

# Children's Literature in China

*From  
Lu  
Xun  
to  
Mao  
Zedong*



*Mary Ann Farquhar*

**CHILDREN'S  
LITERATURE  
IN CHINA**

# **Studies on Modern China**

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*From Lu Xun to Mao Zedong*

*Mary Ann Farquhar*

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Studies on Modern China



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From Lu Xun  
to Mao Zedong

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MARY ANN FARQUHAR

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*For my mother, Peggy, and in memory of my friend, Dianne*

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**CHILDREN'S  
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# Introduction

From its beginnings in the early twentieth century, modern Chinese children's literature was cast as an ideological tool to reshape China. It aroused deep controversies over concepts of childhood, education and language. At the core of the controversy was its role in China's push for modernization. Revolutionaries—from Lu Xun to Mao Zedong—insisted that the future of China would be decided by Chinese children themselves. To this end, they needed their own distinctive literature.

Children and children's literature, therefore, emerged as serious political concerns in modern Chinese history. In a China racked by national disintegration and spiritual crisis early this century, children became a symbol of hope for the future. In the past, children represented a continuity of family and traditional values. Early reformers reinterpreted this ideology within an evolutionary framework and fashioned a new image of children: they represented national, not family, continuity, and evolutionary change, not unchanging tradition. Lu Xun was the spokesperson for this position. The Marxists adopted this position but substituted revolutionary struggle for evolutionary change, calling children 'revolutionary successors' (*gemingde jiebanren*). In a society that valued literature as the primary source of moral values, children's literature was to be a powerful means to educate the future masters of a modern state.

Yet for all its significance in China's recent political and cultural history, in China there are only fragmented and frequently polemical studies of children's literature despite the wealth of available material. In the West the subject itself has been barely acknowledged. It is not that Chinese themselves attribute little significance to children's literature. A cursory

reading of the relevant twentieth century literature reveals the opposite; renowned Chinese thinkers insisted on the crucial importance of children and their books for Chinese society.

The first modern short story in China, 'A Madman's Diary' (1918) by Lu Xun, ends with the now famous cry, 'save the children'.<sup>1</sup> The first children's magazine in Mao Zedong's guerilla base area exhorted children, in Mao's own words and handwriting, to 'rise up. . . and learn to be free, independent citizens of China'.<sup>2</sup> In the fifties, Mao told Chinese youth that both the world and China's future belonged to them<sup>3</sup> and then, as if to prove it, he mobilized them as the energetic 'red' vanguard of the Cultural Revolution that swept China in the sixties. Both liberal reformers and Marxist revolutionaries clearly considered children's literature an important aspect of any long-term modernization strategy. The cry to 'save the children' meant, ultimately, to 'save' China itself.

Ironically, the absence of systematic study of children's literature in China is due *precisely* to its ideological importance. In the period before 1949, the year the Chinese Communist Party gained control over the Chinese state, the major political factions had considered control of children's literature indispensable in their struggle for power. The conflict was so intense that discussions of the subject were usually conducted in quick-fire succession through the newspapers and magazines of the day. This environment was not conducive to rigorous scholarly inquiry.

In the period after 1949, the political potency of children's literature begged an authoritative Party delineation of the field, commensurate with the importance that the Party had bestowed on it. Yet tentative explorations were discouraged, and frequent swings in Party policy towards literature denied any opportunity to publish a definitive work.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, children's literature is a serious subject in modern Chinese history. It is overtly political, and offers valuable insights into contemporary China. As such, it merits special consideration. This book takes up that task, mapping the tumultuous, formative period of modern Chinese children's literature this century: from Lu Xun to Mao Zedong.

In the West there has been only one serious study of modern Chinese children's literature, published in 1971: Jean-Pierre Diény's *Le Monde est à Vous, La Chine et les Livres pour Enfants* (*The World Belongs to You, China and Children's Books*, 1971).<sup>5</sup> This is a study of children's literature under Mao. Diény's opening sentence comments on the then prevailing Western view of children's literature. To write on such a subject, he said then, seems a 'bizarre eccentricity'. Indeed, he continued, 'some Western specialists of children's literature deny that China has any books worthy of the name'.<sup>6</sup> Diény treats these views with some disdain, using Mao Zedong's catchphrase, 'the world belongs to you', in his title to emphasize the significance of this subject. He points out the musings that prompted his study—about the decisive political role of the young Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution and the reading matter that may have influenced them, about the eager young readers whom he saw filling China's bookshops and libraries. 'It is worth the trouble to stoop over these books, whatever they are, that they read so carefully.'<sup>7</sup> In end-of-millennium China, poised to become an economic and political powerhouse of the Pacific region, it is especially worth the 'trouble'.

