



Artistic Analysis: The Deficiency of Literary Value in The Selected Corpus of Yang Hongying's Works

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Abstract

Driven by rising social productivity and electronic media development, commercial children's literature has spawned the "Yang Hongying Phenomenon", featured by huge divergence between market popularity and academic criticism. Publishers and readers praise Yang Hongying's works for catering to children's reading demands, while literary critics argue her creations suffer from weak literariness, colloquial narration and superficial thematic expression. Yang Hongying defends her writing relying on sales data, yet market success and literary quality are two independent evaluation dimensions, and sales volume cannot prove superior textual aesthetics. Though her creation claims to follow child-centred theory, Yang Hongying's texts indulge in cultural pandering to children, simplifying adult-child relations into a rigid binary opposition of "innocent children and flawed adults". Quantitative analysis of *The Transfer Student Named Niupi* shows unequal physical depictions between boy and girl characters, which strips girl figures of textual subjectivity. Drawing on Halliday's transitivity theory to analyse *Tomboy Dai An*, this study finds that female characters are mostly trapped in passive responses; even the tomboy Dai An obtains narrative agency only via de-feminised, violent masculine behaviours. Works like *Girls' Diary* and *Boys' Diary* further consolidate rigid gender stereotypes and binary gender divisions. While Yang Hongying's efforts to diversify characters are worthy of recognition, some of her works are restricted by shallow narrative skills, one-sided child-centred narration and fixed gender frameworks, lacking profound artistic value and sound gender enlightenment for young readers.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Yang Hongying Phenomenon, Market Catering, Child-Centeredness, Commercial Books

1. Introduction

Advancements in social productive forces and breakthroughs in electronic media technology have reshaped the forms of cultural communication, accompanied by a continuous upward trend in children's demand for cultural consumption. Commercial children's books emerged as a product shaped by consumerism. Yang Hongying, hailed as the "Queen of Chinese Children's Literature", stands as an exceptionally prolific writer in this genre, with more than 200 published works to her credit. On 31 May 2004, Oriental Son on China Central Television (CCTV) aired an exclusive interview with Yang Hongying, fully recognising and highly commending her two-decade creative career dedicated to children's literature and the remarkable accomplishments she has attained along the way [1]. On 3 September 2019, CCTV News reposted the report Yang Hongying Recounts Her Creative Past: How Did the Series "Naughty Boy Ma Xiaotiao" Come Into Being? Originally published by China News Service. Bai Bing, Editor-in-Chief of Jieli Publishing House, offered an unreserved compliment: "The Naughty Boy Ma Xiaotiao series is an outstanding original work of children's literature that integrates artistic value, cultural value and market value as a cohesive whole."

I intend to correct a citation error in Chen Zhengui's article On the Development of Children's Literature from the Debate over the "Yang Hongying Phenomenon", published in Southern Literary Circles, Issue 3, 2010. The article states: "Critic Li Xuebin also wrote that the Troublemaker Ma Xiaotiao series is an outstanding original work of children's literature that integrates artistic value, cultural value and market value."

In fact, Li Xuebin's article Should Yang Hongying Be Criticized? was published in China Reading Weekly on April 12, 2006. Its original text reads: Contrary to the sharp assessments from the mainstream children's literary critics mentioned above, we have also heard alternative voices from the children's publishing industry. Qiu Jianguo, a book planner at the 21st Century Publishing House, concluded in his article Yang Hongying Should Not Feel Depressed that Yang Hongying's writing responds to the reading demands of contemporary children, and its massive popularity among young readers is an inevitable outcome amid chance. Therefore, Yang Hongying has no reason to feel disheartened. More recently, Bai Bing, a renowned children's writer and editor-in-chief of Jieli Publishing House, who spearheaded and created the blockbuster Ma Xiaotiao brand, put it more bluntly: "The Troublemaker Ma Xiaotiao series is an outstanding original work of children's literature that integrates artistic value, cultural value and market value..."

Accordingly, this quotation does not originate from Li Xuebin himself, instead,

Li Xuebin was paraphrasing remarks made by Bai Bing.

In stark contrast to the widespread acclaim Yang Hongying receives from the publishing and media sectors, most scholars in literary criticism circles tend to judge her works as bestsellers lacking literary aesthetics. In their essay “The ‘Yang Hongying Phenomenon’ Amid Commercial Culture: Childhood Aesthetics in Contemporary Children’s Fiction and Reflections Thereon”, Fang Weiping and Zhao Xia argue that in the story *Dull Girl Anqi’er*, Yang Hongying embeds several sets of children’s brain teasers into the novel’s plot. This literary choice backfires, allowing the frivolous, entertaining function of such trivial material to overshadow its thematic expressive function. In “Review and Reflections on the ‘Yang Hongying Phenomenon’” [2], Liu Xuyuan categorises Yang Hongying’s writings as lightweight, slapstick serial books.

