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## In Search of Mirrors: An Asian Critical Race Theory Content Analysis of Asian American Picturebooks From 2007 to 2017

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### Abstract

Grounded in Asian critical race theory, this critical content analysis examines Asian American representation in 21 picturebooks published from 2007 to 2017.

### Disciplines

Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Book and Paper | Early Childhood Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Methods | Illustration

### Comments

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 ■ ARTICLES

# In Search of Mirrors: An Asian Critical Race Theory Content Analysis of Asian American Picturebooks From 2007 to 2017

NOREEN NASEEM RODRÍGUEZ & ESTHER JUNE KIM

Grounded in Asian critical race theory, this critical content analysis examines Asian American representation in 21 picturebooks published from 2007 to 2017.

**ASIAN AMERICANS** are nearly invisible in P–12 history curricula (An, 2016) and are underrepresented in children’s literature (Cooperative Children’s Book Center, n.d.). For teachers seeking to transform social studies through the inclusion of Asian American narratives, picturebooks offer opportunities to present Asian American narratives that are accessible to young learners (Rodríguez, 2017). Recent decades have witnessed a shift in multicultural children’s literature, with more offerings of historical fiction and picturebooks about Asian Americans than ever before (Cooperative Children’s Book Center, n.d.; Loh-Hagen, 2014). Social media movements like #WeNeedDiverseBooks push publishers to represent traditionally marginalized groups in both the content and production of children’s literature.

However, as slurs, stereotypes, and assumptions have historically been a part of children’s literature (Au, Brown, & Calderon, 2016; Mo & Shen, 2003), picturebooks may perpetuate dominant ideologies and, if read without critique, can serve as tools of oppression (Banfield, 1985). Unfortunately, widespread use of multicultural texts in P–12 classrooms continues to foster uncritical examinations through a “tourist-multiculturalism” approach (Derman-Sparks, 1993) and a focus on heroes, food, and

festivals (Kohl, 1994; National Council for the Social Studies, 2017). Multicultural picturebooks that focus on a character’s foreignness and difficulty assimilating to dominant American culture may also perpetuate stereotypes that position non-White groups as outsiders.

A limited number of studies have examined Asian American children’s literature over the last half century. While the selection and availability of this literature has increased substantially in the last two decades, many of these texts continue to perpetuate stereotypes (Morgan, 2012), such as the overachieving model minority (Loh-Hagen, 2014) and notions of Asian Americans as exotic foreigners (Pang, Colvin, Tran, & Barba, 1992; Roy, 2008), while failing to reflect the extraordinary diversity of Asian America. Most Asian American children’s literature focuses on Chinese and Japanese American experiences (Yi, 2014; Yokota, 2009), which exacerbates the conflation of East Asian Americans with Asian Americans. Bringing together the various critiques, as well as accounting for more recent publications, we conducted a critical content analysis of 21 Asian American picturebooks guided by this question: How are Asian Americans represented in popular children’s literature published from 2007 to 2017?

### Defining Asian American

*Asian American*, like *African American*, *Latinx*, and *Native American*, is a panethnic term that does not reveal the tremendous intragroup diversity of language, ethnicity, culture, religion, socioeconomic class, education, and historical experiences (Espiritu, 1992; Lee, 2015). Espiritu (1992) defined a panethnic group as “a politico-cultural collectivity made up of peoples of several, hitherto distinct, tribal or national origins” (p. 2) that is largely a product of racial categorization. However, as panethnicity emphasizes the experiences of people in the place where they have migrated (Spickard, 2002), the term *Asian American* captures the similar historical experiences and current issues faced by Asian immigrants and their children in the United States, particularly regarding the prejudice, discrimination, and racially motivated violence that hinder their full and open participation in American society (Fong, 2008). Research on panethnic Asian Americans can provide opportunities to illustrate the diversity of Asian American experiences (Hune, 1995) as well as ways to examine shared histories and immigrant experiences related to racism, discrimination, and restrictions on citizenship (Lowe, 1996; Paik, Kula, Saito, Rahman, & Witenstein, 2014).

The term *Asian American* has a unique sociopolitical history. Inspired by Black, Chicano, and American Indian civil rights movements of the 1960s, undergraduate students Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka coined the term *Asian American* when they cofounded the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1968. Although some Asian American individuals were politically active, the AAPA was the first to organize Asian Americans as a diverse, multiethnic group united by politics aimed at ending oppression and inequality in the United States (Maeda, 2012).

In spite of this history, the term is now popularly viewed as simply a racial category based on immigrant histories rather than a political-racial identity (Hollinger, 2000; Philip, 2014). As Asian Americans who received private and public educations devoid of Asian American history, we seek to reclaim the term’s political roots while simultaneously recognizing the heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity (Lowe, 1996) that characterize such a diverse group of people. Consistent with the categories of the U.S. Census Bureau (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011), underneath the umbrella of *Asian American* we include individuals who trace their roots to countries in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian subcontinent, and exclude the Middle East and former Soviet bloc, which are geographically part of the Asian continent but are considered politically and culturally distinct.

