

# A Critical Visual Analysis of Chinese and Chinese American Representations in Picturebooks

**Xiaoning Chen**

National Louis University, USA

**Ran Hu**

East Carolina University, USA

## Abstract

*One of the primary visual sources children are exposed to is the illustrations in picturebooks. This study examines visual representations of Chinese people and Chinese Americans in contemporary picturebooks. It seeks answers to how and why the Chinese and their culture are represented in these books through a critical visual literacy lens. Ten sample picturebooks were analyzed. The findings demonstrate progress in representing diverse Chinese and Chinese American characters in contemporary picturebooks; however, many visual representations still reinforce stereotypes of Chinese people and Chinese Americans, consistent with the dominant social discourse. Implications for developing culturally rich and dynamic Chinese characters in future picturebooks are discussed.*

**Keywords:** critical visual literacy, picturebooks, Chinese/Chinese American representations

## Introduction

Asians are the fastest-growing of the four largest racial and ethnic groups in the U.S., covering 5.7% of all population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Among all Asian ethnic groups, the population of Chinese living in the U.S. has reached 10 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). However, racism against Asian Americans is longstanding and complex. According to *NPR news*, more than 9,000 anti-Asian incidents have been reported since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic (The Associated Press, 2021). “Stop AAPI Hate,” a nonprofit organization that tracks incidents of hate and discrimination against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI), also reported shocking numbers regarding Asian hatred. According to a recent national report, the Chinese have experienced more hate incidents (43.5%) than all ethnic groups surveyed by the organization (AAPI, 2021, p. 2). Of all hate incidents, 48.1% included at least one hateful statement regarding anti-China and/or anti-immigrant rhetoric (AAPI, 2021, p. 2).

As with all forms of social discrimination, racism toward the AAPI is frustrating. As teacher educators, we believe it is critically important to increase exposure to the voice and history of the Asian American community. Children’s literature is one of the primary sources of learning about the world. According to Martha Crippen (2012), children’s literature

... provides students with opportunities to respond to literature; it gives students appreciation about their own cultural heritage as well as those of others; it helps students develop emotional intelligence and creativity; it nurtures growth and development of the student’s personality and social skills; and it transmits important literature and themes from one generation to the next. (para. 1)

As the above quote shows, culturally authentic children’s books can help teachers and students better understand the culture, tradition, and value of diverse racial and ethnic groups (Bishop, 1990; Short & Fox, 2003).

In this chapter, we purposefully use the term “picturebooks” as we strongly believe that visual and print are equally important components (Chesner, 2019; Pantaleo & Walker, 2017; Serafini, 2014). Separating “picture” and “books” in the term “picture books” does not do justice to the essential role visuals play in the meaning making process. We explore the concept of cultural authenticity from the perspective of visual literacy by critically examining visuals representing Chinese and/or Chinese American characters in picturebooks.

### Literature Review

The American Immigrant Council (2021, para. 3) reported that 44.9 million, or one in seven residents in the United States, were immigrants in 2019. The increasing number of immigrants coming to the U.S. brings cultural diversity, including classroom settings, requiring teachers to provide instruction that can meet the needs of diverse students. Multicultural children’s books are essential to providing a window for children into the cultural heritage of others. These books serve as a mirror for children to reflect on their own lives and experiences, and they allow children to walk into the story and become a part of it (Bishop, 1990). However, one concern is that a majority of the published children’s books are still centered on the White, middle-class, heterosexual world (Boyd et al., 2014).

A common theme in multicultural children’s literature research is the cultural authenticity and representation of underrepresented racial and cultural groups (Braden & Rodriguez, 2016; Kalisa, 1990; Naidoo, 2008; Roberts et al., 2005). This group of studies focuses primarily on content analysis of texts. In a study exploring the portrayal of African culture in picturebooks, Kalisa (1990) pointed out that African folklore represents the most common literary form, whereas other forms of oral traditions are virtually nonexistent. Moreover, picturebook illustrations provided a misconception about African cultures through exaggerating traditions and clothing (p. 36). These picturebooks contributed little to help children develop an accurate picture of the diversified and rich African traditions. Roberts et al. (2005) examined contemporary American Indian cultures in children’s books. They found that even though there are many good books on the myths and traditions of Native Americans, there is an overreliance on historical perspectives focusing on American Indian characters and cultures. They suggested that teachers include books that can present American Indians authentically and respectfully, such as depictions of American Indians in everyday tasks of living, presentations of individuals as part of communities or as fully human, with varied physical features and roles (Roberts et al., 2005, p. 2). Naidoo (2008) studied award-winning picturebooks depicting diverse Latino subcultures in the U.S. The findings showed that the portrayal of gender roles between male and female Latino characters was unbalanced; hence, those books failed to represent the complete social and cultural mosaic of the Latino people (Naidoo, 2008, p. 29). Similarly, Braden and Rodriguez (2016) examined picturebooks having significant Latinx content. By using critical content analysis, they reported four insights in those picturebooks: English was privileged in the text; the presentation of Latinx culture lacked depth and breadth; traditional gender roles were highlighted without considering the diversity in Latinx families; and the assumption that there is a Utopian society, exhibiting near perfect qualities (p. 62).

