

From image anxiety to image turn: the commencement of graphic narrative in Chinese children's literature

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ABSTRACT: There is a profound image anxiety in the children's education in ancient China. The entertainment and bionic nature of images are considered harmful to children's growth, picture books are therefore strictly restricted for children to access. This image anxiety had gradually changed with the process of visualization in modern Chinese society. Children are able to construct the legitimacy of viewing in a new cognitive paradigm, carry out their own visual practice, and establish a connection between viewing and knowing. The commencement and development of graphic narrative is a key step. It is accompanied by the renewal of image concepts and graphic narrative methods. Out of respect for the unique attributes of children's vision, such as subjectivity, Chinese children's literature graphic narrative has opened up a visual field full of imagination, enriching Chinese modern and contemporary visual culture. The emergence of graphic narration in children's literature has become the embryo of picture book in Chinese children's literature, and an indispensable link in the history of Chinese picture books before their development. It has experienced a special historical development process, absorbed western cultural resources, and broken through the shackling of tradition.

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: Chinese children's literature; Graphic narrative; Image turn; History of visual culture; Picture books.

Introduction

In ancient China, traditional children's education was marked by a taboo on images. Since the May Fourth Movement, Chinese modern children's literature, with a child-centered approach as its distinct banner, has been reconstructing children's sensory experiences, providing a field for the process of children's subjectification, dismantling various moral educational barriers

before children, and liberating children from the position of passive cultural appendages.

Since its inception, Chinese children's literature has placed great emphasis on the use of images, which is closely related to the development of an image society. The emergence of modernity has elevated the importance of visuality. Visuality has also gradually freed itself from the suppressed status of 'divine encounter' and 'heart understanding' in traditional Chinese society through scientific discourse, enhancing its significance as a sensory cognitive mode. The meaning of the observer and new observational positions are becoming an undeniable force in modern culture and society.

The extensive role of visual culture in the early stages of modern Chinese society has profoundly influenced the process of children's visual modernity, with the influx of various images leading to the democratization of children's visual experiences.

The emergence of various news pictorials became a boon for children, but these were not cultures belonging to children. For Chinese children, the uniqueness of their own visual experiences and desires was emphasized during this period, and the emergence and development of children's literature was a key link. In early children's literature, in addition to illustrations, covers, and other paratexts, new types of image texts such as picture stories, fable illustrations, and comic drawings also emerged, demonstrating distinct narrative characteristics. These graphic narratives in children's literature have opened up new fields of visibility for children, providing many possibilities for children to become modern subjects of observation.

1. *Image anxiety in early Chinese children's literature*

«What could we read at that time? Any book with even the slightest picture would be banned, scolded, or even spanked by the tutor, who was the 'senior who guided the youth' at that time»¹. Many modern and contemporary writers, represented by Lu Xun, recorded in their memoirs their love for pictures in childhood and the sadness of being banned from looking at pictures by their elders. This kind of anxiety about children's images has a long history in traditional Chinese culture. Even in the Ming Dynasty, when the printing and publishing industry was relatively prosperous, when the ancient prose master Chen Jitai was caught looking at the Romance of the Three Kingdoms as a child, he hurriedly explained «I was not looking at the pictures, but the words under the characters»². It can be seen that children who are unmoved by im-

¹ Lu Xun, *ZhaoHua Xi Shi*, Beijing, Beijing Education Press, 2019, p. 22.

² Chen Jitai, *Dai Yi Shan Fang*, Shanghai, Shanghai Bookstore Press, 2001, p. 119.

ages are more in line with the traditional moral principles of eliminating selfish desires and not looking at inappropriate things.

In the classical Chinese paintings of *Hundred Children* and *Lessons*, unlike the traditional «painting with-in a painting», the scrolls held by the children in the paintings are often blank (Pic. 1). These ‘paintings without paintings’ showed that in the context of traditional education, adult painters cannot even imagine what images can appear harmoniously and legally with children. As viewing objects, children’s viewing is empty and incomplete. The long-standing image anxiety of children in Chinese culture had its institutional conditions and psychological motivations. Yan Yan-



Pic. 1. Wang Lian hai, *Chinese Ancient Children's Play Modeling Atlas*, Jiangxi, Fine Arts Publishing House, 1999, p. 33

zhi once gave three interpretations of ‘picture’: «The first is the picture of reason, which is the hexagram. The second is the picture of knowledge, which is the study of letters. The third is the picture of pictures, which is paintings»³. In ancient China, the types of images provided by adults for children were mostly «picture of reason» and «picture of knowledge». The former, such as *Yixue Qimeng Yichuan* and other classics that introduce pictographic symbols, and the latter, such as the illustrated literacy book *New Edition of Four Words of Couplets*, mostly did not go beyond the scope of picture studies such as illustrations and diagrams. There are very few artistic paintings created for children, and the content is concentrated on portraits of sages and records of filial piety, such as Tao Zanting’s *Mengyang Tushuo* in the Ming Dynasty and Shen Sansheng’s *Yangzheng Tushuo Chubian* in the Qing Dynasty. Folk pictures for New Year are also a rare image resource for children. In the Daoguang period, Li Guangting’s *Xiangyan Jieyi* recorded: «Papering New Year pictures is just a child’s play. However, for example, ‘Filial Piety Picture’ and ‘Farming Busy’, let the children look at them and explain them, which is also a way to cultivate morality pictures are all about admonitions and warnings, and they show the rise and fall of the world. After thousands of years, we can learn

³ Shen Zicheng, *A Compilation of Masterpieces on Painting Throughout the Ages*, Beijing, Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1982, p. 34.

from the pictures»⁴. It can be seen that the visual representation of ancient Chinese graphic narrativess is often the embodiment of religious propaganda, Confucian ethics, and social education.

However, even images that serve Confucian ethics education are still inferior to texts. Wang Chong believed that «people like to look at pictures, but the pictures are of the dead in ancient times. How can compare to seeing the dead's face with watching his words and deeds»⁵? In the relationship between pictures and texts in the traditional context, texts have an absolute advantage, while images are suppressed because of their own attributes, especially visual pleasure.

