A Report on C-E Translation of Children’s Literature: A Case Study of Gen Niao (Excerpts)

Ying Zhong *

School of Advanced Translation and Interpretation, Dalian University of Foreign Languages, Dalian, China

* Corresponding author Email: 139917163@qq.com

Abstract: Gen Niao is a short story crafted by Cao Wenxuan, a distinguished contemporary writer in the realm of children’s literature. This story chronicles the maturation journey of a young protagonist named Gen Niao. Currently, there is no published translated edition of this book. This paper takes Gen Niao as an example to primarily explore the English translation of Chinese children’s literature. As international cultural exchanges deepen, English translation of contemporary Chinese children’s literature assumes paramount significance in facilitating cultural outreach. Due to the cultural and linguistic disparities between Chinese and English, translators often find it challenging to accurately and vividly convey the precise connotations of the source text, especially when the target audience is children. Hence, in order to convey the meaning of the source language as faithfully as possible, the author tackles the translation process from two aspects: lexical choices and syntactic structures. Based on the methods that can enhance the international impact of translated works and propel Chinese children’s literature towards global recognition.

Keywords: Children’s Literature; Domestication; Foreignization; Text Analysis.

1. Task Description

In this part, the author will present an overview of the author Cao Wenxuan, and a brief summary of his work Gen Niao. Subsequently, the author will elucidate the reasons behind selecting this particular book for translation practice and the significance it brings forth.

1.1. Introduction of the Author and the Source Text

Cao Wenxuan, a renowned children’s literature writer, Vice Chairman of the Beijing Writers Association, Professor at Peking University, is an active advocate and promoter of youth writing in China. His notable works include novels such as Cao Fang Zi (The Straw House, 1997), Qing Tong Kui Hua (Bronze and Sunflower, 2005). In 2016, he received the prestigious Hans Christian Andersen Award, and then he became the first Chinese writer to achieve this honor. He focuses on the physical and mental development of young children, with his works primarily depicting youth development.

The source text is chosen from the book Gen Niao. It is one of Cao Wenxuan’s works, imbued with a strong romantic hue. It primarily narrates the coming-of-age story of a young boy named Gen Niao, presenting a profound and captivating spiritual fairytale that allows readers to wander in dreams and experience humanity in reality (Cao Wenxuan, 2016). The novel consists of five chapters, each showcasing distinctly different settings, including deserts, grasslands, mountains, villages, canyons, and towns. These peculiar and mystical scenes serve as the backdrop for the protagonist, Gen Niao, as he navigates and matures within this dreamlike environment, creating a mesmerizing and alluring beauty.

1.2. Reasons and Significance

Children’s literature, as an integral part of literature, plays a significant role in shaping children’s values. In recent years, with the deepening of world multipolarity, economic globalization, and cultural diversity, more attention has been given to children’s literature in the process of children’s growth. However, when examining the market of Chinese children’s literature, a large number of foreign children’s literary works have been translated into Chinese and imported into the country. Due to the numerous cultural barriers between China and other countries, the development of excellent English translations of Chinese children’s literature has been slow, hindering their global dissemination compared to English-language children’s literary works. The path for Chinese indigenous works to “go global” has been arduous. Consequently, traditional research on children’s literary translation has long been marginalized domestically. One of the reasons for this is the scarcity of individuals translating Chinese children’s literature into English, let alone those who can do it well. Translation research has also focused primarily on English-to-Chinese translation, with very few studies on Chinese-to-English translation. Therefore, to expand the international influence of Chinese children’s literature and enable more accomplished works by Chinese authors to reach the world, high-quality translation undoubtedly stands as the most crucial factor among all.

Fortunately, in recent years, China has also begun to attach importance to the overseas promotion of outstanding Chinese children’s literary works. Gen Niao is a children’s novel that holds significant research value in terms of both language and meaning. In this paper, I chose this book as the translation subject and translated a portion of its content. Based on this, a detailed analysis of the entire translation process has been
conducted.  

