

Kancil Tales and Manifestations of Ethical Values: Cases from Malaysian School Textbooks

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Abstract

The *Kancil* is the Malay language for mousedeer (*Tragulus kancil*) which is a small native animal of the Malaysian rainforests. Stories about the creature are common in Malay folktales that portray images of an animal imbued with a mixture of good and evil. For reasons of projecting ethical values of a creature that looks adorable and mischievous, the Kancil is featured in textbooks of language and history subjects to convey simple ethical lessons for the education of school children. This paper takes a critical look at the Kancil stories in textbooks published by the same publisher for the school subjects on Chinese, English, and Malay languages and Malaysian history. It is shown that these Kancil stories manifest real or imaginary ethical values and moral behaviour and reflect subtle variations in perspectives in different language texts.

Key words: Malaysian primary education, language and history textbooks, Kancil stories, ethical values

Introduction

Textbooks are meant to transmit knowledge to students. In general, the writing and publication of textbooks are subject to the control and supervision of the government. The influence and authority of textbooks as a way to convey intended messages are then more pervasive than those of general reading materials. Since textbooks are endorsed by the government, the knowledge, meaning and contents contained therein are deemed to imply the principles of being “correct”, “conforming to required standards” and “universal”. However, since the 1980s, certain scholars have, from the perspective of multi-culturalism, re-examined the complicated relationship between textbooks and politics especially in the humanities and social sciences. It is realized that textbooks are influenced by such considerations as politics, economics, ethnicity, gender, religion, and ideology. Among the most crucial issue is the question of “Whose knowledge is of most worth?” (Apple, 1991; Banks, 1995; Torres, 1998; Hickman, 2012; and Zajda, 2010). Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country with an education system

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comprising different language streams as well as public and private educational institutions, each using textbooks of its own. The textbooks of each language stream are written and supplied by persons of the same ethno-linguistic origin. Although the textbooks for each language stream are subject to approval by the Ministry of Education, the extent by which the concept of multi-cultural education is put into practice has yet to be evaluated.

By means of a case study, starting from the angle of multi-culturalism and textbook politics, this paper attempts to analyse the contents of the Kancil stories in Malaysian school textbooks and, by extension, to explore the manifestations of real and imaginary ethical values that are embodied in these tales.

Kancil Tales and School Textbooks

The Kancil, also known as *pelanduk* in Malay, is a native animal of the Malaysian and Southeast Asia rainforests. Resembling a deer, the Kancil is tiny as a cat and, in the folktales of the region, is regarded as the epitome of quick-wittedness and nimbleness. In Malay folktales, the Kancil is known by its honorific of Sang Kancil.¹ These tales are popular in Malaysia as well as Indonesia, Singapore, and Brunei. Although there are differences in various textbook editions, basically Kancil tales illustrate themes such as “the weak beating the strong”, “the quick-witted and nimble out-smarting the big and clumsy” or “the triumph of wise judgement and sense of justice over injustice”. In contemporary Malaysia, the Kancil is popularly viewed in a positive light. However, its early images were imbued with a mixture of good and evil. This was similar to the development of Kancil tales in Indonesia where their origins shared similarities with those in Malaysia. In 1992, Kathie Carpenter published *Kancil: From Mischief to Moral Education* which contained many stories that were not complimentary to the image of the Kancil. In the context of contemporary society, Kancil’s depiction has been modified from being a mischievous creature into a moral imp to meet the requirements of modern-day education (Carpenter, 1992).

Since modernization is a global phenomenon, the Kancil stories in Malaysian textbooks have also been re-packaged to suit the requirements of contemporary moral teachings, and the less desirable elements of earlier Kancil stories have been adapted or omitted to suit the pupils’ reading cognition. Kancil tales were the creations of the past and not targeted for children’s consumption, just as folktales containing elements of violence or immorality were similarly out of bounds for children. However, many Kancil tales feature plots and themes that serve to educate and to imbue morally correct ideas which, together with the adorable appearance and mischievous deeds of Kancil, are deemed to be appropriate for children’s ethical upbringing, and thereby to achieve desired results through education with fun. These considerations have rendered Kancil stories popular in textbooks and children’s extracurricular reading materials (see 廖冰凌/Liao Ping Leng and 伍燕翎/Ng Yean Leng, 2015).