In traditional Chinese culture, the highest and most sacred knowledge is often obscure and hidden. There is a hierarchy between sensory perception and intellectual thinking. As Zhu Xi summarized the three methods of learning in *What Children Should Know*: heart, eyes and mouth, and pointed out that «heart is the most urgent»⁶ among the three methods, traditional education expects children to achieve a deep understanding of the highly abstract philosophical thinking of the world through introspection. The examination method of the imperial examination system also made recitation the main method of acquiring knowledge. Controlling children's vision and focusing it on books was an appropriate measure under this examination system. «When reading a book, one's eyes should be focused on the book and not look at anything else»⁷. «Reading and playing in the market, with eyes on book bags and boxes»⁸. and so on are the qualified visual standards for children. There are also strict restrictions on the books that children can read, and often «non-Confucian books should not be allowed to read»⁹. Since the Qin and Han dynasties, ancient primers have focused on the rhyming arrangement of Chinese characters, which has also cultivated a learning model of speaking, listening, and memorizing. Cui Xuegu said in *You Xun* that «only use the mouth and ears, not the heart and eyes, no matter how smart the students are, they will be taught dozens of times, and even when the teacher stops talking, the students will be silent»¹⁰, which reveals the shortcomings of this

⁴ Zhou Xinhui, *Outline of the History of Ancient Chinese Prints and Paintings*, Beijing, Beijing Joint Publishing Company, 2018, p. 2339.

⁵ Wang Chong, *Lun Heng*, Shanghai, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1974, p. 24.

⁶ Zhu Xi, *Zhu Zi Quan Shu*, Shanghai, Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2002, p. 367.

⁷ Tu Xishi, *The Rites of the Child*, Shandong, Democracy and Construction Press, 2019, p. 11.

⁸ Zhou Xingsi, *Thousand Character Essay*, Beijing, Beijing Children and Youth Press, 2023, p. 1.

⁹ Wang Yunwu and Yao Mingda, *New Chinese Celebrities' Annals Integration*, Taiwan, Taiwan Commercial Press, 1982, p. 14.

¹⁰ Chen Yuanhui, *opium war period education*, Shanghai, Shanghai Education Press, 2007, p. 384.

learning model. Ming Enpu recorded the learning scene of the old Chinese school as follows: «Let's assume that the text to be memorized is a passage in the Analects about teacher habits: 'Buying wine and buying dried meat, do not eat. Do not remove ginger from food, and do not eat too much.' Students who are not familiar with this passage recite it like this: 'Buying wine... selling wine... wine... wine... wine... wine... buying dried meat, buying dried meat... buying dried meat... do not eat. Do not eat... do not eat... do not remove... do not remove... do not remove... ginger, ginger... ginger...»¹¹. This learning method trapped scholars in the constraints of classics. With the support of power, dogmatic knowledge became the mainstream of education. Children expressed their submission to the royal power through copying and reciting as soon as they entered school. Therefore, in ancient times, the most suitable extracurricular reading materials for children could not be picture books, but the classics and history books such as *Tuyuan Cefu* and *Kongzi Beiwenshu* that were easy to imitate, and these would undoubtedly become text decorations for picking out sentences.

In addition to images, toys that cater to children's viewing interests are even more morally inferior. Since the Han Dynasty, Wang Fu denounced children's toys such as «mud carts, clay dogs, horse rides, and singing and dancing» as «useless tricks»¹². After that, the moral requirements for children's viewing ethics became more and more stringent. Zhu Xi annotated «Do not look at what is not proper» as «what is not proper is your own selfishness»¹³, expanding the norms of viewing principles to the negation of individual visual desires.

2. Historical changes in China's understanding of images

For Chinese children, the legitimacy of image viewing has been established since the rise of the cognitive paradigm of the late Qing Dynasty. Since the abolition of the imperial examination system, traditional education has been constantly impacted by new knowledge. «Open your eyes to see the world» – this visual metaphor shows the way of thinking of modern Chinese people of insight to form a correct understanding of the world through observation. In the early winter of 1910, teacher Zhou Shuren found that students lacked imagination for modern new things, so he led students from Shaoxing Prefecture Middle School to visit the Nanyang Industrial Exposition. «They took a ship

¹¹ Ming Enpu, *Life in the Chinese Countryside*, Beijing, Current Affairs Publishing House, 1998, p. 309.

¹² Zhang Jue, *QianFuLun*, Yuelu Shusha, 2021, p. 122.

¹³ Zhu Xi, *Four Books, Chapters and Sentences Collected Notes*, Zhejiang, Ancient Books Publishing House, 2014, p. 104.

and a train, saw roads, railways, electric lights, telephones, and saw famous local products and glassware at the exhibition. There was a dazzling array of things»¹⁴. When traditional teaching methods could no longer cover the endless new phenomena in modern society, «the teacher was a scholar with rich knowledge, but he could not leave the door»¹⁵. has become an outdated way of cognition, and observation is particularly important for understanding the world.

The change in cognitive paradigm since the late Qing Dynasty was first summarized as «Gezhi», which is a traditional Confucian theory, but it was re-proposed in the differential comparison between China and the West in the late Qing Dynasty. Zhang Shusheng's «Ge Zhi, Chinese seek truth, Westerners seek things... Those who seek truth, easy to talk about empty words»¹⁶, has discovered the cognitive blind spots of traditional Chinese «Gezhi». Therefore, the study of science and technology has gradually been given a new meaning. It is no longer a path of metaphysical thinking to «enter the realm of saints and sages», but a practical approach. Kang Youwei said during his travels in the West: «If our country talks about theories and literature in vain, focuses on the metaphysical and disdains the physical, the weakness of the country and the poverty of the people are all due to this»¹⁷. Behind the new interpretation of «the study of science and technology» is the fluctuation of the status of the metaphysical and the physical. The emphasis on 'instrument' has enhanced the importance of eye's observation in understanding the world. In *Diary of the Western Mission*, when discussing elementary schools in the West, Zeng Jize discovered the importance of observation in Western education: «Use a microscope to examine tiny objects to help the study of science and technology... From the small to the big, from the surface to the inside, from the useless to the useful, from the same to the different»¹⁸. The new educational purpose allows children to experience a reading revolution from sound to vision. Tao Xingzhi emphasized the importance of observation for children's learning in «Educational Research Method»: «The more you observe, the more you will feel things»¹⁹, so we should «liberate our eyes, break the colored glasses, and teach everyone to see the facts»²⁰. The reading revolution from chanting to silent reading in the late Qing Dynasty also shows that starting from reading,

¹⁴ Liu Xunhua, *The Beauty of Distress – Modern Student Life in the Great Turnaround (1901-1949)*, Wuhan, Huazhong University of Science and Technology Press, 2014, p. 68.

¹⁵ Global Society Editorial Office, *Picture Daily*, Shanghai, Ancient Books Publishing House, 1999, p. 27.

¹⁶ Zhu Youxuan, *Historical Materials of Modern Chinese School System*, Shanghai, East China Normal University, 1986, p. 358.

