

Reading Diverse Books Is Not Enough: Challenging Racist Assumptions Using Asian American Children’s Literature

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This article draws on my reflections from a year-long study in a first-grade classroom in a Midwestern public elementary school during which I read and discussed a total of fourteen Asian American picture books with the class. Below, I highlight the children’s interactions with Asian American stories and provide suggestions for using children’s literature to teach about Asian American history and culture.

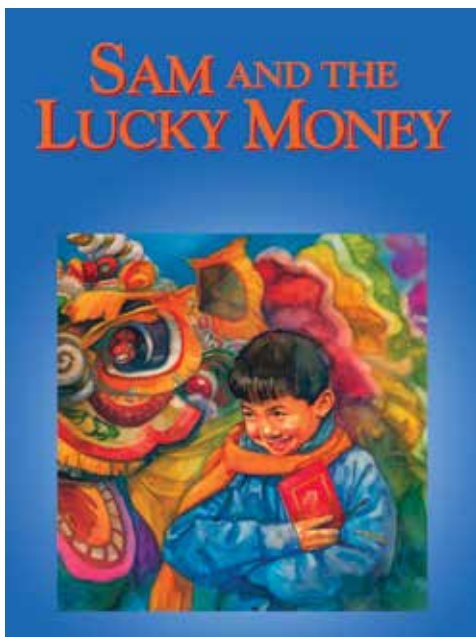
Stories Versus Interpretations

Following a spirited read aloud and discussion of the picture book *Sam and the Lucky Money*, written by Karen Chinn and illustrated by Ying-Hwa Hu and Cornelius Van Wright, the first-grade students transitioned from the rug to their desks to complete a short writing task in their readers’ notebooks. The day’s writing topic was story mapping. I asked students

to recap the setting of the story, including where and when it took place, and I cheerfully reminded the students to use details.

I selected *Sam and the Lucky Money* because it was about an Asian American boy and his bicultural experiences celebrating Lunar New Year. Sam, the main character, takes a special holiday trip to Chinatown with his mother and excitedly navigates the busy city streets. The illustrations depict stores with signs written in both Chinese and English and a diverse crowd of sightseers. Sam visits a toy store and contemplates using his New Year’s money to buy a basketball. Later, he visits a bakery where a worker asks in Cantonese what he would like. He is unable to understand her question until she switches to English. As a Korean American, I recalled similar childhood experiences, and I hoped the text would be a gateway to rich conversations about diverse representation in stories and cultural identities. Indeed, as we read the story, students interrupted to share about their visits to Chinese restaurants and their own family traditions on New Year’s Day.

However, as I walked around, peeking over their shoulders at their jottings, I was surprised to see that students were recording the setting of the book as China. Child after child described the setting with iterations of “a long, long time ago” and “in an old village in China.” Some drew pictures of rolling mountains, wispy clouds, and pagoda-like structures. All in



all, out of eighteen students, fifteen described the setting as being in China or taking place long ago. Only three children (including a girl who had immigrated from China just a few months prior) correctly described the setting as being in Chinatown, a city, or the United States. Confused, I asked the class if they recalled the various details that indicated it was a contemporary story set in the United States. Most nodded or shrugged but failed to see the disconnect between what we had read and what they had written.

I left the classroom that day stunned at how differently my students and I had interpreted the story. Although we had read and talked about it together, the story had settled itself neatly into simplistic racialized tropes of Asian Americans as the perpetual foreigner or inhabitants of a mystical Orient. It was not enough to read the story aloud or even to discuss it afterward. The students needed to work through their interpretations of the story while confronting their own cultural assumptions. Importantly, they needed to do this consistently and repeatedly over time with a multitude of texts.

