

# Chinese Popular Literature and the Child

Dorothea Hayward Scott



# *Chinese Popular Literature*

---

## *and the Child*

---

*Dorothea Hayward Scott*

American Library Association

Chicago 1980

Copyright © 1980 by the American Library Association

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

Printed in the United States of America.

**Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Scott, Dorothea Hayward.

Chinese popular literature and the child.

**Bibliography**

1. Children's literature, Chinese—History and criticism.
2. Chinese literature—History and criticism. I. Title.

PN1009.C5S36

895.1'09'9282

80-10412

ISBN 0-8389-0289-8

Designed by Richard Pace

with modifications by ALA Publishing Services staff

Composed by FM Typesetting Company in Linotype Caledonia  
with Garamond and Delphin II display faces

Printed on 50# Warren's 1854, a pH-neutral stock,  
and bound by Braun-Brumfield, Inc.

Cover design by Ellen Pettengell

---

To all my  
Chinese friends,  
East and West

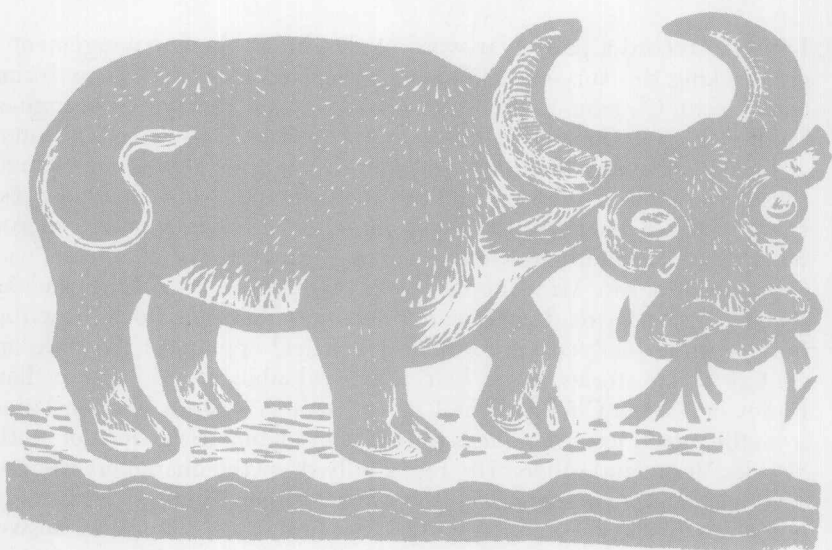
## Acknowledgments

---

I wish to record a particular word of thanks for the encouragement in undertaking this survey which I have received from two of my former teachers of Chinese, Mrs. Anne Chang of the School of Language Studies, Ealing College, London, and Mrs. Shu-hsiu Tien Macdonald of Leeds University, England, whose translations of rhymes and tongue twisters embellish the last chapter of the book. Professor Chow Tse-tsung of the University of Wisconsin, who has always been generous with his advice and help, kindly consented to write the character “east” on page 29 for me. Mr. Bing-cho Chan, Mrs. Jeannette Cheng, and Ms. Joyce Yang kindly read the twentieth-century children’s books described in the text and helped me formulate a critical opinion of the style and content of the stories. Their help was invaluable. I also wish to thank Professor Tsai-fa Cheng of the University of Wisconsin for translations from the introductory prefaces to Lu Hsün’s Chinese versions of stories of Jules Verne and others. He, too, kindly drew the characters from my seal which are embossed on the cover. Other Chinese friends, too numerous to mention individually, have been most helpful in answering the many questions I have asked along the way. I am grateful to them all. When, as is inevitable in a work of this nature, I have tied myself into knots, my husband, A. C. Scott, has patiently helped me unravel them. My grateful thanks also go to Ms. Hallie Kirschner and Mrs. Grace Miller, who have patiently typed the many drafts and the finished text of the book.

D.H.S.

