

# A Bridge to Intercultural Understanding

## Reading Teachers in the U.S. & English Learners in China Read Children's Literature Books in a Global Book Club

Yang Wang

### Introduction

"But I don't have a culture. What should I explore?" This is how one Caucasian teacher responded when asked to explore her culture in a course assignment during a graduate level children's literature course that I taught in the spring of 2016. The purpose of the assignment was to invite teachers and teacher candidates to examine their cultures. Many teachers identified themselves as cultureless in their reflection paper because they were Caucasian American.

Their reaction to this assignment made me wonder how teachers understood the concept of culture, what they knew about their own cultural identities, and whether they would be able to teach children of various cultural background to embrace diverse cultures since they as teachers did not see or value their self culture. I wondered what I could do to help teachers find their cultural identities and thus build up their intercultural understanding.

Besides talking about what culture was and how they could explore their own culture, I invited this group of teachers and teacher candidates along with a group of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in China to participate in a book club through which we would read and discuss global literature books.

The inquiry I developed for this action research project was: How do American teachers and Chinese EFL learners build intercultural understanding through reading and responding to children's picture books in a global book club? The purpose of this study was to investigate how readers

explore each other's culture and their self culture and gain intercultural understanding through children's literature books, while also seeking implications for selecting and incorporating children's literature to inform literacy practices.

### Global Literature

Corapi and Short (2016) define global books as those "written by immigrants and set in their home countries; written by authors who live and work across global cultures and regularly move between the U.S. and their home culture; or set in global cultures but written by American authors using various research strategies that influence the cultural authenticity of their stories" (p. 6).

Multicultural literature books are those that represent marginalized groups (Corapi & Short, 2016). They provide readers a mirror of their culture and a window into other cultures (Glazier & Seo, 2005), just as do global literature books. When reading books from a different culture, readers tend to wonder if the book accurately represents that culture. Cultural accuracy and authenticity thus is a critical issue when teaching multicultural children's literature (Fox & Short, 2003; Noll, 2003).

Global literature encourages children to sharpen their critical perspectives when exploring personal cultural identities, cross-cultural studies, cross-curricular international materials, and sociopolitical global issues (Short, 2009). Short created a curriculum that is international and invited children's engagement in critical dialogue (Short & Thomas, 2011).

### What is Intercultural Understanding?

Culture includes all aspects of the way of life of any social group and thus cultures are "dynamic, complex, and changing" (Banks, 2008, p. 56). Intercultural understanding involves dialogue at the

cultural level and includes problem solving and social action activities. Gaining intercultural understanding cultivates deeper comprehension of others and helps us become global citizens (Corapi & Short, 2016). Intercultural understanding is obtained when a person:

- Exhibits curiosity and basic knowledge about the world and global cultures;
- Expects complexity in viewpoints and intentionally seeks out multiple perspectives;
- Sees self as a product and participant of multiple cultures;
- Values cultural diversity as a resource;
- Is comfortable with ambiguity and not having one "right" answer. (p. 4)

One important goal is to help students to establish intercultural competency beyond country boundaries and become global citizens who have a better understanding of culture and empathy for various cultures in and outside of their own nation (Banks, 2008).

### Why a Book Club?

Multicultural education is situated within a sociopolitical context (Nieto & Bode, 2011). Drawing upon sociocultural theories of learning and reading (Vygotsky, 1978), this study situated the participants' learning and reading in a global book club involving two different cultural settings. Readers gain new understandings when they are dialogically engaged with others (Bakhtin, 1986), recognizing that learning is a form of communication (Barnes, 1992, p. 14).

This book club was a modified literature group that allowed participants to construct meaning through a dialogue experience and it involved necessary skills of inquiry and critique (Peterson & Eeds, 2007). The community established through the book club fostered relationships with

*Yang Wang is an assistant professor of language and literacy education in the Department of Instruction and Teacher Education of the College of Education at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.*

others, encouraged readers to try new reading experiences, and enhanced appreciation for books they read (Miller, 2013).

