Chinese Folklore: Impact on Children’s Literature

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Introduction
In China, the term “children’s literature” originated from “May 4th” age. Regarded as a new type of literature, children’s literature was understood gradually and spread widely among the masses from the early 20th century in China. When it came to the age of “May 4th” new cultural movement, this genre developed fast with in the modern ideology. Children’s literature became the newest, most popular and hottest topic in literature, education and publishing circles.

Although the term “children’s literature” appeared first in the early 20th century in China, literature for children has existed since the ancient times. The literature for children included folklore. Research indicates that the primary source of literature for children was oral narratives that were passed from generation to generation and existed in communities. Some of the more common forms were folklore, fairy tales, nursery rhymes and folk ballads. Even now, when people refer to folk literature, it usually encompasses fairy tales, nursery rhymes and folk ballads learnt as children. These genres have played an important role in their formative years, by not only enriching their life, but also influencing their view of life and world. If we accept folklore as literature and recognize that it belongs to children’s literature, then it is obvious that the origin of children’s literature dates far back. This article will deal with “children’s literature” in narrow sense, namely the main readers of this type of literature are children, children’s life and their feelings are taken from children’s angle. Also it should be writer’s creation.

We know that folk literature was a collective community effort and spread orally. “Collectivization” means the folk literature was produced and spread by masses. It uses the literary and artistic works loved by the people to express their life, idea, emotion and sense, thus a way of cultural accumulation of a nation in a long time. Oral character means folk literature is produced and spread orally. There is corresponding way of expressing and its particular style. These characters of folk literature help it overcome time limit and influences contemporary writers’ writing, especially their writing on children’s literature. Folk literature has important effect on children’s literature production. To some extent, it can be said to be the basis of children’s literature. Hereinafter the writer will analyze its influence from four respects.

Subjects of the Chinese folk literature: Impact on children’s literature

Children’s literature often draws its materials and nourishment on folklore in subjects, and folklore is the inexhaustible source of children’s literature. It has been accepted by the academic circles of children’s literature that early works of children’s literature mainly originates from adapting or polishing the folklore works. For example, Ge Cui-ling’s “wild grape”, Zhang Shi-jie’s “Fishing Boy”, Ruan Zhang-jing’s “Golden Conch” and some other works, all these are based on related folklore. Some works of children’s literature even directly draw their materials on folklore. Zhang Tian-yi’s “Grey Wolf” and Qiao Yu’s “Orchard Sisters” both draw their material on model stories of “Wolf Grandmother”, Lao She’s “Treasured Boat” and “knight Frog” on the folk stories of the same names of Han nationality (Sino) and Zang respectively. Ren De-yao’s “Malan Flower” on those “Snake Man” model, and “Golden Conch” on the girl-river-snail-modeled ones.

Ge Cui-ling’s representative work, “Wild Grape”, is a fairy tale based on folk legend, praising the pursuit of the bright ideal and the excellent characters of kindness, bravery and ready-to-help-others, which embodies love, one of the three themes of children’s literature. In “Grey Wolf”, the bright oldest daughter, Da Niu, penetrates the grey wolf’s disguise, and cleverly catches the tricky and ferocious wolf, with the help of her two sisters.

In “Orchard Sisters”, the mother went to see the grandmother, leaving her three daughters – the oldest, Door Bar; the second, Bolt Staple; the youngest, Broom to look after their home. At night, a wolf disguised herself as the grandmother visited their home. The clever Door Bar saw through the wolf and led her two sisters to fight a battle of wits and bravery against the Wolf, and finally won a victory with the help of the fruit trees. “Orchard Sisters” is the only opera Qiao Yu wrote for children, which won the prize awarded by Song Qingling herself. And it was “Orchard Sisters” that made the image “Grey Wolf” popular among children all over China. “Treasured Boat”, the only play Lao She had written for children, tells about kind-hearted Little Wang, Little Wang received a magic boat from an old man he had saved out of a river when a flood came. Little Wang took advantage of the magic boat and saved a snake, an ant, a bee, and a boy who is son of a rich man. However, the boy presented the magic boat to the emperor and became an official and millionaire. Even worse, he thought of tricks to kill Little Wang. But thanks to the
help of the snake, ant and bee, Little Wang defeated him. At last, he was punished and Little Wang married the princess and went back to hometown. “Magic Boat” also draws its material directly on a folk story of Han nationality.

