

Influences of Translated Children's Texts upon Chinese Children's Literature

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Introduction

The year 1898 witnessed the beginning of western children's works being translated into Chinese by Chinese people. Some of *Aesop's Fables* were translated and published in a newspaper entitled *Wuxi Baihua Bao*.¹ In the same year, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* was also translated and published in China. The following years saw more and more western children's works translated into Chinese (see Li 2004). Yet it was not until the year 1922 that the Chinese writer YE Shengtao (1894-1988) created and published the first collection of fairy tales entitled *The Scarecrow* in China. This marked the beginning of Chinese children's literature.

In feudal China, children were regarded as property of their parents and miniaturized adults. Given this conceptualization of childhood, there existed little possibility to create child-oriented literature. However, as the translation and adaptation of foreign children's works and theories flourished, Chinese writers created their own children's works. It is unlikely that without the introduction of foreign children's works there would have been no such Chinese children's works. Or in other words, foreign children's works have exerted a tremendous influence upon Chinese children's literature. This paper adopts the methodology of the Influence Study from Comparative Literature Studies to investigate the influences of translated western children's works upon created Chinese children's literature. To be specific, the method of chronology and doxologie are singled out.

Evidence of the existence of influences

It is not always easy to locate and identify the actual influences on Chinese children's literature; however, the introduction of chronology provides us with the theoretical foundation and the opportunity to prove the existence of the influences. Simply speaking, chronology aims to find out the factors that influence the theme, subject matter, characterisation, plot, linguistic elements, and style of a writer or a literary genre. Chronology can be subdivided into written, oral, individual and collective. This paper mainly uses written chronology, memoirs and articles included, to examine the influences of translated western children's works.

In 1980 a book, entitled *Ertong wenxue he wo* [Children's Literature and I], was published by Shanghai Publishing Press for Children and Young Adults. This memoir of 29 famous Chinese writers (translators) devoted to children's literature, tells of their encounter with children's literature. Of the 29 entries, 11 explicitly expressed that they had been influenced in one way or another by the translated children's works. For example, YE Shengtao, who was the first Chinese writer to create fairy tales for children, says:

*My writing fairy tales is certainly influenced by the west. Around May 4th period, fairy tales by Grimm brothers, Hans Christian Andersen, and Oscar Wilde were gradually introduced into China. I was then a primary school teacher, and therefore paid attention to this kind of literary form which was suitable for children to read. In the end I came up with the idea of having a try by myself.*²
(YE, 1980: 3-4)

In addition, there are some articles written by authors and translators scattered in different journals. Take BING Xin as an example here. BING Xin (1900-1999)³ is the most famous female essay writer for children and a poet who is noted for her short-poetic form in modern China and her themes on love of mother, motherland and nature in her children's works.

In 1959, BING Xin wrote an article entitled *How I Wrote A Maze of Stars and Spring Water*, in which she explicitly admitted the influence of Tagore upon her: 'When I wrote *A Maze of Stars and Spring Water*, I was not writing poetry. All I did – under the influence of Tagore's *Stray Birds* – was to gather together my scattered and fragmentary thoughts' (BING, 1959: 10).⁴

These explicit comments by authors serve as evidence of influences of western children's works on Chinese books for children.

Aspects of Influences

Once the existence of those influences is acknowledged, it is important to find out what exactly those influences are. In order to achieve this, the method of doxologie is adopted. Doxologie is the study on the achievement, fame and influence of a work, a writer or a literary genre in foreign countries.



It provides clues about the actual influences of translated children's literature upon created Chinese children's works. To be specific, three major aspects, namely the influences on technique, content and image, are to be discussed.

