

# Students Learn about Chinese Culture through the Folktale *Yeh-Shen*

## Emphasizing Figurative Language Interpretation

Barbara C. Palmer, Lingzhi Sun, & Judith T. Leclere

We are now living in a globalized world. Present and future generations must develop intercultural competence in order to meet new social and economic challenges (Davies, 2008). As cross-cultural understanding increases, communication is facilitated and clarified around the globe, and we are more readily able to learn about cultures that are not already familiar to us. One way to learn about and appreciate a culture is to become familiar with its literature. Kaminski (2002) indicated that “multicultural folktales are an excellent source of content for illustrating not only the uniqueness of different cultures but also the commonalities between and among cultures” (p. 31).

Widely-known fairy tales, for example, can be used as vehicles to experience and understand life from different cultural perspectives. “*Cinderella* is the best known and most copied of the fairytales, with as many as 700 variants; almost every culture has a version” (Worthy & Bloodgood, Dec./Jan. 1992-93, p. 291). It is agreed that one of the earliest recorded versions of *Cinderella* is the Chinese story of *Yeh-Shen*, believed to date back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.). It was popular among the ethnic minority, Luoyue, of southern China in the ninth century (Nong, 1998).

Barbara C. Palmer is professor emerita of reading and language arts in the College of Education at Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida.

Lingzhi Sun is an associate professor of English to speakers of Chinese at Shanxi Agricultural University in the People's Republic of China.

Judith T. Leclere is an adjunct professor of reading and language arts in the College of Education at Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida.

By studying this unique version of *Cinderella*, students can both experience authentic Chinese culture and better understand the Chinese people's wishes, dreams, and problems during ancient times. Students' minds can open to appreciate and enjoy great works of art and literature and to discover their own identity and responsibility through fairy tales (Bettelheim, 1976). Furthermore, fairy tales can encourage imagination and creative thinking by compelling readers to find new solutions to age-old problems.

Fairy tales typically carry two levels of meaning. The first level, the literal story, is often an allegorical conflict between good and evil, containing characters that are one-dimensional and stereotypical, such as the lovely young woman, the handsome prince, the evil old crone, and some element of magic. Hidden behind the overt, literal story is a second metaphorical story that provides a window into the cultural origins of the fairy tale.

These two levels provide opportunities for the teacher to successfully utilize the tales and to lead students into a deeper and more thorough understanding of how to read for meaning, to scaffold an appreciation for figurative thought, and to examine the nature of a different culture. *Yeh-Shen* provides such an opportunity.

*Yeh-Shen: A Cinderella Story from China*, retold by Ai-Ling Louie (1982), is an early version of the classic fairy tale and was based on the Chinese manuscript “*Youyang Zazu*,” which might best be translated as *The Miscellaneous Record of You Yang*. *Youyang Zazu* is dated to the Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.) (Nong, 1998).

Such stories were recorded by the Chinese scholar Duan Chengshi and named for a mountain sanctuary in Hunan, to which some scholars were supposed to have retreated at the time the Emperor, Qin Shihuang, burned books and perse-

cuted scholars who opposed his efforts to centralize and unify China (Waley, 1947).

### The Figurative and Metaphorical Language of *Yeh-Shen*

Figurative and metaphorical language effectively convey exact meaning in a vivid and impressive manner. Language using figures of speech such as similes, metaphors, hyperboles, personification, and symbolism to form imagery is known as figurative language. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have shown that everyday metaphors in a language are culturally as well as perceptually based (as cited in Kondaiah & Dana, 2004). Bonvillain (2003) argued that linguistic analysis, particularly of words and expressions, reveals underlying concepts, beliefs, and values. Duranti (1997) adds that “the considerable body of literature on metaphor can be considered as another case in which culture is seen as transmitted through linguistic forms” (p. 38).

