

Original Paper

The Study of Zhang Kangkang's *Karaoke in the Summer Vacation*

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Abstract

Children's literature constitutes only a small part of Zhang Kangkang's literary creations. She began her literary journey with children's literature but paused for many years before resuming later. Zhang Kangkang's children's literature work, *Karaoke in the Summer Vacation (Colorful Plate)*, is a multi-themed middle-length novel that not only addresses the concept of "divorce" but also pays attention to conceptual differences between parents and children, and highlights the importance of children's healthy growth. The novel employs diverse artistic forms: two plot lines represent different themes, music becomes a unique expression in the novel, and it also portrays a group of children from divorced families. In summary, *Karaoke in the Summer Vacation* fully embodies Zhang Kangkang's literary creation philosophy that "what to write" and "how to write" are equally important.

Keywords

Zhang Kangkang, children's literature, divorce and growth, artistic forms

1. Introduction

Zhang Kangkang (1950-), originally named Zhang Kangmei, was born in Hangzhou, Zhejiang, and her ancestral hometown is Xinhui, Guangdong. Zhang Kangkang is a prolific and long-standing contemporary writer, whose "life's half was spent in writing" (Zhang, 2019, preface, p. 005).

Up to now, surveying Zhang Kangkang's literary career, she has published over a hundred works of literature, with a cumulative total of approximately eight million words of novels and essays. Her representative works include the short story *The Right to Love* (1979), *Arctic Light* (1981), the middle-length novel *Indra's Net* (1987), *Sandstorm* (1993), *Galaxy* (1995), the long novel *Invisible Companion* (1986), *Crimson Vermilion and Jujube* (1995), *Gallery of Passion and Love* (1996), *The*

Working Woman (2002), and essays such as *Olive, Reflections on the Underground Forest*, *Revelations from Emei Mountain*, *The Refusal of Peonies*, *Looking Up Without Guilt*, *The Eyes in the Foggy Sky*, *Thoughts on the Red Mangrove*, *Uncomfortable Years*, *Reflections on Pearl Harbor* and so on.

Currently, scholarly research on Zhang Kangkang's works primarily focuses on her novels and essays, research on her novels is more than essays. Youth cadre literature and women's literature are two main areas in the research of her novels. Besides, the character analysis, thematic ideas, narrative techniques, and language studies are particularly prominent. In recent years, there is research on her novels from a literary geography perspective. Research on her essay writing mainly focuses on themes, artistic features, and styles, with the most extensive studies focusing on the content of the themes, including reflections on the value of life, explorations of female independence, and reflections on real-world issues. However, compared to her main body of works, Zhang Kangkang's children's literature has not yet to receive significant scholarly attention.

Zhang Kangkang's representative works in children's literature include *We Learn to Be Little Doctors* (1961), *Reach for the Flying Peak* (1984), *Selection of Zhang Kangkang's Children's Literature Works—Karaoke in Summer Vacation* (1991) and so on. *Selection of Zhang Kangkang's Children's Literature Works—Karaoke in the Summer Vacation* was published by the Children's Literature Press in 1991. This book includes a mid-length novel *Karaoke in the Summer Vacation*, four short stories (*Marlboro and We*, *A Fan*, *All Because of Her*, *The Hunter's Adventures*), and six essays (*Hot Stones*, *Jasminka*, *Watching Dolphins Perform in Chicago*, *Pets*, *Two pandas named Lingling and Xinxin*, *Cute Alice*). *Karaoke in the Summer Vacation* (also known as *Colorful Plate*) in this article refers to the mid-length novel rather than a collection of works.

2. Zhang Kangkang's Journey in Children's Literature Creation

Zhang Kangkang's connection with children's literature began in her teenage years. Her engagement in children's literature creation is inseparable from the influence of her family. Zhang Kangkang's parents "belong to the typical 'intellectual youth' of the 1940s" (Zhang, 2019, preface, p. 006). Under their influence, she developed a habit of reading from a young age, which sparked her interest in words. During her early childhood, she was first introduced to children's literature and Western fairy tales. For a long time, her "emotional thinking remained stuck in the innocence of childhood and the immaturity of adolescence" (Zhang, 2019, preface, p. 006). Moreover, Zhang Kangkang is also genetically linked to her mother, inheriting part of her mother's literary genes. The literary genes passed down from her mother manifest in her literary creations as the inherent purity and boundless spirit of her works.

