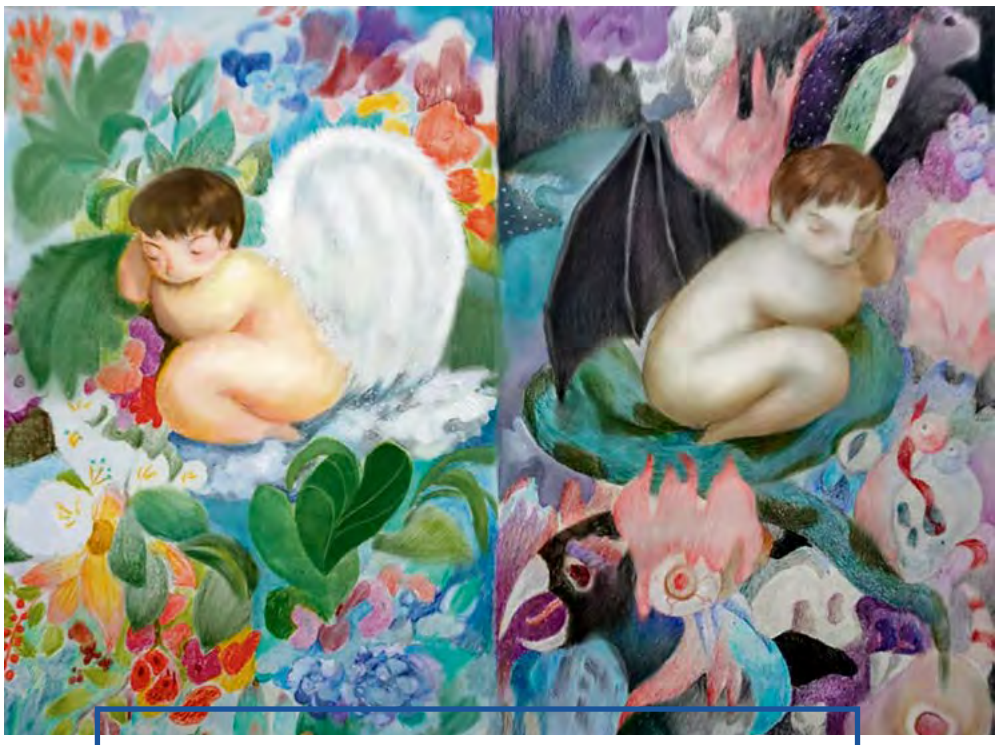

Fig. 1 (left): The discussion of human nature ultimately concerns new born babies. *Untitled*, Anqi Chen, watercolour and coloured pencils, 7.95×6.35cm, 2018, private collection of the author.

Revisiting Childhood Innocence

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Although the theory of childhood innocence predates the Romantic Movement (1780-1830) in Europe and spans across multiple cultures,[1] there is no doubt that key tropes in Romantic philosophy, literature, and art at the cusp of the modern industrial age played a significant role in its renewal and global dissemination through Western imperialism. In China, even before the thinker Li Zhi 李贽 (1527-1602) formulated the notion of "childlike innocence" in his essay "The Theory of the Childlike Innocence" (Tongxin shuo 童心说, 1590), Taoist belief had revered childhood innocence in texts such as the Tao Te Ching 道德经 (571-471 BCE). Hence, the idea that children were inherently "innocent" in their characters and perceptions became part of the broad understanding, construction, and defence of the child and the stages of childhood development in both Eastern and Western cultures.

Scholars have, of course, criticised and rejected the idea of childhood innocence as it evolved and spread across different cultures. Strains in the perception of children's innocence become particularly acute when linked to other "Romantic" characteristics and to certain ancient Chinese folklores recording oddities and interactions with spirits. While in some texts and accounts of childhood, these spirits are seen as metaphors for the visionary-imaginative capacities of childhood that inevitably fade away as children mature, these representations can also slip into much darker portrayals strongly associated with the Gothic themes of children interacting with evil or occult forces.[2] Even if we interpret this solely in psychoanalytic terms, as has been attempted at critical junctures, the proximity between radical innocence and radical wickedness becomes unsettling, casting further doubt on the durability and authenticity of the "innocent child." These anxieties, of course, do not account for the thankfully rare yet shocking instances of children associated with sometimes monstrous transgression and crime.[3] The loss of innocence sometimes underscores children's vulnerability and the understanding that their purity cannot be guarded forever.

Questions of childhood innocence also shape the representations of children in literature. In the 20th century, the trend of presenting children as "darkened," evil, corrupted, and monstrous has become increasingly salient in different cultures through literature, video games, films, TV programmes, and digital media.[4] It is also interesting, in this context, to observe the trend of transporting "darkened" children from the lines of fantasy novels to screens. Adapting literary works for other platforms also returns to existing and older literary traditions. In the Chinese context, after *The Journey of Flower* (*Huaqiangu* 花千骨) was adapted into a TV series in 2015, the genre of "Immortal Arts Literature" boomed in China's film and television industries. *The Journey of Flower* recounts the story of Hua Qiangu, a young girl with extraordinary powers who, despite her love for her master Bai Zihua, a powerful immortal, is fated to become a demon god, forcing them into a tragic struggle between love, sacrifice, and the struggle between personal passion and duty. These works often follow a similar structure, in which the central characters are born with natural talents, evil powers, or even mental disabilities, lacking perceptions from the six senses. While growing up, these characters come into contact with an Immortal Sect and begin cultivating the Immortal Arts. At the same time, they are tasked with killing demons and monsters and maintaining the world's peace. However, due to their extraordinary and abnormal origins, they eventually become entangled in the liminal spaces between good and evil. Although they all become infected or possessed by evil influences in this borderland location, they are ultimately freed either through death or by purging the evil influences and returning to their previous state as Immortals or ordinary people.