¹⁷ Kang Youwei, *Lieguoyouji*, Shanghai, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1995, p. 109.

¹⁸ Zhong Shuha, *Diary of a Journey to the West*, HuBei, Yuelu Shusha, 1985, p. 2.

¹⁹ Tao Xingzhi, *The Law of Educational Research*, «Jin ling guang», vol. 5, 1918, p. 569.

²⁰ Id., *Democratic Education*, in *The Complete Works of Tao Xingzhi*, China Press, 1985, Vol. 3, p. 569.

modern Chinese children are consciously cultivated to be a subject of observation.

At this time, the more intuitive reproduction power of images than words made it an indispensable communication tool in this cognitive revolution. In children's books, the hierarchical transformation between the reproduction media such as classical Chinese, vernacular, and images began. In July 1903, the 53rd issue of «Education World» began to serialize Rousseau's *Emile* (*Emile's Ear Notes*). Rousseau reflected on the education of text symbols in his naturalistic thoughts and believed that in order to get rid of the shackles of the old culture, eye perception is better than verbal impression. He tried to rebuild the transitivity of language and restore the identity between what is written and what is seen, so he advocated that visual symbols such as images could also be included in literary creation. Fu Sinian also believed that «if you want to talk about the truth and the original meaning, just say it directly, such as the early Christian paintings. This is great literature»²¹.

Kang Youwei sighed when browsing Japanese books: «Looking at the details of Japanese elementary school textbooks and the exquisite pictures, their strength is not without reason»²²! In the face of images, which are increasingly important as a reproduction tool for translating the world, children's desire to watch is allowed under the cognitive method of «investigating things» and the educational purpose of spreading science. The emergence of children's pictorial magazines such as *Meng Xue Bao* and *Qimeng Pictorial* and new textbooks fully demonstrate the scientific education significance of images. In 1904, the Commercial Press absorbed the shares of Japan's Jingangtang, introduced five-color printing technology, and began to compile illustrated textbooks such as *The Latest Chinese Textbook*. Although the path to image freedom for Chinese children is still tortuous, the introduction of images into textbooks has become a general trend. In the 1920s, Wu Yanyin was dissatisfied with textbooks without pictures in *An Overview of Primary School Textbooks in my country since the Late Qing Dynasty* (originally published in «Tongxin Monthly» Volume 4, Issues 1-4): «There is a certain kind of high school Chinese textbook that has no pictures at all, which is really surprising»²³. Even in rural primary schools, Yu Ziyi recalled: «Only this natural scenery can never arouse the interest of rural primary school students in beauty»²⁴. And professional art decorations replace student scores in the classroom. In addition,

²¹ Fu Sinian, *Lectures on the History of Ancient Chinese Literature*, Anhui, Anhui People's Publishing House, 2019, p. 29.

²² Kang Youwei, *Japanese Bibliography*, in Jiang Yihua (ed.), *The Complete Works of Kang Youwei*, Book III, Beijing, People's University of China Press, 2007, pp. 408-410.

²³ Gao Song, *Ninety-five Years of the Commercial Press*, Beijing, Commercial Press, 1992, p. 217.

²⁴ Yu Ziyi, *Diary of a Village Primary School Teacher*, Shanghai, Commercial Press, 1927, p. 13.

the architecture of cultural spaces such as modern museums, art galleries, and children's exhibition halls has formed new ways of displaying images (splicing, surrounding, juxtaposition, etc.). The public domain of image viewing and the private reading space brought by image printing have promoted the widespread acceptance of modern images by Chinese children and strengthened the legitimacy of image dissemination.

The cognitive paradigm of connecting seeing and knowing allows children to no longer weave their impressions of the world based solely on literary words, but to use current experience as the starting point for grasping reality. Visuality is of great significance in the innovation of the relationship between 'words and things' at the turn of modern China. The emphasis on visuality has strengthened the transitivity of Chinese education. In order to express various new things since modern times, more words have emerged, and visuality has become an important part of the language revolution. This has broken the infinite cycle between the recitation and interpretation of classics, impacted the cultural tradition of historical word-centrism in textual research since the Qing Dynasty, and created new opportunities for cultural creation. In short, the new cognitive paradigm of viewing and grasping the world in a scientific way in the late Qing society is the key to breaking the image anxiety in traditional education, and it is also the starting point for Chinese children's literature to create modern visual representations in image texts.

In addition to being vigilant about the visual pleasure attributes of images, the reason why ancient China did not provide children with a large number of image texts is also due to the cognitive limitations of the relationship between children and images. In his study of *the dissemination and reception of images in the Ming Dynasty*, Clunas concluded that «scholars contemplate, while peasants (as well as women, children, and eunuchs) merely look»²⁵. «Only the lower social classes (women, children, eunuchs, and Mongolian princes) are unable to transcend figurative art, but are instead confused by what they see and imitate the behaviors (good or bad) depicted in it». As the saying goes, «If we judge paintings by their resemblance to form, our vision is similar to that of children». Traditional culture generally believes that children cannot interpret the metaphorical connotations between images and the world, but can only regard images as mirrors of objective reality, and may even be dazzled by the realism of the images in the images and directly accept them as the real world. Just as the ancients worried that «people in the market would knead clay to deceive children»²⁶, the ancients worried that the bionic nature of images would

²⁵ Ke Luge, *Images and Visuality in the Ming Dynasty*, Beijing, Peking University Press, 2011, p. 237.

²⁶ Ren Jigai, *Zhong guo he shi wen xue Qing dynasty wenzheng*, Beijing, Jilin People's Publishing House, 1998, p. 10.

cause children to fall into the illusion of not being able to distinguish between truth and falsehood.

In the early graphic narratives of Chinese children's literature, this ancient image anxiety was eliminated by giving children more subjectivity when facing images. In many stories related to painting, the relationship between children and images, and the life images in images, is repeatedly discussed. In these stories, children use animals' illusions of reality to achieve their own goals. Bao Ge'er in *Scare Away the Squid* carves a human face on a watermelon to prevent the squid from stealing again. In *A Clever Plan to Repel the Enemy*, Li Er draws a fake cat on the wall, making the vicious dog believe it and run into the wall and fall to the ground. *Toad Watching Paintings*, *Cloud Watching Mice*, *Cat and Moving Duck* and other stories follow the same story pattern. In these stories, children are no longer passive viewers, but masters of using images to create things. *The Dead Becomes Alive* tells how Huisheng turns two dead dogs lying on the ground in a painting into two running dogs by simply changing the lines. Li Gu also adds an ending to the story for the two dogs, «They want to run off the paper and chase the cunning wolf in the South Mountain»²⁷. The simulation of life through superb skills is an old topic in art history. The graphic narrative of children's literature has transferred this ability to create like a god to children. Children are no longer the recipients of image illusions, but the initiators. They know the boundary between illusion and reality, know how to manipulate life through simple lines, simulate and create reality outside of reality, become their own 'storytellers', and open up another function of images beyond the reproduction of the world: creating a new world.

