

## A Study of Translation on Nursery Rhymes From Reception Aesthetics: Taking *Bronze and Sunflower* as An Example

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### Abstract

As a part of children's literature, nursery rhymes have attracted much attention from the academic circle because of their unique aesthetic and cultural value. This paper analyzes the similarities and differences between English and Chinese nursery rhymes in terms of sentence pattern, content, form, and culture from the perspective of children readers' expectations, and taking the English translation of Andersen's prize-winning work *Bronze and Sunflower* as an example, this paper then explores how to preserve the similarities in sentence patterns and contents of English and Chinese nursery rhymes while compensating for the differences in form and culture with various translation methods, so as to seek common ground while reserving differences.

**Key words:** Reception aesthetics; Translation of nursery rhymes; *Bronze and Sunflower*

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### 1. CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND RECEPTION AESTHETICS

At present, the most commonly accepted definition of children's literature comes from Gote Klinberg, a Swedish scholar who believes that children's literature refers to literature works created specifically for children (Oittinen,

2000). Because of the differences between children's literature and adult literature, its audience is mostly children whose psychology is beginning to adolcesce. At this stage, children's abstract logical thinking still retains a large degree of concrete image (Xu, 2004), and they prefer the learning mode of viewing pictures and reading aloud. Therefore, nursery rhymes have a unique sense of reading rhythm in children's works, which meets the special aesthetic needs of children readers. With the widely spreading and various sources, the nursery rhyme is also the essence of regional culture and worthy of translation study.

However, in recent years, most of the studies on the translation of nursery rhymes have solely focused on the translation of language (Huang, 2011), ignoring the aesthetic needs of English and Chinese children readers. In fact, throughout the development process of Chinese children's literature in the 20th century, the innovative thoughts such as the "children-oriented" concept advocated by Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren around the May 4th movement, the project proposed by Zheng Zhenduo and Mao Dun that children's literature should help children understand society and life in the 1920s, the claim that children's literature is the literature of educating children put forward by Lu Bing and He Yi in the 1960s, and the claim provided by a group of young writers represented by Cao Wenxuan who believed that children's literature was related to the shaping of the future national character after 1980s (Wang, 2003). The core of these creative thoughts gradually draws closer to the readers. Therefore, the aesthetic factors of children's customization in the original text should not be abandoned in the translated works, and the acceptance of readers should still be seen as the essence.

Reception aesthetics is a post-modernism school of aesthetics and literary theory which came into being and developed in the second half of the 20th century in the Federal Republic of Germany and spread rapidly in

Europe and the United States in the 1970s-1980s. It is based on Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics and shifts the focus of aesthetic research to "readers" (Zhang, 2010). It is the core of reception aesthetics to study readers' acceptance of works. From the perspective of reception aesthetics, the translation of nursery rhymes can break away from the aesthetic bias of adults' abstract logical thinking and focus on the needs of children from different cultures.

## 2. ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ENGLISH AND CHINESE NURSERY RHYMES

Starting from the comparison of English and Chinese nursery rhymes, we would analyze their similarities and differences in sentence pattern, content, form, and culture, to summarize the aesthetic needs of the target readers and grasp the horizon of expectation in the process of translation, facilitate readers' understanding and promote readers' acceptance.

Most of the Chinese nursery rhymes selected in this paper come from oral folk, and the source is unknown. The English nursery rhymes are selected from *Mother Goose*, which is widely spread and corresponding to the audience. They are both deeply loved by children readers and can be used for comparison and further analysis.

### 2.1 Similarities Between English and Chinese Nursery Rhymes

#### 2.1.1 Similar Patterns

① The length is short, the rhythm is bright, uses the repetition short sentence;

Chinese: 小老鼠, 上灯台.....咕噜咕噜滚下来, 咕噜咕噜滚下来.....

(Little mouse, go to the lampstand... Gulu, Gulu, rolling down, Gulu, rolling down)

English: shoo fly, don't both me / shoo fly, don't both me / shoo fly, don't both me / I belong to somebody

Nursery rhymes are not only children's literature texts but also commonly sung songs. For children, repeating short sentences is easier to remember and more rhythmic, which is convenient for children to "readout". Besides, English and Chinese nursery rhymes are both compact, repeating sentences could integrate into the rhythm.

