

**THE MILITANT TREND
IN EARLY PATRIOTIC WORKS
OF MODERN CHINESE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE***

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This paper first provides a brief summary of the historical background leading to the May Fourth era and its political, cultural and emotional significance to the explicit patriotism and militant trend in children's literature of that period. The main body of this paper, however, focuses on analysis of four short stories, which mainly tackle the issue of political demonstrations against 'external' aggression and 'internal' weakness. The analysis of these texts forms the basis for the argument that Chinese writers created these works as propaganda against foreign imperialism and local official corruption to inculcate in young readers to become fighters in the patriotic battle to save China.

Background

Modern Chinese children's literature emerged along with the May Fourth Movement in 1919. In the course of the 19th century, China suffered numerous defeat in battles waged with western powers. Consequently, Chinese intellectuals of the late Qing and early Republican era wrote of the national humiliations they experienced, often in a

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passionate tone. For example, Kang Youwei described China as ‘a house which is about to collapse’ and ‘a boat which is about to topple over’ and the Chinese people as ‘horses and cattle or dogs and sheep that are to be pushed around as our masters please or cut into pieces whenever they choose’ (Li, 1969, 229). At the end of World War I in 1919, the Versailles Conference ruled against China, awarding the former German leasehold of Shandong to Japan. On May 4th 1919, thousands of university students went out onto the streets of Beijing to protest against the warlord government’s consent to the decision reached at Versailles. The result was, as Spence observes, ‘many educated Chinese were convinced that their country was about to be destroyed, and they began to study every kind of political and organizational theory, examine the nature of their own social fabric, debate the values of new forms of education and language, and explore the possibilities for progress’ (1990, 271). People like Liang Qichao believed that transforming society begins with transforming individual consciousness and advocated the creating of new China through the creation of the ‘new citizen’ to transform the Chinese national character and to break with old ‘habits of mind’ (Nathan, 1986, 48-9). The notion of ‘saving the nation’ had been ‘a dominant motif in China’s political and intellectual movements since the late nineteenth century when reformers and revolutionaries alike were anxious to find a way to save the country from external aggression and internal decay’ (Fung, 2000, 5). Grieder points out that the Chinese nationalism in this era manifested itself as ‘a concern for the invisible foundations of the social order’, which was ‘a problem of cultural identity at the level of both individual and collective self-consciousness’ (1981, 209). It was also an emotional complex surrounding the New Culture movement, as Spence argues that ‘as if the far-off events at Versailles and mounting evidence of the spinelessness of corrupt local politicians coalesced in people’s minds and impelled them to search for a way to return meaning to Chinese culture’ (1990, 312). In an attempt to redefine China’s culture as a valid part of the modern world, reformers took a variety of avenues of thought and followed very different paths of conduct, but ‘most of them shared a patriotic ground: they wished for a rejuvenated, unified China that was capable of solving her problems at the time, including foreign imperialism (Spence, 1990, 313). It was this political, cultural and emotional crisis that brought out ‘the literary flowering that was one of the most creative and brilliant episodes in modern Chinese history’ (Goldman, 1977, 1). The purpose of the May Fourth writers was to ‘save’ China (Ibid). In this crisis, children became a symbol of

hope for the future (Farguhar, 2000, 1). Children's literature, almost all of a sudden, became an important literary field, which, in the eyes of many Chinese intellectuals at the time, could work as a weapon to fight against foreign imperialism as well as their own corrupted and spineless government, and more importantly as an educational tool to foster a new generation of patriotic citizens. Works analysed in this paper either directly embark upon the movement of 'saving the nation from extinction', or contain explicit patriotic slogans. Most of these works include some reference to themes of aggression and exploitation of China by foreign powers and the Chinese protests in the form of demonstration against these foreign powers as well as against the weak stand of the Chinese government in the May 4th era.

