



Racial Stereotypes and Counter-Narratives in Children's Literature: Critical Content Analysis Using AsianCrit

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Abstract

This study examines the representations of Asian American children and their families in children's literature, utilizing Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit) to analyze stereotypical portrayals and emphasize counter-narratives. In this study, we conducted a critical content analysis to identify themes in the underlying messages in the children's literature. As a result, we identified four themes among the selected literature: (1) stereotypical representation of Asian American children and families, (2) counter-narratives against the perpetual foreigner myth, (3) counter-narratives against the model minority myth, and (4) literature as spaces for honoring Asian American voices. Our findings highlight the need to critically examine race discourse in children's literature to acknowledge and validate the diverse experiences of Asian Americans, moving beyond the model minority and perpetual foreigner myths.

Keywords AsianCrit · Children's literature · Critical content analysis · Racial stereotypes · Counter-narratives · Asian American

Introduction

Children's literature serves as an educational tool for young children, contributing to their cognitive, emotional, and social development (Fletcher & Reese, 2005; Jalongo, 2004). As young children engage with the literature, they develop language skills, vocabulary, and storytelling abilities (Braid & Finch, 2015; Reed et al., 2015). The content of the literature is significant as it conveys messages, themes, and values to young children and can influence children's perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes through the stories they present (Morgan, 2009). Also, the literature provides children with a valuable opportunity to explore diverse cultures, identities, and perspectives, thereby cultivating empathy and promoting cross-cultural understanding from an early age (Crisp et al., 2016; Iwai, 2013; Masko & Bloem, 2017).

The emergence of children's literature that purposefully describes and represents diverse cultures marks a significant shift in the landscape of children's literature (Colby & Lyon, 2004; Koss, 2015). Over the years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of diverse representation in children's literature. One of the primary motivations behind the emergence of such literature is the need for more inclusive narratives that reflect the experiences and identities of children from various cultural backgrounds and create inclusive and culturally responsive classrooms (St. Amour, 2003; Souto-Manning, 2009; Frenkel & Lester, 2014). Furthermore, the lack of representation to reflect the current demographics in the United States in children's literature has led to an increase in demand for diverse literature (Muhammad, 2020; Yi, 2014). In response to the growing demand for diversity in children's literature, authors and illustrators have created works that focus on ethnicity (Gilton, 2020), gender (Tsao, 2020), and disability (Adomat, 2014; Aho & Alter, 2018; Matthews, 2009). This reflects a broader effort to provide more inclusive representation in literature for young readers.

Several studies have examined the portrayal of minority ethnic groups in children's books, focusing on African, Hispanic, and indigenous peoples. For example, Pescosolido et al. (1997) conducted research investigating the portrayal of

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Black people in U.S. children's picturebooks. They focused on documenting changes in racial images within these books and explored the complex relationship between culture, gatekeeping, and societal conflict. Similarly, Nilsson (2005) concentrated on the portrayal of Hispanics in children's literature, examining the evolution of representation, characters' roles, and stereotyping. The author noted improvements in Hispanic portrayal, with a broader range of roles and characteristics moving beyond traditional stereotypes. However, Nilsson also suggested that further progress is needed to address stereotypes and ensure authentic, nuanced portrayals. This research contributes to creating accurate and nuanced representations of various ethnicities in children's literature.

In recent years, there has been an explicit focus on representing Asian American children, families, and cultures in children's literature (Kwon & Sun, 2021; Koss, 2015; Wee et al., 2021). It underscores an increasing acknowledgment of the significance of offering young readers authentic and varied portrayals of Asian Americans' experiences. As a result, numerous studies have examined how Asian American children and families are portrayed in children's literature. This research sheds light on how representation in literature shapes children's identity development, cultural awareness, and empathy towards others. However, amidst the positive aspects of the literature that seek to describe diverse cultures, some scholars have raised concerns about the limitations of such literature. For instance, Yi (2022) studied first graders' engagement with fourteen Asian American picturebooks, offering insights on using children's literature to teach about Asian American history and culture. In the study, she argued that simply increasing exposure to Asian American picturebooks did not prevent children from holding stereotypical views. This finding suggests that the mere presence of diverse literature may not be sufficient in itself to counteract deeply ingrained stereotypes.

