

Research Article

The Three Constructive Pathways of Children's Self-Identity in Chinese Original Picture Books

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Abstract

Self-identity, an essential and inescapable theme in children's development, is frequently explored in original picture books. Although children's "self-identity" is centered on the "self," its construction, from a practical perspective, is not achieved by the self alone. This study, founded on a selective collation and curation of contemporary original Chinese picture books for children, identifies a number of influential works that engage the theme of "self-identity". It aims to elucidate the real-world orientation of the "self-identity" question as manifested within China's corpus of original picture books, and to examine the mechanisms by which the proposition of "self-identity" is enacted. By classifying these works, three distinct thematic propositions are distilled: the individual (self-) construction of self-identity, the social construction of self-identity, and the other-mediated construction of self-identity. Through close textual reading and comparative analysis, this paper demonstrates that whether arising from spontaneous personal reflection and the individual's project of self-construction, from a sense of personal identification catalyzed by social recognition, or from self-identity elicited under the guidance of "others," the series of picture books grouped under the rubric of "self-identity" uniformly seek to prompt young readers to contemplate the fundamental questions "Who am I?", "Who do I aspire to become?", and "By what means might I realize that aspiration?" These three pathways complement and illuminate one another, providing feasible approaches for children to achieve a coherent sense of self-identity.

Keywords

Original Picture Books, Self-identity, Child Subjectivity

1. Foreword

Self-identity is a lifelong concept that encompasses not only individuals' perception and evaluation of themselves but also their observation and judgment of others and the world at large. For children—who are at a critical stage of both mental and physical development, with their minds and bodies not yet fully mature—the cultivation and formation of self-identity at this stage are of particular importance. As an expressive and affectively rich medium, picture books play a pivotal role in helping children establish and internalize a sense of

self-identity. This paper adopts a thematic approach to conduct close readings and comparative analyses of several picturebooks that revolve around the theme of self-identity. It identifies three distinctive modes of constructing the notion of self-identity in contemporary Chinese original picturebooks. The selected works, which have enjoyed wide acceptance among Chinese children over the past two decades, also align closely with the thematic focus on self-identity.

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2. Subjective Construction of Self-Identity

In *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Anthony Giddens points out that self-identity is “the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography.” [1] Thus, self-identity first emphasizes the inner perception and self-awareness of the “I” as a subject. Throughout this process, individuals gradually become conscious of their unique existence and begin to explore and affirm their identities, values, and beliefs. The formation of such identity results from continuous self-reflection and self-adjustment during one’s interaction with the external world. Picture books such as *I Like Myself, I Make My Own Decisions, My Little Sister Is a Tagalong*, and *The Confident Princess’s Great Invention* each, to varying extents, highlight the self-recognition of the “I” as an autonomous subject.

Giddens further asserts that “the self is, of course, embodied. Awareness of the body’s contours and characteristics is the true origin of creative exploration of the world.” [1] Works such as *I Make My Own Decisions* and *I Like Myself* employ the medium of bodily perception to open children’s understanding of both self and world. *I Make My Own Decisions* [2], in particular, incisively portrays the theme of how adult-imposed standards can suppress the authenticity of childhood nature. In this story, conventional notions of the “good child” versus the “bad child” are exposed as moral frameworks that, rather than guiding, actually constrain children’s self-development and individual expression. In the book, the mother is frequently depicted with folded arms and a frown, whereas Bingbing—the child protagonist—appears small and subdued, seemingly an appendage to her mother. A father figure briefly appears, detached and silent, taking no part in the mother–daughter exchange. Scholars have noted that “the family is the primary agent of a child’s socialization.” [3] It is precisely the mother’s dominance within this family structure that creates a dynamic of power and repression, placing Bingbing in a passive position within the domestic sphere. Consequently, when she enters the marketplace—a relatively freer social setting—Bingbing begins to distance herself from maternal authority. She bravely proclaims, “My body, my choice!” This declaration not only demonstrates her newfound sense of autonomy over her body and decisions but also signifies a powerful affirmation of self-identity. As Bingbing resists her mother’s authority, the final illustration dedicates an entire page to her alone, positioning her at the very center of her own world, liberated from maternal control. Through such visual and narrative design, the picture book conveys a compelling message: every child has the right to live and grow according to their own will, rather than being confined by the expectations and norms imposed by the adult world.