Thus, the analysis of figurative expression in language can reveal underlying concepts as well as the culture of its speakers. With the publication of an important book by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980 entitled *Metaphors We Live By*, the early idea of figurative language as merely figures of speech to be used by writers has given way to a contemporary theory of metaphor. As described by Yu (1998), “the central thesis of the theory is that metaphor, in its broadest sense, is pervasive and essential in language and thought” (p. 2). Essentially, there has been a movement from considering figurative language as figures of speech to the broader term “figures of thought” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Understanding diverse cultures, therefore, requires that there is some attempt to understand the unique nature of the figurative thought of that culture. While most research about figurative language

(i.e., Gibbs, 1992; Gibbs, 1994; Gibbs, Bogdanovich, Sykes, & Barr, 1997; Glucksberg, 2001; Glucksberg, 2003; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; McGlone, 1996; Polli, Smith, & Polli, 1990) focused on its understanding and interpretation, there are few studies about figurative language in relation to society and culture.

### Objectives of Our Analysis

This article will analyze the figurative language that reflects Chinese traditional society and culture in *Yeh-Shen*. We will consider both the figures of speech and the figures of thought (to include symbolism) that provide insight into an understanding of the Chinese culture through a reading of *Yeh-Shen*. This analysis can be used by teachers to increase students' cultural awareness and authentic understanding of figurative language, thus developing intercultural competence. The intention of the article is:

1. To identify and categorize the figurative language and symbolism in *Yeh-Shen*.
2. To encourage students and teachers to reflect on socio-cultural elements in the story through an analysis of the

figurative language, thus acquiring a deeper understanding of Chinese traditional society and culture.

3. To examine traditional Chinese symbolism and figurative thought in order to better understand Chinese customs, beliefs, social values, and ways of thinking, thus developing both students' and teacher's intercultural understanding (and to provide some instructional ideas for the use of *Yeh-Shen* as a bridge to cultural understanding for students through the grades.)

### Figures of Speech in *Yeh-Shen*

An examination of only the figures of speech in *Yeh-Shen*, as presented in Table 1, might lead the reader initially to believe that there is very little use of figurative language. However, as the reader develops an understanding of the use of metaphor and symbolism in the story, a far different picture emerges. Knowledge of the nature of Chinese cultural thought and the Chinese people's extravagant use of symbolism is required to fully appreciate the metaphorical nature of *Yeh-Shen*.

Symbols, as an alternative way of

communication, can reflect the thoughts and hopes of a particular cultural group. Symbolism is an important part of Chinese culture. The high incidence of the use of symbolism in China can be attributed to three factors:

1. The fact that Chinese is an ideographic (rather than an alphabetic) written language allows the development of multiple dialects and pronunciations. The ideographic nature of the language also leads to multiple pronunciations of a single word contributing to a large number of homophones in the language. For that reason, words with very different meanings become associated with each other due to the similarity of their sounds when spoken. An example of this is the word "fu," which means "good luck," but also can mean "bat." As a result, a bat represents good luck. In addition, the ideographic nature of the written language is that all meanings, whether concrete or abstract, must be represented by concrete pictures. This is the very nature of symbolism.
2. As well as linguistic symbolism, there are symbols that originated

**Table 1**  
**Figures of Speech in *Yeh-Shen***

Figurative Language	Definition*	Example in <i>Yeh-Shen</i>
Simile	A figure of speech that involves a direct comparison between two unlike things, usually with the words "like" or "as."	Yeh-Shen's skin is as smooth as ivory. Her feet feel light as air. Her slippers were woven of golden thread, in a pattern like the scales of a fish.
Metaphor	A figure of speech that involves an implied comparison between two relatively unlike things by speaking of one in terms of the other.	Dark pools for eyes The old man's hair flowed down over his shoulders. It was said her stepmother and stepsisters were crushed to death in a shower of flying stones.
Synecdoche	A figure of speech that mentions a part of something to suggest the whole.	That day Yeh-Shen turned many a head as she appeared at the feast.
Personification	A figure of speech that gives the qualities of a person to an animal, an object, or an idea.	The fish rested its head on the bank of the pond. The fish wisely hid itself. The moon hid behind the cloud.
Hyperbole	A bold, deliberate overstatement not intended to be taken literally; it is used as a means of emphasizing the truth of a statement.	Yeh-Shen dropped her tears into the still waters of the pond.
Understatement	The presentation of a thing with underemphasis in order to achieve a greater effect.	The slipper was shaped of the most precious of metals. It wasn't until the blackest part of night that Yeh-Shen dares to show her face in the pavilion. At once the king was struck by the sweet harmony of her features.