(i) *Influence on technique*

Technique refers to the skills for writing children's literature. BING Xin is a useful case study here. As mentioned previously, her use of the "short poetic form" is strongly influenced by the Indian poet Tagore. Classical poetry, with its strict rhyming patterns, occupied a dominant position in traditional Chinese literature. BING Xin's short poetic form was different from traditional Chinese poetic forms in that they can be as short as one sentence or a phrase, or as long as several lines; they can be partly rhymed or not rhymed at all. In general, it is a very free poetic form, suitable for expressing spontaneous and fragmentary ideas. In BING Xin's *Preface to a Maze of Stars*, she tells readers how she began to write those short poems:

*In the winter of 1919, I sat near the stove as my younger brother Binzhong read Rabindranath Tagore's 'Stray Birds'. He said to me: "Don't you sometimes complain that your thoughts are too scattered and fragmentary, too difficult to set out in writing? Couldn't they be collected like these?" From then on, I recorded such thoughts in a little notebook.*⁵

(BING, 1921)

A comparison between a few poems from Tagore's *Stray Birds* and *A Maze of Stars* and *Spring Water* highlights the similarities in form:

Poems by Tagore:

79⁶

MAN barricades against himself.

69

*"I GIVE my whole water in joy,"
sings the waterfall, "though little
of it is enough for the thirsty."*

35

*THE bird wishes it were a cloud.
The cloud wishes it were a bird.*

12

*"WHAT language is thine, O sea?"
"The language of eternal question."
"What language is thy answer, O sky?"
"The language of eternal silence."*

19

*THE night kisses the fading day
whispering to his ear, "I am death, your
mother: I am to give you fresh birth."*

150

*MY thoughts shimmer with these
shimmering leaves and my heart sings
with the touch of this sunlight; my life is
glad to be floating with all things into the
blue of space, into the dark of time.*

308

*CHEERLESS is the day, the light under
frowning clouds is like a punished child with
traces of tears on its pale cheeks, and the cry
of the wind is like the cry of a wounded world.
But I know I am travelling to meet my Friend.*

Seen from the quoted poems by Tagore, it can be concluded that Tagore's poems in *Stray Birds* are very free in form. Sometimes just one line makes the whole poem (see 79), sometimes 2 lines (see 35), or sometimes one paragraph containing several sentences (see 150, 308). And there is no clear rhyming pattern involved. In addition, direct quotations are also used (see 69, 12).

The following poems are selected from BING Xin's *A Maze of Stars*⁷:

19

*My heart –
A lonely vessel
cuts through the ebb and swell of time.*

44

*Nature,
allow me just one question,
one serious question:
"Haven't I mistaken you?"*

111

*Too monotonous?
My lute,
I forgive you –*

*I cannot make your strings,
sound like woodwinds.*

135

*My friend –
Have you scaled a high cliff?
Have you overlooked the ocean?
Up there,
Isn't it desolate,
alone with wordless "nature"?
Your heart,
Was it full of joy or was it bowed?*

From these selections the similarities between the two poets are evident. For instance, there are: no fixed number of lines; no rhyming pattern; direct quotations are often used. While there are further similarities in form between Tagore's poems and BING Xin's, BING Xin was not just imitating the poetic form of Tagore; rather, she also made some changes. Tagore's poems in *Stray Birds* seldom split sentences into more than 2 lines. On most occasions, he kept the several sentences in a paragraph form, while BING Xin likes to separate her poems into different lines. For BING Xin, what she learnt from Tagore's *Stray Birds* most importantly was the freedom in form. This kind of short form is very suitable for expressing the scattered and fragmentary thoughts.

(ii) Influence on content

The influence on content here mainly deals with the influence of theme and subject matter upon the receiver.

Theme refers to the underlying central idea of a literary or artistic work or the generalization of the work. The poems of BING Xin are useful examples. It was BING Xin who first took the themes of love for mother, motherland and nature into children's literature in China. And she is also famous for expressing such themes in her works.

BING Xin translated some poems from Tagore's *Gitanjali* into Chinese and wrote in the preface of the Chinese version:

Tagore is one of my favourite foreign poets when I was young.... His poems are full of his love for the motherland, his sympathy for women and his love for children.... In this collection of his poems I have travelled in his beautiful and rich country,

known the gentle and perseverant women, and the naïve and joyous children there.

