

# Children's Literature Translation and Reasons for its Marginalization

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**ABSTRACT.** *In recent decades, great progress has been made in the studies of children's literature translation, though there is still much room for improvement in this field. Starting from the concept of children's literature, the paper analyzes the status quo of the studies of children's literature translation at home and abroad, and explores the reasons for the relatively slow development of the studies of the children's literature translation. The writer holds that due to the special characteristics with children's cognition and psychology, which gives rise to special requirements for the translation of children's works, few people would make attempt in this sphere. The article finally attempts to provide suggestions for future children's literature translation studies.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Children's Literature Translation; Marginalization; Reason*

## 1. The Concept of "Children's Literature"

The concept of "children's literature" is a compound composed of the two words "children" and "literature". The connotation of the two words is vague. And there is no consensus on the definition of "children's literature" among scholars. Nevertheless, out of necessity, many scholars have attempted to define "children's literature". Peter Hunt (1992:15) [1] defines it as books that are especially suitable for children, or that is particularly satisfying for children and is read by children; Finnish children's literature writer, translator and graphic artist Riitta Oittinen (2000: 61) [2] believes that children's literature refers to the literary works created for children or read by children. German scholar O'Sullivan (2003: 14) [3] holds that children's literature is works suitable for children and adolescents. These works are defined as children's works by various authoritative institutions. She thinks children's literature differs from adult literature in sales, publishing, education, reading, and criticism etc. An expert in British children's literature, Gillian Lathey (2010: 198) [4], maintains that children's literature includes works written specially for children, texts written for adults but later read by children, and texts written for children and adults and read by children and adults as well, Mark Twain's

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn falls into this category. This study follows Gillian Lathey's definition.

Since the 1980s, the study of children's literature at home and abroad has steadily increased, and now it has thrived, and research perspectives are diversified. In the meantime, the translation and introduction of children's literature at home and abroad is also very active. However, studies on children's literature translation are relatively few.

## **2. The Status Quo of the Studies on Children's Literature Translation**

In the West, the emergence of functionalism in Germany and the “cultural turn” in the 1970s provided a new perspective for translation studies. Translation studies began to change from “the source language oriented” to “the target language oriented” and scholars began to explore the external factors of translation. As a component of the literary translation system, children’s literature translation has also been affected by this trend, and its focus moves from the source text to the target text and target language culture, shedding light on the study of children's literature translation. Based on her classification of text types, Reiss (2004) [5] applied functionalism to the translation. She discussed the translation of children's literature in the section on special readers. Afterwards, many scholars studied children's literature translation in the context of social culture in general. It is commonly believed that in different contexts, writers create for different purposes, and translators also translate for different purposes. Oittinen (2000) pointed out that translation practice is inseparable from the context. In different contexts, for different purposes, translators translate differently. She also pointed out that besides translators and child readers, translators should also take into account other factors, such as the publishers or the sponsors.

Li Hongshun (2014)[6] reviewed and summarized the researches on children's literature translation in the foreign countries from five aspects: (i)children's literature translation research and Polysystem theory. Israeli scholar Zohar Shavit (1981) [7] pointed out that due to the marginalized status of children’s literature in the plural literary system, translators have great freedom when translating children’s literature. They can manipulate the original text in various ways, as long as their translation behavior is based on the following two principles: adapting the text to make the translation useful and beneficial to children (whether it is beneficial or not is judged by the current social norms); adapting the text to cater for the children's comprehension level. Obviously, children's comprehension level is closely related to the age: the younger the age, the lower the comprehension level, the greater the adaptation and more omission); (ii) The studies of children’s literature translation in specific countries; (iii) The studies of the deviation of children’s literature translation, which are categorized into four types and the reasons leading to the deviation are also explored. (iv)The study of the relationship between children's literature translation and ideology and publication censorship, and he pointed out that the creation and translation of children's literature were easily affected by mainstream ideology; (v) In the translation of children’s literature, the rendering of

illustrations poses a great challenge to translators. To summarize, the researches abroad on children's literature translation have shown an increasing trend, with a wide research scope, diversified and interdisciplinary perspectives.

### **3. The Status Quo of Studies on Children's Literature Translation in China**

Scholars have paid too little attention to the studies on children's literature translation so far in China. We enter the keyword "children's literature translation" in the CNKI full-text database and the total number of relevant articles published between 1996 and 2016 is 103, only eight of which are published in major journals, and only four of the eight are published in major foreign language journals (Yan Weiming [8]; Xu Derong [9]; Li Hongshun; Xu Derong, Jiang Jianli [10]).