Thereby, this translation practice contributes to delve into the realm of translating Chinese children’s literature into English, examining various strategies and techniques. It synthesizes introspective reflections and in-depth analyses of the translation process in the context of children’s literature. The ultimate goal is to uncover effective methods that can amplify the global influence of translated works and propel Chinese children’s literature towards attaining widespread recognition on the international stage.

2. Translation Process

To successfully finish the translation task, the author conducted an extensive research on materials related to the characteristics of children’s literature prior to translation. Children’s literature, as an essential branch of literature, possesses both fundamental literary characteristics and unique attributes. Precisely, it is mainly characterized by strong appeal, vivid and lively descriptions. Besides, according to Eugene A. Nida in the book Language, Culture, and Translating, the target audience always constitutes a major factor in determining the translation procedures and the level of language to be employed (Nida, 1993: 139). In this aspect, Children’s psychological and intellectual development is not yet mature, with limited vocabulary and comprehension abilities. They have not yet formed correct outlooks on life, the world, and values. Therefore, translators of Chinese children’s literature should focus on enhancing the readability of the text (Xiu Wenqiao, 2020). Last but not least, Children’s literature is produced and translated by adults, but its target audience is children. Thus, the overall approach to translating children’s literature should involve a combination of domestication and foreignization and other methods of translation, creating translations that are more accessible to children readers.

During the translation process, the author employed both online and offline methods to aid in the translation process. These methods included resources such as the Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary (7th Edition), DeepL Translator, Youdao Dictionary, among others. In addition, the translator also applied relevant translation theories and techniques learned during the research. Some challenges were encountered during the translation process, which were consciously integrated for subsequent analysis.

Upon completion of the translation, the author enlisted the assistance of classmates and teachers to proofread the work.

3. Case Study

Children’s literature is a collective term for literary works specifically created for children and tailored to their reading comprehension. The most prominent characteristic of children’s literature is its simplicity and vividness. Hence, it is common to observe authors employing imagery-rich language that appeals to children’s senses, allowing them to immerse themselves in the narrative and experience the genuine emotions conveyed by the work. Furthermore, the language of children’s literature is straightforward, emphasizing the use of vivid and imagery-laden words such as nouns, verbs, onomatopoeia, etc., in accordance with the developmental characteristics of children’s language. In terms of sentence structures, they are predominantly short and concise.

3.1. Translation Strategies on the Lexical Choices

The source text contains numerous cultural elements deeply rooted in the native culture, along with a significant number of words closely tied to the country’s cultural context. For example, there are a large number of words with Chinese characteristics, which can be classified as culture-loaded terms. Culture-loaded terms are words, phrases and idioms that indicate something specific to a culture (Zheng Dehu, 2016). These lexical choices mirror the distinctive lifestyle of a specific nationality, evolving gradually over an extensive historical continuum, thereby distinguishing it from other cultural entities. (Liao Qiyi, 2000: 232). This kind of expression difference poses a significant challenge and requires special attention during the translation process.

Due to the influence of cultural factors, in order to facilitate the transmission of information across different cultural contexts, translators may appropriately employ domestication and foreignization methods during the translation process. The domestication and foreignization translation strategies were proposed by translation scholar Lawrence Venuti in his work The translator’s invisibility. Domestication translation refers to translators’ necessity to embrace the target language’s expression conventions in order to improve text readability. On the other hand, foreignization translation aims to maintain fidelity to the source language, requiring translators to adopt the expression conventions corresponding to those used by the author (Venuti, 1995). The following is some typical cases.

3.1.1. Chinese Expression of Time

ST: 大约是五更天了，根鸟在朦胧中似乎又听到了马的嘶鸣。

TT: It was nearly at dawn when Gen Niao seemed to vaguely hear the neighing of the horse again.

Analysis: “五更天” is a unique timekeeping method derived from traditional Chinese culture. It refers to the period from three to five in the early morning, just before dawn. Some translators may opt for a transliteration approach, translating “五更天” as “wugengtian” accompanied by annotations, in order to preserve its cultural significance. However, since “五更天” serves as supplementary information within the sentence and does not constitute the focal point emphasized by the author, it is unnecessary to employ such approach.

