Theoretical Perspectives on Cultural Representations in Vietnamese Children's Picturebooks

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PREFACE

This book is based on Tai Huynh's PhD thesis submitted in August 2021 for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at University of Tasmania, Australia. The title of the thesis is: **"*Representations of Vietnamese Culture in Children's Picturebooks"*,** under the main supervision of Dr Vinh To and Dr Angela Thomas. The degree was granted to Tai Huynh in May 2022 on the recommendation of the examiners, Professor Louise Ravelli and Professor Quy Khuong Luu. We are grateful for the examiners' constructive and insightful feedback.

This thesis has been successfully completed based on the thesis by publication model. Many papers published from the thesis have been co-authored between the PhD Candidate and the main supervisors due to their valuable intellectual input and rigorous reviews and edits of multiple drafts. New chapters included in this book is the result of the continued collaboration between the three authors.

This book was developed for three primary reasons that are of significant importance in our world today. Firstly, it aimed to make a contribution to the Australian government's policy about Asia literacy, and the Australian Curriculum's general capability of intercultural understanding, and cross-curriculum priority of "Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia". The Australian government's policy about Asia literacy emphasizes the importance of developing intercultural understanding and appreciation for diverse cultures, including the cultural traditions of Asia. We believe that the study of Vietnamese culture, as represented in children's picturebooks, will make an effective contribution to this goal.

Secondly, this book was developed to not only promote Asia literacy, but also contribute to the preservation of Vietnamese cultural traditions. There is a large Vietnamese community in Australia and globally and children of Vietnamese immigrants and refugees would experience Vietnamese cultural and linguistic loss if they were not engaged in their heritage cultures personally, socially, and intellectually. Teaching language and culture in context is a great emphasis of innovative English teaching pedagogies. Literary contexts shown through images and illustrations in picturebooks are powerful ways to shape children's understanding and

appreciation of Vietnamese culture. Needless to say, two of the authors of this book are academics who are originally from Vietnam, and thus, we have a personal connection and a passion for exploring and sharing the Vietnamese culture to contribute to cultural heritage of Vietnamese children living overseas.

For non-Vietnamese students, an enhanced understanding of Vietnamese culture will equip them with their intercultural general capability and enable them to become global citizens in the 21st century. An understanding of Vietnamese culture will foster mutual sympathy and respect, and an appreciation of diversity and differences. Those are much needed values to build a better society with respect, equality, and love.

This book aims to provide a comprehensive study of Vietnamese culture as represented in children's picturebooks. Our focus is on examining the representation of cultural aspects and the various methods used to do so. We explore both Western and East Asian theories for interpreting visual meanings in multimodal texts and picturebooks, with a specific focus on Vietnamese culture. We also examine Vietnamese artist perspectives on representing cultural aspects in visual art and propose an East Asian framework for interpreting cultural representations through visual meanings in Vietnamese children's picturebooks. We believe that this framework can enhance cultural literacy and promote Asia literacy in young readers.

It is our hope that this book will not only contribute to the promotion of intercultural understanding and Asia literacy but will also enhance the appreciation of Vietnamese culture, thereby fostering positive intercultural communication between Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese communities, and contributing to the values of respect, equality, and love in our global society.

Tai Huynh, Vinh To and Angela Thomas

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book is structured into seven chapters that aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of cultural representations in Vietnamese children's picturebooks from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

Chapter 1. Introduction

This chapter first presents the rationale for conducting the current study of the thesis based on which this book is developed, with a focus on Australian context of educational policy on teaching and learning about Asian culture. In the time of globalisation, promoting cultural literacy has become a crucial component of education. In particular, Asia literacy has gained increasing attention due to the rising significance of Asia in global politics, economics, and cultures. Children's literature, including picturebooks, plays a significant role in developing cultural literacy among young readers. However, the representation of culture in children's literature can be complex, and it is essential to explore the various methods used to represent cultural aspects in children's literature.