Diény is modest about the limitations of his work. At the personal level, it was a means of prolonging his stay in a China which captivated him. In scope, it relies on only 180 books (most published in the early sixties) collected while he worked there between 1964 and 1966. In depth, it is bereft of bibliographic research into histories of Chinese children's literature. Yet this work is pioneering. It points to an unexplored field which yields new perspectives on twentieth century China, not just in its children's literature but also in education, cultural policy and political control. Diény claims:

In China. . . there is no break in continuity between the literature for children, adolescents and adults. All three, being three branches on the single trunk of official ideology, resemble each other: China treats children as adults and adults as children. To have a knowledge of children's literature, therefore, is to know something of all forms of literary activity.<sup>8</sup>

Diény's work identifies three key problems that serve as useful starting points for this study. The first is the extent to which Chinese children's literature is an identifiable field with its own distinguishing characteristics. The second is the basic task of classifying the major literary texts in each historical period and assigning them to the main currents, or schools, of children's literature. The third problem is tracing the development of these schools and explaining their dominance or decline. Diény's analysis, for example, shows how the majority of the children's books that he collected on the eve of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1965) conform to the primary function then assigned to children's literature by the Chinese Communist Party: political education of the young who must assure the continuity of the revolution. But he also discerns a dissident 'counter-current' which challenges the 'cement block of propaganda' dominating the cultural scene in these years. He claims that an inquiry of any depth 'should explain how this heretical stream evolved and then lost ground during the rectification campaigns', which successively assailed literature after Liberation in 1949.<sup>9</sup> These three problems in analyzing Chinese children's literature—its distinguishing characteristics, the major texts in the field, and the evolution of the main schools of literature—are central issues examined in this book.

The purpose here, however, extends beyond the problems outlined by Diény and derives from a reading of the Chinese sources. The central proposition here is that the Chinese, in the twentieth century, have attempted to develop a canon of children's literature. In literature, a canon variously refers to major authors, major literary works or fundamental rules governing standards of literary criticism.<sup>10</sup> Early this century, China's first generation of modern writers produced a vernacular children's literature to displace the key texts of the Confucian canon in the classical language that traditionally children memorized as part of their education. At the end of this century, we can confidently say that these Confucian texts are relegated to history. Vernacular children's literature is now institutionalized as part of children's reading and part of the education system.

The purpose of this book, therefore, is four-fold. First, we seek to identify the hallmarks of Chinese children's literature. Second, we seek to identify and classify the major literary texts for Chinese children, beginning with the first work in 1921. Third, we relate these texts to the historical conditions that produced and privileged them. On this basis we can, fourth, assess the development of a canon in the field of children's literature in China.

The proposition that there *is* a canon of children's literature in China rests on two assumptions. The first is that there is a literature specifically for children. Diény's contention that 'in China. . . literature for children, adolescents and adults. . . resemble each other' does not mean that these literatures are the same, however solid are the continuities between them. Chinese distinguish children's literature from that for adults, but do not differentiate within this literature between works for children and works for adolescents. Children's literature is called *shaonian ertong wenxue* which means literally 'literature for adolescents and children'. This study adopts the inclusive Chinese usage. It examines a literature in China which, from its inception, has catered for children from five years (kindergarten) to fifteen years (the end of junior middle school).

The second assumption is that children's literature in China is now an identifiable field. The sources reveal that Chinese children's literature has:

- a clearly constituted audience of vast proportions. Population statistics show that the potential readership for children's literature has grown rapidly this century. The total population of 387.89 million in 1911 grew to 1.008 billion in 1982. By far the most significant factor is the very high proportion of young people, with approximately 300 million then under sixteen years of age, according to Chinese census statistics;<sup>11</sup>
- a wealth of books, some of which are considered classics, and a range of genres, some of which are considered particularly suitable for children, such as fairytales and children's songs;

- specialized professionals, such as writers and critics, and organizational support such as libraries, publishing houses, a writers' federation, congresses and prizes. The organization extends from national through provincial to local levels;
- a history filled with its own particular debates, such as those on the role of children's literature, the nature of childhood and the social function of fairytales and comic books; and
- conscious, even mammoth, efforts by Chinese to enrich their own literature with translations, especially in the 1920s, 1950s and 1980s.

