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Lafayette author draws on her childhood in China to pen award-winning children's books

By Kara Navolio



Ying Chang Compestine

Photo provided

Ying Chang Compestine, a Lafayette resident since 2002, is the author of 20 books, with her newest book, a retelling of "The Chinese Emperor's New Clothes" (Abrams, 2017), released this month.

The picture book for 6-10 year olds is a twist on the old tale; the child emperor Ming Da realizes that his ministers are stealing from his country, leaving nothing for him to give his people. He comes up with a plan and enlists his tailors to help expose the thieves and take care of his citizens. The book has been awarded a Kirkus Star, an honor for children's books of exceptional merit.

All of Compestine's books are inspired by her childhood growing up in China during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. "Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party" (Henry Holt, 2007) is specifically based on her own life in China. It has won over 30 awards and has been published in many languages. She recently signed a contract to have the novel turned into a movie, being co-produced by Canadian and European companies.

Another book that Compestine co-wrote with her son, Vinson, when he was in high school, "The Secrets of the Terra-Cotta Soldier" (Abrams, 2014), has also won many awards and is being made into an animated television series.

Compestine has also written many picture books for younger

children and five cookbooks that focus on healthy eating. Her children's books include activities and sometimes recipes as well, all tied to Chinese culture.

Compestine is the type of author who enjoys getting out to schools and interacting with the kids who read her books. She has developed a unique school assembly program, traveling all over the world, as her books are published in many languages. Compestine travels on cruise ships and gives school visits in every port of call, using the ship as her floating hotel. While the ship is at sea, she conducts writing workshops and cooking classes for her fellow travelers. She has cruises booked for the spring in Europe and the fall in Asia.

For all her previous successes, one would guess that getting her newest book published would be relatively easy. However, success does not come without continued hard work, as Compestine explains, "I worked on Emperor for 13 years. It was rejected by 20 editors! Each time I sent my baby out, I was full of hope. When he came back, rejected, I would spend days doubting my abilities as a writer. But like a loving, infinitely persistent mother, I kept on. I restructured the story every way I could think of. I wrote variations from the point of view of every major character in the book. I spent days working on one sentence and hours finding the perfect word. I was determined to improve

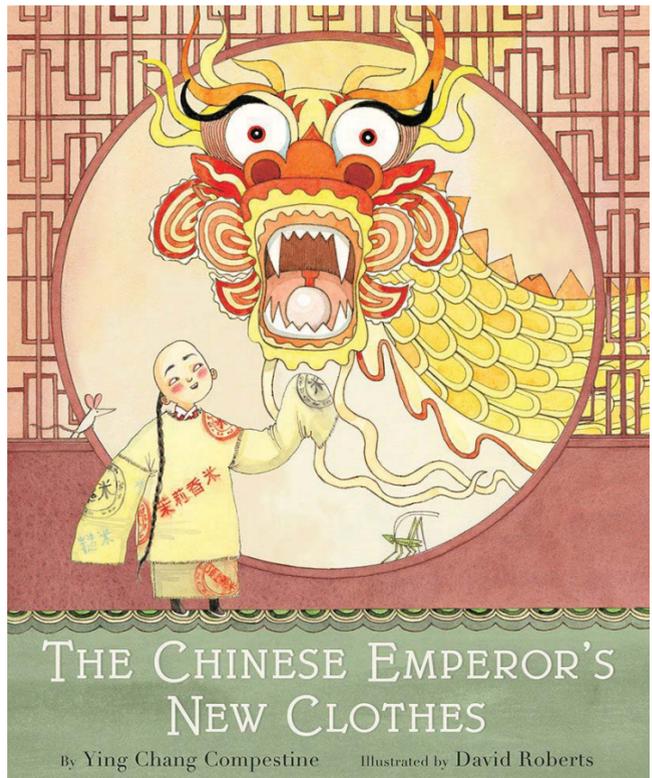
my inadequate baby because he represented part of me – my bitter-sweet childhood growing up during the Chinese Cultural Revolution."

Compestine, who came to the U.S. when she was 23, is not like other writers who sit at their desk and write for several hours each day. She does most of her story writing in her head while exercising or cooking. By the time she sits down at the computer to "write," she has already formed the story in her head, and she just has to type it out. One of her favorite places to exercise is the Lafayette Reservoir and the trails surrounding it. She and her husband made the move from Colorado to the Bay Area 15 years ago because Compestine always wanted to live near San Francisco. As a young girl in China, the Golden Gate Bridge was a powerful symbol of freedom and the West. She makes regular visits to see the bridge.

All 20 of her books are still in print, and her earliest, "The Runaway Rice Cake," is in its seventh edition. Compestine's hard work and attention to the smallest detail has paid off. "I don't want to just publish books. I want to publish award-winning books that stay in print."

Book Passage in Corte Madera will be hosting a Book Launch Party for "The Chinese Emperor's New Clothes" in celebration with the Chinese New Year from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 17, with activities for children.

Her books can be found at Orinda Books and at online booksellers. For more information, visit yingc.com.



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