



Dilemmas in Selecting Early Reading Content for Young Children: A Family Perspective

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Abstract— Early reading plays a well-documented role in young children's language acquisition, cognitive development, and emotional socialisation. Within the family—the primary site of early literacy—parents act as “gatekeepers” who determine which books children encounter. Yet their choices are not purely pedagogical; they are entangled with educational anxiety, commercial marketing, children's preferences, and digital media shifts. This conceptual paper examines the multifaceted dilemmas facing Chinese families when selecting early reading materials. It identifies four parental-level obstacles: insufficient literary knowledge, developmental misjudgements, consumerist influences, and intergenerational conflicts. It then analyses structural imbalances in the children's book market, including the dominance of functional texts over aesthetic works, the prevalence of moralistic narratives, and the underrepresentation of high-quality indigenous picture books. Finally, it explores how algorithm-driven recommendations and screen-based reading further complicate selection. The analysis concludes that these dilemmas reflect a deeper tension between adult-imposed standards and children's authentic needs, calling for a more child-centred approach to content choice.



Keywords— early reading; content selection; family literacy; children's literature; media ecology

I. INTRODUCTION

The foundational role of early reading in young children's language development, cognitive construction, and emotional socialisation has been repeatedly confirmed by scientific research. The family is the primary setting in which early reading takes place, and parents, as “gatekeepers” of reading content, exert a profound influence on the accumulation of children's reading experience. In the home context, however, the selection of reading materials is not a purely educational decision; it is a complex practice interwoven with parental educational anxiety, the commercial logic of the market, children's aesthetic preferences, and the transformation of media technologies. When the traditional belief that “opening a book is always beneficial” encounters the chaotic and

uneven children's book market, the question of “what to read” becomes far more perplexing than “whether to read.”

For parents, the ideal is to possess a basic literacy in children's literature and aesthetic judgment, to understand the age-specific characteristics and developmental needs of young children, and to maintain a clear critical awareness of the children's book market. The convergence of these three demands, however, leaves most parents feeling ill-equipped in practice. The difficulties manifest in several interrelated dimensions, which this paper aims to explore. Following a conceptual analysis of parental dilemmas, market imbalances, and media-environment complexities, the conclusion synthesises these issues and suggests directions for future empirical research.

II. PARENTAL SELECTION DILEMMAS

2.1 Insufficient Parental Literacy in Children's Literature

Most parents' reading experience is predominantly adult-oriented, and they have only a limited grasp of the stylistic features, artistic standards, and classic canon of children's literature. When selecting books, they tend to prioritise "usefulness"—such as character recognition, knowledge acquisition, and moral instruction—over literary quality, thereby turning reading into a means of early academic preparation. Works that are genuinely outstanding in both literary and child-oriented terms may be dismissed because they contain "too few words" or "do not teach any clear lesson." One parent candidly remarked on a parenting forum: "Spending dozens of yuan on a picture book with only a dozen words feels like a waste." This habit of measuring "value" by "word count" reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the picture-book form, whose essence lies in the narrative art of text-image interplay rather than in verbal quantity.

2.2 Misunderstanding of Young Children's Developmental Characteristics

Children of different ages differ markedly in cognitive level, language ability, and interests. The Guidelines for Learning and Development of Children Aged 3–6 (Ministry of Education, 2012) point out that three-year-olds enjoy repetitive rhymes, while five-year-olds are capable of actively creating their own rhymes; three-year-olds need simple cognitive picture books, whereas five-year-olds prefer narrative picture books with a distinct artistic logic. In practice, however, many parents follow the anxious logic of "the earlier, the better" and choose content that is developmentally too advanced, or they make purchases casually based on vague impressions with a "good enough" attitude. As a result, mismatches between content and the child's developmental stage are common. Surveys indicate that a considerable proportion of parents select picture books whose plot complexity far exceeds the cognitive processing capacity of children under three, causing the child to lose interest within a few pages; parents then mistakenly attribute the problem to the child's "dislike of reading."

