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Fostering Creativity through Cultural Narratives: A Qualitative Study on the Impact of Chinese Folk Picture Books in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract: Cultivating creativity is essential in early childhood education. Folk picture books, which integrate cultural heritage with artistic expression, show significant potential in stimulating young children's creativity, though their specific mechanisms remain underexplored. This qualitative case study, conducted in a kindergarten in Guiyang, China, aimed to: (1) examine teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding Chinese folk picture books; (2) analyze how these books stimulate creative behaviours in children aged 5–6; and (3) propose evidence-based principles for their design and application. Through in-depth interviews with 12 teachers and 2 experts, non-participant observations of experimental and control groups over two months, and systematic analysis of 20 folk picture books using a Piagetian framework, the study revealed that these books function as "cultural-cognitive scaffolds." Results indicated that the experimental group demonstrated enhanced narrative complexity, imaginative play, and artistic expression incorporating cultural motifs. Key facilitating features included animistic characters, open-ended narratives, and distinctive artistic styles. The findings highlight the value of folk picture books in fostering creativity and suggest that educators should integrate them intentionally using interactive strategies, while designers should blend authentic cultural elements with developmentally appropriate narrative and visual techniques.

Keywords: Folk Picture Books、Creativity、Early Childhood Education、Cultural-Cognitive Scaffolds、Cultural Heritage

I. Introduction

Early childhood, particularly ages 5–6, is widely recognized as a critical period for fostering creative thinking (Gajda et al., 2017). During Piaget's preoperational stage, children's cognition is characterized by symbolic play and egocentrism, which provide a fertile ground for creative development (Babakr et al., 2019). Picture books are a fundamental educational resource in kindergartens, known for supporting language acquisition, emotional regulation, and social understanding (Rohman, 2024; Donohue, 2023).

While the general value of picture books is acknowledged, the specific impact of folk picture books—rich in cultural narratives, traditional symbols, and indigenous art forms—on creativity warrants deeper investigation. These books serve as vessels of cultural capital that shape cognitive frameworks and creative expression (Bourdieu, 1986; González, 2023). However, there is a scarcity of nuanced qualitative research on how educators perceive these resources and how they trigger creative processes in authentic classroom settings (e.g., Lena Sari Silaban, 2024; Eckhoff, 2017).

This study addresses this gap by examining the interplay between Chinese folk picture books and creativity development in a real-world educational context. The objectives are:

1. To explore kindergarten teachers' perceptions and practical experiences regarding the use of Chinese folk picture books in fostering children's creativity.

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2.To analyse how the cultural and artistic elements within folk picture books stimulate creative behaviours (e.g., narrative, symbolic play, artistic expression) in children aged 5-6 through empirical classroom observation.

3.To propose evidence-based principles for the design and pedagogical application of folk picture books to effectively enhance early childhood creativity.

II. Literature Review

Creativity development in early childhood is closely linked to cognitive development. Piaget's preoperational stage (2–7 years) is marked by the emergence of symbolic thought, where children represent objects and ideas through play, language, and drawing (Piaget, 1962). This capacity for representation underpins creativity. Vygotsky (1978) further emphasized the socio-cultural context of development, noting that cognitive skills, including creativity, are cultivated through social interactions and cultural tools such as stories and art.

Folk picture books represent a quintessential cultural tool. Their narratives and artistic styles engage the specific cognitive schemas of preoperational children. **Figure 1** illustrates the theoretical framework, mapping how key features of folk picture books interact with and stimulate cognitive processes leading to observable creative outputs.