Given the magnitude of this field, how do we approach it? The approach taken here is that of the Chinese themselves, using the texts of writers, critics, educators, theoreticians and political leaders. Chesneau has stated that:

China has become an active subject which in itself defines the restrictions and approaches that determine the area in which they must think and work. . . there is still some room for speculation. . . but this margin. . . remains narrow, for it is defined by the Chinese themselves which means that the questions we ask are in some sense predetermined.<sup>12</sup>

The sources for a study of children's literature in China are many and various. Indeed, there is an over-abundance of material. Newspapers and magazines, including children's magazines, have featured articles on the subject since its genesis in the twenties. Major debates, reviews and discussions of policy change are conducted continuously in the main newspapers and adult magazines on literature. For the contextual materials I have utilized sets of newspapers and magazines covering the entire period under study. The exception is almost a decade (1938–47) in the war period when literary production was low and paper was scarce; in this case I have relied on later reports and reviews. In the mid-fifties, and again since the late seventies, many important essays and reports have been published in book form for easy access. These include reports on congresses, book reviews and essays on writers, as well as theoretical articles and debates.

Most of the major literary texts reviewed in the press during the period under review here were located for this study. The May Fourth or inter-war period (1918–36) is the formative period of modern children's literature in China as Lu Xun and others set about to produce the first vernacular children's works. This period takes its name from Chinese demonstrations over the Versailles Treaty on May 4, 1919, and ends with the Japanese attack on China in 1937. It is the period of greatest Western influence on China and is particularly well documented, as the main writers for children were also major figures in the literary world. Again the exception is the war periods, which include the Anti-Japanese War (1937–45) and the Civil War between the Nationalists and Communists (1946–49). However, the first two anthologies of the 'best' children's literature cover the civil war period (1946–49) and many works from this period have been republished. It should be restated that commentators agree that there was not much published in this period, partly because the Japanese, as colonizers, had taken over the publishing centres on the eastern coast. Nevertheless, despite this relative paucity, fair generalizations about pre-Liberation children's literature will be offered here, based on a sample which represents the range and diversity of the works produced during that time. This sample is itself based on an analysis of both the literary works which the Chinese consider important, and the contextual material in the press.

The range of works published after 1949 is available to Western researchers. These are found in books, newspapers and literary magazines for both adults and children. The most important source is the anthologies of children's literature published periodically since 1949 with the exception of the Cultural Revolution period (1966–76). During the first phase of the Cultural Revolution (1966–69) most publication ceased. Works published in the seventies were collected while I lived in Beijing for three years from 1974. The publication record was so pitiful in this period that it was possible to collect and digest almost everything available on this subject. The situation changed dramatically in the late seventies with a publishing explosion, which has included works of, or on, children's

literature. From 1978 to the mid-1980s, for example, more anthologies were published than during the three decades of the preceding period, and these include not only annual or biennial anthologies but specialized collections, such as fairytales and pre-school literature. Most cover literature originally produced in the period 1949 to 1979 but some begin with twenties selections. They therefore come within the period under study. Although the titles, *Ertong Wenxuexuan* (*Anthologies of Children's Literature*), suggest they do not include adolescent literature, many of the works are selected from adolescent magazines and are aimed on the whole at older children.

The post-1949 works discussed in this study are not selected at random from the range. They are considered important by Chinese critics either because they are prize winners, controversial, frequently republished or the subject of major reviews. Even so, the territory is large and many works are not included. This is especially true of the post-Mao proliferation of books after 1976, which is partly why the scope of this study ends with Mao's death, itself a watershed in China's political, social and literary life. Similarly, the emphasis on fiction is proportionate to the amount of attention it has received in the press relative to other literary forms. Plays, poems and songs are included when they have been specifically reviewed or won prizes. Serial picture books (comics), on the other hand, are included because they were emphasized in the thirties and fifties as the most popular of all the reading material for children and because their development illustrates an important aspect of left-wing policies towards children's literature.

