

# From the Mouth of Children

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## Abstract

*This paper aims to study how Sui Sin Far, a pioneer Chinese American writer, disrupts the hierarchy power in her children's tale, "The Banishment of Ming and Mai." In this story, Sui Sin Far develops storytelling to have her readers involve in her work; her readers become her listeners and then become more active, more sensitive, and more open to change their thought. In this way, through her children's tale, Sui Sin Far can inculcate children with ideas about human relationship: no boundaries among races.*

## From the Mouth of Children

Fairy tales and fables are part of oral tradition. In its written form, a fairy tale tends to be a short narrative told for the amusement of children, dealing with a hero or heroine, who having experienced various adventures of a more or less supernatural kind, lives happily ever after. A fable, on the other hand, is a short narrative which non human creatures or inanimate things are normally characters, and its aim is to point a moral (Cuddon 322-3). However, Sui Sin Far, one of pioneer Chinese American writers in the United States, creates her fairy tale and fable to overturn the power hierarchy

between humans and animals.

Sui Sin Far was the daughter of a Chinese mother, Grace Trefusius, and an English father, Edward Eaton. Born in 1865 in England and named Edith Maud Eaton, Sui Sin Far immigrated in 1873 with her parents to Montreal, where she grew up in a genteel poverty in a family that included fourteen children. The family was poor and the children often felt ostracized for their mixed race heritage. Sui Sin Far grew up having little contact with Chinese people or Chinese culture. However, Sui Sin Far acknowledged her Chinese heritage when she had more opportunity to contact with Chinese

people at a Baptist mission, teaching English to Chinese immigrants (Ling 28). In the time of Chinese Exclusion, she employed a Chinese pen name, Sui Sin Far, and wrote stories and articles to defend Chinese people in the United States. “The Banishment of Ming and Mai” is one of these writings.

In Sui Sin Far’s “The Banishment of Ming and Mai,” a brother and sister, Chan Ming and Chan Mai, are banished to a land. After the boatmen put them out of the boat and leave them alone. A crocodile guides them to a soft, mossy bed, from where they wake in the morning to find themselves encircled by animals of various species that unite to protect Ming and Mai. After “many a moon”, the children’s nurse comes to rescue them.

Sui Sin Far, in this story, revised oral traditions in written form, using storytelling to shape her story. Paul Robinowitz describes the social nature of storytelling as a narrative form.

As a social process, storytelling mediates social relations rather than providing moral proscriptions; the story’s meaning is embedded in the telling, not in its final point... A profoundly interactive process, storytelling provides a cultural intersection between the personal and the political, the individual and the community; the teller, the tale, and the audience. (28)

Trinh T. Minh-ha also emphasizes the communal and culture-building aspects of storytelling, calling it “the oldest form of building historical consciousness in community” (148). Applying Robinowitz’s and Minh-ha’s idea to Sui Sin Far, it is clear that she uses storytelling to set up dialogue among the characters and with her readers. The different perspectives and voices in her story emphasize dialogue, community, and the social process of storytelling. By using storytelling, Sui Sin Far makes her readers part of her community of listeners and invites them to be involved in her text, thereby lending a sense of orality to the written text. In this way, her readers play a more active role in the construction of meaning, filling in the “gaps,” as Wolfgang Iser says, by bringing “into play our own faculty for establishing connections” (*The Implied Reader* 280). He also suggests, “The reader’s wandering viewpoint travels between all these segments; it constant switching during the time flow of reading intertwines them, thus bringing forth a network of perspectives” (*Interaction* 113). In other words, Sui Sin Far has her readers involve in her work, and then they become more sensitive to cultural boundaries and open their own thought to change.

In addition, after inviting reader involvement, Sui Sin Far manipulates the audience’s expectation. Christina Feldman points out,

“Our fairy tales give us a ready-made vision and version of what it means to be feminine, a successful woman, and equally clear warnings of this pitfalls that lie ready to ensnare us in our quest” (27). The majority of fairy tales written by men cast girls in the role of a beautiful and patient heroine who is rescued from the forces of evil because her innate goodness and purity. Often the rescuer is a prince charming. For young boys, the development paradigm in fairy tales is different because masculine heroes are clever, resourceful and brave. They leave home to slay dragons, outsmart the malevolent brute, and find fortunes to save their people. Sui Sin Far’s tales for children are unique because they do not reflect conventional roles for girls. Sui Sin Far rejects stereotypical images of submissive, self-sacrifice, or victimized young girls by creating young heroines who challenge the traditional manners. In “The banishment of Ming and Mai,” when the children first confront the “breast,” Ming, (the brother) asserts his power and argues that, “These honorable beings have to be subdued and made to acknowledge that man is master of this forest. I am here to conquer them in fight” (270). Ming’s learned stereotypes about human and male supremacy and causes Mai (the sister) to reject this human superiority argument and think that “his words made him terrible to her than any of the beasts

of the field” (139). Sui Sin Far creates a tiny but passionate young girl who rejects negative stereotypes and gives animals a chance to initiate a peaceful coexistence.

In the words of Navaho storyteller Yellowman, “Through the storytelling everything is possible” (Toelken 221). Similarly, in “The Banishment of Ming and Mai,” Sui Sin Far can suggest the dissolution of boundaries by opening communication between species; the parable suggests the possibility of breaking through fixed ideas, the monologic assumptions and ethnocentric prejudices that divide human cultures. The orphaned, deserted children realize that the animals are docile and gentle with them. What happens next represents a breakthrough across borders between humans and animals: “The tiger smiled in return, and advancing to Ming, laid himself down at his feet, the tip of his nose resting on the boy’s little red shoes . . . Thus in turn did every other animal, bird, fish, and insect present” (271).

The history behind the animal’s kindness to these particular children reinforces the ideal vision: there are no racial boundaries. Centuries ago, an ancestor of Mai and Ming was “so kind of heart . . . that he could not pass through a market street without buying up all the live fish, turtles, birds, and animals that he saw, for the purpose of giving them liberty and life” (265).

The animals that help the descendants of this man are themselves descendants of the animals that he set free in this forest. “Believe me. Your highness, we were conquered many years ago—and not in fight” (271). This statement explicitly shows that the social borders can be destroyed by love. Therefore, in the forest, Ming and Mai live in harmony with these animals without boundaries of species. When the children’s nurse comes, her cry of “wild beasts” is answered by the children’s “They are not wild beasts. They are elegant and accomplished superior beings” (274). In this case, we see Sui Sin Far’s skill: through children (the mouths of babes), an adult audience naively accepts this idea which could not if spoken by adult characters.

Children’s tales become Sui Sin Far’s strategy to create more flexible ideas of identity and race in children who are still in the process

of forming worldviews and value systems. The French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) added another point of view to the concept of children’s reading. His ideas about education were expressed in *Emile* (1762) where he emphasized the importance of moral development could be best accomplished through simplicity of living. Rousseau’s idea led to extremely didactic and moralistic books for children, books that supposedly taught them how to be good and proper human beings. Similarly, children’s literature played a central role in Sui Sin Far’s work to effect a change of racial attitudes in the United States. In the imaginative arena of children’s literature, using the fairy tale, and the animal fable, Sui Sin Far inculcate children with ideas about human relationship: people can live in harmony without boundaries among races.



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