In short, the image anxiety of Chinese traditional culture towards children mainly includes two parts. The first is the fear that the visual pleasure of images will erode children's minds. This has been eliminated by the educational purpose of using images to help children understand the modern world and scientific knowledge since modern times. The second is the doubt about the low level of children's image cognition. With the recognition of children's visual subjectivity, the function of images for children has also expanded. Children are no longer considered to be always trapped in the illusion of reality of images. Images also have independent values different from the objective world. Children can open up more imagination space through graphic narratives. The relationship between children and images is also becoming closer. «Pictures are the windows of children's hearts, pictures are the homes of children's emotions, and pictures are the language of children's cognition»²⁸ has become a new consensus on the relationship between children and images.

²⁷ Wang Chuan-fen, *The Game of Practicing Painting: Dead Becomes Alive*, «Children's World», n. 77, 1923, pp. 19-21.

²⁸ Chen Heqin, *A Study of Children's Psychology*, Beijing, Beijing Institute of Educational Science, 1983, p. 531.

3. «Minimum Expression Clues» and the development of graphic narratives in Children's literature

In ancient times, children regarded not showing their emotions on their faces as a benchmark for emotions. As the «raw material of sages and saints», all the celebrities and scholars in ancient biographies or memoirs were able to control their emotions and remain calm and confident from a young age. For example, Xia Yuanji said: «When I was young, I was always angry when someone offended me. I began to be patient on the surface and in my heart»²⁹. In addition, there are Wei Yuan, who was «seldom talkative and smiling since childhood», Lu Shanji, who was «dignified by nature», and Huang Daozhou, who was «quite calm in nature». This emotional norm is also reflected in literary and artistic works. Children, who exist as decorative or symbolic symbols, often cater to the aesthetic gaze of adults with static and stereotyped faces, and their expressions do not change significantly. In the classic story *Mencius Cuts the Loom* included in the *Illustrated Biographies of Women* (Pic. 2), although the image is the most dramatic scene of Meng's mother cutting the loom with a knife, the image narrative completely erases the emotional tension of «mother's anger» or «Mencius' fear» in this plot. Meng's mother's gentle and smiling face and the knife-holding posture seem contradictory. The author wants to write about the mother's strictness in educating her son, while also maintaining the ideal family scene of a loving mother and a filial son. In the end, in this



Pic. 2. Liu Xiang, Qiu Ying, *Illustrated Biographies of Women*, Bao's Zhibuzhuzhai printed in the 44th year of the Qianlong reign of the Qing Dynasty, quoted from *Ann Elizabeth Barrott Wicks Children in Chinese Art*, University of Hawai'i Press, 2002, p. 93

educational ritual with visual deterrence as the core, the children's fearful eyes are gradually faded, and the paranoid, violent, and panic-inducing side of traditional education is also obscured, leaving a rift between the image and the text.

The two pictures above (Pic. 3 and Pic. 4) are typical children in literati paintings. In this type of child images, the children's expressions are plain and detached. Their expressionless expressions store the desires of the viewers and dilute and eliminate the world-weariness of adult viewers.

Whether it is a picture of a baby playing or a artistic painting, the invisible expressions of children in tra-

²⁹ Zhang Jian, *Qian Jin Lu*, Xinjiang, Xinjiang People's Publishing House, 1995, p. 237.

ditional works make their emotions and demeanor look the same. However, the various picture stories that have appeared in Chinese children's literature since modern times are just the opposite. In their creation, they often magnify the expressions of the characters through exaggeration and deformation. This creative feature unveils the veil of tranquility and peace on the faces of children in literary and artistic works since ancient times, and produces narrative moments of destruction, manifestation and reconstruction.

In general, this creative technique is the use of «minimal expression clues». According to Gombrich's understanding, «minimal expression clues» are shapes similar to facial or facial expressions that can produce our instinctive psychological reactions. Gombrich believed that humans have cognitive and emotional instincts when looking at facial expressions, so the lines that combine to form expressions can turn any shape into an image with human life and existential significance. Rudolf Töpfer, known as the father of comic strips, said: «People who tell stories through painting only need one condition – to understand the facial features and facial expressions of the characters»³⁰. When combing through the emergence and development of image narratives in Chinese children's literature, we will find that this method has been used from the beginning (Pic. 5). *Minimum expression clues* can be traced back to the earliest children's comic book handout in China, *Children's Funny Painting Notes*. The author Pan Dawei has close ties with the Lingnan School of Painting and absorbed Western painting techniques to write this book. In this book, there are already many expressions composed of lines and free combinations of expressions and shapes. «The face is the part of the image that 'looks' back at the viewer, giving the illusion that the image has life and soul»³¹. The widespread use of painting techniques that use lines to reproduce facial expressions facilitates the descrip-

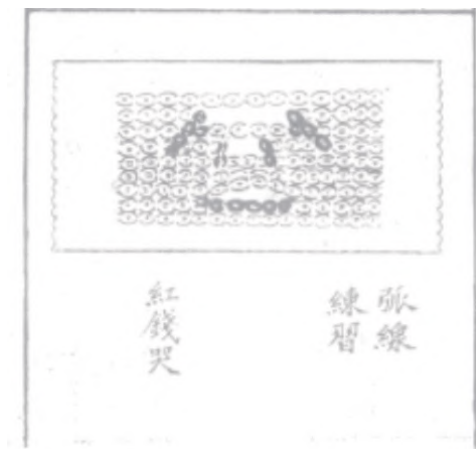


Pic. 3. Taipei National Palace Museum, Photo Catalog, SV-362. Quoted from Xiong Bingzhen, *Childhood Memories*, Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008, p. 208

Pic. 4. *Divine Infant*, Ren Bonian, *Ren Bonian's Painting Collection*, Vol1, China Nationalities Photography Art Publishing House, 2003, p. 70

³⁰ E.H. Gombrich, *A Psychological Study of the Reproduction of Art and Illusion Pictures*, Guangxi, Fine Arts Publishing House, 2012, p. 286.

³¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Meta-Image Images and Their Theoretical Discourse*, Shanghai, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2023, p. 35.

