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FINDING ITS WAY IN THE TIDE OF GLOBALIZATION:
TENDENCY AND DEFICIENCY IN CHINESE
CHILDREN’S LITERATURE SINCE THE MID-1990s

Based on an outline of the major transformations in modern Chinese children’s literature throughout the past 100 years, this paper analyzes changes, tendencies and problems in Chinese children’s literary creation and literary studies from the mid-1990s to the present. In this era of globalization and commercialism, Chinese writers for children seem to be divided into three groups, the steadfast guardians of pure literary creation, market-driven commercialized writers, and frustrated self-questioners. Since the 1990s, with unprecedented passion, creativity, and dedication, Chinese writers have produced many excellent original works for children. However, compared with Western classic works for children, Chinese children’s literature in general suffers from a thematic and aesthetic deficiency. Lack of profound themes and ingenious artistic techniques plagues most of China’s original creations. What is the direction of Chinese children’s literature in the age of globalization? What does it need? Quantity or quality? Westernization or localization? Pure literary creation or commercially-oriented writing? Literary or cultural studies?

A unique feature of the 21st century is that human history has henceforth entered a brand new age, the age of globalization. In this era no country or nation can choose to withdraw from the world at large, the entire universe even, which has become a network of innumerable pluralistic internal relationships. Since the early 1990s, China has been opening itself to the outside world and pursuing economic reform while achieving high-speed development which has raised the country to an unprecedented level in the hierarchy of global capitalization and consumption. The increasingly stronger tide of globalization has affected not only economic circles in China but also cultural, ideological, and literary spheres. As an integral part of Chinese literature, children’s literature has also felt the impact of the tide and consequently undergone a series of changes in both literary creation and criticism. Mary Farquhar’s (1999) book, Children’s Literature in China – from Lu Xun to Mao Zedong, challenged the situation in which Chinese children’s literature had long been under-researched in the West, however, her study ended with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. Following this, Lijun Bi (2003) examined what Chinese children read in the post-Mao era and...
identified new contents in Chinese children’s books of the so-called New Period (Xin shiqi, from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s). The present essay will continue with the study of Chinese children’s literature by focusing on the changes in children’s literary creation from the mid-1990s to the present, addressing the tendency towards original writing for Chinese children, deficiency in children’s literary creation, and incentive for the creation of Chinese literature for children within the global commercial context.

MODERN CHINESE CHILDREN’S LITERATURE: THREE TRANSFORMATIONS PRECEDING THE MID-1990s

The history of Chinese children’s literature is believed to have begun with the short fairy tale “Xiao Baichuan” (The Little White Boat) written by Ye Shengtao in 1921, though some scholars disagree with this periodization. They argue that if folk tales belong to literature and fairy tales and ballads belong to children’s literature, then Chinese children’s literature should date back to the Jin and Tang dynasties (from 265–907 A.D.), well before the advent of the designation “children’s literature”. Despite this disagreement, there is little question that as early as the 20th century, notably during the May Fourth Period, Chinese children’s literature underwent a series of fundamental transformations that provided the real groundwork for modern children’s literature in China. This section will sketch a historical account of the development of Chinese children’s literature in the 20th century, describing its three major aesthetic transformations from 1919 to the mid-1990s, an important basis for understanding the new tendency for children’s literary creation and criticism in the current era.

Modern Chinese children’s literature has always provided an accurate reflection of the social, political, and cultural changes in Chinese history throughout the 20th century, with the latter having a powerful influence on shaping people’s views regarding children, which in turn influences the creation and criticism of Chinese children’s literature (Wang, 2003). In feudalist China before the 20th century, Confucian thoughts prevailed in the society and filial piety was considered to be of paramount importance. Children were viewed as accessory children or the property of adults, with their individual personality denied and spiritual needs completely ignored. Books they read were intended for moral instruction or as preparation for taking imperial examinations.

The first fundamental transformation in modern Chinese children’s literature took place in the May Fourth Period and featured the child-centered view on children. In the late 19th century, China suffered from numerous humiliations at the hands of Western Powers, ceding territories and signing unequal treaties to open ports where Western invaders could establish “concessions” in the Chinese territories. During the May Fourth Period, inspired by a strong sense of social responsibility and historical mission, a group of patriotic Chinese intellectuals worked together to create modern Chinese children’s literature with a view to educate China’s future generation, thus simultaneously “saving the children” and “saving the nation”. Two representative
works marking this transformation are “Women Zhenyang Zuo Fuqin” (How to Be a Father) written by Lu Xun in 1919 and “Ertong De Wenzue” (Children’s Literature) written by Zhou Zuoren in 1920. In his article, Lu Xun strongly attacked the traditional perception of children in China and promulgated the child-centered idea of children observed in the West. He claimed that “A child who is not treated as a man cannot become one when he grows up.” He even called for parents to “healthily give birth to children, try their best to educate them, and completely understand them.”

