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Representing Gender in Chinese Children's Literature (1920 – 2010)

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Abstract

This study investigates the representation of gender roles in Chinese children's literature from 1920 to 2010, focusing on constructions of masculinity and femininity in different historical contexts. The paper attempts to demonstrate the persistence of, as well as departures from, traditional stereotypes about gender roles in China throughout the last century. Although there is no definite evidence that children's literature is a deciding factor in the assigning of gender roles to the young in China, the influence of literary works on how gender is perceived and constructed in society cannot be denied. A close reading of these literary texts offers us insights into understanding the changing representation of gender roles in Chinese children's literature, which reflect changes in society and social attitudes toward gender in mainland China.

Keywords: gender roles, gender relations, gender stereotyping, Chinese children's literature

Introduction

Two children, a boy and a girl, in a Chinese kindergarten are discussing how to avoid their imminent separation due to the decision of the girl's parents to immigrate to Canada:

“Hey! I know,” the boy breaks the silence excitedly. “We can get married!”

“Get married?”

“Yes, when we get married, you will no longer stay with your mum and dad. You will come with me.”

“Really?”

“Of course. When my aunty got married, she moved out of Grandma's house. When my mum got married, she then had to follow my dad.”

“Yeah... that's right.”

“It's decided. Today when you get home, tell your mum and dad about our marriage,” the boy says firmly.

“But, but, what shall we do if they don't agree to our marriage?” the girl asks softly.

“Tell them we are in love, already for a long time.” The boy is quite resolute.

“And we can always think of some other plans, if they don't agree. We'll discuss it then.”

– Shu Huibo, “Puppy Love” 108-109

The above conversation, taken from a recent Chinese short story for children published in 2015, highlights the age-old question: “Does art imitate life or does life imitate art?” This debate has long frustrated researchers in

the field of children's literature, especially in terms of gender stereotyping. It has long been agreed that works written specifically for children are informed by the authors' respective value systems, their ideas of how the world is or ought to be, and therefore such works have tremendous power to teach and to shape (Sutherland 144). When China faced the cultural predicament of the degeneration of its traditional heritage toward the end of the nineteenth century, its youth represented the vigour needed for a revitalised China, and children thus gained symbolic status as representatives of the future. This shift in values a century ago accompanied the advent of revolutionary beliefs, and brought into existence modern Chinese children's literature (Bi and Fang 55). The pioneers of this literature tried to connect social realism to patriotism by exposing social problems in their texts in order to educate the young, a concept noted by the scholar Mary Farquhar, who argues that teaching children the notion of equality – in terms of gender and class – is the central concept of this new children's literature (152).

As a part of the view that children represented the future of China, a re-examination of gender roles was called for. Indeed, Ye Shengtao's *Scarecrow* (1923), the very first major work of modern Chinese children's literature, focuses on the destitute lives of peasant women, and uses the figure of the scarecrow to express frustration about the unfair treatment of women in Chinese society (Bi 35–36). Following this initial work, many progressive Chinese writers advocated the liberation of women in their stories. According to Leo Ou-fan Lee, the women's liberation movement in China began at the turn of the century and reached its peak in the 1920s (168) during which time, almost all early twentieth-century Chinese political and intellectual leaders spoke about the need to change the prevailing ways of thinking about women and their social roles. The key issue in the early stage of the women's liberation movement was the stance against the practice of foot binding, a movement which went on to achieve great success. In a short period of time, women's seclusion and possession of tiny feet went from being a source of pride in Chinese refinement to a symbol of embarrassment that was synonymous with China's backwardness, and by 1930, it was only in remote areas that young women still had their feet bound (Ebrey et al. 460). Yet to rid China of the practice of foot binding was only the beginning of a long battle, with the ultimate goal to revitalise and to modernise the nation.

The issue of gender stereotyping in children's literature has attracted much concern among Western scholars. To cite only three such examples, Clare Bradford emphasizes that when evaluating children's books, attention must be paid to messages about gender construction because they affect the construction of identity in their readers (3). Christine Christie also points out that particular attention must be paid to the identity of characters in the texts that depict oversimplified gender-role stereotypes, which may contribute to establishing and reinforcing sexist attitudes (12). And, finally, John Stephens comments that "all textual representations engage in gendering their participants, of course, and it has been an important endeavor in the criticism of children's literature to map how the characteristic humanistic narratives of that literature are

apt to be endemically gendered” (2002, x). The purpose of this essay is to provide a selective survey of Chinese children’s literature over the last century in order to reflect the changes in society and social attitudes toward gender in mainland China.