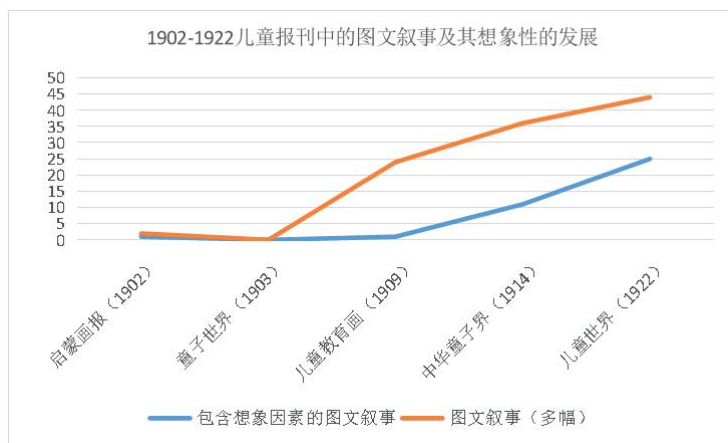


Pic. 5. Pan Dawei's, *Children's Funny Painting Post*, 1908, p. 9

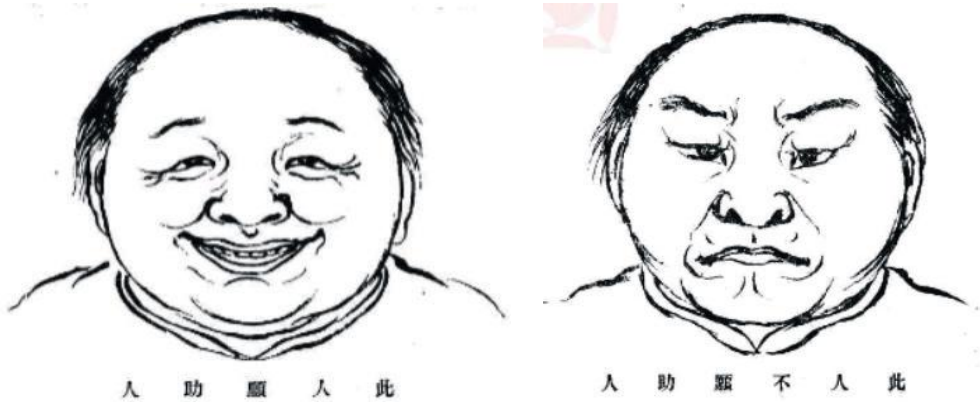
tion of personality in concise graphic narratives. For example, in the *Fuyou* Newspaper, two faces with the same face but opposite expressions are used to illustrate the personality traits of a kind and friendly person (Pic. 6) and a cold and stingy person (Pic. 7).

In addition to the character description in the narrative, «minimal expression clues» have special significance for children. They make everything in the image express human emotions and feelings. This is a concrete expression of children's view that everything has animism and the key to opening the door to children's imagination and creativity. In the embryonic period of children's literature from 1902 to 1922, a quantitative turning

point of imaginative graphic narratives appeared in *The World of Chinese Children*.



In many graphic narratives in *The World of Chinese Children*, the use of *minimal expression clues* makes its graphic narratives have the color of literary imagination. For example, in *Crows Come to Eat Persimmons*, insects gnawed the persimmons into the shape of human faces, causing the crows to flee in fear. *War in the Belly* anthropomorphized honey cakes and sesame cakes, and the simple facial features make the arrogance of honey cakes and the cowardice of sesame cakes vividly appear on paper. Child psychologists such as Charlotte Teler and Elsa Kohler have found that the phenomenon of «transitivism», in which children are easily assimilated to other people's emo-



Picc. 6-7. *Helping Others*, «Fu you Newspaper», n. 5, 1918, p. 12

tions, often occurs in children. «This temporary confusion between self-image and other people's image can be understood as a function of creating a healthy self, and «transitivity» plays an important role in children's picture and text reading. As mentioned above, the picture and text narrative of Chinese children's literature attaches importance to the application of «minimum expression clues» in the occurrence period. Through «minimum expression clues», the seemingly simple, primitive and concise lines in children's books have gained the life of the image, which creates an artistic environment for children's «transitivity». Therefore, the image text of Chinese children's literature also obtains its own meaning in the double gaze of children gazing at images and images gazing at children in turn.

In short, the use of «minimal expression clues» in graphic narratives has enriched the narrative expression methods of Chinese children's literature. Although the lines are simple and the shapes are simple, the expressions in the images of children's literature can convey emotions concisely and intuitively, calling for an empathetic experience that is close to the source of life and instinct. This experience has the power to penetrate across different cultures, ages, genders, and races, and fully demonstrates the «life of images» in Chinese children's literature.

4. *Western cultural resources in the narrative of Chinese children's literature*

Artistic illustrations in modern Chinese literature were influenced by the works of foreign artists such as Beardsley and Fukuko Honger. In the early days, graphic narratives in children's literature were also deeply influenced by foreign

graphic texts. The styles and contents of the works that children's literature writers borrowed from were very wide, including children's magazines, textbooks, foreign folk tales, religious illustrations, comic strips, etc. Researchers such as Zhang Mei have concluded that due to the lack of copyright awareness at the time, some of the images in *Children's World* and *Little Friends* borrowed content from foreign newspapers and magazines, so they showed a Westernized color. However, directly defining this appropriation as «hard transplantation» ignores the changes in meaning caused by the migration of context in the «journey of images» and the active acceptance and re-creation of Chinese authors.

Zheng Zhenduo mentioned the British children's magazine «my magazine» in *Talks on Illustrations*. Later, in the founding declaration of *Children's World*, he listed the foreign literature he referenced, the first of which was «my magazine». «My magazine» predecessor was «Children's Magazine», published by the British large commercial publishing group The Amalgamated Press (AP). The first type of reading material published by its founder was *Comic Cuts*, a picture magazine for adults, so he was familiar with the market benefits of comics. At the same time, this publishing house also had a history of publishing encyclopedias, and later added news, history, geography and other encyclopedic knowledge to «Children's Magazine», and changed its name to «My magazine». The emphasis on image narrative in the content editing of *Children's World* and the broad knowledge perspective reflected in the display of zoology, botany, geography and other natural history content were all influenced by British children's publications in the 20th century.

