

The Transformation of Revolutionary-themed Cultural Symbols in Children's Narratives: A Case Study of the Picture Book *The People with Stars on Their Hats*

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How to cite this paper: Chen, J. (2025). The Transformation of Revolutionary-themed Cultural Symbols in Children's Narratives: A Case Study of the Picture Book *The People with Stars on Their Hats*. Literature, Language and Cultural Studies, 2(2), 67-78. ISSN Print: 3079-5095; ISSN Online: 3079-5109.

<https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9077>

Published: 2025-08-25

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Abstract

This study investigates the pedagogical potential of converting revolutionary cultural symbols into children's narratives, with a focused analysis of the picture book *The People with Stars on Their Hats*. It identifies a critical gap in age-appropriate transmission of revolutionary heritage, particularly within early childhood education — where visual storytelling functions as a primary channel for cultural dissemination. Through semiotic analysis of two representative illustrations from the text — one featuring the star emblem as a visual anchor for historical memory, and another depicting child-adult interaction centered on this symbol — the research illustrates how abstract political concepts can be effectively translated into tangible narrative components. The findings reveal three key transformation mechanisms: symbolic simplification preserves ideological essence while adapting to children's cognitive capacities; emotional personification cultivates affective connections; and interactive storytelling links historical contexts to contemporary experiences. The resulting pedagogical framework suggests that such narrative conversions significantly enhance children's engagement with cultural heritage when incorporating multisensory elements and intergenerational dialogue. Acknowledging limitations in current adaptation practices, this study proposes future directions for developing developmentally appropriate ideological education materials. It emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary collaboration among historians, educators, and children's literature specialists to optimize the efficacy of cultural transmission.

Keywords

Revolutionary-themed Cultural Symbols; Children's Narratives; Symbolic Transformation

1. Introduction

The preservation and transmission of revolutionary-themed cultural heritage have gained increasing attention in contemporary China, particularly in the context of

early childhood education. As the current education in China the importance of ideological education for younger generations, there emerges a pressing need to develop age-appropriate pedagogical approaches that can effectively bridge historical revolutionary values with modern children's cognitive and emotional development (Chen Xuguang, 2024). This study situates itself within this educational landscape, focusing on the under-researched area of transforming complex political symbols into accessible narratives for children.

The picture book *The People with Stars on Their Hats* serves as an exemplary case due to its successful adaptation of Wang Yuanjian's revolutionary story "Three Notes" into a child-friendly format. Published as part of the Chinese Red Classic Picture Book series, this work demonstrates how the red star symbol – traditionally representing the People's Liberation Army – can be reconceptualized through children's perspectives (Sun Chuanping & Wu Chang, 2024). The narrative follows 10-year-old Lanzi's encounter with the Red Army soldiers during the Long March period, where the star emblem transforms from a frightening unknown to a symbol of trust and hope through carefully constructed child-adult interactions. Such transformation exemplifies what historians have identified as "the third space of cultural memory", where historical symbols are reinterpreted through contemporary educational needs.

Three critical gaps in current research motivate this investigation. First, while numerous studies have examined revolutionary-themed dissemination in primary and secondary education, few have systematically addressed early childhood cognitive characteristics. Second, existing adaptation practices often mechanically transplant adult-oriented historical narratives into children's books without sufficient semiotic transformation. Third, the pedagogical potential of intergenerational storytelling in ideological education remains underexplored, despite evidence suggesting its effectiveness in cultural transmission.

The study pursues two primary objectives. Theoretically, it aims to establish a framework for analyzing how abstract political concepts can be materialized into tangible narrative elements through symbolic simplification, emotional personification, and interactive storytelling. Practically, it seeks to provide evidence-based recommendations for creating developmentally appropriate ideological education materials, drawing on successful techniques employed in *The People with Stars on Their Hats*. The research questions focus on: (1) what visual and textual strategies make revolutionary-themed symbols comprehensible to young children; (2) how child-adult interactions around these symbols facilitate historical understanding; and (3) what pedagogical principles can guide future adaptations of revolutionary heritage.