Since the writers and publishers of the textbooks in each language stream are from the same ethnic group, the ethical values highlighted in Kancil tales may vary in emphasis. This study examines Kancil tales published in Chinese, Malay, and English as well as in history textbooks. Of these languages, Malay or Bahasa Malaysia enjoys special significance in the educational system as the national language of the country since independence in 1957. Many of the school textbooks that this study refers to are published by Malaya Press Sdn. Bhd. which was founded in 1959.²

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the ethical values of the same Kancil tales in different languages, having been processed and finalized by different writers and editorial committees, exhibit varying interpretations, sometimes even in diametrically opposing fashion. While taking note of the contexts of the original Kancil stories, it is necessary that the role and relevance of Kancil stories in fulfilling the educational needs of pupils in the multi-cultural context of Malaysia receive careful scrutiny.³

In the Name of Education: Kancil Tales in Chinese Textbooks

From the textbooks for the Chinese Language subject published by Malaya Press, six Kancil tales have remained in print for 22 years from 1964 (Table 1).

Table 1. Kancil Stories in Chinese Textbooks

Grade	Title
2	The Clever Kancil
3	Kancil Crosses the River
3	Kancil Stands for Justice
3	Two Months
4	Ancient Town Melaka
5	The Trial by King Solomon

Sources: The Malaya Press, 1964, 1967, 1968, and 1986 editions

“The Clever Kancil” is a tale that relates how Kancil is bitten on its front leg by a crocodile when it is drinking water by a river. Enduring the pain, it fools the crocodile that it is biting a branch, and then manages to escape when the crocodile releases its grip. The English and Malay textbooks use alternative titles such as “Kancil Fools the Crocodile” and “*Kaki Sang Kanchil Di-tangkap Buaya*” (Kancil’s Leg is Caught by the Crocodile) respectively. Whereas the Chinese textbook emphasizes cleverness, the English version focuses on cunningness, and the Malay version provides a factual account.

The story “Kancil Crosses the River” recounts how Kancil plays a trick on the crocodiles in its attempt to cross a river. It tells how Kancil wishes to cross a river to eat fruits to quench its thirst. To do this it invokes the name of King Solomon to summon the crocodiles to line up to be counted. Kancil then jumps on their backs to cross the river effortlessly.

In other editions, the story is variously known as “The Clever Kancil”, “Fooling the Crocodiles”, “Battling of Wits with Crocodiles”, “Kancil Uses a Trick to Cross the River”, or “Kancil Deceives the Crocodiles”, all of which possibly reflect the value systems of the compilers (筱林/Xiao Lin, 1952; 易孟丽/Yi Meng Li, 1961). One edition points to Kancil’s thirst and that it is caused by its running away from a tiger. In other editions, different fruits such as the *rambutan* or *lychee* is eaten by Kancil to quench its thirst, whereas in the *Stories of Kancil* published in the 1950s and 1960s, Kancil is shown to have fallen asleep without realizing the sudden arrival of a shower which traps it on an island. Hence in order to save itself, Kancil employs a trick to deceive the crocodiles to form a bridge across the river. Upon reaching the opposite bank, it turns back to ridicule the crocodiles for being stupid, and rudely shouting at them to eat dung (西华/Siwa, 1959: 41-50). Some editions depict Kancil counting the crocodiles loudly as it crosses the river, while others mention the use of a stick or its hoof to thump the crocodiles, or even to urinate on them. The latter version has appeared less frequently in modern editions. When incorporated in textbooks, the mischievous intent of Kancil or its desire to quench its thirst is often omitted, showing instead Kancil’s desire merely to use the crocodiles to cross the river. As such, the story has taken on the tone of Aesop’s fables, one of which depicts a crow dropping pebbles into a bottle so as to drink its water, without invoking any ethical appraisal. This edition is often used in textbooks and carries a factual title such as “Kancil Crosses the River” rather than one with moral undertones such as “Fooling the Crocodiles” or “Deceiving the Crocodiles”.

