



A Theoretical Conception of the Value System of Criticism in Chinese Children's Literature

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the value system of children's literature criticism in China. This is examined against the backdrop of the current imbalance between the gains made by Chinese children's literature in terms of composition and publication and the lag in theoretical criticism as well as lack of clear evaluation criteria. In approaching children's literature criticism as a set of theoretical categories and meaning systems relating to value evaluation, the paper considers the following issues: the value relationship between the critical subject and the critical object, children's literature values, value standards, and the accompanying critical and theoretical approaches that play a key role in this relationship. While the paper proposes and addresses problems based primarily on the Chinese context, it also touches on value issues in global children's literature. It therefore seeks to promote cross-cultural dialogue and exploration of universal issues relating to the value dimension of children's literature.

Keywords: children's literature criticism, value system, value cognition, value concept, evaluation standard

Children's literature is born with value judgments. Indeed, it can be said that the birth of children's literature is the result of these value judgments. The traits of "children" are of high value in human society, which holds that children's characters are unique enough to form their own literature. Therefore, since the conscious emergence of such literature, it has achieved viability and self-sufficiency due to its special value. Children's literature is the result of the human choice of "children's subjectivity" and although children's literature is free to meet the fundamental goal of children's spiritual needs, it is nevertheless closely related to social issues because children constitute growing "social people". Its cultural practices, ideological attributes, and value judgments are self-evident and essential. Yet because it is influenced by philosophy, aesthetics, and social trends of thought, value judgment becomes a difficult issue in the field of children's literature, as scholar John Stephens points out:

Contemporary literary theory has moved to a position in which value judgment is generally eschewed and rarely invoked except by feminists and marxists. Yet the issue of value judgments points to a vital area in which contemporary theory may have little to contribute to the study of children's literature. [...] I think we have no option but to risk judgments about value and quality. Children's literature itself is so thoroughly imbricated in social attitudes and ideologies, and is so committed – explicitly or implicitly – to the acculturation of its audiences, that its critics and commentators would be themselves socially irresponsible to evade coming to judgment. What we can do, however, is be open and self-reflective about our grounds for judgment. (1995, 265)

Taking into account the Chinese social context, we find that Chinese children's literature has experienced a ten-year period of prime development and is about to enter into its second ten-year golden period; this gives more pre-eminence to multiple social power structures in terms of the participation and intervention of value

judgment in children's literature. The diversity of stances, benefits, and targets is not only capable of enriching and boosting the ecosystem of children's literature, but also of immensely enlarging value options and stimulating the development of multiple conceptions of value; however, such circumstances also make value judgment more difficult and more controversial. A sufficient number of literary practices eagerly appeal to the conceptual transformation of theoretical research but the fact-cognitive research on "what is children's literature" will continue to shift more towards "value cognition" based on realistic and reliable social contexts.

Children's literature scholar Peter Hunt points out that shifts in the theory and practice of criticism over the past twenty or thirty years have meant that 'quality' and 'value' are no longer seen as something intrinsic to a text, but are determined by the contexts of reception. Hunt's examination of the trend of Western children's literature in the academic world now seems to be relevant to the transformation trend facing the academic community of children's literature in contemporary China. In the present era, because the stable and static concept of children's literature has been shattered, we have been unprecedentedly placed in the specific literary field of the production, distribution, consumption, and acceptance of children's literature and in a social network of complex power relations. Therefore, the present concept of children's literature cannot survive such an abstract and imaginary vision. "Value cognition", however, places more emphasis on the field of practical literary activities. It focuses on value thinking, attaches importance to the complex mechanisms of value formation in the net power structure, and probes the epochal and social characters crystallized by the multiple value relationships in children's literary activities. It adopts a more open, systematic, forward-looking awareness of the value of children's literature in order to make a rational value analysis and a more objective value judgment of the typical "placeholder" text that is under development, and whose value can be confirmed by children. "Value cognition" pursues a pluralistic and overall view of the value, through conducting multi-dimensional and multi-level connotation analyses of value subjects in children's literature activities, so as to fully understand the aesthetic and applicational value of children's literature as a unique genre. The focus of "value cognition" is naturally the theoretical discovery and summarization of the common value attributes or value elements of children's literary texts. This is the ideological, material, and fundamental answer to questions regarding "why children's literature is valuable" or "why children's literature is valuable for children". On the basis of clarification of the multiple value functions of children's literature, the important task of "value cognition" may lie in clarifying the "core" parts of the value system; that is, those parts that are constructed as "the most influential part for children in children's literature", namely, the construction of children's "values". The study of "value cognition" refers directly to the cultural practice attributes of children's literature, and pays attention to the rationality and effectiveness of value realization in the process of implementing the socialization of target readers. The ultimate goal of "value cognition" is to construct a scientific and practical evaluation standard for children's literature. This standard belongs to the "hard core" of the value system of children's literary criticism. In the category of literature, this standard enables children's