A few studies are investigating the representation of Asian Americans, their culture, and traditions in picturebooks (Cai, 1994; Cha, 2009; Jan-Thomas, 2013; Pang et al., 1992; Rodriguez, 2018; Yokota, 1993; Wee et al., 2015). These studies suggested that Asian culture is only presented at the surface level; oversimplified topics and stereotypical elements prevail in picturebooks. Hence, there is an urgent need for authors and illustrators to depict realistic stories and authentic illustrations to reflect the current, everyday life of Asian Americans. Further, stereotypical images such as slanted eyes are frequently used to portray characters from the Chinese cultural background. However, when artists are conversant with their own culture or have direct experience with a particular culture, they are less likely to misrepresent culture in illustration.

As text and illustration in picturebooks transact and transform with each other (Sipe, 1998), they are equally important in representing cultures and subcultures, traditions, and individuals. Several studies have focused on visual representations in picturebooks and their value in teaching visual literacy. Cai (1994) pointed out that picturebooks often confuse images from other cultures with those from Chinese culture. Nikolajeva (2012, 2013) studied how words and images in picturebooks are not only powerful implementations for visual literacy but also pathways for children's emotional development. Meanwhile, Papen (2020) suggested using dialogue between teachers and students to enhance critical visual literacy so that children could have a better and more thorough understanding of the visual content. Serafini (2010) has also argued that, as we move from a print-dominant era to a post-typographic epoch dominated by visual images and multimodal texts, teachers should expand their perceptual, structural, and ideological perspectives on literacy instruction to prepare readers to better comprehend multimodal texts (p. 100-101). In keeping with this insight, a few researchers have suggested guidelines and criteria for selecting multicultural picturebooks. Pang et al. (1992) recommended selecting picturebooks based on whether they have a strong plot, historically accurate and culturally pluralistic themes, positively portrayed their characters, set the story in the U.S., and authentically illustrated their characters. Similarly, Yokota (1993) presented five criteria for selecting multicultural books: 1) cultural accuracy, 2) rich cultural details, 3) authentic dialogues and relationships, 4) in-depth treatment of cultural issues, and 5) inclusion of members of a minority group (p. 159).

We have identified a few gaps in the field. First, there has been a lack of studies critically analyzing Chinese Americans compared to other minority groups in children's literature (Harada, 1995; Hsieh, 2018; Lowery, 2000). Secondly, most studies focus primarily on content analysis of text, and only a small number of studies explore the significance of illustrations in picturebooks and visual literacy instruction (e.g., Cai, 1994; Kim & Serrano, 2017; Nikolajeva, 2012, 2013; Painter et al., 2014). Third and finally, limited studies employ the lens of critical visual literacy (e.g., Papen, 2020; Serafini, 2010). This study intends to fill the gaps by examining how Chinese and Chinese Americans are visually represented in picturebooks through the lens of critical visual literacy. We hope the study results may add to the courageous conversation on how picturebooks contribute to the construction of social discourses about race and ethnicity, and in the long run, provide insights on promoting social justice.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts critical visual literacy as its theoretical framework. Critical visual literacy brings together two fields of study: visual literacy and critical literacy. Visual literacy refers to learned skills to construct meaning from visual representations in order to compose visual communication (Avgerinou, 2001). Visual thinking is one of the critical skills that cut across all the visually related tasks. Critical literacy (Comber, 2015; Freire, 1972; Janks, 2014) is an approach that moves readers beyond literal meanings to examine the ideas, positions, and values embedded in the context of information.

Critical visual literacy is defined as the skills necessary to take an active stance in exploring the use of visual modes and other semiotic systems, such as text, examining how they create meaning (Papen, 2020) in social, cultural, and political contexts. Thus, critical visual literacy investigates the power relations illuminated by visual production and perception (Chung, 2013; Kim & Serrano, 2017; Santos Costa & Xavier, 2016). Guided by a critical visual literacy framework, we intend to carefully examine how illustrations are constructed to represent Chinese and Chinese American characters, paying particular attention to questions such as: Who are represented? How are they represented? Why have they been represented this way? Whose voices are presented and whose are excluded? Whose interest does the visual representation serve? (Janks, 2014).