Thus, in this research, we aim to contribute to understanding how Asian American children and families are represented in children's literature by critically examining various children's literature that features Asian American children and families. Further, we seek to identify themes, and portrayals that either reinforce or challenge cultural stereotypes. Based on the purpose of this research, our research questions are as follows:

- 1) How does children's literature portray Asian American children and their families, and what stereotypical representations surface through the application of Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit)?
- 2) How do counter-narratives emerge in children's literature, actively challenging stereotypical depictions of Asian American identities?

Theoretical Framework

Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit) is rooted in Critical Race Theory (CRT), a theoretical framework that is useful in studying how systemic racism—a deeply ingrained form of racism embedded in our institutions, like schools—can oppress people of color (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT examines how race operates in a society and affects the lives of racially diverse people. Some scholars have adapted CRT to create a critical perspective on race that concentrates on a specific racial or ethnic group, such as AsianCrit (Iftikhar & Museus, 2018). In particular, AsianCrit confronts ahistoricism (ignoring historical contexts), color-blindness (overlooking racial differences), white meritocracy (the idea that white people succeed based solely on merit), and the reduction of racial issues to a simple black-white binary (Han, 2019).

In this research, we use two out of the seven AsianCrit tenets, generated by Iftikhar and Museus (2018): *Asianization*, and *story, theory, and praxis* due to their direct relevance and potential to deepen our analysis. The first tenet, *Asianization*, refers to how Asian Americans are often unfairly categorized or stereotyped in the United States (Iftikhar & Museus, 2018). This stereotype also appears in children's literature where different Asian American cultures and backgrounds are often mixed together as if they are all the same monolithic group. In our research, we particularly address two common stereotypes: Asians as perpetual foreigners and Asians as the model minority.

First, the perpetual foreigner myth casts Asian Americans as eternal outsiders in the mainstream white culture of the United States (Wu, 2002). This stereotype positions Asian Americans as always being foreign, no matter where they were born or how long they have been in the United States. This stereotype is particularly strong for those who are not fluent in English. Indeed, not speaking English proficiently is often seen as a significant indicator of foreigner status. This stereotype is even more pronounced “when English is spoken with a non-standard American accent” (Kim et al., 2011, p. 2). Being perceived as a perpetual foreigner often leads to feelings of alienation, helplessness, and frustration (Tuan, 1998). Such feelings can have a deep impact on one's mental and emotional well-being and create further division within the community itself (Kim et al., 2011).

Second, the model minority label suggests that Asian Americans are always successful and well-behaved, which oversimplifies and overlooks diversity and individual experiences within the Asian American community (Chang, 1993). The model minority myth paints Asians as submissive, quiet, obedient, not complaining, and politically inactive in the face of unjust social systems (An, 2016). These misconceptions can lead to a lack of awareness or dismissal

of the real challenges and struggles Asian Americans face. The model minority myth can often mislead people to believe that Asian Americans are universally achieving a high level of success through hard work and discipline, implying that other minority groups could achieve similar outcomes if they just worked as hard. This idea is often used to take attention away from systemic racism, putting the blame on individuals and fostering competition among different minority groups (Iftikhar & Museus, 2018).

Story, theory, and praxis is another core AsianCrit tenet, drawn from CRT (Iftikhar & Museus, 2018). In essence, story, theory, and praxis are three interrelated components in the process of analysis and advocacy. Stories drawn from lived experiences shape theory and inform practice; theory in turn guides practice, and practice can uncover stories and apply theory for transformative change. Under this premise, the experiences of Asian Americans depicted in children's literature are essential to offering an alternative system of knowledge that is communicated through stories and can influence theories and practices in significant ways. In this study, we examined the counter-narratives in children's literature that challenge the prevailing narratives about Asian American children and their families in the U.S. and provide alternative empowering perspectives that reflect the realities of people of color (Brayboy, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2000).

Method

Definition of Terms

In this study, we define *Asian Americans* as individuals in the United States with Asian ancestry, including immigrants, transnational migrants, refugees, adoptees, and others. The term *Asian American* originated in 1968 at UC Berkeley through the efforts of activists Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee, aiming for unity among Americans of Asian descent within the civil rights and free speech movement. A Pew Research Center study in 2019 identified six origin groups, constituting nearly 85% of all Asian Americans: Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). These groups have diverse cultures, languages, and backgrounds, including varying levels of education, class, income, acculturation, and exposure to war trauma (Lin & Cheung, 1999). Terminologies like Asian Pacific Islander (API), Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (AANHPI), and Asian Pacific Islander, and Desi Americans (APIDA) have been used. However, it is important to know that Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiians have different lives and experiences from Asian Americans (Kauanui, 2005).