The critical approach and criteria for selection of their leading works by the Chinese themselves have differed from period to period. As Jean Chesneaux maintains, Chinese study history 'as a way of integrating a political thought which is rooted in the present. . . not only is their history filled with crises and sudden shifts, it is read backward, constantly being revised and reinterpreted as these crises and shifts occur'.<sup>13</sup> Survival is one test of a book. Later interpretations have, however, almost always been tested by background research in the newspapers and magazines of the period when the work was originally

published. With the exception of the Cultural Revolution period, when almost everything was being questioned, there is evidence of consistent attitudes towards what were considered 'good' books. Indeed, almost all the works and writers pilloried during the Cultural Revolution, or in the preceding rectification campaigns, have been reinstated since the late seventies. Children's literature is cumulative and, throughout most of its history in China, certain texts persist as major literary works. These works and the contextual materials which explain them offer a basis for establishing the canon in the field.

The most striking characteristic of the history of Chinese children's literature is the alignment of certain schools, literary forms and theories with different political factions struggling for power. Literature was one means of establishing and maintaining the legitimacy of social programs. Literary works may, therefore, reflect incompatible ideological positions. It follows that there should be conflicting criteria for judging literary value. While this view is valid at one level of analysis, a further reading suggests that there are basic cultural assumptions, common to all factions, which underpin the judgements and debates on children's literature. The most crucial assumption is that the importance of children's literature lies in its educative function, and that this is located in the social domain. Most critics, whether they are Confucian, liberal or Marxist, regard social and historical context as fundamental. The often vehement debates on children's literature take place within this framework; they question the educational theories and practices and the concepts of childhood which inform children's literature, but never question the primacy of its educational role. In almost all cases literary value in a text is conferred according to its perceived 'educational significance' (*jiaoyu yiyi*) and, as a corollary, its implications for the future directions of Chinese society.

Lu Xun, the 'father' of children's literature and the most influential theorist in the field, reserved 'the very, very, very blackest curses' for all who opposed it, precisely because of its special importance.

No matter who they are, there must be a limit to this eating of children, it must end when they die. And even if the poison of those who oppose the vernacular is as powerful as raging floods and savage beasts, so extremely widespread and long-lived that all of China becomes a pock-marked, bearded (bogey-man), then children everywhere will die in its belly.

All it needs is more murderers of vernacular (literature) to cause total destruction.<sup>14</sup>

Lu Xun's generation of writers in the early twentieth century rejected the entire dead weight of Confucian texts for children. But instead of completely rejecting literature as something unsuitable for children, these far-sighted writers created a new literature specifically for them. From its inception, children's literature in China was both 'a weapon to educate children'<sup>15</sup> and a means of awakening their imagination. It was both militant and full of care. Under the Communists after 1949, published works became increasingly militant and the literary field became a 'battlefield'. By the end of Mao Zedong's days, most existing literature was purged, leaving a few 'revolutionary' works as lone sentinels in a devastated literary landscape. After Mao's death in 1976, the field was reassessed and famous works were rehabilitated. Children's literature was once more called a 'garden'.

This book takes us into both the garden and the battlefield.

## Notes

1. Lu Xun, 'Kuangren Riji', *Lu Xun Quanji*, Vol. 1 (Beijing, 1973), p. 291.
2. Mao Zedong, in Liu Yu, 'Jiefangqu Diyizhang Ertongbao', *Ertong Wenxue Yanjiu*, 2 (1959), p. 85.
3. Mao Zedong, 'Talk at a Meeting with Chinese Students and Trainees in Moscow' (17 November 1957), in *English Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (Peking, 1976), p. 288. The full quote is: 'The world is yours, as well as ours but, in the final analysis, it is yours. You young people, full of vigor and vitality, are in the bloom of life like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed in you . . . The world belongs to you. China's future belongs to you'.
4. I have located one slim history of Chinese children's literature for the period under study: Jiang Feng, *Zhongguo Ertong Wenxue Jianshuo* [*An Introduction to Chinese Children's Literature*], published in Nanjing in 1959. It deals primarily with pre-1949 material. The Chinese in the field recognize the paucity of research, according to statements made to the author during discussions in Sichuan in both 1984 and 1986-87. However, the Children's Literature Writers'

Association, which belongs to the National Writers Association, had plans to publish a history of Chinese children's literature within the next few years (according to an interview with standing member and editor of Sichuan Children's Literature Publishing House, He Qunying, in 1987). In 1998 it is still to be published.