Chapter 2. Western theories for exploring visual meanings in multimodal texts and children's picturebooks

To understand how cultural aspects are represented in children's picturebooks, it is essential to explore theories and frameworks for interpreting visual meanings in multimodal texts. In this chapter, we will examine various Western semiotic frameworks and explore how these can be used to interpret Vietnamese picturebooks. The original version of this chapter was published as a peer-review conference proceeding:

Huynh, N. T., Thomas, A., & To, V. (2020). *Interpreting Vietnamese Picturebooks with a Western Semiotic Framework*. In T. Le, Q. Bui, T. Mai, & N. Lam (Eds.), Proceedings of the 8th OpenTESOL International Conference 2020, Language Education for Global Competence: Finding Authentic Voices and Embracing Meaningful Practices (pp. 151-175). Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam: Open University.

Chapter 3. East Asian theories for interpreting visual meanings in Vietnamese picturebooks

In addition to Western theories, it is crucial to examine East Asian philosophical concepts as an analytical framework for interpreting non-Western images in children's picturebooks. This chapter explores how to enhance foreign language teachers' use of multicultural literature with an analytical framework namely CMAI framework for interpreting picturebooks about East Asian cultures. The original version of this chapter was published as a chapter of an edited book:

Huynh, N. T., Thomas, A., & To, V. (2020). East-Asian philosophical concepts as analytical framework for interpreting non-western images in children's picturebooks. In G. Neokleous, A. Krulatz, & R. Farrelly (Eds.), *Handbook of research on cultivating literacy in diverse and multilingual classrooms* (pp. 393-420). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.

Chapter 4. Enhancing foreign language teachers' use of multicultural literature with an analytical framework for interpreting picturebooks about East-Asian cultures

This chapter discusses the importance of teaching intercultural awareness in multilingual classrooms and the role that multicultural resources play in achieving this goal. The chapter specifically focuses on picturebooks from Vietnam and introduces an analytical framework for interpreting the cultural meaning-making opportunities found within these texts. The analytical framework presented in the chapter provides a step-by-step approach for teachers to interpret the cultural meaning-making opportunities in picturebooks. This chapter also provides examples of how this framework can be applied to specific Vietnamese picturebooks.

Chapter 5. Vietnamese artist perspectives on representing cultural aspects in visual art

In this chapter explores how Vietnamese artists view cultural aspects in visual art, with a particular focus on Yin-Yang balancing. We will examine how these perspectives can inform the representation of culture in children's picturebooks. The original version of this chapter was published as a paper on Social Semiotics.

Huynh, N. T., Thomas, A., & To, V. T. (2021). Visual meanings in Vietnamese picture books: exploring Vietnamese artists' perspectives on the Yin–Yang balancing. Social Semiotics, 1-26.

Chapter 6. Towards an East Asian approach to exploring cultural representations in children's picturebooks

This chapter proposes an East Asian framework for interpreting cultural representations through visual meanings in Vietnamese children's picturebooks. We will explore how this framework can be used to enhance cultural literacy and promote Asia literacy in young readers. The original version of this chapter was published as a chapter in the open access ebook titled: ***Systemic Functional Linguistics Theory and Application in Global Context***

Huynh, N. T., To, V., Carrington, V., & Thomas, A. (2023). An East Asian framework for interpreting cultural representations in Vietnamese children's picturebooks. *Systemic Functional Linguistics Theory and Application in Global Contexts*, 35. University of Tasmania.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

The last chapter of this book brings together all the important findings revealed in Chapter 2 to Chapter 6. It highlights the main ideas and discoveries found in those chapters. The chapter also takes a close look at how this book has contributed to the field in terms of theoretical, practical, methodological, and cultural contributions. This chapter then carefully evaluates the studies reported this book, considering their strengths and weaknesses. Based on the analysis, important ideas and directions for future research will be suggested. As the final part of the book, the chapter includes some thoughtful reflections from the authors.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, fostering intercultural understanding has become a vital component of education. This chapter introduces the underlying motives for conducting the current study, which serve as the foundation for the development of this book. The focus lies on the Australian educational policy concerning the teaching and learning of Asian culture, specifically known as Asia literacy. Within the Australian context, the importance of Asia literacy has magnified due to Asia's increasing significance in global politics, economics, and cultures. Nevertheless, researchers have highlighted concerns associated with the implementation of Asia literacy policy in Australia (Cloonan 2015; Halse 2015). Children's literature, including picturebooks, plays a pivotal role in cultivating cultural literacy among young readers. However, accurately representing culture in children's literature can be intricate, necessitating an exploration of diverse methods used to depict cultural aspects in these books (Creany, Couch, and Caropreso 1993; Harlin and Morgan 2009; Yoo-Lee et al. 2014). Consequently, this chapter will also briefly address the issues concerning representations Asian cultures in children's literature generally and specifically in Vietnamese children's literature.