However, this does not mean that Zheng Zhenduo completely accepted foreign children's books. Zheng Zhenduo's *Children's World* was founded with a distinct children's literature consciousness as its starting point. In addition to the absurd words and nonsense in the content, its target readers were also children in second and third years of primary school and first and second years of high school. *The Youth's Companion – The Companion for all the family* is also one of the references cited by Zheng Zhenduo for founding *Children's World*, but Zheng Zhenduo deliberately erased the subtitle of this magazine. This popular family life book from 1827 to 1927 published advertisements, poems, current affairs satires and other life contents to take care of the reading experience of adult readers. Zheng Zhenduo purposefully selected the children's literature part in the process of reference and filtered out the adult content. For example, in the design of the cover, Zheng Zhenduo did not adopt the method of using historical buildings and celebrity deeds as the cover of *The Youth's Companion – The Companion for all the family*. Instead, he mostly used children as the protagonists of the pictures, and used bright colors to outline the image of modern children with vitality and fashionable clothes. This is consistent with the cover style of the Japanese children's literature magazine *Red Bird* of the same period, both of which placed a relaxed and leisurely Asian child in the dreamy colors of fairy tales (Pic. 8).

In the early period of Chinese children's literature, there were also many references and transformations of foreign images in the specific graphic creation. In the 20th century, a number of action-oriented and continuous comic strips appeared in the West, and their interesting forms were widely learned by the picture stories of Chinese children's literature. For example, the comics in *Ah, My Palette* and *The Favorite Comic* have similar creation techniques, both presenting the same scene in a short number of images, and promoting the development of the plot with destructive pleasure. Both of these graphic narratives set a sun/moon as a spectator above the picture. The round celestial body is similar to a human face after adding expressions. The expressions of curiosity-surprise-laughter imply changes in the reader's storyline, playing a narrative function similar to the «chorus effect» of emotions (Pic. 9 and Pic. 10).

The absorption and reference of foreign graphic narratives made the early graphic narratives of Chinese children's literature present a style that blends Chinese and Western styles. The two pictures at Pic. 11, with very different styles, are both excerpts from Zheng Zhenduo's *Aimei's Flute*. The image content is *Bee Country* and *Hundred Flowers Country* respectively. Each chapter of the text changes the narrative space according to Aimei's travels. Sometimes it is the light and shadow of the beehive in the sketching method, and sometimes it is the lotus flowers and the fairy in the wind in the traditional Chinese mythology. The changes in image style and text style reflect each other. It is a typical work in the founding period of Chinese children's literature graphic narrative that borrowed from Western children's literature and adapted and reorganized it with local culture.

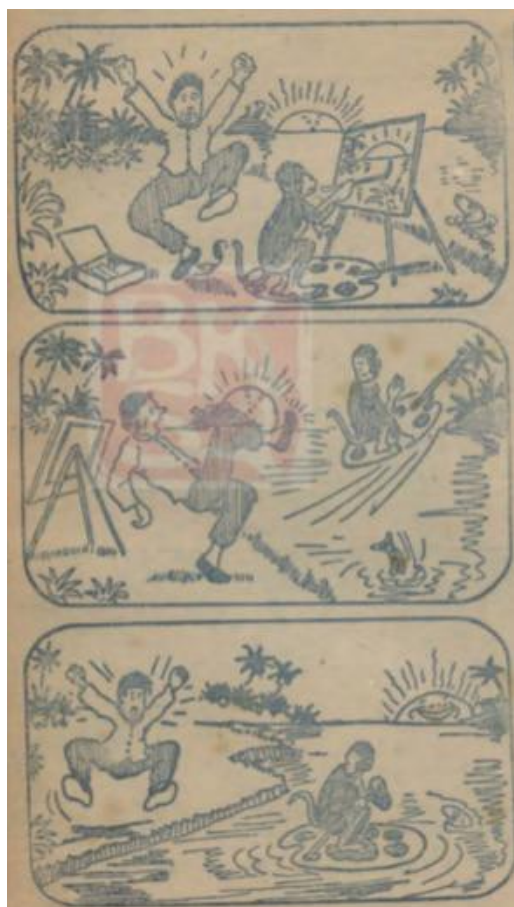
Some researchers have pointed out that the first issue of *Children's Pictorial*, *Insect Carnival*, borrowed its image and story ideas from the Victorian English poem *The Butterfly's Ball*. Comparing these two works, we can see how the early graphic texts of Chinese children's literature were created under the influence of traditional and Western cultural resources. In terms of the main body of the picture, the image in *Insect Carnival* (Pic. 12) and the anthropomorphic animal image in *The Butterfly's Ball* (Pic. 13) are very similar.



Pic. 8. Suzuki Mieyoshi's cover painting of «Red Bird», January 1, 1919



Pic. 9. *The Favorite Comic*, January 20, 1919



Pic. 10. *My Palette*, «Children's World (Shanghai 1922)», vol. 9, 1925, p. 3



Pic. 11. Zheng Zhenduo's, *Flute of Love of Beauty*, «Children's World (Shanghai 1922)», vol. 2, 1923, p. 2



Pic. 12. Jonathan Cott, *Victorian Color Picture Books*, Stonehill Publishing, 1983. p. 178

Pic. 13. *Insect Carnival*, «Children's Pictorial», vol. 1, 1922, p. 3

The painting method of splicing animal heads onto human bodies in early graphic narratives of Chinese children's literature is also common. In terms of the characters' clothing and activities in the picture, there are various clothing styles such as modified suits, Hanfu, and dresses, as well as various activities such as painting Chinese paintings and writing with fountain pens. The creators replaced the spiritual content of Chinese and Western competitive sports in *The Butterfly's Ball* with poetry, music, dance, and crafts. These cultural phenomena are all microcosms of the social atmosphere in the early Republic of China.

The biggest difference between *Insect Carnival* and *The Butterfly's Ball* is the different composition methods. *Insect Carnival* does not use ordinary single pages of books, but chooses the form of traditional Chinese scrolls, from which we can see the traditional narrative painting techniques of *Night Banquet of Han Xizai*. The whole picture shows four activity groups: craft group, music group, game group, and painting group. Each activity space is separated by a specific form. The row of colorful flags on the far left, the running insects in a row, and the wall of the textile hut divide the whole picture into three parts. The two insects carrying the load outside the textile hut increase the continuity of the space beyond the division. The movement trend of the characters from right to left in the painting is also arranged according to the traditional Chinese reading order. These together form the process and movement of this image in the narrative effect. The *Butterfly's Ball* uses a perspective composition with a concentrated focus, while *Insect Carnival* pays more attention to the integrity of the story picture. In the scattered and multi-center visual structure, it carries a brand-new carnival story about fantasy, sports, and music, which belongs to modern times. Just like Zheng Zhenduo's use of traditional Chinese fine brushwork to connect the images of *Hippo Kindergarten* in the original English magazine, it is the visual pattern of traditional Chinese art that inherits the new world art and passes it on to children, calling on modern emotional power with shared cultural elements. In this process, it is clear that although the form is partially taken from foreign children's literature, China's traditional visual paradigm, Chinese painting pattern, and social reality in the early Republic of China are the main contents of the creative materials of Chinese children's literature.