### Context of this Book Club

This book club took place from mid March to mid April 2016 in a master's degree level course for literacy teachers in a university in the southeastern United States for which I was the instructor of record. The participants of this book club included two groups, one of pre-K-8 literacy teachers in the U.S. and the second of college EFL students in mainland China. Both groups happened to be all women. Among the literacy teachers, 13 were Caucasian and one was African American. Three participants were full-time graduate students while the others were teachers of students ranging from four years old to middle school. Most of them were from the Southeast and two were from other locations in the U.S.

The EFL students were pursuing their bachelor's degree in English Education from a comprehensive university in the middle region of China. They were from

different areas of mainland of China. I invited those students through their English course instructor, Mrs. Zhao (all names are pseudonyms). She had been teaching at that university for 13 years and the two of us have been exchanging ideas about teaching EFL students for nearly ten years.

Her students were extremely interested in the book club after she explained the format and content. Due to a large number of requests, she had to select a smaller number of participants by grouping the students and letting each group select one or two representatives; this resulted in 25 representative participants.

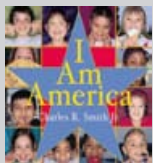
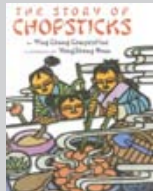


The teachers and students all read one book a week over a time span of a month. They each read four picture books in total: two about American culture and two about Chinese culture. I invited the teachers to recommend literature books that they thought best represented those two cultures. Then I listed out all of their recommendations and sent the book names together with a brief introduction of each book to Mrs. Zhao. She passed them to her students and they decided which book to read each week. After they finalized the

book choices, I announced those choices to the American teachers and they read the same books, or reviewed each book if they had read it before the book club. See Table 1 for the list of selected books.

All teacher and student readers involved in this book club read the books by themselves and prepared for the discussion before online video chats. We conducted the book club through a popular instant messenger used in China, QQ, that allowed us to operate the instant videoconference while sending text messages and sharing photos simultaneously (See Figure 1).

Each video chat discussion session was about 40 minutes long. The teachers remained in the classroom where I set up the computer, camera, and microphone for the chat each time. Due to time zone differences, we negotiated a time that worked for both parties to meet from 6:30-7:10 p.m. Eastern Standard time, which was 6:30-7:10 a.m. Beijing time. The Chinese students gathered in a dorm room since it was early in the morning before their school started. The room capacity and time schedule were the other reasons we limited the participants on the

**Table 1**  
*The List of the Selected Books*

Book Name	Book Cover	Brief Content
<i>I Am America</i>		A poetic photographic picture book of the diverse faces that make up America.
<i>The Story of Chopsticks</i>		A boy Kuai began using sticks for hot food. Then all Chinese use Kuai zi, chopsticks.
<i>Happy Birthday, America</i>		A small town celebration of Independence Day.
<i>A New Year's Reunion</i>		Maomao's family celebrated Chinese New Year together.

Chinese end. When we thought of things to share or query after the video chat, I emailed or contacted Mrs. Zhao and the student leaders via QQ.

The process started with sharing introductory information from both parties, followed by an opportunity to ask questions of each other, and then moved to a free-style discussion. After the video chat, the participants debriefed their reading and discussion in both locations. I led the U.S. teachers in a debrief right after the video chat and Mrs. Zhao also led a debriefing with a bigger group in her class, which also involved students who were not selected to attend the book club.

All sessions of the book club discussions were video recorded and transcribed. I also kept observation notes of the online discussion, teachers' reflections, students' work samples, and my contact record with Mrs. Zhao and her students. I used open coding (Yin, 2014) to look through all of the data and borrowed constant comparison (Merriam, 2009) for analyzing themes. The data were triangulated for reporting the findings (Yin, 2014).