1.1 Asia literacy

A significant driver of studies in this book is the implementation of Australian education policy namely *Asia literacy* in school contexts. The Melbourne Declaration stated that Asia literacy is the ability "to relate to and communicate across cultures, especially the cultures and countries of Asia" (Barr et al. 2008, 9). As societies become increasingly multicultural, it is imperative that we develop intercultural understanding to foster positive communication and mutual respect.

The growth in the economic influences of Asian countries in the context of globalisation has resulted in a growing concern for Australian policy-makers in relation to knowledge of countries of Asia (Halse 2015; Henderson 2008; Salter 2015). Asia literacy, in particular, has gained

increasing attention due to the rising significance of Asia in global politics, economics, and culture. According to Salter (2015), "since 1969, over 60 Australian government and non-government policies, documents, committees, working parties and organisations" have made attempts to address the need to better understand Asia (781). As educators and researchers, we believe that children's literature, including picturebooks, plays a crucial role in developing cultural literacy among young readers.

In the educational context, the culmination of the need for Australian citizens to understand about Asian cultures is referred as Asia literacy (Salter 2015). Implementing Asia literacy in the Australian context means to develop citizens' respect towards cultural diversity (Halse et al. 2013) and the unique aspects of Asian cultures. The position of Asia literacy policy in the Australian Curriculum is reflected in three strands of the Australian Curriculum: Asian languages, Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia, and Intercultural Understanding (Halse 2015; Kalantzis et al. 2016). In particular, the strand "Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia" requires students to develop *intercultural understanding* of the diversity of Asian cultures (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA] 2016a). In the Australian Curriculum (ACARA 2016a), intercultural understanding consists of three interrelated elements: recognizing culture and developing respect, interacting and empathizing with others, and reflecting on intercultural experiences and taking responsibility. According to the Australian Curriculum (ACARA 2016a), learners can develop intercultural understanding when they "learn to value their own cultures, languages and beliefs, and those of others" (para.1). Intercultural understanding helps students to "understand how personal, group and national identities are shaped, and the variable and changing nature of culture" (ACARA 2016a, para.1). The Australian Curriculum for English, version 8.3 (which will be referred to as "curriculum" hereafter), requires students to read, interpret, and value a wide range of texts about Asian nations. In the curriculum, multimodal texts including picturebooks are among the materials that teachers and students are recommended to work with to develop intercultural understanding about Asian cultures.

The requirement for teaching intercultural understanding in the Australian curriculum indicates that theoretical frameworks for interpreting certain Asia related texts – children's picturebooks can make a significant contribution to address the need of Australian teachers in response to one of the general aspects of Asia literacy. Such frameworks are in turn introduced in this book. For now, we will briefly discuss several problems associating with teaching Asia literacy in the Australian context.

1.2 The problems of teaching Asia Literacy
in the Australian context

Regarding the effectiveness of implementing Asia literacy in schools after two decades, Halse (2015) considered Asia literacy as a 'wicked policy problem'. In general, Asia literacy becomes a wicked policy problem when "the entanglement of different elements and conditions prevents the conditions desired by the policy being archived in practice" (Halse 2015, 25). One of the major factors is the defined 'problem' of Asia literacy policy, which is perceived as "a deficit in language skills" and can be resolved by "the injection of resources" (Halse 2015, 23). According to Rizvi (2015), there is an urgent need for changing the narrative of Asia literacy developed in the late 1980s in which "Asia is still seen as the East – different and exotic – while Australia is assumed to be a proxy for the West" (67). A reflection from Asian Education Foundation (AEF) on two decades of implementing Asia literacy in schooling systems concludes that "there has been only small-scale progress towards Asia literacy becoming a universally attainable school education outcome" (Halse 2015, 13). Halse et al. (2013) analysed data from 1,319 teachers' survey responses about Asia literacy. The survey explored: teachers' views on the features of an Asia literate teacher; definitions of Asia literacy; and teacher perceptions of the significance of Asia literacy in the classroom. The study concluded that "most teachers do not yet feel expert, with only a minority considering themselves "highly accomplished" or "lead' teachers" (Halse et al. 2013, 5). Altogether, there are problems in approaches and ideologies of the implementation of Asia literacy policy in the education system. They also raise questions of how various schools and teachers in Australia are dealing with the desired outcomes of the Asia literacy policy.

