

A Blend of Modern and Traditional, Memory and Reality: The Representation of Asian Childhood in *The Sound of Silence* and *I Dream of Popo*

Cheng-Ting Chang
Sophia University, Japan

Abstract

The number of books with significant Asian content, published by U.S. publishers, has increased considerably in recent years. Added to this, there has been an increasing effort to analyze children's books containing Asian cultures, including Chinese (e.g. Cai, 1994; Chen, 2009) and Korean/Korean American (e.g. Wee et al., 2015; Yi, 2013). However, less research is about Japan (e.g. Wee et al., 2018) and almost none at all about Taiwan. These books provide essential resources for understanding how Asian childhood is imagined, but very few studies have explored this topic. Many scholars have highlighted that these books include inaccuracies and inauthenticity. However, further questions are not discussed: Do inauthentic representations all come from a lack of understanding or inexperience of a specific culture? What are the assumptions or possible reasons behind inaccuracies and inauthenticity?

To address the above-mentioned gaps, this paper aims to explore the verbal and visual representations of childhood through a close analysis of two picturebooks published in the U.S., including Japanese and Taiwanese content respectively: *The Sound of Silence* (2016), written by Katrina Goldsaito and illustrated by Julia Kuo, and *I Dream of Popo* (2021), written by Livia Blackburne and illustrated by Julia Kuo. Both are set in contemporary Asia with traditional elements. The former is inspired by a story that the author's father told her when she was a child, and the latter is based on the author's life story. Therefore, they both shed light on the intersection of modernity, memory, and Asian childhood, which will be explored by discussing the author/illustrator's positionality and examining the verbal text, visual text, and verbal-visual interactions.

I argue that both picturebooks display Marah Gubar's "kinship model" of childhood (2013, 2016), which positions adult and child as akin to one another. The children and adults in the story are "separated by differences of degree, not of kind" (2013, p.454), revealing a continuum of child/adult rather than a binary one. Also, inauthenticity does not necessarily mean a lack of understanding. As fiction, they can be a blend of modern and traditional, memory and reality, with various considerations of the authors and illustrator.