

Angel Island: A Barrier to Chinese Immigrants' Passage to America in the Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract

Guided by the tenet of sociology of school knowledge, this paper examines four children's books that were published in English in the United States and discussed early Chinese immigrants' experiences at Angel Island in the first half of the twentieth century. Mainly, the discussion concentrates on the literary representations of the history in terms of authenticity and aesthetics. Historical events, settings, procedures, regulations, and participants portrayed in the research data are seriously examined based on the evidence drawn from a variety of the historical records, laws, and research collected and presented by the scholars. The study concludes that the set of literature is considered to be culturally authentic and also successful aesthetically and may provide an accurate portrayal of the Chinese immigrants at Angel Island from 1910 to 1940.

Keywords: Chinese Americans, Authenticity and Aesthetics, Sociology of School Knowledge, Angel Island, Multicultural Children's Literature

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天使島：二十世紀初期中國移民者進入美國的阻礙

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摘要

以學校知識社會學為理論基礎，本研究論文旨在探究四本出版於美國的英文童書，其內容討論了二十世紀初期中國移民者在舊金山灣天使島的經驗。探討的重點著重於檢視這些童書是否真實且具有美學地詮釋這一段歷史。根據學者們所收集的史料記載、法規、還有研究，童書裡所描繪的歷史事件、場景、過程、相關規定以及角色都經過仔細的分析。研究發現，這四本童書在文學表現上，成功且適切地描繪了從 1910 年到 1940 年間，中國移民者在天使島的心路歷程。

關鍵詞：華裔美國人、真實性與美學、學校知識社會學、天使島、多元文化
兒童文學

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1. Introduction

Due to the high percentage of immigrant children, such as Asian Americans, who participate in the education system in America, multicultural education is a hot issue that demands particular attention. According to Nieto (1992),

Multicultural education is a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism...Multicultural education permeates the curriculum and instructional strategies used in school. (p. 208)

Similarly, Taxel (1997) refers to multiculturalism or multicultural education as “education that address the interests, concerns, and experiences of individuals and

groups considered outside of the sociopolitical and cultural mainstream” (p. 421). Thus, multicultural education is an umbrella term that describes education for all individuals regardless of gender, race, class, and religion.

In addition, Cai and Sims Bishop (1994) states that “multicultural literature is about some identifiable ‘other’ - persons or groups that differ in some way (for example, racially, linguistically, ethnically, culturally) from the dominant” (p. 57-8), and later Sims Bishop (1997) articulates that “multicultural children’s literature is rooted in the call for inclusion and curricula reform by groups who have traditionally been marginalized in this society, and generally is to refer to literature by or about people from such groups” (p. 2). Since multicultural education is concerned with inclusiveness in both curricula and pedagogy, what constitutes the body of multicultural children’s literature taught in a classroom and used to enhance students’ understanding of others demands educators and policy makers to consider the availability, authenticity, and aesthetics of such literature that has the potential of enriching students’ knowledge and interpretation about people other than themselves.

In his examination of high school curricula in terms of adequacy of portraits of American history in textbook selections, Alridge (2006) states that “history textbooks often presented simplistic, one-dimensional interpretations of American history” (p. 662), and the problematic portraits deny “a realistic and multifaceted picture of American history” (p. 663). By the same token, Ladson-Billings (2003) argues that in curricula the “discourse of invisibility is true of every non-European group of people who constitute our nation...Throughout our history we present an incoherent, disjointed picture of those who are not Whites” (p.4). Since one of the major purposes of teaching and learning history is to

provide students multi-dimensional perspectives “with an understanding of the complexities, contradictions, and nuances” (Alridge, p. 663), incorporating relevant children’s literature, including young adult literature and multicultural literature to support and enrich pedagogy, might be a stepping stone to filling in the gaps left by the inadequate but ubiquitous history textbooks used in classrooms. As Huck, Kiefer, Hepler, and Hickman (2004) suggest, “good trade books help fill in perspectives that the textbooks omit” (p. 534). Before purposefully adapting children’s literature in classrooms, teachers must examine, in this case, the portraits of historical events, people, and settings to make sure the literature is authentic and aesthetically satisfying and does not misrepresent and mis-portray historical significances. This concern with the accuracy of history is especially important with regard to immigrants since, according to Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001), approximately 20% of adolescent in the states are children of immigrants.