1920s – 1940s

Although the Chinese state as a central authority was weak during this turbulent era as various political forces vied for power, it is this period that witnessed the rise of Chinese nationalism. This movement was marked by the advent of a wave of new revolutionary ideas in the form of the May Fourth new culture advocacy, which was an outcome of the sustained resentment among patriotic Chinese intellectuals against imperialist occupiers. The best intellectual minds of the time turned to a new area, children’s education, hoping that the new generation would eventually shoulder the task of building a new China (Bi, Fang and Bradford 39). As such, a great deal of literature was created specifically to educate children for this task and in these works, the influence of the state as a ruler weakened when compared to earlier works, as the fate of the nation became the central concern.

The most popular literary work for children in the 1920s was Bing Xin’s *Letters to Young Readers* (*Ji Xiaoduzhe*), which idealises love and celebrates childhood (Farquhar 118). Bing Xin, who was brought up in an affluent family, wrote these letters while studying in the United States from 1923 to 1926; these letters were published first as a newspaper supplement before being published as a book in 1926. Within a year of the book’s publication, another three editions were published, and in less than a decade, twenty-one editions were released (Wan Pingjin and Wang Wending 198–199). Following the success of her *Letters*, Bing Xin emerged as the most prominent writer for Chinese children in the 1920s.

The book is distinguished by its candid probing of the multiple dimensions of universal love, natural beauty, and the pursuit of truth, which are all seen as positive moral values. Bing Xin’s homesickness is also an important theme in her *Letters*, as evidenced, for example in Letter 16 in which she wrote, “As long as the lake does not dry up and the rock in the lake does not crumble, my feeling of homesickness will not fade either” (Bing Xin n. p.), a homesickness that is often read by contemporary Chinese critics as a sign of patriotism (Wang Quangen, *Pioneers* 198). Writing passionately about “maternal love”, Bing Xin expressed longing for her mother’s protection and caring when she needed them quite desperately. Her social concern and her proposed remedy, based upon the notion of “universal love”, are extremely idealistic but Bing Xin’s unique style also makes her *Letters to Young Readers* distinctively didactic in terms of proposing maternal love as the solution to the world’s problems. From a feminine perspective, she promoted the idea of love as a social remedy, with universal love depicted as a bridge for any gap and a remedy for any social problem.

However, more negatively, traditional sentimentalism derived from self-pity and self-affection can also be felt throughout the collection of her letters, as seen above, hence creating an image of a mild-mannered, shy, and sentimental damsel in distress. Jiang Guangci, a revolutionary writer, calls Bing Xin “the representative of bourgeoisie young ladies” and “the representative of aristocratic women, who only knew weakness: “I miss mum, I miss my brothers and I miss home” (1). Jiang further comments that there is not much difference between her views and those of sentimental young ladies from the former dynastic China.

In contrast, revolutionary writers advocated for their readers to have a fighting spirit, and consequently created young male characters who actively participated in political activities, such as street demonstrations and confronting the violence of the police force. Indeed, these actions can be found in the story “White Flags” by Cheng Sheng, published in *Weekly Review* on May 26 1919, three weeks after the students’ May Fourth Movement’s patriotic demonstrations, and also in Lu Yin’s story “Two Pupils” (1926) and Dai Pingwang’s “Xiao Feng” (1928). In having their main characters as males, these stories present an overwhelming male dominance in the participation of political activities with a bearing on the fate of the nation. These boys are shown as adopting values from older boys at school, who are presented as self-conscious ideologists, always ready to provide patriotic slogans and this over-representation of male participants in patriotic demonstrations provides some indication of these authors’ stereotypical views of gender roles in relation to the family, society and political participation. Remarkably, the traditional figure of power in the patriarchal family, the father, is still depicted in these revolutionary stories as exercising the decision-making power with regard to granting permission for the two parents’ children to participate in demonstrations, whilst the mother is always portrayed as “protective”, discouraging their children’s integration into a larger community beyond the family (Bi, Fang and Bradford 39–41).

1950s – 1970s

Having been victorious, Mao Zedong and the communist revolutionaries announced the founding of the People’s Republic of China on 1 October 1949. Despite their victory, the new government faced the tremendous task of consolidating its power, and constructing a national economy shattered by both World War II and the subsequent civil war. Furthermore, the regime had to build up a strong defence against what was regarded as the American threat, especially after the Korean War of the early 1950s. The mission to train socialist defenders and constructors was “grounded” inextricably in “communal” and “collectivist values” that were assigned to children’s literature (Stephens 2018, 3). In this light, the rhetoric of socialist construction became one of the dominant traits of children’s literature of this era, and new socialist gender roles were to be

fostered in order to boost productivity. In this context, literary works began to break the barriers of traditional gender stereotyping.

