

The Development of Zhou Zuoren's View on Children's Literature and its American Influence

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Abstract Similar to China's drive for modernization, the emergence and flourishing of children's literature in China has been directly influenced by the European and American scholars and writers. The development of the views on children's literature of Zhou Zuoren, founder of the theory of Chinese children's literature, distinctly reflects a direct influence from the United States. This influence is divided into two aspects. First, Zhou Zuoren echoes the American view on children's literature represented by Granville Stanley Hall that "children's rights should be protected" and "children are different from adults physically and psychologically". On this foundation, Zhou develops his child-oriented view of children's literature. This view allows children to grow up through a natural course and guides them when necessary, so that they won't do anything they are not ready for. Second, Zhou Zuoren draws strength from studies of the applications of many American scholarly theories, including those of Porter Lander MacClintock and H. E. Scudder, and reveals more clearly the stylistic features of children's literature from the perspective of literary education in elementary schools. The American pedology and studies on literary education in elementary schools exerted a profound influence on Zhou Zuoren, and played a pivotal role in the development of his child-oriented view of children's literature.

Key words Zhou Zuoren; children's literature; America; child study; literary education

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In Chinese academia of children's literature, there has been for a long time a heated debate about whether children's literature "can trace back to ancient times" or "is a modern literature." Up to this time, all the arguments have focused primarily on the time when children's literature began to emerge. Both sides see children's literature as a physical entity like a rock: If it exists, then it should be visible and tangible. Actually, this view embodies essentialism. What I would like to formulate is a constructivist theory of essence that children's literature is a concept constructed in the course of history instead of a physical entity with a distinct identity. If we discuss the origin of children's literature from this constructivist theory of essence, what lies ahead is not to look for the concrete existence of children's literature itself in a certain period of time just like we look for a "rock"; instead, we should investigate how children's literature, as a historical concept, came into being in people's mind.

Zhou Zuoren is the founder of and the pacesetter for theories of children's literature in China. Thus the study of the development of his concepts of children's literature makes it possible for us to look back at the beginnings of the idea of children's literature in China and trace its history. This paper focuses on it mainly through the lens of the American influence on Zhou Zuoren.

From "Marchen" to "Literature for Children"

In *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Jonathan D. Culler argues: "For 25 centuries, people have written works that we call literature today, but the modern sense of literature is scarcely two centuries old. Prior to 1800, literature and analogous terms in other European languages meant 'writings' or 'book knowledge'" (22). Here Jonathan Culler points out the evolution of the meaning of the term "literature". The formation of Zhou Zuoren's view on literature was under the direct influence of that in the West.

Zhou's essay "On the Meaning and Mission of Articles and the Weaknesses of Chinese Contemporary Articles" published in 1908, is the earliest summary of his view on literature. In the essay, he employed the word "article" rather than "literature". " 'Literature' is a word from the West, originating from the Latin words 'litera' and 'literatura'. Its meaning remained complicated even in Roman times" (94). Zhou Zuoren was aware of the multiple meanings of the word "literature" "It encompasses all knowledge since ancient times. When any writings whatsoever are referred to as 'literature,' it poses difficulties in distinguishing them, due to the

word's broad meaning" (94). After presenting the three weaknesses of such a view regarding "articles" (literature), he introduced the theory of Theodore W. Hunt, who indicates that literature, usually written and different from academic research, is the expression of human thoughts in terms of images, feelings and taste, which is intelligible and interesting.

The significance of this essay lies in its inclusion of children's literature in his revolutionary concepts about literature, which were just beginning to take shape. "It is urgent to write books under this circumstance. There are two types. One is folk novel (folk-novel) and the other one is bizarre story (marchen). The former offers one a glance at people's wellbeing in the country and the latter is mainly instrumental in the education of children" (115). The word "Marchen" used by Zhou should be the German word "märchen," which presumably resulted from a typographic error and was not a mistake by Zhou, because in his later essay *Study on Fairy Tales*, he employed the correct word "märchen". In German, "märchen" refers to works like Grimm's *Fairy Tales*. At present, it is acknowledged that the translation of "märchen" in Chinese is "Tong Hua" (fairy tales). Generally speaking, Zhou's translation of it into "bizarre story" makes sense.

