

Bernard Wilson and Sharmani Patricia Gabriel (Eds). *Asian Children's Literature and Film in a Global Age: Local, National, and Transnational Trajectories*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 398 pp. ISBN 978-981-15-2630-5.

Reviewed by

Aneesh Barai

University of Sheffield, Sheffield, United Kingdom

The book has sixteen chapters organised in four sections by regions of Asia: first East, then South and West, Southeast, and finally Diaspora. The contributors to this work include not only literary and film scholars, but some fascinating perspectives from outside the discipline, such as work by a semiotician, and even a cardiologist. The book is rich in visual material, with colour screenshots in chapter 4 on South Korean film, and lovely images from picturebooks in chapter 12 on Indonesian children's books.

Texts discussed stretch back to the 1960s, but there is a heavy focus on the contemporary. It includes chapters on famous filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami and Hayao Miyazaki, as well as on less internationally recognised works, such as Sonia Ghalian's chapter on Indian children's cinema. For children's literature, it covers a substantial range of genres and target ages, from picturebooks to Young Adult (YA), from folk tale to speculative fiction. A common topic among the chapters is 'family', unsurprisingly for its broad significance in children's and young people's lives. For example, Yasuko Doi examines Japanese children's literature for ways that it represents divorce, child abuse, adoption and re-marriage, in counterpoint to stereotypical positive representations of nuclear families, and Xiangshu Fang and Lijun Bi explore parent-child relations in contemporary Chinese children's literature.

There is also a strong focus on intersectional reflections and LGBTQ+ representation that recurs through several chapters, which is especially strong in the chapter by Suchismita Banerjee, who discusses queer representation in contemporary Indian English Young Adult fiction. Banerjee focuses on two novels, *Talking of Muskaan* (2014) by Himanjali Sankar and *Slightly Burnt* (2014) by Payal Dhar: “Neither novel attempts to pigeonhole the teenaged characters into categories but, rather, focuses on the exploration of their identities, of which sexuality is just one aspect. Moreover, this exploration of sexuality and experimentation is not restricted to the gay characters: some of their friends also admit to being confused about their preferences” (p. 165). Banerjee takes care to reflect on what feminism and liberation mean in this specific cultural context, beginning her contextualisation from the impact of the Victorian British penal code, the criminalisation of homosexuality under colonialism, and the complexities of tensions between feminism and ‘traditional culture’ (161). Drawing on the work of Niranjana 2007, she argues for the need to uncouple concepts of modernity from feminism, with its assumptions that liberation can only come at the cost of erasing one’s own traditional culture, and as an example of this, she points to the history of gender diversities within Hindu mythology: “There are several figures in Hindu mythology that are of ambiguous gender, the most prominent among them being Shikhandi (a character in the epic Mahabharata) and Bahuchara Mata (considered the patron of members of the third gender in India).” (160). This chapter exemplifies the strength of analysis and theorisation that this collection provides in focusing on children’s culture from Asia within its specific national contexts.

One of the most interesting aspects of this book comes in the rich and illuminating reflections of the editors Bernard Wilson and Sharmani Patricia Gabriel in the introduction, providing the rationale for this collection. They set out the issues of multiculturalism and globalisation that impact on the critical construction of ‘Asian’ children’s literature: “For all of

globalisation's touted 'two-way' dialogue and exchange of ideas and transactions between cultures, the balance of geopolitical power and knowledge still remains asymmetrically weighted towards the West and the North. Indeed, European and Anglo-American discourses on children's literary culture and their regimes of literary and visual representation continue to dominate the global stage, eclipsing, overlooking or excluding voices, perspectives and discourses from Asia" (6). They insightfully note that even where Western theories like multiculturalism claim to provide positive representation, they "are premised on uncritical liberal humanist ideals and on stable and secure self-other oppositions that do very little to eradicate unequal power relations and essentialist attitudes to cultural otherness" (6). In response to this, they prioritise glocalisation: "when local practices respond to global discourses, and as global influences become absorbed and adapted in local settings, the outcome is "glocalisation"— a practice or perspective that is at once global and local. This means that though we should be mindful of globalisation's totalising tendencies and homogenising effects, we should also be open to the possibility of global processes providing conditions for the local "to come into representation" (Hall 1997, 27)" (9). Further, they sensitively handle the heterogeneity of 'Asia' as a continent of many diverse cultures: "The aim, then, is not to consolidate "Asia", but to conceive of it as a space of many centres and many peripheries, with its own flows of influence and networks of connections, always shifting and moving" (11).

It is crucial in our current period of globalised cultures to avoid the trap of thinking in terms of 'the west and the rest,' and instead to engage genuinely with cultural specificities. This includes understanding the impact that colonialism has had on many Asian contexts, but also how countries have responded to, rejected or diverted from colonial norms over the past decades, and looking at the pre-colonial histories of gender, family, childhood and education

that were interrupted in those countries by colonialism. In terms of literary and cultural research, it is also essential to draw from research created within that context, both literary analysis and theoretical material, something that all (bar one) of the chapters in this volume eminently achieve.

The call from the editors Wilson and Gabriel, thus, is to rise to the challenge of thinking glocally and heterogeneously about children's literature and media from outside of Western nations, a project that this collection powerfully and effectively responds to in its many international voices and the great variety of types of text that it engages with.