The term “Yang Hongying Phenomenon” refers to a landmark cultural and publishing phenomenon that took shape amid late-1990 s emergence and early-2000s full-scale flourishing of contemporary Chinese children’s literature. The moniker arose from the starkly divergent evaluations of Yang Hongying’s voluminous, widely circulated works between academic literary critics and the commercial market. While Yang Hongying’s writings are wildly popular among juvenile readers and publishing institutions, literary critics broadly question their textual aesthetics, ideological depth and artistic craftsmanship. The “Yang Hongying Phenomenon” triggered a wave of imitative mass creation, restructured the landscape of the children’s book market, and sparked enduring debates regarding the commerciality and literariness of children’s literature, literary evaluation systems, and writers’ creative stances. It constitutes a pivotal literary event for researching the development of original Chinese children’s literature within a market-economy context. This thesis intends to conduct targeted analyses of the selected corpus of Yang Hongying’s works primarily from an artistic dimension.

The core research conclusions of this paper are only derived from the quantitative and qualitative analysis of four designated texts: *The Transfer Student Named Niupi*, *Tomboy Dai An*, *Girls’ Diary* and *Boys’ Diary*, and the auxiliary analysis of partial fragments of *Dull Girl Anqi’er* and *The Tortoise Who Can Smell the Scent of Childhood*. This paper does not cover Yang Hongying’s all works. Therefore, the conclusions about narrative defects, adult-child binary opposition and unbalanced gender writing in this paper cannot be fully generalized to all works of Yang Hongying. Subsequent research can expand the corpus scope to include her fairy tales and other series to form a more comprehensive research judgment.

2. Corpus and Research Methodology

This paper adopts the research methods of close reading, quantitative statistical analysis and Halliday’s transitivity analysis [3]. The corpus of this research includes four representative works of Yang Hongying’s campus growth novels: *The Transfer Student Named Niupi*, *Tomboy Dai An*, *Girls’ Diary* and *Boys’ Diary*. The selection basis is as follows. First, these four works belong to Yang Hongying’s most influential cam-

pus series, which are the core carriers of the “Yang Hongying Phenomenon” and occupy a dominant position in market sales and children’s reading reception. Second, the four novels contain a large number of character appearance descriptions, dialogue texts and multi-type clause processes suitable for quantitative statistics and transitivity text analysis, which can provide sufficient text samples for qualitative and mixed research. Other works such as *Dull Girl Anqi’er* and *The Tortoise Who Can Smell the Scent of Childhood* are only used as auxiliary supplementary texts to assist argumentation, not the core statistical corpus of this paper.

Clear rules are formulated for all quantitative statistics in this paper to ensure the objectivity of data analysis. Independent narrative sentences describing characters’ facial features, hair, body shape, dressing and appearance temperament are defined as physical appearance descriptions. Indirect comments on appearance from other characters are classified as indirect appearance evaluation, separated from direct appearance depiction in statistics. Referring to Halliday’s systemic functional grammar, all clauses in *Tomboy Dai An* are divided into six process types: material process, behavioural process, verbal process, relational process, mental process and existential process. Material processes refer to clauses describing external physical actions; behavioural processes refer to physiological and psychological behavioural responses; verbal processes refer to all speaking and utterance clauses; relational processes focus on attribute judgment and appearance description of characters; mental processes cover perception, cognition and emotional inner activities of characters. All clauses are manually classified and counted according to the above standards.

3. Surface Creative Logic and Artistic Defects in Yang Hongying’s Texts

Yang Hongying once stated: “It’s not that I spend all my time hanging around kids or that they pour their hearts out to me. What matters is that my thinking is simple, straightforward, just like a child’s. Take all the viewpoints on education in my books, many of them carry a rebellious streak. So why do children, parents and teachers alike accept them? To some extent, it’s because I frame everything through a child’s perspective instead of dwelling on conflicts endlessly.” [4] According to questionnaire responses included in the postscripts of Yang Hongying’s books, children are drawn to her works for the following reasons: her playful, witty and delightful language delivers a comfortable reading experience; her rich, life-oriented and accessible content aligns with children’s expectations of the world and their inner aspirations; her vivid characters enable strong reader identification and readily evoke emotional resonance; her stories brim with imagination and childlike fun, allowing young readers to discover joy within the pages, experience the delights and beauty of childhood, immerse themselves in reading, and cultivate a love for books.

