

Comparative
Perspectives on
Children's Picture Books
and their Significance
as Cultural Artefacts

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By

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PREFACE

This book is a culmination of many years of teaching and researching in the early childhood education sector. Early work experiences included working as a teacher/director in preschools and community child care centres. These positions made me aware of how uneven the provision of early childhood education and care was in Australia and I developed an interest in Children's Rights. In the early 1990s I became a founding member of *Defence for Children International (DCI) Australia*. This was a children's rights organisation aligned with the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROc)*. I also became a validator with the *National Childcare Accreditation Council*. Advocating for our youngest children in care became a strong interest and my doctorate was a language study of infants in long-day-care. When I went into academia I continued to lobby for better qualifications for early childhood staff, quality programs and an emphasis on the arts in early childhood training as a way of giving children a voice. Opportunities to study centres overseas led to repeated visits to Reggio Emilia in Italy and to Chinese centres, mainly in Beijing. These interests and experiences were a motivation for this book.

Picture books have developed over the years and many are works of literature and art that will have intergenerational value. As they have become a global phenomenon it is not surprising that there is an enormous amount of research on children's picture books. This book is grounded in this research and offers a view of the picture book as a significant artefact in the growth of intercultural awareness. Chapters in the book are themed to report on social and state institutions, family, libraries, policies and the artists, translators and booksellers who make the interchange possible. Some books are explored across a number of chapters to emphasise the storytelling, artistic preparation and important themes they represent. The choice of Australia and China is explained in the introductory chapter.

Of especial value to the exercise of preparing this book has been the opportunity to collaborate with two Chinese academics with a scholarly interest in early childhood education. I do not speak Chinese and as I started to prepare the outline for the book I realised that, even though this book has been written for an English-speaking audience, a knowledge of the Chinese language and a lived experience of Chinese early childhood culture was necessary. As co-authors Drs Longyi and Fan Xin have been tremendous to work with and have added insights into the Chinese early childhood picture book scene that would not have occurred to an outsider.

—Berenice Nyland

CHAPTER 1

CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS AS CULTURAL ARTEFACTS: AUSTRALIA AND CHINA— AN INTRODUCTION

Abstract

This book is a comparative study of children's picture books as cultural artefacts. Books shared across the Australian and Chinese early childhood environment have been the focus of this qualitative enquiry. As an introduction to the investigation this chapter justifies another look at children's picture books as the perspective taken has social and political dimensions not usually found in studies of young children's literature. The chapter outlines the purpose of the study explains why comparative views are valuable and addresses the question, why choose Australian and Chinese children's literature?

Purpose and aim

This book explores the history and use of young children's picture books in Australia and China. Literature, literacy and an enthusiasm for reading are essential elements of early childhood education in the 21st century. The role of the picture book has been heavily researched in recent years as the position of the picture book in supporting language growth, symbol use, imaginative and critical thinking and providing a guide to personal and national identity are recognised as important aspects of early childhood experience. The book describes how ideas presented in visual and written form in picture books are social and cultural artefacts, or tools, that assist

children to become enculturated through shared use with other members of the culture. How children make sense and create meanings about their world, through experience is an important part of how society develops. This study is comparative as children's picture books in two different contexts are explored, Australia and China. With some exceptions all books discussed are available in Australia and China in both English and Chinese. Some international classics have been included that are popular in both countries but most of the books discussed are authored or illustrated by Australian or Chinese writers and artists. Some books reappear across the chapters of the book as they are presented as examples of different types of experience. This provides in depth discussion of some of the texts that are considered significant specimens of children's literature in each country.

In many countries throughout the 20th century and early decades of the 21st century, children's picture books grew in number and became increasingly accessible to families and children's education settings. It is argued that these books reflect cultural mores and changes in perceptions of early childhood and provide a lens to how a society expresses its social image of children and childhood. The study explores the potential for the sharing of quality literature across languages and borders in relation to intercultural exchange. The possibilities of picture books as mediating artefacts that can help develop new meanings and attitudes is considered through the frame of activity theory (Hashim and Jones, 2007) which is a significant element of the socio/cultural approach adopted for this study (Vygotsky, 1978). Sharing children's literature across borders is a form of information exchange that has validity as text moves from one culture to another, albeit altered in translation and transition and is part of the process of global knowledge sharing. A second element that supports a study of cultural exchange through children's picture books is that the development of early childhood education across the globe is a relatively recent phenomena and shares a number of underlying cross-national concepts as well as significant variations at the local level (Kammerman, 2006).

