



Zhou Zuoren's Vernacular Poetry and His Cult of Childhood

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Abstract

Pioneering modern Chinese children's literature, Zhou Zuoren personifies the child as an angel of peace. In his view, the child is neither an object of pedagogy nor a ward of the adult. Indeed, the child becomes an unwitting teacher and spiritual warden of the adult. He worships the innocence of childhood and believes that efforts to use a scientific approach to rectify children would be more harmful than beneficial because it would hinder the natural development of children's capacity for imagination. This paper examines the development of Zhou Zuoren's conceptualisation of childhood through analysing three of his vernacular poems.

Key words: Zhou Zuoren; Childhood; Chinese vernacular poetry

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INTRODUCTION

Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967) was the first person in China to conduct a systematic study of childhood, children's developmental theory and children's literature theory. Zhou Zuoren's keen interest in children's literature came to fruition with his pioneering work, *Minor Treatises on Children's Literature* published in 1932. This work includes the findings of an approximately twenty-year long research experiment that began in the early 1910s.

This book can be read as an indication of Chinese intellectuals' more sophisticated and more mature understanding of the development of children. As a well-known professor in literature at Peking University, the centre for the New Culture Movement, Zhou Zuoren's writings were inspirational to intellectuals working in the field of children's development and to writers of children's literature. His contemporaries identified him as a most-respected authority in the field (Zhao, 1928). Through his research and publications, "Zhou Zuoren raised the scholarly and popular awareness of the necessity for the psychological, mental and spiritual well-being of children" (Liu, 2002, p.129). Central to his contribution to the exposition of the theory of children's literature is his firm belief in children's autonomy in terms of their physical and psychological development, and also their emancipation from other considerations, especially the didacticism of traditional children's books. This paper examines the development of Zhou Zuoren's concept of childhood through his poetry.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Brothers Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren were influential figures in twentieth century Chinese literature, but the two have been met with very different receptions. Whereas the elder brother Zhou Shuren, better known by his pen name Lu Xun, has been idolised both inside and outside of China as the "founding father" of modern Chinese children's literature, his younger brother Zhou Zuoren was almost completely dismissed. For years, Zhou Zuoren was subjected to officially sanctioned accusations during Mao Zedong's reign, claiming that he was a counter-revolutionary due to his negative and adverse stance to the left-wing revolutionary literature in the 1930s and his collaboration with the Japanese during the second Sino-Japan war (1937-1945). So far, little has been done to investigate the development of his concept of childhood

as reflected in his vernacular poetry. This paper attempts to address this under-researched topic by analysing three of his poems.

2. "A LITTLE RIVER"

On the 24 January 1919, Zhou Zuoren wrote a vernacular poem "A Little River" (*Xiao he*) which first appeared in *New Youth*. It was regarded as a long poem in a fresh prose poem style (Zhu, 1935). Zhou Zuoren credited the prosaic style, which paid no attention to rhyme, to Baudelaire's prose poems in *Le spleen de Paris*.

A little river flowed steadily forward.
It passed fertile dark earth on both sides,
full of red flowers, green leaves and yellow fruits.
A farmer came with a hoe on his back,
and built a dyke in the midst of the river.
The downstream dried up, the water in the upper side
retarded by the dyke, was unable to flow down to move forward,
nor could it flow back.
It could only whirl in front of the dyke.
To retain its life, water had to flow,
so it whirled in front of the dyke.
The earth under the dyke hollowed bit by bit,
and gradually a deep pool formed.
The water didn't have anything against the dyke,
- it only wanted to flow, like before, steadily forward.
One day came the farmer again,
at the outer side of the mud dyke he built a stone dyke.
The mud dyke caved in,
Water washed the stone dyke, and it only whirled.
Hearing the sound of water,
A rice shoot outside the dyke knit its brows:
"I am only a rice shoot, a poor grass.
I love to be watered,
But I am scared of its current over my body.
The water in the little river was my friend,
Who used to flow steadily in front of me.
I nodded at him and he smiled at me.
I wish it could escape the stone dyke,
To flow along its winding and bending course,
as much as it could before.
The both sides it passes turn into a green brocade.
It was once my good friend.
I am afraid it could not recognise me anymore.
It groans under the earth.
It sounds feeble, but how awful it is!
This does not sound like the usual voice of my friend,
- when, held by breeze, it walks up to the sand beach,
That joyful sound.
I am afraid that this time when it comes out,
It would not recognise me as its old friend,
And it would walk over me in great strides.
Therefore I am worrying right here."
The mulberry tree by the paddy, shaking his head too, said:
"I am tall, and I can see that little river.
It was my good friend.
It sent me fresh water to drink,
Enabling me to grow green leaves
and purple mulberries.

