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Marketing Chinese children's authors in an age of celebrity

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Abstract

In this paper I explore the topic of authorial self-fashioning in an age of celebrity. Specifically, I consider the persona of the contemporary children's author, as he or she is constructed within the paraphernalia surrounding the main stories in children's books. This paper is part of a broader project examining how authors and translators choose to represent themselves, or are represented by their agents and publishers, within the paratextual elements of books. The primary case study for this enquiry is Cao Wenxuan 曹文轩. Since winning the 2016 Hans Christian Andersen Award, and with an increasing volume of his work available in translation, Cao is the prime example of a celebrity Chinese children's author, now with global recognition. Cao has always been a prolific preface writer and many of his works have other paratextual elements, including an exceptionally large number of photos of the author, all of which provide a rich source for a comprehensive evaluation of the image constructed by author/publisher of the author's persona as presented in the 'margins' of the books.

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Contributor Note

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Marketing Chinese children's authors in an age of celebrity

The uneasy relationship between culture and commerce is both the object of academic debate and the lived experience of many cultural practitioners worldwide, as producers of literary and artistic works grapple with the need to make money from their work, while at the same time maintaining a vision for it apparently unsullied by such mundane concerns. This paradox holds true in China, where working for 'fame and profit' (mingli 名利) was traditionally and explicitly regarded as incompatible with true scholarly enterprise, but yet where entrance to the civil service bureaucracy and hence a stable government post and income, status and public prestige were essentially determined by one's performance in a series of literary exams.

Despite early twentieth century drives to reject some Confucian cultural values, the Maoist era, albeit for different ideological reasons, ensured that the literati continued to eschew capitalist enterprise. Heroes at this time, both real life ones and fictional protagonists, were promoted primarily for their loyalty to Communist values and the Party. After the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), and the (re-)emergence of the entrepreneur, a central industrial policy shift, favouring the individual and private enterprise over centrally-driven nationwide projects, was mirrored in the cultural sphere. As a result there was a notable shift towards the development of individual literary talents who were not afraid to aspire openly to writing best-sellers and to achieving celebrity status. An increasingly market-focused publishing infrastructure to support, encourage and exploit these endeavours also began to develop, laying the foundations for a new type of hero, the cultural celebrity.

The following article explores the topic of authorial self-fashioning in an age of celebrity. Specifically, I consider the persona of the contemporary children's author, as constructed within the paraphernalia surrounding the main stories in children's

books. This short study is part of a broader project examining how authors and translators choose to represent themselves, or are represented by their agents and publishers, within the paratextual elements of books.

In my project as a whole I argue that these paratexts provide a unique space in which a particular image of the person of the author can be constructed, whether by the author him/herself or by the publisher or other agent. Of course, there is no guarantee that the image of the author provided in these paratexts is any more 'genuine' or 'realistic' than an authorial voice or persona within the fictional text itself, or that the actual agency directing this image is the author rather than the publisher or literary agent. However, it is clearly consciously constructed and, in the 21st century, the age of social media and celebrity, it appears to be an increasingly significant tool in terms of sales and marketing.

This article explores how these concepts apply in the rapidly expanding world of Chinese children's fiction. I am not a specialist on children's literature, but while reading a Roald Dahl book to my five year old daughter recently, I was struck at the amount of information about the author provided, in a child-friendly way, in appendices and blurbs, including pictures of his garden writing-hut and descriptions of the physical process of his writing. The emphasis on stepping back from the wonderful and engaging plotline, to focus on the figure of the middle-aged male author, seemed remarkable to me. While we expect and often encourage young children to immerse themselves unquestioning into magical realms of fantastic plots, deliberately blurring the lines between fact and fiction, yet we equally presume them to be interested in the (usually adult) creator of these textual realms. We would not, I think, expect them to show similar interest in the director of a Disney film, or even the voiceover actors or anyone else 'behind the scenes' in children's film – or indeed the creators of other types of children's toys and merchandise. It seems

that in the world of books, we are asking children, who are often just learning to write sentences themselves, to engage with and relate to 'children's literature', from the dual perspective of both reader and writer.

