

JoLLE@UGA

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Volume 9 Number 1

Spring 2013

Editor
Lindy L. Johnson

<http://jolle.coe.uga.edu>

Engaging in Critical Thoughts: Re-reading as a Form of Activism

Xiaoli Hong, xiaolih@uga.edu

The University of Georgia

Abstract

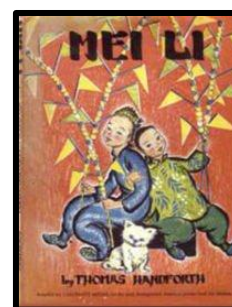
Given the importance of examining gender constructions in children's literature and as a response to JoLLE's call for activism, the author reflects on her experience of re-reading a picturebook that received criticism for its gender depictions. By walking the readers through the process of using scholarship in children's literature to critically examine her first reading of the picturebook, the author shows other possibilities of interpreting the book and hopes to inspire teachers and educators to delve deep into gender depictions in children's literature.

Please cite this article as: Hong, X. (2013). Engaging in critical thoughts: Re-reading as a form of activism. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], 9(1), 208-213. Available at <http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Critical-Thoughts.pdf>

The construction of gender in children's literature has never ceased to attract attention from librarians, teachers, critics and scholars. As gender is a socially constructed identity and implicated within social power structures, representation of gender in children's literature plays a vital role in socializing children into culturally accepted gender roles. It is important for teachers and educators to engage in close reading of gender in children's literature so that they can guide children to make sense of gender as they negotiate their own gender identities.

As a response to JoLLE's call for activism, I reflected on my experience of re-reading a picturebook that received criticism for its gender depictions of the female protagonist. By walking you through my process of using scholarship to navigate my initial resistance to the picturebook, I hope to share how scholarship can help complicate our understanding of gender in children's literature.

The picturebook I re-read is *Mei Li*, a 1939 Caldecott Medal winner written and illustrated by Thomas Handforth. As a Chinese woman studying in US, I first read this book in 2011 when inquiring about Caldecott Medal winners for one of my graduate seminars on children's literature. *Mei Li*, a common Chinese girl's name, immediately caught my attention. After reading the picturebook, I immensely enjoyed the illustrations which showcased Chinese cultural elements such as historical buildings, acrobatics and clothing. However, I was annoyed by the plot which seemed to emphasize a woman's value as one associated with domesticity. The depth of my annoyance resulted in my refuting the book. Little did I know *Mei Li* and I would reunite in the distant future.



Mei Li

My interest in *Mei Li* was revived a few months ago when I discovered a recent article in *The Horn Book Magazine* honoring *Mei Li*. Reading this article ignited my desire to re-read *Mei Li* and see if I could delve deeper into the interpretive possibilities of gender construction. Initially, I found it difficult to critically examine my first reading due to my previous schooling that discouraged critiquing what was already learned. Yet, with the help of empirical and theoretical scholarship that provide significant lenses to look at children's literature (e.g. Hubler, 2000; Power, 2003), I was able to further develop my understanding of *Mei Li*. My enhanced understanding also resulted from analyzing both the text and illustrations in *Mei Li* this time. In the remainder of this article, I discuss my journey from initial resistance to the picturebook to a more prudent understanding of both the text and my own reading experiences.

My Initial Reading

Set in North China in 1930s, *Mei Li* tells a story of a Chinese girl who refuses to accept the cultural expectations of women to stay at home. One day, she ventures out to her town's New Year Fair and tries to demonstrate the activities a girl can do at the New Year Fair, such as riding circus ponies and practicing acrobatics. As evidenced by this brief book summary, Handforth made a deliberate attempt to depict a Chinese girl who challenges stereotypical conception of femininity in China. Further expressing his intent, Handforth included a poem at the beginning of *Mei Li* to offer a glimpse of the historical context in which Mei Li performed her adventure. The poem, translated by Isaac Victor Headland, reads:

We keep a dog to watch the house,
 A pig is useful, too,
 We keep a cat to catch a mouse,
 But what can we do
 With a girl like you? (n.p.)

Based on my interpretation of the poem, Mei Li lives in a time when a girl is of less use than small animals raised at home, so Mei Li's efforts to show that a girl can do many things in a New Year Fair is very brave and adventurous.