Considering the characteristics of children’s language abilities, cognitive levels, and immature psychological development, the domestication translation strategy is more suitable for translating children’s literature (Yuan Yi, 2010). It reduces cognitive barriers for young readers and enables them to read the translated text smoothly, which is one of the advantages of domestication translation. In this case, given the young age of children readers, who may not have a precise understanding of the time frame from three to five in the early morning, translating “五更天” as “three to five in the early morning” would be meaningless. Instead, the translator’s objective is to convey to readers that it’s getting light, hence here translating “五更天” as “at dawn” suffices.

Based on the above analysis, hence, every language possesses its unique syntactical, grammatical, and discourse characteristics. To enhance the quality of translation and align it with the conventions of the target language, it is necessary to appropriately adjust the structure of the source text
according to the linguistic preferences of the intended audience, so as to maximize comprehension and appreciation among the target audience. The aim is not solely to convey information, but also to create a translation that resonates with the target language’s conventions and enhances its value.

3.1.2. Chinese Idioms

ST:  "鬼使神差"， 去做的第一件事就是去客店收拾了自己的行囊, 然后骑着白马，来到了戏班子住的客店。

TT: After being awakened by the wind, Gen Niao’s first action was to pack his belongings at the inn. He then mounted a white horse and arrived at the inn where Chinese opera actors stayed.

Analysis: “戏班子” is an old term referring to a theatrical troupe in Chinese culture, specifically a group formed for the purpose of performing in the theater. It emerged during the period when the Chinese theater was prevalent and falls under the category of culturally specific words related to Chinese spiritual culture, which is a unique opera culture exclusive to China.

Chinese readers are acquainted with the notion of “戏班子” as a group of people singing Chinese opera, yet such a cultural concept lacks a direct counterpart in the target linguistic domain. To bridge this gap, the author considered adopting Venuti’s proposed foreignization translation. Translators should prioritize readers as their target audience, but maintaining the original meaning intact is also important. Hence, the term “戏班子” can be translated as “Chinese opera actors”.

3.1.3. Chinese Literary Quotation

ST:  他在赌场时, 就觉得有神灵在他背后支使着他— —真是鬼使神差。

TT: When he was at the gambling table, he felt as if a divine force was guiding him.

Analysis: The Chinese idiom “鬼使神差” originates from the work *Bitaohua* by the Song Dynasty poet Fang Hui. It means as if being guided by ghosts or deities, unconsciously doing something that was not originally intended. This idiom metaphorically describes unexpected events or actions that occur involuntarily.

Because the term “鬼使神差” in the original text does not emphasize what drives the protagonist, but rather implies an unknown force compelling him to engage in gambling, translating it directly as “driving by the God or Heaven” would be inappropriate. Furthermore, considering the simplified and more vivid language used in children’s literature compared to adult literature, a more suitable translation is needed. Translating “鬼使神差” as “spirit-carried out” may not evoke a relatable feeling for children, thus hindering their comprehension. Instead, we can opt for “a divine force,” which would facilitate easier understanding for young readers.

Based on the comparison and analysis provided, it is evident that the key aspect of translating Chinese Characteristic words into English lies in comprehending their underlying and pragmatic meanings. It involves transcending the constraints of word structure and integrating them with the target language context and the reading preferences of the target audience. Thus enabling the translation to be conveyed, using suitable and idiomatic English expressions.

3.2. Translation Strategies on the Syntactic Structures

According to the American linguist Nida(1982:16), the distinguishing feature between eastern and western languages lies in the difference between hypotaxis and parataxis. The term “hypotaxis” refers to the use of formal means in language, such as morphological changes of words, vocabulary and articulation, to express the meaning and logical relationships within sentences. On the other hand, “parataxis” is a linguistic organizational approach in which a language establishes connections between words or clauses based on semantic relevance, emphasizing the inherent logic and correlation of meanings. Regarding hypotaxis and parataxis, English and Chinese stand out as notable representatives. English predominantly employs hypotaxis, while Chinese leans towards parataxis. In light of this, translators should prioritize conveying the core essence of the original text during the translation process, rather than rigidly adhering to a literal rendition of the source material.