Use of Children's Literature in Social Studies

Children's literature has long been utilized and recommended in classrooms across subjects and grades. Because of its strong potential to kindle empathy and vicarious experiences, children's literature can help support the curricular standards of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), particularly within the themes of **7 CULTURE**; **8 PEOPLE, PLACES,**

AND ENVIRONMENTS; **9 INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY**; and **10 GLOBAL CONNECTIONS**.¹ In addition, organizations, such as Learning for Justice, have advocated the capability of literature to advance social justice standards within an anti-bias education framework. The idea that literature acts as a mirror, window, or sliding door to the self and new experiences² is now commonplace, and much research on promoting diversity in literature begins with this premise and has encouraged global paradigms and humanizing curricula.³

Yet, the vignette above shows that educators cannot assume books in and of themselves will impact readers as intended. Jonda McNair's work in exposing African American families to culturally relevant literature stressed that the introduction and use of such texts requires training and sustained exposure.⁴ Likewise, teachers must prioritize instruction and time. This dedicated effort is especially important as research has shown White teachers often hesitate to read their students books featuring BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) due to feelings of unfamiliarity, discomfort, and awkwardness.⁵ In other words, it is not enough to read diverse books in class; rather, diverse literature must be used intentionally for the purposes of breaking down dominant, racialized understandings and interpretations. Furthermore, using children's literature to teach about race, culture, and society requires a framework for understanding race and racism for specific groups and training in the identification of harmful stereotypes and biases.

Dive into History

From the late nineteenth century to the 1960s, the purpose of much writing about Asian Americans was to obstruct further immigration of Asians or inhibit their social mobility.^(a) These efforts were rooted in the Yellow Peril ideology, which depicted Asians as uncivilized, dangerous, and primitive beings of the occult who were ready to invade America.^(b) Concurrently, the United States established a long line of discriminatory immigration policies, including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, further exclusion acts in 1888, 1892, and 1902, the Japanese Exclusion Act, the Immigration Act of 1924, and a repealing of legislation in 1943 that sanctioned a contemptible quota of 105 Chinese immigrants annually.^(c) This legal history directly speaks to the racialized representation of Asians as excluded, unwanted, and disregarded in the United States.

This sustained exclusion of Asian immigrants was lifted with the Immigration Act of 1965. This legislation, in conjunction with the end of the Vietnam War, dramatically changed population demographics by allowing the entry of Asians over a wide diaspora, especially, increasing the numbers of Chinese, Taiwanese, Filipino, Korean, and Indian groups.^(d) However, as Helen Heran Jun pointed out, "Despite access to citizenship, Asian Americans continue to signify within the national imaginary as racially particular and as foreign to the national culture."^(e) Being perpetually viewed as foreign has had horrific consequences; for example, it fueled the forced removal of Japanese Americans into incarceration camps during World War II.

Notes

- (a). Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, Linda Trinh Võ, and K. Scott Wong, eds., "Introduction," in *Keywords for Asian American Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 1–5.
- (b). KaYing Yang, "Southeast Asian American Children: Not the 'Model Minority,'" *Future of Children* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 127–33.
- (c). Rhoda J. Yen, "Racial Stereotyping of Asians and Asian Americans and Its Effect on Criminal Justice: A Reflection on the Wayne Lo Case," *Asian American Law Journal* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1–28.
- (d). Schlund-Vials et al., "Introduction."
- (e). Helen Heran Jun, "Citizenship," in *Keywords for Asian American Studies*, eds. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, Linda Trinh Võ, and K. Scott Wong (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 23.

Defining “Asian American”

Such support is desperately needed for educators regarding Asian American history, culture, and identity. The omission of Asian Americans—their status, rights, and voices—in current society and throughout U.S. history is critical to acknowledge. For over twenty years, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) recorded a yearly publishing average of just 3% for children’s books about Asian or Asian Pacific Americans.⁶ Meanwhile, Asian Americans continue to be ignored in K–12 history curricula.⁷ What are the consequences of this invisibility? What messages are being relayed to readers about their significance in history and society? How do these stories influence readers’ developing ideas about Asian Americans?