Despite Handforth's seeming emphasis on Mei Li's challenges to societal norms of women's behavior, I remained unconvinced of his intent and goal. My initial reading still considered Mei Li's adventure outside the house a failure to transcend traditional gender boundaries. I was extremely irritated by some of the demeaning messages I believe the picturebook conveyed. For example, while at the New Year Fair, Mei Li wants to hit a bell for good luck and money but she is sure she "could never hit it" (n.p.) and asks her brother, San Yu, to do it for her. Additionally, at the conclusion of the story, where one might expect to see further examples of challenging the "status quo" as related to women's roles in Chinese society, the opposite seemed to be true. The Kitchen God tells Mei Li, who is looking for a kingdom where she can reign, that "This house is your kingdom and palace." Mei Li, agrees, "It will do for a while." (n.p.) I deemed Mei Li's response to be her eventual acceptance of the destiny confronting women at that time; she can only excel within the walls of her home. Similarly, critics, such as Crisp & Hiller (2011), interpreted Mei Li's response as "abdication of her will and locating her future in the safety of the domestic sphere" (p.22). The criticism leveled at *Mei Li* solidified my view that Handforth's efforts to depict a strong female protagonist are unsuccessful due to the gender depictions in the picturebook.

Revisiting My Initial Interpretation

My attitude toward the picturebook began to change when I discovered [Kathleen T. Horning's \(2013\) article in the Horn Book Magazine](#) a few months ago. In her article, Horning challenged previous criticism and strived to identify possible misconceptions of *Mei Li*. She pointed out that "contemporary critics have been quick to call *Mei Li* sexist due to its conclusion that the only kingdom Mei Li can possibly rule over is her own household" (paragraph eight). She believed it is perfunctory to ignore the attempts made by Mei Li to display various kinds of things girls can do in a New Year fair and the reality for most Chinese women at the time it was written.

Horning's article urged me to reconsider my understanding of this book and connected me to Hubler's (2000) argument that feminist criticism of fiction for young readers should "move beyond a focus on images [of the characters] to examine the way in which fiction allows readers to map social structure" (p. 84). Thus, instead of putting emphasis on the absence or presence of "positive images and strong role models" (p.84) who overturn the social or institutional oppression at the end of the story, there is a need for scholars, and readers as well, to go deep into the structural map of social reality offered in a book, which both encourages and limits the possibility of individual agency and social transformation. In *Mei Li*, I considered the

aforementioned poem a structural map to display Mei Li's difficulty in breaking the shackles imposed on her. The translated Chinese poem laments the situation that girls in China at that time were less useful than house animals that could guard houses or provide food. Within this context, it might be too optimistic to expect Mei Li to press forward with indomitable will.

Horning's article also evoked wonderings about whether I applied a presentist lens in my first reading of *Mei Li*. According to Power (2003), readerly presentism—a reader's perception that a book written in or about the past is, racist and sexist—is “to a large degree inevitable as readers cannot completely identify and control their own cultural and social conditioning” (p.425). However, it “would be a grievous problem if it in fact denied the integrity of a past era” (p.457). After recollecting my first encounter with *Mei Li*, I think I imposed my modern beliefs and values onto a past era without going deep into how the social structure of discrimination and oppression against women was (and may still be). Based on stories I read and heard about in contemporary society, I assumed that a female character would triumph over sexism or at least make some life-transforming decisions at the end of the story. My presentist lens precipitated me into a quick yet narrow judgment of the picturebook. Thus, as McClure (1995) argued, “the milieu of the time in which a book is set should be considered for its influence upon the book's perspective and content” (p.11).

Interestingly, as I started to gather more materials of the historical context in which this picturebook was created, I found that the author, Thomas Handforth, based his story on a real Chinese girl named Pu Mei Li during his sojourn in China in 1930s. [Based on Handforth's \(1939\) own article](#), Pu Mei Li “assumed such importance [in the story], which she rightly deserved, . . . that she crowded many of [Handforth's] other friends out of the story” (paragraph eleven). Handforth also spoke highly of the determination Pu Mei Li had—“She was that kind of a girl. No Empress Dowager [who ruled over the kingdom of China after the death of emperors] was ever more determined than she. A career is surely ordained for her, other than being the heroine of a children's book” (paragraph fifteen). Considering this, is there a possibility to generate some alternative explanations of certain parts in the book?