I Like Myself [4] explores, in depth, the importance of children’s recognition and appreciation of their own bodies. The narrator expresses affection for their facial features, for

the slightly protruding front teeth, and for a stature that is “not so tall.” The child offers a series of affirmative reflections upon the body, conveying an unreservedly positive feedback toward self-image. Meanwhile, the narrator delights in solitude, takes pride in their behaviors and temperament, and cherishes their uniqueness. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, asserts that “my body is the pivot of the world” and that “it is through my body that I perceive the world.” [5] In the picture book, the “I” figure is frequently positioned at the center of the visual composition. At such moments, “I” often faces the reader directly, symbolizing a worldview centered on the self and implying an equal, reciprocal gaze between the narrator and the reader. Through this visual strategy, readers are drawn into an almost tangible interaction with the narrated “I,” evoking empathy and a shared awareness of self-recognition. By offering affirmative feedback through ordinary, everyday moments, the book gently guides children toward positive self-perception and the cultivation of self-identity. This sense of identity serves as the foundation of self-confidence; yet it is also a reminder that confidence must never degenerate into blind arrogance.

My Little Sister Is a Tagalong [6] vividly depicts the common childhood scenes of mischief and mimicry. In this story, the younger sister is an unrelenting “tagalong,” imitating her brother’s every movement and gesture without distinction. Such behavior naturally arouses the brother’s aversion; confronted with his sister’s lack of an independent self, he forms a firm judgment that “brother” is by no means equivalent to “sister.” Xiong Bingzhen observes that “in every corner of society—across different ethnicities, regions, genders, and classes—children may experience entirely different kinds of childhoods; even within the same group, or in the life of a single child, multiple ‘micro-worlds’ are always in operation.” [7] In other words, children construct clear personal “micro-worlds” to differentiate themselves from others. Once these private boundaries are intruded upon, their psychological defense mechanisms are activated, as if the uniqueness of the “I” were under threat. As the story progresses, the brother repeatedly competes with his sister through play, and ultimately secures a small yet meaningful victory. This victory, however, transcends the game itself—it metaphorically represents the triumph of selfhood. Through this act, the brother asserts and safeguards his individual consciousness and the integrity of his self-identity. Friedrich Froebel once remarked that children’s play “is the spontaneous expression of their inner essence—an outward manifestation of what arises from inward necessity and desire.” [8] The brother’s contest within the picture book can thus be understood as a symbolic means of defending his inner being. Furthermore, the story critiques habitual adult assumptions—such as the expectation that “an elder brother should yield to his younger sister”—which often overlook the significance of children’s individuality. By portraying the brother’s eventual triumph, the work underscores the importance of recognizing and protecting the autonomy of the child’s self.

3. The Social Construction of Self-Identity

Human beings, as inherently social creatures, do not exist in isolation but are profoundly embedded within networks of social relations. Children, as integral members of human society, naturally possess this same social attribute. As Karl Marx insightfully remarked, “The essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations.” [9] This statement profoundly reveals the social nature of human beings and underscores the inseparable connection between the individual and society.

In exploring the development of children’s self-identity, attention must be given not only to the individual dimension but also to the social influences that shape it. Unlike individual identity, which derives primarily from personal internal characteristics, social identity originates from one’s position and function within social relations. Through interactions and communication with others, children gradually come to recognize their own value and significance within the broader social fabric, thereby constructing a positive sense of self. This process of social identification plays a vital role in children’s psychological growth and the cultivation of their social adaptability. Picture books such as *We Are All the Best*, *Don’t Laugh at Me*, and *Gugi Gugi* each highlight, to varying degrees, the inherently social dimension of self-identity.

In *We Are All the Best* [10], fire trucks, ambulances, police cars, and other vehicles—through self-expression and mutual communication—gradually become aware of each one’s unique function. These vehicles not only acknowledge their own value but also recognize and appreciate the contributions of others. Within the imaginative world of the picture book, cars are not merely means of transportation; they serve as metaphors for diverse professions and social roles. In one illustration depicting the vehicles gathered together, a child on the left eagerly operates a fire truck, while at the center of the picture, a baby plays joyfully with a toy car. These two children play significant roles in the narrative, occupying central positions in almost every instance of the vehicles’ self-expression. In a sense, the children act as intermediaries—animating the vehicles and speaking on their behalf. The voices they project represent an evaluative understanding of the vehicles’ “thingness,” which, in turn, reflects human judgments about social value and identity. In their perception of objects, the children’s voices implicitly extend to the recognition of human social functions and roles: the fire truck symbolizes the brave firefighter, the ambulance represents the life-saving doctor, and the stroller evokes the loving parent. The children’s manipulation of these vehicles constitutes a form of role-play, through which they explore the concrete question of “what kind of person they aspire to become.” Norbert Wiley has suggested that “identity can be attached to an individual externally through social processes or internally from within.... Identity resides within the self, expressing its

various qualities and the assemblage of its multiple facets.” [11] Within such role-playing, children progressively come to perceive the distinctions among different individuals and the corresponding responsibilities each assumes. Through this socially mediated process—assigning roles, enacting duties, and attributing value—children internalize social meanings and thereby construct a socially grounded sense of self-identity.

