Cultural Differences Seen from Adult Images in Both Chinese and American Young Adult Literature

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中文摘要: 不同的民族有不同的文化和价值观，而不同的文化和价值观又必然反映在文学作品中。中美少儿童文学也同样体现着各自民族的文化意识。翻开中国和美国的少年小说，我们不难发现，其中的成人形象大不相同：中国少年小说中的成人形象是良师益友，他们在少年成长过程中的作用是积极而重要的；而美国少年小说中的成人则不同，特别是在出版于二战后至 20 世纪 80 年代间的少年小说中，有许多教师是反面形象，父母的作用也不明显，他们经常不是去世就是不在家。究其原因，主要是不同文化对作家有着不同的影响。中国作家受儒家思想及集体观影响，而美国作家则崇尚个人主义与平等观。

Literary creation is a cultural activity. Pellowski defines culture as "the means people use to structure and express their experience conceptually so that belief, knowledge, or information can be transmitted from one generation to the next" (Hunt, 1996: 663). The carrier of culture is man through whom culture can be transmitted generation after generation. Literature is one of the best forms of cultural transmission. It can be said that people all over the world transmit their culture to their next generation by means of language and literature. When writing books for children, writers who have been deeply influenced by their national culture often have other
purposes, apart from the purpose of entertainment. They also want to promote certain values and transmit certain cultural values through molding the psychological and moral consciousness of young readers. And young readers receive cultural influence unconsciously in the joy of their reading. Therefore, literary creation and reading together accomplish the goal of cultural transmission and inheritance.

Different people have different cultures and values. Young adult literature of different people reflect their different cultures and values through themes and the portrayal of characters, as we can see in Chinese and American young adult literature. Reading Chinese and American young adult novels, we will find that there is a great difference between the adult images represented by parents and teachers portrayed by writers of the two countries. We hold the opinion that the portrait of different adult images reflects the different cultural influences on writers. Hence this article attempts to compare adult images in Chinese and American young adult novels and future to explore the cultural differences which result in different adult images.

I. Adults in Chinese Adult Novels: Good Teachers and Helpful Friends

Generally speaking, schools and families in Chinese young adult novels play an affirmative and positive role in the process of children's growth and development. Therefore, teachers and parents are portrayed as positive characters on the whole. Of course, there are also negative adult images. But, overall, positive images are the mainstream. The adults themselves set examples in children's education. Their love to children also has a limit, a standard and a method.

Adults in Chinese young adult novels are role models. They themselves set examples for children. They teach children not only by verbal instructions but also by personal examples, so they are models children can learn from. The teacher in The National Outstanding Children's Literature Award winner Schoolboy Jia Li, Mr. Cha makes Jia Li realize his narrow-mindedness with his own "heart wide-like-the-sea". The teacher in the
National Children’s Books “Golden Key” Award winner Schoolgirl Jia Mei, Mr. Chen, takes part in general cleaning and blends himself with the class by contributing to it. After the teacher Ms. Shu in Our Golden School Days recites the contents of Pipa Verse completely, the sound of young voices reading aloud fills the class; no one complains that it is too long to recite any more. The teacher, Ms. Lei in A Solitary Girls’ Club stands in front of the class team carefully doing physical exercise, as a result, all the students attentively do the exercise. Xin Ran’s father in Adolescent Years gives the long-awaited opportunity of registering as a permanent resident in Shen Zhen to Lao Li who is going to retire. Thus showing his daughter that as a human being, one cannot be too selfish.

Adults in Chinese young adult novels are strict teachers. They are very strict with their children, never doting on them. Xiao Yao’s father in Adolescent Years pays attention to cultivate his son’s independence from an early age, encouraging him to solve problems by himself. That is why he refuses his son when Xiao Yao gets a flat tire and asks for help. Jia Mei in Schoolgirl Jia Mei wants to go to the performance given by singer Zuo Gel; her father does not give the money for ticket directly, instead, he goes to a restaurant and agrees that she does a part-time job during the summer vocation after he has made sure it is a secure place to work at. But Jia Mei does not earn enough money for the ticket, so her father asks her to copy a 5000-word draft in order to earn enough money. Doing these two things, Jia Mei gets valuable practice — not only gains life skills, but improves her handwriting and earns the money she needs.