Data Sources

Our main data source is children's literature, specifically picturebooks that target children aged four to eight which feature Asian American children as the main characters. To identify such books, we began by reviewing previous studies on children's literature, such as those conducted by Kim and Wee (2020), Koss (2015), Kwon and Sun (2021), Wee et al. (2021), and Yi (2014). By analyzing these studies, we selected the three most frequently used databases: (1) the Database of Award-Winning Children's Literature which includes 180 awards (such as the Carter G. Woodson Book Award) from English-speaking countries, (2) the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database, and (3) the Children's Picture Book Database at Miami University. These databases provide either thematic categories such as multicultural education, or summaries of stories for users.

Initially, we conducted keyword searches, resulting in 64 relevant pieces of Asian American children's literature. We used the keywords "Asia," "Asian," and "race" in our sampling process without restricting the publication dates. While we acknowledge that these keywords may not encompass all literature depicting the lives of Asian American children, they provide a practical means to locate books for discussing race, especially those featuring Asian American children.

Then, to narrow down our selection, we applied five criteria to these works: characters (Asian American children), stories (narratives depicting Asian American children and families' daily lives), setting (in the United States), language (written in English), and age appropriateness (4–8 years). Each of the three researchers analyzed the 64 books individually before sharing their coding and reviewing their coding together to narrow down the number of literature. This process led to the exclusion of 48 books, leaving 16 for further review.

Afterward, we assessed these 16 books for aspects like syntax, text complexity suitable for young children's developmental characteristics, and relevance to Asian American daily lives aligned with our theoretical framework. Ultimately, we selected seven pieces of literature for our critical content analysis. This rigorous selection process aimed to identify literature that would offer a nuanced portrayal of Asian American lives and depth of content, thereby enhancing the credibility of our research findings.

Data Analysis

To analyze the literature, we followed Pérez Huber and Solorzano's (2015) critical content analysis framework. First, based on our research purpose and questions, we carefully selected the literature for analysis through processes

described in the above section on data sources. Second, using the AsianCrit framework, we conducted critical content analysis (Johnson et al., 2016; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015) to examine power dynamics and discourses within the texts. Critical content analysis delves into the contents of various texts, including books, articles, and narratives, to uncover and comprehend the underlying power dynamics and discourses within them (Johnson et al., 2016). In our study, we employed deductive coding, using three primary codes: “Stereotype of Asian American,” “counter-narrative,” and “Story, Theory, and Praxis.” The three primary codes are used to identify and examine stereotypes, alternative narratives, and the broader narrative and practical aspects of Asian American representation in children’s literature. These codes helped reveal the representation of Asian American experiences and identify four themes in the literature, supported by textual evidence.

Researcher Positionality

We identify ourselves as Asian American researchers and educators. With experience in early childhood education in the U.S. for six to eight years and teaching Asian American children, we have observed a lack of authentic portrayals of diverse Asian American families in children’s books, leading to misunderstandings about Asian American cultures. To address this gap, we decided to conduct a study on Asian American representation in children’s literature, utilizing AsianCrit as our framework. We maintained a reflexive stance, consistently examining our perspectives and biases, to ensure the reliability of our research. Additionally, we ensured the accuracy and validity of our findings by having American early childhood literacy experts carefully review our work.

Findings

In our analysis, we identified four themes that shed light on the complex portrayal of Asian American children and families in children’s books. The first theme explores the ‘Stereotypical Representations of Asian American Culture,’ where we delve into how prevalent stereotypes have shaped the depiction of Asian American identities. The second theme, ‘Presence of Counter-Narratives against the Perpetual Foreigners Myth,’ examines instances where children’s literature challenges the pervasive notion of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners. The third theme, ‘Counter-Narrative against Model Minority Myth,’ delves into narratives that push back against the limiting stereotypes associated with the model minority myth. Lastly, ‘Literature as a Space for Honoring Asian American’s Voices’ highlights literature’s potential in honoring the diverse Asian American lives and experiences. These themes not only reflect the existing challenges but also point toward opportunities for more authentic and inclusive representations. Table 1 below visually presents these themes, supported by relevant textual evidence from the literature.