2.3 Erosion of Rational Choice by Consumerism

In the marketing discourse of children's books, labels such as "award-winning," "bestseller," and "celebrity recommended" are proliferated, while external attributes like "hardcover," "large format," and "imported" are endowed with excessive symbolic value. This transforms book selection from an educational judgment into a marker of identity under consumerism. Data from a major e-commerce platform show that boxed sets labelled

"international award-winning picture books" sell several times better than comparable unlabelled products, yet some of these awards are often fabricated or lack transparent accreditation. Faced with information asymmetry, parents tend to substitute price and packaging for in-depth content evaluation, mistakenly believing that "expensive" necessarily means "good."

2.4 The Hidden Influence of Intergenerational Value Conflicts

In Chinese families, grandparents often play an active role in young children's early reading, making content selection a process of intergenerational negotiation and even contestation. Systematic differences between generations in views of childhood, reading, and education constitute a dilemma dimension that is easily overlooked but deeply consequential. One mother mentioned in an interview that her choice of *Where the Wild Things Are* was rejected by the grandparents because of its "dark illustrations" and "strange story," and was replaced by a more "understandable" and "educative" word book. While parents tend to value imaginative stimulation, grandparents lean towards safe, practical, and morally explicit content. The resulting tension over selection criteria often ends in a contest of adult authority, while the child's genuine interests and needs are sidelined.

III. STRUCTURAL IMBALANCES IN THE CHILDREN'S BOOK MARKET

The dilemma of content selection is not only a matter of "who chooses" but is also deeply embedded in "what is available to choose." Although the current children's book market is extraordinarily abundant in quantity, its content structure displays serious imbalances that cannot be ignored.

3.1 Crowding Out of Aesthetic Materials by Functional Materials

Functional reading materials—such as literacy cards, thinking-training books, and behavioural-norm picture books—constitute the "essential" category for family early reading. These materials are designed with explicit instrumental goals, reducing reading to a quantifiable and assessable training exercise. On the bestseller list of a prominent e-commerce platform, functional titles account for more than 60% of the top fifty, while aesthetic picture books that emphasise the artistic interplay of text and image, and that leave room for imagination and contemplation (Nikolajeva, 2014), are notably scarce. Such aesthetic books are often perceived as "useless" and therefore fail to gain priority in family selection—even though they are precisely the vehicles for cultivating

young children's aesthetic sensibility and literary awareness. In this process, the aesthetic enlightenment function of reading is systematically marginalised.

3.2 Erosion of Narrative Quality by Moral Didacticism

Many storybooks for young children follow a rigid moralistic structure of “wrongdoing – punishment – correction,” featuring flat characters, formulaic plots, and impoverished language. A typical behavioural-norm picture book might recount: “Little Bear does not wash his hands – gets a stomach ache – goes to hospital – thereafter washes his hands carefully,” with characters serving merely as symbols of the lesson. This kind of “disciplinary text disguised as a story” sacrifices narrative richness and openness in the name of education; children gain not the expansion of imagination but the repeated inculcation of standardised behaviours. More troublingly, some parents regard this explicit “educational value” as a marker of quality, creating a low-level lock-in between supply and demand.

3.3 Imbalance Between Imported and Original Works and Its Cultural Implications

Imported picture books have clear advantages in artistic quality and multicultural perspective, but over-reliance on imports weakens the connection between young children's early reading experiences and their own cultural context. Some imported works depict life scenes, interpersonal norms, and value assumptions that are distant from Chinese families' experiential world—for example, frequent references to fireplaces, attics, sleighs, or modes of interaction that emphasise individualistic expression—requiring additional cultural translation for young children. Of course, excellent imported works have an irreplaceable role in broadening children's international horizons and exposing them to diverse artistic styles; the problem lies in the serious disproportion. Although indigenous Chinese picture books have made progress in recent years, they still lag behind in artistic maturity and market recognition. Truly original works that embody both Chinese aesthetic character and child-friendliness remain rare. A telling contrast is that imported classics such as *Goodnight Moon* and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* have been popular in China for decades, while indigenous picture books that can rival them and are widely adopted by families are still few and far between.