“Ertong De Wenzue” (Children’s Literature) by Zhou Zuoren is a landmark article in the revolution of modern Chinese children’s literature, from which the concept of “children’s literature” first sprung. Zhou Zuoren repeatedly emphasized a view on children that included three criteria: children should be treated as human beings, children should be treated as children, and children’s individual personalities should be respected. As this new perception of children became more widespread, many excellent Western children’s literary works were translated into Chinese, such as Andersen’s Fairy Tales and Grimm’s Fairy Tales. At the same time, inspired by Western works some open-minded and passionate Chinese writers began to create original children’s literature that embodied the spirit of discovering children, such as Ye Shengtao (“Daocao Ren” [A Scarecrow]), Bing Xin (“Ji Xiaoduozhe” [Letter to Young Readers]), and Yu Pingbo (“Yi” [Memory]).

The second transformation occurred in the 1930s and 1940s and lasted through the mid-1970s. This period featured revolutionary themes in children’s literature. Responding to the drastic social turbulence caused by the Second Civil War and the War against the Japanese Invasion, Chinese children’s literature made a big readjustment to the child-centered principle in literary creation and infused a significant amount of “revolution,” “class struggle,” and “preservation for survival” ideological elements into children’s literature. Andersen’s idealistic fairy tales providing spiritual nourishment for children, such as imagination, fantasy, individuality, expression, and games, etc., did not seem to be of immediate importance to children within that historical context; instead, realistic works from Russia describing the revolutionary life of Russian youngsters seemed to be a better choice. Chinese writers for children in the 1930s and 1940s believed that children’s education, entertainment, and other spiritual needs could not be fulfilled unless the problem of the survival of the nation and the children themselves were solved. Zhang Tianyi’s “Dalin He Xiaolin” (Big Lin and Little Lin) is a typical political fairy tale of this period featuring the confrontation of two opposing social classes, with Da Lin the older brother representing the bourgeoisie and Xiao Lin the younger one the proletariat. The two brothers started out as close friends but ended up in bloody class struggle that ultimately separated them. Other literary works of marked realistic coloration from this period include “Dabizi De Gushi” (Stories of Big Noses) and “Shaonian Yinshuagong” (Little Pressman) by Mao Dun, “Xiaobing Zhangga” (Little Soldier Zhang Ga) by Xu Guangyao, “Xiao Zhencha Yuan” (Little Scout) by Jun Qing, and “Qiang” (The Gun ) by Wang Shizhen, etc.

From 1949–1965, after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, although many children’s writings depicted children’s happy and prosperous life at school and at home in the new country, the revolutionary and social class commitments still
greatly influenced literary creation. During the disastrous Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, when people’s moral principles depended on absolute loyalty to Chairman Mao personally, Chinese children’s literature ceased existing.

The third transformation took place in the New Period (the early 1980s–1990s), featuring the return of the child-centered notion of children and a humanistic spirit in children’s works. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping, who was actually China’s leader during the New Period, announced the shift of the nation’s focus from class struggle to socialist modernization and construction. The passion and innovation of Chinese writers for children, which had been suppressed for some ten years during the Cultural Revolution, burst forth and children’s literature began to flourish. The generation of young writers who had been forced to leave school to do productive labor in the countryside now became leading children’s writers. Following the endorsement of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, China’s National People’s Congress passed the Law of Protection for Minors in the People’s Republic of China in 1991. For the first time in Chinese history, the social position and human rights of Chinese children were legally recognized and secured. These improvements further stimulated the growth of children’s literature, meanwhile debate raged as to whether children’s literature should educate children or reflect humanity, whether children’s literature should be more instructional in nature or aesthetic instead, and whether children’s literature should likewise disclose the evil side of life or not, etc. Zheng Yuanjie, known as the “king of fairy tales” in China in the 1980s, is a typical representative writer for children speaking for them from a child’s perspective. Respecting children, improving children’s spiritual life, and promoting a happy and healthy environment for growth all characterized the spirit of literary creation during this period. Respect and persistent pursuit of art and literature along with the confidence in their innovative artistic creation distinguished the pioneering writers for children of the 1980s and 1990s.

