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Ahead of her Time: Sylvia Chew and *Little Chiu*

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In Volume Two of Maurice Saxby's *History of Australian Children's Literature*, Sylvia Chew's *Little Chiu* is described in the following terms:

*A more sprightly touch appeared in Sylvia Chew's Kwong Chiu's New Year Clothes (1947) . . . In this amusing tale of a 4-year-old who learns to dress himself, the Chinese setting seems almost irrelevant. Reluctant to begin, the boy cries and the clothes come to life and roll away, but one by one are retrieved by various animals and one by one Little Chiu puts them on. The book included a song with music.*¹

The comparison here is with the ersatz fairy-tales featuring pixies and gnomes placed uneasily in the Australian bush which were so common among Australian picture books of the forties. For me, a more significant comparison is the one downplayed in Saxby's *History*, that between the Chinese characters and setting of the book and the predominantly Anglo-Celtic characters and settings of picture books of this period.

To be sure, the central predicament of the book, Kwong Chiu's reluctance to dress himself, is scarcely culture-specific, and the movement of the narrative, from rebellion to acceptance of societal norms, is a common picture book pattern, but the details of Kwong Chiu's life are based firmly in a particular set of Chinese traditions and conventions. Thus, Kwong Chiu brings his pet tortoise extra



meat on the day before New Year because "no one will chop meat tomorrow lest they chop off good luck", and his nurse Chenma instructs him on New Year's Day to dress and go to wish his parents good luck for the New Year.

Sylvia Chew, now eighty-five, has vivid memories of the writing and illustrating of *Little Chiu* and of the unpublished *Little Chiu* books which she intended to follow it. Then, as now, writing for children was an uncertain and protracted business; then, as now, institutions such as publishing houses made decisions to publish (or not) for political and ideological as much as for literary reasons.

Sylvia Chew was born in Australia in 1909; her Australian-born mother was of Chinese descent and her father, who had travelled to Australia from China as a tourist, was a doctor in the Victorian country town of Shepparton. Sylvia Chew recalls² that, as a child of the second Chinese family to settle in Shepparton, she was subjected to the usual racist labels,

such as "Ching Chong Chinaman" and "Chow". At a time when Australians of non-Anglo background were expected to assimilate into the dominant culture, Sylvia Chew's family maintained a strong sense of themselves as Australian and Chinese.

After she completed her secondary schooling in Shepparton, Sylvia Chew undertook her teacher-training, first as a junior teacher, then as a student at Melbourne Teachers' College, specialising in what was then termed "infant" work. Once she had completed her training she taught in training schools in Melbourne before moving to a small country school at Nar Nar Goon. Like all young women teachers of the period, she was prohibited by departmental regulations from teaching after marriage.

By the time her son (born 1938) was old enough to attend kindergarten, Sylvia Chew had decided that, as her "war effort", she herself would start up a kindergarten, first for her son and then for children in the Melbourne suburb of Burwood, where she lived. She rented a small shop and gathered equipment, running a kindergarten session each day from nine until twelve for thirty children from 1940 until the end of the war. It was during these years that *Little Chiu* was written and illustrated.

The story was based on a real-life situation, the reluctance of Sylvia Chew's son to dress himself, and

she developed it first as a story told to the children in the kindergarten and later as a written text.

Sylvia Chew met the artist Jean Elder when the latter brought her son to attend the kindergarten, and Chew asked her to illustrate *Little Chiu*. Over some months Elder completed eight colour illustrations and the black and white illustrations with which they are interspersed. Sylvia Chew's familiarity with children made her determined that her book should be accessible to young readers, and she was responsible for the layout and design of the book, insisting on the use of a print-face much larger than the publisher generally used.

Jean Elder's work in this book focuses on the character of Little Chiu, seen bathing, in bed, as a small naked figure chasing his runaway clothes and eventually dressed in his finery for his New Year breakfast.



Australian children reading *Little Chiu* must surely have been charmed by the exoticism of the idealised Chinese setting with its details of Kwong Chiu's pet



tortoise, peacock, pheasant and kitten, as well as by the colour and texture of the verbal and visual depictions of his New Year clothes, his red satin tunic embroidered with a dragon and its collar made of blue birds' feathers, his black satin cap with its gold button carved with the character for "Long Life" and his tiger-head slippers. Sylvia Chew recalls that, in working with Jean Elder, she had frequently to edit Australian details of flora and fauna so as to maintain the Chinese setting.

Sylvia Chew cannot recall how large the print run was, but the book sold out in three months and was never reprinted because, shortly after its publication, its publisher, Murfett Pty Ltd, consolidated its operations to concentrate on the greeting-card trade and did not publish further children's books. For years after *Little Chiu* was published, Sylvia Chew received letters and telephone calls from parents asking for copies of the book and for news of the production of further *Little Chiu* books.

Contemporary writers of picture book text (apart from some established authors) generally have little control over the illustration and design of their books, and from this point of view Sylvia Chew may seem fortunate in the extent to which she was responsible for the total book. However, she was, like all writers, subject to the constantly changing face of publishing, and when Murfett stopped publishing books she found herself with a second manuscript, again based on the character of *Little Chiu*, but this time built on a family story about her father. For this story, Sylvia Chew employed a young art student to complete the illustrations, paying him a fee because of the uncertainty of publication.

After the war, a friend of Sylvia Chew's travelled to London, taking with him the manuscript and the completed illustrations. He showed the story to several publishers, receiving rejections from all. Finally, he took it to Collins, where, according to Sylvia Chew, he was told that the story was exactly the kind of work which Collins liked to publish, except that at this time, the publisher "wouldn't dare to touch a Chinese subject because it would never sell." On the other hand, Sylvia Chew believed that the story would not be published by a Chinese firm, for example in Singapore, because it was based on the character of a landlord's son. So no further *Little Chiu* books were published, falling victim to two political forces, the anti-Chinese sentiment in Britain

following the establishment of the People's Republic in China,³ and the anti-feudal mood of Chinese publishers. Sylvia Chew still has the manuscripts of her second and third Little Chiu stories, and the illustrations which she commissioned for the second.

Little Chiu developed out of Sylvia Chew's experience and out of her sense of herself as Chinese and Australian. For the 1940s, when fewer than 10 000 Chinese lived in Australia, her cultural background made her an unusual writer for children, but in 1994 it is still true to say that "in Australia, . . . publishers still rarely commission books from other than Anglo-Celtic authors".⁴

Sylvia Chew was ahead of her time as a writer representing cultural diversity well before the beginnings of multiculturalism in Australia. Nevertheless, almost fifty years later Australian picture book publishing has a long way to go before it adequately represents children of cultural backgrounds other than Anglo-Celtic. Until more writers and illustrators of non-Anglo-Celtic backgrounds publish picture books, children of minority cultural groups will not see themselves in what they read.

Notes

1. Maurice Saxby, *History of Australian Children's Literature*, Vol. II, Wentworth Books, Sydney, 1981, p. 231.

2. All references to Sylvia Chew's reminiscences derive from an interview by the writer in August, 1994.

3. See E.M. Andrews, *Australia and China: The Ambiguous Relationship*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1985, pp. 121-147, for an analysis of Australian and British relationships with China, 1945-1949.

4. John Stephens, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, Longman, Harlow, 1992, p. 51.

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Biographical Note

Clare Bradford is a graduate of Auckland, Victoria (Wellington) and Sydney Universities and now teaches at Deakin University. Her main teaching interests are in literacy, literary theory and children's literature, particularly the picture book. She has published a picture book called *Phillip and Jack the Monster* and a book on children's literature, *Genre in Perspective*, as well as a number of articles.