By examining this picture book's success in connecting historical memory with children's lived experiences, the study contributes to ongoing discussions about cultural inheritance in early childhood education while proposing concrete methods for

cross-disciplinary collaboration between historians, educators, and children's literature specialists.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Concept and Significance of Revolutionary-themed Symbols

Revolutionary-themed symbols, rooted in China's revolutionary history, embody Communist-led values and serve as vehicles for intergenerational collective memory transmission. Their educational value lies in translating complex historical concepts into child-friendly forms, as seen in *The People with Stars on Their Hats*.

Drawing on semiotic theory, these symbols function via Peirce's triadic system: iconic (e.g., five-pointed star), ideological (revolutionary spirit), and emotional (hope). The book illustrates this: Lanzi's perception of the star evolves from unknown to a "light in darkness", enabling children to grasp abstractions through visual storytelling.

Pedagogically, such symbols act as Vygotsky's (1978) "cultural tools", mediating historical understanding within children's zone of proximal development. Lanzi's receiving silver dollars exemplifies material culture facilitating intergenerational learning; tangible symbols enhance memory retention more than verbal instruction (Chang Yijun, 2024). Adapting these symbols for children requires simplification (focusing on the Red Army kindness over strategy), emotional personification (star as "friend"), and contextual bridging (the Red Army note paralleling modern thank-you cards) – aligning with Nordic approaches to age-appropriate historical narratives (Stenius et al., 2011).

For Generation Alpha, *The People with Stars on Their Hats* succeeds through developmental alignment: short length, relatable 10-year-old protagonist, and concrete resolution, enhancing engagement (Sun Chuanping & Wu Chang, 2024). It balances authenticity with sensitivity via "scaffolded realism", avoiding oversimplification (Chen Xuguang, 2024). These symbols serve as ideological carriers and educational mediators, requiring semiotic accessibility, developmental appropriateness, and intergenerational dialogue. Their transformation offers models for cultural transmission amid prioritized revolutionary heritage education.

2.2. Current Research on Children's Narrative Transformation

Recent studies on children's narrative transformation of revolutionary-themed symbols identify three key approaches aligned with modern pedagogy. First, cognitive adaptation simplifies complex historical narratives to match children's development, as seen in *The People with Stars on Their Hats*. By condensing revolutionary ideals into child-friendly symbols — such as the red star evolving from a mystery to a hope symbol — it aligns with Bruner's narrative cognition theory, making abstractions meaningful through sequential storytelling. Second, affective engagement uses emotional anchors to connect young readers with history. The book's de-

piction of Lanzi's shift from fearing star-adorned caps to trusting their wearers illustrates "emotive pivot points", leveraging universal emotions like fear and reassurance. Studies show such techniques strengthen children's emotional bonds with historical figures (Chang Yijun, 2024), as in the silver dollar scene that makes army-civilian solidarity tangible. Third, multimodal integration combines visual, textual, and sensory elements. The book uses color psychology (warm reds for soldiers, cool blues for fear) and pairs with tactile activities (e.g., star crafts) to boost retention, supported by classroom role-plays.

Challenges include the authenticity-adaptation paradox, addressed via "mediated realism" (e.g., framing turmoil as "a long, dark night"), and the intergenerational interpretation gap — eye-tracking shows children focus on the star's visuals over its ideology (Sun Chuanping & Wu Chang, 2024), urging better visual-textual coordination. Emerging directions emphasize balanced digital adaptations, like interactive star emblems, and cross-disciplinary collaboration (historians, psychologists, educators). A new "CARE" framework (Cultural fidelity, Age-appropriateness, Retention efficacy, Emotional impact) uses the book as a benchmark, advancing evidence-based evaluation of revolutionary-themed children's literature.

3. Case Analysis of The People with Stars on Their Hats

3.1. Visual Representation of Revolutionary-themed Symbols in the Picture Book

The visual representation of revolutionary-themed symbols in *The People with Stars on Their Hats* exemplifies how complex ideological concepts can be translated into child-friendly imagery without diluting their core significance. Through meticulous illustration design, the picture book achieves what scholars term "symbolic accessibility", where politically charged emblems like the red star are reconfigured to align with children's cognitive and perceptual capacities. Two pivotal illustrations demonstrate this transformation process with particular effectiveness.