literature to display classic literary qualities, but its spiritual mission is to educate children, placing them on a healthy socialization path, which is identical to the value standard that advances the socialization of children.

Research regarding the value of Western children's literature shows that it has always enjoyed a close connection with the value of adult literature. It is deeply influenced by various philosophical and aesthetic trends, among which great importance is attached to the cultural practice attributes of children's literature. For example, the formation of adolescent's subjectivity (McCallum), the ideological stance reflected in the texts and readers' subjectivity (Stephens, 1992), the hidden adult and shadow text (Nodelman), and other research areas are substantially related to the significance and social value standard of children's literature. In recent years, Roberta Trites has studied the literature-conceptualized issue of "growth" in adolescent literature, which has received tremendous attention, through methods which include cognitive linguistics and cognitive literature among others. Trites contends that young adult fiction focuses literally and metaphorically on narratives of growth and that the concomitant literary criticism likewise focuses on metaphors of growth (2014, 12-28). Western children's literature has always pursued the individualistic value orientation of the growing subject, through which the youth are encouraged to develop their sense of self-worth and ultimately challenge the authority of adults. The value standard involved in this approach is what we must have a good understanding of when assessing the value system of criticism of Chinese children's literature.

Modern Chinese children's literature was conceived in social revolution and the enlightenment movement of the late Qing Dynasty. From its beginning and onward, it has had an organic affiliation to social cultural practices. It is a direct result of the universal popularity of modern Western views of children and scientific studies of children. Chinese children's literature, in comparison, focuses particularly on what may be termed the "children's problem". This concept holds that if a child's true nature is discovered and respected, it is highly probable that he or she will become an individual with a sound human nature and behaviour, and thus a bright revolution in national character and national attributes will take place. As a result of this belief, the advocates and promoters of the "New Culture" Movement (1915-1923) exerted great effort to introduce and build Chinese children's literature. Modern Chinese children's literature thus comes into being with a rather high starting point and lofty ideals, as Wang Quangen notes: "From the perspective of social history, the discovery of children's literature is both a factor and a sign of China's entry into modern society" (13). Children's literature then is a sign of, as well as a result of, "modernity".

The inclusion of scholar Mary Ann Farquhar's works on Chinese children's literature into the Studies on Modern China collections is a clear demonstration of the unique perspective of Western society in the reflection of modern China. In her introduction to *Chinese Children's Literature: from Lu Xun to Mao Zedong* (1999), Farquhar notes: "From its beginnings in the early twentieth century, modern Chinese children's literature was cast as an ideological tool to reshape China. It aroused deep controversies over concepts of childhood, education and language. At the core of the controversy was its role in China's push for

modernization” (1999, 1). Such observations provide us with a clear example of the axis Western scholars invariably adopt in the value judgment of modern Chinese children’s literature.

As a proactive value option, children’s literature was given abundant interpretations in terms of its value connotations during the “May Fourth” period (1917-1927). A number of scholars, including Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, Guo Moruo, Zheng Zhenduo, and Ye Shengtao conducted research into key areas such as: “the relationship between father and son”, “children’s orientation” and “children’s world” in association with these respective scholars’ spiritual situation and cultural pursuits, and established close value relations with children’s literature and the profound spiritual ecology of childhood. The significance of such relations arises from the close association of the concept of “children’s issues” with the nationalist concerns of “China’s issues”, which unleashed an enormous liberalizing power of thought at both national and state levels. However, its specific implementation lies in the respective value discovery of the connection of the concepts of “childhood” and “literature” and the inherent association of the spiritual life.