### **The Study**

This qualitative study examined how Chinese people, Chinese Americans, and their cultures were represented in picturebooks. Both researchers were born and grew up in China and pursued our advanced studies in the U.S., becoming faculty within the fields of language and literacy education in higher education institutions. Considering our cultural backgrounds, the focus of the study was on Chinese and Chinese American characters as represented in picturebooks. Two research questions were: 1) How are Chinese, and Chinese Americans represented in contemporary picturebooks? and 2) How is the Chinese culture represented in these picturebooks?

The data sources were the illustrations from the selected picturebooks. The selection criteria were: 1) the books were targeted for the grade level of Pre-Kindergarten through third grade; 2) the books featured Chinese and/or Chinese Americans as the primary character(s); 3) the books were contemporary fiction and nonfiction, and 4) the books were available in the U.S. We referred to databases such as the award-winning picturebooks from the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association (2021), the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC, 2021) diversity statistics, and local libraries (e.g., Naperville Public Library in IL and San Jose Public Libraries in CA) to identify appropriate picturebooks for this study. We were able to locate 30 books that met all the criteria. In the field of multicultural children's literature, the majority were in the genre of traditional literature, where stories were set in ancient times with flat characters (Short & Fox, 2003). We purposefully focused on contemporary picturebooks since these books depict characters in an everyday context to which young readers can easily relate.

This chapter reports findings from ten representative picturebooks out of the 30 that met our selection criteria. We determined the genres of the picturebooks using the literary genres guide from the California Department of Education (2021). Out of the 30 books, 26 were fiction, and the remaining were nonfiction. These books were further categorized into four groups: 1) Authored and illustrated by Asians or Asian Americans with stories set in the U.S.; 2) Authored and illustrated by Asians or Asian Americans with stories set in China; 3) Illustrated by Asians or Asian Americans, and 4) Illustrated by non-Asians or non-Asian Americans. Ten picturebooks were randomly selected from each of these four groups. The ratio of books in each group in the ten sample books was identical to that in all 30 picturebooks. The titles of the ten picturebooks, genres, and the group they belong to are:

- Authored and illustrated by Asian/Asian Americans with stories set in the U.S.
  - *Eyes that Kiss in the Corners* (Ho, 2021, realistic fiction)
  - *Popo's Lucky Chinese New Year* (Loh-Hagan, 2017, realistic fiction)
  - *A Big Mooncake for Little Star* (Lin, 2018, realistic fiction)
  - *Jenny Mei is Sad* (Subisak, 2021, realistic fiction)
- Authored and illustrated by Asian/Asian Americans with stories set in China
  - *A New Year's Reunion* (Yu, 2013, realistic fiction)
- Illustrated by Asian/Asian Americans
  - *I Dream of Popo* (Blackburn, 2021, realistic fiction)
  - *Queen of Physics* (Robeson, 2019, nonfiction, biography)
  - *Nine Months: Before a Baby is Born* (Paul, 2019, nonfiction & fiction)
- Illustrated by non-Asian/Asian Americans
  - *Made in China* (Oelschlager, 2008, realistic fiction)
  - *I Hate English* (Levine, 1995, realistic fiction)

To analyze the illustrations, we started with codes adapted from Naidoo (2008) and added new ones using the grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Specifically, we individually took notes on the visual representations of the main characters in the ten books. We then used the constant comparative analysis

to go through our notes and keep a running list of emerging codes commonly used by both of us. If one of us included a code that the other didn't have, we discussed why it was significant and whether we could reach consensus to add it to the list. After we finalized the codes, we grouped them into the categories of visual content analysis and visual semiotic analysis. Sample codes are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Data Analysis*

Categories	Codes
Visual Content Analysis	Gender, age, physical appearance (shape of eye, shape of face, hairstyle, type of dress, body build, and posture), social-economic class, characteristics, interaction with family vs. others
Visual Semiotic Analysis	Literal and symbolic representations of Chinese and/or Chinese American peoples and cultures, cultural traits, and moral attitudes, the relationship among characters

We also took detailed notes to capture the qualitative nature of codes, such as the physical features of the main characters and how they interacted with others. The following section presents findings organized by research questions and significant themes.

### Findings

The first research question, "How were Chinese and/or Chinese Americans represented in contemporary picturebooks?" was answered by quantitative and qualitative data.