ORIGINAL LITERARY WRITING FOR CHINESE CHILDREN SINCE THE MID-1990s: TENDENCY AND DEFICIENCY

As previously stated, changes in Chinese children’s literature have always been closely related to, even shaped by, the changes in China’s social, political, and cultural environment. The period from the mid-1990s to the present is a unique stage deserving special attention because never before in history has China been so deeply penetrated by commercialization and globalization, with the result that rules pertaining to the cultural sector, including children’s literature, have greatly changed. Specifically, with the burgeoning of market economy and commercialization, the commercial value-oriented forces at work in society have encroached on the space reserved for the pursuit of purely literary activists. The advent of cyber time has significantly changed the way people live, their literary tastes and preferences, and their manner of consumption. It has even changed the basic content and contours of childhood. The imminent age of picture reading has challenged the traditional form of
reading; people including children are more and more apt to rapidly consume reading material for recreation, relaxation, or merely information. Thoughtful reading for exploring the meaning of life and elevating personal cultural level has become a rare luxury.

In such macro-socio-cultural circumstances, the environment that surrounded original Chinese children’s literature has changed accordingly. Firstly, the artistic innovation and aesthetic pursuit-oriented literary creation for children, which has existed since the 1980s, is being replaced by the market-driven and commercial value-oriented literary production. Secondly, in the age of internet and picture-reading, Chinese children, under heavy academic pressure, have a different mentality towards reading than children of the 1980s: they are more inclined to indulge in speedy consumptive reading that demands no reflection or meditation. Thirdly, the publishing trade has changed in its attitude towards children’s literature. Many publishers are reluctant to publish works that are purely literary because they are elite and thus low-profit. Excellent literary works, without proper marketing techniques, may even fail to enter the increasingly competitive book market. Facing the changed surrounding environment of Chinese children’s literature, three tendencies have surfaced in children’s literary creation (Tang, 2006; Fang, 2007).

One school of thought insists on the importance of aesthetic value in literature deffering to the classic and elegant style of writing for children. Cao Wenxuan, one of China’s foremost children’s authors, represents this literary camp that believes the mission of children’s literature is to enhance their spiritual life and thereby provide a solid humanist foundation for development. Cao Wenxuan, nominated in 2003 by CBBY for the Hans Christian Andersen Author Award, has won some 20 important awards in the field of children’s literature and screen plays since the 1980s. His stories deal in the subject of teenagers growing up in rural China, their fluctuating emotions, joys and disappointments while coping with various adolescent problems. As in his recently published novel which has proved another big success, “Qingtong Kuihua” (Bronze Sunflower), Cao’s works are always distinctive due to the everlasting charm of elegant style. Jin Bo, a famous Chinese children’s poet writing since the 1980s, has published over 20 collections of poems, novels, and fairy tales for children. One of his poetic fairy tales, “Wu Diudiu De Qiyu” (Wu Diu Diu’s Adventure), won the sixth Chinese Writers’ Association’s Children’s Literature Award in 2004. This book consists of fifteen sonnets describing a naughty wooden foot Wu Diu Diu, who accidentally lost his puppet body and heads off on a journey, accompanied by an elderly poet, in search of the missing body. He gains wisdom and knowledge in the course of his adventures but he also becomes more kind and intelligent. Zhang Zhilu, a CBBY nominee for the Hans Christian Andersen Author Award in 2005, is another stalwart guardian of pure literary creation for children. His “Pili Beibei” (Thunderbolt Baby) and “Disan Juntuan” (The Third Legion) were adapted for the movies in the 1990s and his science fiction novel “Feifa Zhihui” (Illegal Intelligence) received the fifth Chinese Writers’ Association’s Children’s Literature Award and the sixth Song Qingling Children’s Literature Award in 2003. Other writers for children who also represent the firm standpoint of “pure and elegant writing for children” since the late
1990s include: Bing Bo (“A Benmao” [Stupid Cat’s Biography], 2002; “Nanguabao Xilie” [Pumpkin Castle Series], 2006), Chang Xingang (“Chentu De Liugen Toufa” [Chen Tu’s Six Threads of Hair], 2003), Peng Xuejun (“Nishi Wode Mei” [You Are My Sister], 1999), Qin Wenjun (“Nansheng Jiali, Nvsheng Jiamei” [Stories of Boy Student Jia Li and Girl Student Jia Mei], 2000), Wang Yimei (“Yanshu De Yuelinghe” [Moon River of Little Mole], 2002), Xiong Lei & Xiong Liang (Xiaoyanshu De Tudou” [Little Mole’s Potato], 2003; “Xiao Shishi” [The Little Stone Lion], 2005), and Zheng Chunhua (“Datou Erzi Xiaotou Baba” [Big-headed Son and Small-headed Daddy], 2001).