The picture book *Penguin Xiaoqi: Facing Ridicule* [12] tells the story of a penguin named Xiaoqi who, born with a body covered in long feathers, feels out of place among its siblings and develops a sense of inferiority due to its ungainly appearance. When danger befalls the family, Xiaoqi “pretends to be ugly” to frighten away the wolf. This act earns Xiaoqi and its long feathers the eventual recognition and acceptance of the family. Throughout the picture book, whenever Xiaoqi is “looked at” by other penguins, it occupies the focal point of their gaze and becomes the object of scrutiny. In scenes of dialogue, Xiaoqi appears at the lower edge of the composition, turning its back toward the reader—an arrangement that visually encodes its marginality within the family and its subordinate position in the domestic hierarchy. When the wolf arrives, the other penguin siblings are depicted sleeping soundly in their parents’ embrace, while Xiaoqi remains isolated on the periphery, unable to merge into the familial circle. This exclusion constitutes a form of intra-familial bullying, which also explains why Xiaoqi alone notices the wolf’s intrusion—it is not sheltered beneath its parents’ wings. At this moment, Xiaoqi’s position shifts from the lower margin to the upper-left of the frame. This spatial transition metaphorically signifies a reversal in its familial status: after scaring away the wolf, Xiaoqi ceases to occupy the periphery in its interactions with siblings and gradually assumes a central role. In the final image, Xiaoqi stands atop a rock, asserting both independence and self-affirmation amid the vastness of nature. A parallel can be drawn with *Gugi Gugi* [13], whose protagonist is likewise an “ugly duckling.” However, unlike Xiaoqi’s marginal identity, Gugi Gugi consistently remains at the center of the composition and never suffers rejection from its family. The mother duck does not show favoritism or discrimination based on her child’s rough and unconventional appearance. Consequently, Gugi Gugi grows freely and confidently in a nurturing environment, surrounded by familial companionship and emotional support. This setting nurtures an innate self-assurance and a strong sense of selfhood. Even when the crocodile’s provocation triggers a momentary self-doubt, Gugi Gugi ultimately dispels it with humor—jokingly calling itself a “crocoduck”—and, through courage and wit, turns the situation around to outsmart the crocodile, becoming a celebrated hero among the ducks.

A comparative reading of *Penguin Xiaoqi: Facing Ridicule* and *Gugi Gugi*—two picture books that mirror each other conceptually—reveals a latent utilitarian perspective within the former. Xiaoqi’s “pretending to be ugly” frightens away

the wolf, and the siblings' subsequent approval of its long feathers stems not from genuine empathy but from a belief that the wolf was afraid of those feathers. Thus, Xiaoqi's sense of self emerges from the instrumental value attached to its long feathers, which, in turn, grants it social validation. In other words, Xiaoqi's self-identity is mediated through social recognition, whereas Gugi Gugi's self-identity is self-originating, forming the foundation from which social identity can later unfold. The two picture books point toward divergent trajectories and therefore resist moral comparison or ethical judgment. Yet several questions remain worth pondering: in *Penguin Xiaoqi: Facing Ridicule*, had the long feathers failed to repel the wolf, would Xiaoqi have received any attention at all? Would it have remained a marginal figure, perpetually exposed to familial neglect and subtle aggression? And can the form of self-affirmation Xiaoqi achieves truly be considered authentic self-recognition? As Wu Zhihong observes in *Why the Family Hurts*, "Existence equals being perceived," and "the sense of nonexistence arises when one's feelings go unperceived." [14] He further contends, "Those who lack a clear sense of self have never accomplished this step, and thus spend their lives yearning—either directly or in distorted ways—to be seen." [14] As a perennial outsider within its family, Xiaoqi's existence has never been acknowledged or perceived by others. Hence, its confrontation with the wolf constitutes an act of compelled bravery—a desperate bid for attention by placing itself in mortal danger. Xiaoqi's people-pleasing disposition is the by-product of a dysfunctional family dynamic, and the self-recognition it ultimately attains is fraught with instability. It remains perpetually vulnerable, always at risk of being revoked by the very familial system that once conferred it. Therefore, *Penguin Xiaoqi* reveals the author's disciplinary intent toward the child, reflecting the constraints imposed by collective, familial, and social norms, which render the child's self-identity a state of potential non-autonomy.