② The words are simple, easy to understand, and play a teaching effect;

Chinese: 小皮球, 香蕉梨, 马兰开花二十一。

(A small ball, a banana pear, and twenty-one malan flower.)

English: star light, star bright / first star I see tonight...

English and Chinese nursery rhymes sometimes use a large number of specific nouns or even stacked nouns. On the one hand, simple and popular words are more suitable for daily life and lay the foundation for children's literary

learning. On the other hand, explicit and simple words fit the dependence of children's psychological special period on thinking. From the perspective of reception aesthetics, the abstract aesthetic of adult literature is meaningless to children, while the specific aesthetic is more conducive to children's acceptance, which is in line with children's preliminary cognition of the world and their expectation of aesthetics.

#### 2.1.2 Similar Contents

③ The plot is vivid, lively, and interesting, combining fantasy with daily life.

Chinese: 你拍一,我拍一,一个小孩坐飞机。你拍二,我拍二,两个小孩丢手绢。

(You clap once, I clap once, one child takes a plane. You clap twice, I clap twice, two children are playing handkerchief game.)

English: Jack and Jill went up the hill/To fetch a pail of water/Jack fell down and broke his crown/And Jill came tumbling after.

As mentioned in the above example, children's perspective of acceptance mainly focuses on specific images, which is quite different from adults' abstract thinking. The transformation from specific thinking to abstract thinking is a certain process of children's psychological maturity. Therefore, English and Chinese nursery rhymes are mostly based on daily life situations, which can not only attract readers' attention but also lead children to actively imagine the content of nursery rhymes, which promotes their thinking growth.

④ Enlightening teaching with fun, popularizing moral, religious, and historical knowledge in ballads.

Chinese: 我在马路边, 捡到一分钱, 交到警察叔叔手里边, 挥挥手, 说再见。

(I picked up a cent by the side of the road, handed it to the police uncle, waved, and said goodbye.)

... In 1958, when food was free (implied historical knowledge of the people's commune period)

English: ..... God bless the moon/ And God bless me. .... Are the children all in bed, for now it's eight o'clock?

Children's literature has a unique enlightenment significance. In English and Chinese nursery rhymes, some of them popularize daily, moral, and religious knowledge and use the repeated songs to deepen children's impression of rules in order to shape children's positive psychology and daily behavior norms.

In addition to the above common features caused by the universality of nursery rhymes, English and Chinese nursery rhymes are all oral folk songs, so they all overlap with folk songs. It is even difficult to determine whether some ballads are created for children or spread after children's learning.

Because of this, there are many differences in form and culture between English and Chinese nursery rhymes.

## 2.2 Differences Between English and Chinese Nursery Rhymes

### 2.2.1. Different Form

#### ① Different rhyme;

Chinese: 黑黑的天空低垂, 亮亮的繁星入睡。虫儿飞, 虫儿飞, 你在思念谁。

(The black sky drooping, the bright stars all sleeping. Insects fly, insects fly, who are you missing.)

English: He went to shoot a wild duck,  
But wild duck flew away;  
Say Simon, I can't hit him,  
Because he will not stay.

The rhyme mode of nursery songs in a certain cultural background is similar to the mode of metrical poetry. Apart from the unified mode that one rhyme for the whole text, the Chinese rhymes mostly go with AABA, while English rhymes are more diverse, and there are also some rhythms rare in Chinese nursery rhymes such as ABCB and ABAB. Different nationalities have different perceptions and expectations of rhythm. From the perspective of children's acceptance, the unconventional pause mode and rhythm format are more difficult to accept when reading or spreading, and the aesthetic value of the original text is difficult to reflect.

#### ② Different dialogue;

Chinese: 我问燕子为啥来? 燕子说, 这里的春天最美丽。

(I ask the swallows why are they coming? The swallow said, the spring here is the most beautiful scene.)

English: Baa, baa, black sheep, have you any wool?  
Yes, sir, yes, sir, three bags full.