The other school of writers for children, not large but growing in importance, subscribes to some of the practices of commercialized writing. The huge commercial success of the first translations of the Harry Potter books in 1999 spurred Chinese publishers, who were shocked by the potential for huge profits in children’s book market, to shift their focus to publishing works with maximized commercial value. Frustrated by the diminishing popularity of pure literary works and driven by the hot market enticement for commercial writing, some writers for children began to produce market-tailored books that cater to the tastes of mass culture. In 2002, three young women authors named themselves “Pretty Clothes Writing Team” and began writing for teenage girls. The team impressed the public with fashionable, avant-coureur style, like a pop group, and their disdain for literary conventions. They wrote about teenagers’ emotions, friendships, relationships at school, etc. and were highly prolific: they produced over 20 novels within 3 years and these books all sold well. Another influential writing team composed of two young authors, who wrote a novel named “Wowei Gekuang” (I Am Mad about Songs) (2002), describes the high school life of teenagers. The story had such a strong, distinctive and fashionable style that it quickly caught on among young people. The story appeared in cartoon film, in paperbacks, CDs, T-shirts, computer games, star cards, and fast-food meal packs, etc., and is currently being adapted for the stage and television. However, despite the popular writing teams described above, these groups all broke up two or three years after they joined forces, which makes people question how long the charm of their work will last as well. Another notable case worth mentioning here is Yang Hongying’s series of children’s stories “Taoqibao Maxiaotiao” (The Naughty Boy Ma Xiao Tiao) published in 2003. This is the product of a joint effort between author and publisher to devise a meticulously designed marketing scheme. The series consists of many funny stories about a 10-year-old boy and his friends, combining exaggerated reality, fantasy, and buffoonery. Children find the book highly entertaining. With over 2.25 million copies printed in the first two years of its publication, the book became one of the most successful bestsellers in Chinese children’s literature of the 21st century.

If the first camp of writers can be described as “stalwart guardians of pure literary creation”, and the second camp “market-driven commercialized writers”, then the third groups of writers can be characterized as “discouraged and perplexed self-doubters”. Finding themselves in the new age and new literary environment of the 21st century, some pioneering Chinese writers for children collectively demonstrate a keen desire for appreciating and learning from the excellent classic works for
children in foreign languages. Mei Zihan’s “Yuedu Ertong Wenxue” (Reading Children’s Literature), Peng Yi’s “Tuhua Shu: Yuedu Yu Jingdian” (Picture Books: Reading and the Classics), and the new-generation writer, Chen Enli’s “Haizi, Rangoo Peini Yiqi Chengzhang” (Child, Let’s Grow Together) are all works in which writers share their findings and reflections on the foreign classics with colleagues in the field of children’s literature as well as ordinary readers. From fairy tales by Astrid Lindgren, Roald Dahl, Awa Naoko, and other winners of the Hans Christian Andersen Author Award among other prestigious honors, the Chinese writers are deeply touched by the magnificent imagination, playful spirit, philosophical reflections on life and the beauty of human nature so vividly depicted in the splendid world of children created by these ingenious authors. Such in-depth learning led to a shocking realization for the pioneer Chinese writers, concerning the huge disparity between original Chinese children’s literature and its foreign counterparts in the general quality of books. This gap cannot be bridged in a short time. The confidence and sense of aesthetic achievement that possessed these Chinese writers, in conjunction with the explosion of passion for literary creation and innovation that marked the 1980s, seems to be shattering in the 21st century. Deeply frustrated, many of these writers came to realize that most of the original Chinese children’s literature created in the 1980s and 1990s has been lingering at a relatively low level of aesthetic creation. The pride and confidence they felt in the past is just “shallow and illusionary”.


