any obstacles preventing these children from understanding the stories. To answer such questions, the children summarized the stories in brief sentences and the answers sometimes involved partial or selected retelling of the

stories. Answers to *Lon Po Po* were "it's about a wolf and three children;" "the book is about a wolf that pretended to be the grandma Po Po;" and "it was about a wolf who tried to eat three children." The answers reflected a basic comprehension of the major plots. Only one child answered "The wolf's heart was broken" — an answer which did not cover the whole storyline but was a scene described in the story. Answers to *I Hate English* followed the same pattern. Typically children summarized the story as "a girl who hated English" or "a Chinese girl learned to speak English."

Answers to *Tikki Tikki Tembo*, however, were more diversified. The answers ranged from an answer as simple as "it's about Tikki Tikki Tembo" to selected retelling of the story — such as "it was a story about two children who fell into a well," and "the story was about a well and the children and an old man." Some children focused their attention on the action part of the story and wrote "it's about an old man who rescued two children," and "it's Tikki and Chang's adventure story." Two children seemed to be concerned about the moral of the story and wrote, "it's about listening to your mother or something might happen," and "this story is about the two children that went to a well when their mother told them not to and they fell in the well." Finally, one child answered that the story was about "why Chinese people gave short names to children instead of long names."

Involvement with the stories through realism. When asked if they thought the stories or any of the characters could be real, the children answered with a simple *yes* or *no*. Some gave further explanations. Only three children thought that the stories of *Lon Po Po* and *Tikki Tikki Tembo* could be real. They reasoned that the story of *Lon Po Po* couldn't be real because "the wolf can't get into a basket, it can't knock on the door and get into the bed, and a wolf cannot talk." The

children argued that Tikki Tikki Tembo couldn't be a real person because "no one could hold his nose in the water for such a long time" and no one could be as stupid as Tikki Tikki Tembo because "he could have turned the bucket in the well the other way and stood on it to keep his nose above the water" (the child was referring to a picture illustrating that Tikki Tikki Tembo sat on a bucket inside the well with his nose immersed in the water). The very few children who agreed that *Tikki Tikki Tembo* could be a real story thought so because "there could have been two boys that didn't listen to their mother and fell into a well" and "there could be a mother that has two boys that didn't listen to her."

Of the three books, *I Hate English* was considered the most realistic. Most of the children believed a story like that could happen in real life. They reasoned that "there are people who act like Mei Mei."

Involvement through identification. The majority of the children could not identify themselves in the three stories. The reason why they could not be in *Lon Po Po* and *Tikki Tikki Tembo* was because the stories were not real to them and "I always listened to my mother." Why they couldn't be in *I Hate English* was because "I never hated English." Interestingly, one child identified herself in the story *I Hate English* because the girl in the story had long hair like hers.

Evaluation of the stories. Most children responded positively to the three books. The children seemed to like stories that had happy endings. For example, they responded to *Lon Po Po* that "I like the story because the wolf was dead" or "the wolf died. His heart broke into pieces."

The children seemed to be very concerned about drawing morals from the stories. Answers such as the following were typical: in response to *Tikki Tikki Tembo* one said, "it taught you a lesson that you should listen to your mom or you might get into trouble;" in response to *Lon Po Po*, one said, "I like the book because the story has a lesson to be told;" and, in response to *I Hate English*, one said, "I like the book because it tells children not to be scared when you move."

The illustrations also played a part when the children determined whether they liked the books or not. Several of the children responded that they liked the books because of the beautiful pictures in them. One child wrote, "the pictures are pretty and artistic" in response to *Lon Po Po*. Another child wrote, "the pictures look like real," also referring to the illustrations in *Lon Po Po*.

The children also gave generic comments. For instance, one wrote, "I found it very interesting," in response to *Lon Po Po*. Another wrote, "it was funny" in response to *I Hate English*. The other child wrote, "it was exciting," in response to *Tikki Tikki Tembo*.

Cultural elements, however, elicited contradictory responses in terms of the judgment of the book *Tikki Tikki Tembo*. One child pointed out that she liked the book because "there is a lot of things about China." On the other hand, another child criticized that the book "said many things that was not true about China."

Some children had difficulties appreciating the story *I Hate English*. One child did not put down any comments about the story but crossed out the title of the book and changed it to *I Like English*. Most children reported that learning English was easy for them.

Limitations

It is obvious that there were limitations to the study. First of all, the number of subjects involved in the study was limited. Had more subjects been involved in the study, the responses might have been more varied. Secondly, the number of books read by the children was small. These books only represented a small spectrum of the Chinese children's books available.

Despite the limitations of the study, several interesting results were found. These children were able to go beyond the comprehension of the stories at the literal level and to draw personal relevance. They not only recited the stories accurately but also retold the parts which most impressed them. They responded that the stories were quite adventurous and there were lessons to be learned from them. This finding corroborated the reader response theory that the young child is an active constructor of language and is capable of inference and abstract thought (Rosenblatt, 1978).