In terms of Australian teachers' capacity for teaching Asia literacy in the classrooms, Halse et al. (2013, 112) found six influential factors that 'distinguish Asia literate teacher' including:

- Possesses expert knowledge of content, assessment strategies and pedagogy for teaching Asia related curriculum;
- Demonstrates familiarity with a wide range of Asia related teaching resources;
- Actively builds intercultural understanding;
- Frequently, purposefully and seamlessly integrates Asia into the curriculum;
- Uses ICT to connect their students with students in Asia;

- Leads Asia related learning within and beyond the school.

Among the above features, the level of understanding and making uses of various teaching resources "were the critical features defining the Asia literate teacher" (Halse et al. 2013, 46). It was also reported that among 1,319 teachers who participated in the survey about their teaching of Asia literacy, the majority of the respondents stated that they did not have sufficient Asia related resources for classroom usage (Cloonan 2015). Also, Bullen and Lunt (2015) contended that it is essential for teachers to be familiar and critical when applying the Asia-related teaching material in the classrooms.

The above findings suggest that there is an urgent need of supporting teachers' understanding and selecting suitable Asia related texts for teaching Asia literacy. This is also the significant driver of the studies reported in this book. In particular, chapters in this book focus on exploring cultural representations of one particular Asian country in children's literature, that is, the aspects of Vietnamese culture children's picturebooks and potential theoretical frameworks for interpreting certain Asia related texts – children's picturebooks. This attempt can make a significant contribution to address the need of Australian teachers in response to one of the general aspects of Asia literacy.

1.3 Representations of culture in children's literature

In this section, we will explore various themes of cultural representations reflected in children's literature, including some influential literary theories and relevant studies in the field. With respect to the relationship between cultural studies and literary studies, Culler (1997) asserts that "cultural studies arose out of literary studies" (54). According to Culler (1997), cultural studies analyses literature as a specific form of cultural practice. This means cultural representation can be explored through investigations into children's literature. It seems that much of the research on cultural presentations in children's literature is on central issues concerned with cultural and literary theories, such as *feminism* and *orientalism*. Each of these will be examined in the following sections.

1.3.1 Feminism and Representations of Gender in Children's Literature

One of the influential literary theories in cultural and literary studies is *feminism*. With respect to the main concern of feminism in literary analysis, Hall (2001, 199) contends that "feminist methodologies focus intensively on gender (the social roles performed by the sexes) and explore the complex ways in which women have been denied social power and the right to various forms of self-expression". In particular, three main streams of methodological categories were developed within feminism (Barry 2002; Wolfreys 1999). The first development focuses on exploring the representations of women reflected in various texts produced by either male or female writers from the perspective of a critical female reader (Ferrier 1985). The second development seeks similarity in texts produced by female authors by republishing their works (Wolfreys 1999). The third development of feminist criticism is based on various literary theories, including post-structuralism, French theorists, sociology and other influential theories in the field (Ferrier 1985). This means the most recent development in feminism employs various approaches in its investigations into literature.

On children's literature, Rudd (2010) asserts that issues associated with representations of gendered bodies and behaviours in literary work for children and young adults has received significant research attention. In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on representations of gender in children's literature. In particular, reviewing studies on gender issues in children's literature demonstrates that the problem of gender inequality has not been resolved in books for children (Harlin and Morgan 2009). Hamilton et al. (2006) found that there is a significantly greater percentage of male main characters compared to female main characters in the 200 best-selling picturebooks for children. Results from this study are aligned with previous studies with similar research interest. For instance, Poarch and Monk-Turner (2001) report that in their selected picturebooks, there were fewer illustrations of female characters using production artefacts than male characters. However, these findings are not consistent with what Crabb and Marciano (2011) found when they explored differences in the uses of household artefacts, that is, bowls, forks, knives, spoons, sewing machines, production artefacts, cars, trucks, fishing nets, tools, used by male and female characters in 85 picturebooks for children published in the period 1990–2009. The results of this study revealed that among 490 illustrations in the examined books, the proportion of female characters using household artefacts was significantly

greater than that of the male characters. Crawford and Bhattacharya (2014) examined 220 picturebooks for children published over a period of 20 years (1989–1998 and 1998–2008) and reported that the majority of examined books contained more images of modern grandmothers than traditional ones.