“Kancil Stands for Justice” tells of an ungrateful wolf (or a tiger) that has been trapped in a cage and later saved by a goat (or an old man). Freed, the wolf turns on the goat to devour it. A dispute ensues and they seek the help of someone to arbitrate the case. They come across a fox and then a snake, but neither dare to speak out to incur the displeasure of the wolf. Kancil then comes by and cleverly asks them to repeat the act. The wolf is promptly locked up in the cage again. In its original form, this story tells of an ungrateful crocodile which wants to eat the cow that has saved its life. When Kancil passes by, they plead with him to decide which side is right. The crocodile is then asked to repeat the incident and is then duped as he is pressed under the tree trunk again.

The moral of the story is that one should not be ungrateful and to praise the intelligence and wisdom of Kancil for helping the victim in its predicament. Another message is that the ungrateful is made to pay for its evildoing. Kancil stories of this type include such titles as “One Deserves One’s Punishment”, “The Crocodile is Devoid of Gratitude”, “*Buat Baik di Balas Jahat*” or “Repay Kindness with Wickedness” (Daud, 1963), “The Tiger Gets What It Deserves” (Skeat, 1901), and “Requite Kindness with Enmity”. However, from the title of this adapted text and the fact that it mentions the fear of the fox and the snake to speak out against the wolf, it is possible to see that its educational objective is to encourage defiance against brute force and to seek justice. This also reflects the compilers’ and editors’ intention of inculcating social moral responsibility.

“Two Months” is a narrative on the obligation to repay one’s debt. Hasim is indebted to Keri and his repayment is overdue. He agrees to settle his debt in two months. Interestingly, in Malay, *bulan* means the moon as well as the calendar month. Hence Hasim cunningly thinks that Keri must wait until two moons appear at the same time. Keri seeks Kancil’s advice on the matter. Kancil makes its judgement by pointing to the moon and its reflection on the surface of the river to prove that the date for repaying the debt has arrived, and it is time for Hasim to settle his debt.

The formation of Kancil’s image as a judge and taking on positive qualities had taken considerable time to complete its course. The evidence with the strongest representation is *Hikayat Sang Kancil* compiled by Daud Bahrum in 1963, comprising 20 stories that systematically portray the transition of Kancil from being young but frivolous, clever but mischievous and wilful, to gradually becoming mature and steady after going through a range of experiences, and spreading its reputation far and wide, to finally establishing its supreme image of King and judge of the forest.

In “The Trial by King Solomon”, Kancil unintentionally kills a litter of otters, whereupon the mother otter asks King Solomon to bring Kancil to justice. Kancil uses the logic of linked events and sequential reaction to absolve itself from blame. This is a tale that is passed down from the remote past and used to be known as “Who Killed the Otter’s Babies?” (Skeat, 1902) and “Whose Mistake?” (西华/Siwa, 1959). The story eventually points to the mother otter as the source of the disaster. She goes into the river to catch shrimps and crabs which go into a panic and run for their lives. The tortoises, thinking that the shrimps and crabs are attacking them, seek refuge on the shore. Thinking that the tortoises want to march onto the land, the woodpeckers begin to peck with the beat of drums. On hearing the drums, Kancil believes that war is breaking out and, also stamping its hoof to the beat of drums, accidentally stamps to death the seven little otters under its care. What this story indicates is a game of logic based on pure fantasy. It would be unrealistic to read any meaning into the story using the logic of ethics. What it shows is that Kancil is able to reverse a hopeless situation to work in its favour by its quick wit and eloquence.

