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Socio-political, gender, and educational allegories  
in Yuanjie Zheng's fantasy children book *Magic Cube*

By

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## Abstract

The paper provides a brief classification of allegories in the book *Magic Cube*, one of the most popular Chinese children's fantasy literature. By comparing *Magic Cube* to another children's book *The Wizard of Oz*, this study aims to prove that allegories exist commonly in children's fantasy literature. Both *Magic Cube* and *The Wizard of Oz* feature journeys in lands with special rules, except that the protagonist of the former is a boy and the latter is a girl. This paper discusses how male authors write about young protagonists of different genders. This paper aims at adding cross-cultural interpretation of children's fantasy literature to current theories.

To test the hypothesis that socio-political, educational, and gender allegories are ubiquitous in children's fantasy literature, this paper involves close reading of texts from the two examined books in their textual and cultural context. In addition, even though children's fantasy literature is not always gendered, these two books have gender implications related to narratives and plots. I would like clarify that the arguments I have drawn are based on my personal understanding, incorporating academic views and textual evidence that I tend to approve of.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Chinese children's literature, and comments for children, specifically became common at the turn of the twentieth century (Ho, 130). Before 1908 when the first children's book *The Kingdom Without a Cat* in China came into being, the children's books published in China focused mainly on western literature (Nyland, 17). By the 1990s, there were increasing books available to children with expanded topics in China, and by 2000 the Chinese government became concerned that children were almost only being given western books (Nyland, 18). There were several famous Chinese writers creating literature for children and young adults in the last century, and Yuanjie Zheng stood out for his unique writing style and personality. He began to publish his works on newspapers and magazines in 1984, and later in the same year he set up his own magazine 'King of Fairy Tales' with a maximum monthly circulation over 1 million copies (China Daily.com.cn).

It would be fair to mention that Zheng's children's fantasy literature has filled a gap in the Chinese market and at the same time made readers aware that children's literature is not only for children, but can also inspire adults. The original *Magic Cube* serialization began in the 1990s and was republished in 2016. Its animated adaptation of the same name was produced by Shanghai Animation Film Studio between 1990 and 1994, with 26 episodes originally planned, but was discontinued after the 10th episode due to funding and staffing problems. Both the book and the animation constitute an important part in the life of readers born in 1980s to 1990s. In the book *Magic Cube*, the boy protagonist Laike (a word with the same pronunciation as *laike* in Chinese means guests) encountered many peers of diverse species such as a glass boy Lelele (*le* means happiness, and repetition used in Chinese stands for nickname, especially for children), and an ant girl Gelu named after her brother (*ge* stands for brother here, and *lu* is a common girl name). Laike entered the cube when the cube grew bigger and bigger upon being thrown. During Laike's trip to all 26 cube countries with his friends, he

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discovered bizarre rules in all kinds of curious lands, and by following or challenging the local rules he liberated and secured those residents from unreasonable politics.

The process of traveling is a commonly used structure in children's literature. According to Mendlesohn and James, quest fantasy is 'a story (frequently in multiple volumes) involving one or more people travelling through a landscape, learning about the world, and fulfilling some quest or destiny' (Mendlesohn and James 253f.), thus *Magic Cube* is a typical quest fantasy. Lyman Frank Baum's fantasy book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, also known as *The Wizard of Oz*, shares many features with *Magic Cube* in terms of quest fantasy. The Kansas girl Dorothy met a scarecrow who desired brains, a tin woodman in need of a heart, and a cowardly lion on her journey to the Great Oz so that she could return home after being carried away from home by the cyclone. She suffered greatly on the road and killed two wicked witches by accident, and giving people under the tyranny some hope.

Speaking of politics in the children's books, it is usually interpreted by the method of allegory. In *Magic Cube* there was a description of totalitarian lands and the children played a significant role in the tyranny, which was both educational and political allegory. I divide the allegories in the books into three main categories: socio-politics, gender, and education; but these allegories are often weaved into one another. As a female reader, I notice differences between genders in children's books from time to time. Laike in *Magic Cube* as a boy and Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* as a girl had different aims and companions on their journey: in the novel *Magic Cube* there are admirers of the protagonist from time to time, which emphasized the concept of masculinity since Laike is a boy in his identity. I want to examine if the girl protagonists created by male writers have similar or different settings concerning their companions and admirers by analyzing their interpersonal relationship with their adventure companions and their emotional needs due to their social and gender roles.

Like other forms of literature, children's fantasy literature resembles the reality in many

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ways; the writers share their reflection on the reality with insightful allegories. Fantasy literature is more than just fantasy. 'Fantasy literature represents our personal need and the universal quest for deeper realities and eternal truth' (Gates et al, 2). 'In fantasy literature, the plot goes beyond everyday life and beyond what realist literature has to offer' (Kokorski, 4). Although the subject and style of fantasy literature are different from real life, it is still reasonable to assume that the depiction of characters and society in fantasy literature reflects reality in some aspects.

Children's fantasy literature are considered by lots of scholars to be highly white-centered and men-oriented; Maria Sachiko Cecire for instance, argued that some terms such as 'white magic' have overt racial implications (174), and the racial and ethnic others are depicted as 'danger, evil, or competence that requires proper governance (176)'. Chinese language books are oftentimes neglected or othered in mainstream children's fantasy literature. In order to make Chinese language children's literature better known and understood, it is important to closely read the texts from native Chinese writers, and to compare it properly with similar texts in English. Besides, Chinese children's fantasy literature adds on to the understanding of important elements in fantasy literature, and even challenges some biases among the readers.

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## Chapter 2: Socio-political Allegories

In *Magic Cube*, children are not only the victims of tyranny as in *The Wizard of Oz*, but also the agency and performers of tyranny.