A group requiring particular attention in terms of the issues of multicultural education and curricula in the United States is Chinese immigrants, who are one of the major components of immigrants, dating back to the mid-nineteenth century when gold was discovered in California. The great wave of the nineteenth century Chinese immigrants began when one of the Chinese residents in California shared the news with his friends in the Canton region (Chang, 2003). The people in the region soon were told that California was a place full of gold; hence, they called the place “Gold Mountain”(*Gum Shan* 金山), which refers to a place where gold was everywhere and piled up like a mountain (Chang, 2003). The living conditions in the Canton region during the time period were harsh. People were starving and supplies were scarce. The news about gold discovered

in the Gold Mountain seemed to be a stream of hope that attracted many Chinese people to immigrate to the far west and look for their fortunes and dig their gold dreams (Chang, 2003). By the year of 1880, the number of the Chinese immigrants reached about 200,000 in California (Lowery, 2000). Their arrival changed the history and the dynamics of the state's population structure.

If multicultural education is significantly related to all students who participate in education in the United States but whose histories have been neglected for so long in history textbooks and classes, incorporating and introducing multicultural literature may be an approach that supports and provides students chances for tracing their ancestors' footsteps. It further helps students picture and construct the history of what happened when their people first arrived in America where they wished to pursue a better life in the foreign land. This study will focus on the history of the Chinese who immigrated from the southeast of China to California in the early twentieth century. Since many scholars advocate the inclusion of multicultural literature in curricula, it is my intention to purposefully and closely examine available children's literature that has an overarching theme of Chinese immigrants in Angel Island, where the name of *Angel* was ironic for the majority of the early immigrants. I will draw on detailed evidence provided by professionals who study the history of the Chinese immigrants in Angel Island to examine relatively accessible historical fictions, in both picture book and novel formats, to discuss literary authenticity and aesthetics in terms of the creation and the content of the literature.

2. A Selection of Related Children's Literature

Although Chinese Americans have constituted a major portion of the immigrant population in the United States since the nineteenth century, the historical encounters in Angel Island are not commonly visible and available in the form of written literary representations. Four titles of children's literature of historical fiction were identified, and the collection includes two novels and two picture books: 1) Laurence Yep and Kathleen S. Yep's novel *The Dragon's Child* published in 2008, 2) Li Keng Wong's novel *Good Fortune: My Journey to Gold Mountain* published in 2006, 3) Milly Lee's picture book *Landed* with illustrations by Yangsook Choi published in 2006, and 4) Katrina Saltonstall Currier's picture book *Kai's Journey to Gold Mountain* with illustrations by Gabhor Utomo published in 2005.

3. Theoretical Framework

According to Apple (1990), institutions such as schools are agents that recreate or reproduce certain cultural and economic power that is perceived as natural and legitimized, and that only benefit and enable some groups to "assert power and control over others" (p. 31). One of the problems of formal curricula designed and taught in school context is the assumption that each individual

comes from a very similar background and possesses similar cultural capitals, such as language proficiency, that favor certain groups of students and neglect the majority of the rest. Since America is a country valuing justice and freedom, true justice, according to Apple (1990), should have the agenda of “maximize[ing] the advantage of the least advantaged” (p. 32). If schools are institutions that have the mission of educating and cultivating students to become sophisticated citizens who value and practice equality and justice in society, the teaching materials that have been taught and incorporated into school curricula are one of the major analytic areas that require specific attention.

This study is guided by the concept of sociology of school knowledge, which is concerned with the content and knowledge being taught in the school and is broadly defined as “the study of the content and organization of school knowledge with emphasis on the relationship [among] school curriculum, students, educators and the political/economic structure of society” (deMarrais & LeCompte, quoted in Power, 2003, p. 429). Because the sociology of school knowledge focuses on the actual content and implications of teaching materials such as literature and textbooks, examining the selection of children’s literature is a cornerstone that aims to demonstrate the importance of careful analysis of a set of literature whose mission is to broaden students’ points of view of multicultural literature and see themselves and their people as one of the pedagogical inclusions in school contexts. Hence, how well the Chinese people’s history at Angel Island has been inscribed in the selected children’s books constitutes the major focus of the study. Mainly, the discussion will concentrate on the literary representations in terms of authenticity and aesthetics.

4. Definitions of Authenticity and Aesthetics

According to Cai (2002), “The realities reflected in multicultural literature are the culturally specific realities that ethnic groups experience” (p. 168). How and what culturally specific realities are incorporated into the literary representations of Chinese American experiences at Angel Island are the major concern. Cai further suggests that “cultural authenticity is a basic criterion in the sense that no matter how imaginative and how well-written a story, it should be rejected if it seriously violates the integrity of a culture” (p. 169). Similarly, Huck et al. (2004) also suggest that “Historical fiction *does* have to be accurate and authentic” (p. 485). However, the essential meaning of cultural authenticity that is purposefully included as one of the primary criteria in the discussion of the multicultural literature requires further definitions. According to Sims Bishop (2003), cultural authenticity

is an elusive term that carries a number of different connotations. In some sense it has to do with the success with which a writer is able to reflect the cultural perspectives of the people about whom he or she is writing, and make readers from inside the group believe that the writer “knows what’s going on.” (p. 29)

Cultural authenticity, to a certain extent, involves the examination and discussion of literary creations that reflect cultural specifics and realities embedded in

historical contexts.

