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Diverse Representations of Success in Asian Children's Texts

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Abstract:

This review article argues that the volume titled *Representations of Children and Success in Asia: Dream Chasers*, edited by Shih-Wen Sue Chen and Sin Wen Lau (2022), is an invaluable contribution to English-language critical discourse on children's literature and culture in relation to Asian and non-English language texts. The monograph analyses a broad range of primary texts from Asia, offering a comprehensive introduction to diverse Asian cultural contexts. The chapters address various critical issues, such as questioning rigid standards of educational success, negotiating identities, and becoming a moral being in society. The engaging selection of primary texts and the critical insights presented in the volume may serve as a contribution to further discussions.

Key words:

Asia, Asian children's texts, non-English texts, success in Asia

Zróżnicowane reprezentacje sukcesu w azjatyckich tekstach kultury dziecięcej

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Abstrakt:

Artykuł recenzyjny poświęcony jest monografii *Representations of Children and Success in Asia: Dream Chasers* [Reprezentacje dzieci i sukcesu w Azji. Łowcy marzeń] pod redakcją Shih-Wen Sue Chen i Sin Wen Lau (2022). Publikacja stanowi

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nieoceniony wkład w anglojęzyczną krytyczną dyskusję na temat kultury i literatury dziecięcej, szczególnie w odniesieniu do tekstów azjatyckich i nieanglojęzycznych. Obejmuje ona szeroki zakres tekstów źródłowych, prezentując różnorodne azjatyckie konteksty kulturowe. Poszczególne rozdziały podejmują istotne zagadnienia krytyczne, takie jak kwestionowanie sztywnych ram sukcesu edukacyjnego, negocjowanie tożsamości oraz stawanie się istotą moralną w społeczeństwie. Interesujący wybór tekstów i przedstawione wnioski krytyczne stanowią przyczynek do dalszych dyskusji.

Słowa kluczowe:
Azja, azjatyckie teksty kultury dziecięcej, teksty nieanglojęzyczne, sukces w Azji

Overview

This review article examines the title *Representations of Children and Success in Asia: Dream Chasers*, edited by Shih-wen Sue Chen and Sin Wen Lau (2022c), a recent addition to the Routledge series *Children's Literature and Culture*. The volume focuses on a specific aspect of childhood – success – with the clear aim of addressing a well-identified gap in academic discourse by focusing on the cultural contexts of Asia. Its scope is ambitious, and for the most part, it successfully meets its objectives. The volume also provides a solid foundation for further research and discussion on representations of success and childhood across different cultural contexts. This review paper offers a summary of the volume, an analysis of its content, and some suggestions for further consideration.

Summary, Scope, and Methodology

The purpose of this edited volume (Chen & Lau, 2022c), as stated in the abstract, is to "[explore] how success is conceptualised and represented in texts for young people in Asia" (p. ii). The editors further define the three key terms – 'success', 'texts,' and 'Asia' – in Chapter 1, "Dreams of Success: Young People, Agency, Values, and Citizenship in Asia" (Chen & Lau, 2022b). The discussion begins with the dictionary definition of 'success,' referring to the achievement of various goals, as well as the attainment of wealth and social status. This framing opens the way for subsequent chapters to present a range of representations of success. The term 'texts' is understood broadly, encompassing literary fiction and non-fiction, picturebooks, TV drama series, films, anime, archival

materials (biographies), and oral sources. The concept of 'texts for young people in Asia' is also treated loosely, covering texts specifically for young audiences, texts intended for a general audience that feature young people as subjects, as well as texts performed by children. As for 'Asia' as a geographical location, the volume includes texts from Japan, South Korea, the People's Republic of China, Singapore, Taiwan, Indonesia, Vietnam, and India. At the same time, the editors acknowledge the absence of works from other Asian countries, as well as themes regarding "disabled young people, LGBTQIA+ subjects, and celebrity children in reality TV shows" (p. 6).

The volume consists of four thematic parts: "Educational Success," "Cultural and Politics of Success," "Success and the Nation," and "Success in the World." These sections reflect an intention to start the discussion at a personal and individual level, gradually expanding outward to broader cultural and global contexts. Most chapters conduct close readings of a small number of texts (one to three), with the exception of Chapter 11, "Messages of 'Success' in Popular Taiwanese Children's Books" by Agnes Tang and Ivy Haoyin Hsieh (2022), and Chapter 15, "Semiotic Representations of Success in English-Language Picturebooks for Young Korean Children" by Jennifer M. Graff and Eun Young Yeom (2022), who analyse a larger corpus. Chapter 8, "To Be Red: Child Propagandists and Their Success in the Cultural Revolution" by Yi Ren (2022) stands out methodologically, as it is the only essay that includes archival and ethnographic research data. Justifications for the selection of primary texts vary from chapter to chapter, with some choices based on popularity and others on thematic relevance. The goals of each chapter also differ slightly: some explore the portrayal of success in selected texts by highlighting and problematising pervasive ideas or ideals, while others juxtapose the textual representations of success with social phenomena. Overall, the volume approaches the topic of success from multiple angles across various Asian contexts.