Chinese children’s literature had long been regarded as an instructional tool for children: the stories were aimed at correcting children’s weaknesses. Although this situation has changed since the 1980s with the appearance of more diversified themes than moral messages, thoughtful reflection of life and human existence is still lacking in Chinese children’s literature. Frequently addressed topics are emotional changes in childhood, growing-up problems in adolescence, and nostalgia, etc.; more profound themes such as universal humanity and human relationship are seldom explored. As noted by Tan (2007), in Chinese literary works for children little attention is given to the children in minority groups or disadvantaged situations, such as physically handicapped or mentally retarded children, single-parent children, and children from migrant farmer worker families (in which parents go to work in the city for survival and either leave their children to the grandparents in the countryside or bring them to the city to live in tough conditions). However, such themes can be found frequently in works for children in foreign languages, for example, “Henry Hikes to Fitchburg” vividly reveals the subtle relationship between purpose of life and process of life. The irresistible charm of many such works lies in their impressive revelation of the most touching and fundamental elements of human existence and universal truth.

According to Fang, the aesthetic deficiency in Chinese children’s literature is reflected in three aspects: lack of child fun, lack of ingenious design, and lack of expressive details. As to child fun, it should not be denied that Chinese children’s literature has greatly improved its artistic look since the 1980s with the prospering of teenager literature. Zheng Chunhua’s “Datou Erzi, Xiaotou Baba” (Big-headed Son and
Small-headed Daddy), Qin Wenjun’s “Nansheng Jiali, Nvsheng Jiamei” (Stories of Boy Student Jia Li and Girl Student Jia Mei), Mei Zihan’s “Nver De Gushi” (Story of the Daughter), and Tang Sulan’s “Benlang De Gushi” (Tale of the Stupid Wolf), etc, are all good examples in which humor and child fun are employed in many places to achieve the special aesthetic effect for children. However, in comparison with foreign works such as the poems written by the Canadian best-loved poet for children, Dennis Lee, Chinese children’s literature still suffers from deficiency of pure, natural, skillful, and highly expressive child fun and humor.

Lack of ingenious design is another problem in Chinese works for children. How to weave complication into a simple plot to achieve dramatic effect is a test of both the talent and the skill of the writer. Chinese writers for children have been good at loading rich, heavy themes into stories, but are less skillful in handling the content in a deft way to avoid making the stories sound abstruse for children. A Racecourse for Andy (I Own A Racecourse), the Hans Christian Andersen Author Award-winning novel written by Australian writer Patricia Wrightson, is an excellent example of ingenious instillation of profound theme into light and easy plot. The story, filled with warmth and love, reveals the touching humanistic care of the ordinary people for the mentally-retarded children. Andy, whose understanding and perception ability is slow and not age-appropriate, thinks that he has “bought” a racecourse from an old man for 3 dollars. After he “owns” it, he puts his heart to taking care of the racecourse. People working in the racecourse try their best to help Andy realize his dream in his world of fantasy. The story ends happily with Andy persuaded to “sell” back the racecourse for 10 dollars to the racecourse committee. Touching and profound as its theme is, the story consists of a series of simple and delightful episodes that make very joyful to read.

In terms of details, the deficiency in Chinese children’s literature is not in quantity but in quality, which means it lacks unique, vivid, highly expressive details. As the basic mechanisms of narration, details constitute the overall aesthetic look of a literary work. Many Chinese writers for children begin writing with high intention, but end up with works that fall short of that intention due to lack of expressive details.

Corresponding to the three transformations in the past one hundred years, Chinese children’s literature has experienced three changes: coming back to literariness, coming back to children, and coming back to individual (Wang, 2007). Nowadays, Chinese children’s literature is getting increasingly free from political influence and is developing in the real sense of literary creation. As an integral part of literature, however, Chinese children’s literature and literary studies can never escape the influence of culture. In the age of globalization in which the country is experiencing fusion and collision between Chinese culture and Western culture, how should Chinese children’s literature balance its tendency and overcome its deficiency so that it can better develop in the tide of commercialization and globalization? The next section will discuss some major issues concerning Chinese children’s literature in the 21st century.
CONSTRUCTING CHINESE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION AND COMMERCIALIZATION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Although contemporary Chinese children’s literature has made substantial progress in the past decades, it is facing serious challenges which might in the meantime turn into opportunities for future development.