Besides authenticity, the aesthetics of the literature is another primary concern. Cai (2002) adopts one of Hemingway's aesthetic principles, stating that "fiction must be founded on real emotional and intellectual experience and be faithful to actuality, but also be transformed and heightened by imagination until it becomes truer than mere facts" (Hemingway, quoted in Cai, p. 175). Hemingway's notion of aesthetics brings in an important concept that fictional literary works not only need to consider the functions of written language that transmit ideas, knowledge, or concept, but they also should have the quality of aesthetics that reflects non-fictional characteristics and values. Since multicultural literature is a very specific written literary representation that speaks for certain groups of people's experiences in society, the recreation of the selected historical events, participants, and scenes should be examined based on the principles of cultural authenticity and aesthetics that emphasize the reflection of reality in fictional stories.

5. Historical Background

Angel Island in San Francisco Bay

According to Hoskins (2004), Angel Island is the largest island located in the Golden Gate area. Its beauty of tranquility has attracted more than 200,000 visitors each year to spend their time enjoying the peace of the island since 1963, when the California Department of Parks and Recreation began to manage the

island as a state park. However, for many early Asian immigrants, especially Chinese Americans, Angel Island was not as pleasant as its name now implies. During the first half of the twentieth century, the Department of Commerce and Labor built an immigration station in the island (Hoskins, 2004), which serviced and accommodated Chinese and other Asian immigrants before they were admitted to the United States (Yung, Chang, & Lai, 2006). Angel Island was essentially turned into a detention center for Asian immigrants, who awaited medical examinations and interrogations conducted by immigration authorities between 1910 and 1940 (Markel & Stern, 1999).

The Chinese Exclusion Laws

From 1882 to 1943, anti-Chinese policies were enforced in the United States, including the Chinese Exclusion Laws (Mckeown, 2003, p. 377). Explicitly speaking, “‘Chinese Exclusion’ refers to a series of Acts of Congress designed to put severe restrictions on the entry of Chinese into the United States” (Barde, 2008, p. 10). The first act of the series was the “‘Chinese Exclusion Act’ of May 6, 1882” that was an official law “[t]o Execute Certain Treaty Stipulations Relating to Chinese” (Barde, p. 10). Mainly, the law was designed and launched to prohibit Chinese laborers or “coolies” and other people of certain occupations from entering America, and additionally, to make it impossible for Chinese to become American citizens. The act was in force for more than fifty years until President Franklin Roosevelt repealed the act in 1943 (Barde, 2008). From 1910 to 1940, the Chinese Exclusion Laws profoundly influenced the procedures, experiences, and outcomes at Angel Island, often promoting racist and classist results.

6. The Journey of Immigration: 1910-1940 in Angel Island

Preludes

Based on the Chinese Exclusion Act, Chinese laborers were not allowed to enter the United States or obtain citizenship; only certain groups of people were exempted, such as “merchants, diplomats, ministers, travelers and children of citizens” (Hoskins, p. 686). Those who were not prohibited by the Act found it possible to gain entry into America. According to Barde and Bobonis (2006), the Chinese Exclusion Act was certainly “a modest bias in the laws in favor of other classes” (p. 105). Hence, the Chinese who wanted to immigrate to the United States would claim membership of these exempt groups. Being a member of one of the exempt groups was relatively important for Chinese immigrants because that was the “ticket” for them to enter the land of hope. In the fictional stories, Kai in *Kai's Journey to Gold Mountain* (Currier, 2005) was twelve years old when it was the time for him to join his father, who owned a restaurant in “*Gum San*” (p.3), Gold Mountain. In Lee's (2006) *Landed*, the protagonist was also a twelve years old boy named Sun whose father was a merchant who owned a store in San Francisco where the father “imported food from China to sell and ship to Chinese stores and restaurants throughout America” (unpaged). Similarities between the fictional characters – Kai and Sun – are that they both immigrated to the United States at the age of twelve, they both were males, and their fathers belonged to one of the exempted groups.

In Yep & Yep's (2008) *The Dragon's Child: A Story of Angel Island*, Yep

Gim Lew was a ten-year old boy whose father was born in America “and had spent most of his life in that strange land” (p. 9). Hence, Gim Lew’s father was automatically categorized as Chinese American, although his occupation was a “houseboy” (Yep & Yep, p. 56). Gim Lew, as a consequence, was not denied admission into the United States. To this point, the entry “tickets” for Gim Lew, Sun, and Kai were somehow different, but they were all qualified to apply for their immigration documents before they landed in the West Coast. Among the four historical works, Gee Li Keng in *Good Fortune: My Journey to Gold Mountain* (Wong, 2006) was seven when her father, who worked in Gold Mountain, decided to travel back to his village named “Goon Do Hung” (p. 2) in China to bring the family to America. Gee Li Keng’s father “had been living in Gold Mountain since 1912” (p. 11), and he owned a grocery store that “[wasn’t] really a grocery store...It [was] a gambling place that sells lottery tickets” (p. 64).

