The Wishing Cupboard by Libby Hathorn, Illustrated by Elizabeth Stanley (2002)

The wishing cupboard is a picture book that engages its audience through the main character, Tran’s exploration of his Grandmother’s hopes, dreams, and memories in the sharing of a special cupboard. Tran’s grandmother takes him to the wishing cupboard as he is longing for his mother’s arrival from her visit to Vietnam. This special cupboard provides a window in which Tran’s ancestry and background is shared, and presents various aspects of Vietnamese culture. A significant aspect of the story is the opportunity for Tran to have his own space in the cupboard and a chance to make his own wish. The value of family is reflected here as Tran shows his love for his grandmother by not only making his own wish but one for her also.

Background social, historical and cultural information required prior to reading

This picture book reflects historical information about Vietnam and Vietnamese culture. For Student’s to be able to reflect on the content on the book beyond Tran’s explorations of objects and wish making, it would be necessary for them to reflect on the images and language presented in order to develop cultural understanding. To assist this cultural understanding students would also benefit from knowledge about Australia’s immigration history including recent arrivals from Asia. This would assist students in gaining meaning, and understanding references to Tran’s family remaining in Vietnam, and his mother’s traveling.

Libby Hathorn does not have a Vietnamese background, however the content and illustrations of the text can be viewed as highly authentic as they present a high degree of accuracy. The author has traveled to many countries, and has clearly researched all historical and cultural references in the book. The author makes references to the historical culture of Vietnam through the grandmother’s character, and presents various aspects of deep and surface culture, creating a high degree of authenticity.

The surface culture is presented in the images and text including the grandmother’s dialogue as Tran explores the contents of the cupboard. This is also presented in objects in the character’s environment such as pictures of traditionally dressed Vietnamese people. Images related to the grandmother’s dialogue and objects found in the cupboard are also examples such as Vietnamese fishing boats, a figure of Buddha, and other images of Vietnamese landscape. Deep culture is also presented through the grandmother’s dialogue such as her nostalgic references to her family members in Vietnam, which reflects the strong value of family.

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<td>While the language in the book is based on dialogue in the mainstream Australian culture it includes vocabulary, which makes references to aspects of Vietnamese culture, such as rice paddies and villages, which are expressed by the grandmother. The author also uses descriptive language through the character’s narration and dialogue to convey imagery of sounds, smells, and colors to describe the cupboard and its objects. E.g. burnished gold, musty, musky, inlaid doors, soft, slippery, bright red. The colorful illustrations also assist in creating this imagery. Realistic and colorful illustrations of Tran and his grandmother represent the authenticity of their environment and the contents of the wishing cupboard. The illustrations also depict body language and expressions, which reflect the characters feelings such as surprise, anticipation, love and disappointment. Dialogue features throughout the text showing the grandmothers wisdom and nostalgia.</td>
<td>The Wishing Cupboard deals with discourses surrounding family, wisdom, childhood, and culture and migration. Throughout the book the author reflects on the value of family through the relationship between Tram and his grandmother, the grandmother’s reflections on her family in Vietnam, and Tran’s anticipation for his Mother to return home. In addition to this discourses of wisdom are presented in the relationship between Tran and his Grandmother, as she shares her knowledge, and experiences with him. The illustrations, and differences in power in the interactions between the characters reflect the mature wisdom of the grandmother, and childhood qualities of Tran. Discourses of migration and living in a different culture prevail as descriptive detail about the grandmother’s nostalgia of life in Vietnam and Vietnamese traditions are provided.</td>
<td>Throughout the exploration of the wishing cupboard, the reader is taken outside of the mainstream Australian culture into traditional Vietnamese culture at certain points in history, as the Grandmother reflects on her home country. Through the impact of migrating to a different country with a different culture can be viewed. Without knowledge of the cultural or historical understandings of the memories and ancestral information shared by the grandmother, the depiction of characters and traditional objects in the illustrations may be seem as stereotypical. However, these images and accompanying descriptive dialogue are reflective of authentic culture and cultural beliefs. The story is mainly told through the dialogue of the grandmother directly in a nostalgic manner as well as Tran’s dialogue and descriptive narration. This results in other voices and perspectives not being heard such as cultural perspectives of grandmother’s sister, brother and other family members.</td>
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Chinese Cinderella is a children’s novel that presents an autobiographical series of events with reference to the author’s childhood where she was considered by her family to be bad luck, following the death of her mother as a consequence of her birth. It presents information about her struggle for acceptance as she was made to feel unwanted by her father, stepmother, and siblings, and how she overcame the odds to prove her worth. The account of events center around her childhood up to the age of fourteen, and include accounts of two important people in which she had loving relationships with; her grandfather Ye Ye and her Aunt Baba. The author from a young age proves to be outstanding academically and this ultimately leads to her opportunity to study in Oxford, England. A significant aspect of the book is the author’s note at the beginning, which provides cultural information, including a brief overview of the Chinese pictorial language, and a map of China.