4. The Construction of Self-Identity Through the "Other"

Compared with spontaneous construction, most children—due to their relatively undeveloped cognitive capacities and limited life experiences—often cannot generate an autonomous sense of self-identity. In such cases, the "other" assumes a crucial role in guiding children toward self-recognition and self-acceptance.

Picture books such as *Two Little Imps Capture an Old Monk*, *It's Okay If You Can't Do It*, *Don't Mind Imperfection*, and *The Frog and the Boy* foreground the question of how to guide children in constructing self-identity, highlighting the significance of care and guidance provided by significant others. Through engaging narratives and vivid, expressive illustrations, these books enable children to apprehend their uniqueness, thereby cultivating a positive sense of self. Adults

engaging with these works can gain deeper insights into children's psychological needs, providing timely guidance and supportive scaffolding.

Two Little Imps Capture an Old Monk [15] vividly depicts the series of wondrous and profound inner transformations experienced by the two little imps, *Listen to Me* and *Do It This Way*, as they carry out the orders of the *Great King*. These imps are commanded to capture an old monk, intending to use him as food. However, throughout this process, they gradually awaken to self-consciousness, begin to question the authority of the *Great King*, and ultimately construct their own self-awareness while simultaneously deconstructing the *Great King's* authority, thereby averting a gruesome massacre. As Chris Shilling observes, "The social body constrains the ways in which people apprehend and experience the physiological body. These perceptions and experiences themselves sustain particular social perspectives." [16] In this picture book, the *Great King*, as a transcendental social norm, continuously manipulates *Listen to Me* and *Do It This Way*—the *Great King* desires to consume the old monk, and the imps obediently follow. As the *Great King* fades from presence, the social body of the imps (carnivorous behavior) gradually gives way to their physiological body (adopting vegetarianism). In this narrative, the withdrawal of the *other*, embodied by the *Great King*, creates a space for the growth of self-consciousness in the two imps. Within the text, *Listen to Me*, as a precursor and guide, exercises its spontaneous individual subjectivity to negate authority, thereby fostering the emergence of self-recognition and self-identity in *Do It This Way*.

It's Okay If You Can't Do It [17] delves, through dialogic exchanges between parents and children, into the inherent cognitive differences of each child. Such differences not only mark individuality but also constitute an inescapable aspect of the developmental trajectory. Through this dialogical framework, children gradually come to recognize their limitations in specific domains, while the text simultaneously underscores that these limitations are transient and surmountable. In the picture book, the protagonist maintains an almost eye-level stance with the reader, while the narrator's use of the term "Darling" invites readers to assume the parental perspective embedded in the narrative. This positioning indicates that the implicit audience comprises parents, who, through equal eye contact and guided empathetic engagement with the child, are presented with a model of encouragement-based pedagogy. Developmental psychology research asserts that "the family constitutes the first social environment encountered by the individual" [18] and that "early childhood is a critical period for the emergence of individuality and sociality. Adults should consciously foster self-awareness and facilitate the formation of healthy peer relationships, thereby laying a crucial foundation for the future development of personality." [18] As a microcosm of society, the family functions as a primary social field; parental guidance not only nurtures the child's individual self but also plays a decisive role in shaping the child's social self.

Don't Mind Being Imperfect [19] addresses a pivotal issue: the socially constructed ideal of the "perfect child," as imposed by adult norms, can, to some degree, impede the natural development of a child's inherent tendencies. Within this framework, the character Honey the Chipmunk experiences self-doubt, striving to align herself with external standards and become the "child other parents wish they had." As Nordmann observes, "Adults claim to believe that children in reality are such-and-such, and the traits we describe are entirely designed to encourage children to become that way... without offering any indication of alternative possibilities, it is easy to guide children into this mold." [20] The "child other parents wish they had" constitutes an adult-constructed utopian identity, aiming to regulate the child into a prescribed form rather than allowing them to develop as they truly are. Faced with such societal expectations, children—whose individual subjectivity remains under formation—experience inner uncertainty and are prone to fall into the trap of this externally imposed template. Parental guidance, therefore, becomes pivotal: should children be disciplined to conform to the socially sanctioned "perfect child," or should their differences be acknowledged, fostering authentic selfhood and cultivating genuine self-recognition? Honey's parents opt for the latter. Through this narrative, child readers are invited to recognize that "imperfection" is a universal condition and that a "perfect" personality is not inherently flawless but a socially constructed mirage.

