

Writing for Asian Children: History, Fantasy, and Identity

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Abstract

A short autobiographical essay on the motivations and contexts for the writing of the children's novel, *Princess Shawl* (2008). The essay also explicates its narrative structure and explores the relation of history to specific novelistic strategies.

Keywords

Abjection, local, colonial, diasporic Chinese, novel, history

Why write Asian children's literature? My paper maps a number of parallel universes to answer this question and in the process bring some of these seemingly parallel discursive universes into convergence.

The first answer to "why" is drawn from personal experience. I began writing as a colonial subject at age nine, while educated in a British colonial school system, at the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, in the small town of Malacca, which was, like Singapore then, part of the British Straits Settlements. In short, I was raised not only by my Hokkien and Nonya father and mother, but also by Catholic nuns from County Clare in Ireland. In my 1996 memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces*, I contrast my Chinese Malaysian experience of being an only girl in a family of five children to the lessons on individualism and autonomy that were subtly taught to me through the children's literature I was reading.

But critical and analytical as I have been over the decades about the cultural, social, and psychological effects of British children's literature on my self-formation and my present identity straddling, it never occurred to me that I should myself make

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an intervention in this field of the early imagination that I had owned theoretically and existentially as primary, crucial, and excruciating in its long-term affects on abjection.

In 2006, the Director of the Singapore National Book Development Council, Mr. Ramachandran, asked me to write a book for Asian children. Singapore has been sponsoring an annual conference on children's literature for a number of years, and what had emerged in the course of those conference meetings is the paucity of such writing oriented specifically for Asian children, and the overwhelming role played in children's readings and in school curricula, whether in Singapore, Malaysia, or Hong Kong, of children's books written by Euro-Westerners for Euro-Western children.

I remember, digressively, that my own induction as a five and six year old into the obsessive pleasures of reading was mediated for me and for my generation throughout a global Anglo-British Empire by a goddess-author whose visage was never shown to me and who went by the gloriously Victorian-inflected name, Enid Blyton. At six, I read about Noddy, naughty black-faced Golliwog, Miss Minny Mouse, and a few years later delighted in the adventures of the Famous Five and the Secret Seven. It was not until I had earned a Ph.D. that I began to note that Golliwog was always illustrated as a raced character in black face, and that Golliwog may perhaps be associated with the popular British slang term WOG, standing as a racial epithet, for Western Oriental Gentleman, a word to demean dark-skinned Indian colonised subjects who'd internalised and therefore imitated the superior culture of British Raj administrators, the kinds of characters Salmon Rushdie vividly recreated and satirised in *Midnight's Children*.

Thus, when Mr. Ramachandran made his appeal to me, I understood immediately and perfectly the significance of the mission he'd set out for me. Nonetheless, I found his request then merely amusing. As a full professor, having spent all my early and adult years in academia, particularly at a research university, I know better than most that creative writing is seldom held in high regard at the university, where the theory and critical interpretation of literary texts are privileged, but the actual production of literature, unless validated by honours and awards, is held at sceptical distance, reproducing in this way the value distinctions between pure or theoretical and applied Maths, Physics, and so forth that prevail in the sciences. How much less valued is writing for children both in the critical domain and among literary producers themselves! There are Nobel Prizes and Bookers for serious literature but not for children's writing, which by association with young humans, is almost universally viewed as unserious and light. An academic could not hope for the rewards of promotion, tenure and even further merit pay once she were to write for nine-year-olds rather than for brilliant post-thirty intellectuals.

However, after I returned to California, Mr. Ramachandran's earnest request continued to intrigue me. After all, for a few years in my life, I had spontaneously composed bedtime stories for my son, when he was one to four and five, before he'd learned to read. Often, halfway through an invented tale, it would strike me that the story was worth remembering; it was worth writing down. But the exhaustion that felled me each night after I managed to lull my son to fitful slumber meant that none of those stories, so desperately narrated to amuse a determinedly sleepless child,

survived MY weary nights. Indeed, all my adult waking life has been a scramble for precious time to write – to devote to my poems, short stories, memoir and novels, the critical texts that earn me my professional rank and status, and so on and so forth. Mr. Ramachandran’s appeal perhaps arrived at an auspicious time in my life. A full professor at the top of my university’s merit system with no where higher to be promoted to, I can after all afford to ignore the exigencies of a narrow institutional reward system. If not a tenured professor, who at a university could or would be sufficiently secure to focus on writing for children?