Cheng Sheng's 'White Flag'

'White Flags', a short story by Cheng Sheng, was published in *Weekly Review* on May 26, 1919, three weeks after May 4th demonstrations. Five characters appear in the short story, with each representing a 'typical' attitude of that time.

Erer and his big brother are depicted as children with an innate sense of righteousness and who were clear-sighted as to what was right or wrong for the nation. Both characters are supportive of older students who took part in the demonstration at Tiananmen. These two boys, a primary school pupil and a secondary school student, are thus positive characters who represent the future and indeed the hope of the nation. Their father, a government official, is negatively depicted as someone who supports a 'heartless and shameless traitor'. The mother and the house servant are reflective of the 'ignorant' and indifferent majority of the Chinese population: people who felt that the demonstration at Tiananmen or the threat of the nation's extinction had nothing to do with them. Also mentioned in the story are the university students, who are positively portrayed as 'noble', 'enthusiastic' and 'brave'. They volunteer to take on the responsibility of saving the nation: 'if we don't stand up to fight back, who else will?' The author then portrays schoolteachers, through the comments of the students, as a source of inspiration and information.

This story illustrates the affirmation of the role of students and intellectuals in literature of the May Fourth era. The villains of the story are the Japanese, who are described as men-eating monsters that would enslave the Chinese people. As Erer

puts it, the Japanese would ‘gobble them up’ as if they were mere meat and less than human. The young, including children, are regarded as the people capable of saving China. The older generation, including the parents and servants, are portrayed as people who need to be rescued from their ignorance and who should learn from the young. The explicit propaganda value of such patriotic stories for children was to cultivate patriotic sentiment in children through the use of terrible images of their nation being exploited by foreign powers. The narrative is thus designed to encourage them to stand up and fight, first against ‘internal’ and then against ‘external’ enemies.

As can be seen in the following exchange between Erer and his mother, the mother is portrayed as someone who fails to understand the importance of the demonstration. Erer, a child of ten, came home, bitterly crying, and his mother asked him if he had been beaten or bullied at school. Erer replied, ‘No one bullied me. I just attended this Tiananmen student demonstration, and big brother is still there.’ His mother was puzzled, ‘then why are you so sad?’ Erer said, ‘the students at Tiananmen say the Japanese will take Qingdao by force and we China will be extinct.’

In ‘White Flags’, we can see how the children are represented as symbolic of the hope of the nation. They appear to understand the importance of protesting against the Japanese and, in fact, the words spoken by Erer’s brother to their mother are not so much the words of a child to its parent but a form of moral instruction delivered by a young patriot to an ignorant older person. For example, he told their mother, ‘Now the Japanese want to take our Qingdao by force, and if we young people, enthusiastic and brave students don’t stand up to fight back, who else will?’ The older generation, represented by Erer’s parents and servants in ‘White Flags’ serve as a negative contrast to the enlightened attitudes of the young. The mother is symbolic of a housebound traditional woman who only worries about the well being of her immediate family. The father is similarly only concerned about his career, and by extension, his family. The children, on the other hand, are portrayed as people who understand the interdependence of personal and national concerns, as Erer’s brother said to his mother, ‘Father is so upset about the student demonstration and worries about his job, but he doesn’t understand that he wouldn’t have any official position if China were taken by the Japanese.’

The story thus presents to the young reader the necessity of patriotism in the form of the words and actions taken by Erer and his brother as well as the students demonstrating at Tiananmen. Their emotions are closely linked to the fate of the nation. They volunteered to take up the task of saving the nation. Erer's brother told their mother, 'I listened to the speeches by those university students. They say that most of us Chinese people are ignorant and don't care about our nation's fate. We young people have to wake them up.' The younger generation defied the authority of the government. They branded the government officials as 'heartless and shameless traitors'. Furthermore, children no longer represented a continuity of the family and traditional Confucian values such as obedience to father, head of the family, as demonstrated in the story. Children were concerned about the fate of the nation. Erer and his brother confronted their father, who was a government official and strongly opposed the students' demonstration at Tiananmen. The father was furious with the student demonstration for a very selfish reason. He was working in a department under Chao Rulin, who was regarded as a traitor by the students and therefore the main target of their demonstration. Erer's father was worried about the possibility of a change of leadership in his department as a result of the student demonstration, and consequently he himself might be out of favour with the new boss.

