

The Becoming and Developing of British Children's Literature: Review on From the Industrial Revolution to Children's Literature Revolution: A Study on Modern British Fairy-tale Novels

Zhang Shengzhen

Abstract: Children's literature of a nation reflects its thinking mode and spirit. British children's literature not only invigorates British literature but also helps with the formation and development of the indigenous literature and culture in Britain. Therefore, British children's literature has its particular historic status and social value. *From the Industrial Revolution to Children's Literature Revolution: A Study on Modern and Contemporary British Fairy-tale Stories* illustrates the main thread of the artistic components and evolutionary trend in the history of British children's literature. It is the first book in China that focuses on the evolution of British fairy tales. Overcoming the narrow views on fairy-tale literature, it enriches the content and broadens the horizons of foreign literature studies in China. The book will certainly exert great influences on the macrocosmic studies on children's literature for its outstanding value in historic studies and its exemplary role in academic quality.

Key words: children's literature; fairy-tale stories; morality

Author Zhang Shengzhen, Ph. D., is Professor and Dean at International College, Jiangsu Normal University. Her research interest includes British and American literature, comparative literature and children's literature (Email: zhangshengzhen2008@126.com).¹

标题: 英国儿童文学的产生和发展——评《从工业革命到儿童文学革命：现当代英国童话小说研究》

内容摘要: 儿童文学蕴含着特定国家和民族独特的思维方式和民族精神。作为欧洲文学重要组成部分的英国儿童文学遵循英国文学的价值体系，影响了英国本土文学和文化的形成与发展，造就了其特殊的历史地位和社会价值。中国学者代表性成果《从工业革命到儿童文学革命：关于英国现当代童话故事研究》对英国童话小说的发展历程、文学思潮、艺术流变以及代表性作家

1 本文得到国家社科基金重点项目“英国儿童文学中的国族意识与伦理教诲研究”(项目编号: 17AWW008)的资助。

作品进行了全景式的深入探讨，建构起了英国儿童文学史的主体艺术构架与发展思潮的主脉，是思想深刻的英国儿童文学发展历史的专著，具有重要的学术价值和文献价值。

关键词：英国儿童文学；童话；道德观

作者简介：张生珍，文学博士，江苏师范大学特聘教授，主要研究领域为英美文学、儿童文学和比较文学。

Introduction

From the Industrial Revolution to Children's Literature Revolution: A Study on Modern British Fairy-tale Novels by Professor Shu Wei and his team is a national-funded project, which has been accomplished with seven years' efforts. There are more than 700 thousand Chinese characters in total, 694 pages in thickness and 31 chapters excluding the introduction and conclusion parts. Published in 2015 by the prestigious publisher China Social Sciences Press, it has won immediate concerns and enthusiasm in the field of children's literature and comparative literature in China. Among which, Wang Quangen's review is most typical, who holds that this great work "fills the void in the field. The publication is an event to be cherished in the long run. It is an encyclopedia and a philosophical book" (Wang Oct.31). Other scholars like Du Chuankun, reviewed the significance of this book in the "construction of children's literature theory" (Du, 2016). Jiang Taidi & Sun Xiaoyu, argues that "this epoch-making work will even change people's understanding of children's literature" (Jiang & Sun 64).

As is known Britain is viewed as the center of European children's literature. Each innovation, revolution or transition in European children's literature and even in global children's literature would not have happened without the changes in British children's literature. In ancient Greece and medieval Europe, there were no texts written exclusively for children. In the 17th century, there appeared religious pamphlets written by British puritans; in the 18th century, there were picture books for children to enjoy sensory pleasure; in the 19th and 20th centuries, there came forth the writing exclusively for children. The emergence of children's literature results from the modernization process under the influence of the developing humanism since the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Essential elements in British children's literature link history, present and future, for example, ideas about nation, citizenship, human nature, ethic issues of goodness and evil, dreams and pursuits, etc. British children's literature not only invigorates British literature but also helps with the formation and development of the indigenous literature and culture in Britain. "To understand the history of children's literature is to understand the

history of all our forms of literary experience (Lerer 16)". Therefore, British children's literature has its particular historic status and social values.