According to Merriam-Webster online dictionary, tyranny is:

1 : oppressive power

2a : a government in which absolute power is vested in a single ruler

b : the office, authority, and administration of a tyrant

3 : a rigorous condition imposed by some outside agency or force

4 : an oppressive, harsh, or unjust act : a tyrannical act;

(<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tyranny>)

thus verbally, physically, and mentally othering, confining, and manipulating can all be included into the category of tyranny. The antagonists often become leaders of the state, which allows them to abuse and terrorize their citizens, posing a threat to a peaceful and stable society that the protagonist is fighting for. (Kokorski, 156) In Zheng's *Magic Cube*, however, children seek for peace when they serve as head of state, which is a challenge to stereotypical roles of children. One of the most obvious element of tyranny in *Magic Cube* and Zheng's other books is confinement. Take Chapter 3 for example:

All the adults in this city are under the control of the children. At home, moms and dads obey their children; in society, all leadership positions are held by children... Laike remembered that his own mother and father kept him at home all day (except for school), always controlling him according to the will of the adults, and not letting him make friends. He felt suffocated every day. Well, let the adults have a taste of suffocation. 'Put all the moms and dads in cans, seal them up and store them for a day,' Mayor Laike announced the governance program.



(Figure 1, a scene in animation *Magic Cube* episode 2, The Canned Parents)

This is a carnival-like celebration of the kids after their parents were sealed into special cans. There was a great turn in attitude of the children: when they first ‘excitedly’ supported Laike’s municipal proposal they thought it was ‘highly interesting’ so that they ‘happily surrounded the cans singing and dancing’; later when the children realized that they had not been separated from their parents for such a long time and that they could not open the cans, they panicked and went to Laike crying ‘give me my mom back’ ‘give me my dad back’. Even the idea of children participating in democracy sounds innovating, I would never describe the political system in this city as healthy, mature, or sane. Considering that the governors were extremely young, ‘these days probably 3 or 4-year-olds are in charge’ according to the narrator, it was not surprising that this town is a large mixture of socio-political absurdities.

Pushing young kids to the leadership of such significant responsibilities is never democracy; instead, it is the beginning of tyranny. Whether it is the ‘homogeneous kindergartens’ built for adults or the cans, the essential idea is that children are engaged in the massive tyranny because of their immaturity, and they are victims as well. One simple reason for the young citizens to be upset later was separation anxiety. According to Walrath,

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‘behavioral and emotional manifestations of fear, worry, or upset associated with separation. from home or from individuals to whom the child is attached. Separation anxiety is common throughout preschool age in children, typically emerging around 8–9 months of age.’

From another aspect this means that the children who were participating in politics were not even mentally independent enough to make decisions, and if they are endowed with power, they could perform tyranny on other people and themselves just as Laike did. To some extent, children's tantrums are an expression of low-level tyranny, especially when combined with parental spoiling; in this story, the children rulers take this tyranny to the extreme where all parents were confined. Besides, children in this place played an important role in tyranny since they blindly advocate for unhealthy childlike politics, thus creating a reversed society.

Besides the confinement, other forms of tyranny were mentioned in several other chapters. In *Magic Cube*, it is common to see lands where the citizens were silenced, restrained mentally, manipulated, or deprived of political rights. Here, I would like to discuss the cases in which young generations and other residents were victimized by invisible tyranny in chapter 11 Lock Country, chapter 13 Emperor Laike I, and chapter 14 Three Adventures to Cherry Tower. All these chapters provide insight into the speech freedom.

The first story took place in a primitive society. The Lock Country is an enclosed and silent land founded in 418 BC. But until the day Laike sneaked in, its inhabitants were only farming with slash-and-burn agriculture, covering their bodies with leaves. This country was not only locked by a huge lock in the entry, but also planting a lock behind the head of each inhabitant to prevent them from thinking and communicating. The people there were impressed by the fabric Laike was wearing, thus hoping to develop high technology like the society outside of their land. Only when they negotiated with the King did they know that he was just following the royal family rule to keep everyone else locked so that the family could remain in the throne. It is exactly a policy of obscurantism to keep the people ignorant so that the rulers gain more benefits from tyranny, and the ruled crowd would not be informed or intelligent

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enough to understand if they are mistreated or how they can fight for their own rights. Hanging a lock on human head is miserable enough, not to mention purposefully hindering people from sharing their thoughts, which causes a physical and mental torture. The King was against opening the lock at first, since his ancestors told him that the locks were his guarantee of the throne. Later, the King heard Laike's description of the modernized world and became envious of a better life, therefore he agreed to unlock his 'citizens'. Lock(ed) Country (*suo guo*), also means to shut down and to isolate the country as a verb phrase. This allegory might be a reflection on the historical isolation during the Qing Dynasty of Chinese Empire before the Opium War, or the 1960-70s Cultural Revolution in which China stopped the majority of its diplomacy with other countries. During either period of time, Chinese society suffered from a ubiquitous poverty, and the privileged class was not significantly more privileged than the regular crowd since the whole country was not developed, or developing at all. However, Zheng's story of Lock Country still sounds like a typical Chinese revolutionary styled narrative, since the wish of developing technology in weeks was so close to the Great Leap Forward from 1958 to 1962, champagning on reforming the agrarian country into a modern communist country. It is not surprising if we take the fact that Zheng was born in 1955 into consideration.

The second story is slightly uncannier than the first one, because none of the people in the city were real human beings, instead, they were human-like puppets. At the beginning when Laike luckily landed on the emperor's chair and became an emperor, he and his companions all agreed that Laike as emperor must be able to experience the pleasure of power, and everyone was curious about how great the imperial power was. Therefore, Laike accepted the role of emperor, appointed the glass boy Lelele and the ant girl Gelu as prime ministers, and forced the puppets to play childish games..

Laike did not think he could be an emperor once in his life, so he wanted to feel what it is like to be an emperor. Laike thought, so many people want to be the emperor, it must be very interesting to be one.