We are careful to note our use of *Asian American* rather than terms such as *Asian Pacific Islander* and *Asian*

*American Pacific Islander*. The U.S. Census Bureau used *Asian American Pacific Islander* as a single category in the 1970s, but designated Pacific Islanders as a separate panethnic group in the 2000 census (Spickard, 2002). Pacific Islanders have their own histories and political agendas related to colonialism, land, sovereignty, and political decolonization (Hau’ofa, 1994; Kauanui, 2015) that are distinct from Asian American histories and experiences. Subsequently, in this study, we attend solely to Asian American identities, experiences, and histories.

### The Dominant Narrative of Asian Americans

The dominant narrative of U.S. history is the story commonly portrayed in textbooks and perpetuated by state institutions and popular culture. Told through the perspective of landed White men, this celebratory narrative describes a unified society engaged in continuous progress and freedom (VanSledright, 2008). Little attention is paid to America’s long history of conflict and distinctions based on race, ethnicity, class, or gender (Foster, 2006; Levstik & Barton, 2011), thereby ignoring the historical and ongoing political, social, and economic struggles faced by many Americans. In state standards (e.g., California, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Massachusetts, New York, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Washington) and in school textbooks, Asian Americans are largely absent (An, 2016; Harada, 2000; Hartlep & Scott, 2016; Wolf, 1992; Zuercher, 1969) and mentioned in secondary history books only in regard to the Chinese in the 1800s and the incarceration of Japanese and Japanese Americans during World War II. In both of these historical contexts, Asian Americans are presented as pariahs who were either excluded from entry or considered to be enemies of the state (Rodríguez & Ip, 2018). More contemporary treatments of Asian Americans tend to focus on cultural differences and may perpetuate stereotypes of Asian Americans as the model minority, able to attain academic and economic success through hard work without relying on social services (Hartlep & Scott, 2016).

This dominant narrative of Asian Americans is incredibly limited and fails to recognize the contemporary Asian American experience, the extraordinary diversity beyond Chinese and Japanese Americans, and the deeply racialized histories of Asian American communities across the United States. Maeda (2009) described three main ways Asians have been racialized in the United States. First, as subjects of capitalism and imperialism, various groups of Asians migrated to the United States, where they were exploited for their labor and then had immigration restrictions imposed upon them (e.g., the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Immigration Act of 1924, Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952). Second, each group pursued naturalized citizenship through legal channels but was denied as the

courts declared Asians to be “aliens ineligible to citizenship” (Parker, 1925). Third, these Asian groups were considered socially unassimilable and undesirable. Due to this racialized history, it is important to consider the ways that Asians and Asian Americans are represented in P–12 curriculum, including in children’s literature that is often used to fill curricular gaps created by a lack of resources and content knowledge around Asian American history.

### Asian American Children’s Literature

Children’s literature offers educators an alternative resource to bring Asian American experiences and (hi)stories to the classroom, but in this realm dominant narratives exist as well. One of the earliest analyses of Asian American children’s literature, conducted by the Council on Interracial Books for Children (1976), found that the majority of books published between 1945 and 1975 were racist, sexist, and elitist and contained grossly misleading representations of Asian Americans. Moreover, 45% of the books surveyed were about Chinese Americans and 41% were about Japanese Americans. Subsequent analyses by Harada (1995) and Yoo-Lee, Fowler, Adkins, Kim, and Davis (2014) found that most Asian American children’s literature continues to focus on Chinese Americans, often features assimilationist ideology and stereotypes, and fails “to represent the full range of cultural experiences and histories, instead repeatedly exploring the same themes” (Yoo-Lee et al., 2014, pp. 327–328), such as immigration and linguistic struggles. Yokota (2009) found that topics of generational conflict, culture clashes, and ethnic celebrations of New Year abound in Asian American children’s literature, leaving other stories untold.

Scholarship on Asian American children’s literature from the last decade reveals an abundance of historical fiction, particularly about the topic of Japanese American incarceration (Chen & Yu, 2006; Teorey, 2008; Youngs, 2012). Contemporary Asian American picturebooks also focus on the immigrant experience (Stephens & Lee, 2006; Tuon, 2014; Yi, 2014). When stories of immigration from Asia and adjusting to life in the United States are ubiquitous in these picturebooks, they present a dominant narrative of Asian Americans as immigrant newcomers rather than citizens (Tuan, 1998), which ignores the Asian American communities who have lived in the United States for generations and positions Asian Americans as decidedly more Asian than American. Such treatment neglects the hybridity of the Asian American experience, which Ching and Pataray-Ching (2003) described as the seeking of “membership with the dominant culture as it pushes the boundaries of mainstream perspectives” (p. 123)—in other words, demanding recognition as a part of American

society without being forced to erase or ignore one’s cultural or linguistic identity (Rodríguez, 2018, in press).

In this vein, Pang et al. (1992) urged educators to select Asian American children’s literature that includes themes of cultural pluralism, positively portrayed characters, strong plot and characterization, and historical accuracy, with authentic illustrations and settings in the United States. Such selection criteria, they argued, provide learners with a broader range of Asian American perspectives that disrupt stereotypes. Additionally, as Aoki (1993) argued, educators must present students with multiple points of view, both within and across Asian American cultures, and recognize that the differences within groups may be larger than the differences across them. Such approaches better attend to the diversity of Asian America while also highlighting the historical and contemporary legal, social, and economic experiences that led to the development of a shared Asian American identity (Iwata, 2005).