Ma Feng's short story, "Han Meimei," was first published in 1954 in *People's Literature*, a highly prestigious national literary magazine, and the story was later adapted to be included in the national Chinese language textbook for Grade 5 primary school students in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is the story of seventeen-year-old Han Meimei, who fails her entrance examination for senior high school, causing her family great distress. For generations her family had been illiterate peasants, their hope being that her education would enable Meimei, the only child in the family, to gain a decent, well-paid job that would be able to deliver the family from its impoverishment. Despite her failure to do well in the entrance examination, Meimei is firmly convinced that she can nonetheless contribute to the socialist motherland by participating in agricultural work. The story shows that Meimei's new scientific farming not only boosts the output of the village community, but also greatly advances her family's standard of living (Bi, Fang and Bradford 42).

The disparity between personal and collective interests is the main conflict in the story. Notably, loyalty to the socialist motherland is of strong contrast to the Confucian belief that an individual is first and foremost a member of the family, with their duties and obligations to the family as a priority. The authority of the head of the family, usually a father or a grandfather, must never be challenged. The author presents a picture of the confrontation between Meimei and the older generations of her family after her unsuccessful performance in the entrance examination to high school. Her mother sighs constantly. Her grandmother cannot help disclosing what she has always felt: "What could you expect of a girl? A girl is a girl. What a waste it was to send a girl to school for all these years!" (131). Her father is described as the most upset. He throws her rice bowl on the table, calling her "useless," "a failure" and "a disgrace to the family" (131–132). Contrary to the negativity of the older generations, Meimei is described as determined to make a difference in the new socialist China. She represents not only the new socialist girlhood, but also the hope and future of the nation. As she succeeds in scientific farming, not only does the community around her prosper, but ultimately, Meimei's family benefits as well. At the end of the story, both her father and grandmother have to admit that they have been wrong about both the new socialist values, and about girls. To underscore the protagonist's tenacity, the author introduces a male character named Zhang Wei, who also fails his entrance examination for the senior high school. When he hears the news of his failure, he instantly cries. This boy is depicted as picky, lacking in vision, and selfish.

Through the course of the story, the author excels at establishing a new conviction that in the battle to modernise China and rescue it from its previous backwardness, the young are the quintessence of socialism. They not only represent the scientific advancement of new knowledge, but are also capable of conveying the new socialist moral values to the older generations, whom they now can guide. From this story,

it is clear that the discourse of socialist children's literature shares the traditional Confucian notion that literature is primarily informative and didactic, serving a social and moral purpose, a purpose that makes the role reversal in stories like "Han Meimei" even more pertinent when analysing the new gender roles in the post-revolution era, as girls are capable of doing better than boys in leading and educating their elders.

Qu Bo's novel *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* was published in 1957, with 1,560,000 copies of the novel printed between 1957 and 1964 in three editions. A film adaptation of the novel was made in 1960, and *The Taking of the Tiger Mountain*, one of the eight modern revolutionary model operas of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), is based on this story. It has become a very popular story in China and has been adapted and readapted into several films and plays. Subsequently the novel was also adapted as a comic strip and made into comic books for children. *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* is about the success of a small detachment of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) who go into the snowy mountains and forests to destroy the organised remnants of bandits, landlords, and former Kuomintang (KMT) officers and spies, as these people were sabotaging the land reform programme started by the PLA in 1946 in the communist-controlled areas of northern Manchuria. It is a gripping adventure story full of exciting episodes, heroic feats, and brilliant demonstrations of courage and strategy, with a strong element of local colour and folklore (Fang and Bi 391).