As a parent of young children, this concept fascinated me, and so I decided to explore the way in which the author figure was constructed in Chinese children's literature.

The primary case study for this enquiry is Cao Wenxuan 曹文轩 (b. 1954). Cao has received multiple prizes for his work, culminating in his winning of the 2016 Hans Christian Andersen Award. With an increasing volume of his work available in translation, Cao is the prime example of a celebrity Chinese children's author, now with global recognition. Cao has always been a prolific preface writer and many of his works have other paratextual elements, including an exceptionally large number of photos of the author, all of which provide a rich source for a comprehensive evaluation of the image constructed by author/publisher of the author's persona as presented in the 'margins' of the books, and how this has developed as his reputation has grown.

Celebrity and authorship

Celebrity Studies is a burgeoning academic discipline. In an important early volume, celebrity was defined as not 'a property of certain individuals. Rather it is constituted discursively, by the way in which the individual is represented' (Turner, Bonner and Marshall (eds) 2000, 11). In a later monograph on the topic, Graeme Turner states 'We can map the precise moment a public figure becomes a celebrity. It occurs at the point at which media interest in their activities becomes

transferred from reporting on their public role [...] to investigating the details of their private lives' (Turner 2014, 8). In this discourse, the point at which an individual becomes a celebrity appears to be primarily the responsibility of those who represent him or her, either in their interests, or with other agendas. In the People's Republic of China, these agendas may be both commercial and state-driven.

This may be a relief to those who are uneasy about the intersection between cultural and other forms of capital, since it means there is no requirement (or indeed reason) to actively pursue celebrity oneself. I have already noted the traditional disdain within the Confucian mainstream for such petty pursuits as 'fame' and 'profit'. Similarly high-minded views can be found in many traditional civilisations, with such vulgar objectives being contrasted with more noble values. The realities of making a living have somewhat diminished these attitudes, and while cultural practitioners often prefer to use the vocabulary of 'reputation' and 'recognition', rather than 'fame' and 'celebrity', there is increasing acceptance that cultural products are created by individuals, who deserve due credit for this. Authors are increasingly taking to social media, like the rest of us, and are quickly learning the art of self-fashioning in the age of the internet (like the rest of us).

In his monograph on the topic, Joe Moran has extensively analysed the phenomenon of the author celebrity in the United States, noting that the impact of commercialism on authors is not straightforward, but 'forms part of a complicated process in which various legitimating bodies compete for cultural authority and/or commercial success, and regulate the formation of a literary star system and the shifting hierarchy of stars' (Moran 2000: 4).¹ Again, just as the creation of

¹ Another useful comparative study looking at the author as celebrity in the US is Loren Glass's *Authors inc* (New York: NYU Press, 2004). The notion of celebrity authors in other cultural contexts is less researched to date. One reason for this may be, as Moran points out in a brief

comparative overview of the situation in the UK in his conclusion, that the phenomenon is often discussed purely in terms of American 'cultural imperialism'. Moran disputes this as an over-simplification (Moran 2000: 149-154).

the celebrity is often the responsibility of external agents, so is the maintenance of the celebrity status and hierarchy. In the US these forces are overwhelmingly market-driven; in China, as we will see below, the Party-state still has an important role.

The transition from author to celebrity author can be unwelcome, depending on how the process is handled and who controls it. Jeanine Tuschling, in a study of the 'branding' of the Austrian Nobel Laureate and author Elfriede Jelinek, notes that 'Media are often so occupied by the writer's personality that reading the texts appears to be a superfluous task' (Tuschling 2011).² While Tuschling notes that in Jelinek's case her consciously and overtly self-reflective authorial style is in part responsible for creating the brand, nevertheless the media attention on her personal life, caused her to withdraw from the spotlight, and after winning the Nobel prize in 2004, she made no further public appearances. 'Authors', Tuschling concludes, 'are being forced to develop a corporate identity, a recognisable brand and persona to please the celebrity-obsessed literary audience' (2000, 93). The example of Jelinek neatly encapsulates this dilemma for successful authors and their promoters: on the one hand the branding and recognition is clearly welcome and a mark of success; on the other hand the intense focus on the public image of the author can eclipse the text, particularly if this is led and encouraged primarily by the commercial media.