Lelele and Little Gelu agreed that Laike should be the emperor for a few days, and they both wanted to

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see how powerful the emperor really was...

Lelele walked up to a minister and lifted his clothes only to see that it was a puppet! Then look at the other ministers, all being puppets. Each puppet has an invisible line under the feet, and all the ministers' lines were linked to the armrest of the emperor's chair. The ministers' every move was completely manipulated by the emperor...

Seeing the emperor and the prime ministers so entertained, the civil and military ministers played more happily. They thought being manipulated was the happiest thing in the world.

The mindset of Laike when he first became an emperor of the puppets was quite simple. He considered himself a puppet performance artist, and he was amused by the interaction with his puppet ministers. Until later a sentence caught my attention, 'they thought being manipulated was the happiest thing in the world'. One of the most noticeable traits in Zheng's narrative is that there are comments from an unidentified omniscient perspective, which makes me wonder whose voice it is: if all the puppets are non-human but only toys, how could they 'think'? If they are not able to think since they do not function like humans, in whose opinion do the puppets feel happy? I tend to perceive that Zheng utilized an unidentified narrator to express his irony, since it is almost a common sense that normal human beings do not enjoy being manipulated, and the puppets are his vehicles of irony.

Laike's encounter on the street in the puppet city, nevertheless, became a more direct allegory of speech freedom. In order to take control of the puppets, there was a wire set up on the street and each puppet connected their strings onto the main wire. Unluckily, our young friends were noticed by the soldiers and then misrecognized as a regular citizen, and forced to be connected and controlled.

The soldiers hooked up Laike, Little Gelu and Lelele to the wire without explanation.

Laike wanted to say, 'I am the emperor', but when the words came out, they turned into 'I support the emperor!' His tongue did not obey his command, it became someone else's tongue. It only resided in his mouth. Laike felt so happy to be a man of his own opinion.

According to *The Order of Discourse*, 'in every society the production of discourse is at once

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controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by ...procedures...' 'to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality'.(Foucault, 52) Censoring people's speech and adapting it into an official discourse, this sounds much too like the censorship that the governments have been using to respond to inappropriate incidents take place. Besides, the line 'I support the emperor' was once the most impressive quote I read from Chinese language children's books, because even though this sort of speech was common, the process in which the speech was unwillingly converted that readers could directly read and see was uncommon. Laike was authorized by the governmental ministers to be an emperor, but he himself was not allowed to claim his dominance over the country, which reveals a fact that privileged individuals do not overpower the totalitarian mechanism itself. So far, I have seen the whole picture of this puppet city and understand that it is a city of totalitarianism. This raises a question: who is the tyrant, the dictator, and the designer of this political system? As was mentioned in the background of this city, the 'former emperor just passed away, and he didn't have any son'. It is obvious that puppets do not die, thus it is reasonable to infer that the former emperor might have been a human, or at least a living being that could think. Probably the old emperor was the artist who crafted all of these puppets and the city. The real-life relation between craftsmen and their artwork should be normal, but once the puppets were personified in children's stories, we see the craftsman as manipulative and the puppets being controlled. Now that the person who created all the system has gone, why would the totalitarian system keep operating? I believe it is the system that forces people to continue working for tyranny. Laike was just a visitor who accidentally participated in this political scheme; if it was not him, there might as well be other participants taking power. Laike chose to be a dictator, when he could no longer master the authority, however, he was turned into a dictator that the institution chose. Interestingly at the end of this chapter, the protagonists did not rescue the country from totalitarianism, unlike what they used

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to do, but running away to the next state. The underlying reason was suggested in the conversion between Laike and Lelele:

He couldn't understand how these puppets had been operated for generations without complaint. Laike decided to issue a holy decree to cut the strings on all the puppets.

'It won't work, will it?' Lelele objected.

'Why?' Laike's eyes widened.

'You are a human being, you would like to have your own opinion. But they are puppets, if you cut the strings, how can they act?'

In the puppet city no one was the actual controlling villain and no real sound was heard, thus it is hard to tell if the puppet citizens were the victims or a part of the collusion for the totalitarian. As a matter of fact, the protagonists could not rescue the puppets or adapt the city into an egalitarian society, because they could not locate anyone being responsible for the tyranny: there was no living tyrant, no rebelling citizens, and no one understanding the reason that the violent institution existed. Thus I may conclude that in the puppet city tyranny was not created but inherited and participated by every part of the society. The invisible tyranny was a collusion with the efforts from the ruler and the ruled. Actually, both the public and the institution organize some sort of deprivation of the rights, and the public are even doing so spontaneously. The public are both victims and accomplices in the invisible violence of right of speech.

Chapter 16 Milk Wells is different from other forms of tyranny above, and I would like to name it an 'utopian tyranny'. I use this oxymoron to reveal that tyranny does not always appear to be one, and sometimes the tyrant makes their citizens to believe that they live in a utopia. The story began with baby animals crying in the bushes, and the protagonists were drawn to them, digging a well so that the baby animals could be fed. When the milk sprang from the well, the glass boy and Laike both carried the weaker animals to drink the milk, leaving carnivores like tigers and bears out in the cold. The ant girl hesitated to give the carnivores