Stereotypical Representations of Asian American Culture

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from our analysis is stereotypical representations of Asian American children and their families in the United States. While these portrayals offer readers a basic understanding of Asian American cultures, they often perpetuate stereotypes and fail to capture the diversity and complexity of Asian American identities and experiences (Wee et al., 2021; Wu, 2019). In four out of seven pieces of the literature chosen for analysis— in *Dumpling Soup*, *Apple Pie 4th of July*, *A Different Pond*, and *Big Red Lollipop*, we observed depictions of Asian American culture characterized by stereotypical descriptions of Asian American families, such as food, hard work, collectivism, assimilation, and patriarchy.

Table 1 Books and the four themes

References of the Selected Literature	Theme 1: Stereotypical Representations	Theme 2: Counter-Narratives Against Perpetual For- eigner Myth	Theme 3: Counter- Narrative Against Model Minority Myth	Theme 4: Honoring Asian American Daily Experience
1. Cleversticks (Ashley, 1992)		x		
2. Dumpling Soup (Rattigan, 1993)	x		x	
3. Apple Pie 4th of July (Wong, 2002)	x	x		
4. Big Red Lollipop (Khan, 2010)	x			
5. Auntie Yang’s Great Soybean Picnic (Lo, 2012)			x	x
6. Different Pond (Phi, 2020)	x	x	x	x
7. What I Am (Srinivasan, 2021)		x	x	x

Some of the literature features traditional Asian foods, highlighting their cultural significance and the role of culinary practices in shaping Asian American identities. For example, *Dumpling Soup* portrays the family's tradition of making Korean dumpling soup for New Year's Day in Hawai'i, showcasing the importance of food in celebrations. However, this emphasis on culinary culture can sometimes reinforce the stereotype that Asian American culture revolves solely around food. Previous studies argue that focusing only on surface-level aspects like food and clothing fails to capture the complexity of Asian American culture (An, 2022). Thus, while these portrayals offer insights into cultural practices, they may not provide a comprehensive understanding of Asian American identities.

Additionally, the literature portrays the strong work ethic of Asian American parents, emphasizing diligence, perseverance, and discipline in Asian cultures (Yoo-Lee et al., 2014). For example, in *A Different Pond*, the father is described as "working hard and having two jobs (n. p.)," reinforcing the stereotype of Asian Americans as industrious. Similarly, in *Apple Pie, 4th of July*, a Chinese family operates their food store on the holiday. The daughter expresses her frustration, exclaiming, "Seven days a week, fifty-two weeks, three hundred sixty-four days a year, our store is open" (n. p.). This literature subtly suggests that immigrant Asian families are expected to work exceptionally hard, potentially reinforcing the stereotype that all Asian Americans are constantly working.

Moreover, the literature highlights collectivism as a key aspect of Asian American cultures, emphasizing the interconnectedness and shared responsibilities within families. For example, in *Dumpling Soup*, the family's tradition of making dumpling soup for New Year's Day illustrates their close bond. The story begins with the girl's explanation, "Family goes to grandma's house for dumpling soup. My aunts and uncles and cousins come from all around O'ahu" (n. p.), depicting shared activities that emphasize familial unity and the prioritization of collective well-being. Similarly, *A Different Pond* portrays the father-son relationship during a fishing trip, showcasing collectivist values. These portrayals contrast with Western individualism and may perpetuate stereotypes about Asian Americans (e.g., Museus, 2014; Ngo & Lee, 2007).

The literature also explores assimilation within Asian immigrant families in the United States, depicting how Asian American characters balance assimilating into a new culture while preserving their heritage. In *Big Red Lollipop*, Rubina's story illustrates this struggle when she's invited to a friend's party but her younger sister, Sana, wants to join. Despite Rubina's explanation, their mother insists she take Sana, reflecting the pressure to conform to mainstream

American culture, ultimately affecting Rubina's social acceptance.

Lastly, the literature depicts patriarchy, highlighting traditional gender roles and power dynamics within Asian families or communities. For example, in *A Different Pond*, the father is portrayed as the main provider, working hard to support the family by fishing before his two jobs. Meanwhile, the mother is depicted in traditional roles such as cooking and serving food. This portrayal allows readers to infer patriarchal norms within Asian American families in the U.S.

