

## The Heroic Journey in Shirley Lim's *Princess Shawl*

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Shirley Lim. *Princess Shawl*. Petaling Jaya: Maya Press, 2008. 115 pages. ISBN 9789832737438.

This review discusses a work by an author who is no stranger to the Malaysian literary scene, or, for that matter, the Singaporean, Hong Kong and American literary scenes. Many Malaysian students know her from studying her poem "Monsoon History" which is included in the secondary school English syllabus, and most university students have studied some of her texts. The first Asian and woman to win the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1980, Shirley Lim now contributes to the development of Asian American literature. Her works mainly deal with serious post-colonial issues. I was surprised, but pleasantly so, when she announced that she was writing a book for Malaysian and Singaporean children based on the famous story of Princess Li Po, who was sent by the Emperor of China as a bride and ambassador of goodwill to Sultan Mansur of Melaka. Many Malaysian schoolchildren are familiar with this story. Published in 2008 by Maya Press, Lim's *Princess Shawl* is an important addition to the growing genre of children's literature in Malaysia. As a generation that grew up on a diet of Enid Blyton, Rudyard Kipling, Aesop's tales and Grimm's fairy tales, my youthful imagination was filled with images of the four seasons, treacle puddings, golden hair and blue eyes. Wonderful though these images may be, they were alien to me, for I had never tasted treacle pudding much less experienced snow and my hair and eyes are black.

Reading materials especially shape the ideals and identities of very young children. It is important for readers of all ages to have books that they can relate to, books they can read, nod and say, "Aha—I've been through that." *Tots for Teens* columnist Daphne Lee says that it is important for the child to find books they can relate to on a personal level in order to build their confidence and develop their self-identity. Beyond several perfunctorily didactic books, few authors have answered this need for children's books with Malaysian children in mind. But there has been a slow but steady stream of well-written Malaysian children's books, such as Iain Buchanan's *Fatimah's Kampung*, and Shirley Lim's *Princess Shawl*, finding their way into the market. It is important for Malaysian children to be able to read about a character that they can relate to culturally and emotionally. It fires the imagination of children when historical and mythical figures are turned into storybook characters, a trend that authors around the world have followed, with the recent *Percy Jackson* series, the *Harry Potter* books, *The Sea of Trolls* trilogy

and many other fantastical books whose roots stem from real-world mythologies and folklore.

However, despite the culturally-unique setting and background for *Princess Shawl*, Lim inadvertently follows the universal pattern in storytelling. In her autobiographical essay "Writing for Asian Children", Lim admits that she combined the Euro-Western literary written style and Asian-Malaysian-Chinese oral story traditions in telling the story of Mei Li, the hero-child of the story. Indeed, Mei Li's journey, while uniquely Malaysian-Singaporean in setting, carries elements such as the call for adventure, the supernatural helper, the heroic quest and coming-of-age theme found in children's literature around the world.

Mei Li, the protagonist in *Princess Shawl*, is a normal 9 year old Singaporean girl whose main priority in life is school, homework and making her parents happy. The story opens with the news of the death of Mei Li's namesake, her Grand-aunt Mei Li. It is the arrival of this news, and the subsequent appearance of Grand-Aunty Mei's heirloom, the magical shawl, that sets into motion the quest theme in the book. Like any good quest story, Mei Li is given a task by her late Grand-aunt. On the first night after the arrival of the shawl, Mei Li meets her recently deceased Great-aunt in a dream. Revealed to be the descendent of the legendary Princess Li Po, Mei Li discovers that centuries ago, the princess was spirited away to Pulau Tikus by an evil sorceress, the Bomoh, before she was able to marry her intended, Sultan Mansur of Melaka. Unless Mei Li succeeds in her quest to reunite the two star-crossed lovers using the magical shawl, the princess and the sultan will never meet and history will be altered. Initially, Mei Li hesitates and doubts her ability to complete the task.

Furthermore, the task is assigned with a deadline, and Mei Li has to complete it before she turns ten, which contradicts the prophecy that the child of a single-digit age will carry out the task. Who knows when the next child will inherit the shawl, or if it is not too late? However, despite her misgivings, Mei Li acknowledges that she has to answer the call to duty; this signals her understanding of her responsibility towards her ancestors and her past. She is given the talisman, the beautiful magical shawl that was passed down through the generations before Mei Li herself, and it has the ability to transport Mei Li back to the past.