In this essay, Zhou indicates that as early as 1908, Märchen was already a crucial component of what he interprets as literature. In this essay, he connects Märchen with the education of children, revealing his emphasis on the pragmatic value of his primary view on children's literature.

In his diary written on Oct. 2, 1912, Zhou recorded: "I studied fairy tales this afternoon." This marks a memorable moment in the history of Chinese children's literature. In the above mentioned article, he pointed out explicitly that fairy tales are literature for children. He made this conclusion on the grounds that "the fairy tale is for people at a younger age, and is enjoyed by primitive people, as well as children, for it reflects the same emotions and thinking as them" (265). Although there are such expressions as "fairy tales" and "fiction for children" in Sun Yuxiu's Preface to *Fairy Tales*, it is a great leap to come up with the expression "literature for children".

Zhou, in his *Introduction to Fairy Tales* published in 1913, repeated the expression "literature for children." "Fairy tales are literature for primitive people as well as children. Individuals' development follows the same order as that of mankind as a whole. Therefore they have shared emotions and interests." (279) It is noted that Zhou Zuoren, for the second time, explicitly connects "fairy tales" in "literature for primitive people" with the "fairy tales" in "literature for children."

Zhou Zuoren once said in his *Bitter Tea: My Reflection*:

I read *Literature in Elementary School* by Scudder and Porter Lander MacClintock during the early years of the Republic (starting from 1912). The book demonstrates the value of literature in the education of children in elementary schools. We should encourage children to read literature extensively, not just the textbooks fabricated by merchants. These textbooks enable children to know individual characters, but not to read, because no interest in reading can be evoked in the process. I cannot agree with them more. Therefore, I wrote several articles devoted to this idea, such as *Study on Fairy Tales* and *Introduction to Fairy Tales* in my spare time after teaching, which are to be published. (310)

An examination of *Study on Fairy Tales* and *Introduction to Fairy Tales* reveals that he was aware of and advocated the incorporation of fairy tales into the education of children. However, he made a mistake in attributing his view to the influence of Scudder and Porter Lander MacClintock. According to his diary, he bought *Literature in Elementary School* by Porter Lander MacClintock on March 30, 1914 and *Childhood in Literature and Art* by Scudder on Oct. 11, 1914. By that time, the articles such as *Study on Fairy Tales* and *Introduction to Fairy Tales* had been completed. So far there has been no evidence proving that Zhou had read those books beforehand.

From “Literature for Children” to “Children’s Literature”

In the academic study of children’s literature, the statement about when and where the phrase (concept), “children’s literature” began to take shape remains vague. Mao Dun said in *About Children’s Literature*: “The expression ‘children’s literature’ emerged from the May-fourth Movement” (396). However, he failed to specify the exact time of its origin, which, as far as I can see, is of great academic significance and is crucial to the study of the development of a children’s literature theory.

Among all the works of Zhou Zuoren, the expression “literature for children” first appeared in *Study on Fairy Tales* in 1912. Eight years later, the term “children’s literature” was used in his *Children’s Literature*. *Children’s Literature* offers a systematic introduction to the children’s literature genre, and is the first academic paper of its kind in China, as well as the first literary work where the concept of “children’s literature” emerged.

In *Children’s Literature*, Zhou Zuoren said:

According to Porter Lander MacClintock, once the imagination of children is suppressed, they will lose interest in everything and become materialistic, dull and dry. However, if they are indulged in their imaginations, they may become dreamers and wanderers. In literature then, as in the other subjects, we must try to guarantee three things: (1) allow and meet appropriately the child's native and instinctive interests and tastes; (2) cultivate and direct these; (3) awaken in him new and missing interests and tastes. The first one is the original intention of creating and providing children's literature. The second and third ones are the effects therefore achieved. (275)

(All the emphasis marks are added by the original author of the excerpt.)