My efforts to pursue some alternative understandings led me back to the end of the story when the Kitchen God indicates to Mei Li, who is eager to have a kingdom where she can rule, that the house is her kingdom and palace. Then Mei Li says, “It will do for a while, anyway” (n.p.). Here, instead of regarding Mei Li's response as her decision to settle down in the domestic sphere, I think the phrase “for a while” conveys another possibility that Mei Li deems her house as a temporary kingdom where her family loves her no less than a real princess and she will find her kingdom in the outside world someday in future. Besides, the word “anyway”, put into emphasis at the end of the sentence, indicates a tone of unwillingness to accept the current situation.

During my re-reading of *Mei Li*, I also sought to augment my interpretation of the book by focusing on Handforth's illustrations along with the written text, which I did not take into account during the first reading. Picturebooks, often spelled as one word by scholars (e.g. Lewis, 2001), are increasingly being seen as an aesthetic whole in which pictures and texts interplay to create meaning. In particular, I needed to take into consideration the fact that *Mei Li* is the first true picturebook because of Handforth's groundbreaking use of double-page spreads and the lively interplay between words and pictures in his text (Horning, 2013). In fact, Handforth's

book helped the Caldecott committee distinguish the difference between an illustrated book and a true picture book. Thus, the illustrations in *Mei Li* should play an important part in helping us construct the meaning of the book.

In *Mei Li*, there are several double-spread pages that are used to show Mei Li's adventurous spirit in the New Year Fair. In one of the double spread-pages showcasing New Year Fair activities, I noticed Mei Li standing on the pony and even dancing on its back without any fear. Although the text accompanying this illustration says "she missed San Yu", the illustrations indicate otherwise. Mei Li is engrossed in this challenging activity and seems to have an enthusiastic audience. In another double-spread page, the text states that "The circus girl lifted her [Mei Li] high in the air...her [Mei Li's] legs wobbled a little" (n.p.). The accompanying illustration shows Mei Li is lifted upside down in the air yet I don't think readers can perceive any fear on her face. Compared to San Yu, who dresses himself up as a wise old man on the other side of the page, Mei Li is braver in their competition of activities that they each can do in the New Year Fair. Judging from these two examples and a few other pages that illustrate Mei Li's performance, Mei Li is a courageous girl.

Final Thoughts

The new insights derived from the words and the pictures enable me to complicate my understanding of gender construction in this picturebook. Rather than coming to a facile conclusion of calling it sexist, I have seen other possibilities of interpretation with the guidance of scholarly discussion which alerted me to read not only *Mei Li* but also the structural maps of social reality within it. *Mei Li*, though released in 1938, is definitely a book worth re-reading and exploring with its complex messages. Thus, in sharing my re-reading of this picturebook, I believe I have displayed a form of activism that calls for other teachers and educators to re-read children's books and delve deeper into gender construction. Included in such (re)readings is the awareness of the dangers associated with reading with a presentist lens. It is imperative that when one reads books written and set in the past, one shall consider much about the historical context of a story. It is true that a presentist lens will open the text for inquiry and interrogation, but it also involves the risk of enabling hasty judgments of the literature we are reading. Overall, while there are children's authors and illustrators who are devoted to creating books that disrupt gender stereotypes, our re-reading and critical thinking process will add to their efforts and encourage our children to question the ways in which people perform gender.

References

- Crisp, T., & Hiller, B. (2011). Telling tales about gender: A critical analysis of Caldecott Medal-winning picturebooks, 1938-2011. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 37(2), 18-29.
- Handforth, T.(1938). *Mei Li*. New York, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company.
- Handforth, T. (1939). Personal progress toward the orient. Retrieved from <http://www.hbook.com/2012/12/choosing-books/horn-book-magazine/personal-progress-toward-the-orient/>
- Horning, K. T. (2013). *Mei Li* and the making of a picture book. *The Horn Book Magazine*, 89(1), 35-40.
- Horning, K. T. (2013). Thomas Handforth, China, and the real Mei Li. Retrieved from <http://www.hbook.com/2013/01/authors-illustrators/thomas-handforth-china-and-the-real-mei-li/>
- Hubler, A. E. (2000). Beyond the image: Adolescent girls, reading, and social reality. *Feminist Formations*, 12(1), 84-99.
- Lewis, D. (2001). *Reading contemporary picturebooks*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- McClure, A. (1995). Censorship of children's books. In S. Lehr (Ed.), *Battling dragons* (pp.3-30). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Power, C. L. (2003). Challenging the pluralism of our past: Presentism and the selective tradition in historical fiction written for young people. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 37(4), 425-466.