Nevertheless, crudeness is by no means equivalent to simplicity. Yang Hongying’s narrative style leans towards plain, unadorned storytelling, and some of her works even exhibit colloquial traits. She makes extensive use of dialogue and incorporates lighthearted, entertaining humorous materials. In *Naughty Boy Ma*

Xiaotiao Series: The Transfer Student Named Niupi, dialogue appears as many as 992 times throughout the book, and the entire plot is driven almost entirely by direct speech. As Song Xiaojin argues in “Interpreting Aesthetic Trends in Contemporary Chinese Children’s Literature Through Bestselling Juvenile Titles”: flat and unembellished narrative erodes the literariness of Yang Hongying’s works. Guided by fast-paced cultural consumption, the author largely omits scenic descriptions and physical character depictions irrelevant to plot development, as well as diverse rhetorical devices, laying out the storyline purely through dialogue. This writing technique amplifies the recreational function of storytelling within novels yet weakens their aesthetic function of shaping character images.

Yang Hongying’s writing bears traces of theme-first creation, attempting to hitch the carriage of “literature” to the locomotive of “education”. However, the excessive stacking of entertaining trivial materials, plot progression carried by dialogue, and shallow, insubstantial core storylines boost textual readability and children’s reading interest, while simultaneously diluting the interpretive potential and aesthetic value of the texts.

Yang Hongying herself harbours a certain sense of resistance to textual analyses and creative critiques directed at her from literary criticism circles, consistently adopting a dismissive stance. In October 2006, Li Hong conducted an interview with Yang Hongying and raised the following question: Since 2000, whenever discussions arise about the current landscape of domestic original children’s books, you are universally recognised as the top bestselling author in this field. You have created multiple blockbuster literary brands including the Naughty Boy Ma Xiaotiao Series, which has rendered the “Yang Hongying Phenomenon” and the “Ma Xiaotiao Phenomenon” hot topics within the industry. What is your personal take on these phenomena?

Yang Hongying’s response to this question largely evaded the core inquiry: At first, I read various articles featuring sensational headlines such as “The Inside Story”, “The Truth” and “Behind the Scenes” about myself, which repeatedly deployed terms like “marketing packaging”, “media hype” and “commercial writing”. I stopped reading them later, for no one knows my work better than myself. My books first shot to bestseller status with *Girls’ Diary* in 2000, and they have remained popular for six consecutive years, reprinted over 40 times with a total print run of more than 600,000 copies. To this day, it ranks as the original children’s literature work with the highest number of reprints and the largest total print volume. Other branded bestseller series, namely the Yang Hongying Campus Novel Series, Yang Hongying Fairy Tale Series, Naughty Boy Ma Xiaotiao Series and *Diary of the Smiling Cat* Series, have also gained their market reputations step by step. What I wish to convey is that I have never believed in overnight legends from the very start; as a veteran editor myself, I fully understand the publishing industry. It constitutes an everlasting misunderstanding if critics only examine my work from operational tactics rather than conducting in-depth explorations centred on the texts themselves.

Much like the numerous publishing house editors who sing Yang Hongying’s

praises, Yang Hongying herself falls into the logical fallacy of validating the literariness of her works by sales volume. Commercial success and outstanding literary are essentially two independent evaluation dimensions. Judgments of literariness rely on professional artistic analytical frameworks, focusing on textual aesthetic qualities, narrative techniques, linguistic artistry and other core elements. In contrast, the primary benchmarks for measuring commercial success consist of market reception, sales volume and scope of dissemination. The reasoning that directly deduces the level of a work's literariness from its market performance is inherently flawed and logically invalid. Within the market domain, there exist works that boast remarkable literariness while attaining strong sales, as well as cases of texts with relatively weak literariness that nonetheless win wide market favour. Fundamentally, a high degree of literariness is not a necessary prerequisite for a book to become a bestseller, nor is commercial popularity the primary criterion for manifesting literariness. Therefore, if Yang Hongying disagrees with the conclusions put forward by literary critics, she ought to refute the critiques deemed unreasonable by market stakeholders through more persuasive, text-based analyses grounded in the actual writing, rather than citing superficial market achievements as evidence. Above all, she must not equate sales data from the marketplace with professional artistic criticism.

4. The Alienation of Child-Centred Theory: Cultural Pandering Narratives for Children

To explore the underlying reasons why Yang Hongying's works, despite their perceived lack of literariness, have secured market recognition, we must turn to the child-oriented creative theory that Yang Hongying frequently invokes. During her interview with Li Hong, she elaborated on her understanding of "unlocking children's inner worlds" as follows: As a writer of children's literature, you write about children, and your readers are children too. You must place them on the highest pedestal and grant them full respect, including respect for the mistakes they make while growing up. Growth itself is a process of making mistakes and correcting them. This philosophy permeates the Naughty Boy Ma Xiaotiao Series, where children's innate dispositions are laid bare to the fullest, encapsulated in Ma Xiaotiao's core credo: "Be unapologetically a child!"