Moreover, Mr. Ramachandran had appealed to me as a “local” author, coming from a Malaysian-Singaporean social base, and therefore organically concerned with the social development of local children, rather than as an American or cosmopolitan author, addressing a Western-based and global readership. After I had left Malaysia for the United States in 1969, really, no one, but no one had appealed to me so directly as a locally rooted author. Despite my continued interests and research in Malaysia, Singapore and more recently Hong Kong cultural and educational matters, there has always been the distancing that frames me as an American outsider, not a national subject, and clearly not in possession of the mother tongues that articulate one as socially belonging and from which one creates art with that mother tongue’s articulations.

So, in 2006 I began to cast back to the local stories that had offered a counter-literary tradition during my childhood – stories that came out of an oral, vernacular, mixed-tongue, fully Asian (that is, Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Eurasian) imaginary. In that return to my childhood and the local stories that had stirred me, in a parallel tradition to Enid Blyton’s books, I recalled the Malay ghost stories of the bomoh and the pontianak that had thrilled my brothers and me in the evenings, and particularly the story first narrated in the *Sejarah Melayu*, the *Malay Annals*, of the legendary figure of the princess from China, Hang Li Po, who had been sent by her father, the Emperor, to marry the Melaka prince, Sultan Mansur Shah. To a girl-child living in Malacca, the marriage of Princess Hang Li Po and Sultan Mansur Shah was an intensely vivid and authentic legend, vivified by the concrete geography of the town, where their union may be said to remain like visions in a palimpsest throughout the town’s narrow streets and its mixed Malay and Chinese architectural sites. My mother, a Nonya dressed in Baju Kebaya, had talked to me in Malay, and we as often ate rice and sambal blachan using the fingers of our right hand as we slurped noodles with chopsticks.

I had spent the first twenty years of my life in Malacca. From a house too small for my father’s overflowing family I would flee many afternoons after school to climb St. Paul’s Hill, pass by the crypt where St. Francis’s reputedly undecayed body was said to have been laid when brought from Macau before being sent on back to Europe. There in the shade provided by the broken walls of St. Paul’s Church, close by the tall heavy headstones that commemorated in sonorous Latin the illustrious Portuguese captains and other officers whose bodies were buried somewhere near the hill, I studied my English books. I walked daily in and through Malacca’s long colonial history, and as a young girl in Standard Six I had wanted deeply to write those stories I

glimpsed among the gravestones, the crypt, the statehouse, the narrow Chinese streets, the Malay mosques, the fountain dedicated to Queen Victoria right by the clock tower, and more. I had even as a child and teenager a romantic imagination that seized on what probably to most Malaccans appeared musty, dull, soporific, everyday, colonial and communal remnants, like the items in a bin by the corner of a second-hand store reduced to a couple of dollars. I found these historical remnants visible everywhere in Malacca town and irresistibly wonderful, of a texture unknown elsewhere, bits and pieces of folklore, legend, histories visible in stone, brick, tile, and landscapes that I knew could be stitched into rapturous stories. But, of course, I was only ten, eleven, and twelve, and soon colonial exams like the Senior Cambridge Exams and the A levels, professional demands, and tougher critical and intellectual challenges erased these fanciful storytelling desires, and I migrated to the United States and steadily moved up the university ranks.

I did write about Malacca in poems, stories, and in my memoir. But in these works, Malacca's legends and history are always scrimmed through the viewfinder of dislocation, exile, and immigration, and the psychic content in these adult experiences have discoloured and stained that first childish delight in the original stories. That is, until Mr. Ramachandran's appeal to that childhood storyteller, that young Chinese Malaccan writer who had never come to be because the woman who carried her left for the US East Coast instead and began to write about the difficult conditions of continuously provisional, situational identities.

