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Contemporary Interpretations of Science Fiction in Chinese Children's

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Abstract: This article examines contemporary interpretations of science fiction in Chinese children's literature and analyzes its distinctive literary features. It explores how science, technology, ecology, and moral values are integrated within literary narratives. Furthermore, the study evaluates the role of children's science fiction in fostering creativity, scientific thinking, and imagination among young readers.

Keywords: Chinese children's literature, children's science fiction, science, technology, ecology, artificial intelligence, literary imagery, scientific thinking.

Introduction: Within the literary landscape, realist, educational, and children's literature occupies a distinctive and significant position. Science fiction, in particular, plays an important role in cultivating children's interest in science, shaping their understanding of technological futures, and fostering innovative ways of thinking about the relationship between reality and imagination. Rather than presenting the future as a purely imaginary concept, science fiction encourages young readers to perceive it as a reality that can be envisioned, designed, and ultimately realized. In an era characterized by the rapid advancement of science and technology, nurturing children's curiosity about science and inspiring them to pursue discovery from an early age has become one of the key educational priorities. This responsibility extends beyond families and is essential for the development of society as a whole. In this regard, literature—and especially science fiction—serves as an effective medium for cultivating innovative thinking and stimulating children's intellectual curiosity.

Chinese children's science fiction began to develop rapidly in the 1990s and achieved remarkable progress in the twenty-first century. During this period, many authors increasingly focused on the theme of children's growth and personal development. Their novels and short stories introduced new narrative approaches and distinctive artistic features that significantly enriched the genre.

From the perspectives of physical and cognitive development, adolescents often experience a period of intellectual and psychological instability. They gradually become dissatisfied with a childhood world confined to care and obedience, seeking instead independence, freedom, and self-development. As they observe the external world, they no longer perceive it as a fairy-tale realm filled solely with innocence and dreams, but rather as a complex reality marked by contradictions and uncertainty. These complexities evoke a wide range of emotional responses, including curiosity, hope, confusion, fear, and inner conflict. Through this process, young people develop a deeper understanding of life and gradually discover their own identities. The journey toward maturity therefore represents one of the most significant stages of childhood. However, in many science fiction novels and stories published before the beginning of the twenty-first century, greater emphasis was placed on plot development than on the protagonists' psychological growth and the formation of their personal identities.

Therefore, writers of children's realist literature should promote the initiative of self-development by encouraging children to discover their inner potential and independently determine their own paths of growth. For nearly two decades, the works of writers such as Zheng Wenguang, Tong Enzheng, and Ye Yonglie reflected the political missions of their respective eras, while their protagonists acted in accordance with prevailing ideological ideals. As a consequence, children's subjectivity was long suppressed by society and collective values, leading to the alienation of their sense of self.

In science fiction novels of the new era, however, increasing attention has been devoted to the subjectivity of children and adolescents by portraying their inner worlds and modes of thinking. Writers began to depict children's unique perspectives, emotional experiences, and imaginative cognitive patterns that are characteristic of childhood. This shift reflected a growing awareness of the need to reshape human consciousness and cultivate the character of future generations. A representative example is the contemporary Chinese children's science fiction writer Zhang Zhilu, whose novel Thunderbolt Beibei (《霹雳贝贝》) vividly portrays the subjectivity of a child during the process of growing up by presenting the protagonist's unique perspective. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Chinese children's science fiction has continued to evolve, placing greater emphasis on the independence and inner freedom of young people, while recognizing their right to grow and develop within both their own imaginative worlds and the realities they construct.

For children and adolescents, the process of growing up is fundamentally a process of continuously establishing relationships with others. Within the family, they are expected to develop healthy relationships with parents and relatives; at school, they learn under the guidance of teachers while building positive interactions with their classmates. In society, they engage with people from diverse social backgrounds and gradually seek their own place within the broader community. According to the "mirror stage" theory proposed by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, infants initially perceive their reflection in a mirror as another individual. Only over time do they recognize that the reflected image is their own. Before this recognition occurs, the child has not yet developed a complete awareness of the self. Through the mirror, the child begins to construct the concept of the "self," while simultaneously discovering the "other"—a subject perceived as distinct from oneself. This interaction constitutes a fundamental stage in the formation of self-consciousness. During the process of growing up, the notion of the "other child" consistently functions as a symbolic representation of the "other" in the development of personal identity. Under the influence of this "other," children gradually shape their attitudes toward their own appearance and identity. They may develop a positive self-image or, conversely, attempt to reject or conceal their perceived shortcomings. These experiences represent the earliest stages in the formation of self-awareness.