The above studies and findings indicate that much of the contemporary research on children's literature pays particular attention to how the images of women are represented in comparison to men. In particular, most of these studies tend to focus on the quantity of portrayals of women and gender roles. Such a research interest seems to be aligned with *second-wave feminism*, which "seeks to amend or rework masculine and feminine stereotypes and roles" (Rudd 2010, 28). However, according to Rudd (2010), more recent children's literature focusses on another wave of feminism, which considers sex identity as relational, rather than oppositional (Rudd 2010). It appears that there has been little research in children's literature holding interest in this wave of feminism.

Within the scope of the study in this book, issues associated with gender representation in children's literature will not be the focus. One of the reasons is that this book aims to gain insight into the methods of interpreting and analysing cultural meanings of images in children's picturebooks. This entails that the holistic view on cultural representation will receive priority over examining how a specific cultural issue is presented.

In addition to the theme of gender, there is also a growing interest in examining cultural aspects of Asian countries in children's literature. This research trend links to another influential theory in children's literature, namely *orientalism,* which emphasises literary texts for children containing cultural aspects of Asian countries (Rudd 2010). Since this research trend in children's literature relates to Asian cultures, it will be briefly discussed in the following section.

1.3.2 Orientalism and Representations of Asian Cultures in Children's Literature

One of the main notions of orientalism, stated by Said (2003), is that "Orientalism is a western style for dominating, reconstructing and having authority over the Orient" (3). According to Said, the Orient – the countries of East and Southeast Asia, are represented as "a sort of surrogate and even underground self' due to orientalism" (3). Barry (2009) provides a further interpretation of the view of orientalism towards the Orient:

> This means, in effect, that the East becomes the repository or projection of those aspects of themselves which Westerners do not choose to acknowledge (cruelty, sensuality, decadence, laziness, and so on). At the same time, and paradoxically, the East is seen as a fascinating realm of the exotic, the mystical and the seductive. (Barry 2009, 186)

In the words of Nodelman (1992, 30), this is "an act of speaking for the other". Furthermore, with respect to criticism of children's literature, Nodelman (1992) asserts that an orientalist mindset still exists, which has not changed significantly despite the passing of time. However, Barry (2009) suggests that reading literature with the awareness of orientalism is beneficial in terms of providing readers with critical thinking about the cultural representations of 'Other'. Rudd (2010) cites that, in children's literature, "Orientalist discourses inform a variety of children's texts, including retelling and reworking of *Arabian Nights* stories, collections of folktales, colonial fiction and contemporary fiction either set in Asian cultures or tracing the experience of young protagonists" or refugees from Asian countries in Western countries (43). Along with such scholarly interest, several studies examine representations of Asian cultural aspects in multicultural children's literature.

One of the problems found in picturebooks from diverse cultures is the issue of cultural authenticity. More specifically, images in multicultural picturebooks can under-represent, and even misrepresent, the cultures depicted in the books (Creany, Couch, and Caropreso 1993; Harlin and Morgan 2009; Yoo-Lee et al. 2014). Yoo-Lee et al. (2014) found that among 48 multicultural picturebooks containing three ethnic groups of characters representing the cultures of African American, Asian American and Hispanic American characters, Chinese, Korean and Japanese cultures were the most frequently portrayed. The researchers concluded that other East Asian countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam are under-represented in these books (Yoo-Lee et al. 2014)). In another study on misrepresentation of Asian cultures, Wee, Park and Choi (2015) analysed the content of 33 picturebooks written in English and published in the US from 1999 to 2012 to examine how aspects of Korean culture were represented in these books. The key findings were that the examined books tended to fail to portray realistic physical appearances of Korean children. In particular, the researchers found "some exaggerated Asian features, including small eyes (almost a small dot or a straight line) and round/square faces, as well as having straight black hair with bangs" (Wee, Park, and Choi 2015, 11). Another finding was that 75% of the examined books represented Korean culture at the surface level (Wee, Park, and Choi 2015, 11).

