

*Research Article*

# Unhei's Adaptation as an Asian American Immigrant Child in The Name Jar by Yangsook Choi

Amanda Nur Syafika <sup>1\*</sup>, Yosep B. Margono Slamet <sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> University of 17 August 1945 Semarang; Indonesia, email : [amandasyafika1104@gmail.com](mailto:amandasyafika1104@gmail.com)<sup>2</sup> University of 17 August 1945 Semarang, Indonesia, email : [yosep-bambangms@untagsmg.ac.id](mailto:yosep-bambangms@untagsmg.ac.id)\* Corresponding Author : [amandasyafika1104@gmail.com](mailto:amandasyafika1104@gmail.com)

**Abstract.** Immigrant children often face challenges in adjusting and adapting to new environments. This study analyses the adaptation process of the main character, Unhei, as an Asian American immigrant child in Yangsook Choi's picture book *The Name Jar*. This study examines the challenges Unhei faces in *The Name Jar* as she attempts to adapt and maintain her identity in a new environment in America, including language barriers, cultural differences, and social interactions with peers. This study employs a qualitative method using text and illustration analysis based on the adaptation theory proposed by Lamme et al. (2004), which consists of three stages: making transitions, making connections, and becoming American. The findings show that Unhei experiences various challenges in adapting to her new environment, including language barriers, cultural differences, and difficulties in social interaction. Unhei undergoes three stages of adaptation; making transitions, making connections, and becoming American. In the making transitions stage, Unhei experiences confusion, insecurity, and difficulty adjusting to a new cultural and social environment. In the making connections stage, she maintains connections with her Korean identity through her family, language, traditional objects, and Korean food while gradually building relationships in her new environment. In the becoming American stage, Unhei begins to adapt to American society and develops confidence in accepting her Korean identity without abandoning her cultural background. Furthermore, Unhei's experience reflects that adaptation does not always occur smoothly, but involves a process of self-negotiation in dealing with cultural differences. The adaptation process is dynamic and influenced by both internal and external factors, and positive social interactions can help accelerate successful adaptation in a new environment.

**Keywords:** Adaptation; Asian American; Culture; Immigrant Children; Picture book

Received: November 16, 2025

Revised: January 19, 2026

Accepted: March 20, 2026

Published: May 22, 2026

Curr. Ver.: May 22, 2026



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors.  
Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY SA) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

## 1. Introduction

When individuals move from one place to another, they naturally want to be accepted by others in their new environment. However, in reality, such acceptance does not always occur easily, especially when the differences involved relate to cultural identity. Those who often face such difficulties are immigrant children, as they are still in a developmental stage and are emotionally vulnerable when dealing with changes in a new environment. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2024) shows that more than 21 million immigrants, particularly from Asia, live in the United States, making them one of the largest immigrant groups. Asia itself has vast cultural diversity, which differs in many ways from American culture. These cultural differences can influence how individuals interact, communicate, and adjust to a new environment. This indicates that the experience of cultural adaptation is a significant and relevant phenomenon to study, especially among Asian immigrant children living in the United States.

Feng (1994) notes that Asian Americans represent more than 29 different subgroups. Each Asian country has its own unique identity and characteristics, which lead to differences in how individuals adjust and adapt to different environments. This diversity of cultural backgrounds and characteristics shows that the adaptation experiences of Asian immigrant children are influenced by the values, language, and customs they bring from their countries of origin. Therefore, the adaptation experience of Asian immigrant children is not only related

to adjusting to a new culture but also involves negotiating and maintaining their original culture.

In the process of adaptation, Asian immigrant children in the America not only face the demands of adjusting to the dominant culture in their new environment but also have to maintain their original cultural identity. This situation often creates challenges, particularly in social interactions and daily communication. In America, Asian American immigrant children often experience challenges related to cultural adjustment, identity conflict, racism, and social acceptance. Lamme et al. (2004) explain that in the process of adjustment, immigrant children often encounter various obstacles, including discrimination due to being different from most Americans. Many immigrant children are expected to adapt to dominant American culture while still maintaining the cultural values and traditions of their families. These experiences may affect their emotional well-being, self-confidence, and sense of belonging in social environments such as schools and communities. In addition, minority children are frequently underrepresented in children's literature or portrayed through stereotypical perspectives. As a result, literary representations of immigrant children become important because they can provide visibility to minority experiences and help readers understand the complexities of cultural adaptation and identity negotiation experienced by immigrant children.

Children's literature, especially picture books, plays an important role in representing the social and emotional experiences of immigrant children. According to Bishop (1990), children's literature functions as a mirror that allows readers to understand life experiences through stories. Picture books combine text and illustrations, allowing complex issues such as immigration, identity, and belonging to be presented in ways that are accessible to young readers. Through visual and narrative representation, picture books can portray how immigrant children experience cultural differences, negotiate identity, and seek acceptance in their social environment.