Counter-Narratives Against the Perpetual Foreigners Myth

The second theme that emerged in our analysis is the presence of counter-narratives that challenge deficit views on Asian American children and their families. These deficit views are rooted in the perpetual foreigner myth, a stereotype that perceives Asian Americans as outsiders to the mainstream white culture of the United States (Wu, 2002). As described above, the literature we analyzed shows some aspects of Asianization and stereotypical understanding of Asian culture (i.e., priority of family, food, and assimilation). However, we also found narratives in some of the chosen literature that contest the perpetual foreigner stereotype. In particular, four of the seven pieces of the literature offer alternative understandings of Asian American cultures and identities. In particular, our analysis includes *Cleversticks*, *Apple Pie 4th of July*, *What I Am*, and *A Different Pond*.

Cleversticks shows how a young Asian American boy, Ling Sung, shifts from feeling inadequate to recognizing his talent with chopsticks. Despite struggling with English in school, his teacher highlights his chopstick skills, framing them as clever: "Oh, look, everyone! Look what Ling Sung can do! Isn't that clever?" (n. p.) This asset-based teaching approach challenges the deficit perspective often placed on Asian American students, emphasizing their strengths and cultural assets (Gay & Howard, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Moll et al., 1992). This literature effectively presents a counter-narrative to the prevailing deficit perspective on Asian American children, particularly in classroom settings, by emphasizing and celebrating the boy's strengths and talents.

A Different Pond shows how a boy from an Asian immigrant family transforms a deficit view on his father's English pronunciation by acknowledging the diversity of ways of speaking English. The main character, a boy from an Asian immigrant family, understands that some people might not like his father's accent: "A kid at my school said my dad's English sounds like a thick, dirty river" (n. p.). But he thinks differently and says, "But to me his English sounds

like gentle rain” (n. p.). The boy’s words highlight that English accent can be embraced diversely in English-speaking communities. These stories challenge the dominant norms of language usage in the United States, which are primarily determined by the speech of the white middle class. The stories show that there is diversity in the way language is spoken and understood, encouraging a broader, more inclusive view of language and communication.

Furthermore, *Apple Pie 4th of July* highlights that Asian Americans are not just outsiders or foreigners but are a fundamental part of the diverse American society. The main character of the literature initially believes that “no one wants Chinese food on the Fourth of July” (n. p.), reflecting a dominant binary view that separates Asian culture from American culture and deems Chinese cultural foods as inappropriate for an American holiday. However, by the end of the story, her assumptions are proven wrong when she sees people from diverse backgrounds enjoying the Chinese food served at her parents’ restaurant. This story actively challenges the prevailing narrative by asserting that Chinese people, and more broadly, Asian American individuals, should be recognized as an integral part of American society. This literature provides readers an opportunity to challenge and rethink such misconceptions by showing an Asian American girl’s journey of self-realization and understanding of her dual cultural identity.

Additionally, the literature explores the identity struggles of many Asian American children, who often feel caught between two cultural worlds. For example, in *Apple Pie 4th of July*, a young Chinese American girl grapples with her dual identity as she stands outside her parents’ Chinese restaurant, surrounded by the sights and smells of an American holiday. Similarly, *What I Am* explores the identity journey of an Asian-descended girl, affirming her fluid sense of self as both American and Indian. She expresses, “I am American. I am Indian” (n. p.), indicating that her identity is context-specific and evolving. Her concluding remark, “What I am is more than I can say” (n. p.), underscores the complexity of her identity. These sentiments align with research on immigrant children’s complex identity formation, challenging the oversimplified view of identity. The child’s assertion, “I am American. I am Indian” (n. p.), reflects her “fluid sense of identity” (Salomone, 2010, p. 53), rejecting assimilation into a single culture. These narratives advocate for a nuanced understanding of identity, recognizing its multifaceted nature and the influence of multiple cultural backgrounds.

Counter-Narrative Against Model Minority Myth

The dominant monolithic racial depiction of Asian Americans, centered on the model minority myth, reinforces the

image of Asian Americans as a singular, high-achieving group, often narrowly defining their experiences through academic and economic success (Lee, 2009; Iftikar & Muses, 2018). However, amidst this prevailing narrative, a theme from certain selected literature emerged as compelling counter-narratives that challenge this stereotypical myth, introducing Asian Americans’ diverse immigrant experiences and uncovering their struggles. Our research has identified a third theme centered on the diverse backgrounds and dynamics of Asian American families’ immigrant experiences and lives, vividly portrayed in both *Dumpling Soup* and *Auntie Yang’s Great Soybean Picnic*. Additionally, *A Different Pond* sheds light on the reality of Asian Americans who face challenges and struggles in their daily lives.