With respect to issues of authenticity in Vietnamese children's literature, Bullen and Lunt (2015) point out a significant point concerning the truth-status of a well-known Australian comic book, namely *The Little Refugee*. Holding the view that "autobiographical texts by authors of Asian heritage would appear to offer potential to circumvent representational inaccuracies, inauthenticity, and cultural stereotypes" (Bullen and Lunt 2015, 151), the researchers demonstrate that there exist issues associated with orientalism in *The Little Refugee*. Specifically, Vietnam is depicted as a "crazy place", whereas Australia is preferred as "a great country" (Bullen and Blunt 2015, 157). This entails an implication that Eastern cultures are exotic compared to Western cultures (Bullen and Blunt 2015). The study seems to be one of the most current and significant dealing with issues of orientalism found in contemporary children's literature.

1.4 Cultural representations in Vietnamese children's literature and picturebooks

Various studies have been conducted to explore representations of Vietnamese culture in children's literature and children's picturebooks. Some of these studies either interpret textual elements (Ngoc-Bui 2009; 2010) or visual elements (Le 2015) without the application of semiotic frameworks or partially based on semiotic frameworks without consideration of cultural constraints when interpreting non-Western visual elements (Dinh 2014; Dinh and Sharifian 2017).

Ngoc-Bui (2010) explored the structure and motifs of the Vietnamese Cinderella and other Southeast Asian variants. The study revealed the significance of the unique factors shaped by local cultures such as Buddhism's concept of reincarnation, and cultural symbols in the Vietnamese version of Cinderella which are not found in other versions including Chinese ones. Such findings indicate cultural meanings of literary texts and images in children's literature are not always identical across cultures even for one similar tale such as *Cinderella*. Similarly, Nguyet (2017) compared and illustrated the ways in which experiential and interpersonal concepts are expressed in the endings of four Cinderella variants (one German, one French and two Vietnamese versions). Systemic Functional Linguistics was used to analyse the social and cultural aspects represented in the selected texts. The results of the study revealed cultural meanings contained in the texts may have both similarities and differences. One of the limitations of this study is that only two aspects of culture were the focus, namely experiential and interpersonal concepts.

In another study, Dinh (2014) investigated Vietnamese cultural aspects in locally developed English textbooks. As for analytical frameworks, Dinh (2014) examined cultural representations of images of the selected English textbooks in the light of Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) semiotic framework. The strong point of Dinh's (2014) study is that both visual and textual elements were interpreted to explore cultural representations. However, only part of the metafunctional meanings (participants, actions, settings and attributes) was applied to interpret the selected images of this study (Dinh, 2014).

Since the focus of our book is on Vietnam, the above findings on issues of orientalism in children's picturebooks are very relevant. They not only provide convincing rationale for conducting more comprehensive research into children's picturebooks about Vietnam but also serve as directions for addressing issues of representation of Vietnamese culture in children's literature. In particular, this book takes a slightly different approach to resolve problems identified in studies on orientalism in Asian children's literature. This means our book does not directly examine the issues of cultural representations in children's picturebooks but provides potential methods (in terms of analytical frameworks) which serve as 'tools' for readers of non-Vietnamese cultural backgrounds to apply and gain objective views on cultural aspects represented in children's picturebooks about Vietnam. Therefore, this book explores how Vietnamese images make meaning and how Vietnamese artists convey cultural meanings in their artworks. It is our belief that, based on findings from these questions, readers of Vietnamese picturebooks can develop an objective view on cultural aspects of Vietnamese cultures, which will contribute to resolving issues related to misrepresentation, or under-representations of Vietnamese culture in children's picturebooks.

Therefore, this book not only fills the literature gaps on the application of the current Western semiotic approach to non-Western images but also provides a significant contribution to the current state of knowledge in studies of East Asian visual texts (Chen 2010; Dinh and Sharifian 2017; Hsiao-Chien 2014; Le 2015; Liu and Qu 2014; Souzandehfar et al. 2014). Additionally, results from studies reported in this book will provide teachers with useful references for plans to incorporate Vietnamese literature into teaching curriculums and appropriate frameworks for analysing, interpreting and discussing picturebooks about Vietnamese culture in classroom contexts.

