



Juvenile Literature in China after the Reform and Opening-Up Era

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Abstract-This article explores the development of juvenile literature in China after the Reform and Opening-Up (*gaige kaifang*, 改革开放) era initiated in 1978. It traces the revival of children's publishing in the 1980s, the commercialization of the 1990s, the globalization and digital transformations of the 2000s, and the challenges of the contemporary era. By analyzing the shifting roles of state policies, market forces, and cultural exchanges, the study argues that juvenile literature has functioned as both an educational tool and a cultural mirror of China's modernization. The article concludes that while challenges remain—such as digital competition and market oversaturation—juvenile literature continues to play a vital role in shaping the values, imaginations, and cultural identities of Chinese youth.

Keywords: juvenile literature, China, Reform and Opening-Up, children's books, globalization, digital culture

Introduction-The Reform and Opening-Up era (*gaige kaifang*, 改革开放), launched under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) in 1978, marked a dramatic turning point in modern Chinese society. Alongside economic reforms and cultural liberalization, the sphere of children's literature underwent profound transformation. Juvenile literature (*értóng wénxué*, 儿童文学), long entwined with state ideology and social education, began to diversify in style, genre, and audience. This article examines the trajectory of Chinese juvenile literature from the late 1970s to the present. It situates children's literary production within broader political, economic, and cultural contexts, exploring how juvenile literature reflected social changes while also shaping the values and imaginations of younger generations. The analysis proceeds chronologically across four major stages: the revival of the 1980s, the commercialization of the 1990s,

globalization and digitalization in the 2000s, and the contemporary challenges of the 2010s and beyond.

Juvenile Literature in the 1980s: Revival and Reorientation- The 1980s witnessed a cultural thaw after the disruptions of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) recognized the importance of children’s culture in nation-building and invested resources in reviving juvenile publishing. The establishment of the China Children’s Press and Publication Group (CCPPG, 中国少年儿童新闻出版总社) in 1980 was a landmark event (Dai, 2018). This publishing house became the cornerstone for children’s magazines, picture books, and educational materials. Key literary magazines, such as *Children’s Literature* (*Értóng wénxué*, 儿童文学, founded 1981), offered platforms for writers like Zheng Yuanjie (郑渊洁), who gained fame for his *King of Fairy Tales* (*Tonghua dawang*, 童话大王) series. His stories combined imaginative plots with moral lessons, breaking away from purely ideological narratives while retaining patriotic undertones (Wang, 2017). Another major theme of the 1980s was moral education. Stories often featured hardworking, honest, and selfless young characters, echoing Confucian traditions while aligning with socialist values. Books such as *The Little Trumpeter* (*Xiao hao shou*, 小号手) emphasized discipline, diligence, and collective spirit. Simultaneously, translations of foreign works re-emerged, including Hans Christian Andersen, Mark Twain, and Soviet classics. The reintroduction of world literature helped broaden children’s perspectives, while the state ensured imported works did not contradict socialist values (Chen, 2015). In short, the 1980s laid the foundation for a rejuvenated juvenile literary culture, balancing state guidance with imaginative creativity.

Juvenile Literature in the 1990s: Commercialization and Market Dynamics-the 1990s marked the rise of a market-driven cultural economy. As publishing houses gained relative autonomy, juvenile literature was shaped increasingly by consumer demand rather than state directives (He, 2014). The most striking phenomenon was the emergence of literary celebrities. Zheng Yuanjie maintained his popularity, while Yang Hongying (杨红樱) rose to prominence with her series *The Diary of a Smiling Cat* (*Weixiao mao riji*, 微笑猫日记) and *Mo’s Mischief* (*Ma xiaotiao*, 马小跳). These works reflected children’s everyday lives, school experiences, and friendships, resonating deeply with young readers (Zhao, 2019). The 1990s also saw experimentation with genres. Science fiction flourished, exemplified by Ye Yonglie’s (叶永烈) children’s sci-fi stories, while fantasy narratives gained ground. This diversification marked a

departure from the didactic dominance of earlier decades. At the same time, commercial pressures created tension. Publishers prioritized high-selling titles, sometimes at the expense of literary quality. The rise of *kuaican wenxue* (快餐文学, “fast-food literature”) sparked debates among educators and critics, who feared an erosion of cultural and educational value (Wang & Li, 2005). Nevertheless, the 1990s consolidated juvenile literature as a mass-market commodity, fueling both literary innovation and consumerist critique.

Juvenile Literature in the 2000s: Globalization and Digital Transformation- The turn of the 21st century ushered in globalization and rapid technological change. Chinese children gained unprecedented access to foreign literature, both through translations and media adaptations. Works such as J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series and Japanese manga reshaped Chinese reading habits, introducing new aesthetics and narrative forms (Liu, 2012). Domestic authors responded with innovation. Cao Wenxuan (曹文轩), later awarded the Hans Christian Andersen Award in 2016, became a leading figure with works such as *Bronze and Sunflower* (*Tong tong he xiang cao*, 铜铜和向草). His novels combined lyrical prose with themes of hardship, resilience, and human dignity, appealing to both children and adults (Chen & Xu, 2017). Meanwhile, digital platforms transformed juvenile literature. Online literature portals such as Qidian and Jinjiang introduced serialized stories, many targeted at younger readers. Interactive e-books, educational apps, and online fan communities expanded the reach of children’s texts. This era also gave rise to multimedia franchises, where books, cartoons, and merchandise intertwined (Sun, 2016). Despite these advances, concerns about cultural homogenization emerged. Foreign works, particularly Japanese and Western fantasy, often outshone domestic creations in popularity. In response, government initiatives encouraged the production of literature with “Chinese characteristics” (*Zhongguo tese*, 中国特色) to safeguard cultural identity (Xu, 2019). Thus, the 2000s highlighted the interplay between global cultural flows, domestic literary achievements, and digital innovation.

Challenges in Contemporary Juvenile Literature- Despite its vibrancy, contemporary Chinese juvenile literature faces significant challenges. First, competition with digital entertainment—such as TikTok (*Douyin*, 抖音), online games, and streaming platforms—has reduced children’s time and inclination for traditional reading (Zheng, 2021). Second, market oversaturation poses a problem. The abundance of titles, some hastily produced for profit, has led to questions about quality control. Critics warn against “fast-food literature” that entertains but lacks depth (Wang

& Li, 2005). Third, cultural identity remains contested. While global works enrich young readers, they sometimes overshadow domestic literature. Efforts to revive traditional culture through juvenile works—such as adaptations of *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji*, 西游记)—reflect attempts to reassert national heritage. Lastly, the urban-rural divide persists. Access to high-quality children's literature is concentrated in urban centers, while rural areas face shortages in both books and digital infrastructure (Li, 2020). These challenges highlight the need for sustainable strategies to ensure juvenile literature remains educational, culturally grounded, and accessible to all.

Conclusion—The history of juvenile literature in China after the Reform and Opening-Up era reveals a field in constant negotiation between education, entertainment, state influence, and market forces. From the revival of the 1980s to the commercialization of the 1990s, globalization of the 2000s, and the complex challenges of the present, juvenile literature has mirrored China's broader transformations. As both a cultural product and an educational tool, juvenile literature continues to shape the moral values, imaginations, and identities of younger generations. The future of the field lies in balancing literary quality with market demands, safeguarding cultural identity while engaging global trends, and ensuring equitable access across urban and rural divides. Ultimately, juvenile literature remains a cornerstone of China's cultural future, providing children with not only entertainment but also a vision of who they are and who they may become.

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