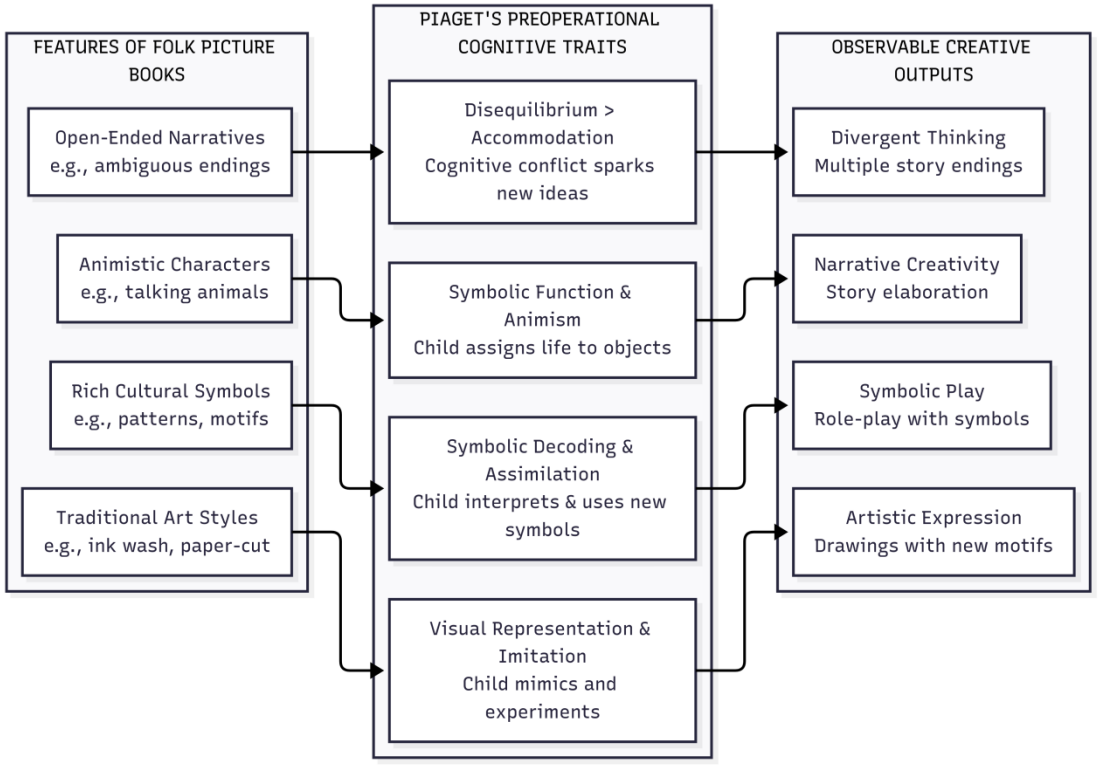


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework: How Folk Picture Books Stimulate Creativity in the Preoperational Stage

This model visualizes the mechanism through which specific features of folk picture books activate core cognitive traits in preoperational children, serving as a "cultural-cognitive scaffold" that fosters measurable creative behaviours.

Picture books support literacy development, introduce new concepts, and stimulate imagination (Salley et al., 2022; Niland, 2023). The synergy between text and image enables children to construct meaning, make inferences, and explore worlds beyond their immediate experience (Wright, 2010; Wang, 2025). Research indicates that picture books can enhance vocabulary (Galea et al., 2025; Salley et al., 2022), foster empathy and prosocial tendencies (Chen et al., 2025), and provoke imaginative thinking (Niland, 2023).

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Folk tales, in particular, possess qualities that align with creative development. They often feature archetypal characters, mythical creatures, and narratives involving problem-solving and transformation—elements that resonate with children's animistic and magical thinking (Asokan & Naganathan, 2023). By engaging with folk narratives, children actively construct meaning, drawing on cultural schemas to create new connections and ideas; such stories can also scaffold prosocial and moral reasoning (Chen et al., 2025). Furthermore, picture books—including folk narratives—facilitate cross-cultural communication and help children appreciate diversity (Rochanavibhata & Marian, 2021; Skaremyr, 2024).

However, research on how the cultural content and artistic style of folk picture books specifically catalyze creative behaviours remains limited. This study employs Piaget's framework to analyze how these books interact with the preoperational child's mind to stimulate creative expression.

III. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design (Stake, 1995), focusing on a single kindergarten in Guiyang, China, renowned for its focus on folk arts integration. This approach allowed for an in-depth, contextualised investigation of the phenomenon. The study utilised methodological triangulation, combining in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis to enhance the validity and richness of the findings.