One picture book that represents this experience is *The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi (2001), which tells the story of Unhei, a Korean immigrant child who must adapt to a new school environment in the United States. In the picture book, Unhei faces various adaptation challenges, one of which is her name, which her peers find unfamiliar and difficult to pronounce. This condition reflects the influence of linguistic and cultural differences on her social interactions. Therefore, this study focuses on Unhei's adaptation process to differences in language, culture, and social interaction in her new environment.

Previous studies of immigrant children's picture books generally use approaches that analyze multiple books to identify broader patterns of immigrant children experience. For example, a study by Puspaningtyas (2018) compares the picture books *The Name Jar* and *The New Girl* to examine how immigrant children construct their cultural identity. The study reveals similarities in the cultural challenges faced by immigrant children from different backgrounds, such as difficulties in social adjustment and identity negotiation. However, the analysis remains general and does not explore the detailed adaptation process experienced by a single character within a specific context. As a result, the adaptation experienced by individual immigrant children are not fully examined. This limitation makes it difficult to fully understand how the adaptation process of immigrant children unfolds.

In addition, a study by Wee et al. (2024) examines the representation of East and Southeast Asian immigrant children through dozens of English-language picture books published in the United States. The study highlights various experiences faced by immigrant children, such as racism, stereotypes, language barriers, and cultural differences in social and school environments. While this research provides a broad overview of how immigrant children's experiences are represented in children's literature, its wide scope makes the analysis less specific, as it does not explain in detail how the adaptation process of a single character is portrayed within a single narrative.

These limitations indicate a research gap in the existing studies, particularly regarding in-depth analysis of the adaptation process experienced by an individual immigrant child character within a specific narrative context. Therefore, this study focuses on one picture book, *The Name Jar*, to analyze in greater detail how the adaptation process is represented through the main character, Unhei, a Korean immigrant who comes to the United States. To analyze this process, this study applies the adaptation theory proposed by Lamme et al. (2004) as the main analytical framework. This theory allows the researcher to examine Unhei's experience of adapting to her new environment, from three stages: making transitions, making connections, and becoming American. This framework allows the study to examine how Unhei negotiates cultural identity, social acceptance, and belonging throughout her adaptation process.

Based on this background, the objective of this study is to analyze how the challenges and adaptation process of Unhei, an Asian American immigrant child, are represented in the picture book. The research questions of this study are: (1) what challenges are faced by Unhei in adapting to her new environment, and (2) how does Unhei undergo the adaptation process represented in the picture book *The Name Jar*. Therefore, this study contributes to children's literature studies by providing a deeper understanding of immigrant children's adaptation experiences and by highlighting the importance of minority representation in picture books within multicultural societies.

## 2. Literature Review

Immigrant children are a group that experiences complex and multilayered processes of adaptation. According to Tienda & Haskins (2011), immigrant children in America are those from birth to seventeen years old who either live in a foreign country or have at least one parent born abroad. In their daily lives, they are not only confronted with changes in their physical environment but also with differences in language, social norms, and new value systems. This condition places immigrant children in situations that require adjustment in social, cultural, and emotional aspects. These challenges may affect their psychological well-being, especially when they experience difficulties in communication and in building social relationships in a new environment.

Asian immigrant children are highly diverse. Feng (1994) explains that Asian Americans consist of more than 29 ethnic subgroups with different language, traditions, and cultural values. This diversity influences how individuals respond to new environments and negotiate their identities within multicultural societies. In addition, Asian immigrant children often face stereotypes, discrimination, and social pressure from the dominant culture. These experiences may complicate the adaptation process because children are not only expected to understand a new culture but are also pressured to assimilate into dominant social norms while maintaining their original cultural identity.

The process of adaptation is essential for understanding immigrants' experiences. According to Berry (1997), adaptation refers to changes that occur in individuals or groups as a response to the demands of a particular environment. It involves adjustments in behaviour, attitudes, and values to achieve balance in a new environment. It is not merely an external process of adjustment but also an internal process related to identity, belonging, and self-understanding. In the context of immigrant children, adaptation often becomes a dynamic negotiation between preserving one's original culture and accepting the culture of the new environment.

Many immigrants, especially children, feel lost and must adjust to a new environment. They exist between two cultures, which can lead to internal conflict. In this context, the pressure to assimilate into the dominant culture often leads children to feel they must change aspects of themselves, such as language, habits, and even personal identity. This condition shows that adaptation is not merely a process of adjustment but also a complex negotiation of identity. Identity plays an important role in shaping how individuals understand themselves and interpret their experiences. As explained by McCarthey and Moje (2002), identity influences how people make sense of their world. In the context of immigrant children, identity formation becomes more complex because they continuously negotiate between their original cultural identity and the dominant culture surrounding them. This negotiation often appears in their language use, behaviour, social interactions, and feelings of belonging within a new environment. Therefore, adaptation cannot be separated from identity formation, as immigrant children not only adjust socially but also reconstruct their understanding of who they are within multicultural societies.