### Asian Critical Race Theory

Given our focus on Asian American representation in children’s literature, we utilize an Asian critical race theory (AsianCrit) framework. Drawing from the critical race theory principle that racial inequality permeates every aspect of social life (Bell, 1992; Delgado, 2013), AsianCrit centers the racialized experiences of Asian Americans over the course of U.S. history and their intersections with immigration and citizenship (Chang, 1993; Museus & Iftikar, 2014). Recognizing the racialized history of Asian Americans described previously, it is important to consider how Asians and Asian Americans are represented in the P–12 curriculum. As social studies educators and scholars, we are acutely aware of Asian Americans’ absence in history textbooks, and as advocates of children’s literature to address curricular gaps, we consider Asian American representation to be a significant ongoing issue due to the persistent simplification of Asian American identities (e.g., model minority, forever foreigner, monolith) and histories (e.g., Chinese railroad workers and Japanese American incarceration).

Museus and Iftikar (2014) outlined seven tenets of AsianCrit, two of which are highlighted in this study. First, *Asianization* identifies the particular ways Asian Americans are racialized in the United States, from being viewed as a monolithic group to historical depictions as the yellow peril and modern-day stereotypes like the overachieving model minority (Hsu, 2015). These racializations and stereotypes affect the daily, lived experiences of Asian Americans. Second, *strategic (anti)essentialism* acknowledges that “dominant oppressive economic, political, and social forces impact the ways in which Asian Americans are racialized” (Museus & Iftikar, 2014, p. 97). Asian American researchers and activists can engage

in coalition building and (re)define racial categories to generate a better understanding of Asian American communities (Museus, 2014). Particular to this study, Cai (2002) argued that an examination of Asian American picturebooks in classrooms through critical perspectives can disrupt the monopoly of mainstream culture by portraying marginalized cultures and challenging texts through questions about who is represented, underrepresented, misrepresented, or invisible, as well as questions about how power is exercised. We recognize the transformative power of children's literature (Ching, 2005) and forefront the AsianCrit lenses of Asianization and strategic (anti)essentialism to explore Asian American representation in recently published picturebooks.

### Method of Study

The representation of Asian Americans in children's literature has been the subject of limited study, with few contributions in the last decade (e.g., Aoki, 1981; Cai, 1994; Chattarji, 2010; Dowd, 1992; Endo, 2009; Harada, 1995; Loh-Hagen, 2014; Yi, 2014; Yokota, 2009). To determine the state of contemporary Asian American children's literature, we conducted a critical content analysis of picturebooks published between 2007 and 2017. Short (2017) broadly defined critical content analysis as the use of "a critical lens to an analysis of a text or group of texts in an effort to explore the possible underlying messages within those texts, particularly as related to issues of power" (p. 6), with particular consideration of "voice and who gets to speak, whose story is told, and in what ways" (p. 5). We use AsianCrit as our critical approach and subsequently, with the goal of transforming conditions of inequity through the identification of counter-narratives, this AsianCrit stance pervaded all aspects of our research process (Short, 2017; Willis et al., 2008). Counter-narratives, also known as counterstories, are narratives that center historically marginalized perspectives and may challenge, disrupt, and/or counteract the multiple conditions and realities of oppression found in schools and society (Rodríguez, 2018; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Vinson, 2006).

We selected picturebooks aligned with the following criteria drawn from recent children's literature analyses (Crawley, 2017; Ghiso & Campano, 2013; Koss, 2015; Yoo-Lee et al., 2014): (a) human Asian or Asian American main characters, (b) set in the United States (not Asia), and (c) less than 40 pages in length. In order to ensure that the books selected were likely to be purchased by and in circulation in public schools and libraries, we initially searched notable book lists by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE); however, because there were no recommended picturebooks that met our criteria on the NCTE lists, we expanded our search to include winners of

annual awards by the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association and National Council of the Social Studies and Asian American children's literature recommended by the San Francisco Public Library. With our focus on recently published books readily available in U.S. classrooms and libraries, we included hard-copy books published by major trade publishers and thus excluded texts not published in the United States for their first edition, e-books, unoriginal books with marketing tie-ins (e.g., *Moana*), and self-published books.

As former classroom teachers and current teacher educators, we designed our selection process to highlight books that would be most accessible to families and educators through public, school, and classroom libraries and thereby have a greater possibility of being read widely. We included only those books that were available through at least one of two major public library systems (Orange County, California, and Austin, Texas) or our institution's substantial youth collection, resulting in the exclusion of some books that met our criteria but were unlikely to be in school and community library collections, such as *Tashi and the Tibetan Flower Cure* (Rose, 2011) and *What Should I Make?* (Nayar, 2009), which were only found on the San Francisco Public Library lists.

Ultimately, 21 books were included in the study. We first read the entire set of books independently and took notes on general themes as well as details related to language, culture, and illustrations. We then analyzed each book together; we compiled and compared our notes and revisited texts through a constant comparative and recursive process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). After these analytical discussions, books were coded by theme (e.g., new schooling experience, cultural celebration), the presence of Asian American stereotypes (e.g., exoticized food, cultural and/or intergenerational clashes), and themes related to race (e.g., White savior characters, discrimination) and language (e.g., linguistic assimilation, associating shame with Asian languages). The complete book list and a partial list of codes are found in Table 1.