CHAPTER TWO

INTERPRETING VIETNAMESE PICTUREBOOKS WITH A WESTERN SEMIOTIC FRAMEWORK

As mentioned, this book explores representations of cultural aspects in Vietnamese children's picturebooks through the lens of both Western and East Asian theories for interpreting visual meanings. To do so, we first explore the extent to which a contemporary Western framework for interpreting picturebooks can be applied to analyse visual meanings in images in a Vietnamese picturebook. This attempt is an important starting point of this book, since the Western framework developed by Painter, Martin, and Unsworth (2013) has been widely applied by teachers and researchers to gain an understanding of picturebooks in classrooms and in studies on multimodality. For non-Western images such as those presented by Vietnamese illustrators, however, no previous study has determined the usefulness of a contemporary Western framework for interpreting visual meanings. The aims of this chapter is, therefore, to demonstrate how images in East Asian picturebooks can be analysed by using a Western semiotic framework. This chapter analyses several selected double-page spreads in a Vietnamese picturebook using a framework developed by Painter, Martin, and Unsworth (2013). The findings indicated that general meanings of the selected images can be interpreted with the proposed Western framework. However, the cultural meanings of these images are not revealed by using this framework. Therefore, it is recommended that further studies are conducted to develop a framework for interpreting cultural meanings of East Asian images in picturebooks. Furthermore, the findings and suggestions in this paper provide helpful references for Vietnamese teachers of English to apply picturebooks in their classrooms.

2.1. Introduction

It has been reported that the use of children's picturebooks supports both cultural and intercultural awareness in children. One of the well-known theories applied in contemporary analysis of picturebooks is social

semiotics. However, previous research on intercultural awareness did not examine the ways in which non-Western picturebooks can be interpreted by using Western semiotic frameworks. The primary aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how images in East Asian picturebooks can be analysed by using a Western semiotic framework. To do this, we analysed several selected double-page spreads in a Vietnamese picturebook using a framework developed by Painter, Martin and Unsworth (2013). The findings indicated that general meanings of the selected images can be interpreted with the proposed Western framework. However, the cultural meanings of these images are not revealed by using this framework. Therefore, it is recommended that further studies are conducted to develop a framework for interpreting cultural meanings of East Asian images in picturebooks. Furthermore, the findings and suggestions in this chapter provide helpful references for Vietnamese teachers of English to apply picturebooks in their classrooms. It is evident that children's picturebooks are beneficial to develop young readers' cognitive and intercultural awareness (Budd 2016; Chen and Browne 2015; Levin 2007; Styles and Arizpe 2001). In Vietnam, young readers are more familiar with Japanese manga style comics than picturebooks. Popular comics read in Vietnam include *Dũng sĩ Hasman* (*Hero Hasman)* by Nguyen Hung Lan (1992), *Thần đồng đất Việt (Vietnamese genius)* by the Phan Thi Company, and *Long thần tướng* (*The dragon general*) by Nguyen Thanh Phong (2014). These comics are in the Japanese manga style (Brown 2014; Ngo 2011; Nguyen 2014).

Vietnamese readers are less familiar with modern picturebooks than comic books. In recent years, several picturebooks produced by young Vietnamese artists have been introduced to international readers. Among them are *The First Journey* by Phung Nguyen Quang and Huynh Kim Lien (the winner of the Scholastic Picture Book Award [SBPA] 2015, 2017), *The whale whisperer* by Le Thi Bich Khoa (the 2nd runner up of the SPBA 2017), and *The Mysterious Princesses* (*Những nàng công chúa bí ẩn*) by Khoa Le (2016). Several studies have been conducted on the development of comics in Vietnam (Lent 2014; Nguyen 2014).

To date, however, very few studies have used contemporary Western frameworks to explore how Vietnamese artists express meanings in picturebooks. Moreover, no theoretical framework for analysing picturebooks about Vietnam has been developed. Therefore, our chapter aims to fill this gap in the literature about Vietnamese picturebooks. In this chapter, we investigated how Vietnamese images create meaning by using a contemporary Western framework for interpreting picturebooks.