Whether or not the protagonists’ fathers’ occupations/businesses were legally established in the United States, their families were able to pass the preliminary application procedures that enable them to set out on their immigrant journeys to Gold Mountain– San Francisco. Mckeown (2003) states, “The Chinese Exclusion laws were more pioneering in their goal of sifting through migrants one by one and applying a status to each that determined his or her right to enter...the original laws specifically barred entrance only to Chinese laborers” (p. 377–8). The descriptions of each protagonist’s status meet the historical requirement since none of them or their fathers were categorized as working/labor class.

After the rumor of gold everywhere spread among the Chinese poor villages in the Canton region in 1848, thousands of individuals who were living under

severe conditions such as poverty sought to re-start their lives in America where wide-open spaces and resources seemed to be able to offer great opportunities needed for a promising future (Chang, 2003). Kai's, Sun's, Gim Lew's, and Li Keng's stories are not exceptions. They all lived in rural areas where living supplies were scarce. In Li Keng's Goon Do Hung village, "Villagers trudged out to the fields each day to attend to their rice crops and small vegetable gardens...Everyone worked hard to survive" (Wong, p. 2). The hope and pursuit of living a better life stirred many Chinese to immigrate to the new land, especially for the parents of youngsters. They all wanted to have families living in *Gum San* in order to make their fortunes and to provide their children a better living environment. They knew that their life should be changed, and one of the solutions was to travel overseas to look for and cultivate their dreams. As depicted in *Kai's Journey to Gold Mountain*,

Kai deserves to live with me in *Gum San* where he can get a proper education. He is the brightest boy here in Toy San. What fortune does he have in this poor village besides working in the rice paddies. (Currier, p. 6)

Similarly, Sun in *Landed* was taught to prepare for the journey because his father acknowledged to him, "Our village is small...so we must go where there are more opportunities" (Lee, unpagged).

At the beginning of each story, the authors skillfully depicted the historical backgrounds of each protagonist, whose living conditions were a lot better than

the rest of the villagers because the fathers worked in San Francisco and were able to send money home to support the families. However, sending money home was not the ultimate goal for the fathers of the children since the new land provided more opportunities and hopes that would bring more fortune to the children. Hence, the journey of traveling to *Gum San* was carefully planned by the fathers. As Mckeown (2003) suggests,

Chinese migration was not a process of monodirectional relocation but of circulation. Money earned abroad was intended for the benefit of a family in China, and migration could be a family economic strategy over several generations. A father would migrate, come back, and have a child who would migrate, returning to marry and have a child, and so on for generations. (p. 396)

The circulation was endless as long as newcomers could survive and find hope in the new land. The place called *Gum San* was actually a place of fortune for many early immigrants, including the families of Sun, Kai, Gim Lew, and Li Keng in the narratives that authentically reflect the historical circumstances in the early twentieth century involving China and San Francisco. From the aesthetics perspectives provided by Hemingway, the introductions of two extreme living conditions portrayed in the four historical stories also carry the reflections of realities.

Preparations and Coaching

Although all the protagonists in the selected children's literature belonged to one of the exempt groups, which helped them earn the possibility of entering the United States, their status did not guarantee their entry without severe and tiresome interrogations. As Mckeown (2003) claims, "Native-born citizens and their China-born children were not subject to exclusion, but they still had to submit to initial investigations" (p. 392). The required procedure is carefully inscribed in the fictional stories. Before the departure for Gold Mountain, Gim Lew in *The Dragon's Child* was informed by his Chinese American father to study for the immigration tests. As the narrative described, "The Americans are going to ask us a lot of questions about our family and our village...They don't want Chinese in their country...In your case, they'll want to be certain you're my son" (Yep & Yep, p. 23-4). Gim Lew was told to study detailed information about his family, his neighborhoods, his school life, and his life in his home village. The coaching procedure, although it brought much pressure to Gim Lew, was necessary training that prepared Gim Lew for the severe interrogations at Angel Island. A similar coaching practice was also depicted in Wong's (2006) *Good Fortune* and in Lee's *Landed*, but not in Currier's *Kai's Journey to Gold Mountain*. In the story, Kai's father wrote a letter telling him what he could expect during his trip to Gold Mountain. One of his father's instructions was that "[t]he men in green uniforms will interrogate you to prove whether or not you belong here. Don't be afraid. Know that you do belong here, for you are my son. Answer their questions honestly. If you do not know an answer, do the best you can" (Currier, p. 15). Unlike the rest of three protagonists in the other three stories,

Kai's father did not make him study for the interrogations beforehand. Kai was just simply informed by the written letter.