In *Dumpling Soup*, the author challenged the traditional depiction of Asian immigrant families as monolithic ethnic groups. When the main character, Marisa, describes her family’s demographics, she proudly mentions members from various Asian countries, including Korea, Japan, and China, as well as individuals with Hawaiian and haole (Hawaiian for white people) backgrounds. The inclusion of different Asian ethnicities within the family (or having people of many nationalities in one family) challenges the more typical homogeneous representation of Asian Americans. In the literature, Asian immigrant families are often portrayed as a single, homogenous group, with each family categorized by their country of origin, such as Chinese in *Dim Sum for Everyone!* (Lin, 2014), Japanese in *Tea With Milk* (Say, 2009), or Korean in *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2022). However, *Dumpling Soup* rejects this narrow representation by emphasizing the complexity of the Asian American immigrant family in Hawai‘i. Additionally, the term “chop suey,” used by the main character’s grandma, comes from Hawaiian pidgin and means “all mixed up.” The use of this word connotes a harmonious blending of different elements, reflecting the coexistence of various Asian cultures and traditions within the family. Marisa expresses her optimistic perspective on her family’s demography, stating, “I like it that way” (n.p.), encouraging readers to see beyond the simplistic and stereotypical portrayal of Asian Americans as a monolithic group. By presenting a family with members from different Asian countries, this literature fosters a sense of inclusivity and belonging, reflecting their diverse experiences and identities.

Auntie Yang’s Soybean Picnic focuses on immigrants who are highly educated and middle class, reflecting the model minority myth. However, the author does not just focus on the success of Auntie Yang but explores the diverse immigration experiences within Asian American families, emphasizing transnational contexts. The author explains the family’s reason for immigrating, saying, “Like Mama and

Baba, Auntie and Uncle Yang had come across the ocean to study at universities in the United States. They had all planned to return to their hometowns after graduating but had stayed because the war in China made it too dangerous to go back” (n. p.). This additional layer of storytelling enriches the narrative and adds depth to the characters’ experiences. It acknowledges that not all Asian immigrants have the same background, experiences, or socioeconomic status. By recognizing this diversity, the author challenges the uniform portrayal of Asian Americans as minority exemplars. Furthermore, this literature acknowledges the connections and ties that immigrants maintain with their homelands, linking their present experiences in the U.S. to their previous lives in China. As a result, it highlights the complexity of cultural identity and the continuing impact of one’s heritage even after settling in a new country.

In contrast to *Auntie Yang’s Soybean Picnic*, which focuses on immigrants who are highly educated and middle class, *A Different Pond* presents the hidden reality of Asian American immigrant families. It tells the story of a young Vietnamese boy and his father who go fishing early in the morning to provide for their family. The picture literature shows that not all Asian American families are high-achieving and privileged, as often portrayed. Unlike the model minority stereotype that portrays all Asian Americans as successful and academically accomplished, this piece of literature shows the struggles and hard work of a working-class family. By focusing on the experiences of a working-class Asian American household, *A Different Pond* rejects stereotypes and breaks away from the homogenous depiction of success often associated with the Asian American family. Instead, it illustrates a more authentic and multi-dimensional life, allowing readers to connect with the characters and understand the complexity of immigrant families’ lives. By doing so, it contributes to a more accurate and nuanced portrayal of Asian American immigrant families, helping to dismantle harmful stereotypes about such families and fostering a deeper appreciation for their diverse narratives.

Literature as a Space for Honoring Asian American’s Daily Experience

Many pieces of the literature we analyzed were written by authors who used their own real-life experiences as immigrants or racial minorities in the U.S. as inspiration. For instance, in *Auntie Yang’s Great Soybean Picnic*, the author and illustrator revealed that the story was inspired by their childhood experiences and cherished memories as stated in the author’s and illustrator’s notes. They also explained how the soybean picnic became a historical space and event for “young Chinese immigrant families who had been displaced

