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On the Image of Elders in Children's Literature

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Abstract: Elderly figures occupy a significant position in children's literature, mostly presented as "flat characters" that can be roughly categorized into two types: "benevolent" and "ferocious". There are notable differences in the portrayal of elderly figures between Chinese and foreign children's literature, particularly evident in the images of "elderly women" and "elderly men": In Chinese works, elderly women are often depicted as kind and selfless, while those in traditional Western fairy tales are frequently portrayed as evil and threatening; elderly men in Chinese literature emphasize moral perfection and spiritual guidance, whereas their counterparts in Western works (such as Dumbledore) focus more on the complexity and human flaws of their role as "guides". The shaping of different images conveys distinct literary connotations. Elderly figures in children's literature embody multiple meanings, including compensating for the emotional or authoritative absence of parents, serving as inheritors of the group's historical culture, possessing the trait of "rejuvenation", and respecting and aligning with children's cognitive characteristic of "animism". By analyzing the portrayal methods and cultural logic of elderly figures in Chinese and foreign children's literature, this paper reveals their important roles in emotional compensation, cultural inheritance, psychological identification, and cognitive development.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Elderly Images, Image Portrayal, Literary Functions.

1. Introduction

Since the emergence of children's literature, a wide variety of images in it have entered public view. There are elderly figures in traditional Chinese myths and stories such as Ma Liang the Magic Brush and Yu Gong Moves the Mountains; animal images full of the authors' whimsy like those in Fantastic Mr. Fox and Charlotte's Web; and mischievous child images embodying the spirit of play in works such as Totto-chan, the Little Girl at the Window and The Adventures of Tom Sawyer... These images with distinct characteristics demonstrate the diversity of children's literature writers in image portrayal. Writers convey their ideas through shaping literary images, which become the carriers of their thoughts. Looking back at the various images in children's literature, elderly figures have always occupied an important position in creation and are an indispensable part of children's literature. Therefore, the image spectrum of "elderly figures" is one of the key directions in children's literature research.

Based on the analysis of similar elderly figures, this paper takes "elderly women" and "elderly men" as case studies to explore the differences between Chinese and foreign elderly images, reproduce and clarify the underlying logic of authors in shaping these elderly figures, and conduct an in-depth interpretation of the connotations behind the images.

2. Classification of Elderly Images

Literary images are divided into flat characters and round characters. In most children's literature works, stereotyped flat characters are in the majority, lacking distinct personalities and almost always shaped with polar opposite traits such as "beauty", "ugliness", "goodness", and "evil". This is largely related to children's cognitive level and understanding ability. To adapt to the characteristics of the target audience at certain stages, children's literature uses "types" to overshadow certain individual traits of characters, to a certain extent forming common characteristics of characters across different works. James Wood defended flat characters in How Fiction Works, refuting E.M. Forster's view that flat characters have low artistic value. He argued that Forster failed to distinguish the real reason why some flat characters are dull while others are not. In Wood's opinion, flat characters are not equivalent to cartoonish buffoons; a character is good if its function is to illuminate a certain truth or characteristic of human nature. Ultimately, fictional characters are imaginary, and "roundness" is impossible in novels. Therefore, "flat" elderly images also have research value.

The image of the elderly does not deviate from the characteristic that "stereotyped flat characters are predominant in children's literature". When mentioning "the elderly", words such as "kind", "amiable", and "wise"-often used to describe the older generation-come to mind driven by subjective emotions. In the public perception, the elderly are almost the embodiment of certain commonalities or symbols of certain things. Their differences may only lie in titles such as grandfather, grandmother, maternal grandfather, or maternal grandmother, with no specific descriptions of their individual psychological mechanisms behind specific behaviors in particular contexts.

The shaping of the elderly can mostly be summarized by the polar opposite words "kind and benevolent" or "ferocious and evil". Kind and benevolent elderly are the "catalysts" for the protagonists' happiness. They are tolerant and patient, taking on part of the parents' responsibilities without imposing strict requirements on the young protagonists like parents do; instead, they offer pure support and care. Because their love is not mixed with any social responsibilities, they only need to sincerely care for the children's growth. In a modern context where aging is feared, the elderly characters appearing on the stage of children's literature, though gray-haired, are mostly wise men far from decay and decadence. What they bring to readers is not a sorrowful face, a sickly figure, or an eccentric temperament, but psychological maturity and personal charm gained through age[1].