The role of teachers in the story, however, is quite traditional. They are the source of information and inspiration. Erer teaches his mother about the catastrophic consequences of Japanese rule of China by quoting his teacher, 'the teacher at school said when that happens we will all become slaves to the Japanese and lose our homes. And the Japanese will swallow us up like fish and meat. Isn't that frightening?' Students in this story as well as in other stories of the period seldom question the validity of the information and assertions provided by their teachers. Almost all the stories of the period affirm the traditional Confucian belief that learning and righteousness are closely linked and that teachers provide students with moral guidance. To awaken the general population and alert them to the danger of being ruled by the Japanese became a key patriotic message of the story to the young readers. The process of awakening the ignorant and indifferent fellow countrymen, as demonstrated in the story, was to present to them a 'frightening' picture of enslavement to the Japanese who were, in turn, denounced as cannibals.

Patriotism in this story is expressed firstly through the sad feelings of Erer and his brother about China losing her territory, Qingdao, to Japan, as the students demonstrating in Tiananmen Square demanded ‘Give Qingdao back to us!’ Secondly, it is brought up through expressions of hatred towards the Japanese who are described at every turn as brutal aggressors and as well as expressions of hatred towards the Chinese officials who are portrayed as ‘shameless and heartless traitors’. Finally, patriotism in the story is reflected in the willingness of the demonstrating students to sacrifice their lives in the interests of the nation.

In his discussion of the ideological effects of children’s literature, Sutherland writes of ‘the politics of advocacy’ and ‘the politics of attack’. For ‘the politics of advocacy’ Sutherland argues:

Advocacy is pleading for and promoting a specific cause, or upholding a particular point of view or course of action as being valid and right.... Frequently it sets up attractive role models for the young, inducing admiration, and extolling certain values as virtues (1985, 144-5).

The politics of attack, Sutherland states, is ‘essentially the reverse side of the coin: for implicit in the choice of target and the fact of the assault is the converse ideological principle that the author would advocate’ (1985, 148). In ‘White Flags’, the author uses ‘politics of advocacy’, through which he tries to endorse the actions taken by the students and thus promoting their patriotic cause. He uses ‘politics of attack’ to condemn the brutality of the Japanese aggressors and actions of those ‘traitors’. However, the ‘politics of attack’ on brutality here in the story is not actually advocating its opposite, such as mercy, clemency and forgiveness. In fact, the militant trend in the story is unmistakable, as the students raise the flags with the slogan: ‘Kill traitors!’

Lu Ying’s ‘Two Pupils’

Lu Ying’s ‘Two Pupils’ (1921) is another short story dealing with the May Fourth student demonstration. Guoshu and Ajian were two pupils from Beijing Number Two Public Primary School (*Beijingshi gongli dier xiaoxue*), which participated in a

demonstration in front of the national president's office[†]. The two boys ended in hospital, injured by the police. The purpose of the demonstration is not explained clearly in the story and is mentioned simply as an activity undertaken on behalf of 'the future of education'. As in the previous story 'White Flags', students and teachers are portrayed as people with the lofty aspiration of playing an active part in nation building. They were described as people who were prepared to 'sacrifice themselves' and who were determined 'not to show any signs of fear'.

