Children’s Literature in Taiwan

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Children’s literature is generally considered to be literature that is meant for children to read, but it is also literature that piques the interest of the child’s mind. Authors of children’s literature may be children themselves, writing of their experiences, thoughts, and feelings, or they may be adults, making children the subjects of their works. From the beginning, there have been many myths, parables, and folk stories, which, although they do not have children in mind as their primary readers, contain story material that can and does attract children to read them, and for this reason these too comprise a category of children’s literature. The world famous classics, such as The Arabian Nights’ Entertainment (1450) of Persia and Arabia, and the legends in China such as the Great Archer Yi shooting nine suns and Chang’e ascending to the moon, or even Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719-1720) and Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels (1726) of England, Grimm’s Fairy Tales (1812) of Germany, and Xīyōu jì [Journey to the West] and Feng-shen bang [Investiture of the Gods] of China, although they were not written with children in mind, are all able to arouse children’s interest and stimulate their imagination.

By children’s literature basically we mean literary works that can get children interested in reading, no matter whether the author is a child or an adult. “Children” in psychology usually refers to youngsters between six and twelve or thirteen years of age, but the world of children’s literature is broader, including youngsters from nursery school, kindergarten, and primary school, from ages three to fourteen, and even including juveniles. Literary works that deal with the growing experience of the juvenile are called “shaonian wenxue” [juvenile literature], and they are included in the broader sense of children’s literature. Creative writings with children in mind include nursery rhymes, fairy tales, children’s poems, parables, and fiction. As a genre of literature, children’s literature, just like literature in general, certainly has the two basic qualities of being interesting and being wholesome. Being interesting, it is entertaining and able to attract the reader’s interest; it is wholesome, because its content is instructive and helpful to the mental development of a child by increasing the child’s knowledge and reading ability.

In order for a work to be literature, it must have three important qualities: the world the author constructs must have a depth and breadth of both thought and feeling, the narrative structure of the piece must be of a superior quality, and diction and style must bear some artistic qualities. From the viewpoint of readers of children’s literature, this literature has a special character that distinguishes it from adult literature: it has to be interesting and moving for children. The value of children’s literature lies in its content approaching closely the experiences and development of children at this stage in their lives; only then will they appreciate and understand it. The theme, subject, plot, story, the characters, and use of language should correspond to the psychological development and values of children. These pieces should reflect the inner world of children, and also open their eyes to the realities of certain human truths and the larger society. They may also provide an outlet by which adults can understand the child’s world through this literature. Because of all these things, children’s literature can act as a bridge between the child’s world and the world of adulthood. The authors of children’s literature cannot “lose the heart of the child”; they must see through the child’s eyes, sensibility, and temperament, and only after that will they be able to write the kind of literature that is rich in children’s experience and perception.

Studies of the development of children’s literature in Taiwan, usually deal with writings in Chinese following World War II. The development of children’s literature during Japanese rule before the war awaits further investigation. We may conjecture, however, that Taiwanese writers must have been influenced by children’s readings and magazines published in Japan since the Meiji and Taishō periods, especially Shōnen Kurabu [Juvenile Club] (1914), which promoted childhood fiction during the Taishō period, and the magazine Akai tori [Red Bird] (1918), by which Suzuki Miekichi (1882-1936) and Ogawa Mimei (1882-1961) promoted the writing of fairy tales and children’s
songs. Regarding the development of children’s literature in Taiwan after the war, Hung Wen-ch’üng, the author of *Taiwan ertong wenxueshi* [The History of Children’s Literature in Taiwan] (1994), has provided her observations and analyses from the viewpoint of publication, and the scope of her study includes not only children’s books in general but also children’s periodicals and comic books. Basically she maintains that the vigor of children’s literature is displayed through the publication of books and periodicals, and that the advanced development of publication in children’s books is nothing other than the flourishing development of children’s literature. Therefore market is the most important factor in the development of children’s literature, which began in earnest after the eighties when Taiwan really started to have a more mature market in children’s books.

From the end of the war until the mid-sixties, most children’s books in Taiwan were translated from foreign languages or adapted from folk tales or rewritten from old publications. In 1964 Taiwan’s economy started to take off, and in the same year the Department of Education under the Taiwan provincial government, with the support of the United Nations Children’s Fund, launched two series of publications: *Zhonghua ertong congshu* [Chinese Children’s Series] and *Zhonghua youer congshu* [Chinese Preschool Children’s Series], which emphasize children’s psychology and reduce didacticism. In 1971, when Taiwan withdrew from the United Nations, the Department of Education started a writing course for children’s readings in the Primary School Teachers’ Seminar to foster primary school teachers interested in the creative writing of children’s literature. Then in 1972 and 1979 Taiwan severed diplomatic relations with Japan and the United States, which exerted a strong impact on the society, awakening the self-awareness of the people and causing a nativist consciousness to arise.