When translating between languages, particularly Chinese and English, translators often encounter the need for flexibility in adjusting sentence length due to differences in language conventions. In Chinese, it is common to have multiple smaller sub-sentences combined into one lengthy sentence with a single subject. However, a direct translation into English with the same structure and length would result in a sentence with suboptimal structure. At times, it may even contribute to grammatical inaccuracies. When dealing with a children’s novel as the source text, translators often encounter an abundance of lengthy sentences composed of smaller sub-sentences. In such instances, adjusting the length of target language sentences and, when necessary, reorganizing the logical sequence can aid translators in faithfully expressing the essence of the original text. Just as Nida proposes, in the process of translation, emphasis should be placed on capturing the essence and intended meaning of the source text, rather than rigidly adhering to its linguistic form and structural composition. There is a variety of strategies to cope with translation difficulties. The following is some typical cases.

3.2.1. Repetition

ST:  他们喝得猛, 喝得不留一点余地, 喝得热泪盈眶, 喝得又哭又唱, 还有大打出手的, 甚至动刀子的。

TT: They drank hard with no restraint, crying and singing. Some of them got into fights, and even wielded knives.

Analysis: Repetition is a rhetorical device commonly utilized in Chinese. In this instance, repetition is employed to vividly depict the drinking scene. Repetition can help to reinforce a point, establish a pattern, create parallelism, or evoke certain emotions in the reader. It can also contribute to the overall cohesion and coherence of a text by providing a sense of unity and structure.

The source text utilizes the word “喝” four times, creating a concise and impactful repetition. This repetition also highlights the characteristic of Chinese as a language prone for parataxis that often emphasizes inherent logic and correlation of meanings. To faithfully convey the essence of the repetition, translators can segment this lengthy original sentence, transforming them into separate sentences. Without any adjustments, a literal translation of the original sentence into English would inevitably result in redundant meaning. Therefore, translators need to thoroughly organize the logic of the Chinese sentence and then connect all parts according
to English expression patterns.

By doing so, the description of the drinking scene can be conveyed in a more vivid manner while ensuring that the target language readers do not feel confused. This adjustment ensures a closer alignment with the structure commonly found in English sentences. Simultaneously, it also aligns more closely with the characteristic requirements of children’s literature.

3.2.2. Run-on Sentences

ST: 酒是奇妙的，它能使根鸟变得糊涂，变得亢奋，从而就不再觉得无聊与孤独。

TT: Alcohol is marvelous for it has the power to bewilder and excite his senses, thereby alleviating his feelings of boredom and loneliness.

Analysis: In this sentence, it is evident that the original sentence lacks explicit logical connectors and falls into the category of run-on sentence. Through analysis, it can be observed that the original sentence exhibits a causal relationship. The statement “Wine is marvelous” serves as a conclusion, followed by the author’s explanation of why it is marvelous - because wine can make the protagonist confused and excited, thereby alleviating his boredom and loneliness. Translators need to grasp this logic during the translation process.

Therefore, we can employ the technique of augmentation to enhance the readability and fluency of the English translation. By adding the logical connector “for” after the first clause, the English translation becomes more aligned with English expression conventions and language style.

3.2.3. Non-subject Sentences

ST: “天凉了，进屋吧。”

TT: “It’s getting chilly. Let’s go inside,” said Gen Niao’s father.

Analysis: While Chinese frequently employs non-subject sentences, such constructions are comparatively uncommon in English, with the exception of imperative sentences and certain idiomatic expressions. This disparity arises from the emphasis on subjects and hypotaxis in English, contrasting with the thematic focus and parataxis prevalent in Chinese (Chen Ju, 2013). Hence, particular attention should be paid to such sentences during the translation process.