Background social, historical and cultural information required prior to reading

In order for students to gain an understanding of the author’s experiences in the book it would be necessary for them to have an understanding of Chinese culture including customs, as well as knowledge about the geography of China including places in which the author moved to, such as Tainjin and Shanghai. Students would also benefit from having knowledge about the historical context in which the author’s events occur. This would assist in understanding references to the changes in the political and social contexts of the time. Many references are made to conflict and war in the context of communist movement, and the affect these had on the author and her family. In addition to this, knowledge about Chinese history before the author’s time such as the Opium War where China lost a war to France and England are important for students to understand the changing cultural context the author was living in. Other cultures were also prominent due to the war, and foreign soldiers from America, Italy and Germany also occupied China. This is reflected in many references to the author’s schooling where different languages were prominent as well as Catholicism. The places in which the author moved to in this early period of her life also reflected the influence of these cultures.

Information in the text can be viewed as highly authentic as it is based on the author’s personal childhood experiences as a Chinese girl in an affluent family, in a time when communism was gaining power in China. Even though the author may not of fully understood the political and social context of the period and culture she was in, as a child, the reflections on experiences within the specific setting in China at the particular point in time are at a high degree of authenticity. However, this may not be apparent to the reader until developing an understanding of cultural and historical contexts of China.

Surface culture can be seen through the author’s description of her environment such as the Shanghai streets, customs, such as descriptions of the grandmother’s bound feet, and celebrations such as Chinese New Year. Deep culture is evident when we consider comments about how certain aspects of culture have changed such as the bounding of the feet by the author, and the descriptions of westerner influence on lifestyle. These comments address the changes in values and attitudes of the people in her community, from the previous generations.

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<td>Vocabulary related the Chinese language and culture such as Ye Ye, Wu Mei, and Nai Nai, which are defined by the author at the beginning of the book and throughout the autobiography. These Chinese words are also special terms of address for different members of the family, which reflects the traditional use of a variety of names for Chinese children depending on their order in the family. In addition to this the author also continues to include the Chinese pictorial version of such words in brackets throughout the text. The author effectively uses her own voice descriptively and figuratively throughout her book to reflect her emotions. This is effective in unveiling her emotions in her powerful extreme highs, and uncertainty and confusion in her extreme lows.</td>
<td>Throughout the book the author presents messages about her innocence in childhood. This is presented as the author comments on experiences in which meaning was unknown until later on in life. This is also associated with the discourses of race and power in the novel within the Chinese culture, which is not expressed until the author's historical comments are presented at the end of the book. Innocence is also presented here through the author's surface level description. In addition the importance of family and relationships are presented throughout the book in the author's reflections of the poor relationships with her parents and stepsiblings, and the loss of the only loving relationships she had. Her struggle, loneliness and abandonment reflect the importance of such relationships.</td>
<td>Throughout the authors autobiography the reader is taken initially into the mainstream culture of the time. As political and social contexts change the main character is continuously influenced by other cultures outside the mainstream culture, which are gaining dominance. In doing this we can see the impact of wars, conflict and cultural revolution such as communism and westerner influences on Chinese culture. This is enriched as the story is told from a character that was present during the events. This also presents the characters in the books as individuals. However, as the events are told in first person perceptive other voices are not heard. From the author’s perspective, messages about love of Aunt Baba and grandfather are received. In addition to this messages about the cruel and cold treatment, and hatred toward the author by her father, stepmother, and siblings.</td>
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Teaching learning strategy (The Wishing Cupboard):  
**Outcomes:**