Our approach was deeply influenced by our shared, but culturally, ethnically, and linguistically distinct, positionalities as Asian American researchers born and raised in the United States to Asian immigrant parents. Although we grew up in different areas of the United States, with dissimilar demographics (Texas and California), as children, we both longed to see more Asian American images like us in the books we read and hoped to encounter texts that reflected our own experiences like mirrors (Bishop, 1990), unlike the sea of books with White protagonists that dominated our schools and libraries, an exclusionary phenomenon we experienced personally in the 1980s and 1990s but that continues today (Koss, 2015;

TABLE 1  
Books Published Between 2007 and 2017 Selected for Analysis

Book Title & Author		Ethnic Groups	Genre	Asian Language Present	Author Positionality
<i>A Different Pond</i> , Bao Phi	2017	Vietnamese	Fiction (contemporary)	No	Cultural insider
<i>A Path of Stars</i> , Anne Sibley O'Brien	2012	Cambodian	Fiction (contemporary)	Yes	Cultural outsider
<i>Barbed Wire Baseball</i> , Marissa Moss	2013	Japanese American	Historical fiction	No	Cultural outsider
<i>Chef Roy Choi and the Street Food Remix</i> , Jacqueline Briggs Martin & June Jo Lee	2017	Korean	Biographical fiction* (contemporary)	Yes	Cultural outsider & cultural insider
<i>Cora Cooks Pancit</i> , Dorina K. Lazo Gilmore	2009	Filipina American	Fiction (contemporary)	Yes	Cultural insider
<i>Double Happiness</i> , Nancy Tupper Ling	2015	Chinese American	Fiction (contemporary)	Yes	Cultural insider
<i>Duck for Turkey Day</i> , Jacqueline Jules	2009	Vietnamese American	Fiction (contemporary)	Yes	Cultural outsider
<i>The Favorite Daughter</i> , Allen Say	2013	Japanese American	Fiction (contemporary)	Yes	Cultural insider
<i>Fish for Jimmy</i> , Katie Yamasaki	2013	Japanese American	Historical fiction	No	Cultural insider
<i>Grandfather's Story Cloth</i> , Linda Gerdner & Sarah Langford	2009	Laotian Hmong	Fiction (contemporary)	Yes (bilingual)	Cultural outsiders
<i>Hana Hashimoto, Sixth Violin</i> , Chieri Uegaki	2014	Japanese American	Fiction (contemporary)	Yes	Cultural insider
<i>Hiromi's Hands</i> , Lynne Barasch	2007	Japanese American	Biographical fiction (contemporary)	Yes	Cultural outsider
<i>Hot, Hot Roti for Dada-ji</i> , F. Zia	2011	Indian American	Fiction (contemporary)	Yes	Cultural insider
<i>I'm New Here</i> , Anne Sibley O'Brien	2015	Korean	Fiction (contemporary)	Yes	Cultural outsider
<i>Juna's Jar</i> , Jane Bahk	2015	Korean American	Fiction (contemporary)	Yes	Cultural insider
<i>Landed</i> , Milly Lee	2007	Chinese	Historical fiction	Yes	Cultural insider
<i>Mountain Chef: How One Man Lost His Groceries, Changed His Plans, and Helped Cook Up the National Park Service</i> , Annette Bay Pimentel	2016	Chinese American	Historical fiction	No	Cultural outsider
<i>My Dadima Wears a Sari</i> , Kashmira Sheth	2007	Indian American	Fiction (contemporary)	Yes	Cultural insider
<i>Paper Son: Lee's Journey to America</i> , Helen Foster James & Virginia Shin-Mui Loh	2013	Chinese	Historical fiction	Yes	Cultural outsider & cultural insider
<i>Sky High: The True Story of Maggie Gee</i> , Marissa Moss	2009	Chinese American	Biographical fiction (historical)	No	Cultural outsider
<i>Yoon and the Jade Bracelet</i> , Helen Recorvits	2008	Korean American	Fiction (contemporary)	No	Cultural outsider

\*Note: *Biographical fiction* is used to describe fictional accounts of a real individual's life.

Yoo-Lee et al., 2014). Our experiences with and perspectives on racial and cultural discrimination undeniably informed our analysis of Asian American texts, as students in any educational setting would bring their experiences and perspectives to bear on the texts they encounter (Rosenblatt, 1978).

When we encountered picturebooks that reflected our specific Asian American ethnic groups, we used our insider positionalities to assess cultural and linguistic accuracy and authenticity. Noreen identifies as Pakipina; her father was born in India and moved to Pakistan after Partition, while her mother is Filipina. Esther identifies as Korean American, and both authors were members of close-knit Asian American communities growing up. Books with which one researcher shared the same cultural/linguistic background were subjected to prolonged discussions to more deeply explore our observations as insider/outsider. Additionally, many of the books included in this study were the subject of conversations in an Asian American studies course taught by both authors. Students in this class claimed a range of Asian American identities (Vietnamese American, Chinese American, Korean American, Indian American, Laotian/White, and Japanese/White), and their comments unquestionably informed and added nuance to our understandings of cultural and linguistic authenticity beyond our respective Asian American cultural knowledge.

Morrell and Morrell (2012) insisted that multiple cultural perspectives allow individuals to read with and against the texts they encounter, and such a multi-perspectival approach was essential in our analysis. Importantly, our distinct ethnoracial backgrounds and professional experiences discussing the complexity of Asian American identities and cultures allowed us to take an array of Asian American sociohistorical and cultural contexts into account as we conducted our analysis.