The guidance of good mentors is important to Zhang Kangkang's children's literature. Her maiden work, *We Learn to Be Little Doctors* was published in the 12th issue of the *Youth Literature* magazine in 1961, when Zhang Kangkang was only 11 years old. At that time, Children's Literature writer Mr. Ren Dalin always cared for her and became her literary mentor. Mr. Ren Dalin wrote back to the junior

high school Zhang Kangkang, telling her that the reason her article was rejected was because it was “too formal” and “lacked its own characteristics”, which actually meant that her work was a bit old-fashioned and lacked vitality, failing to capture the feelings and thoughts of a young person. These words have always influenced Zhang Kangkang’s literary creation.

In a manner of speaking, Zhang Kangkang’s literary creation began with children’s literature. “The ‘Youth Literature’ magazine is like a small flower bed, nurturing countless literary seeds with the spring breeze year after year”. However, compared to other literary works, children’s literature was merely a sporadic product for her. Starting from the publication of her novel *Light* in the Liberation Daily in 1972, Zhang Kangkang’s literary writing entered the track of the literary system. In the 1990s, Zhang Kangkang attempted to “switch pens” and learn computer writing, trying to write a children’s literature middle-length novel titled *Colorful Plate*, which is the *Karaoke in the Summer Vacation* that the author intends to analyze.

Overall, Zhang Kangkang’s children’s literature only occupies a very small part of her literary creation. The creation journey of children’s literature works is not as long-lasting as that of other types of works, and it has not formed prosperity like *Youth Cadre Literature* or *Feminist Literature*, nor developed a relatively complete system. However, this cannot be a reason for us to ignore the value and significance of Zhang Kangkang’s children’s literature works.

3. The Unchanging “Core”—Concern for Reality

As the saying goes, articles are written for the times, and poems are composed for events. Using words to depict reality and reflect reality is an inescapable responsibility of the writer. “A writer’s works throughout their life may see many changes in artistic style, but there will always be an unchanging core. That is the thing that has troubled her since childhood, forcing her to think about it, like a seed that stubbornly remains silent, growing quietly over the years until one day it bears fruit” (Zhang, 2019, preface, pp. 014-015). For Zhang Kangkang, the unchanging core of her works is her focus on reality and her reflections on life.

3.1 Facing the Concept of Divorce

Divorce was not a novel phenomenon when the author was creating this work and remains so in today’s society. Children from divorced families have become a special group. The theme of “children from divorced families” has been presented in many works. However, Zhang Kangkang’s *Karaoke in the Summer Vacation* offers a new perspective, prompting us to face the concept of divorce.

Zhong Cong was six when his parents divorced, and his mother started a new family later. In the summer vacation of the year, he turned fifteen. After finishing the junior high entrance exam, Zhong Cong boarded a train to his mother’s city and arrived at her new home with her stepfather, Zheng Fen. During his time with them, Zhong Cong’s views on divorced families gradually changed. At six years old, he “thought he was a zipper that could pull his parents together into a leather bag” (Zhang, 1991, p.

12), but after that snowy night, he realized “when the zipper breaks, the leather bag can never be closed again” (Zhang, 1991, p. 12). For a long time, he felt ashamed about his parents’ divorce. Later, during a conflict with his mother by the sea, Zhong Cong poured out his “hatred” for her decision to divorce. Afterward, his stepfather Zheng Fen comforted him, saying, “We won’t abandon our responsibilities because of this... we just hope to give you more care and love so that your mind can develop healthily”, and “when you grow up, you’ll understand that emotions can’t be forced... hoping your parents sacrifice their happiness for you is very selfish...” (Zhang, 1991, pp. 106-107). Finally, Zhong Cong reconciled with his mother. He understood, “Mom, you are my mom, but you have your own name, and it’s Fang Weiwei. Fang Weiwei is a journalist, Zheng Fen’s spouse, and the daughter of my grandmother. Fang Weiwei is not just my mom” (Zhang, 1991, p. 114).