When we turn to the question of authors who write mainly for children and young adults, there are further factors to consider. What sort of image is best portrayed to the readers and, more crucially especially for young children, the parent-purchasers, of this genre? Where do/should the lines between the personal and the public lie? Who are the 'legitimizing bodies' that Moran refers to? And, returning the question which first motivated

me to examine this, how much of an adult author's life may, or should, be of interest to a child reader?

The complex relationship between celebrity and children's fiction has been particularly controversial in the last few years, and works both ways, as many well-known personalities without any prior experience of writing are suddenly producing popular books for the children's market. This phenomenon links into an apparent belief that writing for children is somehow easier than writing for adults. In the UK at least, many established children's authors regularly decry the deluge of children's titles written by a host of different celebrities from the world of sport, television, music or even members of the Royal Family. The acclaimed author Joanne Harris compares celebrity children's fiction in her blog (1 Oct 2017) to the McDonald's Happy Meal, which is fine as a one-off, but not as a substitute for anything else. She warns that the current flood of celebrity books, 'is having a detrimental effect, not just on children's publishing, but on the reputation of children's writing, and even on literacy in general' (Harris 2017). Fellow UK author and Carnegie Medal winner David Almond agrees. In responding on his Facebook page to the news that in the UK nearly half of the World Book Day's list of free books would be penned by celebrities, he wonders 'how it is that books by a clutch of celebrities could possibly be better than those by some of the wonderful children's authors at work today?' (in Flood 2017)³

While of course some could consider such outbursts to be nothing but sour grapes, the fact that concerns are being aired by established, award-winning children's authors, suggests at the very least that there is a tension inherent in the term 'celebrity children's author'. It is worth noting that the fact these debates among authors are themselves often taking place on social media, clearly assumes at least that all sides

² I am grateful to my PhD student, Wenqian Zhang, for pointing out this article to me.

³ A further question around the listing might be why few if any books by non-UK authors are

included for the 'World Book Day', but that is a debate for another forum!

agree that the 21st century author does and should have a public persona, and that s/he is, with a nod to Roland Barthes, alive and well, and with influence. But as young audiences increasingly expect interactive experiences with their idols in all fields, the point at which an 'author' may become a 'celebrity' evokes strong sensitivities. So, publishers and agents may face a particular challenge in promoting children's fiction in finding a suitable balance between marketing the book and marketing the writer. In a cross-cultural context, this dilemma is particularly striking.

Literary celebrity in China

In the introduction to their very useful volume surveying aspects of celebrity in modern China, Elaine Jeffreys and Louise Edwards remind us of the key role still played today by the Chinese state in promoting hero-figures. 'In the changed era of economic reform', they observe, referencing Geremie Barmé's earlier work, 'the CCP continues to create and promote exemplary individuals as models for public emulation, but it now does so by relying on commercial promotional culture [...] and the celebrity effect' (2010, 15).⁴

Shuyu Kong has explored the development of the notion of literary celebrity in China since the end of the Cultural Revolution. She discusses Wang Meng 王蒙 (b. 1934) as an early example of a literary celebrity in the reform era, who shifted roles regularly between CCP-loyalist and critic. 'Despite Wang Meng's continued celebrity, the literary establishment that nurtured him became less relevant to many young Chinese writers and readers in the 1990s and 2000s. State cultural bureaucrats still used literary institutions for their political crusades or personal and factional struggles, but the emerging cultural market of the commercial publishing and media entertainment

industries, presented an alternative space for cultural products' (Kong 2010, 131). Kong then examines the interesting phenomenon of the emergence of what she terms 'the literary bad-boy or bad-girl' in the last couple of decades in China, specifically examining the writers Wang Shuo 王朔 (b. 1958) and Wei Hui 周慧 (b. 1973), and concludes that 'Celebrity-making in China's post-reform literary world has transformed rapidly from one dominated by the Party-state and a combination of socialist and Confucian vision of literature's role in society to a system dominated by the market and sensational, consciously crafted campaigns by individuals to propel themselves to fame and wealth through commercial and creative savvy' (Kong 2010).