The child-centred theory proposed by John Dewey targets the non-child-centric bias inherent in traditional education. Dewey argued that under traditional education, "the centre of gravity in the school is outside the child. It lies with the teacher, the textbook, anywhere you please, except in the child's own immediate instincts and activities. Under such circumstances, there can be no genuine account of the child's life. One may discourse at length on the child's learning, yet the school is not recognised as a space for the child's life. The transformation we seek in education today consists of a shift in this centre of gravity. It is a revolution, comparable to Copernicus' astronomical revolution that relocated the cosmic centre from the Earth to the Sun. Here, the child becomes the sun, around whom all educational arrangements revolve; the child stands at the centre, and all

educational practices are organised around them.” [5]

In depicting interactions between children and adults in her writings, Yang Hongying exhibits a cultural pandering tendency of “currying favour with children” that deviates from the core tenets of child-centred theory. This tendency manifests chiefly as excessive identification with and deference to child psychology, and it stands out most prominently in character creation and conflict construction across the Naughty Boy Ma Xiaotiao Series. Its most representative manifestations are the infantilised portrayal of certain adult figures, alongside deliberate vilification and one-sided criticism of the adult world whenever tensions arise between adults and children.

In works such as *Playful Dad* and *Innocent Mum*, Yang Hongying endows Ma Xiaotiao’s parents with childlike traits including fondness for play and naivety. Through a string of storylines, she affirms the childlike innocence preserved in grown-ups, forming a relatively mild early expression of child-centred thinking. By contrast, in *Dull Girl Anqi’er*, the author shapes Anqi’er’s mother as an overbearing figure who arbitrarily meddles in her daughter’s life, setting the adult world in absolute opposition to the child’s realm and diminishing adults spiritually in her narration [6]. As voiced by the Thousand-Year Tortoise in the novel: “Alas! All children are good; every fault lies with the adults.” [7]

Narratives that attribute the root of all conflicts entirely to adults and overemphasise children’s spiritual superiority betray clear signs of pandering and currying favour with young readers.

This creative technique of “adopting entertaining materials to propel plot development coupled with adults’ spiritual submission to children” can also be observed in *The Transfer Student Named Niupi*, a volume belonging to the Naughty Boy Ma Xiaotiao Series. When Teacher Qin attempts to assign Niupi a proper Chinese given name, this strong-willed foreign boy declines politely yet firmly: “Thank you, Teacher Qin! There is no need to trouble yourself. I wish to keep the name Niupi.” Confronted with Teacher Qin’s habitual follow-up question of whether his parents would approve, Niupi replies nonchalantly, “They respect me, and they respect my preferences as well.” His response directly breaks the ingrained mindset in which adults invoke figures of greater authority to interfere with children’s choices, and Teacher Qin’s eventual speechless compromise epitomises adults yielding to children’s wishes.

When assisting Niupi in selecting a Chinese language study partner, the antagonism between adults and children is further intensified. Upholding the school system’s achievement-centred “excellence criterion”, Teacher Qin strongly recommends Ding Wentao, a top student renowned for his rich mastery of idioms. She even worries that Niupi will be negatively influenced by stuttering Zhang Da and advises Niupi to keep his distance from him. This plot echoes an earlier depiction: “Teacher Qin’s gaze, bright as a searchlight, swept repeatedly back and forth across the faces of Ma Xiaotiao and Tang Fei.” Teacher Qin always judges Ma Xiaotiao and his average-achieving friends through preconceived biases, while she places near-unwavering trust in high-performing Ding Wentao and class

monitor Lu Manman. Nevertheless, Niupi declares resolutely: “Zhang Da is my friend. I will never abandon him, and I am not afraid of stutters.”

This choice not only embodies children’s perspective-oriented emphasis on friendship and adherence to morality, but also lays bare the irrationality of adult evaluative criteria. One can readily perceive the author’s sincere efforts to dismantle the authority of adult viewpoints and encourage children to stand firm by their inner thoughts. At the same time, however, the practice of belittling adult figures while elevating children’s status merits critical reflection. In subsequent plotlines, Yang Hongying infinitely magnifies the utilitarianism and absurdity of the adult world, framing a group of adult characters including Teacher Qin, Anqi’er’s parents and Ding Wentao’s father merely as foils that set off children’s purity. Guided by the adult utilitarian logic of pursuing unbroken gains, Ding Wentao’s father compels his son to reject Niupi’s mutual aid arrangement of speaking only Chinese without English, reducing learning to a transaction of interests. Drawing entirely on unfounded speculation, Anqi’er’s mother fabricates a story to Teacher Qin claiming a puppy love between Niupi and her daughter, imposing the anxieties and prejudices of the adult world upon children. Teacher Qin, consumed by excessive fear of triggering “international repercussions”, grows so flustered that she takes antihypertensive medicine on the spot.