5. Diény, J. P., *Le Monde est à Vous: La Chine et les Livres pour Enfants* (Paris, 1971). There is an excellent study of the books available to children in traditional China with a closing sketch of the new modern children's literature: Hayward-Scott, D., *Chinese Popular Literature and the Child* (Chicago, 1980). There are two English-language bibliographies on Chinese children's literature. The first, mentioned by Diény, is Pellowski, A., *The World of Children's Literature* (New York, London, 1968). It lists only 32 titles. The other, Haviland, V., *Children's Literature: A Guide to Reference Sources* (Washington, 1966) also has a very short section on Chinese children's literature. Margaret Wylie's *Children of China* (Hong Kong, 1962) includes a chapter on children's reading.

6. Diény, J. P., *op cit.*, p. 8.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

10. Abrams, M.H., *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 5th ed. (New York, 1988), p. 20.

11. The Population Census Office Under State Council, Department of the State Statistical Bureau, *The 1982 Population Census of China* (Hong Kong, 1982), p. 64.

12. Chesneaux, J., *China: The People's Republic 1949-1976*, translated by Auster, P. and Davis, L. (Hassocks, 1979), p. xi.

13. *Ibid.*, p. ix-x.

14. Lu Xun, 'Ershisi Xiaotu', *Lu Xun Quanji*, Vol. 11, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

15. Jiang Feng (ed.), 'Qianyan', *Lu Xun Lun Ertong Jiaoyu he Ertong Wenxue* (Shanghai, 1961), p. 1.

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# 1

## **The Historical Background**

In China, modern children's literature began in the early twentieth century. It was written by the first generation of great modern writers such as Lu Xun, Ye Shengtao and Mao Dun. There were, of course, books for children long before this. But these were elementary primers within the Confucian education system, rejected by modern reformers.

This chapter considers the historical background of Confucian children's books up to the end of the early May Fourth period (1926). It outlines the growing challenge in the nineteenth century to the legitimacy of the Confucian canon. This challenge became direct confrontation in the May Fourth period. May Fourth writers for children borrowed ideas and forms from Western literature to attack the dominance of Confucianism which they regarded as inimical to the modernization of China. They believed that only the introduction of modern science and democracy could ensure China's survival as a nation.

At the core of this confrontation lay two very different views on education. Writers such as Lu Xun claimed that Confucian children's texts were rooted in the past and were retrogressive; Confucian texts directed children towards mindless obedience. Advocates of a modern children's literature, on the other hand, sought to inculcate a sense of individual worth and a spirit of scientific enquiry. Progressive thinkers in the early twentieth century considered that the lack of these two qualities explained, in part, the decline of China. These thinkers stressed that education through children's literature should develop the personal capacities of the young.

In this context, it can be said that the Chinese 'discovered' childhood in the early twentieth century. There was widespread interest in Western theories on child psychology and the nature

of childhood. The discussions focussed in particular on an evolutionary concept of childhood development and pre-Freudian notions of childhood innocence. These theories served a dual function. First, they undermined Confucian educational practices as 'unscientific'. Second, they underpinned current arguments for new developments in children's education which included the production of 'a garden' of children's literature. Pastoral images of hope and delight reinforced arguments for the emancipation of children from the dark night of Confucian orthodoxy.

Despite the obvious incompatibility between Confucian and May Fourth views on education, they share one striking feature: recognition of the social importance of the educative role of children's books. Confucian children's books clearly sought to perpetuate a living tradition. The success of these texts within the education system offered a partial explanation for the longevity and dominance of Confucian ideology. Twentieth century reformers, therefore, sought to displace them. But the reformist conception of children's literature was still socially determinist in that its stated end was to transform and enrich future Chinese society. Reformists' interest in childhood, albeit genuine, was ultimately shaped more by the emerging forces of nationalism than by disinterested scientific curiosity. Indeed, for a short period the child was the political symbol of China's future.