\* Definitions from Webster's Online Dictionary

from ancient mythical beliefs. The Chinese people's respect for nature is reflected in their widespread use of natural symbols to which they attach specific values that represent their sacred feelings. Accordingly, symbolic meanings have become an intrinsic part of Chinese culture and have played a significant role in the lives of Chinese people. Some examples of nature symbols in *Yeh-Shen* are the fish, her constant friend, and the feathers of the cloak that she wears to the festival. These symbols are further described later in this article.

3. Finally, much of the Chinese understanding of the universe is based on the acceptance of the Chinese Five Element Theory (May, 2001). The Chinese believe that there are five basic forms of energy: water, wood, fire, earth and metal. Each of these elements is associated symbolically with unique characteristics. For example, water represents solitude, mystery, honesty, anxiety, and introspection; wood represents leadership, decision-making, and conflict; fire represents emotional extremes and extroversion; earth represents a caring, supportive, family focus; and metal represents analysis, morality, moderation, and self-control. Each element also has a color and an image, i.e., water—black, night, winter; wood—green, morning, spring; fire—red, mid-day, midsummer; earth—yellow, afternoon, late summer; and metal—white, evening, autumn. For the Chinese, the keys to health and happiness lie in keeping these elements in the proper balance. This balancing is called Yin and Yang. Yin and Yang and the Five Elements are used by the ancient Chinese to explain everything on the earth.

Additionally, many Chinese symbols have much to do with five types of good fortune: good luck (“fu” in Chinese), prosperity (“lu” in Chinese), longevity (“shou” in Chinese), happiness (“xi” in Chinese) and wealth (“cai” in Chinese) (Liow, 2005). This is a relatively simple explanation of a very complicated belief system.

### Teaching Cultural Understanding Using the Figurative Language in *Yeh-Shen*

The metaphorical/cultural instruction of *Yeh-Shen* should take into account the age of the students. It was once believed

that children could not comprehend figurative language at an early age and did not develop a deep understanding until later adolescence or early adulthood. The charming examples we have of the literalness of children's talk support this belief. However, in a review of the research on children's understanding of metaphor, Vosniadou (1987) found that children produce “metaphor-like utterances as soon as they start talking and are capable of understanding simple metaphorical expression by the age of four” (p. 870).

However, Vosniadou goes on to explain that “this development is not complete until the late childhood years when the child's conceptual and linguistic competence approximates that of an adult” (p. 870). What follows is a breakdown of some instructional ideas for elementary children, middle-schoolers, and high-schoolers that take into account the cognitive stages of each of these groups of students.

#### Ideas for Elementary Students

Children of this age will probably benefit from direct, explicit instruction in how to understand figures of speech. Palmer, Shackleford, Miller, and Leclerc (2006) offer a model to provide explicit modeling and instruction in context with students across the age continuum. They recommend the following steps:

1. Identify the figurative language that you wish the children to understand (e.g., “dark pools for eyes”).
2. Determine the literal meaning; (What does a dark pool look like? What characteristics does a dark pool have?)
3. Check to see if the literal meaning makes sense and is logical—re-read for clues in accompanying context, summarize what has been understood; and
4. Find the significance of the phrase as it relates to the students' lives. Who in the classroom has eyes that remind you of dark pools? What is something that you could compare your eyes to? Provide examples of the expression or word in oral, informal language where the intended meaning is clear; ask students to formulate other examples; use role-play and body language; find pictures; ask students to illustrate the expression; and allow discussion and guessing.

Younger children, also, might be entranced with the cultural elements that are present in *Yeh-Shen*. Some of these follow.

#### Tiny Feet and Shoes

Yeh-Shen was described as having very tiny feet to wear the golden slippers. Feet in ancient Chinese culture have unique symbolic significance (Lu, 2007). Small feet were considered exotic, beautiful, and feminine and were preferred by men. The practice of foot binding was thought to have begun in the late Tang Dynasty and lasted almost a thousand years in China (Steele & Major, 1999).