All behaviours of these adult characters—Teacher Qin’s disproportionate anxiety over international repercussions, Ding’s father’s utilitarian calculations, and Anqi’er mother’s groundless conjectures—are positioned by the author as opposites to children. The text’s consistent child-centred narrative perspective strengthens young readers’ identification with Ma Xiaotiao and by extension with themselves. Children are steadily elevated to the moral high ground, while the adult world suffers continuous degradation within this one-dimensional narration. This devolves into an extreme binary opposition that simplifies the intricate adult-child relationship into a rigid framework of “children are always right, adults are always wrong”. While reinforcing children’s subjectivity, Yang Hongying’s writing erodes room for in-depth exploration of intergenerational relations and eliminates the possibility of reconciliation between the two generations.

Fang Weiping and Zhao Xia argue that this kind of “cultural pandering” to childhood may be an inevitable outcome of childhood aesthetics centred on children amid the prevalence of commercial culture, and it is exerting a profound impact on the future artistic trajectory of contemporary children’s fiction.

5. Imbalanced Gender Writing: Disparities in Appearance Depiction and Character Subjectivity of Male and Female Roles

Such belittling portrayal exists not only in depictions of adult characters but also of girl characters. In their essay “An Alternative Narrative of Bildungsromans: On Yang Hongying’s Puerile Growth Novels”, Li Rongmei and Yang Hongmin point out that Ma Xiaotiao shows boundless care and chivalry toward the vulnerable

and the marginalised. Anqi'er is dull and plain-looking, shunned by most classmates; yet Ma Xiaotiao never treats her that way. He even arranges for the handsome Brother Han Li to pick her up from school, stirring intense envy among the other young female students. He also draws Anqi'er as an angelically beautiful figure, instilling confidence and joy in her heart. Ma Xiaotiao braves all dangers to protect rare wild animals. It is precisely this humanistic concern and compassion that sets Ma Xiaotiao apart from the "model students" in teachers' eyes, endowing him with a fuller and more virtuous personality.

When answering questions from young readers, Yang Hongying elaborates on her creative philosophy as "originate from children, return to children". Having long wished for a son of her own, she created the character of Ma Xiaotiao. She also states that she holds particular affection for mischievous boys like Ma Xiaotiao and girls like Anqi'er. Nevertheless, Zhou Junnan identifies a striking contradiction: in *Dull Girl Anqi'er*, a volume of the *Naughty Boy Ma Xiaotiao Series*, the portrayal of Anqi'er betrays no trace of the author's admiration or esteem for this girl. The text reads: "She had a flat nose, thick lips, and eyes set far apart—her features marked her plainly as a slow-witted girl." [8]

Parallel descriptions appear in *The Transfer Student Named Niupi*:

"Niupi says I'm pretty."

Teacher Qin thought she had misheard: "What? Say that again!" In Teacher Qin's mind, Anqi'er was far from attractive.

"It's fine," Anqi'er said. "Everyone thinks Xia Linguo is pretty, and I think so too."

Texts centred on Ma Xiaotiao and Niupi, as well as those focused on Anqi'er herself, all carry the implied author's judgments and comparisons of the girl characters' appearances. The author even resorts to ugly physical depictions to highlight Anqi'er's inner beauty. By contrast, for Ma Xiaotiao, the boy character she equally admires, the author never relies on belittling his outward appearance to accentuate his fine human qualities. To visualize the imbalance in character depiction frequency and appearance description volume between male and female roles in *The Transfer Student Named Niupi*, this paper compiles quantitative statistical data as **Table 1** below.

Table 1. Quantitative statistics of depictions of boy and girl characters in the transfer student named Niupi.

Character	Frequency of Appearance	Physical Appearance Descriptions	Gender
Ma Xiaotiao	438	0	Male
Ben/Niupi	103/473, total 576 occurrences	14	Male
Tang Fei	184	3	Male
Zhang Da	85	0	Male
Mao Chao	122	0	Male
Anqi'er	249	7	Female
Xia Linguo	51	2	Female
Lu Manman	18	0	Female
Du Zhenzi	70	2	Female

This statistical table is self-compiled by the author of this paper. “Frequency of Appearance” refers to the total number of times each character appears in the full text; “Physical Appearance Descriptions” counts independent narrative sentences directly describing facial features, body shape and looks of characters, excluding indirect appearance evaluation from other roles. The statistical corpus covers the complete text of *The Transfer Student Named Niupi*.

This study adopts a combined qualitative and quantitative research methodology. By extracting and comparing all physical appearance descriptions of Niupi and Anqi'er in *The Transfer Student Named Niupi*, we can observe the monotonous and repetitive aesthetic judgments and feature depictions Yang Hongying applies to the girl characters she creates.

As shown in **Table 1**, male characters occupy far more character appearance frequency in the novel, while female characters bear concentrated appearance descriptions. Among the 14 segments describing Niupi's physical appearance, the phrase “green eyes” recurs 13 times, mostly presented as meaningless repetitions of identical phrasing such as “like tiny green lanterns”. Of these 14 passages, 3 record other characters' impressions of Niupi's looks, while the remaining 11 are direct depictions of Niupi himself.