by the political upheaval in China during World War II” (n. p.). From this explanation, we can gain a better understanding of Asian Americans’ immigration backgrounds which is invisible in the curriculum (An, 2016; Jang, 2022). *A Different Pond* is another piece of literature with an author’s note that offers insights into the early settlement experiences of immigrants, particularly those of Vietnamese Americans who fled to the United States due to the war. The author, Bao Phi, who was born in Vietnam and raised in the United States (mainly in Minneapolis), vividly shares his childhood experience, stating, “Both my parents worked multiple jobs to survive and support us in a country where people at best didn’t understand why we were here, and at worst blamed us for the aftermath of the war” (n. p.). In his words, the United States, the host country for Vietnamese war refugees, is a place filled with people who neither understand nor show interest in the harsh reality that forced his family to leave their homeland. He notes that he wrote this story to honor his parents’ efforts to tell him “difficult stories about the war and where we came from” and continue their legacy. This literature successfully makes Asian Americans’ real stories visible.

In *What I Am*, author Divya Srinivasan describes how she came up with this story, which is about an Asian American girl who actively responds to the question, “What are you?” This question was unexpectedly posed to the author’s sister by a stranger in a restroom. “My sister was confused but quickly figured out this stranger was asking about her race. Instead of a friendly, casual how are you, the question was a nosy, pointed what are you. As if my sister were a thing—a curiosity—and not a person. Intentional or not, the lady’s words were insulting” (n. p.). After this incident, the author and her sister had a conversation about how they could have responded differently. The author imagined, in her story, a child who could boldly respond to such a rude question with, “I am a who, not a what.” The literature portrays a young girl affirming various aspects of her identity, ending with the powerful declaration, “I am more than I can say.” Through the influence of literature, Srinivasan illuminates the daily racism faced by racially minoritized individuals, amplifying the voices of Asian Americans capable of reshaping perspectives. This transformative process allows them to transition from outsiders to essential contributors to the intricate configuration of American society.

Conclusion and Implications

In this study, we examined the representation of Asian Americans in children’s literature, focusing on identifying stereotypical portrayals and emphasizing counter-narratives grounded in Asian Critical Race Theory. In the previous

studies of children's literature informed by feminist epistemology, queer theory, critical literacy, or critical race theory (e.g., Koss, 2015; Kwon & Sun, 2021; Yi, 2014), they tended to highlight diverse cultures and lives of Asian American children and their families. Building on these previous studies, our study expands the discussion of the racialized discourse about Asian Americans. In particular, we employed the AsianCrit to focus on a nuanced interpretation of Asian American children and their families. It enabled us to reveal how Asian Americans were unfairly categorized or stereotyped within children's literature due to the myths of perpetual foreigners and the model minority.

In addition to the stereotypical depictions of Asian Americans, our analysis found counter-narratives in the chosen children's literature. Our chosen children's literature reflects the conflicting ideas or tensions in larger society about Asian Americans' racialized experiences. It reflects the struggles, negotiations, and reconstructions of identity and representation that Asian Americans navigate daily. Our study also reveals hidden complexities within the texts, showing a vast amount of variety among Asian Americans, in terms of ethnicity, immigration, socioeconomic status, multiracial family composition, and so on.

Our research findings have implications for various stakeholders, including teachers, researchers, publishing professionals (including children's book authors and illustrators), and parents and caregivers. Early childhood educators can create inclusive learning environments by integrating children's books that authentically depict Asian American experiences into their curriculum. This approach not only fosters a celebration of diversity but also cultivates empathy among students, promoting a more inclusive classroom culture. In addition, researchers have a significant role in advancing our understanding of Asian American representation in children's literature. By exploring and documenting counter-narratives to stereotypes, researchers can contribute to a broader and more nuanced portrayal of Asian American identities in children's books. Additionally, there is a pressing need to highlight the stories of invisible Asian American children, such as those who have been adopted or raised by single parents or grandparents. These narratives, often overlooked in mainstream literature, challenge stereotypes and provide essential representation for a demographic frequently excluded from traditional children's literature. Through their work, researchers can advocate for the inclusion of these narratives in academic discussions and publications, ensuring they receive the attention and recognition they deserve.

Furthermore, publishing professionals can contribute to a more diverse and inclusive literary landscape through their selection and promotion of books created by authors and illustrators that authentically portray the experiences of

Asian Americans. Finally, parents and caregivers can bolster these efforts by choosing books that authentically depict Asian American experiences for their children. This proactive approach can help children develop a more nuanced understanding of various cultures and identities, nurturing empathy and cultural literacy from an early age.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest All authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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