Compared to Zhong Cong, Li Xiang, a boy whose parents have also divorced, lives with his mother. His parents compete with each other, aiming to compensate for him doubly. However, he still lacks security and carries a hint of being alienated. He views his mother as his possession, believing that “mom does anything for her child willingly” (Zhang, 1991, p. 47), and gives him whatever good things she has. Because she is his mom. Moreover, he often pretends to be sick to have his mother stay at home with him and uses every means to prevent his mother from starting a new relationship. It is clear that Little Li Xiang has become selfish, precocious, and neurotic.

The novel tells the story of children from divorced families, but the author does not merely evaluate them from a traditional moral standpoint. Instead, she wanted to express some modern ideas through the contrast between Zhong Cong and Li Xiang. On the one hand, the parents of these teenagers are individuals with independent personalities. They are not only their children’s parents but also themselves. While pursuing one’s independent personality, one can still fulfill their responsibilities towards their children. On the other hand, a teenager’s happiness does not depend on the formal completeness of a family but on whether they have a healthy personality. Some families may appear complete on the surface, but the inner are completely broken, and teenagers in such environments cannot grow healthily. “A person living in the world mainly relies on themselves; life cannot guarantee that everyone has a good family environment, but not everyone will be consumed by a bad environment. A person can lack money and housing, but they cannot lack self-respect and love” (Zhang, 1991, p. 108).

3.2 The “Conceptual Contest” Between Parents and Children

Karaoke in the Summer Vacation does not merely depict the social phenomenon of divorced families and their children, it also narrates the differences in views between parents and children.

When a child likes doing something, it might be without any particular reason, but adults often ask why. Regarding Zhong Cong’s fondness for pop music, his mother, Fang Weiwei, initially showed disdain, viewing it as a vulgar commercial culture and inquired why Zhong Cong liked it. To Zhong Cong, a teenager, “I don’t want to say why or why not; there are simply no so many whys in the world” (Zhang,

1991, p. 124). After learning that Zhong Cong genuinely loved pop music, his mother tried various ways to teach him to read sheet music and make him sing. She even specially visited a music professor to understand his musical feelings. All these efforts by the mother were aimed at helping Zhong Cong's future development. However, for Zhong Cong, such methods caused him great distress. He did not want to become a musician or a composer, he simply enjoyed pop music. "Singing is for fun; it's just for play, not for learning. If you force me to learn staff notation, I won't be happy, and if I'm not happy, why should I sing?" (Zhang, 1991, pp. 104-105)

Regarding their perspectives, we cannot judge right or wrong, as from their respective viewpoints, their views are both fitting to their own situations. The conflict between the two ultimately stems from their different ways of understanding the issue. "We usually have the tendency to 'project our own thoughts onto others, because this tendency allows us to understand people and things outside of ourselves. Strictly speaking, each person can only directly understand themselves, only knowing their own position, their own perceptions, and their own emotions" (Zhu, 2018, p. 15). It is precisely because of the differences in cognition between people that there is also a generational gap between parents and children, as expressed in the lyric *My Current Thoughts Exceed Your Time* by Zhong Cong in the novel. Therefore, parents cannot force their thoughts and ideas onto their children. Both parents and children need to proactively understand each other's thoughts and feelings, and enhance communication through appropriate means.

In the novel, Zhong Cong realized his mistake after talking with his stepfather. Through his own method—picking pretty wildflowers and placing them on his mother's bedside, he apologized to his mother and privately practiced playing the guitar. For Zhong Cong's fifteenth birthday, his mother and stepfather gave him two birthday gifts: a colorful round plate and a box of OK music tapes. They also took him to a karaoke lounge to listen to Zhong Cong singing. Finally, the barriers between the two parties dissipated, and hearts drew closer together.

The author frequently used music in the novel to depict Zhong Cong's inner world, also conveying the concept of respecting children's ideas. In the end, the children, represented by Zhong Cong, reached a reconciliation with the adults, represented by Fang Weiwei. This best illustrates mutual respect and understanding between the two groups.