Its clean and clear colour of the past
Now has turned into green and black.
With the struggle all year around,
Fitful wrinkles have appeared on its face.
All it does is to tunnel under.
Since long, it no longer has time to nod and smile at me.
The pool underneath the dyke is now deeper than my roots.
I live by the little river.
Summers cannot dry my branches,
And winters cannot freeze my roots.
Now I dread that my friend
Should bring me down on the sand beach,
With the water-weeds it sweeps along.
I feel sorry for my friend,
But I am also really worried for myself."
Listening to their conversation,
Weeds and frogs in the paddy field
All gave a sigh and were lost in their own thoughts.
Water could only whirl before the dyke.
The solid stone dyke remained unshakable.
The man who had built the dyke was nowhere to be found.¹

The first three lines bring out a picture of peace and beauty featuring four different colours of black, red, green and yellow, as well as the movement of water – "steadily flowed forward" – complementary to the still tranquillity of earth, flowers, leaves and fruits. Against these charming surroundings of nature, Zhou Zuoren took a radical departure from the descriptive disposition of traditional poetry by introducing an element of storytelling, from the fourth line. In using anthropomorphism, Zhou draws on the use of this primarily European literary device. The attribution of human characteristics to animals, depicted as creatures with human motivations and the ability to reason and converse, is not entirely new to Chinese stories, appearing in traditional texts such as *The Journey to the West* and *Liao Zhai*. Strikingly, Zhou's use differs from traditional Chinese uses of anthropomorphism. In traditional Chinese literature, anthropomorphism is generally associated with creatures that have magical powers. At that point, Zhou (1918) was strongly critical of endowing creatures with supernatural powers and expressly advocated a literature of human nature that is neither bestial nor supernatural. By giving human characteristics to objects like a river and water, a fresh feature emerged in the new vernacular poetry, and indeed the entire new vernacular literature in general. To further highlight the viability of anthropomorphism, Zhou Zuoren introduces a talking rice shoot and a talking mulberry tree, and other small animals with recognisable human behaviours. Contrastingly, the only human, the farmer, doesn't utter a word.

This little river's natural course is interrupted by man-made obstacles, first a mud dyke and later a stone dyke. Through the voices of the anthropomorphised characters such as a rice shoot and a mulberry tree, the poet contrasts

¹ First published in *New Youth*, 6(2), 1919, (pp.91-95). The English version here is an adaptation from Haoming Liu (2002).

the little river of the past in its natural state against the present condition of being tainted by the dykes. In the past, its water was “clean and clear” and “flowed steadily”, but after being restrained, its water changed to “green and black” and “fitful wrinkles have appeared on its face” “with the struggle all year around”, to the point where it struggled to survive: “To retain its life, it had to flow, so it whirled in front of the dyke.” The poet could even sense the potential danger of the outburst of the dammed little river from the perspectives of both the rice shoot and the mulberry tree.

The use of anthropomorphised characters in children’s literature is based on the author’s perception of cognitive stage-based childhood development, mainly derived from his inquiries into pedagogy² and evolutionary anthropology.³ He made it clear in his essay “The Literature of Children” that characteristics of children’s mentality could be seen in the life of primitive people (1920/1988, p.7). Evidence of life in early times suggested that anthropomorphism was a long-held propensity with ancient roots. According to Zhou Zuoren, “children are like little savages”, who “would naturally think that grass and trees are able to think like humans and cats and dogs could talk” (p.5). He continued to explain that efforts to use a scientific approach to correct children would be more harmful than beneficial because it would hinder the natural development of children’s capacity for imagination.

European fables, especially Greek, in Zhou’s view, would greatly encourage the healthy development of children’s imaginations. He translated *Aesop Fables* himself, but he did have one reservation in spite of his Philhellenism. He suggested that the pithy maxim expressed explicitly at the end of a fable be deleted (1920/1988, p.9). As a translator, he was known for adhering to the principle of absolute faithfulness to the original, but as a well-respected authority for children’s literature, he demonstrated flexibility in adapting foreign fables to meet his child-centred approach. The ending of his poem “The man who had built the dyke was nowhere to be found” is open to a variety of interpretations. To believe that “A Little River” has transcended didacticism would be extremely naïve, to say the least.

