

Complexity of Perspectives: WWII Historical Fiction of the Pacific Front

With the establishment of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1993 in Washington DC, U.S. citizens have become more aware of the European front of World War II. The Atomic Bomb archive of the Museum of World War II in Boston, the USS Arizona Memorial at Honolulu, and the Japanese-American Redress in 2008 captured more attention in the Japanese-American internment between 1942 and 1945. However, U.S. citizens still have very limited understanding of the Pacific front of World War II involving Japan and other Asian countries. It was not until the publication of *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (Chang, 1998) that the general public gained access to a more balanced understanding of the Japanese involvement in the war. Chen (2009) discussed the far-reaching impact of the Japanese war crimes in many Asian countries during WWII, leaving “survivors dealing with physical pain, emotional trauma, poverty, and social discrimination for the rest of their lives” (p. 4). Nevertheless, it seems that few American citizens have taken advantage of this access.

For instance, the teachers in my children’s and young adult literature seminar just finished reading Linda Sue Park’s *When My Name was Keoko* (2002). This book for intermediate grade took place from 1940-1945 in Japanese-occupied Korea. Japanese soldiers stripped Korean families of their cultural symbols. Students learned only Japanese history and language at school. Everyone had to convert their names from Korean to Japanese. Park’s historical novel is well-researched, including bibliography and author’s note that explains what happened to Korea after WWII. Many teachers expressed surprise at their lack of knowledge of this historical Japanese-Korean tension and its place in WWII. Some had seen the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, on the front page of *Time Magazine* in February 2012. They knew about the Japanese bombing

of Pearl Harbor, which drew the United States into WWII. One teacher vaguely recalled the tension among Korea, China, and Japan because of the Japanese prime minister's hesitance to accept the culpability for the "comfort women" (women and girls forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army during WWII). The teachers in my seminar had heard about the American bombing of Hiroshima that ended the Japanese military action in Asia. Some teachers had read children's literature on Japanese-American internment camps, one of which was located less than 10 miles from our university campus. As the teachers examined historical literature titles they would introduce to their students, a question emerged: To what extent does K-12 historical fiction published in the United States help students understand history, particularly the Asian front during WWII that impacted one quarter of the world by land mass and influenced the world beyond Asia? Teachers understood the inherent value of historical fiction as a lens into historical learning. In a global sense, they asked: Who were the victims in WWII, the Koreans or the Japanese? And from whose point of view? This article presents the analysis of using these two questions to examine the Japanese and Japanese-American and the Korean and Korean-American juvenile historical fiction available in the United States. By reading a collection of literature, readers can triangulate events, settings, and perspectives gathered by close reading, resulting in an informed, critical understanding of the complexity of historical perspectives.

Historical Fiction

In order to understand how historical fiction can enhance students' understanding of history, we must first define *historical fiction*. Historical fiction refers to works of realistic fiction that are set within the historical past (Hancock, 2004; Kiefer, Hepler, & Hickman, 2007). The narrative may portray invented characters and dialogue, but all must seem accurate to the time period. A book may not be classified as historical fiction just because it is set 30 years or

more in the past. To qualify as historical fiction, the book must also include references to historical figures and substantial information about historical events, though the references and the facts may be skewed (McElmeel, 2009). More specifically, to be a work of historical fiction, the setting must be integral to the actions of the characters. Historically-based events, characters, and the requisite specific setting define a work of historical fiction.

In the last two decades, there has been emergent excitement in connecting children's literature and the teaching of history in the classroom, asserting that reading historical fiction provides students with a vicarious experience for places and people they could, otherwise, never know (Allen & Landaker, 2004; Ammon & Tunnell, 1992; Levstic & Pappas, 1992; Zarnowski, 2006). Quality historical fiction creates an emotional connection between children of today and their counterparts. Scholars and practitioners in social studies and literacy have recognized the importance of learning history in ways that actively engage students in cognitive and empathetic interactions with the texts (Dodd, 1999; Schur, 2007). In addition, Crawford and Zygouris-Coe (2008) believe that historical fiction helps students develop a critical understanding of complex social issues and age-old dilemmas. When history is presented from characters' points of view, students are exposed to multiple perspectives on events, revealing the complexity of an issue. Understanding the restraints that the historical figures faced, such as abiding by cultural conventions, students may empathize with the characters' struggles in making choices. However, this understanding must be accompanied by research done by teachers, who can then guide students to interpret the issues at hand in the context of historical facts.

