



# Marginalized Children in Chinese Children's Fantasy Literature: A Journey of Self-discovery and Acceptance

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## Abstract

This paper utilizes textual analysis to examine classic works from the *Little Cloth Tiger Series*, a collection of popular children's fantasy novels published by Spring Breeze Literary Arts Publishing House in the early 21st century. This was a formative period for the genre of Chinese fantasy literature. The paper explores the portrayal of marginalized groups, such as children from divorced families, those who do not conform to traditional beauty standards, and those who do not meet conventional academic expectations, within these works. By focusing on protagonists endowed with magical powers who embark on journeys of self-salvation, the study emphasizes that their growth is ultimately derived not from supernatural abilities, but from discovering and accepting their true selves. The analysis adopts Carl Rogers' theory of self-concept and narrative therapy, employing psychological and literary perspectives to explore the social implications of such narratives. This study aims to highlight the humanistic and social values embedded within Chinese children's fantasy literature.

## Keywords

Chinese children's fantasy literature; marginalized groups; self-discovery; self-acceptance; social value

## 1. Introduction

In the early 21st century, the genre of fantasy fiction was formally established in China, and Chinese children's fantasy literature began to move towards a path of conscious development. These works quickly gained favor among young readers due to their creative storytelling and imaginative elements. Notably, as society progressed, protagonists in early 21st-century Chinese children's fantasy literature were no longer flat, adult-approved model students, nor psychologically troubled youths in need of care, and neither were they resilient "little warriors" hardened by adversity. Instead, the focus shifted towards marginalized children, such as those from divorced families or those who do not conform to traditional standards of beauty or academic success. These stories serve as both a source of entertainment and a powerful tool for reflecting societal realities and addressing children's psychological challenges, providing marginalized children with a sense of belonging and recognition.

Children's fantasy literature has long been considered an important genre for addressing the fears, challenges, and emotional needs of young readers. In Western contexts, iconic works such as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* explore themes of self-discovery, acceptance, and resilience (Babu, R. K. & Vishnuvardhan, V., 2021). Similarly, Chinese children's fantasy literature has begun to address the unique cultural and social issues faced by modern Chinese children. Scholars have noted that fantasy literature enables marginalized

children to imagine themselves in empowered roles, fostering a sense of agency. However, little attention has been given to how growth in Chinese fantasy literature is ultimately driven not by magical abilities but by a deeper process of self-acceptance.

This paper aims to explore how Chinese children's fantasy literature portrays marginalized children, focusing on the transformations experienced by these protagonists during their magical adventures. By analyzing how these characters grow—not through their magical powers, but through their journeys of self-discovery and acceptance—this study seeks to reveal the broader impact of these narratives on the psychological development of young readers.

## 2. The Plight of Marginalized Protagonists in Chinese Fantasy Literature

### 2.1 Protagonists from Divorced Families

One key group represented in Chinese children's fantasy literature is children from divorced families. With the rise in divorce rates in China in the early 21st century, albeit still under the strong influence of conservative thought, many people viewed "divorce" and children from divorced families with suspicion. Thus, contemporary children's fantasy literature began to focus on the growth and psychological well-being of children from divorced or single-parent families. For instance, in *My Mom Is an Elf* by Chen Danyan, the protagonist's friend Li Yuchen is a child from a divorced family. Her father, preoccupied with work, neglects her basic needs, leaving her often unkempt and feeling like an outcast. This portrayal reflects the prejudice faced by children from divorced families and highlights their sensitivity, independence, and vulnerability.

Li Yuchen's experience is shaped by societal biases, as evidenced by her classmates' attitudes: "When our classmates hear that someone's parents are divorced, they look at them as if there's a riddle—'If nothing shameful happened in their family, why would they get divorced?'" (Chen, D. Y., 1998) Such remarks highlight the sense of exclusion and prejudice faced by children from divorced families. The protagonist, Chen Miaomiao, finds herself unexpectedly sharing this experience when she learns that her own parents are divorcing. Her mother is not a human but an elf, and after years of hiding the truth, her father decides to separate. As her family unravels, Miaomiao experiences a mix of sadness, confusion, and panic, and for the first time begins to understand Li Yuchen's feelings. The bond between the two deepens as they work together to cope with their changing realities, forging a friendship based on genuine empathy and shared struggles. This mutual support contrasts with relationships founded on superficial charity, highlighting the importance of emotional reciprocity in children's psychological growth.

