



Guest Editor's Introduction

The Particular and the Universal: Asian Children's Literature, Film, and Animation

Bernard Wilson

University of the Sacred Heart, Tokyo, Japan

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In the particular is contained the universal.

James Joyce

(Qtd. in Arthur Power, *From the Old Waterford House*, London: Mellifont, 1944, 65)

This Special Issue brings together a diverse collection of papers analysing children's literature, film, and animation, all of which represent aspects of Asian culture and the Asian diaspora. Importantly, the issue provides a forum through which a range of academics and scholars – both from within and from beyond Asia – can bring greater attention to children's written and visual texts, reflect upon the social and cultural mores represented in those texts, and discuss the issues that concern Asian children and society, both past and present.

The broad spectrum of children's and young adults' literature and other forms of visual media constitute categories that are not easily defined, crossing over as they do with numerous other genres and subgenres, just as the definition of Asia in itself is also tenuous. Yet, amid these broad referential points, connections may be made. The prevailing threads that run through many of these stories are the changing issues that confront children in the contemporary societies of Asia, and despite the concerns often represented in the narratives, concerns which express themselves socio-culturally and often in relation to gender or economic imbalances, the clearest unifying thread is the underlying belief in the need for human connection and guidance. As such, though the issues raised in these essays and in the texts they discuss may from their content often be seen to be regional and localised, they are, in many ways, very much universal in their import, in the lessons they teach, and in the questions they ask.

Folklore is an intriguing and eclectic genre of children's literature which has traditionally functioned in terms of entertainment but also as a didactic tool, reinforcing (but at times questioning) social processes and structures. In the opening essay, Sharifah Aishah Osman discusses the Langkawi folkloric legend of Mahsuri, a subversive tale that, in its brutality and violence, ideologically questions the position of the female in a patriarchal society, and draws attention to the plight of the disenfranchised. Osman looks at the adaptation of this tale and its representation of the subjugated female in two contemporary Malaysian texts that have adopted its central tenets: Lee Su Ann's young adult murder mystery, *The Curse* (2005), and Preeta Samarasan's short story of interracial love, "Mahsuri" (2011), the first a contemporary bildungsroman that is an affirmation of female strength and individualism in the face of restrictive social structures, the second an interrogation of interracial relationships in Malay-dominant Malaysia. Osman skillfully links analyses of these two contemporary tales through affirming the importance such narratives can hold for young Malaysians and the ways in which they perceive themselves individually and collectively.

Lijun Bi and Xiangshu Fang have contributed two articles on the relationship children's literature has with the history of Chinese political and social movements over the last century, and these movements'

influence on depictions of gender and ethnicity in texts for Chinese children. Their first essay, “Representing Gender in Chinese Children’s Literature (1920 – 2010)” traces the disparities and transitions in such gender representation, and the social and moral purposes assigned to young males and females in children’s literature since the rise of nationalism in China through to contemporary society.

The third essay, Alicia Alves’ analysis of the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore’s collection of poems in *The Crescent Moon*, foregrounds the relationship of the “unnamed child” with nature and with those around him, shedding light on the almost mystical purity of communion with the natural (and social) world that children may achieve, and the perfect sense of unity that can emerge from this symbiosis. In doing so, the child – rather than the adult – becomes the teacher, inverting the traditional perception of the filial relationship and functioning as a symbol that celebrates both the shared values of universalism and the individualism that resides within it. Connection and communication are at the heart of Tagore’s child.

Just as the portrayal of children in Chinese children’s literature has seen considerable changes over the last century, so too have such representations in Indian children’s literature. In the first of our essays from India-based academics, Venkatesh Puttaiah reflects on the complexity of the issues (in both regional and global terms) facing contemporary Indian youth, as evinced through Paro Anand’s recent publication *The Other: Stories of Difference* (2018), a collection of stories that focuses most particularly on those children and teenagers who exist outside of what may be considered social “norms”. Anand’s stories, Puttaiah argues, allow the reader to develop empathy with her characters while reconsidering the existence of those individuals who are often ignored, victimised, or vulnerable to the problems which confront many young people in India today.