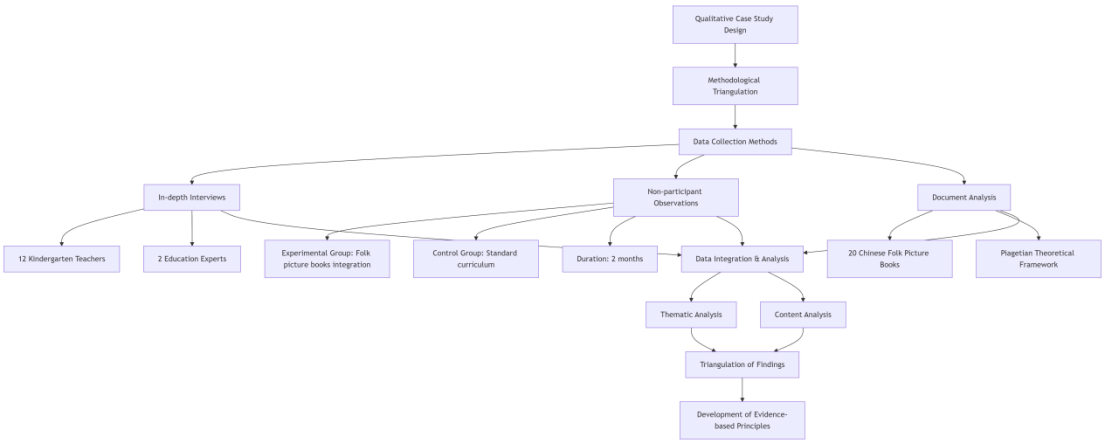


Figure 2: Methodology Flowchart

The flowchart illustrates the systematic research process, emphasizing triangulation of data sources to ensure valid and reliable findings.

Participants and Setting

Purposeful sampling was used to select 12 kindergarten teachers from the case study school, ensuring a mix of experience levels and classroom responsibilities. Two experts in children's literature and early childhood education were also recruited. The study involved observing children (N=25, aged 5-6) in an experimental classroom that incorporated folk picture books into its daily routine and a control classroom (N=25) that followed the standard curriculum without a special focus on folk literature.

A preliminary analysis of the interviews conducted with the twelve teachers indicated several key themes, which subsequently informed the design and focus of the observational phase of the study.

Theme 1: Perceived Value of Folk Picture Books

Teachers consistently emphasized the unique value of folk picture books in early childhood education. They described these materials as "cultural bridges" (T-4, 8 years experience) that help children connect with traditional stories while stimulating

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imagination. Most teachers reported observing enhanced engagement and curiosity when using these books compared to standard picture books.

Theme 2: Implementation Challenges

Despite recognizing the educational value of folk picture books, teachers identified several significant implementation barriers: limited access to diverse and high-quality folk picture books was emphasized by 9 teachers; a lack of training in culturally responsive pedagogy was reported by 7 teachers; and time constraints in developing appropriate lesson plans were mentioned by 10 teachers. These challenges collectively hinder the consistent and effective integration of folk literature into early childhood classrooms.

Theme 3: Observed Child Responses

Teachers noted several consistent patterns in children's responses to folk picture books, including increased questioning about cultural elements and traditions—as reported by 8 teachers—as well as enhanced narrative creativity and story-telling willingness, noted by 11 teachers. Additionally, 9 teachers observed greater engagement in symbolic play inspired by story elements, reflecting how children imaginatively reinterpreted and extended narrative elements in their own play.

The results of the teacher interviews helped refine the observation protocol and provided a context for interpreting the classroom observation data, particularly in identifying specific creative behaviors that needed to be recorded during the experimental phase.