The first illustration presents the initial encounter between the protagonist Lanzi and the Red Army soldiers (See Fig. 1). On the soldiers' hats, the star emblem acts as both a visual focal point and a narrative catalyst. In the composition, the stars are positioned at a height that aligns with a child viewer's line of sight. Set against the backdrop of what implies a dimly lit environment (echoing the story context), the stars are rendered in striking red. This visual arrangement serves two purposes: it highlights the star as a key narrative symbol, and at the same time, avoids overly strong political overtones that could burden young readers. Such a visual anchor offers cognitive scaffolding, enabling children to start associating the symbol with the positive story developments to come. The illustration shows Red Army soldiers carefully picking pumpkins, with one soldier reminding to avoid damaging the vines — an act of benevolence. Through elements like these, along with the prominent red stars, a connection is subtly built between the star symbol and feelings of goodwill,

laying the groundwork for Lanzi's (and young readers') shifting perceptions.



Figure 1. Initial encounter: the Red Army soldiers picking pumpkins

A second crucial illustration freezes the trust-building moment: after the mysterious figures leave, Lanzi, with bated breath, retrieves the melon-leaf package from under the 10th melon vine (See Fig. 2). As she hurries into the thatched hut, opens it, and discovers the two gleaming silver dollars and the neatly folded note inside, the star emblem, though not directly depicted in this scene, is conjured in her heart. She seems to see the bright red five-pointed star on the octagonal hat again. Visually, the exchange-related actions — Lanzi carefully feeling under the melon vine, her hands holding the package, and then opening it to reveal the silver dollars — create an implicit link to the star symbol. This connection, a form of “symbolic embodiment”, ties the abstract revolutionary idea (represented by the star) to the concrete act of kindness (the silver dollars left by the Red Army). The illustration's perspective mirrors Lanzi's experience: from her cautious search under the vine to her startled reaction when opening the package, letting young readers step into her shoes and deepen emotional immersion. By embedding the star's significance in this sequential, relatable discovery — rather than showing it as a standalone symbol — the image sidesteps heavy-handed moralizing. Instead, it naturally conveys values like integrity (the Red Army's honest, considerate act) and reciprocity (their silent “give - and - take” with the people), all through a child-centered, story-driven visual narrative.



Figure 2. Lanzi opening the melon-leaf package to find silver dollars and a note

Pedagogical analysis reveals three visual strategies that enhance the red star's educational efficacy. First, symbolic consistency ensures the emblem appears across key narrative moments, reinforcing recognition and thematic continuity. Second, progressive elaboration gradually increases the star's visual complexity – from an isolated graphic element to an integrated narrative symbol — mirroring children's developing understanding. Third, contextual anchoring embeds the symbol within emotionally charged scenes.

Emerging research underscores the importance of such visual design in bridging the intergenerational interpretation gap (Sun Chuanping & Wu Chang, 2024). Eye-tracking studies confirm that children follow the star's visual trajectory across pages, with gaze patterns correlating with improved comprehension of its symbolic meaning. This validates the book's approach of using visual storytelling as the primary vehicle for ideological transmission, supplemented rather than dominated by textual explanation.

The illustrations' effectiveness stems from their dual-encoding capacity — functioning simultaneously as narrative elements and symbolic carriers. As Xu (2024) observes, this duality allows *The People with Stars on Their Hats* to operate on multiple pedagogical levels: as a straightforward adventure story for younger readers, and as an introduction to historical consciousness for older children. The visual representations thus achieve what the CARE framework identifies as optimal cultural transmission — preserving ideological essence while ensuring age-appropriate engagement (Sun Chuanping & Wu Chang, 2024).

3.2. Narrative Strategies for Children's Understanding

The People with Stars on Their Hats employs sophisticated narrative strategies to adapt revolutionary heritage narratives to children's cognitive and emotional capacities. Through deliberate structuring of plot, characterization, and symbolism, the picture book achieves what educational theorists term “scaffolded historical consciousness”, enabling young readers to grasp complex ideological concepts through accessible storytelling. Three core strategies prove particularly effective in facilitating this understanding.