However, while kind and benevolent elderly are certainly the focus of portrayal in children's literature, it is not difficult

to find that ferocious and evil elderly are also an integral part of the spectrum of elderly images. Ferocious and evil images are usually the embodiment of negative characters. "Negative characters are also an indispensable part of constructing literary frameworks, creating conflicts, and promoting the development of plot in literary works"[2]. In recent years, Zhang Wei, a writer who has shifted from serious literature to children's literature creation, has created a group of typical negative elderly characters in his novels. In Lion Cliff, he portrays Laowutou and the fish tyrant who steal large scallops. When they were young, the two were the "sea tyrant duo", sparing no effort to bully the poor people by the sea. Finally, when the poor people turned over and became masters, hoping to criticize them severely to vent their anger, they still "could not change their nature" and secretly started stealing large scallops—the very scallops to be donated to Asia, Africa, and Latin America! Labor reform in the new society still failed to make them repent and reform; they continued to be "parasites of society and enemies of the people"[3]. Nevertheless, the opposite of bad people is good people. Without the "evil" of bad people, the "goodness" of good people cannot be highlighted. Therefore, negative characters have their necessity. They embody the "evil" in human nature, showing the struggle between "good" and "evil" within characters. In many cases, negative characters are often more likely to arouse sympathy and compassion. In narration, negative characters can, with their stereotyped traits, "set off" the formation of positive identification, reflect the fun of the game, and at the same time reveal certain social realities.

"Kind and benevolent" and "ferocious and evil" are the different types of elderly portrayed in children's literature. From a macro perspective, if we examine carefully, there are also differences in the elderly images between Chinese and foreign children's literature. Even if they are both stereotyped characters, their focuses are worth exploring, especially in the images of "old women" and "old men".

2.1. Old Women

In traditional European fairy tales, there are many images of "old women". Only a small number are kind and amiable, or rather, not very malicious; most are depicted as ugly in appearance, bizarre in dress, vicious in temperament, and extremely malicious. They often use evil magic to turn innocent people (mostly young boys) into various animals, and some even harm or eat children[4]. In the well-known Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, the queen, jealous of Snow White's beauty which surpasses her own, disguises herself as an old woman and offers Snow White a poisoned apple. The old woman in this story is undoubtedly the embodiment of evil. Most of the time, the image of "old women" shaped in foreign children's literature is a literary carrier for exposing the social phenomena of the time or criticizing the dark core that the authors themselves want to condemn. However, it is undeniable that even though the vast majority are evil "old women" images, they cannot overshadow the glory of a small number of "old women" images in foreign children's literature works. The primary school textbook The Little Match Girl is a classic example. On the verge of death, the little girl sees her grandmother, who was the only one who loved her, and remembers what her grandmother said to her. The father in the text is the fundamental reason why the little girl dares not go home, because she knows that "if she didn't earn a single coin, her father would definitely beat her". Her grandmother is her only source of warmth.

Images of elderly women also often appear in some contemporary Chinese children's literature works. However, possibly due to the profound influence of traditional Chinese concepts, most old women are depicted as kind and amiable[3]. The grandmother in Grandma and the Little Ghost by the famous children's literature writer Tang Sulan is a typical image of an "old woman" in contemporary Chinese children's literature. Because she longs to raise a child, even when teased by a little ghost and receiving a strange-looking and ugly child, she still cherishes him deeply. Grandma's love is selfless; she does not show any negative attitude because of the child's appearance, but pours almost 100% of her affection into raising her grandchild. The grandmother in Bao Dongni's Misha the Magical Little Fairy is also kind; she often "looks at her granddaughter with a smile" and gives her a gift on her fifth birthday[5].