I Want to Be Myself [21] narrates the journey of a dog navigating confusion and struggle during its process of self-recognition. The dog persistently fails to perceive its own virtues and unique qualities, instead measuring itself against other dogs as models and benchmarks, thereby generating identity anxiety. It perceives its life as devoid of significance, unable to truly acknowledge its value or the meaning of its existence. Yet, upon a fortuitous encounter with an elegant and noble poodle, its perspectives and self-awareness undergo a profound transformation. The poodle serves as a mirror, reflecting the dog's intrinsic worth and luminous attributes. According to Lacan's Mirror Stage theory: "A child still in the infantile moment... manifests, in what we observe, a symbolic pattern in which the self emerges in a primary form. Only subsequently, through the dialectical process of recognition with others, does the self become objectified." [22] This illustrates that subjectivity arises through the guidance of an "Other". Through the mirror experience provided by the poodle, the dog gradually learns to appreciate itself, attaining a sense of self-recognition and belonging. During the reading experience, the protagonist is mostly depicted from a top-down perspective relative to the reader; when the poodle appears, the gaze gradually aligns to eye level, creating an interactive metaphor for the awakening of the dog's subjectivity.

The Frog and the Boy [23] tells the story of a boy who,

responding "I can too" to a series of questions posed by a frog, is mistakenly assumed to be a frog prince and taken to the frog kingdom. At this juncture, the boy becomes acutely aware of the danger of homogeneity: indistinguishable from 36,000 frogs, he risks complete loss of individuality. Consequently, he engages in a process of self-affirmation, asserting his distinctive traits—"I have black hair," "I have red ears," and so forth. This self-affirmation unfolds across four seasons, culminating in the boy's eventual escape during the frogs' collective hibernation. The picture book underscores the peril inherent in uniformity; the boy's "I can too" statements are interpreted by the 36,000 frogs as expressions of homogeneity, rendering him an indistinct "ordinary individual." The threat of such uniformity lies in the deprivation of individuality. The boy, recognizing this danger, differentiates himself from the collective and maintains a stance of deliberate detachment, thereby concentrating attention on his selfhood and affirming his uniqueness.

From the classification and overview of these picture books on self-recognition, two prominent features emerge:

- 1) Within these self-recognition picture books, there is always one or more representations of the "Other". Scholars have argued that self-recognition arises "in the interplay of 'sameness' and 'difference'; only when disparity exists between the subject and the Other does self-recognition emerge." [24] The presence of the Other enables the protagonist to distinguish the self from the Other, or, through the Other's care and reflection, to clarify, examine, and affirm the self. The former represents spontaneous self-construction, whereas the latter is guided or induced.
- 2) On certain pages—often the cover or final page—protagonists who achieve self-recognition frequently occupy a distinct, individualized illustration, typically centered on the page. This centrality conveys a sense of encirclement, emphasizing the protagonist's personal awakening and visual prominence.

5. Conclusion

The series of picture books centered on the theme of self-identity, characterized by their visual, tactile, and emotional appeal, serve as a potent and evocative medium within the tapestry of a child's formative years. As highlighted in *Modern Psychological Aesthetics*, "An individual's childhood experiences often set the tone for their entire life, shaping the trajectory and extent of their future development; they are the latent causes of human individual development, leaving an indelible imprint on the individual's developmental history." [25] Whether through spontaneous personal reflection and self-identity construction, social recognition prompting individual identity, or self-identity fostered by the guidance of the "Other", the overarching aim of the "self-identity" themed picture books is to prompt children to contemplate the questions: "Who am I? Who do I aspire to be?" and "How can I

achieve this?” This objective necessitates collaborative efforts from the child, the adult community, and society at large; relying solely on the child’s spontaneous experimentation may lead to missteps. Consequently, while a child’s “self-identity” is rooted in the “self,” its practical realization extends beyond mere self-construction. The “self-identity” themed picture books delineate three primary pathways for practice: the construction of the self as a subject, social construction, and the construction by the “Other”. These pathways are not mutually exclusive but are complementary and reflective of one another, collectively offering pragmatic avenues for children to achieve self-identity. This approach acknowledges the child as “a fully conscious individual; an autonomous and stable whole, the ‘core’ of the self.” [26]

Author Contributions

Wang Jin is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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