My first children's novel, *Princess Shawl*, comes from the imagination I possessed as a Chinese Malaysian girl. It is the kind of writing I would have done had I never left Malaysia or had immigrated to Singapore instead. It comes from the writer I was intended to be, had adventurous, wearisome life not interfered. In that way *Princess Shawl* is my most joyful book. With little Mei Li in *Princess Shawl*, I have been able to rescue my inner Hang Li Po from the island of exile to unite with the Sultan, and hence to secure, if only in imagination, a future for diasporic Chinese who have been transformed through Time's mighty engine into national subjects in Malaysia and Singapore.

Before I committed to writing *Princess Shawl*, I asked Mr. Ramachandran who would be interested in publishing such a book, intended for such a small Singaporean and Malaysian English-language audience. I had suffered a bad experience with trying to publish a critical book on Singapore literature in the early 1990s. After spending a year at an ISEAS Fellowship working on a study of Singapore and Filipino English-language literature, and another two years completing the manuscript, I had been stunned to have the manuscript rejected by a Singapore press that I thought had already committed itself to publishing it. I realised then, in scrambling to find another publisher to pick up that manuscript, that interest in Singapore culture was extremely limited outside of Singapore, and that an author would be taking a risk in expending her energies on Singapore-oriented cultural matters, unless she was assured contractually of publication within the Singapore Republic itself. Mr. Ramachandran was very confident. He said, "Shirley, write the book, and I promise you I will find a

publisher for it.” I completed *Princess Shawl* before summer 2007, and Mr. Ramachandran faithfully shopped the manuscript around in Singapore. But it found no takers.

It took me almost a year to find a publisher, Maya Press, a non-profit subsidiary of a successful textbook publishing venture, Sasbadi, in Malaysia, which did a beautiful job of producing *Princess Shawl*.

Did I know what I was doing in writing this children’s novel? Yes and no. For those of you who wish to learn something about this particular genre, yes, children’s literature is a genre that is quite distinctive from fictions for adults, from the short story, novel, and memoir forms. Children’s literature has very much its own set of conventions. After I finished writing *Princess Shawl*, I recognised that I had depended intuitively and in an un-theoretical manner on my own experiences of delight in reading children’s literature, on the books that had so deeply affected me as a young reader – chiefly the stories of Hans Christian Anderson, the Grimm Brothers, *The Thousand and One Nights*, and so forth. At the same time I had also tapped into the oral tradition of my native society, which included the historical events recorded of my hometown, Malacca. Both the Euro-Western written literary and the Asian-Malay-Chinese oral story traditions converge in the book. It was in this way a deeply satisfying book to write. The multiple traditions from West and East, from literary and oral narratives, from the layered histories of a serial European colonialism, from Chinese and Malay folklore and cultural visions converge for me in Mei Mei’s adventures. They never appeared to me while I was writing as dualistic, separate, conflicting, disjunctive, etc. Various cultural strands came together naturally and organically in the narrative, just as these strands must appear natural and organic to a nine-year-old child who experiences them in her life and imagination.

On narrative structure and the representation of local history, the novel uses a local trope to explain the nature of narrative layering. That is, time was sequenced as layers of a kuih lapis, and the chapters peeled back historical time beginning with the most recent and ending in the earliest historical period, beginning that is with Malaya in the 1950s, pre-Independence, leading on to colonial 19th century Malaya of Chinese immigration, and then the settlement of assimilated Nonyas and Babas, before covering the loss of Portuguese Malacca to the Dutch, the loss of the Malacca Sultanate to the Portuguese, and finally arriving at the time of Princess Li Po’s exile from Malacca. This layered backward historical progression, what Mei Mei calls a kuih lapis-style story, is book-ended by opening and closing chapters set in contemporary Singapore.

In hindsight, it was amazingly fortuitous that the original *Malay Annals* had a Chinese Princess marrying the Malay Sultan – here were both romance and royal blood – two excellent ingredients for a tale whether from Hans Christian Anderson, *The Thousand and One Nights* or the Grimm Brothers!