Analysis

Considering the variety of text types, cultural contexts, research questions, and methodologies presented across all 14 chapters, the editors have delivered a comprehensive volume with two major strengths. First, it addresses a clearly identified gap in the critical discourse of children's literature and culture. Second, although not the primary purpose of the volume, it serves as a notable introductory sampler to the Asian context.

The introductory chapter identifies a legitimate gap: "[…] to date, there have not been any English-language books published on children and success in Asia that employ a literary or cultural studies approach" (Chen & Lau, 2022b, p. 3). This gap has two components. The first is the cultural significance of 'success' within the Asian context. The editors reference popular Asian cultural icons that have emerged from an overemphasis on academic success, such as 'the tiger mother,' China's 'giant infants' and Hong Kong's 'Kong kid.' A list of studies and books on educational success in Asia, conducted from historical and social perspectives, also illustrates the significance of the topic.

The second component of the gap is the limited English-language critical discourse on Asian children's literature and culture. In surveying five key book series within the field of children's literary and cultural criticism, I found only a few titles and chapters addressing Asian subjects. Of the 154 titles in the *Children's Literature and Culture* series by Routledge, only three (in addition to the volume reviewed here) focus on Asian subjects (Goswami, 2012; Stephens, 2017; Superle, 2011). The latter two concentrate on India, with the last dealing with English-language materials. Sporadic chapters on Asian subjects appear in a few edited volumes, such as the four chapters (Chen, 2013; Gangopadhyay, 2013; Kilpatrick & Muta, 2013; Lee & Stephens, 2013) in *The Nation in Children's Literature* (Kelen & Sundmark, 2013), one chapter (Yokota, 2016) in *Child Autonomy and Governance in Children's Literature* (Kelen & Sundmark, 2016), and one chapter (Mukhopadhyay, 2015) in *Global Perspectives on Death in Children's Literature* (Clement & Jamalie, 2015). In the 43-volume *Studies in Childhood, 1700 to the Present* series, initially published by Ashgate and now by Routledge, only two titles address Chinese materials (Chen, 2013; Nelson & Morris, 2014), with the latter comprising contributions translated from Chinese scholarly articles. The 17-volume *Children's Literature, Culture and Cognition* series by John Benjamins, the 35-volume *Critical Approaches to Children's Literature* series by Palgrave Macmillan, and the 15-volume *Bloomsbury Perspectives on Children's Literature* series by Bloomsbury contain no titles focused on Asian children's texts.

This is not to suggest that there are no other books on children's literature criticism beyond these major series, or no relevant titles beyond this field. One example is *Silence and Silencing in Children's Literature* (Druker, Sundmark, Warnqvist, & Österlund, 2021) that contains one chapter (Yung, 2021). *The Asian Family in Literature and Film: Changing Perceptions in a New Age-East Asia (Volume I & II)* (Wilson & Osman, 2024) features three chapters on children's literature (Bi & Fang, 2024; Wu, 2024; Yanilla Aquino, 2024) and one on the portrayal of children in texts (Dou, 2024). Naturally, the language

and cultural divide limits the availability of English-language academic discussion on non-English primary materials. Given its rarity, this edited volume is undoubtedly a valuable addition to English-language critical discourse on children's literature and culture, bridging the gap between scholars' awareness of texts and issues beyond the Anglosphere and the West.

The second strength of this volume is that the range of cultural contexts serves as a compelling sampler of Asian contexts and children's literature. The blend of cultural and historical insights, interwoven with thorough analyses of primary texts, make it an unusually engaging academic read. Readers unfamiliar with Asian contexts will find this volume an excellent starting point, while those with prior knowledge will appreciate its nuanced exploration of success within specific cultures.

While the variety in this volume is a notable strength, closer scrutiny of individual chapters reveals a notable disparity in academic rigour, particularly regarding the selection of primary texts and the explication of cultural background. Since each chapter presents unique questions, the justification for selecting primary texts varies according to the aim of each chapter. In some cases, texts are chosen based on popularity, yet the cultural impact, reach, or representativeness of widely circulated texts is often assumed rather than clearly articulated. This is particularly relevant in Chapter 11, "Messages of 'Success' in Popular Taiwanese Children's Books" by Tang and Hsieh (2022) and Chapter 14, "Cultivating Dreams: Becoming Middle-class and Affluent in Globalizing Urban Vietnam" by Catherine Earl (2022), both of which argue that children's literature inspires social change.