The tale “Ancient Melaka Town” which connects Kancil and Melaka is unusual in that its origin is traced to *Sejarah Melayu*.⁴ The story introduces the history, scenery and the genesis of the Kingdom of Melaka. Legend has it that one day a Malay Sultan from Singapore passed by Muar. While taking refuge under a big tree he saw a mousedeer being chased by a hunting dog and, being cornered, suddenly turned round to bite the dog. Shocked by this abrupt turn of event, the dog backed down. The Sultan was very pleased to see a small creature like a mousedeer acting so bravely. He felt that the place was good for building his state. He asked his followers for the name of a big tree at his side, and was told that it was a “Malaka tree”, hence he named the place “Melaka”.

This set of Chinese textbooks from Grades 1 to 6, in 12 books and compiled by Hu Dexin (胡德馨) was first published in 1964. These textbooks were adopted by the majority of Chinese

primary schools and had undergone repeated revisions and reprints even before the 3M system was officially implemented in the 1980s.⁵ They featured Kancil stories such as “Kancil Stands for Justice”, “Ancient Town Melaka”, “The Trial by King Solomon”, “The Clever Kancil” and “Kancil Crosses the River”, and deemed to have sufficient educational merit to suit the reading cognition of primary school students. These stories portray Kancil’s positive image as a result of the compilers’ efforts to delete the negative elements of the original versions so as to present the desirable image of a clever, brave and righteous Kancil.

From Fable to State Formation: Kancil Tales in History Textbooks

One may expect stories of the adorable Kancil to be used as children’s textbooks and as reading materials, but to include such stories in History textbooks is rather unusual. That the Kancil is featured in History textbooks is due to its connection with the founding of Melaka. The History textbook in Chinese between the first edition of 1964 and subsequent editions to the 1980s contains a lesson called “Ancient Melaka Town”. The 1964 textbook deals with “The Formation of the Melaka State and Its Prosperity” and traces its source to the legend in *Sejarah Melayu*. The factual content of the Malay textbook is more exhaustive than that of the Chinese version.

Significantly, as noted in the *History Teaching Guide (4b)* (1964: 34) the negative image of Kancil was erased just because it was praised on a single occasion by the founder of a kingdom (despite the doubtful credibility of this legend). Its image was transformed to symbolize bravery and good luck. The textbook lessons are often accompanied by exercises and questions that refer to Kancil, the Malaka tree and the origin of the Melaka kingdom. For instance, one question was why did Parameswara think of building a state in Melaka when he saw a hunting dog scared into retreat by a mousedeer. Another referred to the reason for the choice of Melaka as the name of the state (*History 6b*, 1964: 32-33).

The story of Kancil and the founding of Melaka are popular topics in Chinese and history textbooks and these have in turn influenced the change in perception of Kancil. However, the ethical assessments in English and Malay textbooks present somewhat different viewpoints.

Wit or Cunning? : Kancil Tales in Malay and English Textbooks

The Malaya Press editions of the Malay and English textbooks do not contain as many Kancil stories as the Chinese textbooks. These textbooks feature only a single story for each of the six grades. In *Belajar Bahasa Kita (4a)* (*Learn Our Language 4a*)(1967) is a story called “*Malam Ini Belum Ada Dua Bulan*” (Tonight There Are No Two Moons Yet). The arbitrator in this story is not Kancil but *Penghulu* (the Headman) Dato Nordin. This change is in spite of the fact that the Kancil is portrayed as clever and righteous. A plausible reason for replacing an animal with a human may be because it is more realistic to let the local headman play the role

of the arbitrator of local disputes. This too is in keeping with the administration of local affairs by local officials in a newly independent nation.

