

# Breaking Taboos in Asian Young Adult Fiction: The Cases of Japan and Thailand

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## Abstract

This dissertation looks into the curious absence of Young Adult (YA) literature in Japan and Thailand. The category of YA literature has been established in Western countries since the publication of S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967). It has dealt with a number of social problems including divorce, abandonment, sex, gender identity, and racial issues. Teens have used this body of literature as a reference material, checking their own problems against those presented in the narratives of YA fiction.

No such body of literature exists in Japan, nor does it in Thailand, if we are to believe an authoritative voice on Thai children's literature, Siriporn Sriwarakan, whose 2008 research into German and Thai YA literature concludes that the subjectivity of the child is vastly different in the two countries. This dissertation looks at Sriwarakan's findings and suggests ways in which they also hold true for the subjectivity of the Japanese child.

The dissertation examines an important distinction between pre-modern and modern fiction proposed by Franco Moretti in his 1987 *The Way of the World: the Bildungsroman in European Culture*. Moretti sees the arrival of modernity in Europe as a kind of crisis, because Europe did not yet have a culture of modernity. In the "stable societies" of pre-modern Europe youth is simply a biological distinction, and youths repeat the pattern of life that has existed for centuries.

With modernity, the rural life begins to crumble, youth are drawn to the city, and become the "essence" of modernity. Now society looks for the meaning of life in the future rather than in the past. The dissertation finds a connection between Moretti's "stable societies" and Sriwarakan's assertion of the "innocence" of the Thai child, separate from the adult world. I also explore ideas by Richard Rodriguez (1992) about "tragic and comic cultures" and link them to Moretti's "stable" and "dynamic" cultures, as Rodriguez contrasts

California's endless optimism and openness to change with Mexico's "tragic culture," where children are "sweeter" and funerals more "opulent" in a flourishing of traditional values.

My examination of Japanese texts that could have been candidates for the YA category found them unsatisfactory because of the safety net which always existed for the child; there was no exteriority in the sense that the protagonist never had to confront dangers or problems by him/herself, without a mentor somewhere in the background. It was as if the story took place in a stuffy room where it was impossible to open any window.

As I was wondering how to overcome the problem of the claustrophobic text I came across Norma Field's essay "Texts of Childhood in Inter-Nationalizing Japan" (1996). Field, a Professor of Japanese at the University of Chicago, analyzed Hideo Levy's *A Room Where the Star Spangled Banner Cannot be Heard* (2011). Both Field herself, the daughter of an American soldier and a Japanese mother, and Levy, whose protagonist abandons the American consulate in Yokohama in search of a more authentic existence in Japan, are what I came to see as "people in the middle," people caught between two cultures.

This was the exteriority I had been looking for. The dissertation proposes Levy's novel, as well as the Thai writer Rattawut Lapcharoensap's *Sightseeing* (2004), as prototypes of a new type of Asian YA literature written by people caught in the middle between two cultures.