To address these questions, it is important to begin with a clear understanding of the term *Asian American*. The term merges an enormous number of nation groups and, in doing so, diminishes their distinct identities and experiences. It also fails to recognize the extraordinary regional and generational distinctions within countries. Asian Americans include Americans of Asian descent, but this group may be further distinguished to refer to immigrants, adoptees, biracial or multiracial individuals of partial or full Asian descent, and refugees. Lumping everyone together reinforces much of the racist rhetoric toward Asians, since stereotypes, such as “all Asians look the same,” come from both a refusal to acknowledge ethnic and cultural differences and a nativistic persistence in treating Asian Americans as foreigners.⁸

At the same time, however, the term recognizes a meaningful solidarity among peoples who share racialized experiences, including stereotyping, glass ceilings, economic and political scapegoating, hate crimes, and erasure.⁹ Historian Erika Lee argued,

As diverse as [Asian Americans] are, they are part of a larger Asian American community that—through its complexity—uniquely captures the story of America. Theirs is a history of immigrant dreams, American realities, and global connection that has helped to make the United States what it is today.¹⁰

Thus, it is important to teach children that Asian Americans are made up of many different people groups and that Asian Americans share many connections and histories. It is also necessary to be frank and honest about the racialization of Asian Americans as a monolith, as a key component of anti-bias curriculum is the recognition of stereotypes and the harmful impact of bias and injustice.¹¹ Additionally, pan-ethnic advocacy is strengthened when Asian Americans come together under an umbrella of commonalities and shared experiences.¹²

In the case of my first graders, after reflecting on their jottings about the story’s setting, I realized I had not defined

“Asian American” for them. To the majority of the students, “Asian” was synonymous with “Asian American,” and as a result, the Asian American stories I read aloud were, to them, stories about foreigners. Far from splitting hairs, this lack of distinction is hugely significant as it has made matters of immigration and citizenship central to the Asian American identity.¹³ The failure to accept Asians as Americans has been the source of their racialization and Othering for centuries.

Educator Charlotte Huck once noted, “In childhood, much is known, little is explained.”¹⁴ Certainly, children see and absorb everything within reach, but their understanding is limited. Beginning with a definition of Asian American provides a way for children to organize their observations, while providing necessary nuance. For many students, this means that teachers must be explicit about “American” being a national or cultural identity that is not synonymous with White. This is critical, as scholar Sohyun An pointed out that the White-Black binary in discussions about race in the United States implicitly suggests that “‘American’ means ‘white’ and ‘minority’ means Black,”¹⁵ which conveniently leaves Asian Americans out of the conversation.

These assumptions surfaced in the classroom when a biracial Black-White student, Christine, raised her hand, and we engaged in the following conversation:

- Christine: I’m half Black and half American.
Me: Your dad is Black, and your mom is White, but you are fully American!
Christine: That’s what I meant.
Matt: Well, Emma is Japanese, but I don’t think her parents are White.
Me: Yes, Emma’s parents are not White. ... They are Japanese American, and Emma was born in California. They are all American, too.

Emma was a former classmate who had moved away before the winter break, but this conversation occurred in April, and the class had already had many conversations and read alouds about cultural and racial identity by this time. Yet, the students’ talk indicated there was still confusion about what American meant and who it could include. The lessons we had learned about nationality and race were still very tenuous and required much more clarification.

Disrupting Asian American Racialization

When teachers clearly define cultural, racial, and national identities for children, they help students recognize issues of race and racism. By acknowledging the wide diversity of who is Asian American, they disrupt the racialization of Asia as a monolith and confront the stereotype of the perpetual or forever foreigner.¹⁶ Understanding these problems will

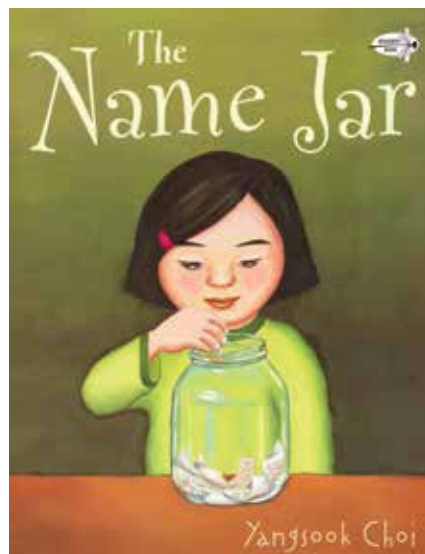
encourage students to face their own biases and prejudices and help them recognize underlying racist beliefs.