Of all literary genres in China, however, children's literature provides one of the most obvious battlegrounds for ideological control, and where the nature of the promoted hero is perhaps most likely to be of concern to the CCP. In her seminal study of the development of Chinese children's literature in the twentieth century, Mary Ann Farquhar notes, 'In a society that valued literature as the primary source of moral values, children's literature was to be a powerful means to educate the future masters of a modern state' (1991, 1). Farquhar surveys the ideological implications of fairy tales, revolutionary literature and comic books, and ends with an assessment of the post-Mao canon of children's literature in the last decades of the Twentieth Century: 'While post-Mao practices have been widened, relaxed and diversified, education through children's literature remains one mode of political control and the main criterion for officially, at least, judging major works' (1991, 303). If the aim of the writing is to educate and if such education is the way to gauge its success, then in a world composed, to adopt Schickel's phrase, of 'intimate strangers' (2000), the image constructed of the writer, as educator and

⁴ See also Geremie Barmé's 'CCP™ and ADCULT PRC' in *The China Journal*, no. 41 (Jan 1999), 1–23.

role model is crucial to this enterprise. Moreover, and with Schickel's wording in mind, when the issue of safeguarding children is paramount in the heads of parents (the book purchasers) the world over, the manner in which such a 'stranger' accesses and engages with his child readers is of particular concern.

In what follows, I argue that within the realm of Chinese children's literature, where naturally there are likely to be increased ideological restrictions on the portrayal of the author figure, the enterprise of fashioning a celebrity author has been taken up afresh by the political establishment. Using the hugely successful author Cao Wenxuan as my case study, I suggest that the paratextual elements to the presentation of his work are selected carefully to present an image of the archetypal paternalistic guide, with, I argue below, apparent invitations for readers to envisage the author-figure as a political authority as well.

Author-centric packaging

In order to examine the way in which Cao Wenxuan is portrayed in his works, I have selected a few prominent examples, by different publishing houses. The three core examples I have chosen have all been published by specialist youth publishing houses, and were all published in 2014 or 2015, before Cao won the Hans Christian Andersen Award. I will look at my first example in some detail, before summarising the paratextual features of the other two series.

Commemorative edition of *Bronze and Sunflower*

The first example I have chosen is a commemorative edition (Jinian teji 纪念特辑) of *Bronze and Sunflower*, published by

⁵ 酒店 can also refer to a hotel rather than a pub specifically, but nevertheless neither is child-focused.

Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd (Jiangsu Fenghuang shaonian ertong chubanshe), in 2014. Set during the Cultural Revolution, the novel is the story of the friendship between a young mute peasant boy called Bronze and an orphan girl, Sunflower, who is taken in by his family. The commemorative edition consists of a boxed version of the novel, along with a supplement which I examine in detail below.

Immediately striking in this is the visual focus on the author: in all, the short 75 page supplement contains 36 different author pictures, clearly curated to depict a certain image of the author. The first, inside the front cover (fig. 1), is captioned, 'in a pub in Tokyo in 1994',⁵ so from the start we are shown a relaxed, international figure – and set in what is hardly a child-friendly environment.



Figure 1.

From the start, the textual portrayal of Cao in this supplement is also carefully constructed, both in content and in style, to effect an author-image acceptable to the various legitimating bodies.

The supplement opens by situating the author specifically as both academic and author,

almost as if to pre-empt any doubts about whether children's literature can be considered a worthy research field, and simultaneously to infuse the author-image from the offset with academic credibility and respect.

