



Chinese Children's Literature in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)

Lijun Bi^{[a],*}

^[a] School of Languages Cultures and Linguistics, Monash University, Australia.

* Corresponding author.

Received 29 November 2012; accepted 8 February 2013

Abstract

In China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), childhood was portrayed as a battlefield in which opposing classes strived to fulfil the political impetus of training their heirs. In order to represent the new socialist morality, the few stories produced for children had to shift their focus to the space of the adult world, where there were more activities of "revolution" and "class struggle". Consequently in these stories, the child protagonists talked and behaved like adult political instructors voicing the whole vocabulary of abstract revolutionary rhetoric. Stories written in those years are often readily seen, in their political context, as propaganda. Nevertheless, this paper argues that, from the perspective of the twenty-first century, the ideology of the 1960s and 1970s may look less like "propaganda" and more like "legend" due to the way in which the passing of time is capable of transforming propaganda into traditional art.

Key words: Chinese children's literature; Cultural Revolution; Propaganda

Lijun Bi (2013). Chinese Children's Literature in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). *Studies in Literature and Language*, 6(1), 82-86. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320130601.1952> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320130601.1952>

INTRODUCTION

In Mao's China, children were no longer viewed as heirs to the family, but rather to the new socialist motherland and the proletarian revolutionary cause. The traditional

ancestral reverence, family-clan cohesiveness and filial piety had long been eroding, and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) furthered the process. The Cultural Revolution is often referred as "the barren period" (Jiang, 1988, p. 22) for Chinese children's literature. During this time, the main activity in the field of Chinese children's literature was to criticise the so-called "black line of revisionist literature and art" – the guideline for socialist children's literature for the previous seventeen years (1949-1966). Almost all the writers who had created works for children during these seventeen years were severely criticised and suffered persecution of various degrees. Examples of the absurdity of some of the criticisms can be found in almost every article or book during "the barren period". For instance, *A Race between the Tortoise and the Hare* was condemned for having tried to satirise the speed of the socialist reconstruction in new China (Jiang, 1988, p. 23) because the slower competitor ultimately won the race. Whilst most critics of children's literature in China claim that there is hardly anything worth mentioning from this period of writing, this study argues otherwise: it is not entirely fair to ignore the ingenuity of some writers, who tried hard to write for children while being surrounded by potential political hazards. This paper briefly examines Xu Ying, Yang Xiao and Hao Ran's works before focusing on *Shining Red Star*, a major work in the Cultural Revolution.

1. XU YING'S THE STORY OF THE SUNFLOWER COURTYARD (1973)

After the chaos of the early phase of the Cultural Revolution, some degree of normality returned in 1971 and novels and short stories for children began to reappear, though in very small quantity. Published in 1973 was Xu Ying's novel *The Story of the Sunflower Courtyard* (*Xiangyangyuan de gushi*). In this neighbourhood of "the Sunflower Courtyard", the two conflicting classes try hard

to win over children to be their successors and carry out their ideologies. Uncle Shi represents the proletariats and Hu Lizai, the bourgeoisie. The thread of class struggle is the main line of the story development and the overt politicisation of the children's life is obvious. It follows Mao's instruction, to "never forget class struggle", trying to instil the idea that the class enemy always want the restoration of a capitalist system in China. Given the political context, the author has no other choice but to abide the guideline set by the regime. Nevertheless, the author's familiarity with children's life, folklores and style of traditional literature makes this novel a quite rare gem for children in the Cultural Revolution. Characters are vividly depicted, especially the boy, Heidan, who knows almost everything about martial arts. The cordial and friendly relations among neighbours, an important moral message of the novel, are also portrayed in a convincing manner.