Notably, my first graders frequently demonstrated a tendency to foreignize the characters in the picture books. For example, as a follow-up to our reading of *Sam and the Lucky Money*, later in the week, students constructed Venn diagrams to compare and contrast themselves with the main character, Sam. In this activity, several students positioned Sam as a Chinese speaker and themselves as English speakers. I had to state clearly that Sam did not understand Chinese and reread pages of the story as proof before students changed their answers. When we discussed Yangsook Choi's *The Name Jar*, a book about a girl named Unhei who feels pressure to "pick" an English name for herself, several students commented that Unhei was not a "normal" or "American" name, demonstrating a baseline for normalization that excluded non-English languages. To disrupt these notions, I paused the activity and drew attention to the problematic assumptions. I also clearly explained how internalized stereotypes were affecting their understandings of the characters and stories, and the damaging impact that such thinking can produce.

This internalization manifested in real life as well. Though the class had held a goodbye party for Emma before she left for California and had written her letters addressed to her new home, two students at two different times referenced her move by stating she had moved to China. Both times, other students intervened to correct them, demonstrating their own learning to speak up when they recognized bias. Near the end of the school year, I interviewed the children to talk about what they had learned about Asian Americans during the year. I found myself surprised again when I asked each of them to identify an Asian American, either someone they knew personally or from media. Nearly half the class named me, Emma, or Hari, a Nepali American student in the class, likely a response to my frequent and direct references to the three of us as Asian Americans throughout the year. However, six students were stumped and could not come up with an answer—even as I sat across from them! For these students, an Asian American was still an unknown entity and the disconnect between foreign and familiar remained. Such moments serve as clear reminders that racialized understandings are deeply ingrained, even by first grade, and require constant excavation and reconstruction over time.

Suggestions for Teachers

My time with the students exploring Asian American identity and culture through children's literature was profound, as we had more opportunities to read and talk about Asian American stories in one year than most children have in their entire K–12 schooling. Unfortunately, this amount of time in a single school year is not possible for the average



Teacher's Guide to Using Asian American Children's Literature

- Introduce texts by describing the characters' pan-ethnic identity as Asian American as well as their specific ethnic or cultural identity to disrupt monolithic stereotypes.
- Check with students to clarify their understandings of definitions and concepts such as *Asian American*, *American*, *bi-/multi-racial*, *immigrant*, *refugee*, etc., focusing on what is relevant to the story.
- Ask clarifying questions such as "Is this character American? Why do you think so, or why not?" and "Could this story take place here? How do you know?" to disrupt foreignizing racialization.
- Pause during class discussions to allow students to respond to one another and work through understandings collectively, particularly when a question of racialization or bias emerges. Facilitate these conversations with students' learning of advocacy and action in mind.
- Encourage students to make text-to-self connections to cultivate empathy and care.
- Review text selections to ensure that a variety of Asian American stories, cultures, and histories are represented. Be intentional about including South Asian and Southeast Asian American stories.
- Be careful about using children's literature that features racially or culturally ambiguous characters, without reference to cultural markers or identifiers. While there are quality exceptions to this guideline, in general, educators must be cautious not to rely on books that provide diversity without actual racial or ethnic inclusion.

elementary teacher. Even with the effort I devoted to these lessons, combating the invisibility and racialization of Asian Americans was a relentless process. What, then, can teachers do? How can teachers include Asian American peoples, cultures, and histories in their curriculum?

The earlier vignettes serve as a reminder that deep learning and understanding, particularly about historically marginalized groups, cannot be achieved by simply reading more diverse books or by adding on some lessons recognizing a perspective outside the mainstream. A complete conceptual shift is required, because while representation matters, it is *belonging* that is being claimed. Diverse literature must be paired with a pedagogical framework that provides frequent exposure to diverse peoples over time, confronts and resists stereotypes, both deconstructs and reconstructs histories, truly recognizes a pluralistic American society, and moves students to action against injustice. Children, and adults, too, need time to talk and listen in equal measure to process understanding.