Both Australia and China have a commitment to early childhood education and an appreciation of the early years as foundational. Within this context the picture book as a children's literary artefact has developed. Since 1978 translations of popular Western children's picture books have been

available in China, in recent years outselling local literature (Springen, 2018). This domination is a concern for the Chinese government which supports universal early childhood provision, is open to cross-border ideas on quality and practice but is also committed to cultural sustainability. In Australia 5.5% of the population identify as having Chinese heritage. This group is extremely diverse and many welcome the increasing supply of quality bilingual picture books in Chinese and English.

Like China, Australia has introduced national curriculum and regulatory reforms and is increasing universal preschool education access for three and four-year-old children. As a largely settler /colonial and migrant population Australia has drawn on local writers and illustrators as well as those from the United Kingdom, North America and New Zealand for the picture book market. This has meant that Western literature has had a dominant place in the Australian market. Australian authors and artists are increasingly entering this space including works from First Nations Australians.

Individual and national relationships with literature are complex and involve family, taste and tradition, educational policies in specific contexts, the potential of literature to influence future growth as well as having a powerful space in the consumer market. Research on picture books has experienced huge growth in recent years. This book draws on this literature, introduces many examples of shared literature across Australia and China and uses a comparative framework and socio/cultural approach (Vygotsky, 1978) to explore the value of cross border exchange.

The comparing of the use of picture books is a specific inquiry involving a number of players. Picture books play a seminal role in character development and attitudes while also representing wider views on what is suitable literature for young children.

At the same time sharing of children's picture books between China and Australia is not an equitable one at present. Many Western books are available in China, in translation (Springen, 2018), but less original Chinese picture books have appeared on the Australian market. This trade imbalance is a concern as an aim of early childhood education is to provide opportunities for children to learn about and respect diversity. The

Australian national early childhood curriculum states that children should have the opportunity to “learn about similarities and differences and about their interdependence and citizenship (AGDE, 2022, p. 16). Such insights may be enhanced if children are introduced to images of children in other societies. These images are more valuable if they are a product of the society and not an image developed from within the Australian diaspora. For example, Springen suggests that an Australian citizen who speaks Chinese would not necessarily have sufficient experience to be an effective voice in expressing life in the China of today. All stories are valuable but among the mix there needs to be Chinese voices telling stories that represent the present. Children’s picture books portray humour, social relationships, adventures and magic and require sophistication for these carefully, crafted, illustrated books to become high quality examples of both Chinese and Australian outputs. Equal sharing of quality children’s literature encourages reciprocal and respectful knowledge of each other.

Yang (2000) discusses Goethe’s ideas in relation to comparative approaches to literature that is relevant to the arguments offered in this book on the value of cross-cultural exchange. Goethe termed the phrase ‘World Literature’ as literature that had the capacity to serve a social purpose and “embodies a general significance” (p. 103). At the same time, he considered it important for nations to maintain their own characteristics and be aware of their own historical traditions.

The theoretical view of language, literature and culture adopted in this study is a socio/cultural approach (Vygotsky, 1978). Of significance is the idea of culture as dynamic. Vygotsky’s concept of culture as forceful is explored by gathering data from historical studies, research literature on different aspects of the picture book, literature including types of stories, analysis of intertextuality, design and format, what gets lost, or gained in translation, librarian voices as arbiters of educational value and parents who remember their own childhood of picture books who are now consumers for their own children. Rublik (2017, p. 334) says:

the notion of culture as a fluid, dynamic experience where individuals are viewed as living culturally as opposed to belonging to one, static culture is monumental.