“Golden conch”, a long fairy poem written by Yuan Zhang-jin, also directly draws material on a popular folk tale – “Girl River-Snail”. Long long ago, there lived a young fellow on the beach. Poor but happy, he went fishing and sang heartily every day. One day, the young fellow freed a captive golden fish. Days afterwards, his net always caught a golden conch and he took it home, keeping it in a vat. After that, every day the young fellow saw meals ready on the table when he came back from fishing. Later, he found out that it was the golden conch, the Girl Conch, who was always looking after him. It was the golden fish, who changed herself into Girl Conch to pay a debt of gratitude. Therefore, they live a happy life. But unfortunately, soon the Sea Goddess took Girl Conch back to the sea. The young fellow went in a boat to search for her. At last, he gained the Goddess’s admission that Girl Conch should come back and live together with him if he could stand three severe tests. The pen in the writer’s hand polished the old and plain folk tale and coloured it with magnificent fairy emotion. This work has been translated into Mongolian, Korean, English, and French. In 1980 it won the first-class prize the second award at the national literature creation for children.

The varied styles and material of Chinese Folklore, provides effective original version and valuable resources for children’s literary works creation. Chen Bo-chui, a famous children’s literature writer, has said “The folk fairy tales are a treasure house of fairy tales, with plentiful, uncut jade. It has always been developing the people’s optimistic spirit, rousing the people’s confidence in overcoming natural and man-made calamities. The spiritual essence of the folk fairy tales adapted and polished by the writers’ pens can be the best quality spiritual food for children.” As well as they directly touch the fairy tales creation in children’s literature, these words were suitable to recognize the impact of the folklore on other types of children’s literature.

Ideological Content of Chinese Folklore: Impact on Children’s Literature

The ideological content of the folklore also has great impact on children’s literature creation. It has been mentioned formerly that the folk literature is collectively created and spread collectively, it is a long time infiltration of a nation culture, and it is an embodiment of the cream of a nation culture. Using the ideological content of the folklore and emphasizing the intension of national culture in it are often made use of by the children’s literature creation as the effective tool to develop children’s aesthetic conceptions and mould children’s sound moral integrity.

The idea that “Good is rewarded; and evil with evil” is deeply rooted in Chinese traditional mind, and the theme of punishing evil-doers and encouraging people to do good floods in Chinese folklore works. “Magic Brasher Ma Liang” written by Hong Xun-tao is an example embodying such a theme.

Long ago, a cowboy named Ma Liang loved drawing. He was poor that he was unable to afford a brush. Once he begged a painter for a brush. The painter did nothing but laugh at him. Without a brush, Ma Liang practiced drawing with branches or charcoal. One day, a god gave him a magic brush with which what Ma Liang had drawn all came into reality. Ma Liang drew for poor peasants. But a greedy rich man seized him and ordered him to draw gold. Ma Liang refused and was locked up in a stable. He drew a ladder with the magic brush and escaped. Later the emperor knew of the magic brush and had Ma Liang taken to the Palace. The emperor robbed Ma Liang of his brush, but what other people drew with the magic brush did not change. The emperor had to force Ma Liang to draw Gold Hill. Ma Liang drew a sea. In the sea, a gold hill and a great boat. The emperor hurried into the boat to get the gold. Maliang drew a storm and the storm engulfed the boat and the emperor. Ma Liang left the palace with the magic brush and went on to draw for the working people what they needed. “Magic Brasher Ma Liang” embodied the working people’s will “Punish evil-doer and praise good”. The work tells the sharp conflicts between good and evil through Magic Brasher. Ma Liang’s actions — draw for the poor people and fight against the official authorities. This work intends to develop and influence children’s pursuit of the good and the beautiful to encourage them to look forward to good and beautiful, as well to hate the bad and evil. Hong Xun-tao used the usual theme of the folk literature and adopted the style of treasure stories in the folk fairy tales and created this popular work. The theme “Good for Good, Evil for Evil” appears in many children’s literature works.