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milk because she feared they would eat the sheep and rabbits. At first all the various animals played together without any worries, but then the tiger could barely resist the urge to eat the rabbits. In order to solve the mentioned problem, the protagonists drilled ten more milk wells, in the hope that carnivores and herbivores could live in peace. But this itself was an atrocity, suppressing the nature of animals, ignoring the laws of nature, and demanding all animals to stifle their own nature to meet the so-called superficial equality. Zheng's fairy tales often feature personified animals, and they stand for different social classes. "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others." (Orwell, 97) The idea of 'being more equal than others' has come to a summary of the inequalities in class, race, and religion, and the power structures in the books that the social leaders tried to maintain. (Kokorski, 155) Unlike reality, Zheng's stories seek equality between species, compensating for the differences between species by denying privileges to creatures higher up the food chain. The carnivores were hated and demonized just as what people do to the capitalists in those proletarian revolution occurred in the alleged communism countries. The rulers exploit the powerful class because they must comfort the poor, or they want to take share of their property; and the ruling class trick the crowd and even themselves to believe that the rich and powerful people are guilty. A similar occurrence happened in chapter 24, namely the follow-up to the Lock Country. The citizens of the Lock Country hunted eagles with shotguns, and not only did they occupy their castle, but also they captured the eagles' descendants. The people and the eagles hated each other, with the citizens guessing that the eagles had captured Laike, and the eagles believing that the citizens persecuted the animals. Eventually Laike decided to stand on the eagle's side, because 'he only taught the citizens of the Lock Country advanced technology, but not to rob others of their land'. He later suggested that all the citizens abandoned their weapons, claiming there was no point making guns. This black-and-white view of things by Laike and his companions led to the utopian tyranny I described above.

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Some of Zheng's political allegories do not fall within the framework of tyranny, yet the common theme among them is that they all more or less reflect Zheng's values, such as collectivism; moreover, Zheng's unconscious masculinism narratives are often reflected in the comments of his unidentified narrator. These features are especially evident in Chapter 4, *The Country on the Train*. The two boys Laike and Lelele boarded the train and discovered that it is the country of the tin men. The tin men's train conductor told them in a 'gruff voice' that there were many emergencies on the train and that he wanted the outsiders to get off as soon as possible.

Laike was reluctant to go down. He felt that there was tenacity in these tin men, and he liked them. Besides, Laike wanted to see what kind of danger he would encounter.

'Let us stay in your country for a while,' begged Laike, 'and maybe we can do something for you.'

'All right.' The conductor, feeling that Laike was not a coward, agreed.

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At that moment, the alarm went off again. Immediately afterwards, the conductor's voice came over the loudspeaker: 'Please get ready, there's an emergency ahead! Please get ready, there's an emergency ahead!'

The tin men all stood up with delighted expressions on their faces, as if they were about to have some joyful event.

'Why are you guys so happy?' Laike asked the tin boy Lunlun.

Lunlun couldn't care less about him anymore.

'They probably take fighting with difficulties as a pleasure.' Lelele said.

The tin men inspired a desire in Laike to fight against difficulties.

In the discourse of societies that promote collectivism and socialism, Chinese society for instance, 'fighting against difficulties' is a very common metaphor. The context implies elements of war and military. This metaphor of difficulties as enemies and milestones sees the subjects of overcoming difficulties as fighting warriors. Because of the reverence that socialist discourse holds for revolution and Zheng's own experiences growing up during the

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revolutionary period, the hardships and perils in this chapter are glorified as something the tin men all aspired to go through. Circumstances that pose a threat to national security are theoretically unwelcome to the nation, but in the collectivist state represented by the train, these circumstances were both an opportunity for the individual to integrate into the collective and a proof that the cooperative efforts of the nation can change the fate of the country. Also, the collectivist discourse emphasizes the importance of fighting as a group and the impact of individuals on their comrades.

The three crises on the train were all defused by collaboration. The first crisis was the flaming cave, all of them held hands to fix each carriage, so as to avoid the carriage being burnt off by the flames; after the end of the danger, all the tin men began to celebrate, which led to Laike's realization that it would be a pleasure to struggle with difficulties. The second time the train needed to drive through the bottomless abyss; the solution was to have all the tin men to stand symmetrically in the carriage to maintain balance. Both experiences greatly challenged Laike's endurance and made him persevere for the sake of the whole crew. However, unlike the first two times, Laike disappointed all the tin people in the third crisis. The uniqueness about the third crisis is that no one was allowed to speak when passing a certain section of the journey, and whoever speaks would cause the train to stop. This requirement may seem unreasonable, but metaphors about speech are by no means rare in Zheng's stories. As a youth who was never allowed outside but for school, Laike could not help but marvel to the conductor when he saw such strange sights as 'houses hanging from trees' and 'bears parachuting from airplanes'. Although it was against the collective interest to speak under the circumstances, it was against the nature of children not to speak.

As I mentioned before, the chapter on the train is notable not only for its collectivism, but also for Zheng's unconscious masculinity narrative. I believe his narrative is unconscious because his focus in the chapter is about discipline rather than gender, and he is dedicated to

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creating courageous girl images in his books even though he can be sometimes biased. It is easier to understand if we look at what happened after Laike exclaimed and caused the train to stop:

Before Laike could finish his sentence, the train had stopped.

Laike then realized that he had made a big trouble!

The tears came out of Laike's eyes.

‘What are you crying for?!’ The conductor glared at Laike. The tin man hated crying the most.

No female character has been seen in this chapter of highly representative of his political ideology, thus I should start analyzing his narrative by what he showcased in male characters and finding out what his ideal for males, or boys, is. If we compare this chapter with the depiction of the Tin Woodman in *The Wizard of Oz*, we will find that the tin men of two authors are very similar in appearance and nature; the essential difference lies in the two authors' portrayal of the tin men's inner character and the language and attitude the authors used to portray these character traits. First of all, when tin people appeared and first interacted with Laike, they warned the protagonists off the danger in a ‘gruff’ voice, while the tin man in *The Wizard of Oz* had Dorothy heard him ‘groaning’ for help when they first met. The coarse voice is generally associated with tough guys of manly image. Zheng's explanation for this coarse voice was ‘probably tin man's voice is not flexible’, which is consistent with the physical characteristics of the Tin Woodman in *The Wizard of Oz* who was prone to rust. Yet Baum did not make any comment on the tone of the Tin Woodman's speech, nor did he connect the ‘tenacious spirit’ to the Tin Woodman's appearance. The tin men on the train accepted Laike into the collective after judging him not to be a coward, while the Tin Woodsman was rescued by Dorothy upon his debut. Dorothy’s act proved that girls can also be instrumental to male characters, and Laike was seeking for conformation of his manhood from the tin boys. Laike’s relation to the tin boys is a more masculine interpersonal connection, especially when he was eager to show that he was not a coward to his male peers. In the framework of traditional

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Chinese discourse of masculinity 'coward' equals de-masculinity and childishness, and children (even adults) use this word to shame other children, especially boys.