### **Traditional Children's Books**

Children's books in traditional China were primarily educational. The best known, *The Three Character Classic* (*Sanzi Jing*),<sup>1</sup> was a language primer which introduced children to characters, an outline of Chinese history and the social tenets of Confucianism through easily memorized three-character phrases. This book, together with *The One Hundred Family Names* (*Baijia Xing*),<sup>2</sup> and *The Thousand Character Classic* (*Qianzi Wen*)<sup>3</sup> formed a set of elementary Confucian texts for children. They were familiarly known as the *san bai qian* ('three, hundred and thousand') and were learned by heart.

When children had mastered the basics—counting and reading—they continued to follow an approved reading schedule. According to *The Three Character Classic*:

Those who are learners  
Must have a beginning.  
When *Education for the Young* is finished  
Proceed to the *Four Books*...  
When the *Classic of Filial Piety* is mastered  
And the *Four Books* are known by heart,  
The next step is to the *Six Classics*  
Which may now be studied.<sup>4</sup>

Children's traditional education directed them as early as possible to the *Four Books* which, as the first portion of the Confucian canon, were memorized by all candidates who hoped for success in the public examinations. In meritocratic China, success in these examinations was the gateway to official position, wealth and prestige. In one sense, children's texts were merely necessary stepping stones to the Confucian classics rather than reading matter or 'literature' as we now understand it; indeed, twentieth century critics claimed that children did not understand the texts they recited and were bored to death by them. Nevertheless, these texts were spectacularly successful. They remained within the Confucian canon for centuries because they were well suited to their purpose: the *san bai qian* introduced children to about two thousand characters, the basic number for beginners, and the short, rhythmic lines of *The Three Character Classic* trip off the tongue as easily as nursery rhymes.

Children also had elementary reading material: poetry texts such as *The Thousand Family Poems (Qianjia Shi)*<sup>5</sup> and prose story books such as *Daily Stories (Riji Gushi)*.<sup>6</sup> While books such as these could be called 'children's literature', the Chinese saw them as properly belonging to education; they were texts for 'enlightening the ignorance' (*qimeng*) of the very young. Zhu Xi makes this clear in his comments on *Daily Stories* in *Education for the Young (Xiaoxue)*:

Education for the young is not just learning by heart. We must begin with language as the basis in nurturing both deep knowledge and a fine application (of that knowledge). *Daily Stories*, whether old or new, must first teach such qualities as filial piety, fraternal love, loyalty, truth, propriety, duty, honour and honesty through stories like Huang Xiang warming his parent's be. . . Only when these (stories) are well known will the basic principles be clear and through long familiarity (the habit of) virtue will become natural.<sup>7</sup>

China produced the world's earliest picture book for children, one century earlier than production of the first picture book for children in the West, *Orbus Pictus* by Comenius (1592–1670). The Chinese book, written in 1542, was an illustrated version of *Daily Stories*, a staple in the Confucian children's canon. Pictorialization was common in both traditional and modern children's books. It enhanced the pleasure of reading and reinforced the educative meaning of the texts.

Approved children's books such as these had three aims: to introduce characters and sentence structure, to impart general knowledge and to transmit traditional Chinese cultural values. The transmission of culture involved more than exposure to literature or factual accounts of Chinese history and philosophy, for the Chinese did not separate knowledge from its application; as Zhu Xi suggests, these books sought to internalize as second nature certain moral attitudes that would produce patterns of behavior which formed the basis of Confucian society. Their acceptance by the child guaranteed survival and continuity of Confucian mores within Chinese culture.

Mastery of the Confucian classics was, however, the prerogative and the hallmark of the educated elite: the literati from whom the mandarins or official class were chosen by examination. The vast majority of Chinese people remained illiterate. They lacked the leisure and wealth required to support the acquisition of a traditional education. Even within the wealthier families, education was principally the domain of the sons. When it existed for daughters, it was directed towards preparing them for marriage, not for public office. Texts for girls, such as *Precepts for Women (Nu Jie)* and *Classic for Girls*

(*Nu'er Jing*), set standards for female conduct. Essentially, these texts reiterated and expanded on the maxim contained in the Confucian classic, *The Book of Rites (Liji)*: 'to be a woman meant to submit'.<sup>8</sup> As Croll claims, books such as these embodied the ideological mechanisms of subordination of women in traditional China. The works rationalized female's acquiescence in their own inferiority and domestic seclusion. The works interacted with other mechanisms of subordination to reduce women to a state of economic dependence, physical subservience and sexual servitude.<sup>9</sup> In short, the Confucian classics which include books for children were the educational pillars of a patriarchal and elite social system.

