

The Educational Reflection of Naughty Children's Spirit of Play in the Mid-to-Late 20th Century - Taking Pipilu and Ramona as Examples

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Abstract

This paper explores the fundamental differences in educational philosophies between China and the West during the mid-to-late 20th century through a comparative analysis of two classic literary figures: Pipilu from Yuanjie Zheng's works and Ramona from Beverly Cleary's writings. Adopting the perspective of naughty children's spirit of play and grounded in the pedagogy of children's literature, the research indicates that during the mid-to-late 20th century, Chinese education tended to cultivate individuals who conform to social norms through discipline and suppression. In contrast, Western education placed greater emphasis on nurturing well-rounded individuals through guidance, respecting children's innate nature and creativity. These differences are profoundly reflected in the establishment of educational objectives and the selection of pedagogical methods in both contexts, revealing the influence of culture. This study provides a historical and cultural perspective for understanding the divergences in Chinese and Western educational concepts during the mid-to-late 20th century, offering insights for contemporary educational reform.

Keywords

naughty children; the spirit of play; children education

1. Introduction

"Naughty children", meaning "mischievous and playful children", are charming child characters widely present in literary works across various countries. The spirit of play is one of the fundamental aesthetic principles of children's literature, emphasizing children's innate desire for freedom, boundless imagination and creativity, and their eternal pursuit of joy and adventure. Mischief is a natural tendency displayed by children during play, reflecting their longing for freedom. In games, children release their energy through mischievous behavior while simultaneously nurturing their imagination and creativity. Thus, mischief is a part of the spirit of play in children and an indispensable quality in their growth process.

For a long time, Chinese education has prioritized “knowledge acquisition efficiency” as its core objective. As games lack explicit knowledge output, they are often regarded by parents and schools as meaningless play. In Western educational philosophy, games are considered a vital means for children’s learning and development, as they foster creativity, imagination, and social skills. Wang Quangen (2000) noted that Chinese children’s literature emphasizes spiritual redemption and moral cultivation, while Western children’s literature advocates for the primacy of joy and a return to nature. On the artistic level, Chinese children’s literature embodies a strong ethical consciousness, whereas Western children’s literature demonstrates distinct humanistic and philosophical views. In terms of value orientation, Chinese children’s literature places significant emphasis on collectivism, while Western children’s literature prioritizes individualistic principles. By examining the characters of Pipilu and Ramona, this study delves into the fundamental disparities in educational objectives and methods between China and the West during the mid-to-late 20th century.

2. Literature Review

In the field of studies on naughty children, scholars have focused on the narrative of naughty children, affirming its aesthetic independence while also reflecting on issues such as stereotyping and deviations in values. Case studies of authors like Yang Hongying have garnered attention. Xuyuan Liu further elevated “naughty children” to a core motif in children’s literature.

In the study of the spirit of play, scholars generally emphasize its intrinsic connection to children’s subjectivity, creation, and growth. They focus on theoretical construction, narrative and imagery in literature, and practical approaches in education to counter utilitarianism. However, research in this area still suffers from a lack of empirical evidence, insufficient attention to children’s perspectives, and inadequate cross-cultural comparison.

Research on the Ramona series covers multiple dimensions, including educational mechanisms, narrative functions, gender construction, and cultural representation. Studies on Yuanjie Zheng’s fairy tales are more systematic, addressing modern aesthetic sensibilities, educational criticism, narrative patterns, characterization, and cultural critique. Overall, research in both areas remains relatively limited in methodological diversity, lacks interdisciplinary perspectives and empirical support.

3. Contrasting Educational Aims

When discussing the aims of children’s education, a pivotal question remains: Is education meant to cultivate “tools” who adapt to social norms, or to nurture “whole persons” with independent character, creativity, and free spirit? This question not only serves as a watershed in educational philosophy but also profoundly shapes the creative direction and value orientation of children’s literature.

3.1. Aims of Utility in Education

Yuanjie Zheng's fairy tales integrate the spirit of play, immersing young readers in a world of freedom and creativity. Although to some extent his stories emphasize respecting a child's individuality, they still bear the imprint of traditional education. Certain works contain an implicit affirmation of conventional education values.