Why are there differences in the portrayal of "old women" images between Chinese and foreign children's literature? To a large extent, it may be due to the "differential mode of association" in Chinese society. Mr. Fei Xiaotong believed that interpersonal relationships in traditional Chinese society are centered on the "self", spreading outward from near to far, from close to distant, like concentric ripples formed by dropping a stone into water. In other words, the image of the traditional Chinese "old woman" is not divorced from the traditional social structure of China. With them as the center, the "ripples" spreading outward will "radiate" to their own grandchildren. Therefore, in extended families, grandparents naturally believe that they should take care of their grandchildren. Moreover, China has a long-standing tradition of "respecting the elderly and loving the young". Having a "three-generation family", "four-generation family", or even "five-generation family" is regarded as a symbol of blessing for a family or even a clan. Unlike China, the family structure of Westerners is inherently an evolving framework. The pattern of children living with their parents is broken when they reach adulthood; they leave home to live independently and face everything on their own, which means they must trust their own judgments[6].Such a family structure leads to the relative independence between children and parents. Individuals can live their own lives without burden. Unlike the "ripple-like" radiation of Chinese families, the radiation scope of foreign families is relatively narrow. Individuals only need to consider their own needs, and the connection with family elders is not close.

2.2. Old Men

In traditional stories suitable for children's reading, there are many images of old men. However, even these male figures with similar life stages and abilities are portrayed differently in Chinese and foreign stories. The following will cite two stories from Chinese and foreign children's literature respectively to illustrate this point.

The old man in Ma Liang the Magic Brush created by the Chinese writer Hong Xuntao appears when Ma Liang is in the most desperate situation and grants him a "magic brush", helping him change his life. This old man is actually a symbol of spiritual strength. The "magic brush" he bestows gives Ma Liang the ability to change the world. While endowing Ma Liang with spiritual strength, the old man also appropriately reminds him to stay true to his original aspiration and make good use of this hard-won "magic brush". This is not only a story but also a mirror reflecting the characteristics of Chinese

elders. Basically, all old men in traditional Chinese stories have a common feature: they always appear when the protagonist is in deep trouble. "To get out of a desperate situation, one can only rely on foresight or a lucky thought-in other words, a spiritual function or a certain inner spiritual autonomy."[7] Therefore, what the old man brings to the protagonist is not only material support but also more precious spiritual strength. The appearance of the old man can convey traditional virtues such as wisdom, kindness, and willingness to help others, and can also test the protagonist's moral character through the material conditions he brings.

The well-known Headmaster Dumbledore in the Harry Potter series is a representative figure of the "old man" image in foreign children's literature works. He plays an important role in the growth of many people. He can perceive the traits in them and give children the opportunity to make new choices. He is a typical Western wise man with magic. He not only imparts knowledge to the protagonist Harry but also guides him to understand himself, love, and courage. Faced with various difficulties on Harry's growth path, he does not directly give answers but guides Harry to comprehend and grow on his own. When Harry sees his long-missed family in the Mirror of Erised and indulges in it, Dumbledore does not roughly pull him away but tells him the truth about the mirror. Western "old men" are not saints in many cases; they may also be burdened with many mistakes. For example, in his youth, Dumbledore planned with the dark wizard Grindelwald to rule Muggles "for the greater good". This wrong ambition indirectly led to the death of his sister Ariana. This also draws Dumbledore closer to real readers, making them feel that he has something in common with elderly people in reality in many aspects: although he has magic, he can also make mistakes. He is not so flawless in the story and is still an "ordinary person" in many ways.

It can be seen that even though the two "old men" in children's literature who both possess "superpowers", Chinese and foreign writers have different "expectations" for them. In the "white-bearded grandfather" in Ma Liang the Magic Brush, readers can feel more of the traditional morality in him. He is a "perfect symbol", embodying the society's expectations for good personal qualities-as long as a person maintains a pure and kind nature, "heaven" and "Tao" will naturally help him. His appearance reflects more the need to maintain social order. Dumbledore, on the other hand, mainly plays the role of a "guide", allowing the protagonist to grow through trial and error. He not only appears when the protagonist is in danger but also accompanies the protagonist's growth. The strength he brings to Harry is presented through gradual guidance and inspiration. Under the different expectations of Chinese and foreign writers, these two types of "old men" images come vividly to life. In China, elderly men with "superpowers" are often flawless. Their appearance is to endow the protagonist with extraordinary abilities. Whether it is the "Jade Emperor" in traditional Chinese myths or the "white-bearded grandfather" mentioned earlier, their flaws never seem to be shown in public cognition. Although "old men" in foreign children's literature can be classified as "flat characters" in terms of "temperament type", their shaping in different works seems somewhat "round". When the public thinks they are omnipotent elders, the author always seems to surprise us in another convincing way—they will tear open the elders' flaws and "expose them to the sun".