Unlike Erer and his brother in 'White Flags', the two pupils had their parents' permission to participate in the student demonstration, although Guoshu's father doubted the effectiveness of their demonstration. He said to his wife, 'if students want to have a demonstration, then the only concern I have is whether or not it would achieve anything. Sure it shouldn't lead to any unexpected disaster. Now that Guoshu wants to go, let him go. It's a good opportunity for him to go out and face the real world.' The author makes a point of contradicting the father's view. Guoshu and his friend Ajian were both injured by the police guarding the president's office. The description of their injuries is graphic: 'the blood oozing down their faces from the wounds on their heads soaked their clothes' and 'even the cement on the pathway was dyed dark red'. However, the patriotic action of these children is depicted as attracting tremendous sympathy from ordinary people along the streets, who all stopped and stood watching these 'pure and flawless' young demonstrators. Some of the onlookers even shed tears. At the end of the story, the boys' spirit of self-sacrifice and their consequent suffering also appeared to win the hearts of the patients in the hospital: 'their crying sound pierced the hearts of the patients in the whole hospital. Sighs of sympathy echoed in the vast sad night sky and the blood of the sons and tears of the mothers contrasted the darkness of the surrounding world.' In this story, the militant patriotism is most strikingly portrayed by the defiance of very young pupils against the highest authority of the nation, the president, in a confrontation with the brutal police force.

[†] Duan Qirui was the president of the nation then.

Jiang Guangci's 'A Mad Boy'

Jiang Guangci's 'A Mad Boy', published in *Chinese Youth* in May 1926, tells the story of a secondary school student who participated in a demonstration in a Western concession in Shanghai against Japanese capitalists killing Chinese workers. The main character, Fang Da, a secondary school student, became mad after witnessing foreign policemen shooting at demonstrating students.

Jiang Guangci's story 'A Mad Boy' recalls Lu Xun's 'Diary of a Madman' quite strikingly. When talking about the publication of 'Diary of a Madman', Lu Xun said, that his 'Diary of a Madman' was 'to wake a few of the lighter sleepers' in 'an iron house having not a single window and virtually indestructible, with all its inmates sound asleep and about to die of suffocation' and 'if a few wake up', then 'there is some hope that the house will be destroyed' (Weiss, 1985, 49-50). The positive representation of student demonstrations in several children's stories of the May Fourth era, including 'A Mad Boy', echoes the same commitment to awaking 'the ignorant masses'. They made speeches, handed out pamphlets, shouted slogans in order to arouse Chinese people's patriotic feelings to sense the danger of their nation being subjugated.

Both Jiang Guangci and Lu Xun used 'madness' to signify the necessity of rebellion against oppression in a society where people took this oppression for granted. But, whereas Lu Xun focussed on the oppression he perceived in traditional values, Jiang Guangci wrote against the oppression of foreign exploiters and denounced the Chinese government for failing to defend the oppressed Chinese people. Like Lu Xun, he also denounced the general population's indifference to 'foreign imperialism'.

Foreigners are portrayed as monstrous in the story 'A Mad Boy'. The brutality of the Japanese (the killing of the Chinese workers by Japanese capitalists) is placed at the very beginning of the story and becomes the cause of the subsequent events. In the foreign concession, Western policemen and Indian policemen are described as 'fully armed butchers', and the derogatory term *hongtou ahsan* (literally 'redheaded number three', a local term in Shanghai dialect) is used for Indian policemen. They did not allow anyone to make a speech or hand out pamphlets. When students handed out pamphlets, these foreign policemen began to shoot and the road and shopwindows

were splashed with blood. A defiant Fang Da yelled at these foreign policemen: ‘you inhuman foreign animals, come on! Kill us, and we won’t die in vain!’

In the story, these foreigners are portrayed not only as monstrous, but also as hypocritical. They pretended to represent justice and brought the ‘rioters’ to the court. The foreign judge, who presided the hearing of Fang Da’s case, is described as someone with a hooknose like an eagle’s beak, yellow hair and two blue eyes, just like a demon. Fang Da’s description of the court where, ‘murderers are trying victims’, provides some indication of the highly emotive and inflammatory language that the author chose to include in a children’s story. And in this story, images of fat foreigners, cigars in hand, sitting in rickshaws pulled by skinny Chinese men and *hongtou ahsan* (Indian policemen in Western concessions) bashing up Chinese rickshaw men often became the triggering factor of reoccurring of Fang Da’s illness.

