

# ***A Comprehensive Review of Research Literature on the Development of Children's Drama in China***

## ***-Using the Example of the Play Malanhua***

**Jingyao Wang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Jing Hengyi College of Education, Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, 310000, China

a. 1912100130@mail.sit.edu.cn

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** Children's theater plays a significant role in the cultural landscape of theater and has a major impact on children's education. In this study, the author uses a literature review method, focusing on the play *Malanhua*, to review the research progress in Chinese children's theater, specifically in terms of script content, themes and so on. The research results on the innovation and development of stage design, characterization, and main theme of Chinese children's theatre represented by *Malanhua* are summarized and concluded. With the changes in the times and the evolving societal needs, the perspective on children has also changed. Starting from the deep influence of political ideologies in the 1950s and 1960s to a return to nature in the 1980s, and then to catering to the market in the new century, these shifts have influenced the tendencies in character development, themes, script content and stage design in children's theater. However, there are some tendencies that have remained constant, such as the increasingly successful fusion of Chinese traditional culture and Western culture in stage design, the understanding of the characters by the director and scriptwriter deepens in terms of character development, and the close connection between purpose and societal needs. Eventually, it was pointed out that deficiencies and limitations of research on children's theater in China, like the lack of theoretical construction in children's drama, the weak foundation of the history of children's theater in China and so on.

**Keywords:** Children's view, China children's theater, *Malanhua*

## **1. Introduction**

Theater, with its long history, has played a pivotal role in the history of human artistic development. Not only is it a patent for adults, but it also plays a positive and significant role in the development of children's intellectual abilities, the cultivation of artistic thinking, and the shaping of a well-rounded personality.

*Malanhua* was written by Mr. Ren Deyao, a famous children's playwright in China, and was the first children's play performed by the first children's theatre established in new China. With the progress and development of the times, *Malanhua* has been adapted multiple times, from children's

theater to musicals and even animated films. It has continuously innovated in project operation, internal management, and children's theater writing, ultimately winning the first "Excellent Preserved Repertoire Award" from the Ministry of Culture. The development and innovation of the play *Malanhua* can be seen as a reflection of the changes and development of children's theater within the context of its time. The division of time in the play aligns with the categorization of children's theater. Furthermore, the changes in stage design and character development in children's theater can be better understood through specific examples from *Malanhua*.

The research on Chinese children's theater in China is relatively limited. From the search of the literature, by searching for "Chinese children's theater" on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), 90 relevant documents can be found. These documents have been compiled and summarized (see Table 1).

Table 1: A summary of the research literature on children's theater in China.

Time period	1956-1979	1980-1999	2000-until now
Volume of publications	3	9	78

According to Table 1, it can be observed that the research interest in Chinese children's drama in China has increased approximately sixfold during the 21<sup>st</sup> century compared to the previous historical period.

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China's theater has gradually deepened its exploration in areas such as theoretical analysis, artistic characteristics, aesthetic features, cultural evolution, and problem awareness, and has achieved certain accomplishments. There are also shortcomings in its theory building. The theoretical construction of children's drama in our country is lacking, and the foundation of children's theater of comparative data on early childhood drama between China and the West. Through reviewing the literature on the changes in social demands and attitudes towards children in the 1950s, 1980s, and the new century, this article aims to summarize the tendencies in children's perspectives during these three periods. Furthermore, by summarizing the innovative development of stage design, character portrayal, themes, and performance techniques in the play *Malanhua* during these three periods, the article will correlate the innovative development of *Malanhua* with the perspectives on children. Specifically, it will combine concrete children's theatrical works with theories to make the theories more accessible. Finally, through further research on children's theatrical theories and expanding the study of children's theatrical works, it is hoped that the gaps in the history of children's theater in our country can be effectively filled.

## 2. Research Status

### 2.1. A Study on the Tendency of Politicization in Chinese Children's Theatre in the 1950s and 1960s

In the early days of the establishment of the People's Republic of China, there was much to be done and the focus of the country's work was to consolidate the new political power and carry out economic development. *Loving the new generation is a virtue of communism - Summary of the Second National Conference on Youth and Children's Work* emphasizes that the establishment of the new China in 1949 closely linked the society's attitude towards children with the national ideology. Children were no longer seen as miniature adults, but as the successors of the socialist cause, and children's activities were carried out with this goal in mind [1]. During this period, children's theater played an important role in the overall social and cultural system.

In the article *Alienation and Reconstruction: Changes of Vies on Children's Drama of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century China* Song Min and Tan Xudong expressed their concern about this trend. They believe that during the “seventeen years” period after the establishment of New China, the perception of children by the state and society changed with the times. The primary task of child upbringing was to cultivate the successors of the revolution, which gradually led to the deviation of children's drama from the real world. The themes and content of children's drama gradually became politicized [2]. In the paper *Exploring Children's Drama - A Bud in the Garden of Flowers* Ren Deyao considered the differences in children's age, character, and life knowledge, but it was still based on the ideals of patriotism, socialism, and communism, or the glorious image of workers, peasants, and soldiers, to educate children [3].