It is this view of culture as dynamic that is important when comparing phenomena across different languages, cultures, generations and political settings. Exposure to diverse cultural artefacts can help children to better understand themselves and to downplay stereotypical opinions of others. In this study the picture book is examined as a source of cultural mediation that has been experienced across generations and remembered in different ways, it is a powerful artefact (Nodelman, 2010). Beliefs about children and childhoods play a role in present and historical educational practice and influences government policies and actions. The value of reciprocal exchange of ideas contained in cross-cultural literature is one way that children can explore new concepts across different contexts and transfer these concepts into thinking about other lives and worlds.

Value of comparison

Comparative research looks for similarities and differences between a chosen phenomenon. As a cultural artefact the picture book can be examined in a socio/cultural/historical/political context (Vygotsky, 1978) that can expand understanding of attitudes towards young children and extend the social image of children across different settings. The picture book itself is an example of a physical and psychological tool that has the capacity to bring about changes in human activity. Today we are moving from an era of globalisation that also emphasised local knowledge (Li, 2009). The challenge of a multipolar world brings with it the suggestion that the value and emphasis on cultural artefacts may have an enhanced role to play in a world where political and economic relationships are changing.

An Australian example is an ever-stronger tie to America in foreign affairs and at the same time, a growing early childhood attention to First Nations Australian stories is occurring. This part of the Australian population are the Indigenous occupants who were in the country before colonial settlement and are now referred to as First Nations or First Australians. Through curriculum reform and increasing numbers of First Nations resources, such as picture books for the young, there is a growing acknowledgement of First Nations culture and language. There is also an acknowledgement by government that much of the literature available in Australia is monocultural and this is problematic as we are a multicultural society

(Victorian Government, 2023). In China there has been an awareness that foreign picture books have had a strong share in the Chinese children's book market in the 21st century and this has compelled Chinese writers and artists to try to provide more Chinese children's books with a distinct cultural style (Tan, 2013). It has also led to increased comparative studies about books in translation (Oittinen, 2017).

Comparative studies are useful for policy and resourcing decisions made by parents and educators about the benefits of quality picture books for children, the elements of quality and whether translation influences epistemological messages. These decisions are made in an international context. An aim of early childhood education and care is social and cultural transmission and preparing young children as learners. As artefacts the picture book provides insights into the society that produced them as well as a guide for the child as cultural novice.

Why Australia and China

China and Australia have been chosen as comparators as the two countries are major trading partners and share a geographical place in the world, both being part of Asia, have a long history of association and a significant percentage of the Australian population identify as having Chinese heritage. There are historical trends on the growth of early childhood education and care and provision of children's literature on a mass scale that have comparable timelines. Picture books can represent different historical times and ideologies so the question of how these histories and ideologies have been represented provides an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the aspirations of each country for the younger generation. The history of China and Australia are incredibly dissimilar.

Comparative studies are designed to examine differences and similarities of perspective in different social contexts. Australia is an English-speaking country that embraces a Western form of individualism (Grossman and Santos, 2020) while being physically situated in Asia. China has a different political system and is guided by a collectivist morality (Yang et al, 2024). Ties between the two countries are robust as many Australians have a Chinese heritage, some going back to the gold rushes of the 1850s and today

the international student cohort in Australia is dominated by students from Asia. The two countries have a strong research relationship and the world of early childhood is an important one to share where images of children in society is of growing significance as societies require citizens with high levels of human capital (Fernandes, 2024). Picture books have been chosen as the central emphasis of the comparison as picture books represent an expression of culture and changing needs of a society. Belcher (2018) suggests that “changes in the foundational patterns of life can be seen through the pages of a picture book” (p. 29) and sees them “as narrative vehicles that represent change in culture, and form a particular kind of literary history” (p.30).

Before the country that goes by the name Australia existed there was the Aboriginal population with the longest, continuous culture on the planet. Then there was a British colony, gold rushes that brought people from around the world followed by a federation with a constitution developed under the influence of the British. In the 20th century Australia had an apartheid policy directed towards migrants and First Nations Australians. It suffered two world wars and the great depression. After the second-world-war the country moved closer to the influence of the American empire. Immigration became a major population trend. The British and American empires had an effect on the books offered to young children in the second half of the 20th century and American early childhood literature still has a dominant market share. Although there is a discrete catalogue of Australian children's literature (O'Connor, 2009), as a largely settler/colonial population even the home-grown variety of early books for children represented the culture of Western English-speaking countries.