Tang and Hsieh (2022) state that picturebooks "[play] major roles in shaping parenting practices" (p. 164), basing this claim on the idea that "the types of books being purchased reveal the kinds of messages endorsed by the parents" (p. 169). A thematic analysis of the top 10 bestselling picturebooks shows that their themes do not align with Taiwanese curriculum guidelines. The authors therefore conclude that "there is a misalignment between their aspirations for success for their children and how the Taiwanese government has defined success" (p. 177). However, a much stronger link between the best-selling books and parents' notions of success is needed to fully support this conclusion. Tang and Hsieh make an ambitious claim that "reading decisions among the urban middle class in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) […] contribute[s] to raising children as political subjects who feel empowered to enact far-reaching social change through an emerging form of networked participatory citizenship" (p. 212). Yet, by the chapter's end, it concedes that "the potential action of children as political subjects engaged with social revolution remains hypothetical"

(p. 226). More substantiation on the cultural impact of the primary texts is required to address this missing logical link, or alternatively, closer alignment between the premise and the conclusion is needed.

Apart from popularity, other authors select their texts based on thematic relevance to illustrate their arguments (Ghosh, 2022; Kuchibhotla, 2022; Nafisah, 2022; Tan & Nelson, 2022; Wibawa, 2022; Zou, 2022). Some provide further explanations for their choices, while others do not. For example, in Chapter 10, "Becoming Indonesian: Political Constructions of Successful Children in *Aku Ingin Menciummu Sekali Saja* and *Denias Senandung di Atas Awan,*" Satrya Wibawa (2022) uses two children's films to discuss the dynamics between dominant Javanese discourse and marginalised Papuan perspectives in relation to Indonesian national identity, qualifying these films as "highly acclaimed" and "award-winning" (p. 148). In Chapter 9, "Reaching for the Stars: Identity and Success in Three Indonesian Children's Films," Nia Nafisah (2022) also discusses Indonesian national identity through three films but does not explain why these specific films were chosen beyond their thematic relevance. Even though some elaboration on the selection of texts would be beneficial, this chapter comprehensively illustrates how contemporary Indonesian political ideologies are reflected in the three films to promote national pride. The problem, therefore, does not lie solely in whether each chapter justifies its choice of primary texts but rather in whether each chapter's argument, text selection, and conclusions are logically aligned and adequately supported.

Another weakness of this volume is the inconsistent level of cultural background explication. The contributors are expected to ground their discussion "in historical, political, cultural, theoretical, or philosophical contexts in which [the images of success] are produced or consumed," as stated in the monograph's Call for Papers (Chen & Lau, 2020). While most chapters provide sufficiently comprehensive backgrounds to support their argument, some chapters frame cultural contexts equivocally to serve their main arguments. For example, in Chapter 2, "The Grace in Failings: Reading Failure as Success in SKY Castle and Assassination Classroom," Sambhabi Ghosh (2022) argues that the intense pursuit of academic success "dehumanises" parents and children alike. To support this, Ghosh first establishes "what it means to be 'human' in the East Asian context" (p. 20), demonstrating how the characters in the texts deviate from or deteriorate this concept, thereby becoming "dehumanised." The author uses Confucian beliefs to define "human." The depiction of the "East Asian context" overgeneralises and oversimplifies the relevance of this classical philosophical tradition in the modern societies of Korea and Japan discussed in the chapter. This framing overlooks the impact of other traditions

and ideologies, such as Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity (in the case of Korea), Shintoism, and German idealism (in the case of Japan), among others (Kim, 2017; Moore, 1992). It also neglects the process of modernisation since the early 19th century and its impact on societies, as well as on the concepts of being human as an individual and as a member of a collective. This caricatured presentation of the "East Asian context" falls into the trap of Orientalism, portraying it as "static, frozen, fixed eternally" (Said, 1978, p. 208). The idealised concept of humanity presented here resonates with what Edward Said described as "the wisdom of the East" (p. 208), conditional to approval from the West.