According to Levy (1996), “the vogue for a special and artistic dancing effect achieved through foot binding slowly established a fashion for the rest of the country” (as cited in Kippen, 2005, p. 68). Small feet were often associated with the euphonious term, golden lotus (Feng, 1994). Mao (2008) indicates that tiny feet were seen as a sign of beauty and attractiveness in ancient China, much like high heels give the visual illusion of smaller feet as used by fashionable modern women in many cultures.

Mao (2008) argues that tiny feet were also a symbol of identity and virtue because it signified that a girl had achieved womanhood; it also symbolized that a girl's family was wealthy since they had a daughter who did not have to work. Historically, this is an interesting element of the story because foot binding is dated to the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.), which is much later than the Ch'in (221-206 B.C.) and Han (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) dynasties in which the story takes place.

This gives us an indication that small feet were admired for some time prior to the actual practice of foot binding and that it came more slowly into the Chinese culture than had formerly been thought. Interestingly, the European version of *Cinderella* also includes this element of tiny feet. It is important to indicate to the students that this custom is no longer practiced in China.

#### Azure Blue Gown and Gold Slippers

Throughout their history, as well as today, colors are very important to the Chinese people. The symbolism attached to a specific color varies from culture to culture. Yeh-Shen was provided with a gown of azure blue and a pair of gold slippers by the fishbone to attend the spring festival feast. While red comes to mind immediately as having cultural significance in China, blue has its meanings as well.

For Chinese people, there is no distinctive difference between blue and green, azure is often used to describe blue-green

instead. Blue is the color of water, sky, and sea, so it is often associated with purity, tolerance, and immortality. It usually signifies femininity and life, just as water does.

Gold and yellow have great significance in Chinese culture. The color gold shares many attributes with yellow. Traditionally, the color gold or yellow is the color used in imperial service. For example, the costume worn by the ancient Chinese emperors is in yellow or gold. It is believed that the Chinese people worship the color yellow because the first legendary Chinese emperor called Huang Di (or “Yellow Emperor”) is considered the ancestor of all Han Chinese people.

Moreover, gold is also used in the dragon, which is the mythological symbol of good fortune and protection and the most popular art decoration in the Chinese culture. Therefore, the color gold is not only a symbol of wealth and strength, but also of good fortune in China because it is associated with money, prosperity, grandeur, nobility, royalty, and immortality.

#### **Festival and Celebration**

Yeh-Shen longed to go to the festival where young men and young women hope to meet and to choose whom they would marry. Every nation of the world has its own traditional festival, as does China. With 5,000 years of recorded ongoing history, Chinese traditional festivals have been an important part of Chinese culture.

Chinese traditional festivals are based on the Chinese lunar calendar. The dates of each festival in each year are varied. For example, the Chinese New Year, known as Spring Festival in China, is celebrated on the first day of the first month of the lunar calendar. Chinese traditional festivals are colorful and rich in content.

Each festival, including the Spring Festival, the Lantern Festival, The Clear Brightness Festival or Tomb-Sweeping Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival and the Double Ninth Festival (Zhou, 2003), is associated with legends and stories. Of all the festivals, Spring Festival—the Chinese New Year—is the most elaborate, popular, and important. This is an exciting and cheerful time of year and everyone greatly looks forward to this celebration. Although celebrations of different festivals are diverse, the common elements of all festivals are similar, namely, expressing a desire for happiness and well-being, experiencing harmony between man and heaven, and family reunion.

#### **The Old Man with Long Hair**

When Yeh-Shen was crying for the dead fish, an old man with long hair came up to her and said that the bones of fish are filled with a powerful spirit. Historically, Chinese society has attached great importance to both elderly people and long hair. Respect for elderly people is an integral part of Confucian doctrine (Confucius, Chinese philosopher, 551-479 B.C.), so the oldest person in a family or an organization has the most respect, honor, and dignity. They are valued for their accumulated wisdom, knowledge, and experience which give them the power to cope with difficult situations.

