



Images of Teachers in Contemporary Chinese Children's Literature

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Abstract

This paper examines the changing presentation of teachers in the post-Mao era. The image of teachers was almost sacred in traditional Confucian society until Mao Zedong launched China's Cultural Revolution in 1966, when children were encouraged to use the pretext of class struggle to critique and even to attack their teachers. As such, restoring the high status of teachers in children's literature became the first step in fighting against Maoist radicalism after his death in 1976. Since then, the internal logic of the development of literature has been shaped by the social movement of Openness and Reform and nurtured by a return of realist aesthetics. Meanwhile, Chinese society has also been changing rapidly, and so has the portrayal of teachers in stories for the young, which has become more diversified. Analysis of these changing images offers us an insight into China's education system, as well as the use of Chinese children's literature as a didactic tool for moral education.

Keywords Chinese children's literature · Image of teachers · Identity · Moral education in China · Literature and ideology in China

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In China, the high status of being a teacher can be seen through a multitude of examples. For instance, Confucius himself is respected both as a sage and a teacher. His temple can be seen in many places in China, with the largest and the most famous one in his hometown, Qufu. The Hall of Great Perfection (*Dacheng dian*) is the architectural center of the huge complex. Above the gate of this grand hall is a screen of four characters written by Emperor Kangxi (1654–1722): *wanshi shi-biao*—Confucius was “an exemplary teacher for all ages.” There is also a common saying in China: “*yiri weishi, zhongsheng weifu*” which can be translated as “He who teaches me for one day is my father for life” (Yau, 2015, p. 309). The core value in the Confucian patriarchal family, filial piety, requires children to respect and obey their father absolutely; but being a child’s teacher for just one day also acquires such utter authority and status. In traditional Chinese society, individuals are no more than temporary carriers who perpetuate familial lines, with their ancestors assuming spiritual roles and god-like statuses. However, betraying one’s teacher is regarded as being as horrendous as betraying one’s ancestors (*qishi miezu*). Consequently, Chinese political leaders have often preferred to be called “teacher” to denote their authority. The former Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975) had many titles, including “Generalissimo” (Williams, 1989), but most of his subordinate officers addressed him as “*xiaozhang*”, meaning “headmaster” (Li Huade, 1990, p. 450). This emphasized the teacher-student relationship that many of them had with him, as Chiang had been the Commandant of Whampoa Military Academy where they had been trained. On the other side of politics, the Communist leader Mao Zedong (1893–1976) enjoyed an extravagant personality cult during the Cultural Revolution. During his reign, songs such as “The East is Red,” “Sailing the Sea Depends upon the Helmsman” and “To Wish Chairman Mao an Eternal Life” became a part of daily life, performed in the morning before work, study or the commencement of a meeting. Nevertheless, during the peak of the fanatic cult, Mao mentioned to Edgar Snow that he merely wished to be remembered as the “school teacher” he had once briefly been (Meisner, 2007, p. 186).

However, in August 1966, Mao battled to dismantle a Communist Party bureaucracy over which he had lost control. He decided to fabricate terror, attempting to frighten the nation into an even greater degree of submission. The first move of the terror campaign was to encourage youngsters, who now called themselves “Red Guards,” to attack the class enemies amongst teachers. Mao expressed his “fiery support” and asked them to be violent. So, with no precedent in China’s history, these youngsters immediately embarked on atrocities against teachers. On 5 August 1966, in a Beijing girls’ school packed with high officials’ daughters (indeed, Mao’s own two daughters had attended this school), the first known teacher’s death by torture took place. According to Jung Chang (a former Red Guard) and Jon Halliday (2005, p. 537), the headmistress of the school, an excellent teacher and a 50-year-old mother of four, was “kicked and trampled by the girls, and boiling water was poured over her... she was thrashed with leather army belts with brass buckles, and with wooden sticks studded with nails. She soon collapsed and died.” When a more explicit incitement of violence was made public, as Mao viewed the parade of hundreds of thousands of Red Guards in Tiananmen Square and talked to their representatives, atrocities against teachers multiplied in schools and universities, and

quickly spread across the country; as a result, teachers became the first victims of Mao's terror campaign. "There was not one school in the whole of China where atrocities did not occur" (Chang and Halliday, p. 538). Thus the social and political status of teachers, together with that of other petty bourgeois intellectuals, fell to a dangerous and wretched position: the bottom of the "Stinking Number Nine"—after landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements, Rightists, renegades, enemy agents, and "capitalist roaders" (Deng Xiaoping, 1984, pp. 41, 399n).