In addition to the intervention of traditional factors, there are many other ways for Chinese children's literature to recreate foreign graphic content in its early days. There is a fairy tale called *Eyes Opened* in *Little Friend*. From specific text descriptions such as He had already prepared a bamboo basket, covered it with soft grass, and cushioned it with a red blanket, it can be seen that this fairy tale is exactly the same as the image content of *Colorful Western Famous Paintings* in the 4th issue of Volume 9 of «Student». The author put it into the children's literature context of *Little Friend*, attributed the identity of the puppy in the painting to the pet of the children on the cover of the first

and second issues of *Little Friend*, and then *speaks from the picture*, which is a cross-media text translation of Western paintings. The graphic narratives of Chinese children's literature have always been in the flow and intertextuality of the world's visual cultural representation system. In the preface to *My Picture Book Theory*, Japanese picture book theorist Nao Matsui said: «The publication of Chinese children's books reached a fairly high international level in the 1920s, but after the 1930s, it suffered a devastating blow due to our country's war of aggression and its development was hindered»³². Even though it has exogenous characteristics, Chinese children's literature is not just a simple imitation of Western works, but has its own style since its inception, occupying a place in the world's children's literature.

5. *New development trends in graphic narratives in Chinese children's literature*

Since modern times, for the purpose of enlightenment and national salvation, realism began to become the main pursuit of intellectuals at that time. In order to achieve the greatest enlightenment effect for a larger audience, we must first break down the barriers of the elite culture of scholar-bureaucrats and find more real, direct, and unlimited ideas. Loss is a way of reproducing the world to unveil reality, and 'nature' becomes the new aesthetic standard. The art revolution, the vernacular movement, and the new literature revolution are all moving closer to reality. Peng Lijun analyzed in *Hybrid Mirror: Chinese Visual Modernity* that in modern China, the realism style occupies a mainstream position in various visual images. This also affects children's literature. The connection between graphic narratives in children's literature and cognitive methods such as «gezhi» mentioned above is an example.

However, due to the characteristics of children who love fantasy and value subjectivity and sensibility, realism cannot meet all the requirements for the development of Chinese children's literature. The proliferation of mechanical realism dissatisfied the children's readers and advocates of children's literature at that time. According to Shen Qionglou's recollection of primary school education in the early Republic of China, «My mother bought me a new textbook. The first lesson was «A person's hand, foot, knife and ruler and pictures. Although there are new-style binding textbooks, but they still memorize a paragraph and sing it at the throat». It can be seen that simple image education that depicts reality cannot satisfy children's aesthetic needs. In his evaluation, Zhou Zuoren also mentioned that the realistic works based on adult standards are

³² Nao Matsui, *My Theory of Picture Books*, Hunan, Juvenile and Children's Publishing House, 1997, p. 5.

«unforgettable in terms of craftsmanship, shape and color. There is no spirit of free movement»³³. Liu Haisu, who was working as a picture textbook at the Commercial Press at the same time, observed that «so far, the two hours of picture subjects taught in ordinary middle schools in China every week are nothing more than old manuscripts of flowers, birds, and landscapes, or so-called picture models to teach students Those who copy, or plagiarize some vulgar Western pictures and copy them indirectly for students, are considered to be innovative»³⁴.

Just as the *Twenty-Four Pictures of Filial Piety* aroused the interest of the young Lu Xun, «the picture above says that there are fewer ghosts and more people», what children always yearn for is a mysterious, charming and imaginative space, which is closely related to the uniqueness of children's vision. Compared with adults, children rely more on physical feelings and independent imagination when watching due to imperfect logic. When Xu Yongchang was a child, he went to the theater with his sister. After the play was over, he was walking at night and «suddenly saw a big fireball. It quickly circled in a small circle and disappeared into the waterway. It wasn't until I grew up that I realized that it was the light reflected by the waterway. It can be said that it has been a mystery to me for twenty years, and only now can I find the answer»³⁵. This memory reproduces the subjective side of children's visuality.

The phenomenon that children are prone to visual hallucinations has been mentioned as early as *Lecture Notes on Hypnosis* published in «Mainland». When explaining the causes of children's visual hallucinations such as *Fairy Child* and *Celestial Vision*, the author points out that children's vision is susceptible to deformation due to external factors and their own factors. *Lecture Notes on Monsterology* translated by Cai Yuanpei said: «Although the sensory person is born from the stimulation of the outside world, sometimes he also uses the spiritual thoughts of the inner world as the reason to have visual hallucinations and delusions in the senses»³⁶. Viewing, especially children's viewing, is not an isolated and abstract sensory activity, but carries emotions, beliefs and spirituality.

In 1919, Cai Yuanpei regarded art education as an emotional enlightenment movement that aroused «lively and noble feelings»³⁷ in *Don't Forget Aesthetic Education in the Cultural Movement*. Aesthetic education requires

³³ Zhou Zuoren, *Zhou Zuoren ji xian wen: 1904-1925*, Hainan, International Press and Publication Center, 1995, p. 181.

³⁴ Gao Song, *Ninety-five Years of the Commercial Press*, Beijing, Beijing Commercial Press, 1992, p. 233.

³⁵ Xu Yongchang, *Memoirs of Seeking Jijizai*, TaiWan, Zhonghua Shubu, 2016, p. 7.

³⁶ Inoue Yuande, *General Introduction to the Lecture Notes on Demonology*, Shanghai, Oriental Publishing House 2014 edition, p. 169.

³⁷ Cai Yuanpei, *Don't forget aesthetic education in the cultural movement*, «Morning Post», n. 12, 1919, p. 1.

that the cultivation of children's visuality is not limited to objective observation, but also the emotional and emotional experience brought by pictures. In the 1920s, translation and research on children's studies began in China. «Most children like the color red (warm color)» and «most of them pay attention to the activities and functions of things and people»³⁸. The uniqueness of children's visual experience is also constantly being explored and valued.