*December, 1978*



Wood-cut by Huang Yung-yü a contemporary twentieth-century Chinese artist

## Contents

---

	Figures	viii
	Acknowledgments	ix
	Introduction	1
1	Chinese Literature and Its Transmission from Early Times	7
2	Myths, Legends, and Symbolism	21
3	Traditional Education and the Classics	47
4	Storytellers, Puppets, and Theaters	61
5	Folk Epics of the Fifteenth Century and Their Influence	75
6	Popular Novels and Story Collections of a Later Period	91
7	The Twentieth Century and Development of a Modern Colloquial Literature for Children	109
8	Folklore and Nursery Rhymes, Riddles and Proverbs	139
	Chronology	153
	Bibliography	155
	Index	169

## Figures

1	Section of inscribed oracle bone	8
2	Principles and forms of shell and bone inscription	9
3	Wood-block printing, ca. 1195–1200	16
4	The eight trigrams	23
5	The Ten Heavenly Stems and Twelve Earthly Branches	24
6	The Chinese character for “east”	29
7	The imperial dragon	33
8	The phoenix	34
9	The money tree	38
10	Door gods	39
11	A puppeteer	42
12	Mooncake peddler	45
13	A page from an early, illustrated Chinese primer	52
14	The <i>Do Not Eat Beef Chant</i>	53
15	The monk Tripitaka and Monkey	92
16	Title picture from cartoon film	95
17	Lu Hsün’s famous couplet	119
18	Two drawings of children by Feng Tzu-k’ai	133



## Introduction

---

Literature written especially for children (apart from school primers) did not exist in China in any appreciable way until the end of the nineteenth century. Instead, from the earliest times, Chinese children were fortunate in being able to listen to master storytellers whose entertainment consisted of every kind of tale drawn from a vast repertoire of literature dating back to the tenth century B.C. Myths; legends; animal fables; stories of gods and ghosts, heroes and villains, of love and war; interspersed with songs, poems, jokes, rhymes, and riddles; all were grist to their mill.

Chinese stories retold for western children always draw on the tales made popular by the storytellers. But what was the origin of these tales? Because a child's first understanding of a people from another country will be gained through stories read or told about them, it is important to know the sources of retold stories so that judgment can be made as to their authenticity. To eradicate from a child's mind a false stereotype implanted through misleading pictures or unauthentic stories introduced to them when very young is extremely difficult. We know from the intensity of the "black is beautiful" campaign in contemporary western children's literature how hard it is to undo the harm of false stereotypes.

For centuries the Bible, an anthology of ancient literature, with the moral precepts it teaches, has dominated the cultural life of the western world, its history and literature, its customs and festivals, and certainly the education of its children. For example, it would only be necessary to mention "Daniel in the lion's den" or the story of Noah's Ark to call forth an immediate imaginative reaction in the minds of most western children, without any further elaboration of the story. Even in this secular age, almost every child knows the story behind the Christmas and Easter festivals. In exactly the same way, the words of ancient Chinese historians, poets, and philosophers, their moral teachings and the stories they told to illustrate their points, written down before the third century B.C. and generally referred to as the Classics, colored the whole cultural life of China and its education system. These were the sources to which the storytellers turned for many of their tales which became elaborated through the ages with

## 2 Introduction

countless tellings and retellings. Many of the stories from these ancient sources are as familiar to Chinese children as Cinderella or Little Red Riding Hood are to western children. But the familiar stories collected by Basile, Perrault, and Grimm were not originally told for children. In Europe, as in the rest of the world, the presence of children has always encouraged storytelling from familiar sources nearest to hand.

In China professional storytelling has been a highly developed art from very early times and one whose continuity remains unbroken today. Where did the traditional stories of China come from and how old are they? How is it that China's literature dating from one thousand, two thousand, three thousand years ago is so much alive today? How is it that Mao Tse-tung could refer in two brief sentences to a story from the philosopher-sage Lieh-tzu of the fifth century B.C. and be sure to be understood by the uneducated masses to whom his words were addressed? What really are the sources for stories whose origins are given in the kind of vague reference one sees so often in western translations, "story from the Warring States period, fifth to third century B.C."? These are the kinds of questions this book sets out to answer for the benefit of editors, librarians, teachers, and parents who wish to provide reliable guidance in children's reading about China.

The very word "China" seems to conjure up visions of the exotic and fantastic. From the time of Marco Polo onwards, travelers' tales of the marvels of the East have fascinated the western world. Strange customs still lingering on in overseas Chinese communities provide a living illustration of a different way of life. Why do they have a lion dance procession, why do they set off noisy firecrackers on festive occasions, why do they have dragon boat races, why do they hang up decorated lanterns, and why do they eat moon cakes? All of these customs and many more are rooted in ancient traditions and stories. Their origins are known, but the temptation to invent explanations or embroider the truth has often proved irresistible. The difficulty of learning Chinese, the comparatively few people who have gained sufficient knowledge to translate it, and the even smaller minority of these who have turned their attention to children's literature, the vast amount of existing literature to encompass in order to obtain a perspective view, all this has encouraged both the idea that everything Chinese is different and mysterious and that any out-of-the-way explanation will serve as well as another.