3.3 Children's Own Growth

As mentioned earlier, the journal *Youth Literature* had a significant impact on Zhang Kangkang's creation of children's literature even the entire literary creation. Zhang Kangkang inherited the publication philosophy of *Youth Literature* that she understood—"While *Youth Literature* may not have deliberately aimed to cultivate youth writers, what it truly hoped for was that 'youth' could derive reading pleasure suited to their age and grow healthily" (Zhang, 1991, p. 89). *The Karaoke in the Summer Vacation* is a novel that portrays the growth journey of children and hopes for their healthy development.

The protagonist Zhong Cong lived with his grandparents after his parents divorced. His father was often busy doing business, and his mother had left. He would sometimes lie to his grandmother to get a cassette tape and even feign illness to change the subject. However, he was ultimately moved by his grandmother's concern and realized his mistake, vowing not to become a habitual liar. Since his parents divorced, he harbored deep resentment towards his mother, always feeling that he was inferior because of his divorced family. However, through interactions and the guidance with his mother and stepfather, he came to understand that his mother was doing her best to fulfill her responsibilities and hoped to give him more care and protection, hoping he would grow up healthily and happily.

4. Changing “Shell”—Diverse Artistic Forms

In her literary memoir, Zhang Kangkang wrote, “In my long life of writing, what to write and how to write have always been equally important” (Zhang, 2021, preface, p. 015). In the previous section, we analyzed what Zhang Kangkang wrote in *Karaoke in the Summer Vacation*. This part will discuss how she wrote it.

“The most important distinction between children's literature and adult literature is that children's literature has an implied reader who is a child. Therefore, children's literature writers must have a child-centered awareness and reader awareness when creating” (Wang, 2019, p. 167). In other words, when writing children's literature, authors must consider the psychological state and age characteristics of children. Zhang Kangkang had a profound understanding of this perspective, which is why she particularly focused on the writing style of the novel when creating *Karaoke in the Summer Vacation*.

4.1 Dual Parallel Structure: Two Flowers Bloom, Each on its Own Branch

Karaoke in the Summer Vacation is also known as *Colorful Plate*. From the name of the novel, the theme and plot cue can be predicted, and the novel itself is a dual parallel structure of “two flowers blooming, each on its own branch”.

4.1.1 Relationship Changes and Personification Metaphors

From *Colorful Plate*, the colorful plate in the novel is a symbolic object. The state changes of the colorful plate symbolize the changes in the relationship between the protagonist Zhong Cong and his mother. The colorful plate once was a very precious thing and Zhong Cong was not allowed to touch it. But after the divorce, when his mother broke it to pieces before leaving, the connection between Zhong Cong and his mother was severed with the shattering of the colorful plate. During Zhong Cong's growth, his true passion was piecing together these glass fragments, hoping to restore it. “I just want them to be together, like when it was on the cabinet, by my side every day”. This behavior also revealed Zhong Cong's true thoughts—hoping his mother would return to be with him, and for everything to return to how it was. Finally, on his birthday, Zhong Cong received a new colorful plate. He placed the original glass fragments in his mother's drawer. In the end, he understood his mother, and their relationship became harmonious.

Additionally, the colorful plate symbolizes rebirth and an independent personality. The glass colorful plate represents the mother in her original family, and Zhong Cong has always wanted to restore it to its original state, hoping that his mother would always be by his side. On his 15th birthday, he received a new bamboo colorful plate. This new plate can be seen as a symbol of their reconciliation as mother and son. It also symbolizes “rebirth”. The mother recreated the plate, which is a symbol of her rebirth; she is herself and cannot be constrained by marital or parental relationships, representing her independent personality. For Zhong Cong, he finally understood that “nothing in the world can truly restore what is broken; you can only create something new” through this new colorful plate. This colorful plate became an external manifestation of his personal growth.

4.1.2 Children’s Inner Growth

In *Karaoke in the Summer Vacation*, it is evident that music and singing represented by karaoke are what the protagonist Zhong Cong loves. Zhong Cong’s journey of singing at karaoke also reflects his inner growth process.

