

Children’s Literature in China during the “Seventeen-Year Literature” Period (1949–1966) ‘十七年文学’时期的中国儿童文学 (1949–1966)

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Abstract

This article examines the development of Chinese children’s literature (儿童文学, *értóng wénxué*) during the “Seventeen-Year Literature” period (1949–1966). Against the backdrop of political movements such as the Hundred Flowers Campaign (百花齐放, *Bǎihuā qífàng*) and the Great Leap Forward (大跃进, *Dàyuèjìn*), children’s literature functioned as both a creative art and an ideological tool. Focusing on three key writers—Ye Shengtao (叶圣陶, *Yè Shèngtáo*), Bing Xin (冰心, *Bīng Xīn*), and Zhang Tianyi (张天翼, *Zhāng Tiānyì*)—this study highlights recurring themes of patriotism, collective labor, moral education, and international solidarity, while situating their contributions within broader cultural and institutional contexts.

Keywords: Children’s literature; China; Seventeen-Year Literature; Ye Shengtao; Bing Xin; Zhang Tianyi; socialism; pedagogy

Introduction

Children’s literature (儿童文学, *értóng wénxué*), broadly defined, encompasses stories, novels, fairy tales, poems, plays, and picture books created for and consumed by children. It is not only a category of entertainment but also a powerful cultural and pedagogical tool, deeply connected to how societies imagine childhood, morality, and education. In China, the development of children’s literature reflects broader historical transformations, particularly the turbulent years following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (中华人民共和国, *Zhōnghuá Rénmín Gònghéguó*) in 1949.

The period between 1949 and 1966 is commonly referred to as the “Seventeen-Year Literature” era (十七年文学, *shíqī nián wénxué*). This span of time began with the founding of the new socialist state and ended just before the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命, *Wénhuà Dàgéming*). Scholars widely recognize it as a distinct literary epoch characterized by political directives, collective enthusiasm, and intense ideological supervision (Chen, 2001; Wu, 2018). Within this framework, children’s literature emerged not only as entertainment but also as an instrument of moral education, patriotism, and political socialization.

This article examines the nature of Chinese children’s literature during the Seventeen-Year period, with a particular focus on three influential authors: Ye Shengtao (叶圣陶, *Yè Shèngtáo*, 1894–1988), Bing Xin (冰心, *Bīng Xīn*, 1900–1999), and Zhang Tianyi (张天翼, *Zhāng Tiānyì*, 1906–1985). By situating

their works within the broader socio-political context—marked by campaigns such as the Hundred Flowers Campaign (百花齐放, *Bǎihuā qífàng*), the Anti-Rightist Campaign (反右运动, *Fǎn Yòu yùndòng*), and the Great Leap Forward (大跃进, *Dàyuèjìn*)—this study demonstrates how children’s literature functioned both as a reflection of state ideology and as a site of creative negotiation.

Historical and Cultural Context of the Seventeen-Year Period

The seventeen years following 1949 represented a dramatic phase of restructuring in Chinese society. The Communist Party of China (中国共产党, *Zhōngguó Gòngchǎndǎng*) envisioned literature and art as vital tools for nation-building, mass mobilization, and socialist education. Mao Zedong’s (毛泽东, *Máo Zédōng*) famous 1942 “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” (在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话, *Zài Yán’ān Wényì Zuòtánhuì shàng de Jiǎnghuà*) established the guiding principle that literature should serve workers, peasants, and soldiers (Mao, 1942/1965).

Children’s literature, too, was placed under this guiding framework. The founding of the Chinese Writers’ Association (中国作家协会, *Zhōngguó Zuòjiā Xiéhuì*) in 1949 institutionalized state control over literary production and encouraged writers to dedicate their talents to socialist education (Wang, 2010). The establishment of the Juvenile and Children’s Publishing House (少年儿童出版社, *Shàonián Értóng Chūbǎnshè*) in 1952 further underscored the state’s recognition of children’s literature as an essential field.

Statistics reflect the rapid growth of this sector: according to reports in the *People’s Daily* (人民日报, *Rénmín Rìbào*), over 4,600 titles of children’s literature were published between 1950 and 1954, while another 8,900 titles appeared between 1955 and 1959 (Zhu, 2005). These publications included fairy tales, prose, poetry, picture books, and plays. While creativity flourished, political imperatives—particularly the emphasis on “class struggle” (阶级斗争, *jiējí dòuzhēng*) and patriotism (爱国主义, *àiguó zhǔyì*)—shaped the content of children’s literature profoundly.