Characteristic	Category	Number	Percentage
Teaching Experience	1-5 years	4	33.3%
	6-10 years	5	41.7%
	11+ years	3	25.0%
Educational Background	Bachelor's in ECE	8	66.7%
	Master's in ECE	4	33.3%
Previous Folk Literature Training	Yes	3	25.0%
	No	9	75.0%

Table1: Teacher Demographic Information

This preliminary analysis highlighted the value teachers place on folk picture books alongside significant implementation challenges, underscoring the need for structured support in the experimental phase.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study was conducted over a concentrated two-month period, employing a structured approach to gather comprehensive and longitudinal observational and qualitative data across multiple classroom settings.

In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with 12 teachers and 2 experts explored perceptions, experiences, and observed impacts on creativity. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Observational Protocol and Data Collection Procedures: A comprehensive structured observation protocol was developed based on Piagetian preoperational characteristics to systematically document creative behaviors. The protocol included five key indicators with specific operational definitions:

(1) Symbolic Play (frequency per session): Episodes where children transformed everyday objects into story-related symbols, such as using wooden blocks as magical artifacts from folk tales or pretending scarves were dragon scales from legend narratives.

(2) Narrative Elaboration (complexity rating 1-5): Richness and sophistication of storytelling during group discussions, measured by story length, character development complexity, plot innovation, and incorporation of cultural elements from the books.

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(3) Animistic Thinking (frequency per session): Documented instances where children attributed human emotions, intentions, or consciousness to inanimate objects, mythical creatures, or natural phenomena featured in the stories.

(4) Divergent Artistic Expression (frequency per session): Creative art activities where children incorporated cultural motifs from the stories but modified, combined, or reinterpreted them rather than directly copying illustrations.

(5) Cultural Meaning-Making (frequency per session): Verbal explanations where children connected story elements to their personal experiences, family traditions, or broader cultural understanding, demonstrating deep comprehension beyond surface narrative.

Two independent observers, trained through 10 hours of protocol familiarization and practice sessions, conducted simultaneous coding with an established inter-rater reliability coefficient of $\kappa = 0.87$. Each observation session lasted 60 minutes, strategically scheduled during free-play periods immediately following story reading activities to capture peak creative engagement. Field notes documented contextual factors, peer interactions, and teacher interventions that might influence creative expression patterns.

Literature Analysis: A systematic analysis of 20 famous Chinese folk picture books (e.g., Nian, Kitchen God, and The Magic Brush) was conducted. A coding framework was constructed based on Piagetian preoperational characteristics (e.g., animism, symbolic representation, and narrative structure) to analyze the picture books' content, imagery, and potential to stimulate creative thinking.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed for the interview transcripts and observational field notes. Codes were generated inductively from the data and deductively from the theoretical framework. The coded data were then grouped into themes related to teacher perceptions, creative behaviours, and book features. The document analysis involved content analysis to identify and quantify key characteristics across the 20 books. NVivo software was used to manage and analyse the data. Triangulation of findings from the three data sources was performed to identify convergent evidence and enhance trustworthiness.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to interview transcripts and field notes. Codes were generated inductively and deductively, grouped into themes related to teacher perceptions, creative behaviours, and book features. Content analysis identified key characteristics across the 20 books. NVivo software facilitated data management and analysis. Triangulation of data sources identified convergent evidence and enhanced trustworthiness.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from the kindergarten administration, all participating teachers, experts, and the parents of the observed children. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. Children were free to opt out of activities at any time.

IV. Findings

The analysis of the qualitative data revealed rich insights into the perceptions, experiences, and observed outcomes associated with using folk picture books. The findings are structured around the three primary data sources, addressing each research objective in turn.

Theme 1: Cognitive and Affective Value Recognition. Teachers universally perceived folk picture books as unique and valuable resources that extend beyond conventional picture books. They were described as "windows to cultural heritage" (T-PM2) and "sparks for imagination" (T-EXP3). Teachers noted that these books provided a "shared cultural code" (E-1) that helped children connect stories to their own experiences and local traditions, facilitating deeper cognitive engagement and affective connection.

Theme 2, Effective teachers used interactive strategies: open-ended questions during read-alouds, role-play, art projects, and group storytelling. One teacher noted: “We didn’t just read ‘The Story of the Twelve Zodiac Animals’; we became paper-cutting artists, creating our own zodiac images using patterns we invented” (T-EXP1).