Loving family, hometown, political society, and country is another usual theme of Chinese folk works. To Chinese tradition, they are both the root to sustain spirit and life on, because traditionally Chinese people lived under the ceiling that family and hometown is pocket political society and country while the political society and country is magnified family and hometown. This cultural theme is outstanding in the folk literature. From the legends of Pan Gu (who created heaven and earth) and Nv wa (who patched the hole of heaven by colourful stones) to the Yangs stories of the Yangs and the Boxing Heroes, these folk literature works handed down generation by generation, mirror the national firm spirit of improving oneself unceasingly when we eventful nationality was faced with the danger of extermination. Many works of children’s literature carried on this kind of ideological content and expressed patriotism as strong as the folk literature had displayed. The famous children’s novel “Yulai—Little Hero” written by Guan Hua had appeared in Chinese teaching material of middle and primary schools fifty years ago. The image of Yulai has commanded deep reverence among the
people as a patriotic hero, and educated and influenced more than a generation. Guan Hua said when recollecting his experience that those stories about the heroes who served their country with unreserved loyalty tuned his creation. The well known phrase “We are Chinese, and we love China”, which has encouraged innumerable people, is consistent with the spirit of those patriots. “Shark Scout”, a imaginary novel written by Zhang Wenguang, also holds this patriotic theme. In this novel, the shark became an excellent scout under the human mind and served mankind with his talent. It came to a perfect integration of ideology and art by combined fierce patriotism and passionate feelings against evil with the undersea world with some imagination and some reality. This makes children receive education of patriotism while enjoying the beauty.

Pursuit for the truth, the good and beautiful lashing against the false, the evil and the ugly in the folk literature have a great impact on the practical creation of Chinese literature works for children. Also, those good themes are carried on and used by children’s literature, and deeply influence and educate the mass of children.

Artistic manifestation of Chinese Folklore: Impact on Children’s Literature
As far as artistic manifestation is concerned, folk literature has great impact on the literary genre, narrative modes and representation skills of children’s literature. More attention should be paid to its influence.

Firstly, the genres of folk literature exert the fundamental influence on children’s literature. Lu Xun once said that songs, poetries and gqa (a type of Chinese verse in literature) all originated from folk literatures, and were used by Chinese poets and literati again to create their own literary works. Children’s literature is part of pure literature of writers’ creations, so almost every kind of genres of children’s literature originated from folk literature. The myths, legends and stories in the form of essay and the ballads, proverbs in the form of verse are all important reference to the form and development of children’s literature. Some of them become the literature genres as transition to children literature. For instance, magic tales, spirit stories, children’s songs and nursery rhyme are all imitated and borrowed by children’s literature. This just explains why it is difficult to distinguish the fairy tales and verses out of the folk from those created by writers.

Secondly, the narrative modes have extreme impact on the creation of children literature. Fairy tales, legends and stories usually have complete narrative modes, namely the stress of time, characters, process and result. This kind of mode influences children’s literature directly. The Three-stage mode or repetitive mode, which is often used in folklore, is also widely used in children’s literature. Not only fairy tales and stories but also science fictions use this mode often. As Ye Yong-lie, a famous writer of science fiction put it: “We can use three-stage mode to make science fiction interesting and full of suspension. Three-stage mode is often used in fairy tales, which is mostly ‘this way does not do—then that way, but it does not do either—then take lessons from the last two tries and finally succeed’. The mode develops from a peaceful beginning to exciting ending, full of suspension of trials and failures and instructive spirit.”

The reason that this mode is paid so much attention to is that it has a simple but profound philosophy that failure upon failure sometimes results in success. This form can also influence children a deep impression, helping them to understand the importance of determination and persistence and encouraging them to manage to overcome difficulties. This philosophy is embodied in the form of narrative stories, developed into a underlying culture and passed on generation by generation. This long accumulated undoubtedly culture would be valued by writers. Beside the three-stage mode, the pursuit of happy ending in folklore can also be found. Folklore describes people’s pursuit of optimistic spirit, bright future and happy ending. Many children’s literatures also embody these themes in them, with a happy ending.