### Global Book Club

Both the teachers and students were excited upon initiating this conversation at the first session. The book *I Am America* served as the dialogue prompt. They shared who they were and what they did. They asked general questions about each other to build a rapport.

For example, the teachers asked, "How old are you? Do you drink Starbucks? Do you have Instagram? Do you listen to American music? Who is your favorite American singer?" The students asked, "Have you been to China? Are Hollywood movies very popular in America? Do you like peanuts? How do you maintain so confident?" They shared a lot of laughter during that first introductory session.

### Teachers in the U.S.

The teachers quickly understood more about Chinese culture through reading the literature books and talking with Chinese students in this book club. They also experienced a reading workshop model of teaching literature and literacy skills. In addition, they had an opportunity to see their own culture through the outsiders' eyes. That was helpful in encouraging the teachers to think about their cultural identities and to learn how to teach students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The teachers were more interested in

cultural stereotypes and knowing if the books accurately represented Chinese culture. Prior to the book club, they had learned about some stereotypes of Chinese people and Chinese culture. However, they seldom had their questions answered. This book club provided them an opportunity to talk with Chinese Mandarin native speakers who were born in and grew up in China. The teachers cherished this opportunity, learned to look beyond the stereotypes, and heard authentic cultural perspectives from the students in China. For example, they asked about American stereotypes from the Chinese students' perspective.

TEACHER ANGELA: What are some American stereotypes that you can think of? Like are we fat?

TEACHER ELLEN: Really? ... Yeah we like food here. ...

STUDENT JIAJIA: In my opinion America their country not only the area but also America is very strong and I think Americans, I think are very open minded, very hard study, and very hard working.

TEACHER MICHELLE: Interesting.

TEACHER ANGELA: I just think everyone thinks we're lazy.

TEACHER JULIE: That's a better portrayal than I thought that would be.

TEACHER KELLEY: That was generous.

Besides learning about themselves through other's eyes, the teachers queried the stereotypes that they had about Chinese culture. They asked the students about real life in China. For example,

TEACHER ELLEN: Do you have marriages that are arranged for you? Like do your parents pick who you marry?

CHINESE STUDENTS: [Laughing] No.

TEACHER ANGELA: Sorry it's a stereotype. It's just a question.

ONE CHINESE STUDENT: We are too young.

TEACHER ANGELA: Too young?

TEACHER MICHELLE: What age do they start dating?

CHINESE STUDENTS: We have no boyfriends.

Teachers asked about stereotypes and asked if the information presented in the book *The Story of Chopsticks* was accurate.

TEACHER JULIE: Did you think that book about chopsticks was accurate about Chinese culture?

STUDENT JIAJIA: No, only a part of it.

AUTHOR: Which part is not accurate?

STUDENT ZIWEN: It's accurate about Chinese chopsticks but not all about the tradition and culture.

Teachers brought up the accuracy question again when discussing the book of *A New Year's Reunion*.

TEACHER PEGGY: Was the book an accurate picture of what happens on Chinese New Year Celebration Day?

STUDENT MEIJUAN: I think yes. Yes, some parts are accurate. We have different food in North and South. And in North we eat dumplings and we don't eat that round rice bowl. And this is the first part, and I think the book introduces the (inaudible)

**Figure 1**  
A Screen Shot of the Book Club Video Chat: Angela, Ellen, Michelle, and other teachers discussed via QQ with Shihua, Jiajia, and other students.



and another part is we are visiting our relatives on the New Year's First day. So this is the accurate one, we meet each other and we say Happy New Year and this is the accurate one in my opinion. And we play together and we have many happy things to do.

The U.S. teachers learned about Chinese culture as they listened to the Chinese students present and discuss the books they read. This dialogue made the U.S. teachers aware of some cultural aspects that they had never heard or seen before. For example, the teachers compared and reflected on their culture after Chinese students presented their festivals of Water Splashing, Dragon Boat, La-Ba, and Lantern Festival. They realized they did not have that many festivals in the U.S. Teacher Angela said, "There seem to be more traditions in Chinese culture than American. Like we don't have festivals. You seem to have a lot of festivals."