The story launches an even more severe attack on those Chinese collaborating with foreigners. For example, the Chinese judge is depicted as even more disgusting than the foreign judge, ‘his face revealed a mixture of inferiority and flattery towards his foreign master, but superiority and arrogance towards his fellow countrymen. To Fang Da, this Chinese judge is really ‘a son of a bitch, having forgotten he is a Chinese himself’. The language that the author expressed through Fang Da is highly unusual for a children’s story and constitutes an extreme example of what Sutherland calls the ‘politics of attack’.

The Chinese judge:

Your parents spend a lot of money sending you to school. You should concentrate on study.... Do you know that you have now become a troublemaker and have broken the law?’

Fang Da:

Your mother’s fart (*fang ni niang de pi*). Who has broken the law? Who is a troublemaker? Japanese capitalists killed some Chinese workers, and we came out to make speeches for the purposes of saving other workers and arousing our fellow countrymen to wake up. Do you call that troublemaking? Foreigners shot and killed our country’s students, workers, and even pedestrians at will. Do you still say it is us who have

broken the law? You are a mere slave to your foreign master. You were born Chinese, but why do you assist foreigners to oppress your own countrymen? What a heartless traitor!

The story ends with Fang Da's death after he read a newspaper, which was full of such news: the Chinese police and army helped the Japanese kill workers on strike; students were arrested by Chinese police force for handing out pamphlets protesting against foreigners; the head of local business association accepted foreign bribes; and students union and workers union were outlawed by the local government. Fang Da jumped out of the balcony while yelling his last protest against those he regarded as traitors: 'Evil warlords! Heartless capitalists! The shameful reporters who deserve execution! It's the fault of all these base breed, slaves and cold-blood animals!'

Through the story, the author presents a picture of a country where the majority of the population are numb and unable to see the danger of the nation being subjugated, and in this insane place the only sane character in the story is Fang Da, the mad boy, who has the rational and logical ability to observe the society and a sense of responsibility to take up action to challenge this senseless society, just like the madman in Lu Xun's story, who was the only one able to see the two words 'eat people' between lines of Chinese history books where all over each page are the words 'Virtue and Morality' (Lu Xun, 1973, 6-13).

Patriotism in this story is reflected firstly through the expressions of hatred towards foreigners through presenting the brutality of the Japanese capitalists, the violence used by the Western and Indian police in Shanghai concession and the hypocrisy of the foreign judge and his court. Secondly, it is expressed through Fang Da's explicit denunciation of 'traitors' such as the Chinese judge. Finally, it is expressed through the violent language the author chose to use throughout the story in the interests of patriotism.

In discussing ideology in literary works, Gary Waller Comments:

The power of ideology is inscribed within the words, the rule-systems, and codes which constitute the text; as we read it reminds us of what is correct, commonsensical, or 'natural'. (1986, 10)

In the story, Fang Da and his fellow students are described as ‘full of anger in their chest’. They were angry because some Chinese, in their eyes, did not behave like Chinese. For example, Fang Da questioned the Chinese judge: ‘you were born Chinese, but why do you assist foreigners to oppress your own countrymen?’ Fang Da and his fellow students constantly use expressions like ‘mongrels’, ‘a son of bitch, and ‘base breed, slaves and cold-blood animals’ to show their indignation toward those Chinese collaborating with foreigners. Through these expressions, the author was reminding the young reader of what kind of behaviour an honoured true Chinese should have, thus achieving the patriotic purpose of the story.