In *The Tale of Pipilu's Doppelgänger*, Pipilu's parents, hoping for him to attend university and become an engineer, enroll him in Bai Bai Middle School, known for its high admission rates. However, Pipilu didn't perform very well in his studies. His teacher, Mr. Beibei, provides extra tutoring, but Pipilu's distraction with drawing causes Mr. Beibei to fall ill. Striving to meet expectations, Pipilu gives up drawing and throws himself entirely into his studies, eventually barely managing to get into university and become an engineer. Meanwhile, Pipilu's doppelgänger, receiving careful guidance from a painter, becomes a world-renowned artist.

Pipilu's experience reveals an educational model that suppresses individuality and neglects creativity. Originally a child full of creative spirit and a love for drawing, Pipilu is forced to abandon his interests to focus solely on academics to fulfill his parents' and teacher's expectations of "going to university and becoming an engineer." The children's spirit of play emphasizes freedom, creation, and exploration, yet Pipilu's creativity is deemed "useless" by his parents and teacher and is ultimately stifled. This educational model operates based on societal expectations, driving children through external pressure rather than cultivating their intrinsic motivation and individuality. While it may help children meet society's narrow definitions of "success" in the short term, it ultimately constrains their long-term development. In the end, Pipilu becomes what can be termed a "tool-person"—capable only of performing predetermined tasks, yet unable to realize his self-worth or fulfill his latent potential.

3.2. Principles of Humanity in Education

In contrast, the *Ramona* series places greater emphasis on unleashing children's natural instincts and creativity, portraying growth as a process of free exploration and personal expression rather than confinement by adult-imposed rules. In *Ramona the pest*, during a classroom drawing activity where students were asked to sketch their homes, Ramona, finding her basic house drawing too plain, added thick black smoke billowing from the windows with a crayon. She then provided an imaginative explanation: the fireplace was on fire and Santa Claus was stuck in the chimney. Her addition of smoke and the creative narrative behind it were filled with playful inventiveness. What an adult eye might perceive as chaotic scribbles was, through a child's lens, transformed into a humorous scenario.

This unique creative expression, however, drew skepticism from her classmates, who found her drawing messy. It was at this point that Miss Binney, the teacher, intervened. She skillfully guided Ramona with an open-ended question: "Why is

smoke coming out of the windows ?”(Cleary, 1999) This approach avoided direct criticism while creating a space for Ramona to articulate her thought process and creativity. Encouraged by Miss Binney, Ramona shared her idea. After listening, Miss Binney offered positive feedback: “And you did make it interesting.”(Cleary, 1999) In this case, Miss Binney demonstrated a high degree of educational wisdom and professionalism. She maintained a gentle and inclusive attitude, refraining from judging Ramona’s drawing by conventional standards. Instead, she provided skillful guidance that encouraged the student to use her imagination, express her inner thoughts, and respected her individuality and creativity.

4. Divergent Educational Methods

Chinese elders often assumed a superior stance in education, emphasizing obedience and submission. As Ban Ma (2017) pointed out, the reverence for ancestors extended into the spirit of childhood, creating a sense of historical oppression associated with the “old,” the “superior,” the “outdated,” and the “ancient.” Western educational thought generally regards children as “active learners,” advocating respect, humor, and heuristic dialogue. As John Dewey asserted, “Education is growth,” a premise that acknowledges children as individuals with personalities equal to adults and unique inner worlds. These differing perspectives have given rise to two distinct educational models: the Chinese tradition tends to emphasize authoritarian discipline and disciplinary suppression, while mainstream Western education focuses on experience-oriented and inquiry-based approaches to foster individual growth.