Both English and Chinese have nursery rhymes of self-questioning and self-answering, but the forms of those dialogues are slightly different. Most of the Chinese nursery rhymes use someone questioning and someone saying to switch perspectives and reflect the form of dialogue. In English nursery rhymes, the dialogue is mainly represented by direct questions and answers, and the dialogue form starting with the name of perspective is not common. This also makes the rhythm of the English nursery rhymes in the Q & A part more compact, and the sense of dialogue stronger and more vivid.

#### ③ Different format of antithesis;

Chinese: 一 二 三 四 五, 上山打老虎, 老虎打不到, 打到小松鼠。

(One, two, three, four, five, go up to the mountain and find a tiger to fight. But the tiger can't be fought, I will fight a squirrel.)

English: Cut thistles in May /They'll grow in a day  
/Cut them in June /That is too soon  
/Cut them in July /Then they will die.

The format of antithesis in Chinese nursery rhymes is based on words and has more monosyllabic units, while English nursery rhymes are composed of prosodic rhythms. There are differences between the two in terms

of word number equivalence and step equivalence. For example, following the form of Chinese metrical poetry, there are many quatrains with the same number of words and the traditional AABA rhyme in Chinese nursery rhymes. However, this kind of nursery rhyme is rare in English, and more of them are iambic nursery rhymes with an irregular number of words. In reading, this kind of difference causes Chinese rhymes to have to read one word after one word, while English rhymes usually match stressed syllables and mild syllables regularly, and pay attention to the matching between the steps.

### 2.2.2 Different Cultural Features

#### ④ There are different types of kinship terms in English and Chinese nursery rhymes;

Chinese: 爸爸的爸爸叫什么, 妈妈的妈妈叫什么.....

(How to call father's father, how to call mother's mother...)

English: My aunt Jane, She came from France, To teach to me the polka dance.

In English culture, appellation terms are simple and broad in generality, but Chinese kinship terms have a long history, which can be divided into two parts: the mother's side and the father's side of the family. In Chinese nursery rhymes, father's elder brother(伯伯), father's elder brother(叔叔), and other special appellations appear frequently, which aims to educate children on addresses. However, in English nursery rhymes, kinship appellations are highly referential. Exemplified by the aunt mentioned in the rhyme who could be a family friend or a parent's relative.

The boundary between nursery rhymes and folk songs is vague. Many nursery rhymes have a strong cultural context as background. For example, Chinese nursery rhymes often involve traditional factors such as solar terms and farming seasons, while English nursery rhymes also contain traditional festivals or religious themes such as Christmas and Thanksgiving. The two cultural contexts are not similar, and it is difficult for children to understand the traditions of other cultures. If the translation standard of adult literary works is taken as the requirement, cultural context is an indispensable component in the dissemination of works, and cultural characteristics should be indicated utilizing annotation or endnote. However, to explore the translated works from the perspective of children's acceptance, children's acceptance and expectation should be the main vision, then not all cultural factors can be translated in an intense rhyme.

From the similarities and differences between English and Chinese nursery rhymes, we can see that they have similarities in sentence structure and content, and differences in form and cultural characteristics. Children's understanding of the differences between different cultures should be subtle. If the cultural background is laid according to the requirements of adults' literature, the

storytelling and reading fluency expected by children's readers will be blocked in the dissemination along with the aesthetic meaning of nursery rhymes.

Therefore, the translation of Chinese nursery rhymes should focus on seeking common ground while reserving differences and the common ground should be retained. Translation strategies could be used in different places to get close to the target readers, focusing on the transmission of complete children's interests and stories. Based on fluent "story-telling", the interpretation of cultural transmission and cultural characteristics should be gradual and selective, which can not be achieved immediately. And it's unwarranted to ignore the aesthetic needs of children for the sake of retaining the aesthetic feeling of "literariness" of adults, the aesthetic needs of target readers from the perspective of children's reception aesthetics should be attached importance to.