I was confused by the period after "Neither the flesh nor the mind is strong enough to fulfill their dreams," which made it rather vague as to whether the "three things" was also a quotation from MacClintock or an idea proposed by Zhou Zuoren. Later, I came across an introduction to *Teaching Approaches to Children's Literature* by Zheng Zhenduo. In the book entitled *Literature in Elementary Schools*, MacClintock believes there are three principles of teaching children's literature. To allow and appropriately meet the child's native and instinctive interests and tastes; to cultivate and direct these; to awaken in him new and missing interests and tastes. It was at that point that I realized that the "three things" were devised by MacClintock. The second time Zhou uses "children's literature" in *Literature for Children* is also in relation to MacClintock's works:

MacClintock said that the importance of literature in elementary schools lies in two key points: one is to cultivate that special ability of imagination and the other is to empower students to construct complete and ordered wholes. This explains why literature can awaken and direct children's new and missing interests and tastes. These two points can generally be regarded as the artistic criteria for children's literature. (279)

Accordingly, my surmise is that the choice of "children's literature" by Zhou Zuoren in *Literature for Children* was inspired by MacClintock's works.

In *Literature in the Elementary School* by MacClintock, we can find the excerpt cited by both Zhou Zuoren and Zheng Zhenduo. "In literature then, as in the other subjects, we must try to do three things: (1) allow and meet appropriately the child's native and instinctive interests and tastes; (2) cultivate and direct these;

(3) awaken in him new and missing interests and tastes.” (18) It is clear that both Zhou and Zheng's interpretations of this paragraph are fundamentally correct.

Zhou Zuoren once said in *Bitter Tea: My Reflection*:

My arrival in Beijing coincided with the establishment of Kong De School by colleagues in Peking University in Fangjinxing Alley. It is generally regarded as a school promoting Confucius philosophy (Kong) and morality (De), yet it turned out to be a school named after a French philosopher. It adopted liberalism as its educational approach; a genuine western--style school covering elementary and middle school education. The invitation from them to the opening ceremony rekindled my old interests. I gave a speech titled *Literature for Children* there on Nov.26, 1920. It was written in regular spoken language (as opposed to writing in a classical style), which was its only distinct feature. The gist of it was more or less the same as previous ones in a classical style. There were not many fresh ideas.... (310-11)

From this excerpt, we can get a glance at his modesty as well as some errors in his recollections. From my point of view, his new contributions in *Literature for Children* can be summarized in three facets. First, it offers a clearer and more comprehensive interpretation of a child-oriented view on children's literature. Second, drawing upon the strong points of American scholars, such as MacClintock and Scudder, regarding the role of literature in elementary schools, Zhou expounds on a variety of issues centered on the proper literary education for children in elementary schools. Third, it sorts out the resources for literary education in elementary school in terms of genre, which better demonstrates the genres and styles of children's literature.

Literature for Children is deeply influenced by the United States. Intriguingly, Zhou and MacClintock have a lot in common. For instance, both were professors at colleges and studied elementary education. Their shared background is an important factor, which led to Zhou's direct absorption of the views of MacClintock and others. Furthermore, it determined the pragmatic value of *Literature for Children*, which studies children's literature from the perspective of a literary education in elementary school. However, Zhou maintained a clear vision about the nature of children's literature from the very beginning. He pointed out in *A Study on Fairy Tales*:

Whoever educates children using fairy tales should always bear in mind that it

is more an art than a tool. Different from mere textbooks, its influences should be measured by the standard of other forms of art. The advantage of fairy tales lies in its expressiveness, which can bring an enjoyable experience. It purifies the mind and inspires people to pursue lofty ideals. Other influences of fairy tales are in a secondary position. The essence of it will be lost if the position is reversed. (264)

It can be seen from *Literature for Children* that Zhou Zuoren is not only influenced by American scholars like MacClintock with respect to his views and his sensitivity to problems in academic studies, but also with regard to the expression, “children’s literature,” which seems to be borrowed directly. There are repeated appearances of the term, “literature for children” in MacClintock’s *Literature in Elementary Schools*. The expression literally means “literature especially created for children,” that is “children’s literature”. In *Childhood in Literature and Art* by Scudder, “literature for children” and “books for children” appear many times. It is most likely that the expression “children’s literature” in Zhou’s *Literature for Children* is borrowed directly from the expression “literature for children” in Scudder’s and MacClintock’s books.

Child-Oriented View on Children, Children’s Literature and the Children Study in U.S.