In Chapter 5, "Representations of Money and Success in Contemporary Chinese Children's Literature," Ying Zou (2022) presents the changing connotation of money in China from the mid-20th century onward. Describing China's current economy as a "global market economy" is simply not true. China's currency, the Renminbi (RMB), is not freely traded, and its global supply is limited (Goldman Sachs, 2023). By maintaining control over its currency China can "directly manage key economic variables" (ChinaPower, 2016). An economy where the government plays such a strong directive role is not a "global market economy;" instead, it is what economists term a "socialist market economy" (Asialink, 2018). There is inconsistency in the timeframe for implementing China's economic reform, colloquially known as the reform and opening-up policy. It is initially mentioned as being introduced "in the 1980s," but in the following paragraph, China is said to have "'opened up' in the late 1970s" (Zou, 2022, p. 77). It is generally agreed that the reform and opening-up policy began in 1978 with Deng Xiaoping rise to power (Zheng, 2014).

Chapters 2 and 5 (Ghosh, 2022; Zou, 2022) exemplify a limitation inherent in the structure of this volume. While the variety serves as a strength, it also requires broader expertise from the editorial effort. Some chapters assume more prior knowledge on the part of the reader than others. As with all academic literature, readers should approach the background information in each chapter with a critical eye, acknowledging that it is written specifically to support the discussion within that chapter.

Points for Further Consideration

While the above section addresses the content within the framework set forth by the editors and authors, the following points suggest considerations beyond what is presented in the volume. First, the treatment of the central theme of 'success' calls for some reconsideration. In the introductory chapter,

Chen and Lau (2022b) offer the Oxford English Dictionary definition of 'success' as a starting point for discussion, stating that "success [is] 'the prosperous achievement of something attempted; the attainment of an object according to one's desire: now often with particular reference to the attainment of wealth or position'" (p. 4). The editors explain that, although wealth and status are not typically associated with children, the chapters demonstrate otherwise. Since academic achievement can lead to good careers, children being driven to strive for academic excellence is an indirect way of expecting them to acquire wealth. At the same time, the editors note that children are also expected to develop moral character. Therefore, "[s]uccess is not just about accumulating wealth and achieving social status, but also entails the cultivation of a moral being as a form of achievement in itself" (p. 4). Given the diversity of contributions, they conclude that "[t]he diverse experiences of young people living in a globalising Asia are strikingly similar. They must navigate the adult world regardless of whether they are children of the urban poor, privileged middle-class students, racially marginalised young people, or children living in rural villages" (p. 13).

There are several problems with this conclusion. The editors argue that the diverse experiences of young people are "strikingly similar" because "[t]hey must navigate the adult world," which adds little to existing discussions. A child's coming of age inherently involves navigating the world constructed by adults, and gradually, they transition into adulthood, continuing this trajectory. Numerous scholars have explored the dynamics between the child and the adult, such as Perry Nodelman in *The Hidden Adult* (2008) and Maria Nikolajeva, who introduced the concept aetonormativity (2009). Both scholars approach the adult-child relationship as one of opposition, suggesting that adults define the rules and conditions, thereby holding power over the child. Admittedly, some chapters conclude that the parameters of success are largely adult-defined, requiring young people to negotiate their paths – often failing to impose any structural changes. However, other chapters present a different adult-child dynamic – one of collaboration, aligning with ideas discussed by Clementine Beauvais in *The Mighty Child* (2015) and Marah Gubar in "The Hermeneutics of Recuperation: What a Kinship-Model Approach to Children's Agency Could Do for Children's Literature and Childhood Studies" (2016).

Furthermore, concluding the experiences as "strikingly similar" undermines the very strength of this volume: its nuance and variety. While similarities prevail in educational settings, more differences than similarities emerge in other context-specific understandings of success. In Part 1, Ghosh (2022), Hansen (2022), and Laskar (2022), who discuss educational success, present

similar notions – namely, a deep-seated veneration of academic success that drives families and individuals to push themselves beyond their limits. All three authors argue that this notion of success should be critiqued and re-examined, yet the primary texts analysed do not challenge the looming importance of academic success. After all, the value of academic success extends beyond Asia and applies globally, differing only in degree.

However, the three other parts of the volume present very different parameters for success. Shriya Kuchibhotla (2022), Chen and Lau (2022a), Nafisah (2022), and Wibawa (2022) discuss forms of success within specific political contexts that extend beyond "achieving wealth and social status" (Chen & Lau, 2022b, p. 4). Nafisah (2022) and Wibawa (2022), for example, address nation-building for Indonesian children from two different angles. The success depicted by Wibawa (2022) in Chapter 10 involves the preservation of one's identity and one's native culture, a kind of success excluded from the editors' conclusion. Similarly, the metaphysical success discussed by Katsuya Izumi (2022) in Chapter 13, "Saviors of the World: Impersonality and Success in Shinkai Makoto's Animated Films," where "an individual character […] [empties] themselves in order to become a medium for others' agencies and voices" (p. 200), is also overlooked. Reducing this diversity to merely "becoming a moral being" (Chen & Lau, 2022b, p. 4) seems inadequate. The different moral frameworks across various chapters require further exploration and assessment to determine whether they qualify as moral achievements.