These new understandings of children's visuality have affected the budding picture and text narratives of Chinese children's literature. In early visual aspects such as image selection, color lines, and binding design, Chinese children's literature focused on stimulating children's desire to watch. It also began to pay attention to the different interests of boys and girls. For example, the release of special issues such as *Little Brother* and *Little Sister*. Therefore, the graphic narrative of Chinese children's literature is not purely visual-centric, but is based on the context of physical experience such as desire and gender. For example, early children's pictorials attach great importance to fun and the effect of visual imagination. The *Funny Paintings* column of *Children's Educational Paintings* uses the occlusion of things to create visual illusions,³⁹ and the bounty painting activity uses simple irregular shapes to attract children to participate in the visual field. Come to imagination and creative activities.

Children's World pioneered the provision of fantasy graphic narratives for children. The editor-in-chief Zheng Zhenduo borrowed a book by Porter Lander Macclintock from Zhou Zuoren before the launch of the publication. «I wanted to borrow the book *Literature in Primary Schools* because I edited *Children's World* (a kind of children's literature) for reference, please check it out and send it to me when you need it»⁴⁰. In this book, McClintock distinguished the educational functions of different pictures in detail, and discussed the significance of literary picture stories for children's reading: «Those Beautiful, imaginative pictures provide a gateway to an ideal realm, and through the guidance of great and serious artists, children will find that path»⁴¹.

At the same time, Impressionist painting methods were gradually introduced in the 1920s, challenging the clear and calm visual order of the Enlightenment. Impressionist paintings are «simple in shape, flat in color, and when viewed hastily, they are indistinguishable from childish graffiti». The reason is that «the shapes and colors of the objects in the paintings are purely the artist's expression of his emotions towards the objects and his self-esteem. Expression is comfortable and easy to change, and it cannot be said that it is similar to

³⁸ Guan Kuanzhi, *Children's Studies*, Shanghai, The Commercial Press, 1921, p. 23.

³⁹ Funny Paintings, «Children's Educational Paintings», n. 42, 1914, p. 12.

⁴⁰ Jia Zhifang, *Chinese Literary History Materials*, Beijing, Intellectual Property Publishing House, 2010, p. 660.

⁴¹ Porter Lander Macclintock. *Literature in the elementary school*, Chicago, The University of Chicago, 1920, p. 12.

the natural appearance»⁴². Children's concept of image creation is closely related to Impressionist painting. In other words, the emotional dynamics and the fragmentation and reorganization of shapes contained in modernist paintings are similar to the world in the eyes of a child. This has been discussed in modern art theories such as *A child of six could do it! cartoons about modern art*. similarity of those. All these enable Chinese children's literature to open up an imaginative space full of possibilities beyond realism. For fantasy graphic narratives, the important thing is not to reproduce reality, but to create a viewing field that suspends rules and reality, accommodates change and reorganization, dissolution and creation, thereby stimulating children's viewing subjectivity and making them Become a literary imagination. In the early 1920s, after reading *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* translated by Zhao Yuanren, Zhao Jiabi sighed: «It was like following a white rabbit with red eyes and entering another world. He swam through the Pool of Tears and participated in the crazy tea party, listening to the complaints of the mock turtle, I gradually began to daydream, although like Alice's sisters, I also understood that as long as I opened my eyes, everything would become an ordinary world, and those tea bowls. The sound will become the sound of sheep bells, and the queen's sharp throat will become the cry of a shepherd boy»⁴³. From the words of birds and beasts to nonsense, Chinese children's literature has been in the fantasy genre since its inception. In the translation and creation of literary narratives, although realism appears to address reality, it can also obscure reality in the name of truth. Although children's literature uses various fantasy creation methods such as imagination, fiction, and assumptions, it can become a literary expression of the spiritual situation of a generation of realistic children. For the creators of graphic narratives in children's literature during this period, a recognized invisible viewer of children gradually became established. Children's need to seek fresher visual texts outside of traditional schemas is also taken seriously. Everything children see with their eyes continuously creates a desire to watch.

Children's viewing of graphic narratives in children's literature is not only a subjective and imaginative viewing, but more fundamentally, this subjective imagination brings children's viewing back to the realm of the body. This is a continuation of the synesthetic characteristics of traditional Chinese visual culture. It is not intended to establish sensory hegemony over vision, but focuses on opening up the five senses and completing viewing under the control of the heart. There has never been a clear sensory hierarchy in children's education in China. For example, the theory of «aesthetic education replacing religion» pursues pan-sensory acceptance without distinction between the five senses.

⁴² Lü Zheng, *The Passage of the New Painting Movement in the Late Modern West*, «Fine Arts», n. 2, 1921.

⁴³ Zhao Jiabi, *I and Literature*, Beijing, Life Bookstore, 1934, pp. 105-107.

At the same time, feeling and knowledge are a process of integration: «There is no doubt that A child's knowledge is gained from experimental experiences through his sense organs. Through his eyes, he knows the shapes of various things and understands the development process of things. Through his hearing, he can understand other people's emotions. Ideology and the various sounds of nature, through his hands, he understands the properties of various objects, and also learns to deal with things that happen in daily life»⁴⁴. As a literary text, the graphic narrative of Chinese children's literature is intrinsically rational, interpretive and emotional in its acceptance by children. What it emphasizes in children's viewing is not fixed gaze and calm cognition, but an observation method in which the eyes meet the spirit and the subject and object are united. The loosening of restrictions on children's visual power does not point to a pure visual experience, but is combined with other senses or mental activities to advance towards an overall goal.

Conclusion

In traditional societies, children primarily served as the continuers of life, inheritors of culture, and transmitters of history. For modern China, children are not only continuers but also bearers of cultural change. The emphasis of modern Chinese intellectuals on the observation of children is not coincidental but a natural result of historical logic.

Only when children are no longer merely objects of gaze but become subjects of observation can the visible forms of traditional habits and stereotypes be interrupted. The graphic narrative in children's literature provides a literary ground for Chinese children's observation. Its emergence is predicated on viewing children's observation as a subject of literary and aesthetic significance, which has led to the various comic, mysterious, chaotic, fantasy and colorful styles of graphic narratives during this period; it has led to the re-encoding of the world through literature organized by confrontational visual images. This, in turn, becomes a site for the exercise of Chinese children's visual subjectivity, creating for them the power to perceive the world, to look at adults on an equal footing, and to reflect upon themselves. The graphic narrative in Chinese children's literature is a product of memory, change, and history, and it integrates the expectations of origin myths. These complex characteristics ensure that once it emerges, it is no longer a passive object but possesses its own life and desires, generating its own meanings in the gaze and counter-gaze of images.

⁴⁴ Chen Heqin, *A Study of Children's Psychology*, Beijing, Institute of Educational Science, 1983, p. 525.