Wee et al. (2024) highlights that immigrant children represented in picture books frequently experience racism, language barriers, cultural differences, and difficulties in peer interactions, all of which may affect their psychological well-being and identity development. The study also emphasizes that social relationships and community support play important roles in helping immigrant children adapt to their new environment. These demonstrate that immigrant children's adaptation experiences are strongly influenced by social acceptance and interactions within their new environment.

In multicultural societies, representation in children's literature becomes important because literature can shape children's understanding of identity and cultural diversity. According to Banks (2010), multicultural literature helps children understand cultural diversity,

develop empathy, and recognize the experiences of minority groups in society. Similarly, Bishop (1990) explains that children's literature can function as "mirrors" and "windows," allowing readers both to recognize their own experiences and to understand the experiences of others. Therefore, the representation of immigrant children in picture books is important because it provides visibility to minority experiences while helping readers understand issues of identity, belonging, discrimination, and cultural negotiation.

Picture books are particularly effective in representing immigrant children's experiences because they combine textual and visual elements. Illustrations help readers understand emotional and social experiences more concretely, especially for young readers. Lamme et al. (2004) categorize immigrant experiences into three main themes: making transitions, making connections, and becoming American. The first theme, making transitions, highlights how many immigrants long for their homeland. They explain that immigrant children in the United States face significant difficulties, especially when they must leave behind what they know and begin a new life. This category addresses adjustment to American experiences and efforts to fulfil immigrant aspirations in a new environment.

The second theme, making connections, refers to how immigrants often bring mementos, objects, food, or other items that remind them of their homeland. These help them stay connected to their identity and culture. The final theme, becoming American, explains that many immigrant children want to be like American children. They seek acceptance and sometimes feel ashamed of their parents' culture. Many change their names and reject traditional clothing. This process takes time and involves painful transitions, rejection, recognition, and reconnection. For immigrants, becoming American is not only about legal status but also about embracing a new identity as hyphenated Americans, meaning they have two identities: their original cultural identity and their American identity, such as Korean-American.

These three themes demonstrate that adaptation is a dynamic and gradual process, especially for immigrant children who face various challenges in their daily lives. Therefore, the adaptation theory proposed by Lamme et al. (2004) is used in this study to analyse how the adaptation process of Asian American immigrant children is represented in picture books, particularly through the experiences of the main character in *The Name Jar*. This theory also helps to identify how the character responds to social and cultural challenges within a new environment.

### 3. Method

In this study, the writer employs a qualitative, descriptive approach to analyse the character Unhei's adaptation process in *The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research is used to provide a broad explanation of behaviours and attitudes and may include variables, constructs, and hypotheses. This approach is appropriate for this study because it allows the writer to explore meanings, experiences, and interpretations in greater depth and with greater context. Through this qualitative method, the writer can examine the challenges faced by the main character, Unhei, and understand how her adaptation process is constructed within the narrative.

*The Name Jar* is selected as the object of this study because the picture book explicitly portrays the experiences of an Asian immigrant child adapting to life in America. The story presents issues related to language barriers, cultural differences, identity conflict, and social acceptance, which are closely connected to immigrant children's adaptation experiences. In addition, the picture book combines narrative and illustrations, allowing the representation of adaptation and identity to be analysed through both textual and visual elements.

The data collection methods used in this study consist of two approaches, text and illustration analysis to obtain primary data, and a literature review to collect secondary data. Primary data are obtained through critical reading and systematic note-taking of the narrative and illustrations in the picture book. According to Wallace and Wray (2011), critical reading is used to evaluate and interpret information in depth. Its application not only involves understanding the story's content but also requires the writer to actively examine how textual and visual elements interact to construct meaning within the narrative. The collected data include dialogue, narration, character expressions, settings, and social interactions that reflect the character's adaptation process.

Secondary data are obtained through a literature review, including books and relevant journal articles that related to immigrant children, cultural identity, adaptation, and multicultural children's literature. According to Sugiyono (2013), a literature review is used to strengthen the theoretical foundation of a study. These secondary data support the analysis

of primary data by providing theoretical frameworks, previous research findings, and scientific context that reinforce the study. In addition, the literature review helps situate this research within existing academic discussions on adaptation and children's literature, particularly in the context of immigrant experiences.

