



Negotiating Cultural Authenticity in Diasporic Children's Literature: A Multicultural Analysis of *Crouching Tiger* and *Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic*

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Abstract

*This study aims to examine how the protagonists experience and respond to cultural authenticity in two children's books, *Crouching Tiger* by Ying Chang Compestine (2011) and *Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic* by Ginnie Lo (2012), from the perspective of multicultural literature. A qualitative approach employing textual and visual analysis is used as the primary method. The analysis focuses on both narrative elements and illustrations to explore how Chinese culture is preserved and adapted within diasporic contexts, drawing on Mingshui Cai's (2002) theory of multicultural literature. The findings indicate that cultural authenticity is dynamically represented through the protagonists' encounters with cultural boundaries and the negotiation of ethnic perspectives. Moreover, the protagonists respond to issues of cultural authenticity through cultural immersion and fidelity to cultural realities. The study concludes that cultural authenticity functions as a crucial element in fostering a sense of belonging and enhancing intercultural understanding within children's literature.*

Keywords: *Cultural Authenticity, Diaspora, Multicultural Literature, Picture Books*

INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism has become an increasingly prominent feature of contemporary societies, as individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds coexist and interact within shared social spaces. Multiculturalism refers to social conditions in which multiple cultures coexist and influence one another (Crisdiana, 2018). This social reality is frequently reflected in literary works, particularly in multicultural literature, which portrays the lived experiences, values, and identities of culturally diverse communities.

According to Cai (2002), multicultural literature presents narratives that highlight cultural plurality and function as a medium for representing diverse human experiences across different cultural contexts. One crucial concept in evaluating multicultural representations in literature is cultural authenticity. Cultural authenticity refers to the extent to which a cultural representation accurately reflects a group's values, beliefs, traditions, and lived realities without relying on stereotypes or simplifications. Scholars emphasize that cultural authenticity should be understood as dynamic rather than static, as cultures continuously evolve through internal developments and external influences (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In multicultural education and children's literature, cultural authenticity plays a significant role in ensuring that cultural representations are meaningful, respectful, and educational (Bishop, 1997). However, defining and achieving cultural authenticity remains challenging due to its subjective nature and the complexity of cultural identity itself (Banks, 2008).

Cultural authenticity is particularly visible in diasporic communities, such as Chinese-American communities in the United States. For instance, Chinatown in New York City illustrates how traditional Chinese cultural practices, including food traditions, are preserved within a multicultural environment. Soybeans, a staple ingredient in Chinese cuisine with a history of cultivation spanning over 3,000 years, hold deep cultural significance due to their nutritional value and symbolic connection to balance, health, and sustainability (Liu, 1997). Such cultural elements often become markers of identity that are maintained across generations despite geographical and cultural displacement. Cultural authenticity is also prominently represented in children's literature, particularly picture books. Children's literature serves not only as a source of entertainment but also as an educational medium that introduces young readers to social values, cultural diversity, and identity formation through accessible language and visual storytelling (Shih, 2024). Picture books, which integrate text and illustrations, are especially effective in conveying cultural meanings to children.

This study focuses on two picture books, *Crouching Tiger* (2011) by Ying Chang Compestine and *Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic* (2012) by Ginnie Lo. *Crouching Tiger* portrays the experiences of Ming Da, a Chinese-American child who struggles to reconcile his cultural heritage with his life in a multicultural society. The narrative explores issues of identity, fear, and acceptance related to his dual cultural background. Meanwhile, *Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic* presents a family tradition centered on soybean harvesting, introducing young readers to the cultural significance of food,