### **Tension in Intercultural Understanding**

One critical incident happened when they read the book *Happy Birthday, America*. The tension in intercultural understanding emerged at the moment when they talked about Independence Day.

STUDENT SHIHUA: Independence Day is the remember of the Great War in America of Washington. I want to know what is your favorite president in history? I want to know the history of the America.

AUTHOR: [Turned to the teacher and repeated the students' question.] What's your favorite president?

STUDENT SHIHUA: Can you introduce him to us?

[Silence. Teachers looking at each other and nobody responded.]

TEACHER CAROL: Oh. [Thought for a second] Franklin Roosevelt.

[For a minute nobody else continued.]

AUTHOR: So you all agree with this one?

TEACHER MICHELLE: No.

[Again no one else responded for a moment.]

TEACHER KELLEY: Everybody has their own personal favorite.

STUDENT SHIHUA: So what is your personal favorite?

[Teachers conversing over favorites. No one responded to the big group.]

AUTHOR: Well, they all have different favorites. It's a hard question.

I was surprised that many teachers did not give an answer to this question which I thought would be easy to answer, but only Carol, who was a 67-year-old retired teacher, had offered a response. I conferred about this situation with two colleagues who are both university faculty in teacher education. One, a literacy specialist, thought it could be that teachers did not want to answer a question revealing their political stances. The other faculty colleague, in social studies education, thought it might be that the teachers did not know the previous presidents well enough to be able to offer a favorite name.

When I followed up with Mrs. Zhao, she said the girls asked this question because they had their favorite president from what they have read about American history, and they just wanted to know if American teachers liked the same one they did. Reflecting on this, I realized how personal literature discussion could become and how comfortable teachers needed to be to step out of their safe zone to express their opinions.

If teachers cannot speak their voices, then how could they help children to speak their different voices? How much do we value personal opinions? Would it be different if we could have built a safer community in which everybody felt more comfortable to express their opinions?

Overall, the teachers enjoyed talking with students in China. Teacher Katy emailed me, "I thought video chatting was great!!! I think it would be awesome to do that in the classroom with other classes around the world. Thanks for allowing us to do that!" Additionally, teachers reflected on teaching reading and writing with the emphasis of using children's literature books.

TEACHER JULIE: I've realized that you just have to look at it with a very critical eye and hope you are doing the right thing. But then I agree that we should double check everything, or you can ask someone.

TEACHER CAROL: I think it is really cool having the picture books that have two different languages so that it translates it's easier to show it to your students or to other people learning languages.

TEACHER PEGGY: For ESL learners a lot of times learn through pictures, so having the picture with the word or verbally with the picture makes it much easier or much more real.

### **Students in China**

In this book club, college EFL students in China read for aesthetic purposes and

enjoyed the dialogue as a *lived-through* experience (Rosenblatt, 1978), but did not read for a test or bank the information (Freire, 2000). They were highly engaged in this book club and were motivated to learn English language as well as American culture while they reflected on their own culture.

Chinese students in small groups read the selected books and prepared questions and topics to share in the book club. They researched extensively about American culture and their own culture and prepared talking points. They were interested in the selected books as well as the door those books opened to discuss different cultures and real life experiences. They shared some of the festivals they celebrate, and talked about taboos of using chopsticks.

STUDENT AIHUA: In China, chopsticks always appear as double. Because in china, pairs means lucky. I want to ask a question about are there some symbols like this in America?

TEACHER JULIE: A rabbit's foot?

TEACHER ANGELA: Are you asking things in America that symbolize to be lucky or for luck or are you asking are there things in America that come in pairs?

STUDENT AIHUA: Yes. Pairs in China means lucky.