The “New Culture” Movement (1915-1923) enabled the establishment of a new relationship between the ideas of “culture” and “mankind”. Children, as “mankind” in its initial stage, began to enjoy their own literature, of which the new literal form was created specifically for children and continued to act in unity with children of later periods. Literature and children have boasted a vivid relationship based on self-conscious ideological concepts, a relationship which is common and which is what children are willing and able to accept. Such a relationship changes children’s lifestyles and content, the effect of which is directly pertinent to the grand proposition that society consists of the potentiality of children. Therefore, modern children’s literature in China has reached epoch-making significance, for it presents the opportunity of an effective channel to connect children and Chinese modernization in daily life.

As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, a pluralist ideology of children’s literature was constructed (Li). The concept of “modern children’s literature”, imported from Western countries but developed with local features in terms of reception, construction, and development, represents the natural results of a number of intertwined factors that include Chinese cultural tradition, social context, the political situation, and educational foundations. Children’s literature has reflected social developments to update its value orientation. Especially in the 1930s and 1940s, the left-wing literary movement injected fresh blood into the development of Chinese children’s literature, endowing it with a higher social value status. Scholars like Zhang Tianyi and Yan Wenjing observed and analysed aesthetic practices in children’s literature, which positively echoed the directions in which Chinese children’s literature should head.

During the 1950s and 1960s, contemporary children’s literature in China took an extreme direction in the concept of education theory, facing twists and turns in its exploration of the subjectivity seen in the literature. Yet in the new era, children’s literature has returned to the simplistic dual values of the specific binary relationship between the concepts of “children” and “literature”. Grounded on these two values, children’s literature has reconstructed its value connotation and has made major breakthroughs, especially in

the understanding and representation of children's subjectivity. As one such example, *I Want My Carving Knife* (1982) by Liu Jianping, is regarded as an emblematic work of Chinese literature for its image of a child protagonist Zhangjie, who dares to challenge adult authority and criticize social values by boldly proclaiming "My head is not on the shoulders of others..." (2016, 126).¹ The narrative brims with intense emotion just as its title suggests, and from this point, many works, including *A Special Student* (1984) by Fan Xilin, *No.1 Player of New Girl Star Association* (1981) by Zhuang Zhiming, *Blue Force Crossed the Defense Line* (1984) by Li Jianshu, and *A Red Shirt Without Buttons* (1984) by Tie Ning, have built on these new images of children liberating their own emotions and subjectivity. For example, Tie Ning, the author of *A Red Shirt Without Buttons* describes the heroine, An Ran, in the following manner:

Actually, she is a genuine girl. Despite that she is apt to debate with other people, prefers wearing jackets than skirts and despite that she sets off firecrackers, laughs loudly, and even whistles every now and then, which seems to be the natural disposition of a boy. Anyway, are there any disciplines forbidding a girl to be fond of doing so? (1984, 201)²

In the genre of Chinese fairy tales, what is termed the "lively school" and defined as "game spirit" may be seen to represent children's energy and its relationship to their lives, and these aspects of the genre provide many of its texts with excitement. Moreover, such an approach also reclaims the unique aesthetic traits of children's literature, as may be evidenced in the work of Zheng Yuanjie, its representative writer and one who has gained great popularity. The issue of children's subjectivity in the new era is an integral part of the subjective trend of thought in contemporary literature, and a positive reflection of the value of human subjectivity construction during the social progress and development of the times. Keeping pace with these shifts in composition, the theorizing of children's literature in the 1980s witnessed multiple innovations in its ideas and approaches, among whose views the following are of particularly far-reaching significance -- Ban Ma, who proposed the notion of "children's anti-childization" in 1984, and Cao Wenxuan, who in the same year proposed that the "children's literature writer is the shaper of the future national character". The two viewpoints, acting in close cooperation with each other, are complementary to the relationship between "adults" and "children", the two main bodies in children's literature, and clearly define their respective value goals. It is of great significance to view the two points as parts of a whole, with each component symbiotically representing the complexity of the multiple values of subjectivity that co-exist in children's literature.