Continuing in this vein, Abhisek Ghosal asks the important question of what children’s literature actually constitutes, and assesses the rupture that occurs for the child upon becoming an adult. From this starting point, he examines novels from two emergent contemporary Indian authors, Mitali Perkins’ *You Bring the Distant Near* (2017) and Sowmya Rajendran’s *The Lesson* (2015), each of which raises issues related to gender and identity and its expression in South Asian society. Rajendran’s text presents a dystopian world with coded parallels to female repression in existing heteronormative societies, while Perkins provides a narrative of dislocation and of globalised, diasporic existence. Ghosal notes the universal themes inherent in both stories but also argues that the attention to regional socio-cultural details in the texts denotes the literature as distinctly South Asian.

Anurima Chanda examines the traditional roots that have formed the perception of children in India and the changing conceptions of what the term “child” now represents in modern society. Chanda traces colonial influences and Indian cultural traditions and applies these to the practical concerns of publishing and selling, and the challenges faced in this competitive environment. In South Asia, she notes, such texts have invariably been gender-biased and have provided few role models and perspectives for female children. Societal and cultural restrictions have ensured that girls have had far fewer educational opportunities than boys

and, even in contemporary society, alternate sexual and gender identities are given limited coverage and are often met with a hostile reception. Yet, while these conclusions may appear discouraging, Chanda notes that there is now a growing defiance of these trends by a small number of emergent publishing houses as evidenced by the two texts discussed in this essay, Niveditha Subramaniam and Sowmya Rajendran's *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet!* (2011) and Devika Rangachari's *Queen of Ice* (2014).

An analysis of Japanese and Korean cultural representations in Asian-American children's literature, most particularly through the roles and values of mothers and the transference of those values (either specifically or inherently) to daughters, forms the basis of Gabrielle Atwood Halko's essay, which examines Japanese-American Yoko Kawashima Watkins' *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* (1986) and Korean-American Sook Nyul Choi's *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* (1991). The events depicted in these narratives had previously been under-discussed – or indeed hidden – from mainstream cultural narratives in America, and both texts received considerable attention upon their publication. Halko discusses the stereotypical assumptions of race and gender in American society and the expectations of a mainstream American audience, assumptions partially reflected in the content of the two novels and the values they convey. Each novel, she notes, seemingly inhabits both familiar and exotic spaces, binaries which are indicative not only of the authors' bicultural mix of Asian and American values but also of their awareness of the preconceptions of their Western audience.

In their survey of Chinese cinema, Tan Fengxia and Li Lu look at depictions of war in Chinese children's films and at the thematic adjustments within the medium. Their analysis commences with the utilisation of the child as an example of nationalistic endeavour in conflict – the “little hero” loyal only to the greater cause per se – moving to perspectives that, while still expressing loyalty to the collective cause, convey a far more humanistic expression of the devastating effects war can have on children and individuals. The authors argue that such an approach signifies an adjustment in the relationship between collectivist priorities and individualistic concerns.

Of course, any discussion of children and children's literature invariably involves depictions of their reliance on, or separation from, the family unit. Raj Gaurav Verma draws attention to this crucial aspect of the genre in his discussion of the role of parents, and the implications of their absence in children's lives, through a selective survey of children's literature, with specific reference to the dynamics of child/parent relationships in a range of stories by Indian authors, including Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Kalpana Swaminathan, Anita Nair, Harshikaa Udasi, Ruskin Bond, and Kamala Das, among others. Verma analyses these dynamics but also asserts that the lessons fundamental to the traditional Eurocentric fairy tale trope now bear limited relevance in terms of contemporary Indian society and the issues confronting these children.