Out of the ten selected picturebooks:

- 100% had young female main characters
- 70% interacted with family only, and 30% interacted with others
- 90% were from a middle-class background, and 10% was from a working-class background

All the main characters in the ten books were female. We determined the gender of the characters primarily by looking at their physical features (e.g., long vs. short hair) and clothing (e.g., dress vs. shirt). The print in the book provided a way to confirm the gender categorization. A more in-depth analysis revealed the main characters' physical appearances in the categories of: 1) skin tone, face, eye shapes, hair, and dress styles; 2) body build and posture; and 3) characteristics. Further, we examined who the main characters interacted with and where they interacted with others.

The main characters generally had a peach/light brown skin tone. When a White character was present, the skin tone of the leading Chinese character appeared to be slightly darker. No significant skin tone variation was noted among the Chinese characters in the same book except the father figure in *A New Year's Reunion* (Yu, 2013). As a blue-collar worker, the father had a much darker skin tone than the mother and the daughter.

All ten main characters appeared to have monolid eyes with somewhat different shapes: Almond-shaped (4), upturned (3), round (2), and small dot/line (1). A slight variation was noticed in the face shape. Eight of the ten main characters had round faces, one had a long face, and the other had a square-shaped face. All

ten main characters had black straight hair, with six at medium length and four with a short, bob hairstyle with bangs. Half of the main characters wore pigtails or a bun as an adult (e.g., Robeson, *Queen of Physics*, 2019). In addition, seven of them had general, everyday clothing, while the other three had traditional Chinese style dresses (i.e., Qipao). It was also noted that even the characters wearing general clothing had something in red such as a hairpin or neckline of the dress.

Concerning body build and posture, most of the main characters were positioned in a family unit, so the dichotomy of body build between children and adults was apparent. There was no significant difference in the limited cases where the main characters interacted with peers outside the family unit. A noticeable example of posture changes was in *I Hate English* (Levine, 1995). The main character, Mei Mei, appeared much more relaxed and happier when in a Chinese-speaking environment. In contrast, she seemed tense when expected to communicate in English.

Likewise, in eight out of ten picturebooks, the ethnicity of the main characters was essentially tied to the plot. Some characters were able to express who they were and show pride in their physical features (e.g., Ho, *Eyes that Kiss in the Corners*, 2021), culture (e.g., Loh-Hagan, *Popo's Lucky Chinese New Year*, 2018), and language (e.g., Levine, *I Hate English*, 1995). Other characters had to rely on others (e.g., the father in Oelschlager, *Made in China*, 2008, and the science community in Robeson, *Queen of Physics*, 2019) to confirm their identities and acknowledge their value.

In terms of who and where the main characters interacted with others, the data indicated that the majority (7) interacted with their family (including their immediate family members and grandmas), and the rest (3) interacted with others outside of their family circle. When the main characters interacted with their families, their family members appeared to be Asian as they had the visible physical features such as black hair, brown eyes, and peach/light brown skin tone. One exception was *Made in China* (Oelschlager, 2008), where her White parents adopted the main character from China. This gives the viewer the impression that Chinese people and Chinese Americans are a closed ethnic group uninvolved in things like interracial marriage. In the three picturebooks where the characters interacted, some interracial interactions included friendships and mentorship. In *Jenny Mei is Sad* (Subisak, 2021), a special friend who appeared to be a black girl of similar age helped cheer up Jenny Mei. In *I Hate English* (Levine, 1995), a White teacher helped Mei Mei to overcome her negative attitude toward the new language. In *Queen of Physics* (Robeson, 2019), Wu Chien Shiung engaged with her Chinese peers (female students) in China and other male scientists from diverse ethnic backgrounds in the U.S.

We identified a variety of characteristics based on the main characters' facial expressions, positioning in relation to other characters, and the use of visual elements such as line, color, shape, and symbol. For instance, there were multiple scenes where we saw the back or the side of Jenny Mei and her eyes were looking down or to the side (Subisak, *Jenny Mei is Sad*, 2021), indicating she was sad. Another example was that Wu Chien Shiung was portrayed as intelligent by scenes where she had her head buried in books, raised her hand to answer questions while others were not, and was surrounded by mathematical numbers as she engaged in math work.

The visual depiction of the setting was often the scenes of a U.S. middle-class neighborhood (nine out of ten picturebooks) where the main characters and their families lived in a house with a spacious living room, a well-equipped kitchen, and individual bedrooms. One of them also included scenes from Chinatown (Levine, *I Hate English*, 1995). The other picturebook was set in a small town in China (Yu, *A New Year's Reunion*, 2013).