The opening sentence reads, 'He holds a knife in one hand, and a sword in the other, academia is the blade of his knife, literature is the tip of his sword'. The metaphor is belligerent, authoritative and purposeful. This is not aimed at promoting a persona of someone writing to express his emotions, or to entertain his young readers, or even engage with them. The style of writing is immediately redolent of political speakers, most notably when Mao Zedong famously wrote of Chiang Kaishek, 'He always tries to impose war on the people, one sword in his left hand and another in his right. We take up swords, too, following his example'.⁶ More recently, Deng Xiaoping regularly used the phrase about 'grasping things in both hands, with each being equally tough' (jianchi liangshou zhua, liangshou dou yao ying 坚持两手抓, 两手都要硬).⁷ In this way, with overtly political overtones, the dual aspects of academic and creative writer are portrayed as equally important and mutually reinforcing.

The writer of this introductory paragraph extols how these two facets of his character complement each other in his writing, and then continues 'He is such an easy person to identify, because his works and the man himself are so similar'. The suggestion that authors include autobiographical elements in their fictional characterisation is nothing remarkable in itself. However, the explicit linkages being made here are focused on the construction of the author-figure, rather than vice-versa, suggesting that readers who are familiar with the characters in the book, will

⁶ The original reads 他左手拿着刀, 右手也拿着刀。我们就按照他的办法, 也拿起刀来。Mao Zedong, 'The Situation and Our Policy After the Victory in the War of Resistance Against Japan' (August 13, 1945), Selected Works, Vol. IV, pp. 1126-1127.

thus be able to recognise the author. The introduction ends with the dramatically stylised proclamation, 'This...is Cao Wenxuan' (Ta, jiushi Cao Wenxuan 他, 就是曹文轩).

In this way, the reader is invited to consider the person of the author as being both a serious academic and author, and as being personally and vitally intertwined with his works. Know the books, know the man. The rest of this opening chapter of the supplement is an interview with the author, covering standard topics such as how he came to write the story, the significance of the names of the characters etc. The images which are chosen to accompany this interview are equally interesting.



Figure 2.

In case we didn't get the bit about the author being both academic and creative genius, the first picture (fig. 2) shows Cao with his two hands in the air, with the caption 'left hand literature, right hand academia'. This picture is also used prominently in the novel itself, with a full-page version of this image

⁷ See Deng Xiaoping's speech in 2004, '必须始终不渝地坚持两手抓, 两手都要硬的方针, 加强精神文明建设'. Or for more explanation on this as a central phrase within Deng ideology, see http://keywords.china.org.cn/2018-10/30/content_69101816.htm

appearing immediately after the title page. Equally, the text of the author-bio situated just before the contents page juxtaposes his two roles throughout, listing his roles in the Chinese Writers' Association, and then his academic appointments in Beijing University, followed by two lists: the first of his literary works, and the second of his academic works. The short biography then ends with just a list of the languages his works have been translated into, and then a further list of his 'over forty academic and literary prizes'.



Figure 3.

The second picture (fig. 3) to accompany the text shows Cao sitting cross-legged on the floor wearing a Young Pioneers scarf with a group of children in Shenzhen. This setting, unique to Communist cultures, allows a person to be identified simultaneously as ideologically correct, and 'one of the kids', and provides the perfect setting for a Party-approved children's author. Cao is carefully displaying his latest title, *Dawang Tome: The Amber Tiles* (Dawang shu: huang liuli 大王书：黄琉璃).

The third picture (fig. 4a) shows Cao clapping, with the somewhat unrelated caption, 'regardless of where he finds himself, he is always calm and collected'. To me this initially seemed a little random, as it doesn't relate to the text, or demonstrate an obvious aspect of his role as author – there are no books, readers, writing implements, etc., in sight, and the caption shed no light. However, I later

⁸ This mental association was first pointed out to me at a recent conference by a scholar from the PRC currently based in the US, who said it was

discovered that this image, is immediately redolent to many Chinese readers of various Mao Zedong propaganda pictures (eg fig. 4 b), in terms of the angle and stance of the figure, and his expression.⁸



Figure 4a.



Figure 4b.

his first instinctive reaction to the picture. The impression has since been confirmed to me by various Chinese friends and colleagues.



Figure 5a.



Figure 5b.



Figure 6.

