

“Borrowing” and “Reconstruction”: A Study on the Localization Path of Zheng Zhenduo’s Translation of Children’s Literature

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Abstract: During the May Fourth New Culture Movement, Zheng Zhenduo translated and introduced a large number of foreign children’s works when he edited the magazine *Children’s World*, thus pioneering a localization path of children’s literature translation guided by the child-centered concept. Taking the three-dimensional integrated framework of educational value, artistic quality, and entertainment value in Zheng Zhenduo’s child-centered idea as the theoretical basis, this paper examines his differentiated translation strategies. The study finds that Zheng Zhenduo’s translation practice can be summarized as a hierarchical localization strategy divided into superficial localization and in-depth localization. Through analyzing typical cases, this paper reveals the internal logic of his localization strategies and puts forward the concept of hierarchical localization to generalize the characteristics of his translation approaches. The core argument is that Zheng Zhenduo’s differentiated translation strategies are the concrete application of his child-centered concept in the field of translation.

Keywords: Zheng Zhenduo; Children’s literature translation; Localization path; *Children’s World*

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1. Introduction

In January 1922, *Children’s World*, China’s first special periodical for children’s literature, was founded in Shanghai under the editorship of Zheng Zhenduo^[1]. At its initial stage, China suffered a severe shortage of original domestic children’s literature, so translating foreign children’s works became the main content of the journal^[2]. In Volumes 1 to 5 compiled by Zheng Zhenduo, translated works outnumbered original writings, covering more than ten countries across the world^[3].

In the *Manifesto of Children’s World*, Zheng Zhenduo put forward two core viewpoints: first, the magazine adopted “retelling” rather than literal translation; second, foreign excellent children’s literature should be boldly introduced while catering to local Chinese tastes^[4]. These statements reflect his awareness of localization in children’s literature translation: foreign works must undergo cultural adaptation to fit

Chinese children's reading habits and aesthetic psychology instead of rigid copying. Nevertheless, improper handling of works with diverse cultural backgrounds may strip them of all appeal. Therefore, whether to simply borrow texts or conduct adaptive reconstruction became a critical issue.

Existing studies have pointed out that in the translation practice of *Children's World*, Zheng Zhenduo adopted flexible methods including literal translation, paraphrasing, and compilation translation according to literary genres^[5]. This finding reveals the differentiated feature of his translation strategies, yet a deeper question remains unanswered: what logic lies behind these varied strategies, and what internal connection do they share with his child-centered concept?

2. Theoretical framework: From child-centered concept to translation strategies

2.1. The core of Zheng Zhenduo's child-centered concept: Integration of education, art and entertainment

Zheng Zhenduo's child-centered concept took shape amid the ideological enlightenment of the New Culture Movement, with its core lying in establishing children as the principal subjects of children's literary activities. In his editorial practice and theoretical elaborations, this concept centers on the organic integration of entertainment value, artistic quality, and educational significance. Zheng held that entertainment serves as the gateway to attract children: without amusement, children would refuse to read, making all educational goals unattainable. Artistic quality acts as the carrier to elevate literary taste, for children's literature is first and foremost "literature" and must possess aesthetic charm. Educational value is the subtle ultimate goal. He stated that children's literature constitutes the optimal medium to convey moral precepts and essential knowledge for juveniles, and compared with tedious lectures and science textbooks, it can achieve educational effects imperceptibly^[6].

2.2. Guiding significance of the three-dimensional integration principle for translation practice

The three-dimensional integration principle sets specific requirements for translation. First, entertainment: translations must be intelligible and engaging for children; literal translation that causes confusion or boredom defeats the purpose of translation. Second, artistry: translations ought to retain the literary merit of original works and avoid losing aesthetic appeal due to localized revisions. Third, educational value: translations should deliver positive values naturally through storylines instead of rigid preaching.

Balancing the three dimensions is challenging. Excessive pursuit of entertainment may damage artistic essence through arbitrary deletion; overemphasis on artistry may sacrifice readability with complex sentence structures; overhighlighting educational value may lead to didactic writing. Zheng's solution lies in genre-specific translation tactics, realizing the integration of the three dimensions via different methods for different literary genres, which forms the theoretical foundation of the differentiated strategies analyzed below.