China has a sprawling history that stretches across millennia. It has a recorded history of 5000 years and is therefore considered one of the oldest civilisations in the world. In the world of today there are shared ambitions and one area where there is an overlap is the realisation of the value of children's literature. Chinese literature for 'ordinary' children appeared in the early part of the 20th century when stories written in the vernacular for children and comic books were available to cater for low literacy levels in the general population (Farquar, 1999). These changes were introduced as there was a growing realisation of the importance of education for the very

young (Vong, 2008). This was a century where China experienced the end of a dynasty, invasion, civil war, world war and revolution.

China has a long literary history and some of this history has been widely distributed. In the first half of the 20th century children's stories in China were sourced both locally and from Western countries. Much later after the opening up of the Chinese economy in 1978 translated picture books became increasingly popular. One export from China that has been very successful is the 16th century, '*Journey to the West* (Wu Cheng'en, 1592) which includes the character of the Monkey King. It has been suggested that the Monkey king is the most popular super hero in the world (Trapp, 2016). Released as a television series in 1978, by Nippon TV and International Television Films, Monkey gained cult status in the UK, USA, Australia and New Zealand. Children's picture books of Monkey appeared in English from the Chinese Foreign Languages Press in the 1980s to take advantage of this phenomenal interest. As recently as 2017 New South Wales Books released a version of the Monkey stories titled: *The Monkey King: a classic Chinese tale for children*.

Children's literature in Australia and China played a role in helping define and sustain cultural values and attitudes across political and historical times. The comparison between Australia and China becomes more complex with globalisation when many classic children's works became accessible around the world. One such story was the American classic, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, which has been translated into at least 66 languages. As a push for a multipolar world is growing there is value in examining children's picture books as an historical and cultural artefact that can help explain similarities and differences about perceptions of young children and choices about the books and ideas children are exposed to. How these books are altered through translation is also a consideration. As children's picture books become more visible and gain an esteemed place in the canon of early childhood literature there are myriad analyses about the value of these books. In this study picture books are investigated as literature and mediating cultural artefacts. The emphasis is on the potential changes that can be gained through human interaction, and tool use to mediate social understandings at the local level and across borders. The manipulation of

such mediation through government, popular culture and the media, both legacy and social, is also a consideration.

Picture books as cultural artefacts

The choice to focus on picture books as cultural artefacts was determined as the rise of the picture book in both Australia and China has been accompanied by a changing view of childhood with the early childhood years being increasingly recognised as a significant period of human development (Farquar, 1999; Cole & Cole, 1993). As the economic foundations of a country change policies aimed at the development of a society reflect different needs and opportunities are advanced. The picture book is a tool for learning and the design, structure and content of picture books reflect ideas of citizenship, skills and childhood itself within the wider society. Unlike many cultural artefacts children's picture books reflect changes in society while maintaining a central core. In a study of the history of Western picture books Christensen (2010, p. 55) discusses three types of books:

... one based on a Christian paradigm, one based on Enlightenment philosophy, and one based in a modern secularized view of the world. The common denominator of the books is an intent to discuss human nature in relation to classical and Christian ideas of vice and virtue ... they all address a human being with an urge to make sense of the world.

In China debates around children's picture books in the first half of the 20th century grew out of the May 4th movement. The May 4th Movement in 1919 emerged as a response to the perceived unfair treatment of China at the Treaty of Versailles following World War I, particularly the transfer of German-controlled territories in China to Japan rather than returning them to Chinese control. Young students led protests advocating for governmental reform, national independence, and the modernization of Chinese society and culture. The movement had profound effects on the development of Chinese politics, literature, and thought throughout the 20th century. The debates about children's literature had previously consisted of deliberations of the Confucian texts, mainly, *The Three Character Classic*, written in classical language. The homegrown literature that emerged from the May

4th movement, written in the vernacular, was designed to enlighten children's minds and encourage imagination (Farquar, 1999). Teskar et al (2019) identify stages of Chinese children's literature and divide these into "the Confucian child, the Modern child and the Maoist child" (p. 381). They do not cover the post-Mao child, though studies are emerging to address this gap (e.g., Li, 2009; Tan, 2012) as picture book research explores changes during the years of globalisation and the impact of a growing multipolar world (Peters, 2022). These changes have an impact on the image, philosophy and principles of childhood expressed in recent literature.