In terms of the national spirit embodied in the image of the old man, the old man in Ma Liang the Magic Brush reflects the Chinese people's respect for fine traditional Chinese virtues, while the image of Dumbledore in Harry Potter shows Westerners' pursuit of "power". Tracing back to Chinese and foreign myths, it is not difficult to find that the differences between these two "old men" images were already foreshadowed in the mythological systems. Corresponding to the more ethical factors in Chinese imperial lineage stories, the basic characteristic of Chinese spirit is the respect for "virtue" in secular life such as society and politics. Greek mythology centered on Zeus has a high cognitive character, which is consistent with the basic element of Greek spirit-the admiration and pursuit of "power"[8].Admittedly, the two examples cited above are differences in the shaping of "old men" images in Chinese and foreign children's literature. We cannot generalize that all "old men" images conform to these characteristics; instead, we should consider specific situations.

3. Connotations of Elderly Images in Children's Literature

3.1. Compensating for the Absence of Parents

In real life, most of the time, the elderly in a family will take on the responsibility of caring for the younger generation and become the "main force" in taking care of them at a certain stage of children's growth. This is not only because of the inherent love of the elderly for their grandchildren but also a necessary compensation for children when their parents are "absent". The "absence" of parents in children's literature can refer to parents being unable to accompany their children's growth due to work or other reasons, or parents' authority appearing weak due to their limited abilities.

Charlie's parents portrayed by Roald Dahl in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory are typical examples of the absence of family authority. In fact, they do not lack companionship with their children, but due to their limited abilities, they can only let Charlie live a life of hunger every day. The chocolate on his birthday every year becomes the only sweetness in his heart. Perhaps the absence of authority allows children to enjoy the free state of "having no parents" like Sun Wukong, but it also means the loss of the spiritual guiding role of authoritative figures. Charlie's family is full of love, but the poor family situation makes Charlie's ideals increasingly "pale", which inevitably implies the incompetence of family authority.[9] Therefore, Charlie's grandfather takes on the role of "spiritual guidance of authoritative figures". Even though he is equally poor, his love can be superimposed with that of his parents, to a certain extent compensating for the harm caused to little Charlie by the negative authority of "poverty". Faced with Charlie's idea of selling the golden ticket to improve the family's living conditions, he says: "Only a fool would give up a golden ticket for something as vulgar as money." This undoubtedly injects a shot in the arm for Charlie.

Similarly, there are many young protagonists in children's literature who face the absence of companionship from family authority (usually parents). Taking The Witches created by Roald Dahl as an example, the young protagonist in the novel loses his parents and is taken care of by his grandmother. Here, the appearance of the grandmother is more a compensation for the protagonist's lack of family affection. Parents are mainly responsible for their children's socialization, and inevitable conflicts will arise between obeying parents' standards and the degree to which children are willing to accept them. Grandparents, however, can act as "objective

observers" in a certain sense, influencing their grandchildren from a position that is quite difficult for parents.[10]

However, it should be clarified that even with 100% love from grandparents, it cannot make up for the absence of parents in children's hearts. They cannot cover all the spiritual traits that parents can bring to their children, nor can they replace parents as the real family authority. Their power is always limited; all they can do is make up for part of the love that children lack or bridge the gap between children and their parents.

