



# A Study on Translation of Chinese Children's Literature from the Perspective of Polysystem Theory

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**Abstract**— *Polysystem Theory* was developed in 1970s by Israeli scholar Itamar Even-Zohar borrowing ideas from the Russian Formalist of the the 1920s(Munday, 2001: 109). Although building on work by the Formalist, Even-Zohar reacts against 'the fallacies of traditional aesthetic approach'(Even-Zohar 2002: 4), which had focus on 'high' literature and had disregarded as unimportant literary systems or genres such as children's literature, thrillers and the whole system of translated literature. We put the translation of children's literature in the general circumstance of social culture and find that children's literature is on the margin of the literary system. This causes a lot of constraints and obstructions in writing and translating for children's literature. This paper explores how the translation of children's literature were influenced by cultural environment. the author conducted the development of Chinese children's literature into 3 period and analyze how children's literature improved in different eras from the perspective of polysystem theory.

**Key words:** Polysystem; Children's Literature; Translation

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Israeli scholar Itamar Even-Zohar borrowing ideas from the Russian Formalists. For the Formalists, a literary work was not studies in isolation but as part of a literary system, which itself is defined itself as 'a system of functions of the literary order which are in continual interrelationship with each other'(Tynjanov 1927/1971: 72). Even-Zohar focuses on the relations between all these systems in overarching concept to which he gives a new term, the polysystem. This is defined by Even-Zohar as: a multiple system, a system of various system which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent. He mentioned three circumstances in which translated literature may occupy the central position in target literature system:

- (1).When a 'young literature' is being established and looks initially to more established literatures for ready-made models.
- (2).When a literature is 'peripheral' or 'weak' , or both. It imports those literary types to use for reference.
- (3).When there is a critical turning point in literary history at which established models are no longer considered sufficient, or literary vacuums in a literature.

This theory treats all literature including translation literature and other sorts of literature as an open and dynamic systems. Polysystem aims to express the dynamic and heterogeneous system concept, and to bring things and images that are inadvertently ignored or even consciously excluded into the research field.

Children's literature, as a special branch of literature, is hard for people to define and classify. Zohar's polysystem

theory has laid the theoretical foundation for the translation of children's literature, but Zohar Shavit is the scholar who has further studied the translation of children's literature both in theory and practice (Tan 2011 : 24) . Shavit's Children's Poetics Translation Theory mentions two primary principles that must be considered in the translation of children's literature: "one is to adjust the text to make it suitable and useful for children according to the socially accepted principle of 'good for children', that is, the educational function; the second is to adjust the plot, character's personality, language to adapt to children's understanding level and reading ability, that is, to meet their acceptance" (Shavit Zohar 1981:2).

In the following, the author will focus on analyzing the process of the development of Chinese children's literature based on the Polysystem.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 The Origin of Polysystem Model

Polysystem theory is mainly based on the idea of some late Russian Formalists. According to them, a literary work is not just "a heap of devices but an ordered heap, a hierarchically structured set" (Herman, 1999:104). Among those Russian formalists, Yury Tynjanov has had the biggest influence on Even-Zohar's polysystem theory. Two of his essays, *The Literary Fact* and *On The Literary Evolution* are particularly relevant to the development of polysystem theory.

### 2.2 Current Study on Polysystem Theory

The hypothesis of polysystem theory broadens the field of translation studies and literature studies. However, it still has some limitations. Hermans (1999:118) points out the limitation in his essay: "it is not only ferociously abstract and depersonalized, but also runs the risk of being ultimately deterministic". He continued to explain that "polysystem remains blind to all those ambivalent, hybrid, unstable, mobile, overlapping and collapsed elements that escape binary classification."

Many Chinese scholars have discussed the influences of polysystem theory for China in their papers. For example, Xie Tianzhen (2003:59-66) introduces the basic concept of polysystem theory and illustrates the significance in Chinese translation studies with abundant examples. Polysystem theory made remarkable contributions to the

cultural turn and thus provides a new approach for translation studies. He points out that there are many periods that match the 3 cases proposed by Even-Zohar when the translated literature occupies the central position in the target culture.

Thanks to those scholars, they have introduced millions of foreign literature works to China, which makes the translated literature gradually become a part of Chinese literature and promoted the rapid development of Chinese culture. However, there are still some literary genres left behind and rarely researched. Take children's literature as an example: it was greatly researched and studied in most of the western countries, but in China it was lately imported and barely researched. Here, the author tends to analyze the growing history of Chinese children's literature according to the 3 periods discussed above and aims to give a comprehensive perception.

## III. ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Children's literature is an integral part of literature. Generally, researchers believe that children's literature, as an independent category of Chinese literature, emerged in the May Fourth Movement period, while the late Qing Dynasty was regarded as the "sprout" period of Chinese children's literature. The birth of Chinese children's literature is closely related to the translation of foreign children's literature in the late Qing Dynasty. Because of the prosperity of the translation, especially the translation of foreign literature, that adults in the late Qing Dynasty gradually developed a distinct "consciousness of children's literature", which also gave birth to Chinese children's literature. The iconic work is "A Country without A Cat", which appeared in 1908, marking the initial birth of Chinese children's literature (Xie 1999:15). In order to recognize the development of Chinese Children's Literature from the polysystem approach, the author will arrange the whole process of the development into 3 periods.