TEACHER MICHELLE: Four leaf clovers.

TEACHER ANGELA: A rainbow? No.

TEACHER CAROL: A rabbit's foot.

When the students did not have a chance to talk in the book club, they typed out their words in groups as a back channel conversation. Mrs. Zhao collected their writing and emailed them to me so I could share with the teachers. For example, several teachers asked about social media in China. One selection of a group response in an email was:

In China, media has become more and more important in our daily life. As for us, because the major we study is English, we should know the cultures and customs about many English-speaking countries. The social media is convenient for us to search the information from many online search engines. Such as Wikipedia, Baidu and Google. It's as important a tool as the dictionary for English study students. And sometimes our teacher can upload the PPT (such as the e-book *Chopsticks*) about lessons to QQ so we can download them to study after class.

Ms. Zhao extended the reading from the book club to the entire class and involved

those who were not selected to participate in the live video chat. They brainstormed questions that they would like to ask American teachers together in class, and they carried the topic discussed in the book club in big group. Students in groups wrote and created their own books about their culture and wrote about their culture. See Figure 2 of a small group of students who worked together responding to their reading in the university library.

This experience stimulated the students' English language learning. They read more supplementary materials to get to know American culture and read about their own culture in English. In addition, they wrote their inquiries about questions that generated from reading those books. They wrote about their own culture in English and even made their own books using PowerPoint. For example, students in small groups made an *I Am Chinese* multimodal book including text, pictures, and music using *I Am America* as a mentor text (see Figure 3).

When asked what they have learned from this book club in the last session of book club, two of those students shared,

From this book club, we can practice our oral English. By having this book club, chatting with you and maybe we make friends with you and we have many friends. Also, we learn more about American cultures and your Americans daily life. But we don't know it correctly before the book club. (Jiajia)

Through literature book we can learn history of literature language which we love. Hopefully, from my point of view, I hope that every language is based on the certain history by based on the history and we can better understand the background of this language from reading literature books, that's all my view. (Ziwen)

After the last session, Mrs. Zhao emailed and informed me that her students still had some questions and wondered if they could ask them. This time they wrote down many questions about social justice and equity in the U.S. We were not able to conduct another session due to our schedule; however, I believe if we had had enough time for those questions, the dialogue would certainly have pushed everyone to think more critically while appreciating cultural differences and similarities.

### Discussion

Reading and responding to children's literature books in this global book club created an opportunity for American teachers and Chinese students to interact with curiosity about each other's cultures and gain a deeper understanding of each other. Such conversations at a cultural level extend to a wide range of appreciation of everyone's values and beliefs (Corapi & Short, 2016). The book club helped the participants foster diversity awareness and appreciate their own culture.

Both groups enjoyed learning the oth-

er's culture from an insider's perspective. They all gained a richer understanding of the other culture through the window of the literature books (Glazier & Seo, 2005) and the conversations with the other group. This book club allowed them to explore the answers to their questions from cultural insiders. They asked questions about unknown things that generated from their reading and general wonderment about a different culture. They asked about stereotypes and explored the new answers. In that way, they sought for cultural authenticity and in the process corrected negative stereotypes.

If the literature books are the windows to a different culture, this global book club provided them with an interactive window to understand the other culture. They asked and confirmed ideas and information they learned from the books they had read or the internet. They did not read the books for banking information (Freire, 200), but rather questioned what they read from the book, reflected on their prior knowledge, and sought answers from the insiders. The book club conversation between the two groups decreased negative stereotyping (Noll, 2003) and developed intercultural understanding.

When the participants read books of their own culture, they mostly read and accepted who they were and their culture in the mirror of the books (Glazier & Seo, 2005). Having a conversation with the outsiders made them reflect on who they really were and reflect on their own cultural identities. Both parties read books, as a mirror, about their culture so that they could see themselves in the books.