The question of ideology has become an important element of the picture book as a cultural artefact discussed in recent years. Belcher (2018, p. 30) starts an article on picture books as culture with the statement, "Picture books are not neutral. They display the life of humans and how they live in the world". Belcher gives examples of stories told, how they are represented and how perspective can change across time within the one story, even by the same author. The first example Belcher provides is the popular children's book *A Walk in the Park* by Anthony Browne, published in 1977. Anthony Browne is an award-winning British author who was Children's Laureate from 2009-2011. In 1998 Browne published another book called *Voices in the Park*. Both are available in Chinese. The same characters are present in the two versions of the book but in 1998 the characters were drawn as gorillas and where the story was descriptive in the first book each character in the 1998 account has a distinct voice. Multiple points of view are a common feature in postmodern narratives and this second variation of the trip to the park moves into postmodern territory. The multiple voices in the 1998 story emphasise personal social issues as a prominent element. In 1977 there was a message about the English class structure, not a surprising insight from an English publication of the era but by 1998 Belcher suggests the new story represents "[T]he distrust, disillusionment, and fear of others in the postmodern age" (p.32). Belcher makes the statement that "[C]hildren discover what they do and do not wish to be like in stories" (p. 34). She says: "Change the story and change the world" (p.38).

Browne has used the pastiche of the picture book of text and images to play with meanings in *Voices in the Park*. It is more complex than the previous book *A Walk in the Park* and there are unsettling features. The statement

about changing the story and changing the world is a radical declaration that can be challenged in the context of children's books as possibly an epistemically misleading statement. The implications of postmodernism being used to change codes in picture books, however, is an example of children's picture books not remaining static and reflecting debates about society and culture that are being experienced in the present.

Belcher has said children will discover what they want in picture books and individual children bring their own interpretations and knowledge of life to the experience. The discoveries children make within a story are a combination of the story itself and what the child brings. This is evidenced in the following observation. A librarian was reading *The Little Red Hen* to a group of four-year-old children. The message seems clear in this age-old story, the lazy friends did not deserve to share in the fruits of the little red hen's labours. The librarian asked the children what the story was about and one child offered, "the little red hen was a greedy pig". This story is an American fable first published in the 19th century. The child who missed the moral about hard work and personal initiative was not alone as the story has been used to criticise capitalism as well as being seen as a text that supports capitalism and Christian values. There are various editions of *The Little Red Hen* available in Chinese.

Power of picture books as shared experience that can influence social change

Using international books for children is important as they are a source of precarious experience into the lives of others. Children can learn about their world and through cross-cultural and multicultural literature learn about others. Considering the significance of intercultural knowledge, the famous adage that books for children should be mirrors and windows is an effective saying (Bishop, 1990). Books for children should be mirrors where they can see their own, or similar experiences reflected. Windows represent places where new worlds can be unfolded to their imaginations. As Bishop said:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of

whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (p, ix)

China is the fastest growing children's market in the world and many books available for children in China have been translated from English and other languages. As this market grows there are two trends that may influence the literature available for young children in China and Australia. One is that the Chinese government and major publishing companies have an aim to improve the popularity, quality and quantity of local Chinese titles for young children. The other is that Australia has produced some outstanding children's authors. This has created a vibrant Australian children's market with many popular titles available in the Chinese market (Smith, 2020). Australian booksellers hope the numbers of translated children's books will increase as more books enter the international market. At the same time as the local Chinese content in the children's book market increases there is an opportunity for Australian children to enjoy a wider array of narrative styles and aesthetic expression. At the present Chinese books available in Australia are mainly presented in three versions, English translation, simplified Chinese and bilingual form with both English and Chinese text. Many of these bilingual books are marketed at Chinese/Australian families or those attending centres where languages other than English are taught. Some of these books, like Li Jian's popular Zodiac series, have been deliberately developed to retell Chinese tales to an overseas audience (Mandarinhomeschool, 2021).