The first step to confronting the invisibility of Asian Americans is to verbally acknowledge who they are, their complex citizenship history in the United States, and their contributions and continued participation in society. There is a real need to break down racist and colorblind ideologies in curricula, but An observed that, for Asian Americans, their invisibility means “there is really nothing much to deconstruct in the first place.”¹⁷ Rather, effort must go toward constructing an Asian American history for students. Intentionally talking about Asian Americans, reading about their lived experiences, and pointing out how they have been racialized are straightforward paths for teachers to combat Asian American racialization.

Consequently, I provide the following reflections and suggestions for teachers to consider when using children’s literature to teach about Asian Americans:

- Think about the big picture regarding students’ take-aways. Prioritize time to define terms and concepts, such as *Asian American*, *American*, *stereotypes*, and *bias*. Return to these often, pointing out their relevance in literature and in real life.
- Select a variety of books that depict Asian Americans in their diversity to confront monolithic representations. Include geographic, cultural, religious, and ethnic differences. When I highlighted the great diversity of *who* made up Asian America using different texts, it nearly always led to a meaningful discussion, and children frequently confessed they had literally never heard of some countries or ethnicities prior to the read aloud.
- Pair each book with frequent talk and check-ins for understanding. Return to these texts throughout the

year. This is also essential for establishing patterns that disrupt internalized racial discourses or develop stronger pan-ethnic solidarity.

- Be upfront about racializing mechanisms. Children are capable of understanding harmful biases and stereotypes, such as the perception of Asians and Asian Americans as a monolith, forever foreigners, or a model minority. During my time in their classroom, I learned that modeling the recognition and rejection of racial tropes in literature equipped children to do it themselves. By the end of the year, many students fervently pointed out when texts overrelied on East Asian tropes and motifs and advocated for the use of non-English languages in texts.
- Encourage students to make personal connections to texts to promote familiarity, vulnerability, and solidarity. Simultaneously, remind students that the breadth of human experience is vast and that each person carries a story that is different from their own. I found that, after reading a text, students often made it a “single story” about a particular group.¹⁸ When it is not possible to read more stories from a particular culture, it is critical to interrupt these lumping tendencies and to point out that one story does not reflect an entire group’s experiences.
- Consistently highlight Asian Americans and other BIPOC in media and in curricula. Clearly state their contributions to history, culture, and society. It is especially important to highlight contemporary individuals, particularly as their Asian American identities are often erased or overlooked. Pointing out that public figures—for example, Vice President Kamala Harris, pop singers Olivia Rodrigo and Bruno Mars, and athletes Sunisa Lee, Tiger Woods, and Chloe Kim—are Asian American reminds students of their public presence and societal contributions while resisting monolithic and forever foreigner stereotypes.
- Give children the language to use when confronting harmful behaviors or representations. Concepts such as equity and respect can be nebulous, so furnish children with specific phrases they can use, such as “Cut it out! That’s not cool!” on the playground or “Don’t yuck my/their yum!” in the cafeteria.

Though the reflections shared here are based on experiences with young children, these suggestions are applicable across grade levels. As they develop, children may gain more nuanced information and complex understandings; after all, transformation rarely occurs overnight. A commitment to

thinking aloud, reflecting, intervening, and pursuing further learning will impact students most deeply. 🌍

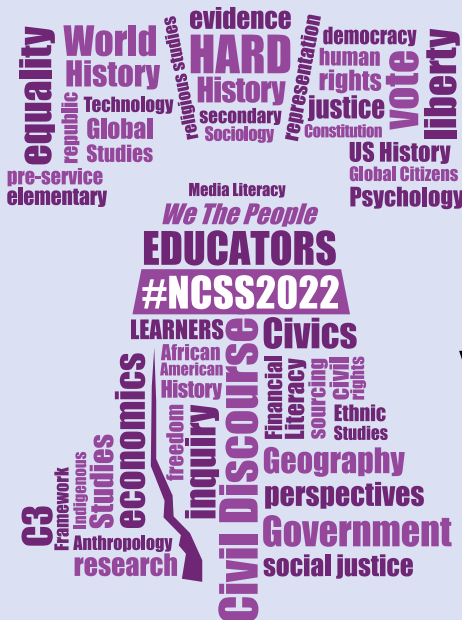
Notes

1. NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010).
2. Rudine Sims Bishop, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* 6, no. 3 (Summer 1990): ix–xi.
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