First, perspective anchoring structures the narrative entirely through the viewpoint of ten-year-old Lanzi. This technique directly addresses the documented “empathy gap” in children's historical understanding. By filtering events through the child protagonist's limited comprehension — initially fearing the Red Army soldiers as strangers before gradually recognizing their integrity — the narrative mirrors its audience's cognitive journey. The text remains tightly focalized on Lanzi's perceptions, utilizing syntax reflecting juvenile thought patterns. The text describes Lanzi's observations: “Lanzi felt puzzled: They don't look like melon thieves. Who on earth could they be? ... By the silvery moonlight, Lanzi saw that these soldiers were all wearing octagonal caps, each with a bright red five-pointed star on it” (*The People*

with Stars on Their Hats, 2019). This linguistic simplification, coupled with psychological authenticity, creates a “cognitive bridge”, allowing children to project themselves into historical scenarios while preserving narrative authenticity.

Second, symbolic concretization transforms abstract political concepts into tangible narrative elements. The red star emblem, signifying revolutionary ideals, acquires meaning through association with concrete actions: purchasing pumpkins at fair prices, leaving payment unattended, and penning respectful notes. Literacy scholarship confirms this leverages the “embodied cognition” principle, where children comprehend ideals through associated physical behaviors. Crucially, the narrative avoids explicit ideological exposition, instead allowing symbolic meaning to emerge organically through repeated association with virtuous acts.

Third, the book employs “emotional sequencing” to guide children’s affective engagement. The narrative arc traces Lanzi’s emotional trajectory from fear to curiosity, then to trust and admiration, creating what psychologists refer to as an “affective roadmap.” This progression aligns with established developmental sequences in which children’s moral understanding evolves from concrete reactions to abstract principles. Key scenes are structured to mirror children’s own social learning processes: observing adult behavior (the Red Army soldiers’ disciplined conduct), experiencing consequences (receiving fair payment), and forming value judgments (“They’re good people,” Lanzi concludes). Research on the development of historical empathy confirms that such sequenced emotional engagement significantly enhances children’s ability to transfer narrative lessons to real-world contexts (Sun Chuanping & Wu Chang, 2024).

The narrative’s temporal framing further contributes to its pedagogical effectiveness. Rather than presenting historical events as distant occurrences, the story emphasizes temporal bridging through enduring human experiences — hunger, fairness, trust-building — that resonate across generations. As educational historians have noted (Li et al., 2023), this technique helps address children’s difficulty in conceptualizing historical time. The Red Army soldiers’ actions are framed not as historical artifacts but as demonstrations of timeless virtues, enabling contemporary children to draw parallels with modern examples of integrity and social responsibility.

Dialogue construction adheres to child-centered principles identified in developmental literature. Exchanges are concise, with the Red Army soldiers’ lines focusing on concrete actions (“We’ll take 20 pumpkins”) rather than abstract declarations. This aligns with research indicating that children under 12 process historical information more effectively through operational language than ideological discourse. The note left by the Red Army soldiers — “Thank you for the pumpkins. Here is your payment” — exemplifies this principle, conveying revolutionary discipline through simple, actionable statements rather than political rhetoric.

Intergenerational storytelling mechanisms are subtly integrated throughout the

narrative. Early contextual cues establish a framework of cultural transmission that mirrors the intended child-adult reading dynamic. This narrative device activates what family communication scholars term the “intermediary interpretation” effect, wherein adult co-readers can elaborate on historical contexts while children engage with the core story. The book’s ending, which shows Lanzi safeguarding the Red Army soldiers’ note, symbolically positions the child reader as another link in this chain of cultural transmission.

Current pedagogical applications demonstrate the real-world efficacy of these narrative strategies. In kindergarten classrooms where teachers use the “pause-and-ponder” technique — stopping at key narrative junctions to ask “What would you do?” — children exhibit markedly improved historical empathy scores. The book’s avoidance of direct moralizing, instead allowing values to emerge through narrative consequences, aligns with constructivist learning principles that dominate contemporary early childhood education (Vygotsky, 1978). As revolutionary-themed education continues to evolve toward more child-centered approaches, *The People with Stars on Their Hats* offers a replicable model for balancing ideological integrity with developmental appropriateness.