So begins Mei Li's journey and, as Lim puts it, her journey is like that of the traditional Malaysian *kuih lapis*, each layer revealing surprises and lessons of wisdom for the child to take with her. Every night Mei Li is transported to the past, each journey taking her further back in history. During her journeys, Mei Li encounters her ancestors in various periods of history. Through each woman's story, Mei Li, a modern child living in Singapore, learns more and more about her roots and heritage in Malaya. While some would consider that the point of a quest story is getting to the completion of the task, in the heroic journey, the journey itself is as important as the task itself, if not more so. This is true when it comes to



Mei Li's journey. It is down this road into the past that the Malaysian reader gains insight into the early history of Malaysia.

In classical heroic stories, the hero's journey will be fraught with battles against dragons and monsters and fights against enchantments and traps by vicious sorcerers. While the main antagonist of the book, the deceitful Bomoh, is indeed an evil, wicked-hearted sorceress, Mei Li's adventures do not involve battles with dragons and monsters, but her struggles instead are more internal: ignorance, insecurity and an anxious search for her origin. Mei Li represents the young diasporic Chinese living in modern Singapore who are gradually losing their heritage and tradition. Mei Li's journey serves to reacquaint her with her roots and place in history.

History is important in shaping identity. We live today in the shadow of the people of the past to whom we owe our identity and sense of belonging. Malaysian literature has long been connected with the search for identity and belonging, especially so since our country is a melding pot of multiple cultures and beliefs. It is important that children like Mei Li, who are part of the Chinese diaspora, recognize that their ancestors have lived in this country for a long time, and that they have been part of Malaysia's colourful history for centuries. In her nocturnal journeys into the past, Mei Li encounters her ancestors, each living in different periods of Malaya's history. These wise and gentle guides, being mirrors of the past, help reconnect Mei Li with her roots, and provide her with wisdom and insight into the older generations, knowledge that is rapidly disappearing in modern Malaysia and Singapore. Grand-aunt Mei Li says that in the olden days, magic was associated with ancestral spirits and the loss of magic in modern times symbolizes the loss of our connection to our roots:

"Well, there are other forms of magic not in law, and you are just the right age for those. Too bad your parents don't believe in any of them, but I see you do. In the venerable days, magic was simply ancestral spirits. But if no one will remember them today, it is no wonder magic is disappearing from Malaysia" (27).

Her meetings with her foremothers serve to teach Mei Li valuable lessons on wisdom, strength and feminine solidarity. Armed with the gifts and advice from her ancestress, Mei Li is able to face the final journey with courage and determination, successfully rescuing Princess Li Po from her island prison and reuniting her with the Sultan.

In successfully bringing together the Sultan and the princess, Mei Li completes her task, ensuring that history runs its intended course. However, the well-water, the talisman intended to bring her home has been used up, and Mei Li despairs of ever going home. But her selfless act in sacrificing the water to help the princess does not go unrewarded and as the princess drapes the shawl over her shoulders,

Mei Li finds herself waking from a long dream into her parents' arms. Her journey with the magic shawl also marks a coming of age passage for her, and she returns home wiser than before, carrying the memory of her history and heritage within her.

There has been much criticism of *Princess Shawl* itself. Some critics claim that the book is too straightforward, formulaic and lacks originality. But while I admit that these criticisms are not baseless, we cannot simply refuse to acknowledge the important contribution that this book will lend to the growth of children's literature in Malaysia. While other writers are content to write didactic and under-stimulating local children's books, *Princess Shawl* is one of the first genuine attempts by an acknowledged author to integrate Malaysia's colourful history into a fantasy tale. Lim's *Princess Shawl* is an important contribution to the development of children's literature in Malaysia, for not only is it one of the few books that are written primarily for Malaysian-Singaporean children, it also gives young readers a character that they can relate to on a personal and cultural level, and reminds us that no matter how young we are and humble our origins may be, each of us has the potential to partake of a hero's journey and emerge triumphant in the end.