2. YANG XIAO'S NOVEL *RED RAIN* (1973)

Yang Xiao's novel *Red Rain* (*Hongyu*) published in 1973 is another masterpiece in the Cultural Revolution. It is a story about a barefoot doctor, called Red Rain. On the one hand, the novel follows the line of extolling the new medical system of the Cultural Revolution – the barefoot doctor (*chijiao yisheng*), yet on the other hand, it depicts a genuine picture of the difficulty of seeking medical care in remote mountainous areas. It advocates determination, perseverance and devotion on the part of the protagonist, Red Rain, who wants to change the medical system. The author appears to be not only familiar with life in those remote poor mountainous areas, but also with knowledge of acupuncture, herbal medicine and traditional remedies. The author is also good at building up great suspense in simple children's language to stimulate curiosity for the further development of the story. The part of class struggle is clearly forced in a stereotypical formula, in which the negative character Sun Guaizi, representing the class enemy, always wants the restoration of a capitalist system in China.

3. HAO RAN'S WORKS

Like Yang Xiao's *Red Rain*, Hao Ran's short stories, novelettes and novels all reveal the author's familiarity with the rural life and his talent with the colloquial rustic language, whereas the element of class struggle in his stories is noticeably forced. Hao Ran was the undoubted literary superstar in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and was perhaps the only author to get through that

period without coming to some sort of political turmoil. His two epic novels of agricultural collectivisation and class struggle in the countryside *Bright Sunny Skies* (*Yanyangtian*) and *The Golden Road* (*Jinguang dadao*) enjoyed wide readership, spanning from grown-ups, youths and juveniles in the Cultural Revolution. Meanwhile, he produced several volumes of short stories about life in the villages of Hebei. In 1973 he published *Collection of Short Stories for the Young* (*Youmiaoji*). Many of Hao Ran's works are about life of children in the countryside, which is vividly depicted.

4. *SHINING RED STAR* (1971/1974)

This title, also translated as *Bright Red Star* or *Sparkling Red Star* in English, is listed in *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*. Li Xintian's novel *Shining Red Star* (*Shanshande hongxing*) was published in 1971.¹ In 1974, it was made into a feature film of the same title. The feature film *Shining Red Star* was adapted and produced by a team from the People's Liberation Army's August First Film Studio in 1974.²

4.1 Story Line

Shining Red Star follows the story of the boy hero, Pan Dongzi, whose father joined the underground Communist Party and organized revolutionary activities against the village landlord in 1931. The landlord, Hu Hanshan, is a tyrant, responsible for the death of Pan Dongzi's grandfather. When Hu Hanshan fails to capture Pan Dongzi's father, he captures the son instead, and orders his men to beat him to death. The Red Army arrives just in time to rescue the boy. With the help of the Red Army, Pan Dongzi's dad sets up a revolutionary government, stationed in Hu Hanshan's residence, a big compound, and confiscates his land to distribute among poor peasants. However, the villain, Hu Hanshan, somehow manages to escape. On his way to the bush he meets Pan Dongzi, who happens to be playing with his friend in the bush. The two have a fight, but Pan Dongzi is too small to match Hu Hanshan, only managing to bite Hu Hanshan's hand before the villain disappears into the bush. In the autumn of 1934, the Red Army was forced to start the Long March to the north. Before leaving, the father gives Pan Dongzi a red star, like the one every Red Army soldier wears on his cap.

Hu Hanshan returns and speaks boastfully to the villagers, who are forced to gather before Hu Hanshan's house: "No one expected me, Hu Hanshan, to come back, eh? Here I am. This village still belongs to me. Whatever you took from me in the past, return it to me. Whatever you ate that belonged to me, throw it out. Some of you

¹ For the English translation, see Li Hsin-tien (Li Xintian in pinyin) *Bright Red Star*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1974.

² For the adapted version for film, see *Learn From Pan Dongzi: Strive to be a Child of the Party* (pp. 18-94). Shanghai: Red Little Guards Newspaper Press.

owed me money, and I will take time to settle the accounts one by one." Just then, one of his men rushes over and murmurs something to him. Immediately, Hu Hanshan yells, "What? He's gone! The monk might escape, but his temple can't go with him! The son will pay his dad's debt and the wife, her husband's!"

