

The Sprouting of Children's Drama in China before the May Fourth Movement in 1919

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Abstract

This article delves deeply into the origins of Chinese children's drama before the influential May Fourth Movement, shedding light on the multifaceted and intricate influencing factors that contributed to its nascent development. By examining the influence of traditional Chinese opera on early children's dramas, the evolving concepts of children's education, the burgeoning growth of other forms of children's art, and the significant impact of established Chinese drama, the article reveals a rich tapestry of cultural and societal dynamics. These elements collectively facilitated the emergence of Chinese children's dramas, marking a pivotal moment in the nation's cultural landscape. Furthermore, the budding of Chinese children's drama before the May Fourth Movement serves as a testament to the profound cognitive transformation of Chinese society towards children, reflecting both the integration and collision of Chinese and Western cultures. Ultimately, this historical phenomenon underscores significant shifts in Chinese society's understanding and appreciation of children as a distinct and valuable group within the broader cultural fabric.

Keywords: Chinese Children's Drama, May Fourth Movement, Chinese Traditional Opera, Educational Transformation, Cultural Collision

Introduction

In China, children's drama is a foreign form of theatre. After being influenced by Western drama, literature, and children's content in Chinese traditional opera, the development of children's education in China, children's drama emerged. However, the birth of children's dramas requires a process of accumulation and development. Accumulation also began before the birth of Chinese children's dramas in 1919. Although children's drama had not yet

formed a large-scale and systematic development trend at this time, there were already some phenomena that laid the foundation for its later prosperity.

Children's drama is an important part of the cultural industry. However, research on Chinese children's dramas is not sufficient. There are records of children participating in song and dance performances in the Analects during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC). (Song, 2019). However, during the long period of feudal society in China, there was a lack of creativity in children's drama. The emergence of Chinese children's dramas after the May Fourth Movement in 1919 has vital significance for the development of Chinese children. By exploring the predecessor of Chinese children's drama, we can deepen our understanding of the evolution of children's art and its role in social and cultural development. And reveal the transformation of Chinese society's perception of children, and understand the integration and collision of Eastern and Western cultures in the context of children's drama.

Chinese children's drama was born during a significant historical period, the May Fourth Movement. The May Fourth Movement played a vital role in Chinese culture. After the May Fourth Movement, Chinese culture shifted from classical to modern. It has given birth to numerous emerging cultural and artistic forms, including children's drama (Tan, 2022). During this period, children's drama also emerged in China. Guo Moruo's (1892-1978) creation of "*Dawn*" (1919) marked the birth of Chinese children's drama (Song, 2019). Prior to this, although there was no children's drama in the history of Chinese theatre. Through this study, not only has the theoretical system of children's literature and drama research been enriched, but it has also provided useful historical references and inspirations for future children's drama creation and educational practices. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the development process of Chinese children's drama and its important role in social and cultural development.

The emergence of children's drama stems from multiple aspects. The children's theatre in Chinese traditional opera makes the audience aware that there can be theatrical performances for children on stage. Before the May Fourth Movement (1919), foreign cultures entered China. There have been many changes in the education of children among Chinese people. Before the emergence of drama, many types of art changed. In addition, the emergence of the new and comprehensive art of drama has laid the foundation for the birth of children's drama. This article will analyze this change and understand the situation before the birth of children's drama.

Children's Drama in Chinese Traditional Opera

Children's theatre is present in Chinese traditional opera. Some Chinese traditional operas can be appreciated by children. These Chinese traditional opera works are not created for children, but children enjoy watching. These works are divided into two categories, focusing on educating children and adapted from folk myths, legends, and fables children enjoy watching.

One type focuses on its educational role. In modern children's theatre, education is only a part of it. It also has characteristics such as entertainment and infectivity (Xiong, 2023). However, education has been placed in a critical position in Chinese traditional opera. In feudal China, Chinese traditional opera works were not focused on whether they were

suitable for children to watch. At that time, Chinese traditional opera works focused more on whether children could understand adults. The viewpoint that such children's theatre works must have educational significance has also influenced the emergence of children's drama. Li Jinhui's (1891-1967) pursuit of children's drama creation is to perform dramas to make people happy and moved and to make themselves happy and glorious. Our most important purpose is to keep humanity moving upward and for all civilizations to progress (Li, 2003).