**TS1.1** Communicates with an increasing range of people for a variety of purposes on both familiar and introduced topics in spontaneous and structured classroom activities.

**RS1.8** Identifies the text structure and basic grammatical features of a limited range of text types.

**3.2** Demonstrates awareness of aspects of spoken English necessary for communicating and learning at school

**3.6** Demonstrates awareness that English texts may be organized in different forms and that written English differs from spoken English

**Teaching and learning**

**Critique:**

A teaching and learning strategy that could be used after reading is a picture and sentence matching activity to assist students in developing cultural understanding. The wishing cupboard is a picture book, which is effective in developing understanding of Vietnamese culture, through the grandmother's descriptive dialogue and the colorful illustrations. The book presents traditional customs, beliefs, and landscapes of the country. The descriptive language used by the two main characters, and illustrations provides the reader with an insight into the cultural significance of the objects.

**Activity – Picture and Sentence Matching**

- Provide images of six main objects found in the wishing cupboard, and matching sentences from the text, cut individually.
  - The big shell, glass eye, the wedding dress, feather, scroll and photographs, carved box.
- Lead the whole class through one example of picture and sentence matching. Lead and model discussion about the significance of each, and the meaning it has for the grandmother.
- Ss work in groups or pairs to jointly match the pictures of objects with descriptive language form the text. Ss encouraged to discuss the significance and meanings of these objects.

Teaching learning strategy (Chinese Cinderella):  
**Outcomes:**

**TS3.2** Interacts productively and with autonomy in pairs and groups of various sizes and composition, uses effective oral presentation skills and strategies and listens attentively.

**RS3.7** Critically analyses techniques used by writers to create certain effects, to use language creatively, to position the reader in various ways and to construct different interpretations of experience.

**7.1** Communicates in a variety of social and learning contexts, presenting ideas and information on a range of familiar topics and issues

**7.5** Evaluates a given text with reference to its validity and quality, justifying own reading of a text in relation to the readings of others.

**Teaching and learning**

**Critique:**

A teaching and learning strategy that could be used during reading is an explicit jigsaw reading activity to assist students in developing cultural understanding. Chinese Cinderella is a novel, which is effective in developing such understanding as it reflects authentic Chinese cultural and historical contexts, and provides an opportunity for students to learn about customs, beliefs, geography, and historical events. While the text presents large amounts of references to the culture, which may be difficult to understand, the author provides many resources such as information on Chinese pictorial writing, a map of China, historical notes, and information about the original Chinese Cinderella to gain meaning.

**Activity - Jigsaw Groups:**

- Divide students into three expert groups. Each group will focus on a particular aspect of cultural or historical contexts presented in the book.
- Each group will be provided with a scaffold of an activity that they are to become an ‘expert’ in. Each activity is required to be completed as a group through discussion.
  - **Chinese Writing:** Each S given a copy of the author’s note at the begging if the book. Ss must discuss, select, and highlight two sentences, which describe Chinese pictorial writing. Ss highlight and discuss the meaning of the main characters Chinese name and home name.
  - **Geography:** Provide Ss with a blank map, and Atlas’s. Ss discuss and map the three main places where the character lived in the story.
  - **Chinese History:** Provide Ss with a copy with the author’s historical notes at the end of the book. Ss highlight three main historical points, and discuss examples of indicators of the contexts in the book.
- Ss then form mixed groups and share and display the information they have become an expert in with the rest of the Ss.