Initially, he found a microphone that could be used for karaoke at his mother’s place, but he “felt an itch in his throat but couldn’t produce a single note” (Zhang, 1991, p. 16). Later, facing his mother and stepfather’s expectant gazes, he “coughed and coughed, drank soda, and then cola, but still couldn’t sing” (Zhang, 1991, p. 38). Then, at a concert in the gymnasium, his “throat felt hot, and something seemed to well up in his heart”, but in the end, he “swallowed hard and couldn’t produce a sound” (Zhang, 1991, p. 74). Later, when no one was around, Zhong Cong finally sang by the sea, but his parents’ appearance interrupted him. It wasn’t until his fifteenth birthday that he sang a few songs in a nightclub. “Now, no matter how many people are around, I can sing, and I can sing better than anyone else” (Zhang, 1991, p. 120).

Zhong Cong’s change in attitude towards singing is essentially an external projection of his heart journey. From diffident, somber, and timid, to confident and brilliant, we witness the transformation of a teenager. Therefore, the novel named *Karaoke in the Summer Vacation* is focusing on the growth of children themselves and showcasing the vitality and life force of teenagers.

4.2 Unique Music: Unusual Modes of Expression

Karaoke in the Summer Vacation stands out in its form with a significant feature: the novel contains a large number of texts in other fonts that are set apart in their own paragraphs. These texts are actually music, or more accurately, the textual carriers of music—lyrics. The author refers to these texts as the novel’s subtext, as they contain a wealth of information that cannot be directly expressed by the main text.

4.2.1 Projection of Inner Thoughts through Music

The young protagonist, Zhong Cong, is a big fan of pop music, both listening to and singing it. He believes that “pop songs are meant to be sung from the heart, for one’s own enjoyment” (Zhang, 1991, p. 38). Therefore, the music in the novel often reflects the protagonist’s inner thoughts. Unspoken

feelings are expressed through lyrics. For instance, when the protagonist Zhong Cong is sitting on a train, about to meet his familiar yet unfamiliar mother, his heart is filled with nervous anticipation:

*Once I thought my home was a series of ticket stubs,
ripped open to unfold a journey, diving into another unfamiliar place.
Drifting like this for so many years, feeling so lonely for so many years,
ending up back at the starting point, only to realize now,
oh, ... people who passed by, I have already forgotten,
events that passed, have already drifted away with the wind,
The restless heart has gradually calmed down,
Tired as I am, can I have the fortune to rely on you. (Zhang, 1991, p. 4)*

Just like Zhong Cong and his mom, who had a conflict over learning staff notation and playing the guitar, when his mom was scolding him, Zhong Cong felt that she was being too nagging, but he couldn't argue back, so he could only express his emotions by singing in his heart:

*Mom, don't say, mom, don't say,
Please don't nag, don't talk endlessly. (Zhang, 1991, p. 51)*

After Zhong Cong understood his mom and faced the divorce, he realized the difficulty and bitterness of his mom. He understood that the most important thing for a person is to be herself/himself rather than being an appendage of the child. But he didn't know how to apologize to his mom, so he could only think of some lyrics in his heart:

*Past actions, I can no longer distinguish as good or bad,
Past time has flowed by, and I can no longer recall the years,
The future I once fantasized about in the past is not the present,
Only now do I seem to understand what the future truly is. (Zhang, 1991, p. 114)*

4.2.2 Flashback Indicators

Some music plays a unique role in novel narration, serving as indicators of flashbacks, signaling the impending narrative of reminiscence. For instance, after Zhong Cong arrived at his mother's home, facing a stranger and a distant mother, he was at a loss. "I have a good companion, his name is Memory". The words "Memory" bring Zhong Cong's thoughts back.

Back to when he was six years old, the text interjected the event of his parents divorcing. Similarly,

*Whenever all the other friends would leave,
He would stay by my side voluntarily, comforting me to fill my emptiness,
He was my best friend—memories. (Zhang, 1991, p. 12)*

A "memory" then brought Zhong Cong back to when he was nine years old, when his mom, who had been away for three years, returned to try to gain custody of him.