Each of the operations requires a different strategy, relying on the exceptional qualities of valour displayed by a host of truly memorable heroes, each of whom brings their individual specialized talents. The author creates one of the most brilliant female characters in the discourse of Chinese socialist literature — Bai Ru, the only female member of the unit, who serves as its medic:

Only eighteen, she was very pretty, with cheeks as pink as rose petals. A pair of deep dimples danced along with her endless smiles. Her large beautiful eyes flashed happiness as though they could speak. Two short braids hung behind her ears. With wispy hairs framing her forehead, she looked exactly like a floating hibiscus flower. Her body was refined and delicate, but also sturdy. She also had a clear, full voice, and was good at dancing and singing. When dancing her body was light as a bird, and her singing was as melodic as a *qin*. Wherever she went songs and laughter followed. (Trans. adapted from Hang 108)

Bai Ru does not merely have good looks. At the tender age of eighteen, she is already a member of the Communist Party, and is portrayed as representing the charisma of the PLA when interacting with the local people. The success of the small PLA unit largely depends on the help they can obtain from the local villagers, who have a sound understanding of the areas in which the battles are fought. Being the victims of the bandits

for years, these villagers do not trust the PLA soldiers and there are multiple incidents where it is Bai Ru who, representing the PLA, is able to win over the villagers. While the men know policy and try to explain it to the local people, it takes the charming voice, innocent eyes, and healing skills of Bai Ru to really gain the trust of the people (Hang 109). Yet while such a portrayal may be viewed positively from a number of aspects of female representation, it should also be noted that the characterisation of Bai Ru subtly reinforces the traditional gender bias that the success of a female largely depends on her physical looks and feminine charms.

Another popular novel of this period is Luo Guangbin and Yang Yiyan's *Red Crag*, which was published by the Chinese Youth Press in 1961. Within a year, the novel won wide public attention, as excerpts from it were recited at literary gatherings and on radio programmes. Four years after it was published, 5,000,000 copies had been sold, and it was still ranked as the number one best seller (Fang and Bi 393). There are two parts to *Red Crag*; the underground communist activities in Chongqing, and the struggle of the communist inmates in prison. Sister Jiang is the principal hero of the novel. As a communist leader, her personal life is more closely related to her role than any of the other characters. As the novel develops, she is assigned to work with her husband, Peng Songtao, who is a political commissar for the communist guerrillas in the nearby Huaying Mountains. On her journey to the communist guerrillas' base outside a small town, Jiang sees a wooden cage hanging on the gate tower of the city wall. Inside the cage is her husband's bloody head:

Hot tears welled up in her eyes. She put her hand to her choking throat and closed her eyes to shut out the sight. She wanted to cry aloud. Wave after wave of dizziness made her feel faint and she swayed on her feet [...]. In her misery she reproached herself: Was this the time or the place for self-pity? What about the task with which the Party had entrusted her? She had no business to reveal her grief, and less to linger. (Trans. from *Red Crag* 78)

The scene demonstrates Jiang's incredible capacity to accept the greatest of personal tragedies in her absolute dedication to the revolutionary cause. When she finally arrives at the base, her comrades have prepared a meal to welcome her. Trying to soften the blow, they tell her that Comrade Peng is busy on a mission and will be away for a few days. Controlling her sorrow, Jiang tells them in an even voice, "I know everything" (80). The heroism of Jiang needs no more description than this simple sentence.

In the concentration camp, Jiang is tortured every night for more than a month. The jailers stick sharp splinters under her fingernails, but the enemy obtain nothing from her because, as Jiang later says to a fellow inmate, "Torture is but a small test. Splinters are made of bamboo, but communists have wills of steel" (Trans.

from *Red Crag* 291) Facing her death on the eve of the communist victory, she is calm. Her last words to a fellow inmate are: “If it should be necessary for us to die for the ideals of the communism, we should be ready to do it – without blanching, heart beating no faster [...]. I know that I can.” (Trans. from Huang 104). The characterisation of this kind of female heroism is unparalleled in Chinese literature.

1980s – 2010s

The Cultural Revolution shook China for ten years from 1966 to 1976, and all the institutions governing children’s literature collapsed. This second revolution came to an abrupt end when Mao Zedong died in 1976, and then the renaissance of Chinese children’s literature began.

The phenomenal popularity of *Stories for 365 Nights*, published in 1980, with twenty-one editions totalling a print-run of 4.3 million copies in the following eight years, reflects a severe shortage of children’s books free of explicit political content. The book comprises new stories tackling problems associated with one-child families and old stories written earlier but modified to represent a reconfigured childhood in this new age. These stories are intended to show children what is right and what is wrong for the purpose of transforming the children to live up to the expectation of adults. The narrator regards the qualities of a “good” child, who is more often a girl, to include “being diligent, hygienic, helpful, sharing, tolerant and quiet” (Bi and Fang 63–64). In contrast, those who are deemed “bad” or “naughty” characters are usually the boys, who are depicted as behaving in less regulated ways. They are shown, for example, as liking to play, or taking a short stroll back home after school, which could take them a few hours, as they stop in the market for an hour, playing with shop displays. They are also attracted to flying birds or singing cicadas, are usually late for dinner and have little time to do homework. They hate to practice piano or calligraphy and in class they are usually too tired and sleepy to concentrate. In this book, positive characteristics, usually exhibited by females, are contrasted with their opposite characteristics, invariably associated with males (Bi and Fang 64).