Another way that the mirror/window metaphor can work is through picture books changing to reflect shifting social values. A popular topic of comparative research on content of children's picture books has been on gender messages in the books and the negative impact gender stereotyping can produce. Two examples are Li, Terras and Li (2023) who studied gender representation in picture books in the UK and China and Adam and Harper (2021) who examined the issue of gender equity in the role of parents depicted in children's picture books in the USA and Australia. Li et al

focused on the child showing that picture books still overwhelmingly supported gender stereotypes though the UK books indicated more diversity and gender equality for measures like authorship, main characters and the story content. The researchers did not recommend censorship of books containing stereotypes and acknowledged many of the books in their study were quality literature and could have a progressive impact if educators could explore these books with children while encouraging a critical lens. Adam and Harper reported that in the books they researched the prevailing characterisation of parent roles in both the USA and Australia was stereotypical.

The Research

This study is a comparative one. Comparative inquiry can be a methodology and this project is a comparison of the phenomenon of children's picture books and their use. Picture books as cultural artefact, as a language for children and a means of social mediation is a theoretical frame utilised here within a socio/cultural/historical context. The ontological perspective is a constructivist one, albeit a Vygotskian one where social reality is co-constructed through interactions with others and the sharing of physical and psychological tools of the society. The epistemology is interpretivism. Within the interpretivist approach the study of children's books and the act of sharing the books within particular contexts and relationships is analysed using activity theory (Hashim and Jones, 2007). Data has been collected using a variety of approaches within the constructivist paradigm with the books, or texts, themselves being a primary source of information, so the focus has been on particular children's picture books and how they are shared within a context. Digital media is included with a discussion of films, video story-telling and parents' and children's use of the media. Different aspects of the use of picture books have been investigated. Historical and political background are important.

The research literature is rich. Discussions include the library, the preschool, parents, and booksellers as well as thoughts on the changes in the intertextual nature of the picture book. The books or at least the stories, discussed or mentioned, are familiar to audiences in both English and Chinese. A range of techniques has been employed including an analysis of

the research literature, literary examination of a sample of the books referred to as well as details of libraries, parents and the child audience. The findings are viewed through the lens of activity theory with the books considered mediating artefacts. The books are both physical and psychological tools with the capacity to focus and influence children's and adults' thoughts and actions. Interactions between members of a culture, shared tools and a growing social awareness helps children make meaning and sense of their world which in turn will provide direction for problem solving and direct action.

Summary

This book is based on an understanding of the value of intercultural exchange in the early years and the significance of social interaction and tool use in mediating the child into the culture. An aim of the study is to ascertain the extent that early childhood literature from both Australia and China is available in each country and how the use of multicultural picture books is promoted. The literary quality of the books is important when Goethe's idea of world literature is considered, that is, a literature that has appeal generally to a child audience while maintaining historical traditions and cultural characteristics of the source country.

Australia is a multicultural country. The value of a powerful artefact like picture books can be found in books that reflect meanings and contain knowledge and experience designed for young children. Through interacting with picture books children have the opportunity to consider their own identity, appreciate difference, recognise universal characteristics and learn to challenge prejudice in co-construction of meaning through sharing the stories with other members of the culture. There is the reported trend that the flow of children's literature is uneven and Australia exports more children's books to China than it imports books from non-English speaking countries, including China. One objective of the study is to explore this uneven exchange and investigate how this might change.

China is a vast country with 56 ethnic groups and has undergone radical economic and social reform in recent decades. Globalisation of early childhood care and pedagogical ideas have been prevalent in China as the

early childhood education and care field has expanded. At the same time there is a tension between some of the 'new' global ideas and a struggle to acknowledge the importance of cultural values and practice (Yang and Li, 2019). This strain is reflected in the government's emphasis on producing more local literary content for young children. While we live in a globalised interconnected world and intercultural learning can make a significant difference to attitudes there is also the necessity to maintain local character and a memory of history (Yang, 2000). This was a point that Yang took from Goethe when discussing the importance of comparative studies. The theoretical framework for this study is a Vygotskian one that acknowledges the dynamics of culture and this has implications for China continuing to build a society with Chinese characteristics and Australia developing a more cohesive national identity.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

Abstract

The growth of children's literature from the early 20th century to the present is discussed in relation to types of books promoted at different historical times. Economic and social conditions have changed, picture books have become an expression of visual and formal literacy as well as reflections of a wider social view of children and childhoods. Shared children's literature from Europe, in both China and Australia, in the early part of the 20th century gives a window into ideas about children and how ideas present in different contexts. Increasing home-grown literature for young children across the century reflects the child's place in society. In the present the availability of books from around the world introduces discussions in both countries about quality of children's literature, ideology, cultural sustainability and the role of the market.