As far as the content of these papers, the children's literature translation research topics at home are relatively rich, mainly focusing on the following four aspects: (i) General researches on children's literature translation, such as Xu Derong (2004), Li Jiachang, 2016[11]. (ii) Studies on the translation history of Chinese children's literature, such as Qin Gong (2004) [12]. (iii) Researches on children's literature translators, such as researches on Lu Xun (Qin Gong, 2013[13]), Zhou Zuoren (Cheng Rong, Sun Li[14]) etc. Although the value of the above researches cannot be ignored, the present researches on children's literature translators mostly focus on modern male translators, and some are repetitive. The researches on contemporary children's literature translators are obviously insufficient in depth and breadth. Although some papers involve contemporary female translators engaged in children's literature translation, such as Ma Ainong, and Su Nong, the researchers only explore from the traditional perspectives of translator's subjectivity and manipulation theory, with focus on the language features the translated text, and fail take into consideration the translator's gender, the background and other external factors. (Li Jiachang, 2016) (iv) Approaching children's literature translation from multidisciplinary perspective. Scholars apply linguistics, reception aesthetics, skopos theory, equivalent functioning, stylistics, relevance theory, translator's subjectivity, corpus linguistics and other theories to the study of the translation strategies and techniques of children's literature. In recent years, this kind of research has been favored by many scholars, such as Huang Ying (2011)[15]. What is worth mentioning is the rapid development of corpus research in recent years, Zang Guangya (2009) [16] for example. Zhang Qunxing (2014) [17] reviewed the researches on children's literature translation at home and abroad, and he pointed out that corpus-based study played a certain role in analyzing language universals, translation strategy, translation of cultural loaded words, etc. He also proposes some ideas and methods worth exploring such as constructing a corpus of children's literature translators, conducting comparative studies on children's literature translation and adult literature translation, and conducting diachronic and synchronic studies on children's literature translation.

On the whole, the current researches in China are mainly based on the practice of children's literature translating, the majority of which are mostly description and evaluation of a specific translation strategy of a specific literary work. The

researches are highly repetitive, lack of innovation, failing to explore beyond the language. The researches are focused on the genre of fairy tales and fictions; little attention is paid to poetry, prose, plays for children.

It is not difficult to conclude that although the study of children's literature translation has made great progress these years, there is much room for improvement. The translation of children's literature has been on the rise in recent years, but the study of children's literature translation, as an important part of translation studies, still has not received the attention it deserves in academia. Ying Chengfei (2015) [18] reviewed the researches on children's literature translation abroad in the recent three decades. She concludes that the studies abroad covers intra-language studies and external language ones; the former are mostly prescriptive while the latter are mainly descriptive, which involves the translator, the target audience, the social, political and cultural factors etc. Her study may be insightful for Chinese scholars concerned.

#### **4. Reasons for the Marginalization of Children's Literature Translation**

There are many reasons why children's literature has not received the attention due to it. One of the reasons is that translators of children's literature are faced with the challenge of conveying not only the childlike characteristics but also the culturally specific features in the source language to the child readers of the target culture. This challenge frightens many translators away from translating children's literature. Furthermore, even if a work is translated, many translated versions are difficult to gain popularity due to acceptability.

American translation theorist Eugene Nida[19] believes that translation is communication between cultures. The author believes that the translation of children's literature is the communication between adults (the translators) and children (readers). The readers of children's literature may be adults, but mainly children. Therefore, children's literature translation must take into account child readers, paying attention to their special characteristics and their cognitive features, which is also challenging for translators. Children's literature writer Chen Bochui[20] pointed out: "A distinguished children's literature writer is one who is willing to think as a child, to perceive as a child, to listen as a child, and above all, to experience as a child. And so, s/he will definitely produce works that children can understand and like to read." The same is true for the translator of children's literature. Therefore, in the translation of children's literature, translators should base the translation on the special cognitive characteristics of child readers to select simple and easy the words, brief sentence structure, and avoid obscure and difficult words and sentence patterns to reproduce an easy and acceptable target text. As for the translation of cultural images, translators may try to preserve the cultural images in the source text, so that children readers can learn more about foreign countries culture, but at the same time, the translator may keep an eye on the acceptability of the translation. That is, translators must handle domestication and foreignization translation strategy properly, which is also a challenge for them. All these add to the difficulty of translating children's works.

The second reason is that there are always illustrations in children's literature works to cater for the special cognitive characteristics and cognitive level of child readers, and to attract young readers. How may the translators convey the information in these illustrations to the target language poses a challenge too. As the translation here involves two media and thus becomes more complicated, which makes the translation even more difficulty [21]? In addition, the complicated relationship between children's literature translation and ideology and publication censorship may also affect the translation and introduction of children's literature to a certain extent.

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