By contrast, out of the 7 physical appearance descriptions concerning Anqi'er, only one constitutes a direct portrayal of Anqi'er, and the other six are indirect assessments of her looks voiced by Niupi, Teacher Qin or Anqi'er's mother. This arrangement drastically diminishes Anqi'er's subjectivity within the text. Such a writing technique, which advocates for characters' inner beauty yet frames them as passive objects open to arbitrary judgment, merits critical vigilance. To further compare the textual differences in specific appearance descriptions of male and female characters, this paper sorts out all representative descriptive fragments and forms **Table 2**.

This table is self-sorted by the author based on the full text of *The Transfer Student Named Niupi*. All excerpts are original text fragments extracted from the novel; male character descriptions focus on independent objective narrative depiction, while most female character appearance evaluations are indirect remarks from other characters, which reflects the missing textual subjectivity of girl figures.

The contrast of descriptive texts in **Table 2** fully reveals the unequal aesthetic writing of male and female images. Beyond the deliberate physical depictions of girl characters prevalent across the *Naughty Boy Ma Xiaotiao Series*, *Girls' Diary* and *Boys' Diary* also perpetuate disciplinary gender norms that deepen rigid gender stereotypes. Li Xiaojun and Dai An form a pair of deskmates with inverted gender identities crafted by Yang Hongying. Raised exclusively by his single mother, Li Xiaojun is highly feminised in every respect, from clothing to speech and conduct; he only enjoys playing with female peers and was bullied relentlessly by boys at his former school, forcing him to transfer to Class 3, Grade 5. With the tough protection of tomboy Dai An and the distinctive guidance of Teacher Milan,

he eventually grows into a masculine young man. Dai An, who adopts a tomboy persona partly voluntarily and partly out of circumstance, recovers her feminine identity through the loving care of her father Mr. An and the earnest expectations of her classmate Li Xiaojun.

Table 2. Specific depictive contents of boy and girl characters in the transfer student named Niupi.

Described Subject	Corresponding Depictive Contents
Boy (Ben / Niupi)	1. Ben's hair is flaxen and curled on the top of his head... Ben's eyes are green, not large, round as two green glass marbles. The most distinctive feature on Ben's face is his nose, which strikes Ma Xiaotiao as utterly enormous.
	2. His flaxen hair is styled in an elegant bob. His two eyes are small and round, like two tiny green glass marbles. His nose is very big, resembling an exclamation mark suspended in the middle of his face.
	3. Niupi blinked his small green eyes: "What does 'average' mean? I don't understand."
	4. "Wait for me, Ma Xiaotiao!" Niupi's green eyes glowed like two flickering little green lanterns in the night...
	5. Niupi blinked his green eyes: "What are the Hundred Family Surnames? I don't know."
	6. Niupi stared wide-eyed with his green eyes, searching for cat fur.
	7. Niupi fixed his small round green eyes on him without uttering a single word in reply.
	8. This remark was equally baffling; Niupi blinked his green eyes.
	9. On that gloomy day, sorrow lingered in Niupi's small, round green eyes.
	10. Niupi said his eyes looked different from Ma Xiaotiao's.
	11. She guessed that this foreign boy with green eyes and a huge nose must be Niupi.
	12. His green eyes, like tiny green lanterns, dimmed instantly.
	13. "Why?" Niupi's round green eyes widened.
	14. "I've discovered another miracle—" Niupi's green eyes sparkled under the starlight.
Girl (Anqi'er, Du Zhenzi)	1. Niupi said Anqi'er bore an angel's name and that she was lovely...
	2. "You are not unattractive. You are inherently pretty, just uniquely so."
	3. Anqi'er was overjoyed after hearing Niupi's words... "No one has ever told me I look nice." "Everyone thinks Xia Linguo is beautiful, and I think she is too."
	4. "He actually said Anqi'er is good-looking; his praise has turned Anqi'er's head."
	5. In Teacher Qin's eyes, Anqi'er was far from attractive... She stared into the mirror: her lips were a little thick, her nose slightly flat, and her eyes spaced wide apart, yet crystal clear. It was these limpid eyes that lent vivid beauty to Anqi'er's plain features.
	6. Niupi insisted on getting a clear answer: "How does she compare with Anqi'er?" ...In his mind, Anqi'er was the absolute top-tier girl beyond all comparison.
	7. "Very pretty!" Niupi knew Tang Fei was talking about Du Zhenzi, "but she still falls a little short next to Anqi'er."