### Findings

Given our focus on strategic (anti)essentialization of Asian Americans in children's literature from the last decade, we first examined the representation of various Asian American cultural and ethnic groups as well as genre. Next, to highlight the AsianCrit tenet of Asianization, we discuss the role of cultural authenticity, language, and stereotypes.

#### REPRESENTING ASIAN AMERICAN DIVERSITY

Out of the 21 books selected for this study, 14 (67%) depicted stories of East Asian Americans. This statistic echoes content analyses from previous decades (Aoki, 1993; Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1976; Harada, 1995; Yoo-Lee et al., 2014) that found an overwhelming attention to East Asian American experiences, particularly

to Japanese American and Chinese American perspectives. Five of the books (24%) focused on Southeast Asian experiences. As these populations have grown in the last half century as a result of refugee resettlement policies, this shift demonstrates improved attention to current demographics. However, South Asian Americans were the subject of only two books (10%). Considering Asian Indians compose nearly 20% of the Asian American population and are the fastest growing Asian American nationality (Taylor, 2012), South Asian Americans were underrepresented in recent children's literature. The continued overrepresentation of East Asian Americans may perpetuate students' equation of the term *Asian American* with *East Asian American*.

#### GENRE

Six of the books in our review (29%) are historical fiction or biographies of historical figures: *Barbed Wire Baseball* (Moss, 2013); *Fish for Jimmy* (Yamasaki, 2013); *Landed* (Lee, 2007); *Mountain Chef: How One Man Lost His Groceries, Changed His Plans and Cooked up the National Park Service* (Pimentel, 2016); *Paper Son: Lee's Journey to America* (James & Loh, 2013); and *Sky High: The True Story of Maggie Gee* (Moss, 2009). These books reflect the emphasis on Chinese and Japanese Americans mentioned previously, and *Mountain Chef* and *Sky High* follow a common trend of highlighting "first" achievements with the stories of Tie Sing, a Chinese chef, and Maggie Gee, one of the first Chinese American woman pilots.

However, in each of these books, little attention was paid to establishing the racialized context of the stories' settings during their respective historical moments. The primary texts of *Paper Son* and *Landed* neglect to mention the Chinese Exclusion Act that triggered a wave of "paper" sons and daughters, young Chinese who immigrated to the United States with fraudulent documents to seek fortune in *Gum Saan*, or Gold Mountain (Hsu, 2000). Although both books use the term *paper son* extensively throughout, they reserve discussions about Chinese exclusion for their final pages in the form of author's notes.

Nonetheless, the author's note provided remains vague about the racist nature of exclusion; *Paper Son* states that the Chinese "were not welcomed" (James & Loh, 2013, n.p.) and in *Landed*, the author's note states, "The Chinese were blamed for the bad economic times and were attacked and driven out of many communities throughout the West" (Lee, 2007, n.p.). Yet, exactly who did not welcome them and who perpetrated anti-Chinese violence remains a mystery. Similarly, in *Mountain Chef*, the author describes America as "a tough place to be Chinese" (Pimentel, 2016, p. 4) but does not explain why. Such evasion of the racism and discrimination historically

faced by Asian Americans through the use of the passive voice contributes to their ongoing invisibility in historical narratives and removes responsibility for injustice from its perpetrators (Jordan, 2002)—in many cases, the U.S. government (see Loewen, 2007; Takaki, 2008).

Following the trend toward increased publications about the contemporary Asian American experience noted by Yoo-Lee et al. in 2014, 62% of the books in our study are realistic fiction set in modern day. Nine of these books (43%) detail family life and relationships, while two (10%) describe challenges faced by recently arrived immigrants at school. Two books (10%), *Chef Roy Choi and the Street Food Remix* (Martin & Lee, 2017) and *Hiromi's Hands* (Barasch, 2007), are biographies of chefs who are alive and became famous in recent years. While themes related to Asian immigration or culture were present to some degree in every text, there was tremendous variation in authors' and illustrators' approaches to their depiction.

#### CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY

Yoo-Lee et al. (2014) defined cultural authenticity as “the absence of stereotypes but also the presence of values consistent with a particular culture and the accuracy of cultural details in text and illustrations” (p. 326). Bishop (2003) argued that cultural authenticity is a political issue related to economics, cultural appropriation, ethnic pride, and identity; moreover, through story, children learn what it means to be a member of a particular group. Members of the group, or cultural insiders, have shared experiences that Woodson (2003) asserted make it “easy to tell who has and who has not been inside ‘my house’” (p. 45). Cultural outsiders, in the context of this analysis, are those who are not of Asian American ethnicity or have not shared in the historical and cultural experiences of Asian Americans more broadly. In the Asian American children's literature we analyzed, notions of cultural authenticity were most notably present, and most glaringly absent, in the illustrations and storylines around food, the physical home, and language.