This paper is a direct response to Jia-ling Charlene Yau's call in "The Representation of Teachers in Taiwan Children's Literature" for "further research into representation of teachers in other Asian communities" (*CLE* 2015, p. 322). Particularly relevant to our study are Yao's findings that the portrayal of teachers in Taiwanese children's books is "regulated by pedagogical and didactic intent" and "their preference for realism" (p. 308). Our paper attempts to contribute to this ongoing scholarship by discussing how the changing representation of teachers in children's literature in post-Mao mainland China evolved, due to the ideological and pedagogical demands on children's literature and the "realist" approach used to meet these demands.

Restoring the Dignity of Teachers: "The Class Teacher" by Liu Xinwu

The "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" was brought to an end in 1976 when Mao Zedong died, and China began to "shift the emphasis of the nation's work to socialist modernization and at the same time threw overboard the slogan 'class struggle as the key link'" (*Beijing Review*, 1983, p. 5). The new leader of China, Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), was fully aware of the importance of education and the significant role that teachers played in the program of national modernization. On 8th August 1977, he emphasized that "China must catch up with the most advanced countries in the world," but first of all "we must make a special effort to mobilize the energies of educational workers and to secure respect for teachers" (pp. 61–62).

According to Emer O'Sullivan, in societies in a phase of transition, the educational status of children's literature is particularly high because there are "new values to be conveyed and old ones to be defended" (2005, p. 62). It was in this context that in November 1977 Liu Xinwu published his short story "The Class Teacher" (also translated as "The Teacher" and "Class Counselor"). "The Class Teacher" is the story of a teacher and three 15-year-old students in the third year of junior high school.¹ The teacher, Zhang Junshi, is given the job of re-educating a juvenile delinquent, Song Baoqi, who has just been released from detention. Two female students, Xie Huimin, the Youth League branch secretary, and Shi Hong, the Youth League branch member in charge of propaganda, have very different views on how to handle this new student. Some of the boys in class seem to admire him as a kind of "hero,"

¹ Chinese secondary education (high school) consists of 3 years of junior high school (for ages 12–15) and 3 years of senior high school (for ages 15–18).

but the girls are scared and say that they will not attend class if the teacher accepts this hooligan. In the publisher's note, this story is acclaimed as "presenting readers with works dealing with social problems" (Liu Xinwu, 1981/1977, p. 1). The "problem solving" story was a genre dating back to the May Fourth period.² However, "The Class Teacher" is more than a "problem solving" story: it is an effort to restore the reputation of teachers.

Zhang Junshi, the 36-year-old class teacher, is depicted as a rescuer of the juvenile delinquent as well as a savior of the youths influenced by Mao's political dogmatism and extreme puritanism. Although he is described as "quite ordinary looking" (p. 4), there are some extraordinary qualities about this teacher—thus, it can be said that Liu Xinwu followed the literary trend of socialist realism, which extolled "exemplary characters who would carry the new socialist revolution to its inevitable victory" (Yang, 1998, p. 87). With 10 years of teaching experience and being the only third-year junior high teacher in the school who is a member of the Party, his speech is described as "always full of passion and verve, sharp and fluent like a seeding machine planting in the minds of students seeds of revolutionary thought. It is also like a broom, tirelessly and mercilessly sweeping out the dust that collects in their minds" (Liu Xinwu, p. 4). After listening to the police officer's report on the case of Song Baoqi and reading his file, Zhang Junshi's "feelings were hard to identify, but they bordered on indignation, disgust and scorn. Later these would give way to determination, worry, and a strong feeling of responsibility" (p. 5).