Secondly, it is interesting to compare how Zheng and Baum counted for tin man's avoidance of tears.

During the rest of that day there was no other adventure to mar the peace of their journey. Once, indeed, the Tin Woodman stepped upon a beetle that was crawling along the road, and killed the poor little thing. This made the Tin Woodman very unhappy, for he was always careful not to hurt any living creature; and as he walked along he wept several tears of sorrow and regret. These tears ran slowly down his face and over the hinges of his jaw, and there they rusted

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'This will serve me a lesson,' said he, 'to look where I step. For if I should kill another bug or beetle I should surely cry again, and crying rusts my jaws so that I cannot speak.'

...

The Tin Woodman knew very well he had no heart, and therefore he took great care never to be cruel or unkind to anything.

It is obvious that tears hinder tin people's functions physically, but what is obvious is the difference of length the two writers used to convey the messages to the readers. Unlike Baum's informative and sensitive description of the Tin Woodman altogether with his sentimental thoughts, Zheng almost only gave the readers a negative judgement that tin people hated crying, or tears, based on the previous conclusion that they were admired for their masculinity. In fact, in more than one book Zheng emphasized that crying is only for girls and boys should never shed a tear. Moreover, tears stand for the expression of feelings. The Tin Woodman always wanted to regain a heart so that he could feel emotions better, while the tin men on the train tended to suppress any sentimental expressions that were negatively connected to femininity. Zheng's unconscious rejection of feminine traits and his resistance to femininity in his books with male protagonists have othered and stereotyped female characters in his stories. Zheng wrote two books for boys and girls respectively, and on the book for girls he jokingly noted

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‘for girls exclusively’. In the ‘boys’ book’ the twin brother scared the twin sister with firecrackers to tears, and he mocked her as a ‘coward’; in the book for girls where the twin sister was the protagonist, she was nearly drowned in a pond of girls’ tears. As for the beginning of the two books, Zheng claimed that the boy had ‘bigger guts’ than the girl, and this was why a boy is a boy; Zheng also had the twin brother as the opening narrator in the girls’ book.

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### Chapter 3: Gender Allegories

Zheng's and Baum's texts might not be equally gendered, yet gendered implications can be found in both. In their books, male and female protagonists bring different consequences upon their arrival in the new place. Young protagonists of different genders enter new places far from the environment they know due to different factors, and their arrival brings different effects to the inhabitants of the new places. As a boy, Laike had a tantrum because he could not solve the Rubik's Cube. After throwing the cube, he saw the cube getting bigger and bigger in front of his eyes, and out of curiosity he entered the cube from an open corner. This plot reinforces the stereotype of boys as violent and impatient. In this case, Laike himself is the one who triggers the series of events including the earthquake inside of the cube which caused great injuries among glass people. Dorothy grew up in Kansas in the center of the United States, where natural disasters such as hurricanes are not uncommon, and so she was taken by force majeure far from her hometown. The house she sheltered in happened to smash the evil witch, so the people of the East in Oz adored her and considered her arrival a blessing.

The two protagonists arrived unaware of what they have done to the world that they have entered, and it was only when they met the locals that they gained awareness and reflection on their actions. In both cases casualties were rendered but depending on the subjects being involved in the incidents, only Dorothy initially was adored as a heroine for rescuing the locals, and Laike was luckily forgiven by the glass boys. This coincides with social stereotypes for different genders that males are supposed to create and invade at all cost while females clean up the mess left behind. Besides, the real reason for the 'murder' of the witch was natural disaster, and the cause of Dorothy failing to shelter was that she had to protect her dog. Females are described as easily impacted by external factors and caregivers even at a young age.

As Stephens suggests, this is because there is a tendency for major genres in children's literature to be "endemically gendered in their character functions, events and outcomes"

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(Stephens, 17). This theory may be the answer to the question why writers need girl and boy protagonists to have their own method of starting the journey. The beginning of *Magic Cube*, like other books of Zheng, is highly gendered and full of boyhood impulses.

‘I’m going to have to conquer you today!’ Laike swore as he spun the cube. But the cube was still randomly colored, regardless of whether Laike swore. He felt dizzy and put the cube down fiercely on the table.

Huh, strange thing! The cube is getting bigger.

In a short while, the cube stood like a building in front of Laike.

‘I’d like to see what’s inside!’ Laike muttered to himself and walked to the cube, the bottom right corner of the square of the white plastic veneer uncovered a corner.

Laike gave a cry of surprise with joy, there was a city inside! Finally, there is a place to have fun, Laike did not hesitate to go inside.

So far, Laike did not realize what his violence have led to. He even socialized with several glass boys upon his arrival, and they kept him company to visit their injured friend at the hospital. This is where Laike first recognized his own violence and apologized to the peers. Dramatically, his sincere apologies were able to cure the injured boy.

Good grief, all the hospital wards were filled with patients.

‘Why are there so many patients?’ It seemed to Laike that the glass people should not be sick. ‘There was a big earthquake yesterday and a lot of people were injured in the crash, didn’t you see that they were all surgical patients?’ Gugugu (one of the glass boys) told Laike.

Laike took a closer look, well, some of the glass people broke their legs, some broke their arms, and some lost their noses.

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Laike suddenly remembered that he once dropped the cube hard, could it be... Laike blushed.