The Emergence of Children and Children's Literature

The emergence and development of children's literature are closely related to the understanding of children and childhood. Childhood is considered to be a kind of socialization, which provides a framework to explain the origin and the development of human life. As a variable in social analysis, childhood is rich and colorful instead of being monotonous and homogenous. The culture of childhood has a profound social nature. To children in the West, their childhood is represented by their participation in various public activities. It is a series of periods of socialization and acculturation and is not determined by the social status in their life. These periods with changing goals and values decide the image of childhood. Such an idea about the changing childhood lays a theoretical foundation for the literary creation for children. The evolution of children's literature has close relations to children's history as the evolutionary modes of children's literature to a large extent go in line with the different periods in children's history.

After examining the genesis and development of children's literature, researchers and literary history experts of children's literature in different countries have drawn a conclusion that the artistic consciousness and independence come into being when human society has entered modern times, before which the East and the West alike have a long period without a specific conception of children's literature. In terms of its emergence and existence, children's literature is an inevitable and commensal phenomenon in a particular society when its views on the nation and children have developed to a certain stage. The history of children's literature is a process during which children's literature undergoes gradual developments from poor artistic traits to stronger ones, from an uncertain artistic identity to a well-defined one, from a mixed artistic quality to the artistic purity of its own.

During its ascent in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, children's literature allowed children to have access to didactic literature, such as fables, catechisms, etc. It provided, according to its own value, children with particular content and teachings with no regard to the need of profound reforms on itself. Truly, children's literature was meant to shape children in accordance with values and morals; however, it should also conform to the established literary traditions.

"Discovering the child," generally thought to be first raised by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1762 in his *Emile, or On Education*, was a great progress in human history. Rousseau's view on education greatly impacted children's literature in the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the period from late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, William Wordsworth and other Romantics advanced Rousseau's view. They revered the value of children as human beings, regarding "the Child as father of man" and commended children as subjects of virtues. The Romantic view of literature revitalized nineteenth century children's literature. It made the traditional, genuine and unembellished folklore and legend the only genre of children's literature. Romantic writers believed children's literature must take root in the Mythic Age, the middle Ages or the Classical Antiquity and engage in dialogues with children through telling stories, deeds, legendary reincarnation and farces. It is the very child-centered view on childhood — to emancipate and develop children in accordance with their original desire for life — that gives birth to a child-sized genre of literature.

"The diverse genesis of human cultures decides the peculiarity, richness and self-sufficiency of each culture. It is the same case with children's literature. Each innovation, revolution or transition in European children's literature and even in global children's literature would not have happened without the changes in British children's literature" (Wang Sep.14). Children's literature of a nation reflects its thinking mode and spirit. In Britain, children's literature used to uphold the patriotism that maintained the integration and unity in the British Empire of those parts scattering around the globe. As an important component in children's literature, fairy tales have special significance to a nation.

Changes of Moral Values in Children's Literature

In both western philosophy and literature, the construction of morality starts from Plato. In western literature, children's literature included, the construction of morality, or moral education, can't be separated from philosophy. The artistic manifestation of the construction is inseparable from intellectual thought; it may first appear in literature and then is concluded in philosophy and neither process can be disjointed. *Divine Comedy* by Dante reveals to later generations that it is only when a person of a sound mind examines himself in his deep soul that he can become virtuous. This is the very core idea and humanistic essence in Renaissance. In 18th century, along with the emphasis on rationality and enlightenment, moral education through children's literature was stressed. Writers also became aware of their responsibility as educators. French children's literature in this century presented a stronger moral color. When it comes to 19th century, moralism penetrated into all children's literary works. Children's literature deepens the spiritual plane and life values of children, and undertakes its obligations to educate children to believe in

goodness and justice. “Moralization continued to mark nineteenth-century fairy tales but it was more limited than it had been in the eighteenth-century (Hunt 158)”. For this book, *From the Industrial Revolution to Children’s Literature Revolution: a Study on Modern and Contemporary British Fairy-tale Stories*, its foreword reviews the basic theoretical issues, namely, some basic issues of cultural studies on fairy tales as well as the status quo of studies on fairy-tale literature and fairy-tale stories, in attempt to clarify the basic issues and key issues of the research on children’s literature. As is mentioned in the Forward, the book deals chronologically with the history of British fairy tales in terms of four major developmental stages.