Furthermore, the data are analysed according to the adaptation theory proposed by Lamme et al. (2004), which comprises three main stages: making transitions, making connections, and becoming American. The analysis began by identifying and categorising textual and visual data related to Unhei's adaptation experiences based on these three stages. The writer then interpreted how narration, dialogue, symbolism, and illustrations represent Unhei's emotional struggles, identity negotiation, and social interactions within a new cultural environment. Finally, the findings were connected with previous studies and theoretical perspectives to provide a deeper understanding of how immigrant children experience cultural adaptation and negotiate their sense of identity and belonging.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

In this study, the writer examines the challenges Unhei faces in the picture book *The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi as she adapts to her new environment in America. Adapting to a new environment is not easy for Unhei, as she must adjust to different surroundings, language, and American food. This adjustment process is closely related to how she interacts with the people around her, especially her classmates.

The social experiences Unhei encounters when she first enters school cause her distress, as she must adjust to be accepted in her new environment. Her classmates' reactions to her name, which they consider difficult to pronounce, become one of the most significant challenges. Her name, which should symbolize cultural identity, instead becomes a source of discomfort, making her feel different from others. This situation reflects Wee et al. (2024) argument that immigrant children in children's literature often experience identity conflict, language barriers, and difficulties in peer interactions within multicultural environments.

Unhei faces a dilemma, on the one hand, she seeks acceptance in her new environment, while on the other, she strives to maintain her identity as a Korean. It is very difficult for Unhei to maintain her identity at school because her classmates cannot pronounce her name. This situation makes her feel uncertain about her identity and leads her to consider using an American name to be more easily accepted by her peers. However, in the end, Unhei adapts to her new environment with the support of her friends and family.

##### **Challenges Faced by Unhei in *The Name Jar***

When moving from one place to another, everyone faces the challenges of adapting to a new environment. This process of adjustment does not always run smoothly, as everyone faces different challenges, such as cultural, language, and social value differences. Everyone has their own way of overcoming these challenges. Unhei, the main character in *The Name Jar*, also experiences this situation. In this story, Unhei faces challenges adapting to her new environment, leading to conflicts over her original identity. One of the examples of Unhei's adaptation struggle can be seen when other children on the school bus have difficulty pronouncing her Korean name, causing her to feel embarrassed and uncertain about her identity. As a result, Unhei considers choosing an American name in order to be more easily accepted by her classmates. This situation reflects a common adaptation pattern experienced by many immigrant children who often feel pressured to assimilate into the dominant culture by changing parts of their identity, such as their names, language, or behavior. In addition, Unhei's hesitation to introduce her real name demonstrates the emotional conflict between maintaining her cultural identity and seeking social acceptance in a new environment. This situation shows that immigrant children do not merely adjust to a new culture but also negotiate their sense of identity and belonging within their social environment.

Unhei is an immigrant child who moved from Korea to America because she had to follow her family. This relocation places her in a social environment with a language and culture that are very different from what she previously knew. In *The Name Jar*, Unhei's culture and language differ greatly from the English language and American culture. She must also adapt to them by learning English to communicate with others. In Korea, people use hangul, or the Korean writing system, whereas in America, the Latin alphabet is used, which is very different from hangul.

The main challenge Unhei faces on her first day of school is on the bus. She experiences verbal discrimination from other people on the bus because the pronunciation of her name is difficult for American children. Lamme et al. (2004) explain that many immigrant children experience discrimination due to differences in language, culture, and education. The discrimination Unhei experiences stems from her difficult-to-pronounce name. American children think that the name Unhei sounds unusual. Cho and Park (2006) explain that pronunciation errors arise from differences in the phonological systems of the two languages. Therefore, Unhei's friends have difficulty pronouncing her name because they are not familiar with such sounds.

“Ohh-ney?” the girl asked, scrunching up her face.

“Oooh, oooh, oooh-ney!” some kids chanted.

“No, no,” Unhei corrected. “It’s spelled U-N-H-E-I. It’s pronounced Yoon-hye.”

“Oh, it’s Yoo-hey,” the boy said. “Like ‘You, hey!’ What about ‘Hey, you!’”

(Choi, 2001, p.4).

Because of the bus incident, Unhei feels embarrassed and wants to change her name to be better accepted by her friends and the community. When she arrives at school, her teacher, Mr. Cocotos, asks her for her name. Since Unhei is still too shy to say her name, she decides to choose one first and announce it the following week. In the classroom, Unhei's classmates begin to wonder why she has no name, and one of them even thinks she robbed a bank and came to America to get a new identity. Unhei hears all of this, which makes her feel even more ashamed. Jiang (2023) explains that name-based discrimination can negatively affect children's self-confidence as well as their relationships with their social environment. These experiences illustrate how social pressure and the desire for acceptance can shape how Asian immigrant children perceive themselves and their cultural identity.