To answer the second research question of how Chinese culture was represented in the illustration, we

found that 80% conveyed literal and symbolic representations of culture while 20% didn't. The overall tone for the picturebooks featuring holiday celebrations was festive, highlighted through the wide use of the red color and the characters' facial expressions. Other than that, a variety of tones such as being sad, lonely, happy, exciting, and proud were shown through warm vs. cool colors, facial expressions, and positioning of the characters. The literal representations of culture included cultural products and practices associated with holidays. For example, in *Popo's Lucky Chinese New Year* (Loh-Hagan, 2017), viewers can see dumplings, fish, red envelopes, and dragon/lion dances. In *A Big Mooncake for Little Star* (Lin, 2018), mooncakes were a critical visual component on most of the pages. Further, Chinese scripts were often seen in the background, elaborating the setting in Chinatown. An example is *I Hate English* (Levine, 1995). In contrast, symbolic representations of culture were present in many picturebooks. For example, many characters wore something in red. The color red symbolizes good luck, and Chinese people typically wear red for the new year and special celebrations. In addition, the grandmas in two picturebooks wore jade jewelry, a symbol for good luck and prosperity in Chinese culture: *I Dream of Popo* (Blackburn, 2021) and *Eyes that Kiss in the Corners* (Ho, 2021). In the latter, many figures from Chinese classic literature were depicted, such as the monkey king, illustrated as a stuffed animal in the main character's bedroom. In comparison to the literal representations of culture, the symbolic representations may be well appreciated by cultural insiders and inspire the curiosity of cultural outsiders. Notably, *Jenny Mei is Sad* (Subisak, 2021) and *Nine Months* (Paul, 2019) were the two picturebooks that did not include specific references to culture except for the physical features of the characters and/or their ethnic names in the text. The ethnicity of the main characters was incidental to the story because their ethnicity did not form the basis of the plot.

Overall, two themes emerged from the findings. First, a small variety of Chinese and Chinese American main characters were visually represented in picturebooks with contemporary settings. All the main characters in the sample were young girls who primarily interacted with family members. A few were engaged in interactions with people from cultural groups other than their own. The characters' ethnic identities were signified by physical features, such as black straight hair, monolid eyes, peach/light brown skin tone, and culturally specific products and practices shown through the visuals. The main characters varied in their characteristics, voice, and agency. Secondly, Chinese culture was prominent in most of these picturebooks. It was visually represented by the color of red, products such as dumplings and lanterns, and practices such as family reunion and lion/dragon dance. These were primarily surface-level signifiers (CLPE, 2021) that rarely delved deeper into cultural values and perspectives.

### Discussion and Implication

This section sheds light on the findings through a critical visual literacy lens, enabling us to analyze how the visual mode was used to represent Chinese people and Chinese Americans, and explore why they were represented in specific ways and whose perspectives were missing. Further, the implications of the study will be discussed. Five key points will be discussed below.

First, it is worth celebrating the increasing number of contemporary picturebooks featuring Chinese people and Chinese Americans as the main characters. Compared to other ethnic groups, Chinese Americans are significantly underrepresented in children's literature despite their strong presence in U.S. society. A similar trend was reported in the U.K. (CLPE, 2021). Many of these picturebooks were authored and illustrated by cultural insiders, which adds new perspectives in understanding the lived experiences of Chinese people and Chinese Americans. The findings from this study demonstrate a small yet steadily increasing variety of main characters and their families from the Chinese ethnic group.

All main characters in the ten picturebooks were young Chinese girls. These girls varied in how they looked physically and their characteristics. Some girls were sad and helpless, while others took the initiative to problem-solve and make their voices heard. Traditionally, Chinese, and other ethnic groups from eastern

Asia, are portrayed stereotypically with slanted eyes, round faces, and yellow skin tone (Wee et al., 2015). A case in point is the political cartoon titled *The New Religion* created by Valtman in 1966 (Figure 1), where all Chinese men and women are shown with slanted eyes, identical facial expressions, and outfits. In the top center of the cartoon, Mao Zedong, the founding father of the People's Republic of China, is featured wearing Mawashi, a traditional Japanese Sumo wrestler outfit. In contrast, our findings are considered a significant breakthrough to dispute the stereotyped image of Chinese people and Chinese Americans with biased physical features and submissive characteristics in the dominant social discourse.

**Figure 1.**

*The New Religion* (Valtman, 1966).