In the fourth (fig. 5a) a much younger image of the author is used, sat with his son on the kerb of a road. Here is an intimate, family portrait from a time when Cao's son was presumably the target age of his readers. Family is once again the topic of the fifth image (fig. 5 b), where the young Cao is pictured with his siblings. Here the link

between the author and the characters within his books is explicitly underlined, as the picture is captioned, 'just like Bronze, he is an elder brother'.

In the sixth and final photo (fig 6) to accompany this interview, Cao is pictured outside signing books for children, and this one is captioned, 'wherever he goes he is surrounded by children'. The book visible here is another of Cao's best-selling novels, *The Straw Hut* (Cao fangzi 草房子).

In this introductory essay the pictures alternate between colour and black and white, apparently regardless of chronology, so some pictures of a youthful Cao are in colour, while more recent photos are in monochrome. Together these choices add to the constructed author-image a deliberate fusion of old and new, both experience and relevance. The books featured in the images of this initial essay are Cao's other titles, rather than *Bronze and Sunflower* (the focus of the edition), thereby providing a literary context as backdrop, while subtly advertising his other works.

These photos are clearly deliberately curated to underline the construct of Cao Wenxuan the man: serious academic, and children's author. Politically dependable, and at one with the children. A family man, but also intimately tied up in the lives of the characters he creates. The lines between fictional creation and reality are deliberately blurred.

The second section of the supplement contains selections of reviews by well-known critics, all listed with full academic credentials: Gao Hongbo (listed as the vice-chair of the Chinese Writers' Association); Wang Quangen (listed as Director of the Chinese Children's Literature Research Centre at Beijing Normal University, professor, PhD adviser); Zhu Ziqiang (Deputy Director of the Literary Institute at Ocean University, Head of the Children's Literature Research School, Professor, PhD Adviser). The framing of a children's author in such a strongly academic context seems a little incongruous,

but clearly serves the purpose to underline the reliability and educational value of these works. The target audience of this section does seem clearly to be parents or other gatekeepers, rather than the young readers themselves.

These are once again interspersed with pictures of Cao with children from the Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang autonomous region of Sichuan (fig 7a); with the late author Wang Zengqi in Kunming (fig 7b); with the late children's author, Sun Youjun, who was born in Harbin, and was the first Chinese author to be nominated for the Hans Christian Andersen Award (fig 7c). In the context of China's political climate, the message of Cao as symbol of national unity is clear. In the final picture in this section we once again return to the identification of Cao with the character Bronze, albeit less explicitly referenced, by showing him on stage with a young girl who was acting the part of Sunflower (fig 7d).



Figure 7b.



Figure 7c.



Figure 7a.



Figure 7d.

The third section of the supplement is a selection of responses to the novel by primary school children ranging in age from Y3-6. The pictures accompanying these reviews (fig. 8a-d) are, predictably, photos of Cao with children – three of them depict him at book-

signings, one (8d) is of children waiting to greet him with banners welcoming 'Uncle Cao'. The image is of an approachable paternal figure, willing to engage with his young readers.



Figure 8a.



Figure 8b.



Figure 8c.



Figure 8d.

The fourth section is a reprint of an essay by the children's author and critic Li Donghua, entitled 'Facing up to the difficulties of childhood; and a review of Cao Wenxuan's novel *Bronze and Sunflower*' first published in *Wenyi Bao* 2005, dated 20th Sept. This section is accompanied by a further six photos of the author, ranging from when he was a student at BeiDa in the 1970s, visiting the Summer palace (fig. 9a), the Great Wall (fig. 9b and 9c), and the ancient city of Gaochang (Karakhoja) in Xinjiang (fig. 9d), to more recent photos talking to children in Zhejiang (fig. 9e), and finally by the sea in Cuba (fig. 9f). Again, the choice of these photos seems deliberate, with places of national and political significance to the fore.



Figure 9d.



Figure 9a.



Figure 9e.



Figure 9b.



Figure 9f.



Figure 9c.