### 3. A CASE STUDY OF NURSERY RHYME TRANSLATION IN *BRONZE AND SUNFLOWER*

In April 2016, the International Board On Books For Young People (IBBY) announced that Cao Wenxuan, a Chinese writer of children's literature, won the Hans Christian Andersen Award. This is the first time for a Chinese writer to win this honor, and it is an important milestone in the field of Chinese children's literature in recent years. Cao Wenxuan became famous for his *The Goat Don't Eat Paradise grass* (《山羊不吃天堂草》) (1991). In 1997, with the publishing of *The Straw House*, Cao's reputation has been arisen to a new height and then published his peak work *Bronze and Sunflower* in 2005. In 2017, this book sold 700000 copies, with a total sales of 3.5 million (Tan, 2018). On his way to winning all the honors, the translator Helen Wang has made a great contribution.

As for the translation of children's works, Wang conveyed her idea in an interview: "We often think about language and culture when translating, but the storytelling is just as important. Things like timing, tension, suspense, length, rhythm, humor, and dialogue are crucial elements of a story. We learn these when we are very young, and we all know how little children will complain if you don't tell the story properly." (Wang, 2015) Wang's thought coincides with children's views on rhythm and story-telling in their special period. The proper retreat of language and culture and the insistence on the faithful transmission of storytelling are the core of Wang's translation and also the heat point of reception aesthetics. In *Bronze and Sunflower*, it could be realized that Wang uses different translation methods for several nursery rhymes to achieve her translation effect.

① Source text:

南山脚下一缸油， 姑嫂两个赌梳头。  
姑娘梳成盘龙髻， 嫂嫂梳成羊兰头。(《青铜葵花》, 2005, p.75)

花》, 2005, p.75)

Literal translation:

One jar of oil at the foot of South Mountain,  
A girl and her sister-in-law bet on combing hair.  
Girl combed into a panlong bun,  
sister-in-law combed into a sheep orchid head.

Wang's translation:

Little Sister, Meimei, we combed your hair  
And now you look like a lady!

Big Sister, Jiejie, we combed your hair

And now you look like a baby! (*Bronze and Sunflower*; 2015, p.117)

This nursery rhyme comes from the poems of the Song Dynasty. Judging from the similarities and differences between English and Chinese nursery rhymes mentioned above, Wang retains the flat and straightforward narrative way and interesting storyline in the original text while provides some changes in cultural differences.

In terms of the story, the original meaning of the original text is that a girl and her sister-in-law compete for their hair binding skills. The younger sister-in-law combs her hair in a Panlong bun, and the sister-in-law combs a sheep orchid head. Both Panlong bun and sheep orchid head are women's hairstyles in the Ming Dynasty. With a long history, their details can no longer be tested. If the hairstyle information needs to be translated, some corresponding notes must be added. The unique regional cultural context of the original text is extremely difficult to convey directly to young readers of English culture in translation. Wang uses the variation translation method to simplify the meaning of the rhyme into an old sister combed into a childish head while the young sister combed into a lady-kind. It is obviously different from the meaning of the original text, but it also has an interesting storyline, which is more in line with the acceptance of children's readers while achieving the purpose of retaining the story favor in common between English and Chinese at the same time.

In terms of cultural differences, the commonly designated kinship appellation for "姑嫂" here originally refers to a woman and her husband's sister, but there is no fixed pronoun as established reference in English, and the annotation will break the coherence of nursery rhyme reading and distract the attention of young readers. Therefore, the translator has simplified it into an ordinary form of sisters. This is a domesticated translation of the difference of kinship terms in English and Chinese nursery rhymes. Then, for "jiejie" and "meimei", Wang adopts the transliteration translation method, combining the Chinese phonetic alphabet of big sister and little sister with English interpretation. On the one hand, she changes the original text to translate more in line with the expectancy of English readers, and on the other hand, she supplements the lack of Chinese culture.

From the perspective of reception aesthetics, the above

example translates the nursery rhyme from the perspective of readers by focusing on the story and paying attention to the interesting plot, while preserving the differences of cultural situations. Then, there is another nursery rhyme in *Bronze and Sunflower* that can illustrate the translation methods of the formal differences between cultures.