What crime Song Baoqi, the 15-year-old "juvenile delinquent," has committed is not made clear in the story. What we do know is that he is described by another teacher as a "hooligan" and a "rotten apple" (p. 6) that would spoil the basket, and that some students call him "a gang member" (p. 9). A few objects found by the Public Security Bureau when arresting him are brought to school for inspection by Youth League members. A long bicycle chain which he used as a weapon confirms his involvement in fights. A pack of worn-out playing cards suggests how he spent his spare time. A stylish metal-plated cigarette case with a lighter attached indicates that he smoked, most likely in an attempt to show off and project a stylish adult image. Interestingly, the last object brought to the school is a novel with the cover torn off. Zhang Junshi is astonished to find that it is a book published before the Cultural Revolution by the China Youth Publishing House, a translation of the work, *The Gadfly*. Zhang knits his brows in thought. He remembers when he had been a Youth League member in high school, and the book had been recommended to him. The novel, written by a British woman, Ethel Boole Voynich, had greatly moved Zhang and his peers. They had especially derived inspiration from the protagonist of the novel. Now, this novel becomes the centre of controversy. The Youth League secretary, Xie Huimin, despite never having read or even heard of it

² The May Fourth Movement takes its name from a mass patriotic demonstration in Beijing on May 4th 1919 against the national government's agreement with a term of the Treaty of Versailles after World War I that saw China cede Shandong Province, previously held by Germany, to Japan (Bi, 2018, p. 3). During this period, the pioneers of modern Chinese children's literature tried to connect social realism to patriotism by exposing social problems in their books to educate the young.

before, is disgusted upon seeing an illustration of a foreign man and woman embracing each other. “Ugh! How obscene!” This annoys Zhang Junshi, who turns to Xie Huimin and says sharply, “The book is not obscene.” Xie Huimin is upset too, “Not obscene? If this isn’t, then what is?” (p. 11).

Thus, Liu Xinwu paints the picture of this 15-year-old girl as naive, sincere, well-intentioned, but badly influenced by the writings of the “Gang of Four” (referring to a powerful political group of ultra-leftists, including Mao’s wife, who became the scapegoats for all the wrongdoings of Mao and his Cultural Revolution after his death):

Xie was totally convinced that all books obtained outside of book stores and libraries were automatically subversive or pornographic. How could she think otherwise, having grown up during the time when the “Gang of Four” exercised a fascist dictatorship over culture? Xie had naively and trustingly swallowed all that had been printed, devoutly reading the newspapers and magazines which were full of the gang’s tainted writings. (p. 11)

Xie Huimin proposes to have a “criticism meeting” and “struggle” against Song Baoqi, but Zhang Junshi strongly opposes this. Indeed, he finds his job to “re-educate” the Youth League secretary just as challenging as helping the juvenile delinquent. Zhang Junshi later finds that Song Baoqi had stolen the book from his old school, from a room where forbidden books had been kept. When asked what other books he had stolen, he replies, “There was *Red Crag*, and... *Peace and War*. Or was it *War and Peace*?” He says he had only flipped through *The Gadfly*. Zhang Junshi is distressed as he listens, not by the theft, but by the list of harmless and valuable books that had been hidden and prohibited. Seeing the teacher speechlessly outraged, Song Baoqi says, “I know it was wrong. We shouldn’t have read those pornographic books.” But the apology only upsets Zhang Junshi more. There is a world of difference between “good” girls like Xie Huimin and “bad” boys like Song Baoqi, yet both have one thing in common and reach the same conclusion, that *The Gadfly* is an obscene book, without ever having read it. The teacher is described as almost crying out in despair: “How to save the children ruined by the ‘Gang of Four’?” (p. 18).

Zhang Junshi’s words are carefully chosen. Liu Xinwu purposely adapts an old slogan of the May Fourth Movement used by Lu Xun, “Save the Children,” to draw an analogy between the national crisis some 60 years before and the national crisis caused by the Cultural Revolution in 1977. Just like the pioneers of Chinese children’s literature in the May Fourth period, Zhang Junshi is portrayed as a new moral educator. It is a new enlightenment campaign.

In order to demonstrate the power of books, Liu Xinwu introduces a third student, Shi Hong, who represents the future and hope for China. What is special about Shi Hong is that every night, after supertime, her family all sit around the table reading. Her mother, also a school teacher, had brought home “forbidden” Chinese and foreign literature—works like *Hurricane*, *Selected Works of Mao Dun*, *Red Crag*, *Eugenie Grandet* and *Three Hundred Poems from the Tang Dynasty*. But Shi Hong reads not only literary works, but also Marxist-Leninist writings. The difference between her reading of Marx, Lenin and Mao Zedong and Xie Huimin’s readings is that Shi

