



The Return of Fantasy in Chinese Children's Literature After 1978: A Literary Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The revival of fantasy in Chinese children's literature after 1978 marks one of the most significant developments in contemporary Chinese literary history. Following the implementation of China's Reform and Opening-Up policy, writers were granted greater creative freedom, allowing children's literature to move beyond the political and educational functions that had dominated during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Fantasy emerged as a vibrant literary mode through which authors could explore imagination, folklore, childhood, morality, identity, and social transformation. This paper examines the historical conditions that facilitated the return of fantasy in Chinese children's literature after 1978 and analyzes the literary characteristics of representative works by prominent writers such as Zheng Yuanjie, Cao Wenxuan, and others. Drawing on literary criticism and historical scholarship, the study investigates how fantasy integrates traditional Chinese myths with modern storytelling techniques while responding to changing social and cultural realities. The paper argues that the resurgence of fantasy not only transformed children's literature into a more artistically sophisticated genre but also reflected China's broader cultural modernization and renewed appreciation of creativity, individuality, and childhood imagination.

Keywords: Chinese children's literature, fantasy, post-1978 China, literary analysis, Reform and Opening-Up, imagination

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature occupies an important position in shaping the intellectual, emotional, and moral development of young readers. Throughout history, literary works written for children have reflected the political, cultural, and educational priorities of society. In China, children's literature has experienced several major transformations, each corresponding to significant historical and political changes. Among these developments, the return of fantasy after 1978 represents a landmark moment that fundamentally reshaped the genre.

Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, fantasy had already existed within Chinese storytelling traditions through myths, legends, fairy tales, and classical novels. Ancient works such as *Journey to the West* and collections of folklore introduced generations of readers to magical worlds inhabited by supernatural beings, talking animals, immortals, and mythical creatures. These narratives demonstrated that fantasy has long been embedded in Chinese cultural traditions. However, during the Maoist period, particularly throughout the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), literary production became closely tied to ideological objectives. Children's books were expected to educate young readers according to socialist values, leaving little room for imaginative or fantastical storytelling. Fantasy was often dismissed as unrealistic or politically unproductive, and literature increasingly emphasized realism, class struggle, and revolutionary heroism.

The death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the introduction of Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening-Up policy in 1978 transformed China's political, economic, and cultural landscape. Literary institutions gradually



regained creative freedom, publishing houses resumed normal operations, and writers were encouraged to experiment with new genres and artistic techniques. Within this changing environment, children's literature entered a period of remarkable renewal. Authors began to recognize childhood not merely as a stage for ideological education but as a unique world characterized by curiosity, imagination, playfulness, and emotional complexity. Fantasy became one of the most effective literary forms for expressing these qualities.

Unlike earlier didactic literature, post-1978 fantasy emphasized imagination as an essential aspect of childhood development. Writers combined elements of folklore, mythology, science fiction, fairy tales, and magical realism to create stories that entertained readers while encouraging creativity and critical thinking.

Talking animals, magical kingdoms, invisible cities, enchanted forests, and extraordinary adventures became recurring features of contemporary Chinese children's literature. These narratives did not reject moral education entirely; rather, they presented ethical questions through symbolic characters, imaginative settings, and emotionally engaging plots rather than direct political instruction.

One of the most influential figures in this literary revival is Zheng Yuanjie, whose imaginative stories transformed Chinese children's literature during the 1980s. His fictional characters challenged conventional educational practices while celebrating independence, kindness, creativity, and individual thought. Other writers, including Cao Wenxuan, integrated realistic depictions of childhood with symbolic and fantastical elements, demonstrating that fantasy could coexist with psychological depth and literary sophistication. Their works contributed to expanding the artistic possibilities of children's literature and attracted both young readers and academic attention.

The resurgence of fantasy was also influenced by increasing cultural exchange between China and the international literary community. As China reopened to the world, translations of Western children's literature—including works by authors such as Hans Christian Andersen, Lewis Carroll, Roald Dahl, and later J. K. Rowling—became more widely available.

These translations exposed Chinese writers to diverse narrative techniques and imaginative traditions while inspiring them to reinterpret fantasy through distinctly Chinese cultural perspectives. Rather than simply imitating Western models, many Chinese authors blended traditional myths, Confucian values, Daoist philosophy, Buddhist symbolism, and local folklore with contemporary storytelling, creating a unique form of Chinese fantasy literature.