Pan Dongzi and his mother hide in the mountains. Whenever he thinks of his father and the Red Army, Pan Dongzi takes out the red star. Soon, his mother becomes a member of the Communist Party and involves herself in the underground activities against Hu Hanshan. Pan Dongzi thinks to himself, "Now that Mum is a Party member, I am a Party's child." In one of the confrontations, Pan Dongzi's mother is cornered in a straw hut. Knowing this, Hu Hanshan orders his men to set fire to the hut and Pan Dongzi's mother is burned to death.

Pan Dongzi, because of his courage and resourcefulness, becomes an excellent member of the underground Communist guerrillas, fearlessly completing one task after another. Eventually, he is sent to work in a rice shop as an apprentice, spying on the proprietor who is responsible for organizing the enemy troops' rice supply. Hu Hanshan is one of the commanding officers of these troops. One night he comes to a dinner at the rice shop, and Pan Dongzi has to serve Hu Hanshan and the proprietor. Hu Hanshan, even after a few years now, seems to recognise Pan Dongzi. When the boss of the shop sees the scar on Hu Hanshan's hand, he enquires about it. Hu Hanshan says that he was bitten by a wolf cub, while looking directly at Pan Dongzi.

Hu Hanshan was half-drunk and yelled at Pan Dongzi, "Pan Dongzi, come here."

Pan Dongzi went on doing whatever he was doing, as if he heard nothing.

Hu Hanshan asked, "Is your mum home?"

"Are you asking me? Oh, no, she is not."

"Is she dead?" Hu Hanshan continued.

Looking directly in Hu Hanshan's eyes, Pan Dongzi replied, "She is still alive."

"What does your father do?"

"A pig slaughterer."

"He is able to kill people as well, I am afraid. What's your real name?"

"Guo Zhengshan!"

Hu Hanshan stood up and grabbed Pan Dongzi's collar, "No! Your real name is Pan Dongzi! Your father's name is Pan Xingyi! Your mother has been burned to death!"

Just then, Pan Dongzi's fellow apprentice, another underground worker for the Communist guerrillas, yelled from outside of the room, "Guo Zhengshan, come, your mum is here to see you." Stunned, Hu Hanshan let Pan Dongzi go.

Outside the rice shop, Pan Dongzi's little comrade asked him to leave, "Tomorrow, when Hu Hanshan becomes sober, he will definitely recognise you."

"But he won't have tomorrow. Quick, run to inform our guerrillas that there will be a very good opportunity to attack this shop tonight." Back to the shop, at midnight, Pan Dongzi quietly came into Hu Hanshan's room, poured gasoline from an

oil lamp on his quilt and set fire to it. Hu Hanshan jumped out of the bed, trying to escape, but Pan Dongzi took out the sword which he carried on his back and killed Hu Hanshan.³

4.2 Critics' Comments

Farquhar (1999) comments that the story of *Shining Red Star* is "in the tradition of *Feather Letter* and *Little Soldier Zhang Ka*" (p. 287), which are the titles of two children's feature films before the Cultural Revolution, both telling stories of boy heroes in "the revolutionary wartime". She points out that the virtues conveyed in these stories are usually the combatant qualities required in revolutionary struggle: "bravery, resoluteness to the point of martyrdom" (p. 285). The protagonist, according to Farquhar, is "a typical hero" for Chinese children and the plot is "both compelling and exciting" (p. 287). *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* describes the story as "the best known example of this type of book" "set during the 1930s" dealing with "the Communist struggles against the Nationalists and the Chinese fight against Japan" (p. 115). Indeed, the story follows the line of works about "revolutionary struggles" such as *Looking for the Red Army*, *Growing Up in the Wind and Rain* and *A Youth Iron Team*, which were all produced before the Cultural Revolution.