In *Belajar Bahasa Malaysia (3a) (Learning the Bahasa Malaysia 3a)* (1971/1973: 36-37), published jointly by the Academia Publication and Malaya Press, the title of Lesson 9 is “*Kancil Menipu Buaya*” (Kancil Deceives the Crocodiles). The same title also appears in the Malaya Press edition *Inti Bahasa Malaysia (Essence of the Malay Language)* Grade 3, Lesson 24. It is worth noting that its story plot is different from that of “Kancil Crosses the River” in the Chinese textbook. The Malay textbook focuses on Kancil’s act of deceiving the crocodiles, but which the Chinese version completely ignores. The plot in the Malay version is more elaborate. It relates how Kancil, in order to cross the river, deceives the crocodiles into lining up to be counted. Kancil is shown to be carrying a coconut shell by which to knock each crocodile as he crosses the river. Having reached the opposite bank, Kancil is shown to be making fun of the crocodiles by saying that they have been fooled. As intended, this unkind act was strongly resented by the crocodiles.

In the Chinese textbook that is also published by Malaya Press, Kancil’s act of knocking the crocodiles is omitted. After crossing the river, Kancil does not laugh at the crocodiles or ridicule them, as in the Malay version, but remarks with a healthy sense of humour, that “You crocodiles are indeed numerous. But I want to thank you for your help, I am now going to eat *rambutan* !” (胡德馨/Hu Dexin, 1964: 25).

In the primary 6 English language textbooks, *New Era English Readers (Book 12)*, Lesson 5, the only Kancil story is “Pelandok, the Mousedeer” and seems to be the only one of its kind (Shen and Fernandez, 1965: 52-56). The compiler uses a third of the textbook to instil some general knowledge about animals to students. First to be mentioned is the mousedeer and its imminent danger of extinction, followed by an objective account of its characteristics and how it seeks to survive by being clever and mischievous. It then introduces the plot of a Kancil story which is similar to “The Fox Borrows the Tiger’s Terror”. This factual handling of Kancil may be due to the fact that the compilers of this set of textbooks are Professor Y.T. Shen and Oscar Fernandez, both of whom had studied in United States.

The two Kancil stories in the Malay and English textbooks have to a certain extent verified the Malay community’s general image of Kancil. As pointed out by a Malay scholar Harun Mat Piah (2006: 102-105), the survival instinct of Kancil as perceived by the Malay community is dependent more on cunningness and deceit rather than on wittiness. While its wit and cleverness are widely praised, its cunningness and deceitfulness are generally not well received. The English lesson “Pelandok, the Mousedeer” emphasizes Kancil’s use of its wit to survive in the forest. However, discussions on both the good and evil images of the Kancil are rare in Malay literary works. In fact, the positive image of Kancil is often portrayed in Malay literary works that also include other animal stories, fables or tales from folk literature. These are mainly short commentaries that cite Kancil’s wit and bravery, its triumphs as an underdog or its comical antics (Ismail, 2001: 20-24). Following frequent education policy changes from the

1980s, tales about Kancil are rarely encountered in Malay and English textbooks published by the Malaya Press. This is also the case in Chinese textbooks. Preliminary findings from interviews with publishers reveal that a possible reason is that a condition in the bid to publish textbooks is the selection of innovative story contents and the need to coordinate with the level of language proficiency stipulated for different grades. What is happening is that not only are Kancil stories being adapted to suit changing situations but also the gradual exclusion of these stories. This is a case of downgrading the importance of classical literature in contemporary textbooks.

Conclusion

Textbooks in Chinese, English, Malay and History (in Chinese) published by Malaya Press and in use since 1964 to the present day in primary schools contain selected tales of Kancil. These tales manifest similar or dissimilar ethical values in the different language versions. Chinese textbooks tend to emphasize educational objectives and ethical concepts; through frequent revisions, textbook compilers have consistently viewed Kancil as an exemplary model to convey certain desired ethical values. In the History textbooks, Kancil occupies a symbolic role in Malay folk culture on the founding of Melaka and as the manifestations of bravery and auspiciousness. The selected tales in Malay textbooks adhere faithfully to the original Kancil stories and consistently project an image of Kancil according to the traditional interpretations of the Malay community. The English textbooks adopt a more scientific approach to help young readers to appreciate the real and fictional character of Kancil. This approach differs from that of the Chinese selection of classical fables for purposes of ethical teaching, and the Malay selection that generally serves to counsel and to solve puzzles.