Nevertheless, the work is far from done. A concern regarding the balanced representation of female and male characters is that none of the ten picturebooks featured a male main character. The concern regarding unbalanced representations of gender was also brought up by Nadidoo (2008). In the scenes where a family was portrayed, the father figure was either absent or had minimal interaction with the main character. The Chinese are historically referred to as the “Sick man of East Asia,” a phrase coined as early as October 17, 1896, in the British-run *North China Daily News* newspaper (Sick man of Asia, 2021). This derogatory reference to Chinese men remains relevant to the present, as the *Washington Street Journal* recently published an article titled “China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia” on February 3, 2020 (Mead, 2020), reviving the speculation that China should take responsibility for the cause of the Covid-19 global pandemic. Given the intensified racial and ethnic relations in the current social and historical context, young children should instead be exposed to a wide variety of Chinese characters, especially strong and powerful Chinese males, to fight against deeply rooted systemic racism.

Furthermore, most characters exhibited lifestyles from a middle-class, suburban setting. We cannot help but wonder about the experiences of Chinese from other socioeconomic classes or settings. In addition, there was no signifier to their specific ethnic group, given that China has 56 ethnic groups with unique languages and cultures. For instance, one of the researchers is from the minority group of Hui (Chinese Muslim). Her cultural upbringing, such as traditional clothing and dietary habits, differs significantly from the majority of Han people. The gaps of developing a sophisticated understanding of richness in culture have not been successfully bridged by Chinese characters’ diversity and experiences. Diversity among main



characters in non-traditional family structures, disabilities, and mixed racial backgrounds is critically needed. Interestingly, one of the illustrators came from a mixed racial background (Subiasak, the author and illustrator of *Jenny Mei is Sad*). We would like to encourage more illustrators with diverse backgrounds to share their own nuanced experiences in their artwork.

Thirdly, authors, illustrators, and publishers should portray Chinese people and Chinese Americans interacting with people from diverse cultural groups. Our world is becoming increasingly diverse, and all children need to develop intercultural communicative competencies to prepare for their schooling, career, and lives. The examined picturebooks demonstrated Chinese main characters interacting solely in the context of family. On rare occasions where people from other racial and ethnic groups were shown, they stayed in the background and hardly engaged in close interaction with the main characters. One exception was Jenny Mei, who demonstrated the appreciation of a strong relationship with a black girl in *Jenny Mei is Sad* (Subisak, 2021). Chinese Americans do not live in isolated communities that are close-minded about embracing diversity. Therefore, more picturebooks should reflect such a reality.

Moreover, we strongly recommend expanding cultural representations beyond the traditional, superficial signifiers associated with holiday celebrations such as red envelopes, lanterns, and lion/dragon dances. In addition, such surface references to cultures may overgeneralize the entire culture by one set of products and practices. For example, many picturebooks portray dumplings as a staple for the Chinese New Year celebration. However, one of the researchers grew up in southern China. Her experience of celebrating the Chinese New Year with family never involved making or eating dumplings, a practice primarily done in northern China. *Popo's Lucky Chinese New Year* (Loh-Hagan, 2017) set a good example to present other cultural practices, such as offering food to ancestors and providing a perspective on why writing in red ink is not culturally appropriate even though red is a lucky color. Cultural values can be presented visually by exploring the what, how, and why of cultural products and practices.

Finally, we call for more authors and illustrators to create picturebooks where Chinese people and Chinese Americans are not confined by the cultural boundaries predetermined by their ethnicity. For instance, most Chinese people wear modern clothing, so it is uncommon to see Qipao unless it is a special occasion. Also, many young people in China celebrate western holidays such as Halloween and Christmas. Likewise, Chinese Americans who call the land of the free their new home have adapted their cultural traditions based on their resources and experiences. Cultural adaptations have not been represented in any of the reviewed picturebooks.

Most importantly, the majority of the picturebooks overly rely on the character's ethnicity as the basis of the plot, highlighting culturally unique celebrations and challenges. Roberts et al. (2005) recommended portraying American Indians with more everyday roles in picturebooks. Along the same lines, we urge picturebook artists to represent the full spectrum of the lived experiences of Chinese people and Chinese Americans by creating more picturebooks that show the characters engaging in everyday activities just like other people. *Nine Months* (Paul, 2019) is a powerful example where a Chinese family excitedly waited for the arrival of a new baby.

### Conclusion

Although the sample size is small, the findings from this study provide insights into how Chinese people and Chinese Americans and their cultures are visually represented in contemporary picturebooks. The critical visual literacy lens is a valuable framework to help us examine the power relations embedded in the sociocultural context and to enable us to identify future directions. Picturebooks are widely used in classrooms, and young children draw meaning primarily from illustrations. Understanding the importance of representing a diversified and pluralistic culture helps rupture prejudices and stereotypes. In the long

run, it leads to a deeper appreciation of how different ethnic groups contribute to our diverse society. We hope the study's findings can be beneficial to those interested in picturebooks, particularly classroom teachers, to be more critical when selecting picturebooks that represent diverse ethnic groups and their cultures.