Compared to Kai's experience, the well-structured coaching procedures for Sun, Li Keng, and Gim Lew provide another scenario that brought tension into the plots and more vividly inscribed and presented the historical encounters in the literary formats. As Li Keng's story goes in *Good Fortune*,

“Girls, these are coaching papers,” Mama explained...“Coaching papers will help us answer the questions that the officials in Gold Mountain may ask us”...“We all must answer the questions correctly...Baba says we must study the answers carefully. We must memorize the contents of this package so we won't make any mistakes. If we can't answer questions correctly, the Gold Mountain officials will deport us back to China.” (Wong, p. 15–16)

From her own experience of going west to the Gold Mountain, Wong (2006) incorporates her mother's serious attitude and language into the narrative, revealing the significant cause-and-effect relationship and brings the historical tensions to the audiences. As Yung states, “In preparation for the interrogation, most detainees studied ‘coaching books’ which were sent to them prior to their coming to America” (p. 54). Studying coaching books was not only for people who could claim relationships with citizens, but also for people known as “paper sons” during the time the Chinese Exclusion Laws were enforced.

Paper Sons

According to Yung (1977), “Because of the Exclusion Laws, many Chinese immigrants were forced to lie and come to the U.S. as ‘paper sons’” (p. 54) who pretended they were sons or daughters of existing Chinese Americans or American Chinese. Among the four selected fictional stories, Currier’s *Kai’s Journey to Gold Mountain* includes two paragraphs portraying the historical issue. Currier (2005) writes,

...Young [was] sitting in a corner of the deck studying a booklet of papers...Young briskly closed the booklet, tucked it under his tunic, and walked away...Kai wondered if Young might be a paper son, like his neighbor’s cousin, Wei. Wei’s family had saved their money for six years to purchase papers claiming that his uncle, who lived in San Francisco, was his father. (p. 12)

Another paper son example can be found in Lee’s (2006) *Landed* when three boys were talking,

Hop looked around to make sure no one was listening before quietly asking, “Are you a paper son?” “What is a paper son?” asked Sun. He explained to Sun that some families sent boys who claimed to be sons of returning merchants and U.S. citizens so they could be admitted into the country. (unpaged)

The history of paper sons can be traced back to 1906 when the 1906 earthquake and fire in San Francisco burned and destroyed birth certificates of Chinese Americans (Daniels, 1997). Many citizens seized the chance to circumvent the laws, lying about the number of their family members, and the outcome is that

A significant number of Chinese successfully represented themselves as native-born American citizens. The advantage of making such a claim was that a citizen could not only travel to China and return, but any children he might father there were also American citizens and admissible. (Daniels, p. 5)

Similar observations were indicated in Mckeown's (2003) article,

On trips to China, male migrants with citizen or merchants papers claimed to have fathered at least one son, who could also claim citizenship before reaching his majority...Fathers claiming to have eight or more sons and no daughters were not uncommon. Their nonexistent sons were known as "slots", and these could be sold, exchanged, and even transferred along with dowries to young men who wished to work in the United States. (p. 393)

The phenomenon of purchasing and presenting fake identifications claiming relationships with legal citizens later made the immigration process more difficult and more challenging. The Bureau of Immigration designed and processed intensive interviews that could last for weeks, and questions asked might include "all of his relatives and in-laws, the layout of his home village, the numbers of

windows, doors, and animals in his household” (Mckeown, p. 393). The historical phenomenon was also indicated by Yung (1977), who states that “[i]n order to catch these illegal entrants [paper sons or paper daughters], detainees were asked questions regarding the layout of their village and their house, and their family background, going back two or three generations” (p. 54). The historical incident was included in Lee’s (2006) portrayal in *Landed*; when Sun was excited about the upcoming journey to Gold Mountain his father asked him to study for the interrogations before departure,

but first you must be coached by Mr. Chan so that you can answer all the questions that will be asked of you. Your brothers and I gave the American officials information about our family, our home, our village when we entered the country. You will be interrogated to prove you are my true son. (unpaged)

From the narrative, audiences are informed that the information regarding the Chinese immigrants was recorded by the American officials. The purpose of detailed questioning was to keep out possible paper sons or illegal immigrants, but the interview format was designed for every applicant “who claimed admission as a citizen or family member of one of the exempt classes and all of his alleged relatives” (Mckeown, p. 393). Although the coaching procedures were time consuming and not pleasant in terms of memorizing detailed information, the most challenging mission for immigrating to America was the experience of being detained at Angel Island which, for many Chinese immigrants, was a place full of suspicions, rejections and frustrations.