6. In-Depth Gender Narrative Analysis Based on Halliday's Transitivity Theory—A Case Study of Tomboy Dai An

By applying the transitivity concept from Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar to analyse the story Tomboy Dai An contained in Yang Hongying's *The Troublemakers of Class Three, Grade Five*, we can identify the limitations of gender construction embodied in Yang Hongying's works with greater clarity. The transitivity process-type analysis of the syntactic language in the text Tomboy Dai An is divided into three chronological stages. The first stage is set on the school campus, centring on the plot that after Dai An cuts her hair short, the boy Fat Cat (Lu Yunfei) teases her maliciously, claiming she wears a wig. The second stage

takes place beside the table tennis table after class. Fat Cat secures the table first, yet he is threatened by sixth-grade boys that his racket will be seized unless he leaves. Dai An, who originally intended to settle scores with Fat Cat, steps forward to retrieve the playing space for Fat Cat and the other boys. The third stage shifts the scene back to the classroom. Several days after Dai An recovers the table tennis court for the boys, she remembers to confront Fat Cat over his earlier mockery.

In the first stage of the story, the total number of processes with female participants as the subject exceeds that of processes centred on male participants (26 vs. 19). Nevertheless, the distribution of process types reveals distinct gender disparities that reflect the passivity of female character depictions. Material processes, which denote direct physical interventions upon external surroundings, register equal quantities between female and male subjects (4 vs. 4) numerically. Yet all material processes undertaken by Dai An constitute violent, reactive counterattacks, such as shoving Xiao Yiyi and twisting Fat Cat's ear. In contrast, the material processes performed by the boys Fat Cat, Mickey and Bean Sprout consist of deliberate teasing and sarcasm, intentional offences directed at Dai An. In terms of behavioural processes, female instances are far fewer than male ones (1 vs. 4). The text repeatedly depicts the boys' mischievous taunting and their reactions after Dai An twists their ears, while the sole behavioural process assigned to a female character is Dai An's single leap forward, which drastically diminishes the initiative of female conduct.

Verbal processes are equal in count for both genders (9 vs. 9), yet male utterances consist of dominant jeering, fabricated rumours and malicious jokes, whereas female speech mostly comprises passive retorts, excuses and clarifications. By contrast, relational processes exclusively belong to female participants in this first stage (5 vs. 0), 80 percent of which describe Dai An's physical appearance. Many stereotyped aesthetic judgements of outward looks even issue from the narrative focaliser "I" (Xia Xueer), reinforcing the collective impression of Dai An as a tomboy. Mental processes also concentrate heavily on female characters (6 vs. 2).

Within Tomboy Dai An, a text featuring a female protagonist, Yang Hongying's construction of girl characters remains largely confined to assessments of physical appearance and articulations of inner emotions. Female figures lack equal access to material and behavioural processes enjoyed by their male counterparts; their actions stem from no active initiative, and they only respond passively to boys' mockery. Female characters are marginalised as figures to be scrutinised and ridiculed throughout the first narrative stage.

In the second narrative stage, sixth-grade boys enter the plot, expanding the range of participating characters. The total count of transitivity processes tilts in favour of male participants (12 female vs. 17 male), further highlighting the imbalance in gender construction.

Males still dominate material processes (3 female : 6 male) and verbal processes (2 female : 8 male). Action-initiating behaviours and utterances such as threaten-

ing, seizing, arguing and speculating belong chiefly to male figures including the older sixth-grade boys and Fat Cat. This segment is deliberately crafted by the author as the prime illustration of Dai An's chivalrous temperament. Within this passage, Dai An engages in proactive material and verbal processes: she dashes forward resolutely to retrieve Fat Cat's table tennis racket and speaks out sternly to secure justice for her classmates. Nevertheless, Yang Hongying frames Dai An's chivalrous disposition on the premise of de-feminisation.

Though behavioural process depictions of Dai An multiply and outnumber those of male characters (2 female : 0 male), they only consist of simple physical acts of Dai An and Xia Xueer squeezing through the crowd. Relational processes still centre predominantly on female figures (3 female : 2 male), and remain focused on descriptions of Dai An's tomboyish traits—her voice, clothing and short haircut. These are paired with masculine-coded material processes such as “folding her arms across her chest” and “standing there staring sideways at them”. Yang Hongying's narration steers readers to conclude that masculine attributes constitute the precondition for Dai An to stand her ground against boys.

The text intends to depict Dai An's integrity, resolve and bravery, conveying that girls, just like boys, can equally embody fine human virtues. Yet it attributes Dai An's success in driving away the senior boys entirely to her de-feminised appearance, alongside her voice and gestures that lead others to mistake her for a boy. Therefore, even though Dai An gains greater agency in material processes during the second stage, the plausibility of her actions rests upon the premise that she is misrecognised as male. This gender-reversed iteration of the “hero saves the damsel” trope crafted by Yang Hongying fails to liberate female characters; instead, it reinforces inequitable gender construction, confining women to rigid labels based on physical appearance and gendered bodily markers.

In the third stage, the scene shifts back to the classroom of Class Three, Grade Five. The total number of transitivity processes for female characters is lower than that for male counterparts (4 vs. 6). Even though this stage features a single female character holding agency while the group of male characters act passively, inequity persists in the text's gender construction.