Hopefully, the old man can give young people instruction and guidance when they are faced with difficulties and frustrations. On the other hand, in ancient China, until the Qing Dynasty, men and women all wore long hair, the longer, the better. According to *Classic of Filial Piety* “our bodies—to every hair and bit of skin—are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them. This is the beginning of filial piety. “Filial piety is the root of all virtue and the stem out of which grows all moral teaching” (Legge, 2004, p. 17). Cutting one’s hair was considered not filial and uncivilized.

The old man with long hair in *Yeh-Shen* is a cultural symbol of status, of nobility and of virtue. Therefore, he can help Yeh-Shen deal wisely with her difficult problem. Some ideas to explore these cultural elements with children might be to:

Have the children use the internet to find examples of Chinese clothing or festivals and prepare a bulletin board or report.

Discuss ideas of beauty in cultures; long hair and tiny feet, for example. Find pictures in magazines of people with short hair and/or big feet and discuss whether they are considered beautiful in our culture.

Ask students to line up in the room based on the size of their feet or the length of their hair. This might include some direct instruction on measurement. What are some of the best characteristics of the person with the biggest feet or the longest hair? What about the best characteristics of those with the smallest feet or the shortest hair? Have students discuss whether these characteristics make a difference in our culture.

Have students research some of the characteristics of the various Chinese festivals and plan a similar festival to take place in their classroom. Invite other students, or parents, to share in the culminating festival.

Have students use a lunar calendar to determine the exact date for this year’s Chinese New Year.

Elementary children would also enjoy further insight into the nature symbols in the story, the fish and the kingfisher’s feathered cloak.

**Fish:** Yeh-Shen’s constant friend as she deals with the difficulty of her family situation is a small fish with gold eyes. In the Chinese language the characters “fish” and “abundance” are both pronounced the same way, although they are written differently. For that reason, the fish often symbolizes the wish for “more” in the sense of “more” good luck or good fortune. The characters for “goldfish” sound similar to the characters that mean “abundance of gold.” Finally, two fish together symbolize marriage and fertility. Therefore, the fish in *Yeh-Shen*, which represents magic power in the story, is also a cultural symbol of good luck and prosperity and can bring happiness, marriage, and family.

**Feather Cloak:** The cloak that Yeh-Shen wears to the festival is made of the feathers of the kingfisher. McDowall (2009) indicates that Chinese people were inspired by the beauty and variety of the birds and animals around them. They sought their feathers as adornment or accessories. The kingfisher has enchanting, colorful feathers and has been considered a very lucky bird (Jackson, 2001). The Chinese considered kingfisher feathers on their clothes to be both attractive and lucky. Thus, Yeh-Shen’s kingfisher feather cloak is an indication of her attractiveness and beauty as well as a sign of good luck.

Reflecting the Chinese symbolic understanding of fish and feathers, have the children make fish scale shoes and feather cloaks.

#### **Middle-Schoolers**

Students of this age are able to relate abstractly to metaphor and symbolism. Oftentimes, the theme of a fairy tale such

as *Yeh-Shen* can be reduced to a cultural proverb. Teachers can use the fairy tale to reinforce the concept of theme for middle-schoolers. According to Worthy and Bloodgood (Dec. /Jan. 1992-93), “The Cinderella stories portray a universal theme—the triumph of good over evil in a family context” (p. 291). *Yeh-Shen* is no exception. However, Chinese folktales usually convey a moral lesson that often can be described in proverbs. Proverbs have great significance to the Chinese since they embody many of their cultural values.

Thus, the theme of *Yeh-Shen* can be summarized as the following proverbs:

Jealousy never wins;

One good turn deserves another;

Kindness is rewarded and evilness is punished;

Do to others as you would want others to treat you (the Golden Rule).

As a part of language, proverbs are closely integrated within the society and culture. Francis Bacon said:

The genius, wit, and spirit of a nation are discovered in its proverbs. In them is to be found an inexhaustible source of precious documents in regard of the interior history, the manners, the opinions, the beliefs and the customs of the people... (as cited in Lister, 1994, p. 243)

During a long history as a civilization, the Chinese have generated innumerable proverbs that have guided generations of people. Therefore, Chinese proverbs can

tell much about Chinese traditional ways of experiencing life, about typical Chinese virtues and cultural values, common sense and wisdoms.