During the 1910s and early 1920s, Zhou Zuoren devoted himself to collecting, translating and researching nursery rhymes, fables, folklores, fairytales and other literary genres for children. By 1923, he had written over twenty treatises on children’s literature. His poem “A Little River” was the culmination of his erudition in this field, and it reflects the principles he recommended for

the creation of children’s literary works. The language is simple, plain and easy, the style is free, relaxing and unpretentious, and the imagery is fresh, exhilarating and inspiring. Furthermore, the literary device of anthropomorphism is seamlessly employed to go hand in hand with what he understood as the developmental stage of young children (3 to 10 years old). The story is captivating and the ending is certainly stimulating for a child’s imagination.

Time and time again, Zhou Zuoren emphasised that his humanist literature was of individuals, not races, nations, regions or clans, as he extremely disapproved of the notion of nationalism. Thus, he advocated a humanist literature, which he defined as a literature in which the individual, as a qualified member of humanity, uses artistic methods to express his individual feelings, represent the will of humanity, and bring about happiness in human life. However, he seemed to have sensed the inherent dangers apparent in his humanist slogan “art for life”, which could lead easily to utility, where art becomes a tool of ethics or a sermon from some alter. He tried to explain that the writer should use artistic means to express his thoughts and feelings toward life, offering the reader artistic pleasure and elucidation toward life (Zhou, 1918).

The significance of the poem should be understood in the context of the transitional period that the poet underwent considering his perceptions of the role of literature. During the time from 1919 to 1923, Zhou Zuoren completed his transformation from the leading figure of the new literature, responsible for its crucial manifesto “Humane Literature” (1918), to a new identity as the vanguard of the autonomy of literature. His new views of literature were expressed in *Our Own Garden* (1923). A most relevant factor in relation to children’s literature was his spectacular shift in attitude towards supernaturalism between 1918 and 1923. In his 1918 “Humane Literature”, Zhou Zuoren, influenced by a narrow scientific and humanistic notion of life – shared almost unanimously by his May Fourth contemporaries who held a strong utilitarian view – condemned what he called “superstitions” in literature, including the two previously mentioned books, *The Journey to the West* and *Liao Zhai*, and demanded that books of this nature be excluded from a modern curriculum.

However, in *Our Own Garden* (1923), equipped with a wider view on the role of literature being based on a more sophisticated and matured knowledge, mainly acquired through his inquiries into pedagogy and anthropology as well as the development of European literature, Zhou Zuoren declared that supernaturalism as

² Edmund Gosse is frequently quoted by Zhou Zuoren. Other influences are Grimms’ *Märchen* and Anderson’s *Eventyr*, Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and MacClintock’s *Literature in Elementary School*.

³ Zhou Zuoren was strongly influenced by anthropologists such as Andrew Lang (1844-1912) and Jane Harrison (1850-1928), who belonged to a school called evolutionary anthology.

well as anthropomorphism in literature, especially for children, were not only necessary but also beneficial, even indispensable, for the natural and healthy growth of imaginative capacities. Underpinning this intellectual transition was his new emphasis on the natural state as an ideal for the development of the human imagination.

Contrary to Zhou Zuoren's opposition to the concise maxim expressed explicitly at the end of a fable, the moral of "A Little River" still lies in the last line, but in a much more subtle fashion: "The man who built the dykes was now nowhere to be seen". This builder of the dykes appeared twice before in the story, both times being referred to as a "farmer". And now, at the end of the story, he is referred to as "the man who built the dykes", which has much broader connotations. This man was now invisible. Thus, the poem is really asking the presumably older reader to question whether or not this invisible man is symbolic of themselves, building all kinds of "dykes" in the path of natural childhood development.

Around the end of the 1910s, Zhou Zuoren taught the history of contemporary European literature at Peking University. It was this task that made him systematically study the development and heritage of European literature. There had been no material available in Chinese at that time and, according to his own diary, his main sources were English editions of histories of literature from the main European countries. Through his research and compilation of materials, he became more and more exposed to conceptions of European romanticism, notably Rousseau's cult of "the noble savage", Herder's view on primitivism and Schiller's notion of the "holy childhood" (Liu, 2002, pp.126-133). He was excited and enthused by the fact that these notions of European romanticism were very much complementary to his own views on children's literature, which were mainly based on his knowledge acquired through his pursuit in the study of pedagogy and evolutionary anthropology. Naturally he was excited with ideas such as Rousseau's notion that education should not be seen as replacing what was known to be the uncouth child; rather it should be seen as the "drawing out" of hidden mannerisms that a child should already possess. Zhou Zuoren also found an affinity with Schiller's belief in the necessity of natural imagery for the development of the human imagination.