It is noticeable that Laike is a boy full of emotions: joy, amazement, curiosity, and shame when he realized his wrongdoing; meanwhile, Laike is also impatient and impulsive due to his overwhelming passion. Even though Laike is the narrator in this book, I reasonably infer that

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the author Zheng projected his ideal of what a child, or more specifically, a 10-year-old boy should be like: simple, carefree, careless, with his sense of justice. Laike started his journey with a violent performance of his own, just like other male-oriented boy adventure stories where males are ‘troublemakers’.

And here I would like to comparatively read how Dorothy, altogether with her dog Toto, landed in Oz.

Toto jumped out of Dorothy's arms and hid under the bed, and the girl started to get him. Aunt. Em, badly frightened, threw open the trap door in the floor and climbed down the ladder into the small, dark hole. Dorothy caught Toto at last and started to follow her aunt. When she was halfway across the room there came a great shriek from the wind, and the house shook so hard that she lost her footing and sat down suddenly upon the floor.

Then a strange thing happened.

The house whirled around two or three times and rose slowly through the air. Dorothy felt as if she were going up in a balloon.

The little girl gave a cry of amazement and looked about her, her eyes growing bigger and bigger at the wonderful sights she saw.

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While she stood looking eagerly at the strange and beautiful sights, she noticed coming toward her a group of the queerest people she had ever seen...

When these people drew near the house where Dorothy was standing in the doorway, they paused and whispered among themselves, as if afraid to come farther. But the little old woman walked up to Dorothy, made a low bow and said, in a sweet voice: "You are welcome, most noble Sorceress, to the land of the Munchkins. We are so grateful to you for having killed the Wicked Witch of the East, and for setting our people free from bondage." (Chapter 2)

Upon Dorothy's arrival, the Munchkins gathered to celebrate the evil witch of the West's death caused by Dorothy's landing, even though she was not aware of the fact from the beginning. 'Dorothy was an innocent, harmless little girl', so as the narrator said. Dorothy failed to realize that her arrival killed the witch because she lost track of her whereabouts during the trip, and

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as a young girl, she felt reluctant to accept that she ended someone else's life even if it was not on purpose; in addition, she was a typical modest girl who did not boast her achievement. In contrast with the stereotypical males who create problems, the female seems to be problem solvers in this case: Dorothy by her accidental landing on a foreign land emancipated the civilians. At first Dorothy denied, 'I have not killed anything'. After seeing 'two feet' 'sticking out from under a block of wood', however, she 'gave a cry of fright', 'clasping her hands together in dismay'. Clearly, she was anxious about what she had done that might have led to consequences, and she was so frightened by the thought of killing a person that her body language revealed her fear. According to Kathryn James, death is an instrument of power (13), and death is gendered (14). If we take a closer look in the first few chapters, Dorothy was not only intimidated by the concept of death, but also overwhelmed by the dread of the power endowed by an action of killing.

Efrat Tseëlon writes that woman "serves the dual function of signifying a fear and the defense against [death] at the same time" (101) Dorothy's direct confront with death removed the protection standing between her as a female and child and the witch's death representing huge political power, in another word, the 'defense' against death was impaired, thus she had to cope with the growing fear of rendering a death. She did not feel comfortable about the idea of killing people partly because she was a female, different from the wicked witch who tried to slave her and kill her. She did not crave the power as her tin friend and scarecrow friend did (these two characters chose to be local rulers while Dorothy was about to go back home).

Dorothy's second 'murder' is also worth closely reading. When Oz introduced himself as 'the Great and Terrible', Dorothy respectfully answered 'I am Dorothy, the Small and Meek', in spite of Oz's response that Dorothy was 'strong enough to kill the Wicked Witch of the East'. Oz traded with Dorothy on the condition that she could kill the Witch of the West for him in this game of power struggle. Just as Dorothy questioned 'If you, who are Great and Terrible,

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cannot kill her yourself, how do you expect me to do it?', Oz turned out to be a mediocre man from a circus, which explained how a man who did not deserve his throne asked a girl to conduct a murder for his political need. Besides, Dorothy killed the Witch of the West with water, a most common and essential substance, which is supposed to save life rather than taking someone's life. It is obvious that the males, the Oz and the author Baum pushed Dorothy to be the agency of death, which embodies men's recognition and compromise for female power. By arranging the water as a deadly weapon, I believe it is suggested that it is easier for a girl to kill a villain than we imagine, or the death is understated, in children's books. As I quoted, death is an instrument to power, the witch told Dorothy that she could take over her castle and people after she died, even though Dorothy had no intention of being a ruler.

Apparently Zheng's and Baum's opinions on children's gender differ from each other. Dorothy as a girl does not have admirers but only some males serving as knights, while Laike has several girl characters crushing on him. It is a reflection of the author Zheng's expectation for boys, and vanity is a part of boy's pride. Another guess is that Baum deemed girls of Dorothy's age were genderless.



(Illustration of Dorothy from early copies of *The Wizard of Oz*, her estimated age is similar to Laike according to this image.)

According to Elizabeth Marshall, in children's books, the boys are usually instrumental and active while the girls appear as passive and dependent (259). This explains why there were

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always girl admirers around Laike: because of them, his skills were shown to be helpful to women and they rescued women; at the same time, the girls' admiration as a reward, indirectly displayed that Laike's behaviors were masculine, worthy of affirmation. The male characters around Dorothy were instrumental sometimes, but the essential difference is that Dorothy also demonstrated her instrumental traits to ensure her companions' safety rather than waiting for being helped. One can see Dorothy as a female leader of her male followers, and the relationship is more professional than romantic. These male characters had their own experience and goals in life, they viewed Dorothy as a role model because of her courage, and they were able to settle down to their own leadership without Dorothy. On the other hand, the female characters in *Magic Cube* grew dependent on Laike so that he had to sneak away without saying goodbye. The females, not matter girls or grown women in the book, were depicted to count on a 10-year-old to solve their problems.