The literary genre of Immortal Arts was influenced by earlier Martial Art Literature, Chinese legend, myth, and religion. However, the first modern appearances of the concept came from literary works, film, TV, as well as video games at the end of the 20th century.[5] For example, the video game Legend of Sword and Fairy (*Xianjian qixia zhuan* 仙剑奇侠传) was first released in 1995 and was later adapted into a TV series in 2005. As the game continued to be updated, sequels to its first TV series were subsequently produced in 2009 and 2016.

In the 21st-century Anglophone world, there has been a trend of revisiting or repurposing "darkened" children from earlier or existing fantasy works in TV series and films. These "darkened" children include not only the monstrous or demonised children seen in Chinese Immortal Art literature, but also children who are experienced beyond their years. Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (hereafter HDM) (1995-2000), for instance, was adapted into a TV series in 2019 and 2020, following a critically disparaged 2007 Hollywood adaptation of its first volume. In public commentaries, Pullman has clarified that HDM was conceived as a literary and imaginative intervention, deliberately engaging with the complex lineages and legacies of "Romantic Innocence." Influenced by William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley, Pullman portrays his central protagonist, Lyra Bellaqua, as valuing both the stage and condition of childhood innocence and the gifts it undeniably bestows upon children, while also affirming and embracing the inevitable end of innocence, as the world of adult opportunity, responsibility, and desire beckons young people at adolescence.

A similar theme appears in the recent fantasy film *Come Away* (2020). Although not directly adapted from a specific literary work, the film is inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, with Alice and Peter Pan as central characters. Before the accidental death of their brother David, neither Alice nor Peter Pan wanted to grow up. The family is devastated by grief after David's death: their mother drinks heavily, and their father accumulates severe gambling debts. To save their family, Alice and Peter set out on an adventure to London. In the face of these harsh truths, both Peter and Alice realise that it is time to grow up. Eventually, they succeed, but Peter chooses to remain a child in Neverland, offering to visit the family from time to time. Much like Immortal Arts Literature in China, children take on responsibilities at a young age and face the dangers of the adult world. In their adventures to protect the world or their family, these children inevitably lose their innocence, becoming wiser but fundamentally changed. These responsibilities, imposed by adults, pull them out of an Arcadian childhood, pressing them to grow up quickly.

The concept of "darkened" or evil children carries symbolic meanings in both literature and real-life contexts. Karen J. Renner examines portrayals of evil children in literary works, films, and TV series, categorising them into six groups: "Monstrous Births," "Gifted Children," "Ghost Children," "Possessed Children," "Ferals," and "Changelings."[6] James Garbarino studies how children lose their innocence and accumulate experiences in real life, including those affected by trauma, political violence, displacement, abandonment, extreme poverty, war, and child abuse.[7] Further research is needed to explore the various meanings of childhood innocence in these turbulent and often menacing settings.

Of course, the evil or "darkened" children discussed here and in other literary works cannot fully represent all childhood experiences, and it is important to avoid overly pessimistic or fatalistic accounts of adult-child interactions and relationships. While children may have been routinely ignored in history, in modern times they are supposedly valued and protected as part of the advancement of international human rights. However, it is crucial to remember that not all children receive the warmth and care of parents, teachers, siblings, or peers, nor the peace that such initiatives assume and promote.

Fig. 2 (right): The protective wall of childhood will eventually be broken by the outside. *Untitled*, watercolour, Anqi Chen, watercolour and coloured pencils, 25.84×20.81cm, 2018, private collection of the author.

Fig. 3 (right): As the Victorian philosophers and writers described, the protective wall of childhood will eventually be eroded by the cruel adult world, and children have to face this dark world early. *Untitled*, Anqi Chen, watercolour and coloured pencils, 25.2×20.32cm, 2018, private collection of the author.

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Notes

1 Robert Davis, "Brilliance of a Fire: Innocence, Experience and the Theory of Childhood", *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol 45, No. 2 (2011), 383-386; David Kennedy, *The Well of Being: Childhood, Subjectivity, and Education* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 27-40.

2 Renee Simmons Raney, *Hairy, Scary, but Mostly Merry Fairies!: Curing Nature Deficiency through Folklore, Imagination, and Creative Activities* (Montgomery: NewSouth Books, 2017), 18; Karen J. Renner, *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 6.

3 Eric Ziolkowaski, *Evil Children in Religion, Literature, and Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 5-6; David Oswell, *The Agency of Children: From Family to Global Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 143.

4 Renner, *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination*, 1.

5 Zhange Ni, "Xiuzhen (Immortality Cultivation) Fantasy: Science, Religion, and the Novels of Magic/Superstition in Contemporary China," *Religions* 11.25 (2020), 12.

6 Renner, *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination*.

7 James Garbarino, *Children and the Dark Side of Human Experience: Confronting Global Realities and Rethinking Child Development* (New York: Springer, 2008).