It was before the time that he explicitly used the notion of “children’s literature” in his *Literature for Children*, that Zhou formed his child-oriented view of children, at the beginning of the Republic of China (starting from 1912), which is reflected in some of his scattered essays.

In *On Children*, Zhou challenged the adult-oriented view of children for the first time:

China preserves the Asian tradition that respects the elders and neglects the young, which can be most easily demonstrated in the parent-child relationship. It is more than natural for father and son to have disagreements. This relationship will restore itself to its original status after reconciliation. However, the balance is disturbed. The care and affection towards the young are ignored and the love and respect for the elder are emphasized. What an extreme practice!...In Chinese tradition, children are subordinate to, instead of being on an equal footing with their parents. Children belong to their parents just as livestock belongs to their owners. Therefore, children should go to any

lengths to attend to their parents. It is even acceptable for the parents to kill their own child.” (246)

With regard to the relationship between adults and children, he comes up with the child-oriented view in his *Studies on Toys I*. “As a result, we should strike a balance between children’s interests and tastes, and the criteria of beauty” (322). In *Suggestions on Students’ Performance Display at School*, he goes further, to propose the notion of appreciation in his child-oriented view. “So the goal of collecting students’ excellent works is to preserve their instinctive interests and tastes in a child-oriented fashion which is also the criteria for review. The purpose is to understand and appreciate children’s talents” (369).

In *On Children*, Zhou poses challenges to the adult-oriented view on children for the first time. He calls for a “study on children”. He said: “Generally people’s attitudes toward children experience three phases, that is, first dealing with them on their own merits, then treating them with aesthetic judgments, and finally studying them.” “However, in China, poems praising children are rare to see, not to mention a study on children” (247).

The expression “study on children” coined in 1912 was soon replaced by “child study,” which emerged in *Introduction to Fairy Tales* and *General Introduction to Study on Children* in 1913. “The study of fairy tales should be based on folklore and yet further child study” (276). “The above mentioned illustrates the nature of fairy tales and what we should pay attention to when applying them to children’s education. In summary, the inclusion of fairy tales in children’s education should be supported, first, by folklore, otherwise they are not fairy tales; second, by pedology, otherwise they are not suitable for education”(281). “Study on Children, is also known as child study. It focuses on the physical and psychological development of children. When applied to education, it aims to allow children’s development to take a natural and gradual course, neither too weak nor too proactive” (287). Because *Introduction to Fairy Tales* was completed before his procurement of *Aspects of Child Life and Education* by Stanley Hall, there is no such expression as “child study” in it. It can be deduced that *Introduction to Fairy Tales* and *General Introduction to Study on Children* were created after reading *Aspects of Child Life and Education* in February, 1913.

It is worth noting that *Introduction to Fairy Tales* introduced the notion of child study. Zhou Zuoren’s area in child study covers fairy tales and nursery rhymes. He once said in his essay “On Study for Women.”

Books in child study in America cover areas ranging from the measurement of

physical fitness and capabilities to educational approaches. There are a great number of books devoted to the study of fairy tales and nursery rhymes whose authors mostly are women. Stanley Hall, the founding father of child study and a great scholar, is also an American. (498)

From Zhou Zuoren's perspective, the study of fairy tales and nursery rhymes falls into child study, thus it can be clearly seen that his study on children's literature is directly influenced by the child study in America, especially by Stanley Hall.

One of the themes of the above mentioned *On Children* is the call for equality between children and adults in terms of human dignity and rights, which was proposed in 1912. The gist of *General Introduction to Study on children* concerns what has been revealed about the physical and psychological differences between children and adults, which was introduced in 1913. These are the two points around which his later child-oriented view "discovery of children in China" developed. Zhou points out that both of these points originated from American child study in his essay "Children's Literature":

People in the past didn't have a proper understanding of children, treating them either as miniature adults or as naïve kids: in the former, they were expected to be mature at a young age; in the latter, they were dismissed as ignorant kids. It is known to all that although children are different physically and mentally from adults, they are, after all, human beings who have both mental and physical activities. This is common sense in child study, which could be a good starting point if we want to save children. (212)

The "common sense" that Zhou refers to is the very notion of his child-oriented view of children, expounded in his works on "new literature" such as *Literature for Human Beings* and *Literature for Children*. This view of children is the ideological foundation for his proposals of "literature for human beings" and "literature for children."