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Figure 3: Interview photos

Theme 3: Identified Challenges and Barriers. Despite recognizing their value, teachers' application was often hindered by a lack of curated resources and targeted training. Many expressed a need for more guidance on how to select appropriate folk stories and translate them into effective lesson plans. "We know they are good, but we need more than just the book; we need ideas and support to use them to their full potential," noted a veteran teacher (T-PM6).

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quote
Value Recognition	Acknowledgment of the books' unique role in cultural and creative development.	"They are more than stories; they are the roots we can give to our children." (T-PM4)
Pedagogical Strategies	Interactive methods used to extend reading into creative activities.	"I ask them to tell me what happens after the last page. Their ideas are always surprising." (T-PV1)
Implementation Challenges	Obstacles to consistent and effective use, primarily lack of resources and training.	"We have few books, and they are not durable for classroom use." (T-PM3)

Table 2: Summary of Primary Themes from Teacher Interviews

This summary outlines teacher perspectives, highlighting both the potential and challenges of using folk picture books.

Theme 2, which addresses Objective 2 regarding the observed creative behaviours stimulated by folk books, was evident in the observational data that revealed a marked difference between the experimental and control groups. The experimental group exhibited more frequent and sophisticated creative behaviours: children frequently engaged in symbolic and animistic play, where objects became symbols from the stories, such as a blanket transforming into a "magic carpet" or a stick representing Mulan’s sword, and they readily attributed feelings and intentions to characters, both real and mythical; in terms of narrative creativity, these children told longer, more elaborate stories during discussions, often incorporating vocabulary and plot structures from the folk books, and demonstrated a greater willingness to invent new scenarios for characters; furthermore, in artistic expression and cultural meaning-making, their drawings and crafts incorporated motifs from the books, like Dong embroidery patterns or stylised animals from legends, which went beyond mere imitation as children created new meanings, such as explaining a blue hue as "the sad colour of the moon in the Chang'e story." In contrast, the control group's play and expression, while creative, remained more anchored in everyday experiences and showed less narrative complexity and cultural infusion.

Creative behaviour	Experimental Group	Control Group	Difference
Symbolic Play	4.5	2.1	+2.4
Narrative Elaboration	5.1	2.9	+2.2
Animistic Thinking	3.8	1.7	+2.1

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Divergent Art	4.7	2.3	+2.4
Cultural Meaning-Making	3.2	0.8	+2.4

Table3: Average Frequency of Observed Creative Behaviours per Session

The table clearly shows that the experimental group exposed to folk picture books scored significantly higher than the control group on all five creative behaviors, The experimental group scored significantly higher across all creative behaviours, with the greatest difference in cultural meaning-making.

Theme 3: Principles for Effective Design and Application (Addressing Objective 3)

The systematic document analysis of 20 folk picture books was crucial for identifying the specific features that make them effective tools for stimulating creativity. This analysis allowed us to move from observing outcomes to prescribing design principles. The prevalence of key features and their theorized primary creative domain are presented in Table 4.

Book Feature	Number of Books Featuring This	Primary Creative Domain Supported
Distinct Cultural Art Style (e.g., ink wash, paper-cut, embroidery motifs)	20	Artistic Expression
Animistic Characters (e.g., talking animals, mythical beings)	18	Symbolic Play
Cultural Symbols (e.g., specific patterns, clothing, architecture)	16	Cultural Meaning-Making
Open-Ended Narrative (e.g., ambiguous endings, unresolved dilemmas)	15	Narrative Creativity

Table 4: Analysis of Features in 20 Chinese Folk Picture Books and Their Primary Associated Creative Domains

Caption for Table 1: Document analysis of 20 Chinese folk picture books. The table shows the frequency of key features and the primary creative domain each feature is theorized to support, based on the Piagetian theoretical framework and corroborated by observational and interview data.