## References

- American Immigrant Council. (2021). Immigrants in the United States. <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/immigrants-in-the-united-states>
- Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI). (2021, October 27). Stop AAPI Hate national report. <https://stopaapihate.org/stop-aapi-hate-national-report-2/>
- Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association. (2021). Literature awards. Retrieved from <https://www.apalaweb.org/awards/literature-awards/>
- Avgerinou, M. D. (2001). Towards a visual literacy index. In R.E. Griffin, V.S. Williams, & L. Jung (Eds.) *Exploring the visual future: Art design, science & technology* (pp. 17-26). IVLA.
- Bishop, R. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. Ohio State University. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 6(3).
- Boyd, F. B., Causey, L. L., & Galda, L. (2014). Culturally diverse literature. *The Reading Teacher*, 68(5), 378-387. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1326>
- Braden, E. G., & Rodriguez, S. C. (2016). Beyond mirrors and windows: A critical content analysis of Latinx children's books. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, 12(2), 56-83.
- Cai, M. (1994). Images of Chinese and Chinese Americans mirrored in picture books. *Children's Literature in Education*, 25(3), 169-191.
- California Department of Education. (2021). Literary genres. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/rl/litrlgenres.asp>
- Cha, F. (2009) Growing up in the margins: Asian American children in the literature of the New South. *Southern Quarterly*, 46(3), 128-144.
- Chesner, G. (2019). Engaging with endpapers: A visual literacy experience upon opening a picturebook. In D. M. Baylen (Ed.), *Dreams and inspirations: The book of selected readings 2018* (pp. 13-31). Carrollton, GA: International Visual Literacy Association.
- Chung, S. K. (2013). Critical visual literacy. *The International Journal of Arts Education*, 1-21.
- CLPE (2021). *Reflecting realities: Survey of ethnic representation within U.K. children's literature 2020*. <https://clpe.org.uk/>
- Comber, B. (2015). Critical literacy and social justice. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 58, 362–367.

- Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC). (2021). CCBC diversity statistics book search. School of Education. University of Wisconsin, Madison. <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/diversity-statistics-book-search/>
- Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory method: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13, 3-21.
- Crippen, M. (2012). The value of Children's Literature. *Oneota Reading Journal*.  
<https://www.luther.edu/oneota-reading-journal/archive/2012/the-value-of-childrens-literature/>
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin.
- Harada, V. H. (1995). Issues of ethnicity, authenticity and quality in Asian American picture books, 1983-93. *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries*, 8(2), 135-149.
- Hsieh, I. H. (2018). Confucian principles: A study of Chinese Americans' interpersonal relationships in selected children's picturebooks. *Children's Literature in Education*, 49, 216–231.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-016-9289-z>
- Janks, H. (2014) Critical literacy's ongoing importance for education. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 57, 349–356.
- Jans-Thomas, S. (2013) More than chopsticks and fried rice: Aspects of the Asian American experience in children's and young adult literature. NAAAS Conference Proceedings, Scarborough, 381-391.
- Kalisa, B. G. (1990). Africa in picture books: Portrait or preconception. *School Library Journal*, 36(2), 36-37.
- Kim, H. Y., & Serrano, A. (2017). Enhancing critical visual literacy through illustrations in a Picturebook. *WOW Stories*, V(3), 13-27. Opportunities for Inquiry. <https://wowlit.org/wp-content/media/WOW-Stories-V5-I3-Kim-and-Serrano-Article.pdf>
- Lowery, R. M. (2000). *Immigrants in children's literature*. Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers.
- Mead, W. R. (2020, February 3). *China is the real sick man of Asia*. Wall Street Journal Opinion. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-is-the-real-sick-man-of-asia-11580773677>
- Naidoo, J. C. (2008). Opening doors: Visual and textual analyses of diverse Latino subcultures in America's Picture books. *Children and Libraries*, 27-35.
- Nikolajeva, M. (2012). Reading other people's minds through word and image. *Children's Literature in Education*, 43, 273–291.
- Nikolajeva, M. (2013). Picturebooks and emotional literacy. *The Reading Teacher*, 67(4), 249–254.
- Painter, C., Martin, J. R., & Unsworth, L. (2014). *Reading Visual Narrative: Image analysis of children's picture books*. Equinox Publishing.