**PORTRAYALS OF HOME AND CUISINE.** *A Different Pond* (Phi, 2017) describes a father-son fishing trip; however, the trip is not recreational as the pair are responsible for catching dinner for their large family. The father's homeland of Vietnam is mentioned only once, briefly, but the family dinner scene includes a description of fish sauce, the quintessential Vietnamese condiment, and the accoutrements of a typical Southeast/East Asian dinner are visible in the accompanying illustration: rice cooker and paddle, small individual bowls of rice, chopsticks, and multiple bowls of fish sauce. These subtle, culturally authentic details evoked our own memories of such table settings, which accurately depict common elements of

Asian American home life. Similarly detailed, culturally authentic Khmer, Korean, Chinese, and Filipino home and dining portrayals were found in the illustrations in *A Path of Stars* (O'Brien, 2012), *Juna's Jar* (Bahk, 2015), *Chef Roy Choi and the Street Food Remix* (Martin & Lee, 2017), *Double Happiness* (Ling, 2015), and *Cora Cooks Pancit* (Gilmore, 2009).

In contrast, *Duck for Turkey Day* (Jules, 2009), which centers on a Vietnamese American girl troubled by her family's decision to eat duck instead of traditional turkey on Thanksgiving, contains a culturally inauthentic representation of Vietnamese American dining. While East and Southeast Asian American families may certainly opt to use forks and knives rather than chopsticks at meals, the storyline of *Duck for Turkey Day* revolves around the family's meal of duck with spicy sauce purchased at the Saigon Supermarket. The family's insistence on serving a traditional Vietnamese feast featuring duck contradicts the illustration of a stereotypical “American” table setting of forks, knives, spoons, and salt and pepper shakers, with the noticeable absence of rice and chopsticks, customary components of most formal East and Southeast Asian meals. The scene's illustration lacks authenticity as it simply substitutes duck for the Thanksgiving turkey without taking into account how other aspects of the meal would also reflect culinary traditions specific to Vietnamese culture.

**PORTRAYALS OF TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS.** Twelve books (57%) feature storylines that reflect culturally authentic narrative traditions, objects, and customs. In *A Path of Stars*, *My Dadima Wears a Sari* (Sheth, 2007), *Hot, Hot Roti for Dada-ji* (Zia, 2011), *Cora Cooks Pancit*, and *Grandfather's Story Cloth* (Gerdner & Langford, 2009), immigrant elders share cultural stories with the American-born generation. The story that Cora's grandfather tells of harvesting fruit in the Philippines and the sentimentality attached to particular saris were familiar themes to the researcher positioned as an insider to these cultures. *Grandfather's Story Cloth* explains the role of story cloths (*paj ntaub*) in documenting the journey of Hmong refugees. In *The Favorite Daughter* (Say, 2013), the Japanese American father chides his mixed-race daughter for rubbing her chopsticks together before eating sushi, reminding her that it is bad manners despite the action's widespread occurrence among non-Japanese.

To cultural insiders, the object around which the entire plot of *Yoon and the Jade Bracelet* (Recorvits, 2008) revolves is not authentic to Korean and Korean American culture. Instead, Recorvits conflates elements of Chinese and Korean cultures. Historically, jade was used for hair ornaments more than jewelry in Korea; therefore, a jade bracelet as an heirloom or a gift to a young child would be

unlikely among Korean and Korean American families. The more common gift that would be passed on to Yoon at some point in her adult life are gold rings, the traditional Korean gift for first birthdays. To the researcher positioned as a cultural insider, Yoon bore greater resemblance to a Chinese girl in America than a Korean girl; Recorvits's universalizing tendency with the character of Yoon and her family in her previous books furthers notions of Asian essentialization and has been detailed elsewhere (see Stephens & Lee, 2006).

**PORTRAYALS OF SELF AND FAMILY.** Cultural authenticity was most often present in picturebooks written by authors who were cultural insiders. Of the 21 books in this study, 10 (48%) were authored by cultural insiders and two (10%) were coauthored by a cultural insider and a cultural outsider. In 10 instances (48%), authors had personal connections to topics in their book. Author Katie Yamasaki's great-grandfather was one of hundreds of Japanese Americans arrested by the FBI the day of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and several of her family members were imprisoned in camps like the characters in *Fish for Jimmy*. Like the title character in *Juna's Jar*, Korean American author Jane Bahk played with her mother's old kimchi jars, and Chieri Uegaki's grandfather, like the grandfather in *Hana Hashimoto, Sixth Violin* (Uegaki, 2014), was also a violinist. *My Dadima Wears a Sari* author Kashmira Sheth was inspired to write her story after watching her mother pass the tradition of wearing a sari to her granddaughters, and in the author's note of *A Different Pond*, Bao Phi described his story as a way to honor the struggle of his refugee parents. These authors' insider perspectives and experiences contributed cultural authenticity and accuracy to their books that was noticeable to us as cultural insiders ourselves. Ultimately, cultural authenticity demonstrates an understanding of the nuances of Asian American cultures, rather than dismissing or conflating them in ways that disregard their unique attributes and result in the inaccurate essentializing of Asian Americans as a singular monolith.