Adopting a critical stance is especially important when readers approach multicultural historical fiction (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). For example, when reading a historical fiction on Holocaust, students should go beyond an aesthetic response of empathizing with the

characters who lost families and homes. They need to go further than an efferent understanding which consists of facts and knowledge about the Holocaust. They must develop their critical responses by examining various perspectives on the Holocaust. Readers should first analyze their own misconceptions and biases revealed in their reading of a multicultural literary work. Such biases should be considered “as subject matter for analysis, interpretation, and criticism” (Cai, 2008, p.217). Classroom discussion of such individual biases can further engage the readers to compare their assumptions with those of others.

Reading historical fiction can also help students understand their own and others’ heritages. They learn about people, values, beliefs, hardships, and physical surroundings common to a historical period. They discover the events that preceded their own time and that influenced the present. Through historical fiction, children can begin to visualize the sweep of history and discover that in all times, people have depended upon one another for similar needs. They learn that when human relationships deteriorate, tragedy usually results. Historical fiction allows children to judge relationships and to realize that their own presents and futures are linked to the actions in the past (Norton & Norton, 2009). One must also be cautious, however, that children do not visualize the sweep of history through just one perspective. In a previous study on Korean-American juvenile literature (Louie, 2005), I discovered that the Korean lens on WWII was in sharp contrast to the Japanese and Japanese-American experience. Thus, I set out on this project to examine Japanese/Japanese-American and Korean/Korean-American historical fiction around WWII. My goal is to have this exploration serve to inspire teachers to compare and contrast historical fiction of the same period. Through close and critical reading of various texts, students can develop a repertoire of literary, cultural, and historical knowledge.

Book Selection

In order to analyze the Japanese/Japanese-American and Korean/Korean-American juvenile literature that provides access to understanding the Asian front of World War II, it is important for teachers to understand the scope of this collection that is available to students--its comprehensiveness, its biases, and its richness. Such knowledge will enable teachers to include non-fiction materials as a context to interpret the issues embedded in the historical fiction titles. I identified Japanese/Japanese-American and Korean/Korean-American historical fiction through various sources: *Books In Print* database, online booksellers, publishers' catalogs, local county library catalogs, local city library catalogs, the second edition of *Kaleidoscope* (Barrera, Thompson, & Dressman, 1997), the third edition of *Kaleidoscope* (Yokota, 2001), the fourth edition of *Kaleidoscope* (Hansen-Krening, Aoki, & Mizokawa, 2003), the multicultural booklist by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (Kruse, Horning, & Schliesman, 1997), and professional journals such as *School Library Journal*, *Booklist*, *Booklinks*, *The Horn Book Magazine*, and *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*. These data sources were chosen after consulting similar studies on other juvenile literature collections (Barrera, Quiroa, & West-Williams, 1999; Cai, 1994; Heller, Cunningham, Lee, & Heller, 2000; Leu, 2001). These sources also assured that exemplary books would be included in the collection. The terms *Korean-American*, *Korean*, *Korean-American juvenile literature*, and *Korean juvenile literature* were used in the subject and the keyword search fields. I used similar terms to identify the Japanese collection. The search established a booklist of 106 books, of which 88 were Japanese/Japanese-American historical fiction, and 18 were Korean/Korean-American historical fiction. I read all 106 titles, which I purchased or borrowed from libraries. A substantial number of titles in each collection had World War II (including the pre-war events and post-war reconstruction) as their settings, indicating that World War II remains an important period to both communities.