Introduction

This chapter examines the growth of children's literature, with the focus on picture books, across China and Australia. History and historical events were very different in the two countries for most of the 20th century, with increased border crossing of children's literature occurring from the 1990s. The changes that occurred are described separately with comparative ideas being highlighted in the discussion section. An important change that occurred in both countries was the changing concept of the nature of childhood. By the 1870s, in pre-federation Australia, most of the colonies had introduced compulsory education acts. Farquar (2015), in a history of children's literature in China, considered that by the 1920s children were

“increasingly treated as complex and crucial components of Chinese social organisation” (p. 33). In the 20th century children in Australia were growing up in the new federation of the previous colonies and child psychologists and educationalists promoted scientific child rearing practices that would lead to nation building. There was an increased interest in child health and early education. Children generally were becoming more visible and being seen as part of the future. Given the different experiences and histories in the two countries in the 20th century a brief history of each is described.

Australia

In 1871 two brothers, William and Samuel Calvert (O’Connor, 2009) from England established a printing company in Melbourne and started printing books for children. Early books tended to be didactic and *The Young Australian’s Alphabet* was the first book printed. Each letter of the alphabet was accompanied by a word starting with the letter. The word was described using little ditties to emphasise the letter in the cardinal position and the word was chosen to link back to something that could be associated with Australia. The first was a nationalistic A for Australia. The ditty contained the words:

A for AUSTRALIA
Which I am told,
Is famous for Corn,
For Wool and for Gold” (Cited in O’Connor, 2009, p. 11).

Other letters celebrated bush birds and animals but also denigrated First Nations Australians. The rhyme for B was:

B is the BLACK-FELLOW
We can all see,
Lazily sleeping
Under a tree (Cited in O’Connor, 2009, p. 11).

The education acts of the 1870s (Campbell. 2014) meant that levels of literacy were growing and there was a growing demand for books. Into the new century O’Connor cites another alphabet book that rejoiced in Australia

as a 'new' country but also with pride that it was part of the empire and would fight for the King of England.

D is for Duty, to which we should cling,
Soldiers do their duty, fighting for their King,
But the duty of good children is quite another thing,
They should listen to their parents and do as they are told.
That everyone may love them, when they are growing old (Cited in
O'Connor, 2009 p. 19).

Other ABC books followed. By 1942 some of these books were beginning to take on a distinctive edge. The Australian social realist artist Hal Missingham produced an *Australian Alphabet* book. The illustrations were striking. Like Eric Carle and Marcus Pfister, famous for the international best sellers, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and *The Rainbow Fish* (see chapter 7), Missingham had a background in graphic design. He believed in craftsmanship and that skilled artwork would refine the message (Badham, 1949). The Missingham alphabet book contained striking illustrations of Australian creatures and information about their habitats (O'Connor, 2009 pp. 23-25). Other alphabet books followed and were becoming more imaginative with Graeme Base taking illustrations to a new level with *Animalia* in 1986. Graeme Base is a popular author in both China and Australia. One other alphabet book that needs to be mentioned as part of changing trends is *A is for Aunty* (Russell, 2000). First Nations Australian and artist Elaine Russell wrote and illustrated this alphabet book to bring back a picture of living on a mission in Northern NSW in the 1940s and 50s. The book won an honours title and was shortlisted in 2001 for the Australian Picture Book Award. The illustrations in this book are acrylic and gouache done in a naïve style. Topography is an important element that Russell has included in the illustrations that give a sense of place. An aesthetic atmospheric book that reflects an important aspect of Australian history often not found in children's picture books, especially alphabet books.