communal values, and intergenerational connections within Chinese culture. These two picture books are selected because they offer strong representations of cultural authenticity within Chinese-American experiences. Through their protagonists, both works depict how children encounter, experience, and negotiate their cultural identity in multicultural contexts. Therefore, this study aims to examine how cultural authenticity is experienced by the protagonists and how they respond to it within different social and cultural settings, contributing to broader discussions on multicultural representation in children's literature.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to examine cultural authenticity in children's picture books. Qualitative approach focuses on understanding social and cultural phenomena by interpreting descriptive and textual data rather than numerical measurement (Creswell, 2018). The data sources of this study are two picture books representing Chinese-American cultural experiences which are *Crouching Tiger (2011)* by Ying Chang Compestine and *Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic (2012)* by Ginnie Lo. Data collection was conducted through several systematic stages. First, the researchers performed repeated readings of both picture books to gain a comprehensive understanding of the narratives, characters, and cultural contexts presented. During this process, significant textual excerpts and visual representations related to cultural authenticity were identified. These relevant elements were then documented and categorized as primary data for further analysis. Data analysis was carried out by examining the collected data using a descriptive interpretative technique. The analysis is guided by Mingshui Cai's (2002) framework on multicultural literature, which emphasizes cultural representation, authenticity, and identity. Through this framework, the study analyzes how the protagonists experience cultural authenticity and how they respond to it within multicultural environments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

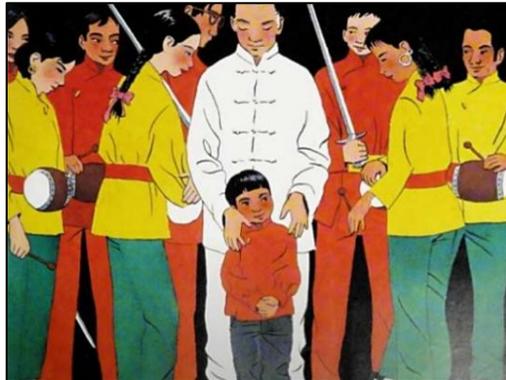
The discussion of the findings is divided into two main sections, first, the protagonist experiences of cultural authenticity, and second, the protagonist respond to cultural authenticity in *Crouching Tiger (2011)* and *Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic (2012)*.

1. Protagonists' Experience of Cultural Authenticity in *Crouching Tiger (2011)* And *Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic (2012)*

1.1. Cultural Boundaries

Cultural boundaries are where traditional values intersect with modern or external influences, creating opportunities for adaptation and identity negotiation.

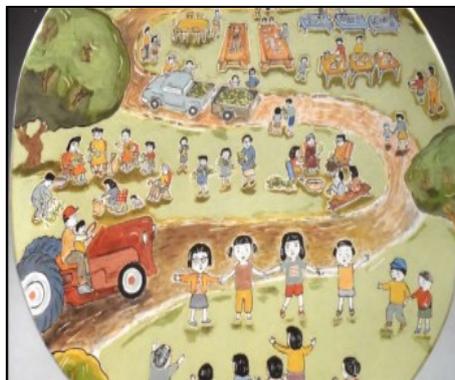
According to Mingshui Cai (2002), cultural boundaries refer to the spaces where cultural values interact with external influences, enabling adaptation and identity negotiation without losing cultural authenticity.



Crouching Tiger (2011)

"As we approached the end of the parade, Grandpa yelled, 'Ming Da, let the lions have the cabbage!' I lowered the pole. The lion's bit at the cabbage and tore it apart, spraying the leaves onto the crowd."
(Compestine, 2011)

As stated in the quotation above, lion dancers and martial artists surround the protagonist of *Crouching Tiger (2011)* as they participate in a Chinese New Year parade, holding the symbolic cabbage. This data exemplifies how cultural adaptation and preservation can coexist in a diasporic context. The protagonist's participation in these traditional events shows an attempt to preserve cultural traditions despite residing in a new cultural environment. The dialogue "Ming Da, let the lions have the cabbage!" encapsulates the event's energy and shows how the protagonist gradually becomes more immersed in his culture. This vignette illustrates how younger diasporic generations engage with their cultural heritage while navigating circumstances that may not accurately represent their ancestors' traditions.



Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic (2012)

In Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic (2012), the image captures a communal soybean harvest involving multiple Chinese families, followed by a festive picnic. This picture represents the adaptation of an agrarian tradition in the American Midwest. The narrative accompanying the image states, "Everyone hurried to the farmer's field to pick soybeans. It was hard work, but we quickly filled a big trailer with mounds of soybean plants." (Lo, 2012), Captures the physical labor that bonds the families. Harvesting soybeans, a custom associated with Chinese agricultural tradition, is reframed as a group activity that promotes harmony among Chinese American households. Tractor and rural farming are examples of American characteristics that demonstrate how traditional ideals of connection and cooperation are upheld in a new culture. Further demonstrating how the families combine their Chinese background with the recreational pursuits common to American country life is the passage, "Back at Aunty and Uncle Yang's house, while the grownups set up picnic tables, we played hide and seek and flew kites."

1.2. Ethnic Perspective

An ethnic perspective refers to the researcher's understanding of the perspective of ethnicity. It is the way culture is presented in the work to understand the perspective of an ethnicity in the way of living, believing, and behaving. It is challenging to introduce another culture.



Crouching Tiger (2011)

In the first image, the scene from *Crouching Tiger (2011)* portrays the protagonist meeting their grandfather, who has come from China. The figure of the grandfather, dressed in simple traditional clothing, represents humility and the wisdom typically associated with elders in Chinese traditions. His posture, as he bends down to greet the young protagonist, demonstrates the importance of respect and care between generations. The background, with quiet suburban houses and trees, contrasts with the grandfather, making this moment of family connection stand out.

"My GRANDPA was coming to visit, all the way from China. When he arrived, I rushed out to greet him. 'Hello, Grandpa.' I bowed, as Mom had told me to." (Compestine, 2011)

Textually, the phrase "Hello, Grandpa.' I bowed, as Mom had told me to." shows the importance of language as a cultural marker. The mother's explicit instruction to greet the grandfather properly teaches respect and helps keep cultural traditions alive. The grandfather's response in Mandarin, "Ni Hao, Ming Da," highlights how language bridges cultural and generational gaps. By focusing on preserving Chinese cultural traditions in a foreign, the image and text together reflect an ethnic perspective.



Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic (2012)

The family portrait depicted in the extract from *Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic (2012)* has diasporic relatives. The family's cultural diversity is reflected in the visual portrayal of a large extended family, with people wearing a variety of vibrant colors. The location and stance of each character within the group echo the Confucian ideal of close family ties and represent unity and connectivity.

"For a long time, Mama was homesick. She missed her family's trips to West Lake, her older brother's stories, her younger brother's tricks, and all her favorite Chinese foods—from simple boiled soybeans to fancy Eight Treasure Rice. There were very few Chinese families in the Midwest back then, so Mama and Auntie Yang made sure our two families visited often. Mama said she wanted us cousins to grow up "as close as four soybeans in a soybean pod." (Lo, 2012).

As an example of the immigrant experiences, it describes how Auntie Yang and her siblings traveled across the seas to study in the United States. They talk about their need for comforting foods and memories of China, from boiled soybeans to eight treasures rice. It highlights the importance of food in preserving cultural bonds. Additionally, the Chinese cultural focus on preserving familial relationships despite distance and

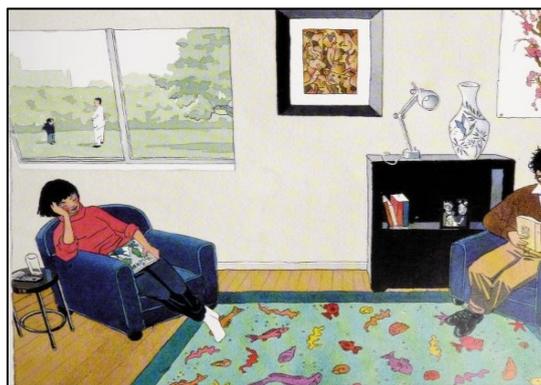
generational differences is reflected in Mama and Auntie Yang's attempts to guarantee regular family visits. A cultural emblem and family connection are poetically linked in the expression, "Mama said she wanted us cousins to grow up as close as four soybeans in a pod." A mainstay of Chinese cooking, soybeans symbolize tight family ties and cultural continuity, illustrating how material things like food may serve as a cultural identity anchor in diasporic.

