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Asian and Asian American Families and their Representations in Literature

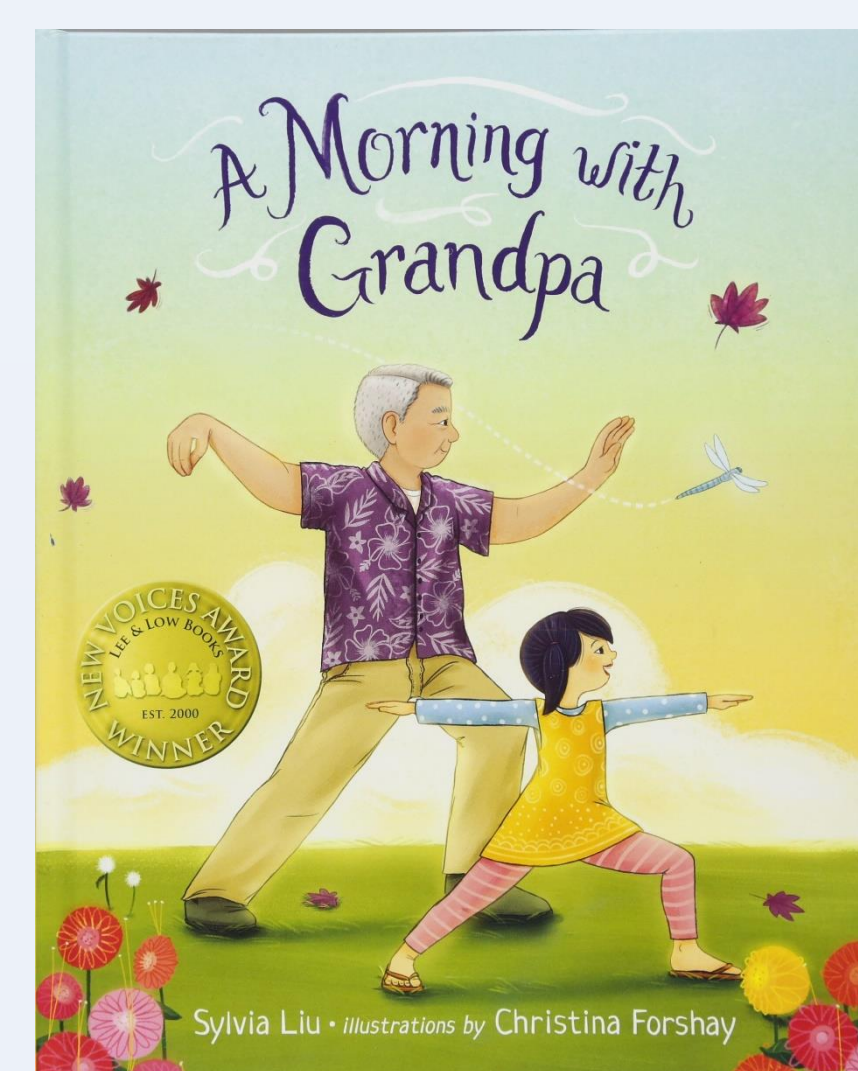
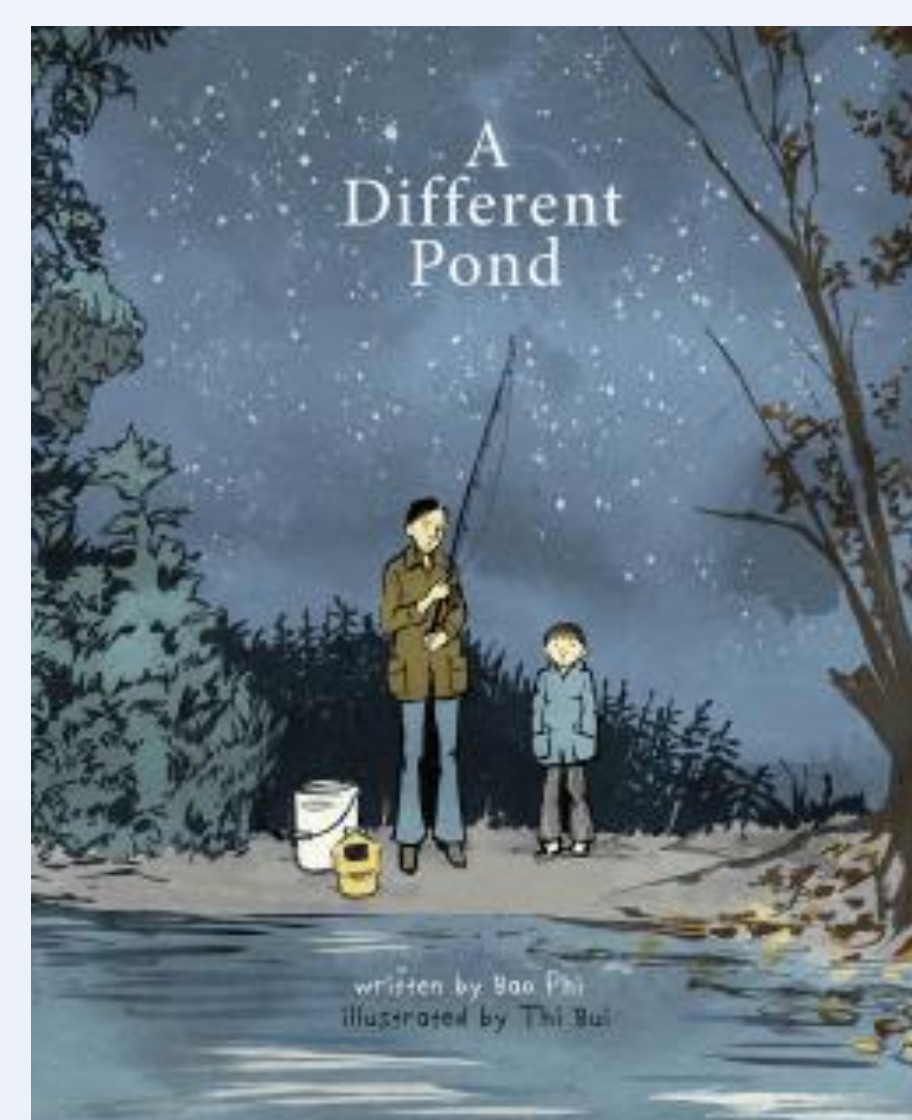
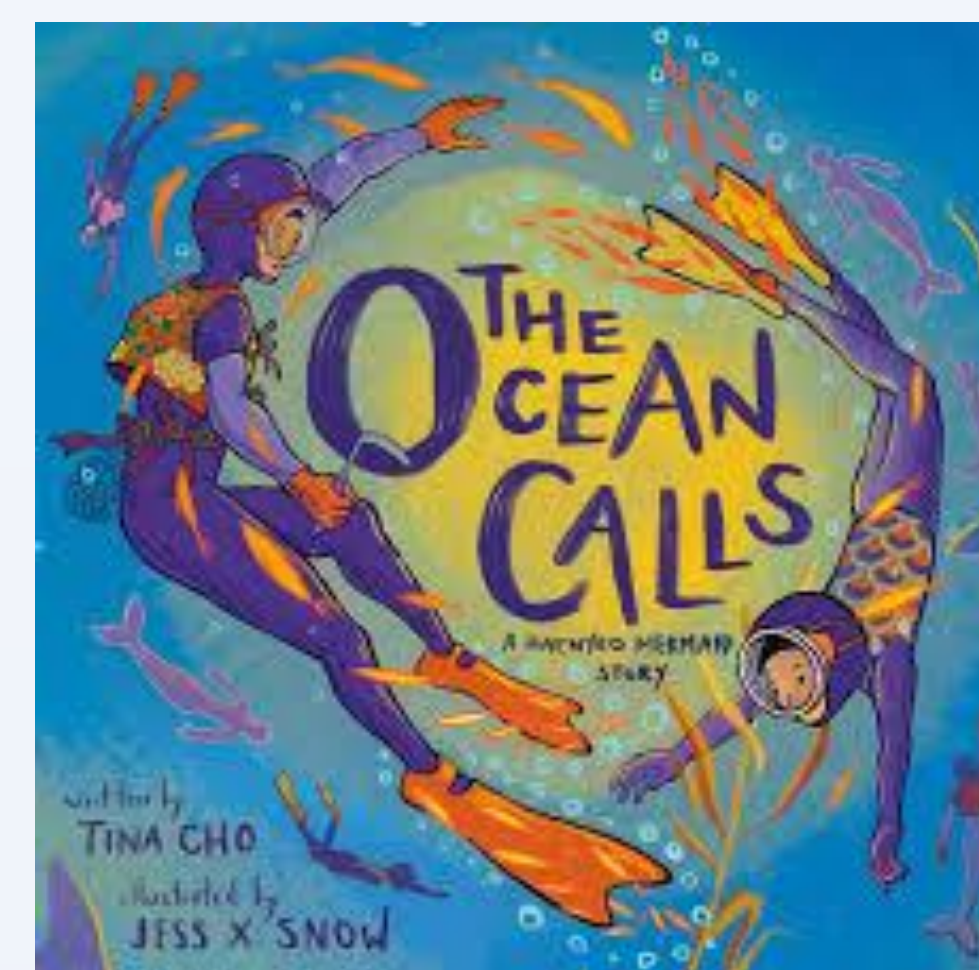
Hannah Overstreet

