

## ***Samsui, Wayang, Rambutans: Using children's stories to teach language and history***

### **Ho Lee-Ling**

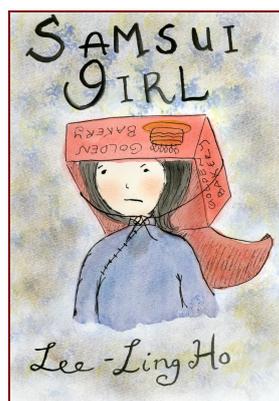
My interests and training are very much reflected in the books I write and illustrate which try to combine story, pictures and history.

My first book was 'Samsui Girl', published with a grant from Singapore's Media Development Agency (MDA). It set the model for a series of books that integrate story and history in a fun way. The second book in this series is 'Wayang Girl'. The aim is to use stories to interest children in learning about the past. These are chapter books with pictures - targeted at children with a reading-age from 7 years and above.

The next series of books were commissioned by Singapore's Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports. They wanted a series of four picture books that would illustrate and promote understanding of the four main principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in Singapore. I conceptualised and wrote the books, which were illustrated by Chia Kok Tiong. Unlike 'Samsui' and 'Wayang Girl', these books were concerned with values rather than history. The books are 'The Boy with a tree on his head', 'The Shadow', 'The UGB' and 'Shush!'

As this conference is focused on pictures, I will talk in more detail about two of my books and how the pictures play an important role in telling the story. Lastly, I will explore some idea about how the pictures and these books can be used to teach history and values in the classroom.

### **'Samsui Girl'**



This story is set in Singapore and about an 8 year old girl whose name is Amber. I drew Amber in a way that would convey the kind of girl she is. You can see she has short hair, wears T-shirts and shorts. She is a tom-boy but a child that likes to try new things. One of her problems is that she likes to put her leg on the chair - a habit I used to have.

Amber's leg on chair leads to a stand-off with her Mother. Amber's mother thinks it is very rude for her to put her leg on the chair. Her mother says 'Only Samsui women and rickshaw pullers put their legs on the chair. Young ladies do not do it.' In anger, Amber replies that she will be a Samsui girl so that she can put her leg on the chair.

Amber's mother is an important character in the story. She often challenges Amber, and it is her challenges and Amber wanting to prove her mother wrong

that motivates her to do new things. I imagined Amber's mother to be very different to what Amber is. So I decided that she would be a curvy, funny woman who is always immaculately groomed and made up. See her red lips, jade pendant, earrings and bracelet.



Amber first tries to become a Samsui girl on her own but does not succeed. She later meets her neighbour, Lee Por Por who used to be a Samsui woman. Lee Por Por makes a Samsui headscarf for Amber. This process is very hard to describe in words, so I drew pictures referring to historical photos from an old newspaper article.



With Por Por, Amber goes to a construction site to do work which the Samsui used to do. In a conversation with Por Por, she also learns that not all Samsui women put their legs on the chair, only rude ones do. At the end of the day, Amber returns home tired but finally understanding what it is like to be a Samsui girl.

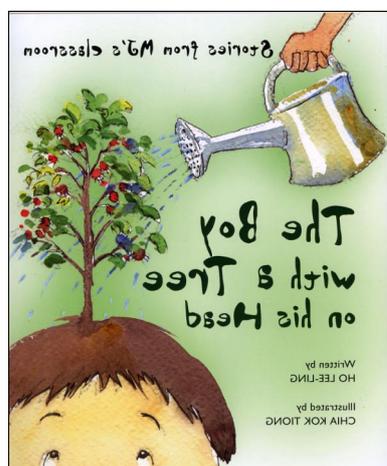
### *Suggested classroom activities – Language*

- The teacher can tell the story using only the pictures and after listening to it, students can write out the story
- The teacher can tell the story without the pictures. Students then draw their own pictures and compare them with the original
- Students are given pictures, and told to arrange them in the correct order. Students make up and tell a story based on the pictures.

### *Suggested classroom activities - History*

- After listening to the story, students can discuss and compare Amber and a real Samsui woman
- After listening to the story, students to draw a Samsui woman/girl and write a short essay on the Samsui women.
- After reading the book, students are to think about other historical figures. In groups, they are to research them, dress up like them and say what work they do.

### **MJ's Classroom: The Boy with a Tree on his head**



Each book in MJ's classroom was written to illustrate a particular UN convention of the child value. The first book I wrote was 'The boy with a tree on his head' and the basic value was 'children should not suffer discrimination'. This was difficult as I wanted to teach the value by using a negative example: someone who was discriminated against. However, what kind of child should I choose to be the victim? The fear was whatever choice I made may inadvertently reinforce or set up discrimination or stereotypes based on race, ethnicity or disability. So I decided to have a character who had an 'unbelievable' disability - a tree grew out of his head.

I think the idea for this came from the folk belief that if you ate the seed of a fruit, a fruit tree will grow out of your head. I chose the tree to be a rambutan tree because I like rambutans, it is a local fruit, and would fit in with my storyline.

For this book, the pictures were very important in helping children imagine this boy and develop empathy for him. What I wanted was also to see the tree 'grow' on his head.

In the beginning we meet Mark who is a new member of MJ's classroom. MJ or Monitor John is the Monitor of a class and the narrator of the stories. The children all laugh when they first meet Mark, but they get reprimanded by their teacher. Notice the tree is relatively small.



One day there was a sports competition. MJ encourages Mark to join the 400m race as he is a good runner. The other students suggest that he not compete.

Xiao Ming says 'That thing on Mark's head is so heavy. He'll run so slowly that he might as well not run at all.' But MJ stands firm.

You can now see that some time has past and the tree has started to blossom flowers.



On the day of the competition, Mark's tree is full of fruit. His classmates are worried but MJ encourages Mark to do his best. At first Mark starts off at the back. MJ yells his encouragement, and as Mark runs, rambutans to fly off the tree hitting the other competitors.



Mark ran and ran and in the end he won the race!

His competitors were unhappy because they were hit by the flying rambutans. MJ calmed everyone down by saying "Mark can't help having a fruit tree on his head. But we can all enjoy these fruits together. So everyone picked up the fallen rambuan and had a juicy, yummy, sweet rambutan feast.

*Suggested classroom activities - values*

- After telling the story, students can imagine what kind of tree they would prefer growing on their head and draw a picture of it. Students can show their drawings and explain their choices
- The teacher can talk about how everyone is different, but they should all be treated fairly. Very often disadvantages can be advantages in different circumstances. Student can think about and discuss what disadvantages they have may become advantages in different circumstances.