3.2. Symbols of Group History and Culture

In children's literature works, "old people and children are often the same; they both need to share experiences, have secrets, and possess the creativity to meet these needs". Therefore, children can always help the elderly awaken their childhood memories, and many children's literature works describe this connection between the elderly and children.[11] Many of the experiences shared by the elderly are collective memories of the time. Writers often extend from the description of individual memories of the elderly to rational thinking about group historical and cultural memories. The implicit expression of these group historical and cultural memories in children's literature can help children get rid of the simple "pleasure principle", avoid indulging in fantasies, enable them to have a deeper understanding of the real world, and promote children to step out of the fantasy world.

Here, we still take Charlie and the Chocolate Factory as an example to glimpse group history. It is not difficult to find that there are two instances of unemployment in the book. One is when Mr. Wonka suspects there are spies in the factory and fires many workers, including Charlie's grandfather. The other is when the factory where Charlie's father works introduces advanced machines and no longer needs too many manual workers. The two unemployment experiences of one family may be just a projection of the social economy at that time, and may to a certain extent reflect the social situation of the time. This state is hard not to be associated with the "Great Depression", an economic crisis that originated in the United States between 1929 and 1931 and later spread to the entire world. This crisis lasted for a long time, covered a wide range, and was highly destructive. It not only led to long-term large-scale unemployment but also changed social relations. Charlie felt the difficulties at home at an early age, making him different from other children. Even at an age when he should follow the "pleasure principle", he took the initiative to break away from childhood fantasies and move towards the real world. It is impossible to simply judge whether this seemingly "precocious" performance is beneficial to children's physical and mental development, but it is undeniable that it did not prevent Charlie from growing into a simple, kind, and brave little boy.

There is also an elderly person who tells group history in Childhood, which appears in primary school Chinese textbooks. Gorky shaped the image of a grandmother who is good at telling stories. There are as many as four or five long quotations of stories told by the grandmother in the book. From Alyosha's memory, it seems that the grandmother has been a good storyteller since the first time he met her. Most of her stories conform to orthodox religious teachings-love, kindness, and morality-and inherit the traditional language and culture of the Russian nation. When the grandmother tells folk tales that conform to Orthodox doctrines in fluent and natural modern Russian, these stories that are not influenced by Western culture, truly belong to the Russian nation, keep pace with the times, vivid, practical, and exhort people to do good, have deeply entered the heart of little Alyosha and the heart of every reader. Through the narration of the elderly person "grandmother", Gorky shows the changes of Russian culture and introduces some traditional cultures to readers.

In this way, Charlie's grandfather and Alyosha's grandmother may be carriers of this or that period of social history, and also reasonable narrators of group history. Without the existence of such elderly people in literary works, there is no guarantee that the collective memory belonging to humanity can be reasonably written and truly perceived by children. Even if there are books that faithfully record history, in what way can this history be truly passed on while protecting children's hearts? The existence of the elderly allows collective history to be preserved, and also enables children in modern society to come into contact with the group historical culture of the past in a correct and not too serious way, allowing some precious memories that need to be known and recorded to enter the hearts of child readers in a relaxed way.

3.3. Magical Individuals of "Rejuvenation"

Someone once proposed the concept of "adults with childlike innocence", referring to a group of adults who are as simple as children compared to other adults and can provide a supportive arm for children when they are with them. The characteristics of "adults with childlike innocence" are particularly obvious. After experiencing decades of trials and hardships, they take off part of the shell of the adult world and return to the most authentic state of the individual. However, because they have experienced the complexity of the adult world and understand the value of childlike innocence, they can more firmly guard childlike innocence. When breaking free from the constraints of social customs, the elderly do not lose the reason of adults; they add nature and innocence to the judgment and life skills of adults.[12]

As the saying goes, "Old people are like children, and young children are like children." Most adults in old age no longer have economic and parenting pressures, have passed the difficult period of "having elderly parents to support and young children to raise", and can rely on their children or even grandchildren. Their behaviors will gradually tend to be childish. Maslow believed that those who experience life fully, actively, and selflessly-that is, the most mature people-are also those with the strongest childlike innocence who can achieve self-actualization, and such people are generally the elderly.