China in the 1990s witnessed rapid economic growth and a consequent publishing explosion in children’s literature, which has enjoyed double-digit growth per annum since the beginning of the twenty-first century (Li 392). This atmosphere of rapid economic growth and commercial activity can be easily detected in the behaviour of the protagonists in Qin Wenjun’s well-known novels, *Schoolgirl Jia Mei’s Story* and *Schoolboy Jia Li’s Story* (both 1993). The two novels present pictures of the vibrant life of a contemporary middle school in China for Jia Li and Jia Mei, who are twins born to a Shanghai family. In *Schoolgirl Jia Mei’s Story*, the female protagonist wants to earn money during the forthcoming winter vacation in order to buy a ticket to see her favourite pop singer, and she decides to work in a restaurant. She announces her decision at the dinner table by telling her parents, “Middle school students abroad take jobs during holidays, so you

can't stop me from taking a job!" Her twin brother responds sarcastically, "Only for fifty *yuan* for working the whole winter vacation? This is called exploitation." He goes on to say, "I will make a huge sum of money in the future. It's easy for an intelligent person like me to earn thousands of *yuan*, no, it must be thousands of dollars for a month" (28–29). In these two novels, the male protagonist is portrayed as a boy who is ambitious, more focused on making big money and obtaining status as well as more likely to take risks, whereas his twin sister is described as more concerned with her appearance, and more interested in material items, fashion, and pop culture. She is often presented as a "vacuous airhead", who is fodder for jokes and teasing from her brother. The author elaborates:

(Schoolboy) Jia Li has a brave heart, which will never disappear from human nature. Likewise, (schoolgirl) Jia Mei's pursuit of beauty is shared by children from all generations. These stories have a lot in common with human nature, that's why children can find themselves in the stories, and are attracted to them. (Lau and Song n. p.)

The author's view affirms the gender bias generally prevalent in Chinese society through an unquestioning acceptance of their stereotypical gender roles, internalising them as natural and as part of common sense. As such, it can be said that the two novels are full of established assumptions in Chinese society about gender roles, which are transmitted into the author's writing in an unconscious manner. It is safe to assume that most readers, especially young ones, would not even recognise the presence of the bias in the stories, because the stories would reflect their own assumptions about gender roles, reinforcing them instead. As further examples of this bias, male teachers are usually depicted as tolerant, respecting, and encouraging whereas female teachers are often presented as malicious and narrow-minded, and they frequently yell at students.

The same can be said about works by Yang Hongying, who remained largely unknown outside the circle of children's writers until 2000, when the Beijing-based Writers' Publishing House released *Girl's Diary*, which is today considered an essential coming-of-age novel for adolescent girls in China. Set in the final year of primary school, it is inspired by Yang's own daughter's transition from childhood to adolescence, and chapters of *Girl's Diary* have been adapted for inclusion in the primary school Chinese language textbook. In 2002, Yang released another novel, *Boy's Diary*, which became another successful book, exemplified by the Chinese national education ministry issuing instructions for the library of every primary and middle school in China to have a copy of it. Indeed, Yang regards the main function of children's literature to be educational, and notes that incorporating this educational element requires great skill. Her "formula" is to mix moral education with stories that capture children's attention, as this is much more effective than solemn words (Zhu

n. p.), a point proven by the fact that so many copies of these works have been sold that Yang has become known as “China’s J.K. Rowling”.

Even a brief investigation of her two novels reveals that both *Girl’s Diary* and *Boy’s Diary* contain very serious instances of gender stereotyping. For example, the most common words and phrases used to describe girls include “beautiful”, “rich with emotion”, “charming”, “an angel in a boy’s heart”, “obedient”, “quiet”, “understanding”, “fashionable”, and “a mad fan for movie stars”. Conversely, the words and phrases used to describe boys include “assertive”, “independent”, “determined”, “fond of computers”, “good at maths”, “brave”, “a walking encyclopaedia”, “confident”, “smart”, and “full of tricks”. Indeed, stereotypical images in these two novels do reflect the author’s decisions, consciously or otherwise, to construct male and female characters differently, and language plays a subtle yet significant role in this construction. The unchallenged assumptions embodied in these works reflect the socially-accepted distinctions between women and men in Chinese society, and potentially lead girls to internalise this limited outlook, ultimately placing them in a powerless and reactive, rather than proactive, position.