In my discussed books, Girls are more enthusiastic in finding the way back home while boys prefer to stay outside of home. As Dorothy said,

‘no matter how dreary and gray our homes are, we people of flesh and blood would rather live there than in any other country, be it ever so beautiful. There is no place like home’.

It is interesting that both Laike and Dorothy exclaimed out loud because of their amazement at the new land, because regardless of their gender, they were both children about the same age. The residences where they originally lived were colorless and boring, while the cube states and Oz were filled with vibrant landscapes, which catered to children's need of fulfilling their curiosity. Their emotions for being away from home diverged after the shock. As children's books, both works are organized in a way that shorter paragraphs brief the readers the development of plots. While this trait is shared by both, what remains undeniable is that the sentences in *Magic Cube* are even more fragmented than in *The Wizard of Oz*, despite the different grammar structure in Chinese from English. I assume this to some extent represents how the boy's attention was distracted by all the new people and things he was about to explore,

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while the girl has always kept her goal of returning home in mind.

For Laike, the cube was his belonging, and he explored the cube just like checking through his property. He was so confident when he determined to enter the cube as if he had the dominance over the object: he threw the cube away, he walked into it, and he planned to enjoy the stay inside. As for Dorothy, she could not fight against the cyclone, therefore, she was brought by the cyclone away from home. This can be seen as a metaphor that males take charge of the properties while females are forced to migrate for economical or marital reasons; or on the contrary, males are confined while females venture outwards. Therefore, Dorothy's urge to return home was due to her uncomfortable feeling of staying outside of her family, besides drifting outside of her home state. Dorothy was more forced to travel around the Oz because she had to fulfill her tasks so that she could return home, and even though she went to most dangerous parts of the country, she was not driven by her curiosity. She was pushed to travel, and pushed to kill, but the only thing she was interested in was going home. Laike, on the very contrary, only thought about his family when he was touched by the occurrences he brought into being.

Another factor contributing to the attitudes of two children concerning returning home was their interpersonal relationship with their family members in real life. Laike was an only child just like so many other only children in 1990s China. When Laike invited his neighbor boy to play with him, his dad 'gave him a bad scold' and the boy was so intimidated that he never dared to come back. And not only that, Laike's parents refused to entertain him. 'They simply raise their son as a rabbit; it seemed that Laike had nothing else to do every day but eat'; and when he asked questions out of curiosity, his parents commented 'what is wrong with this child'. The closeness to their family was a nice motive to come back home, and Dorothy's attachment to her aunt and uncle was obviously much stronger than Laike's to his parents.

Although Baum might have attempted not to strengthen the biases on female gender in

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children's book, other authors such as Zheng's overwhelming masculine texts shed light on the gender awareness of children. And people of older age may as well be referred to in the allegories. Genderless might also be gendered, when another category is overly emphasized, the genderless group is othered.

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## Chapter 4: Educational Allegories

Zheng wants to educate children through his books and to avoid indifferent parenting styles.

The first chapter of *Magic Cube* explains Laike's family background: Laike was an only child, and his parents were extremely unconcerned about his mental growth, while also cutting him off from his neighbors and peers. In addition, his parents did not guide him to develop his curiosity, but denied his ideas in the first place, saying that he 'has some problem'. Despite this relatively extreme description, it reflects some common traits of Chinese parents, such as being more controlling and purposeful in parenting. Chinese parents feature a high degree of control and an emphasis on school performance (Rao, et al., 485). Zheng often presents his young heroes as children with poor academic performance and naughtiness, but occasional novel ideas. This setting is not only a review and appeasement of his own childhood, but also a rebellion and protest against the stereotypical parents and schools. In his vision, children can become well-rounded individuals who gain the necessary experience and knowledge through reading. The introduction he wrote for *Magic Cube* is: Life is a Magic Cube Mansion where [we] look for patterns in the vagaries and pursuing the essence. The essence he mentioned, as I interpret with my reading experience, is the good nature of children, the innate bravery, justice, kindness, inquisitiveness, and so on. By portraying these wonderful children's images, he has sent a message to traditional parents that outdated educational methods do not always work, and that 'bad' children in the conventional sense also have many strengths. Parents should be more open to accepting, understanding and respecting the individuality of their children, because otherwise it is harmful. The parental acceptance-rejection theory holds that children need acceptance from parents and other attachment figures, and when children are not embraced by their parents, they tend to develop negative attributes, including hostility and aggression, impaired self-esteem, and emotional problems (Rohner et al., 299). Although luckily Laike did

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not display many of those negative traits, not every child has access to a child utopia where they learn to grow up on their own.

In two chapters named after avian animals, Zheng unfolded intriguing and curious episodes about knowledge acquisition. The first story was staged at the White Swan Restaurant where a group of gorgeously dressed animal nobles threatened to close the restaurant because they do not offer ‘nutritious’ meals. The swan waitress and manager from the restaurant told Laike that a reputable old doctor diagnosed these animal nobles as malnourished. After talking with the nobles, Laike found them very ignorant and knowledgeable, and after the deduction he concluded that by malnutrition the old doctor meant a lack of knowledge. Laike's comment on the animal nobles was ‘People without knowledge do stupid things. Terrible.’ After recognizing the importance of knowledge, the protagonists cooked the animal nobles a meal rich in knowledge.

Shortly after, the waitress brought a stack of books and several large bottles of ink.

Laike poured a bottle of ink into the pot, and the fire was turned up. After a while, the ink was hot and smoky; Laike picked up a book, tore off a page from it, and threw it into the pot.

What a great discovery, you can fry things in ink! The page was immediately deep-fried, and Laike put in another page...

The waiters brought these bizarre meals up to the nobles. Once they heard that it was a meal. rich in nutrients, the nobles gobbled it up and it tasted pretty good.