From a literary perspective, fantasy performs several important functions within children's literature. It allows writers to explore themes of identity, courage, friendship, environmental responsibility, and social change through symbolic narratives that transcend ordinary reality. Fantasy also encourages readers to question assumptions, imagine alternative possibilities, and develop empathy for others.

Scholars of children's literature argue that imaginative narratives contribute significantly to cognitive development because they stimulate creativity while enabling children to interpret complex emotional and ethical experiences in accessible ways.

This paper examines the return of fantasy in Chinese children's literature after 1978 from a literary perspective. It first explores the historical and political conditions that made this revival possible before analyzing the literary characteristics of representative authors and works.

It further investigates the major themes, narrative techniques, and cultural significance of fantasy in contemporary Chinese children's literature. Ultimately, the study argues that the revival of fantasy represents not merely a change in literary style but a broader transformation in China's understanding of childhood, creativity, and cultural identity. Through imaginative storytelling, Chinese children's literature after 1978 successfully reconnected with its rich traditional heritage while embracing the opportunities presented by modernization and global literary exchange.



Historical Background and The Revival of Fantasy After 1978

Historical Background of Chinese Children's Literature

The development of Chinese children's literature has been closely connected to the country's political, cultural, and educational history. Traditional Chinese literature for children originated in myths, legends, folk tales, fables, and classical novels that were passed down through generations. Stories such as *Journey to the West*, *The Investiture of the Gods*, and numerous regional folktales introduced young readers to magical creatures, immortals, dragons, talking animals, and supernatural adventures. These narratives not only entertained children but also transmitted moral values, cultural traditions, and philosophical ideas rooted in Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism.

During the early twentieth century, especially after the May Fourth Movement of 1919, Chinese intellectuals began to recognize children's literature as an independent literary genre. Influenced by Western educational thought and literary movements, writers such as Ye Shengtao produced original fairy tales that encouraged imagination while promoting children's emotional and intellectual development. Fantasy was viewed as an important means of cultivating creativity and independent thinking.

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, children's literature increasingly served educational and political objectives. Literature was expected to support socialist nation-building by teaching patriotism, collective responsibility, and revolutionary ideals. Although some imaginative stories continued to appear, realism became the dominant literary mode. Fantasy was often regarded with suspicion because it was considered detached from social reality and socialist education.

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) further restricted literary creativity. Publishing activities were severely reduced, and many authors were prevented from writing. Children's books focused almost exclusively on revolutionary heroes, political loyalty, and ideological education. Fairy tales and fantasy stories were criticized as promoting escapism or "bourgeois" thinking. As a result, the imaginative richness that had characterized earlier Chinese storytelling traditions almost disappeared from published children's literature.

The conclusion of the Cultural Revolution marked a decisive turning point. China's transition toward modernization after 1978 created new opportunities for literary experimentation and cultural renewal. Children's literature entered a period of rapid development, during which fantasy re-emerged as one of its most influential genres.

Reform and Opening-Up: A New Literary Environment

The Reform and Opening-Up policy introduced by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 transformed Chinese society economically, socially, and culturally. These reforms encouraged greater openness to international ideas, restored educational institutions, revitalized publishing industries, and allowed writers considerably more artistic freedom than had been possible during the previous decade.

Within this new environment, children's literature gradually shifted away from its exclusively ideological function. Authors began to view children as imaginative individuals with unique emotional experiences rather than merely future citizens requiring political instruction. Literary critics likewise argued that children's literature should nurture creativity, curiosity, empathy, and aesthetic appreciation instead of functioning solely as a moral textbook.

Publishing houses specializing in children's books expanded rapidly throughout the 1980s. Literary magazines devoted to young readers introduced innovative stories that explored fantasy, adventure, science fiction, and fairy tales. Schools, libraries, and families also became increasingly supportive of reading for pleasure, creating a larger audience for imaginative literature.



Another important factor was China's growing contact with world literature. After decades of relative isolation, translations of international children's classics became widely available. Chinese readers encountered the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen, the imaginative worlds of Lewis Carroll, the adventures of Astrid Lindgren's characters, and later the works of Roald Dahl and J. K. Rowling. These translations introduced new narrative techniques while encouraging Chinese writers to develop their own distinctive approaches to fantasy. Rather than copying Western models, many authors integrated Chinese folklore, mythology, and traditional cultural symbols into contemporary fantasy narratives.