Adults in Chinese young adult novels are good friends. They show concern for children’s emotions. They understand and respect children, in return, they also gain children’s trust. So when Jia Mei cherishes some secret which she would rather die than tell others, her father understandingly says to her mother “Without secrets, how can she become an independent person?” When Xiao Yao is very nervous and timid before the competition, his teacher encourages him by saying “look, you are nervous, they are even more nervous than you.”

Adults in Chinese young adult novels are pilots. In the process of chil-
dren's growth, they lead young adults out of setbacks, out of perplexities and into maturity. Xiao Yao is in low spirits after he fails in the competition, his mother writes to him immediately from Britain illustrating the argument that "those who suffer from setbacks in their youth are the lucky ones for they can learn the way to encourage themselves and start again, getting the worry-and-fear-nothing experiences." Then she explains to him the reason why she and her husband, though middle-aged, still untiringly strive in their careers by using her own experience as an example. Having read the letter, Xiao Yao leaves his depression behind, regarding the failure as "the experience that can greatly enrich and prolong his life." Xin Ran faces the problem of a love affair when she is too young, but her father talks with her like a friend, telling her that only mature persons can control their feelings, talking with her about the harm of committing one's heart too early. He does not stealthily read his daughter's letters or diaries. Comparing his heart with that of his daughter's, with respect and understanding, he leads his daughter out of the swamp of such an early love affair.

Adults presented in Chinese young adult novels are like brilliant music masters playing a variety of youthful melodies in children's hearts.

II. Adults in American Young Adult Novels: Negative Images

Adults images in American young adult novels published after the Second World War till the 1980s, compared with their Chinese counterparts, are much gloomier. They are negative images or showing no presence at all. Of course, we can not deny the fact that there are positive ones, for example, the father in A Day No Pigs Would Die who is understanding and the mother in Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry who is caring and reasonable, but they are rare — the majority of parents come off poorly. Overall, adults in American young adult novels have the following characteristics.

First, adults in American young adult novels are of no importance in the process of children's growth and development. Sometimes they do not appear at all; sometimes they are absent from children's life for a long period of time. The famous American young adult literature writer Zindel adheres to 10 principles when writing for the young, of which the second one
is “Parents should be in the background because teenagers are interested in putting distance between themselves and their guardians”; the seventh, “Teenagers like mischief and rebellion in novels because they resent being ruled by adult society” (Forman, 1998:13 -14). To some extent, Zindel’s principles reflect the trend to which many young adult literature writers adhere. In order to put the parents behind the scenes, writers “arrange” their death. In The Outsider, Ponyboy’s parents die in a traffic accident. In When The Phone Rang, the parents die in an air crash. The young adults in both novels totally depend on themselves to support the family and attain maturity. Some parents are absent from home for a long time. In Tex, Tex’s father is always out driving cattle, leaving Tex and his brother at home to look after themselves. In Dicey’s Song, Dicey’s mother collapses under the pressure of life and goes insane. It is Dicey who takes care of her three younger brothers and takes them to their grandmother’s home after her mother has to stay in hospital. This shows that adults in American young adult novels are of little importance in children’s life. It makes little difference whether they exist or not. The young heroes are brave and independent. They reach their maturity through their own efforts.