In another example, *The Secret Room Under Grandpa's Iron Bed*, the protagonist Apei's father divorces his mother due to infidelity, leaving Apei to live with his father and grandfather. His strained relationship with his father and resentment towards his father's new partner illustrates the emotional struggles faced by children in such situations. These stories depict how marginalized children often find solace in others who share similar experiences, creating a sense of empathy and connection. Apei's friend, Yu Bao, faces similar challenges. Yu Bao's mother has remarried and had a child with his stepfather, but the relationship between Yu Bao and his stepfather remains fraught with tension. In his defiance, Yu Bao searches for a way to disrupt the life of his stepfather, eventually unleashing a ghost army from a secret room—an act that inadvertently causes chaos in their community. These fantasy elements, intertwined with the depiction of real-world issues, underscore the emotional turmoil and resilience of children from non-traditional families.

### 2.2 Protagonists with Non-traditional Physical Appearance

Another group frequently depicted in Chinese children's fantasy literature is children who do not conform to traditional beauty standards. Children, like adults, are often drawn to beauty and trends, and those who do not meet these standards are often bullied or ostracized. In *My Deskmate is a Female Demon*, the protagonist Aqun is described as "plain (or even ugly)" (Che, P. J., 2002). and despite her efforts to conform by buying fashionable clothes and learning to apply makeup, she remains invisible. Her friend Gu Liyan, despite her wealthy background, is ridiculed for her plump figure and given derogatory nicknames.

The friendship between Aqun and Gu Liyan emerges from their shared experiences of being marginalized. The new deskmate, a demon named Qiao Xi, also faces ridicule due to her unattractive features, such as a flat nose and disheveled hair. Despite her appearance, Qiao Xi, like Aqun, deeply desires to be seen as beautiful. Together, they navigate the challenges of being ostracized, eventually forming bonds of solidarity. The trio's adventures in a magical monster town become a means for them to learn important values such as courage, resilience, and self-love, which

ultimately help them move past their preoccupation with physical appearance and accept themselves for who they are.

These narratives highlight how marginalized children use their shared experiences to build resilience. Instead of succumbing to societal pressure, they draw strength from one another, demonstrating that genuine beauty is found in qualities such as loyalty and bravery. This message of self-acceptance is significant for young readers who may struggle with similar issues related to appearance and societal expectations.

### 2.3 Protagonists Who Do Not Meet Academic Success Standards

Chinese children's fantasy literature also focuses on children who do not conform to traditional academic standards. These children, often ignored by teachers and ridiculed by classmates, find their own ways to assert their worth. In *Li Dami and His Shadow*, the protagonist Li Dami is ridiculed because of his unusual name and his mediocre academic performance. Despite his struggles, he eventually gains a sense of agency through the intervention of his shadow, Professor Futian, who embodies his suppressed desires for courage and assertiveness. This narrative reflects how marginalized children create alternate identities to cope with societal pressures.

Li Dami's school divides students into four levels: gold, silver, bronze, and wood, based on their academic performance. While most children fit into one of these categories, Li Dami finds himself excluded from even the lowest tier. His greatest desire is to be acknowledged as a "metal pupil" and to be accepted by his peers. Professor Futian, Li Dami's shadow, takes on a life of its own, acting out the assertiveness that Li Dami lacks. By physically defending Li Dami and standing up to ridicule, Futian becomes a manifestation of Li Dami's inner struggle for self-worth. This split between Li Dami and his shadow serves as a metaphor for the conflict between societal expectations and personal desires, and through his interactions with Futian, Li Dami learns to integrate both parts of his identity.

## 3. Self-acceptance Without Reliance on Magic in Fantasy Literature

### 3.1 Self-discovery and Self-control

In Chinese fantasy literature, magical powers often serve as a catalyst for protagonists' self-discovery. In *My Mom Is an Elf*, the parents' divorce marks a turning point for the protagonist Chen Miaomiao, who comes to realize that her perceived control over her family was an illusion. Through her friendship with Li Yuchen, Miaomiao learns to cope with change and the complexities of human emotions. The story emphasizes that the true growth of these children lies not in supernatural abilities, but in their understanding of and adaptation to the real world.

Before her parents' separation, Miaomiao's life was harmonious and stable, with her parents maintaining the illusion of a perfect family for her benefit. When this illusion shatters, Miaomiao feels powerless and deceived. Initially, she attempts to regain control by running away from home and trying to convince her father not to proceed with the divorce. Her friend Li Yuchen, who has already endured the divorce of her own parents, becomes an unexpected source of strength for Miaomiao. Yuchen has meticulously collected newspaper clippings about children from divorced families, as a way of understanding her own past and coping with her feelings. By helping Miaomiao, Yuchen also revisits her own emotional journey, attempting to provide the support she wishes she had received. This partnership emphasizes that the journey to self-empowerment often involves understanding one's limits and the importance of emotional resilience.