Among the 88 Japanese-American historical fiction titles, 50% of the books (44 titles) were related to World War II. The prevailing sentiment of the Japanese-American collection was the suffering of the Japanese and Japanese-Americans during the World War II. I also analyzed 18 Korean-American historical fiction titles, 50% of the books, 9 titles, had pre- and post-World War II as their setting. The prevailing sentiment of the collection was the suffering of the Koreans during the World War II because of the aggressive Japanese military activities in Korea.

(Insert Table 1)

Analysis

There are a number of personal memoirs in both collections. I did not differentiate the memoirs from other historical fiction titles in my analysis because all the memoirs highlighted the suffering of countrymen in the war. The perspectives offered by the memoir authors were very similar to those offered by the historical fiction authors.

In order to answer the questions: Who were the victims in the Second World War, the Koreans or the Japanese? And from whose point of view? I first provide a historical timeline for both Japan and Korea (See Table 2). The timeline gives us a factual context in which to place the books and to understand how much the books reflect history. To understand the impact of WWII on these peoples, we need to know the preceding events and the aftermath of the war. Ironically, both collections have different perspectives on who the aggressors were; yet they share the themes of victimization and dignity. When the authors lamented at how the war victimized the literary characters, they also celebrated the dignity and strength these characters demonstrated throughout the ordeal of war. The books then ended with a sense of hope that human resilience can overcome the atrocities of war.

Both groups identified themselves as victims, who suffered much during the war.

Uniquely, the Koreans accused the Japanese as aggressors who brought havoc into their lives during the war. In contrast, the Japanese-American and the Japanese books failed to mention Korea during the war and said little regarding Japanese military action in China and other Asian countries. It is worth noting that as we examine the drama of historical fiction on a global stage, we can use the historical facts to identify the actors who should be on the stage. Even though the protagonists of the books might be ordinary people in a small town, the readers should not ignore the larger political powers at work, invisible within the narrative of the books but having significant impact on the daily existence of the book characters. A critical question is whether the author of the historical fiction acknowledged the political actors at large. With the setting, both time and place, being integral to historical fiction, a confined setting ignoring the larger historical context may lead to biased perspectives. Without bringing in the broader context, the authors lead the readers to interpret the perspectives based on a limited set of circumstances. Teachers can consult additional historical content so that they can better guide students to read critically. Cai (2004) advocated for readers to engage in critical reading, analyzing the perspectives set forth by the text before accepting or rejecting them. For instance, teachers can read Bix (2001) along with WWII Japanese/Japanese-American historical fiction. In his Pulitzer award winner, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan*, Bix (2001) provided detailed documentation about the strong, decisive role Hirohito played in wartime operations, from the takeover of Manchuria in 1931 through the attack on Pearl Harbor, and, ultimately to the fateful decision in 1945 to consent to an unconditional surrender. In fact, the emperor stubbornly prolonged the war effort and then used the horrifying bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Soviet entrance into the war as an escape route from a no-win situation.

Japanese and Japanese-Americans. Although the historical timeline of Japan clearly indicates that Japan engaged in aggressive military activities in many Asian countries and bombed Pearl Harbor in the United States, the whole set of Japanese and Japanese-American historical fiction hardly mentioned the activities at the Pacific front. Instead of focusing on Japanese military aggression in WWII, 41 out of the 44 WWII-related titles focused on the suffering of the Japanese and individuals of Japanese descent in United States, Canada, and Australia. Japanese nationals appear as victims following the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. For example, in *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* (Coerr, 1977), Sadako was hospitalized with the dreaded atomic bomb disease, leukemia. In *Meiko and the Fifth Treasure* (Coerr, 1993), when Nagasaki was bombed, Mieko's nearby village was turned into ruins, and her hand was badly injured. *Shin's Tricycle* (Kodama, 1995) is a poignant historical fiction about a father unearthing his son, Shin's treasured tricycle from the lawn during the process of relocating the remains. Shin suffered a painful death after the bombing of Hiroshima. In this translated book, the author wrote about the beautiful morning of the tragic day; soldiers "repairing the road in front of our house, laughed as they watched the red tricycle speed by" (p. 8). If readers only accept the perspectives presented in this book without a wider context, they will likely condemn the enemies who bombed a peaceful place, where soldiers' jobs were to repair roads. Although most Japanese characters in the historical fiction perceived themselves as victims of war, they rose up with strength and dignity to overcome the aftermath of the bombs. Tatsusharu Kodama (1995), Yokio Tsuchiya (1988), and Toshi Maruki (1980), whose books were translated from Japanese into English, included author's notes about the heroic process of rebuilding Japan and the civilians' solemn determination to promote peace.