It is impossible to consider children's literature in China without reference to the system of education. Literature and the art of calligraphy were held in such high esteem that from the time of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.—A.D. 220) to the turn of the twentieth century, the educated man deemed fit for government office was the one well versed in the Classics, the literature of the tenth to the third centuries B.C., which included songs and poems of many kinds, official chronicles and histories, and the philosophies and moral sayings of great sages like

Confucius and Mencius. A scholar had to be able to express himself in the accepted form of literary style patterned after these Classics. All education was geared to this ideal. On the one hand this veneration for the Classics has preserved a huge body of work with an unbroken tradition unique in the world. On the other hand, the requirements of classical scholarship led to the establishment of an educated elite writing in a literary style which was divorced from everyday spoken language. A key to the many revolutionary changes which have taken place in contemporary China may be sought in the rejection of the old learning in the earlier part of this century and the call by modern scholars for a new written style more compatible with everyday spoken language.

Parallel in time to the great body of classical literature, there grew up a flourishing colloquial genre, called "small talk," from which the Chinese term for a novel or short story derives. The themes for this popular literature were drawn from many different literary and oral sources and included myths about the creation, the wonders of the natural world and the perils of the infernal regions, tales of gods and supernatural beings, the chivalrous exploits of past heroes, and romantic love stories. Interspersed with the stories there were songs, poems, ballads, and humorous anecdotes. Jokes, rhymes, and riddles were also written down, material which was often culled from marketplace gossip and the talk of the streets. Although this kind of writing was despised by the literati, it is recorded that court chroniclers traveled round the countryside to collect and write down the things they heard as an important reflection of public opinion. The official chronicles of the early periods of Chinese history, therefore, often contained sections with colloquial writing of this kind. In completing their accounts of the past, the early historians drew upon the myths and legends woven around the creation and racial origins thus recorded.

The introduction of Buddhism into China from India in the second century A.D. was a paramount influence on the development of a folk literature based on stories of the supernatural, animal fables, and magic happenings. The early Buddhist monks were often skilled storytellers and ballad singers who used their arts for proselytizing the Buddhist scriptures, and in doing so, laid the foundations for the more sophisticated storytellers of a later age. However, it was not only the Buddhists who used the art of storytelling for religious purposes. Taoists, the intellectual sources of whose faith was derived from the teachings of two philosophers of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., used storytelling to convert the common people to follow "the Way" (Tao), drawing upon nature myths and primitive beliefs in the supernatural for their tales.

Even though some of this popular oral literature was recorded, many rhymes, riddles, jokes, and tongue twisters repeated by generations of Chinese children had never been written down at all until serious

study of oral and folk material was begun in the twentieth century. Then every region was found to have its own repertoire of traditional rhymes for children, the subjects and the types of which are very similar to those we know in English: lullabies; ring-a-roses and hand-clapping rhymes; counting rhymes and those about parts of the body and things to eat; rhymes about animals, birds, fishes, and insects; and rhymes about holidays and festivals. There are also flower-sellers' songs, beggars' chants, birthday songs, riddle rhymes, cumulative rhymes, and rhymes about the weather.

Written and printed Chinese uses characters or symbols that represent whole words. Some, signifying objects like sun, moon, or tree, are derived from ancient and purely pictorial forms; some are simple representations of such basic concepts as above or below, or numbers, such as one, two, or three which are represented by an equivalent number of strokes. But by far the majority are composite characters of either pictorial or ideographic symbols as *moon* and *window* to mean bright, or combinations of an element indicating the meaning and known as a radical, with a purely phonetic element indicating the sound only. For instance, the radical for water is included in a large number of characters signifying liquid of some sort. But because of the comparatively small number of sounds compared to the thousands of characters which can be represented, there are many homophones, that is to say, different characters expressed by the same sound, exactly as in the English *tail* and *tale* which are pronounced in the same way but mean different things. To help avoid confusion with similar-sounding words, the Chinese use a pronunciation system having four different tones for each sound. A child learning to speak a word learns the tone and never afterwards makes a mistake. This tonal quality of the Chinese language readily lends itself to sing-song chanting and recitation, echoed in the techniques of the storytellers. Every visitor to Chinese schools or kindergartens is struck by the universal practice of children learning by reciting aloud in unison. This has always been their method of learning. Primers to the Classics, all were learned in this way.