Ye Shengtao 叶圣陶 (Yè Shèngtáo, 1894–1988)

Ye Shengtao was a pioneer of modern Chinese children’s literature long before 1949, but his role during the Seventeen-Year period became even more influential due to his political and educational positions. Having joined progressive political organizations early on, Ye became a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (中国人民政治协商会议, *Zhōngguó Rénmín Zhèngzhì Xiéshāng Huìyì*) in 1949. By 1954, he had risen to the position of Vice Minister of Education (教育部副部长, *Jiàoyùbù fù bùzhǎng*), overseeing curriculum development and textbook reform (Li, 2012).

Literary Contributions

Before the founding of the PRC, Ye had primarily written fairy tales, but in the 1950s his focus shifted toward lyric poems and prose designed for children. One of his most notable innovations was the adaptation of song lyrics (歌词, *gēcí*) into children’s literature, blending rhythm and educational themes. His short poem “Little Boat” (小小的船, *xiǎoxiǎo de chuán*), written in 1955, contains only four lines but conveys a child’s romantic wonder at nature—sitting in a boat while gazing at stars in the sky. The simplicity of language and vivid imagery appealed directly to young readers while also resonating with broader ideological messages of optimism and collective belonging (Ye, 1955/2001).

Other significant works include:

- “Goldfish” (金鱼, *jīnyú*)
- “Frog” (青蛙, *qīngwā*)
- “The Motherland Covered in Green is So Lovely” (祖国全路太可爱, *Zǔguó quán lù tài kě'ài*)
- “Planting Trees” (植树, *zhíshù*)

Recurring themes in Ye’s writings were patriotism, the beauty of collective labor, and the responsibility of children to contribute to the socialist future. Between 1949 and 1966, Ye published around thirty works dedicated to children, making him one of the most prolific and politically engaged authors of the era (Zhang, 2014).

Bing Xin 冰心 (Bīng Xīn, 1900–1999)

Bing Xin, one of the most celebrated women writers in modern Chinese literature, achieved renewed prominence during the Seventeen-Year period. Her humanistic style, often emphasizing tenderness, family bonds, and moral reflection, made her a unique voice in children’s literature.

Public Influence

Between 1951 and 1965, Bing Xin was mentioned 244 times in *People’s Daily* articles, reflecting her importance not only as a literary figure but also as a cultural critic and political participant (Liu, 2015). She frequently published recommendations and essays on children’s literature, shaping the field both creatively and critically.

Literary Contributions

Her 1956 story “Suggestions of a Mother” (一个母亲的建议, *Yīgè mǔqīn de jiànyì*) humorously addresses the scarcity of children’s clothing, while also offering practical social commentary. Another work, “Tao Qi’s Summer Diary” (陶奇的暑期日记, *Táoqí de shǔqī rìjì*), depicts a schoolgirl’s struggle with writing and her engagement with Soviet children’s literature, highlighting transnational socialist influences (Sun, 2011).

Bing Xin also emphasized themes of international friendship and peace, as seen in poems such as “Moscow and the Sky” (莫斯科的上天, *Mòsīkē de shàngtiān*) and “Saluting the People of Egypt” (向埃及人民警告, *Xiàng Āijí rénmin jǐnggào*). These works reveal how children’s literature during the 1950s was mobilized for global solidarity, aligned with China’s foreign policy.

One of her short stories, “A Kite Looking for Friendship” (寻求友谊的风筝, *Xúnqiú yǒuyì de fēngzheng*), adapted from the 1958 Franco-Chinese film *Kite*, similarly underscores friendship as a universal value.

Although her masterpiece “Letters to Young Readers” (寄小读者, *Jì xiǎo dúzhě*) predates the Seventeen-Year period, its re-readings and continued influence further solidified her stature. The letters, written in poetic prose, offer heart-to-heart communication between the author and children, celebrating affection, empathy, and imagination (Bing Xin, 1931/2002).

In total, Bing Xin published fifteen books for children during this period, in addition to her translations of Rabindranath Tagore’s (泰戈尔, *Tàigē'ěr*) fairy tales into Chinese—further internationalizing Chinese children’s literature.