2.3. Proposal of hierarchical localization

Based on the above theoretical framework, this paper proposes the concept of hierarchical localization to generalize Zheng Zhenduo's translation characteristics, which is split into superficial localization and in-depth localization.

Superficial localization mainly involves linguistic transformation: replacing classical Chinese with

vernacular, rewriting Europeanized syntax into idiomatic Chinese, while largely preserving the original plots, characters, and themes.

In-depth localization entails systematic revision of plots, characters, themes, and structures, including simplification, typification of characters, theme reshaping, and structural compression to make works suit local Chinese tastes.

Both levels aim to realize the integration of entertainment, art and education yet adopt different approaches, embodying the dialectical unity of “borrowing” and “reconstruction.”

3. In-depth localization: Paraphrasing and compilation translation of fairy tales

3.1. Reasons for in-depth localization of fairy tales

In-depth localization includes paraphrasing and compilation translation. Paraphrasing means translators rewrite original works on the premise of fully grasping their content and style; aside from unchanged core ideas, forms, sequences, plots, and characters may be extensively adjusted ^[7]. Compilation translation refers to further integration and compression based on existing translations. Both methods combine translation and creation as creative literary labor.

Three reasons account for the necessity of in-depth localization for fairy tales: First, fairy tales feature lengthy, complicated plots. Direct literal translation would exhaust Chinese children with limited vocabulary and short attention spans, greatly reducing entertainment value. Second, foreign proper nouns and cultural backgrounds create reading barriers for young Chinese readers. Third, Chinese children are long accustomed to folk tales and legends with distinct narrative rhythms and character archetypes different from Western fairy tales. As Zheng remarked, retelling can be adopted to facilitate children’s reading ^[8].

3.2. Paraphrasing: Simplification and theme elevation in *Princess Bamboo*

Princess Bamboo was paraphrased by Zheng based on the Japanese classical tale *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*. The original work, written in the early 10th century, tells the story of a bamboo cutter who finds a baby girl inside a bamboo stalk. When the girl grows up, five noble lords propose marriage lured by her beauty, and she sets difficult treasure-finding tasks to reject them before ascending to the moon.

Zheng conducted drastic revisions in his paraphrased version. He eliminated lengthy, hard-to-remember Japanese proper nouns and uniformly referred to the five suitors as nobles, removing official titles and numerous Japanese poems to lower reading difficulty and retain entertainment. He adjusted narrative structures and added legendary background about the princess’s life on the moon to enhance artistic appeal. More importantly, he elevated the thematic connotation: while the original merely satirizes aristocracy and imperial power, Zheng’s translation strengthens moral lessons such as “no gains without pains” and “upholding credibility.” The five nobles are typified as lazy, treacherous, arrogant, conceited, and cowardly, respectively, and their failed courtships serve as inevitable consequences of their flaws ^[9]. Such typification aligns with the narrative traditions of Chinese folk tales and realizes the unification of entertainment, art, and education.

3.3. Compilation translation: High generalization and structural simplification in *The Catless Kingdom*

The prototype of *The Catless Kingdom* is the world-famous Western story *Dick Whittington and His Cat*. Sun Yuxiu once localized and compiled it into Chinese with semi-classical language, adding abundant didactic

content for inclusion in the *Fairy Tales* series.

Zheng further recompiled based on Sun's version. He condensed the thousands-word original into merely over 300 characters, retaining only the core plot and cutting lengthy scenery descriptions and trivial details. Zheng intended to arouse children's interest in reading the complete original through this condensed version ^[10]. This extreme simplification fully reflects his pursuit of entertainment to lower reading thresholds and stimulate curiosity about full texts.

Notably, Zheng retained the foreign background instead of fully sinicizing the story as Sun did. This demonstrates his selective localization: retaining exotic features while adjusting narrative modes to adapt to Chinese children, rather than simply transplanting Chinese settings. Such balance distinguishes his translations from arbitrary late-Qing adaptations and rigid word-for-word translations of later periods, achieving both artistic and entertaining effects.