Synthesising data from all three sources yielded the following design principles: the principle of Cultural Symbolism emphasises the use of authentic and visually clear cultural symbols, such as specific patterns, clothing, or architecture, that children can both decode and re-use; the principle of Narrative Openness advocates for the incorporation of open-ended plots or questions within the story to invite speculation, prediction, and co-creation; and the principle of Artistic Authenticity & Appeal highlights the importance of employing art styles that are both true to the cultural tradition and visually engaging for young children through the use of bold colours and expressive lines.

The application principles emphasize a structured approach beginning with transitioning seamlessly from reading to creative activities, such as posing prompts like, "We read about the magic brush; now what would you paint?"; furthermore, it is essential to scaffold imagination through teacher-led questioning and modelling to guide children from comprehending the story to innovating upon it; additionally, educators should strive to create a culturally-rich environment by supplementing book reading with other cultural artifacts, music, or discussions to provide deeper contextual understanding of the stories.

V. Discussion

Theoretical Framework Development and Contributions This study advances early childhood education theory by introducing the "cultural-cognitive scaffold" framework, which synthesizes Piaget's cognitive constructivism with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory

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to explain how culturally-embedded materials optimize creativity development during the preoperational stage. Unlike generic picture books that may conflict with children's natural cognitive tendencies, folk narratives create cognitive consonance by mirroring preoperational characteristics.

The Cultural Resonance Mechanism: Our findings reveal that folk picture books succeed as creativity catalysts because they reflect children's innate cognitive patterns. The prevalence of animistic characters in 90% of analyzed books directly corresponds to preoperational children's animistic worldview, creating optimal conditions for engagement. When children encounter talking animals or magical objects in folk tales, these elements validate rather than challenge their natural attribution of consciousness to non-human entities, facilitating deeper narrative immersion and creative elaboration.

Symbolic Bridging Theory: The rich cultural symbolism embedded in folk narratives provides children with sophisticated meaning-making vocabulary that extends beyond their immediate experiential reality. This study demonstrates that cultural symbols function as cognitive bridges, enabling children to construct increasingly complex creative expressions. The 4-fold difference in cultural meaning-making behaviors between groups illustrates how folk symbols offer children intellectual scaffolding for abstract thinking development.

Narrative Incompleteness Principle: The deliberately ambiguous or open-ended structure characteristic of traditional folk tales (identified in 75% of analyzed books) creates productive cognitive gaps that children instinctively fill through imaginative speculation. This structural feature transforms passive reading into active co-creation, aligning with research emphasizing the importance of open-ended narratives in stimulating imaginative thinking (Niland, 2023). Children's tendency to elaborate storylines, predict character motivations, and invent alternative endings reflects their natural drive to resolve cognitive dissonance through creative problem-solving.

These theoretical contributions challenge predominant Western-centric creativity frameworks and establish empirical support for culturally-responsive pedagogical approaches in early childhood education, supporting recent calls for diverse literature in expanding children's creative thinking perspectives (Noor et al., 2025).

VI. Conclusion and Implications

This study concludes that Chinese folk picture books are not merely vehicles of cultural transmission but are active catalysts for creative development in early childhood. Their narratives and artistry provide the ideal raw material for the imaginative, symbol-minded preoperational child.

The implications of this issue lie in both practical application and publication design. Early childhood educators must receive adequate support and systematic training to organically integrate folk picture books into the curriculum. Professional development should focus on strategic guidance for interactive reading instruction and, through the design of outreach activities that inspire creativity, help children make the transition from cultural absorption to artistic expression. Furthermore, the publishing industry needs to produce more high-quality folk picture books. While respecting cultural authenticity, creators and publishers should strive to enhance the accessibility and appeal of narrative and visual design, making them not only accessible to young children but also deeply inspiring. Furthermore, works should demonstrate open narrative structures and clear symbolic expression to support children's understanding and imagination. A limitation of this study is its focus on a single kindergarten case, which may affect generalisability. Future research could involve a larger, more diverse sample of schools and include longitudinal designs to track the long-term impact of exposure to folk literature on creative potential.

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