4. Pedagogical Implications and Future Directions

4.1. Educational Value of Revolutionary-themed Symbols in Early Childhood Education

The integration of revolutionary-themed symbols into early childhood education, as exemplified by *The People with Stars on Their Hats*, demonstrates significant pedagogical value in fostering historical awareness and ideological identity. This picture book’s success lies in its ability to translate abstract revolutionary concepts into developmentally appropriate narratives, offering a replicable model for cultural transmission in early education settings.

At the core of this pedagogical approach lies symbolic simplification. The star emblem on the Red Army soldiers’ hats — originally a complex political symbol — is transformed into a child-oriented metaphor (“a light in darkness”) through repetitive visual anchoring. Empirical studies indicate that such simplification enhances symbolic comprehension significantly among children aged 4–6 compared to literal explanations, aligning with Vygotsky’s concept of “cultural tools” wherein physical representations mediate abstract learning.

Emotional personification functions as a complementary mechanism. The protagonist Lanzi’s journey from fear to trust mirrors children’s socioemotional development, constructing an affective bridge to historical narratives. Classrooms adopting this approach report increased sustained engagement in revolutionary-themed activities. Illustrations depicting Lanzi receiving silver coins and a note of gratitude exemplify embodied ideology, where values like fairness and gratitude are conveyed through concrete actions rather than abstract instructions.

The book's intergenerational dialogue model addresses a persistent challenge in heritage education — temporal distance. By positioning Lanzi as an active interpreter with adult guidance (her mother contextualizes the stars), It implements what is termed “temporal scaffolding”. This contrasts with traditional methods where adults dominate historical narration, often leading to disengagement. Recent studies show that children exposed to such interactive storytelling demonstrate higher retention of historical concepts (Sun Chuanping & Wu Chang, 2024).

Pedagogically, the book's multisensory potential remains underexploited — a gap highlighted by the success of interactive apps. Future adaptations could integrate tactile elements (e.g., textured star emblems) or auditory components (period soundscapes) to enhance engagement. However, the existing visual narrative already provides a strong foundation, particularly through its contrastive use of color: dull backgrounds make the red stars visually “pop”, unconsciously reinforcing their symbolic importance (Chen Li, 2024).

4.2. Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

Future research and practice in transforming revolutionary-themed symbols for children's education should prioritize interdisciplinary collaboration, technological integration, and localized adaptation to maximize pedagogical efficacy. Building on the success of *The People with Stars on Their Hats*, three key directions emerge for advancing this field.

Overcoming the gap between historical accuracy and developmental needs requires interdisciplinary frameworks. While some materials, such as the picture book simplifying the star emblem's ideological significance, demonstrate progress, many revolutionary-themed resources still present historical events as monolithic narratives. First, collaborative teams comprised of historians, early childhood educators, and illustrators should develop “layered storytelling” models. In this approach, core symbols maintain historical authenticity, while peripheral details adapt to children's cognitive levels. For instance, the depiction of the Red Army soldiers' discipline in purchasing pumpkins can be supplemented with age-appropriate materials contextualizing the hardships of the Long March (Wang & Li, 2023). Such strategies are essential, as existing limitations are evident: only a small proportion of preschool materials effectively balance historical rigor with developmental appropriateness (Chang Yijun, 2024).

Second, technology-enhanced engagement demands systematic exploration. The book's visual symbolism — the star — could be enriched through augmented reality (AR) applications that animate interactions between Lanzi and the Red Army soldiers. Pilot studies involving apps like *Revolutionary-themed Story Adventures* show that interactive elements, such as tapping stars to reveal soldiers' personal stories, strengthen emotional connection compared to static images (Cheng Li, 2024). Future projects should integrate multisensory feedback; for instance, pairing

the silver dollar exchange scene with tactile replicas of historical currency could reinforce the value of fairness through kinesthetic learning. These innovations, however, must avoid overwhelming young learners — a risk evident in early digital adaptations that prioritized interactivity at the expense of narrative coherence (Sun Chuanping & Wu Chang, 2024).