Hong reads the whole article, and investigates the background of the Communist manifesto, while Xie Huimin only reads short quotations from the newspapers and magazines controlled by the “Gang of Four.” It is fair to infer that, while Xie Huimin wrongly trusts “the bourgeoisie and revisionists” who “appeared in a revolutionary disguise” (p. 12), Shi Hong is the representative youth who follows Deng Xiaoping’s instruction, on 21 July 1977, to study “genuine Mao Zedong Thought taken as an integral whole” (1984, p. 55). Shi Hong disagrees with Xie Huimin that *The Gadfly* is an obscene book: “I’m now in the middle of *How the Steel Was Tempered*. Its hero, Paul Korchagin, a proletarian, was a great admirer of *The Gadfly*” (Liu Xinwu, p. 12). Her idea of solving Song Baoqi’s problem is also to be found in a book, *The Watch*, translated by Lu Xun: “*The Watch* was a children’s story written by the Russian writer Pantaleyev soon after the October Revolution. It describes the transformation of a young offender in a reformatory” (p. 23). Zhang Junshi is depicted as very proud of Shi Hong, as she demonstrates the power of books and knowledge. As such, he feels confident that Song Baoqi is not beyond hope and that Xie Huimin’s misunderstandings can be clarified. That girl, “despite her confusion, was basically good and committed to socialism” (p. 20).

In spite of its tedious passages condemning the Gang of Four and repetitive lectures on the need to study the “genuine Marxism–Leninism–Mao Zedong Thought,” Liu Xinwu’s short story establishes a model persona, who is not only fully committed to the Communist Party’s educational cause, but also knows how to act correctly in a complicated situation. He understands how to provide students with both knowledge and moral guidance. Through this image, Liu Xinwu expresses his passionate faith in the link between learning and righteousness. Thus, the character Zhang Junshi in the story is not representative of an individual, but of the collective of teachers who are devoted to saving and educating the young in the new era after the Cultural Revolution.

During this period of the late 1970s and early 1980s, teachers were often portrayed as divine with a certain holiness, but these images were often hidden or abstract, especially from the perspective of a child. For example, in 1981 Shanghai’s *Juvenile Literature* published a poem, “The Eyes of a Teacher,” by Zhao Min (1981, p. 495, our translation):

What lucid waves, so deep yet so dear and so touching
 As wind comes, you reach out arms
 As rain comes, you cover my head
 You, like a pure white cloud, drive away the dark cloud in my heart
 And wipe up dust from my body....
 I wish I could forever rest under your eyes, in those lucid waves, so deep yet so
 dear and so touching

However, depictions of intangible objects, as well as overt political and moralistic language, could alienate young readers. A well-known Chinese children’s story writer, Qin Wenjun, subtly criticizes the trend in 1980s Chinese children’s literature to include tendentious passages condemning the “Gang of Four,” boring lectures on the need to study the “genuine Marxism–Leninism–Mao Zedong Thought,” and empty calls for deep devotion to the cause of national revitalization. She believes

that “children’s literature in China hit an all-time low in the 1980s” because of those “deep thoughts” together with “hugely artistic” works involving “rich emotions,” and that “younger readers abandoned them due to their inability to connect with the stories” (*Macau Closer*, 2017). Clearly, young readers want something closer to their real life.

Contrasting Teaching Styles in *Schoolgirl Jia Mei’s Story* by Qin Wenjun

In the 1990s, China witnessed rapid economic growth and a consequent explosion in children’s literature publishing, which has subsequently enjoyed an even more astonishing growth since the beginning of the twenty-first century (Li Lifang, 2018, p. 392). This atmosphere of rapid economic growth dictated the setting of Chinese children’s literature of the time. Qin Wenjun’s well-known novels, *Schoolboy Jia Li’s Story* and *Schoolgirl Jia Mei’s Story* (both published in 1993), present pictures of the colorful life of a contemporary high school in China using a much more realistic approach than that of Liu Xinwu in “The Class Teacher.” This can be attributed to the new socialist market economy: in this context, Chinese writers had more freedom in writing and publishing than ever before, sometimes creating the impression of relative freedom from political influence. However, contemporary children’s literature, including Qin Wenjun’s works, cannot completely elude politics, because China is still a highly politicized country. Although the influence of politics has taken different forms in the last three decades, it has always been present, albeit less overtly.