Because of this, Unhei's classmates try to offer a solution by helping her find a name. They put name suggestions for Unhei into a jar. However, this only makes Unhei more confused because there are so many names in it. When she tries to say those names, Unhei feels that none of them suit her. When her classmates attempt to help her choose an American name, Rosie, one of Unhei's friends, says, “Well, we didn't get to choose our names when we were born, did we?” Rosie argues (Choi, 2001, p. 18). In addition, Mr. Kim, the owner of a Korean grocery store, explains that Unhei means grace. After receiving a letter from her grandmother in Korea, Unhei finally decides to keep her original name. She then teaches her classmates how to pronounce her name. This decision shows that she is beginning to accept her identity as a Korean. This phenomenon shows that the process of adapting to a new environment does not always require an individual to abandon their cultural identity. In some cases, the process of adaptation encourages individuals to appreciate their identity more, as it is an essential part of who they are.

The next challenge concerns her mother's expectations. When Unhei returns home, her mother asks about school and whether Unhei understands what her teacher has explained. Unhei nods, and her mother tells her that she must study hard, be a good person, and achieve good grades to show that she is a good Korean child. Koreans are often considered intelligent because of their diligence in studying. They usually study for hours to achieve perfect grades. Many parents in Korea send their children to after-school classes, believing that higher education can lead to success.

According to Lim (2025), in Korea, a child's academic achievement is viewed as a source of family pride, which is why many parents in Korea send their children to private tutoring centres. However, many parents are not aware that this can become a source of pressure for their children. In this picture book, Unhei's mother does not fully consider Unhei's feelings as Unhei struggles with her classmates. When Unhei expresses her concerns, her mother says that she is indeed different from others and that it is not a big problem. Thus, Unhei faces challenges not only from her peers but also from her mother.

To deal with this, Unhei studies very hard. She tries to meet her mother's expectations by working harder and behaving well at school. This effort becomes one of the ways for Unhei to demonstrate that she is capable of being a good child, as her mother expects. In this way, Unhei attempts to overcome the challenges she faces by proving her abilities through academic achievement and positive behavior at school, showing that she is a good Korean child.

Another challenge Unhei faces is food. Korea and America have different cuisines. Each culture has its own eating habits, including the types of food consumed daily. In America, many foods are made from flour, such as donuts and cakes. In contrast, Korean cuisine often includes fermented vegetables, such as kimchi, a traditional Korean dish. Kwon et al. (2023) explain that in Korea, fermented foods are an efficient and refreshing way to address three key challenges in food development at once, how to make them tasty and ensure they remain edible over time. This allows Koreans to store food until winter.



**Figure 1.** Unhei's mother serving Korean food (Choi, 2001, p. 9)

Even though Unhei and her family live in America, Unhei's mother ensures that they can still eat Korean food because it is part of their identity as Koreans, as seen in this quote, "Just because we've moved to America," her mother said, "doesn't mean we stop eating Korean food." (Choi, 2001, p.11). For this reason, Unhei's mother shops at Kim's Market, where the sign is written in both English and Korean. There, ingredients for preparing Korean dishes are available, including cabbage, seaweed, and more. The presence of this store helps Unhei's family maintain their habit of eating traditional food, even while living in a different cultural environment. Unhei is happy because she can still enjoy her favorite food, Korean soup, which her mother usually cooks.

According to Lamme et al. (2004), children experience adjustment through three themes: making transitions, building relationships, and wanting to become American. Upon further analysis, *The Name Jar* does not represent only one of these themes but incorporates all three simultaneously in its storyline. These three themes align with the experiences Unhei faces. Through the various events depicted in the story, it becomes clear that Unhei undergoes a transition when she first enters a new school environment, maintains connections to her original culture through cultural symbols, and negotiates her identity within a different cultural setting. The writer discusses these three themes in detail below.

### **Making Transition**

The first theme in the process of adaptation is making transitions, a stage in which an immigrant child begins to face environmental changes and attempts to adjust to a new setting. Lamme et al. (2004) state that during this process, children often feel lost and homesick as they adapt to a new environment. In *The Name Jar*, Unhei experiences a complex transition marked by anxiety when she first enters school. As a child who has just moved from Korea, Unhei must face an environment completely different from her home, as we can see in the following quote: "Through the school bus window, Unhei looked out at the strange buildings and houses on the way to her new school. It was her first day, and she was both nervous and excited." (Choi, 2001, p.1).

On the first page, it is explained that Unhei sees unfamiliar buildings, indicating that the new environment is very different from her home in Korea. In addition, she feels nervous and excited because it is her first day at school. These feelings are natural for someone entering a new environment, especially for children who must face unfamiliar situations. This marks the beginning of her journey, as she must interact with others and adjust to a new place. The people on the bus are unable to pronounce Unhei's name correctly because its pronunciation is difficult for Americans. She feels embarrassed because the children on the bus seem to discriminate against and mock her due to her different name.