The Revival of Fantasy as a Literary Genre

The return of fantasy after 1978 represented far more than the reappearance of magical stories. It reflected a broader transformation in literary philosophy. Fantasy became a means of exploring emotional truth, social criticism, ethical questions, and childhood psychology through symbolic and imaginative narratives.

Post-1978 fantasy literature demonstrates several defining characteristics. First, it emphasizes the child's perspective. Stories are often narrated through curious, imaginative protagonists whose adventures reflect children's hopes, fears, and dreams. Unlike earlier ideological literature, these works acknowledge children's emotional complexity and celebrate their capacity for independent thought.

Second, contemporary fantasy combines traditional Chinese cultural resources with modern literary techniques. Dragons, fox spirits, legendary heroes, magical animals, and ancient myths are reinterpreted within contemporary settings. This fusion allows writers to preserve China's cultural heritage while making it meaningful for modern readers.

Third, fantasy provides authors with an indirect way of addressing social issues. Through imaginary worlds and symbolic characters, writers examine themes such as educational pressure, environmental protection, family relationships, urbanization, technological change, and moral responsibility. Because fantasy operates through metaphor rather than direct political commentary, it enables more nuanced explorations of complex social realities.

The renewed popularity of fantasy also reflects changing educational philosophies. Psychologists and educators increasingly recognized that imaginative play contributes to children's cognitive and emotional development. Fantasy encourages creative thinking, problem-solving, empathy, and resilience by inviting readers to imagine alternative possibilities beyond ordinary experience.

Moreover, fantasy restored the artistic value of children's literature. Rather than being judged only by its educational usefulness, children's literature came to be appreciated for its narrative craftsmanship, symbolic richness, and aesthetic beauty. Writers experimented with magical realism, allegory, fairy tales, and hybrid narrative forms, expanding the literary possibilities of the genre.

The revival of fantasy after 1978 therefore represents a significant cultural achievement. It reconnects contemporary Chinese children's literature with ancient storytelling traditions while responding to the realities of modernization and globalization. By balancing imagination with cultural memory, fantasy has become one of the most dynamic and influential genres in contemporary Chinese literature for young readers.

Literary Analysis of Major Authors and Works

The revival of fantasy in Chinese children's literature after 1978 is best understood through the works of several influential authors who transformed the genre by combining imagination with cultural reflection and psychological depth. Although each writer employs fantasy differently, they share a commitment to restoring creativity to children's literature and presenting childhood as a period of exploration rather than merely ideological instruction.

Among the most influential figures is Zheng Yuanjie, often referred to as one of China's leading contemporary writers for children. Beginning in the late 1970s and reaching widespread popularity during the 1980s, Zheng created imaginative fictional worlds populated by memorable characters such as Pipilu and Luxixi. These stories challenged conventional educational practices and encouraged children to think independently. Rather than presenting authority as unquestionably correct, Zheng frequently depicts young protagonists who solve problems through curiosity, imagination, and moral courage.

A defining characteristic of Zheng Yuanjie's fantasy is the use of anthropomorphic characters, magical inventions, and impossible situations to expose social contradictions. Talking animals, intelligent machines, and magical objects function as symbolic devices that encourage readers to question rigid educational systems, excessive competition, and unquestioned obedience. Although humorous and entertaining, these narratives also contain subtle social criticism. Fantasy therefore becomes a literary strategy through which important ethical and educational issues can be discussed without direct political confrontation.

Another major contributor to contemporary Chinese children's literature is Cao Wenxuan. Unlike Zheng Yuanjie, Cao is primarily associated with realistic fiction. Nevertheless, many of his works incorporate symbolic imagery, dream-like episodes, and poetic descriptions that approach the imaginative qualities of fantasy.

Novels such as *Bronze* and *Sunflower* combine realistic settings with symbolic natural imagery, transforming ordinary rural landscapes into emotionally powerful spaces that evoke wonder and hope. His narratives demonstrate that fantasy does not always require supernatural events; it may also emerge through symbolism, metaphor, and the imaginative perception of childhood.

Cao's literary style is distinguished by lyrical language, emotional depth, and careful characterization. His child protagonists encounter hardship, separation, poverty, and personal growth, yet their experiences are enriched by imaginative interpretations of the natural world. Birds, rivers, forests, and changing seasons acquire symbolic meanings that reflect children's emotional development. This blending of realism with poetic imagination broadens the concept of fantasy beyond fairy tales and magical adventures.