2.2. Literature review

Various frameworks have been developed for interpreting picturebooks based on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) work titled *Grammar of visual design*. Some of these frameworks focus on interpreting meta-functional meanings of picturebooks (Painter, Martin, and Unsworth 2013), while other frameworks explore ideological meanings (Serafini 2010; 2014). Although these frameworks have been proven to be useful in interpreting picturebooks, especially picturebooks about Western cultures (Painter, Martin, and Unsworth 2013; Serafini 2010; Unsworth and Thomas 2014), very few studies have examined the usefulness of a social semiotic framework in analysing picturebooks about Asian countries. To fill this gap in the literature, the present chapter aims to explore the extent to which a contemporary semiotic framework developed by Painter, Martin and Unsworth (2013) can be used to interpret images in a picturebook about an Asian country – Vietnam.

The social semiotic approach for analysing meanings of multimodal texts is inspired by Halliday's concept of meta-function, in which every semiotic mode has the capability to convey three meta-functional meanings, namely *ideational meaning*, *interpersonal meaning*, and *textual* or *compositional meaning* (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). The ideational meaning denotes the semiotic mode's ability to convey a representational meaning of the world, while the interpersonal meaning reveals the relations between sign producers and receivers (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). The textual or compositional meaning refers to meanings created through the way visual elements are arranged and distributed to produce an ordered, logical and consistent whole (Painter, Martin, and Unsworth 2013).

We will now briefly introduce the framework for picturebook analysis developed by Painter, Martin and Unsworth (2013), which draws mainly on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) early work titled *Grammar of visual design*. This framework is summarized in Figure 2-1.

Fig 2 - 1 Summary of a Semiotic Framework for Picturebook Analysis
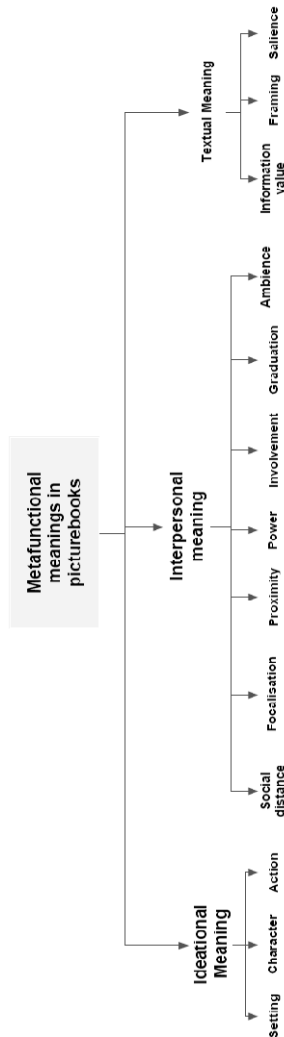
Note: Adapted from Painter, Martin and Unsworth (2013); Kress and van Leeuwen (2006)

2.2.1. Ideational Meaning

Painter, Martin, and Unsworth (2013) proposed a framework for analysis of ideational meaning in picturebooks based on Kress and van Leeuwen's discussions on representational meaning of images which includes the consideration of three narrative aspects, i.e., *Setting, Character* and *Action* (Fig. 2-1). *Setting* refers to the depicted environment or the context in which characters of picturebooks appear and act. In picturebooks, the setting or the background context offers information about the visual location of the surrounding environment in which the characters perform (Painter, Martin, and Unsworth 2013). The setting in picturebooks should be analysed in not only a single image, but also sequences of images. Within a picturebook narrative, the setting does not always remain unchanged, and it can be either similar or different in successive images (Painter, Martin, and Unsworth 2013). Any consistency or alteration in the depiction of setting details can provide important information to readers.

   Character in picturebooks refers to Kress and van Leeuwen's notion of represented participants (Painter, Martin, and Unsworth 2013). The ways in which a character's physical appearance is depicted in picturebooks help readers to understand other important information, such as age, ethnicity, family and social status (Painter, Martin, and Unsworth 2013). According to Painter, Martin and Unsworth (2013), characters in picturebooks can be depicted with complete features of their physical representation with the head and/or clothes (complete). Readers can also recognize a character from a part of his/her body's shadow/silhouette with the choice of metonymic. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) discussion of narrative processes was employed by Painter, Martin and Unsworth (2013) to refer to the system of action in ideational meaning of picturebooks. Narrative processes reveal depicted actions engaged by visual participants. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), a narrative process consists of participants who are linked together by means of vectors. Figure 2-2 illustrates various types of visual process recognized by vectors. Vectors linking participants in narrative processes can be either visible, such as participants' bodies, arms or means to carry out physical action, or invisible in mental action, such as a gaze line (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006).