(BING 1982, Preface p. 1)

BING Xin's most famous children's works include a collection of essays entitled *Letters to Young Readers*, and two collections of poems entitled respectively *A Maze of Stars* and *Spring Water*. Now let's take a few examples from her *A Maze of Stars*, which was translated into English by John Carley, to see her praise on children.

35

*Numberless angels
will rise to sing the praises of a child.*

A child –

*This fragile flesh
Enfolds a great spirit.*
(Cayley 1989, p.111)

74

*The child
is a great poet,
with an imperfect tongue,
lispng perfect verses.*
(ibid, p. 115)

Here BING Xin used such words and phrases as "great spirit", "great poet" and "perfect verses" to describe and praise children. These poems were written during 1921-1922. No other writers had praised children like this and their sentiments were a contrast to how children were regarded during the period of feudal China. In spite of the fact that concepts about children were progressing, children-oriented writings did not appear in China until the May 4th Movement when the social and cultural conditions became mature. Since Bing Xin's praised children with great enthusiasm, there appeared then an upsurge of such a theme in Chinese literary circles both in created and translated children's works.

The *subject matter* refers to a specific topic of a literary work. There were some topics, such as homeless children, which were never embodied in created Chinese children's literature before the introduction of such topics into China. In 1935 LU Xun translated and published the Russian novel *The Watch* by Panteleev (1908-1987). The story was about how a homeless child got rid of his bad habits and became

a good boy. The book was printed in China at least 17 times by 13 publishing presses from 1935 to 1949. And there was a revised and shortened form based on Lu Xun's Chinese version in 1949. In 1935, a film director planned to adapt the novel into a film, though not successful, it indicates the kind of popularity of this novel at that time. Then in 1947 the novel was adapted into a five-act drama. Later on a film with the same title as *The Watch* was directed by ZUO Lin in 1949. It was regarded as one of the classics in the Chinese film history. In summary, the novel was one of the most reprinted translated children's works in China during the period of 1898-1949.

At the time when this book was translated into China, the conflicts between Chinese Communist Party and Kuomintang had lasted for years, and there were numerous homeless children wandering the streets. But those children had never been represented in children's works before. The protagonists in children's works before that were "good" obedient children whether at school or at home. They were supposed to be good examples for other children to follow. The introduction of *The Watch* into China broadened the vision of the Chinese writers for children's works, making them realize that homeless children, who were not perfect and who made serious mistakes, could also be the protagonists in children's works.

After *The Watch* was translated into Chinese, there appeared a number of children's works with homeless children as protagonists. One such story is *The Story of Big Nose* written by MAO Dun in 1936.

The protagonist in *The Story of Big Nose* was a homeless child, whose nickname was Big Nose, a title given to him by an old woman in charge of a public toilet. When he was 7 or 8 years old, his parents were bombed to death and since then he became homeless in Shanghai. Big Nose had lots of weak points: stealing, telling lies and playing tricks. There are significant similarities between *The Watch* and *Big Nose*. The plot of the former centred on the theft of a watch, and the latter on five coins. The narrative structure of *The Watch* followed a redemptive pattern: stealing watch – feeling touched – correcting mistake; Big Nose followed a similar pattern.

(iii) Influence on image

Since Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* gained worldwide popularity, the image of Alice had appeared in many countries across the world. The book was first translated into Chinese by a Chinese linguist CHAO Yuen Ren⁹ (1892-1982) in 1922. The translated version was reprinted many times and there appeared some adapted versions based on CHAO's translation. Then in 1928 and 1933, two Chinese novels, which used the image of Alice, were created by two Chinese writers. The first one was written by SHEN Congwen (1902-1988) under the title of *Alice's Adventures in China*, and the second by CHEN Bochui (1906-1997) was entitled *Miss Alice*.