Dai Pingwang’s ‘Xiao Feng’

Dai Pingwang’s short story ‘Xiao Feng’ (1928) also deals with a Canton demonstration protesting the killings of demonstrators by imperialists in Shanghai, seemingly the demonstration described in Jiang Guangci’s ‘A Mad Boy’. The development of the story is almost repetitive of other above-mentioned stories and characters suffered the same fate. Xiao Feng, an eleven-year-old student of an evening school for workers’ children, with the permission of his father who was also an active participant of the demonstration himself, joined the demonstration against imperialism. They, like all other demonstrators in China at that time, held little flags with slogans such as ‘Down with imperialism!’ and ‘The oppressed peoples of the world get united!’ Once again, their demonstration was suppressed by ruthless foreign troops guarding their concession in Canton. Xiao Feng’s friend, Ah Ming, was shot dead, and Xiao Feng saw him ‘lying on the ground, hot red blood welling out from the wound on his back, hands shaking and legs twitching’.

Like other similar stories, patriotism in this story is reflected in its militant expressions of hatred towards foreigners through the description of violence used by the foreign police force in suppressing the demonstration. The derogatory term ‘foreign devils’ (*yang guizi*) is constantly used by the character in the story. The ‘foreign devils’ are further demonised through the images in the young mind of the main character, Xiao Feng, ‘a black giant standing on a round gold coin which is crushing many struggling people under it’. Xiao Feng felt that this black giant was ‘just like the ugly female monster in the story that his mum often told him, who would

come out at night killing people and sucking their blood.’ The choice of expressions, in terms of belligerence, by the author in this story is reminiscent of the violent language used in Jiang Guangci’s ‘A Mad Boy’.

Unlike other stories dealing with the theme of demonstration, the story of ‘Xiao Feng’ presents a picture of an ‘awakened’ people through description of Chinese workers, people from rural areas as well as students and teachers massing together to demonstrate against the killings of Chinese in Shanghai by foreign police. Also unlike other similar stories, Xiao Feng’s parents supported Xiao Feng’s participation of the patriotic demonstration. They were even talking about how Xiao Feng could become a member in the reserve for fighting against imperialism in the future. They seem to have linked the fate of the nation with their own future much more closely than parents in other stories. They are no longer depicted as a kind of a housebound traditional woman who only worried about the well being of her immediate family or a selfish father who was only concerned about his career, and by extension, his family. Nor were they numb and unable to see the danger of the nation being subjugated or indifferent about the fate of the nation. They talked about sending cables to every city in China to inform people of the killings of students and workers by foreign police, appealing to the local Chinese government to take actions to punish the perpetrators, and organising strikes and picket lines.

Concluding Comments

May Fourth was an era in which there were constant political upheavals and where intellectuals and writers presented themselves as a people enduring a constant state of cultural and emotional crises about the imminent destruction of the nascent Chinese nation. Patriotic Chinese writers literally ‘created’ modern Chinese children’s literature as a weapon to fight against foreign imperialism and the weak Chinese government, as well as a tool to educate the young to become patriotic fighters in the battles to save China.

An important feature of these early works is the inclusion of militant slogans of patriotism used in the demonstrations such as ‘Return our territory’, ‘Down with imperialism’ ‘Kill traitors’, ‘Withdraw extraterritoriality’, ‘Boycott Japanese goods’, ‘Remove the unequal treaties’ and ‘Rise, fellow countrymen, or China will be

extinct!’ The language in these works is explicitly political and sometimes very passionate. The plot is usually straightforward, easy to follow. Characters are often of one dimension only and they are presented as social ‘types’ with little or no reference to their private feelings. The authors constantly use descriptive language and slogans to construct and promote the patriotic theme. The explicit propaganda value of such patriotic stories for children is to arouse children with patriotic emotion to fight against ‘traitors’ as well as foreign aggressors.

Patriotism is usually expressed in these works through the praise of the young patriots who are always portrayed as brave, determined, enthusiastic and, most importantly, ready to sacrifice themselves for the nation. They appear to understand the importance of protesting against foreign imperialism. These young educated patriotic characters in the stories often serve as instructors to the uninformed older generations, providing them with moral guidance. Indeed, they are presented in the stories as the hope of the future of China.

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