4.1. The way of Discipline and Control

Yuanjie Zheng’s *The Taming of the Rabbit* vividly exposes the issue of disciplinary suppression in Chinese education. Youchao Sun, Pipilu’s head teacher who had just taken up his position a week earlier, seized on a student named Jia Wan’s cough during his self-introduction as an opportunity to make a big issue out of a minor incident. To establish his authority, he sternly ordered Jia Wan to cough publicly and threatened to “cancel the class,” aiming to “execute one as a warning to others” by punishing Jia Wan, which created a tense atmosphere in the classroom. (Yuanjie Zheng, 2007)

As a new head teacher, Sun firmly believed that his primary task after taking over the class was to establish his authority. Jia Wan’s cough was originally an involuntary physical reaction, but Sun overinterpreted it as a personal challenge. By publicly humiliating Jia Wan, he sought to reinforce his authority. When Jia Wan explained, “I didn’t do it on purpose. My throat was itchy,” Sun refused to accept this explanation and instead continued to exert pressure, demanding that Jia Wan “cough to her heart’s content.” This transformed a natural bodily reaction into a performance of obedience, to some extent depriving the child of control over their own body. Such an approach stands in stark contrast to the spirit of play, which emphasizes freedom,

imagination, and uninhibited physical expression. Sun even threatened, “If you don’t cough, we won’t have class.” The threat not only put Jia Wan under psychological pressure but also disrupted the entire class’s learning.

4.2. The Approach of Experience and Guidance

In *Ramona’s World*, when Mrs. Meacham asks the class to write self-introductions, Ramona writes a long and thoughtful piece—though it contains many spelling errors. After reading Ramona’s composition aloud to the class, Mrs. Meacham writes the misspelled words on the blackboard the next day. When Ramona asks whether spelling really matters as long as people can understand the meaning, Mrs. Meacham responds with humorous examples to illustrate its importance.

Instead of directly criticizing Ramona’s mistakes, Mrs. Meacham poses a playful question: “You wouldn’t want people to think you sat on a coach instead of a couch, would you?” (Cleary, 1999). Rather than making negative judgments, she uses a gamified approach to prompt reflection—a teaching strategy that embodies the spirit of play in children’s literature. This method integrates cognitive development into an imaginative framework, allowing rules to be internalized through enjoyable experience and the awakening of agency. Mrs. Meacham’s practice offers a vivid example of this educational philosophy.

These lively and humorous examples not only capture students’ attention but also clearly demonstrate how spelling errors can lead to misunderstandings, making the lesson more relatable and easier to grasp. Moreover, Mrs. Meacham excels at guiding and inspiring critical thinking. Her heuristic teaching style stimulates students’ minds, helping them actively recognize problems and understand their significance. She further drives the point home with another example: “And before lunch, are you hungry or hunrgy?” (Cleary, 1999) This patient and step-by-step approach reflects both her wisdom and dedication as a teacher.

5. Conclusion

The divergence between Chinese and Western education systems can be attributed to two core aspects: cultural roots and teaching philosophies. Culturally, China’s system is shaped by Confucian values, emphasizing respect for authority and collective goals, while the West’s is influenced by Greco-Roman traditions that prioritize individual critical inquiry. In teaching philosophy, this is manifested in a teacher-centered model in China, focused on knowledge transmission, contrasting with a student-centered approach in the West that fosters discussion and creativity. Through an in-depth analysis of two literary figures—Pipilu and Ramona—we can clearly observe the fundamental differences between Chinese and Western education from the perspective of the spirit of play. Shaped by collectivist and utilitarian traditions, Chinese education tends to regard children as “instrumental beings”, emphasizing molding, discipline, regulation, and knowledge acquisition, which to

some extent subdues children's innate nature and creativity. Western education, on the other hand, is more inclined to regard children as "whole persons", respecting their individual value, stimulating their imagination and independent thinking. However, this comparison is not intended to judge inherent merits and demerits, but rather to provide a cultural reflective lens. With the evolution and exchange of global pedagogical paradigms, Chinese and Western education systems have been engaging in mutual learning and integration. Contemporary Chinese education is increasingly emphasizing students' creativity and individualized development, with numerous ongoing educational reforms attempting to subvert traditional disciplinary models by incorporating more gamified and experiential learning methods. Future education must both preserve cultural heritage and respect children's innate nature while stimulating their potential. The principles of freedom, creativity, and joy advocated by naughty children's spirit of play may offer valuable insights for developing more humanistic educational frameworks.

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