Alice's Adventures in China was regarded as the continuation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in China. The author arranged the two characters, namely Alice and the rabbit, to come and travel in China. The white rabbit here was a gentleman named John Norchi (according to Chinese pronunciation). What they saw was actually a realistic picture of the Chinese society in 1920-1930s: hunger, superstition, backwardness and slave trading. In contrast to this, there was also a depiction of the simple age-old living style of the Miao minority people in western mountainous area in Hunan province, China. Actually SHEN Congwen was famous for depicting the scenery and the people in that part of China in several of his novels such as *The Border Town*. Below is an excerpt which tells of what the characters heard on the very first day in China:

One life, although it is a life, in many parts of China it is not more expensive than that of a pig or dog. In case of a disaster or famine, children are traded in terms of their weight, at most seven cents per 500 g.
(SHEN 1999, p.375)

The author, however, originally intended to write something quite similar to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to amuse his younger sister and sick mother. But while he was writing, he changed both the white rabbit and Alice, as was stated in his preface of the book: 'I changed the kind and cultivated white rabbit into a Chinese gentleman-like rabbit. At the same time, Alice

is not what she was.... The rabbit John Norchi is not an amusing character at all, whereas the naivety of Alice is also lost to a great extent' (SHEN 1999, p.339).

In *Alice's Adventures in China*, Alice and the rabbit served as the witnesses to the Chinese society at that time, which was quite different from what they were in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Although SHEN borrowed these two images from Lewis Carroll, Carroll's depiction was imaginary and amusing, whereas SHEN's approach was quite realistic.

CHEN Bochui's *Miss Alice* was also based on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. CHEN Bochui once wrote in one of his memoirs:

I was thinking of writing a novel named Miss Alice. I read Alice's 'Adventures in Wonderland' some years ago. I was then a young man with imagination and was totally conquered by the book... I wanted to depict a child image with naivety, brightness, courage and intelligence. But when I wrote till the twelfth chapter, the Japanese attacked China on Sept 18, which made me appalled. I realized that Alice should come back to reality from her wonderland, to realism from romanticism.
(CHEN 1980, p.31)

So we can see that both SHEN Congwen and CHEN Bochui started their creations with the idea of creating an image quite similar to that in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. But in the end, both deviated from what they originally intended. Or, in other words, the Alice created for the Chinese context was actually distorted.

Complexity of Influence Study

The identification and location of the actual influences of translated children's works on Chinese children's literature is a complex process. Sometimes the influences are blended without any distinctive trace as to the original source. Also, influences may be exerted upon a work in many ways. In spite of this, it is important to make clear the influences of translated western children's works upon created Chinese children's literature. And a more in-depth study may be achieved with the adoption of new methods and revelation of more materials.

NOTES

1. This was the first newspaper in China whose language was modern Chinese (baihua). Wuxi is a place in Jiangsu Province, where the newspaper was first published.
2. This is my translation from Chinese.
3. BING Xin is the penname for XIE Wanying. Her most famous collection of essays is entitled *Letters to Little Readers*.
4. This was translated by John Caylery in 1989. See Renditions No. 32: 88.
5. This was translated by John Cayley in 1989. See Renditions No. 32: 108.
6. All the poems from Tagore's *Stray Birds* quoted in this paper were downloaded from the website: <http://www.terebess.hu/english/tagore6.html>
7. Here the poems from BING Xin's *A Maze of Stars* were all translated by John Carley unless otherwise indicated. See Renditions, No. 32: 108-117. The translator sometimes made some changes in the number of the lines. Here only those which have the same number of lines with the originals are chosen.
8. CHAO Yuen Ren was regarded as Father of Linguistics in China. He went to study mathematics at Cornell University with a scholarship in 1910 and later switched to physics before moving to linguistics. He taught at Cornell University, Harvard University, Tsinghua University and later was professor of linguistics at University of California, Berkeley. In addition, he was also an amateur composer. He died in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1982.



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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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