In Li Yu's (1611-1680) "*Silent Play*," there is a chapter called "*Three Mothers Teach Children*." This play is a very famous Chinese traditional opera for children. Beijing Opera, Qin Opera, Henan Opera, and other mainstream Chinese operas all have this script. In ancient China, the mother was an intermediate link in family relationships. Due to reasons such as polygamy and the need for men to work outside, women bear the responsibility of giving children care for the elderly at home. Due to the ancient Chinese requirement that women must follow their husbands (Gao, 1996). Chinese women are also an essential carrier of patriarchal ideology. So, using the image of a mother as the main subject of educating children was very meaningful in ancient China. During the feudal society, Chinese women were also an essential carrier of patriarchal ideology. So, using the image of a mother as the main subject of educating children was very meaningful in ancient China. Although it is a script for children, it is not created for children's entertainment. This play involves many situations in traditional Chinese families, and for today's children's dramas, the content here has exceeded the scope of children's acceptance. It involves content such as wives and concubines, friends running away with money, biological mothers abandoning their children, and fathers passing away. The male protagonist was born to his father's concubine and was eventually adopted and raised by another concubine of his father. In this play, the psychological changes caused by the child's face of significant family changes are not given enough attention. The negative emotions he reflects are considered unfilial. After such a significant family change, children must maintain good academic performance and achieve top spot exams (Li, 2023). Similar scripts with educational significance include "*Fenhe Bay*," "*Sending Sons from Sangyuan*," "*Han Kuangheng Chipping Walls and Stealing Light*," and "*Zhao's Orphan's Remembrance of Injustice*" (Song, 2019).

The other type mainly refers to plays adapted from folk myths, legends, fables, etc. Children deeply love this type of script. Such as "*Journey to the West*," "*Zhu Ji Da Xian*," "*Cowherd and Weaver Girl*," "*Chang'e Running to the Moon*," "*Cat Xianggong*," "*Splitting the Mountain to Save Mother*," "*Fengshen Bang*," "*Wang Xiao'er Fighting the Tiger*," etc (Song, 2019). These plays are still being performed in modern times. "*Journey to the West*" has still been moved multiple times. In 2008, China Children's Art Theatre performed "*Journey to the West*," in 2017, China Children's Art Theatre also performed a puppet drama, "*Journey to the West*." Traditional mythological stories are in line with children's aesthetic views. However, at that time, mythological stories were not entirely suitable for children to watch, and Chinese traditional opera did not create these scripts specifically for children. Issues such as "*Cowherd and Weaver Girl*" and "*Chang'e Flying to the Moon*" involve adult marriage (Song, 2019).

Children's drama laid much groundwork before the emergence of children's drama. Although there was a gap between children's Chinese traditional opera and children's drama, it was not created for children's entertainment. However, from these children's Chinese traditional operas, we can learn about their viewing preferences. It also cultivates the

audience's appreciation habits. From these Chinese traditional opera scripts, it can be seen that in addition to scripts created by adults to educate children. Children are selective about what kind of scripts they like. Children are more inclined to choose to watch imaginative plays. The chosen scripts also reflected this trend after the birth of Chinese children's drama. Guo Moruo's "*Dawn*" contains elements of mythological stories. The children's drama "*Guanghan Palace*," created by Guo Moruo in 1922, incorporated the stories of the Eight Immortals, Chang'e's journey to the moon, and the legend of the Cowherd and Weaver Girl (Song, 2019).

Children's Education in the Past

After the Opium War (1840), Chinese people were exposed to more Western knowledge, culture, customs, etc. In the late Qing Dynasty, the Chinese government frequently failed in wars, which made Chinese people pay attention to education. Moreover, the scope of education has also been expanded. Many practical sciences have been incorporated into the field of education (Zhang, 2011). Some educational changes have occurred in children's art. This change is twofold; on the one hand, it is a change in school education. On the other hand, there have been changes in family education.

Although specialized children's plays only emerged in China after the May Fourth Movement. However, before the May Fourth Movement, children, as a group carrying the future destiny of the country, had already been noticed. The changes in education have changed the Chinese people's perception of children as a group.

In ancient China, there were also children's education and books specifically designed for children's enlightenment, such as the *Three Character Classic* and the *Thousand Character Classic*. It can also be seen from some paintings and novels that children had many games to play at that time. However, children's education in ancient China was adult-oriented and mainly focused on preaching. However, children's nature is still evident in many aspects (Cao, 2015). Although children had many unique characteristics then, the works were not tailored to their nature. Taking the *Three Character Classic* as an example, it is a classic Chinese children's book that was born during the Southern Song Dynasty (June 12, 1127-March 19, 1279) (Gao, 2023). The *Three Character Classic* focuses on educating children to be filial to their parents, respect their teachers, and so on (Xi, 2023). At that time, the works did not focus on the individual needs of children but more on how to educate children into adults who met the requirements of society at that time.