In 2016, Cao Wenxuan became the first Chinese author to receive the Hans Christian Andersen Award, the most distinguished international honour for children’s literature. “Cao Wenxuan’s books don’t lie about the human condition,” the International Board on Books for Young People declared in announcing the award. “They acknowledge that life can often be tragic and that children can suffer” (quoted in Qin 2016). Almost twenty years ago, Cao claimed that “children are the future of the nation, and therefore writers of children’s [literature] are moulders of the future national characteristics and should have the sense of this sacred mission” (*On Children’s Literature* 112). However, Chinese critics point out that his works closely link images of tough young male protagonists, who embody the “spirit of masculinity” (*yang gang zhi qi*), with the rise of Chinese nationalism (Wang, “China’s New Era” 49). This tendency is also noticed by critics in the West. Amy Qin wrote in *The New York Times*: “Although Mr. Cao has won several important prizes at home, his work has not been without controversy. Among other things, he has been criticized for promoting outdated gender stereotypes: Boys in his stories are often bigger and stronger, and girls are weaker and more prone to tears” (2016).

First released in 2005, Cao’s novel *Bronze and Sunflower* is the recipient of many awards in China. The English translation of the book was published in 2015 and was a winner of the English PEN Award. Set in the political mayhem of China’s Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the novel uses a poor rural village as a microcosm of a society experiencing numerous catastrophes. It is the story of a tender friendship between two children, one a boy called Bronze, the other an orphaned girl called Sunflower, which develops in the midst of the cruel realities of the revolution. Bronze, who lost his ability to speak at the age of five when a terrible fire swept through his village, is depicted as tough and resourceful, and full of the spirit

of self-sacrifice. Sunflower is also portrayed in a most positive manner; she is caring, hard-working and thrifty. The gender distinctions, however, are obvious, as the tough boy looks after the unfortunate girl throughout the story, and this stereotypical image of the “tough guy” appears in many of Cao’s works including, among other characters, Daer in *the Sweet Orange Tree* (2007) and Maziye in *The Eleventh Red Cotton* (2007). In each successive text, they are assigned more dominant roles, exert strong leadership abilities, display great toughness, and feel an overpowering need to suppress emotion.

Conclusion

Gender bias and gender stereotyping in Chinese children’s literature have their roots deep in China’s cultural traditions. For thousands of years, Chinese society was patriarchal and patrimonial, placing women in a markedly inferior social position to men. In the last century, however, family structures and gender roles have undergone enormous transformations in China, and women’s socioeconomic status has significantly improved. Modern Chinese children’s literature certainly has contributed to this improvement. Nevertheless, both in reality and the texts that, in part, represent that reality, females remain disadvantaged compared to males in relation to earnings, positions of power, and domestic duties. In terms of children’s literature and its importance in shaping the present and future, one may ask: Does literature, as a postscript, accurately reflect society? Or does society take its ideas and cues from literature, evoking changes in the roles its members play?

There is no doubt that, by engaging with the fictional world of literature, consciously or otherwise, children project themselves as the characters in their treasured stories, and the roles that they play can become integral to the development of that child’s personality. The process children go through when constructing their gender roles is an important part of their knowledge construction, and one which enables them to identify with their place in society. Over the last century, the male dominance expressed in Chinese children’s literature has gradually moved towards achieving greater gender equality, but this change is happening too slowly, and is lagging far behind the international trend. There is a sense of urgency for children’s books in China to provide images of more balanced gender roles, thus offering more opportunities for little girls to have positive role models in the future.

As shown in the analysis above, Chinese writers for children are fully aware of their duty as moral educators. But authors of children’s books are inescapably influenced by their own sociocultural views and assumptions while determining what goes into their writing when developing plots and characters, deciding the nature of conflicts and their resolutions, casting and depicting heroes and villains, and thereby directing and eliciting young readers’ judgments and morals. Furthermore, gender bias is so widely and so deeply held in Chinese society at large that authors have internalised societal beliefs about what constitutes

“masculinity” and “femininity”, and the kind of behaviours appropriate to each, that stereotypes appear quite spontaneously or instinctively in their writing. Nevertheless, though gender roles are beginning to be reassessed globally and, to a certain extent, locally, it is clear that there are still significant changes to be made in teaching Chinese children to respect individuality and to disregard traditional gender stereotypes.

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