The children found the stories of *Lon Po Po* and *Tikki Tikki Tembo* unrealistic and *I Hate English* to be very realistic. This result could be due to the genre of the stories. *Lon Po Po* and *Tikki Tikki Tembo* both were folktales of what happened "a long, long time ago." *Lon Po Po* was a fantasy which contained elements that could not happen in the natural world. Although *Tikki Tikki Tembo* did not contain supernatural events, the exotic setting and absurdity of the story might have caused the children to disbelieve. On the other hand, *I Hate English* was contemporary realistic fiction in which the story was more likely to happen to real people. The children, thus, found it quite real. However, when asked if they could be in the stories, the children exhibited the same kind of detachment from all three books. This is probably due

to the fact that their experience in learning English as a second language was a different one from that of the protagonist in *I Hate English*. This difference in experience also seemed to affect their rating of the books. *I Hate English* was the least liked among the three books. This finding seems to be in congruence with Purves and Beach's (1972) research findings that readers tend to turn away from works with which they can't identify.

The children's response to *Tikki Tikki Tembo* is an issue that deserves further discussion. The children have demonstrated an array of interpretations of the major theme in the story. Out of the eleven children, only a ten-year-old pointed out that it was about why Chinese had short names and that the cultural representation about Chinese in the story was inaccurate. One possible explanation for this phenomenon could be that these children were not yet mature enough to possess the cultural sensitivity to detect the inappropriate depiction of Chinese customs and people in the book. As Galda (1982) and other researchers (Cullinan, Harwood, and Galda, 1983) have suggested, developmental maturity of the reader has an influence on the responses to text. It would be a worthwhile effort to have a group of older children respond to *Tikki Tikki Tembo* and compare the responses to those of this group. In addition, the length of stay in the United States could also be a factor affecting the responses. The ten-year-old who pointed out the inaccurate cultural information in *Tikki Tikki Tembo* happened to have stayed in the U.S. for the least amount of time (i.e., three years) among the eleven children. There is a possibility that the child had more exposure to Chinese culture and possessed more understanding of the native culture than did other children.

Most of the children involved in this study were very concerned about learning a lesson from the stories and

abiding by filial piety. Although these children were informed that the reading was for sheer enjoyment, they might already have adopted certain attitudes through prior reading experiences. Harris (1993) points out that adults have never perceived reading literature as simply for the pleasure for children:

Historically, it has served socialization, educational, and moral functions — it was something that was good for children or taught them a lesson. Although proponents of literature-based approaches assert that pleasure and entertainment principles should become an integral component of the approach, the exhortation is typically paired with other functions (p. 277).

For this reason, the children have presumed that they needed to learn something from the stories to meet adults' expectations of a good reader. Nevertheless, since this group of children were all Chinese, the concern for filial piety might have been a culturally specific phenomenon. Chinese culture places filial piety as the highest virtue and it wouldn't be a surprise that the parents of these children have emphasized the importance of this virtue to them. However, further study will be needed if such conclusions are to be drawn.

In summary, this study seems to have raised more questions than it has answered. There is no doubt that literature-based instruction has its merits. However, how to reap the full benefit of using children's literature in the classroom is still a topic that deserves exploration. If we agree that literature cannot be divorced from the social and cultural milieus that engender it, reading children's literature is a lot more complicated than just comprehending the text. The issue gets even more complex when cultural stereotypes, false claims about the minority heritage, or inaccurate presentation of cultural information occur in children's literature.

Multicultural children's literature does not necessarily reflect the true images of minority culture. Although researchers have started to examine children's responses to multicultural children's books in terms of cultural authenticity and involvement, the number of studies is still small. More research on minority children's responses to literature is evidently needed. This study has revealed that Chinese children's responses to Chinese children's books are diversified, which corroborates the reader response theory that "a single, authoritative interpretation of a text does not exist but that a range of interpretations are possible" (Harris, 1993, p. 283). This study also revealed several culturally related issues such as cultural sensitivity and its relationship to age difference and the influence of traditional cultural values on readers' responses. As the Chinese population is increasing rapidly in the United States and Chinese and Chinese-American literature is becoming more available than before, studies on this group of children's literary responses are needed in order to help educators shape their literacy instruction programs.

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APPENDIX

Levine, A. (1989). *I Hate English!* A story about a Chinese girl, Mei Mei, who moved from Hong Kong to New York. She resisted speaking English at first but was then able to feel comfortable speaking both Chinese and English because of an understanding English teacher. NY: Scholastic.

Young, E. (1989). *Lon Po Po: A Red Riding Hood story from China*. The Chinese version of the *Little Red Riding Hood*. A mother went to the grandmother's house and left her three children at home. A big bad wolf, dressed up as the grandmother, tried to get into the house to eat up the children. The three children outwitted the wolf and saved their own lives. This book was the 1990 Caldecott Medal winner. NY: Philomel.

Mosel, A. (1971). *Tikki Tikki Tembo*. A story about why Chinese people name their children with short names instead of long ones. A long time ago, Chinese parents named their first born sons great long names. A child named Tikki Tikki Tembo-no Sa Rembo-Chari Bari Ruchi-pip Peri Pembo fell into a well but could not be rescued immediately because his younger brother was not able to say his name well. Although Tikki Tikki Tembo was finally saved, the people learned the lesson never to give their children long names.