**Figure 2.** The confused expressions of the children on the bus (Choi, 2001, p.5)

The experience on the bus then influences Unhei's behavior in the classroom. When the teacher asks Unhei to introduce herself to her classmates, she hesitates to say her name directly. As a result, Unhei decides to say that she will tell her name the following week. At first, her classmates are confused about why she does not have a name and assume that she wants a new identity in America. However, they later try to help Unhei find a new name by putting name suggestions into a jar.

At home, Unhei's mother asks about her school day and whether she understands what the teacher said. Unhei nods, and her mother says that she is grateful that Unhei has learned English well. This shows that Unhei must also adapt to language differences. English and Korean are very different languages. Korea uses hangul, while in America, the Latin alphabet is used. This difference requires Unhei to work hard to communicate with those around her. Through these experiences, Unhei undergoes an adjustment to a new environment. This experience shows that the transition process for immigrant children is a complex stage and often involves conflicts that can make them feel lost or uncertain.

### **Making Connections**

She fingered the little block of wood in her pocket and remembered leaving her grandmother at the airport in Korea. Her grandmother had wiped away Unhei's tears and handed her an ink pad and a small red satin pouch.

"Your name is inside," she had said. My name? Unhei had wondered.

Again she took out the red pouch to look at the wooden block with her name carved in it. As she ran her fingers along the grooves and ridges of the Korean characters, she pictured her grandmother's smile. (Choi, 2001, p.3)

In this text, it is explained that Unhei keeps memories of her grandmother in the form of a traditional Korean pouch (*bokjumeoni*) and a wooden block (*dojang*) engraved with her grandmother's name, so that she remembers her origins. According to Corpus (2021), the traditional purse, known as *bokjumeoni*, literally means a "luck pouch." It is usually made of silk or satin and is characterized by its bright colours. Through these items, Unhei tries to overcome her nervousness in front of others, as they are gifts from her grandmother that help her feel connected to her Korean identity. Unhei cherishes these gifts because they are important to her, helping her not to forget her original identity as a Korean.

Life in America is very different from life in Korea. On the bus, Unhei is teased by one of the boys because she was holding something unfamiliar to them, as we can see in this, "Is that thing for show and tell?" (Choi, 2001, p.4). They think that the object is something for display. The wooden block is a *dojang*, Horigan (2003) explains that *dojang*, a personal stamp or seal commonly used as a substitute for a signature on important documents. It is typically used to represent identity or to sign official documents in Korea.

Unhei always carries the *dojang* and the purse because they remind her of her grandmother. She uses these objects to create a connection between herself and her homeland. This situation also shows how Unhei is placed in an unfamiliar social setting where her actions are easily misunderstood. It reflects the challenges she faces in adjusting to new social interactions in her environment.

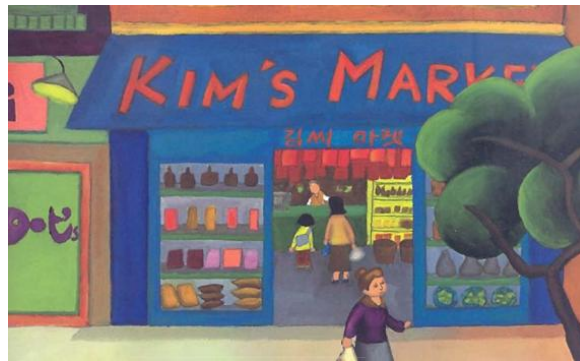


Figure 3. Kim's Market (Choi, 2001, p.11)

In America, many foods are unfamiliar to Unhei. When Unhei and her mother go shopping, they pass by stores that seem foreign to her until they arrive at Kim's Market. They go there because it provides Korean ingredients. Unhei enjoys being there because she can find ingredients for her favorite foods. The store offers various Korean food items that Unhei's family commonly consumes. This shows that food can also serve as a way for someone to remember their original identity, as her mother says, "Just because we've moved to America," her mother said, "doesn't mean we stop eating Korean food," (Choi, 2001, p.11). This statement shows that even though Unhei's family has moved to America, they continue to maintain their cultural habits, including their food practices. Ayeomoni (2011) explains that the food we eat can also reflect the identity of a particular culture. In this context, food not only serves as a daily necessity but also as a symbol of cultural identity, helping them stay connected to their original traditions.

In addition, the store is run by an older man named Mr. Kim, who is also from Korea. Unhei feels happy when speaking with Mr. Kim because he can pronounce her name without difficulty, as we can see in the following quote, "Hi, Unhei!" "Hello, Mr. Kim," Unhei replied. She felt as if she was back in her old neighborhood in Korea. (Choi, 2001, p.23). When speaking with Mr. Kim, Unhei feels as though she is in her old environment in Korea. She feels a sense of connection because both she and Mr. Kim share the same cultural background. This shows that social relationships with people who have similar cultural backgrounds can help someone feel more accepted in a new environment.