In May of 1972 a group of Taiwanese students studying in the United States raised funds to publish *Ertong yuekan* [Children’s Monthly]. They introduced American ideas of editing children’s magazines and encouraged nativism in creative writing. At the same time, there was a children’s magazine, *Xiao duzhe* [Little Readers], established by a young college graduate of the postwar generation. These two children’s magazines were representative of the seventies in Taiwan, when children’s poems took the lead in the field of children’s literature. In 1974 the Hung Chien-ch’üan ertong Wenxue Chuangzuo Jiang [Hung Chien-ch’üan Children’s Literature Creative Writing Award] was established by entrepreneurs, and attracted the attention of society to children’s literature. Its contribution to fostering writers of children’s literature cannot be ignored. In the eighties study groups and societies of children’s literature were established one after another, big enterprisers got involved in the market of children’s books, and the development of preschool children’s literature showed a particular vitality. The national Association of Children’s Literature of the Republic of China was established in 1984. In 1987 martial law was lifted, followed by permission for people in Taiwan to visit relatives in Mainland China, and many publishers competed to publish children’s books written by writers in China. In 1991 the Association of Children’s Literature of the Republic of China published a book entitled *Hua-wen ertong wenxue xiaoshi* [A Brief History of Children’s Literature in Chinese], which is not limited to Taiwan but includes the development of children’s literature in other areas like China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore. Furthermore, the Society for the Study of Children’s Literature on Both Sides of the Straits, China was established in 1992, enthusiastically promoting the exchange and study of children’s literature across the straits. The introduction of children’s literature form the mainland has caused among the nativist critics of children’s literature in Taiwan concerns about the cultural orientation of children’s literature in Taiwan. After the nineties, the world of publication entered the age of electronics, computers with floppy disks and compact disks replaced the traditional books printed on paper, and electronic children’s books have gradually become the favorite of the new generation.

In this issue of the series we have selected works of children’s literature. The fictional pieces are the creations of adults, including stories of juvenile fiction and stories of popular science, but the selections of children’s poetry include works by elementary pupils themselves. The seventies in Taiwan were a flourishing time for the creation of children’s poems. This had some relation with the writing course for children’s reading in the 1971 National Primary School Teachers’ Seminar. Poetry is better adapted than stories for the development of imagination and originality in the individual, and doubtless this also was an important factor. That Taiwan children’s poetry has flourished so well is echoed among teachers of Japanese children’s poetry in the printing of two bilingual anthologies of Taiwanese-Japanese poetry under the title, *Kairyû—kodomo to otona no shi* [The Ocean Current—Poetry by Children and Adults] (translated by Chen Ch’ien-wu and Hosaka Toshiko, 1990/92). Among the works selected for this edition, we attach particular significance to the pieces by Cheng Ch’ing-wen and Huang Wei-lin. We have already published Mr. Cheng Ch’ing-wen’s stories many times in previous issues of this journal, and when we found his accomplishments in the area of children’s literature, we were pleasantly surprised. The most important motivation for him to write literature for a youth readership was that,
among the juvenile reading materials in Taiwan, he found so few works by Taiwanese writers that display local life and concerns, and that caused him much distress. He said, “I write children’s literature as a small token of my love for the land.” His writings are entirely concerned with the subject matter of life in Taiwan, which he develops implicitly on a deeper level, difficult perhaps for children to immediately grasp. The pieces in the collection Yanxin guo [The Swallow’s Heart Berry] have their roots in the very life of the Taiwanese, and are endowed with the special cultural characteristics of Taiwan; for this reason they have laid a significant cornerstone for the tradition of Taiwanese children’s literature. The Japanese professor Okazaki Ikuko selected fifteen pieces (twelve from the nineteen pieces in The Swallow’s Heart Berry, and three from other publications in newspapers and magazines) and compiled the “Works of Children’s Literature in Taiwan,” with the title changed to Arisan no shinboku [The Miraculous Tree of Mt. Ali]. The criteria of selection for these were “... to avoid works of earnest didacticism, and to select those works that were born of the land of Taiwan itself, possessing the flavor of Taiwan and expressing a sense of universal love.” In this issue, we have selected four pieces representative of the work, including “The Turkeys and the Peacocks” (originally two pieces, “Secret Couriers of Turkeydom” and “Night Raid on Turkey City,” back-to-back in the original, but here printed consecutively). “The Turkeys and the Peacocks” alludes to the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists and ridicules the nature of man, rich in humor and implicit meanings, and worthy here of special appreciation. In this collection we have selected two stories by Huang Wei-lin, where one can discern the mode of her writing, the richness of her imagination and creativity, and her skill at narrating matter of universal concern, displaying the innocence of children's hearts and the purity of their delights. Huang Wei-lin is a young author of great potential, having written since junior middle school works of fiction and earning herself many awards in the field of children's literature. She has established a different style of her own, contrasting with Cheng Ch’ing-wen’s nativist concerns and implicit meanings.

In the development of Taiwan children’s literature, Yang Huan is an extraordinary asset. After having followed the Nationalist army to Taiwan, he created not a few children’s poems in the fifties. His works are clever and well-crafted, quite aptly constructed, the language lively, imagery vivid, and poetic sentiments convivial. In both quality and quantity, they are certainly a notable achievement. His popular works and poetry are often placed in sample books of children’s readings, and he has maintained an influential presence in the development of Taiwan children’s literature to this day. He considered children to be little sprouts, thinking of himself as a simple gardener. Using a fine and skillful brush, he has depicted a lively world of children. One might call him the forerunner of Taiwan children’s poetry. Unfortunately he passed on very young, being only twenty-four at the time.

Concerning research in children’s literature in Taiwan, most articles emphasize chronological development and focus on observations and analyses of various publication data, and few are aimed at assessment of literary achievement. In this issue we have selected three articles, and although they are not particularly in-depth theoretically, they can still show us the development and achievements of Taiwan in the areas of juvenile fiction, fairy tales, and children’s poems.

In our five years of unremitting effort, we have finally accomplished the publication of our tenth issue. Just as in the past, for this collection of children’s literature in Taiwan, many friends have given us their help in translation in spite of their busy daily work, and to them we cannot but express our most heartfelt thanks.