The literature of China over a long period of time has reflected social and historical events marked by both continuity and change. From the second century B.C. until 1908, China was ruled by an absolute monarchy, then passed through revolution to the establishment of a republic, and after a further period of war and civil strife, became the Marxist People's Republic we know today. In the following pages the writer has traced against this background a profile of Chinese literature and has shown how that literature has influenced the minds of children, literate and illiterate alike. In order to understand the revolution which has taken place since 1950 in Chinese attitudes to children, in their education and the provision of literature written for them, we have first to understand the traditions which shaped them for centuries.

This account does not review the new literature—a separate book is needed for that and can be written only after a comprehensive collection of the first three decades of publications is available for study. It does show how the seeds for a new children's literature were sown in the years of China's first Republic.



Chinese papercut:  
a contemporary design

## Chinese Literature and Its Transmission from Early Times

---

## I

China's long and living tradition of literature, both oral and written, goes back for nearly four thousand years to the period known as the Shang dynasty (1765–1123 B.C.). The story of its preservation and influence is a remarkable one, and any adequate appreciation of the civilization of China must take into account the profound part her literature has played in all aspects of her cultural life. To this earliest recorded period belong a substantial number of written records. Literature proper, the earliest songs, poems, histories, and philosophical and moral writings belong to the next millenium, referred to in Chinese history as the Chou dynasty (1122–221 B.C.), and are known in general terms as the Classics. In the chronicles written in this period historians attempted to trace the origins of their people back to the beginning of time and incorporated in their purely historical accounts of contemporary events stories based on oral sources about how their world began. Once written down, many of these, although known to be mythical, became the authoritative sources for popular stories, told and retold. Comparatively recent archaeological discoveries have thrown new light on this legendary period of Chinese history, a brief description of which gives some background to these early stories.<sup>1</sup>

### Oracle Bones

The earliest known written records were inscribed on large animal bones and tortoise shells or on bronze vessels of many kinds. Ancient bronze inscriptions have been known and revered from time immemorial in China, but the many thousands of bone inscriptions now known were only discovered towards the end of the nineteenth century. About that time the attention of two scholars was drawn to pieces of bone with inscriptions on them which were turning up in local medicine shops near the ancient site of An-yang in modern Honan Province (fig. 1). It was ascertained that local farmers were finding the bone fragments when they plowed and were selling them to medicine shops where they were being ground up and sold as "dragon bones," thought to be a good medical remedy by the credulous! The inscribed char-





Figure 1. Section of inscribed oracle bone

from Tung Tso-pin, "On the Inscription of Scapulae in Seoul University's Collection" in *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology* 28:825-40 (1957). Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1957.

acters were recognized as similar to some found on known ancient seal inscriptions and bronzes. Realizing the importance of these relics, the scholars offered to buy all that were found and also organized careful excavations resulting in thousands of pieces of inscribed bones and tortoise shells being unearthed. A publication by one of the scholars in 1903 was the first systematic account of the discovery.<sup>2</sup> Later two Chinese government institutions, Academia Sinica and the National Academy of Sciences, conducted scientific excavations which are continuing, and which have yielded a number of rich finds. In one of the most important digs made in 1936 a full pit with over seventeen thousand pieces, almost all of tortoise shell, was discovered. Thus far more than one hundred thousand pieces have been found.

Most of the inscriptions have been dated between the early fourteenth and the twelfth centuries B.C., when the capital was situated in the general area where the finds have been made. Many have been deciphered, although a number of personal and geographical names remain obscure. The writing is sophisticated in form and must have been developing for at least a thousand years earlier than this time. All three kinds of characters still in use are found on these bone fragments: the pictorial, characters representing ideas, and characters used for sounds only (see fig. 2). The majority of the inscriptions are records of divination by oracles. The practice of divination by placing pieces of bone in fire dates back to earlier neolithic times in China, where bone objects from this period with scorch marks have been discovered. In Shang times records were inscribed with a stylus on the bones and




















































PRINCIPLES	EXAMPLES								EXPLANATION
Pictograms									a. Whole or parts of human body
									b. Side or front view of animals
									c. Symbol of natural objects
									d. Symbol of artificial objects
Ideograms									e. Combination of pictograms suggesting action
									f. Assembling ideas
									g. Indicating position
Phonograms									h. Combination of pictogram and a phonetic element
									i. Phonetic loan of a word with the same sound to express another idea
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	

Figure 2. Principles and forms of shell and bone inscription

from *Written on Bamboo and Silk* by T. H. Tsien. Reprinted with permission of the University of Chicago Press. Copyright © 1962 by the University of Chicago.