“Angel” in the Name of Angel Island is An Irony

According to Yung’s (1977) research, “[a]fter twenty days at sea, often accompanied by seasickness, new Chinese immigrants arriving at San Francisco were transferred to a small boat and taken to Angel Island— a small island in San Francisco Bay” (p. 52). The historical passage of Chinese immigrants to San Francisco from 1910 to 1940 was tiresome and unpleasant due to the fact that those Chinese immigrants were ferried to Angel Island for official interrogation and physical examination purposes. The transfer from San Francisco Bay and Angel Island was part of the storylines that explain the passengers’ journeys. As Lee’s (2006) narrative in *Landed* describes,

They saw the northern coast of California just before they entered San Francisco Bay. When the ship docked,...A loud announcement in Cantonese directed passengers...Sun picked up his suitcase...They were told to have their identification cards ready to show before boarding the motor launch that would take them to Angel Island. (unpaged)

Sun’s encounter resembled most of the Chinese immigrants’ experiences, and Kai in *Kai’s Journey to Gold Mountain* also was expected to go through the process,

Son, when your ship lands in San Francisco, the returning citizens and first class passengers will be allowed to land. But you will be taken to a place called Angel Island to be questioned by the *luk yi* [綠衣 green uniforms]. These men in green uniforms will interrogate you to prove whether or not you belong here. (Currier, p. 14)

Another similarity comes from Yep and Yep's (2008) *The Dragon's Child* when the narrative describes the transition: "[w]e switched to a smaller boat that chugged across the water" (p. 85). The four historical fictions all present harmonious descriptions of the experience of traveling from China to San Francisco and then being detained at Angel Island and awaiting medical examinations and interrogations.

According to Daniels (1997), "The location [of Angel Island] was pleasant and scenic, although quite damp. The ferry trip from San Francisco took forty-five minutes" (p. 4). However, the Island was not as joyful as its name suggests. For the Chinese immigrants, Angel Island was a place full of tears and unpleasant memories, in which they were treated as prisoners and locked up at Angel Island, which "was almost exclusively dedicated to the inspection, disinfection, and at times, detention of Chinese" (Markel & Stern, p. 1321). In the autobiographical novel *Good Fortune*, Wong (2006) depicts the scene,

Women newcomers were separated from the men. Mama, my sisters, and I followed the guard to the women's barracks. The guard opened a locked door. I looked around as we stepped inside. We were in a large, rectangular hall with metal chicken wire...the building was dark, bleak, gray, and depressing. (p. 41)

Gim Lew's journey in *The Dragon's Child* was not much different from Li Keng's: "The bars on all the windows scared me...I felt as if I were being sent to jail, though I had done nothing wrong" (Yep & Yep, p. 88-9). The scary feeling of being "imprisoned" echoes Kai's storylines: "Kai's heart sank as he entered the

huge room before him...The air was stifling...He heard the door close. The clinking of the clock sent a shiver down his spine” (Currier, p. 20).

The jail-like descriptions of the scene of being detained at Angel Island authentically and aesthetically address the historical setting and atmosphere of Angel Island in which the Chinese immigrants were hopelessly held for weeks, months, or even a couple of years depending on the results of the official interviews. Detention at Angel Island and being treated as prisoners aroused the Chinese immigrants' anger and frustrations. According to Hoskins' (2004) observation,

[f]or the most part immigrants on Angel Island endured their confinement and poor treatment with stoic silence not wishing to risk deportation...An important exception to this, however, was the writing of poems where detainees could give vent to feelings of frustrations, bitterness and despair anonymously by carving their stories on to the wooden walls of their prison. (p. 687)

Composing poems and carving the poems on the wooden walls is another historically significant phenomenon that has attracted the attention of many scholars in the second half of the twentieth century when the immigration station was no longer in use. According to Lai, Lim, and Yung's research (1991), over 135 poems written in the classic Chinese style were discovered, and “about half are written with four lines per poem and seven characters per line” (p. 25). Examining the historical fiction, Lee (2006) incorporates a poem written in Chinese as one of the illustrations in *Landed*, and he portrays the scene as follows: “[c]arved into the walls of their dormitory room were poems written by those who

had been there before them. Some of the poems were sad and bitter. Sun read them aloud to the boys” (unpaged). The poem reads, “林到美洲 逮入木樓 成為囚犯 來此一秋” (Lee, unpaged), meaning: “Lin, upon arriving in America, Was arrested, put in a wooden building, and made a prisoner. I was here for autumn” (Lai, Lim, & Yung, p. 128). Compared to Lee’s narrative, Currier’s (2005) depiction catches the life feeling of the ongoing scene, “Kai’s bunkmate was etching something into the wall behind their bed. How strange! ...As soon as the barracks were empty he looked on the wall behind his bunk and found it covered in Chinese script” (p. 27). It says, “夜靜微聞風嘯聲，形影傷情見景詠。雲霧潺潺也暗天，蟲聲唧唧月微明。悲苦相連天消遣” (p. 27). The English translation of the poem was also incorporated into the narrative,