In the middle and late 19th century, Victorian culture had great influence on the ethos of children’s literature. In the 20th century, childhood was regarded as a process full of adventures instead of a training base for adulthood. Children’s literature evolved into an independent genre with modern aesthetics. This book begins with Victorian Era and Edwardian Era (1840-1910), during which children’s literature gradually received attention. With the English translation of European classics of fairy-tales, British fairy-tale stories enjoyed a surge. This period came out many classical writers, such as John Ruskin, Charles Kingsley, Lewis Carroll, etc. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* series was published and swept the world instantly. *Peter Pan* also encouraged people to dream of a wonderful world. British children’s literature developed almost in all aspects. The narrative paradigm and practices in the 19th-century British children’s literature play an exemplary role for its later creations. Along with the social changes from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, British children’s literature experienced significant transition where the nostalgic lens brought the pastoral childhood back to the readers. That childhood is of metaphorical significance. In the upper half of the 19th century, the transition of children’s literature was marked more obviously in political and social dimensions. By means of children’s literature, writers expressed their philosophical insights, which reflected that humankind could rely on its own strength to reach the Utopia. From the early 20th century to WWII, children’s literature was rendered more tasks as it was regarded as an instrument of education or recreation to encourage the young to find the world similar to or different from theirs through travel, explorations and adventures. Children’s literature at this period emphasized ideas and varied methods of story telling, resulting in a considerable amount of works with great aesthetic values.

In the period between two world wars, linking the past and ushering in the new times, the subject of children’s literature changed fundamentally. Children’s literature at this moment reflected political and social challenges via the creation of

a utopian world and through retrospections on ethics, morals, human nature and national identity, etc. Religion and tradition received due attention, and in the meanwhile people were in search of a home and humanistic ideals. Since 1950s, writers gained new successes by means of new subject matters and new narrative formats. Fairy tales became the best means to express their ideas. C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* series was the result of the period. Making use of history and (fantasy) space, the series combined the criticism of industrialization and illusion of future so as to reconstruct the identity of the individual and the identity of the nation.

Around 1970s, social and ideological situations brought about new development of children's literature. British literature responded duly to the overall changes in Nordic and American children's literature; however, the response was not recognized until the 1980s by the research circle of children's literature. The quality and behaviors traditionally belonging to adults were projected onto the young and children, whereas certain traits of the young or children were found in adults. In terms of relative autonomy, the historic barrier between different worlds disappeared. The only thing emphasized was knowledge, which played a determinant role in the disappearance of the traditional demarcation and was responsible for the differentiation between adults and children.

Since the 1970s, "writers of children's literature took in elements from modernism and postmodernism in diverse directions" (Shu 436). During this period when feminists realized the role of fairy tales in ideological formation, fairy-tale rewriting became a narrative strategy in contemporary literature, particularly the feminist literature. A case most exemplary is the feminist fairy tales and criticisms in North America and Britain from 1960s to 1980s. Fantasy literature (or Science fictions) gained unprecedented development. *Harry Potter* series exerted its great influence in helping with the socialization of children and making children's literature the most popular literary form. With academic thinking and diverse academic perspectives, scholars came to view this series in a serious style. It also enthralled adult readers for the very reason that its unique inclusiveness of the whole genre of children's literature contributed to the complexity that theoretically differentiates adult texts and children's texts, surpassing the simplistic identification of children's literary texts.