The situation of not paying attention to children's entertainment needs and only focusing on their education changed after the Opium War in 1840. The Opium War began in 1840 and lasted until the downfall of the last feudal dynasty in China, the Qing Dynasty, in 1912. The Qing government had been trying to introduce various Western ideas to save this empire, which was already in dire straits. However, the Qing Dynasty ultimately ended in extinction. However, these attempts have also promoted the development of Chinese society (Shen, 2016). At this point, Chinese scholars had already realized the importance of children's education. In 1903, the *Regulations of the Xuding School* were promulgated, which changed the education system in China. China's original imperial examination system has transformed into primary education, secondary education, and higher education, which are similar to the Western education system. At the end of 1906, the first nationwide unified textbook, "*Elementary School Chinese Textbook*," organized by the central government, was published

in China. By 1909, all textbooks for various subjects in elementary schools had been published (Shi, 2008). These ideological and educational reforms made the Chinese people at that time realize that the education needed by children was different from that of adults. It is necessary to educate children according to their preferences. The Elementary School Chinese Textbook contains knowledge about traditional Chinese culture and Western science and technology and pays attention to children's preferences. The entire textbook has many exquisite illustrations and colored images, especially in the first volume, almost all illustrations without any text (Shi, 2008).

During the Republic of China period, great emphasis was placed on children's education. In 1912, the Republic of China was established, and in early September of the same year, the Ministry of Education officially announced the structural framework of the Republic's educational system, the "*Renzi Education System*". In the *Renzi education system*, both elementary and higher primary schools have set up drawing classes, which provide students with a basic way to come into contact with and learn art. Sewing classes are also added in higher primary schools, especially for female students (Deng, 2017). This also promotes the cultivation of children's artistic appreciation ability to a certain extent.

Although these changes in the education system did not directly lead to the birth of Chinese children's drama, they also played a driving role in the development of children's drama. The appreciation of beauty and the dissemination of Western knowledge laid the foundation for the birth of children's drama.

In addition to the education of school-age children, the education of preschool children has also gradually received attention. China has always focused on early childhood education. Taking the literary figures of the May Fourth Movement period as an example, Chen Duxiu's (1879-1942) enlightenment books at the age of six were the *Four Books and Five Classics*, as well as the *Zuo Zhuan*. At the age of four, Li Dazhao (1889-1927) studied the "*Three Character Classic*" and "*Hundred Family Surnames*". Traditional books such as "*Three Character Classic*", "*Hundred Family Surnames*", "*Disciple Rules*", "*Thousand Character Classic*", "*Thousand Family Poetry*", and "*Prodigy Poetry*" were common teaching materials for preschool children's enlightenment education at that time (Deng 2020). These traditional books and educational methods have cultivated a good learning awareness for children in China before and during the Qing Dynasty. But the truly specialized teaching institutions and personnel were established in 1903-1904 after the Qing government promulgated the "*Regulations on Nursing Homes and Family Education*". The art education content of singing and handicrafts should be included in the nursing home curriculum. Songs are mainly small poems that teach children peace and simplicity, such as ancient short songs and five-character quatrains. Handicraft emphasizes teaching children to use wood chips, bamboo sticks, paper, clay, etc., to create various shapes or to plant flowers (Tang, 2013). Children's entertainment has received more attention, and with such emphasis, there will be more and more forms of entertainment for children.

The changes in attitudes towards children in schools and families have provided more significant opportunities for children's entertainment and art. It also laid the foundation for the birth of Chinese children's dramas. In order to conform to the new children's education,

art forms have also undergone corresponding changes. After Western educational methods and concepts entered China, they naturally tried foreign children's drama.

The Development of Other Forms of Children's Art

Drama art is comprehensive, and the types of drama-related art include literature, music, dance, art, etc. (Dong, 2012). When other art forms develop and change, they will also have a corresponding impact on drama development. There are various types of theatre, and drama is the most literary form (Dong, 2012). Modern Chinese children's literature had already emerged before the birth of children's plays. In the late 19th century, children's journals were published. In 1875, the *Children's Monthly*, founded by the American church school Qingxin Academy, was published in Shanghai and was the earliest children's journal in China. In 1897, the first children's newspaper founded by the Chinese, the *Mongolian Journal*, was published in Shanghai (Tan, 2022).