The forty years of development of children's literature since the New Era (1978 -) reflect a process of constantly innovating values, meeting the challenges of multiple value relationships, and gradually enriching the pursuit of value. Post-1990s children's literature began to face greater environmental changes in the market economy and multimedia electronic context, as children's literature was suddenly placed in another open

space. Especially since the beginning of the twenty-first century, commercialization has directly stimulated the creation, production, dissemination, and sales of children's literature, reaching hundreds of millions of children in reality; correspondingly, various types of instructions on reading and reading promotional campaigns have also come into being. With the advancement of educational concepts and educational reform, as well as socio-economic development and the increase of household income, children's literature has been adopted as profound educational material on a much wider level. The productivity of original children's literature has been greatly boosted, and the publication of children's books has become the most dynamic part of the domestic publishing chain, a phenomenon that has been continuously moving forward.

However, children's literary practice in China has continued to meet with difficulties in terms of its value evaluation. Sun Jianjiang had proposed differences between artistic children's literature and popular children's literature as early as in the 1990s,³ suggesting the development of classified guidance, while in the twenty-first century, Zhu Ziqiang commented that, in this new era, "Chinese children's literature is in an unprecedented period of differentiation."⁴ Fang Weiping proposed that because of the enormous impact of consumer culture on children's literature, the latter should be more accustomed to consumer culture, and should promote the active construction of contemporary childhood culture and future social culture by cultivating the cultural critical awareness of children readers.

In the golden age of a co-existence of miscellaneous forms of children's literature, some scholars have advocated a commitment to the classic and timeless peculiarities of the genre and its ultimate value. In 1984, Cao Wenxuan asserted that "writers of children's literature are the shapers of future national characters" based on this, in the postscript of *The Grass House* (1997) he proposed the idea of "the pursuit of the eternal", a concept of the aesthetic value in children's literature, which later developed into "a sound nature basis for humans." Judged from "human" and "human nature" perspectives, the value function of children's literature obviously produces greater awareness of its artistic mission and more profound cultural significance because it reflects the broad humanistic approach as well as the lofty value pursuit of Chinese children's literature writers. In 2016, Cao won the International Andersen Award, which in and of itself is sound proof that the values he adhered to have won international recognition.

Mainly focusing on the period of critical theory and practice of Chinese children's literature since the early twentieth century, research into the value systems used in critical analyses of Chinese children's literature reveals that various types of value evaluation relate to different historical periods. Through a review of the academic history, this research, linked to the transformation of China's contemporary social values and the specific demands of the value remodelling of individuals, investigates the following: the attributes of value evaluation in Chinese children's literature criticism, the establishment of value relationships between the subject and object of criticism, and value conceptions and value standards in the critical theory of children's literature, which play a significant role in the establishment of value relationships. The creative point of this research lies in introducing an academic view to the study of world children's literature, and proactively

addressing the previous situation of unclear value standards and disordered value evaluation in criticism of Chinese children's literature. Straddling the connecting points between the universality of children's literature in general and the more specific aspects of national character, this research strives to explain in Chinese terms who will benefit from children's literature, from what aspects, and how much that benefit will be, while also addressing other fundamental issues related to value judgment and evaluation. In this way, this research will push beyond the limits of overly-macroscopic definitions of value standards and the restrictions of being bound only by established, prototypical theories.

The research starts by contesting the construction of the value system of children's literature criticism, especially with regard to its historical inevitability, and argues for a real urgency in the building of evaluation criteria. The main body of this research clarifies the basic framework of the value system in children's literature criticism and its theoretical connotations. Currently, the field of Chinese literary theory defines the value system of literature criticism as "the mechanism related to value conception or consciousness, and value choice or orientation including evaluation criterion" (Mao Chongjie, 60). This research expounds that children's literature, as a unique genre, possesses the generality of common literature criticism, but also specific characteristics that give it its individuality and particularity in the basis and components of its value system and in the construction of that value system. Therefore, specific research must be conducted in accordance with the internal logic and theoretical connotations of the construction of the value system. This paper proposes five areas of investigation related to the critical assessment of children's literature in China as follows: firstly, an artistic value formation of children's literature, and research regarding a value realization mechanism as a logical starting point; secondly, research on the value conception of children's literature as a theoretical foundation; thirdly, the study of critical theory in the value system of children's literature criticism to provide resources for a critical methodology; fourthly, studying the evaluation criterion of children's literature criticism as the basis of the value system; fifthly, research on criticism and practice, based on children's criticism of the value system theory. The first four parts compose the main body of the value system in a logical progressive manner, while the last area involves practical research on the existing value system.