4.3 Discussion

Is there anything new, besides making children aware that the Communist victory was not easy to win? In addition to the message that they must work extra hard now to consolidate this victory and learn from these brave role models, what new political and moral messages did *Shining Red Star* try to convey to children? Is there any difference between this children's story and those written before the Cultural Revolution? The team responsible for the adaptation of novel to film claimed that the film presented the course of winning, losing and winning again the revolutionary victory under the different leaderships in the Communist Party. "In the brilliance of Chairman Mao's revolutionary line, Pan Dongzi, a little slave, became a little revolutionary, dragging Hu Hanshan to be paraded through the streets. But, because the third 'left' opportunist line within the Party expelled Chairman Mao from the leadership, Pan Dongzi had to suffer a second time. Only when Chairman Mao's leading position was established at Zunyi Conference, the revolution started to develop and flourished once again, and Pan Dongzi rapidly grew into a glorious Red Army fighter in the struggles." The purpose of the film was "to make the younger generation remember: adherence to or betrayal of Chairman Mao's revolutionary line is the fundamental issue concerning the victory or failure of the Chinese revolution" and that they should "resolutely and bravely implement and defend Chairman Mao's revolutionary

³ My own translation.

line to make sure that the red mountains and rivers which our revolutionary martyrs lost their blood and even their lives to win, will never change colour" (August First Film Studio, 1974, pp. 1-14).

It is clear that the struggle between the correct line of Mao and the lines of his opponents within the Communist Party was the issue now in the Cultural Revolution. Adherence to and defence of Mao became the prerequisite to the defence of the motherland, with Mao personifying the Chinese revolution. The struggle between the two lines within the Communist Party in early 1930s, however, was simply too complicated for children (and indeed, most adults as well!) and to present the struggle in a children's story was no easy task. The film uses an off-screen narrator, a middle-aged Pan Dongzi, to explain this complicated struggle between the two lines in the Party. For example, before the Red Army starts off on the Long March, the narrator says:

In order to defend the red power, the Red Army fighters and revolutionary masses fought heroically, but no one understood why it became more and more difficult and the revolutionary base area became smaller and smaller. In the autumn of 1934, the main force of our central base area had to retreat (August First Film Studio, p. 35).

After the retreat, the narrator says:

Dad was gone, and so were the Red Army. Many years later, I found out that the expedition of the Red Army was the serious consequence of the disastrous third "left" opportunist line. They removed Chairman Mao and took over the Red Army's commanding power from Chairman Mao. As a result, they failed to smash the Fifth Encirclement of the enemy and had to give up the central revolutionary base area which Chairman Mao personally established (p. 39).

After Hu Hanshan's returning speech, the narrator explains:

Hu Hanshan and class enemies returned to power. The victory and happy life obtained under the guidance of the revolutionary line of Chairman Mao were given away by the wrong line within the Party (pp. 41-42).

The difficulty of conveying the message of the political struggle in the Communist Party to children is evident in the five children's articles collected in the book – *Learn from Pan Dongzi: Strive to be a child of the Party by Red Little Guards Newspaper* Press, printed in 1974. Even Huang Shuai, a well-known twelve-year-old schoolgirl,⁴ failed to receive the political message of the two-line struggle. In her article "*Shining Red Star Educates Me*", she listed the four points that impressed her most:

1. The self-sacrificial spirit of Pan Dongzi's mother;
2. Pan Dongzi's clear class stand about who to love and who to hate;

3. Pan Dongzi's resourcefulness and courage; and
4. Pan Dongzi's unconditional acceptance of the Party's directives. (HUANG, 1974, pp. 179-80)

Other children's articles all followed more or less the same line, with only one exception, "Learn from Pan Dongzi, Be a Little Revolutionary Path Breaker" by the Literature and Art Critic Team of Beijing Xisi Primary School's Red Little Guards. This article not only pinpointed the importance of adhering to Chairman Mao's revolutionary line in the Red Army period, but also linked that to the political campaign in the Cultural Revolution and the long-term significance of consolidating the proletarian dictatorship.