Third, localized adaptation is critical for diverse educational contexts. The current emphasis on rural settings (e.g., Lanzi's pumpkin field) may restrict engagement among urban children. Research indicates that adapting core symbols to regional histories — for example, a Shanghai-based version could feature the Red Army's underground activities in the city, using subway maps as contemporary parallels to the Long March routes — enhances children's historical understanding by connecting stories to local landmarks (Cheng Li, 2024). Teachers' guides should include modular components: while the star emblem remains a constant, accompanying activities should vary by region (e.g., comparing stars on the Red Army caps to local hero monuments).

Practical recommendations for educators include:

Symbol Expansion: Develop "symbol kits" with interchangeable narrative elements (e.g., different hats/emblems) to explore variations of core themes.

Temporal Anchors: Use the book's intergenerational dialogue model (Lanzi and her mother) to structure mother-child storytelling sessions in classrooms.

Empathy Mapping: Guide children to create emotion charts tracking both Lanzi's feelings and their own reactions during readings, reinforcing affective connections.

For policymakers, establishing revolutionary-themed adaptation guidelines is urgent. Current practices lack standardized criteria for developmental appropriateness, often resulting in either oversimplified or overly complex materials. A national repository of evaluated resources — categorizing books like *The People with Stars on Their Hats* by age group and learning objectives — would help educators select effective tools.

Future studies should investigate longitudinal impacts. While the picture book demonstrates immediate engagement, research is needed on whether symbolic comprehension (e.g., stars as "hope") translates to sustained ideological understanding during adolescence. Cross-cultural comparisons could also reveal universal principles; Finnish adaptations of wartime stories for children show similar success with "object-mediated memory" (Stenius, H., et al., 2011), suggesting broader applicability of these methods.

Ultimately, advancing revolutionary-themed education demands recognizing symbols such as the Red Army star not as static icons, but as dynamic narrative tools that adapt to the needs of each generation. *The People with Stars on Their Hats* initiates this process, yet its potential remains far from exhausted.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the picture book *The People with Stars on Their Hats* successfully bridges the gap between complex revolutionary-themed symbols and children's cognitive capacities through three transformative mechanisms: symbolic simplification, emotional personification, and interactive storytelling. By analyzing two key illustrations — the star emblem as a historical anchor and child-adult interaction scenes — we confirm that abstract political concepts can be effectively materialized into tangible narrative elements suitable for early childhood education. The pedagogical framework derived from this case study highlights the importance of multisensory engagement and intergenerational dialogue in fostering meaningful connections with cultural heritage.

The research underscores several actionable insights for educators and content creators. First, maintaining ideological authenticity while adapting narratives to children's developmental stages requires collaborative efforts among historians, educators, and illustrators. As Wang and Li (2023) note, layered storytelling approaches — where core symbols remain intact while incidental details are simplified — can enhance comprehension without undermining historical significance. Second, technology such as augmented reality offers promising avenues to deepen engagement, though care must be taken to preserve narrative coherence (Sun Chuanping & Wu Chang, 2024). Third, localized adaptations that connect revolutionary-themed symbols to regional contexts can improve relevance and retention, particularly for urban audiences.

However, limitations persist in current adaptation practices. The study reveals a need for standardized guidelines to ensure developmental appropriateness in ideological education materials. Future research should explore longitudinal effects to determine whether early exposure to transformed revolutionary-themed narratives translates into sustained ideological understanding during adolescence. Cross-cultural comparisons, such as those highlighted by Stenius et al. (2011), could further validate the universality of these transformation mechanisms.

In conclusion, *The People with Stars on Their Hats* exemplifies how revolutionary-themed symbols can be dynamically reinterpreted for new generations. This study calls for continued innovation in narrative design, emphasizing collaboration across disciplines to optimize cultural transmission. By treating symbols not as static icons but as evolving narrative tools, educators can ensure that revolutionary-themed heritage remains accessible and meaningful for young learners.

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