I. The formation of an artistic value of children's literature and research on the mechanism to guarantee the realization of this value

The target of children's literature criticism relates to the value attribution and features of the works, and the phenomena of value activity, which is related to the possibility of a latent multi-dimensional value. Thus, only after reflecting on the artistic value formation of children's literature and its realization mechanism can we make an academic value analysis and identify propositions of value judgment, such as, for example, "Are the values inherent in this text inferior or superior?". The production of children's literature is reliant on what may be termed as "the finding of children", and on a human understanding of the value significance of childhood

as the root of all adulthood, that is, not only as the root of individuals but the root of collective humanity. The realisation that children are the basis for the progression of human beings' self-knowledge enjoys a history of less than 400 years, which means that the human understanding of what constitutes the concept of "children" is still rather limited.

Children's literature gained its artistic value once humans made a conscious value confirmation of the idea of "childhood" and the literature of this genre would not exist without a positive confirmation of the value of childhood. Thus "the finding of children" contains an intrinsic fundamental conclusion that children, being different from adults, are a particular and distinct group. As for the identification of these particularities, this is a journey of discovery that lasts indefinitely. Children's literature, as an art form, is a crucial component in this philosophical process because it develops and provides special access to children. The values that such a literature expounds and explores form a fundamental component of the growth and liberation of children. The formation of an artistic value of children's literature and research on a value realization mechanism will primarily focus on the establishment of value relations between children and literature and the complicated symbiosis that exists between the two.

With changes in the socio-materialistic lifestyle of the Chinese, and the subsequent socio-psychological and socio-cultural structural changes, the formation of an artistic value of children's literature and its value realization mechanism must also undergo transformations. This research, which is particularly related to the context of the current time and reality, will focus on the "rationality" of the artistic value formation of children's literature so as to examine the historical development of a multi-dimensional value and to assess its practical social features. The research will make further efforts to identify and dissect what constitutes artistic value, and the authenticity or falsity of such values.

II. Research on the value conception of children's literature

The value conception of children's literature is a kind of paradigm that the concept of children's literature was conceived from a worldly outlook, which is relatively stable and predominates people's value choices and value orientations in their response to, and assessment of, such literature. In a manner of speaking, it is often not the literature itself that is critiqued but the way in which the children within the literature are represented. Put in a specific way, the value conception and connotation of children's literature not only reflect people's perception of the concept of "children's literature", but more importantly their "understanding of children", or what we usually refer to as their "view of children." This "view of children" is the basic component of the value conception in children's literature. We have reached a consensus that the essence of children's literature lies more in the children than the literature itself, per se.

The development of children's literature represents a progression of the understanding of and reflections on the values of children's literature. In other words, a revolution in the view of children's literature

is the driving force that will promote reforms in children's literature. The subject composition of children's literary values has its complexity, manifested as it is in the cultural connotations of the two dimensions of "children" and "adults" and their accompanying differences. In "adult" terms, there are also multiple forces to be considered in the production of and assessment of children's literature, such as writers, publishers, salespeople, reading promoters, librarians, book reviewers, scholars, teachers, parents, and other family members. Social organizations and communities will invariably affect the formation of children's literary values. Today, the composition of the concept of value has become increasingly complicated, in that it responds to, but is also constructed by, the public sphere.

This area of research will retain a connection to the literary context of diachronic and synchronic time, and is designed to clarify the historical development and realistic pattern of the value concept form, as well as discern the "value subject" of different concepts, define the subject's identity characteristics, and scientifically and reasonably explain these various identities. Such an approach will not only establish a more tolerant system of the coexistence of multi-valued entities, but will also establish basic rules and boundaries, as well as identify the position of the main body and its value statutes.