3. "A SCENE ON THE ROAD"

The image of childhood in his mind now became elevated. This is demonstrated in his "A Scene on the Road" (*Lushang suojian*), which was published in *New Youth* in 1919:

On the side of Beichang Street,
Was a soymilk seller's stall, that could be carried on a shoulder pole.
Sitting between the two components of the stall was an old man,
Who was slowly slicing a radish with a small knife.
A pair of shining eyes, rosy cheeks and two little braids,
A girl of four or five sits next to him.
In front of her was half a bowlful of soymilk.
In her tiny hand was a pair of bamboo chopsticks.
Eyes wide open, looking at the old man,
She was asking him something.
It's a pity my vehicle was too fast.
I couldn't hear what they said.
But this image constantly appears in my mind,
Just like one of *Raphael's* classic paintings, the Angel and Apostle.⁴

The poet engages in a series of presentation manoeuvres, which resemble modern cinematographic techniques. In establishing his *mise en scène*, a panoramic view is employed to include the street, giving the audience a sense of locality in the first line of the poem. Then, in the second line the focus phases into a medium shot, as attention is moved towards the soymilk seller's stall. In the third and fourth lines, the audience is now asked to focus on more intricate details, the old man's slow movements when slicing a radish with a knife. A kind of simple and almost primitive atmosphere is created. Zhou Zuoren then refocuses on the girl sitting next to the old man.

At that moment, the poet reverses the previously employed process, giving the poem a satisfying sense of symmetry. First, an extreme close-up shot concentrates on a single facial feature, her eyes. Then, as the focus is drawn to a greater picture, her cheeks begin to appear in the frame, and then her whole face, including two braids behind her head. Next, her activity is presented. Now entirely in the spotlight, Zhou Zuoren portrays a very young girl of four or five years, her innate charm, childhood innocence, naïve expressions, and unpretentious mannerism sparkling in a rudimentary environment. All surroundings, including the old are now faintly blurred into a dim background. The whole process conveys the feeling of the poet watching the old man and the girl from a vehicle, first moving steadily towards the soymilk stall, and then, being too fast to catch their words. The final four finishing lines are quite dramatic as compared to the slow movement before. As his vehicle slips away, the image remains in his mind, frozen into eternity, representing natural grace and naïveté, "Just like one of *Raphael's* classic paintings, the Angel and Apostle."

This poem was written when Zhou Zuoren became uncomfortable, even alarmed, with his former radical

⁴ My own translation. *Raphael* is printed in English in the original Chinese text. For the original, see Jiang Feng. (Ed.), (1988). *Zhongguo ertong wenxue daxi, shige I* [The great anthology of Chinese children's literature, shige I], (p.6). Shanxi: Xiwang chubanshe.

views about literature. These views were based on what was known as realism, scientism and rationalism. He tried to justify his former position by saying that historians specialising in the development of literature ought to spend a fair amount of time to study each school of thought, but writers like him had to make a choice, either to write for art or to write for life. He admitted that he made his choice to support “art for life” on the basis of science, and acknowledged that an unconscious factor may have swayed his decision – the burden of the past history and having been born in the present conditions, hence he could not have too much sympathy for aestheticism or hedonism. He called this approach rational critique (Zhou, 1918). In a way, he conceded that after all he still couldn’t escape the sense of social responsibility, like a member of the elite literati of the traditional Confucian society, especially during times of national predicaments. Nevertheless, it was precisely his sense of social responsibility that ultimately brought about strong feelings of guilt when he eventually realised that he, although unconsciously, had been part of the “dykes” to restrain the natural development of childhood, as he depicted in “A Little River”.

4. “A PRAYER SAID TO CHILDREN”

In 1922, Zhou Zuoren published “A Prayer Said to Children” (*Duiyu xiaohai de qidao*).