In the quiet of the night, I heard, faintly, the whistling of wind. The Forms and shadows saddened me; The floating clouds, the fogs, darken the sky. The moon shines faintly as the insects chirp. The sad person sits alone, leaning by a window. (p. 27; also recorded in Lai, Lim, and Yung, p. 53)

Another example is depicted in Yep and Yep’s (2008) *The Dragon’s Child*:

I put my box on a top bunk and clambered up after it. Chinese words were carved into the wooden wall next to the bunk...My mouth moved slowly as my finger traced the carving: *Winter gives way to spring. One year gives way to another. Hope gives way to hope. In this wooden tower, worry poisons me.* “What happened to the poet?” I asked. A boy next to me said, “They say he hanged himself.” (p. 89–90)

These poems incorporated into the fictional narratives were not the authors' creations; in contrast, they were historically carved on the wooden walls at Angel Island, and later were collected and recorded in Lai, Lim, and Yung's (1991) *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angels Island, 1910–1940*. The book provides rich resources regarding the historically written Chinese poems and their English translations. The examples depicted in Lee's, Yep and Yep's, and Currier's narratives are also available in the book.

Another historically significant law that directly affected the Chinese immigrants was the Immigration Act of 1924. According to Mckeown (1999), "the merchants, teachers, and students who were exempted from exclusion were allowed to bring spouses and children over, as were American citizens of Chinese descent until the Immigration Act of 1924 prohibited them from bringing over Chinese wives" (p. 74). In the historical fiction, Li Keng's mother in *Good Fortune* was the only mother figure who accompanied the family to the United States in 1933. In the historical period, Chinese wives of American citizens were no longer allowed admission. The historical incident was also clearly indicated in the storylines that state, "Gold Mountain has laws which make it hard for Chinese people to go there. One of those laws says a Chinese labor can't bring his wife to the United States...I can't enter the United State as Baba's wife, but I can enter as his sister" (Wong, p. 17). Hence, Li Keng's mother instructed the children to lie about her real status: "Baba says we must lie about me, even though lying is bad. That is the only way for me to enter the United States with you girls" (p. 17).

For the sake of coming to America with the whole family, Li Keng's mother followed her husband's instruction and told the children that "Baba says you three girls must call me 'Yee' and not 'Mama.' 'Yee' means aunt in Chinese. You must

not forget. If you call me ‘Mama’ in front of the officials, we will be deported back to our village here in China” (Wong, p. 17). Later, throughout the process of immigrating to the United States, the three children were cautious and remembered to address their mother as “Yee” even when they were interrogated by the immigration officials. The interview included in Wong’s (2006) *Good Fortune* reads,

“Where is your mother?”

“She is dead.”

“When did she die?”

“She died in the third month of this year, 1933.”

“Did you attend your mother’s funeral?”

“Yes.”

“Who is the woman here with you in this station?”

“She’s my Yee.” (p. 54)

The fictional encounter fits well with the historical circumstance when the law was launched and barred wives of Chinese to enter the land.

Cultural Specifics

One of the principles of closely examining multicultural literature is to see how culturally specific practices and beliefs are embedded in the historical fiction that have the mission of enriching curriculum in multicultural education. Since the stories have the common theme of Chinese immigrants at Angel Island, evaluating other aspects of the literary works based on cultural authenticity and

aesthetics is crucial. First of all, naming issues are important in terms of individual identities. In the stories, all of the protagonists and their family members had Chinese names. Examples can be drawn from Wong's (2006) narration in *Good Fortune*, "My name is Gee Li Keng. Gee is our family name. Chinese people always put their last name first. Li means 'beautiful' and Keng means 'jade'" (p. 1), and in Yep and Yep's (2008) *The Dragon's Child*, "My father was a dragon. Lung Gon was his name. And he came from a village of dragons" (p. 1). In addition, Currier's (2005) *Kai's Journey to Gold Mountain* also includes the introduction of the protagonist's name in Chinese: "'Ni how Ma! [How are you?] My name's Wong Kai Chong,' he introduces himself. 'What's yours?'" (p. 10). In addition, Sun in *Landed* was named "Sun Chor" in Chinese, who met "Puy Gong from Cha Yuen village" (Lee, unpagged) in the dining room.