Dr. Miskec

ENGL 384: Diversity in Literature for Young Readers

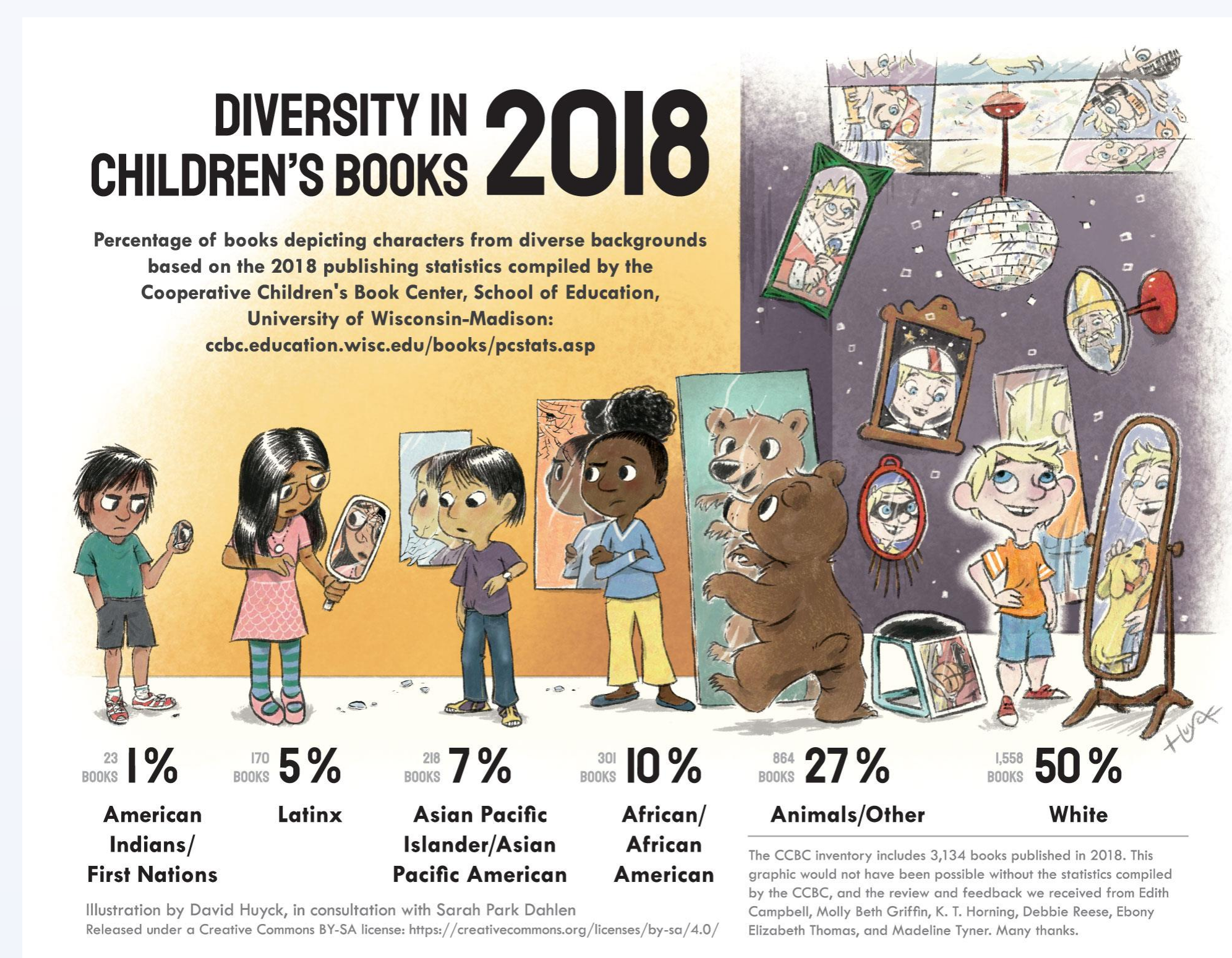
Introduction

One of the smallest and least populated groups of literature for young readers is literature about people from Asia or Asian Americans. Despite the fact that Asian Americans are a rapidly growing group in the United States with about 18.2 Asian Americans living in the United States as of 2017 (Office of Minority Health), the literature available for this group is crushingly small. However, the representations that are available have very interesting themes running throughout in terms of their family dynamic. Many of them are remarkably similar in their theme and the cause of the central conflict, which is noted in the books that I have read by Asian American authors about Asian American characters. In picture books, the family dynamics are very different from the chapter books. There is more of a reliance and interaction with grandparents (or extended/larger families in general). In the chapter books, the family dynamics are more pronounced, and more specific themes can be identified. Throughout the chapter books, the family dynamics are more defined by conflicts caused by cultural differences between the more traditional parents and children who are more individualistic and “Americanized”. Other media, including a few movies, further represents these dynamics in many mother-daughter relationships.