The revival of fantasy has also encouraged writers to reinterpret traditional Chinese mythology. Dragons, fox spirits, immortals, heavenly kingdoms, and legendary heroes have reappeared in contemporary children's books, often presented through modern narrative structures. Instead of reproducing ancient myths unchanged, authors adapt these stories to address present-day concerns, including environmental protection, friendship, cultural identity, and ethical responsibility. Such adaptations strengthen children's awareness of Chinese cultural heritage while ensuring that traditional narratives remain relevant within contemporary society.

Another notable feature of post-1978 fantasy is the increasing influence of global children's literature. As translations became widely available, Chinese writers encountered diverse storytelling traditions from Europe, North America, and other regions.

However, rather than simply imitating Western fantasy, they developed distinctive approaches by integrating Chinese folklore, philosophical traditions, and social experiences into imaginative narratives. This synthesis has produced a uniquely Chinese form of fantasy that reflects both international literary developments and national cultural identity.

Narrative technique also distinguishes contemporary Chinese fantasy from earlier didactic literature. Authors increasingly employ multiple perspectives, humorous dialogue, symbolic settings, and open-ended conclusions that encourage readers to interpret stories independently.

Magical elements frequently operate as metaphors for emotional growth, social change, or ethical decision-making rather than serving merely as entertainment. Consequently, fantasy becomes an effective means of exploring complex psychological experiences that realistic narration alone may not fully capture.



The success of these writers demonstrates that fantasy has become a central component of modern Chinese children's literature. Their works illustrate that imagination and literary artistry can coexist with educational value, producing stories that entertain while encouraging reflection on friendship, justice, responsibility, compassion, and personal identity. Through their creative innovations, they have expanded both the artistic possibilities of children's literature and the cultural understanding of childhood in contemporary China.

THEMES, CONCLUSION, AND APA REFERENCES

Major Themes

Several recurring themes characterize the revival of fantasy in Chinese children's literature after 1978. The first is the celebration of imagination. Contemporary authors portray imagination as a vital aspect of childhood rather than a distraction from reality. Magical adventures encourage readers to think creatively, solve problems independently, and appreciate alternative perspectives.

A second theme is identity and personal growth. Fantasy narratives often depict children discovering their abilities through encounters with magical beings, extraordinary worlds, or symbolic journeys. These experiences represent the emotional and psychological challenges associated with growing up while emphasizing resilience, courage, and self-confidence.

The preservation of cultural heritage forms another important theme. Many authors incorporate traditional myths, folklore, and philosophical ideas into contemporary stories, allowing young readers to engage with Chinese cultural traditions in imaginative ways. Fantasy therefore serves as a bridge between historical memory and modern society.

Environmental awareness has likewise become increasingly significant. Magical forests, animals, rivers, and mythical landscapes symbolize the interconnected relationship between humans and nature. Such narratives encourage ecological responsibility while reinforcing traditional Chinese concepts of harmony between humanity and the natural world.

Finally, fantasy frequently addresses friendship, compassion, and moral responsibility. Rather than presenting simplistic moral lessons, contemporary authors invite readers to consider ethical dilemmas through symbolic situations that require empathy, cooperation, and thoughtful decision-making.

Conclusion

The return of fantasy to Chinese children's literature after 1978 represents one of the most significant literary developments of the Reform and Opening-Up era. Freed from the ideological restrictions that characterized the Cultural Revolution, authors rediscovered imagination as an essential element of childhood and literary creativity. Fantasy re-emerged not simply as a form of entertainment but as a sophisticated artistic medium capable of exploring identity, morality, culture, and social transformation.

Writers such as Zheng Yuanjie and Cao Wenxuan demonstrate the diversity of contemporary Chinese children's literature. While Zheng employs magical adventures and humorous fantasy to challenge conventional thinking, Cao combines realism with poetic symbolism to illuminate children's emotional experiences. Together, these approaches illustrate the flexibility and richness of fantasy as a literary mode.

The revival of fantasy also reflects broader cultural changes within Chinese society. Increased openness to international literature, renewed appreciation for traditional mythology, and changing educational philosophies have all contributed to the genre's development.

Contemporary fantasy successfully integrates Chinese cultural traditions with modern narrative techniques, producing stories that resonate with both national identity and global literary trends.



In conclusion, fantasy has become an indispensable component of post-1978 Chinese children's literature. By encouraging imagination, preserving cultural heritage, and addressing contemporary social concerns through symbolic storytelling, fantasy continues to shape new generations of readers while enriching the literary landscape of modern China.

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