Children, O children,
 I say my prayer to you.
 You are my redeemer.
 Please redeem my sins,
 And the sins of my ancestors that I was unable to redeem,
 With your smile,
 With your gladness and joy
 With the pride of being able to become true humans.
 Before you there is a beautiful garden.
 Jump over my head,
 Proceed thence in peace.
 And do redeem my sins,
 Including the sin of not even being able to see its shadows
 easily,
 For I cannot be there.⁵

The significance of this poem lies in his guilty conscience. In the poem, Zhou Zuoren mentions three kinds of sins: the first being his own, best represented by what he then perceived as a flawed rationalist approach, especially in the case of his treatment of supernaturalism; second, his ancestors’ sins, which he had tried to redeem by attacking all kinds of didacticism in children’s books, but in the end he himself had repeated the past errors; and the third being his failure to detect the problems, “the sin of not even being able to see its shadows”. This final sin hurt him the most, given his prestige and authority in the fields of children’s development and children’s literature.

The words “smile”, “gladness and joy”, and most significantly “the pride for being able to become true humans” emphasise the innocence, as well as the vulnerability of childhood. “Garden” is metaphorically used to symbolise the bright future for the young, free of all types of man-made corruptions, possibly somewhat like the Garden of Eden, and before long, this metaphor would be reused in the title of his new book *Our Own Garden* to highlight his new ideological position on the autonomy of literature. The two lines “Jump over my head, Proceed thence in peace” echo the motif of “A Little River”, as the poet has now accepted that he is just like one of the dykes, an obstacle on the path of natural childhood development. Sadly, with his sins, especially the “sin of not even being able to see its shadows”, “I cannot be there” in the beautiful garden with the children. Such sentimentalism is rare in his writings. When commenting on the utilitarianism of the new literature for the general public, C.T. Hsia (1971) remarks that the writers of the new literature “in their earnest effort to transform China into a modern nation, took upon themselves primarily the task of educating their benighted countrymen”, believing literature to be an effective weapon “to fight lethargy, cowardice, and ignorance”, and hence the overt didactic and patriotic tone of their literary works (pp.20-21).

CONCLUSION

The three poems analysed here symbolise Zhou Zuoren’s ideals in preserving the natural state of childhood, his worship of children’s natural grace and naïveté and his guilty conscience in regard to his previously unconscious act of being an obstacle to the natural development of childhood. Facing the possibility, or rather the inevitability, of children’s literature being used as a means to advocate political and moral doctrines from some ideological altars, Zhou Zuoren was alone when voicing his deep concern. As a pioneer of modern Chinese children’s literature, Zhou Zuoren tried his best to place children in the best position possible to maximise physical and psychological wellbeing through his literature. Zhou Zuoren was deeply concerned with this short-termed utilitarianism in the new children’s literature, as revealed in his poem “A Little River”. In the poem Zhou Zuoren appears to reiterate his commitment to the task of the salvation of children from any political or moral indoctrination, but behind his image of the vanguard of natural children’s development still lies the patriotic motive of national salvation: the real rejuvenation of the nation could only be achieved by children’s genuine absorption of nutrients from writers like Hans Christian Anderson, the Brothers Grimm and Lewis Carroll. However, facing all the intellectual forces aligned against him, stressing the primacy of the national fate, his efforts were all but in vain. Of course,

⁵ Haoming Liu’s translation, with a variation of just two words.

this reluctance to base the genre of children's literature in the cognitive and psychological domain of children's own development, as opposed to the culture of childhood imposed by the dictates of adult society, is by no means unique to China, and certainly not during this period of world history.

Just like a member of the traditional literati whose ideas failed to win the endorsement of the rulers or fellow intelligentsia at the time of political upheavals, Zhou Zuoren attempted to retreat from the world to become a recluse. In 1937, Zhou Zuoren remained in Peking when the Japanese troops advanced to occupy Northern China. In 1941, he began to take positions in the realm of culture and literature under the Japanese puppet government, and in the same year he visited Japan as a delegate to the East Asia Cultural Conference. In 1945, after the defeat of the Japanese, Zhou Zuoren was arrested and convicted for treason by the Nationalist Government and served nearly five years of a ten-year sentence, only to be released in January 1949, shortly before the Communists took power. In Mao's China, he was mainly involved in research and the translation of Japanese and Greek literature. In the early months of China's Cultural Revolution in 1966, being the feeble age of eighty-one, he was punched, kicked and trampled by angry Red Guards. He died in

1967 after a long period of mistreatment and abuse by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. In the mid-1980s, the Chinese authorities commenced to allow a re-assessment of Zhou Zuoren's role in development of modern Chinese children literature.

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