#### LANGUAGE

Negotiating between English and non-English language(s) is an important aspect of many immigrant experiences. In 14 books (67%), Asian languages are present; however, some uses of Asian languages are more authentic and accurate than others. For example, *Juna's Jar* incorporates Korean in authentic ways. In one instance, the main character, Juna, refers to her older brother as *oppa* (older brother), rather than by his given name. Such honorific titles for elder siblings, family members, and respected community members are common in a range of Asian cultures, but may not be observed by or known to outsiders

to the family or culture. Nine books (43%) also use Asian languages to refer to family members, such as the Hindi *dadima* for paternal grandmother and *dada-ji* for paternal grandfather in *My Dadima Wears a Sari* and *Hot, Hot Roti for Dada-ji*. Similar usages occur in *Landed* (the Chinese *baba* for father) and to refer to grandparents in *Duck for Turkey Day* (Vietnamese *bà* for grandmother); *Hana Hashimoto, Sixth Violin* (Japanese *ojiichan* for grandfather); *Paper Son* (Chinese *popo* for maternal grandmother and *gong gong* for grandfather); *Double Happiness* (Chinese *nai nai* for paternal grandmother); *A Path of Stars* (Khmer *lok yeay* for grandmother); and *Cora Cooks Pancit* (Tagalog *lolo* for grandfather).

In seven of these texts (33%), the non-English terms are used without definition and in place of the word for the family member; in *Cora Cooks Pancit* and *A Path of Stars*, the terms are defined at the first usage and then the Asian word is used exclusively thereafter. Five books (24%), including *Cora Cooks Pancit*, *Duck for Turkey Day*, and *Hana Hashimoto, Sixth Violin*, also demonstrate generational linguistic shifts as the main characters' parents are named in English and only grandparents are referred to by their Asian language names. As first-generation Americans, we identified with this generational naming phenomenon and have witnessed it among many Asian American families and across multiple ethnic Asian American groups.

Some books, however, took problematic approaches in their use of Asian language. For example, in *Hiromi's Hands*, the text in a Japanese market scene is not actual Japanese words, but, as footnoted by the author, nonsensical symbols that are essentially gibberish. In contrast, all English-language signs feature real words and phrases. The lack of time and effort devoted to the accurate representation of the Japanese language not only reinforces the perception of East Asian languages as unintelligible but also conveys a degree of disrespect for cultural insiders. In contrast, in *Chef Roy Choi*, the Korean depicted in illustrations is accurate and includes signs that cultural insiders would expect to see in Los Angeles's Koreatown (e.g., "New Life Church" with "New Life" written phonetically in Korean rather than translated directly).

In *Yoon and the Jade Bracelet*, other language issues were of concern. As a single syllable, the name *Yoon* is highly uncommon among Koreans and Korean Americans. Additionally, the English conversations between Yoon and her mother are unrealistic as either translations from Korean or as everyday speech. The formal use of *Mother* by Yoon is not typical of young children Yoon's age. Similarly, the constant use of *little Yoon* by her mother is an odd pairing; the adjective *little* is more commonly used in Korean as a qualifier with a relationship to denote birth order (e.g., *little uncle* or *little father* to refer to the second

son of one's grandparents), rendering the verbal interactions between characters culturally inauthentic.

Of the 21 books in the study, only *Grandfather's Story Cloth* is bilingual, with side-by-side text in English and Hmong. The poems in *Double Happiness* are titled in English and Mandarin, but the majority of the text is in English with occasional use of Chinese pinyin (Romanized spellings of Chinese characters). *Chef Roy Choi* is the sole book to use sidebars and other textual features to define Korean words; the book begins with an explanation of *sohn maash*, a phrase commonly used and known among Korean Americans that translates as "hand taste," or "the love and cooking talent that Korean mothers and grandmothers mix into their handmade foods" (Martin & Lee, 2017, n.p.). The variation of non-English language use in these books could be attributed to a number of factors, from the author's own linguistic expertise to publishers' linguistic preferences or perceptions of what is most comprehensible to a range of audiences.

#### FOREVER FOREIGNER STEREOTYPES

Notions of Asian Americans as unassimilable and exotic foreigners have long been present in children's literature and were also found in this review, as illustrated by the experiences of recently arrived immigrant youth from Korea in *I'm New Here* (O'Brien, 2015) and *Yoon and the Jade Bracelet*. *I'm New Here* features Jin, a newly arrived immigrant from Korea, alongside the stories of immigrants from Guatemala and Somalia. Jin struggles learning English at his new school. In *Yoon and the Jade Bracelet*, Yoon and her family have assimilated somewhat to U.S. culture, although Yoon remains isolated and friendless. For both Jin and Yoon, life as a recent immigrant is filled with confusion and isolation. Immigration is certainly a process fraught with many challenges; however, in our increasingly global society, English is present all over the world and would unlikely be completely unfamiliar to a new immigrant. In many Asian countries, students learn English in school, either as the primary language of instruction or as a foreign language. Asian Americans include both first-generation immigrants and second-, third-, and fourth-generation Americans, native English speakers, and English language learners. However, when only non-English-speaking Asian immigrant perspectives are shared in classrooms, teachers may perpetuate the essentializing stereotype that *all* Asian Americans are recent immigrants unfamiliar with the English language.

Food is also seen as a marker of cultural difference; noodles, steamed rice, dumplings, and curries are not viewed as "American" foods. Four of these picturebooks (19%) are centered around food: In *Cora Cooks Pancit* and *Hot, Hot Roti for Dada-ji*, family elders teach young

narrators how to make a traditional Asian dish, and major events occur around a family meal in *Duck for Turkey Day* and *My Favorite Daughter*. While food is an important part of any culture, minoritized groups are often presented to children through brief exposure to "food, fun, festivals, flags and films" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2017). If these books are used in isolation to depict Asian American experiences, they may reinforce perceptions of Asian Americans (and their food) as exotic and foreign.