He mentioned American child study in his *General Introduction to Study on Children*, in which he points out that Child study

is flourishing. Dr. Hall, in America, is the most prestigious scholar in this area. His methodology can be divided into two parts. One is exclusively devoted to recording one child, starting from his/her birth. The child is observed in meticulous detail in an attempt to trace his/her changes in development. The

other part focuses on the integration of literature from different studies for comparison and analysis, in order to pinpoint the differences. (288)

This is consistent with Stanley Hall's work. It can be seen that Zhou has an adequate understanding of Stanley Hall which is largely obtained from Stanley's *Aspects of Child Life and Education*. According to his diary, *Aspects of Child Life and Education* was bought from and mailed by The Sagamiya's Bookstore in Japan to his home in Shaoxing in East China on February 1, 1913. Since February 21, he noted down as many as six times that he was reading that book.

Obviously, his child-oriented view of children was directly influenced by child study. He "grew interested in this field only after he obtained the compilation, *Literature in Praise of Children and Study on Children Applied in Education* written by Takashima Hizaburo in Tokyo" (*Bitter Tea: My Reflection* 539). Zhou benefited greatly from *Aspects of Child Life and Education*. Interestingly, Wu Qinan, a Chinese scholar of children's literature once thought "oriented" in "child-oriented" is a financial term, which is incorrect. It is not groundless for me to draw a conclusion that the expression "child-oriented" is borrowed from Japanese. It appears in both the contents of *Study on Children Applied in Education* and the book itself. It is entirely reasonable to make the speculation that his expression "child-oriented" originated from Takashima's book.

According to Zhou's works, he benefited far more from Stanley Hall than he did from Takashima. Altogether, he mentions Stanley and his child study theories seven times in his works. To analyze things in chronological order, one can easily notice that at first he kept an optimistic attitude towards learning but gradually became disappointed at the formidable difficulty of introducing child study to China. This was related to the throwback to "Reading Classics" Movement after the May Fourth Movement.

For instance, he stated in *On Saving Children — Preface to Anthology of Li Changzhi's Papers*:

It is said that the modern study on children began in the United States of America where competent scholars, represented by Dr. Stanley Hall, keep emerging in large numbers. Why is this not introduced to China? It doesn't make sense: a considerable number of Chinese students further their studies in America, among whom many major in Education, whose object is almost always children. Why are there so few books on child study or child psychology? There is not much written about the well being of children, either.

It is partly due to my ignorance of such research; but if there were a lot, then it is certain that I would come across one or two books regarding it. I've heard that human beings were "discovered" in 16th century in the West, women in 18th century and children in 19 century, at which point people's minds began to be enlightened and liberated. My admiration for this is beyond words. I am not in a position to comment on which phase China is in, but it is safe to say that children have not yet been "discovered," and even that in this regard we have not learned from the West. (413)

In this article, Zhou believes that in order to "save children," one has to "get acquainted with the notion of children," because "one can think correctly only if he can obtain the necessary knowledge beforehand" ("On Saving Children" 413). After criticizing the "old arbitrariness" and "new arbitrariness" of adults toward children, he woefully comments: "There is not a single scholar, not to mention literary man, in China paying adequate attention to the study of children. As a result, children's literature in China is brimming with empty words and false emotions. No satisfactory books and no quality illustrations." ("On Saving Children" 414) Here, the failure to "discover children" in China was unfortunately a fact.

In 1945, Zhou Zuoren said: "With respect to children, the issue of parenting falls under the range of education, which I dare not venture into; and the protection of children's rights should be based on Mrs. Ellen Key (1849 ~ 1926) from Sweden, Dr. Hall from America and other scholars, which I won't reiterate here." ("Beliefs of the Ordinary" 619). He once argues unequivocally that the protection of children's rights should be based on Dr. Hall from America and other scholars. Although this was said after his publication of articles such as *Primary Interpretation of the Issue of Children, Literature for Human Beings* and *Children's Literature*, what he said in these books demonstrates this idea well.