Children also had access to a vast amount of material which, while not intended specifically for them, seems to have reached them by one means or another. In *Chinese Popular Literature and the Child*, Hayward Scott gives a full account of traditional popular literature available to Chinese children. This includes oral literature such as songs and stories, and popular written literature such as novels.

An historical example of the influence of popular literature on children is found in China's most famous novel, the Qing Dynasty masterpiece called *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Baoyu, the boy hero, is bored with reading Confucius and Mencius, but enraptured with a pile of books bought for him by his young servant, Tealeaf.

His purchases include:

Old Inklubber's Stories Old and New  
The Secret History of Flying Swallow  
Sister of Flying Swallow  
The Infamous Loves of Empress Wu  
The Jade Ring Concubine, or  
Peeps in the Inner Palace  
and a heap of playbooks—mostly romantic comedies and the like. . .

Tealeaf uttered a warning: 'Don't take these into the garden. If you do and anyone finds out about them I'll be in real trouble—more than just a bellyful'.<sup>10</sup>

Baoyu ignores the warning and takes a few of the more chaste volumes into the garden where his young cousin finds him. She, too, becomes absorbed: 'she felt the power of the words and their lingering fragrance. Long after she had finished reading, when she had laid down the book and was sitting there rapt and silent, the lines continued to ring on in her head'.<sup>11</sup>

It could be said that the prehistory of modern Chinese children's literature had two branches: material, primarily educational, that was written for children with meticulous care, and material that children enjoyed, but that was not meant specifically for them. Children were seen as immature adults. They were seen to be ignorant (the traditional words for 'early education' and 'elementary texts' contain the character *meng* meaning 'dark, covered, confused, in childish ignorance') and they were to be enlightened through the classics which expounded social and natural 'laws'.

In any society, awareness of the special characteristics of childhood is a necessary precondition for the emergence of a modern children's literature. Aries claims that 'the idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children; it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, the particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult'.<sup>12</sup> Chinese writers on the subject agree that this awareness was lacking in traditional China. Ascertaining the extent to which this is true would require a detailed study, but the proposition is borne out by the description of Baoyu's childhood and adolescence in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, the masterpiece discussed previously. The description of Baoyu includes his fear of his strict father; his early childhood play with his young female cousin; the rumpus and sexual innuendo in the family school; a wet dream during which he follows the instructions of a fairy, called Disenchantment, in the art of love; sharing these instructions with Aroma, his personal maid; and the erotic literature he read during a period of adolescent discontent. By this time one assumes he is no longer a child. But these descriptions are particular to Baoyu; despite the Chinese love of categorization, there is no mention that these are general attributes of childhood

or adolescence. Indeed, the framework of the novel is Buddhist, and Baoyu's life is pre-determined by the operations of karma—he is one of 'a batch of romantic idiots' who are 'sent down into the world to take part in the great illusion of human life'.<sup>13</sup>

### Western Impact on Chinese Children's Literature

For more than half a millenium, between the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) and the early twentieth century, the body of children's texts beginning with the *san bai qian* remained relatively unchanged.<sup>14</sup> Developments and additions were within the general outline set by Neo-Confucians. The pattern was continuity, not change.

From the mid-nineteenth century, however, the thread in Chinese history is change, not continuity. A period of blatant Western influence began with the first Opium War (1840–42) when British forced Chinese to accept opium and to open more treaty ports for trade along the east China coast. The Chinese label this period 'semi-feudal semi-colonial'. However, additions to the body of children's books in the nineteenth century were minimal and only hindsight makes these at all significant; they were precursors to the large-scale introduction of Western children's literature in the twentieth century and a small part of the gathering momentum for change over more than a hundred years which led to the rise of modern China.

Two points suggest that Western influence on children's literature before the twentieth century was negligible. First, from the scant information available (and here we must rely on records of later writers and recorded changes in traditional texts), any additions were kept neatly within the confines of Confucianism and the classical language. Second, the general understanding of children's reading was still traditional in that the literature for them was subsumed by classical education. Western works were introduced as educational tools, for language training in particular, and new ideas were propagated in traditional packages, such as *The Three Character Classic*.

A survey of Western-influenced children's books and translations of Western works available in the nineteenth century