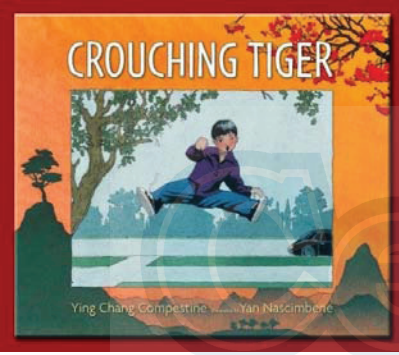


## A BOOK REVIEW: *CROUCHING TIGER* AND ISSUES OF CULTURE

	<p>Crouching Tiger</p> <p>Y.C. Compestine and Y. Nascimbene</p> <p>Somerville, Mass: Candlewick Press 2011, Unpaged.</p> <p>ISBN 9780763646424, 0763646423</p>
---	--

**Reviewed by Yosep Bambang Margono Slamet<sup>1</sup>**

*Crouching Tiger*, a children's picturebook, is filled with cultural issues. As in any other picturebooks written for young children, the story in this picturebook is simple. However, the simplicity of its story is not an indication that the issues the author wants to raise are simple. The story starts with the

---

<sup>1</sup>**Drs. Yosep Bambang Margono Slamet, M.A., Ph.D** <bapak.jalu@gmail.com> +6282226119416 is a full-time faculty member at Akademi Bahasa Asing 17 Semarang.

arrival of Master Chang from China to visit his grandson, Vinson or Ming Da, in the U.S. To Vinson or Ming Da's father, Master Chang speaks English perfectly but to Vinson or Ming Da he always speaks Chinese. In the morning of the second day in the U.S. Master Chang practices tai chi or, in Vinson's words "Grandpa was dancing slowly in the garden with his eyes closed. His hands moved like gliding birds. He crouched like a tiger; ..." Vinson thinks that his grandfather is practicing kung fu so he insists that his grandfather teaches him kung fu. Vinson wants to learn fast but his grandfather only teaches him the basic movements for a couple of weeks and it makes him bored. But later on Vinson learns that his grandfather is right; in learning martial art, one should be patient. Meanwhile, the Chinese community in Vinson's city is preparing the Chinese New Year celebration. Master Chang trains lion dancers for the celebration and he is very popular among the Chinese community.

Through this book, Compestine tries to keep the balance between Chinese culture (her culture of heritage) and the U.S. culture. Take for example, the main character's name, Vinson or Ming Da. Vinson is an American name while Ming Da is a Chinese name. This is an identity that many children in the U.S. keep. Living in the U.S. (whether they were born in the U.S.) or come to the U.S. with their parents and live there permanently), these children—including Vinson or Ming Da—show the tendency towards assimilation into the U.S. culture and move away from their heritage cultures. It is clear that Compestine portrays Vinson or Ming Da as a child who has the tendency towards assimilation into the U.S. culture.

On one occasion of tai chi practice, Vinson says to his grandfather that his name is Vinson and he does not want to be called Ming Da:

Although he speaks English perfectly well with Dad, Grandpa always talked to me in Chinese.

“My name is Vinson, Grandpa.”

“Your Chinese name is Ming Da. You are Chinese as well as American,” he said firmly.

Through the characters of Vinson and Master Chang, Compestine wants to deal with the issue of identities for Chinese American children in particular. She seems to assert that even though living in the United States, children of Chinese origin are still Chinese. In the cultural context, the characters of Vinson and Master Chang represent two different cultures. Interestingly, ethnically or racially, Vinson and Master Chang have the same ethnicity. *Crouching Tiger* is an example of a children’s picturebook in which the author grapples with this complicated issue.

To many of us perhaps this sounds strange: how can two people having the same ethnicity be culturally different? In today’s world, this is not something extraordinary. People move from one country to another easily. When they do this, they not only cross geographical boundaries, but also cultural and linguistic boundaries. Consequently, they may adopt the new culture and move away from their heritage culture or they adopt the new culture but still maintain their heritage culture.

The Internet and technology add to the complexity of the issue because these people build local, national, and international/transnational/global relationships and interactions. All of this makes culture fluid and in flux, in the sense that, as in the case of Vinson and Master Chang, two people of the same ethnicity may adopt two different cultures.

One of the important characteristics of children's picturebook is that it is educational and influential. Compestine, as most children's picturebook authors do, not only tells a story about a Chinese-American boy and how the boy lives in two cultures but also has the intention of emphasizing the importance of the story for the teaching of cultures to transnational children or children who cross geographical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. In American context, this book, together with other contemporary realistic children's books, has tremendous educational value. Teachers and parents can make the most of this book for introducing to young children not only American culture but also Chinese culture in particular and Asian culture in general.

In the context of multiculturalism in the U.S., this book falls into the category of multicultural literature or generally known as literature written by and for people other than the mainstream society. Historically, these multicultural literary works began to emerge in the 1960s, after the Civil Rights movements. Since then, every minority groups in the U.S. produced their own literature to challenge the so-called cannon literature or literature written by authors of the mainstream culture. The goals of producing these kinds of literature are to give the voice to those who have been silenced and to teach their group members about their identities. As a Chinese-American, Compestine is really aware of this issue.

Through *Crouching Tiger*, Compestine also speaks to readers about cultural tensions or dilemmas—as a consequence of children living in two cultures. As described previously, Vinson does not want his grandfather to call him by his Chinese name. In other words, Vinson identifies himself more American than Chinese. This is a common phenomenon among Asian-American children that they identify themselves more

American than Asian. Even many of them do not speak the languages of their countries of origin. On the other hand, Master Chang insists that Vinson is both American and Chinese, therefore he addresses him by his Chinese name, Ming Da. We learn from the story that Vinson is not the only one who undergoes the cultural tensions or dilemmas, but also Master Chang. If the story is set in China (or outside the U.S.), we expect that Master Chang will consistently speak Chinese. Because the story is set in the U.S., this makes Master Chang has to speak English at some point. What is really intriguing is that he speaks Chinese to his grandson but he speaks English to Vinson's father. There is no information from the story whether Vinson's father is Master Chang's son or his son in law. This is important because if Vinson's father is Master Chang's son, there is no point of Master Chang to speak English to him. Or, does Compestine as the author want to complicate the story? Does she want to portray that Master Chang is a modern, not traditional, Chinese? These are cultural questions, in the sense that in terms of language, people can speak different languages on different occasions, depending on the situation. Being in the U.S., Master Chang crosses geographical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries and the consequence is that he adapts to the culture and language of the host society.

It is not enough to give the credit to Compestine only without mentioning Nascimbene as the illustrator. Picturebook as a totality consists of words or conventional signs and pictures or iconic signs. To understand the meaning of picturebooks we need to take the pictures into account because the meaning of a picturebook is found in the synergy between the words and the pictures. This is to say that Nascimbene's illustrations have the same contributions to that of the words in creating the meaning of *Crouching Tiger*.

What could we, teachers and parents in Indonesia, benefit from this book? If it is possible for us in Indonesia to make use of this book, we can teach our young children about cultural, linguistic, and identity issues. In addition, we can introduce other cultures to our children to broaden their perspectives and world views.



Celt