Furthermore, Zhou Zuoren gained insight from American child study, specifically studies on the psychological development of children from the perspective of the physical and psychological differences between children and adults. There's one thing worth noting here. The childhood educational theory he proposes, "when applied to education, aims to allow children's development to take a natural and gradual course, neither too weak nor too proactive," is incorporated into his theory about children's literature. "Fairy tales can meet children's demands for interesting stories. The aim should be to allow children to grow up in a natural course and guide them when necessary, so that they won't do anything they are not ripe for; to help them to grow up through a natural and gradual process, which

is the very essence of education.” (“Introduction to Fairy Tales” 279) “To allow children’s development to take a natural and gradual course so that they won’t do anything they are not ripe for” is the core of Zhou’s view on children’s literature. This is of critical importance to the healthy development of children’s literature in China. Zhou always takes it upon himself to criticize whatever educational theories are against this “education following the natural course” theory throughout the development of children’s literature in China. “Recently I noticed that the 70th issue of *Little Friends* is entitled “To Support Things Made in China” which, I feel obliged to comment, makes it not a magazine for children any more. I, as an old brother as well as a father, object to the practice of infusing popular political views into the innocent minds of children, no matter how fashionable and prevalent they are.

In the feudal morality, adults were even justified in selling children for food or just for fun. Or they trained children, against their wills, to pursue power or money, to preach and to fight in wars. In our modern morality, we cram children’s mind with all kinds of beliefs. People are far too impatient. Why not take it slowly, allowing children to grow up to the fullest and to meet their natural demands with all the knowledge of the world. It won’t be too late to woo them to support or join this or that party or faction after their graduation from senior high school. Yet adults are too keen to wait. Moralists long to snatch away the dolls from children and thrust sacrificial vessels into their hands. Militarists would be more than happy to see children playing with military gadgets and receiving military training even in kindergarten. Other groups are the same. Although this is an idea quite pervasive in this day and age, I strongly disapprove of it.¹

Conclusion

Accordingly, Zhou’s view of children’s literature takes shape during the course of the worldwide dissemination of modern culture from the West (Japan included). Close examination and interpretation of the development of his views regarding children’s literature in his works, reveal that he is profoundly influenced by American scholars. This influence can find its manifestations in even tiny details and is largely divided into two aspects. First, Zhou Zuoren echoes the American view on Children’s literature represented by Granville Stanley Hall that “children’s rights should be protected” and “children are different from adults physically and

psychologically.” On this foundation, Zhou develops his child-oriented view on children’s literature. This view allows children to grow through a natural course, and recommends that adults guide them when necessary so that they won’t do anything they are not ripe for. Second, Zhou Zuoren draws strength from the studies of the application of the theories of many American scholars, including those of P. L. MacIntock and H. E. Scudder. This leads to a more comprehensive presentation of the style and features of children’s literature from the perspective of literary education in elementary schools.

However, it should be pointed out that the influence in the above mentioned aspects is intermingled. The children’s literature-oriented study on literary education by P. L. MacIntock and H. E. Scudder is also based on the study of children. What MacIntock proposes about the “proper literary education in elementary school” requires“(1) allowing and meeting appropriately, the child’s native and instinctive interests and tastes; (2) cultivating and directing these; (3) awakening in him new and missing interests and tastes. The first proposal refers to the original intention of creating and providing children’s literature.” This is in line with Zhou’s idea, “to allow children to grow in a natural course and guide them when necessary, so that they won’t do anything they are not ripe for.”

In addition, the influence from Japan also plays an important role in the formation of Zhou’s child-oriented view of children’s literature. I have elaborated on this in my books such as, *The Modernization of Children’s Literature in China* and *The “Discovery of Children: the Origin of Zhou’s View of Literature for Human Beings.”* However, because a detailed summary of the influence from Japan on Zhou seems to be no part of the present discussion, I will leave it for future study.

Note

1. Zhou Zuoren. “On Saving Children: Preface to Anthology of Li Changzhi’s Papers.” *An Anthology of Zhou Zuoren’s Essays*. Vol 6. Ed. Zhong Shuhe. (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2009):413-414.

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