Moreover, research on children's literature in China only emerged later than modern Chinese literature. In 1912, Zhou Zuoren's (1885-1967) "A Study of Fairy Tales" was a theoretical article that studied fairy tales from a folklore perspective and, for the first time, determined the aesthetic nature of fairy tales: fairy tales are literary and different from textbooks (Zhou, 2009). This brings a child-centered mindset into children's art. The development of children's literature provides a textual and theoretical basis for children's plays.

Other children's arts are also being influenced and developed by Western thought. A national children's art exhibition was held from 1912 to 1915. One of the requirements of this event is to prioritize preserving the true essence of children in the production of works (Zhang, 1997). The works of this event include articles, calligraphy, painting, handicrafts, needles and chisels, and toys (Guo, 2017). At that time, children's artworks may have been mainly paintings, handicrafts, etc., with content mostly revolving around themes such as children's lives and natural scenery. Although these works may have simple techniques, they are full of children's innocence and imagination. This activity puts children in the leading position, and the collection of artistic works also focuses on the children's characteristics.

These have laid the groundwork for the birth of children's drama in the future. It can also be seen from the situation after the birth of children's drama that the development of other children's arts has directly impacted the birth of children's drama. Guo Moruo had read Western children's literature before creating children's drama. In his 1921 work "Observations on Children's Literature," he defined children's literature and proposed the idea of child-centeredness (Qiao, 2020). Moreover, Li Jinhui used to be a music teacher in elementary school (Song, 2019). Other forms of art influenced these early children's drama creators.

The Influence of Reputable Chinese Drama

Chinese drama provides a form of expression for children's dramas. Before the birth of Chinese drama, Chinese people needed to be made aware of the art form of drama. The birth of drama in China coincided with the development of children's art and education, leading to the emergence of children's drama. During the May Fourth Movement, Chinese drama also underwent significant changes. At this time, Chinese drama entered a new stage. During the May Fourth Movement, magazines such as "New Youth," "Haiku You Magazine," "New Tide,"

and "*Drama*" introduced the new art form of drama. In 1918, the famous Chinese translator Song Chunfang (1892-1938) recommended the theatrical works of 58 writers from thirteen countries in "*New Youth*". Lin Shu (1852-1924) has been translating theatrical works since 1899 (Guo, 2004). These new publications and translated works have also played a promoting role in the dissemination of drama in China.

Li Jinhui is a pioneering representative in Chinese children's drama history. He created 12 children's song and dance dramas between 1920 and 1929 and widely performed them nationwide for several years after the May Fourth Movement. Before creating children's dramas, Li Jinhui participated in drama group activities. In 1911, Li Jinhui participated in the activities of Chunliu Society, the earliest drama club in China (Zhang, 2023). The first children's drama in China, "*Dawn*," created by Guo Moruo, drew inspiration from the creative methods of Western children's dramas. Guo Moruo drew inspiration from Western theatrical forms such as "*The Blue Bird*" and "*The Sinking Bell*" in his creation (Han, 2018).

Chinese drama has influenced the birth of Chinese children's drama. However, children's drama are also different from adult drama. The difference in appreciation habits between children and adults did not lead to the emergence of Chinese children's drama simultaneously. This difference led to the emergence of children's drama after the May Fourth Movement because, at this time, sufficient children's related thinking was necessary to create children's drama that was in line with their appreciation habits. And authors with the ability to create children's dramas naturally emerged. For example, before creating children's dramas, Li Jinhui worked as a music teacher in four primary and secondary schools (Song, 2019). This experience helped Li Jinhui understand the difference between children's art and adults, which is why he created plays that are consistent with children's appreciation habits.

The emergence of children's drama in China is gradual. The environment of Chinese traditional opera, new educational ideas for children, changes in other children's art, and the promotion of drama in China have all led to the birth of Chinese children's drama. The birth of Chinese children's drama not only represents the emergence of a new art form. The birth process of Chinese children's drama reflects the transformation of Chinese society's understanding of children as a group. Moreover, this shift in understanding children, combined with the Chinese traditional opera and the birth of Chinese drama, has changed. We have achieved a transformation from quantitative to qualitative. Thus, Chinese children's drama emerged. Moreover, the quantitative change process before the qualitative change is the various signs before the emergence of Chinese children's drama. It also demonstrates the changes that are happening in the entire Chinese society.

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