Zhou Yuyuan mentioned in *Everlasting 'Malanhua' that never withers* that in 1956, the children's play *Malanhua* was first released [4]. Zhang Zhengyu and Shen Fan et al. in *Discussing the stage art design of 'Malanhua'* commented that the style of *Malanhua* emphasizes simplicity, easy to understand and highlights Chinese and folk expression methods [5]. That is in line with children's thinking levels [5]. In the author's opinion, the reason why *Malanhua* was able to be released at that time is because it is based on a folk story and embodies Chinese traditional culture in terms of technique and stage design. This reflects the society's desire to cultivate successors and is also influenced by the “nationality-oriented” ideology to some extent. Although the play *Malanhua* during this period catered to social needs in terms of its themes and overall style, it still had limitations by excessively focusing on societal requirements and neglecting the needs of children. Yi Zhou, in his article *Discussing the Children's Play 'Malanhua'*, criticized the director's handling of intense conflict scenes, such as when Da Lan pushed Xiao Lan into the river and Old Cat placed a large stone on top [6]. This manner of portrayal was deemed inappropriate [6]. The author believes that such descriptions and treatments have departed from the foundation of real life and have not taken into account the perspective of children. This also reflects a shift from a “child-centered” approach to a “national-centered” approach.

In conclusion, the children's play *Malanhua* is deeply influenced by social demand, as reflected in its style, stage design and performance techniques, all of which embody national characteristics. For example, the use of Peking opera facial makeup in the form of small animal sculptures. However, there is still room for improvement in balancing reality and art, as well as character development, which is also an area where children's theater in the 1950s and 1960s as a whole needs improvement. In addition, the themes and educational purposes of children's theater were very grand and placed significant emphasis on the integration of Chinese traditional culture and the process of nationalization during this period. However, to some extent, this neglected the needs and levels of children.

## 2.2. A Study on the Tendency of Chinese Children's Theater to Return to Nature in the 1980s

In the autumn of 1989, *Malanhua* was rearranged once again. The new version of *Malanhua* underwent a change in its “dramatic quality”, transitioning from a drama fairy tale to a fairy tale musical. Naturally, compared to the 1956 version, the new version of *Malanhua* has significant differences.

In the work *Alienation and Reconstruction: Changes of Vies on Children's Drama of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century China*, Song Min and Tan Xudong concluded that in the 1980s, Chinese children's theater began to embrace a child-centered perspective that respects the natural inclinations, rights, and personalities of children [2]. In *Implementing transcendence and breakthrough in 'Malanhua' after*, Yu Si writes about the overall style of the performance transitioning from realism to a comprehensive expression [7]. The narrative and plot of the entire performance are relatively

weakened, and the portrayal of characters and the revelation of their personalities tend towards expressionism [7]. However, there is a deepened understanding of the protagonist, which gives natural significance to the character's development [7]. In *The 'Malanhua': Classic Revivals and Synthesized Innovations*, Gong Zhengwen commented that the new version of *Malanhua* portrays the malleability and complexity of human nature. The adaptation of the ending of Lao Mao's character in the plot was made [8]. The play made bold attempts in the alternating use of puppets and human puppets, the creation of various animal figures and the innovation of puppet manipulation techniques, achieving a gripping effect [8]. In the author's opinion, the portrayal of characters, adaptation of the ending, and incorporation of puppet elements all reflect a child-centered perspective in children's theater. Compared to the 1950s and 1960s, Chinese freehand brushwork, while also ensured the three-dimensional portrayal and understanding of characters. These are all advancements in Chinese children's theater since the 1980s.

In conclusion, although the child perspective in the new era is similar to that of the New Culture Movement period, both emphasizing "putting children first", it is evident that the director and playwright have a better understanding of the themes and characters, and have greatly improved their abilities in stage design and character development. However, the transition from children's drama to musical theater in *Malanhua* is a significant leap, often resulting in common issues in musical theater such as fragmented plots and disjointed elements. In the author's opinion, it is still important to emphasize the narrative aspect of children's theater, ensuring that the ploy and character development are not overshadowed by the songs and dances.

### 2.3. A Study on the Tendency of Chinese Children's Theater to Prosper in the New Century

In 2009, *Malanhua* was designated by the Central Propaganda Department as a key domestically produced animated film to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the country. While retaining Chinese characteristics, it incorporated a large number of elements with a modern aesthetic.