As the century progressed there were new trends in the books being offered to children in Australia. Early books written before the first world war for children were often targeted to children of primary age. Goblins, fairies and anthropomorphism abounded. Harold Gaze and his *Mite Merry* series were

beautifully illustrated and Harold Gaze also wrote the rhyming stories to this series. The *Mite Merry* books appeared in 1919. Fairies remained popular and there were many authors working in this genre. The taste for fairy books was strong even after the second world war with the publishing of books like *Peg's Fairy Book* (Peg Maltby, 1944) and the fairy stories of Pixie O'Harris. O'Harris said she was influenced by the work of Arthur Rackham who was a well-known English artist whose illustrations appeared in many children's classics, for example, *Grimms' Fairy Tales*. Books published in Great Britain were common in Australia but, like the Australian fairy tales, most of these were not written for very young children. Stories were too long and many writers wrote in rhyme. Other writers were looking for an Australian literature.

In 1918 May Gibbs had produced *The Complete Adventures of Snugglepoot and Cuddlepoot*, a couple of little gumnut babies. Born in England May Gibbs came to Australia at the age of four and became a much-loved Australian writer. The house she lived in and her studio are heritage listed and they have become a popular museum. Gibb's stories of the gumnut babies are considered to be an Australian departure from the fairy stories of Europe. It is Gibb's imagery that seized the imagination of Australians and visions of gumnut babies, bad banksia men, Mrs Goanna and little Ragged Blossom continue to appear on a range of merchandise. There is a gumnut ABC book, a gumnut book of opposites, children's pyjamas, crockery and tea towels to name a few. *The Complete Adventures of Snugglepoot and Cuddlepoot* as a book is available in Chinese, translated by Li Yao. This book is considered a bridge between the fairytale books of England and Europe and a more antipodean approach.

Equally famous and written between the two world wars is Dorothy Wall's *Blinky Bill*. This book is an example of the popular use of anthropomorphism in children's literature. Dorothy Wall was originally from New Zealand and had a deep interest in Australia's fauna and flora. She was interested in conservation and her stories contained messages about caring for the natural world as she believed "information presented as fun would encourage informed respect for the Australian environment" (O'Connor, 2009).

What was largely missing in these early books was an attempt to represent non-Anglo-Saxon culture. The two groups that were significant in their absence were the First Nations Australians and the local Chinese population. Australian Aboriginal groups had strong oral cultures and visual representation of stories. It was in the 1970s that First Nations Australians, for example, Dick Roughsey (Gooalathaladin of the Lardil language group) produced a number of books that became part of the mainstream canon. In her anthology of Australian picture books O'Connor (2009) gives a few examples of Aboriginal picture books. O'Connor felt presumptions about cultural difference and a poor understanding of Aboriginal people only started to change in the 1970s as part of a wider international discussion on culture, oppression and racism. Today there are increasing numbers of children's picture books produced by First Nations writers and artists. A number of them are introduced in the chapters of this book. There were books before the 1970s that depicted Aboriginal children in picture books but were not written by First Nations writers. One of these books was *Piccaninny Walkabout* by Axel Poignant and illustrated with photographs he took in Arnhem land in 1952. The book won the Children's Book of the Year Award in 1958 and was reprinted many times with the name, *Bush Walkabout*, being introduced in 1972.

Looking at the book, *Bush Walkabout*, in 2024 it is difficult to place it. Conor (2012) commented that the piccaninny image was often used to impact on the popular imagination in Australia. The word is considered derogatory and probably comes from a pidgin Portuguese term. Conor says the term was used to obfuscate the dark history of colonisation and stated:

The Piccaninny type encapsulated an acquisitive impulse over colonized children that brought about their disinheritance either through their removal from their families or through the dispossession of their homelands. Within this setting, black child beauty as a commodity form for white consumption, in imagery, ceramics, fabrics and popular ephemera, acted as a fetish which disavowed the injury of these children's disinheritance and delimited their cultural presence to cute domestic and tourist bric-a-brac (p. 47).

Conor is less damning of *Bush Walkabout* than other books portrayal of the 'piccaninny' and comments that Poignant wanted to change the representation of Aboriginal children in children's literature by portraying children within