III. The study of critical theory in the value system of children's literature criticism

The value system of children's literature criticism is a value theory that supports criticism, and which studies the criticism based on the perspective of value science. It is not only different from, but also related to, the study of criticism from the perspective of general literary principles. Value philosophy is the most direct theoretical resource used in this article, but literary aesthetics, literary sociology, and pluralist theoretical methodology resources of children's literature are also closely related to this. Since there is no ready-made theory of the value of children's literature, the value system constructed in this study itself is a study of critical theory within the field of the embedded value system. The study will focus on the theoretical methods of focusing on, introducing, self-constructing, and using Chinese children's literature since the modern era. What are the developments and changes in these theories in different historical periods? Which parts can be directly included in the current value system when the existing critical theories are examined? In which level can it be concretely or dialectically used? Which part can be used as converted construction? All of these questions require further research.

In dealing with the methodology of a theory for children's literature, we must hold an attitude of open-mindedness and advocate two kinds of lessons: First, we should master the study of children's literary theories and methodology trends throughout the world, understand their essence, and learn from this experience. Second, we should refer to the development of adult literary theory beyond children's literature. Children's literature must not be excluded or viewed as a separate entity, but should be considered within the broad body of literature.

IV. Study on the evaluation criterion of children's literature criticism

The evaluation criterion is what may be termed as the “hard core” in the entire value system. The acquisition of, and concise structure of, this hard core is not entirely new, based as it is on the unity of the historical and chronological elements. Critics and reviewers of world children's literature have reached a consensus to some extent on the evaluation criteria implied in the evaluation of texts. They are expressed in the major aspects of aesthetic value and the practical value of children's literature, which can be summarized colloquially in the following terms: “Qualified Pleasures”, “Showing, Telling, Focalisation”, “Layers of Meaning”, “Character, Selfhood, Society”, “The Language of our Culture”, and “The Good Guy in the End: Closure” together with some other broader literature aspects which share common characteristics with children's literature, and which can also be used as referential points. China's early modern scholars, including Wei Shouyong, Zhou Houyu, Zhu Dingyuan, Zhou Bangdao, Zhang Shengyu, and Wang Renlu, all carried out research on the selection criteria for excellent children's literature in terms of form, content, and aesthetic elements. In the history of the theoretical criticism of Chinese children's literature over the past century, there have been a large number of opinions on the considerations that should constitute the evaluation criteria. This study will be based on the rich “standard” statements evident in previous Chinese and foreign children's literary theory and criticism resources, and the current Chinese social cultural context, to establish a scientific and practical standard system of children's literature evaluation, and will continue to be verified and corrected in terms of practical criticism.

V. Research on criticism and practice, based on children's criticism of the value system theory

Criticism practice is a test of the value system theory. It mainly examines the feasibility and scientific sense of applying a value system that has both universality and stability, to a critical practice with individual and active characteristics, and verifies its applicability and reliability upon acceptance of its validity.

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Notes

1 The original text of “I Want My Carving Knife” was first published in 1983 in the first edition of “Children's Literature”. The quoted version here is by Liu Jianping, *I Want My Carving Knife*. New Classic Children's

Literature of Chinese Children's Literature (Part One), Fan Fa-Jia, Shao Jun's ed. Shandong Education Press, Jinnan, China, 2016.

2 *A Red Shirt Without Buttons* was written in 1982, and the earliest publication is Tie Ning, *A Red Shirt Without Buttons*. China Youth Press, Beijing, China, 1984.

3 On 4-9 August 1997, Sun Jianjiang was invited to attend the "World Children's Literature conference" in Seoul, South Korea, where he gave a keynote speech entitled "The Art of Children's Literature and Popular Children's Literature".

4 In 2006, Zhu Ziqiang proposed the term "differentiation" to clarify some "internal correlations" of important trends in children's literature based on his observation of the development trends of children's literature in the twenty-first century. In 2009, he raised the idea of a "differentiation period". The notion of "comprehensive performance" specifically raised the issue of establishing popular children's literary theory. Actually, it is a matter of establishing different evaluation standards. For further details, see Zhu Ziqiang (2009).

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