IV. NEW COMPLEXITIES ARISING FROM CHANGES IN THE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

The proliferation of smartphones, tablets, and various reading apps has expanded the channels through which young children access “reading content” from paper books

to screens. While convenient, this shift has profoundly altered the logic of content selection.

4.1 Algorithmic Recommendations Replacing Parental Choice

Digital reading platforms promote “age-appropriate recommendations” and “smart book lists,” thereby transferring part of the selection power from parents to algorithms. Yet the underlying logic of these algorithms is user retention and commercial monetisation; the materials they tend to recommend are highly interactive, stimulating, and potentially addictive—qualities contrary to the deep attention and imagination cultivation that early reading should foster. Researchers who tracked the recommendation mechanism of a popular children's reading app found that its “smart matching” results overwhelmingly favoured “interactive picture books” with game-like features and sound effects triggered by tapping each page, while works with calm illustrations and literary texts were buried due to “short user dwell time.” Parents cede judgment for convenience, but may not fully appreciate the cost of this delegation.

4.2 Dilution of Reading Quality by Screen Reading

The sound effects, animations, and interactive elements in digital picture books, while seemingly enriching the reading experience, may replace the inherent meaning of the text with sensory stimulation, turning children from “constructors of meaning” into “recipients of stimuli.” A kindergarten teacher observed that children who regularly used reading apps showed more frequent attention drift during group reading of paper picture books, constantly poking the pages and expecting “something to happen.” When children become accustomed to immediate audiovisual feedback, their sustained attention tends to decline significantly when they return to paper picture books that require active imagination and patient contemplation. The change in medium thus alters the very nature of reading.

4.3 Parents' Media Management Dilemmas

Some parents, caught up in the seemingly irresistible discourse of “digital natives,” regard digital reading as an inevitable adaptation to the times and relax their screening and regulation of media use; others swing to the opposite extreme, completely rejecting digital reading and viewing screens as purely harmful. Neither approach embodies a rational analysis of media attributes: the crucial issue is “what to read” and “how to read,” not simply “whether to use” digital devices. A more constructive practice, adopted by some families, is to confine electronic devices to the specific function of “accessing high-quality animated picture books” with strict time limits, while maintaining paper books as the mainstay of parent-child shared

reading, thus achieving complementarity rather than substitution.

V. CONCLUSION

This conceptual analysis has identified three interconnected layers of difficulty in selecting early reading content for young children in Chinese families: parental dilemmas rooted in limited literary literacy, developmental misconceptions, consumerist pressures, and intergenerational conflicts; structural imbalances in the children's book market, where functional and didactic materials crowd out aesthetically rich and narratively complex works, and where imported titles disproportionately overshadow indigenous creations; and emerging complexities from the digital media environment, including algorithmic recommendation biases, the attentional costs of screen reading, and parents' ambivalent media management strategies.

The primary advantage of this analysis is its systematic integration of these dimensions, highlighting how they mutually reinforce each other—for example, how parental reliance on bestseller lists amplifies market imbalances, and how algorithmic recommendations further erode critical selection skills. The limitations, however, are equally clear: the findings are drawn from secondary sources, observational reports, and illustrative anecdotes rather than systematic empirical data. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track how selection practices evolve as children grow and as the media landscape changes; cross-cultural comparative studies would also illuminate which dilemmas are specific to the Chinese context and which are generalisable. Intervention studies—such as parent training programmes in children's literature appreciation or co-reading protocols for digital picture books—could provide actionable evidence to alleviate the identified dilemmas.

Ultimately, the dilemmas of selecting early reading content in the family are a microcosm of the relationship between the adult world and the child's world. When we seriously address the question of “what to read for young children,” we are in effect asking: are we willing to lower ourselves to children's eye level, see the world through their eyes, and, by that standard, choose for them the books that are truly worth encountering?

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