In addition to traditional objects such as bokjumeoni and food, another factor that connects Unhei to her identity as a Korean is her grandmother. In the story, her grandmother sends her a letter written in Korean. The letter conveys that no matter how far she is from Korea, Unhei will always be Korean. Her grandmother's constant reminders of Korea give Unhei the strength to face the challenges she encounters. This shows that the process of adaptation for immigrant children does not always mean abandoning their original culture. On the contrary, immigrant children can maintain a connection with their cultural background while learning to adapt to a new environment.

### **Becoming American**

In *The Name Jar*, the theme of becoming American is clearly reflected in Unhei's desire to change her name to an American one. This desire arises after she experiences an unpleasant situation in which people on the bus struggle to pronounce her name. This situation makes Unhei feel that her name sets her apart from the other children at school.

"I will," replied Unhei. "But... but I think I would like my own American name," she said quickly.

Her mother looked at her with surprise. "Why? Unhei is a beautiful name. Your grandma and I went to a name master for it."

"But it's so hard to pronounce," Unhei complained. "I don't want to be different from all the American kids."

"You are different, Unhei," her mother said. "That's a good thing!" (Choi, 2001, p.8).

She wants to change her name to an American one because her original name makes her feel different from others. A name can be an important symbol of a person's identity. It not only functions as an individual marker but also often reflects cultural background, language,

and family history. Therefore, Unhei's desire to change her name can be understood as an effort to adapt to the dominant culture in her school environment.

At first, Unhei feels uncomfortable with her name. However, the adaptation process she experiences at school gradually changes her perspective on her identity. When her classmates try to help her choose an American name by providing a jar filled with various name options, one of her friends, Rosie, says something that makes everyone think deeply, "Well, we didn't get to choose our names when we were born, did we?" Rosie argues (Choi, 2001, p.18). People cannot choose their own names, and at that moment, Mr. Kim explains that the name Unhei means grace. Unhei continues to reflect on this, and later, her younger sibling brings her a letter from her grandmother. After reading the letter, Unhei decides to keep her original name.

This decision shows that she begins to accept her identity as a Korean living in America and becomes more confident in her own name. In this case, Unhei learns that becoming part of American society does not mean she has to erase her Korean identity. This condition reflects cultural acculturation, where she can maintain her cultural identity while adapting to her new social environment.

The initial stage of adaptation is marked by confusion and discomfort as Unhei enters a new environment. During this stage, she undergoes a transition process as she adjusts to surroundings that differ significantly from her place of origin. Her anxiety, uncertainty, and difficulty interacting with others reflect the experiences commonly faced by immigrant children when entering unfamiliar social and cultural environments. This stage supports Lamme et al. (2004) concept of making transitions, which explains that immigrant children often experience feelings of isolation and insecurity during the early adaptation process.

The next stage involves efforts to build connections, particularly through Unhei's relationship with her grandmother, Korean cultural objects *dojang* and *bokjumeoni*, food, and her interactions with Mr. Kim. Through these symbols, Unhei maintains a connection to her Korean identity while adapting to life in America. In this phase, the story demonstrates that adaptation does not necessarily require immigrant children to abandon their original culture. Instead, cultural identity becomes an important source of emotional support and belonging. This finding aligns with multicultural perspectives that emphasize the importance of respecting cultural diversity and preserving minority identities within multicultural societies.

The final stage, becoming American, marks a more mature level of adaptation in which Unhei gradually gains confidence in her identity while interacting with her new social environment. Although she initially wants to adopt an American name to fit in with her classmates, she eventually decides to keep her Korean name after realizing its personal and cultural significance. Her name functions as an important symbol of identity, cultural heritage, and self-acceptance. This condition reflects that adaptation is not simply assimilation into dominant culture but rather a process of negotiating between maintaining one's original identity and participating in a new cultural environment.

These findings indicate that adaptation is a dynamic and gradual process involving social, cultural, and emotional negotiation. The study also demonstrates that adaptation is not linear, as immigrant children continuously balance their original identity with the pressures of social acceptance. In addition, the findings highlight the importance of multicultural education and inclusivity in children's literature. Through Unhei's experiences, *The Name Jar* encourages readers to appreciate cultural differences, respect diverse identities, and develop empathy toward immigrant children. The representation of minority children in picture books is significant because it allows children from diverse cultural backgrounds to feel represented while also teaching young readers the values of tolerance and inclusion within multicultural societies.