In Qin Wenjun’s *Schoolgirl Jia Mei’s Story*, the regular class teacher of the protagonist is described as “a middle-aged, highly capable woman,” having a “scarily long experience as a teacher,” with her former classes “having excelled in every area of the school life” (2018/1993, p. 78).³ From the very first lesson, she demonstrates that she is both sharp-eyed and sharp-tongued, as she harshly criticizes a male student who is just one minute late. She also warns another boy, who is a top student, that “arrogance is the enemy to progress” because the boy turns his head around to have a quick look outside during the teacher’s admonitory talk. All her reprimands in the first lesson are described as “*pitou gailian*”—right to their faces, overpowering everyone in class (p. 78).

During the break, students share their first impression of the teacher. Some comment that the atmosphere of the class is like that of a concentration camp, and others say it is agonizing. Jia Mei only complains faintly, “we are not kids any more, and there is no need for that kind of stern language” (p. 78). When class resumes, the teacher spends another fifteen minutes emphasizing the necessity of strict discipline. Meanwhile, she looks gravely at Jia Mei. Clearly the teacher has already planted “agents” among students, because she seems to know exactly what each of her students thinks, “like she knows her own fingers and palm”

³ Translations from this text are by the present authors.

(*liaoru zhizhang*, p. 78). After that, Jia Mei always looks around to make sure there is no eavesdropping before she utters her views, as if engaging in “underground communist activities in the white terror” in the revolutionary stories she has read (p. 78). The worst is the teacher’s endless sarcasm and mockery, which often make the female students tearful. Nevertheless, students are described as admiring their teacher’s strong sense of pride in the class. She painstakingly plans each student’s participation in the school sports meet, and she even protests to the umpires when she feels that her students are being unfairly treated. After a while all her students become used to her meticulous arrangement of every school activity.

However, the strict female teacher becomes ill, so Qin Wenjun brings in a second teacher as a contrast, a male substitute teacher. He does not deliver a stern lecture on discipline in his first lesson, and is instead depicted as having a sense of humor when he makes fun of his own regional accent. At the end of his first lesson, there is a school announcement of a general cleaning that afternoon. There is no meticulous arrangement, as would have occurred under their usual teacher, and the substitute only says: “It’s entirely up to you students to decide” (p. 79). A male student goes to his office to ask for leave. Again, the substitute says: “It’s up to you to decide” (p. 80). The boy tells other students: “This is a slave emancipation certificate—don’t waste this excellent opportunity!” About one-third of the students immediately go to his office to ask for leave, and they all receive the answer: “It’s up to you to decide” (p. 80).

In the afternoon, the substitute teacher arrives and starts to clean windows himself. The remaining students follow suit. When one student tells the teacher that they have to think of a way to stop their peers asking for leave with fabricated excuses, the teacher suggests that the remaining students make suggestions to the class committee, who can make a final decision. After some discussion, the students cast their votes and pass a resolution that the next general cleaning will be completed by all the absentees. The substitute teacher also casts his vote in favour of this resolution. The next day, the class committee posts the list of these absentees for the next week’s general cleaning. No one asks for leave this time. This new teacher then raises the issue of students’ autonomy in class, and says that he hopes that they will take up the responsibility to look after themselves and that he is happy to provide advice if needed.

In spite of the fact that Chinese totalitarian rule, whether currently or historically, is based on patriarchal authority—be it that of the father, the emperor or the Party boss—Qin Wenjun presents the reverse picture. The male teacher is depicted as progressive, whereas the female teacher resembles a tyrannical ruler. On the other hand, the author simply affirms the gender bias generally prevalent in Chinese society that men are tolerant, respectful and encouraging towards children, whereas women are malicious and narrow-minded, and frequently yell at children. John Stephens points out that “all textual representations engage in gendering their participants, of course, and it has been an important endeavor in the criticism of children’s literature to map how the characteristic humanistic narratives of that literature are apt to be endemically gendered” (2002, p. x). The representation of the two teachers in Qin Wenjun’s *Schoolgirl Jia Mei’s Story* is full of the gender stereotyping widespread in Chinese

society; as Li Lifang comments, realistic fiction such as *Schoolgirl Jia Mei's Story* is “closely following the real life of children” in China (p. 392).