Issues of Diversity

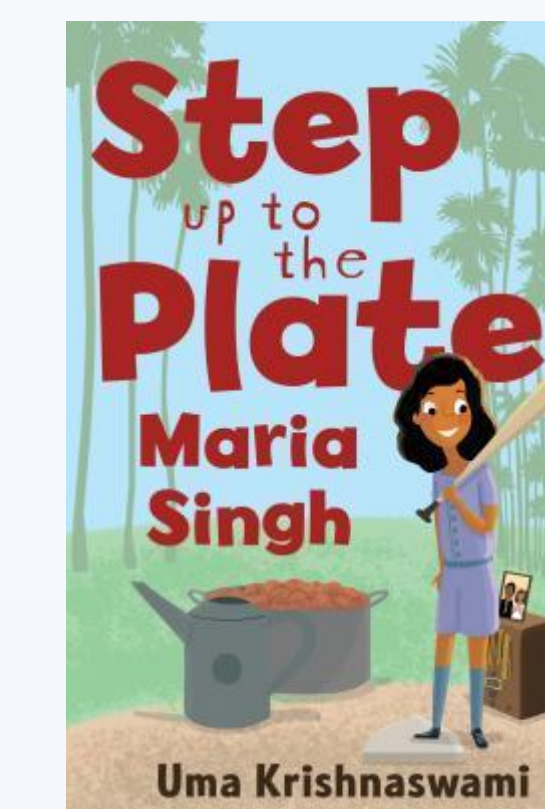
The general consensus from authors who are writing about Asian American representation in literature or media is unmistakable: there is not enough. Diversity is something that many of these authors have been fighting for a long time- arguably since Nancy Larrick’s release of *The All White World of Children’s Books*. Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop brought to the stage the idea of sliding glass doors alongside windows and mirrors, and other noteworthy names have expanded even upon those ideas. The push and reasoning for diverse books is only growing, and scholars are refusing to stay silent.



Picture Books

- *The Ocean Calls* by Tina Cho
- *A Morning with Grandpa* by Sylvia Liu
- *A Different Pond* by Bao Phi

Two of the picture books that I read portrayed a young girl and one of her grandparents with no representation of parental relationships beyond a brief mention in *The Ocean Calls* that Dayeon was only visiting her grandmother, not living with her. These books contrast in this way (and in tone) to *A Different Pond*, which, while still a picture book, shares some familial dynamics with the chapter books rather than the other picture books. *A Different Pond* shows a Vietnamese family living in poverty while the parents work sometimes several jobs in order to support their family. The older siblings take care of the younger ones, and though the interactions that the parents have at their jobs are not shown in the book, the boy who narrates the story mentions an interaction he had at school where someone teased his father for his imperfect English. This is a way in which the cultural or linguistic differences made an impact on the family, such as they tend to do in the chapter books rather than the picture books.