Many of the historical fictions with a U.S. setting portrayed Japanese-Americans as victims in the war because of the internment experience. After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 in 1942, authorizing local military commanders to establish exclusion zones, which banned all people of Japanese ancestry from the Pacific coast, including all of California and much of Oregon, Washington and Arizona, except for those in internment camps. Over 110,000 people of Japanese heritage were forced into "War Relocation Camps," 62 percent of the internees were American citizens (Takaki, 1990). Some of the historical titles portrayed the pain that the internment inflicted upon the Japanese-Americans.

Yoshiko Uchida authored a series on the negative impact of the internment camp on Japanese Americans. *Journey to Topaz* (1971), *Journey Home* (1978), *Desert Exile* (1982), and *The Bracelet* (1993) showed the hardship for the Japanese Americans disposing of all their properties. When they had to reconstruct their temporary homes in the concentration camps, it was humiliating and degrading. In *Farewell to Manzanar* (Houston & Houston, 1983) and *Weedflower* (Kadohata, 2006), readers learn much about the details of camp life, living behind barbed wire, making homes in horse stables, and being hovered over by searchlight towers and armed guards. Moss (2013) presented a memoir of Kenichi Zenimura in *Barbed Wire Baseball*. According to the author's note, "...the baseball field he so lovingly crafted in the middle of the desert. It was a symbol of hope, of the resilience of the human spirit, of making life normal in the most abnormal times" (Moss, 2013, p. 39). Zenimura personified how Japanese-American families survived the indignities of forced detention with grace and resourcefulness.

Japanese in the West. Japanese people also suffered injustice in other western countries. In *The Divine Wind: A Love Story* (Disher, 1998), an Australian boy and a Japanese-Australian girl fell in love but were driven apart when the town turned against its Japanese residents. In *The*

Eternal Spring of Mr. Ito (Garrigue, 1985), a beloved Japanese-Canadian was rejected by the community after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Although it happened in the United States, persons of Japanese ancestry became targets of police round-ups and forced evacuation in Canada. When Sara, the protagonist, visited the camp, she saw a bouquet of grasses arranged in a bottle on a cotton runner. “It looked beautiful in its spartan surroundings” (p. 151). The calm and gentle manners of Mrs. Ito reflected peace and strength, in sharp contrast to her reality as a victim of wartime and discrimination. Based on her own experiences, Joy Kogawa told the story of the evacuation, relocation, and dispersal of Canadian citizens of Japanese ancestry in *Obasan* (1981) and *in Naomi’s Road* (1986). In her books, Kogawa (1981) considered Naomi’s and her mother’s chosen silence a sign of weakness: “Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction” (Kogawa, 1981, p. 291). However, by ending the book with Aunt Emily’s participation in the Japanese Canadian Redress Crusade, Kogawa portrayed the Japanese-Canadians’s strength and dignity to find their voices to address the wrongs against them during WWII.

Koreans and Korean-Americans. The Korean suffering during the first half of the twentieth century is the predominant theme in the 9 books of this period. Korean citizens bore much pain during the 36 years of Japanese occupation as the Japanese military government forcefully removed Korean culture, including their names, from their lives. After the Japanese defeat in 1945, Soviet soldiers became the new oppressors in Korea. The subsequent Korean war between North and South Korea also added to the destruction of the country and its people.