#### MODEL MINORITY STEREOTYPES

*Chef Roy Choi* and *Hiromi's Hands* spotlight acclaimed Asian American chefs, disrupting stereotypes that Asian Americans are relegated to careers in STEM fields like medicine and engineering. However, these texts, alongside *Mountain Chef* and *Sky High*, maintain meritocratic narratives that may reinforce the notion that Asian Americans are exceptionally hardworking model minorities who are able to overcome obstacles like racism and sexism not only to persist, but to succeed in ways that make their mark on history. Fortunately, in each of these texts, there are opportunities to focus on other members in the characters' communities who achieve levels of success different from the title characters.

The protagonists' Asian American identity and culture are secondary to the storylines in *Double Happiness*, *A Different Pond*, *Grandfather's Story Cloth*, *Hana Hashimoto*, *Sixth Violin*, and *Juna's Jar*, books that offer Asian American readers mirrors of everyday experiences. *Double Happiness* explores the varied emotions felt by two siblings as they move across the country and leave loved ones behind. In *Grandfather's Story Cloth*, a young boy struggles with his grandfather's forgetfulness due to Alzheimer's, and the title character in *Hana Hashimoto*, *Sixth Violin* prepares for a school talent show. Stories such as these push back against model minority and struggling immigrant tropes, instead offering readers a diverse array of Asian American main characters whose adventures and emotions they can relate to and understand.

#### Conclusions and Implications

Overall, our critical content analysis found notable improvement in the diversity of Asian American representations in children's literature published between 2007 and 2017, particularly compared to studies from before 2000. Although a disproportionate number of picturebooks in our study continue to focus on East Asian American experiences (67%), the increased number of books about Southeast Asian Americans (24%) and South Asian Americans (10%) added to the ethnic range of Asian American narratives. The role of author positionality appeared influential in the production of culturally

and linguistically authentic and accurate texts, as many cultural insiders drew from their own family experiences and histories. Four books (19%) perpetuate model minority stereotypes through tales of hardworking, successful immigrants that omit the institutionalized discrimination and racism they encountered. Rather than confront Asianization through nuanced representations, in some ways these books maintain the dominant narrative of Asian Americans as passive immigrant others while emphasizing meritocracy, American exceptionalism and individualism, and notions of a post-racial society.

Our findings led to four implications to combat Asianization and essentialism through the strategic, critical use of Asian American children's literature. First, educators and librarians can select books that display a range of Asian American experiences over time. Historical fiction like *Paper Son* and *Mountain Chef* establishes the Chinese as one of the earliest immigrant groups to the United States, while *A Path of Stars* and *A Different Pond* illustrate how recent Asian refugees may be forced to leave beloved homelands out of safety and necessity only to continue struggling upon arrival in America. Side by side, these Asian American narratives demonstrate that some Asian Americans are recent immigrants, while others have lived in the United States for many generations, disrupting perceptions of all Asian Americans as forever foreigners (Tuan, 1998).

Second, more complex stories of Asian immigration, rather than triumphant tales of language acquisition and acculturation, are needed for children to better understand the spectrum of immigrant experiences. The American immigration system has from its very inception established preferences based on race and nationality. Consider, for example, the marked difference in experience between a highly educated professional fluent in English immigrating with an H1-B visa to work in the technology sector in Silicon Valley versus a political refugee with limited English fluency and interrupted formal schooling placed in a small Midwestern town. Such nuances cannot be addressed through the use of a single Asian American immigrant story and do not explain important distinctions between Asian immigrants and refugees.

Third, educators and librarians can apply a multiple perspectives approach by attending to intragroup diversity as well as diversity across nationalities, as described above. For example, *Chef Roy Choi*, *Juna's Jar*, and *I'm New Here* all feature Korean American protagonists. How are these characters similar and different? How do the settings,

families, culture, and language usage of each book compare to the others? Just as there is no singular American experience, there is no singular Korean American experience. Yet minoritized groups are often represented through a single story (Adichie, 2009)—in some classrooms, through a single picturebook—that may lack authenticity and reinforce harmful and inaccurate stereotypes. As Adichie (2009) explained, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” A thoughtful approach with multiple voices can encompass not only the reality of Asian American racialization but also the shared experiences common to many in the United States regardless of race or nationality.

Fourth, while much attention has been given to how children's books might misrepresent Asian American experiences to cultural outsiders, the impact on students who are cultural insiders merits closer attention. Determining cultural authenticity and accuracy in Asian American children's books may be difficult given the diversity within the Asian American community, but may significantly benefit the experiences and identities of Asian American students. Educators and librarians might consider reaching out to student families as resources who can make recommendations or help determine the cultural authenticity and accuracy of books.

Burbules (1986) argued, “Once a text passes from its author to a reader, it takes on a life of its own; what interpretations the text will plausibly bear are legitimate whether or not the author intended them” (p. 241). While the author's intentions are not without significance, more important to us as educators is how teachers and children make sense of the picturebooks they encounter together. Asian American children's literature can provide young learners with rare insights into Asian American identity, culture, and history that are otherwise unlikely to occur within traditional school spaces. ■

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