Zhang Tianyi 张天翼 (Zhāng Tiānyì, 1906–1985)

Zhang Tianyi's contribution to children's literature lies in his ability to blend didacticism with humor and imaginative storytelling. Like Ye and Bing Xin, Zhang was actively involved in cultural institutions, serving as Deputy Director of the Central Literary Research Institute (中央文学研究所, *Zhōngyāng Wénxué Yánjiūsuǒ*) in 1951 and as a member of the Chinese National Committee for the Defense of Children (中国保卫儿童全国委员会, *Zhōngguó Bǎowèi Értóng Quánguó Wěiyuánhui*) in 1952.

Literary Contributions

His most famous fairy tale, “The Secret of the Magic Gourd” (宝葫芦的秘密, *Bǎo húlu de mìmì*), published in 1958, narrates the dream of a schoolboy named Wang Bao (王葆, *Wáng Bǎo*). The boy discovers a magical gourd that fulfills his wishes, only to realize at the end that diligence and self-reliance are more valuable than shortcuts. The story became so popular that it was later adapted into a film (Guo, 1986).

Zhang's 1954 collection “Stories of Chinese Young Pioneers” (中国少年先锋队队的故事, *Zhōngguó Shàonián Xiānfēngduì de gùshi*) includes:

- “Going to the Cinema” (去看电影, *Qù kàn diànyǐng*)
- “How Luo Wenying Became a Young Pioneer” (罗文应的故事, *Luó Wényīng de gùshi*)
- “They and We” (他们和我们, *Tāmen hé wǒmen*)
- “Yusheng at Home” (雨生在家里, *Yǔshēng zài jiālǐ*)

These stories highlight self-sacrifice, teamwork, and moral integrity. For example, in “Going to the Cinema,” a girl gives up her much-anticipated movie trip to return a lost notebook—an act of altruism promoting socialist virtues. Similarly, “They and We” portrays a girl donating her favorite dress to support a performance, underscoring the value of collective success over individual desire.

Zhang's style was distinguished by accessible language and warmth toward his characters, making moral lessons appealing rather than authoritarian. His stories encouraged children to internalize socialist ideals voluntarily, through identification with characters who embody diligence, generosity, and responsibility (Xu, 2019).

Broader Trends in Children's Literature (1949–1966)

Beyond the works of these three authors, Chinese children's literature during the Seventeen-Year period followed recognizable thematic patterns. Scholars have noted that plots often revolved around four relational elements:

1. An exemplary model (模范人物, *mófàn rénwù*)
2. A positive peer/friend (朋友, *péngyǒu*)
3. A central event or conflict (事件, *shìjiàn*)
4. An enemy or antagonist (敌人, *dírén*) (Peng, 2010).

This narrative structure mirrored broader socialist literary formulas, emphasizing role models, collective action, and the triumph of virtue over adversity.

The publishing industry was centralized through the Juvenile and Children's Publishing House (JCPH), which specialized in picture books and children's magazines. Approximately 40% of published works incorporated revolutionary romanticism, praising patriotism and sacrifice for the nation. Another 40%

conveyed moral lessons such as honesty, friendship, and sharing—for instance, “A Radish Returns” (萝卜回来了, *Luóbo huílái le*, 1955), later adapted into a short animated film. In this tale, a rabbit passes a carrot to a monkey, who passes it to a fawn, and eventually the carrot makes its way back to the rabbit’s home, symbolizing the cyclical nature of generosity and friendship.

Although Chinese children’s books of this era often lacked the production quality and international circulation of their Western counterparts, they laid the foundation for a uniquely Chinese tradition of children’s literature (Ni, 2017).

Conclusion

Children’s literature during the Seventeen-Year period (1949–1966) was deeply entangled with the political, cultural, and educational transformations of early socialist China. Writers such as Ye Shengtao, Bing Xin, and Zhang Tianyi navigated the dual imperatives of creativity and ideology, producing works that remain influential today.

While the literature of this era was undoubtedly constrained by political directives, it also introduced new genres, experimented with storytelling strategies, and established lasting traditions in children’s publishing. These works encouraged patriotism, international solidarity, moral integrity, and collective responsibility—values central to socialist education.

In retrospect, the Seventeen-Year period represents both a golden age of productivity and a cautionary tale of ideological limitations. Today, Chinese children’s literature continues to evolve under global influences, technological innovation, and shifting educational practices. Yet the legacy of the 1949–1966 era remains evident in the persistent intertwining of pedagogy, politics, and imagination in Chinese narratives for young readers.

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