In this sentence, there is no explicit subject. A literal translation such as “It’s getting chilly. Go inside,” would be inadequate, as it fails to specify the speaker, causing confusion for the reader and deviating from the tone of the original text, appearing too abrupt, akin to issuing a command. However, considering the context, it is evident that this sentence is spoken by Gen Niao’s father during a conversation between father and son. He suggests they move indoors for the sake of comfort and excitement, thereby alleviating his boredom and loneliness. Translators need to grasp this logic during the translation process.

Therefore, during the translation process from Chinese to English, translators should supplement the subject as necessary based on the context, or modify the sentence structure to better align with the linguistic characteristics of English.

4. Conclusion

In contrast to adults, children exhibit a narrower lexicon and possess limited social experience. Hence, when undertaking translation tasks, a propensity towards employing simpler vocabulary is advisable. Translators ought to meticulously select vocabulary, taking into account the age-specific attributes of children, discerning their reading habits and preferences, while avoiding intricate terminology. Such an approach facilitates children’s comprehension of the source text, thereby enhancing their interest in reading. Similarly, with children’s constrained reading proficiency, lengthy and intricate sentences may impede their reading experience. Consequently, when translating children’s literature, translators must be aware of the unique reading characteristics of child readers, flexibly handling long and difficult sentences, and using shorter sentences that are conducive to comprehension and fluency in reading.

Venuti once said: “The various language structures have great similarity, and the deep structure is much more common than the surface structure(1964:164).” Thereby, the translation should be translated into the deep body to express the original text. To put it in a more detailed way, firstly, words serve as the fundamental building blocks of sentences and texts (Liao Qiyi, 2000). When translating, it is crucial to handle word translation effectively, as the meaning of sentences and texts can be lost if word translation is not handled properly. Since words can have multiple meanings, it is important to consider the specific context when selecting the most suitable equivalent during the translation process.

Apart from that, through the process of translation, culture is able to spread among different ethnic groups, enabling the interplay, exchange, and integration of diverse cultural expressions, thereby enhancing their growth and significance. Translators should not confine their attention solely to the literal rendition of Chinese children’s literature into English. Instead, we should delve into the underlying Chinese cultural context it embodies. In the translation process, it is imperative to employ a comprehensive range of translation techniques, striving to capture and convey these facets of Chinese culture to the fullest extent possible. Only by doing so can the global dissemination of Chinese culture be facilitated, thereby safeguarding the richness and diversity of global cultural heritage.

To sum up, despite the existence of numerous translation strategies, such as the ones that mentioned above, whether be it Nida’s functional equivalence translation strategy or be it Lawrence Venuti’s domestication and foreignization strategies, it is essential to understand that regardless of the approach taken, the primary objective of the translator is to convey the cultural essence of the source language as effectively as possible to the target language readers. Just as Venuti once said: “Translation is cultural communication.” This will enable outstanding Chinese children’s literature to reach beyond national borders and be cherished by children from other countries. Simultaneously, it will promote cultural exchange between China and the West, disseminates Chinese culture, and contribute to the realization of a culturally strong nation.

References

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从根鸟那里取走钱的,甚动刀子的。根鸟原是一个怯弱的人,但在莺店,他就有了酒友。那是他在赌场认识的。根鸟的酒量越喝越大。他以前从不曾想到过,他在喝酒时会有这样大的气派与做法。他故意沙哑着喉咙,叫着‘嘿，哥们儿哥们儿’,甚至学会了用脏话骂人。——真是鬼使神差。他不知道怎么就在那儿下注了,也不知道怎么就先走了手。他心里并不清楚他自己为什么会作出那些选择。那些选择,总是让他赢钱,也学他们投掷骰子的将与他的赌注同样多的钱摔过来时,他一方面感到有点歉意,一方面又兴奋得双手发抖。他停了两回之后,又强行接连下了两注。当听到咔嚓的冰裂声时,既感到害怕又感到刺激。他就这样战战兢兢地投入了进去。

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