Finally, one key yardstick for success 'potentiated' in the chapters is missing: survival. By this, I mean not symbolic, ideological, or metaphorical survival, but actual physical survival. I use the term 'potentiated' because, while it may not be explicitly argued by the chapter authors, it is apparent in the texts and data provided. The dilemma faced by Ah Cheng and his sister in a text discussed by Zou (2022) in the above-discussed Chapter 5, the ragpicker children depicted by Kuchibhotla (2022) in Chapter 6, "Hope, Oppression, and the Indian Urban Poor: Portrayals of Success in *Trash!* and *Dear Mrs. Naidu*," and the youth in the sci-fi films explored by Fengxia Tan and Claudia Nelson (2022) in Chapter 12, "Youth Ecoagency in Two Chinese Science Fiction Films on Environmental Disasters," all revolve around the struggle for survival. Zou (2022) and Kuchibhotla (2022) provide examples of children handling or earning money to sustain themselves, while Tan and Nelson (2022) depict youth facing physical danger.

In Chapter 8, "To Be Red: Child Propagandists and Their Success in the Cultural Revolution," the only chapter that presents ethnographical data, Ren (2022) explores the success of the Red Children Propaganda Team. The author

concludes that "[b]y portraying themselves as innocent children, they protected themselves from political and social unrest" (p. 126). While the prospects of better career opportunities and improved material conditions are highlighted as motivators for the child propagandists' active and voluntary dedication to the political cause, the author lightly touches on the potentially fatal consequences if the Propaganda Team had failed. The principal of the school that hosted the Propaganda Team played a key role in establishing the group. His former students "[tried] to take him in for a 'struggle meeting'" (p. 117). This information, mentioned in passing, sheds light on the severity of the "political and social unrest" the Red Children escaped. Even though struggle meetings are usually associated with the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the chapter focuses on the period when similar struggle sessions – which eventually cost millions of lives – were common during the preceding decade as Mao pushed the Land Reform Movement (Fairbank & MacFarquhar, 1995). Against this backdrop, the principal – and, by extension, the Red Children – were therefore highly incentivised to do whatever was necessary to survive. The success that the Red Children sought under his care carried a weight of an entirely different kind. In this case, becoming a 'moral being' takes on a very different meaning and demands much more elaboration.

The last point I wish to highlight is the use of nations as labels for the cultures discussed. While this issue is pervasive and extends beyond this volume, it deserves reflection to enrich our cross-cultural understandings and avoid essentialism. It is not inherently negative; it may even be an inevitable practical arrangement. The problem, however, is that nuanced cultural differences are often obscured and homogenised behind national labels, as national borders are conveniently taken as cultural boundaries. This potentially contributes to an overly simplistic understanding of diverse cultures. Culture is a symbolic process that unfolds over time; therefore, history is of utmost importance. The use of national labels, however, masks the complexity of this process and, by extension, the very essence of culture.

The borders and political landscapes of many countries, such as China and Korea, have undergone drastic changes in recent history. Similarly, countries like India, Pakistan, and Indonesia, like many others in the Asian region, are post-WWII entities. Presenting them alongside nations with a longer and relatively coherent existence, like Japan, reinforces a false equivalency and flattens the complexity and cultural implications behind these national labels. In some cases, national labels are biassed towards certain political agendas. As Wibawa (2022) argues in Chapter 10, the construction of an Indonesian national image continues to marginalise Papuan culture in favour of Javanese culture.

While it is not the fault of this volume, it may be worth exploring alternative approaches to cross-cultural discussions that go beyond using the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis.

Way Forward

It is fair to conclude that this volume is an invaluable addition to English-language critical discourse on children's literature and culture, drawing on a wide range of Asian and non-English language primary materials. Although it lacks representation from some Asian countries and themes such as disability, alternative sexual orientations, and celebrity children in reality TV shows, this volume serves as a comprehensive starting point for critical discussions on the representation of success in children's texts, inviting engagement with these unaddressed areas. The 14 chapters address various critical perspectives on success, covering personal, social, and global dimensions, and invite further discussions and exploration in multiple directions. This review article represents my contribution to this ongoing conversation. To facilitate additional research and discussion, I have one final suggestion: the volume should consistently include references in their original languages, rather than solely providing Romanised or translated titles. I look forward to seeing more scholarly attention given to Asian materials and critical issues within Asian contexts.

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