Chapter books

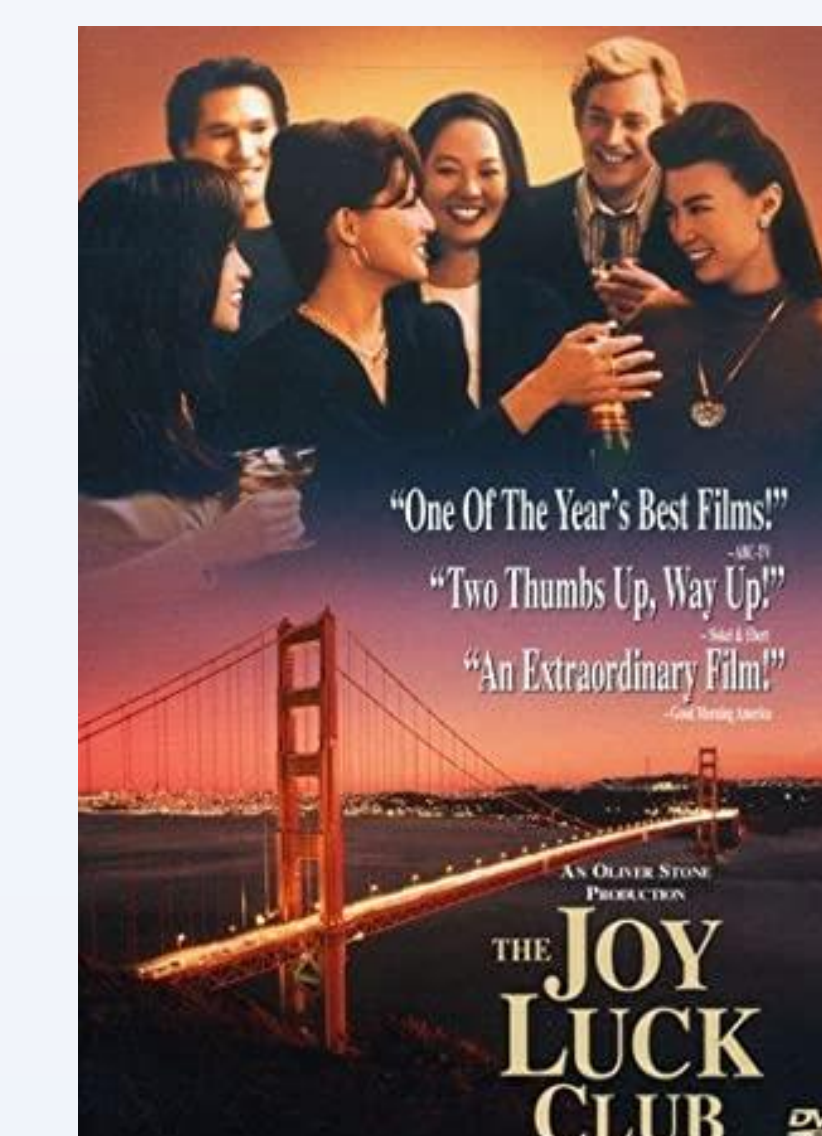
- *Front Desk* by Kelly Yang
- *Step Up to the Plate, Maria Singh* by Uma Krishnaswami
- *Blackbird Fly* by Erin Entrada Kelly

Though the plots were very different, they were influenced by similar nuances. All the parents were far more traditional than the children, and throughout each of the books, there were conflicts within the family caused by the cultural differences of growing up in the United States versus growing up in Asia. For example, in *Blackbird Fly*, the main character, Apple, feels uncomfortable having people over because of how different her mom is compared to American mothers. Similarly, in *Front Desk*, Mia struggles with her mother who wants her to practice and love math instead of English, even going so far as to tell her daughter that she is a “bicycle and the other kids are cars” in English classes (Yang 145). *Step Up to the Plate, Maria Singh* also shows the protagonist has issues with her extremely conservative father, who does not want her to wear shorts or play softball.

Asian cultures tend to be more collectivist, thinking of what they can do to benefit all of society, and acting more like a unit. American culture is far more individualistic, with people making decisions based on whim and what they want to do, what they enjoy the most- which is not always what is best for everyone around them. Such different cultures will inevitably butt heads within families, and even though the daughters in the stories are raised by these very traditional parents, they still attend school and socialize with others who are not a part of this culture and introduce them to new ideas. Even in Zhang Minglan’s analysis of Gish Jen’s *Typical American*, there is evidence to support that often in narratives about Asian American families, cultural differences between generations create conflict.

Other Media

Of the other media, two of them are movies: *The Joy Luck Club* and *Crazy Rich Asians*. Both of these movies were revolutionary due to their nearly all-Asian cast, and both also follow similar family dynamics. *The Joy Luck Club* is all about these mothers and the conflicts that they have with their daughters- some of which are caused by stubbornness and cultural differences while some of which are (unfortunately) caused by men. In one instance at least, it was an American man who caused the conflict, which could arguably still fit into the mold of “Americanizing” the daughter. *Crazy Rich Asians* was very different as far as overall plot, and Rachel’s boyfriend’s grandmother had an issue due to her socioeconomic status more than her individualism, however, the matriarch did hold much of the power and the family as a whole was very important to her. The generational gap could have caused some of the misunderstanding, and in the end, there was reconciliation as the young woman in the movie was prepared to sacrifice for the benefit of Eleanor’s (the grandmother) grandson.



Conclusion

Though all of these representations of Asian Americans are different and have contrasting plots and themes, there is a similar family dynamic running through them, especially within the chapter books and other media. The picture books follow a different theme in their portrayal of the grandparent, which are not seen in the chapter books, and only once in the other media. The amount of literature and media available about Asians and Asian Americans may be sparse, but it is rich with thematic similarities.