Thirdly, the representative skills of folk literature also have great impact on children’s literature. In folk literatures, it is common that human beings and other beings could talk and live together. For example, fairies could descend to the world as the kindhearted wife of farmers; swans and field snails could change themselves into beauties; a frog could change himself into the prince; cimelia could help a kind man to punish baddies. Some artistic means of superrealism such as distortion, exaggeration, imagination and impersonation are very common in folk literature, which were used for reference by children’s literature and became artistic means in common use. For instance, wild fancy is a base of many successful children’s literary works. Imagination is a supernormal representation skill in literature. Just as Cao Wen-xuan said, imagination is the reason why children’s literature exists. “Macro fancy literature” series published by the 21 Century Press are just this kind of children’s literary works full of fancy, composed of For Who Cicada Sing by Zhang Zhi-lu, Dream Moor by Mu Ling and Little Cuspidal Hat by Dai Zhen, and etc. These works are full of fantastic imagination and arouse the children’s imagination and creativity.

Folk literature accumulates rich and colourful artistic types and means in its long history. These artistic types were cherished by masses for a long time, used for references by writers of children’s literatures extensively in many areas and bring endless vitality to children’s literature.

Language of Chinese Folklore: Impact on Children’s Literature
Folk literature is spread orally and language of folk literature is a rich mine. Language of folk literature is plain and pithy. Moreover, many glossaries with thick cultural meaning and great art were abstracted and
accumulated during the long oral expressive activity. Language of folk literature is crystal of the populace’s wisdom, and is the root of the creation of children’s literature. The creation of children’s literature absorb nutrition consciously from the mine of the language of folk literature. On one side, children’s literary works are written with plain, nearly spoken words that children may comprehend; on the other side, they adopt the concise, visual and lively words to give children beautiful enjoyment.

Conciseness is the basic quality for the language of children’s literature. There is a children’s song Wash Hands:

Huahua Liushui Qingyouqing
The water is clear and clean
XiXi Xiaoshou Jiang Weisheng
Wash my hands clean
Dajia Shenshou Biyibi
Let’s show our hands
Kankan Shuide Zui Ganjing
To see whose hands are the most clean

In this song, the theme of keeping hands clean is clearly expressed. Children can understand it at the hearing of it. So the song is suitable for children’s ability of understanding, thus achieves the effect it is expected to have.

A poem named The Sea is Asleep in Liu Rao-min’s poem anthology Song of the Sea is:

Feng’er Bunaole
The wind stopped playing
Lang’er Buxiaole
The wave stopped laughing
Shenye Li
It’s midnight
Dahai shuijiao

The sea is asleep
Ta Baozhe Mingyue
She hugs the bright moon
Ta Beizhe Xingxing
She carries the stars on her back
Na Qingqingde Chaosheng A
The gently sound of her tide
Shi Ta Shuishu De Hansheng
Is her snore

The song describes the peaceful night sea for us with just a few vivid words. Liu personified the sea with “Baozhe (hug)”, “Beizhe (carry ...on her back)”, “Hansheng (snore)” to show to us the graceful and peaceful mother—the sea at night. This kind of works can not only attract children to read them, but also can improve their ability of taste beauty and the ability of expressing what they want to express with simple but beautiful words.

By absorbing and inheriting the folklore in a critical way, the language of children’s literature is enriched. It has become and is becoming more and more suitable to children’s ability to understand and appreciate it, making it suitable for children.

Conclusion

In a word, children’s literature has close contact with folk literature. During the shape and development of children’s literature, children’s literature was deeply affected by folk literature on contents, ideas, artistic manifestation and language. On some certain meaning, it’s the base of children’s literature. The writers of children’s literature should be more conscious to absorb nourishment from folk literature to create more children’s literature and contribute to the development and boom of children’s literature.

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