Second, adults in American young adult novels cannot serve as the role models to be followed. On the contrary, they are detestable and despicable images. Negative parents can be classified as follows: 1. weak and incompetent; this type of parent cannot help their children in face of difficulties, so they exist in name only. The father in The Chocolate War is such an example. After Jerry receives threatening phone calls, his father is completely at a loss. He has to agree with Jerry that they take the telephone off the hook. 2. indifferent and hypercritical; this type of parent is either indifferent to their children or hypercritical in every possible way. Johnny’s mother in The Outsiders regards her son as nonexistent, she never asks or worries about him when he leaves home after he kills a person in order to save Ponyboy. While in The Pigman, the criticism by Lorraine’s mother has become her “usual practice”. “You are not a pretty girl, Lorraine”, “You wear your clothes funny”, etc. 3. selfish; this kind of parent have no responsibility at all. They attain their own objective by all means. Jacob’s
father in *Celine* forgets to take his son to see the doctor, instead he goes once date with his new lover. Sean’s father in *My Darling, My Hamburger* cheated after the car crash: “Even our family doctor. He signs anything I tell him to. That car accident I was in years ago. He knew I didn’t have whiplash. Five thousand I got out of that one” (Zindel, 1969: 124). His “teaching” affects Sean. He shrinks his duty towards the pregnancy of his girlfriend and brings great harm to her both physically and mentally. 4. abusive: this type of parents physically torments their children. For example, Patty’s father in *Summer of My German Soldier* always beats her for no reason at all. Another example, Abby’s father in *Abbey, My Love* exploits her sexually.

Teachers are not so great and perfect as those in Chinese young adult novels. Brother Leon in *the Chocolate War* is portrayed as ruthless animal. “He could hold your attention like a cobra. Instead of fangs, he used his teacher’s pointer, flicking out here, there and everywhere. He watches the class like a hawk, suspicious, searching out cheaters or daydreamers, probing for weakness in the students and then exploiting those weakness” (Cormier, 1974:23). Likewise, his conduct is also loathsome. He bought the chocolates with the money he isn’t supposed to use, then forced the students to sell them for huge profits. As for Jerry who does not want to sell for him, he stops at nothing in persecuting him. *The Catcher in the Rye* which is warmly welcomed by young Americans also portrays some negative teachers. Take Holden’s history teacher as an instance, he does not know his own students very well. His teaching, in fact, is sarcasm. “You glanced through it, eh?” (Salinger, 1968:16). He said — “very sarcastic… He started handling my exam paper like it was a turd or something” (Salinger, 1968:9). He was not civilized in his behavior: He was snobbish: to the headmaster’s corny jokes, he’d “practically kill himself chuckling and smiling and all, like as if Thurmer was a goddam prince or something” (Salinger, 1968:16). We can imagine that such teachers can hardly become students’ role models in their life.
III. The Reason for Different Adult Images: Cultural Difference

To sum up, there is really a difference in the portrayal of adult images in Chinese and American young adult novels. Most adults in Chinese young adult novels are positive. They play a decisive role in children's cultivation. They are good teachers and helpful friends. While most of adults in American young adult novels are negative, their role is almost next to nothing. Then, what is the reason that results in the difference in the portrayal of adult images? We think it is the difference between the two countries' cultural background and values that have exerted an influence on the writers when creating literary works.

Chinese writers are influenced by Chinese culture. First comes the Confucian doctrine. From Confucius and Mencius on, Chinese traditional culture has reached the historical stage when Confucius' ethical and moral principles dominate the society. Chinese have been influenced by Confucianism for thousands of years consciously or unconsciously. Confucianism, especially Confucian doctrines, centers on "Ren" which means goodness in English. Behaving well to his parents and his elders is the first stipulation of Goodness. So it can be safely said that the whole ideology of Confucianism is based on "filiality". A Good Face on the Probrity of Their Gifts: On the Doctrine of Mean says among the so-called good qualities, to be filial means filiality, while to respect the capable means loyalty (Chen Qingkun; Li Jinglin, 1995:5). Ancient Chinese considered it perfectly justified that subjects should absolutely obey their monarch, the same as the relationship between sons and their fathers. Filiality still takes a very important role in Chinese culture, so we have the saying "Of all the good behaviors, filiality takes the first place, while of all the vices, obscenity is the foremost detestable." Lu Xun once criticized the practice by saying "A father has absolute authority and commands absolute obedience; as a father, one can say anything. The son is wrong before he opens his mouth if he has something to say." What he said vividly summarizes the authority of a father has over his son. The status of teachers in Chinese culture is the same with that of parents. So we have the proverb "Even if a person plays as your teacher for just a single day, you should treat him as your parents all your life." Chi-
nese writers living in such an environment, influenced by traditional culture, find it difficult to deny the roles of parents and teachers, or portray them as negative characters.