② Source text:

树头挂网枉求虾，泥里无金空拨沙。

刺槐树里栽狗橘，几时开得牡丹花(《青铜葵花》，2005, p.85)

Literal translation:

A net at the head of a tree is in vain for shrimps,  
no gold in the mud so no use to search the sand.

Dog-berry is planted in locust tree,  
When will the peony blossom.

Wang's translation:

Fishing for prawns in trees? Oh, put away your net!  
Looking for gold in mud? There's only sand as yet!  
Oranges grow on the black locust tree

Oh, when will we see the pe-o-ny? (*Bronze and Sunflower*, 2015, p.134)

Same as a nursery rhyme that came from metrical poems, the original text of this example highlights the meaning of philosophical teaching for children's logic, and enlightenment teaching is one of the common points of English and Chinese nursery rhymes. Therefore, Wang adopts the literal translation method, only uses conversion skills in syntactic structure and retains the easily understandable fable content of the original text. In terms of vocabulary, the nursery rhyme unifies the sentence pattern throughout the whole article and reforms the first two sentences into V + ing pattern to strengthen the repetition of sentence patterns and facilitate children's habit of reading sound. In addition, the three verbs in the original text were replaced by phrases in the translation, which retain another common feature of English and Chinese nursery rhymes: simple and easy to understand.

In terms of formal differences, Wang makes changes to the structure of dialogue and the format of confrontation. The original text is plain and straightforward while the dialogue is not prominent. The translation first adopts the common direct Q&A mode of English nursery rhymes, and then adds two modal particles "Oh" before the sentences, all to restore the vivid features in the dialogue part of English nursery rhymes. As mentioned above, the antithesis format in English nursery rhymes is mostly reflected in the cadence of equivalence. Wang lengthens the syllable of "peony" in the last sentence to make it a better match with the long sentence above for the reading experience. Children readers would follow the symbols to unconsciously lengthen the syllable when reading and achieving the rhythm harmony.

From the perspective of reception aesthetics, the above example translates the nursery rhyme from the perspective of readers by retaining science teaching process and changing form for harmony.

To sum up, for the nursery rhymes in *Bronze and Sunflower*, Wang firstly emphasizes the subjectivity of readers, and sometimes even gives up the cultural equivalence that may be essential to adults. In the aspect of seeking common ground, Wang tries her best to retain the common ground between English and Chinese nursery rhymes. In the translation of nursery rhymes, she attempts to follow the principle of popularity and replace difficult words, to make the interesting plot of the original text still shine in her translation; In the aspect of reserving differences, to prevent the factors affecting readers' smooth reading experience, Wang uses different translation methods and techniques for the cultural and formal differences that undermine the integrity of the story. After all the efforts, Wang respects the expected vision of children's readers and conforms to the requirements of reception aesthetics.

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#### 4. CONCLUSION

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Few notes have been added in *Bronze and Sunflower*, and many unavoidable words are mentioned repeatedly from the beginning of the article, those all mean to deepen the impression of children readers and avoid an unsmooth reading process. Through the comparison between English and Chinese nursery rhymes, a conclusion could be provided that the translator Helen Wang has retained the similarities between English and Chinese nursery rhymes while focused on the expectations of children's readers from the perspective of reception aesthetics. Meanwhile, Wang uses a variety of translation techniques and methods to innovate in rhythm, form, and content, which follows the aesthetic expectations of readers.

From the perspective of reception aesthetics, the translation of children's works should focus on the special aesthetic needs of the readers. By comparing Chinese and English nursery rhymes, we found that nursery rhymes from different cultures are similar in theme, function, and entertainment value, indicating the universality of human needs. But for pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence patterns, Chinese and English nursery rhymes are slightly different. With the discussion of nursery rhymes in *Bronze and Sunflower*, Wang's translation approaches can be explored and then provides experience for future cultural communication.

To promote national cultural exchanges and to bridge the gap between readers from different cultural backgrounds, we should not confine ourselves to the aesthetic thinking of adults but treat the readers from the angle of reception aesthetics. To enrich the theoretical researches and provide a reference for the translation of nursery rhymes from different cultures, we should strengthen cultural communication and enable more readers to experience the beauty of the pluralistic world.

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