There are two Korean historical fiction books on the Japanese occupation of Korea. In *When My Name was Keoko* (2006), Linda Sue Park chronicled the experiences of 10-year-old Sun-hee and her 13-year-old brother Tae-yul. The children spoke and studied Japanese at school. Their own Korean language, their flag, their folklore, even their names were forbidden under the

Japanese rule. When World War II came to Korea, the Japanese even expected their Korean subjects to fight on their side. Many Koreans, including the children's uncle, joined the underground resistance. It was a time of turmoil and tension in all Korean households. In spite of the suppression, father led a quiet life at his school while secretly writing articles for the underground paper published by the resistance. Park delivered a message that while enemies could conquer the Korean land, the Korean spirit remained strong in its quietness, ready to re-bloom like the rose of the Sharon tree at the book's end. In *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* (1991), Sook Nyul Choi captured Korean suffering under Japanese occupation and the Soviet invasion. Ten-year-old Sookan's resistance-fighter father left their homeland in North Korea to hide in Manchuria. Her older brothers were taken to toil in Japanese labor camps. Sookan and other family members ran a sock factory for the Japanese war effort. The Japanese forced many young girls to be comfort women during the war. Sookan, his brother, and their mother finally rejoined the rest of the family as they courageously cross the 38th parallel on foot. Victimized by the wars, the Korean characters held onto hope to rebuild their lives against all odds.

The division of Korea between north and south forced many families to leave North Korea when the Russians were moving close. In *The Surrendered* (2010), Chang-Rae Lee authored a compelling story inspired by information obtained from his own father. Eleven-year-old June Han fled military combat during the Korean War when she was separated from her younger siblings. Eventually brought to an orphanage near Seoul, Jun Han received much needed care from the director's wife, who herself was haunted by the murders of her parents by the Japanese in Manchuria. Soo, a young schoolgirl who lived in North Korea, also crossed the border to join her father in the south. In *My Freedom Trip: A Child's Escape from North Korea* (1998), Frances and Ginger Park used their mother's escape experience to weave the story of a

young refugee. Young Soo helped readers see the horror of the war through a child's eyes. In *To Swim Across the World* (2001), the Park sisters again created a historical fiction based on their family's experience. With their mother from North Korea and their father from the rural south, the Park sisters showed Korean suffering across the Japanese occupation, the Soviet dominance, and the Korean war. Six decades of turbulence wrecked the Korean peninsula and the lives of Koreans--rich and poor, young and old. As readers are touched by the horror of the war, they are also impressed by the strength and dignity of the Korean characters.

Like other immigrants, Korean-Americans suffered from discrimination and low-paying jobs when they left their war-torn country to live in the United States. Ronyoung Kim created a tale of two generations of Korean-Americans in pre- and post-World War II Los Angeles in *Clay Walls* (1987). Haesu, born in an upper-class Korean family, found it hard to perform manual labor in the U.S. She yearned to return to her home country. Again, with strength and dignity, the family persevered, bringing hope for the next generation

Implications

WWII tension between Japan and Korea is still relevant in today's international relationship. During his April 2014 Asian trip, President Obama addressed historical tensions between U.S. allies, Japan and South Korea, during a news conference in Seoul. He commented that Japan's use of South Korean "comfort women" during the Second World War was an egregious violation of human rights. My goal of this paper is not to condemn any nation but to help teachers and students develop an appreciation of the complexity of perspectives and a balanced understanding of historical events within historical fiction.

Because each historical fiction is only a snapshot of history, each title tends to focus on a biased perspective without taking into a broader context of events. Teachers can address this

problem by introducing a balanced text set to include a variety of perspectives. For the Asian front of WWII, I recommend *When My Name Was Keoko* (Park, 2002), *Faithful Elephant* (Tsuchiya, 1988), *Shin's Bicycle* (Kodama, 1995), *Journey to Topaz* (Uchida, 1971), and *Passage to freedom: The Sugihara Story* (Mochizuki, 2003). Focusing on the interaction among characters, settings, and perspectives, teachers can guide students to read historical fiction with a critical stance. (Insert Table 3) A person's thinking and behaviors may shift with the setting and his or her position within. Readers also need to consider what may happen if one has to choose between following orders and hurting someone or not following orders and either being killed or having their families killed? By asking students to read historical fictions presented by different groups, in the context of factual information, this article demonstrates how a set of historical fiction can support the CCSS anchors, "analyz[ing] how two or more texts address similar themes ... in order to build knowledge or to compar[ing] the approaches the authors take" (CCSS, 2010, p.10).