The outsiders' opinions and questions helped them reflect on their own culture and value their culture and their cultural identities rather than taking it for granted. It helped all the participants to value themselves as individuals situated in their own cultures. The American teachers found that they were not "cultureless," but in fact shared a rich culture.

Both the American teachers and Chinese EFL students established a broader perspective of intercultural understandings through reading and discussing the literature books. They were curious and picked up new knowledge about cultures from their dialogue. They respected cultural differences and valued diverse culture.

Through the book club discussion, they became more comfortable interacting with multiple perspectives (Corapi & Short, 2016). They enjoyed sharing the similarities as well as valuing the differences.

**Figure 2**  
*Aihua's Group Worked on Their Reading Response in the Library*



Teacher Julie said, “I’ve enjoyed hearing the similarities that we share with you all.” The cultural differences expanded their intercultural understanding and the similarities among them drew them together in the global community.

### Final Words

Teachers play an important role in supporting children’s experiences and interaction with books. Integrating global literature into curriculum takes time. It also takes time for readers to reflect and seek their personal cultural identities and build understandings for other cultures. It is crucial that the intercultural understandings be built on accurate information and life experiences, not stereotypes or misinformation. Authentic global literatures provide readers with such information. Access to global literature books could provide children an opportunity to see others through the window and see themselves through the mirror.

Teachers need to feel comfortable with talking about cultural diversity before they bring in any cultural conversations to their classrooms. Encouraging conversations over global literature would better promote intercultural understanding. Utilizing a book club would situate reading and learning in a social context.

In this context, reading global literature provides an opportunity for readers to explore other cultures, seek their culture identities, and cultivate the intercultural understanding. Teachers could set up reading workshop in the classroom or book clubs that connect to other classrooms in the states or in other countries or areas. Teachers can encourage critical thinking and dialogue during reading workshop and book clubs. Cultivating intercultural understanding is not a one-step procedure, but a continual growing process.

### References

Bakhtin, M. M. (1986). *Speech genres and other*

*late essays*. C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Eds. V. W. McGee. Trans. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Banks, J. (2008). *An introduction to multicultural education*. Boston, MA: Pearson.

Barnes, D. (1992). *From communication to curriculum* (2nd ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Corapi, S., & Short, K. (2016). *Exploring international and intercultural understanding through global literature*. Tucson, AZ: Worlds of Words.

Fox, D., & Short, K. (2003). *Stories matter: The complexity of cultural authenticity in children’s literature*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.

Miller, D. (2013). *Reading in the wild*. San Francisco, CA: Education Week Press.

Nieto, S., & Bode, P. (2011). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*. Boston, MA: Pearson.

Noll, E. (2003). Accuracy and authenticity in American Indian children’s literature. In D. Fox & K. Short (Eds.), *Stories matter: The complexity of cultural authenticity in children’s literature* (pp. 182-197). Urbana,

**Figure 3**  
The First Four Pages from the “I’m Chinese” Book Made by One of the Student Group.



IL: National Council of Teachers of English.  
 Peterson, R., & Eeds, M. (2007). *Grand conversations: Literature groups in action*. New York, NY: Scholastic.  
 Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.  
 Short, K. (2009). Critically reading the word and the world. *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, 47(2), 1-10.  
 Short, K., & Thomas, L. (2011). Developing intercultural understandings through global

children's literature. In R. Meyer & K. Whitmore (Eds.), *Reclaiming reading: Teachers, students, and researchers regaining spaces for thinking and action* (pp. 149-162). New York, NY: Routledge.  
 Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

### Children's Literatures

Smith Jr., C. R. (2003). *I am America*. New York, NY: Scholastic Inc.  
 Compestine, Y. C. (2001). *The story of chopsticks*.

New York, NY: Holiday House.  
 Osborne, M. P. (2003). *Happy birthday, America*. New York, NY: Roaring Brook Press/Macmillan.  
 Yu, L. (2013). *A New Year's reunion*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.