In China Orbit (《中国轨道号》), a novel by Wu Yan, a leading theorist of Chinese science fiction and a prominent advocate of science education—which received the second Chinese Nebula Award in the children's science fiction category—the protagonist, Xiao Yan, is portrayed as an intelligent boy who excels in mathematics and enjoys considerable admiration among his neighbors. However, this balance is disrupted with the arrival of Zhou Xiang, a boy selected to participate in a summer training camp in preparation for a mission to Mars. The novel advances the idea that children's growth is determined not by their innate talents or living environment, but by the way they perceive external reality and interact with it. In other words, an individual's relationship with the outside world directly shapes personal growth and identity formation.

As the neighborhood children increasingly express admiration for Zhou Xiang, and even Xiao Yan's younger sister becomes inexplicably fascinated by him, Xiao Yan begins to experience a profound sense of emptiness as the attention previously directed toward him gradually diminishes. This emotional transformation gives rise to a strong competitive impulse: he seizes Zhou Xiang's American baseball cap, triggering a conflict between the two boys. This confrontation is not merely an accidental narrative device but rather reflects Xiao Yan's desire for self-worth and his active search for self-identity. It represents an attempt to gain recognition and affirm his

own sense of self. In this respect, the educational significance of the novel constitutes one of the central pillars of its narrative structure.

The novel encourages children and adolescents to develop an interest in science, presenting scientific knowledge not merely as school learning but as a key to the future. Rather than inviting young readers simply to follow the storyline, it encourages them to imagine the future and contemplate broader questions: Where is humanity heading? Is technological progress ultimately beneficial or dangerous? What kind of person should one become in the future? Through these questions, the novel cultivates strategic thinking, ethical awareness, and a sense of responsibility. It emphasizes that intelligence alone is insufficient; becoming a morally responsible human being is equally essential. The following passages from the novel illustrate these educational ideas:

“**科学**给了人类前所未有的力量，但力量本身并不代表正确。决定未来的，是人如何使用它。”

"Science has given humanity unprecedented power, yet power itself does not guarantee what is right. The future will be determined by how human beings choose to use that power."

This passage teaches young readers that intelligence must always be accompanied by responsibility.

“**当我**们走向太空时，不应只代表一个国家，而应记住自己是人类的一员。”

"When we journey into space, we should remember that we represent not only our own nation but also humanity as a whole."

This statement cultivates in children a sense of shared responsibility toward humankind.

“**真正的**轨道，是为后来的人留下选择的可能。”

"The true orbit is the path that preserves the possibility of choice for future generations."

Through this idea, children are encouraged to understand that the decisions made today will inevitably influence the lives of tomorrow's generations. Conveyed in a simple yet thought-provoking style, the novel promotes the principle that although science enables humanity to reach extraordinary heights, the direction of that progress must always be guided by both wisdom and compassion.

Through interactions with others, adolescents symbolically enter the realm of the "other"—represented in science fiction by imaginative and alternative worlds—and subsequently return to a deeper understanding of themselves. Viewing themselves through the perspectives of others expands their horizons and enables them to achieve personal growth and maturity. In this sense, science fiction novels play a significant role in fostering children's and adolescents' self-awareness as well as their psychological and intellectual development.

The development of self-awareness is one of the most essential factors enabling children and adolescents to understand their own values, personal dignity, and the meaning of life. According to the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, identity (or self-awareness) refers to an individual's striving for personal development and self-affirmation, together with the formation of ideals, career aspirations, values, and worldviews associated with this developmental process. The formation of self-identity requires adolescents to integrate their present experiences with their future aspirations into a coherent and harmonious sense of self. Achieving this integration first requires profound self-understanding and conscious attention to one's own identity.

During this developmental process, adolescents naturally develop new perspectives on the surrounding environment, society, and their own inner world. By reflecting on how others perceive them and by evaluating the diverse social roles they perform, they gradually acquire a deeper understanding of their own personalities. Through various life experiences and challenges, children and adolescents inevitably encounter internal conflicts while simultaneously seeking psychological integration. They learn to think independently, make conscious decisions, recognize their own potential, and establish personal values, moral principles, and beliefs that guide their future behavior. These developmental concepts are vividly reflected in a number of contemporary Chinese science fiction novels discussed in the following sections.

CONCLUSION

In contemporary Chinese children's literature, science fiction has evolved beyond its traditional function of

popularizing scientific knowledge to become an influential literary genre that fosters the critical and creative thinking of young readers. These works integrate scientific and technological advances with Chinese cultural values, moral education, and environmental responsibility, creating narratives that are both intellectually engaging and educationally meaningful. Consequently, children's science fiction serves as an important literary medium for cultivating innovative thinking about the future, stimulating interest in scientific inquiry, and reinforcing universal human values among younger generations. In this respect, contemporary Chinese children's science fiction occupies a significant position in the development of both Chinese and world children's literature, demonstrating its growing educational, cultural, and literary importance.

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