4.2.3 Indications of the Storyline

Some of the music also serves as an indication of what will happen next in the story. For example, when Zhong Cong first meets Li Xiang, Zhong Cong sees Li Xiang playing “wall ball” (ping-pong against a wall) alone. Zhong Cong wants to approach and talk to him, to get to know him. Thus, there is a verse like this:

Where do you come from, my friend?

Like a butterfly, you flew into my window. (Zhang, 1991, p. 25)

The word “friend” expresses Zhong Cong’s inner desire to find a friend, and using “like a butterfly flying into my window” implies the coincidental nature of this friendship. It was precisely when Zhong Cong was trying to be Li Xiang’s friend when Li Xiang missed the ball, and Zhong Cong happened to catch it. From that moment, the small seed of their friendship began to take root and grow.

This lyric appears in the text three times, with the second instance occurring during their formal conversation. When Li Xiang came to Zhong Cong’s home to look for the cat Dabai, Zhong Cong, worried that Li Xiang would leave after getting the cat, started catching fish to feed the cat. During the interval between these two actions, this lyric appeared:

Where do you come from, my friend.

You are like a butterfly, flying into my window. (Zhang, 1991, p. 35)

And when these lyrics appeared for the third time, it was after Zhong Cong saw Li Xiang off. He sang loudly in the room:

Where do you come from, my friend.

You are like a dragonfly, flying into my window. (Zhang, 1991, p. 37)

For the third time, Zhong Cong changed the butterfly to a dragonfly, as he believed a butterfly usually refers to a girlfriend, while a dragonfly can refer to a good friend. This change indicates that he had already regarded Li Xiang as a good friend, which is why they later went to the zoo and to “Yi Er San Restaurant”.

4.3 Portrayal of a Children’s Ensemble: Adolescents from Divorced Families

The novel portrays an ensemble of children from divorced families, sharing similarities among them. The protagonist, Zhong Cong, whose parents divorced due to emotional issues, had his mother leave while his father has been busy with business out of town, leaving him to live with his grandparents. Zhong Cong’s friend, A-kun, whose father has not yet divorced from his mother. When his parents divorced, A-Kun was already given a stepmother, “He left his birth mother because he had a stepmother first” (Zhang, 1991, p. 5), which means that A-Kun became a child from a divorced family because his father had cheated on his mother. A-Kun’s father would also beat him when he got drunk. Another close friend of Zhong Cong, Xin Xiaoya, had to live with her mother because her father was sentenced to prison for gambling, so her parents also got divorced. Zhong Cong met a friend named Li Xiang on her mother’s city, whose parents were also divorced and lived with her mother.

Although both were children of divorced families, their personalities were starkly different.

Xin Xiaoya lost all her hair like fallen leaves because of her parents' divorce. She liked pop music but just copied lyrics into a notebook instead of singing, always pursing her lips with "a lightning-fast smile passing through her eyes" (Zhang, 1991, p. 57). A-kun seemed a bit more mischievous, secretly riding his grandfather's bicycle and stealing money from his parents to buy things. Compared to other children, Li Xiang seemed to be a bit extreme child, with strange personality, a sensitive and proud heart. He only wanted to possess maternal love and prevent her from getting married. Kittens, monkeys, flamingos, would let him recall maternal love. In comparison, Zhong Cong was relatively happier. His previous depression and inferiority had been transformed into confidence under her mother's and stepfather's care.

One could say that Zhang Kangkang's portrayal of the children from divorced families is to call for society's attention and care for this special group and protect them. But more importantly, she hopes to emphasize the importance of shaping healthy personality by contrasting Zhong Cong with other teenagers. She also wants to convey the idea that we should pay attention to childlike innocence and childlike interest of children during their growth.

5. Conclusion

Although Zhang Kangkang's children's literature works are not numerous, we cannot overlook the value of her children's literature. This novel reflects reality and contains the author's good expectations for the future. She hopes that every teenager can develop a healthy personality and grow up healthily.

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