Questions surrounding cultural and textual adaptations of the “Ballad of Mulan” are the focus of Joseph V. Giunta's discussion of Robert San Souci's *Fa Mulan: The Story of a Woman Warrior* (1998) and Disney's animated adaptation of the same year, a film that borrows from Souci's text but also adds to it a range of Asian

cultural stereotypes and clichés. Giunta's principal concern lies with the process of "Disneyfication", a mode by which, he argues, narratives from other cultures are remodelled through Western transculturation, and which covertly embeds Western values in non-Western narratives under the guise of cultural authenticity and sensitivity.

Lijun Bi's and Xiangshu Fang's second essay, "'Rude Tribes and Wild Frontiers': Treatment of Ethnicity in Chinese Children's Literature" provides a fascinating literature review of the depiction and treatment of ethnic minorities by the dominant Han culture through the directives and policies of national unity and "liberation". Though pursued under the twin banners of cultural emancipation and the benefits of unilingualism, the authors assert that the implementation of such policies remains contentious in its reinforcement of the lingua franca and hegemonic culture over minorities, and its perpetuation of ethnic stereotypes.

In the penultimate article, Li Lifang provides an analysis of the theorizing of children's literature over the last century in China, its initial external influences and its development of the themes and contexts which reflect Chinese society and national goals, but which also reflect the increasing importance and power of the genre. Li's essay primarily focuses on value systems and how those values are constructed in the criticism of children's literature within China, and proposes a system of value evaluation that covers five crucial areas of research and assessment.

In the final essay, Jabeen Fatima brings to readers' attention the Indian Bengali author Mahasweta Devi's *The Armenian Champa Tree* (2000), which relates the story of a young boy, Mato, who is forced to flee from his village with his goat when it is demanded as a sacrifice. The story is set during the Great Bengal famine of 1770 and relates to both oral and written forms of Indian history emphasising, in particular, the subversive power of oral traditions on written history, but also the dangers of the superstitions that are deeply ingrained in some traditional societies. Fatima is particularly concerned with the nature of culture and cultural beliefs, how they are formed and propagated, and how these errant beliefs and prejudices act to the detriment of the greater group.

Images in children's literature form a crucial component of storytelling, whether in conjunction with language or as an independent visual narrative. We are fortunate to be able to include in this issue Kok Su Mei's interview with the award-winning Malaysian children's writer and illustrator Emila Yusof, who provides insights into children's literature in Malaysia, and the Malaysian motifs and cultural signifiers in her books.

Translation, linguistic and cultural, is an area that affects literature in general, but is a particularly important aspect of children's authors' texts in Asia because it enables such writing to meet with a broader readership. Yet the translation itself brings its own problematic considerations. With this in mind, we are delighted to include Amin Amirdabbaghian's and Hans V. Wolf's review of *The Mousedeer and the*

Crocodiles: A Malaysian Folktale in 111 Languages (co-edited by Hans Volker Wolf, Looi Wai Ling, Stefanie Pillai, and Adriana Phillip) which, as its title indicates, undertakes the ambitious multiple translation of a classic tale.

Finally, it would be deeply remiss of me not to note that such a project could not have been undertaken without a collaborative effort. My thanks, in particular, go to Professor Sharmani Patricia Gabriel for her guidance, patience, hard work, and wisdom, and to those at Universiti Malaya and elsewhere who worked tirelessly – and continue to work – on the technical aspects of this journal. And, of course, my thanks to the scholars who, from within Asia and from across the seas, gave of their time to produce insightful articles and to ask thought-provoking questions. The diversity in these contributions is readily apparent yet despite this, there remains an admirable unity of purpose. Each writer has in various ways, whether that be by introducing new material to other eyes, whether through providing context or historical background, or by questioning assumptions, stereotypes, and inequities, provided blocks upon which to build and issues upon which to ruminate. To paraphrase John Donne's words and, perhaps ironically, apply them to the Asian themes – and global connections – that run through this Special Issue, every contribution is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.