4. Superficial localization: Literal translation of fables with minimal revisions

4.1. Reasons for superficial localization of fables

Contrary to fairy tales, Zheng advocated literal translation for fables. Comparing translations of *Indian Fables*, *Aesop's Fables* and *Tolstoy's Fables* published in *Children's World* with original texts reveals nearly word-for-word consistency.

Fables only require superficial localization (i.e., vernacular transformation) for three reasons: First, fables are short and structurally simple without the reading obstacles present in fairy tales, so literal translation does not undermine entertainment.

Second, fables adopt anthropomorphic animals with cross-culturally consistent symbolic meanings: crafty foxes, timid rabbits, fierce lions, and cruel wolves, etc. Literal translation fully preserves artistic characteristics ^[11].

Third, fables deliver profound meanings in plain language accessible to children; literal translation suffices to convey educational value without redundant additions.

Zheng believed fables are suitable textbooks for primary schools and leisure reading for children, as the stories themselves bring joy ^[12]. In his view, literal translation achieves the three-dimensional integration for fables.

4.2. Literal retention of *The Duck and the Moon* and *The Fox and the Grape* in *Children's World*

The translation of *The Duck and the Moon* (Volume 3, Issue 1) printed in the journal is highly consistent with Tolstoy's original text without additions or deletions ^[13]. The story describes a duck mistaking the moon's reflection for fish and diving to catch it, only to be mocked by companions and grow too timid to hunt real fish, eventually starving to death. Its moral about the harm of blind ridicule possesses universal cross-cultural applicability and requires no localized adaptation.

Similarly, *The Fox and the Grape* (Volume 5, Issue 1) from Aesop's Fables fully retains the core moral of "sour grapes" ^[14]. The universal lesson allows literal translation to preserve artistry, deliver education, and remain readable for children.

As the journal's editor, Zheng adopted literal translation for all fables printed in *Children's World*. He himself also translated fables by major global writers in the same way to maintain their unique stylistic

features and avoid distortion through rewriting.

5. Historical significance and theoretical value of hierarchical localization

5.1. Transformation of foreign children's literature resources

Against the backdrop of scarce domestic children's literature in the 1920s, Zheng's hierarchical localization strategy successfully converted massive foreign classics into abundant Chinese literary resources. In-depth localization rendered Grimm's Fairy Tales, Andersen's Fairy Tales, Wilde's Fairy Tales, and Japanese myths acceptable for Chinese children; superficial localization introduced Aesop's Fables, Tolstoy's Fables, and Indian fables in their original flavors. Complementary to each other, the two levels formed a rich translated literature system in *Children's World*.

5.2. Model reference for domestic original creation

While hierarchical localization temporarily solved the resource shortage, independent creation remained an inevitable path. Zheng invited Ye Shengtao to contribute to the journal. Influenced by Andersen's lyrical style in his early career, Ye wrote works such as *The White Boat* and *Swallow* filled with tenderness and poetry; later, inspired by the dark tones of Wilde's fairy tales, he turned to realism and created the widely popular *Scarecrow*^[15].

Zheng's translation strategies provided a referable model for Chinese writers and laid an important foundation for the localized development of modern Chinese children's literature, enabling it to strike a balance between foreign resources and indigenous culture and achieve continuous innovation.

5.3. Theoretical enlightenment of hierarchical localization

The concept of hierarchical localization deepens understanding of Zheng's historical status. More than a mere translator or writer, he acted as a cultural mediator who adopted graded processing between "borrowing" and "reconstruction." Guided by the three-dimensional integration standard, he implemented varying degrees of localization for different genres and works. This strategy still inspires contemporary children's literature translation: translators need not rigidly choose between absolute faith and free adaptation, but conduct localized adjustments at different levels based on translation purpose, genre features, and target readers' acceptability.

6. Conclusion

During his editorship of *Children's World*, Zheng Zhenduo adopted a clear hierarchical localization translation strategy. Based on previous scholars' descriptive research on his translation tactics, this paper introduces the child-centered concept as an interpretive framework, proposes the notion of hierarchical localization, and reveals the theoretical logic behind his differentiated approaches. This research integrates translation strategy analysis with children's literary theories, offering a new perspective to evaluate Zheng Zhenduo's contributions to the development of modern Chinese children's literature.

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