The next section is entitled ‘travel log’ of *Bronze and Sunflower*. One of the only two sections where the images concentrate on the work, rather than the author, the pictures here are all of the various translated editions of the novel. No translators are mentioned, although there are some remarks about the various publishers. However, this is followed immediately (fig. 10a-e) by a section on Cao Wenxuan going global, along with three photos of him in Cuba, one in Brazil, two in Germany, two in Singapore, one in Japan and one in Mexico. There is a clear attempt in these two sections to trace parallel global trajectories for the book and the man.



Figure 10a.



Figure 10b.



Figure 10c.



Figure 10d.



Figure 10e.

After this comes a 2013 interview with Cao about the similarities to be found across World Literature. This section is also accompanied only by pictures of his books (twenty-four different titles) rather than of him (although even here there is a thumbnail of the author at the beginning, lest we forget!).

The final two sections revert to reader responses, letters from children. The first is entitled 'A Letter to Sunflower' signed by Lu Tong who is 'A reader who loves you'. The second is entitled 'Letters to Cao Wenxuan' and includes three letters from primary school pupils, the last of which is a reprint of a handwritten letter. It is notable that there are no letters addressed to Bronze, as if the authorial persona and the male protagonist were already indistinguishable in the young readers' minds. In two of these he is addressed as 'Uncle Cao', and in the third as 'Teacher Cao'.

These two sections are accompanied by a further three photos of Cao with children (fig 11a-c), and three examples of children's own illustrations of the works. The final photo in the supplement is a thumbnail of the writer of the final letter, pictured reading *Bronze and Sunflower*. The young writer ends her letter by asking whether or not the characters of Bronze and Sunflower are based on anyone.

What emerges overall from this commemorative edition is a strong and consciously constructed image of the author – visually, through the remarkable number of different profile pictures, as writer, academic, father, friend to children, champion of all regions of China and international traveller. This is reflected textually, through the political language, juxtaposition of responses to his work by academics and school children, and through the deliberate suggestions of parallels between the author and his fictional characters.



Figure 11a.



Figure 11b.



Figure 11c.

The Cao Wenxuan Pictorial Series

My second case study, is the Cao Wenxuan Pictorial 曹文轩画本 series, by the Yangtze Children's Publishing House (Changjiang shaonian ertong chubanshe), a set of nine books, also from 2014, entitled, in both Chinese and English [on the front cover], *The Straw Hut* (Cao Fangzi 草房子). This series once again is filled with authorial photos, and appears (as you might expect in a pictorial series) to privilege these over textual information about the author.

In this series, the textual information about the author (a one-page biography at the beginning and a list of prizes at the end) is common to each book, and forms part of the branding of the series. The series as a whole is brown/orange (fig 12), and the back cover blurb is identical for each book.



Figure 12.

In this way a clear visual and textual uniformity is created for the boxset. However, despite this, for each of the nine books, there are different authorial photos in the front flap, and at the end of the book there are two pages of author photos, again different for each book.

There is a clearly a deliberate editorial decision here to increase the number of pictures of the author, despite repeating the same text in each edition. The pictures are not in themselves remarkable, mostly simply mug shots, and the overall effect is almost as of a conscious attempt to promote the images as collectables. Accompanying each book is a two page essay by Prof Li Lifang 李利芳 of Suzhou University, whose credentials are once again clearly stated as 'having a PhD in children's literature'. This essay is different for each volume. This suggests once again that academic credibility is a key aspect of the brand marketing.

The only other paratextual elements are short illustrated introductions to the characters or content of the book, apart from one authorial preface, a reprint of an essay Cao often uses for this purpose. For this publisher, then, the two central aspects of the branding are the author pictures, and the academic credibility.

The Dingding Dangdang series

My third example is a Dingding Dangdang boxset of seven novels, (fig 13a-b) published by the China Children's Publishing House (Zhongguo shaonian ertong chubanshe), in 2015; a highly acclaimed series of stories of two young brothers with Down Syndrome. In the same year, this series was selected as one of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY)'s Outstanding Books for Young People with Disabilities.

