A First Opinion: A True-to-Life Story of Chinese Adoption


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Written and illustrated by Ed Young, My Mei Mei is Young’s real-life story recording the adoption of his second daughter from China. The book is written in first-person narrative: Young’s first daughter Antonia is the narrator who reveals her emotional transitions shortly after the adoption of her baby sister. The story starts with Antonia describing how she is adopted to Young’s family in the first place. Being the only child, she likes to play “big sister” with her parents. However, pretending to blow her mother’s nose or change her dad’s diapers and talking to an imaginary sister satisfy her no more. She wants a real sister. So, the whole family decides to adopt a second baby girl from China, where Antonia is also from.

After a long period of anxious expecting, the baby sister finally arrives. Yet she’s nothing like what Antonia imagined. She doesn’t walk, talk, or play. All she does is cry a lot. What’s worse, the baby sister takes all the attention away from Antonia, which makes Antonia feel left out and lonely.

As the baby sister grows, she interacts with Antonia. The two sisters play games, read books, keep pets, and do a lot of things together. They eventually complete each other, because the little sister looks up to Antonia and she, in return, cares for her younger sibling with all her heart.

Ed Young’s realistic and lively depiction of his daughters makes My Mei Mei a pleasant read. Through the perspective of Antonia, readers are presented with the delicate emotional reactions a girl has toward a new sibling. All those who have siblings recognize this universal theme. These readers can read and reminisce about their own complex emotions when first welcoming their own baby brother or sister. The realistic nature of the dialogue spoken by Antonia clearly reflects the pure naiveté of a little girl. In addition, the incidental incorporation of two Chinese words ("Mei Mei"—little sister, and "Jieh Jeih"—big sister) in the text adds to the cultural authenticity of the story.

Ed Young incorporates Chinese cultural images into his work without hesitation. His adept illustrations reflect Chinese artistic influences through collage, pastel, and gouache. The most striking feature is the considerable use of floral patterns, either as the background or the central design of the characters’ clothing. The bird-and-flower theme is an
important motif in Chinese paintings, and Ed Young successfully weaves the traditional Chinese painting images into his drawings. However, such artistic inspiration could also have resulted from the floral patterns seen on qipáo (or cheongsam)—the one-piece mandarin gown worn by Chinese women since the Qing dynasty. All these details give the audience a slight taste of authentic Chinese culture.

Educators who intend to use this book in their curriculum could encourage students to investigate the motifs of adoption, the issues surrounding new siblings, and the Chinese cultural icons in My Mei Mei. Besides the clever usage of first-hand narratives from his daughter in responding to the new member of the family, Young demonstrates the apparel (floral pattern dresses, daddy’s back shoes, and the hair style of the sisters) representative of people in suburban China. This could be an interesting cultural experience for American students.
A Second Reaction: *My Mei Mei: An Authentic Tale of Parenthood*


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An invisible red thread connects those destined to meet, regardless of time, place, or circumstance. The thread may stretch or tangle, but never break.

- Chinese Proverb

It is inspiring to learn that the corpus of children’s books dealing with international adoption is expanding. Many of the stories are told from the perspective of the adoptive parents, siblings, or extended family members. Ed Young's *My Mei Mei* gracefully and meaningfully explores the process of adoption as it impacts his daughter, Antonia, who soon becomes a Jieh-Jieh (big sister) to newly adopted Mei Mei (little sister). Told in simple language, Young’s story depicts his daughter Antonia’s real-life experience of becoming a big sister in a way that young children can comprehend. Young’s use of young children’s diction provides an honest look at siblinghood.

The story evolves as Antonia moves from playing big sister with her parents to asking them if she can have a real Mei Mei rather than continuing to only have a pretend little sister. Antonia states, “I once asked Mommy if I could have a real Mei Mei.” This passage struck me personally, as I am the mother of Maddie Zhi Lan, adopted from China in September 2005. My husband and I have fielded similar questions from Maddie. Most recently, she told us of her imaginary sister, Ella. She claimed only she can see Ella, but that we need to help her care for her new Mei Mei. Soon the conversations grew to Maddie’s asking us if she could have a real little sister. One can only imagine Maddie’s response to reading Young’s story of *My Mei Mei*!

In the book, Antonia explores first her desire to become a big sister, and then realizes her lack of awareness of the true abilities of a toddler. Antonia’s idea of a Mei Mei contrasts with the reality of the capabilities of a young toddler, as she is so hoping to have a younger sister with whom she can play. Antonia tells her parents, “When we returned, I found out that she was not what she ought to be. She couldn’t walk. She couldn’t talk. She couldn’t play. She took all the attention away from me. I felt left out.” Once the family returns from China with their newest daughter, Antonia realizes that Ananda is unable to play, talk, and walk as she had hoped. Antonia soon sees that as her sister grows, she will...
be more of a playmate. As time goes by, Antonia has an opportunity to defend her Mei Mei and assume her new big sister role when a boy takes away her Mei Mei’s shovel at a playground. As her little sister grows, Antonia and Mei Mei play board games, perform music, mimic wild animals, and begin to develop a trust that is beautifully nurtured into a sisterly bond.

The illustrations complement the story effectively by conveying a purpose to the text and will easily keep the attention of young children. Young uses exquisite, expressive drawings that reflect Chinese culture. Young’s use of gouache lends itself to illustrations with more opaque effects and reflective qualities. The floral patterns used in some of the clothing, fabric, and backgrounds are reminiscent of one of the most typical traditional costumes for Chinese women, the qipao. Young’s art throughout the book complements the story effectively by lending an authenticity to the text.

This book could easily be shared with young children and included in conversations about adoption and families in home and school settings. The information is palatable for children and most importantly, authentic and heartening. Young’s integration in the text of the Chinese words—Baba (father), Mei Mei (little sister), and Jieh-Jieh (big sister) adds beautifully to the authenticity of the book. What is missing is attention to the more difficult topics such as bonding with new parents, the trauma experienced from numerous placements, the separation from loved ones, such as foster parents and nannies, and the grieving process that accompanies those experiences. Such issues, from my experience, are critical for adoptees. Unfortunately, they are often overlooked in the corpus of children’s literature.

Perhaps when writing about international adoption and a child’s yearning for a younger sibling, authors such as Young should include the ramifications of new siblinghood. Transitioning to becoming an older sibling may not always be a smooth process. Issues such as jealousy and lack of understanding can easily arise. Our son, Niall, was 11 years old when he became a big brother. We were mindful to include Niall in the adoption process, from completing paperwork, to talking with our social worker, to decorating Maddie’s bedroom, to traveling with us to bring her home. He tells us now that he felt included, and we can see how much he loves and cares for his young sister, Maddie. At the same time, we have observed the typical jealousy that arises, especially when Niall points out to us that he feels we are too lenient with Maddie in our philosophies of discipline. He is happy and contented in being a big brother, but we have watched him struggle a bit with his transition from being the only child to becoming the older sibling to Maddie.