Some ideas to correlate the idea of theme and proverb for middle-schoolers could include the following:

Compare and contrast some Chinese proverbs and English proverbs.

Identify some English proverbs and have students work in groups to develop short fairy tales that illustrate the proverb.

Have students match proverbs to other known fairy tales.

Other ideas to capture the growing abstract reasoning of early adolescence might be to:

Have them write song lyrics about *Yeh-Shen* and/or Cinderella.

Have them work in groups to develop a webpage or webquest about the figurative language in the story.

### High-Schoolers

By this time students can fully understand the cultural implications of the story, compare and contrast cultures, develop abstract concepts related to the story, and create their own abstractions from their understanding of the story. Some ideas might be:

After completing a study of the Five

Elements and the concepts of Yin and Yang, older students could be asked to complete a chart such as the one in Table 2 in order to understand the deep respect that the Chinese people have for balance and the Five Elements.

Explore the stereotypical roles for women and men in fairy tales, such as beautiful young woman, handsome (rich) prince, wise old man, and wicked stepmothers and sisters. How do these stereotypes describe the culture from which they came? Many interesting ideas can be debated around this topic. For example, do we value women for beauty and men for wealth? Do the Chinese? What about step-relationships? Why are they so often present in fairy tales?

How do the two cultures describe beauty, both in people and in nature? How would you use metaphor to describe beauty? Look at examples of poetry as well as prose to find examples of figurative language to describe an abstract concept, such as beauty. Make a poster, poem, or bulletin board using the figurative language that you have found.

Evaluate the quality of metaphor. Establish a rubric or set of standards to evaluate figures of speech and bring in examples to discuss.

This version of *Cinderella* was written by a minority group in China.

**Table 2**  
**The Five Elements**

Element	Chinese Thought	Examples in <i>Yeh-Shen</i>	What I Believe It Means
water	Water is considered the source of all life. Water is associated with good personality, beauty, and affection (Mi, 2005). Water is contradictory in that it is strong and soft, tolerant and adaptable. It also symbolizes Yin, or woman, the counterpart of man (fire). As a result, being soft like water is a wise way to solve interpersonal problems in daily life. (Liow, 2005)	<i>Yeh-Shen</i> dropped her tears into the still waters of the pool.	<i>Yeh-Shen</i> , like water, had great power to overcome obstacles to realize her dream.
earth	(Fill in responses as above for this element)		
fire	(Fill in responses as above for this element)		
wood	(Fill in responses as above for this element)		
metal	(Fill in responses as above for this element)		

Using the story as a framework, create your own version of the fairy tale, choosing a separate ethnicity. In doing so, research the culture and incorporate characteristics indicative of that particular culture. For example, what does the culture value in a woman? What does the culture regard as cruel and unjust? Then, create a digital story book, including narration, music, and images to engage your selected audience.

Each student could choose one of the fictional characters in *Cinderella*. With these characters in mind, every student could create a blog, taking on the persona of his or her particular character. Collaborating with peers, students could both post on their own blog page and comment back and forth to classmates (always remaining in their character's voice).

### Conclusion

A metaphorical examination of *Yeh-Shen* provides students with an opportunity to deepen their understanding of figurative thought and language while exploring the history and the central ideas of a country whose culture is quite different from their own. Concomitantly, students are able to develop a deeper understanding of the complex nature of literature as they investigate the many layers of meaning in text, including figurative language.

Figurative language interpretation instruction facilitates reading comprehension growth. As Palmer and Brooks (2004) have stated, "students who develop the ability to interpret figurative language not only expand their capabilities for creative thought and communication, but also acquire insight to expressive forms of language, allowing them to comprehend both text and speech on a deeper and more meaningful level" (p. 265).

Fairy tales allow exploration of different cultures by providing insight into the mores, character, thoughts, values, and beliefs of the people. The rich symbolic nature of Chinese historical thought as set forth in *Yeh-Shen* invites readers of all ages to understand, appreciate, and enjoy the tale as well as the culture described through the story. And, through a deeper investigation of the symbolism found in the story, combined with expanded schemata for Chinese history and thought, readers are better positioned to move beyond a surface understanding of the story to a much richer comprehension level that includes cultural understanding.

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