As with previous examples the box set is branded by text which (aside from a short introduction to the content of each title on the inside front flap) is common to all the books in the series: with an author bio, a frontispiece quote clearly aimed at the child reader, a three page authorial preface (written in 2011), and at the end a four page chronological list of his prize-winning works. The back flap is an introduction to the series, and the back cover contains the same illustration and the same two quotes from children's literature specialists: specialists

Gao Hongbo 高洪波, credited as the Deputy Chair of the Chinese Writers Association, and Jin Bo 金波, Chair of the Children's Literature Committee of the Beijing Writers Association. The same quotes appear on the box itself, along with a big picture of the author and list of prizes won by the Dingding Dangdang series.

In this set the author bio is accompanied by a single photo of Cao, common to all the books in the set, but this is then followed by a further five full pages of photo montages of more author photos, a different selection for each volume. In all, and not including the large author photo on the box itself, this modest box set includes a grand total of seventy-six distinct photographs of the author!



Figure 13a.



Figure 13b.

Conclusions

From the three examples considered above of the way in which Cao Wenxuan is marketed, it is clear that the visual impact of the author, in the form of author photos, is paramount. The remarkable number of different images is certainly appealing in a digital age, and presumably mainly targeted at his young fans.

Simultaneously, Cao's academic credentials are repeatedly stressed in these paratexts. Prefaces are also contributed by other academic authorities in the field of children's literature. The vast majority of the paratextual writing appears to be targeted at the parents, and aimed at establishing the author's credibility as a dependable and reputable educator.⁹

Reliability and credibility of a different kind are provided, particularly in the Phoenix commemorative edition, by the explicit framing of the author in political discourse, both textually and in the choice of photographs used.

From this short study, the Cao Wenxuan brand as promoted in the paratexts to his work, is multi-faceted: it is highly visual and author-centric, simultaneously stressing his multiple roles as academic, writer, father, elder brother, and children's hero, while also linking him closely to the characters within his book. The target audience appears to be a mix of his readers, their parents, and his academic colleagues.

⁹ It is clear that the need to frame Chinese children's fiction within academic discourse is not something specific to Cao Wenxuan. In a recent collaborative series of contemporary American authors translated into Chinese, published in 2013 by Mingtian cbs, [series editors Prof Zhu Ziqiang 朱自强 and Prof Claudia Nelson, sub-editor Luo Yirong], *The Golden Treasury of Contemporary American Children's Books*, the one quote common to all books in the set is by Zhu Ziqiang, described as 'renowned children's literary theorist, professor and PhD supervisor'.

Identifying who exactly is responsible for the construction of different aspects of an author's brand is not straightforward, and likely in most cases to involve a mixture of the author and their agent and publisher. In China the cultural infrastructure is rarely entirely independent of political concerns, and authors are promoted for a range of different purposes.

In his sixties, a professor at Beijing University, and having been writing and winning acclaim for children's literature for some 35 years, Cao Wenxuan wields considerable authority and is well able to participate in, and influence the process of establishing his brand. In this respect, Cao's choice of metaphor in his acceptance speech at the Hans Christian Andersen Award ceremony in Auckland, is revealing. He compares his writing to housebuilding, stating that, in Helen Wang's translation, it 'fulfils my craving for housebuilding, because it satisfies my desire for the happiness and delights of having a shelter [...] A house made of words, for me, is a shelter – for the spirit'. He adds later that it 'satisfies my intrinsic yearning for freedom' (which he clarifies as being unrelated to politics).

Without wanting to overwork the metaphor, a house is something permanent, safe, cosy but eminently recognisable. A concrete external image and part of the landscape. Perhaps house-building is the perfect metaphor for marketing a children's author in China today.

Professor Zhu states that 'The guiding editorial principle behind this set of books is, that the books selected are all influential and popular children's book in contemporary America, that the books must be both interesting and beneficial, and that the books must be both readable and have literary merit'. The main paratextual material preceding the story is a preface by Professor Zhu (common to all five books), in which the series is described as 'resulting from the painstaking collaboration of children's literature experts in both China and America'.

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