2. Protagonists' Responses to Cultural Authenticity in *Crouching Tiger* (2011) and *Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic* (2012)

In a multicultural society, cultural authenticity often emerges as a personal issue that shapes how individuals understand and express their identities. In *Crouching Tiger* (2011) and *Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic* (2012), the protagonists Ming Da and Jinyi are portrayed as characters who encounter cultural authenticity in their everyday lives. Cai conceptualizes responses to cultural authenticity through two interrelated approaches. The first is cultural immersion, which emphasizes direct and active engagement with cultural practices, traditions, and everyday experiences as a means of understanding and affirming cultural identity. The second approach is faithfulness to cultural reality, which highlights loyalty to lived experience and the truthful representation of cultural life as it is personally encountered.

2.1. Cultural Immersion

Crouching Tiger (2011) portrays cultural immersion as the process of dealing with cultural authenticity, which is guided and enforced particularly in the introduction of authentic Chinese Culture.



Crouching Tiger (2011)

"My name is Vinson Grandpa." "Your Chinese name is Ming Da. You are Chinese as well as American." (Compestine, 2011)

Ming Da struggles with his identity, preferring his American name, Vinson, over his Chinese name. It indicates a subtle rejection of his Chinese identity. Later, his grandfather's reminder, "*Chinese as well as American*," becomes a crucial turning point for Ming Da. The grandfather's insistence is not merely about the use of a name but rather an affirmation of the dual identity that Ming Da must acknowledge. At this moment, cultural immersion occurs. Ming Da no longer disregards his Chinese identity after his direct interaction with his grandfather, which becomes an entry point for him to understand the meaning of cultural authenticity. By realizing that he is not only "Vinson" but also "Ming Da," he begins to understand that cultural authenticity cannot be achieved solely by assimilating into American culture or by rejecting his authentic cultural roots. Instead, Ming Da needs to integrate both aspects of his identity in order to construct a more holistic self-representation. This awareness marks the first step toward his acceptance of a more authentic identity.



Crouching Tiger (2011)

"On New Year's Eve, we cleaned the whole house. Dad cut my hair, and Mom cooked a big traditional meal. Grandpa handed me a red silk jacket embroidered with dragons. 'Ming Da, wear this for the parade tomorrow.' My heart sank. All my friends would be there and see me in this silly jacket. I excused myself and left the table." (Compestine, 2011)

Not only Ming Da's Chinese name but also the tradition of costume becomes an issue of cultural authenticity that temporarily troubles him. Based on the illustration, the red silk jacket embroidered with a dragon, given to him by his grandfather, represents cultural heritage. The red color is traditionally believed to bring good fortune, while the dragon motif symbolizes power and prosperity. This red silk dragon embroidered jacket functions as a symbol that reinforces cultural authenticity by presenting an authentic representation of Chinese traditions. In this way, Ming Da does not merely encounter his ancestral culture in an abstract sense but also experiences it directly through a costume imbued with symbolic significance. However, Ming Da's embarrassment and his dismissal of the jacket as "silly" reveal a form of resistance toward his cultural authenticity. He continues to interpret this traditional symbol from the perspective of his social

environment, which is the American cultural standards considered more modern and acceptable in his environment.



Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic (2012)

“That September weekend started just like our other visits. On Saturday morning, Mama and Auntie Yang had the four of us sit quietly for Chinese lessons. Afterward, Mama guided us with watercolor painting, while Auntie Yang taught us how to fold paper into boats, monkeys, and rabbits. In the afternoon, the adults carried on with their never-ending game of mahjong”. (Lo, 2012)

Based on the illustrations and quotes above, it is clear that Jinyi experiences a process of cultural immersion through her activities with her family. Activities such as taking Mandarin lessons and folding paper into various shapes are not merely recreational activities, but rather means of cultural inheritance that connect her to her family's Chinese identity. Jinyi gains firsthand experience that strengthens her attachment to ancestral traditions. These practices emphasize that cultural authenticity is reflected not only in cultural symbols but also through active involvement in inherited routines.