(1) Quantity versus Quality

On May 31, 2004, Chinese President Hu Jintao made the following remarks highlighting the importance of improving Chinese minors’ ideology and morality at a conference during his inspection of work for minors in Beijing:

We should enhance the sense of social responsibility of mass media and publishing trade to create a favorable public environment for the ethical education of the youth. Our strategy is to provide more and better cultural products and cultural services for children and young people. (“China Youth Daily”, 2004)

The following statistics shows the increased quantity of books for children in China in the past decade as a result of favorable market environment: Before 1974, China had only 2 presses of children’s books, publishing only some 200 children’s titles each year, most of which were reprints. By 2001, there had appeared 31 publishing houses specialized in children’s literature as well as 130 other publishers which also publish books for children. In 2003, according to the data released by China’s General Administration of Press and Publication, 7588 children’s titles were published in China (of which 4646 were originals), with some 200 million copies printed totaling 20 million US dollars.

On the one hand, it is inspiring to see the increased quantity of books owned by children in China, given the large population of Chinese young readers which approximates 367 million; on the other hand, however, it cannot be neglected that quality works are still rare. In recent years, critics have been calling for “tough creation” in Chinese children’s literature: tough in the sense that the creation should feature both high-level artistic expression and profound theme exploration. Recently a disturbing tendency of urbanizing children’s literature appeared in China: stories tend to exaggerate the fashionable life of urban teenagers; fairy tales tend to be always light and easy, and poems tend to depict only the happy side of the “lucky single-child generation”; there is little, if any, representation of children from lower social classes, poor rural areas, or with physical or mental disabilities. It is urgently needed to increase the number of quality works for such audience which, while providing entertainment and aesthetic pleasure for children, reflect profound humanistic power and universal truth.
(2) Westernization versus Localization

According to Wang Ning (2001), a Chinese leading scholar of literary and cultural studies, the relationship between globalization and localization can be illustrated as follows:

Even if cultural globalization does exist, it cannot obscure all the national characteristics of individual cultures. Cultural globalization cannot but be resisted by the other force: cultural localization. In the Chinese context, we have on the one hand the extensive introduction of Western culture and learning, but on the other hand, the revival of neo-Confucianism and the popularization and new interpretation of classical Chinese literature are in full swing (Wang, 2001: 59).

It is true that with the extensive introduction of foreign classics for children, there appeared a tendency of reviving Chinese traditional works for children which carry both instructional value and traditional beauty of Chinese language. “Dizi Gui” (Rules for Being A Good Student and Child), the most favored primer for pre-school and primary school children in China nowadays, was written about 500 years ago by a skillful writer of the Qing Dynasty. It contains 1080 Chinese characters in sets of 3-character rhyming phrases which, in a highly condensed style, described Chinese ancient wisdoms on children education. Sincerity, respect, humanity, and peace are essential qualities that children in ancient times were expected to possess. In the current information age, many people in China hold that it is highly necessary to pass the traditional Chinese moral standards down to the new generation who, exposed to diversified ideological and cultural influences, feel perplexed in front of the many options, not knowing how to judge and what to choose. “Dizi Gui”, with its original implication and new interpretation, has become an obligatory course for children in primary schools in China.

A monumental effort in preserving the heritage of Chinese children’s literature in China is the compilation of The Anthology of 100 Classical Chinese Children’s Literary Works in 100 Years, published on December 31, 2005. The Senior Committee of Compilation of this book consists of almost all the authoritative figures in the field of children’s literature and literary criticism in China, including Zhang Zhilu, Yan Wenjing, Jin Bo, Wang Quangen, Gao Hongbo, Cao Wenxuan, Fan Fajia, and Su Peide. These writers and scholars hold that in the past 100 years, Chinese children’s literature has been strikingly characterized with realism and nationalism. Chinese children’s literature, growing up with the country in her ups and downs in the last century, has been bearing the hope of the whole nation. It is the holy commitment of Chinese writers for children to preserve the glorious tradition of Chinese children’s literature and hand it down in innovative ways in the 21st century.

A severe challenge that confronts the literary study of Chinese children’s literature comes from the lack of discourse system of its own. As Zhu Limin (2006) pointed out, modern Chinese children’s literature has been always subject to the hegemony of the Western discourse system of children’s literature from its very beginning in the early 20th century. Studies of modern Chinese children’s literature had been restricted to
the Western system of literary criticism, applying the Western theories to the interpretation of Chinese children’s literature. The question is how can modern Western literary critical theory interpret traditional Chinese children’s literature? For example, an ancient classical Chinese poem written some 1600 years ago, named “Chilechuans” (Chi Le River), contained only 23 Chinese characters but vividly depicted the vast extension and beauty of the plain where a group of herdsmen lived happily with their children. From the western angle of literary criticism, is this poem realistic or romantic? Is it pleasure principle or game principle? None of these terms which are tailored for Western children’s poems seemed to be adequate to interpret this ancient Chinese ballad. In the new century, it is of urgent need to construct a Chinese literary theory and discourse system for Chinese children’s literature on the basis of learning from the Western literary criticism.