In addition to the authenticity of the naming issue, other Chinese cultural practices and specifics include Chinese Festivals, such as Ching Ming [Tomb Sweeping Festival] in Yep and Yep's (2008) *The Dragon's Child*,

During the Ching Ming, Father announced that he and I would visit my grandparents together. The Ching Ming was a spring festival when people went to their family graves and cleaned them. They also offered food and drink to the departed. (p. 30)

Similar portrayal is also available in Wong's (2006) book: "In Goon Don Hung we celebrated the New Year Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival, and the Clear Brightness Festival [Tomb Sweeping Festival]" (p. 7). Besides the incorporation of Chinese festivals, the authors of the selected historical fiction are able to include some Chinese in the storylines that I have

already presented earlier. Further example can be quoted from Wong's (2006) *Good Fortune*, "*Sun nang lai la!* The bride is here!" (p. 13).

After the discussion of Chinese names and language, another cultural aspect is the focus of the Chinese diet. In Kai's and Li Keng's stories, the diet was described as "He remembered his mother's silence and her trembling hand as she served him his last breakfast of tea and rice porridge, cooked just the way he liked it – thick and steamy" (Currier, p. 4), and "Fung prepared a lunch of boiled white rice, cabbage, and steamed sausage" (Wong, p. 17), and the introduction of kitchen wares in Yep and Yep's (2008) *The Dragon's Child*: "Then I got my plates and cups and bowls, soup spoons and chopsticks, and bring them into the parlor" (p. 38). The examples provided in the study only represent part of the narratives that are rich in Chinese expressions and cultural practices, which meet Sims Bishop's principles of authenticity and Hemingway's notion of aesthetics: the stories are fictional but they reflect cultural realities of traditional practices and regional dialects in the historical contexts.

More Evidence Supporting the Quality of the Historical Fiction

Although the selected stories are categorized as historical fiction, Yep and Yep's *The Dragon's Child* and Wong's *Good Fortune* are created based on real encounters experienced by real Chinese immigrants who immigrated to Gold Mountain in the years of 1922 and 1933. One unique feature of Yep and Yep's (2008) story is that they use actual historical documents to begin each chapter by presenting the conversation of interrogation between Laurence Yep's father and an officer. Yep and Yep (2008) acknowledge audiences at the beginning of the

book, “Though this book is a work of fiction, it is based on facts drawn from the immigration files, as well as my own research” (p. ix). The format of each chapter starts from the historical conversations, for instance,

QUESTION: What was life like in China?

Pop: When I was little, I used my left hand and not my right. So I got hit for using the wrong hand. And that kind of made me nervous, and when that happened I stuttered a little bit. That made people even madder. (Yep & Yep, p. 1)

Wong's (2006) *Good Fortune* is another “realistic” story in that she uses her personal account of the immigration experience to construct the story and present her journey as a Chinese immigrant who accompanied the family to America in order to pursue a better life. Unlike the rest of the three stories that center on the immigration procedures and experiences, Wong spends half of the novel recalling her memories of the journey from China to the immigration station at Angel Island. The second half of the novel focuses on the family's life in China Town in San Francisco.

7. Conclusion

According to Sims Bishop (1997),

multicultural literature is to help correct misconceptions and eliminate

stereotyped thinking and if it is to help readers gain insight into and appreciation for the social groups reflected in the literature, then the literature ought to reflect accurately those groups and their cultures. (p. 16)

Among the four titles of children's literature included in the study, authenticity regarding the historical events, settings, procedures, regulations, and participants is seriously examined based on the evidence drawn from a variety of the historical records, laws, and research collected and presented by the scholars. All of the literary representations included in this study are considered to be culturally authentic because they all provide coherent portrayals of the historical events and the people who were involved in the specific time periods. If Sims Bishop's suggestion is to urge the inclusion of multicultural literature to be incorporated and implemented in curricula, the set of literature may provide an accurate portrayal of the Chinese immigrants at Angel Island from 1910 to 1940. Furthermore, the four stories are also successful aesthetically because the narratives are skillfully written, and the tones and languages used in the stories help readers step into the historical settings in which fictional protagonists are granted "lives" through the authors' depictions that bridge the fictional world with the reality.

Sims Bishop (2003) later suggests,

Across ethnic, racial, cultural, and national boundaries, and across time, children's literature has long been considered a vehicle for transmitting moral and cultural values as well as entertaining. When a group has been marginalized and oppressed, the cultural functions of story can take on even greater significance because storytelling can be seen as a means to

counter the effects of that marginalization and oppression on children. (p. 25)

Through the narrative worlds of the Chinese immigrants at Angel Island, students perhaps will be exposed to the history of Chinese immigrants whose stories were once neglected, invisible, and inaccessible. Although the selected children's literature is qualified to be one of the teaching and/or supplementary reading materials that have the function of enriching and supporting curricula, more multicultural literature related to Chinese or other minorities and marginalized groups in the states is needed due to the scarcity of the availability of such literature.

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