The general positive impression of Kancil depicted in the textbooks, though conforming to the ethical standards of modern education, has yet to receive a common treatment in the evolution of the perception of its image. The presence of persistent discrepancies in different language editions calls for the widening of the scope of research on the image of Kancil so as to obtain a better overall ethical assessment of what it implies.

This study shows that the tales about Kancil presented in different language subjects and history are treated differently by compilers of diverse ethnic and educational backgrounds. This may be due to two reasons. Firstly, the Chinese version tends to accommodate the multi-cultural ethical values of the country. Whether these values are real or imaginary manifestations of a multi-cultural state remains to be seen. If the former indicates a more popular acceptance of the idea of co-existence and sharing of prosperity, does the latter then refer to a superficial and false type of knowledge? Secondly, on close scrutiny, the value orientation and compiling policy of the minority Chinese community favour the preference for universal and positive values, perhaps also to indicate their good intention to mainstream society and their identity as fellow citizens.

The Malay and English versions, together with their compilers, enjoying the established identity of the national language and ruling elites and possessing a bigger political voice, are relatively free from the concerns that constrain the minority communities. In other words, the good or bad images of Kancil in the Malay and English textbooks do not constitute any threats to the conventional wisdom of the mainstream. As the nation is anchored on the back of mainstream society which also commands the larger objectives and vision of education, the dissemination and continuity of the mainstream culture and ideology are assured. On the other hand, whether textbooks are regarded as the carrier of “legal knowledge”, or a “cultural economic product”, the publishers, compilers, teachers and students of minority communities are inevitably enjoined to operate within an official framework and to abide by its rules and regulations.

This study is an interpretative attempt to examine, from selected folk tales about a native animal, the possibility of putting into practice the learning of shared ethical values in primary education. Interpretations are invariably personal. This task is further complicated by the fact that the stories on which this study is based are about a Kancil that conveys different manifestations of moral values to editors and publishers of different ethnic and educational backgrounds. One moment the Kancil is depicted as a mischievous creature and another as a moral imp. As to how best to utilize the stories of the Kancil to project it as a symbol of shared ethical values in a pluralistic education system of Malaysia may be determined by greater efforts to widen and deepen the scope of discourse on the subject.

Notes

- 1 The word *Sang* is a traditional Malay honorific meaning “revered” to indicate respect. The image of the Kancil in the earliest stories is often associated with negative qualities such as cruelty, coldness, selfishness, mischievousness, or deceitfulness. It is only in more recent years that this image has undergone some significant changes. For details see 廖冰凌/Liau Ping Leng and 伍燕翎/Ng Yean Leng (2015).
- 2 Starting from the 1980s, the government has introduced reforms in primary education of the various language streams. Prior to these reforms, Chinese primary schools that are a component of the national education system used textbooks on social-oriented subjects published by the Malaya Press and Nanyang Book Company.
- 3 Present research outcomes are mainly focused on Kancil stories, it can be seen in Carpenter (1992) and See (2016) as well as some Malay scholars such as Hassan Muthalib (2000) and Azahar Harun *et al.* (2010). Further research and discussion on Kancil stories in textbooks could be continued.
- 4 *Sejarah Melayu (The Malay Annals)* is a Malay language work composed sometime in the sixteenth century featuring accounts and legends on aspects of Malayan history. There are numerous editions the contents of which are not always identical.
- 5 With the introduction of the 3M system in 1983 to emphasize the importance of “*membaca, menulis, mengira*” (reading, writing, arithmetic), the main textbook publishers have been Malaya Press, Gemilang, Odonata, Pelangi, and FajarBakti.

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