But, as every fairytale reader knows, a tale also needs a protagonist who becomes a hero through fulfilment of a quest. My heroine, Mei Li, or little Mei Mei as her parents call her, is a nine-year-old Singaporean girl whose quest is to rescue the princess from Pulau Tikus, the island of exile, so the Princess can marry the Sultan

and achieve the destiny intended for her and for future generations of diasporic Chinese Malaysians and Singaporeans. The dramatic action is plotted on Mei Mei's quest – and for that the novel needed not only a clear heroine but also a clear exposition of her character and the nature of the quest, both elements best achieved through showing rather than telling.

The little girl heroine has to go back through time to succeed. Time travel, as we all know, is a given in many tales of wonder and magic. Instead of a flying carpet or flying horse, instead of Peter Pan's and Tinklebell's magic dust, I invented a magic shawl. Here I drew on my years as a Hong Kong visitor and inveterate shopper, to introduce visual and cultural elements, like the iconographic figures found in Mandarin squares to make the tale vivid.

I knew what I was doing both in content and narrative structure when I was writing the book. *Princess Shawl* has a clear heroine and protagonist with whom we can strongly identify. It has a strong romance element, the Princess and her Sultan, echoed in the other romantic couple, Mei Li's father and mother. The novel, after all, concludes with the birth of a second child, a son, to Mei Li's parents. *Princess Shawl's* quest motif raises suspense and surprise. The plot dramatises the struggle between good and evil, love and hate, and in the end, good triumphs over evil, love wins over hate. These are all conventional elements common to, if not universally found, in many children's stories. Think Cinderella, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Peter Pan, The Lion in the Closet, and so forth.

But in a crucial sense, I did not know what I was doing. It has been decades since I have read children's books. I have never studied children's literature either as literary artifact or sociological and historical production. When I began writing *Princess Shawl*, I had no notion of appropriate age audience and the kind of vocabulary level for any such young readership. I had done no research on what the market for children's writing is like and queried no publisher. I wrote the book that was in me, pulling on much that I had carried away from those years as an entranced child reader – the profoundly psychological drives that are peculiar to writing for children's imaginations, what Bruno Bettelheim had suggested in his book, *The Uses of Enchantment*.

When *Princess Shawl* was completed, it was as if I woke up out of storytelling time and into a rather hopeless muddle of socio-political confusion. As I had said earlier, no Singapore press was interested in it. Although it begins and ends in Singapore, the book is also about Malaysian origins, and although thoroughly Chinese diasporic in cultural reference, it is also fairly Southeast Asian and Malay in nuance, idiom, and linguistic shading. That is, as a children's book it is not firmly moored to *one* national or *one* ethnic cultural identity. Like the Malaysia and Singapore that nourished me as a child, the book's cultural referents are mixed, hybrid, champor-champor, rojak, multicultural, multi-ethnic, even multi-national. I did not ever consider sending the manuscript to a US press. For me, I had written it as a local author and for the children of my *geni loci* – and if American children will read it one day that would be fine, but that must come after the book has been read by and to its first family members – to Malaysian Singaporean Chinese diasporic peoples.

Novels for adults, like my children's novel *Princess Shawl*, often go to history for their content and psychic charge. In his novel, *Crabwalk*, Gunter Grass, the German author and Nobel Prize winner, talks about the novel genre from the perspective of the author, about the psycho-social motivations that may be little understood by publishers and readers, of the relationship between history and the novel genre: "History, or, to be more precise, the history we Germans have repeatedly mucked up, is a clogged toilet. We flush and flush, but the shit keeps rising." But in a novel for children, while history must also be represented in its aspects of destruction and suffering, the imagination may yet partake of the child's desire for delight, so that the form serves as a didactic equivalent to lessons that are best learned through the honey of imagination. That is, instead of history as shit, a children's novel offers some sweetness in the learning of history's painful episodes.

"History does not refer merely... to the past," James Baldwin famously reminds us in *The Fire Next Time*. "On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways. And history is literally present in all that we do." That was what I aimed for in constructing the characters of Mei Li and her parents in Singapore, ordinary Singaporeans who nonetheless carry the history of the diasporic Malaysian Chinese in all that they do. *Princess Shawl* ends with the image of the future for such characters, with Mei Li celebrating her eleventh birthday in the presence of family friends and her new baby brother.

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