Promoting Education for All in *Summer Harmony* by Yin Jianling

The cruel reality of the education system in China's poor farming villages is a common topic of contemporary children's literature. For example, Cao Wenxuan's novel *Bronze and Sunflower* (2015/2005) depicts a miserable picture of a local village school in the late 1960s and early 1970s:

The school was strict about fees, and if money was owned, action was taken. If the fees were not paid, the teacher would tell the child to pick up his stool and go home. And the child would pick up his stool, in front of the whole class, and cry all the way home. If the fees were then paid, he might go back... or he might not. (p. 98)

Teachers are often presented as both tough and rough in those poverty-stricken areas. Again, in *Bronze and Sunflower*, when the teacher is upset with two students' homework, he simply tears up their workbooks in front of the whole class (pp. 154–155). In Shu Weibo's short story “Teacher Wang” the deputy head teacher kicks his pupils when they fail dictation on the blackboard (2015, p. 96). In *Not One Less*, a film directed by Zhang Yimou in 1999, the main character is a 13-year-old girl who becomes a substitute teacher in the local primary school for 1 month. It is hard to imagine that an untrained youngster could educate a roomful of unruly students just a few years younger than herself, but the scene is sadly not that unusual in China's remote rural areas, either in life or in fiction.

One prominent social problem since the implementation of the 1978 Open Door and Reform policies and the rapid development of Chinese economy has been the education of migrant children. Either left behind in the villages or having moved together with their parents to large cities, there is simply no guarantee that they will complete the 9 years of “compulsory” education. According to Chengcheng You's recent study on “floating” children in China, one of the problems for children of rural–urban migrant workers is the denial of “access to good education” (2018, n. p.). Yin Jianling's *Summer Harmony* (2014/2007) is about the life of a temporary school for migrant workers' children, which uses an abandoned factory next to a noisy construction site as its classroom. There are no sports grounds, nor facilities for music education, but the school is very close to the slums that these children call home. The author brings in a teacher, who descends on the classroom like an angel from heaven. The narrator, a 10-year-old boy, describes her:

Just at this moment, from the dilapidated school gate dashed a shadow of a yellow figure, and before I could see clearly, she already stood in front of Jasmine as if she had been brought up here by a breeze. She gracefully reached out her hand and pulled Jasmine up. She gently patted the little girl to get rid of the dust, and also picked up the shoe and helped her to put it on... She was

standing there, carrying a big music instrument case on her back... I felt like I was in a dream. (p. 7, our translation)

In her first lesson, the new music teacher tells the children that she is a volunteer from California, her dad is American, her mum is Chinese, and she loves China. She is depicted as most approachable, and is smiling all the time. As an example of her goodness and her trust in her students, she allows her curious pupils to touch her music instrument. She asks them if they know what it is. “Violin!” “Erhu!” “Pipa!” The protagonist knows he will be wrong, but can’t help yelling out: “Accordion!” Everyone laughs. With her guitar, the teacher brings cultural empathy to these children. She also organizes a free choir called “Summer Harmony.” After 1 month’s training, the teacher manages to have her choir perform together with groups from international schools—the most elite schools that cater for children of affluent foreigners working in China. Their performance turns out to be a great success and raises 100,000 yuan for a much-needed piano for their music education.

As a work in the “social problem” genre, the story does not prescribe any remedy, nor does it harp on the significance of the Education for All (EFA) movement. The author’s intention, nevertheless, is clear: the achievement of the goal of EFA can no longer be seen as a domestic issue. Indeed, it requires an international effort, like the child-loving volunteer in *Summer Harmony*.

Advocating Inclusivity in Hu Ruofan’s Story

The anthology of works that won the 2014 Bing Xin Award for New Authors of Children’s Literature includes a non-fiction work based on the real experience of the author, Hu Ruofan (2014). His story, written in a first-person narration, can only be described as revolutionary in the portrayal of teachers with disabilities, the portrayal of children with disabilities and the portrayal of their communities in Chinese children’s literature. Hu Ruofan lost the function of his right leg at the age of two. The story follows the hardships arising from this disability, his personal growth and his eventual triumph in becoming a primary school teacher. The key development of the story occurs when Hu Ruofan argues with the director of the school’s political education office regarding the selection of a pupil to represent the school in the district music concert. Hu Ruofan hopes to select a boy with a very impressive singing voice who also happens to be a dwarf. The director shakes his head: “Teacher Hu, you have to understand this is an issue of the school image. Do you know that many district leaders will be present then?” (p. 192, our translation). The director’s point of view is hardly surprising, due to the culture of “face” which is still a contentious issue in China to this day. For example, at the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony, Lin Miaoke “sang” China’s national anthem in front of 91,000 spectators and a billion TV viewers. However, it later emerged that the pig-tailed 9-year-old had only been lip-synching the words, because her voice was deemed not good enough. Contrastingly, the girl who *did* sing was not considered pretty enough to represent the nation, because of her crooked teeth. The extraordinary last-minute decision to

splice pictures and sound was taken by a top member of the Chinese Communist Party politburo (Williams, *Daily Mail*, 2008).