(3) Commercial Writing versus Pure Literary Writing

As China opens wider to the outside world and keeps deepening its economic reform, it is impossible to return to the past. Commercialization cannot but speed up. In the commercialized environment, how can Chinese writers for children face the gloomy prospects of pure literary creation and resist the growing temptation of commercial writing, which is basically aimed at catering to the market demand and the mass taste? In a sense commercial writing is a betrayal of the artistic individuality of the writer. It is subject to the restriction of the market demand from the very beginning of literary creation, and targeting at grabbing market share and maximizing profit. In commercial writing, individuality is replaced by standardization. Successful models are duplicated so that scale production becomes possible (such as the beauty-hero stories repeatedly presented in Hollywood movies). Marketing is an integral part in commercial writing which involves a complete chain of R & D (research and development), branding, and sales, etc.

As Tang Rui (2006) states, the increasingly influential role of marketing in the process of circulation is a double-edged sword for Chinese children’s literature. Good marketing can lead or even create the market demand, kindle the readers’ desire to read, and guide them to appreciate the intrinsic value of quality books; On the contrary, mediocre or bad marketing can only cater to the instinctive needs of man, produce cultural junk, and hinder civilization. A winning strategy for Chinese children’s literature in the commercialized environment would be to adequately use marketing as an effective tool to promote quality literary works for children. In the meantime, marketing organs should deepen their sense of socio-cultural responsibility and work out a way to integrate market rules with artistic elevation.
In China it has long been a tradition to study children’s literature centering on essentialism, addressing questions like “What is literature?” and “What is literature for?”. But nowadays the situation has changed in which the domain of literature has become much wider and the pure literary study of the work proper is no longer sufficient to interpret its complete meaning. Chinese children’s literature calls for a shift of focus in literary studies from pure essentialism to an integration of aesthetic criticism with cultural studies (Tan 2007). Cultural studies cover a wide range of areas, including gender study, area study, ethnic study, and media study, etc. These factors constitute the external ecological environment of children’s literature and exert significant influence on literary creation. Transformation of children’s discursive patterns, formation of new tendencies in literary creation, changes in narrative patterns, and book circulation, etc. are but a few examples of the aspects in literature that are easily affected by changes in cultural environment. In terms of methodology, literary studies of Chinese children’s literature should break the confinement of the traditional method of elucidation and integrate with methodologies in other disciplines, such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, economics, and politics, etc., to form its own methodology system with distinctive features.

Although the study of children’s literature is different from the study of comparative literature, it is highly recommendable here to appreciate Wang’s (2001) statement on the relationship between comparative literature and cultural studies. The following concise remarks, though intended for the study of comparative literature, equally apply to the study of Chinese children’s literature:

[…] doing comparative literature study cannot just confine ourselves to the narrow domain of literature proper, for the scope of literature is expanding, and the traditional literary theory is being replaced by the more inclusive critical theory with the latter being closer and closer to Cultural Studies … comparative literature study in its highest sense should be done in a cross-linguistic, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary way. It should not just stick to the “text” of the formalistic sense, but it should deal with the larger “text” of social and ideological sense or “context”. It cannot be done well without touching cultural and ideological issues. But it must start with literary phenomena and come, after some theoretical and interdisciplinary analyses, back to literature, thus making some construction of literary theory itself. (Wang, 2001: 63)

In today’s China, unlike the older generations, children are well-equipped with multi-disciplinary knowledge. Their interest and curiosity goes far beyond the literature proper. This requires Chinese writers for children to create highly informative works of art to satisfy children’s aesthetic demand and curiosity. The same is true of Chinese scholars of children’s literature who, while indulged in their literary study, should also serve as a guide to children in reading. In this sense, the present essay might not only serve as a historical retrospect on what has been achieved in Chinese children’s literature and its studies in the past decades, but also anticipate what will come in the near future, for which I am still optimistic.
WORKS CITED