When combining the counts of material processes and behavioural processes, female and male figures register an equal ratio of 2 to 2. All proactive interventionary acts such as twisting ears and forcing Fat Cat to perform a “ballet dance” are carried out by Dai An. Instead of reinforcing Dai An's chivalrous temperament, however, these acts incline readers to believe that transitivity processes marked by overt violent tendencies and masculine traits constitute the prerequisite for Dai An to claim narrative agency.

The ratio of female to male verbal processes stands at 1 to 3. While males occupy more verbal processes, their utterances consist mainly of Fat Cat's pleas for mercy, evasion of accountability, and Bean Sprout's panicked shouts from under the desk. These are passive speech acts devoid of dominant discursive power, embodying submission and reliance on Dai An's authority.

Even in this third stage where Dai An takes the initiative to demand an explanation and seize control of the situation, Yang Hongying still attributes Dai An's agency to her tomboyish violent conduct and underscores her imitation of masculine traits. The countermeasures Dai An adopts after being the target of rumours even replicate, to a certain degree, the violent tactics employed by the sixth-grade boys to seize the table tennis court—tactics which the author condemned in the second stage. The text fails to present Dai An as a purposeful, influential, and capable young woman. Having torn off the stereotypical label of “weak and passive womanhood”, the author immediately pastes an alternative tomboy label of “forceful and aggressive” onto her. By tying the growth of Dai An's agency in transitivity processes to the prominence of masculine traits on her character, Yang Hongying's writing remains trapped within a binary gender framework that centres men and frames women as the Other.

While the author's attempt to diversify character portrayals deserves recognition, there remains a long journey ahead to truly break outdated gender perceptions and continuously dismantle rigid gender stereotypes within narrative construction.

Li Rongmei and Yang Hongmin argue that the poignant tales stemming from Li Xiaojun and Dai An's inverted gender roles under Yang Hongying's pen serve as a reminder to all adults: children's growth constitutes a complex developmental process that requires comprehensive, appropriate guidance [9].

In the essay “Cross-Dressing Narratives in Contemporary Children's Literature from a Gender Perspective”, Wang Shuainai contends that such texts mirror the array of real-life hardships endured by juveniles who deviate from traditional gender expectations—especially those with conspicuous cross-dressing inclinations and behaviours—and carry an undercurrent of resistance against binary gender frameworks [10]. Nevertheless, though Yang Hongying's writing sets out to reflect on conventional gender perceptions, it ultimately falls into the trap of reinforcing rigid binary divisions of gender roles. Her heavy emphasis on self-identification with normative masculine and feminine identities restrains the development of diversified subjectivity for both boys and girls.

7. Conclusions

While Yang Hongying's exploration of diverse character portrayals merits recognition for enriching juvenile reading materials and capturing children's authentic daily emotions, the rigid fixed gender archetypes and oversimplified binary gender awareness embedded within her literary texts severely restrict the depth of gender thinking and fail to deliver comprehensive, sound gender enlightenment for young readers. Such narrow narrative logic risks implanting biased gender cognitions in minors and misleading them into rigid, one-sided misconceptions about gender identity, gender temperament and interpersonal relations between males and females.

Throughout the “Naughty Boy Ma Xiaotiao Series”, Yang Hongying's typical

creative shortcut is to grant female figures narrative agency only through de-feminised, masculine and even violent behaviours, which sets a harmful implicit rule: soft, delicate feminine qualities equal weakness and powerlessness, while bold, aggressive masculine traits represent authority and dominance. This flawed writing trope of elevating female subjectivity by discarding femininity must be thoroughly broken free from by contemporary children's literature creators. Writers ought to completely abandon the biased evaluative logic that takes masculine demeanour and behavioural modes as the universal measuring stick to judge whether a character is brave, independent or influential.

Instead, children's literature should construct multi-layered, open and diversified gendered characters without predefined gender labels: girls can be gentle and sensitive as well as decisive and fearless; boys are allowed to display tenderness, vulnerability and emotional richness without being stigmatised. Only by depicting a balanced spectrum of personalities unchained from gender shackles can literary works authentically convey the core notion of gender equality, teach children to respect individual differences regardless of gender, and guide them to build inclusive, equal interpersonal perceptions during their growth.

From the perspective of the artistic development of original Chinese commercial children's literature, the "Yang Hongying Phenomenon" also offers valuable reflective experience. Popular juvenile literary works catering to market demands should strike a healthy balance between recreational readability and profound aesthetic, ideological value. Future children's writing needs to transcend one-sided child-centred pandering and crude binary conflict settings between adults and children, adopt multi-dimensional, objective character shaping, and escape the trap of stereotyped gender narration, so as to realise the organic integration of educational significance, artistic value and market appeal.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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