Laike regretted that he did not bring a pen, otherwise, he really wanted to put the pen into the. soup pot to fill some ink.

There is a commendatory Chinese idiom ‘having ink in one’s stomach’ to describe people who are educated, and ‘to drink ink’ means to accept education, especially higher education. In this allegory, however, Zheng never meant to praise the animals who acquired knowledge by drinking ink. It is clearly an irony because the animal nobles were pigs, dogs, leopards, wolves and other animals that have often played stupid or evil roles in Chinese fairy tales and were

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described by the author as ‘greasy’, ‘fat-headed’, ‘pretentious’, and ‘disgusting’. After eating the book mishmash, the animals made a variety of illogical statements, such as ‘to let the restaurant hibernate’ and ‘the restaurant does not need to have the first floor’, so these aristocrats once again made the White Swan Restaurant suffer from a crisis. The final solution was to let these animals eat only one book of one subject at a time to avoid confusion in the system of knowledge. This story satirizes the uneducated but boastful people, and their embarrassment of learning a lot but not learning well. It also sarcastically illustrated the ignorance of people who want to learn in such a simple way, eating, and without any effort. The narrative of this story is one in which the appearance of ignorant animals were uglified and shamed, especially the Countess wolf, who Laike remarked that she was 'dressed too ugly' and ought to be 'given a book of aesthetics to eat'. While the purpose of this chapter was to indirectly educate the reader that knowledge is invaluable, this way of depicting characters by linking their external appearance to their inner nature seems slightly outdated and simplified. Moreover, throughout the whole book *Magic Cube*, the characters who served as dependent, shallow, emotional, and ignorant were usually females.

Zheng has made irony against didactic and exam-oriented schooling, while he fell into the trap of didacticism as well.

Traditional Chinese teaching emphasizes drills and cramming with the child's effort, the teacher's authority, and discipline. (Rao et al., 477). There was such a school that included from first grade to college graduation, using the fast-track method of teaching; students needed to pass a daily test to advance to a higher grade. This school tested students by having them repeat what the teacher has said. One parrot who was enrolled with the protagonists took only five days to get his doctorate, making Laike and the others very envious. At the celebration for Dr. Parrot, the principal not only announced that only parrot students would be admitted in the future, but also renamed the school as ‘Parrot School’. However, Dr. Parrot could not say

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anything except repeating the words of the principal. Laike led the glass boy and the ant girl to the store, and borrowed three small tape recorders. They utilized the tape recorders to pass the school exams and all became PhDs.

‘So my recorders are all ready for college?’ The salesman asked with a smile.

‘All high achievers.’ Laike thanked the salesman

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‘What did we learn in Parrot School?’ Little Gelu suddenly found herself with a feeling of emptiness.

‘Yeah, what did we learn?’ Lelele also froze.

In this story we see irony about the dogmatic faculty, the rigid criteria for exams, and the repeater-like students. Although the story is an exaggeration of the reality in Chinese schools, it partly reflected some common drawbacks in the exam-oriented education system. While the students feel confused about what are the qualities the school is asking for, the schools are also perplexed about creating more efficient methods of examining students’ achievements. Since Zheng was so dissatisfied with the traditional education system, he conveyed his irony to the readers via Laike that ‘With this stuff [certificate] you have knowledge; without it, knowledge doesn’t count’. It is true that a diploma is not indicative of a person's education. Yet while Zheng tries hard to avoid schooling to indoctrinate students, he exported quite a few values with his stories, many of which were assertive and subjective comments.

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## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Children's fantasy books such as *Magic Cube* and *The Wizard of Oz* have abundant allegories to represent some real-life phenomena. Nevertheless, many stories convey morals that are not fully representative of the reality of society. The authors' subjective opinions greatly influence their writing, such as what their original intentions were in writing, what they want to guide children to do, and what bad examples they warn them not to follow. Such messages are very susceptible to factors such as the author's personal upbringing, the context of the time of writing, and writing style, and even the reader's interpretation varies from person to person. I would therefore like to make it clear that the arguments I have drawn are based on my personal understanding, incorporating academic views and textual evidence that I tend to approve of. I chose Zheng's and Baum's books as examples, because both books belong to the range of quest fantasy with a variety of peculiar instances, and their main characters have very distinctive features.

Using Zheng's text to compare Baum's text does not show that Chinese children's literature is necessarily full of explicit sexism, nor that English children's literature is a model of gender equality. Both books are among the better known and more popular works of children's fantasy literature in their respective languages, and comparing the two books can reflect, to some extent, the values and gender perceptions recognized by different readers. The unconscious political ideology and masculinity appear more frequently in Zheng's narrative than in Baum's, which also reflects the existence of less than reasonably expected gender roles for children in contemporary children's literature in the Chinese context. Similarly, although Baum's text cannot be considered sexist, the image of a genderless Dorothy in his book still warn us that girls are underrepresented in children's literature.

By depicting children as innocent tyrants, Zheng was able to show the connection between children's natural tantrum and the absurdity in the political society. His experience with

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authorities gifted him abundant resources and reflection regarding social and political issues. He is positively writing about the real society, but also due to his exposure to the ideological education, he unconsciously displays the traits that he has been objecting to. For example, he satirizes the dictatorship in several chapters, while he advocates to a fake egalitarian animal world as his ideal state; he tries to let the protagonist stand out at the cost of stereotyping the females. The authorship can be a dictatorship under certain circumstances, and the author should grow aware of their impact on the readers.

Education and gender issues are long existing in all societies. Chinese language being one of the most spoken language, is capable of informing people of what we deserve to know, so as the Chinese literature for children. An educational book should always be open to different possibilities and interpretations by both children and adults, and it should never take away children's imagination and questions; it should be inspiring us to think about our reality, and to explore beyond the limitation of the book itself and the authors' ideas.

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