In *The 'Malanhua': An Extraordinary Work That Rivals Disney's Animated Classics* article, Yang Xiaolin highlights the innovations of the new century's *Malanhua* from three perspectives [9]. In terms of the theme, *Malanhua* adds themes of environmental protection, harmony and survival [9]. It transforms from the original concept of hard work overcoming laziness to goodness and justice prevailing over evil and ambition [9]. This aligns with the mainstream values of commercial animated films that promote the punishment of evil and ambition [9]. This aligns with the mainstream values of commercial animated films that promote the punishment of evil and the promotion of goodness [9]. In terms of character design, the main characters Ma Lang, Xiao Lan and Da Lan are designed to have a youthful appearance [9]. In terms of scene design and other aspects, the scenes primarily exhibit three characteristics: grandeur, perilousness and environmental consciousness, with a strong emphasis on visual impact [9]. The technique of scene composition combines the intensity of three-dimensional and two-dimensional art, as well as the vividness of oil painting and the freshness of landscape painting [9]. In the research of *Study on the Development of Contemporary Children's Theater*, Wu Yuzhuo and Li Qian pointed out that since the new century, children's theater has placed more emphasis in its real-life significance and has a more international perspective in cultivating the audience's sense of social responsibility [10]. It has also shown differences in techniques and styles compared to the past [10]. Tan Xudong, in his study of *Reflections on the Development and Historical Research of Chinese Children's Drama*, mentioned the combination of children's theater with electronic media in the new century, which has brought significant breakthroughs in performance methods and has clear traces of commercialization [11]. In the author's opinion, this film is heavily influenced by foreign films and caters to the demand of the market by targeting a young audience for animation.

Although the adaptation of *Malanhua*, during this period, had a positive social impact, there are also some issues. Wang Gang mentioned in his article *A Brief Discussion on the Gains and Losses of the National Style of the Domestic Animated Film 'Malanhua'* that *Malanhua* draws heavily from foreign influences, but these foreign influences often cannot integrate well with traditional Chinese culture [12]. As a result, the film sometimes appears messy and many character images and line designs are rough, lacking in detail [12]. In the author's opinion, there are two main reasons for the lack of integration between traditional Chinese culture and modern factors, and the lack of careful observation of reality by the directors and screenwriters.

In conclusion, with the progress of the times and the development of technology, the film *Malanhua* has made innovative explorations, moving closer to foreign animated films. It has revolutionarily innovated in terms of character design, theme, narrative approach and technology. It not only meets market demands and is entertaining, but also has educational significance. However, children's theater should not only pursue market benefits, but should also focus more on humanistic qualities, educational value and emotional impact, and then try to meet market requirements on this basis.

Based on the research on Chinese children's theater in China, during the May Fourth Movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some benevolent individuals advocated for breaking the constraints on children and allowing them to grow up freely and healthily. This led to the establishment of a "child-centered" modern perspective on children, which later transformed into a "national-centered" perspective during the war period where children were used as propaganda tools. In the 1980s, there was a return to a more natural and child-centered approach. At different time periods, the perception of children is constantly changing under the influence of society. As a result, the portrayal of characters, stage forms, script content and other aspects of children's theater have also changed. In this regard, the adaptation of the Chinese children's play *Malanhua* also reflects these changes across different time periods.

### 3. Conclusion

As a highly acclaimed children's play, the creators of *Malanhua* have keenly captured the needs of society in different periods and continuously improved and innovated in terms of themes, stage design and other aspects. They have also continuously experimented with the quality of the play, from children's theater to children's musical theater and even animation. This spirit of innovation should be learned by all those involved in children's theater. Regardless of how they innovate, they always regard Chinese traditional culture as the foundation of their creation. This cultural confidence should be learned by all theater professionals.

Through reviewing and summarizing existing literature on children's theater in China, it becomes evident that there is a lack of basic theoretical construction in this field. Most of the literature consists of evaluations of theater by authors, with few scholars actually summarizing and generalizing the theoretical aspects of children's theater. Even among those few scholars who do study the theory of children's theater, their focus is mostly on foreign children's theater, and very little attention is given to the historical development of children's theater in China. Additionally, most domestic scholars tend to focus on the history of adult theater or foreign theater when it comes to conducting historical research in this field. Furthermore, the distribution of children's theaters in our country is scattered and diverse, making it crucial for scholars to categorize and summarize them. In the adaptation of *Malanhua* into animation in the new century, people can observe its significant alignment with Disney animation, both in terms of themes and animation techniques. However, there still exist challenges in finding a balance between commercialization and literary qualities, as well as between Chinese traditions and Western culture. Throughout the lengthy development process of Chinese children's theater, there are bound to be numerous clashes and

collisions between Chinese and Western cultures. Through in-depth research in this field, people can undoubtedly elevate and break new ground for Chinese children's theater.

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