Crawford and Zygouris-Coe's (2008) stated that historical fiction provides students with a better understanding of the period or event. The comprehensiveness of the knowledge depends on information included in the collection of published historical fiction for a certain historical period. In order to present a more balanced portrayal of the Pacific front of the Second World War, teachers must include historical texts about different countries in the Pacific Rim.

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Table 1: World War II Collection of Japan-American and Korean-American Historical Fiction

| Historical Fiction | WWII Era | Author Ethnicity | Authors with Multiple Titles | Setting | Publication Period |
|------------------------------|-----------|--|--|--|--|
| Japanese & Japanese-American | 44 titles | 34 authors: 12 heritage, 22 non-heritage | Eleanor Coerr: 2 Joy Kogawa: 2 Harry Mazer: 2 Ken Mochizuki: 2 Graham Salisbury: 2 Allen Say: 2 Gail Tsukiyama: 2 Yoshiko Uchida: 5 | US: 25 Japan: 12 Canada: 3 Lithuania: 2 Australia: 1 Philippines: 1 3 translated from Japanese | 1950s: 1 title 1960s: 1970s: 4 titles 1980s: 10 titles 1990s: 16 titles 2000s: 12 titles 2010s 1 title |
| Korean & Korean-American | 9 titles | 8 authors: 7 heritage, 1 non-heritage | Frances Park: 2 Sook Nyul Choi: 2 | US: 2 Korea: 7 No translated titles | 1960s 1970s 1980s: 1 title 1990s: 5 titles 2000s: 2 titles 2010s: 1 titles |

Table 3: Understanding perspectives using historical fiction

After using a historical event timeline to present the basic facts of the historical period, teachers can use the following table to guide instruction.

| Literary Element | Instructional Questions |
|-----------------------|---|
| Characters | Who are/were the historical figures/characters in this historical period? |
| | Who are the characters in the book? |
| | What types of characters are there in the historical timeline but missing in the book? |
| Setting | What is the setting of the book? |
| Perspective | How do the characters think about what is happening to them? |
| Character and Setting | How does the setting in which each character lives affect his or her way of thinking? What will happen to the character if s/he does not share the thinking of those who live around him or her? How would the characters change their thinking and behaviors if they lived in another setting? |

Table 2: Timeline for Japan and Korea before and after WWII

| Time | Japan | Korea |
|-----------|---|---|
| 1901-1910 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 1904, Japan launched a surprise military attack on Russian navy • Japan annexed Korea. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japan began to occupy Korea in 1910. |
| 1911-1920 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 1910, Japan annexed Korea after 3 years of fighting. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japan implemented its “cultural policy” in Korea to start eliminating Korean cultural elements in 1919. |
| 1921-1930 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extreme nationalism began to take hold in Japan to preserve traditional Japanese values and to reject "Western" influence. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many Korean underground groups emerged to resist the Japanese occupation of Korea. |
| 1931-1940 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria (Northeast China), with an extensive Russian border. • In 1937, Japan launched a full-scale attack of China | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 1938, the Japanese government in Korea ordered all Koreans to change their Korean names to Japanese-style names. |
| 1941-1950 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 1941, military conflicts erupted along the border of Russia and Japanese-occupied Manchuria. • In 1941, Japanese war planes bombed Pearl Harbor. • Starting in 1942, Japanese soldiers occupied Hong Kong, the Philippines, Thailand, Burma, Dutch East Indies, and Malaya. • In 1945, the USA dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. • In 1945, the Russian military invaded Machuria and moved into Korea. • Between 1945 and 1952, the U.S. occupying forces in Japan, led by General Douglas A. MacArthur, enacted widespread military, political, economic, and social reforms. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 1945, Russian forces landed in Korea. • In 1954, Korea was divided between the Soviet (northern) occupying forces and American (southern) occupying forces at the 38th parallel. |
| 1951-1960 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Japan focused on reconstruction. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North Korea and South Korea focused on reconstruction. |