Moreover, China is a nation with a strong sense of collectivism, stressing commonness, collective strength, social values and the sense of group, giving prominence to the collective. Schools and families as collective symbols carry the responsibility of cultivating the next generation, so teachers and parents are the executor of this responsibility. Of course, teachers and parents in Chinese young adult novels also appear in the same features and play the same role. This is also one of the reasons why adults in Chinese young adults are portrayed positively.

Unlike China, America is a society advocating individualism and self-consciousness, stressing equality and emphasizing independence. A Dictionary of British & American Culture defines it in this way “Individualism considers individual values paramount, widely emphasizing self-determination and self-control, opposing authority, religion, state, society or any other external factors that interfere with or prevent individual development in any form” (Hu Wenzhong, 1997:448). Individualism is the core of American culture. American Encyclopedia holds that the first person that used the word “individualism” in the English-speaking world may be American philosopher Emerson who has been considered a real practitioner of the ideas of individualism. The origin of American culture should be dated back to European Renaissance (Zhang Guoqing, 2000:23). The core of Renaissance is humanism which eulogizes the greatness of man and advocates the free development of individuality, opposing submission to God. Renaissance becomes the starting point of individualism. In America, individual spirit is the legacy of the frontier culture. In colonial time, pioneers attained their self-sufficiency through independence and self-reliance, in the following Westward Expansion, when American people started from scratch, and built their own homes, they also depended on their independent spirit. With the influence of Puritanism and Transcendentalism, individual values have become one of the most important values to Americans. Individualism stresses “self-independence”, “personal dignity”, “individ-
unal freedom”, “self-realization” and “personal opportunity”, etc. Independent thinking, independent judgment and realization of personal ideals through personal efforts are all encouraged and appreciated.

In America, independence is the utmost reflection of individualism. Americans form the habit of striving independently from an early age, never relying on their parents. Economically, after senior high school, young people usually do not depend on their parents, even if they are born rich. They do not want to make a living or receive their education with the help of their families. People are proud of their independence, they will be looked down upon if they depend on others. With the wide spread of social Darwinism, America has become a society advocating competition rather than cooperation. Influenced by such ideas, Americans like to be self-centered, love self-determination, self-practice and shouldering the consequences themselves from an early age. So in American young adult novels, adults are not positive, or show no presence at all. Thus providing the chances and space for young adults to act independently and take the responsibilities by themselves. The fact that the young heroes attain their maturity all by themselves reflects the spirit of independence.

As a code of values, American individualism advocates that everyone should be equal in morality and justice, and that authority or society should not interfere with personal development. This is identical with the aspect of rebelling in American national character. This character is related to the specific historical situation in which the nation was founded. It is known that the United States of America was founded through rebelling and breaking away from British colonial domination. So in the characters of her countrymen, the character of rebelling is inborn. This character is also reflected in the instinctive rebellion of young adults against the authority of schools and families. Just like what Zindel has said “they resent being ruled by the adult society.”

The American concept of equality makes Americans believe that they are equal before God from the bottom of their hearts even if they face a lot of inequality in reality. So when writing for young adults, writers adopt the young adults’ point of view rather than the condescending “adults’ point of
view". The drawbacks existing in adults in the novels express in a way the sense of equality, that is, adults also make mistakes like young adults. They are no more brilliant than young adults.

Now we can see that it is the different cultures and values that result in the difference in the images of adults. We are not trying to decide which is right and which is wrong, or which is good and which is bad. There is one more point worth mentioning, with the expansion of academic exchange between China and the outside world and the strengthening of the discourse between the East and the West, Western educators have begun to use the Chinese "collective standard" for reference, while Chinese educational circles also realize that in the past too much emphasis went to collective strength and social values, while individual values and rights have been somewhat ignored. Hence, there is an interesting change in the literary creation of both countries. American writers begin to rethink the roles and position of teachers and parents, so positive adults are on the increase; while Chinese writers also change their condescending "parents' point of view" and "teachers' point of view". Instead they describe young heroes with independent consciousness from the young adults' point of view. Adults in their novels are no longer always correct and perfect. We think that this is the result of interaction of cultures and that this phenomenon is worth exploring as well.

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