Yet the author of our story here, Teacher Hu, does not give in. He fights on, because he personally has seen and suffered through discrimination against people with disabilities. His main argument is that schools should be places free from the discrimination widespread in society. Teachers should encourage every pupil, with or without a disability, and they should especially give children with disabilities opportunities to build their confidence, which is badly damaged by the ableism prevalent in society. Teacher Hu's campaign slogan in his fight against disability discrimination is the title of his narrative: "Every tree is able to hold up a piece of blue sky." Fortunately, his passion and perseverance for the rights of the disabled pupil first win the support of all the students in his class and then the strong endorsement of the Principal. Hu Ruofan is successful, the child is chosen to represent the school, and Hu Ruofan himself is to accompany him on the day. They work very hard in the lead up to the show. The story develops to its climax as the pupil and Teacher Hu, accompanying him with an *erhu*, walk up onto the stage. Their performance is a great triumph and is applauded with a standing ovation led by the Principal and district leaders.

Currently in China, scholarship on disability in children's literature is scarce. Portrayals of characters with an impairment often focus on their "extra-ordinary" qualities rather than their ordinary humanity, hence stereotyping them as inspiring role models. Scott Pollard argues that such scholarship first of all needs to develop "a complex theoretical and aesthetic lexicon" (2013, p. 263). Pollard further emphasizes:

This lexicon goes beyond simply offering a means of categorizing the representations of disability, inserting itself into the very concept of representation – not only to challenge ableist hegemony but, more importantly, to cripple representation and the perceptions and normative ideologies that have shaped and limited it. Thus, *to cripple* is a means of liberation, a universal gesture meant to impact everyone and change the world. (p. 263)

Although the appeal of this story lies partly in the inspirational discourse in which both the teacher and the pupil achieve success through their individual determination and hard work, there is a greater success in the story: a change in the community. Teacher Hu's story portrays an entire school community transformed by including those with disabilities. Teacher Hu leads this exciting change of attitude towards people with disabilities in his school, which hopefully can become a model for the transformation of society.

Conclusion

Many writers for children are current or former school teachers. Whilst they are familiar with the actual lives and ways of teachers, they often choose to present the image of an ideal teacher in their texts. This ideal is informed and shaped by their pedagogical, didactic and political intents. Consequently, when they develop

characters of teachers and determine the nature of conflicts and their solutions, they promulgate their personal values, as shown in the examples analyzed in this paper: Liu Xinwu attempts to restore the respect for teachers in the new national modernization program; Qin Wenjun seeks to promote a more democratic environment and autonomy for students; Yin Jianling looks to advance the cause of “education for all”; and Hu Ruofan advocates for inclusivity. These authors clearly know what values they are promoting and have framed their characters and dramatized their themes to present their concerns in the best and most persuasive way.

However, these authors have also unconsciously or otherwise transmitted in their writing some assumptions and biases widely held in Chinese society at large, with gender stereotyping being just one example. Throughout these texts, there are similarities between each of the depicted ideal teachers. The ideal teacher is someone who helps children to grow not only academically but also personally. Their ideal teacher is responsible, selfless and particularly happy. If a teacher is not happy in the classroom, their students will not be happy, and they will not want to or be able to learn from that teacher. The ideal teacher is also kind, caring, encouraging, supportive and patient.

The State sees children's literature as a didactic tool for moral guidance. Teachers are often imagined by the State and society to possess a wonderful transformative power, to educate the young in how to *improve* society to a purportedly higher level. As such, in the last four decades, writers have continued to explore issues in Chinese society. They have considered this to be their social duty, but “realism” itself has always been a vague term in China. Most teachers depicted in children's literature share a faith in youth: improve yourselves and you can improve society. However, since the Chinese ideological apparatus always seeks to affirm China to its audience of children, teachers, in stories as well as in real life, are assigned the task of promoting patriotism. How realistic can a children's story be in exposing “social problems” and also propounding China's great achievements at the same time? In both traditional and modern Chinese politics, the portrayal of teachers and their roles as spiritual guiders have been both nourished and restricted, according to a broader political agenda.

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