### 3.1 The late Qing and Early-Republican period

Since the late Qing Dynasty, translated literature has been an important member of the Chinese literature family. In fact, translated literature plays a dominant enlightening role in the modernization of Chinese literature. Just as Guo Moruo said, "No matter which ethnic culture is changing, a foreign

trend will join in". Foreign cultures become catalysts and stimuli, causing qualitative changes in our own culture. Translated literature opens the door of western cultures for us. Chinese children's literature started from the translation of western literature, which has made an indelible contribution to the initiation, establishment and development of Chinese children's literature. Driven by the idea of enlightenment and salvation, the intellectual elites of the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China paid attention to children's education. Those scholars had experienced the process of imitating, exploring and creating the children's literature while translating western works. Liang Qichao is an example, in the magazine *New Novel* founded in Japan, he actively advocated the creation of children's poetry and personally created the four chapters of children's poetry, which is addressed patriotic poetry. In addition to poetry, he also advocated the translation of novels for children, and personally re-translated the science novel *Fifteen Little Heroes* (the original famous "Two Years of School Summer Vacation"). In 1902, he translated the scientific and philosophical novel "Diary of the End of the World" under the pseudonym "Yin Bing", praising the French novel. Hu Congjing (1982) believed that: "the construction of modern children's literature theory began with Liang Qichao". Liang's monograph, poems and essays, preface and postscript often have insightful views on children's literature, and have made corresponding practice.

Translated literature in the late Qing Dynasty has exerted a profound influence on Chinese children's literature, at least in the following two aspects: First, the translated literature in late Qing Dynasty pays the attention to the characteristic of narration, which makes the real creation of children's literature possible. Without narration, there would be no children's literature; second, in order to awake Chinese people, children's literature in that time is actually a political tool rather than literary genre. Most of the western works were translated into classical Chinese and it is hard for children to understand. the translated literature of late Qing Dynasty did not have a clear consciousness of targeting children readers while breaking the shackles of the old Chinese literature.

### **3.2 May Fourth period**

This was a period of great emancipation of the mind. Distant view of ancient society, children as the belongs of

their parents, their own independence has been completely denied. It is conceivable that no real children's literature can be produced under such feudal concept. The birth and development of children's literature in the real sense benefits from the correct understanding of "children" as an individual. During the May Fourth Movement, with the introduction and translation of western children's literature, many insightful people, such as Zhou Zuoren and Lu Xun, realized that children were independent individuals and made gratified contributions to the discovery of "children" in their own literary field. These healthy and correct ideas arouse the keen attention of all sectors of society through various carriers. People constantly put forward new views, all kinds of ideas in the exchange of collision and fusion, so that the theory of children's literature can be gradually improved.

The active participation and guidance of cultural pioneers is one of the most important reasons why the translation of children's literature in May Fourth Movement period can be so enthusiastic. Lu Xun attached great importance to the spiritual resources provided by children's literature outside the country. He said, "if there is a new fairy tale, I do not think that is necessary to tell the story of enthronement and worship" (Lu Xun 1981). Besides Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, Zhao Jingshen and other modern literary masters strongly advocated and were enthusiastic about children's translation. The impetus of newspapers and publishing circles is also an important reason for the prosperity of children's literature translation during the May Fourth Movement. At that time, "Morning Newspaper", which was very influential, used a lot of space to publish the translation of children's literature.

The rich translation of children's literature promotes science and love, focusing on life and national history, encourages happiness and imagination. Advocating love is an important feature of May Fourth Movement children's literature translation.

### **3.3 The Reform and Opening-up period**

From the end of 1920s until now, Chinese children's literature has gone through a long development. Here the author only focus on the period after the reform and opening-up policy in 1978. Due to the influence of "anti-revision-prevention" and "Cultural Revolution" in the 1960s and 1970s, the translation of children's literature in

the early year of 1978 was at an unprecedented low ebb. Engaging in translation work has the suspicion of “worship foreign things”, so the translators dare not make mistakes and the translated works were barely published. Data shows that since 1962, Shanghai Children's Publishing House published the Soviet union writer Belyayev's science fiction “Pingel's Adventure”, the whole 18 years, China only produced a few foreign children's literature alone, until 1981, this began to revive (Wang Genquan 2003).

The translation of children's literature in this period has the following three characteristics. First of all, during this period, translation materials come from all over the world and broke the Soviet union's dominance. Britain, Japan, Germany and France have also become the main source countries; Secondly, the objects of translation are mainly classic works. Most of the classical works of children's literature in the world have been translated. By the mid-1980s, nearly 70% of the masterpieces mentioned in the history of western children's literature had been translated into Chinese according to Wei (2009:49-54). Jules Verne's science fiction, Mark Twain's adventure novels, Stevenson's adventure novels and detective stories all be translated into Chinese.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that the translation of Chinese children's literature has made significant breakthroughs and achievements since the reform and opening-up. In a word, these gains are reflected in the following aspects: first of all, Chinese children's literature has a large number of translation and a broad vision, which has promoted the development of Chinese language education. China has the largest group of children's readers in the world. Second, Chinese translation of children's literature has a clear “classic consciousness”, in the beginning, China has selected classic works from various countries, these works have passed the test of time and are the precious literary heritage and spiritual wealth left to the world. Their translation is undoubtedly of great benefit to the spiritual growth of Chinese children.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

To analyze the process of the development of translation of the children's literature in China under the polysystem by Even-Zohar, it can easily found out that Chinese children's

literature is placed the peripheral and weak position in the traditional Chinese literary system. With the time goes by, the position of children's literature changes from time to time but mainly in accordance with the development of history. According to the polysystem, all literary system are struggle for the primary position and always entangled with non-literary factors, such as policy, economy, culture. With the new culture movement, the emergence of the western children's literature inspires the literary pioneers. They introduced a brand-new material to China and filled the “vacuum” of modern Chinese children's literature. After the reform and opening-up, more and more types of children's literature are introduced to Chinese children, and arouse academic research on them.

Although children's literature has a high status in China, it is a pity that there is no localized, classic and successful children's literature in China. While translation has taken the center position, it means that this literary genre will soon be localized and a glorious future is on the way.

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