Overall, the findings of this study support its objective of understanding how the challenges and adaptation process experienced by Unhei are represented in the picture book. This research contributes to children's literature studies by emphasizing that immigrant children's experiences are complex and multifaceted. Furthermore, the study highlights how picture books can serve as meaningful educational tools for promoting multicultural awareness, inclusivity, and cultural understanding among young readers.

## 5. Conclusions

This study analyzes the adaptation process of the character Unhei, an Asian American immigrant child, in *The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi. The findings show that Unhei faces various challenges in adjusting to a new environment, including language barriers, cultural differences, peer interactions, and pressures from her family. Based on the theory proposed

by Lamme et al. (2004), Unhei's adaptation process occurs through three main themes: making transitions, making connections, and becoming American, moving from initial discomfort to gradual adjustment in a new environment. These stages demonstrate that adaptation is a gradual and dynamic process involving continuous negotiation between maintaining one's cultural identity and adjusting to a new social environment. The study also highlights that names, food, and cultural objects function as important symbols of identity and belonging throughout the adaptation process.

Furthermore, this study emphasizes the importance of multicultural awareness and inclusivity in children's literature. The representation of immigrant children in picture books can help young readers develop empathy, respect cultural diversity, and better understand the experiences of minority groups. For educators and parents, this study highlights the importance of creating supportive and inclusive environments that encourage children to appreciate their cultural identity without fear of discrimination or exclusion. For literary scholars, this research contributes to discussions on Asian American children's literature and the representation of immigrant experiences in multicultural societies.

However, this study is limited to the analysis of a single picture book and focuses primarily on one immigrant child's experience. Therefore, future research is recommended to examine a wider range of immigrant narratives or compare adaptation experiences represented in other Asian American children's literature. Further studies may also explore themes such as multicultural education, identity negotiation, and language discrimination in children's picture books to provide broader insights into immigrant children's experiences in contemporary society.

### Acknowledgments

The writer would like to express sincere gratitude to the faculty, lecturers, fellow students, and all parties who have provided support and assistance, both directly and indirectly, in completing this study. It is hoped that this research will provide benefits and make a positive contribution to the development of literacy studies in the digital era.

### References

- Ayeomoni, M. O. (2011). Language, food and culture: Implications for language development and expansion in Nigeria. *Advances in BioResearch*, 2(2).
- Banks, J. A., & Banks, C. A. M. (Eds.). (2010). *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology*, 46(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x>
- Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspective*, 6(3).
- Cho, J., & Park, H. K. (2006). A comparative analysis of Korean-English phonological structures and processes for pronunciation pedagogy in interpretation training. *Meta*, 51(2), 229–246. <https://doi.org/10.7202/013253ar>
- Choi, Y. (2001). *The name jar*. Random House Children's Books.
- Corpus, P. (2021, July 21). Colorful lucky pouches endure as traditional cultural heritage. *Korea.net*. <https://www.korea.net/News-Focus/HonoraryReporters/view?articleId=201314>
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Feng, J. (1994). *Asian-American children: What teachers should know*. ERIC Digest.
- Horgan, D. P. (2003). Observations on the South Korean Penal Code. *Journal of Korean Law*, 3, 139.
- Jiang, Y. (2023). How name-based discrimination affect minority groups. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.54097/ehss.v9i.6414>
- Kwon, D. Y., Kim, S.-H., Chung, K. R., Daily, J. W., & Park, S. (2023). Science and philosophy of Korea traditional foods (K-food). *Journal of Ethnic Foods*, 10(1), 26. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42779-023-00194-3>

- Lamme, L. L., Fu, D., & Lowery, R. M. (2004). Immigrants as portrayed in children's picture books. *The Social Studies*, 95(3), 123–130. <https://doi.org/10.3200/tsss.95.3.123-130>
- Lim, H. S. (2025). The impact of Korea's 'hagwon' culture on academic pressure among high school students. *Research and Advances in Education*, 4(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.56397/RAE.2025.01.01>
- McCarthy, S. J., & Moje, E. B. (2002). Conversations: Identity matters. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 37(2). <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.37.2.6>
- Puspaningtyas, V. (2018). *Cultural identity construction in The Name Jar and The New Girl: A comparative children's literature*. Universitas Brawijaya.
- Sugiyono. (2013). *Metode penelitian kuantitatif, kualitatif dan R & D*. Alfabeta.
- Tienda, M., & Haskins, R. (2011). Immigrant children: Introducing the issue. *Future of Children*, 21(1). <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2011.0010>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). *American Community Survey*.
- Wallace, M., & Wray, A. (2011). *Critical reading and writing for postgraduates*. Sage.
- Wee, S. J., Kim, J., & Yang, V. (2024). Unpacking East and Southeast Asian immigrants portrayed in children's picture-books: Centering on immigration in contemporary times. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 63(2).