Charlie's grandfather is such a magical individual of "rejuvenation". For him, "rejuvenation" can refer to both psychological and physical aspects. When he hears that Mr. Wonka has issued golden tickets, his psychology is almost the same as that of a child. Even if there is only a little possibility, he takes out his private money and lets Charlie buy a piece of chocolate. When tearing open the chocolate wrapper, his psychology is almost no different from Charlie's. When he finds that the golden ticket does not appear, Charlie's grandfather's disappointment is no less than Charlie's. As an elderly person who has been bedridden for many years, when he hears the exciting news that Charlie has obtained the last golden ticket, "his thin body has risen and left the bed", changing from his usual frailty. This frailty is real because "adults with childlike innocence" have a dual nature. They are in the adult society and do not have the qualification to escape

like children, but they cannot be completely integrated into the children's world. This duality leads to the softness in the hearts of "adults with childlike innocence". It is precisely because of their soft hearts that they can better uphold childlike innocence. Under the intricate plot, they seek help from children and form a force that can compete with the adult society.[13] This softness is not a flaw of theirs, but rather increases their human touch and affability. "Adults with childlike innocence" in children's literature are often played by elderly people like Charlie's grandfather. These elderly people escort children's growth, giving them the courage to dare to change their own destiny. Children also use their own abilities to rescue the elderly with childlike innocence trapped in the adult society. Under certain intricate plots, elderly people with childlike innocence often form alliances with children. They will take the initiative to seek help from children, compete with the adult society together with them, and escape from the situations they fear.

3.4. Unique Creations Conforming to Children's Developmental Stages

Psychologist Jean Piaget believed that young children's thinking is egocentric thinking, that is, objectifying the subjective and objectifying the world. Under the influence of this kind of thinking, young children will regard all things in nature as living, able to speak, and inspired. The creation of children's literature writers is also affected by this "animism". The elderly often proceed from the children's perspective, stand with them, perceive all things around them with animistic thinking, and thus form a close alliance with the children. Even though elderly people with rich life experience rationally recognize that children's view of "all things have spirits" is wrong, they still do not evaluate children's poetic imagination with scientific rationality or stifle their curiosity to measure the world with reality.

In Grandpa's House, the little girl Zhenzhen goes to her grandfather's house in the countryside for the first time. At first, she sees the bare red soil in the yard, a dilapidated shed, and a dilapidated fence. What's worse, she also feels that the animals here are unfriendly to her, so she is so disappointed that she refuses to call her grandfather. However, in the evening, the mythical atmosphere created by her grandfather changes everything.[14] Grandpa does not break Zhenzhen's view of the outside world; he only uses kind reminders to allow his granddaughter to view things from more angles and ways. The interaction between the grandfather and granddaughter benefits both parties: Zhenzhen can respond to her grandfather's reminders, and the old man also gains inspiration from it. The conversation between Zhenzhen and her grandfather under the starry sky is not only an impromptu spiritual entertainment but also a profound exchange of life experiences, which also includes a way of "seeing" the world and an attitude towards all things.[15]

In children's literature, writers protect the unique "animism" characteristic of children's developmental stages through "elderly people", allowing children to comply with the laws of their own developmental stages when reading. This kind of protection is beneficial to children's physical and mental development. They are the echo and materialization of children's internal "animistic" world outlook in the text, and a bridge connecting children's hearts with the vast and mysterious story world. Their existence elevates children's imagination from "wild fantasies" to a permitted and guided great adventure.

4. Conclusion

As an important part of children's literature, elderly images not only enrich the connotation of literary works with diverse forms but also assume multiple functions of emotional compensation, cultural inheritance, psychological identification, and cognitive development in a deep sense. When shaping elderly images, Chinese and foreign children's literature show different characteristics due to differences in cultural backgrounds and social structures. However, regardless of the form, elderly images, with their unique charm and far-reaching influence, have become an important bridge connecting children with the adult world, and reality with fantasy. Through in-depth analysis of elderly images, the public can not only better understand the aesthetic value and social functions of children's literature but also cherish and inherit these precious spiritual wealth that transcends time and culture in the process of accompanying children's growth. This is also of great significance for the creation of children's literature in the future.

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