Cultural authenticity is reflected not only in the learning of Mandarin but also in Jinyi's participation in traditional culinary practices, such as making and boiling dumplings. Through this practice, Jinyi directly experiences the values of togetherness and familial heritage embedded within the dining tradition.

2.2. Faithfulness to Cultural Reality

Not only through cultural immersion, but the protagonists in both children's books, *Crouching Tiger (2011)* and *Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic (2012)*, also address cultural authenticity through faithfulness to cultural reality or the commitment to preserving the original meaning, philosophy, and culture. Faithfulness to cultural

reality is an important principle to prevent cultural representations from falling into simplification or misinterpretation (Cai, 2002).



Crouching Tiger (2011)

"Grandpa took hold of my hand. "Ming Da, remember that a good martial artist must first gain self-discipline. The standing meditation looks simple, but it builds your inner strength and increases your speed and power." (Compestine, 2011)

In *Crouching Tiger (2011)*, faithfulness to cultural reality is manifested through the grandfather's teaching, which does not alter the original philosophy or techniques of Tai Chi as a Chinese martial art. As explained in the quotation above, Tai Chi is not merely standing meditation but also a discipline of self-control, "*a good martial artist must first gain self-discipline...it builds your inner strength...*". Ming Da serves as a concrete example of how faithfulness to cultural reality is represented through the inheritance of authentic philosophical values. The grandfather's advice on self-discipline, standing meditation, and the cultivation of inner strength reflects traditional Chinese teachings that remain alive in daily practice, particularly within martial arts. This depiction is neither exaggerated nor stereotyped but is instead presented authentically in accordance with the cultural reality.



Auntie Yang's Great Soybean Picnic (2012)

“If you get a four-bean pod, you are a lucky Chinese American girl... if you happen to get a five-bean pod, well, you are more fortunate than the emperor of China” (Compestine, 2012)

Meanwhile, in *Auntie Yang’s Great Soybean Picnic (2012)*, Jinyi, as the protagonist, negotiates cultural authenticity by trusting and preserving the culinary philosophy of Chinese tradition. As illustrated in the quotation above, when Auntie Yang explains the symbolism of good fortune in the number of beans within a pod, faithfulness to cultural reality is evident in the depiction of traditional Chinese beliefs that associate food with luck. The author presents this tradition as it truly is, without simplification or distortion, thereby maintaining the authenticity of cultural values. Moreover, Jinyi’s acceptance of the symbolic meaning of the soybean pod demonstrates how younger generations of Chinese children raised in America remain faithful to ancestral values. Her acknowledgement and belief in this philosophy exemplify how Chinese cultural reality continues to live and persist within the diaspora experience.

CONCLUSION

Cultural authenticity refers to the extent to which cultural representations convey a group’s values, beliefs, and practices in a nuanced manner while avoiding stereotypical portrayals. This study demonstrates that cultural authenticity in *Crouching Tiger (2011)* and *Auntie Yang’s Great Soybean Picnic (2012)* is presented through the protagonists' lived experiences and their responses to cultural heritage within multicultural contexts.

Crouching Tiger (2011), Ming Da encounters cultural authenticity through intergenerational interaction with his grandfather, particularly through traditional practices such as tai chi and the lion dance, which convey core cultural values including discipline, respect, and perseverance. In contrast, *Auntie Yang’s Great Soybean Picnic (2012)* emphasizes communal experiences, where family gatherings, soybean harvesting, and food traditions function as cultural anchors that reinforce familial bonds and cultural identity in a diasporic setting.

Furthermore, the protagonist's response to cultural authenticity is manifested through cultural immersion and faithfulness to cultural reality. In *Crouching Tiger (2011)*, active participation in traditional practices enables the protagonist to internalize cultural values and reconcile his Chinese and American identities. Meanwhile, in *Auntie Yang’s Great Soybean Picnic (2012)*, engagement in family-centred activities, such as cooking traditional food and learning cultural skills, highlights cultural authenticity as a process rooted in meaningful participation rather than symbolic representation alone. Overall, the study concludes that cultural authenticity in children’s literature is dynamic and evolving, shaped by active involvement, intergenerational transmission, and the preservation of cultural values within diasporic life.

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