Children's literature implies the other, namely, adult literature. Despite the assertion that there is no obvious adult interference in children's literature, it lurks in. During the process of modernization, in the further division between children's literature and adult literature is deepened. Actually the division between children's literature and adult literature is a gradual process since a new form takes shape only

when social modernization has reached certain stage.

Children's Literature Defined by Social and Cultural Context

From the Industrial Revolution to Children's Literature Revolution: a Study on Modern and Contemporary British Fairy-tale Stories features extensive theoretic perspectives and a combination of historic exploration and textual analysis by relating to the history, society and literature. The author of this book conducts profound analyses on representative writers in terms of text-based examination and rational criticism from the perspectives of the developmental process, literary trends and artistic changes of British fairy-tales. In this way, the book presents profound expositions on British history of social, ideological and educational evolutions. The author believes historic events such as the medieval period in Europe, the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, the world wars, the civil rights movements, etc., exerted great influence on and brought about the evolution of children's literature. "The study of children's literature is an interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary field, involving literature, linguistics, psychology, pedagogy, reading studies and cultural studies, etc." (Wang Sept.14). Children's literature plays a key role in the understanding of national identity since it conveys the core values of that nation, which, as something of essential importance, bind its history, present and future. The author explores the enlightenment of British fairy-tales on Chinese children's literature and juvenile fantasy literature, indicating the sentiment and attitude of Chinese scholars at the concluding part of this book.

Chinese children's literature did not appear until the 20th century. From its outset, the new literary genre in China was partly modeled on western patterns. Children's literatures in British and American countries were nearly celebrated as standards and examples for children literature in other nations and regions to follow. The author of this book has dealt with the following issues: how to draw lessons from and absorb elements in the creations and academic achievements of modern and contemporary British children's literature, how to create high-level children's fantasy literature with Chinese characteristics in relation to the demands and conditions in the Chinese history, and further to develop the Chinese literature and culture. In this sense, the book bears outstanding academic and cultural significance as well as important social significance.

Conclusion

From the Industrial Revolution to Children's Literature Revolution: A Study on Modern and Contemporary British Fairy-tale Stories is the first book in China that

focuses on the evolution of British fairy tales. Overcoming the narrow views on fairy-tale literature, it enriches the content and broadens the horizons of foreign literature studies in China. The book will certainly exert great influence on the macrocosmic studies on children's literature for its outstanding value in historic studies and the exemplary role in academic quality.

At present, it has become an urgent task for us to grasp the developmental course of British children in order to gain a rational understanding of it, particularly, its evolution along the historic changes of Britain from British Empire to a modern nation. With that, we are further expected to comprehend the relevance of British children's literature to world literature and its difference from adult literature, so that we can obtain an insight of how children's literature to be internationalized and effectively spread the core values of a nation when that nation is establishing its international image and its ethics. Although western values are not universally applicable, British children's literature offers successful experiences, which reveal the fact the developing national and ethnic awareness and the ethnic identity should start with childhood. To Chinese writers of children's literature, they are entrusted with a hard but foremost responsibility.

Works Cited

- Du, Chuankun. "Shu Wei Who Meditates on the Re-establishment of Fairy Tales and Fairy Tale heory." *China Reading Weekly*, September 21, 2016.
- Hunt, Peter. ed. *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*. London & New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Jiang, Taidi & Sun Xiaoyu. "A Chinese Perspective on British Children's Literature: Reading *from the Industrial Revolution to Children's Literature Revolution: A Study on Modern and Contemporary British Fairy-tale Stories*." *Jiangsu Foreign Language Teaching and Research* 3 (2017): 62-64.
- Lerer, Seth. *Children's literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter*. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 2009.
- Shu, Wei etc. *From the Industrial Revolution to Children's Literature Revolution: A Study on Modern and Contemporary British Fairy-tale Stories*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2015.
- Wang, Quangen. "From the Industrial Revolution to Children's Literature Revolution." *China Reading Weekly*, September 14, 2016.
- . "Shu Wei and His *From the Industrial Revolution to Children's Literature Revolution*." *Wenyi Bao*, Oct.31, 2016.

责任编辑：杨革新