CONCLUSION

The Cultural Revolution shook China for ten years, and all the institutions governing children's literature collapsed. No one can deny that the Cultural Revolution had a disastrous effect on children's literature as well as mainstream literature and art in China. Children were urged to follow Mao's instruction to go out and face the world and brave the storm, tempering themselves and transforming themselves in the mighty storm of class struggle. There was hardly any form of children's literature in the first five years (1966-1971), and the pitiful amount of literature and other performing arts that was produced was merely a tool for political indoctrination and propaganda for Mao's personality cult. All the efforts that Maoist radicals made in brainwashing children were to ensure that they would hold the Maoist banner up high in the future. Mao was treated as a living god, whose authority was never to be questioned and to whom loyalty ought to be unconditional. The state decided what all the citizens, including children, should sing, read and watch. Every form of literature and art had to follow "revolutionary models". To involve children in political campaigns was a typical example of abusing children's literature and performing arts for political expedience. Maoists completely ignored children's characteristics by trying to force the intricate ideas of advancing their political interests and opposing their political enemies into the minds of the young. Needless to say, it never worked. What did in fact happen to Chinese children's literature in the Cultural Revolution totally betrayed the fundamental principles of the May Fourth Movement based on the slogan of "democracy and science". These principles advocated child-centred education theories which recognized children as independent human beings, entitled to their own rights, and opposed the authoritarian rule. On the other hand, given the extreme narrow margin

⁴ Huang Shuai's letter and diary about the confrontation between herself and her class teacher were published in *Beijing Daily* in November 1973 and later reprinted in the *People's Daily* in December 1973 which praised her as "daring to open fire at the revisionist line in education" (Central Education Science Research Institute 1983, pp. 457-58).

which was allowed in the Cultural Revolution for literary creativity, it is not entirely fair to ignore the ingenuity of some writers, who still tried hard to write for children while being surrounded by potential political hazards, and ideology and entertainment merged in their works. The factor of time is also important in the way people perceive what is "art" and what is "propaganda". The passing of time is now rescuing the explicitly politicised literature of the Cultural Revolution, which is redolent with crude and intrusive ideology, thus making it into a genre of nostalgia.

REFERENCES

- August First Film Studio *Shining Red Star* Adaptation and Filming Team. (1974). To Make Proletariat Glorious on the Screen. In *Learn from Pan Dongzi: Strive to Be a Child of the Party* (pp. 1-14). Shanghai: Red Little Guards Newspaper Press.
- Carpenter, H. & Prichard, M. (1984). *Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Central Education Science Research Institute. (1983). *People's Republic of China: Chronology of Big Events of Education 1949-1982 (Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Jiaoyu Dashiji 1949-1982)*. Beijing: Jiaoyu Chubanshe.
- Farquhar, M. (1999). *Children's Literature in China: From Lu Xun to Mao Zedong*. New York: An East Gate Book.
- HAO, Ran (1973). *Collection of Short Stories for the Young (Youmiaoji)*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- HUANG, Shuai (1974). *Shining Red Star Educates Me*. Originally in *Beijing Daily*, 9 October 1974, later included in *Learn from Pan Dongzi: Strive to Be a Child of the Party* (pp. 179-180). Shanghai: Red Little Guards Newspaper Press.
- JIANG, Feng (Ed.). (1988). *Chinese Children's Literature, Theory I (Zhongguo Ertong Wenxue Daxi, Lilun I)*. Shanxi: Hope Publishing House.
- Learn from Pan Dongzi: Strive to Be a Child of the Party*. (1974). Shanghai: Red Little Guards Newspaper.
- Learn from Pan Dongzi, Be a Little Revolutionary Fighter*. Originally in *Beijing Daily*, 23 October 1974, later included in *Learn from Pan Dongzi: Strive to Be a Child of the Party* (pp. 181-182). Shanghai: Red Little Guards Newspaper Press.
- LI, Hsin-tien (1974). *Bright Red Star*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press.
- Literature and Art Critic Team of Beijing Xisi Primary School's Red Little Guards. (1974).
- XU, Ying (1973). *The Story of the Sunflower Courtyard (Xiangyangyuan de gushi)*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- YANG, Xiao (1973). *Red Rain (Hongyu)*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.