### 3.2 Self-affirmation and Self-acceptance

Throughout their journey, protagonists often come to affirm themselves, gaining confidence and independence. In *My Deskmate is a Female Demon*, Aqun initially seeks to restore her appearance through magic to win back her friend Tong Biyang, who had rejected her due to her physical changes. However, her journey ultimately becomes one of self-respect rather than seeking others' approval. The narrative conveys that the true value lies not in outward beauty or magical solutions, but in inner strength and self-worth.

In one significant scene, when Aqun and Tong Biyang are accused of being assassins by the Moon Princess and face execution, Tong tries to reassure Aqun, saying that those who are innocent have nothing to fear. Aqun, however, rejects this passive approach, declaring that "Because we haven't done anything wrong, we have to fight to save ourselves!" (Che, P. J., 2002). This moment represents a shift in Aqun's character, as she transitions from a mindset of passive acceptance to one of proactive self-defense and advocacy. The use of fantasy elements here underscores

the empowerment that stems not from external magic, but from internal conviction and resilience.

This message aligns with Rogers' theory of self-acceptance, in which individuals must learn to value themselves regardless of perceived shortcomings or societal expectations. By embarking on a journey through a fantastical setting, Aquan is able to overcome her insecurities and redefine her self-worth. Ultimately, her self-acceptance comes not from magical transformation, but from the inner peace she achieves by embracing her true self and gaining independence.

### 3.3 Self-struggle and Self-narration

Magical elements in Chinese children's fantasy often symbolize the protagonist's inner struggle, manifesting as an alternate self that fights for their rights. In *Li Dami and His Shadow*, Li Dami's shadow, Professor Futian, represents the protagonist's unspoken desires and suppressed sense of justice. "Have you ever hesitated before doing something? You want to do it and you don't want to do it. And want to do this, and want to do that. It's like having two little people fighting. Right now I am one of those little people, and you are the other little person, and we are like the heads and tails of a coin" (Zhang, Z. L., 2002). The shadow's actions are a manifestation of Li Dami's struggle against societal norms, ultimately aiding in his journey towards self-acceptance. This aligns with Rogers' narrative therapy, where the personal narrative reshapes one's identity.

Li Dami's initial rejection of Futian stems from his fear of being perceived as a troublemaker. Futian's actions—defending Li Dami, questioning unfair rules, and standing up to authority—represent the desires that Li Dami has suppressed under societal expectations. As the story progresses, Li Dami learns to embrace Futian as a part of himself rather than viewing him as a disruptive external force. In Rogers' view, such self-acceptance allows for congruence between one's real and ideal self, as it empowers individuals to re-author their stories to include, rather than reject, aspects of themselves that had previously been hidden. In his gradual understanding and identification with Professor Futian, Li Dami also completes his self-understanding and self-confirmation in his inner tugging and reaches a new growth in which his own heart is self-consistent and unmoved by external objects. This evolution reflects the importance of integrating different facets of one's personality and accepting the "shadow self" as crucial to personal growth.

## 4. Conclusion

Chinese children's fantasy literature provides a unique perspective on the growth and empowerment of marginalized children, emphasizing that real transformation comes not from magical abilities but from within. As Hopkins and Lillard suggest, Fantasy elements can foster imagination, but may at times hinder children's accurate comprehension of the underlying real-world principles if they are not made explicitly clear (Hopkins & Lillard, 2021). By depicting protagonists from divorced families, those with non-traditional physical appearances, and those who do not meet conventional academic standards, these stories offer relatable role models for young readers, helping them learn to accept themselves and find their inner strength.

This study highlights the importance of self-acceptance and inner growth in children's fantasy literature, showing how these stories can serve as powerful tools for emotional and psychological development. Hopkins and Lillard also note that children's learning from fantastical stories can be enhanced when there is an effort to bridge fantastical elements with real-world applicability (Hopkins & Lillard, 2021), which aligns with the role of these stories in helping young readers recognize that true transformation is internal rather than magical. Using Carl Rogers' self-acceptance theory and narrative therapy, a deeper understanding of these protagonists' journeys reveals how they reflect the processes of self-discovery and acceptance in real life.

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