- Pang, V. O., Colvin, C., Tran, M., & Barba, R. H. (1992). Beyond chopsticks and dragons: selecting Asian-American literature for children. *The Reading Teacher*, 46(3), 216-224.
- Pantaleo, S., & Walker, G. (2017). Exploring the artwork in Peter Brown's Mr. Tiger Goes Wild. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 43(1), 38-47.
- Papen, U. (2020). Using picture books to develop critical visual literacy in primary schools: Challenges of a dialogic approach. *Literacy*, 54(1), 3-10.
- Roberts, L. C., Dean, E., & Holland M. (2005). Contemporary American Indian cultures in children's picture books. *Beyond the Journal: Young Children on the Web*. 1-6.  
[https://nevt.org/devyk\\_ko.pdf](https://nevt.org/devyk_ko.pdf)
- Rodriguez, N. N. (2018). Avoiding the single story. *Literacy Today*, 32-33.
- Santos Costa, G., & Xavier, A. C. (2016). Critical visual literacy: the new phase of applied linguistics in the era of mobile technology. In A. Pareja-Lora, C. Calle-Martínez, & P. Rodríguez-Arancón (Eds.), *New perspectives on teaching and working with languages in the digital era* (pp. 201-212). Dublin: Research-publishing.net. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.tislid2014.434>
- Serafini, F. (2010). Reading multimodal texts: Perceptual, structural, and ideological perspectives. *Children's Literature in Education*, 41, 85-104.
- Serafini, F. (2014). *Reading the visual: An introduction to teaching multimodal literacy*. Teachers College Press.
- Short, K. G., & Fox, D.L. (2003). The complexity of cultural authenticity in children's literature: Why the debates really matter. In D.L. Fox and K.G. Short (Eds.), *Stories Matter: The Complexity of Cultural Authenticity in Children's Literature* (pp. 3–23). National Council of Teachers of English.
- Sick man of Asia. (2021, December 2). In *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sick\\_man\\_of\\_Asia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sick_man_of_Asia)
- Sipe, L. (1998). How picturebooks work: A semiotically framed theory of text-picture relationship. *Children's Literature in Education*, 29(2), 97-108.
- The Associated Press. (2021, October 14). More than 9,000 anti-Asian incidents have been reported since the pandemic began. <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/12/1027236499/anti-asian-hate-crimes-assaults-pandemic-incidents-aapi>
- The U.S. Census Bureau. (2020). The American community survey. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=DP05#>
- Valtman, E. S. (1966). The New Religion. China, 1966. [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016687290/>.
- Wee, S., Park, S., & Choi, J. (2015). Korean culture as portrayed in young children's picture books: The pursuit of cultural authenticity. *Children's Literature in Education*, 46, 70–87. DOI 10.1007/s10583-014-9224-0

Yokota, J. (1993). Issues in selecting multicultural children's literature. *Language Arts*, 70, 156–167.

#### Picturebooks Reviewed:

- Blackburn, L. (2021). *I dream of Popo* (J. Kuo, Illus.). New York: Roaring Brook Press.
- Ho, J. (2021). *Eyes that kiss in the corners* (D. Ho, Illus.). New York: Harper Collins.
- Levine, E. (1995). *I hate English* (S. Bjorkman, Illus.). Scholastic.
- Lin, G. (2018). *A big mooncake for little star*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.
- Loh-Hagan, V. (2017). *Popo's lucky Chinese New Year* (R. Benoit, Illus.). Sleeping Bear Press.
- Oelschlager, V. (2008). *Made in China: A story of adoption* (K. Blackwood, Illus.). Vanita Books.
- Paul, M. (2019). *Nine months: Before a baby is born* (J. Chin, Illus.). Neal Porter Books.
- Robeson, T. (2019). *Queen of physics: How Wu Chien Shiung helped unlock the secrets of the atom* (R. Huang, Illus.). Sterling Children's Books.
- Subisak, T. (2021). *Jenny Mei is sad*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.
- Yu, L. Q. (2013). *A new year's reunion: A Chinese story* (C. L. Zhu, Illus.). Candlewick.

#### APA citation format (7<sup>th</sup> edition) for this publication:

Chen, X (2022). A critical visual analysis of Chinese and Chinese American representations in picturebooks. In J. Lee, S. Beene, X. Chen, W. Huang, L. Okan, and F. Rodrigues (Eds.), *Seeing across disciplines: The book of selected readings 2022* (pp. 79-91). International Visual Literacy Association. <https://doi.org/10.52917/ivlatbsr.2022.016>